

# Totalitarianism and Dystopia in Franz Kafka's 'The Trial'

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Received :23/09/2020

Accepted :02/05/2021

## Abstract

This research paper focuses on examining the totalitarian and dystopian system of the court in Franz Kafka's 'The Trial'. The main character Joseph K. feels impotent and helpless to defend himself or prove his innocence in a powerful and corrupt court against an unspecified crime. Kafka presents the court as an organization that has absolute authority and views members of society as worthless. The iron grip of the legal system in Kafka's narrative aims at restricting the freedom of people rather than protecting them, and influential court officials are not accessible or accountable. The corruption of the court agents can be viewed in the fact that they do not work as law-enforcers, but rather as criminals who steal and accept bribes. The terrifying death of Joseph K. at the hands of merciless executioners by getting stabbed in the heart in an isolated quarry represents the tyranny and surreal world of the court and destroys any possibility of justice .

**Keywords:** Totalitarianism, Dystopian, Court, Trial, Justice.

## Introduction:

Franz Kafka's tragic novel *The Trial* (1925) recounts the story of an ambitious banker named *Joseph K.* experiencing existential worries in an absurd society that arrests and persecutes him for an unidentified crime. Milan Kundera reads the novels of Kafka as realistic narratives that express the hopelessness of the author crushed by the forces of life, "There are periods in modern history when life resembles the novels of Kafka ... the images, the situations, and even the individual sentences of Kafka's novels were part of life in Prague".<sup>1</sup> Ritchie Robertson seems to agree with Kundera when he tries to find connection between Kafka and his character K., "Now it is clear that ... there is a connection between Kafka himself and Joseph K., ... such biographical and psychoanalytical interpretations tend to ignore the fact that for Kafka writing was a way of objectifying problems, gaining detachment from them and seeing them in perspective".<sup>2</sup> Everett Siegel studies the novel from a psychoanalytic perspective and views K. as guilty, "although he [K.] seems innocent and arbitrarily accused, a psychoanalytic understanding of Oedipal and preoedipal issues as well as of the nature of the superego allows us to see K. as actually guilty".<sup>3</sup> Other critics like Emily Tall state that the narrative reflects "Kafka's pessimistic views on man and history".<sup>4</sup> Robert Kauf suggests that for an author who wrote a novel like *The Trial*, "the idea of justice must have been a foremost concern".<sup>5</sup> Harriet Parmet also writes, "the injustice of the court is undeniable but its law is established in *Joseph K.*'s innermost

self".<sup>6</sup> This paper argues that the dystopian and frightening society of the character K. can be viewed as a result of the totalitarian system that oppresses the weak and impotent.

Many psychoanalysts consider anxiety a serious health condition that develops into mental and physical disorders. Paolo Azzone argues that "empirical research has repeatedly shown that the experience of stressful life events increases the risk of one's developing major depression".<sup>7</sup> It would be true to say that there are close ties between anxiety and depression that affect the behaviors of a "sick individual".<sup>8</sup> Kafka conveys, throughout his narrative, the tension and anxiety of the modern individual, represented through the suffering of the main character K. under the injustice of the totalitarian rule. The character K. suffers from existential worries and depression as a result of feeling dehumanized at the hands of corrupt and violent law officials. The novel opens with two warders of the court arresting K., the chief clerk of a bank, on his thirtieth birthday for an unspecified crime. The first sentence of the narrative reads, "somebody must have made a false accusation against Joseph K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong".<sup>9</sup> The absurdity of the judicial system can be viewed in the constant attempts of K. to get access to the court and know the nature of his crime. This incomprehensible system robs K. of his freedom the moment the pair of guards arrives at the lodging house of K. and notifies him of his arrest. It would be true to call Kafka humanist

because of his devotion to the sorrow and pain of the modern individual in a dystopian and inhumane world as Emily Tall points out, "Kafka's anguish at human suffering was enough to make him a humanist".<sup>10</sup> Kafka criticizes the repressive and corrupt system of the court through sympathizing with the oppressed and suggests that a change would be necessary.

Kafka satirizes the ignorance and intellectual limitations of the court officials who arrest and enslave people, while at the same time know nothing about the charges. When K. asks to see the identity of the warders and the warrant for his arrest, one of the warders answers, "we are junior officials who hardly know one end of an identity document from another and have nothing more to do with your case than to stand guard over you for ten hours a day and get paid for it".<sup>11</sup> The reply of the guards angers the innocent K. who feels helpless to defend himself, "this law is unknown to me ... It probably exists only in your heads" (5). It would be important to note here that Kafka was employed as an insurance lawyer for a government agency at a time when Prague was part of Austro-Hungarian Empire, and therefore was familiar with the legal proceedings of the court. No doubt that the job of Kafka as a lawyer and his real-world experience influenced his fiction, and this would be perceived through making law a prominent theme in his writing. Kafka's criticism of the tyranny and corruption of the law officers in his narrative could reflect his loathing for his career as a lawyer and an insurance executive. Max Brod, a friend and biographer of Kafka, reports that Kafka once remarked on the injured workmen who entered the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute, "How modest these men are . . . They come to us and beg. Instead of storming the institute and smashing it to little pieces, they come and beg".<sup>12</sup> Kafka expresses his sympathy for the injured working-class customers who feel powerless to defend their rights. Furthermore, he criticizes the autocratic system of the institute that could be viewed through the indifference of the employers to the safety of the workers and the deficiency in the workmen's compensation program.

The indifference of the law officials to the suffering of humans in Kafka's novel creates a troubled and dystopian society. The moral bankruptcy of warders, who represent the expansive power of the legal system, could be perceived in their willingness to act as thieves by eating the food of K., stealing his clothes and asking for bribes. K. explains to the examining magistrate about the inhumane circumstances of his arrest,

The room next to mine was taken over by two ill-mannered warders. If I'd been a dangerous bandit they could not have taken greater precautions. These warders were degenerate scum too; they talked my head off, they fished for bribes, they tried to take my

clothes and underwear from me by false pretenses, they asked me for money, supposedly to supply me with breakfast after they had shamelessly gobbled up my own breakfast before my very eyes.<sup>13</sup>

K. expresses surprise at the intrusive guards, who are supposed to be law-enforcers, for breaking the law through invading his privacy, and messing up the room of his neighbor, Fraulein Burstner, that the inspector uses for interrogation. The guards and the inspector prove to be low-level employees in the court who know nothing about the charges of K. To the surprise of K., the warders notify him that although he is under arrest, he can pursue his normal life and that he will be informed of any further proceedings. This makes K. live a dreadful existence ridden with guilt that he has done something wrong. Kafka criticized the corruption of societal institutions as Peter Neumeyer points out, "Kafka found that those same organized and socialized concerns with which he thought it necessary to associate himself were, in themselves, corrupt".<sup>14</sup> The apparently innocent K. in Kafka's novel assumes that the law will protect him; however, the law representatives prove to be hostile and corrupt, and this makes K. lose faith in the judicial system.

Kafka presents the court as a totalitarian institution that dehumanizes, terrorizes and destroys the weak and oppressed. At the time of his arrest, K. seems to be concerned about his reputation and position as a vice president in the bank, and therefore he expresses his anger and rebellion against the oppression of the legal system. The corrupt court in the novel aims at silencing the common people and limiting their freedom rather than protecting human rights and promoting social justice. K. complains to the examining magistrate in the first trial hearing about the guards who accompany three low-level employees from the bank to smear his reputation, "the presence of these employees had another purpose too; they ... were to spread news of my arrest, damage my public reputation and in particular undermine my position at the bank".<sup>15</sup> This implies that the court is not ruled by law, but rather by conspiracy and tyranny that makes it impossible for K. to prove his innocence. In his depiction of the court officials as evil, Kafka reflects his pessimistic outlook on life and the hopeless situation of humans. Kafka thought that "evil is an inseparable part of human existence and that there is therefore no sense in struggling to overcome it".<sup>16</sup> He also believed in "the inscrutability of the world, the omnipotence of evil, and man's insuperable loneliness".<sup>17</sup> The character of Kafka, K., seems to be caught in the clutches of sadistic and dystopian world that uses violence and terror to control and disempower individuals.

Kafka suggests, throughout his narrative, that the absence of justice and law creates a bureaucratic and dystopian state ruled by corrupt officials. The legal

system seems to be a bureaucratic institution that destroys the idea of justice and helps advance the will of corrupt court officials, not of the public. K. proclaims that there would be an organization behind his arrest that aims at intimidating innocents and restricting the civil liberties of common people. He declares, "there is no doubt that behind all the utterances of this court, and therefore behind my arrest and today's examination, there stands a great organization. An organization ... employs corrupt warders and fatuous supervisors and examining magistrates".<sup>18</sup> Kafka depicts the court as a representative of an institution of absolute power that appears to be malicious and oppressive. It would be important to note here that the world of K. seems to be structured on the basis of fear and retaining control over the fate of people through the use of the expansive grip of the legal system. Harriet Parmet points out, "it is almost impossible for men to live without a trust in ultimate justice ... and at the same time ultimate justice is impossible in a world where one must not accept as true what the law says is true".<sup>19</sup> K. fails to understand the nature of his guilt because the legal system appears to be inexplicable and inaccessible, and therefore succumbs to his fate. Kafka emphasizes that the oppressive system of the court is hierarchical in which powerful officials dehumanize and punish lower employees. The sinister atmosphere of Kafka's story seems to be filled with conspiracy and persecution with little or no hope for justice. The fact that the powerful court officials degrade their subordinates and treat them in a contemptuous manner can be observed clearly in the episode when K. discovers the two warders, who arrested him, being flogged in a dark storage room of the bank. The warders reveal to K. that he is responsible for their tragic fate after complaining about them to the examining magistrate. The guards cry, "We are only being punished because you reported us. Otherwise nothing would have happened to us, even if they have found out what we had done. Can that be called justice?"<sup>20</sup> The sympathy of K., who stands for Kafka himself, with the downtrodden and weak, can be noticed through his sympathy with the guards and his attempts to release them. K. says, "As it happens, I don't think they are guilty; it's the organization which is guilty, the senior officers who are guilty".<sup>21</sup> This implies that K. seems to be aware that these employees occupy inferior positions at the court and obey the orders of powerful court officials. Historically speaking, Kafka wrote *The Trial* in 1914-1915, as World War I was getting under way, and millions of patriotic soldiers lost their lives on the battlefield defending the powerful positions of bureaucrats and political leaders. Kafka, who lived under the iron grip of the Austrian Hungarian Empire, once told his friend Max Brod about the hopeless situation of his life, "there is hope, plenty of hope – but not for us".<sup>22</sup> Kafka explores the life of

powerless people who experience threatening and awful situation at the hands of irrational authority. It would be important here to refer to Prague's tumultuous history under the bureaucratic rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the fact that Czechs "became an exact replica of Josef K. and it remains to be seen if they recognize their guilt or if they will perish like a dog at the hands of cleanly shaven henchmen".<sup>23</sup> The inhumane bureaucracy that irrational politicians practiced against young soldiers during WWI seems somewhat similar to the irrational authority in the world of K. that demands complete submission from the public. This represents a critique of the use of power over the helpless and emphasizes the need of empathy in the life of humans.

Kafka criticizes the absurdity and totalitarianism of the judicial system through criticizing the immoral practices of the court officials and the bleak atmosphere of the court offices. Joseph K. in Kafka's novel struggles against the court system through trying to show the corruption of law representatives and prove his innocence. He snatches the notebook from the examining magistrate, while being examined in one of the dark offices, and shows his disgust through "dangling it by one of the middle pages so that the closely written pages, stained and yellow-edged, were hanging down on either side. 'These are the examining magistrate's records,' he said, and let the book fall on the table".<sup>24</sup> The stained and dirty pages of the examining magistrate's notebook reveal the elusiveness of the court and formality of the trial. K. expresses his surprise at seeing indecent books in the courtroom, "so these are the law books studied here ... It's by people like this I'm supposed to be judged".<sup>25</sup> Everett Siegel points out, "the court whips its employees, seduces and violates women, and its officers read pornography".<sup>26</sup> This displays the revulsion of K. at the fact that the ones who occupy ultimate authority are inaccessible and unaccountable.

The dark and suffocating courtrooms display the sinister and perilous places of the court as well as the suspicious circumstances in which it operates. Kafka describes the corrupt court through the suffocating air that leaves members of society like K. mentally and physically feeble and unable to prove their innocence. K. attempts to conform to the norms of society and assumes that the law will protect him; however, after his experience in the court offices, he comes to understand that law is obscure and aggressive. K. feels tormented by guilt, and yet he cannot understand the nature of his crime. The law appears to be powerful and merciless and leaves innocents like K. impotent and doomed. Upon his visit to the studio of painter Titorelli, who proves to be an agent of the court, K. realizes that "everything belongs to the court" (120) and that "there are court offices in nearly every attic".<sup>27</sup> K. feels frustrated and nearly suffocates in the stuffy studio of Titorelli,

which is one of court offices, and this makes him feel trapped by the hostility of the court. In his description of Titorelli's studio and the claustrophobic reaction of K., the narrator says, "the air in the room had gradually come to seem oppressive; he had already looked in bewilderment several times at a little iron stove in the corner which was clearly not lit; the stuffiness in the room was inexplicable".<sup>28</sup> Frederick Karl comments on this appalling atmosphere, "the initial description of Titorelli's locale leads in by way of images of hell".<sup>29</sup> No doubt that these horrible images stand for the uncertainty of K.'s fate and the rigid system that he encounters.

The existential anxieties and uncertainties of the character K. as a result of the absurd judicial procedures reflect the bleak view of Kafka about modern life. Kafka uses the aggression of the court and the moral decadence of court officials to express his hatred of modernism and modern institutions. Karl points out, "it is typical Kafka despair: deeply urban, full of corruption of civilization and human values, not unlike an animal's noisome lair, replete with his detestation of human progress and modernity".<sup>30</sup> Kafka criticizes the absence of law in society and the dehumanization of common people, and suggests that social progress depends on justice and freedom. Neumeyer argues that "autonomy, integrity, the necessity for absolute truthfulness are the core of Kafka's ethic".<sup>31</sup> Kafka highlights the misery and weakness of the modern individual caught up by the process of an unjust court. The absurdity of the judicial system in Kafka's novel can be perceived through subjugating and humiliating the client Block at the hands of the advocate Huld. Huld has been representing Block for more than five years and the case has not started yet. The humiliation of Block is described as follows, "the client was no longer a client, he was the advocate's dog. If the advocate had ordered him to creep into his kennel under the bed and bark from there, he would have done it willingly".<sup>32</sup> Huld punishes Block for seeking help from other "back-street lawyers",<sup>33</sup> and therefore Block sleeps in the maid's room to be under the command of his lawyer at any time. The tradesman Block complains to K. that his case at the court has already consumed his energy and income. This suggests that the court does not spare any effort to subjugate and terrorize clients through the use of excessive power and intimidation.

The alienation of the character K. in the narrative can be read as an autobiographical account of the alienation of Kafka from his parents and family. Kafka had intricate relationship with his parents who refused to appreciate his creativity as a writer. This could be the reason that made Kafka feel dissatisfied with his writing and order his friend Max Brod to destroy his work before his death of tuberculosis. Siegel reads the advocate Huld in the novel as a father figure when he says, "the lawyer is a father

figure by reason of his age, superior authority, and experience".<sup>34</sup> The tyranny and wickedness of the lawyer can be viewed as a representation of the oppression and profound impact that the father of Kafka, Hermann, had on the life his son. The attempt of K. to dismiss the lawyer because he does not see any progress in his case resonates with the hatred of Kafka to his father and the attempt to escape his authority. Siegel views the novel as "Kafka's effort to escape his father's domination through the weapon of his writing".<sup>35</sup> It would be true to say here that the impotence of Kafka to resist the dominance of his father can be viewed in the failure of his character K. to challenge the cruelty and the absolute authority of the court system.

The cathedral episode gives K. the opportunity to understand the nature of the court and the surreal world surrounding him. The court has apparent influence over religious figures that justify the inhumane practices of the legal system. The meeting of K. with the priest, who is the prison chaplain, reveals the hopelessness of K.'s resistance to his inevitable death and destroys any chance of salvation. The priest rebukes K. for offending the court when he declares, "You look for too much outside help ... and especially from women".<sup>36</sup> Shimon Sandbank argues that "the dialogue between Josef K. and the priest ends with despair of reaching the truth".<sup>37</sup> Although K. is accused of unspecified crime, the priest announces that he is guilty of challenging the absolute authority of the court through trying to prove his innocence. Rodolphe Gasché points out, "The assumption holds that Kafka's heroes always, from the start, face overpowering force against which they can only react before eventually being crushed by it".<sup>38</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté reads the mortifying death of K. as an "anti-revelation, for it removes any possibility of illumination or final understanding".<sup>39</sup> The ignoble death of K. at the hands of two executioners, who escort him to a quarry where they stab him in the heart "like a dog",<sup>40</sup> shows the manipulative nature of the legal system and perpetuates injustice in society.

In conclusion, Kafka criticizes the surrealist and dystopian life in Prague that was under the control of the Austrian Hungarian Empire and suggests that a change seems to be necessary. The court system in Kafka's narrative is presented as a totalitarian and powerful organization that does not only fail to protect innocents like K., but also humiliates society members through the use of intimidation and terror. Kafka suggests that the corruption and unaccountability of court officials as well as the use of power to restrict the civil liberties of people destroy the notion of justice in society. The court does not deal with K. as a human being who has civil rights, but as a worthless being, who is guilty for challenging the absolute power of the court system through futilely attempting to prove his innocence.

The humiliating execution of K. in a quarry like an animal at the hands of court agents for no discernible reason empowers tyrants and removes any possibility of enlightenment.

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# الاستبداد والواقع المرير في رواية فرانتس كافكا "المحاكمة"

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القبول : 2021/05/02

الاستلام : 2020/09/23

## الملخص:

يُركز البحث على تحليل النظام الاستبدادي والواقع المرير للمحاكمة في رواية فرانتس كافكا "المحاكمة". حيث يشعر الشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية (جوزيف ك) بأنه ضعيف وعاجز عن الدفاع عن نفسه، أو إثبات براءته في محكمة قوية وفاسدة ضد جريمة غير محددة. يُقدّم كافكا المحكمة على أنها منظمة تملك سلطة مطلقة، وتتنظر إلى أفراد المجتمع بوصفهم أشخاصاً دون قيمة. كما تهدف القبضة الحديدية للنظام القضائي في رواية كافكا إلى تقييد حرية الناس وليس حمايتهم، وكما لا يمكن الوصول إلى مسؤولي المحكمة المؤثرين أو مساءلتهم، يمكن النظر إلى فساد وكلاء المحاكم في الحقيقة بأنهم لا يعملون كجهات إنفاذ القانون، وإنما كمجرمين يسرقون ويقبلون الرشوى. ويمثل الموت المرعب لـ(جوزيف ك) على يد جلاّدين عديمي الرحمة من خلال طعنه في قلبه في محجر معزول، وهنا نرى الظلم والعالم السيريالي للمحاكمة اللذين يدمران أي احتمالية لتحقيق العدالة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** استبداد، واقع مرير، محكمة، محاكمة، عدالة.