

Exploring Lingo-Cultural Alienation in Ben Lerner's Leaving the Atocha Station

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Abstract

Alienation or Estrangement is that centrifugal term which describes the plight of modern society. The mass cluster of individuals inhabiting together in community structures the society. The umbrella term to delineate the norms and the social behaviour of individuals practised within a society is the "culture" of that society. Culture denotes information regarding the characteristics and the knowledge of a particular group of people circumscribing their language, religion, habits etc. The association between language and culture is ineradicable. The society uses language to preserve its culture and to transfer cultural ties. This exchange begins right from the birth of an individual and is transferred through generations as a legacy. The problem arises when an individual begins to abandon one's culture in favor of others; then the individual faces cultural alienation. In this paper, the researcher analyzes various contributors of alienation faced by a youth Adam in a foreign land (i.e. Madrid in Spain) due to linguistic and cultural differences. The paper has used Melvin Seeman's Theory of Alienation as a research tool to analyze the various lingo-cultural aspects of alienation expressed in Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011).

Keywords: Lingo-Cultural Alienation, Melvin Seeman, Existential Crisis.

Introduction

Men evolved language as a medium to express and exchange ideas and feelings. It comprises of words, symbols, signs. The basis of intellectual development is imbibed in culture.

It can be accumulated like wealth and knowledge. It is a social institution. It shapes human consciousness and behaviour. When we communicate in society various obstacles can stand on the way to access. Fromm says “The alienation of language shows the whole complexity of alienation. Language is one of the most precious human achievements; to avoid alienation by not speaking would be foolish – yet one must be always aware of the danger of the spoken word, that it threatens to substitute itself for the living experience.” and one shouldn’t forget that “The same holds for all other achievements of man; ideas, art, any kind of man-made objects. They are man’s creations; they are valuable aids for life, yet each one of them is also a trap, a temptation to confuse life with things, experience with artefacts, feeling with surrender and submission”(Fromm).

The protagonist of the novel *Leaving the Atocha Station* is Adam Gordon, an American Fulbright Scholar to Spain. *Leaving the Atocha Station* is Lerner’s first novel, set in Madrid, where the narrator Adam Gordon spends a year abroad since he won the fellowship for poetry. The novel acts as a mirror to the lingo-cultural alienation faced by a youth, gone abroad to study. In *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) Adam’s life experiences bear a close resemblance to Lerner’s own. The narrator meditates about his experiences and difficulties faced while his stay at a foreign land. From these first few lines, we meet Adam, who declares himself immediately as the first-person narrator of the book, and what is described here is his typical morning routine on a weekday during his fellowship. He is talking about his research, which we expect should involve some insightful involvement with research but it describes the monotonous routine. The book begins with Adam’s description about his regular day as a scholar abroad; he describes the other minute details of his daily life, he begins with the description of the first of his research. However, this phase seems to involve barely any work at all “THE FIRST PHASE OF MY

RESEARCH INVOLVED WAKING UP WEEKDAY in an attic apartment . . . by the noise from La Plaza Santa Ana, failing to assimilate that noise fully into my dream, then putting on the rusty stovetop espresso machine and rolling a spliff while I waited for the coffee” (LAS 7). As the story progresses, the novel talks about the linguist difficulty that he has been facing abroad, he always carried “bilingual edition of Lorca’s *Collected Poems*” to maintain his scholarly appetite. Adam has won a scholarship to Spain, the language he can read but finds difficulty in communicating. Adam attempts to apply aesthetic ideals to the relationships that he had with other people and his consequent failures in applying the same. The relationship he develops in Spain continuously poses questions in front of him and unable to find answers results in anxiety. These life experiences lead him to experience situations of displacement that influence his behavior throughout the novel. Schact quoting Kaufman says: “To claim that a person is alienated is to claim that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction” (238).

In the novel, the narrator, Adam supposedly researches and intends to write a long poem on the literary heritage of the Spanish Civil War—of which, admittedly, he has neither the knowledge nor the intention to complete. “My plan had been to teach myself Spanish by reading master-works of Spanish literature . . . , would collide with the mundanities of daily life, giving the impression less of someone from a foreign country than someone from a foreign time” (LAS19). Adam divided his year, to which he ironically refers as “project,” into a series of “phases,” that are distinct in their pacing (and in the particular combination of hash and prescription medicine in which he chooses to indulge). Incredulous of the world in which he lives, Adam deconstructs the experiences that fill his year abroad utilizing an uneasy investment in a peculiar, self-obsessive disengagement “This is the beginning of the rapid fragmentation of

your so-called personality; you will have to be hospitalized” (LAS 17). Though he wishes to participate in genuine, meaningful human interaction, Adam is sceptical of the authenticity of his experiences—of whether the real can translate across the barriers of language, time, capital, etc. He convinces himself with explanations like “Even my silences would seem well-wrought “(LAS 19) on his incapability to comprehend and communicate in the Spanish language.

Adam’s position resonates (albeit with more philosophical grounding) with a particular sort of American privilege that disengages from all components of collective life, especially politics. He experiences the events of his year abroad, including the March 11, 2004, terrorist attack on Atocha Station, not through the mediators of language, film, touch, etc., but as meta-commentaries on the mediation of experience itself. Exemplifying the post-September 11th turn of the sonnet from *The Lichtenberg Figures*, Adam’s experience of the post- March 11th environment highlights how critical approaches to moments of unconscionable violence provoke a need, however deceptive, to differentiate cultural products in the aftermath of an attack from that of the pre-attack community. Attending an event at a gallery run by some of his Spanish friends the night of March 11, Adam reflects on the dominant mood among his fellow attendees: “I overheard a conversation about the role of photography now, where ‘now’ meant post-March 11. A ‘post’ was being formed, and the air was alive less with the excitement of a period than with the excitement of “periodization” continuing to elaborate his observations “ I heard something about how the cell phone, instrumental to organizing the marches, was the dominant political technology of the age. What about Titadine, the form of compressed dynamite used in the attacks, I wanted to say; wasn’t that the dominant technology? I said this to Teresa, who corrected me gently as we poured ourselves drinks: these attacks were ‘made for TV.’”(LAS 140). This violent and dislocating shift caused by the mass killing of almost two hundred

individuals, and injuring almost two thousand was probably to destabilize a culture and a politics.

While defining alienation in *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* Sidney Finkelstein calls it “a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt towards something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier erected which is no defense but impoverishment of oneself” (1965). In the same way, an individual faces cultural-alienation when he tries to be a part of some different culture than he’s born into. In Horney’s views, the condition of self-alienation is such as the “person simply becomes oblivious to what he feels, likes or rejects, believes in short to what he is”(1946). While trying to acquaint himself in Madrid, Adam’s loneliness and his longing for a company made him friends with Teresa after his initial encounter with her from the lie about her mother’s death. McClosky also points that, “the feeling of loneliness and yearning for supportive primary relationships” (XXX) are the two sides of a coin. Teresa introduced him to Maria Jose, knowing that he was here on accounts of scholarship and was a poet (although in English). On being invited by Teresa’s brother Arturo to his gallery for showcasing his poetic talents, he tried to escape the invite but it couldn’t happen. He accepted the invitation clarifying that he’d only be a passive listener at the event and not a speaker; however, it was also in vain. After all the failed attempts to escape the invitation to recite the poetry, where Arturo offered to be the translator of his poems in Spanish, Adam thought of was to escape because he didn’t want to express his linguistic incapability “I thought about claiming I was too ill to continue, surely I looked sufficiently pale, but I was worried that failing to appear in front of Maria Jose would somehow constitute the breaking point of my relationship with the foundation, that the total vacuity of my project would finally be revealed and I would be sent home in shame” (LAS 35). He was feeling

powerless to control this situation out of the fear of losing his friendship with Teresa. His attempts to compose himself, to become comfortable turned non-fruitful; on being asked about his view regarding poetry “ in my first expression of frustration in Spanish, that the poem wasn’t about that, that the poems aren’t about anything, and the three of them stared at me, stunned” LAS (36). Later “I sat with Teresa and Rafa in the fourth row, pissed off, nauseated with anxiety, searching my bag for a tranquillizer” (LAS 36) Adam excused of his behavior and accepted the situation. His struggle with Spanish, his attempts to maintain an image in front of Teresa, Maria and other audience were visible through his physical gestures “I poured myself a glass of water, nearly spilling it when I drank and opened my note-book” (LAS 39). Although all his insecurities with his incapability to speak Spanish vanished with his poetry recitation, his attempt was appealing, the audience liked it and treated him as a great scholar. Arturo’s discomfort in translating Adam’s poetry to Spanish made him delighted “Arturo hesitated and I imagined he had expected my performance to be more like Tomas’s . . . he was trying to figure out if he needed to read the translation in the manner in which I’d read the original or if he should deliver it as he had envisioned it before my reading; I was glad to see him struggle” (LAS 40). It was the same nervousness and discomfort that was initially faced by Adam.

Linguistic Alienation occurs not against the individuals who are illiterate but unexposed. It also occurs to them who are literate but do not understand technical vocabularies. When the natives weren’t able to understand Adam’s fragmented Spanish, he would satisfy himself explaining it as “Their failure to understand me was not the issue of my ignorance or accent but their removes from the zenith of their language” (LAS 19). Sometimes oppressive language hurts us and does linguistic violence. Oppressive language may cause psychological or physical violence “My inability to grasp or be grasped by the poem in Spanish so resembled my inability

to grasp or be grasped by the poem in English that I felt, in this respect, like a native speaker” (LAS 20). Most of the people use abusive forms of language to hurt the individuals to whom they are directed. Sometimes, totalitarian and genocidal languages lead to the killing of a large number of people. Wittgenstein was working with the concept of linguistic alienation and was developing methods for its reduction. He stressed the fact that linguistic alienation does not occur when we do respect the rules which have been taught to us. What we call ‘normal communication’ masks how discourse and power are skewed toward specific educational, professional and racial classes. There are different forms of linguistic alienation. For example, prisoners are not allowed to send written messages to others especially outside the prison. Sometimes individuals are allowed to read texts by authorities and even to write about them. But they do not understand the technical vocabulary and are alienated in this form of communication. Sometimes people born and brought up in a different culture when moves out of that culture and tries to be a part of the different culture faces linguistic as well as cultural alienation due to their inevitability to comprehend and communicate in that language of which they want to become a part of. It can be described as the “most common in descriptions of the intellectual role, where writers refer to the detachment of the intellectual from popular cultural standards” (Seeman, 788).

On many occasions, when Adam got the chance to meet and know people, his unfamiliarity with the Spanish language became an issue for him, he was either lying to hide about his linguistic incapability or finding a way out to excuse himself from talking “Outside we lit cigarettes and before he could repeat his questions I hurriedly said: my Spanish is not good. I read very well, I lied, but I don’t speak” (LAS 23). Since his arrival in Madrid, Adam always felt culturally alienated because he wasn’t familiar with the language. He was spending most of his

time alone as he only knew his Spanish tutor, Jorge, who was hired and paid by the foundation to profound him in Spanish. But they met for professional purposes. During his first phase of research, sometimes on weekends, Jorge took Adam to swim and meet where he meets his friends from the language school where Jorge passed out. His friend called him El Poeta It was during one such gathering where he met Teresa, who became his long-term companion. Adam's way of making friends is deceiving, he portrayed himself as despondent both in front of Isabel and Teresa. During one of the gatherings, to catch attention he moved out abruptly out of the place so that Teresa follows and tries to ignite conversation "I realized with some anxiety that she would expect me to be upset, very moved, that I needed to be so to justify my abrupt departure from the others" (LAS 28). Therefore, to show his despair he becomes one of those deceivers about whom he talks later in the book, he starts wetting his eyes "repeating this until I felt there would be enough moisture to catch a little light or at least make my face damp to the touch" (LAS 28). She asks ". . . if I were O.K., what was bothering me" (LAS 28) which fulfils his motive of lying and faking. His loneliness compelled him to lie to the extent that he faked his mother's death "I tried to calibrate my silence to convey less that I wasn't comfortable telling her than that the circumstances weren't tellable . . . I thought she could see the wetness on my cheeks and I said, I was shocked to hear myself say: My mother died" (LAS 29). His lie provided him with the care and company he was hungry for "Poor boy, poor boy, Teresa said, embracing me, and I let my head rest on her shoulder, careful to touch her skin where my face was wet" (29). But this doesn't satisfy his need, he is estranged with another issue of ethic, he questions himself about the lie which altogether makes him more guilty "I began to imagine my mom, how she would feel if she knew what I had done, my self-disgust giving way in turn to the fear that some-

how this lie would have material effects, would kill her, . . . I traded her life for the sympathy of an attractive stranger” (29).

Halfway through the novel *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), Lerner remarks from the viewpoint of the disillusioned narrator, Adam that a poet’s evident archaism is precisely what makes a position for him or her in a society full of deception, he says “If I was a poet, I had become one because poetry, more intensely than any other practice, could not evade its anachronism and marginality and so constituted a kind of acknowledgement of my preposterousness, admitting my bad faith in good faith, so to speak” (LAS101). The paradox of the poet who admits the failures of the society that produced him is precise that he inevitably finds those same faults in his poetic representations. Yet from this self-critical irony, Adam realizes that despite his preposterousness, being in “good faith” is freeing, as it allows him to see his words and his society for what they are, and then, in a moment of renewed inspiration, to reimagine the bond between his poetry and his community. His detachment is visible throughout “the hint of smile lost and with it all suggestion of detachment” (LAS 27).

Leaving the Atocha Station is also a meditation on the evolution of Lerner’s theoretical concerns from the beginning of his career until the novel’s publication. In it, he establishes a progression of thought on the problem of linguistic alienation, moving from a diagnostic perspective towards an articulation of one possible solution through poetics. Languages always emerge in speaking and progress in writing. It is at these basic levels that the phenomenon of linguistic alienation arises and various forms of linguistic alienation become visible. Communication is possible either orally or by the written form of language. Corresponding to this there are two forms of linguistic alienation i.e. Orality and Literacy. Orality tends to be ‘open and public’ whereas literacy tends to be ‘closed and private’. Orality functions in a more

democratic and egalitarian manner than literacy. More emphasis is given on the communication skill that is how to choose words while talking and how to express one's feelings, desires and emotions. Some of the linguistic obstacles arise from dysfunctions and others arise from linguistic alienation. Dysfunctions are generally the results of physical or intellectual challenges that an individual faces from birth or after accidents suffered during life whereas Alienation is usually the result of intentionally imposed obstacles. An individual faces alienation when "forced out of conscious awareness and into the realms of the unconscious" (Morgan 119).

On an occasional gathering, Adam was high due to boozing because of which he didn't realize that he was smiling on Isabel's sad confessional tale for which he was based by her friends. His intoxication resulted in his abashment by Jorge's fellows. He was physically frayed; someone hit him on the fact that he started bleeding. Isabel came to defend him. Her interference appeared as a model of care to him, he got the chance to talk and befriend her. He made good use of this opportunity to gain sympathy by acting demure "I could taste the blood from my mildly cut lip and I bit hard to deepen the cut so that I would appear more injured and therefore solicit sufficient sympathy to offset the damage my smiling had done" (LAS 13). Adam excused for his unintentional smiling and ignited the conversation "My Spanish is very bad. I get nervous" (LAS 13).

He tried to meet people, go to places whenever got a chance just to get rid of the estrangement he was facing since his arrival, however, language always appeared as a barrier in front of him "I was unaccustomed to such hours or so much public space . . . because I was bored at night and because I was undeniably attracted to the air's vulgar libidinal charge. Of course, I could not sit in the plaza alone; although I saw men do that" (LAS 21). But these meetings helped him gaining momentary physical connections "People in one large group or another often

began to speak to me, assuming I was one of their numbers whom they hadn't had the chance to meet" (LAS 22).

On an occasion of casual gathering Adam was able to express himself more vibrantly after he was excessively intoxicated " Ester disappeared after a while but I bought Teresa and Arturo several mojitos and it was when I found myself enthusiastically explaining my project to Teresa that I realized I had had too many"(LAS 24). And after realizing that he was being extra familiar about the project he barely knows, he tried to excuse himself from the gathering and go home "I need air, I said, and left the slowly spinning bar; I intended to walk home and pass out" (LAS 24). Since Adam arrived in Spain for his scholarship, he was feeling lonely "In the first phase of my research, I knew no one expects Jorge and his friends and they never invited me to do anything on weeknights" (LAS 21) he had no one to talk to or to spend his time with "There was no one whose company I could join if I wanted to do the things one was supposed to do while in Madrid" (LAS 21).

He had friends and family back home but he longed for a physical connection instead of connections over the internet. While replying to emails he claimed to be writing from the internet café and that he has limited access to the internet, although he had personal internet access. He says "I tried my best not to respond to most to most of the e-mails I received as I thought this would create the impression I was offline, busy accumulating experience, while in fact, I spent a good amount of time online, especially in the late afternoon and early evening, looking at videos of terrible things" (LAS 19).

Adam's initial way of looking at his stay in Madrid changes, initially he thinks "I didn't need to establish a life in Madrid beyond the simplest routines; I didn't have to worry about building a community, whatever that meant. I had the endless day, months and months of endless

days, and yet my return date bounded this sense of boundlessness, kept it from becoming threatening” (LAS 15). Later, Adam wonders whether he would like to prolong his stay in Spain and says “There would, of course, come a point when I would be familiar enough with the language and terrain that it would lose its unfamiliar aspect . . . But that moment of familiarization had not yet arrived; why not stay until it was imminent?” (LAS 163). The novel has deeply reflected upon the various aspects of lingo-cultural faced by an individual abroad. He is not far away from family and friends but also the basic needs that were satisfied in the culture he was born into. It shows various events from the life of the narrator Adam that draws light on the various emotional needs of an individual. If these needs aren’t sustained, a person starts feeling detached and estranged. Alienation surrounds him. In the same way, the narrator to escape alienation being caused due to different language and culture that he wasn’t exposed to finds ways and means to gain physical connections throughout. He implies all possible ways to sustain in an abroad land, finding means to satisfy his all primary needs.

Conclusion

Leaning the Atocha Station (2011) encompasses a tale of lingo-cultural alienation an individual comes across in a foreign land. This alienation is not only due to his estrangement from the culture he was born and brought up into and isn’t a part of it anymore. It is more because humans are social animals born with physical as well as emotional needs; non-fulfillment of any might result in the alienation. It is otherness from which an individual feels alienated. This otherness may be an outcome of separation of an individual wither willingly or forced from the society and the basic needs fulfilled by it. Humans are hemmed in by a world of things which are opaque to us and which we cannot understand. On being alienated from the social-system, they do not know that their desires are system determined and system-

determining. To overcome or escape alienation it becomes essential for an individual to maintain synchronization between the basic needs and the culture or society he's born within.

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