
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Finding Meaning in Meaninglessness: Comparative Reflections on Rumi and Kafka's Literary Thoughts

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the metaphysical concept of 'finding meaning in meaninglessness' as reflected in the selected works of Jalal Ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, a thirteenth-century Persian poet, and Franz Kafka, a modernist Jewish author of the 20th century from Prague. The analysis compares their insights on hope and despair, showing how two literary figures from different eras and religio-cultural traditions address the challenge of finding significance in a meaningless reality. During moments of existential uncertainty, Rumi focuses on the importance of moving beyond the ego to achieve unity with the divine to find true purpose in life; whereas Kafka's absurdist narratives reveal the profound alienation and anxiety of living, emphasizing the challenge of searching meaning in a complex and indifferent situation. Rumi's approach is grounded in Islamic mysticism and spiritual enlightenment, while Kafka's perspective is marked by Judaic esotericism, existential dread, and the absurdity of existence. Although Rumi's spiritual optimism and Kafka's bleak view of existence highlight their differences, both are essential for understanding the broader human condition or experiences of seeking meaning in life, particularly in the context of spiritual and existential crises arising from modernity.

KEYWORDS

Jalal Ad-Din Rumi, Franz Kafka, meaning, absurdity, human condition

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of "finding meaning in meaninglessness" is an ancient and recurring theme throughout human history, appearing in various philosophies, religions, and artistic expressions. It reflects the innate desire and the persistent effort of humans to make sense of their lives in a disordered and unpredictable reality, particularly during challenging times. Jalal Ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207–1273), the leading Sufi mystic and poet in Persian literature, explores the human experience of confusion and uncertainty, reflecting the inner challenges faced by individuals in their quest for meaning. Franz Kafka (1833-1924), a German-speaking Bohemian author of Czech origin, also reveals a profound sense of ambiguity, instability and difficulties of life by portraying his characters trapped in surreal, bureaucratic, and often oppressive systems of modernity where they struggle to find meaning and worth in existence. While Rumi's focus is on the spiritual dimensions of existence, Kafka's works bring attention to the existential instability and confusion encountered in the search for meaning. The reason is that Kafka's modern society experiences a more profound struggle for meaning than it has ever been, intensified by the disintegration of humanity, loss of faith and identity, moral

and religious ambiguities, ethical and spiritual crises, failure of sensibilities and consciousness, and the degradation of social, cultural, and political values (Weidner, 2017, p.200).

Although Rumi and Kafka hail from distinct periods and literary traditions, their writings address the universal challenge of making sense of the human life in an unpredictable, unstable and confusing situation. This study examines Rumi's poems "A Great Wagon," "The Song of the Reeds," and "The Guest House," alongside Kafka's novels "The Metamorphosis", "The Trial" and "The Castle" to compare their philosophical and existential concerns, showing how Rumi's spiritual pursuits and Kafka's experiences of alienation and identity crises affect their understanding of the quest for meaning within a seemingly meaningless reality. The study also looks at their narrative styles, focusing on symbolism, metaphor, and portrayals of characters to identify their respective perspectives on hope and despair.

2. RUMI'S QUEST FOR MEANING IN THE MYSTICAL ABSURD

In Rumi's poetry, the physical world is often depicted as an illusion, contrasting with the ultimate reality found in the spiritual domain. This duality introduces an existential ambiguity, challenging the nature or essence of existence itself. In "A Great Wagon" this theme is conveyed through a metaphorical tone and deliberately vague language which leads to various interpretations reflecting the Sufi philosophical concept that the material world is an illusion compared to the eternal reality of the divine. The title of this poem represents a meaningful symbol of a vehicle, signifying the journey humans undertake through the material life in pursuit of their spiritual aspirations. In this context, the wagon, with its many passengers, embodies the collective human experience and unity, highlighting how love and harmony are fundamental in bringing people together, rising above their individual differences and creating a greater sense of oneness. Thus, the phrase 'great wagon' also means divine love and wisdom, representing itself as a guiding force to unite individuals in their relationships and spiritual exploration (Eli & Lestari, 2018). This poem addresses the complexities of life in the material world, highlighting the natural tendency of humans to evaluate and make judgments about the various situations and experiences they encounter. As it has been stated in the following ways:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing,
 There is a field. I'll meet you there.
 When the soul lies down in that grass,
 The world is too full to talk about.
 Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
 Doesn't make any sense.
 (Trans. Coleman Barks)

In this stanza, a significant moment of existential reflection is conveyed, revealing an individual's unity with his surroundings, recognizing the limitations of language for expression and the challenge of finding meaning in a complex reality. The poet encourages a spiritual awakening, suggesting individuals to transcend intellectual boundaries to engage in a more authentic and holistic experience of life, arguing that real understanding lies beyond language and concepts. He inspires humans to elevate themselves above conventional moral judgments and constraints of expressions to discover a profound sense of unity and truth, arguing that an ineffable reality exists beyond traditional views (Frazier, 2017).

In "A Great Wagon," Rumi recognizes the limitations of dualistic thinking of the human mind and the potential for greater understanding. He suggests accepting the complexities of life, viewing beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood as part of a greater whole, rather than categorizing experiences, actions, or man strictly as 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong' (Payne, 2020). For him, these manmade distinctions don't truly exist but lead to misinterpreting experiences and foster inner and outer conflicts by limiting the perspective, preventing individuals from exploring more profound truths that lie beyond these rigid classifications. Despite having the tendency to judge or categorize others based on superficial differences or disagreements, the poet believes there exists a conflict-free 'field' that transcends dualities, in which typical moral judgments and intellectual ideas become insignificant (Youssef, 2016). This state of awareness, through compassion, acceptance, and a sense of shared existence, build profound spiritual insight revealing absolute connectedness. Thus, here 'field' also refers to the state of unity with others and is comparable to true love that overcomes personal limitations, constraints of expression, reasoning, and dualities. True love, as described in this poem, involves three essential elements: spiritual awareness, non-judgment, and unity, which together facilitate an understanding of each other's heart, mind, and soul (Cole, 2023).

Rumi's another work "The Song of the Reed," the introductory poem of his *Mathnavi*, also addresses the human experience, the role of divine love and the quest for liberation from the trapped condition or the illusions of the material world. The platform of this poem is man's withdrawal from the state of conformity with God's command because this separation creates a profound spiritual aspiration for divine unity (Topbas, 2009). Thus, metaphorically the 'reed' stands for the human soul which belongs to divine origin and the reed's mournful tune simultaneously reflects human yearning for the divine and serves as a reminder of the soul's trapped condition. This dual imagery reveals both a lament and a call for reconciliation, representing the paradox of human

existence and also the possibility of spiritual emancipation. Through these images, Rumi focuses on the soul's anguish arising from its entrapment in the material world, which is often perceived as transient and illusory, distant from the eternal truth (Aghili & Samakar, 2010). In this complex situation, the soul's desire for union with the Divine creates a contradiction, generating tension between finite human existence and the infinite divine, leading to existential ambiguity. As Rumi expresses his observation in the following lines:

Listen to the reed and the tale it tells,
how it sings of separation:
Ever since they cut me from the reed bed,
my wail has caused men and women to weep.
(Trans. Kabir Helminski)

Here, the term 'sings of separation', in a metaphoric sense, reveals that the soul, previously close to the Divine, has been placed in the material world. It reflects the Islamic concept of '*fitrah*,' the pure, original state from which humanity has deviated due to sin. Rumi transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries, using 'the reed' as a symbol of '*fitrah*,' representing the universal human tendency to seek truth and experience of spiritual union, as mentioned in the *Qur'anic* verse, "Indeed, we belong to Allah, and indeed, to Him, we shall return" (Al-Baqarah:156). Thus, the phrase 'tale it tells' suggests that the reed, when played as a flute, shares a narrative through its tune, evoking feelings that reveal the profound sorrow and longing resulting from this separation. As Rumi states:

I want a heart torn open with longing
the share the pain of this love.
Whoever has been parted from his source
longs to return to the state of his union.
At everything gathering I play my lament.
I'm a friend to both happy and sad.
(Trans. Kabir Helminski)

In the poem "The Song of the Reed," the quoted verse "heart torn open with longing" implies intense emotional anguish and desire, signifying the 'heart' as the essence of one's being, and representing 'torn' as existential struggle and the search for meaning, reflecting the human condition. Similarly, 'love' is depicted as a double-edged emotion, since it offers both immense joy and profound suffering, and its willingness to share this pain reveals a deep sense of connection and empathy with others. Rumi reflects the existential idea that suffering and love are integral to human life, suggesting that their combined expression deepens a sense of unity and insight. His poetic verse, "Whoever has been parted from his source longs to return to the state of his union," echoes Heidegger's existential idea of "thrownness," where individuals constantly seek to reconnect with their origins or authentic identities. In this poem, Rumi points out that the longing of the soul is a driving force in human life, leading individuals on a journey toward completeness (Schimmel, 1982).

In "The Song of the Reed," the existential anguish of the human soul is echoed in the melancholic melody of the reed flute, arising from a sense of alienation from the divine and its longing for meaning in an indifferent universe. This complex dual perception of soul's experience as both separate and inherently connected exemplifies the poet's existential paradoxical ideas through which he tries to define human life as a union of joy and sorrow. Thus, the underlying message of this poem advocates for acceptance to achieve a deeper understanding of the experience, promoting balance and wisdom, and finding meaning within the contradictions of life (Nabiloo, 2012). Rumi points out that in the complexities of life journey, the most important task is cleansing the heart through sincere repentance and virtuous deeds, since it facilitates the realization of inner love, affirming that God alone is sufficient. This poem focuses love not merely as an emotion but as an influential force that leads individuals toward a deeper understanding of themselves and the divine, through healing, transforming and uniting all aspects of existence, guiding them toward spiritual enlightenment and the ultimate reality of oneness (Topbas, 2009).

However, Rumi's "The Guest House," drawn from his *Mathnawi* (Book Five), deals with the nature of the self, transcending the boundary between the individual and the universal, introducing existential ambiguity that invites readers to question whether the self is an independent entity or part of a greater whole. Here, he conveys the Sufi belief in acknowledging all experiences as divine gifts, interpreting each emotion and event as lessons from God to develop and elevate the soul. In its title, the poem reflects the transient nature of human existence, viewing the experiences of life as short-term visitors and suggesting a need for both mindfulness and detachment from one's surroundings (Spalding, 2012). He emphasizes self-awareness, encouraging individuals not to be defined by their feelings and thoughts becoming overly attached to them because the self is ever-changing, shaped by experiences and emotions. Rumi's view of the self as a temporary host for human emotions and experiences encourages a deeper

understanding of identity and fosters personal growth, suggesting individuals embrace the impermanence of their feelings while seeking a higher spiritual truth and connection with the divine. As it has been expressed in the following verses:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
(Trans. Coleman Barks)

According to Rumi, human existence is similar to a 'guest house', as individuals encounter new thoughts, emotions, and experiences daily, much like a guest house receives new visitors. Thus, the image of the 'guest house' with daily visitors, effectively visualizes how human minds function, while individuals' inner lives are dynamic and constantly changing. Here, the ambiguity or confusion arises from the concept that the self is simultaneously the host and distinct from the experiences it faces, implying a transient and evolving identity. Nevertheless, Rumi promotes the acceptance of all emotional experiences, recognizing their worth and impermanence, and seeing each moment as an opportunity for learning and self-discovery (Devroede, n.d.). He portrays these emotions and moments of awareness as 'guests' and writes:

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
(Trans. Coleman Barks)

Here, 'joy' stands for happiness, while 'depression' denotes sadness, and 'meanness' refers to actions of cruelty, anger, or pettiness. In "The Guest House," Rumi characterizes joy, depression, and meanness as visitors, giving importance to their essential role in all feelings, and highlighting their unpredictable and transient nature. He conveys the idea that emotions and mental states, whether pleasant or unpleasant, are temporary, and can help one value these experiences, promoting growth and insight. Although the ups and downs of human life are often misinterpreted as negative or unproductive, Rumi's poem advocates for accepting all experiences, acknowledging their potential to bring enlightenment and growth, and recognizing that ignoring the lessons from experiences could result in missing out on wisdom and transformation they offer (Spalding, 2012). Rumi emphasizes the significance of giving up resistance and accepting things as they are in order to proceed from expectations to reality. He expressed this thought in the poem "The Guest House" as follows:

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
(Trans. Coleman Barks)

Here, the 'crowd of sorrow' denotes the unavoidable and overwhelming hardships that are an integral part of human life, which Rumi believes should be considered as a guest. He describes sorrows as 'violent sweeping,' to emphasize the destructive force of these sorrows, highlighting their ability to disrupt and unsettle life, eroding meaning and comfort. In this context, by 'furniture' the poet metaphorically reflects the human need for comfort and security to provide a sense of emotional stability; as in its absence the experience of sorrow leaves one feeling hollow, disconnected and unsettled (Schimmel, 2020). Rumi advocates for treating sorrows with reverence and acceptance rather than denial or conflict, highlighting that intense griefs are not limited to the moments of sadness, might have diverse impact on humanity to change thoughts and perceptions. The experience of pain's adverse effects, leads to personal development, enlightenment, and a richer self-understanding through opening individuals' mind to lessons, growth, wisdom, and a deeper understanding of life and themselves, despite its destructive nature (Marikar, 2023). Rumi's Sufi approach highlights the importance of gracefully accepting sorrows as a sign of surrendering to God's will and trusting in the divine plan, viewing each sorrow as sent by the Divine. He encourages individuals to face their fears and sorrows instead of avoiding them, emphasizing the need for understanding and managing emotions without judgment, recognizing sorrows as valuable experiences and engaging with them to develop emotional resilience. In "The Guest House" he writes:

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing
and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.
(Trans. Coleman Barks)

Rumi symbolizes negative emotions using phrases like 'the dark thought' for pessimistic ideas, 'shame' for feelings of guilt or embarrassment, and 'malice' for hostility or a desire to harm. Despite these negative connotations, he suggests handling difficult emotions with 'laughing,' a symbol of joy and an open attitude, encouraging acceptance of these emotions as part of the human experience. Rumi posits that all experiences, even those that seem devoid of meaning, are important as they serve "as a guide from beyond," providing wisdom and facilitating personal growth (Nepo, 2020).

3. KAFKA'S STRUGGLE FOR MEANING IN AN ABSURD AND OPPRESSIVE WORLD

Kafka, as a critique of modernity, focuses on the common experience of meaninglessness, prevalent in the materialistic culture of his time, where happiness is often equated with success, intellectual achievement, financial prosperity, and dominance over others. Individuals who fail to achieve these goals may develop a negative self-image, perceiving themselves as worthless, ineffective, and insecure (Riggs, 2018). This view is notably reflected in his novella "The Metamorphosis", which explores the survival and exploitation of a man arising from both his own struggles and those of others, emphasizing the rise of dehumanizing, materialism and the erosion of the human self. In this story, Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, experiences a dire sense of alienation and despair, undergoing a dramatic metamorphosis, turning into a hideous-giant insect overnight, which generates sensation of horror. His personality evolving into something less human and increasingly more like the insect embodies the degradation and ultimate dissolution of man into nothingness (Minar & Sutandio, 2017).

Walter H. Sokel (1983) identifies Gregor as a victim of self-alienation, whose internal fractured personality manifests in his physical transformation, as he aspires to compete with the world around him but fails to reach its demanding standards. Azadeh Davachi (2009) describes Gregor's helpless condition as a state of absurdity, where his machine-like work tendency drives him into existential nothingness. Despite his insect form, his obsessive concerns about his family and job make his surroundings seem irrational, absurd, and unreasonable. Davachi further identifies that the protagonist is imprisoned by his own circumstances, encaged by the demands of his family, society, and his traveling salesman occupation, which had already dehumanized him before his physical transformation.

In "The Metamorphosis," Kafka shows how a 'passive attitude' serves as a major factor in dehumanization and the erosion of human identity, asserting that this state leads to a loss of inner strength and ability to act, affecting their sense of manhood. Here, Gregor's passivity is reflected in his disconnection from his family, lack of self-confidence, acceptance of his transformation, and tolerance of mistreatment and abuse, showing how these factors together contribute to his isolation and a sense of meaninglessness. Additionally, Grego's sister Grete and their father, Mr. Samsa, also reflect passive attitudes by neglecting their responsibilities and relying extensively on Gregor's financial support, which reinforces his feelings of entrapment and exploitation (Sokel, 1983).

Kafka, through the depiction of Gregor's unfortunate transformation into a vermin, echoes a life that appears tragic and meaningless but leads to an awakening, as both Gregor and his family realize the necessity of adaptation, resilience and the inevitability of change in finding new ways to live during moments of challenges. Significant transformations in this novel include Gregor's father, who transitions from a weak, retired, and financially dependent man to a strong and self-confident individual. Grete also evolves from immaturity to responsibility, reflecting her increasing assertiveness and decisiveness as she cares for Gregor, ultimately resulting in her demand to remove him from their lives. Here, Grete's maturity and growth following her brother Gregor's transformation and death parallels the family's journey toward independence and adaptability, encouraging self-awareness, overcoming stagnation, and restoring a sense of hope and optimism. Thus, Kafka's portrayal of Grete's final transformation into a beautiful, lively, and energetic individual symbolizes the family's potential and the continuity of life despite past hardships. This change is effectively reflected in the title "Metamorphosis", evoking the image of a butterfly emerging from a cocoon (Straus, 1989).

In "The Trial", Kafka explores universal themes of the human experience, including the struggle for understanding and justice, the feeling of being overpowered by impersonal forces, and the search for meaning in an indifferent universe. Addressing a range of social and individual challenges, the novel focuses on the inefficiency and oppressive nature of modern bureaucratic systems through the experiences of Josef K., a young and successful banker who faces an unexpected arrest at home by two warders. The protagonist, accused of an unspecified crime, embodies existential guilt and the universal anxiety about one's place in the world.

His attempts to understand the charges and find a logical explanation for his situation, reflects the human quest for meaning in an often seems difficult and incomprehensible world (Fatemeh & Hamedreza, 2013).

In "The Trial", Josef K.'s struggles with a complex legal procedure that is beyond his understanding or control, serves as a symbol of the absurdity of human efforts against an indifferent authority or system. The tragic ending of the novel, where Josef K. faces execution without knowing the charges against him or having a fair trial highlights the reality of the inescapability of death and the futility of resisting it. Kafka tries to portray a society steeped in suspicion, anxiety, and persecution, reflecting the restrictive living conditions of the Bohemian people during his lifetime. He focuses individual's struggle against large, impersonal, powerful institutions that control much of modern life as Josef K, failing to receive justice for his mysterious crime from the corrupt court system, faces punishment. Despite constant assertion of his innocence, the never-ending investigations of court officials continue, ultimately leading to his death described as "like a dog" (Handique & Phukan, 2021).

All the aforementioned elements of absurdity, alienation, and bureaucratic oppression, typically classify the novel as a bleak and pessimistic narrative and present its protagonist Josef K. as trapped in an absurd and nightmarish reality. Nevertheless, certain aspects of mystical thought, including an omnipresent but incomprehensible higher authority, an enigmatic system, a continuous search, and a separation from the ordinary world, possess a meaningful undertone. Therefore, the trial faced by Josef K. in this novel might signify something greater than a conventional legal process. The paradoxes found in Josef K.'s trial are similar to spiritual challenges, focusing on inner conflicts and the personal clash with guilt, fear, and alienation, representing a deeper confrontation with the self and its place in the universe. Likewise, his relentless search for meaning and justice in an obscure and arbitrary world can be understood as an encounter with ineffable realities and divine forces, similar to the journey of a mystic seeking enlightenment or union with the divine. The portrayal of Josef K.'s alienation, expressed through his detachment from ordinary life in quest of a deeper, hidden truth, can additionally be interpreted as a mystical separation from the mundane (Alter, 1996).

Kafka, through the character of Josef K., tries to convey the fundamental nature of man's deep self-awareness, dignity, and courage, as he consistently defends his identity and innocence, opposes the court's charges, and maintains his self-assertion, even in the seemingly hopeless situation of his mysterious arrest and trial. The protagonist confronts an unfathomable system, motivated by a strong commitment to challenge the enigmatic higher authority, revealing his resilience and refusal to accept his fate passively. In a wider context, Kafka tries to reveal the complexities of humanity by depicting Josef K.'s journey of transformation from confidence to despair or from arrogance to a deeper understanding of limitations. Josef K.'s initial resistance and ultimate realization of his powerlessness creates a profound inner conflict and a changing perception of destiny. Thus, the story starts with a belief in the world's logical and rational nature, feeling confident and self-assured, but gradually becomes increasingly suspicious, anxious, and contemplative as the trial progresses.

In "The Trial", Josef K.'s sense of alienation after his arrest and trial by a mysterious authority reflecting a broader human experience of feeling disconnected and powerless within a world or system that lacks clear guidelines, logic, and equity. His struggle represents the challenge of finding justice and meaning in a society where the complex systems and oppressive structures of institution hinder personal growth, bringing to light the conflict between the quest for individual enlightenment and the limitations imposed by established systems. From a metaphorical context, Josef K.'s this experience symbolizes the frustration and confusion that arise when one seeks truth or justice within manmade doctrines of religion that often prioritize rules over genuine understanding or compassion (Handique & Phukan, 2021). Therefore, Kafka's focus on rigid dogmas that value rules over real understanding and empathy highlights his critical viewpoint on institutional religion, whose complex structures obstruct meaningful spiritual connections instead of promoting divine relationship.

Kafka's last novel, "The Castle" narrates the tale of K, a land surveyor, who is summoned to a village by Castle authorities, but upon arrival, he finds his appointment steeped in confusion and obstruction, leading him into a mysterious and obscure bureaucratic system that governs the village. He sees the existing systems as inefficient and unpredictable, causing frustration and a feeling of futility due to their more focus on protocol rather than individual needs. He perceives that his own life and that of the villagers are subjected to the dominant, indirect, and pervasive influence of an inaccessible and mysterious authority, as Kafka names it "the shadow of the other". He notices that despite the rare visibility of the Castle's authorities, their influence and power are consistently felt, creating uncertainty and oppression among the villagers due to the complex and confusing rules. Here, Kafka draws a parallel between the authority depicted in the title and contemporary bureaucracies highlighting how both can create feelings of frustration and helplessness due to their lack of personal relationships and the seemingly arbitrary and unpredictable nature of their decisions.

The novel begins with K's arrival in the village surrounding the castle, creating an image of entering into a dark, passionless world, cold and grey, which evokes "the tragic sense of being trapped without hope of escape." Here, the villagers' fear and excessive caution indicate their lack of courage and critical thinking, discouraging both individuality and creativity. Their uncritical obedience to social norms leads to mediocrity, leaving them unwilling or hesitant to engage with the challenging truths about themselves or

their circumstances. Their behaviour reflects that of religious followers who, despite recognizing the absurdity of their beliefs, prefer to ignore this truth, engaging in groupthink, blinded by tradition, and justifying their actions. Based on this observation, K gradually discovers that the villagers are hiding a crucial truth, which metaphorically implies that "in *The Castle*, God is dead, and we are faced with a universe devoid of sense" (Kaufman, 1956, p.122).

Kafka's narrative highlights the essential differences between K and the villagers in terms of their perceptions, motivations, and interactions with the bureaucratic authority of the Castle. The land surveyor K, appointed by the Castle, is driven by individualistic or personal motivations who seeks validation and recognition, aiming to establish his legitimacy within the village. In contrast, the villagers' collective or practical concerns, prioritize their livelihoods by following to the Castle's rules, avoiding conflict, and efficiently managing bureaucracy to simplify their lives. K, an outsider, struggles to comprehend the complexity of the bureaucratic system and gain recognition from Castle authorities, experiencing confusion, frustration, and alienation due to the unpenetrated enigmatic and oppressive rules. Conversely, the villagers are accustomed to the Castle's authority and bureaucratic system, having become familiar with its obscure presence, and complex and pervasive management. They perceive the Castle as a remote and enigmatic power, believing it controls their lives in ways they don't fully understand but they have learned to accept this reality. They employ intermediaries like Barnabas to handle the bureaucratic challenges posed by the Castle, gradually enhancing their adaption strategies for more successful interactions. Unlike the villagers, K continually interrogates the fairness and legitimacy of the authorities and the court system, seeking to rationalize his circumstances, by exploring and confronting the system's inherent inconsistencies. He strives to communicate with the Castle authorities through his own continuous efforts and repeatedly encounters failure and misunderstanding, confronting obstacles, confusing directives, and unhelpful intermediaries. This experience makes him painfully aware of his outsider status and the impenetrability of the formal system, which, much like the modern life (Smetana, 1991).

In "The Castle", K's unsuccessful attempts to gain access to the Castle's officials symbolize the relentless human struggle for divine approval and spiritual enlightenment, both of which remain out of his reach. Kafka sees the strict adherence to formalities as a cause of this failure, arguing that excessive obedience to rules and regulations overshadows true connections and hinders human relationships. In addition to this, he highlights two critical factors that lead to K's failure: his rationalist mindset in understanding the Castle's complexities and then his approach of treating others merely as means to his advantage, disregarding their distinct personalities (Lowly, 2004, pp. 52-55). Here, Kafka shows how an overdependence on logic and reason can obscure the deeper, often irrational or emotional dimensions of existence. Furthermore, he points out how a lack of empathy, arising from not recognizing others as unique individuals, hampers the potential to create meaningful connections and gain essential support. Through these two faults in K's character, the author exposes the underlying reasons for the general failures of humanity in reaching their goals.

In "The Castle", an unattainable reality is portrayed through the complex bureaucratic system of the Castle which might be comparable to a spiritual barrier where intermediaries obstruct one's path to spiritual enlightenment. Kafka's depiction of the Castle officials as uncaring and inaccessible reflects the nature of the divine as obscure and unreachable, revealing how the hierarchical systems of institutional religion can complicate access to divine reconciliation (Azizmohammadi & Kohzadi, 2013, pp.103-105). Here, K's relentless endeavour serves as an example of the broader human condition where miscommunication and misunderstandings are common but offer moments of connection and insight, suggesting that meaning can be found in the bonds between individuals. Kafka presents an absurd and surreal world, conveying a message that meaning is not always inherent but must be constructed by individuals (Jones, 2010). Thus, his protagonist K not only defends his dignity and integrity by asserting humanity but also challenges the arbitrary and dehumanizing system, recognizing the importance of preserving principles and self-respect even in humiliation or degrading situations. He confronts authority, strives for freedom, faces anguish, confusion and challenges of life to make sense or meaning of his experiences.

4. DUAL REALITIES IN RUMI AND KAFKA'S LITERARY THOUGHTS: SPIRITUAL OPTIMISM AND EXISTENTIAL DREAD

Rumi and Kafka present two distinct approaches to the search for meaning: Rumi focuses on an inward journey leading to a sense of connection and inner harmony, while Kafka's outward exploration reveals the absurd and alienated nature of human life. Their works together provide a thorough examination of the human condition, addressing the different dimensions of the search for meaning, knowledge, and a sense of purpose in life, offering a holistic view of the various aspects of the journey toward understanding and fulfilment. Kafka's narrative combines existential questions with his complex understanding of faith and Jewish mysticism, particularly *Kabbalah*, creating a mystical atmosphere that compels readers to explore themes of divine justice, the mystery of God, and the enigmatic order that underlies behind the chaos of life (Leavitt, 2011). Thus, Kafka's spiritual journey is often seen as futile or absurd, with characters trapped in a cycle of endless seeking without resolution; whereas Rumi's is a path to enlightenment, divine union, transformative experiences, and the ultimate realization of divine love.

Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" represents a character's physical and existential transformation, while Rumi's "A Great Wagon" focuses on universally man's transformation from the material world to spiritual enlightenment and divine love. By revealing themes of alienation and identity, Kafka shows the impact of the protagonist Gregor's transformation on his family and his own sense of self, but Rumi highlights how the soul's transformation affects love and material attachments. Through Gregor's physical transformation, Kafka metaphorically reveals the loss of human identity that occurs when individuals confine their roles to a functioning machine for their family's needs only. Rumi, in "A Great Wagon" much like Kafka, expresses the essence of existential ambiguity, addressing the uncertainties of life, the shifting nature of desires and forms and the profound mystical truths that lie beyond typical understanding. Nonetheless what sets him apart is the idea of interconnectedness with God, stressing the importance of transcending the ego and the journey toward divine unity, conveying that true understanding and peace arises from recognizing the divine presence within oneself and the world. However, Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" also reflects a sense of hope within a state of meaninglessness, highlighting the importance of interconnectedness with one's surroundings without directly acknowledging unity with God. Gregor, influenced by the demands of his family and society, reduces himself to a mere worker for their needs, which alienates him from meaningful life experiences. Likewise, Gregor's incapacity and isolation force the family to come together more closely, strengthening their bonds as they face their challenges, despite their initial reluctance. By presenting these two results of transformation, Kafka brings attention to the dual themes of despair and hope.

In "The Castle", Kafka reflects a pessimistic understanding of the human condition, emphasizing struggle, alienation, and the hopeless search for meaning in an indifferent world. Conversely, Rumi's "The Guest House" conveys an optimistic and accepting approach to life, encouraging to perceive the challenges of life as meaningful and transformative, since they are integral to the human experience and essential for deeper understanding and personal growth. In "The Castle", the absurdity and bureaucratic mechanisms compel characters to find their own ways and derive meaning from their experiences, despite the absence of a clear, rational order. Thus, the protagonist K.'s persistent search for clarity, the metaphorical implications of bureaucratic systems, the investigation of ambiguous authority, the significance of human connections, existential reflection, and acceptance of the absurd, are presented as pathways for discovering meaning. In "The Castle", K.'s experience is characterized by external struggles, filled with bureaucratic and social challenges, embodying his existential search for identity and purpose. On the contrary, the journey in Rumi's "The Guest House" is internal, focusing on the soul's encounter with various emotions and experiences as part of spiritual growth. Kafka's existential viewpoint emphasizes human complexity and individual isolation, while his esoterism focuses struggle for understanding and acceptance in a world that is often incomprehensible. Rumi's Sufi mysticism promotes holistic acceptance of life's experiences and divine purpose, suggesting a harmonious acceptance of all life's experiences as part of a greater spiritual journey. Regardless of their differences, Rumi and Kafka highlight a shared understanding that despite the absence of clear solutions or inherent meaning in the world, the human endeavour to find and create meaning is both important and worthy of recognition.

Rumi's "The Song of the Reed" reflects an intense longing for divine union, portraying separation as a temporary but significant transformative stage and enlightening part of the journey towards spiritual realization. Kafka's "The Trial" delves into existential alienation, where separation is portrayed as a permanent and inherent aspect of human existence without any promise of reconciliation or understanding. Rumi's optimistic perspective suggests that suffering and longing serve a purpose and lead to spiritual fulfilment; while Kafka's pessimistic outlook represents suffering as meaningless and the pursuit of understanding or justice as futile. In "The Song of the Reed", Rumi's portrayal of the individual's journey towards a higher spiritual truth, gives priority to the personal transformation and divine connection; but Kafka's "The Trial" depicts Josef K.'s quest for meaning in a surreal world governed by arbitrary laws, highlighting the oppression of individuality and autonomy caused by an overwhelming and impersonal system, leaving no room for spiritual or personal redemption. However, Kafka's protagonist Josef K. challenges a dehumanizing system, asserting his humanity and maintaining personal dignity, thus, the tragic ending metaphorically leaves a message of resistance and empowerment, highlighting the potential for human dignity and reform which significantly resonates with Rumi.

In Kafka's writings, the divine is often portrayed as a bureaucratic, absurd authority, reflecting his own struggles with faith and institutional religion during his time, presenting a world where God or a higher power seems distant, unapproachable, and inscrutable. Thus, in the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world, his characters' quests for justice, understanding, or redemption are met with silence or contradictory answers, suggesting a universe devoid of clear divine guidance or purpose. In contrast, Rumi's portrayal of the divine focuses God's omnipresence and profound involvement in believers' lives, presenting spiritual reality as a source of guidance and enlightenment, encouraging surrender to God's will and the dissolution of the ego to achieve a higher state of consciousness and unity with the divine. In Kafka's narrative, nature of God is distant, possibly indifferent, and often associated with an impenetrable and unfathomable authority, while Rumi's God is intimate, loving, and accessible, seeking a deep personal relationship with each believer.

However, Rumi, through his verses, reflects on the journey of self-discovery and the complexities of existence, pointing out the dualities of life such as joy and sorrow, certainty and doubt, suggesting that accepting these contradictions leads to a more meaningful life. He encourages overcoming the ego to connect with a greater reality, often seen as divine or universal

consciousness, promoting the idea that the feeling of being separate from one another and from the divine is an illusion. Conversely, Kafka's narratives often portray individuals as isolated and disconnected from society, exploring how this detachment affects their identities and relationships. Using his distinctive style and surreal narrative techniques, Kafka brings attention to the irrational and unpredictable aspects of human life, but, similar to Rumi, also addresses the necessity of confronting the challenges that come with existence and the human condition.

5. Conclusion

Rumi and Kafka, despite representing different historical periods, and cultural, philosophical, and spiritual values, both seek to reveal the diverse limitations of humanity, addressing existential, cognitive, emotional, psychological, social, environmental, physical, and ethical challenges of human life. They reflect on the search for meaning in a complex situation within their writings, viewing this quest as an essential part of being true human. Rumi combines his spiritual and existential thoughts with religious experience to address fundamental problems of human life under different headings like the nature of the soul, the freedom of the will, immortality and the relation of the human to the divine. He explores the nature of divine love and the soul's longing for union with the divine, which are central to Sufi concepts like the annihilation of the self (*fana*) and subsistence in God (*baqa*). He also employs the idea of the unity of all existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) as a recurring theme to convey profound spiritual and philosophical insights. Kafka, on the other hand, explores complex questions related to identity, alienation, suffering, and redemption, suggesting that within a sense of emptiness lies the potential for valuable discoveries and deep transformative insights. Rumi's mystical approach to understanding human reality focuses on the complex dimensions of psychological and personal struggles, distinguishing between devotional and ascetic practices in metaphorical and formal contexts. As an atheist with a strong sense of his Jewish identity, Kafka's writings serve to question and illuminate the darker aspects of modern existence, addressing the absurdity and emptiness of human life, emphasizing the need for a value system based on duty, responsibility, and the inevitability of moral obligations. However, this study, concentrating more on metaphysical concepts and some literary techniques of their selected works, has not adequately discussed the impact of historical and cultural contexts on Rumi and Kafka's literary thoughts. Therefore, future research could extend the comparative scope by delving into additional thematic elements of Kafka's existentialism and Rumi's mysticism.

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