CHAPTER III
ALIENATION DUE TO CIRCUMSTANCES.

The Key is the first story of this chapter. It is about a deaf and dumb couple who set out on a trip to Niagara Falls in the naive hope of finding love and happiness. They have never been understood by people and are looked upon with indifference. Their experience in life has always made them wary and suspicious of everyone and everything around them.

The story begins in the waiting room of a remote station where people sat in two rows of benches, waiting for the train. The train is late yet no one seems in a hurry. Among these people are Ellie and Albert Morgan. Their poverty is indicated by the possession of a single suitcase from which the buckle is missing.

Ellie Morgan is a healthy woman of about forty.
She carries a black satchel purse which contains her savings which made this trip possible. Perhaps this is her first trip in her life for she is very tense. Her face is sad. Albert Morgan is smaller than his wife. He sits motionless beside her. Welty describes him as: *He looked home-made, as though his wife had self-consciously knitted or somehow contrived a husband when she sat alone at night.* (ACOG—62). He is so shy that he appears to say, *Don’t look — no need to look — I am effaced.* (ACOG—62). He presents a sorry picture of a weak and insignificant person.

The only person standing is a young man. His excessive energy separates him from the rest who look exhausted and tired. He looks like a stranger in town or can be a criminal or gambler yet there is gentleness in his eyes. He has a quick tender regard for the people near him. However, there is something in him which gives the impression that he desires to be secretive. He has a key which he keeps tossing from one hand to the other. In this continued gesture the key drops to the ground.
Everyone looks at him for a moment as the key makes a noise and then looks away. As the stranger goes to retrieve his key it slides towards Albert's feet. He sees it and picks it up with wonder. Being deaf he and his wife are the only persons who did not hear the key fall. Seeing him, the young man does not claim the key but simply watches. Albert looks at the key as if it reminds him of some distant memory, as if the sudden appearance of the key was as unexpected and meaningful as that distant memory of his. That particular memory of his must have brought him happiness as much as the sudden appearance of the key has. Albert looks at his wife. Ellie suddenly begins to communicate to him in sign language. People then realise that they are both deaf and dumb. They realise it and dismiss the discovery all at once.

Albert excitedly tries to convey to his wife of the possible joy and luck the key will bring to their lives. *It means something*.................. *Maybe when we reach Niagara Falls we will*
even fall in love ............... Maybe our marriage was really for love ...............not for the other reason—both of us being afflicted in the same way, unable to speak, lonely because of that. (ACOG—66). He cannot contain his happiness at his discovery. Ellie is embarrassed of him and asks him to be quiet but secretly she is pleased. Suddenly he is quiet and the young man wanders back to the wall. The train comes and goes but the disabled couple and the stranger are still in the station.

Something about the young man is striking. He is acutely aware of the world despite his youth. The intensity of his eyes seems to reveal both the joys and sorrows of his life: as if he has experienced much of life at such a young age, as if his sufferings and pain were much more than anyone of his age could bear. Yet he has borne it all and his eyes reveal everything. It was he alone who did not just dismiss the couple. Having gone through so much himself he must have understood their situation. He comes closer to the couple. His closeness makes
Ellie suspicious. The Morgans begin to communicate with their hands rapidly. Ellie suspiciously asks Albert what the stranger want. Albert suggests perhaps he wants the key. They have no idea that the key did belong to the stranger. Albert fondles the key in his pocket for reassurance. He strongly believes in the miraculous power of the key since it has appeared mysteriously and unexpectedly. There was something — something he could almost remember but not quite — which would let him keep the key always to himself. (ACOG—70). Albert assures Ellie of the safety of the key. Ellie nods, yet she is doubtful and anxious. She never fully agrees with Albert, ever.

They are remarkably similar as if they are cousins even, afflicted in the same way, sent off from home to the state institute .......... (ACOG—69). In spite of their unawareness of the ways of the world, they appear to be preparing themselves to face any danger that might befall them. They do not know when anything drastic might happen to them, anywhere, anytime. Ellie is more
experienced than Albert and is wary all the time. She is there to protect Albert. But because of her suspicious nature she fails to realise that Albert needs more than her care and protection. He needs to be reassured all the time that he is loved too.

Ellie takes out a picture of Niagara Falls from her purse but suspiciously makes a sign to Albert to hide it from the young man. Albert remembers their teacher telling them about the sense of hearing. The teacher had indicated that by leaning on the railing shown in the picture one can hear the Falls. It can be heard with the whole self and after that one can never forget what hearing is. Ellie loves Albert’s repeated narration of this story. Ellie thinks they would have reached their destination had they not missed the train. She is ignorant of the distance to the Falls. Depressed at having missed the train they think of the uselessness of all the hard work of many years making this trip possible. For Ellie, unhappiness is when she thinks of this particular day, also of their lives together besides other things.
As a young girl it had been pointed out to her that married couples visit the Niagara Falls to start their lives with happiness. With this hope of finding happiness in her mind she had worked harder than Albert to make the journey to the Falls possible. And though Albert thinks of the impossibility of their journey, the mysterious appearance of the key has renewed his faith. He also secretly feels that the key is a symbol of happiness not with Ellie but for him alone.

The young man takes a second key from his pocket with a printed tag ‘Star Hotel, Room 2’ and places it in Ellie’s hands. As he turns and walks away he can see the uselessness of his gesture. He knows that they will either throw it away or keep it as a sign of something. The thought may never occur to them to go to the hotel and spend the night there.

Being a deaf and dumb couple, Ellie and Albert Morgan have to use sign language. This fact separates them from
the rest of the people. They have been sent to a special school or institution as Welty suggests. Their experience of life does not seem a pleasant one as they are of a suspicious nature and are constantly wary. Even though they have been taught to communicate between themselves they have no other education. For this reason they believe that they will reach Niagara Falls when the train stops at the next station. They are a lonely couple in search of happiness. Their disability is the main source of their unhappiness, solitude and sense of alienation from others.

The sudden appearance of the key brings about a drastic change in their lives, especially in Albert's. He is now more positive than ever before. He is fully certain that love and happiness await them at the Falls and they will live in love and happiness after that. This is one of the two main reasons for going to the Falls. Their's have been a loveless marriage. They appear to have been married simply because they are afflicted in the same way. As Albert says, they were married because they
were lonely and unable to speak, an indication of the absence of love and happiness. The other reason is—being fully aware of their disability and their teacher's encouragement that after their visit to the Falls and listening to it, they will never forget what hearing is. So, with this prospect in their minds they have worked hard to achieve their goal. This shows their desperate attempt to at least hear. If they can do this, they believe that at least one of their problems will be solved.

Because of such expectations, an ordinary key assumes so much significance for this couple, as if the key is a sign of something miraculous and as if all the impossibilities of their lives will be made possible by the key. Secretly Albert feels that it will bring something much more than happiness to him alone. It reminds him of something that he is not quite able to recall clearly. The young man did not have the heart to take away the key and erase the look of hope and brightness from their faces.

The Morgans have undergone much pain and suffering
because of their condition. The greatest of this is the sense of alienation from society because they are deprived of the basic means of communication. The pain they feel becomes all the more poignant because they are ‘aware’ of their problem and yet unable to do anything about it except to grasp fleeting glimpses of hope symbolised by the mysterious key.

*Why I Live at the P.O.* is about a young woman moving out of her parents home to escape her family, especially her younger sister. In order to assert her independence and find happiness she leaves home to make the post office her new home.

The story begins with the narrator telling how well she is getting along with her mama, Papa — Daddy (grandfather) and Uncle Rondo. The apparently peaceful atmosphere in the family is belied when the narrator reveals how her sister Stella Rondo steals her boyfriend Mr. Whitaker and marries him. Soon Stella separates from him and returns home with a two year old
Stella claims the little girl is adopted. Soon after her return Stella begins turning the entire family against her sister, the narrator. The narrator cannot believe that the little girl is adopted for she is the spit-image of Papa-Daddy without his beard (his prized possession) and also looks a bit like Mr. Whitaker. She tells Stella so and Stella is furious. The first person Stella turns against her sister is Papa-Daddy. She lies to him saying that her sister cannot understand why he does not cut off his long beard. Stella knows how sensitive their grandfather is regarding his beard. The alleged insensitivity infuriates the grandfather and he thinks that the narrator is an ungrateful person. He is convinced that she deliberately said it after all the trouble he had taken to get her a job at the post office. Since he disbelieves her denials, she angrily leaves the room. The grandfather too leaves in anger and decides to lie in the hammock with the words: *This is the beard I started growing on the Coast when I was fifteen years old. .........remember my words: I’ll never cut off*
my beard as long as I live, even one inch, and I don't appreciate it in you at all. (ACOG—91).

Soon after, Uncle Rondo arrives in Stella's flesh-coloured kimono. He is a pharmacist and is drunk that day. But it is not surprising because the date is fourth of July and it is his annual habit to be drunk on this day. In such a condition, he used to go straight to the hammock to lie down. Papa-Daddy who is already lying in the hammock is disturbed and he wakes up with a horrible yell. On seeing Uncle Rondo he straight away starts to turn him also against the sister. The grandfather is still mad at the sister believing Stella's lie. But Uncle Rondo is too drunk to feel anything against the sister for the time being.

Just then Stella lifts the upstairs window and utters a dramatic 'oh'. As the sister goes to enquire, Stella asks if she notices anything different about their uncle. The sister says:
Why, no, except he's got on some terrible-looking flesh-coloured contraption I wouldn't be found dead in ............. (ACOG—93).

Stella says the kimono is part of her trousseau and their uncle looks like a fool in it. Here the sister tells her that she is in no position to criticise or judge others when she herself is home without any explanation whatsoever for her separation and the adopted girl. After that she goes down and talks with her mother.

The sister cannot believe that the little girl is not Stella's own. Her mother of course believes Stella. Suddenly it occurs to the narrator that the child has so far not spoken a word. This makes her mother sit up. She calls and asks Stella whether the child can speak at all. Stella is again furious at such a suggestion from her sister. *And in a minute the loudest Yankee voice ........ yells out, 'OE'm Pop-OE the Sailor-r-r-r Ma-a-an!* (ACOG—97) thus proving that the child can not only talk but also sing. The mother is furious with the sister and asks her to apologise but she refuses to do so. So her mother runs to
hug the child and now mama, Papa-Daddy and the baby are all on Stella’s side and the other sister, the narrator is alone and alienated from the whole family.

There is only Uncle Rondo left. Stella takes the opportunity at supper time. She tells him that her sister spent the entire afternoon sneering at him and thinking how foolish he looks in his outfit. This angers their uncle who has the most violent temper. Once again the narrator’s denial is brushed aside. The evening is spent without further incidents. This should have warned the narrator that her uncle is up to something because he is not one to take things lying down.

The next morning he throws a whole package of firecrackers into the sister’s room. He knows she is sensitive to noise of any kind. People heard it as far as the cemetery, and old aunt thought it was Judgement Day. It’s usually so quiet here. (ACOG—99). This incident
scares the narrator so much that it compels her to access her situation within the family. She realises that she is alienated from everyone and so she decides to leave home and move to the post office. She takes everything that belongs to her: electric fan, needlepoint pillow, radio, sewing machine motor, calendar, thermometer, canned goods, wall vases, even a fern she feels is rightfully hers because she watered it. The family declares they will never go to the post office again. Finally, the sister is left alone in the post office safe in her knowledge of who in town is for and against her. Asserting her independence and claiming some measure of happiness, she works her revenge by shutting her family off from the outside world. *But here I am, and here I'll stay. I want the world to know I'm happy.* (ACOG—105).

*Why I Live at the P.O.* tells the story of what family tensions can do to a person. Firstly Stella steals her sister's boyfriend and marries him. As if this is not enough she turns the entire family against her because they are gullible. Stella is
jealous of her sister and wants to hurt her so much that she turns every member of the family against her. Finally unable to bear the unfair accusations, the sister leaves home and family. Their’s is the main family in China Grove. So naturally there are people who want to be on the good side of her grandfather. Because of this, part of the society refuses to acknowledge her while part of the society sympathises with her.

Due to the false accusations of this gullible family, the sister is forced to separate from the people who matter most in her life. Unable to withstand the overwhelming antipathy of the entire family, the narrator’s only course of action is withdrawal from it into new establishment, the physical displacement thus highlighting her state of enforced alienation.

In the last story of this chapter *A Visit of Charity*, a young girl Marian goes to an Old Ladies’ Home on a visit of
charity. Her purpose is to gain some extra points to her score as a Campfire girl, an organisation where doing good work in society enables one to earn points.

One morning Marian, a girl of fourteen steps down from a bus in front of an Old Ladies' Home. She carries a potted plant as a gift. Before entering she stops beside a prickly shrub then proceeds towards the entrance. As she enters she tells the nurse that she has come on a social visit. On learning that Marian has no particular old woman in mind, the nurse takes her to a room occupied by two old women.

The place is so quiet and still, it makes Marian want to turn around and escape. As the nurse knocks, an old woman opens the door. She has on her face a strange eerie smile—which is supposed to be a smile of welcome. As she enters
Marian sees the profile of another old woman lying in bed. As soon as the nurse leaves, the first woman asks Marian if she has come to be their little girl for a while. Suddenly she snatches Marian's cap with one hand and draws her inside with the other. The room Marian observes is small, dark and wet. She is terrified by the woman's strange behaviour. *It was like being caught in a robber's cave, just before one was murdered* (ACOG—197). The potted plant is snatched from her hands and the woman appreciates it. She says it is pretty.

Then the other woman lying in bed speaks for the first time. She contradicts what the first woman said. She says the flower is not pretty without even turning around. Then the two of them starts bickering much to Marian's amazement. Then the first woman explains that 'poor Addie' is ailing. To which Addie replies that she is no more sick than the other is. Still the first woman says Addie acts in this manner when 'you all' come. This means
that Marian is not the only visitor. There must have been others like her who come to visit them. Then she tells Marian that she, too, used to go to school. Again Addie screams: *You never went to school. You never came and you never went. You never were anything—only here.............. Your head is empty, your heart and hands and your old black purse are all empty ...........(ACOG—200).* Addie finds the other woman’s persistent talking intolerable. Marian can see the desperation in Addie’s eyes. Still the old woman persists and thinks Addie is mad because it is her birthday. Addie is furious and screams that no one knows her birthday except herself alone. She pleads with the other woman to be quiet else she will lose her mind. She then calls Marian towards her and tells her that when the worst comes she rings a bell and a nurse comes to her rescue. Seeing the woman so close Marian wonders about her and her age as if there is nothing else in the world to wonder about. The woman refuses to tell her age and suddenly she begins to cry. She sounds like a little
lamb. 'That’s Addie for you’ says the other woman spitefully.

Suddenly Marian wants get out of the strange room and its even stranger occupants. As she runs towards the door, the first woman tries to clasp her but fails. She follows Marian to the hall. Suddenly she clasps Marian and begs in a high-pitched whine for a penny. "Have you a penny to spare for a poor old woman that’s not got anything of her own?....... Little girl, just a nickel — a penny—. (ACOG—203). Marian breaks free and rushes towards the door. As soon as she is outside she stops briefly near the prickly shrub and picks up an apple that she has hidden. Then she races towards the moving bus shouting for it to stop. Then she makes her escape.

The story depicts the sad plight of two old women who are utterly alone. The greatest need in their lives are love, care and attention which no one can provide; least of all by
the so-called charitable visits of people like Marian whose sole aim in undertaking the visits is to earn points for herself. Their isolation and alienation are due to their inability to cope with the realities of life outside because of which they are shut up in this institution. When Addie talks about the emptiness of the other woman’s head, heart and purse, she is merely voicing the great sense of emptiness that she feels about herself.

They are fated to spend their entire lives in a small dampened room. Had they families who dumped them when they grew old? Addie seems to have a family who has deserted her. Whereas the other woman seems to be in this situation all her life. She has become mentally unstable. One learns of this when Addie declares that the other woman has nothing and has been nowhere. They have no other alternative but to accept their situation and they can do nothing about it. Circumstances have brought them together to this situation where they have only
each other for company and the occasional meaningless visits of people like Marian.

In all these stories, the protagonists suffer from a deep sense of isolation from society. As a result of this they lead unhappy lives and some, like the Morgans in *The Key* undertake an absurd journey to Niagara Falls in the mistaken belief that by doing this they will obtain happiness.

The narrator in *Why I Live At the P.O.* is under the illusion that by moving away from the alienated family and asserting her independence she will be happy. Ironically, this act merely highlights her own alienation from family and society, a condition which cannot lead to any happiness.

The two old ladies in *A Visit of Charity* are already ‘cast out’, as it were, from society and are obviously leading
extremely unhappy lives. Though they are together in a room, it does not bring them any nearer to having a meaningful relationship because of their mental condition. In such a circumstance the charitable visits turn out to be futile and provide no solace to them. The temporariness of such meaningless gestures from the visitors only heighten their sense of loneliness and alienation from the rest of the outside world.