

# Franz Kafka's The Trial As A Critique Of Bureaucratic System

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**Abstract:** In his remarkable work *The Trial*, Franz Kafka tries to draw the crisis of modern man. This novel chiefly portrays the surreal and an absurd nature of the legal world that arrests Joseph K for something; but for what exactly, nobody knows. Throughout the novel, K has been watched over or in a way under constant surveillance. However, the readers do not find any physically tangible force like bureaucracy but, we cannot deny its presence. Moreover, one can compare the condition of Joseph K with the notion of Benthamian panopticon. In *The Trial*, the bureaucratic apparatus is just like a panopticon, which constantly keeps under its surveillance.

**Keywords:** Franz Kafka, crisis, modern man, surreal, absurd, legal world, surveillance, bureaucratic apparatus, panopticon.

## INTRODUCTION

Bureaucracy originated within the capitalist culture of the late nineteenth century Europe which started to govern all human beings. It served to fulfill some social requirements but, slowly started to dictate the lives of human beings. Bureaucracy is excessively complicated administrative procedure. It promoted its own mentalities, its rationalities, its own techniques to control people. Human beings are part of a system which overpowered them, which resulted in a great psychological depression. Franz Kafka's remarkable work, *The Trial* chiefly deals with the crisis of modern man. During his lifetime, Kafka worked in insurance companies which made him experimentally and intellectually aware of the fact that humans are the slaves of modern bureaucratic system. However, in *The Trial* bureaucracy is somewhat invisible as the readers are not able to know who operates the whole system and it is impossible to defeat this authoritative power.

*The Trial* chronicles the surreal and an absurd nature of the legal world, which arrests Joseph K. for something; but for what exactly, nobody knows. The two warders, come to arrest K. but this

arrest of K. is very strange and peculiar. The timing of K's arrest is the morning of his thirtieth birthday. Birthday is in a way especially one marking off a decade and it is actually the time to do something soul searching and K. has been arrested in his birthday morning. Moreover, Block, the tradesman is also arrested after the death of his wife when the routine of his life suffers a decisive break. In this context, the readers can say that this powerful bureaucratic force has curtailed individual's private space. Related to this what Milan Kundera in his *The Art of the Novel* calls the lack of privacy.

## CONTENT

It is noteworthy that just like a bureaucrat, K is both professionally and economically powerful, who holds a high position in the society and also a wealthy boarder of Frau Grubach's house. This powerful Joseph K has been arrested but, his captors offer no clues. K is bewildered, wondering how this can happen in a free country. However, the court warders acknowledge their own lack of power in saying that they are not authorized to reveal the reason of K's arrest. Similarly, the court inspector acknowledges his lack of power and responsibility. According to Michel Foucault, the notion of 'power' can be found everywhere and operates through a network. Here, the characters of the warders and the inspector symbolize the hierarchy of 'power' but, they have to maintain secrecy as they are not authorized to reveal the cause behind K's arrest.

In *The Trial*, the readers cannot assume about the head of this bureaucratic system. Various characters used to give Joseph K one advice that he should go to this or that person but, they do not know who operates the whole system. Moreover, the motif of hierarchy is introduced here. Joseph K, like the bureaucrat has a high position in the society. K even refers to the arresting policeman as being of the lowest position. Despite his feelings of superiority, K. submits to the absurd demands of the policeman. He gives them his clothes. K. does not tell them to leave Miss Burstner's room after they have taken it over and rearranged the things to make space for themselves. In this way, one's private space becomes a sector of bureaucracy. In this novel, K has been watched over or he is under surveillance. It is a peculiar kind of arrest as K is allowed to call up his lawyer and also permitted to go to work in the bank. Therefore, the readers can relate K's condition with the notion of freedom through captivity. The readers of the novel can compare the condition of Joseph K with the idea of panopticon, propounded by Jeremy Bentham. Foucault used this concept in order to express how power operates. In *The Trial*, the bureaucratic apparatus is just like a panopticon, which constantly keeps people under its surveillance. All the time K. is unaware that three subordinate officers of his are inspecting his every move. They are the stiff Rabensteiner, the fair Kullich and Kaminer with his false smile. K. thinks of these men as subordinates but, the inspector calls them colleagues. It is noteworthy that Kafka's fictional character of Joseph K. and the three clerks indicate his own superego. If as an interpretative basis, K is taken to be a fictional counterpart of Kafka himself, it becomes significant that the clerks, Kullich and Kaminer also share his initial. The name of the remaining clerk Rabensteiner can additionally be deconstructed: a Rabe in German denotes a raven and the suffix '-steiner'

additionally indicates the punishment of stoning a person to death. All three clerks therefore can be read as projections of K's superego.

For K, the whole situation is just like a joke. In Kafka joke has nothing to do with comedy and laughter. K. perceives the whole situation as a joke; an ordinary situation seems to have suddenly defamiliarised. Therefore, it is the process of bureaucracy which defamiliarises the familiar things and makes the whole legal system just like dark humour. Joseph K. gets a phone call informing him that his first trial hearing is to be that Sunday. This statement is ironical because Sunday is not a working day. In a way, the authoritative power of bureaucracy curtails individual's freedom in a totalitarian state.

K. hesitates to ask for the directions because he feels that people will humiliate him. K also thinks that lateness is acceptable, as being punctual for a lowly trial committee would be beneath him. Joseph K does not want to lower or reveal himself as being on trial therefore; K. uses the ridiculous lie to cover up his humiliation at being under arrest. Thus, in this monotonous bureaucratic system, the chief clerk of a bank has to tell a lie to maintain his status. The Examining Magistrate looks in his notebook and asks K if he is a house painter. Thus, in this context one can say that the judge himself does not know about his client which is highly ironical.

Moreover, K sharply says that the purpose of the court is to arrest innocent people and wage pointless prosecution against them. K also tells the crowd that he is openly challenging the current proceedings not only for himself, but on behalf of who are similarly charged. For example, the washerwoman at the back of the room is being sexually assaulted by a man. The washerwoman says to K that she is exploited by both the student and the examining Magistrate, while the usher is helpless as his job is at stake. The wife of the court usher wants to be liberated from the collective erotic pleasure. She hopes that she will be liberated through K. From K, she expects an improvement of the entire judicial system and even her husband believes that only a man like Joseph K could destroy the student's power. In this case, a woman is being harassed in front of the judge. It is noteworthy that sex is the matter of biology but, sexuality is the matter of power. Like K woman characters are also the victim of patriarchy and law. Even they are not protected by law. Thus, this bureaucratic system is not only responsible for the mental breakdown of people but also it is responsible for the harassment of women.

In *The Trial*, the court is associated with dust, darkness, staleness and suffocation. K repeatedly suffers from the lack of fresh air. Here, the situation is highly claustrophobic. The bad air symbolizes the oppression of the court. At K's request, the washerwoman allows K to look at the books on the judge's table. He opens them and finds that they are not the books of law but books containing pornographic pictures. Here, the readers can map the juxtaposition of law and sexuality as the lawyers are constantly busy in their amorous activities without paying attention to the problems of the common people.

The other accused people are bent and despondent, like street beggars. In this way, the so called bureaucratic system makes people physically and mentally sick. The washerwoman explains that she allows herself to be raped because the student who assaulted her would one day be very powerful in the court and the student too uses sex as a way to assert his power and to control others.

Again, the fact that the whip-man and the policemen are in a closet at the bank shows that the court and the law are everywhere. The warders, Willem and Franz are being whipped. They say that they are punished because K complained about their conduct. K becomes horrified. K had only mentioned that the warders had taken his clothes. Although this is a common practice, it is actually not allowed by the court. K feels very guilty about their situation, and offers the whip man a bribe not to beat them. The whipper declines, saying that if he took the bribe, K would again complain about him and then he would be beaten. Moreover, it is noteworthy that in chapter 5 of *The Trial*, the name of whippers are not mentioned. They are introduced through their job or occupation. K tries to shift the blame from himself to the organization or the court. For him the entire court system is responsible, not the policemen themselves. K boldly claims that if he could, he would have the top court officials beaten, not these lowly employees. Physical violence is one of the notable parts of the principle of power. In this world of justice, the courtroom becomes bedroom and the office space becomes torture chamber. Here, the notion of space is collapsed, familiar spaces become unfamiliar. However, the notion of power is in a way never static. For example, in the beginning chapter, it was the policemen who had power and authority but, in chapter 5 they eventually become the victims. In this Kafkaesque bureaucratic world the notion of power is not static as the powerful becomes powerless due to some trivial mistakes.

The motif of deformity and illness is one of the notable themes of *The Trial*. When they gain entry to the house, K and his uncle, Karl are told that the lawyer, Herr Huld is unwell. It indicates that law itself is in bed, which is always sick. However, K is surprised that the lawyer, Dr. Huld already knows about his case and finds it interesting. From the character of Leni, the readers can assert that though women are exploited but, they have some knowledge about court. While K is not able to get any help from the male authority of this bureaucratic system, it is the female characters such as the washerwoman and Leni, who help K in his trial.

Titorelli tells K that he never sees the judges whom he paints, but uses his imagination to depict them, which indicates that bureaucracy, is invincible. Titorelli admits that once someone is accused, the court assumes guilt. He explains three types of acquittal. For example, absolute acquittal is possible only when the accused is truly innocent, but Titorelli knows no case of absolute acquittal. Apparent and deferment are also called acquittals but, the accused is never declared innocent. With these types of acquittal, the accused is never free from the court. Moreover, the readers can compare Titorelli's moorland landscapes with the surreal paintings of Salvador Dali. These moorland landscapes indicate the barrenness of the bureaucratic system as the color of the painting is not clear, hazy like the mysterious court.

Block is another willing informant on the doings of the court, who is described physically as dried up, psychologically he has subjugated himself entirely to the lawyer. Leni grabs him by the collar just as one might misbehave with a household pet. Block, once a respected tradesman, has been reduced to doghood. Block also mentions the great lawyers about whom every accused man dreams, but this bureaucratic forces are entirely inaccessible and unknown. Moreover, this chapter 8 remains incomplete just like the monotonous trial of Joseph K.

Joseph K visits the cathedral to accompany the Italian client but, instead of the Italian client, K meets the priest of the court there. The priest relates K's situation with a parable about the doorkeeper of law. According to Joseph K, the doorkeeper cheated the man but the priest tells him not to be so quick. The priest says that the doorkeeper is kind enough to give salvation and save his soul but, he was only a doorkeeper and as a doorkeeper he did his duty.

This parable indicates the hierarchy in a bureaucratic system. Though, the doorkeeper speaks that the door of law is always open and law is accessible to anyone at anytime but he does not have the authority to give the permission to enter which indicates the network of power that bureaucracy possesses.

After all of the bureaucratic delays, amorous digressions and lectures on law and art, Joseph K is executed on his thirty-first birthday. K understands it is pointless to resist the men by attempting a heroic escape. At the end, one of the warders grabs K's neck, while the other pushes the knife deeply into K's heart. As he dies, K gazes at his killers. "Like a dog!" he says. His dying like a dog is the death of canine consciousness, a dog whose physical senses are very alert.

The bureaucratic apparatus is just like a panopticon, which constantly keeps people under its surveillance. This bureaucratic panopticon is highly powerful that it caught a person under its constant surveillance and finally killed the individual. T.S. Eliot in his *The Waste Land*, also depicts the image of dog, which can dig out the buried past. Here, the readers can compare it with the last utterance of K, "Like a dog!" as K has been killed like a dog because he knew everything about the hollow aspects of bureaucracy. Kafka very profusely showed in *The Trial* how a human being is bound to suffer, and in certain cases die. The existentialists such as Freud saw man as an incomplete project because the only way to get out from the trap of the modern bureaucratic system was death.

Kafka's critique of law and legal apparatus in *The Trial* can be interpreted through the concept of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) as put forward by French Marxist theorist, Louis Althusser. According to, structural Marxist Louis Althusser, ideology always has a material practice, and is embodied in an apparatus that has a material existence. State power is maintained through Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) like the police, the army, the law courts and prisons that operate through actual or threats of coercive force/violence. Therefore, the scenes of physical violence such as the whipper scene and the death of K can be called a part of RSA. While the RSA functions massively and predominantly by violence/repression; the ISAs function by ideology, which represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. For Althusser, Christianity is an ideology because it inserts concrete individuals as subjects/children of God. Althusser cites examples such as the religious ISA (church), the educational ISA (schools/educational institutions), the family ISA, the legal ISA, the cultural ISA (literature/arts/sports) and so on. In this context, the chapter "In the Cathedral" from *The Trial* can be related to the notion of ISA. Again, the surreal pictures of Titorelli might be a part of ISA. It is noteworthy that justice in a state is impossible and legal apparatus cannot provide justice to us. So, we have to incline towards God or a supreme power for justice as we saw in the last chapter when

a figure occurs and stretches its arms. It might be the figure of God who emerges to provide justice to Joseph K. In this context, this figure as a bearer of hope can be related to the notion of ISA.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, The Trial is replete with some absurd kind of legal and bureaucratic, social forces, controlling and limiting individual freedom in the modern world. Though, in this novel, the readers do not find any physically tangible force like bureaucracy but, we cannot deny its presence. The sirens of The Odyssey have one weapon more terrible than their songs that is their silence and just like the silence of the sirens bureaucracy is invisible and invincible but at the same time, it is the cause behind K's death. Here, Kafka uses K as a universal figure through which he draws the ill aspects of bureaucracy in a vivid manner.

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