A Dual-Perspective Analysis of Alienation in Ali Shariati's Thought: Idealist and Materialist Approaches

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article **Article history:** Received: 20 July 2025 Received in revised form: 11 September 2025 Accepted: 14 September 2025 Published online: 22 December 2025 **Keywords:** Alienation; Ali Shariati; Assimilation; Consciousness; Reification.	Although the concept of alienation has been explained within a broadly shared semantic framework across diverse intellectual traditions, it remains ontologically plural and contested with respect to its nature and meaning. Nevertheless, thinkers have repeatedly mobilized alienation to critique existing realities and to articulate alternative, desirable social conditions. Whether the criticized condition is understood as emerging from a material contradiction between social classes or groups, or as a primarily discursive formation, largely determines whether alienation is theorized on an idealist or materialist basis. In general, Søren Kierkegaard, G. W. F. Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, Max Stirner, and several nihilist and existentialist thinkers (e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre) have addressed alienation primarily within an idealist register. By contrast, Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon have employed the concept in materialist analyses. Among Iranian revolutionary thinkers, Ali Shariati makes extensive use of alienation. This study argues that Shariati's treatment of alienation integrates both idealist and materialist dimensions. At times, however, methodological ambiguities in his work contribute to conceptual confusion or, at minimum, reduce the theoretical coherence of his definitions. Shariati's materialist dimension is most visible in his analysis of cultural alienation and assimilation into foreign culture—an emphasis that may reflect the perceived clarity of antagonism between "native" and "foreign" cultural formations, reinforced by discourses of dependency, self-sufficiency, and "return to the self." By contrast, class-based and intra-societal material antagonisms appear more ambiguous in Shariati's context, given the incomplete formation of class structures and civil society in contemporary Iran. It is in this domain that Shariati's account tends to assume a more idealist form.

1. Introduction

Alienation denotes a felt rupture between individuals (or groups) and the surrounding social environment. This environment may include dominant discourses and ideologies as well as prevailing social and economic relations. Alienation often leads to indifference and, as Kierkegaard's analysis suggests, may intensify into anxiety and anger, ultimately motivating resistance against the existing order and the pursuit of an alternative, more familiar social arrangement (Stewart, 2021b: 179–204).

A shared assumption across major accounts of alienation is that the "social reality" that currently produces alienation was, at its inception, compatible with human purposes and capacities. Over time, however, it becomes increasingly detached from its human origins and is transformed into an inhuman or dehumanizing order. Standard discussions of alienation frequently involve several interrelated components:

- **Subjectivity:** the human mind and human agency in shaping and organizing social reality. The more closely the social environment approximates an individual's lived ideals and purposes, the weaker the experience of alienation.
- **Objectivity:** the external world, including social institutions and structures. A basic human process involves projecting one's purposes onto the environment and transforming it into a meaningful "object" of action. When the object diverges sharply from the subject, alienation intensifies (Marx, 1973: 68–69; Leopold, 2022).
- **Reification:** a distortion through which the human-made object becomes "thing-like," independent of its makers, and increasingly empty of its original human meaning. Feuerbach offers an influential description of this process in *The Essence of Christianity* (Feuerbach, 1855: 52ff; Stewart, 2021a: 88, 127ff). Shariati also emphasizes related dynamics in his discussion of truth and reality and their distinction (Shariati, 1979; Shariati, 2000).

Solutions to alienation are often presented in two broad stages. The first is **self-awareness**, understood as recognizing both (a) the human elements that must be reflected in social life and (b) the deficits within the existing environment that generate alienation. The second is **struggle**—the effort to dismantle alienating social arrangements and to establish an order that realizes human subjectivity and restores affinity between social structures and human purposes. This second stage is especially central in materialist accounts.

This article examines alienation in Ali Shariati's thought by distinguishing and analyzing its idealist and materialist dimensions. It argues that Shariati employs both registers, yet methodological ambiguities in his work sometimes weaken conceptual coherence and generate interpretive misunderstandings. The central research problem, therefore, is to clarify these two dimensions in Shariati's writings and to assess the tensions and limitations that follow from their combination.

2. Methodology

This study employs an analytical–descriptive design within a qualitative framework. Data are collected through library research and qualitative content analysis. The research proceeds in four stages: (1) identifying and categorizing Shariati's discussions of alienation; (2) extracting idealist and materialist dimensions across the corpus; (3) critically evaluating methodological ambiguities and conceptual slippages; and (4) developing an interpretive synthesis in light of the study's research questions and hypotheses.

3. Findings

The analysis yields five main findings:
1. Shariati interprets alienation through both materialist and idealist frameworks.
2. The materialist dimension in Shariati's thought is most strongly connected to cultural alienation and assimilation into foreign culture, likely because antagonism between "native" and "foreign" cultural forms is presented as relatively clear.
3. The idealist dimension becomes more prominent where class antagonisms and internal material contradictions appear less sharply defined, partly due to the incomplete development of class structure and civil society in Shariati's Iran.
4. Methodological ambiguities in Shariati's approach contribute to reduced theoretical coherence and invite misreadings of his use of alienation.
5. Shariati's critique of modernity and Western discourse is predominantly idealist in orientation, rather than materially class-centered.

4. Discussion and Conclusion
This article examined alienation in Ali Shariati's thought through a dual-perspective lens, arguing that Shariati combines idealist and materialist elements to diagnose both individual and collective forms of estrangement. He treats alienation not merely as a psychological condition but as a cultural and social phenomenon tied to modernity, colonial relations, and the displacement of indigenous meaning-worlds. In this respect, he draws on idealist traditions to critique fragmentation across multiple dimensions of human existence, while also using materialist motifs to analyze cultural domination and imperial power.

A central contribution of this study is its demonstration that Shariati strategically mobilizes Western philosophical vocabulary to interpret the crises of Eastern societies. At the same time, his methodological tensions—especially in his account of social classes, intellectual leadership, and revolutionary agency—pose significant conceptual challenges. Shariati sometimes presents the urban middle class as a primary engine of revolutionary transformation, yet he also expresses deep suspicion toward future hierarchies of power. This unresolved tension may reflect limits in anticipating the institutional realities that follow revolutionary rupture.

In sum, despite theoretical ambiguities, Shariati offers a distinctive synthesis in which idealist and materialist dimensions jointly inform a critique of modernity and a politics of mobilization against cultural and economic colonialism. Subsequent historical developments in Iran, however, suggest that translating Shariati's normative ideals into durable institutional forms encounters serious obstacles—particularly in relation to entrenched hierarchies with more elaborated political-theological frameworks. Future research may further clarify how Shariati's conceptual synthesis operates across different genres of his writings and how it can be situated within broader debates on revolutionary theory, cultural domination, and post-revolutionary state formation.

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