

## SECTION 2. LITERATURE

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-26-520-4-2>

### THE PROBLEM OF WOMEN'S URBAN IDENTITY IN E. GILBERT'S NOVEL "CITY OF GIRLS"

### ПРОБЛЕМА МІСЬКОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ ЖІНКИ В РОМАНІ Е. ГІЛБЕРТ «МІСТО ДІВЧАТ»

**Boklakh D. Yu.**

*Lecturer at the Department of Foreign  
Philology and Translation  
Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian  
National University  
Kyiv, Ukraine*

**Боклах Д. Ю.**

*викладач кафедри іноземної філології  
та перекладу  
Східноукраїнський національний  
університет імені Володимира Даля  
м. Київ, Україна*

In the twenty-first century, when rapid changes in social rules and cultural values are becoming the norm, the issue of women's identity and place in society is a very important one. Today's world forces us to rethink traditional ideas about the role and self-determination of women, especially in the context of the urban environment, where human identity is undergoing a significant transformation.

Contemporary fiction, as a reflection of social trends, plays a crucial role in highlighting topical issues of gendered urban identity. One of the works that clearly demonstrates this issue is the novel "City of Girls" by E. Gilbert, which does not simply tell the story of the main character Vivian Morris, but uniquely reflects the intertwining of the urban atmosphere with a woman's self-identity and explains the motives of her actions.

The purpose of the study is to examine the influence of the urban environment on the formation of women's identity on the example of the novel by E. Gilbert's novel "City of Girls", (2019).

V. Aheieva, O. Babeliuk, T. Hundorova, O. Zabuzhko, Yu. Kristeva, A. Marchyshyna, and others have studied the concept of gender and its content in contemporary discourse through the prism of linguistics and literary studies. Among the current studies, V. Aheieva's research "Being a Goal for Yourself" is noteworthy, as in the above mentioned work, the scholar briefly touches upon the problem of the relationship between gender identity and the urban environment [6, p. 112–127]. R. Legan in her monographic study "The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural

History” demonstrates the role of the city in literature and its influence on the formation of the characters’ identity in general [4]. L. Kern’s interdisciplinary work “Feminist City: Claiming Space in the Man-Made World” vividly presents the problems of gender discrimination and different views on the role of women in modern American society [3]. Fundamentally important is the monograph by E. Giddens “The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies” because it traces the main aspects of the transformation of the sexual sphere, which in the process influenced the change in the perception of the traditional female role in society [1]. The analyzed works examine how the urban environment affects a woman’s awareness of her role and status in an urbanized society, as well as how the city changes her social practices and behavior, especially in terms of sexual perspectives.

According to A. Marchyshyna, a holistic image of gender identity is a consequence of the cognitive and emotional process of an individual’s comprehension of a certain system of values and his/her further identification with this system [5, p.96]. First of all, we are talking about different life goals of women, family relationships, needs and problems of everyday life, peculiarities of relationships with men, sexual behavior in general, leisure interests, etc. that are intensively activated by the city.

A woman’s urban identity is a conscious and unconscious correlation of a personality with urban norms, values, group intentions, and life-role scenarios. In general, this concept is manifested in a set of individual and social traits through self-identification and a sense of self-worth.

In the novel “City of Girls”, the life of the protagonist is closely intertwined with the history of New York in the mid-twentieth century. The city becomes a separate character in the novel, it is ambivalent in its own way. Its diversity is associated with a labyrinth, inevitability, in which one can lose one’s human essence: “We moved with such speed! Sometimes it felt like I was being dragged behind the city itself – sucked into this wild urban river of music and lights and revelry. Other times, it felt like we were the ones dragging the city behind us – because everywhere we went, we were followed” [2, p. 97]. However, it is precisely this city that becomes the catalyst for the heroine’s identity determination; unbeknownst to her, she is increasingly moving her life into a different semantic horizon, a dynamic sphere of challenges and erotic practices.

At the beginning of the novel, New York is the city of young Vivian, where she lives her life in the rhythm of a fast-paced metropolis and bohemian entertainment: “<...> I went out with the showgirls; we gave the jump to some playboys; we drank rank after rank of cocktails on other people’s dime; we had tumults of fun; and the next thing you know we were trying to get home before the sun came up, feeling as if we were swimming

upstream through bilgewater” [2, p. 154]. The above fragment reveals the typical lifestyle of the heroine, who associates herself with the bohemian gathering, feels like a young person imbued with leisure. However, out of all the fun she has, she skillfully manifests her creativity and talent by creating new clothes at the Lily Playhouse. Vivian identifies herself as a metropolitan resident who is able to combine her creative potentials in the frantic rhythm of life and realize another potential in the sphere of urban fun, even if it is not quite decent.

The city is defined by social experiments, socio-cultural and sexual changes that are constantly spreading in society, changing the perception of gender roles, family values, and norms of sexual behavior. In a large city, the processes of changing the traditional perception of marriage and family, sexual behavior are intensifying, and the boundaries of normality and perversion are becoming increasingly blurred. In particular, according to E. Giddens, the gay cultural communities that came into being in American cities provided a new public face [1, p. 14].

Increasing equality in sexual relations and public manifestation of homosexuality fully contribute to the expansion of possible identities and changes in role models. Vivian also observed these innovations, gradually changing her role, replacing her parents' values with an adventurous exploration of herself and her sexuality, but no less important is her perception of the environment, which forced her to seek her own impressions and pleasures: “The sexual revolution? I'd been doing that all along. Homosexual couples, living together as spouses? Peg and Olive had practically invented it. Feminism and single motherhood? <...> A hatred of conflict and a passion for non-violence? <...> With the greatest of pride, I was able to look out across all the cultural upheavals and transformations of the 1960s, and know this: My people got there first” [2, p. 473]. The heroine expresses a kind of pride for her loved ones in the context of socio-cultural and gender changes in the mid-twentieth century, and therefore claims that her environment has long practiced these revolutionary ideas because it was more dexterous in implementing them.

A new perspective is emerging: a platonic love for the dancer Celia Rey, whose beauty releases Vivian's most secret impulses. Thus, the urban environment reveals the improvement of sexual identity. The scene of the young heroine's virginity being taken by the practical and not quite romantic doctor Kellogg takes on a dramatic and comedic form. The urban atmosphere in the work no longer resembles a space of emancipation, but rather resembles a sphere for new sexual practices.

According to V. Aheieva, the city for a woman often becomes “a kind of theater, a stage where you can present yourself in the most favorable light” [6, p. 114]. We can observe a similar in Miss Morris, and in the literal

sense, she does work in the theater, but the New York arena becomes a more favorable stage for “illuminating” her desires: she actively gains sexual experience with different partners, manages to sew skillfully, flirts, makes the right friends, and finally throws herself into the whirlpool of bohemia, partially losing contact with the real world. In addition, her inner core is captured by the city, and thus she identifies herself as a full-fledged modern city dweller, starting an affair with the city itself.

The illustrated image of Vivian emphasizes the role of women in the advanced implementation of social practices. Women have played a key role in shaping and implementing socio-cultural changes in the context of the sexual revolution, which emphasizes the significant participation of women in the process of social transformation. At the same time, all the features of the sexual revolution phenomenon (the recognition of women’s right to express their sexuality, the consideration of sex as an adventurous sphere, increased tolerance for extramarital relationships, and non-traditional forms of sexual activity) in the work of E. Gilbert are a visual tool for revealing women’s identity in urban projection.

The diversity of the urban sphere determines the freedom of personal choice, where the individual vector always dominates, including even in work communication. This style of behavior is inherent in Vivian: “I swiftly learned, to my head spinning astonishment, that no figure of authority was going to be monitoring my comings and goings anymore. I had nobody to report to and nothing was expected of me. If I wanted to help out with costumes, I could, but I was given no formal job” [2, p. 47–48]. The lack of control created favorable conditions for her own life adventures and time to make mistakes.

The young woman also justifies a sexually hedonistic lifestyle: “It was more important for me to feel free than safe. And if you’re wondering whether I ever had crises of conscience about my promiscuity, I can honestly tell you: no. I did believe that my behavior made me unusual – because it didn’t seem to match the behavior of other women – but I didn’t believe that it made me bad” [2, p. 396–397]. Thus, the main thing for Vivian is freedom of expression, so she is not ready to support stereotypes about the norms of moral behavior. She emphasizes her willingness to take risks in life and act in accordance with her own beliefs. This position of Vivian is also important in the context of sexual issues, because the heroine not only expresses her openness to risk in relationships, but also points out her difference from other women. She does not feel guilty or afraid of sexuality, but rather considers it a part of her uniqueness: “Anyway, at some point in a woman’s life, she just gets tired of being ashamed all the time” [2, p. 397].

Thus, the big city plays a significant role in the formation of a woman's identity, offering, on the one hand, completely new sensations, and, on the other hand, posing serious challenges to the moral ego. The urban identity of a woman in the novel "City of Girls" is manifested through various aspects of the protagonist's life and experience, which reflect the influence of the city on her personality and self-determination:

- social opportunities and challenges (opportunities for self-realization and career, unprecedented rest and leisure);

- the gender aspect (Vivian faces issues of gender equality and successfully breaks down stereotypes that influenced her false perception of the world and her own place in it);

- sexuality and intimate relationships (bohemian city life opens up adventurous experiences and new explosive sensations for the heroine);

- self-determination and freedom (the world of New York gives Vivian a sense of unlimited freedom, actualizes hidden bodily impulses to seek pleasure).

The city's urban culture, intensified social interaction, mobility, and access to a variety of benefits affect a woman's social roles and behavioral strategies. Vivian's urban identity is dynamically formed primarily under the influence of her own unchanging desires, which have released her bodily desires without embellishment into a real world of pleasure rather than harmony.

### **Bibliography:**

1. Giddens A. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1992. 212 p.

2. Gilbert E. *City of Girls*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. 512 p.

3. Kern L. *Feminist City: Claiming Space in the Man-Made World*. London, New York : Verso, 2020. 224 p.

4. Lehan R. *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London : University of California Press, 1998. 350 p.

5. Марчишина А. Актуалізація поняття «гендерна ідентичність» у постмодерністському дискурсі. *Одеський лінгвістичний вісник*. 2015. Вип. 5. Т. 2. С. 95–98.

6. Урбанізм і фемінізм: урбаністичні студії / упоряд. В. Агеєва, С. Шліпченко. Київ : Всесвіт, 2018. 226 с.