

# Self and the State: Negotiating Marginal Identities through a Reading of Franz Kafka's *The Castle*

Heena Kishnani & Rimika Singhvi

## Abstract

Franz Kafka's oeuvre is a reflection of man as an existent faced with the inescapable prospect of solitude, dread, subjectivity, anguish, absurdity, nothingness, and death. Kafka's *The Castle*, an allegorical novel published posthumously in German as *Das Schloss* in 1926, is the dramatization of man's self-discovery in the depths of a dark, ambiguous, and diabolic world. Kafka lived during a "period of intense socio-cultural changes" and saw the two World Wars as well as the anti-Jewish riots. Other important historical events that took place during that time were the "first and the Second Balkan Wars in 1912-1913; the failure of the Russian Revolution in 1905 and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917; the humiliating defeat of Germany in 1918-1919; and, Prague becoming the capital of independent Czechoslovakia" (Chamling). During this period of political upheaval, there was an upsurge in the rise of smaller nation-states such as Poland and Hungary besides Czechoslovakia. The aforementioned defining historical events had a deep impact on Kafka's hyper-sensitive mind. The German-speaking Bohemian Jews, like him, were marginalized in multiple ways as they were considered a part of the oppressive Austrian elite without their own national language. They were subjected to repeated outbreaks of anti-Semitism, which escalated as Czech nationalism gained strength (Deleuze and Guattari). The Paper thus seeks to trace and critique the literary, cultural, and historical developments, vis-a-vis the negotiation of German-Jewish identity during the nineteenth century, through a close reading of *The Castle*. Furthermore, Kafka's diaries have also been critically examined for corroborating his Jewish identity and for exploring how that helped him articulate - so astutely and profoundly - the problem of the quintessential modern man.

**Keywords:** Franz Kafka; German-Jewish identity; Marginalized writer; Modernism; The Castle.

## Introduction

A clairvoyant and a cosmopolitan writer par excellence, Franz Kafka is indisputably one of the most read German and Austrian writers of modernism. He was an absurdist to Albert Camus, a surrealist to Breton, and the perfect manifestation of minor literature to Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari). His literary output includes the novels such as *The Trial* (1925), *The Castle* (1926), and *Amerika* (1927), and the renowned short story *The Great Wall of China* (1931) among others. Interestingly, Kafka was extremely self-conscious about his writing, to the extent that before his death, he had asked his closest friend and literary executor, Max Brod to destroy all of his unpublished works. Fortunately, Brod accurately recognized their literary value and defied his friend's instructions, thus, blessing the world with Kafka's fictive universe.

Kafka's corpus is a contemplation of his ordinariness of being, which is ironic because his parents named him after the Habsburg emperor, Franz Joseph. He renders his existential anguish by repeatedly asking the unspoken question that who is he. A Foucauldian critique of Franz Kafka, on the other hand, outlines that he encompasses different identities such as being a German-speaking Jew from Prague, an Austrian subject, a Czech city resident, a theologian, a philosopher, and a literary critic. But paradoxically, he is nothing, not even Franz Kafka. This aforementioned "psychic confusion of the self bordering on eccentricity" arouses fear of being regarded as 'mad' which he translates skilfully and elegantly into his writings (Breeding). His overarching thematic concerns include the moral problems of guilt, responsibility, and freedom. He investigates how authorities seek recourse to power to subtly coerce and dominate the individual as well as the individual's scope for defying such an authority.

*The Castle* is an exploration of the conflict between an outsider and a given culture. In the context of the nineteenth century and Kafka being a marginal writer, it can be read as an unfolding of his German-Jewish identity. It has been much less critically analyzed in this regard compared to his more popular works such as *The Trial* (1925) and *The Metamorphosis* (1915). However, the objective to uncover the Jewish influence that informs his works does not inhibit his rich legacy as a universal writer. If anything, it only adds to the diversity of origins and interpretive multiplicity in a major literary author.

This unfinished novel's protagonist is K. He has been called to work as a "Land Surveyor" by the "castle of lord the Count West" in a small village.

Having arrived at midnight, he is told discourteously that he has not been invited. "You're probably surprised at our lack of hospitality," said the man, "but hospitality is not our custom here, we have no use for visitors" (14). Shortly, he learns that the castle is not even aware of his existence, let alone his duty in the hostile village. Perpetually remaining "an object of curiosity," we see a character who is torn between his past and his present. In 10 days, "K. experiences time and place as a consequence of his lost sense of purpose" (Tudhope).

The novel opens: "It was late in the evening when K. arrived, the village was deep in snow. The Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there" (3). Upon an arduous study of his narrative techniques, we can deduce that his style is neutral. This is to ensure that the writer is not engaging in any authorial judgement as he does not intend to take K's side or that of the Castle's. In addition, he abstains from using the dense poetic language of his predecessors, which increases the 'isolation' faced by modern writers.

Another striking stylistic choice is the use of a reduced point of view, implying that the reader sees, knows, and feels only what the character is directly undergoing. For example, "K. pricked up his ears. So, the Castle had recognized him as the Land Surveyor. That was unpropitious for him, on the one hand, for it meant that the Castle was well informed about him, had estimated all the probable chances, and was taking up the challenge with a smile" (7).

One cannot also overlook the striking resemblance between the word usage and sentence formation of a bureaucratic report and a Kafkaesque sentence. He prefers to incorporate 'dream-like' effects rather than fully-fleshed out dreams. Hence, it would be inaccurate to call his fictional world completely "surreal." Moreover, undescribed characters' faces and under-described settings abound in Kafka's plots to let the reader impose his/her descriptions that personalize the universality ("Castle Hill," "the Bridge Inn," "Count West's castle").

This brings us to examine Kafka's Judaism as a multivalent and intricate web of ideas, words, and associations that derive from a variety of sources and experiences. Kafka said: "What have I in common with Jews?" "I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe." It should be noted that the word "Jew" is completely absent from Kafka's fiction. Four critics namely Scholem, Schoep, Susman, and Brod agree that "there is something Jew-

ish about Kafka's works" and their interpretations of his 'Jewish essence' differ.

In Schoeps's case, Kafka's writing is said to exemplify the Jewish paradox of faith, rendered in Protestant-Barthian terms; Scholem associates Kafka's style with the nihilistic potential inherent in the Jewish mystical tradition; Brod and other members of the "Prague Circle" identify his novels with a communal ethic and a desire for "national rejuvenation," which they perceive as the primary mission of Zionism; Susman sees Kafka's writing as a contemporary expression of the Jews' "diasporic vocation," a reminder that Jewish peoplehood is rooted in the experience of exile. (Rubin)

In his seminal work *Kafka's Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition*, David Suchoff outlines the multiple strands of Jewish elements in Kafka's major works with extraordinary richness and refined textual analysis. In Chapter 2, he interprets "Yiddish as a language of comic curse" in *The Judgement* and suggests that its father-son conflict is fundamentally linguistic, referring to "the language wars that arose in the Zionist discourse of the time." In Chapter 3, in an effort to "unpack the transnational and transcultural dimensions" of *Amerika*, Suchoff draws on notions associated with "Jewish Kabbalah and elements of Hebrew Bible interpretation." Kafka's critique of the "Yiddish theatre" is used in Chapter 4 to critically understand the comedy of the law in *The Trial*. Chapter 5 argues that *The Castle* was deeply influenced by Kafka's experiences with learning and communicating in Hebrew, a novel that, according to him, reflects the role that multiple national sources played in the birth of modern Hebrew (Suchoff).

However, the only criticism of Suchoff is that in an attempt to focus on Kafka's Jewish language, he ends up overlooking the possible Czech influences on him as he grew up in a multi-lingual environment in which German, Czech, and Yiddish were all frequently spoken.

### **German-Jewish Identity in *The Castle***

Kafka's choice of making K. a land surveyor is seemingly deliberate. In Hebrew, the word for surveyor closely resembles Messiah. Therefore, the figure of K. may allude to "Jewish Messianism," which is, "an oppressed minority's periodically recurring hope for divine political intervention" (Heidsieck).

The novel is ripe with allusions to important events in the Hebrew Bible, particularly those of the New Testament. Notable similarities can be seen between K.'s first lovemaking with Frieda and the biblical account of the Fall. Arguably, K.'s arrival in the village suggests beyond the mere Messianic to the birth of the Messiah-Christ: K. was "at the very first hour of his arrival ... quite helpless on his sack of straw...at the mercy of any official action." It is replete with motifs from the "Epistle to the Galatians." The second chapter is titled "Barnabas" and introduces the castle messenger, which alludes to the "missionary role of the historical Barnabas, his wavering between adherence to the Judaic law and faith in Christ, thus, becoming a symbol for K.'s crossing of quasi-ethnic borders and for the Barnabas family's outsider status within their own society" (Heidsieck).

K's desire to belong, to be acknowledged by the castle, is undoubtedly apparent. He is a land surveyor - *landvermeeser*, a word close in sound to that of the word 'wanderer' (*landstreicher*). In addition, Kafka adds to K's character a walking stick and rucksack - the typical symbols of the wandering Jew, both in literature and in folklore. However, it is crucial to note that we don't find the appearance of a priest or a pastor or a rabbi in the chosen text. The image of a church is preferred in lieu of a synagogue while making a comparison between the Castle Tower and the Church Tower. K's estrangement can be observed while he is hugging Frieda:

K felt constantly as if he was lost, or happened to be in a foreign country, no one has ever been to, a foreign country in which even the air has nothing to do with the homeland. One cannot but suffocate there due to its foreignness. And yet, with the power of its absurd charms, one can but walk on, lose one's way. (Kafka)

K. resigns without any problem to the abasements he suffers from the people in the castle and the villagers, "you are not from the castle, not from the village, you are nothing" (49). Firmly believing in the righteousness of his way and in the correctness of emancipation, he persists, intensifying his alienation furthermore. K. has no way to enter the castle, he is clueless about the way to the castle which can be seen as the failure of emancipation. At first, Kafka depicts the community's reluctance to accept the foreigner, the Jew: "a stranger and foreigner, a so-and-so no one wants, getting under everybody's feet, causing trouble, with his dubious intentions" (50).

Furthermore, Kafka highlights his critique of Jews, who had renounced their homes: "The memory of his home town passed quickly In K's mind.

That same small town was nothing short of this castle. And should K. be interested in appearance only, then his long journey was useless. He had better visited his old birthplace" (11). Hence, it implies that K. did not come to enjoy himself, but for another purpose - a purpose for which he was prepared to suffer – assimilation.

K's insistence on being part of the community only stresses his sense of alienation. He is humiliated, yet attempts with all his might to blend and fit in. Similar to the Jews, who tried to assimilate and were attacked from two different directions: the formal authorities, letting them do only low-rank office jobs, and the manual workers (helpers, cooks, etc.), even lower in position, refusing to accept them, thus causing permanent enmity. So was K. - below the castle, which denies to acknowledge him in principle, in spite of the correspondence, and above the hostile village, the foreigner-hating village, refusing to let K. assimilate. K's knocking on the castle doors (metaphorically, since he will never reach the castle), and his wish to enter it, may represent Jews knocking on other nations' doors, wishing to assimilate among the gentiles. The doors are always locked for K., they are the powerful, real expression of the boundary, separating the Jews from their environment. The locked doors are an additional expression of the failure of emancipation. Ergo, *The Castle* highlights the homelessness, facelessness, and rootlessness of the "stranger" who can be a Jew or a Gentile, or anyone in the pursuit of a "sense of orientation."

### **Kafka's Diaries**

Upon looking at Kafka's diaries, it is suggested that this body tormented him in childhood. Despite being a Jew, whether consciously or unconsciously, the anti-Semitic hate for the Jewish body, common at the time, was adopted by him. "It is certain, that the main obstacle to my progress is my physical condition. In a body like this one cannot achieve anything. I will have to get used to permanent failure" (Diaries a, 133). One cannot gloss over the recurrent note of intense self-hatred. "Sometimes I would like to take them, just as a Jew (myself Included) and stick them all, say, into a drawer of a linen cupboard, then wait a while, and open the drawer to peek in and see if they have all suffocated and if not - close the drawer and keep it on to the end" (Kafka, *Letters to Milna*).

The Jews, who will not let go of Europe, are compared to indestructible bathroom cockroaches: "What could be more natural than get up and leave the place you are hated in? The heroism in staying, in spite of all, is that of the cockroaches, which, too, cannot be annihilated from the bath-

room" (Kafka, *Letters to Father*). Nonetheless, a limitation of the present study is that it uses his autobiographical writings, thus, making it difficult to estimate to what degree the text is "strictly fictional" or "strictly autobiographic," as noted by the translator of his journals and his correspondences.

### Other Readings of *The Castle*

Because K. does not fit within his episteme (the finite set of ideas which constitute knowledge for a specific culture at a specific period in time), he is a madman, a nuisance to the culture that must either be corrected or removed. Thus, Kafka's protagonists stand alone, against a whole world of non-understanding. (Breeding)

The elements of absurdity abound in the novel *The Castle* in terms of its futility of waiting, the meaninglessness of existence, the incredulity of the events and happenings surrounding us as K. represents the man and his plight and the castle/officials of the castle represents 'the Godot will not come today he will come tomorrow'. Such an existence of absurdity in literature leads us towards the realization of the nature of human life and leads us towards leading the lives for the sake of life itself, nothing more and nothing less (Parameshwari).

The absurdity of Kafka's text does not come from fantastic imagery, dreams, or surrealistic mirages, but rather from the inscrutable logic, anti-logic, or dream logic that governs the tales. It can even be read as an example of dystopian fiction portraying an irrational society that is far from ideal with its protagonist K. attempting to navigate his way through its complicated bureaucratic system. The world described here seems chaotic, suffocating him to his suicide. In addition, it may also stand as a metaphor for the corrupting and debilitating effects of industrialization on society. It predicts the rise of dystopia in a society where those with power are virtually unreachable and living in an isolated world. Another lens to look at it is through paranoid fiction, as Kafka's narrators and protagonists never know if they would wake up human, animal, or insect. But whatever reality they are in, they have absolutely no control over it.

In sum, it may be concluded that Franz Kafka's most humanistic work is actually a quest narrative wherein the search for meaning (also, transcendence) - via one's identity - is placed within the social context of a village, pitting the marginal self against the powerful state ('castle').

**Works Cited:**

- Breeding, Jacob. *The Power of Madness: A Foucauldian Reading of Kafka's The Castle and Other Works*. 2016. Middle Tennessee State University, MA Dissertation.
- Chamling, Rosy. "My Life Is a Hesitation before Birth': The Pain of Unbelonging in the Novels of Franz Kafka." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)* ISSN (Online): 2319 - 7722, ISSN (Print): 2319 - 7714 [Www.Ijhssi.Org](http://www.ijhssi.org) | | Volume 8 Issue 02 Ser. III | | February. 2019 | | PP.01-05. Accessed 10 Apr. 2022.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. U of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Duttlinger, Carolin. *The Cambridge Introduction to Franz Kafka*. Cambridge UP, 2013.
- Heidsieck, Arnold. "On Judaism, Christianity, Anti-Semitism in Kafka's the Castle, His Letters, and Diaries." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, Elsevier BV, 2008. Crossref, doi:10.2139/ssrn.1276447.
- Issac, Haim. *Diaries*. Shoken Publishing House, 1978.
- Kafka, Franz. *Letter to My Father*. 2008.
- . *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Penguin UK, 2008.
- . *The Castle*. Schocken, 2012.
- . *Letters to Milena*. Schocken, 2015.
- . *The Trial*. Xist Publishing, 2015.
- Parameshwari, K. "A STUDY OF THE ELEMENTS OF EXISTENTIALISM AND ABSURDISM IN FRANZ KAFKA'S WORKS." *VEDA'S JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)*, 2019, doi:<http://joell.in/vol-6issue-4-2019/>.
- Rubin, Abraham Arie. *Kafka's German-Jewish Reception as Mirror of Modernity*. 2014.



Graduate Center, City University of New York, PhD Dissertation.

Suchoff, David. *Kafka's Jewish Languages*. U of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

Tudhope, Andrea. *Place as Process: A Comparative Analysis of James Joyce's "Eveline," Franz Kafka's The Castle, and Jorge Luis Borges' "Las Ruinas Circulares," and a Philosophical Exploration into Aristotle and Heidegger on Art, Being, and Place*. 2013, [digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:8096/datastream/OBJ](https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:8096/datastream/OBJ).