

Disability as Social Construction: Production, Rejected Bodies, and Social Exclusion in The Metamorphosis

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Abstract:

The study proposes a new approach to discussing Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* by using the disability studies as formulated by Susan Wendell. Unlike the existing interpretations of the protagonist's metamorphosis as an existential issue or an allegory for the flaws of capitalist exploitation, this paper redefines the character's change as a condition of social disability rather than a biological impairment. By distinguishing the concept of physical impairment from disability understood as a limitation of possibilities imposed by society, the work emphasizes the marginalization of the character's body for failing to meet the requirements associated with productive activity within the framework of capitalism. This paper argues that Gregor's transformation becomes a disability only through social responses shaped by capitalist notions of productivity and normalcy. While initially displaying empathy, the family members show growing irritation towards their family member whose value is reduced only to that of a commodity, leading to Gregor's complete withdrawal from society argues.

Keywords: Disability Studies, Social Construction, Capitalist Production, Franz Kafka, Susan Wendell, Rejected Bodies, Social Exclusion.

Introduction:

Wendell states that disability does not necessarily mean that a person suffers from an inherent physiological feature, as disability occurs due to the social setting rather than the physical body of the individual. Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate between impairment and disability in the analysis of the issue. An impairment may imply a physiological condition while disability implies something that a society imposes on an individual because of failure to provide necessary arrangements for the impaired person. In Gregor's case in *The Metamorphosis*, his impairment is the result of transformation while his disability is imposed by his family members as well as capitalism itself. It is especially clear in relation to the early phases of the story, when he was able to think rationally and feel certain emotions. The thing that separated him from others was the fact that no one was able to look beyond his impairment.

Because of the deliberate focus on a certain theoretical approach, other approaches will not be considered in the research process. In fact, using Susan Wendell's theory creates an understanding of the subject in terms of concepts only from this perspective. The main aim here is the social construction of disability, which will serve as an attempt to interpret *The Metamorphosis* as a literary criticism of those societies human's value is measured by their utility and nonconformity to societal standard.

Literature Review:

Previous studies of *The Metamorphosis* usually revolve around the aspects of existentialism, alienation, and mental breakdown. In such analyzes, *The Metamorphosis* of Gregor Samsa is taken to symbolize the futility of existence in modern times, with the story being viewed as a philosophical novel. For instance, Kohzadi et al. describe the novella by Franz Kafka as an existential allegory that captures the uncertainty of identity and the alienation of modern man. Such interpretations view subjective experience as central to the analysis instead of social institutions, and thus revolve around Gregor's internal situation.

Many scholars regard alienation as the core issue of the novella while taking into consideration certain psychological concepts such as the concept of "escape mechanism" by Erich Fromm. Ultimately, as various scholars observe, Gregor is not capable of coping with the challenges of modern-day living, including financial hardships and social pressure, which only worsens his feelings of alienation (Wardani et al. 388). As a result, he ends up withdrawing psychologically, until he manages to get rid of himself symbolically. This interpretation suggests that Gregor's psychological conflict is a response to the stresses of liberty, anxiety, and loneliness.

Contemporary scholarship tends to examine discourse and society. Through approaches such as Critical Discourse Analysis by Norman Fairclough, Arshad notes the ways in which language in the novella constructs identity, perpetuates exclusion, and demonstrates power dynamics (3618). It is clear from these analyzes that Gregor's identity is increasingly diminished through linguistic changes in particular in relation to pronouns and objectification through naming. The fact that he is restricted to a particular place and the failure of communication is seen as devices that sustain his exclusion. These approaches will give a wider perspective because they do not just concentrate on each element but rather a societal one. This means that there is something in our language that constructs exclusion; however, this does not incorporate the economic side of exclusion into account.

An additional issue that is worth discussing concerns the social and political aspects of the novella and modernity, capitalism, and class relations. The metamorphosis of Gregor is viewed as an attack on bourgeois society and its capitalist labor conditions (Raja and Dasgosh 89). His position as a traveling salesman- tired, helpless, and motivated by profit marks him as the object of unjust societal structures. Once he is no longer able to work, he is superfluous and expendable, thus demonstrating the way in which capitalist societies evaluate the value of individuals by their productivity. While this perspective highlights the significance of socio-political context, it does not consider disability a social construct.

Some scholars, however, seem to make the transition to a disability studies approach by studying Gregor's body either as an "impairment" or an "abnormality", and facing social exclusion. In particular, in her study entitled "The Metamorphosis: Through the Looking Glass of Disabled", Uttara Ghosh argues that Gregor becomes subjected to the gaze of society, loses control over himself, and lets others define his identity. His body becomes the field of battle for his identity, and he ends up losing his own identity, becoming just instruments of power. However, such readings acknowledge that Gregor's condition can also be impacted by his perception of his own body, implying that disability is a relational category rather than a biological one. Nevertheless, many researchers confuse the two categories or do not create an entire theory within disability studies.

Despite the diversity of approaches to analyze this literary work, there is definitely a gap in literature. Most scholars opt for an existential or psychological interpretation or discuss Gregor's social exclusion, but only a few researchers have considered this phenomenon in light of disability studies. Very less attention is paid to the fact that the protagonist condition may be analyzed in terms of social disability

based on capitalist principles of productivity. Furthermore, the issue of impairment as opposed to disability is never raised in the existing research works. Consequently, the text demands a more nuanced reading that transcends traditional existentialist tropes.

To fill this research gap, the present study examines Gregor Samsa's condition in *The Metamorphosis* through Susan Wendell's theory of the social construction of disability. The paper argues that Gregor's transformation becomes disabling not merely because of his altered body, but because of the social responses shaped by capitalist expectations of productivity, usefulness, and normalcy. Rather than interpreting Gregor's condition solely as a biological abnormality or personal tragedy, this study reads the novella as a critique of the medical model of disability, which defines disability primarily in terms of bodily defect and individual impairment.

Problem Statement:

Wendell challenges this model by arguing that disability cannot be understood only through medical explanations because social and environmental structures play a central role in producing exclusion. She observes that "the rate of disability in a society increases with improved medical capacity to save the lives of people who are dangerously ill or injured in the absence of the capacity to prevent or cure all the physical damage they have incurred" (37). This argument shifts attention away from the body itself and toward society's inability to accommodate bodily difference.

In the context of Kafka's novella, Gregor's body becomes problematic not because it transforms into an insect, but because the world around him is incapable of adapting to his altered condition. This exclusion takes place in the context of economic expectations, physical containment, the language of dehumanization, and the mounting realization within the family that he represents a burden to society.

Methodology:

The methodology used, therefore used in this research paper is qualitative and involves literary criticism and disability studies. The selected literary text, which is *The Metamorphosis*, will be closely examined in terms of its transformation, confinement, labor, family issues, and social alienation themes. The work of Susan Wendell provides the main framework of analysis of the text. Her critique of the biomedical model and her emphasis on the economic, environmental, and cultural production of disability provide the foundation for analyzing Gregor's gradual alienation.

Analysis:

Gregor Samsa's transformation in *The Metamorphosis* happens suddenly and without explanation: "One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin" (Kafka 1). Kafka deliberately avoids offering scientific or supernatural reasons for his change, focusing instead on how society responds to his condition. From the beginning, Gregor's situation aligns with Susan Wendell's definition of bodily impairment; however, the key problem arises when Gregor is incapable to fulfil his social duties in a capitalist society. This highlights how society ultimately defines disability through social exclusion, making Gregor's transformation a critique of the value placed on productivity.

Instead of horror at his grotesque form, Gregor's primary anxiety is his tardiness for work and missing his train. He does not question his humanity or his right to exist; instead, he ponders the implications of his workplace delay, his employer's anger, and his tardiness. The protagonist's reaction shows how

labor and production have affected his sense of self. Gregor's identity is linked to his physical efficiency. He has accepted this dependence within the capitalist system. His transformed body's horrific appearance does not make his existence difficult; instead, it is his inability to meet societal expectations because of this change. As Wendell writes, "Expectations of performance are reflected, because they are assumed, in the social organization and physical structure of a society, both of which create disability" (39).

Prior to the metamorphosis, Gregor's life involves strenuous efforts, continuous journeys and, in addition, the burdens of working life. As a travelling salesman, Gregor finds himself in a very stringent capitalist system, which allows no margin for physical weaknesses and emotional fatigue. Wendell believes that people with disabilities should have equal opportunities to hone their abilities and pursue productive endeavours. This approach contrasts with treating them solely based on their limitations in meeting work standards. But Gregor's case is different, as he is living in a society that recognizes the worth of workers in terms of economic production alone. And once his body fails to fit into this criterion, he loses all significance socially. This fact is illustrated quite clearly by the arrival of the office manager, who comes to Gregor's house after only a brief span of time. Instead of asking about the well-being of Gregor, he questions whether he can be trusted and is reliable enough to come back to work. Under capitalism, production is paramount. Thus, illness or the human condition are not accepted excuses for missing work. Gregor's body is no longer considered a human one; rather, it is perceived as machinery that did not function properly.

The discussion on pace and productivity by Wendell will help in apprehending Gregor's case better. According to her, "When the pace of life in a society increases, there is a tendency for more people to become disabled, not only because of physically damaging consequences of efforts to go faster but also because fewer people can meet expectations of 'normal' performance" (37). The profession adopted by Gregor shows how this problem exists. It calls for endless movement, time management, and pressure to remain productive all the time. Gregor's life was already very exhausting, even before he turned into an insect, because of the nature of the capitalist system.

It is evident in the process of the development of the plot that his gradual lack of contribution symbolizes his position within the family members. Whereas the previous position of Gregor was that of an admirable person among the family members due to his capacity to provide for them, the present situation renders him incapable of even taking care of himself. His father goes back to work, Grete finds a job, and everyone adjusts their finances without him. Gregor stops being useful and, on the contrary, starts representing an economic burden.

Therefore, Kafka portrays the extent to which society turns people into mere economic beings under capitalism. What causes Gregor to be considered an outcast in the family is his inability to conform to capitalist mechanisms and engage in productivity. The author reveals how disability in capitalist societies represents both a biological and a social phenomenon. As Gregor is gradually marginalised and alienated from other members of his family due to his transformation, Kafka depicts a scenario in which individuals who cannot keep up with society's productivity pace are alienated and cast aside.

Another crucial point made by Susan Wendell in "The Social Construction of Disability" is about how disability is created not just via impairment of the body but also via the physical and social organization of the environment. According to Wendell, "a great deal of disability is caused by the physical structure and social organization of society" (39). It is especially pertinent in relation to Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, where the protagonist's experience is further aggravated by the surrounding world as

opposed to merely undergoing a transformation. Kafka shows that Gregor Samsa's disability is created by the family reorganizing the space at home, shutting off communications, and ignoring the new circumstances.

According to Wendell, disability results from "the failure to give people the amount and kind of help they need to participate fully in all major aspects of life in the society" (40). This aspect perfectly describes Gregor's case. Once he undergoes the transformation process, no real effort is put into integrating him back into the family or making any environmental accommodations for him. Rather than providing a situation where Gregor will be able to continue living with honour, the Samsa's isolate him slowly but steadily. Whereas the house once provided the comfort of home and acceptance, it eventually becomes Gregor's prison. Therefore, Gregor's disability is not just a matter of his changed body but also of the refusal of others to accept bodily differences.

Gregor does not conform to the ideal image of a worker who is disciplined and productive under capitalism. In this way, Gregor's surroundings become restructured in such a way that he is marginalized further. Society marginalizes individuals "through the failure or unwillingness to create ability among people who do not fit the physical and mental profile of 'paradigm' citizens" (Wendell 41). This marginalization process in terms of space is illustrated in the story by Kafka using Gregor's room. In the initial stages, the room is presented as one that belongs to Gregor. Eventually, the room comes to represent a prison cell. Being confined in a room with locks on its doors depicts more than Gregor's incarceration, depicts not only Gregor's incarceration, but also his emotional isolation from his family members. Although Gregor could hear people talking outside his room, it did not help much as Gregor remained isolated from his family members.

Furthermore, the changing sequence of events within this space is symbolic of the gradual dehumanizing process undergone by Gregor. It may seem like a compassionate move by removing furniture from the room in order to accommodate Gregor in it. However, to remove the furniture is to strip away the material possessions that are symbolic of Gregor's past identity. This explains why Gregor strongly defends the framed picture that hangs on the wall in the same room. Gregor desperately attempts to cling to what he used to have before the transformation took place.

Moreover, the room itself becomes symbolic of the declining social status of Gregor within the family environment. There is dust on everything, unnecessary things pile up, and the room is literally flooded with things that have been dumped there by his family. It shows how architecture, like language and human relationships, forms an essential part of the disabling process. Thus, the room of Gregor stops functioning as a place to live but becomes rather an embodiment of indifference to him.

Conclusion:

The conclusion of *The Metamorphosis* ultimately reveals that disability is not produced by bodily difference alone, but by the attitudes and structures through which society interprets difference. Susan Wendell argues that disability continues to be treated as a "personal or family responsibility" rather than a matter of collective social responsibility (52). It is clearly portrayed in Kafka's novella, where the plight of Gregor Samsa is limited to the domestic setting. It is up to the members of the family to cope with his plight, and as pressures mount in terms of economics, caregiving soon becomes frustration. His body is not seen as an issue that must be accommodated by society but rather a personal tragedy that impedes normal family functioning.

It echoes Wendell's point that society often views disability as personal misfortune. Disability is seen not as something that is generated by the way society itself is organized but as personal bad luck that befalls some unlucky few individuals. Gregor's case too is viewed in terms of personal disaster rather than being considered as a result of the rigidity of the system that exists. Since Gregor cannot perform the necessary labor he has lost all value in the eyes of the social system because capitalism values human beings based on their contributions.

Wendell also notes that when attempts are made to help individuals with disabilities, there is a tendency to have reservations over the issue of "cost and benefit," since disability continues to be regarded as charity and not "social investment in ability and productivity" (51). This is also observed in Kafka's work in terms of how the Samsa household deals with Gregor. Gregor's life continues to be considered acceptable as long as there is still something that could be gained from him. Once he becomes someone who needs constant care and does not contribute anything to the economy, the family perceives him as a drain of their resources.

Furthermore, Wendell opposes the view that life is a game of lottery where people hope not to suffer alone. It becomes especially relevant in the context of *The Metamorphosis*. Instead of questioning why Gregor was left solely responsible for the economic well-being of the Samsa family the family members adjust to life without Gregor as part of it. Gregor's disability becomes another personal misfortune that is supposed to be gotten rid of rather than a problem that could be helped with.

Wendell also emphasizes that many able-bodied people think that "life with a disability would not be worth living" (53), a notion created on the basis of ignorance about the lives of disabled people. This is the attitude that Gregor starts accepting in the end. Because he becomes more of a burden and a monster for the rest of his family, Gregor starts thinking that his death will be better for everybody around him. This means that the fact that he is retreating from society is a clear indication of the psychological impact that rejection has on him.

Contemporary Relevance:

With respect to this, it becomes very clear why this novella is so pertinent in contemporary society. Just as back then, today systems prioritize speed, efficiency, and ability to undertake activities based on a set of predetermined norms that pertain to physical perfection. Those individuals who have bodies that do not measure up to such standards are deemed unworthy of contributing anything worthwhile to the society. Individuals who suffer from mental or physical diseases and unemployment have the fear of becoming unproductive members of society.

From this discussion, therefore, it is evident that there is a great need for future research on issues concerning disability, work, gender and exclusion in literary discourse. This research would show how the current neoliberal mode of production is leading to similar exclusions in literature as seen in Kafka's literature. Future research needs to include the ways in which society produces disability in its failure to embrace diversity.

Overall, *The Metamorphosis* demonstrates that the true horror about Gregor Samsa is not becoming an insect but realizing how easy it is for society to remove all sense of humanity from the body that fails to conform to its norms. It exposes how societies continue to produce disability by privileging productivity over human dignity.

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