

Research Plan Proposal

**Human Dignity in the Works of Franz Kafka
(Menschenwürde in den Werken Franz Kafkas)**

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I. Research Problem (Forschungsproblematik)

The deeper one delves into Kafka's stories, always a newer intellectual, philosophical and spiritual aspect one is able to fetch from them. Hence Kafka's works have undergone theological, philosophical, biographical, psychoanalytical, Marxist, structural, postmodern and so many other interpretations.

But in spite of a number of critical streams overflowing with innumerable interpretations of Kafka's writings the critics seem to have missed to decipher an underlying and unifying undercurrent by which most of his protagonists are driven.

Has not Menschenwürde or Human Dignity been main latent driving force behind all the acts of Kafka's protagonists?

In this thesis I will try to analyze this question on the basis of his three main works i.e. *Die Verwandlung*(*Metamorphosis*), *In der Strafkolonie*(*In the Penal Colony*) and *das Urteil*(*The Judgement*).

Further I will also try to establish the fact, in Kafka's works we find that human dignity takes precedence over human existence i.e. his protagonists are ready to forsake their human existence for the sake of preservation of human dignity or in other words they would rather choose being human than being human being if the situation in their life compels them to make a choice between two. Thus the preservation of human dignity is the principal characteristic of all his works. Human dignity as ever indestructible and as a constant companion remains with Kafka (or read Kafka's protagonists), wherein he finds his ultimate solace in the face of every punishment, every catastrophe, every hurt feeling and every death ____

Auch der extreme Subjektivismus Kafkas, die konsequente Introversion und Konzentration auf das ‚traumhafte innere Leben‘ als die einzig wahre Welt, der Rückzug auf den begrenzten reinen Kreis‘ des ungestörten inneren Selbst finden sich bei Novalis. (Kafka und Goethe by Bert Nagel, 1977. p. 188)

(Even the extreme subjectivism of Kafka, the consequent introversion and concentration on the ‘dreamlike inner life’ as the only true world, the retreat into confined pure circle of the undestroyed inner Self occur with Novalis.)

However, it was Peter Staengle who first of all in his postscript on Kafka’s “Verwandlung” (Metamorphosis) pointed out that an exposition with >Human Dignity< as the basic characteristic in Franz Kafka’s works is very much possible. He explains_____

„Bei der Lektüre dieser zu Lebzeiten Kafkas veröffentlichten Erzählung – Gregor Samsas Verwandlung in ein <<ungeheures Ungeziefer>> – drängt sich geradezu schmerzlich die Frage auf, ob und unter welchen Bedingungen die Wahrung von Menschenwürde möglich ist.“

(In course of the reading of this fiction published in Kafka’s lifetime _ Gregor Samsa’s transformation in a <<huge vermin>> _ there was no getting away from the writhing question, whether and under what circumstances the preservation of Human Dignity is possible.)

In all the works of Kafka this question of preservation of Human Dignity lies enveloped which also in >>Verwandlung<< according to Staengle has been realized by Gregor Samsa only in metamorphosis and through that an emancipation from the clutches of

customary and from the fear and notion of mental violence. Once again I quote

Staengle_____

„Humanität, aufscheinend in den unbeirrbar wohlwollenden Deutungen, die Samsa inhumanen Verhalten entgegenbringt, ist nur noch im Innenleben des Ungeziefers bewahrt.“

(Humanity, apparently in the unequivocal benevolent expressions, which Samsa displays in the face of all inhuman treatment, is only preserved in the inner existence of the Vermin.)

This is the crux of the characteristics of all the Kafka protagonists, which Kafka has envisioned through sometime allegorical, sometime absurd and sometime humorous (one may call it black humour) portrayal of their characters and this is what I would like to ascertain while investigating his three main works mentioned beforehand.

II. Definition of the term (Definition des Terminus)

Menschenwürde(Human Dignity) : The term Human Dignity is being here used in order to express not only spiritual-moral dignity of human being but also all the similar concept and components of the same which may entail the preservation of Human Dignity. Therefore the terms related to human values will naturally refer to Human Dignity.

Secondly the word here means the inherent worth of the human being which has a universal self-certification and which guarantees the human being self respect unequivocally.

III. The Background of the Research Work (Der Hintergrund des Forschungsvorhabens)

One of the main concerns of modern civil society has been to see it through, that Human Dignity is safeguarded at all costs and therefore all its major institutions necessarily swear by it. As Antoon De Baets from University of Groningen writes in his long research article “*A Successful Utopia: The Doctrine of Human Dignity*” _____

The concept of dignity is increasingly used in legal argument and political discourse. And of course, human dignity is central to all major religious traditions and ethical systems when they speak about the sacred nature of human life.

>>How to define Human Dignity and determine its role in various dimensions of human life? << ____ this question has occupied the centre stage in the major works of all the prominent thinkers of the world. But before we delve into their deliberations about Human Dignity we may a bit matter-of-factly look into a few definitions in some major dictionaries which will assist and augment our argument about Human Dignity. In this context it is interesting to see that one cannot find such word as human dignity as a single entry in English dictionaries as ‘human’ and ‘dignity’ have their independent entities therein which can be associated with different nouns and adjectives to express their meaning as may be required in a particular reference. Hence we find a general definition of ‘dignity’ in A.S. Hornby’s *Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* as >>*the quality of being worthy of honour or respect*<<. On the other hand one can easily find ‘Menschenwürde’ or ‘human dignity’ as single entry in the most authentic Duden German dictionary which defines the word as >>*Bewußtsein des eigenen Wertes (Consciousness of one’s own value)*<< and as second meaning states >>*die geistig-sittliche Würde des Menschen (mental-moral or spiritual dignity of human being)* <<. In the context of my research

work a combination of both the meanings will construct the outline of the same. One other prominent German dictionary *Deutsches Wörterbuch* by Hermann Paul defines the word 'Menschenwürde' as >>*die Würde des Menschen als eines vernünftigen über alle Erdgeschöpfe erhabenen Wesens; besonders die sittliche Würde des Menschen (the dignity of human being as one of rational sublime entity above all the creatures of the world)* << which will also work like as a guiding dictum in the analysis of the principle of Human Dignity working in Kafka's three major works under consideration in this research work.

Moreover, if one goes through the major epochs of German literature, one comes to the conclusion that they have been able to reach their pinnacle only through determining the path of establishment of Human Dignity for the redemption and enlightenment of human being. This is the reason why the torchbearers and path makers of >Aufklärung< (Enlightenment) and >Klassik< (Classical Period) have taken up this question of Human Dignity so fervently. Thinkers and writers like Immanuel Kant, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Schiller in their deliberations have very clearly pronounced the concept with well-anointed details so as to untangle it from any kind of diversion and arbitrary deformation through diverse interpretations which helps furthermore to understand its fundamental meaning and also how it occurs in the works of Kafka.

As a concrete phenomena the concept of Human Dignity has, however, been able to attain a comprehensive application only in the hypothesis of Kant. As James Rachels in his essay >*Kantian Theory: The Idea of Human Dignity*< explains_____

The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant thought that human beings occupy a special place in creation.

In his view, human beings have “an intrinsic worth, i.e., dignity,” which makes them valuable’ “above all price”.

According to Kant, humans may never be “used” as means to an end. He even went so far as to suggest that this is the ultimate law of morality.

This “intrinsic worth, i.e., dignity,” which makes human beings valuable’ “above all price” has been affirmed in Kafka’s works through the rational and moral stand taken by his protagonists.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing the other leading exponent of ‘Aufklärung’ (Enlightenment) thinks that dignity of human being is realized through his truthfulness and tolerance and ultimately his evolution as absolute moral being.

On the other hand Goethe is able to get the vision of dignity of human being in his being identical with God and also with a yearning for the antiquity through which human being is able to attain perfection. In his essay ‘Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert’ he points out towards the same_____

Der Gott war zum Menschen geworden, um den Menschen zum Gott zu erheben. Man erblickte die höchste Würde und ward für die höchste Schönheit begeistert. In diesem Sinne kann man wohl jenem Alten recht geben, welche mit völliger Überzeugung aussprachen, es sei ein Unglück zu sterben, ohne dieses Werk gesehen zu haben. (Wege der deutschen Literatur, 1962. p. 202)

(God had become human being in order to uplift human being to God. One got the vision of highest dignity and became very enthusiastic about the highest beauty. In this sense

one can very much acknowledge that old man who expressed with full conviction, it would be unfortunate to die without having seen this work.)

Kafka has in fact used quite a few motifs from antiquity e.g. Poseidon, Prometheus etc. rather ironically only to show various deformities of modern society.

According to Friedrich Schiller, the other big classicist the human being is able to attain his worth through moral and aesthetical education, wherein he learns to overcome and master his impulses and nature. He concludes his essay „*Über Armut und Würde*“ with following words _____

Beherrschung der Triebe durch die moralische Kraft ist die Geistesfreiheit und Würde heißt ihr Ausdruck in der Erscheinung. (Wege der deutschen Literatur, 1962, p. 229)

(Command of impulses through moral power is spiritual freedom and dignity is its expression in the appearance.)

In all one can conclude that Human Dignity is an inherent power which unfolds itself in every human being with the claim of freedom and humanity and has to be nurtured by oneself which finally will lead to elevation of oneself. In the works of Kafka we find the glimpses and expressions of this inherent power of Human Dignity which determines the very activism of his protagonists and which ultimately gives direction to his stories.

What do other critics say about Kafka's characters?

Klaus Hoffer one of the Kafkalogists thinks that human beings and in fact their human dignity in Kafka's works seem to be held by unknown fetters of civilization whose marionette they remain for ever. I quote Klaus_____

>Liest man Kafkas Prosa genau, so stößt man immer wieder auf diese Helden, denen eines Morgens klar wird, dass sie nicht nur Menschen sind, die sich in ihrem Leben weitertastend, vor sich hinleiden, sondern gleichzeitig die nach – 'höheren Orts angeordneten' – Gesetzen entmenschten Requisiten eines >>Naturschauspiels <<. Den Inhalt dieser Gesetze kennen sie, wie gesagt, nicht. Ihr Leben ist die schmerzhafteste Lehre, die ihnen erteilt wird, weil sie gegen eines dieser unbekanntesten Gesetze verstoßen haben(Methoden der Verwirrung by Klaus Hoffer,1986. p.108-9)

(When one reads Kafka's prose properly, one always comes across these heroes whom on one morning becomes clear that they are not only human being who in their life groping further keep on suffering rather they are simultaneously requisites of >>nature's movie<< dehumanized as per the _ ,regulations of some higher place'. The contents of this law, as told, they do not know. Their life is the painful lesson which is being imparted to them because they have infringed upon one of these unknown laws.)

Where would then Kafka look for human dignity? He always insists upon this that fundamental human value cannot be sacrificed in any case. For this Klaus quotes Kafka himself ____

>>Man darf niemanden betrügen, auch nicht die Welt um ihren Sieg.<< (Methoden der Verwirrung by Klaus Hoffer,1986. p.148)

(One should not betray anyone, also not the world for its victory.)

One other critique Walter Sokel in his book 'Franz Kafka – Tragik und Ironie' discovers the modern European humanism in Kafka which in 20th century was in danger of getting lost in the victorious commotion of 'suppressed, bestial powers*'. Through the characterization of explorer in his work >>In der Strafkolonie<< (In the penal colony)

___ who has accepted the invitation of the Commandant to witness the execution of a soldier condemned to death for disobedience and insulting behaviour to a superior (Vintage Kafka - The Complete Short Stories. p.140) ___ Kafka portrays a picture of European humanism, as Sokel believes. But without getting into the polemics of European humanism one can not deny the fact that it is very much the inherent human dignity in the explorer, the protagonist, which compels him to give up his ambivalent stand and ultimately disapprove of the penal procedure executed by the only officer of the penal colony where the condemned man is supposed to experience the sentence through the torture machine writing it on his body. This disapproval consequently calls out for dismantling all the undignified imprisoning structures of the modern society which turns human beings into objects and animals and through which the things rather appropriate the power of human beings and devoid them of all the human dignity.

Die Aufruhr der durch jahrtausendalte Tabus unterdrückten Instinkte im Menschen selbst; die Befreiung des Menschen von Schuldgefühlen durch die Sekularisierung des modernen Lebens; die Emanzipation der bisher der unterdrückten Gesellschaftsklassen, die nun aus Sklaven und Knechten zu fordernden Mitmenschen geworden sind und mit ihrer primitiven Vitalität die ganze Kultur anstecken; die Befreiung der farbigen Mehrheit von der weißen Minderheit – all das in seinem Wesen, in seiner Atmosphäre, nicht in seinen Einzelheiten, hat Kafka in der knappen >>Schau<< des Reisenden am Ende der Erzählung gezeichnet. (Franz Kafka – Tragik und Ironie by Walter Sokel. p.149)

(The upheaval of instincts in human being suppressed by centuries old taboos; the emancipation of man from guilt consciousness through secularizing of modern life; the

emancipation of up till now suppressed social classes, who now from slaves and bonded labourers undergone a transformation (or rather one can call it an uplift to Human Dignity) to lead a new life of assertive fellow human beings und with their primitive vitality going to leave an imprint on whole culture; the emancipation of coloured majority from the white minority – all this in its essence, in its atmosphere, not in its details have been well portrayed by Kafka in the brief >>Scene<< of the explorer at the end of the story.)

Hence Human Dignity has to be looked from a different aspect in >>In der Strafkolonie<< (In the penal colony) where it plays paradoxical role for the officer and the explorer. The officer, whose entity becomes so much identical with that of torture machine as he takes any affront on this penal system as a consequential affront on his existence and his dignity, whereas on the other hand the explorer although does not have any sympathy for the condemned man, on the contrary rather a feeling of appreciation for all the commitment of the officer to the system, and as explorer he tries his best to remain neutral, but in spite of this could not help to disapprove of this inhuman system, because the inherent universal human dignity cannot allow him to approve of it.

There will be certainly this polemics of Human Dignity which will also remain as one of the major points of discussion in this research work.

In the third work >Das Urteil < (the Judgment) the human dignity of Georg Bendemann, the protagonist is challenged by his own father, when he gets into conversation with him about the letter that Georg has written to his friend in Russia and the father calls him devilish human being and a cheat. But in spite all the mental violence exercised by the father against his son – which has also some biographical background – the protagonist

does not show any revengefulness rather sounds very considerate and ready to sacrifice himself so that his Human Dignity is not compromised.

If we look at this attitude of the protagonist from the point of view of Jainism, we find that forgiveness and self suffering is preferred to any kind of mental or physical violence caused to others and hence expressed as _____

>>*Kshamā Veerasya Bhushanam !*<<which can be interpreted as 'forgiveness adds to the dignity of a brave human being'.

Hence one strives here to forgive the fault of others and in the place one may let oneself suffer. But in this way his dignity as human being gets more and more strengthened.

This tendency is noticeable in Kafka's protagonists also to a great extent. To cite a few examples in brief.

The protagonist Gregor Samsa in >>Verwandlung<< is almost going to breathe his last. He has already undergone lot of violence from his father since his metamorphosis into vermin. Added to this the insulting words from his sister, for whom Gregor had always lot of affection, only seems to hasten his death. But in spite of all this and even in his dying moments Gregor thinks very emotionally about his family. _____

>>*An seine Familie dachte er mit Rührung und Liebe zurück.*<< (About his family he thought back with emotion and love.)(*Sämtliche Erzählungen* by Franz Kafka. 1974 p.96)

In the same way in his other work >>Das Urteil<<the protagonist Georg Bendemann whom his father sentenced death by drowning for his treacherousness to his parents and friend (only from the point of view from the father), has to utter only these words in his dying moments _____

>>*Liebe Eltern, ich habe euch doch immer geliebt.*<< (*Dear parents, I have of course always loved you.*)(*Sämtliche Erzählungen* by Franz Kafka.1974 p.32)

The above examples only ascertain this view as how forgiving Kafka's protagonists appear and how fervently they hold onto their Human Dignity even when they face death. My humble attempt through this research work will be to connect and relate to all these diversified points in order to fathom the depth and understand the inner dynamic of functioning of Human Dignity in the works of Franz Kafka.

IV. Chapterization (Aufbau der Kapiteln)

In my research work, which is based on three main works of Franz Kafka i.e. 'Die Verwandlung' (The Metamorphosis), 'In der Strafkolonie' (In the Penal Colony), and 'das Urteil' (The Judgement), I plan to divide it in five chapters. The first chapter will consist of an introduction and initiation into the research work. I will also discuss here the central hypothesis of the work as well as the concept of human dignity from the point of view of some prominent thinkers who have particularly deliberated on this subject. In this very chapter I will cite some plausible appropriate reasons for my having chosen this topic. I will also try to furnish a small chronology of the life and the works of Franz Kafka.

In the further three chapters I have an obvious assignment to analyse in what way the question of Human Dignity has been handled in the above mentioned three works of Franz Kafka separately and also try to find out under what conditions the protagonists in these works have tried to uphold their Human Dignity.

The fifth and last chapter will conclude with a critical analysis as to how Human Dignity has worked as unifying undercurrent in Kafka's works in order to reveal a sublime indestructible human soul in all of his protagonists as we see that death cannot be any greater punishment for his protagonists than the loss of Human Dignity in them.

V. **Research Methodology** (Forschungsmethodologie)

As one knows, Kafka is one of the most interpreted authors of the world. But in my critical analysis of Kafka's works I do not make any claim of inheriting any philosophical or literary tradition., rather abandoning much practiced and trodden path of critics of interpreting Kafka's works from an established point of view my role as researcher is confined to the extent as to discover all such features and tendencies in the three above mentioned works of Kafka as implicitly or explicitly point to preservation of Human Dignity in the face of any challenge in life. In doing so I will certainly take into account what other critics – both past and present – might have expressed vis-à-vis engagement with Human Dignity in Kafka's works. For this I have already gone through the original works of Kafka and will further wade through maximum secondary literature available on Kafka's works.

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