
Quest of Self, Absurdity and Alienation in Elfriede Jelinek's Novel *Lust*

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Abstract

One of the most profound issues of modern fiction is alienation and isolation. It has become the subject of discussion for psychological, philosophical, sociological, and literary scholars. In the contemporary world, phenomenon like alienation has left an indelible impact. The Austrian Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek has firmly dealt with alienation and absurdity in most of her novels. Her protagonists fight for self-actualization, honor, dignity, and human existence. Edmund Fuller expressed that in the modern era, "man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine, and ruin but from inner problems, a conviction of isolation, randomness, and meaninglessness in his way of existence". Similarly, Gerti, the protagonist of the novel, *Lust* feels alienated at her husband's house. She is captivated in a marriage relationship with Director Herman, where she is engaged in sex and red porn, quenches his sexual and sadomasochistic desire. Gerti escapes Herman to find peace but returns, devastated and lost. The present paper analyzes and discusses the theme of alienation in the novel *Lust* from Albert Camus and Karl Marx's perspective.

Keywords: Isolation, self-actualization, sadomasochistic desire, Elfriede Jelinek

Introduction

Alienation is defined as a sentiment of being left out or deserted, displaced, or not acknowledging any relationship to the surrounding atmosphere. In psychology, researchers discuss alienation concerning how goodly or badly people adjust themselves into their social structures and relations. It includes how comfortably people associate with their comrades within the school or at the workplace and how related they feel to those who are associated and around them. Various psychoanalysts have also analyzed the processing of 'self-alienation.' Karen Horney's notable work, *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, has displayed her observations about 'self-alienation'. Horney feels that man becomes self-alienated whose: "Spontaneous individual self (has been) stunted, warped or choked, he is said to be in a condition of alienation from himself (or) alienated from self" (11). Franz Kafka, in his revolutionary work *Metamorphosis*, talks about alienation through his protagonist 'George.'

Sociologists consider loneliness similar to the alienation that is found in

the absence of intimacy with others in the family or society. When a person admits that he often feels lonely or acts in a way that indicates his/her loneliness, it is obvious that she/he is segregated and disassociated from others or his/her relationship with others is not such that could conquer his/her loneliness while accompanying them. Being with her husband, Gerti always felt lonely as his acts were not of love but labor. Gerti was paying through sex. Mc Closky points that "the feeling of loneliness and yearning for supportive primary relationships" (15) resemble the two sides of the same coin. Conforming to this notion, the meaning of the feeling of remoteness is the loss of substantial relationships with others in the social context. It is the lack or loss of this crucial relationship with others in society or family that becomes the fountainhead of alienation. The cognizance of this alienation or separation has a sociological nature and is also termed as social-isolation. The meaning of Social alienation within the social context is the spoiling of creative and gifted relations between men and the environment, between men or the prevailing reality. One locates himself to

be lamenting of the authentic footholds that bring meaning and purpose to life. Alienation thus occurs from illegitimate existence. Marx visualizes alienation in relation to laboring class only, and Sartre always tried to understand the implication of alienation in the life and world of writers. Paul Tillich did use the word 'Estrangement' to define alienation. Tillich pinpointed the disparity between the real condition of man's existence and his basic - nature. He finally termed this difference as alienation. As he says, "existence is estranged from essence ... Man's estrangement from his essential being is the universal character of existence" (16). He also affirms that estrangement obstructs the course of self-realization or self-actualization; it is really a fact that appears as a hostile force extremely insidious to the elemental self. He believes that every pronouncement of the alienated state is contradictory to man's essential being and his power for goodness (17). Social alienation proves to be "a condition in social relationships reflected by a low degree of integration or common values and a high degree of distance or isolation between individuals, or between an individual and a group of people in a

community or work environment (Ankony 120-32)." This type of sociological concept is the development of several classical, contemporary theorists. It has various discipline-specific applications and can relate to both an individual psychological state (subjectively) and a type of societal relationship (objectively). The conception of social alienation can also be defined as social isolation or social segregation, the sentiment of being deserted or segregated from one's kinship or community. The other concept that is used in this regard is the peculiar type of relationships that of parental i.e., fatherly or motherly alienation, in which a child feels chilly and disdained from them and expresses a general dislike for one or both of the parents due to the chilly atmosphere and attitude at the house, not the home. The term must not be applied or mistaken for child abuse. Since Parental alienation is the outcome of unequivocal influences by either of a parent or it could be the outcome of the dynamics of the social fabrics of the family as a whole. This phenomenon can also be understood in terms of personal bond or devotion and affection, love, and the social and

emotional process of bonding among children and those who care for it.

Alienation, in sociology, is a more composite and complex idea to define and understand. Alienation is how and in what sense people do recognize themselves concerning the whole society. A fine example of it is how people imagine and relate to themselves while moving and performing some act or affair. Karl Marx is the pioneer who conceptualized and advocated this phenomenon. This type of alienation takes place when people perform any act or do the work they are not that interested in or realize it boring. Despite this, in almost each and every society, various people are compelled to enter into an affair that they don't love since they have a dire need of earning money or getting loved. It could be signified as a kind of alienation since a person's true or real feelings and actions are contrary, separated, and unrelated. At the same time, a person might feel enthroned and empowered and also connected if they perform an act or a job they love and like. Being Empowered and being connected is contrary to alienation and estrangement.

Self-estrangement as an idea has been envisioned by Karl Marx's theory of alienation. Marx talks about self-estrangement as "the alienation of man's essence, man's loss of objectivity and his loss of realness as self-discovery, the manifestation of his nature, objectification, and realization". Self-estrangement is when a person feels isolated from family and friends as a whole, he is bewildered or in a state of Self-estrangement.

Quest of Self and Alienation:

Elfriede Jelinek's works are multifaceted that highlight the sensitive issues of society. Due to World War II and the Holocaust, people lost faith in humanity and human optimism. They were left in a dilemma whether there is really any meaning and purpose in life or not. There was a lot of destruction, particularly of human value and dignity, due to wars. Elfriede Jelinek revealed such absurdity through her protagonists like Gerti in her masterpiece *Lust*.

Lust, an extraordinary violent book, is the story of Hermann, a manager of a paper mill, and his wife, Gerti. Gerti is sexually abused daily by

her husband. Both have a son together. Gerti is captivated by her House of Lords and masters. She always has an encounter with her wild husband, Herman, who reins her and forces her to enter into red pornography, indicating the helplessness of the womenfolk in general and Austrian in particular. As a commodity, "The woman was brought here from the town, to this place where her husband runs the paper mill" (4). She has no value for her feelings, a poor creature. She has not come but is brought (dragged) to this place. She is treated as a worker, not a wife at all. Her husband has no value of her nerves as, "The Director (Herman) does not treat his workers as individuals. But he knows their total value as the workforce" (4). She has not her own identity, identity as a mother, and identity as a wife.

Jelinek's novels are plentiful with existential themes. Full of cross and sorrow, the characters of Elfriede Jelinek's novel experience the absurdity of life and try as they might develop a positive essence by their choices like Gerti did at the end when rescued by Michel. Their lives end in sorrow and alienation. Just in Kafka's

Metamorphosis, George's search for identity seems to be a hapless journey, mostly because he never had an identity of his own in the first place; A Farewell to Arms shows that there is no solace to be found from a life of love and war. Accordingly, life has been proving a burden for Gerti as the days pass. "At times the woman is dissatisfied with these defects that burden her life: husband and son" (6). The dictatorship of the house has been increasing twofold. The desires are fulfilled in a wild manner. Gerti is treated as a mere toy having no feelings and emotions, estranged, and alienated. "...women realize that there is no stable center in her life, not even a recreation center where a life of recreation might be waiting." (8) Gerti has continuously been fighting and struggling to get hold of her monster husband, but all in vain. Whenever her husband returns home, he bangs over her as a wolf bangs on his prey. "He takes her arm in a determined grip. First he wants a crack at her....Time and again the same old song. This resounding banging tune" (*Lust*14). In this novel, Elfriede Jelinek sketches a couple that shares a bizarre and secluded marriage relationship. The protagonist

Gerti possesses psychological alienation and the feeling of disillusion. She is dissatisfied with her role at her home and her bizarre condition. The story transpires immediately after World War I, a time of great hardships and austerity. These hardships result in degradation and ignominy of values both morally and socially. She wants to escape the boring life of captivity and subjugation. She feels trapped and wants to break the shackles of bondage.

The collective effects of indifference and rigorous rationality in the post-war and post-holocaust Austrian society are indirectly represented, in fact, as the cultural symptoms in Jelinek's novels. Avi Beker argues that "The real confrontation of Austrians with their Nazi past started in 1986 during the presidential campaign of Kurt Waldheim" (Beker 102). These facts reveal that Elfriede Jelinek had a strong impact on the themes of her novels. The themes like terror, violence, and alienation remained the focal point of her novels. Accordingly, in this highly-repressed and paranoid environment, Gerti cares about her identity, her own self-respect, and her survival. As a

result, in Jelinek's novel *Lust*, one can easily find the symptomatic traces of indifference, coldness, and apathy displayed in her daily interactions; even love itself is reduced to the cold, mechanical exchange of libido energy. Jelinek says that "The woman is passive as a toilet, for the man to do his business. He shoves her head down into the bathtub. . . so you must cry on it, that's love. No, cries the woman. She isn't asking for love (44). This statement reveals that Gerti's love does not only mean being a passive spectator and enjoy senseless eroticism and pornography, but she desires something else. She desires peace, harmony, and honor, as well.

Jelinek's novels' major themes tend to focus on how patriarchal rationality and gender discrimination plague women's self-autonomy and how male subjugating power leads to the identity crisis of the womenfolk. Jelinek is the kind of writer who always aims at revealing social evils radically and deconstructing what we perceive in our daily relations and thus creating highly colorful "texts of negation." Hence extreme emotional reactions are being

triggered by her while reading her texts. Gerti bears male dominance and continuous harassment and exploitation by her lusty husband, but finally, she gets tired and surrenders that means "The woman is so tired. As if she, complete with her still passable figure, which is usually covered by her husband, was about to topple over forward" (111).

Elfriede Jelinek's novel *Lust* does always have an aesthetic appeal. On the one hand, we feel bombarded with sadomasochistic images and the effects of the incredible linguistic zeal in her art, and on the other hand, we feel vulnerable to the attractions of the remarkably musical flow of the narrative voice revealing in the novels' steady flow of violence in a state of what can only be termed as a mere pleasure dragging Gerti psychologically out of her prisonlike house to get home. Certainly, an aesthetic musicality is deeply rooted in her narrative, creating a paradox that satirizes the institutionalized patriarchy and the senseless violence widening a vacuum between social relations in the postwar Austrian society. Larson Powell and

Brenda Bethman postulate that "Jelinek's musical writing technique could refer to its origins in Romanticism and Modernism" and "music, for Jelinek, becomes the key to a poetics of nonidentity, of perverse validation of sound and material or medium against meaning. (Powell and Bettman 164).

In the state of the dilemma of belongingness, Gerti's struggles to obtain recognition become more desperate. She is curious to get recognition and find love. She takes a bold decision to break the shackles of bondage and depravity. Taken to drink and escaping her husband, Gerti wanders into a nearby ski resort to find peace and pleasure. She has a brute encounter with Michael, a self-centered student and a hopeful politician. Michael discards her for younger women and seduces her frequently. Gerti takes these actions; however, she lets him have her hair done for love as she dreams of having self-respect and honor. Once she returns to meet Michael and finds him skiing, he, being of demonic nature, abuses her physically in front of a crowd of younger people. Gerti, disappointed and

disillusioned, returns home and drowns her son in a nearby stream.

Conclusion

In her novel *Lust*, Austrian Novelist Elfriede Jelinek explores the issue of alienation as the characters suffer from isolation in society. The protagonists seem nonconforming in a society mostly due to some defects in themselves or some evils in society. The Austrian novelist is not very much interested in advancing philosophical statements in showcasing an alienated individual's plight, expressing empathy for him and disapproval of society. A close examination of Jelinek's fiction reveals that her major novels deal with the general drama of human pain. The tough tests, trials, and adversities her protagonist has experienced are symbolic of man's quandary in this world.

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