

## The Understandings of Suffering from Alienation as Reflected in Franz Kafka's *Before the Law*

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### Abstract

*The widening aspects of literary criticism have brought in insights of cultural studies. One main idea of that discipline is about social alienation in society. Raoul Vaneigem emphasizes how individuals may be trapped in social alienation due to conscious constraints that shapes such despair to the condition of disorder. People tend to experience suffering as they could not move forward by not understanding the obstacles, even thinking about those is reflection of alienation in the process. Before the Law is one interesting short story written by Franz Kafka that tells a person who seeks knowledge but being restrained by the guardian or gatekeeper of the law. This story is full of parables that its meanings are not easily grasped through usual concepts. Then, the question is; how is suffering from alienation be reflected in Franz Kafka's Before the Law? By using qualitative method, cultural concepts are used to explain the correlations between Kafka's story and Vaneigem's perspectives. The man in the story experiences such alienation from the gatekeeper as he suffers inability to enter and meet the law. He is enslaved by the language of the gatekeeper. The guardian's language is impenetrable by him. His meanings are out of sense beside merely left with anxiety of being secluded. He seems to have right but he is not rightful at all. In conclusion, the story of Kafka's matches with Vaneigem's perspective. The man who would like to enter the gate is familiar to the law but is foreign to the language of gatekeeper. His relations to others are unknown unless being alienated socially and individually.*

**Keywords:** alienation; Before the Law; Franz Kafka; Raoul Vaneigem; suffering

### A. Introduction

Social alienation is common today. People must face various restraints in their life as problems may be vary too (North, 2015). Somehow, not many people could attain solutions to all of their problems. They may get stuck in front of the problems; facing them powerless in a

cuffed situations. The same condition is seen in Franz Kafka's short story entitled *Before the Law*. The story tells a man that wants to enter a place to meet the law (Kafka, 1971). He is stopped by the guardian or the gatekeeper from entering the place. He wants to fight the guardians but he could not. He waits in front of the

gate. He ends up being old and then dies in front of the gate without could even enter the place or meet the law by himself.

This man experiences what Raoul Vaneigem says as social alienation. Alienation is meant in similar with estrangement of individuals separated from society (Glen, 2007). People tend to experience suffering as they could not move forward by not understanding the obstacles. Even thinking about it is reflection of alienation in the process. *Before the Law* is one interesting short story written by Franz Kafka that tells a person who seeks knowledge but being restrained by the guardian or gatekeeper of the law (Kafka, 1971). This story is full of parables that its meanings are not easily grasped through usual concepts. Then, the question is; how is suffering from alienation be reflected in Franz Kafka's *Before the Law*? The man is enslaved by the language of the gatekeeper. The guardian's language is impenetrable by him. His meanings are out of sense beside merely left with anxiety of being secluded. He seems to have

right but he is not rightful at all. He is total reflection of remoteness as he is waiting outside the gate with disaffections.

## **B. Research Method**

Through qualitative method, certain concepts and written data are analyzed to answer the question in this paper. Online and offline scripts are derived to follow ideas of Kafka's *Before the Law*. Vaneigem's idea of social alienation as source of suffering is drawn either. Online and offline scripts are taken from books, journals, and online resources to understand shown matters. The data analysis include attaining sources, reading them carefully, comparing with other issues, quoting into paper, and writing down in reference lists.

## **C. Results and Discussions**

### **Unending Parables in *Before the Law***

The story by Kafka is indicated through simple plots with simple characters altogether with simple settings (North, 2015). There is a man who would like to meet the law. He must enter a place where a gatekeeper

guards it. However, the gatekeeper prohibits the man to enter and to meet the law. He must remain outside. Instead of pushing the gatekeeper to give him permission to enter, the man complies the rule. He stays outside the gate and having dialogues with the gatekeeper. To the day of the death comes, the man could not enter the place. The gatekeeper even closes the gate once the man could no longer breathe.

That simple plot above actually reflects some problems in the story. First, the man could not stand to fight the gatekeeper. The guardian by himself says that he is the lowly one while there are many others after him (Kafka, 1971). The man is weak enough to fight the gatekeeper. He may be strong-willed, but his body could not truly endure such punches. It is interesting how he actually prepares everything to meet the law but then easily being pushed back by the gatekeeper. However, it is understandable since he comes with a thought of complain, not with big boulder of muscle to fight (Huber, 2019). Second, he does not expect many difficulties in seeing the law

before. He assumes that the law is open to everyone. He thinks that every human being could access the law by having such meeting (Kafka, 1971). But he is wrong. He is prohibited not only to meeting the law, but also from entering the place. It is quite intriguing that he must face different reality of perception before the law. He tries to think as common sense speaks but somehow the context is totally different (Teubner, 2013). He may be all prepared, but being totally rejected is indeed not his quite option. Third, waiting outside the gate makes him being interrogated by the gatekeeper. They talk each other about life but not as a joyful conversation. The dialogue is totally only asking and answering while both sides try to find any weakness that the other may have (Kafka, 1971). The man tries to observe the habit of the gatekeeper to find a way so that he could sneak inside. The gatekeeper also focuses himself to amplify his guard so that the man is still outside.

Fourth, the man is getting focus on the gatekeeper, not the law. It is quite provoking how Kafka slowly shifts the essence from the law to the

gatekeeper. Indeed, the man's real purpose is to meet the law, but his own situation is actually before the law (Teubner, 2013). He is not the law and he is the object of the law. He may expect conversation with the law, but latter he must follow the rule to speak only to the gatekeeper (Kafka, 1971). The man may be part of the law, but then the gatekeeper may be either. The gatekeeper even is also guardian of the law (Huber, 2019). Fifth, the very condition of the man that could only wait outside the gate is exciting. Instead of going somewhere else and then returning again someday, the man chooses to wait outside the gate. He keeps his will to meet the law although he could not do that. He still hopes the gatekeeper will open the gate by the time comes (Kafka, 1971). He may wait for nothing but the old age. He dies and he could not meet the law while he actually is still before the law. Sixth, the riveting part of how the gate is actually intended only for the man. The gatekeeper says it before the man dies. That action is leaving him with burning hope but dying body (Huber, 2019). The man does

not limit himself to meet law, but the gatekeeper restricts him to enter, while in between is reality of the assigned gate. The gate is only for the man but it is not owned by him since the gatekeeper is having the power (Kafka, 1971). The gate was widely open but the man could not enter. Now, the man's death is in the similar rhythm of the closing gate (Glen, 2007).

There are many assumptions in the story that could not be defined easily. Many questions always come forward looking for answers, but they could not be found (North, 2015 and Brackett, 2015). An idea comes with these as follow. Why is the man trying to meet the law? What kind of problem does he have? Why the gatekeeper prohibits the man to enter? What does the law actually mean? Why must the man wait in front of the gate until he dies? Those questions are examples of how the story demands more understandings but the source is so limited (Robertson, 2004). The readers would like to be satisfied but Kafka hinders it (Brackett, 2015). It is quite the same with the exact meanings of each

concept in the story. Although it can be concluded that the meanings are open, some will say that the man is facing bureaucratic difficulties. Or, the law is actually not just after all. The gatekeeper is way more powerful than the law itself (Kafka, 1971). The position of the man is actually under the law, not before the law. Those parables are how readers could only guess the real pre-conditions behind the story.

The story itself speaks parables among elements of fictions. Parables reflect two main understandings (North, 2015). (1) There are no exact definitions correlated to the parables. (2) Things are widely connected to others while definitions are always suspended by the time they nearly come. However, those ideas are so open in meanings that could varying abundant possible conceptions. Indeed, a thing should be free at it first presupposition so that it may give birth to different understandings (Huber, 2019 and Glen, 2007). It should not be named so that it could come up with different names. Moreover, Kafka states the story in an unending parable (Brackett, 2015). At

a time, the definition is almost caught but then it is getting loose again. That cycle goes on and on. A question is proposed yet the answer is ready to solve it. But then, that answer is preceded with another question, and the cycle moves again. The story keeps regressing, demanding for more questions, yet craving for more answers (Brackett, 2015). The story is there, the questions are shaping, but the answers to close the dialogue are in absence. It remains open until the end (Huber, 2019 and Brackett, 2015). The gate is closed but the death of the man still demands him to have permission to meet the law.

### **Suffering of Social Alienations**

Raoul Vaneigem's criticism on social issues rely on ideas of progressive and left understandings. He explores concepts of Marxism through indications in social conditions through his roles in Situationist International (Taminiaux, 2020). There is nothing and no one that could escape consequences of capitalistic civilizations. His main purpose is to build such awareness to human beings about those situations

through realization of revolution. It is everyday life that has been his own emphasis as he participated much through Cultural Revolution on France in 1968 (Taminiaux, 2020).

Suffering is one of Vaneigem's main concepts in his book that explains how recent condition is reflection of pain (Vaneigem, 1983). The main problem of suffering comes from alienation. Being alienated is never so natural at all and indeed there is no thing as natural alienation. If alienation is so natural then it has lost meaning, making it so normal and usual (Vaneigem, 2001). If someone suffers, his or her surroundings matter the most to that situation. In bigger pictures, existence of superior beings rather than human beings also shapes more to ideas of suffering. Suffering, including sickness, is something that human beings must not really face. Vaneigem says that humans must break chains of it rather than try to fulfill that bad feeling with emotional meanings (Maxwell and Craib, 2015).

Alienation, as it is social, comes closer because humans are enslaved by consumptions of ideas from superior beings and dictated by its

greatness in ultimate uncertainty (Taminiaux, 2020 and Vaneigem, 2001). Those superior ones could be bureaucracy, nation-state, and even religions. The more ideas of the superior is consumed, the more people embrace truly to suffering. They have been alienated from themselves on behalf of the superior beings. People could no longer decide what he or she would like to do, or even define his or her own meanings. They have surrendered to be alienated by values of superior beings (Vaneigem, 1983). Someone could not move freely around the world because he or she has to follow global procedures of passports that he or she does not approve at all. If someone is sick then he or she has to follow medical procedure which could be really expensive, and there is no true and free medical coverings all around the globe (Maxwell and Craib, 2015).

Vaneigem proposes how suffering today is embraced by people and not as something that should be avoided (Vaneigem, 2001). It is interesting since human beings naturally will come closer to joy and evades pain as much as possible. This

is what makes human beings weak. Instead of going out from suffering, people in reverse see that it is such sacrifice that he or she could make. It is like he or she does not have any other choice at all while he or she could just walk away after all. Suffering then is seen as something valuable; it is a must willing for humans to live (Vaneigem, 1983). Here, suffering is spoken through destiny and fate. Being suffered as sufferers is a useful willing that fills the infinite pain with deep meanings. Suffering then is considered okay if reasonable enough and could be embraced well by people. Vaneigem's position is clear; he criticizes how humans tend to get surrendered to other dictated values rather than try to find his or her own meanings individually and socially (Vaneigem, 1983). He says that dictated meanings that fill infinite suffering is out of sense but exploitation of humans' pain. The meanings, even religious ones, are the illusion of superstitious evil, that do not free human beings but drown them deeply to unbreathable sulfur (Maxwell and Craib, 2015). Yet the

sulfur is seen as noble and glorious intentions.

There is no natural aspect of suffering (Vaneigem, 2001). Its main cause is social existence alongside with other people, institutions, and even superior beings. Vaneigem underlines how suffering correlated to alienation is based on the social ontology of metaphysical system (Vaneigem, 1983). It is metaphysics yet abstract but lays on condition of being socially human. He says that man or woman does not live alone but surrounded by ideas of God, Nature, Human, and Society (Vaneigem, 1983). The truth of God indeed values everything to such measurements of good and bad. Nature is how human lives altogether with other creatures even if those are undiscovered ones. Living with other humans is also inevitable as part of becoming sufferer. Norms in bureaucracies and even politics reflect how society matters to social realm of human beings. Therefore, those four aspects indicate that suffering is not a problem of individuals for his or her own private matters. It is actually so public that states social organization

as the root of the problem of suffering (Vaneigem, 1983).

Through suffering, freedom has been transformed into apathy as doing things freely has nothing to do with being free itself (Vaneigem, 2001). Nothing is actually free since suffering is totally in bound with human's existence (Maxwell and Craib, 2015). It is compelling that being free is being suffered and being happy as well. Happiness as stated to the fruit of flourished well emotions is nothing but passivity. This passive aspect shows that to accept things is to surrender to condition of suffering as totality. Both freedom and happiness are emphasized with how suffering is so particular in individual but gets its pre-text through universal desire (Vaneigem, 1983). As despair will never let go its prey, suffering will never leave humans as it has been such mere desire of the creature. Mourning is not bad, only such common condition in suffering today. Lastly, suffering could not be explained more than such enjoyment of being in emptiness (Vaneigem, 1983).

Then, suffering is considered as normal and usual in human life. Vaneigem shifts the idea of suffering from natural to social alienations (Taminiaux, 2020). His main purpose is to show that human should be aware of his or her condition of being dictated by other superior values. Human beings should break free by reshaping solidarity through revolution of everyday life. Equality should be demystified by accentuating altruism rather than underlining religious mystifications. Everyone is equal, not because each is destined to suffer. But, since each person is entangled with another then people should be free from suffering (Vaneigem, 1983). Suffering is not to be accepted and received bluntly. It is a challenge to be destroyed as it is main condition of being alienated as well. Vaneigem's truest thought says that everyone wants to breathe, so let us try to make it happen (Vaneigem, 1983). There is no need to suspend that since it is so crucial in life. However, people want to breathe but they always say "we will breathe soon, or even later". They know they want to breathe but they insist to stay



to suffer. At last, everyone dies forgetting to breathe as they will do it later. They want to but they will not do.

### **Subjectivity in the Gaze of the Same**

Kafka's story is reflection of what Vaneigem says about suffering. The man stays in front of the gate, before the law, and under provision of the gatekeeper. He is nothing but object of gatekeeper. Interestingly, he seems enjoying that condition. It is true that he suffers more as he tries to enter and he is prohibited to do so. However, that suffering is actually unwanted by him, yet he has to face it before the law (Kafka, 1971). He also does not ask any help from others which reflects that he chooses to be suffered. In an aspect, it shows that the suffering is so individual. This shapes suffering as personal matter that is so natural for human beings. In other aspect, the suffering is made as such dictation of enjoying the pain rather than trying to break free (Andronico, 2021). This asserts how suffering is closed to social matters

that it will never hinders condition of other people rather than own self.

It can be clearly seen how suffering plays big role in the story. The analysis is emphasized through how relations between the man, the gatekeeper, and the law is intermediated by condition of suffering (Kafka, 1971). Even that condition surrounds outer and internal aspects of in-between relations. No one could leave from that surroundings; leaving everyone with agony of having pain through suffering. There is no other way than accepting the condition as it can be said as destined or pre-made (Glen, 2007). The man persists to meet the law although he knows he will suffer. He does not avoid the law or come at another time. He also does not cheat or do underhand with the gatekeeper to meet the law. The man insists to have reasonable negative experience by filling it with purposeful meanings (Teubner, 2013). Rather than surrender to suffering, Vaneigem suggests people to break free from alienation. Any human being should fight any oppressor that will come, including those who will make them

suffer. Suffering may be experienced by everyone, but anyone should never just nod, accept, and do nothing else (Vaneigem, 1983).

The man is the subject. His subjectivity is clear and ultimate; he is a person being that comes to meet the law (Huber, 2019). Yet, while he is prepared to meet the law, he must face the gatekeeper first. His whole subjectivity is stopped by existence of other. He has no other way than goes passing the guardian. At first, his subjectivity is defined by him only, but then he is dictated by the gatekeeper (Kafka, 1971). Being subject is actually not whole at all, but people should not surrender only to that situation. People should always try to identify themselves, not by others' meanings, but by own self of understanding. Suffering, according Vaneigem, is not part of subjectivity at all since it is not natural either (Vaneigem, 1983). Suffering is problem of alienation that must be removed from human's life. Being subject is not alienated by others negatively, but indicated by own self positively (Andronico, 2021 and Huber, 2019).

As the story tells about how suffering is so social, then it relates to condition of other entities. The story emphasizes only to the law including the gatekeeper and ignores matter of choices in human life (North, 2015). The man could always leave or find another way to get through the gate. The law is not a single option for him, even if it is then he must be free of it. In reverse, the man quite totally accepts his condition of being prohibited to enter the gate (Houtum, 2010). The suffering is not natural for him since it is his own preference to do so affected by the prohibition from the gatekeeper. Suffering is quite a must before the law, and the man must face it (Huber, 2019). Actually, the man surrenders to that term and condition rather than tries to break free from the issues.

It is interesting how the story indicates that suffering is such an obligation to do for anyone before the law. It works through logic of sense and logic of speech but it escapes the meanings from the characters and other elements (North, 2015). No one should ask why, even the gatekeeper may only do as told. The gate is

assigned to the man but the way to go there is full of pain (Robertson, 2004). He has to bear the pain before reaching inside the gate. Presumably, he could not enter the gate. He finally gets nothing but suffering by the pain. In that way, the man even could not define who he is as he is alienated from himself. He is only dictated by the rule of the law. His condition is out of the world as he thinks that the law is actually inaccessible and out of common sense (Houtum, 2010).

The man in the story experiences such alienation from the gatekeeper as he suffers inability to enter and meet the law (Kafka, 1971). He is enslaved by the language of the gatekeeper. The guardian's language is impenetrable by him. His meanings are out of sense beside merely left with anxiety of being secluded (Robertson, 2004). He seems to have right but he is not rightful at all. Moreover, he chooses his own role to meet the law. He chooses to suffer rather than to leave. He refuse to break free from what constraints him. If being free is such a way out that is so certain, the man chooses to have burdens of uncertainty (Vaneigem,

1983). He is only certain to the law, but the law is out of common sense either. Then, his suffering is only matter of being alienated to him (Robertson, 2004).

He or the man lives under the gaze of the same. He fails to understand what really happens as it is so absurd (Houtum, 2010). He is forced to be in line with the rule of the law by obeying the gatekeeper. He is pushed to be normal in meeting the law. There is nothing to him beside must be object under the gaze of the gatekeeper (Kafka, 1971). He knows that he suffers but he refuses to be free. Vaneigem will say that the man must bring in solidarity and break the chain free (Vaneigem, 1983). In reverse, the man chooses suffering although it will bring him pain. Even at the end, the man could not meet the law, he must die watching the assigned gate closed by the gatekeeper.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The story of Kafka matches with Vaneigem's perspective. The man who would like to enter the gate is familiar to the law but is foreign to

the language of gatekeeper. His relations to others are unknown unless being alienated socially and individually. The analysis is emphasized through how relations between the man, the gatekeeper, and the law is intermediated by condition of suffering. No one could leave from that surroundings; leaving everyone with agony of having pain through suffering. The gate is assigned to the man but the way to go there is full of pain. He has to bear the pain before reaching inside the gate. Presumably, he could not enter the gate. He finally gets nothing but suffering by the pain. In that way, the man even could not define who he is as he is alienated from himself. He is only dictated by the rule of the law. His condition is out of the world as he thinks that the law is actually inaccessible and out of common sense.

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