

**A CLOSE READING OF THE PARALLEL  
CHARACTERS BETWEEN FRANZ KAFKA'S *THE TRIAL* AND *THE  
METAMORPHOSIS*: THE EXISTENTIALISM OF J  
OSEPH K AND GREGOR SAMSA**

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**Abstract**

The seminar paper aims a critical study of Franz Kafka's major characters in *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*. The paper initiates an exploration of characters such as Joseph K and Gregor Samsa who are torn by anxiety and anguish over the fragmentation and dehumanization in the modern world. In general, Kafka portrays a totalitarian regime manifesting its pain through an overbearing bureaucracy and its effects on the people. The paper consists a close reading of Kafka's *The Trial*, its intricate relation with modern bureaucratic system and how this seminal work of Kafka remains as a testament of the unspoken and unseen anguish of modern man. In *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonist is struck within the predicaments of his own survival and identity, whereby he succumbs to an inevitable death. Both the texts bear the horrific and dreadful human experiences of the twentieth century caused by the modern bureaucratic system. The texts are inbuilt with elements of alienation, and individual's psychological subordination by his social surrounding, the sense of emptiness and being lost which dominated the twentieth century modern man.

**Body**

Kafka's writings, show characters struggling with vast, anonymous bureaucracies and reflect the alienation that is so dominant in capitalist societies. The protagonists Joseph K and Gregor Samsa are recognized as symbolizing modern man's anxiety and grotesque alienation in an unintelligible and hostile world. The reason why humans are under the enslavement of this system is due to rapid growth of industrialization, urbanization and commercial institutions. The protagonists of Franz Kafka do not project the romanticized and larger than life pictures of a hero. Rather the characters are docile and incomprehensible. Modern man of twentieth century

Europe reflects the hollowness of existence. Their nightmarish situations slowly progress towards death or slavery. The characters project absurd expressions, never quite convey what they really ought to convey hence magnifies the temporary and fragmentary quality of Kafka's stories. The characters Joseph K and Gregor Samsa are vivid illustrations of humans trapped within the hierarchy and the web of bureaucracy which project predicaments like alienation and existentialism crisis brought about by the torment and unusual circumstances that have made themselves unable to decipher the actual and authentic meaning of struggle and survival. The characters lay astray when bogged down to the indiscernible circles of labyrinthine mystery.

Kafka was among the first thinkers to argue that modern law could not deliver on its pretense of being a stable guarantor of fundamental rights within a body of transparent, systematically ordered rules and procedures. Against this traditional view of modern law, which still holds sway at least in the popular imagination, Kafka recognized that gaping pockets of irrationality could persist within the framework of highly rationalized modern law. The bureaucratic system of which K is a victim and the system being a part of the society as a whole decide K's ultimate fate of life. Kafka's K gets trapped in a system which very much resembles the system in which the modern man remains at the mercy to the legal and social institutions. This is relevant in the very first lines of *The Trial* were "Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested" (1-2). There is absolutely no level of transparency within the legal system, as is seen throughout the novel that K endlessly seeks a probable cause and a solution of his case. The trial of K is the existence of human beings in the modern bureaucratic society. Kafka seems to have criticized the law under the modern bureaucratic and capitalist societies under the ground that it fundamentally cannot uphold the essential rights of individual human beings. K attempts to seek a cause of his case, and in this process he slowly realizes the meaningless of the legal system of his society. The court stands in for a society that insists on conformity at all costs, and the individual is guilty simply for no reason. In chapter eleven of *The Trial* named "In the Cathedral" in one instance of the conversation between K and the Priest, K states that, "But I'm not guilty. There's been a mistake. How is it possible for someone to be guilty? We're all human beings here, one like the other." to which the priest replied "That is true, but that is how the guilty speak" What is noticeable here is that K has within him a human consciousness through which he claims how a human being can be guilty as all human beings are the same, to that the priest, instead of consoling K with the words of God, tells all guilty states that. There is no level of human empathy in the bureaucracy, to an extent when even religion has lost its significance to the power of bureaucracy and capitalism. Joseph K seeks justice and his relentless search within the insane system of modern bureaucracy and its legal system, dies and in his death Kafka prophesized the dreadful future of humanity under the modern bureaucratic society. In *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett wanted to highlight human beings when they are reduced to their existential crisis, alone facing the world which is meaningless. Kafka perhaps also wanted to show through K the common adult individual who faces the lunacy of the modern bureaucratic system alone, and dies alone in a meaningless absurd world by waiting for a resolve to his trial.

Michael Foucault highlights the political practices of surveillance, exclusion division and segregation through discussion of Jeremy Bentham's model of the Panopticon whereby it functions as a kind of laboratory of power. The private life is constantly intruded by public. Panopticon is an enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which all events are recorded, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure in which each individual is

constantly located, among the living beings, living or dead that constitutes a compact model for disciplinary mechanism. In the beginning of the novel *The Trial* the “supervisor” tells K, in the first chapter, “You’ve misunderstood me. It’s true you’re under arrest, but that doesn’t mean you can’t follow your occupation. And you won’t be hampered in your normal way of life” (11). This clearly suggest that the prison system, where fundamentally the prisoners are kept under observation by the authority, and which according to Foucault serves a social and a psychological function, has extended to such a proportion that the modern society, the twentieth century modern bureaucratic society, with all its laws, itself becomes a prison system. Joseph K is like Sisyphus who knowing his fate, although being condemned and punished by the gods, is granted to live. However, the twentieth century modern man, with the advanced system of supervision, discipline and punishment exterminates anyone who becomes aware of the whole system. “The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.” ( Camus 75-76).The God’s in *The Myth of Sisyphus* acts as the metaphor for the intense and rigid cynical bureaucracy in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* and they have forcefully grinded the innocent life of Joseph K .Because despite every hurdles they strive to prove their legitimacy of being innocent, knowing the absurdity of their gruel circumstances. Knowing the inevitability of their fate they are superior to their fate and stronger than predicaments where “That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock” (Camus 76). Joseph K in the ninth chapter of *The Trial* exactly goes through such a realization. “Is there nothing more you want from me”? K. asked. ‘No’ said the priest. ‘You were so kind to me earlier,’ K said, ‘and explained everything to me, and now you dismiss me as if I meant nothing to you’...the priest replies “the court ask nothing from you. It receives you when you come and releases you when you go” (172-173). It is in this precise moment that K becomes fully aware that he is condemned, that by his will his seeking help from the court is only a role playing, nothing substantial would have happened regarding the discovery of his guilt and his achieving justice, the whole society is a prison system where being a free citizen as Joseph K thinks of himself in the first chapter of the novel is just a mere illusion.

Michael Foucault in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* writes in a paragraph,

the panopticism, of every day many well be below the level of emergence of the great apparatuses and the great political struggles. But, in the genealogy of modern society, they have been, with the class domination that traverses it, the political counterpart of the juridical norms according to which power was redistributed. Hence, no doubt, the importance that has been given for so long to the small techniques of discipline, to those apparently insignificant tricks that it has invented, and even to those ‘sciences’ that gives it a respectable face; hence the affirmation that they are at the very foundation of society, and an element in its equilibrium, whereas they are a series of mechanisms for unbalancing power relations definitively and everywhere; hence the persistence in regarding them as the humble, but concrete form of every morality, whereas they are a set of physio-political techniques. (225)

This form of governance or discipline deliberately created an unbalanced power relation through which it can control human beings and make them fully functional to achieve certain

aims. The law of the modern society, hence, is not a medium through which morality is being promoted amongst the citizens, they were in Kafka's time were means to fulfill the aims of the purposes laid down by the bureaucratic structures. Emphasizing on concerns of biopolitics Thomas Lemke in his book *Biopolitics* states that life is not only the object of politics and external to political decision-making; it affects the core of politics—the political subject. Biopolitics is not the expression of a sovereign will but aims at the administration and regulation of life processes on the level of populations. It focuses on living beings rather than on legal subjects—or, to be more precise, it deals with legal subjects that are at the same time living beings. Foucault too sees the particularity of this biopower in the fact that it fosters life or disallows it to the point of death, whereas the sovereign power takes life or let's live. Repressive power over death is subordinated to a power over life that deals with living beings rather than with legal subjects. Joseph K was a man who was very much a part of such a society, of such a governing system and this is another reason why K was totally oblivious about his case. In *The Trial* Joseph K continuously searches for a solution and tries to solve his case and he was finally condemned to death by murder; Kafka ends his work like this without letting his readers know what was the cause at the starting of K's case and what is the actual reason for K's demise. The reason why *The Trial* confirms nothing is because Kafka has not made any compromise in showing the modern bureaucratic system, its shallowness and superficiality, its detachment from human beings and its govern mentality that imposes upon all human beings who belongs to the modern bureaucratic society. The real tragedy of the story is not so much that Joseph is doomed to execution, but that well before the verdict he already became submissive to the law defined by its very absurdism; the mere fact that he submits to jumping through such ridiculous hopes makes his battle against it seem as pointless as the system itself. The protagonist is a victim of conspiracies and unfortunate incidents. A law might also be a social construct. The Law is deconstructed where Joseph K is able to resume his work in the bank even after arrest without a bail warrant. The Law becomes dichotomic in regards to the imposition of psychological punishment to Joseph K and the inhuman torture and punishment imposed upon the two police officers by the Whipman. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* Elaine Scarry argues that torture involves the simultaneous occurrence of three phenomena. Torture begins by inflicting pain on a person in ever intensifying ways. Secondly the pain is continually amplified within the person's body and is also amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person's body and lastly the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power. The bureaucratic system becomes more problematic when the police officers on interrogation reveal that they are not aware of anything regarding the type of arrest and are just unanimously working on their responsibilities. The magistrates desk is filled with books of pornography and a student of law easily initiates sexual activity in the midst of a trial provides a glimpse of the in order and whimsical atmosphere of the highest institution of justice. The parable "Before the Law" might be interpreted as a political allegory that dominates the entire journey of Joseph K till his death in the form of a dog, dehumanized in a bureaucratic system. *The Trial* concerns Kafka's yearning for truth, to create something universal and the urge to live in a world, overpowered by destiny and human contradiction. There are sexual themes in the affairs of the judges and of K. himself. The parables, the usher, the painter and the lawyer are figures of a metaphysical religious imagination. Everyone who knows K also knows about his trial. From his point of view, the entire universe finds him guilty, from the casual observer to the men who kill him like a dog.

The first theme is that modernity creates a loss of grounding for the law, leaving the edifice of law and its legal institutions intact but hollow, as if the legal system splits off from its foundation and assumes it's as it was evitable. What remains is a directionless superstructure of courtrooms, procedures, and law books, increasingly decadent to any substantive notion of justice, and which posits itself as its own higher form of justice. The second theme is the paradoxical nature of modern law, and by "modern law" it might be interpreted as those highly rationalized legal systems that arose within industrialized Western societies in the nineteenth century and which promised an ordered and transparent system of entitlements, obligations, and procedures built upon a solid foundation of guaranteed human rights. This shows the directionless nature of the modern legal system. In chapter two "First Cross-examination when K arrives to the magistrate he accuses K of being an hour and five minutes late which shows how hollow the legal system is of its own foundation. The law should serve men, but as happened in the bureaucratic society through modernity, human beings were subjects of the law and various other unknown legal regulations. Western society as a whole went through the phase of modernization by passing through many historical epoch only to create a legal system which lacks a single degree of transparency, has no sense of obligation to the citizens, and apart from that the legal system, which is a byproduct of the dominating bureaucratic social system, only serve its own means. For example, in another chapter of *The Trial* name "Merchant Block-Dismissal of the Advocate" the merchant tells K, "Your case is six months old...I've heard of it...But I have already thought these things through countless times, to me they are the most familiar things in the world...I've been trundling on with my case for five years" ( 137). In this quote it can be aptly noticed the inevitable nature of the modern legal system controlled by bureaucratic institutions, for they only serve their own material purpose and as a result lacks the components through which it can fulfill the human rights. "Before the Law" is Kafka's testament, his prophecy that if a man realizes that the society in which he lives is nothing but filled with invisible chains, he will be free, but that freedom will come with the cost of life, and *The Trial* is a vivid manifestation of the parable. As a result *The Trial* can be interpreted as a social critique of the twentieth century bureaucratic system, as well as the courage and dignity of K to face his undignified death showing the position of human existence, bare and unclothed, in a society where humanity and all its values are dead.

A similar form of absurdist structure is witnessed in *The Metamorphosis* when Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous insect. Gregor Samsa's body is transformed, but his mind remains human. And Gregor does not exactly find himself transformed, rather although he sees his brown belly and numerous legs, he fails to register this incomprehensible fact. He reverts to the consciousness of a busy commercial salesman who has to get up early to catch the five O' clock train. Money and security plays a key theme throughout the entirety of the story. Gregor's first concern after realizing his transformation into an insect is the fear of losing his job and will be unable to provide for his family. His family falls into dire financial crisis and as Gregor loses touch with his humanity, he still thinks about money and what he can do to ease their troubles. Metaphorically, Gregor represents the fate of proletariats who become disabled or unable to work. He works at a job he thinks is torturous and finds him miserable in order to pay off his father's debt. However once he is unable to work, his chief clerk abandons him. Modern civilized beings are commoditized labor, and without a financial prospect every individual, though repressed and internally downtrodden, is as better as nonexistent. It is not an individual's condition, but his or her ability to perform and make the ends meet of the modern bureaucratic

system which ensures one's existence in the modern society. Kafka has illustrated Samsa that he is a commodity, a means to earn income for his family, and on the other hand he is a means for the commercial firm for which he works to make certain commercial ends meet. Samsa, being inside the body of a vermin, is also thinking about losing his job, how can he catch the train on time to report for work. All these are inner mental states of Samsa through which Kafka has clearly proposed the subtle yet sophisticated system through which fear and the need for security is injected within the working class people by the bourgeoisie. Power manifests in the way capitalists exercise them over the working class people and *The Metamorphosis* shows this harsh reality. Samsa is trapped in a system which provided him external or societal well-being in the form of security; he is a working man supporting his family. However, due to the bureaucratic system his work resulted in suppression of unexpressed emotions, and perhaps that is why his internal being also metamorphosed into something which is unable to contribute in any way to the bureaucratic institution. Samsa's inner being protested against the bureaucratic system of imposing on him a forced identity. Thus he thinks, "What a fate, to be condemned to work for a firm where the smallest omission at once gave rise to the gravest suspicion! Were all employees in a body nothing but scoundrels...had he wasted only an hour or so of the firm's time in the morning, was so tormented by conscience as to be driven out of his mind and actually incapable of learning his bed?" (87). Samsa is an honest human being who cares for his sister and mother, but he is labeled as a scoundrel by the organization for which he works. It can be assumed that due to this internal suppression Samsa's inner self rejected, or found it unbearable, to be a human and act as a machine for the bureaucratic society. Samsa's metamorphosis is a direct response of the individual's daily anguish caused by the bureaucratic system of modern times. In a bureaucratic society where individuals are crippled and internally suppressed, rebellion at times becomes a form of absurdity and Kafka's seminal work is a vivid manifestation of this fact the events that happen in *The Metamorphosis* are a reflection of the reality of the modern society. Samsa is condemned by his family after he was no longer physically able to work in the commercial area to earn money. Samsa, who is already left alone as a travelling salesman, is also alienated by his family who are the most intricate part of his inner self. Samsa's real self, his inner consciousness, was now reduced to something worse than any insect as he is destroyed by the very people who gives his life a meaning, a will to work. In a bureaucratic society human empathy has no place and human beings are forced to view themselves as source of financial security, which also is the primary source for survival for any individual who belongs to the modern bureaucratic society. The levels of alienation can be seen in the story through the alienation of Gregor Samsa, the worker, "a salesman". First, he is distant from his work and takes no interest in it though he does it regularly, like his mother remarks "the boy thinks about nothing but his work" ( 24-25). Secondly, his job alienates him from himself even with a different body, his mind does not get out of the thought patterns, for example of regular work, engrained in him where he says "It's much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the home office, and on top of that there's the trouble of constant travelling, of worrying about food and irregular meals ,casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friends" (18-19). Thirdly, he suffers alienation from the material world, which he is no longer able to participate in due to his appearance and lack of mobility. Men make themselves an alienated representation of their conditions of existence because these conditions of existence are themselves alienating because these conditions are dominated by the essence of alienated society. Lastly, he suffers alienation from other people around him, especially his family. Gregor's change makes him literally and emotionally separate from his family members indeed,

from humanity in general. Gregor finds his father also transformed, although not to an insect, but from a decrepit old man into a vigorous upright one with bushy eyebrows and sharp eyes. His father drives Gregor back to his room by bombarding him with apples one of which causes shocking, unbelievable pain. Eventually the apple becomes the centre of a festering wound that contributes to Gregor's death. After his transformation he stays almost exclusively in his room with his door closed and has almost no contact with other people. This tragedy of alienation kills Gregor not as an insect but as human being deprived of family feelings.

The dichotomy between his physical presence as an insect and a psychological presence as a rational human being is brilliantly projected by Kafka. As in certain instance we get a glimpse of Gregor's presence of consciousness as a salesman and how he need to provide financial needs for his family. The duality of character that is portrayed is well witnessed when he says "Before it strikes a quarter past seven I absolutely must be quite out of this bed, without fail. Anyhow by that time someone will come home from the office to ask for me since it opens before seven" (Kafka 22-23). And at times we see him behaving completely like an animal. "He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked" (18-19). And again on the occasion when his sister played the violin, Kafka asks the reader on whether Gregor was really an animal as "he felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved" (56-57). In fact, the alienation caused by Gregor's metamorphosis can be viewed as an extension of the isolation he already felt as a person. The transformation is an indication of the breakdown of Gregor's psyche and alienation within his self. Gregor's transformation limits his liberty, both of choice and movement. He can no longer move around as he pleases and therefore has no option but to remain in his room most of the time. His situation gets worse as the story progresses. He cannot communicate anymore. Gregor's job is of necessity, not choice. He has to work because he has to and not because he wants to. His life is spent in service of others and it is not in his nature to be defiant. "The result is that man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions -- eating, drinking, and procreating, or at most in his dwelling and adornment -- while in his human functions, he is nothing more than animal" (Marx 4-5). The mind of a human inside the body of a creature is symbolic of the extent of estrangement within capitalist labor exploitation. The modern man of the twentieth century is forced to give up his existence into the hands of the modern bureaucratic system. Bureaucratic system makes the individual crippled; in the name of security. Kafka's society was bureaucratic from all its imaginable aspect, and hence the modern life was tarnished in every possible way. The only way to respond for human beings in order to ensure their survival was to follow the pattern imposed upon them by the bureaucratic structure, to immerse in their given hierarchical position and shapes their lives according to their bureaucratic roles. *The Metamorphosis* focuses on the experiences and memories of Gregor Samsa, suddenly condemned by the society and his family for an unexplained and illogical metamorphosis. In Samsa's memories and experiences there remains the reflection of the condemned modern man, condemned by the modern bureaucratic system.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude the two stories culminate with a sense of emancipation. The silence of absurdity and their eventual sacrifice for the better cause of humanity epitomizes their status as an Absurd Hero. In his death Gregor Samsa is both extinguished and set free and it is parallel with the

family's liberation. *The Metamorphosis* projects the transformation of Samsa who has turned into an insect. Kafka uses very simple terms to describe the extraordinary situation. He creates a chaotic world rather than rational. *The Metamorphosis* is a powerful indication of intense trauma and sufferings of an individual within the large commercial bureaucratic society. However, the insect represents the inner turmoil and dehumanized state that is brought upon by modern social orders. Kafka creates an atmosphere of haunting anxiety and darkness. Kafka's works are full of symbols and parables. Joseph K's story depicts an absolutely alienated atmosphere where mankind has no hope in the meaningless world. K does not die as a result of absurd situation, but he is already dead at his arrest. Joseph K's death is only a nightmare, because there are such inscrutable forces beyond his control that no way of solution can protect the self from them. And alienation is the deliberate option left for him. Kafka unfolds an alienated world before us which is unchangeable. He exposes the world which is governed by its own logic. The vague legal proceeding points something far more sinister. Kafka shows the tyrannical mystery of modern law to explain the illogical situations. Kafka's indication is truly about the torturous notion of modern bureaucracy that still exists to this very day.

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