

## ‘ALIENATION’ AND ‘ISOLATION’ IN *IF TODAY BE SWEET* BY THRITY UMRIGAR.

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### Abstract

*Alienation and Isolation are basic aspects of many subjects such as literary, psychological, sociological, and philosophical studies. In the present time, Alienation and Isolation are major theme of human condition especially in immigrant works. The novel, If today be sweet by Thrity Umrigar is a story of an aged woman Tehmina, named as Tammy in America. She came to live in America from Bombay after the death of her husband Rustom. In America, she lives with her Son, Sorab and daughter-in-law, Susan, and with her grandson Cookie. In America, she doesn't find herself as happy as she was in Bombay as she can't adjust herself with a new life in America. She often gets found and scolded on her talking or her chipping to Bombay's memories. Her feeling of comparison becomes panic in her way of life led in America. Like Snow in America reminds her rain in Bombay, and how her own grandson's ill-behaviour reminds her of her own son Sorab's servile and obedient nature at India. Therefore, her life in America becomes for her traumatic experience. This research paper explores the alienation and isolation in the lives of the characters in the novel, especially of Tehmina in this novel. Isolation gets generated out of the characters' feeling with rejection whereas alienation comes out of the newly inappropriate situation. These two aspects can be understood with the help of the character's (Tehmina) feeling in the novel.*

**Keywords:** Trauma, Alienation, Isolation, Comparison, Anxiety.

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### Introduction:

The term immigrant defines a person who comes to live permanent to a foreign country. Immigration is the world-wide movement of a person into a country of which they are not a population or where they don't hold individual nationality. Some of the reasons include, career opportunity in terms of wider access to resources, to escape conflicts like war and violence, family unification, and mainly for economic reason in pursuit of better standard of lifestyle. In addition, the repeal of bias barring laws and the delay of nationality freedom powered pretentious increasing immigration from India. A large-scale immigration of Indians is visible in the United States of America, Canada and European countries.

Alienation is mainly considered as concept or general theme of Modern age. It can be traced as the feelings of speaker or narrator in the literary works of Modern Age. It is also believed that the roots of alienation somewhere lie in the urbanisation, migration, and technology. In the contemporary age, when whole world is thought to be globalised, and therefore, it is understood that it's greatly connected but the connection is more virtual than the real one. Diasporic writings too have alienation as one of the aspects or themes because it takes place in such strange or foreign environment where people are disconnected culturally, socially, religiously, philosophically, and politically. The immigrant community remains always in trauma and alienation due to this disjointedness (not connect with leading culture). Isolation is the process being separate from something and refers to human related problems. There are two types of isolation: physical and emotional. When someone is abjured physically and kept alone at a place where no one is around is called physical isolation. Physical isolation can generally take place in old age, decease, and indifferent people. Emotional isolation is a type of negative feeling which takes place in the

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mind of a person out of hostile and ungenerous attitude of his/her near and dear ones. My paper studies the theme of alienation and isolation in the novel *If Today be Sweet* (2008) by Thrity Umrigar.

The novel revolves around character named Tehmina, named as Tammy in America, who came to live in America from Bombay after the death of her husband Rustom. Here, she struggles to live with her son, Sorab and daughter-in-law, Susan, and with her grandson Cookie as she can't find herself as happy as she was in Bombay. She can't adjust herself with a new life in America. She becomes the victim of alienation and isolation due to the behaviour of her family members, and also due to the new environment in which she can't connect herself, and confronts dilemma whether to live here or to go back.

### **Alienation in the novel:**

Hegel discussed the concept of 'alienation', in his *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, includes separation, strangeness, something becoming alien. When the person stops to identify with the social matter and comes to limit himself/herself to his own specific person, he/she now interpret the matter as something external and opposed (12).

The major element in this novel is alienation. The alienation is revolving around the Indian character Tehmina, who came to live in America from Bombay after the death of her husband Rustom, who at her old age can't accept the life conflicting to what she had viewed and had believed in India. She starts comparing things which are not alike and difference in America. It gets revealed when she is talking with her daughter - in - law named Susan and she said:

what's wrong with you Americans, deekra, you all think too much of laughter and play, as if life was a Walt Disney movie. Something a child would make up. Whereas in India, life is a Bollywood melodrama—full of loss and sadness. And so everyone rejects Bollywood for Disney. Even my Sorab was seduced by your Disney life—all this pursuit of happiness and pursuit of money and pursuit of this and that. (08)

And she also adds to say further that what she learned after being in America. She says: “But this year, I’ve learned a new lesson. Maybe the Indian way is better after all” (08). She also compares that how Indian and Americans are different in their lifestyle:

See how much money you spend on therapists and grief counsellors and all? Even my own son keeps telling me to take that capsule—what is it called?—Prosaic or something. That’s because your periods of mourning don’t last as long as they need to. (08)

Here, Umrigar has successfully expressed Tehmina anxiety and alienation which she is probably feeling from the distance or gap generated between her and her grandchildren. Here she says: “Why talk to a therapist who you have to pay to listen to you, when you can talk to a grandparent or an aunt or uncle? Sort of like visiting a prostitute, isn’t it, having to pay someone to listen to you? (08)” Tehmina always feels strange and awkward with her new life in America. To this, she expresses her anxiety to Eva of her being alien or alienated as she feels Bombay is her home and this place cannot provide the familiar atmosphere of her home in Bombay. She says, “And yet...Bombay is my home. Here, I am afraid that I will always be a stranger, that I will never get used to all these ways” (32). She is aware about her surrounding that how all people and things are different and not the same what she saw in her past days. She feels alienated seeing the changed world around her. Her anxiety towards this changed world is expressed through the following lines:

Tehmina remembered the old science-fiction cartoons they used to show before the feature film in Bombay when she was a kid. Many of them starred robots carrying out the wishes of their masters. But here in America, it seemed as if the opposite had happened--the humans had become the robots, carrying out the wishes of their mechanized gadgets. (26-7)

In the novel, Tehmina alienation comes across such a border which is related to home and homeland and due to feel alien and unable to set in America. According to McLeod ‘Home’ means “a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves” (210). The word ‘Homeland’ “describe the person native land or birthplace where a: cultural, national, or racial individuality had shaped.” In the novel,

Tehmina is in dilemma to choice between 'home' where her son along with his family lives and 'homeland' where there is no one to look after her. Homi Bhabha discussed the live of immigrants as "border lives" in *The Location of Culture* (1994). He proposes the word 'borders' that indicates the end of one place and beginning of new place with various differences which includes the cultural, racial, gender, religious or ethnical grounds depending on the situation. Raghuram writes on different aspects of borders by framing the diasporic identities in his research paper "Thinking Indian Diaspora for Our Times." He says:

We emphasise the ability of diasporic thinking to play with boundaries—on their maintenance, reconfiguration, unsettling, and on boundary conflicts and negotiations. The types of boundaries traversed may be physical, political, social, cultural and emotional... Importantly, these borders crossing also bring up unexpected alliances and collisions with the politics surrounding others markers of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality, especially as they relate to nationality, nationalism and transnationalism. (05)

Another sense of alienation she feels when she hears her name sounding like of foreigner or alien. When her friend, Eva, call her "Tammy" and she impatiently reply that she doesn't like her name as Tammy: "No. No, not like that. I wanted to ask—can you call me Tehmina instead of Tammy? After all, that's my real name" (34). Jan Hajda, Professor in Sociology in America, gives a concept of "alienation", to be alienated is to feel "uncomfortably different in the presence of [others] because of one's views ... interests ... personal tastes...(37), in his paper "Alienation and Integration of Student Intellectuals", and this concept is perfect fit in this situation of Tehmina.

### **Isolation in the novel:**

Isolation as a thematic aspect gets reflected in the life of Tehmina when she gets rejected either by her views or her care or her total existence in the new home. It was an incidence when Tehmina was taking side of her grandchildren and expressing her views on how her daughter-in-laws should take care of the grandchild. On this, her daughter-in-law spoke to her in a way that she feels lonely and is in someone else's home. Susan says to Tehmina:



You have a good heart, Mom. I really appreciate that, but I want you to listen to me--I don't ever want to have those boys over again. I hope you can respect my decision. In nut-sell, as per narratives, she should accept the fact in the words' of her daughter-in-law: 'when you're in my house, you follow my orders. (20)

Another time she feels rejected is when her grandson does not appreciate the way she addresses him as Tehmina calls him Cavas instead of his English name Cookie. On this, he replies to her: "My name is not Cavas," he sang. "It's Cookie. And don't use Gujarati words when you talk to me. I'm an American boy and I only understand English." (71). Here, we can find the reflection of Uma Parameswaran's concept of 'Four Phase in the total Canadian immigrant experience.' This four phase describes the struggles of immigrant. Third phase is perfectly fit in the Tehmina conversation with Cavas. This describes opinions of first-generation migrants and second-generation migrants. Third phase shows that dislike of first-generation migrants, refers to the very first immigrants or to the children. When the second-generation migrants, refer to the children or the grandchildren, feel their home is in migrants country not elsewhere. Second-generation cannot relate to the homeland but in the same way as the first-generation migrants do. In the novel, Cavas is belong to second-generation, and consider himself as American not Indian, and that's he don't like his name as Cavas and Indian language. For Tehmina such humiliation became for her everyday scenario. And she finds the absence of communication with her family in Ohio.

We can such kind of isolation in the novel of Anita Desai's *The Village By The Sea* (1982) where the absence of communication is take place with the characters Hari and Lila. They are very different with each other and while Lila wants to express herself, her brother is silent: "He did not feel like talking. He never did talk much and always preferred to think things out very slowly and carefully before he did" (15). This gap of communication take place in family is increases their isolation.

Gabrielle Cubille discussed the role of family in the creation of isolation in his research work "Alienation and Isolation of the characters in Anita Desai's novels Fire on the

Mountain, The Village by the Sea, Fasting Feasting and in the collection of short stories Games at Twilight.” He says that the family has played a big role in the in the formation of isolation, so it becomes one of the social pressure. In certain cases, it is a huge consuming monster that keeps eating the liveliness and the individuality of its members (07).

For Tehmina, this daily phenomenon seemed to her mere disturbance to her normal peace. So for finding peace, she goes back in the past or in her memories of old days at Bombay when she had all the life to live fully. This going in flashback shows her isolation and loneliness in her own towards presence. The word ‘loneliness’ indicates Tehmina disturbance of her regular normal peace due to her relations. This disturbance pressure is leading her to isolation. Jenny de Jong Gierveld discussed the concept of ‘loneliness’ in his research paper “A review of loneliness: concept and definitions, determinants and consequences.” He says:

Loneliness is a condition experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant relations. This indicates conditions in which the number of present relationships is smaller than is considered desirable as well as situations where the closeness has not been realized. Therefore, loneliness is understood to include the manner in which the person observation, experiences, and evaluates his or her isolation and absence of communication with other people. (73-74)

To temporarily forget her loneliness, Tehmina goes back in her memories of old days at Bombay. She also compares her role in Bombay and present in Ohio. She said to Eva:

See, there, in Bombay, I feel like a person—a person whose life has meaning, whose life follows a path. Here, despite all of Sorab’s efforts, I can’t help but feel like an ornament, a decoration. Sort of like a package that someone has dropped off at his door. I think—what I’m saying, Eva, is—I don’t feel needed here. Apart from the occasional worry, the children will be perfectly happy without me here. (32)

This loneliness was not just because of the behaviour of the grandson or daughter-in-law but also because of the emptiness that has created in her life after her husband's death. Even searching someone or trying to find out someone who doesn't exist can be called the greater strength of isolation as a characteristic in the character Tehmina. She misses her husband on discovering how Susan seems indifferent to her, she comes to realise that she missed her husband who used to cool the environment and was a dear company to her:

Tehmina remembered how Susan had been during her past visits to the United States—relaxed, fun-filled, happy. Something was different this time around, something was missing, and Tehmina knew exactly what— who—was missing. Her dearly departed Rustom was not with her this time. (06)

### Conclusion:

In the novel, Thrity Umrigar successfully describes the alienation and isolation with the help of Tehmina. Tehmina as a character is not only alienated or alien herself in the place of other people where everyone has their own lifestyle and ways to deal with. To this ways, she can't deal with, and that's why the question of connection and the question of stay or live get settled and resolved. Since 'stay' is a term which denotes a short residing to a place; whereas lives denotes permanency. And therefore, for Tehmina, it was necessary to adjust and accept the situation. Another situation which is of isolation, which is obvious and as a consequence of alienation, it was bound to come as a part of it. However, isolation can't be generated from society or social institution. It is emotional aspect and more concerned with the family unit. Therefore, rejection from family or family member or ignorance from family or feeling lonely in the absence of someone who is dead now as a result, comes isolation. In short, she becomes the victim of alienation and isolation due to the behaviour of her family members, and also due to the new environment in which she can't connect herself, and this both aspects put her in dilemma whether to live in America or to go back to India.



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