

Violence and Veneration: Tapping a Sadomasochistic Vein in the American Psyche

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Abstract

The recent hype about E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* has reinvigorated a dialogue about sadomasochism. Even more compelling, however, is the notion that the desire to exert power over *and* to surrender oneself to another is an inherent part of being human. Duality is part and parcel of power dynamics. Likewise, the potential to subvert traditional representations of these dynamics plays out in a sadomasochistic terrain, where boundaries between Dominant/submissive, Divine/human, and violence/veneration become fluid. These principles extend to the Divine/human relationships evidenced in the Hebrew scriptures, which inform Judaism, as well as Christian traditions. Such sadomasochistic ideologies have become, implicitly and explicitly, fundamental to American social consciousness. This, in part, explains the fetishistic fascination of *Fifty Shades*. Often overlooked is the recognition that the sadomasochistic terrain is a locus of transformation: a domain of release, transmutation, and ecstatic experience.

Key Words

sadomasochism, divine/human, polarity, power, transformation

Much to the chagrin of the literary community, *Fifty Shades of Grey* created a firestorm in early 2013. E. L. James' inane treatment of the complexity of sadomasochism, otherwise known as Dominance/submission (SMDS), trivializes a sophisticated subculture. Nonetheless, evidenced by its tremendous popularity, *Shades* tapped a deep vein in the collective American psyche. It is irrelevant whether or not James adequately portrayed the subversive dynamics at work in SMDS, also known as BDSM—a blended abbreviation for bondage/discipline, Dominance/submission, and sado-/masochism. What is more compelling is the overwhelming response her pedestrian and, frankly, juvenile approach garnered. James became the world's highest earning author in 2013 with sales topping \$95 million (Bury). The numbers speak for themselves; and one cannot deny the public's voracious, voyeuristic appetite to vicariously play out, what might be interpreted as, violent fetishistic fantasies.

Dualistic aspects of power and subordination appear to feed these, arguably, sexualized desires. However, a question emerges whether the complex interactions that comprise the dynamics of Dominance/submission replicate, or are being replicated by, divine/human relationships and their corresponding ritualized manifestations, where god/s (and their representatives, such as priests, prophets, and gurus) are venerated. This essay will specifically focus on Hebraic treatments of the Divine/human relationship in an attempt to excavate a sadomasochistic terrain, which undergirds Jewish and Christian monotheistic traditions, and as such, is a part of the warp and weft of the fabric of American consciousness. It is, likewise, a call to suspend assumptions about SMDS, since what may masquerade as violence may actually be a mechanism to recover and/or reenact religious or spiritual ecstasies, which also carry a therapeutic potential.

Downing recognizes that there are myriad “mythical illuminations of the psyche”; “each god represents a different aspect” (194). As such, the Hebrew god Jehovah, or Yahweh, elicits certain facets in the psyche, as well as specific dynamics in terms of the Divine/human relationship. Jack Miles stipulates this all-encompassing and contradictory Lord God is “he” who is ever-caught in an interminable double bind of being “Lord of Heaven” and “Friend of the Poor,” “tender, solicitous husband” and “sword-in-hand butcher”: a divine being with “no cosmic opponent but himself” (408). Jehovah is, at once, violent and valiant, castigating and compassionate, sadistic and sympathetic. This Lord God illustrates and illuminates conflicting aspects within the individual psyche, as well as the overlapping boundaries between them. Discovering those boundaries, toying with and transgressing them, is the human project of individuation. Furthermore, per Miles’ view, “Our nearest approach to [God] may be through human beings whose own psychosocial development has been forced out of the usual order” (231). Being engaged in relationships with others is, therefore, a viable means of working out, or working at, our connection to the Divine.

In order to subvert the self or ego, whether it is under the command of God, the rigorous instruction of the guru, or the Master’s leather whip, the task is to identify and disengage from the will. The presence of the Lord/Master confronts and incites the devotee/submissive; and through a series of increasingly difficult tasks, sacrifices, and renunciations the ego is laid bare. Once laid bare, only then can the ego be transcended, or rather, holistically integrated. The sadomasochist dynamic thus serves to expose the self to the Self. It reveals the ego to the integrative consciousness within each individual, illuminating the bondage and boundaries encountered in binary perceptions. This view correlates with Ken Wilbur’s Integral Theory, an approach he describes as the “coherent organization, coordination, and harmonization of all of the relevant practices, methodologies, and experiences, available to human beings” (“Who is Ken Wilbur?”). Integral space, thus, expands into transgressive space; it is precisely this transgressive space in the SMDS arena that has the potential to disrupt and dislodge polarities, as well as the internal tension inherent in holding them simultaneously. SMDS players, in their roles as Doms (Dominants) and subs (submissives), enact these dynamics; and ideally, tap into their therapeutic and/or transformative potentials.

Borrowing definitions from sociologist Staci Newmahr, certain notable Divine/human interactions between the Hebrew God, Jehovah, and his prophets can be juxtaposed with the sophisticated “play” of SMDS practitioners. Intrinsic aspects of sovereignty and surrender evidence similarities between the two. While a veiled sadomasochist dynamic between God and his people is considered sacred, sadomasochism in its more explicit applications is identified as sensual, or rather, consensual. “SM” refers to activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use among two or more people of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for sensory or erotic pleasure, in the context of a public community. “Play” is used as both a noun and a verb to describe SM interactions and “scene” refers to an instance of play as well as to the broader SM community. (Newmahr 315-316)

Newmahr is careful to stipulate that the SM communities she focuses on in her ethnological analysis are not to be confused with individuals who practice “kinky bedroom games” or practice BDSM behind closed doors; they are established groups “organized around SM, who practice and observe SM in particular public spaces and attend informational and educational meetings” (316). As a participant observer in the SM community, Newmahr was able to explore the eroticism and experiential principles of SM; however she differentiates complex SM behaviors from sex, in that they are not coextensive; while they are, often, perceived as such (316). Newmahr’s analysis deviates from the caricature of sadomasochistic play that, for many, has become a point of entry (due in large part to misinterpretations like *Shades*). This distortion perpetuates the belief that SMDS is nothing more than a series of adult play dates where kink is the order of the day.

Conversely, the therapeutic and psychological benefits of SMDS mirror those found in religious practice. This raises questions about innate desires for, or psychological proclivities toward the transgression of boundaries related to power and concurrent explorations of mechanisms that trigger transcendent experience. Newmahr lists similar “durable benefits” of “serious leisure,” which can “include activities like kayaking, mountain climbing and snowboarding”; these experiences instigate a host of positive experiences that comprise “self-actualization, self-expression, feelings of accomplishment, self-renewal, self-image, social interaction and attraction, a sense of belonging, and lasting physical products” (327; 322). Such beneficial outcomes are similar to those induced by ritual observances in religious communities. In addition, the relational dynamics between worshippers and the Divine—either directly, or through intermediaries (rabbis, priests, prophets, and imams)—include, but are not limited to, monotheistic traditions wherein dynamics of sovereignty and surrender are assumed, and/or reversed.

Individuals charged with the responsibility of acting as guides, protectors, and/or mediators in religious communities serve dual purposes. While they represent and enact submissive devotion to the Divine they, likewise, hold a position of spiritual authority, which situates them in a dominant role. Adherents defer to their spiritual masters. Alternately seen as prophets, teachers, and servants, these leaders model sovereignty and surrender; they straddle the

Dominant/submissive divide. Their existence signals that duality is both reality and illusion.

In Hebrew Scriptures, those called by God, for one reason or another, characteristically wrestle with the Divine. Often, they may resist the call; however, they eventually surrender to God's relentless pursuits. This raises the question whether engagement with the Divine is consensual or coerced. For Jacob, the scene is played out literally when he wrestles with, and is wounded by, God's messenger on the eve of a reconciliation with the brother he betrayed years earlier. Jacob, escaping fourteen years of servitude under his father-in-law, Laban, directs his family and servants to take everything he owns across the Jabbok River into his brother Esau's territory. He is then left to reflect on his transgressions and to ultimately fight for a blessing from God; here, he must fight for that which he purloined from his brother.

Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched his hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." (Gen. 32:25-27)

A sadomasochistic terrain is mapped in this overt act. However, it is but a recapitulation of an ongoing dynamic that has been set in motion long before. In Rebekah's womb, Jacob and Esau were contentious opponents. Rebekah's concern led her to seek Jehovah's intervention, whereupon God declared a prophecy: "There are two nations in your womb. From birth they will be two rival peoples. One of these peoples will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). As such, the patterns of Dominance and submission that were established in utero reflect a much deeper truth: they are congenital.

The sadomasochistic dynamic between Jacob and Esau is, by its very nature, paradoxical. Tension ensues from the inevitability of birthright and prophecy at crosscurrents with will and agency. Echoes of this tension can be traced to accounts of Adam and Eve in the Hebraic text. As a result of human transgression and the "fall" from Divine favor, the Hebrew God curses Eve: "I will make most severe your pangs in childbearing; in pain shall you bear children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). Similarly, God castigates Adam: "Accursed be the soil because of you! Painfully will you get your food from it as long as you live" (Gen. 3:17). Pain and submission are forever commingled in God's prophetic pronouncement. The first couple made a choice and took action. As such, they unknowingly entered the masochistic realm. Their exile becomes the point of separation from the Divine that gives rise to the initial tension of polarities, from which desire is born. Desire comes as pain and promise—as curse and pledge—and therefore, inherently engenders the paradox of the sadomasochistic dynamic. The fruit of this reinvented relationship between Adam and Eve is Cain and Abel. The relationship

between the two brothers signals the first violent eruption in the Hebrew text (unless one considers expulsion from the garden a “violent” severing of humanity from Divine presence). Regardless, as Cain kills Abel, the polarity of domination and subordination is replicated to its most sadistic end; and the precedent is set.

When Jacob colludes with his mother, Rebekah, to steal Esau’s blessing, a sadomasochistic dynamic is evident once again. Yet, the fundamental essence of this dynamic is its tendency toward reversals. Much like the proverbial wrestling match, where opponents find themselves alternately in dominant and submissive positions, the notions of power throughout the story are questioned. Jacob, above all, displays this volte-face.

Jacob obtains a blessing that sets him above his brothers; he has dominion over them, as well as all the surrounding territories, according to his father Isaac. The blessing illustrates a sadomasochistic terrain, when Isaac pronounces: “Let people serve you, And nations bow to you; / Be master over your brothers, / And let your mother’s sons bow to you. / Cursed be they who curse you, / Blessed be they who bless you” (Gen. 27:29). In his annotation of the text, Levensen points out that the “reversal of the order of fertility and domination” in Isaac’s blessing, “reflects the reversal of Esau’s expectations” (*Jewish Study Bible* 57). There is indeed an explicit reversal of the natural, patriarchal order, wherein the eldest son receives the father’s blessing. Moreover, Jacob’s servitude, and subsequent triumph following Isaac’s declaration, illustrates that established power structures will be characteristically thwarted in a sadomasochistic terrain. Jacob must leave his home to escape Esau’s wrath, and finds himself enduring anything but the dominion he was promised. He becomes the indentured servant of his father-in-law, Laban.

Once Jacob extricates himself from fourteen years in Laban’s service, he is no longer under the control of a master. He journeys out of familiar territory, and alone, he must confront his most significant transgression: the betrayal of his brother. It is here that he encounters his Divine opponent. Jacob’s supernatural adversary, however, does not subdue him, though he does injure his thigh. Instead, the reciprocity of the sadomasochist dynamic comes into full view when the grappling match ends at daybreak and Jacob receives his blessing along with a new name, and a permanent limp.

Jehovah’s role in the sadomasochistic dynamic is revealed in the patterns of pursuit and punishment throughout the text. Moreover, the Lord God initiates, and simultaneously identifies with, human suffering. Fishbane stipulates God’s punitive tendencies are coextensive with his empathic sensibilities when he analyzes the paradox of the Divine (163). Jehovah is illustrative of the notion that dominant power is inextricably linked with subservient surrender. Thus, a reciprocal suffering is implied in the sadomasochist dynamic that queries the very nature of the Dominant as sadistic, and worries the line between aggression and agony—God’s aggression becomes his own agony. Violence becomes the mechanism through which veneration is realized.

Jehovah God is the ultimate Dom: a “permanently threatening presence,” which is “dangerously unpredictable” (Miles 46). The masochistic response to His immanence is enacted through traditionally accepted notions, or paradigms, which

identify the principal elements of masochism as a contract (or covenant), anticipation, and surrender (MacCormack 111). Once the covenant is established, the “persecutor,” according to MacCormack, “incarnates variously as Oedipal mother or father, as imagined sadist or, most commonly, as slave to the masochist’s demand for mastery of their own pleasure” (111). Therein lays the reciprocity. In the Dom/sub exchange, the Master exposes insecurity and shame, isolating and manipulating them, while paradoxically surrendering to the submissive’s sine qua non need to be dominated. In turn, participants find that shame and surrender have the potential to be transmuted into release, transformation, and/or ecstatic experience.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben contemplates the notion that shame can be transformed into pleasure in the domain of sadomasochism. He asserts that shame, at crucial moments, occupies the space where the masochistic subject confronts himself only in response to his Master; likewise the Master can only “assume” his role “by transmitting pleasure to the slave through infinite instruction and punishment” (108). Agamben notes that the masochist’s suffering can be immediately transformed into delight only through the Master’s utilization of shame—that which instigates an awareness of duality: “self-loss and self-possession, servitude and sovereignty” (107-109). The Master enacts subjectification for both parties. The derivative consciousness is a resurgence of presence that can be tolerated only in the fluidity between Dominant and submissive, an interplay that reveals their opposition as indistinguishable (127; 109). Shame becomes the intolerable space in which annihilation and presence become, if only briefly, united.

In a discourse that invokes the atrocities of the Holocaust, the validity of a perspective that implies any remote possibility of pleasure is called into question. Agamben’s project to delineate subjectivity and desubjectivity under the gloss of shame is eclipsed by what might be considered a lack of sensitivity, savvy, or common sense. However, by toying with an ultimate taboo (the Holocaust), Agamben situates the dialogue directly in a sadomasochistic territory, and signals the epitome of transgressive space, where sacred and secular collide.

Prior and Cusack’s research on the socio-religious function of gay bathhouses in Sydney, Australia, in the mid-20th century has determined the blurred lines between sacred and secular spheres. Similar to Newmahr’s acknowledgement of the benefits of serious leisure, their work recognizes that the sacred is found in secular activities including “sport, rock music, psychoanalysis, and sexuality” (271). Acknowledging that these gay bath houses became “crucial transformative space[s]” for the men who frequented them, Prior and Cusack have contributed to a discourse that recognizes transgressive space as a potential site for psycho-spiritual work. From there, the leap is not insurmountable to SMDS as a mechanism for spiritual transformation. Furthermore, what these exercises in alterity uncover is that, indeed, sacred and subversive are not mutually exclusive when it comes to matters of therapeutic relationships. Downing affirms:

Healing love is mutual love seen in Jungian terms as the sacred marriage and sometimes envisioned through what is taboo or

irreverent—incestuous and therefore, perhaps even “perverse.” Deviant love, however, is only yet another manifestation of that inevitable draw of human relationship. (204)

Sadomasochistic relationships are, more often than not, considered “deviant” love. However, in the context of a consensual SMDS contract, they enact a similar covenant to that between Jehovah and his people. When sadomasochism is pathologized, as it often is, the dynamic principles at work are overlooked for a simplistic version that can only be defined in terms of polarity. Polarity can lead to an imbalance of power that foments abusive, colonial oppression in all its forms, which has been a predominant point of contention for advocates of feminism, who rightly deem such pathological behavior as a threat. Yet, to pathologize behaviors related to Dominance/submission is to inevitably pathologize a God who most evidently embodies these characteristics. As such, Jehovah becomes the gleeful sadist who derives pleasure from inflicting pain in his intimate interactions with the Israelites. He is portrayed as a capricious persecutor—a Divine bully arbitrarily wielding a magnifying glass poised over an anthill.

On the other hand, the sadomasochistic dynamic can be recognized for its potential to radically re-envision power exchanges by realizing and overturning the balance of power between the Master and submissive—a reversal close to the heart of the feminist ideal. Fishbane goes one step further when he asserts that the “balance of power” between the Hebrew God and his people is “given into the hands of humans, whose every action is deemed a crucial component of the divine whole” (313). These perspectives indicate that the Master/Lord is defined by the sadomasochistic exchange in much the same way as the devotee/submissive. In fact, perceived polarities (including gender) become fluid once they are identified and accepted as intrinsic aspects of all human and/or divine beings.

Hebrew prophets exemplify the extreme nature of living in the sadomasochistic terrain. They embody the Divine/human polarities to such a degree that their presence is intolerable. Heschel’s analysis of the Hebrew prophets points out, “[The prophet] suggests a disquietude sometimes amounting to agony. Yet there are interludes when one perceives an eternity of love hovering over moments of anguish; at the bottom there is light, fascination, but above the whole soar thunder and lightning” (7). The prophets’ radical presence insults and instigates the status quo. These “assaulter[s] of the mind” are characteristically able to “hold God and man in a single thought” (Heschel 7; 25). They become a lightning rod for a collective projection of God-aversion in the face of the intimidating intensity of the Divine. On the fringes of society, in the sadomasochistic terrain, the prophets enact bondage rituals through renunciation, asceticism, and radical submission to Jehovah. They, likewise, demonstrate how sadomasochistic reversals manifest.

The vastness and the gravity of the power bestowed upon the prophet seem to burst the normal confines of human consciousness. The gift he is blessed with is not a skill, but rather the gift of being guided and restrained, of being moved and curbed: “Cords will be placed upon you...and I will make your

tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth, and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God' [Ezek. 3:25-27]" (qtd. in Heschel 26).

Bent under the will of God, the prophet endures ultimate surrender and sacrifice, moving toward sanctity and single-mindedness. Here, the sadomasochistic exchange between Jehovah and his prophets clearly maps out how power can be radicalized and reoriented in the covenant relationship. Heschel asks the provocative question: "Is the covenant a tether, a chain, or is it a living intercourse?" (62). The fact is that it is both. The sadomasochistic exchange is an essential part of the process of transformation; it illustrates the human desire to create, interpret, and engage with a God who is a guiding light for, and a reflection of, humanity. It acknowledges that which blurs the line between human and divine: an innate capacity to exert power over another, and surrender to something outside oneself. In coming to terms with these compulsions, which are an intrinsic part of human existence, the path toward comprehending divine love is less obscured.

Heschel puts forth the question: "How does one reconcile the tenderness of divine love with the vehemence of divine punishment?" (61). Truly, how is a landscape of violence and veneration negotiated? If Jehovah's purpose is to "purify" and not destroy, a "dramatic tension in God" is revealed, one which gestures toward the sadomasochistic potential (Heschel 57). Further, this dramatic tension is the site of the sadomasochistic terrain. Jehovah is in good company. Similar power exchanges are evident in stories related to other gods and goddesses: Inanna, Prometheus, and Persephone, to name but a few. All navigate sadomasochistic spheres in the process of transformation. SMDS or BDSM communities in contemporary society reenact and reinterpret similar rituals of power and submission. Much like religious communities, there are those who "play out," and those who "play at," these dynamics. Trivializing either severs them from their transformative potentials, and robs them of their inherent transcendent possibilities.

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In addition to a MA in Mythological Studies at Pacifica Graduate Institute, ANGELINA AVEDANO has earned a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Master of Arts in English from Boston College. Embarking on her dissertation work in the PhD program at Pacifica, she has finally found the ideal proving ground for her research on masculinities. Angelina is exploring the relationship between divine and human representations of masculinities in an effort to re-imagine how they may be interpreted in contemporary society. Currently living on the East Coast, Angelina teaches writing at Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, and provides individualized tutoring for students of all ages. She has also developed a course entitled "Literature and Spirituality/the Sacred" for Ottawa University Online. She has been published in Harvard Divinity School's literary journal, *The Wick*, in 2008 and 2009; *West Virginia University Philological Papers* in 2011; and Pacifica's own *Between* in 2013.