

POLYMORPHOUS MAINTENANCE OF GENDER STEREOTYPES AND ITS RESTRUCTURING: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The socio-cultural perspectives of any society have got huge impacts on stereotypes, especially gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are like the parasite that grows on society. It is the same in every aspect of culture and tradition. The status of men and women is bound by the prevalent gender stereotypes. Gender is a social construct whereas sex is biological. From birth to death, the society teaches men and women some values that are to be followed. These are nurtured through various social institutions. Scientific discourses have proved that rather than the physical differences male and female are equal as far as their intellect and mental capabilities are considered. Still there exists gender-based stereotypes. Religiously speaking everyone is equal before the God. It can be seen that the gender stereotypes are well exercised through the family, education, media, advertisement, social media etc. While men enjoy all the privileges, women suffer the most. This chapter deals with a general analysis of polymorphous gender stereotypes with respect to Keralite society, examine the ways through that these stereotypes strengthen in the society and also looks at the possible ways of restructuring in the light of certain cultural texts.

Key words: Gender stereotypes, deconstruction, institutions, discrimination.

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United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights reports: "A gender stereotype is harmful when it limits women's and men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and/or make choices about their lives" (OHCHR 1). Gender stereotypes are exercised from the very early phase of human lives. If the new-born baby is a girl, she will be given toys like dolls, kitchen sets, dresses in pink etc. In the very early age itself, the girl child is injected with the thought that they should be confined to the four walls of a house, so that it becomes easy to play the traditional female home making role and remain

submissive for all the time keeping inequality and injustice unquestioned. “Discrimination against girl child and gender inequality in Indian Society is associated with the ethos of patriarchy, patriline and traditional gender stereotyping” (Bhadra 6). If it is a baby boy, he will be provided with the guns and cars and are groomed with masculine colors like blue in the very childhood itself. Elders always tell boys that “boys don’t cry”, which is also a kind of stereotyping that exerts more compulsion on boy child.

Boys are asked to lend a helping hand in marketing, going out and fetching things, escorting sisters etc. They can go for acquiring education without any limits. Men are always considered as the permanent and prominent members of family and inheritors of the family line. For that, they are taught to be masculine. Men who are interested in cooking, knitting, embroidery and other household chores hardly get any encouragement from the family members. It is a shameful act when views through the perspective of a society. In fact, men having such interests are branded as man with feminine traits and are ridiculed and discouraged to follow their dreams. Men are always the head of the family and even the society. They can be violent, uncompassionate, arrogant, and tough. No one argues about it. At this point, the power of the this socially constructed gender stereotypes are evident in the society and in the socio-cultural texts.

Men are also having certain compulsions to face in the life due to stereotyping and manly expectations from them. They are supposed to find a job, marry a girl, set up a family, make a home, setting the financial needs, work for the family accepting the burdens etc. It keeps on repeated. Whoever deconstructing these norms in the society are hardly accepted.

Female children are discriminated even before they are born, in the form of sex determination tests. The society practices this kind of high-tech atrocities through the amniocentesis. By female foeticide and female infanticide girl children are denied the life. According to a report published in national daily, approximately 1000 fetuses were destroyed in Delhi alone in 1991 of which near about 995 were female fetuses (Bhadra 71). In a chapter entitled “Subversive Bodily Acts” in her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler terms both gender and sex as “enactments” operating performatively “to establish the appearance of bodily fixity” (qtd. in Mamona et al. 179)

There is a connection between the preference of son over girl, and the discrimination against girl child in the society. Girls are confined to do household works and are well trained for the future of marital relationship and child rearing. They are actually having no space of their own in their own home as well as in their husband’s home. They are being injected to maintain a good

behavior in their own home for their husbands' homes and in their husband's home they are supposed to act like servants without any payment, often. Here the state of being homeless in home is visible. They are not allowed to go out and do their needs on their own. Their education is limited. They are most often the victims of patriarchy and partiality. They are always ill treated. They can only enjoy the secondary status because of these existing social ideologies, value system and cultural ethos. They have no permanent roles and are trained to be serving, subjugating, sacrificing and obedient. They are objectified in the name of beauty. They are discriminated in education, clothing, nutrition, healthcare and general upbringing. Pure instances of gender marginalization are visualized in various fields of lives. All these result in the acquisition of meagre share of their family's affection and resources for women.

Hence in can be observed that these gendered layers of society are preserved through polymorphous maintenance of gender stereotypes in many institutions. They are well maintained through the three important institutions namely family, education and media. Other than that, it can be witnessed in food, clothing, medicine, advertisement, marriage, health and even in care and affection. Butler also observes: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1999 43).

Family is the basic institution of a society. This itself intoxicate individuals with the thoughts of gender stereotypes. It is uprooted from here. At the time of having food, the male head of the family, is given superior position for seating followed by male children and female children. The mother is out of this very act and stay there as if she is the servant. So is the quantity and quality of the food they get. Sisters are often advised to serve the brothers. It will never go round the way. There is the concept of housewife but not househusband. It is the mother of the family who sacrifice her entire life for her family. She should take care of her husband, children, house and everything connected with the house. They keep on doing all the domestic jobs. Their female children may help them or they are forced to help women but rarely a male child. This social structure is also administering this societal norm of gender stereotypes. Anyhow, these domestic chores of women are unpaid ones. Fathers are the one who support them financially. So that they could maintain a superior position. There is an unseen power in their voice. Patriarchy primarily rules the family. Moreover, men can aspire education at any time but in most cases, marriage will be a block often for a girl's education and even if they aspire for it, by the domestic chores they are often denied the same in schools and colleges, though not always.

Education is the actual door to deconstruction of such gendered stereotypes. But at the same time, education in early ages seems to be strengthening the stereotyped images among children. For example, the textbooks show women doing all the household chores, whereas men sit straight and keep reading newspaper or going out for a job. Even the science textbooks do the same. Chemistry text books introduces some chemical reactions with example of women burning woods or making curd from milk. All these indirectly create the notion that women are meant for kitchen or should be confined to the four walls of the house. The textbooks directly or indirectly promote leadership qualities among men. Certain teachers too aid for that. In common classes while selecting leader, the position of first leader will be that of a boy and girl comes only as second. It is the same in campus politics too. In a college of co-education, the chairperson will be most probably a man and the vice chairperson will be a girl. Moreover, most of the tasks are given to the boys thinking that they are strong, having leadership qualities and it is easy for them to handle. In the case of access to higher education also, it can be perceived that increased rate of educational opportunities are for men. They have no much limitations. They can go to any place fearlessly. They can cross states and even nations. But when women do the same, the society will probably begin to start spreading rumors about them. Perhaps, it seems that the educational system which preaches for equality and justice is actually doing its opposite. A contrasting nature is visualized here. The gender stereotypes are practiced at home, at schools and colleges. "The parents at home and teachers at schools and colleges are very often promote leadership and competitiveness among boys while encouraging girls to be generous, accommodating and feminine" (Bhadra 67). In the case of media and advertisement women are always objectified. Like the textbooks, advertisements too showcase visually recurring imageries as women doing domestic chores or rearing the children. In most of the advertisements, the beauty products, washing products, utensils, different powders and mixers are in the hands of women while men behold vehicles, energy drinks, investment centers, building products etc. So it is very transparent that women are portrayed as beauty objects and house keepers and men stand for strength, power and energy. Even though there are lots of changes coming against these traditional gendered representations of media, advertisement and other institutions, changes are not so common. Media misrepresent the actual proportions of men and women in the population. Only less percent of television writers, executives and producers are women. Female film directors are even more scarce. Women are represented as passive, dependent on men and enmeshed in relationships or house works. Many films value men and his power over the

hardships of women. The real negligence can be observed, only while seeing through the lens of women.

In short, gender stereotypes are not something that is taught in schools by as texts. But they are exercised indirectly through the power of these institutions. It only seems to support the existing patriarchal values. This gender marginalization hinders the girl children and women from aspiring their dreams. In reality, family, education, media and other institutions do not often use any force or violence directly, to keep up this typical stereotype. But they are administered through different ideologies and culture. By activating this, women are suffering a lot. To put an end to their sufferings, conscious deconstruction of such gender stereotyping seems to be an obligatory tool.

While observing the stereotyping through the multiple angles, some men, the interpellated women and the women who always lay in the comfort zone of institutions, are ready to accept all these stereotypes. They themselves follow these. They are trained for that. But some men who realize the real pain and plight of women by these stereotyping. Most of the men do not care about it, because they do not have any problem and there is no boundary for them. Since it is mostly affected on women, it is true that, they are the right ones to raise voice against it. But overcoming these stereotyping is actually a need of the progressive society.

The views about the personalities who deconstruct is really different. Those who argue about doing something I this regard is being called as feminist. They are disobedient, disrespectful and disgraceful in others' eyes. The prominent writer Adichie in her talk mentions that she is a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men. She points out that in others' views feminist seems to be unhappy, un- African and the ones who hate men. But what actually they do is that, they protect themselves. Freedom is not something that can be distributed or withdrawn. It is within oneself. Each individual has the right to have their own stand points. For most of the family members who are holding orthodox values, the proponent of the deconstruction is a real trouble maker. They will not allow or support any kind of breaking of stereotypes. They view it as the biggest mistake. Moreover, the society does not have such a tradition of repairing norms. So, the society too nip it in the bud. They never let girls to grow up like boys. They set lot number of rules to home to arrest women. The society and in the name of society, family, suppress the freedom of girls. Actually, women are not really sure what they are rebelling against whether it is suppression by males or the suppression exercised by the other women in the family.

Recently many gender stereotypes are restructured. Women came to the forefront of the media. They began to start getting education even after fighting with their family. Early marriages are comparatively rare. Even mothers too make a comeback after a wide gap. Now there are plenty of women entrepreneurs, workers and employers. Women have been exhibiting their role in the society. Apart from the domestic life, they have begun to enter the socio-political life. Women work somewhere even with the low wages though it is an injustice to them. Women are also going out, enjoying and travelling with their friends. With the advent of technology and the supportive nature of people from their inner circle, they are even able to reach higher peaks and succeed with their potentials. The social media like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube etc., help to picturizes such women who even dare to take journey alone. It is a wider platform for their abilities. Unlike earlier times, women are seen on roads not walking but by driving their own vehicles. Earlier it was simple two wheelers, but now they are driving every vehicle including heavy ones that were once dealt only by the man. Likewise, girls are not that restricted in posting their pictures and videos. The faulty notions during the first wave feminism are dismantled. Now there is no sector-based jobs. Most of the jobs can be handled by men and women alike. Women of today are able to react to the injustice prevalent against them. Now the strategies are quite different. Their economic stability helps them to stand in their own feet. Men too have begun to accept women. Apart from profession of chef, men don't usually cook in their own kitchen. But now men too began to cook and make the dishes. They also began to do household chores. Women's entry to politics is also remarkable in this regard. Earlier women were confined to studies of arts and hobbies of artistic nature only. But nowadays each sport activities have the names of women in them. Women even started to protect man and provide employment opportunities to men. They have become a savior and they inspire other people. In short, the dressing style, the mode of transportation, the educational level or qualifications, etc. are on the progressive scales. Now men do not try to make their girls stand in the border. Instead, many men are seen as supporting their spouses, children, sisters etc.

As an impact of these social deconstructive activities, women are also able to enjoy certain spaces in the social, cultural, educational, personal and political spheres of lives. Moreover, now women could contribute to their family as well so they are not at all seen as a big burden for the family. Rather than that their loneliness and trauma in home space is not at all extending to their future life. Social restructuring of institutions and domestic spaces have been made possible to some extent, so that women do not want to beg for their pocket money to someone else.

Dowry system, another cause of gender discrimination is said to be decreased due to the advent of modern education and women's higher education. But, a 1997 report claimed that at least 5,000 women die each year because of dowry deaths, and at least a dozen dies each day in 'kitchen fires' thought to be intentional. (Mehrotra 60). But many has really understood the hardships of fathers to make the dowry and the girl's traumas in the name of dowry.

Family, schools and colleges are in some way accelerate deconstruction of gender stereotypes into gender justice. In family irrespective of all the limitations the children aspire their dreams. Lately in schools and colleges, girls at least participate in sports and politics. Certain advertisements enhance the upliftment of women. Some women are also finding their space within their acquired potential of family building. Home making, managing an event, organizing things, catering services, small scale industries to big enterprises, gardening etc. are various areas in that women marked their powerful presences. They began to make profit out of these jobs that stabilizes them. Apart from these, a group of women are working internationally too.

Thus, it is clear that gender stereotypes are detrimental when it violates the fundamental freedom of individuals. The society's full potential can be achieved when these kinds of stereotypes are wiped out. It is very true that society's progress can also be achieved by deconstruction of gendered bias. Gender stereotypes is an impediment for the progression. So, if it is removed there will be free flow of the innate abilities and talents of women community too. Absolutely, there will be innovative and reasonable ideas from women and they will also get qualified to be the best professionals with the support of the society and they also will have a creative, free space of their own. New platforms and innovative ideas are also developing. The upliftment of girls includes social mobilization and transformation of outdated values and notions. It also enhances the progression of the entire society as well.

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