

Negotiation of Female Identity in *Paris for One and Other Stories* by Jojo Moyes

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Abstract

Female identity in contemporary women's fiction is often examined through representation or final character outcomes, leaving the process that connects social construction, narrative disruption, and agency insufficiently explained. This study investigates how female identities are initially constructed, how they are negotiated, and what meanings emerge from those negotiations in Jojo Moyes's *Paris for One and Other Stories*. Using a qualitative interpretive approach, the study combines close reading, purposive textual selection, within-story analysis, and cross-story comparison through Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism. The findings show that female identities are initially stabilized through relational labelling, self-silencing, domestic and caregiving responsibilities, material limitations, bodily judgment, and professional misrecognition. The characters negotiate these identities through spatial movement, refusal, verbal articulation, relational repositioning, self-fashioning, mediated performance, professional strategy, and improvisation. These processes do not produce uniform or complete liberation. Instead, the collection represents female identity as situated, relational, and unfinished becoming, in which agency may take the form of departure, reflective recommitment, self-assertion, or the reinterpretation of care. The study contributes a process-oriented Beauvoirian framework that links social sedimentation, disruption, negotiation, and situated freedom beyond binary readings of oppression and empowerment

Keywords: Beauvoirian feminism, female identity, identity negotiation, Jojo Moyes, women's fiction

INTRODUCTION

Female identity in contemporary literature is increasingly understood not as a natural or completed category but as a

process shaped by social expectations, interpersonal relationships, material conditions, and everyday experience. Although contemporary culture often presents women as autonomous subjects, their choices remain structured by

expectations concerning femininity, intimacy, domestic responsibility, work, the body, and consumption. This contradiction is particularly visible in postfeminist culture, where the language of freedom and empowerment coexists with demands that women regulate their appearance, relationships, careers, and emotional lives (Genz & Brabon, 2018; McRobbie, 2009). Female identity must therefore be examined not only through representation but also through how women internalize, question, and modify available social positions.

Literary narrative is important for examining this process because it makes changes in subjectivity visible across time. A female character may initially accept a particular understanding of herself, encounter circumstances that expose its limitations, and respond by reconsidering her desires, relationships, or possibilities for action. Such development cannot be adequately explained through fixed oppositions such as passive and active, dependent and independent, or oppressed and empowered. These categories identify positions but not the gradual and contradictory movement through which identity becomes contestable. A process-oriented analysis must therefore connect initial construction, narrative disruption, situated response, and the meanings produced by change.

Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism offers a productive framework for explaining this movement. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir rejects the idea that femininity is a natural essence. Her account of woman as becoming emphasizes that female existence develops through the interaction of the body, history, social situation, and possibilities for action (Beauvoir, 2011). Women encounter prior meanings that shape how others

recognize them and how they understand themselves. Identity is therefore neither biologically predetermined nor wholly subject to unrestricted individual choice.

Beauvoir's concept of woman as the Other explains how female identity is frequently defined through relational functions such as wife, mother, caregiver, lover, or object of desire. Such definitions may position women within immanence when repetition and responsibility for others restrict their possibilities as self-defining subjects. Domestic routines, emotional attachments, material obligations, bodily expectations, and subordinate professional roles are not inherently oppressive, but they become restrictive when women are reduced to these functions. Transcendence, by contrast, refers to movement toward possibilities through projects, decisions, and actions. Because freedom is exercised within conditions individuals do not wholly choose, the central question is not whether women completely escape relationships or domesticity, but whether they remain confined to assigned meanings or begin to participate in shaping their situations.

Contemporary Beauvoir scholarship clarifies this relationship between social formation and subjective possibility. Heinämaa (1997, 1999) understands femininity as a socially mediated experience that is lived rather than merely imposed from outside. Burke (2018) conceptualizes gender as lived time, in which past experience, present circumstances, and future possibilities interact. Knowles (2019) further shows how socially produced limitations may be internalized through everyday conduct until restrictive arrangements appear normal or personally desirable.

The interaction between agency and constraint is also central to studies of

contemporary women's popular fiction. Ferriss and Young (2006) describe chick lit as engaging with work, intimacy, friendship, sexuality, consumption, and self-definition. Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) show that these narratives often combine individual choice with feminine self-management, while Budgeon (2011) argues that female agency remains embedded within unequal social relations. Harzewski (2011) and Rudin (2023) likewise support reading women's popular fiction beyond romantic formula by emphasizing its engagement with everyday life, work, consumption, and changing female subjectivities.

Jojo Moyes's *Paris for One and Other Stories* is relevant to these concerns because its nine stories portray women in varied relational, domestic, economic, professional, embodied, and emotional situations (Moyes, 2016). The collection addresses romantic dependence, marital routine, caregiving obligations, financial pressure, aging, bodily insecurity, professional misrecognition, and digitally mediated desire. Although "Paris for One" offers the most extensive developmental trajectory, the shorter stories enable comparative analysis across different forms of female experience.

The collection is particularly significant because its characters rarely confront one clearly defined oppressive institution. Their identities are instead stabilized through familiar labels, repeated routines, emotional habits, material restrictions, and judgments about what is sensible, desirable, responsible, or appropriate. Unexpected journeys, domestic conflicts, renewed encounters, professional crises, exchanged possessions, and anonymous messages expose the instability of these definitions. Such disruptions create opportunities for the women to speak, move, refuse, perform

alternative selves, reconsider relationships, or make choices that previously appeared unavailable.

Existing scholarship offers two important but insufficiently integrated approaches. Studies of women's popular fiction explain how romance, work, consumption, bodily self-management, and personal choice operate within contradictory expectations (Ferriss & Young, 2006; Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Harzewski, 2011; Rudin, 2023). Beauvoirian scholarship explains how women live, internalize, and potentially exceed the situations shaping them through temporality, lived experience, and situated action (Burke, 2018; Heinämaa, 1997, 1999; Knowles, 2019). Yet these approaches remain limited when identity is examined mainly as representation, or when agency is judged only by a character's final outcome.

A representational analysis may identify a woman as dependent, domestic, marginalized, sexually invisible, or empowered without explaining how that identity becomes convincing to her. Similarly, a reading centered on whether a woman leaves, remains, refuses, reconciles, or changes her appearance may classify the outcome as liberation or submission without reconstructing the process that gives the decision meaning. This limitation is especially important in Moyes's collection because its characters do not uniformly achieve agency through separation from romance, marriage, or domesticity. Some leave restrictive arrangements, whereas others remain after articulating dissatisfaction, reconsidering alternatives, or redefining their roles.

This study, therefore, brings Beauvoir's concepts together as stages within an analytical process. The Other and immanence illuminate how relational roles, repetition, and external judgments become experienced

as apparently natural identities. Situation and freedom explain why women's responses cannot be separated from emotional attachment, material limitation, embodiment, and responsibility. Transcendence and becoming make it possible to understand change as open, incomplete, and frequently ambivalent. The study terms the accumulation of repeated labels, routines, restrictions, and judgments the social sedimentation of identity and examines the sequence of construction, disruption, negotiation, and meaning.

The research gap lies in the insufficient integration of these stages within the scholarship reviewed here. Previous studies have explained either the cultural construction of femininity or the conditions of situated female agency, but not the relationship among initial identity construction, modes of negotiation, and the meanings produced by negotiation across Moyes's nine stories. The novelty of this study lies in its process-oriented application of Beauvoir's existential feminism to the complete collection. It identifies how female identities are stabilized, traces how they become contestable through action, and interprets the resulting forms of situated agency and unfinished becoming.

This framework also contributes to broader discussions of contemporary female identity. Moyes's British fiction cannot be equated directly with women's experiences in Indonesia or other cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the concepts of social sedimentation, self-silencing, relational responsibility, constrained choice, and situated agency provide a comparative framework for examining culturally specific negotiations of female identity. The study's relevance lies not in universalizing Moyes's characters but in offering an analytical model

attentive to social expectations, individual action, and continuing constraint.

Accordingly, this study addresses three questions: (1) How are female identities initially constructed in Paris for One and Other Stories? (2) How do the female characters negotiate their identities throughout the stories? and (3) What meanings are conveyed through the negotiation of female identity in the stories? By connecting social sedimentation, narrative disruption, situated action, and ambivalent change, the study argues that female identity in Moyes's collection is socially and relationally formed but not permanently fixed. Identity negotiation is understood as a continuing process of situated becoming rather than a completed transition toward unrestricted autonomy

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative interpretive approach and literary text analysis to examine the construction and negotiation of female identity in Jojo Moyes's Paris for One and Other Stories. The approach was appropriate because the study focused on textual meaning, character positioning, relational dynamics, and changes in female self-understanding rather than on the statistical frequency of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Close reading served as the primary analytical technique, while Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism provided the interpretive framework. The concepts of the Other, immanence, transcendence, situation, freedom, and becoming were applied after relevant narrative patterns had been identified so that interpretation remained grounded in the primary text (Beauvoir, 2011).

The primary source was the 2016 Viking edition of *Paris for One and Other Stories*. The corpus included all nine stories: “Paris for One,” “Between the Tweets,” “Love in the Afternoon,” “A Bird in the Hand,” “Crocodile Shoes,” “Holdups,” “Last Year’s Coat,” “Thirteen Days with John C,” and “The Christmas List” (Moyes, 2016). The data consisted of words, phrases, short dialogue exchanges, internal thoughts, narrative descriptions, character actions, and changes in relational or subjective position. Evidence was included when it showed how female characters accepted, reproduced, questioned, or modified socially assigned identities.

Close reading was conducted at three interconnected levels. The narrative scene functioned as the contextual unit, the shortest relevant phrase, sentence, dialogue, description, or action functioned as the evidentiary unit, and the trajectory of each story functioned as the broader interpretive unit. This structure allowed short quotations to be read in relation to both their immediate context and the character’s development from opening position to disruption, response, and outcome. Direct quotations were kept brief, while contextual information not essential to the wording of the evidence was paraphrased.

Data collection involved repeated readings of the complete collection. The initial reading identified plot, principal relationships, central conflicts, and character development. Subsequent readings focused on scenes involving social labeling, self-perception, domestic and caregiving responsibility, material limitation, bodily judgment, professional positioning, conflict, decision-making, and relational change. Relevant passages were recorded in an analytical matrix containing the story, character, page reference, narrative context,

textual evidence, structural position, research-question relevance, preliminary analytical function, and possible relation to Beauvoirian concepts.

Evidence was selected purposively according to analytical significance rather than frequency alone. Recurrence was considered when repeated labels, routines, judgments, or relational patterns contributed to identity stabilization, but a single passage could be retained when it occupied a decisive narrative position. Final excerpts were selected for their relevance to the research questions, clarity, structural importance, representativeness, contrastive value, and economy of expression. Redundant passages were removed when another excerpt performed the same analytical function more effectively.

Although all nine stories were examined, they were not given equal analytical depth. “Paris for One” functioned as the anchor story because it provides the most extended trajectory from initial identity construction to disruption and change. “Love in the Afternoon,” “Crocodile Shoes,” “Thirteen Days with John C,” and “The Christmas List” served as principal comparative stories, while the remaining four functioned as supporting or contrasting cases. This hierarchy reflected differences in narrative length and analytical productivity without excluding any story from the corpus.

The analysis proceeded through three stages corresponding to the research questions. The first identified how female identities were initially constructed through relational labeling, self-silencing, domestic repetition, caregiving responsibility, material restriction, bodily judgment, and professional misrecognition. The second traced how these constructions were destabilized and negotiated through refusal, spatial

movement, verbal articulation, relational reconsideration, self-fashioning, mediated performance, professional strategy, and improvisation. Negotiation was not limited to departure; remaining within a relationship was also considered when it followed reflection, articulation, or conscious evaluation of alternatives. The third stage interpreted the meanings of these negotiations, including situated agency, reflective recommitment, unfinished becoming, and continuing material or relational limitation.

Analysis was conducted within individual stories and across the collection. Within-story analysis followed each character's development, while cross-story comparison identified recurring patterns, variations, and contradictory outcomes. The Other was used to examine identities defined by partners, families, and gendered expectations; immanence to interpret repetitive roles that restricted possibility; transcendence to examine actions that open new projects; situation to emphasize embodied, material, emotional, and relational conditions; and becoming to interpret identity as continuing and incomplete.

Interpretive trustworthiness was supported through repeated reading, contextual re-examination of selected passages, cross-checking among narration, dialogue, thought, action, and character trajectory, and the retention of negative or contradictory evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Decisions to remain in relationships, changes mediated by consumption, unresolved endings, and morally ambiguous actions were retained to avoid constructing a predetermined narrative of liberation. The analytical matrix preserved a traceable connection among textual evidence, context, relevance to the research question,

comparison, and theoretical interpretation. The study did not seek statistical generalization; its credibility depended on contextual grounding, analytical coherence, and transparency

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initial Constructions of Female Identity

Across *Paris for One and Other Stories*, female identity is initially constructed through repeated social definitions, relational expectations, domestic routines, material conditions, and judgments concerning women's bodies and professional positions. Although the nine stories portray women in different circumstances, their identities are commonly stabilized before they begin to question them. From a Beauvoirian perspective, these constructions may position women as the Other and confine them to immanence when externally produced meanings and repetitive roles limit their possibilities as self-defining subjects (Beauvoir, 2011). Three interconnected patterns emerge: relational labeling and self-silencing, domestic and material positioning, and embodied or professional misrecognition.

Relational Labeling and Self-Silencing

The most explicit construction of female identity occurs through labels repeated within families and intimate relationships. In "Paris for One," Nell is introduced through apparently fixed characteristics: "Nell was not the adventurous type. Nell was the sensible one. The quiet one" (Moyes, 2016, p. 13). These statements establish a social identity through which Nell and those around her interpret what she may reasonably be expected to do.

The terms “sensible” and “quiet” appear positive because they associate Nell with responsibility, but they become restrictive when they treat travel, risk, spontaneity, and independence as incompatible with her nature. Her careful behavior then seems to confirm an identity already assigned to her. Caution is presented as an essential personality rather than a disposition shaped by experience and social expectation, leaving Nell with a narrow understanding of her possibilities.

In “The Christmas List,” Chrissie’s identity is constructed through habitual silence. When asked whether she normally expresses her thoughts, she responds, “Never. Safer that way” (Moyes, 2016, p. 177). Silence preserves immediate marital stability but excludes her from decisions concerning her own life. David and his mother recognize her primarily through usefulness, expecting her to prepare food, purchase gifts, and accommodate their preferences without resistance.

Miranda in “Thirteen Days with John C” and Beth in “A Bird in the Hand” similarly understand themselves through relational recognition. Miranda presents herself as an aging, emotionally overlooked wife, while Beth contrasts marital familiarity with the desirability she once felt with Ben. Their identities are shaped through neglect, memory, and unequal attention, while alternative selves initially depend on male recognition.

These stories show that female identity is produced not only through coercion but also through repeated classification, silence, emotional habit, and internalized perceptions. In Beauvoirian terms, the women are positioned as *the Other* when self-understanding is organized around partners,

families, and relational expectations rather than projected possibilities.

This pattern corresponds with Heinämaa’s (1997, 1999) understanding of femininity as socially mediated lived experience. It also develops Knowles’s (2019) discussion of internalized unfreedom by showing how relational expectations come to be accepted as truthful descriptions of the self. Following Burke’s (2018) account of gender as lived time, these identities emerge through accumulated labels, silences, memories, and interactions rather than a single defining event.

Domestic, Material, and Caregiving Identities

Female identity is also constructed through domestic and caregiving responsibilities. In “Love in the Afternoon,” Sara remains preoccupied with uniforms, lunch boxes, music lessons, and family shopping, activities described as “the usual weekend routine” (Moyes, 2016, p. 115). The phrase normalizes extensive domestic and mental labor. Sara has become the person expected to remember, anticipate, and coordinate household needs.

Even when Doug takes her away from home, Sara cannot suspend these responsibilities because their management defines her position within the family. Doug interprets her inability to relax as a personal tendency to worry rather than the result of unequal cognitive and emotional labor. A relationally produced burden is consequently recast as individual weakness.

From a Beauvoirian perspective, Sara’s position reflects domestic *immanence*. Household activity becomes restrictive not because it is inherently oppressive but because repetitive responsibility is disproportionately attached to her and treated as a natural feminine quality. Her

identity as the person who remembers everything limits her access to rest, spontaneity, and self-directed time.

Material conditions construct a related identity for Evie in “Last Year’s Coat.” Reduced income, mortgage payments, school expenses, and caregiving obligations make her the principal regulator of household consumption. When financial difficulties are discussed, the narration states, “She does not mention the coat” (Moyes, 2016, p. 156). Although the coat would replace a damaged one, Evie finds it difficult to express the need because legitimate spending is expected to benefit the family first.

Her self-denial is shaped not only by marital relations but also by economic insecurity, affection, and responsibility. This demonstrates that *immanence* may be sustained through material necessity and emotional attachment rather than one uniform form of oppression. Nevertheless, women’s personal needs become secondary while their value is associated with maintaining domestic and emotional stability.

Sara and Evie illustrate the contradiction described by Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006), in which women appear to possess individual choice while remaining responsible for extensive feminine self-management. Their decisions are neither entirely coerced nor unrestricted. Consistent with Budgeon (2011), they represent choices made within unequal relational and material conditions. Domestic responsibility, therefore, becomes a structure through which women learn to treat their needs as less urgent or legitimate.

Embodied and Professional Misrecognition

The collection further constructs female identity through judgments concerning appearance, age, class, and

competence. In “Crocodile Shoes,” Sam’s colleagues associate her with “Plain” and “Sensible stuff” (Moyes, 2016, p. 138). Their response to the red designer shoes defines what appearance is considered appropriate for a middle-aged woman expected to remain practical and visually inconspicuous.

Sam has internalized similar judgments at the gym, where she compares herself to thinner, wealthier women. Clothing, beauty routines, and financial security represent a social position to which she believes she does not belong. Her bodily insecurity is therefore connected to class comparison. Judgments from colleagues, family, gym staff, and other women shape whether she considers herself entitled to occupy visible spaces confidently.

Gendered misrecognition also operates professionally. In “Between the Tweets,” Bella explains that Declan “had assumed I was the secretary” (Moyes, 2016, p. 106). Before her expertise becomes visible, she is placed in a subordinate role, based on the assumption that authority is associated with men and labor with women.

Alice in “Holdups” is similarly simplified through institutional judgment. Her employment history, lack of a criminal record, and residence with her parents are treated as evidence that she is ordinary and predictable. Bella and Alice are thus interpreted through pre-existing categories that conceal capacities they have not yet demonstrated.

Sam’s self-surveillance corresponds with Gill and Herdieckerhoff’s (2006) account of bodily self-management. It also illustrates the contradiction identified by McRobbie (2009) and Genz and Brabon (2018), in which women appear free to construct themselves yet remain subject to judgments about attractiveness, age, class, and feminine visibility. Bella and Alice extend this pattern into professional and institutional contexts,

where competence and complexity remain invisible until actively demonstrated. This supports Harzewski's (2011) and Rudin's (2023) view that women's popular fiction engages with work, embodiment, consumption, and recognition rather than romance alone.

Taken together, these findings reveal what this study terms the **social sedimentation of identity**. Repeated labels, silences, routines, material restrictions, relational expectations, and judgments accumulate until they function as taken-for-granted knowledge about the women. The sensible woman, compliant wife, responsible mother, self-denying caregiver, aging body, ordinary worker, and female assistant are not identities imposed only from outside; they are also reproduced through emotional habit, everyday conduct, and self-perception.

The findings support scholarship positioning women's popular fiction as a field in which domesticity, intimacy, work, consumption, embodiment, and subjectivity intersect (Ferriss & Young, 2006; Harzewski, 2011; Rudin, 2023). The present study extends this scholarship by explaining how social pressures become incorporated into lived self-understanding. Nevertheless, sedimentation does not make identity permanent. Narrative disruption exposes the distance between assigned positions and concealed capacities, creating conditions through which inherited identities can be questioned and negotiated.

Modes of Negotiating Female Identity

The identities assigned to the female characters do not disappear when new circumstances arise. Negotiation begins when narrative disruptions reveal that socially inherited definitions are neither natural nor permanently binding. Across *Paris for One*

and *Other Stories*, the women leave restrictive spaces, express silenced dissatisfaction, reconsider relationships, experiment with alternative identities, and act strategically in unexpected situations. Negotiation, therefore, does not describe a uniform transition from dependence to independence, but the ways in which the characters question, refuse, reinterpret, or selectively retain identities that have shaped them.

From a Beauvoirian perspective, these responses move toward *transcendence* when the characters project possibilities and act toward purposes increasingly recognized as their own (Beauvoir, 2011). Their actions nevertheless remain situated within emotional attachment, material limitation, social judgment, and responsibility toward others. Four principal modes emerge: spatial movement and refusal; verbal articulation and relational repositioning; self-fashioning and mediated performance; and improvised or strategic agency.

Spatial Movement and Acts of Refusal

Spatial movement becomes a mode of negotiation when a woman leaves a place sustaining her previous identity. In "Paris for One," Nell initially organizes her journey around Pete and interprets Paris through their relationship. Her experiences in the city, however, show that she can manage uncertainty and make decisions without his direction. When Pete arrives and assumes that she will resume their original plan, Nell asks, "Marianne? Could you tell me the best place to get a taxi?" (Moyes, 2016, p. 73).

Although addressed to Marianne, the question does not transfer the decision to another person. Nell has already chosen to leave and requests only the practical means to do so. Her departure redistributes authority

over her actions: Pete no longer determines the journey's direction. Fabien provides an alternative relational possibility, but he does not independently produce her transformation; before pursuing him, Nell has already traveled alone, responded to disruption, and experienced pleasure outside the couple-based itinerary. Her actions, therefore, show that being "sensible" no longer functions as an absolute boundary. Negotiation expands her possibilities without requiring an entirely opposite self.

A more explicit refusal occurs in "The Christmas List." Chrissie's journey through London initially reproduces her domestic role because she spends it completing tasks assigned by David and his mother. When David criticizes her for buying the wrong Christmas pudding, she responds, "I can't do it" (Moyes, 2016, p. 180), turning accumulated dissatisfaction into a boundary. Her decision to travel to her friend's home converts refusal into spatial action: instead of returning with the objects through which compliance has been organized, she redirects herself toward a relationship in which her presence is welcomed. Although fear and uncertainty remain, she recognizes marriage as a condition she can evaluate rather than an arrangement that removes her capacity to choose.

These findings align with Budgeon's (2011) view that female agency operates within ongoing relational limitations and with Burke's (2018) emphasis on gender as lived time. Nell's and Chrissie's decisions arise from accumulated habits and disappointments rather than isolated moments. Spatial movement does not automatically liberate them, but it interrupts the arrangements through which their earlier identities have been maintained.

Verbal Articulation and Relational Repositioning

Other characters negotiate identity by making invisible experiences available for discussion. In "Love in the Afternoon," Sara continues to manage domestic responsibilities mentally after Doug takes her away from home. He interprets her inability to relax as an individual tendency to worry, whereas she understands that the obligations will remain hers upon returning. Sara states, "Because someone has to remember this stuff, Doug, and it isn't usually you" (Moyes, 2016, p. 118).

The statement identifies the unequal cognitive and emotional labor that underlies their family life and shifts the problem from Sara's personality to the organization of the relationship. Her articulation does not immediately remove the inequality, but it establishes her as a participant in defining responsibility, rest, intimacy, and partnership. Negotiation thus occurs within marriage rather than through departure.

Beth in "A Bird in the Hand" negotiates identity through a conscious relational decision. Meeting Ben revives an alternative life associated with romantic intensity, yet she also recognizes the consequences of entering another secret relationship. She responds, "I don't think so. We've both moved on, haven't we?" (Moyes, 2016, p. 132). Returning to Simon does not simply restore the initial marital arrangement because Beth chooses after evaluating the alternative represented by Ben. Her action constitutes relational repositioning rather than passive continuation, demonstrating that remaining may become agentic when it follows conscious consideration.

A quieter form of articulation appears in "Last Year's Coat." Evie expresses her need for a replacement coat after repeatedly

subordinating personal desires to school expenses, household repairs, and caregiving. Although financial pressure causes her to withdraw the request, speaking makes the need visible. The coat she later receives does not remove economic limitations, but it recognizes the value of her care and redefines personal need as compatible with family responsibility rather than selfishness.

These cases complicate interpretations of agency centered exclusively on independence. Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) identify the autonomous choosing subject as central to postfeminist femininity, yet Sara, Beth, and Evie become more agentic by reinterpreting relational obligations rather than rejecting them. Consistent with Budgeon (2011), their choices remain embedded within unequal circumstances. Articulation can therefore alter the meaning of remaining when a woman identifies inequality, evaluates alternatives, and participates in determining a relationship's meaning.

Self-Fashioning and Mediated Performance

Identity negotiation also occurs through appearance, fantasy, consumption, and mediated recognition. In "Crocodile Shoes," Sam wears red designer shoes after accidentally taking another woman's gym bag. When colleagues describe them as inconsistent with her ordinary identity, she asks, "Why? What's 'me'?" (Moyes, 2016, p. 138), challenging the assumption that her practical and inconspicuous appearance represents her only possible self.

The shoes initially increase her discomfort, but later become part of a more assertive professional performance. They make a client reassess "his version of who she is" and make Sam reassess "her version of herself" (Moyes, 2016, p. 139). The shoes do not create competence; they provide an occasion

through which she recognizes confidence and firmness previously excluded from her self-understanding. Her later refusal to return to a gym that intensifies bodily shame shows that negotiation involves not only appearance or consumption but also rejection of a space organized by restrictive standards.

Miranda, in "Thirteen Days with John C," experiments with digital mediation. Messages received on another woman's phone allow her to perform "Scarlet Woman," a desired figure contrasting with her position as an emotionally overlooked wife. She alters her appearance, expresses previously silenced desires, and permits colleagues to think of her as "an object of passion, someone's Scarlet Woman" (Moyes, 2016, p. 168). Although the performance depends on misrecognition, the desires it reveals are not entirely false. It creates a temporary space for possibilities suppressed within her marriage, and ending the deception does not erase her need for intimacy, visibility, and future-oriented desire.

Sam's and Miranda's experiences correspond with Gill and Herdieckerhoff's (2006) discussion of bodily self-management and self-transformation. They also illustrate the contradiction identified by McRobbie (2009) and Genz and Brabon (2018), in which empowerment remains connected to appearance, consumption, desirability, and external recognition. Self-fashioning therefore operates neither as simple liberation nor conformity, but as an experimental practice through which women test possibilities excluded from habitual identities.

Improvised and Strategic Agency

Negotiation also emerges through professional competence and improvisation. In "Between the Tweets," Bella is initially

mistaken for a secretary, but the publicity crisis surrounding Declan allows her to demonstrate expertise in digital communication, negotiation, and celebrity management. She investigates the accusations, identifies Sally as their source, and designs a strategy that converts apparent scandal into publicity. Declan's later admission of an actual affair disrupts the plan but does not erase Bella's agency. Sally likewise moves beyond the position of passive wife by using a celebrity scandal to restore her husband's relevance. Both women act within a media system that commodifies intimacy while also using its conventions strategically.

In "Holdups," Alice negotiates identity through immediate improvisation. Initially classified as ordinary and predictable, she responds decisively during a robbery and later influences its official account. By controlling what she reveals to the police, she moves from being passively interpreted by institutional authorities to shaping the narrative through which the event is understood. Her actions reveal judgment, initiative, and risk-taking that were concealed by her earlier classification.

Bella's and Alice's experiences extend female agency beyond romantic choice. Their negotiation occurs through professional judgment, strategic adaptation, narrative control, and participation in public situations. This supports Ferriss and Young's (2006), Harzewski's (2011), and Rudin's (2023) arguments that women's popular fiction addresses work, competence, and recognition alongside romance. It also shows that agency may be effective without being complete, morally uncomplicated, or fully controllable.

Across the collection, female characters negotiate identity through movement, refusal, articulation, relational reconsideration, appearance, performance,

strategy, and improvisation. These modes neither form a universal sequence nor produce identical outcomes. Their shared significance lies in connecting socially sedimented identity with situated action. From a Beauvoirian perspective, negotiation becomes meaningful when women establish a more reflective relationship to inherited definitions and participate more actively in determining their possibilities. Because these actions remain shaped by material conditions, embodiment, relationships, and recognition, their meanings and limitations require further interpretation.

Meanings Conveyed through Female Identity Negotiation

The preceding findings show that female identity in *Paris for One and Other Stories* is initially stabilized through social sedimentation and later negotiated through movement, refusal, articulation, relational reconsideration, self-fashioning, strategy, and improvisation. The meaning of these negotiations cannot be determined solely by whether a character leaves or remains, speaks or stays silent, or adopts a different appearance. Their significance lies in whether such actions alter the characters' relationship to inherited identities. Viewed through Beauvoir's existential feminism, the collection presents freedom as situated rather than absolute: the women act within embodiment, emotional attachment, domestic responsibility, economic limitation, and social recognition. Three meanings emerge—unfinished becoming, agency within and beyond relationships, and the ambivalence and limits of liberation.

Female Identity as Situated and Unfinished Becoming

The first meaning is that female identity remains open to reinterpretation. In “Paris for One,” Nell describes her journey as one of those weekends “that just changes you” (Moyes, 2016, p. 97). This does not mean she becomes an entirely different person. She remains cautious, uncertain, emotionally attached, and interested in romance. What changes is her understanding of what these characteristics permit: caution no longer proves incapacity for independent action, and she can remain sensible while responding to uncertainty without romantic authority.

Sam’s experience in “Crocodile Shoes” reinforces this pattern. The designer shoes prompt her to “reassess her version of herself” (Moyes, 2016, p. 139), making confidence and competence available to her self-understanding rather than creating them. Miranda’s performance as “Scarlet Woman” offers a more ethically unstable version of the same process. Although based on deception, it reveals desires for intimacy, visibility, and future possibility suppressed within her marital role. Ending the performance does not erase that recognition.

These narratives present becoming as the continuing reinterpretation of situated existence. *Transcendence* does not permanently replace *immanence*, nor does a new identity erase earlier experience. This finding corresponds with Burke’s (2018) account of gender as lived time and Heinämaa’s (1997, 1999) view of femininity as socially mediated meaning. The present study extends these perspectives by showing how narrative disruption makes inherited identity available for reinterpretation. Becoming is not the discovery of an untouched, authentic self but an unfinished reorganization of what has shaped the women and what they may still become.

Agency Within and Beyond Relationships

The second meaning is that female agency cannot be measured solely through separation from romantic, marital, or familial relationships. Chrissie in “The Christmas List” provides the clearest example of departure. The description of marriage as “an agreement, not a prison sentence” (Moyes, 2016, p. 181) enables her to recognize that marital status does not eliminate her capacity to evaluate and refuse the conditions under which she lives. Her departure does not resolve its economic, emotional, or practical consequences, but it restores continued participation in the marriage to the realm of choice.

Beth in “A Bird in the Hand” offers a contrasting form of agency. Her return to Simon after rejecting Ben may appear conventional, yet it follows a confrontation with the alternative life she had idealized. She recommits after evaluating that possibility rather than because no alternative is imaginable. Sara and Evie similarly negotiate within continuing domestic relationships: Sara makes unequal mental labor visible, while Evie recognizes that personal need need not conflict with caregiving. None achieves unrestricted independence, but each moves from unexamined accommodation toward greater participation in defining her situation.

These trajectories distinguish passive continuation from reflective recommitment. Remaining within a relationship does not necessarily constitute *immanence*, just as leaving does not automatically guarantee *transcendence*. The meaning of either action depends on whether the woman remains reduced to a predetermined function or begins to reflect on and participate in determining the relationship’s direction. This finding supports Budgeon’s (2011) argument that female agency remains embedded in

social relations, thereby complicating the autonomous model of choice identified by Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006). Relationships may constrain women, but they may also become objects of evaluation, renegotiation, or renewed commitment.

Ambivalence and the Limits of Liberation

The third meaning is that female liberation remains partial and contradictory. The characters often gain agency through practices that reproduce bodily judgment, consumer culture, romantic convention, professional inequality, or dependence on recognition. Sam's confidence remains connected to the sexual and class meanings of designer shoes, while Miranda's digital performance expands her awareness of desire through male recognition and deception. Bella and Sally demonstrate strategic capacity within a media culture that commodifies marriage and scandal, whereas Alice's control of the robbery narrative involves manipulation of institutional judgment. These cases show that agency need not be morally pure or fully emancipatory; women may act effectively within systems whose conventions they also reproduce.

Even Nell's reunion with Fabien remains ambivalent. The ending does not reject romance and may appear to replace one man with another. However, the relationship emerges after Nell has demonstrated she can act without letting romantic authority determine her direction. Romance remains part of her becoming rather than the sole foundation of agency.

These contradictions correspond with McRobbie's (2009) and Genz and Brabon's (2018) accounts of postfeminist culture, in which empowerment coexists with regulation through appearance, consumption, romance, and individual responsibility. They also

support Gill and Herdieckerhoff's (2006) argument that apparent freedom may conceal the conditions shaping women's choices. Nevertheless, ambivalence does not make change meaningless. A Beauvoirian account of situation allows Sam's confidence, Miranda's awareness, Bella's authority, Alice's initiative, and Nell's altered relation to uncertainty to be interpreted as partial exercises of freedom within circumstances not entirely chosen or controlled.

Taken together, the collection represents the negotiation of female identity as situated freedom. The women become more agentic not because they escape every relationship or structure, but because they recognize socially assigned identities as neither natural nor final. The findings support scholarship describing women's popular fiction as a contradictory space in which romance, work, consumption, embodiment, and agency intersect (Ferriss & Young, 2006; Harzewski, 2011; Rudin, 2023), while extending Beauvoirian discussions of lived experience and possibility (Burke, 2018; Heinämaa, 1997, 1999; Knowles, 2019). By connecting social sedimentation, negotiation, and existential meaning, the study presents female becoming as gradual, relational, and unfinished.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the initial construction, negotiation, and meanings of female identity in Jojo Moyes's *Paris for One and Other Stories*, drawing on Beauvoir's existential feminism. The findings show that female identities are initially stabilized through what this study terms the **social sedimentation of identity**. Relational expectations, self-silencing, domestic responsibilities, material restrictions, bodily

judgments, and professional assumptions gradually become accepted as credible definitions of the women.

These identities are negotiated through refusal, movement, articulation, relational reconsideration, self-fashioning, mediated performance, professional strategy, and improvisation. The negotiations do not follow a uniform transition from dependence to independence. Some characters leave restrictive situations, while others remain within relationships after recognizing inequality, expressing previously silenced needs, or evaluating alternatives. Female agency, therefore, depends not simply on whether a woman leaves or remains, but on whether she develops a more reflective and participatory relationship to her situation.

The collection consequently represents female identity as situated, relational, and unfinished becoming. The women do not attain unrestricted autonomy or completely escape the emotional, material, embodied, and social conditions that shape them. Nevertheless, meaningful change occurs when inherited identities are recognized as interpretations that can be questioned rather than natural limits on possibility. The study thus offers a Beauvoirian account of **situated freedom**, in which transcendence refers to the opening of new possibilities within continuing circumstances rather than the complete rejection of romance, domesticity, or care.

The study further demonstrates that ordinary experiences can become important sites of identity negotiation in women's popular fiction. Its process-oriented framework connects social sedimentation, narrative disruption, situated action, and ambivalent change beyond binary readings of oppression and empowerment. Because the analysis is limited to one short-story

collection, the findings are not intended to represent female experience universally. Future studies may compare Moyes's fiction with works from different cultural contexts or integrate Beauvoirian feminism with intersectional approaches. Overall, the collection presents identity negotiation as a gradual effort to transform socially inherited positions into lived possibilities

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