

The Sense of Alienation: Romantic versus Modernist

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Abstract:

Alienation is a focus of modernist writing, but it is a universal fact. As a concept to represent the condition of modern humans, it has evolved with time. Marx talks about alienation, but his concept points to basically man's dissatisfaction with his socio-economic condition, and it indicates the failures of existing systems to satisfy his needs. The concept of alienation is position in the romantic period, but the modernist concept relates itself to the mental-psychological ills brought about by man's condition of being face-to-face with an indifferent universe.

Key words: David Leopold, Alienation, modernism, romanticism, Marx, T. S. Eliot, Wordsworth, Lord Byron

A man said to the universe:

“Sir, I exist!”

“However,” replied the universe

“The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation.” (quoted in Ruland and Bradbury 226)

Alienation is a frequently occurring focus of both modernist writing and a discussion about the twentieth century literatures. It refers to a conspicuous emotional or collective evil, which is characterized by what David Leopold describes as “a problematic separation between a self and other that properly belong together” (“Alienation”). As such it points towards the failures of existing social political systems to safeguard larger human interests, and thus it is used to diagnose the ills which make for the impossibility of general wellbeing. Characterized by such negative epithets, alienation appears as a fated situation one should try to avoid if possible. However, alienation has not been an always adverse phenomenon. The romantic attitude to it is rather encouraging, as is exemplified in Lord Byron's lines “There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,/There is a rapture on the lonely shore . . .” (quoted in Daiches 862). Here, the romantic poet's voice is heard as exulting, not despairing, in his alienation from society. The romantic poets themselves would find sustenance from their alienated condition. It shows that the concept of alienation has evolved with time, and the contrast between the romantic and modernist concepts of alienation remains a topic not given much attention to. This article attempts to make a quick survey of contexts which gave rise to the modernist sense of alienation, focusing briefly on romantic sense to show how it differs from the radically different modernist paradigm.

As a phenomenon related to literary period, alienation is treated as a distinct characteristic of modernist art and literature. The sense of alienation is, however, a universal fact, perhaps as old as the rise of human consciousness. Oedipus blinds himself after discovering that he is the killer of his father and begetter of children from his mother. It must be a painfully alienating situation for him,

but he survives his blighted condition and is redeemed ultimately at the embrace of death. In the modern time, just as the quotation above indicates, the condition of alienation is represented as being placed vis-à-vis the indifferent universe, where man is doomed to suffer his own insulated existence.

The thoughts about alienation are linked to the views of Karl Marx, who claims that the workers get alienated from their job in the capitalist society (Gaarder 385-403). Marx's concept of alienation, however, focuses more on social than on psychological ills. It upholds that the ills are brought about by specific aspects of economic arrangements, which get corrected in a society envisioned by Marx's political philosophy. The modernist art and literature, on the contrary, depict humans as isolated individuals, cut off from any touch with the rest of the society, which makes it impossible to have any significant interaction as the utterance of one of T.S Eliot's characters exemplifies in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "That is not what I meant at all/That is not it, at all" (14). This form of alienation emerged as a twentieth-century phenomenon when writers and philosophers held in suspect any notion of traditionally accepted fixity or stability, by questioning the Enlightenment's faith on humans' power for reasoning. The Romantics "challenged the supremacy of reason as the foundation of knowledge," Martin D. Henry quotes in his article "The Enlightenment and Romanticism from a Theological Perspective."

The tendency to challenge reason began with the romantic notion of subjectivity, radical self-expression, and individual liberty themselves. The period, however, soon gave way to a confident synthesis of radical ideas and doctrines, emphasizing on the importance of institutions, common assumptions, and frames of reference. Religion, science, culture or philosophy all helped increase people's confidence in referring to an external reality from an objective standpoint. However, such a notion of external reality was suspected a second time on the eve of modernism. This suspicion brought with it a tendency to "try the new, experiment and explore, test against subjective and objective consequences, learn from one's mistakes, take nothing for granted, treat all as provisional, assume no absolutes" (Tarnas 139). The consequences of such a tendency, which was effected by the sense of the loss of a commonly shared knowledge of external reality, contributed to the rise of the sense of alienation of the individuals in the modernist representation.

The romantic concept of alienation contained positive connotations. The romantic poets were the alienated beings, and they portrayed themselves as such, but they would come out of their alienation to meaning communication with the human society. David Daiches argues:

Whether the romantic poet moves out into the country with Wordsworth, or into a symbolic Middle Ages, as Keats sometimes did, or proceeds to have a passionate Platonic love affair with the universe such as we find in Shelley, he is illustrating in one way or another his isolation . . . his desire to escape from his loneliness not by normal human companionship but by discovering man in general through external nature. (861)

The romantics were at odd with the prevailing customs and traditions of their time. William Blake, for example, was totally "at odds with all the official doctrines of his time, theological, moral, political, and esthetic" (Daiches 873). This oddness prevailed in all other romantic poets, but they would come out of its quagmire to establish their contact with the society they lived in. The modernists, however, were differently alienated from the romantics as the former's loss of a commonly shared point of reference seemed more permanent.

Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury report about the 1890s: "Old certainties faded; the old Norwegian playwright Ibsen was reported as saying, 'The great task of our time is to blow up all existing institutions—to destroy'" (219). When the "certainties" were lost, however, a desperate quest

for alternative substitutes began in the forms of several, and a few of them short-lived, movements like impressionism, expressionism, realism, surrealism, Dadaism, vorticism etc. in art and literature. These movements arose at the latter and the early part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. The loss of any commonly held external frame of reference, it seemed, was something humans could not live without. The attempts for alternatives, however, could not fill the gap that had already resulted from the loss, which made them different from the alienated romantics.

The romantics could establish their relation with the external world by turning to nature or some other ideas, like the middle ages or Platonic love. Nature still acted as a guarantee to enable them to find humanity in general for communication. When such a communication is possible, individuals can at least find some way out of their lonely existence as Daiches argues the romantic poets did (861). This kind of way out is not, however, available for the modernists. They seem to be doomed to live in the quagmire of an alienated world. For these condemned beings, the only way out to redemption is a proposition of alternative realities, which the several currents of ideas brought about the sense of irreparable alienation at the same time. Such currents of ideas destroyed people's notion of a publicly accepted reality and caused what one could describe as "an insulated condition of alienation" in the twentieth century modernism.

The ideas that led to the emergence of alienation did take their roots very early in the twentieth century. Some of them were, however, the nineteenth century phenomenon and they came down as the direct continuations of romantic thought itself. There were, in England, writers and thinkers like Thomas Carlyle, J. S. Mill, and John Henry Newman who "represented . . . an attack on Victorian middle-class complacency" (Daiches 966). Fundamental change of mood came at the start of the 1890s, when writers and thinkers offered changed mental attitudes for the new century. The notion of physical universe was also being transformed by scientists and technologists (Ruland and Bradbury 219).

Anti-rationalist philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard had their share, too. They questioned Hegelian dialectic view of history. According to Pandey, Nietzsche "exposes the illusions that underlie the belief systems of the enlightenment philosophy" (170). Nietzsche further questioned the claim of the enlightenment philosophy for its universal application (171). The views that history and civilization were progressive, and that progress was good were called into question. Vincent B. Leitch claims, "Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger call into question and destroy the metaphysical concepts of being, truth, consciousness, self, identity, and presence" (qtd. in Ruland 425). Leitch says this as an argument to see how the deconstructive approach was triggered by those philosophers' radical ideas. In the modernist period, the men of letters could appreciate just the premonition of such radical standpoints, and so they would continue with their project of "an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one" (Pandey 313). They would, in other words, hold on to the idea of offering some alternative possibilities as substitute for their loss of referential point until finally settling into the embrace of postmodernism, which as Pandey argues, "denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable" (314).

Charles Darwin and Karl Marx were two of the most disruptive thinkers to bring about the onslaught of alienated sense in modernism. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection undermined religious certainty of man's being biologically superior. When Darwin proposed that "all hypotheses and events were to be explained and tested by reference to natural causes and events" (Pandey 170), he discarded any metaphysical or transcendental idea about the origin of human life. Such a notion would disconnect humans from their link with God or any other supernatural being. Consequently,

it would not take long to see human life existing in isolation in an alien universe. Karl Marx diagnoses the socio-political problems to declare that the problems with economic order did not result temporarily from the specific wrong doers or temporary condition. They did rather eventuate from the fundamental contradictions within economic order of capitalist society. Such deterministic view of the economic order, Marx contends, ruled western history and culture and consequently he questioned “the idealist philosophy of its time” (Pandey 170). Marx, moreover, straightforwardly states that spirituality has nothing to do with the change in material human conditions. History moves forward just by material relations and “morality is principally a matter of who owns the means of production” (Pandey 170). Such notions of history and morality would radically move people away from spiritual concerns and towards the material ones. When even material things failed to give satisfaction, however, a person would be left with nothing but the questioning of traditional norms that would again lead him or her to alienation itself.

New concepts of time that came into existence because of the influence of William James and Henri Bergson also contributed to this sense of alienation. The concept of time “which does not really exist but which represents the continuous flow of the ‘already’ into the ‘not yet’, of retrospect into anticipation,” was influenced or at least similar to William James’s idea of the “specious present” (Daiches 1153). Henry Bergson proposed a concept of time as “flow and duration rather than as a series of points moving chronologically forward” (1153) and it also brought about influential consequences for the aggravation of modernist sense of alienation. If time could not be considered a chronological series of forward movement of events, or if past and present could co-exist, it could easily be expected that a person’s consciousness was always intervened by his or her past. Such simultaneous existence in both past and present would lead persons away from any possibility of normal human communication, which in turn would pave the way for an individual’s alienation.

Such philosophical and intellectual currents of ideas prepared ground for the modernist sense of alienation. They had radical impact on the literary forms of the time. The literary men, in other words, responded to those ideas in a positive manner and tried to assimilate them into their creation. Modernism as a literary phenomenon is supposed to have been heralded, in England, by the publications in 1922 of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) were other monumental works to accommodate modernist ideas. All of these literary works presented their characters as lonely and alienated humans, who lacked any commonly accepted frame of reference to refer to for any meaningful communication. In Eliot’s work—amidst the scenes of desolation, moral squalor, and social emptiness—the characters live a life which is both fragmented and alienated. In one of the episodes in *The Waste Land*, after the sexual act with her lover, the young man carbuncular, comes to end, the typist woman remarks: “Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over” (Abrams 2521). Such remarks display the symptom of moral degradation in modernist time, but it also highlights its sense of alienation. The sexual act is not an activity in which one gets involved for pleasure or for giving continuation to one’s lineage. It is a burdensome ritual, done for its own sake, and it fails to bring the involved partners together. In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the characters engage themselves in social interaction only to make it their own alienated condition clear. Stephen’s or Blooms’ consciousness, for example, is juxtaposed with the “public conversation they become involved in . . . thus stressing the inevitable loneliness of men” (Daiches 1154-55). Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* represent “treatments of the problem of loneliness and love” (1159). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Mrs. Dalloway has planned to give a party, which is supposed to bring people together. As the scene in the novel moves ahead, however, one sees people feeling lonelier even in the crowd. Such feeling of loneliness among the crowd underscores the fact of alienation of people in modern time.

Alienation is a universal fact, but it occurs as a most striking feature of modernism. The condition of alienation Marx talks about changes with the change in social-economic arrangements. However, the mental-psychological alienation brought about by the radical loss of commonly shared point of reference has remained as a more permanent feature of modernist representation. Alienation began with nineteenth-century English romanticism, but it was radically different from the same in the modernism. In the romanticism, an individual could devise ways out of his or her predicament. The modernist sense of alienation, on the other hand, cannot be transcended; it has rather engulfed the individuals in such a way that it has become part of the modernist culture. The philosophical and intellectual currents of ideas that contributed for the setting in of alienation in modernism have made it almost as part of human nature. The Romantic sense of alienation was a temporary experience of failing to establish a rapport with the external reality. Once the Romantics established it by way of their communication with nature or any other phenomenon, their sense of alienation would go away. The modernists, however, cannot come out of this quagmire of alienated experience. The experience itself has become an existential phenomenon of a time when man faces an indifferent universe relentlessly.

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