

Why Do People Get Alienated

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Abstract

Alienation is the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, a product of work or self. It is by and large, self-imposed. It is the result of one's non-conformistic postures and one's unwillingness to submit and surrender one's dignity, honour and self-respect – his individuality. When a non-conformist refuses to play the role devised by the society, then he suffers alienation. This apart, circumstances, environment, and deterministic conditions cause alienation. It ought to be stressed that the person of superior talents, and greater potentialities and higher levels of competencies suffer alienation at the hands of the marginally intelligent, less capable and minimally talented individuals. The first generation of immigrant suffers alienation in the land of his settlement.

Keywords: Alienation, non-confirmist, powerlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation, alienate, impotent, immigrants

Eric Josephson and Mary Josephson feel that it is an individual feeling or state of dissociation of self, from others and from a world at large¹. Displacement and disorientation also compel one to experience alienation. Racial determinants particularly diaspora, nostalgia and cultural-divide are yet other factors that cause alienation. The neurotic or the mentally retarded also becomes an alienate.

It is of great literary interest to record that great literary artists are known for streamlined scholarship, superior writing capacities and greater language competencies and artistic potentialities suffer artistic alienation.

It is of interest to argue the point that the term 'alienation' is generally accepted to refer to powerlessness. In fact, the alienate experiences meaninglessness, powerlessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement and social isolation. A proper perception of alienation demands a clear comprehension of the existential life situations.

For an existentialist, alienation is a state after paying the price for choosing to be free from an external control that comes from institutions, laws, people, and ideas external to himself. If such a price is not paid, alienation or isolation is not suffered. In this context, the observation of Sekou Toure becomes relevant:

"The individual free will freedom of action and thought and the full enjoyment of his or her personality should be held by a social consciousness, which takes into consideration other people and society in respect of common values, interests and duty..."²

If the individuals do not take cognizance of the common values, interests and duties and responsibilities, then they suffer alienation. Thus alienation is a state of liberation from all forces other than the choosing self; it is servitude forced on the individual who is conscious that he is rejecting a concept that must exist since he is always conscious of being forced to reject the concept continually.

It is also of interest to record, that the great problems of the contemporary society have been described as arising out of different modes of alienation. And there are varying kinds of alienation that characterize the experience of modern people. They are as follow:

1. Self-imposed alienation
2. Alienation of the race
3. Alienation of the superior intellect
4. Alienation of the inferior intellect
5. Alienation of the youth from the elder
6. Artistic Alienation
7. Alienation of the neurotic
8. Alienation of the class society
9. Alienation of the industrial society
10. Alienation of the mass society
11. Alienation of the competitive society
12. Alienation of the post-modern society

These twelve kinds of alienation are independent of one from the other. Lewis Feur argues to the point as given below:

These modes of alienation are independent of each other. A class society need not be a competitive one... A strict class society, carried to caste extremes, brings with it relief from competitive tension, but it aggravates the frustrations of initiative and choice of one's own work, in addition, the man of the lower class must internalize the feeling of inferiority, and cultivate a degree of self-hatred and contempt. In this sense, he is internalizing feelings and attitudes towards himself, of self destruction...³

Higher intellectuals suffer alienation at the hands of lesser intellectuals. The great genius artists experience alienation because of their superior intellect, greater powers of assimilation and interpretation. They have a keener sense of the striking transformation of the ordinary into the

extraordinary. They have a greater cultivated mastery over the art of writing. In all these respects they are alienated from the rest of the ordinary individuals.

By being a demanding artist also one gets alienated. In other words, one has attained a high level of sophistication and elitism in writing. Consequently, one gets alienated from the marginal writers. Lewis Feur's observation warrants mentioning here:

"Alienation is the dramatic metaphor of the intellectual who has left the political gardens of Eden and projects his experience as the exemplar of all human frustrations. The frustrations are immense and universal. The intellectual's alienation was in part a self-alienation which arose as he discovered the character of his own underlying aims..."⁴

The power-crazy man living in the domain of paranoid aggrandizement turns into an alienate, estranged from the mankind around him. The super potent man is complimentary in his alienation to the impotent.

It is in America one witnesses the amifications of artistic alienation in a pronounced fashion. The artistic alienation is actually felt by the Jewish American and the African American writers more than the other artists. The woman writers suffer alienation at the hands of the male chauvinists.

The African American writers suffer alienation because of their black colour, their racial characteristics and their racial determinants. These artists repeatedly refer to the veil which exists between them and the Whites. On this aspect, W.F.B. Du Bois makes a pointed observation: "Within the veil as he (my first born) was born.. and there within shall he live... a Negro (Black) and a Negriss (Black's) son..."⁵

In the modern world of complexities characterized by tensions and anxieties and the stresses and strains, conflicting pulls and counter-pulls and poly urges, there are many who suffer self-imposed alienation. They prefer to remain, loners, then be mixers, in a world that fails to understand them. For instance, a conscientious objector, who refuses to toe the lines defined by the Society and Establishment is never understood properly by the society and the establishment. Consequentially he suffers alienation.

In the competitive post-modern society, the one who is more industrious and more mentally agile, and more alert and one who is endowed with greater powers of comprehension and apprehension stand out as superior to others. This superiority causes alienation in him. Incidentally, this superior intellectual is actually aware of the reason for his alienation from the rest of the society. But he is unable to think his way through to an accommodation with society and the Establishment. It is because his thinking leads him to more thinking – not to action. And it is tragic indeed for the superior intellectual.

The intellectuals, ironically, feel powerless and alienated. Their best efforts are ground to dust, they say, by a materialistic, soulless society that has no use for art, intellect, imagination or truth. Therefore, they see themselves as victims.

The first generation immigrants suffer alienation because of their racial predicaments, their own sense of good and evil, their mental anguish due to cultural divide and their illusion.

The neurotics suffer alienation as they fail to distinguish between objective reality and hallucination. They fail to shed their paranoid complexes. They become prisoners of their own perceptions.

The generation gap also causes the alienation of the youth from the old. Values change and accepted norms and mores suffer alterations. In such a context, the values of the old world are lost on the new generation of the youth, who self-style themselves as the lost generation, and willingly alienate themselves from their elder generations.

Persons preoccupied with a simple introspective consciousness suffer alienation. Therefore, alienation in their case becomes the common denominator. They become victims to excessive brooding, chronic despair, undying yearning, self-centeredness and self-pity. Such alienates are not particularly interested in anything outside of themselves. Therefore, these alienates keep their claustrophobic world doubly closed.

At this point, it is of immediate interest to record the pertinent observation of Melvin Seeman. He agrees persuasively and convincingly that alienation is multifaceted and multidimensional. He distinguishes alienation by referring to

its five variants namely, “powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement”. And he concludes quite authoritatively and persuasively that “the alienates are dissatisfied with the condition of power possession, meaningfulness, norm-orientation, involvement and self acknowledgment”⁶.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to examine the distinguishing properties of existentialism, in close conjunction with what has been classified as the characteristic features of alienation, for there are many overlapping interpretations and continuities as far as alienation and existentialism are concerned.

Soren Abaye Kierkegaard, the theist existentialist and Jean-Paul Satre and his followers known as atheist existentialists hold the view that man’s existential situation is that of his singleness and loneliness in life. The alienate is a loner. Man is alone in the universe. A man has become an island.

Man, in general, has the will and liberty to choose. He tends to choose in haste and then regrets in leisure. He also feels sorry for the paths he has chosen and longs for the roads not taken. Life, after words, becomes a series of regrets to every man.

As man is endowed with freedom, he is responsible for his actions, whether they are good or bad. And the existentialists understand that in his existential situation, the freedom that he enjoys is not compatible, with comfort. The simple reason is what he wants, the other does not want. Therefore, he has to surrender some of his freedom ensured rights to co-exist with others.

Man suffers from ‘angst’. He dreads death. But he knows full well that death is inevitable. He is unable to find answers to mysteries and uncertainties. Therefore, he is always filled with a deep sense of nausea because of his inability to find answers to the mysteries in spite of his human intelligence. In his struggle alone he finds meaning and substance to his existence. In fact, the universally acknowledged truth is that in a struggle is existence. The existential philosophers hold the view that one must understand one’s self.

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