

**“ALIENATING THE UNDEAD“: A MARXIST
EXPLORATION OF NADINE GODIMER'S
*SOMETHING FOR THE TIME BEING***

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Abstract

Apathied, an Afrikanns term which means “separation” was used in South Africa to separate, segregate and create racial differentiation. The result was the social, economic and political alienation of black Africans. This paper argues textually the oppression of man by man resulting to the disillusionment of the psyche of the oppressed. Using Alienation, one of the theories of Marxism to critic Godimer's short story, the research exposes the effects of alienating black South Africans and calls for a concerted effort towards stimulating an environment that promotes equal human development of all races.

Keywords: Alienation, Karl Marx, Capitalists, Workers and Product.

Introduction

The Objective of this paper is to critically analyze Nadine Godimer's short story, *Something for the Time Being* via Karl Marx's Alienation theory. Since Godimer lived in the era of Apartheid, most of her works condemned the then South African government and policies against blacks. Her consistency in displaying the humiliation of Black South Africans made her “an enemy of the state” which culminated

to her being often molested by the apartheid government and her books banned, but her staunch persistence in denouncing the oppression of black South Africans brought her a world recognition which ultimately led to her winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

The word 'alienation', originated from a Latin noun 'alienatio' which in turn is derived from a Latin verb 'alienare' meaning to 'take away', 'remove', or 'cause a separation to occur.' Alienation is a social concept which has been identified as one of the problems besetting the modern man. This term was also considered a complex term by many critic of the Marxist theory, yet scholars are agreed that the term is present in every facet of human life. However, in order to fully understand alienation as a theory of oppression, some definitions are presented as a backdrop to comprehending the plight of black South Africans during the apartheid regime.

Karl Marx's Postulation of Alienation

Marx (1844) cited in Allen (2004:3) maintains that Marx's theory of Alienation as expressed in the writings of Karl Marx (in particular the manuscripts of 1844) refers to the separation of things that naturally belong together, or to put antagonism between things that are properly in harmony". He believed that alienation is a systematic result of capitalism. His theory of Alienation is founded upon his observation that

under capitalism, workers inevitably lose control of their lives and destinies by being deprived of control of their actions. Workers do not see themselves as self-realized human beings because they are directed by the bourgeois. Marx says that capitalists and proletarians are equally alienated but experience their alienation in different ways. According to Marx & Engels (1970):

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement as its own power and has in it resemblance of a human existence. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated, this means that they cease to exist in estrangement; it sees its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence.

According to Marxian thought, there is a natural relationship between people and their environment where those individuals are considered initiators of the relationship. Unalienated human existence is unity with and appropriation of inorganic objects and nature. Alienation therefore is said to be a state of human existence that is less than unalienation. In the passage on “Estranged Labour” in the first manuscript, Marx outlines four different aspects of the alienation of workers under capitalism. Firstly, workers are alienated from the product of their labour, Man and the process of production, Man and species life and finally Man and other men. Regarding the relationship between the worker

and the process of production, Marx (1844:108) writes:

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him.

Again, Marx draws our attention to the plight of the worker by saying

“Workers do not “confirm” themselves in their work; they experience their work as misery; their physical and intellectual capacities are stunted; their work is not freely chosen; and their work belongs to another.” (Marx 1844: 274-275).

A close observation of Marx's declaration open us to three kind of concerns about work in a capitalist society, drawing our attention to the content of the work, the conditions in which people work, and the compulsory nature of the work.

A second separation discussed by Marx, is that between the worker and his product. Marx points at the absence of any control that workers have over the product, that, indeed, it is the product that controls them. The worker has become the slave to the product or he is dominated

[*Herrschaft*] by the product:“. . . the object which labour produces – labour's product – confronts it as something alien [*fremdes Wesen*], as a power independent of the producer” (1844:108).

In the third aspect of alienation, Marx argues that workers are alienated from their essential species-being. By this Marx means that the character of every species is contained in the character or its life activity, and that the human species-being is “free conscious activity”. But Marx argues that wage-labour does not conform to this notion or free and conscious activity, and is not, therefore, truly human activity. The object of labour is, therefore, the objectification of man's species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created. In tearing away from man the object of this production, therefore, estranged labour tears from his species life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him. (Marx 1844:114).

Finally, the fourth aspect of alienation follows on from the first three aspects, and is the “estrangement of man from man”. In other words, instead of truly human relations between people, relations are governed by people's roles as agents in the economic process of expansion and

accumulation of value. According to Marx, Man is not capable of cooperating with others because of competition and class hostility which arise when the process of production and products are controlled by one segment of society (owners of production) whose interests are necessarily opposed to another segment (those who must work for the owners of production). Alienation from other men is a consequence of the alienation of man from the process of production, product and species life. It is very obvious therefore that Marx's theory of alienation is centered on man's separation from the process of production. Marx's theory of Alienation is rooted in the social relations surrounding capitalism and its particular work relations. For Marx, alienation is a product of the division of labour in a capitalistic mode of production. Alienation is therefore seen as an estrangement from one's physical and psychological environment which breeds frustration and aggression. It is a form of exploitation, intimidation and oppression. It is the deprivation of an individual's right economically, physically, politically, socially and psychologically.

Another perspective of alienation is that by Ingelhart, R. (2000:100) who sees alienation as a form of isolation:

Alienation can also refer to the isolation of individuals from a community- a detachment from the activities, identification and ties that a community can provide. In addition, the concept of

alienation has included the notion of cultural radicalism or estrangement from the established values of a society.

From the materialists approach to the concept of alienation, Ollman (1971: 8) asserts:

Man being separated from his work (he plays no part in deciding what to do or how to do it)-a break between the individual and his life activity. Man is said to be separated from his own products (he has no control over what he makes or what becomes of it afterwards) – a break between the individual and the material world. He is also said to be separated from his fellow man (competition and class hostility have rendered most forms of cooperation impossible) – a break between man and man. In each instance, a relation that distinguishes the human species has disappeared and its constituent elements have been re-organized to appear as something else. Ollman (1971: 9) citing Marx sees alienation as “distortion and a separation”. He says that “an alienated man is an abstraction” because that man has lost touch with all human specificity. In relating alienation to the social situation of the society, one can see that alienation results when the members of a social structure have the feelings of being estranged from their society.

In a particular perceptive passage from the Manuscripts, Marx explains how money submerges our personalities. This rejoinder debunks the notion that capitalism allows our individuality to flourish:

That which exists for me through the medium of money, that which I can pay for, i.e which money can buy, that am I, the possessor of the money. The stronger the power of my money, the stronger I am. The properties of money are my, the possessors', properties and essential powers. Therefore what I am and what I can do is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy the most beautiful women. Which means to say that I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness, its repelling power, is destroyed by money. As an individual I am lame, but money procures me 24 legs. Consequently, I am not lame. I am a wicked, dishonest, unscrupulous individual, but money is respected, and so also is its owner...through money I can have anything the human heart desires. Do I not therefore possess all human abilities? Does not money therefore transform all my incapacities into their opposite? (1920:377)

Alienation and commodity fetishism shape all relationships in society. Those who possess wealth also inhabit a world beyond their control, in which relationships are reified. Their individuality is submerged by the dictates of capitalism - as Marx wrote, the instinct to enrich himself, which “in a miser is a mere idiosyncrasy, is, in the capitalist, the effect of the social mechanism, of which he is but one of the wheels. (1990:133). The huge productive forces owned

by the ruling class may bring them riches beyond our imaginings, but they cannot control the vast economic forces of the system or even plan any section of it accurately. The capitalists are caught in a contradiction that "capital is a social force, but it is privately, rather than collectively, owned so its movements are determined by individual owners necessarily indifferent to all the social implications of their activities"(1963:63).

The capitalist has constantly to compete in order to keep up with his competitors and while his actions may be perfectly sensible for the individual firm, when generalised across society they cause the economic recessions which can destroy many firms. Economic crises are irrefutable proof that the system is more powerful than any individual capitalist. This explains why crises are such a massive blow to the confidence and ideology of the ruling class. The capitalist may like to believe that his daring, entrepreneurial spirit creates his wealth, but in reality he 'rides a wave another has created'(1996:154). The class struggle, which he cannot prevent, brings home forcibly how dependent he is on the labour of his employees, and, like economic crises, is a wounding blow to the outlook of the ruling class.

In *The Holy Family*, Marx gives a brilliant description of the situation of the ruling class:

The possessing class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-alienation. But the

former class feels at home in this self-alienation, it finds confirmation of itself and recognises in alienation its own power; it has in it a semblance of human existence, while the class of the proletariat feels annihilated in its self-alienation; it sees therein its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence.(1963:87)

Thus, no matter how deeply alienation affects them, the ruling class will always be driven to defend the system that creates their alienation with all the power and brutality at their disposal because of their material position within it. In addition to this, Georg Lukács argued that the ruling class can never rise above the commodity fetishism of capitalism. The bourgeoisie can never recognise the real nature of capitalism without confronting their own role as exploiters and upholders of the system. Therefore the capitalists do not want to recognise the real social relationships which underlie the institutions of capitalist society. They prefer to continue believing that the relations of production are natural and inevitable.

Alienation in *Something for the Time Being*

Something for the Time Being metaphorically, is a miniature world which symbolizes the Apartheid world in which Daniel's personal battle with the apartheid regime is a quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality.

Daniel Mgoma (the protagonist of the short story) is not comfortable about staying in a job where he is not at liberty to declare his association with ANC. He is angry and frustrated by this act of injustice to his person and when asked about his job by his concerned wife, he replied Ella with sarcasms:

Everything very nice. Boss takes me into his office, apologize for the pay, he knows it's not the sort of job I should have and so forth. So I go off and clean up in the assembly shop. Then at lunch time he calls me into the office again: they don't want me to wear my ANC badge at work. Flora Donaldson's sympathetic white man, who's going to do me a great favour of paying me three pounds a week. (423)

When man acquires and uses economic power he becomes an unrepentant oppressor. The owner of production cares less for a true human relationship and instead, his sole aim is a relationship which is governed by people's roles as agents in the economic process of expansion and accumulation of value. This is exactly the stand of William Chadders whose Marxist view cannot be compromise because of his quest to acquire steady profit irrespective of his inability to pay the black labour force the required wage:

“Fowler and I run a factory. Our only common interest is the efficient running of the factory. Our only one. The factory depends on a stable, satisfied black force,

and that we've got. Right you and I know that the whole black wage standard is too low, right, we know that they haven't a legal union to speak for them, right, we know that the conditions they live under make it impossible for them really to be stable...But the fact is, so far as accepted standards go in this crazy country, they're stable..." (422)

According to Marx, Man is not capable of cooperating with others because of competition and class hostility which arise when the process of production and products are controlled by one segment of society (owners of production) whose interests are necessarily opposed to another segment (those who must work for the owners of production). This result to a degradation and severe humiliation of the lower class in a given community, as it affects Daniel, in this case. Infuriated, Madge couldn't help but to express her disgust at her husband who is an absolute capitalist: "You give him a job but you make him hide his congress button...You'll let him have anything except the one thing worth giving".(422).

The state of one's feeling of having been deracinated and displaced is called "unhomeliness", a term coined by Homi Bhabba and other theorists of post-colonialism and subtly present in *Something for the Time Being*. An unhomed person does not have the feeling of belonging since s/he is in a psychological limbo which generally ends in some psychological disorders and cultural displacement. Here,

being “unhomed” does not mean being homeless. To be unhomed, as Lois Tyson states in *Critical Theory Today*; “is to feel not at home even in one's own home because you are not at home in yourself; that is, your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee” (2006: 421).

The likes of William Chadders and Fowler exploit the homelessness and poverty of men like Daniel and other black South Africans. Nadine's protagonist is alienated from his community in South Africa, and his personal battle to be free from oppression seem to bring him closer to a life of poverty, humiliation and isolation. His sole deficiency of escaping from a life of alienation is not in his lack of skills but his being black. This he recognises when by the end of the story, Daniel expresses how lost he is in his own country in which he is rootless and alienated by the oppression of the whiteman:

You come out and you think there's everybody waiting for you. The truth is, there isn't any body. You think straight in prison because you 've got nothing to lose. Nobody think straight, outside. They don't want to hear you...Perhaps I will get a banishment order next time...(424)

Ollman (1971: 9) says that “an alienated man is an abstraction” because that man has lost touch with all human specificity. What Ollman is trying to say is that capitalism creates a bridge between being full filled and being estranged

from all the goodness of life. After years of being in and out of prison, Daniel is no longer new to the feeling of estrangement. And when asked by Ella of his chances at getting a new job; Daniel who was now used to white oppression, sarcastically dismissed his wife fears: “I wonder what chance they meant? You can imagine. I don't suppose they are going to give me an office with my name on it”. (416)

It is clear that from the attitude of Daniel, he has succumbed to estrangement in a society where those who have money and power indirectly own the lives of their workers.

Conclusion

This paper discussed oppression as a result of alienating the down trodden. The concept of man being separated from the society, his work, and his product were also analyzed through the study of Godimer's short story; *Something for the Time Being*. According to this research paper, the former Aparthied regime in South Africa, directly instigated a fierce hatred by the oppressed blacks for those with money and power (particularly the Whiteman with the means of production). The disposition to “put men in their place” turned people like Daniel into estranged beings. Men like Daniel no longer want to survive like animals, but to live life as men with dignity; but because they rejected oppression, humiliation and degradation from a non-apologetic capitalist state, they are emasculated. His defiant acts and non-

complacent attitude towards the white minority rule brings stigma to Daniel. Even his determination to stay true to his identity as a Congress man is denied as stated in the following: “I can give the man a job because I feel sympathetic toward the struggle he's in, but I can't put him in the workshop as a congress man”. (421).

Protecting his interest, William does not believe in giving identity to his workers and as a confirmed capitalist, his goal his more profit at less cost and if any of his labourers try to disrupt his organized money making venture, then he has no option than to alienate his adversaries. Hence men like Daniel are outcasts in their own home because they are powerless and without means of survival. They become “the undead”: alive without a definite dream, dead to the demands of the society in which they live.

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