A Study of *Moby Dick* from the Perspective of Alienation Theory

Lu-lu YUE¹,a

¹Foreign Language Department, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China

604921902@qq.com

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**Abstract.** *Moby Dick* is one of the most famous American novels in literature history, which represents the capitalist system of America. With the detailed description from Herman Melville, it will be easy to analyze the different features of alienation brought to different people, mainly the capitalists and the laborers, and the reasons why people are alienated with the production, the labor process as well as people themselves. The whaling industry helps capitalist system developing quicker and quicker than before, however, there are some contradicts in it which alienates themselves from their origin subject. After the analysis of alienation in capitalist society, it is clear to know that the essence of alienation and the only solution to alienation is to free all human beings, which is the core of Communist theory by Marx.

1. Introduction

The theory of alienation is one of an indispensable theory used by Marx, in order to analyze the social problem in capitalist country. “As a professional term in philosophy, Marx gives the word totally new meaning in the history of philosophy, which means “a condition of workers in a capitalist economy, resulting from a lack of identity with the products of their labor and a sense of being controlled or exploited.” (Online ) Most of scholars agree with the concept of alienation we use today is started from Hegel, be inherited by Feuerbach, and be completed by Marx.

Marx develops Hegel’s the alienation of religion into the alienation of society, and then puts forward a brand-new concept, Alienation of Labor or Labor Alienation, in the Paris Manuscript, also called *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844*. We can understand the theory of alienation, according to its own contradiction, which means a subject give birth to a contradict, namely an object. As an extrinsic power, the object will place itself above the subject, as well as restrain and stifle the subject, and that is what we called alienation in the field of Marxist Philosophy. Therefore, there should be 2 features included in alienation, the first one is the object must be objectified from the subject, which means they come from the same thing. And the second one is the object must be contradicted with the subject, which generates an alienated and ruling power, that is to say, the object will not be back to the subject. According to *The Introduction to Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844* written by Wang Guixian and Tian Songyi, it is easy to draw a conclusion that there are 3 features in it, which is the alienation between production and producer, the alienation between labor process and the laborers, and the alienation between people in capitalist system. What Marx most care about and the solution he suggests in his book is to solve human problem. As we found in *The Introduction to Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844*, human problem in nowadays can be explained as human beings know what is happiness, but people do not know how to actualize it. In this way, it is easy to understand the theory of alienation is to
make people realize why people feel alienation and nihility in the capitalist society, and one of the feasible ways to get rid of this sense is to free people from the oppression of capitalist system entirely and strive for a higher goal, the communist society.

*Moby Dick* is a full-length novel about whaling-voyage written by American novelist, Herman Melville, which is published in 1851. It has been recognized as one of the greatest novels in 19th America, because the writer gives readers an overall panoramic picture of people’s life in 19th century. Although Melville lives in the Age of Romanticism, the multiple themes in *Moby Dick* make the book with very realistic content as well as romantic style. Melville not only demonstrates the realistic living condition of laborers at that age, but he also depicts the magnificent process of whaling. Melville makes his story full of myth and legend, so people in recent years regard *Moby Dick* as one of the great books in 19th century of American, for which is composed of religious allegory and heart-stopping whaling story. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of society, it is easy to discover many details that American laborers in 19th century are bitterly exploited by the capitalist.

2. The Alienation Between Production and Producers

Firstly, the difference between animal’s production and human’s production lies in animal’s production which is used by itself while human beings have their own free will to manipulate their own production created by themselves.[2] however, in the capitalist society, there is not much free will in people’s choice, because what they have produced belong to the capitalists who hire the laborers. Secondly, the continually improved modern technology has extremely advanced better than before, and people even create nuclear weapons to wipe out all the threats for all human beings. However, the apocalypse is deepened by human beings themselves. So, the promising future pursued by all human is far away from all human. In this way, we can understand it as the thing human produced compels people into a dilemma of which people cannot get rid. As for the reason why alienation exists in production and producer, according to Marx’s theory, the problem is rooted in the capitalist system, and next, there are many evidences extracted from *Moby Dick* to prove what he has said.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville depicts a whole equipment of whaling in 1850s, revealing the actual industry in America. However, people in the whaling-ship are divided by their wages, the lowest and newcomer laborers like Ishmael only can get 1/777 after they have been floating on the sea for 3 years. Even the harpooners who risk their lives to hunt a whale bigger than themselves hundred times can only get 1/90 of the profit sharing. So, can you imagine how much the sponsor can get after the 3 years’ whaling? The sperm oil brought back by the sailors can be made for lamp-oil, flavor, etc. The most welcomed and expensive ambergris used by the aristocrats are extracted from a dyspeptic sperm whale. The most universal use of the oil can be used as lamp-oil, while these oils also can be used to scrub people’s body, so only the aristocrats have money to buy and time to use it. What’s more, even the coronation of the royals in British, the royals also need to use already purified sperm oil to smooth their hair, and these oils can be used to keep body clean. The sperm oil is an indispensable thing for the society.

Therefore, it is a rather pathetic industry chain, from which the capitalist will always get profits, while the laborers or the proletarians and people with low social status can only be exploited by them. Since there are so many fortunes in whaling, will laborers working in the whaling industry gain a lot of fortune? But what is the reason why the sailors keep whaling-voyage over and over
again? Such a huge industry chain, certainly the lowest part is not the most profitable part, and the most profitable part should be in reprocessing and marketing part in the middle. Since the capitalists have processed the oil extracted directly from the sperm whale, so they can put it into the market and people in the society will buy it with price more than 10 times, even the sailors who brought it to the earth, they also should conform in the market rule. In this way, though the sperm oil brought by the laborers, the laborers are oppressed by the oil, which is to say the object contradicts and oppresses the subject.

In conclusion, the productions the laborers create are supposed to bring the laborers fortune and get them out of dilemma, but under the control of capitalist, the maximum profits are absorbed by the capitalists, and the producer, or the laborers, can only get a fixed wage gave by the capitalists, which means the surplus value are exploited by the capitalist. The proletarians who are exploited by the capitalists, according to Marx’ theory of alienation, have been alienated by the production they create.

3. The Alienation Between Labor Process and the Laborer

The labor process originally should be full of satisfaction rather than a sense of failure. The reason lies in the production created by the laborer which will originally encourage a sense of satisfaction inside of the laborer, so the labor process will be transferred into a process of gaining positive feeling. Besides, the labor process should be freed from oppression and it definitely is free and felicific. However, laborers work for the capitalists under the capitalist system, all the production produced by the laborer belong to the capitalists, and all the laborers get is the relatively changeless wages and an aching body. So, the labor process is transferred into the exploitative process.

Many scholars agree with what Oliver Goldsmith said, “where wealth accumulates, and men decay.” What Bernard Shaw states in How Wealth Accumulates and Men Decay are same as what Marx expresses in Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844. It is the modern capitalists who deprive the ordinary people, whose right to enjoy life with free will. When the laborers end the 8 hours working a day, they return home but find a whole boring working day has squeezed out of their mood to enjoy life, and all they want to do may just eat dinner and have a good sleep, and next day will be same as before. If things go on like this for a long time, the laborers find their living conditions are not improved by hard-working, and they gradually lose faith to life. To some degree, the laborers have totally become the vassals of the capitalists, who are exploited by the capitalists to produce surplus value day and night.

In the novel, the evidences of alienation between labor process and laborer are quite easy to find, taking the whaling voyage for example, with the sponsorship of the capitalists, hundreds of laborers gathered in the ship voyage across the Pacific Ocean aiming to find the sperm whales and kill them, but actually the captain and the crew do not know where are the whales. In some way, voyaging in the sea is an action of being alienated from the terrene, because communication technology at that time is not advanced like nowadays, so once a person decides to take a voyage, they can disappear from the public eye for a long time. According to what have been said by captain Ahab, he has been floating on the sea for more than 40 years, and time staying on earth for him is just 3 years. So, he has been fed upon dry salted fare for nearly 40 years and his wife is like a widow with a husband alive on the sea. [1] Due to the special requirement of whaling, this is the evidence of laborers are alienated by the labor process. The sailors risk their life for earning money, but what they have done
do not improve their living conditions, but frustrate themselves deeply. Originally, working as a process of creating thing should bring a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction but the laborers feel life is out of control. Therefore, in the system of capitalist, the labor process is not full of happiness and gratification, but a sense of weariness and void, taking whaling in the novel for example, which is a process full of danger. Firstly, captain Ahab’s leg is bitten by the fierce whale and the captain of Samuel Enderby also loses one arm. As for the harpooners, they have to take a smaller boat to hunt the whale face to face. Secondly, the captain of the Rachel loses his son forever and what is the most astonishing is captain Ahab rejects to help him to find his son, and in the end captain Ahab loses all he got including his own life. Thirdly, all the crew except Ishmael on the Pequod die in the whaling-voyage.

4. The Alienation of People in Capitalist System

According to the first 2 principles mentioned above, naturally it is easy to deduce the third one, the alienation of people, particular in capitalist society. The reason lies in the first 2 conclusion mentioned above, since people who work for the capitalists have no happy and bright life, and they feel no satisfaction in doing their jobs, so they have neither a healthy body, nor a normal relation with other people. Some people may be always melancholy, for his or her life is always in poor conditions, which may trigger the thought of suicide inside of their hearts. And some people may complain about all the unfair things they have met in their life, but still they have no control of it. Therefore, some people may be easily incited to violate laws and stir the peace of society. The alienation of people is rather complicated to analyze and explain, and it is also the most indispensable part in solving the society problem, because the ultimate aim of replacing capitalist system what Marx believes is the solution to people’s problem.

In the capitalist system, the gap of wealth grows larger day by day, therefore, the misunderstanding and suspicion between people is deepened by each other. The laborers work for the capitalists, but they only earn a few wages to keep fundamental living. However, the capitalists make good use of their power and money to exploit the laborers. Take Moby Dick for example, the most obvious evidence of alienation between people is what captain Ahab has done. First at all, captain Ahab doesn’t believe in the sponsors, let alone Peleg, Starbuck, and Stubb. So, captain Ahab secretly convenes 5 people as his whaling-team including Fedallah, because captain Ahab wants to arrange 1 or 2 persons trusted around himself, rather than the people hired by Peleg for whom the laborers work. The reason is quite obvious, captain Ahab wants to kill the white whale, but the crews hired by Peleg are aiming to sperm oil and earning money. Secondly, captain Ahab has been voyaging on the sea for 40 years, sometimes he gets tired of chasing the white whale, but he insists and never gives up to fight against the pitiless sea monster till the last second of his life. Captain Ahab is a pathetic old man, who has been whaling for 40 years, so he has already been unable to integrate into the normal human life. To some degree, he has been tired of being exploited by the cunning capitalists, so he would rather hide himself from others and never return again. The reason is same as why Ishmael wants to become a sailor in the beginning. They are all depressed by the hypocritical people who only care about money, so captain Ahab revenges his anger on the sea monster that symbolizes all the evilness and hatred in the world, while Ishmael as an observer of the world, he keeps his mind clearly and doesn’t lose his faith for life and becomes the only survivor of Pequod.

There is another obvious evidence in Moby Dick, which is at the first-time captain Ahab meets whaling-ship on the sea. Usually all the whaling-ships meeting on the sea will exchange
information about whales, but captain Ahab ignores the Albatross, the first whaling-ship they have met. Later although captain Ahab has contacted with the other whaling-ships such as the Town-Ho and the Samuel Enderby, the only aim of keeping contact with others for captain Ahab is to ask the information about the white whale. The Pequod is also stratified, and there are many evidences such as the different wages among them, and they have the different dinner time, which is captain Ahab eats first and the Mates eat what left by the captain and the rest can be done in the same manner.

The laborers are alienated by themselves when they could not understand each other. In the labor process they only feel the sense of void and unhappiness, because they have been under the exploiting of capitalists so long time, and it is hard for them to find the true meaning of human life or to achieve the life goal in the long run of life. The reason why the laborers are alienated by themselves is under the longtime being exploited by the capitalists, they have lost the faith in other people, and they would rather trust in themselves.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, after all the analysis mentioned above, the alienation is caused by the capitalist system. Herman Melville has revealed the different features of alienation, and firstly the producers are alienated from the production they produced. The oil distracted from the sperm whale neither brings them fortune, nor the sense of happiness. The harder the workers work, the more deformed their arms and legs become. All these evidences confirm that alienation is an object which comes from the subject, but the object is contradicted from it. Secondly, the laborers are alienated from the labor process because laborers are exploited by the capitalists. Captain Ahab has been voyaging for nearly 40 years in order to hunt whales which proves that people in that society have become a part of the machine. Thirdly, the alienation between people is different, for people from different social class feel differently about the capitalist system, therefore, people in such a society with no humanistic care could not develop well in a healthy way. If a society has to develop, people’s development is the foundation of all things, only people in a humanistic society can promote the society toward a bright future. Therefore, we should think highly of people’s development and free human mind from the chain of capitalist system, which is the core of Marx’s Communist Theory.

References