

## Preface

This study aims to locate the 'existential crisis' in Franz Kafka (1883-1924). The very term 'existentialism' generally gives rise to a morbid world view, as existentialism is generally regarded as a philosophy dwelling in despair and dealing with issues of guilt, death, finitude, anxiety, and nothingness. During his brief but eventful life, Kafka has been an observer and recorder of life through his fragments, parables, aphorisms, letters, diaries, short stories and three novels. His first novel **Amerika**, spelt with a 'k' instead of 'c' was deliberate to introduce an element of foreignness, was written between 1911 to 1914. Between September 1912 and early 1913 much of **Amerika** was written and the longest complete story **The Metamorphosis** was written in November and December 1912.; then he begins writing **The Trial** from 1914 onwards; and his third novel called **The Castle** was written in 1922. By 1918, Kafka had finished reading Soren Kierkegaard, generally considered to be the father of modern existentialism. It spurred him to read other existentialists like Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Martin Buber. A reticent but well read man; he was familiar with the works of Spinoza, Darwin, Goethe, Eckermann, Grillparzer, Nietzsche, Hugo Bergman, Marx and Freud. He was also deeply steeped in Jewish folklore and German literature; and often his works are regarded as emblematic of Jewish life in the Diaspora, and he is said to have attended lectures at the Berlin Academy for Jewish studies. He was deeply interested in the Yiddish Theatre Company, and he personally shared close relationship with the Yiddish actor Isak Lowy. His aphorisms (**Octavo Notebooks**) were written from fall-winter of 1917 to the spring of 1918, and they too contain a wealth of wisdom. Harold Bloom finds Kafka as an original aphorist and he places him in the same level as Wittgenstein,

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Goethe. Kafka's narratives are suspended, there is no closure; and he says there is a 'demonic' force in his narrative.

His collection of letters, **Letters to My Father**, **Letters to Felice** (The woman who influenced him most and with whom he got engaged twice finally breaking off was Felice Bauer); **Letters to Milena**; **Letters to Minz Eisner**, not just document his personal feelings but they appear as well contrived epistolary novels in their own right. The diaries and letters are an attempt to exorcise a kind of exorcise his daemon, a sort of redemption that he sought. Such was his interest in human development that he frequently interacted with the founder of Theosophy, Rudolf Steiner. His ill-health due to tuberculosis cut short his life and Kafka died in Kierling on June 3, 1924; his burial took place in June 11, in the Jewish Cemetery in Prague-Straschnitz.

After his death, most of his manuscripts were destroyed by the Gestapo, and some were already burnt by himself or by Dora Diamant, his companion during his last years, upon his instructions. Actually he seemed to have approved only some forty short stories and vignettes. Kafka's original manuscripts were carelessly bundled with a lot of misspellings not realizing the wealth of canonical oeuvre it covered. Kafka was also impressed by Judaism and Zionism and the Hassidic literature. Yet often Kafka has written slightly of Zionism. All works of Kafka show a split between the real world and the nightmarish world. He himself confessed writing to be 'a form of prayer' besides being an attempt to be away from the 'paternal sphere'. Kafka was familiar with Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), his contemporary, whose studies of the 'id', an inaccessible part of man's personality; and how the mind is a cauldron of seething excitation which unconsciously influenced our conscious behavior. Through its apparent simplicity they hide deep philosophical insights. Max Brod his closest

friend had been instructed strictly by Kafka to burn his works after his death but Brod realizing the value of his self-critical friend defied his orders by restoring and preserving them for literary interest. Even the meeting with Kafka with his publishers, for whatever little he published during his lifetime, publishers Ernst Rowohlt and Kurt Wolff in 1912 was facilitated by Max Brod. Immediately after Kafka's death Max Brod signed an agreement on 31 July 1924 with the Berlin Publishers *Die Schmiede* to produce a posthumous edition of his works, which also put him into a legal problems regarding publishing rights with Kurt Wolff. Many have also written on the untranslatability of Kafka's works. I have heavily relied upon the translations of the first English translators, Willa and Edwin Muir. Though the Muirs were untutored amateurs, picking up German in the course of their travels in the 1920's, they found Kafka's works 'less rigid, less clotted,' and 'much easier' to translate than that of other writers. Kafka was a literary talent who was respected by Thoman Mann, Hermann Hesse and Andre Gide. He was a great storyteller, known for his wealth of imagination often with a mystical aura in his writings. "Open up", he wrote in his diary, "Let the Man come out". Really his diaries and aphorisms unlock the nethermost regions of his mind. His shorter pieces are highly rich. In fact these shorter pieces are a kind of bridge to understand his larger novels. They too document his dream like inner state of his being. It is through his rich writings that this study is going to analyze the source of 'existential crisis' in Franz Kafka. For the said purpose, I have sought to divide this work into seven chapters

This study begins by exploring in the first section of **Chapter One: Introduction** by examining the theoretical basis to the understanding of existentialism as a style of philosophizing; and by showing forth how existentialism is a philosophical orientation for which a common and comprehensive definition is rather difficult to work out. It

gives a brief traditional historical trajectory of this philosophy from Blaise Pascal to Soren Kierkegaard. It is in the second section that Kafka is introduced as a man, a writer, and a philosopher. The existentialist notion of crisis is projected here due to the split in his self.

**Chapter Two: The Critical Scene** gives an overview of existing critical commentary made in the Kafka canon. Kafka has been a subject of various literary and critical interpretations like modernist, magic realist, psychoanalytic, socio-politic, theological, philosophical, theoretical, feminist, and biographical studies. An attempt has been made in this chapter to understand the previous critical commentaries made in the Kafka canon with reference to world renowned scholars like Max Brod, Erich Heller, Gunther Anders, Edwin Muir, Heinz Politzer, Malcolm Pasley, Wilhelm Emrich, Elias Canetti, Herbert Kraft, Selma Fraiberg, Dogmar C.G. Lorenz, Elizabeth Boa, Stanley Corngold, Walter Benjamin, Albert Camus, Felix Bertaex, Edmund Wilson, Ronald Gray, Anthony Thorlby, Franz Kuna, Calvin S. Hall and Richard E. Lind, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Ernst Pawl, Henry Sussman, Ruth V. Cross and others. Seldom do these debates run totally contrary to each other; most co-exist, and most augment the existing criticism. However, individual authoritative texts have also been taken into consideration. The omission of other scholars studying Kafka in this overview may be attributed to my limited resources.

**Chapter Three: Authority and the Individual** traces the conflict that exists between individuals and the various representatives of authority threatening man like God or father-like figures, social institutions like Law, Love, Language and Death. The perennial conflict between authority and the individual is the crux of Kafka's existential crises which is why there can be multiple readings of Kafka's text. They

are not only existential reflections arising out of his profound sense of inadequacy but they also shed light on the factors that caused these feelings of inadequacy. His works are therefore a commentary on the complex bureaucracy of the Austria-Hungary empire and its red-tapism and rampant corruption.

**Chapter Four: Tragic Humanism in Kafka** makes a study of the humanistic tradition from Protagoras (481-411 B.C.) to Socrates (469-399 B.C.) to Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) who gives God like qualities to man. The humanistic tradition of retaining faith in man as a reservoir of endless possibility is deeply questioned by the existentialists. The mystery of birth and the mystery of death are interpreted through existentialist notions like 'angst', 'thrownness' 'the anguish of the here and the now' and the difficulty of realizing '*Being*' against the 'givenness' vis-à-vis freedom and responsibility; all these contribute to tragic humanism in Kafka. The chapter traces how existential humanism is essentially tragic in nature because of man's inability to move outside one self; and in consequence Kafka's quest for authentic selfhood remains futile. The existentialists also interpret human life to be constantly living in the face of death. This tragic conflict lies at the centre of each man and the existentialists stress on the maximum of this conflict. If Sartre has gone to lengths to explain how existentialism itself is humanism and if we begin with the idea that humanism is a doctrine which regards man as the source of all values then in Kafka's existential humanism is tragic as he is acutely aware of the tragedy endemic to human condition.

**Chapter Five: Realism and Fantasy** will explore how Kafka's imaginative world fit into the empirical world by a strange mish- mash of fantasy, folk lore tradition, fairy tale like element, myth, parables, dream narratives with concrete reality. Unlike the

traditional literature of transformation as practiced by Ovid and Apuleius; here Kafka uses this technique to convey the ephemeral, bizarre, and the irrational world. Also Kafka's nightmarish world cannot be interpreted with reference to the theme of the artist in exile which is common in German Literature from Kliest to Holderlin. For the existentialist Kafka, it was a difficult time for he saw no stability in external reality; he lived in two different worlds, each threatening to out run the other. What is real threatens to become fantastical and what is fantastical again threatens to take the shape of reality. Kafka oscillates between the real and the fantastic; the natural and the extraordinary; it is not a clearly divided Manichean world but highly paradoxical and hence existential.

However, the more tragic Kafka's heroes become, the fiercer is the hope of redemption. Kafka has captured the frightening elements of total despair which he himself experienced and translated them into human dimensions against a background of myth, allegory and spiritual longing. So this chapter analyses the struggle of the self with itself in the form of dream narratives because in Kafka's world-view reality can be grasped only through a fantastic approach.

**Chapter Six: Kafka's Narrative Pattern: An Existential Perspective** dismantles the conventional narrative discourse. Kafka saw a failure of the narrative mode and language which has a generalizing tendency. Kafka saw a failure of the narrative mode whereby the uniqueness of the existent is subtly brought out. The chapter will show how the existential crisis will lead to shifting paradoxes in his narrative art because of which most of his works lack closure, or any definiteness. This is also the reason why his works defy easy classification and can have multiple interpretations. His existential crisis make it difficult for his narrative to transform 'knowing' into

'telling'. So much of his works are chaotic and haphazard, and are more of speculations. It is an existential state that his narratives are dream-like, which is to say in a state of fluid suspension; and as result when one reads his works we literally are transferred into a nether world. This chapter examines how Kafka tries to approach reality through the use of dream narratives and ironic fables through the subtle use of Freudian symbols and parables. The existential crisis in Kafka could have been expressed only in terms of the parable mode because only the parable has been could help bridge gap between the unknown and the unknowable. If the biblical parable used to illuminate an ultimate truth, the parable in Kafka is used to express the existential crisis. Only the parable helped him to reveal the reality behind the apparently real world of empirical evidence. The parable is an expression of his frantic effort to grasp that reality but which always eluded him. In this way, Kafka's parables is used to expose this gap and man's dilemma of him being incapable of bridging this gap. Kafka's parables are expressions of his own sense of perpetual inadequacy.

Finally, **Chapter Seven: Conclusion** sums up the existential crises of Kafka as a writer and a man of the world. The conclusion sums up in what way Kafka was able to extricate himself out of his existential crises. Existentialism is therefore not to be understood as a philosophy of despair but rather a positive philosophy for there is always a chance before death; even if there is pain in the process of living but it is suffering becomes a proof of our existence.