

Existence and Non Existence in Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis

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*"Man is condemned to be free;
because once thrown into the world,
he is responsible for everything he does.
It is up to you to give (Life) a meaning."*

Jean Paul Sartre

Abstract

The present paper titled "Existence and Non Existence in Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis" is a study on finding the meaning of man's existence. Metamorphosis is a novella which enlightens about existence, alienation, transformation, identical crisis, being and nothingness. According to Sartre "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" is the first principle of existentialism "The first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men." "Abandonment" implies that we ourselves decide our being. And with this abandonment goes anguish. Descartes said, "Conquer yourself rather than the world," what he meant was, at bottom, the same that we should act without hope. According to Sartre Existentialism is a humanism, "What is at the very heart and center of existentialism is the absolute character of the free commitment by which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of humanity – a commitment always understandable, to no matter whom in no matter what epoch- and its bearing upon the relativity of the cultural pattern which may result from such absolute commitment." Sartre rightly opines, "Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, the value of it, is nothing else but the sense that you choose."

Keywords: Existentialism, Existence, Non Existence, Humanism, Identical Crisis, Alienation

"As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." (257) Samsa is shocked by his physical transformation overnight. Samsa had a job which demanded constant travelling and he always used to worry about the train connections, the bed, irregular meals and casual unfriendly acquaintance. Now with this new insect body it was difficult for him to scratch his back and even to turn himself. Though he tried for hundred times he was not successful. He was supposed to catch this train and he gathered himself to come out of the quilt but with tiny legs the movement was very slow. Even his voice had changed still in the bed what he could think was he should work for five or six years to clear his parent's debt. He was prepared to work. The chief clerk had come to their home and he was just complaining for his silence and Gregor is trying hard to walk and open the door. But the chief clerk was sure that from his room there was no human voice answering. When his mother witnessed his new look of an insect she was so shocked that "took two steps toward Gregor and fell on the floor among her outspread skirts her face quite hidden on her breast. His father knotted his fist with a fierce expression on his

face as if he meant to knock Gregor back into his room, then looked uncertainly around the living room, covered his eyes with his hands, and wept till his great chest heaved.” (267) Gregor wanted to convince the chief clerk that he is temporarily incapable to render his service but they should not terminate him on the basis of his previous service to the firm. The second time when Gregor tries to call his mother she screams by the look of her son and falls into the arms of his father. Gregor is not hurt by his mother’s response but wanted to catch the chief clerk and request for his incapability to work. But he managed to vanish and yelled ‘Ugh’ which echoed through the whole staircase. After this incident his father sends him inside his room by shooing. “Pitilessly Gregor’s father drove his dark hissing and crying “shoo” like a savage.” (270) Gregor had got of his little leg damaged and slept. When he woke up he found a basin full of his favorite drink milk with sops of white bread which his sister had kept for him but he didn’t like it after his transformation. Nobody wanted to speak to him. He was hungry and nobody checked on him. But he felt happy that he had provided his parents and sister a fine flat to live in. Though his sister gave a visit but she was so startled looking at him that she slammed the door. Gregor was ready to fell to his sister’s feet for food. Luckily she noticed that the basin was not empty. She took it away not with her hands but with the help of a cloth. Later she brought him old, half-decayed vegetables, bones from last night’s supper, some raisins and almonds, piece of cheese which was two days old, a dry roll of bread, a buttered roll and a roll both buttered and salted. Now fresh food had no claim for him and even he could not stand the smell of it. In this way Gregor was fed twice in a day. Their family members had no idea that he can understand what they are speaking. They were discussing what could be done and nobody was ready to be left alone so always there were two. Gregor had felt happy by his father’s announcement regarding the voucher or memorandum from his collapsed business. Gregor’s sole desire was to help family. He had left his job as a clerk and had become a commercial traveler almost overnight to save his family from the catastrophe that had struck on his family. Gregor had never thought about his comforts and had plans for his sister who loved music. He wanted to announce on Christmas Day regarding his decision to send his sister to study at conservatorium despite the heavy expense and his parent’s discouragement. Gregor had worked hard and spent less on himself for five years and her father had become fat and sluggish but hale and hearty.

After the confinement now Gregor is enlightened about his family members. His sister though helpful could not stand him twice a day to tidy his room without opening the window. It was very distressful to him to witness her suffocation caused by his presence. His parents never visited him and his mother though willing was not allowed even after a month of Gregor’s metamorphosis his sister was startled by his appearance as though he would bite her. He used to hide under the sofa, as he understood how repulsive she was at his sight. Just for the approval of his sister he carried a sheet on his back which cost him four hours of labour. His mother visited him with his sister only to empty his room. They emptied his room like a naked den, all family furniture was taken out except the indispensable sofa. It really broke him to witness all his loved furniture taken out as though he never used it or existed anymore. But his mother remarked “I think it would be best to keep his room exactly as it has always been, so that when he comes back to us he will find everything unchanged and be able all the more easily to forget what has happened in between.” (281) Though his family was convinced that he could not understand their words but Gregor was hearing and witnessing their coldness. The worst of it is when his mother saw him on the flowered wall paper and screamed in loud hoarse voice and fell unconscious. When they moved to another room Gregor followed them in a concern towards his mother. But his sister dropped the

bottle after seeing him and his face got cut and some kind of corrosive medicine was splashed on him also. When his father arrived he guessed it sight but took the worst interpretation as though he was guilty of some violent act. “Truly, this was not the father he had imagined to himself. (285) His father who had welcomed him home every time after coming from his work was now furious. Even he rolled apples on his son. Though Gregor tried to save himself he was stuck with an apple on his back. The serious injury was done to Gregor by his father. For more than a month he was disabled and the apple being sticking in his body made him immovable. Nobody ventured to remove it he was no more a part of the family. His father had forgotten “Gregor was a member of the family, despite his present unfortunate and repulsive shape and ought not to be treated as an enemy that on the contrary, family duty required the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience, nothing but patience.” (287)

The family had become busy after Gregor’s transformation. His sister had taken up a job as a sales girl and was learning shorthand and French in the evening. His mother was busy in sewing and his father had picked a job as bank manager was all the time seen in his uniform. He was ready to work at any time, but he was sleeping all time when Gregor was working. They had sold family ornaments, the servant girl was turned off and a gigantic bony char woman was replaced in her place. But they had not left the flat and Gregor knew the reason for it. They could have shifted him to a box with few airy holes, “What really kept them from moving into another flat was rather their own complete hopelessness and the belief that they had been singled out for a misfortune such as had never happened to any of their relations or acquaintances.” (289) When the family became busy with their works Gregor was neglected by his sister Grete too. He wanted to take his family’s affairs in his hand like before but he was left alone with his helplessness. Gradually his sister hurriedly pushed his food with her foot and never bothered about his eating. She never tidied his room like earlier. George was unable to sleep at night and even in day time. The char woman used to visit him fearlessly and addressed him as “Come along, then, you old dung beetle!” or “hook at the old dung beetle, then!” (291)

Gregor lost his appetite may be due to the Chagrin or the filth around his room. One of the rooms was given to the three lodgers and his room was piled up with unwanted things. The climax falls when Gregor’s sister played violin and Gregor was attracted by the playing. He dared to come out of the dusty room and everybody was busy in their own world. Gregor wanted to lend his ears to her and appreciate her playing as nobody did. He wanted to take his sister to his room. Gergor crawled to have an eye contact with his sister and ask “Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved.” (294) Unfortunately Gregor was noticed by a lodger and they found him more entertaining than violin-playing in the beginning. But later the lodgers demanded explanation from his father to have such a creature as their neighbor. The lodgers announced that they will not pay a penny for the days they have lived. This was unexpected and hurt the family as they wanted to earn some penny. Grete utters with full of assurance to her parents that “We must try to get rid of it. We have tried to look after it and put up with it as far as is humanly possible and I don’t think anyone could reproach us in the slightest.” (296) Grete was sobbing but was determined to get rid of this creature brother. Her father wants his son to understand and he should go by himself. Immediately she corrects her parents to get rid of the idea that the creature is their son. If this creature was Gregor then long back he would have realized that human beings can’t live with such a creature and he would have gone away on his own accord. She wants to go on living with his memory in his

honor. She thinks the creature wants the whole home for himself as it scared away the ledgers. But in reality the creature brother Gergor had no intention of frightening them all that too his sister. His sister whom he had loved more than anybody in a hurry to close the door had damaged his little legs. It dawned on him that now he can't move anymore and it was unnatural to move on those feeble little legs. Still he had survived with that for months together. But now with the rotting apple in his back and the inflamed area around it, dust around it hardly troubled him. He thought of his family with tenderness and love. The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister if that were possible. In this state of vacant and peaceful meditation he remained until the tower clock struck three in the morning." (298) When the first sunlight fell on the window and enters his consciousness he leaves this world. The charwoman announces his death to his parents and sister. The charwoman had tried to tickle and poked it and declared "Just look at this, its dead; its lying here dead and done for!" (299). Mr.Samsa thanked God. Samsa asked the lodgers to leave his house. The three, Mr.Samsa to his board of management, Mrs.Samsa to her employer and Grete to the head of her firm wrote an excuse letter as they want to take a day off and relax themselves. Later Mr.Samsa called out "Come along, now, do. Let bygones be bygones" (301). They left their apartment and went by tram into the open country outside the town. They had hardly done this for months. Now they confirmed they have a good job and they should move to a smaller and cheaper apartment. While they were discussing this together it flashed to Mr. and Mrs.Samsa that they have to get their daughter married to the best suitor.

Gregor sets his mind on a self-desirous death on the awareness of his nonexistence to his family. He had loved his family till the end but they hated him after his transformation. Gregor changed physically and suffers dehumanizing situations from his own family. When he was earning he was a very important person to his family but later they wanted to get rid of him. Gregor lived with all the difficulties but he chose death at the end after he is unwanted by his family. When he faced the reality his experience made him to emerge from being to a non being. Gregor's life changes after his metamorphosis. He was a dedicated person who toiled day and night for his family. He lead a boring life of travelling uncomfortably and just performed his duty like a robot. The deformity or the physical pain was acceptable to him but his non acceptance by his family resulted in his self-destruction. He had a strong belief that he was living for his family when they deny his existence he denied himself. His commitment to the family had made him so blind that he neglected himself. But it is in his isolation and loneliness which brings him awareness of his nonexistence. The awareness leads him to the way of his freedom. His self-consciousness is the key to his freedom. He meditates on himself, the futility of his existence. He confronts his sense of non-belonging or his exclusion in his family. This realization kills him. The novella is a mirror to the tragic nature of human existence. Nobody is dependent on anybody and they can survive easily without anybody. Self-consciousness is important and we should live for ourselves. Sartre argues "existentialism is humanism because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization that man can realize himself as truly human." One of the main features of this system, which Sartre presents in the introduction and the first of Part One of his book "Being and Nothingness" is a distinction between two kinds of transcendence of the phenomenon of being. The first is the transcendence of being and the second that of consciousness. This means that, starting

with the phenomenon (that which is our conscious experience), there are two types of reality which lie beyond it, and are thus trans-phenomenal. On the one hand, there is the being of the object of consciousness, and on the other, that of consciousness itself. These define two types of being, the in-itself and the for-itself. To bring out that which keeps them apart, involves understanding the phenomenology of nothingness. This reveals consciousness as essentially characterisable through its power of negation, a power which plays a key role in our existential condition. In Part-1, Chapter-2 titled Bad faith Sartre describes one's self-deception about the human reality. It can take two forms, the first one is making oneself falsely believe not to be what one actually is. The second one is conceiving oneself as an object. (eg. Being identical to a job) and thereby denying freedom.

Gregor Samsa was in 'Bad faith'. According to Sartre living a life defined by one's occupation, social, racial or economic class is the very essence of "bad faith", the condition in which people cannot transcend their situations in order to realize what they must be (human) and what they are not (waiter, grocer, etc). He also says negation allows the self to enter what Sartre calls the "great human stream". The great human stream arises from a singular realization that nothingness is a state of mind in which we can become anything, in reference to our situation that we desire. Nothingness in terms of bad faith is characterized by Sartre as the integral negation which separates pure existence and identity and thus we are subject to playing our lives out in a similar manner. In Sartre's opinion consciousness does not make sense by itself, it arises only as an awareness of objects. Sartre's says one should be "self-conscious" "Consciousness is fully transparent, unlike an ordinary "object" (a house, for instance, of which it is impossible to perceive all of the sides at the same time), consciousness "sees" all aspects of itself at once. This non-positional quality of consciousness is what makes it a unique type of being, a being that exists for itself.

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