Franz Kafka (1883 – 1924), born in Prague, a part of the erstwhile Austro-Hungarian Empire, wrote some of the finest and most disconcerting novels and short stories in German language. Interestingly he had a very critical attitude towards his own writings. Therefore, he published only a few short stories in his life such as *The Judgment*, *The Metamorphosis* and a few others. Before his premature death at the age of forty one Kafka wrote some letters to his friend Max Brod entreating him to burn his unpublished works.¹ Brod, Kafka’s literary executor and biographer defied his friend’s will and published his works. *The Trial*, appeared posthumously in 1925, is, unlike Kafka’s other novels, the only finished novel. Brod writes how he published this novel which gave its author unprecedented popularity in postwar western history. “The manuscript of this novel, *The Trial*, I took home with me in June 1920 and set in order soon after. The manuscript has no title. But in speaking of it Kafka always referred to it as *The Trial.*”²

The story of *The Trial*, as Kafka’s other novels, is simple but its meaning is ambiguous and complex. It is because this semantic complexity that it has attracted the attention of so many critics writing in different European languages. Therefore, the reader finds himself with multiplicity of interpretations: biographical, religious, psychoanalytic, existential and so on. Nevertheless, its meaning seems...
to be unfathomable and inexhaustible. *The Trial* sets the tone of terror and absurdity from its very inception when one fine morning Joseph K is arrested without having done anything wrong. While K is still waiting in bed for his breakfast to be served two strangers called Franz and Willem respectively intrudes his room. Joseph K is taken aback seemingly as it blatantly violated his privacy. When he tries to go out, probably to know about the happening from the account of the land lady Frau Grubach; one of the strangers stops him from going out. Addressing K in an authoritative mode he says “You cannot go out, you are arrested, so it seems, said K. ‘But for what? He added. We are not authorized to tell you that. Go to your room and wait there. Proceedings have been initiated against you, and you will be informed of everything in due course.”³

Kafka’s novels have abrupt and dramatic opening. It is the very opening incident which determines the whole course of action and seals the fate of the hero. Joseph K, a bank employee, in his twenties, in the face of such an incomprehensible situation is completely baffled. He makes hard speculations about the identity of both the warders and what authority they represent. He thinks that he lives in a country with legal constitution, where all laws are in force, then who can dare to seize him in his room? The whole situation seems to him like a “Joke”. In Kafka joke has nothing to do with comedy and laughter. It depicts the predicament of an individual who is trapped like K in a paradoxical situation which defies all rational thinking. K perceives the whole
situation as a joke; an ordinary situation seems to have suddenly been defamiliarised. Defamiliarisation is a typical effect of Kafka’s mode of story telling. By making familiar unfamiliar Kafka negates the very idea of knowledge, rationality, freedom and individuality in a mode of fiction known as ‘black comedy’ or ‘black humour’. Negation of knowledge and freedom is a dominant theme of Kafka.

Faced with an inexplicable situation K’s whole behavior assumes a farcical dimension. There seems to be something pathological about what he says or does in his defense. Confronted by an impregnable condition his own self goes through gradual metamorphosis as he starts proving his innocence before knowing his crime. As he rummages in drawer for his identification paper the two warders gobble up his food – a comic element. At last K finds his bicycle license; thinking that it is a trivial paper he keeps on his effort till he fishes out his birth certificate. Showing his paper to the indifferent warders he asked them to show the warrant paper. Their response is cold and categorical that they have nothing to do with document. They serve under the highest authorities at the lowest grade and they are sent to arrest people according to the law. To K a law is unintelligible that decrees that an innocent should be arrested.

As the unintelligibility of situation unfolds itself K becomes conscious of the gravity of this case. He is escorted in the next room of Fraulien Burstner, a typist. He perceives that an elaborate preparation is being made for further investigation. It generates in him a sense of
anxiety. Addressing the inspector K argues that he cannot recall to have committed any offence that can be charged against him. However, K’s real dilemma lies in knowing nothing about the authority that accuses him. “The real question is, who accuses me? What authority is conducting these proceedings?” (p.18). K’s reaction is quiet expected from a man who follows the line of logic: a man is innocent unless he is proved guilty. Thrown in a mysterious and unintelligible situation K’s logical stance seems to be ineffective. In whatever way he tries to defend himself against the unknown accusation he always seems to be off the mark. He seems to be under a delusion. To make the case for K more mysterious the inspector says “I cannot even confirm that you are charged with an offence, or rather I do not know whether you are. You are under arrest, certainly, more than that, I do not know”(18). As K wants to telephone to Haster, an advocate, to seek his help, the inspector tells K that it will not make any difference except if he wanted to talk about some private business. K in utter exasperation gives up the idea.

Caught in a bizarre and nightmarish condition Joseph K’s whole effort to exit seems to be an exercise in perpetual futility. Since the Court has not passed any decision against him, he is officially free to go to the Bank, to meet people, and to consult an advocate yet he no longer feels free. Since it is K’s thirtieth birthday he goes to the Bank and there he receives a lot of wishes from his colleagues. But throughout the day in his office he is preoccupied with what had happened to him in the morning. In a state of agony he starts meeting and consulting people
about his case fondly hoping that his acquaintances might come to his rescue. On returning from the Bank in the evening he meets Fraulein Burstner to tell her his tale. As she tells K that though she has no legal knowledge, nevertheless, she is going to join the clerical staff of a lawyer’s office, K becomes hopeful that she might help him as an adviser. She insists that in order to become an adviser she must know the crime and the accusation. K helplessly responds “that is just the snag, said K. ‘I do not know that myself’” (34). For K and Fraulein Burstner and even for the reader, K’s case seems to be quiet laughable. What makes the case laughable is its total inexplicability and the revelation of the limitation of human reason.

In Kafka the location of offices are always inconspicuous; their organisation is hierarchical but the mode of working is never unambiguous. The individual is condemned to run from one office to another to meet the designated person whom he never finds. This is what happens to K. He is informed by telephone that next Sunday a short inquiry is to take place in his case. He goes to the designated place on the stipulated day. After much groping K is able to find the office of the Examining Magistrate.

The office is like a maze in whose crowded and stuffy atmosphere K feels suffocated. The whole interrogation seems to be a farce. The Examining Magistrate does not even know the identity of the accused as he calls K a house painter. When K claims that he is a junior manager of large bank it evokes such a strong laughter in the audience
that K could not help from following suit. This is how Kafka creates humour.5 K realises that he is not taken seriously and he feels irritated. In the presence of the Examiner Magistrate he criticises the Court’s corrupt officials and complains in detail of the way he was humiliated by the strange warders. What K complains about is the violation of his privacy and denigration of his dignity. K is totally defiant and indignant at the injustice being done to him.

One can perceive gradual change taking place in the consciousness of K. Next Sunday he goes to the Court without any summon. The women who had led him to the Court room last time tells him that the Court is not in session on Sunday. The woman cleans the offices of the Court; and her husband is a Court attendant. The nameless woman is exploited by the Examining Magistrate and his student called Bertold as mistress. Her plight reveals lot about the corruption in the Court. She suddenly takes a shine to K and offers herself to him (like Frieda in The Castle). K – Initially suspects her as a ploy used by the Court to trap him – gets attracted to her in the hope that she might help him in his case. On the other hand she takes fancy to him in the illusion that he can improve her condition by taking her out of the clutches of the Court. She wants to use him as a liberating force whereas he wants to use her as a tool in his fight against the injustice of the Court. But K at the same time is fully conscious that, being dependent on higher officials, she cannot be much help for him.

As the woman is telling the tale of her plight to K, suddenly the student who works under the Examining Magistrate takes her away like
an abductor to the garret in which the Magistrate is living. K follows them. He perceives that the Court is situated in a tenement with a lot of rooms in which the Court officials work. The Court attendant takes K inside the building. The observation of the building gives him a very negative impression. K finds the building neither ordinary to be taken lightly nor extraordinary to be respected but simply “loathsome”. In the building’s oppressive atmosphere he feels suffocated; and helplessly struggles to get out without finding his way “show me the way, there are so many lobbies here. I will never find the way” (76).

*The Trail* is episodic in structure, that is, it consists of a series of events which are interlinked. In the first two chapters of the novel Kafka has described everything that is needed to be said about the predicament of the hero, and the succeeding incidents are aimed at to reinforce the crisis the hero has fallen in. One day as Joseph K is quiet busy in his office in the Bank his uncle Carl Albert, a petty square from the country, visits him. His uncle comes to know about his case and trail through a letter from Erna, K’s girlfriend who works in a cabaret. The uncle tells K about the gravity of the case which, if not turns well, can become family disgrace. He takes K to an advocate called Huld. The advocate is his friend whom he considers an influential person. As they reach the advocate’s home they are informed by a girl called Leni, a servant and mistress of the advocate, that he is not well.

Kafka fuses the serious and the frivolous, the real and the fantastic with unusual creative finesse. As K’s uncle, the advocate, and
the Chief clerk of the Court are discussing K’s case in the darkness of the room, K and Leni develop a crush for each other. She intrigues K into another room in which they make love. Erotic encounters like this are the only source of relief for K who is going through a gruelling process of trial. So far K has recruited three women in his ring of helpers: Fraulein Burstner, the wife of the Court attendant and Leni fondly hoping that they might influence his case in his favour.

Joseph K is deeply preoccupied with his trail. Though he attends his duty in the Bank he is simply unable to concentrate on the matters brought before him by his clients. He does not know how the advocate is dealing with his case, if there was any progress or not. Whenever he goes to the advocate to find out the progress of his case the advocate Huld does not give any categorical response. In such a situation the only distraction for K is Leni who in a surreptitious game provides him with some fleeting moments of psychological relief. Though K follows his hectic schedule in the Bank, he is hardly able to get rid of his trail. He is a dexterous and an efficient employee whose career seems to be ruined by a single incident. “What an obstacle had suddenly arisen to block K’s career!” (148). He sometimes desperately realises that he is fighting a battle which he has already lost.

Acting under an extremely pessimistic condition K seeks help of a painter called Titorelli. K goes to Titorelli and meets him in his small attic-like stuffy and oppressive studio. As Titorelli claims to have influence in the Court, K becomes hopeful. Titorelli explains to K that
there are three types of absolution: definite acquittal, indefinite acquittal, and indefinite postponement. As he explains the details of each of the acquittals it becomes obvious that “in his own way Titorelli in fact highlights a paradox which Joseph K is yet not ready to accept: whereas we shall never be free it is necessary for us to find ways and means of striving for freedom, lest we perish in the knowledge of the impossibility of freedom.”

As Titorelli explains the rationale behind each of the acquittals K perceives that each mode of acquittal is contradictory. He realises that the road to freedom from the strange and omnipresent universe of the Court is neither straight nor easy. One can notice that Joseph K seems to have fallen in a quagmire with no possible exit. He is struggling against something of which he is totally ignorant. What is more unbearable is his isolation and alienation from a world which offers no freedom. Negation of individual’s freedom constitutes an important theme in the works of Kafka. One of the many ways in which freedom is denied to the hero in Kafka is his subjection to an interminable waiting. Joseph K in *The Trial* and K in *The Castle* both are subjected to waiting for verdict and recognition respectively from the authority. Although Joseph K in The Trail gets judgment much to his dismay, the condition of the K in The Castle remains more pathetic as he is condemned to an eternal uncertainty.

The tedious process of the trail is proving unbearable for Joseph K. He so irritated that he wants to disengage himself from the service of his
advocate Huld. He neither hopes for any meaningful result nor he wants to be treated like Block, the advocate’s another client, a poor commercial traveler, a corn dealer. The way the advocate humiliates Block, K realises “…that the client finally forgot the whole world and lived only in hope of toiling along this false path until the end of his case should come in sight. The client ceased to be a client and became the Advocate’s dog. If the Advocate were to order this man to crawl under the bed as if into a kennel and bark there, he would obey the order” (214). The metamorphosis of the individual into a beast is a typical phenomenon that one frequently comes across in Kafka. It symbolises alienation and denigration of the individual. It is this alienation which constitutes the fundamental theme of the short story *The Metamorphosis*.

In the works of Kafka incidents are always unexpected. If Joseph K’s arrest at a particular moment in his life was unanticipated the way he receives death verdict is no less unexpected. One day an Italian visitor comes to the Bank; he wants to have a look at the town’s art treasures and monuments. The manager of the Bank assigned K to take the Italian to the Cathedral for inspection. The next morning as K prepares for the journey to the Cathedral Leni informs him by telephone that “they’re driving you hard” (224). Unfortunately K could not understand the conspiracy. Consequently he comes across something unexpected: he reached the Cathedral but the Italian never turns up. K keeps on waiting till he meets the priest who claims to be a prison
Chaplain. As the priest address K the whole situation turns out to be apocalyptic, horrible and nightmarish:

you are Joseph K? Said the priest… Yes said K… you are an accused man, said the priest in a very low voice. Yes said K; ‘so I have been informed’. Then you are the man I seek, said the priest. I am the prison Chaplain. Indeed, said K. I had you summoned here, said the priest, ‘to have a talk with you’. I didn’t know that, said K. I came here to show an Italian round the Cathedral. A mere detail, said the priest” (231/232).

As it has already been noted mixing the familiar and the unfamiliar, the real and the fantastic, the rational and the irrational is an integral feature of Kafka’s unique mode of narration. Whenever decisive moment comes in the troubled life of K everything turns out to be unfamiliar and strange imposing a sense of impotency and haplessness on his lonely sensibility. Although K meets many people but all of them including Court functionaries turn out to be ineffective, indifferent, corrupt and cruel. All of them keep him in a state of suspension. Everything about the Court remains incompressible to K till the ultimate judgment delivered by the priest who, like many other people, is also an agent of the Court:

You are held to be guilty. Your case will perhaps never get beyond the lower Court. Your guilt is supposed, for the present, at least, to have been proved. But I am not guilty, said K, it’s a misunderstanding (232).
K’s utterance before the priest that ‘I am not guilty, it is a misunderstanding’ is the expression of one of the most tragic moments in the novel. Faced with a mysterious power which defies all human rationality and morality an individual’s life is nothing but a misunderstanding. Futility of reason is a dominant theme in Kafka (see chapter IV). Joseph K had taken all steps possible to defend himself in the intricate Court against a groundless accusation. His hope to get justice seems to be an illusion.

Throughout the novel Joseph K’s biggest problem is, first of all, to know what crime he has committed, and what authority is conducting the proceedings against him. But the whole reality about the Court remains shrouded and everything remains inaccessible till he is executed. To show the inaccessibility of the Court the writer has inserted a parable in the novel “Before the Law” which the priest narrates to K in the Cathedral. It will not be out of place to recall here this parable. In this parable a man from the country comes to the door of the Law guarded by a door-keeper. The man pleads for admittance to the Law but the door-keeper says that he cannot permit at the moment and does not negate the possibility of admission in the future. The door-keeper gives him a stool where the man sits waiting for days and years in the hope of getting permission to enter. He makes incessant request but in vain. The man grows old and gradually losses both his sight and sense. In his long waiting and close watch of the door keeper he becomes familiar even with the fleas sitting in the door-keeper’s fur
collar; and begs the very flies to persuade the door-keeper to change his mind. As the man is on the verge of his death the door-keeper bends down to tell him that “No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am going to shut it” (237).

Joseph K concludes that the door keeper deluded the man but the priest contradicts him, and gives all types of interpretations of the parable but all of them are equally non-consequential. The man in the parable faces the same paradoxical question before the Law as K faces before the Court. The Court remains totally silent. As the priest tells K “the Court makes no claim upon you. It receives you when you come and relinquishes you when you go” (244). The parable “simply confirms the incompatibility between the Law and human consciousness.” Seen from metaphysical perspective one can say that aloofness and indifference of the Law is a symbolic representation of God. The law is open and is accessible to all, yet it remains inaccessible to the man. The door-keeper who guards the door acts as an agent to deny the man admittance to the Law. Since he executes the order of higher authority he cannot be held accountable for denying the man access to the Law. One can interpret the parable from any angle only to be led to a paradoxical conclusion:

God waits for us, in his high Castle, but he does everything possible, through his very messengers, to make sure that we shall not reach him. God is near but far, accessible but inaccessible. The door to the
kingdom is open to all men, and therefore, in Kafka’s world, the most ecstatic hope of entering the kingdom is born. But no one goes through that door because of God’s deceptions, and so hope is never fulfilled. God is the one who answers our words, but his answer is always mute.\(^8\)

*The Trail*, like Kafka’s other novel *The Castle*, is one of those modern literary masterpieces which have offered themselves for multiple readings. *The Trail* can be read in more than one ways, yet its meaning seems to be inexhaustible. The inexhaustibility of meaning is one of the chief characteristics of a literary classic. In the words of Calvino “a classic is a book which has never exhausted all it has to say to its readers”.\(^9\) This definition suits Kafka not only because he has said the unsaid, but also because of the magic of his method, the way he tries to apprehend the essence of human predicament. The story of a man who is suddenly arrested, accused, put on trial and executed has forced every critic to ask himself: what does this mad story signify? But every interpretation of the novel seems to fall apart as it gets undercut by another current of potential meaning. *The Trial*, in fact “is one of the most labyrinthine books in the history of literature, a book not only pregnant with dire complexities but full of dead ends, contradictions and paths continuously doubling back on themselves.”\(^10\) The designation of *The Trial* as ‘one of the most labyrinthine books’ is an indisputable truth. It is not only K who finds himself in the labyrinth of the Court even the reader faces a problem of interpretation which is no less strenuous and disconcerting. Hence the proliferation of interpretations.
Max Brod, Kafka’s friend, literary executor and biographer published all the books which Kafka had left with the instruction that they should be burned. Kafka, while suffering from tuberculosis that ultimately caused his premature death at the age of forty one, writes in a letter to his friend:

Dearest Max, my last request: Everything I have behind me (that is, in the book-cases, chest of drawers, writing-table, both at home and in the office, or where ever anything may have got to, whatever you happen to find), in the way of note-books, manuscripts, letters, my own and other people’s sketches and so on, is to be burned unread…\(^{11}\)

The view that Kafka had a very critical opinion of his works is also corroborated by Kafka’s another biographer Gustave Janouch: “My scribbling doesn’t deserve a leather binding. It’s only my own personal spectre of horror. It oughtn’t to be printed at all. It should be burned and destroyed. It is without meaning.”\(^{12}\)

Why Kafka had such a nihilistic opinion regarding his works is a subject of historical curiosity. Brod, however, gives his personal opinion that Kafka “…applied the highest religious standards to all work of his (although he never actually said so), and, of course, it always fell short of these standards, wrung as it was from his own perplexities.”\(^{13}\)

Despite earnest request of his friend Max Brod refused to commit the incendiary act demanded of him. Posthumous publication of Kafka’s major works: *The Trial, The Castle* and those short stories which Kafka did not publish in his life gave him a popularity in critical discourse that
only writers like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann have enjoyed in the twentieth century. Max Brod not only executed and published Kafka’s work, but also gave an interpretation which he believed can be served as a key to the understanding of the meaning of Kafka’s mysterious writings. Brod’s mode of perception seems to be spiritual. Therefore he gave a religious interpretation to the works of Kafka. Because of his intimacy with Kafka, their shared religious and cultural values, and historical experience Brod’s comment on Kafka has influenced the critical opinion of later critics who are inclined to read Kafka’s work as religious allegory or parable. According to Brod “…with Kafka art is a way to God.”\(^{14}\) Or for Kafka art for a writer is an expression of “suffering” in loneliness.\(^{15}\)

Max Brod holds works of Kafka in high estimation with the belief that “The category of sacredness (and not really that of literature), is the only right category under which Kafka’s life and work can be viewed.”\(^{16}\) According to Brod in \textit{The Trial} Kafka explores the eternal misunderstanding between the God and man. Man with his finite and limited reason cannot understand the infinite power and transcendental existence of God. Since man is given a finite reason he cannot comprehend the will of God. “To our ears the will of God sound illogical, that is to say opposed to our human logic in a grotesque fashion.”\(^{17}\) Therefore, whatever God does seems to be either unjust or absurd. The idea is that the yardstick by which man works is diametrically different from the one by which measurements are taken.
in the world of God. There is always an incommensurability between human perception and divine design. Kafka explores this incommensurability between God’s justice and human ethics. “The heteronomy of God is to be described – something that cannot be measured by man’s standard.”18 This eternal misunderstanding between God and man, Brod observes, constitutes a recurrent theme in Kafka (for Brod’s view on *The Castle* see chapter III). Kafka makes the reader conscious of the tragic destiny of man. He exposes the inability of man to identify with God. The writer focuses on “…the most fatal and greatest of all misunderstandings, the failure of man in the sight of God.”19

The Court in *The Trial* represents divine justice. The nature and functioning of the Court is totally incomprehensible for K as well as for the reader. Joseph K is arrested, accused, put on trial and executed. Neither the victim nor the reader knows what crime he has committed. According to human perception it seems to be a tyranny of god, a blatant violation of human rationality. The only possibility to solve the paradox seems to be the explanation which reinforces the belief that divine mode of justice follows its own rules which are above human reason. That is why whatever the Court does seems to be irrational. Irrationality is a dominant theme in Kafka.

If Max Brod gave Kafka life by having his works published Edwin Muir gave Kafka reputation by doing excellent English translation of his works. Muir not only translated Kafka but made some
interesting remarks about the author and his work. Muir, under the influence of Brod’s theological and metaphysical interpretation, regards Kafka as a writer of religious allegory:

He is a profound religious thinker, but the product of his thought is not a system but a world of imagination. As his thought, however, is subtle and comprehensive, his imaginations demand from the reader an effort somewhat like that required to follow a close line of abstract reasoning.  

Edwin Muir believes that Kafka allegorises divine Law on the one hand and human law on the other. Since there is always an incompatibility between divine Law and human law man can never understand the nature and functioning of the divine Law. If Joseph K doesn’t find any way out of the Court it is only because he is not facing any ordinary law; but divine Law he is simply incapable to make sense. The hypothesis is that the divine Law works in its own way; it follows its own logic which seen from human rationalistic perspective might appear even unjust, arbitrary, immoral and absurd.

Faced with a mysterious Court Joseph K does not find any way out in the same way as confronted with an inaccessible authority in The Castle K does not find any way in:

Kafka describes in The Castle the struggle to reach it, and in The Trial the flight from it. But the hero can neither reach it nor escape it, for it is enveloped in a mystery different from the ordinary mystery of human life, and he does not know the law of that mystery.
What Kafka describes is an eternal paradox, a contradiction, an irreconcilability between divine Law and human rationality. In this way Kafka allegorises a universal problem inherent in man-God relationship. Therefore, instead of freedom Joseph K is condemned to a pathetic and pessimistic condition from which the only possibility of freedom is offered by death.23

If Kafka’s works read like allegory, fables and parables there are certain reasons. The story in Kafka, be it The Trial or The Castle, has neither any history nor any definite geographical locale. That is, time and place are either secondary or irrelevant. Similarly the hero has neither any history nor any family rather he has been reduced to a letter ‘K’. He is just a figure who represents everybody. The absence of all those features associated with the realistic novel from the writings of Kafka lends them a kind of anonymity and autonomy. By departing from the nineteenth century realistic mode of writing Kafka had made possible a new mode of writing which is purely imaginative and can be appreciated in more than one ways.

One can see that Max Brod’s and Edwin Muir’s interpretations focus on Kafka’s writings as the expression of author’s religious ideas. But in a very radical and ingenious reading, by exploiting remarkable hermeneutical skill, Charles Neider uses a Psychoanalytical approach in an attempt to excavate the deeper meaning of The Trial, and also to challenge the religious reading of Kafka, or to stop “…the metaphysical flights which he has inspired in his German critics”.24 Neider believes
that what we have in Kafka is the expression of the author’s neurotic problems (for Neider’s view on The Castle see chapter II). Therefore, he has used both textual as well as biographical details to reveal the psycho-sexual implications in the novel. For example K’s arrest has a symbolic significance. He is not incarcerated by a civil authority rather it is a psychological incarceration, “of fixation classical in neurosis.”

In a symbolic sense K is arrested at the anal level of his sexual development; hence he is a victim of a ‘castration complex’. Neider’s psychoanalytical approach to The Trial is based on four-fold findings: the novel contains a lot of mythical symbols; it reveals the development of the states of consciousness as discovered by Freudian psychoanalysis; the novel reveals the dynamics of castration complex; and it contains some nomenclatural symbols.

Charles Neider’s psychoanalytical reading of The Trial and his comprehensive discussion of its meaning is an important contribution to the understanding of Kafka. He observes that there are two types of symbols in The Trial. There are mythical symbols and symbolic actions. For example, Joseph K is a Bank employee. Bank is a mythical symbol, a repository for money. Money symbolises ‘ordure’. Therefore, the Bank has an anal character. The two warders insists on K to wear his black coat. Black coat is a symbol of death. Neider enlists many words from the novel as mythical symbols such as “The pleats, pockets, buttons, and belt of the first warder are all sexual symbols.” Similarly Neider suggest that there are some social symbols which reveal K’s
‘infantilism’. For example Frau Gurbach, the land lady, is a symbol of mother image. Similarly all the paraphernalia in Fraulein Burstner room such as the stockings, blouse, pillow, silk shawl, night table, chest are suggestive of female symbols.

There are some actions in the novel which are of symbolic significance. For instance, Neider refers to the encounter between the Examining Magistrate and Joseph K: “Well, then, said the Examining Magistrate, turning over the leaves and addressing K with an air of authority, you are a house painter? No, said K, I’m the junior manager of a large Bank. This answer evoked such a hearty outburst of laughter from the Right party that K had to laugh too” (p.48). K fails to understand the displacement as the Magistrate was trying to avoid direct reference to the Bank so as not to embarrass K. He uses the word painter. Painting is a sublimated form of ‘coprophilic urge’ which doesn’t have immediate association with the Bank. Since K is unable to understand the mechanism which the Magistrate is using in order to shun direct reference to the Bank K proudly declares himself to be a junior manager of the Bank. This misunderstanding causes laughter. Neider perceives that “K’s laughter arises from his unconscious awareness of his ridiculousness and of the symbolism of his occupation.”

The Cathedral, where K is supposed to take Italian visitor, is a symbol of mother. The Italian who never appears in the Cathedral is an agent of the Court and belongs to the unconscious. Whereas K’s going
to the Cathedral is symbolic of death, and an unconscious desire to return to the womb. The appearance of the priest in the Cathedral suggests a father image; a symbol of castration for K. Neider makes very subtle remarks on this incident: “Read psychoanalytically, this means that religion is a function of the unconscious.”

Charles Neider points out to some elements of depth psychology in The Trial. For instance, the Bank is a symbol of the conscious mind; and the lodge in which K lives symbolises the preconscious and the Court stands for the unconscious. The lodge or the preconscious is a symbol of the ‘irrational’ and the ‘amoral’. The police officers who represent the unconscious announce K’s ‘psychic arrest’. Since they are the minor officials of the unconscious they do not know the complex motive of the Court. Their job is just to arrest the guilty. In the same way Joseph K is summoned to the Court by telephone. Telephone in Freudian psychology has a “phallic value”. Thus Neider delves deeper into the text to find out symbols and images which have sexual implications.

Neider believes that Joseph K is suffering from ‘castration complex’; and provides lots of textual details in order to explain K’s problem. For instance, the Examining Magistrate who conducts an inquiry in K’s case is a symbol of father who has a mistress. The mistress is a symbol of mother. “K’s daydream of wrestling the woman away from the magistrate contains incestual implications.” K cannot have the woman because of the fear of the father. According to Neider
there are many incidents in the novel potent enough to arouse K’s masculinity but he keeps on rejecting them. This constant rejection symbolises the hero’s fear of castration. Hence K’s inability to deal with women characters especially Fraulein Bustner on a mature sexual level.

One can see that Neider has adopted a very different approach to Kafka. He strongly believes that it is the psychoanalytical approach which can unravel the ambiguity in Kafka. He severely rebukes all the exegetes of Kafka particularly Max Brod and Edwin Muir who projected Kafka as a ‘mystic’: a man who is concerned with the spiritual predicament of man. “The chief advocates of the mystical school—by far the greatest cabala of them all—are Max Brod and Edwin Muir.” These mystagogues, Neider thinks, have overlooked the neurotic problem of the author. His fundamental argument is that Kafka is not concerned with the spiritual dilemma of man rather with his personal deficiencies, his sense of alienation—a victim of tuberculosis, a member of Jewish minority community—and his neurotic relationship with his father.

If Max Brod and other critics interpreted Kafka as a profound religious thinker concerned with some fundamental problems in man-God relationship Charles Neider deconstructed Kafka’s oeuvre as expression of the author’s personal problem. Thus one can see that like Neider other critics have made serious attempt to decipher the mystery of The Trial. For instance, critics like Calvin S. Hall and Richard E. Lind have thoroughly explored the relationship between Kafka’s life, dreams, and his writing. Their assumption is that “The writing of fiction
is, of course, a form of expressive behaviour”. They have adopted a quantitative and analytical method to comprehend the meaning of the works of Kafka and have exploited the author’s biographical details including his dreams, his attitude towards his father and his ambivalence towards women to find out the personality of the author. They believe that Joseph K is an extension of the author’s alienated personality. Joseph K in The Trail interacts with males and female and with those who have power and those who are totally powerless. The critics meticulously record the numbers of K’s interaction with men and women and believe that he is aggressive in his interactions with people. In his aggressive interaction he is more often the aggressor than the victim. Though K’s aggressiveness varies both in intensity and quality, he, nevertheless, poses himself as an aggressor. “In one respect, Joseph K’s interactions are like those in Kafka’s dreams. Kafka is more often the aggressor than the victim in his dreams and Joseph K is also more often the aggressor than the victim.”

This is one of the many ways in which Hall and Lind have tried to find out similarity between the behaviour of the hero and that of the author in his dream. For example, it is believed that in The Trail K is suffering from a sense of guilt and most of the critics aver that the sense of guilt constitutes a major theme in Kafka. Hall and Lind believe that Kafka in his dreams did not suffer from the sense of guilt rather from the feeling of shame. Therefore, guilt and shame are not synonymous:
When we examine *The Trial*, however, we see that Joseph K despite his arrest, does not feel guilty. Rather he bends every effort to learn what the crime is that he is charged with so that he can defend himself. At the end of the book, when an official plunges a knife into Joseph K’s heart, he feels ashamed to be dying like a dog. He is humiliated but not guilty.\textsuperscript{35}

In whatever way we look upon the novel the dilemma of K seems to be insoluble. This is the hallmark of Kafka’s writings. His most successful novels and short stories always leave the reader uncertain about the ultimate meaning of the text. Hatefield rightly avers: “There is no single, infallibly correct meaning in which we may reduce them.”\textsuperscript{36} They deal with something which is inexplicable and rationally unintelligible.

Franz Kafka is in fact one of the most commented writers of the twentieth century. He has presented such an image of individual - an outsider with alienated consciousness caught in a helpless condition struggling against a mysterious court - that has caught the imagination of every great critic. Kafka presents everything with remarkable precision and clarity. There is hardly any ambiguity in his style. But the image of man which he has presented in *The Trial* is provocative, disturbing, and surprising. In Kafka the image of the individual is a metaphor for the exploration of different types of human predicament.

Every critic has tried to comprehend the mystery of *The Trial* in his own way. Theodore Ziolkowski, another important critic, has tried
to relate the novel with the theme of guilt. He believes that “The Trial is a book about guilt and freedom: the inevitability of man’s guilt in the world and man’s freedom to accept the responsibility for his own guilt.” Ziolkowski believes that the novel projects the world in which there is no such thing as a state of innocence. Therefore, freedom is guaranteed only to the one who recognises his guilt. The problem with Joseph K is that he doesn’t recognise his guilt. Though he becomes guilty the very moment when he realises that he has been falsely accused and wrongly incriminated by a hostile Court. The moment K refuses to realise his responsibility he loses his freedom. The idea is that man’s freedom lies in accepting his guilt. But the protagonist instead of accepting his guilt attempts to project his own guilt on the world around him. Consequently “what we have in The Trial, is not a reflection of reality, but rather a distortion of reality…”

Ziolkowski focuses on the changing consciousness of the hero. When K is arrested a sense of guilt develops him as is revealed in his apology to the landlady for the trouble he had caused her in the morning. He also apologises to Fraulein Burstner for the slight confusion the morning incident had left in her room. Similarly one another incident that reveals the development of guilt in K is the flogging scene. K realises that the two warders are being punished because he had complained against them to the Examining Magistrate. He also holds himself responsible to explain his case to his uncle lest it should become a disgrace for the family. As the sense of guilt increases
in K he ponders over drawing different strategies to defend himself. Henceforth his whole effort is oriented towards disclaiming his guilt. “It is this decision that is horrendous.” 39 Joseph K has two alternatives either to accept the responsibility of his action or to evade his responsibility on the expanse of freedom. K chooses the second alternative hence he is unfree in perpetuity.

In order to disclaim his guilt K desperately seeks the help of different mediators especially of women hoping sorely that they might come to his rescue. Thus he creates a group of helpers such as Fraulein Burstner, Huld the advocate, and his maid Leni, Titorelli the painter, in a desperate attempt to put his responsibility on the shoulders of others. Ziolkowski further observes that the animal images in The Trail are symbolic of human degradation. For instance, Block, the commercial traveler is a symbol of a man who has degraded himself and is totally dependent on his advocate. “Block is not merely a symbol of human degradation, but a typological anticipation of K’s own fate.” 40

One can say that some of the critics have implicitly or explicitly adopted a psychoanalytical approach in order to comprehend the problem of Joseph K. He seems to be an individual suffering from some psychological problem. Thus The Trail is a psychoanalytic narrative which deals with the hero’s subjective trail. Hence “In The Trial Joseph K can never escape the court. He encounters its representatives in his room, on the street, at work, in the cathedral – everywhere”. 41
Therefore, Greenberg believes it is the protagonist’s mind where the Court is located. The Court and all the intimate references in the novels point to the inner world of the hero. It is in the mind where the trail takes place. “The Trail swims in the turgid atmosphere of mind.” It means that the novel deals with psychological alienation of the hero. K never realises that the Court lies in his own conscience and it appears to him as something external hence he acts against himself. The irony is that “What K thinks is being done to him, he is doing to himself.”

Another important critic of Kafka Ritchie Robertson has made some important observation on The Trail. He is of the view that the novel belong to a genre which may be called “the metaphysical (or religious) crime novel” which has its root in the Gothic and psychological novel of the eighteenth century. The reader can see many features of the metaphysical crime novel in The Trail. For instance, in a typical metaphysical crime fiction the primary interest does not lie “in the ingenuity of the detective… nor in the psychology of the criminal… but in the metaphysical or religious theme arising out of the criminal’s deed.” But Kafka has gone ahead by making the perpetrator known and his commission unknown. Hence the reader is unable to rationalise under which law is Joseph K guilty.

The structure of metaphysical crime novel is “dramatic”. The narrative consists of “a series of dramatic confrontation moving towards a climax.” One can see that the novel consists of a series of dramatic
confrontations between defiant and recalcitrant Joseph K and all the people he comes across while struggling to defend himself. The other features of the metaphysical crime fiction which Kafka has incorporated in *The Trial* are the short span of the time in which the story takes place (The Trial covers just one year of K’s life), the ironic narrative, the urban locale in which “the crowded slums, the attics, the lumbar-room in the bank where the guards are punished, all suggest aspects of K’s inner world.”

In the metaphysical crime novel the setting and other background details play a secondary role. What is important is the interaction of the hero with the large and mysterious institution which he hardly understands. Joseph K confronts a court whose working is unknown to him. According to Robertson these generic features in *The Trial* are quiet conspicuous in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and in other novelists as well. In comparison to his predecessor Kafka has exploited his resources with a difference. The idea is that what Kafka has produced is not a replica of Dostoevsky. If Dostoevsky has observed the realistic norms of the Gothic novel in his masterpiece *Crime and Punishment* Kafka has left him far behind by “reintroducing elements of Gothic fantasy at the expense of plausibility.” One of the very good example of Kafka’s employment of the Gothic fantasy is the flogging scene in *The Trial*. In case of Kafka though the relation between author’s personal experiences and literature cannot be ignored but *The Trial* “is in no sense a roman a clef.”
Robertson challenges the biographical, historical, and psychological interpretations of *The Trial* on the assumption that the author is interested in ‘objectifying problems’ rather than expressing his personal problems. In Joseph K Kafka has not depicted himself; rather he has delineated a character much different from himself and has explored how he responds to a baffling situation that is to say the limitation of man to know the moral law. Joseph K transgresses moral law by expressing his ignorance of it. Ignorance of moral law constitutes the protagonist’s guilt. Therefore, his attempt to prove his innocence amounts to demonstrating his guilt. The court, a metaphor for moral law, tries to arouse in K the sense of good and evil whereas he devises different ways either to evade or to suppress it.

Kafka has created Joseph K not to solve any ontological or temporal human problem rather to make the reader conscious of the problematics of life. The problematics of life can be explored from more than one prospectives. As Albert Camus observes that *The Trial* deals with an absurd world. It makes the reader conscious of the existential reality without offering any solution. Joseph K, Camus believes, is an absurd hero. He accepts his existential destiny and refuses to renounce it. It is in the refusal to renounce life that an element of hope lies. The beleaguered hero continues his struggle till he is executed. Kafka depicts a godless world in which no amount of man’s effort can add meaning to its meaninglessness. Yet man’s freedom lies in accepting this meaninglessness. “Kafka’s world is in truth an indescribable
universe in which man allows himself the tormenting luxury of fishing in a bathtub, knowing that nothing will come out of it.”

According to Camus Kafka’s works are of symbolic nature in which the author has envisaged human life in such a way that keeps on provoking human imagination. Ordinary characters such as Joseph K, involved in a disturbing adventures are caught in a problem that they had never formulated. Joseph K is accused but he does not know of what. He makes every possible attempt to defend himself but does not know why. He continues living in a very pessimistic condition. He accepts his fate with humility and, as Camus observes “it is through humility that hope enters in” till he is put to death.

There is a very dominant view that Kafka depicted a post war condition of western civilisation in his work. That is, Kafka’s transience penetrated to the root of the existential phenomenon which assumed historical and political reality characterised by fear, surprise, shock and violence. For instance, the very opening chapter of The Trail, according to Hoffman, “…suggests the intrusion of the absurd into a world protected on all sides by familiar assurances and securities.” Hoffman believes that The Trail belongs to the post war western literature which deals with the elements of surprise and violence in modern man’s life. The discovery of the intrusion of surprise in private life of individual is one of the greatest novelistic contributions of Kafka to the understanding of the existential crisis of man in the twentieth century.
But Kafka presents the surprise as a normal event in a conventional way. Presentation of an “incredible event” in conventional terms is a typical style of Kafka’s mode of narration.\textsuperscript{55}

Hoffman suggests that the only way to understand the violence in modern man’s life is to see the individual’s ‘willed interference’ with the power which crushes him. K’s personal life has been interrupted by himself; in him one can perceive a close relation between the assailant and victim. K, the victim, questions the justness of the legal system because he does not admit his involvement as victim. Since he is not convinced of his guilt he asserts his innocence in the Court. In K one can find the fusion of an assailant and victim. “Throughout the progress of the novel, this dual role suggests itself in trivial acts and gestures; K makes his way toward his death, never fully suspecting the force of his own role in causing it.”\textsuperscript{56}

The common assumption is that Joseph K is a victim of cruel Court. But Hoffman believes that he is an assailant too. To explain K dual role the critic refers to the flogging scene in the novel (p. 94-101). The two warders Franz and Willem are being persecuted in the lumbar-room of the Bank as K had complained to the Examining Magistrate about their misbehaviour with him. K is surprised to see that they are punished in the very building in which he works. Here, Hoffman notes, K acts as a source of violence. Thus his claim that he had not intended that they should be punished is an attempt to camouflage his selfishness.
Hoffman believes that there is no doubt that K is a victim; but he also contributes to his own victimisation. When he is taken away by the two executioners he gives up his resistance. This “overpowering image left at the end of K’s struggle is of the victim conniving with the assailant in his own destruction.”

In Kafka the story is simple but the meaning is always paradoxical. This paradox, as revealed by Max Brod, still continues to persist in the views of many critics of the final phase of the twentieth century. It does not mean that what we have in other critics is a reproduction of what Brod had already said about The Trail; nevertheless there is a view in most of the criticism of The Trail that Kafka is concerned with “the moral incommensurability of finite and the infinite” inherent in man-God relationship. In other words, The Trail explores the paradox which has always tormented man. God, on the one hand, “is so transcendent, so remote and distant” totally in different and invisible, yet at the same time immanent in the world, present everywhere, in every reality.

Sitati observes that the Court’s offices are everywhere; wherever Joseph K goes he finds Court’s offices in the attics and whoever he meets is directly or indirectly connected with the Court, as if God has incarnated himself in everything. As he tries to defend himself against a baseless accusation “the great shadow of guilt envelopes him completely.” He has no option but to debase himself like Block in
order to get salvation but there is no certainty that self-debasement can lead to ultimate salvation. It is this uncertainty that make Kafka’s world tragic and unbearable.

Joseph K, an accused, desperately seeking self-exculpation from an obscure, elusive and arbitrary Court, presents an image of human life which is immensely disturbing. As Kafka presents everything in an image, it is the image that grips the reader’s attention. The Trail is neither a religious novel nor an allegory but a novel based on the tradition of modernist “city narrative”.  Goebel compares the hapless figure of Joseph K to the individual whose historical precursor is “Baudelairean flaneur”. K is an individual who lives in a modern city (Prague); he is accused of a crime he has not committed. He makes relentless effort to penetrate into the obscurities of the legal system. In this process he meets many people and observes many things. But everything remains clueless as if he is groping in a surrealistic condition.

Goebel is conscious of the marginality of flanerie motif in The Trail, yet he aims to present a strange and provocative meaning of Kafka’s classic novel. The flaneur in Baudelaire can serve both as a model to understand the problem of Joseph K and also as a counter-figure to K. In Baudelaire the flaneur is essentially preoccupied with the urban images. As he strolls the city he observes everything for its intrinsic aesthetic value. Whereas for K none of the images of the city
has any aesthetic value. He roams the city with a purpose in his mind. He goes to the Court, meets its functionaries in order to get himself acquitted. But his ‘flanerie’ proves to be an exercise in futility.

In Baudelaire the flaneur finds himself in complete harmony with his environment. Whereas the K of The Trail is always troubled and misunderstood by everyone whom he expects to come to his help. This ironic condition of K expresses “…his fundamental estrangement from his surroundings.” He is a rootless individual in his own home town, walking in the streets, visiting offices and attics of the Court in a desperate search for the solution of his case.

The traditional flaneur used to move outside the spaces of the city that were more open and vast. But in Kafka the space for flaneur is too narrow. K in search of the Court wiggles from one office to another situated in attics. In Kafka the whole world is turned into one continuous and labyrinthine space without any beginning and end in which life seems to be bereft of freedom.

Franz Kafka is a very dynamic phenomenon whose works, simple yet mysterious, comic yet depressing, have cast a spell on every great critic. Since Max Brod many critics have interpreted Kafka in the light of Judaism, psychology, history and politics. As one explores literature on Kafka. One realises that the author’s Jewish upbringing and his estranged relationship with his father are two factors which have mostly determined the critical opinion on Kafka. One more important incident
whose effect on Kafka’s writings, especially on *The Trial*, can hardly be denied is his failed relations with women as Canetti emphasises. Each generations of readers responds to a work of art in its own way as the context keeps on changing. If Kafka has preoccupied every critic, if one finds his echo in every culture, and if he is provocative even at present it is only because he is a symbolic writer. A symbolic writer is one who transcends the limits of time and place, hence the terror of *The Trial* seems to have a universal echo (this dimension of Kafka’s works is comprehensively discussed in chapter IV).

There are writers who hold meaning for certain historical reasons. And this is true about every writer. But there are writers who have eternal fascination for the generations of readers across history and culture for having grasped the ungraspable. Kafka is one of them. Though he is an extremely complex writer (as this chapter shows), yet even the reader who has not cultivated his sensibility sufficiently to understand the symbolic subtlety of literature can appreciate Kafka at certain level. The terrific story of *The Trial* in which an innocent is falsely accused, arbitrarily prosecuted, and brutally executed, projects an image of life which probably never figured in any human discourse before Kafka. It has shaken the very foundation of the traditional mode of human reasoning. In this way Kafka in this classic novel is able to penetrate to the bottom of the problem before it became an obsession for the postwar European writers, historians and philosophers.
Notes and References


3. Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (1935; London: Vintage, 1999) 9. All the subsequent references to this text are indicated in this chapter by page numbers only.

4. For Russian formalist like Victor Shklovsky defamiliarisation is a formal technique. For Kafka, on the other hand, it has nothing to do with superficial technique, it goes deeper. By projecting an ordinary and commonsensical situation as if it is totally unintelligible Kafka seems to negate the traditional claim of man over knowledge.

5. Kafka uses a type of humour which modern critics have designated as ‘black humour’ or ‘black comedy’: a fusion of comic and tragic, rational and irrational, serious and ludicrous, laughter and horror.


7. Kuna 133.


10. Kuna 111.


15. Janouch 16.


21. Edwin Muir, like Max Brod, believes that Kafka had read Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist philosopher, and was influenced by his philosophy. He founded his argument regarding the incompatibility between divine law and human law on Kierkegaard’s argument on the sacrifice demanded by God from Prophet Abraham of his son Isaac. Seen from human reason the
demand of God from Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son seems to be arbitrary and absurd. Kierkegaard describes this incident in his book *Fear and Trembling*.


23. It is believed that Kafka’s projection of pessimistic existential condition of man was influenced by his Jewish upbringing, his reading of Kierkegaard, and most importantly, as Brod and Muir believe, by his estranged relationship with his father. They think that Kafka has fashioned his father in the image of God. Therefore, as Brod and Muir emphasise, biography is important to understand the meaning of his works


25. Two of the most interesting incidents of Kafka’s life are his famous quarrel with his father and his troubled relationship with women such as Felice and Milena whom he could never marry. Neider resorts to both the incidents for biographical details.


27. Neider 154.

28. Neider 156.

29. Neider 159.

30. Neider 160.

31. Neider 163.
32. Neider 10.
35. Calvin S. Hall, Richard E. Lind 86.
38. Ziolkowski 46.
40. Ziolkowski 56.
42. Greenberg 120.
43. Alienation of the individual is a dominant theme in almost all of Kafka’s novel and stories. Critics believe that the projection of an alienated sensibility is an objective correlative for the author’s personal problem. Critics have also discovered Kafka’s interest in Freudian psychology. As Greenberg believes that Kafka also
inherited some ideas from Freud. Freudian ideas undoubtedly influenced Kafka and his writing.

44. Greenberg 133.


46. Robertson believes that Dostoevsky is one of the greatest practitioners of the metaphysical crime fiction. Kafka was influenced by his reading of Dostoevsky.

47. Robertson 90-91.

48. Robertson 91.

49. Robertson 92.

50. Robertson 93.

51. Robertson 96. (A type of fiction in which the author expects the reader to identify the actual people despite their altered names).


53. Camus 121.


55. Hoffman 293.

56. Hoffman 299.
57. Hoffman 313.
59. Citati 131.
60. Citati 142.
62. Goebel 43. (An individual who inhabits a fashionable city, strolls and observes the evanescent and elusive objects such as building, traffic, and entertainment. The *flaneur* is a symbol of rootless and alienated individual in a capitalist culture. To explore the theme of urban modernity in Kafka’s *The Trail* Goebel is deeply indebted to Walter Benjamin).
63. Goebel 46.