



THE CHAOTIC KAFKA: *Devouring the Absurdism in Gregor Samsa's transformation*

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Abstract— This paper delves into the existential and absurdist themes in Franz Kafka's 'Metamorphosis', unravelling the protagonist's transformation as a metaphor for alienation and societal rejection. Through a critical lens, it examines the existential plight and identity crisis that arise in a world devoid of meaning, challenging conventional perceptions of humanity, purpose, and self.

Keywords— Franz Kafka, Kafkaesque, Metamorphosis, Absurdism, Literature, societal rejection, capitalism, Gregor Samsa



"The Kafkaesque describes an indescribable sense of menace."

- Adam Thirlwell

1915, the year that brought into the world of literature, one of the finest pieces of magic-realism with an allegorical tale of Gregor Samsa's uneasy transformation into a 'gigantic insect'. One can find the true essence of Kafkaesque in this novella - the feeling of entrapment in a distorted, fantastical yet too real world, Metamorphosis is like a nightmare we are trying to wake up from.

Gregor Samsa, the protagonist was a commercial traveller, who awoke one morning to find himself turned into a vermin - Kafka offers texture to Gregor's transformed body and the struggles that come with it - *'his numerous legs... pitifully thin.. waved helplessly..'*, *'however violently he forced himself towards his right side he always rolled onto his back again'* (Kafka, 3) - the reader can't help but pity this helpless creature. The third person limited narrative used in Metamorphosis gives a close perspective of the thoughts and emotions of Gregor as he is affected by this change and pushed into isolation. Although there is a physical change that has upturned Samsa's world, Kafka's choice to give more space to his thoughts and not his appearance creates a connection with the mind of the reader. Samsa is not affected so much about his physical change as much as he is obsessed by his job roles and parents debts.

While exploring his thoughts, Samsa is suddenly reminded of the time, an anxious representation of the passing of time that symbolizes the tyranny of time in this fast paced, capitalistic world. One can read between this text the guilt associated with personal time that an individual desires and the growing apprehensive uneasiness within Samsa's mind about his inability to perform what was normal. There is a strong irony in how despite being free from his routine, he is still an embodiment of being stuck : becoming highly relatable in a world that is governed by deadlines and tenures, that strips one of the joys of living in the present as the dark cloud of what the future holds is always looming. The urgency created by time was what motivated Gregor to move after his transformation and the tower clock striking three in the morning was the last sound he heard before his death.

Gregor was the sole breadwinner of the Samsa house, and his utilitarian purpose is not limited just to his workplace. While one would expect the consequence of his turning into a different creature as him losing his earning capabilities, his job, Gregor's value as a member of the family also denigrates. There is transference of power and importance from Gregor to his sister. The amount of food that she feeds her brother becomes inversely proportional to the power she assumes as a 'contributing' part of the family - new to Gregor's change his sister makes more efforts to

feed him 'to find out what he liked she brought him a whole selection of food.' (Kafka, 22) which progresses to treating Gregor as a burden, '...before she went to business, hurriedly pushed into his room with her foot any food that was available.' (Kafka, 40) The food Gregor is fed becomes a reflection of his treatment by his family, his isolation starts from physicality and extends to behavioral aspects.

The absurdity of the story lies in the contradictions employed by Kafka which become irresistible to ignore. Gregor's physical change comes as an obvious shock to the entire family, initially they are scared of what he has turned into which could also mark the respect they held for him in his human form, but as they start getting used to his monstrous presence, it does not bring them to empathize with his situation, instead the more comfortable they get with Gregor's appearance, the more he seems to become invisible - 'To be sure, no one was aware of him.' (Kafka, 45) Kafka emphasizes on the horrific reality of human nature, that humankind is bound to witness the departure of humanity, in how even Gregor's family becomes a reason for his downfall. Their insensitivity towards Gregor invokes the question of whether Metamorphosis is his worst nightmare, Gregor's deep dark fear that if he were to ever become deprived of the ability to provide for his family, would they dispose of him altogether? - A question that possibly bothers the minds of the working population on whom millions of families rely. Metamorphosis is undoubtedly Kafka's critique of the soul-sucking impacts of Capitalism and how it treats an individual no less than a vermin. It is the timeless allegory of humans being reduced to their purpose of contributing to the economy, a world divided by class and the ever-running rat race to the top of this class hierarchy. Modern society has isolated one human from another; in a competitive world, individualism has created a void in the meaningless lives of the people and attempts are made to fill this void not by coming together but by economic accomplishments.

Affected by Gregor's Metamorphosis, the family members try to find various ways of availing income, one such consequence is Gregor's father being employed as a banker's assistant. Gregor on seeing his father in uniform is reminded of the easy, laid-back life his father used to live before his transformation - 'the man who used to lie wearily sunk in bed whenever Gregor set out on a business....whenever he wanted to say anything, nearly always came to a full stop and gathered his escort around him?' (Kafka, 35). The uniform is used initially as a symbol of pride, respect and dignity, in one instance Gregor looks at a photograph from his past life in the military - 'directly across on the opposite wall hung a photograph of Gregor from the time of his military service; it was a picture of him as a lieutenant, as he, smiling and worry-free, with his hand

on his sword, demanded respect for his bearing and uniform.' (Kafka,15) The uniform worn by Gregor's father undertakes different meanings as the story steers ahead, at first his father looks sharp but then it starts to look overused as he 'persisted in keeping his uniform on even in the house' (Kafka, 38), reflecting on both the father's old age and his exhaustion, as opposed to the easy life he led before. His frustration with Gregor is a result of this change, the 'uniform' itself undergoing changes talks of a deeper meaning that the text holds in how Gregor's Metamorphosis changed the lives of all the family members, how their feelings towards him changed with his lacking utility and how they chose to easily move on with their lives after Gregor's demise as if it was a burden lifted off their shoulders.

The characteristic affected most in Gregor is his movement, as a human Gregor had a very busy life provided he was a 'commercial traveller', movement was a part of his job description. The metamorphosis did not just make him a bug, but a gigantic one in a small apartment, hence restricting his movement to the maximum. In the first chapter, Gregor is consciously making all possible efforts to put himself into movement, but this gradually declines. As the story progresses, Gregor stays still and quiet, doomed to isolation. In the description of his death, Gregor realises that he is now 'unable to stir a limb' (Kafka, 50), his movement has come to a stop. This movement is a direct representation of working life. The working class are highly affected due to the stoppage of any movement, be it technology, conveyance or their own limbs; and so was the Samsa family. Due to his transformation, there is a breakdown of communication between Gregor and his family members. While the voice changes entirely, it is also reflective of the fact that there is a gap, an inability to express what Gregor is going through and equally reciprocating that inability is the ignorance of the family, their insensitivity towards Gregor and lack of efforts to understand Gregor. Even with the mention of his father, his voice is referred to as - 'If only he would have stopped making that unbearable hissing noise!' (Kafka, 18), there is no attempt by Kafka to humanize Gregor's father; the strains of their purely utilitarian relationship are found in how he views his father. His constant hissing, bickering and also the reason that leads to his death, is purely a reflection of Kafka's personal life. 'It is crucial to know the facts of Kafka's emotional life when reading his fiction. In some sense, all his stories are autobiographical.' (Thirlwell, 11) There is a need in Gregor for his father's validation but there is no attempt at sympathizing with his character.

Events leading to the end of the story establish Gregor as a character doomed to exile, a modernist individual repressed by society, so alienated that he is

unable to deal with reality. The lack of a realistic plot, strange characters, and allegorical aspects - all lead to the enigma of this imaginary narrative that leaves the reader stupefied. The rotting apple stuck in the back of Gregor is a direct reflection of how the society and his family have stabbed him in his back and left him to rot and die. His unproductivity in a capitalistic world led to his downfall, in not just the loss of his job and his status as a breadwinner, but also as a significant part of the Samsa family. His physical state is exactly the treatment he is subject to despite his human history, derivative of the meaning that this fast-paced world moves on too quickly, and values a man only in relation to his contribution in the society. Kafka encourages thought-provoking interpretations of this mysterious tale and none of them could prove to be wrong. A reader expects the Metamorphosis of a character, hoping that Gregor might finally wake from this brutal nightmare and prove everything to be just a dream, but instead we see the metamorphosis of all characters in relation to how Gregor's change affected them. A selfish, harsh reality is brought to surface, where our protagonist, a victim of capitalization, is subject to dehumanising behaviour and alienation from the society, unable to prove his worth to even his loved ones, unable to move altogether, faced with complete stagnation - *'And what now?'* (Kafka, 50) passes away. To summarise the genius of Kafka, is to measure the vastness of the universe. *'He is therefore a genius, outside ordinary limits of literature, and a saint, outside ordinary limits of human behaviour.'* (Thirlwell, 11)

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