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Interpreting Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" through the Prism of Marxist Theory

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KEYWORDS

Bourgeoisie, Capitalism, Proletariat, Base and Superstructure, Imperialism, Isolation, Indebtedness, Absurdity, Alienation, Existential anxiety, Domination, Abandonment, Overt and Covert content, Reification, Kafkaesque.

ABSTRACT

The motive of this paper is to demonstrate how capitalism affects the life and career of an individual in this materialistic world. It results in the worker's complete detachment and emotional alienation towards his /her work. Materialism plays a vital role in today's modern era, so people try to explore more and more ways to earn money. The consequence of this is, that human beings are turning into working commodities (mere tools). In this light, Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" shows the alienation and existential anxiety of the proletariat in the entire capitalist system. It pays attention to the conflict between dominant and oppressed sections of society.

Introduction

Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German philosopher and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), a German sociologist found this school of thought jointly. They together wrote the book "Communist Manifesto" in 1848.¹

Marxism is a social, political and economic theory which focuses on the conflict between social classes, specifically between the bourgeoisie or capitalism and the proletariat or working class. According to Marx the power relationship between capitalist and the working class creates class conflict in a society. He believed that class distinction in society is the root cause of this struggle, so society should be classless. For example – replacing private ownership with co-operative ownership. Karl Marx wrote:

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle." ("The Communist Manifesto")²

Marxism assumes that all social phenomena- including social relations, political institutions, legal systems, cultural systems and ideologies are influenced by the structure of economic organization or mode of production. The economic system and these social relations create a Base and Superstructure. The term 'base' refers to where we stand economically, where the bourgeoisie exploits the proletariat. Superstructure refers to other factors such as religion, politics, philosophy, art, etc. Base shapes the superstructure and superstructure maintains the base.

(Base- the material means of production, distribution and exchange) (Superstructure-culture world of ideas, art, religion, language, education) Thus, It is a materialistic approach to evaluate or read a work of art. It is more concerned with the social and political elements of a work than its aesthetic value. Marxist theory can be applied to literature by analyzing the social, economic and political elements such as class division, class struggle, and oppression. It is opposite to visionary or utopian ideology which believes in the survival of an ideal world. As Marx said, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it."³

While other philosophers tried to understand the world, Marxists tried to change it. According to Marx, the progress of a society depends on the conflict between opposing forces. It is this conflict that leads to the transformation. The capitalists exploit and oppress the proletariat; therefore it will lead to proletarians' revolution.

According to Marxism, the context of a literary work is associated to the social class and status of the writer. It explains the nature of a work of art in terms of the social and cultural era which produces it. Marxists say

that a writer's class and its prevailing ideologies have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class.

Objectives of Marxism

The chief objective of Marxist theory is to create a society which is free from distinctions of social class that is established on the basis of mutual partnership of the modes of production, bifurcation and interchange.

- To evaluate a work of art from an economical perspective.
- To show socio-economical analysis of a work of art, class relation and social conflict in a work of art.
- To show History as a class struggle, competition for economic, social and political advantage.⁴
- Marxism proposed that there should be common possession and partnership of the resources of production. The means of production will be owned and controlled by the proletariat. According to Marx, this will be the next necessary step in the progress of society.

In this way, Marxism shows that the oppression of one section of society by another creates alienation and fragmentation in society. It can be seen in modern writings. Earlier we have conventional features of the drama and fiction– chronological time, proper beginning and ending, mental and emotional characterization, entangled plot and fixed narrative point of view. Likewise, the disintegrated and absurd structure of plays and novels used by 20th century authors like Kafka and Beckett are the examples of contradictions and conflicts in capitalist society.

There are many works written by 20th century writers in which we can see the traces of Marxism. I would like to recite the examples of two or three major works in this stream.

- In African literature, we can take the example of "Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad. "Heart of Darkness" highlights the class struggles between The Company, its workers and the Congo natives. The struggle between the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat, the powerful versus the poor. Kurtz's primary reason for traveling to Africa for the Company itself. He has become the brutal embodiment of capitalism. He started ivory trade there. The natives didn't get any kind of profit from the ivory trade they collect the ivory for their master 'Kurtz' sake, the newest member of the bourgeoisie. Kurtz's actions reflect that most of the Europeans were taking brutal advantage of the continent of Africa at that time. The Europeans were portrayed as gods before the Congo natives. It can be seen in their relationship with Kurt. Conrad shows that the White men are not going to take

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responsibility for their actions.

According to Marxism, Kurtz was the horror of capitalism and imperialism.

- In English literature, we have Virginia Woolf, she discusses Writing as a means of controlling Ideology in her famous work "A Room of One's Own". She shows the struggles and inequalities between men and women in a patriarchal society. She talks about financial independence. According to Virginia Woolf, women will break the cycle of oppression by writing their own stories and defining themselves as human, intelligent, equal, rational etc.
- In Indian literature, we can see in Mulkraj Anand's short story "The Barber's Trade Union". In this story, we find the themes of class, appearance, alienation, arrogance, control and freedom. Mulkraj Anand specifically focuses on the theme of class conflict between the Upper class and Lower class. Chandu, the protagonist is considered to be a lower-class boy. He is judged on the basis of his profession that both he and his father are barbers. Chandu is alienated in the sense of caste, creed and profession. He doesn't have the right to wear clothes as he wants. Upper-class people insult Chandu again and again, and then finally his struggle leads to the revolution. He decides to teach them a lesson.

Instead of going to the houses of upper-class people, Chandu starts going to the town to earn money with his fellow barbers. The result is that the landlords and Sahukar look ugly and become the subject of laughter. Chandu succeeds in his plan of non-cooperation. Thus Chandu and his fellow launch a union named "Rajkot District Barber Brothers, Hairdressing and Shaving Saloon". The revolt of Chandu, a low caste boy or a working-class boy is the victory of justice, morality and self-respect.

Now I come to my topic which belongs to German literature "The Metamorphosis". "The Metamorphosis" is a novella written by German writer Franz Kafka. He was born in 1883 in Prague. He is one of the major figures of the 20th century. He was suffering from tuberculosis and died in 1924. His friend

Max Brod published his work posthumously, which include – "Das Urteil" (The Judgement, 1913), "Brief an den Vater" (Letters to His Father, 1919), "Der Prozess" (The Trial, 1925).⁵ His writings are reflections of the cruelty of the family, the coldness of bureaucracy and the misery of cities. In his writings, we find the feelings of isolation, indebtedness, absurdity, alienation, existential anxiety, and the domination of his father Hermann Kafka, a huge, selfish and overbearing businessman. Kafka deals with the isolated protagonists facing bizarre predicaments.

Alike his other works, "The Metamorphosis" was also published posthumously. It was originally written in the German language in 1912 and first published in 1915. The original title of the novella is "Die Verwandlung". While writing "The Metamorphosis" Kafka told his fiancée Felice Bauer that he was writing a story "that came to me in my misery lying in bed and now was haunting me."

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Metamorphosis means "the action or process of changing in form, shape or substance; transformation by supernatural means."⁶

Gregor Samsa, bread owner of the family, is the protagonist of the story. He is a traveling salesman. One morning he woke up from a troubled dream and found himself transformed into a monstrous vermin. In the original story Kafka has used the words 'Ungeheueres Ungeziefer' for that vermin. Ungeheueres refers to the mortal being who has no value in the family. Ungeziefer means the dirty beast inapt for renunciation, the being without a place in God's command. Therefore, being a disgusting bug, it stands for frustration and destruction. The present story shows his struggle to adjust to this new condition.

"The Metamorphosis" is divided into three sections. First section deals with Gregor's transformation into a vermin and the reaction of his family towards his transformation. They are shocked and

repulsed to see him but they aren't concerned with the fact that what had happened with Gregor. The second section shows that both Gregor and his family try to adjust to this new situation. Gregor remains confined to his room. Whenever Gregor tries to come out of his room, his father attacks him. The last section of the story depicts that after realizing that his family doesn't like him and they take him as burden and disgust, Gregor dies. The family celebrates his death with an outing to the country.

Reviews

Zahra Barfi and Fatemeh Aziz Mohammadi analyze "The Metamorphosis" from the psychological perspective in the article 'A Study of Kafka's The Metamorphosis in the light of Freudian Psychological Theory'. They follow Freud's premise in the interpretation of a dream. According to them "The Metamorphosis" is the representation of Gregor's unconscious mind. Freud defined the unconscious world as a world in which our suppressed wills, feelings, horrors and conflicts are hold. Zahra Barfi and Fatehmeh say that Gregor Samsa in "The Metamorphosis" is the representation of Kafka himself. It is the depiction of Gregor's inner world. They also find traces of the Oedipus complex in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis".

Next, we have Michael Ryan who has written the article 'Samsa and Samsara: Suffering, Death and Rebirth in The Metamorphosis'. It points out the influence of Eastern philosophy on Kafka. The article discusses that the family name 'Samsa' in "The Metamorphosis" is inspired by Sanskrit term 'Samsara'. This term refers to the cycle of death, suffering and rebirth. Samsara is the physical or material sphere of greed, longing, desire, sorrows, suffering, end of life and the new beginning or rebirth. Various kinds of sufferings in the life of Kafka are very well documented in this article. Kafka suffered mentally and physically throughout his life. His sufferings and despair might be the reason for his poignant narratives.

Zeynep Zafer wrote the article "The Tragedy of Modern Individual in Society: A Kafkaesque view". It discusses "The Metamorphosis" as a projection of the situation of modern people. This story is the liberation of a man by turning into a bug metaphorically but becoming aware of his existence in reality. "The Metamorphosis" presents how modern life, society and job make individuals a part of the herd, and how they are externalized when they prefer not to be. Kafka shows us the reality of unperceived alienation which happens to everyone by an unrealistic metamorphosis.

Study of "The Metamorphosis" from Marxist's Perspective

Marxism makes classification between the Overt (manifest/surface) and Covert (latent/hidden) content of a literary work and then connect the Covert subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle, the progress of society through various historical stages, the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism, revolution of the working class against the oppression of capitalist.⁷

Marx's philosophy is depicted throughout the story. It contains the chief element of Marxism, materialistic culture and its effect on community as well as on individuals. The consequence of this kind of class struggle can be seen in Gregor's premature and miserable death.

Thus, the conflict, struggle and transformation in "The Metamorphosis" can be read as the struggle of class between the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat. In this story, we find so many instances of Marxism. It shows the proletariat's struggle for existence in a society that destroys him step by step. It also exposes the emotionless relationship caused by capitalism.

Gregor is exhausted while providing financial support to his insensitive family and becomes a non-entity. His boss disapproved him just like an exchangeable tool in a device. Gregor was already confined by his work and his father's dues, now gets trapped by an

insect. He worked very hard to fulfill the ultimatum of employment and put himself in a miserable condition in which he couldn't work anymore.

1. Manager, the bourgeoisie V/s Gregor, the proletariat

At the very beginning of the book, Kafka portrays the characters and their economic classes. Gregor Samsa, the central character, is the representative of the working class and his Manager symbolizes the middle class or capitalist. The manager comes to Gregor's house when he gets late for the office. Being a capitalist, the manager has no time and labor of his own but he has enough time to come to Gregor's house just to rebuke him for being late. The manager comes to tell that Gregor's boss doubts him of embezzlement. As he says—

"The head of the firm did suggest to me this morning a possible explanation for your tardiness it concerned the cash payments recently entrusted to you and your job is not the most secure."⁸

Then Kafka writes that —

"Why was only Gregor condemned to work for a firm where at the slightest omission they immediately suspected the worst?"⁹

The manager is depicted as careless, unsympathetic and demanding. The difference emerges between them when Gregor is transformed into an insect which makes him unable to work. It displays the insensitive and dehumanizing framework of social classes. The manager, upon seeing the transformed Gregor, leaves the apartment. Gregor tries to communicate with both his family and manager but he remains incomprehensible. No one understands his language and his condition. It also shows class discrimination. As Kafka writes —

"Gregor had wanted to answer in detail and to explain everything but, given the circumstances, confined himself to saying, "yes, yes, thanks... I'm just getting up".¹⁰

This shows the inability of the proletariat to explain themselves. They remain unheard or subaltern in the world of capitalism. Gregor can hear the words of others but he is not able to respond them.

Further, Gregor expresses his feelings that the manager, "sits on the desk and talks down from the heights to the employees."¹¹ It shows his superiority over the working class. After all this Gregor doesn't think about his condition, he only says, "I'm under so many obligations to the head of the firm."¹² It means capitalism has made them think only about the bourgeoisie. In a way, along with their bodies, the bourgeoisie has right on the minds of the proletariat.

After all these Gregor "tormented by self-reproaches and worry, he began to crawl, crawled over everything".¹³ It is not his mistake that he has transformed into a bug, but this is how the bourgeoisie makes the proletariat feel worthless and guilty.

2. Gregor V/s His Family

The attachment of the Samsa family with Gregor is only economical. The relationship between Gregor and his family is shown the emotionless relationship caused by capitalism. We are never told why he has transformed or whether he deserves it. It just happens. Only economic discussions are concerned in the family. Even Gregor's chief concern after his transformation is that he will lose his job. Instead of his transformation, he keeps thinking about his job, about getting late for the office.

Gregor is not satisfied with his job rather he finds it disgusting. He says that he would have quit his job if his parents and sister don't depend on his income. While thinking about his life, he expresses his opinion about his job as a traveling salesman, "Day in, day out — on the road...I've got the torture of traveling, worrying about changing trains, eating miserable foods at all hours."¹⁴ The vocabulary he has used to describe his work, 'torture', 'worrying', 'miserable' shows his dissatisfaction and detachment towards his job. But as a proletarian, Gregor doesn't have any other option than to work monotonously. Because he belongs to a working-class

society who does not have any resource of production of his own, has to sell his labor to earn livelihood.

His family loved him only because he was the bread owner of the family but there is no emotional bonding between them. As Kafka writes —

"They had become quite accustomed to it, both the family and Gregor as well. They took the money with thanks and he happily surrendered it, but special warmth was no longer present."¹⁵

Gregor becomes a liability when he isn't able to work and loses his value in the family. He is neglected by his family. His mother and sister gradually start removing the things, which he loves, from his room. His room is used for storage of waste material.

"They were clearing out his room, depriving him of everything that he loved."¹⁶

Gregor's father represents the bourgeoisie and being a bourgeoisie his attachments to his son is only for money. He treats Gregor very badly after his transformation. He hurts him many times by throwing cane, fruits, bundles of newspapers. There is a description in the story—

".....the apple remained imbedded in his flesh as a visible souvenir since no one dared to remove it...seemed to have reminded even his father that Gregor was a member of his family, in spite of his present pathetic and repulsive shape, who could not be treated as an enemy, that, on the contrary, it was the commandment of family duty to swallow their disgust and endure him, endure him and nothing new."¹⁷

This incident can be compared to the Bonded labor (Bandhua majdoor). In bonded labor ship, the bourgeoisie inscribes a kind of souvenir/mark on the body of the proletariat. And, this mark shows the class discrimination along with the miserable condition of proletariat.

As Gregor was not able to take food on his own, he is relying on the endowment of his family. Here we find the description of his food,

"...half -rotten vegetables, bones leftover from the evening meal..., a piece of cheese which two days before Gregor had declared inedible...."¹⁸

It shows that proletarians are forced to accept the things which are provided by the bourgeoisie. They don't have choices of their own. And finally after Gregor's death, instead of mourning, the family celebrates his death by an outing to the country. Now they decide to move to a smaller apartment to save money. They don't miss Gregor after his death, rather they plan their future savings. The economical and material approach superseded the emotional attachment in the family.

3. Abandonment of Gregor being a Proletariat

"The Metamorphosis" depicts the stark reality of materialistic world where a worker is abandoned by his manager and family members after turning out financially incapable. Gregor's transformation shows any kind of inability to work. After losing his worth as a worker, his manager, his family, even his own life abandons him and leaves for a miserable death.

The first to abandon Gregor is the manager, the bourgeoisie. According to Marx and Engels, the bourgeoisie, "has resolved personal work into exchange value".¹⁹ As soon as the manager sees Gregor in his transformed state, he realizes that Gregor is no longer beneficial to him and he abandons him. To the capitalist, an employee's value is no more than his toil. That's why, Gregor becomes worthless for them. The manager leaves the apartment without indicating care for his employee Gregor.

When Gregor is not able to provide the economical support to his family, they abandon him. Marx and Engels stated that — "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation into a mere money situation".²⁰

When Gregor becomes unable to support his family financially, his

relationship with them breaks. His father treats him very harshly. When his father sees him the first time after transformation, he "clenched his fists, as if to drive Gregor back into his room."²¹ And, one day he attacks by throwing apple.

Although not as harsh as his father but eventually his mother and his sister also cut him off. Grete, his sister says to her father, "It has to go", "we have to try to get rid of it".²² And the consequences of all these is Gregor's death.

This breakdown of the relationships shows that their relations were based only on money.

4. Alienation of workers

According to Marxism, capitalism alienates workers from society as well as from themselves. It focuses only on profit and treats the workers as functioning objects, thus gradually they become de-skilled or alienated. In "The Metamorphosis" we see that the prominent outcome of Gregor's transformation is the emotional gap between Gregor and the people around him. Gregor's transformation has made him bodily and psychologically detached from his family and acquaintances.

Other than his family, no close friends or intimate relationship is mentioned in the novella. In fact, the alienation caused by Gregor's metamorphosis can be seen as an extension of the alienation he already felt as a person. Gregor's transformation expresses the alienation effects of modern society.

Kafka's choice of words such as collapse, plunged, despair, solemn, congealed, suffocation, darkness, imprisonment, petrified, nostalgia, condemned, senseless, execution portray the theme of alienation and isolation.

5. Reification

Reification is a term used by Marx to describe the way in which people are turned into commodities. So, here, in this story, we find many examples of Reification. At the very beginning of the story, Kafka compares Gregor's back to armor plate, as he says—

"He was lying on his back as hard as armor plate."²³ Then Gregor is being described by the manager that —

"He was only a tool of boss, without brains or backbone."²⁴

And then, Gregor's sister uses the pronoun 'it' for him. She says to her father- "We have to try to get rid of it."

"It has to go."²⁵ In this way, all these examples show Gregor's condition being transformed from a person into a thing.

Conclusion

According to Marxist literary theory author's writings are the reflection of his/her beliefs, values and social class. The author is influenced by their environment. It means social class and status of the author is related to the context of a work of art. Thus, Kafka's personal and social life has a great influence on "The Metamorphosis".

The figure of Kafka's father overshadows his work as well as his existence. The dominating nature of his father had a significant influence on Kafka's writing. The psychological struggle with his father is explicitly presented in Kafka's story "Das Urteil" (The Judgment, 1913). His relationship with his father is evident in his "Letters to His Father" in which he complains of being profoundly affected by his father's authoritarian and demanding character. His father, Hermann Kafka is described as "huge, selfish, overbearing businessman" by Kafka's biographer Stanley Corn gold. In his "Letters to His Father", he wrote that—

"My writing was about you; in it; I merely lamented what I was unable to lament at your breast."²⁶

When Kafka wrote "The Metamorphosis", the situation of his own life resembled Gregor Samsa's, just before his transformation. This is disclosed by his letters

to his friend Max Brod on oct8,1912. Besides his work in the Insurance office which was hateful enough, Kafka also had to take additional duties in the factory belonging to his father. Now all his

free time of writing was gone. He hated his family in these last months of 1912. His family drove him to despair. He knew very well that it was fear of his father and his guilt feelings which delivered him into this slavery. At that time he was quite close to committing suicide.

Being a Jew, Kafka was alienated in the German society in Prague, but as a contemporary acumen, he was also suffering from isolation among Jewish people. He revolted against the autocratic organization and corrupting modules. Kafka's rebellion to the conventional social structure became evident when he proclaimed himself as an atheist.

Thus, the cause of Kafka's anguish is perpetual alienation from true communication with people, including the friends, his beloved, his family members, the workplace and the community he lived in. In this way, social isolation and rootlessness contributed to Kafka's personal unhappiness as well as his writings apart from all these the novella also deals with the themes of Absurdity, Kafkaesque, existential anxiety, guilt, physical and psychological brutality, mystical transformation, the feeling of senselessness and helplessness.

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