



## Identity, Conflict and Literature: A Study

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### Abstract

This paper examines whether loss is the only inheritance of an individual identity in the trajectory of the emergence of secessionist movements as well as their impacts on those who are mobilised to participate in the movement for the denial of “recognition” (Taylor) on the substratum of collective identities. In a bid to redefine this recognition, it becomes a “strategic essentialism” (Gayatri Spivak) for the actors to defy the threat of the residual element of past impressing upon their present; only to become their future destiny. The select fictions- *The Lowland* (Jhumpa Lahiri), *The Inheritance of Loss* (Kiran Desai) and *The Collector’s Wife* (Mitra Phukan) carry the dynamics of collective violence against the backdrop of secessionist movements. The subversion of such anxieties would be studied, especially, in the fictitious endangered territory along with a phenomenal immigrant influx abruptly and harmfully affecting their lives. The magnitude of these movements and the consistency of their validation normally degenerate into petty acts of coercion, arson and mindless brutal killings of the local public. In the select fiction, Udayan, Gyan and students’ leaders find themselves in the long shadow of personal alienation. The stirred up communal and linguistic passions fail to oblige compassion - a natural core of any human enterprise. Unexpected episodes of violence spiral into a chain of reaction with its varied and infectious manifestations, thereby constituting identities of collective amnesia. Hence, the loss becomes imminent in the dawn of stark reality.

**Keywords:** *Identity, conflict, violence, alienation, disillusionment*

## Full Text

### Introduction

The select novels display the susceptibility of youths' mimetic desire for violence to shape their 'identity' who while practising physical violence graduate in to the use of explosives thereby weakening and making themselves vulnerable to misuse of the very precincts of 'identity.'

Shortlisted for Booker prize 2013, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, interrogates the traumatic impact of loss on three generations of Mitra family in the wake of pursuing an ideology of political violence identified as Naxal-Maoist insurgency in the post partition India. The two inseparable brothers- cautious Subhash and fiery, dynamic and impulsive Udayan part their ways owing to their choice of circumstances; Subhash to US for higher studies in oceanography and Udayan in pursuit of a political identity gets involved in Maoist insurgency as a result of government high handedness and brutal oppression of peasants in the Naxalbari region of Darjeeling. He progresses from distributing pamphlets to colouring the city walls in red with Maoist slogans to that of preparing bombs to a full-fledged conspirator and an insurgent. He marries Gauri, but is snipped off his life by the police on the charges of his murky involvement in the Naxalite activities resulting in the killing of a policeman. Subhash marries widowed and pregnant Gauri against his parents' wishes. Subhash, Gauri and Bela (Udayan's daughter) in Rhode Island and his parents at Calcutta bear the brunt of Udayan's allegiance, surrender and death during the revolution that haunts them perpetually only to shatter their lives. Each relationship in the family falls apart. Lahiri utilises this bleaker terrain of *The Lowland* for her characters to rummage upon the mishaps of an "identity" in relation with the conflict.

Kiran Desai's Booker prize winner *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) is set in Kalimpong at the foot hills of Kachenjunga, against the backdrop of Nepali insurgency. The events set in India, America and England depicts rootlessness, alienation, isolation and suffering due to the loss of identity. Sai lives with her maternal grandfather in Kalimpong along with a cook and a dog. Biju, the son of the cook, illegally immigrates to USA. Desai has aptly shuffled and reshuffled the internal and the external conflicts of her characters. With an impact of colonialism and snobbery, the novel also is a microcosm of varied ethnic groups on the basis of class, race and language.

The Assam students' agitation of 1970s and 1980s began as movement for 'identity' and culminated as insurgency with extortion, kidnappings and killings as its regular feature. The issue of migration in illegal manner dispensed mistrust engulfing the lives of all who reside in Parbatpuri. Even Rukmini, the wife of

District Collector is unable to prevent the meaninglessness that grips her life with a horrifying denouement.

### **Theoretical framework**

The concept of 'identity' has always invited a veritable discussion based on its deconstruction in different disciplinary areas "all of them, in one way or another critical of the notion of an integral, original and unified identity" (Hall, *Who needs 'Identity'? 1*). Hall suggests that the concept of identity operates 'under erasure' in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all.

A continuity of colonialism is depicted through inward struggles of identity whereas history and future possibilities have created binary opposition structures of hybridity and transculturalisation as the products of globalisation. Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* warns of the fundamental transformation and modification in the individuals as a result of decolonialization. For him "it transforms spectators crushed with their in essentially into privileged actors with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them." The corrosive powers of globalisation have destructed cultural identities reified as national and individual identity. The complexity of the problem arises when the adjustments of the 'Nation-states' for homogenised cultural identities pave way for multi-ethnic constitution which often carries a violent and brutal legacy of political instability and inter-ethnic violence. The remnants of violence; one of the salient features of twenty first century; is fatal as it impacts the ordinary people so as to get legitimised through their direct participation in the practice of violence.

Personal identity is a much more fluid concept to structuralists, poststructuralists, and post modernists- and to many feminists, too. (Sim, 9) For poststructuralists, individuals are sites of where various drives come into conflict with social norms, and where desire seeks to find means of expression. (Wolfreys, 94). Jean-Francois Lyotard observes politics as a matter of 'little narratives 'with delimited objectives rather than authoritarian pretensions. His goal is 'svelteness', a condition of being where we can shift from role to role as circumstances demand, instead of having a fixed personality or social role that constrains us to act in a predictable, and thus institutionally controllable ,way. Svelte individuals, by implication, cultivate plural identities. (Lyotard, 95)

Alienation is an experience of society as "other". Its multifaceted character renders it inherently indeterminate and more than the sum of its historically constituted parts. (Bronner, 66). It has an existential component. It is more than a reflex of "social conditions "and irreducible to the division of labour. (Bronner, 65) Conflict and existential alienation remain even at the "end of history" insofar as individuals are still confronted with scarcity and their own mortality. (Bronner, 53)

The escalation of conflict depends upon the dynamics of identity as these conflicts have identities typically based on fear and such threatening identities' 'survival itself is to reject any change or accommodation'. Terrell A Northrup in *Dynamics of Identity* maintains that the operations of identity in escalation, in terms of several psychosocial processes occur in series of stages: threat, distortion, rigidification, and collusion. Further, as these stages are sequential and each stage contributes to the creation of the next stage, it is possible that conflict may de-escalate at any stage, depending on both objective and subjective factors. He opines that during the movement of conflict from one stage to the next, de-escalation becomes less likely, for these processes operate at the individual, group and structural levels and that they serve to increase intractability. Ultimately, this leads to the introduction of new material stakes in the perpetuation of conflict which intensifies the generated conflict.

### Analysis

The crystallization of conflict in the social life is supportive to a sense of identity of the member of the group with a common understanding of its importance of being intertwined with that of a conflict. Terrell believes 'dehumanization' as one of the basic processes which are hypothesized to maintain the domination-submission relationship that can occur between low-and high-status groups of men and women or blacks and whites. Low-status groups are defined as objects by the high-status groups, as less than self and as less than human.

The Naxalbari movement lead to the capturing of unarmed insurgents and their forceful and brutal surrender had propelled Udayan's social instincts to challenge the Government. He got apprehensive of the police action: "People are starving and this is their solution, he eventually said. They aim guns at people who can't shoot back...This could only be the beginning of ... Something bigger. Something else." (Lahiri *The Lowland*, 9)

For his father, "I've already lived through change in this country ...I know what it takes for one system to replace another. Not you."( Lahiri, 23-4);on the contrary Udayan was confident: "We will certainly be able to make a new sun and a new moon shine in the sky of our great motherland" (Lahiri, 33) whereas 'it was a portrait of a city Subhash no longer felt part of it.'(Lahiri, 33) Lahiri contrasted the traits of both the brothers so as to depict the inherent tension of getting attracted to the movement at the same time, another repelling it. Udayan hoped that Subhash would come back to "an altered country, a more just society". (Lahiri, 42) This in reality could not happen as Udayan's parents and his wife watched his death, being shot dead in the lowland behind their house. They could only see his dead body being dragged by the legs and tossed into the back of the police van, vanishing into the thin air. Later Subhash comes to know about Udayan's

unnecessary involvement in a misguided movement to stack his life, only to change the entire dimensions of the lives of his family members for generations to come. For his wife Gauri, he died when he would have lived, “For bringing her happiness, and then taking it away. For believing in sacrifice, only to be selfish in the end.” (Lahiri, 164) His parents disliked talking Udayan’s death; especially after his father’s death, his mother becomes mentally deranged and keeps on visiting a small plaque in the memory of her son in the filthy lowland till the end of her life.

Colonialism has impacted and changed the perception of postcolonial nations to integrate many ethnicities into the homogeneities of the nation-state, is due to the integration of many ethnicities into homogeneities of the nation -states. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Gyan finds socio-economic difference between his and Sai’s status. Their different interest and attitudes to life soon became evident to Gyan: “Gyan felt a moment of shame remembering his tea parties with Sai ...” (Desai, *The Inheritance of Loss*, 161) while at market, Gyan could not avoid listening to the speech out of nostalgia: “Decades of exploitation and deprivation led into the formation of GNLf. In 1947, brothers and sisters, the British left granting India her freedom, granting Muslim her Pakistan, granting special provisions for the Schedule Caste and Tribes , leaving everything taken care of, brothers, sisters, Except us. Except us. The Nepalese of India. ... We are labourers on the tea plantations, coolies dragging heavy loads, soldiers. And we are allowed to become doctors and government workers, owners of the tea plantation? No! We are kept at the level of servants” (Desai, 157) Kiran Desai has presented the problems of the socially oppressed sect of the Gorkhas with genuine compassion. She does not fail to admonish severely political violence and loss of human lives.

According to A D Smith [(1983, 1984, 1986) *Dynamics of Identity*, Terrell A Northrup, 67], has discussed the ways of ethnic groups to share common “myths” of origin and descent which “confer meaning for the participants on their situation and actions and help to unite them into compact body with a collective identity and purpose ...[The myths ] exalt the believer , strengthen his sense of community and incite him to collective actions beyond the range of his purely personal or family interests. Hence, ethnic identity ... expresses the individual’s subordination and dependence upon the community, which can immortalize and ennoble him” (Smith, 153-4). Terrell refers Azar, who states that “protracted international conflicts have at their source the denial of particular human needs, including security, distinctive identity, social recognition of identity, and effective participation in the processes that determine conditions of security and identity” (Smith, 29).The violence was the result of a demand for separate state for the Gorkhas by the GNLf (Gorkha National Liberation Front)

The problem of migration from bordering nations into Assam was the crux of movement by the Students' Union. A notable novelist from Assam has worked upon this problem from the eyes of the wife (Rukmini) of the District Commissioner. She is the silent spectator to her surroundings; at times becoming target for wrong state policies or for its lackadaisical approach especially during social functions: "Foreign nationals, infiltrators – I tell you, the roads are full of them nowadays. The main roads, I mean, not even the quieter byways. Can you imagine what the condition must be like in remote villages?" (Mitra Phukan *The Collector's Wife*, 6) "It'll be the end of our culture. The end of our people. We'll have to have reserved seats..." (Phukan, 7)

It is an accepted fact that insurgencies prosper on commanding upon people's power, their emotions to replenish the gaps in the collective spaces, where the general administration fails to negotiate. Every week, reports of fresh incidents of extortion or looting, or gunning down unarmed citizenry, appeared in the papers. One or the other of many terrorist, or pseudo-terrorist outfits that the district teemed with, unashamedly claimed the "credit" for these incidents within a few days many of these organizations merged. In Rukmini's mind, many of these organisations merged into each other, their identities a clone of the most successful one, MOFEH, or the movement For an Exclusive Homeland.

The terrorists or pseudo-terrorist outfits accredited them of the encounters which really had been a sort of dacoity in the disguise of insurgents. Such conflicting situations are source of adventure for delinquent youth. Their engagement in the acts of mayhem with weapons allowed them to camouflage their anti-social activities.

The Students' Union believed that getting rid of the illegal immigrants would suddenly usher in a kind of utopia. (Phukan, 89) Rukmini feels that these students never believed 'in peaceful means to gain their ends' Acquiring a rank in terrorist outfit was prestigious as the 'need for luxury and personal wealth increased proportionately'. "... These lower ranks of MOFEH are all callow youths. Some of them have hardly acquired any down on their faces yet." (Phukan, 110) 'Within the space of a few years, there would be little to differentiate them from common criminals, with not even the shadow of the ideology that had ignited their passions while they had been students. The student's union was at the base of the pyramid whose apex was all too often the full-fledged, gun-toting, Kachin-trained, fearsome terrorists. (Phukan, 89) Many of these young people in front of Rukmini had opted for these outfits as their profession. Her students Bibek and Bondana led the agitation and when asked about missing studies and parents' acknowledgement about their roles; Bibek attributes it as a question of survival as within few years those immigrants would control the land and usurp the very aspects of social,

cultural, financial and political lifestyles. The lathi charge on the unarmed processionists shattered their ranks behind Bibek who fell unconscious and bleeding on the road along with Bondana with a broken limb.

Animesh Dutta, Rukmini's journalist friend, precisely describes the role of journalism in such sensitive areas and the dousing of the fiery aspirations of disillusioned youth as: "it requires much effort and courage to sift a grain of truth from the chaff of fear, and rumour, and motivated lies, exposing oneself to the pain of the victims, the agony of their relatives... no visiting jungle hideouts, seeing the flame of idealism gradually gutter and die in the eyes of the young men and women there." (Phukan, 248) He further informed her of leech and snake infested training camps of MOFEH that "turned to bog and marsh" during rainy season; the "mind-set of the young members, their dreams, the exploitation of the junior recruits by the top leaders who lived in faraway cities, only communicating with the rank and file through messages brought in by hand." He talked of idealism, of disillusionment, of broken promises, of compromises, of how, gradually, a lofty vision slowly crumbled till what remained in the ruins was a travesty silvered over with a thin veneer of patriotism." (Phukan, 250)

### Conclusion

The sense of self, irrespective of its personal or group status experiences changes in relation to the external world, unlike the core of the self which more or less strives to attain stability. The happening of any unexpected event destabilises and threatens the stability of the 'identical self' only to retaliate intensely in a bid to maintain its 'self.' The intersection of this 'identity' with that of the 'world' gets hinged in intractable conflict where the journey never attains its destination but implies loss of 'self' and psychic annihilation in continued cycles of violence. The end is then impractical.

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