

THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN THE NOVELS OF J.D.SALINGER

R.THIRUVALLUVAN

Of all his writings J.D.Salinger wished to preserve only a novel and thirteen short stories, all published between 1948 and 1959, mostly in *The New Yorker*. In spite of his limited body of work, Salinger was the most popular American Fiction Writer among serious youngsters and vast number of alienated adults because of the way in which he served as a spokesman for the feelings of his generation. His work is of unique interest as evidence of the sensibility of those times. Like Eliot or Melville, Salinger is full enough of quotations from world literature and references to writers to suggest his own literary context and tradition. Reference range astonishingly through the poetry and religious literature of the oriental countries like India, China and Japan, and the occidental literature of many European countries. But in spite of this wide scattering of interests and attractions, the fact remains that Salinger is American novelist writing in the American tradition.

The hero in every Salinger story becomes a reflection of a moral code arising out of a cult of innocence, love, alienation and finally redemption. These heroes form a particularly adolescent troupe of spiritual non-conformists, tough minded and fragile, humorous and heart breaking. These moral heroes are forced to compromise their integrity with a pragmatic society. What disaffiliate the heroes are their peculiar off-center vision which sensitizes and distorts their sense of truth in a false world.

In the earliest stories of Salinger the reader gets the sense that the hero is justifiably an object of ridicule, like the intellectual fool named Justin Horgenschlag of *Heart of Broken Story* (1941). For the first time, Salinger introduced the character of Joe Varioni Brothers (1943) as a writer – artist. In the character of Joe Varioni, Salinger crystallizes the character who will dominate his later fiction – the misfit hero. Unlike his predecessors, Joe is talented, kind and sensitive. Yet, he stands apart from society because he is docile as well as brilliant. Unequipped for the tough world around him, Joe's submissiveness leads to his downfall. It is apparent to note that what had been funny in *Heart of Broken Story* became no laughing matter in *Varioni Brothers*. Undoubtedly Varioni Brother has created the image of the misfit hero. Every succeeding story developed the hero's alienation from society. Salinger's wartime stories accentuated the hero's isolation from the good past and the corrupt world.

Vincent Caulfield, the hero of the wartime story, *This Sandwich Has No Mayonnaise* (1945), is separated from his affectionate family, especially from his lovable brother, Holden, who is 'missing in action'. The thought of separation from his family accentuates himself to be alienated from other soldiers. Vincent is 'drenched to the bone', the bone of loneliness, the bone of silence'. "The soldier's initiation into the terrors of war parallels to the child's initiation into the sordidness of the adult world. What is so horrifying is neither war's physical brutality nor society's overt prejudices but rather the subtle dehumanization, the insidious loneliness and the paralysing lovelessness. Thus, each character becomes a war casualty just as the earlier characters were casualties of society". [1]

Salinger's such early vision is culminated in the post war world of *The Inverted Forest* (1947) in which an innocent and talented poet, Raymond Ford, destroys himself. Raymond Ford inherits the qualities of Joe Varioni. Salinger makes use of Raymond Ford's peculiar qualities in developing the protagonist, Seymour

Glass. Isolated childhood life of Ford left him unequipped to cope with the hard, insensitive world in which he must live. He does not smoke or drink in the early period of his life because he is afraid of dulling his sense of taste. What makes him a misfit in society cannot be compromised.

Salinger is successful in interpreting the meaning of the 'Vision' literally and metaphorically. Reading of poetry twenty hours a day badly damaged Raymond's eyes. His impaired vision required him to wear two pairs of glasses, one for reading and another for regular use. In an attempt to reconcile these two worlds – reading and real- Ford ruined himself. His attempt to recover from it cost both worlds. He returns to the miserable state of his childhood when he saw neither poetry nor the real world. Salinger's insight into his hero's dilemma is now clear. The point for Raymond is that he is a misfit and can never be accepted by society. His vision becomes a problem insoluble. With it he cannot live in society: without it he cannot live with himself. Ford destroyed himself through his vision when he sacrificed his personal world to try to bridge the chasm between himself and society. Against this world of false values, false gods, and 'phonies' the misfit hero finds that his sense of taste is not enough. The off- centre vision in the Inverted Forest is further developed in the succeeding year's work.

To turn to the period of Salinger's major aesthetic successes is to enter a world of psychically under privileged persons rarely saved by love. A perfect Day for Banana Fish depicts the birth of Glass family when Seymour Glass, the eldest son in the family, commits suicide at the age of twenty five. Developing from the mould of Joe Varioni, Vincent Caulfield and Raymond Ford, Seymour becomes the prototype for the whole Glass family. He is shown as sensitive, intelligent, imaginative, loving, combining a whimsical sense of humour and an overbearing sense of his own misfortunes in the modern world. Released from Army Hospital, Seymour is unable to adjust to life with his pompous wife. Muriel, his wife, seems to be incapable of giving Seymour the love that will make him whole.

A part of Seymour's case history is given in one long telephone call. His lifeless life with his wife occupies the first part of the story, while the second part reveals Seymour's needs and emotional state in a scene culminating with his suicide.

Salinger skillfully manipulates the image which suggests an underlying motif: Seymour's sexual inadequacy. Like his forerunners, Seymour forms his most satisfying relationship with a sexually immature female child. Salinger juxtaposes the delightful conversation and relationship, Seymour has with that little girl on the beach with his total inability to communicate with any of the adults around him. "The real success of A Perfect Day for Banana Fish rests upon the way that the disturbed young man, deprived of love, recognizes symbolically the inevitability of his destruction". [2] Seymour has shot himself, seated on the bed next to his sleeping wife.

Seymour is off the stage during the entire 'drama' enacted in the story Raise High The Roof Beam, Carpenters (1955). Method of 'daily and letter' narration by Buddy, Seymour's beloved brother, is tried by J.D. Salinger in this story. Salinger resurrects Seymour through his brother Buddy to shed more light on the earlier story.

It is also holds the key to further evolution of the misfit hero. Highly distracted misfit hero is present, unable to reconcile his Zen Buddhism with his society's pragmatism.

Salinger has made the written word the mode of communication for his hero. Joe Varioni is writer; Raymond Ford is a poet and Seymour keeps diaries. In choosing the private world over the public world of hero has compromised the basic Western principle of social responsibility. Salinger's heroes do not attempt to compromise between the pure spiritual world and the corrupted day-to-day world. They try to disassociate from public world and run away to private world. All this is due to their confusion of their private world with their souls. Seymour is not strong enough for the way of Zen. For all his excellent qualities he is unequipped to resolve the idea of Zen with the fact of the public world in which he must live daily. The way of the holy man is too difficult for Seymour. "Salinger's misfit who is a hero is really a hero who is a misfit; a misfit in society because he refuses to adjust and a misfit in the private world because he cannot pass through its dark night of the soul". [3]

His narrators, Buddy Glass, is construed as the mouthpiece of Salinger by many critics. Salinger is thus committed to the fiction that all his stories have been written by Buddy Glass. "Salinger's real use for the first-person narrator is to give him an opportunity to introduce a voice, to allow him the passionate, colloquial, expansive rhetoric that characterizes his work ". [4] Buddy Glass, his narrator, was born as the second child to the Glass family in 1919 as was J.D.Salinger himself. Like Salinger, who tried thrice in vain, he never finished college. He lived alone in a small unwinterized, un electrified house. Salinger's hero Seymour, his brother Seymour, sister Zooey and in fact all the Glass children are seen wrestling with the problem of how to be their exceptional selves and still remain a part of their community, viewed through the Glass family as a whole, Salinger's vision of heroic life is quite clear. It consists in a struggle that, with only minor modifications, American Heroes have been going through the last hundred years of American literature. That uncalculated coincidence helps the reader to see more clearly what American tradition is and how close to the center of it Salinger's work, for all its traditional novelty of observation and expression, really is.

Salinger's most ambitious presentation of aspects of contemporary alienation, and his most successful capture of an American Audience, is in his only novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is the brief account of Holden Caulfield, a sixteen year-old-boy who escapes to New York after flunking out of his third preparatory school. The novel is written as the Boy's comment, half-humorous, half-agonizing, concerning his attempt to recapture his identity and his hopes for belonging by playing a man-about-town for almost, partially tragic, certainly frantic weekend. *The Catcher in the Rye* is a full-length novel, and yet gives much the effect of his shorter pieces. Its dimension is extrinsic to the narrative and is measured by the reader's response to the dialogue, and the back-ground of city America. It is apparent that Holden Caulfield is so aware of the discrepancies between the surface intentions and the submerged motives of himself and of his acquaintances, that he cannot feel at ease in any world.

The very young adolescents are likely to identify with Holden Caulfield and to see the adult world. He sojourns as completely phony and worthless. The book thus becomes a handbook for rebels and a guide to the failure of the establishment. The older generation is likely to identify with some part of the society that is satirized

and to see Holden as a bright but sick boy whose psyche needs adjustment before he can find his fitting position and settle down.

The episodic nature of its structure is apparent by going through the summery of *The Catcher in the Rye* brief. The plot of the story concerns the three-day odyssey of Holden Caulfield after he has been expelled from Pencey Prep in Pennsylvania for bad grades and general irresponsibility. At the outset, Holden is in mental hospital in California recovering from a mental breakdown. He says that he is not going to tell his life history but just the story of mad things that happened to him around last Christmas.

Being expelled from the school, Holden starts out on the terrible journey to his home in New York to face his parents after his latest in a series of expulsions. The journey becomes a combination of nightmare and burlesque where horror and comedy mix in the inexplicable fashion. Despite his encounters with people, he is yet to have a genuine engagement. On the train to New York, Holden meets the mother of one of his classmates and lies like a mad man to reassure her of her illusions about sensitive son.

He drifts into the company of three female tourists in a nightclub and gets compelled to foot the entire evenings bill. Back at his hotel, a call girl by name Sunny visits him. She is prompted by the elevator boy. Feeling of more depression than sex, he tells her he is not in the mod. This creates a scene of hundred per cent hike than the agreed-on-price of five dollars. So ends the first day of Holden's Odyssey.

On the next day, Sunday, the journey beings again but now with a new cast of characters. Holden's first encounter with two nuns at breakfast is a pleasant one. Holden then beings to drift with the day. He passes a poor boy who is singing a 'rye' song; he walks over to his beloved Natural History Museum, but decides not to go in. After his quarrel with Sally Hayes, his girl friend, he is left alone. After seeing phony movie, he meets Carl Luce, his old schoolmate now at Columbia. After his departure, Holden is once again left alone which prompts him to get drunk. Rebuffed by sally, called by him, he goes to sister phoebe, alone in the family apartment. After a challenge from here to name something he likes, and after he settles on being a catches in the rye, keeping little kids from falling over, 'some crazy cliff'. Holden goes over to stay the night with his former English teacher Mr. Antolini. He comes there just after the end of a drinking party. Paternal advice of Mr. Antolini on the meaning of genuine maturity in the adolescents lull him to sleep on the couch. Holden awakens in fright to find Mr. Antolini patting on the head. He suspects him to being homosexual and panic-stricken flees from his house.

As Holden leaves the Antolini's apartment the light of Monday morning is brightening the sky. But his only thought is to execute immediately his plan to run off to the west. He writes Phebe a note at school to meet him at noon near the Metropolitan Museum. As he is waiting for her, he visits the depths of the Egyptian tomb. He feels sick, passes out briefly and recovers, to go out to meet Phobe. She is prepared to run away with him but he persuade her not to do so. They visit the Zoo, watch the bears briefly and then go to the Carrousal. As she rides round and round on the carousal, Holden makes up his mind to say, to quit running. And in the middle of drenching rain, as he watches Phoebe go around in her endless circle on the Carrousal, he beings to feel 'so damn happy' that he ends up 'damn near bawling'.

"The Catcher of The Rye inevitably stands out as Salinger's only novel to date. As a 'Neo picaresque' the book shows itself to be concerned far less with the education or imitation of an adolescent than with a dramatic exposure of the manner in which ideals are denied access to our lives and of the modes which mendacity assumes in our urban culture. The moving, even stabbling qualities of the novel derive, even to some extent, from Salinger's refusal to adopt a satirical stance. The work, instead, confirms the saving grace of vulnerability, its protest, debunking and indictments presuppose a willing responsiveness on the part of its hero". [5]

Holden's vocabulary and imagery form the texture of the narrative. His 'touchstone' is 'Phony', representing his resentment against the people and the institutions that ask for his loyalty. Teachers, parents, girl friends—nearly all are phony. When he likes them or loves them, the painfulness of their limitation becomes nearly unbearable. He is vulnerable and wishes instinctively to be kind to people and to believe that they are 'nice'. He goes to say goodbye to Mr. Spenser, even though he knows that he will be lectured on his failures, even though he knows that Mr. Spenser is a Phony, too, hanging on to his miserable job as if it were a post of distinction. His flattering to the lady on the train to protect her from her knowledge that her son is a 'bastard' is only when he realizes that she is phony. He would like to conform to the standards of the phony society, and makes several attempts to do so, but always fails, partly because of his spiritual reservations but fully as much because he lacks the skill to be a successful man of the world. He hates the phoniness of movies, yet his reverie is filled with imagery from films. When he dreams of escape it is in terms of Hollywood visions of going back to nature or becoming a farm-hand in the Western frontier."---the main reason for Caulfield's communicative difficulty lies in his absolute hatred for phonies. And he finds that Phoniness, that hypocrisy, not only in the world of his personal contacts, but in the world of art as well. He detests Phony books, phony music, phony movies and plays. He sees Hamlet as a 'sad, screwed-up type guy' and wants him played that way instead of 'like a goddam general'. Likewise he is bothered by the way people 'clap for the wrong things' and hence corrupt the promising artist ".[6]

The Catcher in the Rye is Salinger's most eloquent defense of innocence in conflict with an adult moral world. There is certain logic in Salinger's choice of an adolescent protagonist. The chastity of adolescence needs little explanation. It is to children and to nuns that Holden turns briefly as outposts of the distant pedestal. Although he loved Jane, he never puts the purity of his love to any test of physical expression. He avoids contacting her. What is suggested or hinted at in his earlier work is fully grown in his novel- the idealization of the celibate, the chaste, and the innocent.

The protagonist, Holden Caulfield, is one of the American heroes, but with a significant difference. He seems to be engaged in both sorts of pursuits at once; he needs to go home and he needs to leave it. Unlike the other American Knight errants like Huck Finn, Holden seeks virtue second to Love. He wants to be good. When the little children are playing in the rye-field on the Clifftop, Holden wants to be the one who catches them before they fall off the cliff. He is not driven towards honour or courage. He is not driven towards love of woman. Holden is driven towards love of his fellow-man, charity -virtues. But like these American heroes, Holden is a wanderer, for in order to be good he has to be more of a bad boy than the puritanical Huck could have imagined. To be catcher in the rye in this world is possible only at the price of leaving it.

Holden's quest may be stated in a number of ways. In one sense, his quest to preserve an innocence that is in peril of vanishing – the innocence of childhood. In another sense, the quest is a quest for an ideal but inhuman love that will meet all demands but make none. Perhaps in its profoundest sense Holden's quest is a quest for identity, a search for the self. And that self he discovers is a human self and an involved self that cannot break the 'magnetic chain of humanity'; he cannot deny the love within him when he begins to miss all the people he has told about.

Millions of young Americans of Fifties and Sixties felt closer to Salinger than to any other writer. "... that many people have accepted Salinger's characters, Holden Caulfield as a brother and Seymour Glass as a private and sainted memory".[7] In the first place he speaks their language. He not only speaks it, just as Hemingway did in Twenties.

"The talk of his characters, is so to speak, righter than right. The voice of

Holden Caulfield is a voice we instantly recognize, and yet there is just that always of stylistic intensification that always distinguishes good dialogue".[8]

Holden is worried about the world in which he finds himself is adults and adult values.

" He goes that world belongs to adults, and it seems to him that they have filled it with all kind of phonies, pretense, social compromise. He would prefer a world that is honest, sincere, simple. He is looking, as Ihab Hassan notes, for 'Simple truth'. Such a quest is doomed from the start: there are no simple truths. In a complex modern society truth, too, is complex, and a certain amount of social compromise is necessary". [9]

Holden's search was rather a pilgrimage. He struck through the mask of pretension everywhere. His pursuit of people continued despite hurts and revolts. He sought the genuine, the sincere, the pure, the innocent, the beautiful; he tried to purify himself; he gave himself in large handfuls; he refused to be normal because to be normal was to be a phony but safe.

But Holden is not merely a rebel. What is strongest in him is his compassion. He is full of tenderness towards his sister Phoebe and as well as all children. He is touched by all persons casually met on his pilgrimage – by the woman on the train, by the girls in the night club, by the nuns in the station – and he always wants them to be at peace and feel happy. In the end he feels sorry even for those who have hurt him. "Holden is a rebel. He revolts against the world of grown-ups. But his revolt takes the form of an escape from this world. He does not want to become grown-up himself". [10]

Some critics agree that the chief merits of the book are descriptions of Modern American Life and the honesty of the writers. The world surrounding Holden is barren and dreary. The sixteen-year-old adolescent boy is along among the tired spiritually bankrupt people. He cannot find a place for himself in his life. Holden comes to the view that he is the only sane being among psychopaths and living corpses. His destination is not known to him in this weary world. "According to this searching interpretation, Holden is a truly tragic figure, a wanderer with no place to call his won, a pilgrim kept forever from Jerusalem". [11]

Holden's placement in the Psychiatrist's couch in California, apparently on the way to some kind of recovery from his spiritual collapse, allow him a free play of mind around the events he recounts, enabling him to see them from a more objective perspective than he could possibly have had during their actual happening. His state in the hospital enables him also to move back beyond those three critical days into his past in recollection of more distant excursions, encounters, and collisions that seem somehow to have a bearing on his predicament. This point of view result in the novel's marvelous richness of texture.

" The emergent vision in the whole of Salinger's work is one the potential of the spiritual self and the elusiveness of that self, which is always ahead of the movement of the particular moment. He sees the inner self as potentially loving, compassionate, in touch with a human goodness that encompasses the mysteries of the world: in this sense, it is a vision of hope and carries with it a celebration of life ". [12]

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**Prof.R.Thiruvalluvan,
PG & Research Dept. of English,
Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai,
Tamilnadu, India**