

Reconstructing Women and the Portrayal of Modern Motherhood in Gayle Forman's *Leave Me*

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Abstract

Gayle Forman's novel *Leave me* probes into the character of Maribeth Klein, a married woman who tries to find out the meaning of her life. She lives her life just like all other woman sacrificing her whole life for the welfare of her husband and children. She is not worried about own her own self until she faces a heart attack. Because of the pressure of her work and the responsibilities of her family, she even couldn't realize that she had a heart attack. After that incident she starts questioning whether she has to follow all the rigid rules expected by the society as a mother and wife from her. The novel tries to explore the traditional portrayals of motherhood, where women are expected to fulfill their roles without any selfish motive. Forman tries to reflect the emotional sufferings of a mother when she decides to leave her family, giving priority to her own health. The novel *Leave Me* presents a modern perspective of women, who try to balance between their family and their own personal self. Women in today's world do understand the meaning of their own life. The novel provokes the readers to revision the life of women in the background of present society.

Keywords: Tradition, Autonomy, Identity, Aspiration

Introduction

In the beginning of the story, readers could see Maribeth Klein, a 44-year-old woman as a typical mother and wife as expected by the society. She does her duties properly to satisfy the needs of her children and husband. Though she is a working woman, she never disturbs her husband in caring the twin children who are very young. She manages everything on her own whether it be picking up her children from the school or to pay the bills of her house. When she faces a heart attack because of all these overpowering responsibilities, she is not able to understand her physical problem in the right sense. Even when she visits the doctor to diagnose her physical problem, she is much worried about picking up her children from the school. She makes request with her neighbour to pick her children up. Thus, she is always connected with her children, for whose future she is ready to take any risk.

Maribeth, after experiencing heart attack, is forced to face her mental and physical problems all alone. This is where her internal journey of self-analyzation starts. She undergoes an urgent surgery and after getting discharged from the hospital, she is able to tackle the situation at home which lies ahead remembering her of her daily responsibilities.

Her husband who takes care of her for a short duration of time, leaves her after she seems to become normal. Like all women, she wanted to hide her pain and render her daily duties to the family members. But this made them think that she is quite normal in her physical health. Her mother, who took care of her children also starts to neglect Maribeth's health and concerns

about her own happiness by having a conversation with her friends over phone. When Maribeth sees this, she starts questioning herself whether she has to prioritize her children and family or her health.

This question seems to be the struggle of modern woman in the present society. The traditional portrayal of motherhood is questioned and the novel focuses upon the importance of self-realization of woman in terms of her own identity and self-reconstruction which is an inevitable one. The society never gives importance to the ambitions or personal desires of a woman, it rather expects her to devote herself completely to the family without any condition.

The Burden of Expectations: Traditional vs. Modern Motherhood

In the past, motherhood has been celebrated as the core or root of the family, without whom the unit called family would not exist. This image of woman created by the culture and literature put woman in chains and she was very much afraid to break the image. She sacrificed her desires and lived for the welfare of the family. In *Leave Me*, Forman presents Maribeth as traditional woman having all the qualities of motherhood which is expected of her by the society. But the hard times, she experienced within her family and in her job made her think about her own life in the world.

Till her heart attack, she didn't realize that she needs a personal life outside her familial bonds. Her husband left her who has just now returned from the hospital and he has returned to his job, prioritizing his job. Even he finds no time to accompany his wife to the hospital for check-up. Her mother who took care of her, neglects her thinking she has become well to take care of herself. She starts talking over phone with her friends for long hours, giving importance to her happiness. Thus, everybody around her seems to be persons who care about their life. Until this time, she never thought about thinking her life in terms of self-development.

Maribeth's Search for Autonomy

The main theme in the novel, *Leave Me* is the protagonist's search for autonomy. After realizing the importance of one's own life, Maribeth decides to leave her family. She is not able to decide the place of her settlement. However, she finds a secluded area where no one knows her. This seclusion was necessary for Maribeth to get improved physically and mentally. But society can never approve this decision of Maribeth, which always consider that a woman's place is at home with her husband and children.

Maribeth is not actually going away from her family. In fact, she uses this time to become stronger physically and mentally. Whenever she is reminded of her children, she immediately sits and writes a letter to them which she never posts. Though she is living away from her family, through the unposted letters she tries to get connected with her family. She always carries a question in her mind that what would be the reaction of her family if she goes back to them. While leading a secluded life, she understands the importance of a mother for the wellness of her own children and family. She also rejects the idea of leaving her children totally. In her mind, she wanted to live with her children and at the same time she did not want to make them sad by all her illness and pain. She took time to become physically well with the help of a doctor who lives in that new area. With his friendship, Maribeth starts to perceive life in a totally different manner. He is the one who motivates her to carry out all her desires which she has been neglecting all her life for the sake of her family.

In the new place also, she never wanted to disclose her identity in the beginning because of the fear of society's criticisms. Later on she realizes that her own fear is not having any ground at all. She mails a letter to her husband and often checks for reply without the knowledge of the friend who has allowed her to use their system at their home.

Reconstructing Identity Beyond Motherhood

Forman's portrayal of Maribeth is symbolic of all the woman in the society who face the same kind of dilemma between the self and the family expectations. Through this novel it seems that the author proclaims to the world about the importance of reconstructing one's own self from the clutches of family and society. In this novel, Maribeth turns to a person who search her own identity in the society and also wishes to be independent from the bonds of the society.

The cabin where Maribeth settles, provides her ample time to think about her own personal development and care. Till this time, she didn't care for her own needs and desires. When she sees the new world outside her family, she starts understanding that there is no mistake in living for one's own desires. Day by day, she comes out of her guilty feeling of leaving her children and husband. It is now she understands that to take care of the family in a proper manner, it is also necessary that one should live with good mental and physical health.

This theme of reconstructing one's identity is relevant in the context of modern motherhood, where women are often expected to support the family in all the ways possibly financially as well as physically. Forman through the life of Maribeth, tries to suggest that woman must know the value of their own self first, in order to become a good mother.

The Complexity of Motherhood: Love, Guilt, and Sacrifice

The story *Leave Me* deals with the question of unconditional love and sacrifice. Maribeth asks herself the question whether her decision of leaving her family is right. She knows very well that her presence in the family is more important as she has twin children who are very young and are not able to understand the reason why their mother left them. The feeling of guilt which she had, made her apologize to her children through mails in which she expressed the reason why she left them. She also doubts that whether her husband would have married another woman to bring up the children whom she left behind. Whenever she opens the mail, she eagerly waits to see the reply from her husband.

Forman presents Maribeth as a woman who never wanted to be free totally from her family. Her decision of living alone is explained as a way of energizing her own body and mind. She took the decision of leaving the family as a method of clearing her mind from all negative thoughts about her husband and mother. She knows very well that if the thought continues, she would never have any attachment in the family and it may make her to lead a life without love, care and interest. She would only live her life as a duty and responsibility. She wanted to avoid this thought and come back with full energy and understanding, so that she can be a good mother as always.

The novel also highlights the way in which Maribeth develops personally by taking some decisions on her own when she was all alone. The secluded life also makes her a confident and bold woman who can tackle any difficult situation with patience. The novel opens up a new avenue of women who crosses the traditional limitations of a woman and try to evolve as one who springs up as a role model of modern motherhood. The return of Maribeth to her own family can be described best by the words of Satbir Kaur as,

People return to their homes, families and husbands and wives but the return is always marked by a change of perspective. Through a process of introspection and self-analysis, the women protagonists find solution in the end. The end shows them aware of family and marriage at the same time accepting their need to discover their 'self'. (Kaur 46)

Conclusion

Forman in her novel *Leave Me* offers a powerful portrayal of modern motherhood against the views of traditional ones. Earlier women did all the household works as it was the only responsibility for her to do for the family. But in the modern world, women have started supporting their family financially also by doing some job. In such a crucial situation woman can still not be expected to take care of the family all alone. But

still the society demands her to fulfil her responsibilities both at home and job perfectly. This expectation of the society puts heavy pressure on woman that she feels that she is left uncared. Forman, through the character of Maribeth, presents the dilemma of modern woman who is facing the heavy stress laid upon her both by their family and society.

The novel finally makes it clear that in the modern world, it is not possible for a woman to be the classical model for motherhood. She must emerge as a modern woman, who is able to identify her needs and necessities to do her duties in a perfect manner. As there is welcoming change in the field of Science and technology, the change of view regarding the concept of motherhood should also be encouraged. Woman must also realize and prioritize things in their life, without which they can't find happiness on their own as well as they can't make others happy who love them and whom they love.

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