

# Modern Alienation as an Infinite Journey in the Postmodern World: A Postmodern Critique of *Breakfast of Champions* and *the Stranger*

Syeda Nowshin Anjum Hoque<sup>1,2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup>Department of English University of Scholars, Dhaka, Bangladesh

\*Corresponding Author

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses *The Stranger* and *Breakfast of Champions*, which are based on alienation, to show that modern alienation has not vanished yet but has evolved through new ways in the postmodern world. The paper also aims to apply five theoretical approaches that will connect it to postmodern society: Marx's theory of alienation, Kierkegaard's theory of alienation, Freud's theory of the ego, Sartre's concept of the free man, and Dostoyevsky's revolutionary concept. It explores the reasons and results of human alienation through the lives of Meursault, Dwayne, and Kurt, who are left alone to finish off as worthless, estranged and meaningless human beings in the postmodern world. Characters including Meursault (from *The Stranger*), Dwayne Hoover, and Kilgore Trout (from *Breakfast of Champions*) are the main characters presented here as the critical victims of alienation of separate times. More actual incidents from both texts will portray how human alienation starts in the texts, changes them into alienated souls and puts them into tragic consequences.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Postmodern, Breakfast of Champions, The Stranger, Modern Men.

## INTRODUCTION

Though *The Stranger* and *Breakfast of Champions*, both of these texts have been written in different periods by different writers, they have been placed in this paper side by side to show that human alienation still affects modern people's lives in a postmodern society in different ways. In his novella called *The Stranger* (1942), Albert Camus introduces a young Algerian government employee named Meursault who becomes alienated in the social system that calls society's strict norms legal laws. He loses a sense of belonging in the world and with the people around him. In *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), Kurt Vonnegut presents socially alienated characters like Kilgore Trout (an underrated but upcoming rising science-fiction writer) and Dwayne Hoover (whose wife commits suicide and son declares himself as a homosexual being) mirroring American society's struggle with mental illness. These modern men from both texts represent people who end up being the victim of loneliness because the system created to enhance human lives starts controlling human beings and eventually drags them toward human alienation.

## Research Questions

This paper attempts to answer the following questions: How and why do Meursault, Hoover and Trout share alienation as a common social problem of postmodern society? What are the reasons behind their estrangement? Are they willingly being alienated or is it society that has alienated them? If Alienation is a modern characteristic, how come it is prominent in these two postmodern texts? How do we analyze aspects of human alienation in *The Stranger* and *Breakfast of Champions* through postmodern lenses?

## Research Objectives

Before: "The objectives of this study are: To analyze how alienation emerges in two separate ways in two

different texts (*The Stranger* and *Breakfast of Champions*). To examine statements coming from the alienated characters and their circumstances from both texts. To determine the external forces that have forced the characters to become alienated. To assess the effect of society upon the characters and their alienation and critically comment on modern man's alienation from a postmodern outlook."

After: "The objectives of this study are: To analyze how alienation emerges in *The Stranger* and *Breakfast of Champions*. To examine the characters' alienation and their circumstances. To determine the external forces contributing to their alienation. To assess the societal impact on the characters and their alienation and critically comment on modern man's alienation from a postmodern perspective."

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is based on qualitative research since it allows for a more in-depth analysis of attitudes and behaviour. The primary resources of data are Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* where the journey of alienation will be shown through the characters' family histories, signs of getting alienated, their initial changes and their tragic consequences. The secondary resources include scholarly journals and books. This paper will also give five theoretical viewpoints on human alienation concerning the texts which are Marx's theory of alienation, Kierkegaard's theory of alienation, Freud's theory of the ego, Sartre's free will concept and Dostoyevsky's revolutionary concept. Human alienation has been spreading its effects from the modern to the postmodern era, making a great amount of research. This paper will investigate some of those ideas and perspectives of alienation in individual texts. Shabnam Ashai from India conducted her study on "*Camus' Concept of Alienation*", where in chapter 3, she evaluates Camus' hero, Meursault. And in chapter 4, she shows that the hero is alienated because: "Modern man finds himself in a world which seems essentially meaningless to him. Therefore, he is alienated from his moorings and ideals" (Ashai 95). A PhD student at Istanbul University,

Majd Hamsho's researched "Social Aspects of Alienation in Albert Camus' Novel *The Stranger* Between Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses" which helps to 'know the main social aspect of alienation in Albert Camus's novel, *The Stranger* and identify Meursault character's aspects of alienation' (Hamsho 280). M Adam

Abdullah and Suryo Tri Saksono also researched "Alienation in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*." Thomas Lane mentioned Hoover's alienation in her research paper *ONLY TO THE EXTENT: INSANITY IN THE WORKS OF KURT VONNEGUT and REDESIGNING DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION* in 2013. Here, she discusses Hoover's estrangement:

"Dwayne is a very lonely man, with no real source of love in his life other than the bond he has with his dog—and why wouldn't he be? As the only real human being on Earth, he has never had the opportunity to have a different experience" (Lane 5).

### Theoretical Framework

Characters and situations of *The Stranger* and *Breakfast of Champions* are analyzed here, using Postmodern perspectives to shed light on them. They will be analyzed theoretically with Marx's theory of alienation, Kierkegaard's theory of alienation, Freud's theory of the ego, Sartre's free man will, and Dostoyevsky's revolutionary concept.

Marx's idea of alienation provides us with two perspectives: Firstly, estrangement is the outcome of the dominion of the artificial over the man. Secondly, capitalists and social organizations generate individuals' alienation from their employment and their surroundings. The systems devised by humankind are the ones governing men's fate. The alienation of labour is the most well-known and objective form of alienation, which, following Marx, Max Weber expands to the notion of 'The Modern Rational Society.' Marx argues that contemporary technology is replacing human power and existence, alienating him. According to Marx's theory, capitalists cause alienation among workers in four ways:

- Employees get little control over their time or jobs; thus, they are alienated from their abilities.

- Workers feel estranged from the results of their efforts.
- Workers are alienated due to excessive competition with each other.
- Workers under capitalism are alienated from themselves because, according to Marx, fulfilling labour is a necessary component of being human yet, under capitalism, work is a pain. It has become a chore to endure if one wants to put food on the table.

Kierkegaard's theory of alienation is the logical continuum of Marx's alienation of labour. Kierkegaard's man is a victim of fast-developing technology, but in contrast with Marx, he is doomed to be in that position. Kierkegaard's world is dark, fearful, faithless and faceless. For him, humans are alienating their souls from their creator for the sake of a materialistic world. So, humans need to reclaim their lost souls from the greed of a materialistic world and bring it back to their creator. Camus' outsider or stranger is forced to live like a Christian but Kierkegaard's Christian wants to be a Christian living in a world that has abandoned Christianity. Kierkegaard put it this way in his *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom" 1854-1855*:

A Christian in the sense of the New Testament, although he stands suffering in the midst of life's reality, has yet become completely a stranger to this life; . . . A Christian in the New Testament sense is literally a stranger and a pilgrim, he feels himself a stranger, and every- one involuntarily feels that this man is a stranger to him. (Kierkegaard 229)

Freud attributes the development of alienation to the circumstances and proposes the concepts of the ego and the super-ego. According to him, a normal human being is one whose varied mental faculties, body, and the external world all work together in harmony. To gratify human needs, the ego must find a way to negotiate between the Id, Super-ego, and the external environment. Psychiatric problems and subsequent hardships result from a world unfit for human habitation because it fails to provide how to fulfil basic needs. Thus, according to Freud, the forming of imperfect beings like alienated beings, emerges from the repression or frustration of basic impulses. Freud argued that sexual desire was the most fundamental instinct. On the other hand, he broadened the definition of sexuality to include any pleasurable experience from the body, including emotions such as love, sympathy, and a preference for another.

Sartre argues that man is inherently free. His independence is now a terrible burden since he cannot escape it. The consequences of one's own free will decisions extend beyond the individual. The loneliness that comes with his newfound independence is something he must accept on his own. The truth that God does not exist is a terrifying reality with far-reaching consequences for both the planet and humanity. Free will begins with the realization that there is no God and that man is alone. In his lecture "Existentialism Is Humanism" he argues that man must discover himself since not even God can save him from himself.

For Dostoyevsky, man's desire for freedom is justified, as freedom is the defining characteristic of his personality. He is constrained by religion and rules of the society. A hundred institutions and a thousand conditions serve to classify, define, and fix him. Still, man does not want to be defined and constrained; he desires freedom and must reject the obstacles. For this reason, Dostoevsky says that a free man should be revolutionary.

### Textual analysis

Both texts share a common lack of family bonds, which can be seen as the manifestation of alienation from the most primary level of the characters. Meursault keeps his distance from his only family member in this world, his mother, and accepts this fact by saying: "...I didn't go there much this past year" (*The Stranger* 5). He is so detached from his only family member that now he learns about his importance to his late mother from a caretaker: "You were her sole support" (4). Kurt being the novelist, openly declares at the beginning of the novel that two of his central characters are lonely modern men in the world: "This is a tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast" (*Breakfast of Champions* 7). It is because both are alienated from their family lives and society.

The American Dream achiever, Dwayne Hoover succeeds in being one of the wealthiest businessmen around but fails to keep his loved ones close, eventually dragging him to a dark, lonely world. This loneliness diminishes his modern achievements and highlights his alienation from society: "Dwayne was a widower. He lived alone at night in a dream house in Fairchild Heights, which was the most desirable residential area in the city. Every house there cost at least one hundred thousand dollars to build. Every house was on at least four acres of land" (17). He tries hard to replace his alienation with several marriages but ends up being lonely again: ". . . each of his wives had been extraordinarily patient and loving and beautiful. Each had been shriveled by his pessimism" (110).

Despite having everything else a modern man could desire; he is alone at the end of the day and has none to share his inner thoughts and feelings with. Humans are detached from him, so he finds shelter in the company of an animal: "Dwayne's only companion at night was a Labrador retriever named Sparky" (17). The same is the case with the other central character of the novel, Kilgore Trout, who is an alienated soul and seeks company from pet animals: "Kilgore Trout owned a parakeet named Bill. Like Dwayne Hoover, Trout was all alone at night, except for his pet. Trout, too, talked to his pet" (18). This is probably not Hoover's or Trout's fault because as Kurt says in America, ". . . a lot of citizens were so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought they might be in the wrong country, or even on the wrong planet, that some terrible mistake had been made" (9). So, these men represent all the modern, alienated men of society.

These characters have been gradually showing signs of alienation from the beginning of the texts, and these signs can help to detect how they turned into alienated human beings. Meursault hates humans around him because he cannot feel comfortable around anybody. Social alienation has turned him into a person who gets nervous in crowded situations and interactive places. For example, people are naturally supposed to gather at his mother's funeral, but he feels uncomfortable around people and says: "...but he stayed where he was, behind me. Having this presence breathing down my neck was starting to annoy me" (*The Stranger* 7). Society judges him as a criminal who, unlike Kierkegaard's Christian hero, does not follow Christianity. This fear of getting judged keeps Meursault away from people and alienates him: "...I had the ridiculous feeling that they were there to judge me" (10). Generally, Sundays are supposed to be a public day and generally, Sundays are supposed to be working days where people are supposed to gather for work and are meant to meet with each other, but Meursault does not like to meet people or to be around people, so he does not like Sundays or any working days because these days are meant to face people: "I don't like Sundays" (21). One of the main traits of an alienated person is that he is never allowed to speak for themselves or he is never allowed to share his inner feelings and thoughts. Alienated people like Meursault think that they do not have any right to speak or that their speaking may disturb others, so they prefer keeping quiet and staying away from people and they prefer not to talk to people: "It's just that I don't have much to say. So I keep quiet" (66). Here at one point, Meursault accepts that he has never talked so much in his life and explains his miserable condition like this: "But I was tired of repeating the same story over and over. It seemed as if I had never talked so much my life" (67).

Modern people like Dwayne Hoover seem to be becoming victims of the American dream, where people are running after to be successful. As a consequence, they face alienation because ". . . the love and appetite of postmodern American materialism serve only to aggravate man's alienation" (Malik 95). Due to Hoover's loneliness, he starts to get the wrong ideas, eventually leading him to his tragic consequences at the novel's end.

He gets drug addicted to forgetting his unhappy, lonely life: "Dwayne Hoover's body was manufacturing certain chemicals which unbalanced his mind" (*Breakfast of Champions* 14). This is a prophecy towards the unwanted consequences of the characters' loneliness. Here Trout being an alienated modern man senses that they must face some devastating results of alienation ahead and it will be so severe that their existence will be at risk: "It was Trout's theory that the atmosphere would become unbreathable soon" (18). Dwayne starts to realize his loneliness and asks himself about his identity. Even though he has achieved the American dream and all the success possible for becoming a rich person, his surroundings are getting out of his reach and he feels helpless to be grasped in the modern alienation: "But now Midland city looked unfamiliar and frightening to Dwayne. 'Where am I?' he said" (65). Dwayne is getting so absorbed into this lonely life that he has even

forgotten that he has a son: “Dwayne even forgot that his only child, a son, had grown up to be a notorious homosexual” (65).

Not only the central characters but also the surrounding pupils of them are also presented as victims of human alienation. According to Marx's alienation theory, capitalists like Hoover are responsible for alienating working-class people from their jobs and, eventually, identities. People are getting replaced and ruled by machines which men created. Man is alienating other men through artificial machines here: “. . . he predicted at the time that Robo-Magic appliances of various sorts would eventually do what he called ‘all the nigger work of the world’ which was lifting and cleaning and cooking and washing and ironing and tending children and dealing with filth” (245).

Mental illness along with criminal activities are manifestations of alienation. This also causes people to break the norms that are supposed to be upheld in society. Day by day, it drags a man towards hollowness; everything changes for the alienated man. He starts to devalue pupils, society and laws. He believes in a materialistic world of free will where free will is over everything. Meursault does not give any value to spending time with his mother and thinks materialistically about the expenses of traveling to her mother. He thinks meeting his mother would be a waste of time, money and energy, and that is why he says: “And also because it took up my Sundays-not to mention the trouble of getting to the bus, buying tickets, and spending two hours traveling”

(*The Stranger* 5). Meursault's alienation has caused him emotional detachment and his statements are proof of that: “I even had the impression that this dead woman lying in front of them didn't mean anything to them. But I think now that was a false impression” (11). Here, lonely Meursault's neighbour sets an example of another alienated being who gradually ends up looking like his dog: “After living together for so long, the two of them alone in one tiny room, they've ended up looking like each other” (26). Like a helpless alienated soul, he suffers through a blank slate of emotion and accepts his lackings: “The investigators had learned that I had ‘shown insensitivity’ the day of Maman's funeral” (64).

Freud says that if the aid is not fulfilled, pupils start behaving abnormally and eventually get alienated. He specially mentions sex, lust and love. People like Meursault and Hoover are deprived of meaningful love. At one point, Meursault admits: “. . . my physical needs often got in the way of my feelings” (65). His craving for physical intimacy is expressed through these statements: “... I wanted to squeeze her shoulders through her dress. I wanted to feel the thin material and I didn't really know what else I had to hope for other than that” (75). Trout mentions the lust fascination of modern people to show that these can turn into monstrous consequences soon.: “. . . when Dwayne and Trout and I were boys. Girls concealed their underpants at all costs, and boys tried to see their underpants at all costs” (*Breakfast of Champions* 24). He specifically reveals the two evil things that eventually match Freud's theory and the things that he mentioned which are lust and sex: “The monsters I will name never snoozed. They inhabited our heads. They were the arbitrary lusts for gold, and, God help us, for a glimpse of little girls underpants” (25).

Alienated people are merely bothered about severe matters and others' emotions: “On my way out I was even going to shake his hand, but just in time, I remembered that I had killed a man” (*The Stranger* 64). Trout mirrors his lonely characters devalued perspective towards their society who think that there are no more people around them except machines: “Everybody else was a fully automatic machine, whose purpose was to stimulate Dwayne” (*Breakfast of Champions* Vonnegut 14-15). Hoover's loneliness has turned him into a drug addict and now he is moving towards his destruction along with eleven innocent lives.: “And the bad chemicals . . . wanted him to do queer things also and make a lot of noise” (39). Furthermore, here comes the final warning of Dwayne Hoover's ultimate fate: “Dwayne's bad chemicals made him take a loaded thirty eight calibre revolver from under his pillow and stick it in his mouth” (49).

By definition, human alienation says that estranged people turn into helpless, worthless and lonely souls. In the case of the characters of these texts, these tragic consequences are evident. Society sees alienated people as it reads to the environment because they do not represent normalness. At the end of the novella, Meursault realizes that an abnormal alienated person like him is dangerous to his society: “Especially when the emptiness

of a man's heart becomes, as we find it has in this man, an abyss threatening to swallow up society" (*The Stranger* 101). It is dangerous and feels rejected. Another character of the outsider named Raymond, helpless to his alienation, seeks to regain power by abusing women: "...he 'still had sexual feelings for her'. But he wanted to punish her" (31).

Meursault's helpless efforts are the consequences of human alienation: "I felt the urge to reassure him that I was like everybody else. But really there wasn't much point, and I gave up the idea out of laziness" (66). Social laws have no sympathy for abnormal people like mere salt. He realizes that he will not get any justice because the justice system does not feel sympathy toward alienated people: "He said the truth was that I didn't have a soul and that nothing human, not one of the moral principles that govern men's hearts, was within my reach" (101). Society has made Meursault so lonely that he invokes them to join his execution to at least hate him that day. He has become so desperate because of his helpless lonely condition: "For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate" (123). In the aftermath of the novella, Albert Camus himself declares that his hero is lonely because he is too simple to get used to the social complexities. He finishes his statement by showing sympathy to a modern man lying to Meursault, who ended up lonely because he failed to hide his genuine feelings.

Society treats his feelings as an abnormality and succeeds in removing him by blaming him as a threat to society. Kurt also shows that modern Americans have become suicidal because life has become worthless for them.

American Dream has taken away their social lives and put them into an estranged and helpless state: "Seems like the only kind of job an American can get these days is committing suicide in some way" (*Breakfast of Champions* 86). Due to his alienation, Hoover believes these lines that he must be alone for a reason which is, that human beings do not exist anymore: "Everybody on earth was a robot, with one exception- Dwayne Hoover" (14). Hoover is alone and modern people are so busy with themselves that they do not have any time to hear out his sorrows:

"But nobody would listen to him. He was a dirty old man in the wilderness, crying out among the trees and under brush,..." (15). As Marx says, machines are alienating men from their existence and identity by replacing their force. In *Breakfast of Champions*, working-class people are also facing 'The Hundred Nigger Machine' which is causing them working alienation: "This had reference to a time when black men had done most of the heavy digging in Midland city." (146). Society prefers to put a label on people and put them outside to make them suffer from loneliness because "working-class human being is worth less than he or she was in the feudal period ... Machines, far from overcoming and eliminating alienation, tend to exacerbate it" (Wendling 175). Hoover's son is as helpless as Hoover, who has been labeled out of the so-called normal society. People like Bunny are treated as a threat to the harmony of society and that is why they are thrown away to live alone: The nickname for Bunny's neighborhood was *Skid Row* . . . It was a place where people who didn't have any friends or relatives or property or usefulness or ambition were supposed to go. People like that would be treated with disgust in other neighborhoods, a policeman would keep them moving. They were as easy to move, usually, as toy balloons (*Breakfast of Champions* 183).

The writer of *Breakfast of Champions* himself feels useless and suffers from an identity crisis caused by human alienation. He feels that people have become machines and soon they are going to destroy themselves: "As for myself: I had come to the conclusion that there was nothing sacred about myself or about any human being, that we were all machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide" (219). Wendling also says that "Machines ... become the instruments of torture, death, and misery" (Wendling 175). Kurt mentions an ad that signifies alienating working-class people from their means of livelihood. A black maid's job is replaced by a washing machine which devalues human forces and puts her into an identity crisis:

Another ad, which was painted on a billboard by the railroad depot, showed two white deliverymen who were bringing a Robo-Magic into a house. A black maid was watching them. Her eyes were popping out in a comical way (*Breakfast of Champions* 245). She was saying that they will not be needed anymore. they ain't gonna be needing us. In his concept of human alienation, Sartre says that man is born with free will and is

bound to bear its burden, alienation. According to him, man can do whatever he wants; consequently, he must suffer alone. That is why Kurt writes in his novel that to maintain existence, one must practice free will; otherwise, he will be considered as some machine. Hoover reads these lines and thinks of it as a message to him: “You are the only creature in the entire universe who has free will. You are the only one who has to figure out what to do next and why. Everybody else is a robot, a machine” (253). Hoover being a desperate alienated man at this point, takes it too seriously. Nevertheless, he ends up killing 11 innocent people and is jailed.

This study intends to examine the versatility of modern alienation, the variety of human experience and the multitude of views in the postmodern period. For this, it demonstrates that the characters’ sense of uniqueness in both texts suffers in the postmodern society. They get alienated and become destroyed. According to the 2nd World War (1939-1945) time frame, *The Stranger* (1942) is a freshly post-war novella written when people suffered from a sense of loss and identity due to back-to-back world wars. Even though modernism creates order out of disorder but postmodernism accepts disorder and pluralism as it believes none has the right to impose morality upon others. For this reason, Camus presents Meursault’s disorder from a different perspective and wants his readers to accept Meursault’s flaws whether it is his disorder or not. Camus wants his hero to be revolutionary like

Dostoyevsky’s concept of man’s need to become a rebel. At the end of the novella, he says that Meursault may have ended up being alienated, judged and vanished in front of social morality. But from a postmodern perspective, this is a failure of society that fails to understand individual rights. This shows that modern alienation is still activated in this postmodern world. Postmodernism in literature relies on the fragmented and dehumanized quality of life in industrial capitalism. In the case of *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), Vonnegut has made it ‘a landmark piece of postmodern literature (Hoque 158) by using ironies, satirical tones, meta-fictional elements and critical comments to portray American reality.

Being a post-war novel, it is also postmodern as it signifies the replacement of human resources by the 1950s tech revolution. Human power enhanced by science turns into a digitally alienated society. So, he shows that due to the wretched system, postmodern Americans have lost everything they once possessed and have become separated from one another. He attacks the imposed system of capitalists, who have squeezed every bit of the populace in the guise of technology and development, and then abandons them to their suffering. Hoque notices this and quotes:

Kurt Vonnegut’s remarks on American life reflect his grievances against the culture of oppression and capitalistic ‘progress’ which in turns takes everything away from human beings, even their sanity itself. In Vonnegut’s terms, postmodern humanism is nothing more than a comforting lie (Hoque 158).

For this reason, Vonnegut represents society’s postmodern alienation through Hoover, Trout and many other characters in his novel: “Most of his characters are alienated from their families and this isolation is reinforced by the technocratic intellectual surrounding they live into” (Hoque 156). Even though alienation is a modern concept, this novel sees alienation among people from a postmodern point of view and gives multiple perspectives towards modern men’s postmodern consequences: “Moreover, Vonnegut’s movement toward action through the writing of fiction appears to transcend the modernist paradigm, recognizing the pluralist nature of reality and the postmodern deconstruction of metanarratives” (Davis 13).

## CONCLUSION

*The Stranger* and *Breakfast of Champions* show distinct ways of getting affected by alienation in the postmodern world. This paper is a meditation on the fact that alienation is still prevalent in postmodern society, that it stalks the characters of these texts, gradually transforms them, and ultimately produces terrible effects. Specially Meursault, Hoover and Trout are inevitably victims of estrangement imposed by the postmodern characteristics of the world. Thus, a postmodern approach can assist in uncovering additional information about the past of a socially alienated victim and determining the cause of an alienated man’s estrangement.

## Declaration of competing interest

The author declares she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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