

*The Trauma of the Loss of Identity and Anguish of Alienation: An Appraisal of the
Indian Writing in English*

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This paper explores alienation as a global problem in reference to Indian Writing in English. However, before such a discussion is initiated, it would be appropriate to explain the term Indian Writing in English. The term really applies to the writings of those authors who are by birth, ancestry and nationality Indians, which are written in English and which gives the aroma of Indian culture, ethos, homeland and geography, which are peopled by those men who are either Indians or of Indian origin, who either live in India or in any other part of the world. This paper, in particular, deals with Indian Fiction in English, the domain of which includes such diasporic writers as **Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitava Ghosh** and many others. Most of our Indian –English authors have been globe trotters or educated in the west. R.S Pathak has rightly said;

The Indian writers in English lose their sense of identity -both personal and national-and feel alienated in their making frantic efforts to seek, organize and affirm that identity. In many cases not only the novelists but also the characters in their novels face what psychologists call identity crisis.¹

The Indian Fiction in English started with *Rajmohan's Wife* written by **Bankimchandra Chatterjee** in 1864 and in its voyage of more than 150 years has witnessed such names as **Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Arundhati Roy** and many others. The present paper seeks to dwell upon the anguish of alienation as a global syndrome by referring to the novels: *The Nowhere Man* and *Possessions* by **Kamala Markandaya**, *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* by **Arun Joshi**.

Kamala Markandaya was a pseudonym used by Kamala Purnaiya Taylor. After India attained its independence, she moved to Britain and settled there. She is a sociological writer and her forte lies in her sociological fusion of human life. Her novels are *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *Possession* (1963), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffer Dams* (1966), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgin* (1973) *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977).

Arun Joshi (1939 – 1993) started writing novels in the late sixties. The recurrent theme in his novel is the theme of alienation and identity crisis. His novels are *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and The River* (1990)

Before we explore the novels of both Joshi and Markandaya, I would first like to talk about the concept of alienation, identity crisis and connectedness.

THE SURVEY OF ALIENATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS

The theme of exile, immigration and alienation is common in the twentieth century literacy scene. Lost, lonely, drifting characters parade before us and their mechanical march point to the absence of meaningful relationship in the era of technological development and global interaction. It is the political, social, cultural, economic and

¹ Pathak, R.S., 1985, "The Alienated Protagonist in the Indo-English Novel", New Delhi, in O.P. Saxena (ed.) *Glimpses of Indio-English Fiction*, Vol. I, Pg: 68

geographical dislocations that have made each man an exile. Cultural alienation has become a universal phenomenon. Contemporary literature dealing with the emotional problems of the modern man reflects the injuries, frustration and the identity crisis that an uprooted individual undergoes.

Indian Fiction in English originated and grew up under the tutelage of the British Empire. The learning of English was considered a matter of proud privilege. It produced not only learners but also poets and creative writers. The beginning of 20th century witnessed a gradual growth of the fictional form. The theme of conflict, identity crisis and connectedness assumes a pivotal place in the recent fiction in English. One of the most significant manifestations of cultural interaction is the experience of dislocation resulting in the anguish of alienation. People are being torn between two cultures and are caught between exile and homecoming. They are rendered homeless both at home and abroad. They suffer from a feeling of alienation and rootlessness. Their tragedy is that they possess no sense of attachment or affiliation to any particular culture. This intercultural and interracial reality is a recurring theme in Indian Writing in English. This multi-foliage dimension of the intercultural situation is a worldwide phenomenon. The paper seeks to discover this global phenomenon through reflections on two of the novels written in India in English. One of the significant and vital facets of the contemporary social life in India is the co-presence of dual cultures. No country can afford to insulate itself against cultural diffusion in today's world.

Though several important Indian writers have given a configuration to the dynamics of cultural interaction in their novels, the present paper would highlight this fact on the basis of **Kamala Markandaya's** *The Nowhere Man* and *Possessions* and **Arun Joshi's** *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*.

NOVELS BY KAMALA MARKANDAYA

The *Nowhere Man* is a story of a south Indian Brahmin Srinivas and his very Indian wife, Vasantha. His family gets involved in freedom struggle and Srinivas is dispatched to London where his wife joins him. They have two sons: Laxman and Seshu. Vasantha sticks to her Indian way of living: eating, dressing and thinking. On the other hand the two sons are brought up in a completely foreign culture. They go to Christian schools and are brought up in a Christian environment and they do not inherit any Indian characteristics. They are the true examples of second generation English who belong nor here nor there. Their alienation and loss of identity is evident because their roots are completely cut off. Laxman deems himself to be a part of English landscape but he is treated as an alien. The question of "them" and "us" disturbs Laxman completely. He later gets married to an English girl and a son is born to them. Vasantha, Laxman's mother is not invited for the occasion. This shatters her as she was not invited on her grandson's birth. The irony being that Laxman has no spare rooms as his wife's parents are staying with him. The dialogue between Vasantha and Srinivas is touching.

How does that matter? Is a room essential? I would have slept anywhere. In a corridor or a kitchen, just to see the baby.

They don't do things like that in their country, said Srinivas.²

In fact, Laxman has tried to identify himself with English culture and ways of life. He is a pillar to the community, employer of thousands, a magistrate and a member of the hospital management committee. The question of 'them' and 'us' raised by the natives disturbs him deeply and he broods over his situation.

Whatever anyone might say or think or do he knew he belonged and where he belonged.³

He knew he was a nowhere man. In the absence of the expected reunion of the family, Vasantha collapses and dies leaving Srinivas all alone and desolate. The isolation of Srinivas is intensified. Srinivas's life is a life of alienation and rootlessness.

The story of the novel is a web of complex incidents. It is built on the fabric of human interaction among characters belonging to two different cultures and races. The novel takes a deeper plunge into human reality. It is a novel configuring the need for racial integration, cross-cultural understanding and a cosmopolitan outlook in order that man survives as a human being in the contemporary multiculturalism and existential chaos. It is a fable of human isolation but also shows a way out by presenting how a bridge of human understanding like the one between Srinivas and Mrs. Pickering can mitigate the anguish of alienation. But such an ideal situation hardly exists in reality. The story of Srinivas is a tragedy of an Indian living in England who, despite his ideals of world citizenship and humanism, finds himself a nowhere man.

Moving on to her next novel POSSESSIONS, is a powerful expression of the intercultural tension. Though the theme of the novel is symbolised by its one-word title, it also projects some other dimensions of the story which the novelist has intelligently woven up. It is the inter-cultural tension which is definitely a dominant theme in the novel. Though there has been a great and tremendous progress in science and technology, the post-Darwinian era is marked by religious conflict, moral degeneration, godlessness and lawlessness in society. This is particularly felt in the collapse of moral and religious loss, moral inequity, domestic despair and problems related to sex and gender in several countries of the world. In today's world progress has become synonymous with the corruption of life forces. Walker Percy rightly deserves:

In such times as these, a time of pollution and corruption of meaning, it is no wonder that the posture the novelist often finds natural is that of derision, mockery, subversion and assault... assault and satire can only be understood as conformation of the current meanings of such honourable old words as love, truth beauty, brotherhood of man, life and so on.⁴

The novel POSSESSION (1963) dramatizes the search for true identity of Valmiki, the protagonist of the novel. Valmiki is a born artist. He feels alienated as much as in

² Markandaya. Kamala, 1972. "The Nowhere Man", Bombay, Orient Longman Limited, Pg 44

³ Markandaya. Kamala, 1972. "The Nowhere Man", Bombay, Orient Longman Limited, Pg 259

⁴ Percy, Walker, 1991 Signposts In Strange Land, New York, Patric Samway, Farrar, Strans And Girdus, , Pg:161

his native village as in the urban London. He is a poor neglected lad, a simpleton. He did not even learn the required skills to earn a living. His art did not have any relevance for the poor family. The members of the family simply rejected him. He feels alienated from the grass root itself. In this novel Markandaya depicts the conflict between the material Western world and the spiritual Eastern World. The novel is also a vivid presentation of the plight of the artist. Valmiki is made to entice into the glittering world of alien values and culture. The novelist treats a philosophical topic like possessions in the framework of the novel to show that spiritual influence is more enduring than material possession.

POSSESSION, at the surface level, relates the attempt by Lady Caroline Bell to possess physically, morally and spiritually the shepherd boy Valmiki who is also a painter of genius. It is Caroline Bell who takes him away and transforms him into a widely acclaimed painter in the saloons of London. It is the alien culture that dries him up. Since Val gets uprooted from his spiritual and cultural heritage and has to face the onslaught of an alien dominant white race he obviously suffers from a sense of rootlessness. He starts to feel terribly homesick and finds himself transplanted into the alien milieu where he receives acclaim as a painter. The arrogant and insolent attitude of Caroline is not helpful to reanimate him. He feels that Caroline just wants to mould him the way she wants. Valmiki complains to Anasuya:

She does not care for me...when I do nothing I am nothing to her, no more than a small insect in a small crack.⁵

The period which Valmiki spends in Europe is considered a glorious period materialistically. There is money, power, fame, sex and travel leading a bohemian life, Val enjoys life to the maximum with recklessness and adopts the mercenary values of the “girt-edged society” which alienates him further from his roots. Caroline as an assertive English woman adopts him forcibly and tries to possess him in order to exploit his artistic genius for commercial purpose. She gives him freedom at the beginning and saves him with her money from want, from utter poverty and from the need to backscratch. But she deliberately restrains his spontaneous activity. Besides Carolini’s physical and psychological domination, Val’s artistic genius and growth is curtailed by other factors since Val was uprooted from his spiritual and cultural heritage to face the onslaught of an alien he suffers from a sense of solitariness and feels greatly rootless. The alien culture eats him up but he renews himself through his nurturing warm human relationships with Ellie the Jewish refugee and Annabel, another poor English girl. Caroline proves to be a neat counterpart to Anasuya, the narrator who is also a writer of great repute. The Indian women are reticent, cultured, talented, helpful and spiritually enlightened. In spite of the tremendous impact of the materialistic prosperity of the west, Val is not completely cut off from his spiritual roots and cultural identity. With the arrival of Swamy in London Valmiki is at once reminded of the Indian spiritual values. K. Meera Bai rightly observes:

In the clash between Western materialism and Eastern spirituality, Caroline who combats for the possession of Valmiki loses him to the Swami, whose strength lies in his renunciation of all possession. On his own, Valmiki

⁵ Markandaya, Kamala. 1967, “Possessions”, Bombay, Jaico Publication , Pg:222.

goes to India, to his crevice in the wilderness and to his Swami.⁶

Kamala Markandaya does not rest with the comforting thought that Karma has to be endured. She is very well aware of the two cultures and their differences while she is aware of the deficiencies at home she is equally trenchant against the western urge to dominate and to possess. This is made clear with Caroline's statement to Swamy:

One day he (Val) will want to be mine again. I shall take care to make him want me again and on that day I shall come back to claim him.⁷

Caroline is portrayed as a contrast to Raja Rao's heroine Madeleine in *THE SERPENT AND THE ROPE*. MADELEINE is refined and culturally advanced. She never tries to possess Rama, but helps him in the spiritual pursuit. However Val is ultimately dispossessed from Caroline's insensible, relentless grip. She is aggrieved and frustrated in the end in her futile attempt to possess Val whole-heartedly.

The novelist treats a philosophical topic like POSSESSION in the framework of the novel to show that spiritual influence is more enduring than material possession. Caroline's urge for materialistic possession is sharply contrasted with the Swamy's inner influence on Valmiki. Swamy had no sense of possession as Caroline had in her mind. The Swamy does not block Valmiki's transportation to London by Caroline as he is full from the desire of possessing him. In this novel POSSESSION the novelist focuses on the craving of women to dominate over a young man absolutely – culturally, physically, morally and emotionally. The nature of women by and large is possessive.

NOVELS BY ARUN JOSHI

The Foreigner, a novel by **Arun Joshi**, is another variation upon the theme of cultural interaction. In *The Nowhere Man*, Srinivas has an Indian identity which is lost in an alien soil. In *The Foreigner*, Sindi Oberoi has no definite identity. He is without roots, without soil, without anchorage, fully dysfunctional, anomic and marginal. He is a nowhere man in every sense of the term. His dilemma is both psychic and metaphysical.

Born of an English mother and an Indian father, who died when he was only four, Sindi was brought up by his uncle in Kenya, educated in East Africa, London and America. He has known his parents only in a couple of 'wrinkled and cracked photographs'. He felt the same kind of security when his uncle was alive, but his death stifled away the sense of sustenance to his being. Without love, familial nourishment and cultural roots, he grows with a built-in-fissure in his personality. He becomes a wandering alien like **Camus'** Outsider. He is, in fact, an anomie man, a consequence of social dysfunctioning. Sindi's case typically represents this state of anomic or alienation, spiritual bankruptcy and apathy. He is isolated from the whole apparatus of society. His predicament is spelt clearly. Sindi's crisis of identity rests in

⁶ Bai. K. Meera, "Identity crisis: The problem of the cultural transplants" in *Indian women Novelists*, Vol. I, Ed. R.K. Dhawan, New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1991, 12

⁷ Kamala Markandaya: "Possession", Jaico Publication, Bombay, 1967, 232

his soul. He has nothing to do with the geographical chasm. He feels himself a foreigner in London, Boston, Kenya and New Delhi.

My fifth Christmas on these alien shore, and yet all shores are alien when you don't belong anywhere. Twenty fifth Christmas on this planet. Twenty five years largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places.⁸

Sindi has varied experiences of life in Kenya, London and Boston. But all these only illustrated his state of anomic. In Kenya he felt restless and even contemplated suicide. In London he has a relationship with Anna and Kathy. Sindi is lackadaisical and leaves Anna. Kathy, however, deserts him and returns to her husband. The ache of these broken relationships and his experience with a catholic priest in Scotland disturb him intensely. His life turns over a new leaf as he meets an American girl, June. Sindi, who was trying to live in an illusion of detachment, finds he is not even capable of that. He only clings to a false image and deceives himself with the idea that he has developed the spirit of 'detachment'. He becomes awfully conscious of meaninglessness and absurdity of human situation.

Unfortunately he could not maintain his relationship with her as well. Sindi Oberoi is like Paul Morel in **D.H. Lawrence's** *Sons and Lovers's*. Like an ontologically insecure man, he is always trying to preserve his identity. He is terrifyingly afraid of being possessed: "I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed". He tells June:

Marriage wouldn't help, June. We are alone, both you and I and our aloofness must be resolved from within. You can't send two persons through a ceremony and expect that their aloneness will disappear.⁹

June is in a reckless condition. She dangles between Sindi and Babu another character whose roots are Indian, but Babu is haunted by jealousy and suspicion. When he learns that June had been yielding to Sindi, he kills himself. June also dies later. Sindi Oberoi, thus responsible for two deaths is seized with a sense of guilt. Once again he feels helpless in the hands of existence.

Sindi Oberoi's dilemma is, in fact, socio-psychological. He tries to define, justify and confirm his identity through his contact with others, but when he comes closer, he feels an unconscious fear that his identity is threatened. Sindi Oberoi is like Paul Morel in **D.H. Lawrence's** *Sons and Lovers*. When Mirium demands permanent commitment, Paul's fear of engulfment makes him feel that his self is threatened: "I can only give you friendship – it's all I am capable of – it's a flaw in my make up". Paul tells his mother: "But no, mother, I love Clare and I did love Miriam, but to give myself to them in marriage I couldn't". Likewise Sindi's relationship with Anna, Cathy and June fails as he cannot afford a complete union in any case. Sindi's predicament is his psychosis of engulfment. This is reiterated in his dialogue with June:

⁸ Joshi, Arun . 1968, "The Foreigner", New Delhi, Hind Pocket Books, Pg:57

⁹ Joshi, Arun. 1968, "The Foreigner", New Delhi, Hind Pocket Books, Pg: 133

One should be able to love without wanting to possess... One should be able to detach oneself from the object of one's love.¹⁰

Like an ontologically insecure man, he is always trying to preserve his identity. He is terrifyingly afraid of being possessed: "I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed" (112). In fact it must be seen as some sort of poverty in our souls that make us get away from the very things we want. In such case we go round in circle in a whirl, going everywhere and getting nowhere. This is in the state that defines the global man today. Sindi Oberoi is the emblem of all existential men who are cast in absurd situations, where they struggle against nothingness.

Sindi leaves Boston and comes to India in his restless quest for peace. He sees at Khemka's house the bronze figure of the dancing Shiva. The dancing Shiva is a paradox of truth: he has both destructive fury and creative force. Sindi has been passing through a process of death and a new man is now born as it were. He involves himself in the world of the miserable that live in rags. Human sufferings purges him, awakens in him the real meaning of detachment. He realizes that detachment consists of right action and not an escape from it. He can appreciate the message of *The Gita*: "Karmanyavaadhikaraste Maaphalesu Kadachana" (You have a duty to perform, but you have no right to expect a particular consequence or result or fruit to follow from what you do). Genuine detachment means 'stithi-pragyana'.

THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS (1971), though different from the novel of Joshi, is existentialist in essence. There is recurrence of the themes of the first novel – the crises of self, the problems of identity and the quest for fulfilment. The theme of angst and alienation are more prominent in THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS, than in the first one. Billy's alienation from civilized society including his family is responsible for his escape into the tribal world. The feeling of alienation anxiety and crisis of identity is not at the physical level but at the spiritual and mental. Billy alienates himself from the civilized life to escape into the so called uncivilized tribal life. Billy Biswas despite living with the family members yet does not feel integrated with them. He does not live in proper harmony. He feels lonely and isolated just like a stranger in his own house. Billy's soul is never at rest. Even as a student in America where he goes to study engineering, he switches over to Anthropology and becomes an anarchist. The novelist as an omniscient commentator writes about Billy that "he was one of those rare men who have poise without pose"¹¹. This seems to be the true appreciation of Billy's character. But this is hardly completely true. His tribal sympathies are hardly due to any pose in him. He is instinctively attracted towards the tribals. There does not seem to be the presence of traits in his character that could be said to constitute the element of poise in him. He is a man given over to obsession and fixation.

The strange case of Billy Biswas portrays how a man of extraordinary obsessions is destroyed by civilization due to his rebellions nature. This story parallels the story of the king of the primitives who staked his life in the hopeless attempt to make the face of God and got nothing. Like THE FOREIGNER, this novel is another variation of the doomed existential quest of man for affirmation in an absurd world since life's

¹⁰ Joshi, Arun. 1968, "The Foreigner", New Delhi, Hind Pocket Books, Pg: 71

¹¹ Joshi, Arun, 1976 "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas", , New Delhi, Hind Pocket Books, Pg:

meaning lies in the “dark mossy labyrinths of soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun”. The outward journey performed by Billy Biswas is symbolic of his relentless quest for a personal salvation. His spiritual concern highlights the meaninglessness of our prosperity and civilized society in the first part of the novel when he finds himself alienated from individual society and civilisation as such. The novel thus, runs along existential lines.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored and identified the global in the local. The anguish of alienation portrayed in Indian novels written in English is just not a local phenomenon engulfing Indians but a world-wide syndrome experienced by all men who are fraught with dual cultures or multiple cultures. Srinivas, Vasantha, Laxman, Seshu, Sindi, Babu, Adit and Dev are strikingly Indian names, but they may well represent people of any other nationality. The places where human drama is enacted – Madras or Delhi, London or Boston - are not just local geographical places. They must be viewed as any place on the map of the world that witnesses pallid, savourless people grappling with their existential situations in life. Great fiction transcends time and enjoys a universal appeal. A novel is initially a sociological document and in the final appeal, a cultural asset. The picture of life that the Indian novel gives is not just a picture of social life but also the picture of man’s inner life, his soul, his spirit, his feelings, his emotions, and his intellectual and philosophical awareness. A close reading of Indian novels in English, I am sure, will not only help us to discover the global in the local but will also enable us to empathize emotively and identify ourselves truly.

Finally it must be again reiterated that cultural alienation which has become a global phenomenon today is very well exemplified in Indian fiction in English. Lost, lonely drifting characters that we come across at the local levels really parade before us in every corner of the world. I would like to say that cultural assimilation can be achieved but complete cultural assimilation appears to be impossibility. Since total insularity against other cultures is undesirable, we must really look forward to cultural co-existence as a way of overcoming the anguish of alienation. We all should aim towards a better world where people live peacefully without the barriers of race, caste and creed.

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