

# Gender Identity Construction of Mother in *A Woman's Story* Based on Social Identity Theory

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**Abstract:** Papers on *A Woman's Story* are mainly about the novel's narrative strategies and writing techniques, mostly on analyzing the static features rather than the dynamic characteristics of the novel. According to the theory of social identity, identity construction is a spontaneous process driven by individual self-esteem, with social mobility as one of its common identity construction strategies. As spatial mobility is a metaphorical expression of social mobility, which also could be regarded as the active choice and practice of Mother's identity determination, we explored the corresponding changes in Mother's clothing and cognitive information based on her space mobility through her life. We then analyzed the awakening of her identity consciousness and the processes involved in her identity construction. The dilemma and breakthrough of identity construction, represented by Ernaux's mother, in the spatial mobility of marginalized individuals living in 20th-century French society, were expounded. Thus, we excavated the correlation between spatial mobility and identity construction.

**Keywords:** *A Woman's Story*; Spatial mobility; Identity construction; Clothing; Cognition

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## 1. Introduction

In the 20th century, under the influence of the patriarchal culture, women were largely regarded as vassals and property of men, not deserving of the right to determine their own destiny, this was also applied to the women in the upper class. Men were accustomed to confining women to certain family spaces and endowing them with idealized identity constructions, thus a female's identity was typically constrained to the roles of a meek daughter, a loyal wife, and a cautious mother. However, with the increase of female consciousness and female literature, a small number of women began to exert their own subjective initiative, trying to deconstruct the monopoly of paternity in the public space, escape from the narrow and depressing family space, establish self-awareness, and actively realize their social value.

*A Woman's Story* a masterpiece by 2022 Nobel laureate Annie Ernaux, neutrally records her mother's personal experiences and societal changes with an objective and descriptive style. The novel is of autobiographical characteristics and rich in sociological connotations. Ernaux has altered the grand narrative

rules of traditional writing to stress the perceptual experiences of marginalized people, which are drawn from her family background. Despite their economic challenges, she made considerable efforts to elevate her from the lower class to the higher class, so that she could live between two classes and observe the society in which she lived. The novel embodies Ernaux's careful observation of the social individual's identity construction as an insider of different social strata, as well as her sober-minded scrutinization and profound reflection as an outsider.

Up to now, research on the novel mainly covered the perspectives of the narrative approaches and writing techniques, such as the writing style and form, the anxious narration, and the language of flowers, which dwell on the novel's static features but not Mother's social identity construction under the spatial mobility<sup>[1-3]</sup>. Mobility is the norm in modernity, referring to the exploration of different forms of mobility: people, goods, and information. These forms of mobility can be used to decipher the process of social identity construction of individuals through mobility and migration in their life cycle<sup>[4]</sup>. In this paper, we attempt to analyze Mother's identity construction with the social identity theory proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. This theory suggests that all actors, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses, can equally dominate the process of identity construction. This process is depicted as autonomous, driven by individual self-esteem, and social mobility emerges as a prevalent strategy in identity construction<sup>[5]</sup>. Such practical construction can help the individual to improve self-awareness, inner belonging, and social identity.

Given that spatial migration and social mobility are the practices and critical strategies of Mother's identity construction in *A Woman's Story*, the relationship between her identity construction and mobility with the social identity theory is explored. Firstly, Mother's corresponding changes in clothing and cognitive information are identified. Next, the conflict between Mother's thoughts in the specific social context is analyzed. Lastly, the awakening of Mother's identity consciousness is studied. The ways and processes of constructing different identities during Mother's spatial mobility from childhood to old age are described. The purpose of this analysis is so that readers can get a deep understanding of the sociocultural significance of Mother's identity construction, as she represented one individual of the females living in the 20th century who struggled with the dilemma and finally constructed.

## **2. The awakening of Mother's identity consciousness in the native-rooted countryside**

In the novel, the native rural space in which Mother was brought up is the primary factor facilitating her self-reflection and identity construction. The native space is essential for class differentiation and identity formation and plays the role of the narrative foundation and repository of memories. As Lefebvre noted: a closer observation of space – not only with the eyes and the head but also with all the senses and the body – leads to a greater awareness of conflicts within that space<sup>[6]</sup>. The spatial hierarchy is intertwined with the social class hierarchy, and the twofold marginality of geography and economics creates a spatial order of urban superiority and rural inferiority<sup>[7]</sup>. Hence, growing up in a rural environment, compared to those young girls attending elite boarding schools, prompted Mother who belonged to a disadvantaged class to reflect deeply on her self-identity.

Native space is the genesis of identity awareness and the source of identity-cognitive conflicts. Born on the outskirts of the small town of Yvetot in Normandy, Mother spent her entire childhood in the countryside. The enclosed and isolated rural environment contributed to the development of conservative and content villagers who were satisfied with the status quo. Mother's siblings unknowingly embraced this ideology, rendering them passionate and irritable. Sometimes, they thought they were "somebody"; but other times they would also claim that they were "nobodies." They drowned themselves in liquor, seeking solace in the intoxicated company at

coffeehouses and within the confines of their homes. In stark contrast to this chaotic lifestyle, Mother exhibited a strong sense of self-awareness and spiritual pursuit. She set herself apart from others, refusing to align her identity solely with her group based on cognition, emotion, and conduct. Instead, she attempted to reshape herself through deliberate social categorization. “She was aware that she belonged to the lower class and she resented it, refusing to be judged according to her social status”<sup>[8]</sup>, and she also “tried to escape the dull certainties of her fate: inevitable poverty, the threat of alcoholism, and else that happened to a factory girl who had slipped into bad habits”<sup>[8]</sup>. All these thoughts indicated that Mother felt cut off and alienated from other people around her, suggesting that Mother disagreed with many “others,” who are her siblings and villagers. From then on, Mother started to build her self-identity and recognized her desired life was to be free from a tragic fate.

Mother’s childhood dress revealed her marginalized class image of rural children. A countryside, characterized by specific material conditions in spatial representation, is typically categorized as a marginal space in geography and a lower space in economics. Costumes, being the most prominent material manifestation, facilitate a rapid understanding and absorption of conveyed messages. The effects of costumes, such as identifying individuals and distinguishing between social groups, play a crucial role in this process. People of the upper class often favor dresses made of fine materials and good textures (mostly silk) with embroidery and other exquisite ornamentation. In contrast, people of the lower class preferred plain dresses with poor fabrics, mainly linen. In the novel, there was less emphasis on Mother’s dress. Instead, Ernaux’s description of her grandmother’s skills as a housekeeper would paint a picture that Mother’s clothes were torn and worn out. Grandmother “turned back the collars and cuffs of the boy’s shirts so that they would last twice as long”, “she kept everything,” and “the dresses and pairs of shoes handed down from one sister to the next,” which all suggest that Mother was a countryside girl who was of lower social class<sup>[8]</sup>.

Furthermore, Mother’s observations and views on her church and school life showed that she was not satisfied with her original identity. Mother’s deep impression of primary school was that “the schoolmistresses expected the girls to be polite and clean; they inspected their collars and fingernails and asked them to remove one of their shoes”<sup>[8]</sup>. Nevertheless, she never knew which foot to check, indicating her sense of being lost in the unknown world as the costume bothered her self-identity. Meanwhile, Mother showed little interest in learning but developed a strong interest in doctrines. The choice of Mother was not only due to economic factors but also the result of pursuing a positive social identity driven by her self-esteem. Because attending mass allowed her to “share in the beauty, opulence, and the spirit of the ceremony gold chalices, embroidered chasubles, hymns”<sup>[8]</sup>, which vividly portrayed Mother’s unique observation and pure sensory impression as a rural child. She perceived the stark contrast between the church’s embroidered robe and her coarse cloth, with the former signifying wealth and dignity and the latter representing poverty and rusticity. Additionally, “Catechism was the one subject she studied with a passion, and she knew all the answers by heart (as if to show that she knew)”<sup>[8]</sup>, so that she could get the impression that she did not live in total poverty. All these descriptions indicated Mother’s initial awareness of identity, which inspired her pursuit of different identities.

Mother started building her social identity during her awakening of identity consciousness. Being a member of a community that required a clear assessment of one’s own value and abilities, she lacked objective means for evaluation. Consequently, she leaned towards defining herself through comparisons with other individuals. When it comes to Mother’s childhood experiences, her sense of inner dignity disagreed with and diverged from her recognition of the external world, which brought about identity anxieties. Besides, the constant interaction with other social groups, the different social spaces in her native environment, and her self-reflection triggered Mother’s observation and reflection on her real identity, which aroused her awareness of self-identity.

Mother began to consciously abstain from alcohol, learn the Catechism, overcome poverty, and get rid of the marginalization of real identity, which drove the construction of her different identities within the spatial mobility.

### 3. The growth of a young female worker in the life-sustaining factory

Typically, the upward mobility of young people from rural areas is associated with an escalator effect. This spatial move is connected to a social mobility outcome, resembling the experience of stepping onto a moving escalator that propels individuals along and upward at a faster pace than their peers<sup>[9]</sup>. The adolescent Mother quit her job in a margarine factory to work at a rope factory near the village to earn a living. Being a young female worker, her clothing preferences and reading choices reflected the cultivation of her open aesthetic appetite and stable sense of identity. During this period, Mother courageously explored personal self-awareness and made some breakthroughs in her identity.

Mother established her identity as a working girl when she dropped out of school to support herself. With the rise of the industrialization movement in the 1920s, the countryside was struck by industrialization. At age twelve and a half, Mother left school and worked in margarine and large rope factories. Initially, she took pride in being more civilized and independent than her peers who worked as farmhands and housemaids. However, during this period, societal focus centered on learning as much as possible about others' privacy and closely monitoring girls' behavior. "One was inevitably torn between wanting to enjoy one's youth and fearing reputation"<sup>[8]</sup>. Thus, influenced by public opinion, Mother aspired to be a competent female worker.

Yet, her inner dissatisfaction eventually surfaced and manifested as a rebellious force in her manner of dress, signifying her discontent and a decisive departure from her original identity. Clothing could be regarded as a non-verbal symbol highlighting the wearer's preferences and aesthetic orientation, apart from marking the wearer's gender, age, status, religious belief, and other characteristics. During this period, Mother liked to wear miniskirts and even chose to wear a miniskirt wedding dress that exposed her knees. Her outfit actively conveyed her beauty and vitality, radically deviating from traditional women's introverted and implicit aesthetic vision, propagating her uniqueness and individuality, and creating a distinct image of a young female worker. For Mother, clothing is a significant external manifestation of women's pursuit of equal status and social identity and an implicit expression of women's independence, power, and liberation.

Moreover, Mother's intrinsic willingness and enthusiasm for reading indicated her desire for a new identity construction. The development of an individual's identity arises from the awakening of self-consciousness in situations beyond one's control. Daily reading, encompassed within this evolving environment, undoubtedly influences one's values. In the novel, descriptions of Mother's reading habits reveal that she "reads anything she could lay her hands on"<sup>[8]</sup>, including *Roger la Honte* and *Le Maître de Forges*. Her choice of readings extends beyond mere textual value or social class, indicating that Mother's sense of identity construction is constrained by space, primarily due to her limited freedom in book selection. It is noteworthy that Mother only set aside enough money to purchase rice flour and a copy of *L'Echo de la Mode* upon receiving her wages. Having already developed a sense of style, Mother focused on cultivating her aesthetic appreciation ability. She strategically minimized economic investment to attain maximum psychological satisfaction. Consequently, she purchased fashion magazines not solely for their material value but for the meaning and identity they represented.

The above description of Mother's clothing and reading choice could also be regarded as a subtle symbolic representation of her future, revealing that Mother would not be content with her status as a female worker

of the lower class and wanted to pursue a better social identity. The lower society consists of a complex and diverse range of members, with workers in manufacturing, food processing, clothing processing, watch repair, and other similar walks of life, all falling into the lower-class category. Mother was at the bottom of society, whether she worked at a margarine factory or a large rope factory, so she began to emotionally disagree with her own identity. As Baumeister pointed out “self-esteem plays an important role in defending the individual against anxiety, and so threats to self-esteem may trigger acutely aversive emotional states” <sup>[10]</sup>. Mother then intended to “try to come up in the world at any cost” <sup>[8]</sup> and dreamed of running a grocery business, which would bring her into the upper-class status with access to resources, freedom, space, comfort, time, and most importantly, a sense of value <sup>[11]</sup>.

Hence, the adolescent Mother conjured up the idea of giving up her status as a young female worker. She would escape from the relatively isolated space of ill-informed factories, so that she could establish a new identity as a shopkeeper in an affluent town with a prosperous commercial business. Just as Rupert and Brown pointed out: “In the event of an unsatisfactory identity, individuals may seek to leave their group or find ways of achieving more positive distinctiveness for it” <sup>[12]</sup>, and spatial practice is an essential explicit way for individuals to conduct social mobility to transform their identities and destinies. As the main strategy of identity construction, social mobility can break the barriers between classes, weaken the inherent link between social memberships and status, help individuals upgrade their status, and create conditions for further development.

#### **4. The transformation from being a shopkeeper to a grocery business and café owner**

In the 20th century, French women could only achieve spatial migration and identity change through marriage, influenced by a patriarchal society with ideological limitations on seeking identity within spatial constraints. Given this situation, Mother married a worker and persuaded her husband to settle down in the town of Lillebonne. In this way, she succeeded in transforming from a shopkeeper to a worker, with a desire for material possessions and a township identity. At this stage, her clothing choices and cognitive information changed remarkably, which expressed Mother’s struggle with self-identity and her attempt to achieve self-satisfaction and stability brought by her new identity.

Therefore, Mother began an identity transformation within her reach: from a factory worker to a shopkeeper. In 1931, she applied for a loan for a grocery and a café in Lillebonne. Since then, she dedicated herself to working with “a friendly word for every customer, always in a good humor, and showing remarkable patience” <sup>[8]</sup>. Here, Mother learned to wear a smile on her face, improved her taste in clothes, and acquired interpersonal skills. With an increased income compared to her worker days, she felt a sense of gratification. “She loved to share in the conversation...In short, she felt happy in her new, broadening surroundings” <sup>[8]</sup>. Unfortunately, in 1945, Mother had to shut down her businesses and return to Yvetot due to two force majeure: World War II air strikes and her daughter’s health problems. With an optimistic mind, Mother managed to set up a grocery and a café in a semi-rural district spared from the war three months later and resumed her duties of stocking, counting, and financial management; everything was slowly getting better. In summary, Mother’s two stints in running shops lasted 17 and 25 years, respectively. Throughout these periods, her character and personality remained constant, leading to a long-term stable life and identity. This aligns with Stuart Hall’s construction of the main components of a stable identity <sup>[13]</sup>. During this period, Mother also gained self-esteem and identity through running the grocery and the café. These establishments also transformed into social spaces for her to comprehend the external world, exchange information, and contemplate her own self-identity.

The openness and sociality of the grocery and the café encouraged Mother to interact with different

customer groups, further provoking her insight. She soon perceived the inextricable link between clothing and identity: clothing, as the most direct and obvious way to establish one's identity, was a relatively simple indicator to gain. She believed that wearing new clothes or elaborate makeup before going out was the fundamental expression of "one must keep one's position"<sup>[8]</sup>. Thus, Mother chose clothing as a material symbol to shed the old identity and build a new one. She internalized her dress aesthetic as the reference standard of her professional identity image, thereby creating a decent image for the better identity construction of a shopkeeper.

Mother's notion of dressing started to change, she never went out slovenly, and her dress style switched from plain to ostentatious, from fashionable to good quality. In the beginning, "Before buying a dress, she would consider whether it was chic. She hoped, and later knew, that she would never be taken as a 'country lass'"<sup>[8]</sup>. Little by little, she preferred to be well-dressed in clothes of good quality. She was also particular about the stores that she buys her clothes from "The Printemps department store, more chic, she thought, than the Nouvelles Galeries"<sup>[8]</sup>. Obviously, clothing was no longer just for keeping the body warm but developed into a "social attachment to the wearer"<sup>[14]</sup>. To a certain extent, Mothers' alternative options for shopping places, dress styles, and texture preferences redefined the relationship between herself and others, thus expanding her social space.

Meanwhile, Mother's dresses were vividly colorful and eye-catching. Costume colors are generally assumed as the psychological and moral implications, which may be imposed by one's social identity and can reflect one's social status and personality. In the novel, as a business owner, Mother liked to wear vibrant-colored outfits to different occasions. Except for one black dress, all her other dresses were colorful; for example, when running businesses at the shops, she was often accustomed to wearing "a summer one with big, blue stripes and a soft, beige one made of seersucker"<sup>[8]</sup>; when fishing for mussels, she chose a dress with "black stripes on a mauve background"<sup>[8]</sup>; while climbing mountains, she changed into the blue dress with big flowers"<sup>[8]</sup>. All of these bright colors symbolized Mother's vitality and courage, echoing her enthusiastic and passionate spirit, heralding the rapid awakening of her identity consciousness and passion for life, and aligning with her shopkeeper's identity.

In addition to fabric style, texture, and color, Mother also selected other accessories to modify and support her identity as a shopkeeper. Lurie pointed out that costume refers not only to the clothing materials that are attached to the body's surface, but also to hairstyles, accessories, jewelry, cosmetics, and body decorations corresponding to the costume<sup>[15]</sup>. Reading this novel, we found that Mother preferred wearing turbans, woolen scarves, and high heels, and she often "powdered her face with a puff in a mirror above the sink and dabbed perfume behind her ear. When she put on lipstick, she always started with the heart-shaped bit in the middle"<sup>[8]</sup>. Moreover, she dyed her hair red, blonde, or reddish to match the in-vogue outfits. In short, Mother was very young and beautiful during those years, and customers called her a "handsome woman"<sup>[8]</sup>, and Annie Ernaux saw her as a role model.

Undoubtedly, Mother acknowledged the unique significance and connotation of clothing in expressing her personal identity. Taking the initiative, she pursued and showcased a more refined social identity through a variety of clothes, aiming to distinguish herself within her social space. Consequently, clothing became, to some extent, Mother's expression of social identity, transcending the conventional role of being merely a representation of a woman's beauty significance.

To construct her identity as a shopkeeper, Mother not only changed the way she dressed, but also further enhanced her internal cognition. She helped herself with clothing to temporarily establish the identity of a shopkeeper in the spatial flow from the factory to the grocery and cafe, while she could not fundamentally upgrade her class. In view of this, Mother held that "self-improvement was first and foremost a question of learning and nothing was more precious than knowledge (She would often say, 'One must occupy one's

mind.}')”<sup>[8]</sup>. Mother then began to cultivate her wisdom and grace consciously.

First, a particular link existed between Mother’s identity construction and the improvement of her speaking skills. While managing the shop, Mother “had to go everywhere (the tax office, the town hall) and deal with suppliers and representatives; she learned to watch her language”<sup>[8]</sup>. At the family dinner table, Mother always asked her daughter to talk about what she had learned and particularly enjoyed borrowing her daughter’s words and expressions from class to her daily conversations, because she took these words for “standard French” and expected her daughter to help correct her pronunciation. Besides, Mother stopped asking her daughter whether she wanted dinner instead of tea. When communicating with others, she also “tried to avoid grammatical errors and chose her words carefully”<sup>[8]</sup> and threw in “an unfamiliar expression she had read somewhere or picked up from educated people”<sup>[8]</sup>. In a word, Mother reflected on her words and deeds and constantly improved her language expression ability in speech practice to enhance her sense of personal identity.

Second, a covert connection originated between Mother’s identity construction and her careful selection of reading books. Mother always found time to read; “books were the only things she handled with care. She washed her hands before touching them”<sup>[8]</sup>. She also imitated her daughter in her choice of texts, believing that what her daughter read was recommended by booksellers. Therefore, “besides Delly’s popular romances and the Catholic works by Pierre l’Ermite, she took to reading Mauriac, Bernanos, and Colette’s scandalous stories”<sup>[8]</sup>. In the meantime, she also “read *Confidences* and *La Mode du Jour*, both popular women’s weeklies” and “loved *Gone with the Wind*”<sup>[8]</sup>. Mother, who had been reading fashion magazines to better her aesthetic competence, had also begun to notice the potential benefits of classical literature in nurturing personal quality, achieving self-spiritual world integration, and strengthening her inner belonging of class identity.

Obviously, the spatial shift from the factory workshops to the grocery and the cafe has had a positive and far-reaching impact on Mother’s identity construction. By externalizing her identity through clothing and internalizing it through cognition, Mother achieved self-unification and progressed from being a member of a marginalized group to an independent shopkeeper. She learned from the distinguished group, adopted their identity characteristics, and realized economic independence and freedom of thought. This self-initiated reversal of identity drove Mother’s subjectivity to establish a relatively stable identity gradually.

## **5. A copycat of an elegant noblewoman in the big bourgeois houses**

Due to the limitations of economy, culture, and social relations, women in the lower class had to practice thrifty and conservative lifestyles in order to move up.

With the rapid progress of commerce, science, technology, and urbanization, women gained access to abundant educational and cultural resources. This shift led women in relatively underdeveloped areas, including Mother, to harbor a universal desire for upward mobility. Mother, in turn, placed her hopes for moving out of the small town on her daughter, who had established roots in Annecy.

The then middle-aged Mother chose to live with her bourgeois daughter’s family, expecting to complete the upward vertical mobility of her intergenerational social status. She simplified her dress preferences and enhanced her cultural and artistic pursuits, aiming to reconstruct an effective connection between herself and the evolving environment. This effort was driven by the desire to prevent the loss of life significance and alleviate the anxiety related to personal identity.

Identity is a constantly evolving concept that includes multiple factors such as race, class, gender, political party, religion, occupation, and age<sup>[16]</sup>. With the increasing age, the passing away of her husband, and social unrest, Mother’s grocery and cafe were sold as houses in 1970. She then offered to move to a big bourgeois

house in Annecy with her daughter's family. However, Mother was not as happy as she expected. Because of the change in geographical space, "her world suddenly shrunk and lost its sparkle. Now Mother felt that she was a nobody" <sup>[8]</sup>; she could only communicate with her daughter's family, and most of the skills she had acquired in the small town were useless in an urban environment. This huge gap between ideal and reality caused Mother to be doubtful of the new space and her identity.

Mother viewed her distinguished identity as a process that involved repeatedly locating and highlighting meaning in a specific space. To make the most of her self-esteem, Mother found a new job: caring for her grandson and cleaning the house. Then she "invented a whole new world for herself" <sup>[8]</sup>, which functioned as a modest relief from identity anxiety; she frequently took her young grandson around and slowly got to know neighbors. As Mother noticed that people of the upper classes often displayed their social status and sustained a sense of class superiority mainly on such verbal and non-verbal communication forms like language, manner, and dress, her improved dress taste in Annecy could be found in the novel with a few descriptions: "she never wore dark, only light-colored clothes, and her face was beaming, crowned by a head of snow-white hair. She had lost weight and was wearing a Rodier blouse printed with arabesque motifs," <sup>[8]</sup> which suggested that Mother made efforts to be a member of the upper class through her clothing.

The construction of self-identity was a dynamic process for Mother, in which she maintained a balance between her internal and external environments. Meanwhile, behavioral changes and her evolving identity construction contributed to the development of a confirmative understanding of her own identity. Through this process, she enhanced the construction of her self-value system. First of all, in her daily life, Mother made conscious changes in living habits. For instance, "not drying dishcloths on the radiator in the hall, taking care of things (records, crystal vases), and observing personal hygiene (blowing the boy's nose on a clean handkerchief)" <sup>[8]</sup>; and "attempting to avoid difficulty and maintaining good relations with one's neighbors (We even laughed at her attitude, which hurt her)" <sup>[8]</sup>. Secondly, Mother became more well-mannered and disciplined. "She was careful not to use bad language and tried to handle things 'gently,' keeping a close eye on herself and a tight rein on her temper. One could even say that she was proud of acquiring late in life the knowledge that most middle-class women of her generation had been taught in their youth" <sup>[8]</sup>. Third, Mother did her best to foster reading habits and personal interests. She read, "*Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, showed an interest in antiques, and dropped in on friends for some tea" <sup>[8]</sup>. Apparently, she strove to adjust to a new environment by improving her cultural and artistic literacy in an attempt to construct an elegant upper-class female image.

However, Mother's noble identity construction in Annecy did not become a stable image. She only appreciated antiques because they were worth a lot, and she was not a fan of tea but never told her friends. She instinctively transformed Bach's cultural and real dominance by reading *Le Monde* into a form of economic supremacy, positioning herself as an employee living in her daughter's family and desperately trying to emulate the behavior of the upper class. One day she said angrily that she did not think she belonged there <sup>[8]</sup>, which depicted her discomfort with her new identity and foreshadowed her failure to build an identity aligned with the noble image in the unfamiliar city of Paris.

Differences in spatial ideology made Mother's identity construction ineffective even if she changed her specific way of life. In the mid-1970s, as her son-in-law was promoted, her daughter's family moved to a brand-new, under-construction city in Paris. "It was an empty, soulless place where one drifted aimlessly, devoid of thought and emotion" <sup>[8]</sup>. In this city, "She spoke to only one person in the housing estate, a West Indian woman who worked in an office" <sup>[8]</sup>. As a result, "she never got used to living there" <sup>[8]</sup>. She rejected and criticized Paris, a space belonging to people of the upper class. Despite adapting her manners to the upper-class style, her



psychology remained unassimilated. To a certain extent, Mother failed to establish her noble identity.

Spatial mobility offered Mother an opportunity to build an elegant noblewoman's identity, but upward mobility also involves many factors. Immigrants need to adapt to the new social space psychologically. However, from the material world to spiritual pursuits, from lifestyles to cultural tastes, the differences between upper and lower classes made Mother, who moved from a small town into a big city, feel humble and uncomfortable in the face of this more refined world of urban life. Mother had difficulty assimilating into the dominant urban culture. Thus, she experienced an identity crisis as her perception of identity disintegrated.

## **6. The building of a dynamic elderly lady living in a single apartment**

Personal identity could be reflected by one's cultural background and relatively stable identity. When Mother was frustrated during her upward flow from the rural village to the urban area, a subconscious sense of self-satisfaction slowly emerged to fill in the gap and loss brought about by her frustration. Even when the elderly Mother chose to live alone in a single apartment, she persisted in maintaining her image and lifelong learning to achieve external assimilation and internal self-perseverance, thereby establishing a positive female identity.

Personal space could temporarily free Mother from the given social identity constraint, boost her feelings of security and stability, and help her achieve self-integrity. After six months in the new city, she decided to return to Yvetot and rented a studio apartment near the city center. "She was happy to be independent again"<sup>[8]</sup>, and "she enjoyed seeing her youngest sister (the others had died) and former customers"<sup>[8]</sup>. However, the return to her familiar space of the past does not mean the restoration of Mother's original identity. Mother no longer ran a grocery and a café, and she soon discovered that "the atmosphere there seemed to stifle one's movements"<sup>[8]</sup>. There was nothing to do except sitting down, watching television, and waiting until dinnertime<sup>[8]</sup>. Obviously, Mother lived a boring life in which she did not work every day but repeated the same monotonous activities at home, making her unable to seek self-meaning. The search for meaning is closely linked to self-identity. When one feels that something central has been lost – great goals, vitality, fulfillment —, life will lose its meaning<sup>[17]</sup>. Undoubtedly, Mother once again embarked on the road of breaking out of her identity construction and searching for the meaning of life.

Mother knew that the premise of overcoming identity anxiety and the identity-building dilemma was to face reality and learn to live positively. She still enjoyed donning red dresses, facial care, learning beauty or cleaning tips, and sharing them with her daughter. Likewise, she claimed that reading was the most reliable way to learn about the outside world and develop self-awareness. She often borrowed books from the neighborhood library<sup>[8]</sup>; even when her daughter visited her, she also took out some administrative documents and explained them to her daughter. Thus, learning had become a way of life for her. Eventually, Mother agreed to spend a portion of each year living with her daughter. Even during her time there, she continued to relish her solitude, engaging in activities such as weeding the garden, staying up late, picking mulberries, and visiting the local amusement park. She explicitly rejected involvement with the "old people's club" and never uttered the phrase, "I am too old to..."; readers could perceive Mother as a high-spirited and energetic image of an elderly woman.

Mother's positive self-cognition aided her identity development. The vivid portrayal of Mother's image reflects her courage in reshaping herself, discovering the meaning of existence, maintaining a rich inner life, satisfying her need for belonging and individuality, and steadfastly refusing to be marginalized in society as she aged. The above analysis of Mother's image suggested an awakening of Mother's feminine consciousness and a further leap in constructing her female identity. Therefore, the process of spatial migration of Mother was not only a dynamic process of constant conflict between herself and her environment as well as others, but also a

process of continuous self-awareness seeking and identity construction.

## 7. Conclusion

In *A Woman's Story*, Annie Ernaux tells the story of Mother with pure, simple, and restrained language; she gives a nuanced account of Mother's daily activities and behavioral changes and portrays the ways and processes of Mother's identity awakening and construction. From the analysis above, readers could find that Mother constructed multiple identities: a young female worker, a determined shopkeeper, an elegant noblewoman, and a dynamic elderly, and finally, a woman who insisted on being herself and broke out of her social limitation in pursuit of spatial mobility. The changes in identities were demonstrated through dynamic changes in clothing and cognitive transformation. Throughout her life, Mother consistently engaged in a meticulous examination of her circumstances to discover the accurate definition of herself within the context of spatial mobility. This process potentially mirrors the journey that many women undergo in achieving identity construction and self-identification. Mother's experiences offer valuable insights for modern women navigating similar challenges.

Identity is socially constructed based on various experiences, affiliations, and personal characteristics <sup>[18]</sup>. Mother's identity construction under spatial mobility is of universal significance, demonstrating that in the urbanization process, the urban space influenced by mainstream ideology has affected and oppressed the lower class to varied degrees. Mother represented the spatially disciplined lower-class French women of the 20th century. Their dreams, often expressed metaphorically, reflected aspirations for social class mobility, ostensibly framed in the context of spatial movement. Her experiences reflect the living conditions, realistic needs, and value demands of those at the bottom of society, and evoke collective resonance across the social class. In a closed traditional society, a woman's identity is profoundly oppressed by patriarchal culture, discouraging the pursuit of passion and leading to a lack of identity construction consciousness. However, with industrialization, relative social mobility has the potential to stimulate the enthusiasm and pioneering spirit of certain female groups. It can promote the awakening and liberation of women, encouraging them to construct different identities. This, in turn, guides women to make better assessments of their behavior and careers, infusing vitality into the social system and thereby promoting social progress and development. In challenging circumstances, women need to keep their eyes open to more possibilities, take the initiative with personal identity, and learn to accept and manage multiple social identities.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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