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GENDER CONDITIONING IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S *THE STONE ANGEL*

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ABSTRACT :

Women down the ages have been subject to one form or other form of subjection, irrespective of the country their birth. As per the chief argument of Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, in patriarchy women have been forced to occupy a secondary position in relation to men. The paper exhibits the Victorian middle-class conviction of Women's inferior status to that of men's. The Curie household depicted in the novel *The Stone Angel* upholds patriarchal values that have been deeply entrenched in the very system of each individual which has an adverse effect on human relationships both social and individual. The paper clearly pinpoints as to how Gender assigns the demarcated roles of women and men in society and how these gendered identities inhibit one's capacity to nurture relationships, injecting a void and loneliness in one's lives.

KEYWORDS : patriarchal, gendered identity, entrenched, subjection, demarcated.

Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to men and not he with reference to her, she is the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute. She is the other. (Beauvoir 16)

INTRODUCTION:

Women are an integral part of human civilization. They constitute about half of the world's population but their share in various areas of the world's population and various areas of activity has been totally disproportionate to their numerical strength. For centuries, they have been denied full justice- social, economic, political and constitutional and largely ignored as the "Weaker sex". They have been defined as marginalized creatures and viewed as appendages to men. Their status largely depends on the simple biological fact that they are the bearer of children whose care is their responsibility; thus their sphere is usually restricted to their familial roles.

The chief argument of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is also that in patriarchy women have been forced to occupy a secondary position in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects to that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that they constitute at least one half of the human race. She believes that this secondary position is not imposed by natural "feminine" characteristic but rather by strong environmental forces of social traditions and education, which have been under the control of men. This has resulted in the failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents. Pitiably women down the ages have been subject to one form or other form of subjection, irrespective of the country of their birth.

Domestic violence against women has existed wherever women have been treated as second-class citizens and power has been abused to control and sustain male supremacy, everywhere. It is still acute in male-dominated

societies, where women themselves internalize a suppressive idea of wifehood or womanhood, namely that women should be submissive to men.

Representation of Betty Friedan's concept "Feminine Mystique":

The Stone Angel narrates the story of Hagar Shipley's inner metamorphosis. A ninety year old widow, Hagar possesses a proud determination. Her father Jason Curie had established himself in the society through his hard work and tenacity. The stone angel which he raises in memory of his wife is more a symbol of his wealth than his love. Hagar's mother was a weak and submissive person who had silently accepted traditional feminine roles – reproduction, caring for the children and home. She dies in child birth. So long she lived, she was accorded lesser significance than Jason's broad mare. Since biological essentialism assigns different social roles for men and women on the basis of physical differences, Hagar's mother is treated only as a body, not as a soul, which she has feebly accepted.

Patriarchal society propounds the view that men and women are "intrinsically" different.... Have sex-specific personality traits and therefore are suited to occupying separate positions within society. (Alsop et al. 134) Family settings showcase the idea of sexist dominance in patriarchy. As per the concept, Jason Curie has set and defined norms about what is apposite and appropriate for a woman. A woman, according to his patriarchal logic, must have no wishes of her own- she should find satisfaction in defining herself as a wife and a mother only. Betty Friedan terms it as "feminine mystique" (Friedan 43).

The Curie Household- A Replica of Victorian Middle-class Conviction:

The Curie household upholds patriarchal values, which Hagar internalizes, and also at an unconscious level rebels against. For Jason Curie, Hagar is "the angel in the house" (10). Jason Curie considers, external bodily adornments more significant for girls than any other vocational training. Feminist critics have always been aware of this aspect of patriarchal mindset. Mary Wollstonecraft has recorded similar sentiments in *A Vindication of the rights of women in 1792*, "Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison", (quoted by Greer 63). Similarly Hagar is encouraged for a particular type of education only, which aims at making her lady like in a Victorian manner. It does not prepare her for facing life and its challenges. Hagar reminisces, "I knew embroidery, and French, and menu – planning for a five course meals, and poetry, and how to take firm hand with servants, and the most becoming way of dressing my hair" (42-43). Hagar's father insists on her compliance in a world where women cannot vote, are not considered persons, and are subject to a Victorian middle-class conviction that women's work is subordinate to men's. Hagar's training prepares her for a decorative dependence on men, instead of being self-governing. Hagar also realizes that the traditional education imparted to her by the Toronto Academy, where Jason had sent her ambitiously, has led to her economic impoverishment. She is unable to take up any meaningful vocation in times of her need. She feels envious of those women who have trained for careers and are better prepared for survival.

Hagar does not exhibit any feminine weakness. Her proud attitude does not allow her to have any emotional bonding with her mother, whom she perceives to be weak and therefore worthless. Her aversion to her mother's weakness is so deep that she finds herself unable to wrap her mother's shawl to comfort Dan, her dying brother (25). Jason regrets that Hagar is born as a girl, instead of a boy, and therefore does not welcome independence in her. His aim is to domesticate her so that she can take care of feminine responsibilities. The androcentric norms have conditioned him to view education not as a liberator but as a means to continue the inferior standing of women. When Hagar returns to Manawaka after having completed her education, Jason views her as a possession. A close study of the novel reveals that Jason is unable to think beyond gendered notion. This positioning ignites a sense of rebellion in Hagar. She wants to take up a teaching assignment, but Jason does not allow it, thinking it to be beneath his dignity.

The rebellious Hagar's independence which would have been welcome in a boy becomes a disfigurement for Hagar. Her rebellion against her father comes at a price. She is disinherited by Jason Curie, who donates all his property to the town. Even in his death Jason prefers to rely on the materialist success to perpetuate his memory than on the possibility of any kindhearted patch-up with his daughter – the triumph of the masculine pride has been exalted in this episode.

Trace of Gender Conditioning in Relationships:

Hagar's relationship with Bram is also affected by their gendered notions. The impact of her puritan upbringing is illustrated in the novel through her own recollections of her early marriage, reinforcing the ideas that the creation of gender is subtle and oblique: [...] It was not so very long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew. I never let him know... He never expected any such thing, and so he never perceived it. (81)

Hagar confirms to what Luce Irigaray has called "La Mascarade", a false femininity that allows a woman to experience desire only in so far as it is prescribed by the desires of men (Irigaray 20). In Hagar's imagination Bram is a primitive man who would somehow prove to be incredibly gentle towards a lady. She is unable to perceive the coarse plebian life outside her immediate zone of experience. Bram though, proves to be as patriarchal as Jason, .he gives her an elegant decanter as a wedding gift and wants sons, not daughters, to create a dynasty. He wants a boy because "it would be somebody to leave the place to" (101). Bram also does not give up hobnobbing with other girls and does not bother to improve his language or manners. The twenty four years of marriage are despondent and full of frictions. Bram's frenzied ravings or sullen silences do not prove him any positive rewards. He is also a victim of gender conditioning. It would be appropriate to quote Bell Hooks at this juncture:

As long as he(man) is attacking women and not sexism or capitalism, he helps to maintain system that allows him few, if any, benefits or privileges. He is an oppressor. He is an enemy to women. He is also an enemy to himself. He is also oppressed. His abuse of women is not justifiable ... If feminist movement ignores his predicament, dismisses his hurt, or writes him off as just another male enemy, and then we are passively condoning his actions (Hooks 75).

Adverse Effects of Gender Conditioning:

Another reason of friction can be traced to Hagar's gender conditioning, which has trained her to examine things in a particular mode only. Instead of responding to Bram in an open manner, she views her relationship with him through the lenses of cultivated femininity. She has a dreamy and unrealistic notion about love which Bram cannot understand, "He had a banner over me for years. I never thought it love... Love, I fancied, must consist of words and deeds delicate as lavender sachets, not like the things he did sprawled on the high white bedstead that rattled like a train" (70). Such notions are cultivated in young girls by patriarchy through the commercialization of what Alison Light has termed as "mass entertainment"- genres of popular romances produced specially after the first War in fiction and cinema echoed traditional views about feminine sexuality, and successfully established parallel and distinct male and female audience. (Light 206). Hagar's gender conditioning deprives her of gratifying relationships with other people too.

Hagar's marriage to Bram entrenches her in contradiction because, despite his appreciation of her bid for independence from her father with anything beyond a hard physical life of minding the hearth and bearing his babies in an age before electric shaves and washing machines. He does not have the personal or financial resources to give her a life other than the one that wore down and most likely killed his first wife. Hagar's bids for independence are marked by doomed attempts to change the men in her life. She is no more able to transform Bram into someone who "prospered, gentled, learned cravats and grammar" than she is to convince her own father to transcend his pride and become involved with his grandchildren (50).

The same independence that inspires readers to call her a heroine inevitably isolates her. She eschews social communion with other women because of her contempt for traditional femininity. To her, willfulness is a differentiating characteristic from conventional femininity, a trait concretized in her own mother whose more traditional passivity made her "a flimsy, gutless creature, bland as egg custard" (4). She bases her sense of strength and independence on exactly this difference when she declares, "I used to wonder what she'd been like, that docile woman, and wonder at her weakness and my awful strength" (59). At the same time, she distances herself from the men closest to her in a campaign to deploy her considerable strength in fighting the unfairness of patriarchal privilege. As Brenda Beckman-Long points out, "[h]er opposition is motivated by an attempt to protect the vulnerability of her position in society as a woman. Precisely because she is a woman, part of herself-discovery is that she has had to live 'alone and against' in order to preserve her autonomy in a male-dominated society" (Beckman-Long 1997, 63).

Multiple Modes of Constructing Masculinities and Femininities:

The study of gender sensitizes us towards the multiple modes of constructing masculinities and femininities. Cultural production of those concepts is carried out within a social context, also within the framework of an ideology. The stone angel vividly portrays how gendered identities inhibit one's capacity to nurture relationships, injecting a void and loneliness in one's lives. It is exhibited not only in the lives of Hagar Jason, and Bram, but also in the lives of Hagar's brothers – Matt and Dan. Constance Rooke has astutely commented that "Jason Curie's expectations about what a man ought to be and what a woman ought to be have damaged the lives of all his children" (Rooke 30).

Jason Curie establishes inviolable regimen about how his children have to conduct themselves in life. His sons Matt and Dan are discouraged from expressing gentle affectionate emotions or show signs of any considerate approach candidly. They do not possess the wild streak of defiance which Hagar has and are therefore disliked by their own father who feels that they "have failed to achieve an imposed standard of masculinity" (Rooke 30). Jason is easily put off by their docile and submissive attitude and whips them at slightest pretext. Dan is lazy and does not like to work hard. Hagar remarks, "He was always delicate, and he knew very well the advantages of poor health" (21). His pre-mature death does not affect either Jason or Hagar. Matt, who is hard-working, as well as loving and tender-hearted, develops an inferiority complex a result of parental pressure, which later on results in sexual inadequacy. Jason's pressure to perform accordingly to pre-set norms of masculinity makes him a lonely and discontented person, resignedly waiting for his death. Hagar also fails in her life and she cannot reconcile herself to passive femininity. It is only towards the end of the novel that she acknowledges her actual emotions and gains some peace. Sara Maitland comments, "In almost any other imaginable hand Hagar Shipley would be a classic, male-defined model of a domineering woman, but Laurence transforms her, not into saint but into ME – or you or us" (Maitland 44).

CONCLUSION:

The Stone Angel compellingly captures the constricting influences of gender conditioning in individual and social life. It sensitively shows how gendered identities negate the prospect of self-actualization and thwart satisfying relationships. The novel has creatively captured the vicious repercussions of the notion of gender, of the limiting boundaries it constructs and also how one becomes a gendered self.

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