

ALIENATION

AMIDST THE COLLAPSE OF ETHICAL VALUES IN CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

LA ALIENACIÓN EN MEDIO DEL COLAPSO DE LOS VALORES ÉTICOS EN LAS NOVELAS CONTEMPORÁNEAS

Zenfira Azizova Mirsafari*

E-mail: zenfira58@mail.ru

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9607-8934>

Maarifa Manafova Nuh¹

E-mail: maarifa.manafova@mdu.edu.az

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3330-2213>

Matanat Mammadova Mammad¹

E-mail: ismayilavametamet1961@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0320-4836>

Fakhriyya Isayeva Nail¹

E-mail: fexriyyeisayeva_2020@mail.ru

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5534-0129>

Sevinj Suleymanova Nariman¹

E-mail: Suleymanova-66@mail.ru

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3128-6865>

¹Mingachevir State University. Azerbaijan.

*Corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary literature, alienation emerges as a central theme in novels that portray the collapse of ethical values in modern society. The 21st century reflects a world marked by accelerated sociopolitical change, digital fragmentation, spiritual emptiness, and the weakening of collective belief systems. Alienation transcends personal psychological struggle, becoming a structural condition produced by the disintegration of traditional moral frameworks that provided meaning, identity, and belonging. This article examines the complex relationship between ethical decline and alienation in selected modern novels, exploring Western and Azerbaijani literary traditions. It analyzes how the erosion of moral values—honesty, loyalty, responsibility, and compassion—contributes to the psychological isolation, emotional numbness, and existential hopelessness of contemporary characters. These protagonists inhabit morally ambiguous worlds where ethical norms are relativized or rendered obsolete by modern ideologies, consumerism, or post-truth culture. Particular attention is paid to the representation of alienated individuals in urbanized, secularized, and technologically saturated environments. The characters appear trapped between individual autonomy and social disconnection, between internal moral conflict and external chaos. The study identifies recurring narrative patterns: loss of family ties, spiritual detachment, social apathy, and an overwhelming sense of purposelessness. Finally, it is argued that the alienated figure in the modern novel functions as a mirror of contemporary existential reality, reflecting the collapse of moral universals in a relativistic age and inviting the reader to confront the psychological and ethical costs of modernity.

Keywords: Alienation, Moral crisis, Identity loss, Existentialism, Contemporary literature.

En la literatura contemporánea, la alienación emerge como un tema central en novelas que retratan el colapso de los valores éticos en la sociedad moderna. El siglo XXI refleja un mundo marcado por un cambio sociopolítico acelerado, la fragmentación digital, el vacío espiritual y el debilitamiento de los sistemas de creencias colectivas. La alienación trasciende la lucha psicológica personal, convirtiéndose en una condición estructural producida por la desintegración de los marcos morales tradicionales que proporcionaban significado, identidad y pertenencia. Este artículo examina la compleja relación entre el declive ético y la alienación en novelas modernas seleccionadas, explorando las tradiciones literarias occidentales y azerbaiyanas. Analiza cómo la erosión de los valores morales “honestidad, lealtad, responsabilidad y compasión” contribuye al aislamiento psicológico, el entumecimiento emocional y la desesperanza existencial de los personajes contemporáneos. Estos protagonistas habitan mundos moralmente ambiguos donde las normas éticas se relativizan o se vuelven obsoletas por las ideologías modernas, el consumismo o la cultura de la posverdad. Se presta especial atención a la representación de individuos alienados en entornos urbanizados, secularizados y saturados de tecnología. Los personajes parecen atrapados entre la autonomía individual y la desconexión social, entre el conflicto moral interno y el caos externo. El estudio identifica patrones narrativos recurrentes: pérdida de vínculos familiares, desapego espiritual, apatía social y una abrumadora sensación de falta de propósito. Finalmente, se argumenta que la figura alienada en la novela moderna funciona como un espejo de la realidad existencial contemporánea, reflejando el colapso de los universales morales en una era relativista e invitando al lector a confrontar los costos psicológicos y éticos de la modernidad.

Palabras clave: Alienación, Crisis moral, Pérdida de identidad, Existencialismo, Literatura contemporánea.

INTRODUCTION

Alienation is understood as the experience of separation or estrangement of the individual from their social, political, and moral environment, has been an important theme in philosophical and literary reflection since the 19th century (Hughes, 2023). However, in the context of contemporary novels, this phenomenon takes on new dimensions as it intertwines with the apparent collapse of traditional ethical values (Amlinger, 2022). Alienation, as defined by Zalta and Nodelman (2022) is a problematic separation between the subject and an object that should be connected, such as the individual and their work, their community, or their own identity. In his writings, Karl Marx described alienation as a consequence of capitalism, where workers are stripped of their humanity by being treated

as a mere instrument of production. This disconnection is not only economic but also existential, as individuals lose their sense of purpose and belonging (Øversveen, 2022; Zoubir, 2018). In the literary context, alienation manifests itself through characters who experience emotional emptiness or an inability to integrate into their social environment.

The collapse of ethical values refers to the erosion of moral principles that have traditionally provided a framework for human coexistence. In contemporary society, factors such as consumerism, technology, and globalization have challenged these values, creating a moral vacuum or giving rise to new ethical systems that are not always universally accepted. As McGowan (2024) points out, alienation should not be seen solely as a problem to be overcome, but as a constitutive condition that can be redeemed as an existential and political program. This perspective suggests that alienation can be a tool to question dominant ethical values and foster critical reflection on society.

In 19th and early 20th-century novels, works such as *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 2002) and *The Metamorphosis* (Kafka, 2015) present alienation in religious, familial, or professional terms. However, the contemporary novel (post-1980) also integrates issues such as globalization, technology, and the crisis of traditional institutions. In this context, alienation ceases to be a mere individual matter and becomes a symptom of broader social malaise, where ethics are eroded by commercialism, bureaucracy, and image culture. For example, Willging (2021) argues that in the work of Michel Houellebecq, especially in *Submission* (2015) and *Serotonin* (2019), alienation manifests itself in the loss of meaning in everyday life under neoliberalism, where the individual becomes a mere consumer. The figure of the Houellebecquian anti-hero illustrates how the collapse of ethics occurs not only through the absence of norms, but through the internalization of commercial values that empty human relationships of meaning. The strength of this vision lies in its sharp social critique; however, a notable shortcoming is the scarcity of ethical alternatives, leaving the reader mired in the same disenchantment as his characters.

Abbas et al. (2025) pointed out that in novels such as Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, globalized cities appear as dual environments: they promise mobility and progress, but generate fragmentation and exclusion. The protagonist, Changez, experiences initial euphoria that transforms into profound alienation, marked by racial prejudice and disillusionment with the American Dream. Here, ethical collapse is revealed in the hypocrisy of opening speeches that, in practice, reproduce oppressive hierarchies. The strength of this approach lies in its ability to link physical space and identity construction, although it sometimes diminishes the psychological depth of the character by prioritizing context over subject.

Regarding the techniques for conveying this feeling, many contemporary novelists employ formal devices: fragmented narrators, disjointed streams of consciousness, time jumps, and dreamlike spaces. For example, in *After Dark* (2019), Murakami uses the Tokyo nightscape as a mirror of the disintegration of social ties and the lack of moral grounding of his characters. Minimalist prose accentuates the sense of “emptiness” and temporal ellipses reinforce the idea of a dislocated ethical time (Greene, 2021). The strength of such techniques lies in their evocative power; however, there is possible aesthetic overexposure that distracts from the ethical content.

On the other hand, ecocriticism has explored how reconnection with nature can mitigate alienation in contemporary narrative. Steinbeck's analysis, reviewed by Kouta and Saleh (2013) shows that the integration of natural spaces offers a moral refuge to the protagonist, who seeks to purify himself from ‘ethical deterioration’ by uniting with a ‘greater whole’. Although not all contemporary novels include this ecocritical turn, its potential to reintroduce values of responsibility toward the environment suggests a path of resistance to ethical collapse (Hua, 2020; Soga & Gaston, 2016), although it runs the risk of idealizing nature as a panacea.

These examples reveal that alienation in contemporary literature is not only a symptom of individual disconnection, but also a critique of the erosion of ethical values in modern society. They highlight how power and gender dynamics contribute to alienation and challenge traditional moral values. Moreover, they typically offer a nihilistic vision of a world where consumerism has replaced ethics, while also exploring how technology can both exacerbate alienation and offer new forms of ethical connection. These examples also suggest that alienation can be a tool for introspection and change, as McGowan (2024) proposes, by allowing characters and readers to question dominant systems. However, they also warn of the dangers of a world without a clear ethical framework, where disconnection can lead to total isolation or the loss of humanity. Contemporary literature, therefore, not only diagnoses the problems of modern society but also invites critical reflection on how to rebuild or re-imagine ethical values in an alienated world.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the interplay between ethical collapse and existential alienation in selected modern novels from both Western and Azerbaijani literary traditions. The study seeks to uncover how the erosion of ethical norms—honesty, justice, empathy, fidelity—results in literary characters who become morally adrift and psychologically isolated (Fromm, 1955, p. 150). These figures are emblematic of a broader civilizational

condition in which individual identity is destabilized by the disappearance of collective values (Bauman, 2000, pp. 82–85). Through textual analysis and a comparative cultural perspective, the article demonstrates how alienation in literature serves not only as a thematic motif but as a critical commentary on the ethical crises of modernity. In doing so, the article adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from literary criticism, philosophy (particularly existentialism), cultural studies, and moral psychology. It argues that the alienated subject in the modern novel functions as both a symptom and a witness of contemporary moral collapse—revealing how literature reflects, interrogates, and at times resists the moral emptiness of the age (Sartre, 1953, p. 604). Ultimately, the article contends that understanding the aesthetics of alienation through the prism of ethical disintegration allows for a richer comprehension of how the novel continues to serve as a mirror of the human condition in crisis (Yu, 2011, p. 263).

DEVELOPMENT

Moral Disintegration as the Foundation of Literary Alienation

The modern era has witnessed a profound transformation in the ethical, social, and psychological structure of the individual (Bauman, 2000, pp. 6–8; Fromm, 1955, p. 24). This transformation has found its most expressive reflection in literature—particularly in the modern novel, which has become a space for exploring the dissolution of moral values and the alienation of the human subject (Sartre, 1953, p. 55). With the decline of traditional religious worldviews, the weakening of family bonds, the rise of secular ideologies, and the advancement of consumerist and technological society, literature no longer presents a harmonious moral order, but rather fragmented, uncertain, and often nihilistic ethical landscapes (Yu, 2011, p. 12). Within this context, the phenomenon of alienation (or estrangement) emerges not as an episodic personal conflict, but as a structural existential condition of the modern individual (Camus, 1942, p. 113).

Alienation in the contemporary novel is frequently portrayed as a psychological, moral, and ontological rupture—where the protagonist becomes estranged not only from society, but also from themselves, from the values they once upheld, and from the world as a meaningful whole (Kafka, 1925, p. 41). The ethical disintegration that surrounds the protagonist is not merely a background condition, but a constitutive force shaping their identity and actions (Imanov, 2012, p. 70). Such characters often find themselves in morally ambiguous environments, devoid of absolute principles or collective norms. In these narrative worlds, categories like good and evil, duty and betrayal,

right and wrong lose their clear boundaries, giving way to a relativistic moral order that fosters confusion, inertia, and internal collapse (Sharifova, 2017, pp. 65–66).

This moral ambiguity is central to the structure and function of the modern novel. From Albert Camus' absurd heroes and Franz Kafka's alienated bureaucrats to Kamal Abdulla's metaphysically disoriented post-Soviet protagonists and Orhan Pamuk's psychologically fragmented intellectuals, we observe a persistent narrative pattern: the individual struggles to orient himself in a universe stripped of transcendent values (Abdulla, 2006, p. 88; Pamuk, 1983, p. 72, 1990, p. 145). These protagonists are often intelligent, introspective, and self-aware, yet paralyzed in the face of a world that no longer provides coherent ethical frameworks or reliable social narratives (Camus, 1942, p. 118). Their alienation, therefore, is not only a reaction to external conditions—it is also a product of deep internal erosion, as they question the meaning of their existence in a morally indifferent world (Abdulla, 2006, pp. 94–96; Kafka, 1925, p. 143).

The erosion of moral values in the modern era has left a profound imprint on the narrative structure and philosophical depth of the novel. With the collapse of metaphysical certainties and traditional ethical frameworks, literature increasingly mirrors the disorientation of the human subject, caught between moral ambiguity and existential crisis (Bauman, 2000, pp. 6–8; Fromm, 1955, pp. 23–25). In classical literature, ethics often functioned as an implicit guide—narratives upheld moral clarity and sought to resolve conflict within a value-based framework. However, in the modern novel, the dissolution of such value systems becomes the very premise of narrative conflict (Sartre, 1953, pp. 55–57).

Albert Camus's *The Stranger* offers a radical depiction of a morally indifferent world. The protagonist Meursault is not portrayed as immoral in the conventional sense, but as someone fundamentally detached from all systems of meaning. His lack of grief at his mother's funeral, emotional neutrality in relationships, and indifference toward his own execution are not mere personality quirks—they signal the collapse of the metaphysical basis for moral judgment (Camus, 1942, pp. 6–9; 113–115). Camus deliberately strips his character of the inner moral compass, exposing the reader to a world where alienation stems not from social exclusion, but from the absurdity of existence itself.

A different form of alienation is presented in Kafka's *The Trial*, where Josef K. faces a faceless judicial system that never articulates its logic or laws. The protagonist is guilty, not of a crime, but of existing in a society that no longer

upholds transparent or ethical standards (Kafka, 1925, pp. 41–43). The bureaucratic machinery in Kafka's novel is not just oppressive—it is morally empty, functioning without any clear relationship to justice or truth. Josef K.'s alienation emerges not only from legal persecution but from his inability to anchor himself in any moral certainty. The silence of the court becomes symbolic of a broader ethical silence in modern society (Bauman, 2000, pp. 86–88).

In both cases, the alienated subject is a reflection of ethical collapse. Their confusion, passivity, and eventual self-negation are not failures of character, but narrative symptoms of a morally disoriented world (Fromm, 1955, pp. 149–152; Sartre, 1953, p. 604). This framework becomes a defining feature of the modern novel, especially as it grapples with the psychological impact of cultural secularization, ideological disillusionment, and existential loss (Yu, 2011, pp. 261–263).

Post-Soviet and Postmodern Echoes: Azerbaijani and Turkish Narratives

Another compelling representation of moral collapse and existential alienation in Azerbaijani postmodern literature can be found in the works of Kamal Abdulla. In novels such as *The Valley of the Wizards* (Abdulla, 2006) and *Laokoon* (Abdulla, 2008), alienation is not only a product of historical or social rupture but also deeply rooted in metaphysical and mythological disorientation. These narratives employ postmodern techniques—fragmented time, intertextual allusions, metafictional structure—to depict protagonists who are estranged not only from their society, but also from language, memory, and even their own sense of self. The characters navigate through surreal and allegorical landscapes where the erosion of traditional values leads to ontological confusion and moral paralysis. Abdulla's protagonists often embody the post-Soviet subject adrift in a symbolic universe that no longer offers stable reference points—neither ethical nor epistemological. In this way, Abdulla expands the concept of alienation beyond sociopolitical critique into the realm of philosophical and aesthetic inquiry.

In Pamuk's *Sessiz Ev*, alienation becomes multi-layered—ideological, generational, epistemological. The novel's polyphonic structure—multiple narrators, each trapped in his own version of truth—creates a literary microcosm of post-modern Turkey, where shared moral consensus is impossible (Pamuk, 1983, pp. 180–183). The characters speak, but they do not listen; they act, but without ethical conviction. Pamuk doesn't merely depict alienation—he constructs it structurally in the form of fragmentation, dissonance, and rhetorical repetition (Pamuk, 1983, pp. 246–249). The moral universe of the novel is not empty per

se, but over-saturated with conflicting narratives, where each character inhabits his own hermetically sealed ethical world (Yu, 2011, pp. 270–272).

Moreover, Pamuk's *The Black Book* deepens this theme by combining alienation with identity erasure. The protagonist Galip's search for his wife and later for himself reflects not just personal loss but ontological disintegration in a society where individuality is engulfed by collective myths, media saturation, and historical confusion (Pamuk, 1990, pp. 210–212; Sartre, 1953, pp. 615–618). The alienation here is not only from others, but from language, from memory, and from self-recognition (Fromm, 1955, pp. 151–153).

Both Abdulla and Pamuk reflect broader regional trends, where alienation is a by-product of modernity's incomplete or uneven arrival. The post-Soviet and post-Ottoman subjects are suspended between past ideologies and present uncertainties, between inherited moral vocabularies and their practical obsolescence (Bauman, 2000, pp. 122–124). The characters' silence, indecision, emotional numbness, or symbolic deaths underscore a wider existential predicament—one that is not unique to any single culture but emblematic of the human condition in late modernity (Sharifova, 2017, pp. 70–72).

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of alienation, as examined across a range of modern novels, is not simply an individual psychological disturbance but a deeply rooted expression of collective moral and cultural collapse. The alienated characters that populate the pages of Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Kamal Abdulla and Orhan Pamuk's narratives reflect the profound ethical uncertainty of the modern and postmodern era—an era in which traditional values no longer provide stable guidance, and where individuals must navigate life in an increasingly fragmented, relativistic, and often absurd moral landscape.

In this research we pointed out that the breakdown of ethical structures is a primary catalyst for alienation in the contemporary novel. The loss of faith in religious, ideological, and communal systems deprives characters of coherent frameworks through which to interpret their experiences and responsibilities. In the absence of these frameworks, moral action becomes ambiguous, choice becomes burdensome, and existence itself appears stripped of meaning. Alienation, in this context, is not chosen—it is endured. It becomes a defining existential condition, in which the self is estranged from its values, its society, and even its own inner coherence.

Philosophical frameworks such as Fromm's "automation conformity," Sartre's "condemned freedom," and Bauman's "liquid modernity" provide powerful tools for understanding how literature reflects and interrogates the ethical disintegration of our time. The characters in modern novels are not simply victims or rebels; they are mirrors of a civilization adrift. Their silence, indecision, emotional detachment, or existential rebellion testify to the deep dissonance between the human longing for meaning and the failure of contemporary systems to supply it.

The modern novel, therefore, assumes a dual role: it not only depicts alienation, but critiques the socio-cultural conditions that produce it. In doing so, it reclaims its moral function—not by preaching solutions, but by bearing witness to ethical erosion and existential suffering. It becomes a literary space where the loss of meaning is not merely lamented, but examined, deconstructed, and, at times, transcended through aesthetic resistance and narrative introspection.

In conclusion, the alienated figure of the modern novel stands as a symbolic witness to the ethical void of late modernity. This figure challenges the reader to confront not only the solitude of the fictional character, but also the deeper moral and cultural fragmentation of their own reality. By illuminating the silent crises of the self in a world without stable values, the novel remains a powerful cultural force—one that preserves the capacity to ask fundamental questions about what it means to live, to act, and to be fully human in an age of moral uncertainty.

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