

The Stepford Wives: A Psychosocial Analysis

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Human development is influenced, to a great extent, by a person's social environment. Their interactions with the outside world helps them to learn from the storehouse of societal knowledge without having to create what has already been in use for years altogether. The immense significance given to the role of society in relation to an individual is reflected in the various developmental theories by psychologists; for example, Jean Piaget's *social transmission, adaptation, accommodation and assimilation*; Vygotsky's *co-constructed processes, cultural tools and social sources of individual thinking*; Bronfenbrenner's *ecosystems*; and Erik Erikson's *psychosocial development stages*. All of these theories, in their own respective ways, attest to the role of society in shaping human development. The correlation between society and individuals can further be substantiated by the 1975 movie *The Stepford Wives* based on a 1972 novel by Ira Levin and its remake in 2004.

The basic plot is that, the protagonist, Joanna Eberhart, a struggling photographer, who has moved to a suburban town of Stepford with her husband and two children. However, things turn spooky when all the women of the town are 'perfect' housewives, subservient to their husbands' wishes, submitting to them in every manner, fulfilling their 'duties' as wives and mothers by flawlessly carrying out the household chores and doing, talking or thinking about nothing but how to make their families happy and homes better. She soon begins to suspect the role of the 'men's association' in the women's

strange behaviour. Eventually, she finds out that the women were being murdered and replaced by robots so that the men could come back to a peaceful home. However, this discovery does not help her as she is also murdered and replaced by a shiny new compliant robot.

After watching both the movies, it seems that the 1975 *The Stepford Wives* is closer to the book's genre of being a satirical thriller. The first movie was quite horrifying, spine chilling and thought provoking as compared to the one made in 2004 which had some humorous elements but failed to impact as a whole. The novel and the 1975 film came up in the backdrop of an emerging feminist movement and women demanding equal rights and opportunities, challenging the gender roles assigned to them, which were keeping them in the domestic sphere. There is a subtle hint of scepticism in the first movie, as the impact that the feminist movement would have had was dreadfully contemplated by many. The movie exhibits the unease with which men must have viewed the newly liberated women and what they might do to not compromise the superiority and the power they had held within the house. The sentiment of fear is also touched upon where men murder their wives to subdue them into becoming obedient and husband worshippers. A shot shows a man making love to his robot wife. This scene displays the need for higher self-esteem amongst men which could be served with an appreciation of their sexual performance, even when they know that the praise is mechanical and fed into the robot's system. It is portrayed that their self is more important for them than their wives' lives. This self, however, is socially constructed due to the process of gender socialization they have experienced through their lives. Socialisation is the process of adopting behaviours appropriate in one's culture and making them an integral part of one's life. Socialization can also be seen as a social example of behaviour modification theory, where males and females are rewarded or punished by social acceptance or rejection and ridicule respectively. Males are conditioned to conform to the ideals of masculinity and females

to the principles of femininity. The queer do not receive a respectable place in this structure, to which we will return later. The society, thus, influences an individual's cognitive and behavioural development to a great extent.

The movie ends at a very daunting point where Joanna joins the other wives in the supermarket, the obedient, submissive woman replaces the independent woman who aspired towards achieving heights in her photography career. It distresses the viewer as one wonders about the extent to which a man would go to subdue a woman. The 2004 movie, on the other hand, was on the funnier side, probably because of a decreased apprehension of the male reaction and a possibility of larger acceptance of feminist ideals by this time. There were quite a few changes in the plot. Joanna Eberhart is portrayed as a big name in reality television. However, when she gets fired from her job, her husband quits his job as well and they move to Stepford. The major theme remains the same with the addition of a gay couple. The more 'feminine' one out of the two is also changed by the men's association as a more 'masculine' individual who is contesting the local elections and making public speeches. Here, having a homosexual orientation is accepted as long as the masculine-feminine distinction is not surpassed where the latter is sacrosanct. Men can love men as long as they remain 'manly'. Moreover, Joanna's husband Walter is more vocal in this movie, expressing his dissatisfaction with her not living up to her duties like the other wives in Stepford. Joanna is also shown trying to become more like the other women, wearing different clothes and baking cupcakes. The element of a love relationship is what is stressed upon in this movie, as Walter does not turn Joanna into a cyborg and both of them together de-programme all the women. Eventually, it is revealed that Claire was the brain behind the entire operation. As she was also once a career woman who was cheated upon by her husband, she tries to create a perfect world with both men and women doing their duties diligently. This climax releases men from bearing the burden of gender based discrimination and shows that it's not men or women who are the perpetrators; rather, it is the way the society has evolved which is the reason. Thus the movie ends on a positive note, everyone makes it big in their respective professions and the importance of equality between husband and wife is highlighted. Even

homosexual relationships are accepted and welcome in the 2004 Stepford.

In the two movies, morality apart from gender is also an aspect to ponder upon. Although the movies are based on a satire, the male characters' moral development can be interestingly fit into Kohlberg's stage theory. With the exception of Walter in the 2004 film who operated at the post-conventional universal ethical principles stage towards the end, the other men remained primarily at the pre-conventional reward orientation level where their actions are governed by personal needs. They could have been seen as functioning in the post-conventional level of social contract as well wherein the societal norms of a rampant patriarchy determine their actions but the novel idea of working women, which they do not want to accept, can disturb this society. The changes which occur over time in the norms of a society are not accounted for in Kohlberg's theory which should have been taken into account as the societal context is not static and changing norms can lead to unease and conflicting morality as well.

Gender is a process of socialization which shapes human psychological development from the early years itself. The Stepford men were also victims of patriarchal socialization which advocated that women belonged inside the house and men were the sole breadwinners. This ideal world, where they received the utmost importance, turned upside down when women began fighting for their rights and threatening male dominance in the public sphere. The feminist movement had challenged the women's major exclusion from equal employment opportunities and their confinement within the house. *The Stepford Wives*, thus, represents an attempt by men to restore the balance and stick to the status quo. As movies are reflexive of the times they are produced in, this one does convey an experience of discomfort amongst the men. The later rendition, however, completely alters the essence of the original story; but it, again, is a product of its times too. It conveys an optimism, a hope of getting past the gender roles and stereotypes, of creating a world where relationships are based on mutual respect and love, rather than on principles of subservience and dominance.

The Stepford Wives is, moreover, a great learning tool for all the teachers at multiple levels. The

movie, firstly, conveys the significance of the social set-up in which a particular cultural product is produced. The importance of social context is necessary to comprehend the complexities of a movie and this is best exemplified through *The Stepford Wives*. Secondly, the construction of gender roles pertaining to masculinity and femininity and the processes of socialization which ensure their survival and consolidation through generations is something that every teacher must be sensitive about. Finally, the comfort of a society in maintaining certain binaries and the apprehension of these polarities falling apart is a must know for all the teachers as they are an integral part of an institution which is one of the most powerful forces in value production and reproduction. Thus, popular culture can provide an insight for every teacher into the society and also broaden their minds so that they can act effectively using their best sense of judgement.

To sum up, masculinity and femininity are social constructs and individual development cannot be considered a phenomenon isolated from the external environment. *The Stepford Wives*, therefore, is exemplary of the interaction between the society and the individual. Both of them are interdependent and develop in relation to each other; social and cultural influences work to affix someone to particular roles and these individuals can also influence the norms in turn. Thus, gender is a psychosocial concept which emerges from the self and the social operating together.