



# QUEST FOR FEMALE IDENTITY IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S NOVEL HOUSEKEEPING

Dr. Shagun Singh  
PhD from Dept. of English  
Banaras Hindu University  
India

**Abstract:** The present paper explores the female's quest for identity in a patriarchal society. The 1980 novel *Housekeeping*, portrays how women has been subjected to stereotype roles and how the society sees her as a subordinated object in comparison to men. Robinson in this novel tries to subvert the dominant female perception where women's feelings, aspirations and her individuality has always been considered secondary to her other roles of being a wife, mother, daughter or the caretaker of house. This paper talks about how Ruth searches for her autonomous identity and self-discovery. Ruth attains her identity and rejects away the conventional and societal norms which fail to understand her and her feelings.

**Index Terms** - Identity, Housekeeping, Self-discovery, Freedom, Subjectivity & Conventions.

Women have lived in a culture full of rules and regulations framed for them by men. The dominant ideology was constructed by people in power which has always been male. Therefore, women were always portrayed inferior to men. Gornick a critic in her article "Feminsim, post election" writes:

The conviction that men by nature take their brains seriously, and women by nature do not, is based not on an inborn reality but on a cultural belief that has served our deepest insecurities. That is the real issue, and around it there has collected over these two centuries a great amount of thought and feeling, and an even greater amount of anxiety, in women and men alike. (Gornick)

Prejudice based on gender has been deeply rooted in all cultures it is just that the degree may differ or the kind may differ. Patriarchal society has reduced women to the role of wife and mother only. By marriage, motherhood and housekeeping a woman's true potential was realized and fulfilled according to the stereotype. Simon de Beauvoir aptly writes in her book that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (17-18). To redefine women both social and cultural traditions have to re-analyzed and altered and the worn-out ones should be rejected. Women need to explore herself not only just as women but as a woman, as a human-being and as I to reach her real self, one's individuality.

Marilynne Robinson has also given voice to the new empowered woman in her novels who rejects to define herself as a sexual object. She has given her protagonist the freedom to be one with her own sense of being and to create her own sets of meaning. Robinson advocates for the dissolution of the ideology of separate spheres which fail to express the woman's point of view. In the novel *Housekeeping* the protagonist finds her own selfhood by negotiating her own space in a hostile patriarchal society. The novel aims to dispel the stereotypical depictions of women that confine women to the walls of domesticity.

Robinson in *Housekeeping* portrays the town of Fingerbone where Ruth shows resistance to oppression and convention imposed by the patriarchal society. The book echoes a female perspective where Robinson has reinvented the American myth of freedom and change traditionally assigned to male heroes. The story is a bildungsroman about Ruth, an orphan girl who chooses to be like her vagrant aunt Sylvie who has rejected the idea of traditional domestic life and the stereotype role assigned to women. As a result, Ruth also defies the conventional image of a house which is considered to be a stable and rigid structure with a

dominant subordinate female figure. The novel opens with Ruth declaring her identity -“My name is Ruth” (01). Ruth makes the conscious decision to become a transient in order to remain loyal to her selfhood, which takes her in the abode of nature, away from social structures and obligations. Robinson has thus, defied the conventional notions of male vagrancy by making her heroine a female wanderer.

The novel *Housekeeping* is dominantly a female novel which deals primarily with female experiences. The novel discards the patriarchal order and primacy of male characters. This novel presents a new perspective on the prevailing American myth about the developing individual freed from social restrictions. Robinson in *Housekeeping* subverts the established idea of the female image by giving her a choice to be a transient and opportunity to be one with nature where she is free from social constructions and inhibitions to explore her real self. Thus, she has redefined domesticity, which is not situated in one particular location. The novel confronts the traditional notions of domesticity and motherhood featuring a story of female resistance against the repressive, normative and conventional systems in the town of Fingerbone. Another critic Ravits has demonstrated in her essay how Ruth researches her autonomous identity by refusing adherence to any kind of patriarchal social conditioning. She shows how "Robinson consciously sets her novel against the great texts of the American tradition" as a woman writer trying to "reinvent the American myth to fit female consciousness" (644).

*Housekeeping* is, at its core, a novel of self-discovery where Ruth searches for the answer to a question she defines for herself: “When did I become so unlike other people?” (214). Since, *Housekeeping* is narrated in the first person by the character of Ruth; it allows the kind of self-evaluation. As women were denied a central presence in canonical male literature the woman author and her protagonist could not assert their identity freely. Hence Robinson’s decision to provide first person narration to Ruth is in itself a rebellious act. *Housekeeping* is a novel that exposes the traditional gender roles of the time and place. It is a saga of identity formation, which occurs due to the painful alienation and estrangement of the two sisters Ruth and Lucille where each sister deliberately chooses a different identity. Robinson has tried to suggest an example of self empowered woman through Ruth which stands in contrast to Lucille’s conservative and suppressed attitude. As the novel *Housekeeping* was published in 1980 during Women Rights Movement it has feminist issues to discuss. The title itself is ironic referring to a daily mundane activity performed by women across the world on which depends their value in patriarchal societies.

The novel sees house and home as metaphors for assumed gender definitions which captivate women to traditional socio-relational roles. In *Housekeeping* Robinson has traced female subjectivity both in favor and opposition to the space of the ‘house’ or the ‘home.’ The novel is a combination of two strains of contemporary fiction by women where women not just revolt against the traditional and sentimental domestic settings as exemplified in the works of Margaret Atwood, Gloria Naylor etc. but also choosing a life of female wanderer and affirming her power and strength where she does not need any male presence for her survival and essence.

Sylvie is a transient who because of her dispositions does not conform to strict fabric of Fingerbone. She is a woman who has deliberately chosen a transient life instead of a regular, stable and conventional behavior which has been charted out for females in general. Sylvie is not like usual matriarchs who are regulated by the values of social order. She has erratic ways of running and maintaining a house which are unorthodox relying on the dissolution rather than preservation of indoor and outdoor boundaries emblematic of her transient life. Sylvie presents an outlook where one is free to leave home and depart again. She is the one for whom marriage and an advantageous and stable life hardly matters. Sylvie’s notions of running a house are in stark contrast with the society. Ruth reports that the first spring with Sylvie in the house brought water pouring all over the thresholds “the house flowed around us” (H: 64) and Sylvie dancing merrily “Sylvie took me by the hands and pulled me after her through six grand waltz” (64). Sylvie’s housekeeping blurred the boundaries between the house and lake, house and woods making the house “attuned to the orchard and to the particularities of weather” (85) because for Sylvie stability lies not in maintaining a balance between inside and outside but in the disintegration of such distinctions altogether. Ruth says- "Sylvie in a house was more or less like a mermaid in a ship's cabin. She preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude" (H: 99).

In *Housekeeping* Robinson has sketched two types of female subjectivity through the behavior of Ruth and Lucille. Ruth like her transient aunt took refuge in nature where as Lucille gets well absorbed in the rules of society may be consciously or unconsciously or both. Lucille accepts womanhood as a challenge to be conquered because she does not wish to undergo a journey into the abyss, stepping outside the protective and comfortable framework of patriarchy risking her life like Sylvie. Therefore she took all measures to fit properly into the society. We see her sewing her own clothes and attending social events like dance. Lucille is highly critical about her unconventional aunt Sylvie and her transient habits. Ruth says- “Lucille hated everything that had to do with transience” (103) and “saw in everything it’s potential for invidious change”

(93). She unlike Sylvie desires for all fixity and permanence. We see Lucille getting obsessed with traditional social norms, making endless efforts to improve herself and fit in the conventional society. Ruth notes:

Every morning in August Lucille in her nightgown touched her toes by our open window, because she had read somewhere that good health is a form of beauty. She brushed her hair a hundred strokes, till it crackled and flew after the brush. She groomed her nails. This was all in preparation for school, since Lucille was determined now to make something of her. (*H*: 132)

Lucille resenting her aunt's transient habits and her sister's growing intimacy for Sylvie eventually decides to leave. She abandons her sister and moves to live with her home economics teacher who followed a strict household routine where as Ruth embraced Sylvie's transient life style.

The two sisters share different relationships with nature too. During the night they spend in the woods Lucille like a traditional home maker insisted to build a small house in order to protect themselves from the wild world outside. When their little shelter collapsed at night she whistles and rushes to throw stones to frighten the wild world by their human presence. Where on one hand Lucille got frightened to see human boundaries getting over-run, Ruth finds it exhilarating and revelatory. She understands the barriers between the human and the natural and says:

I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings.... Darkness is the only solvent. While it was dark... it seemed to me that there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track or trace, if only the darkness could be perfect and permanent. (*H*: 116)

This action shows that both the sisters have accepted two different worlds- where Lucille followed society; Ruth is drawn into the world of nature where she experienced a sense of totality without separation. She surrenders her ego which loosens the self and the boundaries between the self and the world dissipates. Lucille right from the beginning willingly conforms to the societal norms making herself acceptable to Fingerbone society while Ruth a dreamer and lonely soul like her mother does not see any reason to improve her in order to fit in the society. Ruth, the narrator, grew up in a society that cannot contain her. Lucille's and Ruth's value of life was located in a different place. Ruth refusing to adhere to a conventional life decides to cross beyond the realm of common life in order to discover new territories available in Sylvie's explorations of spiritual and perpetual frontiers. Ruth does not want to enter and become a part of the conventional society of Fingerbone town. Instead she gets inclined to Sylvie's notions of life and like Sylvie wishes to feel "the life of perished things" (124).

Sylvie's erratic ways of housekeeping soon became a problem for Ruth and herself as the townspeople warn to separate the two unless Sylvie conforms to the societal norms. Her attempts "to conform (their) lives to the expectations of others, or to what she guessed their expectations might be" (*H*:172) went futile as she could not convince the guardians of the social order that she is being capable of maintaining a 'proper' home. Her greatest sin is her failure to understand, respect and abide by the societal orders as laid down by patriarchy which is essentially male. Sylvie who cannot maintain the distinctions and limits of property and propriety made her unfit to live in society. Sylvie was very soon considered a misfit for Ruth's guardianship and measures were taken to take away Ruth from her. Due to threats of separation imposed by the sheriff (which is again a male authority) Sylvie set fire to their family house and crossed the bridge and disappears into oblivion taking Ruth with her. This action marks their separation from the world of society, rules and regulations making them drifters who are out of the official story of town Fingerbone or may be driven to their social death. This process of unhousing is suggestive of denial of the societal boundaries which are expressions of transience. Ruth tells- "For we had to leave. I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me. Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping" (*H*: 179). The decision to walk across the railroad bridge leaving behind Fingerbone, their house, and Lucille by Ruth and Sylvie indicates their refusal to conventional domestic life.

By rejecting their paternal house Sylvie and Ruth actually rejected the patriarchal notion of house building and housekeeping. It is a rejection of a particular social vision of the female, the house woman and the house wife. Critic Aldrich states that "the conventional ideology of housekeeping can be seen as a clinging to forms, conforming to female fate, and as such . . . Sylvie's housekeeping and her eventual abandonment of housekeeping altogether is a reinvention of the female fate," and their chosen life of transience at the end of the text is a "declaration of existence" for Ruth and Sylvie (131). Ruth's final escape from Fingerbone town is an enactment of the story of classic male American hero who abandons his home and civilization and embarks on an unknown journey. This shows that Ruth and Sylvie were compelled to run away from the oppressive clutches of civilization in order to be true to their self and secondly to protect their small family.

Robinson has presented a new form of female subjectivity by the two models of female subjectivity in the novel Lucille and Ruth, the settled one constituted within the structure of the patriarchal home and the

other transient one constituted in resistance to that structure. For Ruth, the town's behavior is from the 'othered' position, and she challenges the town's set standards. These oppositions signify that the transient possesses the power to overcome rigid social boundaries. The transient subjectivity presented by Sylvie and Ruth brings to light a new empowered female subjectivity affirming their female self and being their selves which has the power to deconstruct the conceptual framework of patriarchy liberating women. Ruth rejected Lucile's conventional femininity and aside with Sylvie's alternative notions of life. The traditional framework of women's roles embedded in the walls of house is put to question by Robinson, a woman writer. Robinson has portrayed two different type of female subjectivity by Ruth and Lucille which emphasizes the fact that for some women the house and their cultural roles assigned to it generates security and protection where as for others it is inadequate and inappropriate as it curtails their freedom of choice, stopping them from being themselves.

Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* thus, explores and subverts the existing cultural myths, societal structures and dominant ideologies ascribed with women that are actually oppressive. Ruth the protagonist takes a radical decision to follow Sylvie refusing to get contained within the space traditionally coded as female, domestic and normative. The interference of society which inhibits one from remaining loyal to one's own beliefs and identity especially in the case of women is put to question by Marilynne Robinson. The patriarchal society rejects the model of self sufficient ostensibly 'homeless' women who are capable of taking decisions and guiding their destinies. Thus, we can say that the novel *Housekeeping* shows us the results of complete acceptance or complete elusion- of their traditional roles assigned to women. The novel *Housekeeping* is a satire on the impermanence of nature and social construction of family because nothing is stable and controllable in world. Robinson is critical about the application of traditional roles and stereotyping of women. The novel depicts the collapse of several female categories like wife, mother, orphan, daughter and of a drifter too.

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