

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background of the Study**

Humans possess an inherent capability of questioning everything around them. Back in the ancient times prior to Common Era, a number of great thinkers of the Western World such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle contemplated, from their own different perspectives, the meaning of the universe and all that exists in it. Their philosophical views influenced many modern schools of thought, including existentialism. In general, existentialism focuses on the individual existence and freedom in searching for the meaning of life, which will be elaborated more in the next chapter.

Many writers reflect the philosophy of existentialism in their works, although most of them never pigeonhole themselves as existentialists – one of them is Czech writer Franz Kafka. He is considered by many one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. The surreal and enigmatic realm of his fictions and the clarity of his style make Kafka a major figure of modern

literature. His name has lent itself to the English term “Kafkaesque,” which is widely used to refer to something that has the absurd and nightmarish qualities of his writing (“Franz Kafka Biography”). His work has influenced many critically acclaimed writers, including Albert Camus, Gabriel García Márquez, and Haruki Murakami.

Similar to Kafka, Japanese writer Kobo Abe is an important figure in contemporary literature whose writings also echo the idea of existentialism. Abe’s works have been often compared to those of Kafka and Samuel Beckett for their surreal and grotesque images of the contemporary society (“Kobo Abe facts”). Before his death in 1993, Abe earned prestigious Japanese literary awards, namely the Akutagawa Prize, the Yomiuri prize, and the Tanizaki prize (“Abe Kobo”). His works have all been best sellers in Japan; some of them have been translated into English, and adapted into full-feature films.

The majority of both Kafka’s and Abe’s works have the recurring theme of alienation (“Kobo Abe facts”), which is one of the main issues of existentialism that will be discussed in Chapter Two. There are several concepts of alienation in philosophy; therefore, it is important to clarify that the concept used in this thesis is the one by Jean-Paul Sartre, which will also be explained in the next chapter. Sartre’s concept of alienation is reflected in Kafka’s most famous novella *The Metamorphosis* (1915), which tells the story of a man who, upon discovering he has transformed into an insect, is more concerned about not being able to work than solving the mystery of his transformation. It is also evident in Abe’s critically acclaimed novel *The Face of Another* (1964), which revolves around a

scientist with a deformed face who creates a life-like mask to cope with human estrangement.

Not only do Kafka and Abe share similarities in their theme of alienation, but they also share strength in the portrayal of the protagonists. Portrayal, which is the way an author presents a character (Kenney 34), is distinctive in both Kafka's and Abe's works. Kafka's typical protagonist is confused, hopeless, guilt-ridden, frustrated, and lacking in understanding of their surreal world. Abe's typical protagonist, on the other hand, is a persistent individual who attempts to rationalise the absurdity of the world (Keffer).

Thus, this thesis will analyse the portrayal of the protagonists of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Kobo Abe's *The Face of Another* using Sartre's concept of alienation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problems to analyse in this study are:

1. How do the authors portray the protagonists?
2. What are the purposes of the authors in creating such protagonists?

### **Purpose of the Study**

Based on the statements of the problem above, this study is done:

1. To reveal the characteristics of the protagonists.
2. To reveal the purposes of the authors in creating such protagonists.

## **Method of Research**

I use library research that includes reading and understanding the primary texts, which are the novels, and other references, in order to make an objective and non-superficial analysis in the process of the study. Next, I analyse the portrayal of the protagonist in each of the novels. Lastly, I draw some conclusions from my analysis.

## **Organization of the Thesis**

The thesis is divided into five chapters, which are preceded by Abstract. Chapter One is Introduction, which consists of Background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Method of Research, and Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two contains the elaboration of the theoretical framework. Chapter Three contains the analysis of the portrayal of the protagonist in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Chapter Four contains the analysis of the portrayal of the protagonist in Kobo Abe's *The Face of Another*. Chapter Five contains the conclusion of the analyses. The thesis ends with Bibliography and Appendices, which consists of the summary of the two novels and the biographies of the authors.