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A Critique on the Poststructuralist Readings of Kafka's Works:
Metamorphosis, The Trial, and The Castle

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Abstract:

This research paper examines Franz Kafka's novels through a poststructuralist lens, inquiring into how his works destabilize traditional notions of meaning, identity, and authority. Critically analyzing the theories of Jaques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze, this paper explores how Kafka's fiction challenges the stability of language, subjectivity, and reality. Investigating the decentered notion of subject, challenging binary oppositions, subjectivity as a construct, resistance, and power dynamics in Kafka's novels, this research reveals how his works exemplify the poststructuralist critique of grand narratives and essentialized identities. This paper imparts pervasive scholarly studies about the intersections of literature, philosophy, and cultural theory. It offers new perceptions of Kafka's unfathomable narratives and their continued pertinence to contemporary discourses about power, language, and the human condition. This paper also explores how the issues addressed by Kafka become relevant aspects of the modern generation, making his works transcend beyond time. Kafka addresses the issues

that seem to be expected in the modern world but, through his hyper-realistic way, which is the beauty of his works, reveals how these issues will become more problematic. This often makes people hostile to vulnerabilities.

Keywords: differance, karkain, existentialism, absurdity, bureaucratic.

Introduction

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a German-speaking Bohemian writer known for exploring themes of absurdity, existential anxiety, freedom and entrapment, identity and self-understanding, guilt and punishment, bureaucracy and power. Kafka's father, Hermann Kafka, was a domineering businessman with whom Kafka had a strained relationship, which most probably influenced his writings, and his mother was Julie Kafka.

Kafka even attempted to write an autobiography, *Brief an den Vater*, which translates to "Letter to My Father", and through this work, he talks about the themes of power and authority as his father, depicted as a domineering person and a patriarch, to whom Kafka finds himself submissive, weak, and always fears judgement from the paternal figure; portrayed the contrast between him and his father's character as he finds himself as a weak, delicate, and contemplative while his father is strong, assertive, and practical; reflected his emotional and psychological issues like low self-esteem, anxiety, guilt and all these emotional distresses are attributed to the paternal figure's criticism and lack of empathy, by Kafka. Kafka's struggles and inability to comply with his father's expectations had led him to an intense emotional dilemma. His father's high expectations regarding Kafka's career, social behaviour, and lifestyle were at odds with his love for literature and introspection. Regardless of his grievance, he still seeks approval from his father. Kafka also feels a strong communication barrier between them, as he believes that his father lacked empathy towards him and never truly listened to or understood him. The letter reflects his desperate need to express himself, which he could not

communicate directly. All these things have impacted his writings as the audience can experience his works through the themes of alienation, instability, guilt, and authority. These things shaped Kafka's writings as well as his perspectives and approaches. The term *Kafkaesque* refers to characteristic features of Franz Kafka's works, including situations, settings, or feelings that evoke surreal, oppressive, and absurd qualities. The term refers to people who find themselves entrapped in an oppressive, coldly impersonal, and non-sensical bureaucratic system, a theme that reflects Kafka's own life experiences. The entirety of these things offers insights, and aids in understanding Kafka's works through a poststructuralist lens.

Poststructuralism emerged as a movement against structuralism during the 1960s-70s. Major proponents of poststructuralism include Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari. In this paper, we are analyzing Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle* through the lens of poststructuralism. Analyzing these works involve how language, meaning, and power structures shape a character's experiences, portraying instability of meaning and the deconstruction of traditional binaries. Influential thinkers of poststructuralism suggest that texts contain multiple interpretations; meanings are not fixed but are shaped by systems of language, power, and social structures.

"There is nothing outside the text," says Derrida; here he proposes that for Kafka, the meaning is always deferred, which means there is no clarity attained; for example, in *The Metamorphosis*, the travelling salesman Gregor Samsa is undergoing a physical transformation into a bug where his consciousness remains the same as that of his human form. In the context of Derrida's *differance*, Gregor's body can be considered 'differ', which is fluctuating, and Gregor's mentality can be seen as 'defer', as it remains the same. As a result of this, meaning is never completely generated. From the works of Kafka, it is evident that the notion of binary opposition is spurned and has deconstructed the perception of identity. In the aforementioned work, the absence of identity or individuality leads to another key feature of poststructuralism,

the metaphysics of absence, where clarity is not achieved. "He must go," cried Gregor's sister. "that's the only solution, father. You must try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor." Gregor's mute agony depicts a feeling of estrangement and being set apart. His transformation into a socially unacceptable being intensifies the agony of his existence. Even though he mentally continues to be Gregor, his body's metamorphosis is challenging for society to rationalize. This story tells us of a family in which the transformed person is either labelled as a moral deviant or a monster and subsequently loses societal acceptance.

Gregor's words, "I'll get up soon, get back to work, and forget all this foolishness", symbolize the inescapable authority that governs his life, which he cannot defy even as he transforms into a bug. They also reflect the monotonous nature of existence, where societal constructs dictate the daily routines. "If I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I'd have quit ages ago." These words highlight Gregor's deeply ingrained sense of responsibility toward his family and society, which has become internalized to the extent that it overpowers his peace and well-being.

Jean-Paul Sartre articulated in his book *Being and Nothingness*, "This is certainly one of the meanings which Kafka's *The Trial* tries to bring to light, the characteristic in human reality of being perpetually in court. To be free is to have one's freedom perpetually on trial." These words reflect the uncertainty prevailing in the human world without proper meaning, purpose, or God and always in a court of one's own, waiting for a trial. *The Trial* explores the life of Josef K., a chief clerk at a well-reputed bank, who is arrested by authority without any warning. Even though he is completely inoffensive, he finds himself straining to exonerate his actions. This context reflects in the opening sentence of *The Trial*: "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested." The whole tone of the novel is absurd as Josef K. confronts a trial he does not deserve. There is no proper evidence for the crime accusation that falls on Josef K. His name has likely

been mistaken for someone else's. Here, the meaning of law is deferred as the protagonist tries to find definite meaning in his absurd situation but fails to find it. Thangjam Ibopishak's *I Want To be Killed by an Indian Bullet* reflects a similar situation where the narrator has no idea about what he has done or what is happening around him. In *The Trial*, Josef K faces a moral dilemma: on whether he has done any crime or not, defending himself for the crime that he has not committed, searching for legal support by being inside of utter ambiguity, executing him on his thirty-first birthday. The meaning is deferred in *The Trial* as Josef K continuously searches for a definite meaning of law but never finds it.

Through a Kafkaesque lens, the justice system and the law and order of the postmodern world have been criticized, as they are portrayed ambiguously. In the post-war era, people endured dark times: innocent individuals were arrested and murdered without cause, and women were physically assaulted, reflecting the breakdown of social order. The truth presented here is subtle, but writers like Kafka illustrate reality as a simulation or portray it in a hyper-realistic manner. This makes the narrative feel both strange to the audience and yet relevant to the contemporary world.

"The court wants to know everything about everything, but it does not want to know anything about the individual." these words represent the dehumanizing nature of the bureaucratic system, which is faceless and indifferent to personal identity. Josef K faces mental agony by the internalization of guilt without doing anything. Josef K says, "I cannot sleep unless I am surrounded by books," explicitly indicating that He seeks comfort in the intellectual world despite the incomprehensibility of his situation.

The protagonist suffers due to his disinterest, which prevents him from escaping the unclear situation involving false accusations and illegal detention. His procrastination led to a series of events that followed and culminating in his death. Josef finds himself guilt-ridden for

having a sexual encounter with Leni, a young woman who shows attraction to Josef. She invited Josef K when He was having a meeting with his bedridden lawyer. Leni symbolizes materialistic pleasures, which become one of the reasons Josef is seen as blameworthy. After all these instances, the illegitimate authority portrayed by the author finds Josef guilty and initiates his murder as an end to the process of trial.

Kafka might be trying to convey that Josef briefly tried to escape because of the authority's flaws. Kafka portrays the authority as an abusive force, with Josef's actions accelerating the consequences.

In a way, we can see that this is not helping humanity. The temporary pleasures or escapism are not curing the chaotic minds of people.

"Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" says Michel Foucault. Through these words, he points out the decayed nature of authority and Kafka's portrayal of bureaucratic power, where power is disintegrated and unable to function adequately as it is disintegrated, elusive, and inescapable. "One must fight to get to the truth, and then it's not even certain that one will win." these words are taken from the novel *The Castle* by Franz Kafka. The words under reference were given by Mr. K, the protagonist of the novel. This novel explores the uncertainty revolving around Mr. K and the mystery behind the castle. Mr. K's continuous efforts to understand Klammer, a member of the castle, indicate the enigmatic nature of authority in Kafka's novels. From another perspective, Klammer can be considered a Godly figure who emits a continuous sense of mystery toward humanity, which people seek to unravel this enigma. The curiosity in this mystery drives people beyond their limits, with a risk of becoming wholly lost — just as portrayed in the poem *Journey to the Interior* by Margaret Atwood. "Many have been here, but only some have returned safely." The poem explores a journey into the narrator's inner consciousness. The poet suggests that this

journey inflicts a challenge, as there is no route map or any sort of navigation to rely on. The narrator stresses this through the lines:

A compass is useless; also
trying to take directions
from the movements of the sun,
which are erratic;
and words here are as pointless
as calling in a vacant wilderness.

The narrator implies that the journey is psychologically strenuous, and each step forward should be taken with caution.

Kafka's novels portray the rigid and impersonal nature of bureaucratic systems. In *The Castle*, the protagonist's sense of self is deeply entangled with the elusive authority represented by the castle. This kind of system has a significant impact on Kafka's characters, which in turn causes existential crisis and an absurd sense of identity.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this paper analyses Kafka's novels through the lens of Poststructuralism and their impact on the modern mind. This theory becomes apt for these novels as Kafka rejects all traditional writing methods by deconstructing the traditional structure of a novel, and the primary discussion is about the meaninglessness of life. In *The Metamorphosis*, he rejects the binary opposition using the transformation of Gregor Samsa into a bug and the aftereffects that came into his life. Through this approach, he subverts the traditional character analysis. Gregor Samsa's evolution into a bug aids the idea that nothing is fixed, and nothing can be analyzed

through pre-existing knowledge. In *The Castle* and *The Trial*, the fragmented and abrupt ending contributes to the study of Kafka through this lens. The narratives of Kafka produce ambiguity in general, which can be considered a general senselessness or uncertainty revolving around the minds of the modern era. In *The Trial*, the absurdity revolving around Josef K's case reflects the problems and meaninglessness of law and order through Kafkain perspective and how this issue indulges into problems like procrastination (common in the present generation) and makes it justifiable. On the other hand, this procrastination has never brought any kind of relief or cured his problem, rather than Josef K feeling guilty and aiding his murder. The continuous search for meaning and identity in *The Castle* reflects the existentialist crisis that Mr. K goes through, and his unending curiosity again brings him more mental tension and meaninglessness as his goal is clear, but he is distracted.

Poststructuralism rejects the idea of binary opposition, including the distinction between good and evil, and instead views all actions as potentially justifiable. However, this perspective may open the door to moral ambiguity and societal decline, where repeated harmful actions are no longer seen as mistakes but deliberate choices. Complete rejection of the existence of God or any entities aids the meaninglessness and existential crisis in people as there is no hope to stick on. For the modern generation, the sense of meaninglessness often leads to procrastination and a lack of motivation, making it difficult to maintain everyday routines. Complete rejection of law and order also creates chaos as there should be something, or someone for the organized working of things or else everything will be shattered and chaotic. Still, the system Kafka portrays in his works is too rigid, which causes atrocities and frustrations in an individual's life. A balanced system is mandatory to ensure the proper and organized functioning of society — it should neither be too rigid nor too flexible.

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