

## Gender Stereotypes and Socialization of Women: A Review of ‘The Stepford Wives (1975)’ Movie

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The movie begins with the protagonist Joanna leaving behind the hustle-bustle of New York and starting her life fresh in the quiet and mysterious town of Stepford, courtesy of her husband, Walter. Her unhappiness in leaving a lively metropolitan city is obvious but being a woman, she is forced to accept her husband's decision. Joanna tries to balance her role as an independent, talented and passionate freelance photographer on one hand and a dedicated wife and loving mother on the other hand. Though not happy in this new town, she tries hard to adapt to it. Her husband without consulting her joins the Men Association of Stepford. Joanna is dismayed at the convenient autocracy of her husband; falsely depicting her role in decision making where the decision has already been taken. Joanna soon finds some bliss in Bobbie's company, a cheerful and lively woman like herself. With much difficulty both of them manage to persuade the other housewives of Stepford to form a Women Association wherein they could relieve themselves from the monotonous and unending household chores. This effort goes in for a toss when Bobbie and Joanna find that these women are obsessed with the mundane household chores and cannot think of anything apart from washing, cleaning and baking. At the same time, they all resemble each other; pretty with a narrow waist, a full bosom and rounded hips. The men are a sorry picture; dull, unattractive and undeserving of such beautiful and perfect wives. Desperate for a

panacea to this prominent yet obscure disease, Joanna and Bobbie disembark on a difficult journey only to discover macabre and horrible truths and ultimately losing out themselves to the heinous and gruesome acts of the malevolent and inhuman men.

I chose this movie for my review primarily because of its genre- this one is a *psychological horror*. Psychological horrors have an uncanny enigmatic character- focusing on the human psyche and its complexity; bringing the unconscious to the forefront with such stark reality that it renders itself frightening. The element of horror in these movies is its focal point; it showcases metaphorically what the mind wishes and its internal conflicts. The climax shows Joanna face to face with her humanoid; dead black eyes, wearing see-through nightwear, bigger breasts and combing her perfect hair. Much to Diz's delight, the humanoid kills the human Joanna and takes her place signifying that sexual gratification of men demands sacrifice of the female human body (incapable of serving the purpose) replacing them with the artificial robots; perfect in form and dead in spirit, a slave of their master's desire. Desire, the core of Id, is personified in the form of these robots. Such movies are very powerful in terms of their impact, exposing the dark side of the human psyche blatantly and giving many sleepless nights. The movie comes full circle when the robot takes Joanna's place. Ironically, the movie had begun with a man carrying a naked mannequin of a woman and Walter's comment, "That is why we are going to Stepford" finally" finally makes sense.

Apart from this, *gender stereotyping* and sexism is also an underlying and eloquently woven theme in the movie. It shows rigidity in the gender roles of men and women and the extent to which the men go to preserve this rigidity and maintain the gender disparity. The men in Stepford are influenced by their id to such an extent that to pleasure themselves and remain

satiated, they kill their wives and replace them by a humanoid which is the exact replica of their wives; infact, a better version of the original- epitome of perfection and sexuality, with a stunning figure and clear skin and dedicated to the housework and at the disposal of the husband, always willing to satisfy him in every respect. The superego is a long-lost identity hidden in the deepest crevices and repressed. The ego is forced to abide by the vicious id since the superego is weak and lost. The men prefer the programmed robots over their living wives; they cannot tolerate any dearth of dissent or independence from their female counterparts. In the end, Diz, the creator of these robots tries to rationalize his action by saying (to Joanna) “if the roles were reversed, wouldn’t you like some perfect stud waiting on you around the house praising you, servicing you, whispering how your sagging flesh was beautiful no matter how you looked.” He persuades her to give in to the male supremacy and give up her life. Upon her resistance, Joanna finds herself in an exact imitation of her bedroom; her dog Fred is alive who was taken as dead. This metaphorically represents the role of a wife as equivalent to a dog- faithful, compassionate, submissive and giving, available at his master’s peck and call.

The Stepford Wives showcases the sinful id in the form of cruel and lustful men triumphing over the superego represented by the women. In the 1960s and 1970s, the role of women saw a radical change with the wave of feminism. They realized that there was much more to their essence apart from housework and sitting at home. The men saw this as a threat to the well-established and laid foundations of patriarchy. The movie brings to light this raging conflict between the powerful masculinity and developing modern-age femininity. The controversial end of the movie gives it the tag of being anti-feminist. To my opinion, the end may have been a blow to the feminists but this is what makes it a cult classic (hats off to Ira Levin for the brilliant novel by the same name). It gives much food for thought and a deep insight into the otherwise latent and hidden Id and the

irrevocable consequences of giving in to one’s desires and succumbing to it. The movie closes with the robotic wives buying stuff from the superstore from the things displayed on the shelves. This is a metaphor as the wives are comparable to the store merchandise meant for the comfort and pleasure of their husbands. This is degrading to the dignity of women. Even today, after 44 years since the release of the movie, these roles are quite evident in our society and with the escalation in the crimes, it would be not wrong to say that the Id remains all powerful.

### **Significance for Teachers:**

The movie “The Stepford wives” gives new insights and brings to the forefront, the otherwise hidden and invisible elements of gender stereotyping and socialization. Women continue to be treated as sex objects, in most of the societies, despite of the waves of feminism. A shift is required in the patriarchal mindsets of the sexist, misogynist, men and women who view the opposite sex as tools meant for satisfying and pleasing them, physically and/or monetarily without regarding her/him as a human being. Also, the devastating impact of the over empowering id is highlighted in the movie. In the absence of the ego/ weak ego, the id is capable of achieving numerous immoral and inhuman feats. This shows the prominent role the ego plays in keeping the id in check. For this, the ego must rise above the war raging between the id and superego and become autonomous resulting in an inner-directed human being. This is known as individuation. “The Stepford wives” is a path breaking movie which must be included in the curriculum of high school students as a pedagogic tool- it will help them to view the society from varied perspectives and expose them to the inherent inequalities persisting in the society. Our educational ethos is based on the values enshrined in the Constitution and until and unless the future citizens develop the spirit of an egalitarian society, democracy cannot exist in true sense in education and in the society as a whole.