



Exploring Existentialism and its Key Concepts in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *A Hunger Artist*

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Abstract

The core aim of this paper is to implement the existential elements in the select works of Franz Kafka, such as *The Metamorphosis* and *A Hunger Artist*. Kafka's writing describes their profound engagement with the complexities of human existence, especially for the individual's struggle to construct meaning and identity in a different and irrational world. Here, in the paper, the scholar wants to apply existential tools such as alienation, identity crises, absurdity, meaninglessness, and isolation in selected works. The primary focus of this research is to study existential philosophy and its key elements, as well as to explore existential and modern crises in human life through the selected works of Kafka. Through the works of Franz Kafka, the researcher wants to study human life and its structure with selected existential tools. After applying these core elements to both works, the researcher will critically evaluate them based on the arguments of both protagonists. The writings of Franz Kafka highlight how his narrative reflects the universal condition of existential anxiety and the continuous search for identity and purpose in human life.

Keywords: Alienation, Existential Crisis, identity, Absurdity, Meaninglessness, Isolation, Kafka

Introduction

Franz Kafka is one of the most influential writers whose works explore the psychological and emotional experiences of individuals who feel alienated within themselves and within incomprehensible social systems. The characters are frequently engaged in a desperate inward search, trapped in irrational, ambiguous, and oppressive situations that reveal deeper concern for human identity, existence, and meaning. In Franz Kafka's works, characters have to confront strange systems and enormous forces in a world that feels like a nightmare. The kind of stories that Kafka has written are called "Kafkaesque," and that is what he called his literary style. His characters are alone, as if they are cut off from the world and even from themselves. For example, Gregor Samsa changes into an insect in *The Metamorphosis*. Kafka's *The Trial* portrays people as powerless against hidden and bureaucratic forces that shape their lives without providing a reason. A lot of the time, his stories depict how the protagonists' bodies or thoughts

alter to show how scared, worried, or out of control they feel. Through these parts, Kafka shows a world where it's challenging to discover meaning, justice is unachievable, and people have no authority.

The writing of Kafka explores the ideas of existentialism; the movement or philosophical concept connected to such profound writers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The characters Gregor and the Hunger Artist raise important questions about struggle, human challenges, and the identity and value of existence. The central purpose of the study is to analyse such aspects in the selected works of Franz Kafka.

Kafka talked about real human conflict and existential uncertainty. Kafka saw life as fundamentally absurd and illogical. Human life is all about continuous struggle, emotional suffering, and an endless search for meaning in the world, which remains silent and indifferent. Many of Franz Kafka's works show the absurdity of human life, like the character who suddenly transforms from a human into an insect. This work totally shows the idea of the absurd later developed by Camus, as a conflict between the human desire for meaning and a universe that offers none. Same as Kafka, characters also struggle with existential questions regarding identity, freedom, guilt, and the search for meaning. Kafka's characters are wandering in confusing states of mind to discover proper solutions but can't discover meaning.

Existentialism

The philosophy of Existentialism started in the 19th and 20th centuries. Major contributors to this philosophy are Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Soren Kierkegaard was one of the pioneer writers of this philosophy. The Second World War drastically changed human perspectives, making the impact of existentialist philosophy evident. A person who suffered in the war shared his experiences, which created drastic changes in his life. It raised several questions in the minds of the humans about whether life exists or not in the present world.

The ideology behind human existence was raised by Blaise Pascal, the writer and philosopher, in the 17th century; critical discussion and research have been done in the 19th century by Martin Hedegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Simone de Beauvoir.

The experimental and subjective thoughts and logical discussions presented in the 20th century by Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger are both connected with the emergence of existentialist philosophy. The diversity of existential thoughts extends to religious, metaphysical, moral, and political subjects. The ancient philosopher Plato and his disciple both discussed the essence of life through the Alpha and Omega theory, which relates to the concept of life. Soren Kierkegaard is known as the father of existentialist theory. He was a Danish theologian and philosopher. The point of view of Kierkegaard is that meaning can be given to life through the leap of faith. The meaning of the term 'leap of faith' is belief in God; through this act, you will survive and feel every experience of life. If people have faith in their ability and capability, then meaning will be created. This is the central point of Kierkegaard's theory.

The theorist Kierkegaard raised several questions about life; the first question is, 'What is the objective of life?' How does life have any meaning? What is the role of humans in the present life? Kierkegaard's theory exemplifies the subjective approach. You are free to make your decision because you are free to choose your path in the world, which defines the subjective meaning of life based on a person's own experience. According to Kierkegaard's theory, a person is entitled to decide their journey. Existentialism theory focused on individual existence and life; Kierkegaard explained more in his work 'Stages of Life.' "Here, Kierkegaard narrated three different stages to justify his view: "The first one is aesthetic, the second is ethical, and the third is religious. The ethical phase is the transition phase; the aesthetic phase is the phase of immediacy, and the religious phase is a phase of fulfilment" (Farah 3). Kierkegaard's point of view is that human beings can remove anxiety, depression, and all problems through blind belief or blind faith. This concept is called the Leap of Faith. Sartre's ideas of existentialism are similar to

Kierkegaard, but his ideology regarding faith is different. Sartre discusses how life is purposeless and illogical; for him, existence is absurd. He totally believed in the individual existence of every person. Man is free to do anything. He has no restrictions or bonds that can hold him back. He further elaborated that believing in a god imposes responsibilities, which means you are not truly free.

Sartre is talking about existence; he said that existence precedes essence. It means existence comes first, then the essence. He even mentioned that existence is absurd because death is permanent. And one has to follow the life cycle without any certainty. The positive aspect of human life is the freedom of choice. For Sartre, existence, freedom of choice, and responsibility create essence. Freedom is making man free from all the burdens.

The view of Jean-Paul Sartre is that the existentialist theory questions existence and rejects essence because it is illusory. People question their existence, whether life means anything or not. The philosopher of existentialism explored the question of human existence, its value, and its purpose. The common elements of existentialism are anxiety, existential crisis, questions about existence, absurdity, authenticity, and human virtues.

Research Objectives

- 1 To implement several existential tools like alienation, identity crisis, absurdity, meaninglessness, and isolation in select works.
2. To study the philosophy of existentialism in the selected works of Franz Kafka.
3. To study the philosophical ideas of writers and philosophers who are associated with existentialism.
4. To find out how these selected tools affected the character's life structure.

Theoretical Framework

This study is highlighting existentialism, a philosophical concept based on human existence, individual freedom, and the search for meaning in an uncertain and often irrational world. Existentialism, developed by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, emphasized that human beings are not born with a fixed mindset or essence; rather, they create their identity through their actions, choices, and experiences.

Within this framework, several concepts are suitable for analysing the works. Alienation refers to the condition in which individuals feel disconnected from society, others, and themselves. "Identity crisis" suggested the instability and fragmentation of personal identity. Absurdity explained the human struggle to discover meaning in the meaningless nature of the world. Meaninglessness emphasizes the absence of inherent purpose, while isolation highlights both physical and emotional separation. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *A Hunger Artist* represent existential concerns. His characters are placed in situations that disrupt their identity and their understanding of existence. This existential concept interpreted Kafka's narrative as a representation of the modern human condition, where individuals struggle to construct meaning in a fragmented and individual world.

Research Methodology

This research is all about a qualitative, interpretive use of a textual analysis method to analyze the selected primary texts. The study is based on close textual analysis of *The Metamorphosis* and *A Hunger Artist*, specifically focusing on characters' psychological and emotional mindsets. Here, an existentialist framework has been used for the analysis of primary texts, with key concepts such as alienation, identity crises, absurdity, meaninglessness, and isolation guiding the interpretation. The research also incorporates secondary sources, including philosophical texts and critical studies, to support the analysis.

This method allows for a more profound understanding of how Kafka represents existential crises in different narrative contexts.

Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Alienation

Alienation is the most prominent and recurring theme in the stories "The Metamorphosis" and "A Hunger Artist". In the story, Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect shows his complete separation from human society but also describes his emotional, psychological, and spiritual isolation. Through the character of Gregor, the writer aims to depict a modern man who is disconnected from his family, society, and even his identity. His inability to communicate effectively isolates him both physically and emotionally in life.

Gregor's alienation occurred even before his physical transformation. Here, the sudden transformation of Gregor reflects alienation in the protagonist's life; his sudden transformation symbolises his complete separation from human life. Even before his transformation, he already lived an alienated life. He works continuously to support his parents and sister, sometimes sacrificing his desires and freedom. His job is very pathetic and exhausting; he also has no meaningful social relationships outside of his family. Therefore, Gregor's life demonstrates both external and internal alienation.

After an insect, Gregor's alienation becomes visible and extreme. He is excluded from everything, though his body transforms, but his mind initially remains human. He still worries about missing work, disappointing his employer, and supporting his family financially. However, his inability to communicate creates a barrier between him and others. His family no longer recognizes his inner humanity. This communication gap symbolizes the existential condition in which individuals fail to truly connect with one another.

Gregor's own father no longer treats him as a son but treats him as a dangerous creature. His father did not show sympathy and concern but determined to remove him from the house.

His father, of course, in his present mood was far from thinking of such a thing as opening the other half of the door, to let Gregor have enough space. He had merely the fixed idea of driving Gregor back into his room as quickly as possible. He would never have suffered Gregor to make the circumstantial preparations for standing up on end and perhaps slipping his way through the door. Maybe he was now making more noise than ever to urge Gregor forward, as if no obstacle impeded him; to Gregor, anyhow, the noise in his rear sounded no longer like the voice of one single father. (Kafka 6)

Kafka further illustrates the atmosphere of Gregor's family. At first, they show concern and sympathy, but slowly and gradually they begin to fear and reject him. His room gradually transforms into a prison, isolating him from his identity within that space. His family removes his furniture from his room, symbolising the destruction of his human identity and personal history. Eventually, Gregor is treated not as a family member but as a burden and an unwanted object. His father was too bored with Gregor and felt burdened by him; even his sister said that they must get rid of him. This rejection reveals the conditional nature of human relationships in materialist society. Modern society and his economic status determine the value of a man. When he is economically useful, people value him, but once he loses the ability to work, he loses his place within the family structure.

In A Hunger Artist, alienation takes a more symbolic and psychological form. Unlike Gregor, the hunger artist is constantly visible to society because his fasting performance attracts public attention. Despite the presence of viewers, he remains emotionally isolated. The audience watches him only for entertainment and curiosity; they never understand his inner dedication or artistic passion. This creates a painful separation between the individual and society. The artist was emotionally distracted by society because

he thought that nobody truly understood him; he said, "It was impossible to fight against this lack of understanding, against this world of misunderstanding" (Kafka 55).

The hunger artist believes that fasting is considered an art form, but for society it is a temporary spectacle. Here people are bored and lose interest in fasting performances. A new form of entertainment emerged, replacing the fasting performances. The lack of public interest gradually erases his memory from everyone's minds. So, his attention is not physical but existential. He thought that no one really understood him, including the impresario who manages his performances. Even when he dies, he remains unnoticed.

Kafka has demonstrated the concept of alienation that is an unavoidable part of modern existence. Gregor is isolated because he becomes physically different, while the hunger artist is isolated because society cannot understand his inner truth. In both cases, the individual remains trapped in loneliness and understanding.

6.2 Identity Crisis

Kafka's works deeply connect the concept of identity crisis to existential philosophy. Both Gregor Samsa and the hunger artist struggle to define who they are in a world where identity depends upon external recognition and social function.

Before his transformation, Gregor's identity is entirely based on his role as a worker and provider. He sacrifices his ambitions and personal happiness to support his parents and sister financially. His existence revolves around duty and responsibility. Kafka implies that Gregor's individuality has already vanished due to the constraints of economic and social expectations.

After his transformation into an insect, his social and economic role collapses immediately. Since Gregor can no longer work or earn money, he loses the foundation of his identity. He loses the foundation of his identity. Even his family and employer stop recognizing him as a human being. This creates a severe identity crisis because Gregor's sense of self depended entirely on external usefulness.

Gregor's inner conflict became increasingly painful throughout the story. Mentally, he still thinks and feels like a human, but physically he becomes more insect-like. He was struggling to manage his body, crawling on walls, hiding under furniture, and gradually adapting to insect behaviour. This concept shows a conflict between human consciousness and animal body and describes existential anxiety about the instability of identity. The sudden transformation raises questions about Gregor's life, leading him to contemplate his existence and identity. He himself thought, "What's happened to me? It was no dream" (Kafka 1). Gregor slowly disconnected from everyone. And his human past. His emotional connection to his family: Kafka portrays this connection as a weakness, ultimately leading him to accept isolation and death. Kafka portrays his emotional connection to his family as a weakness, which ultimately leads him to accept isolation and death. Kafka discussed human identity because it can disappear when society withdraws recognition and value from an individual.

The same, A Hunger Artist, also illustrates this as an identity crisis. The same theme of identity crisis is illustrated in A Hunger Artist. His identity: Fasting completely defines his identity. to fasting. The artist believes that fasting is his unique talent and life purpose. Unlike common people, he describes himself through suffering and self-denial. However, society gradually loses interest in his performances. As the audience disappears, the hunger artist begins to question the value of his art and existence. He has lost the ability to describe himself as an artist of fasting. His identity changes as a result of his artistic practice. He said, "Because I had to fast. I can't do anything else" (Kafka 89).

The climax occurred during his death, when he finally admitted that he fasted because he had never found food, he enjoyed eating. This confession destroyed the heroic image of the dedicated artist. His life's purpose suddenly appears meaningless and empty. Kafka said that the hunger artist's identity was based on illusion rather than authentic fulfilment.

Both Gregor and the hunger artist felt an identity crisis because of society and its structure. Kafka explained that modern individuals often build their identities on unstable foundations such as work, social approval, or public recognition. Once these foundations disappear, the individual confronts existential emptiness and confusion. This situation leads to existential emptiness and confusion for the individual.

6.3 Absurdity

Absurdity is the central existential aspect in Kafka's fiction. Kafka described life as irrational, unpredictable, and impossible to fully understand. Human beings often search for meaning, but reality often appears strange and meaningless. In *The Metamorphosis*, absurdity begins with Gregor's transformation into an insect.

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed 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 slightly, he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff, arched segments, on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep its position and was about to slide off completely. (Kafka 1)

Kafka never explains how or why this transformation occurs. There are no specific, religious, or supernatural explanations. The event simply happens, and the characters are forced to accept it. This lack of explanation creates a sense of absurdity because it violates logical expectations.

The characters' reactions further highlight the absurdity of the situation. Instead of questioning the impossible transformation, Gregor immediately worries about being late for work. His family also focuses more on financial problems than on the shocking event itself. Gregor was still in a dilemma after the transformation, as he was physically fit enough to do his job. Economic concerns dominate human life even in extraordinary situations.

Gregor was still in a dilemma after the transformation, as he felt physically fit enough to do his job. "Well," said Gregor, knowing perfectly that he was the only one who had retained any composure, "I'll put my clothes on at once, pack up my samples, and start off. Will you only let me go? You see, sir, I'm not obstinate, and I'm willing to work; travelling is a challenging life, but I couldn't live without it" (Kafka 89).

The absurdity continues throughout the story. Gregor's existence becomes trapped in-between human consciousness and an insect body. He desires human connection but is treated as an animal. His suffering has no particular purpose or resolution. Ultimately, he dies without achieving understanding or meaning.

In *A Hunger Artist*, the concept of fasting exemplifies absurdity. It shows the ridiculousness of entertainment for people. The concept of fasting in *A Hunger Artist* is both strange and absurd. The idea that an audience gathers to watch a man starve himself reflects the irrationality of human society. The hunger artist treats fasting as sacred art, but society sees it merely as spectacle and amusement.

The audience interest would the audience's interest would gradually change. slowly and gradually. At one time, society held fasting in high regard. But later it becomes irrelevant because people seek newer forms and entertainment. This instability demonstrated how social values lack permanence.

The hunger artist's final confession further intensifies the absurdity of existence. After dedicating his entire life to fasting, he reveals that, "he could not discover food that tasted acceptable to him. If I had found food that tasted satisfactory to me, believe me, I would not have made a spectacle" (Kafka 89). For him he never found food he liked. This declaration about the entire fasting period reveals that he fasted simply because he never found food he liked. This statement destroys all heroic or spiritual meaning attached to his art. Kafka suggests that human life may ultimately lack objective meaning despite efforts to create purpose. Through absurdity, Kafka describes existential philosophy.

Through absurdity, Kafka shows existential philosophy. This theme is particularly evident in the idea that humans live in a universe that does not provide clear answers.

6.4 Meaninglessness

In the novella *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's existence is crucial as long as he is able to support his family financially through his job. His identity is solely tied to his economic productivity. Once he becomes incapable of working, his life appears meaningless to others.

Somehow the writer has described how a human being is less significant than money. The writer has tried to show how capitalist society reduces human worth for utility and productivity. Gregor's emotional needs, sacrifices, and humanity become irrelevant once he can no longer contribute financially. His family quickly adapts to life without him. Showing that his existence was valued primarily for practical reasons.

Gregor himself realised his internalised meaninglessness. His withdrawal from communication wanes, his art declines; it is survival. And he accepts his gradual decline. His death completely provides relief rather than sorrow. This tragic conclusion emphasises the existential belief that human existence can become empty and insignificant in an indifferent world.

In "Hunger Artist", meaninglessness emerges through the destruction of artistic creation. The hunger artist believes his fasting possesses deep value and significance. However, nobody understands or fails to appreciate his dedication. As public interest wanes, his art declines; it, his art declines; his art loses recognition and meaning. He thought that "no one was counting the days; even the hunger artist himself was unaware of how enormous his achievement was by this point, and his heart grew heavy" (Kafka 81).

The decision of the hunger artist raised certain questions because he himself did not fast out of spiritual greatness or artistic discipline but because he lacked desire for food. This realisation destroys the meaning he attached to his suffering.

Kafka therefore depicts that meaninglessness as an unavoidable condition of existence. Human beings attempt to create meaning through work, art, sacrifice, or social recognition, but these meanings often collapse under existential reality.

6.5 Isolation

Isolation is closely connected with both the stories that focus more, especially on loneliness and emotional separation. Kafka portrays isolation as an unavoidable aspect of human existence. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor felt emotional and physical isolation. Physically, he is confined to his room and excluded from society. This room becomes a symbol of imprisonment and separation. The closed doors represent the barriers between Gregor and the outside world.

Gregor was emotionally attached to his family, but slowly he abandoned them. His sister initially cares for him, bringing food and cleaning his room, but eventually she also becomes exhausted and resentful. Gregor's inability to communicate intensifies his loneliness because he cannot express his thoughts, emotions, or suffering. Finally, Gregor accepted his disappearance and believed that his existence no longer mattered because of his emotional separation from his family members.

The story highlights that the painful reality of individuals may remain emotionally isolated even within their families. Gregor's sorrows come not from physical transformation but from emotional abandonment and rejection.

In "A Hunger Artist," the isolation is depicted as spiritual and psychological. He has done his fasting challenges so people could believe in him. However, it demonstrates that no one is interested in him. It describes that he is completely alone in his inner experience. No one understands his motivations or

emotional struggles. “The hunger artist was the only one who could know that and the only spectator who could be was the only one who could know that and, at the same time, the only spectator capable of being completely satisfied with his fasting” (Kafka 21).

When the hungry artist came to know that nobody would be interested in his art, his isolation began. He is eventually placed near the circus animals, ignored and forgotten by society. He suffered continuously and silently until his death, unnoticed by the world around him. Through both of these characters, Kafka uses the concepts of isolation in both works.

Conclusion

The study narrated that *The Metamorphosis* and “A Hunger Artist” provide profound explorations regarding existential crises and modern human suffering. Through the tragic experiences of Gregor Samsa and the Hunger Artist, Kafka examines the psychological and philosophical struggle of individuals living in an indifferent and irrational world. The several concepts, like alienation, identity crisis, absurdity, meaninglessness, and isolation, are deeply interconnected throughout both works. Kafka reveals that modern society often values individuals on the basis of their usefulness, productivity, or entertainment value rather than their humanity. Once the protagonist loses social status, they become isolated, misunderstood, and dehumanized.

The transformation of Gregor Samsa symbolizes the fragility of identity and the collapse of human relationships under societal and economic pressure. Same as in “A Hunger Artist”, the artist’s suffering defines the isolation of individuals whose inner truths remain unrecognized by society. Both protagonists struggle to communicate with others. Which totally depends on existential desolations. Kafka highlighted the absurdity of existence, both finding meaning in a meaningless world. Both characters struggle significantly and fail to achieve recognition, fulfilment, or understanding. Their sadness depicts the loneliness, alienation, and search for meaning that define modern human existence.

Franz Kafka’s works remain universally relevant because they’ve explored timeless human concerns such as identity, existential questions of human life, alienation, and purpose in an indifferent and absurd world.

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