THE CONCEPT OF ALIENATION: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
In this post-modern world, the human beings are said to be leading an alienated existence. In addition to the issues concerning basic material needs like food, clothing and shelter, the modern man has to cope with the feelings of loneliness, frustration, isolation and alienation. He feels that he is leading a purposeless and meaningless existence. Different thinkers have tried to grapple with these issues from different perspectives viz. Marxian, Existential, Sociological, Psychological etc. But all of them agree that this feeling of alienation has a paralyzing effect on the personality of man. This feeling sometimes comes to the surface in the form of neurotic behavior, psychosomatic disorder, suicide, ethnic prejudices, and even civil riots.

Keywords: Alienation, Powerlessness, Meaninglessness, Normlessness, Isolation, Self-Estrangement.

Modern age is called the age of alienation in which man is said to be leading an isolated, lonely, frustrated and alienated existence. He suffers not only from war, famine and ruin but also from more complex problems – problems of isolation and meaninglessness in his existence. He, today, lives a life of confusion, frustration, disintegration and disillusionment.

Though the term 'alienation' is commonly and widely used, it is an elusive concept with so many but often contradictory meanings. The concept is used to explain almost everything from the physical to the metaphysical in relation to the individual and the environment. The concept of alienation is somewhat abstract and super-sensuous and is more psychological than objective. It does not denote or connote anything exclusive, specific and final.
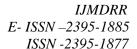
The feeling of alienation is almost as old as man. It may be said that no society, culture or human being can be free from alienation. There are some critics who regard Adam and Eve as the Biblical symbols of alienation from God and Nature. They contradict the popular notion that alienation is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Writing on the inevitability of alienation, Kaufmann remarks, "Alienation is neither a disease nor a blessing, but for better or worse, a central feature of human existence." (Kaufmann, 1970: xxxvii)

The word 'alienation' has been in use in English since the 14th century "to describe an action of estranging or state of estrangement normally in relation to a cutting off or being cut-off from God or to a breakdown of relations between a man or a group and some received political authority." (Williams, 1981: 33) From 15th century onwards, the word has been used to describe the action of transferring the ownership of anything to another. It refers especially to the transfer of rights, estates or money. Later on the term is extended to mean the result of such a transfer i.e. a state of having something been alienated. By analogy the term is further used to mean the loss, withdrawal or derangement of mental faculties and thus isolation.

Though alienation is an age-old phenomenon, yet in modern times, it has assumed alarming proportions. Technological developments and industrialization which have led the modern world to the heights of material prosperity have also brought in their wake their own problems. The weakening of familial, social and national bonds has made man a stranger in his own home, an outcaste in his own society and an alien in his own land.

Scholars differ radically in their explanation of the term 'alienation'. Hegel is the first thinker to introduce the concept of alienation to the modern world. He uses the term in a philosophical sense. For him alienation is an ontological fact, rooted in the man's existence in the world. According to him, there are two entities of man – man as a subject and man as an object and there is an inherent disassociation between them. The mind through its creations transfers parts of itself to the external world but considers these externalizations to be alien to itself. Thinkers like Marx and Engels trace the roots of alienation in the division of labour. According to them alienation takes place when labour becomes a commodity. They think alienation is inherent in the very structure of the modern capitalistic society. Work under the capitalistic economy is neither voluntary nor spontaneous, it is forced one. And this forced labour gives birth to the feeling of boredom and frustration. As a result, the labourers feel alienated. For Marx, therefore, exploitation of labour is responsible for their alienation.

Another related form of alienation, pointed out by Marx, is political alienation where politics is seen as the form that organizes the productive forces of the economy. It is alienating in the sense that it "distorts the logic of economic development". (Axelos, 1976: 87) Next, there is ideological alienation which refers to the general tendency of the religions to divert people away from true happiness and turn them towards illusory happiness.

Another form of alienation is human alienation where the individuals become estranged to themselves in their quest to stay alive. "They lose their true existence in the struggle for subsistence." (Axelos, 1976: 111) In this connection Marx refers to two aspects of human nature. The first one is concerned with the necessities of food, clothes and shelter. The second one refers to the tendency of the human beings to generate more needs and desires after their basic needs get satisfied. In this way, they get stuck in a cycle of never ending wants which makes them strangers to each other.

The Marxian tradition, however, represents only one stream of thought concerning alienation. Another stream is embodied in what has come to be called the theory of 'mass society'. There are thinker like Ferdinand Tonnics and Fritz Poppenheim who trace the causes of alienation in the breakdown of traditional society and consequent loss of sense of community. These writers regard modern man as isolated, anonymous and impersonal, uprooted from old values without finding new values to sustain him. To quote Poppenheim once again, "These indictments culminate in the accusation that man in the technological age has become alienated from his work, from himself and from the reality of society and nature." (Poppenheim, 1959: 43)

Enrich Fromm looks at the state of the alienated man from the philosophical, sociological and psychological perspective. For him the type of life the modern man lives is determined by larger cultural patterns. Man obtains his sense of identity from conformity with the majority. By doing so, he loses his sense of individuality and distinctiveness. This self-alienation of man is the result of his total surrender to the standards of society. The scientific and technical developments have reduced him to a non-entity.

Herbert Marcuse makes similar observations about the predicament of modern man. Like Fromm he contends that the modern man is alienated because he is made to identify himself with social norms and values. In the process, he loses his individuality and his inner desires. The modern day industrial-cum-capitalistic society tries to repress his true needs. This leads to the emergence of one dimensional man.

Karen Horney tries to understand the concept of alienation on the basis of a distinction between two types of self – the actual self and the real self. The actual self can be described in terms of one's "feelings, wishes, beliefs and energies and also his past." (Horney, 1970: 153-54) On the other hand, the real self is the "most alive centre of ourselves which engenders the spontaneity of feelings." (Horney, 1970: 154) An individual who becomes oblivious of his real self ultimately gets alienated from himself. He often develops an idealized image of himself which is different from his real self. If this idealized self is attainable then there is no emotional or psychological problem. But if it becomes unattainable then it leads to a conflict between the ideal self and the real self. An individual tends to reject the real self as it fails to satisfy the demands of the ideal self. This chasm between the real self and the ideal self becomes the cause of the alienation of the individual.

Seeman looks at the issue of alienation from the socio-psychological perspective. He refers to it in the sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement of an individual. He perceives the state of powerlessness as "the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes or reinforcements he seeks." (Seeman, 1959: 784) Kalekin-Fishman opines in this connection that "a person suffers from alienation in the form of powerlessness when he is conscious of the gap between what she would like to do and what she feels capable of doing." (1996: 97) The same idea is extended by Julian Rotter who distinguishes between internal control and external control. It refers to the "differences in the degree to which success or failure is attributed to external factors, as against success or failure that is seen as the outcome of one's personal skills or characteristics." (Quoted in Seeman, 1966: 355) In this way, powerlessness is perceived as the lack of means to achieve the objectives. This concept of alienation is related to the Marxian concept of worker's alienation in a capitalist social set-up.

Meaninglessness refers to low expectancy on the part of an individual to predict about the future outcome of his behavior. It shows his lack of understanding of the events in which he is engaged. Normlessness "denotes the situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules of behavior." (Seeman, 1959: 787) It refers to the inability of an individual to identify with the dominant values of society or what he perceives to be the dominant values of society. He tends to rely more on his own judgment than on the institutions of authority. Isolation refers to the feeling of being separated from one's community. An individual keeps aloof from the values held by the society. This kind of alienation has become central to the existence of the post-modern man. His daily interactions are with those who are strangers to him and with whom he lacks any ongoing social relationship. Self-estrangement, another variant of alienation, refers to the value of an individual's acts in terms of external consequences. Marx considers it to be at the heart of social alienation. It can be defined as "the psychological state of denying one's own interests – or seeking out extrinsically

satisfying, rather than intrinsically satisfying, activities….” (Kalekin-Fishman, 1996: 97) It refers to the feeling of having become stranger to oneself, or some part of it.

Existential thinkers yet represent another stream of thought regarding the concept of alienation. They regard alienation as an ontological fact and not the result of outside objective conditions of man's environment. For Sartre and other existentialists, self-estrangement is a natural state of affairs in a world bereft of meaning and purpose. Soren Kierkagaard holds that attaining an adequate sense of self in a world dominated by purposelessness and despair is the central problem of alienation. Existentialists see man as a unique and isolated individual in an indifferent and hostile environment. They believe that man is so constituted that his subjective self will always remain unrealized and his inner being unfulfilled and he can never assert his authentic self.

For Sigmund Freud and his followers, self-estrangement is seen to be lying in the split conscious and unconscious forces of the personality. The conscious mind for fear of society, represses the instincts and desires. These repressed desires accumulate into powerful personality factors and ultimately condition the inner urges of life. The result is a war of the mind with itself and the world. And from this war results the loneliness of the self which fails to find social expression.

Thus, scholars differ radically in their definitions of the term 'alienation' and the assumptions that underline these definitions. But all of them agree that this feeling has a paralyzing effect on the personality of man. A man suffering from this peculiar feeling feels that life holds out no comprehensive meaning for him. He feels that his life is not under his control but is determined by some outside forces which are independent of him. The feeling of alienation separates him from his environment, relations, Nature, God and even from his own self. This feeling, sometimes, manifests itself in neurotic behavior, delinquency, psychosomatic disorder, suicide, psychosis, wildcat strikes, ethnic prejudices, civil riots and so forth.

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