

Finding Gregor Samsa in The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka

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Abstract:

The chain of literary theories is intricately woven in the work, with very unique style. With an experience of father issues from childhood and being the single breadwinner of the family, Gregor had to toil the whole day as a salesman but unknowingly he was transformed to a vermin, which led to his inactivity leading to financial crisis in his family—which is a phenomenon with no valid explanation, through which the novella heads towards a climax of a bitter sweet fate. It is totally a hardcore reality of a German speaking Jew in the fast paced world. It weaves structuralism, existentialism, absurdism, surrealism and realism in one thread. It centres around alienation, isolation, and the dehumanising effects of modern society. Capitalism is the main threat that demolished all relationships and swift stride of commoners with less pay, and the futility of human happiness under the rapid metamorphosis of society accelerating the metamorphosis of youth from agile to vain.

Keywords: Existentialism, Surrealism, Structuralism.

1. Introduction:

The very inception of the novel shows the pivotal point. The very point denotes the metamorphosis. There is no lacuna. That is the truth of the piece. Everything lies here. Begins from here. Ends here. Beyond ideology. Happiness is ideology, but life is not an ideology. But without money nothing is ideology, it is devoid of passion. It is devoid of hope. Nadir of emotions is the condition. In the very course of the novel the diminutive question arises, Kafka asks why do we write and why do we read? to be or not to be? Which was personal, but Kafka's was common in 1915. It is the feeling of every youth in derision, at least in a war-torn world, just as at present in 21st century.

Franz Kafka was a German speaking Jew of Prague, Bohemia now Czech Republic. He was the eldest of six children. He had two younger brothers who died in infancy and three younger sisters- Gabriele, Valerie, Ottilie, all of whom perished in the concentration camp. His father Hermann Kafka, was described as a huge ill-tempered domestic tyrant, who on many occasions directed his anger on his son and was disrespectful towards his escape into literature. All his life Kafka struggled to come to terms with his domineering father, a businessman. Kafka was well versed in Latin, Greek and history.

As Gregor Samsa, the travelling salesman, aroused from an anxious dream, he found himself amidst another nightmare, which was not a virtual dream but a real horror, he was transformed to a verminous insect, hence *The Metamorphosis*, which is beyond possibility, but not unlikely to happen, its physically impossible—Gregor’s metamorphosis takes on a supernatural significance. Nothing had been mentioned about any deeds inviting ordeal owing to the metamorphosis. Kafka intricately delineates the operations of irrationality. As a salesman Gregor was doing his ‘bread job’, to pay his family debts. He was the sole breadwinner of his family prior to his transformation. It is a situation of neither chaotic nor cheerful situation, it is a silent ordeal, which is the main diminutive theme of the novella. He is an obedient son who dreams big for his family mostly his sister, whom he wants to send to the conservatory to learn music, but whose own fate is tragic. In the initial stage her family, especially sister was caring towards him as if he had caught an illness but later they lost their patience. It is not about losing patience but loss of willingness to care towards him, amidst which the readers are also engrossed in a dilemma regarding whether care should be taken or not. Hence emerges absurdity of existence and a the then contemporary world devoid of fair justice, but is still relevant in the postmodern life of especially the middle class. The novella delves around the theme of totally a case of alienation, disillusionment and existentialism, the desynchronization being between his mind and body and also his role and fate, and his self and the surrounding situations. He was unable to harmonize between the cronies of human existence, which was not the outcome of any filial disbalances or any other fatal mishap in the material world, but an unanticipated occurrence. As Eugene Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano* produces a world is a nightmare vision of the life and culture of the French bourgeoisie, the absurdism in Kafka’s work offers existential crisis from the very first line which, for the then capitalist system of dehumanizing bureaucracy that valued individuals only for their productivity during rapid industrialization and cultural shifts in Europe, particularly within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In the very beginning Kafka asserts that he is not facile for human movements, but he still ‘thinks’ of his toiling job “ Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I’ve picked out for myself” , and in the very next moment he “felt a slight itching up on his belly” then after some bug movements, he slid down again into his former position, repeatedly he thinks “ it’s a peculiar habit of his, too, sitting on top of the desk like that and talking down to employees”, hence he is the embodiment of every postmodern have-nots who rather everyman earn their bread and butter after whole days toil but is paid off minimally, who are the burden bearers awaiting the doomsday, which itself, though common but unethical concept. Here Kafka didn’t give any outlet for the transpiration, leaving the readers incompetent to fit their mind in the appropriate space- absurdism or existentialism? The essence lies in the inner conflict in Gregor which attempt magically evaluates the conditions of the milieu, he is a failure but he rules at the end of the story, transforming the emotional state of his family members from nadir to zenith. He is the hero of his life. Apparently observed the theme resides on the functioning of the two movements, but systematically seen in his ‘mind’ he is in conflict with the both movements and encompassed by both.

In the element of absurd, the definition being: “Absurd is that which has no purpose, or goal, or objective”. The three absurdist has their own special type of absurdity: “in Beckett it is melancholic, colored by a feeling of futility born from the disillusionment of old age and chronic hopelessness; Adamov’s is more active, aggressive, earthy, and tinged with social and political overtones; while Ionesco’s absurdity has its own fantastic knock-about flavor of tragical clowning. But they all share the same deep sense of human

isolation and of the irremediable character of the human condition.” Bertolt Brecht’s “Verfremdungseffekt” (alienation effect), the inhibition of any identification between spectator and actor, which Brecht could never successfully achieve in his own highly rational theatre, really comes into its own in the Theatre of the Absurd. According to Adamov, “that the destinies of all human beings are of equal futility, that the refusal to live (of the character called N) and the joyful acceptance of life (by the employee) both lead by the same path, to inevitable failure, total destruction(The Parody).

The case is different from Aristotle’s tragedy in that, here there is no hamartia and flies straightway to anagnorisis, that is throughout the story by various means, firstly with the arrival of the chief clerk of his office, then his hunger, and arrival of his sister, after that the shock of his mother, which depicts nothing but the intensity of inner conflicts, and ends in peripeteia but most surprisingly there was no hubris, instead there is a prolonged provocation in quotidian cycle of the ‘demented caprice of an unaccountable idiot fate.’ And we are definitely bound to commiserate with the everyman in Gregor Samsa. As a human being urges to experience differences, ups and downs in and to the cosmos, only the humans with their inner light has that ability to endure and define pain, Gregor is definitely the unsung hero of his family. Kafka here uses the techniques from the classical : “objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity”

As we break free from the absurdism, we are entangled in existentialism and are dispelled too. We are compelled to resort to T.S Eliot, for the question: Is Experience, Knowledge or do they have a duality of existing planes that are to be studied separately? Though that Knowledge is thus proved by common experience, still it is righteous, not divorced from righteousness; it is the result of desire-less virtue accumulated over realization. This realization is the kernel of enlightenment, which in turn is the first step towards Brahman. “Enlightenment”, according to Kant “is the human being’s emergence of self-incurred minority. Minority is inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! But this definition can engender misconceptions, leading to an inferior understanding. Hence there is a comparison and contrast of the idea of action and inaction and the limits of their performance in the profile of definitive knowledge. By the doctrines of Sankhya philosophy, nature is composed of three forces: equilibrium, activity and inertness— in Sanskrit, Sattva, Rajas, Tamas is typified as darkness or inactivity; Rajas is activity, expressed as attraction or repulsion; and Sattva is the equilibrium of the two. These elements act towards the vitality of a cognitive approach towards the understanding of the nature of our actions, which we call experience. But the question is what is the nature of experience? In general, if we comprehend any event that gives us a lesson to be implemented in relative future pursuits—that being done—reflects experience. But the practical ground of pure reason renders a promising force to changeable attitudes, according to circumstances. Our adaptability to this altering nature of circumstances is the manifestation of this reasoning mind. Ironically, rational reasoning sometimes, overshadowed by ambition, creates laws for one and the process of adjustment is hindered thus. Rules can be guiding principles not necessities. And when it becomes an imperative, our reasoning mind becomes inert from active judgement, as we tend to follow, blindly, these rules. This is Tamas. But all knowledge derives by hypothetical reasoning from knowledge of external facts and previous knowledge (a very haphazard mixture of thoughts and influences). These

external facts are indicative of the driving force; the “direction”—to use this expression that is efficacious albeit not very philosophical—is an important ingredient towards the acquisition of knowledge.

Do we ever have non-existence? Do we ever have the feeling of nothingness? The concept of Brahman—studied as an object of knowledge and meditation. Knowledge about the Brahman which by its very nature is immediate, is indirectly spoken of as a mediate when it fails to produce its fruit owing to such obstacles as ‘impossibility’. But the knowledge, which, on removal of these feelings of impossibility as a result of the perfection of vicara, consciousness, arises from that valid means, it is said to be immediate when it produces results. That is vijnana, realisation (special knowledge), because it is generated by the maturity of vicara. The idea is: when through the knowledge of absolute Existence, which is the basis of all, Existence stands alone as the residue after isolation of everything imagined, our mind becomes Self-fulfilled through the somatic knowledge of “That” alone; knowledge and existence are homocentric.

There may be an ironic simulacrum of existence, as in the state of nothingness. But ‘to be’ is ‘to be in being’; ‘not to be’ is also ‘to be in being’. A thing is both in the existing and non-existing state at the same time, dead and alive. It’s presence to our mind is through active perception of its being. Kafka positively maintains T.S Eliot’s : “poetry is an escape from emotion, not an expression of it”, which seems to be obeyed by the silent death of Gregor.

The pressure of antisemitism experienced by the Jews has been depicted by the abrupt account of the peripeteia by the lens of absurdism, which is mirroring his mind, which is eventually sketched by structuralism. The structuralism in *The Metamorphosis* is very rigid with many aspects such as human-vermin, worker-parasite, son-father, that are intricately woven within the plot of the story. The inability of Gregor to talk further after becoming a bug is essentially indicative of structuralism in: “however, structuralism as conceived by Mukarovsky, Jakobson, Vodka and their disciples... is not a philosophy, but a methodological trend in certain sciences, especially those concerned with sign systems and their concrete uses”—it is not only showing binary divisions but the incapability of speech delineates the operations of structuralism with sign systems as destiny the fruit of merging of human culture, language and psychology—epistemological stance—how Gregor appears a hero by his utmost endeavour to emerge into a “potential or actual partner in the exchange of verbal messages among the members of the speech community”—to support his family—the ‘internal approach’ (in post-war structuralism), and as observer-participant he is capable of understanding ‘the text through the code’. Which predicts the presence of symbolism too. Thematic entities of literature cannot be expressed otherwise but by verbal(linguistic) means, which is so similar to the condition in Gregor’s life. Structuralism no doubt is complementing Gregor’s condition and trauma (paternal trauma).

Surrealism in Gregor Samsa’s room is a leap from his inner conflict between absurdism and existentialism to the readers clarification of its relation other components and mirrors the whole life and deeds and thoughts of Gregor, which further casted reflection of the whole novella in the light of all theories. Surrealism plays an important factor, which is the collage of his immobility, relation with sister and parents which seems to be dwindling, the mirror and the four walls and the moving of the furniture, and the photos on the wall. Hence as we the readers wait for the catharsis, we find Gregor a hero as he found his both indulgence and escape from his derision and he finding his surrealistic world he perished within the world.

What could be greater than seeing the truth? Through Gregor's internal approach to absurdism we are to find the compatibility between existentialism, structuralism, surrealism.

The relevance of the text is also acute after his publication, and acts as 'objective correlative'. The massive genocide of holocaust, was based on antisemitism, the mass killing of the jews, which occurred few years after the book came. Mention may be made of the book *The More I Know The Less I Understand* by UBC Witnessing Auschwitz, where it is told that: liberation is a term which in the context of the war is usually employed selectively and subjectively, i.e. for military operations that are approved. Jessica Passey truly raised the valid question for 21st century- "who liberated whom from what?"

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