



An Approach to Psychosis: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*

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Abstract— *Kafka's The Trial (1925) provides an intricate narrative, it is enriched with complex feelings and perceptions that are difficult to grasp. Most of Kafka's works allows the readers to experience states and feelings that go far beyond their normal understanding. Even though this text mainly focuses on the dystopian and totalitarian system of the court, it can also be viewed under a psychoanalytical lens. It narrates the story of Josef K., a bank clerk who's arrested in a very abrupt manner without any predisposition. He's never enlightened about the true nature of his crime. As K. tries to unfold the labyrinthine network of bureaucratic traps he slips into a state of complete delusion. This paper is an attempt to inquire as to how The Trial shows the crisis of a modern man in a dystopian world altogether leading him into a state of psychosis. This paper further argues as to how the main character of this text, Josef K. subverts the Cartesian position of being "I think therefore I am" with his constant attempt at making sense of his state as he tries to abject his superego. In the course of the paper through a detailed analysis it shall bring forth instances to appropriate the reason for Josef K.'s psychosis. It will further try to draw a parallel between his psyche and chaos by proving how he tries to conceal his logical inconsistency by presenting himself as someone who is rational and in order while lurking behind it is his pathological illness i.e disorder within order.*



Keywords— *Dystopian, Totalitarian, Psychoanalytical, Psychosis, Psyche*

The Trial was one of Kafka's most renowned works which was written in 1912 and was published after his death in the year 1925, by his close friend Max Brod. It is a symbolic representation of Kafka's awareness of the unconscious that tries to accuse and condemn the conscious. As Josef K. the protagonist tries to unravel this labyrinthine network of the bureaucratic system he delves deep into the trial that happens both in his unconsciousness and the court. If we talk of a rational person, he would have followed the laws of the state and act accordingly and would have implicitly agreed to obey the commands of the state and despite of fearing his death he would have welcomed it. However, in case of K. he doesn't have the comforting knowledge of his own innocence, or the knowledge that he is a victim of injustice. Even though he tries to present himself in a very rational manner someone who is upright he relegates himself from applying the law of reason and has drawn the conclusion that he is guilty as he has been

unjust for he allowed, the highest faculty of the soul to be ruled by passion, the lowest. Rebecca L. Thacker in her work

Kafka's The Trial, Psychoanalysis, and the Administered Society (2020) applied psychoanalytic intervention to Foucauldian readings of *The Trial* by interpreting the text as "the narration of Josef

K.'s unconscious experience as a split subject in relation to the big other" (1). This paper shall be carried forward through a detailed analysis of the primary text along with the secondary materials to substantiate the argument. An angle of psychoanalysis would be employed to view the notion of psychosis in the text by exploring appropriate examples along with it, Edward Lorenz's theory of "Chaos" would be cited in order to relate Josef K.'s psyche to chaos.

Psychosis as defined in clinical psychiatry is a serious mental illness which affects the whole personality

of a person. "In psychoanalysis, 'psychosis' is used to describe conditions such as hallucinatory confusion, paranoia and schizophrenia" (Macey 319). In context of this text psychosis or states of paranoia, schizophrenia can be encountered through the character of Josef

K. in many instances. As Milan Kundera in *Art of the novel* (1986) talks about the corrosion of the

Cartesian position in his chapter on "*The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes*" he says:

"Kafka and Hasek thus bring us face to face with this enormous paradox: In the course of the Modern Era, Cartesian rationality has corroded, one after the other, all values inherited from the Middle Ages. But just when reason wins a total victory, pure irrationality (force willing only its will) seizes the world stage, because there is no longer any generally accepted value system to block its path." (Kundera 6)

Kundera emphasizes on the fact that the modern era has completely subverted the position of the self, this corrosion of the Cartesian position has been employed by Kafka through his character of Josef K. For he believed in conditioning his exterior image rather than what's within.

Therefore, the very notion of Descartes "I think therefore I am" has been subverted by Josef when he fails to reason his thought process, he fails to understand his psychological rupture. His failure to make sense of everything leading from the functioning of the court to his own self became the reason for his psychosis. He in a way takes recourse to the Freudian interpretation that no human can succeed by siding completely with his superego and its derivatives over and against the id and the ego. "According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the id is the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories, the super-ego operates as a moral conscience, and the ego is the realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego" (McLeod 1). However, according to Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language which Josef K, tries to abject as the very notion of language is patriarchal. There is a schism between the subject's actual self and his ideal self in the Lacanian split subject. The superego, a guilt-inducing agency operating in the subject's unconscious, bridges this gap. The subject will never be able to fully realise his ideal self, but the subject persists in trying. Failure causes guilt, and guilt leads the subject unconsciously to continue seeking "that which will allow him to achieve the impossible ideal" (Thacker 10).

From the very first chapter, we can see K's agitation towards acknowledging the nature of his crime. He's in away stuck between the law of reason and law of nature, as he fails to adhere to any logical understanding of

his situation. He's presented as someone who is very much preoccupied with his own thoughts, for he had very little knowledge about the workings of the bureaucratic machinery. The first chapter establishes a link between Josef K.'s state of consciousness and some enigmatic powers from the unconsciousness the responds to it. "Our authorities as far as I know them, and I know only the lowest grades, do not in search of guilt in the population but are, as it says in the law, drawn to guilt and must send us warders out" (Kafka 5). With these claims of the warders, it perhaps arises in the minds of the readers, if Josef K. Is guilty or by what law he has been judged and found guilty? However, these questions remain as it is for his whole trial happens in an ambiguous manner along with it, he never lets his actual instincts to come to the forefront. His trial takes place both in his consciousness as well as in the court.

Throughout the novel, the physical description of the atmosphere of the court is intensified with strangeness and perplexity, which itself alludes to dissociative experiences. Elizabete

Castelon Konkiewitz and Edward Benjamin Ziff in their work *Dissociation, Delusion and the*

Splitting of the Self in The Trial by Franz Kafka: Phenomenology and Neurobiology of Schizophrenia (2018) claims that "Two common forms of dissociation are depersonalization and derealization, both being closely related pathological perceptual abnormalities in which sensory information fails to integrate" (204). This can be exemplified through the instance when Josef K, was in the atelier of the painter Titorelli which was in an outlying part of the town, diametrically opposed to the location of the court building. As K. was leaving the atelier, he came across the court and witnessing his astonishment, the painter replies:

"Didn't you know there are court offices here? There are court offices in nearly every attic, why should they be missing just here? Even my studio is part of the court offices, but the court has put it at my disposal." (Kafka 131)

His unawareness of these things led him to the feeling of detached from the outside world thus making one unfamiliar with oneself. K.'s lack of exercise in reason is the main cause for what can be termed as his pathological illness. He was declared but was not literally arrested. His consciousness of being aware of something going on against him is what controls his behaviour.

This text shows a man's inner journey, a sense of guilt a man carries within himself. Thus, in the opening chapter itself it was evident when the warder Franz points out K.'s logical inconsistency in claiming his innocence while at the same time simultaneously admitting that he was unaware of law. This perhaps indicate K.'s attempt at concealing his

superego, for he was aware of his actual guilt which he denied to acknowledge by blaming his rationality altogether. As he pursued his matter, he tried recollecting instances from his past through journaling if he had committed any crime or any immoral act that can incur any legal trouble. Throughout this process he was fighting against his "self" for it make him come in terms with his repressed guilt that is his fascination towards women, he in a way tries to overlap this guilt with the law of reason(his own understanding and realization of his case). Instead, K. has in his mind the image of a rational person in the widest possible way, a person who thinks and acts according to the dictates of reason- that is how he wants to present himself in front of the society. This can be evident of his self preserving nature by proving himself innocent. His self preservation can also be seen in his encounter with Titorelli while discussing the acquittals, he was in a way giving himself an affirmation that he is innocent while replying to Titorelli's question if he's innocent "I'm completely innocent".... "But you are definitely innocent? 'But yes,' K. Said. "That's the main thing" (Kafka 119).

From the moment of his arrest, he is subjected to constant surveillance, every character he meets already has a pre- judgement about him and his case. As a part of the society, he seems to focus all his energies on the effort to remain logical and rational for he is afraid to be appearing as someone who lacks common sense or someone who contradicts himself. Frank Stringfellow in his work *Kafka's "Trial": Between "The Republic" and Psychoanalysis* (1995) renders a

psychoanalytical point of view to define the self-understanding that K. arrives through his obsession with these controlling concepts of law, justice and logic. She further goes on explaining this by drawing a parallel between Plato's *The Republic* and *The Trial* "The first is similarity in the overall "plot" of the two works. In *The Republic*, Socrates demonstrates that justice lies not in such external actions s giving every person their due, but in the internal constitution of the human being- specifically, in the proper ordering of the three parts of the soul. K. too, seems to turn from n external to n internal understanding of justice." For most of the novel he seems to be consciously thinking of justice as a bargain that he is going to make with the authorities. He thinks that if he follows their laws, they will in turn render him his due by considering him innocent and refraining him from his punishment.

According to Kafka, the sense of guilt is the most-riskiest moment, that happens to men in the "awakening process" (Azizmohammadi, Kohzadi, et al.1264) and within this process the repressed feelings comes out to the unconscious in a fractious manner. No matter how much he

tries to put his sense of reason over brute instinct (sexual desire), he fails for he at times deviates himself from proving his innocence. His vulnerability is very much evident whenever he meets any women. He is so much invested in his own preoccupations that he relegates all the other things including his trail. In spite of the fact that he was frustrated after witnessing the meaningless mechanism of the court and began questioning his whole existence he couldn't resist his sexual inclination towards women. That was his fatal flaw which eventually resulted into his sense of guilt. And even though he didn't accept in front of the society that he is guilty, he in away started to recollect instances if he had ever committed any crime as mentioned earlier. This is evident of how such situation impacts ones psyche s this is how ones psyche works. He didn't want to take responsibility of his choices, hence, he participated in the absurdity of the court and accepted himself s guilty which ultimately resulted into his death in the final chapter.

Taking recourse to Edward Lorenz's Chaos theory, we can perhaps talk about K.'s mental scenario, as Patrick Brady in his essay *Chaos Theory, Control Theory, and Literary Theory* or:

Story of Three Butterflies (1990) defines chaos theory as something which is "about (dis-)order, a mode or degree of (dis-) organization: it is about how or how much things are, or are not, organized- not about the drive to order, to organize" (Brady 65). Chaos is about disruption that is neutralized by order. This can be associated with Josef K.'s situation as he presents himself to be rational who tries to conceal his vulnerability before the law, however, his unconsciousness is in a constant flux between reason and his id. Thus, in his attempt at making sense of the system and his subversion of the self he tries to find order. This further implicates the fact that though he presents himself to be in order outwardly, his mind is in complete disorder for what lurks behind is his pathology (psychosis) which is suggestive of chaos, disorder in order. As in case of K. the injustice that he faces in the hands of the law is not like an illness from which he can recover, it is in fact an incurable disease. And if at all his disease is incurable or if it in anyway prevents K. from ever working productively, then his life at best is not worth living. This can be seen in kaka's description of the year- long trial with K.'s ever- decreasing ability to work at his job in the bank or his lack of interest in anything other than his trial, for he himself worries halfway through the novel. And in other ways as well K.'s condition seems to be chronic. For instance his attack at Fraulein Burstner is the supreme moment of failure to place reason over brute instinct perhaps this incident turns out to be the "crime" for which he is punished.

K.'s approval to abdicate reason in his life does not only concern his relations to women but there are other indications as well. Early in the novel we're told that it was not K.'s business to learn from experience. It was his failure of reason that towards the end K. wishes to show that he has corrected. However, he never succeeds for he submits himself to the law without proving his innocence, it was as if he also knew he couldn't side with reason. In the penultimate chapter it was evident that Josef K. was unable to establish consensus about reality thus submitting himself for his tragic end. His easy sexual relations with all the women, Elsa, Leni and Fraulein Burstner represents efforts to deny his unconscious "knowledge" that he must disavow all his sexual desires. He is being pushed by one law into sexuality and being refrained by the other from giving into his desires. Throughout the novel most of these instances are presented externally, K.'s inhibitions are symbolized by certain outside force such as the student, the old men in the courtroom, Captain Lanz, Fraulein Montag or the doorkeeper in the parable. In case of Elsa and Leni the external forces were lacking in comparison to Fraulein Burstner, he could give in to his desires without scruple. These instances itself are prove of his failure at disavowing his desires. Though he unconsciously knows that the only way to escape his dilemma is through obliterating his sexual desires, however, he constantly attempts to deny this knowledge and to find some yet unsuspected solution. This inner voice of his seeks access to his consciousness and he hear it enough to know about its repercussions, however, he doesn't seem to win its way through until it's too late. He had a partial realization and understands that when he gives in to those desires, he becomes subject to the court and that now he has suffered of his trial. It is his own sense of guilt or insecurity which makes him see thing. He is in a way suffering from some sort of paranoia, for he is always conscious about the public gaze and that is the reason for his constant attempt at conditioning his image, the environment of the court also adds hugely to his state of paranoia with its suffocative and cryptic ambience. And all these instances were evident of his incapability to grasp any understanding of his situation and his inability to distinguish between what is real and unreal lead to his psychosis.

Thus, in the context of *The Trial*, it can be seen that Josef k. tries to challenge the Cartesian position of being by subverting it as he fails to disavow his brutal instincts. His attempts at conditioning his external image despite of knowing the true nature of his "crime" can be seen as his failure to prove himself as innocent. For he presents himself to be in order externally, however, lurking behind it is his pathological illness that is his mind which is in complete disorder. Along with it the mechanism of the court and its

environment played a vital role in his feeling of dissociation affecting his psyche. K. being judged guilty by an authority whose verdict was being established by uncertainty and force, not by reason, his whole trial is a lie. However, K. could have redeemed the order of the world by making it correspond to reason and truth rather than lying or perhaps by giving up his feeling of innocence and accepting the court's verdict as just. Throughout this discussion it can be seen that his lack of reason and ambiguous actions lead to his inability to distinguish between what's real and what's unreal which altogether became the reason for his psychosis.

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