

Cultural Longing and Identity Negotiation in Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air*

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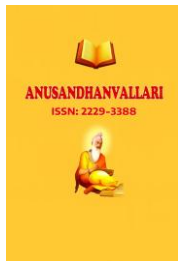
Abstract

Identity is shaped by various factors such as gender, race, class, skin colour, nationality, culture, and the society in which a person lives. It is built on personal traits and life experiences, but in multicultural societies, this process often becomes complex. One important element in this context is cultural hunger—the desire to stay connected to one's roots—which adapts to changing needs and circumstances. Every society upholds certain core values that define its culture, and preserving these is vital, as losing them can lead to a loss of identity. When such values are violated, identity conflicts naturally arise. Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air* explores cultural identity through a range of traditional values, with key incidents in the narrative reflecting them strongly. Culture can be transmitted or acquired through information, symbols, and shared customs. Cultural identity includes behavioural patterns, lifestyles, social structures, and norms that distinguish one community from another. Among these, marriage is a central theme, and Malladi presents it with sensitivity, assigning each character a purposeful role. This paper analyses the challenges faced by the main characters in navigating issues of marriage, caste, cross-cultural relationships, and racial differences, all of which are intertwined with cultural identity. It also focuses on how these individuals strive to bridge the gap between the inner desires of women and the social traditions that attempt to suppress them. Through their struggles and resilience, the novel portrays the constant negotiation between personal longing and societal expectations, offering a vivid picture of cultural identity in a changing world.

Index terms: culture, identity, society, dilemma, tradition

Stories, as literary works, are artistic reflections of life, presenting reality in a more powerful, meaningful, and insightful way. In the 21st century, people continue to grapple with issues such as gender inequality and cultural conflict. Many Indian writers, especially women authors, use their works to explore the struggles faced by women in patriarchal societies. Through their narratives, they reveal the sharp contrast between different ways of life and cultural systems, which often leads to feelings of isolation, frustration, and depression.

Culture can be understood as an integrated pattern of human knowledge, beliefs, and behaviour. It shapes how people live, treat others, and adapt to change. A person's identity is moulded by several factors—gender, race, class, skin colour, nationality, culture, and the society they inhabit. In multicultural societies, identity formation often becomes a complex process. Among its many aspects, cultural hunger - the deep need to remain connected to one's roots—plays a crucial role, adapting to changing circumstances while maintaining core traditions. Losing cultural values often results in the erosion of identity. Cultural identity emerges when an individual understands their own culture, which in turn allows them to respect and appreciate others'. Its key elements include marriage, food habits, caste, language, religion, dress codes, festivals, and traditions.



Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air* captures many of these aspects—marriage, tradition, festivals, nationality, migration, caste, race, self-identity, and language—through vivid depictions of everyday customs. The main characters Anjali, Prakash, and Sandeep play significant roles in reflecting these themes.

The novel opens on December 3, 1994, when Anjali, waiting at a Bhopal railway station for her army officer husband Prakash, witnesses her life change in an instant. A catastrophic gas leak poisons the city's air, and although she survives, her marriage does not. Later, as a successful schoolteacher, she marries Sandeep, a caring professor. Their peaceful life is disrupted when Prakash reappears, stirring memories of a troubled marriage and forcing Anjali to confront her choices in a society that condemns divorce. The story weaves together themes of love, cultural expectations, and the duality of the modern Indian woman, set against the backdrop of Indian traditions—particularly arranged marriage, where family elders, as seen in Anjali's case through Divya aunty, play the role of matchmakers. Symbols like the *mangalsutra* and traditional jewellery highlight the cultural value placed on marriage, reflecting the enduring influence of customs in shaping identity. When Anjali talks about marriage, culture and identity is reflected:

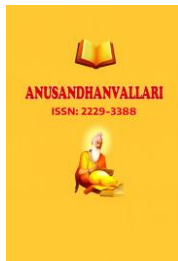
Even the small gold earrings didn't glitter anymore; neither did my mangalsutra. They had all been so bright, so yellow when I first got them. I touched the gold chain of the mangalsutra, let my fingers feel the texture of the interlaced gold. When Sandeep and I had married, neither of us had much money, not that things were much different now. We hadn't been able to afford an expensive mangalsutra, which hadn't mattered to me. The necklace symbolized marriage- its cost was irrelevant. I wouldn't have been so flexible when I was twenty-one. I would have demanded the most expensive mangalsutra because it was a status symbol and I cared about status symbols in those days. (23-24)

In Indian culture, marriage holds a place of great significance. It is regarded as the union of two individuals who commit to spending their lives together. The institution of marriage is guided by certain principles and traditions, with cultural ethics generally favouring unions within the same caste. However, with the forces of globalization, people are now free to move across the world and live in multicultural environments, where love marriages are increasingly common.

In *A Breath of Fresh Air*, when Divya aunty discusses a marriage proposal with Anjali, she strongly supports the idea of an arranged marriage, considering it an important marker of cultural identity. In her view, going against this tradition could lead to social exclusion. At the beginning of the novel, Anjali also shares this belief, reflecting her respect for cultural values: "He was almost proposing to me and that was not how marriage proposals were made. He first had to speak with his parents and they would speak with my parents and then the matter would be arranged." (33) This statement underlines how arranged marriages represent both cultural values and identity.

Food, too, is deeply tied to culture. It serves as a bridge between the outer world and our inner selves, carrying spiritual, cultural, and symbolic meanings that go far beyond its nutritional role. In diasporic contexts, food often becomes a vital link to one's heritage. Regional dishes reflect the identity of their place of origin, and while Indian restaurants abroad may offer a more generalized menu, restaurants within India display a rich variety of regional cuisines. In the novel, when Anjali and Prakash visit a South Indian restaurant far from Bhopal, they embrace the local food, showing openness to its culture. Disliking a region's food can reflect detachment from its culture, while appreciating it often signals a deeper connection and acceptance. The dialogue between Anjali and Prakash on the issue of food dishes proves the fact:

Bhopal was about ten kilometers from Bairagarh, where the EME centre was, and we would go away on a Sunday morning and come back late in the night. Prakash even found a restaurant where they served good south



Indian food. Ethnically I was north, and loved south Indian cuisine. Prakash thought it was too bland, but he came with me and I convinced myself that he did so because he loved me. (89)

Tradition forms one of the strongest pillars of cultural identity, and culture itself is bound by certain norms. These norms are often expressed through ethical codes, such as the belief that when a woman's husband dies, she must wear a white sari and refrain from participating in religious activities. Widows are frequently considered inauspicious, and their role in society is restricted. The treatment of Komal, Anjali's sister-in-law, after her husband's death illustrates this point clearly. The conversation between Anjali and Komal reveals the hardships of widowhood and the societal disapproval widows must endure—an expression of cultural identity:

Komal was a well-behaved woman with them. I probably appeared like a regular Jezebel, in contrast to Komal, who always wore white in deference to her widowhood. Komal was soft-spoken in front of them and very respectful, unlike me, and he followed all the religious rituals and had not left her husband or disgraced herself after his death by marrying again. (93)

Indian culture also reveals its identity through the celebration of festivals, which unite people of all ages. Festivals express the beauty, significance, and spirit of culture. In the novel, Prakash's words confirm this idea:

In the army all religions were accepted. All holy days from Christmas to Diwali to Id to Guru Nanak Jayanti were celebrated. From what I had seen, no one noticed if you were Hindu or Muslim or Sikh or Christian. I had been shocked at how open-minded everyone was. In Hyderabad it was different. Not only did it matter what religion you belonged to, your caste was better than being a Reddy and people from the same caste stuck together. I didn't have too many friends who were from the backward class. We mingled with our own people, but in the army I didn't even know what caste anyone belonged to. (103)

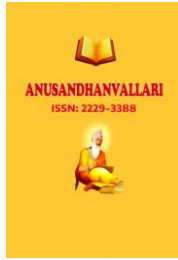
As an Army officer, Prakash distinguishes between personal identity, cultural identity, and national identity, stressing the importance of unity in a multicultural nation: "I love my country. You just don't like the people who live in it. You can't just like the Hindus and not like the Sikhs. They are all Indians, I yelled." (107)

In the course of the story, Anjali shows wisdom by accepting her former husband's request to admit her ailing son, Amar, to the army hospital to reduce medical expenses. She gives Prakash the chance to atone for his past infidelity and refuses to petition against Union Carbide, knowing that nothing can truly compensate for the loss endured. Her deep love for Amar leads her to fulfil his final wish—removing the ventilator and sparing him prolonged suffering. This act, though heartbreaking, reflects her courage and acceptance of life's inevitable realities. In the words of Charles Taylor, "The way in which a person sees and defines himself or herself is a constitutive part of his or her identity." (34). The challenges faced by Anjali in this novel to balance her responsibilities as a mother and a working woman, as well as the intriguing duality of the contemporary Indian woman, highlight the tough decisions that all women have to make. She learns that incompatibility in relationships and the certainty of death are part of life, and that one must move forward, carrying the remnants of the present towards a better tomorrow.

Ultimately, the story portrays cultural clashes and inner conflicts while showing how a strong cultural identity can contribute to mental well-being, improving self-esteem, life satisfaction, resilience under pressure, and protection against the distress caused by discrimination.

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