

# The female identity: redefining women stereotyping and the search for equality es...

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



## Redefining the Female Identity

Gender identity has been on the predominant criteria in judging and attaching characteristics to both the male and the female gender alike. The impositions of such characteristics though have lent greater limitations on the individualism as well as restrictions in behavior, attitude and physical appearances of both genders. However, historically women have experienced stronger gender stereotyping because of the existence of patriarchal societies that tend to box their physical looks, emotional responses as well as mentality into societal norms (Oates, VIII).

Consequently, it is not only the type of society that makes the female identity controversial but also on its definition and how scholars and individuals construct it (Burn, Aboud and Moyles, 1081). This is true not only among feminist and non-feminist scholars but also in fiction and novels. For instance, Joyce Carol Oates who had been writing for years about the travails and plight of women is considered to be a feminist by Elaine Showalter (44) but opposed by Greene (1).

The dilemma in identifying a feminist from one that is not is similar to the problem of identifying what a feminine identity is. Essentially, the female identity is a summation of the influences both intrinsic and extrinsic to her existence and hence, the differences in the definition and characterization of every individual of what a female identity should be. According to Oates in her book *Snapshots*, women does not merely resemble their mother as opined by other scholars but rather is unique in that the female identity is

shaped by genetic, environmental, personal and impersonal forces in he life (VII).

The female identity is largely a social construct and hence, its definition in every culture and society varies. Its lack of absolute definition presupposes that everyone around us have different conception of what a female should be like. However, due to the conventions of our culture, we are likely to follow what the females aside from physical differences would have the following features: sensitive, emotional, less capable, and more sympathetic. In this definition, female career choices are then confined mainly to household works, nursing, assistants to males in the office and support staff. Consequently, in earlier times and even in contemporary traditional societies, females would be confined in the home to take care of the house and the children while it is the man who pursues the economic needs of the household.

Thus, the conception that women are weaker than men physically, emotionally and financially is prevalent within this definition. Women on the other hand, would tend to cry, endure pain and would have to live as second rate in the area of work, in politics, economics and the business world. Hence, it is common to see women who are working to have lesser salaries than men of the same position; they are also less likely to be promoted and are not accepted in some positions. For instance, it is typical that women are nurses and men are doctors. Consequently, in the history of the United States , no women have yet to be elected President.

In literature particularly in the Victorian era, the female identity is considered to be passive and submissive to the men in their lives. This is also true in some of prevailing stories of women are prone to be merely followers of their husbands or their fathers. Needless to say, this conception of the female identity has changed gradually throughout the years largely because of the efforts of the women empowerment movement including novelists such as Joyce Carol Oates in struggling to free women from the female identity of yesteryears.

However, despite the fact that the traditional definition of the female identity has been passé in years, the status quo has yet to be reversed. Women are still holding the same roles that their mothers have held. Hence, redefining the female identity is not only an individual effort but rather a concerted effort to change the cultural, societal and mental image of people on what a female should be like.

In the following section, this paper argues for the need for a redefinition of the female identity within the realm of the individuals as well as the societal need for a change using the work of Joyce Carol Oates particularly the short story titled “ Three Women.”

Proposal Argument: Ending Women Stereotypes in Three Girls by Oates

The need for a redefinition of the female identity stemmed from the need of women to explore their individual characteristics and express them in such a way that society would not restrict them from having the equal opportunities in every aspect of personal and societal life including education, work, roles,

and even physical appearance. One of the more influential novelists and story teller who had explored women particularly the abuses they have experienced as well as their stories has been Joyce Carol Oates. While her depictions of women are largely considered to be masochistic in that it involves stories of women who had been raped, abused and traumatized the social construction by which the definition of her female identity and her depiction of such relationship is important in redefining the female identity.

Oates short story in Three Girls depicts two female lesbian lovers studying at New York University who sought to hide the identity of the most popular television star in the world- Marilyn Monroe. Exploring the female identity within this story, there are three themes that we need to explore: 1) the two female students are lesbians and lovers; 2) in her private life, Marilyn Monroe is not the glamorous and the epitome of femininity but exhibits masculine-like qualities; and 3) that females are intellectuals and are highly political in nature

First, in Three Girls Oates presents us with two interesting female characters: two lesbians who are also lovers studying in NYU ransacking the Strand Used books library in Broadway during a snow evening in 1956. Moreover, these two females similar to Oates are also into literature and in fact, they are described by Oates as poets. During that time, love between the same genders much more between two females is considered a taboo in the society. However, Oates illustrates to us that this is already happening in the portals of society despite the rules and the conventions. The illicitness of such affair however, is made dangerous because of the societal punishments

that can occur even in the liberal area of New York City . However, defying these odds, the two lesbian lovers while careful on their affair freely, roams the city. This signifies that although traditional women would tend to obey the social norms, defiance to authority and disobedience is also practiced by women contrary to popular notion that the female identity will not defy odds. Hence, breaking gender stereotypes and the social norms considering lesbianism and homosexual love, the two students in Oates novel manifested the first step in women empowerment: recognition that they are individuals who are free to feel regardless of cultural and societal constraints.

Second, stumbling upon the heavy piles of books, the two students believe they saw the symbol of femininity and considered to be a film goddess in the person of Marilyn Monroe: wearing a man's navy coat reaching her ankles and oversized sleeves that dwarfed her, a man's hat to hide her hair and crouching like a man. Typically, when the name Marilyn Monroe is mentioned, our vivid imagination is stuck by the image of an ultra-feminine woman with red lipstick, wearing a short red mini-skirt, her hair styled to the latest fads and with stiletto shoes to augment for her height. However, in Oates novel, Monroe is depicted radically different. This symbolizes Oates own deconstruction of the female identity: gender as a social construction is not necessarily reflected in the individual's private lives. In the case of Monroe , Oates depicted her as lacking in vanity by disregarding her physical looks and preferring anonymity over popularity. Again, contrary to one of the more popular stereotypes that women are vain, *Three Girls* showed that this is not necessarily so. What Oates seeks to show is that Monroe as the public

figure is vain but in her private life, she would trade glamour for the comfort of men's clothes. Physical appearance then, is not the primary factor that defines females.

Third, the venue where Oates made the two females encounter Monroe is not accidental: it is incidental to the story because it would lend credibility to the presumption that Monroe is not a good-for-nothing-if-not-for-her-physical-looks celebrity but rather a woman that is substantially not self-absorbed and an intellectual. For instance, the description that Monroe searches through heaps of books symbolizes that her visit in the library is not by chance but rather, she is used to this kind of activity. The allusion that she reads books and is actually an intellectual refers not only to the manner she carries herself but also on the way she conversed with the other two females. Consequently, this also breaks the stereotype that blondes have nothing inside their heads- Monroe being a blonde while not considered as an intellectual is seen as a smart young woman.

### Analysis and Conclusion

The female identity as a weak, vain, emotional and submissive has been changing in recent years. While female stereotyping is still prevalent, the emergence of a new paradigm for women empowerment that depicts the female identity in the realm of mainstream society such as the likes of Oprah Winfrey (strong, independent and influential), Margaret Thatcher (political leader) and Condoleezza Rice (affirmative and unbending) shows that the current status quo on female as the weaker sex is no longer as accepted by

the people. While there are still more high-ranking male politicians and CEOs, similar to the women empowerment movement, we argue that there should a fundamental change in the definition of the female identity in the current era. The cultural changes particularly the orientation and socialization of the people have changing rapidly primarily because of the impact of the mass media. More and more movies and television shows have been showing the other side of the female identity: strong and assertive, decisive and not submissive.

Oates has been noted to be a violent writer- she depicts women in violent situations and in anti-status quo themes. However, as Oates has argued, the question on why her writings almost always involve violence is sexist and ignorant (VIII). *Three Girls* while not violent in nature defies authority- similar to the previous writings of Oates, it tackles an important issue of the implicit characterization of the female identity- free, strong, socially and politically oriented and lacking in vanity.

Similarly, the literature has been fraught with characters that are similar to the characters in Oates novels- and several consider women as the heroes and no longer the damsels in distress or the one in need of a knight in shining armor. Oates in *Three Girls* and other writers have opposed this kind of gender stereotyping which is considered to be damaging not only to the female population but also the males. The limitations which are predominantly social impositions cause pain, stress, suffering and oppression for many females.



This is the proper time to redefine the female identity- the era when cultural changes and socialization are fast-tracked through the mass media and the time when females are exhibiting skills and potentials that are equal to that of men. Hence, it is proper to redefine the female identity to include strength, willpower, and limitless potential is necessary in the emergence of a new paradigm for gender identity. Now is the time that opportunities for men and women should be equal and females will have the freedom minus the social bias to excel in areas that they would like to pursue.

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