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## **A COMPARISON OF FRANZ KAFKA'S »THE METAMORPHOSIS« AND KÔBÔ ABE'S »THE CRIME OF S. KARMA«**

### **Abstract:**

Many comparisons have been made between them, known for their existentialist and sometimes expressionist style of writing. In this work I will look behind their creative writing process and find the similarities in their lives that could have affected their choice of themes and motives. I believe that both, having lived through the changing times of the 20th century, such as the two World Wars, have had trouble fitting into the modern world. Through their work and the problem of their identity and their problems of identifying with the changes in world around them is noticeable. I will concentrate on the analysis of Kafka's short stories, »The Metamorphosis« and Kôbô Abe's »The Crime of S. Karma«. Through the analysis, I will focus on the characteristics of their writing that appear in both of these works, and associate them with their lives and the happenings in the world at that time. One of the main themes of the two chosen works is the metamorphosis that the two main characters go through. The decision of the authors for choosing this exact phenomenon might be different, but the way they use it to portray the inner state of their main characters shows connections between them. Thus I will concentrate on analysing this one motive especially, because I consider that by understanding the cause for the metamorphosis' of the main characters we will get to understand the authors and their relationship towards modern society as well.

### **Keywords:**

Franz Kafka, Kôbô Abe, comparison, metamorphosis

## 1. Introduction

Over the course of the last few decades, multiple research has been done concerning the similarities between Frank Kafka and Kôbô Abe. Even though coming from completely different countries and generations, these two authors give the reader a similar impression of a world full of anxiety for the individual. There are many similar motives and themes in their work, but the one this paper will concentrate on is their use of metamorphosis of their main characters.

Even though the phenomenon of metamorphosis is common in many of Kôbô Abe's works, we will concentrate on its usage in the work *The Crime of S. Karma*. It might not be one of the works that he is most famous for, however, the story itself and the use of the phenomenon of metamorphosis are very intriguing to the reader. Franz Kafka's most well read short story, *The Metamorphosis*, is probably one of the most well known examples of usage of metamorphosis in modern literature. Both, having lived through the changing times of the 20th century such as the two World Wars, have had trouble fitting into the modern world. Through their work, their problems of identifying with the changes in the world around them are noticeable. Through the analysis, we will focus on the characteristics of their writing that appear in both of these works, and associate them with their lives and the happenings in the world at that time. The decision of the authors for choosing this exact phenomenon might be different, but the use of it to portray the inner state of their main characters shows many connections between them. Thus I will concentrate on analyzing this one motive especially, because we consider of importance that by understanding the cause for the metamorphosis of the main characters we will get to understand the authors and their relationship towards modern society as well.

## 2. Literary and historical background of the authors

### 2.1 Franz Kafka

Franz Kafka is known as a modernist, expressionist, existentialist, for some even as a postmodernist. (Virk 2008) It is difficult to categorise him into only one of the literary movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to it being a time of big changes in literature and history. It was a time of impending World War, of big economic and political changes when literature moved from realistic and naturalistic describing of the world to an individual's perception of it. The actions happening in the world around us fell short to one's feelings, reality shifted from being objective to being completely subjective.

The shift from objective to subjective reality is visible in literary works through associations, stream of consciousness, reflections and inner monologue, all of which become more important than the story itself. (Kos 1988) Franz Kafka, who was a writer of this period, used associations, metaphors and symbols to describe the world around him, as if it were a dream and not reality. It is

through the usage of these tools that Kafka did not only write about his own existential crisis, but about the existential crisis of any modern man living at the break of the century.

## 2.2 *Kôbô Abe*

Kôbô Abe's short story *The Crime of S. Karma* was first published in Japan in 1951. So the time of its creation was the time of the World War II, or immediately after its end. Due to the new law concerning the restriction of army, Japan was overflowed by unemployment. The soldiers coming back from war were met with extreme poverty and it is partially due to that, that Japanese people were met by an existential crisis (Beasley 1963). According to Ango Sakaguchi, the Japanese people started seeing their limitations even stronger due to the freedom they were permitted after the war:

»After the war we were permitted every freedom, but one might say that when people are permitted every freedom they become aware of their own inexplicable limits and needs. (Sakaguchi, 1986, pp. 5)

Abe, having lived in the post war era in Japan, noticed that the society norm known to the people until then, had been completely shattered and that together with the disintegration of the latter, any hope for an immutable existence of an individual was lost (Yamamoto 1980). An individual is dependent on the world that one lives in, which makes one weak and one's existence uncertain. Matson (2007) writes that in the time of such uncertainty, identities become freely explored instead of them being imposed.

In this case, it is not only about an individual's identity being explored; it is about the identity of the whole nation. After the World War II, Japan began a process of modernization quickly, but the tendency to try to protect the Japanese traditional culture was strong as well. The nation was divided between modernization and tradition; and after the devastation of the World War II and the search for the cause of it, Japan's identity started being doubted in. Due to it, the post war era was an era of the exploration of Japanese culture, of its meaning and its essence. In his works, Abe researches the new, modern society, and writes about an individual living in a changing world of that time (Cahill 2009).

A literary movement that used the individual's experience of the modern world, and a movement of which Kôbô Abe was also a part of, was the avant-garde movement. The avant-garde, which had its representatives in Japan even before World War II, was commonly used as a medium through which individuals dared to criticise Japanese culture and the politics of the country of that time. It was through the avant-garde that dadaism, futurism and surrealism got introduced in Japan.

The avant-garde movement in Japan started in the Taishô era<sup>1</sup> at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continued throughout to the beginning of Shôwa era<sup>2</sup>. It was the

<sup>1</sup> Taishô era (大正時代 Taishô jidai), the period of the rule of the emperor Taishô from 1912 – 1926.

<sup>2</sup> Shôwa era (昭和時代 Shôwa jidai), the period of the rule of the emperor Shôwa from 1926 – 1989.

representatives of the avant-garde, which opposed the rising militarism at that time, due to the idea of the movement, or as Cahill (2009) wrote:

»The main goal of the avant-garde, to speak with a voice unhindered by national boundaries, is a theme that would carry on and inspire the works and philosophies of post-war artists such as Abe Kôbô.« (Cahill, 2009, pp. 28)

### **3. An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict**

Many experts in the fields of sociology and psychology have tried to come up with answers to the questions of 'What defines us, and what defines our identity?', and as a result, different theories have been presented during a course of many years. One of them is the theory by Henri Tajfer and John Turner, two British psychologists, who have, between 1970 and 1980, developed a theory in which one's concept of self is to some extent dependent on an individual's feeling of belonging to a certain social group.

The idea of an individual having a 'social identity' was being elaborated by psychologists with the purpose of finding out how intergroup behaviour or relations between different groups work. In this theory, Tajfel and Turner present the idea that each of us has a 'social identity' which, together with the process known as 'categorisation', helps us categorise ourselves into different social groups and therefore we feel a sense of belonging. Due to this, we start acting similarly to other members and feel a certain close connection to them, while on the other hand, we feel distanced from the members of other social groups, or those individuals who are not a part of our social group. We also tend to overemphasise the similarities between the members of the same group (Vec 2007).

The idea of humans needing to fit into certain categories comes from our tendency to categorize and classify our surroundings. It's easier for us to perceive the things around us, if we classify them and put them into similar categories. We put ourselves into some of them, while with the other individuals that form a certain category, we do not find many things in common and as a result we do not become a part of them. As a result of categorisation, we form a 'social identity', through which we interact with the others (Padilla & Perez 2003).

»First, social identity is a relational term, defining who we are as a function of our similarities and differences with others. Second, social identity is shared with others and provides a basis for shared social action. Third, the meanings associated with any social identity are products of our collective history and present. Social identity is therefore something that links us to the social world. It provides the pivot between the individual and society.« (Reicher, Spears & Haslam, 2010, pp. 2)

Therefore we can conclude that social identity works similar to a connector between individuals and the society that surrounds us, and if we, for some reason, are not able to categorise ourselves into any social groups, our social identities cannot be formed.

## 4. Interpretations of identities of the authors

### 4.1 *Franz Kafka*

If we take a look at the environment in which Kafka lived and worked, we come across many facts that show how his identification with the world that surrounded him might have been difficult. He was coming from a German family of Jewish roots which lived in Prague. Prague, now the capital of Czech Republic, was at that time a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and from the end of World War I on, the capital of Czechoslovakia. He was living in a period of time when modern European citizens struggled to identify with the new roles and identities that they were given by the changing world (Classon 2014).

»The Austro-Hungarian Empire at the turn-of-the-century presented many complex social and political challenges for its Jewish population. The multi-ethnic empire's lack of a cohesive national culture left it vulnerable to political and social unrest of its varied ethnic groups.« (Classon, 2014, pp. 32)

Due to the uprising of anti-Semitism in Europe at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish population underwent many reconstructions, especially in the cities of Vienna and Prague. Due to the Jewish Enlightenment valuing German culture immensely, a great majority of them spoke German (Classon 2014). That was the case with Kafka and his family as well. They were of Jewish ancestry, and lived in Prague, but in family circles they used German when communicating. On the one hand, the Jewish population in Prague was not considered Czech, as a majority of them spoke German, and neither were they considered German, due to their Jewish roots. They were not accepted by wider society and no matter how much they tried to accept Western culture and tradition, they would remain marginalised. Not being able to identify with a nation or a society that surrounds him must have affected Kafka and his writing as well. On the other hand, he still had his Jewish roots, the culture and traditions that his family came from, to lean on. But, reading his diaries we see that this might not have been the case. He did indeed have quite a fascination with the Jewish culture, especially Jewish theatre about which he commonly wrote. It is important to notice, though, that he considered his family to be assimilated into the West and have thus forgotten their true roots; that is why he never ceased to be fascinated by the Yiddish Theatre, which for him had an authenticity that he could not find anywhere else. (Salfellner 2014)

The second big insight into Kafka's identity problems are visible from researching about his personal life. The thing that he cherished the most in his life was writing. In his letter and diaries, we read about his issues with having a daily job that requires him sitting at a desk every day during the hours that he could spend writing. That is why his writing schedule would, in many cases, be in very early morning or late evening hours. At the same time, having an office job interfered with his interests even more – having worked the whole day, he would get too tired to write, or having written until late, he would be tired and not concentrated at work (Kafka, 2009). It would be

ideal if he could eliminate working in an office as an insurance clerk and pay his attention to the thing he wanted to do the most. But at the same time, he saw earning money with his writing as a way with which his writing would become impure (Virk 2008).

Stane Južnič (1993), a former professor of social anthropology at the University of Ljubljana, writes that one's identity is dependent on the recognition in the eyes of others; if one cannot get recognition from the people that surround him or her, there are many chances of great tensions arising about one's opinion of oneself.

Here it is important to notice that in his diaries and letters Kafka often wrote about the recognition that he sought, but never got. The most famous example of it is his famous *Letter to His Father* in which we see Kafka in front of his authoritative father, who does not understand how his son's interests and introverted personality can be so different to his own and for which Kafka feels an immense guilt, thinking his dad is disappointed in him (Virk 2008). In the letter, Kafka explains how his father's strong personality only made his feeling of incompetence and discontent with himself grow. His father cherished only the personality traits that were common to himself, and seeing that he has very few of them made Kafka's self-image become very negative (Kafka Pismo očetu in druga kratka proza 2013).

The big influence of his father and the difficulties of identifying with any nation are a reason for Kafka's unclear image of himself; he would have wished to please his father. At the same time it would be important to him to feel accepted by his father. He was trying to connect to his roots or to the world around him, but no matter the effort he would put in, he would always find himself in between nations.

#### 4.2 Kôbô Abe

Similar to Kafka, Abe spent a part of his life in a foreign environment; though born in Tôkyô in 1924, he was separated from his homeland just a year after due to his father's new position in Manchuria, which was under Japanese occupation at the time. In Manchukuo, as the puppet state was called, he was met with different races and cultures, but in his classes he would hear about the beautiful rivers, mountains and blossoming cherry trees, which were nowhere to be seen in his surroundings (Illes, 2000). Even though Manchuria was under Japanese occupation, the official line taught in his school was, that all races are equal. However, he constantly found himself noticing the differences that were practised in reality. His beginning fascination with his homeland started dissolving not long after that, and only got stronger when he saw how lawlessly Japanese soldiers were acting after their surrender.

Since his early years, he was distanced from his roots and it became difficult for him to identify himself as Japanese. As a consequence of World War II and how Japanese nationalism drove the country to a downfall, he started seeing having a nationality or being proud of it as a negative thing. (Keene 2003)

Due to this distance that he had to his roots, his identity, when it came to his nationality, Illes (2000) presupposes his loss of identity and a consequential endless search for it – which is also visible in his work.

Contrary to Kafka, his personal life did not include many struggles even though he lived in poverty through many years of his life. It is important to notice, that Kafka even though having written a lot during his lifetime, rarely published any of his works. On the other hand, Abe kept on regularly publishing and trying out his creativity in different areas, might it be poetry, prose or theatre. But seeing how he lost his childhood homeland to war, it could be predicted that the feeling of not-belonging kept strong with him throughout his life.

## **5. Interpretations of the identities of the characters and the causes for their transformations**

### *5.1 Gregor Samsa*

The story of *The Metamorphosis* is a story of Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman, who wakes up one morning only to find out that he has transformed into an enormous insect-like creature. The story continues with his efforts to explain the situation to his family and the office manager who is there to find out why Gregor is late for work. But all of his efforts are in vain – his transformation made them believe that he was no longer human in any sense, and he spend the rest of the days leading to his death, locked inside a room, forgotten and alone. After his passing the maid mops his remains and we hear about his family's happiness, as if just then was the time when they really started living their lives without any of the previous obstacles and limitations.

Gregor is a character whose main concern in life is taking care of his family. He is spending most of his time working and does not even seem to have a social life; in his free time he carves wood alone in his room, and that is the only hobby about which we hear in the story. Thus Gregor has, apart from work, no chances for categorisation. It could be said that Gregor's social identity did not have time nor space to form, as his main concern in life is working and supporting his family. Gregor did not compare himself to the others, did not find any similarities between him and another social group, and thus does not have a place to belong.

This is where his metamorphosis into the human-like insect takes place as a way of physically showing his inner anxiety and feeling of being lost, without a place to belong. Through the metamorphosis, his identity dissolves itself, as it becomes harder and harder for him to find any human traits in him left, which would help him communicate with his family. He did not have a life with a stable identity, and the transformation showed his inner processes happening to his outside appearance.

Together with his transformation, he becomes incapable of leaving the house and working, thus his whole role of supporting his family changes in the same instant as his transformation takes place. His responsibility dissolves, his only role in the society disappears and with it his identity's only stability, his responsibility, is gone. Even more,

he becomes a burden to society – his father has to start working to feed the family, and they have to take in lodgers, to receive some money from their rent. He has lost his function in the society and the only thing that is left for him is death. In a way, death is the salvation for his family, which will, as the story goes, finally start living their life fully, without the feeling of shame for hiding their metamorphosed son.

It is important to notice, that the transformation only happens to Gregor. But even though he is the only one suffering from it, he mentions the possibility of it happening to other individuals, such as his office manager (Kafka *Preobrazba in druge zgodbe* 2013).

Identity is not considered as something stable for Kafka – taking from his own life, he sees how feeling of belonging affects an individual, and using the phenomenon of metamorphosis he shows the inner happenings of Gregor Samsa.

For Jangizahy and Afrougheh, the authors of the work *Metamorphosis: A Žižkeian Barren of Desire* (2013), the reason for Gregor's transformation is his wish to escape from the mechanised modern society. Gregor is searching for his true identity, because he cannot hide behind his work and the responsibility it brings him anymore.

The possible reason for Kafka's decision to use an insect-like creature as the metamorphosed form into which his main character transforms, can be found in his diary's entry:

»Innocent, childlike people, such as, for instance, the Yiddish actor Löwy, had to pay for that. Without knowing him you compared him, in some dreadful way that I have now forgotten, to vermin and, as was so often the case with people I was fond of, you were automatically ready with the proverb of the dog and its fleas.« (Kafka *Pismo očetu in druga kratka proza* 2013, pp. 8)

If the theatre actor, whom Kafka respected greatly, is just a lowly vermin in his father's eyes, then how could he, whose opinion of himself was not particularly good, be anything better?

The main characters of Kafka's work have many of the traits of the author himself; a very close connection between the author and his work has lead him to write very autobiographically. Alienated characters, tormented by the immense feeling of guilt, are in many cases very close to the author himself (Virk 2008).

## 5.2 S. Karma / I

The story of *The Crime of S. Karma* is much longer and more complex than that of *The Metamorphosis*, but it just as well ends with the main character's metamorphosis into a wall in the middle of the desert.

The main character of the story, S. Karma, wakes up one morning and realises that he cannot remember his name. After many hopeless attempts to find out his name, one of which involve him seeing his other self, in a form of a human-sized business card



with his name, he realises that his chest feels shallow, and consequentially absorbs a photograph that he was looking through at the doctor's waiting room, into his chest. At that point his prosecutions by the doctor, his nurse and by the caretakers of a zoo, from which he absorbs a camel, start; which ends up at an underground trial. After escaping the prosecution and being chased, he comes upon a showing of a movie and a lecture with the title 'The End of The World'. After attending it, he is thrown through the movie screen and enters the emptiness of his chest, now filled with the desert that he absorbed at the waiting room. At that point of the story he is no longer called 'S. Karma' but instead he becomes simply 'I'. He walks around the desert and meets his doctor and his father, both of whom try to analyse his chest by performing an autopsy on him. They are stopped by a character, who is also the love interest of S. Karma, they continue to try to figure out the reasons for the happenings inside his chest, but in the meanwhile S. Karma transforms into a big wall, standing in the middle of the desert.

Differently to Gregor Samsa, S. Karma's social identity seems much more stable, or much more apparent; he has a love interest, but the only situations in which his relationship with her seems to evolve, are the situations in which his other selves are involved, most noticeably his business card. That is why we can interpret his division between himself and his business card, as a division between his private self, or how he perceives himself and how he is, when he is alone, and his social self, or how people see him or how he wishes for them to see him.

He has a social identity from which he is distant; it only stands for what the society expects from him, and not what he truly is. His private self has to stay hidden, it is not something that should be made public, which is why his business card tells him to go away from his workplace, because it's not his place, the place to which he belongs. The things that his business card does, such as it getting involved with the typist, are the things that our character wishes to have in his life, as to appear like a part of society, to feel like he belongs in the world around him. Only after he loses his name does his division within himself become apparent; it becomes clear to him that he is distanced from himself due to his work environment which makes him thrive for something that he does not want. His identity becomes unstable as his connection with himself seems to be non-existent.

He reaches some sort of stability with his transformation into a wall – but it is not a stability like any other kind that we search for in our lives. He becomes stable as a lonesome wall, separated from everyone and everything.

In *The Crime of S. Karma*, S. Karma is not the only character that undergoes a transformation. Metamorphosis happen to many characters, from the typist to the dwarf from the zoo; identity is not stable for characters in this work.

»The search for identity presupposes a community in which the ego is to be realized as a social self. For Abe, however, a community is an illusory idea which he rejects outright.« (Matson, 2007, pp. 23)

Abe rejects the idea of community, and together with its rejection the realisation of one's social self is denied.

For Abe a life in a modern world, is a life full of chaos and as a way of describing the inner happenings, similar to Kafka, Abe uses metamorphosis to show the extent of one's alienation.

In *Metamorphosis in Abe Kôbô's Works*, Yamamoto writes that the idea of a metamorphosis comes from one's understanding of reality. Abe's opinion was that human nature is not spiritual, however, it is one's physiological perception of the outside world. For him, the reality of an individual, how he or she sees it himself and the world surrounding him or her, is only a reflection of the outside reality, and sometimes the borders separating the two parts are difficult to detect. As long as the outside world is stable, we do not doubt into the stability of our inner world, or how we perceive reality; but as soon as one's life becomes more difficult or stressful, our conscience cannot rely on the balance between the two worlds. At such times, the deeper, instinctive part of our conscience takes over our conscience, which appears as a physical transformation of one into one's actual, real self (Yamamoto 1980).

The main character firstly loses his name and with it, his personal identity, after the trial, his social identity becomes unstable, as he is thrown out of all social groups that he used to belong to (such as his workplace), and as a consequence, he transforms into a wall. Our character does not have any other reason to continue living the life as he lived it until that point, as he lost everything that connected him to it; he is not only distant to himself, he is also distant to the society. Having lost his personal identity, he cannot continue to exist in a society as a non-existent being, thus his previous function is lost. With the transformation into a wall, our character escapes the unstable and alienated life that he had led up until that point, and chooses the lonely wall as his identity.

But why would Abe choose a lonesome wall to transform his character to? As Yamamoto writes, for S. Karma, the wall of his room, that he stares at in the story, before he transforms into a wall, presents the hypothesis of humanity. It is that one constant, unchanging truth into which he believes and with the help of which he lives his life. It is the limit, the border between his private self, private identity, and his social self. When he loses the balance between the two identities, he transforms into the wall. But as it turns out, the metamorphosis does not serve as his salvation – it shows him true alienation. By transforming into it, he finds his dehumanised essence (Yamamoto 1980).

## 6. Conclusion

It is clear that both of the authors had lived in unusual environment which affected their writing to some extent. Kafka's difficulties with identifying with the world around him are connected to both his negative view of himself, as well as his unhappiness connected to the lifestyle he led; on the other hand, Abe's main difficulties with

identifying with the modern world were connected to him not belonging to any land. But even though they lived in different times, both of them witnessed big changes happening to the world around them. Influenced by the different literary movements of the time, they showed us the feeling of being lost and uncertain of one's future in a new, modern society. Through the phenomenon of metamorphosis, they show us the division between oneself and the society, or the expectations of the latter. Using the metamorphosis into an insect-like creature to portray how Gregor Samsa felt his true personality was no better than that of a vermin, or transforming into a wall, an object that is as stable as any object could be, to find that stability that S. Karma has lost in his life; through the same phenomenon, they show us different sides of a modern man, lost in his time. Their work give us a very special insight into the thoughts or feelings of a modern man, as both authors use modern ways of portrayal the inner happenings of their characters. Through the usage of metaphors, symbols and other tools of modern literature, they show us the tense and scary reality of a modern man; lost, in the changing society, divided between oneself and the society, uncertain of the future, but desperately seeking a way out.

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