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Global Literature II

How can Gender Expectations affect a Person?

The short story “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid reveals the gender expectations of women in many Caribbean cultures. The author herself was an Antiguan woman and used her own life experiences to write this story. It can be said that this reading is more of a list of tasks than an actual story. Before asking the question pertaining this story, it is important to present the term “gender expectations” in another form such as gender roles. The term “gender roles” is more common and widely used, especially in America. This story or list of tasks presented by Kincaid reflects the gender expectations or gender roles that are being passed down from mother to daughter. An important question to ask while reading this short story is “How can gender expectations affect a person?” In this essay, we will explore the way gender expectations can affect a person interpersonally and individually as well as how they affect both genders.

The story “Girl” can be considered a conversation between a mother and daughter, although it is mostly the mother talking and the daughter responding in her head. Gender expectations are nurtured, meaning they are taught and learned at home by someone older to someone younger. Therefore, there is an interpersonal connection happening, whether it has positive or negative effects. Towards the end of the short story or the conversation, the mother says, “this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man; and if

this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up;" (Kincaid). In this portion of "Girl" it is evident that the mother has passed down expectations of how her daughter should love man and what she should do if those ways don't work. This directly impacts the daughter interpersonally. When the time comes for her to develop her own intimate and romantic relationships, there is a lingering expectation of how she should go about it and what to do if it doesn't work out. In this form, these expectations are not very positive and don't teach her to value herself, which is really important to do before engaging in any type of relationship. With these expectations, there is no freedom to love the way she wants to love or even space to try love or a relationship again with someone else. The expectation to just give up instead of keep trying is damaging and can prevent someone from flourishing interpersonally. A person will never know who they can connect with, or who they can be with if there is an expectation to give up on forming interpersonal connections after the first or second person. In another part of "Girl" the mother tells her daughter how she should maintain her house and take care of her father's belongings. Kincaid writes, "this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; [...] this is how you sweep a corner, this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard;" (Kincaid) In this passage the mother is setting the expectations of how a proper wife should do things. Through expectations like these, it sends a negative connotation of if I don't do things this certain way in my relationship, it will fail. This is another example of how gender expectations affect a person interpersonally.

Gender roles or expectations are often passed down from generation to generation in various cultures. Although "Girl" reflects one type of culture, it can be related to many other cultures. The pressures of living up to your parents' expectations is something that most people

can relate to despite of cultural differences. In “Girl”, Kincaid writes “on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruits on the street – flies will follow you; *but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school;*” (Kincaid). In this excerpt from the short story, the mother is telling her daughter what a “proper” woman should and shouldn’t do and how she should carry herself. However, in the daughter’s response, which is italicized, she is defending herself and trying to tell her mother that she doesn’t do that; but it is said mentally. This can possibly be attributed to fear the daughter maybe experiencing from disappointing her mother. Living up to the preset gender expectations given from generation to generation, instills a large measure of fear in various areas. There is the fear of disappointing your elders or parents, as well as the fear of appearing as if you’re going against your culture and its traditions. Fear has a negative impact on a person individually. It can lead to anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic attacks, or depression. None of these are healthy for someone at any age but specifically it is unhealthy for the young adult age range. Despite whatever culture you come from, teens and young adults all experience a large amount of pressure from family and society that can have really negative effects.

Although “Girl” reflects the gender expectations being passed down from mother to daughter and reflects the role of a woman, gender expectations affect both genders. Different societies and cultures have different ideas on how men and women should behave and do things in order to keep the community going. However, although there are different expectations for each gender, there are similar emotions felt by both from the pressures of those expectations and fulfilling those roles. In an article by Saima Ali and Gwen Adshead published by the National Library of Medicine: *National Center for Biotechnology Information*, they state, “Gender role

stereotypes can also influence how men and women express psychological distress, and how they manage painful emotions which affect their well-being (such as sadness, fear, and anger). Gender role expectations for men which emphasize strength, dominance over others and invulnerability [...] Further, this gender role expectation generates an opposing one for women i.e., the belief that it is normal for women to be able to easily articulate distress to others” (Ali and Adshead). This portion of the article expresses how gender expectations not only affects each gender’s inner-self, but it also affects how each gender can express their inner-self. Gender expectations also play a huge role in the self-esteem of both genders. According to an article published by MedCrave online, “Gender roles influence adolescent’ self-esteem. While self-confidence is a stereotypical male feature, the presentation of self-confidence by girls is considered a breach of traditional gender roles. Therefore, it is not surprising that boys report higher self-esteem than girls” (Agam, Tamir, and Golan). In many cultures, girls are expected to be demure, timid, and reserved, which is why in “Girl” the mother continuously insults her daughter of becoming a “slut”. The mother says, “on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; [...] this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; [...] this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; [...] always squeeze bread to make sure it’s fresh; *but what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?” (Kincaid). Although she is relaying the steps of how to do simple tasks and carry yourself a certain way, the words she’s using towards her daughter are harsh and damaging. In the daughter’s response, we see the damage that has been done to her self-esteem. The fear the

mother has of her daughter becoming a “slut” is causing low self-esteem and will result in the daughter becoming demure and timid. Overall, there are various long-lasting effects that gender expectations can have on both genders, especially internally.

Gender expectations or roles affect a person interpersonally, individually, as well as on both genders. They place serious pressures on the person who has to live up to those expectations or fulfill those roles that can long-lasting damage on various areas of life. Interpersonally, it can negatively affect future intimate and romantic relationships; individually it can harm someone’s self-esteem and cause negative emotions; and in both genders it controls how each gender can express those negative emotions caused from the expectation. Although culture, tradition, and gender itself play a role in the different expectations people experience, the effects of those expectations can be a shared experience for everyone.

Works Cited

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