

A Critical Review on Kafka's *An Imperial Message*

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Franz Kafka is a prolific writer of parables, aphorisms, short - stories and novels. His cryptic writing style is known as Kafkaesque. Kafka's life is his literature and his literature is his life. His literature is a soulful urge to righteous and conscious living. Some of his works are *The Judgment, The Metamorphosis, The Penal Colony, The Hunger Artist, The Trial, and The Castle* etc. Writing is Kafka's metaphysical desire to die physically and born inside to meditate universal truth. There are diverse literary reviews on him. Some critics denounce Kafka as a pessimist who has not conveyed anything through his works except confusion. Yet there is another class of critics and writers which hails Kafka as deft writer. Grand names in literature like J. M. Coetzee, Gabriel García Márquez etc are admirers of Kafka. They love his style and humanism in his literature. The parables of Kafka are riddles of humanism and universal truth. "Imperial Message" is one of the excellent and crisp parables of Kafka. The parable elucidates the gulf between people and the human truth which can be transcended by human memory.

Key Words: Kafkaesque, Riddles of Humanism, Universal Truth and Human Memory**Introduction:**

The Legacy of Franz Kafka, the German writer of parables, aphorisms, short- stories and novels, is very rich and distinct. Many renowned personalities, across the world, like J. M. Coetzee, Milan Kundera, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Che Guevara, are spell bound by his mystic woks. Kafkaesque, the popular name to his unique style has laid the path to the literary style, magical realism.

Franz Kafka was born on 3rd July 1883 in Prague, then capital of Austro-Hungarian Empire in a Czech middle-class Ashkenazi Jewish family. Herman Kafka, father of Franz Kafka, was an immigrant to Germany from Osek, a Czech village located near Strakonice in Sothern Bohemia. Kafka, as a German speaking Jew, belonged to a power owning linguistic and religious minority amidst Christian Czechs majority, who were

brimming with nationalistic fervor. Kafka knew, quite early in his life that writing is the only positive hope to him. He was born with creative zeal. Prague with multi-lingual and multi- ethnic conditions enriched his genius. Kafka liberally allowed his art to the positive influence.

In 1901, after attending German boys' primary and secondary schools alongside other middle-class Jews, Kafka entered law school at Charles-Ferdinand University, the German university in Prague. While he was there, he took a few German literature courses and became part of Prague's increasingly popular German-language literary scene, attending readings and participating in reading groups. It was during this time that he met Max Brod, who would become his lifelong friend and editor.

Despite receiving his law degree in 1906, Kafka worked in the legal field for only one year, as an intern in Prague's civil and criminal courts. However, that year appears to have influenced him greatly: Many of his works concern bureaucracy and the legal system.

He considered writing his true profession but worried it would not provide him with sufficient money to live. He sought a reliable job with a steady income and found his niche in the insurance industry, working briefly for a small private company, then for the Workmen's Accident Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague. Kafka rose to a position of authority and continued working for the insurance company there until he retired in 1922.

Because his brothers had died as infants and his sisters were born when he was already in school, Kafka had borne the brunt of his overbearing father's temper and stubbornness. Even as an adult, he remained bitter about his childhood. In a now-famous 1919 letter that he wrote to his father but never sent, he claimed he was a "timid, hesitant, restless person" because he feared his father. Writing, despite his father's objections, became his one escape, albeit an imperfect one: His relationship with his father found its way into everything he wrote.

Despite his claim that Judaism was alienating and that he had nothing in common with synagogue-going Jews like his father, Kafka developed a keen interest in Jewish culture and spirituality as an adult. Not only did he read a lot of Yiddish literature and enjoy Yiddish theater; he

studied Hebrew and dreamed of moving to Palestine in the Land of Israel, which during his lifetime was not an independent nation. However, he almost never mentioned Judaism in his writing.

Kafka suffered from social anxiety and depression and often battled stress-induced ailments like migraines, insomnia, constipation, and boils. He would probably not be considered a fully functional adult by today's standards. Only in 1915 he finally began to live on his own in Prague. By then, he was thirty-two years old and had already broke off his first engagement to Felice Bauer, a Jewish woman he'd met through Max Brod. The couple became engaged again in 1917, but their relationship fizzled after Kafka was diagnosed with tuberculosis in September of that same year. He had three more serious relationships, including a second engagement to Julie Wohryzek, but he never married.

The year before his death, Kafka moved to Berlin to live with kindergarten teacher Dora Dyamant. She burned several of his manuscripts at his request, an order that reflected Kafka's dissatisfaction with his writing. *The Metamorphosis*, however, was among the handful of works he considered worthy, though he told friends he was unhappy with the ending.

Kafka's tuberculosis made him too sick to care for himself, he moved back to Prague to live with him to seek treatment at a series of sanatoriums. Unable to eat for days, he died of starvation on June 3 1924, while seeking treatment near Vienna. Kafka was buried at the New Jewish Cemetery in Prague, just one month shy of his forty-first birthday.

Following Kafka's death, his friend Max Brod discovered a letter instructing him to burn all of his stories, letters, journals, and sketches. Brod ignored his friend's wishes. More than a decade after his death, Kafka's works were first translated and published in English, and they continue to be retranslated, published, and discussed throughout the world today.

The works of Franz Kafka have since been recognized as symbolizing modern man's anxiety-ridden and grotesque alienation in an unintelligible, hostile or indifferent world. In Kafka's mature prose, the lucid, concise style forms a striking contrast to the labyrinthine complexities, the anxiety-laden absurdities, and the powerfully oppressive symbols of torment and anomie that are substance of the writer's vision.

Franz had been trying his hand at serious writing since 1898, but these early works were destroyed. Later he began writing more seriously. His first extant story, *Description of a struggle*, dates from 1904-1905. In 1913, Max Brod convinced him to publish *Meditation*, a collection of some early short stories and sketches.

Writing novels was a long cherished ambition of Kafka. His three major ventures *America*, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, were left incomplete by Kafka due to his untimely death, infecting himself with tuberculosis, on 3rd June 1924, in a sanatorium near Vienna, Austria. *Meditation(1913)*, *The Judgment(1913)*, *the Stoker, the first chapter in America(1913)*, *The Metamorphosis(1915)*, *A Country Doctor(1919)*, *In the Penal Colony(1920)*, *The Bucket Rider(1921)*, *A Hunger*

Artist(1924) were published during his life time. The three incomplete novels were posthumous publications, chiefly due to the sincere and tributary efforts of Max Brod, the friend, editor, and biographer of Kafka, whom Kafka loved so much.

Kafka is an existential modern writer. We cannot find Kafka imitating any contemporary technique. He has worked out his own technique to artistically portray his dream- like inside. He says,

The tremendous world I have in my head, but how to free myself and free it without being torn to pieces. (Diaries, 222)

Literature to Kafka is no recreation. It is everything to him. He said that everything that was not literature bored him. He describes his feeling while writing as,

The strange, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps saving Comfort that there is in writing. (Diaries, 407)

Writing is his metaphysical urge to die physically and born inside to dissolve deep into the higher observations. The ideas for his works are pre- conceived. They happen to him as shocks or special inspirations. These special inspired states of Kafka are the states where his heart and mind are congregated to analyze his multifarious complex observations.

Kafka has penned some very pragmatic and enigmatic parables. "Imperial Message" is one of the simple Parables of Kafka. An emperor of the Sun dynasty summons the meanest of his subjects. The meanest subject is the chosen one to carry the message of the dying sun dynasty Emperor. The subject kneels down near the Emperor's bed, to

which dying Emperor whispers a message. Before the subject could turn his full retina to the Emperor's face the Emperor is dead. And the room of the Emperor is thronged with notables. The amassed notables have come to the dying Emperor with prayers. They have prayed so that the Emperor would rest in peace. The thickly packed crowd has made the walls of the room and the wide high curve of the palace to disappear. It is so impossible for the messenger to push his way through the people and deliver the Imperial message to every home of the every subject of the Emperor. To stamp the glorious tattoo of his fist on every door, the "Strong" and "indefatigable" messenger has thwarted out the people obstructing his way. But it is impossible to him to push through the numerous people. The messenger has to get through so many stair cases, many court yards, the city capital, the center of the world and the overflowing dregs of humanity. It will take thousands of years, naturally, to cross all these. Obviously, unachievable is the imperial task of the messenger. The last sentence of the parable takes a witty twist. The Imperial message cannot overhaul all the thousand years to reach to the humble homes, but all that can be dreamed by the reader, sitting beside a window.

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He will never get to the end of them; and even If he did, he would be no better off; he would Have to fight his way down the stairs; and even If he did that, he would be no better off; he would Still have to get through the courtyards; and after The courtyards, and after the courtyards, the second Outer palace inclosing the first; and more stairways And More courtyards; and still another palace; and So on for thousands of years; and did he finally dash Through the outermost gate-but never, never can that Happen-he would still have the capital city before him, The center of the world, overflowing with the dregs of Humanity. No one can force a way through that, least Of all with a message from a dead man. –But you sit by your window and dream it all true, when evening falls. (Franz Kafka, 5)

The imperial message uttered by the Emperor of sun dynasty is a symbolic reference to the original human truth. The original human truth cannot be reached to people by an outside source. The memory of the truth lies in the readers but they cannot transcend thousand years back and connect to the memory of the truth. The parable has another meaning. The real intent of the ruler, whether it is in the age of anarchy or monarchy or Aristocracy or democracy, cannot be sent to common public.