

# Celebrating the Feminine Self: An Understanding of Stephenie Meyer's Twilight

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**Abstract-** *The paper examines the celebration of the feminine self in Stephenie Meyer's Twilight through the character-Bella. While most of women's writings carry a feminist voice asserting women's individuality, the writers of Gothic romances concentrate more on the celebration of the feminine self rather than challenging the binaries of gender. Stephenie Meyer, by putting her heroine Bella into a traditional feminine frame provides her full scope to exercise her freedom to choose even while carrying out the prescribed feminine roles. Through the analysis of the character, there will be an attempt to demonstrate that while enjoying one's inequality how one can prove the uniqueness of one's individuality.*

**Keywords-** *Stephenie Meyer; Bella; Femininity; Romantic Heroine; Individuality;*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Femininity and Masculinity are the two gendered categories that stereotype men and women's roles and puts the two sexes into confinements. Feminism is all about challenging the stereotypical roles that limits women's freedom and relegates them to the margins. The radical feminist approach of subverting the patriarchal norms have often been condemned criticized and has paved the way for debates on having a more sensitive approach to understand the gender equality with the concepts of individuality that celebrates the uniqueness of each individual. Though, post-feminism is suggestive of possessing an awareness of feminism, nonetheless it does not propagate an affirmation to each and every code of its philosophies.

In light of such discussions, an understanding of Stephenie Meyer's novel- Twilight becomes significant for it has garnered huge criticism for its anti-feminist portrayal of the heroine who is weak, dependent and limited in her sphere. However, as a gothic romance, this work serves to please the women readership. Such romances invoke pleasure to instigate the conventional gendered norms. A closer look at these novels also provokes an understanding of female power since those protagonists are often portrayed to triumph over the most dangerous and difficult situations of life. Likewise, even in Meyer's Twilight, she presents Bella as a young girl who faces the difficulties of her relationship combined with her own lack of physical fitness and beauty. However, she does not overcome these difficulties all by herself; rather she is helped by her male counterpart- Edward Cullen who becomes an agency for her stability and strength. Bella resorts to the relational

ethics to enjoy her woman-hood while also possessing a simultaneous knowledge of the codes of feminism. The feminine codes stand central to the text and it is through these codes that Meyer tries to put forth the idea that how the social and cultural constrictions posit challenge to a woman restricting her freedom and choices. She exercises her power by making choices that determine her individuality despite her weaknesses. She simultaneously exhibits the entrapment of women in the traditional roles dictated by the society along with her suppressed feminine desires. The dichotomy between the imposed roles and the feminine desires is something that most ordinary women experience in their day to day lives. Thus, Bella becomes a representative figure caught between the self and her exteriority. To give a full play to the problematic of a woman's role and desires and to her sense of individuality Stephenie Meyer casts her heroine in a typical romantic frame.

## 2. BELLA: A TYPICAL ROMANCE HEROINE

Bella is caring, good at her culinary skills, self-sacrificial and yet passive at displaying emotions. She has a bland appearance that creates a sense of incompetency in her- "physically, I'd never fit in anywhere" (Meyer 9)[9]. However, this persistent feeling does not distract her from her duties of care towards her parents. Her mother often teases her for being mature (Meyer 91)[9], to which she retorts by calling her 'childlike' (Meyer 4)[9]. Even while leaving for Forks, her concerns for her mother tend to predominate her concerns for her own self- "How could I

leave my loving, erratic, harebrained mother to fend all for herself" (Meyer 4)[9]. Despite such feelings, she leaves upon realizing that her mother requires some space with her new husband. Her detestation for Forks does not dissuade her from leaving for the place and upon reaching there she quickly takes up the responsibility of her father who has been devoid of affection and care for quite a long time. She determines to help him overcome the memories of her mother and also takes up the responsibility of the kitchen on realizing his poor eating habits.

There are references to her culinary skills in many parts of the narrative. Even as the house at Forks dissuades her, she makes a close examination of the kitchen in it- "his small kitchen, with its dark paneled walls, bright yellow cabinets and white linoleum floor" (Meyer 10)[9]. This area becomes a marker of her individuality as it lets her execute her skills and extend her affection for Charlie. She may not be so expressive in showcasing her feelings, but through her culinary skills, she tries to communicate her concerns for him. Charlie recognizes her skills at the kitchen that is unlike her average skill at education and poorer physicality - "I called him in when the dinner was ready and he sniffed appreciatively" (Meyer 30)[9]. The kitchen also provides her a space for distraction where she remains immersed with her own self instead of thinking about others. The long process of cooking chicken enchiladas relieves her from the discomfort that she often faces in her relationship with Edward. Thus while cooking, she is able to determine herself to "leave him alone" (Meyer 79)[9].

Her self-sacrificial and passive nature reflects as she leaves for Forks while lying to her mother about the happiness of her decision. Even in her new school, she becomes the topic of discussion- "Daughter of the Chief's flighty ex-wife, come home at last" (Meyer 12)[9]. Also, she draws too much of attention for being new in the town, but feels entirely unable to project her unpleasantness to the schoolmates. Her self-sacrificing tendency often leads her to eat leftovers and cold cereals when she does not have to care for her father's diet. These qualities along with the blandness of her appearance assimilate her to the typical heroine of the romance novels. The presentation of a heroine who is so devoid of physical fitness or attractiveness helps Meyer to arouse the horizons of imagination for many common girls who often suffer mentally for their physical incompetency.

By presenting such feminine characteristics of the heroine, Meyer evokes an appreciation for the traditional female roles that are often criticized for being immersed within the system of patriarchy. To some extent, Meyer contradicts feminism that focuses on the achievement of equality for women. However, she adapts a neo-liberal attitude where a woman is free to attain any skill so far it interests her. Far from identifying herself with the boundaries of institutional politics, Bella posits her individualism by enjoying her inequality that provides her the uniqueness of her being.

Meyer presents Edward as a classic archetypal hero who qualifies himself as handsome, strong, mysterious who

protects Bella and also dominates her for her own benefit (McConnell 130)[8]. His qualities sharply contrast Bella for she is bland, weak and passive. She feels an instant attraction towards entire Cullen family from the moment she first observes them- "I started because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine" (Meyer 17)[9]. With this portrayal, Meyer evokes the notions related to the standards of beauty/appearance which act as popular cultural markers. However, instead of propagating the idea through the image of the woman, Meyer muses over the masculine imagination that amounts to the objectification of Edward. Readers are likely to enjoy Bella's experience of his physical beauty that she describes as- "Interesting... and brilliant... and mysterious... and perfect... and beautiful... and possibly able to lift full sized van with one hand" (Meyer 68)[9].

Bella's physical weakness damages her reputation at the gym classes and also causes her proneness to accidents. Edward is quick at recognizing her weakness as he states- "you seem to be one of those people who just attracts accidents like a magnet" (Meyer 93)[9]. His concerns for her often materialize when he protects her in different situations like being crushed by a car or being hunted down by a vampire. Meyer dramatizes those instances where Bella realizes his remarkable distinction from her own self- "two long, white hands shot out protectively in front of me, and the van shuddered to a stop a foot from my face, the large hands fitting providentially into a deep dent in the side of the van's body" (Meyer 48)[9]. The remarkable distinction among them brings them closer instead of repelling them from each other. Edward's protectiveness is portrayed at its zenith when he jeopardizes his own life and also that of his family for Bella's sake whom he has to protect her from the blood thirsty vampire James. And even as he protects her as a part of his duty, he does not fail to remind her of his love- "Believe me, I know. It's like you've taken half myself away with you" (Meyer 365)[9].

Even though, Bella remains passive in front of her family members or friends at school, Bella secretly harbours the attributes of inquisition and desire. While most people at Forks ignore the Cullen family, her introspection leads her to a quest for the truth. At Port Angeles, Bella searches for books that might lead her to the truths about vampire. Though, the books do not offer her adequate information about the real traits of vampires, yet she assimilates ideas and assorts different references to conclude the actual identity of Edward- "I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire" (Meyer 170)[9]. And while, she spends her time in securing information about him, Edward keeps track of her movement and arrives at the right place in the right time to protect her from a group of violators. Despite the physical weakness, she reveals her courage when she asserts her irrevocable love for him even after realizing his thirst for her blood (Meyer 170)[9]. On

the other hand, Edward is reluctant about the relationship for he is concerned of Bella's well-being. By staying nearer, he might hurt Bella, however he feels persuaded to proceed in the relationship due to Bella's insistence and involvement (Meyer 166)[9]. Once they initiate their relationship, Bella turns more active and she surprises both herself as well as Edward- "What neither of us was prepared for was my response. Blood boiled under my skin, burned in my lips. My breath came in a wild gasp" (Meyer). Thus, even by drawing sharp contradiction between the two characters, Meyer promotes their romance by portraying them as mutually constitutive of each other. Every dimension of Bella's femininity is complemented and constituted by Edward's strong masculinity. While invoking the traditional form of relationship, Meyer also performs a simultaneous inversion of its conceptualization that stresses on the objectification of women (Buker 816)[3].

### **3. THE CONTENTION: FEMINIST AND THE FEMINE**

Twilight is often criticized for its anti-feminist designs that emphasizes on sexual purity for women through the agency of the man who polices the sexual boundaries of the relationship. He has lived the life of a monster for several years and has complete mastery over his passion that he implements upon Bella who is young and virgin and is undergoing her first experience of a romantic alliance. Susan Bordo argues that the processes of "external regulation" (Bordo 91)[1] often leads to subjugation of the woman whose desires are resisted in the name of improvisation. Even Foucault emphasizes on sexual purity that he associates with intellectual accomplishment. In his third volume of *History of Sexuality* Foucault emphasizes on the concept of chastity before marriage which can be achieved only when one masters one's passion (Foucault VOL. 3. 228-232)[5]. Feminist often argue that the concept of relationship in western culture is asymmetrical in nature that propagates "women" as "objects of passion" (Buker 816)[3]. Foucault's ideology is also patriarchal in nature and his focus on chastity emphasizes on intellectual accomplishment of men rather than women- who just need to be regulated. Meyer too follows the traditional approach and presents the imagery of sexual resistance as an accomplishment for Edward. He is protective about Bella and functions sexual restraint even as he feels attracted towards the smell of her blood (Meyer 171)[9].

However, as Edward focuses on balancing the relational requirements with the resistance of his own thirst, Bella feels free to exert her desires without even feeling guilty for them- "you didn't do anything wrong, Bella. It was my fault" (Meyer 240). Some critics argue that Twilight like most other romances functions to repair the damages created by feminism on the true desires of a woman. Bella too possesses the knowledge of feminism that she reflects while writing her paper on the

misogynistic representation of Shakespearean women (Meyer 124)[9]. At other instances, one often finds her proceeding to school and other places despite her fear for strangers and insufficient geographical knowledge that becomes discomforting for her at times. Her attitude to proceed confidently in spite of the incapacity promotes an understanding of her cognizance of feminism. However, Meyer does not harp on her feminist struggle and rather pampers her by fulfilling her feminine instincts of being cared by the stronger man (Budruweit 52)[2].

Like a typical gothic romance, *Twilight* presents the functioning of relationship within the prescribed gender roles, but at the same time provides an inversion of the previously set standards. Unlike the constructions of western philosophy that places man at the center and posits desire within his domain, Meyer focalization on the woman helps to situate desire within her capacity. Instead of the "desiring man" (Foucault vol 2: 6)[6], in *Twilight* one finds the 'desiring' woman who not only appreciates the masculine body but also seeks to understand the particularities of 'his' being. The knowledge of Edward's vampirism does not dissuade but instills greater desire in her. She too wishes to achieve the superiority of physical beauty and fitness that Edward possesses as a monster (Meyer 432)[9]. Towards the end, she projects the courage to end her human life form- even as she is young and at the fresh of her life to attain greatness of personality. Thus, Edward functions as an object of passion for Bella who constantly tries to gain complete mastery over his being. By presenting this image, Meyer evokes the traditional understanding of "love of boys" that consequences from "love of truth" (Buker 815)[3]. Certain Greek philosophers have argued that "love of boys fosters truth because it combines pleasure with virtue" (Buker 815)[3]. However, while propagating this idea, they didn't advocate any understanding of women's quest for knowledge since they believed that women to be the fabricators of falsity. Meyer invokes the same ideology of love for boys but inverts it as a resource for women to realize truth. Here, it is Bella who seeks knowledge of Edward's truth. This knowledge of his monstrosity functions to instill virtues in her and she becomes more determined and committed towards the relationship. Thus, for Bella, sexual love invokes both knowledge and virtue.

Meyer further inverts the traditional understanding of sexuality while invoking femininity by associating sex with the idea of health. Unlike Foucault and other traditional philosophers who pay least attention to women's health while dealing with the understanding of sexual acts like 'ejaculation' (Buker 823)[3], Meyer continues her focus on Bella's health. She rather converts Edward into an agency for care of Bella. Though, she is fragile, yet Bella is attributed the status of a complete human unlike Edward who functions only like an instrument throughout the text. On the other hand, Bella combats her humanly weaknesses that Edward tries to protect. It is only through the act of protecting Bella that Edward feels the liveliness of his being. An apparent



understanding of Twilight might project the subjugation of women by men, yet a deeper understanding of Meyer's ideology suggests her favour for Bella who is bestowed with the feminine traits of care and love even as she has several flaws and weaknesses. This marks Meyer's stand among the post-feminist who invoke the celebration of womanhood by enjoying weaknesses as much as sensuality.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Meyer situates her work in the contemporary context that does not oppose feminism. Rather it deals with the contemporary version of feminism that evokes individuality and affirms the freedom of choice. In this context, "women, instead of having to experience the pressure of choosing a feminist or feminine path in life, have the ultimate responsibility to choose any path they want..." (Martinescu 124)[7]. Bella signifies the typical post-feminist woman who becomes the key player of the plot. She becomes the focus of the plot, and owns a 'non-dualist space' (Marinesque 122)[7] where both her feminist and feminine values are held together. The text conveys the message that women should feel free and happy regarding the choices concerning their life without being influenced by any political motif.

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