

Women as Secondary Sex in 'Shrinking Women' by Lily Myers

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Abstract

This paper intends to shed light on the shocking concept of women hood portrayed by Lily Myers in her slam poem "Shrinking Women". An attempt is made to study the their roles and duties that are socially constructed by the society for women and they are supposed to live within these confines by silencing their inner self. This poem is about the confusions and anxieties of women about her inner self, her position in the society, roles prescribed for her and the difference of her image and life from those of males in the society. This socially constructed gender difference has been studied under the light of Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex".

Keywords: Women shrinking, self silencing, second sex, gender stereotypes.

Introduction

Slam poetry gained popularity during 1990's. Traditionally, the medium of poetry was oral, even the old epic poems like "Illiad" were recited and performed. Women Shrinking is poem recited by Lily Myers at College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI) in 2013 after that it has become viral on social media because it has given voice to so many silenced women who considered themselves as a puppet in the hands of society and performing their duties which society constructed for them. Myers told Here & Now's Robin Young "I wrote this poem very much for personal reasons and didn't ever think it was going to gain this much visibility". Traditionally, this study is to identify the roles of women in male dominated society under light of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex.

In history, the concept of family system has remained patriarchal where males remain the heads of family controlling every affair and enjoying all the liberties and luxuries of life where as women is supposed to stay within four wall of home serving their husbands and bringing up children. They have no freedom of speech, thought and enjoyment. Shrinking women talks about the idea of "self silencing" as if it is not in the blood of women but it is the society that enforces women to silence her desires and live in subordination to men. Women are taught to remain silence, they are taught to obey, they are taught to take care of their appearances because if they do not look beautiful they will lose love of their husbands and then it would be difficult for them to gain back their original position. So women have to live with fears in their hearts till they die. Even today a woman is not comfortable to wear the dress she wants because she is supposed to take care of what he thinks, what they think and what society will think.

"Shrinking Women" depicts Myers view of deviation in the way men and women socialize in the society by putting forth examples from her own family. She talk about her mother how she is shrinking day by day worrying about social norms where as her father is gaining weight because he is not supposed to worry. She highlights the norms of society that society allows her brother and other males to grow and gain confidence but she is taught only to absorb and incorporate, taking less space in the society and to be careful about her food. She doesn't blame any particular person for this unjust division but she condemns society for such unjust system of identities, gender stereotypes, ideas of beauty affects women and gender expectations.

Literature Review

Modern Criticism proves that gender is socially constructed. The social practices of individuals determine their gender role. Women's experience has great influence on literature in second wave of feminism. By focusing on powerful textual affirmations of experience, critics argued, literature proved offensive for male chauvinism as it put forth new ways of life with new role models shaking away the central position of male in family. (second wave feminism)

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) followed by Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* threw into question the cultural and ethical values of many literary representations. Scrutinizing texts by male modernists such as D. H. Lawrence, both de Beauvoir and Millett drew attention to the way in which the greater social power men have over women is translated into textual conventions (de Beauvoir, 1949; Millett, 1970). What second wave critics did was to question the idealism of literary works and show how literature, like any other social institution, embodies the cultural ideology of the society in which it is formed. Along with institutional critiques came a radical challenge to literary history as critics drew attention to hitherto unrecognized women writers and began to publish lost or undervalued women's texts.

Rural women are active workers and deft storytellers. Aunt Helen works as a prostitute to support Marie's whole family and is 'as sensitive as a photographic plate' (p. 43). Helen is evidently an emotional being and yet in control of her life. *Daughter of Earth* is full of detailed sketches of women's work, including the laundry routines of Marie's mother and Marie's own domestic labor; but it presents these not so much as drudgery but as examples of collective friendships. Taken together, Smedley's themes echo second wave feminists' love of women centered texts.

LeGuin gives her protagonist Ai a rather different goal for his quest from the traditional gold or land. Ai is searching for a spiritual, psychological and mystical holism. The plot of *The Left Hand of Darkness* resembles a traditional myth in its ending: Ai's journey with Estraven across an icy and forbidding landscape to safety. (Maggie Humm 1995)

Methodology

It is a qualitative study of poem under light of Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* in which she talks about the position of women in the society. In *The Second Sex* she says that, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Women remain secondary to men and they need to change their position by overthrowing the system of patriarchy and it is only possible if they work and let their thoughts flow. It was dangerous, she said, to imagine an eternal feminine nature, in which women were more in touch with the earth and the cycles of the moon. According to Simone de Beauvoir, it was a kind of male controlling women by saying them that they have nothing to do with work, career and power and to retain their eternal feminine nature.

She talks about "motherhood" as a road leading to slavery where a woman is being taught to live within confines of her man, take care of her man, bringing up of children and not to bother about technology and politics. Her home is her edifice and she is supposed to serve their whole heartedly.

"Given that one can hardly tell women that washing up saucepans is their divine mission, they are told that bringing up children is their divine mission."

- Simone de Beauvoir, in 1982

It is a way of putting women at second level in the society and forcing them to obey and become slaves knowingly or unknowingly. According to Simone de Beauvoire, it is the responsibility of feminism to change the subordinated position of women in the society by transforming it.

Summary

In "Shrinking Women", Myers talks about her mother that she observes her mother shrinking her circle in home in order to expand space for his father. She remains confined to household tasks, she silences her desires and bother about her diets because she doesn't want to look fat although she is obsessed with food. She, then, talks about the socially assigned norms for women that they do not have the authority to speak in front of the males. She says males have authority to do whatever they want, they do not bother about their looks, their limitations because they have been given a free hand by the society and gives example of her grandmother who has become frail and weak by shrinking herself where as her husband is becoming bulky with red round cheeks because he has no need to worry about his figure. She has been taught from childhood to filter before saying anything, not to eat much to about gaining weight and not to grow whereas her brother is taught exactly opposite to eat much, to grow and not to shrink in the society. Women are taught to absorb whatever males say to them according to unjust parameters of society. She examines the unsaid words of her mother from the knots in her forehead. She says this silence is cyclical and passes from one generation to another generation teaching women how to shrink her thoughts and ideas. She worries that she has to do the same in future as her mother is doing now because this is what the stereotypes and gender expectations demand.

Discussion

“And I wonder If my lineage is one of women shrinking, making space for the entrance of men into their lives, not knowing how to fill it back up once they leave. I have been taught accommodation.”

Shrinking Woman narrates the story of generations. It is not only about a girl seeing her mother drinking and shrinking to nothingness but it is a story of lineage and a story of inheritance. This poem depicts a situation that is found, perhaps, in millions of families and thousands of homes across the globe. This is the story of dual standards and hopelessness. It portrays a picture that is gloomy yet truthful. It talks about the fact that how traits are passed from generation to generation. It tells how a male rules over a woman's thoughts and how a woman accepts that rule. How a father teaches his son that it is okay to cheat and how a daughter learns that it is okay to be cheated.

It is not only related to money or genetic inheritance, but also related to accidental inheritance. She pictures the lessons that she has absorbed from her mother such as to occupy less space, to be less confident, to eat less and to silence her inner self esteem thus leading to differences in the way males and females socialize in the society.

The poem starts with the depiction of relationship of her mother and food. In the poem, the character of mother is presented as a woman who is shrinking herself. She says that her mother always remains conscious about the food she eats because she does not want to gain extra calories thus shrinking herself by drinking few sips of wine. Her mother is a shrinking woman. She then continues saying “She wanes while my father waxes” which shows her view about dual standards of the world where men are allowed to increase and progress in every sphere. Her mom shrinks herself in order to create extra space for her father. She, then, moves towards her father's views about his new girlfriend that she is crazy about food and she needs to shrink herself too because it is the trend in Myer's society that if women become fat, chubby or slightly over weighted, they are not going to get lovable partners and will remain deprived of proposals. So, all women are supposed to take care of their diet and figure. If they keep on shrinking, they will be able to make space for male partners in their lives.

The audience understands implications of poetess when she represents the example of her parents and grandparents who bear same relationship to food but are different in shape and sizes. Especially, when she ponders upon the way of their growth and training. She is taught to sacrifice and be content with little while her brother, on the other hand, is trained to live freely without any restriction being bold and extravagant.

“We come from difference, Jonas. You have been taught to grow out. I have been taught to grow in. You learned from our father how to emit, how to produce, to roll each thought off your tongue with confidence, you used to lose your voice every other week from shouting so much. I learned to absorb; I took lessons from our mother in creating space around myself” (M.Lily, 2013)

Everyone can easily understand that she has inherited things these traits from her mother to absorb and to shrink and not to take space. She sheds light on gender constructs of the society and stereotypes in the above lines and says that it is the responsibility of her brother and her to follow these gender constructs and stereotypes in order to live and these stereotypes are not only for them rather they move in lineage and pass on to generations coming forth.. In the poem, Myers holds with this inheritance:

“That's why women in my family have been shrinking for decades. We all learn it from one another. The way each generation taught the next how to knit, which I can still feel as I walk through this ever-growing house, skin itching. Picking up all the habits my mother has unwittingly dropped like bits of crumpled paper from her pocket on her countless trips from bedroom to kitchen to bedroom again.”

She worries about the fact that being women she is going to follow the same pattern which is less likely to be a life of human being and more like a robot. Like her mother, she is supposed to live her life isolating between bedroom and kitchen, fulfilling needs and demands of males and suppressing their wishes and desires. She also gives the glimpse of her aunt and uncle where her aunt has

become angular because of bending throughout her life in front of her uncle and her uncle became fat and chubby because he did not care about eating.

The poetess does not want to censure anyone for the stress she feels. She does not want to hate her mother for shrinking herself and does not want begin questions by saying sorry. She thinks about her habits of saying sorry before asking a question in class and thinking about more pizza to eat as she is obsessed with food but she is not allowed by the society to come out of the shell which society has made for females. She identifies inheritance of gender roles fixed by society which shows the mouth of cannon to women forcing her to sacrifice, bow and shrink. She pictures her women as a recoiled figure who is supposed to live with such gender expectations. She thinks that she is going to lose her identity soon in this patriarchal structure as she has to keep in mind petty thing but her father and brother neglect all. She is supposed to become a shrinking woman like her mother and her aunt i.e. obeying males, saying yes to their commands and worrying about her figure that she may not get fat. Shrinking woman is all her fate.

Thus, Myer's woman is perfect example of de Beauvoir's second sex because she comes under subordination to man and has not the same access to all the fundamental rights as men enjoy. Men play active and progressive role in the society whereas women remain static, dependent and passive. It is not because of nature but because of the way in which they are brought up. Males are brought up with the concept that they have dominion and they have rights to enjoy power and worldly pleasures. Women, on the other hand, are not born as secondary sex rather they are brought up with the concept that they have to live in subordination to men, silenced and static. This

inferiority is linked with the way in which their upbringing is done. Women need to become more than mere an eternal woman. She should learn to become "self" rather than staying "other".

Conclusion

Lily Myers wants women to change their way of thinking about world, their inner self and their identities. Woman is as important as compared man in family structure as she sacrifices at every step. She forgets herself in order to serve her family and make them happy. There are many women in the world who are worried to break the socially constructed stereotypes because society pressurizes them and represses their voices but Myers raised up her voice for all such suffering women who are victims at the hands of patriarchal system which has silenced their identities.

According to Myer, now it is time to change our thoughts and to move on and break these stereotypes. Women are in no case less significant. Now they do not need to shrink themselves, grow less, eat little and remain scared rather, they are supposed to grow up, gain confidence and create space around them rather than to shrink it because they have full right to use their space. There is a need to open the eyes that have remained close in patriarchal world and to say hello to awareness and freedom thoughts. Instead of rushing away from the scary males, it's time for women to face them, to live, to enjoy and to be happy.

Women should get awareness about her surroundings and try to mold themselves according to the advancement of world. If women keep on worrying about patriarchal society and remain their toy of pleasure and tool for exploitation then society will become a dark world. Myer wants women to learn something from her experience that she has shared in her poem. Women are not servants, they are also living beings like males so they have right to enjoy as men do, they can eat as men do and they can speak when they feel something is going against them or is going in wrong direction. It is time for them to break the silencing shell around them.

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