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Insect Symbolism in *The Metamorphosis*: An Exploration of Identity Crisis and Social Alienation

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Abstract:

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is a seminal work that explores the complex themes of identity crisis and social alienation, using the grotesque transformation of the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, as a powerful metaphor. The paper examines how Gregor's sudden transformation into a giant insect triggers a psychological and existential crisis, marking the breakdown of his identity and increasing estrangement from his family and society. Through the portrayal of Gregor's internal struggle and his family's apathy for him, the novel critiques the fragility of identity in a modern world where individuals are valued primarily for their roles and responsibilities. The paper also contextualizes the themes of the novella within existentialist philosophy, drawing on the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus to discuss the absurdity of Gregor's situation and the alienation faced by a modern individual. In a sense, *The Metamorphosis* offers a poignant commentary on the dehumanizing effects of social and familial expectations, the loss of self-worth, and the pervasive isolation in contemporary life.

Keywords: Isolation, Identity, Rejection, Guilt, Anxiety.

In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the themes of identity crisis and social alienation are intricately woven into the narrative through the character of Gregor Samsa, whose sudden transformation into an insect serves as a psycho-physical catalyst for his unravelling sense of self. Before his transformation, Gregor's identity was predominantly defined by his role as the sole provider for his family. His existence revolves around his job as a travelling salesman, a responsibility he takes on with great dedication, despite his dissatisfaction. "Why don't I just sleep on a little longer and forget all this nonsense, he thought, but that was quite impossible"(Kafka 1). Even after waking up to be transformed into a giant insect, Gregor keeps looking at the clock and thinks of how his company would react to his first leave in five years. He further tries to apprehend how his boss would react: "His boss would surely come along with the doctor from the insurance company, he would complain to his parents about their lazy son"(Kafka 10). What he thinks of as an occupational illness of travelling salesmen soon turns out to be a nightmare. When the head clerk from his office visits him, he forgets his struggle to control his body and thinks of not letting the head clerk leave, agitated as this would put his position in the firm at most risk.

Gregor Samsa is no longer able to express himself with the voice of an insect. As a result, he confronts both a loss of identity and a complete breakdown in his relationship with society and his family. He says, "I cannot make you understand. I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me. I cannot even explain it to myself" (Kafka 12). His transformation into an insect intensifies the fact that he never had any voice. He never lived his dreams. The only aspiration of his life was to provide for his family, and he believed this. He also provides violin classes for his sister, who learns music, so that she can get a suitable husband. We generally get a loving, affectionate, and protective picture of a family fighting external pressures together, but it is only Franz Kafka who in this novel dares to reveal the excruciating psycho-physical pain a son has to go through due to internal familial expectations.

The paper aims to analyse how *The Metamorphosis* portrays the identity crisis and social alienation, highlighting the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of Gregor's transformation.

Gregor's transformation into an insect strips him of his dignity and pride. These feelings highlight the emotional turmoil Gregor endures, as he grapples with his dehumanization and the perceived failure of his existence. His transformation symbolizes his internal struggles with his self-worth and the burden of societal and familial pressure. Kafka himself, as someone whose worth was linked to productivity, is similar to Gregor's life as a traveling salesman. It suggests that the story represents the author's fear about his value as an individual being tied to his work, rather than to his personal qualities. The absurdity of Gregor's transformation and his family's indifferent or cruel reaction to it reflects Kafka's existential anxieties. Kafka's works often grapple with the meaninglessness and absurdity of life, and in *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's transformation is portrayed without explanation, reinforcing the sense of an arbitrary and indifferent world.

Identity Crisis in *The Metamorphosis*:

An identity crisis refers to a point of confusion and deep questioning regarding one's self-concept, dignity, and role in the world, often caused by life changes, challenges, or backlash from people we love. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa's transformation challenges his established sense of self, leading to an intense internal struggle. The text states, "Gregor then turned to the window and looked out at the dull weather. 'I can't go back to sleep,' he thought; 'I can't stay in bed any longer. I have to get up and go to work'" (Kafka 6). This shows that Gregor's identity is rooted in his work, responsibilities, highlighting the existential crisis he faces when he cannot work after his transformation. However, this was also the work he hated to do, and he wanted to sleep for some more time. The readers get to know that if it were not

for his family, he would have quit his job. “Oh God, he thought, ‘what a strenuous job I’ve chosen! On the move day in, day out. The stresses of this work are much greater than in the office at home, and on top of that I’m plagued with all this travelling,...’”(Kafka, 460) We can remember that Gregor's father used to wake him up daily for work. His only worry was that his son should not miss the train. Gregor’s salary was much more important to him than his son’s peaceful sleep for a day. No doubt that such pressure can degenerate any human being into the state of an insect. After his transformation, Gregor struggles to reconcile his human mind with his insect body. He becomes increasingly disoriented, feeling disconnected from his former self. “He could not move his body, and he felt like a soldier who has been wounded in battle, and his legs, heavy as logs, could not lift him any longer” (Kafka 16). Initially, he thought it to be “temporarily unfit for work, but that’s just the right time to remember one's past achievement and to remind oneself that later, once the problem has been resolved, one will work all the harder and more carefully.” Gregor’s physical alienation from his own body marks a significant rupture in his sense of self. In addition to his physical transformation, Gregor’s sense of personal worth deteriorates as his family’s perception of him shifts. His family, once dependent on him, becomes hostile and dismissive as they can no longer see him as the person he once was. Gregor’s sister, Grete, who initially takes care of him, eventually treats him with coldness, further exacerbating his identity crisis. She becomes “someone who was just performing a duty” (Kafka 34), indicating how Gregor’s worth is reduced to a mere obligation, and he begins questioning his value.

Gregor’s identity crisis occurs when he dies, not as a human being but as an insect, a symbol of his complete loss of self. The family expresses relief at his death, saying, “They were relieved that they were rid of him” (Kafka 55). This statement underscores the tragic conclusion of Gregor’s identity crisis, where he is no longer seen as a person by those closest to him. When Gregor realizes, he cannot go to work after his transformation, his first thought is not for

himself, but for his job. Kafka writes, “Gregor, the poor man, thought only of his work” (Kafka 17). This highlights the extent to which his self-worth is tied to his labour and his financial contributions. His crisis is not just physical but also existential, as Gregor becomes increasingly disconnected from his previous sense of self.

Gregor tries with all his might to reconcile with his new body, and he successfully does so. As a matter of fact, he is no longer needed in the family makes him hopeless, and he embraces his death quite peacefully. Kafka describes his transformation: “He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he was hardly aware of his physical appearance” (Kafka 22).

Social Alienation in *The Metamorphosis*:

Gregor's transformation causes a complete shock and stress in his family. Once productive, he was respected and loved, but later, no pleading helped him, and no one understood him. He turned to his father for help in vain. Gregor, who had been working day and night to meet all the family's expenses, took the money gratefully; he provided it gladly. He even thought of sending his sister to the conservatoire the following year.

Upon his transformation, Gregor's family initially expresses concern, but their empathy quickly fades as they realize the extent of his change. Even their preliminary concern and care was for the hope that, after some days, Gregor would recover and start earning again. That is the reason why they didn't talk about dismissing their maid at first. His sister, Grete, who initially takes on the responsibility of feeding him, eventually grows tired of the burden and becomes increasingly hostile. Kafka notes, “The more Gregor heard this conversation, the more his sense of isolation grew” (Kafka 36). The family's alienation from Gregor symbolizes the broader social alienation experienced by individuals who no longer fulfil the roles that are expected of them. Love between parents and children, which is considered to be the most sacred, Kafka

deflates that unquestionable sanctity in this very novel. Gregor's father reacts violently toward him, symbolizing society's harsh rejection of those who are seen as unworthy or incapable of contributing to society. Kafka describes the scene where Gregor's father "hurled him back into his room, slamming the door with a force that sent a shudder through Gregor's entire body" (Kafka 32). Despite his attempts to express himself, the family fails to understand his plight, seeing only the insect before them. Kafka writes, "He had forgotten his words; all he could do was crawl around, helpless and frustrated" (Kafka 30). The extent to which Gregor's inability to communicate leads to further disconnection and emotional isolation.

Social alienation is highlighted through Samsa's transformation and his subsequent isolation from society. Once Gregor becomes physically estranged from humanity, he also experiences emotional and social estrangement, escalating his sense of disconnection from his family, work, and society. His parents, who once relied on him, are now repelled by his appearance and struggle to understand his situation. "He could not move his body, and he felt like a soldier who has been wounded in battle, and his legs, heavy as logs, could not lift him any longer" (Kafka 16). This reflects Gregor's loss of agency and his inability to engage in normal human activities, such as work and communication. This breakdown in communication and understanding demonstrates how social alienation is not only an external experience but a profound internal one, as the individual begins to lose their sense of connection with those around them.

The culmination of Gregor's alienation comes when his family finally decides that they can no longer tolerate him. His death is seen as a release from the burden he represents to them: "They were relieved that they were rid of him" (Kafka 55). This final rejection shows how Gregor is entirely alienated from his family and society, after he turns completely useless in their eyes.

Literary and Philosophical Context

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, like his other works, reflects Absurdism, which emphasizes that no matter what we do, the nature of our existence is doomed to be meaningless and absurd. Kafka's absurd world dictates that happiness in life neither follows any mathematical algorithm nor karmic relation. His other works, like *The Trial* or *In the Penal Colony*, all try to show the same theme of absurdity. Sartre's idea of "bad faith", the denial of one's true self in favour of socially prescribed roles which can be seen in Gregor's initial acceptance of his role as the family provider, which ultimately contributes to his identity crisis after his transformation. Similarly, Camus' concept of the "absurd" resonates with Gregor's experience, as he confronts the absurdity of his situation and the seeming meaninglessness of his existence.

Kafka's use of the insect metaphor to convey the theme of alienation is also significant. The monstrous transformation Gregor undergoes is not simply physical but symbolic of the profound detachment that individuals often confront in modern, bureaucratic societies. His portrayal of Gregor's plight reflects the existential anxiety of living in a world where human connection is fragile and personal identity is often shaped by external forces beyond one's control. Kafka was critical of societal norms and conventions, and *The Metamorphosis* reflects a rejection of conventional ideas of success, family, and societal roles. Gregor's transformation challenges the conventional notion of what it means to be human, and his ultimate demise can be seen as Kafka's commentary on the futility of trying to meet society's expectations when one feels disconnected from it. "Gregor's body was lying on the floor in a heap... He had lost all strength and was now dying"(Kafka 44). In the end, Gregor's physical death is portrayed almost as a release from the suffering and alienation he endured. His family, now relieved of their burden after his death. Kafka's portrayal of death here is not tragic in the traditional sense but rather one of liberation and quiet resignation to the inevitable end of Gregor's existence.

It's not just Gregor who experiences a form of death, but also his family, who seem to feel relief rather than sorrow at his passing. Kafka uses this to show how death in *The Metamorphosis* is both personal as well as social. Gregor's death is as much a death of relationships and bonds as it is a physical demise. It is not a clean, definitive event, but a process of degradation, alienation, and the collapse of Gregor's humanity in the eyes of those around him.

Conclusion

The Metamorphosis is regarded as Kafka's reflection of his struggles with alienation, identity, and familial dynamics. Through Gregor Samsa's transformation and subsequent experiences, Kafka explores themes of self-worth, the oppressive nature of societal expectations, and the pain of emotional and physical isolation. While the story itself is not autobiographical, it is deeply infused with Kafka's personal anxieties and psychological turmoil, making it a profound exploration of the human condition.

Kafka masterfully explores the themes of identity crisis and social alienation, using the physical transformation of Gregor Samsa as a powerful metaphor for the psychological and social breakdown of an individual. Gregor's loss of identity, marked by his inability to fulfil his role as the family provider, and his increasing estrangement from his family, illustrates that in the modern bureaucratic world, the worth of an individual depends on the ability of their productivity. Their value has decreased to the status of a machine or worse, as in *The Metamorphosis*, to the state of an insect. Apart from anxiety, frustration due to a lack of communication, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* also portrays a cruel family structure very dexterously.

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