

**The Shift from Masculine to Feminine Identity in *La Nuit Sacrée* Novel  
by Tahar Ben Jelloun**

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**Extended Abstract**

**1. Introduction**

The main theme of *La Nuit Sacrée* is the life of a Moroccan women under the influence of patriarchy that is dominant over the Moroccan society. In this story, Ben Jelloun portrays the turbulent, frustrating life of a girl named Zahra whose femininity is not even acknowledged by her father. Having imposed his masculine identity on her, the father deprives the girl of her femininity. After twenty years spending a hellish life, the girl's father finally confesses to his sins at his deathbed, recognizing the femininity of the girl who had been covered with men's clothing until that very moment. Accordingly, the main subject of *La Nuit Sacrée* and the present study deals with exiting the limbo of being a man or a woman and stepping into a paradise-limbo atmosphere of femininity. Having been called *Ahmed* to that day, Zahra was raised as a man; she had never been seen as a women not only in the society, but also among her family members and even her mother. Her only taste of femininity was her feminine body that was hidden underneath men's clothing; and her emotions were considerably suppressed. She had to test and learn being a women, and her femininity was formed through such trials. Following her father's funeral, Zahra/Ahmed leaves her family home while she possessed nothing with respect to her feminine identity except for a few pieces of clothes and a name. She then attempts to nurture her femininity by living amid the society as a woman and recover her lost identity. Accordingly, *La Nuit Sacrée* is the story of Zahra's attempts to find and recover her lost gender; the present study is an examination of the heroine's metamorphosis process from masculinity to femininity.

**2. Theoretical Framework**

The present inquiry is a combined study that seeks to analyze a literary text based upon sociology and women studies; this is due to the fact that the subject of identity is intertwined with sociology, while the modern views of sex and gender are the achievements of the feminist movement. To confront man-centered theories of sociology, feminists have asserted the distinction between sex and gender. *Sex* refers to biological

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differences between men and women; observable differences in their reproductive parts as well as their reproductive functions. However, *gender* is a notion related to culture. In other words, gender explains the social classification of the masculine and feminine. In addition to these terms, sexuality and sexism were also used in this paper. Sexuality oversees the sexual behavior system and addresses the actions and reactions in this area. Sexism is prejudice or discrimination experienced by individuals based upon their gender.

### **3. Method**

To conduct the present study, three concepts were required to be defined including sex, gender, and sexuality; the definitions were acquired by studying the works related to gender sociology and feminist studies. Then, the story was read in detail and its themes were classified. The themes were classified into three groups including sex, gender, and the general category. A number of subjects and themes were placed in the last category which helped the analyses for the study despite their somewhat irrelevance to sex and gender. Next, the collected information were analyzed and the process of sex and gender formation for Zahra as a result of the emergence of her new identity was investigated.

### **4. Results and Conclusion**

To recover his/her new identity, Ahmed/Zahra faces two significant challenges as a woman: recognizing her feminine body and spirit. Despite having a feminine body, the masculinity imposed on her by her father never allowed this body to emerge and manifest itself. Zahra must take off her mask and show her true face. Yet, this very first step is by no means simple, as it requires a degree of forgetfulness: forgetting what had happened to her soul and body and forgetting those responsible. What helps her along the way is her revelation-like presence in the children's territory during which she discovers her body; a set of insomniac episodes and revelations repeated several times throughout the story which somehow suggest mysterious discoveries and intuitions that gradually resulted in Zahra's evolution and set her free. After revealing the body, she attempts to learn its language as well and meet its wishes, the most important of which is the sexual need. Nevertheless, her first attempt to partake in a sexual relationship is unsuccessful; for her, it becomes nothing but a violent image of a sexual relationship that portrays men's dominance over women. Yet, in her second attempt, love and bodily attractions are combined which meets her physical needs and helps her better understand herself and take a further step towards becoming a woman. She had previously experienced the bitter taste of a man's dominance over her, yet her masculinity led to her being solely under her father's dominance. And when she chooses to be a woman, she becomes dominated by other women that brought about further damages. Therefore, Ben Jelloun portrayal of Zahra's newfound identity is a realist image that suffers from the dominant reality of the Moroccan society which is full of prejudice and discrimination. However, the prejudice and discriminations did not stop her from embarking upon her journey as she was seeking to become human rather than a woman; and her return to her true self was the most substantial condition for achieving the reality of being a human. In fact, by addressing the double standards between Zahra's life as a man and a woman, the writer

portrays the duality that is dominant over his society as well as the suffering resulted from such domination. In brief, the writer attempts to express to his readers, i.e. the Moroccan society, that they, too, lead duality-centered lives similar to Zahra due to the dominance of incorrect beliefs. To set themselves free of this duality, they have no way out except for rejecting incorrect beliefs and attempting to discover the absolute reality.

**Keywords:** Tahar Ben Jelloun, La Nuit Sacrée Novel, Masculine Identity, Feminine Identity, Feminist Criticism

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