

# Reading Franz Kafka Through the Context of Covid-19

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented changes in our lives, and one of the most significant measures implemented to curb the spread of the virus is the quarantine period or the lockdown. The implementation of lockdown measures has proven successful in several countries, effectively flattening the curve and preventing overwhelming pressures on healthcare systems. However, the impact of lockdown measures goes beyond the containment of the virus. The economic consequences of prolonged lockdowns have been profound, with many businesses forced to close indefinitely and millions of individuals losing their jobs. Small businesses, in particular, have borne the brunt of the economic fallout, struggling to survive under the weight of limited or no income. The sudden and prolonged isolation has taken a toll on mental health, leading to increased anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Along with these, we can also see the positive implications of the quarantine phase or the lockdown which resulted in the exploration of creativity and innovative ideas among the individuals. Although the topic is generic, this paper aims at studying the negative as well as the positive effects of Covid-19 through Franz Kafka's famous novel "The Metamorphosis", where a man is transformed into a "monstrous vermin" and his short story "A Hunger Artist", where an artist is confined to a cage.

**Keywords:** Pandemic; Alienation; Struggle; Frustration; Depression; Innovative; Death.

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## Introduction

In December 2019, Covid-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China, as a respiratory tract infection causing symptoms like fever, dry cough, weakness, shortness of breath etc. This viral pneumonia has disabled the world, causing catastrophic health and economic losses. The incubation period of Covid-19 is between 1-14 days, a mean period of 6 days, during which asymptomatic carriers of the virus can transmit the disease to healthy people, as proven by the evidence of human-to-human transmission via droplets or contact. On January 30, it was declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, according to the standards of International Health Regulations by the World Health Organization.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on humanity, leaving behind a trail of destruction and chaos. The virus has affected every aspect of life, from social interactions to economic stability, and it has drastically altered the global landscape. As such, it is essential to analyze the effects and aftermaths of the pandemic to understand

its full impact. Due to the unprecedented spread of the virus, the world had gone into lockdown. The pandemic had affected all the sections of the society as people were asked to 'self-quarantine' in their homes to prevent the spread of

virus. It resulted in the increasing number of physical as well as psychological problems which included frustration, anxiety, stress, fear, depression, hunger, poverty, domestic violence etc. We were all in a situation of risk and helplessness, thinking about catching the disease or becoming mentally weak after seeing or facing the terrible experiences around. However, the people also came up with innovative ideas too because of the lockdown. Such similar situations could be seen in the works of a German-speaking Bohemian novelist and short-story writer, Franz Kafka who is regarded as one of the major figures of 20th century literature, whose work fuses elements of realism and the fantastic. His works center around the themes of alienation, bureaucracy and the struggle for individuality in the face of oppressive systems of the society. Kafka's works remain relevant today, particularly in the midst of the pandemic, where many people are grappling with feelings of isolation and helplessness in the face of a seemingly insurmountable threat.

### **"The Metamorphosis" resembling the Pandemic:**

Kafka's novel, "The Metamorphosis" is one of his most famous work, first published in 1915. The story begins with a travelling salesman, Gregor Samsa, waking to find himself transformed into a giant "monstrous vermin".

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous vermin..... What happened to me?..... It was no dream. (Kafka 1)

The novel starts with these lines which resembles with the situation we had come across during the pandemic - the time filled with anxiety, fear, curiosity etc. In the last years, we had consistently woken up to the news of death and devastation. One morning we too like Samsa faced a kind of transformation in our day to day lives - everything including from education to economic activities suddenly changes. There's a sudden change in the routine of the everyday lives of the people. People are being quarantined; children are not allowed to go anywhere, even not to the educational institutions, all have to follow certain rules and regulations, everyone was bound to maintain social distance, no one is allowed to move freely around as earlier, even people are restricted to meet their relatives as well as their own family members! Our minds were also full of innumerable questions just like Gregor Samsa, the travelling salesman who had felt the same that morning after his sudden and absurd transformation into a gigantic insect-like creature.

The Metamorphosis is preceded by a span of five years, during which time a steady development always proceeding in the same direction takes place in the hero, Gregor Samsa..... which causes Gregor to devote himself to his job.... becomes the breadwinner for his parents and sister. (Kaiser 148)

As the story progresses, we see that Gregor is concerned regarding his job, his physical comfort and felt guilty thinking about his family's financial situation: " I am really so indebted to Mr. Chief - you know that perfectly well. On the other hand, I am concerned about my parents and my sister."(13) Likewise, the people too had felt the same during the pandemic. They too were found to be concerned. As the lockdown continues, many people lose their jobs there were no source of income for many families. As Samsa had been enclosed in his room, alienating himself from everyone, even from his family members, many Covid patients were also found to suffer the same. They had been quarantined in their particular rooms to prevent the spread of the virus. But it ultimately affects many of the patients as well as all the people as a whole. "His father clenched his fist with a hostile expression, as if he wished to push Gregor back into his room,....."(13).

His father showed expressions of angry rather than remorse because he will no more be able to earn money for the family and looked at him only as a burden to the family. Like Samsa, covid patients too felt guilty and at the same time look themselves as a burden to their family. The social scenario develops into the increasing number of depressed people in the society - not being able to do anything freely. The social alienation, the loneliness resulted in slow death.

"Gregor didn't fight his death; he accepted it because he knew it would benefit his family, a family that couldn't live with his burden any longer. "(Stoops 122). People who were quarantined and the one who get infected by the virus also had to go through a lot of problem and struggle in the society. They were often seen as an object of "trouble maker" to the society as well as to the family like Gregor Samsa: "Mr. Samsa.... answer with only a yes and a no, are making serious and unnecessary troubles for your parents..." (9)

## "A Hunger Artist" and the Pandemic:

"A Hunger Artist" (German: "Ein Hungerkünstler") is a short story by Franz Kafka, first published in *Die neue Rundschau* in 1922. The story was also included in the collection "A Hunger Artist" (Ein Hungerkünstler), the last book Kafka prepared for publication, which was printed by Verlag Die Schmiede shortly after his death. The protagonist, a hunger artist who experiences the decline in appreciation of his craft, is typically Kafkaesque: an individual marginalized and victimized by society at large. "A Hunger Artist" explores themes such as death, art, isolation, asceticism, spiritual poverty, futility, personal failure and the corruption of human relationships. The title of the story has also been translated as "A Fasting Artist" and "A Starvation Artist". ("A Hunger")

The story "A Hunger Artist" may resonate with the experience of the pandemic in some ways. "A Hunger Artist" tells the story of a performer who fasts publicly as a form of art, drawing crowds who marvel at his ability to go without food for extended periods. However, as time goes on, the popularity of the hunger artist wanes, and he becomes increasingly isolated and forgotten.

The hunger artist's isolation and the way he is marginalized by society can be seen as a reflection of the feelings of loneliness and disconnection that many have experienced during the pandemic. The enforced social distancing measures and restrictions on gatherings have limited social interactions and created a sense of isolation for many individuals. The hunger artist's inability to connect with the audience and the gradual decline in interest in his art can be seen as an allegory for the disconnection and loss of connection experienced by many during this time.

Additionally, the hunger artist's focus on physical deprivation and suffering can be related to the physical and emotional toll that the pandemic has taken on individuals. The hunger artist's dedication to his craft and his ability to endure extreme conditions echo the perseverance and resilience that many have had to display throughout the pandemic. The hunger artist's longing for recognition and understanding also reflects the desire for validation and understanding that many individuals have felt during this challenging time.

Overall, while Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" is not directly about the pandemic, its themes of isolation, disconnection, and a longing for understanding resonate with the experiences of many individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. It serves as a poignant reminder of the emotional and psychological impact that the pandemic has had on individuals and society as a whole.

Despite the bleakness of Kafka's vision, there is also a strong undercurrent of hope and resilience in his work. In this story we can see that the protagonist refuses to abandon his art even in the face of apathy and neglect from the public. Similarly, the pandemic has brought out the best in many individuals, who have shown remarkable creativity and resourcefulness in adapting to this new reality, whether through the acts of kindness and generosity, or through learning new things as a source of income in one's daily life, or through the development of innovative new technologies and approaches to healthcare, people have shown that they have the capacity to overcome even at the period of daunting challenges.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the quarantine measures during the Covid-19 pandemic are associated with the increased risk of mental health burden, as already mentioned in the paper. This resulted in financial insecurity, boredom, frustration, feeling of burden, anxiety, loneliness, depression etc. The suffering and feeling of Gregor Samsa as well as the hunger artist is almost identical which even questions on one's existence and ultimately leads to death. Both the stories deal with the themes of alienation and suffering. In the similar vein, the pandemic has forced many individuals to isolate themselves from others. However, in the midst of all these, we have also seen the positive aftermaths of the pandemic which resulted in the creation of new things and exploration of new ideas to survive in a society in spite of all the threatenings of one's life.

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