THEME OF ALIENATION IN “ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT”

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The following research paper is an attempt to focus the theme of alienation, isolation and estrangement in Frost’s sonnet “Acquainted with the Night”. Apparently, a record of personal loneliness and isolation but a close reading reveals the implied sadness on the plight of alienated humanity. This universal expression of gloom and the plaintive note regarding indifference of modern man turns this personal lyric into an elegy of dying humanity. It has been analyzed how an individual reacts towards the frosty silence of surrounding and mechanical indifference of the fellowmen in the scientifically advanced world. The etherized existence in the global village of modern technology has transformed the world into a gloomy and isolated place where robotlike creatures are roaming about.

Keywords: Alienation, Estrangement, Acquainted, Isolation, Humanity, Plaintive

INTRODUCTION

Alienation, a sociological concept developed by several classical and contemporary theorists, is “A condition in social relationships reflected by a low degree of integration or common values and a high degree of distance or isolation between individuals, or isolation between an individual and a group of people in a community or work environment”. (Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management, vol. 22, no. 2 (1999): 120–32.)

In a broader philosophical context, especially in existentialism and phenomenology, alienation describes the inadequacy of the human being (or the mind) in relation to the world. The human mind sees the world as an object of perception, and is distanced from the world, rather than living within it. This line of thought is generally traced to the work of Soren Kierkegaard in the 19th Century, who, from a Christian viewpoint, saw alienation as separation from God, and examined the emotions and feelings of individuals when faced with life choices. Kierkegaard’s notions of angst, despair and the importance of the individual influenced many 20th Century philosophers (both theistic and atheistic) and theologians.

According to Alferd Kazin most of the twentieth century American literature “rests upon a tradition of enmity to the established order, more significantly a profound alienation from it.” Most of the post-World War II American literature displays a tinge of suspicion and dislike against the established order. Alienation can be
perceived in characters’ emotional conflict and their persistent reaction against the established order. (On Native Grounds: 1956)

When such characters try to define themselves in terms of the identity imposed upon them by society, they unconsciously alienate themselves from their true identity. As in Invisible Man the narrator spends twenty years to realize that he cannot make others treat him as who he really is if he himself is unaware of his true identity. Due to the oppressive role of society most of the American writers believe that society discourages individuality and democratic values. Ellison describes this phenomenon by stating: “all literature is about minority; the individual is a minority.” Alienation recurs frequently as a strong theme in modern literature. It encompasses the conflict between an individual’s true and false identity, and sometimes between the individual and society. Sometimes this feeling of alienation is brief but for others it becomes a lifelong tragedy when the character fail to identify his plight.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Alienation is most often represented in literature as the psychological isolation of an individual from society or community. In a volume of Bloom’s literary themes, Shakespeare’s Hamlet is described as the ‘Supreme literary portrait’ of alienation. Other literary works described as dealing with theme of alienation are:


THE POEM

Though Robert Lee Frost (1874-1963) was an American poet but his work was initially published in England. His first professional poem “My Butterfly”, was published on November 8, 1894, in New York newspaper “The Independent”. He is highly regarded for his realistic depictions of rural life and his command of American colloquial speech. His works frequently employed settings from rural life in New England in the early twentieth century, using them to examine complex social and philosophical themes. One of the most popular and critically respected American Poets of the 20th Century, Frost was honoured frequently during his lifetime, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes for poetry. He became one of America’s rare public literary figures almost an artistic institution. He was awarded by the congressional Gold Medal in 1960 for his poetical works. Achieved the honour of reciting his poem at the investiture ceremony of John F Kennedy in 1961. On July 22, 1961, Frost was named *Poet Laureate of Vermont.*

THE POEM

The poem is written in strict iambic pentameter, with the fourteen lines of a traditional sonnet. In terms of rhyme scheme, Frost uses the “Terza Rima” (third rhyme) pattern of aba cdc dad, and ends with a rhyming couplet. The steady rhythm of the poem is identical to the cautious and measured footsteps of the narrator exploring the gloomy night.

While going through the contents of the poem the first thing which strikes the reader is the expression of loneliness and profound melancholy. Even the very title is submerged in the unfathomable ocean of alienation and strangulating estrangement. Repetition of the pronoun “I” in the start of seven lines consecutively adds to the intensity of feelings and emphasizes the plight of a lonely soul in the mechanical routine of this modern world. Though, we cannot deny certain tragic moments in Frost’s personal life i.e daughter’s untimely death, his son’s suicide and different other emotional turmoil yet the sonnet under discussion cannot be labeled as a record of personal melancholy and isolation only. The narrator’s cautions and measured steps in the long night of misery reflect the predicament of all those lonely souls who feel alienated in this modern age of scientific progress and material luxury. Though night symbolizes terror, gloom, loneliness and a chill of deathly silence yet the narrator feels himself comfortable and acquainted with it. He prefers this eerie atmosphere to come out for wandering here and there avoiding eye contact with the watchman.
who is the only person present in the scene. Therefore, the narrator’s behavior is quite opposite to other people who perform their routine activities during the day. We trace the affinity between the narrator and T.S Eliot’s Prufrock who is also an epitome of alienation. Prufrock’s sad expression regarding boredom of urban life and the consequent alienation in the following lines,

“...I have gone at dusk through narrow streets,  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes,  
Of lonely man in shirt sleeves, leaning out of windows”

Is very much similar to that of narrator’s lamentations in “Acquainted with the Night”

“I have out walked the furthest city light,  
I have looked down the saddest city lane”

The question, which captures our attention, is

‘what is the cause of this alienation in modern man?’

While delving deep into the world of literature different characters capture our attention. Whether it is Prufork of Eliot or Mohan Biswas of Naipanl, both feel alienated and isolated. Basically the feeling of alienation is associated with those who are alien in a new country and their rootlessness and identity crisis lead them towards this trauma. But what about those who are alienated in their own society and culture just like the narrator of this sonnet. His plight is further intensified by the fact that the ‘one luminary clock against the sky’ is his only hope but it is far beyond his reach. It belongs to another world and his yearning to brighten his lonely existence by this is just a cry in the wilderness.

The ‘interrupted cry’ which makes him silent for a moment is just an allusion or a routine matter in the urban existence. It is not for him as he laments.

“But not to call me back or say good-bye.”

Whether it is a screaming shriek of humanity or the interrupted cry of dying values, modern man is indifferent to the misery of one another. We feel the echo of ‘The Hollow Men’ here as Eliot says,

“We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
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Our dried voices, when

We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass”

Considered to be one of the finest personal, reflective lyrics of the poet it can be coined as ‘a record of personal melancholy touched with terror’. On one hand, the vague impersonal cry is suggestive of the horror, bloodshed and violence of city life. But it is also alarming that even the narrator (may be the poet himself) does not try to locate the oppressed victim or think about rescuing him from the clutches of brutality. Basically this indifferent and callous attitude of the modern man is the cause of alienation and isolation among human beings. This ‘ache of modernity’ is thrusting the humanity into the abyss of estrangement and selfishness.

As regards the symbolic significance of ‘Night’ is concerned, it alludes to perpetual darkness of spiritual bankruptcy. The arid soil of life is shrouded in eternal darkness of materialism. This preoccupation with worldly desires and material gains leads to inner hollowness and makes us the prisoners of our own self. This imprisonment to selfishness isolates us from each other which results in the unending misery of alienated existence. The poem is a direct criticism on the sense of loneliness and alienation of man in the world of scientific progress. It is not only the personal melancholy of the poet but the sordid sense of loneliness haunting each individual going through the long night of existence. Caught in the cobweb of material gains he has ‘no time to stand and stare’

FINDINGS

After going through the above mentioned analysis of the note of alienation in “Acquainted with the Night” it can be inferred that Frost has alluded to the selfishness, disintegration of values and blind pursuit of materialism as the sole reason for man’s isolation, estrangement and melanchoy. For a meaningful existence, one needs to develop the bond of love and consideration with one another to combat the menace of selfishness. The desire to reach the zenith of materialistic existence and to nourish the physical desires has rendered modern man immune to human values. The inner hollowness with vacant stares has converted him into a zombie like existence where he is completely isolated from his fellowmen. The implied irony in the said poem points towards the fact that in the contemporary society everyone is imprisoned in his own self though the world has turned into a global village. It is pertinent to mention that nothing can replace love, consideration and sharing the feelings with each other despite having access to the modern gadgets that can connect us to the whole world with a click. Psychological maladies and a sense of
meaninglessness will keep on haunting the world if selfishness is not uprooted.

CONCLUSION

On symbolic level ‘Acquainted with the Night’ can be regarded as the psychological interpretation of the alienated existence in the global village of science and technology. Just like Eliot’s ‘The waste Land’ it points towards the malady of modern man and makes him infer the remedy for his plight. The narrator is acquainted with the night of isolated existence and knows its consequences as well. Through a particular example it is generalized that if this menace remained unchecked then a time will come when this land will be inhibited by hollow and stuffed men having human structure sans feelings and emotions. The inferno of technological existence will consume the humanity one day leaving robots to dwell in the world. It is the duty of each individual to unlock the rusty door of his egotistic self and touch the strings of one another’s heart to be human again.

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APPENDIX

**Acquainted with the Night**

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have out walked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.