

## ***Alienation in the Main Character of Fredrik Backman's Novel *A Man Called Ove****

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### **Abstract:**

In this essay, the author analyzes how the protagonist in Fredrik Backman's *A Man Called Ove*, is isolated from others. The study aims to analyze and discuss the specificity of the depiction of the alienation in Ove's character, as well as to consider how that is described in the story. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach focusing on *A Man Called Ove* (2014) as the primary source, along with other sources such as journals, books, and articles. Data was collected by deep reading the book and analyzed using Melvin Seeman's theory of alienation, which has five parts: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, Self-Estrangement, and social isolation. It also uses character theory to examine how Ove is portrayed. The study has shown that Ove's emotional separation from his wife and job, coupled with his repeated suicide attempts after the loss of his job for two years, caused him to withdraw. He felt powerless because he lost control over his life; he felt life had no meaning after his wife passed; he rejected modern society's values; he avoided interacting with his neighbors, showing social isolation; and he isolated himself from others in his daily life. Through these elements, the novel shows alienation as a condition that comes from sadness, loss, and broken relationships. This study helps us understand how alienation depicted in modern literature and can serve as a basis for future research on emotional resilience and reintegration in society.

**Keywords:** Alienation; Characterization; *A Man Called Ove*

### **Abstrak:**

Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana karakter utama dalam novel Fredrik Backman berjudul *A Man Called Ove* merasa terputus dari orang lain dan masyarakat. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis berbagai cara alienasi ditampilkan dalam karakter Ove dan bagaimana hal ini dijelaskan melalui cara dia digambarkan dalam cerita. Studi ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, terutama menganalisis *A Man Called Ove* (2014), serta menggunakan sumber lain seperti jurnal, buku, dan artikel. Data dikumpulkan dengan membaca buku secara cermat dan dianalisis menggunakan teori alienasi Melvin Seeman, yang terdiri dari lima bagian: merasa tidak berdaya, merasa hidup tidak bermakna, tidak mengetahui aturan yang berlaku, terisolasi secara sosial, dan merasa terputus dari diri sendiri. Studi ini juga menggunakan teori karakterisasi untuk memahami bagaimana Ove digambarkan. Studi ini mengungkapkan bahwa pemisahan emosional Ove dari istrinya dan pekerjaannya, ditambah dengan upaya bunuh diri berulang setelah kematian istrinya, menyebabkan dia menarik diri. Dia merasa tidak berdaya karena kehilangan kendali atas hidupnya; dia merasa hidup tidak memiliki makna setelah istrinya meninggal; dia menolak nilai-nilai masyarakat modern; dia menghindari interaksi dengan tetangganya, menunjukkan isolasi sosial; dan dia mengisolasi diri dari orang lain dalam kehidupan sehari-harinya. Melalui elemen-elemen ini, novel ini menunjukkan alienasi sebagai kondisi yang berasal dari kesedihan, kehilangan, dan hubungan yang rusak. Penelitian ini membantu kita memahami bagaimana alienasi ditampilkan dalam sastra modern dan dapat menjadi landasan untuk penelitian lebih lanjut mengenai kekuatan emosional dan proses kembali ke masyarakat.

**Kata kunci:** Alienasi; Karakterisasi; *A Man Called Ove*



## INTRODUCTION

Literary works are a form of creative work that empowers humans. A literary work generally contains issues faced by individuals and is born out of the basic human urge to express one's own existence. Literary works are created not far from the phenomena that exist in this world, which are inseparable from human life and the surrounding community, and are then poured into writing as an expression. Thus, it can be said that literary works are a reflection of life itself, seasoned with the author's imagination. Literary psychology is an approach to literature that considers the psychological aspects of the author, characters, and readers. This approach examines how psychological elements such as thoughts, feelings, and inner conflicts are expressed, understood, and experienced through literary texts.

One of the most popular forms of literature for representing characters is the novel. A novel is a work of prose with a more complex narrative form that can represent society while also serving as a means of criticizing phenomena in life witnessed by the author. The further and deeper development of characters allows authors to express their experiences more imaginatively. One psychological phenomenon often experienced by individuals, especially the elderly, is isolation from society or loved ones due to a desire not to be a burden.

An expert defines alienation as a feeling of being nothing and a feeling that no one cares about what happens to us. Alienation happens when someone feels left out or separated from a group or activity they are meant to be part of and take part in (Seeman, 1959). From a psychological perspective, alienation is also understood as an emotional condition in which a person finds it challenging to have warm relationships and friendships with others. Based on the above definition, the author defines alienation as a state in which a person feels estranged from a group because they believe no one cares about what they have experienced, leading them to withdraw or become isolated from society. One novel that describes this phenomenon is *A Man Called Ove*. The alienation that occurs takes the form of a deep sense of loss, cutting off the main character from social relationships.

The novel *A Man Called Ove* tells the story of how a 59-year-old man named Ove withdraws from social relationships (Backman, 2014). Ove is described as a grumpy and curt old man. Ove is an old man who has suffered deep wounds due to the loss of his wife,

who was paralyzed in an accident. His desire to withdraw began when the government's policy of not providing facilities for people with disabilities made Ove feel angry and disappointed, causing him to distrust everyone and ultimately suppress all the pain caused by his loss. He likes to do the same activities every day and does not change anything in his house, so that he feels that his wife is still with him. Ove feels that no one cares about him, so he develops a sense of alienation.

From a review of the existing literature, articles were found that reviewed the book "A Man Called Ove" and alienation. The first article was by Assiddiqi et al. (2025). The present study discusses the psychological challenges of the hero in the book based on descriptive qualitative research approaches. They applied Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory in the data analysis, in which consciousness is divided into three stages: the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. An analysis of the protagonist's story in "A Man Called Ove" identifies 13 categories of psychological conflict. The 13 conflicts are classified into 5 in the real stage, 4 in the imaginary stage, and 4 in the symbolic stage. These conflicts play an important role in how the story proceeds. The following is from Sharma (2024). The piece is based on how society helps Ove cope with his emotions after his wife's passing, and it highlights the importance of strong social relationships.

One study related to alienation is the work of Margareta et al. This article analyzes the alienation experienced by Little Bee, the main character in Chris Cleave's novel "*The Other Hand*." This article identifies five forms of alienation: helplessness, meaninglessness, abnormality of norms, social isolation, and self-separation through a psychological approach and qualitative methodology. The study concludes that Little Bee represents an alienated character. Next is a study by Aenum & Anwar. This article analyzes the phenomenon of alienation in Dazai Osamu's novel "*Ningen Shikkaku*," focusing on the main character Yozo Oba. This article uses Melvin Seeman's theory of alienation, highlighting aspects such as powerlessness and social isolation, and linking these themes to contemporary Japanese society and issues such as suicide.

Although the first and second studies share the same novel as their object, namely A Man Called Ove by Fredrik Backman, their analytical focus differs. Similarly, the third and fourth studies also discuss alienation, but their objects of analysis differ from this study's, namely the alienation of the main character Ove in the novel *A Man Called Ove*. The focus of this study is the alienation experienced by the main character and how this alienation is depicted in the novel. The alienation revealed will be identified using

Seeman's theory of alienation and characterization. Thus, this study is significant for understanding the novel and alienation, and providing ideas for future researchers for new studies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Alienation**

Sarfraz explains that the word alienation comes from the Latin noun "*alienatio*," which is derived from the Latin verb "*alienare*." This verb means "to take away," "to remove," or "to cause separation." The term was first widely used in religious writings (Sarfraz, 2015). According to KBBI (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia), the term "alienation" has three main meanings. First, this term refers to feelings of separation or marginalization. Second, this term means leaving a group or community. Third, this term refers to assigning the rights and status of a property or position to another person.

### **Seeman's Theory of Alienation**

In his article "On the Meaning of Alienation," Seeman explains that alienation is a psychological condition in which individuals feel separated from society, their work, or even themselves. Seeman outlines five main dimensions of alienation, namely:

#### ***Powerlessness***

According to Seeman (Aenum & Anwar, 2024), Powerlessness is the feeling that events befalling a person are controlled and determined by external forces beyond their control. This causes a person to feel helpless in controlling themselves or a situation or event they are experiencing because others control it.

#### ***Meaningless***

According to Seeman (Aenum & Anwar, 2024), meaninglessness is a mental condition in which a person's life is filled with feelings of loss, futility, and emptiness when they fail to fulfill their desire to give meaning to their life. In addition, a person with such a mental condition also considers life to be meaningless or insignificant, so that they have no meaning or purpose in life.

#### ***Normlessness***

According to Lie (2025), normlessness is a condition in which an individual acts independently of society's values and norms. This can cause the individual to engage in behaviors that deviate from or are not in line with society's expectations.



### ***Social Isolation***

Social isolation is a condition in which a person is isolated from society due to their own actions or external forces (Ngore et al., 2022). An isolated person will experience loneliness, isolation, alienation, and a sense of disconnection from others (Lie, 2025).

### ***Self-estrangement***

Seeman 1971 in (Sarfraz (2015) emphasizes that self-estrangement is a condition in which a person feels alienated from themselves or others. A person who is estranged from themselves or others is unable to connect emotionally with themselves or others.

### **Characterization**

Characterization is the process by which writers describe a character's traits, including their appearance, behavior, manner of speaking, and the reasons behind their actions. Characterization helps identify and distinguish each character (Ngore et al., 2022). Characterization is the process by which writers reveal a character's personality. Characterization is divided into two types: direct and indirect. Kenan divides characterization into two methods: direct and indirect characterization can be identified through actions, speech, outward appearance, and environment.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study uses a qualitative method. The main object of this research is the novel titled *A Man Called Ove* (2014), so this study is classified as library research. The data sources are the novel *A Man Called Ove* by Fredrik Backman. In addition, the data consists of two types: primary data (words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs) and secondary data (books, journals, and articles). While collecting the data, the novel was thoroughly read, with notes and annotations made alongside the data. After that, the data analysis was carried out in several steps: reading comprehensively, identifying descriptions or events, classifying the events, and recording all the data. This study uses two theories: Seeman's Theory of Alienation, which has five types of alienation, and Characterization Theory to explain how alienation is represented.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Alienation in the Main Character**

#### ***Powerlessness***

Won't it be nice to slow down a bit?" they said to Ove yesterday at work. While explaining that there was a lack of employment prospects and so they

were “retiring the older generation.” A third of a century in the same workplace, and that’s how they refer to Ove. Suddenly he’s a bloody generation. (page12)

Ove felt he had lost control of his life after losing his wife, Sonja, and his job due to forced retirement. He felt useless and no longer needed by society. His decision to repeatedly attempt suicide reflected his feelings of helplessness towards changes in his life that he could not control (Backman, 2014). For Ove, losing his job was not just a loss of income, but also a loss of identity, because Ove had always defined his life through hard work, consistency, and responsibility. When he lost all of that, Ove felt he no longer had control over the direction of his life, “Two years later, after Ove had been deposed as chairman of the Association (a betrayal Ove subsequently referred to as “the coup d’état”)” (Backman, 2014 pg:9). Through the dialogue, which reflects the loss of control over an important role in society, and highlights the powerlessness that arises when someone loses the ability to determine the rules that once formed the basis of their existence.

### *Meaninglessness*

After Sonja died, Ove lost his reason for living. His life lost its meaning because all the routines he used to follow were for no other reason than to be with Sonja. He no longer understood his purpose in life in a modern society that felt foreign to him (Backman, 2014). “He was a man of black and white. And she was color. All the color he had.” (page 5). The quote illustrates that Sonja's death was the leading cause of Ove's loss of meaning in life. After Sonja's death, Ove had no “color” left. Backman describes meaninglessness as one of the effects of losing a loved one.

### *Normlessness*

Ove often rejects the new norms of modern society. He is frustrated by bureaucracy and new rules that he considers illogical. Ove believes that today's world lacks clear “moral rules” and that people act selfishly, for example, no longer respecting hard work or responsibility (Backman, 2014).

It’ll be good for you to slow down a bit,” they’d drawled. Slow down? What did they know about waking up on a Tuesday and no longer having a purpose? With their Internets and their espresso coffees, what did they know about taking a bit of responsibility for things?

...Ove looks up at the ceiling. Squints. It’s important for the hook to be centered, he decides. (pages 14)

One of the narrations in the novel states that Ove tried to end his life many times, which clearly contradicts societal norms. However, Ove's actions were not a moral crime but

rather an attempt to reunite with Sonja. Ove no longer considered suicide a violation of norms, but rather a solution to his suffering and deep loneliness.

### ***Social Isolation***

Ove isolated himself from his social circle. He refused to interact with his neighbors and chose to live alone after Sonja died. He had no sense of social belonging and felt that no one understood him (Backman, 2014)

“People said he was bitter. Maybe they were right. He’d never reflected much on it. People also called him antisocial. Ove assumed this meant he wasn’t overly keen on people. And in this instance he could totally agree with them. More often than not people were out of their minds.” (page 5)

The dialogue above portrayed how Ove is perceived by those around him, not without reason, it is because of Ove's unfriendly, rigid, and closed-off character. Ove closes himself off from social interaction due to trauma and loss. He views modern people as stupid, irresponsible, and lazy.

### ***Self-estrangement***

Ove no longer acts based on his deepest personal values, but instead on habit and a false sense of duty. He continues to go through his daily routine without emotional meaning, simply repeating his old patterns. His desire to die also shows that he has lost connection with his former self, who was full of love and purpose (Backman, 2014).

“I’m not going to sit here and talk about feelings. I don’t have time for that” (page 107). The novel depicts Ove living the same routine every day, such as waking up early, checking the fence, inspecting the parking lot, scolding people who park illegally, as if his life were nothing more than a meaningless routine. All of Ove's activities are not done out of desire, but out of habit and a sense of responsibility. This shows his separation from himself and his social role.

## **CONCLUSION(S)**

Based on the analysis of the main character in the novel *A Man Called Ove*, namely Ove, using Melvin Seeman's five aspects of alienation and applying characterization theory, it was found that Ove is portrayed as an old man who experiences all five forms of alienation. The various feelings experienced by Ove after the death of his wife and the poor treatment he received at work, which ultimately led to his dismissal, shaped him into a person without a purpose in life. The character Sonja was significant in Ove's life, as Ove spent his life doing activities with Sonja, so when Sonja passed away, Ove felt that his life

no longer had a purpose. These feelings led Ove to make decisions that were not in line with norms, such as attempting suicide multiple times. In addition, experienced social isolation and self-estrangement, isolating himself from his environment and social life. Ove did not want to interact or build relationships, which is why he attempted suicide is why he attempted suicide.

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