



FRANZ KAFKA IN THE AGE OF ANTHROPOCENE



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ABSTRACT

Anthropocene is said to have begun when mankind began massive exploitation of the natural resources and hunting out driving many creatures to extinction. When all the earlier ages like the Ice age was created by the natural cycle of evolution, Anthropocene age was human made, as a result of which many organisms were confined to the form of preserved specimens in museums of natural history. This paper is an exploration into Kafka's Metamorphosis. In the history of literature Metamorphosis has often been considered as a seminal writing. But most of the critical studies of Metamorphosis has been revolving around ideas like the truth angst and existential dilemma. Grigor Samsa has been considered as somebody who is caught in the unbearable agony of existence. Gregor's transformation into a huge insect has often been overlooked and was considered to be symptomatic of the unbearable agony existential dread. The paper seeks to read Metamorphosis as offering complex insights into the grave ethical, ideological and existential issues ushered in by the age of Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS

Holocene, 'otherness', Extinction, Metamorphosis, Existential anguish, Habitat

RESEARCH PAPER

In her book *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Elizabeth Kolbert, explores the spirituality of earth which has been devastated by mankind. In the book, the humanity is waiting for the sixth mass extinction. This age of the ultimate annihilation is named as the Anthropocene age. In this sixth stage of extermination, man's reckless exploitation of the natural resources, driving hundreds of rare species of animals and plants to extinction. In the self-critical work in thirteen chapters, Kolbert provides extensive detailing of the innumerable species of animals sent to extinction by the reckless greed of man. In his book, *Extinction: A Radical History*, Ashley Dawson imparts a political reading to the ideas espoused by Kolbert.

Albert Einstein once remarked that god does not play dices with nature. In his book *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the 20th Century World* (2000) writes, "In the twentieth century, man began to play the game of dices with this planet, but without understanding the rules of the game. Except Holocene, every other age lasted for many millenniums, and they had evolved out of the natural phenomena. But the new Anthropocene, is not the result natural evolutions but the one created by the humanity. The shortest age of the earth is Holocene. If the arrival of Anthropocene can be considered as factual, Holocene had started some 11, 700 years ago. Anthropocene gave rise two fundamental debates, the scientific life and the human life, the second of these primarily placed the focus on political-ethical issues. The great impact man has left on nature can never be examined apart from the ethical issues they raise. The primary question had been whether man was ever capable of creating such an impact on this planet which belongs to the category of 'otherness'? Can man ever consciously strike such a homicidal path? These questions were asked both by men of science as well as non-scientific areas like literature, philosophy and ethics. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is one of the most powerful and unusually complex treatments of this fundamental question through the transformation of Gregor Samsa and the deeper issues it raises which are not far away ethical and ecological concerns inaugurated by the Anthropocene.

Modern science has given hints that de-extinction is possible when it succeeded in regenerating Pyrenean Eye-bucks, which belongs to the family of Spanish wild sheep which became extinct in 2000. By extracting a surviving cell from the skin of this wild sheep, and infusing it into a domestic sheep, though the baby sheep survived only for a few minutes, it ignited hopes of de-extinction. Much earlier to this groundbreaking invention, it had been played out at an unconscious level in the fiction of Kafka, revealing aesthetic dimension of a scientific fact. Gregor Samsa, the central character in *Metamorphosis* is one who is revealing the rebirth of an extinct species. It has been the finest attempt at narrating the tale of the extinct species through a non-human perspective.

The modernist readers were eager to identify Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis symptomatic of the degeneration of the human race and the existential anguish, and this interpretation continues to date. Gabriel Garcia Marques has admitted with tremendous awe that the writer in him was inspired by the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa. One morning Gregor Samsa finds to his horror and dismay that he has been transformed into a huge 'insect', the word 'insect' may not be the exact translation for the French original. His appearance is capable of inducing fear and revulsion in others. Now his body becomes so light it can cling onto the ceiling and crawl along it. Kafka goes onto describe his metamorphosed body with a certain cynical precision, "the green back part looked as if made of solid plates, the brown protruding abdomen divided as with arches, innumerable legs that do not suit the body. The legs that were shaking uncontrollably...the tiny legs that kept moving in all directions futilely."

The new body pattern of Gregor Samsa keeps making its imprints in the story through the painstaking movements, in which the most prominent parts are the hundreds of tiny legs. All attempts to provide a suitable word for the metamorphosed shape of Gregor has not succeeded. Many translations including one by Ian Johnson has translated it as 'monstrous verminous bug'. The proper word for that has to come from the name of some creature from the past which has faded into extinction and oblivion, thanks to the brutal homosapien. Only from that point in history, we will be able to address the terrible agony of Gregor Samsa.

With his metamorphosis, Gregor Samsa is ostracised from the social history of mankind. It is possible to read Kafka's demolition of his character from the author's resistance and reaction to the modernist ideal supportive of the anthropocenic character. Anthropocene age is the historical epoch which marked man's massive domination of nature through the so-called scientific and technological advancements. Ever since man began his encroachments into diverse territories of the ecosystem, upsetting its fine balance it is presumed to be the beginning of the age of Anthropocene. It does not mean *Metamorphosis* is another opposing revelation of an avant-garde style. Since the publication of *Metamorphosis* coincided with emerging themes of modernism, the readers began to search for the same or similar strain of meaning in it also. It began to acquire a seminal status along with *Outsider* and *Trial*.

Ian Angus, a prominent Marxian critic divides the human created Anthropocene age into two: Bio-physical Anthropocene and Socio-Economic Anthropocene. The first of these is disrupting the natural rhythm and poses a grave threat to all living creatures. To make a proper understanding of Anthropocene, it has to be seen from the perspective of socio-economic realities. It was the saturation of the capitalist economy by the mindless exploitation of natural resources and

destruction of the ecological balance spread over the last two centuries that marked the end of the Holocene and beginning of Anthropocene. (Ian Angus, Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System, Monthly Review Press, 2016)

The modernist critics were in fact oversimplifying the complexity of Gregor Samsa by reading only the meaning of existential anguish. What was missing in those readings is the realisation that begins to dawn in Gregor, the fact that as his free independent human form is lost, the sense of loss and helplessness he begins to experience is akin to that of an extinct linguistic creature who has lost all means of communicating with the world. That has been the most excruciating existential agony of Gregor, who begins to miss his chances of communication along with the human form. Hyoid, the thin bone below the tongue which helps human utterances as well as FOXP2 gene are missing in the metamorphosed body of Gregor.

All the accompanying themes of the human existence like movements, speech, ability to respond, relationships, appetite everything is lost to Gregor and never to be regained. And he becomes a rank outsider to the human race. It was only to this lost human self that readers kept identifying all these years, which could be seen as a truncated reading looked from a different perspective. The problem seemed to be reading Gregor Samsa purely from an existential, human angle. In a way Gregor is the victim as well as a victimiser, because he is beginning to share the collective sin of his race in inflicting severe tortures and exterminating many a species out of shallow greed and avarice. The pitiable sight of his starved, dehumanised carcass towards the conclusion of the story is the visible manifestation of the sin of his race. His parents, sister and maid servant crosses themselves, expresses their gratitude to god for putting an end to his misery. Post-death, his thin frame had been dried up, it looked as if it never had any legs.

Gregor's carcass reminds us the image of a Botswana elephant trunk severed by the hunters who had killed the animal for the tusk. It has been photographed by David Mackency for CNN symbolising the African elephants gradually moving towards the ultimate extinction. Gregor's carcass is similarly evoking associations of some animal which has become extinct or awaiting extinction. Psychological criticism is tempted to reduce the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa as the replay of an archetypal image that removes all possibilities of reading Metamorphosis from the biological, ecological and ecogeographical perspectives. Ancient epics are teeming with tales of metamorphosis. In Aakshay's story it is the transformation of man into deer, Nahushan's story deals with the metamorphosis of man into snake, in Gajendra Moksha it is into elephant and crocodile, Nala and Kubera finds themselves getting morphed into trees. In the ultimate moment of moksha or

salvation, they regain the human form. In modern literature no one has revealed the mastery of Kafka in this treatment.

Perhaps the uniqueness of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* lies in the fact of its shift in focus from philosophy to biology. The motif of the story is controlled by certain possible aberrations in genetics. But that does not mean that Kafka was aware of the intricacies of genetic mutations. During stages of the intensive creative energy, sometimes the writer chances upon revelations that are not merely confined to the territories of his academic discipline. The evolution of the humanistic self into animalistic self has to be visualised at the level of understanding and complementing 'the other', which can never be philosophical but biological. The relationship between the man and the animal to which he is evolving will be ennobling at certain level, and never having renegading attributes. The bird or the animal into which the man is evolving will be complementing the cultural inheritance of the human race. It is the prolonged empathetic association between the two that makes this transformation possible. It is this 'otherness' that is serving as the Leif-motif of such transformations and mutations.

Two kinds of tensions would be built up by these transformations, one is terrible agonies brought about the physical changes that come over the body and the related psychological tremors it begins to register. Gregor Samsa must undergo this tribulations over an unusually prolonged stretch of time till he becomes an outsider to the human race. The subtle difference between Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and earlier tales of transformations is that the cultural ecology of Kafka's story begins to engage the human history in a discourse. This principle is best illustrated in the words of Hubert Zapf, when he states that there are three fundamental prerequisites in literature, of which every work should be fulfilling at least one. One of them is the imaginative counter discourse. The ecological life of Gregor Samsa acquires greater profundities than his earlier life, at which stage there are no human beings capable of communicating with him, because the new creature carries no elements that identifies him with the homo sapiens. It is revealing the inefficiency of the humanity to hold a communion with nature.

J.B.Manichen has pointed that in the future generations of humanity, the ability to communicate with nature will be found to be diminishing, which he terms as 'Change Blindness'. With the loss of the remaining ecosphere, the future humanity would be dipping into perennial poverty in understanding nature. Estimated figures point out hundreds of animals are disappearing into the veil of extinction every year. Samsa too is a victim of ecocide, as there is no oxygen, environment or ecosphere in the house for the new creature. Though Gregor's transformation induces different perspectives in him, the fundamental perspective remains to be that of the human being. The

capitalist rationalisation of the political otherness and alienation becomes a literal and ideological reality here.

Adorno has pointed out that the world of Kafka is like a cryptogram made out of the puzzles of words. Adorno has demonstrated how the capitalist past could be brought out through the character conception of Gregor Samsa. In the painful transformation of Gregor, Adorno identifies the self-consuming destruction of Capitalism. In the syntactic and semantic patterns of Kafka, there is the powerful anti-Capitalist rhetoric. But unlike the stereotypical representation of the capitalist as bent upon the mindless exploitation of the natural resources, Kafka's characters are those who take upon themselves the unbearable burden of tiresome distributive networks of capitalism. In them Adorno found the useless excreta of late Capitalism. Gregor Samsa, his father, mother, sister and even the maid servant are the agents of such a decay that would be inevitably set in the Capitalist economy, "The narrative modes and ideologies of Kafka are like that of the white elephants because no theological principle ever had any impact on him". In Gregor's father's fall from bourgeois abundance to the penury of miserable man, Adorno reads elements of a declassing act. In Gregor's note that 'Father came hissing to me like a wild animal', Kafka is visualising a scene from his own troubled relations with his father. The presence of the father had always been an excruciating torment for Kafka.

The world of the white elephants mentioned by Adorno is richly suggestive of the immensity of Kafka's literary universe, as the white elephants are denying all divine interventions and fatalism. It is not any divine curse or fate that transforms Gregor. On the contrary, his metamorphosis was inevitable. The dreadful appearance of Gregor is not borrowed from myths or archetypes which would have been at the cost of compromising the note realism in the story. In the story there are hardly any element related to the adoration of the magical past. Gregor Samsa's house is geographically located at an ecologically devastated place making it an ecological hotspot. It is scene where only human beings are left and even they are hopelessly looking towards dismal foreboding that awaits their world. Only with the total disappearance of Gregor from the scene, they are able to regain and possess the house for themselves, which precisely illustrates the geographical dialectics of the story.

It was his own narrow bedroom which served as the habitat of Gregor and his metamorphosis happens there. Incidentally it is the same room that helps him to survive for some more time, however insignificant it is. At the climax of the story, Samsa must undergo the tortures which the dissolution of the ecosystem causes for him, when the room is used as a dumping ground for all unwanted objects in the house. It should not be mistaken for the fate in the theological traditions.

Through the metamorphosis and death of Gregor Samsa, Kafka seems to be suggesting the genetic mutation of humanity and prophecy of the extinction of the race. On close examination, it could be seen that Gregor's body is now having greater sensitivity in the lower part. Like a reptile or a fish, he finds that now it is easier to move the body following the movement of the head. The only back part of the his hard and solid enough to withstand a fall. He has neither the teeth nor the human voice. From the jaw a brown thick substance starts flowing out as he was trying to hold the key in the mouth. Now he is capable of crawling in any direction and surface like a lizard, and often he spends the time hanging from the ceiling. To complicate matters, lungs now become highly unstable.

These transformations that become visible in his body are not mere accidental occurrences and imaginative flights by the author, on the other hand they are ominous signs and indications of the ecological changes. Every great work of literature is carrying a cultural history within. When Sapz observes that the characters in them are the counter discourses, it is insisting that the characters need to be understood biologically. The fact that Samsa's body can longer controlled the way he desires it be brings it closer to the features of a fish. In Kafka's own words, "Sighing deeply looking at the countless legs that are fighting among themselves, to reach the dreadful realisation that a pattern can never be imposed on their patternless nature. One of the most unbearable experiences is never capable of moving out of the bed. Even the simple hope of escaping from there is ridden with hazards."

This staticity of the human body is something that happens to a living creature when it is deprived of its biosphere. It is not to Gregor Samsa this loss of the biosphere happens but to the new creature his body has been transformed into. Thus metamorphosis emerges to be the story of the rebirth of an organism that had become extinct in the age of the homocene. Adorno once again comes to make a deeper understanding of this story with his theory of Economic Modernity and which precisely is the backdrop of the story. From there, its ecology takes roots and blossoms. It is the same economy that begins to strangulate the humanity and driving out all creatures from the frame. Simultaneously there may begin a movement in literature that raises protest against this dominating anthropocentric ideology. The literary criticism that develops thus would be more capable of placing Kafka in the proper light, who was resurrecting certain elements capable of suggesting human engineered extinction of other living organisms. Metamorphosis could be seen as a modernist Delphic oracle making the ominous prophecy of the ultimate extinction of the human race.

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