

Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration
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Lecture – 16
Metamorphosis: A Story of Human Predicament

Welcome back all of you. Today, we will have a discussion on Metamorphosis. Well, you all know it is written by Franz Kafka. Metamorphosis has inspired a good many studies from across the disciplines and today we will consider it in the light of Literary Disability Studies. Well, part one, I call it Metamorphosis: A Story of Human Predicament. Well, let us start with the story what it is about.

I strongly recommend that all of you read this story. If there is one great work written in the 20th century, it should be called Metamorphosis. Let us see the plot. There is this young guy, a salesman. He sleeps and like all of us cozies up to bed. Early morning, he is supposed to wake up by an alarm ring.

So, he sets an alarm and goes to bed. However, he awakes with immense pain. He looks at the window and it is raining. It looks like a musty windy rainy day, a dull but a pleasant one. He notices pain all over his body. He is unable to lift himself and turns to see that his whole body looks like a big beetle.

His belly looks brown. He could not lift his hand because hands do not seem to be there. He is able to turn his head and discover that he has innumerable tiny legs which cannot do anything. Still, he is able to have all the thoughts and reveries about his human existence but there is something horrible gone with his body. It feels like, some say cockroach, some say beetle, but nevertheless a big worm.

His body feels so big. He twists it but he could not and it feels painful. He says, 'my god what nonsense is this. If I could sleep a little more I will be fine'. He then tries, tries, and tries but he is never able to do that. But the idea that something has happened to his body does not yet register until there is a knock at his door. 'Gregor, Gregor wake up. It is kind of time'. His mum knocks once and his dad, Mr Samson, knocks the door. His lovely sister Grete also knocks at the door.

But he is saying yes, yes, I am sort of waking up, but his voice changed husky like a cockroach. But you know there is nothing happening and he wakes up, sort of not able to respond but he is able to hear them but they are not able to recognize his changed voice.

Meanwhile his boss comes home and starts complaining that Gregor is already late. He is not good for anything; we are going to fire him and so on but he tries to respond. So, Gregor masters all his body with lots of courage and somewhat slides up like a beetle, so slides up and using his strong teeth sort of turns the key on and he opens the door and there they have a vision of darshan as it were of the big vermin. My god they all faint and the guy who came and complained runs away and mother cries, father faints and all the pandemonium.

So now we know that Gregor is human in mind and worm in body. So, he is different. So then he lies down in the room and the family comes and goes and his sister Grete is given in charge of feeding him leftovers day in and day out. So what happened? Let us fast forward. So what happens, well days go by and his sister's patience also runs out.

They try on the one hand to feed him based on humanity with leftovers from home, on the other hand they are increasingly feeling the nuisance of feeding this chap, well this worm as it were. So, they become poor because Gregor is the sole breadwinner. And so, they lodge a portion of their home for boarders. As the boarders come, they discover that there is a giant insect so claiming that the house is non-hygienic they blast these guys and then walk away.

And meanwhile Grete plays great violin Mozart but they are not able to appreciate but Gregor is able to appreciate the music, still he is human but slowly when the lodgers move away Gregor's father takes revenge by throwing an apple on his back and it lodges on his back and makes a dent and then it rots leaving the body his insect body slowly takes the infestation.

So then at some point his dear sister says it is high time that we get rid of the insect, he is no more Gregor. So having heard words of insult, neglect and abandonment he decides to die. So next day early morning he is found dead and they clear the insect. Gregor's

family with the leftover money go to the city and they board a train. They discover that their young daughter is grown up and she is marriageable enough.

So that is the story. Well seemingly very dark story, but it reveals a lot about our human condition. So that is why I thought, I will introduce the lecture in two parts by calling the first part a commentary on a story of human predicament. A note on Kafka, well this is given his own submission about his personality, incapable of striking up an acquaintance with anyone, incapable of tolerating an acquaintance. Fundamentally, full of endless astonishment when I see a group of cheerful people and he goes on and on well I am fully alienated and so on. I am fond of lovers, but I cannot love, I am too far away, I am banished (**FL: From 11:04 to 11:09**). Students of German forgive me, I do not know German, I have just read his quote. Well, that is the nature of the personhood of the writer of the literature of exile.

If you like, his preoccupation is about abandonment and how that informs so much of humanity. By talking about his condition, he has managed to throw a sharp critique of our condition. So, style what kind of a style he sort of brings parables, the parables in the holy Bible you should visit them they are great. The one greater pull of parable kind of storytelling is you can get audience right from childhood to elderly all in your pocket, you cannot miss them. On the other hand, if you have just the voice of reason, I am afraid it will send half of them to sleep. So he is from Prague, product of 19th century and most of his works happened in early 20th century influenced by world war and most importantly his 7 years of battle with tuberculosis. When he was affected by TB, medicine was not there. So, he was just battling TB.

The horrible thing about TB the most difficult condition it can make you feel that you are evaporating from inside. So that is the hard stuff about that condition. I am not saying to discriminate people who fall ill with TB we should be fully empathetic, caring and help them recover. But TB does inform the kind of story that we are critiquing today. He is informed by his Jewish origin and so on.

I am not going to much focus on Kafka's history because that is not the focus of this lecture. What I am interested now after having told the story is to consider the enduring appeal of the story even today. Well, in 21st century while I talk now about suddenly a

man going to bed and getting up feeling or really seeing that he has become somebody different.

I am inclined to now focus on our life with fantasy and reality, not as a binary but as a contiguous reality in itself, contiguous entities in itself. In Tamil, you say is it dream, is it real, is it reverie, you pinch yourself and find out. Sometimes a pleasant event or a shocking event that surprises you may make you alternate between fantasy and reality. You tend to doubt whether that is true or not. As long as we humans are relying on this edge, the edge between fantasy and reality for our everyday survival Metamorphosis is going to inform us, inform our human thinking and living. In fact, Kafka has become an adjective in the way Google has become a verb for our living. For example, the word Kafkaesque well what does that mean? It demonstrates our precarious reality.

Take the following examples somebody being accused and legally captured or jailed or whatever in spite of the fact that they are innocent. Somebody trapped in war-ridden places despite their innocence. A life of alienation in urban living, a life of loneliness where you have only your mobile phone to meddle with in an urban life. A life where only distant visual connect exists and no human connections exist. A life where you are under trial for no reason at all. This kind of sublime moments that make you alienate from inside existentially banished from inside that moment is called the Kafkaesque moment where one neither feels human nor alive, nor fully dead, nor fully animal too. I am sorry that sounds a bit dark but I am afraid we all go through that moment at one time or other that is the truth of life.

So that edge, Kafka captures it so well along with dehumanization disgust and productivity driven lifestyles. Remember Gregor wakes up only to his life sucking, blood sucking job as a salesman. Imagine a photocopy person whom you jolly well go to a shop and give your book for photocopying. Day in and day out, he keeps one page after like this, like this, like this every day 3000 pages. First of all, he would have damaged his shoulder. Secondly, due to the lack of connect with his job he feels fully alien and this is the great point made by Marxist criticism.

So what am I trying to say, Kafka's Metamorphosis has given rise to various interpretations across meaning, meanings and meaning generations and the alienation that comes to us in various shapes.

So that is where several disciplines in some sense seek recourse to *Metamorphosis* still make a point or two about our contemporary moment. So that makes me go to disciplinary conversations, a few examples I would like to set. Let me take Psychoanalysis for example. Well, talking about few disciplines in few minutes sounds stupid actually. But if we give that kind of sampling, it makes it easy for me to evaluate, analyze *Metamorphosis* from the point of view of Disability Studies which I do in part two. So let us take Psychoanalysis, well Psychoanalysis is roughly 100 years old but our curiosity of the mind is not 100 years old, it is as old as humanity. That being said, Psychoanalysis is about the first interpretation of dreams published in 1901 or 1900 by Sigmund Freud who was primarily concerned with dream interpretation.

Interpretation of Dreams that is the name of book. So what happens then, several symbolic associations in dreaming, dream as a preserver of sleep. First of all, dream is posited by Freud as a preserver of sleep. You dream because you want to preserve sleep, oh wow Gregor wants to sleep again and want to reverie about something pleasant but sorry to the nightmare or reverie or reality he looks different.

And Psychoanalysis is about our inner life, something beneath the skin. Here it is true that a major event has happened, lot of us undergo sometimes torture, sometimes ill health, maybe delirium, maybe disturbances of the mind and body. So that time what is your mental life? What is your emotional life? What is your experiential inner person?

What is the nature of that person beyond your skin is the concern of psychoanalysis and to understand the pain that person undergoes, *Metamorphosis* has become a patent literary source. Philosophically, well existentialism, the study of existence, existence in profession as an IT professional, as a student, as a salesman, as a domestic help, as a partner, as a homemaker, as a brother, as a child, as the elderly person, as a critically ill person. There are so many things and we need to have a specific contextual understanding and from the point of view of the experiencing person. In fact, Kafka was inspired by Kierkegaard. Soren Kierkegaard was a philosopher in the 19th century tradition. He was opposing abstract understanding of Christianity, abstract understanding of transcendental soul, transcendental phenomenon proposed by Hegel. He was more interested in the way things are understood with your feet on the ground and nothing

more. So, it is an embedded reality that is very important. So, disciplines such as philosophy have taken this Metamorphosis seriously. Definitely, we have medicine, care, and nursing. These are the fields about caring for the ill, critically ill, dying and the one who are precarious and the one who need rehabilitation and so on.

Here what happens I was giving an example of a person suddenly becoming paralytic, suddenly losing hands and legs and so on. So, what happens to their wounded self? How long is bereavement? How long is moaning? When do they regain a wholesome personhood? All those questions and when do they give up? And what happens to caregivers? What is their interdependent space? Are they interested in caring all the time or do they undergo sorrow, vexation, disgust and so on? So, all these questions have come under Medical Humanities and Disability Studies arena. And the critical disability studies, for sure, the Kafkaesque existential crisis around the globe Metamorphosis has become again a rich narrative archive to study both the west and the east.

We do not have to assume that Kafka is just for Prague, far from it is as universal and as particular as Metamorphosis was when it was written. Thank you. We will soon meet for part two.