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## A STUDY OF IDENTITY AND CONFLICT IN CHANDANI LOKUGE'S *IF THE MOON SMILE*

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### ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the issues of identity and conflict in Sri Lankan expatriate Australian writer Chandani Lokuge's *If the Moon Smiled*. It discusses the issues of identity and conflict experienced by the personas in a mild and subtle language. The author takes us through a journey of cultural conflict, assimilation, trans-culturalism and an attempt to preserve Buddhist cultural norms. At the same time, it becomes clear that Manthri's family shatters at domestic, social, psychological and cultural level.

**Keywords:** Identity, Multiculturalism, Chandani Lokuge, *If the Moon Smiled*

### INTRODUCTION:

Chandani Lokuge's *If the Moon Smiled* is a novel of migration, cultural conflict, assimilation, attachment towards native culture, cultural gap between generations and double subjugation of woman. The title of the novel stresses back to the Sylvia Plath's *The Rival* which opens with the lines: If the moon smiled, she would resemble you. You leave the same impression of something beautiful, but annihilating. (Plath 166) Plath used the symbol of moon which represents beauty, softness and warmth which attracts everyone towards it. Her next lines make the reader aware that one should not become a victim of such beauty because most of the time beauty comes with danger and problem as moon comes with the darkness. There are chances of being cursed by such kind of attracting beauty. Chandani Lokuge might have chosen this title to indicate Asian's attraction towards the Western education, culture, job opportunities etc. This paper analysis *If the Moon Smiled* to find out the issues of identity and conflict experienced by the characters.

**IDENTITY AND CONFLICT IN LOKUGE'S IF THE MOON SMILED:**

The novel opens with the childhood experiences of Manthri, the central character of the work and narrates about the immigrant experiences after the marriage which leads her to a shattered family because most of the personas are found displaced and deranged with the new socio-culture. The main characters in the novel Manthri, Mahendra, Devake and Nelum have their own mode of tackling things in a multicultural nation.

The novel is a story of Manthri, written in first person narration. She is a typical Sri Lankan girl who is married off to Mahendra before she could enjoy her childhood. After her wedding night experience with Manthri, Mahendra concludes that she has already lost her virginity. It results into the conflict and grudge between Manthri and Mahendra which remains intact till the end of the novel. It was Mahendra's mother who insists him to get in marriage with Manthri because she belongs to a conventional and cultured family. Mahendra decides to go to Adelaide (Australia) with his family to catch hold of a job contract. For him Australia is a nation of opportunities and having job in Sri Lanka is like a frog in a well. He has pessimistic notions towards his motherland and having a lot of attraction towards Australia. Unwillingly, Manthri agrees with him and migrates to Australia with her husband. In the course of time, they are gifted with two children; a daughter named Nelum and the second one being a son, Devake. Both children are born and brought up in a foreign environment so they become accustomed to Australian culture that generates a situation of conflict – cultural and generation gap between the children and their parents. Manthri attempts to have command over both children to teach them culture of their country of origin. She expects that they should follow the Buddhist and Sinhalese culture, tradition and they should know everything about the Sri Lanka. Manthri is the only person in the family who tries her best to keep alive the cultural relation with the homeland. Mahendra is more of a practical person. He likes to embrace the foreign culture. Devake is greatly impacted by Buddhist philosophy taught by Manthri. On the other hand, he gets along well with Australian culture too. However, in such a conflicting situation, he pauses to take his stable resolution while dealing with such a culturally diverse atmosphere.

Unlike Devake, Nelum is a liberal persona who wishes to take her own resolutions without other's interference. The narrative throws light on the awareness of Sri Lankan culture and the experiences of Sri Lankans in multicultural Australia. The novel *If the Moon Smiled* opens with the childhood experiences of Manthri in Sri Lanka which shapes her personality. At the beginning of the narrative, the author gives a picture of Sri Lankan culture, customs, traditions and Buddhist philosophy. Whenever Manthri goes to the village temple with her father, while having a look at Buddha's statue standing on a lotus, her father used to advise her: "You must try to be like that Nelum flower, her father often says to her, pointing to it. Blossom free of the mud in which it is born, unsoiled by it." (3)

The Nelum flower is an embodiment pureness and selflessness that has important significance in Buddhist culture. The character Manthri attempts to preserve her pureness nonetheless during the course of life she has to grieve due to Mahendra's allegation on her that she has lost her virginity. It is a custom that after the wedding ceremony night the groom's mother looks at the blood-stained white bed sheet. After having first intercourse with Manthri, he does not observe any stain on the bed sheet. Hence, this leaves him with a conclusion that she has lost her virginity – before getting married to him. After every now and then Mahendra makes a mention of it to restrain her. It is a mode of subjugating woman on socio-cultural and at the male-controlled level. Similar to immigrants, most of the women are forced to adapt to the different culture, customs and traditions of husband's house. After her wedding Manthri becomes nostalgic and recollects the lotus lake, the river, the temple in her village. In contrast, Manthri's husband perceives Australia as a nation of prospects in addition he yearns to settle there. His utilitarian attitude towards his relocation does not permit him to ponder over his culture, homeland and people. The character is found stating, "You'll like it in Australia," Mahendra says to the children. "Yes, yes Australia. I know where it is on the world map. Come, malli, I'll show it to you...." Nelum gets out of her chair excitedly. (43)

Manthri's husband compares Australia and Sri Lanka. Further, he recommends his wife to choose Australia as a nation where they can lead a lifestyle that would be prosperous and happy, moreover not just for them but also for their children as well. He is displeased with the civil war that is

grounded on the issue of racism in Sri Lanka. Subsequently, he hopes for a sensible and humane environment for the coming generation. At this juncture, it may be pointed out that there is a noticeable connotation that Manthri's husband is enthusiastic to embrace the Australian mode of lifestyle rather than following the conventional lifestyle of his homeland. It may be observed that Manthri's father has a very distinctive and conventional method of dealing with the unfamiliar individuals in Australia. He ties a bit of sacred thread on the wrist of his daughter and Mahendra. Consequently, it may be noticed that Mahendra's wife hesitates to adjust with the new socio-cultural situation. She is found saying that "One gray dawn in February, I gaze down from the clouds at the brown and green jigsaw puzzle of Australia. It seems complete without us. (48)

Mahendra's wife perceives the foreign space as tangram. It turns out into a complicated aspect for the settlers who are attempting to assimilate with the geographical location. It is obvious that puzzles are complicated assignments for new players, similarly migrants have to undergo several complications while assimilating themselves with the new place.

The author gives a clear picture that Buddhism, Temples, the ethos of Sinhala, native customs and traditions are part of Manthri's life. Consequently, it becomes difficult for her to cope up the new cultural atmosphere of Adelaide (Australia). Here, she is unable to visit temples as she used to do in her homeland. Moreover, she yearns and feels that her wish would come true of visiting a temple in Adelaide. Mahendra's wife's wish and its realization commemorate the indentations of multiculturalism in Australia. Although there is not any temple, she finds out that there are sermons of Thai monks being arranged several times. Subsequently, she attends the sermons but finds that the sermons are delivered in English language. At this point, it may be noted that each and every language is part of specific culture and that culture can be flawlessly echoed in the concerned language only. That is why most of the individuals cannot comprehend the translated terms. Furthermore, the author points out that the emigrants from Sri Lanka to Australia are found gathering together and trying to create a homely atmosphere, "The monks are served rice with a variety of Sri Lankan and Thai curries, and soon after, we all share the

remains. The curries do not seem to blend. The people are friendly and happy, greeting each other loudly and fondling children." (64-65)

The aspect of multiculturalism focuses on the safeguarding of all cultures in a hybrid socio-cultural society, without doing any damage to the existing culture. Many an immigrants' first-generation has links with their native culture. However, their children may be observed do not have a firsthand familiarity with their root-culture. This may be pointed produces a cultural conflict in family. The younger generations feel closer to the foreign culture in which they have grown up rather than the culture in which they have never been born in and brought up. The character Prema, at various junctures in the novel, compares her children with Manthri's and holds to a stringent adaptation of Sri Lankan culture to which they belong. Prema's son Rohan likes to maintain a ponytail which is an existing fashion among Australian youth. But, Prema hates such womanly ponytail hair-style of Rohan for the reason that in Sri Lanka only girls have ponytail and Buddhist boys tonsure their heads. She does not like to compromise so far as cultural practice is concerned. Similar to Prema's Rohan, Manthri's Nelum and Devake struggle to make choice between the socio-cultures. It becomes impossible for them to – spend most of the time – get on with their Australian friends, while maintaining Sri Lankan cultural norms.

The native Australian children force Devake to take up smoking and drinking; at a particular point of time they call his father 'Hitler' for controlling him lot. Mahendra reads about Sri Lanka's disastrous condition due to Civil War. While attending the congregations, functions and other ceremonies of Sri Lankans in Australia, he criticises the locals of Sri Lanka and the civil war.

On the contrary, Nelum turns out into a self-reliant girl having her individual philosophy – interpreting the nightmares appropriately and laughing on Devake's parasite lifestyle. He has a lot of interest in music but his father Mahendra insists him to take up medicine as his line of career. Even Devake's teachers talk enthusiastically about his love for music but Mahendra misinterprets that by asserting "What about a degree in music or the hospitality industry? Mahendra comes home in a black mood. Do these Australians think migrants are only fit to cook or fiddle in their hotels? He demands of me." (85) At this point, it may be mentioned that Mahendra talks about the native Australian's approach towards the Sri Lankan. In fact, the teachers of Devake

give valid suggestions but Mahendra's prejudiced mind and experiences in the foreign land conclude that migrants are preferred for inferior jobs in Australia.

It is rightly pointed out by The Australian Review of Books that *If the Moon Smiled* is a study of the tension between two different generations and the conflict of cultural norms and demands. In *If the Moon Smiled* Australia is represented as West where white and English-speaking people are claimed to be native and Sri Lankan (Asian) family of Manthri struggles to cope up with the dominant Western culture. On other hand Mahendra faces dilemma in case of choice of cultures. At home he wishes to keep up with his Sri Lankan cultural norms and at workplace he prefers to assimilate himself with the Australian culture. Devake encounters the problem of cultural identity because one hand his mother imposes him to follow Sri Lankan culture rather than Australian and on the other hand his friends are ready to treat him as Australian only after having a drink. As a young girl in a multicultural country, Nelum prefers to celebrate all cultures equally.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

In conclusion, it can be said that the author takes us through a journey of cultural conflict, assimilation, trans-culturalism and an attempt to preserve Buddhist cultural norms. However, it becomes clear at the end that Manthri's family shatters at domestic, social, psychological and cultural level.

*(Note: This study is carried out as part of doctoral research by the researcher.)*

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