Deconstructive Reading in Franz Kafka’s *The Castle*

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Abstract: This paper attempts to show that how Franz Kafka’s childhood experiences influenced his personal and literary life. His philosophy of life itself seems to be the principal idea of his works. Kafka, being an atheist always spurns the centre or ultimate reality which would guarantee a definite meaning. The Castle of Kafka truly manifests the rejection of an absolute meaning and the possibility of multiple interpretations. The abstract nature of the castle really upholds Jacques Derrida’s notion of ‘deconstruction’ in the form of infinite possibility of significations.

Key Words: Kafkaology, biography, deconstruction, the Castle, transcendental signified.

Inaccessibility of meaning

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Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a different and reluctant writer. Kafka, an enigmatic philosopher wrote the famous novel, The Castle which exemplifies his brilliant craftsmanship and thought provoking philosophy of life. Kafka’s books are not separable from his person because his bitter childhood experiences especially holocaust have influenced his works as well as his outlook on life to a great extent. As a boy, one of his friends argued for the existence of God that having a world without a God to create was like a watch without a watchmaker. Kafka refuted this argument firmly and questioned his Jewish beliefs and practices to become an atheist. It is obvious that his work Blue Octavo Notebooks states the fact that he was quite interested in the metaphysical question of Truth and ultimate reality.

Max Brod, the biographer created the image of Kafka and that of his work; he created Kafkaology at the same time. Kafkaology, is the discourse for Kafkaologizing Kafka. It examines Kafka’s books not in the large context of literary history-the history of the European novel but almost exclusively in the micro context of biography. In their monograph, Boisdeffre and Alberes cite Proust rejecting the biographical explication of art
but only to say that Kafka requires exception to that rule. Kafka’s protagonists or main characters like Josef K., Rohan, Samsa, the Land Surveyor, Bendemann, Josefine the Singer, the Huinger Artist, or the Trapeze Artist, are none other than Kafka himself. Biography is the principal key for understanding the meaning of Kafka’s works.

Kafka grew up in an atmosphere of familial tensions and social rejection that he experienced as a member of the Prague Jewish minority. The feelings of alienation, being an outsider and knowing that his life is subject to forces beyond his control as well as a sense of dogged survival, frequently associated with the Jewish sensibility has been his constant companions. These companions forced him to spurn the centrality of the German speaking elite and the marginality of the middle class Jews. In other words, the very life of Franz Kafka rejected a centre or an ultimate reality, which would guarantee all meanings. Hence, like Jacques Derrida, the post-structuralist Kafka also seems to support the concept of decentring, the unmasking of the problematic nature of all centres. Most of his works truly uphold the subversion of the centre, of which The Castle serves as a major instance.

Jacques Derrida, the best-known contemporary French thinker, writer and literary, cultural and political theorist is mainly known in relation to his development of the word “Deconstruction”. Derrida devised new tactics, which were aimed at challenging traditional methods and practices in literary criticism and philosophy. He replaced meaning in texts with dissemination of meaning. The term ‘Deconstruction’ has more precise and restricted sense in the context of academic humanistic disciplines. Deconstructive readings insist that texts should not be read as works by individual authors communicating distinct messages, on the contrary, texts must be read as sites of conflict within a given culture or worldview. According to Derrida, deconstruction is neither an analysis, a critique, a method, an act, nor an operation. In other words, deconstruction is not properly speaking a synonym for
‘destruction’, with regard to the term- ‘Deconstruction’, Barbara Johnson expresses his view as follows:

Deconstruction is not synonymous with ‘destruction’. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word ‘analysis’, which etymologically means ‘to undo’- a virtual synonym for “to deconstruct.” …if anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. …The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of the warring forces of signification with text. (Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, p. 5)

In other words, the deconstructive activity is composed of the conflicting readings of a

Text, by which the complex interplay of potential meanings within the text are revealed.

Derrida’s own description of deconstructive reading:

Must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses… [It] attempts to make the not seen accessible to sight. (*Of Grammatology*, pp.158-163)

Deconstruction always involves a way of reading that concerns itself with decentring, with unmasking the problematic nature of all centres. Reading the text in the deconstructive mode is, however, not a matter of ‘decoding the message’; it is matter of entering into the thoughtful play of contradiction, multiple references, and the ceaseless questioning of conclusions and responses. It is obvious that a thorough analysis of the plot of the novel in the light of Derridean logic and the principles of deconstruction will definitely give rise to multiple significations.

*Das Schloss* is Kafka’s last major work and its English translation is entitled *The Castle*. Kafka’s writings have an almost endless wealth of meaning. The summary of the
The novel does not do justice to the meaning of the text to a great extent. The simple narrative adopted by Kafka gives rise to an enormous diversity of interpretations and so does to the novel, *The Castle*. One wintry night, K., the protagonist, who has perhaps been summoned to work as a land surveyor, arrives in a snowy village. The notion of ‘the castle’ in the novel is very different from that of the traditional understanding of a splendid building. The Castle is abstract in nature and it is absolutely alienated from the protagonist, from the villagers and the readers alike. What does ‘the castle’ actually mean? It is subject to multiple interpretations. The castle stands as an embodiment of ‘the meaning’ and the entire novel portrays K.’s lifelong attempts to penetrate the inaccessible heart of this castle. The castle never restricts to a single definite meaning. The Castle is a terminus of the soul and mind. It is chiefly concerned with a man’s effort to make contact with an inaccessible castle and its inhabitants. It is a symbolic novel in which the castle can be considered to represent ultimate meaning and the Land Surveyor K., as any man who is in search of it. In the novel, K. is presented as one who believes in the existence and accessibility of ultimate reality. The novel is indeed a quest for and a questioning of the ultimate. The Land Surveyor’s expectations of the castle are shattered in the very first chapter of the novel itself, when he finds out that the castle “…neither an old stronghold nor a new mansion, but a rambling pile consisting of innumerable small buildings closely packed together and of one or two storeys”. It is only a wretched looking town, a bundle of village houses. On top of the hill where K. expects a huge castle, the epitome of the definite meaning, he sees a number of small holdings. The village houses may be said to indicate multiple significations. This very idea with regard to the castle upholds the Derridean argument of an infinite possibility of significations.

It is true that there are many clear instances in the novel, which directly question the existence and authority of the castle. In spite of these troubled situations of life, K. never loses his faith in the ultimate meaning and continues his search. He is busy at all times with
his efforts to reach the castle and the officials. Towards the end, he keeps on meeting the villagers and enquiring about the castle. The castle is the seat of the Divine power as far the villagers are concerned. They literally worship the castle and the officials. Finally, on his deathbed, K. realizes the fact that despite all his efforts in life, to get to the castle, the ultimate referent does not bear fruit and he miserably fails in his attempt to arrive at the castle by acknowledging the inaccessibility of ‘the meaning’.

The castle, the embodiment of the ultimate meaning and reality has itself been interpreted and understood in various ways. The novel reinforces the inaccessible transcendence of the ‘meaning’. This concept of ultimate meaning or reality can be further extended to represent God and Divinity. In *The Castle*, the protagonist K. is a troubled individual trapped in a nightmarishly impersonal world. He cannot accept the situation in which he is in and thus fails miserably in asserting his identity. This causes a metaphysical as well as a social alienation. The influence of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard is explicit in the novel. However, Kafka is more pessimistic than Sartre, Heidegger or Camus.

Kafka in his novel *The Castle* really exposes the impossibility of an ultimate meaning. The detailed analysis and deconstruction of the novel actually give rise to still more significations. The Castle is thematically a metaphysical novel. It illustrates the futile attempts of K. to get to his illusive and infinitely transcendental goal. The failure of each of his attempt reinforces the endless deferment of the transcendental signified. There is no definite meaning but an infinite serious significations. Roland Barthes too opposes the act of positing the author as the centre or the final reference point of meaning. The absence of an author decreases the possibility for intentional fallacy and reveals a set of oscillating significations. On the contrary, Michael Foucault analyses the discursive conditions that make possible the existence of any meaning. Frederic Nietzsche stands for the inaccessibility of an ultimate meaning. His phrase ‘God is dead’ refers to the destruction or abolition of a
universal referent as an ultimate meaning. In short, the priority of the multiple significations and the plurality of meaning have been advocated and maintained by many a renowned philosopher.

The detailed analysis of the *The Castle* manifests the fact that Franz Kafka too favoured the concept of plural significations. The novel presents the story of K. and his bitter and baffling struggle to gain access to the castle, the clouded locus of authority. In his metaphorical expedition K. encounters various moments in which he feels himself to be in close proximity with the castle, the epitome of ultimate meaning. However, a definite meaning or the ‘presence’ is continuously deferred and finally K. is forced to accept its inaccessibility and impossibility.

Concisely, there is no centre that can be regarded as the embodiment of the transcendental signified. The sign is no longer considered as a secondary instance which represents a prior entity or intentionality. In language, instead of stable structures, a never-ending play of meaning is emphasized. This play of meaning is given a number of names in Derrida’s works and post-structuralism including écriture, difference and textuality. As Derrida’s deconstructive philosophy points out there cannot ever be a transcendental signified and consequently no end to the play of meaning. Hence, though the novel of Kafka can be interpreted as an ontological quest, it has the potential to give rise to an infinite play of meaning. Thus the analysis of *The Castle* ascertains the unfeasibility of an ultimate meaning.

**Works Cited**


