The Anticlimactic Journey of Lidie in the Novel of Jane Smiley’s ‘Adventures of Lidie Newton’- A Study

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Abstract
A new territory of Jane Smiley’s The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton is a realistic historical novel unlike of her previous works. Though she is a Native American writer she has projected the theme of slavery as if she belongs to black community but dissimilar theme. Before the Civil War-1850, in the U.S.A., the novel is set about the controversy of pro-slavery system. Lidie Harkness, the protagonist, spends her time at horse riding and verses in swimming across the Mississippi River. Acutely, Lidie’s life is changed, when Thomas Newton marries who is an abolitionist. Newton gainsays allowing slavery system in Kansas as it’s his life-time achievement. ‘Bloody Kansas’ phrase reflects how much, in a larger extent, the violence on going. Thomas Newton is shot and gravely bruises by armed Missourians. For taking vengeance, Lidie is galvanized to go into Missouri and kill the men who assassinated Newton. Disguising herself as a boy, Lidie searches for clues to identify the murderers. Accompanying with Lorna, a slave woman, making their way to Kansas City for eluding, they are caught and send to jail but Lidie is released by paying fine by Richard but Lorna is sold in Louisiana. At the end of the novel, returning to Quincy, Lidie has met Thomas’s family in Massachusetts. The lackadaisical part of Smiley’s novel is the climax section. Lidie’s attempt is turned out badly to reach freedom for Lorna. Poetic justification was failed.

Key words: Midwest, Kansas Territory, Pro-Slavery, Abolitionists, Secret identity, Unsuccessful endeavor.
**Introduction:** Presenting the theme, Slavery system is somewhat shown another perspective in The All True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton by Jane Smiley, an American novelist. This research paper presents the theme of pro-slavery in Kansas Territory aforetime ‘American Civil War’ through the protagonist Lidie, a girl from Quincy. Readers can find as if the novelist is narrating with high-end adventures with Lidie, a young girl in Kansas initially, but realizes all the efforts are fruitless in the climax. Coming to novelist, Smiley brought up in Webster Groves, Missouri, Smiley won the Pulitzer Prize for A Thousand Acres. Besides writing fiction, Smiley wrote an all encompassing critical study, Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel, and a short biography of Charles Dickens. In addition to a regular contributor to the New York Times Book Review Smiley was the author of the ‘Oak Valley Ranch’ series of books for young adults. Novel as distinct literary devise, Smiley wrote fourteen novels in which some are lengthy. According to Smiley, “The novel seems to be limitless and universally capacious; it is actually much more particular in many ways”. (Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Novel, p.22.) Though the novelist had drawn the outline for her Adventures of Lidie Newton from Mark Twain’s Huck, projection and expressing style was vary. Smiley interpreted the story during 1855, and there was going cultural clash in ‘Kansas Territory’ vehemently which was popularized as ‘Bleeding Kansas’ between New Englanders and Missourian people. About Kansas, Smiley said in an interview, “Kansas was the place where these two cultures were unbuffered by the Mid-Atlantic States, and so I think that's where the Civil War started, that's where people came to hate one another for their differences”. (Great Plains Quarterly, pp.333-40)

**Historical Context:** To response the incidents in 1995, terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City, Smiley wrote ‘Lidie’ novel. The novelist recalled her childhood memories at Missouri, with Bill Silag, Ex-husband, information she decided to write about ‘Ideology and American History’. The novel began at Quincy town in Illinois, while Lidie’s older sisters were regretting after their father had died. Lidie, the youngest daughter of twenty years old, was a stubborn girl and became a source of concern and annoyance to her elder sisters. Beatrice, one of the sisters of Lidie, said, “She an’t been properly taught’s the truth,” (p.4). Finding a husband to Lidie became a herculean task to married sisters. Lidie would try to escape from house work, keeping things in orderly but spent most of her time such as riding horse, swimming across the Mississippi River with Frank who was a nephew, twelve years old. On the way to settling in the Kansas Territory, Thomas Newton, an abolitionist visited a friend in Quincy. In his visit, Newton met Lidie, after a short talk, Lidie’s one of the sisters, Harriet said immediately “Lidie, pass Mr. Newton one of these cakes you made it yesterday” (p.15). Certainly, Lidie never seen where was kitchen. Lidie marries the quiet man, Newton who apprenticed in his father’s sail making factory in Boston. Newton joined and sponsored by ‘Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company’ which was founded by Mr. Thayer, a terrific abolitionist, later he was headed for Lawrence, a ‘free state’ town in Kansas, where he was executing his plans and opposing pro-slavery system in Kansas and endeavored for slavery-free statehood.
Endangered Territory: To establish domestic life with Newton was a crucial measure to Lidie. Unmarried woman wouldn’t allow doing adventures, so marriage is pre-requisite to Lidie for adventures. It was anticipated by Lidie that she was entering a susceptible zone and put at risk Newton morality was rooted to anti-slavery in Kansas. Newton was merely transformed as an instrument and indexed to Lidie. About sisters’ domestic life, Lidie said, “My sisters were as fixed in their various homes as stones, and as difficult to lift” (p.8). The novelist somewhat had shown woman empowerment with Lidie words about her sisters. Unlike her sisters, intentionally, Lidie accorded the adventurous and endanger life with full of aware.

The newly-wed couple footed in Kansas and welcomed by Mr. Graves, a preacher and stayed for some days at the home of Mrs. Jenkins who was living with her daughter Susannah and Mrs Bush, a full-figured woman with a youthful face. Mrs Bush explained the dire situation in Kansas about the position of woman, “Lydia, Kansas is no place for gowns and petticoats!” (p.77). The dwellers of Kansas were restricted about to read even newspapers. By resulting, the people of Kansas had lost their choice of reading right and shouldn’t subscribe The Liberator newspaper and not to talk about freeing slaves or write about them, if anybody did, they should face death penalty. Pro-slavery was legal and black people were under treated. For profit, men, women and children were sold, sometimes beaten and killed. Human Rights were vehemently violated and ‘Black’ was treated as domestic animal. In the words of Newton, “People are being treated like animals every day. Every hour of every day” (p.107) Mr. Bisket and Susannah were following Newton, while conversing with Mr. Bisket, Susannah said, “There must be four men for every woman in K.T” (p.134). Arisen the question-how the woman was treated and given reverence. Abolitionists and settlers faced weather-disparity which was another setback, from Illinois to Kansas made settlers unbearable and fell into fevers and not recovered for weeks. Newton thought that the violent-events should be brought to an end in order for the slavery issue by election in Kansas but many Missourians attacked voters heading out to the farm and vowed to break up the ballot boxes and shouted, “Hang some black abolitionists…throw’em out onto the ice” (p.172) Neither native people of Kansas nor white attackers weren’t wish to free slaves and for establishing democracy. In helter-skelter, Free-Staters skedaddled for fear of their lives and nevermore got to vote at all. The vote of right was denied by threatening and framed ‘Enforced State’.

Ruffians, who are called Kickapoo- Rangers, were worse than animals and had no thoughts in their heads except brutal approach. Captain Brown, an abolitionist and many Missourians were hanged, shot and killed, as they were daily activities with no surprising. Drunken ruffians drove off the dead body of Brown to his home. By this, Lidie felt a kind of disillusionment by her surroundings. When winter came, they were forced by the cold and occupied a room in the small house of their friends Charles and Bisket. Lidie’s nephew Frank appeared by carrying a letter to Lidie from his mother, supplicating her to kept an eye at him, but Frank demonstrated that he was capable of looking after him. Frank became a successful trader and a familiar around Lawrence and soon fell in with a group of teen age boys bruited to be active in raiding pro-slavery settlers. In return to her sister’s letter, Lidie wrote about Southerners “That the southerners are not going to give anything up without a fight, for you know they are Scotch-Irish” (p.139). The assassination of Dow who was a Free State man became a sensation in Kansas, was shot forty
times by Coleman, a rich man from Missouri. The murder of Dow became a fool-proof testimony of reaction with violence against the abolitionists and an example of what the authorities would do under the guise of political power.

As it was summer, the day time was long and Lidie and Newton stayed till late afternoon. While crossing the town, Jeremiaiah, a horse flicked ears forward and stopped abruptly in his track. Animals like horse could sense the impending danger than a person. Smiley fascinated and portrayed the latent abilities of a horse as she used to in her previous novels. Newton tried to pick up a sack of corn meal which was fell off from Wagon. Encircled by three ruffians, Newton asked that they would like something. With a Southerner voice, a man grinned and shouted, “Sure! We’d like to shoot us a G-d-abolitionist!” (p.254) shot Newton with a pistol and the boy shot Jeremiaiah with rifle in the neck. Both Newton and horse were left last breath in the warm blood-flood. While moaning and weeping, Lidie was baffled, could not understand what she would do and she was prepared for the worst. A sojourn in Kansas, bonding and experience with Newton, Lidie had taken the task of her husband but she couldn’t understand how long it was. Avenging of Newton assassination, Lidie camouflaged herself as a man and entered into pro-slavery to go after murderers. In the climax-part, surprisingly, Smiley attempted to redraft Twain’s classic ‘Huckleberry Finn’ in her ‘Lidie’. In all of classic American literature, ‘Huck’ ending is the most controversial. Konnikova, a critic quoted, “How could Huck, after building a friendship with Jim for the duration of the book ……. It doesn’t make sense”. (Scientific American, p.2). Smiley’s character Lidie started an adventurous journey without a plan and her endeavor was proven fruitless about slavery but where Huck struggled to understand his relation to Jim rather than challenging slavery.

**Conjectured responsibility**: During Lidie recuperated, she met a slave woman at a plantation, Lorna who had received help from Newton in an unsuccessful escape attempt. Surprised at the observation of Lorna about disguising and pregnancy, Lorna was enlisted to escape again by the help of Lidie and determined that was an opportunity grateful to pay tribute to abolitionist—Newton. As Lidie stated, “Aiding in [Lorna’s] escape was the thing I had to do for Thomas that would somehow restore him to me” (p.404). Though Lidie took the decision merely to satisfy Newton’s aim, her notion wasn’t broader sense to eradicate slavery in Kansas. And Lidie felt, “That was enough for me”, (p.404) in connection to her actions on behalf of Lorna supplant her own conflicting commitment to the cause of abolition. From the plantation to Kansas City, when they arrived late in the afternoon, it was different in a full state of war, troops of soldiers gathered together, marching, riding and drilling madly. Novelist pictured the situation full of terror and the newspapers were pasted here and there on fences as ‘War! War.’ In the words of Lidie, “Every man around seemed the incarnation of danger” (p.429). Lidie and Lorna wished that they would find a passage on a riverboat. On the way, Lidie questioned Lorna about her experiences and crave to escape and asked, “Why shouldn’t you be a slave, Lorna? What if all those preachers are right, and the Lord says that Negroes are best in slavery” (p.420). Here, Smiley straightaway supported to Southerners as if they were the best masters and the decree of god. Despite all the talk, Lidie knew nothing the depth of slavery institution. Slavery experience of Lorna served to
enlighten Lidie. Having a steamboat, an age of Thirteen years boy was approached to travel and chose ‘Jack Smith’ boat.

Lidie’s experience with Lorna transformed her beliefs about slavery yet there was a contrast to ‘Huck Finn’. When Huck determined to save Jim after the King and Duke projected him as an elusive slave, he declared, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” (The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, p.271) Huck segregated his feelings for Jim about the system of slavery and did not believe that slavery is imprudence. Making their way to Missouri, in a hope of booking a steamboat, Lidie and Lorna attempted to escape among the crowd but ‘Kansas Territory’ was on the fringe of open warfare. A cataclysmic turn in the story, Lidie was identified by a former acquaintance, David Graves with a pro-slavery attitude. Recognized by Graves that Lorna was escaping by the help of Lidie, a crowd of men on the deck including a few women gathered. Missourians gave out a clamorous cheer, while dragging Lorna off and stamped Lidie as ‘Niggah-Stealer’. Lorna neither protested nor wept but kept silent. After capturing Lidie and Lorna, former was concisely imprisoned before being banished and Lorna was sold to someone. Constant fear was prevailing, in jail, Lidie asked, “Are they going to hang me?” (p.436).The climax story of Lidie Newton for Mallon, a critic, an utter disappointment because Lidie had left her husband ideology. Emphasizing in words accurately, Protagonist was satisfied and compromised herself about pro-slavery. Weaken Lidie’s role in the final part of the novel when compared to first part. In ‘Bleeding Kansas’, essay, Mallon said, “[lurching] into some broad derring-do and then [galloping] away on a moral high horse, leaving the reader baffled and unsatisfied.” (The New York Times, on the web)

Unsuccessful strategy: Lidie escaped from a harsh punishment only by her whiteness but Lorna was grabbed and affected her wish of freedom. When slave catchers arrived and descend on them, Lidie was failed to take Lorna to steamboat and their fate was separated. Dead silence from Lorna because she was aware what should follow next but Lidie physically prevented and screamed, “All I remember is how frenzied it made me to know that it was through me that Lorna had been betrayed” (p.435). In the Jail-room, where Lidie was sent, each morning was a shock because there was neither Newton nor Lorna who expected a lot to rescue from slavery. Failed as daughter, failed as wife for ten months and at least not succeeded as a woman like her sisters. The efforts of escaping became vain, as Lidie said “Our escape had been a fool’s errand from beginning to end” (p.443). Mr.Day had paid forty-four dollars fine for releasing Lidie from St.Louis to Quincy. After Lidie came to her sister, Beatrice, she met Newton parents, brothers as well friends and shared Negro servitude and abolitionists. Sharing the story of Lorna, She herself wouldn’t get any benefit. As Newton’s mother appealed to me to give a lecture in the hall ‘Danake Hall’ in Quincy, on the stage, staring at audience, Lidie mixed and narrated her story about Kansas people. Truly, Lidie lecture was success.

In the end, the reader fell in an ambiguous condition and might be arisen some questions: Why did Smiley not given Poetic justice or happy ending? What is the fate of Lorna in further? If novelist cast her vote slavery, what is the essence of freedom? Is novelist projecting pessimism in the hearts of readers? In Huck, his adventures surmising a
truthful, satiable ending unlike Lidie adventures which are inefficacious efforts in American history. The reader was disappointed at climax part of the novel as it was set mere ending without any opted judgment. The novelist intention couldn’t be understand by shaping the character of Lidie. This novel is neither comedy nor tragedy for getting conclusion. The problems are left in the void without solution.

**Conclusion:** Smiley’s characterization of Lidie, protagonist, is a kind of Picaresque approach. Lidie wanders aimlessly, purposelessly in her own way unlike her sisters who are being engaged with the service of their husbands’ families. Showing dexterity in Swimming across Mississippi river and riding horses make her heroism rather confinement to kitchen or merely working at home. The perspective of feminism is failed utterly. In a sense, the reader feels that the novelist might shape the character of Lidie as a source to women in accomplishments but not. The protagonist neither establish peace nor freedom in Kansas or at least not successful to relive Lorna. The violations of living right, freedom of speech and right of vote which are fundamental rights are fallen in jeopardy. Though Lidie doesn’t have any life-achievement or any vision to future she is married to Newton. Still then, Lidie doesn’t know the aim of abolitionist and their acts. Lidie’s sisters also have shown compassion at her inability at her life and just want to keep aside burden from them. The sister hood is also failed as there is no unity among the sisters. Smiley left the problems in Kansas itself and the character Lidie too.

**References:**


