

## Societal Alienation Analysis in Chuck Palahniuk Novel “Fight Club”

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the types of societal alienation displayed through main character in the 1996 novel "Fight Club" written by Chuck Palahniuk. The novel follows the story of Jack, an insomniac who forms a fight club with Tyler Durden, a charismatic and mysterious figure. The study employs a qualitative analysis of the novel's narrative and characters to explore how societal alienation is portrayed and its impact on the main characters. The data consists of primary and supporting data. The researcher collected data through watching and reading the movie and movie transcript thoroughly. The researcher used sociological theory, and identifying relevant issues that align with the research questions. The researcher also utilized a qualitative research design and employed document or content analysis as the research method. Based on the research results some societal alienation types are portrayed by the main character such as self-isolation, estrangement, and normlessness.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between sociology and literature is multifaceted and reciprocal. Sociology of literature is a specialized area of study that examines the relationship between literary works and the social structures in which they are created. This field of study is instrumental in elucidating how each literary work is rooted in a certain social and geographical environment where it can perform specific functions.

One of the major issues in sociology is alienation. Alienation in sociology refers to the feeling of disconnection or estrangement that individuals experience from themselves or society. This can lead to a sense of powerlessness and lack of control over one's life. Karl Marx introduced the concept of alienation to describe the impact of capitalism on the working class. The term has evolved over time, with its origins in Latin meaning 'to take away' or cause separation'.

The idea of alienation has been explored in various religious and philosophical contexts. In Christianity, alienation is often associated with separation from God, while Hinduism and Buddhism also interpret it as a dissolution from the divine. The concept of alienation has been used to encourage detachment from worldly desires and attachments in order to avoid spiritual estrangement.

In different religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Sufism, alienation is seen as a means to detach oneself from the physical and social world in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. The Bhagavad Gita emphasizes performing work without attachment to outcomes, while Sufism promotes a state of estrangement from the outer world and even from one's own self.

Overall, alienation has been viewed as a way to transcend material desires and societal constraints in search of a deeper spiritual connection or sense of self.

In theology, alienation referred to the distance between humanity and God. In social contact theories, it meant the loss of an individual's original freedom. In political economy, it referred to the transfer of property ownership (Musto, 2010). Marx, in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, described alienation as the phenomenon where the labor product is seen as something separate from the laborer. Under a capitalist system, the product of a worker's labor can lead to feelings of alienation.

The production of labor is perceived to belong to someone else, and the worker sees it as merely a means to meet physical needs for wages. This sense of alienation can make individuals or society feel isolated, unworthy, and insignificant (Mukhopadhyay, 2020). Marx expanded the concept of alienation to the economic sphere of material production, suggesting that understanding and overcoming alienation in other areas required addressing economic issues (Musto, 2010).

Marx argued that labor was less alienating in past societies where workers had more control, were skilled, and completed the entire product. However, with the rise of capitalism and industrialization, craftsmanship declined. Workers had less control, were unskilled, and were part of a production line, leading to high levels of alienation, powerlessness, and lack of control.

Marx attributed alienation to the economic system itself, as the introduction of machines increased the division of labor, reduced skill levels, and fragmented workers (Boudon & Bourricaud, 1989).

Other sociologists, like Émile Durkheim, introduced the concept of anomie, which occurs when social norms are in crisis due to the division of labor, leading individuals to feel disconnected from society (Musto, 2010).

While both alienation and anomie can result in feelings of isolation, alienation, as defined by Marx, is rooted in the structure of capitalism, while anomie is a social phenomenon related to the breakdown of shared values and norms in society.

In the literary work "Fight Club" by Palahniuk, the critique is directed towards the prevailing corporatism in American society. It sheds light on how consumerism and conformity can result in feelings of emptiness, disconnection, and disempowerment, impacting an individual's sense of self and masculinity.

The novel delves into themes of societal alienation, consumerism, and the quest for meaning in a postmodern era. The protagonist, Jack, forms a fight club with the enigmatic Tyler Durden, challenging societal norms and critiquing the culture of consumerism that fosters disconnection and emptiness.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### ***Social Alienation***

The concept of social alienation has a rich history, with roots in the works of philosophers like Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. Marx's concept, detailed in his "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," highlights how capitalism creates a disconnect between individuals and their work, fostering feelings of isolation and disempowerment. Workers are alienated from their labor, fellow workers, and humanity under capitalism. Nietzsche focused on the individual's struggle to find meaning in a seemingly meaningless world, attributing feelings of disconnection to societal emphasis on conformity and suppression of creativity.

### ***Characterizing Social Alienation***

In this section, we explore a form of social alienation stemming from work that has not been extensively studied in academia. The goal here is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of this type of social alienation but to present an initial outline that will be further developed in the paper. Social alienation, in this context, refers to a situation where work takes precedence over one's social life.

Work defines one's identity and daily routine, while social interactions and relationships are relegated to a secondary position, receiving minimal attention and commitment.

When referring to work, I am referring to organized and regular activities aimed at producing goods or services. These activities have instrumental value and are focused on creating a product. Initially, the discussion will focus on contemporary employment as a form of work, and later, we will explore potential modifications to the current employment model while considering the impact on social alienation.

The dominance of work in our lives is not a new phenomenon. Joseph Pieper noted over 70 years ago that work had taken over human action and existence. This observation is even more relevant today. In today's work culture, even during non-working hours, individuals are often preoccupied with work-related concerns, such as maintaining a work-life balance, preparing for work-related tasks, and ensuring they are adequately prepared for the workday. Work has become the central focus around which all other activities revolve. Social alienation manifests in two ways. Firstly, one becomes disconnected from their social life, viewing social interactions as a distraction from work rather than a source of connection and fulfillment. This leads to a feeling of foreignness in social settings and prevents deep engagement with others. This disconnection also extends to close relationships with family and friends, which may feel strained and superficial due to work demands.

Additionally, social alienation reflects a sense of powerlessness, where individuals feel unable to pursue their desires and values outside of work. Many workers express a desire to spend more time with loved ones but are constrained by the demands of their jobs. This inability to prioritize social activities without risking their careers contributes to a feeling of alienation from the social world, which is overshadowed by work obligations. The conditions under which one does it, one's own."When one is alienated from something, one may be unable to engage with it at all, or unable to choose the conditions under which one engages with it. With respect to social alienation, this lack of freedom is apparent in the diminution of spontaneity in one's social life. One is unable to socialize when one wishes or under conditions one chooses, but rather must deliberately schedule sociality into one's life.

Hayden Ramsay (2005) stresses the constitutive role of freedom in leisure, explaining that true leisure "reminds us of the possibility of existence apart from the daily round, life beyond the anxieties of work and need." Given the dominance of work, however, both in our mental lives and our schedules, sociality becomes merely another part of the "daily round," squeezed precariously into our hectic lives and hardly free from the pressure of looming

work. Theorists of alienation often distinguish between subjective accounts of alienation, which equate alienation with particular subjective feelings, and objective accounts, which locate alienation in certain objective features of the world or agent. Depending on which type of alienation exists in some case; we may get very different answers as to how to respond: for instance, Hegel famously thought that people are merely subjectively alienated and must come to appreciate the ways in which social and political structures constitute a home, while Marx thought only radical structural changes can overcome the objective alienation present in capitalist society.

In typical cases, social alienation consists in both subjective and objective alienation. There are certainly typical feelings associated with social alienation: a sense that one is disengaged in social activities, that these activities are foreign, and a general lack of connection with others that produces anxiety, stress, depression, and loneliness. Yet underlying these subjective experiences are a number of structural conditions. One feels disconnected and disengaged in one's social life because one actually is. As I will discuss more below, one's social activities and close relations occupy only a small fraction of one's time, and the time they do occupy is circumscribed within the confines of work, meaning work looms over these activities and precludes immersion. The result is a smattering of ad hoc social gatherings that do not allow people to fully experience their social life or consistently connect with their closest relations.

There may be situations where a person's life exhibits the objective aspects of social alienation without the corresponding subjective experience. In these cases, the individual may not feel deeply connected to their social environment or the people within it, but they do not experience the negative emotions typically associated with alienation. Despite this, I believe that most of these cases still involve a problematic form of alienation, as I will discuss in the following section.

### *Causes of Social Alienation*

In order to delve deeper into the phenomenon of social alienation, it is essential to explore its underlying causes. One significant factor contributing to social alienation is the excessive amount of time dedicated to work. This issue is not exclusive to the United States but is particularly pronounced in the U.S. due to the extreme work habits prevalent in the country. Statistics reveal that approximately one-third of American workers put in more than 45 hours per week, with one-eighth working over 55 hours weekly. Additionally, a significant portion of the workforce engages in weekend work and late-night shifts. Surveys indicate that over 80% of those working more than 50 hours a week wish to work fewer hours, and 60% of all workers desire shorter work hours. This overwhelming focus on work, termed "overemployment" by Julie Rose, has been

linked to negative impacts on physical and mental well-being, as well as reduced life satisfaction.

Notably, a key aspect that individuals yearn for amidst their busy work schedules is increased social interaction. Research shows that a majority of workers express a desire for more time with friends and family, highlighting the importance of social connections in combating social alienation. While work plays a significant role in fostering social alienation, it is not the sole factor contributing to this phenomenon. Other responsibilities such as childcare, household chores, and personal care also hinder individuals from fully engaging in their social lives. Therefore, advocating for more free time, as suggested by Rose, entails not only reducing work-related commitments but also creating space for activities that bring joy and fulfillment.

Work stands out as a primary cause of social alienation due to its substantial time commitment, occupying a significant portion of individuals' waking hours. Moreover, the desire to reduce work hours is widespread among workers, making it a crucial aspect to address in combating social alienation. While it may be feasible and beneficial to decrease the dominance of work in our lives, the same may not hold true for responsibilities like childcare and personal care, which are essential for daily living.

### *Types of Social Alienation*

The key types of alienation identified by Seeman (1991) are as follows:

#### *Powerlessness*

This type refers to the feeling that individuals lack control over their own lives and circumstances, often stemming from external forces or institutional arrangements that dictate their actions and outcomes.

#### *Meaninglessness*

Meaninglessness occurs when individuals perceive their actions or roles as lacking significance or purpose, leading to a sense of futility in their efforts and a disconnect from their values.

#### *Normlessness (Anomie)*

Normlessness describes a state where societal norms and values are unclear or absent, resulting in feelings of disorientation and confusion about appropriate behavior and expectations.

#### *Cultural Estrangement*

Cultural estrangement involves a disconnection from established cultural values and practices, often experienced during periods of societal change or globalization, where individuals feel alienated from their cultural identities.

### *Social Isolation*

Social isolation is characterized by a lack of meaningful social connections and relationships, leading to feelings of loneliness and exclusion from community life.

### *Self-Alienation*

Self-alienation refers to the disconnection from one's own identity or true self, often resulting from conforming to societal expectations that do not align with personal beliefs or desires.

These dimensions highlight the various ways individuals can feel estranged from their work, society, and themselves, reflecting broader social and psychological dynamics.

### *Several Treatments of Someone Identified Societal Alienation*

To overcome societal alienation, it is important to take a comprehensive approach that addresses both psychological and social factors. Here are some strategies to help combat feelings of alienation:

1. Identify and Address Underlying Causes:
  - Seek professional help for mental health issues like depression or anxiety.  
Manage chronic illnesses that may be contributing to isolation.
  - Seek support for economic challenges that may be isolating you.
2. Therapeutic Approaches
  - Consider Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to challenge negative thoughts.
  - Explore Schema Therapy to change core beliefs contributing to isolation.
  - Engage in
  - Supportive Psychotherapy for validation and encouragement.
3. Social Engagement
  - Connect with others through clubs, groups, or volunteer work.
  - Participate in group therapy to share experiences and build community.
4. Self-Care
  - Stay active with physical activities to combat
  - loneliness.
  - Journal to reflect on emotions and thoughts.
  - Practice relaxation techniques like meditation for mental well-being.
5. Community Involvement
  - Get involved in local communities through volunteering or events.

- Participate in cultural activities to meet like-minded individuals.

#### 6. Empowerment

- Encourage adolescents to explore interests and find purpose.
- Provide strong parental support for children facing alienation.

By addressing these aspects and working towards building connections and a sense of belonging, individuals can make progress in overcoming societal alienation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses qualitative analysis to examine how societal alienation is depicted in the film and its impact on the main characters. The analysis focuses on themes such as consumerism, capitalism, and identity, as well as the characters' struggles to find meaning and connection in a materialistic and conformist society.

### *Research Design*

The researcher employed a qualitative research design and utilized document analysis as the research method, following the approach outlined by Wellek & Warren (1956). The analysis involved examining all the dialogue spoken by the main character in the movie "Fight Club" directed by David Fincher.

### *Data Sources*

The research data was sourced from primary data extracted from the movie transcript "Fight Club" and supporting data from various sources such as books, articles, journals, and internet resources relevant to the topic.

### *Data Collection Method*

The researcher collected data by thoroughly watching and reading the movie and transcript, taking notes using Sociological theory, and identifying relevant issues related to the research questions.

### *Data Analysis*

After collecting the data, the researcher analyzed it by interpreting the data, presenting issues found in selected fragments, explaining how the data relates to sociological issues, and drawing conclusions.

## **RESULTS**

The study delves into the portrayal of societal alienation in Chuck Palahniuk's novel "Fight Club," focusing on the characters' struggles to find meaning and connection in a society that prioritizes material possessions and conformity. The characters' sense of disconnection and emptiness is magnified by the societal pressures and consumerist culture that pervade their lives. The novel serves as a critique of these societal pressures and consumerist values that contribute to feelings of alienation and emptiness.

### ***Self-Isolation***

Self-isolation is explored in the novel as a form of social alienation, particularly through the experiences of the main character, Jack. The quote, "You are not your job, you're not how much money you have in the bank..." underscores the idea that individuals are more than their material possessions and societal roles, urging them to discover their true identity beyond external definitions.

### ***Estrangement***

Tyler Durden's philosophy challenges the notion of individual uniqueness, emphasizing the shared humanity and interconnectedness of all individuals. The quote, "You are not special... We are all singing, all dancing crap of the world," dismantles societal constructs to reveal the commonality and unity among people.

### ***Cultural Estrangement***

Similar to self-isolation, cultural estrangement in the novel critiques the emphasis on material possessions and societal roles. The quote, "You are not your job, you're not how much money you have in the bank..." underscores the need to break free from external definitions and embrace one's true identity.

### ***Normlessness***

The quote, "May I never be complete... May I never be perfect," reflects the characters' perpetual dissatisfaction and yearning for something more, highlighting the sense of normlessness and disconnection that permeates their lives.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The study suggests that "Fight Club" is a thought-provoking examination of societal alienation, consumerism, and the quest for significance in a postmodern era. The film effectively portrays the challenges of feeling disconnected in a society that prioritizes materialism and uniformity. These insights enhance our comprehension of the film's themes and their applicability to today's world.

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