

Theme of Alienation in Modern Literature: The Advent of Existentialism, With Life as Seen Through Indian English Fiction Writers

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Abstract

Edmund Fuller remarks that in our age “man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problems ----- a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in his way of existence”. The paper will discuss and analyse theme of alienation in modern literature in general and Indo-English literature from different angles. It will be contextualized by referring profusely the works of renowned Indian writers. Nuances of the word alienation will also be discussed thoroughly. Alienation forms the subject of many psychological, sociological, literary and philosophical studies. It is a major theme of human condition in the contemporary society. After two World Wars, existentialism got currency all over the world. The chaos, disorder, annihilation and fears and frustration on the one hand and the crumbling traditional values and old-world views including loss of faith and God and trust in man along with anguish and anxiety, estrangement and loneliness rendered the life absurd, meaningless, directionless and futile. Existentialism is a twentieth century’s most influential literary and philosophical movement that focuses on individual existence. It originated in the philosophical movement that focuses on individual existence. It originated in the philosophical and literary works of Sartre and Camus. It focuses on acting on ones’ conviction to arrive at personal truth. Existentialism deals with the problems of the meaning and purpose of life on earth, finding the world as hostile in nature. Indian writing in English fiction has been acclaimed around the world for its innovative and radical novel approaches to storytelling which is one of the oldest tradition in India. The multitude of such writing explores India in its various aspects. Apart from the continued literary output by older generation of Indian English writers, we also have newer generation who explores the contemporary alienation and existentialism felt by the ‘middle class liberal humanist’. Analysis and portrayal of human relationship has been of perennial interests for all who have contributed towards the growth and development of different genres of literature. It has become very essential to explore the essence of ‘India’ in Indian English fiction and its role in uplifting and understanding society and its problems within or outside.

Keywords: Alienation, Rootlessness, Identity, Isolation, Predicament, Existentialism

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Introduction

The word 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek word *Diaspeiro*, literally means scattering or dispersion of people from their homeland. Diasporic writing has been receiving increasing academic and disciplinary recognition. It has emerged as a distinct literacy genre. Many people have migrated from India to various alien lands under forced exiles or self-imposed exiles. Many of them have made a mark in the field of writing. These immigrant writers reflect, on one hand, their attachment to their motherland and on the other hand, their feeling of alienation and rootlessness. Diasporic writings also known as 'expatriate writings' give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers when they are on the rack owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. Immigration proves a pleasant experience only to a few immigrants who succeed in assimilating themselves with new geographical, cultural, social and psychological environment. To most of the diasporic writers, immigration is not a delectable experience. They often find themselves thrown out of their roots and could not bloom properly in foreign soil.

Indian English Literature has a relatively recent testimony which is aged only one and a half centuries. It records a drastic development in the world. Writers use literature as their weapon to express their rebellious and thought-provoking ideas. So, they enjoy their freedom of writing. They express their thoughts through their seminal writing. Since the pre-Independence era, the Indian authors wrote in different genres like poem, essay, drama and short story as we Indians are known as originators of storytelling. In the past few years, authors have been substantially contributing to world literature. Formal prose form and slowly emerged as wan artistic form. Novel experiments the creative transformation of writers to be Indian in notion, sensation and experience, yet also to encourage the graces and submit to the authority of English for expression. Indian novelists in English attempt to put roots of their country in their works. Writers treated political and social themes till 1970s. The characters of their stories are princes, paupers, saints, sinners, farmers, servants, untouchables and coolies and down trodden class. They developed their story in the small cities. The most interesting and dedicating themes are – Western encounter, tradition modernity, materialism and spiritualism. In the later years, the gradual growth of fiction in India is made by gradual shifting of focus from the external to the inner world of the individual.

Alienation: Literature Review

Alienation emerges as natural consequences of the existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms to approach and analyse. Treatment of alienation and consequential dispossession seems worthwhile to understand various nuances of the word alienation. A dictionary of literary terms defined as: "Alienation is the state of being alienated or estranged from something or somebody; it is a condition of the mind". Encyclopaedia Britannica defines alienation as "the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work or self". The English word 'Alienation' is derived from the Latin word *Alienato*, a noun which receives meaning from the verb *alienate* means to make a thing for others, or to avoid. In French language *Alienate* and *alienation*, are used in the same sense as the English. The use of these words is considered modern. These words are Greek in origin the meaning of 'Anomia' is self-alienation and 'Anomie' is alienation from society. *Anomia* is an

indicator of Personal disintegration of man from the society. The present paper is a study to bring out the nuances of the word alienation from different angles such as Political, social, economic and personal.

It also endeavours to analyse the theme of alienation in modern literature in general and Indian Writing in English. I have tried to include as many writers to bring out the various forms of alienation in literature. Alienation forms the subject of many psychological, sociological, literary and philosophical studies. It is major theme of human condition in the contemporary epoch. It is only natural that a pervasive phenomenon like alienation should leave such an indelible impact upon the contemporary literature. The purpose of the study is to acquaint students and teachers of English literature with theme of alienation in modern literature. The study, includes my personal visit to USA twice in last two years and to UK, Singapore, and Malaysia. I find many changes in Indian society in comparison to people of India living in those countries. Today, fiction is the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expression in Indian English literature. Despite its delayed entry, it has evolved as a dominant literary form in the twentieth century. In present time, people enjoy reading novel which is one of the acceptable ways of embodying the experiences and ideas. Both men and women writers of India portray women from different perspectives. They discuss distinct roles played by women. The intellectuals observe Indian Society as a male dominated society. Here, the women have very little options to take up. They are grown up with a submissive nature inculcated in them even from their childhood which teach them never rebel against the actions of the male-dominated society. The Indian women accept and adapt themselves to the demanding circumstances. Their feelings are never taken into consideration. They are not recognized as persons in their family or in the society and deprived of opportunities to prove their individuality. They are constantly reminded of their commitment to the forth-coming family and their husbands. Thus, the society refuses to give equal rights to the women folk. So, Indian women are the examples for dependent figure: to father, husband or to the society. The novel is a long-sustained piece of prose fiction and it is a new variety which landed India a little before a century. The first novel in India, *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (1858) was written in Bengali. The journey of the Indian English novel was started by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee with his (1864) and this literary form underwent speedy evolution. But by changes in generation, we see drastic change in the life of Indian women as they are now on equal platforms with their male counterparts. In ancient India, women were given more respect and were taught all performing arts and academia but with the passing of time tables turned and women were considered second generation.

Amalgamation in the society

Amalgamation is distinguished by Park and Burgess as a biological process, the fusion of races by interbreeding and intermarriage. Assimilation, on the other hand, is limited to the fusion of cultures. Bharati Mukherjee unambiguously has cast off the hyphenated sticky tag 'Indian-American,' although she is an expatriate from India. We can say that words like disintegration, exile, alienation, disorder, and a quest for identity are the terms often applied for defining the experience of emergent. Not only "alienation" but also the "transcendence of alienation" is an inherently concept. This fusion of culture, traditions and even biological appearance can be very well

visualised amongst them. I visited many Indians during my stay who have Indian values in their bosom but intermixing of culture has made them a new persona.

Globalisation and its Impact

Human history is going through an era of globalization. Globalization is a relatively new phenomenon of multidimensional nature that causes variety of complex trends in the economic, social and cultural fabrics of all societies. These trends have presented alarming challenges which throw people into perplexing situation. Globalization impacts on every conceivable aspect of life. Globalization has created a smaller world for people. Recently, people can reach more than three countries within a single day. Hence, meeting people from various places in the world is greatly possible in the era of globalization. When people of diverse backgrounds meet, they need to communicate using a language as a lingua franca. English is now a world lingua franca. Nowadays, English is used by people in almost every part of the world. What is interesting is how English become so widely spread. About half a century ago the concept of English as a true global language was merely a theoretical prediction.

Indian English Fiction

However, English does not gain its special status as a global language merely by being spoken by people all over the globe. English becomes a world language because people in other countries give a special credence to English, even though they do not speak it as a first language. Popularity of English made Indian fiction writers widely read and immensely popular whether it is Mulk Raj Anand or Anita Desai. Indian English writers and their writings always give a new dimensions and directions to the society. My regular visit to USA and UK made me realise that Indian writers are read far and wide and this perspective of life depicted in their works is so close to reality that even other country men like them and try to follow the path suggested in their novels. Words like *Expatriate* and *Diaspora* need no introduction in postcolonial literary scenario. Indian diaspora, today, has emerged with the multiplicity of histories, variety of culture, tradition, and a deep instinct for survival. Indian Diaspora, though counting more than 20 million members world-wide, survives in between home of origin and world of adoption. The process of survival of the diasporic individual/ community in between the home of origin and world of adoption is the voyage undertaken in the entire process from alienation to final “assimilation.” Bharati Mukherjee as well as Jhumpa Lahiri, Indian born novelists living in Canada/America, has made a deep impression on the literary canvass. Their novels honestly depict the issues of their own cultural location in West Bengal in India. They were displaced from their land of origin to USA where they were simultaneously invisible as writers and overexposed as a racial minority and their final re-location (assimilation) to USA as naturalized citizens. They are the writers of *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *The Namesake*. The dilemma of belongingness in these three novels is a matter of flux and agony, which explores the problem of nationality location, identity and historical memory in USA. The cultural diaspora-isation which Stuart Mall calls it marks the beginning of the desire for the survival in the community of adoption. The paper aims to explore their sense of alienation in USA where life as an immigrant was unbearable, forcing them to try towards the process of economic, social and cultural adjustment. Further, Mukherjee’s own inward voyage in *The Middleman* and other stories and visualized assimilation as on “end –product” which implies in

totality conforming to a national culture of nationalist way of life. Diaspora is basically an experience of dislocation and re-location. Indian culture is versatile, plural and fluid. It is the intrinsic plurality and the built-in tolerance of the Hindu system itself that provides a matrix where embedding is possible. Several migrant communities like the Parsi and Bahai have enriched Indian culture like sugar in the milk. The Indian diaspora has made India very resilient. Indians are best example of unity in diversity.

But in India, one possesses the ability to disappear into the masses of the city because one does not look different from those around him. Whereas in North America's environment, one who loses that capability and must prove his worth constantly, especially in places where Indians are a rare commodity. Maintaining ties to India and preserving Indian tradition in America meant a lot to them. The idea of melting pot is a metaphor where all the immigrant cultures are mixed and amalgamated at their own place. Most of the first-generation parents have immigrated to North America to improve their economic status. One of the main results of Cultural blend is acculturation and assimilation. Most languages become either extinct or disappear. People forget the love and affection of their mother tongue. Native languages are forbidden and the immigrants are following the alien language. Cultural clash may lead to changes in language, religion, styles of government, the use of technology and military tactics. According to Huntington, there will be a clash in the cultures because the world is becoming a smaller place and as a result the interactions increases resulting in the clash of civilizations. He insists that the west is at a peak of power and at the same time a return to the roots of phenomenon occurring. Non-western countries can attempt to achieve isolation to preserve their own values and protect them from Western invasion. Post-Colonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin link alienation with a sense of dislocation or displacement.

Alienation and its shortcomings

Alienation is one of the greatest problems confronting modern society. Its corrosive impact can be seen in the form of generation gap, the anti-war movement, the hippie phenomenon, the credibility gap, the compartmentalization of our life, the stunting of personal development, the conspicuous absence of a sense of meaningfulness of life, and so on. The crisis of character, identity or consciousness or authenticity has grown out of man's looking before and after and pining for what he is not. In the 20th century, modern man is confronted with various problems, stress and strains. He reaches a point where he is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny and realizes that there are forces which threaten to wither his life and all its joys and hopes. These psychological problems in the form of alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, withdrawal and detachment are the dominating themes in modern fiction. The depiction of the protagonist's psyche or inner development is seen at its best in the novels of D.H.Lawrence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, Kafka, Sartre etc. They have portrayed beautifully and artistically the inner flow of sentiments of the protagonists in their novels.

Role of Indian women writers

Literature has witnessed the roles of women evolving through ages, but until recent times, most of the published writers were men and the portrayal of women in

literature was without doubt biased. Indian Literature has rich lineage of women writers since times immortal. The contribution of women to oral folklore cannot be taken for granted whether in folk songs, stories, poetry and literature in general. During the Victorian era, there was an unending debate over the roles of women in English Literature. While the era was dominated by writers who treated women as angelic figures. Edwardian poetry spoke of women's rights gathering much attention, feminism and females getting out of their homes during the war times. According to author Anita Nair, "Literature has always been ambivalent in its representation of women. Good women as in ones who accepted societal norms were rewarded with happily ever after. Even feisty heroines eventually go onto find content and life's purpose in a gentleman's arms, be it Elizabeth Bennett (Pride and Prejudice) or Jane Eyre (Jane Eyre).

Author Jaishree Mishra feels if literature is doing its job as a mirror to society then, obviously, the depiction of women in books has changed along with society. More recently, contemporary popular fiction Indian writers like Chetan Bhagat and Anita Nair have showcased the new woman in their books. While Chetan portrays his women characters as harbinger of social change and equality, Nair's characters have their own pain and sorrow but they overcome their entire struggle.

Arundhati Roy is one of the most celebrated authors of India, best known for her novel 'The God of Small Things'. The novel talks about how trivial things in life can affect people.

Anita Desai is one of the most reputed writers of India and was nominated for the Booker Prize at least three times. She was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1978 for her novel 'Fire on the Mountain' and the Padma Bhushan in 2014 for her contribution to Indian Literature. Her stories have an exemplary implication that strikes the human heart besides being humorous at the same time.

Jhumpa Lahiri has gained international acclaim for her writing which mostly deals with NRI characters, immigrant issues and problems people face in foreign lands. Her pen touches the soul with her simple and metaphorical writing focusing on the day to day nuances and the hidden dramas in every person's life.

Kiran Desai is known for her book 'The Inheritance of Loss', which talks about the pain of migration and living between the two separate nations. All these authors are either living out of India or have great exposure to the world, so their depiction is synced with traditional Indian values mingled with international trends.

Indian English Fiction Writers:

Indo-Anglican literature, which forms almost an integral part of English literature, has now attained a distinct place in the literary landscape of India. Indian writing in English fiction has been acclaimed around the world for its innovative and radical innovative approaches to storytelling. The multitude of such writing explores India in its various aspects. Apart from the continued literary output by older generation of Indian English writers, we also have newer generation that explores the contemporary angst, alienation and existentialism felt by the 'middle class liberal humanist' R.K.Narayan was born on October 10, 1906 in Madras. His father was a provincial

head master. He spent his early childhood with his maternal grandmother, Parvathi in Madras and used to spend only a few weeks each summer visiting his parents and siblings. As his father was the headmaster of the Maharaja's High School in Mysore, he moved back in with his parents and obtained his bachelor's degree from the University of Mysore. It was here that he had access to his father's library and got acquainted with all English writers through 'The Strand Magazine' and books. He began his writing career with Swami and Friends in 1935. The existential maturity shown by R.K. Narayan's characters at the time of crisis, how they overcome them and how they decide to lead a fulfilling life. It also explores the psyche depth of his characters. Existentialism is a 20th century philosophy that is centred on the analysis of existence and the way humans find themselves existing in the world. The early 19th century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, posthumously, regarded as the father of existentialism. He maintained that the individual has the sole responsibility for giving one's own life meaning and with living life passionately and sincerely, despite obstacles and distractions which include despair, angst, absurdity, choice, boredom, and death. In the history of Indian English literature, R.K.Narayan reigns supreme with his portrayal of humanistic perspectives. Narayan's greatest achievement was making India accessible to the outside world through his literature. His novels delineate existential predicament of its prominent characters. They carry with them a sense of alienation, loneliness, depression etc and depict the existential dilemmas of the characters in the hostile world. Achieving liberation in their everyday life through their activities does not turn out as an escape but a realization of the human potential and the ability to live in harmony by making their own choices. Narayan knows that human life is a mixture of good and evil, of love and the ugliness, of despair and hopefulness, but he derives hope from this very imperfection of life. His optimism was founded on imperfections of man and is based on his theory of evolution that life is constantly progressing to higher and higher levels. R.K.Narayan proposes a milieu where his men realize the significance of using the freedom to choose and make their lives happy, joyful and meaningful. Not only him but works of Mulk Raj Anand, Aravind Adiga, Bhabani Bhattacharya also give a different glimpse of Alienation.

Thus, we can conclude by saying that Existentialism has an enormous impact on Indian English fiction writers. The picture or theme painted by them is quite real and my personal experience also reflects the same. Quest for motherland, mother tongue and culture remain alive in self despite doing their best while living in far distant countries. Hopefully, this paper will provide true position of Indian English Fiction and depiction of individual living and striving hard to establish his identity in India and other countries.

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