

The Metamorphosis as a Critique of Enlightenment

Ravi Kumar Shrestha, PhD

Asst. Prof. of English, Patan Multiple Campus, Patandhoka, Lalitpur

Email: shrestha.ravi37@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This research article deals with the failure of enlightenment in Gregor Samsa's life which The Metamorphosis reflects. Enlightenment means the way of enlightening with the help of reasons, logics and skeptical power of knowledge on any subject/discipline. It implies the emancipation from superstitious beliefs through the power of reasons. It can be regarded as the cradle of modernity. Anyway, the God-centered medieval age is converted into the man-centered renaissance age, which is regarded as the beginning of enlightenment in the modern history of mankind. Different theorists of enlightenment believe that human life becomes perfect and social due to reasons. The modern technology and science that are uplifting the lifestyle of human beings is due to the power of reasons. However, the philosophy that reason is the core of human beings becomes a great failure in the life of Gregor Samsa in The Metamorphosis. After Samsa's physical metamorphosis into a venomous insect, he suffers from alienation, consciousness, and existentialism though he uses his inherent rationalistic power of thinking. Hence, Immanuel Kant's theory of enlightenment can be applied to show the futility of enlightenment due to the effect of modernity. Likewise, Rene Descartes' theory of existentialism can be applied to show the struggle of an individual despite the effect of modernity for the survival. Thus, for the broad theoretical framework, Kant and Descartes can be used as theorists. Their theory of enlightenment and existentialism can be used for the textual analysis of the select novella to discover that The Metamorphosis is a critique of judgment.

Key Words: Metamorphosis, Enlightenment, odernity, existentialism, critique, alienation, absurdity

Introduction

The study deals with the physical metamorphosis of the protagonist Gregor Samsa and its impact upon his life. In spite of his rigorous struggle in this modern competitive world to run his family, he becomes a failure due to his transformation from human being into a monstrous looking insect. The functioning of his brain still as the previous Gregor does not complete his being a human being. Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* revolves round Gregor Samsa dealing with enlightenment and modernity that are related to show the effect of modernity upon his life.

The study reflects the influence of Kafka's personal life too. Kafka, who was born into a middle-class, German Jewish family in Prague on July 3, 1883, was a German speaking Jewish novelist and short story writer. Regarding Kafka and his works, in 'Shame and Alienation,' Karla S. Minar writes, "Franz Kafka is considered by many to be one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. The surreal and enigmatic realm of his

fictions and the clarity of his style make Kafka a major figure of modern literature” (126). His novella *The Metamorphosis* was written in 1915 and it was published in 1922. It was the high time of industrialization which had engulfed the entire Europe then. Major industrial and scientific changes appeared in the life of people who were fully affected by such changes. The select novella becomes the literary embodiment of the then such a trend in Europe. Likewise, why Kafka’s novella becomes worth researching for the present paper becomes obvious from Ravi Kumar Shrestha who declares in ‘Dissecting the Human Nature in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*:

Europe had started facing a great uncertainty and exhausting change during the 19th century. So many changes appeared due to modernization. The modern age replaced the authority of God with the absolutes of science. Even the Enlightenment brought forth new ideas and gave an outlet to intellectual freedom. The major change that modernization brought was the industrial revolution which drastically transformed the economics and social hierarchies of Europe. On the one hand, industrialization opened the doors of job opportunities to people. On the other hand, due to it, science and technology was used. The use of machines and increase in commercial activities affected the lives of family. Europeans started struggling for identity. It started fragmenting the society. So, they suffered from anxiety, alienation and a state of hopelessness. (87)

The above quoted lines indicate that the select text is the reflection of the then industrial Europe and Gregor is the representative of the Europeans under the horrible influence of industrialization. Due to industrialization, the European society got fragmented as materialism replaced human values.

Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* is his best literary creation which even reflects not only the modernity but also some how his autobiographical element. On the one hand, his physical transformation from a human being into a bug reveals how a modern man is exploited and reduced to an insect by the modern world; on the other hand, it indicates how like his real life conflict, his father develops a conflict with him/Gregor. In this context, in “Metamorphosis and Modernism,” Asha Devi RV explains:

The haunting story of a man transformed into an insect has attracted numerous commentators, who while agreeing on the high quality and importance of the story, and also strongly disagree about what it means. Freudian, Marxist, Existentialist and religious interpretations have all been proposed and there has been debate over whether Gregor Samsa, the man turned insects symbolize human conditions. It is generally agreed, however that the story portrays a world that is hostile and perhaps absurd. The major themes in the story include father-son antagonism (Perhaps reflecting Kafka’s difficult relationship with his own father), alienation, isolation and self sacrifice. The story is sometimes praised for its symmetrical three-part structure and its use of black humour. The symbols of the story are sometimes puzzled over, but what makes the story memorable is the central situation of the transformation of man into an insect and the image of the man-Insect lying on his back helplessly waving his little insect legs in the air. (3482)

On the one hand, the above passage reveals Kafka's autographical element showing a similarity between his relationship with his father in his real life and in this novel. On the other hand, the passage reveals the black humour. Thus, his metamorphosis and alienation are caused due to the impact of modernity and his personal life.

In this way, this study tries to discover the failure of reason in the early twentieth century in the select novella since Gregor Samsa's life reflects different issues such as alienation, absurdism, existentialism and consciousness.

Objectives

This research entirely revolves round the protagonist, Gregor Samsa's failure of existence because of his physical transformation into a venomous insect from a human being. Despite the fact that Gregor as an insect uses reason to communicate, his existence as a human being becomes a failure and it leads to his end. So, this study has different objectives. One objective of the research is to discover how he is alienated from his family, society and the company. The another objective is to explore how the reason has failed for his survival. Basically, the study becomes quite purposeful for discovering the impact of modernity upon human beings.

Methodology

This research applies qualitative research methodology rather than quantitative methodology since the research is based on the study of fictitious characters delineated in the select text rather than human beings, whereas in case of quantitative research methodology, the data of human beings rather than merely fictitious characters as in anthropology and sociology are collected. In this methodology, various words and sentences are used as data. Textual analysis and inductive method are applied to scrutinize how reason becomes a failure in the life of the protagonist Samsa in the novella.

Since the entire research project revolves round the idea of reason that Samsa uses despite his physical metamorphosis, the theory of enlightenment as a broad theoretical framework is used. After Samsa's metamorphosis, he still uses his rational way of thinking although his existence is confined to a venomous insect. Due to his non-human body, he is entirely alienated from his parents, office staff and others, which indicates the failure of rationality or the reason. Hence, on the one hand, the enlightenment theory of Immanuel Kant becomes applicable to use as a theory. Kant's philosophy of enlightenment is applied from "What is enlightenment?". On the other hand, as the failure of the reason affects the existence of Samsa, which indicates that the theory of existence can also be applicable, Rene Descartes' theory of existence is also used.

Discussion

Modernity is related to enlightenment. The origin of modernity is traced back to enlightenment. The enlightenment thinkers think about the systematic functioning of the human society. So, they put society and social relations under intense scrutiny. These thinkers/theorists are concerned with the attainment of human and social perfection. They

regard reason as the core of human beings. According to that philosophy, since Gregor Samsa the protagonist of the novella can use his rationalistic power of thinking in spite of his transformation into a venomous insect, he should be quite systematic, meaningful and successful. But, the failure of his human life reflects the failure of his enlightened mind in the novella, which indicates that the fundamental principle of enlightenment is not only to bring happiness, meaningfulness and success in the life of human beings. If enlightenment were to lead to mental liberation and social betterment among human beings, Gregor would definitely get social and mental liberation and his life would be quite meaningful and successful. His failure in life raises questions about the achievements of human rationalism, which are caused by enlightenment. Gregor's problems such as alienation, existentialism, consciousness and so on reflect that *The Metamorphosis* is a critique of enlightenment although enlightenment gives a remedy for the problems of human beings according to the enlightenment thinkers.

The novella begins with Gregor Samsa's transformation "One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous vermin" (3). Due to his metamorphosis, there is no union of his body as human body and his mind in his self. Human mind is separated from the human body as the transformed body is the insect body, whereas the mind is still that of the human. As the text shows his way of thinking as human beings do, the metamorphosis can be regarded only as physical metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa. In spite of his metamorphosis, Gregor does not feel it, but instead he develops a sense of responsibility showing difficulty in discharging his duties:

"Oh god," he thought, "what a demanding job I have chosen! Day in day out, on the road. The stresses of selling are much greater than the work going on at the head office, and in addition to that I have to cope with the problems of travelling, the worries about train connections, irregular bad food, temporary and constantly changing human relationships which never come from the heart. To hell with it all!" (3-4)

Though his mind does think as a human mind, it does not work due to metamorphosis. Hence, the inclusion and inherent of reason in his existence in spite of separation of the body does not become reasonable to make his life meaningfully successful.

Likewise, his physical metamorphosis alienates him from his family and working colleagues although he is concerned about his duty towards his family and company. His monologic commentary in the text reveals his pathos of being alienated and othered. His monologue "I am really so indebted to Mr. Chief- you know that perfectly well. On the other hand, I am concerned about my parents and my sister. I am in a fix, but I will work myself out of it again. Don't make things more difficult for me than they already are. Speak up on behalf of me in the office" (13) shows how he is distanced from his family and profession. Alienation means keeping someone away from others or a social group. Gregor Samsa's sudden and tragic physical transformation becomes the major cause of his alienation. In 'Gregor Samsa's Self Alienation in Frantz Kafka's Metamorphosis: Lacanian Psychoanalysis,' Devicha Lidya Asriningtyas Alimustafa writes:

In both Gregor Samsa's mind and body, the metamorphosis from a person to a beetle takes place in stages. Gregor Samsa is alienated from his family, job, community, emotions, feelings, and surroundings as a result of his lack of psychological links with his family and society. Gregor Samsa must overcome his isolation from people around him until he accepts his own identity and dies horribly. (263)

It seems to be awkward that such a creature thinking rationally that he was previously working as a human being can be useful for a business company in such a competitive materialistic world. In the text, as soon as Gregor has opened the door, the chief utters a sound loudly "Oh!" (12), which indicates the manager's disappointment to see Gregor as an insect. Although he becomes a good analyst of his situation because of his rational way of thinking, he has to lose his status as a human being due to metamorphosis.

Gregor's split personality between the insectile body and human reason appears like the failure of reason and emotion felt in the seventeenth and eighteenth century enlightenment. He finds his family quite shocked and changed to see his physical metamorphosis. As for his mother, she gets even fainted due to the terrible shock seeing his son in the form of the insect. In such a painful state of Gregor, it is natural for him to expect the intimacy of his parents and sister. However, his mother is not allowed to enter the room and gradually he gets alienated from his family. His mother's fear to see Gregor as the insect "'Oh God, oh God' and felt with outstretched arms, as if she was surrendering everything, down onto the couch and lay there motionless. 'Gregor, you...' cried out his sister with a raised fist and an urgent glare" (30) reveals not only Gregor's alienation but also the indifference of his family towards him. The communication between Gregor and his family becomes impossible. Only the rationalization of the mind of the insectile body becomes a great failure since the novella reveals high human consciousness of an insect. The confinement and isolation become highly unbearable painful experiences for him despite his enlightened mind. Mainly, the insectile body symbolizes the deadly effect of enlightenment caused by modernity. Rene descartes' philosophy in *Discourse on the Method* "I am thinking therefore I am" appears to be a failure. S. L. Dhoni claims:

Quite like Weber, Simmel propounded the theory of modernity in terms of the hegemony of rationality in human life. He also argued that modernity is not always beneficial. It has its gloomy side too. There is alienation in industrial society; there is anomie among individuals. But this is just a simplistic way of looking at modernity and rationalization. The basic tenets of modernization theory consists of money and exchange relations. (73)

The above quoted lines uncover how Weber and Simmel who are the theorists of modernity point out the dark side of modernity, which is the dominance of rationalization over human beings. Because of such excessive rationality of human beings, the insectile Gregor has been regarded as dehumanized one. Weam Majeed Alkhafaji seems to agree with Dhoni's views regarding Gregor Samsa's alienation. In "A study of Alienation in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* as a Moral Guide for the New Generation," Alkhafaji claims:

. . . industrial revolution robbed workers of their dignity by treating them as a means for benefit. This is why Gregor was so confused when he awakened as an insect, his main distress was job. The bug is concerned about what reason he might use for being late to work. This further illustrates that he was detested before his real dehumanization. Samsa was unimportant to his feeling of being useless; he was still lifeless in the old days even as a real man. (16032)

Gregor's alienation can be taken in terms of excessive mental pressure given to human beings by industrial revolution. What is striking in the life of Gregor is in place of showing sympathy upon him knowing his reality of being a helpless bug, he is shown indifference and even given a threat by his company. The company representative's voices indicate only the exploitation of workers. The manager shouted at Gregor along with a threat:

And I am totally losing any desire to speak up for you in the slightest. And your position is not at all the most secure. Only I intended to mention all this to you privately, but since you are letting me waste my time here uselessly, I don't know why the matter shouldn't come to the attention of your parents. Your productivity has also been very unsatisfactory recently. Of course it is not the time of year to conduct exceptional business, we recognize that, but a time of year for conducting no business, there is no such thing at all, Mr Samsa, and such a thing never must never be. (10)

The manager's failure in understanding Samsa's voice indicates the company's failure and reluctance to understand and sympathize the workers' tragic plight of being alienated from the others. The cause behind is companies are purposefully opened to enhance materialism rather than to feel for the workers, which is the reality developed along with the rise of industrialization in the twentieth century. Descartes' concept "But it does certainly dictate that all our ideas or notions must have some foundation in truth" (34) supports the idea that the truth behind Samsa's alienation is no company develops a positive attitude towards a useless person like Samsa.

Besides, Samsa's alienation reflects how the modernity imposes on people and how moderners like Samsa suffer from restriction. According to Kant, the main obstacle for enlightenment is restriction. Enlightenment should be related to freedom, but freedom of individuals is controlled by restriction. Kant's arguments "Freedom is restricted everywhere. Which restriction, however, hinders enlightenment? Which does not, but instead even promotes it? In answer: the public use of reason must at all times be free and it alone can bring enlightenment among men" (59) indicate that Samsa suffers from unnecessary restriction. In this context, Kant's focus on reason does not help because reason has also some limitations. In his research "Crisis of Enlightenment Rationality in High Modernism: A Case Study in

Literature, Philosophy and Art," Yubaraj Aryal claims, "But Enlightenment forgets that what is reasonable is reasonable within the limits. It becomes oblivion to see the conditions of reason. Indeed the formative conditions of reason are unreason" (9). So, Samsa's reason does not get implemented due to the impact of high modernism in the twentieth century as it

gave birth to the rise of materialism rather than the space for emotions, sentiments, feelings and love.

One important aspect of the paper is it reveals existential problem of the protagonist in the select novella. On the one hand, the second world war causes despair and disappointment among people throughout the world and mainly in Europe; on the other hand the modernity treats humans like the machines. As a result, people face existential crisis. Gregor's life is reflected in the novell like this. Due to Gregor's transformation into a bug, his family and others are alienated from him. He feels for them, but they slowly and slowly let him suffer alone. His existence of being Gregor has collapsed and he is merely confined to a non-human bug. Kafka states Gregor's painful plight alone in his room as a bug when nobody cares him:

Gregor spent his nights and days with hardly any sleep. Sometimes he thought the next time the door opened he would take over the family arrangements just as he had earlier. In his imagination appeared again, after a long time, his employer and supervisor, and the apprentices, the excessively spineless custodian, two or three friends from other businesses, a chambermaid from the hotel in the provinces, a loving fleeting memory, a female cashier from the hat shop, whom he had seriously but too slowly courted- they all appeared mixed. . . (36)

Gregor has existential crisis, however he thinks like a human being to take responsibility of his family. He is no longer needed in his family and society as he has been a bug. In "Existential Plight of Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*," Nur Selina and Tasnim Amin argue "However, the reason for his existential opinion is not only his father. Kafka's despair stems from a sense of ultimate alienation from sincere communion with all human beings—his friends, the women he loved, the work he hated, the society he lived in and with God, with actual everlasting Being" (416). Both of the critics mean to argue that Gregor's existential problem is caused by the modernity which has reduced human beings to machines or animals, but not human beings because human beings should have both the bodies and souls. Such human beings' souls reflect humanity. However, in the novella, the failure of the reason is reflected, which indicates the failure of enlightenment and the modification of the reason. Friedrich Nietzsche's views towards reason and truth become important to relate to Kafka's philosophy. Though Kafka is not a philosopher like Nietzsche, he is highly influenced by philosophers and so his this novella reflects existential and absurd philosophy. For the existence of human life, reasons are created and truth is modified according to him. In "Truth and Falsity Nietzsche points out about reason, "... there was once a star upon which clever animals invented cognition" (634). Aryal argues in his thesis "In Kafka's *"The Metamorphosis"* the absolute truth and reasonable human

behaviours are suspended. Kafka's characters live in the world in which truth is revealed in some illogical human activities" (12). Aryal doubts that reason and truth appear as they are regarded in world.

Last but not the least, the paper deals with Kafka's use of absurdism in the select novella. Gregor's physical metamorphosis into a bug is shown as a great absurd by Kafka. Likewise, the family gradually getting alienated from Gregor is another absurd. Particularly, Gregor's mother's becoming indifference towards his son and father's attacking him with an apple appear to be really absurd. Finally, Gregor's death owing to getting humiliation, alienation and deformation is not absurd. However, Kafka's use of absurdism gets reflected in the novella. In "Absurdity in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis: An Analysis*," Smita Mishra writes, "Kafka brings about the absurd element in *The Metamorphosis* by transforming his protagonist, Gregor Samsa, into a despicable insect. He offers no explanation for Samsa's affliction and the protagonist himself does not search for one. Instead he focuses on Samsa's efforts to cope with it. He dives into the family's reaction and their attempts in overcoming the loss. . . ." (413). What Mishra wants to point out is Gregor's struggle for existence becomes too weak for him to survive as Charles Darwin says that struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. In this context, in "Kafka's *Metamorphosis: An Analysis on Social Structure, Disability, and Alienation*," critics Rameez Rajad and Ananya Dasyghosh argue:

From the concept of Gregor's transformation we can correlate how the Victorian era of England witnessed the sociological and existential tremors from the British Naturalist, Charles Darwin in his work '*On The Origin Of species*' introduces the world to an etymology of 'survival of the fittest'. The theory suggests that organisms best adjusted to their environment are the most successful in surviving and reproducing which impacts on the survival situations for Gregor in this particular novella too. The struggle for existence in the revolutionary theme of mankind is one such theme which floats from the opening of the novel in itself. (88)

Thus, human being's transformation into a non-human does not become acceptable in the human society as such a deformed body does not become the fittest for the survival in the world. Hence, Gregor's only power of thinking does not help, but his absurdity becomes the cause of hopelessness, alienation and failure of his existence. Here, Kant's enlightenment and Descartes' philosophy of existence become a failure. Instead, Darwin's theory becomes very contextually relevant.

Conclusions

In this way, this research discovers that the reason which makes life of human beings such as Gregor Samsa in the select novella better in the modern world according to the theorists such as Kant and Descartes becomes a great failure. Instead, modernity with reason changes human beings into machines, which ultimately transform human beings into non-humans such as the bug that can not be the fittest ones for survival in the world according to Darwin. The modernity alienates Gregor from his family, society and company, creates disappointment in his life, makes him unfit for survival and ultimately takes his life.

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