

Franz Kafka's *America*: A Saga of Social Sufferings

Dr. Ajoy Batta
Assistant Professor
Post Graduate Department of English
Patel Memorial National College
Rajpura (Punjab)

ABSTRACT: Franz Kafka a Prague born writer did not write for fame. He wrote for himself and this can be the reason that his major works are unfinished, and were published after his death. Kafka requested Max Brod, his close friend to demolish the manuscripts of his writings. Brod did not carry out his friend's wish to burn his unpublished works and served humanity by publishing Kafka's literary remains. Only fifty six days after Kafka's death, Brod signed an agreement with the publisher *Die Schmiede* which committed him to produce important posthumous publications of *The Trial (Der Prozess, 1925)*, *The Castle (Das Schloß, 1926)*, and *America (Der Verschollene, 1927)*. All of the previously unprinted shorter pieces were published under the title *The Great Wall of China (Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer)* in 1931. His posthumous works brought him fame not only in Germany, but in Europe as well. By 1946 Kafka's works had a great effect abroad, and especially in translation. Apart from Max Brod who was the first commentator and publisher of the first Franz Kafka biography, we have Edwin and Willa Muir, principle English translators of Kafka's works that were published by Alfred A. Knopf. Kafka is among writers that are difficult to understand. Leading studies of Kafka's fictions generally present his works as an engagement with absurdity, element of metaphysical, or the resultant of his legal profession and, in the course failing to record his fictions particularly *America* as a saga of human sufferings that forms an important factor of his fictions. In order to achieve a newer perspective in Kafka's writing, and to understand his fictions in a better way, the present research paper endeavors to mark out Kafka's *America* as a saga of social sufferings.

Franz Kafka's *America*: A Saga of Social Sufferings

Dr. Ajoy Batta
Assistant Professor
Post Graduate Department of English
Patel Memorial National College
Rajpura (Punjab)

Kafka started the novel during 1911-1912 and continued to work on it in the autumn of 1914. He decided to publish the opening chapter of this novel "The Stoker" separately in the year 1913. "The Stoker" appeared as part of a new magazine, *Der Jungste Tag (Judgment Day)* in May 1913. The simple story of "The Stoker" tells the arrival of Karl Rossmann to New York, where he meets a stoker and protects him against a shipmate and finally meets his uncle.

This full length unfinished novel published posthumously as *America* by his friend, Max Brod, in the year 1927, with a change of title from *Der Verschollene* to *America*. Brod, not only change the title, but also made correction of the spellings of "Oklahama" to "Oklahoma." In the Postscript of the novel, Brod admits:

Franz Kafka's manuscript bears no title. In conversation he used to refer this book as his 'American novel', but later he called it simply *The Stoker*, after the title of the first chapter, which had appeared separately (1913). He worked as it with unending delight, mostly in the evenings and late into the nights; the pages show amazingly few corrections and deletions. Kafka knew quite well, and discussed the fact, that this novel was more optimistic and 'lighter' in mood than his other writings. . . .

Kafka broke off his work on this novel with unexpected suddenness. It remained unfinished. From what he told me I know that the incomplete chapter about The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma . . . was intended to be the concluding chapter of the work and should end on a note of reconciliation. . . .

The parts of the narrative immediately preceding this chapter are also incomplete. Two large fragments, describing Karl's service with Brunelda, are extant, but do not fill up the gaps. . . . Only the first six chapters were divided and given titles by Kafka . . . (Brod, "Postscript" 255-256).

America defines the struggle of sixteen-year-old boy Karl Rossmann as he travels through an unknown territory and arrives in New York harbor on board a big liner because a maidservant, Johanna, had seduced him, got herself pregnant, and as a result he is loaded to

America by his parents. In the long opening paragraph of the novel *Kafka* skillfully epitomizes the past and present of the protagonist Karl:

As Karl Rossmann, a poor boy of sixteen who had been packed off to America by his parents because a servant girl had seduced him and got herself with child by him, stood on the liner slowly entering the harbor of New York, a sudden burst of sunshine seemed to illuminate the Statue of Liberty, so that he saw it in a new light, although he had sighted it long before. The arm with the sword rose up as if newly stretched aloft, and round the figure blew the free winds of heaven (Kafka, 12).

Kafka's description of Statue of Liberty captures the reader's attention as it carries a sword rather than a torch. As the torch represents true liberty, and projected America as a land of freedom and opportunities, but here, the sword bearing statue which is described as a Goddess, can be seen as the symbol of destructive powers. It provides a bleak criticism of contemporary America where liberty cannot be easily achieved. This new land to Karl is the land of punishments. At first he is punished by his parents and in his quest for justice he arrives in America with hope and aspiration but to his utter disappointment he only finds the free winds blowing round the figure of the goddess. For Karl there is no freedom, no liberty, but all he has here is a series of struggles, tests, trials, and his search for liberty and justice, which in reality does not exist for the common man in the twentieth century version of America. Talking about the real intention of Kafka, Meno Spann writes: "The very first sentence, long, rhythmically beautiful, saying and implying much, makes it clear that this America will not be the land of red and white" (Spann 76-77). Edmond Lau comments on the absurdity of the statue and says aptly:

. . . the absurdity of Kafka's portrayal of the statue complements the absurdity of Karl Rossmann's initial situation—being banished to America because his sexual promiscuity had shamed his family's honor. This connection reveals an inauspicious beginning for Kafka's young hero in an imperfect America. . . . Thus, through his ridiculous depiction of the statue, Kafka clarifies for his reader at the very beginning the distinction between his conception of America and any other glamorized version that may have reached European ears . . . the choice of the sword signifies that Kafka believes liberty to be more akin to a double edged weapon that can cause both good and harm, that can be both capitalized upon and abused, rather than the guiding light of a torch. This symbolism prepares *Amerika's* atmosphere and introduces a land of liberty in which freedom will certainly do as much, if not more, damage than good to Karl (Lau 2-3).

Thus, as Lau puts, this world of Kafka's America is an imperfect America. It is not a "glamorized America" with a positive American Dream; rather it is an America where the sword in the hands of Statue of Liberty only represents terror, harm, and authority to persons like Karl Rossmann. After his arrival in New York when Karl is about to leave the ship he realizes that he has forgotten his umbrella. His search for umbrella turns into a labyrinthine journey through the

ship's innermost portion where, "he had painfully to find his way down endlessly recurring stairs, through corridors with countless turnings . . . he lost himself completely" (Kafka 12-13). This confused way leads him to an unlocked room where he finds a huge German stoker, with full of grievances and unjust treatment against Romanian Chief Engineer, Schubal. Karl is now more interested in the problems of the stoker, he even forgets his reason of coming back to the ship. In search for justice and their rights, they two approach the Captain's room, where every effort to find justice goes in vein and Schubal finally wins. Towards the end the stoker's story is interposed by the hindrance caused by Senator Jacob, who already present in the captain's room, interposes himself as Karl's uncle and finally Karl leaves the ship with his uncle, "it was now as if there were really no stoker at all" (40).

Karl's encounter with the stoker makes him aware of the first hand information regarding the actual condition of this powerful, inhuman American world where a common man does not have any importance and cannot hope for justice. "In this country sympathy was something you could not hope for" (42). Austin Warren is of the view that "Kafka's imagined America is not a land of broad cornfields shining in the sun but a chiefly metropolitan affair, already stratified, weary, and hopeless—a land of hotels and slums" (Warren 123).

Thus, American judicial ideas are thrown into the dustbin and are shown ridiculous by Kafka. He tried to show through this episode how in America every German, is eyed with suspicion. Here is not the idealized America with balanced judicial decisions rather an America a land of social sufferings where there is neglect of innocence, human values, and goodness. Erich Heller points out, "If [the stoker] is not guilty, it is more likely, to judge by the surrounding circumstances and the removal from the scene of his enthusiastic advocate, young Karl Rossmann, clears it that 'justice' will not be done" (Heller 17).

After bidding farewell to the stoker Karl is in the place of his uncle, who himself had immigrated to America thirty years earlier, now, staying in the busy locality of New York on the sixth floor. It is the place where Karl, amenities provided by his uncle avails himself of the exorbitantly. He now lives on the sixth floor in the house of steel construction with a good balcony view, a piano, and a mechanical writing desk where he takes personal English and horseback riding lessons. But this luxury of Karl does not last long, as he visits a friend of his uncle against uncle's wishes. Karl's decision of going to stay the whole night at Pollunder's house and his decision to miss English and riding lessons is not liked by his uncle. Thus, even without saying goodbye he dismisses Karl forever from his life by informing him:

. . . I must, after the incident of today, expressly send you away from me, and I urgently beg you neither to visit me in person, nor to try to get in touch with me either by writing or through intermediaries. Against my wishes you decided this evening to leave me; stick, then, to that decision all your life. Only then will it be manly decision (Kafka 86).

Karl is now dismissed from his uncle's rigorous but warmhearted protection, and left alone in America out-of-doors. He joins the company of two vagrants Delamarche and Robinson, who

not only make some money by selling the suit of Karl, but also open his box in order to ransack his belongings. Felt cheated and disappointed, he left the company of his disloyal friends and joins the job of a lift-boy, offered by the Manageress of The Hotel Occidental. She has a soft corner for Karl as he too is a European. During his job, one day he finds Robinson who is badly drunk and heartily ill in the hotel asking him for money. Karl gets scared and takes him to the dormitory. Being absent from work and also bringing a drunken man to dormitory, innocent Karl is again met with a dismissal from the job. Disappointed, Karl not only pays for Robinson's taxi but also accompanies him at Delamarche's suburban apartment that belongs to wealthy fat lady named, Brunelda. Here, Karl is forced to act as a servant, he tries his best to come out of this position, but all his efforts prove fruitless. As he finds no solution to his problem, he finally decides to accept his position as his fate. Towards the end of the novel, when Karl is roaming aimlessly, he looks at the placard on a street corner; the poster advertises the employment for the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, When the last unfinished chapter breaks off, we find Karl engrossed himself as a "technical worker" (249) accepting his new name Negro, as he is working for "Negro technical workers" (249). Towards the end Karl is going to Oklahoma in theatre-train along with an Italian boy Giacomo—one of the elevator man at the Hotel Occidental, journeying in the valleys of huge America

Karl, towards the end of the novel, travels in the cryptic way, hoping for a good future and a new life with no more injustice. In this context a critic Ronald Gray aptly comments: ". . . it is clear that an entirely fresh start has been made, which may end happily with Karl's acceptance by the theatre, or may merely lead to his total disappearance from human society" (Gray 76). Charles Osborne views Karl as picaresque and static as he writes:

He remains picaresque and static: he collects and stores experiences, but he has not learned how to sift it, how to make use of it. He has some distance along the road of pain and despair to travel before he grows into the K. of the later novels (Osborne 73).

Karl Rossmann in *America* can be seen as a representative of millions of people, who choose to immigrate to America in order to touch the sky to fulfill their American dream, but their every effort to achieve their aim proves fruitless, and finally they find themselves in American wasteland having completely lost their identity. Karl, throughout the novel, struggles to fulfill his American dream, he hopes of revolution from 'rags to riches' but all he achieves is injustice, disappointment, and failure that reduces him to "The Man who Disappeared." This is what exactly has happened with Karl as towards the end he loses his real identity, his real name and accepts himself as a negro.

Works Cited:

Brod, Max. "Postscript." *America*. Franz Kafka. 1927. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. London: Vintage, 2005: 255-56. Print.

- Gray, Ronald. *Franz Kafka*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973. Print.
- Heller, Erich. *Franz Kafka*. Ed. Frank Kermode. Viking: Penguin, 1974. Print.
- Kafka, Franz. *America*. 1927. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. London: Vintage, 2005. Print.
- Lau, Edmond. "Franz Kafka's *Amerika*: The American Dream." 2001: 1-12. Web. 8 May 2014. <people.csail.mit.edu/edmond/writings/amerikan-dream.pdf>.
- Osborne, Charles. *Kafka*. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1967. Print.
- Spann, Meno. *Franz Kafka*. Eds. Sylvia E. Bowman and Ulrich Weisstein. Boston: Twayne, 1976. Print.
- Warren, Austin. "Franz Kafka." *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Ronald Gray. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1962: 123-132. Print.