IDENTITY CRISIS OF A YOUNG WOMAN: AN ANALYSIS OF “EVELINE” BY JAMES JOYCE

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James Joyce’s short story “Eveline” emphasizes the condition of women in the early 20th century Ireland. Until the last few years of the 1990s, women were second-class citizens in Ireland and had to endure discrimination in every sector of the society (Horgan, 2001). They had limited opportunities in educational institutions, male family members had the control over their decisions, and employers generally hired women for menial labour and paid less than the male labours. In these circumstances, most women tried to create an identity. In his short story “Eveline”, James Joyce depicts the theme of women’s internal struggle to find an identity in the patriarchal societies through the character Eveline who is trying to create an identity through the conflicts she experiences with the male characters in her life and her memories about her past.

Throughout the story, Eveline does not speak of her own identity as ‘Eveline’ but she describes herself in relation to her father, brother, and later to her companion Frank, who all influence her in the way of creating an identity. Eveline is utterly committed to home due to her father’s oppressions and her role in the family, and she does not have any chance for socializing through which she can explore her qualities as an individual of the society. A study of identity development shows that most people think that the “network of social relationships retain the sense of identity” (Hart 105). These social relationships begin from the childhood with the care of the parents and siblings. In fact, Eveline grew up without any support from her family. Eveline’s relationship with her father is based on fear as her father has begun to “threaten her” after her mother’s death (2-3) and did not treat her the same as her brothers. That is, Eveline has not received any love or care from his father and has grown up to a timid and antisocial young woman who “feels herself in danger of her father's violence” (2). Eveline’s psychological state causes her to become an obedient daughter in the extreme out of fear from her father’s violence that she barely leaves home except for work, and these domestic affairs give Eveline no other opportunity than identifying herself with “shelter and food whom she had known all her life about her” (2). One other obstacle for Eveline’s identity development is her memories of her dying mother. Ms. Hill, Eveline’s mother, has spent her life as an obedient wife to her

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husband and as a mother, doing nothing more than caring about the family and fulfilling her daily duties such as cleaning and cooking set by the male-dominated society. Even though Eveline wants to break free from these obligations, “her mother has circumscribed Eveline's own life-choices by getting her into the traditional role of a carer by asking her to ‘keep the home together for as long as she could’” at the point of death (O'Brien, 210). Eveline’s last memories of her mother and the promise she has made to her do not allow her to move further with her own life, and prompt her to take over her mother’s role, in other words ‘identity’, in the family; she does not stand up to her father’s wishes as her mother also did in the past. Due to the fear-based relationship between Eveline and her father, she cannot have an independent life and create a personal identity with her own qualities.

Not only Eveline’s father’s behaviour towards her but also her brother’s status in the family shows the desperation of Eveline for an identity. Unlike her brother Harry who is defined by his occupation and can exercise his own choices, Eveline cannot live as an independent woman in terms of her work and have freedom in her choices. Early in the short story, Harry is introduced to the reader as someone “who is in the church decoration business” which provides him a social identity that defines him in terms of selfhood by his job (3). Henri Tajfel, a British social psychologist, claims that people who belong to a social group, in this case it is the business and the family, “seek to achieve a positive self-esteem” by differentiating themselves from others and exercise independent choices (Haslam 21). Harry makes the choice of working away from home “somewhere down the country” (3) and not involving in the family matters. Eveline, in contrast, do not value herself highly in terms of her social status because she works at a menial job in a store, as women only had a limited amount of job opportunities in the early 20th century era in Ireland. Even though her boss “has always an edge on her” (2), Eveline “has to work hard, both in the house and at business” (2) since she does not have the self-esteem to leave her job as a supporter of the family. Due to gender discrimination at work and at home, Eveline loses her self-confidence which makes it harder for her to belong to a social group and create an identity through a social status.

Moreover, Eveline’s experiences with her father and brother frighten her to find an identity through another male character. At the beginning, Frank is an object of desire and the signifier through which Eveline forms a full identity as herself. According to Lacan, desire is something you find ‘outside of you, because what you desire is always something that you lack, that is other to you’ (qtd. in O'Brien, 204). Eveline, who does not have any interaction with men except her father and brothers, desires to have a boyfriend before she has desired Frank. As a
passive young woman in terms of social relationships, Eveline’s aim was “to have a fellow” (4), in the hope of finding what she lacks, an active personality. After being closely acquainted with Frank, ”she began to like him” as he provides all the means through which Eveline can satisfy her desire and valorise her female identity as a married woman. For Eveline, Frank is a different image from her father and brother. He is a sailor who travels around many countries, is interested in many forms of art, and above all, he treats Eveline like as she is, letting her experience a new world. Eveline thinks that” people would treat her with respect” with her new identity as Frank’s wife and “she would not be treated as her mother had been” (2) who has suffered from her father’s violence as well. Even though Eveline imagines a different life with Frank at the beginning, as she keeps thinking about her mother’s “pitiful vision” (5), she feels horrified that what happened to her mother in the past might befall her. Eveline fears the unknown identity that will come with the marriage and thinks about the possibility that this identity might make her life worse than it is, and finally she lets Frank and her new identity go by the board.

As a critique of the patriarchal societies, Joyce’s story presents identity problems of women caused by men in the early 20th century in Ireland. The character Eveline represents these women, showing their feelings and thoughts in a more detailed way and giving the reader an idea about how difficult it is to create an identity as an individual under pressure. At the end of the short story, the final expression of Eveline is described as “passive and like a helpless animal” (6) which shows that she could not develop an identity that could provide her the self-esteem to give Frank a proper answer of why she is not leaving with him; and this is, so the story would indicate, because she was a girl.
WORKS CITED


