
Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* : A tale of tangled relationships and multiple transformations

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“To die would mean nothing else than to surrender a nothing to the nothing, but that would be impossible to conceive, for how could a person, even only as a nothing consciously surrender himself to the nothing, and not merely to an empty nothing but rather to a roaring nothing whose nothingness consists only in its incomprehensibility.”

- Franz Kafka

I

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect” (Ger. “ungeheures Ungeziefer”, i.e. “Monstrous Vermin” or “a giant bug” or “an insect” as often interpreted in English.). But whatsoever it means, the moment Gregor Samsa metamorphosed from “He” to “It”, “Valid” to “Invalid”, “Dependable to Dependent” - from that day everything in he loved in his life changed forever.

Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis* (Ger. *Die Verwandlung*) or *The Transformation* (as sometimes translated) first published in 1915 is similar and yet different from his other seminal works like *The Trial* (written in 1914 & 1915, published in 1925) or *The Castle* (written in 1922, & published in 1926). Though it portrays the tragic fate of the protagonist Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman and his helplessness in his plight, just like the chief financial officer Josef K. in *The Trial* and K. ,the land surveyor in *The Castle*, but unlike the other two characters, Gregor does not have to fight fruitlessly against

the inaccessible authorities or the bureaucratic system, (as we see in the latter two novels) or get stabbed in the heart and die “like a dog!”. His problem is much more complex. His fight is more with himself and his family rather than the external world. From the beginning Gregor starts losing his self; his body, his voice, his language, his job and in a way, his identity. He gets alienated gradually from the society and more precisely from his own family and this drifting of his self and his self-effacement is completed with his untimely death.

Gregor’s cause of transformation is never revealed or explained by the author. Instead he deals with the after effects of this situation. He focuses on Gregor's attempts to cope up with his “new self”, his gradual destabilized relationship with his father, mother and sister and his dear sister’s denial of the insect to be him: “But how can it be Gregor? If this were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can’t live with such a creature, and he’d have gone away on his own accord. Then we wouldn’t have any brother, but we’d be able to go on living and keep his memory in honor. As it is, this creature persecutes us, drives away our lodgers, obviously wants the whole apartment to himself and would have us all sleep in the gutter.” *The Metamorphosis* is not just a physical transformation of a man but it is the transformation of characters around him too.

That Sister Grete (Fraulein Samsa) who once “would burst into tears” on hearing his “intention of sending her to the Conservatorium” (“despite the great expense that would entail”) would herself, later suggest her father that; “We must try to get rid of it... At least I can’t stand it any longer”. Mother who in her “gentle voice!” would previously inquire her “hadn't you a train to catch?” would later scream “in a loud, hoarse voice” and faint just at a mere glimpse of him. Though “he then ran after his sister into the next room as if he could advise her, as he used to do; but then had to stand helplessly behind her.” “Gregor was now cut off from his mother” and his sister

as well, who for “the first time” (and the perhaps last) “directly addressed him since his metamorphosis”, indirectly blaming him for the accident. Not only did Gregor transform, so did his father; “The man who used to lie wearily sunk in bed whenever Gregor set out on a business journey; who welcomed him back of an evening lying in a long chair in a dressing gown; who could not really rise to his feet but only lifted his arms in greeting... Now he was standing there in fine shape; dressed in a smart blue uniform with gold buttons, such as bank messengers wear; his strong double chin bugled over the stiff high collar of his jacket; from under his bushy eyebrows his black eyes darted fresh and penetrating glances; his onetime tangled white hair had been combed flat on either side of a shining and carefully exact parting.” Being absorbed in his “new recreation” of crawling over the ceiling he failed to notice the changes he should have been prepared for.

Throughout the novella there are various instances which could trace back to Kafka’s own strained relationship with father Herrman. For example, just as Gregor, Kafka too was subjected to his father’s abuse and yelling (because he thought him to be a failure). “Gregor felt as if he had let down the family because he had provided for them up until this point where he could no longer work. He thought it would be very difficult for his family to be financially secure without him working.”¹

His own horror of family life, which he often expressed to Felice in his letters, “I have always looked on my parents as persecutors”² is expressed through the portrayal of Gregor’s father who “believed only the severest measures suitable for dealing with him.” When the metamorphosed Gregor is chased away by his father, “No plea of Gregor’s availed, indeed none was understood; however meekly he twisted his head his father only stamped the harder.” Kafka felt his

life to be so terrible that he even wrote: “I doubt whether I am a human being” and that “It is through writing that I keep a hold on life.” Thus his “exceptionally repulsive” story (as he himself admitted in one of his letters to Felice), perhaps served him as an outlet to express his pains through Gregor and keep himself from being transformed into Gregor. “This is the domestic matrix out of which came the terrifying claustrophobia and self disgust of Gregor Samsa.”³

However “Like *The Judgment*, this story too grew directly from personal experience – though, also like that earlier story, it would be limiting and untrue to its originality and imaginative range to think of it as ‘autobiographical’.”⁴ Perhaps this phenomenon of blurring between reality and fantasy in *The Metamorphosis*, can be best seen in Steven Soderbergh’s 1991 film *Kafka*, which too blurs the lines between fact and fiction of Kafka. Soderbergh’s *Kafka* is an insurance worker cum writer who gradually transforms into K like character and involves himself in solving the mystery of The Castle. However in the beginning of the film he narrates about himself and his father in an autobiographical manner : “Do you remember many years ago Father took me aside and told me I was preoccupied with the insignificant, morbidly preoccupied in his opinion. Well for years now, I have led a life that even he must call normal except for the fact that in my odd, spare moments...I write. I may be a disappointment to him, but I ask- Is it a crime?” and after his getting involved with an underground group and eventually confronting the secret organization in the castle, the film returns again to the autobiographical yet fictitious mode and ends with a TB affected Kafka writing a letter to his father: “I can no longer deny that I am part of the world around me nor can I deny, despite of our differences that I remain your son.”

II

Keeping aside the autobiographical elements let's now just concentrate on the tragic life of Gregor alone. "*Metamorphosis* is about invalidation, our self-invalidations and our invalidations of others; and it does nothing-offers us nothing morally-but this vision of how we do it. The narration focuses on how Gregor invalidates his family, how his family invalidates and destroys Gregor, how his sister Grete, learns to invalidate her brother."⁵ Gregor has 'picked on' the exhausting job of a traveling salesman which he hates but still, is compelled to do for his family's sake: "If I didn't have to hold my hand because of my parents I'd have given notice long ago, I'd have gone to the chief and told him exactly what I think of him...once I've saved enough money to pay back my parents' debts to him-that should take another five or six years- I'll do it without fail. I'll cut myself completely loose then". However, he received no thanks for saving his family after the business collapsed. His duty towards his family, and sacrificing his dreams and desires for their sake were, as if, taken for granted.

But as soon as he metamorphosed, things instantly changed inside the family circle. People are generally afraid of what they don't understand and unable to accept what does not fit their criteria of normalcy. Thus, the transformed Gregor is no longer treated as their family member but is considered as an abominable creature, who is made to remain confined in his room. He is no longer at the center of the family. The axis of power shifts, and the other members; his father, sister and mother who gradually take up jobs to support the family, invalidate his existence. He, from being the sole provider of the family turned into a recipient of their charity. "There is now a sense that he is a burden, and he begins to submerge himself in guilt."⁶

After the metamorphosis, Gregor starts losing contact with the outside world. At first he loses his body, then his language. "The

words he uttered were no longer understandable, apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before.” But at first, he was overwhelmed by the fact that “people now believed that something was wrong with him, and were ready to help him. The positive certainty with which these first measures had been taken comforted him. He felt himself drawn once more into the human circle and hoped for great and remarkable results.” His resolve to open the locked door of his room – “to cross the symbolic space between his private world and the shared world of commonality- should have been welcomed.”⁷ They should all have shouted encouragement to him but nobody did so. Instead they greeted him with a gesture of disgust, horror and fear. “His father knotted his fist with a fierce expression on his face as if he meant to knock Gregor back into his room, then looked uncertainly round the living room, covered his eyes with his hands...”

With the end of his physical metamorphosis, began his family’s mental metamorphosis, especially Grete’s. Gregor strived for acceptance by his family members and tried to cope up with his new form. But the more he tried to act normally like earlier times - the more he tried to play the role of a good son, a loving brother, the more is his identity denied and the more is he misunderstood, feared and distanced by his family. Whenever he emerged from his room, he was greeted with 'panic' by his mother and 'attack' by his angry and disappointed father. And in due course of time he is alienated and his existence is obliterated. Ultimately, Gregor, “who thought of his family with tenderness and love”, passes away due to his suppurating wound, from the apple lodged in his side (once thrown by his father): “The first broadening of light in the world outside the window entered his consciousness once more. Then his head sank to the floor of it's own accord and from his nostrils came the last flicker of his breath.”

Gregor's plight symbolizes the fate of Everyman. Perhaps, through him, Kafka wanted to portray the difficulties of existing in a modern society and the struggle for acceptance of others by an 'invalid', who gets slightly deviated from the societal criteria of normalcy. His or her life becomes as trivial and valueless as an 'insect'. As soon as his or her power to produce or provide ceases, he or she becomes insignificant (like an insect) for the others. His existence becomes a burden, even for his own family and the stable relationship between him and the others is disrupted. He gets alienated gradually, from the society, friends and family and finally dies alone in oblivion. This state reminds me of the *śloka* delivered by the ancient Hindu philosopher of the eighth century, Adi Sankaracharya, especially for the renunciates: "Ka taba kanta kaste putra sansaroyayam atiba bichitra./ Kasya tvang ba kuta ayatastvatang chintaya tadidang bhrata." [Who is your wife? Who is your son? This world is a very mysterious one. (One must practice detachment in regard to wife, sons, relatives and properties, because separation from them are certain.) Brother (a fellow seeker)! Always think of who you are and where you come from. (Only True self-understanding or 'nojabodh' is the way to attain absolute knowledge or 'Atmajnana' resulting in eternal tranquility or 'Brahmishthi').]⁸

III

However, as I have mentioned earlier, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is not just about Gregor's transformation and his predicaments. This is a story of the transformation of all the other characters, (especially Grete's) as an aftermath. As Gregor gradually progresses from being active to being passive, Grete blooms from her caterpillar like state towards being a butterfly, and her transformation too is complete with Gregor's death. Thus the story begins with one metamorphosis and ironically ends with another. It starts with the description of

Grete in a larva like state : “probably newly out of bed and hadn’t even begun to put on her clothes yet” and ends with Mr. and Mrs. Samsa’s discovery of “ their daughter’s increasing vivacity, that in spite of all the sorrow of recent times, which had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure” and their concurrence on the subject of finding ‘a good husband for her’ soon. In response to their ‘new dreams’ she “sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body” like a butterfly shedding of its cocoon and spreading her wings after her metamorphosis.

Gregor’s reverting to infant stage paved the way for Grete’s progress to a matured stage. “With his sister alone had he remained intimate” while in his human form and thus soon after his transformation, it was she who, took care of her, bringing her “a whole selection of food, all set out on an old newspaper.” Then she started helping her mother with cooking and taking care of her parents. In the changed circumstances, Gregor’s once ‘invalid’ father who “had grown rather fat and become sluggish” took a job in some bank, his asthmatic mother started “sewing for and underwear firm”, and his sister “who was still a child of seventeen and whose life hitherto had been so pleasant, consisting as it did in dressing herself nicely, sleeping long, helping in housekeeping, going out to a few modest entertainments and above all playing the violin” took a job as a salesgirl, and “was learning shorthand and French in the evenings on the chance of bettering herself.” In due course of time she supplanted him. They got so self-involved and exhausted by their work that they could find no time “to bother about Gregor more than absolutely needful”. In Gregor’s absence Grete and her mother are drawn closer to each other. They “sat cheek by cheek; when his mother, pointing towards his room, said: ‘Shut that door now, Grete’, and he was left again in darkness, while next door the women mingled their tears or perhaps sat dry-eyed staring at the table.”

Gradually she could not manage her time to look after his brother any more “yet, with a touchiness that was new to her, which seemed anyhow to have infected the whole family, she jealously guarded her claim to be the sole caretaker of Gregor’s room until the appearance of the charwoman. He by now had grown completely useless, just like the things (‘for which there was no room elsewhere’) which were pushed into his room by his family to vacate a room for three lodgers. Though he had even no room enough to crawl, yet he crawled out to hear his sister’s violin (“Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved.”) remembering the times when “no one here appreciated her playing as he would appreciate it.”

But this time her reaction on his appearance was just the opposite. She with her authoritative voice announced “My dear parents, things can't go on like this. Perhaps you don't realize that, but I do. I won't utter my brother's name in the presence of this creature, and so all I say is: we must get rid of it. We've tried to look after it and to put up with it as far as is humanly possible, and I don't think anyone could reproach us in the slightest.” Her denial of his identity is instantly supported and encouraged by her father but until a solution about what could be done to get rid of him could be found, she chased him to his room and “hastily pushed shut, bolted and locked” the door banishing him forever from the human society. In a way, this may be seen as Grete's confirmation of her position from the margin to the centre of the family, de centring Gregor from the position, he once held. The problem of getting rid of him, too, is automatically solved soon, with Gregor's death (due to their negligence and repulsive attitude towards him).

When the charwoman informed them that ,“it's dead; it's lying here dead and done for!”, Mrs. Samsa who once cried out sympathetically: “Do let me in to Gregor, he is my unfortunate son!

Can't you understand that I must go to him?", checked 'it' and said to Mr. Samsa, "now thanks be to God." Grete whose eyes never left the corpse, said: 'Just see how thin he was. It's such a long time since he's eaten anything. The food came out again just as it went in' as if returning him, the status and identity of 'human' (she once denied), after his death. His death brought 'a tremulous smile' on her mother's face and united the family more strongly. His father regains his authoritative self and dispels the lodgers and after their exit "Mr. Samsa and the two women soon left the landing and as if a burden had been lifted from them went back into the apartment."

The family, having finally got rid of the burdens (namely Gregor and the Lodgers), "finds itself renewed and rejuvenated."⁶ To celebrate their liberty, "they all three left the apartment together" to make a trip into "the open country outside the town," with a hope to "let bygones be bygones" and with a resolve to make a new life and also to change the apartment "which Gregor had selected." Thus ultimately, they successfully have managed to escape him and "subtly made him the scapegoat for their ills."⁹

IV

Kafka never explains how or what was the cause of Gregor's metamorphosis, because his intension probably was to spare the pleonasm and portray dramatically, the senses of horror, hatred, self-disgust, anguish and claustrophobia of the characters and the tensions caused in a stably structured family after a tragic incident. From the beginning, the story is concerned with Gregor's predicament, but gradually at the end, the event of his death becomes an insignificant one. For he had long been dead to his family, though alive to himself. Gregor's position resembles that of the Hunter, from another of Kafka's short stories *The Hunter Gracchus*. When the Burgomaster asks the hunter "Are you dead?" he replies in

affirmative and when the burgomaster says “But you're also alive”, he again replies: “To a certain extent I am also alive. My death ship lost its way...” and when asked if he had any share in “the world beyond” the hunter answered, “I am always on the immense staircase leading up to it. I roam around on this infinitely wide flight of steps, sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left, always in motion. From being a hunter I’ve become a butterfly.” Gregor too, after losing his human body, was alive to a certain extent, finding a recreation in the form of “crawling crisscross over the walls and ceiling. He especially enjoyed hanging suspended from the ceiling; it was much better than lying on the floor; one could breathe more freely.” From being a human he had become a ‘giant insect’ but still clinging to the memories of his previous life. His death lost its meaning because his existence itself, by the end of the novel, has become obsolete and thus the story shifts from his metamorphosis to the family’s metamorphosis. And from the ashes of a metamorphosis rises another.

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