

## NARRATIVE IDENTITY IN ELIZABETH STROUT'S "MY NAME IS LUCY BARTON"

*Abisha. X*

*Research Scholar, Department of English, SDNB Vaishnav College for Women, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India*

**Received: 04 Feb 2019**

**Accepted: 11 Feb 2019**

**Published: 19 Feb 2019**

### ABSTRACT

*The paper attempts to analyze the significance of narrative identity. It also explores how storytelling and narrative identity are linked together. Storytelling has been playing a significant role in narrative identity. The characters narrate their own stories or how they want their stories to be told thereby they reveal their own identity. Through their narrative, they reveal their own experiences of past and present.*

*In the novel, My Name is Lucy Barton the identity of Lucy's unnamed mother is revealed through the stories that she shares with her daughter Lucy. Lucy's narrative is a personal narrative which reveals the experience of poverty and her experience as a writer. Each narrative has a purpose. It can be just to share one's experience or to inspire others. Thus the paper focuses on the narrative of Lucy and her unnamed mother*

**KEYWORDS:** *Storytelling, Narrative, Identity, Experience*

### INTRODUCTION

People all over the world have several stories to share. Some retain their stories silently. Stories vary from one person to another. Very often it is their own story that they prefer to tell. Some stories are passed down orally by others. Thus stories serve a purpose. Its Purpose can be many. But often it is to share various experiences which people have undergone. One such Novel is "My Name is Lucy Barton" written by Elizabeth Strout.

Lucy says But this is my story.

And yet it is the story of many. It is Molla's story, my college roommate's; it may be the story of pretty Nicely Girls. Mommy. Mom!

But this one is my story. This one. And my name is Lucy Barton

Dan P McAdams defines Narrative identity as "Narrative identity is a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose. According to him the stories and the experience each one undergoes and how people perceive it can either make a redemptive story or a contamination story. In the novel My name is Lucy Barton, the author Elizabeth Strout focuses on the narrative identity of unnamed mother and her daughter Lucy Barton. The unnamed mother tells her daughter stories of people whom she is acquainted with. By narrating their life stories, Lucy's mother is internally rewinding her own bad marriage. She considers others marriage as a failure because her own marriage was such one too. Thus by narrating other people's stories, she sees her own reflection of self in their stories too.

Lucy is the central character of the novel. She is ruthless in evoking her own story. Through her narrative, she explores her childhood experience which had actually shaped her. Her story is not about her own marriage, but it is about a mother who loves her daughter and is unable to express it openly. It is a story of imperfect love and an unhealthy family.

Lucy's narrative is based on her experiences of past and present. Throughout her narrative, she is reconstructing her past by recalling her experiences of past. The novel begins with Lucy recalling her stay in the hospital for nine weeks. Her narrative begins "There was a time, and it was many years ago now when I had to stay in a hospital for almost nine weeks." She had gone to remove her appendix out. But, soon she was affected with fever. She was unable to retain her food. Her husband was busy with the household. He was busy with his work. Therefore, he was unable to visit her regularly along with her two daughters. With no one, to look after her she felt frightened and she was feeling lonelier that, every time the nurse came to check her temperature she tried to strike a conversation with her. After three weeks she found her mother sitting in a chair. Her mother's presence was able to get rid of her loneliness. For the first time in her life, she slept peacefully in the hospital. Her mother using her pet name "Wizzle" was enough to make her feel warm. Her mother's visit also brings back Lucy's troubled childhood memories.

Lucy's narrative is about destitution. Her narrative offers a glimpse of her childhood. Lucy came from a small rural town of Amgash Illinois. "Oddities" and "Trashy" are the exact words Lucy uses to describe her family. Her father was a victim of World War II who never spoke of it. Her father came upon two young men who startled him and had shot those two German boys. After which, not a single day had gone by without his regret. Her mother was someone who could not openly express her love towards her children. Her father worked in farm machinery. He often lost his job. But he was rehired by his boss. Her mother in order to support her family took up sewing.

Lucy's family was different from other families. Her childhood was affected by poverty and abuse. Lucy describes the kind of treatment that her family received. The family was affected by the indifferent attitude of the people. "Your family stinks" was the comment Lucy and her sister Vicky heard from other children in the playground. Vicky's second-grade teacher criticized her for having dirt behind her ears. Their family was too poor to buy soap. They were mocked at school for being poor and dirty. From then on, Lucy understood that her family was different. When she was six years old, she had witnessed her brother hit by a group of boys. Her brother was paralyzed with fear. The house stood alone surrounded by fields of corn fields and soybeans. They lacked television and newspapers at home. They did not have any neighbors nearby. In the middle of the cornfield was one tree that Lucy considered as her friend she and her siblings were friendless. Her family lived in the garage which had no hot water and failed to provide warmth.

Even as a child Lucy was lonely. Lucy's says ". . . Lonely was the first flavor I had tasted in my life, and it was always there, hidden inside the crevices of my mouth, reminding me." She carries the trauma of being locked inside the truck with a snake in it. When she was less than five years old she was locked in the truck. She does not remember how many times. Sometimes it was a punishment for Lucy. At other times, when her parents were busy with their work she was locked inside the truck. She would wait for someone to come, the more the sky got darker, the more she realized that no one was coming, the more she panicked. She says ". . . Always I screamed and screamed cried until I could hardly breathe." she tried to calm herself or she dreamed that a relative of her mother would come and would ask her to stay with her because she was lonely

and she needed someone to stay with her. Lucy dreamed of clean sheets, clean towels, and a toilet that worked and a sunny kitchen. Thus Lucy's dreams reveal about her desire to escape poverty and to be loved, to feel secure

Her family attended congregational church but her family was treated as an outcast, her Sunday class teacher ignored her. Her love for reading and writing was kindled when she was in her third grade. In her third grade, she read a book which inspired her to write books in the future. Lucy identified herself with the central Tilly who was dirty and poor. Both Tilly and Lucy had one thing in common and that was poverty. But there is another reason why Lucy liked Tilly because she had a nice mother. Reading books made her less lonely, she was able to escape from reality. Lucy stayed back in her school just to get warmth. Sometimes the janitor would allow Lucy to stay inside the classroom. Inside the classroom there was warmth and she was able to complete her homework and study.

Her guidance counselor informed her that a college outside Chicago was willing to pay all her expenses. Soon her counselor drove her, Lucy describes that the Place seemed Huge, buildings were there everywhere above all she was terrified at the same time she was excited. Once she went back to her home Lucy was afraid that she would be struck in poverty. She says ". . . I was afraid that I would wake and find myself once more in this house and I would be in this house forever, and it seemed unbearable to me." Lucy did not want to get trapped in a house filled with poverty.

Lucy escapes from poverty by going to college outside Chicago. Nearby her college, Lucy got a job. She brought her clothes to a thrift shop. Her dresses were accepted. The only person who mentioned her clothes was a professor with whom she had a brief affair. He compared her Fe FeFeb 201973dresses to someone who wore expensive clothes. He was the first person who had wondered about her social status.

Soon she marries Williams and had two daughters. She succeeds in publishing two of her works. She follows the advice of Writer Sarah Payne and her neighbor Jeremy.

Her mother's narrative is about people with whom she was acquainted. Her narrative starts while she is staying with Lucy to look after her. Even though both of them talk about several things, most of the time Lucy's mother shares her real-life stories. She narrates their failed marriages. She tells the stories of Kathie, Harriet, and Dottie who faced bad marriages. Dottie's husband abandoned her for another woman. Harriet was a cousin of Lucy's mother. Her husband died on the street. He left her nothing. Therefore Harriet with great difficulty raised her kids. Kathie was her mother's customer. She had moved out of her husband just to be with another man. But soon she was abandoned by the same man. By narrating these stories; Lucy's mother sees her own marriage as a failure. But unlike others, she did not walk away, but she stayed with her husband because that is what wives did in that generation.

Kahlil Gibran well-known quotes say "It has been said that next to hunger and thirst, our most basic needs for storytelling". Thus storytelling plays a significant part in the novel especially through the stories of Lucy's unnamed mother. Thus the narrative of Lucy and her mother is not about themselves. It also reveals who they are and what kind of experience they have undergone through their narratives. Lucy's experience is not just about a writer but above all her experience with loneliness, poverty, escape shame. Thus it is a general shared experience of Human beings all across the world. That is why Lucy Barton decides to record them to portray the human condition of the world through her narrative.

**REFERENCES**

1. Smith, E. E. (2017). *The two kinds of stories we tell about ourselves, Ideas*. Crown Publication.
2. Strout (2017). *Elizabeth. My Name is Lucy Barton*. Penguin.