

Existential Uncertainty In The Select Short Stories Of Franz Kafka

Sindhu N S

Assistant Professor of English

Government College for Women (Autonomous)

Mandya

Karnataka

Dr Sushma K N

Assistant Professor of English

Government First Grade College

Nanjanagodu

Karnataka

Abstract

Franz Kafka is one of the most influential writers of the early twentieth century who has had a great impact on the literature and thought of not only Europe, but also on the world literature. He is one among the major writers who dealt with inevitable crisis- a part of life of the modern man. Though he never called himself an existentialist, we can find the major traits of existentialism in his works- uncertainty, absurdity, alienation- to name a few. 'Individual', which constitutes the focal point of existentialism, is the centre of his work. Every nook and corner of human mind is explored and the entire world is seen from an individual's perspective in his works. According to Kafka, every human being is unique. The requirement of each and every individual is different. Everyone has one's own private world where none has an arbitrary entry. Kafka's depiction of the individual, the subject and its experience is so powerful that the adjective 'Kafkaesque' serves the purpose for whatever it was coined. The current paper, through some of Kafka's short stories focuses on one of the major tenets of existentialism- 'uncertainty'.

Key Words: Existentialism, Kafkaesque, Uncertainty, Individual, Modern man

According to Ritchie Robertson,

Reading Kafka is a puzzling experience. Impossible events occur with an air of inevitability, and no explanation is forthcoming, Gregor Samsa is turned into an insect, without knowing how or why. Joseph K. never learns the reason for his arrest. The other K. never reaches the Castle and cannot understand why he cannot meet the official who summoned him there as a land surveyor.' (*Kafka: Very Short Introduction* 26)

The centre of Kafka's world is 'modern man'. The sensibility that he displays in his works and the emotion behind the very same sensibility is common to every individual irrespective of nations and races. The flavour of absurdity is just overwhelming; it may be from an incomplete novel or the shortest story of four lines. The people we meet there or the places we come across are sort of unheard of. But the meanings they give out are astonishing. He opened new doors to probe into the darkest corners of the human mind. As we enter into the world created by Kafka we are caught inside the cobweb of absurdity.

One of the major themes of Kafka's works is that of uncertainty. When we read Kafka's biography, the decisions of Kafka in certain aspects have the tinge of uncertainty. 'To be or not to be' is the stand that constantly troubled Kafka, which of course is a general human tendency. Kafka wrote many of the short stories inspired by this attitude of his own self. The stories in the *Meditation* present this theme. A very short story 'Trees' is significant in this respect. The story reads as follows.

For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a light push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can't be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance (*The Complete Stories*, 382).

The reader is sure to fall in a dilemma when he or she reads a story as this. The main impetus behind such stories might be the uncertainty of the place and position of the Jews in Austria during Kafka's time and the insignificant and uncertain position of the human beings in this vast universe. The stories seem to be experimentation with the mood of the writer. The combination of illusion and reality works well on the readers. The 'Trees' though very small in size never allows the reader to arrive at any conclusion. 'The wish to become a Red Indian' is another short story which also brings out a feeling of instability.

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's head and neck would already gone (*The Complete Stories* 390)

In the opening of the story, the narrator expresses his wish to become a Red Indian with the zeal of leading an adventurous and happening life with the grandeur of riding a swift horse. But as the story begins with a great spirit, the fall in the spirit also begins. Everything vanishes- the spurs, reins and ultimately horse's head. With the vanishing of these things, the ride loses its charm. The text comes to a sudden halt and there is a sudden halt in the thought process of the narrator also. The story with the title 'On the Tram' is another example that goes in this tone.

I stand on the end platform of the tram and am completely unsure of my footing in this world, in this town, in my family. Not even casually could I indicate any claims that I might rightly advance in any direction. I have not even any defence to offer for standing on this platform, holding on to this strap, letting myself be carried along by this tram, nor for the people who give way to the tram or walk quietly along or stand

gazing into shop windows. Nobody asks me to put up a defense, indeed, but that is irrelevant (*The Complete Stories* 388).

The tram has no fixed status and it is meant to move around from one place to another. This indicates the lack of fixed settlement to the human beings. The narrator of the story neither defends nor justifies his action of standing on the tram or holding on the strap or moving by the tram. He is also unable to defend the behaviour of his co passengers. The question that arises here is that when one cannot justify the simple action people of moving in the tram, can one really justify the existence of human beings on the earth. Further the story, 'Unmasking a Confidence Trickster'(395) tells us about the feeling of anxiety in the narrator when he thinks that somebody, behind his back is making an attempt to betray him and that he has to escape the danger. The narrator heaves a sigh of relief when he feels that he has escaped from the impending danger. But the reader can never judge whether the accusation of the narrator is true. The story 'Passers-by', on the other hand shows the same theme. The narrator of the story looks at the two men running one behind the other. Here he goes on guessing about the purpose of their movement. As he goes on guessing, a number of possibilities cross his mind. He gets puzzled. At one point he even thinks that if he could intervene in their affairs. But the story ends abruptly and the readers are left with no conclusion.

Some stories of Kafka describe the loneliness, an inherent element of the human existence. 'The Small Businessman' (385) is a story told from the perspective of a businessman. The protagonist of the story, a businessman when busy with the work ponders about his work related problems and also sympathises the distressful state of his fellow human beings. At once, he wishes to be done away with everything and just slip into a solitary mood. He looks forward to go home and be left for himself. But as we read the story, the narrator feels even that futile. He just concludes with neither glory nor the pomp of the luxury of the solitude, but with a tone of world weariness.

'The Way Home' (387) presents us the narrator who we may feel is a step ahead of the narrator of 'The Small Businessman', when it comes to the about the realisation of his existence. The narrator is well aware of his past as well as his present life. Nowhere has he got a point to grumble against any injustice done to him. But there is an ultimate sense of dissatisfaction which lingers. In the same meditative mood the narrator enters home and the feeling of emptiness grows intense. He fails to find any aspect in his life which would give meaning to his life. He opens the window and listens to the music pouring from the garden. Now there is a sudden end in the thought process of the narrator. The story ends with a note of uncertainty. The music does not change his mood but puts an end to his contemplation. 'The Bachelor's Ill Luck' (394) describes the life of an old bachelor. The story is presented as a thought experiment. A married man with children tries to imagine the unhappy state of a bachelor. The key theme of the story is the loneliness.

The work place drudgery is one concept that haunts Kafka constantly. As Kafka worked in a Life Insurance Company, he knew the problems of the factory workers processing their cases and also the trials and tribulations of an official in his own difficult work schedule. As it is mentioned already, Kafka was so much fed up of his

routine work that he wanted to quit his job. But he could not do that owing to many reasons. Though the climax of this theme is reached in *The Metamorphosis*, a slight hint about Kafka's preoccupation is given through the short stories, 'Poseidon' and 'Prometheus'. The Sea God Poseidon is presented by him as a disgruntled manager of waters, instead of a grand picture of Gods that we usually have. According to mythology, Poseidon is the earth shaker, the God of Seas, brother of Zeus. But Kafka in his fiction makes him an ordinary employee. The employment that he has been assigned with is also not very satisfying. Poseidon is not very happy with his routine work. He can hardly enjoy the beauty of water though he works over it. On very rare occasions he catches the glimpse of the sea when he rarely visits Jupiter only on official purposes. He is afraid that he will have to do this boring work until the end of the world (434).

In 'My Neighbour' (424) the protagonist is a young and an active merchant with a confident outlook about his business prospects. But his confidence is shaken by a neighbour by name Harras, who is also an upcoming businessman. The narrator is unnerved by the activities of his neighbour. Though he confesses that he hardly has got any complaint against his neighbour, a sense of insecurity is evident in his behaviour. The narrator wants to know about the activities of Harras, in vain. He is constantly under the notion that he is going to harm him commercially. The professional competition, uncertainties and risks involved in modern business world is shown very subtly. The name of the neighbour really harasses the protagonist. Another thing to be observed here is that the protagonist is not working under anybody and that he is his own boss, yet, frustrated. Being one's own boss increases the number of problems rather than minimising. It means more responsibility, stress and insecurity.

The woes of a travelling salesman are not better expressed anywhere as expressed in *The Metamorphosis*. Time is money for a businessman. The anxiety that Gregor feels to catch the train, his inability to get up from the bed and also his helpless state at the end unnerve the readers. We are not only overcome with the grief for the protagonist but also tend to get horrified at the plight of the modern man better expressed through the character of Gregor Samsa, who laments,

'Oh God!' He thought. 'What a strenuous profession I've chosen! Day in, day out on the move. The stresses of making deals are far greater than they are in the actual business at home. And on the top of that I'm burdened with the misery of travelling; there's the worry about train connections, the poor, irregular meals, human contact that is always been changing, never lasting, never approaching warmth (*The Complete Short Stories* 89).

The story 'The Common Confusion' elaborates this theme. The characters A and B show the readers the crucial role that time plays in their daily business transactions. A and B are to meet at a certain place, H for a business deal. But time is a constraint for A and with his failure to keep up the time he misses a business deal. When he makes up his mind, adjusts himself to accommodate to the time of B, the latter vanishes forever. Though A and B are hard workers and strive hard to achieve their goal in business, they fail. Kafka here unravels the busy schedule and uncertain business prospects for the businessmen. The world presented in this story is the typical

nightmarish Kafkaesque one. At the same time cannot be brushed aside as unreal and exaggerated. Elizabeth

Trahan writes,

This world is strictly ordered by its style, disciplined by its tone, determined by its facts. Not for a moment do we assume that the outcome of the story is merely due to a wrong choice by A and B, a simple error on their calculations or judgement, or that a mere whim brought about this particular sequence of events, that they are insignificant trifles. This world exists and is autonomous. It remains to discover its values and workings – to the extent possible to us outsiders (“‘A Common Confusion’: A Basic Approach to Franz Kafka's World.” 269–278)

As we analyse Kafka’s works through the lens of existentialism it becomes clear to us Kafka was exposed to tensions on both personal and global level and their implications was intense on him. He refashioned existentialism according to the spirit of the milieu in which he wrote. As we go through the works of Kafka and his biographical details it becomes clear to us that more than any philosopher or the writer, socio-political turmoil which characterised the first two decades of the twentieth century influenced him and the same is mirrored in his works. Kafka’s works are more relevant today because the uncertainties faced by man are more intense than the situation a century ago. The impact of literature on world literary scenario and even on the Hollywood cinema is proved by the coining of the word ‘Kafkaesque’ which denotes his unique style of writing and treatment of the subject.

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