

DESTRUCTION OF THE SOCIO-CULTURAL NORMS IN *THE ISSUE* BY TANUJ SOLANKI

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Abstract:

The issue aims at breaking gender norms and questioning the concept of marriage based on predetermined set of rules of our society and culture. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the tools used by the author in order to modify or shatter the said norms and rules.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, identity, femininity, masculinity, marriage as an institution.

The foremost thing that comes in mind while reading this modern story of a married couple is Kamala Das' *Stone Age* and *The First Party* by Attia Hosain. The themes of isolation, loneliness, dissatisfaction with their respective partners are the prominent denominators for these three stories, making them a perfect trio for a comparative study. *The issue*, however, stands as a wild contrast in regards to the depiction of a married life described in *Stone Age* and *The First Party*. Then again, the time and era in which the former stories were set it should also be taken into consideration while analyzing the reasons behind the resemblances and variances between them and *The issue*.

Nevertheless, *The issue*, can and should be considered as the modern exemplification of a married life and marriage as an institution. However, this doesn't mean that this particular literary piece is a depiction of all married couples around us. In today's contemporary society, there are women who do suffer from passive patriarchy if not an active one. Domestic violence, treatment of one's wife as an object, curbing her identity and voice is unfortunately not unheard of even today. This is why, *The issue*, stands out in terms of its characterization, themes, symbolism, and narration.

As the title suggests, the short story is about two people, who are later revealed to be husband and wife, are addressing an important issue. As the plot goes ahead and the discussion between them intensifies, we realize that the said issue is about something extremely serious and whatever conclusion they may come to towards the end of their conversation, it will surely be life changing. Initially, the husband is portrayed as someone who

is inexpressive, insecure and who is terrified of the future. Eventually he finds it in himself to trust in their relationship and let go of his fears and doubts. He gets inspired by his wife's courage and strength, who in turn is sure that they can overcome everything as long as they willingly support each other. The lizard is portrayed as a third character who plays an important role here as it symbolizes the fear that resides in the character of the husband

The significant thing to focus on, is the husband's character. On the surface, he is depicted as a characteristic male, unable to speak his mind and heart, not strong enough to voice out his insecurities or to even admit that he has one. In our society, most men are of the similar sort. They are neither taught to be expressive nor are they encouraged to be one. Displaying their emotions, especially in front of a woman, is considered a sign of weakness. Being lesser than the opposite sex in any manner is something to be ashamed of. Today, if a household has kids of both sexes, the above points can be easily observed. The boy child will be cheered upon if he shows any kind of physical strength and the girl child will be more pushed towards the kitchen or her barbie set. Fathers applaud if their sons show signs of bodily strength, which in turn sometimes lead the kid to take pride in himself if he were to ever get into a fight or physically hurt someone, since they are psychologically trained to earn praises from their parents if they were more 'manly' or 'masculine'. Many studies show that this type of upbringing can mold a person's character into someone who is egoistic, unjust and riotous.

Girls on the other hand tend to hide their abilities in the fields which aren't considered right for them. The partnership is never equal between brother and sister or husband and wife because almost everyone is brought up in a similar manner. This resonates with the common theory amongst most feminists and psychologists regarding how sex and gender differ from each other. These theories explicitly indicate that gender and sex are antithetical and hence should not serve as an obstacle in one's way of life. To simplify, the focus of these literary theories is that being a girl

does not always mean that she has a preference for diamonds, fine clothing, flowers and such. Similarly, being a boy doesn't always state that he would have a likeness towards sports, alcohol, automobiles and such. What we like and dislike as an individual doesn't depend on our biological sex and it most definitely doesn't define our masculinity or femininity. *The issue*, bravely confronts these unjust ideas by violating the obsolete set of rules which unjustly dictates how a man and a woman should conduct themselves.

The second most important theme which this particular short story adopts is that of marriage as an institution. Because of the so-called gender-based upbringing, many of us are unable to see marriage purely as an act of vow which one takes in order to have a partner in a lifelong journey. We carry our outdated norms into our married life and strictly live by it. For instance, a wife's duty towards her husband, her in-laws, her house, her children come before everything else whereas a husband's responsibility to provide for his family and to protect them from harm is of utmost priority. These set of rules are so rigid that just the mere thought of having the roles reversed, baffles most of us. Even today, in many households, irrespective of an educated and civilized one or under civilized one, women still have certain limitation that they must not overcome. This kind of marriage doesn't have partnership of any kind. It has ownership, ownership of the husband who decides the future of his home and his family.

"For him, it was always victor or victim, never a partner." (The issue by Tanuj Solanki; Online Short Story; out of Print Magazine; June 2017.)

In *The issue*, the husband doesn't force his decision upon his wife when he finds himself in disagreement with her plan to study ahead. He has his own points to make which he does in a long and a detailed discussion with his partner. He doesn't shut down the idea by simply saying "I don't agree and you are not to go" like a true patriarch would. It is very clear that he loves his wife immensely and would absolutely support her in whatever path she chooses. This is not to say that there weren't any hesitations from his sides. There sure were. The idea of his wife leaving did drive him into thinking about the consequences if everything didn't go according to the plan. The financial and emotional stain it would leave on their relationship would be irreparable. But then again, this says more about him being a calculative character who considers the cons of a decision before moving forward. Besides this there is one crucial point which is a driving force behind his

disapproval of his wife's choice, his utmost fear of losing her. By making the husband admitting to this, *The issue*, shatters each and every cultural norm of our society that goes against to being a feeble, emotional and an expressive man or husband. *The issue*, displays the husband's character in all its rawness. There is no filter of strong-willed misogyny which will hide his true form. He is a man who is calculative and it's terrified of his wife leaving because he will miss her and his life wouldn't be same without her in it. This simple fact and his courage to admitting defeat towards the end of the sort story, in exchange for his wife's happiness and also their happiness as a married couple, is the highlight of the story.

The phenomenon of husband being the decision maker of the house is strongly debased by Solanki in this short story. What Solanki does is by giving us such unique characters he voices out his opinion of the kind of marriage which he considers an ideal one as opposed to the ones which clearly has ran its course and it is about time that we correct and modify our belief system. A wife should be allowed to ask questions and a husband should be comfortable with answering them. There should not be any signs of discomfort, ego, or any kind of awkwardness. *The issue*, normalizes the idea of a married couple talking, discussing and taking into consideration each other's point of view regarding any life-altering choices since it is going to affect both the parties. By doing so, *The issue* solidifies the utmost importance of communication in a relationship.

In the beginning of the story, the husband's character comes off as a typical male who wishes to avoid any events wherein, he would be forced or made to talk about his feelings. The wife on the other hand is not a stereotyped female. She is passionate, caring, headstrong and someone who is not afraid to speak her mind in front of anyone. She is also not afraid to call her husband a misogynist or a patriarch if need be.

'Your silence,' she said, 'or rather your reluctance to talk about things, is itself a hurdle, do you realise that?' (The issue by Tanuj Solanki; Online Short Story; out of Print Magazine; June 2017.)

The highlight of the wife's character is her ability to read, understand and analyze her husband. She knows what he will like and dislike, which is why she is sure that her husband is going through a hard time and is dealing with this situation by isolating himself. She cares for him and their marriage deeply enough for her to create a safe

space for him to express himself. In doing so, she is aided by the lizard in their room, who has caused the couple to get cramped up in a single mattress. By putting them in a reduced space from where they cannot escape, Solanki forces a dialogue between them about an imperative issue, which was long overdue.

The mattress' width enforced a kind of intimacy that was different from what had been available on the wider bed, so much so that they soon got talking, for the first time, about the biggest issue in their lives at that point. (The issue by Tanuj Solanki; Online Short Story; out of Print Magazine; June 2017.)

Later, with his wife's understanding of him and her constant yet gentle push to encourage him to speak and explain his emotional or mental state of mind, he is able to voice out few of some valid reasons for him to doubt the outcome of his wife's decision, which are hardly rigid, unreasonable, dominating or authoritative in any sense.

The discussion grows intense when the wife also comes up with some of the strong counter points to support her argument. At a certain turn, we as readers, agree to both the parties and are filled with curiosity to know what will happen at the end. Here, the writer's ability to keep his readers engaged should be recognized and appreciated.

For the husband, his wife's success does matter but it also comes with the fear of losing her.

'I'm scared,' he whispered. (The issue by Tanuj Solanki; Online Short Story; out of Print Magazine; June 2017.)

For the husband to admit this was a big step for his character and for the writer to successfully break the gender stereotypes which generally surround men in our society.

Towards the end of the story when the husband reaches an epiphany that their life would not be filled with happiness and rather resentment towards each other if he forces her to stay, is the major breakthrough or a turning point for both of them. He gathers up the courage to fight for their relationship while believing in each other and their marriage.

He then told her that if she decided not to go because he didn't want her to and would then become sad, it

would be the worst thing that she could possibly do to him. He clarified that he had never said that he did not want her to go. He had never said those words. He had reservations, and they hadn't talked about them. And, yes, it was his fault. But the situation was now at a point where he couldn't feel good with any outcome. And he certainly didn't want her to be sad because that would in turn make him sad and condemn them to live with the potentiality of a different life always hanging like a sword above their marriage. There would be resentment that could linger till old age. At least with her going and him following her they would always have a life to return to if the new one failed. 'You should go,' he said, 'and we will find a way.' He showcases his courage by bravely fighting the lizard at the end and letting of his fears and doubts completely. (The issue by Tanuj Solanki; Online Short Story; out of Print Magazine; June 2017.)

Conclusion:

Solanki's motive is quite clear here, he wishes to regularize the treatment of marriage as a partnership in which both the parties and their respective interests are equally important. Men are allowed to have fears and it shouldn't be a surprise if he confides in his partner. Women should be given space to explicitly display her thoughts, ideas and questions without reluctances. More than anything, Solanki promotes friendship between married couples who has each other's best interests at their hearts.

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