



Kafka and Dystopia - An analysis of an overarching sense of despondency and tragedy democratization in Kafka's *The Trial*

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Abstract— *The modern nation state, with its system of social control has the power to relegate the individual to the naught. One of the most important novelists of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka's work went on to be identified with a mood that is infused with grimness and bleakness, uncertainty and an ensuing sense of discomfort. This is what birthed the term "Kafkaesque", and it is also used in real-life situations fraught with an unnerving environment. It is easy to gauge from the premise in Kafka's works, particularly The Trial, a feeling of existential angst and dread seeping in the already forlorn setting. This paper seeks to explore the dystopian realm that Kafka engineers in his works and how it is telling of the large scale annihilation that was to rock the world in the shape of the World Wars.*

Keywords— *Kafkaesque, The Trial, dystopia, tragedy, absurd, Theatre of the Absurd*

KAFKA AND THE TRIAL

Kafkaesque, although emanating from eerily overturned fictional settings, is now also associated with real-life situations wherein chaos is all-pervasive with no respite in sight. Disorder helms the socially punctured milieu. A sense of disappointment with the existing systems of order looms large and seeps deeper into the psyche of the person reeling in the tumult. Kafka's *The Trial* can be considered as the pioneer work that brought to the forefront a multitude of maladies plaguing the socio-political setup and consequently, the quotidian lives of the people. Essentially, the novel can be interpreted as futuristic, both in terms of the progression of the plot and symbolically too. It invokes scenarios in which individuals are irrevocably stuck in a construct famously (or infamously?) called "the system". The purpose is to unnerve the reader the same way as it disorients the protagonist himself and to produce an effect that allows the reader to feel what it is like for a person to grapple with the vagaries of bureaucracy and machineries of social control. The reader almost becomes a character who although a mute bystander, feels the discomfort and

utter despondency of the protagonist. This leads us to the depiction of the subjective interiority of the victim, which is a function of Kafka's own inner reality. Thus arrives the need to dissect and analyse the historical context of Kafka's time. The text reeks of disappointment with the legal processes in place to remedy situations, with the sheer helplessness the protagonist encounters, and with the self. Anger, doubt, befuddlement, self-pity, all amalgamate and dissolve into peak despair. Kafka was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was dejected to find that the moral depravity and tyranny percolating in the world were detected in abominable proportions in his country, the new republic of Czechoslovakia, too. He is therefore drawn to the themes of intrusive governance, the grimness of political quandaries, the helplessness of an individual in the face of adversity, the physical and mental trauma on account of bureaucratic disorder and the proliferation of dystopia.

TRAGEDY ENMESHED IN *THE TRIAL*

An out and out tragedy, *The Trial* cannot be officially called one since it does not conform to the Aristotelian notion of tragedy in terms of both stature and status of the victim. Joseph K does not belong to high status, which makes his suffering commonplace and far from grandiose. However, it qualifies as a tragedy since Kafka deftly plants elements of tragedy, albeit differently from Aristotle, in this work. He intends to bolster the impact of the blow that the protagonist wrestles with throughout and somewhat fulfils the qualification for a literary tragedy. In the modern society, however, high status can be ruled out as a qualification for tragedy. The twentieth century world is inherently flawed and replete with countless maladies warranting immediate redress. Even an ordinary individual, belonging to any class and social standing, can face tragedy and be tested by forces beyond their control. There may be some similarities that play out implicitly; instead of the Greek gods hovering over their heads to determine their fate, it is the "system" that envelops them in the same manner. Eagleton asserts that "Franz Kafka's description of the law in *The Trial* has just the ambiguity of a necessity without justice. Like the Greek concept of *dike*, the law is logical but not equitable. On the contrary, it is vengeful and vindictive." (Eagleton, 2003, p.130). The same work by Eagleton ends with the following words: "We may leave Franz Kafka with the last word. At the end of *The Trial*, as he is about to be executed, Josef K. glimpses a vague movement in the top storey of a nearby house. The casement window flew open like a light flashing on; a human figure, faint and insubstantial at that distance and height, forced itself far out and stretched out its arms even further. Who was it? A friend? A good man? One who sympathised? One who wanted to help? Was it one person? Was it everybody?" (Eagleton, 2003, p.297). Eagleton attests to Kafka's attempt at ending the novel with a tragedy of a remarkable degree. The end elevates the tension to an extent where all paths of a palatable resolution seem closed. The nebulous inscrutability of the whole act of execution, the faintness of hope, and the ultimate awakening of the protagonist that no discernible power could change his fate at this point are the constant strains *The Trial* plays with. In today's modern construct, a person living comfortably within the confines of his house and with technological advances driving their livelihoods can be seen as having a long way to fall when he or she does. Also, a preconceived notion guiding progressive liberal societies of today avers that man is free, revels in independence, and exhibits the sensibility to realise and tap into their potentialities and competencies. Thus, even the smallest ways in which a modern life marks a departure from what is deemed a comfortable life makes room for a tragedy, which is the same in magnitude as a classical tragedy.

"To genuine tragic action it is essential that the principle of *individual* freedom and independence, or at least that of self-determination, the will to find in the self the free cause and source of the personal act and its consequences, should already have been aroused" (Hegel, in Williams, 1966, p.33).

It is, therefore, safe to say that tragedy has been democratised, and this has led to the refashioning of society as a culprit wielding power over the powerless individual. Society can be looked at as the agent and catalyst of destruction of the helpless protagonist. Bugged down by the convoluted workings of the legal mechanisms, he falls and submits to his (impending) fate. Although Joseph K tries to take effective measures to extricate himself out of the precarious predicament and evade his fate, he is almost coerced into complying with the "system" towards the end: "... he yielded himself completely to his companions" (p.176) [to his murderers]. It is not hard to gauge the striking similarities in how a tragedy plays out in modern societies and how it came to pass in the ancient times. The only difference lies in the anatomy of the culprit – the gods have been replaced by an esoteric entity masqueraded in the guise of the "system".

"Man's life is a line that nature commands him to describe upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant. He is born without his own consent; his organization does in nowise depend upon himself; his ideas come to him involuntarily; his habits are in the power of those who cause him to contract them; he is unceasingly modified by causes, whether visible or concealed, over which he has no control, which necessarily regulate his mode of *existence*, give the hue to his way of thinking, and determine his manner of acting..." (Solomon, 1993, p.230).

The idea of structuralism and even determinism can be mirrored in these lines. The involuntary act of living when suffused with external agents capable of guiding individual behaviour is prone to constant reverberations from the unknowable. This determinism becomes more terrifying when fused with what totalitarianism entails, with the victim perpetually in the adamant grip of fate. What is apparent and what is concealed is important since the majority of the protagonist's journey includes a fruitless resolve to understand the seen and unseen, the knowable and the

unknowable, the real and fiction. Its salience with tragedy and hence, with *The Trial*, cannot be undermined.

JOSEPH K'S PERSECUTION

If one dissects Kafka's works closely, they will be able to ascertain a sense of alienation infused in his psyche. Since he grew up in ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire, he experienced "... alienation from daily life" (Stach, 2013, p.xi). The isolation that he felt at the expense of his origins furthered a sense of deep estrangement in him. Being a Jew in a society that persecuted Jews, he is said to have lived in "a ghetto with invisible walls" (Murray, 2004, p.6). "...a sense of alienation from the dominant Christian society seems inevitable. As a Jew, Kafka, had first-hand knowledge from birth of how it felt to be faced with exclusions and un-passable tests with ever changing rules" (James, 2007, p.343). *The Trial* is a result of this protracted sense of alienation that Kafka faced on account of his race. Joseph K. is a microcosmic representation of Kafka and his troubled psyche in the universe of *The Trial*. He is unable to understand the way the authorities operate, what they expect from him, what he should do to meet their demands/expectations and fails to escape death at the hands of the anonymous agents of the corrupted State. *The Trial* is brimmed with the motifs of persecution. Joseph K. is killed "like a dog" in the end (p.178). Jews were commonly addressed by means of animal imagery during Kafka's time. Kafka underscores the illogic of persecution. "For me you developed the bewildering effect that all tyrants have whose might is not founded on reason, but on their own person" (Brod, 1995, p.22). Persecution has been attributed with menace melded with horror in this novel, and it engenders a system which legitimizes inflicting torture upon the innocent. Kafka takes it upon himself to foretell what the world will come to on account of bureaucratic tyranny. Bureaucratic mayhem is the fulcrum of Kafka's oeuvre. His tone is sinister and ruthless. He spares no one and launches a scathing attack on the fascist regimes shoving their agendas down the gullets of the masses. *The Trial* seems to be a major proponent of this form of libellous writing. James has written of Kafka's view of the the "... remorseless logic of an irrational system" (2007, p.343). James's articulation of Kafka's depiction of the "irrational logic" seems relevant with respect to Kafka's portrayal of the workings of social control in a nation state. The social control mentioned here is a manifestation of the irrationality, more so the incomprehensibility of despotism. The victims are seen as responsible for all the wrong that exists in the world, and their killing is justified and given the garb of a bounty. For instance, the Holocaust can be interpreted as an episode of scapegoating the Jews on a remarkably large scale. The

Jews were hurled with accusations of fiddling with the purity of the German population and consequently, the world. This is how their genocide was explicated by the ruling regime of the time. Almost six million Jews were persecuted in the ruthless carnage. The Germans are yet to recuperate from this strain. The incident is embossed as one of the most painful and gruesome, if not the most painful, acts of violence that ravaged multiple countries (Comager, Ed. Allen, 1962, p.427). It is believed and rightly so, that Kafka's works, particularly *The Trial*, pre-empted the ethnic cleansing and the disillusionment with the governing systems that transpired during the dystopic Nazi Germany.

It will not be wrong to associate Franz Kafka with the Theatre of the Absurd since it reflects his relentless attempts to combat the absurdity surrounding him. The bleakness imbued in the surroundings is palpable. In this sense, *The Trial* can be likened to Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, where Ionesco shows people turning into rhinos with only the protagonist being able to resist this metamorphosis. This allegorization is a result of people submitting to a totalitarian system, mostly of their own volition, with freedom not being construed as a liberating prospect, for it is seen as a means towards alienation.

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