



The Grotesque in Kafka: A study of the other in Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'

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Abstract— In Kafka, *The Other* takes on an alien and otherworldly form. Gregor Samsa, Kafka's protagonist in the 'Metamorphosis', leads an uneventful life until his transformation into a grotesque monster incites the worst in his family. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque in literature and art was used as a form of satire to question the hypocrisy and hegemony of the dominant class. In 'Metamorphosis', Gregor morphs into an interstitiality that his family finds extremely threatening. He is no more their own, he is *The Other* and his grotesqueness is proof of this fact. In this paper, we study the relationship between grotesqueness and *The Other* in Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'.

Keywords— Kafka, Metamorphosis, Gregor, Samsa, grotesque, carnivalesque, Bakhtin, Sartre, Hegel, Gramsci, Fanon, Said, Spivak, hegemony, interstitial, *The Other*



I. THE GROTESQUE AS A FORM OF SATIRE

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his seminal work, 'Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics' and 'Rabelais and his World,' describes the grotesque as a literary form that represents the power of the people. He coins the phrase, 'Grotesque Realism', to describe this ambivalent power over the elite and the clergy, and calls it a celebration of the cycle of life. The grotesque body, says Bakhtin, is a figure of profound ambivalence, and it uses the primary functions (eating, drinking, sleeping, defecating, urinating, sex) to satirize the dominant class. In 'Metamorphosis', where Gregor Samsa assumes the form of a grotesque insect, his insectile form becomes the cause of much distress to his family. It eats garbage, defecates around the room, and crawls over the walls and ceiling. Through the grotesque monster that is Gregor, Kafka satirizes the hypocritical attitudes of the dominant class, including Gregor's own family, who decide to adopt a hegemonistic stance and dominate over his entire existence. They are callous and unfeeling towards his metamorphosis:

"For the first fourteen days, Gregor's parents could not bring themselves to come into the room to see him."

According to Wolfgang Kaiser (1957) in his book, 'The Grotesque In Art and Literature', the grotesque found expression in early religious art and literature and adorned Raphaelite churches, papal loggias and elite homes. Despite criticism from some quarters, gargoyles and grotesque monsters were appreciated for their otherworldly character, particularly in Raphaelite and Gothic art, sculpture and architecture.

"...the best known and most influential ornamental grotesques are those which Raphael applied around 1575 to the pillars of the papal loggias. Vitruvius' description can be almost literally applied to Raphael's creations: curled and involuted shoots, from whose foliage animals emerge and cause the difference between animal and vegetable forms to be eliminated."

(Kaiser,W.(1957). *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Indiana University Press)

II. THE GROTESQUE CLARIFIES THE SPACE BETWEEN THE SELF AND THE OTHER:

In 'Bestial Representations of Otherness: Kafka's Animal Stories', Matthew T. Powell (2008), examines Kafka's use of the grotesque and says it allows Kafka to project human dilemmas and predicaments onto animals to gain a measure of clarity. According to Powell (2008),

"By playing on the tension between human and non-human, between what is 'The Self' and what is 'Not The Self', Kafka is able to explore the 'Ontology of Otherness' that clarifies the space between the Self and the Other. This space is critical to maintaining notions of self and identity. Kafka uses the grotesque as a means of illuminating the envisioning shadows that are not oneself and that allow for definitions of the self."

(Powell, M.T. (2008). *Bestial Representations of Otherness: Kafka's Animal Stories*, Journal of Modern Literature, 32(1), 129-142)

Sartre's (1956) study in Existentialism is also relevant to post colonialism because of how it helps to clarify the role of The Other. In 'Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology (1956)' and other works, Sartre (1956) distinguishes between a Being-for-Itself and a Being-for-Others, i.e a Conscious and an Unconscious being. Nothingness, says Sartre, is the determining essence of a Being-for-Itself i.e. a Conscious Being and such a being is on the path to self-actualization. The Conscious Being sets out as a blank canvas on which to create its own being, its own identity.

However, when subjected to The Gaze, the Being-for-Itself is objectified and comes to 'perceive itself as being perceived'. It begins to objectify itself in the same way as it is objectified. The Gaze of the Other robs the Being-for-Itself of its inherent freedom, and it instead learns to falsely identify as a Being-for-Others (an Unconscious Being). We see this in Kafka's 'Metamorphosis', where Gregor's transformation forms the crux of the storyline and yet, he is prevented from achieving self-actualization in his new, insectile form by his family members, who constantly shame him for his grotesqueness.

III. THE GROTESQUE IS HORRIFYING BECAUSE IT IS INTERSTITIAL

In 'Existentialism and Art-Horror', Stuart Hanscomb (2010) writes that the reason why Gregor invokes such horror is because he represents the interstitial. He says,

"I want to highlight the close association between some concepts and imagery of early Sartre and the horror genre. Then I want to argue that this association is

understandable if we realize that the notion of the interstitial-that which falls between established categories-is a central concern in both cases. A development of this point identifies what might be called "a narrative of awakening" in Existentialism that is mirrored in horror fictions. This sees the protagonists overcoming their initial rejection of threatening and repelling circumstances and replacing them with a form of acceptance that crucially, requires a shift in their sense of identity in the direction of the monstrous."

(Hanscomb,S. (2010), *Existentialism and Art Horror*. Sartre Studies International)

Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' is a good example of a character consciously awakening into its monstrous identity, where Gregor, after his initial shock and dismay at his newfound insectile state, begins to revel in it. He enjoys eating garbage and takes a strange pleasure in crawling up walls and hiding underneath furniture. He even absorbs the emotions of the giant insect.

To quote:

"Oppressed with anxiety and self-reproach, he began to crawl about. He crawled over everything: walls, furniture, ceiling-and finally, as the whole room began to spin around him, he fell down into the middle of the dinner table."

Gregor seems to be on the path to actualizing his new identity as a monstrous insect, but his grotesqueness offends his family's hegemonic sensibilities. According to Hanscomb (2010),

"If Gregor's transformation can be understood as a symbol of self-creation, amidst the pressures of an alienating and "leveled" social existence, then his grotesque and unfathomable appearance is an analogue of the fear and confusion of those around him. In his authentic shift, he becomes unclassifiable and threatening, and hence, horrifying."

(Hanscomb, S.(2010)*Existentialism and Art Horror*. Sartre Studies International, 16(1), 1-23)

Gregor's family responds to their fear and loathing at his grotesqueness by attempting to dominate and subjugate him into submission.

In his book, 'The Phenomenology of Spirit', Hegel (1807) attempts to establish an Other who is not marginalized, dominated or negated. His 'Dialectic of Recognition' is a valuable alternative to deconstructive philosophies that attempt to dissolve the Other. According to Hegel, the conflict between the thesis and the antithesis produced the synthesis (which was the ultimate truth). Similarly, Hegel's Master-Slave theory puts forth the idea that the Master and Slave were essentially at odds with one

another, but their conflict helped them achieve self-actualization. The Master-Slave struggle, though a struggle for supremacy and even for existence, should not end with dominance over the Other, because doing so would result in its eventual extinction. This is amply clear in the case of Gregor in 'Metamorphosis'. Gregor represents the proverbial colonial subject while his family represent the colonizers. Their dominating approach towards Gregor thwarts his attempts at self-actualization and eventually results in his death.

IV. GROTESQUE AND CARNIVALESQUE

Bakhtin's (1965) notable work, *Rabelais and his world*, also touched upon the idea of the carnivalesque in post colonialism. Bakhtin (1965) was greatly influenced by Kant and Hegel, and according to him, "carnavalesque" was a literary mode that subverted and liberated the cultural hegemony of the dominant class. It did this through the means of humor and chaos and in a carnival-like atmosphere, where Hegel's thesis and antithesis could come together to form a synthesis. Carnavalesque was a dualistic ambivalence ritual, characterized by opposition towards everything that was considered absolute, single and monolithic. The 'carnival sense of the world' implied a familiar and free interaction between diametrically different components; it implied eccentricity, it implied profanation and it implied carnivalesque misalliances. We find all of these in 'Metamorphosis', where Gregor's transformation into a grotesque monster disrupts the normalcy of his family life and creates chaos. It also seems to pose a direct challenge to his family's financial prospects and social status.

Gregor himself is acutely aware of this, post his metamorphosis:

"What a quiet life it is the family lead," said Gregor to himself and gazing into the darkness felt a great pride that he was able to provide a life like that for his sister and parents. But what now, if all this peace and wealth and comfort should come to a horrible and frightening end?"

Gregor finds that his newfound identity as a grotesque monster clashes with his previous identity as a dutiful son and breadwinner. According to Kevin Sweeney (1990), Gregor, in the 'Metamorphosis', has multiple identities which conflict with each other:

"Not only do the dualist and materialist interpretations collide, but a third account of personal identity intrudes. Dominating the novella's final section, this third conception involves being a person as an individual

constituted by certain social relationships. Personal identity is maintained by preserving the constituting social relationships. Failure to preserve them, even though the individual maintains psychological or material continuity, erodes personal identity."

(Sweeney. K.(1990) *Competing Theories of Identity in Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'*. Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, 23 (4), 23-35)

Thus, Gregor is thrust into the grotesqueness of his monster-state and subsequent "Otherness" not merely by physical transformation but also by social design.

According to Hegel's Master-Slave theory, the Master and the Slave are essentially in conflict with each other. They form the thesis and the antithesis of creation, and from their conflict a.k.a synthesis arise new truths. Similarly, Gregor's competing identities are also representative of inner conflict and his quest for achieving both self-actualization and completeness. Gregor is in conflict, both within himself and without. His inner conflict manifests outwardly as conflict with his family and society. The family and Gregor both reflect their grotesqueness off each other.

According to Gramsci (1947), the subaltern (represented here by Gregor from the 'Metamorphosis') was a marginalized and subordinate class, who, despite periodic rebellions, could never adequately challenge the hegemony of the dominant class. By 'hegemony' Gramsci implied a state of consent that was usually balanced by force. He was of the opinion that such states tended to cultivate consensual support-or hegemony- so that coercion was no longer required except in extreme circumstances. Gregor, in the 'Metamorphosis', is bullied and beaten into submission and eventually dies because of the predatory nature of the conflict he is embroiled in and his family's constant striving for domination and supremacy. In the 'Metamorphosis', we see that even though it is Gregor who physically morphs into a grotesque being, it is his family whose behavior is truly monstrous. They veer between wanting to keep up societal appearances and being mind-numbingly cruel, while Gregor veers between his human (rational) identity and his insectile identity. As a hegemonic force, his family bullies Gregor into submission and soon takes charge of his entire life.

V. GROTESQUENESS IN POST COLONIALISM

In, *"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak notes that the subaltern is voiceless and has no authentic agency. It cannot speak, and all existing historical accounts are largely hegemonic. In Kafka's 'Metamorphosis', Gregor's transformation into a grotesque insect,

quite literally, robs him of the power of speech. Not only is he struck mute, but he is also henceforth greatly misjudged, and this eventually costs him his life. In 'Metamorphosis', Gregor himself offers no explanation for his insectile state; his attempts to do so are completely misunderstood. Instead, his family draw their own conclusions and their hegemony gives them authority. As for Gregor:

"It was hard to lie quietly through the night, his food had stopped giving him any pleasure at all, and so, to entertain himself, he got into the habit of crawling up and down the walls and ceiling."

According to Stuart Hanscomb (2010),

"At various points, he (Gregor) is seen, for example, as unwell (chief clerk), as something to be cared for (sister), as aggressive (father) or as his past self (mother). Through this process, life's ambiguity as expressed by Gregor's horrifying presence hardens into contempt as he is made the scapegoat for his family's ills. Gregor becomes an 'it', just a cockroach. In bad faith the monster is defeated."

(Hanscomb, Stuart. (2010) *Existentialism and Art -Horror*. Sartre Studies International, 16 (1), 1-23)

It may be that grotesqueness, is in fact, inherent to our human nature. In delineating ontological categories, Derrida in 'The Animal That Therefore I am' notes that the 'Thinking Man' has forgotten that he is, in essence, an animal. Derrida considered it futile to distinguish between ontological categories and suggested that the Beast Lies Within. According to Derrida, the very ideas that Man finds grotesque in Nature are fundamental to his own essence and have been since evolution.

Derrida also suggested that animals as a subaltern class share the primary characteristic of being deprived and this is relevant to postcolonial thought. In 'Metamorphosis', Gregor first loses his human form, then his job, then his family's affection, then his sister starts feeding him table scraps instead of proper food, then his family steals all his furniture and belongings and eventually, he dies.

To quote:

"Gregor kept trying to assure himself that nothing unusual was happening, it was just a few pieces of furniture being moved after all, but he soon had to admit that the women going to and fro, their little calls to each other, their scraping of the furniture on the floor, all these made him feel like he was being assailed from all sides."

According to Kevin Sweeney (1990), Gregor's anxiety at the loss of his furniture and belongings is completely justified, because it signifies the end of his relationship with his family, and in fact, with civilization itself:

"The furniture comes to represent Gregor's past self-preserving relationship with his family, awakening him to the intrusion of his animal instincts."

(Sweeney. K.W, *Competing Theories of Identity in Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'*: Mosaic : A Journal for The Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, 23 (4), 23-35)

Gregor's transformation splits his family into two ontological categories-the colonizers versus the colonized, the masters versus the slaves, the humans versus the beasts and the civilized versus the savages. The split is an immediate call to action, to Praxis.

According to Gramsci (1947), Praxis refers to action that has the power to wield change. When Thought leads to Action, and Action causes societal transformation, it is Praxis. Gregor's transformation is the action that leads to large-scale change in the lives of all the characters of 'Metamorphosis'. It has a ripple effect, leading to personal transformation for everyone around him. Thus, Gregor's 'Metamorphosis' can also be viewed as an act of Praxis and metaphysical revolt.

Bakhtin (1965), in his seminal work, "Toward a Philosophy of the Act", also describes the importance of Action in the process of self-actualization. Bakhtin says that even though human uniqueness can be taken for granted, each and every individual also has to strive personally to actualize such uniqueness.

Sartre (1956), whose ideas on Existentialism contributed extensively to both ideas of the grotesque as well as ideas of the horror genre, noted that the Being-for-Itself (the Conscious being) was aware of its incompleteness and consciously strove (i.e. undertook action) to achieve self-actualization.

Thus, we find that Gregor, too, attempts to achieve self-actualization in his new-found insectile state: *"His shocking appearance, should for once, be of some use to him; he wanted to be at every door of his room at once to hiss and spit at the attackers."*

According to Stuart Hanscomb (2010), Gregor strives for self-actualization in his insectile state but is reviled by his family and society. His family, in particular, harass him to the point of extinction. He is a monster to them and is treated as such:

"Boundaries between one ontological category and another are fundamental to Existentialism as a whole. It might be facticity and freedom; being and non-being; past, present and future; the finite and the infinite. Broadly understood, we may say, 'we both belong and do not belong to the world'."

(Hanscomb, Stuart; (2010) *Existentialism and Art Horror*. Sartre Studies International, 16 (1), 1-23)

Never is this more clearly seen than when Gregor's father fatally injures him or when Gregor's sister suggests they kill him off:

"I don't want to call this monster my brother, all I can say is: we have to try and get rid of it."

Gregor has now become an 'it', a mere nothing, and his attempts at self-actualization are being thwarted by his own family, notably his own sister, whose dreams of being a violinist he once treasured like his own.

"If he could understand us," repeated Gregor's father, closing his eyes in acceptance of his sister's certainty that that was quite impossible, "then perhaps we could come to some kind of arrangement with him. But as it is..."

According to Naama Harel (2020), Kafka associates the lack of rights to non-human lives. In Kafka's poetics, the absolute power of the sovereign is a tyrannical power that provides nothing but insecurity and terror to its subjects. It is the absolute antithesis of the sovereign in Hobbes' social contract. Gregor's tyrannical father represents a colonizing force and an authoritarian despot; Gregor's metamorphosis is thus presented as an act of survival, as a reaction to an existential threat.

Gregor is apologetic when he discovers his sister's extreme aversion towards him. He attempts to make their meetings more bearable by hiding himself:

"It made him realize that she still found his appearance unbearable and would continue to do so, she probably even had to overcome the urge to flee when she saw that little bit of him that protruded from under the couch."

In his grotesque form, Gregor is now in a completely different social category. According to Harel (2020),

"In the 'Metamorphosis', species is not reduced to biological identity, but contains, alongside the corporeal component, also a major element of social construction." (Harel, N (2020). 'A Transpecies' Report to an Academy. In Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier. (pp 49-78) University of Michigan Press.)

Frantz Fanon (1961), in the *'Wretched of the Earth'*, says that the colonized were frequently described as being savage, brutish and animal-like, and because their own perception of self tended to coincide with how the colonizers perceived them, they expressed their dissatisfaction at being colonized by "going back" to their "bestial" roots which was hardly satisfactory.

In *'Metamorphosis'*, we learn that Gregor discovers that his family views him with fear and loathing, yet he also gains a puerile pleasure out of indulging in disgusting behaviours like gorging on filth and crawling around the

ceiling. He seems to enjoy living up to their expectations of his bestiality.

"Quickly, one after another, his eyes watering with pleasure, he consumed the cheese, the vegetables, and the sauce. The fresh foods, on the other hand, he didn't like at all."

The colonized have always been perceived as being lower on the scale of evolution than those colonizing them. So, to 'evolve' culturally, materially and scientifically is to do so by adopting the ways of the superior (colonizers') culture or regress to Other ways of bestiality.

Fanon (1961) says that although the colonized were culturally evolved and not actually bestial, their rebellion against western sophistication and western brutality caused them to regress into their own bestiality. We see this in the case of Gregor, who is initially very considerate towards the needs of the people around him, just like his old self. He is concerned about losing his employment and tries to explain himself to the head-clerk, and he is concerned about his family members' feelings and tries to stay calm and out of sight for their sake. However, his father's abuse and his sister's neglect causes his more insectile identity to take over and he finds that he is personally quite comfortable with being a grotesque insect, even if other people have a problem with it.

Edward Said (1978), in his seminal work, *"Orientalism"*, noted that the basic premise of all orientalist discourse is to project the Oriental as *"primitive, violent, despotic, fanatic and essentially inferior to the Westerner,"* (Said, 1978), thus emphasizing the superiority of western values over Oriental ones. In *'Metamorphosis'*, Gregor's insectile condition is the source of much embarrassment to his family, and although he is not violent but is, in fact quite the opposite, he is projected as an irrational monster by all around him. Throughout, we find that Gregor's attitude towards his family remains one of kind consideration, while his family's attitude veers between opportunism, neglect, ambivalence and outright cruelty.

According to Sartre (1956), the Self is constantly in the process of defining itself in relation to the Other. This means that the Self is never fully contained or self-determining, but is always in the process of defining or determining itself with respect to Others. In *'Metamorphosis'*, too, we find that Gregor's family, despite their abuse and ambivalence, determine his thinking process and his attitude towards himself. Gregor is frequently apologetic, even when he is not in the wrong. According to Sartre (1956), his Otherness, like his interstitial character, is what invokes the idea of grotesqueness in the mind of his family. Gregor's grotesqueness veers between human and insectile states,

past and present, rational and irrational, the known and the unknown. His family is grotesque in their own way, too; in their inhuman cruelty and in their hypocrisy, above all.

VI. CONCLUSION

Postcolonial studies have noted how the colonized Other is not only depicted as grotesque, he is also depicted as interstitial--in a state of transition between his own culture and the culture of the colonizers. He moves back and forth between dark and light, civilization and barbarianism in his attempts to negotiate his colonized existence. In 'Metamorphosis', we see how Gregor attempts to live harmoniously (as he once did) with his family; but they have alienated him and now see him as the Other. To this end, anything he says or does is perceived as a threat by them and they respond with violence and intimidation.

According to Bakhtin's (1965) philosophy, Gregor's grotesqueness satirizes his family's hegemony and his metamorphosis is the Praxis, the defining act, which alters the course of the storyline. Sartre (1956) described the Other as both an Object and a Subject. Gregor, in the 'Metamorphosis', proves through his transformation into a grotesque monster, that he is both the object of his family's disgust and fear, as well as the subject of their inadequately formed theories and misinformation about him.

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