The sense of alienation and search for identity in Malcolm Lowry's novel Ultramarine

Dr Abhinav Chauhan, M.A.,Ph.D
Assistant Professor of English,
Bhagwat Jha Azad Degree College, Kundhit, Jharkhand.

Dana Hilliot is the nucleus round which Malcolm Lowry's first novel Ultramarine (1933) revolves. Dana Hilliot becomes a member of the crew on the deck of the ship Oedipus Tyrannus bound for the Far East. He becomes a sailor for The sake of fun and when the Quarter Master wants to know from Hilliot about the motive that prompted him to become a sea-man he tells him that he has chosen seamanship not as a calling or vocation but for the sake of sheer enjoyment of life. Hilliot's choice of a ship as a vehicle for the enjoyment of life is quite significant. When he boards the ship, he finds an affinity with it. He has kinship with the ship in the sense that both are without an identity of their own. In Chapter Two in his soliloquy within parenthesis he introduces the Oedipus Tyrannus to his girl friend Janet. He says:

"Both of us born of Viking blood, both robbed of our countries and left to make out as best we can; both, finally, with the same wandering, harbourless, dispossessed characteristics." [1]

Hilliot says that the history of the ship fills him with a narcissistic compassion for it. He traces the history of the Oedipus Tyrannus : "*First she was registered in Tvedestrand, then bought by an English firm, who reregistered her, altering her derrick plan, then she was bought back by Norway; after which she was rebought by England and, after her reconditioning was completed, received a charter*" [2] This frequent change of nationalities in respect of the ownership of the steamer robs it of a separate identity and makes it a cosmopolitan one. At one place in the novel the writer calls it, 'Whoreship' suggestive of a slippery woman devoid of fidelity in marital life.

Dana Hilliot's history of life resembles that of Oedipus Tyrannus. Varied cultures have gone into his making. Like the Oedipus Tyrannus he too is wandering harbourless and dispossessed. Before he is five he is taken away on interminable voyages all over the world. He nurses a grudge against life that he fails to strike roots into the soil of a particular land. The to and fro movement from one country to the other does an irreparable damage to him. Speaking of the anguish of spirit resulting from his roving from one country to the other he says "*...every country from which I have been forced to emigrate has left a gaping hole in my heart, considering the fomenting heterogeneity of the crew, the*

minute Greek, and Spanish and French firmament as well as the Norse, English and American—is it any wonder that I feel humiliated by it all, and as homeless, as exiled as the ship itself?"[3]

The wandering Jew in Eliot's Gerontion does not belong to a particular culture. He is "*spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp/ Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.*"[4] Hilliot has had his brief education in Oslo, thereafter he has an affair with Janet and when his father receives a tutorial assignment at Harvard, he finds himself uprooted from his native land.

The elaborate comparison Hilliot makes of his life with that of the ship shows that Hilliot becomes a sailor not out or mere fun but out of a deep turmoil in his psyche. The commotion in Hilliot has been engendered by his movement from one country to the other since his boyhood. He wants to cling to a stable point in his ever-wandering life. Behind the facade of fun and enjoyment lurks the smouldering fire of profound unrest. Hilliot's reply to the Quarter Master that he joins the ship out of fun is not to be taken at its face value. Behind this stock and glib reply lies the wounded sensibility of Hilliot. His fascination for the ship may partly be attributed to the teeming chaos of the sea very much similar to his chaotic mental state.

Hilliot suffers from a basic flaw in his life. He lacks order and harmony since his school days. As a student of Euclid's geometry he cuts a very poor figure in the class and receives a reprimand from the mathematics teacher. He becomes a butt of ridicule, when his classmates crowd around him to watch his pathetic attempt to create a regular hexagon. At school geometry puzzles and frightens Hilliot and it eventually becomes a sort of monster to him. This inability of Hilliot to draw geometrical figures with exactness and precision is symptomatic of a deeper chaos in his life. In Chapter I the novelist tells us about this fundamental incapacity of Hilliot: "*For here as nowhere else he could understand precisely what was so all poisoning in him, this incapacity to position things and see them their places.*"[5]

This inability to see things as they are in themselves and to see them in the right perspective is not a predicament of Hilliot only, but a dilemma gnawing at the heart of every modern, especially people of the thirties. T.S. Eliot's Gerontion suffers from such a predicament when says: "*I was neither at the hot gates/Nor fought in the warm rain/ Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, having a cutlass.*" [6] The civilization has become a heap of broken images and values are in a state of disarray. Hilliot voices the anguish of the humanity of his time. The chaotic state of civilization is discernible, when Hilliot goes to a big hall where he sees an old harridan with a saggy face, evidently a European, shuffling in carpet slippers. Around the room meant for fleshpots and sensual enjoyment are

Biblical mottoes and the prints of Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. He also finds a large bed with much haloed Jesus above it intruding on his consciousness and next to Jesus, a meek kitten.

The harridan invites Hilliot to immerse himself in the enjoyment of delights of the flesh t but Hilliot is circumscribed by the promise he had made to Janet before embarking as a voyage to Far East. Hilliot suffers from a conflict. On the one hand, his commitment to Janet that he will keep himself undefiled throughout the voyage rings in his ears, and on the other, the sensual delights dangle before him a world of delectable romance and entice Hlilliot by offering the prospect of dalliance. The voyage is a objective correlative for voyage through the psyche of Hilliot from the state of purity into damnation.

Hilliot, who is considered to be the alter ego of Malcolm Lowry, is obsessed with self destruction. The memory of Janet is a phase in Hilliot's consciousness characterised by purity and virginity and the moment he takes leave of Janet and boards the ship, he finds himself face to face with evil and all through voyage we find Hilliot wrestling with evil. When he steps ashore he finds small anatomical museum.In this museum he sees the aweful effects of "*Man leading a DEPRAVED life visiting the inquiry of FATHERS upon the CHILDREN and upon the CIIILDREN'S children unto the third and fourth GENERATION…* "[7] He reads the stern Biblical injunction that when men disobey the laws of God ,they suffer the inevitable consequence of death. The Biblical maxim "*… if any man defiles the temple of God, him will God destroy. for the temple of God is holy,…*"[8] and it contrasts with the fleshpots and sensual enjoyment.

Conrad Aiken and Nordahl Grieg were also concerned with the exploration of vile passions making a wreck of human life. They chose the medium of the sea for the exploration of man's encounter with evil that slumbers in his soul. It is the elemental simplicity of the sea that he becomes a fit vehicle for laying bare the havoc the fury of wild passions plays with man. Lowry's likeness with Conrad Aiken and Nordahl Greig is on the score of the sea becoming a medium of projecting the self-destructive vision of the writer.

The sea was in his blood. It was so partly owing to his going through the works of O'Neill, Conrad Aiken, and Nordahl Greig and partly to his nearness to Caldy and Chesire in the vicinity of the port of Liverpool .The configuration of Wirral Peninsula with its sinister and awesome landscape inhabited by pirates, who rob those who escape the perils of the sea and come safe to the shore, breeds toughness in him.

Though Hilliot, the alter ego of Lowry, is preoccupied, with low passions corrupting him, he searches for some absolutes of life. He says, "*If we will ever find it, Absolute beauty, absolute truth, did they exist?*"[9] His search for a stable point in life is marred by his scepticism.

The predominant impression his voyage aboard the Oedipus Tyrannus leaves on the reader is that of utter ruin and chaos as the first principle of life. Hilliot says, "*Chaos and disunion, then, he told himself, not law and order, were the principles of life which sustained all things, in the mind of men as well as on the ship*."[10] The furnace of the ship vividly described a veritable hell where firemen are like demons. With great fascination Hilliot watches a fireman Nikolai half-naked, gritty and black with coal and pasty with ashes and blazing light and gloom. Hilliot's search for absolute truth and beauty gets bogged down in the slough and mire of vile passions to which he finds himself susceptible.

He gives a lurid and macabre account of himself in course of his talk with a German sailor in Chapter III of the novel. He Considers himself to be queer, because of the incredible things she does. His youth is ruined by curious passions for collecting among other things, universities. He plays baseball in Harvard and sets fire to Brattle Square. He moves to Princeton where he nearly drinks himself to death. In Moscow he becomes a cameraman and at Cape Cod he holds office simultaneously as the town constable, the ticket collector at the cinema and the local bootlegger and it is there he commits his first murder in a windmill. In Barbados, in Bridgetown he remains a week playing the taropatch in a brothel. While accepting the offer of the fifteen-year-old daughter of the house, he sells her to the Negro door-keeper for a bottle of gin. In Stamboul he plays chess with Sultan's sister.

He pursues women from street to street, from land to land, always remaining a virgin. When they speak to him, he runs away. All his acts and behaviour bear testimony to the fact that he is really a strange character. But to take Hilliot's words prima facie that he is merely a strange character will be reading the novel not in the right perspective. He appears to be a strange character to his mother and to his beloved Janet. The mother is preoccupied with the purity and integrity of the character of her son. The letter Hilliot receives from the mother in course of his voyage on the deck of the Oedipus Tyrannus has the central theme: "*I don't want my son to be coarsened by a set of hooligans.*"[11]

Hilliot keeps the letter of his mother in his pocket and when he meets the German sailor Popplereuter, he hands over the letter to him and asks him to read it out to him. The letter contains the holy injunction "I do not want my son to be coarsened by a set of hooligans." The words of the mother sound to him as pious protestations of a mother's solicitude for the physical and moral well-being of the son. They sound cliches to him and the journey through different harbours comes to Hilliot in all its myriad forms of the reality of the mundane world. The moral nuixim of the mother IS too fragile to cope with the multitudinous spectacle of the offering formidable challenges and is sullied by Hilliot's desire for the banquet of sense.

The novelist through Hilliot's voyage on the deck of the Oedipus Tyrannus wants to present the gradually unfolding kaleidoscopic view of life. At the beginning of Chapter III Hilliot says "*I would have to find all that out for myself*."[12] When he first comes to the ship , he is treated as an alien , a toff, and all took askance at him. The cook Andy becomes a source of nuisance to him and he is always itching for a row of Nordahl Grieg's The Ship sails On is haunted by the supposed guilt that he has murdered Anton , he, too, suffers from the inexplicable feeling of having injury to Andy .

The ship is a miniature universe and Hilliot finds himself descending from the level of simplicity and purity into the realm of multiplicity and vileness. When he looks more deeply into the glass containing gin ,he finds reflected therein sadness ,misery, self-disgust , terror. Journey by the Oedipus Tyrnnus does not mean that he is getting away from the reality that unnerves a man: "*No getting away from it, that from the unfortunate Hiliot, this strong creature with a head of filthy , infected hair, and a maggoty and rotting consciousness who dreams of archetypal images.*"[13]

He considers the voyage to be a 'self inflected penance'. He under takes journey by sea in order to make an exploration of what life is like and this exploratory nature of the voyage entails immense suffering for him. He believes that the ultimate reality is experienced only after passing through a phase of ordeal. Hilliot is not only a voyager concerning through the harbours of several oriental lands. He often proclaims the intention of becoming a writer. As a writer he wants to grapple with the essentials of life, and among writers he is under the spell of Joseph Conrad who gives us the harrowing tale of a civilized and sophisticated European Mistah Curtz through the Congo. The mantle of learning, and civilization falls off Mistah Kurtz and he comes before the reader as a brute in the midst of African savages. The darkness of Africa reclaims his soul and Kurtz sinks to the level of wild animals governed by inordinate lust for ivory, though his despairing utterance '*the horror! The horror!*'[14] faintly redeems him.

Lowry's Hilliot is not a Mistah Kurtz but the affinity with Kurtz is there because both are educated and civilized people and embark on a voyage and find themselves face to face with stark realities that come to the fore ripping open the veneer of propriety and decorum. The excerpt from Chaucer's Maunciples Tale that acts as a prologue to Ultramarine gives the reader an intimation of its protagonist's subterranean impulse to filth and slime. The bird gorging on all dainties in a cage of gold feels a captive and comes out of it and embraces the '*rude and cold*'[15] forest and feeds on worms. Russell Lowry, an elder brother of Malcolm Lowry, knows him from the inside when he observes: "*He was more interested in slime*

than in silk, in stinks rather than mere smells, in the sordid rather than the sublime. The boiling muck under his volcano was more appealing to him than the snow on its summit."[16] Though Hilliot sees the anatomical museum depicting the depravity and iniquity of people with the solemn injunction that 'The wages of sin is death', he does not suffer from the qualms of conscience entering the brothel and having an affair with the Russian strumpet Olga Sologub. He does not heed the warning that any indulgence in sensual passions invites the wrath of God and he wantonly falls into the pit of sensuality. After having had the enjoyment of drinking bouts and of pursuing Women after women, he sometimes feels that he is treading in a ruinous path. He wants to have peace and harmony in place of strife and turmoil and his yearning for peace and harmony finds a positive expression in his attempt to save Norman's mickey that was drowned in the sea. Andy prevents him from leaping into the sea water in order to salvage the drowned mickey of Norman, because the sea is infested with sharks and crocodiles. He yields to the arguments of Andy and refrains from jumping into the sea. However, the idea to salvage the drowned mickey is a movement towards something creative in the life of a character who is prone to despondency and cynicism. The movement towards peace and harmony in Hilliot's mind is not something smug and is not forced on him, but it grows out of his experience with the complex maelstrom of life. Harmony, of which Hilliot speaks, emerges from disharmony and chaos of life. He rightly avers: "*Why was it his brain could not accept the dissonance as simply as harmony, could not make order emerge from this chaos. Surely God had made men free from the first, tossing confusion of slime, the spewing of that chaos, from the region beast. Chaos and disunion, then, be told himself, not law and order, were the principles of life which sustained all things, in the mind of men as well as on the ship.*"[17]

Hilliot's reconciliation with Andy is another proof of growing self knowledge in Hilliot. From the very beginning of the voyage on the Oedipus Tyrannus Andy appears to Hilliot as a red rag to a bull. Andy rouses his ire and Hilliot nurses a grudge against Andy. He cannot get over his sense of wonder mingled with hate at the sight of chinless Andy. But towards the end of the journey he finds himself in such a situations with Andy that his unreasoning hatred of Andy gives way to his love for him. This relationship is the result of sympathetic understanding in Hilliot that enables him to peel off misconceptions about man and reality. Till a long part of the voyage he finds himself a toff and an outsider but realisation dawns on him, when the compulsive events of life make demands on him smashing his illusory ideas.

This he calls identification with Andy is symbolic of his being soaked in the palpable facts of life. Howsoever unedifying he says, "*I have to accept Andy and that is no more dangerous than accepting life.*"[18] Andy's vision is clear. He does not suffer from any ostrich-like complacency. He stares reality in the face and there is nothing squeamish about his character. He has been steeled into granite-like firmness who is not put out in the least by the gritty reality. Hilliot says that his will be the lot of journeying through "*a land corrupted and depressed beyond all knowledge, where the children are starving for lack of milk*,"[19] a land unhappy, and with radiant energy he will cope with this cheerless and nerve racking land. Instead of fathoming the shallows, he would whip the sea or deface his mother's house. He makes this snatch a governing principle of his life: "*But grieving's a folly,/ Come, let us be jolly/we've troubles at sea, boys, we've pleasures ashore*"[20]

Despite the fact that his grasp of the reality of love is tenuous, its presence is ubiquitous. Malcolm Bradbury rightly points out that in Lowry there is a "*sense of love as a transcendent principle and an upward movement, through which things have greater distinctiveness and separateness*"[21] Lowry saw it as a moral force, the supernatural world informing the material. Even Under the Volcano in which Geoffrey Firmin makes a destructive identification, love affirms itself from the start to the finish. George Firmin Who resembles Marlowe's Doctor Faustus selling his soul to powers of darkness, is acutely aware of love as a saviour: "*How could he have thought so evil of the world when succour was at hand all the time? And now he had reached the summit. Ah! Yvonne, sweetheart, forgive me.*"[22]

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