

## An Echo of a Modernist Voice in Reference to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*: Change as Constant and Humanity as Memory

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### Abstract

This paper intends to place Kafka as a modernist by identifying certain aspects in *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka as a voice of modernism came into prominence mostly with his posthumous publications where he made a metaphorical representation of the deep seated realities of time. *The Metamorphosis* is about a commercial traveller, fatigued by the tiresome journey, who turns into monstrous vermin and the respite comes to his family and himself once he is eliminated. Kafka as usually does not clearly come up with the details of the gigantic insect that Gregor has turned into, rather he keeps it for the readers to find out by talking to each other, against each other and to themselves. Gregor is monstrous in appearance as he is perceived by others and himself but within, he is a victim who has been crushed under the monstrous wheels of capitalist world. It is only after becoming a gigantic insect, Gregor reveals everything about himself and his surrounding either in form of reminiscence or with his observation. One may find some sort of umbilical cord existing between Kafka and Gregor as Kafka himself was a poor creature whose back leg is stuck in the Judaism while his front leg, in vain, quested for a new ground, but that idea cannot be the only guiding beacon in comprehending Kafka and his works.

Writing in the first half of twentieth century in the rapidly changing world, the story *The Metamorphosis* carries in itself all that makes it worth considering among all other Kafka's work.

Keywords: Modernism, Kafkaesque, Humanity as Memory, Metamorphism

### Introduction

To delimit Kafka's work on the basis of homogeneity and certain inclusiveness, it is an explicit failure on the part of the scholars as it has engaged thousands since its conception. His short stories as well as his longer posthumous publications not only show a tinge of absurdities, his inner dilemmas but also label him as an experimenter of emerging literary phenomena of twentieth century. In the world of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, transformation occurs at different levels pushed forward by the time and conditions. The constancy of change is what makes the work inexhaustible for the present time and for the times to come. The scholars of religion present it as an exhibition of Kafka's oscillation because of his Jewishness. He was born in Prague, Czech city where he spoke German, the official language of Czech at that time, but he was neither a German nor Czech. His family, for the sake of upward mobility used German but could not crave out the Jew in them. As an outsider from the beginning, the transformation is indispensable with the hope of anchoring to something that is very much like Gregor, who clutches to the photo frame in the story itself. Existential philosophy also interprets Gregor's transformation as his attempts to exist in any form as he has been disintegrated as a traveling salesman. So his profession as traveling salesman simultaneously provides him with an identity and also deteriorates him to such an extent that he ceases to exist.

## Modernism and Kafka

To define modernism is a herculean task and the anomaly surrounding modernism is inevitable as it took in its ambit science, human world, history, myth, tradition, linguistics turn, primitivism, colonial other and many more. Saturation of Victorian morality in the face of rapidly changing world embraced individualism by pushing collectivism to oblivion. As the world is metamorphosed, so is in the world of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. As Virginia Woolf writes:

On or about December 1910 human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910. (Virginia Woolf, *Modernism*, 4)

Avant-gardism was the trend of the time and the independent artists tried their hands to go beyond the photographic realism of nineteenth century. As modernists were a way ahead of their times, they saw everyday reality with a different lens. Gregor's transformation is incomprehensible because he has turned into a monstrous vermin with armor like back and thin legs. He blames the excessive traveling as the reason behind it. But this radical starting point does not respond to the usual world order and much of the subsequent actions consist of Kafka's attempt to come to terms with its beginning. Placing Kafka as one among the many is justified in every sense though he was not an exponent of expressionism but he exemplified certain aspects of it by placing forth the capitalist society and the dehumanizing process it adopts. Kafka's works exhibited the modernist tendencies in their approach to address different ideas like the collapsing of the world order, the absurd phenomenon and incomprehensible system turning man

into a victim of all these uncanny conditions. While explaining Kafka's experience Ruth V. Gross says:

In the world of late nineteenth-century bourgeois Europe, work was more than an economic necessity – it became a way of defining individuals in modern society. The office may have been a horror to Kafka, but, having grown up in the bourgeois environment of his native Prague, the work he had to perform to earn money was necessary for his self-esteem. (Ruth 81)

As the story opens, we find Gregor as an insect, who looks at the clock ticking on the chest. His humanity is his memory which pinches him with the fact that he has to reach office. In the metaphorical level, this is the fear of time and the anxieties of not being in time which is related to his incurring wrath from the chief clerk. He could not afford to lose the job because there is a debt to be paid. He has faced the trials and tribulations of constant travels, eating bad meals, making casual contacts with little intimacy. He has been enslaved to this system controlled by a hegemonic relationship where he suffers because of his submission to this eternal subjugation. Gregor has always been known for his use value, but once he loses the utility aspect, the door is slammed at his face. He is trampled under the feet of many, starting from the chief clerk, who is the face of the capitalist world to his own family members, who replace him with three tenants.

Kafkaesque and absurdity

Kafka was a clerk at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute in Prague. In his official visit to mines and factories, he has observed the dialectical process of production, the legal and social complexities and the unresponsive system that controlled everything. In it everyman is Joseph K as in *The Trial*, accused of some unknown crime, making a disturbing

adventure from pillar to post, exhausted of the condemnation, the reason of which he barely knows. But at last, he is led by two polite and gentlemen very courteously to be killed. In *The Metamorphosis* why does Gregor metamorphose into an insect is unclear. He had uneasy dreams whose contents are not revealed but as he has turned into an insect it shows the profound unfamiliarity that dominates the story.

Fear of the unknown, futility of existence and waning connections guide Kafka's work. His own experience of his work, his family and especially his domineering father left a visible mark in his creations. He tried hard to rise from the firm grip of his father and a psychoanalytic understanding of *The Metamorphosis* reveals Kafka's Oedipus complex. In the letter to his father he expressed the way his patriarchal tyranny impacted his life, his existence. He saw himself as a bug in front of his father and faced all that Gregor had to face after the transformation. As the clerk left, it was up to Gregor's father to drive him into the room and "he seized in his right hand the walking stick ... and began stamping his feet..."(103). "Pitilessly Gregor's father drove him back, hissing and crying shoo! Like a savage"(104). So Kafkaesque takes in its ambit not only the ordeal of bureaucratic incomprehensibility but also of the domineering mentality of superior. As Julian Preece says,

His images of anxiety and cultural dislocation, his multilayered prose which partakes of a multitude of discourses simultaneously, and his ignorance of ultimate answer will speak to us directly. Indeed the secret of Kafka's continued appeal is he has all the time kept so many of his secrets.(Julian1)

## Metamorphism

Transformation is the key to the world of *The Metamorphosis* of Kafka where except Gregor's which follows a nonsensical logic, all other transformations are theoretical, a direct

consequence of certain occurrences. The action and reaction sequence is evident in case of the chief clerk who turns up once he finds Gregor is absent and warns him of dire consequence. He even reveals to Gregor's family member that how dissatisfactory his work had been and it is beyond anyone's expectation. As he could not meet their expectation in doing business, "Mr. Samsa must not exist" (97). Gregor's family members also grow cold towards Gregor's condition with time. In the beginning their concern for Gregor lies in his being confined to his room, his being late for work. As they contemplate over the reasons of Gregor's self-confinement, they assume that he is ill and it is his mother who shows outmost concern by suggesting to call a doctor. But gradually they also undergo some change and become indifferent to Gregor's condition. As Gregor could not work anymore others need to work to survive and they start to work. Grete seems to bloom as Gregor deteriorates and from being a useless daughter she becomes a breadwinner. Towards the end, we see how Grete is looking ahead for some better prospect of getting married and settling herself soundly.

It is Gregor's metamorphosis which gives a blow to the family but they survive with their efforts and Gregor as useless is to be eliminated for the betterment of all. Once Gregor dies they breathe a sigh of relief and the family joins hands together in making the tenants to vacate and renting a comparatively smaller flat. Their remorse for Gregor's demise is overcome by the future prospect waiting for them. Kafka himself was disappointed with the botched conclusion of the story of *The Metamorphosis*, which he blamed to be the result of his arduous business trip. His annoyance and remorse is vividly visible in a letter which he wrote to his fiancé Felice Bauer. But on the other hand, the conclusion seems to be justified as it portrays the capitalist society and its indifference. The tragicomic aspect is true to life and it exemplifies how utility defines one's identity.

The transformation was seen even in the literary technique he used, where he deviated from modernist indirection and allusiveness and came up with a more explicit approach to storytelling. Though there was certain disagreement over the inherent meaning of his work but the quality of modernity was seen in his work with the same intensity and unequivocalness. As he wrote in German, he didn't come up with any technical innovations rather stripped it of involved construction until it came out as clear and simple like an everyday speech. He expressed tragedy and absurd by everyday and logical events though with certain strangeness. As Hannah Arendt says,

“The simplicity, the easy naturalness of his language may indicate that, Kafka's modernity and difficulty of his work have very little to do with that modern complication of the inner life which is always looking out for new and unique techniques to express new and unique feelings”(Arendt 70).

Humanity as memory.

For Gregor his humanity is his memory. The essential problem in the story is that Gregor's identity is being questioned. While the omniscient narrator, Gregor himself, his sister and his father know that the insect has Gregor in it but others remain unaware of it. His mother's disbelief, the clerk's indifference, the tenants' annoyance, and the housekeeper's affectionate insult forces Gregor to self-confinement. Ironically as a perspective character, he explains the different conditions to the reader till his sad demise but simultaneously he remains unintelligible to his fellow men. His sole interpreter Grete suffers from unquestioned self-confidence gained after Gregor's transformation. His observation of objects like writing desk, picture frame, his photograph as a lieutenant are his effort to connect to his memory. The tenants who are now

staying in his house seem to have taken his place sitting in the dining and reading the newspaper the way he did. All these reminiscence of Gregor elucidate his effort to connect to his humanity.

His listening to Grete's violin-playing with rapt attention where everybody else seems inattentive brings in him the memory of his planning to send Grete to conservatorium. "Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved"(131). On one occasion when her sister plays violin before the tenants, Gregor is drawn towards it spontaneously. He is considering his transformation where the human inside him is craving for this music to revive this belief that he is still human. He is reminded of his ability as a man who could afford to plan for others especially for his family. But in reality he is a bug who now eats the left outs of others that are spread on the newspaper, the same newspaper which he read in the dining. His sense of humanity and belongingness faces a sudden collision when his family decides to get rid of him especially Grete, the self-styled interpreter of Gregor. So it was not the mere bombardment of the apple rather it was their aversion and repugnance which made him realize that the time to get rid of his memory of humanity has arrived.

### Conclusion

Before figuring out anything from Kafka's the metamorphosis, one thing that is understood by many is that the whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread whether there's an ending or an absence of ending. Though it ends with some kind of hope followed by Gregor's demise but he seems to be present in the minds of the reader even after that. The ending though disappointed Kafka but that didn't disappoint the readers because there lies a lot beneath to excavate. As already pointed out the metamorphosis works at different levels

and it is to continue for the time to come and the timelessness of the Kafka's creation is justified in every sense.

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