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## **VICTIMS AND WITNESSES: THE SPECTACLE OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IN FRANZ KAFKA'S "IN THE PENAL COLONY"**

**SMRITHI M. VENUGOPAL<sup>1</sup>, SHERON K. P. R<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Post Graduate and Research Department of English

St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Devagiri, Calicut, Kerala

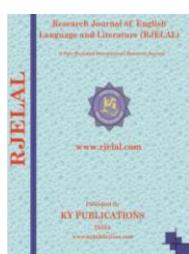
Email: smritimv@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Zakir Hussain Center for Educational Studies, School of Social Sciences

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Email: tajkpr@gmail.com

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### **ABSTRACT**

Torture is central to Franz Kafka's short story, "In the Penal Colony", ambivalent because of the myriad interpretations it has spawned among critics and readers. The killing machine inscribes onto the skin and later into the flesh of the condemned, the judgement without trial. The condemned knows not what is being written on his body. The act of killing, or rather the act of making the victim understand the nature of justice delivered, takes twelve hours for its completion, and is a matter of spectacle in the story. The story wavers between the dichotomy of experiences of witnesses, of the past and the present; the former being crowds from near and far, and children who were given preferential treatment in seating arrangements to watch the spectacle of torture, and the latter, a European traveller, assigned by the new Commandant with the duty to provide a verdict regarding the killing machine, who is seen caught in between positions of uncertainty and confusion. The trauma of the condemned affects the spectators differently. While some look at it as inhuman and gruesome, for the rest it is a moment of civic and spiritual celebration. The paper aims to explore the complex relationship between the traumatic experiences of the victims, and the witnesses of torture inscribed on the victim's body by Kafka's killing machine, reading it in parallel to the torture and execution methods that have evolved over the generations.

**Keywords:** Kafka, Machine, Trauma, Victim, Witness

### **Introduction**

"I went out to Charing Cross to see Major-General Harrison hanged, drawn, and quartered, which was done there, he was looking as cheerful as any man could do in that condition. He was presently cut down,

and his head and heart shown to the people, at which there was great shouts of joy." (From the diary entry of Samuel Pepys, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1660)

Having witnessed the series of executions in London, followed by the restoration of monarchy

in 1660, Samuel Pepys famously documented the above quoted in his diary, an eye witness account of the execution of a victim. Witnessing executions have never gone out of fashion. Be it beheading, stoning, crucifixion, or hanging, throughout the course of history, all gruesome and blood chilling execution methods ever invented have proved that mankind has mastered the art of torture and death, mutilation and deformation. It is in this very act of inflicting pain and humiliation, history have shown us humans to be surprisingly and disturbingly 'creative'. As Silvia Amati Sans points out, "torture is an organised instrument of social and political power, the principal aim of which is to provoke catastrophic fear and traumatic consequences throughout an entire population."(Sans,3). The ingenuity that has gone into the act of torture whether with the use of scorching heat, sharp tools, or ravenous animals is genuinely shocking. Execution methods that ensure slow and agonising torture, where the condemned does not immediately fall unconscious out of shock, or dead in a couple of minutes are the most dreadful. In execution methods like impalement in which victims were skewered through their midsection, 'blood eagle' where the ribs of the victim were exposed and forcibly bent, others like keelhauling, flaying, scaphing or quartering, death would normally come as a result of massive blood loss and shock. However the victim could be kept in a state of perpetual agony for several hours or days until they finally succumb to their severely infected wounds. Exposed, bleeding and writhing in agony, the victim is a spectacle. Despite the gruesome nature of such executions, they were often public and attended by large, jeering crowds. Most execution methods of the past were devised in such a manner that the process of execution went on for a considerable stretch of time, so as to keep the tortured alive, intensifying his trauma, and guaranteeing the spectators of trauma a feeling of contentment and gratification.

Before the French Revolution, a variety of methods were employed in putting a prisoner to death – regicides were quartered, thieves hanged, and highwaymen broken on the wheel. Only the privileged were despatched swiftly, if they were

lucky, by beheading. The revolution extended this privilege to all social classes and ushered in an age when public execution was a swift and mechanized business. During the Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution, it was performed efficiently and on an industrial scale by the guillotine. Holocaust happened not centuries before, reinforcing the idea that torture was not a thing of the past. Survivors of medical experiments like amputations and surgeries, placing subjects in pressure chambers, testing drugs and freezing them, attempting to change their eye colour by injecting chemicals, conducted in concentration camps by notorious physicians like Joseph Mengele at Auschwitz, are still not out of the terror and trauma holocaust offered. In his short story, *In the Penal Colony* (1919) composed many years before the Second World War, Kafka seems prophetic of the extermination and genocide methods later developed by the Nazis in concentration camps.

#### Literature and Trauma

The earliest and detailed approaches to the study of trauma can be traced back to Sigmund Freud and his highly influential work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Though references to trauma and its effects can be seen in his other works like *Moses and Monotheism* and *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, it was in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that Freud first give a detailed account about traumatic neurosis. Hence the origin of trauma theory can be attributed to psychological sources but is more empathetically and strongly articulated in literary theory, criticism ad practice. The field of trauma studies in literary criticism gained significant attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Caruth describes trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon" (Caruth, 32). Caruth explores the ways in which the texts of psychoanalysis, literature, and literary theory all speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience. Trauma theory, in its initial course popularised the idea of trauma as an event that has been

experienced but that cannot be represented again. A physical trauma is overwhelming and anomalous that it cannot be comprehended, broken down or processed by the conscious memory, but instead persists in the mind like an intruder or a ghost. Sigmund Freud characterized the memory of trauma as "a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work." The late 20th century, however, brought with it the rise of trauma studies and studying the psychological nature of trauma allows us to show how characters are affected by their traumatic histories and how their ability or inability to cope with those traumas drives the action of their stories. When a character is "diagnosed" as a victim of trauma, his journey can be understood through what science knows about trauma and the post-traumatic process, allowing us to explore the relationship between literature and trauma.

#### Torture as Spectacle

Execution was once a public spectacle. In Britain, public hangings were for a long time a huge source of popular entertainment. Large crowds of men and women, including children would travel long distances to be part of the occasion. An Act of Parliament ended public hangings in Britain in 1868, but it took America nearly seventy more years to follow suit. The United States had public executions of the condemned criminals well into the twentieth century. In 1936, Rainey Bethea, an Afro-American who confessed to rape and murder an elderly woman was the last to be publicly executed in America. Regarding his execution, in *The Last Public Execution in America*, Perry T. Ryan reports that around "20,000 men, women and children witnessed it". Reports of the crowd surging forward to grab 'souvenirs' from the dead man appear to be exaggerated, although they were instrumental in the abolition of public execution in the United States.

Public executions, in civilised societies began to be looked upon as a matter of embarrassment as our society was shamed into drawing a line between public executions and entertainment. Most civilised societies of today look upon public executions with distaste. Earlier, in the minds of those watching, public execution was an

affirmation that justice was being delivered. Kafka's plot introduces a character visiting a penal colony, expected to attend an execution of a soldier alleged to have disobeyed his superior and state a verdict regarding the nature of punishment and delivery of justice. The traveller is turned into the witness, the witness to the spectacle of execution, one among the many who have watched similar things happening in the past.



(The hanging of Rainey Bethea, the last public execution in the United States, 14 August 1936)

Not just the victim but also the tool is a spectacle. It is a matter of awe and admiration. An ancient machine programmed to inflict torture and bodily destruction is the nucleus around which the story revolves. Kafka's killing machine is perhaps one of the most horrific killing apparatus ever made in history and literature. For Heinz Politzer, for instance, the essence of "In the Penal Colony" is the execution machine, which becomes for him a symbol for "the tortures to which Kafka, the writer, subjected himself" (Politzer, 104). The officer at the Penal Colony is obsessed with the artistry of the elaborate apparatus and expresses his respect to the old commandant who created the same. The entire first half of the story involves the officer's enthusiastic description of the structural peculiarities of the machine. Such attention has been given to accomplishing the machinist functions of the apparatus and to the discourses pertaining to the same.

The ethical issues generated by the hurtful machine are not addressed by the officers. The architect of the machine was keen on thinking about the ways in which his creation will affect the bodies it subjugates. From numerous small needles that slowly inscribes the text, to the final stab that

eventually kills the victim, the machine is perfected for torture. The story is highly corporal in the way in which power operates and architectures and institutions of power capture bodies and torture them. At the moment when the officer despairs of convincing the traveller of the efficacy of the machine, he puts an end to the torment of the condemned and frees him. Instead the officer offers himself to the machine. The machine breaks down bloodily executing the officer. The devastating effects of bodily subjection is projected onto the reader's mind when in the process of execution, the machine collapses and itself disintegrates. The victims of trauma in the *Penal Colony* are unable to process their trauma. Nor do they remain alive to relate to others the traumatic experiences they have endured.



(Artist's imagination of Kafka's Killing Machine)

The Officer's tale of spectator capital punishment, with all its gruesome cruelties and brutalities, reminds us of a world in which, as Foucault points out, "the very excess of the violence employed is one of the elements of its glory". Moreover, the apparatus demonstrates a "justice that pursues the body beyond all possible pain" (Foucault 34).

#### **Witnessing Public Executions**

Friedrich Nietzsche, as a precaution against overpowering and subjugating others, tends to offer a warning that "we shall seldom be able to alter an individual and, if we should succeed in doing so, something else may also succeed perhaps unawares: we may have been altered by him" (Nietzsche, 140).

In penal societies, like the *Penal Colony* envisaged by Kafka, witnessing executions is also about bearing witness to what the government was doing to its citizens. It is difficult to arrive at a definite answer as to why some people watched gruesome executions with fascinations, why some others were revolted by the sight of another person in pain while some others seem indifferent to the whole process. Executions served as group bonding exercises where social norms were reinforced and the thrill of the spectacle revived while governments intentionally ritualized the process as a demonstration of political control. The whole affair had a carnival feel about it with crowds singing and chanting, and street vendors selling eatables. Kafka presents to the reader relics of the same carnival spirit, a crowd waiting to witness a gory killing, along with cheering women and children glued to the scene, who are offered the privilege of special seats to experience an uninterrupted panoramic view of the site of execution, the victim and the process of torture. It is no wonder that the children, who are conditioned from their early childhood to witness executions and thereby form primary notions upon the exercise of power and delivery of justice, to be indifferent to the trauma of the victim in their adulthood. The execution officer considers himself to be the only defender and the single advocate, and open supporter to the legacy of the old commandant. His memories of the most spectacular executions carried out by the 'peculiar apparatus', a time at which no discordant notes disturbed the killing machine is worth mentioning. As the single person to have witnessed all the executions carried out by the machine and eventually becoming the final victim of the disintegrating apparatus, the officer's memories carried the weight of nostalgia as he also expressed his pain in performing executions with a partially damaged machine with no public to witness.

"You should have seen the executions in earlier days! The entire valley was overflowing with people, even a day before the execution. They all came merely to watch. Early in the morning the Commandant appeared with his women. Fanfares woke up the entire campsite. I

delivered the news that everything was ready. The whole society—and every high official had to attend—arranged itself around the machine. This pile of cane chairs is a sorry left over from that time. The machine was freshly cleaned and glowed. For almost every execution I had new replacement parts. In front of hundreds of eyes—all the spectators stood on tip toe right up to the hills there—the condemned man was laid down under the Harrow by the Commandant himself.” (Kafka, 114-115)

During the regime of the Old Commandant, executions were festivals to which crowds flocked to see Justice being done; children were given a privileged place near the apparatus in order to witness at the sixth hour the transfigured face of the suffering man. Now, however, no one attends; the machine is run down and the officer can get no spare parts for it because the New Commandant disapproves of all that it represents. It becomes clear that the explorer has been positioned in a struggle between the old and the new orders.

To judge people of the past with the morality of our times would be fallacious. People who were routinely exposed to pain would hold different attitudes regarding human sufferings. In earlier times, executing somebody behind closed doors was regarded nothing less than murder as this derived the victim a final chance to meet a crowd, and deliver a final speech, and was crucial to the state or power structure to parade their authority to those who fall under its jurisdiction. Introduced in 1977, death by lethal injection is considered today's most humane method of execution. Neither painless nor dignified, death by legal injection is still not a private affair with so many people watching over needles injecting poisonous compounds into a person's blood stream. Torture thus never ceases to be a matter of spectacle.

Analysing trauma in memorial cultures is in itself a trauma. This is because memorialisation is characterised by the privileging of the notion of witnessing with its constraints on comprehension and re-presentation. Witness need not resolve

conflicts and problems of the past, but they do offer diverse perspectives to look at history. Every witness is a door that leads to different corridors and every corridor leads to different rooms and readings. There is a gap between what one sees and what one writes because of the influence of trauma that the witness knowingly or unknowingly is subjected to. Every witness is in that sense a victim of trauma, unable to comprehend and recreate what had happened right in front of their eyes or the experience he/she has gone through while watching the same. The ways in which witnesses are affected by traumatic situations are never similar. Kafka presents situations and people who are not centuries apart from one another but experiencing literally the opposite of what each other felt at the sight of a condemned penalised by the killing apparatus.

The Officer and the traveller express an essential conflict with regard to their view of the world. The traveller rejects approval for the continuing usage of the apparatus and its executionary power. The European traveller, who was fundamentally opposed to any kind of death penalties and this kind of mechanical style in particular, is accused of being trapped in the European kind of thinking by the Officer. The irony lies in the fact that the history of Europe is soaked in the blood of countless victims of blood chilling public executions. This becomes evident at the end when the traveller who was certain that the apparatus and the system of justice in the penal colony were unjust and inhumane, prevented the escape of the condemned man and the soldier from the self-contained and isolated penal colony, exhibiting his double standards on humanity and compassion towards a fellow being. Kafka tears apart the European mask of human values.

### **Conclusion**

The story, “In the Penal Colony” occupies a unique place in Kafka’s works as it describes a collective trauma that takes place in a colonialist, totalitarian regime. With its graphic violence and the pedantic detached manner in which the torture mechanism is described, Kafka’s classic piece, is a nerve racking reminder of how mankind have

accustomed themselves to the very idea of humiliation, torture and trauma, without in the least bearing a grain of regret. The tale has indeed attracted a range of critical approaches, ranging from cultural-historical readings via post-colonial approaches to deconstruction. The narrative is structured around the opposition between the enlightened Western traveller and the strange rituals of an exotic society. In fact, however the penal colonies were indeed a European creation, and the torture machine an emblem of modern technology, of human progress at its most advanced and destructive. The killing machine's victims have external witnesses to the physicality of his trauma but his real torment exists inside, in the fact that he is the only one who can understand it. The issues they face are so unnatural and so dehumanizing that even if they were given the opportunity to speak to others about their traumas, they would have a hard time explaining their experiences and feelings because of the incomprehensible nature of trauma. Being left with no chance of survival, trauma of Kafka's victims dies with them, unsaid and unheard.

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