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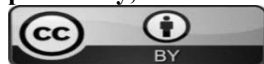
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A Study of Alienation in Meg Wolitzer's The Wife

A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the concept of alienation in Meg Wolitzer's novel *The Wife* (2003), focusing on the main relationship within the narrative. The research centers on the protagonist, Joan Castleman, and her detachment from herself, society, and labor, as analysed through Karl Marx's theory of alienation. By exploring Joan's marriage and her creative writing, the paper delves into her isolation from her aspirations as a literary writer. The research highlights how alienation influences Joan's life and her struggle to assert her identity and achieve her goals. The novel critiques the patriarchal society and capitalist system, emphasising how Joan's creativity contributes to her isolation and how her husband exploits her talents to further his success. Utilising Marx's perspectives on alienation, the research reveals Joan's internal and external conflicts, illustrating the significant impact of her unrecognised support for her husband. It also discusses how an individual can become disconnected from their work, which is often imposed upon them for the benefit of others.

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دراسة عن الاغتراب في رواية "الزوجة" لمغ ووليتزر

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جامعة واسط / كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة مفهوم الاغتراب في رواية "الزوجة" (٢٠٠٣) للكاتبة ميغ ووليتزر، مع التركيز على العلاقة الرئيسية داخل الرواية. يتمحور البحث حول البطلة، جوان كاسلمان، وانفصالها عن ذاتها، والمجتمع، والعمل، وذلك من خلال تحليلها وفقاً لنظرية الاغتراب لكارل ماركس. من خلال استكشاف زواج جوان وقدرتها الإبداعية في الكتابة، تتعمق الدراسة في عزلت جوان عن طموحاتها ككاتبة أدبية ويسلط الضوء على تأثير الاغتراب في حياة جوان ومعاناتها لإثبات هويتها وتحقيق أهدافها. كما تنتقد الرواية المجتمع الأبوي والنظام الرأسمالي، مع التركيز على كيف أن إبداع جوان يسهم في عزلتها، وكيف يستغل زوجها موهبتها لتعزيز نجاحه الشخصي. ومن خلال منظور ماركس حول الاغتراب، يكشف البحث عن الصراعات الداخلية والخارجية التي تواجهها جوان، موضحاً التأثير العميق لدورها غير المعترف به في دعم زوجها. كما يناقش كيف يمكن للفرد أن يفصل عن عمله، خاصة عندما يُفرض عليه لصالح الآخرين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ميغ ووليتزر، الزوجة، الاغتراب، الزواج، النساء، النظام الأبوي، ماركس.

Introduction

American novelist Meg Wolitzer was born on the 28th of May in 1959. Her novel *The Wife* was published in 2003. She is somehow interested in feminism; in one of her interviews, she said, "I feel I'm a feminist, so I write like a feminist" (O'Kelly, 2018, p.2). The novel was adapted into a film released in 2017. In her New York Times review, Clare Dederer (2019) calls *The Wife* "a light-stepping, streamlined novel" that despite rage being its signature emotion, "is also very funny". She concludes, "if *The Wife* is a puzzle and an entertainment, it's also a near heartbreaking document of feminist realpolitik." (interview). This research explores the concept of alienation, which has evolved in modern and postmodern society as individuals seek identity and understanding.

Meg Wolitzer writes in the first pages of her book some opinions about her novel, one of them related to Adam Gopnik, an American writer and essayist, by saying;

Meg Wolitzer's sixth novel is her best—an astonishingly dry, funny, and gripping account of two writers trapped for life in an evermore bizarre marriage. Every detail she evokes about an era in American literary life, from college campuses to writers' parties, is persuasive, hilarious, and even frightening, while the indignation she registers about her heroine's predicaments is lightened and even liberated by her perfect comic timing. *The Wife* is a milestone in the career of one of her generation's truest novelists (Wolitzer, 2003, p. 4).

The Wife tells the story of a long stormy marriage between a famous novelist, Joe Castleman, and his wife Joan. Joan was a student of Joe Castleman in the writing course that

he led at the university. The title reflects the story's core message, focusing on the role of a wife in a married relationship, the dynamics of power inside a marriage, and the sacrifices women make to support their spouses' success. The Wife title symbolises the broader remark on gender roles, equality, individual choices, and the influence of patriarchal standards on spouses. It narrates a tale of a husband and wife who receive news that the husband has been awarded a famous prize—in the movie version, it is the Nobel prize for literature—and all that comes when the couple travels to Sweden, where he receives the award.

The English term 'Alienation' originates from the Latin 'Alienato', which means 'to render something for others'. In French, 'Alienate' and 'Alienation' are utilised, but 'Anomie' and 'Anomia' serve as synonyms for 'Alienation', denoting 'self-alienation' and 'alienation from society', respectively. A dictionary of literary terms defined as: "Alienation is the state of being alienated or estranged from something or somebody; it is a condition of the mind" (Saleem, 2014, pp. 69/70).

Marx extended the concept of alienation from philosophical, religious, and political contexts to the economic domain of material production. He demonstrated that comprehending and addressing alienation in various spheres necessitated grasping the financial sphere. In the Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, alienation is described as the existence where the product of labour meets labour as something foreign, a force independent of the producer (Marx, 1844 as cited in Musto, 2010, p. 88).

The opening line of *The Wife* is a powerful introduction, showcasing Wollitzer's narrative techniques and thematic concerns, capturing the reader's attention and laying the groundwork for a thought-provoking narrative. It starts with "The moment I decided to leave him" (Wollitzer, 2003, p.11). The narrator's voice provides a personal and direct language, creating a close bond with the reader. Using the first person establishes a sense of closeness and trust, calling the reader to the narrator's thoughts and emotions. The line serves as a narrative introduction, employing a technique to capture the reader's attention immediately. It implies that the narrative will entail a voyage of exploration for both the storyteller and the reader.

The concept of alienation has been essential in several realms, including theology, sociology, philosophy, literature, and psychology. It is generally associated with Karl Marx's critique of capitalism and is regarded as mystical due to its Hegelian roots, which Marx later separated himself from. According to Melvin Seeman's essay (1959) "On the Meaning of Alienation", "alienation" derives from Marx's perspective on the worker's powerlessness classified capitalist society, where primary holders appropriate their rights and management capabilities. This alienation resulted in effects including the estrangement of individuals from one another and the reduction of individuals to mere commodities (p. 4).

This can be seen in, Joan Castleman, who suffers intense separation from her identity as a woman writer, partly due to her husband's consuming success. Joan here is a powerless worker under her husband's control. Despite being a highly intellectual and talented lady, Joan has devoted her life to hiding her ambitions to support Joe's job. When Finn calls Joe and Joan to say that Joe is the man of the year in his career, he describes him as a great writer:

He is a wonderful writer,” continued Halonen calmly, “who deserves these accolades. We are honored to have had the opportunity to choose this gentleman, for we find his work to have been heartbreakingly beautiful and important over the years. His career has a great span to it; he has grown in stature, and it has been a pleasure to observe. Each book is increasingly mature. I must say, my personal favorite is *Pantomime*, for in many ways the characters of Louis and Margaret Strickler remind me of myself and my wife, Pippa. So fallible! So human! You should know,” he went on, “that later today, Mrs. Castleman, you shall be fending off the press (Wolitzer, 2003, p.33).

In the beginning, Joan leaves her department and friends to be with Joe, and she becomes without family, money, and study. She has alienated herself from everything she likes to help Joe, who has nothing to do, and even he has been dismissed from the English department “So now he was ruined academically and financially” (p. 89). Money has become the alienated wealth of man, a product of mutually estranged individuals who exchange freedom for individual needs, according to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Jones, 2002 p. 114). Even in the beginning, Joan thinks that one day in their marriage, Joe works on writing short stories. She goes outside to make money to increase the income of both of them, which is a matter of exchange labour: “Joe was the one who would work on short stories, while I’d go out and make some money, supplementing the small income” (Wolitzer, 2003, p. 92).

Marx states that workers are alienated from the products of their labour under capitalism. Joan experiences a similar alienation as she is separated from the recognition and rewards of her literary work. Marx's concept of alienation, a key category in Marxist humanism, is prominently featured in his works, including his early works and later works like *Capital* (1867). Marx first used the term “alienation” in his 1843 essay “The Jewish Question” referring to money as the estranged essence of man's work and existence, referencing Epicurus' philosophy of the alienation of the core (Fuchs, 2021, p.13). Joan is alienated even from a profound motherhood with her children. She says that most of her time sitting in the room looking for new ideas for Joe’s career, and the door looks up “They would cry as a sitter carried them off, and they would reach out to me with desperate arms” (Wolitzer, 2003, p.180).

Furthermore, psychological alienation is regarded as a person feeling alone and isolated, not belonging, losing confidence, experiencing tension and anxiety, rejecting social norms and values, being separated from their family, and experiencing psychological pressures. In other words, psychological alienation occurs when a person feels like they do not belong to the world they live in. Alienation is a compelling force that propels human consciousness to its limits. It is a process wherein individuals get alienated from their surrounding environment. Detecting and addressing the issue of alienation is crucial, as it can precipitate other grave problems, including suicide, substance misuse, alcoholism, other deviant behaviours, and other severe emotional illnesses (Hirsch et al., 1996 as cited in Zorcec et al., 2023).

For instance, Joan suffers psychological alienation throughout her marriage. She internalizes her suffering in silence, embodying a quiet, introspective nature. Joan silences her voice, bound by Joe’s domineering grip and shallow ideals. Her children, too, become mere instruments of his fleeting contentment. She is creative but not a challenger, and she lives the

discrimination, struggles in the patriarchal system, and is alienated from her individuality and her writing. She admits that by saying, "My desire to have a baby was swaddled in the need to make Joe happy" (p. 69). They have three children, Susannah, Alice, and David, who are the fruits of this long-exploited marriage. Moreover, to be a creative woman, one must contend with two challenges: the struggle against class discrimination and the added struggle against patriarchy. Women encounter a twin burden, precisely like those dual duties borne by women who engage in employment both externally and within their residences (El Saadawi, 2010, p. 155).

Patriarchy denotes a social order where males possess greater power, albeit the power transmission mechanisms may differ. It might manifest as clear gender gaps, such as salary inequities, or as cultural practices that reinforce conventional gender norms in everyday life. Wolitzer's depiction of Joe's upbringing underscores the inconsistencies in women's perceptions of masculine authority. These women, while subjected to patriarchal systems, also actively perpetuate and uphold them, demonstrating the real-world effects of Chilean women's involvement in reinforcing patriarchal structures (McKenna, 2015, pp. 121/124). Wolitzer describes a scene where a crowd of male writers reflects on an observed propensity of female writers towards mental illness :

Have you ever noticed,' said Lovejoy slowly, as though introducing a theory he'd been quietly cultivating for some time, 'that a surprisingly high number of them are mad as hatters?' ... 'I've come across a few of that kind in my day,' said Samuelson. 'Boy, they give you a run for your money.' The men all nodded and laughed easily, Joe included, though when he saw me looking at him he sobered quickly. 'You're not one of them, are you?' Lovejoy said to me mildly. He leaned forward, reached out and then very, very lightly stroked the soft skin of my forearm with his fingers. I jerked back quickly. 'Don't,' I said. Lovejoy removed his hand. 'Sorry,' he said, and then shrugged at Joe. 'It was just irresistible.' 'Like women themselves,' said Lyle Samuelson. 'Like women themselves,' repeated Lovejoy. (Wolitzer, 2003, p.96)

Joan finds herself on the outside looking in during a discussion that is skewed toward men and treats women like things for their admiration and manipulation. Lovejoy's unwelcome and disrespectful physical contact heightens Joan's feelings of alienation and emphasizes the imbalance of power. Contrasting with the heroine's unease, the men's friendliness is emphasized by their shared laughing and knowing quips, highlighting her estrangement from their world. Peer pressure causes even Joe's fleeting self-awareness to disappear, illustrating how conformity intensifies the protagonist's marginalization.

In the present case, Rahel Jaeggi (2014), a Swiss professor of practical philosophy and social philosophy at the Humboldt University of Berlin, utilises the term alienation to describe the subject-object connection, corresponding to the alienation that arises when persons' subjective requirements are incongruent with the reality of the objective world. This disconnection leads to self-estrangement, causing the term alienation to acquire new interpretations that articulate human existential suffering through its sub-terms. The evolution of the relationship between individuals and their creations leads to alienation, resulting in existential crises as individuals struggle to comprehend their surroundings (p. 15).

Social alienation encompasses subjective and objective experiences marked by withdrawal from social activities, estrangement, and absence of connection, frequently associated with structural constraints (Bousquet, 2022, p. 4). Both of these types are reflected in Joan's character. Objectively, her experienced alienation related to cultural standards that place women in inferior roles, often relegating them to places where their abilities and voices are overlooked or stifled. Subjectively, this type is clear in Joan's internalised sense of being disconnected from her desires and identity. Joan has endlessly sacrificed her literary career and voice throughout her marriage to Joe Castleman to support Joe's success. This internal struggle makes Joan feel as if she is living a life that is not entirely her own, isolating herself from her true self.

Joan and her living in a patriarchal society and a capitalist one leads her to alienation, not only her choice of marrying Joe. Like any woman under this system, she is the tool for her husband's needs. Joe views his wife as nothing more than a tool, disregarding her feelings and needs, which ultimately dehumanizes her. Marx says that workers in modern society are dehumanised as producers due to their immediate bodily needs and ceding labour power to others. This results in a dehumanising state akin to slavery, as the worker is diminished to the status of a machine. This system of alienation dehumanises workers, reducing them to the status of animals, enslaved people, and machines (Mary, 2024, p. 91).

In contrast, Joan always thinks of Joe and his feelings, and she is the one who sacrificed forty years of her life for him. In the last chapter of the novel, when she expresses her attention to leaving him, she also thinks of his feeling at first case. She said;

Look, try to imagine my situation. I want another chance at life," I said. "I'm sixty-four years old. I'm almost a senior. I can go anywhere half price, and I want to go there alone. Please don't act furious, or heartbroken, or shocked, none of which you could possibly be. For once, try to be thoughtful, just try to listen." "So that's my big congratulations," he said. "Well, you know what? ..." "Big congratulations? Why exactly should you be congratulated?" I asked. "Don't you get enough of that elsewhere?" He paused. "I happened to introduce you to the world, remember," he said, but no, this wasn't true; I was the one who had taken him there (Wolitzer, 2003, p. 174).

This alienation can also be noticed in David Castlema's character, Joan's first son. David feels estranged from his family, particularly from Joan, who remains cold and emotionally distant, and from his father, who is preoccupied with his matters. This lack of connection with his parents leaves David feeling misunderstood and isolated, struggling with his sense of purpose and direction. He grapples with being in his father's shadow, just as Joan did, but without the same sense of internalised sacrifice. His desire for validation also exacerbates his alienation as an individual and a writer, which complicates his relationship with his family and adds to his discontent. And he even describes his father as a monster;

"Ask him," David said. "He wants to kill me," Joe blurted out. "He held that knife to my throat." "Give me the knife," I told my son. "It's a good steak knife. It belongs in the set." I was improvising. To my astonishment, he simply handed it to me. "Thank you," I said. "Can we all sit down now?" So we all sat in the family room, beneath the row of Audubon prints, the birds staring blankly, and David said, "I've always known what a monster Dad is, with a

big swinging dick. It's like he's turned you into his fucking handservant." "I will not sit here and listen to this garbage," Joe said. "Because it's nonsense, okay? Absolute, raving nonsense." I didn't say a word. "Feel free to jump in at any time, Joan," he added (Wolitzer, 2003p. 184).

At the end of the novel, Joe dies in a strange country. He dies after Joan tells him her decision to leave him. Joe's death brings a natural conclusion to the exploitative dynamic of their relationship. The literary success built on Joan's uncredited work ends, reflecting the novel's critique of gender inequality and exploitation in creative partnerships. "DYING IN A strange country is similar to being born" (p.191). Joe's death liberates Joan from her roles as a supportive wife and ghostwriter, allowing her to follow her path free from his influence. The stability of dysfunctional marriages relies upon the silence of women solely. Those women who continue to stay silently in abusive relationships will rescue their marriages from divorce or separation (Wahab and Bhowmick, 2023).

Tony McKenna criticises the novel's end in his book *Art, Literature and Culture from a Marxist Perspective* (2015), that the novel's ultimate twist, Joe claiming Joan's work for his own, is the worst aspect. This underlines the harshness and sorrow of labour appropriation in the capitalist period. The tenor of labour is undercut by capturing its outcomes and bending the production process in line with capitalist accumulation. In pre-capitalist feudal forms, the direct producer was the overseer of the producing process, bound by their immediate conditions, means of production, and inherited traditions. (p.126).

Conclusion

The novel urges a closer exploration of the emotional and intellectual isolation women often undergo in partnerships that, on the surface, appear ideal. *The Wife* is a sad observation of the deceptive nature of separation in marriage, emphasising that full self-realisation can only come when one meets and overcomes the stifling forces of external expectations and internalised oppression. The lack of communication between husband and wife is felt throughout the novel. Joan's silence regarding her frustrations limits her potential earnings and professional development. She might have achieved economic success if she had pursued her writing career independently. However, she is the silent spouse in this marriage and the one who suffers alienation in all its kinds, so she loses forty-five years of caring and giving with no reward. Maybe she does not marry him for economic reasons, but he does.

Wolitzer successfully examines the societal standards and expectations placed on women, particularly in the context of marriage and work. The story offers insight into how these external demands, coupled with Joan's Internalised sense of responsibility, lead to a terrible estrangement from her genuine self. The story argues that alienation is not simply an individual experience but also a systemic and societal issue, one that is created in gender inequity and the lack of appreciation for women's achievements. In Joan's pathway concerning self-awareness and freedom, Wolitzer presents a profound meditation on identity, power, and the possibility of recovering one's voice in the face of estrangement. This study is a comprehensive exploration of alienation in Joan's life.

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