

# Awareness of the Cultural Ego and Gender in Lonely Marriages by Shantichitra

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## Abstract

This paper explores the novel *Lonely Marriages* that reveals the inner psyche of women who search for free-will, as it questions the cultural ego that procreate the gender discernment and prejudices that predominate the country constructed by the representations of ancient mythologies. Such prototypes have been replicated and expected to be followed and obeyed in the ways of life trailing to the dangers of abandonment if not abide by the rules it infers. The paper ventures the consciousness of the female characters who reciprocate the cultural ego, as the writer puts it, to describe the biases shaped against women.

**Keywords:** gender, culture, chastity, awareness of the self, spiritual emancipation

## 1. Introduction

The view of men over women, or women over men has not changed much. Elders reinforce the social and cultural systems bound with loads of expectation, nonetheless the younger generation knowingly or unknowingly practice such things still today. Educated minds are still being disturbed or persuaded to manage relationships through the cultivated habit of gender policing. Theories and discussions about understanding sexual orientation has now at the fast pace in the literary grounds. The vast cultural cradle called India is now experiencing drastic changes as this is the time where the intensity of the gender talks becoming impetus, there is an equal and unimaginable expression of superiority in the forms of violence and oppression persists, for example, the distortion of gender in the social debates on media or online platforms. The abstract ideas of feminine values such as chastity, virginity, reticence, and motherhood are still believed, promoted, and expected, as it were from the arrival of religions into humanity. The atavistic notion has not come to cease anytime sooner as far as the moral policing is done at the base of gender ideologies.

Social, cultural expectations upon women are obviously seen even in the twenty-first century modern era. Among all the potential details, the code of conduct is highlighted in the family set-up. Since families are the basic unit of the society, the expectations developed and maintained from there itself before it gets full-fledged outside. For example, the ideology of breadwinner of a family does not change after all these histories of civilization of human beings happened so far. The idea is still prevalent and refreshed substantively, not only in the Indian societies, but all over the world and so, the linguistic constructions of gender does not change or evolved into a prospective one. Sets of words and phrases disclose the traits of gender specific interpretations. Cecchini and Toffle describe those cultural actions and manners which are governed by the unconscious mind, and it affects the social system through participation via communication among the members of the society. They say, "Cultural behaviour originates from the unconscious, and is carried by the 'culture-type' (member of a particular culture)." (2182). Being a male is still considered as proud and adventurous compared to the word female which has a more discreet connotation for itself. Gender operates from the idea that a man is always seen as a breadwinner of a family and is expected as so, and it can be confirmed and filtered through our everyday conversations, the linguistic choices, and conversations among

the social groups.

Lifting the veil or breaking the ceiling is not an easy task, as women have been striving for the achievement of equality for ages. It is the kind of freedom that every woman wants in the world. The Indian socio-cultural system is not fluid enough to break through since families are the catalyst for production and sustainability of values because communication begins there. If communication is done by the social group predominantly the senders and receivers are males and their ideologies, obviously it would affect the communication done inside the family is presided by the male head of the family. Equality does not exist there. Novels written by the female writers have always been dealt with such issues of difference. The gendered consciousness such writers create has been constantly asserting freedom for individual self, a liberation for the soul away and apart from all the constraints of burden upon humanity over the conforming of gender. Julia T. Wood validates identities of culture entitles one's gender. in the chapter, "Cultural theories of gender Theoretical Approaches to Gender Development": "the range of ways that societies define masculinity and femininity.... symbolic interactionism, which concentrates on how individuals acquire cultural values so that most of us adopt the identities our culture designates as appropriate for our gender." (51).

The mythologies created by the human minds separate and virtualise the difference of sublime men to subtle women. From the ancient times till today, woman is always portrayed as weaker sex, who always depends upon men and yield for their desires or to manipulate men to yield for their desires. They are created to propagate the standards, values and morals designed by men and continue to proliferate the same over and over as to say a woman must be "remained, covered, and honour intact." (Hennessy 23).

The writer Shantichitra has been well acclaimed for her novels *The Fractals* (2018), *Lonely Marriages* (2018), and *Intimate Strangers* which appeared in (2019), and a non-fiction *Fiction and Anita Nair* (2020). Her novels are meant for the revisiting of mythologies. She presents the individuals and families from different vantage points as they propose to show the psychic tour of the physical and spiritual freedom of human beings with natural desires for the living.

Sita in the *Lonely Marriages* is one such soul who is "too proud of" (8) her cultural values and codes imbibed from childhood and believed that she could not imagine living without them. She is a person who is an epitome of virtue and wants her to be perceived so, as Judith Butler's calls it, every woman does a "performative act" (2537) that keep on confirming her gender throughout her whole existence. Sita's love for Rajesh is so intense that she soon "wants a marital sanction for togetherness to continue..." (27), but he, on the other hand, detests marriage as "a humbug and a non-sensical trap" (27).

Sita finds herself "hide behind the codes of modesty" (9) and always feels in contrast with that of her friend Suparna and that of Viren who prefer a "live-in" (10) relationship rather a conjugal bonding. Suparna is a self-assured kind of woman who is at her own will that she never ever depends on anyone about the decision which she makes for her life. To Sita, Suparna is the "other woman" (2), and it is through her conviction the author says, "She was Sita. *Sita* never become the other woman." (2). Sita feels shattered to the core for she was abandoned by her only dream source of her life Rajesh, could never digest the fact of cheated upon by him. Feeling desperate to talk to Suparna, she moves to meet Suparna only to discover that her life was not over, and it could also be there waiting to unveil new arenas in her life. Getting into the stories of every woman like Padma, Anju, and Renuka, everyone of their lives unfolding new painful details that makes her struggle and soothing at a time. For now, she must stand and face "The culturally bestowed ego" (xi), as the author puts it, which is visible at every strand of the story that travels along with Sita. Sita is assumed to be grown along with the conceptions of the stories of Gods highlighting and differentiating herself from whom she considers them as her exact opposites: Suparna and Viren since, "Sita was simple and serene and homely." (94). It is not only her pride over the chaste, unadulterated mind that seeks only her sweetheart Rajesh, true and whole love for himself she comes up with, but she consistently represents the stereotype of the divine Sita who never ever gives up her pious attitude whenever it is put into test by anyone around her. She would be the one who is ready to sacrifice her body along with any carnal desire for the sake of proving her purity of mind and body to others, the imaginary spectators of her life. Suparna and Viren are the two minds that console each other regardless of differences of opinions about chastity. To Viren, Sita is the "Custodian of morality" (94). But it becomes the spiritual exploration for Sita to question the basic idea of "The custodian of culture." (118) To which she is always entitled. What Anju says to Viren is resounding the belief that man is perceived a master of the human hierarchy: "The man – as husband as brother as lover as son. Plays just this one game again and again." (102). The role of these two genders in marriage system assures the function of societal power relations designed by men. The token that marriage offers a woman is more of a dependent, a secondary status, yet women constantly strive for marriage as an integral part of their lives. It is said by Lindsay as, "Marriage was an economic obligation that affected power,

property, and privilege. From a functionalist perspective—without the assurance of marriage, which produced legitimate heirs—the entire social and political system might be threatened.” (208). Some liberated minds like Suparna holds views that are entirely different from the conventional women. According to her it is neither love nor social system provides the happiness that one wants for oneself. One must be engaged actively without affected by anyone’s rationality or hypocrisy, i.e. under the perception from the cultural or social lenses. But Sita has always wanted for a ceiling, which she wants to couch on comfortably “to shield me and to give me the protection of a home” (119). Asserting one’s rights and claiming or acknowledging the responsibility for her actions is what every woman needs in today’s world. It can be best expressed by Suparna in these lines to Sita: “According to you, home is a husband... If you think that a person in our life is home, then it’s because you depend on somebody for support” (119). It is mainly because of the expectations of gender constructs upon women that one should or should not live or behave in such a way. Especially females are expected to be bound by the system of family and made proud when they are safe and sound inside their boundaries of gender like caring husband, maintaining households etc. Sita’s only aim after finishing her college is to marry Rajesh and make good family: “was to love him, live with him. Cook for him. Pack lunches for him. Laugh with him. Cry with him.” (LM 10). The culinary skills that a woman should discover the delicious savoury ingredients appealing for men should be kept under the secrecies inside kitchen. The implication by the author is that such women are “the women men sought after” (100). The same is voiced in *The Second Sex* by Beauvoir who says “With her fire going, woman becomes a sorceress...Cooking is revelation and creation... (476).

Beauvoir’s opines on marriage as “the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. But the very next page, she claims that “Marriage has always been a very difficult thing for a man and for woman (448). She says this necessity brings “a condition of reciprocity between them” (448) that does not work well enough for many couples. To Rajesh, marriage strangles him with load of expectations that he really wants to come out of, to the extent that he wants death for her wife Sita. But his decision of leaving Sita affects her badly that she could only feel “the senselessness of pointlessness” (5) of life and of existence. After having forlorn by everything and having no grasp on anything including her own son Pramod. It is to be comprehended in a way that dissipates life into segments; that some must be erased and forgotten and some has to keep forever as memories for keeping oneself intact of the present being. Sita, after hearing Anju, and Padma, seeks a new hope towards life with no compunction for not having to go on with the “culturally upright track” (95), as Suparna asserts to her “Whatever I did in my life I did it for myself. With no remorse. No regret. If had to face the consequences I faced it with all my heart... I live for myself but you don’t.” (120-21).

The author magnifies this concept, applies to her second novel *The Lonely Marriages*, where it becomes the show of war between the facades that constructs chastity and the seemingly evil outwardness of natural reality. Men are intolerant of the criticisms that is made of chastity, because it is what the country is firmly rooted upon. The Kimmel and Aronson call this in their work as “Emphasised Femininity which exaggerates gender difference as a strategy of adaptation to men’s power stressing empathy and nurturance. Real womanhood is described as fascinating, and women are advised that they can wrap men around their fingers by knowing and playing the rules.” (xv).

Likewise, Sita learns from Suparna the unending fractals of life that only helps her envisaging the true nature of existence in the world. An imaginary cultural barrier that has been created and cultivated strongly over and over for centuries. All these stories float like leaves in the stream of life touching intricate details of peoples and lives, sudden twist and turn of emotions swirl through the temperaments, passing on the sounds of cries and silences. All asserting the needs of open access of minds. A novel to the readers is a freedom of such open access of minds. The author’s exploration of the cultural ego. These are the stories which could heal or may lead or could be catalysts for change. They consolidate a unified perspective about gender Bringing the dining into the hall suggest the unveiling of such social, cultural, and gender discrepancies. It is the closed curtains, and clean kitchen, a well-decorated food. All these characters go on a spiritual journey, or in other words, the author invites the readers to do so and explore to understand guilt chastity and hate for better understanding of humanity.

In *The Lonely Marriages* the accepted prejudgements are taken by the women of the past kept it all hidden away in their own zone of the kitchen. The author says, “What mess were created for the delicious dish they made was never known to the men who savoured it on the dining table. All they saw were delicacies garnished and decorated... the art of Serving.” (99-100).

Rajesh and Viren in the *Lonely Marriages* all seem to be differed in their own ways in their convictions about life. Rajesh and Viren are more aware of their selves, neither have firm believes about the system of the society and culture that is incorporated by it. They do not hold onto their patriarchal instincts, yet they discuss with the fellow

human beings, the women who are around them. All these men assert their honesty and individuality rather than imposing or thrusting their male ego onto any of these women around them.

Not only these men want freedom from the congested cultural expectations thrust upon them of the societies, but all these women characters do also want to be left alone of their necessary and urgent for humanity to come over and change the views of gender. For then a liberated society is formed among the representatives of culture. Sita in the *Lonely Marriages* finds her travel give new meanings to her life, a spiritual incarnation of the new self.

Suparna is perceived as a “misfit” and “an unnecessary garbage attached with the great culture of this society. A mockery. A filth...” (43) as she further assumes it as an objective remark made by herself, though asserting that people like her are always sought for emotional support and would run for as an immediate “refuge” (42). Sita is reminded of the evolution of civilised societies from “born wanderers...stripped out of our naturalness with cloths and coverings” and the “imaginary shackles” like “rules, morals, values, constitutions, legalities, punishments” (43), that constitute the societies. Sita is a woman whom everyman wants her as his wife, beautiful, modest, intelligent all at once enveloped package of femininity and balance, ready to be delivered herself to a good partner.

Sita is named after and shown in relation to that of the mythical Puranic Sita, who is now pushed to face the situation in isolation, removed from all the fantasies of life she dreamt for Rajesh before. Serenity is what she achieves later after surpassing the oddities, the indecisive nature of existence itself, dragged by the undercurrent of rageous emotions that forced out of a cheated wife. Unemployment increased the uncertainty of modest living further infuriates her soul “The heat in the kitchen inflamed her skin. Scathed she was exhausted. She was charred. She was dead.” (16). It was the mythical, the mystical Sita who takes a revengeful stance against all the nature of existence, the culture that bounds strangling her neck, deprive of breathing. It was the time when Suparna showered her grace to Sita, the evil torture incarnates into a guiding light for another; for the perception and reality is evasive at any moment. Love that is shown seems eternal, creating a strong bondage, transcending all virtues and vices that the literate society could categorise. Suparna assures: “I just want you to empower yourself Sita... become that Sita who is beyond every *Agni Pariksha*. The biggest one is the one which we go through in our conscience... It’s a kind of *Yagnam*...” (74). Sita experiences a kind of stuck in between “man-made ethics” and “natural craving” which Suparna wants to get her out of. (76).

Bitches thus called were they once, and now spread their wings to feel freedom on their path, devoid of all self-deceptions, and false facades others put on to emphasise their virtuousness to make them stand naked on the stage called world. Suparna, Padma, Renuka, all live with the help of guilt, but realises the self at its potential, what the other women could not; for they are not immersed in the cultural ego of their Gods and moralities preached by myths. The author questions “What one is to know is, if one possesses enough strength to withstand in their chosen path? If one can tread in that long journey with no remorse of that choice? Stories help one know that strength and that’s what I want her to know.” (83).

Sita who fears “A life full of guilts and blames” that Suparna or Sundarambal have to go on” (8). Sita who is “Ignorant of the manipulations of the society, in the name of an “upright upbringing... entangled in that messy web of cultural norms and its shitty guilts.” (43), finally realises that what Hess calls “Chastity is a moral state of being historically linked to other virtues such as temperance and thrift.” (121). The cultural perspective that “women, then, are expected to play into these roles, serving as the pursued responding to the man in pursuit.” is still prevalent topic over decades. (415). In Anju’s case it is her husband who left her without any concrete reason, the crudity of male ego exposed to a woman who left everything including hope for betterment of soul. “Part of the problem is that even in biology, society’s views about the cultural position of women dictate that men should be regarded as genetically superior to women”. (104). For Padma, it is the “Cultural expectations impose high standards of devotion and labour-intensive self-sacrifice on women who become mothers, what is described as the intensive mothering ideology” (138). Smothered herself more to incline to Palazhani, only to face inescapable grief later.

All these female characters’ roles prove that they are emotionally and psychologically driven for love and more intimate needs that are not at best perceived by the society. To society they are whore and sluts, “The traditional female gender role does not facilitate self-confidence or mental health. Both men and women tend to see women as being less competent than men” (138). The roles that make her crippled inside the family set up, preventing her from evolving further. Sita could never give herself the flexibility of mutual understanding. But to wish to hold on to something which is not natural and normal, for human beings are constantly changing roles and perspectives. Sita falls into hopelessness and a groundlessness as she stamps herself as the centre of a family that holds and epitomises Rajesh as the sole proprietor of her nuclear family. Her world is exceedingly small and confined, so her views about human nature. Later, with “the self-actualisation” she could decide what she really wants for herself and to

rationalise with her ideology to grasp the other's needs, especially her son's need becomes even clearer for her. She keeps exploring the "vistas of morality" (211), invite herself into the guilt-free world of others, for she evolves into hate-free human that really achieve "transcendence" (SS 380), and not let her be stagnated in the brooding "immanence" (380) as Beauvoir suggests every woman should endeavour for herself. Sita decides to "put the powers of liberty to test" (SS 634) as in Beauvoir's words that continues to say, "Let the future to be open to her and she will no longer cling desperately to the past." (634), and let herself to be projected as bold and courageous.

With the self-assertion, she realises and let him have "the Mastercard of free-will" (211) for Pramod to choose his way of life completely felt and satisfied, and happy about his own decision of taking Pranjal as his soul-mate. The identification and acceptance that every human being craves for must be granted as natural as the course of time and eternity. One of the author Petra Kelly starts the chapter "Women and Power" with Emma Goldman's quote: "True emancipation begins neither at the polls nor in the courts. It begins in women's soul." (112).

## 2. Conclusion

The inward revelation she attains in her soul made her say with pride and dignity devoid of any remorse that she has for anyone before, that "I am myself; I am me... and now when I am me, I know that I love you all for what you are." (211). It is the freedom that wishes to be away from all the leashes produced through the culture of the society. It is the liberty and autonomy that both the gender must be acquired of. The famous writer Roxane Gay suggests woman ways to appreciate the fruit of universal sisterhood, invites the readers further to "Abandon the cultural myth that all female friendships must be bitchy, toxic, or competitive. This myth is like heels and purses—pretty but designed to SLOW women down." (Gay).

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