

Franz Kafka and Existentialism

Dr. Ajoy Batta
Associate Professor and Head
Department of English, School of Arts and Languages
Lovely Professional University, Phagwara (Punjab)

Abstract: Franz Kafka was born on July 3, 1883 at Prague. 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. Majority studies of Franz Kafka's fictions generally present his works as an engagement with absurdity, a criticism of society, element of metaphysical, or the resultant of his legal profession, in the course failing to record the European influences that form an important factor of his fictions. In order to achieve a newer perspective in Kafka's art, and to understand his fictions in a better way, the present paper endeavors to trace the European influences particularly the influences existentialists like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche in the fictions of Kafka.

Keywords: Existentialism, absurd, meaningless, superman, despair, identity.

Research Paper: Friedrich Nietzsche is perhaps the most conspicuous figure among the catalysts of existentialism. He is often regarded as one of the first, and most influential modern existential philosopher. His thoughts extended a deep influence during the 20th century, especially in Europe. With him existentialism became a direct revolt against the state, orthodox religion and philosophical systems. He insists that the individual must exercise his 'free choice' in creating values for his own evolution into a Superman. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is Nietzsche's attempt to help man surpass himself, to become 'Superman' (superman, German Übermensch, in philosophy, the superior man, who justifies the existence of the human race. "Superman" is a

term significantly used by Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883), although it had been employed by Goethe and others). His basic idea is that ‘will’ is the most important aspect of all existence. Moreover, Nietzsche declares through Zarathustra that for modern man God is dead (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Prologue and XXV)). This is an interesting theme upon which the existentialists have concentrated to convey the awful fact that the individual is thrown into a dreadful situation in which he alone is responsible for his own choices. In this context William Hubben is of the view that, Kafka’s men are living in that world without God (Hubben 145). As far as Kafka’s *The Trial* is concerned we sense in the whole novel right from beginning till end, the absence of God and any kind of belief on Him. The protagonist Joseph K. is thrown into a dreadful situation in the novel for which he alone can be blamed responsible because of his choices that he made in his life. Thus, in this sense he represents the existential view that an individual’s choice determines his essence, its man’s responsibility to live a totally committed life, and should be prepared to defy the norms of society for the sake of that commitment. This is what K. is trying to do. But, unfortunately the more he tries to defend himself, with his pleadings to court, consulting the lawyer Huld, the painter Titorelli to prove his innocence, the more he adds to his crime. It is clear from the novel that Joseph K.’s mistake was to accept his case against him. This particular behaviour of acceptance of his arrest is responsible for his failure as without knowing his guilt, he readily goes for first interrogation and after that he makes every possible effort to prove himself innocent. Thus, K. is thrown into existence first without any nature and only later he constructs his nature through his actions, which leads him to a state of anxiety, alienation and his confrontation with nothingness.

Despair, in existentialism, is usually demarcated as a loss of hope. It is the loss of hope and loss of identity. Kafka’s *The Trial* is full of the atmosphere of despair and it ends with the loss of hope against the system. Joseph K. in the novel is shown to be straightaway arrested in the morning, with the warders initially restraining him from leaving his room, and then a seemingly endless trial where “definite acquittal” is the remotest of possibilities. The conflict between the juridical restraining and K.’s protestations of innocence remains irresolvable even at the end of the novel when “the hands of one of the partners were . . .

at K.'s throat, while the other thrust the knife into his heart and turned it there twice. With the failing eyes K. could . . . see . . . the final act. 'Like a dog!' he said . . ." It is "the shame of it" that is "to outlive him" (Kafka, *The Trial* 211). Right from the arrest, the world for Joseph K. is meaningless, irrational, and the search for his guilt brings him into direct conflict with this universe, where unable to find any meaning of his arrested situation he accepts his defeat. Caroline Duttlinger in *The Cambridge Introduction to Franz Kafka* comments:

With *The Trial*, Kafka succeeded in writing a novel with a conclusion, and yet K.'s death points beyond the end, infecting the reader with its lingering sense of shame. *The Trial* is a theatre of cruelty, a succession of lurid scenes of sex, punishment and humiliation in which everyone is complicit, whether actor or spectator (Duttlinger 72).

In regard to *The Trial* Osborne offers a general comment. He says: "The human condition cannot be improved, it can only be suffered. Nor is there anything ennobling in human endurance: man has no choice. Whatever is, is just" (Osborne 82). Kafka has given us a protagonist who manifests complexes of the author, history of his race and the general human condition with concomitant problems. There are problems, just as we all have problems in life, but we have to tackle them and come to grip with reality. Minus the existential baggage, in the case of Joseph K. he is not able to separate the outward injustices from the inward broodings. Joseph K. attempts to continue with his struggles right till the end, and of course this is a tribute to human forbearance and perseverance. The protagonist in the text and human beings in life have to continue with the wrestle and the struggle. Franz Kafka through the efforts of Joseph K. is able to imprint this indelibly on the minds of the readers. To most readers, the death of Joseph K. would seem unreasonable. But what Kafka might have in his mind is to tell that death is better than a lengthy, incomprehensible and illogical existence in the grips of authorities. Boag concerning this says: "Kafka explores what it means to continue to be 'I' in a world that offers neither confirmation nor personal meaning to the 'I'" (Boag 81).

Finding the similarities between the existential writers Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Kafka, we may say that these philosophers as true existentialists try to explain the condition of a modern man who is a solitary figure and his absurd relationship with the world. Joseph K. is an existential protagonist, who emphasises the existence of human beings, the lack of meaning and purpose in life and solitude of human existence. Kafka, through K. propagates the existentialist belief of "Existence precedes essence," (Sartre 1) that is, nothing can rationalize or explain our existence, as K. in *The Trial* is unable to find out any meaning of his arrest and trials. He presents a human being who is lost in a meaningless, irrational universe and it is his search for guilt and order that brings him into direct conflict with his absurd world and law. Unable to find any meaning to his arrested existence, K. succumbs before the absurd authorities as he could no longer live with absolute individuality and absolute freedom. William Hubben talks of the existential quality of Kafka by relating him to Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche:

Kafka is the most existentialist among the existentialist writers employing insecurity and defeat as the fatalistic 'solution' of that same sense of suspense and motion which Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche welcomed as the very element in which to rise above accident and fate. He expresses an existentialist *Weltgefühl* with stronger visionary force than his French colleagues, and speaks undoubtedly to the condition of untold men and women in Europe (Hubben 139).

K. of Kafka's *The Castle* also represents the same existential view that an individual's choices determine his essence, its man's responsibility to live a totally committed life, and should be prepared to defy the norms of the society for the sake of that commitment. K. in *The Castle* is thrown into existence and only later he constructs his nature or essence through his actions, which leads him to a state of anxiety, loneliness, alienation, and his confrontation with nothingness. The more he tries to get closer to the villagers, the more they get about him, the more he tries to know about the Castle, the more he is contravened. The existential attitude in the novel can be seen through a sense of bewilderment and misperception in the face of a seemingly

worthless or absurd world which K. encounters. Here K. is visualised as a rootless wanderer on a quest haunted by forcing a sinister atmosphere. The absurdity gets into the novel through the roads of the village which are actually non-road, endless road, which never leads K. to his destination. Fatemeh Azizmohammadi comments on the absurdity of the road in *The Castle* and says:

Walking in this shadow is as if taking a walk on a non-existent road towards a non-existent castle. [K.] is merely taking a walking posture, as if he is performing a mime before our eyes on a bare stage, walking a sham road towards a sham castle. K. is absolutely stagnant and floating in a vacuum . . . he is doomed to remain in this state of indeterminacy, uncertainty and the vacillation between hope and disappointment. . . . What remains before K. is only a maze with no way out (Azizmohammadi 2244).

The village with closed rooms, closed windows, closed doors represents absurd, barren, spiritless world, where K., creates makeshift stratagems foredoomed to fail. In the novel, the possibility of salvation is linked with the idea of failure and despair. K.'s search for salvation, in order to find entry in the Castle results in despair, because he struggles against a world that turns a deaf ear to his pleas for any help to K. The world he is encountering is none other than a full stop. He proves to be a slavish and passive traveler with threatened freedom, journeying in a modern wasteland. Hannah Arendt views K. as a lonely stranger seeking to find his rightful "Place in the world," "the inalienable rights of man" (Ardent 72). Arendt says further that in this Kafkaesque world, however, there is no guarantee to such rights, and that is why Kafka made his K. die as an uprooted, lonely, superfluous figure. He is the hallmark of modern European man locked up in a myth of inaccessibility in a pre-modern world, where he is struggling to find the right key to get his entry into the Castle. But it goes to the credit of K. that he remains unshaken in his ideology and proves himself to be the only man in the village who refuses to submit to the monstrous bureaucratic authorities that arrogate to themselves his sense of freedom

Kafka's most popular novella "The Metamorphosis" is also based on the existential view, that an individual's choice determines his essence, a person has two sides - one is individual, and

the other societal. It is man's responsibility to maintain balance between these two. If a person chooses individuality over society, he will lose the support of society. However, if a person chooses society, he will lose his individuality. Initially, before his transformation, Gregor, the protagonist chooses society over himself, which in turn transforms him into a working machine and gives him the feeling of the dependency of the family on him. After his transformation into an insect, he chooses himself; looks for his own comforts as an insect, his entertainment, etc. In doing so, he completely rejects his society, and thus loses all his confidence in his capabilities. As an insect, he feels himself worthless for his family and for society; these feelings not only make him alienated, but also become largely responsible for his death. Thus, Gregor is thrown into existence first without a predetermined nature and only later he constructs his nature or essence through his actions, which lead to him in a state of anxiety, alienation and his confrontation with nothingness that results in his death. In this context Hamedreza Kohzadi, along with Azizmohammadi, and Nouri in their paper "A Study of Franz Kafka *The Metamorphosis*" rightly observe:

Thus, with the loss of his world and of his position as bread-winner, which he unconsciously rejects in the course of the metamorphosis, Gregor loses the foundation on which his existence has been built up. The realization of this loss of foundation brings, with it both a deep feeling of anxiety and a bad conscience: the being that has lost its foundation sees itself as 'vermin'; the terrifying outward appearance is in itself the result of an unconscious self-punishment (Kohzadi 1606-07).

So in the end we can say that Franz Kafka was influenced by the philosophy of first generation existentialists like Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. Kafka can be related to these writers on the basis of his physical problems and temperament, as Kierkegaard suffered from the problem of hunchback, Dostoevsky suffered from epilepsy. Similarly, Kafka suffered from tuberculosis. Due to their physical problems these writers became introverts, got alienated and isolated from their societies. All three of them, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Kafka were physically and tempermentally different and they projected their differences as the source of their creative power. These

three were depressed men at war with their societies and with themselves too and this unhappiness that they have projected in their works through the uncomfortable subject matters—suffering, solitariness, alienation, and loss of identity. The characters they create are strangers and outsiders in their own lands. Their characters believe in the inherent freedom of man. Their protagonists feel insufficiency and are hesitant to identify themselves with ‘the crowd’. It’s not that they have been rejected by the society; rather they themselves do not want to belong and have rejected the society. They desire to live authentically and stress on their own self and identity become the reason of their suffering for this attitude. Existentialists have concentrated on the theory that the individual is thrown into a dreadful situation in which he alone is responsible for his own choices. They emphasize the existence of human beings, the absence of importance, meaning, purpose in life, and solitude of human existence. Almost all the protagonists of Kafka project the same existential philosophy.

Works Cited:

Arendt, Hannah. “Franz Kafka: A Revaluation.” *Essays in Understanding*. Ed. Jerome Kohn. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994: 68-77. Print.

Azizmohammadi, Fatemeh. “A Psychological Analysis on Franz Kafka’s *The Castle*.” *Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific Research* 2.3 (2012): 2243-2248. Web. 11 Feb. 2014.
<[www.textroad.com/.../J.%20Basic.%20Appl.%20Sci.%20Res.,202\(3\)22](http://www.textroad.com/.../J.%20Basic.%20Appl.%20Sci.%20Res.,202(3)22)>.

Boag, Cara Ingrid. *Solitude, Suffering and Creativity in Three Existentialist Novels*. Diss. Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, 2009. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.
<scholar.sun.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10019.1/1713/Boag,%20C.I.pdf>.

Brombert, Victor. “Dostoevsky’s Underground Man: Portrait of the Paradoxalist.” *Academic Journal EBSCO HOST (H.W. Wilson)* 15.1 (1995): 4-12. Print.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from the Underground*. 1864. Ed. J. Kentish. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.

Duttlinger, Caroline. *The Cambridge Introduction to Franz Kafka*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. *Cambridge Books Online*. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.
<<http://ebooks.cambridge.org/ebooks.jst?bid=CBO9781139049207>>.

Hubben, William. *Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche & Kafka*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. Print.

Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*. Trans. Joachim Neugrochel. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. Print.

---. *The Trial*. 1925. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. London: Vintage, 2001. Print.

---. *The Castle*. 1926. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir with additional material translated by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser. London: Vintage, 2005. Print.

Kierkegaard, Soren. *Papers and Journals: A Selection, 1835-1854*. London: Penguin, 1996. Print.

Kohzadi, Hamedreza, et al. "A Study of Franz Kafka 'The Metamorphosis'." *Journal of Basic and Applied Scientific Research* 2.2 (2012): 1600-1607. Web. 1 June 2014.
<[www.textroad.com/.../J.%20Basic.%20Appl.%20Sci.%20Res.,%202\(2\)16](http://www.textroad.com/.../J.%20Basic.%20Appl.%20Sci.%20Res.,%202(2)16)>.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. 1883. New York: Cosimo, 2009. Print.

Osborne, Charles. *Kafka*. London: Oliver and Boyd, 1967. Print.

Sartre, Jean - Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. 1946. Trans. Carol Macomber. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. Print.