

Patriarchy and Gender Roles in Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts* and Easterine Kire's *Life on Hold*

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Abstract: This article discusses about the patriarchy and gender roles that is evident in Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts* and Easterine Kire's *Life on Hold*. Patriarchy is a system in which man is the Head and is in charge of all sorts of decision making, while women are to obey by the rules and demands laid on them by the man of the family. Gender role refers to the roles that men and women play in the society. The role that they're expected to partake by the societal norms. The role that is differentiates and distinguishes them as men and women. This research aims to analyse the patriarchy and gender roles in Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts* and Easterine Kire's *Life on Hold*. Judith Butler suggests gender is not the result of nature, but is socially constructed. Male and female behaviour roles are not the result of biology but are constructed and reinforced by the society through media and culture. She argues that there are a number of exaggerated representations of masculinity and femininity which cause 'gender trouble'. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expression' that are said to be its results." (Butler)

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender roles, women, marriage, men

I. Introduction

Shobhaa De (1948- present), popularly known as India's 'Jackie Collins' is one of the top bestselling authors of contemporary India. Her writing focuses on the urban issues of the ultra-modern society with its shade of marriage, complicated relationships and so on. She can also be called a feminist writer. Easterine Kire is a well-known Naga author who has written collections of poetry, four novels, several short stories and children book as well as academic books and articles. Her works revolves around various themes like supernaturalism, gender roles, innocence and so on.

Oxford dictionary defines Patriarchy as "A community of related families under the authority of a male head called the patriarch; applied more generally to any form of social organisation in which men have predominant power. In layman terms, patriarchy refers to a society in which every family or household runs under the authority of men. The man is the head of the family and every decision are made based on his approval.

Gender Roles on the other hand was coined by the Sexologist John Money. He says that Gender roles are "all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively." Aristotle writes that "the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the woman subject" (Poetics 1.1254b). Hence it is believed and assumed all over the world that man is the powerful being while women are the weaker gender who has to be under the authority of men.

Marriage is the most significant custom in an individual's life. It is considered as sacred by many religions. Indian parents often view marriage as a social obligation, and may pressure their daughter to marry early to fulfil this obligation. It is still a prevailing view held by the male-hegemonic society that a daughter must be married off as early as possible as her destiny is limited to marriage and motherhood. Repeatedly over time, marriage is pressure upon a woman by the parents, without knowing her wishes.

II. Patriarchy and Gender Roles in Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts*

Second Thoughts by Shobhaa De is all about the protagonist, Maya's monotonous lifestyle as a housewife who is faced with betrayal, deceit and disappointments, stuck in a traditional Arranged marriage system. She isn't paid attention to or even shown passion for by her husband Ranjan who demands of her to be like his mother, and a responsible housewife. When she finally begins to find a sense of freedom and peace, feeling her true self in the college going neighbour, Nikhil, she is met with betrayal and hurt. Through the character of Maya, De has portrayed the life lived by almost all the women in traditional arranged marriage setting in a male-dominated society.

In the prologue of the novel, *Second thoughts*, there is a description of a corpse lying prone on the platform, with none of the thousands of people walking past it barely noticing it. Maya's mother Chitra herself was too preoccupied with counting their luggage to bother with, that she also didn't seem to notice the dead body lying on the grimy platform. This scene is a metaphor to what is about to unfold in the novel. Every woman in every household is too occupied with their own problem brought by the expectations laid down on them by the male-dominated, patriarchal society that they have no time in noticing another's mummified kitchen.

The scene is followed by the conversation between Maya and Chitra about the motive behind their visit to Bombay. Maya, being an independent minded, educated woman is stunned to learn that her mother intends to set her up with a man named Ranjan. Upon questioning Chitra why she would fix her marriage when she still has a year of college to finish, she replies that boys like Ranjan get snapped up before you and I can blink our eyes- that's why, who knows by the time we get to Bombay, some other lucky girl might have grabbed him. In many Indian families arranged marriages are still the norm. Parents or relatives often take the lead in finding a suitable groom for their daughter.

Even after their successful meeting with the Maliks, Chitra was worried about when they would be made known of their 'verdict' – as though Maya was on trial. This shows how male is dominant even as a candidate for marriage. Men can easily choose a bride of his choice while women stand in queue wishing to be chosen by the man seeking for a wife.

Chitra seems to be very concerned with the fact that the Maliks might find Maya's complexion dark and tries to dress her in clothes with the colours that might make her look fair enough, revealing the society where woman has to be perfect in all aspects while being a man is enough for a man in itself. She goes on to keep a watchful eye on Maya's appearance before they met with the groom's family, wiping away her smudged kaajal with a spit on Maya's brand new handkerchief.

The Maliks' household wasn't different from that of Maya's Calcutta home and when on their return back home, she mentioned to Chitra about Ranjan's lack of courtesy, she is told to not misunderstand him when it was also Chitra's very first time meeting Ranjan. She goes on to say, "If Ranjan had helped the servants, he'd have been thought of as a sissy. Men do not undertake housework- especially foreign- returned men." (De 9)

This shows the role of men in a patriarchal society. Men who help in the household or are soft-spoken are often shamed and looked down upon as sissy or girlish. They are supposed to be stoic and masculine with no soft corners whatsoever. Ranjan's mother exclaims that Indian boys are spoilt and they always expect their mothers, and later, their wives to slog for them. As a response to that comment, Chitra adds that it is the same story in their house where Maya's father acts like an absolute lord at home. She then ensures that Maya is used to housework and that she even refuses to let her enter kitchen on weekends, doing everything by herself. This conveys that a woman, regardless of her degrees, is judged and graded based on her expertise in the household runs.

The 'Bholi bhali ladki' belting out from the car-stereo followed by Maya's falling in love with Bombay is also a symbolism to the innocent women unaware of the trap of the institution of marriage that drains all of their happiness out, filling them with the compulsion of never ending compromises and sacrifices in a patriarchal community. They are supposed to get used to the lifestyles at their parents' home as an unmarried woman as well as at their husband's after marriage. "Life isn't a picnic, you know. And you aren't in Bombay on a holiday. As a married woman, you have to learn to deal with responsibilities." (De, 29)

The sole role of the woman is to take care of the family and to do all the chores by herself without any complaints. It is as though their only reason for existence is to merely look after the house and nothing else. When Maya suggest that they have a part time cook, Ranjan is displeased. "A cook? Just for the two of us? And I don't even come home for lunch. That's absurd. We don't need one. If we do get someone, what work would that leave you?" (De, 30)

In patriarchy, women are supposed to have least contact with her own parents and family while they have to try to strengthen her relationship with her in-laws. The only reason of contacts from Chitra's end was to enlighten Maya of household tips and hints of enquiry about pregnancy news. When a woman gets married, she is expected to quickly become as one with their in-laws. Women are responsible for their husband's peace and comfort even if it's at the cost of their own mental health. Any mistakes made by her is critically judged upon and shamed for not fitting into the society's superficial definition of perfect wife or woman, Maya is made to feel like a servant and Ranjan's mean words always hurt her.

Didn't you do housework at your mother's house? Don't tell me you've forgotten already I had bitten my tongue indismay. I had wanted to say that I had worked in Calcutta, done household chores, but I had never been made to feel like a servant. A menial. I didn't have a problem about doing my own housework. It was Ranjan's attitude that hurt me. The bank provided him a fairly generous allowance and we could well have afforded full-time help. But Ranjan was adamant. (De 50-51)

Ranjan proudly exclaims that when he was living in the States, he did all his work himself as though he had done something honorary, something that's expected of women as a bare minimum. Ranjan reminds Maya that a housewife's duty is to stay at home and make sure everything is tip-top and that is where true happiness lies. He goes around commanding Maya to get him his socks, shirt, water and so on as though she was his personal slave.

The woman of the house has to function like a robot, taking in instructions and doing precisely what is being told. Ranjan's critical eye surveyed even Maya's appearance and would comment things like "blouse doesn't match", "saree petticoat showing", "complexion looking greasy", "kaajal smeared". He expects Maya to be perfect both in appearance as well as in household chores. According to him, a housewife should know what clothes are washed and what isn't. He also commands Maya to wear clothes of his choice. "Listen, wear that nice yellow saree tonight, all right? The one with red border. It suits you. Know which one I'm talking about? The silk one. And yes, iron my blue shirt. The American one. Bye. (De, 104)

Even to have a day out for a breather, Maya has to request and present a proper agenda in order for it to be considered by Ranjan. The air conditioner in the bedroom is used only when Ranjan is also in the room and if Maya tries to use it when he isn't around,

she would be questioned about it and be delivered a lecture on economics. She also has to maintain accounts in a diary about the amount spent on specific things for kitchen use and she is again scolded like a kid if there's an expenditure on expensive food items.

All the money matters was to be dealt by the man of the house, Ranjan and poor Maya had to surrender the little amount her mother gave her as a gift. Ranjan also uses terms like 'Me', 'My home' as if Maya has nothing to do with their home or his life. When Maya insists on taking some classes like pottery, Ranjan interrupts her and reminds her that housewives don't have extra time and that there is so much to be done around the home. Maya desperately wished someone had told her what being married means, that it means giving up everything that one has known as a carefree young girl. Ranjan even openly and harshly criticises on Maya's complexion, calling her dark. All these instances shows that the role of a man in the society is like that of a dictator while women has to bear all the torments and obey their demands and commands.

Maya bitterly recalls her mother's advice, that marriage involves sacrifice and that all the sacrifices has to be undertaken by the woman. The sooner one accepts, the happier one would be. It is the woman's job to care and look after any sick family member and Ranjan, though a mama's boy always has pain in one part or the other of his body, excusing himself to sit comfortably at home when his mother got ill. Maya on the other hand had to take care of her mother-in-law despite her tiredness, even to the extent of being warned by her husband with his 'don't-you-dare-let-me-down' expression, commanding of her stay with his mother all the time.

Ranjan is very entitled as every man in a patriarchal society. Their role is to sit and order around, getting their wishes fulfilled by the woman of the house. Even when Maya is busy in the kitchen and he is idly sitting in front of the TV, he wouldn't dare get up even if there is telephone or doorbell ringing as those job was Maya's responsibility.

III. Patriarchy and Gender Role in *Life On Hold*

Life on Hold, by Easterine Kire, revolves around the character of Nimenuo whose life goes through a series of unpleasant happenings. She is brave and bright but it means nothing being a woman as her only role is to marry a good suitor and settle down while being a good obedient wife, which was also presumed to be of help for her broke family.

In *Life on Hold*, we see the patriarchal setting where the man is supposed to be the head of the family. Women are considered inferior and weak, therefore, Roko sulked and refused to speak to anyone when he was defeated by Nime in the wrestling game as that was something to be ashamed of in a patriarchal society. This is what they have been taught and made feel since childhood i.e. boys are strong, girls are fragile.

Even as a child, boys have big demands such as Zeu wanting to have a new racing car, while Nime is silent and wishes to study hard to help her mother when she grows up. Boys have camps out with fathers or uncles but girls like Nime, never gets the opportunity to do so. When the school arranged an Easter break, the children were divided into small groups. The girls fetched firewood and water while boys helped their teachers set up five shelters. Such is the roles placed on each gender in the society where men and boys are related to strength and leadership while women to completely opposite aspects.

A woman's role is to merely look after their husband and children. Nime's mother stayed at home and looked after her children like many women of her age. Just like Maya, even Nime barely visits her parents as her husband complains of the travel expenses. Both the characters of Maya and Nime feel like a caged bird, having no sense of freedom, and always being monitored and controlled by their husbands.

You know, it costs me 300 rupees to send you home to your family that is quarter of a day's Labour. And then I can't send you empty-handed. So, another 300 for your pocket money and there, half a day's labour is wasted. If your father is recovering, I don't see why you have to visit him so frequently. You have to remember that you have your own family now, and so should they. (Kire 64)

The partiality in the better treatment of the son as compared to the daughter by Abeiu also reveals the how boys and men plays greater and important role in the society and how women's existence isn't really appreciated at all. Zotuo is more demanding than his sister Vinuo which also symbolises the differences between men and women. "Vinuo was well liked by her teachers. She in turn loved school, for it was here that she found the attention she missed at home. Her father barely glanced at her school worm. However, if Zutuo showed him a drawing he had made, Abeiu would be very interested and praise the boy." (Kire, 95)

In a patriarchal society, though women may always be seen through a sympathetic lense, men are also not less burdened in this societal setting as they are supposed to be the breadwinner and provide for their families which are not always easy. Ranjan works tirelessly to provide for his family. In the same way, Pusalie works hard to provide for his family. In the process, he falls heavily in debt, even to the extent of losing his mind. Zeu on the other hand is anguished as he now has to take care of his widowed mother that his father is no more. He battles his thoughts as life in the society was becoming competitive with very less chance of employment both in government as well as business sector.

IV. Conclusion

Though, the role of men and women in the society is very distinctive, both genders have their own share of hardships and sorrow, one not lesser than the other. We are able to identify women in various situations such as Nimeneo who is married but has gender

issues in her relationships, Maya who is devastated by her married life and lacks of physical and emotional comfort from her husband feels lonely at home. In both *Seconds thoughts* and *Life on Hold*, women are always running to take care of everyone in the house, neglecting their own wellbeing, sacrificing their comfort and happiness, while men also have to sacrifice to some extent to provide a comfortable life for their loved ones.

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