Symbolism and the Role of Women in Kafka's *The Trial*

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Abstract:

The Trial by Franz Kafka (1925) is daunting to read and suffocating to comprehend. The difficulty arises not from the plot, but from its symbolic representation of the law and justice system and how they function through a never ending and confusing process of trials and tribulations. Kafka was a student of the law and also worked as a lawyer in Prague, while pursuing his dream of becoming a writer, and his deep understanding of the proceedings of the court and the system of law can be witnessed in the novel. The role of the court in the lives of the accused is massive, as they lose their freedom in every sense of the word. Their lives become completely engrossed with the trial and they are left with very little time to pursue anything else. The mysterious presence of the influence of the court is magnified by the presence of the women characters in the novel. While their role remains very vague and undefined, they have a perpetual presence throughout the narrative of the text and appear during the crucial moments of the plot in the forms of different characters, almost acting as surveillance cameras. In this paper, I attempt to point out various instances from the text of such occurrences where the women characters definitely played a big part, but have been subdued or pushed to the background, giving precedence to the omnipresence and the power of the court. I also attempt to establish their meaning and significance in the context of the plot.

IndexTerms: women, symbolism, law, surveillance

Introduction:

"…there are so many various opinions about the procedure that they form into a great big pile and nobody can make any sense of them." (Kafka, 141)

Franz Kafka's *The Trial* follows the speculation of the case of Josef K., who has been convicted by a rather shady institution for crimes which remain a mystery throughout the novel. "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested." (Kafka, 1) This opening sentence sets the tone for the entire novel and forces us to ask various questions. Who is this 'someone'? Why would Josef K. get arrested without doing anything wrong? Who gave them the authority to arrest a free man against his will? But we receive little to no answers to such questions throughout the entire journey. When asked by K. on why he's being arrested, he receives a very vague reply from Willem, one of the two policemen who came to arrest him: "That's something we're not allowed to tell you." (Kafka, 2*)* We can sense the power and authority this "court" holds over the people from this particular sentence alone.

In order to grasp the complex narrative of *The Trial,* we'll have to look at the text keeping in mind the context of the background of the author. Born in Prague, the capital of Czech Republic into a Jewish family, Kafka studied the law and worked as a law-clerk, which explains his deeper understanding and interest of the proceedings of court and the perplexing, repetitive and often authoritative position of the law and justice system.He pursued his literary dream in parallel with his work and produced critically acclaimed works such as *The Castle, In The Penal Colony, The Metamorphosis etc*. *The Trial* was published posthumously in 1925 by a friend of Kafka, which also explains the uncompleted state of the book.

The plot of *The Trial* is well-known and rather simple. Josef K., the chief clerk at a bank, is arrested without committing any crime, on his thirteenth birthday. The first hearing takes place in the room of Fraulein Burstner, a typist towards whom K. is attracted. K. initially thinks the whole arrest is a practical joke being played upon him by his co-workers for his birthday. He tries to enquire more about the institution which is arresting him or the reason for his arrest, but all in vain, as the two policemen refuse to share any information about the authority they are serving. This mysterious position of the court and K.'s obliviousness over the matter remains a perpetual trope throughout the entire journey of the novel. Not just K., but even the readers never get to learn any detail about the crimes of Josef K. or the court which has arrested him. K. gradually becomes more and more engrossed in the case to the point where he practically devotes his entire time and energy towards his trial, leaving very little room for his job at the bank. He also seeks the help of a lawyer upon the recommendation of his uncle and tries to prove his innocence. He also seeks help from an 'unofficial' worker for the court, a painter named Titorelli, who explains to him the different forms of acquittal one can acquire from the conviction of the court. Yet, all these efforts come with no benefit as K. grows increasingly convinced of his own guilt. A year passes, and on the eve of his thirty-first birthday, two men in frock-coat comes to his home and takes K. away to a deserted stone quarry. K. however, seems to offer no resistance; he is dressed in black, waiting for the men to arrive, although he has not been informed about their arrival prior. It's almost as if K. has given up trying to prove his innocence and accepts his guilt, whatever that might be. The two men then thrust a knife into K.'s heart, uttering the words "Like a dog!" (Kafka, 165)

Throughout the narrative, Kafka gives the reader little shimmering of hope that Josef K. might actually get acquitted. From the beginning, this seems like an exceptional case as he enjoys respectable behaviour from almost everyone, including the two policemen, the court judge and the lawyer. But Kafka shatters those hopes abruptly in the final chapter, as Josef K. is killed by two men. We never learn anything about K.'s crimes or the reason for his conviction. The act imposes the power and the almost totalitarian authority the court holds over the accused.

The true greatness of the text emerges not from the plot but rather from its symbolic connotations. *The Trial* is a prime representative example of the term 'Kafkaesque', a term which became popular and a subject of extensive study, which emerged out of the works of Franz Kafka. Merriam Webster's *Encyclopedia of Literature* defines the term as "Of, relating to, or suggestive of Franz Kafka or his writings-especially, having a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality" (Webster, 617). The novel is not narrative driven. In my opinion, it is often suffocating, and at times, even boring or tedious to read. But the almost nightmarish and surreal proceedings of the events, specially the chapters dealing with the premises of the court building, keeps the reader gripped. For instance, take a look at this sequence from the third chapter where K. visits the court offices:

"It's nothing for you to worry about," she said, "that's nothing unusual in here, almost everyone gets an attack like that the first time they come here. This is your first time is it? Yes, it's nothing unusual then. The sun burns down on the roof and the hot wood makes the air so thick and heavy. It makes this place rather unsuitable for offices, whatever other advantages it might offer. But the air is almost impossible to breathe on days when there's a lot of business, and that's almosteveryday." (Kafka, 49)

The stuffiness of the air around the court premises is too much for K. to handle and it almost instantly makes him dizzy and unable to walk properly on his own. The court has been characterised by a plethora of oppressive and gruesome imageries throughout the novel: the air is unbearable, all of the buildings look exactly the same, almost like a maze and the condition of the court room is desolate. It's situated in a very poor suburb with people living in the courtrooms when there's no trail taking place. The similar offensive air is felt again when K. visits Titorellii, the painter, who paints portraits for the court lawyers and claims to be an unofficial worker of the court. The air keeps worsening every moment Josef K. spends talking with Titorelli about his case until the point where he can't take it any longer and hurriedly leaves:

"Are you leaving already?" asked the painter, who had also stood up. "It must be the air that's driving you out. I had to put everything very briefly but I hope at least it was all clear." (Kafka, 116)

Kafka's The Trail can be studied in the context of Michel Foucault's theory of power as discussed in his The History of Sexuality. Quoting M.A.R. Habib's A History of Literary Criticism And Theory, "New Methods of power, he maintains, operate not by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control" (Habib, 770). The court of The Trial is the apex institution of power and authority, which enjoys almost unlimited control over the people. Moreover, Foucault says, power isn't something which is "acquired, seized, or

shared" (Habib, 771). The court in The Trial has an ominous and very mysterious presence. It is never revealed to Josef K. or even to the readers about its true identity or origin. We do not learn much about the 'higher officials' whom we hear about numerous times throughout the novel. A similar exercise of power by the state over its subjects is seen in Kafka's *In The Penal Colony*. In this disturbing, almost haunting display of power and control by the state, the accused are punished to death in a gruesome way, with the help of "a strange piece of equipment" (Kafka, In The Penal Colony, 129), even for petty offenses. The old commandant from *In The Penal Colony* can be compared to the court in The Trial; both of them holds unprecedented power and control over everyone and their existence is mysterious, yet omnipresent.

The power the court holds over its subjects is immeasurable, as seen through the character of The Whip Man, whose sole job is to whip and punish anyone who's being accused by the court. The two policemen, who came to arrest Josef K., are being whipped as, according to the whip man, K. has complained about them at the court, which K. denies. He tries to get them out of the punishment by trying to bribe the whip man, but in vain:

> "I would make it well worth your while if you would let them go," said K., and without looking at the whip- man again-as such matters are best carried on with both pairs of eyes turned down-he pulled out his wallet. "And then you'd try and put in a complaint against me, too," said the whip-man, "and get me flogged. No, no!" (Kafka, 62)

Instead, in order to further establish the position of the court, he says:

> "Yeah, that's all very plausible, what you're saying there," said the whip-man, "only I'm not the sort of person you can bribe. It's my job to flog people, so I flog them." (Kafka, 62)

While many critics have done extensive research on *The Trial* and what the court symbolically represents, there's been much less emphasis paid upon the role of women and their importance in the context of the trial of Josef K. Most of the women in the novel seem like minor characters that has very little relevance towards the plot. Characters like the landlady of Josef K., Mrs. Grubach, Miss Burstner, a fellow boarder who lives in the room adjacent to K. or her friend, a French teacher who goes by the name of Montag, appears briefly at the beginning of the novel and vanishes almost entirely; only Miss Burstner makes a sudden appearance at the final chapter before Josef K. gets killed.

> "Just then, Miss Burstner came up into the square in front of them from the steps leading from a small street at a lower level. It was not certain that it was her, although the similarity was, of course, great." (Kafka, 162)

The women have a very ominous presence in *The Trial*. Because of their mysterious nature, their role in the development of the trial of K. seems to acquire a new dimension which is up for speculation. Most of the time, they remain hidden in the background, eavesdropping, surveying and keeping an eye on Josef K. every step of the way. The doubt of the reader that these women might actually be working for the court, acting as their informer, is confirmed when Titorelli,the painter, says this about the little girls who constantly keeps intruding into the conversation between him and K., through the keyhole:

> "These girls belong to the court as well." "How's that?" asked K., as he leant his head to one side and looked at the painter. But the painter sat back down on his chair and, half in jest, half in explanation, "Well, everything belongs to the court." (Kafka, 109)

The role of the women is undefined. They are used almost exclusively for their sexuality and acts as sort of a distraction for Josef K., who diverts him from the actual matter at hand. The characters of Miss Burstner, the washer lady, whom K. meets the first time he goes to the court for his hearing, and Leni, who works for K.'s lawyer, Dr. Huld, are all presented as sexual distractions for Josef K. With the exception of Miss Burstner, both the washer lady and Leni seem only to be attracted towards K. because of his dilemma over his trial and conviction by the court. It is K.'s conviction; his almost desperate and helpless condition which makes him so irresistible to these women:

> "I've long since forgiven her for it, and I wouldn't be talking for it now, if you hadn't locked the door just now. Anyway, perhaps I should explain this peculiarity of hers to you, but you seem rather disturbed, the way you're looking at me, and so that's why I'll do it, this peculiarity of hers consists of this; Leni finds most of the accused attractive. She attaches herself to each of them, loves each of them, even seems to be loved by each of them; then she sometimes entertains me by telling me about them when I allow her to." (Kafka, 132)

Leni's importance lies not merely as a help for the old, bedridden lawyer Dr. Huld, but also acts as an informant for him about the behaviour of the convicts. Her youth is a substitute for the disabled lawyer; she moves around the household keeping a constant eye out for every minute detail around the house:

> "What has his behaviour been like today?" asked the lawyer instead of an answer. Before Leni said anything she looked down at Block and watched him a short while as he raised his hands towards her and rubbed them together imploringly. Finally she gave a serious nod, turned back to the lawyer and said, "He's been quiet and industrious." (Kafka, 139)

Miss Burstner is a more enigmatic character whom we meet at the beginning of the novel but vanishes for the rest of it. She is a fellow tenant of Mrs. Grubach and her constant absence makes her a very mysterious person, which Josef K. finds very attractive. She is connoisseur of theatre and stays out late watching plays, sometimes with stranger men, which Mrs. Grubach doesn't appreciate. But her sudden appearance in the final chapter before K. gets killed is a shocker for the readers and raise various questions which are left unanswered.Her role in the trail and ultimate punishment of K. seems to remain a mystery. Whether she also worked for the court or had any role to play in the death of Josef K. is an issue up for speculation. Kafka has left a lot of unsolved puzzles and the abrupt ending of the novel, with the death of Josef K., shatters the hopes of the readers of arriving at any plausible conclusion. It's almost as if he's trying to tell his readers that nothing really can be changed, and the law will remain the ultimate authoritative regime.

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