

# Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*: A Study through the Lens of Critical Disability Theory

**Dr. Ranjana Bhattacharyya**

Associate Professor, Department of English, Nalbari College, Nalbari, Assam, India

Email - ranjanabh4@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The able body is always considered as the gifted body and it defines the traits of being a person. For centuries in human societies, any disability in the physical and mental build-up has been regarded as non-normal and they are frequently cut off from human society making them socially isolated and their opportunities limited. More often families abandon disabled members to the asylums or poorhouses due to the burden that they perceive the disabled members heaped upon them. Other families force these disabled members into isolation within the home, keeping them from the public eye to save their place in society. The alienation experienced by such disabled beings made them suffer tremendously.*

*This paper is a humble attempt to look into the representation of alienation and sufferings felt by a deformed human being in *The Metamorphosis*, one of the seminal works of the 20th century composed by Franz Kafka. The basic research question is how Franz Kafka has adopted the themes of anxiety, alienation, absurd, freedom of choice etc. in the metamorphosed character of Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of the novel. How does the narrative convey the critique of the existential loneliness of a disabled person will also be investigated.*

**Key Words:** *Franz Kafka, Metamorphosis, Disability, Anxiety, Alienation, Absurd, Freedom of Choice.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* written in 1915 presents the story of a salesman who has experienced a drastic transformation of his body one early morning. This novella has become immensely popular as soon as it was published and many interpretations appeared within a very short period. The transformation of a human body to a large insect is an absurd occurrence. Among many critical reviews of the story outline of *The Metamorphosis*, the rewording of the story in the light of critical disability theory assumes a deep significance. Applying this theory Gregor Samsa, the protagonist's transformation into a bug can be seen as a metaphor for the response to, and treatment of, disabled people in modern society. From his physical and mental changes to how his family treats him, we can see how Samsa's predicament in *The Metamorphosis* serves as a literary parallel for the pathetic plight of disability in a social framework.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Critical disability theory analyses the challenges a disabled person faces in a society of able-bodied people. It was first outlined in the 1980s, later becoming a diverse discipline of critical theories that seek to understand social implications and how disabled people are treated by non-disabled people. "Over the last couple of decades, two disability studies have led many literary and cultural critics, with increasing momentum, to rethink what bodies are and to rethink what minds are: all minds, and all bodies, and sometimes the idea that we can draw a sharp distinction between minds and bodies" (Parker 367).

Initially, the critics of disability claimed that no bodily impairment is disabling. Their view is that the disability is a social construct, a state of affairs, not an inevitable consequence of impairment. It is the individual as well as a social response to the impairments of a person. Social exclusion is caused by familial, institutional and social attitudes which fail to recognize the needs of the people who are bodily impaired and who don't match the social expectation of 'normalcy'. The failure of society to accommodate the distinctive individuals limit their space either at their home or outside. Critics like R Devlin and D Pothier probed deep into the concepts of disabilities and questioned the aspects of personal 'dependence' and 'interdependence', 'normalcy' and 'abnormal', fundamental values of individual dignity and

respect in a democratic society and different issues interrelated with the disability like class, gender, race, sex, ethnicity and other social categories.( R Devlin and D Pothier,5)

Critical disability theory looks into such issues as social inequality and the non-inclusion of disabled persons in the normal space or position. It is extended to examine not only bodily or mental disability but the social norms that define particular attributes as disabled as well as the social attitude and treatment of the disabled individuals. The feeling of helplessness, mental suffering, and non-freedom of choice, alienation, loneliness, silenced voice and perpetual invisibility trouble their minds and make their lives miserable. Their disability ultimately becomes a threat to their existence as a free and responsible agent determining their development through free will.

## 2.1 The Story of ‘*The Metamorphosis*’

Kafka’s novel begins with Gregor Samsa waking up one morning to discover himself in a metamorphosed condition of the body. “One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug”( Kafka, 1) To his utter surprise he just woke up from a troubled dream and found himself transformed into a “monstrous vermin,” which usually imagined as some sort of insect. These physical changes made him confused but still, he thought like a normal human being on the inside. He worried that he would be late for work. As a travelling tradesman, he was not happy with the nature of his job, but he couldn’t quit the job as he had family responsibility. As he was stuck in bed all morning, his manager came to his home to find him. Gregor’s family and the clerk asked Gregor to come out, but all they hear from inside his room was strange noises. Eventually, Gregor managed to crawl over to the door and opened it. The family members were shocked at his transformation and out of fear, shut him away from their side. He became alienated from his voice at this stage. Gregor’s food habits also changed. Gregor finally lost his mobility when his father threw an apple at him. With Gregor’s inability to continue his job, the family lost their source of income. The father went out to find a job, and the family started renting rooms to tenants to earn some money. Grete, Gregor’s sister, was sympathetic to him initially. As Gregor had adapted to his newfound body, he started climbing on the walls and ceiling to kill his tedium. His mother and Grete began to take furniture out of his room, seemingly to give Gregor more space, but he didn’t want to lose his furniture and paintings. He managed to grab one painting he loved of a woman dressed in furs. When his mother and sister came in to take away the picture, his mother lost her sense and Grete ran away at the sight of her brother. Gregor tried to follow her but his father threw apples at him to force him back into his room, seriously injuring him in the process. Gregor began to eat less and less as his family kept him away from their lives. His caring was handed over to hired maid, who left the door to Gregor’s room open when the tenants were out. One evening, the door was left open while the tenants were still home. Grete played her violin for the tenants, which attracted Gregor to his room. When the tenants caught sight of him, they cancelled their leases and left the place. Grete, now tired of taking care of her brother, talked with her family about getting rid of ‘it’, meaning Gregor. Gregor heard that and went back into his room to die. The next morning his corpse was thrown out by the cleaning lady while his parents and sister went out to have a picnic. It was as if they got relief from Gregor and decided to find a match for his sister as she had grown into a young woman. With this, the short tale of Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis comes to an end.

## 3. METHOD:

The method of content analysis of the novel is adopted to identify the problems and explore the panoramas of a human predicament.

## 4. DISCUSSION:

This Critical disability theory can be attached to literature to find out representations of disabled individuals in literary texts. Whether oral or written, disabled characters have found inclusion in literature since their origin. From the epic to the post-colonial literature, disabled characters have been found sufficient representation. They are accorded space in the body of texts along with the normal characters. But the treatment of the disabled characters is not the same as the standard characters. They are either presented in direct opposition to the main characters or they are receded to the periphery of the standard world. Most of the time they are made to act villains. A negative presentation of disabled characters reduces their significance to stereotypes. This stereotypical presentation of disabled characters has exerted an indelible impact on the reader's mind. They linger in the reader's memory as evil characters. They are associated with mischief, sin, crime, conspiracy etc. In Indian epic, Manthara, Duryodhan, Sakuni etc. can be cited as examples of

deformed and wicked individuals. The stereotypical presentation of such characters in ancient literature make the readers prejudiced towards them and these prejudiced notions lead to ill-treatment and isolation of such persons in the society. Gradually in literature, disabled persons have come to be represented in two different ways. Firstly, the stories have been invested with disabled individuals like deaf, dumb, blind, lame, crippled characters and the sympathy they earn from the able persons. Secondly, characters are outwardly identified as disabled and treated as non-equal to able-bodied. A disabled identity is created in them and they are denied opportunities to rights, livelihood and equal emancipation. This identity, however, it has changed now as our perception of health and wellness, gender roles, education, occupation, earning have been changed over the ages. Based on the above theoretical constructs, the present study focuses on the representation of suffering and alienation felt by a deformed human being in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Also, the level of consciousness of able-bodied individuals towards disability in the said novel will also be highlighted. To place arguments in quest of the focused point, it would be pertinent to provide the story outline of the novel in brief.

## 5. ANALYSIS:

The story of the novel has a deep association with the critical disability theory. The protagonist here loses the form of his body, his ability to work, his voice, his mobility and finally his life. These losses can be read as a metaphor of a newly disabled person and how he or she is treated not only by society but more specifically by the family. Gregor Samsa's post-metamorphic experience has resonance with the intolerable experience of bodily challenged individuals. Much of what happens to Gregor is similar to how impaired people in our world are treated. While Gregor turns out to be a coarse and ugly creature, unable to communicate, move around freely and even can't protect himself from injuries, the close-knit happy family suffers a drastic change.

Gregor has to support his family before the transformation occurred in him. But when he has undergone physical deformation and his ability to work and earn, he has become a liability for the family. Despite all the hardships, initially, the family members tried to cope with the new situation. His sister tried to take care of her metamorphosed brother. The mother also is sympathetic towards the abnormal son. His father has become a distant onlooker. But day by day, the attitude has changed in everybody. They have developed a mind-set that Gregor is no longer a 'dear one' for them, but a 'despicable creature' who has become a source of shame and embarrassment for the family. He needs to be taken care of. Unfortunately, his sufferings and pain haven't gained any care from his near and dear ones. Ultimately Gregor's responsibility is handed over to a housemaid. The same treatment is meted out by the disabled persons in a so-called modern society. A disabled person has provided a very limited space to move around. His world is reduced to the people around him, and these people resent him for being a burden to them. The dehumanization of such persons is a reality that can't be overlooked. His mental health starts breaking. His situation is well argued by Parker, "we might argue that the social system constructs the definition of disability and constructs the binary opposition between disability and ability" (Parker 368). The pain and suffering that Gregor faces due to the system that his family and others construct to deal with him lead to Gregor losing his mental well-being. The family creates Gregor's distancing which leads to his refusing to eat and eventually dying. After Gregor dies, the family goes on a jaunty picnic, like they are celebrating getting rid of their burden.

The societal treatment of Gregor is more or less similar to the societal treatment of disabled persons. The first strike that Gregor suffered is that the members of the family stopped talking with him. They assumed that since Gregor lost his body and turned out to be a metamorphosed being he would not understand anything. So they didn't talk to him directly. He learnt what was happening by listening to their conversations through the door. He was perturbed to hear that the family members were talking of him in terms of money only. No one tried to understand his mental condition. The bodily variation leads to the breaking of family relations—which is going to be represented through the story of *The Metamorphosis*. What is experienced by Gregor is also experienced by a disabled member of a family. The difference in the body always receives a different treatment. This condition is referred to as the 'dilemma of difference' by Martha Minow. This arises it becomes necessary to decide whether to deal with the difference by accepting it as equal or by ignoring it as another. The predicament of Gregor Samsa reminds us that if the difference is neglected as irrelevant, the outcome would be as pathetic as Gregor Samsa. Rather it is to be accounted as natural which would automatically eliminate the obstacles to welcome them as equal individuals especially able to participate in the mainstream activities. Secondly, the worth of a disabled person is measured by whether he can earn his livelihood or not. If he or she is a dependent one, then he/she has become a worthless being—this is the view of society. The ability to work and take home money through labour defines the personality of a human being. Society always pays attention to people who can earn sufficient. Those who are dependent on others are considered weak or idle. Support for dependents, either social or legal, has been a long-standing problem in many countries. Persons with disability are pitied and undervalued by society

for their dependence and they are made to feel like a minority and marginalized class as they can't walk together with the able-bodied persons. They are relegated to second class citizens. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor has lost his human identity not only because of his deformed body but also because he can no longer earn livelihood and produce wealth. Once his job, which he never liked, was a necessity for his family. But when he has lost his physical form, his ability to move and work, the family has lost their hope to meet their requirements through Gregor. Their hope is shattered and they have restricted Gregor's movement outside of his locked room. As he is unable to perform his worldly duties, his importance for the family has been turned down. Dependency because of disability has become an issue for devaluing the personality in society. The story of Gregor is the true reflection of this grim aspect of disability.

The protagonist of the novel symbolizes the pathetic predicament of an impaired member of a family. When a physically challenged child is born in a family, the family gives him loving care at the beginning. As days go by, the warm care turns out to be one of apathy, rejection and nuisance. No one would expect such a member in his or her family. But when, unfortunately, a family has got an impaired child, their attitude undergoes gradual changes from tender care and concern to rejection and distancing. This dark side of human attitude is focalized in the novel. Just as a normal person may be metamorphosed into an ugly and despicable creature, the loving attitude of human beings may also be transformed into one of refusal and rejection. Gregor is trapped in a body that is considered by others as abject and disabled. The wretchedness of a family member is undesirable and ugly. Even when the wretched one tries to get used to his bodily impairment, the others start to see him in a negative light. In Gregor's case, when he finds his metamorphosis, his chief concern is how he would be able to manage his job. He thinks about his job, his family and his duties. But his outside world's reaction is not the same as his. They at once take him as incapable of doing jobs. They do not want him to project as an earning member of the family. They force him to remain isolated and the behaviour of his mother, father and sister cause self-disgust in himself. When Gregor is not identifiable with the standards of a normal human being, he is pushed out as an unwanted one. Before his metamorphosis, Gregor is a capable individual, independent, economic support for all things that are considered as good. But his shocking transformation of the body makes the family and society feel ashamed of him and dehumanizes him as a result. The isolation which Gregor suffers leads to his death ultimately. The negative attitude of the near and dear ones of a deformed individual has got a real focus in the story of Gregor.

## 6. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION:

Given the above discussion, we can conclude that Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* engages its attention on the complex understanding of the issues regarding the body and its deformity and society's marginalization of the deformed persons as disabled individuals even in the western culture. Exclusion and marginalization of impaired individuals reduce their opportunities to contribute productively to the household and the community. People without disabilities have imposed their image upon people who are disabled. These images have told us not only what is beautiful and right; they have also warned us that the image of disability is ugly and evil" ( Gartner,31-46)Even though they have legal right to work and live with equal opportunities with the non-disabled peoples, in society this seldom happens. The negative stereotype associated with the label of disability directly affects the social attitudes towards the disabled peoples who are represented as deficient, pitiable, wicked or malign. These negative attitudes are focused in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The personal tragedy is invested with a universal discourse of powerlessness, vulnerability and dependence of impaired individuals. Medical treatment and cure are not the only requirements for a disabled individual. The mind-set of the society is to be changed and broadened to accommodate and accept the differences for the equality and social rights of disabled beings. To procure social justice and equality the advocates of literature should address the issues of misinterpretation and mistreatment of disabilities. Their representation in literature can direct empirical research on disability issues and reconstruct the social mind-set about physical impairments and help this excluded section acquires education, participation in work lives equal and enjoys their space in the mainstream.

## REFERENCES:

1. Franz Kafka *The Metamorphosis*, Planet Book,1999.
2. Robert Dale Parker "Eco criticism and Disability Studies", in *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*, (Oxford University Press, 2020)
3. R Decline and D Pothier "Introduction : Toward a Critical Theory of Dis-citizenship" in R Devlin and D Pothier(Eds.) *Critical Disability Theory: Essays in Philosophy, Politics, Policy, and Law* ( University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver 2005)
4. M Minow *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law*(Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1990).