

3. AMERICA FOR THE EUROPEAN: A study of Kafka's novel Amerika

Dr. Shazia Siddiqui Khan*

ABSTRACT: My article has tried to present a deep study of the novel Amerika, written by the Prague born writer, Franz Kafka, this being the first of the three novels that this novelist, belonging to the period of the Hitler regime, wrote. Therefore being helplessly relegated to the margin was an idea that was extremely familiar for this Jewish writer who died early due to tuberculosis. The article takes up the issue of marginality and assimilation as it traces closely, the experiences of a very young, and initially naïve protagonist, in the alien continent\country- America. Also examined in the article is the idea of menace which the protagonist sometimes encounters. I have also tried to probe into the psychology of a character, which has been thrown, unprepared, into a new world, that too by way of punishment.

Keywords: Amerika, Franz Kafka, marginality and assimilation, psychology of a character

FULL TEXT:

That Franz Kafka is an eminent writer of the world-war II period is widely known. But my tryst with Kafka began as a casual interest in the writer's name, which was played upon in Salman Rushdie's first novel, his science fictional work, Grimus. In that book, the amazing creatures of Calf Island, called Gorfs, babble Kafkafkaf, thereby calling this writer's name and creating a certain inquisitive interest in me. I was pulled deep into the labyrinthine fictional world of this enigmatic writer, and this paper was born.

Amerika is Franz Kafka's maiden venture into novel writing. In it are portrayed the experiences of the young protagonist Karl Rossman, not quite sixteen, from the time his ship touches the shores of the continent to the phase in his life when he seems to have finally found his bearings in an alien and entirely new and different country and culture. Kafka himself was a part of the small, and later, very persecuted Jewish community in Prague, which at that time was part of Austria. He was a patient of tuberculosis, a disease which took his life in 1924. His sisters and their families were 'gassed' at Auschwitz after facing the terrible racist atrocities of Hitler's regime. Therefore the idea of being at the margin and helplessly watching the action at the centre is a clear idea in his writing.

Karl's life is lead of its own accord, beyond his control. During his voyage, two articles of immense importance- his box and his umbrella, are highlighted. They cause him to return to the ship. The idea of things being 'absurd' is felt as he meets the stoker and gets caught in his predicament. The whole scene of discussion is one into which Karl is unwillingly sucked. The absurdity and meaninglessness of it all for him is clearly evident. Yet he is more than interested in the problems of a stranger (the stoker), having known him barely for minutes. At that point of the tale, the plight of the stoker becomes central and all important. Karl gets deeply involved in the whole problem, even at the cost of forgetting his umbrella, the very object which had caused his delay in stepping out into the shiny, unexplored shores of America, making him return to the maze of pathways within the ship. Up on the deck, he also takes the risk of leaving his box in the care of fellow passenger, Butterbaum, having hardly any knowledge of the man's character.

Karl has unintentionally brought shame and disrepute to the family by impregnating the maid servant in his house, who thus became the mother of his son. His family therefore sent

him as far away from the whole affair, as they could manage; to America after a long, trans Atlantic voyage. That the punishment was undeserved remains unqualified. Only the accused, Karl himself, can vouch for his innocence. The writer narrates, through the pained memories of the protagonist, how he had avoided any contact with the said woman several times, and this occasion was akin to rape, only inflicted by the much mature woman. Following this, Karl finds himself in America, a helpless, pitiable destitute. Then comes the completely unexpected turn of events after meeting Senator 'Uncle'. Life at Uncle Jacob's is a welcome change from life 'back home' i.e. Europe. The author has very deliberately used various symbols to carefully establish the ideas that Europe and America as two entirely different continents, have come to denote. The old world charm of Europe is forced to compete with the breathtaking newness of America. The writing desk and the constant, surging crowd below, visible from the balcony, are just symbols to highlight this. The traditional panorama of the birth of baby Jesus, seen by the child Karl, are compared to the intricate writing-desk with its myriad, beautifully sliding and fitting compartments. The construction of buildings in Europe and America is also seen in sharp contrast. A 'steel' house is quite an amazing idea for the newly arrived Karl.

The writing desk is an article of great fascination for him. An elaborate description of the same is given:

....it had a hundred
compartments of different
sizes, in which the President of
the Union himself
could have found a fitting
place for each of his
state documents; there was
also a regulator at one
side and by turning a handle
you could produce the
most complicated combination
and permutations of
the compartments to please
yourself and suit your
requirements.

(Ch.- Uncle Jacob, p.174)

Although Karl was advised not to fiddle with it, yet the desk was not kept locked. This is also a symbolic reminder of the servant-woman's character, back home, whose suggestive

touches, and other gestures are like open invitations to a man from a willing woman. His newly found sense of security in the Uncle's home is turned upside down and he is left completely in the lurch. This happens following his acceptance of Mr.Pollunder's dinner invitation. Nevertheless, the heartless reaction of Uncle Jacob at this obviously innocent move of Karl is clearly too harsh. It is this idea of the unexpected that is highlighted throughout in connection with America. The uncertainty is permanent.

The Pinteresque atmosphere of menace is created unmistakably in the novel in certain episodes. It would however be factually and chronologically correct to term this technique as a Kafkaesque rather than a Pinteresque one, as Kafka is chronologically Pinter's senior. It is palpable throughout the dinner meeting at Mr.Pollunder's house; the grandeur of the building, the sumptuous meal and the enticingly beautiful, young hostess, Clara, notwithstanding. The maze-like effect of the multiple pathways and corridors in the house make him feel lost. After fumbling about in these dark corridors, Karl finally meets his host once again. His pleadings now are pathetic, to say the least. There is an urgent and desperate need for Karl to get out of this house, and head home to his Uncle's residence. The Pinteresque scenario of security and comfort within the room/house and menace outside is inverted here. As his chances of slipping out of the prison-like house appear bleak in the absence of a car and driver, he is even ready to take the night-train, in order to reach home by morning. There is a forced goodbye session that he has to endure with Clara. Danger is imminent here, going by his earlier experience with her, which was no less than a physical assault for him. Now too, he is pushed to play the piano for her, though she is much pleasanter with him during this last meeting. At the stroke of midnight another menacing character, Mr.Green delivers to him his Uncle's letter, which finally seals his fate. He has now been instructed to have nothing more to do with his Senator Uncle, 'a man of principles' as he has taken up Mr.Pollunder's invitation and left Uncle Jacob's house without seeking his consent. This letter has been delivered at exactly the time mentioned, which is at midnight. This reeks of the same malice again. Obviously Karl could have avoided this unfeeling and harsh eviction if he reached Uncle Jacob's house before midnight, something he had desperately tried to do for a long time but failed for the lack of cooperation from all possible ends.

This idea of menace is very pronounced in the novel, and regularly pops its eerie head. This unmissable, unmistakable menace is very much of the Pinteresque type. On his arrival in America, he skims into an unbelievably charmed life at Uncle Jacob's. in fact, for a while it seems that his expulsion from his home country to a new, strange land has been a blessing

rather than a punishment. There are language classes and riding lessons. The conversations and discussions with the Uncle seem like the first steps towards the initiation of an heir to the running of his empire. It is the dinner invitation by Mr.Pollunder,in his country house, that brings everything to a jerky halt. Menace takes over and his life seems to have slipped out of his control.

This begins in the form of the unwanted gatecrasher, Mr.Green. the whole evening very soon becomes burdensome for him. Even the sight of the beautiful, red-lipped Clara, Pollunder's daughter, does not interest him much and he longs to join his Uncle back home.

The Pinteresque idea of menace is reversed. Menace thrives within Mr.Pollunder's house and the idea of getting out of there offers tremendous respite. No sooner does Karl decide not to follow Clara's commands and plans, than he finds himself embroiled in a physical brawl with her. It is also immensely embarrassing for him to have been at the receiving end in this scuffle. To get out of this house is all he wants. The room where he is supposed to spend the night offers no rest or comfort. He is lost in the huge palatial house, scrambling along the dark corridors, trying to find his way back to his host. Every door that he tries is locked. His candle is blown by the draught and he seems to be going round in circles. The comfort of a roof over his head is taken away with such a jolt and the young Karl is mercilessly made to fend for himself. Now he is completely on his own. His meeting with the Manageress at the Hotel Occident, who inexplicably takes him under his wing, is nothing short of a miracle. The stay at the hotel begins with him sleeping in a sofa in the living room of the manageress, but it was still blissful for him. He later moved to a dormitory with forty beds. There was certainly a lack of privacy here, with the smoke, activity and noise at any odd hour of the night or day. Yet it was a comfortable and safe haven for him in this country, teeming with so many needy newcomers. He becomes a lift boy and has a smart uniform with gold buttons and gold braids. He is sharp to learn the art of making quick money with his sweeping, low bows, and earns generous tips from most guests. Karl's stint at the hotel comes as a respite to the sudden and shocking turn of events in his life. He is temporarily relieved of the parasitic company of the two vagrants Robinson and Delamarche, who had firstly sold off his 'good' suit at a bargain and even devoured whatever little food he was carrying with him. He also had to foot the bill for their meals and their promises of assistance regarding a job obviously come to nought.

The concept of America as a thick melting-pot, is presented quite clearly, through characters like Robinson the Irishman, Delamarche from France and of course Karl and the manageress from Germany. Many have not had it easy here. Karl was lucky to get the guardianship of his

affluent Uncle. But people like Robinson and Delamarche still lead the lives of wastrels. The Manageress has many years of hard work and struggle behind her. Therese has been a kitchen maid before getting a secretarial position at the hotel. Therese's story sends shivers down the spine and the tragic end of her poor mother point o those unfortunate ones who perish in this tough race for survival. Then there is the case of Joseph Mandel, the medical student, who works and studies his days and nights away, getting almost no sleep, managing this insuperable feat with the assistance of lots of black coffee. He has been continuing with this labour over years, but is still uncertain of his future.

'...I get very little satisfaction out
of it and
even less hope for the future.
What prospects
could I have? America is full of
quack
doctors.'
(Ch.7- A Refuge p. 310)

Kafka's presentation of the mind of a young child shows his keen psychological insight. This is seen in the feelings of the young Karl for his parents. The son wanting a boost of self-esteem through the glow of pride in his parents' eyes, which is missing in Karl's case, is shown rather poignantly. The feeling in him of rejection and of being cast away is acute. The pangs of homesickness and the craving for parental love remain even when he is trying his best to maintain a brave face in a new, alien world. That is why his frantic search for the only photograph of his parents that he possessed. His bitterness and heartbreak at not being able to find it, and the two rogues Robinson and Delamarche, having played a role in its loss, seals the end of their stay together. He is determined to therefore leave these two behind as he looks up to a somewhat fresh start at this phase of his life, which Hotel Occidental promises. But the questions remain: How grave was his fault? Was it really unpardonable?

Did he really deserve this excommunication?

The second case of the presentation of child psychology is through the heart-rending memories of her mother's death, which young Therese recounts to her new found friend Karl. The gnawing hunger, the biting cold and the fear and insecurity of homelessness is all brought home to the reader with a powerful force, and the empathy touches the soul. But what is even more noticeable, apart from the physical discomfort of the hapless woman and

her daughter, is the constant fear of the little girl, at being left behind by the only soul she can look up to for any sort of support. The child Therese shudders and clutches at her mother's garments or arms as the dread in her heart warns her that her mother is running away from her and she simply cannot afford to let that happen. They spend the greater part of the night on their feet, feverishly moving from one concrete building to another in the desperate attempt to snatch some rest or sleep under the comfort of a roof. But that was not to be. The woman had already become a phantom of herself, and it was only a matter of time before she is released from the shackles of her body and her suffering, as she unwittingly leaps down from the under-construction building where she goes to begin work as a labourer. Therese still remembers her mother's last kisses on her dry lips, as she recounts the terrible fall where the poor woman's death was accelerated by the tumbling scaffolding and bricks.

In the novel, Europe is presented as the maker and upholder of all regulations whereas America offers free breathing-space. But at the same time there is the constant fears of the unexpected springing up to throw one off one's feet. Kafka shows how America holds promises of a brighter, perhaps better and definitely more exciting and adventurous life. But to keep up with the pace of this life is also no mean feat. This is shown in almost every new experience that the young protagonist has.

Developments in this country are always rapid.....

This sentence accurately sums up the character of America as understood by Kafka. But just as quick-paced is the undoing of it all. To match this process step-by-step is the key to attune oneself with this marvelous country. By the end of the novel we see how Karl has managed to master this and is relatively relaxed as he prepares to smoothly slip into an entirely different life with the travelling theatre company.

As a European he is surprised at the slightest hint of good-manners and chivalry in America. The posture of the customers at the Hotel Occidental, with their elbows on the counter and their heads resting on their hands, reminds him, noticeably, of his Latin teacher, who would use his ruler to rap the students and suddenly slide their elbows down, when they held a similar posture. He is even amazed to see a man raise his hat in honour of a lady. Kafka's choice of the name of the hotel is thus ironically indicative. The central character in this novel is also one, who, by virtue of being a newcomer in a strange country, can only watch from the margin, as his own life begins to take new shape. Cases like him, hungry to be assimilated into the mainstream, are numerous, such as Therese from the hotel where he

finds employment temporarily, the medical student Joseph Mandel and the crooks Robinson and Delamarche. But the factors that caused him to come to America are certainly very different from those of the others. Back home, he had been seduced, in fact, almost forced by a kitchen maid who is double his age. The incident results in her pregnancy and his parents' furious reaction at his misdemeanor. Ostensibly as punishment, but also involving alimony etc. he had been packed off heartlessly to a foreign land.

The article has made an attempt to look at life in America, the continent of great promise, through the eyes of an outsider, one who is at the margin, the periphery. Life has appeared 'absurd' and 'menacing' here. It is undoubtedly a series of trials and tribulations. But by the end of the novel, the process of assimilation seems underway. The Oklahoma theatre company holds out an invitation that the entire country\continent also apparently extends to the outsider, the other:

....Everyone is welcome.

(Ch.8. The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma. p.313)

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* Dr. Shazia Siddiqui Khan is Assistant Professor & Head in the Department of English at Mumtaz P.G.College, Lucknow India.

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