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Franz Kafka: Envisioning Derridean Concepts

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Critics of Franz Kafka, a German writer, have lamented that the end of Kafka's text does not provide them with a final meaning. This can be understood with the help of Jacques Derrida's concept of "Differance," the idea that there is constant differing and deferring of meaning in a text. Meaning always promises to arrive, but is constantly postponed. Derrida said that *Il n'y a pas de hors texte*, that is, "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158). And whatever provisional meaning is available, it is inside the text, amidst the constant and infinite free play of language, *ad infinitum*. It is with the help of these concepts and with the help of the concept of deconstruction, which means "to disassemble the parts of a whole" or "to lose its construction" that we may be helped in better understanding the works (here, in this study, the novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*) of Franz Kafka. Eschewing the "final" and exhibiting an open-ended text is a significant feature of the contemporary. Thus Kafka's work being open-ended, while eschewing finalities, upholding indeterminacies, repudiates the transcendent signified, illustrates the working of Derridean differance in the semantic aspect of the text. Nevertheless there is provisional meaning in the text and the episodes of a text illustrate processes and functionalities instead of leading to a monolithic episteme. Thus, reading Kafka through Derridean perspective provides us with rewarding insights in this regard.

Derrida became well known in U.S.A. in 1966 when he read his famous paper "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" at Johns Hopkins. Deconstruction is an old term used by Martin Heidegger while discussing Western philosophy originally named *Abbau*, (A German word), which suggests disassembling or unbuilding. Derrida borrowed this term Deconstruction from Heidegger and from the discipline of philosophy; took the term into literature and used it as a movement or process of reading texts. Deconstruction exists within any system or structures and is a part of that system and still which escapes or is in excess of the economy or logic of that system. It is through such element(s) or characteristic(s) that the process of disassembling or the unbuilding of that system takes place. We see in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Joseph K. engrossed in the process of trial, legal inquiries and investigations. Slowly the process of the 'trial' becomes a metaphor and an all pervasive presence. This situation of K. can be better understood if we employ the concept of Derridean Deconstruction. In the very opening of the novel Joseph K. is arrested. The arrest takes place not at physical level, but at mental level. Mr. K. feels circumscribed and eventually this process of the trial proves to be the defining quality, providing meaning to his movements and also making nonsense of his life. It ultimately robs him of his life. Till his last breath Joseph K. could not gain any meaning of his dilemma. Alas! he submits finally to his tragic situation. Why he could not gain meaning is because in the modern world there is the crisis of, as Derrida said, the demise of the transcendent signified; the Lyotardian master narrative.

Derrida's other concept of *differance*, where Derrida has stressed the unstable nature of meaning, also proves helpful in making the situation of K. more understandable. He believes that

a text reveals layers of meanings, incongruities and the usurpation of the space of the other by the self. Derrida says that it is both the strength and the weakness of the literary work that a literary language of that particular work has inbuilt undecidability. In Kafka's another celebrated novel *The Castle* this undecidability looms largely and predominantly. K. is confused of many ways to the castle, which provides the text with many perspectives. Derrida believes that it is this characteristic that becomes responsible for the disassembling and unbuilding of the text. Impossibility is the chief characteristic of the literary language. But it does not mean that a text does not contain any meaning, rather it means that there are many meanings to a text, However, all of the meanings are textual and provisional. In other words, it can be said that there is not and there cannot be only one meaning to a text or the final, ultimate reading of the text. Giving stable meaning or fixed identity to the text or its dramatis personae means doing injustice to the literary work.

Derrida in his paper further revised the concept of "Structure" and re-read Saussure's concept of the "Sign" and discerned the "Play" of language. He opens the essay talking about the fact that a "rupture" has occurred in the concept of structure. Derrida discusses that the structurality of structure as a process of providing it with a centre or referring in it to a point of presence or a fixed origin has limited the free play of that structure. Of course, he believes it is the centre of the structure which organizes coherence of that system and enables free play of elements inside the total form. Indeed one cannot think of a structure without a center. But, the fixidity of the centre and the structurality of structure mar the possibility of substitution of other elements. It is at this fixed centre that permutation or transformation of elements is forbidden. Thus, the centre that governs the structure itself repudiates structurality. The centre being at the centre of totality is not the part of that totality. Derrida wants to say that although the concept of centered structure represents coherence, but it is contradictorily coherent. Also the concept of the centered structure is the concept of the free play. And this reassuring certitude marks anxiety, and the anxiety occurs when we fear we are being implicated in the game or in the system. Further Derrida problematizes the definition of structure as given by Jean Piaget- that centre is a totality, it is wholeness and it has self-regulation. Derrida has analyzed the centre of the structure. This is popularly known as the idea of decentering. But Derrida at the same time does not think of a structure without a centre. When questioned by Serge Doubrovsky, who said; "You always speak of a non-centre," Derrida replied in the following manner:

First of all, I didn't say that there was no centre, that we could get along without the centre. I believe that the centre is a function, not a being -- a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable. The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it. That is to say, I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse one cannot get along without the notion of subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions (Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" 271).

Derrida's decentering hints to the idea that there is no point or origin or end or place outside colloquy from which to fix linguistic or philosophical boundaries for the play of signifiers in language. This enables in better understanding of Kafka's Joseph K.'s predicament, as he cannot make sense of his existence and pressurized trials. One is here remembered of Derrida's famous words *Il n'y a pas de hors texte*, that is, "There is nothing outside the text" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158), and whatever provisional meaning is available it is inside the text. Outside the text there has been drop of the metaphysical assumptions. This is the reason for the

bafflement felt by the critics of Kafka's writings. Since they look for the metaphorical assumptions, the 'transcendent signified', or substitute one set of metaphysical assumptions for another. But, Derrida says the history of western knowledge is the history of these substitutions.

For Derrida the "field...of *freeplay*, that is to say, is a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble" (Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" 260). Derrida explains that in the classical hypothesis it was seen as an inexhaustible field but it is too large, because "there is something missing from it: a centre which asserts and founds the *freeplay* of substitutions" (Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play" 260). The centre is the creation of the "force of a desire.

It seems that in receiving and writing Kafka in his creation is ahead of his times. He is always conscious of the "rupture" in the concept of structurality of structure. His works reveal themselves as fractured episteme. He never believed presences or the transcendent signified, that is why he has not included the *transcendental* in his writings; as we find both in *The Trial* and in *The Castle* there is lack of such presences or metaphysical assumptions. Kafka, like Derrida, also envisioned language as substituting one chain of signifiers for another chain of signifiers and this is what we have in the novels of Kafka. In the novel, right from the beginning with the arrest of Joseph K. till the end when he is executed "like a dog!," we find him in the similar incomprehensible situations, struggling to make out meaning of his arrest, whether at home or outside in the office or in the street. The situation has "arrested" him, and he remains arrested by the situation. The 'trial' situation in *The Trial*, the situation of the odyssey to the castle in *The Castle* is the dominating, all pervasive protagonists of these texts.

Another important concept of Derrida, *differance* also yields promising insights concerning Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Derrida explains *Differance* with a *differre-defer* syndrome:

We know that the verb *differer* (latin verb *Differre*) has two meanings which seem quite distinct...one of the two motifs of the Latin *Differre* to wit, the action of putting off until later, of taking into account, of taking account of time and of the forces of an operation that implies an economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a relay, a reserve, a representation -- concepts that I would summarize here in a word I have never used but that could be inscribed in this chain: temporization. *Differer* in this sense is to *temporize*, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and *temporizing* mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of 'desire' or 'will', and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect. And we will see, later, how this *temporization* is also temporalization and spacing...

The other sense of *differer* is the more common and identifiable one: to be not identical, to be other, discernible, etc. (Derrida, "*Differance*" 7-8).

What Derrida intends to tell us is that metaphysical assumption to writing from "outside" is something which is not acceptable. From inside the field of discourse there is something that exerts informative power. Thus, Derrida also suggests the statement *Il n'y pas de hors texte*, i.e., "There is nothing outside the text" and we have to satisfy ourselves with the provisional meaning of the text (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158). We have the sense of presence presently deferred and waiting to present itself. This allusion is engendered by the very process of deferring nature of language. *Differance* along with the movements of differing and deferring continuously belittle the possibilities of the yet to appear presence and also of the authority of that presence and instead stresses its opposite, the absence of presencing.

In *The Trial* Joseph K.'s existence is defined by the metaphor of the "arrest." The text itself is in a solidify state. Different types of trials and acquittals or merely deferring and

postponement become the status of both, the text and the protagonist. K. and the movements, situations of the text is entangled in Derridean differ/defer syndrome. Titorelli's knowledge which he provides to Joseph K. for endless acquittals are verbose; *freeplay* of language in Derridean terms. This verbose and this differing and deferring which appears to be promising, but is actually postponement is easily detected not only in Kafka *The Trial*, but in *The Castle* also. K. is grasped with the ideas of liberty and confinement, enclosures and being out of doors, fluttering between stasis and activity. His struggles to articulate the paradoxical nature of things and affairs remain useless. K.'s quest for castle ends in all failure and reaching the Castle is arriving at the Utopia, a never never land, glanced only in dreams but can never be reached. Thus, Kafka's *The Castle* is a study in K.'s "partial satisfaction," because it is this partial and provisional which alone is achievable in the postmodern, poststructural. Desired to reach castle, K. is always met with replies "no," "never." (*The Castle* 25, 27 respectively). This clears, on the one hand, K.'s eagerness to reach the Castle, or to arrive at a finality, but he forgets that it is denied in the contemporary postmodern scenario. It is this finality that Derrida has explicitly denied. He not only denies finality, but also makes it clear that no final meaning is available, as there has been demise of the transcendent signified. It is not only K. who has to acquire this wisdom, but the reader in general also has to learn it and satisfy himself with this "partial satisfaction." Further K.'s attempts are must to fail in this regard, and the overall position and scenario, is *mutatis mutandis* which is going to remain the same. The more K. struggles to grapple the situation, the more he finds himself at the same place. There are only promises given to him of taking him to castle, but the promises prove to be all fake, all failure. There is a promise of progress of his situation, but actually the text is bound up in a syndrome of differing and defer. The things move, and the more they move they remain at the same place. Thanks to Franz Kafka for envisioning the postmodern Derridean scenario much ahead of his times.

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