

Exploring Alienation and Identity Crisis: Analysis of Gregor Samsa's Human and verminous existence in Franz Kafka's Metamorphosis

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received:	September	29,2023
Revised:	October	30,2023
Accepted:	November	29,2023
Available Online:	December	31,2023

Keywords:

Alienation, Moral Messages, Identity, Struggle for Survive, Values

ABSTRACT

Franz Kafka's novella *Metamorphosis* has long fascinated readers with its profound exploration of existential themes, particularly the concepts of alienation and identity crisis. This research delves into the intricate portrayal of these themes through the character of Gregor Samsa, who undergoes a bizarre transformation from a human into a giant insect. Drawing from Kafka's narrative techniques and psychological insights, the research scrutinizes the alienation experienced by Gregor as he grapples with the physical and emotional consequences of his metamorphosis. Through a close reading of the text, supported by critical theory and literary analysis, the study examines how Gregor's transformed state becomes a metaphor for the estrangement felt by individuals in modern society. This paper analyzed the two phases of his life through the Lacan psychoanalytic triangle; the image, Symbolic and The Real. The study has unveiled Samsa's major problem; his deficiency to communicate with others effectively to convey his feelings and emotions. Lacan triangle is broken from the Symbolic order in Samsa's life as he is unable to use language and make a chain of signifiers to express his self to others. Furthermore, the research probes into Gregor's internal struggle with identity crisis, as he confronts the disintegration of his self-image and the shifting perceptions of those around him. By exploring the psychological dimensions of Gregor's transformation, the study sheds light on the profound existential questions raised by Kafka regarding the nature of human identity and belonging.



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INTRODUCTION

The Metamorphosis (1915) by Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is a unique masterpiece of 20th century which narrates the story of a salesman; Gregor Samsa. Franz Kafka was a German-speaking Bohemian Jewish novelist and short story writer, who is best known for his isolated protagonists

facing bizarre or surrealistic predicaments and incomprehensible powers. *The Metamorphosis* has been interpreted from various dimensions since its publication, yet there remains a void, that would be fulfilled with this freshly written piece of writing. Gregor Samsa is leading a detached and isolated life, cut off from social gatherings and family sittings. Actually he was the only male child and bread winner of his family. He had to work to support and feed his family of three members; the father, mother and a sister, so inspite of the detestable behavior of the chief, difficult circumstances and the work pressure he had to continue his job. He is not only feeding the family, but he also has to repay the debts he had taken off from his company.

One morning, he wakes up as an insect, finding himself into an insect; he tries to grasp the situation. Surprisingly he is not shocked or terrified neither he gives a robust reaction of newly transformed shape and texture. First he thinks it a dream, but actually this is not a dream, yet he tries to get himself up by dragging his countless legs as he has to be on time at his job. Contrary to his struggle his body refuses to help him stand up. Gregor discovers that his short tiny legs are stuck and he is quite unable to move. Meanwhile his parents come to awaken him, as he is late than usual, his door is locked and he calls from the bedroom. He discovers that his voice is changed. Chief Clerk also comes at his house, to enquire after his being late. But he does not open the door. At his obstinacy the clerk describes his poor position at work, and declares him a lazy person who often ignores his duties. Samsa tries to defend himself, since his voice is changed, nobody believe his excuses. Finally he struggles hard to open the door and succeeds. His mother became faint at his sight, while clerk fled away from the scene. His father pushed him away to the room and closed the door. He got hurt and starts bleeding. His sister conformed to his eating habits and routine. Initially his mother and sister created the space for him in the room, by removing furniture, but with the financial crisis, the family had to keep paying guests, so they moved extra furniture to his room. They no more wanted to keep Samsa; a bug, totally isolated yet completely dependent on them. Samsa felt himself in the void of nothingness and hostility, on listening to the conversation of his beloved relations. He thought himself to be an extra, unwanted and hateful sinister who can only bring bad name and insult to the family. He took away his own life, being overwhelmed with the increasing pain of his self. The family threw his carcass away and decided to move in life.

The protagonist is embodied with Kafka's typical themes of alienation, existential anxiety, guilt and absurdity. "The story's protagonist, Gregor Samsa, is the quintessential Kafka anti-hero. "He has worked himself to the point of utter exhaustion to pay off his parents' debts and his grotesque metamorphosis is the physical manifestation of his abasement". . (bernofsky, 2014).

"The Metamorphosis" has been a concern in the realm of research even after the half century is passed since its publication. Most of its themes of alienation, existentialism, absurdity and search for meaning (Jean Paul Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Philip Roth.) are studied form psychoanalytic perspective. Most of them have thrown light with the lens of Freud Psychoanalytic perspective, while this paper has applied Lacanian psychoanalytic model to unveil a different interpretation.

Research Questions

This paper addresses the following questions;

- 1) How does Samsa's alienation and isolation effect his personal and social life both as a human and after his transformation?
- 2) Why is Gregor Samsa torn between self and others?
- 3) In what ways does Gregor Samsa experience identity crisis and self-dejection that ultimately leads to his death?

Significance of the Study

This research paper is unique for its objective and the perspective from which it is explored. The unique dimension of Gregor Samsa's life, his alienation and identity crisis as a human and as an insect make it enough significant to be placed among other critiques of "*The Metamorphosis*" by "Franz Kafka". This new dimension will provide a new and different insight into Samsa's character by adding something worth the work itself.

Limitations of the Study

Jacques Lacan is the most researched author in psychoanalysis field, after Sigmund Freud. His ideas are difficult to comprehend and apply. In this paper, His RSI triangular model has been applied so far to unveil Gregor Samsa's alienation and identity crisis. In a way it is limited to Lacan triangle and interprets the research questions keeping in view the mentioned concept. The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka may apply Freud or Carl Jung critique to analyze the similar dimension but this paper only discovers the dark aspects in the Lacanian lens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper presents the psychological study of Samsa's alienation and identity crisis both as a commercial man and as an insect. It has applied the Lacanian triangle to magnify the torn self of Samsa, his alienation and identity crisis. Pratha's (2022) "psycho metamorphosis: Franz Kafka's critique of systemic subjugation of modern man aims to analyze the modern metamorphosis of humans into systematic slaves which is not just physical but also psychological through the lens of Freud theory of personality. (Pratha, 2022). Rowe (2002) investigated, metamorphosis: defending the human, supporting the patients and ill persons, how their life become miserable. (Michael Rowe, 2002). Pavlos E. Michaelides worked on the "Modernity and the Existential Metaphysics of Life and Death in Kafka's Metamorphosis". It reveals the complex nature of the story delineating his transformation to an animal and then ending his life. Hossain (2022) in his article, "The Tribulation of Hollowness in Gregor Samsa's Life in Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis" analyzes the causes and sufferings of hollowness of Gregor Samsa who is alienated from his discriminating society. (Hossain, 2022). Devicha Lidya and Ali Mustafa

(2022) in their article ,”Franz Kafka’s Metamorphosis: Lacanian psychoanalysis” aimed to figure out how a character in Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* feels alienated and loses touch with his identity and self-crises as a result of his circumstances. It varies from the previous studies as it studies alienation in his two phased life situations, by applying Jacques Lacan psychoanalytic lens.

(Hamedreza kohzadi, 2017)In their article “A study of Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*” attempt to examine Kafka’s work from philosophical and psychological perspective. Specifically this works addresses the existential and psychological allegories. (2012) (Placeholder2). Sydney stoops brought forth the manifolds of transformation in the “Analysis of the metamorphosis” He explained both the physical and behavioral transformation in the symbolic and literal sense. S (stoops, 2017). “I dreamt I was Kafka: Freudian interpretation and Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*” by Erin Blake(2022) examines Gregor Samsa with the perspective of Oedipal complex, how Franz Kafka seems to reverse the oedipal pattern in *The Metamorphosis* as the main character Gregor Samsa to not long for the love of his mother but rather that of his sister ,Grete.

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French psychoanalyst of 20thc. He developed his theory about human psyche in response to Sigmund Freud. Freud proposed that most of the energy comes from unconscious mind; he delved into child psychology, sexuality and dreams. He categorized mind into three parts as id, ego and superego. Due to the high taboos, certain sexual impulses are suppressed and purposely withheld from conscious awareness. Meanwhile, there are a number of characteristics of our mental structure that we have little control over (Freud, 2014, 1992), Lacan is known as French Freud as he renewed interest in Freud and his theories, nevertheless he is considered controversial writer for his complex and unique concepts. Lacan advocated a reorganization of Freud's ideas (Lynch, 2008; Olivier, 2004; Press, 2013; Stanizai, 2018). Julia Kristeva puts it “Lacan’s work is a challenge to the way we think about human subject. His focus on language and the symbolic has opened up new possibilities for understanding the complexities of identity. “One of Jacques Lacan’s key preoccupations was the development of the individual human psyche as a whole entity comprising inseparable conscious and unconscious elements; in Lacanian terms, the ‘birth of the Subject’”. (Bailly, L. 32) His ideas about “unconscious “are somehow different from Freud, as he aligned with Saussurean concept of “structured language, signifier and signified”. Lacan says, “The unconscious is structured like language”. He further says, “I am where I think not” to refer to the unconscious mind.

According to Lacan we all are subjects, shaped by three registers or orders namely; imaginary or mirror stage, symbolic and the real. This paper will look at the two phases of Gregor life, as a human and as an insect, unveiling his self and other, his identity crisis in the light of these three stages.

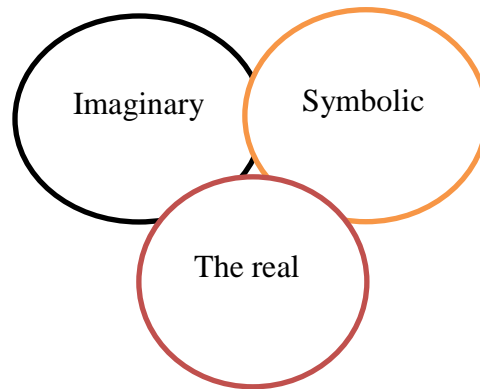


Figure: 1.1: Bromean Knot RSI model

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used descriptive qualitative method to analyze *The Metamorphosis*, by giving some psychological description. Lacan triangle based on his psychoanalysis theory; the imaginary, Symbolic and The Real is used as glasses to discover alienation and identity crisis of Samsa as a human being versus Samsa as a verminous bug. The imaginary is linked to representations and human connections; for example, one's daily interactions with people are influenced by it, and ideas like "love" are more or less causally associated to it (Lacan, 1966).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Gregor Samsa; the only male child of his parents, had to bear the financial responsibility of the family in wake of his father's business failure. He is already leading a robotic life like "going to work, coming back, eating meals and sleeping." Apart from his work there is nothing significant happens in his life, as his mother says; "He does not go out in the evenings". (Kafka, 1912) One morning, he is transformed to a vermin and paralyzed to continue his job. He feels sorry for the family, but now he is physically turned to a bug so he had to remain alienated even from his job.

As a human he was working in a frame, devoid of social peace and pleasure, he was happy with it. As a vermin he was cut off, even from his family, he showed no reaction rather he started leading his life with his new status. The sense of alienation, isolation, boredom remains constant. As a vermin he had to face identity crisis as he lost his self, and the image that he was acquainted with. Do you get anything out of it?" "I could not hear a human voice." (Kafka, 1912). He is not transformed physically only, his voice is also changed so he "lost the sense of recognition" and identity of his own self" which in Lacanian model he achieved in fancy while looking into the

mirror.” The family members and the society has also ceased to recognize his self and ignoring the fact that how valuable he had been for the family

Imaginary/Mirror Stage

Lacan said: ‘we have to understand the mirror stage as identification ... the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image’. At the imaginary stage/mirror stage the subject, human beings as a child looks into the mirror and discovers his “self” identifies himself and recognizes him as a separate individual being, here ego develops when recognizes himself as an individual master piece, different from others but actually he is not one self rather he is the one defined by “other”, he recognizes “his self”, according to Lacan this “self” is determined by others or like others want him to be. By applying this lens we find “Gregor [Samsa] satisfied with his self as defined and led by the other- family members. He seemed contented and peaceful with his mirror image “as an obedient, loyal and responsible son/brother”. According to Lacanian concept this was actually not his self but a reflection of himself as painted by “the other”. His image as a loyal son and a dutiful salesman is shaken by chief clerk in his argument with the family, when he got late for his work. “And your position in the firm is not so unassailable.....For some time past your work has been most unsatisfactory”..... (The Metamorphosis, p. 6) Here his image is determined by the other as inefficient, but he himself had been struggling hard, paying off debts and coping up the duties well to keep his image right erect as seen by himself or his family.

Irony of the matter is that he is in the bed, transformed to a vermin and trying to get up to save his “narcissistic view” as a dutiful employee and loyal son, by claiming “don’t tell this to my parents.. I’ll be attending business soon”(The Metamorphosis , p.6)as at Mirror stage a child develops his “egoistic view” as independent being as Samsa thinks of himself but the reality is opposing. In the initial stages of self-awareness, one experiences a profound sense of detachment and unity, realizing, "This is me, yet not entirely." This is marked by the recognition and uncertainty, recognizing own self or image in the eyes of others; a mixed feeling of looking at one self with the views of others, a dualistic perception of observer and being observed. This duality quickly gives way to a merging and blurring of boundaries between subject and object—a fusion determined by the subject's adoption of their outer world image. For infants, their self-image is embodied by a captivating allure, acting as the cornerstone for a lifelong introspective journey. This implies that the quintessence of human identity is embedded in a mental process of narcissistic self-reflection. That means the baby is in love with himself and his image. At the imaginary stage a child recognizes his ideal self, I, that acts as a “small other”, As described by Roland Chemama: ‘In the relationship between subjects, there is always something false that is introduced – this is the imaginary projection of the one on the screen that becomes “the others”’. When we first start understanding ourselves, we feel like we're seeing ourselves, but also not fully. From the very beginning, we mix our sense of who we are with how we think others see us—it's like we're both looking at ourselves and being looked at by others at the same time. This

blending quickly leads to a kind of confusion where we start to believe what we see of ourselves. This is what happens with Samsa as he defined and determined his ways and days decided and marked by the needs and demands of others. He was contented in bearing his family's financial burden, leaving no room of enjoyment or relaxation for his own self. His family wanted to see him "bread winner" his boss as "dutiful" his chief as "regular and disciplined", In becoming "what others wanted him to be" he lost his very self and identity and became what others detested finally. This is how Lacanian psychoanalysis best explains his "image" both as a human and as an insect. Basically, this means that our sense of who we are is built on constantly thinking about ourselves—a bit like looking in a mirror. Another image of "Samsa" comes into view as "he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiffed arched segments.....numerous legs...gigantic insect"(the metamorphosis, p.1) He is quite controlled to show any reaction about his new transformed body and mirror image, yet he is thinking and feeling hungry, his physical need/demand is there. "The big other", his family members and then society gradually detests his "persona as an insect and devalues him. He is no more important for them to feed and care for them so he is useless yet detestable; this shift of concern and care from feeding his hunger to letting him die is surprising. As his self-image no longer aligns with societal norms that's why paying guests in the story fled away at his sight, saying that they can't live with an insect. His image is distorted and suffers "identity crises". As a human he was alienated and isolated due to his work forced or defined by his family, after transformation he is totally cut off from the mainstream life due to his vermin status. His identity is distorted and further tormented by family and society by his visual image.

The Symbolic

The symbolic stage in psychoanalysis encompasses THE OTHER-- social norms, taboos, law and principles the subject's experiences in which he lives. Here the child enters into the realm of language, understanding world through words and signifiers. The unconscious, on the other hand, is entirely a thing of the Symbolic, as it is made up of only signifiers, and not signifieds.(Bailly. 80) In Lacan view 'how the language and society shape, perceive or represent an individual and how an individual uses language and society to perceive and identify himself'.

As a human he was the symbol of "support and strength" his social contacts as taking him as a part of a work place and he himself, although suffering from his tough job routine yet he was satisfied and contented. As his symbolic structure changes from a human to a verminous bug he is alienated and no more accepted at his job. First of all he fails to communicate effectively; he is unable to convey his state to his family and chief clerk. "A single illness, an attack of giddiness, has kept me from getting up. I'm still lying in bed. But I feel alright again."(The metamorphosis, p.97) According to Lacan signifier lies in unconscious and it works on a chain of signifiers, a chain of signifiers lying in unconscious to represent ideational interpersonal concepts.. Here Samsa is unable to find any signifier related to his shape to define himself to others. As Lacan views that first signifier of a child is his mother, at imaginary stage he separates himself from

mother and identifies his own self. This is further connected with symbolic stage and develops language. Samsa's degradation to an insect distorts his image and he cannot develop language, consequently he fails to sustain his relationship with his family and society, when his sister tries to remove "the woman portrait" hanging from the wall, he is unable to make sense and express his emotions. At this stage he suffers alienation, identity crisis, language disruption and isolation in lieu of his transformed body.

Lacan is of the view that symbolic order was always there like language it pre-exists individual. It's a realm of separateness from mother, marked by difficulties waiting for every individual. "The vermin bug" was a symbolic order waiting for Samsa, a horrible yet indispensable world which detaches him from his family, society and work place forcing him into an alien world of absurdity, cracked-identity and distorted self-image.

The Real

The real does not mean any real happening, event or situation rather it is the obvious and unavoidable circumstance that may befall any character. It is one of the crucial concepts in connection with the imaginary and the symbolic. "The real is not an account of reality or the "objective world" but a kind of recurring impossibility, a return of the repressed... The real is about impossibilities the impossibilities of language and life" (Hill, 2008) For Lacan, the Real is what is impossible, it is never written or spoken rather it collaborates with the imaginary and the symbolic. Lacan borrowed a term from Heidegger when he said that the Real ex-sists, because the Symbolic and Imaginary exist. More simply (and more usefully in psychoanalysis): for everything that comes into our field of recognition by means of a signifier, something of it must remain imperceptible, unsymbolised: this is the Real. (Bailly, L.) Jacques Lacan in a lecture "Le symbolique, l'imaginaire et le reel; 1982) introduced the real as connected with the imaginary and the symbolic. His lectures about the "real" explain that real is unavoidable situation that usually escapes us yet we are bound to catch it up as it is rooted in every dream. Lacan wrote, "One thing that is striking is that in analysis there is an entire element of the real of the subject that escapes us... Applying this concept of "real" brings to light the "molded de_shaped Samsa" when he is caught up in the heinous image that symbolically represents his reality. His blind horse like routine has left him abandoned and alienated, shaping him into an evil bug. His real image is symbolic of his past, present and future life, that came out as a compulsion without any warning or notice. This is how Lacan the real addresses the state of Samsa being an insect.

The Real is the featureless clay from which reality is fashioned by the Symbolic; it is the chaos from which the world came into being, by means of the Word. 'It is the world of words that creates the world of things, initially mixed up in the here and now of the whole in becoming.' (Bruce Fink 1995.)

The Real is something you find always at the same place. However you mess about, it is always in the same place, you bring it with you, stuck to the sole of your shoe without any means of exiling it. 9Seminar XI, trans. Alan Sheridan.

This lens will unveil the pathetic reality of Samsa's life where his identity is not same all the time, his external world is at war with his internal self/ the real. He wants to remain the same commercial man and the bread winner of the family. In the story As he tries to shed away his verminous being to continue his job, **"I must be quite out of bed, without fail. I can catch 8' o clock train."** **"I hope it's nothing serious"**. He fails to keep his same identity and status as recognized before. He is transformed and confines himself in the four walls of the room. At this phase he again tries to keep going as an insect but he loses connection with his family and society. Even Grete his sister who cared for his food in the start, retreats herself as she says; **"he is no more brother, Samsa"**. In this his reality is shattered and devoid him of his family and social world moving him into the dark world of death.

DISCUSSION

Gregor Samsa is introduced as a transformed, insect like creature, he tried his best to get up and attend his job but failed. The sudden transformation in the physical body affects his internal and external world. Lacan's three registers/orders view his life split into three stage, **"HIS IMAGE, SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE;** how he reacts and how others treat him with his new image, **AND THE ACTUAL. Samsa as commercial man,** his job status and efficiency is revealed through his **"SUB-CONSCIOUS"** mind, from his parents and the chief clerk. This explicates that Samsa was living in himself, alienated from his family and the society. But this did not affect him much as he was satisfied apparently, carrying out his routine. According to Lacan **"signifier signified things, and with one signifier come other signifiers and forms a chain of signifiers"**. Samsa lack this ability to use language to communicate his feelings and emotions to his family and other connections. He is confined from work to his bedroom, meeting the requirements of his family, they care for his **"physical hunger"** but nobody dare address his **"mental hunger"**. He has built up his ego as a successful employee and a loyal son; he struggled hard to fulfill the family and job requirements ignoring his own **"self"**. He prefers family/society over his own self and suffers alienation, existential and identity crisis. Lacan's symbolic order is not seen in Gregor Samsa as he could not communicate his needs, desires and wants effectively.

His personality is split and presents a clash of both. In his drawing room he hung a picture in uniform, while in his room he hung a picture of a lady; half naked, her neck wrapped in a fur. Looking through Lacanian triangle Samsa seems to be torn between self and the other, often undermining himself over others. His alienation and lost routine made him a verminous bug, In the start he was anxious about the society's reaction and his family's finance, but after some days he just focused on his self and feeding his **"physical hunger"**. Again the family took care about his food and ignored his mental health. Grete regularly provided him with **"rotten food"** according to his new tastes. She couldn't comprehend his emotions and feelings for the **"woman**

portrait” on the wall. Samsa suffers language crisis in his transformed identity more than before. He is unable to share his mental agony, pain and hardships as an employee and then as an insect. His communication gap makes him isolated and absurd, meaningless. His father couldn’t understand his move for hunger and mistook it for “assault on his mother”. This led to the family think about his murder and got rid of his “obnoxious image”. According to Lacan “Symbolic is always there, like language; it precedes humans, and will remain after their removal. It is marked with troubles and hard experiences, But Samsa couldn’t find words to express his feelings and emotions. His mental agony is worsened when his father mistook him and tries to take away his life. Further his family decides to banish him for his dejected transformed body, as no one wants to live with such a huge insect. Samsa is a threat and fear for them, it may hinder any future prospect for them, his image is humiliated and he will cause humiliation for them as well. That’s why they decide to get away with his life. As Samsa’s mind is still able to perceive his family conversation, rather he is curious to know family gossip about himself. When he comes to know their tormenting views he decides to meet death to stop the tumultuous noise in his internal and external world. His torn self, split personality and identity crisis ends with his death.

Every relation needs time and attention to be strong, In Samsa’s case he was following his routine like a blind horse, forgetting his mental and spiritual needs. He didn’t try to look beyond his work routine. He used to support his family financially, in doing so he actually forgot his emotional and spiritual needs. In reality, this awarded him with detachment from his family and society. So as a human his self-highlighted image is actually not appealing. As an insect he is again only fed with food to quench his physical hunger, He is at worst separated and aloof from his family. The alienated Samsa with distorted image and torn identity lost his place in the family. He soon realized that he is no more wanted as he “is not a human brother”. His distorted self-image, torn identity and alienation affected him to the extent that he didn’t want to live anymore. This is how he wanted to close the chapter of his life, as he is neither needed nor liked.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed the problems of Gregor Samsa as a human and as an insect. He suffered alienation, split personality, torn self and identity crisis. He led lives at two levels; first as a human and then as an insect. At the former level he is the sole breadwinner of his family, he is accepted and acknowledged, yet he is leading a monotonous life from home to work and then to eat and sleep. Here he is only fed with his physical needs; food and sleep, he has no friends or connection, he doesn’t enjoy weekends, he has no time for the family, his soul and mind remain hungry. After becoming an insect his situation is worsened as his new self-image is horrible to go along with. In Lacanian model triangle he is significantly revealed through his image, symbolic order and the actual. His triangle is broken and he is seen torn with mutated identity.

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