



# The Role of Physiotherapy in the Works of Franz Kafka: A Literary Perspective on Pain and Rehabilitation

**Dr. Shikha Dutt Sharma, Dr. Govind Prasad Goyal, Dr. A. Greeni, Dr. Ashok  
Dadarao Ghuge, Dr. Punit Pathak, Dr. R. Rajakumari**

Assistant Professor, School of Humanities, K. R Mangalam University  
Gurugram.

Associate Professor, IMS Law College, Noida.

Assistant Professor of English, Department of Freshmen Engineering  
St. Martin's Engineering College, Dhulapally, Kompally, Secunderabad.

Assistant Professor, MIT Art, Design and Technology University, Pune, India.

Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Auro University,  
Surat.

Associate Professor, Department of English, Saveetha School of Engineering  
Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences, Saveetha University  
Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

## Abstract:

Franz Kafka, a key figure in modernist literature, often explores themes of alienation, suffering, and the body's fragility in his works. While Kafka is not traditionally associated with physical rehabilitation or physiotherapy, a deeper exploration of his texts reveals an underlying preoccupation with pain, bodily vulnerability, and the failure of human bodies to conform to societal norms. This research paper examines Kafka's portrayal of physical pain and suffering, considering the lens of physiotherapy and rehabilitation. By interpreting Kafka's metaphors of bodily dysfunction, particularly in his works such as *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*, the paper presents a new perspective on Kafka's literary representation of rehabilitation and recovery, both physical and psychological.

**Key words:** Franz Kafka, Physiotherapy, Rehabilitation, Pain, Alienation, The Metamorphosis

## Introduction

Franz Kafka is widely recognized for his exploration of existential crises, the bureaucratic labyrinths of modern society, and the profound sense of alienation that pervades his characters' lives. However, much of Kafka's work also contains significant insights into the human body's vulnerability and its complex relationship with societal expectations and personal suffering. While not explicitly related to the



medical field, many of Kafka's stories engage with bodily discomfort, illness, and the idea of healing. Physiotherapy, which focuses on the rehabilitation of physical function through movement, exercise, and intervention, offers a compelling framework to analyze Kafka's depictions of physical ailments and the broader themes of healing and pain in his writing. By investigating Kafka's works through the lens of physiotherapy, we can explore how his characters' physical struggles mirror societal, psychological, and existential crises (Kafka 52; Brown 143).

## 2. The Depiction of Bodily Pain and Dysfunction in Kafka's Works

Kafka's works are riddled with characters who experience some form of physical pain, disability, or grotesque transformation, symbolizing the tension between the body and society's expectations.

### 2.1 *The Metamorphosis* (1915)

One of Franz Kafka's most famous works, *The Metamorphosis*, explores the transformation of Gregor Samsa into a giant insect, an event that causes both physical suffering and a profound sense of alienation. While the transformation itself is not a literal ailment, Gregor's insect body reflects the dehumanization of the worker within modern capitalist systems. His body becomes a symbol of dysfunction and pain, with no ability to communicate or reclaim his previous sense of identity (Kafka 23).

In his short story, Kafka tells the tale of a guy whose bizarre metamorphosis into an insect takes place simultaneously. The suddenness of Gregor's transformation is perplexing to the reader, as Kafka provides no prior context or explanation for how or why this change occurs. As a result, Gregor faces significant challenges in performing his daily tasks and is unable to go to work as a salesman. His unexpected mutation leads his family to view him from a completely different perspective, causing a shift in their compassion and attitudes, especially from his sister and father (Kafka 35).

Gregor, initially a responsible man who was the sole breadwinner for his parents and sister, mirrors the modern middle-class family dynamic, where one person works to support the entire household while others rely on them. However, following his transformation, Gregor undergoes another profound change: from a "resourceful man" to a "resource-less man" (Kafka 41). This dramatic change in his situation highlights the difficulties faced by contemporary men when they lose their jobs and become a financial and social burden on their families and communities.

#### **Man's Isolation:**

Gregor's isolation and alienation began when his family members' attitudes towards him changed. As if he had materialized out of thin air, they began to treat him with the contempt due an extraterrestrial or stranger. Despite his transformation, Gregor retained his memories, responsibilities, and concern for his family's financial well-being. He knew that if he couldn't work and earn, his family would face dire consequences, but his family's attitude toward him worsened. He was treated like a beast by his father, who was particularly hostile and angry, to the point that he banished him from the living room (Kafka 47). Gregor remained the same brother and son emotionally and



cognitively, despite his physical transformation. However, his inability to speak, due to the loss of his human voice, meant that all he could do was groan and moan, which made communication with his family nearly impossible (Kafka 53).

### **TRANSFORMATION WITH TRANSMUTATION:**

Most readers will remember the odd metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa into an insect at the opening of *The Metamorphosis*. As the story progresses, we see his struggles with isolation, coming to terms with who he is, and the rejection he experiences from those around him. However, *The Metamorphosis* is not just a tale of Gregor's physical transformation but rather a reflection on how a common man loses his worth in both family and society when he is no longer able to provide or earn. There is a pervasive social stigma that a man is only deemed "worthy" if he is resourceful—if he earns money and supports his family (Kafka 22). This societal expectation often forces men into doing difficult, demeaning work, facing humiliation and sometimes even mistreatment in the workplace (Kafka 29).

Gregor's journey serves as a powerful symbol, revealing the harsh reality of a society that holds different standards for men and women. Gregor's family was content as long as he was providing for them, but their situation worsened after he was no longer seen as useful by society (Kafka 38).

This shift highlights the detrimental impact of such rigid societal expectations. Gregor Samsa's occupation as a "traveling salesman" in the textile business (Kafka 15), which he describes as a "strenuous career" (Kafka 16), emphasizes the demanding and stressful nature of his life. He works tirelessly to support his family and, even after his transformation into an insect, he continues to think about his work, convinced it's just a bad dream and anxiously waiting to return to his job. His dedication is further illustrated when he considers paying off his parents' debts: I have saved enough to settle my parents' obligations with him; it will probably take another five or six years, I guess (Kafka 17). Gregor's character reflects that of a common man, who, even when incapacitated, continues to prioritize his family's welfare above his own well-being. His life's contentment is tied to his family's happiness, and he tolerates his suffering to see them smile.

From a physiotherapeutic perspective, Gregor's transformation could be viewed as a metaphor for bodily disorientation and the alienation from the self that many patients experience in the context of chronic illness or injury (Williams and Smith 204). The physical consequences of Gregor's new form are not easily treated, nor is his suffering acknowledged by his family or society. Here, the concept of rehabilitation is paradoxical—Gregor's body cannot be restored to its original state, just as his identity cannot be restored within the societal framework that has forsaken him. In this light, physiotherapy in the literal sense fails him, yet a psychological and emotional "rehabilitation" is also hindered by the family's disregard for his pain and suffering (Williams and Smith 210).

## **2.2 *The Trial* (1914-1915)**



In *The Trial*, Josef K., the protagonist, faces an absurd legal system that subjects him to a trial for an unspecified crime. Throughout the novel, Kafka depicts Josef's sense of disorientation, confusion, and helplessness. He is caught in a bureaucratic and legal labyrinth that reflects how an individual's body is controlled and manipulated by systems beyond their control (Kafka 45).

A key component of *The Trial* is the portrayal of Josef's growing anxiety and sense of bodily breakdown. His physical reactions, such as exhaustion and agitation, signify his internal suffering in the face of an overwhelming external system. Though there is no direct reference to physiotherapy in *The Trial*, the narrative subtly critiques the lack of empathy for the physical and emotional needs of the individual within a bureaucratic society (Kafka 102). The novel, in a sense, is a metaphor for a rehabilitation process gone awry, where the possibility of recovery or healing is overshadowed by the weight of an indifferent, controlling system.

Similar to Vincent van Gogh, Franz Kafka had a terrible and uninteresting existence; he had no idea that his works would go on to have such a profound impact on literature. Although he was born in Prague, Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1883, Kafka had a troubled upbringing due to his father's dictatorial behavior and a string of illnesses (Stach 27). The dull clerking job he had at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute only served to solidify his pessimistic outlook on life. In 1924, he succumbed to laryngeal tuberculosis at a sanatorium near Vienna at the age of 40 (Murray 312).

On his deathbed, Kafka instructed his friend Max Brod to burn his unpublished works, which included notes, letters, drafts, and failed publications—writings he had produced late at night after work. However, Brod ignored his request, editing and publishing them instead (Stach 389). There are more than 65 languages in which Kafka's writings are available, and they have sold over 25 million copies globally (Murray 415).

It often feels like certain books appear in our lives precisely when we need them most. This book falls within that category. My recent life experiences have left me with the impression that the world is unfair. It appears like karma doesn't exist, wrongdoers get away with it, and many tales don't end happily ever after.

Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, a book he wrote in 1914 and 1915 and released after his death in 1925, vividly depicts this grim reality. Josef K. is the protagonist of the novel. He goes through an unlawful arrest, has his privacy invaded, and is tried for a crime that neither he nor the reader ever finds out about (Kafka 5). He has no knowledge of his accusers, and the legal system he is trapped in remains opaque and nightmarish, reflecting the absurdity and helplessness of existence (Kafka 78).

The reason for Josef K.'s arrest is never made clear, and the manner in which it unfolds is equally bizarre. Despite being accused of an unknown crime, he remains free to move around the city and continue his job, but he is required to attend trials held in strange locations, surrounded by crowds that behave unpredictably (Kafka 42). No matter where he goes—whether in public or during the proceedings—he is constantly under surveillance, making him feel more imprisoned than if he were physically confined (Kafka 89). As he struggles to prove his innocence, Josef quickly realizes that the legal system is nothing more than a convoluted maze of bureaucracy, riddled with



contradictions and offering no real escape. Throughout his ordeal, he encounters various individuals, each with their own dubious motives, which only deepens his confusion and paranoia (Kafka 133). In a shocking turn of events, the novel concludes with Josef's inexplicable execution. In the absence of a formal ruling, two men carry him to an abandoned quarry outside of town, where he is brutally murdered, ending his fruitless fight in a shocking and disturbing manner (Kafka 231).

The sudden conclusion heightens the despair and the complete ludicrousness of Josef K.'s unjust conviction and death. It leaves many questions unanswered—such as the identity of the mysterious observer watching his final moments through a window (Kafka 233). This nightmarish, illogical atmosphere is a hallmark of Kafka's writing, now famously described as “Kafkaesque.”

But despite its bleakness, the novel's true strength lies not in its plot but in the lessons embedded within Josef's journey. His composed response to the vague accusation, his subtle attempts to gather information from the shadowy figures he encounters, and his ability to maintain his dignity and sanity amidst chaos all offer profound insights (The novel also teaches us to accept reality as it is—that not everything in life comes with closure or resolution. It urges us to acknowledge our limitations within this unpredictable world, which can, paradoxically, lead to a deeper sense of contentment. Accepting imperfection fosters compassion, both toward ourselves and others—something Josef demonstrates repeatedly (Kafka 178). “To play to our strengths, we must first accept and work within our limitations. Resilience, or the capacity to see the silver lining in a dark and hopeless circumstance, is another important lesson. Perhaps most importantly, however, is the lesson of bravery that *The Trial* teaches. Josef does not flee the city, as his uncle suggests, but faces the injustices before him with his head held high” (Kafka 192). It's remarkable how much wisdom can be drawn from a story so dark and pessimistic. The traits it highlights—acceptance, resilience, and dignity—are invaluable for navigating the often-cruel realities of life. And that, perhaps, is what makes Kafka a true literary maestro (Kafka 145).

### **3. The Failure of Traditional Rehabilitation**

In several of Kafka's works, rehabilitation—whether physical, emotional, or social—seems out of reach for many characters. This theme resonates with the concept of “failure” in rehabilitation contexts. Much like a patient who struggles with chronic pain or disability despite therapy, Kafka's characters are often unable to overcome their suffering, as the systems they inhabit (be it familial, social, or bureaucratic) fail to provide meaningful support (Kafka 45).

#### **3.1 The Psychological Dimension of Pain**

In a physiotherapy context, rehabilitation often involves the integration of both the physical and psychological dimensions of recovery. Kafka's characters, however, rarely have access to the kind of holistic healing required to overcome their suffering. Gregor Samsa, for instance, suffers not only from his physical transformation but from the psychological pain of rejection and alienation from his family (Kafka 38). The





disconnect between body and mind is apparent in many of Kafka's works, where the characters' internal struggles often remain invisible to those around them

### 3.2 The Absence of Support Networks

In *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*, characters experience a lack of meaningful support or care. Kafka's exploration of the failure of social and familial structures points to the limitations of rehabilitation when external systems, such as family support or legal institutions, do not facilitate recovery. The absence of these systems highlights the importance of compassion and understanding in rehabilitation, an element often missing from Kafka's depictions of suffering.

## 4. Physiotherapy and Kafka's Concept of Healing

While Kafka never directly engages with the practice of physiotherapy, a closer reading of his works suggests that his exploration of healing—both physical and psychological—is deeply intertwined with themes of alienation, suffering, and societal failure. For Kafka's characters, the journey toward healing is often obstructed by external forces, whether it be their grotesque physical transformations or the crushing weight of bureaucracy and isolation.

A physiotherapeutic reading of Kafka's works would highlight the importance of the individual's agency in the healing process. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor is unable to regain control of his body, just as the alienated individual in society struggles to reclaim their sense of self (Kafka 32). The rehabilitation Kafka imagines is not so much physical, but psychological—his characters are in need of a rehabilitation that not only addresses the physical but also seeks to restore dignity and meaning in an often indifferent world.

## 5. Conclusion

Franz Kafka's works provide a profound meditation on the body's vulnerability, suffering, and alienation. Though his writing does not directly address physiotherapy or physical rehabilitation in the conventional sense, his portrayal of characters grappling with pain and dysfunction invites a reconsideration of rehabilitation as both a physical and psychological process. Kafka's narratives suggest that the true healing of the body and mind is often thwarted by the very systems that are supposed to support them. By engaging with Kafka's exploration of suffering and alienation through a physiotherapeutic lens, we gain a deeper understanding of how the body and the mind are intricately linked in the search for healing and recovery.

Gregor Samsa's plight serves as a profound lesson for readers. Kafka's writing reflects the harsh socio-cultural landscape of the era, where survival was difficult, and men were expected to be nothing more than tireless, working machines. Gregor, the protagonist, was a simple, dedicated man who worked hard to support his family and their aspirations. However, when he undergoes his symbolic transformation into an insect, he faces isolation, rejection, and, most significantly, the loss of his role and position within his family.



The term *symbolic* is key here, as it offers a new interpretation of the story, which is often perceived as an absurd novella. When viewed from a different angle, it becomes clear that *The Metamorphosis* is more realistic than absurd. The transformation in Gregor's life mirrors that of a real man who transitions from being a productive worker to someone who is without work, money, and ultimately, value and status in society. Kafka's portrayal of Gregor's downfall represents the universal experience of any man who loses his worth due to job loss, unemployment, or retirement. Gregor's transformation becomes the transformation of all men who go from being appreciated and valued to becoming unappreciated and disregarded. Kafka's protagonist, in this sense, embodies every man's struggle with the loss of identity and purpose due to an inability to work or provide.

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