

Sense of Alienation in Ernest Hemingway's the Sun Also Rises

Ritu Rani

Kaithal, India

ritushira@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Ernest Hemingway occupies a towering place among the twentieth century post-war writers. The alienation in this century was the direct result of World War I that caused an all-pervasive destruction material, spiritual and moral. The Sun Also Rises exposes powerfully the theme of alienation in a very faithful manner. It is an authentic account of the sense of aimlessness; nihilism, despair and, above all, the sense of alienation. The Sun Also Rises presents the story of young people of what Gertrude Stein has aptly called 'Lost Generation'. It is a group of wounded people, wounded either physically or psychologically as a result of war. They are American expatriates who are leading a depraved life in Paris after the World War I. The sense of alienation is conveyed to us through the recurrent imagery of feast that always ends with empty glasses and mopping-off of tables. An early instance of Jake's experience of this feeling is when he is visited by Cohn and Brett. In this way, after making a close scrutiny of the novel, The Sun Also Rises, we can safely and rightly conclude that not that the heroes of Hemingway's novels are basically unsocial or anti-society, rather they have seen through the realities of social life around them. It is their discovery of their hollowness and vicariousness that has made them disengages their fidelity from the group. The reality of this world is that faith in religion and God is usually disappointing; the prevailing ethics and social conventions are a sham and virtue and morality are mere cloaks for unashamed defiance of all basic principles of honesty, loyalty and righteousness. Hemingway knew that the entire might of the social machinery comes into action against the innocent joys and aspiration of an individual's sentiments, which taken singly, every individual member of the social mass, holds dear to his heart.

Ernest Hemingway is one of the prominent novelists in the history of American fiction. As a novelist, he occupies a towering place among the twentieth century post-war writers. Twentieth century has been interpreted by various writers as an age of disillusionment, full of death, despair and total alienation. The alienation in this century was the direct result of World War I that caused an all-pervasive destruction material, spiritual and moral.

Hemingway's first novel *The Sun Also Rises* exposes powerfully the theme of alienation in a very faithful manner. It is an authentic account of the sense of aimlessness; nihilism, despair and, above all, the sense of alienation. *The Sun Also Rises* presents the story of young people of what Gertrude Stein has aptly called 'Lost Generation'. It is a group of wounded people, wounded either physically or psychologically as a result of war. They are American expatriates who are leading a depraved life in Paris after the World War I. The expatriates' group takes its stand squarely on the principle of an alienation from the society that had been forced upon it by the circumstances of the times. The war injury results in impotency of Jake Barnes, the central protagonist of the novel. Others in the story are less obviously cut off from normal experiences and distracted by violent substitutes. Lady Brett Ashley's final cry, "We could have had such a damned good time together", reflects her utter sense of alienation. It was intensity alone that they were seeking and that they found fleetingly in frantic love-making, in death in the bull-ring. Nihilism was complete. So, a total denial of values could seem to have only one outcome-alienation.

If we go through the novel *The Sun Also Rises* we find that nearly all the characters suffer and are haunted by this sense of alienation. But in case of three major characters of the novel –

Jake Barnes, Brett Ashley, and Robert Cohn this sense of alienation can be seen in its acute form. Jake Barnes, the hero-narrator of the novel, represents the stage next to Frederic Henry in the development of the Hemingway hero. Jake has in his background Frederic Henry's experience in the World War I. He is like Frederic Henry, "hurt in the war"¹. He is wounded physically as well as psychologically and, hence, a victim of utter sense of alienation, constantly disturbed by the memories of war. The war has made him an impotent and a sexual cripple.

The novel beautifully captures Barnes' haunting sense of life's transitoriness, which the experience of war imparts to him. Because of his sense of alienation, he is afraid of death. For him, the last course is always death. An early instance in the novel of the haunting sense of alienation in life is the following conversation between Robert Cohn and Jake Barnes:

Listen, Jake, "he leaned forward on the bar.

"Don't you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by and you're not taking advantage of it?"

Do you realize you've lived nearly half the time you have to live already?"

"Yes, every once in a while".

"Do you know that in about thirty five

Years more we'll be dead?" "what the hell Robert, "I said.

"What the hell" ².

Jake's strong reaction to the mention of death by Cohn reflects his sense of isolation, and being haunted by the idea of life's transitoriness. Dominated by the sense of alienation, different characters in the novel take recourse to different desperate remedies. While Mike takes to drinking and counts to sex, Cohn tries to escape into "romantic" places and "romantic" books. Jake has to tell Cohn that "going to another country does not make any difference", that he has "tried all that", and that "you can't get away from your self by moving from one place to another"³.

More than any other character in the novel it is Jake who is haunted by an acute sense of alienation of the impermanence of life, which he carries with him as much in Pamplona as in Paris. This sense of alienation is conveyed to us through the recurrent imagery of feast that always ends with empty glasses and mopping-off of tables. An early instance of Jake's experience of this feeling is when he is visited by Cohn and Brett. Jake stares at the table where there was an empty glass and a glass half full of brandy and soda, "take "them out to kitchen", and pours "the half-full glass down the sink"⁴. As the feast ends in empty glasses, so does life in death and alienation. Jake's response to the empty glasses and cups, to their removal from the table, and to the mopping off of the table into perfect blankness reveals a feeling of emptiness and a sense of alienation.

Another incident that exposes Barnes' sense of alienation is the emptiness or isolation which

he experiences after returning from fiesta. One recalls here Jake's remarks that going to Paris would have been another "fiesta-ing". As long as the fiesta in Pamplona continues, Jake is able to ignore the haunting sense of life's impermanence and alienation because it meant "something doing all the time". In this way, Feast and fiesta are used as running analogies to life in the novel. Jake's relationship with Brett is the central concern of the novel. It is through Brett's love that Jake tries to overcome his sense of alienation. But as he is sexually disabled, and can not provide her sexual satisfaction, he is filled with sense of alienation. Jake is troubled by Brett's inconstancy and yet is not able to detach himself from her. What Jake needs to learn, therefore, is to be able to live with, or to overcome the consciousness of, his physical deficiency and to love Brett without the desire to possess her. Wrong, too, is to think, as Jackson Benson does, that Jake's "awareness and commitment is shaky until the end of the novel, where he is constantly haunted by a sense of alienation"⁵.

The hero's inability to "keep away" from the thought of Brett and his crying in bed reveals his lack of emotional adjustment with the woman, and not a lack of awareness about Brett and himself. It is only on account of his sense of alienation that Jake is constantly asking Brett in Book I: "couldn't we live together, Brett? Couldn't we just live together?"⁶ When Brett meets him after her stay with Robert Cohn, she finds him rather different. When she informs him of her recent affair with Cohn, he ironically offers his congratulations. As Jake is uninterested in her, she keeps telling him about it.

Here, Jake is "nasty" with Brett because he cannot be indifferent to her, and it is all because he suffers constantly from sense of alienation. He is certainly beginning to compose his sentiments for her, which until now he had rather found unmanageable. It is Jake's utter alienation that forces him to

possess Brett's body because he seeks a kind of comfort and consolation in Brett's love. Jake's impotency and his war experiences have forced Jake to reassess himself and his actions in this alienated situation.

Whereas *A Farewell to Arms* describes Hemingway hero's sense of alienation with his illusion of becoming the saviour of mankind and his acute consciousness of death, the central concern of *The Sun Also Rises* is the hero's subsequent struggle to get over the depression of his alienation and learn to live in a world that "kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially"⁷.

Many critics have regarded the novel as a static picture of the modern "wasteland". Critics like R.W. Stallman; Philip Young etc., consider Jake as a representative of the sterile land, the wasteland; he is viewed as a representative of the "lost generation", a sun gone down, never hoping to rise again. While, on the one hand, Shakespeare's heroes and heroines are persons of consequences on whom depends the destruction or reconstruction of order in the whole society. Hemingway's characters, on the other hand, are modern isolates who destroy or restore their own houses that are their personalities. As we see them at the end of the novel, both Brett and Jake seem to have set their house in order. The climax of the development of both these two characters comes in their self-denial: As Jake denies himself the desire to possess Brett, so does Brett let go Romero whom she so much wanted to have.

In the delineation of his themes, Hemingway makes his characters suffer pangs of emotional isolation. They are tormentingly aware of vast communication gap between themselves, and the surrounding mass of humanity. Misunderstood and spurned, they single-handedly bear the brunt of a callous social order and a hostile universe. Like Jake Barnes,

Brett Ashley, too, has been a victim of World War-I as well as sense of alienation. After her lover had been killed in the war, she married Lord Ashley when the war was still going on. She is 34 now, and is "getting a divorce", and is going to marry Mike Campbell, but has a great liking for Jake Barnes. She also worked as V.A.D. (Nurse) in a hospital during the war, where she met Jake and fell in love with him. It is all because of her sense of isolation or alienation that she tries to seek fulfillment through drink and promiscuity. She tries to overcome her sense of alienation by means of sex because sex has become a pure physical activity; her nymphomania is as sterile as the homosexuality of the male expatriates; both the activities are unproductive and meaningless. Like all other Hemingway's characters, Brett, too, suffers from sense of acute alienation. But like all other typical Hemingway's characters, Brett does not have the insight or intelligence to detect the truth behind the existing facts of social conventions, morality and religion. She takes leave from the institutionalized religion and traditional conception of God; she would hang tortuously in a vast void of nothingness with no hope of support, succor or rescue from any source, however unreal and imaginary. But there are critics like Carlos Baker who assert that "Hemingway's heroes are not only the knowing and the thinking ones; they also have the courage to defy or to reject society and have also the moral courage to face the alienation they would find themselves in after stepping out of the human multitude"⁸.

Brett's understanding of Mike Campbell is equally accurate. Although she does not have for him the deep liking and regard she has for Jake, she chooses him for marriage because he does not mind her affairs with other man which is a way of overcoming her alienation and finding. Fulfillment through sex as she herself asserts: "He's my sort of thing". Brett's alienation and her subsequent nymphomania is the direct result of her shattering experiences of war where she not only lost her true love, which developed an acute sense of alienation

in her, but also her faith. If war has made her a disbeliever in religion, it has also made her a believer in facts. And the result of her honest confrontation of life is that she attains maturity, and up to a large extent overcomes her sense of alienation by deciding to regain her lost dignity, her self-respect etc. At long last, she comes out of the dark night of her moral "lostness", and rises again like the sun.

Robert Cohn is also a principal sufferer of the sense of alienation. He belongs to the pre-industrialized life of the rural Spain. Like Pedro Romero, he, too, acts as a foil to the hero. That Cohn has an important place in the novel's pattern of meaning can be seen from his description in the very beginning of the novel something rather unusual in the Hemingway canon. Like other characters in the novel, he, too, suffers from bitter alienation. He tries to overcome his alienation through reading books which, in Hemingway is a derogatory term, meaning the person is out of touch with reality. He cannot grow because he refuses to expose himself to life. His alienation from the group of expatriates makes him behave in a funny manner even with his friends.

The most prominent cause of Cohn's sense of alienation is that he is a Jew by religion. Being a Jew, he has something to do with his alienation from the other expatriates. After the World War I, when most of Americans were expatriates living in either Paris or Spain, the number of Jews was very small. And if the persons of a particular religion are small in number, a sense of alienation is inevitably developed in them. As a result of that, they separate themselves from the rest of communities. The same is the case with Robert Cohn who is a man of books rather than experience; he is a man of clothes rather than flesh and blood. In short, Cohn is totally stranger and alienated from life.

Cohn's failure of marriage also develops in him an acute sense of alienation. He tries to overcome his alienation by indulging himself in fiction writing. Due to this sense of isolation, an inferiority complex and a sense of insecurity is developed in him. He tries to find out comfort in boxing. As a result of this, Cohn has been a failure on all fronts, yet he has been successful in getting a publisher for his first novel. Despite all this, Stallman traces the qualities of a gentleman in Cohn's character and with all his faults-egoism, sentimentalism, lack of self-respect etc., - Cohn has been viewed by Arthur Scott as an upholder of "heroic values".

Like all other characters, Pedro Romero, too, suffers from an acute sense of alienation. He is the perfect representative of code hero in the novel. He is an example of almost a primitive character for whom Jake's problems of consciousness are non-existent because he himself is victim of sense of alienation. He is not able to pay attention towards the problems of Jake and others in the novel. For Romero, the relationship with a woman is primarily a matter of sex in which he tries to overcome his sense of alienation. In other words, Romero's experience of life, like that of a circus animal, is limited to one single activity and that is bull fighting. That shows his extreme painful state of mind suffering from alienation and loneliness.

It is because of his sense of alienation that Romero ignores Brett as well as life which proves to be a limitation of his character. He is a bull fighter, yet because of his sense of alienation, he is a model of behavior who does not understand Hemingway's conception of heroism. Romero as a bull fighter can be compared to the bull fighter who appears in *Death in the Afternoon*. Because of his sense of alienation, Romero is given to introspection and, that is why, he does not excel in his profession of bull fighting. Apart from these major characters, many minor characters such as Bill and Mike, Wilson Harris and the Count

Mippulous are the victims of brutality of World War I. Like other characters, they too, suffer from a deep sense of alienation.

The important Hemingway characters, thus, live and move about enveloped in a thick-crusted loneliness amidst the crowd and the multitude of the world. They keep their agonies to themselves and make heroic endeavor to maintain a pose of stoic calmness. But internally, their minds are smoldering cauldrons of burning ideation and argumentative reflection. They have frequently to remind themselves that they should overcome their sense of alienation. It would be better for them if they could just not think. What makes the situation entirely desperate in Hemingway's fiction is the peculiar unconcern and indifference towards others sufferings which are dominant characteristics of an average human mind. This creates a situation of callous unawareness on the part of society even in cases of pathetic attempts at communication by the individual. The individual's natural and driving instincts to love and to be loved and understood and appreciated are doomed to end in disappointment. In sheer frustration he withdraws himself and the problem is well realized by Mr. David Daiches, who observes: "Loneliness is the great reality, love the great necessity: How can the two be brought together?"⁹

In this way after making a close scrutiny of the novel *The sun Also Rises*, we can safely and rightly aver that the "Ideal" presented in the novel is of a "mature" response to the challenges posed by the post World War I consciousness. The sense of alienation presented in the novel through the various characters shows, on the one hand, the weakness of a generation; it also shows, on the other hand, the strength of the generation. There is no doubt in denying the fact that Hemingway's novels are the epics of solitude and emotional isolation. His characters suffer pangs of emotional isolation, and

Hemingway's delineation of their heroic endeavors to grapple single-handedly with a callous social order and a hostile universe, makes his novels epics of solitude. Their awareness of their alienation from the general mass of humanity and its set of values and morals, lends a unique dimension to their quest for a philosophy of life, a code of ethics and a set of values that could give purpose and meaning to life.

Through the alienation of different characters in the novel *The Sun also Rises*, Hemingway's intention is not to present a sordid and pessimistic picture of the society; rather he emphasizes the persistent struggle in life in order to cope with the hostile forces of society. The sense of alienation felt by different characters would be erroneous to conclude that the Hemingway hero is an escapist from the society or that he is socially irresponsible or moral dropout. Denning Brown is obviously not right when he says: "Another sign of Hemingway's fundamental lack of concern with large social problems was his concentration on the theme of isolation and flight. His heroes all repudiated society, considering themselves as something apart from the world about them."¹⁰

In this way, after making a close scrutiny of the novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, we can safely and rightly conclude that not that the heroes of Hemingway's novels are basically unsocial or anti-society, rather they have seen through the realities of social life around them. It is their discovery of their hollowness and vicariousness that has made them disengage their fidelity from the group. The reality of this world is that faith in religion and God is usually disappointing; the prevailing ethics and social conventions are a sham and virtue and morality are mere cloaks for unashamed defiance of all basic principles of honesty, loyalty and righteousness. Hemingway knew that the entire might of the social machinery comes into action against the innocent joys and aspiration of an individual's sentiments, which

taken singly, every individual member of the social mass, holds dear to his heart. The most heinous crimes are committed in the name of religion and God and justice and pateridism. Countries with 'Thou shalt not kill' as their basic religious commandments gave the desolation and man-slaughter of the First World War.

Glory here lies in successfully perpetrating inglorious deeds on weaker people. Patriotism and sacrifice do not mean the laying down of one's life at the alter of one's motherland or of any noble cause. They simply mean paying tribute to the mean, self-seeking and ambitious schemes of mischievous and corrupt politicians. With such injustice, cruelty and moral chaos prevailing and also thriving in the world, it is too heavy a weight on one's faith to believe that the world is ruled by a God who is just, merciful and omnipotent. Prayers to him are of no avail and people wearing the sacred. Hearts of Jesus and Saint Anthonies are shot.

The words sacred and holy sounds hallow and embarrass one. Even if one were to have the ingenuity to steal a little individual happiness from this world and to retire with a lone corner to remain with it forever, one's plans are still beyond to be smashed by the hostile forces of fate or nature.

We can wind up the discussion by saying that Hemingway's depiction of their predicament is truly representative of the predicament of the existence of all the members of human society taken individually, since society is the perfect representation of the real scene prevailing in the whole world. In this connection, the following criterion is fully applicable to Hemingway: "A novel is not life but an image of life, an author's selective interpretation concretely embodied. Every selection from the whole of actuality is an interpretation of the whole of actuality."¹¹

Reference:

1. Ernest Hemingway. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Jr., Jackson Benson. *Hemingway: The Writer's Art of Self-Defense*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969.
5. Ernest Hemingway. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.
6. Ibid.
7. Philip Young. *Ernest Hemingway: Reconsideration*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966.
8. Carlos Baker. *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*, Fourth ed. Princeton. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971.
9. David Daiches. *The Novel and the Modern World*. Cambridge: The University of Chicago Press, At the University Press, 1960.
10. David Daiches. 'Ernest Hemingway', *College English*, May 1941. New York: Kraus Reprint, 1964.
11. Mark Schorer. *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction*. New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1952.