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Transformation Into a Bug as a Disability:

How Gregor Samsa's fate parallels the modern struggle of living with disability in Bangladesh

Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* presents the story of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who was inexplicably transformed into a large insect. His new condition prevents him from carrying out typical human tasks, such as working his job as a traveling salesman, or even interacting with his family, as he is no longer able to speak. His physical appearance as a giant bug actively disgusts people, causing him to be treated completely differently at first sight. Although Kafka wrote this piece almost a century ago, these traits parallel the feelings of alienation and isolation felt by those living with disabilities in modern society. In present-day Bangladesh, Dermot Foley and Jahan Chowdhury examine the city of Chuadanga, where disabilities such as blindness, mental impairment, or physical disabilities caused the same results of alienation and isolation from society that Gregor faced. The differing factor was communication: while Foley and Chowdhury emphasize that social networks are the most essential factor in preventing isolation, Grete's final decision to get rid of Gregor is his removal from his only social network, leaving him stranded and pushing him toward his death.

Gregor's isolation stems from his social position in his family. He has devoted his life to working, made clear by his mother explaining what Gregor does in his free time, saying, "The boy thinks about nothing but his work...he never goes out in the evenings; he's been here the last

eight days and has stayed at home every single evening...The only amusement he gets is doing fretwork” (Kafka, 95-96). His purpose for dedicating himself to his work is made clear later in the story, where Gregor thinks to himself, “he had the firm intention of sending her to the Conservatorium, and...he would have announced it to everybody without allowing a single objection” (131). He had dedicated himself to financially supporting his family, rejecting the development of a social life, with his only involvement with society being his family and any necessary interactions at his workplace. With the loss of the ability to work, he loses purpose in life and society, much like those labeled with a disability in the real world. In Bangladesh, many of the jobs require manual labor and able bodies. When Julhash, a rickshaw driver, lost his legs to gangrene, he “lamented that he would still be employed if only he was a shopkeeper or weaver” (Foley, 379). Much like Gregor, Julhash must work to support his family, and the diagnosis of a disability robs Julhash of his livelihood and duty to his family, to the point where he resents his choice of profession. Without the ability to do their duty to their society, both disabilities lead to resentment and self-isolation.

Furthermore, not only does the disabled person feel regret from not being able to carry out their breadwinning duties, but they also require the help of the family to take over work for the disabled person. In Bangladesh, Foley and Chowdhury found that “The participants noted how many of their activities cease and the quality of living declines if the male breadwinner is labelled with a disability...such families are plunged into massive debt” (Foley, 378). Regarding Julhash’s story, “his children dropped out of school to take care of him and his wife now works full time as a housekeeper” (379). This story is very reminiscent of *Metamorphosis*, where Gregor’s father becomes a bank attendant while his mother and sister take up sewing and boarders to make ends meet. The effect this has is poignantly illustrated, “Who could find time,

in this overworked and tired-out family, to bother about Gregor more than was absolutely needful?" (Kafka, 124). Again, both in the modern world and the Samsa family, this disability leads to isolation from the family in addition to society, as the family must now take on extra responsibilities to make up for the lack of financial support from the breadwinner. Thus, the disabled person's isolation deepens, to no fault of their own.

Aside from the isolation happening both in the book and modern-day society, the alienation that happens to the disabled is a significant hindrance to break this societal isolation. One of the main sources of alienation is the perception of ability of the disabled compared to their actual ability. This is especially clear in *Metamorphosis* when Gregor is listening to Grete play the violin, where he thought "[Grete] was playing so beautifully...He was determined to push forward till he reached his sister, to pull at her skirt and so let her know that she was to come into his room with her violin, for no one here appreciated her playing as he would appreciate it" (Kafka, 130-131). This harrowing appreciation for his sister's violin playing being made known to the reader contrasts with the reader's understanding of what society thinks of Gregor – that he is simply a bug with no ability to even appreciate the fine art of music. Meanwhile, modern-day society presents the account of Shubrat, a seller of calcium carbonate lime. His story states, "[he] earned BDT70 a day before becoming blind in 1997. Buyers became wary of Shubrat's ability to sell legitimate goods as a result of his disability. His income is now less than BDT20 a day" (Foley, 379). Shubrat sells calcium carbonate lime, a rock that could be assessed with other senses such as touch and smell. Both Gregor and Shubrat are alienated from society based on discrimination and prejudice – their true ability can be much greater than the perception of their ability, however, society does not give either of them the chance to display their true capacities.

Finally, the most damning aspect of alienation is the simply the neglect of the disabled. After the choice of the Samsa family to get rid of Gregor, Gregor's thoughts in his locked room present the utmost sorrow. "His whole body was aching, but it seemed that the pain was gradually growing less and would finally pass away...he thought of his family with tenderness and love. The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister, if that were possible" (Kafka, 135). His acceptance of his alienation from his family and society is clearly one-sided, however, he has no choice but to succumb to the wills of his family and society, after being clearly neglected and declared unwanted by the people he lives for. This one-sidedness was clear in Bangladesh, as well, where the study found "Mujib...after being labelled with a disability, noticed that some 'friends' began to disappear from his life...Waseem, aged eight, expresses an unremitting theme in our field research – disappointment over how his friends had abandoned him once he was labelled with a disability: 'They have all forgotten me'" (Foley, 383). Mujib and Waseem have not forgotten their friends, longing for the same recognition prior to acquiring a disability, however, their friends have neglected them, resulting in the same alienation and isolation as a result of neglect that Gregor experiences in his story.

The unifying solution to these issues is communication. Foley and Chowdhury especially emphasize the importance of communication in a developing country such as Bangladesh, where "the lack of formal state-provided services often forces people to seek help in social networks" (Foley, 381). They stress that "these networks provide crucial emotional and practical support and, additionally, facilitate access to formal services, if there are any...social exclusion from these networks owing to disability deprives [the disabled] of moral well-being as well as employment opportunities" (381). Naturally, the absence of these social networks for Gregor is

clear in *Metamorphosis*, where he refused to network outside his family. When his own family cut him out of the only social network he belonged to, and without the ability to communicate his needs, values, wants, with a social network of people supporting him, he withered away in his room. If Gregor had a tight-knit social network to rely on like that identified by Foley and Chowdhury, would he have had the emotional support to continue living, being valued by this external network? Would they have tried to find a solution to his communication barrier, and provided an employment opportunity unique to a giant bug? Gregor clearly loved his family and wanted to be useful to them, so if he was able to communicate his desire to work and continue supporting the family, a hypothetical social network may have been able to create such an arrangement.

The applicability of Kafka's 1915 novella to the social struggles in modern-day living with a disability is striking. The causes and effects of isolation and alienation to Gregor and disabled Bangladeshi people are almost parallel, with isolation being caused by a stripping of purpose and distance from primary caretakers such as family, and alienation being caused by prejudice and neglect. The saving grace in both settings would have been communication and social networks, as a vehicle to meet the needs of the disabled and preserve their purpose and desires in life. While Kafka was likely not considering the application of his story to disabled, it is clear that Samsa's transformation is reminiscent of a life-changing event such as amputation of a limb or loss of a sense that drastically changes the day-to-day life and capacity of a person to do work, and as such, while the transformation itself caters to the absurd, the fate of Gregor Samsa is anything but, and creates a sense of familiarity to the modern reader.

Works Cited

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