



## A Screenplay: My Own Private Sex Wars

Ummni Khan

*This screenplay is a dramatization of a micro-battle in which I engaged (both internally and externally) during the so-called feminist sex wars. It mostly takes place in the early 1990s, and shows how my strong identification with Feminism (with a capital “F”, as I believed there was only one kind at the time) started to disintegrate. The story pivots on two key relationships, one with Dragyn, who espoused radical feminism, and one with Daphne, who seduced me—in the best sense of that word—to embrace a more sex-radical praxis.*

INT. MCGILL UNIVERSITY WOMEN'S CENTRE – MIDDAY – 1992<sup>1</sup>

*Two university-aged women, Marie and Ummni, are sitting on mismatched lumpy furniture, engaged in heated, but not angry, discussion. Words like “gender stereotypes,” “misogyny,” and “subversion” can be heard. A third woman – self-chosen name Dragyn – is boiling water. The walls are covered with political posters advocating women’s rights.*

DRAGYN, *scrutinizing one box of tea.* Is this chai tea? I thought we were boycotting India. Dowry killings are still happening, people.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). I began my undergraduate studies in the early 90s, and was eager to become more politically engaged.

UMMNI, *retrieving the box of tea from Dragyn with a sheepish look.* Sorry. My mom sent it to me.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). Of course, I made a lot of mistakes in my quest for feminist enlightenment.

UMMNI, *pointing out something in the campus newspaper.* Hey, the film society is screening the new Polanski film. Anyone want to check it out?

MARIE, *in disgust.* Fuck no.

*Ummni looking confused and embarrassed.*

MARIE. He raped a 13-year-old girl and got away with it.

DRAGYN. They always get away with it.

UMMNI. But then why –



DRAGYN, *handing each woman a mug of tea and joining them on the couch.* What do you expect? The art-house crowd considers him “ground-breaking” (making scare quotes with her fingers).

MARIE. Don’t you mean the andro house crowd?

UMMNI, *tentatively pointing to the newspaper:* It says here it’s got strong female characters.

DRAGYN. As if! He cast his own wife as a masochist in *Bitter Moon*.

MARIE. The film shows he’s probably a wife beater too.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). The Women’s Centre was my favourite haunt in first year. After I had finished classes for the day, I’d hurry over to the university centre to meet up with my soul sisters and debrief our daily encounters with patriarchy in a safe, “womyn-only” space. Sexuality was our hottest topic. Not so much swapping stories of risqué liaisons, of course, as dissecting its power dynamics: sex as a weapon against women; sex as the linchpin to patriarchy. I came to believe there was only one progressive view on sexuality and was completely unaware at the time of any “war” between feminists on the issues of pornography or sadomasochism (s/m). It was self-evident that a feminist would be against porn and s/m, just as a human rights activist would be against torture and killings.

UMMNI, *slamming the newspaper closed.* In that case, maybe we should organize a boycott of the film?

DRAGYN. Nice thinking, Ummni.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). As part of the boycott, The Woman’s Centre presented *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography* on the same night of Polanski’s *Bitter Moon* screening. Afterwards, I couldn’t get the degrading images out of my mind: women in chains, legs spread open, penetration of multiple orifices. We stayed up all night in Dragyn’s dorm room rehashing it all, giddy with outrage.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY – 1993

*A vernissage at the University Art Gallery. Students and professors mingling. Ummni is talking to Daphne, a woman slightly older than her, but still clearly a student.*

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). In my sophomore year, I transferred to Concordia University to enrol in its Creative Writing program. That’s where I met Daphne. And that’s where my feminism started to become undone. She seemed really cool: a graduate student working on a manuscript that retold *Snow White* through a series of interlinking poetry and prose.



UMMNI. So, it's a feminist retelling?

DAPHNE. You could say that.

UMMNI. I'd love to read it. Do you ever show your work in progress?

Ummni turns to look at a painting, as if she doesn't care what Daphne's answer would be.

DAPHNE. I'm a bit of an exhibitionist. (*Daphne steps in front of the painting Ummni is pretending to scrutinize. Their eyes meet for a heartbeat, before Ummni looks sideways.*) I'll share my work at anytime.

CUT TO:

*A small one-bedroom apartment, clearly furnished with hand-me-downs and sidewalk finds. Daphne is holding a bottle of cheap dépanneur wine and heads to the kitchen in search of a corkscrew. Ummni is sitting at the dining table in awe of all the books scattered around. An anthology catches her eye: The Girl Wants To: Women's Representations of Sex and the Body (Crosby 1993). Daphne walks over to the table with two goblets of wine. She notices the book Ummni is holding.*

DAPHNE, passing Ummni her drink. Check out the Trish Thomas poem at the end: *Fuck Your Ex-Lover*.

UMMNI, her hand trembling a little so the wine sloshes almost over the rim. What?!

DAPHNE, taking the book from Ummni and flipping it towards the back before handing it back to her. That's what the poem's called.

The book stays open naturally at the page with a poem by Trish Thomas entitled, as Daphne had said, "Fuck Your Ex-Lover."

CLOSE UP: on the stanza that Ummni is reading. Daphne recites the lines aloud from memory.

DAPHNE. "Don't get me wrong. / I've intellectualized up the / feminist ass / with the best of them./ But all that theoretical masturbation / never got me a warm body in my bed."

UMMNI. What is this? (*Ummni quickly closes the book, as if she had just been got caught reading a secret diary.*)

DAPHNE. Inspiration.

UMMNI. Right (taking a gulp of wine). This book is part of that whole backlash thing, huh?



DAPHNE, with a look of amusement. Here's one of my poems. (*Daphne hands Ummni a spiral notebook.*)

Ummni's eyes bulge out as she reads the text. She gets to the bottom of one page and then abruptly gives it back to Daphne.

UMMNI. It's really ... vivid.

DAPHNE. What do you write?

UMMNI. I'm more of a short story writer.

DAPHNE. Working on anything in particular?

UMMNI, hesitates for a moment then speaks in a rush. Right now I'm writing a piece about sexual abuse, but it takes place in the context of an immigrant family, so of course, I'm using a postcolonial lens in my narrative.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). I thought the words "postcolonial lens" would impress Daphne. She was a Teaching Assistant; I was an undergrad.

DAPHNE. You're brave to tackle that.

UMMNI. Your poem, I guess, deals with abuse stuff?

DAPHNE. It's about the vicissitudes of pleasure.

UMMNI ((VOICE-OVER)). I remember wondering at the time about the definition of "vicissitudes," and assuming it must mean something bad, like distortions of pleasure.

CUT TO:

EXT – MONTREAL SIDEWALK – THE NEXT MORNING

Dragyn and Ummni walking and talking.

DRAGYN. Do you think she was coming on to you with that poem?

UMMNI. Goddess! I hope not.

DRAGYN. You're so naive. Why else would she tell you to read a poem called "Fuck Your Ex Lover"?

Ummni shrugs her shoulders.

DRAGYN. She's saying forget your ex and (cringing as she says the word) "fuck" her.



UMMNI. I don't think I'm Daphne's type.

DRAGYN. What about her poem? Was it just as offensive?

UMMNI. It was good ... (noticing Dragyn's look of disgust) ... from a technical perspective, that is. But it creeped me out.

MONTAGE:

*Sequence of arguments between Ummni and Daphne at quintessential Montreal landmarks as the season turns from summer to fall to winter.*

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER DURING MONTAGE). That's how I entered the sex wars. At first, I approached my conversations with Daphne and the books she gave me the way a litigator approaches the opposing party's factum. Study it and find any weaknesses in the reasoning, or any vulnerable spots you can exploit.

1. Ummni's wild gesticulating hands, as she tries to persuade Daphne of something by the illuminated cross at the top of Mount Royal.
2. Daphne handing Ummni a pile of books in front of the Saint Joseph's Oratory, the leaves in full autumnal colour display.

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER DURING THIRD INSTALLMENT OF MONTAGE). But at some point, I defected and became Daphne's willing protégé.

3. Ummni and Daphne in a heated discussion over a passage in a book Ummni is holding. They are in front of the Biosphère, piles of fresh wet snow around them. Ummni appears exasperated by the debate, shoves the book in her backpack and marches a few feet away. Daphne is worried at first, and walks tentatively in Ummni's direction. Before Daphne realizes what's happened, Ummni has thrown a snowball at her and then turns to flee. Daphne catches Ummni easily and wrestles her down onto a snowy blanket under a tree.

DAPHNE. Classic move, Khan: lure your enemy into a sense of security.

UMMNI, grinning. That is so not what I'm doing.

DAPHNE. What are you doing then?

*Ummni responds by tugging her scarf off, hooking it around Daphne's neck and pulling her down.*

UMMNI. According to that book you gave me, it's called, "topping from the bottom."



MONTAGE:

*A continuing sequence of arguments between Ummni and Dragyn at quintessential Montreal landmarks, as the season turns from winter to spring to summer again.*

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER DURING MONTAGE). My subsequent arguments with Dragyn were a different story. They just got worse.

1. Dragyn covering her face, as if in disbelief of what Ummni is telling her in front of the Cathedral-Basilica on a dreary grey night.
2. Dragyn emphasizing her point to Ummni by drawing her attention to the display at a sex shop on Saint Catherine Street. The leaves are just starting to come out on the sidewalk trees.
3. Ummni and Dragyn staring at each other with tense faces at the back patio of the Café Santropol. Each of them has a large sandwich in front of them, and a copy of *Macho Sluts* (Califia 1988) sits on the table on Ummni's side.

UMMNI. I'm just asking you to read the introduction.

DRAGYN. I'm not going to touch that woman-hating book. (*Dragyn opens her sandwich and starts scraping off most of the two-inch spread of cream cheese onto her plate.*) They always put too much of this shit.

UMMNI. It was written *by a woman*.<sup>2</sup>

*Ummni opens her mouth wide to take a bite of her colossal sandwich and chews loudly.*

DRAGYN. Women are just as capable of spreading misogynist lies as their andro counterparts. (Shoving her plate away from her.) And it's worse when they do it. (Pregnant pause.) They legitimate patriarchy.

CUT TO:

INT. DAPHNE'S APARTMENT – THE NEXT DAY

*Daphne sitting on the couch with Ummni's head in her lap, who is reading sections of The Story of O (Reage 1965) out loud. On the scuffed coffee table in front of them are piles of books with titles that denote kinky erotica, sex-positive feminism, and postmodern theory. A flyer for a fetish night is sticking out of one of the books.*

CUT TO:

INT. A DARK SMOKY CLUB – NIGHT



*Daphne and Ummni holding hands as they walk downstairs and enter the club. Daphne is sporting leather pants and a tiger print bra, Ummni is teetering on hazardously high stiletto heels.*

PAN SHOT OF THE PEOPLE AT THE CLUB:

*In one corner are foot fetishists sucking hairy toes and massaging tired insteps. In another, an adult man is in diapers, holding a baby bottle in one hand and a beer in the other. By the window, a woman outfitted in the classic kinky nurse costume is leading her “patient” around on a dog leash. In the centre, are two men taking turns whipping a very butch woman tied to some hooks in a crucifixion pose.*

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). Their audacity was stunning. Heart-breaking. People who are hated and mocked by movies, by laws, by radical feminists, by conversations that begin with “What would you do if your boyfriend turned out to be a ...?” All outcasts gathered together. In a safe and dangerous space. They—we—were not united by mutual desire. In the underworld of sexual deviance, I discovered stark differences in sexual practices, pleasures, aesthetics, and ethos, ranging from the classic s/m leather-dom to the animal-emulating furies. But there we were, bound together by our perverted sexuality and the disgust we evoked in others. It was sublime.

*Ummni watches another patron teaching Daphne how to flick a whip.*

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. OSGOOD HALL LAW SCHOOL LIBRARY – NIGHTTIME – 2001

*Ummni is conducting legal research on the computer. The book, *Bad Attitude/s on Trial: Pornography, Feminism and the Butler Decision (Cossman et al. 1997)*, is propped open next to the keyboard. She finds a case that she has apparently been looking for. As she reads the judgment, her face registers a memory and she looks out the window, lost in the past.*

UMMNI (VOICE-OVER). I was reading a critique of *R. v. Butler* (1992), the Supreme Court decision that upheld the obscenity provisions of the *Criminal Code*. As it turns out, that precedent-setting case was first applied to criminalize a lesbian s/m magazine because of a short story it contained by Trish Thomas, the writer of that poem I had read eight years ago in Daphne’s living room.

UMMNI (*to herself*). Fuck your ex-lover.



## Notes

1. This screenplay is based on the “Prelude” to the book *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary* (2014).
2. Please note that, since this time, Patrick Califia has transitioned and identifies as a transman.

UMMNI KHAN is an Associate Professor at Carleton University in the Department of Law and Legal Studies. Her research focuses on the construction and regulation of stigmatized sexual practices, with a particular focus on BDSM and sex work. Her book, *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-Legal Imaginary* (2014), examines the ways in which the criminalization of S/M in pornography and in practice rests on problematic ideological claims that engage with psychiatry, dominance feminism, and pop culture. This screenplay is a revised version of the prelude in *Vicarious Kinks*.