

## Alienation: A Cross Study between Karl Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre

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### Abstract

The word alienation has a special relevance in our modern life situations. As the technology and the mass level of industrialization affect our life, we are living a more alienated life than ever before. The word etymologically refers to estrangement, loneliness and a state of isolation of man. Alienation has been a persistent problem of man from the very beginning of human civilization and got intensified during the progress of time. The problems of alienation has been captivated the minds of so many thinkers over the centuries. It has so many versions in different branches of knowledge, like sociology, philosophy, theology or neurology. But it has a special place in Philosophy and Sociology. The concept got a new level of meaning during the 20th century with the radical development of Science and technology as well as industrial development. Alienation, as a philosophical concept, got immense acceptance and popularity through the works of, French Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, and as a Sociological concept, influenced the masses through the revolutionary thoughts of Karl Marx. While Karl Marx was more vocal about the alienation of man in the capitalist societies, Sartre's notion of alienation was more about man's being.

Karl Marx's theory of alienation covers his theory of natural man and how he engages in productive work in capitalist societies. It has social relevance, as it shows the ordinary labor's suffering conditions in industrialist societies. On the other hand Jean Paul Sartre's theory of alienation depicts the various aspects of man's conscious being. Sartre was more interested in describing man's alienation during his intimate private situations like death, innate freedom. Through this paper, I would like to convey, the various aspects of alienation, in the socio-philosophical thoughts of Karl Marx and Jean Paul Sartre.

**KEYWORDS:** *Alienation, Capitalism, Isolation, Species Being, Productive Work, Exploitation, Work, Being and Nothingness, Freedom, Praxis, Scarcity.*

### INTRODUCTION

The word alienation has a special relevance in our modern life situations. As the technology and the mass level of industrialization affect our life, we are living a more alienated life than ever before. The word etymologically refers to estrangement, loneliness and a state of isolation of man. Alienation has been a persistent problem of man from the very beginning of human civilization and got intensified during the progress of time. The problems of alienation have captivated the minds of so many thinkers over the centuries. It has so many versions in different branches of knowledge, like sociology, philosophy, theology or neurology. But it has a special place in Philosophy and Sociology. The concept got a

new level of meaning during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the radical development of science and technology as well as industrial development. Alienation, as a philosophical concept, got immense acceptance and popularity through the works of, French Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, and as a Sociological concept, influenced the masses through the revolutionary thoughts of Karl Marx. While Karl Marx was more vocal about the alienation of man in the capitalist societies, Sartre's notion of alienation was more about man's being.

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Alienation has been a persistent problem of man from the beginning of the human civilization. The very idea of alienation has captivated the minds of so many thinkers for so many decades. The concept of alienation is not restricted in the realm of Philosophy, but it has various meanings and approaches in various subjects like Sociology, Psychology, theology or neurology. The 20th century has witnessed the rapid development in science and technology and the industrialization and the term alienation got a new level of meaning in socio-philosophical arena. The existential philosophy and its humanistic approach got immense acceptance and popularity like never before, and one of its captivating thoughts were the 'alienated man'. The literary, philosophical works of Jean Paul Sartre and the Socio-revolutionary writings of Karl Marx picturized the problem of alienation in a different way

The term 'alienation' has been originated from the Latin noun 'alienatio', which means 'take away', 'remove'. Etymologically the word indicates the state of 'isolation' or 'detachment', a kind of 'withdrawal' or 'separation'. In general, the word refers to the process of separation or estrangement of somebody or something from something else. Melvin Seeman in his article 'On the meaning of Alienation' (1991) beautifully described the various meanings of the term alienation.<sup>1</sup>(Seeman, Melvin :On the meaning of alienation, p. 7)

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#### **In his article, Seeman Describes Different Meanings of the Term.**

- I. Powerlessness: It is a Socio-Psychological Phenomenon rather than an objective condition in society. It is simply the lack of control, or inability to control events and their consequences.
- II. Normlessness: It is the situation in which one feels that the old approved social norms are no longer effective in guiding his behavior for the achievement of culturally defined or personal goals. As a result the individual perceives himself separate from the society and its norms and he experiences a state of normlessness and being alienated from the society.
- III. Meaninglessness: It's a cognitive phenomenon, says Seeman. "The individual is unclear as to what he ought to

believe. When the individual's minimal standards for clarity in decision making are not met."<sup>2</sup> (Seeman, p. 28). It is a state in which the individuals lack's his ability to predict about social situations and the outcomes of their own and others behavior.

- IV. Self-estrangement: Here the individual experience himself as an alien. Estranged from himself. The person is self-estranged, when engaged in an activity that is not rewarding in itself but is instrumental in satisfying extrinsic needs, such as the need for money and security."<sup>3</sup>(seeman, p. 28).
- V. Social Isolation: When an individual finds that the accepted norms of the society is ineffective for attaining his goals, he may develop his own norms to guide his behavior and achieve his goal. The condition is normlessness and it leads him to social isolation. As he has his own norms which is different from the society and others, he is socially isolated.
- VI. Cultural estrangement: "It is the individuals rejection of, or sense of removal from, dominant social values"<sup>4</sup> (seeman, p. 28). Here one individual feels that he is culturally different from other groups of the society, as his ideas and opinions about day to day life is different from others.

## **1. KARL MARX ON ALIENATION**

Marx's revolutionary thoughts has a massive influence on common people as well as scholars. He is best known for his critiques of capitalism. He criticized capitalism as alienating as well as exploitative. Through the concepts like natural and species man, the productive work in capitalist society, and alienation, Marx establishes the true life of man in capitalist societies.

### **1.1 The Species-Being**

The idealistic view of man as spirit and body is rejected by Marx. He says about the natural man, who possesses species qualities, which makes him stand out from other beings. In German Ideology, he explains what makes man different from animals. Human beings are biological beings, like any other animals. Man interact with each other in order to survive like animals. But what distinguishes man from all other animals like bees, spider etc., which are also transforms the world based on instinct, is that we transform the world consciously and freely. Man alone produces his means of life, his own means of survival. This capacity of man of productiveness is the unique characteristic of man. As a man, he possesses certain powers and needs.<sup>5</sup> (Ashai, Shabnam, Alienation: An Existential Concept p. 110). His power is his capacity or his potential of becoming more from what he is now, under any conditions. He has needs for objects which are not immediately available. By need, Marx indicates mans 'drive' and 'want'. Man uses power to fulfill his need. The powers which are associated with natural man are labour, eating and sex. These powers exist in him by nature. They exist as tendencies which needs fulfillment. Thus Marx's man is a living, real, sensuous, knowing being. Man's body is living material object which has senses and potential to do activities, physical as well as mental. Man as a natural being is an objective sensuous creature whose life is suffering, limited and conditioned. He is suffering as he cannot get everything to satisfy his needs.

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Apart from the natural powers man has species powers which makes him special. The qualities which are uniquely human and is distinguished from other living things are the species qualities. Only man possesses them. Marx gives a number of species powers like sensing, feeling, thinking, willing, judging and so on. Through the natural as well as species powers he makes relations between himself and nature.(Ashai, Shabnam, p. 111).Here, nature includes other men also. By summerising the concept of human nature, Marx says – “ the whole character of species is contained in the character of its life activity, and free conscious activity in man’s species character.”<sup>6</sup> (Ashai, Shabnam, p. 127).Thus the essence of a human being ie; species-being, is to consciously and freely transform the world in order to meet our needs. The life activity is the species nature of man. Life activity is the activity which can only seen in human species. And this life activity is the ‘productive work’ “the productive life is the life of species”<sup>7</sup>Ashai, Shabnam, p. 140).

### 1.2 The Productive Work

Man is inevitably related with the productive work. It is his life activity. The productive work or life activity is the point in which man is different from animals. Man consciously conducts the life activity. “Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He had conscious life activity. Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity.”<sup>8</sup> (Raymond, Aron, Marxism and Existentialists, p. 57).The self awareness of what is doing, and for what purpose is doing, is the specialty of man from animal. He has choices to act in order to fulfill his ends. His actions are purposive. Man is living in society, and is a social being hence his activity is always social. In short mans life activity or productive work is conscious, purposive and social. For Marx, the means of production is an important factor. By means of production he means, everything which are essential rather needed for the production. It includes factories, natural resources and commodities. Unlike a socialist economy, the capitalist economy’s means of production is privately owned. The labour, the key element of production, is not included in this privately owned things. And this brings in the formation of two members or rather categories of capitalist economy, the ‘workers’ and the ‘owners’. The capitalist class, the owners, or the bourgeoisie owns the means of production. While the workers or the proletariat do not own the means of production. As a result there is always a sense of superiority in the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. The capitalist owners always exploits the working class as only a mere power less category, and a means of production.

### 1.3 The Concept of Alienation

The idea of class division itself is alienating as the superior one is always exploits the working class. The working class is always remains as a separate, estranged category. Through alienation Marx tries to establish the condition of man in the industrialist society. And through the theory of alienation Marx uncovers the inequality and exploitative mode of production of the capitalist societies. The basic fact of human life is that he need food, clothing and shelter. These are the essentials man should have and he must produce them. And using the raw materials, instruments and labour, man produces them to sustain his life. During the process of production the workers gets overly exploited by the private owners.

Man is alienated, separated or estranged in the capitalist society. Among the two classes, it is the workers who feels the alienation. The very organization of the world of work is the basis of mans alienation. So how are workers gets alienated in the society under capitalism? Marx describes four specific ways.

a. The workers are alienated from the products of their labour:-

As the owners of the firm or factory, the capitalists need not do any labour by themselves. They own the means of production so they only need to control them and make the firm profitable. They make profit by selling commodities which are completely produced by the workers. Simply they are exploiting the workers for profit. The worker invests his labor in materials and things which are not his but private property. And thus the product does not belong to the labor. He has been used only as a tool or means in the process of production. While the workers get alienated from the product of his own labour, the workers' labour strengthens the capitalists.

b. Workers are alienated from the act of labor:

Because capitalists own the firms they employ the workers and pay them wage. It is the employers, the owners, and not the workers, who decide what commodities are made and in what working conditions they are made. The products are not the one which the worker wanted to make. He cannot use his own decisions during the production. He is under the direction or control of others. He is obeying the orders of the superior, the owner. He is not less than a machine, which is also under the direction of others. He is objectified. Objectified in the sense that the workers' labor is put into the objects he makes but he makes it for someone else. He is alienated from the product he made as well as his own labour.

“First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not a part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery, not of well-being, doesn't develop freely a physical and mental energy, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased...finally, the alienated character of work for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his work but for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person.”<sup>9</sup> (Raymond, Aron, p. 54). The work becomes pressurized, repetitive and dangerous under the capitalist firms: The forceful way of work is not meant for conscious, free human beings but for machines. Working like a machine for an extended period of time kills the very essence of being human.

c. Workers are alienated from other human beings

In a capitalist economy, the workers are forced to compete each other for better jobs and wage raises. In business, competition between two companies who produce same product, finally leads to the price drop of the product. Like that the competition between workers leads to the drop of reasonable wages. So, by the competition it is only the capitalists, who benefit and not the working class. As a result of the competition, one worker gets alienated from the others. And there even arises rivalry among the working class. Man is a social being, he is able to transform the world not only by himself but in co-operation with his fellow beings also. But for their own benefit, the capitalist class seeks to destroy the solidarity of the working class. Under capitalism workers see each other as competitors or opposition and thus they become each alienated entity rather than a group.

d. Alienated from the species nature

As mentioned earlier, man has his natural and species instincts. He is conscious and free. Through the species power, he makes relations with the nature and others. His life activity is always purposeful. He does productive works to fulfill his needs to survive. In the capitalist economy, man becomes a tool to fulfill others' need. He is objectified like a machine to produce a commodity. He is no more free to act by his own but is under rigorous restrictions of the firm

owners. His species nature, the free conscious being, gets alienated from him.

The entire process of working in a capitalist society represents the alienation, as the workers work is not the expression of his own ideas and creative powers. “the worker feels himself at home only during leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless.”<sup>10</sup>(Raymond, Aron, p. 61).He is exploited and paid less wages and finally results in the unfair distribution of wealth. It will degrade and alienate men from his essence. They are reduced to objects and thus the joy of life is destroyed. They are reduced to objects and thus the joy of life is destroyed. “the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over against himself, the poorer he himself his inner world becomes, the less belongs to him as his own.. the worker puts his life into the object but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater this activity, the greater is the workers lack of objects whatever the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore, the greater is this product, the less is he himself.”<sup>11</sup>(Raymond, Aron, p. 61).

In the end the worker only feels he is surrounded by objects which are alien to him and they are not his. He understands the reality that his life is dominated by the things which are not his, and he is alienated from them. He is alienated from the nature, as he transforms nature by his labour but in the process gets alienate from what he has transformed. He is alienated from himself, as his own labour does not give him satisfaction and he is selling his work for someone else. He is alienated from his species nature, as he loses the free conscious activity during productive labor.

## 2. SARTRE ON ALIENATION

Sartre, the atheistic existentialist, has discussed the concept of alienation in his writings: But unlike other thinkers, Sartre has two philosophical views in his philosophical life, that of an existentialist and of a Marxist. Talking about alienation, the early Sartre, who was an existentialist was more about ontological alienation, while the later Sartre who was a Marxist, was more concerned about the alienated man is social conditions. These two different views can be seen in his two magnum opus works, ‘The Being and Nothingness’ and ‘The critique of Dialectical Reason.’

### 2.1 Ontological Alienation

Sartre has discussed the concept alienation in detail in Being and Nothingness by elaborating the two realms of being, the ‘being-in-itself and the being-for-itself.’ The being in-itself, is the self contained material things which lacks consciousness. ie, a stone, a table or a chair it is what it is and there is no more or less possibility. The being-for-itself, as a conscious entity, is full of possibilities. It is in relation with other for itself’. It is the conscious being of man. “the nature of consciousness is that it is perpetually beyond itself”<sup>12</sup>(Sartre, JP, Being and Nothingness, p. 141).

Man is a nihilating nothingness. Nothingness is the defining characteristic of the for itself. It is nothingness, because conscious human existence has no objective ground or reference to any system of values Man, is pure nothingness because he is devoid of any pre-determined essence. He is forced to create itself from nothingness. The in-itself, like a tree or a chair, ‘lacks’ the ability to change its being as it is unconscious. But the for-itself, that is man, possesses the ability to change or create himself through his actions in the world. To exist man must endlessly transcend himself or be alienated

from himself.

As an existentialist, Sartre is pictured alienation mainly through three concepts (i). the finitude or subjectivity (ii). The anguished freedom (iii). the death

The aspect of subjectivity makes man stand apart from in-itself's. It is the fact of being a subject. One person is not identical with another one. He is completely different in every aspect from others. His emotions, choices, way of seeing rest of the world and others are unique, he is subjective in every aspect. He is finite in himself, totally estranged from others. Each man is a moral subject and all human experience are subjective. He is finite and alienated from another for itself's in essence.

As an isolated, subjective person, he has total freedom to choose his own actions. There is not any higher authority or superior power like God, to help him in choosing his own actions. He is solely responsible for his actions and the results. The endless freedom makes him anguish, as he know that whatever would be the result, it is totally depends on him. There is no one else to share his fear, his anxiety or his anguish. He is an alienated soul in real sense.

As a conscious being man is well aware of the truth of death. It is not a mystery beyond life but rather a part of human reality. It symbolizes the finitude of human being. The total freedom and possibilities ends with death. Death converts for itself into being-in-itself. Man at some point of life, will think about the domination of death and becomes anxious about the reality. It makes him sick, as he know, no one will be there with him at the face of death. The relations he made with others, the wealth, the name, the religious faith nothing will follow him in death. He has to face it alone. From birth to death he is alone, as an alienated entity. He came from nothing and returns to nothing. Man is here for a short period. He will live his life, alone and estranged, until death. Like Heidegger , who said death is the greatest source of anguish and a symbol of human finitude,<sup>13</sup> (Sartre, JP, p. 149). Sartre also defines the loneliness man faces at death and shows how alienated man actually is. “ the very existence of death alienates us wholly in our own life.<sup>14</sup>(Sartre, JP, p. 157). When Sartre says alone, he means absolutely alone, no structure a priori for values to rest upon. The all aloneness is the most dreadful thing man faces during his life.

## **2.2. Sociological Alienation**

In the later periods of his philosophical life, Jean Paul Sartre, was more attracted towards the revolutionary thoughts of Karl Marx. His experiences as a POW (Prisoner of War) in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War has completely changed his vision and forced him to think about the man and his problems in social circumstances. His political as well as social thoughts were revealed in the magnum opus work Critique of Dialectical Reason. His notion of social alienation can be seen through the concept, like class struggle.

Class distinctions are strong and deep in the modern industrialist society, where the entire population is divided into two sections – the capitalists and the workers. The conflict between them arises, when there is unjust and unequal distribution of wages happens. The capitalists use power to maintain the existing structure of the society, ie, the powerful capitalists at the top and the powerless workers at the bottom. The working class may oppose the oppressions and exploitation of the capitalists, as a united entity. The differences make them, alienated from each other. They are alienated

to each other in power. This alienation on the basis of power causes class struggle. The struggle between the sovereign class and the working class This class struggle is because of the effort of one class to overcome the alienation caused by the other class.

The exploitation of the capitalists causes the alienation of the workers and the uprising of the working class. The uprising of the working class and the reaction of the capitalists against it, leads to class conflict and finally to the alienation of them. "Alienation, is the condition of man in which his free praxis (work) is taken over and controlled by the other"<sup>15</sup>(Sartre, JP, Critique of Dialectical Reason, p. 76).

The unavailability of matter or scarcity makes man opponent to each other. It leads to competition and rivalry between men. The result is that individual man gets estranged from each other. Sartre, is more vocal about the severe exploitation of powerless classes in the capitalist society. As an admirer of Marx, he says about how the exhausting working conditions makes man gets alienated from his true self, through an example of a women working in the factory. In the factory the women works according to the rhythm of the machine Her each movement is in sync with it. The rhythm of the machine is so alien to the personal rhythm of her life. Here the worker totally adapts the rhythm of the machine over her bodily rhythm. Gradually the women emerges like an object and gets alienated from her true self. The scarcity of materials, the struggle between classes and the fact of power all makes man alienated from each other.

## CONCLUSIONS

Karl Marx, as a political as well as social thinker, was always concerned about 'man as a member of the society" But Sartre as an existentialist philosopher, was more about the individual existence of man. Marx considers man as a member of a group, and not an isolated one. But the early Sartre considered man as an isolated, finite, suffering individual. If we consider the concept of alienation in both thinkers, there is a vast difference in thought can be seen. By alienation, Max generally says about man's condition in the capitalist society. But for Sartre, alienation is because of mans subjective awareness, his fear of death and infinite freedom.

In the ongoing discussion, we can understand that both Marx and Sartre were more concerned about human beings and not with the other worldly, unseen life after death. Both of them were against the notion of God, as they were atheist. Humanism was there in both thinkers thoughts. Their concern was always about human conditions in this worldly life. The Marxist way of thought is mainly materialistic in nature, as his thoughts were based in the capitalist societies. While the early Sartre's way of thought was man's subjective existence by comparing the two thinkers, we fund that the later philosophy of JP Sartre was heavily influenced by Marx's social thought. The thinker, who considered man as only a subjective isolated, finite entity; latter said man is a social being and he has sufferings as a social being. We can say that the later thought of Sartre, is a restatement of Marxist philosophy.



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