

Materialism and Sacrifice in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Oscar Wilde's "The Nightingale and The Rose" And the Indian Movie *Tumbbad*

Kanika Saren

M. A in English, Bankura University
West Bengal, India

Abstract: In today's world, most people are getting excessive materialistic and they prioritize objects rather than lives. Most of such cases usually occurred in urban areas. There is a cause or history behind this and also there is a need to focus on the effects of the material world to human mind because the effects of excessive material consumption can never be beneficial for human being. It gives people physical pleasure for a while but its effects give life-time mental sufferings. But there are few people who still believe in spirituality and they are less materialistic. Such people prioritize honesty, love, morality and human values as they are not caged within their own bodily insatiable desires. In this dissertation, a theme of materialism and sacrifice is denoted through the characters of Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915), Oscar Wilde's short story *The Nightingale and the Rose* (1888), and *Tumbbad* (2018) directed by Rahi Anil Barve. In *The Metamorphosis* and the movie *Tumbbad*, the characters are prioritizing money over lives and they do not even hesitate to kill others for money. The macabre series of seven deadly sins is minutely illustrated in the movie *Tumbbad* whereas in *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the theme of love and sacrifice is portrayed. This story conveys humility, kindness, chastity, patience, liberality and diligence as virtuous attributes. The journey of Gregor Samsa from pre-traumatic condition to post- traumatic condition not only gives birth many questions in human lives and many different philosophical perspectives like greed for material world, absence of empathy but it also expresses man's positions in this world which are explained in multiple angles in this work. This world is full of people like Vinayak, who almost have excluded their emotions due to the material consumption but there are few people like the nightingale to whom love and honesty are precious.

Keywords – Material, human, love, sacrifice

Date of Submission: 22-03-2026

Date of acceptance: 04-04-2026

I. Introduction

In today's phenomenon, most people are excessively materialistic. But it's pity to see when they prioritize objects over lives. People have become so self-sufficient that they don't connect to others until it's necessary. In urban areas, most of such cases usually occurred. People are having relationships on the basis of their needs. Then, people sometimes lack a companion who will give them emotional support. The impacts of excessive material consumption can create a hollowness in human mind. It gives people physical pleasure for a while but later, its effects can give life-time mental sufferings. But there are few people who are less materialistic. They are not so involved to the material world. Such people prioritize honesty, love, morality and human values as they are not caged within their own bodily insatiable desires. In this dissertation, the theme of materialism and sacrifice is denoted through the characters of Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915), Oscar Wilde's short story *The Nightingale and the Rose* (1888), and the Indian movie, *Tumbbad* (2018) directed by Rahi Anil Barve. In *The Metamorphosis* and the movie *Tumbbad*, the characters are prioritizing money over lives, money is everything to them. Such type of people believe that it's money which can bring happiness in their life so they do not even hesitate to kill others for money it has made them so blind that to them, life doesn't matter. The depiction of seven deadly sins is minutely illustrated in the movie *Tumbbad* such as pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth whereas in *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the theme of love and sacrifice is highlighted. This story conveys humility, kindness, chastity, patience, liberality and diligence as virtuous attributes. The journey of Gregor Samsa from pre-traumatic condition to post- traumatic condition not only gives birth many questions in human lives and many different philosophical perspectives like greed for material world, absence of empathy but it also expresses man's positions in this world which are explained in multiple angles in this work. This world is full of people like Vinayak, who almost have excluded their emotions due to

the material consumption. The movie *Tumbbad* gives a clear message that greed makes human blind. But there are few people like the nightingale to whom love and empathy are precious.

According to John Jamieson Carswell Smart, "Though Thales of Miletus (c. 580 BCE) and some of the other pre-Socratic philosophers have some claims to being regarded as materialists, the materialist tradition in Western philosophy really begins with Leucippus and Democritus, Greek philosophers who were born in the 5th century BCE." (Materialism). Also in India, the concept of materialism is expressed through:

"The terms Lokāyata and Cārvāka have historically been used to denote the philosophical school of Indian Materialism. Literally, "Lokāyata" means philosophy of the people. The term was first used by the ancient Buddhists until around 500 B.C. E.... After 500 B.C.E., the term acquired a more derogatory connotation and became synonymous with sophistry. It was not until between the 6th and 8th century C.E. that the term "Lokāyata" began to signify Materialist thought." (Wernicki)

The idea of the materialism is described in Karl Marx's concept of historical materialism. According to Karl Marx's concept of historical materialism, the influences of materialism were involved to human entity from the ancient times. Human used to live together so there was no idea of the term 'family' which is formed later. According to Adam Volle:

"Marx's writings identify four modes of production that humanity has already used: hunting and gathering (sometimes called primitive communism), slavery, feudalism (serfdom), and capitalism. Marx also names a fifth mode, communism, which he believed would eventually result from capitalism's own contradiction: like feudalism, it had created a new class of people, industrial workers, who would ultimately cease to accept their place in the social order. Marx labeled this class of workers the proletariat" (Historical Materialism)

Frederick Engels asserts, "And yet the original home of all modern materialism, from the seventeenth century onwards, is England". (*On Historical Materialism* 5). Particularly the industrial revolution in Britain is often considered the starting point of this transformative period in history. It began in the late 18th century and continued into the 19th century, fundamentally altering the economic, social, and technological landscape of the country. Urbanization led to the growth of cities, but also to overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions for workers. Social classes became more defined, with industrialists and factory owners on one end and industrial workers on the other. Later, the feudalists develop and capitalism is originated. The labours become slave and the society is divided into two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie gets more privileged and builds factory. They oppress the labours to work all the time but they sell the products (made by the labours) in the market by increasing the prices and get the whole profit out of it. Degradation of human values provokes a worst generation as well due to the materialism. The environment is deeply connected to the human values. Greedy people tend to follow wrong path to earn money or get obsessed to money, their fall is assured but they don't believe in these matters. Two kinds of people are usually seen, one kind of people who only care about their present and don't think a bit about their future. The other kind of people who focus on their future so they often sacrifice their present. So, people like Volpone are usually seen in everywhere. Materialistic people are often dissatisfied; to satisfy their soul they follow the same wrong path by emerging themselves again to material possessions. A soul is satisfied by spreading love and happiness and connecting it to consciousness. In chapter 1, the idea of materialism in *The Metamorphosis*, *The Nightingale and the Rose* and the movie *Tumbbad* is portrayed excellently. Gregor's family is completely self-centered and materialistic except his mother. Their relationship with Gregor is only based on money. When he fails to earn money, his father doesn't even hesitate to kill him. The movie *Tumbbad* represents the protagonist as an excessive materialist craving for gold coins and it also delineates the horrifying consequences of his own mischievous deeds at the end. In the short story, *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the professor's daughter prefers expansive jewels and refuses a beautiful red rose. The cause of being excessive materialistic and how it affects the inner peace of their mind is denoted in this chapter.

The chapter 2 describes how the characters in *The Nightingale and the Rose* lead the readers towards virtue and diminish the possibilities of vice through love and sacrifice for others. The characters create an emotional connection with the readers. There are some characters who are materialistic but the motive of these stories is to highlight the opposite of materialism. Gregor's ultimate sacrifice for the sake of his family and Vinayak's improvement from a selfish materialist to a sacrificial personality.

II. Excessive materialism

According to Swami Vivekananda "Materialism and all its miseries can never be conquered by materialism" (*The Work Before Us*). The characters in *The Metamorphosis* and the movie *Tumbbad* lack a peaceful life. Their mind is so thirsty for material possessions that that has made them blind. Gregor's father kills Gregor out of rage and Vinayak kills his proprietor, Raghav out of envy all because of money. It's shocking that whom Gregor's father and Vinayak Rao have killed they are not strangers, they were their own persons.

They are so much emerged to their bodily desires as if their body is controlling their mind. It's true that it's impossible to satisfy a materialistic soul as it is caged within its prison (greed).

It's tragic that to whom Gregor used to believe as his family, in reality they were not his family at all. He used to believe that his family loves him. But after the transformation, as if he is facing distractions to recognize his family. His family, especially his father treats him like a stranger or an enemy when he fails to earn money. At this point, Gregor falls in an existential crisis. His identity is based on his job as a traveling salesman. His transformation ruins his ability to work. His value is only judged by his ability to earn money. The novella begins with Gregor Samsa who wakes up one morning and finds himself transformed into a monstrous bug. His physical transformation is portrayed as a metaphor for his alienation in the materialistic society. Gregor's family was completely depended on him for his financial capability but after his transformation they gradually turn against him. This depicts the materialistic vision that pollutes their relationships. In *The Metamorphosis*, the theme of excessive materialism and its impact on the family as well as on society is revealed. The family's behaviour to Gregor's transformation expresses their materialistic values except his mother. They gradually become indifferent and even rude to him and treat him as a burden rather than a beloved family member. He is energetic to his work because he is the only source of income for his family. When he says:

“If it wasn't that I've held back on account of my parents, I'd have given in my notice long ago. I'd have gone to the boss and told him what I thought outright, with real feeling. It would make him fall off his desk. * He's got a peculiar way of perching on his desk and talking down to an employee from on high — who then, what's more, has to come right up close to him on account of his deafness. Well, I haven't entirely given up that hope; once I've got the money together to pay off my parents' debt to him — that ought to take five or six years — I will do so, no two ways about it.” (Kafka 30).

In this quote Gregor is seen compromising himself that the only reason, he works, is to earn money and pay his parent's debt off. Gregor, who is so much obsessed to earn money for the sake of his family, has been turned into a bug and is no longer a human being. Kafka uses the allegorical representation of Gregor's metamorphosis as an example to critique the dehumanizing impacts of society driven by materialism. Gregor's inability to earn money makes him believe to be worthless in the eyes of his family and it reflects how materialistic values can demolish compassion and empathy in a relationship.

Tumbbad (2018) is an Indian film directed by Rahi Anil Barve. It explores the themes of materialism in a hauntingly atmospheric setting. The background of this film is set in 20th century Maharashtra. The film is combined with the elements of mythology and horror and the depiction of the consequences of insatiable greed and the obsession to wealth. *Tumbbad* conveys the story of Indian mythology, particularly the tale of 'Hastar', a greedy and fallen deity who is banished from the position of being a god. The film revolves around the insatiable desire for material possession through the protagonist, Vinayak Rao, who becomes madly obsessed to discover the secrets of Hastar's treasure hidden within the cursed village of Tumbbad. The generations of Vinayak's family, each and everyone except Vinayak's brother and his wife is grappled with the legacy of Hastar's treasure through the ages. His obsession with wealth drives him to exploit others, including his own family. This represents how materialism decays relationships and human values.

In Oscar Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose" the theme of materialism is portrayed through the professor's daughter who is the most materialistic character in the story. She refuses the student's red rose and asserts that "...the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers." (Wilde). When we give someone flower, we actually express our affection towards them. But the feelings, the student had for the girl are also materialistic as he was only attracted to her beauty. He was madly searching for a red rose because the girl claimed for it. So, when the girl rejected him, he threw the rose and returned to his study. He misunderstands that love is nothing but impractical. The chamberlain's nephew's way of presenting expansive jewels to the girl expresses love as a material pursuit rather than true emotion. Through the student's selfish desire, the professor's daughter's materialistic pursuits and the chamberlain's nephew's displaying of wealth to get the attention of the girl, Wilde questions the moral values of the society that often contradicts genuine love and sentiments with the obsession of material possessions.

III. Sacrifice as a redemption from materialism

The depiction of sacrifice is also illuminated through the characters such as Gregor, the nightingale and particularly Vinayak. In *The Metamorphosis*, before his transformation, Gregor sacrifices his own happiness and desires for the sake of his family because he truly loves his family but his family doesn't love him except his mother. They just show their love towards him as he was the only source of income. His one and only motive in life has become to support his family financially. But his sacrifice for his family ultimately leaves him neglected and abandoned. This continuation makes him mentally sick. At the end, he dies realizing that he has become a burden to his family and his presence creates irritation and unrest in his family. His transformation into an

insect-like creature is just a metaphor to express his alienation in his materialistic family and it is his death which sets him free from this dehumanizing society. If he could leave his strict family he could lead a better life. But he was imprisoned in his family. So, in such confusing state, either he had to leave his family or sacrifice himself for the sake of his family. So, he chose the second option and his family didn't hesitate to leave him.

The movie *Tumbbad* revolves around the protagonist, Vinayak Rao's insatiable greed towards wealth and the horrible consequences that he encounters at the end of the movie gives a moral lesson as well. Vinayak's mind is controlled by his greed and obsession to Hastar's treasure. *Tumbbad* explores the theme of sacrifice as a way to redemption which is obvious at the end of the movie. In course of the movie, as we can see Vinayak is so greedy since his childhood that he is not even afraid of the upcoming consequences after his brother's death just as his mother leaves Tumbbad with Vinayak as soon as possible after the death of his brother. Vinayak spent his entire life by wasting money on luxury and whores but still his greed was dissatisfied when he was getting old. So, he trains his son, Pandurang and Pandurang will go to the chamber to steal the gold coins of Hastar. But Pandurang was lame so Vinayak doesn't expect anything from him and ignores him as well. To get his father's attention, Pandurang gives the idea of stealing the bag full of gold coins instead of stealing few coins. The climax of the movie takes place when they bring more dough dolls to feed Hastar and shockingly more Hastar(s) are originated. So, Hastar symbolizes the greed in Vinayak's mind. Just as Vinayak and Pandurang's soul is surrounded by greed, physically they are surrounded by so many Hastar(s). At this point, Vinayak realizes his fault. So, he decides to sacrifice himself for the sake his son. Vinayak's endeavour to sacrifice himself is quite an unexpected attempt. At last, his love for his son takes place in his corrupted mind. He doesn't hesitate to sacrifice himself to Hastar. While attacking him, the cannibal like Hastar(s) get touch to the flour and they are perished into pieces. Pandurang gets devastated in sorrow while he finds his father, who got the curse of Hastar, groaning in pain. Vinayak was about to give him the bag of gold coins but Pandurang refuses to receive the bag only for which he did not even hesitate to attempt the life-risking tasks. Like Vinayak, Pandurang also realizes his fault that whatever he has done, nothing but an abominable injustice to his father. He could not bear with his father's sufferings. After getting the curse of Hastar, Vinayak was suffering in-between of life and death. Neither he can live nor he can die because of Hastar's curse of immortality. Vinayak smiles when he finds Pandurang realizing his faults which Vinayak himself never realized in his entire life. Once, Vinayak told him "Hastar's curse is a boon for us" (*Tumbbad*). Now, Pandurang is no longer fantasized by this boon and he feels immense hatred for this. Pandurang sets fire on Vinayak to liberate his soul and himself from all sorts of vicious dominance.

The presence of sacrifice is explored through the nightingale's genuine love for others and helping others. When the nightingale saw the student lamenting after getting rejected by the girl, he loves because of a red rose he did not have one. The nightingale was moved by his direful condition. She decides to support the boy. She leaves her home searching for a red rose. She puts all her efforts to find a red rose. When she ultimately finds out a rose, she also discovers that the tree was eroded and it was unable to bear a rose. So, the nightingale's only way was as the tree suggested, "you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood." (Wilde). At the heart of this story, the profound theme of sacrifice is situated. The nightingale does the same what the tree suggested and dies. The student exclaims in joy after seeing the red rose. He plucks it and gives it to the professor's daughter but she no longer wants the rose and insult's the student. The student "...threw the rose into the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart-wheel went over it." (Wilde). The Nightingale's sacrifice is unnoticed. She was not selfish and corrupt like human. She sacrifices herself for the sake of true love. But she didn't know that the student's love for the girl was nothing but an attraction. By giving the example of a bird, an animal, it is denoted that at least animals are not materialistic like human. They also understand the language of love.

IV. Conclusion

In the three artistic genres, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose* and the movie *Tumbbad* directed by Rahi Anil Barve, the three characters, Gregor, the nightingale and Vinayak, are suffering from the material world. Being the part of this material world, Gregor and the nightingale are getting the impacts of the material world and that brings sufferings in their life. They had become the victim of their circumstances.

After all, they were not materialistic or greedy like Vinayak. They had other choices. Gregor could leave his materialistic and dominating family who just used him to get the financial support and he could lead a happy life. According to Zahra Barfi, Fatemeh Azizmohammadi and Hamedreza Kohzadi:

"Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, in fact, represents Kafka himself. It is also interesting to note that the word Samsa is phonetically the same as the word Kafka. Furthermore, in the word (Kafka) the letters "k" and "a" are repeated two times and in the word (Samsa) the letters "s" and "a" are repeated two times, too. Perhaps, this is another reason which proved

that Gregory Samsa represents Franz Kafka himself... This situation reminds the reader of the condition that Kafka himself experienced in his whole life." (107)

As we can see he is not married yet because, "Kafka, in comparison to his father, felt weak which results from his father's repression, so; he believed that marriage is just for his father and is dominated by him. That's why Kafka felt marriage is forbidden for him." (Barfi, Azizmohammadi and Kohzadi 109). Gregor truly loves his family. He never imagined to leave them. He tried his best to support his family financially as much as he could. He used to believe that his family also loves him but he never imagined that he was nothing but a money-making machine to his family.

In *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the nightingale could ignore the feelings of the student and instead of leaving the Oak-tree which actually loves the nightingale. He feels sad for the nightingale and whispers, "Sing me one last song" and further says, "I shall feel very lonely when you are gone." (Wilde). The nightingale just did what she wanted to do without thinking about the consequences. She never considers this kind of act as worthless. She could not ignore the voice emotion. She could not see the pain of the student. So, nothing could stop her to help the student. The nightingale was habituated to see everyone happy. Jessica C. Tungka, Olga A. Rorintulus and Fivy A. Andries remark:

"She knew about those three things because she sacrifices her life for her belief in true love. The rose symbolizes nightingale's true love... Life is a struggle and often needs sacrifice that must always be done by every creature to stay alive. The sacrifice itself can be in the form of material (which can be seen, held) and immaterial (can only be felt) ... Through sacrifice, someone is ready to give more efforts on something that he or she is willing to achieve". (Tungka, Rorintulus and Andries)

Hence, the sorrow of the student moved her. People like the nightingale are very rare in this world who can feel what others feel or have the ability to put themselves in other's shoes. She doesn't even ask herself that, why is she doing this and in change of what? She sacrifices her life for love without expecting anything from anyone. This is what our nature also does. Our nature never asks for anything in change of whatever she gives to human being.

In case of Vinayak, he was materialistic but still he had a good heart. When a person has more good qualities in compare to bad qualities then he is considered as a good person and when he has more bad qualities in compare to good qualities then he is considered as a bad person. So, most people have more or less good and bad qualities, nobody is completely perfect in this world. If so, they are very rare. In *Tumbbad*, Vinayak set a trap for his proprietor, Raghav to kill him indirectly because he dared to know the source from where Vinayak used to collect the gold coins. But when Vinayak enters the chamber, he is shocked after seeing the filthy body of Raghav. He realizes that Raghav also got the curse of Hastar like his grandmother. At this point, he feels sad for Raghav whereas he was not supposed to feel sad for him as he inadequately set the trap for Raghav. But he realizes his fault, he realizes that he has done something wrong. He sets fire on Raghav's body to liberate his soul from suffering. At the end of the movie, Vinayak even sacrifices himself to Hastar to protect his son, Pandurang which is quite an unexpected attempt of Vinayak.

Works Cited

- [1]. Barfi, Zahra, Fatemeh Azizmohammadi and Hamedreza Kohzadi. "A Study of Kafka's the Metamorphosis in the Light of Freudian Psychological Theory." *Research Journal of Recent Sciences* II(10) (2013): 107. Web.
- [2]. Engels, Frederick. *On Historical Materialism*. New York: International Publishers, 1940. Print.
- [3]. Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis and other stories*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.
- [4]. Smart, John Jamieson Carswell. *Materialism*. 16 July 2024. Web. 19 July 2024. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/materialism-philosophy>>.
- [5]. *Tumbbad*. Dir. Rahi Anil Barve. Perf. Sohun Shah. 2018. Web.
- [6]. Tungka, Jessica C., Olga A. Rorintulus and Fivy A. Andries. "Sacrifice as described in Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale And the Rose*." *JoTELL Journal of Teaching English, Linguistics, and Literature* (2022): 306. Web.
- [7]. Vivekananda, Swami. *The Work Before Us*. 12 January 2009. Web. 15 July 2024. <<https://nextfuture.aurosociety.org/the-work-before-us>>.
- [8]. Volle, Adam. *Historical Materialism*. 1 March 2024. Web. 15 July 2024. <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/historical-materialism>>.
- [9]. Wernicki, Abigail Turner-Lauck. *Lokayata/Carvaka—Indian Materialism*. n.d. Web. 19 July 2024. <<https://iep.utm.edu/indmat/>>.
- [10]. Wilde, Oscar. *The Complete Short Stories of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Dover Publications, 2006. Print.