

## RE-READING FRANZ KAFKA'S *THE METAMORPHOSIS* IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### Abstract:

*Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis (1915) explores various problems like existential angst, discomfort, alienation, inward fear, etc. that a modern man is facing today. His novella can be applied to the present crisis caused by Covid-19 Pandemic. One can reconnect the existential angst of Gregor Samsa, principal character of the novella, with the deplorable condition of infected people due to corona virus. Hence, in this article, an attempt has been made to compare and contrast the dilemma of Samsa with the trauma of modern man suffering from covid-19 which compels him to keep physical distancing. Here, the Kafkaesque metamorphosis of a human being into a monstrous insect is aligned with the infectious patient who is trying his best to comprehend his transformation and cope up with it. Like Samsa, the suspected patient is helplessly trying to perceive and conceive his new medico-physical conditions. The plight of Samsa can be compared with infected covid-19 patients. The changed psychological behaviour of Samsa and covid-19 affected patients is the focal point of this discourse. The article also focuses on the economic predicaments of the infected patient's family with that of Samsa's due to unprecedented draconian lockdown. The family of infected patient is sometimes irrationally harsh towards the patient because of ignorance, negligence and unawareness. This article endeavours to testify the prophetic vision of Kafka by observing how Samsa, even after a century, represents the existential alienation of a corona virus infected human being.*

**Keywords:** *Alienation, metamorphosis, covid-19, pandemic, predicament, existential angst, economic crisis, social distancing, discourse, etc.*

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A host of writers and philosophers like Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Garcia Marquez, O.V. Vijayan to name a few have shed light on the predicaments of modern man. Franz Kafka, a pioneer figure in the movement of existentialism, is not an exception to this. He stands apart from the rest of the writers due to his craftsmanship and prophetic vision in exploring the plight of modern man. In all of his writings, be it letters or novellas, Kafka always tries to tackle the root problems faced by modern man. He visualizes beyond the horizon and alerts us to the dangers of an uncertain future. His *magnum opus* works such as *The Judgment* (1913), *The Penal Colony* (1919), *A Hunger Artist* (1924) and *The Castle* (1926) explored the fallacy of disintegrated family system, horrors of a military regime, futility of aesthetics and passive bureaucracy. His *The Metamorphosis* (1915) is a classic literary work which exposes the transformation of a modern man into gigantic insect. As a realist, he deliberately brings to the fore the crucial issues of alienation, existential angst and uncertainty of our time. This article is an attempt to compare and contrast the plight of infected patients suffering due to corona virus with Gregor Samsa, protagonist of *The Metamorphosis*. A sincere attempt has been made to understand the tragedy of Samsa and covid-19 infected patients.

Samsa is tired due to hectic work. It seems his life had become a mechanical one. He is emotionally detached from his family members, colleagues and ultimately society. All these factors are solely responsible for his transformation into an insect. The opening lines of *The Metamorphosis* go like this:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armour-

plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely (Muir, 19).

This metamorphosis of Samsa from human being to a non-human entity left him fragile and vulnerable. This bipedal to centipede transformation came with a lot of symptoms of bodily changes. Whether his transformation into an insect is real or imaginary remains debatable. This uncertainty is comparable to the covid-19 testing process including rapid or swab tests (Pandey, Gaurav Times of India). Because of defective testing, many suspected patients have been treated like confirmed ones. In the same way, Samsa would not have truly metamorphosed in a real sense. He suffers from being isolated by his family members. Needless to say, he is not transformed into a non-human entity but his family treated him like an insect and accordingly, keeps him in a lonely place. His transformation has tragically detached him from his beloved family. To quote Kafka:

In such moments he focused his eyes as sharply as possible on the window, but, unfortunately, the prospect of the morning fog, which muffled even the other side of the narrow street, brought him little encouragement and comfort (Muir, 25).

Samsa is a sole breadwinner of his family. Hence, he becomes an apple of the eye of his family. However, his transformation compels him to be an unproductive entity. It happens as he has lost his job. Resultantly, the family members do not show him any respect. Money is everything for them. It shows how the modern man is materialistic. Considering the fact that Samsa is useless entity, his father not only ill-treats him but also attempts to kill him by throwing an apple towards him. To quote Kafka: "It was an apple; a second apple followed immediately; Gregor came to stop in alarm; there was no point in running on, for his father was determined to bombard him. An apple thrown without much force grazed Gregor's back and glanced off harmlessly" (64).

Samsa, as an ideal member, tries at his level best to keep his family united. But his family despise him due to his changed condition. His mother sees him as a 'polluting and disgusting being' and Grete, his beloved sister, remains estranged from her metamorphosed brother. She serves him without love and affection; moreover, she treats him as a stranger in the house. Covid-19 suspected patients as well as confirmed ones are treated in the same manner by their family members in particular and society in general. As a measure of precaution, covid-19 patients and suspected ones are quarantined. In medical terms, 'quarantine' is the displacement and imposition of the movement of the suspected persons who have been exposed to the infected environment to check the risk of dissemination of the disease. History witnesses that the practice of quarantine has reduced the spread of deadly diseases like Plague, SARS, Ebola, H1N1, MERS and Influenza (Brooks, Web).

Alienation and isolation caused by physical distancing and quarantine create a feeling of boredom and guilt in the minds of covid patients. Even their dead bodies are not allowed to be given to their relatives and family members for last rites. The practice of physical distancing makes the patients alienated from their kith and kin, restricts social liberty and creates a sense of depression. This unprecedented estrangement may harm them for longer time, if not, life-time. The imposed quarantine might imprint negative psychological impact on their mindset. This consists of psychological issues like post-traumatic imbalance, psychological exhaustion, insomnia and psychiatric complexities. According to a study, the recovered patients might suffer the long-term behavioural problems like vigilant hand washing and fear of crowd (Brooks, Web). The suffering of quarantine patients and Samsa's pathetic condition are more or less same. After witnessing the predicaments of quarantine patients, one may empathize with the agony of Samsa. The angst and suffocation of Samsa can be seen in the following textual lines:

To make his voice as clear as possible for the decisive conservation that as now imminent he coughed a little, as quietly as he could, of course, since this noise too might not sound like a human cough for all he was able to judge. In the next room meanwhile there was complete silence. Perhaps his parents were sitting

at the table with the chief clerk whispering; perhaps they were all leaning against the door and listening (Muir 33).

The routine life of corona-affected world is totally changed. There is a dire need of taking sufficient care in order to protect ourselves from the virus. Hence, the medical practitioners strongly refer some rules like sanitization, physical distancing, swab test, mask on face, frequent washing hands and avoiding social gatherings. This societal detachment may harm a person physiologically (Brooks, Web). This might align with the inborn sense of alienation and absurdity of a human being. Albert Camus, a Nobel laureate, rightly comments, in his *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusion and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile....This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity (Abrahms, 1).

Kafka, in *The Metamorphosis*, tries to unveil that bodily metamorphosis is somehow connected to the economical dimensions. Samsa's family undergoes a traumatic experience due to his passive suffering. Even after encountering this weird experience, his family tries to cope up with the socio-economic conditions. As a result, his retired father, asthma-patient mother and an unemployed sister became extremely helpless due to his unpredictable financial crisis. This pitiable financial condition compels his family to remain dependent on the unknown lodgers. Kafka summarizes alpha and omega of the same in the following words:

"I beg to announce," said the lodger, lifting one hand and looking also at Gregor's mother and sister, "that because of the disgusting conditions prevailing in this household and family"-here he spat on the floor with emphatic conditions prevailing in this household and family"- here he spat on the floor with emphatic brevity- "I give you notice on the spot. Naturally I

won't pay you a penny for the days I have lived here; on the contrary I shall consider bringing an action for lodgers against you, based on claims-believe me-that will be easily susceptible of proof" (79).

In this way, one may observe how Samsa's family struggles hard to survive in his absence. They totally became dependent on the alien lodgers for their livelihood. In the same way, corona patient might make their family dependent on strangers for survival. The lockdown which is considered as mechanism to curb and check the spread of Covid-19 pandemic also affected the economy on a micro as well as macro level creating financial vacuum (Pak, Web). The financial crisis caused by the draconian lockdown compelled the bread-winners to lose their jobs and economic stability. This aspect of decadence can be compared with the Kafkaesque world encountered by Samsa and his family. Due to lockdown, the world economy collapsed and GDP of many countries went down. The lockdown which came with air-tight regulations and suffocating authoritative decrees of the state have impacted unorganized sectors, migrant workers, daily wagers, petty farmers and labourers worldwide.

It is a universal truth that negative change in body and mind, either psychological or physical, may be detrimental to the self and the surrounding of a human being. This evil effect might deteriorate self's chance of overall development in a society. In other words, diagnosis of the above-mentioned issues is an urgent need of the hour. Kafka, in his masterpiece, *The Metamorphosis* effectively portrays alienation of a modern man. Nevertheless, the alienation may educate the affected human being to acknowledge the ways of the world. Samsa, like a pandemic affected patient, who is going through a medico-physical change, can successfully decode the concealed manifestations of the family in which one lives. For instance, Samsa comes to know only after the metamorphosis that his family was not in that much economic crisis. Another realization of Samsa is the comprehension that his family wanted to serve the unknown lodgers for financial gains instead of their son. Even Samsa's mother was found torn between the motherly affection towards her human son and natural disgust against the vermin bug. So, in the same way, the pandemic also revealed the delicate and shallow foundations of modern family.

In short, one can observe the pitiable condition of countless migrant workers who suffered due to draconian lockdown. Kafka has already captured this scenario in his *The Metamorphosis* almost a century before which shows his prophetic vision. One should really appreciate it. As an expressionist, Kafka narrates the story of transformation of Samsa into an insect just to alarm the posterity. This proves true in the time of covid 19 pandemic also. Hence, the re-reading of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is essential for descendants of Samsa to survive with the unavoidable and equally unprecedented aftermath of covid 19 pandemic. In a nutshell, a sincere effort has been made to pay a glowing tribute to his prophetic vision by revisiting Kafkaesque world.

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