

# **(En)gendering Division of Labour in COVID-19 Lockdown: A Study of Domestic Space in Shobhaa De's *After This, Dubai* ?**

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an enforcer of gender inequality in diverse spheres of life. It has resurfaced the antiquated socio-cultural norms about gender roles and position within domestic space, during the lockdown. The lockdowns have substantially increased the amount of domestic labour, which has disproportionately fallen on women. Unequal distribution of household chores and childcare exacerbated the gender gap that exists in our society. Due to the lack of paid public services and domestic support systems during the lockdown, the home became a hegemonic site of exploitation for women. In the lockdown story, "After This, Dubai?" taken from her collection *Lockdown Liaisons* (2020), Shobhaa De represents the social reality of women's stressful existence within the domestic space, due to the overwhelming burden of housework in the absence of any spousal support. The proposed study will contextually analyse the ramifications of the lockdown on the domestic space and the gender relational dynamics, as represented in the story. Attempts will be made to critically examine the social attitudes perpetuated by individuals and communities that give credence to the exclusivity of housework and child care as gender-specific tasks.

**Keywords:** Childcare; COVID-19; Domestic space; Gender; Housework; Lockdown.

## **Introduction**

After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020, various countries imposed complete or partial lockdowns as a preventive measure against the contagion. On 24 March

2020, the Government of India ordered a complete nationwide lockdown starting from 25 March 2020 for three weeks by imposing section 144 of the Constitution of India to contain the spread of COVID-19-induced pandemic. It was later extended till 3 May 2020 in response to the growing number of cases. With no viable cure, the Government of India issued 'stay-at-home' directives to promote social distancing and to ensure minimal transmission of coronavirus among the population. With sizable human fatalities across the globe, economic loss, unemployment, migrant labour crisis, and stringent travel restrictions, the human society at large was witnessing a disaster of an unprecedented scale. Amidst the socio-economic crisis and impending health hazards, the lockdown had also created a paradigm shift in every walk of life. The lockdown had created a domestic space that was enforced as well as essential at the same time, thereby, obfuscating any distinction that exists between the social realities of the public and the private sphere, the work and the home, the professional and the personal, the formal and the informal, the outside and the inside world. It is a paradoxical space that is, at once, a source of preservation from the onslaught of COVID-19 as well as a source of chronic entrapment for individuals and society. In the grip of such a crisis, the home has been called an ambivalent space of cohabitation that is under strict restriction and self-regulation (Moretti and Maturo 97, 100-01). While restricting people to their homes, the pandemic has disproportionately affected individuals on the basis of gender. The pandemic amplified the gendered nature of the domestic space and made us question the existing structures that enforce as well as legitimize gender roles in every sphere of life. The study attempts to analyse how COVID-19 has exposed the societal mechanisms that operate tacitly, defining the role and position of women within the domestic spaces engendered by the COVID-19 lockdown as represented in Shobhaa De's short story "After This, Dubai?"

"After This, Dubai?" is an internal monologue from her self-reflective work, *Lockdown Liaisons* (2020), one of the early works of fiction on the COVID-19 pandemic. Starting from 30 May to 4 July 2020, De wrote a series of twenty-four short stories with four short stories releasing on six consecutive Saturdays as e-books. It was later compiled and published in book form by the end of July. Her collection of short stories rivetingly touches upon the far-reaching consequences of the lockdown on human relational dynamics and the society at large. The collection encapsulates the myriad hues of individual vulnerabilities and human responses to the global crisis. In many of her stories, De captures the plight of women whose lives have come to a complete stasis inside the bubbles of their homes and who are seeking an eventual

release, both physically as well as emotionally, from their trapped existences and unhappy domestic lives. "After This, Dubai?" lays bare the shortcomings in the existing gender system that perpetuates the dominant patriarchal discourse by questioning the conceptual notion of 'homemaking'. The study intends to examine the gender relations, roles, identities, and division of domestic labour that are immanent in our daily life and are permeated as established norms embraced by individuals and communities alike. In doing so, attempts shall also be made to contextually assess the catalytic role of lockdown in exacerbating gender inequality within the domestic space.

### **Gender, Domestic Space and COVID-19**

Domestic labour or housework has a gendered dimension in our everyday lives. Across different societies and cultures, it is men who, traditionally, worked outside their homes and played the role of being the sole breadwinner of their family. Whereas, women worked within the home and have always been held responsible for its smooth functioning. Thus, geographically, home and the outside world formed associative identities with respective genders. According to Silvia Federici's *Revolution Point Zero: Housework Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (2012), housework has not only been imposed on women but also considered a "natural attribute of female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character" (16). Thus, 'housework' has been considered a way of feminine self-expression, a way to affirm womanhood, and a way to earn social validation and acceptability within the domain of family. Women's domestic role is indoctrinated within the female psyche to such an extent that it inevitably becomes an inalienable part of their identity. A woman tends to serve her role diligently in keeping up with the social norms to ensure 'order' within the family. By doing so, she also tries to ensure a 'blissful' relationship with her male counterpart, playing the role of a 'perfect housewife'. A 'housewife', as typified in Ann Oakley's *The Sociology of Housework* (1974), is someone who "is phrased in terms of responsibility: thus a housewife is 'the person, other than a domestic servant, who is responsible for most of the household duties (or for supervising a domestic servant who carries out these duties)'. A housewife may be married or not, and she may or may not have a job outside the home" (29). Oakley's extended definition of 'housewife' is indicative of the social construction of feminine responsibilities of women regardless of their marital status and professional work. The profound weight and multifarious nature of feminine responsibilities find universal expression in the lines of Maya Angelou's poignant poem,

“Woman Work”:

I’ve got the children to tend  
The clothes to mend  
The floor to mop  
The food to shop  
Then the chicken to fry  
The baby to dry  
I got company to feed  
The garden to weed  
I’ve got shirts to press  
The tots to dress  
The can to be cut  
I gotta clean up this hut  
Then see about the sick  
And the cotton to pick (1-14).

Even in modern times, when women have established their professional footing in the outside world, they fulfil the bulk of the household responsibilities i.e., directly engage or oversee housework that sustains other members of a family on a daily basis. Shoma A. Chatterji discusses modernisation theorists in *The Female Gaze* (2022), asserting that “women are free to enter and remain in the marketplace through remunerated jobs, though cultural norms in most societies define the household as the primary sphere of a woman’s life” (3). Sociologist Arlie Hochschild regards these obligatory household duties as women’s “second shift” in her book, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (1989), co-written by Anne Machung. In her own words, “[m]ost women work one shift at the office or factory and a “second shift” at home” (4). In “Women Working Worldwide” (2002), Swasti Mitter calls this extensive labour the “burden of double day” where women engage in waged work in the outside world and unwaged work inside the home to conform to society’s expectation that women will work at home irrespective of whether they are engaged in a paid job (114). A working woman, in this sense, is preoccupied with work almost throughout the day. The combination of labour within and outside the home leads to the exploitation of human resources due to additional working hours, increased stress, weariness, and often unmanageable daily routines.

The introduction of the COVID-19 pandemic as an aggravating agent further complicates the already existing gender dynamics. A disaster like a pandemic uncovers and deepens the shortcomings of our social systems

and processes that influence our perception of gender relations and the division of labour. Rashi Bhargava's "Gendering the Pandemic: Revisiting the Domestic Space in Times of Covid-19" (2021) critically looks at "homemaking, homemakers and housework and its conceptualization before exploring its reconfigurations in the current pandemic situation" (20). She explicates "housework as an important dimension and its distribution as an expression of gendered relations within the domestic space" (22). The Lancet's article titled "The gendered dimensions of COVID-19" also underlines the domestic inequities that have impacted the social well-being and economic resilience of women during the lockdowns. The article stresses the critical challenges that women grappled with during the lockdown: "Households are under strain, but child care, elderly care, and housework typically fall on women." (1168). UN Women Report titled "The First 100 Days of the COVID-19 Outbreak in Asia and the Pacific: A Gender Lens" (2020) also identifies the uneven distribution of domestic work and the unpaid nature of care as a result of gendered social expectations that act as major hindrances towards achieving women's empowerment and gender equality (7, 9). As per its assessment, the existing gender imbalance, which had been catapulted by the pandemic, was further heightened at the closure of schools and business places where women needed to act as caregivers for children, elderly, or sick members of the family (9).

"UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women" (2020) has also been vocal about the "gross imbalances in the gender distribution of unpaid care work". It grimly exposes the socio-economic vulnerabilities and the pre-existing inequalities that were aggravated by the pandemic. Statistically, it says, women were involved in thrice the amount of domestic work done by men even before COVID-19 could assume the status of a universal pandemic (13). Paola Profeta further validates these findings in her 2020 publication, "Gender Equality and Public Policy during COVID-19," which critically examines women's economic vulnerabilities in the labor market, the substantial increase in household chores and childcare responsibilities during lockdowns, alterations in relational dynamics within family resulting from the impact of COVID-19, and the implementation of public policy measures aimed at mitigating gender disparities. The study is also suggestive of women's leadership as an alternate recourse to tackle the pandemic (365-66). Profeta opines that the lockdown has increased the amount of work for families and should the burden of the extra work fall on women, it will only deepen the gender gap (368). Lockdowns have led to the perpetual overcrowding of the domestic space, resulting in oversaturation or overabundance of domestic labour for women.

### **Weighing the Heft of Housework**

In “After This, Dubai?”, Shobhaa De provides an insight into the psychological landscape of an unnamed woman speaker through the deft use of internal monologue. The inner voice of the protagonist is communicated to the readers through self-talk while she is reminiscing about her present life— hardships caused by the pandemic, her relationship with her husband, and her role as a sole domestic caretaker and caregiver to her one-year-old daughter, Natasha. The story underscores the predicament of an urban woman employed as a scriptwriter in the television industry, as she grapples with the loss of her job due to the lockdown. The television industry, like any other industry, has heavily suffered due to the pandemic and is forced to lay off employees to cope with the sudden financial loss. Her husband, Anirudh who is a journalist, has also been asked by the company management to take three months off, which, according to the speaker, was polite to have an employee terminated. In the wake of a sudden shortage of paid job opportunities in the market, they struggled to meet their financial commitments, such as clearing mounting bills, covering car and home loan payments, and providing for their infant.

Apart from the economic strain that directly affects the well-being of individuals, the lockdown also cast aspersions on the entrenched gender inequalities and discriminatory outlook that looms large on the domestic space inhabited by people. Despite being part of a dual-income household, her husband does not contribute to any domestic responsibilities or childcare, even during the lockdown, which not only results in an imbalance in the workload but also highlights the presence of unequal family dynamics, traditional attitudes, and the psychological forces and discourses that reinforce gender stereotypes. In her story, De attempts to explore this disproportionate spousal allocation of household jobs that is not only strenuous but also unmanageable most of the time in the absence of adequate assistance: “Natasha started howling and before she threw up her porridge, I ran to pick her up. Naturally, I forgot about the daal [lentils] I left on the gas... how many things could I handle? ‘It’s fucking burning...’ Anirudh hollered. But did not enter the kitchen to turn off the gas” (De 23-24). Cooking remains one of the primary nourishing jobs of a woman, apart from childcare and cleaning. De skillfully depicts the collision of these simultaneous domestic duties, where certain tasks demand attention at the same time. The woman had to hastily attend to the baby, who might have been at risk of choking on her food, and then promptly clean up the resulting mess. In her absence, the ‘daal’ was burnt with no one left to oversee it. Anirudh was not only reluctant to enter

the 'feminine space' of the kitchen to turn off the gas but also unwilling to check on his infant daughter when she vomited. He, furthermore, reproached his wife for her 'failure' to manage domestic obligations. This is indicative of asymmetrical gender expectations and sociological role allocation of household work and childcare. According to Rashi Bhargava, it is "the patriarchal common sense that conceptualizes housework as 'no work'" whereas "experiences of women across time and space have proven that housework and care work are physically demanding, mentally exhausting, time consuming and most importantly unpaid/unwaged labour" (24). In "The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective" (1981) Angela Y. Davis characterised housework as "[i]nvisible, repetitive, exhausting, unproductive, un-creative—these are the adjectives which most perfectly capture the nature of housework" (222). Shoma A. Chatterji also agrees with this line of argument and defines housework as "petty, isolated and monotonous involving unending hours of hard and unrewarding labour" (15). In this regard, 'family' as an institution and 'home' as a geo-spatial location can be considered as the primary site of oppression, exploitation, monotony, and boredom for many women, especially during the lockdown.

Families were compelled to suspend their domestic help services in adherence to government guidelines on social distancing to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19. This aggravated the domestic workload of women, who were left to bear challenging situations at home. While navigating through the unequal gender roles in social and familial life, women were compelled to cope with the drastic change in lifestyle, singlehandedly, compensating for the absence of paid domestic help. In this context, the situation of a working woman like De's protagonist can be deemed more adverse in comparison to that of a full-time housewife. Since a full-time housewife purposively vests all her time and energy in unpaid care and domestic chores, the expertise and ease she acquires over time ought to be more than that of a working woman. Thus, a working woman not only needs to accustom herself to the increased pressure of domestic workload more than a housewife but also needs to adapt to the immobility of domestic space during lockdown. While juggling between unpaid housework and paid professional work the quality of women's paid employment is likely to get undermined. The state of a working woman like De's protagonist is bound to be more precarious than full-time housewives who traditionally continue to devote their undivided attention and efforts to the domestic sphere. De situates her character in a position of utmost vulnerability to heighten the gender gap plaguing the households. Erstwhile President of India, Ram Nath Kovind has also acknowledged

the exacerbating gender inequalities in terms of workload that a working woman had to confront during the pandemic: "Work-from home has its benefits but it also puts working women under a 'triple burden'. They already have the double burden of paid work and 'unpaid work', that is, domestic responsibilities. On top of that, as children attend school from home, their learning as to be supplemented by the parents, and that task usually falls on the mother" ("Arise, The Future"). He is deeply concerned about the detrimental effects of the concurrent pressures of professional responsibilities, household duties, and childcare on the quality of work performed by women who are striving to maintain a delicate equilibrium between 'work from home' and 'work for home'.

### **The Pain of Parenting in the Pandemic**

The protagonist of "After This, Dubai?" was not in favour of having children as she "didn't want to be stuck at home changing nappies", hampering her professional and social life (De 21). She desired to subvert the patriarchal template that reduces a woman's social role to that of a domestic caregiver for children and elders. She was at the prime of her career, frequently messaged by television stars for seeking favours. Despite her conscious family planning, she accidentally conceived and had a child untimely before the lockdown. A woman's maternal duties include feeding, changing napkins, playing, putting the child to sleep, getting the child dressed, and bathing among others. In the absence of external assistance, the pandemic augmented these parenting responsibilities. According to Kate Power, "The United Nations (2020) confirms that as institutional and community childcare has not been accessible for many families during the lockdown, unpaid childcare provision has been falling more heavily on women, which has constrained their ability to work" (69). The childcare infrastructure and support systems collapsed during the pandemic. Apart from the paid childcare services like babysitters and nannies, the care provided by neighbours and relatives was also cut off due to social distancing norms. Limited access to pediatric healthcare facilities and difficulties faced in child safe-keeping add to the complexity of child-rearing during the lockdown.

Also, as the baby was not pre-planned, there were no prior arrangements and anticipatory planning in getting the apartment "baby proofed" (De 22). The lockdown has limited access to general public service providers like cooks, cleaners, and electricians among others. Families, mostly based in urban areas, are hugely dependent on various kinds of professional services for everyday existence. Consequently, the protagonist was not able



to avail herself of any professional assistance from the outside world to cover the electric plug socket in order to safeguard her playful child. She critically questions her husband's domestic inaction and apathetic role as a father, when her plea to stick tapes at least on the ground level sockets goes unheard: "I see him on that bloody couch all day, playing some idiotic game or the other" (22). K. Power rightly estimates that the "care work will be done more often by women than men, partly because of the persistence of traditional gender roles and partly because of the structure of women's economic participation, which is more likely to be part-time, flexible, and less remunerative" (69).

### Decontaminating the Domestic Space

Cleaning and sanitization became daily household rituals during the pandemic, adding to the existing burden of domestic chores for women. Washing hands with soap and using alcohol-based sanitisers emerged as a standard hygiene practice to ward off the coronavirus. Governments and public welfare entities around the world highlighted the importance of maintaining these standard protocols which also forbade bringing the unwashed hand in close contact of nose and mouth to prevent contamination. Anirudh's unhygienic habit of eating with unwashed hands was counterproductive to her wife's anxious efforts to maintain a healthy home during the pandemic: "I was particular about cleanliness – and lockdown made me doubly aware of how important that is. If I told him to wash his hands before touching the plates, he would snap, "Back off cow!" (26). A woman, in sociologist Heejung Chung's words, is always invested in "ensuring the emotional wellbeing of [not only her children](#) but also [her] parents and other family members. In other words, they [i.e. women] are in charge of the [mental load](#) of [worrying about](#) the family". She calls it the "third shift" which a woman does in terms of emotional labour, stressing about the wellbeing of her family ("Return of the 1950s Housewife?"). By doing so Chung is supplementing as well as complementing Arlie Holschild's idea of women's "second shift" i.e., unpaid domestic labour, while 'first shift' includes the paid professional labour done by women (4).

Cleaning the toilet is also among the essential household chores that maintain basic household hygiene. De's protagonist was annoyed at her husband's "sloppiness in the loo and the way he threw his stuff around" (26). In her unpretentious way, De criticises the patriarchal negligence of housework reflected in Anirudh's 'neither shall I clean it, nor can I keep it clean' attitude. Through her mouthpiece, De not only puts a question mark on the inadequate role of men in domestic space but also questions

the male agency that perceives housework disdainfully. Anirudh's intransigent nature seems to stem from his firm conviction about the exclusivity of housework as a gender definitive task. Anirudh also keeps his things cluttered around the house much to his wife's apathy: "Seeing his underwear on the sofa drove me insane. He said, 'It's my underwear... I am free to throw it anywhere and keep it handy.' Handy? Then he said, 'Thank God I don't suffer from OCD - like you.' So now, my good habits had become a disorder?" (26). Anirudh's shambolic habits transpire into additional domestic chores for his wife. His failure to recognise his wife's contribution hints at the invisibility of women's labour in the domestic sphere. It is not only eschewed but also undervalued and overlooked. Eco-feminist Vandana Shiva opines that "women produce the sustenance for society through 'invisible' unpaid work called non-work" as the "[d]ominant economic theories assign no value to tasks carried out at subsistence and domestic levels" (75). In Angela Davies' opinion "[j]ust as a woman's maternal duties are always taken for granted, her never-ending toil as a housewife rarely occasions expressions of appreciation within her family. Housework, after all, is virtually invisible: "No one notices it until it isn't done - we notice the unmade bed, not the scrubbed and polished floor"" (222). The focal point here is to identify and redress the structural hierarchy that is stacked heavily against women. Patriarchal discourses need to be subverted and their cultural practices should be unlearned to cultivate a new cultural consciousness. An empathy-bound male gaze is a prerequisite in making perceptible the inordinate amount of house chores. An egalitarian gender role would involve an equitable sharing of domestic work to quintessentially mitigate the grave systemic inequality that was heightened during the lockdown.

## Conclusion

Shobhaa De has deftly dealt with seemingly disparate subjects like 'disaster' and 'gender' by merging the COVID-19 pandemic with the existing gender dynamics of our domestic space. It is evident that the pandemic is not 'gender-blind' as men and women were not equivalently affected by its encroachment on domestic life. "UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women" deems the pandemic a gender-regressive phenomenon as "even the limited gains made in the past decades are at risk of being rolled back" (2). The glaring gender gap in the domestic space that even existed during pre-pandemic India can be quantified in the following study:

Even before the pandemic, for every hour of housework—clean-

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ing, nurturing, cooking, teaching, managing— that Indian men put in, women put 10, far higher than the global average of three, and among the highest levels of gender disparity in unpaid work in the world. Even at minimum wage rates, unpaid work could contribute \$300 billion to India's economy (Purushothaman et al.)

Evaluation and monetisation of household work and child care can be regarded as a palliative and compensatory measure to deal with the gender gap that was stretched to its utmost limit during the COVID-19 lockdown. Implementation of an even-handed policy framework and strengthening women's support systems can have a positive impact on achieving gender-based equilibrium in society. According to Diane Elson, "strategies that can help to achieve this can be summarized as recognize, reduce, and redistribute women's unpaid work" (54).

De also underpins the prospect of male vulnerability at home without any female assistance, as her protagonist sardonically quips, "then who will cook and clean for this jobless oaf [her husband]?" (23). Fostering men's domestic independence at home can be enhanced by deprioritizing traditional gender roles and desexualizing household work. To promote male autonomy, it is important to create a conducive atmosphere that not only encourages self-reliance but also ensures an equitable balance of workload, especially during the challenging times of lockdown. At the end of the story, the author mentions the possible recourse of liberation from the crisis that has crept into the domestic space. As her heroine says, "there is nothing left for me here. The virus has killed the woman I once was", she rues on the nature of her abused existence (27). As soon as the lockdown is lifted, she wants to leave her husband and flee to her brother-in-law's place in Dubai, to start her life anew: "I really couldn't see us growing old together - no way" (26). A study in Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth's "Changes in Gender Role Attitudes and Perceived Marital Quality" (1995) "indicates that if wives became more egalitarian in their attitudes... reports of negative marital quality increased (more problems, more disagreements, and higher divorce proneness)" (63-64). To this end, it can be inferred that if the feminine agency intends to resist, subvert, and transcend its stereotypical image within the domestic space carved out by patriarchy, then in all likelihood, it shall have to transgress the institution of marriage, as in the case of the female protagonist in De's story. Thus, in the title "After This, Dubai?", "Dubai" does not seem to be a mere geospatial location where she wishes to seek refuge; it is rather a symbol of hope igniting in her heart the vision of an egalitarian world.

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