IDENTITY CRISIS

What I am writing may sound strange to you but this is the truth. How would you feel if you had no name? How would you feel if people just called, "Hey, come here," or "Hey, do this, or do that?" Don't you think it would offend you? But this is how women lived for a long time in my country of India. Even today, it is common to hear husbands not addressing their wives by their given names (husbands are also not called by their proper names by their wives).

I am not talking about the present generation. I am talking about the older ones, like my parents and grandparents, barely 30 or 40 years ago.

It was a very strange practice, especially for women. Parents would give a girl-child a name. She'd live with that name until she got married. She would be married off at the age of 13 or 14. My grandmother got married when she was just nine and from that day on she lost her name. You know how? My grandfather never addressed her by her name. That was the custom. He just called her "Engikke?" (Where are you?). Or, sometimes he would call her by "Ikkiiya?" (Are you there?).

These phrases come from Kannad, one of the many languages of Southern India. In Northern India, husbands refer to their wives as mothers, not individuals. They would address her as, "Raju Ki Ma," or "Ramu ki Ma," which meant "Raju's mother" or "Ramu's mother." I don't know how women could manage a lifetime with this kind of effacement of their names.

In many households, if the bridegroom's family thought it fit to change the name of the bride, they would do so without even asking her permission. Doesn't this name-game seem demeaning? Her parents gave her a name she grew up with, and surely it was very precious to her. But just because her husband wished to change the name of the bride, he did it without batting an eyelid.

I am a teacher by profession. I once asked a group of children what was the favourite word that they liked to hear? It was heartening to hear most of them say, "My own name!"

Let me tell you about another offensive thing. A girl is called Miss So-and-So until she is married and then suddenly becomes a Mrs. So-and-So after she gets married. This did not exist before British rule.

When we study Indian epics, we find that the male gods' names are prefixed by their wives' names and not vice-versa. For example, Lord Rama is referred to as Seeta-Rama. Lord Krishna is referred to as Radha-Krishna. In both the cases, it is the wife's name that is prefixed to their names and not the other way. Even Lord Shiva is known as Parvati-Parameshwara. Parvati (his wife) remains just Parvati. It is the husband that prefixes his wife's name. Strange indeed! I do not know why and how we started copying the westerners in appending the husband’s name or his family name to our first names.

Men never change their names or legal identity just because they get married. Only the woman has fallen prey to this axe. This is similar to how she is called a "housewife" when she does not work outside her home. Is she a woman who has married a man, or the structure in which she lives? What exactly does the term mean? How does a woman's psyche react to this title? Does it suggest security? To me it has always sounded offensive. It disturbs me, because it seems to suggest that a woman is a wife only if she stays in the house of her husband—an unpaid, unsung, pseudo-servant who cooks, serves and looks after the members of the house.

The ideas expressed by me are not intended to accuse men or society. It is done with the honest, genuine intention of awakening the general consciousness of people and making them aware that "homemaker" would be a more dignified term than "housewife".

—Srijaya Char, teacher, Bangalore, India.