

**'FAMILY': FRANZ KAFKA'S REFLECTIONS AND REFUTATIONS**

*Sindhu. N. S., Assistant Professor of English, Government College for Women  
(Autonomous) Mandya, Karnataka, India*

**Abstract:**

*Franz Kafka is one of the pioneering writers who criticised the social institutions- Law, State and Bureaucracy. 'Family' is another institution which he targeted. His views about this institution are mainly the result of his personal experiences. He considered the social institutions mainly as the instruments of oppression and 'family' is not an exception to the same. According to him, for a child oppression and suffocation begin at home. Parents thwart the independence of children by imposing their aspirations on them and make them handicap. As we go through the two stories of Kafka, 'The Judgement' and 'The Metamorphosis', it becomes clear to us that, the protagonists of these two stories are nothing but the alter ego of Kafka himself. Along with his personal experiences, Kafka was also influenced by the contemporary psychiatrists Sigmund Freud and Otto Gross, whose theories had considerable impact on his works. Special reference can be made of Otto Gross, who suffered a great deal because of his father. The same is true of Kafka too. His father had such an adverse impact on Kafka's life that it left him psychologically disturbed. The current paper makes an attempt show Kafka's repudiation the institution of 'family' in his short stories.*

**Keywords:** Social institutions, family, oppression, children, father.

Social institutions play a vital role in the evolution of the personality of an individual. These institutions are necessary for the working of the civilized society as well as the betterment of the life of the civilians. The institutions- State, Law and the Bureaucracy together ought to work towards the chief goal of making the life the people easy and comfortable. The institution of 'Family' too has no less responsibility in this respect. But there are also situations when all these institutions together have made the life of people unbearable. The sociologists like Erwing Goffman and Michel Foucault have shed considerable light on the hazardous impact of the social institutions on the life of individuals. Franz Kafka can be considered as a pioneering writer who focused on this issue. Along with criticising other institutions, he also targets the working of the institution of family and the negative impact of its working on the individuals. In the words of Ritchie Robertson,

*'The family for Kafka is also a place where power, guilt, law and punishment originate. The 'Letter to His Father' describes how Hermann Kafka laid strict laws on good behaviour from which he himself was exempt. From such experiences Kafka came to imagine law as a mechanism of power, going back to family relationships. Children, dependent on their parents and trapped by the bonds of love, acquiesce in the power that rules their small lives, and internalise the standards of behaviour which they later pass on to their own offspring. The acquiescence the law of the family is carried over into adult life as acquiescence in social institutions'. (Kafka: A Very Short Introduction P 72)*

Though Kafka lived with his parents till he died, he never felt secure either with them as he never felt easy inside the institution of family. For him, family is the place where the oppression starts. He considered family life as a battle ground. Not that the parents don't love their children, but the compulsion added with love has a negative impact on the children. Not only Kafka's troubled relationship with his

father, but also, the German Expressionism, which presented fathers as tyrannical, the case of Otto Gross and the influence of Sigmund Freud and his famous 'Oedipus Complex' influenced Kafka indirectly to produce the works where he repudiates the institution of family. Kafka wrote to Felice in 1912,

'I always felt my parents as persecutors. Parents only want to drag one down to them from which one would like to ascend with a sigh of relief; they want to do this out of love, of course, but that's what's so awful'. (*Kafka: A Very Short Introduction* P 68)

He never accused his parents at any point, but felt that the 'sticky bond' never let him to breathe free. The two stories, 'The Judgement' and 'The Metamorphosis' present us the protagonists who are doomed by the love for their parents.

'The Judgement' is the text that brought in a revolution in the writing career of Kafka. The main plot of the story is the conflicting relationship between the son and the father. The father accuses the son of disloyalty and betrayal and orders him to drown himself in the river which the son obliges without any hesitation.

Georg Bendemann is a very sincere son who has taken over the family business and has improved it to a greater extent. As a dutiful son he has also been looking after the ailing father. Apart from the two major characters in the story, the father and the son, we have another character in the story, which has no role to play directly but acts as a link between the father and the son- friend of Georg Bendemann who lives in Russia. When the story begins, Georg is engaged with a beautiful daughter of a wealthy father and is looking forward to start his life with her. There is nothing much significant about the first half of the story.

Georg writes a letter to his friend about his upcoming engagement and comes to see his father. He tells to his father about the same. A very dramatic as well as an unexpected conversation takes place between both the father and the son. His father's response is normal till he asks him the question, 'Have you really got a friend in St. Petersburg?' The conversation takes a very awkward turn at this point and Georg is constantly accused by his father of not only betraying his friend but also his father. Georg tries to pacify his father by cleaning him up and nursing him and reprimanding himself for not taking care of his father properly because of his preoccupation with his wedding. The timid figure of his father very soon gathers indomitable amount of energy and like a giant, he snubs the spirit of his son. As long as Georg tries to convince his father, the things turn worse and he condemns his son to die. 'After all, you were an innocent child really- but more really, you were a diabolical human being! And therefore know: I condemn you now to death by drowning'. (*The Judgement': The Complete short Stories* P 87)

Georg finds himself in an utter helpless condition and just to prove his innocence and in protestation of his father's judgement on him drowns himself, in the river and dies calling out, 'Dear parents, I did always love you'. The ending of the story somehow seems unrealistic. It is very unlikely that any parent would pronounce death sentence on their children and consider the casual negligence that are common to any human being as grave blunders. But the sons of Kafka's stories are in one way or the other emotionally crushed and destroyed by the fathers.

On the one hand, we have in Georg Bendemann, a neglectful and a selfish son who has given no thought about his father as well as his friend in Russia and his father rightly commands him to die drowning in the river, which Georg sincerely follows. On the other hand we have Gregor Samsa who has supported the family single handed after the bankruptcy of his father. The story not only explores the conflicting relationship of father and son, but also of brother and sister. The fact that really astonishes the readers further is that Gregor's father had saved some money and there was really no dearth need for it which Gregor earned by self sacrifice. It is a story where the family members lose interest in him once he is transformed into an ugly insect. The story begins abruptly with the very famous sentence. 'As Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from uneasy dream, he found himself transformed into some kind of monstrous vermin'. (*The Metamorphosis': The Complete Stories* P 89)

Before Gregor is out of his bad dream, he is resolved of the confusion that his transformation is not a bad dream but the bitter reality of his life. We are also given a picturesque description of the vermin's body with Gregor's brain as the reader should not take this transformation as the sham of the author, created for a while. The result of Gregor's physical transformation is just his inability to work any further which means his contribution to the well being of his family would come to an end. This is what the turning point of Gregor's life is. His physical transformation just leads to the mental transformation of all the members of his family. The crux of the story lies not in Gregor's metamorphosis, but in his family's response. His father is the first person to show his anger and hatred towards Gregor. Later, his most beloved sister, who initially cares him a lot starts neglecting him. Only his mother remains intact in her affection towards her, though she is not completely successful in saving her son from her husband's wrath.

Gregor's transformation to the worst leads to the onset of better conditions in the life of his father, mother and sister. His father who had been a dozing old man becomes a disciplined bank employee and also his mother and sister take up paid work. His father after taking up the bank job becomes a full time abuser of his son. He can be compared with Herr Bendemann, a decrepit man, who just turns into a towering giant just to shock Georg. Gregor's father even goes to the extent of killing his son now in the form of a vermin. At the end, Gregor after not receiving any help from either his mother or sister, just retreats to his room to die. Gregor's death is somewhat similar to Georg's death. He expresses similar sentiments. 'He thought back on his family with affection and love. His own opinion that he should vanish was, if possible, even more determined than his sister's. He remained in his state of vacant and peaceful reflection until the tower clock struck three in the morning. He still lived to see the dark begin to grow generally lighter outside the window. Then his head sank down without his willing it. And from his nostrils his last breath faintly flowed'. (*The Metamorphosis: The Complete Stories* P 139)

Kafka's stories repeatedly emphasise on the point where the adults seek to suppress the children's individuality. Kafka very easily understands the worse things that can happen to the children which is the result of his own childhood experience. Kafka had also met Otto Gross, a radical psychologist of the time and shared his critical views on the contemporary child rearing system. Otto Gross considered the overthrow of the conventional patriarchal authority by revolution. The glimpse of Otto Gross' thoughts can be seen in Kafka's 'Letter to His Father'.

Ritchie Robertson, in *Franz Kafka, A Very Short Introduction*, focuses on the fact that Kafka took interest in bringing awareness among his close associates regarding educating the young children. He advised Felice to visit a home for young Jewish refugees in London and also on the ways of handling of these children (*Kafka: A Very Short Introduction* P 70). He also wrote to his sister Elli to send her son to A.S.Neill's progressive School at Hellerau. Kafka was deeply influenced by Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The Lilliputian way of bringing up the children really impressed him. Here the parents are the last people to interfere in the matters of children's education. That kind of childhood Kafka longed for and also aspired for children. Parental love according to him is a pure form of selfishness. In the guise of love parents exercise tyranny on children and they try to entrap them into the lifelong slavery. In his own words, 'These, born from selfishness, are the parents' two methods of education: tyranny and slavery of every shade. The expression of tyranny can be very tender (You must believe me, because I am your mother!) and that of slavery very proud (You are my son; therefore I will make you into my saviour!). But they are two dreadful methods, two methods of anti-education, designed to stamp the child back into the ground from which it emerged'. (*Kafka: A Very Short Introduction* P 71)

To conclude, Kafka advocated the parents to free the children from the compartmentalised sticky areas in the name of protection and affection and provide them easy and comfortable zone to make them morally and psychologically stronger persons than simply worldly successful people.

**Works Cited:**

1. Robertson, Ritchie. *Kafka: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.2003. Print. (p 72)
2. Ibid (P68)
3. Kafka, Franz, 'The Judgement' *The Complete short Stories*. Tr.Nahum.N.Glatzer, London: Vintage, 1999. Print. (P 87)
4. Kafka, Franz, 'The Metamorphosis', *The Complete Stories*. Tr. Nahum.N.Glatzer, London: Vintage, 1999. Print. (P 89)
5. Ibid (P139)
6. Robertson, Ritchie. *Kafka: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.2003. Print.(p 70)
7. Ibid (P71)