

# Ontological Analysis of “The Metamorphosis”

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## ABSTRACT

This study began originally out of an interest in the nature of Franz Kafka in contemporary world. Franz Kafka has been translated nearly in all languages of the world and whose impact on world literature is far reaching. Much research and criticism have already been carried out to explore enrich treasure-house of meaning as extensive use of allegory and figurative language crowded the Kafkaesque World with tons of interpretations as it has been described. Kafka pictures the horror of modern age in which characters are going through the traumas of existential bewilderments that resulted further in alienation and isolation. Modern man is the central figure of all fictional world of Kafka whose various stages of life have been minutely captured by Kafka on the canvas of short-story and novel. Ontology is a philosophical concept which deals with the study of the nature of being, interpretation of the being or the doctrine of the being. It explores the existential position of being in a particular situation. It deals with the question of existence that whether an entity exists or not, what an existing entity is, how is it existing, in which form and condition it is existing, what is the nature of its interaction with other existing entities. Ontology extracts the meaning of a being by analyzing the state in which that being is existing. It does not confine its scope to prove which entity exists and which does not. It also makes sure to bring forward those properties which can elucidate existence. Existentialism, Metaphysics, Hermeneutics, and Nihilism are the major disciplines which include ontology as their integral concept. The current study focuses on the different stages of characters' life in the light of ontology.

**KEYWORDS:** Ontological Dilemma, Transformation, Being-with-one-another, Dasein, Being, Becoming

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading Kafka is a puzzling experience. Impossible events occur with an air of inevitability, and no explanation is forthcoming. Gregor Samsa is turned into an insect, without knowing how and why. Joseph K. never learns the reason for his arrest. The other K. never reaches the Castle and does not understand why he cannot meet the official who (perhaps) summoned him there as a land surveyor (Robertson 26).

Franz Kafka was born in Prague to middleclass Jewish parents in 1883. Kafka's father Hermann Kafka owned a successful dry goods store and provided his family with financially stable living conditions. Born under less fortunate circumstances, Hermann Kafka was a self made man with social aspirations, and he chose to send his son to German-language schools.

Kafka is one of the most prominent writers of 20<sup>th</sup> century who did not receive much fame in his life time yet huge critical acclaim just followed his funeral ceremony as Max Brod published his prominent works right after his death denying his last will. Max Brod betrayed his friend by refusing to burn his literary pieces yet provided a chance to the whole world to read and appreciate surrealistic treatment of the dilemma of modern man who is devoid of metaphysical, spiritual and religious roots.

Kafka's fictional world is multidimensional and every interpretation seems to suit it as these literary pieces are full of multitudinous thoughts that have been painted like a Dadaist painter who is just throwing paint on the canvass causing a complexity and labyrinth. In this puzzled literary panorama every critic will have its own subjective path to define the meaning but in this free-play of meaning usually critics lose their path and entangled in this complex labyrinth of meaning designed by great maze-maker novelist of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2 PROBLEM SPECIFICATION

This research aims at exploration of ontological dimension of Fran Kafka's The Metamorphosis. In particular, different dimensions of nothingness prevalent in Kafka's short fiction in relation to ontology are also under discussion.

### 3. OBJECTIVES

- 1- To explore ontological dimension of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.
- 2- To observe the actions of characters in terms of ontology.
- 3- To point out different similarities and differences in development of characters in the light of ontology.

### 4. DISCUSSION

The characters of *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, (1925) *The Castle* and *The Hunger-Artist* (1924), undergo the oppressions of life. There in their life the mark traces of absurdity, obscurity, and meaninglessness can be found. On the other hand, in all these works characters are found in the struggle for the attainment of Divine. Meaninglessness and Mysticism are two extremes but Kafkaesque can be interpreted in both ways. Malcom Bradbury in his book, *Modernism*, discusses Kafka's work under the heading of Janus-Faced Novel. Beings in Kafka's fictional world are trying to discard all materialistic obligations in order to achieve the heights of spiritual world. As Bloom remarks, "... his literary authority is now spiritual also, particularly in Jewish context" (Bloom 11). Much the same way, Greenberg comments on *The Metamorphosis*, "his story is about death, but death that is without denouement, death that is merely a spiritually inconclusive petering out" (19).

The question which haunts the reader is a basic and legitimate one, what is the reason of this transformation? First one is very simple, the oppression of a colonizer over colonized (economical, social, and moral), Second, an air of hypocrisy prevailing over the country for Jews (which lead him towards a crisis of his religious identity, about which Mairowitz quoted him as, "What do I have in common with the Jews? I don't have anything in common with myself") (25): Third was his relationship with his father and Felice (his beloved); fourth was the burden of a debased morality, and fifth was his existential anguish which leads him towards realization of nothingness.

Traumatic experience of transformation was going somewhere in his own life as well, as Gray indicates "The transformation is at first incomprehensible, without some experience of it through Kafka's diaries" (84). Mairowitz affirms this as, "he would never stop transforming himself into animals, his favorites being those which could crawl and quickly scamper away, although he had an inordinate terror of mice" (56): and Alberes and Boisdeffre say, "Whether his name is Joseph K., Raban, Gregory Samsa, the Land Surveyor, George Bendermann, Josephine the Singer, the Hunger Artist, or the Trapeze Artist, the hero of his book is none other than Kafka himself" (2).

In Kafkaesque world, one can find a satire on the set patterns of a society as well as on its ethics and conducts. It is also a severe critique on the corruption and cruelty of higher officials ruling the government. Kafka, who has been living in a colonized country, is trying to expose the dilemma of colonized beings. In *The Metamorphosis*, his main character Gregor Samsa undergoes the stress of economical problems and burden of material life which forces him to transform into an insect:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning after uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard... His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes" (Kafka 75)

The use of metamorphosis in literature is perhaps as old as literature itself. There are many such examples even in 20<sup>th</sup> century. The *Metamorphosis* is no doubt the best known of modern stories of transformation. The actual mutation of characters is an element of unreality, and it is the one element most vital to the development of the physical plots and mental situation of *The Metamorphosis*. The *Metamorphosis* has attained the stature of classic as it is widely discussed and researched piece of writing that functioned as an introduction of Franz Kafka. Kafka is a fable-minded writer as it is evident from his many stories yet these fables are far different from Aesop's fable in their subject matter. The *Metamorphosis* is one such story but it does not deal with moral implications of any sort yet it evokes horrors of modern life. The sudden metamorphosis of central character can be as an allegory of the transformation of a personal identity by incurable and long-drawn-out illness of existence, with its burden on all. The transformation has no evident connection with the previous character or behavior of the person; it is a predicament or fate, and attention is focused on the effect on others. This compelling fable has such a general force that cannot be confined to any single interpretation as it evokes many perspectives.

Kafka unfolds ontological dilemma that human beings in essence are detached. It can be witnessed even prior to his transformation, Gregor is a victim of isolation owing to the nature of his job which precludes his capability to form and maintain meaningful association with other people. Jean Paul Sartre is one of the most prominent ontologist who has been already discussed in previous article specifically in relation to ontology in following words:

Ontological consciousness creates the consciousness of existence... In-itself is the pre-ontological consciousness which represents the existence of I yet for-itself is another kind of consciousness which thinks about in-itself. Sartre defines existence as a relationship of in-itself and for-itself.

The herd has been thrown to existence and is not pre-defined for that reason there is a gap between in-itself and for-itself. (Adnan 209)

Gregor isolates himself from his family by shutting himself in his bedroom at night. In the wake of his transformation, his isolation increases his family cordons him off in his own room. He is clearly aware of his present state and family condition. He holds himself accountable for present state of affairs. He is keenly aware of the fact that he has become a burden though by no fault of his own because of which he feels extremely guilty. But one positive aspect in this transformation is that he achieves personal freedom and does away with hitherto imposed responsibilities and obligations. The transformation forces Gregor to confront the reality of being as truth which is the inexplicable predicament of his life.

Now this money was by no means enough to let the family live off the interest; the principal was enough to support the family for one year, or at most two, but that was all there was (Kafka 27).

Gregor Samsa under economical sufferings and due to monotony of his tiring routine has forced to restrict him to a mere animal self. "Gregor's humanity has defeated in his private life as much as in his working life" (Greenberg 21). He has reached at a stage when he sees only one possibility that is to continue his monotonous routine in order cling to his status of a loyal son. He had sacrificed his own being in order to justify his being-with-others. Yet *being-with others* does not cause the recognition of his being. Here, nothingness emerges in his existential anguish wherein he is unable to decide or to make a choice. He wants to remain in that state of herd yet his existential anguish reaches at peak, as he thought:

Oh God, what a grueling job I've picked! Day in, day out-on the road. The upset of doing business is much worse than the actual business in the home office, and, besides, I've got the torture of travelling, worrying about changing trains, eating miserable food at all hours, constantly seeing new faces, no relationship that last or get more intimate. To the devil with it all! (Kafka 4).

Despite this boredom, he wishes to continue to earn for his family but now it is too late for him as he has already transformed into an insect. He is already reduced to a state of nothing as he is nothing for others in his newly acquired state. But, "his metamorphosis is a path to the spiritual rather than the bestial" (Greenberg 29).

Caught in the world of practical existence, too many readers of Kafka fail to notice the metaphorical thrust of *The Metamorphosis*, which disturbs the static concepts we have to our environment. For many the work is an allegory, which links the simile or analogy, links the unknown to known. The story thus becomes psychological, sociological, or theological yet in real the story works to burst these categories in order to add a whole new dimension to human experience. Insofar as this realm cannot be reduced to familiar pattern it remains problematic and must be approached in its ongoing activity, for it remains constant only in this.

Many critics have striven to find autobiographical psychology in the story, but most look for idea of universal importance. Perhaps the most important point of *Metamorphosis* is the statement of the absurdity of human predicament, illustrated by scenes of man's entanglement in the perplexed state and demonstrating non-communication and isolation. William Emrich describes the plight of Samsa in these words,

The most gruesome aspect of Samsa's fate is not his metamorphosis but the blindness with which everybody treat this metamorphosis. His parents and his sister do not understand it. The self is what is absolutely alien, void, and nonexistent, not only in the world of the business but also in the world of the family (122).

To understand any work of Kafka requires basic familiarity with the ontological dilemma of nothingness from there emerges the concept of absurdity. That absurdity pictures a fortuitous universe which has no divine foundation, and which provides no meaning or purpose of man's existence. The awareness of such senselessness and absurdity in man's situation gives only an extreme sense of anguish, and that anguish is expressed in nearly Kafka's entire fictional world and especially in *The Metamorphosis*.

The unreal elements are introduced as soon as possible, and from then on are taken for granted. Once the reader accepts the picture of a man converted into a bug, all that follows seems natural, no matter how impossible it is. Kafka's visualization of a man turning noticeably into a bug erases any doubt in the mind of the viewer that the characters are really being transformed. In *The Metamorphosis*, there is an early challenge to nature and normalcy—Gregor's shattering awakening—but the author never retreat from that first premise of the unnatural.

Kafka gave the world a foretaste of the acute sense of absurdity which later writers expressed. Kafka sought to reveal constant encounter of being with absurd world that resulted in a state of bewilderment. Nothingness is another characteristic for which Kafka is known as there can be seen constant self insignificance that has been portrayed in his whole fictional world. The overwhelming forces are evident in *The Metamorphosis*, for Gregor's transformation is without explanation and unchangeable. None of the characters question its reality for a moment. Kafka assured the readers from the very beginning that it was not at all dream. The unexplained powers simply strike the Samsa household one night while all are asleep. Throughout the story the Samsa cling to the belief that there is some sort of misfortune that had cast its spell on their house.

Kafka writes of a pessimistic universe in which the normal patterns are distorted. Kafka's protagonist, Gregor is unable to decipher the existential puzzle put forth him in the shape of absurdity. In his invalid state he

feels guilt that his family must all work because of his condition. Because of his inadequacy, he is not able to sleep. He thought of revival of normal everyday life that has been left far away. He dreams that next time when door will be opened then everything will be perfectly all right and he will be able to take all household matters in his hands. Gregor's being is associated with his family and he is suffering from psychological trauma of nothingness when he feels his insignificant status within his family. Gregor tries to formulate authentic being yet he seems to be left in a hopeless position.

Gregor's basic transformation has already been completed before the story opens, and Kafka makes no effort to explain how or why, since the inexplicability of it is his main point. The opening sentence gives the very moment that Gregor first becomes aware of what has happened. Gregor's hard plated insect form is an expression of his isolation which, once made manifest, comes more and more absolute. His metamorphosis places him in an irredeemable condition which leads to his demise. There is futile and pointless effort and the impossibility of true communication. Gregor's existence becomes pointless, his struggle to retain his identity is futile, and his ability to communicate with others disintegrates throughout the story.

Gregor's situation changes from one page to the next and every move he makes depend how all the other characters are reacting to his condition. Gregor really longs for other to respond, rather than react, to his situation as this whole process deals with a small unit, the family, and its reaction to catastrophe. For a long time after that scene, Gregor discovers his other changed characteristics and newly acquired abilities. His appetite is totally changed, his sensitivities are lessened, and he experiments with his feelings and sticky feet when he needs their services. Kafka makes clear the degraded state in which Gregor now lives. Gregor is very conscious of what is happening to him. His first reaction is to deny the reality of his condition with weak optimism but this hope cannot alter his miserable plight in which he has been thrown. He does observe degeneration in himself, such as the hunger for garbage rather than for fresh food, he is powerless to correct. His locked-up existence creates a stench which is especially offensive to his sister, Grete, who cleans his room. Gregor is painfully aware of how repulsive he is. Gregor's condition affects the whole house-hold, even in physical arrangements.

Meanwhile, Gregor's change continues. Gregor entertains fantasies of caring for his dear sister, and more. He would like to keep her and her music looked up all to himself. He clings to hopes of someday rescuing the entire family from their plight that seemed not feasible. His fatal apple injury leads to his physical deterioration. Then his sister realized that the creature called Gregor can no longer be tolerated as part of the family; Gregor needs only to consent to his own end.

Gregor himself wants to disappear as he knows that his newly acquired being is becoming a burden for the rest of beings. He begins to fast and later on beetle carcass proves to be flat, dry, and empty. His physical transformation wrenches him from his humanity, victimizes him, and finally forces him to quit his being-in-the-world and end his existential relationship of being-with-one-another.

Herr Samsa after transformation is active in asserting his being that was suppressed in the presence of Gregor's being as Heidegger theorizes that being is formulated in relation with other being. In this case, Herr Samsa is dependent on Gregor for his living and leading a state of herd as making no authentic existence which he realizes after transformation. He starts taking decisions and trying to assert his existence in being-in-the world.

Michael P. Ryan established the link between Samsa and Samsara. "Samsara is this world of craving, lust, suffering, death rebirth, and disease." (133) Kafka has great affiliation with Schopenhauer and he had close link with Buddhist and Hindu Philosophy. Ryan proposes a hypothesis that Kafka might have consciously choose this name for his major character or his unconscious agencies might have played their role and, in this way, Samsa's spiritual side is visible. Samsara can be overcome by moksha (liberation) from maya (illusion). Maya captivates one mind by overwhelming desires and ambitions which Samsara has. He is worried about material problems which imprison him and keep him away from his spiritual self. Material worries limit him to a materialistic self that causes sufferings for him. He undergoes death in life and he transforms into an insect. Newly acquired state (rebirth as an insect) is the result of Karma (deeds) of previous self, according to Hindu philosophy. He embarks on a spiritual quest by abandoning material self as well as normal food. His priorities have been changed and he is not able to develop the taste of fresh food as he used to. His food contains, "old, half-rotten vegetables; bones left over from the evening meal, caked with congealed sauce; some raisin and almonds.." (Kafka 23). He does so to change his karams (deeds), and to break away from the maze of maya (illusionary self) in order to achieve that he was unable to have in previous self.

As compared to other stories, there is a more strong female character who is striving to assert his being after the sorry state of his brother. Kafka draws powerful characters that often challenge to social and cultural boundaries; in case of Grete, whole gender role is switched as she substitutes Gregor. The transformation of Gregor paved the way for Grete's maturity and her character becomes more powerful when Gregor had to depend on her for food. From there onwards, Kafka switches the role as generally perceived; as to what a man in general supposed to give the financial support and female is supposed to be at receiving end. The meaning of existence is lost as transformation snatches the economical superiority from Gregor and Grete's character can be seen in the formation of being (being-in-the-world in particular).

Gregor, as a genderless bug who has lost his identity as a human being, is in a state of *despair* and *dread* where his being has been concealed in the depths of *nothingness* and he is unable to perform any *authentic* act that matters to other beings then in this chaotic atmosphere Grete's character emerges who is in the process of *becoming*. As females don't have active role to play in the society so they are leading the life of herd but in that state of herd when chance is offered to Grete then she begins to evolve and starts defining her *being-with-one-another*. Kafka rejects male dominance by dehumanizing Gregor and label of *non-being* can be assigned to Gregor. It is his character that becomes insignificant within the story and bringing Grete more and more in the limelight. Gregor's family is reactivated when reliance on Gregor will no longer support them, and Grete comes through the experience all ready to blossom forth into womanhood. Grete is there to earn for the family, to take care of the insect body of Gregor and she is there to console the family at the same time.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The researcher analyzed that Kafka's fictional world is not merely a fantasy world which does not have any resemblance to the real world. Kafka's protagonist are real life heroes who are suffering different absurdities prevalent in the modern world as they are trying to answer these chaotic challenges with the will of an existential hero and in their journey they are confronted with different modes of nothingness. Researcher has tries to grasp the moments of nothingness in their journey to assert their being. It is quite difficult to analyze Kafka's short fiction due to his excessive use of figurative language that duplicates the meaning and no single interpretation will be sufficient.

Kafka's characters do their utmost to create their own *essence* and bear the anguish of their being existent without any firm grounds to initiate their trip towards resolution. They seem panic in meaningless and absurd outlook of their existence. They try to resolve the riddle of their existence but, in the end, like a patient, they themselves do not know what they have achieved. Their quest begins from *nothing* and ends also on *nothing*. Their lives present continuous effort on the part of modern man to achieve the realization of their *being* but hypocrisy and malice in the heart of higher officials (divine) do not give them permission to come out of the labyrinth of existential design. When they are near to solution then situation becomes more complicated and confused. None of his characters end their lives by realizing their *being-in-the-world*. They remain alien and indifferent to external world. Their existential and spiritual problems have crossed the optimum level of threshold and they are compelled to swallow the *existential anguish*, which leads them to understand the dilemma of their predestined *thrown*.

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