

ANNIHILATION OF APPARATUS: EXPLORING THE POWER STRUCTURE IN FRANZ KAFKA'S *IN THE PENAL COLONY*

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Abstract

The enthralling machine invented by Franz Kafka in his short story *In the Penal Colony* is probably the most famous torturing apparatus in the history of literature. Kafka examines the nature of punishment in this story, especially as it relates to the power structure of the society that takes place in. This paper tries to explore how the power is structured in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* which was organized by the Old commandant as well as the total destruction of the apparatus that was invented by him for the sole purpose of torturing the prisoners.

Key words: Annihilation, Power structure, apparatus, Penal colony

Franz Kafka is one of the enigmatic major fiction writers of the twentieth century. He is born to a middle-class German-speaking Jewish family in Prague, Bohemia (presently the Czech Republic), Austria-Hungary. He has a unique body of writing where much of his works are incomplete. Despite being published posthumously, he is considered to be among the most influential in Western literature.

It is well known that Franz Kafka never took part in the conflict of the First World War; however, we can hardly find few direct remarks on the First World War in Kafka's letters and diaries. Literature refers to his famous diary entry on 2nd August 1914, where the writer notes that "Germany has declared war on Russia.-Swimming in the afternoon." (*Diaries* 75), which is a fine example of macro- and micro-history. Researchers have never been deceived by this outwardly detached entry and often emphasized how deep Kafka's works are influenced by the Great War. On analysing his single masterpieces, starting from *The Trial* (written between 1914 and 1915, but published only in 1922) to the *The Castle* (1926), it has been proved how the Czech writer particularized the distress of the First World War in his narrative creations.

Generally, a penal colony is a settlement used to expel prisoners and separate them from the overall population by placing them in a secluded location, which is often an island or distant colonial territory. The penal colonies are the first example of colonies founded without representative institutions. There lived a community of prisoners overseen by wardens or governors having absolute authority.

In Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, the entire first half of the story involves the executioner officer who presents the dreadful apparatus to the visitor with a great passion for this machine that was invented by his former Commandant. Kafka's Penal colony is a place where those in power uphold that there is perfect order and justice, but in reality it is clear that both are lacking. Discipline in the penal colony is imposed through the exhibition of punishment through the apparatus. The device is divided into three parts, the Bed below, the Designer above and, in the middle, the Harrow. The Harrow is composed of multiple needles that draw a pattern on the back of the convict's body. The pattern is specific to the sentence attributed to the convict and, for this reason, it needs to be first set-up in the Designer. Once the machine operates, the pattern is inscribed in the body of the convict for hours.

The officer is boasting about his old Commandant for inventing the apparatus. He also says that "the organisation of the whole penal colony is his work" (IPC 167). The friends of Old Commandant (including the officer) believed that,

"the organisation of the colony was so perfect that the Old Commandant's successor, even with a thousand new schemes in his head, would find it impossible to alter anything, at least for many years to come." (IPC 167)

This is the point where the control of power begins in the story. The Penal Colony is purely autocratic till the explorer arrives. The penal colony symbolizes a society that follows an authoritarian God.

Punishment is charged through the destruction of the body, for the body is the ultimate means by which those in power get to control the hearts and souls of whom they rule. Describing about the apparatus and the punishment, the officer adds that "Our sentence does not sound severe. Whatever commandment the prisoner has disobeyed is written upon his body by the Harrow. . . . This prisoner. . . will have. . . HONOR THY SUPERIORS!" (IPC 169).

Another deep incident is that the prisoners are not told about the sentence that has been passed on them. The officer explains the explorer that “there would be no point in telling him. He’ll learn it in his body.” (IPC 170) Those in power maintain their clutch on society by asserting that their method of punishment is good for the people, since it supposedly results in religious transcendence. It is through religion the power is brought in and had been maintaining till the explorer’s inspection.

The officer tried so hard to get the approval of the apparatus, but he did not succeed in doing so. When the visitor disapprove of this execution, the officer frees the prisoner and takes his place on the machine, he then dies in horrific pain when the machine dysfunctions. “No sign was visible of the promised redemption; what the others had found in the machine the officer had not found;” (IPC 190, 191).

The ruling class used the rule of law ideology to enhance their power. The old commandant and the officer made the people believe that the apparatus gives redemption to them, so as to wash off their mistakes they have committed despite not knowing what it (mistake) is.

There was the annihilation of the apparatus in which it destroyed the one who is in favour of it as well as it dismantled itself. This can be seen as the death of old ideas and motifs which are autocratic and birth of democratic environment that slowly evolves.

Initially, the old Commandant who created the penal colony had power and control over the people in there. Later, when the explorer arrives, the power to approve or disapprove the apparatus created by the old Commandant shifted to the explorer who came from a very long place. The explorer has the upper hand here. He has the power to change the lives of the people in the penal colony. Thus, the power is structured everywhere; it is operating in all aspects of our daily life, that we encounter at least one incident where the power structure plays some role.

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