

Anxiety and Irrationality in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

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Kafka wrote the novel *The Trial* in 1914-15 but it was published after his death on 26 April 1925. The original manuscript has been preserved in the Museum of Modern Literature in Germany. Its first translation in English was published in 1937 by Willa and Edwin Muir. It is on record that Kafka first composed the opening and concluding segments of the novel, the rest of the novel being written in an unplanned manner in scattered manuscripts preserved by his friend. The novel was arranged by Kafka's friend Max Brod, as per the latter's own understanding of the events in the story, after the death of Kafka. The novel begins on the morning of the thirtieth birthday of the protagonist who works as a cashier in a bank. The unforeseen circumstances unfold as the protagonist Josef K is arrested for a crime unknown and unrevealed to him by agents who don't divulge details regarding the reasons of arrest, nor do they inform him about the agency responsible for the arrest orders.

"Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested."

— Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

The irony heightens when Josef K is told to go about his routine daily chores until the Committee of Affairs sends further orders and guidelines. The under-arrest-K is allowed to visit his bank, too, like on any other normal day. The happenings are absurd but this is how life is in the novels of Kafka!

Josef K is unmarried and shares a boarding house the proprietress of which is Frau Grubach who holds Josef K in high esteem even after he is arrested. There are female occupants in the boarding as well, Fräulein Bürstner and Fräulein Montag, with whom Josef K has strange communication and connection. While Josef K tries to be physically and emotionally close to the former, the latter seems to intimidate him. Josef K receives orders to present himself in the court without being informed of the time and location of the building. After a lot of searching and wandering, K locates the court in an attic where instead of finding the officials and court executives, he meets an attendant's wife who tries to seduce him. Her attempts are thwarted with the entry of a law student whose claims that the lady is his mistress surprise K to no end. Finally, the attendant and husband of the lady shows K around the court building. There is utter chaos around, the happenings are irrational and the encounters of K with various characters in the novel are totally absurd and confusing. The story line defies logic.

"The right understanding of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other."

— Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

Later, as the story progresses, K is visited by his uncle who introduces K to a rather pompous and ostentatious lawyer Herr Huld whose nurse Leni obsesses over K and becomes his lover. K also meets Rudi Block, another client of lawyer Huld, who shares with K the perspective of a client undergoing a trial for a long period of five years and consequently being drained by it. All his time and resources have been utilized for the trial and he no longer is a prosperous grain dealer as a result. Rudi Huld is at the mercy of his lawyers, completely obedient, docile and yielding to Herr Huld. Once Josef K is asked to accompany an Italian client to the Cathedral and show him around. The client doesn't turn up, but as K is about to leave the Cathedral he's summoned by a priest whom K has never met before. The Priest narrates a parable to K "Before the Law" wherein a man who wishes to enter a door is not able to do so because the guard informs

his that it isn't time yet for him to enter. The man keeps trying to enter the door and even bribes the guard for it. The guard takes the bribes so that the man doesn't think that he hasn't tried enough on his part and in his capacity to enter the particular door. It's an open doorway but denied to the man till he is on his death bed. The doorman informs that the door was meant only for that particular man and no one else could have sought entry to it. The priest gives various interpretations about the story to K before K departs from the Cathedral. This particular fable was one of the very ancient texts of the court and is meant to explain the situation of K.

"No," said the priest, "you don't need to accept everything as true, you only have to accept it as necessary." "Depressing view," said K. "The lie made into the rule of the world."

— Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

"But I'm not guilty," said K. "there's been a mistake. How is it even possible for someone to be guilty? We're all human beings here, one like the other." "That is true" said the priest "but that is how the guilty speak"

— Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

The final part titled "The End" suggests that two men have come to execute K on the eve of his thirty first birthday, a year after the entire trial-saga commenced. K is killed with a knife outside the city in a quarry, that's his fate, his existence comes to an end after a meaningless life of survival at the mercy of an incomprehensible system and unsympathetic society. It is a highly pessimistic story by Kafka. The story is surreal. The happenings are meaningless, illogical and the protagonist is an alienated-self ridden with anxieties, stress, panic and despair. The absolute power rests with the Jury and the so-called government and the arbitrary trials and dominated by this absolute constant power. The individual is rendered powerless and impotent. He's just an instrument controlled and dominated, commanded and governed by the authorities.

"From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached."

— Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

The Stranger is a novella by Albert Camus in French that was published in English as *The Outsider* in 1942. The protagonist is an ordinary French settler in Algeria named Meursault who takes a casual approach towards the passing away of his mother living in some old age home, takes leave from work to attend her funeral. He seems not to have any great emotional connection or feelings of regret towards the unfortunate happening.

"Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure."

A day after his mother's funeral when he's back in Algiers he meets an old acquaintance Marie and an affair between them takes off. They celebrate their union by watching a comic movie and by going for swimming together. Raymond is a neighbour of Meursault and a friend who desires to avenge his girlfriend for suspected cheating. Raymond gets involved in an ugly spat with his girlfriend and ultimately the police are called. Meursault testifies that the girlfriend had been unfaithful to Raymond and the latter is released by the police. Meursault is given an option by his boss to work in the office in Paris to which Meursault replies in an uncertain manner and agrees if the Boss is happy that way. Later again when Marie asks him if he loves her and wants to get married Meursault is completely unsure and uninvolved emotionally.

"A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn't mean anything but that I didn't think so. She looked sad. But as we were fixing lunch, and for no apparent reason, she laughed in such a way that I kissed her."

— Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

Once when Raymond has invited Meursault and Marie to a Beach Cabin, they are encountered by the brother of Raymond's estranged girlfriend and an Arab who had been following Raymond around lately. It so transpires that Meursault shoots the Arab when the latter brandishes a knife at him. Meursault is now

locked up for the murder. For almost a year in the prison, Meursault talks to himself and misses things of his usual life but he doesn't deny having killed the Arab. He is also unsure of why he had shot the Arab four more times after having accidentally shot him once.

“I realized then that a man who had lived only one day could easily live for a hundred years in prison. He would have enough memories to keep him from being bored”

— Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

Meursault receives the sentence to be guillotined or beheaded, after the trial and his repeated refusal to see the chaplain and repent for his wrong doings or ask forgiveness of God. He's uncertain if he wants to live or die. He feels that if everyone must die one day then the time of death doesn't matter. But Meursault is not ready to accept the humiliating and patronising attitude of the chaplain when he finally meets him.

“Since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter.”

— Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

As the time moves on and Meursault starts contemplating he tries to find meaning of why people might react the way that they do. For instance, he now comes to understand why his mother would have needed a partner at the fag end of her life in the old age home, for the sake of company and companionship.

“For the first time in a long time I thought about Maman. I felt as if I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a 'fiancé,' why she had played at beginning again. Even there, in that home where lives were fading out, evening was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her. And I felt ready to live it all again too.”

Meursault finally gets ready to be executed when he finds that there's no escape for him from his present situation. He resigns to his fate. He feels that after all, he will not be lonely any more on the day of his execution as a large crowd would be present to give him company. *The Stranger* is the first novel by Camus and ironically is an absurd story of the protagonist who is the outsider in an unintelligible society and its norms. The protagonist is unable to identify with the ways of the contemporary world. Meursault is an atheist whose responses towards his bleak world are apathetic.

“I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world.”

— Albert Camus, *L'Étranger*

Meursault becomes the representative of an alienated, amoral and emotionally detached man in the eyes of the society. Meursault is finally sentenced to death not because he killed another man but because he refused to conform to the standards set by the society. Meursault's life is a purposeless life. His existence is rendered futile. His life never works out the way he might have wanted it to.

“Have you no hope at all? And do you really live with the thought that when you die, you die, and nothing remains?” “Yes,” I said.”

— Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

The Trial by Kafka is a bleak representation of a common man's life although the story might appear to be a criticism of the judicial system at the first gaze. Kafka wrote of existential aspects governing a man's life. The common person is a meek entity getting grilled and carried with the sway and force of fate and circumstance. Man has not been able to carve his fate or identity in *The Trial* not *The Outsider* as per the theory of Nietzsche for the realization of the self. The Priest or the Chaplain play a role in both the stories. They have been used to state the importance of God and accept the prominent position of Law and its compliance by individuals. *The Outsider* makes the protagonist an outsider in his own world. *The Trial* has no courtroom trial for the protagonist to make a proper plea or to fight the case against him. It is an absurd world where the main characters are trying to find a voice of their own and the meaning of their existence but in vain.

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