



The Portrayal of Worker Alienation in the Movie *American Fiction* (2023)

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Abstract

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This study aims to identify the practices of alienation and examine how the main character, Monk, confronts and responds to his alienated condition. Directed by Cord Jefferson, *American Fiction* (2023) portrays the conflict between Monk—a Black writer—and the publishing industry that demands conformity to market-driven stereotypes. As financial pressures mount, Monk is forced to compromise his creative autonomy to meet both economic needs and external expectations. This study employs Karl Marx's (1977) theory of alienation, which conceptualizes the estrangement of workers from their labor, the act of production, their species-being, and their fellow humans, due to exploitative capitalist conditions. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research analyzes selected scenes and dialogues to identify how these dimensions of alienation manifest in Monk's experiences. The findings reveal that Monk undergoes all four forms of alienation: from the product of his labor, from the process of writing, from his creative identity, and from others in his personal and professional life. Despite moments of resistance, Monk ultimately chooses to persist within the system of alienation in order to sustain his livelihood. This study highlights the psychological and existential dilemmas faced by creative workers under capitalism, offering insight into the commodification of art and identity in contemporary cultural production.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies, labor is not merely a means of survival, it is also an expression of creativity, identity, and purpose. Yet, in a system dominated by capitalism, work often becomes a burden rather than a fulfillment of one's potential. Workers who contribute creatively to society, particularly those in the cultural and literary sectors, frequently face a dilemma: remain true to their ideals or compromise under economic pressure. As Horgan (2021) notes, while creativity and freedom are integral to meaningful labor, workers are often forced to surrender autonomy due to material necessity. In environments where individuals must choose between laboring without idealism or not working at all, many suppress their aspirations to meet economic demands. This leads to worker alienation, a condition in which individuals feel disconnected from their labor, its outcomes, their fellow humans, and even their own sense of self.

The concept of alienation is deeply rooted in Marxist thought. Karl Marx (1977) theorized alienation as a multifaceted phenomenon, where the laborer becomes estranged from the product of their work, the act of working itself, their essential human nature (or species-being), and other individuals. For Marx, labor should be a space for human self-realization, but under capitalist conditions, it becomes commodified and dehumanizing. Hirschfeld and Field (2000) describe alienation as a rupture between workers and their work lives, leading to emotional disconnection and psychological distress. This detachment is particularly visible in contexts where creative labor is transformed into market-driven production. Thus, examining alienation in creative professions—such as writing—sheds light on the broader consequences of commodification on human expression and dignity.

Film, as a cultural artifact and narrative medium, often encapsulates these tensions. It not only reflects societal realities but also dramatizes the psychological and social consequences of economic structures. The 2023 film *American Fiction*, directed by Cord Jefferson, presents a compelling case for literary analysis through the lens of Marxist alienation. The narrative follows Monk, a Black writer navigating the publishing industry while grappling with economic obligations and moral integrity. Faced with mounting medical bills and financial insecurity, Monk publishes a book that conforms to stereotypical expectations—despite his initial refusal to do so. His creative agency becomes compromised, and the resulting tension between personal conviction and survival embodies the core of worker alienation.

Several previous studies have explored the representation of alienation in literary texts. Khan and Shah (2025) analyzed Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuliwala*, revealing how capitalist systems reduce human relationships to economic exchanges, leading to existential estrangement. Similarly, Soomro, Syed, and Arain (2023) examined Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*, illustrating how capitalism erodes emotional and interpersonal bonds, leaving characters alienated from their humanity and from one another. Sagita and Wahyuni (2020) extended the analysis to Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, emphasizing the commodification of women's bodies and the subsequent alienation from their maternal identities and autonomy. These studies collectively affirm the relevance of Marx's alienation theory in diverse literary contexts and its capacity to critique systemic oppression. However, they largely center on traditional literature or earlier cinematic texts, leaving a gap in analyzing contemporary visual narratives that confront current capitalist contradictions—particularly in the post-pandemic creative economy.

This study, therefore, seeks to bridge that gap by applying Marx's (1977) framework of alienation to a contemporary cinematic work. Specifically, it identifies the forms of

alienation experienced by Monk in *American Fiction* and examines how he confronts and navigates these experiences. The analysis will address the four Marxist dimensions of alienation: from the product of labor (his published work), from the act of labor (his writing process), from his species-being (his creative and moral self), and from others (his relationships with publishers, readers, and family). By mapping Monk's struggles and resistance, the study provides insight into how alienation operates within creative labor in the twenty-first century and how it shapes individual agency under capitalist constraints.

This research contributes to both literary and sociocultural studies. Theoretically, it enriches the discourse on Marxist literary criticism by engaging with a recent film that dramatizes economic and racial tensions within the creative industries. Practically, it highlights the ongoing challenges faced by artists, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, in preserving authenticity while sustaining livelihood. By focusing on a Black writer's conflict between cultural representation and economic necessity, this study also contributes to broader conversations about race, authorship, and commodification in contemporary literature and media.

METHOD

As the analysis came in essay formulation, the writer takes the qualitative method to frame the study. As Creswell & Creswell (2018) described that qualitative approach brought an extensive interpretation toward action and mannerism (p.108). The study unraveled the issues in the movie with its main character's activities toward other characters and his life values upon the theory and notions by the experts. With the primary data from the movie *American Fiction* (2023) by Cord Jefferson, the writer put dialogues, ways of thinking, decisions, and interactions as the source of the issue took place.

In collecting the data, the writer watched the movie while identifying related problems through the conflict. The writer identified the alienation condition in the movie, did further reading about the movie through the media reports and the assumed issue through digital studies. Then, the writer learned and chose the theory to elaborate the issue. Ultimately, the writer watched the movie again for several times and collected relevant scenes and dialogues toward the issue. The analysis process of the movie comprises comprehending the issues, theories, and movie that were examined. Once the selected data being compiled, the writer proceeded to outline acts and utterances of the main character and the interactions toward other characters by linking the data with the conceptual model of Karl Marx (1977)'s alienation theory to emphasize the worker alienation phenomenon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This discussion elaborates *American Fiction's* (2023) Monk character and his surroundings through Marx's concept of alienation. Revealing comprehensive analysis from the movie is conducted according to the formulated question problems with further substances. The organizing of the data found in the movie and its interpretations are presented through each branch of discussion.

Alienation in the movie *American Fiction*

The seclusion of worker's life situations costed him as a project of production, depriving a room for self-development and freedom from Monk's own product. As Marx (1977) explained that alienation was a result of capitalism that eliminated a worker from the

product he created, the work activities he did, the human nature within him, and the people around him.

Monk's Alienation from the Product of Labor

Monk or now is known as Stagg R. Leigh confronted by life decisions to maintain his artistic principle throughout his career with less profit gains or repainted it meeting publishers' needs with significant incomes.



Note. From American Fiction [40:55–41:07], by Cord Jefferson (director), 2023

- Monk : “I mean how’s that book so different than some of the other garbage they put out?”
 Arthur : “That’s not the point.”
 Monk : “Well, it’s my point. Look at what they publish. Look at what they expect us to write. I’m sick of it. And that’s an expression of how sick I am.”

In the quotation above, it could be seen that Monk admitted to consciously write *My Pafology* and asked Arthur to send the draft out toward some publishers. Monk’s gesture where he put his hand to his waist through the medium shot and eye-level angle clarified his anger and tumultuous state of mind. However, the root of his decision rooted from empty options caused by the publisher’s confinement. That situation, then, embedded in Monk’s mind and made him to take any option to consolidate his crises. In the dialogue, “*I mean how’s that book so different than some of the other garbage they put out?*”, clearly enhanced his attention of taking revenge as the only way to go out of this hardship in the industry (Jefferson, 2023). Monk who used to value and be proud of his work now felt ashamed and called *My Pafology* as a “garbage” like other mainstream ‘Black book’ works. According to Marx, Monk was alienated from his product of labor. Marx (1977) explained that alienation caused a product being estranged and strengthened its existence by seeing its creator as an “alien” (p.69). The data above identified Monk’s work situation exemplifying himself being disconnected from a book he wrote.

Alienation from the Act of Production

The publisher Thompson-Watt informed Monk trusting *My Pafology* as the year’s new bestseller novel. They shared some marketing campaigns for the release of *My Pafology*. Monk had never been enjoying the discussing times of his to-be-released *My Pafology* nor the time during its writing process.



Note. From American Fiction [01:21:16], by Cord Jefferson (director), 2023

Monk : “I wish I could go back to not selling books.”

Monk or Leigh pretended as a fugitive had to appear in a black screen portraying the way Monk did not want to be known for writing *Fuck*. However, *Fuck* was an actual best-

selling book and his new identity as a ‘real-life fugitive’ did give exposure for the audience buying and putting interest in Fuck. This situation was a big deal for the United States’ FBI who swiftly searched for internal information about Monk’s Stagg R. Leigh identity as a fugitive. By saying, “*I wish I could go back to not selling books*”, displaying Monk in an eye-level angle with close-up shot which expressed his disappointment (Jefferson, 2023). Monk who was on call with Arthur showed his regret toward his own career as a writer. The quotation above denoted Monk’s current occupation as a writer failed to be the essential part of Monk’s life.

A work he had done for a long time now shifted its value, from crafting his own ideas into the market’s ideas. Monk’s writing shifting portrayed himself from writing for enjoying into writing for “selling” (Jefferson, 2023). According to Marx (1977), Monk experienced alienation from his labor activities, causing his work as a “self-sacrifice” (p.71). Monk did not find his profession as something that is pleasurable and authentic. The job estranged him from the job description and received more efforts to do so.

Alienation from Human’s Species-being

Monk was mad and puzzled with the book he wrote out of giggles and rage had to be on public shelves. Rather than having *My Pafology* or *Fuck*, Monk preferred *The Persian* as his notable work. Once again, Monk was in between of surviving his economic problem or idolizing his huge craftsmanship.



Note. From American Fiction [46:52–47:08], by Cord Jefferson (director), 2023

Monk : “Well, I’m not participating in making them any stupider.”

Arthur : “Well, you haven’t this far, which is admirable, but... you also haven’t made any money. Doesn’t your mom need helps these days?”

Arthur knew Monk’s gentility in crafting his books saying, “*Well, you haven’t this far, which is admirable, ...*”, which showcased Arthur’s recognition toward Monk’s dedication coming from his passion in writing (Jefferson, 2023). From the medium shot and low-angle camera, the scene above showed Arthur pursuing Monk to let *My Pafology* being published convinced him, “*Doesn’t your mom need helps these days?*” (Jefferson, 2023). Monk’s mom was urgent of health care needs and his house bills had to be on time. This situation forced him to sacrifice *The Persians* in order to continue to live.

The description of Monk’s two-sided state was a form of his alienation from his species-being and his human nature. It could be seen that the only survival way now was to publish *My Pafology*, letting his art blended into a cash need. This clarified Monk’s life decision faced by failure where he had to impress the market and the publisher, avoiding Monk from evolving into a total human. Marx (1977) further signified alienation from human’s species being as how workers seemed external with their own “body” (p.74). A human owned his total authority of life. However, economic crisis and the importance to solve it had Monk failed “participating” to reclaim his words (Jefferson, 2023).

Alienation from Other Humans

The promotion for *My Pafology* or *Fuck* had done completely. Passing without certain celebration, Monk found the book at his girlfriend Coraline ‘s home. Monk was angry

hearing Coraline enjoyed reading the book. The fight considered alienation as the source of



their distances.

Note. From American Fiction [01:23:14–01:23:42], by Cord Jefferson (director), 2023

Coraline : “You’ve been acting like weirdo for weeks. You’ve been obfuscating, sneaking around. You’re fucking unknowable. Maybe you think being an enigma is chic and artsy. I just think it makes you an asshole.

Monk : “Well, um, you don’t understand my life, and you can’t, so just leave it at that.”

A low-angled medium shot Monk standing whilst talking to the blurry Coraline, which creating Monk dominated the conversation with his rage and yearning somebody to understand his reasoning. Fuck, for Monk, degraded the existence of marginalized humans who had been objectified in the creative industry and ultimately devalue his self-direction over economic needs. For Coraline Monk’s words were exaggerative. She said, “*You’re fucking unknowable*”, conveyed a meaning that they both in a conflict due to new but distinct perceptions. After the release of the book without they both realizing, Coraline noticed something in Monk had altered. Monk argued, “... *you don’t understand my life, and you can’t, so just leave it at that*” (Jefferson, 2023). After hoping somebody to understand, he decided to hate Fuck by himself and left no one an explanation of his emotions. He relied upon emotional burst encountering him with the final stage of worker alienation.

Monk had been picked up some indecisive decisions throughout this publishing process because of creativity restriction, economic crisis, and masked identity. The situation created him an artificial character that was only suitable for the publisher. As Marx in Mandel & Novack (1973) wrote that humans lost their basic capability neither to speak nor listen closely to others (p.29). This type of alienation considered as an ultimate exclusion of a human from his society. Monk failed to be communicative in sharing his vulnerability toward his girlfriend who was a closest person to him. Referring Monk’s outrages with the Marx’s concept, sympathies lived outside Monk becoming him “unknowable” or “alien” from his closest ones (Jefferson, 2023).

Negotiation towards the Alienation

After the discussion of Monk’s shapes of worker alienation, similarly, the writer noticed Monk’s critical position in receiving the alienation within his life. It was important to further elaborate how Monk responded to the phenomenon in which whether he committed himself to the alienation or took the lead over the alienation. The data showed that, in order to live, Monk adapted the way he worked with the worker alienation.



Note. From American Fiction [47:16–47:17], by Cord Jefferson (director), 2023

Monk : “I don’t care how drunk we get, I’m not selling it.”

After knowing that the book he wrote as a joke being sold, Monk was mad that the book he crafted deeply was nowhere to be accepted by the publishers but the book he wrote with lacking research was the one ready to be accepted. Arthur and Monk in a high-level angle; Monk in medium shot and Arthur in medium close-up shot captured Monk's powerless gesture on his chair. This depicted Monk's consistency to prime by his decision of not selling the writing, murdering away the big amount of money provided. For Monk, idealism stayed in his writing. As proposed by Marx (1977), alienation said workers could only defect alienation through "emancipation" (p.78). While Marx also asserted that economic system transformation could conjure the alienation, a single consciousness might initiate a combat. The excerpt, "*I don't care how drunk we get, I'm not selling it*", put Monk's persistence to reject the offer from the publisher Thompson-Watt that portrayed as a self-emancipation liberating from alienation. As for Monk, he stood by his point, stating the way he refused to be dictated. However, Monk's valid point collided with the enormous amount of deal that, in the next data, enlightened spark for Monk's economic aid.



Note. From American Fiction [01:45:38–01:45:40], by Cord Jefferson (director), 2023

Wiley : "This is Monk. We're gonna make a movie with him if he changed the ending right."

Both Monk and Wiley were in a two-shot of a medium shot and eye-level angle, focusing the audience to see their both positions. Monk stood legs while Wiley crossed legs, encouraging a meaning of Wiley owning the whole area of his film set that made him held most decisions. Wiley's statement in a ridicule and confident tone introduced Monk to a Wiley's crew. Wiley gamed a promise as if Monk's life depended on him, which was as Marx (1977) supported that the hustles had to be experienced by the workers becoming a pleasure for the rulers (p.76). This situation strengthened Wiley was imposing his ideation toward Monk whom was both a writer and scriptwriter for his movie. Meanwhile, this insinuated Monk who had reached his acceptance as an alienated writer, negotiating himself and his occupation as a writer to survive his writing, and ultimately his life.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *American Fiction* (2023) by Cord Jefferson reveals the interaction between Monk, Thompson-Watt, and the filmmaker as an instance of worker alienation. Only when Monk rewrote *My Pafology or Fuck*, a Thompson-Watt publisher approached and offered him a publication deal. The changing of story and writing style found by the publisher Thompson-Watt as a potential bestseller book. Thompson-Watt and the filmmaker devalued Monk's *The Persians*, leading him to write a new book based on their values. Monk engaged with the emergence of worker alienation, making him to experience the four shades of worker alienation namely from his own book, his profession as a writer, his human's expression in craftsmanship, and his people. Another factor of his negotiation is Monk had to continue living to support his mother and pay the bills. He humbled to achieve his acceptance in living with his alienation embracing them as a way to survive despite his initial refusal.

Furthermore, the writer expects this study as a hand of additional information for future

researches. This study also encourages future emergences with the submitted Marx theory on different works or various resolved issues on the *American Fiction* (2023) as it is tangible with racial spectrum of issue. At one point, variety of messages in the movie and the research get to deliver more perspectives for the readers.

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