



THE UNFULFILLED GENDER STEREOTYPE IN *LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER* BY ROALD DAHL

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Abstract

As society is filled with diversity, such as differences in race, skin colour, culture, religion, and economy, it is common that each society has formed its own perception over things that happen around them. Stereotypes are among the most striking differences in perception. There may be perceptions regarding an unequal assessment of a community group based on attitudes and opinions, leading to wrong beliefs and losses for one party. Stereotypes are like masks put on individuals. Masks cover up individual characteristics and make the people wearing them look alike. The issue of stereotypes is very complicated, and it is sometimes hard because it changes how society views something, which sometimes is not the truth. *Lamb to the Slaughter* by Roald Dahl delivers a story of a housewife who kills her husband with a frozen lamb tight. What the husband and the wife do in this short story break the gender roles stereotypes labelled by the society. This article will analyse how the stereotypes are broken.

Keywords: *gender roles, society, stereotypes*

INTRODUCTION

Discussion about stereotypes has been flowing for centuries. Stereotypes can be related to any social group, whether it is based on one's career, nationality, and religion. "*Stereotypes are like masks put on individuals. Masks cover up individual characteristics and make the people wearing them look alike*" (Cai, 1992, p. 15). In other words, masks hide distinct characteristics and make those wearing them resemble one another. Stereotyping also converts natural persons into constructed, artificial people. Therefore, a stereotype can be a false perception that someone or something has, particularly an untrue one. In the case of America, for instance, America, known to have many races and tribes, might have stereotypes that are believed or rejected to be accurate descriptions of America. While some see America as a land of opportunity, others might consider it a dangerous place, both physically and mentally. Some might think of Americans as passionate and hardworking people. In American culture, people are highly motivated to work individually. They tend to emphasize terms of independence that allow them to actively shape their destinies, which means that you are free to pursue your goals, often in your way (Sriastuti, Adi & Rokhman, 2021; Fithratullah, 2021; Kasih, 2019). On the contrary, others might argue that Americans are relaxed, loud, obnoxious, lazy, racist, and gun-obsessed. Differences in the cultural background are often an obstacle in the process of intercultural communication. This is due to different assessments of good or bad or right or wrong measurements. These differences in judgments can trigger misunderstandings that lead to prejudice. People have long lived in stereotypes. Adjusting to the standard role given by society is only sometimes something that needs to be done. Many consequences occur because people believe that stereotypes that have been in force for a long time become role models as a standard. Even though precisely, in this case, it certainly has its weaknesses, which could be that stereotypes are not always true.

One of the stereotypes that become popular in society is gender stereotypes. In this perspective, women are often labeled as emotional, whereas men are rational (Casad & Bryant, 2016). Women use their emotions often and are considered weak, irrational, and unknowledgeable. On the other hand, as men use their ratio, they are considered more intelligent and decisive. This leads to the gender roles applied to men and women. Women are associated with domestic work, such as taking care of the children and husbands, cooking, and doing the house chores, while men take care of finances and work outside the house (Buttler, 1999). In short, the world of work applies the stereotype that men will usually work in fields that require energy and intelligence while women will work in the care sector, such as being a nurse. If the world allowed women to work in the industry like men, their positions would not be the same. Using a sample of 230 respondents from previous studies on gender stereotypes in India, Khandelwal (2002) found that male managers were portrayed as working in production, sales, and

marketing, as bosses, leaders, and good decision-makers, and as being more likely to take on challenging fieldwork and assignments. Gender stereotypes became an important issue after the discrimination against women due to this distinction (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Various movements emerged to defend gender equality and eliminate this gender stereotype. However, this does not arbitrarily make people aware of the social roles that have gone wrong. This is evidenced by the many issues of gender stereotypes that are still firmly held by society even today. This stereotype can also be seen in literature, where female characters are portrayed as a weaker party than men.

Lamb to the Slaughter by Roald Dahl was published in 1954. It delivers a story of a housewife who killed her husband with a frozen lamb tight. The story characters that are highlighted are husband and wife, Mary Maloney and Patrick. This story is about a woman who is in a marriage that is almost oppressive. When she finds out that her husband plans to leave, she kills him and leaves no evidence for the police to find. Through the use of assumed gender roles and their reversal, *Lamb to the Slaughter* depicts a woman's successful escape from her oppressive marriage and the role society had assigned to her. The setting and the way Mary Maloney and her husband fit into their roles as married people are shown at the beginning of the story. The narrative begins with Mary Maloney, a pregnant woman, waiting for her husband to return home. Mary, embracing her role as a devoted and loving wife, is content with carrying out the responsibilities that are expected of her. When her husband comes home from work, they behave in the manner that is typical of a couple in this era, that is, the wife tries to do everything she can to make her husband happy by offering to help him and doing whatever she thinks will make him happy. However, he does not treat her with respect and acts entitled to her attention, as was almost always the case in those kinds of relationships. The author of story centers the differences of men and women position.

Miller and Lachman (1992) states "*when an author assigns general characteristics to a group particularly if those characteristics have long been attributed to the group rather than exploring its members' diversity and individuality, it can be said that the author has engaged in stereotyping*" (p. 16). Whether used in literary criticism or in sociological studies, stereotype is a pejorative term that denotes an oversimplified generalization that trivializes individual differences and complexities. Stereotypes prepare us for interactions with members of a group we have never met. However, it can also lead to bad attitudes and behaviours toward members of a social group. Thus, stereotypes might be the inspiration behind the most terrible actions that people are capable of. Stereotype might figure in many contexts such as gender tradition roles, cultural, socio-historical, etc. In gender traditional roles for example, it says that women should be staying at home, taking care of her husband, and many other things that represent her domesticity and traditional roles of women. Women are also often described as innocent and graceful creations. The stereotype of men says that men should be the financial providers. This kind of stereotype leads the society to put women's position under men.

Gender roles stereotype is highlighted the most in *Lamb to the Slaughter*. In general, the stereotypes of women roles say that women should be staying at home, taking care of her husband, and many other things that represent her domesticity. Women are also seen as innocent and graceful. On the other hand, the stereotype of men says that men should be strong, powerful, and must work hard as the financial providers. Apart from the oppression and less appreciation, the female character in the story has to first satisfy herself with the role labelled to her before she finally takes an action to protest toward the situation. From this it can be seen that even though the stereotype of the role of women in society has existed for a long time and according to this, the role of women will indeed be subject to men. However, the prevailing stereotypes are not always true, the stereotyped roles of women and men in society are not always agreed upon. This is why women's roles are often more complicated and most women disagree with the roles assigned to them. The purpose of the research conducted based on the background of this story is to find out whether women are against stereotyped gender roles which are accepted standards in society.

METHOD

This research paper is conducted under a descriptive qualitative method. As Bogdan and Biklen have stated, qualitative research should deal with a natural, descriptive setting, emphasize the process rather than the result, and be inductive and interpretative (1992, pp. 29–32). The qualitative method can also be used to analyze social phenomena by interpretation and criticism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). Additionally, the qualitative method is chosen because this study aims to explore a particular phenomenon (i.e. gender stereotypes in a short story). The descriptive qualitative method also allowed the researcher to provide the data through narrations and dialogues (Kasih, Amelia, and Fithratullah, 2022). In this method, the researcher has to build abstracts, concepts, and theories as a research framework. Moreover, the qualitative research method is the research that focuses on understanding a phenomenon and studying it more effectively to find the meaning of the phenomenon discussed and describe a phenomenon in word form and a particular context by utilizing several natural methods to support the primary methodology (Rido & Sari, 2018; Kasih & Strid, 2020). The qualitative descriptive method qualifies scientific data related to each other so that they can be compiled into a scientific and objective conclusion. Therefore, researchers need to organize data, choose which ones are important to study, and make conclusions that are easy to understand (Gulo & Rahmaely, 2020; Kuswoyo, 2016). Through data, the writer can gain information,

and it can help the writer reach the research objective (Amelia & Daud, 2021). Thus the primary data were taken from dialogue, images, and the narrations about gender stereotypes in *Lamb to the Slaughter* (1954) short story written by Roald Dahl. Some studies were also needed to support and strengthen the analysis. The writer also employed several sources, journals, and papers as supporting ideas regarding the issue of gender stereotypes. The study applied a sociological gender approach to defining gender stereotypes theories from Casad and Wexler (2017). As Creswell (2007) stated, data were collected first by closely reading the source of data to find the data related to the research topic. Secondly, the data were categorized and displayed based on the research topic (Creswell, 2007, pp. 276–284).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the beginning of the story, it is told that Mary, a pregnant wife, is sewing while waiting for her husband to return home from work. “*Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come him from work. Now and again she would glance up at the clock, but without anxiety, merely to please herself with the thought that each minute gone by made it nearer the time when he would come*” (Dahl, 1954, p. 1). This is a description of a regular wife in a family. Mary has to wait anxiously for a husband so this makes Mary a weak person who has to wait for her husband. Under normal conditions, a woman can also do other work that does not place herself as a man waiting at home. The text has stereotyped the position of woman and man, Mary and her husband. Stereotype oversimplifies generalization that trivializes individual differences and complexities. The gender stereotypes belief “*reflect perceivers’ knowledge and expectations about women, men, transgender, and other gendered people*” (Casad and Wexler, 2017, p. 2). The issue of stereotypes is very complicated, and it is sometimes hard because it changes how society views something, which sometimes is not the truth. Stereotypes might be good because our mental resources are constrained and we need to organize our social environments. Mary has been put the condition as the one who must take care the house and the child. On the other hand, her husband is never placed to the activities at home.

As an obedient wife, she is ready to serve her husband's home as her daily routine. Later her husband returns from work by hanging up his coat, preparing the drink, and preparing the supper. As a good wife should be, Mary is supposed to remain in the home as a housewife while her husband is at work. Mary exemplifies the conventional duties of women as child-bearers and domestic workers throughout her pregnancy. When her husband arrives home, Mary serves her husband well. “*She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Then she walked over and made the drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself; and soon she was back again in her chair with the sewing, and he in the other, opposite, holding the tall glass with both hands, rocking it so the ice cubes tinkled against the side.*” (Dahl, 1954, p. 2). Mary's act is another example of her wifely duties. Mary really brings out the stereotype of women as a wife in her actions. She serves her husband even though she is still busy sewing, which means her husband needs to support her with money. Mary needs to fulfill her clothes by sewing. Mary also positions to have different kinds of drink that ‘*a strongest one*’ must be for a man and ‘*the weak*’ must be for a woman. Mary places herself on managing everything and puts herself into woman stereotypes. Stereotypes about women's roles are also influenced by societies that are consistent about women's roles. This aligns with role alignment theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The role of women that is very common and developed in society is women who are allocated for household work and men for paid work roles (Cabrera *et al.*, 2009). Society then accepts these skills as normative and feeds into fundamental gender roles, which are descriptive and prescriptive in defining how women and men usually do and should behave.

Mary also offers her husband to eat the supper, “*Darling,*” she said. “*Would you like me to get you some cheese? I haven't made any supper because it's Thursday.*” (Dahl, 1954, p. 3). In this part, her husband also portrays stereotypes over men, meaning that her husband has fulfilled responsibility as a financial provider. Although his refusal to have the dinner is a signal of his power over his wife as a decision maker. Mary's efforts to please her husband seem not enough for her husband. Without any proceeding sign, her husband asks her to sit down and be a passive listener. “*Sit down,*” he said. “*Just for a minute, sit down.*” *It wasn't till then that she began to get frightened.* (Dahl, 1954, p.3). Mary still has no idea with Patrick's intention, she does nothing but obeys his husband because she is aware that the man is the leader of the house.

However, her husband's next words strikes her badly.

“*So there it is,*” he added. “*And I know it's kind of a bad time to be telling you, bet there simply wasn't any other way. Of course I'll give you money and see you're looked after. But there needn't really be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job.*” (Dahl, 1954, p. 3)

It is not clearly stated why his husband does this, but it is enough to explain that her husband is likely leaving her in divorce. Some who enter marriages may not know how much of an ego their new spouse actually has. Stereotype of a good husband or a good wife cannot directly take arrogance from people's minds and personalities. Arrogant individuals have the ability to succeed, not only in their careers but life in general (Milyavsky *et.al.* 2017). Arrogant individuals can be difficult to interact with, causing conflict avoidance with those who interact with them on a

daily basis. They can exhibit their dominance in social situations, which can lead them to obtaining some levels of power. Arrogant individuals can believe themselves to be superior, just like Patrick. It is true that her husband stated that he would give Mary and her unborn child money for living, meaning that he is still the financial provider. However, he breaks the stereotype that men should be the protector of the family. He leaves his family when his family needs him the most.

Furious, Mary took a frozen lamb thigh as a weapon to kill her husband. Mary breaks the stereotype that women should be innocent, graceful, and obedient. On the contrary, Mary not wanting to comply with her husband's request, Mary rebels and even kills her husband. This shows that she is not weak and does not have to obey her husband. She can rebel when it feels wrong for her. *"At that point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head."* (Dahl, 1954).

She feels disappointed with her husband because she does not receive what she deserves even after she plays after she plays her role well as a wife. Her husband fails to fulfil responsibilities as a husband and father. Being treated unfairly after all her devotion to her family makes Mary upset and takes actions in anger. After killing her husband, she tries to remove the evidence by cooking the lamb in the oven.

"She carried the meat into the kitchen, placed it in a pan, turned the oven on high, and shoved it inside. Then she washed her hands and ran upstairs to the bedroom. She sat down before the mirror, tidied her hair, touched up her lips and face. She tried a smile. It came out rather peculiar. She tried again." (Dahl, 1954)

Try to escape from the situation, Mary persuades the policemen and the detectives to eat her cooked lamb. Although it is in a negative way, Mary's efforts to get rid of trouble is a proof that woman can be stronger, more clever and powerful than man. Women can also stand over men in society either in a good way or bad way. Women are not always weak and can never do such things.

"Here you all are, and good friends of dear Patrick's too, and helping to catch the man who killed him. You must be terrible hungry by now because it's long past your suppertime, and I know Patrick would never forgive me, God bless his soul, if I allowed you to remain in his house without offering you decent hospitality. Why don't you eat up that lamb that's in the oven. It'll be cooked just right by now." (Dahl, 1954)

Mary's actions break the stereotypes labelled to women. Clearly, Mary does not fit the stereotype that a woman is caring and loving. But in any point of view, taking a person's life will never be an act of caring and loving.

Finally, this story involves gender issues between Mary and her husband, Patrick, who can be raised and analyzed by correlating the stereotypes between women and men roles. Stereotypes of gender roles make society think that men are higher than women, and women are demanded to obey men, especially in husband-wife relationships. However, the story breaks the stereotype of gender roles. At first, Mary Maloney is an obedient wife who fulfills her responsibility as a good wife by serving and obeying her husband well. She is a good actor in the woman stereotype. In return, she hopes her husband will treat her like she does. However, the reality is not what she wants, as her husband divorces her while pregnant. As a protest, Mary takes the frozen lamb thigh, swings it to her husband's head, and kills him. It shows she is not weak and can 'fight' her husband's oppression and unfair treatment. By doing this, she breaks the stereotype that women are weak. Her disobedience and courage to defend her rights shock society because Mary's action lets her become a murderer. Mary's husband, Patrick, also shows stereotypes in the story. Men are expected to be the head of a family by providing financial and family protection. Patrick has done his role and responsibility as a financial provider by working. However, his decision to leave his pregnant wife has failed him to be a family protector as what society labels man should be. It breaks the stereotype that men should protect women. Instead of protecting and loving his family, Patrick chose to leave Mary and her unborn child at a terrible time when his wife and unborn child needed him the most. Mary's action has triggered a reason to conduct research whether women who are against stereotyped gender roles can be accepted the society or not.

CONCLUSION

Lamb to the Slaughter by Roald Dahl tells a story about a housewife who kills her husband using a frozen lamb thigh. The story portrays stereotypes that are shown by the characters Mary Maloney and her husband, Patrick. However, instead of supporting the stereotype of gender roles, it breaks them. In society, women should be staying at home, taking care of her husband, and many other things that represent her domesticity. Women are also seen as innocent and graceful. On the other hand, the stereotype of men says that men should be strong, powerful, and must work hard as the financial providers. In the story, these stereotypes are denied. Mary Maloney through her action breaks the rules that women should be innocent and obedient. By killing her husband, Mary shows her rebel toward her husband's unfair decision to divorce her while she has played her part as a good wife.

It shows that women can also rebel and do not have to always follow the rules. On the other hand, Patrick, as a husband, fails to play his role as a family protector as he intends to divorce his wife while she is pregnant. Patrick breaks the stereotype that men should protect their family. From this analysis, it can be seen that stereotype can be wrong as it works as a mask which is put to give label over something.

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