

Alienation in Tagore's "Banshi": An Analysis From Melvin Seeman's Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

Since alienation appears as natural outcome of existential predicament both in ingrained and outward terms, it has left an ineradicable impact upon the modern life and. The theme of alienation has been dealt several times with unceasingly and intrepidly in modern literature. The paper will discuss and analyze theme of alienation in Rabindranath Tagore's one of the most celebrated poems "*Banshi*" (The flute) from the theoretical viewpoint of American psychologist Melvin Seeman. It will also show that how identity crisis as one of the prominent trait of modern literature created trauma within the main character of the poem. Seeman's five major features of alienation are in essence taken into consideration for exploring this Bengali poem.

Keywords: alienation, identity-crisis, meaninglessness, Seeman, Tagore.

INTRODUCTION

In the present world, education, cloth, food, shelter and medications are by all account not the only issues. There was time when troubles were just related with earning food and securing and increasing an ever increasing number of regions for the kings. Be that as it may, at present, there is a great deal of difference in ancient troubles and today's problems. Back then, isolation or alienation was not an issue. In one way or different, issues were social and political. In today's world, everybody is living of his own life. More serious issues are not social or political rather personal. Each individual has his own problems and difficulties. Individuals talk less about the society yet increasingly about their own lives. Modern life is brimming with stresses. Loneliness is the serious issue particularly in developed countries. People are living life of machines; expressionless, bore and monotonous life. Aesthetics and art is fading away gradually. People are much more self-centric with a self conscious life. It creates individuals without a root, without a horizon, without an anchor- resulting him to feel alienated. A man experiencing this strange feeling of alienation feels that life holds out no significance for him. He feels that his life isn't under his control however is dictated by some outside powers which are independent of him. The sense of alienation isolates him from his society, relations, nature, God and even from his very own self. Though different scholars have defined the term alienation differently, all of them have the same opinion that this feeling has a paralyzing effect on the personality of man. As a result of that in modern literature the theme of alienation has been variously dealt with unremittingly and unflinchingly. The alienated persona is a repetitive figure in much of the twentieth century American and European literature. Alienation in its diverse forms has been presented in the existentialistic literature. Nevertheless, the Indian literature also, couldn't stay unaffected by it. Poet, writer and humanitarian, Rabindranath Tagore, A native of Calcutta, India, who wrote in Bengali and often translated his own work into English, was the first Indian to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. As an Indian, Tagore predominantly realised the presence of alienation in the society long before others could figure it out. As a result of that a number of poems of Tagore showcased persona who are alienated from their community, from his own fellow member. In June 1932, Tagore published his collection of poems "*Punashcho*" and within this volume he included his famous poem "*Banshi*". This poem is about the lonely life of a middle aged man who embodies the true scenario of the twentieth century Indian alienated individual. Since the poem is written in Bengali, the English version of the poem "*The Flute*" (Translated by Sumit Sarkar) is used for using quote. This paper analyses the theme of alienation presented in the poem "*Banshi*" (*The flute*) from the theoretical perspective of Melvin Seeman, who is a renowned American psychologist.

ALIENATION

The sense of alienation is nearly as old as man. It can be said that no society, culture or human being can be free from alienation. There have additionally long been religious ideas of being isolated or cut off from God and the dedicated, estranged in a negative sense. Sometimes Adam and Eve are also symbolizes as the embodiment of religious alienation from God. Alienation as a term has been used over the years with varied and sometimes with opposing implications. In old history it could mean a feeling of accomplishing a higher condition of euphoria, contemplation or association—in a positive sense, getting to be estranged from a restricted presence in the world. The name of Neo-platonic philosophers such as Plotinus (in the Greek *alloiosis*) can be mentioned since examples of this usage have been traced from his work.

However, in order to explain the term 'alienation' scholars differ radically from one another. Hegel (1967) is the first to introduce the notion of alienation to the modern world and uses the term in a philosophical sense. According to him alienation rooted in the man's existence in the world- is an ontological fact. According to him, there are two entities of man—man as a subject and man as an object and there is an intrinsic disassociation between them.

In his "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844" released by researchers from the Soviet Union, German philosopher and economist Karl Marx (1977) displayed the Theory of Alienation in which he contended that labourers become estranged from their humanity as a result of living in a society in which capitalism is a mode of production. Alienation in a generalized abstract sense, is the loss of power over a quality of oneself, one in which the actor is segregated from any sense of agency in relation to the characteristics. Alienation under the capitalist method of production isn't only a subjective state of mind, that one enters, yet a target procedure that is created from the reality that we experience through labour in capitalist society. The Theory of Alienation explicitly states that an individual loses the capacity to decide his or her own life and fate, just as the ability to coordinate activities and characters of these activities, characterize associations with other individuals, and claim those things created by his or her work. A society does this through the automation of a person. Through the mechanization of an individual a capitalist society does this.

Enrich Fromm (1968) looked at the state of the alienated man from the philosophical, sociological and psychological perspective. He opines about the trait of alienation in modern times, "Alienation as we find it in modern society is almost total: it pervades the relationship of man to his work, to the things he consumes, to the state, to his fellow men and to himself". Axelos (1976) said that, in Human Alienation, individuals become estranged to themselves in the quest to stay alive, where "they lose their true existence in the struggle for subsistence"

Alienation is expressed through Rabindranath Tagore's (1917) words, "there is a period in man's life when his feelings are the pathos of the inexpressible, the anguish of vagueness. The poetry which attempts its expression cannot be called baseless—at worst it may be worthless; but it is not necessarily even that. The sin is not in the thing expressed, but in the failure to express it. There is a duality in man. Of the inner person, behind the outward

current of thoughts, feelings and events, but little is known or recked; but for all that, he cannot be got rid of as a factor in life's progress. When the outward life fails to harmonise with the inner, the dweller within is hurt, and his pain manifests itself in the outer consciousness in a manner to which it is difficult to give a name, or even to describe, and of which the cry is more akin to an inarticulate wail than words with more precise meaning."

While commenting on the unavoidability of alienation, Kaufmann (1970) remarks, "Alienation is neither a disease nor a blessing, but for better or worse, a central feature of human existence."

American social psychologist Melvin Seeman who is known afar for his research in social isolation, published his paper, "On the Meaning of Alienation", in 1959. Seeman pointed out the insights of Marx, Emile Durkheim and others to make what is often thought a model to identify the five major features of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959). According to Seeman (1959), When a person believes that his or her actions have no effect on outcomes. This situation of powerlessness increases his autonomy and he becomes self-centred. Meaninglessness is another feature of an alienated man. When an individual is unable to comprehend that how their own work contributes to the whole he goes through a sense of nothingness which results alienation. Sometimes a person may feel detached from social norms. In such a situation he thinks that social norms for behaviour have broken down and these rules are not appropriate or applicable for him. As a result of that he tries to lead a norm less vague life which basically accelerates his state of being alienated. When an individual cannot find sense of self and ways to identify with surroundings, he finds no sense of belongingness and it results an alienated self leaving him in isolation. Self-Estrangement is quite similar to identity crisis. Alienated people can feel detached from themselves and he may experience no sense of identity of personal fulfilment. So, these are the five features of alienation which Seeman (1959) tries to figure out as traits of an alienated man of modern time. This paper will try to explain the poem 'Banshi' (in English "The Flute") written by prominent Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore from the theoretical perspective of American psychologist Melvin Seeman's these five major features of alienation. Since Tagore wrote the poem "Banshi" in Bengali, for using quote from the poem, translated English version of the poem "The flute" translated by Sumit Sarkar is used.

ALIENATION IN "BANSI"

The poem "Banshi" deals with all these modern problems. It is about the inconveniences of an individual; it is the account of an individual, who was carrying on with a dull life. Though it cannot be said that his life was completely miserable, it is absolutely right that his life was not creative. Actually, he was not living life; instead spending days of his life.

According to Seeman (1959), when individuals are socially secluded they consider that what comes about their lives is out of their control and that what they do eventually does not matter- this sense gives birth to the feelings of powerlessness. In the poem "Banshi"

as well it can be seen that the protagonist *Horipada Kerani* (Horipada clerk) is secluded from his family, friends and society. He strongly thinks that he has no control on his life and as a result of that he didn't hesitate to run away from his marriage. It was settled that he should marry the daughter of his paternal uncle's younger brother. According to the Hindu rituals, the date was fixed even the time was found very auspicious. By fleeing away on the day of his marriage he thinks that he has not only save the girl he was betrothed to rather he saved himself as well. As mentioned in the poem:

The ritual hour was auspicious, indeed,
For on its eve I ran away.

The girl was saved- and me, likewise. (Tagore's "Banshi" translated by Sumit Sarkar)

This ultimately unveils that since he is not certain about his own life and he is out of his own life's control he didn't want to take the risk of spoiling another life and this is how his helplessness proves his powerlessness.

Kalekin-Fishman (1996) opines in this connection that "a person suffers from alienation in the form of powerlessness when he is conscious of the gap between what he would like to do and what he feels capable of doing." At times intermittently he tries to show himself as a powerful man and tries to do a Ironical comparison between himself and the great Mughal emperor Akbar. We can't but understand his powerlessness when in a tone of irony he says:

And suddenly I understand
The clerk *Haripada* is no different from Emperor Akbar
Torn umbrella and imperial canopy,
Both reach the same paradise. ("Banshi")

He says that though in this world he can never be as powerful as Emperor Akbar, in the life hereafter; at heaven he and Emperor Akbar will not have any difference. In heaven both of them will be equally powerful and that day it will not make any difference whether he is having a torn umbrella or an imperial canopy.

The second feature of alienation as mentioned by Seeman (1959) is Meaninglessness. This is a situation when a person cannot trace out meaning from the things with which he or she is engaged, or at least not the same common or normative meaning that others derive from it.

Seeman (1959) writes that meaninglessness "is characterized by a low expectancy that satisfactory predictions about the future outcomes of behaviour can be made." Whereas powerlessness refers to the sensed ability to control outcomes, this refers to the sensed ability to predict outcomes. In this respect, meaninglessness is closely tied to powerlessness;

Seeman argues, "The view that one lives in an intelligible world might be a prerequisite to expectancies for control; and the unintelligibility of complex affairs is presumably conducive to the development of high expectancies for external control (that is, high powerlessness)".

The situation when an individual finds nothing worthy in his life, when life fills up with vague nothingness, he becomes hopeless and as a result of that he falls apart from his society and experiences meaninglessness. A glimpse of Jean-Paul Sartre's (1969) nothingness can be found within these lines:

Dark shadows of the rainy day
Lie still in my damp room
Like rat in a trap
Senseless.
Night and day, it seems
I am chained hand and foot
To a half dead world. ("Banshi")

Throughout these lines, *Harapda*'s hopelessness is predominantly presented here. So the world around him seems without any hope of release and forever he is condemned to a world which is neither alive nor fully dead- a half dead world. He is living a worthless life without any ambition. The poet is very well aware about modern life and its worthlessness. People in modern world have no ambition in their lives. Modern life is dull, tasteless and ambitionless. People are compelled to spend life of machines. *Haripada*'s living style reveals his character. Work, earn, eat and sleep- the only things done by *Haripada*. It is the only purpose of modern life also, which in the eyes of Tagore, is not good enough. Every line of the poem is realistic and refers meaninglessness in life.

Sometimes meaninglessness may be expressed through the illusory unreality. *Haripada* lives at the "Kinu Goala's lane" where one of his neighbours *Kantababu* likes to play on a flute. Suddenly in the dusk, when the Sindhu-baroan raga is played on, the whole sky starts resonating with the timeless cry of the pining love separated from her beloved. At such moments, *Haripada* feels that the lane is absurdly unreal; ultimately a lie. As stated:

And suddenly one knows
The alley is a great lie
Like the mad ravings of a drunkard. ("Banshi")

He didn't marry the girl chosen by his aunt and often when he remembers that girl, his mind and soul turns into a hollow vessel where he can only listen to the melancholy of his voluntary imperfection. He often misses that girl who always moves about his mind and as a result of that he says-

She never entered my home but in my mind she comes and goes
A sari from Dhaka draping her, red *sindur* on her forehead. ("Banshi")

This expression of emptiness also depicts the nothingness and meaninglessness of the life of *Haripada*. The speaker is waiting for his beloved knowing that she will never return to him like the like the song 41 of the *Gitanjali*. The theme of both poems is desolation and loneliness. In the *Gitanjali*, Tagore (1913) wrote:

Where dost thou stand behind them all,
my lover, hiding thyself in the shadows ?
(*Gitanjali*, p. 32)

This sense of desolation, resulting from the emptiness is heightened when *Haripada* realises that the girl will not come. He feels the presence of the girl in his mind since the girl will never come back to his life. His imagination about the girl itself is meaningless. The poem portrays sad imagery and gloomy themes and the approach of the poet is pessimistic here. This poem was written in 1932 in between the time of two world wars. So, the hollowness of the face of the society after World War I has been presented through the poem and the same time the political and social turmoil before another world war has also grab the attention of Tagore. Economic insecurity and the social disorder that tends to go with it has been acknowledged to lead to what Durkheim called anomie—a sense of normlessness that cultivates social alienation. When an individual goes through social alienation they may deny their own personal requirements and interests in order to assure demands placed by others and faces Self-estrangement or identity crisis.

In start of the poem, condition of the alley, house, and specifically the room where *Haripada* is living has been described:

Kinu Goalal's Lane:
A single room with iron bars
Downstairs, on the alley.
Damp walls, swathes of mortar peeled away
Many stained patches. ("Banshi")

The alley where *Haripada*'s rented his room depicts the true picture of his helplessness. *Haripada* is living a miserable life where he doesn't have any economic security. During rainy season, there gather heaps of putrid wastes including peeling of fruits and vegetables and carcasses of cats and dogs. Besides, thoroughly damped room shows the lifestyle of *Haripada*. Speaker says that walls bear ugly damp marks and in places their plasters are also peeling off.

This concept of anomie was first coined in 1893, when French sociologist Emile Durkheim published his book entitled, “The Division of Labor in Society”. According to him, anomie means the lack of usual moral or social standards. Durkheim (1893) assumed that anomie was a state where “the expectations of behaviour are vague, and the system has broken down” This is often known as normlessness.

Haripada also tried to live a life where he didn’t care about any conventional norm. As a result of that he could very easily flee away from his marriage ceremony without letting anybody know anything. So, thus the norm less life of the speaker has been illustrated in the poem.

Another thing that can be seen here is the poverty or economic challenge faced by *Haripada*. He is a junior clerk at the office of a private business house where he gets a very negligent amount of money as his salary. He needs to give tuition in order to maintain his dinner. In the evening he goes to the Sealdah railway station only to spend his time so that he doesn’t cost any money of lighting his room. So, it can be thought that how terribly the low income group of people of the post world war world had to suffer in order to survive. They could hardly live their life. Surviving was more than a battle for them. Modern world had developed a lot in terms of infrastructure, technology and so on but the life of these people didn’t change. Maybe economic insolvency is another cause of being alienated. If *Haripada* is having enough money, at least he could marry the girl he was betrothed to- then probably *Harpada*’s story could be written a quite different way.

From Seeman’s (1959) theoretical concept, another feature of an alienated man is isolation. Isolation results when a person thinks that they are not significantly attached with their community through mutual values, beliefs and practices. An individual in isolation does not have meaningful social relationships with other people. It can be seen that the speaker (Haripada) of the poem also experiences a serious isolation and this isolation is evident throughout the last lines of the first stanza:

Another creature lives here
sharing my rented room-
A lizard.
(The only difference with me-
It doesn’t worry for food). (“*Banshi*”)

The speaker is a poor fellow and he might be just spending his days instead of living them and within the room he is so lonely that even he could notice a small lizard- which is the only creature lives with him. In this lonely planet he is isolated from the world around him and in order to drive out his loneliness everyday he stays at railway station till half past ten in the night. When he is at the station, for the time being maybe he forgets the loneliness. In other words it may be said that probably within the noise of railway engines, whistles and the hustle bustles among passengers and porters he experiences another alienation. He is

secluded being within the crowd. He is alienated inspite of staying within the mob. He feels loneliness in presence of people. At night, when he comes back to his room again he feels the same sort of isolation which resembles darkness and silence:

Half past ten
I return to my lonely den
Utterly dark and silent. ("Banshi")

The darkness set upon the room and silence engulfed the lonely life of *Haripada*. *Haripada* has never thought that this room is his home. He never thought that it is his world. Like the modern man he digs deep down his loneliness and thus he becomes more and more alienated. Boredom is also another theme of this poem which came out of the feeling of isolation. Tagore tries to express his emotions but the intention of the poem is much more implicit than just the emotional expression of the poet.

CONCLUSION

Alienation is the unhealthy relation between a subject and object that properly belong together. In this poem also it can be seen that if *Haripada* is the subject then it must be said that he is having a serious lack of relation to each and every object he is supposed to be attached with. Alienation is a very common aspect of today's modern world. Tagore also Tagore could very easily understand the machine life and so called development of capitalistic society. Tagore's *Haripada* in *Banshi* also possesses all the traits of Melvin Seeman's notion of alienation. Melvin Seeman says that the feeling of helplessness and the feeling that the world is meaningless are evoked by leaving out of conversations or events and a modern alienated man starts feeling different or separate from everyone resulting him to a deceased depression. Seeman also says that in the modern world, divorce or other forms of familial separation are the causes of this sense of being alienated which is also true to *Haripada*. In the modern society, the growth has grown feelings-less and meaningless sense of alienation within individuals. To Tagore, development was not the problem, but it was the excessive mechanisation in the name of development and civilisation which was a sheer concern for Tagore. He tried to show that the aftermath of World War I and the mechanisation of modern world left human being in a state of self acclaimed alienation where he feels his heart to be barren and dry and he is doomed to a life where he needs to continuously fight with his own self to survive.

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