

Franz Kafka: An Ingenious Wizard of Humanism

Prof. Raja Sekhar¹, P. Dr. Ch. Manjusha²

¹Professor, Guide

²Assistant Professor, Guide

Abstract

A riddle, existentialism and Jewish pessimism are the mundane critical surveys on Franz Kafka, the German humanist writer. The literary oeuvre of Franz Kafka is not vast yet he proves to be the most enigmatic writer teasing literary cognizance of the readers and best literary critics. The simple truths of life are tough to understand. This is true with Kafka's writing. His simple yet essential truths about life are weaved into dissuading narratives in all his works. Hence, frustrated critics snub him as a writer with no purpose. Kafka professed the profound principles of humanism through every word he wrote in his works. The article critically explores Kafka's seminal works, his diaries and the critical reviews on him and unveils the Kafka's principles of Humanism.

Keywords: Existentialism, Jewish pessimism, literary cognizance, literary criticism and humanism.

A person who has not been completely alienated, who has remained sensitive and able to feel, who has not lost the sense of dignity, who is not yet "for sale", who can still suffer over the suffering of others, who has not acquired fully the having mode of existence – briefly, a person who has remained a person and not become a thing – cannot help feeling lonely, powerless, isolated in present-day society. He cannot help doubting himself and his own convictions, if not his sanity. He cannot help suffering, even though he can experience moments of joy and clarity that are absent in the life of his "normal" contemporaries. Not rarely will he suffer from neurosis of a sick man trying to adapt himself to a sick society. In the process of going further in his analysis, i.e. of growing to greater independence and productivity, his neurotic symptoms will cure themselves.

--- Erich Fromm.

The quote is a comprehensive definition of a humanist in remorseless and hedonistic times. It has precise terms to describe Franz Kafka (3 July 1883 – 3 June 1924), a German humanist writer. The works of Kafka sketch the worthlessness in human life, piled up by cruel, unmindful and mercenary society and system which isolate sensible and sensitive people and push them to intense anguish and dumb despair. A human being is born with the ability to sense not only her/his own feelings, desires and sorrows but also those of other human beings. To sense the need of the needy and to take up the responsibility to respond adequately to the needs is humanism. But people often evade the human responsibility to establish justice in the world. They do so as people are cowards and weak. Human beings suffer from a weakness to not to deliver any duty which does not yield material benefit. Kafka's philosophy of humanism, knitted into his works, makes people to find out the powerful means, which is hidden inside them, to vanquish their weakness and fear to be human.

Kafka's works are dreams. Their deft, lucid, casual styles of narrations smoothly sow the dreams into the readers' minds. Those sowed dreams are nightmares. Kafka through these nightmares makes us envision the filth in human lives. The narrations see to it that, we, along with the central characters, experience the damp and gloom of life. The deaths of the main characters startle us out of the nightmares. But if we revisit them with awakened senses, we find, in the dream, Kafka right behind us wearing an enigmatic smile. To trace the cryptic philosophy of the enigmatic smile of Kafka has been an acid test. Kafka notes, "Viewed from the outside it is terrible for a young but mature person to die, or, worse to kill him-self... to die would mean nothing else than to surrender a nothing to nothing." (*Diaries* 243)

In *The Metamorphosis* (1915), the short-story synonymous to Kafka, twenty-seven year old Gregor Samsa, wakes up a morning finding him-self transformed into a bug. Uncared by his family, he starves himself to death, over a period of some gruesome months. In *The Castle* (1926), the novel penned by mature Kafka, K steps into a village of the castle at progressed twilight, as a new land surveyor. He wanders, as a stranger, in the village obtaining various means to reach to his employer Klamm for the affirmation of his post in the village. At last he dies, informed at the death bed, as a rejected land surveyor.

The value of the life and the death of Gergor Samsa and that of K, if summed up, is nothing. Literature, whoever is the writer, bares a vision of life Kafka also will enclose a truth of human existence in his literature. Understanding the philosophy in the death of Kafka's characters has been a riddle, hard to crack. Friedlander, a critic, opined that "In Kafka fiction, the truth remains inaccessible and is possibly nonexistent". Franz Kafka claims at two different times to two different persons that "I am nothing but literature"; and "I am literature". Erich Heller supposes that, "The vicinity of literature and autobiography could hardly be closer than it is with Kafka. Indeed, it almost amounts to identity." Then the philosophy of Kafka about man and human life hold the key to unlock the riddle of the enigmatic smile. Jay Cantor the author of *Forgiving the Angle: Four Stories for Franz Kafka* describes Kafka is an existential religious figure.

Kafka's works, given Kafka's Jewish birth, caught vogue in the context of Holocaust. His works were set on fire by Nazi's and anti-Jews. The friction between the sympathizers of Kafka and his literature and anti-Jews had ruptured a wide popularity to his work. Consequently, his work, fortunately or unfortunately, has been branded as Jewish literature. Jews and pro Jews attempt to own him by locating his philosophy in the Jewish religion. On the other end, the legions of anti-Jews smudged Kafka with Jewishness merely to debunk him and his work. Despite the absence of straight instances of Jewishness in Kafka's works, innumerable claims have been made that they are upholding Jewishness, at least indirectly. Or some critics infer Judaism in the superfluous pessimism of his works as the reflection of the pathetic condition of Jews. It is natural to seek the roots of a person's philosophy in the religion of that person's birth. In the case of Kafka, such curiosity is boosted by the peculiar situation of Jews of his time, where in marginalized Jews have geared up their efforts to reinforce themselves with Zionism, the call for Jewish land Israel.

A number of critics have seen Judaism in Kafka's metaphysical inquisitiveness. The list is topped by Max Brod, and it rolls down adding several big names to it. Harold Bloom, the famous literary critic believed that "although Kafka was uneasy with his Jewish heritage, he was the quintessential Jewish writer." Lothar Khan asserts the opinion of Harold Bloom by saying, "The presence of Jewishness in Kafka's oeuvre is no longer subject to doubt." Then, how far does, actually, Kafka's perception of life

upholds Jewishness? , is a crucial question to be answered.

Kafka is a sensitive, modest, rational, responsible person with integrity. He is sensitive to suffering, either it is of his own or that of his own kind that is mankind. He expects and looks for humanitarian attention to such suffering. Humanity is manifested in the ethics, morals and principles. Kafka found the dearth of the humanitarian morals and principles in the society, beginning with his family. Kafka questioned the absence of the humanitarian fatherhood in his father when he mentioned in the *Letter to His Father*, the rude behavior of Herman Kafka in leaving his son outside in cold night for asking water in the night.

Religion awaits the dawn of one's consciousness and overtakes it as the ultimate omnipotent institute to purge human pain. Oneness of mankind is the desired fruit of religious preaching and practices. An obedient practice of Judaism or any other religion, in Kafka's examination of society, has yielded no relieving results to the sufferers. He abhorred the materialization of God and Judaism. So, he reserved his faith with him, not investing it in Judaism. A quest for an ideal or a platform that could unify mankind, at least emotionally, was launched by Kafka quiet at a tender age. Kafka believed that a unified mankind could expel the sorrow in human life. So, at an adolescent age, he proclaimed himself as an atheist.

Hugo Bergson, a popular Zionist leader and Kafka's school mate, commemorated the debates he had with Kafka in gymnasium and admitted how his Zionism was threatened by the socialistic arguments of Kafka. He called Kafka as a socialist. Even today, a good number of critics judge Kafka as a socialist. But Kafka knew that socialism is only an ad hoc arrangement not a permanent and universal solution to save the exploited. Education disappointed Kafka. Education has to teach a broad outlook of universe. In those days, even in the present times, education is mechanical. Education is devoid of substance. Kafka followed the Montessori reforms in education with a hope to see the substance being replenished into education.

October, 1911 is important not only to Kafka but also to his critics. In this period, Kafka was infatuated towards Yiddish theater, literature, tradition and people. Yiddish theater is developed by Eastern Jews. It produces Jewish plays which are composed and acted by Jews. It is primarily musical, comic, and satiric. The Hebrew and the Yiddish are the languages of the plays. The Yiddish people are very nationalistic. The critics, who evaluate Kafka as Jewish writer, vehemently emphasize that his attraction to Yiddish theatre has brought him back to the religious and Jewish track. They are true till to this point that Kafka, who had departed from Judaism, did halt to reassess it, provoked by the lively vibrancy of Eastern Jewish tradition of Yiddish theater. Kafka was fascinated to the tradition, and the literature of Yiddish theater. Another reason is his kindness to the financial meagerness of theatre and its artists. He writes down in the diary, "Would like to see a large Yiddish theatre as the production may after all suffer because of the small cast and inadequate rehearsal. Also would like to know Yiddish literature, which is obviously characterized by an uninterrupted tradition of National struggle that determines every work." (70)

Tradition is different from religion. Tradition is determined by the social, economic and geographical conditions of the people who shape it. Every religion stirs in it the traditions of its originators. Therefore, a lot of religious norms and rituals are reflections of the adopted traditions. For instance, cow is sacred to Hindus and cow slaughter is a sin in Hinduism. Cow was the chief stock of livelihood of the inventors and imitators of Hindu religion. So cow got importance in Hinduism. Cow did not play any special role in the civilization of the initiators of either Islam or Christian religion. So there is no

religious obligation to kill it.

In the reassessment of Judaism, Kafka is keenly interested in those issues of Talmud and Torah which reflect the tradition of the early Jews. There are, in his diaries, numerous rationalizations which Kafka has made anthropologically and scientifically, the religious norms of Talmud and Torah. Artistic zeal in Kafka also has a role in his attention to Yiddish theater. Kafka loved the music of it. He shares it like this, “The melodies are made to catch hold of every person who jumps up and they can, without breaking down, encompass all his excitement even if one won’t believe they have inspired it.” (*Diaries* 66)

Kafka had recorded, in his diary, some of the plays he watched in Yiddish theatre. A section of critics of Kafka refer to them and decide that his literary inspiration is Jewish. David Bleich’s essay “How I Got my Language: Forms of Self- Inclusion” is included in the book, *Self-analysis in Literary Study: Exploring Hidden Agendas*, edited by Daniel Rancour-Laferriere. In his essay he writes his view on Kafka as cited below,

This immediate, literal, experiential sense of Kafka’s work that I have held from my youth led me to try to understand and conceptualize his life as a German- speaking Czech Jew, more than as a “significant literary artist”, even though it seems clear enough that this latter identity was part of his own self-understanding. (56-7)

In this essay he argues that, keeping Kafka’s faith aside, Kafka is Kafka only due to the destiny of Jews in Prague at that juncture of history. Speaking of Yiddish theatre’s sway on Kafka’s literary genius, he mentions the comparison highlighted by Evelyn Torton Beck, in *Kafka and Yiddish Theatre*, between *The Metamorphosis* and Yiddish writer Jacob Gorden’s play, *The Savage One*. In *The Savage One* as in *The Metamorphosis*, according to Beck, the conflict between father and son results in the death of the imprisoned son.

Metamorphosis Transformations of the Body and the Influence of Ovid’s Metamorphosis on German Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries by David Gallagur presents a series of potential sources of inspiration to Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. Eventually, the claim of Gorden’s play as the solo inspiration to Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* is debased. Even if Kafka had taken the idea of *The Metamorphosis* from Gorden, he would not be a Jewish writer. For not all times writers carry on the philosophy of their adopted sources to their works. Writers are at liberty to extract ideas from anywhere. Mere such extractions do not label them as advocates of the original sources’ faiths and theories. Thomas Mann used, to his *Transposed Heads*, a story from the Hindu source *Vetal Panchvimsati* (11th century). Does it make him a Hindu writer? Certainly not. The philosophy of the source and that of the *Transposed Heads* are different.

Western Judaism was stricken down by Kafka as Obsolete. He called it historic. He said that it had nothing to offer to people’s moral, emotional and psychological requirements. On reading the *History of the Jews* by Graetz, Kafka recorded his reaction as below,

It was at first stranger to me than I thought and I had to stop here and there in order by resting to allow my Jewishness to collect itself. Towards the end, however, I was already gripped by the imperfection of the first settlements in the newly conquered Canaan and the faithful handing down of the imperfections of the popular heroes (Joshua, the Judges, Elijah). (*Diaries* 98-9)

The foundations of Judaism were rejected by Kafka as imperfect. He disowned Jewishness, announcing that he had nothing in common with Judaism. He asserted that he was neither the end of outdated Judaism nor the beginning of then accelerating Zionism. Yiddish theatre resonated the strong community feeling in Eastern Judaism. This feature of the theatre has enticed Kafka’s heart. He has immense

compassion to the robust spirit of poor Yiddish theatre actors. But Yiddish theatre has not won him back to Judaism. June O. Leavitt in the book *The Mystical Life of Franz Kafka: Theosophy, Cabal, and the modern spiritual Revival*, estimated Kafka as, “The mystical life of Franz Kafka must be understood as interplay between his own clairvoyant states of mind and a revivalist spiritualist culture fueled by Theosophical theories and occult practices. This interplay leaves traces throughout his literature enterprise.” (6) To Dr. Rudolf Steiner, during the single sitting they had, Kafka disclosed that “a great part of my being is striving toward theosophy”. Another discloser was “And here I have, to be sure, experienced states (not many) which in my opinion correspond very closely to the clairvoyant states described by you...” Wherefore, Leavitt believes that since Kafka is not religious in the traditional sense, his theosophy would have been influenced by occult Christian, Cabalistic, redacted Judaism. Accordingly, he assumes, Kafka had experienced supernatural mysticism in the clairvoyant states.

Theosophy, that is study of God, starts either by accepting or disputing the notion of God. Kafka's orientation is never to God. Instead, “Supreme Judgement” is his orientation. Life often throws at people happenings that are impossible to be rationalized by people. Some call it fate. Kafka vaguely names it “Supreme Judgement”. Kafka's strive towards theosophy is to fathom the phenomenon of “Supreme Judgement”. Kafka narrates to Dr. Steiner like this, “And here I have, to be sure, experienced states (not many) which in my opinion correspond very closely to the Clairvoyant states described by you, Herr Doctor, in which I completely dwelt in every idea, and in which I not only felt myself at my boundary, but at the boundary of the human in general.” (*Diaries* 48)

Generally, during meditation of an idea, our consciousness supervises the thought process. So, we can sense the progress of the meditation, by the end of it. Occasionally, it occurs that during meditation our consciousness melt into the unconsciousness. So, we sense only the end result of the thought process, but cannot remember the thought process. The states that Kafka was indicating to are like the second kind of meditation. If Kafka had said that he was experiencing things those are beyond his boundary and human boundary, in that case Leavitt would have been correct in guessing Kafka as paranormal mystic of Occult, Cabalistic and redacted Judaism type.

Kafka's philosophy is groomed around a principled man, who has to strive to unify with the truth, embedded within him and attain Salvation before death, on earth. Arbitrary loyalty to God has been an essay escape to man from a regulated moral living. Man's mistakes are exempted by religion if he multiplies his prayers or gives costly offers or confesses. Man turns a blind eye to the pain and wrong around him by attributing them to the “Will of God”. A man's mistakes and his human irresponsibility become the debt of the whole mankind. And human kind can do nothing but to pay it in some way or the other, at some time or other, in the process of human evolution. Kafka is aware of this human truth. So, he disposes this refuge of superstition. He exclaims, “Superstition and Principle and what makes life possible through a heaven of vice a hell of virtue is reached. So easily? So dirtily? So unbelievable? Superstition is easy.” (*Diaries* 391)

The abundance of discrepancy, sorrow, fury, and filth in the world despite the predominance of religion, instigates any rational mind to doubt the existence of God or Special Self and fairness of its justice. An objective examination of history reveals the fact that various religious beliefs have been a major cause of the factions and frictions among men. Owing to this, unity of mankind is fractured irrecoverably. Kafka is a witness to such religious feuds. At his time religious tensions were heating up to a point of explosion. Kafka figures out that the idea of unity of mankind is a historic common doubt, agreed by everyone both covertly and overtly. He comments:

The unity of mankind, now and then doubted, even if only emotionally, by everyone, even by the most approachable and adaptable person, on the other hand also reveals itself to everyone, or seems to reveal itself in the complete harmony, discernible time and again, between the development of mankind as a whole and of the individual man. Even in the most secret emotions of the individual. (*Diaries* 243)

Aggregating all these undeniable human certainties Kafka makes up his mind that it is hopeless to hunt solutions to obvious and concrete issues of man in the abstraction and shallow of religion, God and Heaven. Kafka pragmatically emphasizes that “One must limit oneself to what one is absolutely master of.” (Brod 168) It goes to mean that people must be content with the skills, knowledge and material possessions they have. Mastery over uncertain knowledge of God is impossible. Since perennial doubts ever curtail our mastery over it. So offering empty prayers to it for our Salvation and for the purification of human world would be like blind folding ourselves from the definite truth of human existence. The truth is a man could never be what is not he and could never have which is not his. The concept of “Supreme Judgement” of Kafka is also beyond Kafka’s Knowledge. Kafka accepts it and summarizes his goal in life, in a letter to Felice Bauer, like this as quoted below,

If I closely examine what is my ultimate aim, it turns out that I am not really striving to be good and to fulfill the demands of a Supreme Judgement, but rather very much the contrary: I strive to know the whole human and animal community, to recognize their basic predilection, desires, moral ideas, to reduce these to simple rules and as quickly as possible trim by behavior to these rules. (*Diaries* 387)

By accepting one’s limitations, one can lead a meaningful life. A sincere self satisfaction neutralizes the sadistic emotions such as selfishness, jealousy and fury. By limiting to our limitations we can reduce the hijack of individual interests. Since longing for a thing which is beyond one’s boundaries means, one is craving to snatching away that thing which is someone else’s due. Therefore, this kind of self-satisfied life creates a healthy tolerant ambience for the unified existence of mankind. So, the ultimate message in the profound utterance of Kafka is, one must live contently and let the others to live a content life.

People require self- knowledge to know their limitation. Self-acquaintance is enabled by self-introspection. Kafka designates conscience as the ‘indestructible’ in the people. If people let their thinking and action to be guided by their Conscience they can lead a worthy life. Self Conscious life is a moral life. Self Conscious living is humanistic living. A conscious one cannot turn away one’s head, no matter however hard one tries, from the suffering and wrong around one. One’s Conscience fortifies one to do something, within one’s limitations, to deplete the malignance. In the end, when the death is rapidly pacing ahead to engulfed one’s life, if the conscious one questions, what one has done in this life, then the answer will be that one has lived a principled life, does all one could do for one moral being and for the moral upliftment of one’s kind. Thus, tranquility pervades one’s heart before one’s death. Kafka avers such peaceful death as salvation. Kafka’s philosophy expounds two principles, which Kafka himself upheld all through his life, “absolute truth” (absolute wahrhaftigkeit) and “Precise conscious” (prazisc gewissenhaftigkeit). Kafka stresses, in his conversation with Gustav Janouch, that “Truth is whatever man needs in order to live, but can obtain or purchase from no one. Each man must reproduce it for himself within, otherwise he must perish; life without Truth is not possible. Truth is perhaps like itself.” (*Conversations with Kafka (Second Edition)*) Self knowledge is the truth. One must discover one’s own conscience. A life, deserved to be identified as life must be a meaningful and peaceful life. That sort of life is possible only with conscience. Kafka condemns a life without conscious, as it would be a miserable one and said that such life is fit to perish.

Owing to the gap between his philosophy and degenerated conditions of his times, Kafka endured

double desperation. Kafka thought that he was the correct man to cure the inhumanity prevailing in the world. If ever he failed to stop the wrong he felt as if he was betraying his spirit. Kafka writes his anger in the following words, “As soon as I become aware in any way that I leave abuses undisturbed which it was really intended that I should correct..., I lose all sensation in my arm muscles for a moment” (*Diaries* 114). Unable to find any another way to propound his humanistic philosophy of “True Conscious” and “Absolute Truth”, Kafka turned to his last and best resort that is literature. He imbued his philosophy into his works. The death of the main character is an oxymoron. The death is synonymous representation of the reader’s would be death and antonymous representation of Kafka’s content death. The writer records his theory likeunder,

That the best things I have written have their basis in this capacity of mine to meet death with contentment all these fine and very convincing passages always deal with the fact that someone is dying, that it is hard for him to do, that it seems unjust to him, or at least harsh, and the reader is moved by this, or at least he should be. But for me, who believe that I shall be able to lie contentedly on my deathbed, such scenes are secretly a game; indeed, in the death enacted I rejoice in my own death, hence calculatingly exploit the attention that the reader concentrates on death, have a much clearer understanding of it than he, of whom I suppose that he will loudly lament on his deathbed, and for these reasons my lament is as perfect as can be, nor does it suddenly break off, as is likely to be the case with a real lament, but dies beautifully and purely away. It is the same thing as my perpetual lamenting to my mother over pains that were not nearly so great as my laments would lead one to believe. With my mother, of course, I did not need to make so great a display of art as with the reader. (*Diaries* 321)

Kafka proclaimed that he would have contended death. He is true, as he did live a satisfied life. As a man that has lived with “absolute truth” and “precise conscious” he would be dead contentedly. Kafka professed the nothingness of readers, who constituted the people from his time to the last era of earth. His works are symbolic summary of all those readers, who are reluctant to rest their belief on their Spirit. The transformation of man to bug in *The Metamorphosis* is symbolic. The metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa indicates that people lives are as vile and reasonless as that of an insect. Like K. in *The Castle* people are restless and are disregarded on earth. For, people are wanted of self- knowledge. Without that human beings are aimless. Consequently, human lives are desperate marathon towards mirage. Similarly, K. too relentlessly, knocks at every door and consults everyone in his attempt to reach Klam. K’s strolling and readers’ marathon will end in wilderness. People end their lives in defeat and lament just as that of K and Gregor Samsa.

It is not that Kafka wishes readers to die a wailing death. His works warn us against such death. He draws our attention to the alienating situation in which we are dwelling. That way, he allures us to ponder over such unwarranted death and deduce the truth of life. After reading his dreams, that is his works, Kafka anticipates that readers will undertake an inner search and reach their conscience. As a result, with a rejuvenate Spirit, readers spend the rest of the life with consciousness and avoid the impending restless death.

Hence it can be concluded that Franz Kafka can be anything but not an existential pessimist. He propounds the most practical principles for the best social existence. True Conscious and Absolute Truth are simple and effective principles any human can understand and follow. To reach his humanistic appeal for a life with conscience the dogmatic boundaries of spiritual have to crossed. Reading Kafka is an act of self-introspection. Franz Kafka is a peerless ingenious literary wizard who places his humanism in the most aesthetic narrative that entices the conscience of any reader.

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