



Concept, Subject, Origin and Types of Alienation in Ali Shariati's Notion and Thought

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Ali Shariati's conception of alienation, focusing on its meaning, subject, origins, causes, types, and the theoretical framework through which he explains both alienation and de-alienation. Employing qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, the research draws on seven of Shariati's major works. Data were analyzed using the three-stage coding procedure proposed by Strauss and Corbin (open, axial, and selective coding). The analysis resulted in the identification of seven core themes: (1) alienation, (2) the alienated individual, (3) the subject of alienation, (4) the causes of alienation, (5) types of alienation, (6) alienation as an imposed or self-chosen phenomenon, and (7) de-alienation. Interpretation of these themes indicates that Shariati deliberately narrows the broad, global notion of alienation to the more specific concept of self-alienation. In this condition, the individual experiences the self as an "other," loses self-consciousness, and lives under a false and fabricated identity. Shariati conceptualizes alienation as the outcome of a dialectical relationship between the individual and society. He argues that assimilation, alienation, imitation, and corruption are dialectically intertwined processes that may ultimately lead to self-consciousness, awareness, and the rebirth of the authentic self. Regarding the origins of alienation, Shariati refers to factors such as labor and the means of production, colonialism, imitation, bureaucracy, machinery, money, sophistry, and distorted forms of love. Together, these forces estrange human beings from their original selves and generate multiple forms of alienation. For Shariati, the ultimate solution lies in returning to the authentic self and overcoming self-alienation.

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1. Introduction

The concept of alienation is among the most ambiguous and contested notions in the humanities. Despite this ambiguity, it has been widely employed in sociology, psychology, and social psychology to explain various forms of human reactions to social realities, psychological pressures, and structural impositions. Consequently, alienation—along with its numerous derivatives such as self-alienation, political alienation, work alienation, nature alienation, God-alienation, social alienation, and cultural alienation—has become both a popular slogan in political discourse and an empirical concern in academic research (Mohseni Tabrizi, 1991: 26).

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, several Muslim thinkers have offered distinctive interpretations of alienation. Iqbal Lahori understood alienation as self-loss; Soroush (1987) described it as metamorphosis and the adoption of a self-image contrary to reality; and Shariati famously depicted it as a form of spirit possession, whereby an alien personality inhabits the human being. These thinkers commonly traced the roots of alienation to Western cultural domination, colonial rule over Islamic societies, the distortion of Islam through superstition and historical accretions, and uncritical cultural imitation.

Against this background, the present study focuses on the thought of Dr. Ali Shariati, analyzing his understanding of alienation with particular attention to its concept, subject (alienation from what or from whom), causes, and forms.

2. Methodology

This research employs qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis to examine Shariati's perspective on alienation. Following the selection of the research topic, relevant textual material was identified from Shariati's corpus. The selected texts included passages that explicitly addressed alienation or employed synonymous and related concepts such as *spirit possession*, *cultural metamorphosis*, *assimilation*, *self-loss*, *cultural alienation*, and *self-distrust*.

From among Shariati's fifty-four published works, seven texts were selected for analysis: *Empty Man* (1982), *Return* (2007), *Worldview and Ideology* (2003), *Various Works* (Collected Works, Vols. 1–2, 1993), *Features of the New Centuries* (1997), *Revolutionary Self-Building* (1977), and *Re-identification of Iranian Identity* (1989). These works were chosen because they contain the most explicit discussions of alienation and related concepts.

Data were collected and organized in accordance with the research questions and analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's three-stage coding procedure: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

3. Findings

During the open coding phase, 113 sensitive concepts related to alienation were identified in the form of key terms, synonyms, and thematic expressions. These concepts were grouped into semantic units.

In the axial coding phase, 28 preliminary categories were extracted from the initial concepts. Through further refinement and consolidation, these categories were reduced to seven main category-themes, each encompassing several sub-categories. In the selective coding phase, the relationships among these categories were clarified based on interpretive analysis of the texts.

The seven principal categories are summarized below:

Category-Class	Components, Sub-categories
Alienation	Aversion from the self, self-loss, spirit possession, estrangement from human nature, cultural transformation, assimilation, psychological emptiness, and separation from the authentic self.
The Alienated Individual	Spirit-possessed, self-distrustful, assimilated, estranged from oneself, self-defeated, and psychologically fragmented.
Subject of Alienation (Alienation from whom or from what?)	The self, society, culture, politics, religion, work and the means of production, God, science, art, nature, tradition, and authentic spiritual personality.
Causes of Alienation	Colonial domination, blind imitation of Western culture, money and materialism, bureaucracy and machinery, distorted forms of rationality, alien social values, and political factionalism.
Types/Forms of Alienation	Cultural, social, intellectual, substantive, self-alienation, work alienation, political alienation, God-alienation, nature alienation, and alienation from other human beings.
Imposed / Self-Chosen (Being imposed, being self-chosen)	Structural domination, social coercion, dialectical interaction between individual and society, cultural assimilation, and loss of autonomous will.
De-alienation	Return to the authentic self, self-belief, rejection of imitation, restoration of dignity, and reconstruction of identity based on indigenous and religious traditions.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Shariati may be described as a sociologist with strong social-psychological inclinations who interprets alienation through a dialectical framework. While he regards human beings as the creators of society and history, he also emphasizes that individuals may become dominated by the very social structures and cultural products they have created.

In his treatment of the relationship between alienation and consciousness, Shariati is clearly influenced by Marx (1964), viewing alienation as a stage in the process of developing self-consciousness. His distinction between the *active self* (“I”) and the *passive self* (“me”) reflects this dialectical tension. Under the conditions of cultural assimilation and colonial domination, the individual internalizes alien values and becomes an imitator of others, resulting in the formation of a false and externally imposed “me.” Yet the authentic “I,” grounded in human freedom and spiritual autonomy, resists this domination and seeks self-realization.

Shariati’s classification of the subjects and types of alienation parallels the approaches of social psychologists such as Kenneth Keniston (1965), Richard Flacks (1973), and C. Wright Mills (1951), who define alienation in relation to its objects—self, society, work, and culture. Similarly, Shariati’s explanation of the causes of alienation aligns with perspectives that emphasize the multiplicity of alienating structures (Keniston, 1965; Mitchell, 1988).

When Shariati likens alienation to *spirit possession* or madness, he draws on psychological metaphors similar to those employed by thinkers such as Jaspers (1956), Kahler (1971), and Horney (1950). Alienation thus signifies the decay of authentic conscience and the dominance of a false self, resulting in a diminished capacity for self-understanding.

Influenced by Iqbal Lahori, Shariati places *self-consciousness* at the center of resistance against alienation. For him, the recovery of the self requires a return to an authentic and conscious form of Islam—specifically, what he calls *Alavi Shi'ism*. This living and emancipatory Islam, Shariati argues, stands in opposition to Western cultural colonialism and provides the spiritual foundation for de-alienation and collective mobilization.

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