

Experiencing the Real Phase: Kafka's Metamorphosis Metamorphoses Lacanian Psychoanalysis

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Abstract: As a theory, psychoanalysis has contributed greatly to the understanding of human psychic construction. Jacques Lacan, the most common name after Sigmund Freud, extended the theory to an extent where it remains intellectually provocative but much less contested than that of the latter's. Lacan's proposal of the three-phased development of human psychology is at once interesting, challenging, and thought-twisting. According to his discussions, the perception of real self remains beyond the grasp of an individual. Interestingly, an English translation of Franz Kafka's noted novella *Metamorphosis* (this article takes resort to that of the Stanley Conrgrd's) can provide illuminating insights. This article argues and elucidates that the gap between the Lacanian theoretical selves can be bridged; at least Kafka's *Metamorphosis* provides a convincing proof.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*, Real Phase, Jacques Lacan, Psychoanalysis.

(I)

Franz Kafka (1883 – 1924) and Jacques Lacan (1901 – 1981) are so different that drawing a parallel between them would apparently seem incoherent. At one hand, Franz Kafka's famous novella *Metamorphosis* (1915) is about a middle-class salesman named Gregor Samsa who finds himself to have turned into a “monstrous vermin” one morning (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 3). The varied level of metamorphosis unsettles readers and lets them interpret the masterpiece insightfully. For nearly a century, Gregor has been fascinating his readers. On the other hand, Jacques Lacan had extended Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis to a considerable extent and proposed that the unconscious is structured like a language (see Barker, 2004, p. 167). He has theorized a three-phased developing pattern of an individual's psyche and those phases are the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. He has left a vast amount of ambiguity regarding the “real” phase while claiming it to be ultimately unattainable. This article discusses that Kafka's *Metamorphosis* creates a possibility of attainment of the mentioned phase as the protagonist has, either deliberately or unwillingly, undertaken the journey from the “symbolic” to the “real”. To preface my argument, the theory of psychoanalysis is sketched at first as its skeletal preview is required to follow the discussion. The three-phased human psychic construction as proposed by Lacan is then applied to critically study Gregor Samsa. Hence the following phase of the discussion concerns itself with a detailed discourse analysis of *Metamorphosis*. How Gregor experiences the “real” phase which was argued by Lacan to be unattainable in life occupies the next phase. Finally, the flow of discussion invariably leads to the revision of the theoretical notion of the “real”.

(II)

Sigmund Freud, a physician who invented a method of treatment for “hysterics”, is the founder of the theory of psychoanalysis (Lapsley, 2006, p. 66). Initially, whatever he had said was deemed unworthy and was relegated from the literary premises (Osborne, 2003, p. 29). Later, the theory was established as a strong means of literary interpretations. His proposal of a triadic model of mind, especially the concept of unconscious, was exceptionally intriguing. This is because he proved, “through his many carefully recorded case studies, that most of our actions are motivated by psychological forces over which we have very limited control” (Guerin, 2007, p. 154). After Freud, Jacques Lacan elevated the theory to a different dimension by turning it into a radical apparatus for literary interpretation. The latter's extensive and striking allusions from structuralists, philosophers, and artists provide him a very cogent standpoint. He did not only take resort to Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Jacobson; but also invariably enriched his propositions from works of Marx, Althusser, Kojève, Marguerite Darus, Jean Ganét, Paul Claudel in order to reread Freud (*see* Paccaud-Huguet, 2006, p. 281). Freud pioneered the structuring of the human mind – an aspect considered abstract and philosophical before him (for detailed understanding of his works, *see* Freud, 1986/2005). Lacan has taken the theory to an extent whereas, through complex associations, socio-political aspects, advertising, racism, nationalism etc. can be explained plausibly (*see* Simons, 2005, pp. 26 – 31). He made “frequent use of literary and cultural allusions, often for illustrative and pedagogic purposes” (Macey, 2000, p. 319). He has detailed a three-phased psychic development of the human mind mentioned earlier for a span of over thirty years. Throughout the time, he developed, described, and simultaneously modified his propositions.

The imaginary phase, which occurs in a child of six to eighteen months, is the inception point of *its* psychic development. An infant experiences *its* reflection upon a mirror against its own fragmented perception. Influenced by phenomenology and the dialectic of recognition and desire, Lacan characterizes this phase as a phase of mis/recognition. Sean Homer (2007), in his book *Jacques Lacan*, words the implication of this phase thus: “[t]he moment of the image of unity is posited in opposition to the experience of fragmentation, the subject is established as a rival to itself. A conflict is produced between the infant's fragmented sense of self and the imaginary autonomy out of which the ego is born” (p. 26). As a result, the ego becomes an “imaginary function” constituting a relationship between the subject and its own body (Homer, 2007, p. 44). After imaginary, comes the symbolic phase with signifier and signified as the central concept that Lacan picked up from the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and partly from explanations of Roman Jakobson. At this phase, the subject enters into the sign system i.e. language. During the 1950s, Lacan developed the central notion of the symbolic order and the subject as the subject of the signifier. The ‘name-of-the-father’, oedipal complex and the concept of phallus altogether produce the subjection (and subjugation) of the subject. Although phallus functions completely

differently in the imaginary and the symbolic state, it is decisive in subject formation only in the symbolic state. Therefore, the unconscious which is structured and functional like language helps the subject to identify itself against an Other (*see* Barker, 2004, p. 167, & Osborne, 2003, p. 159). Lacan proposes that “the phallus represents a moment of division [that “lack-in-being] which re-enacts the fundamental splitting of the subject itself” (Homer, 2007, p. 57). He proposes that this very split within the subject facilitates the functioning of numerous activities that *preach* wholeness. The next phase “real” is very alluring and ambivalent. During the 1930s, it was essentially a philosophical concept designating a range of meanings from ‘absolute being’ or ‘being-in-itself’ (Homer, 2007, p. 82). In a span of twenty years (1954 – 55), it became one of the inseparable parts of the three phases. Lacan argues that “our reality consists of symbols and the process of symbolisation” (Homer, 2007, p. 81). In a nutshell, the real is something “which resists symbolisation absolutely” (Homer, 2007, p. 83). Real consists of aspects like desire and fantasy, jouissance, the object a, and the letter (for further details, *see* Homer, 2007, pp. 81 – 94, Nayar, 2011, pp. 75 – 78, Paccaud-Huguet, 2006, pp. 280 – 297, and Storey, 2001, pp. 75 – 77). However, while there is a developmental trajectory to Lacan’s theory of subject formation which allows a child to move through the mirror stage from real to symbolic, in the adult subject all three registers are present simultaneously (Lane, 2006, p. 194).

(III)

Metamorphosis is the tale of a middle-aged, average-waged salesman Gregor Samsa living with his family. He fancies being a provider for his family and draws little happiness, perhaps even a bit of credit, for himself. Unfortunately, things get *real* hazardous for him one morning when he finds himself to have turned into a giant bug. Interestingly, he starts discovering things like his father’s secret savings, earning capability of other family members and so on that were unknown to him previously. Gregor used to be pleased with such discoveries initially but soon sees the meaninglessness of such happiness. With continued denial from the nearest and dearest ones, he literally shrinks and ultimately succumbs to the injury inflicted by an ‘apple’ thrown by his father. To evaluate the sad tale critically, the varied levels of metamorphosis must be apprehended at first. The levels of metamorphosis Gregor undergoes are physical, familial, social, economic, and linguistic at once. The physical change is very discrete in the novella – a human figure turned into a creature. From a familial perspective, Gregor loses his position both as a son and as a brother. His metamorphosed form of a bug results economic impediment and adds to his misery. At a linguistic level, Gregor is exiled to ‘*post-linguistic*’ state. Eventually he is driven to morbid thoughts after the realisation that he no more belongs to his family due to his metamorphosed identity. With so many abrupt experiences, he withers away slowly but steadily. Gregor’s being a bug causes not only convulsion but also an equal amount of confusion. His family develops an ambivalent feeling for him. After the opening shock, Gregor tries to figure out what has happened to him. At this phase, he does the

“observing and reflecting” and engages in an interesting monologue with his inner *self* (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 3). The story is then gradually told at this phase. The protagonist's stream of consciousness informs the readers of his “grueling job” which is torturing and alienating at once (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 3 – 4). He contemplates all the issues considering his physical change as a “fantasy” that “would gradually fade away” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 6). *Unfortunately*, the fantasy stays as a permanent ‘ailment’. This makes Gregor apprehensive and for the first time he realises the impossibility of the occurrence of anything dramatic such as “the return of things to the way they really and naturally are” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 7). Interestingly, his thought-pattern reveals that he is uncomfortable with his family members rather than his metamorphosed condition. For him, “the new method was more a game than a struggle” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 7). To make things a little more (*in*) conveniently important, the Bug's physical aspects are rationalised when he contemplates touching the floor as he considers “his little legs would hopefully acquire some purpose” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 7).

The arrival of the manager is an important phase of Kafka's cameo. This time Gregor tries even more to comply with the ‘requests’ of his family members. He finally succeeds from *falling* from the bed with “a loud thump, but it was not a real crash” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 8). Then comes an interesting negotiation between psychologically human Gregor and his metamorphosed physical condition. He speaks up for the sake of his family but *language* betrays him. This is the first instance when his position in Lacanian symbolic order gradually starts to fade away as evident from the Manager's utterance: ““That was the voice of an animal”” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 10). Gregor realises the concreteness of what he has been considering to be an abstract “fantasy” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 6). Kafka words the situation likewise: “But Gregor had become much calmer. It was true that they no longer understood his words, though they had seemed clear enough to him, *clearer than before*, probably because his ear has grown accustomed to them.” (*Emphasis added*, Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 11). Interestingly, he does not want to remain a victim of the situation. Therefore, upon the reception of “assurance and confidence” he “felt integrated into human society once again” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 11). He successfully opens his room's door but he himself remains “invisible” to the spectators outside (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 12). The “door-opening” sequence is another pivotal point as it consists of a spate of shock, repulsion, and exclamation when the *others* see the Bug instead of Gregor. This instance can be equated to the Lacanian concept of an infant's simultaneous recognition and misrecognition in its imaginary stage also known as the mirror phase. Gregor attempts to rationalise his condition but fails and it results into an interesting epiphany that “his speech had possibly – indeed, probably – not been understood again” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 14). This time he sounds pathetic and asks for help for the last time in the story. But “[N]o plea of Gregor's helped, no pleas was even understood” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 14). Moments later, he invents “with much horror that in reverse he could not even keep going in one direction” (Kafka,

1915/1996, p. 15). The incident signifies that Gregor cannot revert back to his former state; he cannot be the Gregor of the symbolic phase anymore. After the dramatic opening, the second phase of the novella opens with the opening of Gregor's eyes that wake up from "deep, comalike sleep" (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 15). A psychic metamorphosis is initiated at this point when Gregor once again undertakes a long and deep negotiation with himself. He finds out that his appetite has changed as milk, which "used to be his favourite drink" previously, does not attract him any longer (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 16). There is a subtle indication that Gregor's family has also changed a bit as his caring sister Grete behaves in a bizarre manner in his presence "as if she was visiting someone seriously ill or even perhaps a stranger" (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 17). In the course of the narrative, he becomes continuously obscure, inscrutable, and inaccessible to his family but understands his family members with absolute clarity. It was true that "the others could not understand what he said, it did not occur to any of them, not even to his sister, that he could understand what they said" (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 19). With a better perception, Gregor starts reflecting upon his previous life. He even remembers with a bit of contempt that his hard-earned money "was received with thanks and given with pleasure but no special feeling of warmth went with it anymore" (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 20). He realises that life no longer proposes anything new and varying to him. Soon Gregor finds his room to have "changed into a cave" – an arrangement conducted by Grete in order to provide him with adequate space to crawl around. At this phase of narrative, Grete emerges as a decisive force. Gregor's "pathetic and repulsive shape" is somewhat accommodated by his family (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 29). By now his father has started earning and his mother and sister have reconfigured themselves into earning sources as well as Gregor does not remain the financial provider anymore. It is his transformation that caused all the upheavals that results the destabilisation of his family structure as well. He does not remain the centre of attention for his family. During the final phase of the novella, Gregor *unwillingly* brings about some misery to his family. Grete finally speaks up and refuses to accept the vermin to be her brother anymore. With the last sympathetic person gone awry, Gregor withers away almost overnight as he has nothing left to signify. His family leaves the house for a walk which was "something they had not done in months" (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 42). This is how ends the tale of Gregor Samsa – a salesman who turned into a bug.

(IV)

The discussion so far shows that Gregor's tuning into a vermin induced a chain of incidents. The first noticeable instance of Gregor's dilemma is the lack of linguistic prowess. In the absence of voice of any recognizable kind, he continually fails to *communicate*. Evidently, he has transcended the linguistic barrier which means he resides no longer in the order simultaneously defined and confined by the sign system. This is the first implication that Gregor has reached in the real phase – the noted coinage of Lacan. Neither Gregor can be interpellated as a child nor does he have the human voice any longer, but he experiences his surroundings unlike

others and rather maturely. There are instances in the novella of this incident that Gregor fully comprehends his surroundings whereas he himself remains incomprehensible to others. It is important to note that after the metamorphosis, Grete once uttered “”You, Gregor!” in an outrage but it was just a cry of frustration and rage *with no anticipation of any retort* (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 26). This leads to the conclusion that Gregor has crossed the barrier of symbolic order and has reached a *post-linguistic* state. The perception of 'real' for Gregor supports the proposition that he has reached the real phase of his psychic construction. As long as the translated version is concerned, the word 'real' has been used seven times in the novella. The first instance is when Gregor *falls* from his bed. It made a sound but it was not any “real” crash (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 8). Secondly, Kafka claims that Gregor does not have any “real” teeth when the protagonist was trying to unlock the door with his mouth on the morning of his metamorphosis (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 11). When he succeeded in opening the door, everyone was repulsed at his metamorphosed condition. After the manager flees away at the sight of Gregor, his father makes apprehensive gestures to frighten him back to his room. At that moment “he began to turn around as quickly as possible, in *reality* turning only very slowly” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 15). When his slow movement induced his father to make use of his voice, the father's voice starts sounding unpleasant to Gregor which was “*really* no joke anymore” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 15).

The next use of the word can be found when Gregor whole-heartedly did not want to bother Grete, his only beneficiary, with his unconventional form and concealed himself with a sheet that “*really* looked just like a sheet accidentally thrown over the couch” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 24). To make his movement comfortable, Grete and 'his' mother shifts some of the furniture that was decided mutually by both the ladies. Gregor tried to comply with this shift but finally came out of his hiding to reclaim at least one object when the ladies were enjoying a respite outside his room. When he came out of his self-induced confinement, “he *really* didn't know what to salvage first” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 26). But unfortunately the ladies reappeared at the room sooner than was anticipated by Gregor and their untimely appearance caused calamities and unrest. So when his father returns that day, Gregor realizes the overall changes in his family more discreetly as he “had been too absorbed recently in his newfangled crawling *to bother as much as before* about events in the rest of the house and should *really* have been prepared to find some changes” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 27). These are the instances when Kafka showed that the *symbolic* reality is no more comprehensive to Gregor. He does not feel pain anymore like before, he does not have conventional physical features anymore, he does not have the humane perception anymore, and *others'* voices do not sound soothing anymore. Moreover, his sense of belonging seems to have been distorted when he looks for something “to salvage first” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 26). Most importantly, Gregor is reported to have been too self-absorbed to bother over symbolic necessity of his family anymore. Sean Homer (2007) speaks of the real in his book *Jacques Lacan*: “The real is thus closely associated with the body prior to its

symbolization” (p. 82). Therefore, throughout the seven instances of Gregor's perception of *real*, Kafka shows his growing indifference with the clear implication that he does not belong to 'symbolic reality' anymore as a result of the physical change.

The next point of Gregor's being in the real self phase rests in the structural shift of his family. He was the sole earning entity of his family. After his 'symbolic transformation', the family (dis)orients itself by accommodating his change. His father speaks of saving a “bit of capital, very little bit” from old days (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 21). The father, who was nearly disabled and was too feeble to engage himself in earning activities, suddenly became the sole authority and primary provider of the family. Both his mother and sister availed jobs to add to the family income. Interestingly, Grete also turns out to be an authoritative force abreast of her father. Changes were much lucid that can be apprehended in the course of the story. It is said that the real “enters into discourse as a sign but the place from which it originates is beyond symbolization” (Homer, 2007, p. 82). The same situation can be seen here. Gregor becomes a sign for his family and *the family is signified by his metamorphosis* utterly. He does not remain the son or brother but something abject that initiates signification (*see* Saussure, 2004, pp. 59 – 71). As the real phase both undermines and determines reality, so does Gregor. He becomes inscrutable for his family as he “resists symbolization absolutely” (Homer, 2007, p. 83). There cannot be more discrete an evidence that Gregor is synonymous to real phase.

A question can be raised that why Gregor is so absorbed in the family affairs if he is in the real phase of his psychic development? It must not be forgotten that Gregor had received the initial shock before his family saw him, although it was not *that* shocking for him. Yet it traumatized him at the beginning and it is proposed that “the real is associated with trauma” (Homer, 2007, p. 83). Gregor knew that he has been metamorphosed but denies complying with the situation. One might ask that why denial or acceptance would matter. Interestingly, the real phase is not defined that simply by Lacan. “What Lacan adds to the Freudian concept of trauma is the notion that trauma is real insofar as it remains unsymbolizable and is a permanent dislocation at the very heart of the subject” (Homer, 2007, p. 84). Gregor transcends the barrier of the symbolic order but the trauma it induces causes him that his situation is nothing but a dislocation, a 'dream', a “fantasy” (Kafka, 1915/1996, p. 6). As the story comes towards its end, Gregor is seen to have grown continuously indifferent towards his family affairs or anything worldly. With Grete turning away from favouring him anymore, Gregor succumbs to death that is “a principal organizer of our psychological experience” (Tyson, 1999, p. 23). In other words, Gregor loses his function as a sign *for his family*. All the arguments clearly state that Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Kafka's signature work *Metamorphosis*, has reached the real phase unmistakably. He has crossed the linguistic barrier and entered into *post-linguistic* state, transcended the symbolic perception of real, and did all the functions as a sign. The Lacanian argument of the impossibility of the attainment of the real phase can be nullified as Gregor had the feat, and thus opens up a possibility.

Kafka rather depicted a real-time scenario but most of the theoretical notions of the “real” phase have actually happened to Gregor. Additionally, the concept of the 'abject' can be applied in *Metamorphosis*. The word 'abject' literally means 'cast out' which disturbs identity, system, and order. It is closely associated with maternal body that has a disturbing generative power and repulsive fecundity within phallogentric system of thoughts. It is horror of physical engulfment, of not recognizing the boundary between self and other (Ahdermahr, 2000, p. 7). Gregor had failed realise the physical significance and kept on signifying himself until his family integrates itself into the structure without him. He merges with other signs in the real phase by leaving his family behind. His traumatized and 'out-of-the-body' experience exhibit the possibility of attainment of the “real” self. This is how Kafka's *Metamorphosis* extends the Lacanian concept of individual psychic construction.

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