The Trial by Kafka: in the light of absurdism and existentialism

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Kafka is an absurdist writer. All of the practitioners in this field have shown through their works the corrupted sides of this society and degenerated nature of human beings in an absurd manner. The existence and reality seems to be absurd. Kafka has depicted the follies of this society, entire system of law and order and the helpless condition of man in his novel, The Trial. In this article I have tried to explore the novel in the light of absurdism and existentialism.

Key words: absurdism, existentialism, nonsense.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘Kafkaesque’ has come to be used to describe what are perceived as typically or even uniquely modern traumas: existential alienation, isolation insecurity the labyrinth of state bureaucracy, the corrupt or whimsical abuse of totalitarian power, the impenetrable tangle of legal systems, the knock on the door in the middle of the night or, in Joseph K.’s case, just before breakfast. The Trial is the popular absurdist and existentialist novel by him.

Sartre defines absurdity as that which is meaningless. Man’s existence is absurd because his contingency finds no eternal justification. There is no reason for either the world or himself to exist. He chooses his values, gives foundation to values by recognising them as such, but there is no proof of the validity of the values he chooses. This also renders all our projects meaningless. Sartre is not saying that reason is unimportant but he is pointing out that There is only intuitive knowledge and that our life is guided by subjective passion rather than by rationalism. But it is Camus who emphasized the primacy of absurdity most. He too agrees that there is no reason for either the world or the individual to exist. This makes the very existence of world itself a source of dead. We can feel the world, Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine. Absurdity therefore, is the only bond between the world and man. Existence defies this awareness of absurdity. Camus says that it is not a question of rational or irrational; the world is merely unreasonable and reason sets man against the world. Man needs clarity, but the world has none to offer. This is exactly the situation in Kafka’s The Trial. The novel opens with: Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K. for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning. We never learn why he was arrested and throughout the novel we are presented with a bewildering tangle of advocates, judges, and witnesses, none of whose actions make sense. It is the perfect picture of an absurd, irrational world.

Existentialism thus sees human life as absurd, without
from the earth. The Law is no longer understood, life is
There is no more divine norm, for God has turned away
way out of this stalemate? How could he make a choice?
life, his sleep. He is the culprit and the judge. What is the
he has not been summoned. This anguish dominates his
and robbed him; and he goes back to the court although
he chooses, he still sins and is forced to punish himself.
He seems to be on the side of his executioners, as he is
sociality. He is torn by conflicting choices. No matter what
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had driven him into a situation where he can only retreat
analysis, an ambivalent acknowledgement that his father
apparent to be an innate part of the human condition, but
it is undefined, unquantifiable. A series of unreliable and
at times ludicrous mentors, who contradict themselves
and each other, offer him dubious guidance on his quest-
the uncle, the advocate, the painter, the priest; his hopes
are invested in elusive and sporadic female figures who
do not advance his cause at the slightest —Fraulein
Burstner, the washerwoman at the court, Leni. The
atmosphere of the court chambers, of any of the legal
institutions, is oppressive, claustrophobic, suffocating;
Kafka spoke of experiencing feelings of nausea like 'a
seasickness on dry land' - a panic loss of psychic
equilibrium that is expressed most vividly towards the end
of chapter three when the corridor of the court chambers
pitches and heaves under Joseph K. like a ship in a
storm.
There are innumerable elements in the narrative that
have the inexplicable sequence (or lack of sequence) of a
dream, the lurching perspectives of a nightmare. Actually,
Kafka's relationship with his father haunts much of his
writings. In the Letters to my Father, written when he was
thirty-six, he even states All my writing was about you.
The letter appears to be an attempt at cathartic self-
analysis, an ambivalent acknowledgement that his father
had driven him into a situation where he can only retreat
into the isolation of the imaginative artist. Instead of
stability encouragement and guidance, his father, who
ruled the world from his armchair, had used abuse,
threat, sarcasm and mockery to rob his son of all security
and self-confidence.
While possessed of a profound desire to live in a
community, K. stands on the border between solitude and
sociality. He is torn by conflicting choices. No matter what
he chooses, he still sins and is forced to punish himself.
He seems to be on the side of his executioners, as he is
overcome by pity for the inspectors who have arrested
and robbed him; and he goes back to the court although
he has not been summoned. This anguish dominates his
life, his sleep. He is the culprit and the judge. What is the
way out of this stalemate? How could he make a choice?
There is no more divine norm, for God has turned away
from the earth. The Law is no longer understood, life is
absurd, and Joseph K., like Camus's The Stranger, has
the experience of total superfluousness. He regards his
arrest as a "ridiculous nothingness" (16). He has a vague
feeling of contingency and looks for judges to justify his
existence. He does not possess the strength to stand up
and to assume a solitude which frightens him. He would
like to be integrated into a hierarchy. These are vain
hopes, for the judges he meets are subordinate, corrupt
judges.
In The Trial and in The Stranger the absurdity of Law
has been depicted in a serious manner. In Bengali,
Sukumar Ray has shown us the same thing in his story
Ha Ja Ba Ra La in a funny way. Here the judge, the
lawyer, witnesses are reduced to sub-human entity. The
character of Higi Bij Bij is the spokesperson of Ray in this
story. Hiji Bij Bij comments about the judicial system as
that somebody complaints and he has a lawyer, the other
person is the accused one he also has a lawyer. And on
both sides there are ten witnesses! The judge goes on
sleeping sitting on his chair. So in a comic manner
Sukumar Ray satirises the system of Law. He actually
shows us the hollowness of this system. Whatever the
people speak in the court is absolutely nonsense.
Meursault, Camus's protagonist in The Stranger is a
more confident person than Joseph K.. He knows his
crime and he knows the reason for his summons to
the court but through the course of his trail he ends up
getting punished for his 'lack of emotions' after his
mother's death rather than for the murder he has
actually committed. Here, a person totally in control of
his emotions, who has his own clarity of thought for all
his actions and inactions including his 'lack' of emotion
for his mother, finally prefers to be executed rather
than accept The Truth as it is perceived and accepted
by the world. Meursault's analysis of the self and the
world as an individual living in an absurd world is
convincing indeed. Compared to Kafka's Joseph K,
Meursault is clearer about his life, his emotions, the
reason he faces the execution, his options, and finally
the reason why he has to die.
The triumph of the two contrasting existentialist
protagonists of the novels is that they refuse to cling
to any illusions to save their own lives or to escape
from their agony and suffering. Their trial and
execution is a mirror Kafka and Camus held out to the
ugly dark world meaningless we all inhabit and cannot
escape. Could Joseph have been a little compromising
and accepted the truth as served by the system? If he
did, would he have been saved from the claws of
death? If he did, it may not have been valiant enough
to continue living. Meursault's predicament of being
punished for being emotionless rather than for the
murder he committed is an example of the absurdity of
life.
Though Camus has given the idea of absurdity, Kafka has already laid the foundation for this eternal school of thought. Absurdist worldwide would know that there perhaps was never a solution for the two protagonists but to accept the Truth as forced down their throats by an unfeeling system. The system has not changed much, and is as absurd as it was during the time of Kafka, or during the terror filled days Holocaust victims spent at Mauthausen or Auschwitz. The players may have changed, but the essence has remained the same, and shall continue to be. It certainly is an absurd world. The being that comes to this world remains a stranger until he or she meets their trials, ultimately ceasing to exist.

The Trial can be read as highlighting a world that has lost its spirituality, where man has become an abstract being without fervour. The Law sometimes issues warnings to this impoverished humanity, but such calls are never heeded. And so, one Sunday morning when he awakens, a man finds a blade lodged in the back of his neck, the blade of the Law. He pulls it out, and heedless of God, he is reassured and happy when he joins his friends in the familiar world of the Sunday stroll. The divine Law is unknown and the court certainly does not possess the key. Therefore any moral judgement becomes both true and vain, for it is true only because its truth is human and relative. That is why the court which summons Joseph K. is made up of subordinate, corrupt judges. The Supreme Court is inaccessible. When life is not related to an absolute standard, it becomes superfluous, absurd, and sin may be the acceptance of this unjustifiable life since the supreme judges cannot be touched. Religion, born of man's existential anguish, was meant to be the highest manifestation of the human spirit wondering about its destiny. But it has become degraded and obsolete. One must therefore rediscover this forgotten divinity.

The cathedral is empty, desperately empty and dark. It is no longer a place for meditation; it is an historical monument which Joseph K. visits. The priest does not preach from the main pulpit but is satisfied with the small pulpit and chooses for his sermon a most unusual hour when the building is not profaned by a crowd who pay only lip service to faith. In the pulpit and at the altar:

*There was no longer a Moses or Aaron.*
*The divine service was carried on*
*Like any other thing Which, following the course of the world is dry and withered with age.* (67)

Nietzsche, who murdered God, held up to man a new ideal, the superman who replaced God; the eternal return replaced eternal happiness. Kafka took only human weakness – for, according to one of Kafka’s aphorisms, we not only “sinned when we ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the fruit of the tree of life” (The Diary of Kafka 23). He seems both to deny and to affirm, not daring to make a choice; he lives in anguish.

Mr. K was under arrest on his 30th birthday. His first trial was in a secret “cabinet.” The trial procedure never seemed to be end. Mr. K could not even know what his accused name was. And he was executed immediately in a secret way. From the point of view of criminal law on this case nowadays, it was obviously not due process of law. Due process of law, means that law should rule the whole procedure. The procedure should be fair and reasonable. The political system is limited by this standard. In this way, the fact finding and dignity of individual could be maintained. The punishment should be conducted in a just way. The litigation rights which are protected by the constitution could be put into practice when the procurator and advocate would be on the fair stage.

The procedure of the court in the novel *The Trial* was very secretive. Mr. K tried hard to discover what his accused name was. However, in the end he still could not know it. The uncertainty of the trial opposes the principle of “due process of law.” Justice would not exist. “The Court” was settled in a dark corrupt cabinet. Kafka tried to protest the vagaries and inefficiencies of the court. The symbolization can be seen throughout the novel. In the first interrogation, K said, *there can be no doubt that behind all the actions of this court of justice, that is to say in my case, behind my arrest and today’s interrogation, there is a great organization at work. An organization which not only employs corrupt wardens, stupid Inspectors, and Examining Magistrates of whom the best that can be said is that they recognize their own limitations, but also has at its disposal a judicial hierarchy of high, indeed of the highest rank, with an indispensable and numerous retinue of servants, clerks, police, and other assistants, perhaps even hangmen, I do not shrink from that word. And the significance of this great organization, gentlemen? It consists in this, that innocent persons are accused of guilt, and senseless proceedings are put in motion against them, mostly without effect, it is true, as in my own case.*

When K. was with Leni, Leni answered K’s question. She said, *you can’t put up a resistance against this Court, you must admit your fault. Make your confession at the first chance you get. Until you do that, there’s no possibility of getting out of their clutches, none at all.*

In the church, the priest told K, *the court makes no claims upon you. It receives you when you come and it relinquishes you when you go.* The painter, Titorelli sat down again on his chair and said half in jest, half in
Furthermore, his guilt feeling is aggravated when he from the rest therefore feels guilty over his apartness. The individual who stands apart vaguely within him an infinitely rich and complex world unhappy over his absurd work at the bank, while he feels he lives on the periphery of society, misunderstood, human logic(151).

Swander says, he is his struggle has recourse to all operations of an all-too-

end, and there is no way out for him other than death. As Swander says, he is such a model of a utilitarian world that he rebels against the world of authentic being and in his struggle has recourse to all operations of an all-too-human logic(151).

Joseph K. follows set paths only superficially. In truth, he lives on the periphery of society, misunderstood, unhappy over his absurd work at the bank, while he feels vaguely within him an infinitely rich and complex world that causes him anguish. The individual who stands apart from the rest therefore feels guilty over his apartness. Furthermore, his guilt feeling is aggravated when he wishes to reveal his singularity, for he must affirm it against the established order. To have an awareness of the self, to be oneself and to give up the impersonal life which men lead, seems to be the ethical thrust of the novel. Joseph K. dies because he is protected neither from on high nor from behind, neither by God nor by an existence established on the deep foundations of the authentic being. His life is therefore no longer based on the absolute. Faith is dead; men have killed it. Man is nothing more than a wreck. He must find his reason for being in himself, at the very core of his existence, which intellect has reduced to the condition of an abstract category. He must rediscover the meaning of life.

Between 1917 and 1919, a few years before his death, Kafka jotted down over a hundred aphorisms. He evidently attached more importance to them than to his other work, for he went to the unusual pains of copying them out on separate slips of paper and numbering them. They are not only remarkable in themselves, but throw a great deal of light on The Trial. A particularly insightful piece is his comment on the law of the world and our confusion in it:

He is thirsty, and cut off from a spring by a mere clump of trees. But he is divided against himself: one part overlooks the whole, sees that he is standing here and that the spring is just beside him; but another part notices nothing, has at most a divination that the first part sees all. But as he notices nothing he cannot drink. (Diaries 1914-1923, p. 235)

In the novel of The Trial by Franz Kafka, we found the greatest part would not be the critics of justice, but the fallacy of the judicial system. It alerts us to the importance of a reasonable system. If there’s no reasonable judicial system, people might be killed at a man’s will in anytime.

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