

## Who was that 'Somebody' in *The Trial*? A Critical analysis of Franz Kafka's Novel

Prof. Shalini Rana

Assistant Prof., Department of English, G.G.M. Science College, Jammu, J&K (India)

### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Received: 01 Sep 2017

Accepted: 08 Sep 2017

Published Online: 12 Sep 2017

#### Keywords

Kafkaesque

Burlesque

Dehumanization

Suppression

#### \*Corresponding Author

Email: shalinirana32@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

*The prophesies of Kafka's writings are gripping the world readers more and more despite the advancements in various fields of life. The tentacles of 'Kafkaesque phenomena' can be seen in democratic as well as in undemocratic countries. The suppression of voices, ruthless exploitation and the rape of dignity of a common man or a woman is still prevalent despite the rosy picture of seemingly law and order situation in every well demarcated acclaimed national territories of the world. Millions of people are dying on daily basis at the hands of the oppressors just 'like a dog,' as in the novel The Trial. Men/Women are subjected to indignity and dehumanization. Kafka's seminal work is a reflection of the injustices that are meted out to powerless people in an exploitative system. The State machinery that becomes a hunter employs ordinary people to collectively hunt down another ordinary but open individuals. Joseph K. the protagonist in The Trial is a victim of an oppressive autocratic system. A system that employs the landlady, the co-lodger, the captain, the washerwoman, the Nurse, the lawyers, the colleagues, the co-rivals, the priest and the painter to hunt down Joseph K. to the point where he expects to go for self-destruction. The Trial is an unfinished novel. Hence, the mystery looms over from the beginning till the end about that, 'somebody,' who must have made allegations against K. The unknown court, the invisible judge, the unreachable system of justice leads the protagonist to the point of , almost insanity. Joseph K., the helpless but dignified individual is trapped in an endless trial on a false accusation. The present paper is an attempt to resolve the mystery of that mysterious 'somebody' who made a false accusation against Joseph K. in the novel. The unfinished novel leaves the readers perturbed. The long torturous process of the court trial pricks the conscious of the readers to find out the culprits behind the sufferings of the young ambitious clerk Joseph K. The dirty dance of bureaucracy, the burlesque representation of State machinery, the deep-rooted corruption in court, church, art and culture is well exposed through different characters in The Trial. The paper shall focus on finding the mysterious informer that made the protagonist die, 'like a dog'.*

Kafka's novel, *The Trial* begins with a mysterious announcement, 'Somebody must have made a false accusation against Joseph K. for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong?'. This particular statement echoes from the beginning till the end of the novel. The readers, just like the protagonist keep on pondering about who could be that 'somebody'. A close reading of the novel however gives some indication that it could be Frau Grubach- the landlady; it could be Fraulein Burstner-the co-lodger; it could be Elsa or a faint needle of suspicion goes towards the rival of Joseph K. at the bank. The pattern that is created by Kafka in the novel has a well-knitted system. Kafka has chosen the arrest of Joseph K., in the early morning of his thirtieth birthday. The evening of K.'s 31<sup>st</sup> Birthday becomes the last day of the innocent victim in a totalitarian State. The beginning and closing of the slow mental torture has been wisely chosen by Kafka. The entire psychological narrative looks like a state-of-dream. The readers recognize the first chapter of the novel as the precursor to the approaching doom of the protagonist.

The temptations and humiliations that follows Joseph K.'s unusual arrest is presented in a satiric manner by Kafka. The intrusion of realism into mysticism and vice-versa is also copious throughout the novel. However, the mystery behind finding the accuser in the novel is not so difficult as there are numerous indications in the novel about that mysterious 'somebody' who told lies about Joseph K. The very first culprit seems to be Frau Gurbach. Frau Grubach, the old lady is the owner of the apartment in which Joseph K. is a lodger. Some critics call Frau Grubach a motherly figure but in actuality the text suggests that she cannot be considered a motherly figure at all. Had she been such she would have herself gone to K.'s room to inform about the arrival of the warders. Since, she was the owner of the apartment, she lives in the ground floor, she must have opened the door when the warders arrived early in the morning. Why did she then permit the warders without giving prior notice or information to Joseph K.? He could have been saved from the sudden shock of his arrest because at that time he was sleeping peacefully in his room. Being the apartment owner, it was her moral responsibility to inform her, 'best lodger'. When K. is

disturbed by the warders, the very first thing that comes across K.'s mind is, 'I must see who these people in the next room are and what explanation Frau Grubach will give for this disturbance?' After all, being the owner of the house she was responsible for the commotion caused by the warders. K. even tries to move out of the living room of Frau Grubach, he says 'I want to see Frau Grubach,' but he was stopped by the warders.

Again, it was very strange on the part of the owner of the house, that while the warders keep on pestering K., Frau Grubach suddenly opens the door, 'she was visible only for an instant, for as soon as she, saw K. she became embarrassed,' the readers ponder over that if she was not guilty of anything then why she felt embarrassed? Similarly after opening the door she immediately 'begged for forgiveness and disappeared closing the door with extreme care.' The question arises that if she is a motherly figure then she should have stood by K. in that hour of despair. She closed the door, 'with extreme care,' may be because she already knew about the gravity of the foreboding problem. Perhaps, the warders were not strangers to her.

Joseph K., the anti-hero, looks like a fish caught in a net-but it is still under water and unaware of the impending death. It can only sense few dangerous vibrations around itself, as revealed in the opening chapter. K. tries to calm his nerves and eats the apple, 'kept previous evening for his breakfast.' Though the biblical apple, revealed the knowledge to the innocent Adam and Eve. They were guilty of the original sin and their guilt followed punishment. In K.'s case eating of apple is followed by punishment but he is kept bereft of the knowledge about his guilt. Here, the law follows the reverse order because here punishment is followed by guilt. K.'s openness becomes his tragic flaw because audacity and openness is not allowed in an autocratic state. It proves counterproductive for Joseph K. Frau Grubach might have picked up some audacious comment of Joseph K., In order to throw him in a painful trial. There are many evidences in the first chapter where Frau Grubach seems to be playing the role of an informer. In the first chapter, after the first short examination is over, the supervisor and his accomplices come down and move towards the front door, then, in an automatic fashion, it is 'opened for the whole company by Frau Grubach, who did not give the impression of feeling very guilty.' It is surprising for the readers that just half an hour ago she looked embarrassed and now she was looking free of any guilt. Is it because she has accomplished her mission?

On the part of K. it seems he doesn't consider Frau Grubach as a motherly figure at all because the deconstruction of the text reveals that he had the habit of observing Grubach's massive body, very closely. Though it was repulsive but he often used to observe her. As the author puts it, 'K. looked down, as he often did, at the apron string which made such a needlessly deep cut in her massive body.' Joseph K. often observes Grubach but he is unable to develop any fondness for her. His neglect and his undue over attention towards the young Fraulien Burstner might have fuelled jealousy and rivalry in Frau Grubach.

Grubach was possessive about Joseph K., the readers are also told that she used to be always available to Joseph K.

and 'he knew very well that he was her best and most valued lodger'. It's strange that she didn't come to rescue K. when the warders suddenly intruded in his room. The attention which she thought she deserved was never given to her probably this might have instigated her to take revenge on Joseph K. The young bank clerk K. is unaware of this fact. He innocently believes that women can easily bring order in everything. He thinks, 'women's hands do get a lot done without fuss,' but in reality it isn't so. The successive women who appear in the novel do not provide the much needed emotional support which a victim craves for in such state of utter dismay.

Infact, the women in the novel keep on complicating the case more and more. They aggravate the complexity of the case to a dangerous level. Frau Grubach has a very casual approach towards the commotion created by the warders in the morning. Although the informal arrest has thrown K.'s life into topsy-turvy, Grubach gives a cold response to the whole situation when she converses with Joseph K. in the evening. She says, 'but above all you must not take it too much to heart. What things happen in this world?' She confesses that she tried to eaves drop but she didn't disclose about what exactly she was told by the warders. Though she claims that K.'s happiness is close to her heart, 'perhaps closer than it should be,' the readers are compelled to suspect her for her false claims. Further, when K. extends his hand for a handshake, she only says in a tearful voice, 'Don't take it so much to heart, Sir K.' It seems, she deliberately tries to break his confidence. Joseph K. finds it useless to seek an emotional refuge in Frau Grubach.

Being the owner of the lodging she is aware of K.'s interest in the young and attractive Fraulein Burstner, like an agony aunt, she gossips about Fraulein Burstner behind her back. In a complaining tone she tells K. that, 'the young lady often comes home late.' It is her sexual jealousy that she tries to poison the mind of K. against Fraulien Burstner. Joseph K.'s irritation over her remarks makes Grubach to recede her ill-placed comment. Gurbach also seems to be a woman in need of money for, 'she has borrowed a lot of money; as claimed by Joseph 'K'. When K. persuades Fraulien Burstner to make love with him. She rejects because of objections from Frau Grubach for bringing a bad name to her apartment. She fears that she might be given a notice by her on account of bringing a bad name for the whole apartment. Joseph K. brushes aside her doubts. He says. 'you know how Frau Grubach practically worships me and believes me and believes without questioning anything I say-she is under an obligation to me too. She has borrowed a lot of money from me.' Since, Grubach owns a lot of money, she being old might not have been in a position to return that sum that's why she might have plotted against him. It is quite possible that due to her inability to pay off her debts she might have misinformed about the officials about Joseph K. She might have done this to keep Joseph K. diverted from his personal affairs. Frau Grubach is also jealous of the other woman', here, in this case, it is Fraulien Burstner. Joseph K. knows very well that 'she's (i.e. Frau Grubach) very attached to me,' but he is unaware that her interests are far deeper in her lodger. Unfortunately, K. does not recognize her temptation towards him. In almost every chapter of the novel, except '*The Whipper*' one or the other women keep on appearing. They are all attracted to Joseph K. Some women stare at his lips, like Fraulein

Montag; some praise his dark eyes, like the washerwoman; some allow him to enter her room anytime, like Leni; some allow him to kiss thirstily on their neck but ultimately he is unable to strike a balanced relationship with any one of them. K. is subjected to temptation and humiliation every time he wants to establish a cordial loving relation. Fraulein Burstner avoids him till the end; Fraulein Montag stares at him seductively but then talks to the captain lustily in front of him only. Leni, the nurse deliberately traps him in love making and later he discovers that it is habitual on her part of seducing the convicts and then she tells the spiced up stories to the old lawyer Herr Huld. Thus, Joseph K. the introspective hero finds himself suffocated by the treacherous relationships and the corrupt court rooms.

Critic Austin Warren observes that, 'Joseph K. is a man alone, man hunted and haunted, man confronted with powers which eludes him and with women with whom he is never at ease, man prosecuted and persecuted, man in search of a job, man the outsider who, wishes to come in'. Despite his violent encounters with different women, K. is well aware of the emptiness and emotional closeness of his relations with all the women in the novel. He wants to control them but ultimately he is defeated in his attempt. The old lady, Frau Grubach, over whom he seems to have final authority, is not young enough to hold his attention for long. After her gossiping about episode, K. stops talking to her. Since then, she herself brings breakfast because she wants to resume her relations with Joseph K. Instead of sending the maid she herself offers breakfast to K. After five days of that episode finally K. spoke to her. When K. finally spoke to her, she 'breathed a sigh of relief.' She even cried while explaining herself over her ill placed remarks on Fraulien Burstner. Joseph K. sympathizes with her and reminds that they are, 'old friends.' K. even reassures, 'Do you really think I could fall out with you because of a girl I hardly know? Grubach finally releases her frustration openly. She says, 'I kept asking myself: Why does Herr K. take such an interest in Fraulein Burstner? Why does he quarrel with me because of her, although he knows an angry remark from him (K.) is enough to rob me off my sleep?' These revelations clearly show her over-possessiveness of Joseph K. Somewhere deep down, she is jealous of K.s' fondness for Fraulien Burstner. Just because she is old doesn't mean that she cannot be infatuated with K. Her jealousy motivated her to take revenge from K. It is likely, she must have played an instrumental role in ruining K.'s life and bestowed him with that painful trail.

*The Trial* is full of violence, power-play and solemnity. The mysterious court surrounds Joseph K. everywhere. The bank employees, clients, co-lodgers, fellow victims, court servants, menial staff, priests, lawyers, agents, painters etc. all are employed to break Joseph K. mentally and emotionally. His openness, obstinacy and arrogance become an enemy of his proclaimed innocence. Women characters act as an agent of moral and sexual corruption of the protagonist. The women in this novel are proxy agents of the court. They first seduce him and then play hide and seek with the innocent victim. They create unnatural situations which finally dehumanizes Joseph K. Like, Fraulein Burstner, initially she allows him to assault her, then suddenly she stops seeing Joseph K. altogether. He daily wakes up early to catch a word with her. He sleeps late at night to strike a conversation with

her. But she always coldly neglects him. She torments him emotionally. Her role in making or aggravating Joseph K.s' false case cannot be denied. On the first day of K.'s arrest it is interesting to note, 'Why Fraulein Burstner's bedroom was chosen for interrogation by the supervisor?' It was a copious attempt to create delusion. It was a play to drag the client into moral corruption. After his arrest, when formally he is allowed to go to his bank, he finds it quite difficult to accept the fact that he is under arrest and he will remain under observation. By evening, K. tries to seek a meeting with Fraulien Burstner, she allows him. Both of them talk and get close to each other. The invisible court makes sure that Fraulin should not develop any emotional attachment with K. Hence, the captain (nephew of Grubach) is planted in the adjacent-room of Miss Fraulien. When the captain hears shouts from the room he immediately knocks at the door as a sign of reminder for her not to go beyond certain limits. Fraulein is a typist; she often comes as late as by eleven at night. Every time she's seen with a different gentleman.

When K. discusses his case with her, she tells him, 'legal matters do interest me enormously. A law court has its own peculiar power of attraction, don't you think. 'But I 'm sure to expand my knowledge in that direction because next month. I am joining the staff of a lawyer's office' She was a typist, it's a strange coincidence that she was about to join the court office just when Joseph K. is kept under observation by the unknown court. The captain who was employed to keep a watch on Fraulein and Joseph must have reported to the court about their long and intimate conversation with each other. Why the captain awake till was late then and why was he keen on knowing what's going on in Fraulein Burstner's room? Throughout the novel, she cleverly avoids him. The court, the bank officials, the co-lodgers all act as the sponsors of torment on behalf of the court. Albert Camus in his essay on *Hope and the Absurd in the work of Franz Kafka* says: 'Kafka's world is in truth an indescribable universe in which man allows himself the formatting luxury of fishing in a bathtub, knowing that nothing will come out of it.' He observes, there are a basic absurdity as well as implacable nobility in Kafka's novels?'

The humiliation at the hands of an autocratic state has universal echoes because the powerless often go through such painful transformations at the hands of unaccountable state authorities. The corrupt practices of totalitarian regimes often crushes the hopes, moral nobility, virtues and sense of dignity of the helpless. Authoritative regimes employ woman as a tool of further exploitation of the victim. Like in Orwell's *Ninety Eighty Four* similarly in communist regimes such malpractices became a norm.

As Michael Wood says in the critical essay *Sleep and Society*, 'Kafka often prophecies in his works about the countless faceless machinery of government. But the bureaucracy is taken as given a fact of life to be observed and hyperbolically portrayed as if Kafka were simply following in the footsteps of his beloved Dickens and had found, to no one's surprise the circumlocution office in Prague, Kafka lived during reign of Austro-Hungarian Empire'. He knew very well the dark side of the parallel government machinery run by the Empire. The atrocities, barbarity and ruthlessness with which the corrupt bureaucracy operated was well known to Kafka. Hence, his protagonist K. is a puppet in the hands of

'faceless modern machines'. Faceless because till the end he could not see the judge who was investigating his case. His dilemma, the shame and indignity he had been through is heart wrenching. Till the last few breaths he keeps on wondering, 'Where was the judge he had never seen? Where was the high court he had never reached?'

Critic Claude-Edmonde Magny observes, 'in Kafka's novels 'there is no reassurance or comforting'. The inhumanity that the protagonist goes through clearly reveals that the civilization has become fragile. The impending death is a result of a failed system. Claude says, 'how fragile is the crust of civilization and reason which separates us from the atrocious, from the barbarous from the unthinkable; as thin as the cloak of earth which disguises the grave dug for him beforehand that Joseph K. sees in his dream. Kafka has strong sense that human life is entirely bordered by the inhuman'.

Thus, till the end Joseph K. searches for some reassurance, he stretches his arms in hope when he is about to be butchered mercilessly. He begs for some sort of comforting from Fraulein Burstner but she is a part of atrocious and barbarous system that makes a victim feel guilty despite being innocent. There are many instances in the text, *The Trial* that clearly indicate that it was Fraulein Burstner who must be that 'somebody,' who trapped Joseph K. She appears in the first chapter and then straight away she re-appears in the last chapter. In between she looks like a master in hide-and-seek game. Joseph K. chases her like a lost, lamb. She keeps on ignoring him mercilessly. In the last chapter titled 'End' when K. is taken away by the two warders in a secret manner; when his hands are tightly gripped and he is made to walk in unison with the warders-Fraulein Burstner reappears mysteriously on the street. The readers are astonished at the timing of her reappearance. How and why did she manage to appear in that crucial moment? Was she given the duty to finish off the task of K.'s trial? What was the point of such reappearance? Her appearance proves that she was responsible for K.'s trial. She cleverly hides her face by walking ahead of Joseph and the warders. Kafka illustrates her appearance in a very artistic and humorous manner. 'Then Fraulein Burstner appeared in front of them, coming up a short flight of steps into the square from a lower alley.' Joseph K. could not see her clearly but the resemblance was strong. Fraulein was taking in front of them, not because he wanted to overtake her-but only because he wanted to keep in mind the reproach she signified him' Joseph K. understood that it was Burstner only, he did not over take her because he knew she was an agent of the corrupt organization which was hell bent upon proving him guilty.

Her reappearance just before the final execution clearly reveals about her role in K.'s case. Infact, Fraulein had turned off into a side-street but K. could do without her now.' He knew it was useless. He is so dignified till the end that he did not call out her name for help. He concludes that Burstner is responsible for his debacle. She was the secret agent of that corrupt bureaucracy that makes sure to crush any rebellious voice against the system. A system that dehumanizes every strand of the humanly thread that a human is comprised of.

The disturbance and disorder that had seeped into Joseph K.'s life in the morning of his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday culminated into his cold blooded murder on the eve of his 31<sup>st</sup> birthday.

The proud, young ambitious bank clerk was reduced to a pitiable creature who could only scream, 'Like a dog' while he was stabbed with a double edged knife. This scene is basically a dream that is recorded by Kafka, in his diary on Nov 21, 1911. Kafka's entry reveals that he had an inclination towards, 'transforming the scenes of torture into bliss.' He writes in his diary, 'this morning after a long time, I again took pleasure in imagining that a knife is turned in my heart,' thus Kafka is the only writer who could merge horror and humour and the ugly and the beautiful.

Joseph K.'s behaviour in the last chapter, 'reinforces the impression of an action reaching its appointed and proper end'. Franz Kafka's narrative power is so strong that despite being an unfinished novel, the narrative seems to follow a well stitched pattern with all its intricate hues. Kafka maintains humour even in the tragic end of Joseph K. Indian author Rosy Singh calls it 'a fusion of the grotesque and the comical,' in her book on Kafka. The injustices, the violation of rights of an individual and the cruelty with which precious lives are destroyed by powerful states with the help of its agents is well exposed by Kafka.

In *The Trial* it is thus, concluded that, that 'somebody' was Fraulien Burstner only. She posed as a sympathizer of Joseph K. but actually she was planted in that house under a well planned mission to destroy 'Open & Arrogant' Joseph K. Kafka's ability to write mystery -cum-crime novel is unparalleled and *The Trial* is a conspicuous proof it. As Michael Wood puts it, 'Kafka owes his place in literature of the twentieth century not to his ability to invent the fantastic or to make the ordinary seem strange and the strange ordinary but to his uncanny understanding of the strategies developed by humankind'.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Batra, Shakti. Franz Kafka: The Trial. Surjeet Publications. Delhi. 2014.
- [2] Campus, Alber. The Myth of Sisyphus (trans) Justin O'Brien. Vintage US, 1991.
- [3] Flores, Angel. The Kafka Problem (ed) Goddian Press. New York, 1975.
- [4] Gray, D. Ronald. Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays. Prentice-Hall, New Jersey. 1962.
- [5] Kafka, Franz. The Trial. (trans). Idris Parry. Penguin Books, England. 1994.
- [6] Singh, Rosy. Rilke, Kafka, Mantoo: The Semiotics of Love, Life and Death. Harman Publishing House. New Delhi, 2001.
- [7] Wood, Michael. Writers and their Work: Franzkafka Atlantic Publishers. New Delhi, 2010.