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The Alienation of the Arab Diaspora in Hoda Barakat's Novel *Barīd al-Layl*: Melvin Seeman's Perspective

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to identify the forms of Arab diaspora alienation as represented by the characters and to analyze the manifestations of Melvin Seeman's five dimensions of alienation namely, powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement in Hoda Barakat's novel *Barīd al-Layl*. This study is a literature review conducted in Malang, East Java, with the text of the novel *Barīd al-Layl*, published by Dar al-Adab in its first edition in 2018, as the object of study. The research data consist of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences containing markers of alienation, both in the narrative and in the characters' monologues, while other data sources include relevant journal articles. The research instrument was the researcher herself, aided by data cards containing a classification of the five dimensions of alienation, and the analytical tool was Seeman's framework of five variants of alienation. Data were collected through repeated readings, annotation, and note-taking, then analyzed using qualitative descriptive techniques involving data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results of the study indicate that all five dimensions of alienation appear evenly, each represented by two textual data points. Powerlessness is evident in the futility of resistance and dreams of escape; meaninglessness is evident in letters that never arrive and suspicion that goes ununderstood; the absence of norms was evident in theft and emotional manipulation for the sake of survival; social isolation was evident in a loneliness that was taken as a point of pride; and self-alienation was evident in work that stripped away dignity and in intimacy that was transferred to objects. Thus, alienation in this novel is not merely an inner state but a direct consequence of war, displacement, and oppressive labor.

Keywords: alienation, Arab diaspora, Barīd al-Layl, Melvin Seeman

Alienasi Diaspora Arab dalam Novel *Barīd al-Layl* Karya Hoda Barakat: Perspektif Melvin Seeman

ABSTRAK
Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi bentuk-bentuk keterasingan (alienasi) dalam diaspora Arab sebagaimana direpresentasikan oleh para tokoh, serta menganalisis manifestasi dari lima dimensi alienasi menurut Melvin Seeman, yaitu ketidakberdayaan, ketidakbermaknaan, ketiadaan norma, isolasi, dan keterasingan diri dalam novel *Barīd al-Layl* karya Hoda Barakat. Penelitian ini merupakan studi sastra yang dilakukan di Malang, Jawa Timur, dengan objek penelitian berupa teks novel *Barīd al-Layl* yang diterbitkan oleh Dar al-Adab pada edisi pertama tahun 2018. Data penelitian terdiri dari kata, frasa, klausa, dan kalimat yang memuat penanda alienasi, baik dalam narasi maupun monolog tokoh, sementara sumber data lainnya mencakup artikel jurnal yang relevan. Instrumen penelitian adalah peneliti sendiri, dibantu oleh kartu data yang memuat klasifikasi lima dimensi alienasi, dengan kerangka kerja lima varian alienasi dari Seeman sebagai alat analisis. Data dikumpulkan melalui pembacaan berulang, anotasi, dan pencatatan, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan teknik deskriptif kualitatif yang mencakup reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kelima dimensi alienasi tersebut muncul secara merata, masing-masing direpresentasikan oleh dua poin data tekstual. Ketidakberdayaan terlihat dari kesia-siaan perlawanan dan impian untuk melarikan diri; ketidakbermaknaan tampak pada surat-surat yang tidak pernah sampai dan kecurigaan yang tidak dipahami; ketiadaan norma terlihat dalam tindakan pencurian dan manipulasi emosional demi kelangsungan hidup; isolasi sosial tampak dalam kesepian yang justru dianggap sebagai kebanggaan; dan keterasingan diri terlihat dalam pekerjaan yang merenggut martabat serta keintiman yang dialihkan kepada objek-objek tertentu. Dengan demikian, alienasi dalam novel ini bukan sekadar kondisi batin, melainkan konsekuensi langsung dari perang, pengungsian, dan praktik kerja yang menindas.

Kata kunci: alienasi, diaspora Arab, Barīd al-Layl, Melvin Seeman

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomena of diaspora and displacement (refugees) in the Arab world have become an unavoidable social reality over the past few decades. Prolonged conflicts, civil wars, political instability, and the emergence of extremist groups have forced millions of Arabs to leave their homelands. This displacement is not merely a physical one; it also carries profound psychological consequences. Immigrants and refugees often experience an identity crisis, a sense of being uprooted from their cultural roots, and alienation when confronted with new environments and cultures that are sometimes hostile to their presence. In studies of Arab diaspora literature, this displacement is depicted as both a physical and an emotional journey, as the characters must navigate the demands of adapting to a new environment while simultaneously maintaining their ties to their cultural heritage (AlGharaibeh, 2025). The resulting sense of alienation is understood as a consequence of a divided identity, as individuals struggle to reconcile their Arab cultural roots with the culture of their host country (AlGharaibeh, 2025).

This social reality is then reflected in literary works. Literary works are manifestations of the author's creativity that showcase the beauty of language while capturing social reality through creative imagination (Rofiudin & Sofyaningrum, 2026), thus, literature serves not only as a mirror of reality but also as a medium for authors to voice the anxieties, traumas, and psychological states of the victims. Within the framework of literary psychology, literary works are viewed as reflections of human psychological processes, and the study of these works examines the inner lives of characters as reflected in the text (Pebriani et al., 2026). This approach also commonly interprets literary works as a reflection of the author's psyche that is, the state of the author's mind as expressed in the text (Melati et al., 2019), thereby allowing researchers to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the personality traits of the characters developed by the author (Azzahra & Solihati, 2024). As such, literary texts can be read as psychological documents that capture the collective experiences of a society during a specific period.

One literary work that skillfully captures this phenomenon is the novel *Barīd al-Layl* by Lebanese author Hoda Barakat. First published in 2018 by Dar al-Adab in Beirut, the novel won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction also known as the "Arabic Booker" in 2019(Bianco, 2023). *Barīd al-Layl* is unique in its narrative structure. It is Barakat's first novel in which all the events take place far from Lebanon and which does not center on a single protagonist; rather, it is a choral work composed of five letters written by different generations of Arab migrants (Bianco, 2023). Through these letters, Hoda Barakat depicts the emotional wounds, loneliness, war trauma, and alienation experienced by her characters, who represent the Arab diaspora. Another unique aspect which also serves as a key thematic element of the novel is that these letters never reach their intended recipients. The novel even explicitly mentions letters that never reach their intended recipients and pile up somewhere, with the senders unaware of what has become of them. This failure to deliver is not merely a technical issue with the postal system but a metaphor for the breakdown in communication among individuals uprooted from their homelands.

A number of previous studies have examined this novel, but from different perspectives. Al-Malki's research explores the novel's narrative structure to uncover the concept of marginalization along with its cultural, religious, and social dimensions, including its relationship to social class and the role of functional space in shaping marginalized characters (Al-malki, 2021). Another study interprets this novel through Derrida's concept of "hostipitality" and demonstrates that the shelters provided by Western countries for refugees have, in fact, turned into spaces of nightmares and bestiality (Bianco, 2022), resulting in a critique that is more ethical-political than psychological. Yet another study situates this novel within the thirty-year trend of Arab literature on forced migration and highlights how Barakat employs the

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epistolary form to restore agency to his subaltern characters (Bianco, 2022). On the other hand, studies of Arab diaspora literature generally focus more on themes of cultural hybridity, identity crises, and the "third space," as seen in readings that employ Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" and the idea of al-ghurba (Eskander & Iskander, 2026) as their primary frameworks.

Based on these studies, it can be concluded that none of the existing research has specifically analyzed the phenomenon of alienation in this novel using a sociological-psychological approach to literature with a detailed operational framework, particularly Melvin Seeman's five-dimensional theory. In fact, Seeman's framework provides a more measurable tool for distinguishing the types of alienation experienced by the characters. Seeman identified five alternative meanings of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959), and these five dimensions have since been commonly used as an analytical framework in various social studies, including research on workplace alienation (Tummers et al., 2015). Therefore, this study aims to fill that research gap.

Based on this phenomenon, two research questions can be formulated. First, how is the alienation of the Arab diaspora represented through the characters in the novel *Barīd al-Layl* ? Second, how do the five dimensions of alienation experienced by the characters manifest, according to Melvin Seeman's perspective? In line with these research questions, this study aims to identify and describe the forms of Arab diaspora alienation reflected in the novel *Barīd al-Layl* , as well as to analyze the manifestations of the five dimensions of alienation identified by Melvin Seeman as experienced by the characters.

Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the body of research on modern Arabic literature, particularly in the application of sociological and psychological theories of literature to Arabic-language texts. Practically, this study is expected to serve as a reference for scholars and readers in understanding the psychological dimensions of literature on migration and displacement, as well as to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of the Arab diaspora.

To address this issue, this study draws on Melvin Seeman's theoretical framework of alienation. In his article titled "On the Meaning of Alienation," Seeman identifies five alternative meanings of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Seeman, 1959). Of these five meanings, powerlessness is defined as "the individual's expectation or belief that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcome or reinforcement he seeks." (Zurcher al., 1965). First, powerlessness that is, the feeling that an individual's behavior cannot determine the desired outcome; this dimension is viewed as the closest representation of Marx's view of alienation (Zurcher et al., 1965). Second, meaninglessness a state in which an individual is unclear about what he or she should believe, so that the minimum standard for clarity in decision-making is not met (Zurcher et al., 1965). Third, normlessness (the absence of norms), which refers to the strong belief that socially disapproved behavior is, in fact, necessary to achieve certain goals; this concept stems from Durkheim's idea of anomie (Zurcher et al., 1965). Fourth, social isolation, which is the feeling of being alienated or separated from societal values and communities. Fifth, self-estrangement, which is an individual's engagement in activities that provide no intrinsic reward. It should be noted that Seeman later expanded this framework to six dimensions by adding cultural estrangement (Peng & Lou, 2025), However, this study uses the original five dimensions as formulated in 1959 because those five dimensions have been most extensively tested and are best suited for interpreting the experience of displacement.

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METHOD

This study employed a library research methodology with a qualitative descriptive design. The research was conducted at the Arabic Language and Literature Program, Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University, Malang. Since the object of study consists of texts, this research is not bound by the timing of field data collection but rather by the availability and readability of the source texts, namely the novel *Barīd al-Layl* , published by Dar al-Adab in its first edition in 2018, which serves as the primary data source. Secondary data sources consisted of journal articles discussing alienation, Arab diaspora literature, and the novel *Barīd al-Layl* , which served as points of comparison in the discussion. The research data comprised words, phrases, clauses, and sentences containing markers of alienation, whether appearing in the narrative or in the characters' monologues and letters. Data collection was conducted using the read-and-record technique. The researcher read the novel repeatedly, marked text units containing markers of alienation, and then recorded them on data cards. Each text unit was coded according to the corresponding dimension: PW for powerlessness, MN for meaninglessness, NL for normlessness, IS for isolation, and SE for self-estrangement, accompanied by a serial number and page number. The research instrument consisted of the researcher as the primary instrument, assisted by data cards and a classification table for the five dimensions of alienation.

The data analysis tool used was Seeman's framework of the five variants of alienation (Seeman, 1959). The data analysis process was carried out in three stages. The first stage, data reduction, involved sorting data that truly contained indicators of alienation from data that was merely descriptive. The second stage, data presentation, involves grouping the data into the five dimensions and describing each one individually, including Arabic text quotations along with their translations. The third stage, drawing conclusions and verification, involves interpreting the relationship between the data and the narrative context, then double-checking the accuracy of the interpretation against the source quotations and page numbers. Data validity is checked by rereading the excerpts within the context of the surah in which they appear, ensuring that the interpretation remains grounded in the characters' speech situations.

RESULTS

The results of this study are presented in five findings, each representing one dimension of Seeman's alienation. Each dimension is represented by two textual data points, bringing the total number of data points analyzed to ten. Before delving into the findings, two preliminary notes must be made. First, this novel is a choral work composed of five letters written by different generations of Arab migrants; thus, each dimension of alienation is essentially expressed through the voice of a different character, rather than a single character experiencing all five dimensions simultaneously. Second, migration studies emphasize that alienation has two distinct aspects: the act of alienation produced by the state and society through processes of separation and exclusion of others, and the feeling of alienation experienced by migrants themselves manifesting as a sense of disconnection from their culture, family, and sense of belonging (Walker et al., 2023). The interpretation of the data in this study straddles these two aspects: the quotes presented highlight the emotional side, while the narrative context reveals the actions that gave rise to them.

1. Powerlessness

The first dimension identified is powerlessness. Within Seeman's framework, powerlessness is understood as an individual's perception that they are unable to influence their environment (Peng & Lou, 2025). This definition is supported by psychological studies on alienation, which state that, in this context, an individual's will and fate are not in their own hands but are determined by forces beyond their control,

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such as luck and destiny (Zorcec et al., 2023). These two formulations serve as tools for interpreting the following two sets of data.

"وتساءلت، كأن معها، عن جدوى أي مقاومة إن كانت مرسومة لنا أقدارنا منذ اللحظة الأولى لخروج أجسادنا الصغيرة من بطون الأمهات."

"And he asked as if speaking to himself what was the point of any resistance if our fate had been determined from the very first moment our tiny bodies emerged from our mothers' wombs." (Barakat, 2018, p. 87)

The first thing to note about this quote is the way the question is framed. The character does not ask directly and does not express refusal; rather, he "asks as if speaking to someone." The fact that the question is not explicitly addressed to anyone indicates that even objections to one's fate are not dared to be stated as a firm stance; they are merely voiced in the form of conjecture. In other words, the powerlessness in this passage is evident not only in the character's thoughts but also in the way those thoughts are expressed namely, as a hesitant, shared question.

The second point is the choice of the word "مرسومة" (drawn, painted), which is attached to "أقدارنا" (our destinies). This verb stems from the semantic field of drawing or writing lines, so that destiny is imagined as something that has already been sketched out beforehand by another party. This word choice is significant because the novel is, in fact, constructed from writing specifically, the letters written by the characters. There is a subtle irony here: the characters write letters to express themselves, yet at the same time, they feel that their own lives have already been written by another force. The third point is the temporal phrase "منذ اللحظة الأولى لخروج أجسادنا الصغيرة من بطون الأمهات", which places the point at which destiny is determined not on a historical event or a war, but on the very moment of birth. Consequently, the entire span of life between birth and death loses its function as a space for effort, because the outcome has already been announced before that effort even begins.

The Second Data Set/PW2 reinforces these findings from a more concrete perspective, namely the experience of being confined:

"أنا مريض الآن؛ مريض في جسمي ومريض في روحي. ولم يعد من أمل في الشفاء. كل ما أحلم به هو الهرب كي لا أموت في السجن. أحلم بالهرب لأموت في العراء..."

"I'm sick now my body is sick, and my soul is sick. There's no hope of recovery. All I dream of is escaping so I won't die in prison. I dream of escaping so I can die in the open..."(Barakat, 2018, p. 54)

In this text, helplessness is no longer a philosophical reflection, but rather the experience of physical pain coupled with the loss of hope for recovery. Note the sentence structure "مريض في جسمي ومريض في روحي" which repeats the word "pain" twice with two different objects. This repetition shows that the suffering has spread from the body to the soul, leaving no part of the self intact as a foothold from which to fight back. The next sentence, "ولم يعد من أمل في الشفاء", ruled out the possibility of a full recovery, and that is precisely why the figure's popularity has plummeted.

This diminishing desire is evident in the use of the phrase "أحلم" (I dream), which is repeated twice. In common usage, the word "dream" is used to describe distant and grand aspirations; here, it is used to describe something very minimal namely, escape. The character does not dream of freedom, does not dream of returning home, and does not dream of recovery, but rather dreams of "dying in the open" (العراء) that is, a space without any shelter whatsoever. There is a sharp spatial contrast in this excerpt between "السجن" (prison) and "العراء". These are not choices between life and death, but

rather choices between two ways of dying. Thus, the sense of powerlessness here reaches its most extreme form because the scope of human choice has shrunk to a choice regarding how to die and even that choice remains merely a dream, not a plan.

When read together, these two sets of data reveal the same pattern: the character pushes his abilities to their limits, then shifts the cause of his actions to something outside himself. This pattern aligns with Seeman's formulation, which serves as the foundation for the fifth variant of alienation, and corresponds to the portrayal of the characters in this novel in other studies as people who live like ghosts, trapped between the past and the present, and unable to envision the future (Bianco, 2023). This inability to envision the future is another facet of powerlessness: individuals who believe their behavior does not determine the outcome have no reason to make plans.

2. Meaninglessness

The second dimension is meaninglessness, which is a state in which individuals lack both behavioral and belief-based anchors (Peng & Lou, 2025). In studies of social alienation, this state is described as leading to a loss of meaning in the individual's experiences, resulting in a form of existential nihilism where the individual does not know which principles to follow when making decisions, and the real world feels as though it has shifted into an unreachable fantasy (Demir et al., 2025). The two data points in this dimension illustrate both of these aspects.

The MN1 text depicts a figure pondering the fate of letters that never reached their recipients:

"أفكر أحياناً في الرسائل التي لا تصل إلى أصحابها، والتي تتكدس في مكان ما لا يعرف مرسلها ما حلّ بها... الآن، أكتب رسالتي إلى من قد يأتي إلى هنا، وأضعها على بيّنة واضحة للعيان قرب فهرس الرسائل... فقد أموت قبل أن يصل أحد إلى هذا المركز."

"Sometimes I think about the letters that never reach their recipients, piling up somewhere without the sender knowing what happened to them... Now, I write my letters to whoever might come here, and I place them in a clearly visible spot near the mail index... because I might die before anyone reaches this center." (Barakat, 2018, p. 125-126)

This quote contains three indicators of meaninglessness at once. First, the sender of the letter does not know the fate of the letter, as stated in "لا يعرف مرسلها ما حلّ بها" (the sender does not know what has befallen it). Second, the recipient's identity is unclear, since the letter is addressed "إلى من قد يأتي إلى هنا" (to whoever may come here) an address formulated conditionally, not directed at a specific person. Third, the figure realizes that he might die before his letter is found, and this realization is expressed by the word "فقد" which functions as a reason or justification: the letter was placed in a conspicuous spot precisely because the possibility that it might not be read had already been taken into account.

Interestingly, the protagonist does not stop writing even though he knows his letters may never reach their destination. He even places his letters "قرب فهرس الرسائل" (near the letter index) that is, near an administrative record-keeping system. This action reveals a shift in the mode of expression: a message that should be addressed to a human being is ultimately entrusted to the archives. Thus, the act of writing which is usually a means of conveying meaning here becomes an act without any guarantee of meaning, since the connection between writing and reading can no longer be assured. The novel itself is structurally built upon this failure of delivery, as the letters are read not by their intended recipients, but by others who happen to come across them by chance. Within Seeman's framework, this situation constitutes the very essence of meaninglessness: the individual loses the criteria for deciding what to believe and cannot predict the consequences of their actions.

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The MN2 data reveal another form of meaninglessness, namely the inability to understand the logic of power:

"أمي الحبيبة، أكتب إليك من المطار قبل أن يأخذوني، وقبل أن أصل إلى حاجز الأمن العام، فهم يراقبون كل حركة خوفاً من الإرهابيين، بدءاً من باب الدخول الرئيسي. يدورون في مختلف الأنحاء بلباس مدني..."

"My dearest mother, I am writing to you from the airport before they take me away, and before I reach the general security checkpoint, because they are monitoring every move out of fear of terrorists, starting from the main entrance. They are patrolling all around in plain clothes..." (Barakat, 2018, p. 49)

In this passage, the character cannot predict what will happen to him a few moments later. The phrase "قبل أن يأخذوني" uses the fi'l mudhari' form for an event that has not yet occurred, but it is constructed without a word indicating possibility, so the arrest is imagined as a certainty whose time has not yet come. The character can only surmise that "they" will take him away, without knowing the basis, procedure, or consequences. The reason for the surveillance is also mentioned namely, "خوفاً من الإرهابيين" (out of fear of terrorists) but this reason does not serve as an explanation the character can use to understand his situation, since the accusation is collective in nature and unrelated to the character's own intentions. Meanwhile, the description "بلباس مدني" (in civilian clothing) confirms that the surveillance officers cannot be identified by their uniforms, making the rules applicable to the character unclear.

It should also be noted that this letter opens with the salutation "أمي الحبيبة" (my beloved mother) the most intimate form of address yet it was written at an airport, the most public and heavily monitored of places. The contrast between the intimacy of the salutation and the public nature of the writing location reveals that there is no longer any space for personal expression. The character finds herself in a situation where the only thing she can do is write a letter that may or may not reach its destination and she writes it precisely at a moment when she no longer has control over her own body. Both pieces of information in this dimension reveal the same pattern: the relationship between an action and its consequences is unreadable to the actor, either because the message never reaches its destination or because the rules governing it were never made public.

3. Normlessness

The third dimension is the absence of norms, which, within Seeman's framework, is defined as the acceptance of illegitimate means to achieve goals (Peng & Lou, 2025). This definition is important because it emphasizes the actor's calculations rather than their moral character: what is at issue is the belief that socially unacceptable means are indeed necessary for the goal to be achieved. The following two examples illustrate this calculation at two levels: the material level and the relational level.

The NL1 data contains a call to commit a burglary at the house where the character works:

"عدت إليه مرة ثانية، قلت تعال نسرقها، فأنا أعرف دواخل البيت وخباياه، ولن نجد جارورا واحدا مقفلا، لا على مال ولا على مصاغ أو ذهب.

"I went to him once more and said, 'Let's steal it, because I know the layout of that house and its secrets, and we won't find a single locked drawer whether for money, jewelry, or gold." (Barakat, 2018, p. 67) This quote shows that the knowledge the character gained from her work as a domestic worker was actually turned into a means to commit a crime.

The phrase أعرف دواخل البيت وخباياه (I know the ins and outs of the house and its secrets) positions knowledge as a weapon: she knows not only the location of objects, but also

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what the homeowner is hiding. The next sentence, ‘’ولن نجد جارورا واحدا مقفلا’’ (and we won’t find a single locked drawer), suggests that the absence of even one locked drawer is interpreted not as a sign of the employer’s trust, but as an opportunity. Here it becomes clear that the character’s social position helps shape her consciousness: domestic workers have a thorough understanding of the most private spaces belonging to others, yet they have no stake in them whatsoever.

An analysis of this novel, which examines the issue of marginalization through its narrative structure, shows that space plays a role in shaping marginalized characters, and that these characters’ marginalization is linked to their social class (Al-Malki, 2021). The findings in NL1 demonstrate a continuation of this trend: the characters’ knowledge of the spaces they inhabit is turned into a justification for violating those spaces.

Another point worth noting is the use of the phrase ‘’تعال نسرقها’’ (come on, let’s steal it). This invitation uses the first-person plural pronoun, thereby sharing the responsibility with the others being invited. The character does not appear as the sole perpetrator, but rather as someone offering cooperation, and this shows that the violation of norms has been framed as a collective matter, not as a shameful personal mistake. The motive behind the invitation is not stated directly in the quote, but it can be inferred from the character’s circumstances: a domestic worker with no job security needs to prepare an exit strategy before losing that job.

The NL2 data reveals a more subtle form of abuse, namely emotional manipulation:

"خطرت لي في الليل فكرة: يجب أن أجعلها تُغَرّم بي حتى لا تفكر في طردي؛ حتى تتعلق هي بوجودي في بيتها... ورحت أشرح لها أني، رغم عني، وقعت في حبّ"

“That night, an idea crossed my mind: I had to make him feel attached to me so he wouldn’t think of sending me away; so he’d feel attached to my presence in his home... And I began to explain to him that I, though I didn’t want to, had fallen in love...” (Barakat, 2018, p. 64)

While in NL1 the violation is material in nature, in NL2 it is relational. This quote is structured as a very neat sequence of cause and purpose: "يجب أن أجعلها تُغَرّم بي" (I must make her become attached to me) followed by two subordinate clauses of purpose ‘’حتى لا تفكر في طردي’’ (so that she does not think of kicking me out) and ‘’حتى تتعلق هي بوجودي في بيتها’’ (so that she becomes attached to my presence in her home). The precision of this reasoning indicates that the emotion here is not an inner experience, but rather a deliberately designed instrument. The word ‘’يجب’’ (must) reinforces this impression, as it is typically used to denote moral obligations, but here it is employed to formulate a strategy.

The climax of this strategy is evident in the phrase ‘’أني، رغم عني، وقعت في حبّ’’ (that I, despite myself, have fallen in love). The phrase ‘’رغم عني’’ (despite myself) serves as a shield: the confession of love is presented as an event that has befallen the character, not as a choice, so the character does not have to take responsibility for it. Thus, the norms of loyalty and honesty in the work relationship are set aside because they are deemed no longer useful for survival, and this abandonment is carried out in a way that preserves the character’s dignity. When read together, these two pieces of information reveal that the character’s disregard for norms does not stop at a single type of transgression: knowledge of the space is used to target property, while knowledge of feelings is used to secure one’s position. Both ultimately serve the same purpose: to remain within the house where he works.

4. Isolation

The fourth dimension is social isolation, which refers to emotional detachment from sociocultural norms. More specifically, social isolation involves an individual’s withdrawal and separation from the prevailing cultural currents in their society, accompanied by feelings of loneliness, psychological

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emptiness, a loss of security, severed social ties, and emotional distance from others (Zorcec et al., 2023). The two data points in this dimension can be interpreted as two stages of the same process: a shift from loneliness that is lamented to loneliness that is celebrated.

IS1 data shows how promises of love are perceived as a threat:

"يعدني بحبّه (إلى الأبد)... كالحكم بالسجن المؤبد. صار يؤذيني أن أسمع رجلاً"

"He promised his love 'forever'... like a life sentence. Now it hurts me to hear a man..." (Barakat, 2018, p. 40)

The power of this quote lies in the shift in semantic fields it creates. A promise of love which, in common usage, falls within the semantic field of affection is shifted to the semantic field of criminal law through the words *"الحكم"* (sentence) and "السجن المؤبد" (life imprisonment). This shift is not merely a stylistic device, for what is being shifted is the way time is interpreted: *"إلى الأبد"* (forever), which usually signifies loyalty, is interpreted here as the length of a sentence. Thus, the duration of the commitment is transformed into the duration of imprisonment, and the person making the promise shifts from the role of lover to that of a judge handing down a verdict.

The second marker appears in the sentence "صار يؤذيني أن أسمع رجلاً" which is cut off precisely at the word *"رجلاً"* (a man). This truncation is not an oversight, as this form mimics a gesture of rejection: the sentence is left unfinished because the subject simply does not want to be heard. Semantically, the character is no longer able to accept the presence of others as something of value, so even the voice of a man feels painful. Within Seeman's framework, this situation falls under social isolation because the individual has become detached from the values that bind human relationships in this case, the values of loyalty and togetherness.

The IS2 data reveals a further shift, namely when solitude is no longer a source of complaint but is instead celebrated:

"صارت الوحدة بذخاً كاملاً؛ مُلكاً عظيماً... إذا ما لمسني... أحد..."

"Solitude is the ultimate luxury; a magnificent kingdom... if someone were to touch me..." (Barakat, 2018, p. 35)

In this passage, solitude is described using vocabulary associated with luxury and power: *"بذخاً كاملاً"* (perfect luxury) and *"مُلكاً عظيماً"* (a mighty kingdom). The choice of vocabulary is intriguing because loneliness is usually associated with deprivation, whereas here it is linked to abundance and power. There are two possible interpretations of this choice. If read as a sincere statement, the character has indeed chosen to live without others and enjoys it. If read as a form of self-defense, this characterization actually underscores that he has already separated himself from the community: the solitude he glorifies is a solitude from which there is no turning back. The second interpretation makes more sense if this passage is placed after IS1, because in IS1, solitude is still experienced as a wound, whereas in IS2, it is already framed as a privilege.

The third indicator in this data is the truncation of the sentence *"إذا ما لمسني... أحد"* (if someone touches me), in which the word *"ahad"* (someone) is placed after the ellipsis. This placement makes the presence of another person seem like something that arrives late and suddenly, rather than something expected. This situation aligns with the portrayal of the novel's characters as people who live in solitude and are at the mercy of their own loneliness, as well as with the explanation that, in alienated individuals, communication with their social environment is severed (Demir et al., 2025).

5. Estrangement

The fifth dimension in Seeman's five-variant framework used in this study is self-estrangement. In

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a systematization of the dimensions of alienation reported by recent studies, self-estrangement is defined as detachment from activities that provide intrinsic rewards (Peng & Lou, 2025). This dimension differs from the previous four in that the object of alienation is not the environment, norms, or other people, but rather the individual's own life activities. The two data points in this dimension reveal self-estrangement in two forms: estrangement from work and estrangement from human relationships that have been transferred to objects.

The SE1 data presents a character's account of the origins of his downfall:

"صرت أتذكر، من ألمي وقهري، أن أمي كانت سبب زواجي التعس وأنا بعد لم أتمّ الرابعة عشرة. وهي لم تغفر لي طالقي، ولا أنت، بل كنتما سبب هجرتي إلى هذا البلد وعملي خادمة في بيوت الناس وفي تنظيف وسخ بشر لا أعرفهم، في حمامات المطاعم وغرف الفنادق."

"I'm beginning to realize, through my pain and heartbreak, that my mother was the reason for my unfortunate marriage even though I wasn't even fourteen yet. She never forgave me for my divorce, and neither did you; in fact, it was the two of you who caused me to emigrate to this country and take a job as a housekeeper in other people's homes, cleaning up the waste of strangers in restaurant restrooms and hotel rooms." (Barakat, 2018, p. 77)

The passage is structured as a long, unbroken chain of cause and effect: an unhappy marriage before the age of fourteen, an unforgivable divorce, emigration to a foreign land, and then working as a domestic helper. This sequence is tied together by the word *"سبب"* (cause), which appears twice: in *"كانت سبب زواجي التعس"* (was the cause of my unhappy marriage) and in *"كنتما سبب هجرتي"* (you two were the cause of my emigration). This repetition shows that the character's job was not a choice, but rather the final link in a chain of events beyond her control. Therefore, work here does not serve as a means of self-actualization, but rather as a continuation of a punishment that began long ago.

The quote also reveals that suffering is transformed into a source of knowledge, as seen in the opening line, *"صرت أتذكر، من ألمي وقهري"* (I began to remember, from my pain and my devastation). Memory does not emerge as nostalgia, but rather as a re-examination of the wound, and what is discovered in that re-examination is a chain of causes that ultimately leads back to the character herself as the victim. The height of self-alienation is evident in the description of the type of work: "Cleaning up the filth of people I don't know, in restaurant restrooms and hotel rooms" (تنظيف وسخ بشر لا أعرفهم، في حمامات المطاعم وغرف الفنادق). There is a sharp contrast between the work and the spaces where it is performed, for bathrooms and hotel rooms are the most private spaces belonging to others, while those working within them are people who do not know the owners at all. Thus, the protagonist actually tends to the intimacy of others while losing the intimacy of her own life. This situation aligns with the findings of a study on this novel, which indicates that its female characters experience extreme poverty, forcing them to work in the homes of the wealthy to earn money (Arefi & Yazdani, 2025), and that this service is performed without any intrinsic reward for those who undertake it.

The SE2 data reveals a different form of self-alienation, namely the transfer of intimacy to objects:

"كأن الرجل الذي ترك الرسالة هنا شخص أليف وأعرفه، لمجرد أن لمست ورقها."

"It was as if the man who left the letter here was someone I knew well, just because I touched the paper." (Barakat, 2018, p. 36)

In this passage, closeness to a person is replaced by closeness to a sheet of paper. Note the use of the

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word *"كأن"* (as if), which indicates that the character himself realizes this feeling of familiarity is merely a semblance, not reality. This realization actually reinforces his discovery, because the character knows that what he is touching is merely paper, yet he still feels a sense of familiarity. The phrase *"شخص أليف وأعرفه"* (a familiar person whom I know) also contains a contradiction: the word *"أعرفه"* (I know him) is not supported by any actual knowledge of that person, and the sole basis for this recognition is *"لمجرد أن لمست ورقها"* (simply because I touched the paper).

This situation confirms that social relationships have lost their function as a source of meaning, causing the protagonist to transfer the need for intimacy to objects. In studies of the concept of alienation, this phenomenon is known as reification that is, a state in which social relationships are understood as relationships between objects (Pavel, 2026). This novel depicts reification quite literally: what replaces human presence is a piece of paper that the protagonist once touched. Thus, the self-alienation in this narrative does not stop at the workplace, as seen in SE1, but extends into the realm of intimacy, where inanimate objects take over the functions of human relationships.

DISCUSSION

The five findings above indicate that alienation in *Barīd al-Layl* does not manifest as a single state of mind, but rather takes five interrelated forms. In this section, each finding is discussed by bringing together two perspectives: the psychological perspective, which views alienation as the characters' inner state, and the sociological perspective, which views it as a product of social structures.

First, regarding helplessness. From a psychological perspective, the data from PW1 and PW2 reveal what Seeman refers to as the expectation that one's own behavior does not determine the outcome (Zurcher et al., 1965). The character does not merely fail; he has already stopped hoping for success, and thus constructs a rationale that his fate was predetermined at birth. From a sociological perspective, however, this fatalistic attitude does not arise in a vacuum. The novel presents a character living through war, imprisonment, and displacement conditions in which decisions regarding one's body are made by others. Consequently, the character's fatalism can be interpreted as a form of rationalization in response to real-life experiences of violence. This finding aligns with studies of Arab diaspora literature, which show that alienation arises as a result of a split identity, when individuals struggle to reconcile their cultural roots with the culture of the host country (AlGharaibeh, 2025). The difference here is that in this novel, the source of powerlessness stems not only from the host culture but also from the home country, which detains, imprisons, and monitors its own citizens.

Second, regarding meaninglessness. Psychologically, the data from MN1 reveals the protagonist's failure to understand the connection between his actions and their outcomes, as the letters he writes lack any certainty regarding their recipients. Sociologically, this failure stems from the breakdown of communication infrastructure amid war and displacement, so that even the letter as the most personal medium loses any guarantee of delivery. In this regard, the novel can be read as a critique of what Bianco describes through the concept of "hostipitality," namely when the hospitality extended to refugees turns into a form of hostility (Bianco, 2022). The novel goes even further by showing that the characters live like ghosts, trapped between the past and the present without being able to envision the future (Bianco, 2023). It is this inability to envision the future that, within Seeman's framework, constitutes the core of meaninglessness, as individuals lose the standards needed to decide what to believe (Zurcher et al., 1965).

Third, regarding the absence of norms. The NL1 and NL2 data reveal characters who take socially disapproved paths namely, stealing and manipulating emotions for a very basic purpose: to avoid being expelled and to survive. Seeman defines normlessness

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as a strong expectation that socially disapproved behavior is indeed necessary to achieve one's goals, and this concept is derived from Durkheim's notion of anomie (Zurcher et al., 1965). Since this definition emphasizes the actor's expectations rather than their moral character, the characters' violations of norms can be interpreted as a response to a social structure that offers no guarantees. When compared to Al-Malki's study, which analyzes this novel through the concepts of marginalization and the role of functional space(Al-Malki, 2021), the findings of this research indicate that marginalization does not end with the placement of characters in peripheral spaces but extends to changes in the characters' moral orientation within those spaces. This second perspective complements the first: marginalization explains the characters' structural positioning, while normlessness explains its consequences on their behavior.

Fourth, regarding social isolation. Psychologically, the data from IS1 and IS2 show characters who withdraw from relationships and then rationalize that solitude is a luxury. Sociologically, this withdrawal can be understood as a consequence of the refugee experience, which has rendered social relationships unreliable. In studies of immigrant literature, this condition is described as a disrupted sense of time that is, when a character withdraws from the present and takes refuge in the past as a psychological sanctuary from the hardships of displacement (Laheg, 2026). This novel presents a different variation: the character does not seek refuge in the past but builds a fortress out of his own solitude. Therefore, isolation in this novel is not merely passive loneliness but an active and even proudly embraced defense mechanism.

Fifth, regarding self-alienation. SE1 data indicates that the protagonist's employment stems from a forced marriage and an unforgiven divorce; consequently, work never becomes a means of self-actualization but rather an ongoing punishment. The SE2 data reveal the culmination of this process: when human intimacy is replaced by the touch of letter paper. In the literature on work alienation, there is a debate regarding the status of self-estrangement: some researchers argue that work alienation is unidimensional and that self-estrangement constitutes the core of the concept, while the other four dimensions serve as predictors (Lagios et al., 2023). The findings of this study support this view to a limited extent, as the SE1 data reveal that the powerlessness, meaninglessness, and lack of norms experienced by the character converge into a single state: the character's separation from their own life activities. However, these findings also indicate that self-estrangement does not always remain confined to the workplace; in SE2, it extends into the realm of intimacy, where inanimate objects take over the functions of human relationships.

From the five discussions above, a common thread can be identified: the letter as the primary metaphor for alienation. A letter is a medium that presupposes the existence of a sender, a recipient, and a message. In this novel, these three elements are fragmented: the sender is unaware of the fate of the message, the recipient is unclear, and the message is read by someone other than the intended recipient. This structure parallels the structure of alienation formulated by Seeman, namely the disconnect between an individual's behavior and the outcomes they expect (Zurcher et al., 1965). Therefore, it can be argued that the epistolary form in this novel is not merely a narrative technique but a form that inherently embodies the theme of alienation. Other Arab diaspora novels generally explore themes of displacement, identity, and cultural assimilation (TKJJaleel TK, 2025), whereas *Barīd al-Layl* shifts these issues into the realm of failed communication. Regarding the strengths of this study, its primary strength lies in the precision of its analytical tools. Seeman's five-dimensional framework allows the researcher to distinguish between types of alienation that are often conflated in conventional thematic readings, so that seemingly similar data such as loneliness and powerlessness can be separated based on their respective operational definitions (Tummers et al., 2015). A second strength lies in the use of the

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Arabic text along with page numbers from the first edition, allowing each interpretation to be traced back to its source. By comparison, studies that analyze this novel through philosophical frameworks such as "hostipitality" produce ethically rich analyses but do not provide reusable categories for measuring the types of alienation experienced by the characters (Bianco, 2022).

The limitations of this study lie in the scope of the data. This study analyzes only ten text units selected based on the representativeness of the markers, so it does not claim to have accounted for all instances of alienation markers in the novel. Consequently, this study cannot conclude which dimension is quantitatively the most dominant. The second limitation relates to the number of variables: this study is confined to Seeman's framework and does not compare it with other frameworks of alienation, such as the six dimensions formulated by Seeman in 1991 with the addition of "cultural estrangement" (Peng & Lou, 2025). Future research could examine the extent to which these additional dimensions are relevant to diaspora characters, given that studies of Arab diaspora literature indicate that Arab immigrant writers occupy a liminal space between their cultural heritage and the host society (Eskander & Iskander, 2026), suggesting that the cultural dimension may carry particular weight in such contexts.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis and discussion, two conclusions can be drawn in accordance with the research questions. First, the alienation of the Arab diaspora in the novel *Barīd al-Layl* is represented through characters who experience a sense of disconnection from their homeland, family, language, and future. This disconnection does not appear as a single theme but is scattered across various experiences: a character who resigns himself to fate; a character who is confined and ill; a character who writes letters with no clear recipient; a character who is monitored at the airport; a character who steals and manipulates to survive; a character who glorifies loneliness; and a character who works as a domestic worker and feels a deep connection to writing paper. All these experiences are united by a single structure: letters that never reach their recipients, serving as a metaphor for the disconnect between action and outcome.

Second, the manifestations of Melvin Seeman's five dimensions of alienation appear evenly distributed throughout this novel, each represented by two textual examples. Powerlessness is evident in the belief that one's fate is predetermined at birth and in the dream of escaping only to choose a place of death. Meaninglessness is evident in the letters that pile up without anyone knowing their fate and in surveillance whose logic is incomprehensible. Normlessness is evident in the invitation to steal from the employer's house and in the manipulation of emotions to avoid being evicted. Social isolation is evident in the rejection of a promise of love interpreted as a life sentence and in loneliness described as luxury and a kingdom. Self-estrangement is evident in the work of cleaning up the waste of strangers as a consequence of a forced marriage, as well as in the shift of a sense of intimacy from people to sheets of paper. Thus, alienation in this novel is not merely a psychological condition that arises by chance, but a direct consequence of war, displacement, and oppressive labor structures; Seeman's five dimensions in this novel serve as a psychological language for interpreting the structural violence experienced by the Arab diaspora.

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