

## ALIENATION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE WITH REFERENCE TO SAUL BELLOW'S 'THE VICTIM'

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### ABSTRACT

Alienation and isolation recreates an experience that is common to many American writers. From the first arrival to this continent, every immigrant has shared alienation and initiation. Alienation is a feeling of not belonging. This feeling can be physical, mental, religious, spiritual, psychological, political, social or economic. At one time or another each one of us has experienced alienation in one form or another whether in a school, among family members, in religion, in politics and in society. So, Alienation is the state of being withdrawn dissociated or isolated from one's surrounding, events and activities as through indifference or disaffection. The paper explores and analyses the extent to which a man feels alienated from birth to maturity level due to different phases of adjustment in new environment. The paper explores the alienation in American literature realized by the Jews in America with reference to Saul Bellow's '**The Victim**'.

**KEYWORDS:** Alienation, The Victim

### INTRODUCTION

A late fifteenth century French Poet, Eustache Decamps, laments the lot of alienated man in the following expressive lines;

*'Why are the times so dark?*

*Men know each other not at all,*

*But governments quite clearly change*

*From bad to worse?*

*Days dead and gone were more worthwhile,*

*Now what holds sway? Deep gloom and boredom,*

*Justice and law nowhere to be found.*

*I know no more where I belong.'*<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, alienation had their meanings. It meant the transfer of rights or property, estrangement from others, and in-sanity. Having enjoyed a long and eventful career till the middle of the twentieth century, it became one of the most popular expressions in various branches of knowledge such as Theology, Philosophy, Sociology, Political Science, Economics, Anthropology, Literary Criticism Psychoanalysis, a modern fetish, "A Ubiquitous Cliché and a Vague Catch All."<sup>2</sup>

Alienation, as says Feuerlicht "*Stands last in a very old line of similar forms of mental anguish.*"<sup>3</sup> Though the term alienation is often taken to signify a modern malaise, it is in reality, as old as human history. The Biblical Story of Adam and

Eve may be illustrated as a yarn of alienation “*from God and Nature, alienation through conscience and reason alienation from home, or from nature, alienation in work and in marriage.*”<sup>4</sup>

Charting a graphic picture of human existence, Erich Fromm writes:

*“What is essential in the existence of man is the fact that he has emerged from the animal kingdom, from instinctive adaptation, that he has transcended nature-although he never leaves it; he is a part of it – and yet once torn away from nature, he cannot return to it; once thrown out of paradise-a state of original oneness with nature, with nature-cherubim with flaming swords block this way, if he should try to return.”*<sup>5</sup>

**Fromm** is stressing here the fundamental datum of human existence, his irretrievable loss of pre-human harmony his “*thoroughness*” into his own particular existential situation. A man who is endowed with reason, awareness of his own self as a separate entity and of others, and who exists apart from him, man, has no other alternative but to feel alienated in his temporal existence in this world.

In short, to be human is to be alienated. The fact of human existence implies alienation. No one comes into the world of his own volition. He is simply thrown into existence. Macquarie puts it: “*From the human point of view, it is rather like the throw of a dice. Just as you may throw a three or a six, so in life you may come up American or Vietnamese, white or black, affluent or destitute, ill-natured or good natured, intelligent or stupid. There is no known reason why the throw should be one way rather than another.*”<sup>6</sup> Actually, no stage in human evolution has been free from the painful awareness of alienation. “*In its panorama of disorder and change*” write Eric and Mary Josephson, “*History offers plentiful evidence that men in times past also felt no small uncertainty about themselves and their identities, suffered no little anguish, gloom, despair and feeling of detachment from each other.*”<sup>7</sup>

Though alienation has alarming proportions in the present age, several factors have brought about this state of awareness. Fritz Oppenheim thinks that the forces of alienation, which existed in previous centuries, have gained in “*Intensity and significance in the modern world.*”<sup>8</sup> Erich Kahler takes note of this growth of alienation in modern society: “*What are we concerned with ....is ....not inhumanity, which has existed all through history and constitutes part of the human form, but a- humanity; a phenomenon of rather recent data*”.<sup>9</sup> Moreover in present stage of human evolution, man has unbounded means of self-realisation at his command which were unavailable to man in the past ages. At the point of conquering space, he finds it painful to reconcile with the fact of his aloneness in society. As Eric and Mary Josephson note: “*The consciousness that man’s yearning for self-realization is thwarted previous stages. In such a situation, the alienation of man is no longer accepted as an inevitable fate; more than ever before in history it is felt as a threat and at the same time a challenge.*”<sup>10</sup>

Taking stock of the colossal advances made in the field of science and technology, we must also take note of the world we have lost. Gone are the days when work and community life were structured on a human scale. The process of work was closely integrated with the total life of individuals and communities. It was not millennium in any sense of the word, but, as Laslett says, “*Time was, and it was all time up to 200 years ago, when the whole of life went forward in the family, in a circle of loved, familiar faces, known and fondled objects, all too human size. That time has gone forever. It makes us very different from our ancestors.*”<sup>11</sup>

The tremendous growth of mechanical power has its corresponding impact on human personality. Whereas previously, he was a part of a group whether a household, a monastery or a guild, now he is thrown on his own individual resources. Outside in society, modern man is increasingly being treated as a commodity, which experiences his life forces as on investment existing market conditions. His worth as a man does not lie in his innate human qualities, but in

his material success which follows the rules of the competitive market, which hardly betray any regard for human propensities. Unable to find a worthy job befitting his individual inclinations, he engages himself either in producing wasteful commodities or in rendering monotonous services.

### **Alienation in the Works of Carson McCullers, J.D. Salinger and James Purdy**

Alienation is one of the most dominating themes in the fiction of Carson McCullers, J.D. Salinger and James Purdy. With their unique imaginative intensity, they have conceived large number individual characters, who are alienated from themselves, from other, from their society, from God and from nature. Each of them is unique in his own way. In virtually all of her creative writings, McCullers is concerned with man's spiritual isolation, his revolt against it and his intense desire to achieve a perfect communion with others. McCullers herself has admitted her paramount concern in her essay, "**The Flowering Dream**: Notes on writing: *"Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes. My first book was concerned with this, almost entirely, and all of my books since, in one way or another, love and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about, people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or to receive love –their spiritual isolation."*<sup>12</sup>

J.D. Salinger is included for his presentation of moral heroes who feel disaffiliated from a pragmatic society. The characters of Salinger's are aware of their alienation; they remain strangers to themselves due to human limitations, but there much more to the vision of alienation than this. Alienated from their society, they feel alienated from themselves. J.D. Salinger focussed his attention on the problem of alienated youth in his marvellous novel **The Catcher in the Rye in 1951** which brought him instant fame and assured his place among the gifted writers of twentieth century. J.D. Salinger focuses our attention on those characters who are economically secure and feel appalled at the norms of the American society. J.D. Salinger in his novel **The Catcher In the Rye** shows that the alienation is an inevitable result of human development which reaches its climax during the period of adolescence. Lacking a conception of his identity, Holden harbours necrophilia feeling of self and his vocal reveries. He seeks a stasis in time, away from his society and the present stage of self alienation. This desire is crystallized during his visit to the museum of Natural History. Applauding the quiescence in time, he says:

*"The best thing, through, in that museum, was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody's move, you could go there a hundred thousand times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deer would still be drinking out of that water hole, with their pretty antlers and their pretty, skinny legs, and that same blanket, nobody's be different. The only thing that would be different would be you."*<sup>13</sup> Not only in the above quoted passage, where he (Holden) longs for repose in time, but throughout the novel, has he despairingly articulated his urgent need for the symbiotic safety of the past. He cherished memories of childhood bliss, a period of idyllic harmony.

James Purdy is a trenchant critic of the American Society and its problems. In all his major novels, Purdy gains the narrative intensity from a feverish search of his orphans for a source of guidance, a point of orientation in a chaotic world, which may facilitate their growth from helpless waifs to the existential world of free self and free action. Whatever may be the incidental factor of their father's disappearance, death, reckless life, a magno-maniac obsession or divorce, his loss is keenly felt by them. Without him they are unable to make their way in life and become vulnerable to abominable perversions, such as incest, rape, sodomy, bestiality, sexual anaesthesia and nymphomania.

In an early story, meaningfully entitled, "**Colour of Darkness**" and "divided into some six or seven episodes that build on one another to a dismaying climax of violence, hatred and rejection, Purdy has created a small classic in which he unites language, theme and mood" to depict a terrifying picture of familiar alienation. The language conveys with the help of

images this incompatibility, a father's narcissism and his helpless fixation in the loveless pattern. These images as Malin observes, "*establish the confining narcissism*"<sup>14</sup> of these characters. At one point in the story, the son Boxter throws a bird made of brown paper into a plant which stuck "*in it, as though it were a conscious addition.*"<sup>15</sup>

Though the story "Colour of Darkness" ends with the father's painful realization of his estrangement from his son, he appears to be powerless to redeem this loveless situation and twists in this acute pain of self realization.

McCullers, Salinger and James Purdy, have illumined the problem of alienation from highly varied angles and depth that is beyond the ken of many prolific writers.

### **Alienation in Saul Bellow's 'the Victim'**

Alienation and search for identity has been the dominant theme in American post war literature. Alienated from the immediate environment, feeling lonely, melancholy and isolated, the protagonists constantly continue their search for identity. Saul Bellow opens his second novel, *The Victim*, first published in 1947, with a description of the weather and the people of New York: '*On some nights New York is as hot as Bangkok. The whole continent seems to have moved from its place and slid nearer the equator, the bitter grey Atlantic to have become green and tropical and the people, thronging the streets, barbaric fellahin among the stupendous monuments of their mystery, the lights of which, a dazzling profusion, climb upward endlessly into the heat of sky.*'<sup>16</sup>

The claustrophobic setting, apart from being realistic, remains a symbolic manifestation throughout the novel. The New York here, very much a Dreiserian city, does not function merely as a physical place, but has become a key factor in the drama of Asa Leventhal, the protagonist of 'The Victim' with its windless air, stifling aura and suffocating oppressiveness, New York, in *The Victim*, is more than a technological jungle.

Like Joseph in **Dangling Man**, Leventhal an editor of a trade magazine, is suffering from alienation. His wife Mary has gone to the south to accompany her newly-widowed mother, so he is left alone to experience a life deprived of companionship. During Mary's absence, Leventhal is unexpectedly driven into a set of circumstances which almost destroy him. He is living in a world of chaos. Isolated and deprived of female support, his life is turmoil. Not only that the absence of feminine strength has also weakened his vitality and made him feel insecure:

*'Since Mary's departure his nerves had been unsteady. He kept the bathroom light burning all night. Somewhat ashamed of himself, he had yesterday closed the bathroom door before getting into bed, but he had left the light on. This was absurd, this feeling that he was threatened by something while he slept. And that was not all. He imagined that he saw mice in the apartment. The building was old; there were bound to be some nesting under the floors. He had no dread of them and yet he had begun to jerk his neck around at the suspicion of a movement. And now he had been unable to fall asleep. Head had never neither to interfere with his sleep. He was sure he was unwell.'* (*The Victim*, P.26.)

Leventhal is increasingly bothered and stalked by an old acquaintance, Albee, who believes Leventhal was responsible for getting him fired and for his descent into poverty when Leventhal allegedly retaliated for Albee's anti-Semitic remarks. When Leventhal meets Albee for the first time in the park after years of departure, he notices:

*'How seedy he looked, like one of those men you saw sleeping off their whisky on Third Avenue, lying in the doorways or on the cellar natches, dead to the cold or the racket or the straight blaze of the sun in their faces. He drank, too; that was certain.'* (*The Victim*, P.29).

Allbee is jobless and the loss of his job has caused him to lose his wife, first by separation, then by tragic death in a traffic accident. Allbee haunted by a feeling of guilt, begins to indulge in drinking, hoping that he might be relieved from that

feeling. When he is able to hunt for the roots of his failure, he suspects that Leventhal is the one responsible for his present downfall. Several years before, Allbee had got Leventhal an appointment with Rudiger, the owner of Dill's 'Weekly', the trade magazine Allbee was then work for. The interview turned out to be calamitous because Leventhal responded indignantly to the boorish insult of Rudiger. Soon after that Allbee was dismissed from Dill's Weekly.

Allbee lays the blame on Leventhal for maliciously contriving the scene with Rudiger as a vindictive punishment for his anti-Semitic remarks which he directed towards Daniel Harkavy, a friend of Leventhal's, during a party which Leventhal had attended. Allbee complains:

*'You try to put all the blame on me, but you know it's true that you are to blame. You and you only. For everything. You ruined me. Ruined! Because that's responsible. You did to me deliberately, out of hate. Out of pure hate!'*

(The Victim, P.68)

Leventhal, though refusing to accept Allbee's accusation, becomes rather confused by such a ridiculous indictment.

Besides his increasing difficulties with Allbee, Leventhal becomes involved in the life of his catholic and Italian sister-in-law who young son is dying. 'The Victim' is a story of guilt and paranoia with considerable emphasis on the strength of anti-Semitism in post war America. Emotionally reserved in public and deeply paranoid, Leventhal persistently experiences anxiety in his interaction with other.

For example, at the novel's beginning, Leventhal tries to help the sick child of his brother's wife, whom his brother has left alone in the city while working elsewhere. Although Leventhal believes he is fulfilling his ethical "duty" in getting the child sent to a hospital. *'He sat down, depressed and gloomy. He began at once to argue that Mickey should be taken to a hospital. 'Who is this doctor of yours?' he said.'* (The Victim P.15) He also fears guilty that the child's mother blames him for taking the boy out of her home and care.

Leventhal is exposed to anti-Semitism in the workplace, from the Italian mother of his brother's wife and even at parties with friends. Earlier in his life, Leventhal made a series of bad decisions that led him into poverty and nearly ruined him. At one point he worked as a clerk at a flop house, where he witnessed the deepest levels of destitution and human misery. When he later reflects on his luck in regaining a respectable position, what he observed at that job haunts him: *"He had almost fallen in with that part of humanity of which he was frequently mindful...the part that did not get away with it-the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined."* (The Victim P.15)

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