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ALIENATION IN MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA

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Abstract: This research paper focuses on alienation as a feeling of estrangement and describes the status of modern man. Alienation emerges as a powerful theme in modern American drama. In the contemporary world and age, the word “alienation” is fluently used in various fields like psychology, sociology, theology, and general philosophy. The theoretical concept of alienation was developed by Karl Marx. It describes the isolating, dehumanizing and disenchanting effects of working within a capitalist system of production. The term alienation has often been employed in literature to depict the peculiar condition in which the modern man finds himself as a result of the unstable social, political and economic scenario in the twentieth century. The plays under study that deal with the theme of alienation are Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Tennessee Williams *The Glass Menagerie*, O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* and Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. In these plays alienation persists and keeps affecting the behaviour and activities of the protagonists.

Key Words : Alienation, Expressionism, Capitalism, Absurdity.

According to *The Oxford Universal English Dictionary* the etymological roots of the word “alienation” are found in the old Latin word *alienationem*, a word derived from the Latin verb *alienare*, which meant “to convert into an alien; to estrange.” The meaning of the word denoted a Roman citizen who was converted into an alien and who was deprived of his citizenship. For a Roman, the loss of citizenship meant the loss of identification with the rest of humanity. Such a state cajoled in him deep psychological misery and thus alienation was much worse than exile. The alienated Roman neither had hope nor a place for him in the world, unlike the exiled man who often retains his citizenship. He became a homeless wanderer if he decided to leave Rome. His lot was perhaps even worse because if he decided to remain in Rome, he would find himself to be more so like an outcaste. This led to a sense of dissociation and loneliness. A similar psychological state is experienced by the “alienated heroes” of the modern American drama.

In the Middle Ages, the word “alienated” denoted transferring the ownership of church lands to secular agencies, as per *The Oxford Universal English Dictionary* (Onions 43). In this context, alienation emphasized the transfer of a physical thing rather than a depressing psychological state. The idea of such a state in connection with alienation appeared again in the fifteenth century, when the word alienation referred to the “loss or derangement of mental faculties” (Onions 43). In the sixteenth century, the word was used in connection with foreigners and legal matters involving rights of ownership. In the seventeenth century, it meant “a turning away from” or “something foreign in nature” (Onions 43).

During the eighteenth century, the word implied “estrangement from a prior settled and happy state” (Onions 635). By the nineteenth century, the meaning of alienation included the sense of loneliness that man feels when he fails to place faith in powers greater than himself. For modern man, alienation signifies a detachment from philosophies of faith which traditionally allowed him to view himself as a superior creature capable of becoming a better version of himself. This feeling dominates in the works of modern dramatists and thus their drama can rightly be called the Drama of Alienation.

In the twentieth century, the term alienation has often been employed in literature to depict the peculiar condition in which the modern man finds himself as a result of the unstable social, political and economic scenario. Viewed psychologically, alienation can be likened to a dissociation of person’s feelings that render him incapable of adjusting in society. Numerous reasons causing alienation may include a shallow, depersonalized, indifferent and callous world, lack of religious or spiritual commitment, lack of human concern in an economically or commercially oppressive environment split between the conscious and the unconscious mind and rootedness stemming from loss of social and religious traditions. Alienation is the result of existential predicament faced by human beings.

Existential Movement is the most influential modern literary and philosophical movement that emphasis on individual existence. Modern existentialism was led by Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish thinker, and by Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher. Kierkegaard coined the term “existentialism” and highlighted the theory behind life and human existence. His philosophy was based on religious beliefs and on theism. Nietzsche, on the contrary, developed anti-Christian and atheistic existentialism. There were other philosophers too, namely Martin Heidegger and the Jean-Paul Sartre who established existentialism on the views of Nietzsche. The world was full of chaos, disorder, annihilation, anxiety, estrangement and loneliness post the two World Wars. On one hand, there was fear and frustration and the on the other hand traditional values were crumbling. Life became absolutely absurd, meaningless, directionless and futile due to loss of faith in God and trust in man. Albert Camus, another existentialist philosopher associated existentialism with the absurd. He uses the metaphor of Sisyphus, the Greek mortal, to show the dilemma of mankind. Just like Sisyphus is chastised by God to repeatedly roll the boulder up and down the hill again and again, similarly modern man is persistently struggling against the essential absurdity of life.

Existentialism rapidly flourished and entered the realms of literature. It dealt with values, attitudes and relationships, which determine man’s role in society and the freedom or bondage that he is subjected to. The emptiness that man feels within the depths of his soul is existentialistic by nature. In order to rescue man from everlasting isolation, it is necessary to counter this hollowness to bring the individual into the mainstream of life. Existentialist thinkers conform to the theory that life as a whole is futile and one’s comprehension of life can never be absolutely soothing.

The existentialists such as Kierkegaard, Martin and Heidegger and Sartre saw some measure of self-estrangement and powerlessness over one's destiny as an inevitable part of the human condition.

Modern man is incapable of accepting the reality of the world as it is, because he always looks for an escape and in this way he lays the seeds of his alienation from the real world. Eric Fromm and Mary Josephson aptly comment that alienation is a feeling of estrangement, a "state of disassociation from self, from others, and from the world at large" (Eric and Mary Josephson 13). Benjamin Nelson observes that "Human guilt becomes a corollary to universal guilt and man's atonement for the human condition." However, men in fact are not at all responsible for this condition of existence and hence are in no way able to cope with it. They are trapped in a universe which is self enclosed and can at best be likened to a cocoon. It offers no scope to grow, to question and to understand the forces operating behind the creation of a void in various spheres of life.

One important factor that may be held responsible for the alienation of modern man is the ruthless social order in which a man stands tortured, starved, disillusioned, thwarted and driven to disaster by the forces of a system which is callous, inhuman and scarcely cares for the social welfare. Alienation as we find in the modern society is "almost total; it pervades the relationship of man to his work, to the things he consumes, to his fellows and to himself" (Eric Fromm 59). One may try hard, but cannot bail himself out of this situation. Arthur Miller aptly sums up this predicament of modern man as:

"... the individual is doomed to frustration when once he gains a consciousness of his own identity. The image is that of the individual scratching away at a wall beyond which stands society, his fellowmen. Sometimes he pounds at the wall, sometimes he tries to scale it or even blow it up, but at the end, the wall is always there, and the man himself is dead or doomed to defeat in his attempt to live a human life." (Miller,70)

In his play *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller presents a man's journey into himself. It is a man's emotional re-capitulation of the experiences that have shaped him and his values, a confession of his dreams to which he is committed. It is his attempt to confront the meaning or rather the meaninglessness of his life and the nature of his universe. Willy Loman, the protagonist, derives his stature not from an intellectual grandeur but from the fact that in an emotional way he confronts himself and his world. Miller points out that social laws determined by materialism have replaced fate as man's relentless enemy by creating in him a sense of alienation from the real world. As such superficial attributes such as an eternal mechanical smile and the quality of being well liked overpower Willy's psyche rendering him helpless and incapable to cope with reality.

Similarly, in *The Glass Menagerie*, the characters live in a world that does not care about their dreams and aspirations. Laura is like a piece of her own "glass collection" (*The Glass Menagerie* 31-32) too fragile to move from the shelf. The modern world has no place for the strange kind of beauty she possessed. Tom, her brother is a poet, but his world, that is the Wingfield apartment and the warehouse does not care for his poetic sensibility thereby alienating him. Amanda, her mother too, tends to get lost in the memories of her "Blue Mountain days" (16) and hence makes her existence in the present existence even more wretched. She cannot relate to the world of harsh realities - given the confrontations that keep intensifying between Tom and her. Moreover, her helplessness in the indifferent surroundings, in which she matters the least, alienates her from the world as well as from her own real self.

In *Desire Under the Elms* Eben feels trapped in exactly the same way. For him "each day is like a cage in which he finds himself trapped but inwardly subdued" (*Desire Under the Elms* 3). Eben indeed is trapped by circumstances confined to that disgusting New England farm which he believes belongs to his dead mother. Abbie, Eben's step mother, was an orphan and had to work for others in their homes. Her first husband was a drunkard and after his death she felt free only to discover that her freedom merely meant working for others once again. Ephraim Cabot for all his physical prowess and valour, undaunted will power and his cold and puritanical rigidity, finds himself condemned to eternal alienation. In his last speech he says, "It's a - goin' t' be loner now than ever it war afore - an' I'm g'ttin' old, Lord-ripe on the bough..." (68).

The hollowness of modern American life is presented in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which reduces the human ideals and pushes Americans to achieve their goals through either legitimate or illegitimate means. Modern American life is full of deceptiveness and this is very much evident from the family life of university teachers because they represent the intellectual class of the society. George and Martha are living with loss, isolation, and fear of facing their reality, all of which push them into hiding behind the image of their imaginary son. Nick married Honey only for the wealth she inherited from her father with the aim to increase his wealth and upgrade his position in society through perverse ways.

The Wingfield family and to some extent even the Loman's, the Cabot households and George and Martha are ill-adapted to their immediate environments and hence experience alienation. The destructions of these families is not melodramatic in character, it is rather gradual, suggestive to the point of being oblique having a marginal tinge of humour and pathos but portrays the erosion of families nonetheless. The predicament of the above mentioned characters is that they are alienated not only from the world around but from themselves too. This self-estrangement has been the preoccupation with many existential writers all over the world.

There is a huge gulf between what Willy Loman actually is and his image about what he should be if at all he has to be a successful salesman. For instance, he has to be a highly likeable person but contrary to his dreams and illusions, he is utterly disliked in his own arena of work. Willy himself confesses "... as I was going in to see the buyer I heard him say something about - Walrus. And I - I cracked him right across the face. I won't take that. I simply will not take that. But they do laugh at me. I know that" (*Death of a Salesman* 29). At one point of time in Willy's life, he is not in a position even to lie to himself with conviction. He keeps oscillating between his dreams and a flawed perception of his past. Towards the end he disintegrates as an individual with his psyche shattered and is not even left with the energy to gather the splinters of his disintegrated self. In the end, Willy has lost everything including his own self respect and has nothing more to lose except his life. Since Willy has spent his life trying to fit himself into one of the reciprocal categories of American society and since Biff, his son, is so much like Willy, the final irony of the play lies in Biff's declaration at the end of the play, "I know who I am kid" (111).

In the play *The Glass Menagerie* Tom escapes from the feeling of isolation which he experiences at the Wingfield apartment. He moves into the greater world of reality symbolized by the ship called "The Merchant Marine" (40). Tom's concluding speech clearly indicates that despite his departure from his home he is not able to find a sense of belonging in motion and the past still haunts him. His preference for moving out of his home is proven ironical as Laura, who signifies his past as well as his home, still occupies his thoughts. He says in his last speech: "Oh, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intend to be!" (92).

The degree of alienation caused by circumstances is aggravated by strained inter-personal relationships. In the play *The Glass Menagerie* it is no wonder that Laura suffers from a painful sense of loneliness. From the very first scene to the last her mother makes her ascertain her lack of popularity with men and her incapability to cope with any kind of social life. Laura's closing speech of the first scene, "Mother's afraid that I'm going to be an old maid" (19) is complemented by the closing scene in which the gentleman caller departs, never to return.

The marital relationships of George and Martha and Nick and Honey highlight the dangers of escaping from reality and preferring to live in isolation. This is a typical reflection of American individuals who try to escape from their miserable and materialistic lifestyles. The confrontations between the couples in the play clearly reflect their sense of despair, loss, and anxiety. Albee highlights the internal obstacles and problems being faced by American families as manifested in the characters' disappointment from failing to achieve their goals, their feelings of loss, and their failures in dealing with members of their community. This is very much evident in Nick's remark when he says: "I wouldn't say there was any...particular passion between us, even at the beginning ... of our marriage, I mean" (54).

Willy Loman thinks that his sons will carry on the tradition of his dream but they fail him terribly. Their leaving him kneeling in a bathroom, and themselves going away with the two whores, is in consonance with the manliness they have imbibed from him. They leave him alone to face the void within his soul. Cabot also symbolically represents the predicament of modern man, who despite the world of interpersonal relationship around him feels lonely. Even at the age of seventy five and after three marriages, Cabot is still hankering for an understanding on the part of the spouse but it is actually a far-fetched idea. He craves for companionable warmth from Abbie but finds it only with his farm animals. Martha's strong desire to engage in a conversation with George reflects the emotional vacuum that she has been living in throughout her marriage. She seeks to avenge herself and escape from her state of anxiety and isolation by insulting George. Meanwhile, George clearly shows his anger and embarrassment at Martha's behavior.

Towards the end of the play, O'Neill presents a beautiful contrast by juxtaposing Eben and Abbie's fulfillment with the eternal craving on the part of Cabot for a harmonious relationship characterized by a sense of belonging, concern and love. Eben and Abbie by submitting to the higher ideals of love and justice are able to absolve themselves of the demon of alienation. In doing so they also ensure Cabot's complete downfall for he is condemned to the very farm he has coveted. Finally, both Cabot and Tom are condemned to a miserable lot which is so much identical with the lot of the modern man who is constantly seeking variety and novelty in an effort to drive off boredom and monotony but eventually confronts alienation and despair.

O'Neill holds certain forces beyond one's control, responsible for the sense of alienation in his tragic protagonist, Ephraim Cabot. He can always feel a sinister presence in the house. It intensifies his alienation and drives him out of his house into the barn where he seeks solace and warmth thereby feeling a sense of belonging. The spirit of Eben's dead mother who was ill treated by inhuman Cabot for being soft and sensitive also works to isolate and alienate him from the world which he braggingly calls his own.

In *Death of a Salesman* the character of Ben is used as a remarkable expressionistic device to ensure that Willy Loman is not able to take a descent into the world of reality. Every time he faces a psychological crisis, Ben appears to provide a temporary solace by reinforcing his dreams and new illusions thereby snapping all threads of connection with reality. Both Willy Loman and Jim O'Connor believe in American Dream which promises popularity and wealth to a man, if he can acquire a winsome personality and pleasant social manners. As such, Willy constantly reminds his sons of the need to be well liked. Similarly Jim who has been a high school hero is impelled to take up public speaking classes.

Like Miller, Tennessee Williams portrays the American Dream as a myth - an ideal which remains ever elusive. Albee also revealed the disguised nature of American family life at the time and attacked the social hypocrisy of American individuals. The characters can at the most try to cope with hyper competitiveness in the commercial world - but they are eventually made to realize their incompatibility as well as their inability to relate to the world. Moreover, there are various forces in society that restrain most people from realizing their potential - namely poverty, lack of opportunity and indifference on the part of the world. Tennessee Williams also avers that some people simply are not born with this potential and it is cruel to teach them that they are like Jim who is actually just a very ordinary young man.

It is interesting to note that in Willy's case the alienation is total, caused by his complete failure in coping with his own self as well as his social environment and he perishes eventually. Ephraim Cabot also feels "lonesome" (68) towards the end but exhibits a rare endurance as his loneliness cannot cripple him. He decides to work harder which is ironical, given his aging body and diminishing spirit. For him God is like a rock - insensitive and unresponsive and so is life. Hence, he decides to work to resist and to fight.

In a similar vein, Tennessee Williams asks for a fugitive flight instead of surrendering to the evil earth i.e. the world of reality. Tom eventually escapes and is still torn between his past and the immediate present. The blowing out of the candles by Laura, completely isolates Tom. Like his father he is free and estranged from the world of reality. Tom can never stop his fugitive flight as he completely lacks the capacity to negotiate reality, to understand it and be a part of it.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? depicts the idea of shattering of illusions. Martha realizes that George is not as inadequate as she supposed him to be. Rather he is the one who provides her with the physical and emotional comfort that she requires. No one can take his place; this is reflected in her disappointment with Nick. In the end of the play, Martha is deprived of her fantasy of being a mother and admits for the first time that the reality scares her. She has realized how simple a life can be without an illusion to furnish it. George and Martha resort to fantasy because they cannot bear their reality. George realizes the danger of indulging in extreme fantasies. He is horrified to find that at a point, Martha fails to even distinguish between truth and illusion.

Most of the characters in the plays become detached from reality because of an intolerable life. They represent the hollow nature of American ideals of success where a man fails to accept failures the same way as he accepts his achievements. They also question the American way of modern life that devalues compassion and equality but elevates success and ambition as the pinnacle of achievement. The modern way of American life succumbs to illusions rather than confronting the reality and the unwillingness to face facts and accept them, however unpleasant they may be. In this way the modern dramatists have shown how this prevailing ideology can have destructive and alienating effects as well as harmful social consequences.

The plays under study seem to condemn a system that promises and indeed demands total commitment to success without any regard to human values. It is a system that as Willy says to Howard "will eat the orange and throw the peel away" (64). It is therefore concluded that the point of alienation is explicitly and emphatically delineated in modern American drama through the dramatic characters who encounter various alienation causing factors in almost all the arenas of life. The major thrust of the plays under consideration is the need for a genuine human understanding and concern that are essential to cope with the predicament of modern man who feels alienated in this world which is apparently without meaning or purpose.

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