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BOOK REVIEW

A Review of ***Metamorphosis***
Franz Kafka
New Delhi: Prakash Books India Pvt. Ltd., 1915/2019
108pp. ISBN: 978-93-8653-832-1. Price: $2.99

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Metamorphosis is a novella written by Franz Kafka in 1912 and published later in the year 1915. The book is a seminal representation of what is called the modernist movement in literature. It also tends to imply the author's own life experiences. The novella was instrumental in transforming him into one of the icons of the twentieth-century novelists, along with James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence. Kafka's childhood was a difficult one as his father was an ambitious and bullying shopkeeper and his mother was a wealthy brewer's daughter who married beneath her social rank. He was their first child, born on July 3, 1883. His was a middle-class, German-speaking Jewish family in Prague, the capital of Bohemia, a kingdom that was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was an outsider even in the Jewish community. Kafka graduated from law college and worked in two different insurance companies but never liked his job.

Kafka suffered from a schizoid personality disorder, characterized by a love of solitude, lack of interest in relationships and emotional coldness. His works are also considered the products of his schizoid personality. He led an inner life of anguish and fear. He suffered from tuberculosis and died in the year 1924. During World War II, his sisters became the victims of the Holocaust. He wanted all his works to be burnt, but his friend and later biographer Max Brod compiled edited and had them published.

All these experiences somehow seem to be reflected in his works. They are the chief features of many modernist writings as modernism in

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literature caters to diverse tendencies and movements in Modern Arts. Its chief characteristics being disenchantment with traditional forms of artistic expression, radical experimentation, and questioning of norms. Franz Kafka created a surreal world to represent realities that lay buried beneath the surface of contemporary life. Themes in his work reflected the absurdity of existence, alienating experience in modern life, the incomprehensibility of authoritarian power.

Metamorphosis was completed in three weeks in the autumn of 1912. It is the lone long work of Kafka to see its end. It was originally written in German and was titled *Die Verwandlung*. It is a novella with limited characters, and events take place in a single chain. *Metamorphosis* is a work of fantasy and unfolds in three chapters.

Gregor Samsa, the protagonist, is a travelling salesperson, a job he disliked. However, he worked for 15 years in the same job as he had to care for his family. He had never once been ill and taken leave. One morning he wakes up to find himself as a horrible 'vermin', with armour-like back, brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. He has many legs, pitifully thin compared to the size of the rest of his body. Horrified with his new look he plans to fall asleep hoping that he might later wake up and find himself normal. His family members call out for him, and his sister Grete is genuinely worried. He tries to move but finds himself bound to the bed. His chief clerk comes looking for him, but Gregor's words are so distorted that no one can make up what he is trying to say. With great struggle, he somehow unlocks the door and everyone is terrified to see him in his new avatar. His father uses the chief clerk's stick and long newspaper to drive him back to his room.

Grete willingly takes care of feeding Gregor and cleaning his room. Milk was his favourite but now he finds rotten things more pleasurable. It takes fourteen days for his parents to see him after the transformation but his mother still struggles to come to terms with the changes in Gregor. The family now has to work harder and cut short their expenses. The maid begs them to release her and she promises not to say anything to anyone. Gregor lies down most of the time and with his new condition, he now learns to climb his room's wall and ceiling. So, Grete and his mother decide to move out of his room and make it more spacious. He does not intervene as they were taking away various items from his room, but he clings to the portrait of the 'Lady dressed in Copious Fur' hung on the wall. This sight terrifies

his mother and she loses consciousness. Later when his father arrives and finds his wife half-consciousness, he swarms Gregor with apples. One of the apples get stuck in his back and others injure him. Grete and his mother persuade his father to calm down and do not hurt Gregor.

Gregor is now immovable due to injury and that one apple which lies buried in his back is causing him great pain. The family had taken in some borders and one evening Grete performs violin for the borders. Gregor's door is open and he approaches the living room. The borders are terrified to see Gregor and flee without paying. This event leaves an impact on everyone, especially on Grete; she cannot bear it anymore and urges her parents to get rid of Gregor. The following morning Gregor dies and his family plans to go for a long vacation.

The novella also hovers around the Marxist concept of capitalism, cash-nexus and the philosophy of consumerism. Before his transformation, as a human worker, Gregor represents a cog in the capitalist machinery. He is an alienated tool in the workings of the capitalist environment. Interestingly after his transformation, as he becomes impotent and sterile for economic benefits, he is abandoned by the chief clerk as he flees the house and never returns or sends any word to the family. When he becomes unable to support his family financially, they all eventually abandon him as well. And finally, he dies of starvation and injuries caused by his family's mistreatment. Gregor ceases to exist as a person when he becomes unable to work. The family's relation is based solely on shared wages. Because of his inability to work, Gregor becomes worthless to the family and will not be missed. No matter how much they may have loved him while he was an asset, they cannot love him while he becomes a liability. Economics supersedes any emotional attachment in the family, which is justified in the comment of Mr Samsa as he speaks thus on the death of his son: "let's give thanks to God for that" (p. 102)

Metamorphosis treats Gregor's transformation as if it were a natural event or a random occurrence. Gregor's inner reality is emphasized more than the happenings in the external world. Kafka in his writing showcases the tale of alienation and a lot of autobiographical revelations in it. The novella may also be read as a fictional version of Kafka's sense of alienation as a German in a predominantly Czech speaking area.