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Literary Research Paper

Dominance and Repression: The Seed of Existential Crisis in Franz Kafka's The Trial

Jannatul Ferdous Asha[1]* & S M Rokibul Hassan[2]

Abstract: This study explores the psychological control and existential breakdown in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, focusing on how unseen power destroys individual identity without using physical force, which works through dominance and repression. The novel presents a character named Josef K., who is a bank official suddenly arrested for an unknown crime and becomes trapped in a bureaucratic system that uses surveillance, delay, and uncertainty. This study demonstrates how the interplay between external systemic repression and internal psychological conflict destroys the protagonist's sense of self. This study uses Lacanian psychoanalysis and the existential philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre to better understand the protagonist's situation. This study has been conducted following a qualitative approach and content analysis method. Through close reading and comparative analysis, this study demonstrates how modern systems of power achieve domination by subjugating the mind.

Keywords: Alienation, dominance, existentialism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, repression

Introduction

Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, published in 1925, remains one of the most compelling explorations of authority, bureaucracy, alienation, and psychological disintegration. This novel shows a disturbing portrayal of a man trapped in a legal system that does not make sense and controls every part of his life. The story is about Josef K., a respectable bank official who wakes up one morning and suddenly find that an unknown authority has arrested him for a crime that is not clarified to him "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K.; he knew he had done nothing wrong, but, one morning, he was arrested" (Kafka, 2005, p. 4). The opening line demonstrates the main conflict of the book, which is not based on physical confinement but on psychological control. Josef K. is still free to conduct his daily life, but the court's unseen power slowly takes over his thoughts, relationships, and sense of self. Josef K. starts out as a self-confident bank employee, ignoring his arrest as a simple mistake. But the court's influence quickly enters every aspect of his existence. He meets officials and lawyers, becoming trapped in a system that defies reason, and his anxiety and sense of helplessness begin to grow. No matter what he does, he never learns the charges against him. Kafka portrays a world were authority functions without transparency. As Kafka states, "the first documents submitted are sometimes not even read by the court" (Kafka, 2005, p. 55), illustrating the denial of justice.

The court's functioning is characterized by psychological dominance, driving the individual to internalize its authority. At the end of the story, Josef K. is completely defeated. The court's actions and Josef K.'s feelings of guilt and helplessness both are responsible for his downfall. Franz Kafka's *The Trial* is a popular novel, often studied for its themes of absurdity and the oppressive nature of bureaucracy. But current scholarship tends to treat these two issues, external systemic control and

*Corresponding author's email: jannatasha161414@gmail.com
[1]Lecturer, Department of English, Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, Bangladesh
[2]Undergraduate Student, Department of English, Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, Bangladesh

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internal psychological repression, separately, neglecting the interaction between them that produces the protagonist's existential crisis. The present study intends to explore the dynamics of dominance and repression in the emergence of an existential crisis in Josef K. in terms of analyzing the interrelationship between systemic control, psychological effect and existential collapse.

Accordingly, the study explores the following questions: How do dominance and repression operate psychologically upon the individual? How does this psychological suffering develop into an existential crisis for Josef K. in Kafka's *The Trial*? Through close textual analysis informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis and Sartrean existential philosophy, this paper demonstrates that Kafka's novel powerfully maps the conditions under which modern systems of power achieve domination by subjugating the mind rather than the body.

Literature Review

Scholarship on *The Trial* is substantial and varied. Ghosh (2024) takes an existentialist approach in analyzing the novel, arguing that the irrationality of law and absurdity of the judicial system leads to Josef K.'s existential crisis. Drawing on Albert Camus's theory of absurdity, Ghosh contends that the novel presents a world in which the individual's demand for clarity is met with institutional silence. Ghosh states, "Man needs clarity, but the world has none to offer. This is exactly the situation in Kafka's *The Trial*" (Ghosh, 2024, p. 151). She concludes that "the absurdity of law leads to the existential crisis of Josef K." (Ghosh, 2024, p. 157).

Thacker (2020) reads *The Trial* through a psychoanalytic and postmodern framework, arguing that the Court functions as Lacan's Symbolic Order and the Big Other – the master signifier that organizes the subject's reality without revealing its own logic. Thacker states that most critics read the novel as an existentialist text representing "the absurdity of a modern world where God no longer exists" (Thacker, 2020, p. 1). She defines the court as "the symbolic network of rules regulating our lives and structuring our reality" (Thacker, 2020, p. 2). Thacker characterizes Josef K. as a split subject whose unconscious struggle with the symbolic order drives the narrative.

Mondal (2018) examines the novel's absurdist dimensions, concluding that Kafka's central concern is not merely a critique of justice but an indictment of the judicial system's inherent fallacy. She writes, "We never learn why he was arrested and throughout the novel we are presented with a bewildering tangle of advocates, judges, and witnesses, none of whose actions make sense. It is the perfect picture of an absurd, irrational world" (Mondal, 2018, p. 80). Ganaie (2015) uses Derridean deconstruction to show how *The Trial* systematically deconstructs fixed structures of truth, justice, and identity, thus revealing the themes of ambiguity and loss of subjectivity.

Rasheed et al. (2021) compare *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*, finding common themes of alienation, helplessness, and dehumanization. They state, "K. also was being alienated by his surroundings. Almost every person he met knew about his trial and saw him as a suspect" (Rasheed et al., 2021, p. 97). Kashyap (2023) claims that Josef K.'s failure to comprehend the Court's operation leads to a psychotic breakdown, in which Freudian repression and Lacanian split subjectivity are crucial elements. She says, "His (Josef K.) failure to make sense of everything leading from the functioning of the court to his own self became the reason for his psychosis" (Kashyap, 2023, p. 259).

While prior scholarship has explored either the external systemic dimension or the internal psychological dimension of Josef K.'s situation, no study has systematically examined how these two forces interact to produce his existential crisis. The present study addresses this gap by demonstrating that the interplay of outer domination and inner repression – not either force in isolation – is the true generator of existential collapse in Kafka's novel.

Theoretical Framework

There are two important and closely related terms introduced in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Symbolic Order and the Big Other. Jacques Lacan describes the symbolic order as the social and

cultural structures which shape our existence, such as language, laws, customs and institutions. He defines symbolic order as "it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject" (Lacan, 2006, p. 7). The symbolic order of the law constitutes Josef K. His crisis starts when this basic order becomes oppressive and hard to understand. Lacan further clarifies, "The signifier's displacement determines subjects' acts, destiny, refusals, blindnesses, success, and fate" (Lacan, 2006, p. 21). The Symbolic Order, as seen in *The Trial* as the law or court, directly controls the subject's whole life. When one of the policemen says,

> Our authorities, as far as I know, and I only know the lowest grades, don't go out looking for guilt among the public; it's the guilt that draws them out, like it says in the law, and they have to send us police officers out. That's the law (Kafka, 2005, p. 6).

It shows how the court pressurizes Josef K. to accept the vague system without questioning and lays out the guilt trip of people without even explaining the reason.

The court performs as an omnipresent force in Josef K.'s life, connected to the concept of the Big Other. Lacan writes, "The subject can grasp nothing but the very subjectivity that constitutes an Other as an absolute" (Lacan, 2006, p. 13). The court is this absolute Other whose supposed knowledge makes him despair. Josef K. believes that he is constantly observed by an unseen power, the Big Other. He has no idea what the court wants, but he feels obliged to obey. He doubts himself and slowly destroys his sense of self, feeling watched and judged.

Jean Paul Sartre's existential philosophy is essential to an understanding of Josef K.'s condition. Sartre's concern is with human freedom and responsibility. In *Being and Nothingness*, he writes, "I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself" (Sartre, 1956, p. 439). Josef K. does not practice this freedom fully. His indecision, reliance on legal middlemen, and waiting reflect bad faith. Sartre also develops "The Other's Look or The Gaze of Others": "I am in a world which the Other has made alien to me, for the Other's look embraces my being" (Sartre, 1956, p. 261). This is connected with Josef K. in so far as his environment creates him and leaves him lost. Through Lacanian psychoanalysis and existentialism, *The Trial* reveals how social domination destroys external freedom and reconstitutes human subjectivity, resulting in psychological paralysis and existential desperation.

Methodology

This study was qualitative and followed a content analysis method for an in depth understanding of Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*. This research was exploratory, investigating systemic control, psychological internalization, and existential decay within the narrative. As primary data, *The Trial* (1925) has been read several times, and relevant passages, dialogues, and narrative descriptions have been used. Several research papers, articles, journals, and philosophical writings on existentialism and Lacanian psychoanalysis were used as secondary sources. Content analysis method was followed to analyze relevant scenes, dialogues, narrative descriptions, and symbolic representations.

Findings and Discussion

Franz Kafka's *The Trial* presents a completely dystopian world, where an unseen authority rules without clear reasons or transparency. The protagonist, Josef K., suffers from severe psychological breakdown as he becomes entangled in a bureaucratic system that defies logic. We learn Josef K.'s identity crisis, his existential anxiety, his alienation and helplessness, and the oppressive nature of institutional power. The court is an omnipresent force that uses psychological manipulation to control people, rather than physical imprisonment. The court believes that individuals do not need to understand the law; they only need to accept it as necessary. As Josef K. himself realizes, "the lie made into the rule of the world." Thus, the court serves as a powerful critique of how modern systems of power achieve domination by subjugating the mind rather than the body.

Psychological Effects of Dominance and Repression

From the very beginning, power is shown not through physical violence but through symbolic control. Kafka writes, "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K.; he knew he had done nothing wrong, but one morning he was arrested" (Kafka, 2005, p. 4). The arrest happens for no reason, causing immediate psychological shock. When Josef K. asks, "Why am I under arrest?" he is told, "That's something we're not allowed to tell you" (Kafka, 2005, p. 5). This refusal to give information shows how repression works by making people confused. A policeman further explains, "Our authorities, as far as I know, and I only know the lowest grades, don't go out looking for guilt among the public; it's the guilt that draws them out" (Kafka, 2005, p. 6). When Josef K. says, "I don't know this law," the answer is, "So much the worse for you, then" (Kafka, 2005, p. 6). The legal system here works as a symbolic order – an unquestionable authority that controls people psychologically rather than physically.

The guards make it clear that they have more power than Josef K. when they say, "You forget that we, whatever we are, we're still free men and you're not, and that's quite an advantage" (Kafka, 2005, p. 7). This statement makes Josef K. feel bad and makes him feel even more like a subordinate, which affects his mental health. This kind of psychological repression through unseen authority appears in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where Vladimir and Estragon wait forever for someone who never shows up. Estragon cries, "What'll we do, what'll we do!" (Beckett, 1954, p. 54), echoing Josef K.'s confusion. Similarly, in Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus asks, "What's going on here?" (Pinter, 2006, p. 2614) when orders come for no reason, reflecting Josef K.'s dilemma. Later, Kafka shows how this invisible power affects the mind: "The policemen were still on K.'s mind all through the following day; he was unable to concentrate on his work" (Kafka, 2005, p. 43). The system's goal is not to do justice but to control. Kafka writes, "Conditions like this, of course, place the defense in a very unfavorable and difficult position. But that is what they intend. In fact, defense is not really allowed under the law, it's only tolerated" (Kafka, 2005, p. 55). The court makes it impossible for the defense to work while also allowing it, which makes it hard for the individual to think clearly.

Josef K. himself points out the absurdity: "Its purpose is to arrest innocent people and wage pointless prosecutions against them which, as in my case, lead to no result" (Kafka, 2005, p. 23). The system processes innocent people but follows its own rules instead of what is true. The cathedral scene reveals the philosophical core: "No," said the priest, "you don't need to accept everything as true; you only have to accept it as necessary." "Depressing view," said K. "The lie made into the rule of the world" (Kafka, 2005, p. 101). The system wants people to accept it not because it is true, but because it is necessary. When authority's power comes not from legality but from force, the individual loses the basis for meaning and identity. In Albert Camus's philosophical essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus's calls Josef K. the perfect absurd man. In this book Camus writes, "In *The Trial*, Joseph K. is accused. But he doesn't know what. He is probably eager to defend himself, but he doesn't know why" (Camus, 1991, p. 99). For Camus, the absurd comes from facing something, "The absurd is basically a divorce. It exists in neither of the compared elements; it emerges from their confrontation" (Camus, 1991, p. 29). Josef K.'s situation is an example of this 'divorce'. His search for meaning clashes with the court's irrationality, creating absurdity. The more he seeks reason, consistency, and fairness, the more illogical the system appears.

Loss of Identity and Psychological Alienation

As this repression goes on, Josef K. begins to feel like people are watching and judging him, even in normal social situations. People he works with, his neighbors, and strangers all seem to know about his trial, which makes him feel even more alone. As repression continues, Josef K.'s sense of self slowly fades. He is told, "You're simply under arrest, nothing more than that" (Kafka, 2005, p. 10). This creates self-alienation where he feels more and more limited. His initial disbelief reflects his former security: "K. was living in a free country, after all, everywhere was at peace, all laws were decent and were upheld, who was it who dared accost him in his own home?" (Kafka,

2005, p. 5). But this certainty falls apart. "It seemed to him that his freedom was being limited as if his arrest was being taken seriously" (Kafka, 2005, p. 24). His effort to establish his identity – "Here are my identification papers; now show me yours" (Kafka, 2005, p. 6) – is met with refusal. He becomes obsessed with the scene of his arrest: "On the way home, as he passed by the junk room again, he opened its door as if that had been his habit" (Kafka, 2005, p. 43). The trial gets inside his head and makes it impossible for him to live normally. He can no longer separate his normal life from his life as an accused man. This confusion begins his existential crisis because he can no longer recognize his own self. Kafka describes how repression takes away K.'s professional identity:

And how was he to succeed in conducting all this at the bank? It involved much more than just submitting some documents that he could probably prepare in a few days' leave, although it would have been great temerity to ask for time off from the bank just at that time, it was a whole trial and there was no way of seeing how long it might last. This was an enormous difficulty that had suddenly been thrown into K.'s life! (Kafka, 2005, p. 63).

He feels disconnected from his identity as a competent Chief Clerk. The statement "Everything belongs to the court" (Kafka, 2005, p. 70) sums up the court's total power.

As the trial goes on, "he considered how freely he had always given his name in the past, for some time now it had been a burden to him" (Kafka, 2005, p. 96). This loss of identity leads directly to existential crisis. This internalization of repression is similar to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Gregor Samsa wakes up as an insect but still worries about work: "If I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I would've quit ages ago" (Kafka, 1999, p. 5). He has internalized his duty so deeply that it controls him even when he cannot work. Josef K. goes through the same: "he no longer had any choice whether he would accept the trial or turn it down, he was in the middle of it and had to defend himself" (Kafka, 2005, p. 60). The court has given him an identity as a defendant.

The Existential Crisis and its Final Destination

Josef K. starts to question everything – who he is, whether he is free, whether his life has meaning. Sartre said humans are "condemned to be free." In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre writes, "I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself" (Sartre, 1956, p. 439). But Josef K. does not use his freedom. He waits, asks others for help, and hopes that the court will save him. This is what Sartre calls "bad faith" – pretending not to be free. Kafka presents a world in which existential crisis is unavoidable because freedom turns out to be an illusion. Although K. is not imprisoned, his freedom becomes empty. The absence of knowledge about the charge creates deep existential anxiety because identity depends on meaning and explanation. Kafka writes, "being led further from place to place, the further he went the more difficult it must become" (Kafka, 2005, p. 33). Every path leads deeper into the maze. Sartre's "Gaze of Others" applies everyone looks at Josef K. as a guilty man. He becomes guilty in their eyes, then guilty in his own eyes.

Toward the end, the priest tells him, "…the court doesn't want anything from you. It accepts you when you come and it lets you go when you leave" (Kafka, 2005, p. 101). This institutional indifference represents ultimate existential abandonment. At the moment of death, Josef K. blames himself: "he lacked the rest of the strength he needed" (Kafka, 2005, p. 104). The last line – "Like a dog!' he said, it was as if the shame were to outlive him" (Kafka, 2005, p. 105) – shows that he dies with no dignity, no freedom, no meaning. This fate is the final destination of Josef K.'s journey: mental repression, absurd power, and existential crisis leading to the total destruction of the self, leaving only endless shame.

Conclusion

Franz Kafka's *The Trial* explores the destructive effects of dominance and repression on human psychology. The novel challenges the legal system where people are trapped without knowing their offense. The Court, led by unknown judges and officials, is a powerful force that slowly destroys

the protagonist's mind. This novel is a strong criticism of the power of institutions today. Josef K.'s arrest is a symbolic way of showing how unexplained authority makes people feel powerless. The phrase "Everything belongs to the court" shows the ultimate power of the bureaucratic system. People lose themselves when they cannot find significance in life. The execution at the end is a metaphor for Josef K.'s complete destruction and a criticism of systems that destroy individuals without reason. The novel critiques the absurdity of modern institutions but does not suggest that resistance is easy. When Josef K. realizes he cannot escape, he accepts his death without fully understanding why. This novel emphasizes that people should not become victims of invisible authority. Destruction of the individual is unavoidable when the system operates through meaninglessness and control. Further research can be expanded on the influence of *The Trial* for understanding systemic oppression, following the theories of other theorists like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, or Giorgio Agamben.

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