

UDC 316.722-027.6:821.112.2(436).09
316.722-027.6:791.221.5(049.3)
316.722-027.6:821.411.16'08.09

ESTABLISHING IDENTITY IN ALIEN ENVIRONMENT: KAFKA'S "METAMORPHOSIS", POLANSKI'S THE TENANT AND KISHON'S STORIES

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Abstract: Identity formation is a process that involves both individual characteristics and cultural constructs. Dependent on family upbringing, as well as on encounter with the social and national environment, identity-formation is inevitably a complex and often painful process. This essay will attempt to convey this complexity and painfulness of establishing one's identity through the characters in Franz Kafka's story "Metamorphosis", Roman Polanski's film *The Tenant* and several of Efraim Kishon's stories, and to explore whether different approaches to alien environment may contribute to undermining the hostility faced. Even though in "Metamorphosis", Gregor Samsa's environment is his own family, the essay will explore how this secure environment becomes alien when it does not accept identity which is different from the one that it nurtures. *The Tenant* will be discussed from the aspect of the alien environment of the building in Paris in which the main character of Polish origin, Trelkovsky, moves, and in which he cannot establish his own identity. The film gives the opportunity for examining the decisive role that culture and national background

may have on the development of identity in an unfamiliar environment. The thesis that this essay aims to explore is whether or not a different approach, such as that of Kishon, to an environment which is equally alien as those in "Metamorphosis" and *The Tenant*, could lead to a more successful and less painful development and affirmation of one's identity.

Keywords: Kafka, metamorphosis, Polanski, Tenant, Kishon

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I would like to argue that Franz Kafka, Roman Polanski and Efraim Kishon share many characteristics. It may seem, at first, that Kafka's story and Polanski's film very similarly treat the inability of the protagonist to affirm his identity, whereas Kishon's stories discuss topics and situations that do not have much in common with it. In fact, many reviewers of *The Tenant* have emphasized that the film

has a definite kafkaesque mood in foregrounding guilt, anxiety, alienation and paranoia. Kishon's stories, on the other hand, specifically those in *Wie Unfair, David* (*It is not Fair, David*), have been praised mainly for conveying the humorous side of everyday life. However, in my opinion, all three works establish the same situation of a hostile, absurd and alien environment which the protagonist faces, and the only difference between them is how he reacts to that environment. This is what the essay would focus on: how the reaction of the protagonist may contribute to undermining the authority of the well-ordered, bureaucratic and alien environment.

Some of the things that have been said of Kafka's stories in general are true for all three authors. Thus, according to the authors of the *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, Kafka's stories are about "... individuals struggling to prevail against a vast, meaningless, and apparently hostile system... Kafka's heroes are driven to find answers in an unresponsive world, and they are required to act according to incomprehensible rules administered by an inaccessible authority; small wonder that they fluctuate between fear, hope, anger, resignation and despair" (Mack, 1997: 2747). That hostile system may be the bureaucracy of the state institutions, religion, the invisible network of social habits, the family in *Metamorphosis*, society represented in the microcosm of the neighbours in *The Tenant*, or institutions and neighbours in the three stories of Kishon selected here for analysis. All three authors present the "vulnerability of characters who cannot make themselves understood" (2747), and in all three works the authority that decides on the order of society is inaccessible and unreachable. The ironic attitude

conveyed in the alleged adaptation of Kishon's protagonist, however, helps the protagonist bitterly criticise society, and thus reduce his fear, anger and despair.

II. KAFKA'S METAMORPHOSIS

In *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a giant vermin. Gradually, as the story develops, we realize that this transformation is symbolic of his inability to establish his identity at work and within his own family. Due to his passiveness and the fact that he complains only in himself about the hardships of his job as a salesman, but never rebels openly against the unjust treatment, Gregor Samsa contributes himself to the situation he finds himself in, and he is painfully aware of it.

This lack of ability to affirm his identity, as the story reveals, is due to his confusion of what his role should be both in regards to his position at work and within the family. The tragedy is that although Gregor understands that something is wrong, he is unable to complain or to say just what he thinks – which would mean a firm establishment of his identity – because he doesn't know who exactly is responsible for the absurdities he experiences. Since the authority that pulls all strings remains hidden, Samsa does not know who to direct his anger to, so his despair deepens.

As he sees himself transformed into a vermin (cockroach in some translations), he immediately thinks about the injustice at work: other traveling salesmen live much better than me, he comments to himself. "For instance, when I go back to the hotel before lunch to write up the business I've done, these

gentlemen [colleagues] are just having breakfast. That's all I'd have to try with my boss; I'd be fired on the spot" (Kafka, 1997: 2750). This contemplation shows that his metamorphosis into a vermin is a result of the realization that he is undervalued and is treated as an unimportant and easily replaceable worker. And further on, he comments that, in fact, he wishes he were fired: "If I didn't hold back for my parents' sake, I would have quit long ago, I would have marched up to the boss and spoken my piece from the bottom of my heart" (2750). This "piece from the bottom of [his] heart" is his true identity. That would be his real self: to speak up to the boss, to rebel against the injustice and to quit the job he hates. However, feeling obliged to feed his family, Gregor Samsa does not affirm his true identity – his behaviour is timid and meek. This constant suppressing of his identity has led symbolically into his transformation into a vermin. His attempt to normally respond to this absurd situation make the story all the more grotesque. For example, just a few minutes after he had first realized that he had turned is a vermin, when he sees the watch, he thinks that he should hurry up in order to catch the train and be at work in time, trying to act as if nothing has happened.

The situation with his family is no better. Instead of his family offering to him love and support, they silently judge him for being unable to provide them decent living now that he has become a vermin. They are even disgusted with his new form, although the obligation of being parents and sister makes them accept him. His father is the most hostile and he resumes the situation of being the head of the family now that Gregor is shamefully enclosed at home. His sister and mother are more sympathetic, but being

much weaker than the father, they do not do much to help him. The situation becomes so unbearable for them that they even feel a true and sincere relief when Gregor dies, marking the end of the period when Gregor took care of them, and they are taking a holiday trip to make plans for the future. Failing to internalize the rules of his working place, in which arrogance and popularity are more significant than hard work, and of his family, which expects him to pay the bills, Gregor Samsa, confused, disappointed and desperate, fails to stand up against the imposed system – even worse, fails to even recognize the need to stand up against it – perishes from the alienated world forever, allowing it to continue existing with the same oppressive principles.

III. POLANSKI'S *THE TENANT*

The atmosphere in *The Tenant* is essentially the same as in "Metamorphosis": dark and meaningless, where alienation, paranoia, anxiety persist. The environment is equally hostile and equally unwilling to accept the stranger, the one who deviates from the norm – in this case, the norm of the building in which he moves.

Trelkovski is a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe who settles in Paris, finding an apartment in an old building, and learning that the previous tenant of the apartment was a young woman, Simone, who committed suicide by jumping out of the window of her apartment.

Similarly to Gregor Samsa, Trelkovski is a decent, honest, hardworking man who does not voice his identity firmly because he is afraid, and because he is too polite. His behaviour is equally timid and meek as

that of Gregor. An excellent example of this is the coffee shop near the building in which he orders breakfast and Gauloises cigarettes. When the owner tells him that they are out of Gauloises and that Simone used to come and smoke Marlboro, Trelkovski switches gradually to Marlboro and to the eating habits of Simone – this is just one of the things that show how weak his will is, as it is the beginning of his transformation into Simone, instead of establishing his own identity.

The hostile environment is represented through the neighbours who are watching him with suspicion without any apparent reasons and who knock on his door criticizing him about his behaviour in the flat. In fact, these are all unrealistic accusations as Trelkovski is a very quiet man who respects the rules. An excellent contrast is presented in the scene in which Trelkovski visits his friend who turns on the music loudly, which causes his neighbour to ask him to be more quiet as his wife is ill. Trelkovski's friend does the exact opposite to Trelkovski: he chases away his neighbour; Trelkovski, on the other hand, justifies himself even though the accusations are groundless. So, instead of firmly taking a stand and showing them that he is not guilty of producing loud noise or making parties or in any other way disturbing the peace and quiet, Trelkovski withdraws and even apologises to his aggressive neighbours.

Taking into consideration Polanski's Jewish experience, the film has frequently been seen as a Holocaust parable. In "Metamorphosis", the social customs and rules are the enemy, even though the character comes from the same cultural background as those he feels oppressed by. Linda Nicholson discusses such experiences in terms of something that is called

dynamic psychology, which is related to Sigmund Freud's work and which has challenged late nineteenth century views of social groups. "This new turn in psychology... contributed to an increased sense within popular thought that individual character is the unique outcome of a variety of environmental interactions..." (Nicholson, 2008: 65). Thus, according to Nicholson, "the emphasis in dynamic psychology on the environmental causes of character expressed a new appreciation that, for all, character is more individual than groups based" (65). Trelkovski, on the other hand, is an alien both in the sense that he has different character and worldview from those he is oppressed by, and additionally in the sense that he does not share the same cultural background as them, that is he is a Jew in a seemingly anti-Semitic environment, which raises the issue of inter-cultural misunderstanding.

The imminent destruction of individuality has been the topic of many reviews of the film, as well as the irrelevance of drawing a definite conclusion as to whether the neighbours really want to kill Trelkovski or he is sinking into madness – since the protagonist both are actually true and realistic in that the protagonist experiences them as such. Reviewer Behrens's interpretation is that "an alien is given the chance to rent an apartment for himself in a well-ordered world, however he may be evicted at any given time once the natives find him in violation of this world's well-ordered rules, or failing to properly internalize them. In the end, it is of little importance who is normal and who is insane. The individual's paranoia equals our well-ordered world's desire to persecute" (Behrens). Feeling confused and frightened in a hostile environment is certainly a feeling shared

by any person, which has been emphasized by Canby in his review about the film: "Trelkovski exists. He inhabits our own body, but it's as if he had no lease on it, as if at any moment he could be dispossessed for having listened to the radio in his head after 10 p.m." (par. 2).

This absurd environment in which he is senselessly and unreasonably accused and in which he is unable to establish his true identity but takes the role of a victim, eventually leads him to madness and to the same destiny as the former tenant Simone: he commits suicide by jumping from the window of the apartment.

IV. THREE STORIES BY KISHON

In Kishon's stories, the world the protagonist faces is just as illogical, meaningless and hostile as the world in Kafka's and Polanski's works. In the story "Please, Have a Sit", the bureaucratic system is so unresponsive that the protagonist cannot finish a simple administrative job because the official is always absent – even though officially he is supposed to be at the office to receive clients, that is the one thing he does not do. This makes the state system very inaccessible to the common people and there is no explanation why nothing is the way it is supposed to be. In "Time for Visits: Monday and Thursday", the institution hospital has rules about visits, but they are never respected by the citizens. In "More Loudly in A-Dur" the hostile neighbours act irrationally thus causing frustration in one of the characters of the story. So, it is not only that the state apparatus is cruel and inaccessible, but also the environment around the protagonist, composed of common people just like himself, acts in an absurd and hostile way.

But instead of the protagonist feeling fear, anger, resignation and despair, as the protagonists of Kafka and Polanski, Kishon's protagonist, always the narrator telling the story, manages to affirm his identity by making fun of rather than fearing from the meaningless world.

Kishon's stories always start with ironic and even sarcastic comments. In "Please, Have a Sit", for example, the narrator tells us that "one of the most emphasized characteristics of an Israeli official is that you can never find him... Israeli officials are most frequently at a meeting" (Kishon 11), some of which meetings last for three days and some – "only for five to six hours" (11). The protagonist goes to the Amidar municipality office 314 to submit a recommendation, but there is nobody there. The assistant tells him that Mr. Cheshuan, whom he is supposed to meet, is at a meeting with Mr. Stern, and politely asks him to "please, have a site" and wait, which, of course, lasts for several hours. Instead of feeling humble and humiliated as Gregor Samsa, who describes his boss as talking "down from the heights to the employees" (Kafka, 2748), the narrator immediately accustoms himself to this alien environment, so when people come in asking where Mr. Cheshuan is, he answers as if he works there: "He is at a meeting with Mr. Stern". Then, after several people come and go taking about official matters, he starts giving them advice about their own job, then he proceeds to opening the drawers and writing recommendations on different cases, then passes messages from one official to another, and even starts criticizing the employees for not doing their job right. Because of this, he even gets a promotion and the other employees are jealous of his business success, as all this happens within one

day. At the end of the working day, he orders the employees not to go to meetings, but always to be at their working places, so that the administrative system would function well. The narrator finishes the story with the following words: "Since then I'm working in the Amidar office. Clients are received every day from 11 to 13.00 hours, room 314. If you don't find me in the room, it means I am at a meeting. Please, have a sit".

This exaggerated and ironic account of an individual facing an ill-functioning institutional system leads to liberating the protagonist from fear and despair. It is undoubtedly clear from this and the other of Kishon's stories that the narrator has not really adjusted to this hostile environment, but that he is trying to cope with it through humour, which exposes the absurdity of the inaccessible authorities who are appointed precisely in order to help the common citizens, and that is precisely what they never do. In the story, the protagonist establishes his identity by becoming very comfortable and satisfied in the meaningless environment, but since this is actually ironic, he, in fact, establishes his identity by becoming a self-confident critic, mocking the absurdities of the world he encounters.

The other two stories, "Time for Visits: Monday and Thursday" and "More Loudly in A-Dur" employ a very similar method of exposing the absurdities of the environment. The former begins with the ironic statement that discipline is one of the important national characteristics of Israel, and they specifically cherish "discipline with traces of individuality" (Kishon 152), so when they see sign saying *Entrance forbidden*, they never enter... except if they have to, or for any other reason. The story is about the

protagonist's aunt who is in the hospital and asks for cheese. The protagonist wants to bring cheese sandwich to her, but the doorman would not allow him inside, saying that the time for visits is: 14.45 to 15.30 on Mondays and Thursdays. The protagonist answers: ok, but now I'm here, so let me in. However, the doorkeeper is professional and doesn't let him in, so the protagonist tells his whole family what an idiot this man is. In the meantime, looking through the glass doors, the narrator sees that there are at least about ten visitors sitting on each patient's bed. In the course of the next few days, the narrator and his whole family are trying to find all kinds of ways to visit the aunt in the hospital – for instance, they pretend the narrator had been injured and they have to take him to the hospital, they pretend to be doctors, journalists, and so on – but they are always caught before they reach the aunt and expelled from the hospital. At the end, they somehow manage to go in and the protagonist notices something very strange: for the first time there is literally not a single visitor in any of the patients' room, and it suddenly occurs to him: of course, he says to himself, it's Thursday about 3.00 o'clock. So, there are no visitors in the hospital only during the time for visits. Here, again, by doing all these ridiculous tricks, which are clearly not to be taken at face value, but are ironic, the narrator again manages to affirm his identity by mocking the absurd world in which visitors incessantly disturb the patients, thinking they do them good.

"More Loudly in A-Dur" can best be compared to *The Tenant* as it also deals with aggressive neighbours in a hostile building. The narrator starts the story also with a sarcastic note: In Israel, music connects us all and brings us close to one another (171). The

protagonist wakes up in the middle of the night hearing horribly loud shout: "We want to sleep! Turn off the music, you idiot!" The protagonist goes to the window and realizes that there is very, very quiet music in a flat at the end of the building. Then many other neighbours join the shouting, asking the "culprit" to turn off the "cat's meowing" (referring to the music), while, in fact, they are much louder than the music. The narrator himself joins in. Then the man from the flat from which the music is heard comes out asking who has called Beethoven's Seventh Symphony – cat's meowing. Suddenly everyone is silent, and after some time one of the neighbours tries to justify himself by saying that he didn't recognize Beethoven because of the shouting of the others, which leads to a verbal fight between the residents, and each of them tells the others to shut up so that they can hear this "divine music". Some even ask their neighbour to turn on the volume so that they can hear the music better. The narrator starts telling them that this Symphony in A-Dur is among the most important one of Beethoven's pieces, commenting to himself that he felt his reputation among his neighbours rising. Once the music stops, the speaker on the radio says: "You have just heard the music piece 'On the walls of Naharia' by Johan Shtockler". Suddenly everyone is quiet for few seconds, then they start shouting again: You call this Beethoven? This is cat's meowing!

Similarly to Trelkovski, the man who turns on the music is verbally attacked by the neighbours for failing to internalize the rules of the building. However, since the story is told from the perspective of one who is a part of the hostile neighbours but at the same time is ironic to them and himself as well, the narrator is

able to convey the absurdity of the shouting which is louder than the music itself, as well as of the snobbishness that makes people accept the disturbance if it is produced by a famous person.

V. CONCLUSION

Identity formation is a process that involves both individual characteristics and cultural constructs. Dependent on family upbringing, as well as on the encounter with the social and national environment, identity-formation is inevitably a complex and often painful process. Hopefully, this paper has shown the possibility that an approach, such as that of Kishon, to an environment which is equally alien as those in *Metamorphosis* and *The Tenant*, could lead to a more successful and less painful development and affirmation of one's identity.

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