

Alienation

in Bahaa Taher's *Sunset Oasis*

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Abstract :

The present study investigates how the theme of alienation is uniquely depicted in Bahaa Taher's *Sunset Oasis* (2009), winner of the first International Prize for Arabic fiction, or the Arabic Booker in 2008. ("Arabic Booker") In his seminal article "On the Meaning of Alienation" (1959), Melvin Seeman classified six alternative aspects or meanings of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, social isolation and cultural estrangement. The aim of this paper is to apply this theoretical frame of reference to the novel under discussion. A detailed discussion of Taher's novel shows that five (out of the six) variants of alienation manifest in his depiction of the two central characters; the Egyptian police officer, Mahmoud Abd el Zahir and his Irish wife, Catherine. The former endures powerlessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement and social isolation and the latter experiences social isolation and cultural estrangement. Throughout the events of the novel the male protagonist and his wife are both presented as alienated individuals. The study endeavours to provide a critical analysis of the theme of alienation, its manifestations, reasons and grave consequences.

Keywords:

Melvin Seeman – types of alienation – *Sunset Oasis*.

الاغتراب في رواية "واحة الغروب" لبهاء طاهر

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مدرس الأدب الإنجليزي بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها والترجمة الفورية
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الملخص:

يهدف البحث إلى دراسة وتحليل مشكلة الاغتراب كما تتناولها رواية "واحة الغروب" للكاتب المصري بهاء طاهر والتي حصلت على الجائزة العالمية للرواية العربية في دورتها الأولى في عام ٢٠٠٨. طبقاً للدراسة التي قام بها ملفين سيمان والتي تهدف إلى تحليل مفهوم الاغتراب من منظور اجتماعي فإن المفهوم يتضمن ستة أنماط أساسية تشمل العجز أو فقدان السيطرة - اللامعنى - الاغتراب الذاتي - الاغتراب الاجتماعي وأخيراً الاغتراب الثقافي. يهدف البحث إلى دراسة فكرة الاغتراب في رواية "واحة الغروب" استناداً إلى نظرية سيمان عن مفهوم الاغتراب وأنماطه. عند تناول الرواية بالتحليل والدراسة تبين أن خمس من بين أنماط الاغتراب الست التي اقترحها سيمان في دراسته تظهر بوضوح في معالجة الروائي لشخصية البطل وأيضاً شخصية الزوجة. يتضح من خلال الدراسة أن الشخصية المحورية للرواية وهي شخصية ضابط الشرطة محمود عبد الظاهر تعاني من أربعة أنماط من الاغتراب وهي العجز أو فقدان السيطرة وخواء المعنى والاعتراب الذاتي والاعتراب الاجتماعي بينما تعاني الزوجة وهي الشخصية المحورية الأخرى من نمطين من أنماط الاغتراب وهما الاغتراب الاجتماعي والاعتراب الثقافي.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

ميلفن سيمان - أنماط الاغتراب - "واحة الغروب".

The objective of this paper is to explore the theme of alienation in Bahaa Taher's *Sunset Oasis*. By adopting Melvin Seeman's theory about alienation, the present study discusses and analyses the manifestation of the different dimensions of alienation experienced by the two main characters, the protagonist and his wife. Mahmoud and Catherine have endured terrible feelings of isolation, estrangement, rejection and loneliness that have detrimental impact on their marital relationship as well as on their interpersonal relationships with the people around them.

Throughout the events of the novel, five out of Seeman's six categories of alienation manifest themselves in multiple ways. Mahmoud's powerlessness (his inability to control events and to anticipate future outcome) is made very apparent at the very beginning of the novel. The sense of meaninglessness he undergoes, concomitant with the involuntary mission of collecting taxes, has made it impossible for him to maintain a sense of community with the people of the oasis and hence his detachment from the surrounding society. It is through his self-estrangement, the most painful of Seeman's presumed variants, that the protagonist personifies the theme of alienation and its consequences for it renders him physically and mentally isolated from the self, from his wife and from aspects of social interaction. Finally, his experience of social alienation is quite unique on the ground that it renders him both a victim and an instrument of isolation. As a socially isolated individual, Mahmoud has to endure the consequences of the alienation imposed upon him by the surrounding community and the voluntary or self-inflicted exclusion.

Taher displays isolation through the character of Catherine simply by placing her in a physically isolating environment. Though in the secluded oasis she is socially isolated like her husband, her experience of social isolation functions as both a

parallel and a contrast to that of her husband. Moreover, unlike her husband, and as a result of the discrepancy between her own personal beliefs and the beliefs shared by the surrounding community, Catherine undergoes cultural estrangement. Her disregard of the prevailing social and cultural set of norms prompts her alienation and exclusion from society and, more importantly, renders the couple's isolation final and complete. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part lays out the theoretical background of the research while the second part analyses the theme of alienation in the novel under consideration.

Seeman's Theory : A Survey

According to Oxford English dictionary, the word "alienation" is borrowed from the Latin word *alienationem* (nominative *alienatio*), meaning "a transfer, surrender" or "separation". The noun is derived from the Latin verb *alienare*, meaning "to transfer (goods, property) to another, estrange, remove or cause a separation to occur". In Encyclopædia Britannica the term is defined, in social sciences, as "the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work or self". Though the term is quite popular, the idea of alienation seems ambiguous and causes difficulty and its meaning seems to be elusive because "it is used to refer both to a personal psychological state and a type of social relationship" (Roberts 346).

The publication of Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript* in 1932 laid the theoretical foundation for understanding the problem of social alienation. Marx's theory of alienation is based on the assumption that within a capitalist system the labourer loses his existence; he is estranged and separated from the self, or from aspects of his human nature, and from the rest of the world. Such an individual, Marx theorises,

experiences different modes of alienation as a consequence of living in a capitalist society and being a mechanistic part of a social class. (Marx 398). In brief, the Marxian theory of alienation is concerned with alienated labour under capitalism and considers alienation an objective fact not a subjective experience.

Melvin Seeman's "On the Meaning of Alienation", published in the journal *American Sociological Review* in 1959, provides the clearest expression of the concept. In his seminal article, Seeman "spoke of the task as being to produce a specific and unique social indicator (rather than global indicators) of the individual's feelings of happiness or despair, well-being or discontent, futility or optimism" (Ludz 21). For the purpose of providing "a better understanding" of the concept of alienation from "a socio-psychological perspective", Seeman suggests six variants or types to study alienation, namely powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, social isolation and cultural estrangement. Seeman's taxonomy, Warren TenHouten argues, "would challenge the longstanding conceptualization of alienation as a general: unidimensional phenomenon" (1). This means that his analytical model is multi-dimensional. The classification of the concept into six different categories does not entail that each one of them is to be found separately in different individuals for these dimensions are not independent; it is possible that more than one, if not all, of them can exist in the same person at the same time.

Powerlessness

In "On the Meaning of Alienation", Melvin Seeman remarks that this "phenomenon" has been first discussed by Karl Marx "in terms of lack of control" (784). As a form alienation, the term is defined by Seeman as "the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence

of the outcomes, or reinforcements sought in relation to society” (784-85). Despite the fact that the concept, by its very nature, includes three main expectancies like inability to solve problems, inability to control events and a sense of helplessness and consequently seems applicable to innumerable situations and events, Seeman suggests that its implication should be confined to the socio-political events only. In his discussion of this variant of alienation, he overtly states “I would limit the applicability of the concept of expectancies that have to do with the individual’s sense of influence over socio-political events” (786).

However, it is quite indisputable that any lived experience of powerlessness is associated with lack or loss of power, control and effectiveness. Powerlessness is, thus, defined by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett as “the perception that one’s own action will not significantly affect an outcome; a perceived lack of control over a current situation or immediate happening” (386). Individuals experiencing alienation, in the sense of powerlessness, find themselves helpless, out of control and incapable of commanding aspects of their lives. For this reason, such alienated individuals, Rahel Jaeggi argues, “do not take any decisions and actions and, therefore, do not act as agents in their lives, but rather follow developments that are offered to them” (474). Powerlessness, in sum, could be viewed as a perceived inability to avoid or control events, situations and circumstances as well as their consequences. Because individuals experiencing lack of control hardly have power and freedom to take and implement their personal free decisions, they suffer resultant feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction.

Meaninglessness

According to Seeman, the concept refers to the individual’s inability to understand the events and social situations in which he/she is engaged and to predict the outcomes of his/her own and

other people's actions. The term denotes a situation when "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" ("On the Meaning" 405). Such uncertainty about decision making, Seeman affirms, is triggered by "the existence of a variety of different beliefs" out of which the individual "should choose and act according to them". These beliefs may include "moral standards that describe what is right and moral". From Seeman's perspective, "even if one chooses one of the beliefs, one cannot estimate the consequences of his/her action" (405). Alienation in the sense of lack of meaning succinctly refers to the individual's incomprehensibility of the surrounding circumstances. As a consequence, the alienated individuals are more likely to experience depression caused, as Seeman suggests, by "the feeling that one is not able to understand the world in which he lives as well as the conditions occurring in it" (405), besides the complete uncertainty about the consequences of their actions.

Self-estrangement

It is worthy to note that the concept of self-estrangement – the most difficult to define – has been viewed by many sociologists as an essential component in the construct of alienation. Marx, for example, placed it at "the heart of social alienation" (Sarfraz 50). Under such presumption, Erich Fromm suggests that among all types of alienation, self-estrangement is the most important. In *The Sane Society*, he defines it as "a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself ... the alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person" (10). Seeman himself found it "an elusive idea" that is difficult to "specify" ("On the Meaning" 91). In "Alienation: Psychological Tradition", he suggests that "self-alienation is a complex and difficult version – some would say the

overarching version of alienation” (389). However, he suggests that it could be defined as “the individual’s sense of discrepancy between his ideal self and his actual self-image” (“On the Meaning” 91).

Self-estrangement is painful not only because it occurs unexpectedly, but also because it causes an extreme sense of grief and sadness. Though “it is not an emotion”, as Warren D. TenHouten argues, “it includes the primary emotion of sadness and disgust” (92). Sadness is concomitant with the self-alienated individual’s loss of his/her ideal self. The second resultant emotion, disgust, as TenHouten suggests, generates “an emotion of withdrawal and disaffiliation” (93).

Social isolation

In “Alienation and Engagement”, Seeman defines social isolation as “the individual’s low expectancy for social inclusion and social acceptance, expressed typically in feelings of loneliness or feelings of rejection or repudiation”. This form of isolation is most prevalent among “minority members” and “strangers” and it is “usually accompanied by loneliness” (492). However, it must be emphasised that social isolation and loneliness are not synonymous. They are two independent and different concepts that may – not most – be related. Consequently, the feeling of loneliness is not necessarily associated with social isolation. From an objective perspective, De Jong Gierveld et al. suggest, “persons with very small number of meaningful ties are, by definition, socially isolated” (486). This entails that the concept deals with the number and quantity of existing relationships. In comparison, loneliness – also referred to as perceived isolation – deals with the “subjective aspect of the problem”, and is defined as “a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships” (Gierveld

et al. 120). It should also be emphasised that social isolation is an objective fact while loneliness is a subjective view of the world.

According to Arther Neal and Sara Collas “having a sense of belonging and membership are among the primary ingredients of an individual’s sense of well-being” (24). In context of social-influence theories, “every individual fulfills his needs to belong, to love, and to be loved by others by adhering to the group norms as a member of that group” (Jones and Gerard 65). However, if these psychological and emotional needs are not fulfilled and the “individual finds the group norms too restrictive and in conflict with the individual personal goals, the group loses its normative influence on the individual and, as a consequence, the individual becomes isolated from the group” (Sarfraz 55). In brief, social isolation occurs at a moment when an individual feels that he/she can no longer be part of society. A socially isolated individual is perceived as one who no longer belongs to the group or is accepted by other people in the group. Such psychological state (social isolation) which is also referred to as social disconnectedness is understood to be lack of consistent contact and relations with other people and with the society as a whole.

Finally, it should be emphasised that socially isolated individuals are not convinced of the validity of the normative system. They find that their values are different from those that prevail within society and that are commonly shared by other people. Their personal needs and desires are not met and there is no communication between them and the social world around them. According to Burgert Adriaan Senekal, “in literature”, the “outsider” is the “perfect personification of that term” (46).

Cultural estrangement

Finally, the last variant of alienation denotes a feeling of detachment or disconnectedness from society and its commonly

shared cultural and social values and activities. In "Alienation and Anomie", Seeman defines cultural estrangement as "the individual's rejection of, or sense of removal from dominant social values and popular cultural standards" (351). In full agreement Kenneth Keniston assumes that it is "an explicit rejection, 'freely' chosen by the individual, of what he perceives as the dominant values or norms of his society" (455). It is worthy to note that though cultural estrangement is a central component of alienation, it is quite distinct. The reason resides in the fact that while some modes of alienation as "powerlessness, self-estrangement and normlessness represent a negative judgment of self", cultural estrangement, by contrast, means that the individual is "sufficiently secure in his judgment of self to be independent of his values" (Kohn and Schooler 90).

Analysis of *Sunset Oasis*:

The idea that the protagonist is powerless and lacking control over events occurring in the large society is perceived from the early beginning of the novel. The protagonist's powerlessness, the first aspect of his alienation, is most basically caused by an extremely influential socio-political event, namely the British occupation of Egypt following the defeat of the Egyptian resistance at Tell el Kebir battle in 1882. Amid such an uncontrollable event and its drastic consequences, that have been affecting everyone in the country, Mahmoud finds that he is neither effective nor powerful to have any influence upon it. This entails that his powerlessness is a mix of an objective fact and a subjective experience. His lack of control, which clearly manifests itself in his inevitable inability to defy or even repel the British conquest of the country and its effects, causes his anger and frustration which are common symptoms of his alienation. There are several reasons that Mahmoud, like thousands of Egyptian officers and soldiers, seems virtually powerless and could not have

even the least influence on that event, in which he has been eventually involved. The most substantial one is betrayal rather than the military supremacy of the invading British troops as might be suggested.

It is particularly during and after the Anglo-Egyptian War that the protagonist realises that the whole country has been betrayed by a number of traitors. Deploring such a fact, Mahmoud describes all the treacherous acts he has been eventually witnessing as “weapons” that have been “stuck in the country’s chest” (Taher 48). His experience as a police officer recently transferred to Alexandria during the British invasion of the harbour and his being an eyewitness to the British “fleet’s shelling of the city” (55) have enabled him to recognise that “betrayal” in effect has turned the “bombardment” into a “massacre” where “more than two thousand Egyptians were slaughtered” (51). In the streets of “el Manshiya and Kom el Dikka”, Mahmoud helplessly “saw gangs of Bedouin riff-raff breaking into the locked shops and plundering them” (52). The situation has been even compounded when the governor Umar Basha Lotfy “stab[bed]” the resistance “in the back” (48) by issuing orders to clear the country of all the rebels and to “bring down Uraby” after declaring him a mutineer who is “bringing ruin on the country” (52).

In Cairo, Mahmoud “beheld the greater betrayal that followed” (48) one year later when Khedive Tewfiq, whose prime responsibility is to defend his country against invasion, decided to support the foreign invaders instead. Mahmoud, while unable to accept or even understand treacherous people’s motivations, saw him “on his dais” in Abdeen Square “from which he reviewed the army of occupation with, on his right, Admiral Seymour, the cannon of whose fleet had demolished Alexandria, and, on his left, General Wolseley, who, with the help of traitors, had annihilated our army in Tell el Kebir” (49). It is exactly at this moment that

Mahmoud feels more politically powerless than ever; his sense of discontentment and estrangement from the political system is complete. Political powerlessness is defined by Marvin Olsen as “those objective situations in which the socio-political system prevents individuals from exercising an effective influence on governmental decisions, politics and actions” (290).

Betrayal is a “crisis” (49), as Mahmoud himself describes it to his wife, Catherine, that is responsible for both his own powerlessness and that of the whole country against the British occupation. Overwhelmed with bitter feelings of helplessness and inability to change the status quo, the broken protagonist could not help bewailing the defeat; he explicitly states “I wept for my country and myself” (49). Weeping is, thus, a subjective manifestation of his political powerlessness which involves an unendurable feeling of inadequacy and shame.

Powerlessness is defined as:

[A]n overwhelming feeling of helplessness or inadequacy in stressful situations – making us more susceptible to anxiety, stress and depression. This may include an inability to exercise our freewill when it comes to expressing opinions, making decisions or asserting our personal choices. (Sava)

Powerlessness, as such, is very present in Mahmoud’s character during his direct encounter with the British advisor and the transfer order he has just issued. Mahmoud’s transfer to Siwa, a disciplinary measure taken against him for his anti-occupation stance, is another inevitable problem that evidences the protagonist’s powerlessness and his sensed inability to avoid or control events and their consequences. His vulnerability is suggested by the fact that he could neither have any effective influence on the transfer order nor predict its outcomes. Even before the meeting in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, he is aware

of the fact that the transfer order is beyond his capacity and control and that he could not combat it not only because it is imposed upon him rather than chosen, but also because he finds himself too weak to overcome problems or “unable” to “solve any problem” (14) as he himself admits. Such honestly acknowledged helplessness is intensified during the “oppressive meeting” (13) with M. Harvey. The authority of the British advisor of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the transfer order he has issued represent another unchallengeable force attesting Mahmoud’s personal weakness and lack of mastery and control. Control, in the broad sense of the word here, is vested in external forces presented in the authority of the British advisor.

Mahmoud’s perceived vulnerability translates into a mixture of repressed emotions of anger, anxiety and event disgust. He is both uncomfortable with feeling weak and ineffectual and frustrated by his inability to control his temper. All the while he is struggling to cope with the situation by means of suppressing his anger and preserving his dignity, but in vain. Because he feels so impotent and defeated or, in his own words, “beaten by the British again” (18), his composure is evaporating and suddenly he becomes totally “incapable of controlling [him]self” (17). In contrast to Mr. Harvey’s commanding position as the man who “held all the strings of the ministry in his hands” (14), and his sense of mastery and composure, Mahmoud’s sense of incompetence and his perceived powerlessness are stressful and humiliating. Both the foreign advisor and the Egyptian officer are fully aware that the latter has neither power nor freedom to defy the order that would shape the entire course of his life and accordingly is not in control.

The unmistakable message delivered by the advisor is that the order is an irreversible decision and Mahmoud – his subordinate – is not able in any way to influence it. It is during the

meeting that Mahmoud begins to recognise his lack of control and that he could neither have a voice in making the decision nor anticipate its future outcomes. His destiny in the oasis, which is out of his own control and is determined by external forces, seems gloomy and ambiguous. Mahmoud finds himself in a situation that is not very comfortable as he has no other alternative but complying with the advisor's authority and accepting the new posting in Siwa oasis. The reason is the fact that "all matters were settled before the meeting" and the order has "to be implemented immediately" since it has been "recommended by the ministry's advisor" and taken by "His Excellency the Minister of Internal Affairs" (13). The protagonist is certain that he is neither powerful nor effective and, therefore, cannot determine or control the policy of his superiors. His personal opinions and choices are considered unimportant and uninfluential by those superiors.

It is particularly after the meeting that Mahmoud feels frustrated and offended for having been controlled, manipulated and jeopardised by the British advisor and his persistent attempts to degrade and humiliate him. Gloating over Mahmoud's powerlessness, Mr. Harvey "with certain malice" (13), as Mahmoud observes, has repeatedly hinted at "the danger of the journey" (13), the "very difficult posting as district commissioner for the oasis" (15), the "difficult task of collecting the taxes" (17), and the violence and "primitive customs" (16) of the natives though he is certainly confident that Mahmoud has no other alternative but submitting to the order and accepting the unpleasant mission. The meeting has rendered him a typically alienated individual who feels completely powerless. Trapped in his perceived helplessness, he is aware that he hardly has power and freedom to make and implement his personal free choices.

Since his arrival at the oasis, Mahmoud has been subject to feelings of perplexity, ambiguity and anxiety. He suddenly, though

unexpectedly, finds himself placed in an utterly meaningless situation. The reasons for such meaninglessness are not unclear. The most ample one is the detested mission and his awareness that gathering taxes, the primary requirement of the new posting, is not only onerous and depressing, but also inconsistent with his convictions, beliefs and moral standards. A second and related reason is Mahmoud's inability to predict the consequences of the assigned task. Under a regressive tax system imposed by the government in Cairo, the Siwans, despite their abject poverty, are to pay a great proportion of their income as taxes. "The Sheikhs", Ahmed Fakhry states, are forced to pay "a one piaster tax for every palm tree in the oasis"(85).

Early in the novel, the protagonist is rightly described by his wife as being "no coward [who] will do his duty there as he has done all his life, whether he liked that duty or hated it" (27). However, Mahmoud's attitude as a tax collector defies his wife's expectations. The newly appointed commissioner is perceived as being hesitant, indecisive and undetermined because his moral integrity forbids him to fulfill that unfair duty. He never could understand the reason why the people of the oasis are to be taxed in the first place. His dissatisfaction with such unfair practices makes him sarcastic of the government, "the law of might" (171) and the heavy property tax burden the oasis endures. His cynical attitude towards these gross injustices manifests itself in the following comment, "I have been told above all to collect the outstanding taxes. I am to send to Cairo immediately on my arrival two thousand camel-loads of dates, five hundred camel-loads of olive oil, and a late fee in cash of five thousand rials. Mr. Harvey chose well!" (47).

Despite the atmosphere of apparent animosity and the "deadly hatred" (89) surrounding him and his wife, Mahmoud honestly confesses that he feels a lot of sympathy for the people of

the oasis, particularly the poor peasants among them. From the very first moment of his entry into the oasis, the sight of the indigent *zaggala* i.e., the cultivators is shocking to the commissioner and it is hard for him to resist pitying them, particularly because he is mindful of their exploitation and impoverishment. His feelings for the oppressed farmers and their distress motivate his anger towards the government. Though Mahmoud might seem to be cold and unfeeling towards those strangers, he displays his astonishment at their obvious destitution and its cause when he unexpectedly argues “their poverty took me aback just as I was taken aback by the massive amount of the taxes that the government demands I collect from them” (89).

Considering the fact that they get nothing from the government in Cairo, the Siwans feel discriminated and view the taxation system as being cruel, unfair and regressive. They hate paying taxes and are bothered a lot by the onerous amount they are required to pay. As a consequence, the *agwad* have persistently “asked for the reduction of the tax to five hundred camel-loads of dates and one hundred of olive oil [as well as] the cancellation of the penalty for late payment” (72). Their anger and frustration are not unjustified and they are convinced that the government is not entitled to their property. Their concern and grievances are openly expressed by Sheikh Sabir when he asks the bewildered commissioner “what would be left for us to live on if we were to pay everything that the government is asking for” (87).

The meaninglessness and absurdity of the whole situation reach a peak when Mahmoud receives two subsequent threatening messages. One, which Mahmoud considers “the first real threat since [he] came to the oasis” (86) and which he “understood well” (87), from Sheikh Sabir, warning him against the “recklessness” of “some heads among the families and even indeed among the *agwad* who are not so wise [and] are waiting to pounce on him”

(87, 88). The other, from the “Protected City”, ordering him callously to collect the delinquent liability, or in Mahmoud’s words, “the late taxes in a hurry and to send [them] to Cairo” (86, 87).

On the one hand, Mahmoud – amidst such turmoil and perplexity – does not lose his fair judgment and integrity, and he adopts a rather unexpected attitude which is difficult to understand, but affirms his sympathies with the offended (the oasis and its people). On the other, Mahmoud’s capacity to find a solution for this perilous situation is challenged by two facts. The first one is the lack of understanding of the hostile environment surrounding him as he himself admits that he “need[s] time” if he is “to understand people here” (88). The second one is his inability to anticipate outcomes. As a result, he experiences another phase of anxiety and personal crisis and, by implication, feels lost and uncertain. His inability to predict the consequences of the present precarious situation, which are certainly out of his hand, is combined with his being unprepared to face them when they occur.

Taking into account his strained relationships with both Cairo and the oasis – the offender and the offended – Mahmoud, as he himself reproachfully argues, has “a thousand causes for complaint” for “the oasis is a vexation and Cairo is a vexation” and he is “caught in the middle” (89). He can be justified in being plaintive and pessimistic since he is concerned that his safety is in question and no precaution could help him while he is “on his own in their midst” (89). Both Mahmoud and Catherine “know” that as “the district commissioner”, he “will always be a prize trophy for them” (28). His response to such meaninglessness and the absurdity of the whole situation is explicitly expressed in his desperate question “what am I supposed to do with the handful of troops I have with me and our ancient rifles?” (87).

In an attempt to assess what the future is holding for him, and to anticipate possible outcomes, he expresses uncertainty about what he could do and finds himself left with nothing but negative probabilities. In Cairo and during his meeting with Mr. Harvey, he has been informed that if he does not succeed, punitive measures will be taken against him. The British advisor made himself very clear when he curtly informed Mahmoud that he “will pay the price and in any case, the penalty will not be his return to Cairo” (18). Evidently, the advisor has been hinting at a trial by court-martial, and Mahmoud does not obtain the means to escape this dilemma the ministry has placed him in. Inside the oasis, it is clearly understandable “even without Sheikh Sabir’s hints and their concealed threats,” as Mahmoud argues, that the *zaggala*, the families heads and even the *agwad* “are waiting to get rid of him” (88, 89). Accordingly, Mahmoud – in deep dejection – is overwhelmed with feelings of impending doom and the only remaining “hope” he has now is that death, or “the end”, as he himself reveals without hesitation, “will be fast and unannounced” (89).

It is this moment, in particular, when the hope is about to be fulfilled and the awaited death is eventually approaching that reveals the most painful facet of the protagonist’s alienation, *i.e.*, his self-estrangement. Among all the other forms of alienation he experiences, he finds his self-estrangement most painful because it is totally unexpected and sudden. The grave accident in the Amun temple and the subsequent injury of Sergeant Ibraheem, whose leg has been smashed by a falling stone while saving a little child, renders Mahmoud conscious of the bitter fact that he is a self-estranged person who is isolated from himself and from his true identity. At the temple, when he “saw death descending in the shape of a large stone”, instead of moving “forward to save the little child”, the terrified protagonist – extremely scared – “moved back and went rigid with fear” (147, 148). To his astonishment,

Mahmoud finds himself too frightened to do the duty that he “had absolutely to obey” and he let the old soldier “perform it” (151). As a consequence of this action or more properly inaction, which he sees as aversive, Mahmoud unexpectedly becomes aware of his being increasingly unlike his ideal self and therein lies the problem.

In Sartrean terms, “shame is by nature recognition” (222). Accordingly, the sense of shame or “ignominy” (170) as Mahmoud calls it, which manifests itself in the feelings of sadness, embarrassment and guilt, is a consequence of his painful recognition that his inaction is evidently wrong. The feeling of shame causes his estrangement and, in corollary, leads to isolation from his own self and from others as well. He repeatedly ruminates over the incident that led up to his self-estrangement. Over time, generalised feelings of hurt, betrayal and disappointment begin to emerge. Since the fact that he “behaved like a coward” comes out clearly and could no longer be denied or even hidden and “the time for deception is over” (151), as he himself admits, the protagonist eventually realises that he has been inhabiting a false identity and begins to feel isolated from himself. Recognising the disparity between who he really is and who he has aspired to be, Mahmoud regrettably perceives a sense that the ideal self he “had drawn for himself” as a hero is a “false image”, which “fell away with all his hypocritical thoughts on life and death” (143), and is totally different from his actual self. In other words, he begins to experience isolation from his own identity or what psychologists call “identity crisis”. This results in inevitable feelings of disappointment, self-dissatisfaction and sadness.

The protagonist is thus forced to face his reality. His shocking acknowledgement that for so long he has lied about himself not only to himself, but also to others since he “deliberately passed on this legend [of his false heroism] to

Catherine from the first days of their relationship” (143) fills him with anger, guilt and self-loathing. The “self-disgust” (147), triggered by the aversive situation, is deepened and perpetuated by the recently obtained knowledge that his actual self, the cowardly one, is significantly inferior to the heroic self he has aspired to obtain. Recounting his shame, he admits that he “lived for months in a state of self-disgust” caused by the “disgrace of his cowardice” (147) which he finds beyond forgetfulness.

Because self-estrangement results in a unique form of sorrow, a great part of the protagonist’s reaction to his painful and distressing failure to possess the ideal self he has desired is expressed in his feeling grief and sadness. Catherine, though unable to “understand” the reason for her husband’s suffering, is not oblivious to his misery and despondency. She describes him as being “miserable” and his bad state as “get[ting] much worse since Ibraheem’s accident” (156). She is, in like manner, conscious of the fact that since the catastrophic event, her husband’s estrangement has become enormous and complete.

Self-estrangement is accompanied by feelings of exhaustion and negativity. This may explain the reason why John Clark defines this form of alienation as “a psychological state of an individual [that] may result in his becoming estranged physically, mentally, or both, from aspects of social interaction” (850). In other words, self-estrangement leads to estranged relationships. Accordingly, self-estrangement is “a continual process” (Scharp). In the protagonist’s case, the feelings of uneasiness, discomfort and anxiety, which are all symptoms of his self-estrangement, translate into his self-inflicted exclusion from any aspect of interaction with Catherine. According to George Armitage Miller, “self-estrangement causes a state of isolation from others” (57). The problem is further compounded by the fact that Mahmoud has been gradually alienating himself from the only meaningful

relationship remaining in his life since she is the only person he could have a close bond with.

It is apparent that the process of estrangement, to which Mahmoud responds by withdrawing and disaffiliating and which comes to Catherine as a surprise, initiates the inevitable deterioration in their relationship. Tension between the two spouses, at bottom, occurs when Mahmoud begins to be emotionally withdrawn and to reduce communication with Catherine and it is exacerbated when both of them begin to lead emotionally separate lives in consequence. In order to escape the company of his wife at home and to avoid intimacy, Mahmoud not only becomes non-communicative and emotionally disengaged, but resumes his drinking habit that unfortunately becomes his only source of solace and consolation. Catherine complains that her husband “has gone back to drinking heavily” (164).

Despite living in close proximity, they feel worlds apart. In other words, they perceive that their life worlds have become psychologically separated and that the emotional distance between them is vast. Experiencing rejection from her husband and subsequently having difficulty approaching and speaking with him, Catherine feels more and more disappointed in her relationship with Mahmoud and she suffers loneliness and discontent. She deplores their emotional divorce and the bitter fact that they have become very much two strangers living in the same house and sharing the same bed when she states that “since the accident”, they “‘ve been avoiding each other” and they “sleep in the bed like strangers most of the time” (164-65).

Because Mahmoud has deliberately refrained from making physical, verbal and emotional contact with Catherine, they both became used to being physically and emotionally detached from each other. It is not surprising then that Catherine, “the abandoned spouse” (242), sees no problem with being not only familiar, but

also “happy” with the distance that has been placed and maintained by her husband though, as she affirms, “it had never before occurred to [her] that she would be happy to see him distance himself from her” (165). Their relationship is irreparably damaged; Mahmoud could not defeat alienation, Catherine has never reproached him for his estrangement and there is even an increasing passive acceptance of its consequences. In brief, Mahmoud’s self-estrangement makes it definitely impossible for them to maintain the healthy and strong relationship they once had.

Since their arrival at the oasis and even before interacting with any of its residents, the two spouses have been exposed to severe social isolation and the subsequent feeling of anomie. This is not only because the transfer, by its very nature, has cut them off their friends and acquaintances in Cairo, but also and more importantly because mobility, as Pitirim Sorokin suggests, “diminishes intimacy and increases psychological isolation and loneliness” (525). The fact that mobility is recognised as a cause of social isolation is affirmed by Ashley Crossman when she suggests that “moving from one country to the other or from one region within a country to a very different region within it can also destabilize a person’s norms, practices and social relations in such a way as to cause social isolation”.

Additionally, in the couple’s case one of the essential causes of their social isolation resides in the absence of meaningful social relations. In the oasis, they find themselves in a constant state of isolation from others. They are unable to form satisfactory personal relationships in that new environment, disintegrated and alienated from mainstream society, its groups and institutions. Both Mahmoud and Catherine are profoundly isolated from the residents and the little contact they have with them could never be considered meaningful or effective. Symptoms of the couple’s

isolation include feeling different and separate from everyone else, having difficulty approaching and speaking with others, feeling unsafe and experiencing social exclusion as if they were a stigmatised minority in a group. Considerable evidence in the novel suggests that the Siwan society is primed for their social isolation, meaning it is blamed as a major part of their exclusion problem.

Jan Hajda defines social isolation as “an individual feelings of uneasiness or discomfort which reflect his exclusion or self-exclusion from social and cultural participation. It is an expression of non-belonging or non-sharing, an uneasy awareness or perception in its scope and intensity” (758). With respect to the protagonist’s character, the definition best suits his experience. His feelings of discomfort and uneasiness reflect both his voluntary exclusion or self-exclusion and the imposed one or the exclusion imposed upon him by the whole oasis. Behind the commissioner’s calm assurance, he suffers from loneliness due to his explicit recognition of his profound disconnectedness, his lack of contact with others and his inability to interact with the social world around him. As a typical isolate, Mahmoud, who is not part of any social contact, finds himself not only unfamiliar but also uncomfortable communicating and interacting with the people of the oasis. It is quite evident that he does not make any effort to show any kind of proximity to them and vice versa.

The protagonist’s voluntary exclusion takes the form of having little or no interaction with the residents. His relationship with the oasis is thus characterised by separation rather than integration. His attitude during his first visit to the Great Mosque and how he holds himself unapproachable and aloof perfectly exemplify this separation. He personifies the idea of alienation. His position is not the only thing that makes him seen as an outcast, it is also the way he behaves, his manner and above all his

relationships with others. The social isolation he endures can be understood in the light of Sarah J. Mann's definition of the term: "the state and experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved" (7). His attendance for the Friday congregational prayer, which is supposed to be a sign of social integration and solidarity, is certainly indicative of his isolation and disintegration. This may explain the reason why his wife regards his attending the Friday Prayer as a "social obligation" (166). In the mosque, he is incredibly discrete and maintains a considerable distance from others. The fact that he persistently escapes the company of the other worshippers and avoids contact with them is admitted when he argues "we shake the hands of the *agwad* and the worshippers near us and then all contact between us comes to an end until the next Friday. None of them has visited me and none of them has invited me to visit his home or his garden" (101).

It is worthy to mention that his determination to maintain this reserved attitude that aims at minimising interaction with the Siwans is ironic. The reason is the fact that his detached attitude is met with their more persistent determination to prevent any interaction with him and hence his involuntary exclusion. In comparison to the commissioner's self-imposed exclusion, the physical and emotional exclusions the residents are imposing upon him are more painful and detrimental. In the following quotation, he admits his concern about the physical and emotional exclusion he is forced to experience during the following Friday prayer as a way of "stressing [his] isolation": "they've made a space for us that is almost separate from the rest of the worshippers, and some of the skeikhs shake hands with us without saying anything, after which they leave the mosque in a hurry" (222). He, thus, finds himself placed in a spiral of isolation. He is not only alone and disconnected from society, but also unable and unwilling to modify the situation.

The commissioner's lack of desire to establish meaningful relationships with the residents and his inability to do so are due to his involuntary exclusion. However, his experience of being physically and emotionally estranged from aspects of social interaction stems in part from the residents' historically rooted fears about outsiders and strangers who are often seen as threats to the tradition and, therefore, stability of their society. The Siwan society is, by its very nature, wary of strangers. The Siwan residents explicitly express fear and worry about outsiders trespassing their private territories and defiling their pristine neighbourhoods. Sheikh Yahya warns Catherine that "in their customs and traditions, they didn't like strangers entering into their town and wandering among the houses" (103). Accordingly, it is impossible "even for a woman to wander about and approach their gathering" (160). Hence, Catherine, who has encountered a disproportionate share of isolating experiences and personal strain, recognises that she could not "break this isolation" (104).

The residents' perennial concern and anxieties over the presence of strangers (Mahmoud and Catherine) and their undesirable influences are closely linked to moral considerations that regard those unruly outsiders as an imminent threat that would bring chaos into the moral social order of their community. This means that social exclusion and residential segregation consistently practiced in the Siwan community are based on a strong moral order. An inherent part of this moral structure is the distancing of strangers in social and spatial relationships.

The sense of isolation and social disconnectedness the two spouses experience are exacerbated by their living in seclusion, the excessively long distance between their remote house and mainstream society and finally the walls and fences surrounding the residents' houses. From the first day in the oasis, the two spouses have become oblivious to their ultimate physical

exclusion. They are exiled in a remote oasis located 350 miles from Cairo, east of the Lybian border. Accordingly, they find themselves held in a desolate spot situated in a physically isolating environment in one of the country's most isolated areas. Catherine is not exaggerating when she describes it as an "isolated oasis in the centre of the vast desert" (195) and Mahmoud, likewise, describes it as "the westernmost place in Egypt" (238). Inside their secluded house, they are not only definitely isolated from mainstream society, but also forced to live as if they were "prisoner[s] in forcible imprisonment" (192), as Catherine herself complains. Viewed in this way, their remote house or the place where they unwillingly reside is affirmative of the acute sense of loneliness and social alienation the commissioner and his wife are destined to endure. Bill Ashcroft et al. affirm that "the most widely shared discursive practices within which alienation can be identified is the construction of place" (9).

The problem of their involuntary exclusion and restraint is further aggravated by the long distance between the house and the residential area, or the two towns of Shali and Aghurmi. The house, which was owned by the former Mayor, is farthest away from the walls of the neighbourhoods. It is not without reason that it is kept far away at the outskirts of the town, at the bottom of the hill, or as Mahmoud himself complains, "outside the walls of Shali" (88). It is quite unarguable that concerted effort has been consistently made by the natives to secure their homogeneity by means of keeping strangers and outsiders away since they are perceived as disruptors of their congruity and harmony. Such ceaseless effort that has incorporated in the construction of fences around their houses and gardens causes further alienation for those strangers. The stone walls and the gates which encircle the whole town and which serve to affirm a moral order of "us" and "them" are parts of an active process of exclusion and separation. While approaching the oasis for the first time, Mahmoud is utterly

astonished to find that “the caravan had to spend more than two hours to reach the heart of the oasis” and during this lengthy journey, they “came across no buildings, only the grey walls of the gardens which no one can see inside” (66).

It is within reason to assume that the construction of walls as separating barriers is inherent in the structure of the Siwan community and the mentality of its people. Catherine could recognise at a glance the utmost importance of this legacy. She observes that while the small girls were playing “the most important thing, though, was that they weren’t forgetting to build high walls of sand around their gardens. They had been taught about the walls since they were little” (166). After her first visit to Shali, she has become completely “lethargic for weeks” (104) in consequence of her shocking recognition that she is both physically and socially isolated from all aspects of social interaction. However, she feels more panicked when she finds that she “could not break this isolation” mainly because of “these layers of shell”. She “cannot gain their affection, or at least get to know them” because of the presence of “walls around the gardens, fortifications around the towns, and a wall around the fortifications” (103-104).

The subsequent absence of communication and interpersonal relationship has generated severe feelings of personal loneliness and social isolation on the part of the two strangers. It is worthy to note that though both are physically and psychologically excluded and alienated from the social world around them, Mahmoud’s sense of loneliness is more prominent than that of Catherine. He, quite alone and disconnected, has experienced so strong feelings of loneliness that he, as he honestly states, “used to depend on whisky to withstand the loneliness of this oasis” (90). Catherine, subject to greater coldness and reserve on the part of the

residents, perceives “the loneliness of this oasis” as being “killing” (228).

The unspoken dogma that every stranger is the enemy is the main premise in the oasis. The discriminating attitude against the commissioner and his wife has continued unabated. Because of their difference and strangeness, which serve as barriers to forming social relationships, the two spouses are understood to be extraneous to the community, irredeemably different, detrimental and hence abject enemies. Accordingly, they are not only treated with great suspicion, but also loathed and feared. As strangers to the Siwan community, the two protagonists – who are cast in the light of abject difference – are immediately perceived to be the other and the other is a potential enemy. According to Kenneth Schmidt, “the enemy is the other, the stranger and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible” (51). It is not surprising then that Mahmoud decides that “in the oasis” and amidst its inhabitants, he has gradually “become the enemy whom no one even speaks to” (224).

It is worthy to mention that the very norms of the oasis do not allow any interaction with the two outsiders. As a consequence, a cruel cycle of emotional exclusion and alienation has been created through the use of distance and silence or what Mahmoud calls “the law of distance and silence” (98) as another separating measure. Examining the nature of their relationship with the residents, both Mahmoud and Catherine find themselves overtly ostracised by the whole community; men, women and even children.

Though both of them are subject to rejection, the husband and his wife differ considerably in the way they recognise their rejection. While the former has immediately understood and accepted it, the latter, who is astonished by the residents’

“incomprehensible hostility” (106), took more time to do so. Mahmoud “from the first day”, as he himself affirms, has been disillusioned enough to realise the seriousness of the situation. He has immediately observed that the dialogue between them and the oasis is disrupted and impaired because “the whole oasis” has “walled [them] with silence and avoidance” (89). Then it was easy for him to accept the fact that the small boy in charge of the donkeys was persistently avoiding any communication with him as he “didn’t say a word and didn’t look in [his] direction” not because he “didn’t understand much Arabic”, but because “like the others here, he was observing the law of distance and silence” (98). Inside himself, the commissioner feels hurt for being purposefully ignored and avoided by everyone around him and he silently regrets living in “this oasis of silence” (91). However, he mindfully does not allow his pain to surface and he maintains the very same indifferent attitude.

Catherine’s experience with this surprising truth of rejection and ostracism is more difficult and painful. At first, she felt sorry that “since” she “arrived”, “no one has spoken to her”. Even “the boys and girls who play in the sandy space move away” when she “leave[s] the house” and “if” she “approache[s] them smiling, they flee towards the town” (103). It has never occurred to her that this avoidance would be persistently maintained. She optimistically thinks that “this wall of silence” that is consciously erected against intimacy is just a temporary phase or “stage” that “will pass”, as she argues, and then she “will manage to get close to them” (103) and to have meaningful relationships with them. Later on and particularly after her face to face encounter with the women of the Aghurmi families, she has been enabled to detect her ostracism. The women’s angry responses to her “friendly smiles” and the humiliation she has endured by the way they “slammed their open doors” whenever she “got close to any of the houses” (105) puts an

end to her optimism. The then disillusioned Catherine, who is filled with anger and sorrow, realises that all her attempts to break the curtain of incommunicability or the wall of silence including her amiable greetings and her nods are doomed to failure since a “miracle”, not “friendliness” (105), as she herself regrets, is needed to do so. Under all these pressures, she finally, though unwillingly, accepts her alienation and succumbs to the status quo.

The rejection and exclusion she has endured are exceedingly painful for she gets the lion's share of isolating experiences and personal strain. Since her arrival and till the very end of the novel, she has been subject to greater coldness and reserve on the part of the residents. Even Zubieda, the elderly woman, who “came” to her house to cure Fiona, “kept silent” and did not exchange any word with her. Catherine admits that she “was hurt” by the discrete silence the elderly woman maintained. She reproachfully regrets that “the old woman rarely said anything” to her and “avoided looking” at her while she “had no difficulty communicating with her sister through signs and sounds” (264).

Contrary to Catherine's earlier naive expectations, the interpersonal interaction between the two spouses and the Siwan community has suddenly turned into irrational hostility, hatred and mistrust. However, this dramatic transformation could not be described as unexpected because hostility toward strangers is essentially an intrinsic human trait. Robert Sapolsky argues that “the tendency to form in-groups and out-groups of Us and Them, and to direct hostility at the latter, is inherent in humans” (34). It should be taken into consideration that social isolation is often linked with hostility and aggression. This means that socially isolated individuals, in turn, are more likely prone to the group's hostility and aggression. With respect to the commissioner and his wife, there is sufficient evidence that both are made aware of this fact. He argues that in their “first days and weeks”, each one of

them “had only the other in the midst of this atmosphere of hostility and isolation” (90).

It is important to emphasise that Catherine is subject to verbal aggression while Mahmoud is subject to relational aggression. All types of aggressiveness, including the verbal and the relational, lead to incommunicability and deteriorated relationships. However, considerable evidence in the novel suggests that the hostility Catherine and Mahmoud have endured rather result from dissatisfaction in communication and relationship deterioration.

When Catherine finds herself exposed to verbal aggression on part of the small children, she does her best to hide her anger and embarrassment. In order to preserve her dignity while being subjected to constant verbal abuse, she adopts an indifferent attitude similar to her husband’s. During her journey from Shali to Aghurmi, she “tried” to take no offence at those children who “stood watching her from a distance, calling out in their high-pitched voices what [she] took to be insults” (229). Likewise, Mahmoud, while “set[ing] off in the direction of Aghurmi, “did not show some of the *zaggala*” that he was offended or even embarrassed when they “ignored him and greeted Corporal Salmawi warmly” (253), with the intention of insulting and humiliating him. The commissioner, as he himself affirms, “looked straight ahead paying no attention to the insults of the *zaggala*” (554).

All these multiple acts of overt hostility and aggressiveness that force them to feel unwelcome and unwanted have adverse consequences on the abused couple. Both feel overwhelmed and resentful for being victims of social alienation. Yet it is the commissioner in particular who experiences stronger feelings of anger and disappointment and his anger has filled him with anxiety, hatred and distrust towards the whole oasis. He is the first

to admit detesting and despising the oasis and its people and the ample reason for his deep-seated hatred when he argues, "I came to this oasis hating it and its people and I have come to hate them even more because of their hostility towards me, Catherine and even the troops" (170).

The second and more detrimental consequence is the suspicion and lack of confidence that have filled him towards the whole oasis and the subsequent conviction that it has become a dangerous place threatening not only his life, but also his wife's. There is heavy irony in the fact that while the residents are concerned that the presence of the two aliens among them is perceived as threatening to the established community and its moral order, Mahmoud is equally concerned that the whole community is perceived as threatening to his safety. Among the residents, he feels that they are insecure and their safety is in question. He explicitly describes living in the oasis as "indeed living in the midst of danger" (223). Near the end of the novel, he, in a serious tone, warns Catherine that "going out is dangerous for [her] and dangerous for Fiona too" (226). All the incidents mentioned above are affirmative of the close association between social isolation, hostility and feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence that the couple has suffered in the oasis.

In the broadest sense of the term, cultural estrangement could be viewed as an individual's complete denial of, or sense of distance from, social and cultural values prevailing within a society. Like the other types of alienation, cultural estrangement is not a physical separation but, as Jeffrey Brooks et al suggest, an emotional experience "where one can feel isolated in the middle of a crowd, if they do not authentically share the group's cultural values, beliefs, and/or norms" (48). It is important to emphasise that cultural estrangement is an attitudinal state that stems from conflicts between personal and social values. Social and cultural

values may be interpreted as those beliefs that are commonly held by members of a given society. According to Russel Middleton, “these beliefs define what is right, moral, and common within a society. When refusing them, one becomes alienated from the society and culture in which one lives” (974). Hence, this variant of alienation refers to the sense of removal or estrangement from goals and beliefs that are highly valued in the society.

Cultural estrangement, as such, is strongly observed in Catherine’s character. From the very beginning of the novel and even before she departs from Cairo, she shows herself as decidedly alien and unfriendly towards the Siwan community, its people and its value system. During her stay in the oasis, she has always been subject to a permanent sense of non-conformity, of not belonging, of not sharing societal norms, mores and values. Her explicit rejection of the whole society and her conscious refusal to accept its set of values and norms as well as the culture it carries translate into the negative perceptions she holds of that society. At the very beginning and even before their arrival, she describes the oasis as “a place so far from civilization” (30). Near the end and as a confirmation of her dissociation from the Siwan people and of her contempt for what she regards as their intolerance and parochialism, she decides that she “hate[d] the sheikhs for their ignorance and narrow mindedness” (233).

According to Middleton, “apart from refusal of social and cultural values, cultural estrangement may also be perceived as refusal of activities that result from the shared values, and that are considered as standard patterns of behavior within a culture” (974). On that account, in addition to Catherine’s persistent denial and disregard of the beliefs that are commonly shared by the Siwans, her cultural estrangement crystallises into her refusal of the activities that emanate from the shared values of those people.

Owing to her dissimilar cultural background, she feels the discrepancies between her own values and the values and practices of the Siwan community. She expresses her disdain for the surrounding people and their patterns of behaviour and regards their social activities and practices as a source of bondage, limitation and dissatisfaction. This is observed when she likens the way the women “travel on the road only in groups going to funerals or weddings, moving slowly and silently in wide blue cloaks” to the herald of impending doom and the bearers of hard and heavy tidings or, as she herself states, to “a warning of ill tidings” (166). Another collective activity that she equally holds in contempt and that sinks in her estimation is also carried out by the women of the oasis. During her visit to the Amun temple, she is astounded to find them turning the hall of the temple into a kitchen. She herself describes how “she was astonished” when she “realized that the women had been using the holy of the Holies as a communal kitchen” and how she descended the hill “filled with sorrow, anger and disappointment” (105).

It is important to explain the causes why, as a culturally estranged person, Catherine has voluntarily separated herself from the dominant value system of the oasis. It might be suggested that her ignorance of the value system or her inability to understand its importance is behind such separation, but it is not the case. Despite her foreignness, she has full knowledge of not only the commonly shared values and beliefs, but also the means to achieve them since she has “studied and read every book and every word written by every scholar or visitor who passed by this oasis” (175). However, she explicitly rejects them for two main reasons. The first reason is that the Siwan beliefs and values are definitely against her nature and as a corollary she does not respect them. The second reason is that her personal values and beliefs take precedence over any other consideration.

“Culturally isolated individuals”, Robert Merton affirms, “do not absorb the norms, values and sanctions of the dominant segment of the society and, consequently, they do not gain the acceptance among the general people” (135). It is not surprising then that Catherine, who early in the novel describes herself as “Irish and a loyal Catholic” (30), to emphasise her different background and different religion, does not gain any acceptance among the Siwans. The possible explanation is that she finds the values and beliefs held by the Siwans not only different to her nature, but also in direct contradiction to her own notions, values and religious beliefs and vice versa. Catherine’s indifferent attitude and, more effectively, her persistent reluctance to show any respect for their presumed values and religious beliefs are primarily responsible for her cultural estrangement.

It is indisputable that the Siwan community is mistrustful and suspicious of foreign outsiders and that her foreignness has created feelings of suspicion and unease among them. Meanwhile, it is important to emphasise that Catherine in particular is culturally isolated not out of her foreignness but out of her disregard of their collective and community values. This means that she is marginalised, excluded and alienated because she is disrespectful of their value system. This is made evident by their bitter complaint that she “violated the decency of the neighbourhood and treated the houses of the families with disrespect when she climbed the Aghurmi ruins (73).

As quite conservative, the Siwan society expects nothing but conformity. In other words, it expects everyone including non-members – like Catherine – to respect its regulations, particularly those related to religion. Because she does not show that respect, she becomes culturally estranged. Immediately following her arrival, she is conscious of the way they are ignoring and avoiding her whenever they come close to her. She notices their

“superstitious looks of hostility”, and how “they would hasten their steps so as to get past her, and move away muttering angrily”. The ample reason for their exclusionary attitude is explained by Sergeant Ibraheem who tells her that “they were astonished and perplexed because it was the first time they had seen an unveiled woman, dressed like a man, in the oasis” (61-62).

Due to demonstrating her complete disregard for the Siwans' religious beliefs, Catherine has been cast as a threat to the moral and religious fabric and, consequently, she finds herself marginalised, alienated and branded as “infidel” and “unbeliever” (47). The word “unbeliever” is specifically used by everyone in the oasis, the *zaggala*, the sheikhs and even the small children to stigmatise her. Mabrouk, one of the *zaggala*, calls her “the foreign unbeliever [who] desecrated our homes” (73, 74). Sheikh Idrees, likewise, describes her as “a stranger and unbeliever humiliating us and desecrating our houses” (76). Even the boy in charge of the donkey, though only five-year old, “angrily called” her “unbeliever!, turned around quickly and ran away from the temple” (110) when she tried to exchange a word with him. Neither the word is haphazardly chosen nor is its negative connotation unclear. Particularly in conservative societies, unbelievers are usually perceived as a threat and a direct attack against mainstream society. This may explain the reason why Catherine has been automatically excluded and alienated by the residents. She is ostracised as a religious misfit or a person hardly accepted by others for she is found different from them and her values contradict with theirs.

Catherine's flat denial of the commonly shared values and beliefs is also caused by the fact that she perceives her own personal goals and beliefs as more important, and, consequently, she gives them priority and precedence over those held by the Siwans. In Seeman's words, culturally estranged individuals are

those who “assign low reward value to goals and beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society” “On the Meaning” 788-89). In Catherine’s estimation, the goals and beliefs that are highly valued in the Siwan community are viewed as alien, oppressive, and inconsistent and, therefore, they are substituted by her own goals and values.

When she suddenly finds herself residing in an alien oasis, living amidst unfamiliar culture, she realises that she is different and considers that her own convictions are more worthy than the ones that the community follows. In order to emphasise her difference, she acts according to her own judgment without considering whether her choices and decisions would be consistent with those of the residents or not or whether they would be accepted by society or not. Such an extremely thoughtless attitude, which has perpetuated her alienation, manifests itself in two grave incidents, Sergeant Ibraheem’s dangerous injury and Maleeka’s tragic death.

According to the beliefs that are highly valued and commonly accepted by all the members of the Siwan society, the Amun temple is assumed to be a sinister and inauspicious place. Even Mahmoud, though not a member of the Siwan society, holds the firm conviction that it is an “ill-omened temple” (151). Consequently, Catherine’s visits to that temple as well as her roaming among the other antiquities, particularly those situated amidst their houses are, as aforementioned, perceived as a manifest error and a challenge to their “traditions and customs” (104). The *agwad* feel deeply offended when they witness her searching in the Great Temple in Aghurmi and Sheikh Yahya, the only one who shows understanding, “urges her to go away” (163). It is within reason that after the falling of the stone, everyone in the oasis, including her own husband holds her morally responsible for not only the falling of the stone, but also for the old

man's grave injury. Sheikh Yahya gives her a message and advises her warmly to "think twice" before taking any further step because, as he explicitly explains, "they see the falling of the stone as a punishment and a warning" (163). Mahmoud persistently believes that "everything that happened did so because of her visit to the temple" (151). Moreover, he does not hesitate to tell her in reproof that he finds her "already implicated in the killing of poor Ibraheem" (150).

As a typically culturally estranged individual, Catherine assigns no value to all these beliefs, regards them as superstitious and considers that her own desires and goals, including her search for "Alexander's tomb" (267), are more worthy and have to be given the highest priority. She even decides to resume her search for the antiquities and temples situated inside Shali and Aghurmi though this is exactly what has brought her into conflict with the residents and caused her cultural alienation. Mahmoud, as he himself admits, is "astonished" because she, without "any regret or pangs of conscience", has resumed "reading her books, reviewing her drawings as though nothing at all has happened" (151).

Catherine's estrangement seems to have reached its peak with the emotionally charged incident of Maleeka's death. This incident and its surrounding circumstances escalate and complicate Catherine's alienation. The accident has rendered her not only culturally estranged from the whole oasis, but also emotionally and physically alienated and rejected by her husband. In such a conservative society that follows blindly the dictates of customs and traditions, Maleeka, Sheikh Yahya's beautiful niece, is believed to be an angel of death. Following her husband's death, she has involuntarily turned into a ghoulish woman or a ghoul for short. According to the Siwan customs and practices, the ghoul or the widow has to remain a prisoner at home for four months and ten days "so that she could be cleansed from the evil spirit that had

taken residence in her body and brought death to her husband” (176). During this so called “cleansing” period, the widow is believed to be inhabited by an evil spirit or what Sheikh Sallam describes as “the reaper of souls and spreader of ruins” (187) and, consequently, a practice of solitary confinement should be imposed upon her. “She was not allowed to change her morning dress. She could [neither] bathe [nor] put on make-up. More important than all this, however, was that she could not leave her house for whoever saw ghoulish-woman during that period was destined to perish”(176-77).

When the young rebellious girl finds herself a victim of such oppressive customary practice that she could neither understand nor endure, she decides to escape her incarceration and to seek refuge at the commissioner’s house, or what Sheikh Yahya describes as “affection and a beautiful friendship far from them” (202). However, the day she “came out”, the defilement of the ghoulish woman “spread ruin” everywhere:

The wailing filled the oasis. Women aborted and children were stricken with fever! Palm trees fell over dead. Fires started in houses. Every minute, a word of new disaster would come from house or garden and weeping and screaming arose. They expect a catastrophe at any second. (179)

Because it is the first time for the Siwans to witness such a catastrophe, they decide by consensus that killing Maleeka “quickly” is the only solution that would rid them of the evil she is spreading. However, following that act of murdering their “daughter”, tension “arose in the oasis” (187) concerning the responsibility for the killing.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, everyone in the oasis strongly holds the conviction that both Catherine and Mahmoud

are to blame for the whole calamity. Though the people of the oasis themselves “see ill-omen in widows” (227), they persistently believe that the two outsiders are to blame for they have brought bad omen to their community. Sheikh Abdallah regards the commissioner and his wife as “harbingers of ill-omen” (185), and in full agreement Sheikh Idrees describes them “the bringers of disasters” (186). Even though Sheikh Yahya is fully convinced of the fact that their worn-out “customs and superstition about widows” (199) have caused his niece’s death, he could not spare the two strangers the moral responsibility for her death. He openly tells Mahmoud that Maleeka “went” to their house “looking for love and affection”, but they “met her with hatred and then killed her” (258) when they threw her into the public highway half naked, causing a scandal. It is not surprising then that the *agwad* maintain that the two strangers “were the reason for all the disasters that had befallen them” (196). The only explanation that could be provided here is the fact that no death or murder has occurred as a result of this practice until those two outsiders came. It is important to emphasise that because Catherine, in particular, is seen as a disruptor of their community and its values and beliefs, she gets the lion’s share of the blame. Mahmoud warningly informs her that “the people considered her responsible for all that had happened since the ghou-woman had left her house” (191). They even “accused her of having cast a spell to release the ghou-woman from her prison” (196).

In affirmation of her cultural estrangement, Catherine regards those commonly held views as foreign and alien. More importantly, she replaces them by her own personal convictions and ideas. Since she is not the person who cares about what others think of her, she shows no consideration for their judgments and accusations. She holds the unexpected unilateral opinion that Maleeka herself is to blame since “she’s the one who came from

her house when it was forbidden for her to leave” (227). This means that in Catherine’s perception, Maleeka, or rather her rebelliousness, is responsible for what happened on the ground that she “broke many of their taboos” (172), when she acted in defiance of the customs and traditions she is quite familiar with. Acting according to her judgment without considering whether her view would be accepted by others or not, Catherine decides to wash her hands of the whole crisis when she declares “I am not responsible for what happened. What happened was not important, and I am not guilty of Maleeka’s death. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve decided to turn this page once and for all” (228).

Meanwhile, such thoughtless attitude has adverse consequences on the two spouses’ relationship and their subsequent alienation. The fact that she does not feel anger or sadness about the tragedy of Maleeka’s death and that she even sees no problem with being unable to feel anything has widened the chasm between them. Mahmoud could not forgive her for her indifference and thoughtlessness which are inevitable symptoms of her cultural estrangement. He feels hurt when he finds that “after her mourning for Maleeka, or [rather] her apparent mourning for her, she returned to being exactly the way she was as though nothing whatsoever had happened” (220). Catherine’s numbness and lack of emotion heighten his discomfort and despair and more detrimentally alienate him from her. Their experience of alienation is undoubtedly exacerbated after her callous response to Maleeka’s death, with Mahmoud deciding he could not keep any longer connected to his wife. Mahmoud’s rejection and keeping his distance both physically and emotionally from her are made obvious as he argues “I think that, inside, I’ve finished with her, after what happened to Maleeka, who lies every night between me and her, keeping me from her and her from me” (221).

Catherine, on her part, is aware of the enormity of the problem. She is quite sure that “Maleeka’s death” not only has caused “the collapse of [her] relationship with Mahmoud” (271), but also rendered her in a constant state of estrangement from him. Recognising that their alienation from each other is final and complete, she reproachfully states “we haven’t been spouses since Maleeka’s blood came between us. He no longer touches me and I too no longer want him to touch me” (242). Near the end of the novel, she objectively describes herself as “an abandoned spouse” (242). Then she laments the emotional disconnection in her marriage and the impossibility of connecting with her husband and rebuilding their estranged relationship, “he’s a complete stranger to me now, as though we had never been man and wife” (266).

To conclude, the paper ends up articulating that, with the exception of normlessness, the other five aspects of Seeman’s topology are perfectly reflected in the novel. The most severe forms of alienation are experienced by Mahmoud, the central character, who feels disconnected from socio-political events, decision making, the task he is forced to fulfill, the surrounding society, his wife and, most painful of all, his self. Catherine, who desperately craves for the company of her husband, his love and affection, suffers severe loneliness, rejection and alienation. Her existence in the oasis amidst people mistrustful of strangers and the unfamiliarity of the prevalent social values render her a social outcast. Finally, her disrespect of the social and cultural beliefs and activities and the way she gives precedence to her own values and beliefs exacerbate and complicate her alienation. Her alienation from her husband and the surrounding community is final and complete.

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