

Theme of Alienation in Modern Literature

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Abstract

Alienation is the basic form of rootlessness, which forms the subject of many psychological, sociological, literary and philosophical studies. Alienation is a 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. Alienation emerges as natural consequence of existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms. The theme of alienation has been variously dealt with persistently and unflinchingly in modern literature. The alienated protagonist is a recurrent figure in much of the twentieth century American and European fiction. Alienation in its various forms, has been dealt with in the existentialistic literature. Owing to its historical and socio-cultural reasons, the Indo-English literature also, could not remain unaffected by it.

Alienation is the result of loss of identity. The dispossessed personality's search for identity is a common place theme in modern fiction. Man fails to perceive today the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in a hostile world. 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 analyze theme of alienation in modern literature in general and Indo-English literature in particular from different angles. It will be contextualised by referring profusely the works of renowned writers. Nuances of the word alienation will also be discussed thoroughly.

key words : alienation , rootlessness , identity , isolation , randomness , predicament , existentialism , existence .

Introduction:

The present paper is a study to bring out the nuances of the word alienation from different angles. It also endeavours to analyse the theme of alienation in modern literature in general and Indian Writing in English in particular. We have tried to include as many writers as we can to bring out the various forms of alienation in literature. Alienation forms the subject of many psychological, sociological, literary and philosophical studies. It is a 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, It is hoped, will help students, researchers and teachers in enhancing interest and encourage them in their study, research and teaching.

Literature Review:

Alienation emerges as natural consequences of existential predicament. It is necessary to understand the meaning of existentialism. Existentialism is not a well organized and systematic philosophy of life nor its beginning can be pinpointed. Jean Wahl considers existentialism as “Philosophies of existence”. It is also considered as a sharp reaction of all forms of rationalism. Kierkegaard reacted against Hegelian idealism. Marcel reacted against the idealist like F.H. Bradley and Brunschvieg. Another important point to be discussed is the dictum that the existentialists set forth – existence precedes essence. They asserted that man first of all exists and then only he thinks of it. All his ‘contemplations and his actions are possible only because of his existence’. Existence therefore, is the first principle from which everything else flows. Sartre is worth quoting here.

“ We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up and defines himself afterwards”(1)

Modern existentialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries moved in two different directions from the two main sources, one led by Soren Kierkegaard, Danish thinker, and the other by Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher. Kierkegaard develops Christian and theistic existentialism while Nietzsche develops anti-Christian and atheistic existentialism. The German Karl Jaspers and the French thinker Gabriel Marcel take the Kierkegaardian line of philosophical faith. On the other hand, the German Martin Heidegger and the French Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre develop it on the Nietzschean way of a theism and godlessness. Albert Camus develops a kind of existentialism of the absurd.

After the two world wars the word 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 absolutely absurd, meaningless, directionless and futile. It is what Albert Camus called as Sisyphean Act. Existentialism therefore rapidly flourished and entered the

realms of literature also. The entire West echoed the reverberations of existential attitudes like, guilt, nausea, restlessness, despair, lack of intimacy and estrangement and over arching absurdity. Existentialism in some way or the other found manifestations in writings of Franz Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Marcel, Ionesco, James Joyce, William Golding, Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, Proust, Hemingway and others.

Existentialism deals with values, attitudes and relationships, which determine man's role in society and the freedom or bondage that he is subjected to. If he is under undue pressure he will have to adopt methods for survival to salvage himself from an aggressive society. This will be extension of the personality, the development of a new dimension of the individual, which will override these critical situations. The hollowness that man feels within the depths of his soul is existentialistic by nature, and this has to be countered to bring the individual to the mainstream of life, to rescue him from perennial isolation.

Most existentialist thinkers conform to the theory that life as a whole is futile and one's comprehension of life can never be absolutely soothing. Thus, alienation is cogent to existence as an inherent solipsism enshrouds the subconscious even while the mind is consciously attempting to reach out to other living beings to make life meaningful.

Existentialism in Indian Writing in English

Existentialism is used in some of the Indian novels in English like in **Across the Black Water** of Mulk Raj Anand and Anita Desai's **Fire on the Mountain**.

Across the Black Water shows a close resemblance to existential art. It throws light on existential concepts such as meaninglessness and subjectivity through the powerful characterization of its several characters including its hero Lalu Singh. The novel tells us about the limitation of the human life and the mystery of existence about infinitude and guilt, death and hope, freedom and meaning, Lalu Singh the hero of the novel, observes that his condition is shaped by fear and loneliness and there is endless suffering in his existence. He is confronted with the problems of understanding things in human terms and the more he tries the more he fails. His experiences as a soldier in the battlefield of France in World War I, when Indian troops land in Marcilles make him a stranger in the face of the absurdities of war and consequent turmoil's, agonies, indifference, tiredness and depression. The tremor of dead spread like a panic in his brain and the confusion of silence and horrors of war overpower him completely. While the oppressions of war render him completely unable to relate outside his own self, his inner urges, struggles, hopes, aspirations as an Indian soldier in France indicate separation from the self. Lalu Singh loves life irrepressibly despite all odds and his keen desire to live makes this novel existentialist in the true sense of the term.

Anita Desai's novel **Fire on the Mountain** is an existential novel. Anita Desai adroitly explores the emotional life of her characters, especially female characters.

She chooses only those characters who are emotionally famished and who fail to come to terms with reality. They choose to live in the cell of the self, building up a world of fantasy. Their preoccupation with the self becomes an obsession with them. All human relations are which in fact supposed to be authentic and the best means of nourishing emotions, prove to be meaningless for these emotionally famished characters - Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. Each one of them is a victim of emotional agony and craves for privacy, isolation and fantasy to escape from unpleasant reality of life. The novel is pervaded by an overpowering sense of loneliness and isolation in the deserted life of the protagonist, Nanda Kaul.

Alienation: Literature Review

Alienation it should be noted emerges as natural consequences of the existential predicament both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms in order to approach and analyze Joshi's treatment of alienation and consequential dispossession it 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 ones milieu, work, products of work or self".

The English word 'Alienation' is derived from the Latin word 'Alienato'. Alianato is a noun which receives meaning from the verb 'alienare' which means to make a thing for others, to snatch, to avoid, to remove, etc. In French language Alienate and alienation, are used in the same sense as the English words 'Alienate and Alienation. Anomie and Anomia are used as synonyms of Alienation. 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. According to G.H.Nettler:

"..... anomia is personal disorganization, alienation is a psychological state of an individual and alienated in the person who has been estranged from, made unfriendly toward his society and the culture it carries"(2).

Generally, Anomie, Anomia or Alienation are interchangeable. In English there are other words other than Alienation. They are Estrangement Isolation and Separation.

Different interpreters of alienation have given different definitions. According to Arnold Kaufman,

"To claim that a person is alienated is to claim that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction"(3).

Feur Lewis says

“..... the word alienation is used to convey the emotional tone which accompanies any behaviour in which the person is compelled to act self destructively”(4).

According to the views of Keniston,

“Most usages of alienation share the assumption that some relationship or connection that once existed that is ‘natural’, desirable or good, has been lost”(5).

In the definition of these thinkers there is an indication of an existing tension and disintegrating human relationship. Martin Buber termed alienation as “the proliferation of the It-World”(6). Sidney Finkelstein defines alienation as

“a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt towards something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defence but an impoverishment of oneself (7).

According to Hegel alienation is of two kinds. The first type of alienation arises due to man’s individuality or incompatibility in his personality and social substance. The second type of alienation is of the same level as the alienation expounded by Rousseau etc., in the principle of ‘Social contract’ in which the theme of surrender or transfer of any right is vested. According to Hegel, the situation arises when a change occurs in man’s concept of ‘self’. The second type of alienation is permanent and from this we can control the first type.

Karl Marx however puts forth a very comprehensive and complex idea of alienation that comprises various extrinsic dimensions of human existence in socio-economic context. His concept of alienation is often classified in the following manners:

1. Political Alienation
2. Economic Alienation

Marx says about political alienation:

“The state does not care about Individual’s existence, in a society without communion between people and that individual in his relation to such a state does not experience a feeling of solidarity, he is only able to relate himself to it as an isolated monad, an individual. Man’s inner life is divided in world split up in such a way”(8).

Marx presumes democracy in which man’s political alienation can be controlled not in a state in absolute power as Hegel thinks. According to Marx to get rid of political alienation, first of all we must get rid of the basic alienation, which is economic alienation. He finds the concepts related to state faulty for political alienation.

The main procedure of every society is to produce for the fulfilment of needs and to create social institutions. Any type of state of being out of this procedure will be termed as the state of being alienated. Due to the state of being alienated the existence of man becomes merely the existence of material human being. In the words of Marx,

“ Just as alienated labour transforms free and self directed activity into a mean, so it transforms the species - life of a man into a mean of physical existence”(9).

According to Erich Fromm, alienation is the result of capitalist society which disturbs the feelings of man. The growth of the personality of man and factors responsible for alienation are subject to the influence of social-conditions on human existence. In the view of Fromm, among all types of alienation, self-alienation is the most important. Self-alienation is the absence of self-awareness or a complete loss of it. He considers self-alienation pertaining to feelings. He writes in his book **Sane Society** that:

“the meaning of alienation is that process of feeling in which anyone feels alienation from self”(10).

An Alienated man necessarily becomes alienated from society, because the identity of self-alienation and the situation of the lack of or loss of self-awareness necessarily alienate him from society.

After Erich Fromm many psychoanalysts have also discussed the process of ‘self-alienation’. Karen Horney in her book ‘**New Ways in Psychoanalysis**’ expresses her views about ‘self-alienation’. According to Horney, that man is self-alienated whose:

“Spontaneous individual self (has been) stunted, warped or choked, he is said to be in a condition of alienation from himself (or) alienated from self”(11).

In another book **Our Inner Conflicts**, Horney again discusses the concept of self alienation with a new approach. In Horney’s views the condition of self-alienation is such as the, “person simply becomes oblivious to what he really feels, likes, rejects, believes in short to what he really is”(12).

Man’s reality is his ‘Real self’ and the meaning of self-alienation is the alienation from this ‘Real-self’. Horney thinks that the situation of self-alienation arises when a man makes an, ‘Ideal-image’ of himself in his mind that is other than his ‘Real-self’. There exists a “gap between his idealized image and his real-self”(13). Even the “pride in one’s respectability alienates a man from his unsavoury past”(14).

Sociologists see loneliness as a kind of alienation, which is found in the absence of intimacy with others. When a man says that he often feels lonely, it is clear that he is dissociated and disconnected from others or his relations with others are not such as he can overcome his loneliness by meeting them. McClosky points that, “the feeling of loneliness and yearning for supportive primary relationships”(15) are the two sides

of a coin. According to him, the meaning of the feeling of loneliness is the loss of significant relation with others. It is the lack or loss of this relation with others that generates a source of alienation. The awareness of this loneliness is sociological in nature; it is called social-isolation. In social reference, the meaning of Social-alienation is the decay of creative and meaningful relations between man and man and man and his environment, between man or the prevailing reality. Man finds himself bereaved of the authentic footholds that grant meaning and directions to life. Alienation thus occurs from unauthentic existence.

Paul Tillich has used the word 'Estrangement' for alienation. Tillich has pointed out the difference between real condition of man's existence and his basic - nature. He has termed this difference as alienation. According to him,

"existence is estranged from essence Man's estrangement from his essential being is the universal character of existence"(16).

Tillich asserts that estrangement thwarts the process of self-realisation, it in fact operates as a hostile force highly pernicious to the elemental self. He puts out:

"Each expression of the estranged state contradicts man's essential being, his potency for goodness"(17).

Sartre's concept of alienation as propounded in his book **Being and Nothingness** is totally different from Marx's approach. Sartre's approach is existentialistic alienation. Sartre says,

"In the shock that seizes me when apprehend the other's look I experience a subtle alienation of all my possibilities, which are not associated with the objects of the world far from me in the midst of world"(18).

Sartre in his book **Critique of Dialectic Reason** has broadened Marx's concept of alienation. Marx says that when the production and labour of man is controlled by other man, alienation takes place. Marx saw alienation in the context of labour class only but Sartre has tried to feel the alienation in the life and world of writers as well.

Taviss speaks of two different kinds of alienation, that is 'social alienation' and 'self-alienation'. By 'social alienation' she mean:

"the sense of estrangement brought out by the sudden discovery that the social system is either oppressive or incomplete with their desires and ideas. 'Self-alienation', however, means the loss of contact of the individual selves with any inclinations or desires that are not in agreement with the prevailing social patterns, as a result of which the individuals are forced to manipulate in accordance with the social demands or feel incapable of controlling their actions"(19).

In one of the great, seminal heart-searching of our time, Camus diagnoses the human predicament as follows:

“A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. He is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity”(20).

In an essay on Kafka Ionesco defines the true nature of this ‘absurdity’ in precise terms. According to him,

“Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose cut off from his religious metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd and useless”(21).

In spite of unprecedented scientific and technological advancements, which have added immensely to his physical pleasures and comforts, the contemporary man is doomed to find himself in a tragic mess. The prevailing economic conditions culminating in the abject poverty of the masses and the economic squeeze of the middle class. All these have made increasing and often disturbing demands on the individual and contribute in their own ways to his rootlessness and dispossession. The present age has shrunk in spirit languishing in confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment, meaninglessness, alienation and dispossession.

The theme of alienation has been variously dealt with in modern literature. The alienated protagonist is a recurrent figure in much of the twentieth century American and European fiction. The artist as an alienated soul has been portrayed in James Joyce's **Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man**. **Stephen the protagonist is alienated from religion, family and culture.** The Negro as an outsider in Ralph Ellison's **Invisible Man is alienated from society.** **The narrator is invisible because others refuse to see him.** . Albert Camus' **Meursault (The Stranger)** is a serious attempt to sketch the confusion, frustration, alienation, disintegration and estrangement of modern man. In Kafka's *The Castle*, it is about alienation, endless frustration of man's attempts to stand against the system, and the futile and hopeless pursuit of an unobtainable goal. The protagonist is known as only K struggles to gain access to the mysterious authorities of a castle who govern the village for unknown reasons.

Theme of Alienation in Indian Writing in English

Owing to historical and socio-cultural reasons, the Indo-English literature also, could not remain unaffected by it. Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, “alienation or rootlessness is a very common theme in it”(22). Alienation serves as a basic theme and recurrent motif in many Indo-English novels.

R.K. Narayan’s novels are the foremost in emphasizing the loneliness of man.

His treatment of alienation in **The Sweet Vendor** is more systematic. Owner of sweet business, Jagan has a son, Mali. Jagan’s wife died of a brain tumour when Mali was still a child. Jagan tried to do every thing possible to give him proper education. But Mali arranges to go to America. He returns three years later with an American (half-Korean) wife and a scheme to market a ‘novel-writing machine’. Jagan is ostracized by his community. He leaves Malgudi twice alienated for good. His loneliness and despair become all the more keen because of his memories of his wife’s death and Mali’s resentful treatment. Jagan’s unhappy experiences are typical of Narayan’s alienated characters. “All his novels in varying degrees, convey this sense of unhappy frustration (23).

The earlier Indo-English novelists were thus aware of the dilemma resulting from alienation. Their works bear witness to a certain involvement with the changing national scene and a genuine concern for the destiny of the country. Even when they felt cut off, their sense of isolation was never so acute as that of the later novelists. The reason for the earlier Indo-English novelists’ feeling rather lonely were chiefly socio-political. While delineating alienated persons, their main aim seems to have been to demonstrate the potential dangers of two cultures meeting in one and the same person and resulting in his unfortunate isolation.

We find theme of alienation in Manohar Malgonkar’s **Combat of Shadows**. The novel is a powerful study of a Eurasian young woman who sought to climb up and become a member of the white English community. She lingers, however, between the two worlds - Indian and Western - without belonging to the either, and finds herself a stranger to both. Ruby’s English lover, Henry Winton, also suffers from loneliness. Winton’s marriage with an English lady does not improve the situation for long. Winton and Ruby represent two different aspects of alienation. In his case its effect is not so devastating; but in Ruby’s, it is a question of life and death.

The theme of alienation of different classes of Indian society is Kamala Markandaya’s continuing theme. From the pattern that emerges from her novels we can deduce her message, i.e., as long as one has roots, one survives; and if one’s roots are injured or lost, one dies spiritually. Nathan’s roots, in the **Nectar in a Sieve**, are scarred when he is evicted from his land, and he dies, but Rukmani’s roots are in her children and therefore she lives.

Balachandra Rajan is another Indo-Englisher novelist who deals with theme of alienation. His novel, **Too long in the West**, tells the story of a young lady named Nalini, who stayed at Columbia University for three years. Ever since her childhood she had found her father's village, Madulur, oppressive with its loneliness. Her predicament gets worsened by her stay and education in America. Her mother knows it that "She'll never fit in", in India, because 'she's been too long in the west (P.24) one of Nalini's suitors also tells her: "You won't fit in. You've joined the lost generation, out of place everywhere and acceptable nowhere. You'll always be an exile and an alien, a self-created foreigner, a refugee from yourself. You can't belong. You'll live in two worlds and fall between two stools"(P.55).

The themes of alienation has been dealt with more persistently and unflinchingly by Nayantra Sahgal and Anita Desai also. The alienated person is a stock figure in Nayantra Sahgal's novels. She deals with problems caused by a changing order.

Sahgal's novel called **This Time of Morning**, Rashmi, the daughter of Kailash Vrind, flutter with the 'freedom of sex'. She seeks to divorce her husband, an IFS Officer. Having left him, she comes back to her parents, alienated and utterly distraught. Her affair with Niel Berensen does not minimize her isolation in any way. She herself is not aware of her ambivalence. Rashmi's problems, despite all her pronouncements, remain as they were. Her entire existence appears to be paradoxical. She craves for modernity and individual freedom, but is considered to be a 'hidebound, conventional, label-conscious, caste-ridden enigma' (P.144). It is this superficial approach to life that renders persons like Rashmi Self-alienated, doomed to bear a 'stab of emptiness, almost of fear' (P.216).

Anita Desai is another novelist who has dealt theme of alienation in a systematic way. "No other Writer", it is said "is so much concerned with the life of young men and women in Indian cities as Anita Desai' (24). In her novel **Cry, the Peacock**, we have an exploration of the alienated human psyche in Maya's self-examination. Hers is the story of a young, sensitive girl obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, whose extreme sensitivity is rendered in terms of immeasurable human loneliness. The novel's beginning itself brings to the fore the theme of husband-wife alienation by unfolding the relationship of Maya and Gautam. Maya, an inverted favourite daughter of a wealthy artistic father, is married to an older man, detached, sober, industrious lawyer. They are complete opposite. Their married life is punctuated all along by 'matrimonial silences'(P.12). What pains her most is her 'loneliness in this house'. (P.9) A restlessness always boils within her. She feels defenceless and utterly alone' in the company of the 'bleak, comfortless figure' passing as her husband (PP. 153, 146). The alienation between them is rooted essentially in his philosophical detachment, which Maya brushes aside. Her rootless keeps on increasing every day.

The treatment of alienation is a major thematic preoccupation with Indo-English novelists. Alienation occupies a particularly important place in the works of the later

novelists. Their protagonists are like Existentialist heroes, nomads ‘alienated from nature and society’(25).

They are misfit in their society largely because of their some defects in themselves or some evil in society. The Indo-English novelist is not so much interested in making philosophical, objective statements as in presenting the plight of an alienated individual and expressing compassion for him and disapproval for society. It is true that a certain amount of alienation has affected, directly or indirectly the whole generation of Indian writers of the present century. But the alienation of Indo-English novelist is ‘an extreme case of the general predicament of the Indian writer and he is the most vulnerable of all’(26). In most Indo-English novels, it is to the novelists’ own outlook and approach to life that gets reflected in their themes and characters.

“The extent of temperamental and experiential identification between the characters and their creators is really striking”(27).

Conclusion:

Alienated protagonist is a recurrent figure in much of the twentieth century American and European fiction. There are serious attempts to sketch the confusion, frustration, alienation, disintegration and estrangement of modern man. In Indo-English literature also alienation or rootlessness is a very common theme. Alienation serves as a basic theme and recurrent motif in many Indo-English fiction. The protagonists are misfit in their society largely because of their some defects in themselves or some evils in society. The Indo-English novelist is not so much interested in making philosophical statements as in presenting the plight of an alienated individual and expressing compassion for him and disapproval for society.

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