

# Gender Disparity and Role of Women in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*: A Re-Reading

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## Abstract

*Shirley Jackson's famous work "The Lottery" portrays the miserable realities of the women who do not uphold the demands and grievances of exploitation in a patriarchal society. In it, there is no example of gender equality and women are victimized in different ways although their issues cannot worry them as they have no feminist consciousness except Tessie Hutchinson who has will and sheer courage to change society. The other women cannot act as her mouthpiece and do not use language to protest, not use their bodies as a voice to express their opposition to the male oppressors. It seems that they are willing victims of unwritten social norms laid down by an essentially patriarchal society. The story enables us to perceive the degenerated world of the women and this degeneration is, however, not a single day affair. A rational society can only be made when both men and women are morally healthy and can resist atrocity towards women. In this short story Jackson pictures a society where women are unwilling to change due to several factors. The paper makes an attempt to show gender inequality and will unfold the reasons of the thoughtlessness of the women to bring light to their dark lives.*

Key terms: Gender disparity; weaknesses of women; futility of a single protester

Shirley Jackson is a prominent short story writer of American fiction who is not only concerned with social realities, but also meditates upon the existential question of women. Jackson's "The Lottery" is a woman oriented short story and the protagonist Tessie Hutchinson is an innocent victim in the male dominating society. She is killed by the social system where man is the absolute authority and women are the silent onlookers who become nasty accomplices to this nasty conspiracy as they fail to understand that act of oppressing, harming or killing are individual as well as group task.

"The Lottery" was published on 28 June 1948 in *The New Yorker*. It presents the portraits of an imaginary American society where people are forced to live under pressure of traditional norms, aimed at making them conform to perpetuate patriarchal

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interests. In fact, it depicts the tragedy of some women's lives affected by poverty, ignorance, superstition, lack of unity, realization and fear. Even children do not stand close to their mothers and they find the helplessness of women normal as they are used to this. Mothers have to call their children "four or five times" (249) before they obey. Only fathers can discipline them. When Bobby disobeyed his mother, his "father spoke up sharply, and he came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother" (249). Female children also do not have much greater choice than their mothers and grandmothers. On the day of the lottery, the boys "made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square while the girls stood aside " (249) talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys. They are virtually excluded from patriarchal society. From an early age they learn how to be self-restraint and subservient to the authority of men.

In this simple, strong, educative short story women are at bottom of the social and economic ladder of their society. Despite their hard work and contribution to domestic sector, they are second class citizens and are exploited by men. They are also distinguished by their simple dresses as they wear "faded house dresses and sweaters." (249). Their welfare is not an issue to the husbands. They are denied permission by the male authority to come before the men folk or to stand together. Here the good women are the obedient ones. Their topics of discussion are also limited to domestic chores as well as children. On the other hand, their husbands have got all the privileges which are apparent from their conversations about "planting and rain, tractors and taxes" (249). Women are for cooking, cleaning and general smooth running of the household unity. These tasks are performed manually without any help from the husbands. They are simply the sources of free labor but cannot take part in planning and decision making. Although they confront gender inequality and female subordination, they never question the nature of relationships between men and women. In fact, they are willing to submit to slavery in order to preserve themselves and the lives of their families.

The law and order is one of the steps to stop injustice towards women. Here, we see lawlessness prevails and the atrocious lottery has been held for the seventy -seventh times and it is not held annually to promote equality between men and women. Despite women's contribution to making up the handmade slips of paper that go into the black box for the annual lottery to ensure good harvest, they never opposed against this discrimination; never thought about the gruesome nature of this particular lottery. Hence, the village lottery culminates in a violent murder each year.

In the first round of the lottery, the head of each family draws a small slip of paper from a black box since they have men-first system. All the men gather first, then the

womenfolk who are not authoritative. Peter Kosenko (1985:226) writes "The most powerful men who control the town, economically as well as politically, also happen to administer the lottery". Due to gender discrimination the small boy Jack draws for the family instead of his mother as the father is not alive. His mother is denied the chance of drawing the lottery because of being a woman. Women can draw lottery if the men are incapacitated and they do not have teenage or older sons. When the Watson boy draws for his mother several voices in the crowd said "Good fellow" and "Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it" (251). Here, grown-up boys are more powerful than their mothers. After marriage, "Daughters draw with their husbands' families" (252). This means they are the property of the husbands.

At the lottery Bill Hutchinson, a villager, gets the slip with a black spot, meaning that his family has been chosen. In the next round, each of his family members draws a slip, and Bill's wife Tessie gets the dotted one. To follow tradition all the villagers including children "moved in on her" (254) with stones. Mrs. Delacroix who gives the impression of being Tessie's friend "selected a stone so large she had to pick up with both hands" (254) and says to Mrs. Dunbar "Hurry up" (254).

Thus the women themselves show that they are too ignorant to step forward to stop injustice. Their hollow minds are one of the causes of their endless sufferings. Their view of reality has also been blind and is unknowingly walking towards the edge of a hill and wants to remain like this. Moreover, in this patriarchal society the male exploiters do not want their women to rise against the inequalities they face.

Jackson condemns the villagers with the wryest of ironic comments, so that we can see for ourselves the tragedy of a human being caught up in circumstances over which the victim Tessie has no control as it is the hardest thing in the world to maintain an individual dissident opinion, as a member of a group. When she arrives late to the lottery, admitting that she "Clean forgot what day it was" (250), she immediately stands out right from the other villagers' right from the start. She is late because her husband brings the children without informing her. But without lending support to her, some women take it lightly and have not stepped forward to argue that it is not fair.

Apart from showing gender disparity the story presents the weaknesses of women and one of the weakest points is their fear which they internalize of being excluded by society and there is no rebellion lurking within them. They are sacrificing happiness as well as family members without having deep shock at what they witness in those terrible society years after years. They are now morally deformed. Indeed, these women can easily accept the way things are because this is how they have always been and believe any change to the status quo will cause further disaster to their already

miserable lives. They are also unable to comprehend complex problems. As a result, not a single woman openly expresses disgust towards patriarchy. Only Tessie who has a rebellious spirit realizes that the old rules are not always right as they are sometimes against injustice.

So she questions the process of selecting the victim in the name of lottery and argues: "You didn't give him (her husband) time enough to take any paper he wanted . . . . It wasn't fair!" (252). Surprisingly, it shames her husband Bill and he humiliates her in public, "Shut up, Tessie" (254) as if she were a slave to her. By silencing her he wants to tell her that the lottery is fair and she should not complain about it. She creates opportunity for other women to question patriarchy but they do not want to join her spirit.

Tessie's husband does not show sympathy and does not feel for her as rebellion from women goes against societal norm. Despite her awareness of the consequences of her action, she has the sheer courage to face it. When she approaches the daunting task of unfairness, her husband does not defend her because he finds her protestation has been marginalized as a minority opinion.

Actually, in this village, the relation between a husband and a wife is like those of a master and a slave woman. The husbands do not treat their wives justly and their attempt to control in the home is not a sign of misogyny and subjugation of wife to her husband is customary in this place. They lack love, companionship and mutual assistance that characterize human pairing. Mr. Hutchinson's mindset is also conditioned to treat his wife as subordinate to him expecting female submission and meekness. No women echoes Tessie's idea of protesting and allow both men and women to manipulate them. They view men as the heads of their households, but not responsible for the protection of their wives. Men do not recognize women as separate individuals but attached wives to husbands. Hence, they find Mr. Hutchinson's behavior towards his wife acceptable and see women's rights to be of marginal importance.

Mrs. Adams tells Old Man Warner that "Some places have already quit lotteries" (252). He stops her telling them "pack of young fools" (252). This is one of the examples of men's treatment to women.

The other women arrive at the square calmly, chat with one another and then join their husbands. The social norm of wifely duty expects Tessie to do her domestic chores first and to behave like the other non protesting wives. So, she is stopped by the female villager Mrs. Delacroix who tells her to "Be a good sport" (252) and is

supported by Mrs. Graves who says to Tessie that all of them "took the same chance" (252). Tessie tries to carve herself a new identity in a socio-cultural set up where there is no sense of equality for women. Her message is clear, evil custom is not fun, when it causes man to kill its own kind. They should try to prevent the destruction of human beings. But "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not HE With reference to HER; she is the inessential as opposed to the essential. HE is the absolute - SHE is the other" (Beauvoir, 1983: 86). Thus, her life is a story of existence caught between pulls and pressures of the old and the past and hopes of the new, the present and the future. Furthermore, she also teaches the women of her society that small scale protestation and resistance cannot be successful without unity and ends in submission to patriarchy.

In this village the flaws of the women are not inborn. Instead they stem from lack of realization, courage, unity, fear of change and superstition. In reality, they have small understanding of the horror of gender inequality. Astonishingly, they hold the tradition of lottery by their unity but for breaking the wicked gender disparity are not united. Hence, they do not plead for the sufferer and blood sheds for nothing. But here nobody is punished for murdering innocent victim and they think there is no cure. They also do not worship or even acknowledge the superiority of forces but fear the power of patriarchy. Thus, they do not seek abolition of patriarchy. Tessie's situation is similar to Okonkwo and Obi of *Things Fall Apart* who "(. . .) but ultimately their resistance is defeated since they live in societies which do not support them" (Sharmin, 2013: 93).

Every society always undergoes transformative change. These changes often occurred in history, not only when a relatively primitive society has been invaded by the forces of 'civilization' but also when, for example, a country has changed its political system as in revolution or when, an agricultural economy has changed to one based on industrialization. But these voiceless women find refuge in domestic chores and become satisfied with their lives. They do not know that without rebellion injustice would be irremediable like "(. . .) the superpowers always are very successful to advocate their case and to label it as things done only with an altruistic aim in mind" (Jahan, 2011: 96).

The women also do not remind society that they are human beings. Rather, their feelings of helplessness are repressed and like machines they follow the societal norms unthinkingly. Since they lack insight cannot work in unison failing to remember what Nietzsche says: "The strongest and the highest Will to life does not find expression in miserable struggle for existence, but in a Will to war" (Stump, 1999: 374).

Women could play important roles in development process but they are stuck in the strings of patriarchal society. In "The Lottery", women fail to sense that groups of women are infinitely more dangerous than individuals. Individual responsibility will not be enough to speak out against atrocities as number has strength. They show their primitive instincts upon Tessie with enthusiasm, not remorse. Nothing shocks them, be it violence, or the brutal manners of their men. They cannot feel connected to her. Even Tessie's husband is not appalled at the senseless loss of his wife.

There is a high degree of unity among the women to know each other. They gossip, laugh together but cannot protest collectively. In the words of Divakaruni "(. . .) they are unable to think for themselves and fail to comprehend complex problems. Thus, they are silent and flaccid" (Divakaruni, 1995: 270). Critic Beer (1997:79) points out that women are seen " as a specifically female, rather than a human power". Mrs Dunbar, one of the participants, shows her hatred for tradition by choosing small stones. But small scale protestation and resistance cannot be successful for proper change. These kinds of small scale movement will end in complete surrender and submission to "riches will" as resistances have to face 'well organized power.' In fact, some evils can be removed single-handedly, some need collective stand. ' The father of modern India' Raja Rammohan Roy dared to abolish some age old religious and social evils like 'Sati System', 'Child Marriage' and 'Caste Rigidity.' He tirelessly criticized what he saw as the superstition of traditional Hinduism and reformed them with people's support. In real life also, we see a man tried to change the conditions of women but no woman dared to do so. When Rokeya started her awareness program for female education, women gave wholehearted support by joining her.

Here as the women cope-up with the exploitation after years of witnessing meaningless violence, they do so with Tessie's yelling as well. Actually, her screaming and the silence of the villagers is the contradiction between the progressiveness and the conservativeness, age-old custom and prejudices. Moreover, her sad ending in the loveless, hostile and unsympathetic surroundings cannot stir their stony hearts of even any women as they do not know their strength. They are inactive as far as resistance is concerned. "They are like the Chinese women who had bore the painful foot binding process, sacrificing their ability to move free" (Mandal, 2009 :74).

In contrast Tessie's resistance takes her to tragedy and death as it was weak due to the non-cooperation of her women who lack harmony, valor, effort, realization in terms of struggle and do not support her act of resistance for their compromising and adjusting nature which fail to evoke our sympathies. It is heart wrenching to see that they have unwavering support for cruelty but not for any innocent victim.

For lack of insight they also do not know which way to turn in regard; to what is right

or wrong. In the same way, the earlier generation could not spread the fire of resistance amidst them. That is why they suffer and their impassivity keeps the wicked tradition alive and will ruin the next generation as children learn through imitation.

Through Tessie's end we see the futility of a single protester still she is endowed with a much wider consciousness, a much larger sensitivity that responds to the atrocious lottery system as well as women exploitation. No woman in her society thinks like her and she will be faded away from the memory of womenfolk also. She refuses to be stoned but nobody cares as gender issue is not peripheral concern to both male and female of this village. Even Tessie's husband Mr. Hutchinson is no exception.

When she is selected for being stoned by the lottery we see there is "( . . . ) a stir in the crowd " (254) but it is useless as they turn themselves away from her witnessing the cold -blooded murder. Remorselessly someone gives Tessie's small son Davy Hutchinson "a few pebbles" (254) in the name of preserving tradition for stoning his mother who is not guilty of anything. So, she continues to scream about the unfairness of the horrific ritual up until her stoning.

Tessie is only a spark but this spark is insufficient to light millions of lamps as to ablaze gender inequality collected strength is required. At the end Jackson has not promised us a new beginning as senseless violence and mindless social evil affect generations of women who are also not going to embark on a new life based on the ability to transform all adverse conditions of society into positive energy since till the last they remain parts of the society of exploiters. Consequently, the story ends on a negative note indicating that violence against women and girls will continue unabated in every continent, country and culture since women do not see them as victims. Thus, Jackson tells a story of weak women and patriarchal authoritarianism.

**Notes:** All quotations are from Kennedy, X.J. (1995), *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, New York: Harper Collins College Publishers.

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