
Analyzing Alienation Trauma in Ajeet Cour's *Green Sparrows*

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Abstract:

Alienation can be defined as a subjective state of mind that gives rise to a feeling of separation from self, society and family. Psychology is a scientific study of mind and the behavior of people. It refers to alienation as a state of mind where a person feels self-estranged, separated from one self or others, and/or one's environment. This can lead to a feeling of disconnection, or powerlessness, often accompanied by a feeling of dissatisfaction and a lack of trust. It can stem from various factors like environmental change, work pressure, emotional detachment. Identity issue remains uppermost in the mind of the person leading to a sense of not belonging, of not fitting or not being accepted by others. The sufferer of alienation trauma struggles with expressing emotions or making decisions. Emotionally, such a person may describe his feeling like an observer, unable to experience them fully.²

This Trauma is well described by Ajeet Cour in her short story *Green Sparrows*. She is a noted Punjabi writer who has won accolades in the form of Sahitya Akademy Award in 1985 and Padma Shri in 2006. In her writings, she focuses on the social issues that concern us all. In this story, she reveals the existential predicament of a youth who goes abroad for higher studies and returns home after a gap of seven years feeling awkward to communicate even with his parents. He refuses to go to meet his sister who got married in his absence thinking, what would he talk with her. He has turned introvert and emotionally dry in these seven years. The silent living in an alien country has played havoc with his behavioural pattern. In this paper, an effort has been made to analyze the psychological factors behind his alienation trauma.

Keywords: Psychology, Alienation, identity, predicament, communicate, introvert, awkward, trauma.

Introduction:

Ajeet Cour is a noted Punjabi writer who has nineteen short story, anthologies, novels and nine translations to her credit. She has also edited more than twenty works. Her

literary work has brought her laurels in the form of Sahitya Akademy Award in 1985, Padma Shri in 2006. She focuses on social issues that concern us all.

Her story, *Green Sparrows* focuses on the alienation trauma of a youth who went to study abroad and returns home after a gap of seven years to be with his parents. But to his amazement, he finds that after meeting his parents he feels no warmth, no emotional connect towards them and there is an awkwardness and alienation in his behavior.

We are living in tech-era which started in the last decade of the 20th century and is in full bloom in 21st century with AI being the latest invention in this field. The advent of technology connected people with the distant world. It generated new dreams and hopes in the youth for going abroad for higher studies after schooling was over. This trend is continuing in 21st century. Those who dared to seek new pastures found that environment and lifestyle of the new country was entirely different from their own country. Slowly, they adjusted and then adopted it. This lifestyle was run by tight schedule with no time to idle away. Their busy study and work environment made them live in isolation with no social connection. The self-estrangement and then a feeling of alienation crept in unknowingly. The protagonist of the story *Green Sparrows* too left home for higher studies abroad. When he left home, he was living a normal life of a happy child quarreling with sibling and enjoying time with friends. His father's personality was dominating and he was afraid of him. When he did something wrong, he hid behind his mother to evade his wrath. He loved his mother who used to awaken him every morning from deep sleep by citing the example of sparrows that chirped outside the window to declare that it was morning and time to get up and go to school.

Overseas, he missed all this but slowly managed to live alone in silence broken by tik-tok of a clock. He turned introvert as he solved his life's problems single handedly. Living in such environment dried up the emotional pool and alienated him from self and society. The story writer has not given any name to the protagonist and „He“ is used to refer to him. So, „He“ encompasses all those persons who like the protagonist of the story went abroad and after returning home experienced alienation trauma like him. In psychology, that deals with the scientific study of mind and way people behave, alienation refers to a state of estrangement or separation from oneself, others, and/or one's environment. This can manifest as a feeling of disconnection, isolation, or powerlessness, often accompanied by a feeling of dissatisfaction and a lack of trust.

According to AI overview, alienation is a subjective state, involves a feeling of separation from oneself, others or one's environment characterized by feeling of powerlessness, meaninglessness, social-isolation and self-estrangement.¹ Various factors are at work for protagonist's trauma including social isolation, emotional detachment, environmental change. Social and self-isolation has led to protagonist's self-alienation. Change of environment, work pressure, study pressure and loneliness are some of the major factors leading to this trauma. He feels agonized by the emotional disconnect with his

parents. “He had been studying medicine and had to work in the library for three hours daily to pay his fees. Later on, he got scholarship, but the two years in between had been extremely difficult. It had meant studying for long hours, attending long hours practicals and dissection. Then, in the evening working in the library on his feet for three hours to earn a living”³(p.158).

In this period, his sister Ashu got married. His parents asked him to come for the wedding but he could not because of his tight schedule. He assumed that his parents would understand his inability to come. But, perhaps his parents could not and they assumed that he was not bothered about them. The occasional letter-exchange from their side stopped. They could not understand his existential predicament sitting far away from him. “For him the journey of life was full of weariness and exhaustion and running about. All the threads of his life seemed to be strung in the hands of a clock and the clock was running faster than he could”⁴(p.158).

Back home, he wants to see things as he left but his separation from his parents has changed many things especially the physical appearance and vulnerability of his parents. His parents feel awkward talking to him. Biji, his mother hesitantly talks to him choosing her words wisely, so that her son may not mind what she says. Going back down memory lane he sees himself quarreling with her for eight annas and new pair of socks or a new pen. His mother used to pull his ears and sometimes smacked him and sometimes he hid him in the kitchen so that his father may not smack him. But now, sitting near him, her mother watches him with sad but tolerant eyes and suggests that he should go to Chandigarh to meet his sister and brother-in-law because he could not attend their wedding.

His mother’s mention of Ashu brings old memories of fights over comics and laughing together over jokes. But now, he seems a stranger to him with whom he can’t communicate and share anything or quarrel with her so, he tells his mother to invite Ashu to visit her parents here. His self estrangement weighs heavily on his mind as he thinks that he has nothing to talk with either his sister or her husband. Seven years of separation has alienated him from his family in such a way that he is unable to communicate normally like a son. It reveals his existential predicament in an alien country without any emotional support and warmth. His emotional pool seems to have dried up and emotions seem to be frozen like ice. Sitting near his father on pretext of reading a newspaper he realizes that his father looks fragile, vulnerable and has lost his strength and vigor, which gave him a dignified aura when he left for greener pastures.

He makes silent observations about his parents without uttering a word. He is very concerned about their physical state but he keeps all his emotions to himself. He feels a sense of fear and loss and compares his father’s physical appearance with a quilt without wool, with only outer cloth intact. “But the arm he could extend in support hesitated, it was difficult that arm to reach his father because a wide distance of seven years sprawled between them frozen over like the ice of South Pole”⁵(p.161).

An awkward distance yawned between Biji, Bauji and him. His daily routine at home is boring. Going out for a walk, coming back having paranthas made by Biji and then go upstairs in his room called *Barsati*. No gossip, no chatting with parents, feeling no urge to meet old friends or visit relatives. The channel of communication has closed for him in these seven years. Self-alienation means a sense of disconnect from one's emotions or sense of self. It can involve feeling unreal, detached from one's body or unable to connect with one's inner self or world. There is numbness of emotions. From a normal youth when he went abroad, he has become self estranged, alienated, non-communicative and emotionless person. "What has come between us, he asked himself. This feeling of alienation". His father tells him that he gets paranthas because of him otherwise milk and eggs are his breakfast. Biji adds that instead of cooking they live on bread and milk or cooks dal. "I do not have the strength even for that"⁶(p.162).

He understands it is her way of asking him to "come back and stay" but he pretends not have understood. As usual, after having paranthas he leaves for his room thinking that departure date is drawing near. He is feeling restless, agonized and anguished at his own behaviour. He closes his eyes and his sub-conscious mind becomes active as it has been affected by his alienation trauma. He sees himself flying in the air. Gradually, it seemed to him as if the roof of the room had disappeared. A roofless room seemed desolate in the vast, blue expanse of dusty huge vacuum of space. Then slowly and softly even the walls of the roofless room seemed to recede. He lay on his bed alone, in the vastness, in the eternity. Then did not know when even the floor from under his bed disappeared. And it seemed to him that he was floating in the air. "A vagabond like a leaf fluttering in the gust of wind... like a scrap of paper in infinite space who was he? Why was he? Where were his roots? And who were rooted in the soul of his mind? Did not know"⁷ (p.164).

The above para reveals existential pain of the protagonist. Like a vagabond, he thinks he has no roots and no home to call his home. His self questioning as to where his roots lie reveal that he is utterly confused and in an anguished state of mind. Identity crisis is revealed here – his feeling detached and considering himself rootless speaks volume about the uncertainty of his belonging. A deep emotional struggle is going on in his mind. Identity issue remains uppermost in the mind of the sufferer leading to a sense of not belonging, of not fitting in or not being accepted by others. A person experiencing it struggles with expressing emotions, making decisions. Emotionally, he may describe feeling like an observer, unable to experience them fully. He feels agonized. He comes out of this riverie by the chirping of birds. "He floated down to the earth like a rag of muslin. The bed came down. The floor under the bed came back. The walls also came back from their wandering"⁸(p 164). His focus is now diverted to sparrows singing outside. Their chirping takes him back to his childhood when his mother used to awaken him from deep sleep in the morning saying "Even the sparrows are up and about but the boy still lie in bed. Get up, don't you have to go to school?"⁹(p.163).

Sparrows still twitter outside in the morning but now his mother does not awaken him. For his parents now equate him to a guest who is with them only for a few days. He thinks that this *green sparrow* today is singing for him only to bring him back to the real world. He notices the sparrow is not only singing but its whole body is quivering with excitement of a wonderful joy. “When it twittered, its whole body quivered, the shiver starting from its beak and weaving through the last feather on its tail. It sang in happy abandonment full of extraordinary intoxication... It seemed to him as if he were the king and sparrow his slave singing only for his pleasure (p 164). Suddenly a thought passes his mind. “Don’t these sparrows grow old?”¹⁰ (p.164).

He has seen his parents grow old and becoming vulnerable, but he has not seen any old sparrow or a dying sparrow. “He has always seen them singing and hopping around...full of life! Intoxicated forever celebrating life! *Evergreen sparrows*”¹¹ (p.164). He imagines a sparrow dying suddenly singing a song. He wants man to die like a sparrow not sad but full of excitement and with a song on his lips. Here, green sparrow is a symbol of living life happily wherever one goes irrespective of the environment. Sparrows move continuously even migrate to other country in search of food in bad weather but, when they return to their original habitat, their singing and body quivering with excitement of living life never changes.

The sparrow-episode is very relevant in the story. The protagonist has seen two lifestyles, different environments rooted by different set of rules. These factors have alienated him from self and family. A man should live happily irrespective of the changed circumstances or changed environment, is the message that sparrow – episode generates. Sparrows, being a part of nature impresses on him the truth that whatever the circumstances emotional quotient should always remain high.

The story is open-ended. May be before going back the protagonist will make efforts of communicating with his parents and promise them of visiting them soon or he will still remain the hesitant talker who finds it difficult to talk with his parents even after watching sparrows. Let the readers judge.

References:

Note:- All references to the text of *Green Sparrows* have been taken from: The Greatest Punjabi Stories Ever Told, Edited by Renuka Singh and Balbir Madhopuria (2023). Published in India, by the Aleph Book Company, New Delhi.

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- 11.Ibid