



A STUDY OF THE ELEMENTS OF EXISTENTIALISM AND ABSURDISM IN FRANTZ KAFKA'S WORKS

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ABSTRACT



Existentialism proposes the existence and essence as 'Existence precedes essence'. It is against of the notion that human predicament is the result of his fate or predestination. Existentialism never surrenders itself to the force something beyond our perception but it asks us to study the life in its own context. The life and its vagaries are the very much responsibilities of the human being himself. According to existentialist philosophy it is the human being who gives to meaning or purpose to life but not any transcendental signifier or god or demon. It is not just the representation of the tussle between atheism and theism but it tries to provide practical explanations to the problems of human existence. Absurdism on the other hand reveals the meaninglessness of life and creative forces surrounding us. The search for the purpose and waiting for somebody or something to save us is a meaningless action. The contradiction that exists between the human mind and the universe results in absurdity. It tries to answer the questions like if there is any purpose in life and is life a futile thing to be lived, shall we commit suicide or shall we live on..?

My paper is intended to explore the elements of existentialism and absurdism in the works of Frantz Kafka as his works are considered as the embodiments of the both.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Humanism, Nihilism, Alienation, Surreal, Disorientation, and Kafkaesque*



Frantz Kafka was born in 1883 in present day Czech Republic. His works are filled with the human suffering and angst which is inescapable. Alienation, existential anxiety and black humor abound his plots. The characters are trapped in existential dilemma of which they are not actual makers. His well known works are *Metamorphosis*, *the Trial*, *In the Penal colony* and *the Castle* which were written during 1920s.

The decades aftermath of the first world war are recognized with the genre of modernism. Modernism is the harbinger of experimentations in literature and in other art forms, existentialism and absurdism are the two important flows of thoughts which pervade the very structure of modernism during interwar period from 1917 to 1940. They found their fullest expression in the works of Kafka, in whom each character stands apart as the symbolic representation of modern man who as defeated, destroyed and alienated. These tendencies of overpowering circumstances under which a human being is just nothing more than an entity led to the creation of the term 'Kafkaesque' that indicates the popularity they received both from the scholars and the readers.

Gregor Samsa is a young man and promising member of the family on whom the responsibility of the entire family rests. When he was working and earning livelihood and was able to look after the needs of every family member, he was considered as the hero of the entire family. Unfortunately without any reason he turns into a hideous insect. Initially his family members tolerate and show sympathy towards him so that he may recover and assume his responsibilities again, but that was not the case with Gregor. Slowly and steadily his conditions turn from bad to worse. The tenants would not tolerate any more the filthy smell which was emanating from the rotting metamorphosed body and filling the house. His employers abdicate him of his job leaving his plight to further damnation. His presence has turned into a nightmarish apparition which led the condemnation of his life. Until Gregor was earning and promising a good life for his family

members he was admired and loved, he is supposed to be a performer always.

In a little time everything falls into disaster, Gregor lost the sympathy, Gregor lost the dignity of life, and Gregor lost the place even in his immediate family. The life of the individual is unpredictable and at most of the time he will be the victim of not of his own making. This is the crux of the existentialism. It poses the question... are striving, are we suffering a lot to attain what is ultimately futile?

The Castle is the another novel which revolves around the character 'K', K being a land surveyor comes to the village where the castle is present and the job of surveying the lands has been assigned to K. But to be for dismay he is informed that he is called by mistake and no such order is issued but K is asked to be an assistant to a teacher without giving any official permission to stay there. K has been constantly prompted to see the castle and know the nature of the invitation if such any. But the castle and the officials remain throughout the novel as an enigma. Their identities are never revealed and the purpose of their very existence is never explained.

The messenger Barnabas is the only key to the castle yet he is also unreliable. *The Castle* is torn between inhumane officialdom and theocracy because nobody in the village was aware of the nature of the work the officials from the castle were performing but the presence and influence of the officials from the castle is felt in the village. One can allude the name 'Barnabas' to the Bible. In 'Acts of Apostles', Barnabas acts as a messenger to Paul who was waiting the kingdom of God to come upon. Then we can derive the inference that the castle is representing the city of God or Salvation which is ultimately shown as a pointless thing to be waiting upon for. In the fight between God and Demon the victim is man.

Man's search for salvation and hope for eternal city, according to Kafka, if we allude the character K to a seeker, it remains as a mere projection of illuminated hallucination. K neither receives attention from the castle which he deserves,



nor does anybody invites him to the castle. The absurd focuses on the futility and dismay which are shapers of human existence. The novel 'The Castle' peripherally just looks as if it is a mere reading of Kafka's contemporary history where bureaucratic apathy was one among the commonplace things.

Fathoming the various angles, the novel represents, the visibility of deep structures of thoughts become clear, as one among them is concurrent theological study of the novel. K representing the man and his plight and the castle/officials of the castle representing 'the Godot will not come today he will come tomorrow'. It ends nowhere. On the other hand Klamm represents the unsympathetic, living dead of the castle officials. They lack any iota of concern for fellow human beings; they think they are there to enjoy just the privileges of being an official of the castle. The suffering is in the share of experiences of the common man.

The elements of absurdity abound the novel the Castle in terms of its futility of waiting for, meaninglessness of existence, the incredulity of the events and happenings surrounding us. Kafka's works represent a scuffle which raging between theism and atheism since the ages, out of this fight dismayed by the outcome the absurdity takes its birth.

The Turf of the novel 'The Trial' is made rich by the abundance of the elements of absurdity and indifference present in it. Joseph K never knows why he was arrested and why suddenly he was deprived of all the privileges and rights a common citizen supposed to enjoy. The prosecutor never intends to explain the nature of the crime he has committed and nature of the proceeding which are pending against him. The absurdity of meaninglessness and concomitant helplessness visible thought the pages of the novel. He was advised and rather forced to hire a lawyer who turns to be burden rather than a help.

The act of sex which is to be observed as out of love just remains as an act which is the result of the craving hormones. Like in 'The Waste Land' here

also Kafka showcases the act of sex as a mere trifle convenience between the two individuals. Mr K's relation with Leni and the woman at court proves the detached human emotions and undeserved feelings. Absurdism looks as if pervaded the fabric of biology also.

Joseph K dies the death 'Like a dog' but why? The question remains unsolved. Mystery is never revealed. What crime he has committed and how proceedings are conveyed...it looks surreal to brood over it. He was, at last, unceremoniously killed with a knife by the executioner un-minding the basic courtesy given to a criminal if at all he is a criminal. The human being never can understand why he is surrounded by the existential dilemma, deriving the many conclusions are nothing but reflection of black comedy which resides in the life of the modern man. The Trial leaves the trail of thoughts in the mind of the reader and it advocates to us that it is a futile endeavor to try to draw conclusions because thinking coherently and acting logically is not possible for the for the world of modern age, human being alienated from the very core of humanity.

The existence of existentialism and absurdity in literature shall lead us towards the realization of the nature of human life and shall lead us towards leading the lives for the sake of life itself, nothing more and nothing less. It is not the blank nihilism but it is the opening the eyes towards the life and its nature. In the words of Jean Paul Sorte the existentialism is after all real humanism.

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