

## **“My life is a hesitation before birth”: the Pain of Unbelonging in the Novels of Franz Kafka.**

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to understand the pain of ‘unbelonging’ in the novels of Franz Kafka (1883-1924) against the backdrop of immense tectonic diplomatic shifts from the 1890’s. A German speaking Jew, he lived during a period of intense socio-cultural and historical changes which had a profound impact upon the delicate sensibility of Kafka. His three novels, Amerika, The Trial and The Castle reflect his life of freezing solitude coupled with intense introspection. In all these three works we see how man is doomed to loneliness. The work will also explore why the self needs to go through the fire of purgatory and the pain of unbelonging in Kafka becomes a necessity. His works reveal how it is through suffering that one could connect with the world of higher reality. Compelled under the forces of ‘scientificity’, institutionalization of history and the professionalization of historiography; writing becomes a salvation for Kafka to release his demon of unbelonging.*

**Keywords:** *Unbelonging, the Jewish Question, Scientificity, Assimilation, History and Historiography.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The period between 1800-1850 can be regarded as the period of national history writing in Europe. However, history then was no longer a simple matter-of-fact political history but dealt with the greater issues of institutionalization and professionalization of history endorsing the ideas of ‘scientificity’. Such scientific historians legitimized the claim of their national superiority, simultaneously constructing an insular national identity. As Ann Rigney puts, “professional historical practice, far from floating serenely in some eternal space, reflected the hierarchies within the society in which it was rooted.” (History and Theory, 2001, p.78). Besides a number of Historical Societies which proliferated during this period, the Universities too played an important role in such institutionalization and professionalization of national history. This institutionalization and professionalization of history and historiography was pioneered by Germany for other European nations to emulate; particularly the French in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Germany, the writing of national history started from the first half of the nineteenth century. The University of Berlin at the beginning of the nineteenth century fuelled the rapidly developing nationalist consciousness through German history and German historiography. With science as their new religion, professional historians assumed the position of a seer becoming a privileged interpreter of a national past. Such professional interpretative historiography played a crucial role in their national identity formation. Philosophers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1830) and his idea of the ‘world spirit’ (Weltgeist) owed more to History than Philosophy. Hegel’s ideas were generated in and through history, owing more to the Enlightenment than to Romanticism. Such a line of thinking which upheld the State and the Law influenced German historians. It influenced National historians like Heinrich von Treitschke who became the official Prussian historiographer in 1886. Treitschke’s anti-Semitic stand is an example of extreme historiographical nationalism of the nineteenth century. Such scientific truthfulness allowed historians to intervene in Politics and justified political programmes. Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) who was a key representative of Enlightenment historiography in Germany too became a victim of narrow nationalism towards the end of his life. Thus nationalisation of historiography led to the creation of a master narrative subduing any minor or dissenting voices or races revealing its destructive potential. Histories based on different spatial levels based on ethnicity, race, class, gender, etc were scientifically obliterated and this brings us to the issue of the Jewish question.

Modern European Nationalism fostered by ‘scientificity’ centred on racial-ancestral-geographic common origin. The Jews were considered as outsiders and not European in origin and culture. Their widely scattered small number made them militarily insignificant in the world map. Initially the Jews of the Habsburg Empire readily embraced both German language and culture. Some Jews even considered German language and culture as superior to their own Yiddish language and culture. It could possibly be because it was a means to their upward economic mobility and social respectability. On the other hand, the Jews were accepted because of their hard-working nature which contributed to the Empire’s productivity. No wonder the Emperor Franz Joseph

called them “my Jews”. However, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Jews were being categorized less as a religious community and more as a Semitic race. Anti-Semitism became one of the new ‘ism’ proliferating in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century like ‘liberalism’, ‘socialism’ or ‘Darwinism’. It was from the 1880’s that hostility towards the Jews were being felt. There was now going to be a reversal of Jewish civil equality. In Germany the cry of Blut und Boden which is the alliterative German phrase for “blood and soil” became the new slogan for the burgeoning national consciousness. Most also blamed the Jews as responsible for the ills of capitalism. The assassination of Alexander III in Russia was also seen as a reason for hostility towards the Jews as till now the Jews were never perceived as political threats. Several outspoken anti-Semitic scholars and thinkers wrote about the excommunication of the Jews. The prominent among them was Wilhelm Marr who wrote *The Victory of Jewry over Germany* (1879) where he castigates the Jews not so much on the ground of religious bigotry but as a potentially destructive race. The popularity of Marr’s book could be gauged from the fact that 100,000 copies was sold in its first year itself. The medieval charges against the Jews such as Blood Libel and the Desecration of the Host gained support. Germany too was caught in the nationalist fervour of the 1880’s. The noted Historian at the University of Berlin, Heinrich von Treitschke also wrote of the cultural destructiveness of the Jews. Adolf Stoecker, the Chaplain to the Court of the Kaiser openly attacked the Jews describing Judaism as a worn-out faith.

Franz Kafka is a literary icon of both German and Austrian literature, but he is also a cosmopolitan writer whose works transcend geographical, historical and cultural confines. He was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1883 in Prague, capital of the then Kingdom of Bohemia in the dual monarchy of Austria- Hungary. He died as a citizen of Czechoslovakia on the outskirts of Vienna in 1924, barely forty one years. His parents Hermann Kafka and Julie Lowy were fancy goods merchants. He was the eldest of the six children including two brothers Georg and Heinrich who died in infancy and three sisters Elli, Valli and Ottila, who all outlived him but finally became victims of the holocaust. All his works centre on the unspoken question of unbelonging: “Who am I?”. He was a German speaking Jew, an Austrian subject, an inhabitant of the Czech city, a theologian, a philosopher, a literary critic; but he was none at the same time. He was not even Franz Kafka. This explains why he wrote in his diary entry of January 24, 1922 “My life is a hesitation before birth”.

Kafka grappled with this psychic confusion of the self, bordering on eccentricity until he transposed this uncertainty about his self into his writings. His first novel *Amerika*, spelt with a ‘k’ instead of ‘c’ was deliberate to introduce an element of foreignness, was written between 1911 to 1914. Around the same time the longest story *The Metamorphoses* was written between November and December 1912; after which he began writing *The Trial* from 1914 onwards. His third novel *The Castle* was written in 1922. Kafka’s notorious self-loathing was caused to a large extent by his dissatisfaction with writing. Many a time he felt an acute sense of guilt by failing to write or by not writing well enough. Upon close analysis one finds the cause lying in the discrepancy between his knowledge of the world and his actual experience of living. Yet writing was his salvation as he found it was impossible to shut himself against the political, social, cultural and familial demands. Kafka lived during a period of intense socio-cultural changes. He lived to see the two World Wars, the anti-Jewish riots, and the publication of Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Other historical events were the first and the second Balkan Wars in 1912-1913; the failure of the Russian Revolution in 1905 and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917; and the humiliating defeat of Germany in 1918-19; and Prague becoming the capital of independent Czechoslovakia. These defining historical moments had a profound impact upon the hyper-sensitive mind of Franz Kafka. Julian Preece corroborates: “Everything in Kafka’s Europe appeared in flux and-as history was to show with a barbarism none could have foreseen-consequently under threat. His image of fractured perception, his figures’ search for wholeness, and their experience of authority divorced from responsibility are modernist images of Europe on the brink of its most awful hour” (2).

Life as a Jew was difficult because under the war conditions, a Jew had to identify either as a German or a Czech. Since Kafka too suffered from the problem of assimilation, the rootless nature of his characters in his novels are well-understandable. However, in Post-War Czechoslovakia, the first President of Czechoslovakia T.G. Masaryk, who being sympathetic to the Zionist cause, gave due recognition to the Jews, which brought a new harmony in Czech-Jewish relations. This perhaps explains the mellowed tone of *The Castle* when compared to *The Trial*. It is difficult to imagine how an outwardly genial personality like Franz Kafka could harbour such acute pangs of loneliness. His friendship with Max Brod, his biographer, is well known, so is his close ties with his school friends Paul Kirsch and Oskar Pollak. His Prague circle of friends includes Robert Musil, Carl Sternheim, and Felix Weltsch. He was also close with Robert Klopstock, a Hungarian medic from Budapest. Kafka had recommended his name as a translator of his stories to his publisher, Kurt Wolff. His job at the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute of Bohemia was drudgery for him from which he found release only at night when he would be writing. Paradoxically, writing becomes simultaneously the cause of his misery and also potentially the means of his escape.

From his very early childhood, Kafka was pulled apart by two contrary forces- the German language which committed him to a foreign culture but with which he seemed fairly comfortable and his own Jewish root. Marthe Robert writes "This, he believed, was what gave rise to his 'infinite' sense of guilt" (11). Klaus Wagenbach writes: "Kafka is the only bourgeois writer of his time who had first-hand knowledge of industrial exploitation and its consequences" (104). In both *Amerika* and *The Trial*, guilt is a foregone conclusion and in both every act of Karl and Joseph K. is driven by their aim to come out of their guilt-conscience. *Amerika* proliferates with tyrannical father-figures like Uncle Jacob, Mr. Pollunder, or the head porter Mr. Green. The very first line of *Amerika* tells us of how Karl had been packed off by his parents to America because "a servant girl had seduced him and got herself with child by him" (13); and how his father packed him off 'shamefully unprovided- for' to avoid alimony and to save the family's name from scandal. But America offered him an opportunity to make up for his guilt: "If only his father and mother could see him now, fighting for justice in a strange land before men of authority, and, though not yet triumphant, dauntlessly resolved to win the final victory! Would they revise their opinion of him?" (30).

*The Trial* opens with a violent air of suddenness. Joseph K. On the morning of his thirtieth birthday is taken aback by his sudden arrest which initially Joseph K. Had thought it to be a bad birthday joke: "Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning" (7). The phrase 'without having done anything wrong' indicates Joseph K. not guilty; yet the doubt persists- who should that 'someone' be and why should this 'someone' work against Joseph K. each effort to unravel this mystery leads to further complication and he finds himself in a world where no logic or rationality works. The extreme intrusiveness of the all-engulfing power prompts him to a long interior monologue:

Who could these men be? What were they talking about? What authority could they represent? K. lived in a country with a legal constitution, there was universal peace, all the laws were in force; who dared seize him in his own dwelling? He had always been inclined to take things easily, to believe in the worst only when the worst happened, to take no care for the marrow even when the outlook was threatening. But that struck him as not being the right policy here, one could certainly regard the whole thing as a joke, a crude joke which his colleagues in the bank had concocted for some unknown reason perhaps because this was his thirtieth birthday, that was of course possible, perhaps he had only to laugh knowingly in these men's faces and they would laugh with him, perhaps they were merely porters from the street corner-they looked very like it- nevertheless his very first glance at the man Franz had decided him for the time being not to give away any advantage that he might possess over these people. (10)

Here language breaks down leading to a discontinuum of the familiar frame of reference and meaning. Ironically, the assault is presented with an air of familiarity. Joseph K. is arrested in his bedroom, the warders eat his breakfast, confiscate his underwear, and he is even allowed to carry on his business of living as usual as much of the trial is conducted only on Sundays and at night time. As Joseph K. grapples to understand the nature of Law, he encounters only an endless hierarchy of corrupt officials, amongst whom the Higher Judge is never visible. The key to the understanding of the Law lies in the parable 'Before the law' narrated by a Priest to Joseph K.. As the man from the country goes to meet the Law, he is prevented by the following words of the door-keeper: "If you are so strongly tempted, try to get in without my permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest door-keeper. From hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other. Even the third of these has an aspect that even I cannot bear to look at" (235). The man from the country ultimately dies at the door not realizing that the doorkeeper was as ignorant about the Law as the man from the country. Joseph K. too dies not realizing the true nature of Law and without making any headway in his case. To a great extent the Law represented the political turmoil of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the fate of the Czechoslovakian Jews controlled by repressive authority. *The Trial* brings to mind the infamous Dreyfus Affair of Europe. In the autumn of 1894, the Dreyfus Affair shook the very core of Jewry. The Dreyfus Affair was the arrest and conviction of an army captain of Jewish origin on the charges of selling military secrets to the Germans. The conviction of Dreyfus was yet another confirmation of the belief that the Jews cannot become members of any national community and cannot be trusted with power. Many Traditionalists in France were shocked to see how a Jew had made his way into the upper ranks of the military. A Jewish officer becoming privy to vital military secrets was unacceptable to them. Dreyfus was even accused of being a member of the *Syndicat*, a Jewish organization to control the French State and economy. Although later the trial of Dreyfus was believed to have been handled by overzealous anti-Semites, much harm had already been done. The birth of Zionism, in a sense modern Jewish nationalism, was a response to this anti-Semitism. A disappointed observer of the Dreyfus Affair was Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, became convinced that Jews can never hope for assimilation in any modern nation and so they needed to establish their own state.

This pain of unbelonging permeates in all the novels of Franz Kafka. It might also reflect to a great extent the homelessness of the German-speaking Jews among the Czechs. On the one hand such writers felt the contrary pull of their Jewish heritage of their fathers and on the other hand, aspired to be the privileged status of the German writers. Many critics have called it the Jewish Oedipus complex syndrome. The castle is a symbol

of power, an obscure hierarchy of officialdom where individuals can be crushed. Like the man from the country, K. of *The Castle* attempts to penetrate the impenetrable. The castle is remote, elevated and inscrutable but nevertheless joined to the village. The castle and the village symbolize two different things- if the castle is the goal, the village is the way through which one can reach the goal. Ironically, K. can neither mingle with the village folk nor with the castellans. *The Castle* is a story of a man who spends all his might trying to penetrate the castle and be accepted by the castle authorities. The futility of his endeavour is marked when K. remarks: “We have tried to get it by crying, by scratching, by tugging-just as a child tugs at the tablecloth, gaining nothing, but bringing all the splendid things down on the floor and putting them out of its reach forever”(293). Unlike the professional smugness of Joseph K. in *The Trial*, K. of *The Castle* only claims he has been appointed as the Land Surveyor and demands his right to stay in the village. In spite of his strong efforts, he continues to be an outsider in the village. Thus each chapter of *The Trial* is a failure, a ‘new frustration’ as Camus puts it. However one is not to be misled by this failure, his heroism lies in his untiring efforts. In September 1917, Kafka was diagnosed with tuberculosis that was to take his life, and by 1922 tumultuous change had overtaken his life. He sensed he did not have long to live, but that did not calm the raging battle within him-between art and life. By December 1917, he had broken off his engagement with Felice Bauer for the second time, and this time for good. His deteriorating health and personal failure with the doom of impending death could explain the oppressive nature of *The Castle*. Like Kafka, K. remains without a home, without a wife, without his job. Joseph K. dies seeking to understand the legal implications of the court; K. in *The Castle* fails to find a way to the impenetrable castle; and Karl Rossmann fails to adjust in a foreign land.

Historically the German Reich saw a stupendous economic growth by the turn of the century, whereupon the French, Russian and the British felt the necessity of containing this power. When Bismarck was forced retirement at seventy five, he was replaced by the relatively young Forty year old Wilhelm II. As a result, when Germany was faced with this strangulating “encirclement” (Einkreisung), it formed an alliance with Austria-Hungary. The Social Democratic Party in Germany (SPD from its German initials Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) became the largest socialist Party. The SPD became a new political model with the working class as its ardent supporter. The glorification of Macht (Power) in Bismarck’s Reich, State-worship and scientific theories promulgated the superiority of the Germans even among the other Europeans. SPD, Germany’s largest party opposed racism yet peace could not be sustained for long as Germany headed on its way to ultra-nationalism making Germany follow a “special path” (Sonderweg). After the 1890’s pronounced bipolarity in international relations was witnessed with Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy on one side (the Triple Alliance) and France, Russia and Britain (the Triple Entente) on the other side. Both side of the alliance was governed by the scramble for power. However, it is generally assumed that the spark for the First World War was prompted by the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Habsburg heir and his wife by Gavrilo Princip, a young Bosnian Serb at Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina on June 28, 1914. Princip, was a member of the Black Hand, a secret nationalist organization, which objected to Austria-Hungary’s rule in Bosnia-Herzegovina believed it should be incorporated with Serbia. Wilhelm II imprudently promised German support to punish the Serbs. Soon Austro-Hungary’s declaration of war was followed by the declaration of war by Germany, bring in France, Russia and Britain culminating in the collapse of Germany. Mankind would never be the same after this “Great War”. It was a shameful act and Kafka portrays the scars of the war through his writings. They are a ringing indictment of European civilization.

The post second world-war period saw a host of Jewish intellectuals who were devoutly political internationalists. Their passion for acculturation led them to depart from Judaism for Christianity to further their career like Austrian Jew Franz-Ferdinand and the Viennese Jew philosopher Otto Weininger, Arthur Trebitsch, Max Steiner, Karl Kraus and the poet Walter Cale, all of whom became delusional in their Jewish insecurities and committed suicide. There were Jews who smothered their Jewish identity propelled less by careerism or cultural aestheticism, but more by shame. Arnold Zweig describes this so called Jewish ‘self-hatred’ as Jewish weltschmerz or Jewish doubt, “the passionate drive to deny one’s own being” (459). In his 1921 autobiography *My Career as German and Jew*, the post-war German novelist Jacob Wassermann announced his pride in his duality of culture: “I am a German and a Jew. I am completely imbued with elements from both spheres, the oriental and the occidental.” Other giants like Max Brod, Ernst Toller, Arnold Zweig, Lion Feuchtwanger also accepted this Jewishness. Kafka accepted his Jewishness interacting with the Yiddish actors from Eastern Europe, took keen interest in Jewish History and Literature reflected in essay “The Literature of Small Peoples”; he attended classes in Hebrew and Talmud and harboured a dream to immigrate to Palestine with Dora Dymant (Jew girl from Poland) to lead authentic Jewish life. Kafka seemed to have transferred all his uncertainty and distrust he felt towards himself to writing. Writing was his salvation; writing came before living. It freed him from his isolation to revel in the spiritual joy of writing.

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