

Existentialism in Franz Kafka's Work

Dr. Vasudha Maitre

Associate Professor Dept. Of English Dronacharya Govt. College Gurugram (Haryana)

Email: vasudhamaitre@gmail.com

Franz Kafka is a Czech-German writer known for his 'absurd' works. He is one of the major figures of the twentieth century. His works are a blend of elements of realism and delusion. He emphasizes the nature of a common man's existence and delves deep into exploring the human condition. The word, 'Existentialism', emphasizes the existence of the individual who is unconfined and a free agent determining their own development through acts of the will.

Franz Kafka's works deal with absurd situations, isolation, alienation, lack of connection with the fellow beings, the absurdity of life and above all, an individual's struggle to find meaning in this world. Kafka's existential philosophy is reflected in his stories, novellas and novels. His writings display an individual's experience of being alive in this unruly world. The characters in his stories and novels are often cut off from society, as they find themselves misfit, lost, alienated and isolated from society. This sense of isolation and loneliness shows the individual existential condition. The universal truth prevails that the man is born alone and dies alone. When an individual is leading a life he has to experience his existence and has to grapple alone in this world to find a meaningful life. Kafka's works reflect that the existence of an isolated individual can be a source of intense suffering. Most of the characters in Kafka's novels struggle very hard to search for meaning in a world that is surrounded by absurdism.

Franz Kafka's novella, 'The Metamorphosis', in which, the leading character, Gregor Samsa, transforms into a giant bug. This novella, informs the readers that Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning and finds himself changed into a monstrous bug. It is an allegorical novella that delves deep into the recesses of the human psyche compelling readers to give a thought, to their existence. Another dominant theme of this novel is intra-family relationships. The physical transformation that has occurred in Gregor Samsa challenges the bonds of family dynamics. The close-knit family ties, start to loosen. The character struggles hard to find the meaning of existence and the purpose of his life. This novella also reflects upon the meaninglessness of the individual, for the people who are around you.

'The Metamorphosis' is the story of a young man, Gregor Samsa, who is busy in earning his livelihood but to his astonishment he finds himself transformed into a bug. The story of this novella, opens with Gregor struggling to get out of bed, only to discover that he has been physically transformed overnight into a giant insect. Initially stunned, bewildered and horrified by his new transformation, Gregor tries to adjust and adapt to his new form, which further complicates his situation and his ability to communicate to his family members. Furthermore, it becomes really difficult for Gregor Samsa (who is now transformed into a bug) to move around his own home.

The protagonist, Gregor lives with his family. He is a salesman and his family is dependent on him. His transformation from a human being into a bug causes instantaneous pain, agony, distress, abhorrence and disgust among his family members. His father becomes belligerent,

pugnacious and aggressive, his mother faints upon seeing him. His sister, Grete, at first cares for him but soon becomes tired and disgusted by his appearance.

As the story moves on, the readers find that, Gregor becomes more and more secluded, lonely and neglected. His family, for whom he was an important part of their lives and depended on his income, now viewed him as a load and burden on them. The family tried to confine him to his room and stop feeding him properly. Gregor's only solace comes when he sees his sister play the violin, which brings Gregor (who has turned into a bug) comfort and solace. But soon his sister is also fed up of him and wants to get rid of him.

As the story moves on, the readers come across the fact that Gregor's family decides they can no longer tolerate his presence as a bug. All the members of the family of Gregor Samsa stop paying attention to him. He feels depressed and miserable for his condition. The family of Gregor starts renting out rooms in their apartment to lodgers. One day, Gregor accidentally frightens one of the lodgers, and his father angrily throws apples at him. Gregor is severely injured. The wounds that were caused by throwing the apples on Gregor become infected. Gregor grows weaker day by day.

Eventually, in the story also, Gregor dies alone in his room. His family, who had initially been horrified and later disgusted by his transformation, feel relief and solace upon his death. The family rather celebrated the freedom from the bug. They took a trolley ride, relaxed and satisfied and hopeful about their future prospects.

This novella, 'The Metamorphosis' is often interpreted as a symbolic representation of an individual's meaningless life associated with isolation, alienation, existentialist philosophy. Gregor's transformation into a bug represents his isolation not only from society but also from his family. The novella explores themes of existentialism, identity crisis, separation from the society and the complex filial relationships. The readers are stunned and startled when they read that a family member has become an outsider in his own home. As long as Gregor Samsa was earning and contributing his money at home he was of great concern but soon that concern vanishes when Samsa turned into bug was helpless to give materialistic relief to the family. Samsa was considered as a burden in his own family.

Similarly, another novel of Franz Kafka, 'The Trial' is also inter-clasped with existentialist themes. The novel predicts the uncertainty of an individual's life. The characters of his novels often find this world as an absurd place to live in.

The leading character of this novel, Josef K, is an ambitious young bank official. He is accused of a crime but he fails to understand the nature of the crime he has committed. He finds himself caught up in a baffling and indecipherable legal system. Till the time of his execution, Josef K. is unable to know his crime. His trial opens up in a strange, unreasonable and irrational manner, foregrounding the absurdity of his situation. The existentialist idea that the world is often illogical, absurd and meaningless is highlighted in the novel.

The novel, further portrays the sorrow, suffering and misery of Josef K. A sense of anguish existential dread is also reflected as his fate is controlled by the inexplicable forces. This existential torment and misery results in his inability to find meaning or justification for his awkward situation.

Josef K. wants to know his crime for which he has to face the trial. He fails to understand where his actions and decisions went wrong. Various critics interpreted the theme of this novel as the quest for meaning in this world. The existentialist philosophy foregrounds the idea that the individual's freedom is hindered by the unexplainable forces.

In this novel, 'The Trial,' the readers notice the sense of uncertainty and ambiguity prevails. Josef K. is never made aware of the nature of his crime. The unpredictability of human existence is highlighted in this novel.

Kafka's work resonates with existentialist themes such as – individual's existence, isolation, alienation, and the search for meaning in this bewildering world. Above all, the novel portrays on the double standards of the society, the bureaucratic absurdity and reflections on the human condition and the individual's powerless struggle against the world which is devoid of rationality and justice.

Another prominent work of Franz Kafka is 'America' (Amerika). 'America', also known as 'Amerika', or 'The Man Who Disappeared'.

Despite being unfinished, "America" is notable for its depiction of alienation, bureaucracy, and the absurdity of modern life. Themes that are dominant characteristic of Kafka's other works such as 'The Trial' and 'The Metamorphosis', also reigns supreme in this novel. The novel offers a unique insight into Kafka's distinguishing and distinctive literary style. Kafka scrawled around the existential and psychological themes. This novel remains unfinished but we can interpret various themes such as estrangement from homeland, struggling to find the place in the society, hostile environment of foreign country.

As this novel begins, the readers come to know that Karl arrives in America from Europe. He was sent by his parents as he impregnated a servant. Karl Rossmann, is the main character of this novel. He experiences hostile environment of America, that further leads to a profound sense of alienation. He is unfamiliar to this place (Amerika). His displacement from Europe to America clearly shows a broader existential theme of being separated from one's homeland. He feels the pangs of loneliness in a foreign society as he finds himself lost and displaced.

The bureaucratic systems seem to Karl as illogical and often oppressive. In 'America,' Karl encounters various bureaucratic structures and processes that hinder his progress. The character navigates through the odd and absurd situations and experiences the sense of disorientation and powerlessness. There are surreal and absurd elements, where ordinary events and interactions take on a bizarre. This contributes to a sense of anxiousness and eccentricity in the novel.

Karl Rossmann tries to establish and adjust himself in America. He sets for a journey to understand himself. His encounters with different characters and situations force him to defy his own identity and beliefs.

This novel reflects Karl's experiences and interactions with the modern society where capitalism, social hierarchy, and the treatment of immigrants play a dominant role. The novel also portrays Kafka's concern with the dehumanizing effects of modern society and the struggle for individual identity.

Overall, "America" by Franz Kafka is a complex, interesting and provocative novel that delves into themes of alienation, bureaucracy, absurdity, and the search for identity. Despite its unfinished nature, the novel remains a significant contribution to Kafka's body of work and continues to resonate with readers interested in existential literature and the human condition.

Another powerful work by Franz Kafka is 'The Hunger Artist'. It is a short story that probes the themes of isolation, alienation, and the hunt for meaning in the modern life. In the story the readers come across a professional faster who is put in a small cage. The main attraction in the circus is a hunger artist who fasts for prolonged periods, while spectators watch from outside.

The hunger artist is committed to his talent. He has amazing ability to fast for astonishing lengths of time. He takes pride in his capacity and skill surpassing all previous records. With the passage of time, public interest in his performance starts diminishing and eventually disappears. He becomes more and more neglected by the circus management. He fails to provide any attraction to the onlookers. Despite his commitment and dedication, he feels unacknowledged, unrecognized, misunderstood, and unappreciated, both by the viewers and the circus officials.

The story explores the existential conundrum of the hunger artist, who seeks validation for his art but is unable to find it in a society that values spectacle over substance. His fasting becomes a form of self- discomfiture, embarrassment and a quest for sacred transcendence. It ultimately leads to his demise. Throughout the story, he has not been assigned any name. His identity soon fades away. He is initially ignored, neglected and finally goes into oblivion.

As the story comes to the closure, the readers feel sad about the hunger artist, who is deserted and dies alone. His talent to control his hunger is not fully appreciated by those around him. The story evaluates the inability of the modern society to recognize, acknowledge and appreciate genuine artist who is true and spiritual in his endeavors.

'The Hunger Artist' is often scanned under an existentialist lens. Some of the major themes that resonates in the story are- art, cage, panther, clock, asceticism, alienation, absurdity, isolation, spiritual aspect, search for meaning in an indifferent world and the last but not the least is the death. The hunger artist is completely isolated, physically as well as emotionally from society. As he was living in a cage he was lonely and isolated from the people. The persons who come to visit circus viewed his fasting as a mere spectacle rather than any spiritual or sacred expression of his inner quest for meaning.

In the story, the reader can easily notice the absurdity that lies in the contrast between the hunger artist's complete dedication to his art to control his hunger and the materialistic nature of the people and circus officials. The visitors to the circus prefer more sensational attractions. The fasting of the hunger artist is a spiritual and expressive endeavor but as the time moves on it becomes increasingly meaningless to the spectators.

However the reader acknowledges the fact that the hunger artist's fasting is not just a physical act but a search for meaning in the modern life. He maintains extreme discipline, strives for his individuality. He overlooks the superficialities of everyday life. However, the end of the story is quite saddening as his (the hunger artist) search for his identity is ultimately choked and smothered by societal indifference.

The hunger artist freely chooses to fast as a way to express his disciplined life, identity, individuality, authenticity and autonomy. Despite the physical and emotional hardships the fasting of the hunger artist becomes a form of rebellion against societal norms and expectations. He removes all the shackles of the norms laid down by the society, foregrounding his existential freedom even in a restricted environment.

The death of the hunger artist in the end may be seen as the futility of his efforts to communicate his inner self to the society. His ultimate demise stresses the existentialist notion- that death is inevitable and is bound to come. His struggle to find meaning, purpose and authenticity in life wanes away.

Some of the major works of Franz Kafka that are discussed, explore the existential themes through the dominant and poignant portrayal of a protagonist who scuffles to find his individuality, identity, isolation, and meaning in this dystopian world. Almost, in most of the works of Kafka one finds the existential void which the protagonist experiences in this modern society.

Works Cited

1. Wahyuni, N., Thoyibi, M., & Candraningrum, P. D. Types of Freedom in Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis: An Existentialism Perspective. (2017).
2. Galani, K. Franz Kafka And His Works. Booksclinic Publishing. (2021).
3. Franz, Kafka. The Trial. Xist Publishing, 2015.
4. Kafka, Franz. The Metamorphosis. Fictionwise, Incorporated, 2000.
5. Kafka, Franz. The Complete Short Stories Volume II. Vol. 2. DIVA PRESS, 2017.
6. Cohen, Joshua. The Pleasures and Punishments of Reading Franz Kafka, The Paris Review, 2020.
7. Gray, Ronald. Franz Kafka. Cambridge University Press, 1973.
8. Hutchinson, Peter, Kafka Franz, and Minden Michael. Die Verwandlung. Routledge, 2006.