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A Woman Bound by Gender Roles - the Feminist Voices in Short fiction

Today we live in the so called post-feminist generation, yet, it can be said that, in today’s society, it is easier being a man than a woman. Even today, women are discriminated against in certain jobs, forced to obey obsolete religious doctrines, refused basic rights in many societies, and are generally expected to put their families first, sometimes at the cost of their individuality. If things are this bad today, then they were much worse in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Historically, literature has always served as a medium, which exposes the fallacies of the society and performs the function of awakening its readers to the unspoken social injustices. The aim of this essay is, to compare three such short stories, " The Story of an hour", " The Chrysanthemums", and " A rose for Emily", and explore how the quest, of the three female protagonists of these stories, to escape isolation and lead a more fulfilling life, is impeded by the established institutions and gender norms of the patriarchal society.

Societal norms, which were mostly devised by men, had always sought to impose unreasonable and impossible standards of morality on women.

Particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American society, women were expected to willingly forego the right they had on their life, and submit to the whims of the men of the family. While Chopin’s Louise Mallard and Steinbeck’s Elisa Allen had to submit to their husbands’ will, Faulkner’s Emily Grierson had her life controlled by her over protective and unreasonable father. Their gender roles were designed in such a way, that they went through their life, rather than live it. This is evident in the way our

protagonists have sacrificed their desires owing to their gender roles.

Louise of 'The Story of an Hour' had a simple desire to live for herself, and not sacrifice her aspirations for the sake of her husband. She just yearned to be free of the shackles imposed on her by marriage, and explore life. She saw the death of her husband, as an escapade from the lengthy monotonous life. Until the moment when she heard the news of her husband's death, Louise's emotions have been stifled and suppressed to fit into the mold of hollow social conventions. Elisa of 'The Chrysanthemums' was confined to a farm life, though she had a lot of potential. She wished heartily to travel outside the walls of her husband's house, but was prevented because of her duty as a wife. Emily too is a victim of the then prevalent gender and class expectations.

Emily of 'A Rose for Emily' was a prisoner of the gender role, imposed on her both by her family and the society. She was expected by her father and the townspeople, to conform to the norms of the antebellum Southern aristocracy. Every action of hers was judged against her social standing and the society around her constantly criticized and commented on her personal life. She remains a constant source of reminder for them of an era bygone. The quote below depicts how she was seen as a reflection of a tradition rather than as a person.

" Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town."

Marriage as an institution gave women very little freedom, and very little scope for venturing outside the established gender roles. A marital relationship prevented women from discovering what they were truly

capable of as a person. Both Louise and Elisa had husbands, who were not abusive, and were caring towards their wives. However, their well meaning intrusion into their wives' lives was resented by Louise and Elisa. Both these women expected more than a faithful and protective husband, they wanted an eventful life. Elisa's expresses her taste for adventure in her conversations with the tinker.

" I've never lived as you do, but I know what you mean. When the night is dark--why, the stars are sharp-pointed, and there's quiet."

Emily's father saw the marriage of his daughter as a social statement of his wealth and family lineage. He chased away the prospective suitors, who came seeking Emily's hand in marriage, as he saw them as inferior to his social status. He too, like Chopin's Brently Mallard and Steinback's Henry Allen, showed his love by being protective rather than being understanding. " Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such."

Homer Barron in ' A rose for Emily' and the unnamed tinker in ' The Chrysanthemums', lead a rambling and romantic life, which is in sharp contrast to the ' fenced-in' life of Emily and Elisa, and this made them yearn towards freedom. Constant societal pressures made these female characters repress their feelings and emotions.

The repressed emotions and the burden of isolation drove all these three characters towards attempting desperate measures. Louise mallard is relieved at the news that her husband, who was always loving and gentle towards her, is dead. The possibility of a new life thrills her and happiness explodes out of her. She is so exhilarated that when her husband enters her

house and she finds out that he is not dead, she falls on the floor dead unable to cope up with the disappointment.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own.

Emily's father prevented her from maturing sexually in the normal way, and these repressed desires drive her to exhibit abnormal behavior. Her father, who was proud of his aristocratic ancestry, always interjected between Emily and any man who showed interest in her. The Jefferson townspeople later carried on the job left by her father, by constantly reminding Emily her social standing. Forced to behave like a Southern Lady, which means not to court people beneath her, Emily lost all chances of leading a normal life. Thus burdened by her gender and class roles, Emily's feelings were repressed for so long that when Homer came into her life, she decided to make him a permanent part of her life by poisoning him. Elisa had her moment of explosive feelings when she meets the stranger.

Married to a farmer, Elisa was literally isolated from the rest of the world, living in a secluded farm house. She was dutifully bound to his farm and did her bit in lending hand in the farm work. However, she resented the notion that men were better than women in certain jobs. When the tinker says his life is not fit for a woman, she challenges him saying that she is as good as him in the tinkering job. She longs for adventure, appreciation, and companionship. Though her husband has some kind words to say about her farming skills, he does not go into the garden and really appreciate her work. The tinker, on the other hand, enquires about the chrysanthemums and gives a new description to them as a quick puff of colored smoke.

His interest towards her gardening, his wittiness, and his adventurous lifestyle attracts Elisa. She so far has remained a loyal wife and has diligently followed the gender code of being a submissive wife. But when she encounters the tinker, a perfect foil of her husband, her repressed emotions see an outlet and her desperation almost make her reach out to him. Though better sense prevails, and Elisa restrains herself in the end, the encounter leaves her feelings ruffled and makes her introspect herself. The long duration spent by her in front of the mirror is her effort of relooking into her self-identity.

All three women suffer from isolation because gender norms have restricted their interactions with the outer world. They were not physically or verbally abused, but by forcing them to conform to the institutions framed by the patriarchal society, the men in their life crushed their individuality. They were not treated as persons, but as symbols of cultures. They were molded to represent the image of a model wife/daughter, and in the process all the three women were forced to be something which they were not. Emily is referred by the townspeople as a 'fallen monument', which indicates that she was perceived as a symbol of an extinct aristocracy, rather than as a spinster with unfulfilled desires. All three of them try to come out of their gender imposed prison, in their own way.

When these female protagonists try to come out of the gender cage and reveal their true personality, the society around them immediately terms them as 'abnormal'. Elisa, after a long look in the mirror and a self search initiated by the encounter with the stranger, tries to reveal some of her emotions to her husband. But he feels uncomfortable and wonders why she

is acting so strange.

“ Henry blundered on.” I don't know. I mean you look different, strong and happy.”

When Emily, at last free of her father's watchful eye starts dating Homer, the whole town is appalled and asks first the Baptist minister and then her cousins to intervene. Louise's sister and Richard expect her to break down at the news of her husband's death, and when she locks herself in the room for long, grow worried. In the end, when she dies of disappointment and shock, they conclude that she died because of joy that kills.

A woman's quest for identity, amidst the unfair expectations placed on her because of her gender, is a universal theme, and is as relevant today as it was during the period these stories were written. The gender roles of the society of most cultures relegate women to a secondary position and give men the control over their lives. When a woman dutifully fulfills her role as a mother, daughter and a wife, she most often is unable to do justice to her potential as a human being and most women go through their entire life without discovering their true aspirations and passions. All the three stories discussed by us, emphatically conveys the unfairness of the traditional gender roles and delineates the effect such oppression has on the emotional and physical well being of women.

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