

Breaking Gender Stereotypes! A Critical Perspective

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Abstract:

Patriarchy has regulated women and men into thinking in terms of stereotypes where men need to be masculine and women feminine. Furthering the stereotypes has not just consolidated the patriarchal male-chauvinist values but also made women victims of gendered discourse, actions, and behaviours. The paper “Breaking Gender Stereotypes! A Critical Perspective” looks at the stereotypes historically and critically to explore the interventions made and needed to free humanity from exploiting half of humankind. The paper also tries to critically understand the gendered ideology from the feminist theoretical perspective and through some select literary narratives.

Keywords:

Gender Stereotypes, de Beauvoir, Woolf, Gillman, Male-chauvinist, Patriarchy.

Gendered stereotypes are conventional male-chauvinist beliefs that the patriarchal world still carries on practising consciously and unconsciously. Going against these stereotypes would be to stand against societal values, customs and traditions, which means too much effort! We, the supposedly educated ones, are intentionally not gendered in our thoughts and behaviour, at least not in public spaces. However, our unconscious thoughts, acts and decisions are often influenced by the gendered patriarchal ideology we have been raised with and lived with for a long time. Though in our private lives, we may be trying to tag along with the traditional beliefs as questioning them and swimming against the tide seem too much of a task. However, often we tend to project a more sensitive approach to gender in our public life, which has been a significant cause of society still carrying on with gender-stereotyped acts and behaviours. The paper explores the gendered ideology that produces such stereotypes to manifest if they can be broken with consistent and conscious efforts.

Gender stereotypes have been so ingrained in our minds and everyday practices that we cannot even see these stereotypes to be so. We feel they are the normalised ways

of behaviour. Anything that does not fall into the stereotype is generally not acceptable by society and even sometimes reprimanded. The gendered existence of humankind for centuries has conditioned human minds so that we do not just accept them but also reaffirm them repeatedly by practising the same stereotypes, sometimes even in our unconscious acts and behaviours.

When a mother cooks the meal every day, we call it the mother's care, but we do not see how she has been restricted to the kitchen. We tend to eulogise the mother's care for the child and the sacrifices she has to make for the baby's sake, even to jeopardise her career. However, at no point is the idea of community involvement in child care emphasised. We do not do so as it would call for questioning, critiquing and destabilising the status quo and building a new social order. So we tend to tag along the gendered lines, quietly accepting what is given to us and passing it on in the name of conventions, heritage and traditions (Dea 3-5).

So, a girl should grow up feminine, and a boy should be masculine! A girl should play with a barbie doll, and a boy with guns and cars! A girl should learn to cook, do dishes, and clean up, whereas a boy should busy himself learning the world's ways outside. A girl necessarily should be obedient; a boy, questioning! A girl should busy herself learning household chores, and a boy need not do so. There are thousands and thousands of such stereotypes we have been practising for centuries and reaffirming through our gendered practices and actions.

Don't you find a boy playing with a doll to be amusing? Is not a young girl driving a racing bike an anomaly? These are so as we have been conditioned to think in such a manner. We are made to believe that gendered roles make the world so perfect. Patriarchy wants us to act and behave in such a manner and actively establish gender roles in our everyday lives. Patriarchy justifies the distinction of roles for males and females based on the biological difference between men and women. However, they fail to realise that "sex" and "gender" are two different concepts that need to be understood in their divergence.

The French scholar Simone de Beauvoir, in her book *le Deuxieme sex* in 1949 (translated into English as *The Second Sex* in 1953), brought a newer perspective to the notion of gender when she makes a distinction between sex and gender by saying – "One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological and economic fate determines the figure that the female represents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature ..." (de Beauvoir 249). Thus, one is born as a female or a male, but one becomes a woman because patriarchal culture moulds her psyche in that manner – where "he is the subject; he is absolute – she is the other" (de Beauvoir 250).

Simone de Beauvoir's voice is significant as she was the one who made a systematic critique of the gendered discourse and patriarchal ideology and laid bare in her book *The Second Sex* how women need to stand up against their suppression, oppression and victimisation. Beauvoir states that when a male writer writes, he does not need to define what a male is as a male always has an identity of her own. However, when it comes to women, they need to define women in clear terms, as patriarchal society has always defined women as men – either as daughters or wives or mothers. Thus, Beauvoir emphasises how a female writer needs to make a firm definition of what a woman stands for. This idea of female writing was taken by later French feminists and given the name of *écriture féminine*, where they emphasised “writing the body”. Beauvoir too attempts to define women as traditionally, in male-chauvinist discourse, women are seen as unfavourable in the binary of men/women, masculine/feminine category where men are both positive and neutral. The negative portrayal of women, which has been a part of the male discourse, has had a long history and needs to be rectified, for which there is a need for revolutionary steps, and Simone de Beauvoir's voice was one.

With Simone de Beauvoir, the feminist debate took the forefront, leading to the Second Wave feminism looking at the problems in a much more coherent way from different knowledge domains. Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the beginning of Second Wave Feminism, challenged the patriarchal norm that a female should be tied to her domesticity within the domestic space (home) and find fulfilment in that and motherhood. She emphasised that women, similar to men, also need self-fulfilment, individuality, and freedom in public and domestic spaces. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) presents how most canonical male authors represented women merely as sexual objects whose role in the literary text is to be subservient to the male protagonist. Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own* (1982), “Feminist Criticism in The Wilderness” (1986) “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979), for the first time, tries to theorise the critical practice of feminist literary criticism and draws attention to the tradition of neglecting the female novelists of the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

During this period of the 1970s in France, another set of female scholars – Helena Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva built a solid theoretical framework based on the works of Jacques Lacan and other post-structuralists and named it “*écriture féminine*”. Hélène Cixous argued for a positive representation of femininity she calls ‘*écriture féminine*’. Her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976) is a famous manifesto of ‘women's writing’ which calls for women to put their ‘bodies’ into their writing – “Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.” The French feminists were of the view that *l'écriture féminine* will not only subvert

the masculine symbolic language but at the same time would create new identities for women. In her work *Spéculum de l'autre femme* (1974), Luce Irigaray points out how the patriarchal oppression of women is based on the negative constructions of women associated with Freud's theory of female sexuality.

Questioning the absolute is too much effort, and how can one have so much time to question the existing order in today's time? And for what? For a feminist takeover! For women to rule the world and create hullabaloo! Let us flow with the tide; why swim against it? Why let the inferior race get the privileged position? Why let second-class citizens rule the world? Why make a comparison between shoes and the crown? So, we keep emphasising the role of the crown to rule over us and consent to their rule! The rule of the male chauvinist! The dictates of the Puritan beliefs of the perpetuation of gendered roles!

What is more disheartening is that it is not just the men who perpetuate the gendered stereotypes. However, with their words and actions, women further affirm and validate such stereotypes. Women are being culturally conditioned to do so. This cultural conditioning of females is detrimental. The females often are not aware of their subservience. They are made to perceive themselves as inferior beings whose objective should be to serve men (Dea 37). Simone de Beauvoir's voice is significant as she was the one who made a systematic critique of the gendered discourse and patriarchal ideology and laid bare in her book *The Second Sex* how women need to stand up against their suppression, oppression and victimisation.

The gendered norms need to be questioned, and there needs to be a whole new paradigm of understanding the world. This new paradigm needs to be gender-sensitive and sensitise people that gendered norms are detrimental to the nation and the world as almost half of the human resources are underutilised and are left to do chores within their homes.

For example, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, one of the famous English novelists and a feminist critic, made a fictional sister of William Shakespeare, Judith, and states the gendered problems she had to face if she had an equal calibre as that of her brother. Shakespeare started as a doorkeeper of the globe theatre, became an actor, and established himself as a playwright. Women in Elizabethan England were not allowed to be doorkeepers. Neither women actors were allowed on stage. Furthermore, the women visiting the theatre were seen as lacking "character." The Puritan belief was that theatre was a meeting place for whores and their customers. Thus, women in public spaces were not allowed. So, Virginia Woolf portrays that even if Judith had similar competence as William Shakespeare, she would not have been accepted by Elizabethan England.

It is not just true of Elizabethan England. However, even in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was thought that women engaged in writing were sure to head towards certain kinds of mental illness. For example, in the American writer Charlotte Perkins Gillman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper", the protagonist is locked in an attic room by her husband's doctor. She supposedly suffers from post-partum depression. She is being instructed that she should not engage herself in writing to worsen her mental state. A general belief was perpetuated that women engaged in intellectual and creative endeavours are always at risk of losing their sanity. It is interesting to note that Gillman's story's husband's protagonist is a medical practitioner. Even then, he believed writing for women could lead to madness (Ghandeharion and Mazari 115). This gendered stereotyping of women closes all doors for them and makes them live a life where they aspire to higher things but cannot have the courage to desire the same. Moreover, if they desire, they are either termed as mad women and locked in the attic room (as pointed out by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar), or they are termed as "the whore in the marketplace." These stereotypes lead women to live a life of fear and desolation, thereby becoming victims of gendered stereotypes.

If men have achieved sublime greatness, behind them lies the contributions of women who provided all the necessary support to go beyond the utmost limits of human thought and achieve more incredible things. However, if women have achieved something, it was despite their challenges. It is not to undermine men's efforts. However, men are also victims of gendered stereotypes as they are also made to do things as the stereotypes ask them to do. Men are also asked to be masculine and not show feminine traits.

A man cannot cry in public as it is supposedly a feminine quality. A man cannot choose to become a househusband (similar to the notion of a housewife), as his role is to go out and earn and sustain the family. If a man chooses to be a househusband and the woman is the earning member of the house, he becomes a butt of a joke for society. Men, too, are victimised by patriarchal dictates and made to follow the stereotypical norms, whether they like it or not. They are also made to perform according to the criteria that gendered discourse had established and society follows.

This is not to say that gendered stereotypes equally victimise men and women. Women find themselves in vicarious situations in all contexts, whether the glass ceiling in professional cases, the 'site' of violence in wars and battlefields or objects of banter and tirade when it is a family mishap similar such other situations. They are the ones who are mainly at the receiving end of the gendered norms, though some men face similar problems, though their numbers are much lesser.

Can one think of a female James Bond? Even if a director and story writer make a film where a female is in the lead role of thriller movie, will the audience accept such a film? Is it possible? The boss of Bond, M, has been made a female; but she is not in the midst of the action. Even in recent Bond movies, women are shown to be doing specific activities, yet there comes a time when the villain traps the female, and the hero has to save her, and then, ironically, consumes her. Thriller is supposedly a male genre as it deals with actions. It shows women as ornamental beings whose role is to provide voyeuristic pleasure to the male audience. Are we in a state where we can go beyond the gendered representation and call for women to take the most influential roles in life and fiction? Again a gendered norm of the genre where women cannot take pleasure in action movies! (Neuendorf et al. 749).

We are surrounded by gendered stereotypes in all corners of our lives, from the media representations of women to everyday practices to how society's political and cultural setup manifests. What would be the state of a "masculine" man who is made to live in the kitchen? He would react and shout and burst out at anything and everything. When the world started changing a bit, such a man shouting at his wife became a hit and evolved a genre of its own in drama – the angry young man. Here, the reference is to the play by John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, whose protagonist, Jimmy Porter, is made to run a sweet stall despite his intellect. He keeps bantering at his wife or blowing his trumpet when he stays home. Men have been accustomed to doing this when they are in perilous situations. Thus, the notion of 'Kitchen-Sink Drama' evolved as a man in the kitchen usually finds his masculinity under threat and reacts violently. The way Jimmy tries to find occasions to hurt Alison's sensibilities portrays how males, when they are put in feminine spaces, find themselves at odds as the gendered stereotypes have defined the psyche of males in a manner that they have defined their spaces and beyond that, they are not accustomed to living a comfortable life. In other words, the gendered stereotype with which Jimmy Porter is brought up makes him reclaim his self to respond in such a manner (Trussler 19).

It is generally believed that the first lesson a child can get about breaking gender stereotyping is when s/he is accustomed to seeing their father in the kitchen sink, doing dishes. The question is, how can they? Men can be fancy chefs, but will they cook and clean up at home if not thrust into such a situation? Men can play with their grown-up sons on holidays, but will they take care of tiny babies? How can men be good school teachers when teaching primary-level students mean tending to the students with care? How can women teach in higher academic institutes as it means to have intellect? Such questions keep on bumping again and again in everyday discourses around the world.

Why do we ignore such questions even when we know they are unjust? We do not want to take up a fight with the world. Even though we may be gender-sensitized, who will take the pain to get out of one's comfort and stand for the rights of others?

Even though this may be the thoughts of many of us, our society is still changing and galloping towards a more gender-just world. A father is not ashamed anymore of getting up first and making breakfast for the family, even on a working day. A wife who comes home after a late-night party with friends has not been harassed anymore in many societies. A man sitting at home and his wife working to earn a living for the family is not a significant stigma in many parts of the world. Changes are coming, and we are a part of those changes.

Breaking stereotypes is not a stigma; the following one is when it causes violence in a particular section of society. One cannot talk about ethics and morality when following stigmatised stereotypes. Breaking them is what makes one ethical. How can one have one's head held high when it is filled with stereotypes perpetuating violence? Will you be able to live respectfully if you know that unknowingly and unknowingly, you are perpetuating gendered violence? If you have a conscience, it is better to take a step back and rethink all the choices that you have made and made others make.

When one steps towards gender neutrality, the world can be better for all. Having bigger goals at international levels for a gender-just world is a need of the hour. However, micro-steps are needed at the individual level. For this, a growing awareness of the stereotypes and their related stigma must be perpetuated, especially for the new generations.

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