

# History of Gender Relations in American Society

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## **History of Gender Relations in the American Society**

Završni rad

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## Abstract

This paper analyses and provides a historical overview of gender relations in American society from the creation of the United States to the present. Gender relations were economically and socially conditioned and influenced by major events, such as the Industrial Revolution, World War II, and major women's movements – the Women's Suffrage and Women's Liberation Movement. During and after the Industrial Revolution, for many men the work place moved from home to the urban centres, thus separating the public from the private sphere. Subsequently, the roles of husbands and wives, who in Pre-Industrial society worked together and had equal roles in their household, became more separate and unequal than ever; men became the sole breadwinners, and women were bound to the house, fulfilling the role of mother and housewife. Furthermore, the American society made an immense step towards gender equality under the influence of the Women's Suffrage movement. However, changes achieved through women's suffrage only concerned women's political rights and had a limited impact on gender relations at home and work. It was World War II and the 1960s Women's Liberation Movement that brought about a profound shift in gender relations and became major catalysts for women's acceptance into labour force. Nevertheless, gender inequality and the division of labour into separate spheres, that furthers the male role of the breadwinner and the female role of mother and housewife, still exists in present-day American society, as is confirmed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's essay "We Should All Be Feminist" (2014) and John Cheever's postmodern short stories "The Fourth Alarm" (1978) and "The Enormous Radio" (1978).

*Keywords:* Gender Relations, American Society, Gender Roles, Equality, Marriage, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, John Cheever.

## Introduction

The term gender may refer to multiple things. It can denote biological features that characterize us as human beings, separating male from female. It may also be used to describe the concept upon which we differentiate between men and women with respect to masculine and feminine features, including features to our personality, and even expectations to our behaviour. These expectations to our behaviour are socially conditioned and create certain gender-bound roles to be fulfilled by men and women. Since gender relations are a broad topic, the purpose of this paper is to examine gender relations in the American society and give a historical overview of their evolution since the Declaration of Independence to present-day America, paying special attention to gender relations in the American family and the American labour force. The paper separates the evolution of American gender relations into logical units, first by centuries, and then based on major events of great significance, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Industrial Revolution, the Woman's Suffrage movement, World War II, and the Women's Liberation Movement.

The first chapter traces the history of unequal gender relations to the very creation of the United States of America and the main premises of the Declaration of Independence. The second chapter focuses on gender relations in nineteenth-century American society through a separate analysis of pre-industrial and industrial American society and pays special attention to the first feminist movements. The third chapter discusses gender relations in twentieth-century America, taking into consideration major events such as the Woman's Suffrage Movement, World War II, and the Women's Liberation Movement. It starts with the assumption that the changing role of women in society caused confusion among men concerning their own social status and role, and supports it with examples from literary and non-literary texts. The fourth chapter analyses the influence of the institution of marriage on gender relations and explains and contextualizes the concept of the four stages of marriage. Finally, chapter five discusses gender relations in postmodern American society, focusing on the roles of the male breadwinner and female mother and housewife. Along with John Cheever's postmodern short stories "The Fourth Alarm" (1978) and "The Enormous Radio" (1978), it also discusses the essay "We Should All Be Feminists" by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in order to provide a female feminist perspective on the topic of gender inequality in present-day American Society.

## 1. The Declaration of Independence: Intentionally Unequal Gender Relations?

After the discovery of “the New World” in the fifteenth century, European colonists set out for America in order to establish new settlements. Three centuries later, in the course of the eighteenth century, North American soil was predominantly divided into British, French, and Spanish colonies, the East coast dominated by British colonies under the sovereignty of the British crown (Runtić, "Pre-National Literature"). During that time, the British crown passed uncountable laws and acts that regulated life in the thirteen colonies. The imposed laws concerning taxes that had to be paid to the British crown were the main reason for numerous riots and protests, such as the Boston Tea Party.

Consequently, in 1776, Britain’s imperial policies towards its American colonies backfired and united the colonies against its rule. A joint action against Britain was held in Philadelphia at the Second Continental Congress. Thomas Jefferson prepared the historic document declaring the colonies' independence from the British Empire, thus forming a new nation – The United States of America (Runtić, "American War of Independence"). The Declaration of Independence was adopted on July 4, 1776. At the beginning of the document, Jefferson writes:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness – That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. (U.S. Constit., art./amend. xix)

Whether by “all Men” Jefferson meant “human kind,” “people,” “men and women,” or really just “men” is questionable. On the one hand, Jefferson and his colleagues yearned for a new nation and were primarily concerned with forming it, determined that this new nation had to be built upon people’s “unalienable rights” to “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” and upon equality. Considering this fact, it is possible that “all Men” was intended to be understood as “all people” living in this new nation. On the other hand, it is evident, that not “all people” had the

same rights after the United States was formed. Native Americans, African Americans, and women; were obviously deprived of equal rights to those enjoyed by Caucasian men. Therefore, it is imaginable that the ambiguity of the “all Men” phrase was not necessarily unintentional, but potentially used on purpose. Furthermore, although most people, in respect to the context of the times, interpreted the phrase as a euphemism for humanity, some critics argue that Jefferson and the other authors of the Declaration meant to exclude women and children (“All Men are Created Equal”).

Either way, the truth is that not all “men” enjoyed the same rights, and that the United States did and still do experience great social divisions of race, class, and sex. To this day, there have been uncountable efforts and movements that have demanded equal rights for all American citizens. Over the next three centuries, the United States will experience a lot of changes concerning gender relations provoked by people who believe in equality of the sexes, but also in the equality of all human beings, regardless of their race, sex, or social status, and many of these people will use the former interpretation of the Declaration of Independence as an argument for their demands.

## 2. Gender Relations in Nineteenth-Century American Society

Although divisions and inequity concerning race, class, and sex were present long before the creation of the United States, gender divisions seem to have intensified even more after the country was established, especially during the nineteenth century and the period of industrialization. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, “to industrialize” means “to build and operate factories and businesses in a city, region, country,” or “to industrialize an agricultural region.” The United States, being a predominantly agricultural land before its industrialization, was struck by the Industrial Revolution much harder than Europe. This also affected gender relations within the American family. Thereupon, gender relations in nineteenth-century American society can roughly be divided into two stages – the pre-industrial and the industrial era.

### 2.1. Gender Relations in the American Family in Pre-industrial Society

While during the Civil War most of the population of the US lived on farms, in small towns and villages, by the end of the nineteenth century two thirds of its rural population had moved to urban areas (Runtić, "Realism and Naturalism"). People no longer produced things manually and at home, but utilized heavy machinery in factories in big cities ensuring mass production. This had a great impact on the traditional pre-industrial American family and the roles of husband, wife, and even children.

Tamara K. Hareven writes that in pre-industrial society, family and work were integrated, meaning that most of the work took place in the household, and that all members of the family worked together and cared for each other, including all relatives living under the same roof, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. There was no need for men to leave their home for work, and women invested far less time in motherhood than their modern successors, since both men and women fulfilled the roles of parenting, as well as those of the worker, and even children were considered “productive members of the family” (Hareven 244).

According to Hareven, work and household duties were delegated amongst all members of a family (Hareven 244), which means that in the pre-industrial society, there was no clear separation of work and family, and consequently, no separation of gender roles. All members of the family worked together to benefit their family and society, and were all considered of equal importance: “Housework was inseparable from domestic industries or agricultural work, and it



was valued, therefore, as an economic asset . . . [and] motherhood, too, was valued for its economic contribution, not only for its nurturing tasks” (Hareven 244).

This equality, especially the equality of gender roles within a family and society, was to change with the beginning of the industrialization and the separation of home and work.

## 2.2. Gender Relations in the American Family in Industrial Society

In pre-industrial society, family and work were integrated, and all family members fulfilled roles of equal importance. This social order drastically changed with the Industrial Revolution, especially when it comes to equality of gender roles within the American family. Under the impact of industrialization, many of the functions formerly performed within a household were transferred to agencies and institutions outside the family, thus separating the work place from the home. This separation essentially meant the transformation of the household from an economically productive entity to the one of little economic value, limited in its functions to childbearing, child rearing, and socialization. This ultimately led to the alienation of the husband from the wife and the father from the children, not only in the physical sense, by leaving home for work, but also in the sense that husbands no longer participated in parenting like they did before (Hareven 245).

Although society continued to recognize the economic value of motherhood, housework on the other hand, since it was not paid, lost its economic and productive value and thus its place in the occupational hierarchy. Furthermore, the separation of the home and work place led to the glorification of the home as an escape from the outside work, thus confining women to the role of the mother and homemaker. Even though the industrialization created new opportunities for women who wanted to join the labour force, it also created a cult of domesticity, an ideology that insisted that women confine their main activities to the domestic sphere, as well as the misguided assumption that women’s work outside the home was demeaning, compromising for the husband, and potentially dangerous for their children. Therefore it is no surprise that most women “entered the labour force only when driven by economic necessity” (Hareven 246-48).

Driven by these inequalities in the perception of socially determined gender roles, many women decided that it was time for drastic changes, thus marking the nineteenth and the twentieth century with a series of feminist movements that aimed to secure equal rights and opportunities for men and women.

### 2.3. The First Feminist Movements

The first women's movement emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century and actually had its political origins in the Abolitionist Movement of the 1830's (Hole and Levine 436). It was "when women began working in earnest for the abolition of slavery [that] they quickly learned that they could not function as political equals with their male abolitionist friends" since they had neither equal rights, nor the right to freedom of speech (Hole and Levine 436). Feminists then started to re-examine the role of women in all social, political, economic, and cultural spheres of life, especially attacking institutions such as marriage that promoted the assumption of the natural superiority of men over women (Hole and Levine 436-38).

Even though female activists all agreed that the battle for freedom must also include women's freedom, they were urged to abandon their cause for the time being in order to primarily support Civil War efforts, ultimately leading to the halt of women's movement activities during the time of the war (Hole and Levine 438). By the time the Civil War had ended and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, abolitionists started demanding the passage of a Fourteenth Amendment, which would "secure the rights, privileges, and immunities of citizens (the new freedmen) under the law" (Hole and Levine 442): "In the second section of the proposed Amendment, however, the word 'male' appeared, introducing . . . [, without doubt, intentional] sex distinction into the Constitution for the first time" (Hole and Levine 442). Appalled by this kind of open discrimination against women, feminists and female activists started demanding equal rights for women, for instance by "campaigning to get the word 'sex' added to the proposed Fifteenth Amendment which would prohibit the denial of suffrage on account of race," thus making "the drive for women's suffrage" a priority of the first feminist movements which would reach their climax in the early 1920's (Hole and Levine 443),.

### 3. Gender Relations in Twentieth-Century American Society

At the beginning of the twentieth century, feminists and female activists started to protest against everything that promoted “male dominance over women” (Steiner, “On Being a Woman” 394), like the media and language, the arts, and literature, in order to “raise public awareness of what they saw as an all-pervasive cultural misogyny” (Steiner, “On Being a Woman” 394). These feminist movements resulted in women finally gaining freedom to speak their mind, being considered part of the American society and being allowed to be ambitious and career-oriented. The women’s suffrage movement resulted in women’s right to vote, which ultimately meant the inclusion of women in the political arena. Nevertheless, these movements were survived by the cult of domesticity and the embedded gender roles of the housewife and the male breadwinner.

#### 3.1. Women’s Suffrage

Women’s suffrage, defined by Merriam Webster’s dictionary as women’s right to vote and the exercising of such right, was one of the biggest steps towards gender equality in the twentieth century. Although women had also been fighting for their rights in the nineteenth century, it was in the beginning of the twentieth century that these efforts finally started to pay off.

In 1916, women’s rights activists Alice Paul and Lucy Burns formed the National Woman’s Party, an American women’s organization that fought for women’s suffrage and the passing of an amendment to the Constitution that would secure this right. In 1917, along with other suffragettes, they organized protests that included picketing the White House and the President, Woodrow Wilson, and pulling out parts of his own speech, hoping that by using his own words against him they could shame him into supporting the women’s suffrage movement. Over 200 National Woman’s Party supporters, who called themselves political prisoners, were arrested, beaten, force feed, and tortured (Poljak Rehlicki). However, their efforts paid off – in August 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment became part of the Constitution, thus finally giving women the right to vote, as follows: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation” (U.S. Constit., art./amend. xix).

“With the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, the majority of women activists as well as the public at large assumed that having gained the vote woman’s complete equality had been virtually obtained” (Hole and Levine 446). That is why all major women’s organizations ceased to function in 1920 and resumed their efforts only forty years later (Hole and Levine 446). Even though women’s suffrage was a great step towards equality between men and women, it was “only one element in the wide-ranging feminist critique questioning the fundamental organization of society” (Hole and Levine 442). Furthermore, it also did not lead to any major changes of gender relations in household and work place. A woman’s primary role in society still remained the ensuring of a secure home and household and the bearing and raising of children. According to William H. Chafe, “one congressional representative declared that a woman’s proper place was in the home, not taking a job away from a male breadwinner”: “By the end of the 1930s, state, local, and national authorities all endorsed discriminatory treatment against married women seeking employment,” and those who still did seek employment had to expect their jobs to be “low paying, sex segregated, and offering little opportunity for advancement” (260). Women had to choose between being a good housewife and mother, or being condemned for wanting to “have it all.” Yet, this would start to change with the beginning of World War II.

### 3.2. Gender Relations During World War II

On 1 September 1939, under the command of Chancellor Adolf Hitler, the Germans invaded Poland, and two days later the United Kingdom and France declared war on Germany, thus starting World War II. Two years later, in September 1941, Japan attacked the U.S. naval base Pearl Harbour. This attack led to the United States’ declaration of war on Japan and marked its entry into World War II. As the War proceeded, the U.S. was in desperate need of military and labour force. This fact is the main reason why the condemnation towards denigration of the working woman disappeared. The working women were now no longer frowned upon, but considered contributors to the greater good of the nation and celebrated for their patriotic spirit. The circumstances under which they worked also changed, even though they were not close to being equal to those of men. Soon a lot of women started to take on jobs:

Women who a few years before had been told it was a mortal sin to leave the home and take a job were now urged as a matter of patriotic necessity to help win the war by replacing a soldier gone to the front. Between 1941 and 1945 over six million women

took jobs for the first time. . . . They performed every kind of work imaginable, from manoeuvring giant cranes in steel mills to toppling huge redwoods in the Oregon forest. None received equal pay with men, and very few occupied positions of executive responsibility. Nevertheless, wages were higher than ever before, some of those at the bottom had the opportunity for the first time to make a decent living. (Chafe 261)

Opposed to the image of women at work before World War II, that characterized them as a threat to household and family, this new image of the working woman symbolized women's contribution to the nation's well-being. It is thus no wonder that “during the war years, the female labour force increased by 57 percent” (Chafe 261). This was a major step in the equality of gender relations in the labour force.

Nevertheless, as the war ended in 1945 and women were no longer needed in the war force, people returned to their former belief that a woman's proper place is at home, once again condemning women for having a career: “The very term ‘feminist’ had become an insult” (Hole and Levine 443). The resulting discrimination and discriminatory attitude towards women at the workplace once again brought about the need for a strong women's movement to challenge the alarming revival of pre-war gender relations.

### 3.3. Women's Liberation Movement

As previously mentioned, the women's suffrage movement, which emerged out of the abolition movement, had demanded so much devotion and energy that it “collapsed from exhaustion” and would “lie dormant for forty years” (Hole and Levine 446). It was in the 1960's that “a strong women's movement challenging traditional sex stereotypes [would be] revived” (Chafe 263). Once again, this movement had emerged out of a “massive movement for civil rights,” since “the demand of black Americans that all discrimination based on race be eliminated had direct relevance to discrimination based on sex as well” (Chafe 263). In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed, and together with its subsequent sister organizations, it created a national structure prepared to use legal, political, and media institutions (Freeman 449-453) that attacked a whole spectrum of institutions and values that limited women in order to fight employment discrimination, organize day-care centers, fight for the repeal of abortion laws, create women's health collectives, write non-sexist children's books, provide support for alternative life-styles, and raise the consciousness of women (Chafe 264). In order to do so, NOW and other organizations developed the so-called “rap group” (Freeman

451). Since people are most likely to be kept down if they are not given the chance to interact and socialize with their “social equals,” but forced to relate more to their “social superiors,” the rap groups served as a tool for consciousness-raising (Freeman 451). Women would come together and talk about their problems and concerns, only to find out that they were not the only ones who felt that way, making their individual problems a problem of society, and making it easier to find a solution (Freeman 451).

The Women’s Liberation Movement transformed the attitudes of many people in America concerning women and their role in society (Chafe 264). Since they started to feel more protected by the law and accepted by society, the number of women that spoke up about being sexually discriminated against skyrocketed (Freeman 453). Other outcomes included the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment by Congress, the legalization of abortions by the Supreme Court (Freeman 453), an increase in college applications and acceptances by and for women, as well as an increase in employment of women (Chafe 264-265).

Nevertheless, complete equality in gender relations will not be achieved as long as there are socially conditioned and accepted gender roles that define our role in society and define us as human beings. The existence of a “female role” depends on the existence of a “male role” and vice versa (Freeman 459), and both roles have to vanish in order to achieve the equality of the sexes. Sadly, a lot of men feel that feminists are basically just men-haters, and thus are intimidated by the idea of gender role eradication, fearing a role-reversal and the suppression of men by women (Freeman 459).

#### 3.4. Male Confusion: Are Feminists Trying to Suppress Men?

It seems as though the changes induced by the feminist movements have brought upon great confusion for men and their roles in society because “when one element of a pair shifts, the other will surely be affected” (Steiner, “On Being a Man” 544). Such confusion of the male image is clearly found in literature. Instead of strong and courageous male figures like the knight in shining armour and the prince on the white horse, twentieth century modern literature produced countless confused and powerless male figures (Steiner, “On Being a Man” 546). A great example of such a male figure is the character of the Beatles’ song “Nowhere Man” who does not have any perspective and seems to be confused about what he wants to do and where he is headed in life (Lennon, McCartney 591). Yet, the necessity of this male confusion is questionable. If women are getting their rights, that does not mean that men are being robbed of

theirs, nor does it mean that women are stealing male identity. Rather, this means that they are living up to their potential and acting on their given rights, the same way men have done so far.

Therefore, the goal of The Women's Liberation Movement is in no way to be considered a shift in dominance or the suppression of men. According to Freeman, "the feminist perspective starts from the premise that women and men are constitutionally equal and share the same human capabilities" (455). As a matter of fact, a lot of male feminists think that men too are oppressed by the sex roles, and that they as well would profit from gender equality (Hole and Levine 453).

Accordingly, the ultimate goal of "The Women's Liberation Movement" is the achievement of complete equality of the sexes, the riddance of all socially conditioned gender roles and basically the riddance of sexism by eradicating the assumption that men are naturally superior to women, as well as the altering of all institutions that suppress either sex and create inequality in gender relations.

#### 4. The Institution of Marriage and Its Four Stages

The inequality and equality of gender relations has clearly been influenced by the former mentioned circumstances and events. However, in order to fully understand the changes in the equality and inequality experienced by gender relations, it is necessary to examine the one institution that has had the greatest impact on them – the institution of marriage.

According to Kathleen Gough, the family is a human institution that is not found in any pre-human species. Gough defines marriage as a unity of “a married couple . . . [that] cooperate[s] economically and in the upbringing of children” (Gough 44). She argues that marriage was an essential tool for the forming of the civilization we know today since it served as a tool for the eradication of incest, polygamy, and adultery (Gough 66). Nevertheless, marriage in its early stages was also a great limiter of individual freedom. Not only were marriages used to rid the individual of the freedom of choosing whom he or she will love, since they were often arranged out of economic advantages, but they were also obstacles to self-realization because of their arranged structure that divided spouses by their gender into socially accepted gender roles – the roles of the master husband and the servant wife. These roles would include, on the one hand, the responsibilities of a wife to live in a home established by her husband, to perform the domestic chores, take care of the children, and care for her husband, as well as accept his right to consummate the marriage by means of sexual intercourse whenever and however he pleased, and, on the other hand, the husband’s responsibility and obligation to provide necessities, such as food, clothing, medical care, and a place to live (Gillespie 71-72). This division of gender roles within the family serves as the basis for marital structures as we know them today, but it would also experience great changes over the centuries.

According to Letha Do and John Scanzoni, in *American Society* the evolution of marriage realized itself in four stages: In Stage I, the wife was a servant to the husband and had to obey his every command (Zlomislić), which would be true for the American Family described in Chapter One and Two of this paper – the American Family from the founding of the United States till the late nineteenth century. Stage II, in which the husband was the head of the family and the wife was his helper (Zlomislić), corresponds to early twentiethcentury American Society, i.e. the period after women gained suffrage described in section I of Chapter III of this paper. Stage III, in which the husband is described as being a senior partner and the wife a junior partner (Zlomislić), concurs with the American Society described in the remaining Sections of Chapter III, i.e. the period during and after World War II and the Women’s Liberation Movement, during which the number of women in the labour force drastically increased,



According to this categorization, it would be only natural to presume that stage IV of the evolution of marriage in the American Society, in which husband and wife are described as being equal partners (Zlomislić), then must be relevant for the following Chapter, that describes gender relations in postmodern American society. According to Gillespie, “[many] sociologists claim that the modern husband and wife are so nearly equal in power, that marriage today can be termed ‘democratic’, ‘equalitarian’ or ‘egalitarian’.” Others, however, claim that because it is assumed that women have gained their rights in all social arenas, the role of women in present-day society is no longer examined, thus creating the need of new egalitarian ideals that will reopen the question of inequality of the sexes to further examine their roles in society and to truly secure gender equality in all social arenas (see Gillespie 65).

Due to this fact, it comes to no surprise that sociologists and theorists, as well as many postmodern authors, willingly, or maybe even without knowing it, deal with the issues of gender relations in marriage and equality of the sexes in all other social arenas.

## 5. Gender Relations in Postmodernism

According to Rebecca Solnit, the traditional marriage “made the husband essentially an owner and the wife a possession” (Solnit 60). Today, this generally is not the case: Men are no longer considered to be superior to women just because they are men, but rather they must prove or earn the right to superiority by competing with their wives (Gillespie 65-69). Nevertheless, gender-bound roles and behavioural expectations are still present. Women are “expected to aspire to marriage” (Adichie 28) and “make [their] life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important” (Adichie 29). They are supposed to bear and raise children and keep the house in order, whereas men are expected to be more career-oriented, to work and provide for their family. Basically, men are still playing the role of the breadwinner, and women the one of the housewife. Acting upon these roles can often result in wives and husbands being miserable in their marriages and, in some cases, lead them to act out. Postmodern short stories “The Enormous Radio” (1978) and “The Fourth Alarm” (1978) by John Cheever provide numerous examples of such characters.

### 5.1. Gender Relations in Postmodern Literature: John Cheever

Bertha from Cheever’s short story “The Fourth Alarm” is so overwhelmed by trying to fit into this role of the loving and caring mother and housewife that when she finally has had enough, she goes to New York and takes part in a nude theatre performance. Her husband calls it acting out, but what she actually is doing, is finally being herself:

There I sat naked in front of these strangers and I felt for the first time in my life that I'd found myself. I found myself in nakedness. I felt like a new woman, a better woman. To be naked and unashamed in front of strangers was one of the most exciting experiences I've ever had. (Cheever 476)

By taking off her clothes, Bertha rids herself of everything that was not “her,” and is finally happy again: “Oh, how wonderful and rich and strange life can be when you stop playing out the roles that your parents and their friends wrote out for you” (Cheever 476). The husband makes an effort and comes to the show, hoping that afterwards he will be able to understand why his wife would want to take her clothes off in front of other people. Yet, when the performance

group encourages him to take off his clothes and “lendings” (Cheever 478), he is unable to let go of the valuables that socially determine his identity, but hide his true self. He flees the theatre:

I held my valuables in my right hand, my literal identification. None of it was irreplaceable, but to cast it off would seem to threaten my essence, the shadow of myself that I could see on the floor, my name. I went back to my seat and got dressed . . . [and] went outside. (Cheever 478)

The husband is so deeply identified with his role in society that he does not see that something is wrong. Moreover, he is surprised that Bertha is not happy, even though there were various signs to her melancholy and boredom, the most important being the “one two three lullaby” (Cheever 475). When dealing with her children, Bertha was never very patient, so whenever she wanted her children to do something, she would threaten them by counting to three. The husband implies that she did this so often that it could be considered their lullaby. This is obviously a sign of Bertha’s dissatisfaction with the role of the mother and housewife, a serious problem that was completely disregarded by her husband. Because their marriage lacked open communication, it comes to no surprise that these spouses encountered marital problems. Maybe if the husband had taken more interest in his wife and their marriage, opposed to just presuming that she was happy, or being in denial about their problems, or if she had spoken up sooner, maybe they could have fixed their problems in time.

Another one of Cheever’s short stories that includes characters with similar marital problems and in similar socially conditioned roles is “The Enormous Radio.” The husband, Jim Westcott, once again is the breadwinner, and his wife, Irene, is once again a mother and housewife. Since Jim works a lot, and the children are taken care of by a maid, Irene is bored out of her mind all alone at home, until one evening something unexpected happens:

Jim was too tired to make even a pretense of sociability, and there was nothing about the dinner to hold Irene's interest, so her attention wandered from the food to the deposits of silver polish on the candlesticks and from there to the music in the other room. She listened for a few minutes to a Chopin prelude and then was surprised to hear a man's voice break in. For Christ's sake, Kathy,” he said. . . . (Cheever 30-31)

They soon realize that they can hear their neighbours’ conversation through the radio. From that point on, Irene begins constantly listening to the radio. Sometimes she even waits for Jim to fall

asleep and then sneaks into the living room. She overhears couples talking about monetary problems, lovers cheating on their spouses, and even a neighbour hitting his wife. She becomes obsessed with listening to her neighbours' problems, completely ignoring and denying her own. Jim starts noticing that she is getting more and more depressed and urges her to stop, but as if she did not hear a word he said, she starts throwing herself into even deeper denial:

“But we've never been like that, have we, darling? Have we? I mean, we've always been good and decent and loving to one another, haven't we? And we have two children, two beautiful children. Our lives aren't sordid, are they, darling? Are they?” She flung her arms around his neck and drew his face down to hers. “We're happy, aren't we, darling? We are happy, aren't we? . . . You love me, don't you?” she asked. (PAGE)

At first Jim tries to comfort her, but then he gets sick and tired of playing the happy husband in a happy marriage, when actually they are two people with great problems, who obviously stay together out of convenience and obligation to their children. He is filled with suppressed resentment and anger:

“Oh, I'm sick!” he shouted. . . . “Why are you so Christly all of a sudden? . . . [And] where was all your piety and your virtue when you went to that abortionist? I'll never forget how cool you were. You packed your bag and went off to have that child murdered as if you were going to Nassau.” (Cheever 35-36)

For Jim, the marriage turned into a nightmare for him after Irene terminated her pregnancy. He could have hit her, he could have divorced her – maybe he even wanted to, but he chose to be “the good husband” and thus let the anger and resentment eat him up. Irene tried to lure Jim into her world of denial, but this time he did not give in. He confronted her, and by addressing the issue and dealing with his resentment, Jim made the first step towards solving their problem. However, since the story has an open ending, we can only speculate whether Jim and Irene stayed together and solved their problems or if it was already too late for them to do so.

The characters in John Cheever's short stories are great examples of socially conditioned gender roles in American society. In most of his stories, Cheever wrote about everyday problems, like the marital ones, that he probably could have watched and examined while living on the Upper East Side of New York City or the suburbs (Poljak Rehlicki). Even though Cheever might not necessarily have intended to write about gender roles, being confronted with everyday

problems faced by his characters makes it easier for the reader to relate to the marital issues and to truly understand the pressure that men and women are under in their marriages due to the imposed gender roles.

## 5.2. Gender Relations in Postmodern Literature: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In her essay “We Should All Be Feminist,” Contemporary Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes about gender relations in both Nigeria and America from a female feminist perspective. Although she experienced gender differences while growing up in Nigeria as being more extreme than in America, she nevertheless notices them in present-day American society. She provides an example of an American woman who does the same job as her husband, but when they come home from work, she does all the housework (Adichie 37). Yet, what strikes Adichie the most is the fact that this woman actually thanks her husband if he sometimes changes their baby’s diaper, as if it were so unlikely for him to do so (Adichie 37). This is just one of the examples of how unequal gender roles are still present in American society that Adichie provides in her essay.

Furthermore, she gives an example of gender inequality in the labour force by describing another American woman who took over a managerial position from a man who was considered a “tough-go-getter.” She continued doing the work the same way he did, with the exception of considering the fact that her employees also had their families, not just work. However, whereas he was praised for his work ethics, she was not. In fact, one employee complained to the top management that she was aggressive and difficult to work with (Adichie 22-23). “In the US,” Adichie writes, “a man and a woman are doing the same job, with the same qualifications, and the man is paid more *because* he is a man” (Adichie 17). She recognizes that men and women are different, that they have “different hormones and different sexual organs and different biological abilities . . . [women being able to bear children and men not, and that] in general, [men are] physically stronger than women” (Adichie 16). Yet, what she finds absurd is the fact that “the higher you go, the fewer women there are” when it comes to prestigious jobs and positions (Adichie 17):

This made sense – a thousand years ago. Since human beings lived then in a world in which strength was the most important attribute for survival, the physically stronger person was more likely to lead. And men in general are physically stronger. However, today, we live in a vastly different world. The person more qualified to lead is *not* the physically stronger person, but the more intelligent, knowledgeable, creative, and innovative one. And there are no

hormones for those attributes. A woman is as likely as a man to be intelligent, innovative, creative (Adichie 16-17).

Still, men are more likely to be leaders and heads of companies. Adichie explains the roots of this kind of sexual discrimination through a story from her childhood: When she was in primary school, her teacher gave a test. Whoever would score highest, would be the class monitor, which of course for children was a big deal. When she herself scored the highest, the teacher suddenly decided that the class monitor had to be a boy, even though this particular boy, with the second-highest score, was a gentle soul and was not interested in being the class monitor, whereas Chimamanda was (Adichie 11-13). This one “little” incident can serve as the explanation for all assumptions why men should be in charge:

If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal. If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we will think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy. If we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem ‘natural’ that only men should be heads of corporations. (Adichie 13)

Adichie is convinced that with a different approach to raising and socializing our children, it is possible to eradicate gender roles and to secure equal gender relations in all social arenas (25).

### 5.3. Socialization of Children

According to Adichie, “Boys and girls are undeniably different biologically, but socialization exaggerates the differences, and then starts a self-fulfilling process” (35): “We teach boys to be afraid of fear, of weakness, [and] of vulnerability” (26), like when we tell them that crying is for girls, this way leaving them with “very fragile egos” (27). Moreover, we teach them that boys should always pay, inevitably linking masculinity to money, in that way programming them to feel less of a man if he cannot provide everything his woman one day would like him to (Adichie 26).

Girls, on the other hand, are taught that they can have ambition and be successful, but not too much, because this would be intimidating for a potential husband one day (Adichie 27-28). We raise girls to feel shame for their sexuality by telling them to “cover themselves” and to “close their legs” (Adichie 33). We also expect from girls to “aspire to marriage” and “make their life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important,” but do not teach

boys the same (Adichie 29), allowing them, on the other hand, to experience everything before settling down, and even urge them to focus on their careers.

So basically, we leave boys with fragile egos and then we raise girls to cater to them, thus raising individuals that one day will become co-dependent; women depending on men to provide for them, and consequently, men depending on needy women to cater to their egos by belittling themselves. Adichie believes that in order to achieve equality of the sexes, we first have to break this circle of co-dependency. This, she says, can hopefully be achieved in some fifty or hundred years if in raising our children we were to focus on their abilities and their interest instead of their gender (Adichie 27-28, 36).

## Conclusion

Gender Relations in the American Society have undergone immense changes over the centuries under the influence of historical events and movements such as the Industrial Revolution, the Women's Suffrage Movement, World War II, and the Women's Liberation Movement. The Declaration of Independence in itself did not state and ensure equality of the sexes, thus enabling one sex to be superior to the other. This became obvious during the Industrial Revolution, when the roles of husbands and wives divided into two separate social spheres. In pre-industrial society, men and women along with their children and other relatives living under the same roof, all worked together in and around the house. Yet, with the urbanization, all work for men moved from home to the public sphere, making them the sole breadwinners of the family, and thus limiting women to their role of mother, housewife, and homemaker. The Women's Suffrage Movement brought about changes concerning women's political status by securing their right to vote, but it did not change gender relations at home or work. It was at the beginning of World War II that women started being accepted into the labour force. Finally, thanks to the Women's Liberation Movement, a woman's role in other aspects of society also became more acceptable. With those changes in mind, it is safe to say that the U.S. is on the right track not just towards the equality of the sexes but also towards securing equal rights and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their race, class, social status, or sex.

Nevertheless, numerous sociologists warn that we are not quite there yet, although many argue that the place of women in society was secured with their suffrage. However, gender inequality is much more than suffrage, and although a lot of men perceive feminism as being a way for women to suppress men, it is quite the contrary; gender inequality is not just a threat to women, but to men as well, and both male and female feminists fight for its eradication. This statement is supported in the title, as well as the rest of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's essay "We Should All Be Feminist." Similarly, in his short stories "The Fourth Alarm" and "The Enormous Radio" John Cheever shows how gender roles affect both men and women, making both his male and female characters miserable due to their gender expectations. Socially prescribed gender roles endorse certain norms on what a woman is and does and what a man is and does. However, gender roles do not make and decide what and who we are. If we were to strip ourselves from these socially conditioned roles, instead of focusing on being a good male or a good female, we could focus on being good human beings.

Men and women are not the same, but neither are two individuals of the same sex. Both men and women have feelings, traits, and shortcomings; yet, every single one of them behaves in



a different way. These differences should not be apprehended as characteristics of either sex, but as characteristics of each individual human being, and should be embraced, not suppressed. Men and women are supposed to be able to live together and support each other, each fulfilling a certain role in their own lives and the lives of others, as well as in our society. Yet, these roles are to be chosen by each individual for him/herself, not predestined, socially conditioned, or gender-bound. They are supposed to be personal and voluntary, not forced on someone. Instead of the dominance of one individual over the other, equality between all races, religions and between both sexes should be nourished. The roles of the husband and the wife should be fulfilled out of love, not out of fear or dependency. Spouses should be equals who treat themselves with respect, who accept and embrace their differences, who love and support each other, and who raise their children in that spirit. They should raise their children not focusing on their gender, but rather focusing on them as human beings. We may not be the same, but we can be equal, and it is up to us to make that happen.

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