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## THE OPPRESSED “OTHER” IN A CAPITALIST SOCIETY:

*An Analysis of Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis”*

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**Abstract:** Franz Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis’ (1915) is a story about Gregor Samsa, a salesman who miraculously transforms into a giant insect. Gregor’s unforeseen transformation leads to him becoming the ‘other’, stripping away his identity and his existence from human society. He is confined in his own house, isolated from his own family. Everything that was once familiar to him has now become alien to him. He becomes a prisoner within the four walls of his own bedroom. Eventually, he is abandoned by both his family and society. This paper aims to analyze Gregor Samsa as a representative of the proletariat, who unintentionally becomes the ‘other’ in a capitalist society. Gregor’s transformation symbolically represents the marginalized, working class ‘other’ as well as individuals who are isolated from the society.

### **Index Terms – Kafka, Other, Marginalized, Capitalism**

‘The Metamorphosis’ was first published in 1915 and was originally written in German titled: ‘Die Verwandlung’ by Franz Kafka. It is an allegorical novella and has been a subject of discussion among many critics since its release. ‘The Metamorphosis’ is considered to be Kafka’s best work in literature. The book was written during the 1900s and the story gives us a glimpse into the difficult lives of the modern working-class society in many ways. It is also a tragic story about rejection and marginalization. Otherness is caused by a discursive process in which a dominant group is able to discriminate one or more groups by stigmatizing a real or imagined situation. It is presented as a negation of identity which results in discrimination. In Kafka’s The Metamorphosis, it can be said that Gregor Samsa’s transformation symbolically reflects the way he is stigmatized into becoming the other.

The story starts off with the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, waking up in his bed from a bad dream where he transforms into a giant insect, which to his dismay becomes his new reality. The story follows the journey of the protagonist, who before his metamorphosis, was an overworked travelling salesman. He was the sole bread earner of his family and for the last five years, had been working “day in, day out”, like a machine and without skipping a day. Gregor’s first reaction upon waking up was that he skipped his five o’clock train and he was late for work. His initial concern is not the fact that he is no longer a human being but that he could be fired from his job. The protagonist’s reaction to his metamorphosis echoes the reality and plight of the working-class individuals in a capitalist society, who are always in a state of fear that they could lose their job at any given moment if they fail to complete their work. In a society where one’s value and worth are based on their ability to work and earn money; Gregor is now useless, just like how his sister was once thought as a “somewhat useless girl” by their parents. However, she was later appreciated because she took the task of cleaning and bringing food to Gregor after his transformation and ultimately, stepped up and started working to support her family.

Gregor was a victim. He lived in a society where dreams die in order to meet a day’s need. The man worked tirelessly for five years straight not because he wanted to but because he had to pay off his parent’s debt and to put food on the table for his family. We do not know much about Gregor as a person in ‘The Metamorphosis’, his interest, his hobbies, or whether he had a friend or a lover, nothing. Other than the fact that he shared a close bond with his sister, Grete and, perhaps, she was his only friend. The nature of his work does not allow him to have anything more than “...casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friends”. Gregor represents the reality of the working class proletariat who, along the way of their work, sacrifice humane relationships, health, dreams and aspirations once they enter the world of adulthood and start working. Grete loved playing violin and her brother loved listening to her and he was very determined to send her to conservatory to study music. His determination to send her to the conservatory despite the economic challenges is because he wants her to follow her passion. He does not want her to lead the same path as him, chained by the economic burdens of their family. But, sadly he could not save her from this path because later, she too, had to work to support her family.

Because of his transformation, Gregor is isolated, marginalized and alienated from society and his family. He is confined within the four walls of his room. Throughout the novella, he continues to desperately cling to his human identity and hopes to be accepted by his family but that was a broken dream. Gregor pleading to his chief clerk behind his bedroom door to not fire him, is his attempt to not be excluded from society. Despite the fact that he never liked his job, it was still the only means to sustain his family. The chief's attitude and his constant threats to fire Gregor also throws light on the bourgeois ideology that the people in power practice and in this case, the chief clerk represents the bourgeois. Gregor desperately tells his chief that he can still catch the eight o'clock train, despite being aware that he cannot in his present form. His situation can seem comical as well as tragic as he desperately tries to lie to the chief to save his job. He goes to great lengths to give an excuse for his situation. And the humour in the situation (dark humour in a way) is the fact that nobody understood what Gregor was trying to say, because what they heard was an inhuman voice. Gregor lost his ability to speak but understanding and hearing everyone else made him feel even more alone, helpless and isolated.

Upon discovering Gregor's transformation, he was marginalized by his own family members. His appearance terrified them and the absence of communication only made him feel even more isolated. Gregor was the unwanted 'other' in the Samsa household. His once beloved sister is now always on her toes whenever she visits him to clean his room or give food, as if visiting a stranger. His beloved mother only visited him once because she couldn't look at him, but the one who took Gregor's transformation the hardest was his father, Mr. Samsa. Mr. Samsa in many ways too, represents the bourgeois. He had been living his best life before Gregor's transformation. He didn't have to work as his debts were being covered by his son who also shouldered all of the expenses of the family. However, when Gregor transformed, he was forced to go back to work and he hated that. All his responsibility as the head of the family was taken care of by Gregor. The first and only person to forcefully corner and push Gregor into his room was his father. He is responsible for all of Gregor's physical injuries that eventually contributed to his death. He first crushed Gregor onto the floor and pushed him "which was literally a deliverance and he flew into the room, bleeding violently". The second time he severely injured Gregor was with apples, he threw apple after apple at his poor son. The supposedly harmless apple got stuck on his back which later infected his whole body. The apple slowly decaying and forever disabling him symbolically represents the abuse he suffered at the hands of his own father. Mr. Samsa exhibits cruel behaviour towards Gregor's new form on many occasions, almost as if he is not just disgusted by his son new form but is also frustrated and angry at the fact that he has to take the responsibilities that he once abandoned and passed off to his once human son. His behaviour towards his own son reflects and represents how individuals in the society suffer abuse from their own family. Mr. Samsa can be considered as one of the main perpetrators for Gregor's declining physical health along with the fact that he could no longer eat human food. But what actually killed Gregor was when his sister, Grete, finally abandoned him. Gregor was never close with his father and although he was suffering physically, I believe that he kept on living despite all these difficulties (like not being able to eat, being cramped inside his room with all the other furniture) because he believed that his sister still saw him as her brother. She was the only person who addressed him as 'Gregor' even after his metamorphosis, although it was only one time. He loved his sister very dearly and when he heard her play the violin in the living room he couldn't contain his excitement and crawled out of his room.

"Was he an animal since music so moved him? He felt as if the way opening before him to unknown nourishment he craved. He was determined to push forward until he reached his sister..." Gregor wasn't just moved because of music but it was because the music was played by his beloved sister whom he loved so dearly. The opening to an 'unknown nourishment he craved' is perhaps his will to live. He wanted to live with his sister and hear her play violin because he appreciated her playing. Gregor dreamt of a happy life where his sister "would stay with him out of own free will" and he would send her to the Conservatory like he always wanted, that way he would free her from "any ribbon or collar" but those dreams shattered as the violin fell silent when the three boarders discovered Gregor.

Gregor was already dead inside when his family threw away his furniture and rearranged his room, when they got rid of his picture, when he silently observed his father in uniform to fetch breakfast for minor clerks, his mother making underwear for a clothing store and when his sister stepped into his shoes and joined sales. He was already subconsciously aware that he no longer had a place in the Samsa family. He was the unneeded 'other' in the house. But when his sister said, "I won't utter my brother's number in the presence of this creature, and so all I say is: we must try to get rid of it" and when his father said "if only he understand us", twice as if to affirm his intention of asking Gregor to go away would transmit to 'the creature', he died. He had died both physically and spiritually the moment his family uttered their intention of abandoning him. Gregor was barely clinging on to his life with all his physical injuries and whatever will he had before was now diminished. Gregor crawled back to his crowded, dusty bedroom, laid down and took his last breath.

In conclusion, Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' shines light on the reality of working-class individuals, through the character of Gregor Samsa. His metamorphosis is an allegory; through 'The Metamorphosis' Kafka exposes many different sides to human beings and how one may react to sudden changes and be faced with discomfort. The ideologies of the bourgeois is represented through many different characters and behaviours: the taunting chief clerk who loves to boss his employees and threaten to fire them at every minor inconvenience, the three boarders who ask Grete to perform for them but very disrespectfully smokes, snarkily comments on her skills and dismisses her performance and lastly, Mr. Sama who put off all his responsibilities on his son and when he was forced to take them back, he blatantly abuses his son out of frustration.

The Metamorphosis is a tragedy. It tells us the sad reality, that love is not unconditional. And conditions were applied to Gregor Samsa by his own family members. His family loved and cared for him when he shouldered all the economic burden and kept them away from any labour but as soon as his transformation, things went south. His family members were hypocrites. They complained about how they couldn't move apartment because of 'Gregor', but they could have easily transferred him through a box or something. However, what they wanted was to save their reputation in the society, so

moving to a smaller apartment would reveal their economic condition. They continued to complain thinking that, if the 'creature' was Gregor, he would leave on his own and not disturb their living space since humans and 'such a creature' can't live together. But it was them who were kept him hostage in his own room, refusing to let him out.

But the saddest part of all is that, Gregor wanted to protect his little sister from the money-driven world. He wanted her to pursue her passions and dreams, but that dream died the moment she placed her violin on her mother's lap to give it to her, and it fell to the ground and broke. Her broken violin symbolizes her broken dreams. Her dreams also died with her brother, who was the only one who wanted to champion her dreams. Grete, Gregor's beloved sister is thrown into the world of working-class individuals following in the footsteps of her brother. At the end of the novel it is hinted that she'll probably be the one to step up to look after her family after Gregor but perhaps she would not just be bound by labour like her older brother but also be bound by the societal institution of marriage as economic proposition to support her family.

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