

## Gender role reversal in Dostoevsky's "The Meek One"

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### **Abstract:**

This research investigates the shifting of gender roles in Fyodor Dostoevsky's short story *The Meek One*, focusing on how these shifts contribute to the ultimate tragedy of the characters. Traditional gender expectations typically assign authority, dominance, and emotional restraint to men, while associating passivity, submissiveness, and emotional expression with women. However, this study explores how Dostoevsky reverses these roles, portraying the male protagonist as emotionally unstable, insecure, and obsessively controlling, while the female character, though silent and meek in appearance, exhibits emotional resilience, psychological strength, and moral superiority. The research draws upon existing literary and gender studies, incorporating a multidisciplinary approach to better understand how literary narratives reflect and challenge established gender norms. A significant part of the theoretical framework is informed by Copenhaver's dissertation, which provides valuable insights into the gender dynamics present in 19th-century Russian literature. Through close textual analysis, this study reveals that the inversion of gender roles destabilizes the relationship between the characters, creating a power imbalance that intensifies emotional alienation and leads to the eventual demise of the female character. Thus, the tragedy in *The Meek One* is not merely personal but rooted in a broader conflict of reversed roles and societal expectations. By examining this complex interaction, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender in literature and bridges the gap between literary criticism and gender theory.

**Keywords:** Gender roles, role reversal, Dostoevsky, *The Meek One*, gender studies, literary analysis, tragedy.

### **Introduction:**

Usually we perceive the world in binaries; we rely on one thing to define the other. In structuralism "**binary oppositions**" is a pivotal concept which asserts that the whole world, its culture, language and almost everything is based on the system of binaries. According to Ferdinand De Saussure, every entity gains its meaning because of its opposite entity, for instance 'cold' derives its meaning from 'hot'. Similarly, humans of earth are bifurcated into Male and Female. In terms of binaries both the male and female have separate set of roles and tasks which may vary from culture to culture, but the biological differences demarcate male from female on the basis that a person is categorized as a male because the actions, behaviours, and characteristics he possesses are not that of a female, certainly both the male and female have their *own* set of tasks in everyday lives which may vary from culture to culture and those set of tasks are called roles and when those roles are specified to a gender they are called "Gender Roles". According to World Health Organization (WHO),

*"Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls*

*and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time."*

As far as human behaviour is concerned it is articulated by the gender an individual possesses, although there may be some exceptions regarding a few cultures, but in most of the cases it is the same. For instance, one can observe in children that male is inclined towards toys, such as, cars, guns, working tools etc. On the other hand, female children tend to buy dolls, miniature cutlery, makeup etc. Though, these attitudes in the both male and female are inculcated by the society yet one cannot deny that they impact the behaviour according to the gender one possesses. A study suggests that, basic physiological and genetic features can induce behavioural differences among male and female based on the sex along with the environmental factors. (Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Understanding the Biology of Sex et al., 2001). As **H.J. Fawcner, in Encyclopedia of Body Image and Human Appearance, 2012 says,**

*"Gender roles can be conceptualized as behavioral expectations based on biological sex. Traditionally, for men to be masculine, they are expected to display attributes such as strength, power, and competitiveness, and less openly display emotion and affection (especially toward other men)."*

A common notion which prevails among the world is that the women are emotional, caring and domestic caretakers, conversely men are deemed to be practical, emotionless, strong, and strict. In most of the societies around the world, women are thought to be as the "caregivers" and men are thought to be as the "breadwinners" of the family. This notion puts men and women in their respective domains, where each of them has specific tasks.

The dilemma begins in today's times when the gender is not only being neutralized, rather the gender roles are being reversed. Although the gender roles are shifting but the societal stereotypes, notions and expectations towards the gender remain the same. Thus, a contrast between society and individual occurs, which leads to the gender ambiguity among the individuals, thus resulting in tragedies of individuals especially in marital lives. Dostoevsky's work "The Meek One" categorically in a way carries this notion that shifting of gender roles among male and female can lead to a tragedy.

Fyodor Dostoevsky is one of the greatest Russian writers. Dostoevsky is known for his advocacy of free-will, religious existentialism and exploration of human psychology on an individual level. Dostoevsky's work rejected nihilistic notions, despair, and an attempt is made by him to give the solution to atheism. Some critics regard Dostoevsky as a psychologist, philosopher and a great author of fiction. Dostoevsky's work "The Meek One" also known as "The Gentle Spirit" accounts the doomed marriage owing to the nature of an overly enigmatic man, with his submissive and weak wife, who was a meek character in the start of the plot and protagonist's life. The story is narrated by a first-person narrator, who the protagonist himself is. He gives the posthumous account of his life with his dead wife and the causes of this tragedy.

Although in the story we find glimpses of the cause of this tragedy, one very important underlying cause is ignored by the critics, which is the interchange of gender roles among the husband and wife. The husband acts in the way his wife is expected to behave, and correspondingly is the action of the wife in the story. This research intends to find: Why does

this tragedy occur? Is gender role shifting responsible for this tragedy? What are the interchanged gender roles? How is this shift portrayed by the writer? Is this tragic account a foreshadowing for the modern world, where reversal of gender roles is taking place?

The theoretical framework used in this research is borrowed from a dissertation, in which the researcher explored gender differences and gender roles in the selection of the American modern and postmodern plays. In the dissertation, the researcher has contrived a theoretical framework from various works on gender stereotypes and gender roles in the contemporary world. After assimilating the works to extract gender roles for males and females, a division was formed where the males were the breadwinners/aggressive/independent. On the other hand, females were passive/dependant/domestic caretakers. The researcher, in that particular dissertation, has annotated some behavioural gender roles associated with either of the two genders, and I am going to take some of those behavioural gender roles to study the reversal of gender for the analysis of the data.

## Literature Review:

Gender studies is an interdisciplinary field, that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in North America, it emerged as an offshoot of feminism and impacted by post-structuralism and deconstruction(Strazzeri, 2024). Strazzeri explains that humans are divided into male and female on the basis of their biological sex, but sex is rather a social construct and varies from culture to culture (2024). A boundary demarcates between male and female and in a society one has to prove their gender with their behaviours actions and social roles and this leads to development of the gender roles.

Gender roles are the socially associated behaviours and traits specified with a certain gender. Social role theory was formulated by Eagly in the 1980s, which defined social roles as socially associated traits attributed to gender. Gender roles are the stereotypes, and they vary from culture to culture, new research in the matter of gender roles and gender stereotypes have uncovered the causes of this gender stereotyping, somewhere its communion with the society, and somewhere it is agency(Eagly & Sczesny, 2019). As noted by Eagly, gender roles are favourable for the leaders and societies where leadership is pivotal entity, they attribute agency, manhood, leadership with male and thus women are ruled out of the race of becoming a leader, thus women are considered for less “agentic” and they are in quest to prove their leadership qualities. **“In a world in which gender is always in flux, the future of gender relations is uncertain.....perceived women to increase in *agentic* traits over time but remain more *communal* than men. Such beliefs, derived from the abstract belief that gender equality is increasing, may not reflect *actual* changes in *stereotype* content over time”** (Eagly & Sczesny, 2019).(My italics) Eagly and Sczesny alluded from other researches in their research about the past, present and future of the gender role and gender stereotype theory.

A substantial research in the field of gender psychology in contemporary times is “Gender Schema Theory” by S. L. Bem. This theory asserts on gender’s induction in children at early stages of life due to socio-cultural environment in which a kid is born. The kid tries to adjust according to the dictations of society and parents. This is referred to as “sex typing” by Bem. Gender Schema theory proposes that gender differences are driven by a readiness on the part of the kid that helps him to adapt to either of the gender discriminations of maleness and femaleness. Gender schema theory, like “learning theory” suggests that sex typing is a learned process, thus it is inevitable and modifiable.

(Copenhaver, B. B. 2002) also conducted research in perspective of portrayal of gender in American modern and post-modern plays. Copenhaver, made a selection of American modern and post-modern plays. He made a framework derived from various sources, cited in the dissertation, in which he derived out four categories on the basis of gender and stereotypes associated with the genders. Then a qualitative analysis was conducted to highlight every selected fulcrum, at the end of the research he found that except in one play, every other play had a typical portrayal of gender and the gender roles.

(Nogas, 2002), conducted a research to study the portrayal of women in Dostoevsky's novels. Especially the two females of his fiction, Lisa and Sonya, who are prostitutes in two different novels, are not the centre of the novel rather they seem to be memorable, side characters only there to facilitate the male protagonists. Another female character Nastasya Filippovna appears as an independent and own her own lady independent of the males, Nogas says,

"However, since even his most autonomous and successful female character chooses only destruction and ultimately is destroyed by her own choice, Dostoevsky fails to offer a valid example of how a woman can exist as her own person independent of male characters in a normal fashion without causing chaos and ruining her life and that of others."

Although, various researches have been conducted in the context of gender differences, portrayal of gender in literature and various theorists in the gender studies have theorised theories about gender, gender roles and stereotypes, gender differences, shifting of gender roles, but there is no existing literature regarding the shifting of gender roles, in literature, especially in Fyodor Dostoevsky's writings and particular in the short story, "The Meek One". Therefore, this research shall deal with the shifting of gender roles in "The Meek One" by Dostoevsky.

## **Study Objectives:**

- To study the reversal of gender roles in the story.
- To study the consequences of the reversal of gender roles, in order to find the root cause of the tragedy in the story.
- To elucidate the potential consequences of shifting of gender roles on individual lives.
- To study the havocs caused by shifting of gender roles in a matrimonial discourse.

By addressing these objective, I will try to find the shifting of traditional gender roles and the potential consequences it can cause, especially in the matrimonial discourse.

## **Theoretical Framework:**

The researcher has borrowed the framework from the dissertation, (Copenhaver, B. B. 2002). In order to study the shifting of gender roles. But before explaining the framework, a few things should be taken into account. Firstly, there is no specific definition of gender roles, rather gender roles are the stereotypes which are associated with the genders, and they vary across the cultures therefore it is a difficult task to associate a characteristic with a particular gender. Secondly, the demarcation of gender roles may be faulty and might not fit into the context of some cultures. To cope with this problem, it has been decided by the researcher that the gender stereotypes and associated gender roles can be taken as the variables in order to study the shifting of gender roles in the story. For that purpose, this particular dissertation is chosen.

In the dissertation, the researcher has studied the portrayal of gender and the gender stereotypes in a selection of the American modern and postmodern plays. The researcher

required to divide the character roles into the basic binary of masculine and feminine characteristics at first. ***“In order to describe the gender roles of the characters in the plays, an overall division of masculine and feminine characteristics was needed.”*** (Copenhaver, B. B. 2002). The researcher then formed an overarching division of males as the breadwinners and females as the caregivers. These broader divisions were extracted from a plethora of books and research articles by the researcher in order to form a practical framework.

For their particular thesis the *Copenhaver* had created four categories into which the male and female characteristics fall; ***“The four categories are Behavior Characteristics, Communication Patterns, Source of Power, and Physical Appearance.”*** (Copenhaver, B. B. 2002). Since current research is focused upon the behavioural patterns and characteristics which are associated with male and female. Therefore, I will explain this role propounded by (writer) taking under consideration the category of behaviour characteristics.

Behavioural characteristics are the dealings of male and female with each other and their interaction with the world at large. Behaviour is motivated by various factors, but in our case we are taking gender as the driving force for the behaviour of individuals. Although, in the thesis, there are various behavioural characteristics, but I would only take into account a few of them as the fulcrum, for my research. The behavioural characteristics taken into account as spectrum for this research are:

**Masculine:**

- A. Non-emotional
- B. Less intuitive about other's feelings
- C. Rough

**Feminine:**

- A. Emotional
- B. Intuitive about others' feelings
- C. Gentle

**General Vocabulary:**

- A. Emotion
- B. Intuition
- C. Encounter

These behavioural characteristics would guide the research process in the study. These roles are taken as a cane for the research process and the whole research process shall not only be based on these parameters, rather these gender roles are taken into account for the definition of gender stereotypes. Traditional gender roles are present in both male and female characters and individuals. In the end of the research it shall be concluded whether there is actually a shift or negation of these gender stereotypes in the characters of the play and whether the shifting of the character traits are responsible for the tragedy. Foremost, the previously prevailing state of these gender roles shall be explained in the Data Analysis and then, their shift shall be taken into the account and explained.

Along with these characteristics, this research would take into account the portrayal of gender and the shifting of gender roles in the characters of the story as portrayed by Dostoevsky and for that purpose qualitative textual analysis technique shall be used.

**Data Analysis:**

The short-story “The Meek One” is considered as one of the celebrated works of Fyodor Dostoevsky. A first-person narrator narrates the story. He narrates the story of his



meeting and marriage with his wife, who is now dead, and he is giving account of his life with her in this doomed marriage while sitting on her funeral. The story is in Dostoevsky's typical style of narration, as one finds in "Notes From Underground". The narrator tells the circumstances of his marriage with his wife and how this marriage came to an end, as his wife ultimately commits suicide because she was dying daily in a loveless marriage. Things were coming back to normalization, but ultimately we find a shift in the attitudes of the characters towards one another, and that is a reason contributing to the causes of this tragedy.

## A. Emotion:

The earlier marriage life of the characters in the novel if taken into account reveals that the male character approaches the lady first and sends a marriage proposal to her. As far as their emotional life is concerned, it is found that it was very much according to the stereotypical roles of genders. Where the lady is more affectionate and courteous towards her husband whereas, the husband does not show much of his emotions. Although, he was doing this on purpose, but this is what is supposed to be the appropriate action according to the selected fulcrum for this research. The lady used to greet the husband with very much energy and love, and she also told him about the stories of her past life. But the husband was always silent towards her. Rather, he was doing this to hurt her, although that is a justified and natural way to act according to the fulcrum of emotion in this research, which is that the male shows fewer emotions or no emotions, conversely female shows a bunch of emotions; **"She rushed to meet me with love, greeted me with rapture....told me in her chatter...all about her childhood and girlhood, her old home, her father and mother."**(Dostoevsky, 2024). These lines indicate that the character of the wife is behaving in a way a female is expected to behave, where she is showing emotions and being open about her feelings. On the other hand, the attitude of the husband is traditional as well, although it is more of a sadist. **"But I poured cold water upon all that at once; that was my idea. I met her enthusiasm with silence, friendly silence"** (Dostoevsky, 2024). There are several other instances where the characters are behaving in the peculiar way, which is the way taken as a fulcrum in this research.

When there is a shift in this swivel of emotions, there seems an induction of artificiality in the characters of the story. As the account of narrator about the time he spends with his wife after her disease, shows that there is not only a shift in the behaviours of the characters, conversely there is a reversal in the gender attitudes of the characters. As one finds that the male is more emotional and expressive whereas the female is silent as it was in start and in the start of the plot they were behaving in an expected and a traditional manner, but that manner sees a shift and both the characters start behaving in a contrary way. **"I wept, said something, but could not speak....she was horribly ashamed at my kissing her feet and she drew them back. But I kissed the pace on the floor where her foot had rested"**(Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 58). Here, in these lines, the husband is behaving in a manner opposite to the manner in which he was behaving earlier. Now he is full of emotions and is confessing things to his wife; **"I made a mistake: I suddenly made her my friend. I was in too great a hurry, but a confession was necessary, inevitable..."**(Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 61). What he confesses is that; **"I told her straight... I had been doing nothing but brood over the certainty of her love."**(Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 62). He is showing emotions and is confessing, against the stereotypical way. **"I told her that I had wept"** (Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 63). The character behaves in a way he is not expected to behave, as he was not this type of character in the start of their marriage.

Likely, the wife is doing the same, she is not showing any emotions rather she only

says to the husband that she had thought that he would abandon her like that. She was resistant when the husband was showing emotions and confessing to her, **"She gently grasped my hand and urged me to stop, saying, 'You're overthinking this... you're only upsetting yourself.'"** (Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 62). Thus, one finds that until the end she confesses nothing and doesn't even give any hint at the emotional side of hers, rather she behaves in a cold manner.

## B. Intuition:

As the story is narrated by the male, therefore, it is not possible to analyse the intuition of the female for the feelings of the husband. On contrary, one can analyse that the character of the husband, is very much intuited about the feelings of the wife, and he always surmises what the other person is thinking and based on those assumptions, he used to guide his actions. There are several instances in the story where we find that the character of husband is trying to guess what is in the mind of the other person and without even verifying it, he considers it a fact. **"At the time, I truly believed she loved me. Back then, she would often embrace me with deep emotion. She did love—or rather, she had a strong desire to feel love."** (Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 30). It was his estimation, and on the basis of these assumptions he was trying to live with his wife. He used to look at the face of his wife and guessed about what she was feeling and thinking about him. As in the forementioned lines from the text, we find that he is guessing about the feelings of love of his wife.

On, other instances in the story, the character of the husband is seemed to be a character stricken by superiority complex. Whatever assumptions he makes, he thinks are the factual assumptions, and reality is like that. We find glimpses where the narrator was behaving in a reverse manner in the respect of gender roles. As, **"It was my pride—I wanted her to discover the truth on her own, without any guidance from me and certainly not through the gossip of common folk."** (Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 25). Here we find that the character of his wife is not intuited about the feelings of her husband, rather she behaves in an opposite manner and believes in the stories of others and on the basis of those stories she also questions the bravery of her husband. That was a point from where a conflict was aroused among them, and they started to distance them from each other after the episode of posing pistol on the temple of her sleeping husband.

Another important indication about the character of the husband is that he wanted to be an enigmatic personality so that his wife should intrigue about her feelings and trying to know what type of person he actually is. Another female quality is here, although, it cannot be generalised but still it can be taken into account in the section of intrigue that, usually it is women who are said to be the enigmatic personalities but here there is a reversal, **"I was—an enigma. And being an enigma was what I made a point of most of all! Why, it was just for the sake of being an enigma"** (Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 24).

His quality of surmising doesn't go away until he confesses his feelings at last, and that causes disaster. Earlier than that scenario, when he encounters his wife after the episode of gun encounter, he says, **"So she still doubts and is asking herself: does he know or doesn't he know; did he see or didn't he?"** (Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 44). So one finds that he is always intriguing about the feelings of his wife and rather than speaking to her and asking, he only surmises and believes it to be true and factual.

## C. Encounter:

After the episode of the gun encounter between the both characters, there is a stern change in the characters and their behaviours, but if we look at the starting days of the marriage, there was a shift in the behaviours of the both characters. When the husband

encountered the enthusiasm of lady with silence, there was a shift in the behaviour of the lady, she was a gentle character as according to the fulcrum for our study, that female are gentle and male are rough, now these roles had been shifted forever, **“Yes, that gentle creature was becoming more and more defiant.” (Dostoevsky, 2024, p. 29).** So, here we find that there is a shift in the character of the female, as earlier she behaved in quite a gentle manner and there was a transposition of traits in her manner of encounter. She was becoming more and more defiant as the story indicates and rather there was a shift in her manner of interaction with the husband although, the husband was behaving in the same manner, but his behaviour would also take a turn. He would become gentle, and the lady will behave indifferently with him

Later in the part II of the novel, we find that earlier he behaves in an odd manner, but then he sits for whole nights along the bedside of his wife to nurse her and takes a lot of care of her. Ultimately, he commits and confesses about his future plans with her and his feelings respectively. Therefore, we can safely say that there had been a shift in the behaviour of the both characters. Which

## **Conclusion:**

This research sought to ascertain the shifting of the conventional gender roles in the short story, *The Meek One* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, by formulating a hybrid framework extracted from a dissertation (Copanhaver, 2002). Three traditional gender roles were selected for this research extracted from the dissertation. This paper establishes that all the variables of gender roles undergo the process of alteration. Shifting of those gender roles lead to a catastrophic conclusion, when the wife of the narrator commits suicide in the text.

As per the findings of this study, it is due to the shifting of gender roles, that in the story, the husband and wife lead a painful and disastrous life, that due to the reversal of traditional roles, the matrimonial relationships are being influenced and in several cases coming to either a tragic end or resulting in the dissolution of the marriage. Moreover, it is also found that if the gender roles are not shifted and both male and female confine to their own domain they may avoid the tragedy found in the text. The reason for this type of conclusion is given because of the static and immutable nature of the society which provokes the development of the gender roles and stereotypes. Thus, if a mechanism doesn't undergo change, the shift of a component would be disastrous.

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