

Brandon Cavazos

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Prof. Fernandez

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D-I-G

The concept of alienation can be understood as both a social and existential condition. In John Christman's essay, "Decentered Social Selves: Interrogating Alienation in Conversation" he quotes Rahel Jaeggi, describing alienation as, "an inadequate power and a lack of presence in what one does, a failure to identify with one's own actions and desires and to take part in one's own life" (44). Alienation emerges as a profound social and personal pathology, disrupting self-realization and democratic agency. This notion resonates with Martin Heidegger's idea of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), which highlights the human experience of being "thrown" into a persisting world where external forces – historical, cultural, and social – define one's context. Alienation viewed through this lens reflects the individuals struggle to reclaim agency and meaning within systems that obscure their autonomy (Sheehan *Making sense of heidegger: A paradigm shift* 159). Similarly, Marx critique of capitalism as a system that intensifies alienation by reducing labor to a commodity, serving individuals from the products of their work, the act of creation, and their own potential. "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever-cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things" (Marx *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Estranged Labour XXII*). Both perspectives reveal how

alienation arises when individuals are disconnected from their capacity to define and own their existence.

Building on this framework, Christman dissects Jaeggi's philosophy on how alienation cuts deeper than the general suffering that manifests in modern life. Christman outlines alienation that obstructs the conditions necessary for self-determination viewed as a disconnection from one's own actions, social identity, and cohesiveness, presenting universal examples of how alienation manifests from failure to integrate one's self-concept into a meaningful narrative. Three universal examples of alienation emerging as critical touchpoints for understanding this pathology. First, alienation manifests when individuals lack agency or fail to recognize their own actions as their own, leaving them detached from their desires and life trajectories, "This can emerge in any number of forms, including rigidification of one's life trajectory in a way that prevents experimentation and adjustment-feels not only that the directionality of that momentum is not of your own choosing-actions and experiences become unrecognizable" (44). Second, alienation results from structural societal forces, such as capitalism, that stifle agency and prevent individuals from engaging authentically with their identities and values, "modes of production and/or social organization prevent members of those societies to feel that their identities and evaluative perspectives are being recognized as the 'sources of normative authority' typically afforded to agents as worth of respect." (55). Third, alienation prevents individuals from constructing meaningful self-understanding, "The question whether someone is 'herself' is not about whether she remains true to certain projects and commitments but whether in passing through various fundamental commitments she is able to tell a coherent 'appropriative story' of herself that can integrate the ruptures and ambivalence in her life history" (170).

While democracy offers an antidote of inclusion and resolution, it often perpetuates alienation by enforcing societal roles tied to perceived utility. Mothers are reduced to child-rearing, the elderly to diminished capacity, and those outside cycles of power to irrelevance. In a society driven by rapid success and valorization of dominance, individuals are confined to predefined roles, alienating them from their full potential. This forced alienation-rooted in societal values that prioritize productivity over human complexity-creates a systemic exclusion for those who cannot conform to the prevailing ideals of success and power. By analyzing Hiroko Oyamada's, *The Hole* through the lens of alienation, we will explore how our protagonist Asa's experiences reflect key dimensions of disconnection through alienation from self-determination through the monotony of her new role as a housewife, alienation from societal roles as she is reduced to 'the bride' by others, and alienation from her personal identity through surreal encounters such as the mysterious hole. What our author deprives Asa of is her previous meaning even if she didn't attain it, it was reachable in her own mind. She then finds herself further away from that meaning, choosing the lesser of two evils. These disruptions parallel broader existential and societal critiques of alienation from Asa's previous life, offering insight into its role in shaping human experience within a capitalistic stylized society.

From the outset, we are thrust into Asa's life as she is shuffled into the unforeseen decision to relocate to the countryside due to her husband's job transfer. While Asa perceives this move as her choice, she acknowledges that it felt like the appropriate choice to assume the role of being his partner and go with her husband. This scenario embodies Heidegger's concept of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), highlighting how she is thrown into these pre-existing conditions to be shaped by the external force of being the wife in this predicament. Her lack of memory about her husband's family and the place they are moving to underscores her disconnection and the

passive role she occupies in her own life. At her previous job, Asa's position as a part time employee made it clear she wasn't considered important, reinforcing her marginalization within a capitalist framework that values utility and productivity. The inadequate pay and stress of work reinforce her decision to resign. Even to be influenced by a coworker who expressed a preference to be a housewife rather than a corporate slave. However, this transition fails to alleviate Asa's sense of alienation. Instead, her daily routine becomes monotonous and unfulfilling, filled with mundane tasks and aimless wandering. She reflects: "The hours moved slowly, but the days passed with staggering speed. Soon I lost all sense of time- The days were slipping through my fingers" (Oyamada 23).

Her relocation is not merely a physical move but a symbolic displacement from autonomy. The societal expectations of being a supportive wife override her personal desires, exemplifying how external forces dictate individual trajectories. Asa's loss of time perception signifies a deeper existential crisis – a disconnection from the temporal markers that give life structure and perceived meaning, like her work. The repetitive and unfulfilling nature of her tasks erodes her sense of self, as her actions are no longer aligned with personal goals or values. Asa further articulates her disconnection: "I had to spend money to pass the time. People say housewives get free room and board and even time to nap, but the truth is napping was the most economical way to make it through the day" (23).

Her need to spend money merely to 'pass the time' highlights a void of purpose and the commodification of her existence—a stark reflection of Marx's critique of capitalism, where individuals are estranged from products of their labor and creative potential. The act of napping to economize time intensifies lack of engagement in her life and forwards her alienation. Contrasting her current state, Asa recalls her coworker who spent paychecks on adorning her

fingertips with rhinestones – a cycle of temporary fulfillment that, while superficial, provide a semblance of agency and self-expression in the face of daunting corporate stress. Through Asa's lens, we observe how societal values that prioritize conformity and productivity over individual complexity fail to offer true inclusivity or fulfillment. Her narrative critiques the broader alienation inherent in both corporate and domestic roles within a capitalist society.

Asa's sense of alienation deepens as societal roles confine her identity when the community refers to Asa solely as "the bride" (35), reducing her to her marital status and erasing her individuality. This label reflects societal expectations and pressures, reinforcing Christmans's second universal example of alienation: structural forces that prevent individuals from engaging authentically with their identities and values. Iani Maloney, a reviewer for *The Japan Times* writes, "*The Hole* is concerned with the plight of women in Japan. In fact, you couldn't ask for a more concise, moving and subtly angry study of the pressures and expectations placed on women by Japanese society" (Maloney *Book Marks reviews of The Hole*). This reduction also implies a singular path forward: motherhood. Asa reflects on the societal notion that having children could provide her with purpose and a means to overcome alienation: "If you had a child, you'd have your hands full, believe me- having a child would change things, but it wasn't exactly the change I was looking for. Besides, was this really the right environment for raising a kid?" (47).

The implication that her alienation could be resolved through motherhood not only reinforces traditional gender roles but exposes the cyclical nature of alienation itself: mothers, confined by the same societal expectations, perpetuate the roles imposed upon them. Asa observes this in the community's simpler way of life, where those who work do so for the whole day and those who stay home to raise children to contribute to the cycle that repeats across generations. This cyclical reduction of women to their roles as mothers or wives within the

community is emphasized in Asa's eerie interaction with family photographs. As she studies old pictures of her husband's family, she notices a striking resemblance between the women: "But the more I studied that photograph, the clearer it was- the two women definitely resembled each other- Grandma was looking down at me in her black kimono" (27).

This moment serves as a haunting glimpse into Asa's potential future – a path dictated by familial expectations. Tomiko, her mother-in-law, subtly reinforces these roles through her interactions, ensuring that Asa understands the duties and expectations of being a housewife. Her role is not a choice but a mantle she is expected to inherit, further disconnecting her from any authentic self-determination. Her narrative exposes the cost of conformity and raises questions about the true inclusivity of a society that prioritizes tradition and repetition over individuality and growth.

This stagnation culminates in a series of surreal and unsettling experiences that reflect her fragmented sense of self. This is most vividly illustrated when Asa encounters a mysterious black creature and subsequently falls into a hole: "There were no birds, no dogs, no cats- just this black animal- I saw the animal's tail slip through the grass, and I leapt after it, but there was nothing to catch me. I fell into the hole" (31).

This scene transcends physicality, symbolizing Asa's internal struggle. The black creature represents an aspect of Asa's fractured self, slipping out of reach. Her pursuit mirrors her attempt to grasp something intangible, falling into the hole, which creates the inability to create a coherent and meaningful self-narrative tailor made for her. Kirkus Reviews points Asa's pattern by stating, "Throughout, Oyamada balances the surreal with the quotidian" (Reviews). This internal void is a space where identity is stripped away, leaving her suspended between reality

and absurdity. Unlike her earlier struggles, this experience signifies a deeper wake up call to her immediate surroundings as supposed to being stained thoughts in her head. While the hole may symbolize an opportunity for Asa to confront and redefine her identity, the decent into her subconscious would be a necessary step in deconstructing her alienated self to rebuild anew. Throughout the book, the recurring motif builds traction towards the fatal conclusion for our protagonist, as she takes a job at a convenience store. With nothing to do, realizing she is in a community where “children go back to school” (91). and all the adults are either at work or retired. She submits to her monotonous role, as described: “With every bump and dip, the 7-Eleven uniform in the basket in front of me hopped into the air. There’s nothing to do here. We never get any customers. Still, somebody’s got to work the register” (91).

Being devoid of her purpose or fulfillment reduces Asa to a functional role, mirroring the same pattern of alienation she sought to escape. The uniform itself becomes a symbol of conformity, erasing individuality and replacing it with a faceless identity tied to her function. Asa’s reflection in the mirror, showing the face of her mother-in-law rather than her own, cements the ultimate transformation assimilated and prescribed role dictated by her husband’s family and society at large. This moment blurs the boundaries highlighting the collapse of her individuality as we know it.

In examining Asa’s experiences in Hiroko Oyamada’s *The Hole*, we are reminded of the complex interplay between societal structures, personal identity, and the ever-present struggle to keep meaning. Alienation, as explored through her journey, is not merely a condition to be endured but a profound wake-up call a mirror held up to the systems we inhabit and the choices we make within them. Whether in the monotony of domestic life, the confinement of societal roles, or the fragmentation of personal identity, Asa’s alienation resonates with the dissonance of

many of us feel in our own lives. We wage a constant battle between the ideals discussed: democracy and the critique of Marxist thought, both offering paths that, while imperfect, illuminate different ways of understanding human connection and purpose. Asa's story compels us to ask: Is alienation an inevitable byproduct of societal progress, or could it be the very catalyst we need to pursue a more meaningful existence? Does alienation serve as a warning, pushing us to confront the distractions of modern life, or is it a tool-however uncomfortable- that can help us carve out a truer path?

Asa's fall into the mysterious hole symbolizes not just her disconnection but also her potential transformation. If alienation can be seen as a state of thrownness, then the act of trying to climb out and failing represents our shared struggle to reclaim agency and meaning in a world that often obscures them. What does that climb look like, is it even worth coming out of? Is there a golden path where communities unite in harmony, or is life an unrelenting competition in which we must carve out our own little ecosystems of purpose? Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in between, in the balance between collective understanding, individual resilience, and a different capitalized dream.

While Asa's story may leave us questioning whether escape from alienation is possible, it also reminds us that the fight for meaning is always within reach. Whether we are scaling the false pyramid of a capitalist dream, seeking a utopia rooted in shared humanity, or simply digging toward the light at the bottom of our own holes, the journey matters. Asa shows us that even within the confines of alienation, there are moments of choice, introspection, and growth even if it's not the outcome we desire.

The alternative interpretation of Asa's journey of alienation itself challenges us to reconsider what it means to lead a meaningful life. From the surreal metaphors of *The Hole* to the broader critique of alienation theory, we see that the fight for self-determination is never straightforward. We live in the absolute peak of humanity and have a surmountable opportunity to search for introspective meaning through the unlimited resources at our disposal, we can go as far as we want with as wide as we need to. Again, maybe alienation, rather than being the end, is the beginning of our awareness coming forth, our outside perspective being initiated, the path toward what we constitute as a 'good life' – doesn't have to be seen in the immediate moment, but if we are keen on not digging a hole that isn't too deep inside the inner workings of our mind that prevent us from climbing out, we can begin to see that digging our own holes no longer serves us.

Works Citations:

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