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Insha Qayoom Shah

M.A. English Literature, Department of English

University of Kashmir

Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Inshaafreen17@gmail.com

The Metamorphosis: A surreal tale of the Fall of Man.

Abstract:

Franz Kafka's celebrated novella *The Metamorphosis* continues to baffle interpreters ever since it was published in 1915. The aim of this study is to trace subtle connections between Kafka's protagonists and the biblical concept of the Fall of Man. The paper intends, through cross-referencing from various works on Kafka and his stories, to look beyond the conventional approaches toward Kafka's stories, in which most of the interpreters have drawn parallels between Kafka's characters and his own troubled childhood especially his estranged relationship with his father. The following paper, however, tries to transcend those traditions by viewing *The Metamorphosis* in the light of guilt, punishment and the redemption. Also, the deeper meanings of the first line in which Gregor transforms into an "insect" seem lost in the translation. The whole idea of punishment, rejection and isolation of Gregor rests on the real meaning of *ungeheueres Ungeziefer*. It's been translated as "insect", "bug" or "dung beetle". The paper aims at deciphering the subtleties involved in Kafka's use of *ungeheueres Ungeziefer*. While peeping into Kafka's theological predilections, the objective is not to retrieve a theologian out of an artist but to discover the real nature of Kafka's characters that, to me, seem experiential rather than representational. *The Metamorphosis*, since it came to Kafka while working on another novel, is, therefore, more of an inner experience than a representative idea weaved through literary craft.

Key Terms: Fall of Man ,Guilt,Punishment ,Redemption,The Metamorphosis.

Franz Kafka's personal diaries have copious entries that tell us about his spiritual quest for understanding the real world. His oblique emphasis on the human suffering being a consequence of the Fall of Man forms the warp and weft of his complex stories including *The Metamorphosis*.

Kafka's stories are more than autobiographical; they somehow look like a journey into the author's own self. He would often say, "Sometimes I feel I understand the Fall of Man better than anyone." Take for example Georg Bendemann, the unheroic hero of "The Judgment" appears a proxy for the author himself. Georg has as many letters as Franz and Bende as many as Kafka. Similarly Samsa has as many letters as Kafka with vowels at the same places.

It is, therefore, safe to conclude that Kafka's characters, unlike the storytelling traditions of his time, are experiential rather than representational. Kafka does not bother to represent an observation; he rather wants to share his experiences and visions from his own inner self and juxtaposes them upon the grand biblical narrative of the Fall of Man.

It's been fashionable to interpret Kafka's stories from a psychological or sociological premise; though his characters betray such reflections, his theological bent and spiritual texture has long been ignored. Since Kafka wants to spew all what he feels inside him, his stories appear complex, often uninterpretable.

"I am constantly trying to communicate something incommunicable, to explain something inexplicable, to tell about something I only feel in my bones and which can only be experienced in those bones. Basically it is nothing other than this fear we have so often talked about, but fear spread to everything, fear of the greatest as of the smallest, fear, paralyzing fear of pronouncing a word, although this fear may not only be fear but also a longing for something greater than all that is fearful."

While reading Kafka, the overriding response one has is one of tragedy rather than irony as one watches Kafka's heroes trying to piece together the rubble of their universe. Kafka's stories inevitably concern the desperate attempts of people to do right. His protagonists strikingly resemble with his own self. This means that the main characters who try to do right but are continuously baffled, thwarted, and confused as to what it really means to do right are also Kafka himself. Viewed in this way, Kafka becomes a religious writer par excellence: he and his protagonists are classical examples of the man in whose value system the sense of duty and of responsibility and the inevitability of moral commandments have survived the particular and traditional code of a religious system — hence Kafka's yearning for a frame of reference which would impart meaning to his distinct sense of "shalt" and "shalt not." If one takes this all-permeating desire for salvation as the main criterion for Kafka's "religiousness" rather than the grace of faith which he never found, how could anyone not see Kafka as a major "religious writer?"

Peeping into Kafka's mind has been a constant endeavor for scholars and researchers, yet *The Metamorphosis* provides a window into his understanding of the real world. Much like Josephine The Singer (actually a mouse whose talent see her among the company of humans) wants to be forgotten and thus reach "the height of redemption", Gregor Samsa, towards the end of his life as an ugly insect seems mesmerized by the violin music played by his sister, an able bodied human. He says to himself, "I am hungry enough,but not for that kind of food." It's a clear representation of a craving for redemption, symbolizing the existence of another real world. But Kafka has masterfully kept the message open-ended as it's difficult to decipher which world is denounced and which one is affirmed.

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a book of fewer than hundred pages, yet the readers and scholars have been trying to interpret its opening sentence for more than hundred years.

The novella's protagonist Gregor Samsa wakes up "one morning from uneasy dreams" and finds "himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect".

The epithet *ungeheueres Ungeziefer* in the opening sentence poses one of the greatest challenges to the translator. Both the adjective *ungeheuer* (meaning "monstrous" or "huge") and the noun *Ungeziefer* are negations— virtual nonentities—prefixed by *un*. *Ungeziefer* comes from the Middle High German *ungezibere*, a negation of the Old High German *zebar* (related to the Old English *ti'ber*), meaning "sacrifice" or "sacrificial animal." An *ungezibere*, then, is an unclean animal unfit for sacrifice, and *Ungeziefer* describes the class of nasty creepy-crawly things. The word in German suggests primarily six-legged critters, though it otherwise resembles the English word "vermin" (which refers primarily to rodents). *Ungeziefer* is also used informally as the equivalent of "bug," though the connotation is "dirty, nasty bug"—you wouldn't apply the word to cute, helpful creatures like ladybugs.

American translator of German language literature, Susan Bernofsky shows Gregor transformed into "some sort of monstrous insect". She says "some sort of" is added to blur the borders of the somewhat too specific "insect". "I think Kafka wanted us to see Gregor's new body and condition with the same hazy focus with which Gregor himself discovers them," Susan argues.

When writing his script for the 1986 sci-fi horror classic, Cronenberg couldn't help but see the parallels between his story, in which a brilliant scientist accidentally transforms himself into a grotesque human/fly hybrid, and Kafka's. In an introduction to a recent translation of *The Metamorphosis*, Cronenberg wrote that he thought of Kafka specifically

when he wrote this line for the unlucky Seth Brundle (played by Jeff Goldblum): "I'm an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it. But now the dream is over, and the insect is awake."

The *Metamorphosis*, as Kafka himself admits to his fiancé, is a "repulsive work" but the craft he has employed clearly juxtaposes the world over the longing for redemption into the real world.

Given the almost similar conditions of Kafka's Gregor Samsa and Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, one tends to find striking resemblance in the themes and devices of *The Metamorphosis* and *Death Of A Salesman*. Willy and Gregor, the breadwinners for their respective families, find themselves rejected by society. Willy cannot find the attention and success he craves, while Gregor cannot even escape incarceration in his own room.

The chief difference between Willy and Gregor in this regard, however, is that Gregor rarely seeks recognition, whereas Willy fails to make an impression on others. However, Willy's intentions are based on his own pride and reputation where as Gregor's are based on providing for his family, never thinking of himself. Willy, just as Gregor is misunderstood by his family.

The key distinction between the two, though, is their reactions to the work environment and promotions which stems from their basic natures. Loman had a very selfish attitude and thus desired more attention at work. Rather than feeling accomplished, he yearned for greater success. This desire drove him mad and lead to his suicide. Samsa, on the other hand, has a very providing and selfless nature. And when he was promoted from a clerk to a traveling salesman, he said that he was able to solely and fully provide food for his family.

Gregor's obsession with getting to work and being successful can be similar to Willy's ambitious nature to notional extent only. Additionally, both Willy and Gregor experience a type of metamorphosis; Gregor's is physical, in that he transforms into a bug, while Willy's ambitions lead to his mental instability. The largest difference between the characters is that Gregor is selfless, wanting to provide for his family. Willy Loman yearns for professional recognition and self fulfillment as a successful business man. But despite all these thematic similarities, Loman is lament on difficulties the American dream entailed while Gregor not just represents the emptiness of 19th century capitalism he deeply recounts the consequences of the Fall of Man and the redemption after undergoing those consequences.

Grete, Gregor's sister, is sparingly named throughout the story. She is often referred to as "sister" and the Samsas as "Father" and "Mother". Even the lodgers are not named. This

device brings Gregor in complete spotlight; Kafka wanted his protagonist's tragedy to dominate the story.

A huge body of work has emerged drawing parallels between Gregor's emotional tensions with Mr. Samsa and those of Kafka's with his own father.

When Franz Kafka was a boy his father abused him. Whenever Kafka disagreed with his father or told his father that he wanted to be a writer, not a shop owner, his father got very upset. In the book Mr. Samsa displayed a violent temper from the very first encounter with the transformed Gregor. When he chased Gregor back to his room, he kicked him in the back as he reached the door. Another event in which Gregor encountered violence from his father was when Mr. Samsa threw an apple at him and it lodged in his back. From this point on the physical and mental condition of Gregor steadily decreased. The apple began to rot away and he felt weaker and experienced more pain than usual. Gregor even lost his appetite. The feelings of seclusion and not being wanted entered Gregor's thoughts. He could tell that his sister did not care as much as she did when he first became a bug. These feelings could have been the same feelings of seclusion that Kafka felt in his own life after abuse from his father.

At the heart of *The Metamorphosis*, however, lies Kafka's bigger idea than a plain lament of his troubled childhood or abusive nature of his estranged father. Mr. Samsa's aura of "the ultimate authority" while holding the crooked-handle stick and shooing away Gregor into his room does reflect cruelty that, as per the biblical traditions, entered the world after Adam and Eve disobeyed the lord and were banished from the Eden. Kafka deliberately makes Mr. Samsa throw apples rather than bottles or bowels. And the "forbidden apple" gets lodged at Gregor's back, only to deteriorate his condition.

Kafka subtly points to the "burden of guilt" that man has to bear after the Fall. In *The Metamorphosis* there are many signs of slow deterioration for Gregor. He gradually starts to lose his eye sight as he notices that he cannot even see across the road to the hospital. He has numerous injuries, some of which he cannot explain, like the pain in his side when he first woke up. He had an apple lodged in his back which was left to rot. He was cut by a piece of glass from a shattering alcohol bottle, and was bleeding profusely when he tried to get into his room and got stuck in the door. It is obvious that all of these descriptions are painful and the whole basis of the novel revolves around a human being who is dying a slow, painful death. *The Metamorphosis* could be one of Kafka's imaginations of his own death that is carefully disguised and elaborated through literature.

Notwithstanding the shadow of third chapter of Genesis on Gregor's life, Kafka has steered clear of those endless theological speculations about the chapter. Gregor's life subtly and surreally depicts Kafka's preoccupation with guilt and its proximity with the Fall of Man.

“Unlike Milton's amorously unbiblical treatment of the subject, *The Metamorphosis* has the closest affinity to what can be deduced from the incredibly simple text of the bible”

"Guilt is never to be doubted," says the officer "In the Penal Colony", the story Kafka wrote after his first break up with Felice Bauer. Gregor dies with a sense of guilt but Kafka leave no trace of regret among the survivors. When the corpse of the insect is disposed off by the charwoman, the family feels relieved of the intolerable burden, goes for a tram ride and Grete, who by now is matured in both psychological and physical ways, "had bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure...soon it would be time to find a good husband for her.”

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