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**The Search for Meaning in a Meaningless World: Existentialism in Kafka's  
"The Trial"**

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<sup>1</sup>**M. Hemapriyadharshini, M.A.**

English, Department of English,

PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore.

<sup>2</sup>**Dr. M. Samundeeswari, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.,**

Associate professor, Department of English,

PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore.

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**Abstract:**

In an absurd world where humans constantly seek meaning and purpose, a much-needed ideology emerges offering valuable insights to quench their thirst. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that appeared in the mid-20th century. Unlike nihilism, with which existentialism is sometimes associated and misunderstood, it argues that individuals' choices and decisions create meaning in their lives, not external sources. With Franz Kafka's *The Trial* as its primary source, this paper delves into key themes of existentialism such as alienation, the absurdity of life, freedom, responsibility, loss of identity, and acceptance. By examining the story and the character of Josef K. through the lens of existentialism, this paper aims to compare the similar themes present in modern society and to help readers navigate life's chaos with a greater sense of understanding and acceptance.

**Keywords:** *The Trial*, existentialism, free will, alienation, absurdity, acceptance, chaos

**Introduction:**

A purpose gives a sense of direction and motivation in an individual's life and thus, its quest has always been a constant necessity. Many researchers have also considered this as a fundamental human psychological need. But does such a purpose truly exist? Does every individual have a preassigned destiny in life? These traditional sources of meaning and purpose in life began to crumble in the face of the technological revolution that began in the late 19th century. This in turn gave rise to philosophical concepts like absurdism and nihilism, an intellectual belief that life is inherently meaningless. These ideals dismiss traditional values, perceiving life and the quest for purpose as meaningless. Such concepts can also motivate depression and suicide bringing a sense of despair in the minds of the people. Thus, existentialism emerged to confront this hopelessness and sorrow.

Existentialism began in the 20th century by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who is also often called “the father of existentialism”. This concept immediately gained prominence for it provided a philosophical framework to grapple with the anxieties and uncertainties of a world experiencing major upheavals like World Wars, the Holocaust, and rapid technological advancements in that period. Kierkegaard’s profound insights into human existence laid the foundation for existentialist movements and thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus later expanded its tenets. Existentialism reminds individuals about free will and encourages them to create purpose through their choices. The paper utilizes the existential views and ideas of Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre to analyse and bring out the respective themes of existentialism as represented in Kafka’s *The Trial*.

Franz Kafka was a German-language writer born into a middle-class, German-speaking Jewish family. His novels and short stories are regarded as one of the most influential works of the 20th century. His exploration of universal themes, concepts of human struggles and the search for meaning makes his works relatable even in the 21st century. Kafka’s work is widely considered for existential studies for they frequently explore the themes of alienation, absurdity, and individuals' struggle to find meaning in a seemingly indifferent world. Kafka’s *The Trial* narrates the story of Josef K., a man in his 30s who gets arrested for a crime he knows nothing about and is forced to navigate a bewildering and absurd legal system where neither the cause of his arrest nor the nature of the judicial proceedings is made clear to him. This sort of scenario is considered so characteristic of Kafka’s work that scholars came up with a new term called “Kafkaesque”. It is used to describe a nightmarish situation that is almost surreal just like the writings of Kafka. The modern world is filled with Kafkaesque experiences. The complexities of social media algorithms, lack of privacy with the surveillance system, lack of human connection with increased AI intervention, alienation with the pressure to present a perfect image, and dehumanizing work culture are all some Kafkaesque situations reflected in the modern world. The paper aims to draw parallels between the existential themes in *The Trial* and modern society trying to offer insights and valuable lessons.

### **The ambiguity and absurd nature of Life:**

The origin of this idea can be traced back to the 19th century in the works of Søren Kierkegaard but the term "absurdism" was first introduced in the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* by French author Albert Camus in 1942. It is the concept that believes life is meaningless. Thus, Camus states this search for meaning is futile in a world devoid of meaning and God.

In the novel, Josef K., the protagonist, is suddenly arrested without being told what crime he’s accused of. Despite being arrested he is also allowed to go about with his daily life without any clear explanation. As the story progresses, we also see the courtroom system and the trial he encounters are all bizarre and absurd. Throughout the novel, Josef K. is

overwhelmed by a maze of bureaucratic paperwork and procedures that seem to go nowhere. He is constantly given forms and instructions that do not have precise information which only adds to his confusion and frustration. Even the actions and roles of most or all most the characters in the novel seem unwanted and absurd.

Similarly in the modern digitalized world, decisions made by algorithms, social media, and online identity, overload of information, deepfakes, and misinformation, the paradox of digital connectivity are all some absurdities an individual faces. These showcase how the modern digitalized world, much like Kafka's universe, can be bewildering, and alienating. Despite the promise of efficiency, connection, and progress, it often leaves individuals feeling trapped in a maze of illogical systems and relentless pressures.

**Alienation:**

Existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus heavily explored the concept of alienation, linking it to the individual's struggle to find meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe. It was initially introduced by Karl Marx in his theory of alienation in Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, and The German Ideology. He used this term to describe the estrangement of people from their work, their wider world, and their selves. Alienation and Isolation, a main feature of the contemporary world are some of the key themes one can find in almost all of Kafka's works. Originally introduced by Marx in the 1840s this concept persisted into the 20th and 21st centuries. Alienation is the feeling of disconnectedness, leading to the withdrawal of self from people and society the reasons vary from physical, mental, spiritual, and religious. It takes different forms:

- Alienation from society
- Alienation from family
- Alienation from the workplace
- Alienation from one's self

Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher best known for contributions to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism talks about the importance of one's interconnectedness with their surroundings in his concept of "being-in-the-world" (Dasein). This concept rejects the traditional subject-object divide. Heidegger argues that we do not exist as detached spectators of the world but are always already involved in it. It refers to the fundamental human experience of being deeply interconnected with the world around them. According to Heidegger, when a person becomes estranged from this authentic connection it leads to alienation. In the novel, the absurdity of the legal system leads to Josef being alienated from society and himself. His conversations with the landlady, police officers, and even his romantic interests are distant and he fails to assert a meaningful connection. Heidegger's critique and Kafka's The Trial remain relevant in today's digitalized world. The overwhelming presence of social media, algorithms, AI, and digital technology has led to digital alienation where individuals feel disconnected from their true selves and struggle to make meaningful relationships. Heidegger in his essay The Question Concerning

Technology originally published in 1954 critiques modern technology. He argues that technology reduces the world and human beings to mere resources, leading to dehumanizing alienation. This critique from the 20<sup>th</sup> century resonates more with the alienation felt in the digitalized modern world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Acceptance and freedom of choice:**

In existentialism, acceptance plays a critical role in grappling with the absurdity and unpredictability of existence. In the novel, despite his initial resistance, Josef increasingly conforms to the demands of the legal system. He attends hearings, consults with lawyers, and tries to navigate the labyrinthine bureaucracy. However, his actions are driven more by fear and external pressure than by genuine choice, reflecting a lack of existential freedom. Throughout the novel, Joseph K. oscillates between trying to fight the system and seemingly giving up leading to an increased passive approach which eventually leads to his downfall. Albert Camus, in his philosophical book *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in the year 1942 argues that acceptance of life's absurdity does not mean passivity but rather a conscious embrace of one's lack of control. Acceptance and freedom of choice are dual forces central to existentialism. Camus argues that while life's absurdity cannot be overcome, individuals can choose how to respond to it. In the novel, Josef's journey oscillates between passive acceptance and futile rebellion. He initially protests his arrest but gradually resigns himself to the system's absurdity. His ultimate submission to his execution reflects a tragic surrender rather than existential acceptance. According to existentialism, acceptance does not imply surrender, it involves recognizing life's absurdity and chaos while embracing one's freedom of choice to live authentically. A real-world example of embracing absurdity to inspire rebellion is Mahatma Gandhi's Salt March of 1930. Faced with the irrational British salt laws, Gandhi recognized the absurdity but chose resistance instead of passive acceptance. His act of making salt, though small, sparked a massive movement against colonial rule. Similarly, in the novel, Josef K. struggles with an incomprehensible system, yet unlike Gandhi, he ultimately surrenders to it rather than challenging it. Josef K.'s passivity in *The Trial* is not entirely a conscious existential choice but rather a consequence of external forces. However, Josef K.'s inability to take control of his situation is seen as a failure to embrace existential freedom. Thus, one must not merely accept his fate but have to rebel against it when needed.

**Conclusion:**

Josef K.'s struggle in the novel masterfully captures existential themes such as absurdity, alienation, and the search for meaning in a meaningless world. His struggles mirror the modern individual's fight against the digitalized chaos of the 21st century.

Existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger argue that true freedom lies in recognizing life's absurdity and choosing to create meaning despite it. Josef K., however, fails to embrace this freedom, allowing external forces to dictate his fate. The novel warns of the dangers of passivity and how surrendering to absurdity, rather than confronting it, can strip a person of agency and identity.

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Understanding existentialism can serve as a guiding philosophy for navigating modern anxieties in an increasingly chaotic world. In an era where individuals face overwhelming choices, societal pressures, and digital alienation, existentialist ideas encourage self-awareness and personal responsibility. By acknowledging the absurdity of life without succumbing to despair, people can take control of their narratives, find meaning in personal experiences, and cultivate resilience. Just as existentialist thinkers like Camus and Sartre argue that individuals must create their purpose, modern individuals can apply this perspective to overcome uncertainties in careers, relationships, and societal expectations. By examining *The Trial* through an existential lens, readers are encouraged to confront and accept life's absurdities. And in the face of bewilderment, are advised to embrace the freedom of choice to create meaning in life. In a world that often feels Kafkaesque where we navigate endless digital algorithms and societal expectations, *The Trial* reminds us that the greatest tragedy is not life's absurdity, but our failure to rise above it.

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