



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ALIENATION AND STAGES OF LOSS IN HANIF KUREISHI'S "GOODBYE, MOTHER"

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#### ABSTRACT

"Goodbye, Mother", a short story by Hanif Kureishi, depicts the relationship of a middle-aged man, Harry, with his family, especially his mother, and shows the problems which the hegemony imposes on his life. attempts to explore the concept of alienation and the way that the hegemony leads the life of the individuals to alienation through the division of labor and mass medi. Upon Marx's view, ruling class has power to control the process of production, the individual's daily life, and the society's ideology. In Marxists viewpoint, the media as a part of capitalist system supports and distributes the capitalist ideology. All hegemony's productions, such as media, penetrate into the life of the people to the extent that they unconsciously become far from each other. People take part in producing, not based on their pleasure but based on the market need and what determines market is the dominant system. Although Harry has been harmed from this production, he himself has become the means of this production which provides him the superficial satisfaction. All of these issues that are explored in this paper lead to alienation. Also, the capitalist system makes people as individuals who lose their love, job, and relationships; makes them be situated in the stages of grief. Indeed, "Goodbye, Mother" shows how the relationships, affections, and beliefs among the family members and, in general, the individuals can be affected by what hegemony imposes on them.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Harry, the protagonist, accompanies his mother to visit his father's grave. During the trip he flashbacks to his childhood and remembers his mother's unpleasant attitude toward her family. Mother never paid attention to her family and never spoke to him as a mother; because the only important thing for her was watching the television. Harry remembers himself as a dirty child who always being bullied by other children. He considers television as a big problem in their life. He remembers his father as a good man who had worked whole the life for his family. Then, he thinks about his wife; in contrast to his sense toward the mother, he is pleasant and satisfied with his wife. The research investigates the traces of the capitalism through Marxist's viewpoint in this story. Marxist literary criticism, as social criticism, is taken from the Karl Marx's theory which was flourished in the nineteenth century with the goal of creating opportunities for working-class to change their social life.

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Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology* maintain that: "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life." People gain their consciousness during their daily life and social relationships. They consider two parts in human society: "the economic means of production within society- the base- both engenders and controls all human institutions and ideologies- the superstructure-including all social and legal institutions" (Bressler 167). Since the ruling class possesses economy, it has the power to control the people's ideology and even define the people's identity in a way that they are not aware of this exploitation. Antonio Gramsci- an Italian Marxist- believes in the existence of "complex relationship between" the base and superstructure which are controlled by the bourgeoisie. He defines hegemony as the norms and values which established and maintained by the ruling class, and believed by the people. In Gramsci's viewpoint hegemony is the "primary mode of power" which shapes individual's identity, interests, and beliefs; in fact, the institutions, which people work in, define their identity (Bressler 169, 172; Kreps 64). The concept of alienation which is proposed by Marx is seen in "Goodbye, Mother."

Based on Marx's viewpoint alienated labor is a social malady which appears in the private property ruling class (Shane, Kupis, and Liang 67). Marx in "The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" maintains that the man in the capitalist society is involved in alienation. In Marx's view alienation is divided into four types. The first type is the alienation of man from his product. In the political economy, the products of the workers do not belong to him but the other- the capitalist. The second type is the alienation of man from the process of producing in which the worker produces according to the will and force of the economic system not based on his creativity and interest; therefore, he is not satisfied with his labor. The third type of alienation is the alienation of man from himself or his own humanity. This type of alienation is associated with the first two. Producing and being active are the substantial needs of man. By losing the first two, he loses his active life and becomes alienated to his own humanity. The fourth one is "estrangement of man from man". Since the owner of the worker's product is capitalist, he considers capitalist and the whole system as an alien. Also, in the private property system, people in the labor-market are forced to compete to gain the market; therefore, they become alien to each other. Such a system abolishes the affection among the people (41-2).

Louis Althusser, a French Marxist, believes in "the reflection of the superstructure to the base" and asserts that ideology shapes people's consciousness. He defines Ideological State Apparatus (the religion ISA, the family ISA, the political ISA, the communications ISA, etc.) and argues that ideology interpellates people through the ISAs. According to Althusser, the communications ISA consists of press, radio and television and, in general, the mass media hailing people and shaping their identity (Althusser 102; Bressler 173). Tony Bennett, in "Theories of the media, Theories of Society", asserts that the audiences of the press, radio, television, the cinema, and record industry- the mass media- are regarded as "the masses." He continues that "business of producing" of the media and "transmitting messages" are in the hands of the dominant system. Marxists believe that the mass media are the "ideological agencies" of the dominant system that fortifying their values and distributing their messages in the society (Gurevitch et al. 26).

Another feature which is apparent in such a system is "Division of labor": With capitalism there arose the division of labor within each branch of production. This division of labor meant that workers had to specialize in particular tasks... in this system workers become increasingly dependent on the capitalists who own the means of production. Just as the worker is depressed, therefore, both intellectually and physically, to the level of a machine, and from being a man becomes an abstract. (Crins 97)

The effects of the mass media as the communication ISA and division of labor on the people's life, and how they lead to alienation is being criticized in "Goodbye, Mother". The other issue which has been under the consideration in this paper is the stages of loss. Slavoj Zizek in his article states about the five stages of personal loss which were proposed by Elizabeth

Kubler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*. These stages are reaction to the catastrophic personal loss:

Denial (one simply refuses to accept the fact: "This can't be happening, not to me."); anger (which explodes when we can no longer deny the fact: "How this happen to me?"); bargaining ( the hope we can somehow postpone or diminish the fact: "Just let me live to see my children graduate."); depression (libidinal disinvestment: "I'm going to die, so why bother with anything?"); acceptance ("I can't fight it, I may as well prepare for it.").

In Kubler-Ross's view this loss is "any form of catastrophic personal loss (joblessness, death of a loved one, divorce, drug addiction)" and these stages do not necessarily come in the same order and all of them may not be experienced by all patients. Zizek argues that these five stages can be seen in the heart of the capitalist system. The present paper explores the loss and the stages which characters are situated in. In fact the present essay, analyzing "Goodbye, Mother", to show how hegemony manipulates one's personal life and his relationships based on Marxist's viewpoint.

## DISCUSSION

Four characters in this story can be investigated regarding the influences of the capitalism: Harry, Harry's wife, his mother, and his father. "Goodbye, Mother" depicts Harry's struggling with himself and his family. Harry is tearing apart between the past and present. He flashbacks to the past, his childhood, and his relationship with his parents, then, thinks about his wife with whom he is satisfied. The traces of alienation are clear in the life of each character. Some are aware of this alienation, but some are not. What is apparent here is the created alienation in Harry's life by hegemony via the TV programs, as the communication ISA, and the division of labor, as the source of creating the objects from the individuals. In fact, the hegemony through the division of labor and mass media causes the different types of alienation for in the society. The status quo puts each person in the stages of loss. This loss, regarding the capitalist society, can be dependent to whatever makes an individual's identity. Here, the loss refers to the loss of mother, childhood, job, family, and social relations.

The person is stuck in the stages of grief; sometimes tries to relief from them; sometimes does not care and merges into them. In Kubler-Ross's view, as it is indicated above, this loss can refer to losing job, death of valued one, or loss of valued relations. Here, the characters lose their job, love, and relations not in their visible aspect but in an invisible one. Understanding this loss needs more knowledge; not just through education but through finding the inner sense, logic, and essence of the human being. This kind of understanding helps an individual to be aware of this loss. Such a person tries to prevent himself from being an alien or an object, and also, he tries to keep his interests and identity; but the unaware person does not show any attempts to save himself. He finds himself in the threshold and feels dissatisfaction, but does not know the source of this dissatisfaction and becomes bewildered. He is not able to find a way to get rid of this status.

## The Role of Media

Harry remembers the days that his mother preferred TV programs to her family. It seems that the mother has been hypnotized by this production and has not attempted to get free from that:

“Mother had always watched television from the late afternoon until she went to bed ... She preferred the faces on television to the faces of her family” (Kureishi 315). This situation reminds Marxists’ view that the purpose of the hegemony is to put its ideology on the society, and the mass media as system’s production convey the messages in the form of news and entertainment to the people. Everything that people see and listen influences on their thinking through the media. In fact, the media gives determined values to the people (Bennett 8- 9). The people are attracted to what the media produces and their thinking are unconsciously shaped by the productions based on hegemony’s interest.

Mother is pictured as a character who has been influenced by hegemony’s ideology. The influence of the media on Harry’s mother creates a distance between her and the family, in a manner that she has not been aware of this space. When she speaks with Harry about the past, despite Harry’s feeling, she thinks that she had been the responsible mother. This is clear when Harry tells her: “You were rotten to me.” She answers: “Oh, was I so terrible?”, “she cried: I only gave you life and fed and clothed you and brought you up all right, didn’t I? You were never late for school!”, then Harry says: “Sorry? You couldn’t wait for us to get out of the house!” (Kureishi 337). Although mother has lost her relationship with the family, she does not believe this situation. This refusing puts her in the phase of denial of loss, and also, the acceptance phase: “Haven’t you done better than the other boys? They’re plumbers! People would give their legs to have your life!” (337).

The attitude of the mother has had the deep effect on Harry. Since he has not received any attention, he has not good sense toward her: “He didn’t like to touch her but he made himself bend down to kiss her” (Kureishi 314). Due to the mother’s attitudes, as an individual who is shaped by hegemony, Harry becomes bewildered and believes himself situated in the threshold. Blaming TV programs, he believes that his mother does not feel any responsibility toward her family and he feels the created distance. This status makes him angry; he feels the shadow of the media in his life and enjoys escaping from it: “It gave him pleasure to turn the TV off” (315). The system by its productions causes people to be alienated with each other and makes them have no real sense of satisfaction. Thus, the alienation between mother and family members, which occurs through the hegemony’s production- TV programs- is clear.

## The Objects of Hegemony

The point which is clear in Harry’s life is that although he has lost his mother and his childhood because of the system, he is working for this system as a successful journalist and earns through it. He works as an agent of the hegemony who chooses and gives news to the society. He works to earn more and have

the better life, and accepts this way: “Money was a way of measuring good things. The worth of a man had to be related to what he was able to earn” (Kureishi 321). Considering Althusser’s view, ISAs interpellate people to accept their ideology. Harry is unconsciously hailed to the hegemony’s ideology.

He feels the destructive effects in one way but he keeps working for the system to continue the life. His is situated in the phase of bargaining. He cannot escape the status quo and justifies this situation because of the good financial conditions. Marx in his “Economic and Philosophical Manuscript” declares that the influences which political economy imposes on the society, makes people as an object: “On the basis of political economy itself, in its own words, we have shown that the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretchedness of commodities. . . Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity” (136- 37). Comparing Harry and his mother, illustrates both as the objects of the hegemony and shows how they are hailed to its ideology, but the system uses different policies in hailing. Erich Fromm, A neo-Marxist, states that man has become a slave of his production (Shane, Kupis, and Liang 68); one of these productions is the mass media which enslaves Harry, in one way, and his mother, in another way. Hegemony deforms their identity and makes them as its own objects.

Gramsci believes that hegemony, to sustain its power, keeps people to be satisfied in their position and through its power prevents the individuals to resist and makes them accept their situation (Kreps 64). The programs and advertisements, which hypnotize mother and the people like her, are the financial sources for the owners as capitalists, and mother as a consumer is a source of benefit for them. Mother is not aware of interpellation and denies the situation. Harry, on the surface, considering social and economic status, has all the things that other people desire; but, deep inside, there is no happiness: “My job. I feel I’m in a cult, there” (Kureishi 338). He works for this system as a journalist and provides the news upon its policy. In fact, he has become a means of production of the messages that hegemony wants to distribute. He is successful in his labor but this success is due to being the object of this system and he has to accept what it wants without complaining: “He had shut his mouth and pleased the bosses” (321). He considers himself as a “hollow man” who does not know his situation.

Harry believes in the prevailed idea of capitalism which relates the value of the people to the money that they earn whether they are pleasant or not: “the worth of a man had to be related to what he was able to earn” (Kureishi 321), but, in contrast, Alexandra, his wife, does not accept this idea. She follows her pleasure and love: “Life and meaning had been created because she had never doubted the value of what they were doing. It was love” (329). Her activities and beliefs show her awareness of the hegemony’s effects; she is seeking for the ways to be free from the imposed ideology, and the way she chooses in life is showing her attempts to prevent herself being an object of the system. Alienation in Marx’s viewpoint “drives from division of labor”, and activity and producing are in the essence of human which are abolished by capitalism

(Rueschemeyer 25). By division of labor, the action of production occurs based on the hegemony's will and the workers as producers are subordinates, and are not the owners of their production: "The products of capitalism begin to control their producers" (Sarup 137). Therefore, the fissure between the worker and his production will appear; and the worker becomes unhappy.

Harry's father is depicted as a man who "had worked all day his entire life and had done well" (Kureishi 330). Although father wanted to hide his desperation after retirement, he was depressed. He attempts to produce more and gain money to be able to stop this situation for his children in the future. He went to the doctor. The Doctor "listened to Father's terse, urgent account of inner darkness and spiritual collapse before murmuring, 'Life has no meaning, eh?'" (331), the father said: "'The wrong meaning,' . . . Harry was puzzled and amused by father striking out for happiness. . . . What did he expect? . . . Why couldn't he sink into benign, accepting old age?" (331).

### Awareness and Striving for Resistance

Dietrich Rueschemeyer in, *Power and the division of labor*, discusses on Adam Smith's view about the division of labor and results that the mind of a worker who just pays attention to producing a special thing cannot control the other issues of life, therefore, "an elementary education of the common people can counteract these effects of division of labor" (22). Father felt the fact; he had worked whole the life and made himself be satisfied by working and hoping better future for his children, and this is what puts him into the stage of bargaining. He tried to gain money to make his children educated, through which they gain the ability to control their life. The problem appears when Harry accompanied his father to the doctor and said to the doctor: "There's no cure for living!" (332), the father told him in fury: "Shut your big mouth in future! Who's asking for your stupid opinion! There's no cure! You're saying I'm incurable? . . . What do you know! You don't know anything! . . . Why did we stay in that small house? . . . The money went on sending you to a good school! I wanted you to be educated but you've turned into a sarcastic, smart-arsed idiot!" (Kureishi 332). Even by education Harry has been formed as an object in the system and has become an alien person. Madan Sarup in *Education and Marxism* considers Marx's view and concludes that knowledge is a production and:

education is treated as a thing . . . It is attributed with powers usually given to man . . . it comes to be seen as a power over and above man, and therefore beyond change . . . Scientists produce commodities through their specialized labor. But instead of developing science to attain humanist goals, science and its products are today separated from the subject, the scientist who produces it . . . science has become bourgeois science.

Harry is challenging between two senses. On the one side, he is attracted to Alexandra and afraid of losing her: "He was afraid Alexandra would fall in love with some exotic idea, or with Thailand, and never want to return" (Kureishi 323). On the other side, he is dissatisfied but does not aware about the source of his dissatisfaction. Harry is struggling with the idea

that everything is determined for man and there is no control over what the life has imposed on him: "If it's all been decided years ago, if there's no free will but only the determinism of childhood, then it's pointless to think we can make any difference" (320), but Alexandra convinces him to change his mind: "Freedom is possible . . . The freedom that comes from understanding" (320), and Harry thinks about her ideas.

Alexandra is the other person who Harry thinks about. Although they have different ideas, he is satisfied with living with her. Kureishi pictures Alexandra a character as opposed to the mother. Resisting the hegemony in Gramsci's view needs recognition of "the dominant norms and values" (Kreps 69). We see Alexandra as a person who is struggling with the hegemony's intention about imposing its ideology: she does not like to watch the TV programs: "Noise she called it" (Kureishi 333); she does not like Harry's job: "She said she was sorry he had to go into the office – 'such a place' – every day" (325); or she tries to pass her time by doing cultural and social activities:

Alexandra was interested in the history of food, the garden, the children, novels. She sang in the local choir. She was a governor of the local school and helped the children with their reading and writing. She talked of how, inexplicably, they suffered from low self-esteem. It was partly caused by 'class', but she suspected there were other, 'inner' reasons. (Kureishi 319).

She strives to help children to know themselves and gain knowledge and self-esteem, to make their identity. She believes in the ability of controlling life: "Because I am one person . . . A whole" (320). She goes to the therapist to speak and tries to recognize herself to make a better life and relationship with others: "Something in me is making my life-my relationship..." (320). By contrast, the mother has been absorbed to the system's policy that is clear through the lines: "She didn't speak, she didn't write to him, she hardly phoned. She was staring into the bright light, minute after minute, hour after hour..." (326); the mother becomes alien to her family. The two characters, mother and Alexandra, are depicted to show the different ways of encountering hegemony and the help of awareness in resistance. Alexandra tries to be aware of the impacts that system aims to impose. This awareness helps her to challenge and keep herself away from alienation- to be an alien with her activities and family members.

### Conclusion

Textual analysis has explored the concept of alienation and its different types based on Marx's standpoint, and also, hegemony, the mass media, and the division of labor, the features of capitalism, which lead to alienation, have been taken into the consideration. The cold relationship between mother and son and the distance which is created through the mass media can be expanded to the whole society through the other productions. This gap shows the fourth type of alienation: alienation of man from man. Through the story the estrangement of Harry and his father to their works is clear. Harry is not satisfied enough of his situation and his father, after many years of working, has not any sense of happiness.

This situation depicts their alienation to their labor and products which make them “hollow” creatures who belong to the dominant system. This status indicates the first, second, and third type of alienation: alienation of man from his product, from the process of production, and from himself. On the other side, the beliefs of the people, like mother in this story, who consider money and superficial conditions as pleasure instead of spirituality and love, are a kinds of beliefs which exist in the political economy.

Through this belief- in Marxists’ view- capitalism adorns the appearance of the people’s life to keep them be happy and satisfied with their position. It forces them to keep back from resisting and leads them to the alienation of man from himself- humanity. The deep unhappiness which is caused by people’s alienation from their labor and product is the result of the division of labor; people also become alien with their own natural need which is activity, production, and fulfillment of their labor in Marx’s word. All the mentioned conditions put the characters in the stages of loss: five stages of grief which has been proposed by Kubler-Ross. In fact, capitalism can be considered as a source of creating grief. Considering the whole society, this loss in the capitalist system is the loss of relationships and whatever makes the identity of the people. While in this status mother denies and accepts, father bargains and depressed, Alexandra is the only person who is aware of the loss, therefore, strives to resist the imposed ideology. Harry is angry and bargains but at the end when he is waiting for Alexandra, it seems that he wants to put himself in her way. As a result, all the issues which have been scrutinized above among the family members can be expanded as the problems of the people in the capitalist society in which awareness helps them to be able to control their own identity and life.

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