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Existentialism in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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Abstract

Existentialism is a philosophy which explains the existence of an individual or a group of people and freedom or choice of life in the irrational society. The main concept is that man is all alone in the godless universe and underscores the meaninglessness and hopelessness of life. Existentialism deals with the problem of finding meaning with existence. The individual must find or create meaning for their life. Philosophers say that existentialism dates from 19th and 20th centuries and it is mainly from the continent of Europe.

Keywords

Existentialism; Franz Kafka; *The Metamorphosis*.

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Introduction

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society. The main concept is that man is all alone in the godless universe and underscores the meaninglessness and hopelessness of life. Existentialism deals with the problem of finding meaning with existence. The individual must find or create meaning for their life. Philosophers say that existentialism dates from 19th and 20th centuries and it is mainly from the continent of Europe.

Whenever man faces problem or revolts against the contradictions and conflicts of structural barriers, he tries to explore the quest of freedom or faith. This leads to existentialism in an individual's life. Existentialism entered American culture soon after the Second World War through the French philosophers Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. After the Second World War despair, insecurity, pain and decline in values reclaimed the lives of people. Thus existential movement rose in revulsion against the corruption of values.

Themes

Existentialism is often associated with anxiety, dread, awareness of death and freedom. It lays emphasis on the human situation or condition. The basic idea behind existentialism is that man conceives himself to be uniquely individual, a person who transcends environment and committed to personal perception of reality.

The two important concepts in existentialism are Atheistic existentialism and Theistic concept of existentialism. Atheistic existentialism is an attempt to explain about life on an assumption that there is no god. The key features of Atheistic existentialism are man's force of individualism, rejection of reason and rationality, exercise of will and freedom, experience of nothingness and absurdity in life. Theistic existentialism strives to overcome alienation and other problems in life by rediscovering the world through personal communion with god.

Some of the important figures in existentialism are Soren Kierkegaard, Jean Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus. The key themes of existentialism are hopelessness, estrangement, loneliness,

anxiety, freedom, situations, existence and absurdity. This paper discusses Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* in the light of existentialism.

Synopsis of the novel

The main character in *The Metamorphosis* is Gregor Samsa. He is a young and unhappy salesman who transformed into a monstrous insect, overnight. After the transformation from a young man into an insect, his life has changed. His life becomes disgusted and burdened to other family members. Due to the transformation his self-absorbed family sentenced him to life alone in his room. All these circumstances lead him to estrangement, hopelessness, despair, physical and mental pain, and meaninglessness in life.

Gregor Samsa is a travelling salesman. He is not successful in his career. Though he is not successful, he is the main source for family income. He considers his job as a miserable one. He worked countless hours. He has endured stress, missed trains, bad food and fleeting love affairs. The relationship with his family is not good. The time of staying in his house is less. Even in office he does not have good relationship. He never achieved his target in the office. And so the job is not permanent for him. He cannot even quit his job, because Gregor must work to pay off his father's debt. Gregor is the sole provider of his family. All these mental pressure, made Gregor to become tired of his life. Gregor needs transformation in his life.

Transformation

Franz Kafka's idea of transformation in the novel *The Metamorphosis* is something different when it is compared with the real transformation. In the novel *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa transformed into a monstrous insect, when he wakes up in the morning. "One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug" (3). This transformation made the life of Gregor into a hopeless one. He has been alienated and searches for his own identity and freedom.

Alienation

Alienation is an important theme in existentialism. In the novel *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa is alienated throughout the novel. When he was working as a travelling salesman, he was alienated from the office. And so, he could not attain his goal. This leads to alienation of his inner self. After the transformation, Gregor was not only alienated from the society, but also from his family.

Due to the transformation, Gregor is alienated from his job, his humanity and even from his physical body. His consideration for his family seems to be something alien to him. Later at the end, he completely loses his consideration. He feels alienated from his room and environment.

He undertook the very difficult task of shoving a chair over to the window. Then he crept up on the windowsill and, braced in the chair, leaned against the window to look out, obviously with some memory or other of the satisfaction that used to bring him in earlier times. (39)

In an incident, Gregor's manager arrives and asks about him. At that time Gregor was not able to get up from his bed due to his transformation. After a long time, he got up from the bed and tried to explain to the manager for being late for the job from inside his room. But no one understands any of his words. Though he utters words, they were heard as an animal's voice to others who were in the living room. Since he is transformed into a monstrous insect, Gregor was not able to express his reason as a human being. Rather his voice became non-human. This is explained by the words of the manager. "Did you understand a single word?' the manager asked the parents... 'Have you heard Gregor speak yet?' 'That was an animal voice', said the manager..." (17).

Finally Gregor opened the door with his insect jaw. When everyone saw him as a monstrous bug, he was not accepted by his family and manager. His family felt that the insect is not their son. His manager started to move off from

the place. "...The manager exclaim a loud 'oh!' - it sounded like the wind whistling - and now he saw him, nearest to the door, pressing his hand against his open mouth and moving slowly back, as if an invisible constant force was pushing him away" (20). Gregor tried to stop the manager but he could not run fast due to his new transformation.

When Gregor is alienated by his job, his family flourished, living a comfortable life. When he is out of sight from them, they tend to be happier. After this transformation, he is visible and becomes an active participant in their lives. But his family members seem to be unhappy. This shows that there is correlation between Gregor's alienation and his family's condition.

At certain point, Gregor alienates himself from his family. Grete, his sister is the only person who enters Gregor's room. She provides him with food, cleans his room and tries to make him comfortable by moving the furniture with the help of her mother. Though she helps his brother, she is so afraid to face her brother in an insect form. And so, Gregor alienates himself from others eyes by covering himself under the sheet or behind the couch. "Gregor had drawn the sheet down even farther and wrinkled it more" (44). So that no one will see him in an insect form. This explains that Gregor voluntarily alienates himself from the family.

Freedom/Escapism

The next important theme in existentialism is Freedom. Gregor wants his freedom both before and after his transformation. Before his transformation Gregor is trapped in his job, in order to fulfil his role as a son. But he urges for freedom and he dreams of the day he can pay off their debts and quit his job.

After his transformation, Gregor's urge for freedom has increased. Though he got freedom from his job after the transformation, he moved into very worse condition. The worse condition after getting freedom from his job is the imprisonment by his family members in his own room. Thus when Gregor works he is enslaved by his job and when he does not work he is enslaved by

his family. There is no way of freedom or escapism in his life. The only means he found as a way of freedom or escapism is death. When Gregor is alive, he does not get any freedom in his life. But after his death, Gregor attains his freedom.

The relationship between Gregor and his father is not good. The very first day his transformation explains it clearly. Gregor came out of his room with great effort to explain everything to everyone. But her mother faints and no one does like to see him. So his father pushes him harshly with a cane inside his room: “Then his father gave him one really strong liberating push from behind, and he scurried, bleeding severely, far into the interior of his room. The door was slammed shut with the cane, and finally there was silence” (27).

Gregor wants to come out of his imprisonment. He wants to be with his family. One day Grete and mother tried to remove furniture from Gregor’s room. Gregor covered himself with the sheet and was behind the couch. At a certain point, his mother saw Gregor in an insect form. On seeing him in an insect form, she fainted. His sister helped her mother to recover. In the evening his father came from work and heard all that happened at home. He was very much frustrated. At that time Gregor came out of his room. At once his father threw an apple at him. It was almost like killing Gregor.

And now, without for the moment taking accurate aim, he was throwing apple after apple. These small red apples rolled around on the floor, as if electrified, and collided with each other. A weakly thrown apple grazed Gregor’s back but skidded off harmlessly. However, another thrown immediately after that one drove into Gregor’s back really hard. (54)

Gregor tried to get relief from his imprisonment, but what he got is only pain.

Conclusion

Gregor's search for freedom, identity, and individuality is almost hopeless. He tries to find hope and meaning in hopelessness. Though he knew it, yet he tries to attain meaning in life. At the end of the novel, Gregor attains freedom, identity, and individuality only by his death. Death gave him everything that he wanted in life.

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