Chapter V

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An attempt has been made in the foregoing study to examine the English Canadian woman novelist Audrey Thomas with reference to the theme of alienation that runs through her works. It has also been attempted to find out whether there are specific patterns of alienation revealed in the novel. The condition of alienation is a characteristic experience of man in the 20th century. This subject has, of course, been most competently examined by John Moss (1974) in his well-known book Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian fiction. The present study may have been inspired by John Moss, but the approach and the mode of analysis adopted are different from John Moss's.

In analyzing the alienated condition of life of the characters, the study has focussed on categories like the causes, and consequences, and manifestations of alienation and also on the struggle against the impact of alienation. These four elements explain what an alienated person is alienated from, how the condition of alienation is manifested, what the consequences of alienation are and what strategies have been adopted by the characters to fight against and overcome alienation.
Erich Fromm (1956) describes an alienated individual as one who is out of touch with himself as well as with any other person, and with experiences that have no relatedness to himself or to the world outside productively. The estranged person feels guilty for being himself and yet not being so, for being alive yet being an automation and for being a person and a thing simultaneously. Fromm believes that the sense of alienation can be overcome by mental health or by the ability to love and to create.

Audrey describes the frustration and sense of alienation following the ambitious struggle for success. And life seems to be a simple game between hope and misunderstanding. Moreover, it only helps in increasing the sense of insecurity of man.

Alienation is a structure of experience which is characteristic of modern civilization. The structure can be related to the existential dilemma and one’s perception of the world as an absurd theatre in which there is an utter breakdown of human relationships and breakdown of all communications.

Members of the human society, micro or macro are interdependent. They cannot satisfy their wants by themselves. They need human company. But feeling and living integrated with the society is
prolematic because all that is individual cannot get social approval. Even on the microlevel, one is in conflict with fellow members and the conflict may so intense as to create a chasm between the individual and others.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that this study has a relevance to the present-day global scenario in a larger sense. This study is a reflection of not merely the women’s urge for emancipation but a manifestation of a much more deep-rooted psychic condition which affects the female of the species.

As K.S. Ramamurthi (1993) has observed, the predicaments in which modern Canadian women:

find themselves are perhaps the predicaments in which any sensitive woman anywhere in the modern world may find herself and typify the neurotic states into which a self-conscious woman may fall under the stresses and strains of modern life when her dreams and aspirations are crushed under the weight of a male-dominated social order which is insensitive to her finer feelings. (Com.Lit. 207).
From this point of view, a study of this kind does have a universal validity, a relevance to the present-day global scene. Though these patterns of alienation have been examined in a colonial context in the context of immigrant experience and with reference to psychological states, the experience of alienation is in its essence a universal condition which goes far beyond all these boundaries. In fact, it is this dimension which is perceived only in a careful in-depth study which raises these novels from the boundaries of Canadian literature and makes them a part of world literature. This may sound too far to describe but it is a claim which can be amply justified.

Audrey Thomas, like Margaret Atwood, Gabriella Roy, Margaret Lawrence, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant and others, is a living English Canadian Woman novelist. Audrey Thomas, like her contemporaries, reveals an insistent perception of the conditions of women’s existence in diverse situations in life and relationships with their environment.

Thematically, Audrey Thomas’s novels reveal a preoccupation with the experiences of joy, sorrow, loss, fear, innocence, guilt, sanity and madness; with creativity, modes of existence, and with the fractured nature of contemporary life.
Alienation is a predominant theme in the novels of Audrey Thomas. Highly pervasive throughout the novels are different modes and conditions of alienated existence. Many of the alienated characters in Audrey Thomas’ novels wage a struggle against the alienated condition of their life. The protagonists struggle psychologically and physically.

After a survey of available criticism on and the published interviews with Audrey Thomas, it was identified that different dimensions of alienation offered ample scope for research investigation. The investigation proposed to examine the probable patterns of alienation in its different facets.

On the thematic level, woman’s position and conditions of existence in the patriarchal social structure have been narratively presented in the novels of Audrey Thomas. The novels present the quest of the women protagonists for self definition, self-identity and autonomy and their struggle to create a space for themselves.

Individually and collectively, the psyche and existence of the alienated characters are derived from the social institutions, including that of the family. This may have a broad applicational relevance to contemporary life which is the matrix of the alienated characters.
There are several frames of reference using which Canadian novels can be examined. For instance, they can be studied with reference to various themes running through them, such as the theme of womanhood from the social and sociological perspective, the multiculturalist existence, the quest for female space, creativity, ambivalence and so on. They can also be examined with reference to structure and narrative modes. The question of Canadian identity also figures in most of the critical studies. But the major dimension in Canadian fiction is the experience of alienation, though the condition of alienation may be regarded as the characteristic mode of existence of twentieth century men and women in general. Audrey Thomas, a contemporary novelist, has projected this theme of alienation successfully in her novels.

A survey of secondary sources on Audrey Thomas and the published personal interviews with Audrey Thomas have led to the identification of alienation as a major theme that runs through the novels of Audrey Thomas. The main characters feel that they have been cut off from their own surroundings. It was resolved to study the factors that cause alienation and the ways in which it manifests itself. It was also decided to focus on the consequences of alienation and on the protagonists’ response to their alienated condition in life.
Alienation arises through the characters’ failure to relate themselves with fellow members and things in the immediate environment. This failure to relate and integrate themselves with things other than themselves made the alienated characters develop some sort of uncertainty about themselves and led them to question themselves and others.

Almost all the characters of Audrey Thomas fall a prey to passion and excitability. They turn against others or against their ownself. Frank Davey (1974) comments thus on Audrey Thomas’ writing:

Her narrators are confused misinformed and frequently tortured individuals. They know at best only a fragment of the story which they are living, their speech can be garbled by their confusion and pain. It is not their that Audrey Thomas presents but the condition of living such Lives, and she does this vividly (254).

The initial focus of the present study is on identifying the sources and causes of alienation. The focus is also turned on the various manifestations and the consequences of alienation which may range from the personal
to the social. Alienation from one self and withdrawal into oneself and from the environment have been analysed. The potential and actual termination of existing relationships as a result of alienation has also been examined. The investigation has also focussed attention on the major strategies adopted by the characters to overcome the condition of alienation in their lives. Accepting new conditions, forging new relationships and resigning oneself to the present condition are some of the responses of the characters to their alienated condition. Quest into the roots of alienation and the effort to resolve the past crisis which is the cause of alienation have also been examined as major strategies undertaken by the protagonists.

The discussion then focusses on the consequences of alienation. Major characters like Isobel in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, Mrs. Blood and *Blown Figures*, Miranda and Munchmeyer in *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island*, Rachel and Michael in *Latakia*, Alice in *Intertidal life*, Charlotte in *Graven Images* and William in *Coming Down From Wa* feel that they have been excluded from their family and society in some way or other.

The first chapter has briefly examined twentieth century Canadian fiction and the place of Audrey Thomas in the contemporary English
Canadian world of fiction. The introductory chapter has dwelt at some length on the history of Canadian women novelists. It has also presented the background of women novelists in Canadian literature with particular focus on Audrey Thomas. The scope of the study has been indicated in this chapter. It has also briefly discussed some of the major themes and techniques of Audrey Thomas’ novels. Relevant criticism of Audrey Thomas has been reviewed in this chapter with a view to justifying the topic of research. This chapter has also examined the concept of alienation from different perspectives including the individual and the social aspects. It has briefly examined different components of alienation like the causes, the manifestations and the consequences of alienation. It has also outlined the attempts made by various characters to overcome alienation.

The second chapter has discussed the causes of alienation. The predominant causes of alienation were identified as displacement, split personality, sense of insecurity and breaking down of relationships. The chapter has attempted to show how in the lives of the characters one or more of these causal factors usher in frustration and discontent which result in alienation. Mrs. Blood, Miranda, Rachel, Alice and Sandy feel that they have been excluded from the society in some way or other.
This leads to their experiencing frustration which, consequently, leads to a sense of alienation. The experience ranges from a sense of insecurity through disillusionment, incompatibility and split love between two persons to a sense of mystery.

Various types of movement of characters from one space to the other(s) have been examined under categories like periodical / arranged displacement, voluntary displacement, and forced and necessary displacement. Periodical and arranged displacement of Isabel in *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, voluntary displacement of William in *Coming Down From Wa*, of Charlotte and Lydia in *Graven Images*, of Isobel in *Blown Figures* and of Miranda in *Prospero on the Island*, the necessary displacement of Mrs.Blood / Mrs.Thing in *Mrs.Blood* and the forced displacement of Munchmeyer in *Munchmeyer*, Rachel in *Latakia* and Alice in *Intertidal life* have been analysed in an effort to show how the alienated condition of existence of the characters has been caused by some form of spatial displacement. All these characters try to have the power to determine the mode of displacement, but many lack the ability, for various reasons, to decide and to act. Each of them is in search for peace in her/his life. Isobel’s working voluntarily in the asylum in *Songs My Mother Taught me* is an illustration. Isobel remarks: “In many ways it was
easier for me to cope with the avowed madness of ward 88 than the
glossed over violence of my home “”(145). Mrs.Blood admits in the African
hospital that her aim is “To prepare myself for the journey…”(83). Isobel’s
journey to Africa and William’s and Charlotte’s movement away from
home are motivated by their intense urge to resolve the mystery haunting
their families. Rachel, Alice and Miranda displace themselves not only to
ease themselves out of their alienation, but to turn their writing into a
therapeutic exercise.

Another major cause of alienation is split personality. The self is
neither constant nor stable. It shifts identity and writing is one way to try
to understand and clarify the positions occupied by that identity. This is
evident in all the novels, but is particularly strong in the Isobel Carpenter
trilogy Songs My Mother Taught Me, Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures.

In Songs My Mother Taught Me the split is between the narrating “I”
and “Isobel”, in Mrs. Blood between first person and third person narrators
and in Blown Figures between Isobel’s multiple selves like I / Isobel / Miss.
Miller. In many respects the split as found between Mrs. Thing and Mrs.
Blood, Lydia and Miss. Miller, Rachel’s love and hatred and Alice’s love
and hate relationship arises from the conflict within the characters and it
leads to a strong sense of alienation.
Another main cause of alienation is the feeling of insecurity. Isobel’s family’s economic condition, pretensions, frequent shifting of living place and quarrels between the two parents create a sense of insecurity in the mind of Isobel in *Songs My Mother Taught me*.

In *Intertidal Life* Alice’s separation from her husband, and her refusal to accept the fact of separation show her feeling of insecurity and her tensed life. In *Latakia*, Rachel’s sense of guilt arising from what she considers her neglect of children, Michael’s intrusive behaviour and Rachel’s love–hate attitude to Michael are the real causes of alienation. In *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island* Munchmeyer’s uncertain economic condition, and his chosen isolation that is fruitless make him a victim of alienation. His sense of alienation is such that though he recognizes the harmlessness of his wife, he accuses her of exercising a destructive influence on him:

"I feel so incredibly lonely, lonely as hell in this darkened house beside a wife who’s never done anything to hurt me consciously but yet who is slowly killing me". (5)
Another major cause of alienation identified in the novels is the breakdown of existing relationships. The major characters are in need of emotional bond and affection. When they are unable to find it in their own home, they try to break their relationship with their lover, husband, wife, children, parents, friends and even with the society, of which they are members. When they find their need for love and affection thwarted the characters leave their home and settle themselves in new situations or just drift though apparently with a declared purpose.

The breaking down of relationships such as the disintegration of marriage relationships (Alice and Peter in *Intertidal Life*), breaking down of love (*Mrs. Blood* and Richard in *Mrs. Blood*, Rachel and Michael in *Latakia*), breaking down of familial relationship (Alice's children without their father, Rachel's daughters without their father, Isobel's parents' conflicts) has been examined as yet another major cause of alienation in the novels of Audrey Thomas. Moreover, when a third person steals the affection of husband, wife, children or lover, there is, along with pain, a sense of having been betrayed, which leads the protagonist to the realisation that incompatibility has sneaked into the existing relationship. This makes the protagonist feel alienated.
In *Intertidal Life* on numerous occasions, Peter coerces Alice when Alice expresses her anger and hurt at their separation and at Peter’s affair with their friend, Anne-Marie. Later, however, Alice displays assertiveness (although she does eventually give in) about Peter’s control over her affairs, when she reacts strongly to his having given his friends permission to stay at the house in town on a weekend when Alice was supposed to have the house to herself. “I’m not your wife any more”, she declares, “and any decisions about house cabin, anything like that had better be joint “(120)” and again she thought of divorce “I am so torn, If I went to a lawyer now. I could sue for divorce “(87). In *Latakia* when Rachel discovers that Michael is a self-centred, arrogant and intrusive person, she wonders: “I wondered why I could not just tell you to leave” (75).

The third chapter has analysed the different consequences of alienation. The focus of analysis was on the possible patterns of consequences of alienation like withdrawal, uncertainty, anxiety and creative crisis and the potential and actual termination of existing relationships. The alienated characters are consequently left alone and loveless and are locked up in their own inescapable shell.
Anxiety expresses through jealousy, guilt and hate / dislike. Mrs. Blood's guilty remembrance of her lover Richard is continued even long after her marriage to Jason in Mrs. Blood:

I don’t love him now because I am ill and frightened.
I will love him again when the crack is sealed the ache is removed, the consuming self-obsession disappears...
we wish to be alone to obscure our traitor body or our trait or mind... I want to hate him, fighting pain with greater pain. I want to tell him I have been unfaithful to him... (BD, 102 - 103)

Isobel’s tense life, William’s detached manner, Alice’s frustration, Charlotte’s jealousy and intense experience remain unresolved to the end.

Secondly, there is the withdrawn condition which can be construed as the rejection of routine life. Isobel, Rachel, Alice, Sandy, Martha, Mrs. Blood, Charlotte, Lydia, Munchmeyer and even Miranda are leading a suffocated life. Mrs. Blood’s cutting off of all routine life, when she is hospitalised, Mrs. Thing’s fragmented nature, Isobel’s suffocating family life and the disintegrated lives of Rachel, Alice, William, Charlotte and Lydia
are the consequence of withdrawn condition. In *Songs My Mother Taught Me* Isobel’s wish is:

For weeks I went around hoping, praying, that I was adopted. That my real parents, preferably English and absolutely wealthy, would send a telegram and claim me: MISSING HEIRESS FOUND AT LAST ELECTS TO RETURN TO WAR.

TORN HOME LAND. ...So much longing to escape, so much hoping to be rescued. Parents do not think it is possible in a child of six to ten. How credibly wrong they are. At six I already understood, although I could not have articulated it, that Jane and I were the dream images projected above the wasteland of our mother’s life. (SMTM, 90).

In *Latakia*, Rachel’s simultaneous experience of love and hate towards her lover is evidenced by her letter to Michael that states that their life would not be in anyway productive and creative. At the same time, there is unmistakable with expression of her loving preoccupation with Michael.
Another major consequence of alienation is the state of uncertainty in which one’s life is caught. Blood, Rachel and Alice try to escape from their present uncertain condition by letting their mind be immersed in kind of preoccupation. In *Intertidal Life*, Alice’s inner desire is:

I am so torn! If I went to a Lawyer now, I could sue for divorce and have it over with. done with, get on with my life. I could even take the girls away some place, for a year or so until the wounds start to heal. I could ask him for the money to do that; demand it. And yet a part of me is so convinced that he’ll comeback, that I must hang on, stay here, not more the girls around for a while, finish any book. But I understand, now, about wanting to make a man pay and pay and pay I understand about vengeance. ... The girls try not to look at me, the mark of their gentle father’s anger blooming on my face. Well, it will fade. On the outside anyway, on the outside... But I could have had some rationalization.
"Oh! I thought" This is too warm. Hardly, to last". (IL,87)

Creative crisis is another consequence of alienation. The creative impulse could be viewed as a force that could lead one out of the state of alienation. Audrey Thomas’ protagonists Isobel, Rachel, Alice, Miranda and Munchmeyer make an effort to understand their experiences and to organize themselves through their creative work (writing). While Rachel and Miranda succeed to a certain extent in their effort, others fail miserably. This failure to utilize creativity as a way out only reintensifies the condition of alienation.

Munchmeyer’s desire is to become a writer. In Munchmeyer he says:

And I write this as though it were a novel in which I play the role of narrator. (a) because Martha thinks, I’m writing a novel down here in my cellor, and thus it’s easier not to make a slip, but (b) and really. What is most unimportant diaries scare me.

From myself to myself a kind of... (5)

In Intertidal Life, Alice’s diary writing, in Latakia Rachel’s long love letter and in Munchmeyer’s Miranda’s novel writing reveal the factors
underlying their struggle in their alienated life. The protagonist’s struggles indicate the desire in them to adopt some strategy to come out of their alienated life.

Isobel, Mrs. Blood, Rachel, Alice, and Munchmeyer, fail to eliminate the root of alienation from their life from the beginning. They remain helpless and they are unable to take any firm decision. Uncertainty is the condition particularly highlighted in the lives of many characters.

The fourth chapter has undertaken a study of the strategies adopted by the characters directly or indirectly to overcome their alienation. Resigning themselves to the present condition, making efforts towards reintegration, finding new relationships, and launching out on new ventures are the processes of self-discovery which, the protagonists believe, will help them overcome the frustrating dominance of alienation.

The characters resort to questioning, retrospection (recollectioin), seeking freedom and new connections, new resolutions and communication with oneself and others through writing, in their effort to get themselves free of the disruptive onslaught of alienation.

Quest is generally related to any mysterious factor that had occurred in the life of the protagonist or in that of someone close to him or her. Under the weight of the mystery, the protagonist may proceed on a
quest in his/her effort to find out the origin and cause of the mystery and thereby to render the mystery powerless anymore. When and if the mystery is resolved, the sense of alienation might disappear.

In *Coming Down from Wa* William’s family is shrouded in a mystery that lies in the past life of the parents. William wants to find out what had happened between his parents; “What happened to my parents out in Africa? Wiliam asked” (10). In *Blown Figures* Isobel’s quest, which begins by her leaving her family, is to get back the unborn baby. It is an impossible mission since the urge for the retrieval of the lost baby is more symbolic /psychological than real and physical. The probability of William resolving the mystery is greater than that of Isobel rediscovering the lost baby.

The next strategy is retrospection. Memory is used as a device for re-enacting some crucial part of the past life of the characters. Sometimes, recollection leads to an obsessively neurotic condition, as in the case of Mrs. Blood, and sometimes to a new perception of a relationship, as in the case of Rachel. Sometimes they consciously capture their life’s episodes and repeat them in their mind ceaselessly.

Isobel’s regularly repeated recollection from *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, *Mrs. Blood*, and *Blown Figures* is “my father was really nervous driver, constantly. Pulling on his...” (Mrs.Bood 19). In *Graven*
Images the protagonist recollects one incident that occurred in another novel Songs My Mother Taught Me: “The last summer I worked at the insane asylum” (Graven Images 243). Charlotte in Graven Images, Alice in Intertidal Life and Mrs. Blood in Mrs. Blood recollect the same lines, that is “Alice’s father. She could remember him pacing his upstairs, the awful sound of his breathing”. (Intertidal Life, 180). This strategy could be therapeutic in effect and free them of their alienated condition. But, retrospection need not always be therapeutic. It may intensify the neurotic obsession of the protagonist as it happens in the life of Mrs. Blood.

Taking a resolution is another strategy adopted by some characters in their effort to fight off alienation. Isobel’s resolution is to leave England, her home now, and move away from Jason and their two children, on a lonely pilgrimage to West Africa. Alone, like the compulsive-obsessive ancient mariner, she seeks her dead child in the depths of the African rain forests. In Munchmeyer and Prospero in the Island Munchmeyer leaves his family in his desperate desire to become a novelist. He has become bored with his family and seeks an escape, hoping to find an environment in which he can become a serious fiction writer. In Latakia Rachel’s decision is to take revenge on Michael through her writing. This is the “longest love letter in the world” (21) at two hundred pages, but... the
best revenge is writing well" (172). The resolution to write well focusses not only on revenge, but on sorting out problematic relationships, and her frustration. That is, the aim is analytic apprehension and auto-therapy.

In *Intertidal Life*, Alice’s resolves to come to terms with the various aspects of her conflict with Peter and makes an effort to convince herself that she would be happy if someone accepted her as she was actually. In *Coming Down From Wa*, William’s travel is meant really researching his parent’s past and in *Graven Images* Charlotte resolved to trace the roots of the maternal malaise to her family’s history in England. While William’s resolution is realized with his mother as the ultimate helper, Charlotte’s resolution fritters away in the face of numerous, disjointed and fragmented documents and information.

One of the strategies adopted by some of the characters in Audrey Thomas’ novels in an effort to overcome alienation is that of developing new relationships. Though many who adopt this do not succeed in the effort, the fact remains that this mode of behaviour has been employed. Thus, Isobel’s attempts, despite her avoidance of young workers at the hospital, to win friends, especially in her sexual explorations may be viewed from this perspective. Munchmeyer has a dreamgirl and Rachel has the people on the Island of Crete. But, it is true that neither
succeeds in striking new roots. Alice in *Intertidal Life* has a host of friends like Raven, Selene and Trudie and by strengthening her ties with them, she hopes to steer herself off her despair and alienation.

Another major strategy employed by characters to overcome alienation is communication. Most of the protagonists in Audrey Thomas’ novels try to write about their own experiences. Through writing they recall their life through memories and try to comprehend their life in a new perspective. This is therapeutic in nature and function. In *Latakia* Rachel writes a letter to a Michael. This letter is not simply a substitute for the absent. That is, it does not aim at filling the gap created by Michael’s absence and by the loss of separation. The two year-long love affair with Michael is recalled in the book: "My book was difficult. I was having trouble. I felt vulnerable and helpless and you know it" (65). Evidently, the book is not a sentimental recall of what is lost. It is an analytic attempt at understanding and thereby eliminating the root cause of alienation. In *Intertidal Life* Alice’s novel is an attempted analysis of her life though she is not sure what the result of the analysis would be: "I don’t know. After I finish this book I don’t know what I ‘ii do ... I want to transform us all into characters. And perhaps I am still hoping for the oh so unacceptable in... ending?" (89). Munchmeyer’s
and Miranda's creative efforts have also been examined in the fourth chapter on similar lines. An attempt has also been made to find out whether by adopting such strategies, the characters succeed or fail in their struggle against alienation.

Thus, the study has examined the novels of Audrey Thomas as the ground reflecting the perennial conflicts of existence from the perspective of alienation. A number of factors ranging from a sense of the past burdened with anxiety to the psychological state caused by thwarted desires has been identified as the sources of alienation. The responses of characters such as passive acceptance, struggle and resignation, and determined triumph over alienation have been identified and analysed.

The overall existential element that emerges from the study of the novels is without doubt alienation. The problem starts when a woman is sensitive, educated and exposed to the new ideas of freedom, emancipation, civil rights, conjugal rights and the rights for self expression and self-determination. The modern world has thrown open the doors for self expression for women to such an extent as to create a new awareness of the problem of alienation. The study has attempted to reflect, to some
extent, this important aspect of the present-day human relationships as portrayed in the novels of Audrey Thomas.

From the findings presented and discussed above, it could be inferred that the novels of Audrey Thomas are not mere bleak representations of alienation. Life is not shown as something crushed by alienation but as an assertion against the disruptive forces of alienation and a celebration of that assertion. Thus, it is hoped that the present study would put the study of Audrey Thomas in a new and positive perspective.

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