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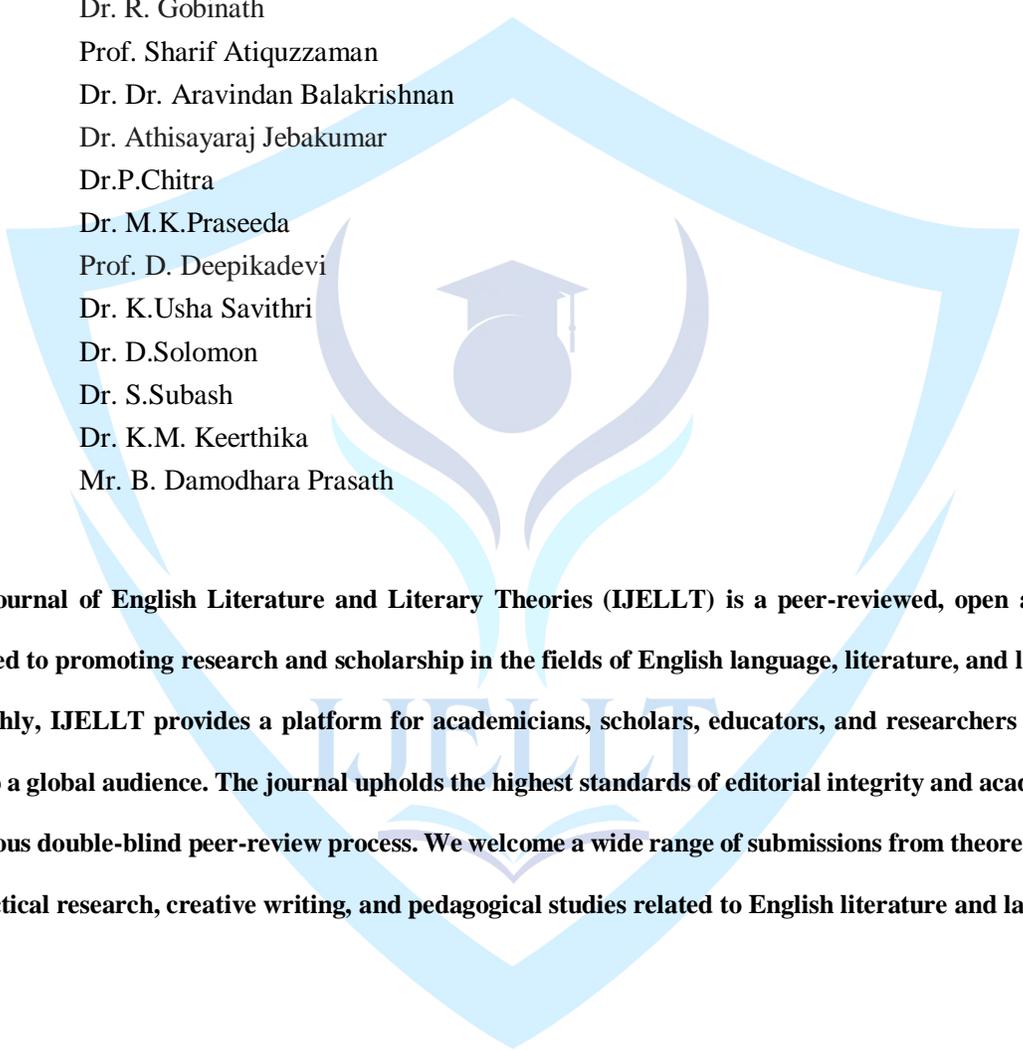
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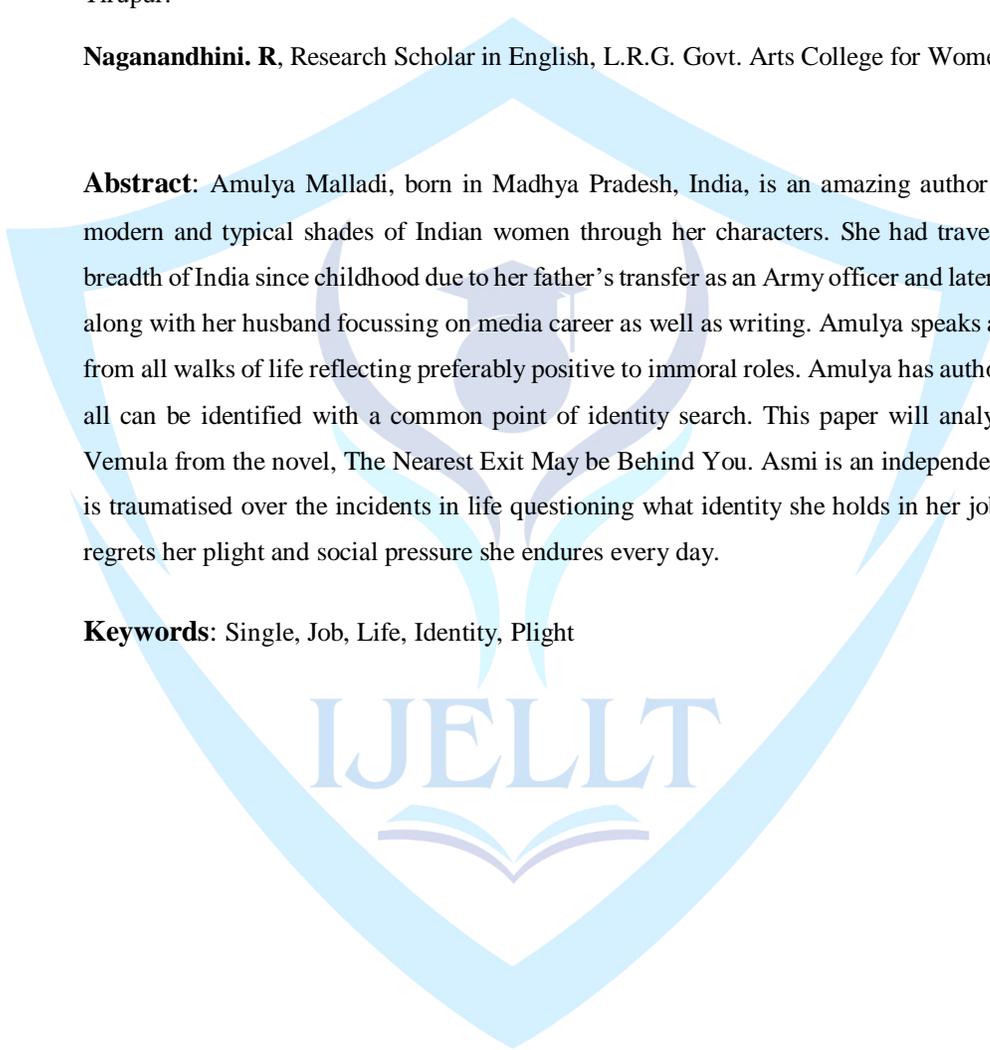
Quest and Plight of Asmi as portrayed in Amulya Malladi's The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You

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Abstract: Amulya Malladi, born in Madhya Pradesh, India, is an amazing author who brings out the modern and typical shades of Indian women through her characters. She had travelled the length and breadth of India since childhood due to her father's transfer as an Army officer and later migrated to Canada along with her husband focussing on media career as well as writing. Amulya speaks about Indian women from all walks of life reflecting preferably positive to immoral roles. Amulya has authored eight books and all can be identified with a common point of identity search. This paper will analyse the life of Asmi Vemula from the novel, The Nearest Exit May be Behind You. Asmi is an independent single woman yet is traumatised over the incidents in life questioning what identity she holds in her job as well as life and regrets her plight and social pressure she endures every day.

Keywords: Single, Job, Life, Identity, Plight



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The novel, *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You* is a current generation novel by Amulya Malladi that presents the real time struggles and survival of a single woman in the corporate and global career. Asmi Vemula, the Marketing Director at GTECH was in her 40s, remaining unmarried due to her career choice. Her prime focus was on her job and she was expecting promotion as Vice President that was shortly falling vacant. She never spent her time or thoughts on her personal life, though deep down she always wished to get married and settle down.

Asmi enjoyed her job yet she was stressful due to the rising competition among her colleagues, especially men. They were dominant over Asmi expressing their male ego and never wished a woman to lead them. On the other hand, Asmi's single state was also taken as a reason to suppress her. Personally, what caused much stress in Asmi was her being unmarried. Even her parents were highly disappointed and every time they met, they seemed distressed and hopeless about Asmi's marriage. This kind of mental pressure led Asmi develop an affair with a French businessman Etienne, and the connection lasted for about four years.

Though Asmi and Etienne enjoyed the physical aspect in the relationship, neither of them was happy. Asmi always felt she is treated as a choice because Etienne every time abandoned her to join his wife early morning after the intimacy. This made Asmi seek a real partner who will prioritize her in life. Whenever Asmi tried to step out of the relationship, Etienne pulled her back through his ornate words and fake love. Asmi was actually weak towards Etienne and he made use of it precisely. This led Asmi to find Levi and she realized he was her potential partner forever. With the consent of her family, Asmi and Levi were all set to settle down marrying each other. Asmi initially oscillated as she was much elder than him, but age never interfered as Levi was highly supportive and caring towards Asmi.

Throughout her life, Asmi's constant support and strength was Ananya, her sibling. She shared all her ups and downs, including her relationship with Etienne. Ananya and her husband Venkat backed Asmi during her odds and that gave her the courage to choose Levi forever. Once Asmi overcame the traumatic phase, she was transformed into a new, bold and daring lady ready to balance job and family.

Asmi's quest and plight are inter-related. Asmi questions who she really is and how being a successful corporate manager has only fetched her stress and competition rather than peace. Asmi is highly dominated by her male colleagues, who were only trying to put her down to prevent her attain the Vice President position at the GTech company. These men only envied her as she was the only woman in the race. Every meeting and discussion only caused trauma in Asmi. It even went to the extreme of doubting her own calibre.

My friend, a director in HR, told me in confidence, obviously, that I probably don't have much of a chance because the CEO and the board don't think I'm suited.

I'm not ready. I lack executive presence, may be

I don't feel ready. It's a really senior position (7)

The other women colleagues encouraged Asmi and stood by her, but that only comforted Asmi for a short time.

Cara shook her head. "No, no. Don't put this on me. I think you're an awesome marketer and leader. You turned your department and business unit around. Come on, the baking business grew from four to nine percent last year. You're on your way up. But you don't think you're ready. You're confident, you're sure of yourself, you're a good leader; something inside you pulls you back from thinking you can take on that big job. Something that doesn't let you play big." (17)

Taking the plight of Asmi for discussion, it is way too deep and heart-touching, awakening all single women around the world. Single and nearing 40s, she was scared she might never get a perfect match in life. She tried dating a few men hoping to settle down and even continued a four-year relationship with Etienne, a 50-year-old man. Beyond physical pleasure, she only felt emotionally empty with him. Asmi longed for a perfect married life taking responsibilities and also to experience motherhood.

Being single caused a trauma everywhere Asmi was related. At her workplace and among friends circle too Asmi was branded to be free of responsibilities and such criticisms always crept first. The same was highlighted as a reason for pulling her from the Vice President election and other activities. Within the family too, Asmi's parents always appeared grief-stricken worrying about Asmi.

Asmi took a Lyft to San Francisco International Airport to get on a flight to Santa Ana that next morning. Her parents had intentionally not said goodbye to her to let her know they were still very angry with her.

Why can't you at least meet this guy? Is too much to ask of you? We are your parents; don't we have any rights? (47)

Asmi's mother was sensitive and also harsh enough to directly criticise her daughter. It always created an ambience of nagging. Asmi gradually was forced to feel being married and earn respect and dignity in the society. This thought was an outcome of the criticisms marked based on her single state and she also felt men are controlling women all the time despite ignoring her education, qualities and values. A woman is always expected to be dependent.

"I'm nearly forty and maybe I want to have a baby," Asmi said. "Having Jim's job will be too much for me. I think this is the right choice. Cara, I deserve happiness."

"Happiness and career are not mutually exclusive."

"I think for a woman they are," Asmi said. "It's too hard and too much of a fight. I don't want to do it. Look at you, having miscarriages because of work stress. Mathew can give the job to Scott, he can give all the jobs to Scott, I don't care and if you don't mind, I don't want to discuss it anymore." (105)

She herself has experienced this with Etienne where he controlled her emotionally and never let her go and settle down marrying a suitable guy. Additionally, he was also not ready to acknowledge the relationship and take her into his life forever. So, this behaviour of Etienne made Asmi realize women are just objects to men and the plight of women never changes even in the modern era as they are expected only to be submissive.

I can't, she wrote to him.

Why not?

It's all always on your terms.

What are your terms? Tell me.

Asmi typed with what came first, without planning it and decided to be honest with him and herself. I want to be more important to you than your wife.

It took Etienne a while to respond to that.

I have children.

And that's why I can't.

Goodnight, my sweet Asmi. (112-113)

Finally, Asmi got rid of the gendered clutches of Etienne and her ill-mannered male colleagues. She stood up for herself and with confidence chose Levi as her life partner. At the workplace too she shed her stress and remained cool and confident accepting the promotion without reluctance. The panel witnessed a new Asmi which their eyes have never seen before.

All these positive changes happened in Asmi only after realising that she has got real love from Levi for loving her as she is. Levi cared for her, never nagged her for catch-ups. Instead, he gave her the personal space and at the same time joined her in a gentle way. This made Asmi feel complete and she understood what real affection is and that is what has been missing in her relationship with Etienne. Asmi refrained from Etienne and never bothered about him. This swag Asmi was new to her colleagues after she got promoted and for choosing Levi among her family members.

Observing the plight of other female characters like Ananya and Cecile, their plight too remains the same making themselves question who they really are and what identity they hold. Married women like Ananya who remain as homemakers have to be dependent on their husbands economically and also seek permission for all things they plan. Cecile, a working woman compromised her career for the sake of her husband's job transfer by giving up her promotion and moving along with him to a new country. Also, Cecile was in a situation to make compromises in order to get a baby.

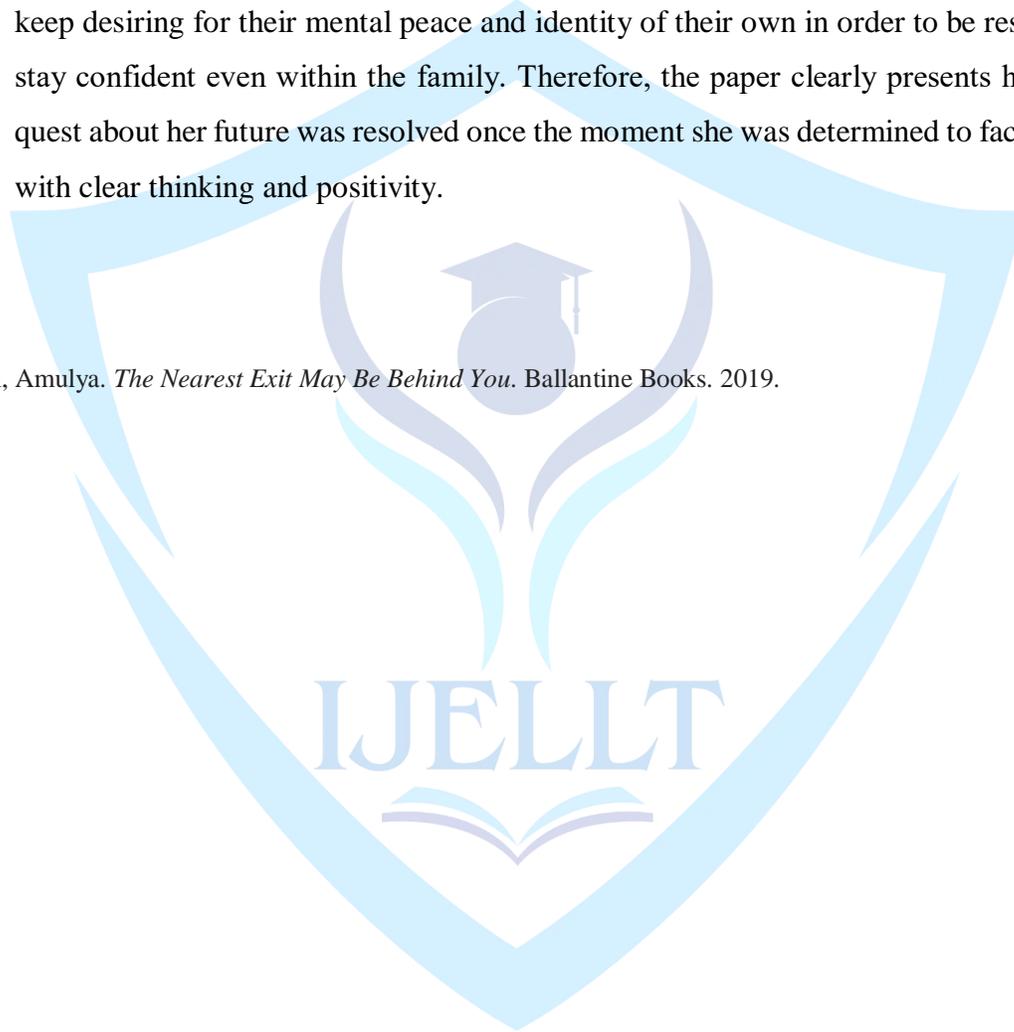
Cecile was in her early thirties and had recently married her longtime boyfriend, Francisco, a software programme from Mexico whom she met at UC Berkeley. They had been married for a year and the end of the honeymoon period was marked with Cecile wanting to move back to France, and Francisco who had no desire to leave the United States, wanting to have nothing to do with her plans. (33)

Beyond this, the salary and other expenditures too are judged by men in the family, which determines a woman's values and character. In most households, home-makers are mere unpaid workers who spare their entire life and passion to the benefit of their husbands and children, not able to voice out what they actually wanted and desired.

The identity analysis thus exposes how women in whatever stage of life they are, keep desiring for their mental peace and identity of their own in order to be respected and stay confident even within the family. Therefore, the paper clearly presents how Asmi's quest about her future was resolved once the moment she was determined to face her plight with clear thinking and positivity.

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