

# CHAPTER - I

## Introduction

*Since I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else... ..*

Franz Kafka, *Diaries*, August 21, 1913.

### I

'Existentialism' is a profoundly complex and elusive term. It is often misconstrued as a philosophy dwelling in despair and negation. Generally speaking, existentialism is a philosophy which declares as its first principle that existence is prior to essence. Existence should be the sole criteria or the basis of philosophy and ultimate knowledge. For Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, existence is inextricably bound up with essence. Descartes' dictum 'I think therefore I am' gives preference to abstract thinking but for the existentialists, reason is not the only proof of our existence and so for them it is 'I am therefore I think.' Existentialism entails existence in the world through which man becomes aware of his own existence. The onus for proving his existence lies upon man himself. Man is thrown into the world yet, it is man himself who determines what he actually is. Even essence is to be created by man and not a given situation. The early predecessor of existentialism was actually Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) who was a scientist, a philosopher and a psychologist. Rejecting the Cartesian rationalism, Pascal tried to define man in rational terms. For Pascal, man is a paradox, a contradiction between the mind and the body; a contradiction which cannot be solved even by religious arguments, and hence the threat of the universe dwarfing man defines his judgment on the nature of human existence. Pascal does not approve the faith of the philosophers; rather his conception

of God is one of an irrational and mysterious figure. Hence his famous outcry: "Not the God of the philosophers, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?". Soren Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism, who coined the term 'existentialism', also shared this paradox. So existentialism is rejection of ratiion or logic and scientific thinking. It is a way of life, a movement from the general to the individual. It is a profoundly personal philosophy because the evidence of man's existence can be reached only through one's own personal experience. In contrast to 'existence' is the 'essence' of things; 'essence' is the nature of things or ideas but since these concepts are too abstract they are often regarded as secondary to 'existence'. Existentialism believes in starting from the real and not something abstract. Jean Paul Sartre explains the principle of existence preceding essence in his **Existentialism and Humanism**:

We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself after already existing as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism.

(Sartre, 1948, 28)

Further, Sartre elucidates the difference between man and the other things occupying this world in terms of 'subjectivity', which for him is an acute self-awareness propelling man to move ahead:

Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he

purposes to be. Not, however, what he may wish to be. For what we usually understand by wishing or willing is a conscious decision taken- much more often than not- after we have made ourselves what we are. I may wish to join a party, to write a book or to marry- but in such a case what is usually called my will is probably a manifestation of a prior and more spontaneous decision. If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.

(Sartre, 1948, 28-29)

This is in contrast to the idea of the ancient philosopher Plato for whom although man has no fixed essence, he makes his own essence out of the historical situation in which he is placed, or out of his freedom. Plato called these essences as ideas, and these ideas constitute a realm of absolute realities beyond time, history, change and existence, which is more real. Thus when these ideas are transferred to existence, there is a kind of fall, from a higher realm of being. This is what is meant by Plato's essentialism, which is essence being prior to existence. Kierkegaard regarded that that philosophy should not be abstract but it should be based on personal experience and specific historical situation. He formulated the concept of 'dread' or 'angst' in German; the idea of 'absolute paradox' and the idea of the leap into the unknown or the 'jump into the abyss'. Although an existentialist, Kierkegaard was a staunch Christian who had unwavering belief in God. But the God of Kierkegaard is one who acts arbitrarily with no sense of justice yet which demands blind faith leading the individual to let out a profoundly existential agony: "Where am I? Who am I? Who is it that has lured me into the world and now leaves me there? Why was I not consulted?...How did I obtain an interest in this big enterprise they call reality? Why should I have an interest in it? Is it not a voluntary concern? [why am I] compelled to

take part in it?" (Kierkegaard, 1942,114). It echoes Pascal's cry in the *Pensées* (literally 'thoughts'): "I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there; why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?" (Pascal,1688, No.205). Kierkegaard elaborates this paradox through the biblical figure of Job who is for no apparent reason submitted to utter misery and suffering; knows that he is good yet cannot be right in front of God; and the figure of Abraham who is willingly to sacrifice his only son upon God's order without question. For Kierkegaard knowledge and faith are two different things; if knowledge is consciously gained; faith is the acceptance of things which is beyond proof. He too believed that to discover truth one has to start from personal experience. So for all existentialists the personal is real because 'existence' is a profoundly individual phenomenon, while 'essence' is the more general human nature. Unlike Kierkegaard, Nietzsche attacks Christianity and regards religion as the neurosis of the weak. He dismisses God in **Human, All Too Human**: 'God is dead', and asks rhetorically: 'what thinker still needs the hypothesis of God?'(Kierkegaard, Vol.7, 43). Consequently Nietzsche attacks all religion and finds all religion to be devoid to of truth. Thus in spite of his differences with Darwin, Nietzsche too is influenced by him when he says in **Beyond Good and Evil** that the 'more complete men' were always the 'more complete beasts' ( Nietzsche,224). For Nietzsche in many ways heralded the birth of man as a magnificent beast of prey. In **History as System**, Ortega says that "Existence itself is not presented to [humans] ready made, as it is to the stone; rather...all that happens to him is the realization that he has no choice but to do something in order not to cease existing. This shows that the mode of being of [human] life, even as simple existing, is not a being already, since the only thing that

is given is and that is when there is human life is the having to make it, each one for himself”(Gasset, 1936,303). Therefore existentialism lays emphasis on subjectivity or inwardness. All existentialists agree that subjectivity is truth and man is required to reach out for this truth. Existentialism also analyses boundary situations like death and suffering, freedom, time and transcendence. It is in such boundary situations that even language becomes ineffective in conveying the richness of experience. Faced by numerous choices, an individual becomes aware of his ‘being’. It is a uniquely human situation because ‘being’ is an issue only with human beings. Karl Jaspers in his work **Philosophy**(1970) writes that it is only man who raises the question of ‘being’ and it is this search for ‘being’ that can lead him to anxiety. Anxiety is the awareness that there is no thing that stands between ones ‘being’ and ‘not being’. Heidegger calls this unique nature of existence as ‘*Dasein*’ or ‘*being there*’, further meaning being out in the world amidst the sordid and not just the good and the beautiful. Anxiety is not to be confused with fear because fear has an object but not anxiety; anxiety arises due to the confrontation with oneself. In the opening chapter of Heidegger’s **Being and Time**: “We are ourselves the entities to be analyzed. The being of any such entity is in each case mine. These entities, in their Being, comport themselves towards their being. As entities with such Being, they are delivered over to their own Being. Being is that which is an issue for every such entity” (Heidegger,1962,42). Even freedom is an ambiguous issue for the Existentialists; because not to choose too is still choosing and still the freedom of choice or the choice of freedom is limited for the existentialists. If freedom is actually acting entirely by our own free will, then making the right choice is equally important. Making a right choice therefore becomes crucially important because a wrong choice can enslave us.

This is why the existentialists put stress on man as an active 'subject' and a not 'passive' recipient of all that is given. Man is organically related to his environment and therefore man's effort to recognize his '*being*' or to prove himself as an existent has to take place solely in this world. Therefore when skeptics level the charge against existentialism being a philosophy of quietism and accused of contemplation; and since contemplation is a luxury, the communists interpret it as a bourgeois philosophy, Jean Paul Sartre denies these charges in **Existentialism and Humanism**. Also, Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* meaning '*Being there*' or '*being in the world*' explains how man's being can be realized only in this world and how this being is a nascent possibility in every human being. Man's entire effort is thus directed to realize this '*being*'. The existential crisis arises when man encounters the impossibility of realizing this '*being*' or self. Man is overwhelmed by nihilism when man loses the worth of his self or any sense of dignity in his self. The best definition of nihilism is provided by Nietzsche in **The Will to Power** : "What is nihilism? The fact that the highest values lose all value. There is no aim, no answer to the question "Why?" Radical nihilism is the conviction that the highest values which one wants to accept are readily untenable, and added to this is the insight that there is no justification whatever for assuming that there is another world or a true nature of things or anything divine or a given morality" (Nietzsche, 1910, 693).

But the enigmatic character of birth shows how existence is forced upon us. We do not have any control over the historical and personal situation in which we are born into. Thus when Sartre talks of man making himself, he is actually referring to man's capacity of molding or improving his essence because one's control over one's existence is not much. Man is forever to remain man; as the French critics say and man cannot become strawberries or peas or cats. But Hegel refuses to follow Sartre's

principle and by moving from being and essence to actuality and existence. Sartre attacks this brand of Hegelian brand of objectivity. Kierkegaard's thought centers in the problem of the individual and his subjective existence. The individual's existence being his inwardness. It means turning away from the life of unexamined sensation to the intensive life of deep introspection. It means moving from the general, abstract and non-real propositions to an understanding of the particular, concrete and the real existent. The opposition of Kierkegaard to Hegel extends to all matters. For Hegel the inner and outer worlds are identical but Kierkegaard knows that there are things hidden within and which cannot be expressed.

Therefore existentialism is a philosophical orientation for which a comprehensive definition cannot be worked out. It is a philosophical orientation concerning solely with human existence and it recognizes the uniqueness of man's being and this entails that man should constantly work towards recognizing his being, it is man's constant striving: 'Existence... is a constant striving, a perpetual choice; it is marked by a radical freedom and responsibility; and it is always prey to a sense of Angst which reveals that, for the most part, it is lived inauthentically and in bad faith. And because the character of a human like is never given, existence is without foundation; hence it is abandoned or even absurd' (Cooper, 1999, 3). However, existentialism is not a body of philosophical doctrines because there is no common body of doctrine to which all existentialists subscribe to. John Macquarrie in his book **Existentialism** regards it as a style of philosophizing rather than a body of philosophical doctrines.

He writes:

The first and most obvious one is that this style of philosophizing begins from man rather than from nature. It is a philosophy of the subject rather than the object. But one might say that idealism too took

its starting point in the subject. Thus one must further qualify the existentialist position by saying that for the existentialist the subject is the existent in the whole range of his existing. He is not only a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of feeling. It is this whole spectrum of existence, known directly and concretely is the very at of existing, that existentialism tries to express. Sometimes, therefore, this style of philosophizing appears anti-intellectualist. The existentialist thinks passionately, as one who is involved in the actualities of existence.

(Macquarrie, 1972, 2)

Modern existentialism arises out of the German tradition and it soon engulfed the European mind. The most important philosopher who was the first to see the inadequacies of intellectual abstraction was Henri Bergson (1859-1941). He formulated the idea how the inner experience of life cannot be measured by quantitative methods. All existentialists are common in studying the relationship between religious faith and the individual. The nineteenth century was an age of progress and with the publication of Darwin's **The Origin of Species** in 1859, religion was no longer the mainspring of life. The ruthless life and death struggle for survival is akin to the class warfare in a capitalist society, where the self finds it impossible to mingle in the social milieu. Man is therefore not only alienated from God, society but also from his own self. Existentialists also focus on the contingency of life. Human finitude is dealt by Heidegger in **Being and Time** in 1927. The same year also saw the arrival of Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminacy which believed in the limits to one's reason. Some of the leading existentialists in the same thought were Nietzsche (1844-1900), Dostoevsky (1821-81), Gabriel Marcel (1899-1973), Nicholas Berdyaev (1874-1948), Paul Tillich(1886-1965), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), Miguel de Unamuno (1865-1936), Lev Shestov (1865-1938), Karl Barth

(1886-1968), Martin Buber (1878-1965) other leading French existentialists besides Sartre were Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Albert Camus (1913-1960); and most of them have vociferously denied the label of 'Existentialists'. So it is in their philosophical style and it is in their common themes that they customarily treat that they can be said to belong to a common school of thought. There are not only diversities but grave conflicts between the different philosophers of existence.

Jean Wahl in his book **Philosophies of Existence** stresses on the fundamental difference between Sartre and Heidegger:

Sartre has said: essence follows existence. Heidegger rejects this proposition, because he believes that Sartre is using the words existence and essence in the classical sense; he has reversed the usual word order but remains, despite this reversal, within the fold of classical thought. He has failed to grasp what Heidegger regards as an essential element of his own theory. This element involves the definition of existence which, Heidegger says, must be understood to mean 'being in the world': *ex-sistere*, 'to be outside oneself'. If it is agreed that existence is this, and not the simple empirical reality, then we shall arrive at a proposition quite different from Sartre's 'essence follows existence'- a proposition made by Heidegger himself, and which is: the essence of man is existence-the essence of man consists in 'being outside himself.

(Wahl, 1969, 13)

But again Hegel believed that to exist objectively is no longer existence but a divorce from existence. For Hegel, objective truth is actually the death of existence. Gabriel Marcel begins his philosophical meditation by writing in the **Journal Metaphysique** that we are beyond truth and falsehood. We are not in possession of any truth about

ourselves. We are beyond classification and comprehension. We are nothing. This is what one would mean by existential crisis. According to Kierkegaard, ethical understanding implies understanding the claims made upon me by the others. It is only in such a way that 'disclosure' comes in and truth is grasped. He had faith in the Jewish saying that the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom. This is why he sees death as a kind of freedom. In both his important works **The Concept of Dread** and **The Sickness unto Death**, Kierkegaard makes his point by saying how man wants to be himself but yet he cannot be himself. The 'sickness unto death' is despair, which means to say that it leads to inner death or closure.

However, existentialism is not to be regarded as an utterly pessimistic philosophy but it is only that its adherents have been realistic enough in acknowledging the disorder inherent in the scheme of human existence:

To exist is to project oneself into the future. But there is always a lack or disproportion between the self as projected and the self where it actually stands. This discontinuity in existence has been noted from Kierkegaard to Ricoeur. One may call it flaw or fault, not so much in the sense in which the word is used by geologists, that is to say, to express a radical break or discontinuity. The gap is between existence and essence, as between facticity and possibility, or between the self one is and the self that is projected. But this kind of flaw is not yet a moral flaw, but rather the kind of finite being that makes mortality possible. The case is similar with Heidegger's notion of falling. He takes care to explain that this is an ontological possibility and that he is not making an ontical pronouncement on man's actual condition. Man is so constituted that he stands in the possibility of falling, that is to say, of a disproportion or a failure to measure up to the stature of his possibility. Nietzsche was clear that the flaw or impression in the way man is constituted, the fact that he is unfinished, not only makes

possible the deterioration of man but is equally the ground of the possibility of his advance towards superman.”

(Macquarrie, 1972, 158-159).

In this way the existentialists seem to have mastered the technique of reaffirming the value of life while boldly depicting its horror. Instead of defining what 'Existentialism' is, we must try to enumerate a certain number of concepts of the philosophy of existence and set them against the background of experience like anguish, nothingness, isolation, finitude, absurdity and guilt. These are issues or problems which need not to be solved for the existentialists but mysteries against which the response of the individual will serve to reveal his uniqueness.

## II

The existentialist notion of crisis is perhaps best expressed in the works of Franz Kafka, than in the actual philosophical treatises. Kafka's works are a reflection of the man as an existent faced with the idea of solitude, of dread, of subjectivity, of anguish, of absurdity, of nothingness, and of death. Franz Kafka is a literary icon of both German and Austrian literature, but he is also a cosmopolitan writer whose works transcend geographical, historical and cultural limitations. He was born on 3 July 1883 in Prague, capital of the then kingdom of Bohemia in the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary. He died as a citizen of Czechoslovakia on the outskirts of Vienna in 1924 barely forty one years. His parents Hermann Kafka and Julie Lowy were fancy goods merchants. The Kafkas were of a robust breed with business acumen but the Lowys were intellectual with a religious bent. He was the eldest of the six children, including two brothers Georg and Heinrich who died in infancy and three sisters Elli, Valli and Ottla who all outlived him but finally became victims of the holocaust. His parents had named him after the Habsburg emperor Franz Joseph. Ironically Franz

Kafka turned out to be everything but an emperor, his works being a reflection of his ordinariness of being to the point of nullity. In fact, all his works center on the unspoken question-“Who am I?”. Kafka puts the whole of his existential anguish to this question. He is so many things- a German speaking Jew, an Austrian subject, an inhabitant of the Czech city, a theologian, a philosopher, a literary critic; but at the same time he is nothing, not even Franz Kafka. This psychic confusion of the self bordering on eccentricity left Kafka with a fear of being regarded as a mad man, but he transposed this uncertainty about the self into his writings.

Though he transferred to his writings all his uncertainty and distrust he felt towards himself, writing soon became the source of his anguish. Kafka's notorious self-loathing is caused to a large extent by his dissatisfaction with writing. Many a times he felt an acute sense of guilt by failing to write and by not writing well enough. Upon close analysis one finds the cause lying in the discrepancy Kafka finds between his knowledge of the world and his experience. Yet writing was his salvation, writing came before life. It freed him from his isolation to revel in the spiritual joy of writing. But try as he might, man is never to be regarded as a subject shut in on himself. The political, social, cultural and familial demands threaten the subject's isolation. Such was the case with Kafka. Kafka lived during a period of intense socio-cultural changes and lived to see the two world wars, the anti-Jewish riots, and the publication of Sigmund Freud's **The Interpretation of Dreams** in 1900. Other important historical events were the first and the Second Balkan Wars in 1912-1913, the failure of the Russian Revolution in 1905 and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the humiliating defeat of Germany in 1918-1919, and Prague becoming the Capital of independent Czechoslovakia. During this period there was an upsurge for the rise of smaller nation states like Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary. These defining

historical moments had a profound impact upon the hyper-sensitive mind of Franz Kafka. There was also an air of intellectual stagnation which paralyzed much of Europe. Under such conditions, Kafka had sought to take refuge in writing but only to be enmeshed in the mire. Julian Preece elaborates:

Everything in Kafka's Europe appeared in flux and-as history was to show with a barbarism none could have foreseen-consequently under threat. His images of fractured perception, his figures' search for wholeness, and their experience of authority divorced from responsibility are modernist images of Europe on the brink of its most awful hour

( Preece, 1999, 2)

Kafka was also profoundly influenced by Nietzsche and Marx, nudism, anti-Semitism and the rising Zionist Movement. He is said to have attended the Zionist Congress in 1913. Life as a Jew was difficult because under the war conditions, a Jew had to identify himself either as a German or a Czech. Since Kafka suffered from the problem of assimilation, the rootless nature of his characters in his writings is well understood. However, in Post-war Czechoslovakia, the first President of Czechoslovakia T.G.Masaryk who being sympathetic to the Zionist cause gave due recognition to the Jews; and particularly after the anti-Semitic flare up in 1920 brought a new harmony in Czech-Jewish relations. This explains the mellowed tone of **The Castle** in comparison to **The Trial**. However, it is also difficult to imagine how an outwardly genial personality like Franz Kafka could harbor such acute pangs of loneliness. His friendship with Max Brod his biographer is well-known and he also shared close ties with his two schoolfriends Paul Kisch and Oskar Pollak. His Prague circle of friends also included Robert Musil, Carl Sternheim and Felix Weltsch. He was also close with Robert Klopstock, a Hungarian medic from Budapest, who later

died in New York in 1972. Kafka had recommended his name as a translator of his stories to his publisher, Kurt Wolff. His dietary habits were also interesting. By 1912 Kafka turns vegetarian and he was himself a frugal eater leading to speculations that he deliberately starved himself. Many of his stories like **The Hunger Artist**, **The Metamorphoses** and **Investigations of a Dog** either deal with the problem of food. Kafka admired Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Kliest and Grillparzer. He also read Darwin and Ernst Haeckel, the chief exponent of Darwinism in Germany. Strangely, Kafka formulates an inverse evolutionary order. Kafka also practiced nudism besides physical activities like swimming and hiking. His interest in nudism was his response to the cult of the natural. He also practiced 'fletschern' or rhythmic mastication after its American propagator Horace Fletcher. These activities, celebrating the human body, were followed by Kafka for spiritual regeneration. It could also explain his way of coming to terms with his frail body and its acceptance by him. He writes how he felt acutely conscious of his father's robust body starkly different from him whilst they went swimming.

Kafka felt the overwhelming experience of writing only after he had written **The Judgment** 'at one sitting during the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup> from two o'clock at night to six in the morning.... The fearful strain and joy how the story developed before me as if I were walking on water' (CS, 310). It was from now on that Kafka was to devote himself to writing religiously. But constituted as he was he also knew that it was a vocation which would demand the sacrifice of his other interests. Henceforth he would write but he would have to quit living. This was the painful choice which appeared before him. At the end, he could achieve neither, leading him to experience an acute existential crisis. Kafka worked at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague. Brod recalls Kafka's seething frustration and

anger when he saw meek workers who were victims of industrial accidents, being denied the appropriate accident insurance premium. Kafka once said to Max Brod: "How modest these men are. They come to us and beg. Instead of storming the institute and smashing it to little pieces, they come and beg" (B, 82). His job was drudgery for him from which he found release only at night when he would be writing. Paradoxically, writing becomes simultaneously the cause of his misery and potentially also the means of his escape.

The 'existential crisis' in Franz Kafka arises from his failure to grasp his real self both as a writer and as an individual. Upon close analyses we find that the split between the author and the self is deliberate so that the demons of his self do not contaminate the purity of his works. Perhaps this explains why Kafka uses the mode of the fable because it enabled the maximum effacing of the author from his works. In this way also the personal and the individual could be raised to the level of the general and universal. Unlike the other existentialists, his life of freezing solitude coupled with intense introspection does not make him aware of God or any such beneficent Higher Power. The tragedy of man's position lies in his inability to perceive and relate to this Higher Power for reasons too complex and mysterious for his comprehension. The resultant despair and irony form the thematic concern of his works. Kafka's works reveal him to be a self-analytical, self-obsessed writer. His anxious diary entries and agonizing letters perplex the reader with psychological and epistemological enigmas. From the autumn of 1912 till the time of his death, Kafka seemed to have written every single day. Kafka wrote to Max Brod from 1904-1924; Oskar Pollak from 1902-1904; Robert Klopstock from 1921-14. He also wrote to Felice Bauer from 1912-17, to Milena Jesenska, Grete Bloch who was Felice's friend and intermediary, Minze Eisner, to his favorite sister Ottla and to his publishers and editors. These

letters are no doubt personal, unlocking the labyrinthine consciousness of the soul yet so well thought out, well documented writings with clear narration and clever phrasing. It is hard to believe that they were personal outpourings because of its deliberate overtones. **Letters to Felice** almost seems like an epistolary novel put very appropriately by Julian Preece that these letters are not to her as much as about her; **Letters to Milena** is more compact and more mature in nature; **Letters to Minze Eisner** is more of a student-mentor communication where Kafka advises her on her career as a horticulturist and encourages her to be independent. **Letters to My Father** is an autobiographical document written in 1919 at the age of 36 portraying the archetypal father-son conflict, pitting the father's strength against the son's weakness. Kafka admired his father's business talents but it also horrified to see him Hermann Kafka's tyrannical manner of dealing with his employees which created an aversion for Kafka towards the shop and made him seek refuge in writing. He was appalled to see how his father's employees meekly surrendered to the scathing venom of his father. Hermann Kafka like all fathers of the Jewish Bourgeois of Prague wanted to give his son a German education. Hermann Kafka was a second generation Jewish migrant and was a practical businessman who knew that one had to speak the language of the ruling class for social and professional advancement. His schooling was at one of Prague's German Grammar schools and he later studied at the German University of Prague. His father publicly supported his son to study German, but privately he forced his son to cling to their poor preserved Czech vestige. While he was speaking Czech at home, he spoke German at school. Thus from his very childhood, Kafka was pulled apart by two contrary forces-the German language which committed him to a foreign culture but with which he seemed fairly comfortable later; and his own Jewish root. Thus according to Marthe Robert in her book **Franz**

**Kafka's Loneliness** writes: 'This, he believed, was what gave rise to his "infinite" sense of guilt' (Robert, 1982, 11) Marthe Robert further quotes from a letter written by Kafka to his father: "As a child," he wrote to his father, "I reproached myself, in agreement with you, for not going to the synagogue often enough, for not fasting, etc. In this I thought I was doing a wrong not to myself, but to you, and I was assailed by a sense of guilt which was of course always ready at hand" (LMF, 171). Robert correlates Kafka's sense of guilt with the persecution and uprooting of Jews. We find that Kafka's protagonists are identified only by a truncated initial Joseph K. in **The Trial** or simply K. in **The Castle**. It could suggest the castrated individual or Kafka himself. Besides the protagonists are seldom given proper names; most are only known by their professions be it the hunger artist or the trapeze artist, the explorer, the doctor, the hunter, the singer, the tradesman, the advocate, etc. or may simply be animals like dogs, jackals, mouse, insect, spool or even hybrid creatures as Odradek or as in the short story **The Great Wall of China** the Jews are represented as Chinese. Kafka Although Kafka shared greater affinity with German Literature yet again the disavowal of his Jewish heritage was not a happy situation for him. Kafka was isolated from the warmth of his family circle, primarily his father. Temperamentally, Kafka's intellectual agility and personal delicacy set him at loggerheads with his brutally healthy and assertive father. Kafka had an aversion for his body and the decisive factors appear to us to be the way in which he compared his body with his father's and the way in which Hermann Kafka reacted to his son's physique. These feelings of physical inferiority were made more serious by his father's overt rejection of his son. Kafka's anxiety about his father's domination is expressed in almost all his works in a physical metaphor. These are physical manifestations of an existential crisis brewing within Franz Kafka. Hermann Kafka



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was disinterested towards his son's writings; and even his friendship with Isak Löwy, the director of the Yiddish Theatre troupe was looked down upon. Kafka was impressed deeply by the Yiddish Theatre Troupe in 1911. But it was Hermann Kafka's hatred towards Eastern Jews which made him remark 'He who lies down with dogs gets up with fleas' (**D**, Nov 31, 1911). Kafka was mad with rage at this brutal attack and he chose to exorcise himself by writing. This scathing remark was also the cause of several 'dog' metaphors in Kafka's works and also the dog was an anti-Semitic epithet. In the short story **Investigations of a dog**, the investigating dog was actually an aspiring Jew or could be Kafka himself. In **The Metamorphosis**, Gregor Samsa waking up to find himself transformed into an insect is reminiscent of the 'flea'. Also the comment seemed to have inspired the open ending of the novel **The Trial**, where Joseph K. is seen himself dying cut off from society 'like a dog!' (**T**, 251). Like a dog, Kafka chose to live outside the familiarity of his community. The dog metaphor condenses in the untitled and unfinished story called **Investigations of a Dog** written in 1922. Here through the disabused old dog, Kafka investigates his own life. His investigations have no result but drive him deeper into the throes of despair. Thus Marthe Robert opines:

For his writing, directed essentially against his father's tyranny and the narrowness of his environment, was anything but an innocent game. It was a dangerous offensive weapon, the use of which brought with it a profound sense of guilt. Hence the conflict in which he was involved from the age of twenty one, and which he was able even then to formulate: "God does not want me to write, but I- I must. And so there is an everlasting up and down; after all, God is the stronger and there's more anguish in it than you can imagine.

(Robert, 1982, 37-38)

The mysterious inner law which he here called "God"- in mockery, perhaps, because at the time of this letter to Oskar Pollak he called himself an atheist, or more likely through an intuition of the true nature of the commandment only intensified its rigors as time passed, and in the end every page of his work had to be torn out of him. Although Franz Kafka was not an avid traveler himself, yet the traveler image is predominant in his significant works. In **Amerika**, Kafka writes about a country that he had never visited. Possibly, they are impressions of Kafka's two visits to Paris as noted by Hartmut Binder in **Kafka in Paris**. All these images of travel show man as an insignificant creature in his quest for understanding the vastness of the universe. Writing did serve as a therapeutic device to some extent for Kafka and so he is not confined to the paper but via the imagination of creativity, his works teem with images of the far-fetched worlds- Prague, Italy, Paris, Russia, Turkey, China, America; and his characters take various shapes like a dog, mouse, trapeze artist, bank-official, scholar etc. In all his works Kafka sees a great divide between Man and the Institution, whether it is Joseph K. in **The Trial** seeking to understand the legal implications of the court or whether it is K. in **The Castle** trying to find a way to the impenetrable castle, or Karl Rossmann's struggle in a foreign land in **Amerika**. **Amerika** can be a different kind of a novel of development *Entwicklungsroman* wherein there is a gradual regression of the protagonist. It solved the problem that all modern artists have faced regarding the difficulty of providing a definite image of man in the face of constant threat. Likewise the heroes of modern writings are often faceless and anonymous, one who is at once everyman and no man. So it is with Kafka's heroes; be it Joseph K. or K. standing for the truncated hero or the castrated author. William Barrett elaborates:

In the novels of Franz Kafka the hero is a cipher, an initial; a cipher, to be sure, with an overwhelming passion to find out his individual place and responsibility- this which are not given to him *a priori* and which he dies without ever finding out. The existence of this cipher who does not discover his own meaning is marginal, in the sense that he is always beyond the boundary of what is secure, stable, meaningful, ordained. Modern literature tends to be a literature of "extreme situation", to use Jaspers expression. It shows us man at the end of his tether, cut off from the consolations of all that seems so solid and earthly in the daily round of life-that seems so as long as this round is accepted without question.

( Barrett, 1961, 54)

Kafka tried to escape from this existential crises brewing within himself and outside by his effort to achieve domestic serenity. Though he had had relations with several women, nothing really worked for him. Felice Bauer was an intelligent and well read woman to whom he had got engaged twice but never married. He first met Felice on 13 August, 1912. He broke off his first engagement with Felice Bauer in 1916 and then broke off and again he renewed his engagement in 1917 and fell ill. But again the same year he again broke off for good. The prospect of failed marriage with the competent Felice seems to have confirmed his sense of inadequacy. His problem aggravated because he saw marriage as a threat to his purity: "Coitus as punishment for the happiness of being together. Live as ascetically as possible, more ascetically than a bachelor, that is the only possible way for me to endure marriage. But she?" (D. August 14, 1913). Between the years 1913 and 1914, Kafka's stormy relationship with Felice Bauer was mediated by one Grete Bloch. There are speculations of Grete Bloch's romantic involvement with Kafka. Interesting the defendant of Joseph K. in **The Trial** is called by the name of 'Block' and 'Grete' is Gregor Samsa's sister in

**The Metamorphoses.** How true the liaison was remains only a matter of pure speculation. Later he had had an affair with Milena Jesenská, a Christian Czech and got engaged to Julie Wohryzek another woman from a modest Czech Jewish background. He again broke off his engagement and finally gave up all thoughts of marriage. His companion during the last years of his life was a young Jew girl Dora Diamant. All women in his life were strongly independent and intelligent. Kafka lived in a society where only the valid motives for marriage were generally love or social convenience. He seems to have been obsessed with the idea of marriage. In his diary entry of November 24, 1911, he notes a sentence from the Talmud (I:162): "A man without a woman is not a human being" (D. 126). Kafka knew that marriage would fulfill his natural right as an adult, but he also knew that it was forbidden to him. The bliss of establishing a home was denied to him due to his existence as a writer. He knew that marriage was a human and moral obligation and that to exclude from this obligation was to exclude oneself from the human race. Thus his obligation to the higher order of writing preventing him from the happy realm of marriage which only aggravated his existential crisis. Writing required 'absolute solitude, a night blacker than all other nights, the silence of the tomb where he dreams of burying himself' (Robert, 1982, 106). Before tuberculosis caught up with him, he was able to spend a few happy years with Dora Diamant. In a love scene between Frieda and the land surveyor K. in **The Castle** K. was haunted by the feeling of painful strangeness and it was in such a painful state that Klamm's voice calling Frieda from the next room almost relieves him. The father in **The Judgment** annihilates the son's individuality but when Georg Bendemann jumps to his death, it expresses his final exclusion from the world of sex and procreation. Not to marry was a difficult decision for Franz Kafka. Now for the existentialists the action of decision-making is fraught with

anxiety because to decide for one possibility is to renounce every other possibility. This is the tragic element in human existence. Choice is ubiquitous because all actions of men imply choice. For Sartre, even if one does not choose, one has chosen not to choose. Confrontation with this limitedness of choice is what causes dread in man. Kierkegaard speaks of fear or dread of confronting the nothingness or void. Heidegger sees it as an ontological constituent of the universe. Jaspers sees it as a situation that lays stress on the fragility of our existence. Kafka can also be read parallel to Lewis Carroll's **Alice in wonderland**. Alice like Kafka's protagonists is a quester seeking out new worlds but which only leads her to baffling territories. Alice too finds herself in a strange situation, in a room with many doors to choose from and at the end is a small door with a view to the ideal world. Confronted with many choices, Man is actually cut off from the ideal world. Decision brings the existent face to face with himself in a way that must stir anxiety. For Kafka, by renouncing marriage, he had hoped to strengthen his self as a writer. Writing would enable a break through out of his loneliness and guilt but when writing proved elusive at times, he experienced an anguish which threatened to engulf his total self. The concept of the self occupies an important area of concern in both Philosophy and Literature. For the philosophers, the self is the origin of all knowledge and which prods one to action; but in literature, the self is the principle of intelligibility which is the understanding of experience. Now the understanding of experience is a subjective act and only then does the existent comprehend the world outside. It was seen in the nineteenth century literature that the heroes were moving outside, marking a breakthrough from the static pre-capitalist society. If the Marxists see the Kafka heroes as men pitted against the social forces outside; for the existentialists, it is man's search for the self. A peculiar tension therefore arises in Kafka with regard to the self's tenacity for recognition and the

inaccessible other. The existential crisis arises from the distance that separates the self from the other because only from the self can meaning can be had but there is difficulty in grasping the self. Unlike Nietzsche's Superman, who is strong enough to resist the curse of existence, Kafka's heroes are overpowered as victims. What remains is only an all-engulfing weariness "Everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair. The Gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wounds closed wearily" (CS, 432).

Thus writing did bring some relief but it did not bring freedom because he had to write about himself and relive the pain again and again. Soren Kierkegaard in his **The concept of Dread** regards anxiety as a vertigo of freedom, for freedom means possibility and to stand on the edge of possibility is rather like standing on the edge of a precipice. The human task is to accomplish the syntheses of body and soul, and this task is from the very beginning anxiety-ridden. Kierkegaard's talks of the deceptiveness of all earthly things and the terror of total annihilation. According to Kierkegaard, every man who awakens to the realization of infinite demands made on him begins to undergo a trial. The true meaning of **The Trial** can be understood only in the light of Kierkegaard who believed that man is infinitely guilty and that man cannot comprehend his guilt by his analogy with external frame of reference. On the other hand, Sartre in **Being and Nothingness** writes anxiety arises because according to him- 'I distrust myself and my own reactions' (Sartre, 1956, 29). In other words, there is a profound ambiguity in freedom. And for Kafka anxiety resulted from an unresolved tension between freedom with its possibilities and finitude with its restrictions and its threat of nihilation. Seen from this perspective, Kafka's works are manifestations of doom plunging into death. Life itself was a paradox for Kafka. Kafka was familiar with Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the German philosopher and he

was especially influenced by Kant's **The Critique of Pure Reason** particularly where Kant formulates the relationship between the empirical and the transcendental world which expressed itself as a paradox. Thus such paradoxes or as Kant calls them 'antinomies' seems to be working in Kafka. The events presented in his works are absurd yet true to each self. Existential crisis in Franz Kafka is also his painful awareness of the contingency of life. He even at times relished at this morbid idea of experiencing death. In his short story called **The Hunger Artist** the protagonist reaches almost absurd heights of disastrous self destruction in the interests of preserving and almost sanctifying his ego. Likewise **The Hunter Gracchus** is a sardonic commentary on death. Here the dead hunter wanders aimlessly about the earth even after he has been killed. Kafka here seems to suggest the frightening thesis that death should not be regarded as a kind of blessed release. Death, too, is a world where there are outcasts equally bewildered by the meaninglessness of their trapped state. It is in the anticipation of death that we come face to face with our own nothingness. This existential idea of finitude implying the idea of limitation and nothingness is expressed by Jean Wahl in his book **Philosophies of Existence** in the following words:

To exist is to be limited. To be limited is to depart from the absolute and the infinite. Therefore to exist is to be guilty. This idea may be traced back to the Kierkegaardian notion of existence as guilt, but in Kierkegaard the idea is part of a larger doctrine stating that existence is at once the highest value and sin. We are separated from the Wholly Other in relation to whom we live in a state of ceaseless tension. This separation is a guilty thing, but at the same time, this separation is what gives our existence all its intensity and thereby its value.

(Wahl, 1969, 69-70)

This explains the existential crisis in Franz Kafka. He professed himself to be an atheist at one time of the life and at the same time he lived his life with a kind of religious courage. This also explains why all his characters meet their end with a heroic grandeur. The French existentialist Martin Heidegger writes in **Being and Time** about the uniqueness of death as an individual exercise and further says: "In the first instance, we must characterize Being-toward death as a *Being towards a possibility*-indeed, towards a distinctive possibility of Dasein itself" (Heidegger, 1962, 305). Thus only the person who realizes that it is he alone who has to face death can truly experience his sense of individuality. The view that the consciousness of death intensifies individual self awareness is found not only in Heidegger but also in others like Unamuno, Kierkegaard and Shestov. Thus death becomes a phenomenon giving totality to life. Robert G. Olson in **An Introduction to Existentialism** explains how Sartre will have none of it: Sartre will have none of this. For him death is never a personal possibility, much less a personal possibility which we can freely resolve to assume and which will give an ultimate meaning to the series of act which constitute our individual lives. As Sartre sees it, death is merely an external limit or a 'wall' which we may encounter at any time in pursuing our personal projects but which we can never personally or freely project as an end to be pursued. More technically, death is 'an always possible nihilation of my possibles which is outside possibilities' (Olson, 1961, 203). Kafka had no faith in the Christian idea of God and Christ suffering for mankind. Rather he proposes ethical individualism where the impersonal divinity, the indestructible, lies at the centre of each individual. Suffering becomes a necessary mode to reach this indestructible. The experience of suffering can even lead one to death. Thus K.'s painful quest in **The Castle** proves destructive not only to himself but to others as well. In Kafka the difference between Heidegger and Sartre's

concept of death does not seem to bother much. In his works we see a fine coalescence of Heidegger and Sartre. Death makes one aware of his individuality but death can also remove all meaning from life. However, Kafka's works also reflect his faith in the 'indestructible' present in man. There is a tendency to regard Kafka as an artistic freak and nihilist, but his tortured analyses of the self is an attempt to reach a spiritual meaning in life. Even though his works abound with a sense of man's bewildered struggle against metaphysical odds and in spite of Nietzsche proclaiming God to be dead, but his faith in the 'indestructible' prevented him from collapsing under the weight of his existential crisis. This is beautifully summed up in **A Message from the Emperor**, the emperor sends a message from his deathbed. The messenger though strong and indefatigable has to force his way through the royal palace, the inner chambers, the stairs, the courtyards, the outer palace, each representing a space so large that the message can never reach to the addressee. But, the story concludes 'you sit at your window and dream up that message when evening falls' (CS, 5). Even if God is dead, we want a divine message, if none is available, we will dream it ourselves. Kafka says: "Man cannot live without a permanent faith in something indestructible in himself" And he adds further: "At the same time this indestructible part and his faith in it may remain permanently concealed from him, and one of the way in which this concealment may be expressed is the belief in a personal God" (B, 172). Faith being concealed permanently may explain why his important novels lack closure and why the goal is forever deferred in Kafka's shorter stories. Kafka died in June 3, 1924 barely completing his fortieth year. His life saw the publication of very little works, not more than five or six volumes. The first edition of his three novels was published only in 1931 but because of the Nazi censorship throughout 1930's,

Kafka was virtually unknown in Germany after the Second World War. His works were available openly in Germany only after 1945.

Although his works brought him recognition only posthumously, but the richness of his works has made it an inalienable part of modern study. Kafka was also influenced by Taoism and Gustav Janouch tells us how Kafka owned nearly all the volumes of the German translations of Taoist writings. But Kafka himself inherited no literary tradition; rather he created his own tradition by his unique literary imagination. If he sounds like a religious allegorist like Dante or Bunyan, it is purely unintentional. What attracts the attention of the readers is not just the form or structure of his works but the layers of meanings it veils underneath. And this mystification instead of baffling the readers only liberates us. Kafka is definitely not a religious writer. For him man was more sinned against than sinful. It is paradoxical to the concept of the original sin. His interest in Zionism is also ambiguous. He studied the Jewish folk literature, the Hebrew language and read the Talmud. In his letter to his friend Oskar Pollak he wrote: "But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished from forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us" (LFFE, 16). Hence the creative act is a kind of breakthrough to the inner self. Kafka is original in the way he perceives the world. No philosopher had looked at the world this way or was affected by the antinomy of the world. Kafka is presented as a modern Bunyan by his English translators Edwin and Willa Muir. This image clearly appealed to the age witnessing religious erosion but more than an allegorist, Kafka is an existentialist because Kafka writes as if suffering was desirable and nowhere does he voice his unease with his suffering. If Kierkegaard's anguish arises from certitude, Kafka's anguish arises from self doubt. Vacillating between

self-laceration at most times taking diabolical proportions, Kafka shares Hamlet-like dilemma and even contemplated suicide. Kafka writes, "How could Fortinbras say that Hamlet had conducted himself truly like a king?" (D. September 29, 1915). Hamlet suffered from a split within himself and the world which failed to recognize his authentic self, and estrangement between his soul and the world. Kafka makes the following entry in his **Fifth Octavo Note-Book**: "The world- F. is its representative- and my ego are tearing my body apart in a conflict that there is no resolving." But his self-criticism is an expression of his desire to love and to be loved; a wife could have taken his place; or God ; or even his sister Ottilia. But ultimately, he gives up all desire of escape and the only thing that he could do was endure.

If in German Idealism, Truth and Existence are one; but for Kafka, they are divided; and his life-long struggle is to unite truth with existence. This Manichean situation is also the source of his existential crisis. Kafka beguiles the readers. All his works open with an element of surprise. There is a sudden upsetting of the routine( like Gregor turning into an insect in **The Metamorphoses** or Joseph K. suddenly arrested one fine morning with no reason in **The Trial**; but it is at the same time not unrecognizable because of its ordinariness but soon one is transported to the bizarre but recognizable world. However, never for once the reader finds himself out of place because the air of familiarity continues until one is enmeshed in the narrative sequence. Kafka's narratives are basically speculations using the imaginative language. His myths do not have a mythopoeic historical quality and they have a contemporary feel about it. Through the unfathomable the reality is brought closer to us. The movement of Kafka's narrative is also circular where the beginnings become the end and the ends from which now beginnings may arise; while the truth is safely ensconced in the centre. Therefore one needed to possess patience to explore the hidden truth. Kafka

knew the value of patience and this he could have inherited from the tradition of the Gnosis says Bloom in **The Western Canon**: "Paradoxes are what his readers expect from Kafka, but a patient gnosticism more than a paradox. Gnosis, by definition, is a timeless knowledge, both of the self within the self and of the alien God whose spark remains in that innermost self" (Bloom, 1995, 449). So in Kafka, events keep revolving around a certain crux all quest of the individual remains futile because he is only moving in the periphery of the events. Therefore what was required of one was to be patient to understand the world as it is, this is perhaps what Kafka means when he says in one of his aphorism: "There is no need for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked; it can't do otherwise; in raptures it will writhe before you." Also while the tradition of myth usually stands for some idea or truth; the Kafka myth is inverted. In spite of an air of mystery prevailing in his narratives they are not the kind of detective story with which we may be familiar. Kafka clarifies this to Janouch: "On the contrary, it stares one in the face. It's what is obvious. So we do not see it. Everyday is the greatest story ever written..." (GJ, 133). Since reality cannot be comprehended within a conceptual system, many have decried the existentialists as disappointed rationalists. There is no explanations of why things are as they are and not otherwise. Even freedom for the existentialists is ambiguous. This makes Kafka the most canonical writer of the modern era. Margaret Church in her essay *Kafka and Proust: A Contrast in Time* traces two theories of time; time as a continuum as is in Proust and other such writers who follow the stream of Consciousness technique; and the other is the Platonic concept of time which is more general in nature. It is the former mode of time that Kafka presents because the mythic form and the dream-parable mode are also general

modes of narration. Although Proust and Kafka did not know each other yet Goronwy Rees in his preface to his translation of Gustav Janouch's 'Conversations with Kafka' while drawing comparisons between the two finds similarity between them in their quest for truth—"the same power of observation and penetration, the same mastery of a psychological calculus for measuring the smallest, most fatal of human actions" (GJ, ix). If Proust reconstructs time with involuntary memory; for Kafka memory is practically non-existent which is why the dream parables and myths are free from the constraints of past, present and future. Lifting the constraints of time, Kafka applies it to hypothetical situations. Today's Kafka's works are not read simply, they are scourged for his message to humanity. His two earliest English translations were done by Edwin and Willa Muir and their translations were published by Alfred A. Knopf. Credit goes to Edwin and Willa Muir for making Kafka studies popular in the United States during the 1940's. The later editions, notably the 1954 editions, included an addition of the deleted text which was translated by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser. This edition is generally called the 'definitive editions'. In spite of several biases, they are credited with translating **The Trial, Definitive** and **The Castle, Definitive**. After Malcolm Pasley and Schillemeit completed their recompilation of the German text, the new translations were completed and published as **The Castle, Critical** (1998) by Mark Harman; **The Trial, Critical** (1998) by Breon Mitchell ; and **Amerika: The Man who Disappeared** (2004) by Michael Hoffman. These editions are often noted as being based on the restored text. However, today Kafka's works are translated into all the major languages of the world French, Italian, Czech, Polish, Spanish and Swedish. Also after his death, he has been a subject of interest to writers like Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse. "One must not cheat any body", wrote Kafka in one of his aphorisms, "not even the world of its triumph". Kafka has given birth to the adjective

“Kafkaesque” which is generally applied to man’s absurd relationship with the universe; and the Encarta Encyclopedia defines “Kafkaesque” as “grotesque, anxiety-producing social conditions or their treatment in Literature”; yet it would be a narrowing effort if one can only studies the darker side of Kafka. No doubt there is anxiety, paradox of existence, and solitude in his works, but this disquietitude is not something that his works ended with. It provided man with the strength to trudge along the path of life.