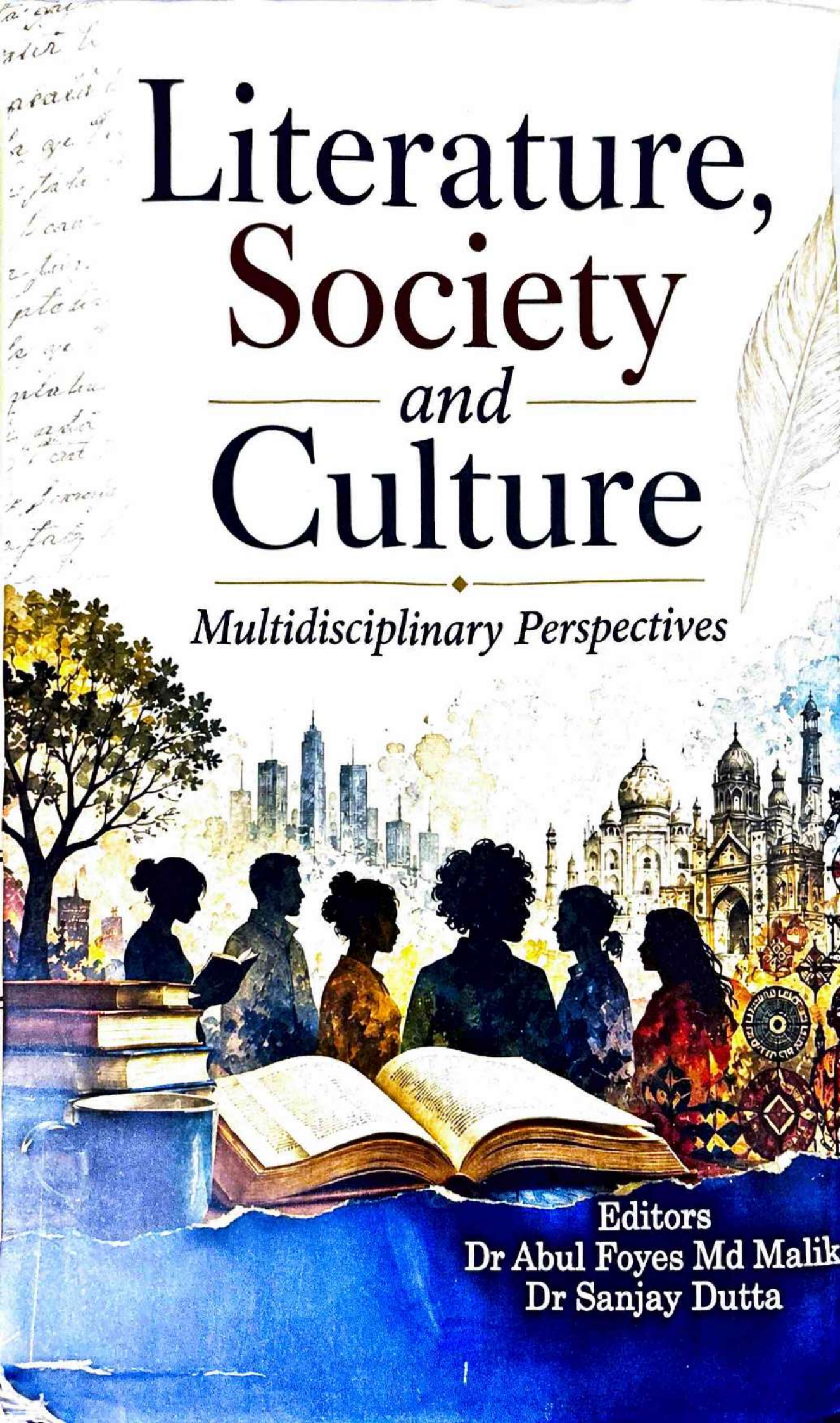




Literature, Society *and* Culture

Multidisciplinary Perspectives

Editors
Dr Abul Foyes Md Malik
Dr Sanjay Dutta

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Capitalist Alienation and Existential Despair: A Marxist-Existentialist Analysis of Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis'

Senjumbeni K Jami

Introduction

Franz Kafka's most favourable year as a writer proved to be 1912, as he felt his creativity was taking a definite form, owing to which he created his highly acclaimed works, including *The Judgement*, *The Metamorphosis*, and much of his novel, *Amerika*. The writing process of *The Metamorphosis* is said to have been quite laborious, taking three weeks in November and December, and the final product turned out to be the longest work Kafka ever completed in his life. His labour, however, came to fruition as *The Metamorphosis* is to date studied across multiple disciplines globally, not just as a product of Modern Literature but as an allegorical representation of the Marxist, capitalist, and existential reality of life.

Marxism makes a classification between the Overt (manifest/surface) and Covert (latent/hidden) content of a literary work and then connects the Covert subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle, the progress of society through various historical stages, the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism, and the revolution of the working class against the oppression of capitalism. Therefore, through a compelling Marxist lens, Samsa's transformation, both prior to and following his transformation, can be studied as a manifestation of the dehumanising logic of bourgeois capitalism, wherein an individual's value is determined primarily by economic utility. The Marxist reading opines that Gregor's transformation into an insect is not a random biological event but a physical metaphor for the condition of the proletariat under capitalism. His metamorphosis lays bare what was already true: that under industrial capitalism, a person's worth is measured by his usefulness.

Conversely, when examined through an existentialist lens, Gregor Samsa's life produces a profound irony because the life which he diligently sought to sustain in pursuit of social recognition, purpose, and belonging ultimately becomes the source of his estrangement and isolation. His relentless commitment to fulfilling societal and filial duties not only erodes his sense of self but also precipitates the alienation that defines his tragic condition. Samsa's absurd transformation into an insect deemed useless may be interpreted as an allegorical representation of the hollow, futile, and robotic existence he had long inhabited. His unwavering commitment to the demands of the materialist society and economic productivity gradually reduces his life to a mechanical routine, wherein his sense of identity and purpose gets knitted to his occupation as a travelling salesman, instead of living a purposeful life worth living. Consequently, when he finds himself in the face of reality with regard to his inability to fulfil his professional duties, he experiences not merely the loss of employment but the collapse of the very foundation upon which his existence had been constructed. The metamorphosed episode thus exhibits the extent to which his self-worth had become synonymous with his capacity to work, exposing a life whose meaning had been almost entirely squeezed out by labour and economic utility, rather than the true essence of existence.

Although Marxist and existentialist interpretations of *The Metamorphosis* have been extensively explored within literary scholarship, these frameworks have largely been employed in isolation from one another. A comparative study of both theories, however, reveals a significant intersection between socio-economic oppression and existential suffering in Gregor Samsa's life. From a Marxist perspective, Gregor's identity and worth are inextricably tied to his role as a travelling salesman, rendering him valuable only insofar as he remains economically productive. His transformation and subsequent inability to work expose the precariousness of a life defined by labour, as he is gradually stripped of significance within both the family and the broader social order.

An existentialist reading further illuminates the psychological consequences of this condition. Deprived of the occupation that had long formed the foundation of his identity, Gregor is confronted with an existence marked by alienation, purposelessness, and absurdity. His crisis is not solely the result of physical transformation but also of the realisation that his sense of self had been constructed almost entirely around his economic function. Consequently, the novella suggests that a life anchored exclusively in productivity is vulnerable to existential collapse once that source of meaning is removed.

By placing Marxist and existentialist perspectives in dialogue, this study argues that Gregor's existential despair emerges as a direct consequence of the capitalist alienation that governs his life. While Marxist criticism exposes the socio-economic structures that reduce individuals to instruments of labour, existentialism reveals the profound psychological and philosophical repercussions of such reduction. The present study, therefore, seeks to address a notable gap in existing scholarship by examining the interconnectedness of capitalist alienation and existential despair, demonstrating how Kafka's novella critiques economic exploitation that leads to existential consequences of a life defined by utility and productivity.

This chapter aims to draw a connection between capitalist alienation and existential despair by applying Marxist-Existentialist theories through qualitative textual analysis and comparative study as its methodology.

Marxist Readings of *The Metamorphosis*

Alienation under capitalism

Marxist critics view Gregor's metamorphosis as a symbolic representation of alienation under capitalism. According to Marx's theory of alienation, when work is driven by pure economic necessity rather than passion and love, the worker becomes alienated from himself, his labour, and his humanity. Gregor, as is evident from the narrative, has no affinity towards his job. He despises the strenuous career he has chosen because of the lack of liberty that comes with the package, as he has to travel day in and day out, compromising sleep and comfort, which are basic necessities to keep one's mental, emotional, and physical health functional. Despite being discontent with his career, he does not have the luxury to quit because he has to pay off his parents' debt to his boss: "If I didn't have my parents to think about, I'd have given in my notice a long time ago...." (Kafka 2) But as a proletarian, Gregor doesn't have any other option than to work monotonously because he belongs to a working-class society that doesn't have any resources of production of its own and has to sell his labour to earn a livelihood. (Monika 12,13) Gregor, as a product of labour, is painstaking to witness because even after working day and night without taking leave or falling sick for 15 years of his service as a travelling salesman, he never relished the fruits of his labour because his parents' debts stood as a painful reminder to never let his guard of frugality down. As a result of 15 scant years of mechanical working devoid of attachment, he is alienated not only from his job but from the people around him, including his family.

'According to Marxism, capitalism alienates workers from society as well as from themselves. It focuses only on profit and treats the workers

as functioning objects; thus, they gradually become de-skilled or alienated.' (14) The emotional gap between Gregor and the people around him is quite evident following his transformation, as he is bodily and psychologically detached from his family and acquaintances. 'Other than his family, no close friends or intimate relationships are mentioned in the novella. In fact, the alienation caused by Gregor's metamorphosis can be seen as an extension of the alienation he already felt as a person. Gregor's transformation expresses the alienation effects of modern society.' (14) Additionally, the dark irony in Gregor's concern about being late for his work, even after he transformed into an insect, shows Kafka's criticism of capitalist oppression. Even at his worst physical state, his only concern was arriving late at work, and this conspicuously exposes the loophole in the work system where the mental and physical health of a worker comes secondary to productivity. The absurdity is in the persistent concern about work and economic productivity when a person's humanity is lost entirely. (Mocen et al. 4)

Reification

Marx's concept of *reification* suggests that humans are treated as commodities, and there are shreds of evidence about Gregor being treated as a mere commodity in the text. In the opening paragraph, Gregor is described as having an 'armour-like back'; his manager calls him 'only a tool of the boss, without brains or backbone,' and his sister Grete eventually refers to him as "it" — "We have to try to get rid of it." This vividly exhibits how Gregor is deemed a mere thing, a commodity devoid of human feelings and emotions. Additionally, this mirrors the hypocrisy of a society that is ready to devalue and abandon anyone who doesn't bring anything of worth to the table. The value of an individual ends when his/her contribution expires and is automatically gifted the tag of a burden, and with it comes invisibility as he/she eventually ceases to exist in society.

Class Struggle and Abandonment

A Marxist reading of *The Metamorphosis* additionally reveals a pronounced class dynamic between Gregor Samsa, who represents the proletariat, and the office manager and Gregor's employer, representing capitalist authority. Underscoring the same substantial point, Gregor's worth within this socio-economic structure is determined solely by his ability to remain productive and profitable. Significantly, the office manager's reaction to Gregor's transformation exposes the impersonal nature of capitalist relations. Instead of being considerate about Gregor's absurd state and expressing concern, the manager immediately withdraws upon discerning that Gregor can no longer serve the purpose of being economically functional. This conspicuously reflects the fundamental

working of capitalist society, which sadly turns human relationships into market value and productive usefulness.

The same logic gradually permeates Gregor's familial relationships. Initially dependent upon his labour for financial security, the Samsa family begins to perceive Gregor as a burden once he loses his ability to work. As his economic usefulness diminishes, so too does the affection and sympathy extended toward him. His father's violent hostility, his mother's growing detachment, and his sister Grete's eventual insistence that he be removed from the household collectively illustrate the erosion of familial bonds under the pressures of material necessity. "When Gregor is not able to provide economic support to his family, they abandon him. Marx and Engels stated that 'The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation into a mere money situation.'" (Monika 13)

Furthermore, the Samsa household increasingly functions as an extension of capitalist ideology, reproducing the same principles of utility and productivity that govern the external economic sphere. Grete was Samsa's dimming hope, the hope he hopelessly held on to to find meaning in his metamorphosis. Grete did become the embodiment of a caregiver, understanding Samsa's preposterous transformation, trying to put sense into their parents' heads, and carrying the role of a sister who deeply cares about her brother. Unfortunately, this was short-lived as Grete abandoned the human emotional demands of her brother, started viewing him as a literal insect, and gradually turned into a symbol of capitalism along with her parents, the symbol her brother once represented, excelled and lost himself in. Thus, this unveils the heinous lifelong cycle of productivity in which people of the struggling class are trapped for life in order to escape being deemed futile, as they are accurately aware of the kind of fate they will end up with should they ever lose their ability for productive engagement.

Death as economic liberation

In addition, the change that transpired in the family following Gregor's becoming incapacitated underscores the ideological scope of economic identity. With every member of the family joining the labour market, Gregor's previous job is no longer needed, and his further living is positioned as a liability. This change shows the concept that economic survival rules moral judgement, which accepts exploitation and eliminates sympathy. Gregor's death is not mourned because his life had already been reduced to his productive capacity. Once that capacity is gone, his continued existence is a net drain. The family's outing, the move to a smaller apartment, and the absence of grief are not callousness in a personal sense; they are the logical expression of a system where

human worth is measured in economic terms. The death is, in the Marxist reading, the final act of liberation: not for Gregor, but for the family from the burden of a non-producer.

Existentialist Analysis

The core principle of Existentialism centres around the search for meaning by an individual in an otherwise meaningless world. In this sense, *The Metamorphosis* is a quintessential example of how one's life is constantly keen on establishing core identities in an absurdly fast-growing mechanical world. The existential concept of 'existence precedes essence', a core concept of Sartrean existentialism, is profoundly reflected in Samsa's metamorphosis into a vermin. According to Sartre, Existentialism opines that identity is not determined but embodied, but Gregor's new existence only makes him unable to act in human society- he gradually turns silent, invisible, and irrelevant to his family. Following the transformation, Samsa's initial default reaction, exhibiting a life rooted in a performative lifestyle with zero essence of life, was to return to his salesman life because, ironically, he thought that his meaningless life would only have meaning if he were productive and useful to the people around him. But what Samsa was not registering is the fact that the life which he was desperately trying to get back to had drained meaning out of his life, as he did not have a meaningful life outside of work, and life is supposed to be greater than work. If your life is synonymous with your work, if the meaning of your existence is synonymous with your work profile or productivity, then the whole essence of life gets lost.

According to Sartre's existential view, alienation emerges when isolation disconnects a person from their true self. Gregor's feeling alien, figuratively and literally, in his own body mirrors how people feel disconnected in a world fueled by materialism, self-interest, and self-gain. The physical transformation which Gregor experiences conspicuously reinforces the profound emotional and mental isolation which had built up inside him. When people exist only to please others, they become less like themselves and more like what society expects them to be. (Aslam et al., 607) The existential elements within Kafka's work stem from Gregor's encounter with an absurd reality throughout his fruitless attempt to belong in a world that lacks authentic meaning. (606)

Absurdity constitutes one of the central existentialist dimensions of *The Metamorphosis*. Drawing upon the philosophy of Albert Camus, the absurd may be understood as the fundamental tension between humanity's persistent search for meaning and the universe's indifference to that pursuit. Samsa's transformation is preposterous, with no valid explanation from Kafka. This may have been intentional to underscore the idea that sometimes there can be no meaning to a situation that

transpires in one's life, or in other words, the search for meaning in every episode of life is not required, as there is none to begin with. Gregor's unexplained metamorphosis thus serves as a powerful literary embodiment of the absurd, exposing the fragility of rational assumptions and underscoring the unsettling possibility that existence itself may be devoid of inherent meaning or intelligible design.

Capital Alienation Leading to Existential Despair

From the lens of the capitalist socio-economic structures as interpreted through a Marxist framework, Samsa's tragic life prior to the metamorphosis episode mirrors the lives of thousands of others within the oppressive socio-economic order characterised by class inequality and labour exploitation. Individuals such as Samsa lack the socioeconomic privilege of selecting pathways toward material security. They are constrained to either rely upon their innate capabilities, which must demonstrably surpass those of the broader labour pool, or dedicate their entire existence in physical and emotional form to occupations governed by excessive labour demands. Despite devoting an absurd amount of his time, energy, and well-being to his occupation, Gregor remains trapped in a cycle of obligation to society and his family, gaining little personal gratification. His life becomes synonymous with his work because he lives and breathes the life of a travelling salesman, and as a result, he gets completely alienated from his own sense of self and from his family as well. The relentless obligations of work leave little room for meaningful familial interaction, resulting in relationships that are sustained more by economic dependence than by genuine emotional connection, thus leading to alienation. Consequently, Gregor comes to be recognised primarily through his function as the family's breadwinner rather than as an individual possessing intrinsic worth. However, once he loses the ability to work, the foundation upon which that recognition rests begins to erode. Upon the removal of this productive capacity through his metamorphosis, the family fails to apprehend Samsa's humanity beneath his transformed corporeal state, perceiving him instead as an absurd and utilitarian liability requiring elimination. From a normative perspective, had the familial relationship been grounded in affective bonds of love and compassion rather than economic utility, Samsa's acceptance in his metamorphosed state might have been possible. This aligns with the fundamental ethical principle underlying familial institutions: the unconditional commitment to family members regardless of their contributory capacity. The abandonment of a family member solely due to diminished economic utility represents a fundamental violation of this principle, revealing the extent to which capitalist logic has permeated and corrupted intimate familial relations.

Samsa's metamorphosis, in a way, acts as a type of existential freedom from his life previously embedded in episodes of existential crisis. His life before he metamorphosed did not truly belong to him because he was controlled by the external forces around him. He was a mere puppet under the capitalist society, and his only core objective in life was to be productive and gain economic stability, and to never bear the tag of being a burden to his family or to society. His transformation should have provided freedom, but instead of feeling liberated from his work, this newly gained liberty has an enormous negative impact on his overall condition. Since he was so deeply invested in keeping up with the capitalist way of life, he did not know how to function outside of work or, rather, live without working. Samsa had been relentlessly working as a salesman for the past 15 years, so when he woke up to find himself transformed into a vermin, his initial reaction was how was he supposed to work now, without even contemplating how this preposterous transformation even occurred in the first place. On the contrary, he was more concerned about being late to work because he had not been late to work even once in his 15 years of service as a salesman. This conspicuously mirrors the kind of life he had been living, putting economic gain above physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The transformation makes Gregor physically free from working, but the uncanny physical freedom becomes a burden that he cannot handle, because this was not the life he was accustomed to or trained to live. 'In his story, Kafka shows Gregor's freedom as an existential struggle: A person must face extreme loneliness and suffer from defining themselves as free individuals rather than suffering control from external forces. Kafka uses Gregor's misery to make us wonder if living freely makes us truly free or drives us away from our basic humanity.' (607)

Conclusion

The Metamorphosis can be discerned equally by applying either the Marxist or the Existentialist framework, but the application of both frameworks in conjunction reveals substantially greater analytical depth regarding Samsa's existential crisis. Samsa's existence may have been relentlessly governed by the capitalist society, and his identity in his family and the society may have been earned by being economically beneficial, but in the process of surviving, he loses what is most important to him, which is the essence of life and his relationship with his family, which gets eroded over the course of his long service as a travelling salesman. He not only gets alienated from his family and lives an alienated work-life, completely devoid of happiness and gratification, but in the process gets alienated from his own ontological sense of existence, and this is quite apparent from the life crisis he goes through

following his transformation. Because his life's meaning was attached to his job, his inability to work collapses the meaning of his existence, which plunges him into an abyss of despair from which he could not save himself. From this perspective, Gregor's existential despair may be understood as a direct consequence of capitalist alienation. Having internalised a system that equates human worth with productivity, he finds himself incapable of constructing meaning beyond the confines of labour. If he had lived a meaningful life outside of work or if he had not merged his work identity with his personal identity, his life could have had a profound ending, but since he became prey to capitalism, capitalist alienation swallowed him in its entirety. It becomes the menacing factor contributing to his two deaths- the first, a figurative death, occurs when he surrenders his individuality to the demands of capitalist labour, allowing his identity to be consumed by his economic role. The second and final death follows his exclusion from the very system that once conferred value upon him. Physical death becomes the only viable solution to end his miserable, futile life devoid of meaning following his first death. Deprived of both productivity and recognition, Gregor is left with an existence stripped of meaning, culminating in his tragic and inevitable collapse. The interplay between Marxist alienation (economic exploitation and commodification) and existentialist despair (loss of meaning and ontological collapse) demonstrates how capitalist structures not only exploit labour but also annihilate the very conditions necessary for authentic human existence.

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