An Analysis of Female’s Changing Archetype in a Family—Review on Kramer vs. Kramer and The Bridges of Madison County

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Abstract. This paper is exploring the female’s roles in a family by making a comparison and contrast between the two women in movies Kramer vs. Kramer and The Bridges of Madison County. Their fates mirror the beliefs of the times and their dilemmas can explain where the women’s position is in the society. Francesca in The Bridges of Madison County chooses to retreat to her family and conceal her love when she is confronted with the conflicts of family responsibilities and her personal expectations and her decision has satisfied everybody. While Joanna in Kramer vs. Kramer makes a quite different choice. Joanna gets away from the suffocating family life and succeeds in being what she wants to be. The two women’s destinies are the epitome of their ages. Undoubtedly, with the rise of women’s movement, women’s role is changing so drastically that it’s necessary to reshape the women’s image in both family and society.

1. Two Lonely Souls

Both Kramer vs. Kramer and The Bridges of Madison County star Meryl Streep, probably the greatest actress ever. Her success of the portrayal of two lonely housewives made both the movies beautiful and thought-provoking. Many housewives kept asking such a question to themselves after watching the movies: “Who am I? What do I expect from myself? What do I expect from my marriage?” Undoubtedly, the movies succeeded in inspiring females to set off a journey of self-discovery.

The Bridges of Madison County is based on the same name novel by Midwestern writer Robert James Waller. The story was set in in the Summer of 1965. Meryl Streep was Francesca Johnson, a conventional wife of an Iowa farmer, like other women of her generation, she had poured all her energy into nurturing her two children and her decent but dull husband Richard. Francesca managed household affairs with all her heart, as she had done for years. She described herself as “happily married,” however, she was vaguely unhappy with her life, since it didn’t quite match her dreams. She was someone whose dreams of coming to America had not been fulfilled by the tedious reality of her life. She was caught up in the trivia of small-town life, filled with details but had nothing to trigger her passion. Francesca had quite the different attitude towards life with the people in Madison county, including her husband even her own children. Beneath the surface, life should nurture people of poetry, romance and love, for everything.

She couldn’t even share her innermost feelings with her husband. She felt constraint in front of Richard shaped by the rural cultures, naturally demanding his wife to follow the protracted customs that she could not adapt. The loneliness and desperation could be felt in her conversation with Robert Kincaid. She confessed to him that her life was quiet but it’s not what she dreamed about as a girl. That was the first time that she confided her true feelings, which were buried in her heart for so many years.

In 1979, Meryl Streep and Dustin Hoffman’s landmark drama Kramer vs. Kramer hit theaters. Meryl Streep is Joanna, a brilliant, beautiful and independent lady who was an excellent graduate of Smith college. Ted Kramer, her husband and a promising New York advertising executive, believed that his role and responsibility to his family was the breadwinner, which meant a focus on career and his wife of eight years was relegated to role of housewife and mother to their five and a
half year old son, Billy Kramer. But in the tedious family life, Joanna gradually blurred her identity. Her roles in the family, or in the society, was merely mother and wife. Life was no longer full of poetry, romance and love as before. When she tried to communicate with her husband, revealing that she was exhausted both physically and mentally, her husband was stunned and couldn’t figure out what was happening to his wife, because the husband firmly believed that they had had eight happy life together, he sheltered the family and could afford a decent life for his wife and son. Hence, in the husband’s eyes, his wife was just disgruntled for a while, she would assume the role of the housewife very soon. Joanna’s disappointment, depression and loneliness were utterly ignored.

Joanna, on the encouragement of Margaret Phelps, a recent divorcée in their apartment building and one of Joanna’s primary confidantes, decided to abandon the marriage, and leave Billy with Ted, as she felt she couldn’t properly take care of Billy in her current fragile mental state. Ted believed that Joanna was solely going through a gloomy phase and she would return home in a day or two, but she didn’t.

2. Different ways of rebellion and different destinies

Facing a conservative husband and living in a small town life that forces you to conform, Francesca chose to retreat superficially and rebelled quietly. She reserved a private space in her heart for her lonely soul to harbour. Once she was wearing a pair of gold hoop earrings, she encountered the objection from her husband saying that she looked like a hussy. She quietly put them away without saying anything. She knew clearly that Richard was rather observant and allowed no change or anything peculiar to him. When the time for watching TV came, she seldom joined her children or Richard and usually read books in the kitchen—TV bored her. She belonged to a book club, which enabled her to borrow books from it, history and poetry and fiction. Only in those books, could she find herself consoled, her spirit elevated. She enjoyed that solitary time. She loved books as well as music, when Elvis and the Beatles first appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show, Francesca was conquered by their power of summons, while Richard looked at their hair and kept shaking his head in disbelief and disapproval. Therefore, Francesca could appreciate those music only when she was alone at home. When he took the kids to the state fair, she secretly reveled in their absence and was beginning to recoup her sense of self. She had silently rebelled through the years. Yet she was absolutely resolved to endure. She had kept her disappointment to herself because she loved her family and was aware of the family responsibilities she should assume. But she felt compromised, being more sophisticated than she let on.

Then the manly Robert Kincaid pulled into her driveway in his battered pickup in the Summer. Francesca, although nervous by the attention of the courteous visitor, but guilty about being unfaithful to her passionless Iowa husband, found out a mystical attraction for the top photographer who had come to Madison County to take pictures of the local covered bridges. Without signposts, Robert’s having some trouble locating the Rosamunde Bridge. She offered to show him to the bridges and thus began the bittersweet and all-too-brief romance of her life. When the delicate emotions were growing, they concluded they were made for each other, in just four fateful days, they were together both physically and spiritually. When the critical moment eventually fell upon them, Francesca made a painful choice, she remained on the farm to commit her duties as wife and mother, while Kincaid went on his travel in another world. Although meeting Robert Kincaid and hearing stories of his travels reawakened her yearning for a more worldly life, she eventually chose her family, chose the principal obligation as a mother and wife. In the letter she wrote, “I gave my family my life; I gave Robert Kincaid what was left of me.”

“You know my loneliness is only kept for you, my sweet songs are only sung for you. Love is when you find someone better, yet you stay with the same person you promised to spend forever with.”

But Joanna had to find herself, her own identity in the society. Before the marriage, she had held a good job. Now she was simply Ted’s wife, her boy’s mother, a homemaker, a housewife, and her
life in their shadow had become intolerable. She wasn’t even sure that she could function well as a mother any longer. She tried, without success, to convince Ted she was leaving because of concern for their child as well as for her own sake. Fifteen months after she walked out, Joanna returned to New York in order to claim Billy, and a custody battle ensued. The damaging facts that Ted was fired because of his conflicting responsibilities with his son, forcing him to take a lower-paid job, came out in court. Eventually, Joanna was awarded the child’s custody to Joanna due to the assumption that a child was best raised by their mother who had got a decent job as a fashion designer and regained her confidence as well.

Joanna didn’t feel that she should be dependent on her husband, she wanted independence and freedom. It has been proved that a woman can be as good as man in the workplace. When her husband was occupied with both taking care of family and working outside, he was fired for failing to strike the balance. Joanna didn’t choose to give up her career for the sake of her own happiness, she lived the life she wanted. It can be assumed that when Joanna is growing old, she will not say “if..., I would have....”

3. Marriage and family: an ideological battleground for females

It’s embarrassing to jump to a conclusion that whether Francesca or Joanna has made the right decision. After considered judgments, both of them have made calculated choices that are in favor of them in the social context. It is unfair and unreasonable to judge from the perspective of contemporary people. Hopefully, where the women are, where they were and where they are heading for can be explored from the development of the women’s liberation movement.

World War II largely obliterated feminist activism on any continent. The war did open employment opportunities for women, but these doors of opportunity were largely closed after the war, when women routinely lost their jobs to men discharged from military service. This turn of events angered many women, but few were willing to mount any organized protest. Through years of the duplication of everyday life, most women in 1950s and 1960s became dumb and insensitive to the routine job, taking caring of kids and husbands and endless housework had washed away their dreams. There was no passion, no pursuit. They occasionally complain, but they had got few thoughts to alter their fate. The traditional families still occupied the predominant position. The husband was working outside, while the wife stayed at home. Everything was taken for granted until they got access to the movie. The story of The Bridges of Madison County happened in a small town of Iowa where the Women Movement exerted little impact on the people’s mind, it’s quite understandable for people there to cling to their original life styles. When the movie was released, it particularly seethed the women with irrepressible feelings. Almost every woman’s tender part in heart is deeply touched, feeling the same pain as Francesca. They were struggling to figure out the relationship between love and passion, responsibilities and loyalty, reason and motion. After measuring gains and loss, Francesca tipped the scales in favor of traditional female priorities such as marriage and motherhood and gave up her personal expectations. Francesca’s decision expresses the feelings and beliefs of 1950s and ’60s in America.

Kramer vs. Kramer reflected a cultural shift during the 1970s while the second-wave Women Movement occured, an ideological brawl broke out between the institutions of marriage and family. The film gave equal weight and importance to both husband and wife, men and women were standing by shoulders.

The Women Movement of the 1960s and ’70s represented a seemingly abrupt break with the tranquil suburban life pictured in American popular culture. Unlike the first wave, second-wave feminism provoked extensive theoretical discussion about the origins of women’s oppression, the nature of gender, and the role of the family. Some feminists claim that the family is the foundation of patriarchal capitalism, the source of women’s oppression. They lean on the idea that a woman’s personal fulfillment should outweigh all other expectations. Driven by such ideology, Joanna managed to embody the independence and freedom spirit of the 1970s. The “debate” related to “whether Joanna is a responsible mother” took place. Most of the apologists of traditional ethics
frowned, while most feminists applauded. The debating forum is bound to become a place where ideas clash and crash. However, nobody can preclude the society from progressing and gender equity is not just a dream.

4. Conclusion: locating the identity in a family

With the dogged efforts of many generations, the formidable job, women’s liberation, has reached a new level in modern world. Today, there seem to be no typical families, no stereotype of a nuclear unit. Domestic life has been transformed by economic realities that force most mothers into the workplace and out of the kitchen. When large numbers of women walk outside the household, new connections with the society are established for women just like for men; There’s been a shift in the social status and power between the genders, too. More women are getting degrees than men and female wages have boomed over the last decades. Educated women can get many of the things they want, such as security, accomplishment, and identity without marriage. Social, economic, political and cultural changes exert great impact on family structure: decline of the traditional extended family, changes in the status of women, and a new distribution of roles between spouses in the nuclear family. The foundation of the traditional families is teetering on the edge of collapse.

The institution of marriage is quickly redefining itself. According to G. K. Chesterton, a marriage is neither an ecstasy nor a slavery; it is a commonwealth; it is a separate working and fighting thing like a nation. Kings and diplomatists talk of “forming alliances” when they make weddings; but indeed every wedding is primarily an alliance.

Couples are facing more challenges than ever in preserving their relationship stability. To maintain the family stability, couples need to negotiate in every aspect before they get married. Role expectations, ranging from applying to job, finances, chores, sexual intimacy and more, are incredibly common for modern couples, which has never been discussed in a traditional family. It is questionable just how much control individuals have over their lives, fate and destiny. Therefore, in today’s society, everyone has the freedom to control their own fate and destiny. For some women, it’s right to cherish traditional female priorities such as marriage and motherhood. They believe that only families can offer the long-term emotional stability and commitment that child rearing requires. For others, they may not find such goals fulfilling and should have the freedom to pursue other paths.

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