

Concern for The Unconcerned: Angst Towards Political System in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and *In the Penal Colony*

Abstract

Franz Kafka is a German-speaking Bohemian, born in Prague on 1883 who takes up law as a career. It is to relieve from the stress of his job as well as the society, he started writing. His writings took him to heights, but only after his death. This does not mean that he failed in his career as a lawyer. It is he who formulated laws in insurance for working class people which helped them in adverse situations. *The Trial* is an unfinished novel by Franz Kafka which is about a man Josef K., who awaits his judgement from an invisible government with weird laws. Generally, Kafka is known for his undefined situations, absurd politics and son-father conflict. Whereas this paper brings out Kafka's other dimension, that is, his support for voiceless characters. This paper is a comparison of Kafka's works *The Trial* and *In the Penal Colony* where the epistemological standard for punishing each person by the amorphous justice system is brought out. Kafka's advocacy for lower officials through the protagonist K. and his angst towards the political system in *The Trial* and Kafka's concern for the soldier in *In the Penal Colony* are discussed.

Keywords: Invisible laws, bureaucracy, lower officials, corruption, bribery, torture machine.



The Trial was written by Franz Kafka between 1914-1915 and published posthumously in 1925. Kafka asked his friend Max Brod to burn all of his manuscripts to which Max denied and published Kafka's works. It is Max who edited and organized the chapters of *The Trial*. Years later he realized that the second chapter might need to be replaced by the fifth chapter "The Whipper".

Because Kafka prolongs incidents. There is a specific reason why “The Whipper” must be considered. Although Kafka’s works are full of unanswered situations, this one is to be looked into. The chapter is about a whipper who punishes the two warders Franz and Willem in a lumber-room near K.’s office. They are the one who guarded K. during his arrest. This situation arises out of the blue and had no connection to the previous chapter and later chapters. It seemed to be a nightmare of K. on one hand. And on other hand, it seemed that he was fooled off by the government by putting such an act.

K. comes to know about the punishment of the warders through Willem as he says “Sir, we are to be flogged because you complained about us to the examining magistrate” (*The Trial* 66). But K. did not make any complaint on them; instead he just told what happened when he was arrested. Willem defends their act saying that he has got a family to feed and Franz has to get married. Thus, they took his fine linen clothes which tempted them. He also adds the fact that the accused’s clothes usually go to the warders which is an unwritten convention.

K. was very desperate to help them. K. says he would pay the whipper well, if he let the two warders go. But the whipper turned down K.’s offer. If Franz did not scream, he would have definitely dissuaded the whipper. K. was sure that the flogging was heavy to increase the level of the bribe a little and not because the whipper is a dutiful person who does not bribe. “If all the officials were riff-raff, why should the whipper who held the most inhuman office, prove an exception?” (70) Questions K. himself. It is obvious that there are prejudices within the government officials.

Neither the government nor its laws are stated openly. Public is unaware of the government that runs invisibly behind them. “Our Judicial System is not very well known among the public and a great deal of information is asked for (55)”. If anything of the judicial system is to be visible, then it is the corruption that is evident (in the eyes of K.). Considering K.’s case from a political psychology standpoint, “The citizen was represented as a limited information processing machine that was nevertheless able to make good enough decisions based on various cognitive heuristics” (Staerklé 427). Till the end of K.’s trial, he is unable to make any productive decision for his case which is rightly because of the unavailable information for his case. Only based on the accusation laid on K., he would be able to defend his actions. But the invisible government kept secret from K. for unknown reasons. This was the notion during the 1980s and early 1990s regarding the condition of a citizen as far as political psychology is concerned. Kafka was able to foresee this dimension of the bureaucracy decades ago.

The one who accused the warders is now ready to pay money to get them out of their punishment. Even though K. wants the corrupted people to be punished, he also wants the warders to be released from the punishment. “I don’t think they are guilty; it’s the organization which is guilty, the senior officers who are guilty (*The Trial* 86).” K.’s angst is towards the invisible bureaucracy and not the minor officials. K. accuses the whole judicial system to be the main reason for them to commit such kind of bribery and corruption. The reason for this is very much

evident. K. himself feels that, since his battle against the corruption of the judicial system has begun, he should intervene from this quarter too. The quarter which opens up about the lower rank officials. K. is obsessed with the thoughts of the warders. It made his mind numb and could not concentrate in his work.

Amidst his daunting affairs, K. tries to show some concern towards the warders who are of low rank in the court. They were paid low wages which is insufficient. Even K. felt guilty of not having helped the warders. This act of K. shows Kafka's concern towards minor characters. Kafka voices for the marginalized groups as well, for which the picture of the porters in *Amerika* is an example.

Franz Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" also has a similar amorphous justice system. The Penal Colony runs with the Commandant and the Officer who acts as the governing bodies in the colony. The whole story revolves around a soldier's execution who seemed to have disobeyed and insulted an officer. The execution follows a principle that it is carried out with the help of a dreadful apparatus. This apparatus was invented by the Old Commandant that would inscribe a sentence on his body based on the crime he commits. The soldier who is accused is unaware of the crime that he committed. The commandant who accused him never tells the reason because he was treated like a slave and has no right to learn about his mistake. When the explorer asks about the reason, he was told that "It would be useless to tell him. It will be put to him physically" ("In the Penal Colony" 105). This shows how the lower rank people are treated.

Only after the traveller insisting the Officer about the charge laid on the soldier, he explains it. A captain complained that the soldier failed in the performance of his duty. The soldier is his batman who sleeps outside his door. He is required to get up every hour, and salute outside the captain's door which is a very necessary duty because it keeps the man fresh for guard duty and for service to his master. Last night, the captain wanted to see whether his servant was discharging his duty properly. At the stroke of two, he opened his door, and found the man sprawled out asleep. He fetched his riding crop, and struck him a blow across the face. "Instead of getting up and begging for forgiveness, the man grabbed his master by the legs, shook him, and cried: „Drop that whip, or I'll gobble you up"— That's the long and short of it" (124).

The disturbing thing is that the Officer did not allow the soldier to defend his action. The Officer disregarded the soldier telling that "If I had called on the man first, and questioned him, it would have produced nothing but confusion. He would have lied to me" (124). The Officer judges people by their position in the society. Whereas the traveller opines that „He must have had an opportunity to defend himself," (124).

Observing the cases of the Warders and the soldier in *The Trial* and *In the Penal Colony* respectively, the amorphous justice system which governs them has different standards to punish each person. In both the works, the bureaucracy is invisible and unclear. The similarity between both is that the biases are not between the government and common people but among the person who works for the

organization itself. The principle for lower officials differs than that of the higher officials. Their submissiveness towards the amorphous autocratic system does not provide justice in their case.

The Authoritarian personality syndrome which was developed aftermath of the Second World War, explains about the mass submission to political authorities, aggressive behavior against the minority groups and uncritical endorsement of the totalitarian ideologies. K., the protagonist from *The Trial* initially tries to defend himself against the amorphous justice system but later as the novel progressed, he submits himself to the invisible system unconsciously which led to his execution. K.'s case made him personally insecure of himself and self-agitated. This might be the possible reason for him having been unable to take correct decision for his case.

On the whole, when comparing both the works of Franz Kafka, he not only brings out the errors in the higher officials of the abstract bureaucracy but also shows the discrimination that how much lower officials were affected and treated by them. They take this lower official's life for granted and punish them for menial crime but leave out the fundamental purpose of the Judicial System to be not taken seriously. K. in *The Trial* spoke out in defense of justice.