



## A Re-Reading of Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* in the Perspective of Beth Jarrett

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### Abstract

*The 'ordinary' American woman writer Judith Guest became 'no more ordinary' after the release of her first novel, Ordinary People, in 1976. This novel gained worldwide attention for its unique plot, which deals with the psychological struggle of a suburban family after a severely traumatic event. This novel is more about the rehabilitation of the protagonist, a 17-year-old boy coping with his mental illness and deals with the theme of family disintegration, mental health issues, adolescent development, and domestic relationships. Judith Guest narrates the entire novel from the perspective of Conrad and Calvin; however, this paper tries to bring Judith Guest's woman character "Beth" to light in an attempt to recognize this character along with the other strongest female characters in literature like Hester Prynne, Janie Crawford, Jane Eyre, Wife of Bath, Celie and so on. The article deconstructs the novel from the perspective of Beth, who is physically attractive, emotionally strong, rational, and an absolute perfectionist in the novel, Ordinary People. Despite all domestic struggles, Beth's sensible, realistic and practical approach toward life helped her make a controversial yet compelling decision that attained her self-identity at the end of the novel. Therefore, this research paper is a re-reading of Judith Guest's Ordinary People" in Beth Jarrett's Perspective.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Self-Identity, Domestic Issues, Existential Feminism

### Introduction

Judith Guest was a 1936-born American woman writer, raised in Detroit, Michigan, currently serving as a member of screenwriters and belongs to one of the most popular celebrities in Michigan with a net worth of \$100,000 – \$1M. Judith Guest's accretion of excellence in English and Psychology obtained from the University of Michigan has out-turned the merge of psychology and literature. Besides, Guest graduated with a degree in education in 1958 and guidance from her niece of the acclaimed poet Edgar Guest assisted her in constructing the structure of her thirst for creative writing in the form of novels. Apart from her most acclaimed novel *Ordinary People* (1976), Judith Guest's other novels *Second Heaven* (1982), *Errand* (1987), and *The Tarnished Eye* (2004) have been noted for her insightful treatment of domesticity and family crises in the happenings of contemporary America. Judith Guest in collaboration with Rebecca Hill, penned a mystery novel *Killing Time in St. Cloud*, which earned a publication in 1988, highlights the notion of murder mystery and whodunit complex that is said to be one of the psychologically deeply discussed headings in the 20th-century American literature. Judith Guest's sub-urban environmental setting and the upper-middle-class social setting created in her novels are said to be the source of the writer's domestic or personal experiences. Besides, most of the characters inscribed in her novels reflect the accumulation of those experiences. Judith Guest in an



interview approached by Jill Van Antwerp conveys the importance of places for the setting for her novel, "I think that I have two things that are really important to me and one is the people that I am writing about and the other is the context, the place where they are, and place seems very, very important to me, personally" (5). In the novel *Ordinary People*, the setting of the story takes place in the suburbs of Chicago, centering the life of an upper-middle-class American family in the year 1970s.

Calvin is a successful lawyer, Beth is a beautiful woman and Conrad is a healing adolescent altogether construct the Jarrett family. The Jarrett family consists of three members bodily (Calvin, Beth, Conrad) and four members psychically; whereas the fourth member (Buck) never appears physically in the novel, but travels solely in the minds of other characters of the Jarrett family throughout the novel. Each of the family members experiences emotional illness in complex forms and struggles hard to work through their domestic issues in day-to-day life. By incorporating these family members as major characters, Judith Guest exposes the disintegration of the typical American family and their journey towards ultimate healing. Guest's depiction of Beth's role as a homemaker reflects the second-wave feminism of the women's liberation movement that happened in the 1970s United States, by discussing the area of women's experience with the family. Beth's primary role in the Jarrett family as a "married woman" is to prepare dishes for her family members, raise their children, serve her husband, and perform all domestic purposes. Therefore, a re-reading will help to highlight the inner themes.

### **A Re-Reading of the Novel**

Calvin and Beth lead a picture-perfect relationship in a nuclear family with their two sons named Buck and Conrad. Calvin as a tax attorney holds a prestigious position in society, whereas Beth as an admirable and efficient woman enjoys spending most of her time in a country club. The Jarrett family is supposed to love each other and lead a wealthy lifestyle in the suburb of Lake Forest, Illinois. Unfortunately, the unexpected death of the family member shattered their happiness by leaving a psychological scar in their minds. As a consequence, each of the family members struggles in their way to regain their normal life. The happiness in the Jarrett family completely vanished after the death of Buck and the psychological pressure on the rest of the family members to live a perfect life seemed difficult to accomplish. The horrible event that killed his brother made Conrad spend his days a month in a psychiatric hospital. Apart from that, Conrad's attempt at suicide pushes his father Calvin into a state of solicitousness and his mother Beth in a state of bereavement. Unlike Calvin and Conrad, Beth tries to rearrange the disorderliness in the Jarrett family but the family member that ultimately leads to the destruction of the Jarrett family misunderstands her inexpressive nature.

The novel *Ordinary People* defines the character Beth only through the perception of her husband Calvin and son Conrad. Hence, to understand what kind of a woman was Beth; this research paper deeply examines the situation from Beth's point of view and intends to portray the character Beth as a "rational" woman. What it means to be a "rational woman" is that rational women can actually understand not only their one's own emotions, but they could also sense others' emotions, thoughts, and feelings too. However, what makes them different from others is their decision-making process, which would never depend upon emotional factors. In simple terms, their choice of decisions would never be based on sentiments; preferably, they always make their decisions based on logic, reason, and rationality. Judith Guest's description of Beth's physical appearance in *Ordinary People* unveils the potential of the character in a more definite way. Guest portrays Beth as,



"Her face is soft in the morning, flushed, slightly rounded, younger than her thirty-nine years. Her stomach is flat, almost as if she never had the babies. She raises her hands to the back of her neck, pinning her hair into a neat coil at the back of her head. Beautiful hair, the color of maple sugar. Or honey. Natural, too. The blue silk robe outlines her slender hips, her breasts" (*Ordinary People*, 6). Beth's past and present haunt her, as the death of her beloved son and the present condition of the surviving son psychologically drags her down from all aspects of life. Despite all distress, Beth deliberately struggles to move on with enough positivity to bloom; but the relationship with her husband Calvin becomes constrained when he grows to worry too much about Conrad and least about Beth. Rationally, Beth expressed her optimistic approach towards life as, "And do not be paralyzed. It is better to move than to be unable to move, because you fear loss so much: loss of order, loss of security, loss of predictability" (*Ordinary People*, 242).

Beth always expects a complete sort of perfection in everything; including her looks, way of dressing, domestic life and household activities. Before marrying Conrad, most of her activities centered around the country club culture illustrates a place commonly located in the suburbs to entertain the upper-class people with typical athletic offerings like golf, tennis and swimming. Beth was a skillful tennis player at Beverly Racquet Club and she challenged men to play with her for better competition. Filled with elegance and self-possession, Beth resembled the fashion of an ideal upper-class woman, as she appeared "so beautiful in every detail that men and women both like to look at her" (*Ordinary People*, 25). After marrying Conrad, most of her activities centered around the household chores and being a homemaker, Beth is expected to fulfil the socially assigned role of a woman that includes taking care of the family, serving the needs of the husband and focusing on the happiness of their children. The sudden change in Beth's lifestyle after her marriage represents the women's disadvantaged societal position in the words of Simone de Beauvoir in her *Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".

The guest portrayal of typical housewives in the 1970s through her character Beth in *Ordinary People* unveils the traditionally constructed role of American women after their marriage. Being a woman, Beth is supposed to fulfil the role of motherhood to Conrad and wifeliness to Calvin. Judith Guest confesses the notion of what it's like to be a woman in a disturbed family as, "She hands him his coffee; crosses to the doorway; motes of dust flutter nervously in her wake" (*Ordinary People*, 10). Through Beth, Judith Guest has created a notion that family responsibilities could never perform as an obstacle for ideal women, whereas Guest describes Beth as "She's such a perfectionist. And yet she never lets herself get trapped into things she doesn't want to do" (*Ordinary People*, 89). The recognition of self-identity is the only way to discern the purpose of life in the case of Beth. She not only loses all of her roles and identity in the Jarrett family but also gets neglected like trash. The way Beth loses all of her purposes is, firstly, Beth had lost her beloved son in a sailing accident, secondly, she lost her husband's care when he got involved in substance abuse, thirdly, she feels her son's constant attempts of committing suicide is his method of punishing her. Therefore, from the philosophical perspective of Simone de Beauvoir, in Judith Guest's *Ordinary People*, Beth struggles in search of self-identification as a rational woman to "where to fit" in a distorted family, leaving with a convincing statement that the family should not destroy one's individuality. Moreover, marriage, children, and family should never determine or affect women's self-identity and women are not the only ones expected to bear the burden of the family. From Beth's perspective, the situation of Beth in the Jarrett family is quite similar to the condition of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. For instance,



Miss Havisham is jilted on her wedding day and decides to stay with her rotting wedding dress till the end of her life, in the same manner, the already rejected Beth is in a position to stay with her distorted family till the end of her life.

Gender plays a significant role in Beth's identity confusion, moreover, the answer to the interrogation of what defines the role of man and woman is based on their gender. Celine Leboeuf's *The Sex-Gender Distinction and Simone de Beauvoir's Account of Woman: The Second Sex* mention, "gender encompasses the identity and the behaviors acquired on the basis of social expectations about what is appropriate for females and males; this identity and these behaviors make one a woman or a man" (*Ordinary People*, 141), to convey a statement that searches for identity is more about the role of man/woman play in the society rather than a person's assigned sex at birth. By portraying Beth as an ideal woman, Guest tries to deliver the impression that the role of women could shape their identity irrespective of gender, as she says, "Nobody's role is simple these days" (*Ordinary People*, 8).

Calvin forces Beth to care much about their thriving son, but Conrad's annoying behaviour of suicide attempt makes Beth distant from him. On one hand, the already depressed Beth became more depressed when her family expected her to make things happen which was not even in her hands. On the other hand, her family never cooperates with her decision of blurring the tragedy to reconstruct the happiness in the Jarrett family. Calvin neglects Beth's plan of going away for Christmas in the middle of December, this act of Calvin disappoints her deeply because he rejects her desire to go to London even after so many compulsions. The question, "are we going to live like this? With it always hanging over our heads?" (*Ordinary People*, 30), clearly envisions her fear of identity confusion and search for identity. The difference in assertion between Beth and her son Conrad concerning the loss of their family member resulted in an emotional disconnection as Beth asserts it was "nobody's fault", in contrast to Beth's assertion, Conrad blames himself for "letting him drown". Calvin and Beth attended a social event organized by the Murray family and soon got stuck up in a conversation with their neighbours. When they ask about Conrad's medical condition, Beth replies with a certain courtesy that "He's fine, now" (*Ordinary People*, 66), but her husband Calvin replies, "There's a doctor in Evanston. He sees him twice a week" (*Ordinary People*, 68), anguished Beth. Because of that, Beth felt that Calvin committed a "violation of privacy" by displaying their family issues, which she doesn't want to converse with society. Beth remained a woman of "pride" among her social circle with her charming beauty, high-grade manners, and unblemished reputation before her marriage. Without considering Beth's sentiments, the inebriated Calvin transformed her image from a woman of "pride" into a woman of "sympathy," making Beth's home life miserable.

Beth realizes there is nothing to deal with or expect from Calvin, which allows her to grow completely hopeless day by day. Throughout the novel, it is evident that Calvin is sexually unavailable due to his drinking problems as Guest points out Calvin's behaviour as "He will not be able to sleep tonight for hours; another side effect of drinking too much" (*Ordinary People*, 71). Conrad's confession to the psychiatrist he consults "My mother is a very private person" and "We don't drive the same bus" (*Ordinary People*, 98) ensures the communication gap and emotional disconnection that occurred between Beth and Conrad. Amidst all agitations, Beth hopes Conrad is her responsibility and gives cautionary advice for quitting his swimming class, but the raged Conrad reacted hard by saying, "You never wanted to know anything I was doing, or anything I wasn't doing; you just wanted me to leave you alone! Well, I left you alone, didn't I?" (*Ordinary People*, 110). Beth is aware of Conrad's psychological struggles still his words, "Go to Europe, why don't you? Go to hell!"





(*Ordinary People*, 110), made her feel as if he was walking over her. Being a woman, Beth has a compulsion to carry the emotional burden of her dysfunctional family for the sake of society. Beth feels like an outsider; when she gets emotionally rejected by her husband Calvin, as well as her son Conrad in the Jarrett family. Beth's emotion of "love" towards her family is true, but the problem is that the family demands Beth to be an emotionally invested woman who is "not a sharer." Both Calvin and Conrad neglect her opinions to solve the family issues, as Beth suggests, "Well, what do you expect? We are a family, aren't we? And a family turns inward toward itself in grief, it doesn't go in separate directions, pulling itself apart. Like hell it doesn't. Grief is ugly. It is isolating. It is not something to be shared with others, it is something to be afraid of, to get rid of, and fast" (*Ordinary People*, 127).

Calvin does not understand Beth and her need to strive to lead a life in perfect order. Though Calvin suffers from his depression, he never wishes his marital relationship to get ruined. Indeed, Calvin tries to please, impress, and convince Beth in several ways, but all his efforts fail when he dreadfully confronts Beth after, "he lets himself drink too much" (*Ordinary People*, 234) in the Butler's living room. On the other hand, the disagreement between Beth and Conrad fluctuates on the feelings they have for each other, as an approval, Beth says about Conrad, "I am sick of talking, talking, talking about him!" (*Ordinary People*, 236). Moreover, Beth strongly argues to Calvin that Conrad's suicidal attempt is merely an intention to hurt her, as she outburst her final emotions by saying, "He made it as vicious, as sickening as he could! The blood—all that blood! Oh, I will never forgive him for it! He wanted it to kill me, too!" (*Ordinary People*, 237). From the earlier statement, it is clear that what troubles Beth more is not Buck's accident, but Conrad's suicide attempt, which makes her entangled in a state of depression, as she blames Conrad, "he tries to blackmail me" (*Ordinary People*, 238).

Beth finally declares she does not want to be a part of the Jarrett family anymore and decides to have a life that she had before marriage. The terminal decision-making process of Beth quivered the readers and critics, as a matter of controversy, many condemned her choice of abandoning her family members. Being a practical woman, the rational thinking of Beth allows her to drive an absolute solution for her domestic issues on account of the words of Judith Guest, "The only one who can help you is you" (*Ordinary People*, 55). Beth realizes the fact that no matter how much hardship she puts on to restore the happiness in the Jarrett family, all she would receive back is hopelessness and burdensome. Beth finally settles to set out with an absolute clarification to the audience stating that in terms of her role in motherhood, "Mother's don't hate their sons! I don't hate him!" (*Ordinary People*, 238), and her questions of "tell me how to be happy" (*Ordinary People*, 239) as a perfect wife, justifies her role as ideal wifeness.

In the end, Beth starts to organize the social events that she used to enjoy doing before her marriage. Beth's self-identification and loss of self-identity have insisted through her final words, "I don't know what you want from me anymore, Cal. I don't know what anybody wants from me" (*Ordinary People*, 239), which indirectly delivers the quandary of: in what way marriage could assist ideal women, and does women's freedom exist within their family circle? The ultimate actions of Beth may serve as an answer to this query because she neither divorced Calvin nor permanently discarded her family. Instead of performing the role of motherhood and wifeness in a disintegrated family, Beth merely chooses to do a role that she did before her marriage. Therefore, Beth's loss of self-identity is retrieved at the climax of the novel *Ordinary People*, where she finds herself through the way of recreating her identity of "Beth Jarrett" into a new identity as "Beth." Every woman longs for self-identity. In real life,



it seems like a dream. These are the rational points that could have happened in the minds of Beth and seeking her self-respect and identity.

### Conclusion

Therefore, at the beginning of the novel *Ordinary People*, Beth is seen as a woman through the sense of a wife to her husband Calvin and as a mother to her son Conrad. Beth has an individual point of view and her intent to portray her self-desire as Beth as a rational girl has been discussed in the article. It is customary for rational girls to recognize their emotions and they might sense others' feelings, minds and feelings too. Nevertheless, this makes Beth exclusive from others by her self-identity. It is purely by her liberty. In her sense, she feels like a new woman when she becomes Beth.

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