

# Alienation Philosophies in Franz Kafka: An Existential Reading of Modern Identity

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**Abstract:** Search for identity is the major concern of modern English literary novels. Especially, the expression of 20<sup>th</sup> Century existentialism has found its recognition in the novels of modern writers. Among them Kafka's fiction remains one of the most profound literary explorations of alienation in modern literature. This qualitative review examines the philosophical dimensions of alienation in Kafka's major works, particularly *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle*. Drawing upon existential philosophy, Marx's theory of alienation, and Camus's concept of the absurd, the study synthesizes existing scholarship to explore how Kafka portrays the fragmentation of identity, social exclusion, bureaucratic oppression, and the search for meaning. The present study reviews critically the recurring patterns in the interpretation of Kafka's representation of alienation. The review demonstrates that Kafka's protagonists experience alienation not only from society but also from family, work, authority, and the self, making alienation a universal condition of modern existence. The analysis further reveals that Kafka's narratives anticipate many concerns of twentieth-century existentialism while remaining highly relevant to contemporary discussions of identity, technology, and institutional power. Through the integration of diverse philosophical perspectives into a single interpretative framework, this study brings forth the continuing significance of Kafka's works for understanding the complexities of modern identity and the human condition.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Existentialism, modern identity, absurdism, bureaucracy

## 1. Introduction

Individuality in the modern world constitutes the major part of the problems of twentieth century literature and philosophy. The transformations from traditional to modernity with new economic, bureaucratic, technological, and institutional structures. Industrial capitalism reframed human labor, urbanization diluted the traditional forms of community; bureaucratic institutions increasingly regulated everyday life and the fall of unquestioned religious and metaphysical certainties intensified the individuals' confrontation with the uncertainty. Literature also marked the response to these tremendous changes through developing new representations of fragmented, anxious, isolated, and alienated individuals. Franz Kafka's fiction stood as the most powerful among the representations during the era. Kafka's fictional universe is populated by characters who cannot understand the systems governing their lives. The strange authorities they communicate cannot be accurately located, institutions that has no clear or adequate interpretation, families with mechanical execution, occupations consuming personal identity, and languages with no genuine identity. The ordinary world in Kafka is simultaneously recognizable and strange. The domestic room becomes a prison, the workplace becomes an instrument of psychological domination, the law proves to be the inaccessible labyrinth, and the castle becomes a visible but unreachable centre of authority. The major research pattern always involves in the investigation of alienation. Conventionally the concept alienation refers to the separation of character from other people but Kafka's characters alienate from themselves. Most of the protagonists of Kafka frequently possess an internal sense of identity that conflicts with the identity assigned to them by society.

Substantially, Gregor Samsa introduces himself as the human after his physical transformation, while his family increasingly perceives him as an unwanted creature. Josef K. understands himself a respectable citizen but becomes progressively defined by an accusation whose basis remains

unknown. K. in *The Castle* considers himself as a legitimate land surveyor, but the institutional structure refuses to provide stable confirmation of his identity. Kafka's central concern can consequently formulated as a problem of recognition. The major concern occurs here that the conflict between personal self and the social existence. The entire works of Kafka can be placed at the intersection of existential philosophy, social theory, and modernist literary criticism.

The existentialism is particularly useful because it examines the individual's confrontation with freedom, anxiety, absurdity, isolation, responsibility, meaninglessness, and the absence of guaranteed foundations. Although Kafka predates the formal consolidation of existentialism after the Second World War, his fiction anticipates many of its central questions. His work is therefore not treated here as a straightforward philosophical illustration of existentialism. Instead, Kafka is perceived as the literary thinker whose fictional structures provide an imaginative space in which existential problems can be experienced. The present study probe into the annals of three major works: *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle*. These works have been chosen for study for the presence of distinctive form of alienation.

*The Metamorphosis* exposes the family and workplace values. *The Trial* creates the realm of law and bureaucracy. *The Castle* improves the problem into institutional recognition and belonging. Together, the three works provide a progression from domestic alienation to institutional alienation and finally to ontological uncertainty. The prime focus of the paper is that recognition of Kafka's philosophy of alienation that is fundamentally a philosophy of failed recognition. His characters become alienated because they fail to secure recognition of their humanity, innocence, professional identity, or right to belong. Their conflicts arise not from loneliness but of selfhood.

Born in Prague in 1883, Kafka lived within a complex central European cultural environment marked by German, Czech, and Jewish identities. His professional life also brought him into direct contact with modern bureaucratic institutions. His work in the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute exposed him to administrative structures, legal procedures, institutional language, and the consequences of industrial labour. Recent scholarship on Kafka's office writings emphasizes the importance of his professional legal and bureaucratic experience in understanding themes that appear in his fiction.

Kafka's relationship to modernity is therefore not simply philosophical or symbolic. His fictional worlds emerge from concrete experience of work, administration, law, urban life, and social organization. Reiner Stach's biographical research demonstrates the extent to which Kafka's literary development was submerged in the cultural and political circumstances of pre-World War I Prague and the Austro-Hungarian world. His biography situates Kafka's writing within a period of rapid social transformation and technological change. Kafka's modernity therefore needs to be comprehended as a general feeling of pessimism but as a response to particular transformations in the individual's relationship with institutions and society.

## 2. Literary Review

Kafka's criticism demonstrates the difficulty of assigning his work to a single interpretative category. Early criticism frequently emphasized religious, metaphysical, psychological, and biographical interpretations. Max Brod's influential interpretation emphasized the religious dimension of Kafka's writing. It can be witnessed from Max Brod's portrayal that Kafka contributed substantially to the long-standing tendency to interpret the Castle, the Law, and inaccessible authority in theological terms. Later critics challenged the reduction of Kafka to a religious allegorist. Ronald Gray's collection *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays* demonstrates the diversity of early Kafka criticism. The volume includes interpretations by figures such as Albert Camus and Erich Heller and helped establish Kafka as a writer whose work could be approached through philosophical and literary frameworks rather than through biography alone (Gray).

Another influential perspective by Kafka in Walter Benjamin resists a simple allegorical interpretation and insists the enigmatic relationship among tradition, interpretation, law, and storytelling. Kafka's stories, for Benjamin, remain within a space where meaning is continuously created and stagnated. Theodor W Adorno similarly resists interpretations that reduce Kafka's work to a stable symbolic code. His essay "Notes on Kafka" creates Kafka's writing as a form of negative representation in which social reality becomes visible precisely through distortion and estrangement. These findings are significant because they establish that Kafka's alienation cannot be reduced to a single symbolic meaning.

Kafka's association with existentialism has been extensive. From the essay of Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, absolute transparency on the tension between Kafka's absurdity and his apparent search for meaning is visible.

Camus' vision of Kafka reflects as he occupies an ambitious position between hope and absurdity. Kafka's fiction shows compatibility with existential philosophy because his protagonists confront worlds in which established structures of meaning become unstable. As an extension of this vision Kierkegaard's philosophy of despair is useful in interpreting Kafka's fragmented selves. The 'self' has to be appropriately distinguish itself according to Kierkegaard.

Heidegger's concept of *Unheimlichkeit*, or uncanniness/unhomeliness, offers another useful framework. Human existence can become unfamiliar to itself; the individual can experience the world as no longer genuinely "home" (Heidegger).

Sartre's philosophy furthermore illustrates Kafka's unstable identities. Sartre's distinction between facticity and transcendence demonstrates the tension between the identities and circumstances imposed upon the individual and the individual's capacity to travel beyond them.

Most often Kafka's characters repeatedly find themselves trapped in facticity. Josef K. is trapped within the role of accused person. Whereas Gregor is imprisoned within the role of economic provider. Furthermore, K. is confined within the role of outsider.

Adding to the above, Marxist criticism has also been particularly influential in interpretations of *The Metamorphosis*. Karl Marx's theory of alienated labour describes a condition in which workers become estranged from their labour, its products, their human capacities, and other people. For instance, Walter H. Sokel's influential essay *From Marx to Myth* explicitly connects Gregor's transformation with the concept of self-alienation. Sokel also notes that Kafka changes the metaphor of alienation into a literal fictional transformation. More recent research continues to connect Gregor's alienation with capitalist productivity and social value. Deligoz, for instance, analyses *The Metamorphosis* through Marx's concept of alienation and emphasizes the relationship between capitalist organization and the individual's inability to find a meaningful place within society. These readings find to be the important notes, but in-depth Marxist interpretation can understate the existential dimension of Gregor's experience. Gregor's problem lies in his exploitation as a worker. His deeper problem is that when his economic usefulness disappears, his identity itself begins to disappear.

In the perspectives of psychoanalysis, the relationship between Kafka's fiction and family structures, especially father-son conflict, has attracted sustained critical attention. His fiction extends beyond family dramas. Recent scholarship continues to combine psychoanalytic, philosophical, social, and existential approaches. This interdisciplinary tendency supports the present study's decision to combine existential philosophy with social theories of alienation.

Kafka's representation of bureaucracy has become particularly important in contemporary criticism. David Luban, Alan Strudler, and David Wasserman, Douglas E. Litowitz, and Espen Hammer's discussions on *The Trial* emphasize the novel's exploration of alienation, inscrutable

law, and the relationship between human authority and an apparently absolute legal order.

Many recent researches continue this line of inquiry. Epsen Hammer's discourse of authority in *The Trial* emphasises the novel's exploration of alienation, inscrutable law, and the relationship between human authority and an apparently absolute legal order. Kafka's legal world can illuminate contemporary questions about automated justice and algorithmic governance, Chippy Abraham argues. Studies also connect Kafka's *Trial* to contemporary institutional and technological structures. Through this it is visible that Kafka's bureaucracy is not merely a historical curiosity.

*The Castle* frequently emphasizes theology, identity, bureaucracy, and existential alienation. The critics, Kohzadi and Azizmohammadi explicitly interpret *The Castle* through existential concepts and identify Kafka's experience as a struggle involving identity, alienation, and transcendence. It is also important to recognise that Kafka's problem is not simply access to a physical building.

The above existing Kafka's scholarship is extensive, but several areas remain open for further synthesis. First, alienation in individual texts rather than constructing a comparative sample across *The Metamorphosis*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle*. Second, Marxist, psychoanalytic, existential, theological, and bureaucratic interpretations often operate as separate critical traditions. This method can overlap within Kafka's fiction. Third, considerable scholarship examines alienation as isolation, oppression, or bureaucratic domination, but comparatively the attention is less to recognise the central mechanism connecting these forms of alienation. The present study addresses these gaps by proposing a unified model, alienation-failed recognition-identity instability-existential anxiety.

The most interpretative mistake in reading *The Metamorphosis* is to assume that Gregor becomes alienated only after becoming an insect. Indeed, Kafka establishes his alienation before the transformation. Gregor is already imprisoned within an occupation he dislikes. His life is organised around travel, work, debt, and family responsibility. His primary concern after waking is not primarily the philosophical mystery of his transformation but his inability to attend work. This detail in the fiction is crucial to understand the concern. Gregor has internalized the logic of productivity so completely that even a radical transformation of body cannot immediately displace the demands of employment. The situation shows the externalisation of existing condition. Gregor's insect form as a literalization of self-alienation where body becomes the visible representation of a condition that previously existed psychologically and socially.

Gregor's occupation is central to his identity. He works to support his family and repay his father's financial obligations. His labour therefore possess little intrinsic meaning. It is instrumental as he works because he must. This is precisely the condition Marx describes through alienated labour. The worker becomes separated from the activity through which human beings might otherwise realise themselves. Gregor's transformation exposes this condition. When he reaches the

condition of no longer work, the social structure surrounding him begins to change. His father also becomes economically active. Whereas his mother becomes involved in household survival. Gregor's disappearance from the economic structure allows other members of the family to develop independent roles. Paradoxically, Gregor's physical decline produces the family's economic independence. His loss of productivity therefore corresponds to his loss of social value. Gregor's appearance is also one of the most complex symbols in Kafka. His consciousness remains human while his body becomes non-human. The distinction creates a conflict between inner identity and external recognition. Gregor refuses increasingly to recognise himself. This status demonstrates that identity is not merely an internal possession but depend partly upon recognition by others. The transformed personality becomes a place for social conflict.

The family initially appears to be the opposite of alienation. It should provide intimacy and belonging. Yet Kafka demonstrates through his setup that family belonging can be conditional. Gregor is expected by the family to fulfil economic function. After his transformation, his family increasingly understands him as burden. Grete's transformation is particularly significant. At first she becomes Gregor's caretaker in the course of time argues to the core saying that the creature must disappear. Inclusion and exclusion happens to the same person therefore functions as a structure of belonging and a structure of exclusion. This appears central to Kafka's representation of modern identity. Gregor's inability to communicate produces a fundamental crisis because he understands others and others cannot understand what he says. His consciousness therefore survives while his communicative identity collapses. This is more profound than physical isolation. That's how communication essentially a condition of social identity. Once communication fails, recognition becomes impossible. Kafka thus demonstrates a contemporary problem that the individual may possess an identity internally but remain socially invisible when the systems of communication cannot recognise that identity. He continuously experiences shame that he manages to hide from others. Since when his relationship to his own body becomes increasingly negative. He continuously experiences "I have done something wrong", a deeper existential crisis becomes the source of shame.

The beginning of *The Trial* introduces Josef K. into an unfamiliar condition. His imprisonment without clear notice destroys the normal relationship between action and consequence. Generally, crime-accusation-explanation-judgement is the sequence but Kafka creates accusation-uncertainty-investigation-incomprehension. His system fails to allow him access. The court in *The Trial* is not represented as a single identifiable authority but consists of officials, documents, messengers, lawyers, judges, and intermediaries. K. struggles to confront one person. The bureaucratic system stands almost autonomous. Individuals within it may not even understand the entire system they serve. Thus responsibility becomes dispersed. No one in the fiction appears fully responsible. Still the system continues to exercise power. The court's greatest power lies in its ability to create uncertainty. Though he has not done anything, his behaviour altered because of accusation. He becomes increasingly preoccupied with defending himself. Sartre's philosophy of the other

provides a useful framework through the fiction. Through individual experiences the possibility of being seen and judged by another consciousness. Kafka intensifies this experience by deciding on other factors than personal. K. is not judged by another individual or a system but the institutional gaze becomes everywhere. K. cannot escape it but his identity becomes increasingly defined by the accusation. Through which it is clearly stated through his fiction that the individual may spend an entire life seeking an external authority that will never provide the certainty being sought.

If *The Metamorphosis* is primarily concerned with usefulness and *The Trial* with guilt, *The Castle* has primarily concerned with belonging. K. arrives in the village proving a professional identity, he believes that he has been employed as a land surveyor but the castle's administration system does not provide a stable confirmation of his status. K. is therefore neither completely inside nor completely outside. Thus he exists in a state of institutional liminality.

K.'s struggle can be interpreted as a struggle for recognition. His inner capability wants the Castle to confirm his employment, his legitimacy, his right to remain, his relationship with authority and ultimately his place in the community. The invisible authority of the Castle is extraordinarily difficult. However closely K. moves toward recognition, the further recognition seems to recede. The structure therefore creates endless movement without resolution. K. becomes an outsider because he does not accept the village's assumptions. The villagers have adopted themselves to the Castle's authority. His resistance creates further exclusion. A clear definition is given here that the alienation may emerge not only because an institution rejects the individual but also the individual's refusal to accept the system's definition of reality. Kafka's outsider therefore possesses an ambiguous position. His exclusion becomes his alienation. He himself has been alienated because he refuses complete conformity.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa identifies his alienation economically, familial and bodily with the doubt for clarity towards "Am I still human? In *The Trial* Josef K. alienates himself legally or bureaucratically with the doubt that "Why am I guilty? And in *The Castle*, K. aloofs himself institutionally and socially with the self-doubt "Where do I belong? The significant changes in the protagonists in all the three are visible.

The conflict between human expectations and institutional reality formulates a deeper meaning. The characters expect rationality, justice, communication and recognition instead they endure uncertainty, delay and contradiction. The absurd realities of Camus' presentation on the conflict between the human demand for meaning and the world's constant silence. The same conflict is clearly dramatized by Kafka through narrative situations.

### 3. Conclusion

Alienation proceeds isolation in all the novels of study. Kafka's characters are already alienated before they become physically isolated. Gregor's alienation before becoming an

insect, Josef K.'s alienation before his final destruction and K.'s alienation before fully understanding his execution. Kafka demonstrates that self-identity is partly depends upon recognition by others. The reality is a person cannot control how society identifies him or her. The ability of productivity also is the main factor of social value. Gregor's story expose the danger of equating human worth with economic usefulness. *The Trial* shows that institutional power can operate without providing intelligible reasons. Kafka's presentation of alienation should be distinguished from a simple philosophy of loneliness. Loneliness concerns the absence of meaningful relationships. The problem is the absence of meaningful recognition. This distinction provides the basis for an integrated reading of Kafka. Therefore, uncertainty is the Kafka's definite power.

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