

# How to sing in dark times?

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A paper published in the journal ‘Nature’ on the ill-health effects of loneliness has come up with several deep insights, shedding light on how a lack of social interaction is becoming an increasing risk factor for heart disease, amnesia and so on.

Research on how loneliness affects the brain has, of late, intensified. Scientists have discovered the neural mechanisms responsible for the signals the human body emits when social needs are not met.

Although the sector has progressed significantly, the overall picture is still incomplete. But preliminary results suggest that isolation can

change many aspects of the brain ranging from its size to the connections among neurons.

A survey conducted by Meta in 2023 revealed that one out of three adults worldwide feel very or somewhat lonely. In the same year, the World Health Organization launched an awareness campaign on loneliness under the name 'Pressing Health Threat'.

### **Loneliness in language**

The word 'loneliness' began being used in English in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The early use of this word in literature is found ('of course!') in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet'.

All through the 16<sup>th</sup> century, people were incited to imagine being confined to secluded places like hell, tombstone etc. by way of warning them against committing sinful acts. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the term was dormant.

English naturalist John Ray defined it as a term describing places and people in neighboring countries as well as far-off regions. He added the term to the list of rarely used words. Again, the term went into dormancy for the subsequent century. It was Samuel Johnson's 'A Dictionary of the English Language' (1755), which defined loneliness in such a way that it launched the modern sense of the word.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the connotation of 'loneliness' shed its association with religion and took on the new form of 'alienation', thanks to the rise of modernity. After the 1800s, Karl Marx's concept of 'alienation'

brought into focus in the wake of the industrial revolution, was seriously debated. "But the concept of 'alienation' put forward by Marx in a definitive sense has become the basis for philosophical interpretations of various capitalist thinkers who are diametrically opposed to Marxism.

Psychological disorders, tension, agony, decadent personality, loneliness, self-doubts and decline in values have all come under the umbrella of the concept of 'alienation'", says S.V. Rajadurai in his book 'Alienation' (1979).

### **Arendt's 'Loneliness'**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hannah Arendt adopted a completely different approach to loneliness. A German-American historian and philosopher, she was one of the most influential political theorists of the last century. Her most important contribution was 'The Origins of Totalitarianism' (1951), a study of how Nazism and Stalinism emerged as the primary totalitarian political movements in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Totalitarianism means banning opposition parties and ideologies; it is a political theory as well as a form of government that controls all aspects of people's public and private life.

In the 1950s when McCarthyism was at its peak, Arendt was engaged in attempts to write a book on Karl Marx. At that point, she reflected on the relationship of loneliness to ideology and terror. "In a non-totalitarian world, it is loneliness that prepares men for totalitarian domination. What was once a controlled experience during conditions like old age has become an everyday experience of a growing population in our century.'

## **Mechanism of totalitarianism**

The components of totalitarianism may be various. But Arendt finds that the essence of a totalitarian government lies in isolation because loneliness cuts off one from human contacts. A word used by Arendt in her native German language for loneliness is 'Verlassenheit' that means 'a state of abandonment'.

Loneliness, she argued, is “one of the most intensely desperate human experiences” because in solitude one cannot realize one’s full potential to function as human beings. When we experience loneliness, we lose the ability to enjoy anything else.

To explain that the essence of totalitarianism lies in solitude, Arendt distinguishes loneliness from isolation and from solitude. One can be isolated to engage in creative activity. Even reading a book takes some solitude.

But loneliness cuts off one from human contacts and all levels of companionship. Totalitarian movements isolate people with ideologies. What Arendt calls the ‘iron grip’ of totalitarianism destroys human movement, activity, and thinking ability to think. The world becomes a wilderness where nothing like experience or thought is possible.

The way we think about the world affects the relationships we have with others and with ourselves. By infusing a secret meaning into every event and experience, ideological movements are forced to change reality in keeping with their claims, once they capture

power. This means that in such a context, one cannot believe in the reality of one's own experiences.

### **Singing in Dark Ages**

Organized loneliness, bred from ideology, leads to tyranny; besides, it destroys one's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction and leaves one in a position of indecision. A person cannot have a conversation with himself because the ability to think in loneliness is limited.

Ideological thinking removes us from the world of life experiences, drains imagination, denies pluralism, and destroys the space that allows human beings to interact with each other in meaningful ways.

In the 21st century we are still facing the phases of totalitarianism that Arendt lists. We need no examples to explain this period surrounded by darkness against our background.

"In the dark times Will there also be singing? Yes, there will also be singing. About the dark times" Perhaps following these lines of Bertolt Brecht may lead us to light!

**This is an article based on the one written about Arendt published on the Aeon site.**

**Translated by V. Mariappan**