

Franz kafka's 'in the
penal colony': a
microcosmic
enactment of the
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"It was a machine like no other." The opening lines of Franz Kafka's work 'In the Penal Colony' puts forward a cryptic yet insightful simile that sets the mood of the entire story. Kafka's simile offers little further clarification, yet categorizes the machine in question as one that is different from all other known things. Being unknown, the machine becomes automatically disassociated from the reality of the reader, who feels alienated by not being able to relate to it. Such alienation and disassociation, especially in terms of culture, is a prevalent theme in the post-colonial world of today. Kafka, through his story of four men and a machine, paints a vividly impactful image of a society that is, in many ways, symbolic of the colonization that was rampant throughout the 19th century in most parts of the world. In its simplest form, colonization is the political and ideological dominance of one country over another that is significantly different from it in terms of its culture, traditions and values. Such domination is accompanied by the use of brute force, and is essentially exploitative in nature, as it works to the benefit of the dominant group, and to the abuse of the exploited one. Under such circumstances, conflict becomes inevitable. Conflict arises in the relations of power, in the perception of moral values and most of all, in understanding what justice truly means. Kafka's story is unique, however, not because it is a symbolic depiction of a colonial conflict. Its brilliance lies in the author's ability to introduce the post-colonial perspective, right in confrontation of the colonial one. By placing a post-colonial view in the presence of the colonialist officer, Kafka introduces another dimension of conflict. The post-colonial perspective, in essence, has developed as a response to the colonialist ideologies, and it criticizes, disapproves and

condemns colonialism in an attempt to illegitimize the ideologies it promotes. The colonial – post-colonial conflict, therefore, forms the very core of the conflict around which Kafka's story revolves. This conflict, and multiple others, are all aesthetically woven into the tapestry of the post-colonial setting that Kafka creates for us "In the Penal Colony." The proud stubbornness of the colonizers reflects in the stoic determination of the officer; the submissive colonized represented in the meekness of the condemned man; the detached observation of the upholders of the post-colonialist discourse mirrored through the removed gaze of the explorer; and the barrenness in the description of the penal colony bearing resemblance to the austerity of the colonized land – all make the unique individual strands of the story that come together to form a meaningful whole. The whole, in this case, is a microcosmic representation of the interaction between the colonialist and post-colonialist view points, right in the presence of the colonized man, in a purely colonial setting. It is through the effective use of characters, language and setting, that Franz Kafka is able to create an engaging enactment of the post-colonial debate in his story "In the Penal Colony", weaving a tale that parallels an interaction of the post-colonial perspective with a colonial ideology. The setting of Kafka's penal colony is extremely pivotal in understanding the underlying themes of the plot. Little is devolved to the reader about the location and surroundings of the penal colony; however, Kafka does provide the reader with details through which an inference, albeit vague, can be made. The opening of the text describes the penal colony as a "small, sandy valley" with "a deep hollow surrounded on all sides by naked crags" (Kafka, 1). Furthermore, "there was no one

present”, except the officer, explorer, the condemned man and the soldier.

In the beginning of the story, an image of a dead, lifeless and austere setting is conjured by Kafka, making the reader wary of the place. The setting is isolated, uninteresting and unappealing, and at best the most distracting thing about the place is “ the glare of the sun in the shade less valley” (1), which at one point makes the explorer lose his train of thought.

Understanding the importance of such a setting in the context of colonial and post-colonial discourse, it is not difficult to draw parallels with the stereotypical view the colonizers hold of the colonized land. The British complained of the unbearable heat of India, while the Spanish found the climate of the Americas unappealing. Not only is the setting in Kafka's tale unpleasant, but also vague in its description. This indescribable nature of the surroundings suggests to the fact that despite the colonizers' claim of dominance over their colonies, they were never truly able to master the lands in the way a native would. An elusive element of not being able to recognize the particulars of the flora and fauna of their surroundings has been mentioned in accounts of, for example, British colonists living in India. The book “ Passage to India” by E. M. Forster captures this beautiful moment where two of the British characters come across a beautiful bird in a club, but fail to identify it. The author writes, “ It was of no importance, yet they would have liked to identify it, it would somehow have solaced their hearts” (Forster, 101). This solace is never offered to the foreign invader, just as the surroundings of the penal colony fail to provide any comfort to the officer or the explorer. Thus, the lack of appeal and comfort that the colonized lands hold for the colonizers is symbolized effectively through the setting of

Kafka's story. While the surroundings are pivotal in setting up the beginnings of a colonial reading of the text, the characters in this story are crucial in highlighting the conflict between the colonial and post-colonial viewpoints. The officer is a quintessential representation of the colonizers, while the condemned man is a quintessential representation of the colonized nation. The explorer, however, is the embodiment of the post-colonial perspective, who views colonization and the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized within the penal colony with disdain and disapproval. This trichotomy is not only visible in the way these three men interact, but also in the close analysis of the specific details of these characters. The uniform, and how all three respond to it, is one such example. Beginning with the officer, the uniform becomes the first thing that stands out for him. Despite the oppressive heat, the officer is wearing a heavily uncomfortable uniform. The explorer is aware of the discomfort the officer must be facing, and considers it irrational to wear it under such conditions. Pointing out the fact to the officer, the explorer says " These uniforms are too heavy for the tropics, surely." In response, the officer replies saying " Of course...but they mean home to us; we don't want to forget about home." (1) This apparently simple exchange is loaded with crucial truths of the way colonizers' ideology worked, and the critical eye with which the post-colonists viewed them with. The sense of being away from home and the attempt of retaining the original identity is one that is an essential characteristic of the colonizer. The practice of wearing a uniform by the colonizers, therefore, is not necessarily one that is linked to practicality, but is one that is associated with identity. The urge to belong to one's origins in a foreign land is expressed in the

officer's words, as is evinced from the attitude of colonizing nations in the past. The use of the affectionate term "Motherland" is an example of the emotional attachment between the colonizers and their native country (Dubhashi, 197). The British colonizers in India, for example, wore elaborate uniforms and red coats, despite the excruciating heat of the sub continental region. Not unlike the officer's uniform in Kafka's penal colony, the British uniform too embodied the identity, culture and power of the colonizing nation. It is important to note how the British soldiers took great pride in wearing blaring bright red coats to the battlefield, despite the fact that it provided poor camouflage. The sense of an irrational sense of pride can be understood when, in the colonizer's shoes, one sees the need to belong to a relatable greater whole, in the British colonizer's case, Great Britain. Despite having dominance and claiming ownership to Indian land, the British could never relate to the place, and thus, were unable to belong to it in the same way as the native would. The uniform, therefore, serves to symbolize not only the authoritative position of the colonizer, but also highlights his lack of belonging. The officer, despite being physically present in the penal colony, is very distant from it in reality. He, however, is unaware of this reality, and sees himself as an inherent authority on the systems of the penal colony. While the officer is a three dimensional portrayal of the colonialist ideologies, the explorer, on the other hand, is the symbolic image of the post-colonial gaze. The explorer seems to be Kafka's special character since he is dealt with differently as compared to the rest of the characters. While Kafka provides vivid descriptions of the officer, the condemned man and even the soldier, he does not give any visual details to describe the explorer.

Providing vague, indefinite details and altogether omitting any physical descriptions of a character is a conscious strategy employed by Kafka, which enables the reader to perceive the explorer less as a person and more as thought, or a point of view. What the explorer thinks about the Harrow, what his judgment on the system of justice in the penal colony is, or how he perceives the actions of the men around him all are more central to the plot than the characteristics of the explorer himself. This strategy is not merely coincidental, and is a conscious master stroke of the genius mind that Kafka was. The explorer is not a thing to be seen – he only sees and observes that which is going on around him. This is in contrast to, for example, the condemned man's portrayal. Kafka writes, "The condemned man, who was a stupid-looking, wide-mouthed creature with bewildered hair and face." A further metaphor is added to aid the reader's visual perception of the condemned man by comparing him to a "submissive dog". On another instance, we are told that the Harrow needs to be adjusted for the condemned prisoner, "since he was a thin man" (Kafka, 6). These details, and many others, are those that bring to life the condemned man in the eyes of the reader. His fear, his repulsion, his vindictive smile – all his emotions are duly expressed through the pen of Kafka. The officer too, enjoys a definite description in the story. In the opening paragraph of the story, he is described as "uncommonly limp, breathed with his mouth wide open, and had tucked two fine ladies' handkerchiefs under the collar of his uniform." (1) Such attention to detail is a luxury extended to all but the explorer. Even the inanimate machine called the Harrow is portrayed in such elaborate detail that it is, figuratively speaking, brought to life. Each and every minute

detail of the machine, its parts, its moods and its actions are penned down in a manner so exquisite that it belies a sense of life in the machine. The explorer, however, is devoid of any physical description, which strengthens the claim that his character is a symbolic depiction of the post-colonial gaze. Furthermore, the words, actions, reactions and thoughts of the explorer seem to follow a trajectory similar to that of the post-colonial discourse. Post-colonialism is associated with an acknowledgment of the fact that two very different cultures may exist, and be right at the same time. On the other hand, colonial perspective acknowledges only the existence of one dominant culture, i. e., their own, and take it as an inherent right to impose their superior culture on the lack of culture of other nations across the world. Such a system “ rests primarily on the foundation of brute force” (Majumdar, 89). Through the explorer, Kafka brings to life the post-colonial perspective. The post-colonial perspective, being an essential critique of the colonialist ideologies, comes about as a response to it. Post-colonialists do not actively take part in the process of colonization, but view it from a spatial or temporal distance. The key feature, therefore, of the post-colonial view point is that it is detached from the actual process of colonization. This feature is one that is present in the explorer as well. He is unfamiliar with the landscape and feels out of place in the penal colony. While the officer too suffers from a lack of belonging in the desolation of the penal colony, he considers himself a part of it nevertheless, justifying his involvement in the local justice system. What makes the explorer unique, however, is the simple awareness he holds of the fact that he is a stranger to the place. This is the defining difference between the explorer and the officer. Being a stranger to the penal colony,

the explorer is also conscious of the fact that his cultural knowledge may vary from those that are the residents of the penal colony, and that this difference may not be the sole reason for him to pass judgment upon them. This comes out quite explicitly in a scene where the explorer acknowledges in his thoughts that for him, “ the injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution were undeniable.” (Kafka, 7) However, at the same time, he also affirms that, being a “ foreigner”, he has no right to interfere in the culture and traditions of another people, since they may hold a different value for them. This belief forms the very basis of what is known as cultural relativism. The explorer and the officer are both foreigners, while the condemned man is the native. Being classified into distinct categories links us to the essential conflict that engulfs the entire process of colonization – the dilemma of cultural relativism. How is it justified for a group of people, like the officer, to impose justice and take decision for another people, the condemned man, when they fail to connect with them, even at a very basic level? How well can the British, for instance, pass judgment the culture and moral traditions of the native Indians when they are unable to relate to it? Cultural relativism is the acceptance of the fact that there exists a difference of opinion on what is right and wrong between different people and different cultures. Morality, the understanding of what is right and what is wrong, is therefore a relative term and not an absolute one. In the context of the story, we see an understanding of cultural relativism emerge from the thoughts of the explorer. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the theory of cultural relativism emerges as a result of post-colonial discourse. The explorer, being the symbolic representative of post-

colonialism, thinks to himself “ It is always a ticklish matter to intervene decisively in other people’s affairs.” He is also aware of the fact that if he chooses to intervene, the members of the penal colony can tell him “ You are a foreigner, mind your own business.” The explorer is conscious of the existence of differences between his own cultural values and the traditions of the land he is visiting. Post-colonial discourse not only criticizes colonists for failing to take into account the reality of cultural relativism, but also actively propagates the concept. Franz Boas first spoke of the idea of cultural relativism, while his students coined the term. Boas writes, “ Civilization is not something absolute, but ... is relative, and ... our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes.” (Boas, 1887) Boas’ words evince a reality that was learnt after the world experienced the impacts of colonization. All people and nations are not the same and cultural realities may differ drastically among them. This is in sharp contrast to the colonialist view aptly advocated by Jules Ferry in 1884 when he declared; “ The higher races have a right over the lower races, they have a duty to civilize the inferior races” (Ferry, 1884) Ferry’s words determine culture as an absolute. The colonizers, considering themselves to be the superior race, believed they owned the monopoly of culture and civilization, and were in effect doing the colonized nations a favor by enlightening them. This debate is one that is evident quite explicitly in Kafka’s story. While the colonizer speaks the mind of Jules Ferry, we hear Franz Boas’ words resonated through the thoughts of the explorer. This also serves to bring to light the reality that culture is central to the process of colonization since the process is in essence a raw, unabashed encounter between two distinctly diverse cultures. The post-

colonial discourse, while being sympathetic towards the colonized man, and shunning the use of brute force by the colonizers, refuses to accept or take responsibility for the colonized man or the horrors he has faced as a result of the process. Kafka portrays the explorer as the quintessential post-colonist who criticizes the colonists for torturing the colonizers with their foreign culture and traditions. However, the explorer's actions are not simply a critique of the colonists, and exposit that the post-colonial perception of cultural relativism is not limited to a mere acceptance of cultures being diverse from each other. Post-colonial thought, while commenting on the short comings of colonization, is careful to respect the boundaries of the distinct culture of the colonized. Kafka's story ends with the following line as the explorer sets onto the boat which would take the explorer away from the penal colony and into his own country. Kafka writes, " They could have jumped into the boat but the explorer lifted a heavy knotted rope from the floor boards, threatened them with it, and so kept them from attempting the leap." (Kafka, 16) Interpreting this incident under the light of the post-colonial interaction with the colonized world, we can see the attempted leap by the condemned man and the soldier as a cultural leap, as a means of escape from the horrors of the colonialism that was inflicted upon them. However, the explorer is aware of the fact that it is not only the presence of the officer that caused the doom of the natives of the penal colony. The people of the penal colony, after being rid of the forces of colonization, are confined by the unconscious bonds of their own culture, their new post-colonial identity. Any attempt to break these bonds could end up being disastrous, a reality which the explorer realizes as he sets sail off the penal

colony. The process of colonization and its aftereffects cannot simply be reversed by an elimination of the colonizers from the colonized land. The strong post-colonial identity that has been formed over the years of exposure to colonial dominance is a reality that cannot be erased, and an attempt to forcefully write over it will only result in further chaos. It is the responsibility of the colonized man to mould their own identity from the remnants of the identity the colonizers imposed upon them. This further serves to strengthen the divide by keeping intact the distinctions between morals, traditions and values of each nation. Colonialism, when first introduced in the Americas in 1492, was indeed a process like no other. The process was so uniquely inhuman, so distinctively exploitative and so exceptionally damaging that it was hard to find a precedent for it. The simile Kafka draws to explain the Harrow as a machine like no other brings us to think whether the machine really is as incomparable as Kafka claims. The Harrow, as the officer claims, has many names, and colonialism is a likely metaphoric projection of the same torturous device that is central to Kafka's story. What the Harrow achieved in the penal colony can be allegorized to the impact colonization had on the natives and the colonizers, and how, even after the demise of the system, its impact and influence never died out. The story, therefore, becomes a crucial link in formulating our understanding of the impact of colonialism on the post-colonial world of today. Works

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