
“Marriage as a Tanga: A Critical Analysis of Gender Roles, Social Expectations, and Cultural Transformation in Saba Mahjoor’s Short Story”

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Abstract:

"Marriage is like a Tanga" is a short story written by journalist Saba Mahjoor. In this short story, she explores Kashmiri culture concerning marriage and women, highlighting how cultural expectations are primarily imposed on women. "Marriage is like a Tanga" examines themes of marriage, life after marriage for women, social expectations, gender roles, human behavior, boldness, parenthood, family problems, and the solution. These narratives are thought-provoking, challenging, and inspiring for both women and men in this society.

Mahjoor's notable aspects highlight the inherent flaws of the traditional institution, like marriage, responsibilities, oppression, freedom, self-timing, stereotypes, injustice, hallucination, power of actions, and the loss of shame and modesty. The story analyzes the symbolic use of the "Tanga" (bullock cart), which represents equal responsibility between partners in marriage. Mahjoor raises awareness of gender roles, parenthood, married life, social expectations, and the struggle for individual identity within marriage life.

Keywords: Society, responsibilities, gender roles, social expectations, stereotype.

Introduction

This short story represents culture at its core. Tahira, the main character of "Marriage is like a Tanga" by Saba Mahjoor, learns about the customs of Kashmir after her marriage.

She realizes that married women must address their husbands with respect, whereas the same is not expected of men. This cultural norm confines women within strict boundaries. When a girl gets married and moves into another family, her relatives visit her new home to judge her luck and behavior.

The character Phuphee is an extremely bold woman who expresses her stress and depression through smoking. When Tahira gets married, life suddenly becomes difficult, presenting her with numerous challenges. Although she initially settles into her married life, the birth of her child makes things even more complicated. Before childbirth, she could eat with the family, but after having a baby, she no longer had the freedom to eat fresh food. She must serve everyone, feed her baby, and then eat cold or congealed food herself. This injustice within the family highlights the unequal responsibilities placed upon women. Despite preparing food with love and effort, she is unable to enjoy it herself.

Tahira shares her struggles with her uncle but later regrets it after realizing his situation. However, a few weeks later, during dinner, her uncle challenges the stereotype by ensuring that Tahira eats her meal while it is still hot. This action stuns everyone, including Tahira. Her uncle's bold move creates a valuable change—when Tahira faces trouble; he always finds a solution. Mahjoor explains that marriage is often unequal and unjust for women, but through intelligence and resilience, small changes can be made.

Tahira later shares her thoughts with her husband. A few days later, he begins to change and realizes his equal responsibilities. He starts addressing Tahira affectionately as "myoan zuv" (my life) in public. The narrator suggests that the world is changing, but at the same time, shame and modesty are fading. Tahira wins a small battle against society, culture, customs, and stereotypes, though the outcome for society remains uncertain.

This tale encompasses many key themes. Mahjoor uses the metaphor of the "Tanga" (bullock cart), whose two wheels signify equal partnership in marriage. When the wheels are uneven, the cart crashes and is ruined. Just like that, marriage must be an equal partnership where both spouses share equally. But the tale shows us that women tend to carry most of the responsibility in marriage, which culminates in injustice and inequality.

In Indian society, duties are usually gender-based. These are predetermined by society—for instance, women are supposed to alter their mode of address upon marriage, but men are not. This is a kind of cultural practice that is not unique in Kashmir but is prevalent throughout India. Different stereotypes stipulate that women should care for children, do household chores, cook, and serve family members. Women cannot go out of the house without obtaining permission from several family members. Even in dress and appearance, women have to follow cultural norms, whereas men are not put under the same constraints.

Once married, these stereotypes become even more stringent. Women must alter their style of dressing as per tradition, whereas men do not have to do so. Women are also

not free to show their wishes and desires, decide what to wear, eat whatever they want to, or take up whatever hobby they wish. Mahjoor portrays the lack of this freedom in more than one aspect. For example, she criticizes why others are allowed to eat hot foods when Tahira is compelled to have a cold. Though she also takes pains in cooking, the simple joy of relishing fresh food is snatched away from her. Following marriage and giving birth, women do not have personal time to attend to their health and looks. Parenthood is supposed to be a shared responsibility, similar to the two wheels of a Tanga. Yet, women are supposed to take most of the childcare duties, which causes stress and depression. Parenthood needs to maintain equality share to balance life and good health.

Social expectations are a heavy burden to women even upholding stereotypes and limiting their autonomy. Women are conditioned to obey the societal norms more than to seek their own path. Women have to be courageous enough to question these norms, as Phuphee does in the story. Her character symbolizes courage to live life as one chooses after marriage. If women voice their issues within their families, they can be resolved, and they end up living happier lives. Women have the power to initiate change within society.

This short story brings to the fore female struggles, social expectations, gender roles, and solutions. The process of change begins with confronting the problem constructively. Tahira's uncle recognizes her plight and has respect for her, resulting in positive change. Such understanding and growth are necessary for society. The story dispels stereotypes and promotes progress. Society is slowly changing according to modern realities and breaking out of outdated traditions.

The story promotes change in societal norms and stereotypes. Other characters recognize their mistakes and responsibilities, and realization is an essential step toward progress. Tahira's husband realizes his mistake and changes his behavior, setting an example for breaking stereotypes. Allowing Tahira to eat hot food is a small victory, but it symbolizes a significant societal shift. While her uncle takes care of the baby, her husband begins addressing her lovingly in public, signaling a win for women and a step toward societal change. Small changes can lead to major transformations in life.

Conclusion

"Marriage is like a Tanga" critically examines the societal expectations, oppression, responsibilities, stereotypes, gender discrimination, injustice and personal struggles. In this society women, often finds itself constrained by cultural expectations. People prioritize customs and traditions over individual happiness, particularly for women after marriage. To overcome these challenges, women must address their problems and advocate for themselves. They must be prepared to challenge societal norms to achieve happiness. Society must also adapt and modernize traditions to reflect evolving realities. Recognizing and correcting mistakes is crucial for societal progress. Women who exhibit courage and boldness can drive meaningful change.

All genders must understand their responsibilities as partners and parents, ensuring

equal roles and mutual respect in marriage. Like a tango, where both wheels must be balanced to reach the destination safely, marriage requires equal responsibility from both partners. In today's world, society is gradually shedding stereotypes and recognizing equal responsibilities within families. Husbands are learning to support their wives, bringing justice to marital relationships. The world is evolving through small societal actions, shifting toward equality. This struggle is not about feminism but about humanism, ensuring fairness and justice for all.

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