

## Reconceiving Womanhood: Choices in the Changing World

Chayanika Roy

Assistant Professor in English, Gobinda Prasad Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, West Bengal, India  
Email - payel.guharoy@gmail.com

**Abstract:** "Identity" is a prime concept for much contemporary cultural and literary criticism, which, along with its even abstract terminological twin, the "self," has become a cliché without becoming clear. The word "identity" is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women. Carolyn Heilbrun's brave book, "Reinventing Womanhood", inadvertently exemplifies some current confusions about female identity and literature. For example, she claims that successful women are "male-identified" but that it is a "failure" for a "woman to take her identity from her man". Women never form a self because they "need never undergo an identity crisis", yet they have an identity to lose. Are women male identified or self identified is the question which has created undulation in the vast sea of feminist literary criticism. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find "the woman's quest for self-definition" the underlying plot of nineteenth-century writing by women, while Elaine Showalter sees "self-discovery," "a search for identity," as the main theme of women's literature since 1920s. Women have voiced their anguish; oppression and affliction in and through literature and so literature and feminine identity are integrated and inseparable. Female identity can better be coined as woman identity for the term 'woman' confluences the 'female', 'feminine' and the 'feminist' together. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar find 'the woman's quest for self definition' as the predominant theme of the nineteenth century writing by women while Elaine Showalter sees 'self- discovery', 'a search for identity' as the crux of woman's literature since 1920. The quest for women's identity is a never ending soap-opera which croons the true song of women's soul. The concept of identity construes multiple variables as it truly depicts different ways in which writing by women differs from writing by men. Women have come to the forefront to challenge the ideas, actions and organizations held by men for centuries. From times immemorial women have forayed into the world of men to establish their subjective identity and carve a niche for them, only the ways to contest ancient patriarchal ideologies have undergone changes and modifications. The two woman protagonists who have sought to find their own places amidst the patriarchal framework of society are Gauri of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Maria of Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*.

**Key words:** Patriarchy, feminine, feminist, female, identity, self, ideology

The late 1960s and 1970s was the budding period of feminist literary criticism which endeavoured to analyse literature as a vehicle for reproducing and challenging patriarchal stereotyping of women in fictional texts and to identify the specificity of woman's writing. By 1980s the focus shifted to marginalisation of issues of classes, heterosexism, racism and the colonial legacy as they affected cultural production. Women have always tried to seek their own individuality outside of their images of being victims to male control and traditional cultural practices. Gayatri Spivak conforms to the vocal crisis in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) by 'analysing the relation between the discourses of the west and the possibility of speaking of (for) the subaltern women'. (Spivak, 1988:27) Dale Spender's influential book *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* casts women as eternal victims of male ploys.

Women have been victimised physically, emotionally, intellectually by men and for ages they have been striving hard to combat male power and dominion. In order to subvert the obvious female oppression Cixous advocated for a new feminine language which challenges these patriarchal binary schemes to repress and silence women. The language which hides us from history is not mere coincidence but a part of the patriarchal pejorative movement which women do not control. Women need to justify their own individual stances either submitting themselves to the assigned roles of the patriarchal structures or by vehemently opposing their subjugation and condemnation imposed upon by the society which they equally contribute to. "A woman is not born, she becomes" truly said Simone de Beauvoir. A man holds his position as a subject and denies the same to a woman and in this manner categorise the woman as 'other' in the respective subject positions and deprived of asserting her own authentic self. There is a whole plethora of attitudes towards women which restrict their development as an individual identity. Some French feminists like Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler have carried forward the legacy of Beauvoir but in their own unique representation of the position of women as 'other'. In French feminism the woman's identity is not the man's 'other' but the 'other' in herself and thus she aspires to become the 'other' as subject and not as object. Not only in Western discourse but also in our own texts of the sub-continental yore the feminine identity is expressed and manifested in various forms. The female body parts in relation to Sati of the Shakti

cult are represented hierarchically in a bid to deify her as a new expression of womanhood. In the Vedic culture women stood as the decisive force of spiritual development and strong morality. Women participated with men in a similar vein as far as religion and education were concerned.

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Helmer says to Nora, "Before everything else you're a wife and a mother." Nora retorts back, "I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before everything else I am a human being just as much as you are. At any rate I shall try to become one." For ages together women have been striving hard to become a human, an identity which would locate them specifically in the world map and render them both space and voice to question their own position. In this regard I would like to throw light on two women protagonists from two contemporary novels, Gauri of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Maria of Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*.

My choice regarding these two women is based upon their own confidences in chalking out the course of their own lives by themselves. *The Lowland* is the tragic story of two brothers whose lives are torn apart by a single woman who reaches to both surrendering to none in order to satisfy her own soul's longing. The name Gauri is itself significant as it construes in our mind the goddess Durga Durgotinasini or power embodied to ward off all evils. Here Gauri struggles throughout her life to seek her own self which remains insatiated till the end. Here the diasporic problem of assimilation is also palpable. Gauri is a powerful, well-rounded character who strives hard to seek her identity in three different perspectives – personal, gender, nation. Gauri is an indomitable spirit who breaks the cage and flies away for higher studies. But this freedom does not give her the soul's contentment that she has yearned throughout her life. Gauri is not an epitome of perfect feminine beauty but her intelligence, sharpness, and quest for higher studies make her an individual by herself. This trait impresses on Udayan who falls in love with Gauri and gets married much to the family's disagreement. But soon marital bliss escapes through doors and windows as Udayan becomes staunch supporter of the Naxalite movement and is hunted down mercilessly by the policemen and shot in the nearby low marshy land in front of his wife and parents. Gauri's pathetic condition touches Udayan's brother Subhash as well when he comes from US hearing about the tragedy. Subhash gives Gauri and her unborn child a new lease of life in US marrying her and taking her away from stereotyped familial customs and practices. But Gauri could not reciprocate his love; her intense passion for higher studies takes her away from her home, husband and daughter. Though she achieves name and fame in academics but remains forlorn and dejected. She could neither assimilate nor appropriate herself in the Calcutta of 1980s nor in the new land abroad. The lack of possibilities in her homeland and those present in America could not bind her for consciously or unconsciously trying to connect one set of rules, customs and practices with another we often end up relinquishing both. Her alienation persists till the end at every decision of hers. She approves same sex relationship but felt rejected when her partner dismissed as a casual fling. "The liaison ended, without rancour but definitively. Yet Gauri was humiliated for not taking it as lightly." (Lahiri, 240) The identity Gauri wanted to make for herself among two nations far and wide made her so alien that her own daughter rejects her and at the end she finds herself forsaken and forlorn: "Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end." (Lahiri, 240) Starting with the usual cliché words of a fairy tale: "Once upon a time....."

Coelho's *Eleven Minutes* is a fairy tale for the adults with grim connotations. It is a bildungsroman of Maria who strives to find her identity and light through love. After several heart breaking incidents at the age of twenty two and being disillusioned with the stereotyped Brazilian country life of getting married and begetting children she leaves for Switzerland to become a world famous samba star in order to taste the vagaries of life. Unfortunately she lands up in a brothel in her entourage and quite reluctantly accepts her position as a prostitute in spite of having qualms for the work she is doing. Maria makes herself confident with the other women who work in the brothel and express their true selves. She becomes alien to her own body and starts accommodating herself in a make-shift world presuming it to be her own. She achieves material prosperity but is deprived of spiritual bliss and hangs between two worlds – world which has she left far behind and the world which is in front of her. In the course of her amorous camaraderie with different persons of different tastes she meets a young painter who perceives the inner light within her. It is he who falls in love with her innocent inner glow overlooking her titillating body. The painter paints the real Maria and makes her realise what she is and where she is. She starts believing in herself, retraces her lost identity and gains back confidence which she thought she has lost. Our identity is constructed through building on what we already have. Gender identity reflects where we are and in this novel we see how the female gender is manipulated and manoeuvred by men and used for consummation. The female body is used not as a person but as an object.

Suleiman in her book *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* defines female body as beautiful but unclean, alluring but dangerous. If Suleiman considers female body as unclean because they are prostitutes, Coelho in this novel tries to depict just the opposite by claiming that women are beautiful in their own way, however and whatsoever their bodies are manipulated and moulded. If prostitution is sex that incites violence against women and reduces them to bare commodities for market exchange, Maria unravels this whole market enterprise and like a phoenix recreates herself from her own burnt ashes and reinvents herself anew. The prostitution of sexuality is constant configuring of sex on men's terms to sustain women's subordination. Ralf and Milan are two persons juxtaposed together in different perspectives and both in a way are responsible for Maria's changes in the course of her life. She has to take a decision whether she is going to drown her own identity which is untrue in the stream of prostitution or find a new one in the arms of the painter. Though Maria finds her own true self through Ralf

yet she makes room for her own departure from this fantastic romantic realm for she thinks herself undeserving and ill-fitted. But the ending is indeed like a fairy tale where the prince charming not only rescues the damsel in distress but also lands down before her to the place she is about to visit and commits her a life full of spiritual bliss and happiness. They discover the inner light in each other and much like Donne's lovers become the world together. If in the first novel the woman protagonist Gauri ended up in no man's land, broken and dejected, in the second Maria discovers herself anew in the arms of the prince charming, Ralf. Women are trying hard to establish themselves from being just mere bodies to be feasted and consumed upon, to a much higher realm in order to be a part of the same world trodden by their male counterparts and rejecting the age old dictum of being 'the other.' A woman cannot be an inert, passive body unable to move, skip and jump for it is this cryptic body which bears life's ultimate animated essence- another life itself.

#### REFERENCES:

1. Barry, K. *The Prostitution of Sexuality*. U.S: 1995.
2. Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Jonathan, 1953.
3. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.
4. ... Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex. London: Routledge, 1993.
5. Cixous, Helene. The Laugh of Medusa. Trans. Keith Cohen, Paula Cohen. *Signs*. 1.4 (Summer 1976) 875-893.
6. Coelho, Paulo. *Eleven Minutes*. Britain: Harper Collins, 2003.
7. Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies. Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. London: Routledge, 1994.
8. Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.
9. Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. Random House, 2013.
10. Moi, Toril. *Sexual/ Textual Politics*. Methune &Co. Ltd, 1985.

#### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY:

Chayanika Roy is working as an Assistant Professor in English in Gobinda Prasad Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, West Bengal for seven long years. She has published several papers in National and International Journals and also contributed in edited books. She is a Registered Research Scholar of The University of Burdwan and is a voracious reader.