

# Becoming a Woman –Grete’s Journey Towards Finding Her Identity and the Defiance of Gender Roles in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*

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## ABSTRACT

*Gender-based critical readings of almost all of Franz Kafka's works have emerged ever since the evolution of gender studies. In his most significant work, The Metamorphosis, Kafka encapsulates the social and political changes of his time and an analysis of the characters of this novella via the gender lens shows how the protagonist of this exceptional literary work, Gregor Samsa, shares an intricate relationship with his sister, Grete Samsa. This study, therefore, aims to explain how Grete Samsa serves as a perfect foil to her brother by mirroring Gregor's "metamorphosis" in this text. It also explores Grete's journey towards finding and creating her own identity in the midst of all the chaos and how this journey is perceived by her family. By looking at the gender and power structure depicted in the novella, the study also intends to reveal the extent of damage caused in a hegemonic familial setting in a capitalistic modern society.*

## KEY WORDS

Gender and power, hegemony, identity, transformation.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 12 August 2023

1<sup>st</sup> Review: 28 September 2023

2<sup>nd</sup> Review: 23 October 2023

3<sup>rd</sup> Review: 18 November 2023

Accepted: 23 December 2023

## 1. Introduction

Czech writer Franz Kafka is considered to be one of the most influential German literary figures since Goethe. He shaped the literature and worldview in the early 20th-century with his significant works such as *The Trial*, *The Metamorphosis*, *In the Penal Colony*, *The Judgement* and so forth, and paved the way for the absurdist writers like Camus, Sartre, Eugene Ionesco and many others who define the absurdist literature of the age. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is considered his greatest prose fiction

that can never be surpassed by anything (Canetti 22). Kafka's stories carry a sort of ambiguity as well as a certain sense of universality; hence inviting multiple-layers theories and implications of analysis within just a single piece of work.

The universality and ambiguity in Kafka's works allow the superimposition of multiple theories, ideas, and analyses onto the very same text. Albert Camus, in his Appendix to *The Myth of Sisyphus*, titled "Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka" mentions that "The whole art

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of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread" (124). By allowing the multivalency of meaning, Kafka welcomes his readers to reread, and thereupon reanalyse his texts as new theories keep on emerging.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka strengthens the oppression of women in the house by highlighting the transformation of Grete, from a domestic caretaker, considered as the actual and proper role of a woman to a more controlling one, who breaks out of her stereotypical role but eventually becomes the villain of the story at the end. The word "metamorphosis" means transformation, which also means change, and this theme becomes the focus of Kafka's novel. Although mainly focused on Gregor Samsa's transformation, it clearly highlights his sister Grete Samsa's transformation as well.

His representation of women in the text reflects the way patriarchal society wants to see them. The novel is written in the first person narrative; hence through the lens of Kafka. Therefore, Mrs. Samsa and Grete have been portrayed as the embodiment of ideal womanhood having no identity of their own. Mrs. Samsa is the sole caretaker of the household who has little or no say regarding any situation. Grete is not any different either as she and her mother devote all their time and effort to Gregor when

he turns into a giant bug. However, the desire to act the ideal woman, as perceived and desired by the patriarchal society starts to diminish in both Grete and her mother's heart.

With the passing of time, everyone in the family grows tired of taking care of Gregor. Even though his mother wants to see him, she is stopped to do so by the other members of the family. Moreover, the family starts to face financial issues as Gregor is the sole breadwinner of the family and they end up renting out their house to other families. However, even after facing all these hardships, the family is reluctant to let Grete work and expects her to get married to a wealthy man. In other words, she was expected to adhere to the existing gender roles of society and become a housewife (Kafka 36). Eventually, we see Grete defying such expectations imposed upon her and becoming the breadwinner of the family. But as soon as Grete becomes a mature and independent woman, we see her changing from a timid, feminine little girl to a negative character who wants to get rid of her distressed brother (Kafka 34). Even though both Gregor and Grete go through their own metamorphosis, the consequences of their transformation receive quite different reactions from their parents. While Gregor goes into the ultimate depth of despair, Grete blossoms into a woman (Kafka 32). But her strength

and newfound opinionated self are not celebrated but rather villainized. Although she finds her place in the world and starts contributing to the house and to the society in general, her newly formed self is seen as a threat to the already established gender roles in the society and she is expected to go back to being a housewife. As Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* asserts that it is the woman who "is condemned to domestic labour" (75) while the domesticity of women is viewed as the reciprocity of the master-slave relationship. And when it comes to a single woman like Grete, Beauvoir asserts that "the single woman most often remains a servant in the father's, brother's or sister's household" (155) and is not expected to "escape the traditional feminine world" (155). Therefore, their identity continues to be linked to the household or the men of the household. As Mary Wollstonecraft also writes, "Connected with man as daughters, wives, [sisters] and mothers, their [women's] moral character may be estimated by their manner of fulfilling those duties" (Wollstonecraft 53). Hence, given the notion that society disapproves of any departure from conventional roles, it expresses revulsion at Gregor's metamorphosis as a bug and Grete's transformation as a strong, independent woman. However, the noticeable difference that this paper attempts to

shed light on is that while Gregor's fate effects catharsis in most readers, the society's disapproval of Grete's independent self is somewhat normalised and even accepted to some extent.

## **2. Theoretical Framework of the Study**

While looking at the text from an analytical perspective, this study adopts a few notions of gender studies as its theoretical framework. Gender studies is a discipline that uses theoretical models such as deconstruction and feminist theory in order to examine the social and cultural constructs of gender stereotypes such as masculinity and femininity and how they relate to class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and the like. The term "gender role" was coined by John Money where he examined the actions and responses that, in a particular context, reveal someone's status as a boy, man, girl or a woman. These "roles" may include certain activities or ways of lives such as clothing or speech patterns or even the household duties assigned by society to individuals according to their sex.

Gender Studies has emerged as an academic field of study at a relatively later period and has been characterized as multi-or interdisciplinary. The birth of this academic field owes its origin to the criticism of

several disciplines for contributing to the marginalization of women, or often ignoring them by producing knowledge that did not take gender into consideration. After certain struggles related to these issues the notion was finally incorporated into other disciplines as well (Pilcher and Whelehan 9).

Thus, feminist literary criticism started gaining its momentum and eventually started questioning the male-centered approach in literature. The approaches of the Gender Studies framework in literature, therefore, focuses on the European white "canon" that excludes the experience of women and keeps the marginalized in literary circles. It can be noticed in numerous literary works. Gender stereotypes are in play in love poetry, for instance, where women are represented as delicate and defenseless; or in the case of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* it is noteworthy how Grete's experiences receive a completely different reaction from his brother Gregor's. Hence, this paper uses the framework to focus on the multifaceted gender issues that lie within the novel.

### 3. Literature review

*The Metamorphosis* is the most well-known work of Franz Kafka and it has been subjected to multiple interpretations over the years, including Gregor's alienation, his father's

influence on his life, the influence of capitalist society on individuals and so on. It has also been analysed from a feminist perspective by Nina Pelikan Straus (1989) where Grete is shown as a foil to Gregor's character reflecting how they both go through their respective changes.

According to Robyn Wiegman gender studies appeared as theory in literary criticism as a consequence of women's studies (18-37) and consolidated itself as a proper academic field in the 1970s. Even though Kafka had passed away in 1924, both his works and personality have been crucial topics of concern for feminist scholars ever since gender studies came into existence.

Several feminist critics, including Evelyn Torton Beck, use the Marxist-Engelian approach to focus on Kafka's patriarchal treatment of women and point out that he refers to Gregor as "Samsa," but to Grete as "Grete", somehow stripping Grete off her family identity (89). Even though it is undeniable that Grete's experience is crucial in interpreting the existential crises depicted in the novel, Kafka's portrayal of women and their position in the society need further interpretation.

In the article, "Transforming Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*" Nina Pelikan Straus argues that the female characters of the novel, especially Grete,

should be highlighted in view of her importance and experience (67). It is often observed that most of the readings of *The Metamorphosis* include Marxist viewpoints or the Oedipus Complex as the character of Gregor and his situation and experience dominate the course of the novel. However, Nina Strauss views Grete as the perfect substitute of her brother in the book as she also goes through her own metamorphosis and becomes an independent woman (54). The siblings’ physical and mental transformations perfectly mirror each other where Gregor goes from being the financial pillar of the family to a dependent man while Grete surpasses her typical role as a woman (Strauss 56). Therefore, “Grete’s metamorphosis” is looked upon as the tool that resonates with the social and psychoanalytic aspects of the novel (Strauss 652). Thus, the analysis of Grete’s performance reveals the text to be “hour-glass-shaped” where the siblings interchange their roles, personalities, and powers as the plot thickens (Strauss 243).

Several critics even claim that the story is as much about Grete as it is about Gregor as the titular “metamorphosis” shows Grete’s transformation from a passive, submissive, and dormant girl to an active, independent, and assertive woman. Dr. Lisa Seidlitz terms Gregor’s transformation a “regression” as it “is done in

the reverse direction” addressing this from a biological standpoint. She claims that “metamorphosis” or transformation is “progressive in most cases” (45). Whereas, Gregor who “was a human being who could stand upright and could move” is transformed into “this thing that creeps low to the ground...and he is debased” (“Frieze Lecture: “The Metamorphosis” 100 years later”). Sokel terms Gregor Samsa’s transformation “counter-metamorphosis” (78) while Cerfeda focuses on the cinematic transformation of Grete through her looks as the change is visible in Grete’s uniform, a less feminine haircut and a less childish behaviour (77).

Therefore, the regressive modification of Gregor appearing in the text as the primary metamorphosis camouflages Grete’s metamorphosis in the text. This notion has also remained unnoticeable for a long time after the novel’s publication as a result of the dominant masculinity in contemporary literature. Strauss also opines that Grete’s plight is often subsumed by the paradigm of male alienation as the text is mostly interpreted in light of masculinist attitudes and orientation (654). However, with the emergence of feminist literary criticism and the progression of the literary circles towards gender equality, this angle has started coming to attention.

Although it is clear that both Grete and Gregor suffer, and are exploited in terms of their labour, Grete rises up to become a full-fledged woman, defying societal expectations. Therefore, this paper attempts to dive deeper into her journey towards finding her identity and to explore how her "metamorphosis" is portrayed as something rather to be crushed than celebrated.

#### **4. Grete's journey towards finding her identity**

One of the major questions that plagues the novel from the very beginning is the loss of identity as Gregor Samsa slowly turns into an insignificant bug. Gregor's sister, Grete also struggles throughout the course of the book to find her right self and eventually emerges as a strong character. But it still remains arguable whether she would have been able to go through this journey of self-revelation if Gregor hadn't suffered his fateful transformation. As Straus writes, "'For Kafka there can be no change without an exchange, no blooming of Grete without Gregor's withering'" (657-658). As evidence to this argument, we see how in the beginning of the novel, Grete is hardly given any importance by the narrator or Gregor as she is often addressed as "Gregor's sister" and her name is eventually revealed by her mother calling to summon her (Kafka 16). As Beauvoir mentions,

"Humanity is male, and man defines women not in herself..." depicting how women are always identified in relation to their gender roles assigned to them by the society (79).

The story of Gregor depicts his grotesque escape from the burdensome patriarchal obligations; however, it also depicts how his role within the family is exchanged, and gives birth to a newer dimension. Gregor exchanges his responsibility with being completely dependent with the rest of the family; while Grete takes up these responsibilities, leaving her timid and submissive role behind. Thus, the relationship between the siblings suggests oedipal as well as family conflict (Bodeker 12). Gregor's initial transformation becomes a foreshadowing and reflection for Grete's as she goes through her own journey of self-revelation.

A closer look into the novel reveals that the primary struggle between the sexes is between Gregor and Grete rather than between him and his father. Their interchange of roles and the "hour-glassed" shape of the plot suggest that *The Metamorphosis* is Kafka's very own depiction of shifting gender roles within a family, or perhaps society in general. Gerhard Rieck mentions in an analysis that Kafka's works often incorporates "irreconcilable personalities" indexed

as “couples” (104-25) where one possesses a passive and austere personality and another a libidinal one, allowing Kafka to compare and contrast the two. The motif of these interchangeable and polar opposite qualities is seen between Gregor and Grete as it is seen between Gregor and his father. In doing so, Kafka dedicates the opening and closing paragraphs of the novel to Gregor and Grete respectively stating while Gregor "had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug", Grete, on the other hand, "had blossomed recently ... into a beautiful and voluptuous young woman" (77). Additionally, he also uses the past tense in Gregor’s context suggesting that Gregor’s “metamorphosis” had already reached its ultimate destination; whereas Grete goes through a slow, continuous process as the events in the novel progress. We see Grete as a seventeen year old girl who is on the verge of legally being called a “woman” rather than a “girl” and she truly becomes one in the Beauvorian sense (293).

In the early 1900s, precisely during the publication of the novel, women were starting to make their way into the world and become equivalent to the gender counterparts while exploring their rights and opportunities as varied opportunities were being presented to them. Especially, as we know, during the

WWI women started contributing to the society by working as cooks, mechanics, or even as police officials. However, they were still not exempted from their household duties. Grete had to go through a similar situation where she had to multitask as a 17-year-old child as well as a “beautiful and voluptuous young woman” (77).

As a patriarchal inheritor in the family, Gregor automatically inherits the family-identity: their last name, which is never given to Grete, even after his death. In addition to names, identity-diminution can also be achieved via trivialising someone as a "child". A repeated reference to Grete’s childhood is done by Gregor, their father, and even the narrator.

Wollstonecraft writes that "when the epithet [of a child/children] is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for weakness" (43). Accordingly, when Gregor mentions or thinks about Grete’s childishness, he is infantilising her, and depriving her of her identity as a grown-up and self-sufficient woman. Such a situation gives birth to an identity crisis inside Grete as she is torn between wanting to find her footing and sticking to what is expected of her. Grete’s character repeatedly faces identity debasement in the text and this has been evident through various occasions. One such example is her

passion for playing the violin as we see that Gregor makes a “secret plan” to send her to the conservatory the following year even though Grete explicitly never mentions it if she wants a career out of it (Kafka 65). Furthermore, upon playing the violin for the gentlemen in part III, it is Grete’s father that thanks them “as if he were the one playing the violin” (Kafka 63). The men, including Grete’s father, assume the position of power and demand and answer on her behalf, leaving Grete no scope for making her decisions. Metaphorically, she leaves the same violin to fall after placing it on her mother’s lap and its “reverberating tone” is strong, sudden, and in sharp contrast to the “charming” play of her violin earlier. (Kafka 69)

Defying the threats to her identity, Grete rather relentlessly works towards consolidating her identity. After her brother’s fateful transformation, she takes charge to be his caretaker and puts her own thoughts and decisions into doing whatever is the best in any crucial moment. She starts experimenting with Gregor’s dietary choices by bringing him “an entire selection, all spread out on an old newspaper” (Kafka 31); thus she goes from being the child to being the mother figure who can make decisions and take care of her brother. As Straus points out, she becomes a “carrier of

nourishment” transforming herself into a symbolic mother who takes care of a sickly child (660-61). The deterioration of Gregor gives birth to the evolution of Grete and every fragment of this downfall adds an extra bit to the evolution of Grete’s identity. As Straus states, Gregor has to surrender his masculine prerogative to Grete by eating whatever she gives him. He hides under the sofa to avoid being looked at by her (664). She emphasises this role reversal by focusing on sentences such as “Gregor was fed ...” where the passivity of the sentence reflects the passivity of Gregor against Grete’s active role (Straus 664).

A turning point in Grete’s acceptance of her newly assumed identity is noticed when she assertively states that the furniture must be removed, going against her mother’s opinion and stripping off Gregor’s previous position as male authority. Afterwards, upon her mother’s fall at the sight of Gregor, Grete cries out “Gregor, you ...,” and raises her fist, and these are the first words that she directs to her brother ever since the transformation (Kafka 47- 48). Grete verbally abuses Gregor to express her frustration with the whole situation and her “raised fists”, according to Mary Coble, is an iconic marker of minorities' fights against oppression – minorities of not only sexual orientation but also of gender, race,



class, and ethnicity" (86). Thus, Grete starts making her position clear in front of the set gender roles and embraces her position in the status quo of the family.

As Grete tries to focus on herself and starts taking care of the financial matters of the family, she fails to take care of Gregor as much as before, rendering him dirtier and less human. Gregor’s deterioration accelerates not only because of his father’s continuous abuse but also of his awareness of the fact that he has lost his control and power over the family and Grete is becoming the substitute in this matter. As Cerfeda argues, Gregor fails to cope with the frustration caused by the re-consideration of gender roles in the family (76). Kafka also registers this rebellious frustration and describes Gregor’s positioning in the particularly “filthy corner” as his attempt to “*make something of a protest*” but Grete does not pay heed to that and “let it stay” (Kafka 58). Grete’s indifference is an indication of her evolution as a resolute woman and she unknowingly contributes to Gregor’s feeling of powerlessness.

Grete’s identity emerges in its true colour in Part II when she finally slams her fists instead of staying timid and opines that “We must get rid of it ...” (Kafka 68). It is evident here that she acts as a decision maker and owns her

decision as well. The complete inversion of the “hourglass” reveals Grete in the position of the judge of the house and the only one “standing up” when Gregor retreats into his room and turns around to look back just before his death (Kafka 76).

### **5. Care taker to bread winner**

Grete’s choice to work in order to put his family out of financial misery results in the replacement of Gregor as the primary caretaker of the Samsa household; and this turns out to be the ultimate revelation of her identity as a full-grown woman. As Beauvoir writes: “It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap separating her from the male; work alone can guarantee her concrete freedom” (737). And as she chooses to step up to prove her worth by assuming the role of the caretaker of the family, it comes to Gregor as well as the other family members as quite an unfamiliar phenomenon. Because she is just a “little seventeen-year-old sister” who starts to “earn money” whose life so far has consisted of “dressing herself nicely” and “helping around the house” and other womanly pursuits assigned to her by the established gender-role structure (Kafka 37). However, this effort made by Grete does not elevate her to the status of the head of the family; rather she is considered just a temporary helping hand and her

assertive behaviour that comes paired up with her newfound identity is not welcome at all.

Hence, as soon as Grete becomes the breadwinner of the family, her portrayal is shifted into a negative one, reflecting a typical disapproving position that society takes when a woman steps out of her assigned gender role. Grete has been simply expected to wait around for someone to come along and save her from the horrid situation and meanwhile to be engaged in household activities. However, things do not go quite the same way and the family eventually make their decisions to push Grete back to her familiar gender roles.

#### **6. Transformation as a Villain**

As soon as Grete steps out of her typical gender roles assigned by the society, she turns into a villain in her family members' eyes. Kafka interpreted her busyness with work as carelessness, saying that she "shoved any old food" into Gregor's room and hastily "swished" the food with her broom upon coming back in the evening (32). Such an interpretation of Grete's changed behaviour makes her look like an evil family member who does not care for her miserable brother's wellbeing; whereas, all she tries to do is to keep her family together in the face of the prospect of financial and emotional hardships.

As Grete's mind is no longer concerned with only Gregor's wishes and she tries to juggle her new responsibilities, she is portrayed as a rebel who does not adhere to her assigned duties. The fact that she is sick and tired of her typical domestic duties and defies her feminine roles, eventually turns her into a cold, heartless villain in the text. When Grete assertively expresses her opinion saying that "things can't go on like this" and that "we have to get rid of it", it creates an impression that taking financial responsibilities has turned her into an unsophisticated, heartless woman (Kafka 37). This portrayal of Grete reflects society's dogmatic notion that, whenever a woman dares to step out of her assigned gender roles, she is perceived as a threat to the patriarchal society, and needs to be disciplined.

Grete's parents are no different. Once they Grete's assertive voice, they become busy looking for a husband to put her on a leash. As she becomes "livelier and livelier" and can communicate "almost unconsciously through glances" they start thinking that it is high time to "find her a good husband" (Kafka 42). According to them, her husband will be able to compensate for the financial loss that Gregor's situation has brought upon them, suggesting that they consider Grete's contribution to the family as a

mere extra and not sufficient at all. Moreover, rather than depend on Grete the woman, her father would be happier to rely upon Grete’s husband, a male stranger, to help the family out of their misery. Therefore, Grete’s marriage is an economic plan rather than an emotional issue that depicts how Grete is treated as a typical woman whose only goal in life is to find a husband and get settled. Grete’s efforts to find her own identity and defy gender roles are completely ignored and she is pushed into the same box that she fights so hard to get out of.

## **7. Conclusion**

The characters of Gregor and Grete created by Kafka depict the power dynamics playing between the roles of the male and female members of society. Female dissent in society is perceived as a threat to the patriarchal structure of families and society in general. The text emphasizes the fact that despite standing up on her own feet, striving for her own identity, Grete is still

pushed back into her familiar gender roles. Such notions make it very difficult not to raise questions about the male-female social gender role stereotypes. The paper, therefore, has tried to explore such mindsets and depict how women have to go through the ordeal of creating a safe space for themselves in their family as well in society but are still perceived as a threat rather than as an acceptable equal to their male counterparts who can contribute to the betterment of society in general.

**Declaration of Interests:** I, the author of this research manuscript, declare that I have no financial interest. I have provided written consent to publish the research manuscript in this journal.

**To Cite this Article:** Rahman, S. M. (2023). *Becoming a Woman –Grete’s Journey Towards Finding Her Identity and the Defiance of Gender Roles in Kafka’s The Metamorphosis*. *Journal of English Studies (JES)*, Volume: 01, Issue: 01, Page: 1:12, ISUCRDP, Dhaka

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