

CHAPTER: II



CHAPTER II

THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN INDIAN FICTION: A BRIEF SURVEY

The Indian novel in English is now an integral part of Indian reality. Since its emergence, it has been flourishing with vigor and vitality in both quality and quantity. Many writers of India have selected the subjects of international importance for their work. They borrowed themes from all over the world. In this effort we find the influence of Western thought as well as way of life on the writing of Indian writers. The theme of East-West encounter has fascinated many writers. Almost in every case, the impact of West on Indian mind is depicted through external symbols like cloths, habits etc. It will be appropriate to quote here R. S. Singh. He says that, “the process of modernization that started after Renaissance in the West came to exert influence on the Eastern mode of life as a consequence of the encounter between England and India.” (Singh, 1977: 164) The Indian writers not only try to imitate them but they also try to re-examine their tradition as well as ours. They take the themes from political, social and religious context.

So, the development of Indian novel in English can be traced from its experimental stage to realistic to psychological. Essentially, the realistic novel in India came to be written after 1920s. In this period many writers writes about communal frenzy, political maneuverings, social disparities and corruption in administration for their thematic treatment. The writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh, Ruth Pawar

Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal etc. try to depict the reality of the society. These writers bring in new themes, new techniques, new styles and new approaches to the form of the novel. They depict the social controversies with its varied aspects. The novels like *Untouchable*, *Swami and Friends*, *Kantapura* throws light on the social system and the politics of the day.

After 1950s, however, the novelist's interest shifted from the socio-politico-economic themes to the exploration of the individual's inner world. The writers from this period try to portray individual's quest for the self in all its varied and complex forms. They are no longer interested in the depiction of the external world, the outer weather, the physical atmosphere or the visible surface action. Their forte is the exploration of the limitless depth of human mind.

The most important problem that man faces today is the problem of alienation. Edmund Fuller rightly says that, "In our age, man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem...a conviction of isolation, randomness, [and] meaninglessness in his way of existence." (Fuller, 1958: 3) Today man finds himself caught into the meaningless world. He is suffering from the problem of isolation. In his quest for the meaningful world he isolates himself from the society. Sisirkumar Ghosh's remark reveals this condition of modern man. He says, "Today, everything conspires towards a philosophy of meaninglessness, boredom and the Absurd." (Ghose, 1975: 5) The modern man sees absurdity around him. He sees life as a meaningless existence.

The twentieth century; especially the post-War period; has been regarded as an age of great spiritual stress and strain. It has rightly been regarded as "The Age of Alienation." (Murchland, 1971) It has been treated in considerable detail in Western philosophy. Following are some definitions of Alienation:

1. "The action of estranging, or a state of estrangement in feeling or affection."

[The Oxford English Dictionary]

2. "Alienation is a term widely used to describe and explain a state of estrangement from work, political and social norms, other people or oneself."

[Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia]

3. "Sense of isolation, powerlessness, and therefore frustration; a feeling of loss of control over ones life; a sense of estrangement from society or even from oneself".

[Farlex Encyclopedia]

4. "Alienation is seen as composed of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement. This kind of analysis tends to emphasize feelings at the expense of social situation."

[Everyman's Encyclopedia]

In the Encyclopedia Britannica the following variants of Alienation have been mentioned:

- 1) Powerlessness: The feeling that one's destiny is not under one's own control but is determined by external agents, fate, luck, or to a generalized sense of purposelessness in life.
- 2) Meaninglessness: It refers either to the lack of comprehensibility or consistent meaning in any domain of action or to a generalized sense of purposelessness in life.
- 3) Normlessness: The lack of commitment to shared social prescriptions for behavior.
- 4) Cultural Estrangement: The sense of removed from established values in society.
- 5) Social Isolation: The sense of loneliness or exclusion in social relations.
- 6) Self Estrangement: Perhaps the most difficult to define and in a sense a master theme, the understanding that in one way or another individual is out of touch with himself.

Elizabeth B. Hurlock in her book *Personality Development* identifies "three syndromes of 'Alienation.'" They are recessive, socially disinterested and socially ineffective. She says that, "these syndromes include the trait that makes a person disliked by others." (Hurlock, 1976: 41) Further, she gives five characteristics of an alienated person. These are: 1) reserved, 2) listless, 3) having withdrawn behavior, 4) self bound and 5) concerned with his own interest and welfare. Such a person, according to her, causes trouble

to others by being noisy, boisterous. He rejects the accepted norms regarding behavior, speech and dress.

Thus, many scholars try to define the term "Alienation" in their own way. Some psychiatrists define it as a symptom of an individual's maladjustment to society. On the other hand, some sociologists and philosophers assert that a society can be sick or simply foreign and that alienation should not be taken as an indication of an individual's condition.

If we look back we find its (Alienations) antecedents date from the early Christian era. However, it was a major perspective in 19th century thought.

19th Century Views:

Alienation occupies a central place in George Hegel's *Phenomenology* (1807). Hegel asserts that man struggles to attain actually what he is capable of. But this realization is achieved by consciousness and will, and manifested in physical objects, institutions, and customs. According to Hegel, this makes man difficult to understand that they are alienated from self. For Hegel, alienation was exclusively an intellectual construct.

One of Hegel's disciples, Bruno Bauer, following this line of argument, popularized the term self-alienation. He proposed that religious belief causes a separation in man's consciousness between his received idea of the world and the world as he experiences it.

Ludwing Feuerbach, a contemporary of Bauer is another disciple of Hegel. He is of the view that religion is a projection of man's inner nature and desire. It makes man locate his humanity in an external object. It caught man into the superstitions of traditional organized religion. Feuerbach's concept, like Hegel's, influenced Karl Marx, who develops a secular view of alienation.

In Marx's early writing (1846), alienation is discussed as social phenomenon. According to Marx, man's power of perception, orientation and creation become stunted and crippled by the very nature of the industrial organization and by capitalist economic system. Man is alienated from his work because he plays no role in deciding what to do. He is alienated from the product of his work because he has no control over what he makes. And he is alienated from other people by the economic competition and class hostility. Marx says that man suffers from alienation to the extent that he does not realize the full capacity of his being. This aspect of Marxian thought has little impact on social and economic philosophy until the middle of 20th century. However, after that, it has been focus of intense interest.

Modern Concept:

Alienation, as a consequence of social organization and culture, is a key generative concept of modern sociology. It underlines the analysis of Emile Durkheim, Marx Weber, and George Simmel. Durkheim used the term *anomie* to describe the rootlessness (often resulting in suicide). According to him it is the outcome of the breakdown of traditional community and religious customs. For Weber, the increasing rationalization

of bureaucratic life causes disturbance in personal relationship and individual values.

Simmel used the concept to denote the tension within a person. The person tries to preserve his autonomy and individuality against the forces of society. Few empirical studies have been done, however, and the term alienation is used to explain, among other things, both voters' passivity in political elections and students' protest movements.

Whereas both Marx and the mass-society theorists secularized alienation, a third stream of influence retained the existential emphasis of Hegel. Existential themes also include such topics as alienation, absurdity, guilt, despair, death. Thus, Soren Kierkegaard stresses the importance of subjective experience over objective knowledge. He says that the central problem of alienation is acquiring a sufficient sense of self in the world dominated by the purposelessness and despair.

The same theme, without the religious solution offered by the Kierkegaard, continues into the recent work of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and other existentialist philosophers. They have argued that some degree of dissociation of the self in thought and life is inescapable for man. He is a stranger in the world. Thus, we find the concept of alienation is transferred from the religious context to the social context and from social to existential philosophy.

The present century has seen the dissolution of old certainties and dogmas. It has been totally deprived from old world knowledge. Paul

Brunton observes in this context that: "Never before were so many people plunged in so much uncertainty, so much perplexity and unsettlement." (Brunton, 1952: 7) The old centuries has provided the much needed basis for value and meaningfulness in life. The present century is deprived from the ancient wisdom.

The modern man has no substitute for faith and religion except science and information. Thinkers like Aldous Huxley have aptly pointed out that "ours is the world in which knowledge accumulates and wisdom decays." (Huxley, 1956: 124) The wisdom of the ancient world is destroyed. The potential meaningfulness has gradually destroyed human life from various quarters. Man fails to perceive the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in the hostile world. The scientific and technological progresses have added immensely to his physical pleasures and comforts of modern man. But in such hostile world man feels alienation from the every sphere of life.

As it is, the contemporary man finds himself participating in a rat race. He is estranged not only from his fellowmen but also from his innermost nature. The existential encounter with nothingness and the tenuosness of human existence are prototypical of modern life. Man is shocked to find that he is no longer the master of his destiny. There are forces which threaten to wither his life and all its joys and hopes. He suffers from a deep sense of powerlessness and alienation. This realization leads him to see the meaningfulness in the life. Erich Fromm rightly points out that, "In the nineteenth century the problem was that God is dead; in the twentieth century the problem is that man is dead. The danger of the past

was that men become slaves. The danger of the future is that men may become robots”, who “will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand...a meaningless life.” (Fromm, 1955: 122) Man finds many limitations on his life. He is aware of his loneliness. He knows he can not do anything to overcome his problem.

Thus, the sense of alienation and estrangement is the most dominant problem that man faces today in this modern world. The existential states of disappointment, alienation and meaninglessness have received an adequate attention in the West. All sensitive people feels concerned about the unfortunate spiritual predicament of the modern man. His inner problems have been treated in considerable detail in modern literature. The writers from all over the world tries to put forth this problem through their writing.

The modern Indian English writers like Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Deshpande etc. have also concentrated themselves on these themes. The individual's quest for the meaning in life has become the theme of urgent interest for these writers. They explore the limitless depths of mind, the hidden contours of the human psyche. These writers tries to focus on mans alienation. Their forte is to put forth the problem of isolation, alienation that man faces today.

The theme of alienation takes on a special edge in the numerous novels published by women writers in the period. While they form no particular school, it is their emergence which is perhaps the most striking feature of the period. Many women novelists like, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Gita Meheta,

Shobha De, and Kamala Markandya write different kinds of novels though some of them use common method of writing fiction. The women writers deal with the themes of love, marriage, alienation and search for identity.

Innovation can, however, be found in the psychological depth of the experiences of the women characters. They try to put forth their experiences and the complexities of their position in the society. The novels of these women writers are often autobiographical, and a number of women such as Venu Chitale (*In Transit*), Zeenuth Futehally (*Zohra*), and Mrinalini Sarabhai (*This Alone Is True*), published single novels of self-discovery.

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight in a Broken Column* (1961) has provided among the most popular of these studies of women's consciousness. In the novel the story is told from the perspective of the orphaned Laila. She has grown up in a joint family controlled by an old patriarch, Baba Jan, her grandfather. Laila is encouraged towards Western education. But the tradition is strictly maintained in the family. However Laila breaks the tradition and chooses Ameer Husain to be her husband. After the death of Baba Jan, Laila lives with her uncle named Uncle Hamid. The family is caught in the struggle for Independence and the arguments over the prospect of Partition, which eventually divides the family. Although the national developments and the effect they have on the feudal family are richly detailed in the novel, Laila remains relatively aloof from them. The novel is dominated, instead, by her lonely struggle to survive in the tradition bound society.

However, Shakuntala Shrinagesh's *The Little Black Box* (1955) is perhaps the first attempt to focus on the theme of alienation. The novel, according to Singh, "is probably the only novel before Anita Desai that can be called psychological for treating at leisure the dark moods of a tubercular woman who, lodged in a sanatorium, alienated from her relatives and friends." (Singh, 1977: 168) A somber atmosphere pervades the novel and the readers almost wallow in the translucent imagery of frustration, resentment and gloom. The novel presents the story of the protagonist Sarala. She has been sent to the hospital. She lives there with her money-box under her bed in a dying condition. She has a feeling of an alienation from her relatives and friends.

Anita Desai is another writer, of whose several novels explore tensions between family members and the alienation of the middle class women. She skillfully explores the emotional ecology of the turbulent inner world of the individual, tormented by the existentialist problems and predicaments. Her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), is about highly sensitive and imaginative woman, Meera. She is married to rich pragmatic executive, Gautama, who is far from being sentimental. He is sharp and cooperative and worldly wise. On the contrary, Meera is too sensitive to ignore the slightest injury to her feelings. We find her sensitivity in her reactions to the death of her dog. She is unable to forget it. She thinks, she is denied even a chance to express her feelings openly.

She become nostalgic and regressive and covered mentally. She is frequently assailed by thoughts of beauty, evil and mortality. She is obsessed by the childhood prophesy of disaster that in the fourth year of their

marriage either of the couple will die. Prophecy has come true. She has destroyed the source of her uneasiness, her husband, who has failed to play the role of the guardian to her. She becomes alien through all her life.

This exploration of the lone individual is continued in her next novel, *Voices in the City* (1965). But, here, the theme of alienation is treated in terms of mother-children relationship. Nirode's mother and her three children come, one by one, to Calcutta to be lost in the black city of Mother Kali, the goddess and the demon rolled in one. The children come to Calcutta seeking their destiny. However, they find themselves more alienated from everything they tried to belong to — their mother, their friends and the city itself.

In all her novels Anita Desai has painted the image of an alienated individual. In her novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), she depicts the plights of Sita. Sita is pregnant with her fifth child. She takes refuge from her marriage on the magical island. Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) withdraws into a private world of self-willed isolation. In *Clear Light of the Day* (1980), Desai wove the history of Delhi with a middle class family. The central character is Bim (Bimal) Das, a history professor, an independent woman. Bim's memories of the family past dominates her sterile existence, she feels betrayed by her unambitious sister Tara, and replays her memories in the decaying family mansion in Old Delhi.

In Custody (1984) is Desai's ironic study of literary traditions and academic illusions. The central characters are Nur and Deven. Nur is an Urhi

poet, who has fallen on hard times. Deven is a professor of Hindi. He realizes that his beloved poet has not the magical genius, which he thinks. In *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), she has contrasted American and Indian culture, and male and female roles. In *The Zigzag Way* (2004), Desai departed from her familiar territories and set the story of identity and self-discovery in Mexico. Thus, all Anita Desai's novel explores the theme of alienation that a modern man faces today.

Another woman novelist is Nayantara Sahgal. Her novels present the life of the richest sections of Indian society, their hypocrisy and shallow values. At the same time her novels present an alienation of the women in male dominated society. Her novel shows an interest in the way Western educated elite has borne the responsibility of political power. The major national events provide the background for each of her novels. For example, *A Time to be Happy* (1958) presents the coming of Independence. Another novel, *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), deals with the partition of Punjab along linguistic lines in 1965. This concern with the way power is used in the public sphere is typically combined by Sahgal with an exploration of the fate of women within the domestic sphere.

Another novel, *Rich Like Us*, portrays the theme of alienation through the two women characters: Rose and Sonali. Rose is a British immigrant. She marries to powerful native business man Ram. Sonali is a highly educated, young civil servant. Rose struggles to find a sense of home in this foreign society. She is entangled in a three-pronged marriage, as she is the second wife of Ram's. Rose suffers to understand the Indian culture, and its effects on the female spirit. As Ram's health deteriorates, she realizes her

rights as wife are in question. Dev, Ram's son from his earlier wife, Mona, schemes to take all Ram's assets by disposing Rose. In fear, Rose turns to Sonali, her friend and niece. Sonali is living and working in New Delhi during the political upheaval of the emergency. She is divided between two worlds, one representing her ideals and longing for progression and the other that embodies her upper-crust, conservative culture.

Both Rose and Sonali engage in external and internal conflict. Sonali's past experience has consisted mainly of seeing women in submissive roles. She gets experiences of women's submissiveness when her friend Bimmie gets married. Sonali is thrilled to shuck off the chains she feels bound by as a woman when she goes off to Oxford. Rose also feels this conflict raging around and within her. As Ram's second wife, she will have very few rights when he dies. She may end up like just another piece of furniture for Dev to throw away. She also struggles within herself about whether the role she has chosen fits her. Whether she has become submissive to Ram's will and should not have settled for second wife.

Kamala Purnaiya Taylor, who often wrote under the name of Kamala Markandaya, published ten novels dealing with the theme of women feeling alienation in the patriarchic society. Her novels, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), *The coffer Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *Pleasure City* (1982), depicts the crisis of contemporary society often combined with the sense of alienation that a modern woman faces today.

The impact of new economic and political ideas on traditional Indian society is Markandaya's main theme in *A Silence of Desire*, *Possession*, *A*

Handful of Rice, and *The Coffey Dams*. *The Nowhere Man* transports the clash of cultures to England, where Markandaya settled in the early 1960s. *Two Virgins* marks a radical change, showing a much more experimental style and a more positive view of modernization. Her most ambitious novel was *The Golden Honeycomb*; a historical look at how the coming of Indian independence affected a native or princely state. *Pleasure City* provides a subtle and ironic view of a friendship. *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays, through the lives of its characters—Rukmani, Nathan and their children—the hopes and aspirations of a young nation recently embarked on the path of development, surmounting many obstacles along the way. All of Markandaya's novels portray the theme of alienation often combined with the themes such as economic and political impact on the traditional Indian society.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the most accomplished women novelists of postmodern period. Her novels are *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *If I Die Today* (1982), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983), *Roots And Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988) *The Binding Vine* (1993) and *Small Remedies* (2000). She won the Sahitya Akademi Award for *That Long Silence* for the year 1990.

The theme of *That Long Silence* is simple. Jaya, the heroine of the novel, recalls her married life. She is married to Mohan and lives with him at different places. Mohan goes away from her to clear himself of the charge of business malpractice. She bore him two children and the third child was aborted. She recalls her relationship with many peoples. She tires to come to the terms with herself by trying to write about herself and her family. She

determined to break a long silence. The novel presents the frustration in married life of the protagonist, who failed to be closer to her husband mentally. She suffers from isolation. Despite her marriage to Mohan and subsequently becoming a mother of two children, she is lonely. Her husband could not understand her feelings as a result of it she is torn from within.

Shobha De is another women novelist whose novels have immense literary values in terms of the experimentation in the use of the language and creation of an Indian English idiom. Her novel *Sisters* (1992) deals with the two daughters of a rich industrialist, who after the death of their parents faces the problems in their lives. Mikki, who becomes the owner of the industry, is deceived by Shanay. After the marriage Mikki becomes a domestic wife who finally leaves the house of her husband. She goes to her parents property of which owner now is Alisha. There is a feeling of hatredness between two sisters. The two sisters finally understand each other. They decide to marry and set their houses.

Her second novel *Snapshots* (1995) is about six women who look at the things from their own point of view. They literally and metaphorically play with men and sometimes are played with by men. The novel depicts the love play between men and women in great details. Morality is a dirty word for the characters in the novel, for they believe in enjoyment of life, throwing the norms of the society out of window.

Within the framework of her novels, Shobha De depicts the breaking up of the institution of the marriage. The new concept of the marriage envisages complete sexual freedom with no notion of fidelity. In such a

situation men and women merely become partners in love. Economic freedom, promiscuity and uncontrolled passion resulting from the lust of the blood make most men and women vulnerable and the resultant frustration in life engulfs them. In such a condition they become alone. Shobha De presents love, sex and quarrels within the ambit of fictional framework. Life is presented as it is and not as it should be.

Another woman novelist is Bharati Mukherjee. Her novels explore the struggles of immigrants living in the United States and Canada. Many of Mukherjee's characters are Indian women who are victims of racism and sexism. They are driven to desperate acts of violence. They realize that they can not fit into the Western culture or the Indian society which they left behind. Her novel *Wife* presents a significant psychological study of the alienated, frustrated neurotic protagonist, Dimple Dasgupta. Another novel, *Jasmine*, is about an emigration and assimilation, both on physical and psychological levels. In this novel, Bharati Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experiences of trauma and triumph in her attempt to create a new identity for herself.

Manju Kapur, an academic turned writer made a name with her first novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998). The novel depicts the story of Virmati who has hooked on her with her Professor, Harish. The eldest among the eleven daughters, Virmati has an ambition to be highly educated. She comes into the contact with Professor Harish who stays in her aunt's house as a tenant.

The married Professor, Harish is not happy with his illiterate wife. He is attracted towards Virmati and gradually comes closer to her. Virmati though initially resists his love, subsequently give in. because of her affair

she refuses to marry Inderjit. The whole family turns against her and she goes through harrowing experiences. Finally, the Professor marries her as his second wife. Virmati gets the love of Professor but loses both families. At the time of partition they moved to Delhi. Virmati gives birth to Ida, a daughter. She, like her mother, makes disastrous marriage and is divorced. The novel presents the plight of the women in modern society, who have to struggle alone for their life.

The theme of alienation is further elaborated by Arun Joshi. Madhusudan Prasad rightly says that, "In his novels Arun Joshi depicts existentialist dilemmas evoking our cultural heritage and imperishable moral values." (Prasad, 1985: 220) His character's problems, and the alienation which afflicts them, are presented as universal rather than specifically Indian. The hero of his first novel, *The Foreigner* (1968), is orphaned at an early age. He grows up without ties of family or country. His love for June ends tragically because he fears emotional involvement, a fear which persists even after he returns to India. However, at the end of the novel he is transformed by the trust and affection of the workers of his factory. Thus the novel deals with the alienation of the self and traces Sindi Oberoi's rootlessness and search for identity.

His second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) is a powerful novel that shows Billy Biswas alienation from the ostentatious, phony society of today and his resultant quest for the better way of living. *The Apprentice* (1974) dramatizes Ratan Rathor's alienation from his soul caused by a strong guilt consciousness.

The Last Labyrinth (1981) evokes alienation from the self of the protagonist Som Bhaskar, an intellectual industrialist. His last novel *The City and The River* (1990) is different from other novels. The symbolic representation of the river suggests that the river is the source of the life as she is the source of the humanity and God is the ultimate truth. Having realized the importance of the God in one's life, Joshi says that the question in one's life is not of success or failure but of trying.

Sasthi Brata also displays existentialist concerns in his obtrusively autobiographical novels, *Confession of an Indian Woman-Eater* and *She and He*. His novels are characterized by angry rebellion against the tradition-bound Indian society. They represent alienation, rootlessness and futile search for permanent anchor.

Upamanyu Chatterjee is another novelist whose novels depict the problem of alienation. His novel *English August: An Indian Story* (1992) presents the mentality and mood of its hero Agastya Sen, particularly when he is alienated from his land and people. Both thematically and technically this novel break the new grounds. It depicts the encounter of an urbane youth with provincial India. It gives an account of twenty-four years old I. A. S. trainee posted at Madna, which according to the protagonist is Mad, No. "It realistically records the protagonist's sense of isolation, rootlessness and cultural dislocation. It also depicts the identity crisis which is so common to the present day youth. The lack of identity leads them to various defects in building up personality and psychological balance." (Das, 2003: 80) In his second novel Chatterjee deal with the basic structure of Indian

society — that is the family. It deals with the Indian middle class family that settles down in a new place after a partition

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