



## Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*: The Avowal of a Fasting Body on Art

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### Abstract:

The Story *A Hunger Artist* is a tale about the fasting of an artist. He goes on fasting without end, claiming that he lacks eatables; he is put inside a cage to make him a case of amusement. Initial amusement gives way to disinterest among the visitors. The advertisements about his fasting also fail to attract the attention of the people. Being a man on continued fasting and hoping to find a new hirer, he arrives at a circus. The initial amusement of the circus-visitors slowly wanes there too. As his fasting continues, he reaches almost his end of body, when one day one visitor notices his situation and inquires him of his steadfastness in his fasting. The last sentence of the hunger artist is that he could not find the food which he would have liked. This story is a poignant tale of the artistic passion of an artist who lives by his own different emotional hunger for his recognition and failing which his continued thirst for recognition about his particularity leads even to an existential self-renouncement of being.

Key Words: Fasting, Hope for Recognition, Existential being, Autobiographic undertone

Human hunger for food reassures his existence as natural being. Nature, in its pledge to feed, exercises its call of duty to nurture and foster the child to the flourished and bountiful youth. As a natural dispensation, the child heeds the maternal attention for the propitiation of his appetite for food, whereas the young men do not. Nature does not aim to consign the youth sure as fate to pauperism, nor does it intend to coerce the youth to bear the cruel brunt of hunger. The magnanimous nature propitiates the human desire to repose faith in others who would embalm his physical and spiritual wounds, for the pain inhabits the being of the living human likewise.

That the hunger might affiliate to an art bespeaks a gruesome irony of human destiny constitutes the plot of Franz Kafka's story *A Hunger Artist*. In this plot, the nameless protagonist obtains minimum existential value by being condemned by the fate to be put on the exhibition without being cared for his feeding. The predicament of this tellingly grim existence lies in the inexorable strain that he has been made deprived of his intention, like a child, to express his hunger on the one side and abnegated from being provided with the meal by those who stand around him during the day and who keep a watch on his activity from the fall of night to the next morning. While the children and elders reveled in "holding each other's hands for greater security, marveling at him as he sat there pallid in black tights, with his ribs sticking out so prominently"(Kafka, 1971: 301), the artist remained seated in his strenuous position and corroborated the painful exhibition-value of his existence by "stretching an arm

through the bars so that one might feel how thin it was, and then again withdrawing deep into himself” (Kafka, 1971: 301) perching on the floor in the cage improvised for him. This scene reverberates with the sorrowful obviousness of his disinclination to expression his hunger, as a child would have done. As it is plain that he is dispossessed of the food, his destiny takes a toll on him in that as a grown up young man the natural nurturing desists from relenting in this instance. He helps himself in the strange irony in resuscitating his emaciating body by gratifying it with the purest element of nature—the water. He is engaged with “now and then taking a sip from a tiny glass of water to moisten his lips.” (Kafka, 1971: 301) The terrific value of the exhibition of his parched body as a piece of odd acknowledgement and monitoring meets with the challenge to this horror by the grit of the so-named artist to surmount his exhibitionist value by his subjective intervention to nourish his body on his own, which runs straight against the inhuman spirit of the pitiless onlookers of his absolutely thin, bony posture housed in the cage.

The inherent build-up of an artist lay in the existential<sup>1</sup> lane of this thin, emaciated, and bony man provided a dwelling in the cage. This man, kept in cage under the vigil remained almost verged on the metamorphosis into an animal. Like pet animal he received little food to keep himself on life. Besides this however, it took him a sufferance to avail himself little amount of water while singing in the dark hours of the night under the surveillance of the watchers. This efficiency and the brittle desire to clutch water for him and being able to “always drowse a little, whatever the light, at any hour” (Kafka, 1971: 302) bore witness to his manhood under all severities of the nightmarish realization of the metamorphosis of his human existence into an animal one. All the more, he employed strenuous, though inherent / mastered ability and desire to sing. In this human effort, his face as an artist shone up. The watchers “only wondered at his cleverness in being able to fill his mouth even while singing” (Kafka, 1971: 302). The mettlesome manhood and the passion of an artist intermingle in him and define his fateful being. The artist within him is the narrator. He has engaged himself through the pleasures and sorrows of life at different stations and as a wanderer he has collected memories which he lends his voice to. He tells “stories out of his nomadic life” (Kafka, 1971: 302). The nomads lead no fixed life. The fixity runs counter to their fertility of being man nourished in the distant zones of the lands. Even cities fail to entice them into taking to residence. Being filled with the force of imagined landscapes, lived tapestries of fanciful wanderings they are listening inside to the innate urge to tell stories. And in telling ‘stories’ they become ‘story-teller’, the artist. Conclusively, what makes this man into an artist is ‘singing’ and ‘story-telling’. This strain of the naturalness of an artist runs deep through his nerves and rightly he is repelled at the sight of the onlookers, whose gaze at him made him ‘miserable; they made his fast seem unendurable” (Kafka, 1971: 302). Probably having arrived at the recognition that ‘singing’ and ‘telling stories’ would meet their fullest strength in giving his own body into a unique shape by fasting, he organizes a ‘fast’, a ‘lasting

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<sup>1</sup> “According to existentialism: 1) Existence is always particular and individual-always *my* existence, *your* existence, *his* existence, *her* existence. 2.) Existence is primarily the problem of existence (i.e. of its mode of being)”

<http://www.britannica.com/topic/existentialism> accessed 01.03.2018

fast'. What remains of art when the body fails, probably this inquisitiveness within self-hushes in his ears when he undertakes fasting. So to say, this is a 'conscious' and 'conscientious' kind of art, merely not the art of experiment for the gratification of the visitors. His body thwarts the ubiquitous understanding. Foucault, in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (1975)<sup>i</sup> has shown as to how the disciplining, power-driven institutions create a notion of 'body' to be declared fit for the institutions. This gutsful man preserves in himself the enigmatic conscience of representing through his body the strength to not to subscribe to the notion of a 'body' as institutionalized for 'observers' and 'onlookers'. His body is far from being a 'docile' body. The conscience of an artist forbids him from grumbling at his destiny. Being aware of the physical destitution of the 'self' though, he compromises yet not on maintaining his artist hood of his voice and memory. The immaculate conscience of an artist in him thrives at the bodily pain of a frail body, but it fails not from 'thriving'. In upholding this unsullied, uncomplaining conscience, he gives vent to the existence of an artist of his own kind in himself.

If recognition and love at all, this artist seeks the gratification of love and recognition for him for this kind of indocile body of a 'hunger artist'. People desist though from the inclination to let him leave body Forty days prove to be a fairly longer stretch of time in the ordinary imagination of the people who throng in daily practice to visit and wonder at his fragile and hungry body. After forty days are over, the hunger artist is taken out from his cage and brought to the open space for the public notice. Lest this day not go uncelebrated, "on the fortieth day the flower-bedecked cage was opened, enthusiastic spectators filled the hall, a military band played." (Kafka, 1971: 303) Whereas the artist sought recognition and love for his meager body, the people wanted to feed him after not more than forty days to keep him on life. They wanted to accord admiration to him in their own worldly way by playing military ban in recognition of the way he had put up with hunger for forty days. The human love was showered to him when two women held him in their hand when "the whole weight of his body, a featherweight after all, relapsed onto one of the ladies, who looking around for help and panting a little-this post of honor was not at all what she had expected to be-first stretched her neck as far as she could to keep her face at least free from contact with the artist, then finding this impossible...to the great delight of the spectators burst into tears." (Kafka, 1971: 304) The spectacle of the tearful eyes and the apparent concern of the doctors, who check him on the occasion, do not move his self, for his heart craved for honor due to his art emanating from his emaciated body. Understandable then that he held inside sarcasm for the ostentation of love and concern for his almost insubstantial physical frame. At that spectacle, inside he groaned against the cheat. On the one side remaining imbued with an ambition to break his own record of fasting and on the other being absolutely dissatisfied with the ostentatious proceedings, and furthermore the interpretation of his fasting as an instance of 'self-denial' evoked in him a consciousness of cheat being flung on his face. Admittedly, he read into the otherwise friendly eyes of the lady "apparently so friendly and in reality so cruel" (Kafka, 1971: 304) countenance. The ceremony of affection, friendliness, being brought out from the cage after forty days, and doctor's concern towards him pointed to one and only thing in his mind-"cheat". What he

received for his practice of hunger as an exceptional presentation of art with his body was tear, and not a, for him, correct recognition of his art.

The kind of art, which he had conceived to be recognized by the onlookers and visitors, derived its sustenance the least from the pitiful gesture on the part of the people to idolize his 'fasting body'. Yet his body, devoted to a purpose but remaining inscrutable by others around him, fell victim to the fancy of being 'idolized'. Some of them, who frequented his frail sight, inferred a deep-seated instinct of 'self-denial' in him. With his weak neck hanging helplessly on the hands of the ladies and his slackening swaying body in total submission fed the imagination of the wonderers to detect in him a martyr, like the saints sacrificing their physical frames to propitiate the deities and reaching thereby the triumph of the divinity of their earthly existence. Many reckoned attendance of Heaven in his hungrily poised body and did not swear off from mentioning it among the visitors congregated on the occasion of his routine release from the cage on the fortieth day of his fasting. On that inferred auspicious moment "The impresario came forward, without a word-for the band made speech impossible-lifted his arms in the air above the artist, as if inviting Heaven to look down upon this creature here in the straw, this suffering martyr, which indeed he was, although in quite another sense; grasped him around the emaciated waist, with exaggerated caution, so that the frail condition he was in might be appreciated".(Kafka,1971: 304) This line attests his existence akin to "martyr...although in quite another sense". This 'quite another sense' resonates with the 'sense of quite another art' in his fasting body.

For the people at this place and for this man himself the excruciating endurance of hunger in a fasting body betokened something of a 'happening' evoking no permanent pleasure or wonder. This man abhorred the food which any general man would endear to himself; on the other hand he bore out the 'riddle' that he kept the finality of physical existence too at bay by way of sipping water and munching tiny bits of morsels inside his cage taking advantage of the moments when the watchers heeded him momentarily not. In a way, he neither lived nor died. Precisely this weight heavily on the understanding of the visitors and the interest in him slowly waned and gradually petered out. Kafka narrates: "For meanwhile the aforementioned change in public interest had set in; it seemed to happen almost overnight; there may have been profound causes for it, but who was going to bother about that; at any rate the pampered hunger artist suddenly found himself deserted on fine day by the amusement-seekers, who went streaming past him to other more-favored attractions." (Kafka,1971: 305-306) What to do? This man's hope on the 'recognition' of truth behind fasting melted yet not.

As Kafka pointed earlier the nomadic existence of this man distinguished his self. He, sticking to a conviction inside of being 'recognized', decided to proceed to next station of human populace and arrived at a place of circus-show. He decided to try exploring the possibility of the recognition of fasting body there. He took the employment contract at the circus without minding any formal requisites of the hiring. Being either 'too old' or being 'fanatic', the switching-over to another engagement than fasting lay in almost unconceivable terrain of possibility for him. In the text of

the story, for the first time the coinage “a hunger artist” appears at the moment of his joining the circus.

The personality of this ‘hunger artist’ exhibits an existential conflict. The apparent image of this conflict exemplifies itself in the temporal lengthening of the incoherence or tension between ‘existential-subsistence’ and ‘existential-ambition’. The hunger artist uncomplainingly renounces food, the subsistence aspect, in favor of his ‘ambition for recognition’ of his art, the veil of which spells out in his fasting. The ‘recognition’ which he perennially hankers after, lies deep down in an earlier, later or far later unveiling of the veneer over his fasting. Driven by the sustained impulse of his ambition, he hence even forsakes to go for nourishing his aging body, requiring otherwise the fulfillment of the appetite for eating like any other common-man. The variance from this ‘commonality’ epitomizes his ambition. The destiny has it that he comprehends it well that he is the ‘sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast’. (Kafka, 1971: 302)

In circus he deflects not from continuing his pursuit for the recognition of the art defined within the surface of fasting. The circus agreed to take his art, more than that it took him for his name long acknowledged by that time-the name being ‘hunger’ artist. Like other attractions of the circus the ‘hunger-artist’, his fasting being a distinct attraction though, incited visibly the interest of the public there too. Curiosity and puzzling intermingled in this interest for something peculiar as earlier. Among others, the ‘peculiarity’ emanated from an obvious appreciation that ‘time’ ran over his existence, nonetheless renunciation of the food ran into the face of the advancing time that ordains unconditionally and unexceptionally the final hours of human existence. The ‘peculiarity’ of his art inscribed itself on the statement of this artist that he could ensnare the limits of human imagination by setting a record of fasting, more than that transcend his own record. This ‘record-setting’ statement pulled the amusement of the circus-goers and so by way of ‘amusing’ he persevered in his ‘existential-ambition’.

The reading of this kind of ambition enjoins the exploration of the discourse on rationality and differing notions of the rationality. The steady and unflagging pursuit of the fasting of hunger artist pungently challenges the perception and imagination of the public. This pursuit swerves from the idea of coherence-reason<sup>2</sup> that nourishes the common understanding of decision-making and behaving. The daily life and each moment of the fasting of the hunger artist baffle the interest of the public. In this context and to this extent, Kafka activates the discourse of rationality through this story. The sociological discourse on rationality affiliates to the uncovering of the veneer of the trenchant complexity of this story. In the discourse on rationality, two co-existing, however not co-terminus models of rationality and rational ‘decision-making’ stand in the center of discussion. Instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and value rationality (*Wertrationalität*) refer to these two models. Instrumental rationality sides with the pursuit of action by the social agent who employs his

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<sup>2</sup> Coherence reasoning exemplifies coherentism. According to Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, “Coherentism is a theory of epistemic justification. It implies that for a belief to be justified it must belong to a coherent system of beliefs. For a system of beliefs to be coherent, the beliefs that make up that system must “cohere with one another.”

<https://www.iep.utm.edu/coherent/> accessed 01.03.2018

‘means’ to the ‘ends’ as learned way of decision-making to meet the expectations of the human environment. Value rationality draws its significance in that the social agent engages himself in the pursuit of realization of the ethical, aesthetic or religious goals for himself, not always conforming to the decipherability of the individual achievement. A close reading of this story would suggest that in so far as the hunger artist desists from renouncing the bare minimum for his physical social presence, his self-understanding and action conform to the model of ‘decision-making’ to be endorsed by the instrumental rational behavior. The behavior though, which receives its stronger impetus from his fasting, relates to the discourse of value rationality, for he remains exceptionally sole in his pursuit of his ‘peculiar’ art.

In further unfolding, the contest of the ‘self-assertiveness’ of the artist is shown to be confronting with the interest of the public. Initially, one the thronging crowd outside his cage divided itself in the quickness of time into two-one stopping and staring at him, and the other shoving and jostling this staring crowd to enter into the menagerie for savoring thrilling performances. With the passage of some time, public’s interest to stand staring gave way to the visible zealously of the public to go past him quickly giving a momentous look to him. All the more resolute in his sticking to “self-assertiveness” (Kafka, 1971: 307), the question lurked in the heart of the hunger artist if his existence was verging now on seclusion, for among all kind of animals placed outside the circus, he too seemed to be attracting a fleeting glance by the public. Bitterly at heart, he made out a single event when the children stood longer watching him to be an incident of luck for him. Convincingly for him “he had a stroke of luck, when some father of a family fetched up before him with his children, pointed a finger at the hunger artist, and explained at length what the phenomenon meant, telling stories of earlier years when he himself had watched similar but much more thrilling performances, and the children, still rather uncomprehending, since neither inside or outside school had they been sufficiently prepared for this lesson-what did they care about fasting?-yet showed by the brightness of their intent eyes that new and better times might be coming.” (Kafka, 1971: 307-308) It might imply any other kind of better times for the children, for the hunger artist, albeit new and better times related probably to his hope to be ‘recognized’.

In pursuit of his enigmatic hope and goal, the hunger artist one day lay on to the straw inside his cage shrunk so little as to remain unidentifiable to a general sight. An overseer walking past his cage stopped wondering at the empty cage with dirty straws inside. The overseer poked inside and found him inside indistinguishable from the tiny heap of straws. Answering to their question as to why he persisted almost to the physical extinction in his fasting, the hunger artist said his last words: “I could not find the food I liked.” (Kafka, 1971: 309) The rationality of his fasting resonates in this reply by the hunger artist.

In the final decimation of the physical existence of the artist the transcendence of the artist beyond the common recognition resuscitates itself luminously. The passion behind his fasting lay in his conviction that hidden behind the food, behind common appetite, human being can possibly be motivated and spurred by the ambition to demonstrate it to the world that human existence may thrive by the hunger of a different kind, the hunger which cannot be propitiated by the common appetite. That

appetite relates to the appetite of the soul unmistakably, and not to that of the body. The panther roared in the same cage, where the hunger-artist transcended his physical body. The cage comes up as the play-ground of the body and soul, distinct from one another. The hunger artist pursued an aesthetic hope.

The particularity of this aesthetics lay ingrained in a dialectical framework. This dialectics relates to the apperception of 'body'. 'Body' presents itself as an idea in that the beauty of it associates itself to the flowery state of suppleness and cheer. Through this story Kafka has strived to present another idea of 'body', namely its 'destitution'. It is the body which flowers in its suppleness, then the idea of seeing the beauty of body in a different way, i.e. in its destitution may also be valid as another way of looking at the body, presenting an unforeseen another way of conceptualizing the ascription of the idea of 'beauty' of body. Hunger and destitution led to the death of the hunger-artist, but he amply made it clear that his appetite differed-it was the appetite of 'renouncing'. The destitution and renunciation, and in its culmination represents the framework of an aesthetics of being different in the awareness of reaching 'nothingness'. This aesthetics of 'nothingness' reverberates with the existential philosophy.

Explaining the entry of the existential philosophy on scene in the wake of the First World War and in its ensuing years; a time in which Kafka himself lived and wrote,- William Barrett writes in his book "IRRATIONAL MAN: A Study in Existential Philosophy": "A society coming apart at top and bottom, or passing over into another form, contains just as many possibilities for revelation as a society running along smoothly in its own rut. The individual is thrust out of the sheltered nest that society has provided. He can no longer hide his nakedness by the old disguises. He learns how much of what he has taken for granted was by its own nature neither eternal nor necessary but thoroughly temporal and contingent...In the end he sees each man as solitary and unsheltered before his own death." (Barrett, William: 1962: 34)

In this story, body is the embodiment of the artist's idea of death. That idea has been realized through the medium-the extreme and unique medium-of fasting body. In raising the idea of death to this artistic domain, Kafka's story carries an undertone of the existential philosophy which has conceived of man as 'solitary, naked and unsheltered' before his own death.

Otherwise, this story bears an autobiographic undertone also. In his own life, between the final choice between his job and his passion for art, he would have remained uncompromising in his explicit alliance with his passion of art. Among others, in a letter to the father of his fiancé, he wrote: "I find my job unbearable because it conflicts with my one desire and one calling, which is literature. Since I exist for nothing but literature, and can wish to exist for nothing else, my job can never have any attraction for me, even though it may cause me to go completely to pieces...Everything that isn't literature bores me, and I hate it, for it distracts me." (<<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-key-to-Kafkawhat-is-his-true-significance>>)

Death as a motif looms large in the story and in stretching this idea to a conclusive understanding it seems to be pliable to recognize this story as a parabolic or allegorical construction. Except the artist no one else dies. In the exceptionality of

such a death of a protagonist, who nurse a hunger which was unique, this story acquires its parabolic or allegoric sub-structure. “In the beginning, his art is very popular; by the end of the story, he dies, still fasting, virtually forgotten. By leaving the main character-actually all of the characters-unnamed, the story takes on the quality of a parable or allegory.” (<https://www.schmoop.com/hunger-artist/title.html>.)

Conclusion:

An artist lives by a steadfast passion. This passion is painful too. The admiration of his works does not imply the exhibitionist-value of his work, in that his works at the bottom aim to evoke in the observers compassion towards the pain which marks the creative process of the art-works. Understanding this pain is the task of the beholder of the works of art. If this pain is truly recognized, the artist feels at rest as he arrives at a satisfaction that the recognition due to him has been given to him. Secondly, the beholder is invited to fully know that the feeding of the soul of an artist has been of a different kind. This feeding could be emotional charge of the self, the sentimental cognition of the world and a labor capable of molding the suffering to art. It is the recognition of this feeding which he hopes to get in his tumultuous existence. In this story, the protagonist has unwaveringly sought to attain this recognition. The recognition of this kind denied to him, he takes the extreme step to at least physically show that the eatables of the common men are not his eatables. Having renounced the common eatables, his body fasts and in its non-terminating fast, his body becomes an artistic site of resoluteness to embrace the death, uttering at long last that he could not get the food which he required.

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**Notes:**

<sup>i</sup> See, Sigmund, Dr.. Gerald: *Dance and Image of the Body: Der Körper als Diskurs* <https://www.goethe.de/kul/tut/gen/tan/20364060.html> accessed 03.03.2018

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