Abstract of the Dissertation

SHERWOOD ANDERSON : A STUDY IN NATURALISM

This dissertation is an attempt to discuss the creative writings of Sherwood Anderson in the light of the literary naturalism which flourished in America towards the closing decades of the last century. It is true that a writer's perception of life reflected in his writings cannot be interpreted in its totality by identifying him with a particular literary movement. An attempt to do so, however, does not preclude other critical judgements which can flow from his writings. The aim of this dissertation is, therefore, to focus on the naturalistic traits in Anderson's writings and to arrive at the conclusion that some distinctive aspects of his naturalism have widened the range of this literary movement in America.

The first chapter of the dissertation briefly surveys some of the important factors which have shaped this literary movement and have given its mood and content. The rise of natural sciences explained, in rationalistic terms, the causes of natural phenomena. The forces which operate automatically in nature are relentless and life's survival is dependent upon its capability to adapt itself to these forces. This brought about the concept of determinism which filtered into the realm of literature and provided the writers with fresh perspectives to interpret life
in terms of its confrontation with deterministic forces. This chapter also tries to ascertain how the idea of force has been dealt with by the major American naturalistic novelists. It ends with a brief discussion of the sources from which deterministic forces operate and mould the destinies of the Anderson characters.

The second chapter deals with the matter-spirit conflict which is central to five novels of Anderson. The protagonists of these novels consider the finite world of matter to be hostile to their inner lives and try to circumvent it. They repudiate material accomplishments under the compulsiveness of this metaphysical aspiration.

The third chapter identifies the elemental, biological force as determining the destiny of man. Born with a distorted, twisted psyche the Anderson character fails to assess himself and the objective world. The result is that he leads a lonely life with his unrealized yearnings disharmonizing his inner self. He unsuccessfully tries to circumvent the psychic barrier in order to lead a life of fulfillment. Unable to know what causes his inner discord and what he precisely wants in life, he decays silently within the bounds of his loneliness.

The focus of the fourth chapter is on the psychological naturalism. The Freudian contention that man's libido presides over his destiny is corroborated by some of the novels of Anderson. In these novels man is seen governed by his irresistible reflexes and passions which determine the direction of his life.
The fifth chapter deals with the external forces emanating from diverse sources which govern the lives of some of the characters of his short stories. In this chapter some minor characters of his novels are also discussed because their lives are moulded by external forces. A life-denying environment, severe puritanical code of conduct, economic privation, social conventions etc., play havoc with these characters' lives. Consequently, their outlook towards life is mutilated and they remain imprisoned within the confines of these forces.

Insofar as the substance and technique are concerned, Anderson occupies a unique position among the naturalistic writers. The sixth chapter is an attempt to clarify this unique position. Anderson has identified sources from which deterministic forces operate and victimize man. No other naturalistic writer seems to be aware of these sources. Besides, he is convinced that the plight of man cannot be remedied by reconstructing the social and economic environment. This naturalistic thesis is not only a variation of Zola's idea of the novel serving a social purpose, but also an enlargement of the concept of determinism. Moreover, Anderson's mode of transcribing life is lyrical rather than descriptive. In this context, Anderson's style is essentially AndecGian and a departure from Zola's dictum that a novel should incorporate circumstantial details in order to give a complete picture of man's confrontation with hostile forces.

All the naturalistic characters try to transcend the rigours of the forces which tend to govern their lives. In the self-situation
conflict depicted by Anderson, the situation remains victorious with the result that it leaves the human self repressed and distorted. Man's confrontation with the surrounding forces and his aspiration for liberation from them are some of the ideas which find recurrent treatment in the naturalistic novel.