



## QUEST FOR IDENTITY: A STUDY OF RUPA BAJWA'S TELL ME A STORY

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### Abstract:

Society shapes the behavior of an Individual. And this behavior is determined and shaped by the norms and values including conventional wisdom in the society in which an individual takes birth. A famous French sociologist- Emile Durkheim theorized that an individual's behavior is greatly impacted by social factors in his book 'A Study in Sociology' (1952). The subjects like Identity, Gender Identity, status, etc., all are the outcome of society itself. A victor of the Sahitya Academy Award in English Literature, in 2006, Rupa Bajwa, an Indian post-feminist writer portrayed the novel: *Tell Me A Story* (2012) which describes the reality of Indian society and other societal elements as well. *Tell Me A Story* is a tale that depicts the theme of a sense of loss and hope, the Quest for Identity (by Rani, a protagonist), the struggle of middle-class people, the suppressive and down status of women in society, the role of education, etc. Basically, this novel is more reliable for females because the whole novel draws an image of Rani's struggle as being a woman, a less decisive woman (in Indian society), female feticide, the will of the boy child, and so on.

**Keywords:** Female Feticide, Gender, Identity, lower status, Patriarchy, Struggle.

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**Introduction:** What Identity is- a general and universal question which needs to answer to demolish all kinds of stereotypes, prevalent in contemporary times from the beginning of human civilizations? The quest for identity refers to the search for a sense of self, purpose, and meaning in life. It involves the exploration and discovery of one's personal and cultural values, beliefs, and experiences, and the ways in which they shape one's sense of identity. The concept of the quest for identity is often associated with personal growth and development and can be influenced by a range of factors, including social and historical contexts, relationships, and life experiences. Numerous authors presented various perspectives on the subject of the search for identity. Simply, identity can be defined as a trait or set of traits, a social relationship, a set of roles, a set of responsibilities, a set of qualities, a social connection, or membership in a social group.

Identity is our representation. An individual's sense of who they are, which includes their personalities, values, beliefs, and experiences, can be thought of as an intricate and multifaceted concept known as identity. The term "representation," on the other hand, refers to how people and groups are portrayed or represented in different forms of media, works of art, and cultural contexts. Because it affects how a person is perceived by others and how they present themselves to the outside world, identity can be thought of in this context as a type of representation. The way people see themselves and others can be significantly influenced by representation in media and culture, which can also have a big impact on how people form their individual and group identities. Positive and varied depictions of various cultural and racial groups in the media, for instance, can support the promotion of a sense of diversity and belonging, whereas negative or stereotypical depictions can result in feelings of marginalisation and exclusion. Thus, Identity and representation are related ideas that are intimately entwined with one another because how we present ourselves and others can both reflect and influence how we feel about ourselves. It can be said that a person's appearance, behaviour, language, and other modes of communication are all representations of who they are. It helps us to represent ourselves or to place a position in society. Identity representation is on the basis of one's gender, religion, culture, region etc. People recognize someone with their gender, family, religion, region, or community. But why we need this identification? The simple factual reason for this, is that we live in society and we need to follow it for our survival. Aristotle said, "Man is a social animal" in his book '*Politics*' (350 BCE), which

means man cannot live in isolation. He/she needs society because we are all interdependent on each other for something. Therefore, we people are very much indulging in societal construction and trying to get it with the help of identity building. One's recognition is necessary- that we can see at national and international levels as well, each and every country is trying to build its identity by making and accepting various policies, agreements, etc, or to promote their national interests.

Then comes gender identity (a social construction), one of the types of Identity- man, and woman. "An individual's sense of him or herself as biologically, psychologically, or socially male or female" (Newman, 2012). Gender identity is the fact of being or deep feeling that you are a particular gender (according to the Cambridge Dictionary), gender being a social construct has some specific roles signed to each gender, and society drafts these roles and has suppressed women (particularly) in Indian society. According to the report published by Pew Research Centre (March 2, 2022)- 62% of people in India think that women should be responsible for Child rearing and 34% thinks that it is only the responsibility of women to take care of child not the responsibility of men. Rani (the main protagonist) is a young Indian girl who faces many challenges in her day-to-day life and many other problems which occur due to some sudden changes in her life, lost and troubled, Rani begins her quest for identity while breaking the societal obligation, which is put on her. '*Tell Me A Story*' portrays the image of a young woman seeking freedom, happiness, and a change in her life, while breaking the restrictions that are put on her. In search of Rani's individual identity (identity of oneself, with the needs of the individual being satisfied before those of the group) she seeks many new paths, after many events take place in her life, the death of her father especially pushes her to find a new way in her life, from working in a parlour of Amritsar while living with her family to traveling all alone first time outside Amritsar to Delhi, founding a new job as a caretaker and servant and founding out her love, and talent for storytelling and proceeding that path further, but a twist of the event take Rani back to her home, all through the story Rani not only tries to find herself but also grow as a person and as a woman.

Therefore, Rani is also such a character in the novel '*Tell Me A Story*' by Rupa Bajwa who doesn't have her own identity. Whether she is working but still dependent on her father and brother for everything. After the death of Dheeraj (Rani's father), Rani is totally dependent on her brother, Mahesh. She likes Satish- who is having a shop of electricals and is a friend of his brother, Mahesh; but due to

conservative society or family (where people start to make assumptions about the girl if they see her with a boy), she is not able to express her love for Satish and can't marry without her family's consent. Also, the right to take decisions is also not in the hands of Rani. It is clearly visible when after the death of Rani's father, Neelam (Rani's Bhabhi) suggests his husband marry Rani to the alcoholic boy who is the cousin of Neelam's sister-in-law.

In contemporary times also when women are playing similar roles as men are playing in society-are not able to receive equal status. By using the examples of some well-known women, such as Indira Gandhi, the first female prime minister of India or the first woman who encouraged women globally by stepping her feet into politics (which is considered a game of scoundrels), Second is Kiran Bedi who is an Indian social activist, former tennis player, and first IPS officer of that time in which women literacy rate was very less and later became the governor of Puducherry in 2016 up to 2021. But these examples have no use because still people considered 'women as the footwear of men'. These inequalities lead to the demand for a separate identity for women.

### Discussion:

The search for identity is a fundamental human experience, as individuals seek to understand who they are and where they belong in the world. The cultural and social characteristics, such as race, ethnic background, sexual orientation, religion, and class, can have an impact on how people view their own qualities as well as how they are considered by others, and these factors frequently shape people's search for their own identities. In contemporary India, these factors are particularly significant, as the country undergoes rapid social and economic change, and individuals navigate complex and often contradictory social norms and expectations. The central idea of this research paper is the main question: Why do women need their separate identities in society? What are the factors which lead to the demand for separate identities? – in the context of Rupa Bajwa's book '*Tell Me A Story*'. Through her journeys, Bajwa explores the complexities of identity formation and the impact of social and economic inequalities on individual lives. Moreover, by examining the ways in which Bajwa's novel engage with this theme, the paper offers new insights into the complexities of identity formation in contemporary India and the ways in which literature can help us understand and navigate these complexities.

Rupa Bajwa's novels are situated in the context of contemporary India and are informed by the country's complex social, political, and cultural

history. Bajwa's work is particularly attuned to the experiences of the lower-middle-class section of society and explores the challenges and possibilities of identity formation in a rapidly changing society. Bajwa's second novel, *Tell Me A Story*, is set in a working-class neighbourhood in the city of Amritsar. The novel is published in 2012. The novel's protagonist, Rani, is a young woman who dreams of a better life but is constrained by the social and economic realities of her community. Meena's journey reflects the complexities of identity formation in contemporary India and the ways in which individuals use storytelling and memory to make sense of their experiences and assert their humanity.

Women need identification of their own because of the inequalities which they were facing and they are facing. The woman is only regarded for her reproductive ability. Apart from this, women do not have much importance in a male-dominated society. The women who have given birth to great persons like Alexander, Ashoka, Maharaja Ranjit Singh etc. didn't get similar positions and respect in society as men are getting. Guru Nanak Dev ji once said, "So Kyu Manda Aakhiye Jit Jamen Rajan"- It means why we are saying them badly or are using immoral/wicked words for those who have given birth to great kings. But people are blind and study these great philosophers but don't follow their ideologies. Time has changed in which women are doing unexpected efforts in every field of their life, they are carrying a couple of responsibilities on their shoulders, whether not physically but emotionally stronger than men- but still, parents want boy child and feel scared about giving birth to the girl child. There are so many girls in the present time also which are not getting equal opportunities as boys are getting. This patriarchy hinders them to represent their talents and abilities and is doing work of shackles and handcuffs. Girls are still living in prison which always gives them the regret that why they took birth on this earth which is controlled by a monstrous man. Women's own identity is missing somewhere and therefore, in youth, their identification is checked with their father's name, and in adulthood, they identify with their husband's name. In this customized society, a woman is not independent. She always depends upon the male person in her lifetime. She counts as incomplete without the companionship of man and child.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, women writers used their pseudonyms or by keeping themselves aloof/anonymous in front of society, published their works. Using the female authors Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Bronte as an example, they published a book of poetry in May 1846 using the

pseudo name like Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell respectively. Because at that time, people did not like to read the works of women or also not allowed them to write too. Therefore, most of female writers used to publish their compositions with men's names. So that society could accept their works and read them to know the miseries and problems of women.

These are the main justifications for why women require an identity.

Let's now discuss the struggles that women faces and how society views them in the modern era, which causes women to question their "identification" as individuals or as a person.

- **Women's decisions are always secondary:** As we observe, especially in Indian society, due to the norms of patriarchy, women's decisions are always counted as secondary because the primary decision is taken by the head male in the family which is final and bounded to everyone.

Nobody enquires about Rani's desires. Dheeraj, Rani's brother, decides to find Rani a husband after her father passes away. This is evident in the conversation between Mahesh and Neelam had when Mahesh said, "She will be twenty-two soon." "We should begin looking right away. Nowadays, it is difficult to find boys who are suitable". (*Tell Me a Story*, Pg.123)

- **The concept of the wedding dowry system:** In India, a woman's social status is determined by her ability to bear children or her capacity for conceiving and her marital status. The patriarchal system somehow strips a woman of her parental support system and rendering her dependent on her husband's family, leaving her parents with her parents always available to accommodate her husband's family's demands.

In Rupa Bajwa's book "*Tell Me A Story*," the dowry system is mentioned. Certain exchanges or conversations between Mahesh and Neelam make it clear that they are concerned about the cost of marrying Rani.

'All that is fine', Neelam said acidly. 'But who is going to pay for her wedding? My brothers?'- Neelam's statement demonstrates her unwillingness to carry Rani's burden. (*Tell Me a Story*, Pg.123)

- **Restrictions on girls:** Often girls were bounded in the four walls of home. Even in the present scenario also, whether girls are educated but somehow their parents don't let them alone. They are not allowed to talk to strangers, they are not allowed to go outside alone and so on. When Rani leaves her home and flee to Delhi for work or to get herself free from all the mental pains from which

she is suffering. People and Rani's family itself begins to doubt her decision. Even though when Mahesh dies, Neelam refuses to accept Rani at home again.

- **More preference for boy child:** Son preference is common in patriarchal societies. Sons have been favoured for a variety of reasons, including the belief that sons maintain the family line, uphold the family name, provide for the family financially, etc. While girls are frequently seen as a financial burden. Son is seen as a social safety net, and men continue to dominate women. The basic preference for a male child over a female child is deeply ingrained in India; Konkona Choudhary examines the underlying causes of such son-preference in her piece or article 'Five reasons'- why Most Indians Still Prefer "a boy over a girl". Gender inequality is present throughout the world. This preference to a boy child leads to female foeticide which we can also see in chapter fourteen of Bajwa's book in which the conversation of Neelam and her sister-in-law is mentioned during the birth of Neelam's nephew: The mother sighed. "Thanks to Lord Krishna, He has sent a spitting image of himself. Now I can be at peace. Years and Years, test after test, and all girls. My body is tired after all those abortions." (*Tell Me a Story*, Pg.92)

The author Sneha Kulkarni provides the most straightforward response to the most frequently asked question in her article, 'Of daughters and sons-Why Indians prefer a son as their first child'. People frequently hold the opinion that a boy is an asset and a girl is a liability. She will eventually finish school, get married, and move out.

According to a government report, about 63 million women are statistically "missing" from India's population because Indian families prefer to have male children. One of the most thorough government surveys of Indian households is the National Family Health Survey. The "son preference" has its origins primarily in the prehistoric belief that a son would uphold the family name and legacy and look after the parents as they grew older. The same issue of favouring a male heir over a female child had been raised by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

- **Domestic violence:** Women are the victim of domestic violence because of their lower status in society. The identity and the existence of women is suppressed by her own family after marriage through violence which happens domestically. According to the report published by National Crime Research Bureau in 2018: 89,097 domestic violence cases were reported in India.



This issue has also been raised by Rupa Bajwa in her book through the Kavita (Rani's friend). When in Delhi, Rani receives two letters from Seema. One of the letters is describing the condition of Kavita who is the victim of domestic violence. When Rani begins to read the second letter in which Seema writes, "There had been a family fight in Kavita's home involving the couple, the mother-in-law, two sister-in law and few visiting relatives. Angry, Kavita's husband had struck her on the head with a metal flower vase. Kavita had died on the spot. The matter had been hushed up" (pg.171). This quotation advocates that how domestic violence is not only partner is involved in domestic violence but also family members. It also reflects how the matters of domestic violence in Indian society are 'hushed up'.

Most Indian parents teach their girls how to 'behave or adjust' after marriage. About half of Indian adults (51%) believe that teaching boys to "respect all women" is more crucial than teaching girls to "behave appropriately" in order to increase the safety of women.

### Conclusion-

In conclusion, the theme of the quest for identity is a prominent and recurring element in the novels of Rupa Bajwa. Through her characters and their struggles, Bajwa explores the complex and often challenging process of self-discovery and self-realization, as individuals strive to understand themselves and their place in the world. The novels by Rupa Bajwa reveal that the quest for identity is a multifaceted journey that involves personal reflection and introspection, as well as a sense of connection and community with others. It often requires Individuals to confront their own fears, prejudices, and preconceptions, and to embrace their differences As sources of strength and uniqueness.

The social and historical contexts that affect how people experience their identities are also highlighted in Bajwa's books, as well as the ways in which political, cultural, and economic factors can influence or restrain the development of identity. By depicting characters from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, Bajwa offers a nuanced and inclusive portrayal of the challenges and opportunities that arise in the quest for identity. Overall, the novels of Rupa Bajwa provide a rich and insightful exploration of the human condition, and the universal desire to understand and define oneself in relation to the world. Her work reminds us that the journey toward self-discovery and self-realization is an ongoing and dynamic process that requires courage, resilience, and a willingness to

engage with the complexities of the world around us.

Basically, this paper tries to highlight the situations from which an individual and especially women suffer which leads to the quest for identity.

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