

The Public/Private Space, Gender Roles and Inequalities in Modern Society: A Reading of Maureen Sherry's *Opening Belle*

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Abstract: Traditionally, men are the breadwinners while women run the household. This division refers to the concept of public/private space. According to J. Pilcher and I. Whelehan, this concept has a "gendered nature" and involves the "association of masculinity and the public and femininity and the private" (2004, p. 124-125). With the evolution of society, women now participate in the public sphere in addition to managing the home. In *Opening Belle*, Isabelle McElroy works on Wall Street and takes care of domestic chores, a situation that reveals inequality. Therefore, how do we redefine gender roles in a context where women now occupy both public and private space? Based on gender studies, our goal is to promote partnership as an equitable means of redefining gender roles in order to stem the resulting inequalities.

Keywords: Public/Private Space, Gender Roles, Inequality, Partnership, Gender Studies

L'Espace Public/Privé, les rôles de genre et les inégalités dans la société moderne: une Lecture de *Opening Belle* de Maureen Sherry.

Résumé : Traditionnellement, les hommes sont les pourvoyeurs tandis que les femmes gèrent le foyer. Cette division renvoie au concept d'espace public/privé. Selon J. Pilcher et I. Whelehan, ce concept a une "gendered nature" et implique l'"association of masculinity and the public and femininity and the private" (2004, p. 124-125). Avec l'évolution de la société, les femmes participent désormais à l'espace public en plus de la gestion du foyer. Dans *Opening Belle*, Isabelle McElroy travaille à Wall Street et s'occupe des tâches domestiques, cette situation révèle une inégalité. Dès lors, comment redéfinir les rôles de genre dans un contexte où les femmes occupent désormais l'espace public et privé ? En nous appuyant sur les gender studies, notre objectif est de promouvoir le partenariat comme moyen équitable pour redéfinir les rôles de genre afin d'endiguer les inégalités qui en découlent.

Mots-clés : Espace Public/Privé, Rôles de Genre, Inégalité, Partenariat, Gender Studies

Introduction

Gender roles are an integral part of community life, and this is mainly due to patriarchy, which is the system par excellence for the subordination of women. Defining patriarchy, A. Johnson states in *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives* that it is: "the valuing of masculinity and maleness and the devaluing of femininity and femaleness. It is about the primary importance of a husband's career and the secondary status of a wife's, about child care as priority in women's lives and its secondary importance in men's" (2004, p. 29).

From this definition given by A. Johnson, we can clearly see that in addition to putting men first, in the patriarchal system, there is indeed a natural division of labor that gives men the most important roles while women find themselves tied to domestic roles.

However, being relegated to the sidelines has always been denounced by feminist activists, who believe that women have more skills to bring to the table than just being expected to do housework. Thus, throughout the three major waves of feminism that have followed one another in the United States, women have demanded more rights and equality. For the first wave, this meant participation in political life through the right to vote; for the second wave, it was about equal pay for men and women and the right to education. Finally, for the third wave which was mainly interested in the demands of a certain category of women –lesbians and women of color– it was about their inclusion and protection against all forms of violence. This non-exhaustive list of feminist demands bears witness to the fact that, at some point of their existence, women have aspired to emancipation. Although much remains to be done in terms of gender equality, feminists have succeeded in gaining access to women's emancipation, hence their participation now in everything that constitutes the public space.

When we take a look into the novel *Opening Belle*, we see in M. Sherry's heroine Isabelle McElroy, the image of an accomplished woman according to the modern society of 2008 that is depicted. As a matter of fact, Isabelle, also known as Belle, went to school, graduated and now holds a position of great responsibility in a well-known U.S. company on Wall Street. This professional success coupled with her life as a mother and wife make her a distinguished woman who has made a success of her life. The flip side is that this modern society, which acclaims women who distinguish themselves by their participation in the public sphere, has made no provision for alleviating their contribution in the private space. Despite their participation in the public sphere now, women remain the only ones to manage the private sphere, thus creating an imbalance and inequality with regard to gender roles. Therefore, we see that the equality demanded by the women's liberation movement has been achieved, through women's participation in the public arena, but this equality is not equitable. Women now have access to paid work, but remain tied to domestic chores, unlike men, who are strictly confined to the public sphere.

Then, how can we redefine gender roles beyond the public/private space in order to guarantee gender equality? In this analysis, we will focus on Belle's experience to reveal this inequality towards women in current society. We will first expose the classic expression of the notion of public/private space, then show the paradigmatic shift with regard to gender roles, and finally we will propose partnership as an effective means of redefining gender roles in order to guarantee equitable equality between men and women and curb gender inequality. To achieve our goal, we will resort to gender studies which "is an interdisciplinary academic field that examines gender inequality, women's lived experience, sexuality, masculinity, and the interaction of gendered social processes with race, class, and other systems of inequality." (W. Scarborough and B. Risan,

2020, p. 41). Gender studies will be useful in helping us understand how gender is perceived in patriarchal society, fostering inequality. But also, how gender roles can be redefined through the notion of partnership.

1. The Traditional Gender Division of Labor

It is culturally accepted in most parts of the world that women are the ones who take care of the household chores and the children while men go outside to work and bring back money to feed their family. This idea almost works in each part of the world and is naturally included in people's habits. The gender division of roles between men and women, occurs because gender is dichotomized and hierarchical. And in this dichotomy of gender, men occupy the first place while women are relegated to the margin. In this perspective M. F. Calista and W. Udasmoro say that "the domestic sphere also makes the women's image changing into second sex, which values women as inferior gender to men." (2021, p. 318). In fact, because of their physical features, men are considered stronger than women, that is why society finds necessary to assign domestic work to women whereas men perform works related to the public sphere. This way of thinking manifestly gives power to men over women, that is why M. F. Calista and W. Udasmoro state in this sense that "the traditional role of men as breadwinners is one of the masculine constructions that become a hegemony in the social environment." (2021, p. 320).

In defining gender, Y. D. Koffi asserts that "gender refers to the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, identities and expectations assigned to men and women" (2013, p. 268). This definition of gender corroborates the fact that there is actually a role that society assign to individuals according to the gender there are assigned at birth. Indeed, society functions on what Judith Butler calls the heterosexual matrix, which indicates who can be defined as a real man or a real woman based on socially constructed criteria. These criteria also take into account the working sector. In an article written by J. Matthaei, one can read that "a properly socialized female undertakes woman's work, shuns man's work, and consequently develops herself into a woman" and "a properly socialized male, likewise, becomes a man by undertaking man's work and avoiding woman's work." (1980, p. 198). We observe that being a real woman in society means performing domestic activities and losing interest in the public sphere. And to be a real man is to object to doing certain activities like laundry, cooking, washing dishes, and making the bed, which are actually classified as women's work.

In the novel *Opening Belle*, we witness that the gender division of labor is also present in the mind of some characters even though the environment in which they live seems to be a modern society. Indeed, before getting married to Bruce McElroy, the main character Isabelle, also known as Belle, has been engaged with another man called Henry. The fact is that, Henry acts like a conservative man who thinks that it is his responsibility to work and provide for the family while his wife stays at home. Unfortunately for him, he meets Belle who is a hardworking woman who refuses to stay at home and perform the 'good-wife duties.' Belle has always wanted to work in companies and she did everything to reach her goal.

One day, when Belle was so happy to have received her bonus check and proudly showed it to Henry, he declared "this is money for teasing men." (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 86). The truth is that Henry was still a student in business school at the time when Belle was already working. As Belle says, "Henry started acting like some portion of his manhood was being questioned by me. It was clear that Henry wanted to be the provider. The fact that I was outearning him made him nuts." (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 87). Henry wants to be the provider in their household because he is the man. As

a general rule, men are allowed to work outside the home to provide food for their family, Henry has subscribed to this idea as well. For him, “it’s emasculating” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 87) that a woman works and earns money to take care of her family when her husband is still alive. This situation has led to the collapse of their relationship because Henry says he does not “want to be married to a man.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 277). In his mind, Belle is not a real woman for she earns more money than him. She trespasses the requirements of her gender by being a successful woman with a lot of money in her bank account.

Finally, Henry finds another woman who meets the demands of the female gender as it has been socially established. In his eyes, Danielle is the perfect woman, she does not work and allows him to fully pay the bills and exercise his manhood. When Belle asks him if his wife has a job, he says “no, she loves to play,” “she knows exactly what she wants and what she wants is not to work a day in her life.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 215). Belle notes that Henry is in admiration when he talks about the fact that his wife does not work and does not even intend to work. This situation allows him to be the breadwinner of his family and reinforce his masculinity. In addition, this way of thinking helps him establish his authority and domination inherited from patriarchy. Henry reveals that his wife Danielle has a “wifey bonus” that she uses as the following: “one-third for fun, one-third for charity, and one-third for clothes and gifts.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 215). Like Henry who is financially taking care of his family, Danielle also has some duties, she takes care of their home and children. For example, she uses the money given by her husband to buy “the boys’ clothes.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 215). This is how traditional families have separated the gender roles and they function on this model. Visibly, Henry has internalized the idea that “holding a job and earning a salary has been considered to be a husband’s traditional family’s obligations, whereas tending to home and children traditionally has been considered a wife’s primary obligation.” (S. Coltrane and K. Shih, 2010, p. 401). As we can see, the traditional gender division of labor is effective when women stay in the private sphere and men occupy the public sphere alone.

Added to the experience of Henry’s wife, we can also see in *Opening Belle* a group of women called the “PA Ladies”. As a matter of fact, these women represent “the not-employed-out-of-the-house, Park Avenue mothers” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 55), they are married to rich men and do not feel the need to work. What they do is to take care of their children and networking with other billionaire’s wives. They do not have to work because they have rich husbands who already pay for the bills. In fact, women have always been considered as being fragile, weak and in constant need of assistance from men, that is why they are always relegated to the private sphere with activities that strictly concern their households.

We want to highlight the fact that the setting of the novel is related to a 2008 New York City, which is more modern in terms of infrastructures and mentalities. For decades, feminist activists in the United States have struggled to promote gender equality and demote women’s marginalization. The well-known scholar and feminist activist B. Hooks, addressing this matter, says

This marvelous creation was described as a submissive wife whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household. Physically weak, and ‘formed for the less laborious occupations,’ she depended upon male protection. (2015, p. 72).

Hooks, taking part in the feminists fight to enhance the image of women, put to the fore the fact that women are not weak and should not be seen as being dependent on men. She describes women as being a “marvelous creation”, meaning that they are also capable of doing great things

outside of their private sphere. Gender roles being one of the sources of inequalities toward women, it is time to rethink this notion to guarantee gender equality.

If we take a look at the novel *Opening Belle*, we will see that apart from the women who have chosen to be housewives, some like Belle have decided to be invested in the public sector despite their wife and mother duties. The feminist struggles that have been conducted for years has allowed women to work in companies and also to take decisions. In the following lines, we will address this change in women's status as well as the disadvantages associated to it.

2. The Paradigmatic Shift in Women's Condition and Gender Inequality

The struggle of feminist movements for the liberation of women and the recognition of their rights and effective participation in social life seems to have borne fruit. Today, things have changed, and women are major players in the economic, social and cultural development of countries all over the world. Indeed, the public sphere and everything that takes place there is no longer the exclusive preserve of men, women are to be found in all sectors of activity, and often in high positions of responsibility. Examples include Kamala Harris, Vice-President of the United States, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former Head of State of Liberia, and Christine Lagarde, former Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, just to name a few of them. According to M. F. Calista and W. Udasmoro, "one aspect that encourages women to enter the public sphere is economic globalization." (2021, p. 319). This is true because economic globalization fosters the development of countries and facilitates access to better health and education systems, among others. For example, women benefit from better health care and can now be trained in the schools and universities built as a result of economic globalization. From the demands of the first-wave feminists, which focused mainly on the recognition of their civil rights, to the present day, there has been a major advance in the status of women.

This progress of women is also represented in the novel *Opening Belle* by our main character Isabelle McElroy and her colleagues, who hold several high-level positions on Wall Street as well as in other leading companies and earn a very good living. Belle as a professional on Wall Street announces her salary, she says "mine at the managing director level is \$500K" (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 2). Looking at her job description, which is Managing Director, we realize that Belle is part of her company's top management, which means that she is one of the company's top executives, decision-makers and those who manage the company's highest responsibilities and guarantee its economic performance. Belle is proud of herself and what she has achieved so far, she says "I became a managing director at twenty-eight here, the youngest to ever do so. And now at thirty-six I am comfortable in the role." (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 10). In this modern era, where the struggles of the feminist movement have given women the same access to education as men, equal opportunities seem to be a reality, with women occupying positions of responsibility in the public sphere. In *Opening Belle*, like Belle, other women stand out for their remarkable presence in the public sphere. This is the case of Aripicy Salinas who is said to be working "at a competitive bank" (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 16). There is also Ina Drew who is "the chief investment officer of JPMorgan Chase & Co, and a member of their risk committee." (M. Sherry, 2016, p.111). Another outstanding woman in the novel is "Sallie Krawcheck, CFO of Citigroup, the world's largest bank." (Sherry, 2016: 111), we can also mention "Muriel Siebert, the first woman to own a seat on the New York Stock Exchange" (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 243). All these women are testimony to the fact that women now occupy the public space in a significant way.

However, it should be noted that the fact that women are now associated with the public sphere does not exempt them from continuing to work in the private sphere that represents their restricted family circle. This is the case for Ina Drew, the narrator reveals that “she kept getting promoted and managed to have two kids.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 111). The same reality applies to Belle who has a “tribe of three kids” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 3). But the problem is that, although women are now an integral part of the public sphere, the tasks assigned to them in their private lives have not been lightened. In other words, society expects women to continue managing their homes, children and households, among other things, with the same intensity as they did when they were not allowed to take part in activities in the public sphere. Since their identity as women is automatically linked to domestic chores due to patriarchy, women who are in the public space continue to bear the burden of housework and the management of their children. This situation naturally leads to inequalities towards these women. As a matter of fact, men are once again privileged, since they only participate in the public space, while women are expected to participate in both public and private space. This is what leads H. Kim to affirm that:

Many women perform housework and childcare whether they work outside the home; many men perform market work and have less responsibility for housework and childcare than women do. This gender division of labor is one of the main causes of women's oppression, especially in current society, where women's work is less valued than men's work. (2009, p. 181).

This statement is a reality in Belle's life, as she is the only one to manage her family on all fronts, in addition to holding a constraining position in her office. Indeed, Belle is the only one to manage all the burdens of family life, including bills and other expenses of all kinds. Belle's husband, Bruce, is unemployed and has no interest in having a job, since his wife already earns a good living and, above all, takes care of the household. Belle says:

I'm paying for three private school tuitions, a nanny salary, a dog walker, a housekeeper who only shows up on occasion, rental space to park our car, a mortgage on a family-sized apartment, and the rent on a Hamptons house we run to each weekend to exhale, all with after-tax. (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 3).

Belle looks after her three children Kevin, Brigid and Owen, her husband Bruce and their Labrador dog Woof Woof. In short, she is the breadwinner of her family. However, despite Belle's best efforts to keep her husband and children out of trouble, Bruce does not help her at all in managing the children and their household. Once again, this is due to the patriarchal ideas that men grow up with, namely that household chores are assigned to women and that it is they, as mothers, who must look after the children. Belle tells us what she mainly does when she gets home after a busy day at work:

When the elevator door opens, the scene in front of me screams, “Fun!” The slide perched on the sofa, adding the foot to the drop to floor, and it appears that mini golf was played because I step on a few rogue balls. (...) I crack the boy's bedroom to see Bruce snoring on a chair with a Nate the Great detective story spayed across his chest. (...) Owen, my two-year-old, is facedown on the floor and not even in a bed. (...) I should wake Bruce and send him to bed. I should put Owen in his crib but odd of waking him up are too high. (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 21-23).

Bruce is carefree, as he has internalized the fact that it is not up to him to take care of all the tasks pertaining to the house and the kids, because he is a man, so he does not bother and leaves it all up to Belle, who still has to come home from work and fix everything. H. Hartmann asserts that

women who take part in activities in both public and private space are subject to a “double day’ of wage work and housework.” (1981, p. 386). This denotes an inequality towards women who have to work twice as hard to achieve their professional goals and take care of their families in order to be seen as real women. Belle adds again:

I GET HOME (...) to find that Bruce has left the place like a crime scene. His message seems to be, “I’m leaving every overturned sippy cup, every empty wine bottle in exactly the position it was left in. I want you to see what you missed and then I want you to clean it up. (...) I remove my shoes and methodologically begin picking up raisins, rice crackers, and bits of masticated apple. (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 231-232).

This attitude of Belle's husband shows that he is irresponsible and above all that he has a macho behavior. He does not take part in household chores because he is a man, but makes no effort to share the financial burden. It is true that today, the notion of head of the family has been rethought in many societies, and that financial burdens no longer fall on men alone, as women now share the attribute of head of the family with men. But this should not be a pretext for men to shirk their responsibilities and leave all family burdens in the hands of women. Belle finds herself in a vicious circle where she is the only one to make the human and financial efforts to guarantee her family's well-being. Although it is hard work, given her busy schedule at work, Belle finds a way to cook for her family. That is what she says on this purpose, “like a four-armed person I marinate, chop, steam, and sauté.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 187). But while Belle devotes herself to caring for her family, her husband behaves like a welfare recipient, not hesitating to spend money at his wife's expense. This is what Belle explains in the following lines:

The reality was that the more money I made at work, the more Bruce's spending climbed on just the sort of stuff she described. (...) I talked to Elizabeth about Bruce's habit of flitting from one big purchase to another. He bought Pinarello Dogma bikes (plural) that cost as much as a small car (\$25K for two) and parabolic skis that nobody uses anymore. (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 21-23).

In patriarchal society, there are criteria to which individuals must adhere in order to be recognized as belonging to a gender category, since gender is socially constructed. If we refer to Bruce's attitude, we can easily say that he does not meet the conditions to be categorized as a real man. A study conducted by M. Atkinson and J. Boles reveals that husbands who are financially dependent on their wives and do not work are perceived as “losers, e.g., lazy, irresponsible and unmasculine.” (1984, p. 864). Nevertheless, the aim of our work is not to put men on trial, but to use the novel *Opening Belle* as a starting point for reflection on how to balance gender roles in a contemporary context where women are taking over both public and private space. The fact that women are now active members of the public space should lead men to also invest in the private space in order to balance gender roles and ensure gender equality. But, although the struggle of the women's liberation movement has enabled women to achieve equality by participating in the public space, this so-called equality leaves a bitter taste because it is not equitable due to the non-participation of men in the private space. Addressing this crucial topic, the American sociologist A. Hochschild says, the “strain between the change in women and the absence of change in much else leads me to speak of a “stalled revolution.”” (2003, p. 12). In her view, women's struggle for equality has certainly borne fruit, but this revolution has stalled because equality between men and women is achieved without equity. Men should also change and adapt to the evolution of society as women do, in order to guarantee equity. As our objective is to redefine gender roles in order to achieve equality and equity between men and women, we will propose an alternative in this direction in the following lines.

3. Partnership: An Alternative for Gender Equality

Partnership means joining forces and carrying out joint tasks that benefit both partners, the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines partnership as “an association of two or more persons or entities that conduct a business for profit as co-owners.”¹ In the context of our study on gender roles and women’s participation in public space, partnership is an important alternative for reducing inequalities between men and women. In today’s world, things have changed, and women are no longer confined to the private family sphere, but are actively involved in the development process all over the world. What is more, we are now talking about gender equality, and this necessarily involves redefining the gender roles that continue to oppress women. In an article written by E. Leacock, she asserts that “at this point in history, most nations have declared their formal support for legal, economic, and social equality for women.” (1981, p. 474). While it is true that following the involvement of feminist movements in the struggle for women’s emancipation, states and institutions are now in favor of their participation and inclusion in economic, social, and cultural development, etc., there is still much to be done to achieve the much-desired equality.

As we have seen through the plot of *Opening Belle*, “the husband-provider/wife homemaker family” (J. Matthaei, 1980, p. 201) is not really relevant anymore if we take into account the evolution of current society. The economic realities of today’s world demand the participation of all, which is why women are now present in the public sphere to increase the family’s income. In Belle’s case, she wants her husband to be able to find a job but also to help her with household chores. Addressing her husband, she declares, “what I really want to say is *I love you so please get up and get a regular job in the world. Please, stop being the depressed house daddy because it makes me feel like I’m alone in this and I’m cracking.*” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 38). Tired of dealing with the financial and emotional burdens of her family on her own in addition to being a business executive, Belle enlists her husband’s involvement, which could help her feel better psychologically. It is in this sense that T. Calasanti and C. Bailey indicate that “employed women, and not men, experience an “over-burden” of domestic labor to the detriment of their psychological well-being.” (1991, p. 34).

T. Calasanti and C. Bailey's claims are confirmed in Belle’s life. She reveals that managing the household chores and being a corporate executive, without any help from her husband, not only weakens her physically, but also emotionally. Belle says, “I resemble a car crash lately, a sadden, sulky, weepy, empty mess, rumped and barely standing at the edge of Union Square.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 14). To be fulfilled, Belle wants her husband Bruce to be a little more involved in running the family. The fact that she is under all this pressure shows that there is a gender inequality in the distribution of household chores, as well as any other burdens relating to the management of their family. Belle adds once again that sometimes “the leader is tired of being responsible of so many people.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 107). Only the partnership between Belle and Bruce could help her be free, fulfilled and guarantee an equitable gender equality. Men should understand that the division of labor has no place in today’s world. Gender should not necessarily be associated with any domestic task, since we are in an environment that requires the participation of everyone, regardless of gender. Talking about her husband, Belle says, “he still thinks we should split domestic tasks, or that I need to thank him everytime he empties a dishwasher.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 107). Bruce behaves this way because, in his mind, he is helping Belle, but he does not feel involved as a real partner playing his part for the well-being of his family.

¹ “Partnership.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/partnership>. Accessed 23 Dec. 2023.

Indeed, in contemporary society, work has been de-gendered, which is why we see “men do the same sorts of work outside the home for pay as chefs, waiters, janitors.” (S. Coltrane and K. Shih, 2010, p. 403). If men are capable of doing “women’s work” for money, that means they are just as capable of doing it at home. It is the reasoning of patriarchal society that leads them to refuse to be associated with domestic tasks, thus creating inequality towards women, which is also a form of oppression. J. Matthaei, a specialist in gender and women, recommends the participation of men in the private space in the same way as women in the public space. For her, “as females take on masculine as well as feminine activities, becoming more whole human beings, they urge males to experience their feminine sides.” (1980, p. 201-202). The idea that emerges from this statement is, of course, that of partnership with regard to the division of labor in a context of redefining gender roles.

Going in the same way, Belle, speaking of the unequal distribution of work, states that “it’s me bringing home ninety-nine percent of our income and still having to do eighty percent of the non-caregiver kid stuff. It’s not the Aston Martin, the driver or diamonds that I want. I just want real partnership.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 293). By real partnership, Belle means that her husband should really invest and help her with household chores and childcare while she is away for work. Since he does not yet have a job, and as such is forced to remain in the private space, he should be more present by helping to manage the expenses related to the private space. There is nothing degrading about a man helping with household chores or taking care of children, it is the patriarchal ideas of male superiority and the gender division of labor that create confusion.

Furthermore, Belle makes the distinction between partnership and assistance, explaining that, “I don’t need help. I need *partnership*. A helper is someone who does favors for you, someone you have to thank all the time. A partner is someone who’s in it with you.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 293). She insists on the term partnership so that Bruce understands what she really wants from him. Belle aspires to achieve gender equality but also equity in her marriage, as these will help reduce the pressure she feels on both sides of the public and private sphere. According to J. Matthaei, “the new marriage is a union, not of man and woman, but of full persons, each of whom participates actively in economic and family life.” (1980, p. 202). What she means is that couples should work in tandem, not dividing up work according to gender, but taking into account each other’s availability and ability to complete the work assigned to them. The ultimate goal is to help each other, which would be a big step towards ending inequality towards women in the social sphere.

Luckily for Belle, her husband Bruce eventually pulled himself together and adopted the posture of a real partner. He decided to take a more active role in helping his wife run the family. She says, “we just sort of out a lot, run one-hundred-yard dashes on the beach together with the kids planted at the fifty-yard line. We don’t have a caregiver. We look better than we did a few years ago, we’re better parents and we’re good to each other.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 330). In fact, Bruce has found a job and is now interested in family activities, the partnership he has with his wife Belle is beneficial to their family as it has improved their quality of life and their relationship and they seem happier together. Belle also says, “I love our days together, love that he cooks dinner, love that he’s respecting me again.” (M. Sherry, 2016, p. 335). Even though Bruce’s bad attitude towards Belle almost led to their divorce, it is sure that Bruce’s positive change will definitely help them make things right. Bruce’s attitude shows that he is resolutely focused on a gender equality that is fair and based on partnership.

Conclusion

This research work was an opportunity for us to address the issue of gender roles and the inequalities associated with them at a time when women participate in the public space in the same way as men. Focusing on the experience of Belle, the main character of M. Sherry's novel *Opening Belle*, and with the support of the gender studies perspective, we first set out the traditional way of dividing tasks according to the gender of individuals. In fact, gender, as socially constructed, responds to certain criteria. As far as the division of labor is concerned, it is naturally understood that men are the only ones who can participate in the public sphere, including paid work, decision-making and political participation, to name but a few. As a result, men are automatically considered to be the economic providers. Women, on the other hand, are confined to the private sphere of their family circle. The activities that devolve upon them in this private space are linked to child-rearing, household chores, and so on. In this way, they remain under the responsibility of men, who hold all the power.

But this way of thinking about gender has been opposed by women's liberation movements, which have denounced patriarchy that fosters the marginalization of women. Feminists believed that women's full participation in public life could contribute to equality between men and women. Nowadays, women's participation in the public sphere is a reality. This is what we have shown in the second part of our work through Belle, who occupies a position of great responsibility on Wall Street. On top of that, thanks to her consistent salary, she takes care of her family financially, she is the breadwinner. But the progress made by women through their participation in the public sphere remains mixed, as they are still tied to activities that were previously dedicated to them in the private sphere.

As a result, women have a double burden of participating in both public and private sphere, which represents a gender inequality since men only take part in the public sphere. This equality, desired by women, seems to have been achieved, but it lacks equity. In the last part of our work, we proposed a redefinition of gender roles through partnership, which remains an alternative for curbing gender inequality. We argued that, since men and women are now major players in the public arena, it would be important for men to collaborate with them through a partnership that guarantees equity in the distribution of roles. In other words, men should also be involved in the private sphere, as this would promote true gender equality. Finally, we can say that partnership tends to be a reflection of today's society, in which women diplomatically bring men into the private sphere.

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