

2026

When The Metamorphosis Turns White: Kafka Reimagined in Igoni Barrett's Blackass

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Recommended Citation

Ajibade, Bisola J. (2026) "When The Metamorphosis Turns White: Kafka Reimagined in Igoni Barrett's Blackass," *Vernacular: New Connections in Language, Literature, & Culture*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://voljournals.utk.edu/vernacular/vol11/iss1/6>

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Introduction

One hundred years separate the publication of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* (2015), yet both texts present narratives of radical bodily transformation. This centennial distance is not merely chronological but marks a profound historical, political, and racial shift from the moment of Kafka's modernist Europe to Barrett's postcolonial Nigerian society shaped by capitalism, global mobility, and the enduring power of whiteness. Although *Blackass* has frequently been described as a "race-rewrite" of *The Metamorphosis* (Edoro), such characterizations often remain descriptive rather than analytically comparative. This article places Kafka and Barrett in direct dialogue, arguing that the century separating the two works reveals how metamorphosis itself acquires new racial and political meanings across historical contexts.

Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* has often been read in relation to Kafka through questions of identity, biopolitics, or posthuman transformation. While these readings productively acknowledge Kafka's influence, they tend to treat the relationship between the texts as thematic resemblance rather than sustained literary engagement. By examining how Barrett reimagines Kafka's narrative structures, aesthetics of alienation, and the logic of transformation within a postcolonial racial framework, this article argues that *Blackass* does not merely reference Kafka but fundamentally reconfigures the meaning of metamorphosis itself.

Kafka's own positioning as a German-speaking Jew in Prague has long complicated efforts to situate his work within a single national literary tradition. Scholars have variously claimed Kafka for German, Jewish, Czech, and Austro-Hungarian literary histories, while also recognizing the unmistakably transnational circulation of his aesthetics. The global afterlife of

Kafka's writing demonstrates that the Kafkaesque cannot be confined to Europe alone but has become one that reappears in diverse cultural and political contexts. On the African continent, this transnational circulation of Kafka's influence is visible in works such as Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King*, Achmat Dangor's *Kafka's Curse*, and the stage adaptation *Kafka's Ape*. Barrett's *Blackass* stands as one of the most explicit and self-conscious African reworkings of Kafka, engaging the logic of metamorphosis as a racial and social problem rather than a purely existential or bureaucratic one.

Despite this growing body of Kafka-influenced African texts, scholarship has yet to fully theorize what it means for a postcolonial African novel to rewrite a canonical modernist European work exactly a century after its original appearance. Existing articles of *Blackass* tend to emphasize its satirical treatment of race and privilege in Nigeria or to note its Kafkaesque elements in a largely descriptive manner. What remains underdeveloped is a centennial comparative framework that reads *Blackass* not only as an adaptation but as a transnational deterritorialization of Kafka's modernism across time, space, and race.

This paper does a comparative analysis by placing *The Metamorphosis* and *Blackass* in direct theoretical and historical relation. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature, alongside race, sociological and postcolonial theory, the essay examines how metamorphosis functions in both texts as a political and aesthetic strategy for articulating marginality, otherness, and social power. While Kafka's Gregor Samsa embodies a form of European alienation tied to labor, bureaucracy, and familial obligation, Barrett's Furo Wariboko undergoes a transformation that produces racial hyper-visibility and privilege within a postcolonial society. By reading the two works across their centennial divide, this article argues

that Barrett's *Blackass* does not simply imitate Kafka but actively reconfigures the Kafkaesque to expose the racialized logics of twenty-first-century global modernity.

This paper proceeds as follows: the next section establishes the historical and conceptual contexts of 1915 European modernism and 2015 postcolonial Nigerian society. It then offers a close theoretical reading of *The Metamorphosis*, followed by an analysis of *Blackass* through the lens of race and ethnicity. A subsequent section develops the framework of minor literature as a transnational aesthetic mode linking both texts. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of this centennial comparison for German and or Kafka studies, African literature, and world literature more broadly.

The Metamorphosis

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* was published in 1915. The original story was written in German and titled *Die Verwandlung*, and it has since been translated into English by various scholars. The novella is widely read at different academic levels and remains one of Kafka's most well-known works. Rather than focusing on the full narrative progression of the text, this section highlights the central elements of transformation, alienation, labor, and bodily exclusion that are relevant to the comparative analysis with *Blackass*.

The story is narrated from a third-person perspective and opens with the sudden transformation of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman, into a bug. Prior to his transformation, Gregor already lives a life defined by economic pressure, routine, and obligation. He works solely to support his family after his father's financial collapse and has little personal freedom. His transformation therefore does not introduce alienation into his life but intensifies a condition that already exists. The first major consequence of his transformation is the loss of

communication. Although Gregor understands everything that is said to him, his voice becomes unintelligible. This breakdown of language marks the beginning of his social exclusion (Kafka 16).

Gregor's body becomes the primary site through which this exclusion is enacted. His inability to open the door to his room and present himself as a productive worker results in the immediate intervention of the manager, his boss whose visit exposes the rigid control of capitalist labor structures. Gregor's attempt to justify himself fails, not because his argument lacks reason, but because his transformed body renders his voice meaningless to others. His failure to be recognized as human is therefore not the result of a moral flaw but of bodily unreadability.

As the novella progresses, Gregor's room becomes a space of confinement that further separates him from family and society. His changing diet and physical habits signal his gradual internalization of his exclusion. Although his emotional attachment to his family remains, especially to his sister Grete, the family's perception of him shifts from concern to burden. His father's violent act of throwing apples at him, one of which remains embedded in his body and later becomes infected, symbolizes the inscription of rejection onto his physical form (Kafka 51-52, 72).

Gregor's death is not treated as a tragedy by the family but as a release. With his removal, the family regains economic stability and begins to plan for a better future. This reaction exposes the underlying logic of the social order presented in the text: the value of the individual is tied entirely to productivity. Once Gregor can no longer function economically, he becomes disposable. Kafka's novella therefore presents a powerful critique of modern subjectivity under

capitalism, where the human body is reduced to an instrument of labor and loses its social worth once it ceases to be useful.

Although race is not an explicit category in *The Metamorphosis*, the mechanisms of dehumanization, exclusion, and disposability that Kafka exposes create a structural framework that becomes explicitly racialized in Barrett's *Blackass*. The transformation of Gregor's body into something socially unintelligible prepares the conceptual ground for understanding how bodily difference functions as a site of power and marginalization in later contexts.

Blackass

Blackass is Igoni Barrett's debut novel and was published in 2015, exactly one century after Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The novel is divided into six chapters, alternating between third-person and first-person narration. Barrett has stated in an interview that he became aware of the similarities between his story and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* during the writing process and intentionally developed the novel as a reinterpretation of Kafka's idea of transformation (Ganier). Unlike Kafka's protagonist, however, Barrett's character does not withdraw from society after his transformation but actively enters social, economic, and political spaces.

The novel opens with Furo Wariboko awakening to discover that he has transformed into a white man with green eyes, pale skin, and light-colored limbs (Barrett 3). At the time of his transformation, Furo is an unemployed graduate from a financially struggling household. His mother supports the family after his father's business collapses. Furo's transformation immediately alters his social position. Without qualifications that match his new corporate role, he is employed in a high-ranking position and given privileges that were previously inaccessible to him. His new body becomes the primary reason for his sudden economic mobility.

Barrett uses Furo's experience to expose the value attached to whiteness within Nigerian society. Whiteness functions as a form of symbolic and social capital that grants automatic access to opportunity, security, and desirability in professional spaces, or in social encounters. His sexual desirability also increases, and he begins relationships that are shaped by the racial hierarchy embedded in social interactions. The body, in this sense, becomes a passport to privilege. At the same time, Barrett complicates the idea of complete transformation through the detail of Furo's black buttocks, which remain unchanged (Barrett 255). This incomplete transformation undermines the fantasy of total racial conversion. The black butt functions as a reminder of his original identity and exposes the instability of racial transformation. Despite the privileges he enjoys, Furo is constantly aware that his whiteness is fragile and dependent on concealment. The novel also introduces a fictionalized character of the author, Igoni, a writer who becomes fascinated with Furo's transformation. Igoni's later transformation into Morpheus, a female figure who retains male genitalia, extends the theme of incomplete bodily change beyond race into gender. This parallel transformation reinforces the novel's concern with identities and the limits of bodily reinvention.

While Gregor's transformation in Kafka's novella leads to isolation and death, Furo's transformation produces visibility, mobility, and social power. However, this visibility is not neutral. It is structured by the racial logic of whiteness. Barrett therefore reworks the Kafkaesque within a postcolonial setting where transformation no longer results in disappearance but in overexposure and commodification. In this way, *Blackass* demonstrates how the logic of metamorphosis is reshaped in a society governed by global inequality and postcolonial power structures.

Kafka and Barrett: Toward a Minor Literature

In their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari 16-18). According to them, a minor literature is not defined by a minor language but by the way a minority group uses a major language. They identify three main characteristics of minor literature. The first is the deterritorialization of language, which occurs when a dominant language is transformed by a minority writer. The second is that everything in minor literature is political, meaning that personal concerns are inseparable from wider social and political realities. The third is that in a minor literature, everything takes on a collective value because individual experiences become representative of a larger community.

Franz Kafka was born in Prague into a German-Jewish family at a time when the city was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Prague was a multilingual and multicultural space in which German, Czech, and Jewish communities coexisted. Although Kafka was fluent in several languages, including Czech, Yiddish, Hebrew, French, Latin, and Greek, he chose to write primarily in German, the dominant literary language of the time. His decision to write in German rather than in Yiddish, Hebrew, or Czech reflects the deterritorialization of language that Deleuze and Guattari describe. Kafka used the major language of German not as a representative of cultural dominance but as a minority subject who remained socially and culturally marginal within that linguistic system.

Kafka's engagement with Jewish culture, particularly through his interest in Yiddish theater and Zionism, further complicates his position as a minor writer within a major language. Although he attempted to distance himself from his Jewish heritage in several aspects of his life,

traces of Jewish cultural expression remain visible in his work. One example is the presence of the violin in *The Metamorphosis*, played by Grete, which can be read as a subtle reference to Jewish musical tradition (Kafka 35). Kafka's writing therefore reflects both a tension with and an attachment to his Jewish identity, even when this identity is not explicitly named in the text.

Kafka also fulfills the political dimension of minor literature (Deleuze and Guattari 16-18). Rather than functioning as purely existential or apolitical literature, Kafka's work provoked unease across twentieth-century ideological contexts, where it was frequently regarded as pessimistic, decadent, or politically troubling (Robertson 94-96). His position as a German-speaking Jewish writer in Prague already situated his work within competing national and linguistic tensions in the Habsburg Empire (Robertson 94-95). The unsettling portrayal of alienation, bureaucratic authority, and the vulnerability of the individual challenged dominant narratives of social order and progress. In this sense, *The Metamorphosis* exposes the oppressive mechanisms of modern society and gives collective expression to the anxieties of marginalized subjects, thereby embodying the political force that Deleuze and Guattari identify as central to minor literature.

In a similar way, Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* can be read as a work of minor literature within a postcolonial framework. Barrett writes in English, the official language of Nigeria. Although English is the official language of Nigeria, it remains a major language because it is a legacy of British colonialism and continues to structure access to education, power, and social mobility. Barrett deterritorializes this dominant language by using it to articulate local Nigerian experiences, racial hierarchies, and postcolonial contradictions. His occasional use of Nigerian Pidgin further intensifies this process, since Pidgin reshapes the grammar and rhythm of English in ways that reflect the linguistic realities of everyday Nigerian life. Through these choices,

Barrett adapts a major global language to express the perspectives of a society shaped by colonial history, ethnic diversity, and global inequality.

Barrett's engagement with minority perspectives in Nigeria also emerges through the novel's attention to Kalabari culture in *Blackass*. Nigerian literary production has often been discussed in relation to authors associated with major ethnic traditions, particularly Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa cultures, represented by writers such as Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Balaraba Ramat Yakubu amongst others. In contrast, *Blackass* presents characters who belong to the Kalabari culture. The two central characters, Furo and Igoni, are associated with this cultural background, situating the narrative within a minority context that is less frequently represented in Nigerian literature. By incorporating elements of Kalabari culture, Barrett expands the scope of Nigerian literary representation beyond the more commonly depicted ethnic traditions. This narrative choice allows the novel to bring a minority cultural perspective into national and global literary circulation, aligning with the collective dimension of minor literature described by Deleuze and Guattari.

Blackass also fulfills the political function of minor literature through its sustained engagement with race, marginalization, and power. Barrett addresses white favoritism and the lingering effects of colonial hierarchy by showing how Furo's life changes dramatically after his transformation into a white man. He gains professional and social privileges without earning them through merit. These privileges expose the structural advantages attached to whiteness within Nigerian society and transform an individual experience into a broader political critique of racial inequality.

The novel further extends the political scope of minor literature through its subtle engagement with gender and sexuality. The character of Igoni transforms into a woman named Morpheus while retaining male reproductive organs. This incomplete transformation introduces questions and attention to the instability of embodied identity and introduces themes that resonate with contemporary discussions of gender. The text presents this shift within a cultural context where conversations about gender and sexuality are often contested, and it uses the transformation to highlight the limits and possibilities of self-redefinition in a rapidly changing society. Rather than offering a direct commentary on transgender politics, the narrative incorporates this element as part of its broader exploration of metamorphosis, identity, and social perception.

Through the framework of minor literature, both Kafka and Barrett emerge as writers who use dominant languages to articulate minority experiences and political realities. While Kafka deterritorializes German to express the alienation of a Jewish subject in early twentieth-century Europe, Barrett deterritorializes English to expose the racial and postcolonial contradictions of contemporary Nigeria. In both cases, metamorphosis becomes a collective rather than merely individual condition, and personal transformation serves as a lens through which broader structures of power and exclusion are revealed.

Identity and Alienation in Kafka and Barrett's Works

Although Franz Kafka and Igoni Barrett write from very different cultural and historical contexts, their works share important thematic concerns. Both authors use fiction and transformation to explore the instability of identity, the experience of alienation, and the difficulty of finding belonging in a world shaped by shifting social and political structures. In

The Metamorphosis, Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect produces an immediate break between his inner consciousness and the way others perceive him. In *Blackass*, Furo Wariboko undergoes a racial transformation that alters not only how others see him but also how he sees himself. In both cases, metamorphosis becomes a way of examining how identity is shaped by the body and by the social meanings attached to it.

Isolation in *The Metamorphosis* can be read in relation to the cultural and linguistic divisions that shaped Kafka's environment in early twentieth-century Prague. Kafka himself belonged to the German-speaking minority in a predominantly Czech city, a position that placed him within overlapping linguistic and cultural spheres (Robertson 23). Within this historical context, his writing repeatedly stages characters caught between incompatible systems of meaning and authority, producing a sense of multiplicity rather than stable identity. Gregor's experience dramatizes this tension. After his transformation, he remains conscious of his family responsibilities and desires but inhabits a body that no longer corresponds to the social identity he once had. His inability to communicate with his family and their eventual shame and fear toward him intensify his separation from the human world.

Barrett also explores questions of identity, particularly within the multi-ethnic and postcolonial landscape of Nigeria. Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups (Tuki 2) and more than 500 languages, (Obiakor 2) and this diversity has historically contributed to ethnic tensions and competing political interests. In *Blackass*, Barrett creates two major characters who belong to the Kalabari ethnic group, thereby marking minority ethnic identity within the narrative (Barrett 54-55). This emphasis on a specific minority community situates the novel within Nigeria's multi-ethnic structure and reveals how identity is shaped not only by race and nationality but also by intra-national ethnic markers.

Self-alienation emerges strongly in both texts. Gregor becomes estranged from his own body as he realizes that he can no longer perform the physical and social tasks that once defined him. His family further contributes to this alienation by hiding him from visitors (Kafka 28-29) and discussing him as if he no longer exists. Furo, on the other hand, chooses to hide from his family because he fears their reaction to his new appearance. Although his family begins searching for him, he struggles to reconcile his white body with his Nigerian identity. Early in the novel, he is described as a “lone white face in a sea of black,” (Barrett 11) a phrase that captures his disorientation and the beginning of his internal conflict. His initial attempts to live as he did before, such as eating at local restaurants or speaking Nigerian Pidgin English, confuse those around him and underline the disjunction between his appearance and his social world. As he begins to inhabit the expectations placed on a white man in Nigeria, his sense of self becomes increasingly shaped by how others perceive his transformed body.

While Gregor’s transformation results in dehumanization, Furo's transformation leads to over-humanization. Gregor, once the financial provider for his family, becomes physically repulsive to them and is eventually treated as an inconvenience. He eats decayed food, hides under furniture, and loses all social value (Kafka 30-31). Furo moves in the opposite direction. His transformation grants him access to jobs, (Barrett 25-27) privileges, and social spaces that were previously inaccessible. He shifts from eating in modest local restaurants to dining in expensive venues with influential people (Barrett 59-61). Barrett therefore exposes how the body determines one’s place in society and how appearance influences the way others communicate with and interpret an individual.

Reading both transformations through a racial lens illuminates the structural logic at work. Gregor’s exclusion does not explicitly invoke race, yet the process through which he is

treated as less than human resembles the racialization of non-white bodies in many societies. Frantz Fanon describes how racist discourse reduces Black people to animalistic stereotypes. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he recalls a moment in which a child points to a Black man and exclaims, “The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is wicked, the Negro is ugly; look, a Negro...” (Fanon 68).

This framework helps clarify the stakes of Furo’s transformation. Furo becomes overvalued because his new body aligns with the racial privileges associated with whiteness. Gregor becomes undervalued because his altered body no longer fits into the category of the human. Although the social conditions differ, both narratives reveal how identity, value, and belonging are tied to the legibility of the body within a given social order. Together, Kafka and Barrett show that metamorphosis is not only a physical event but a social one. The transformed body becomes a site where meaning is assigned or taken away. In both works, alienation arises when the inner self can no longer be reconciled with the body that others perceive. Identity therefore becomes unstable, shaped by forces beyond the individual’s control, and rooted in broader structures of power that determine who is recognized, who is excluded, and who is granted access to privilege.

Barrett and the Kafkaesque

The term *Kafkaesque* has been used to describe the qualities often associated with Kafka’s works. It refers to narratives that contain a nightmarishly complex, bizarre, or illogical quality, and it is frequently applied to literary techniques or atmospheres that resemble Kafka’s style (“Kafkaesque”). These descriptors can also be applied to Barrett’s *Blackass*. *The Metamorphosis* appeared in 1915 and *Blackass* in 2015, meaning that the two texts were written

exactly one hundred years apart. Despite the century that separates them, both authors provide a striking representation of transformation. While the transformations of Gregor and Furo may be understood as metaphysical, the transformation of Igoni into a woman can be interpreted as social. Barrett does not provide explicit information about how Igoni becomes a woman, but the text presents the transformation as a bodily change. Although Igoni's body develops female characteristics, the transformation remains incomplete (Barrett 260-261). One might argue that Furo's transformation could also be framed socially through the practice of skin whitening or bleaching. The novel references bodily alteration when Furo attempts to bleach his butt (Barrett 119). It works temporarily (Barrett 148), but his black butt resurfaces soon afterward suggesting that the Blackass cannot be erased (Barrett 225). Although bleaching may seem plausible, it does not account for the transformation presented in the narrative.

A central Kafkaesque attribute present in *Blackass* is the semiotic function of naming. Kafka often used abbreviated or altered names to convey reduced identity or symbolic presence (Robertson 4). Kafka's novel, *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*, 1925), features a character named Josef K ((Kafka, *The Trial* 1). "K", pronounced "Ka" in German, which can be interpreted as a reference to Kafka himself. He names a character with the initials F. B, which stands for Fräulein Bürstner (Kafka, *The Trial* 1), a name that recalls Felice Bauer, one of Kafka's fiancées (Parry, *The Trial* ix-x). Barrett employs a similar strategy when Furo Wariboko changes his name to Frank Whyte, thereby keeping the initials F. W. (Barrett 158). This conscious use of naming connects Barrett's narrative technique to Kafka's semiotic play.

Both texts can also be connected to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Roman epic that treats the theme of transformation. The resemblance extends beyond the similarity between the words *Metamorphosis* and *Metamorphoses*. Barrett makes a direct intertextual gesture by naming one

of his characters Morpheus. After Igoni transforms, she adopts the name Morpheus. In Ovid's work, Morpheus is the figure responsible for shaping dream-images that take human form. Ovid describes him as "a master craftsman and simulator of human forms," capable of reproducing human movement, appearance, and speech within dreams (Ovid 303). This association is significant because the transformations in both Kafka's and Barrett's texts occur in the liminal space between sleep and waking, where bodily identity becomes unstable and subject to reinterpretation.

This connection is visible in the opening lines of both works. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's transformation occurs immediately after waking:

"One morning as Gregor Samsa was **waking up** from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been **changed** into a monstrous verminous bug" (Kafka 3).

A similar moment appears at the beginning of *Blackass*:

"Furo Wariboko **awoke** this morning to find that dreams can lose their way and turn upon the wrong side of sleep...he could see his alabaster belly, and his pale legs...the pink life lines in his palms...**His hands were not black but white**" (Barrett 3).

The emphasis on sleep and transformation links the two scenes. Igoni also undergoes a transformation of this kind, although the exact process is not described. Barrett further develops the Kafkaesque through the theme of partial transformation. Igoni's change into a woman is incomplete, which parallels the partially transformed woman in the picture hanging in Gregor's room. The woman in the picture, whose fur-clad body suggests an ambiguous form, is an image Gregor had clipped from a magazine and placed in his room before his transformation (Kafka 3).

Even Furo's transformation is incomplete, since his body changes while his behind remains black (Barrett 225). Both partial transformations are connected to moments of recognition. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's mother recognizes him while he is pressed against the picture of the woman in furs (Kafka 47–48). In *Blackass*, while Furo is still with Igoni, his mother calls out to him (Barrett 262). In both scenes, the presence of a woman, whether an image or a transformed figure, mediates recognition between mother and son. These moments suggest that recognition does not depend entirely on stable bodily identity but emerges through relational and symbolic cues that persist despite physical transformation.

Blackass also mirrors Kafka's interest in art and authorship. Furo works for a publishing company named HABA Limited (Barrett 15), while Igoni is represented as an author within the narrative. The fictional Igoni attempts to revive his literary relevance by turning to social media, specifically Twitter. This recalls Kafka's short story "A Hunger Artist," which depicts a performer who places his body on display in search of recognition. In the story, the interest of spectators gradually diminishes, revealing the vulnerability of an artist who depends on public attention (Kafka, *The Complete Stories* 268–70). Barrett translates this dynamic into the twenty-first century, where the artist now seeks visibility through digital platforms. The second chapter, titled "@_Igoni" (Barrett 86), which uses the author's actual Twitter handle, can also be read as a narrative strategy that reflects contemporary struggles for artistic visibility and authenticity.

Kafka and Barrett on Social Issues

Both authors use absurdity and transformation to explore significant social concerns, particularly the structure and expectations of the family. In both narratives, the protagonists have

sisters who initially occupy a mediating role within the household, Grete in *The Metamorphosis* and Tekena in *Blackass*. Gregor works tirelessly to repay his family's debts and hopes to leave his job once he has secured their financial stability (Kafka 5). Furo expresses a similar sense of responsibility toward his family (Barrett 42-44); however, after his transformation and sudden access to social privilege, he distances himself from them rather than offering support. This contrast highlights how family obligations are shaped not only by personal duty but also by the social value assigned to the body. In both texts, transformation destabilizes the family structure by altering the roles through which care, authority, and responsibility are negotiated.

Both texts also address marginalization and social hierarchy. These concerns intersect with capitalism, labor, race, and white supremacy. In *The Metamorphosis*, capitalism appears most clearly when the manager arrives at Gregor's home simply because he failed to report to work (Kafka 11). This moment reveals how individuals are evaluated primarily through their capacity for labor. Gregor is exploited long before his transformation. He works mechanically and relentlessly in order to repay his parents' debt. Even after his transformation, he continues to worry about his inability to work, suggesting that his sense of worth is tied almost entirely to economic productivity. Capitalism is also visible in *Blackass* through the structure of HABA Limited, the publishing company where Furo works (Barrett 15). The company operates according to a strict hierarchy in which those who earn the most perform the least physical labor, while those at the bottom of the hierarchy work the hardest. The novel exposes how class divisions are reproduced through institutional structures. Both Gregor's family and Furo's family belong to the lower middle class, and both protagonists initially attempt to serve as breadwinners. Their transformations, however, shift their class positions in opposite directions. Gregor moves from human to insect and from valued worker to social burden. He is reduced to

eating rotten vegetables and bones instead of the milk and bread he once loved (Kafka 27, 31). Furo moves in the opposite direction. His transformation grants him access to elite spaces that were previously inaccessible to him. He begins to associate with influential figures and enjoys privileges tied to his new racial identity.

These reversals demonstrate the continuing influence of racial hierarchy. Whiteness grants Furo immediate access to wealth and opportunity, while Gregor's transformation closes off all social and economic possibilities. In both narratives, the door functions as an important symbol. It separates the transformed characters from their families and from the wider social world (Kafka 12; Barrett 5). The door conceals their altered bodies until it is opened, marking the boundary between inclusion and exclusion. For Furo, whiteness becomes the key that opens social doors. For Gregor, his altered body becomes the reason those doors remain closed.

Kafka and Barrett also engage with questions of consciousness and reflection. Both texts mirror the societies in which they were written. *The Metamorphosis* reflects aspects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where linguistic and cultural divisions shaped everyday life in Prague, particularly between German-speaking Jews and Czech speakers (Robertson 23). Although the novella is not explicitly historical, Gregor's increasing marginalization can be interpreted in relation to the complex social position of German-speaking Jews within this multilingual environment (Robertson 23). In this sense, Gregor's character embodies the position of those who are excluded or rendered invisible within larger imperial structures. Gregor's transformation therefore becomes a metaphor for the social invisibility imposed on individuals who do not fully belong within dominant political and cultural structures.

In *Blackass*, the physical mirror becomes a significant symbol of identity and internal conflict. It serves as a reminder of Furo's divided self. When he looks at his face, he is confronted with his new identity as a white man. At one point, looking in the mirror, he thinks, "A monstrous joke, a monster's joke: that's what it is" (Barrett 63). The use of the word *monstrous* recalls Kafka's description of Gregor as a "monstrous vermin," creating a subtle intertextual connection between the two transformations (Kafka 3). When he sees his behind, however, he is confronted with the persistence of his former identity as a Black man. The mirror therefore becomes a device that reveals the tension between external appearance and internal identity. It also reflects the postcolonial society in which racial meaning continues to shape mobility and belonging.

Conclusion

Kafka is long dead, yet his work continues to circulate across linguistic, cultural, and historical boundaries. His influence extends far beyond German or Jewish literature and has become an important part of world literature. Igoni Barrett's work is also gaining international recognition, and *Blackass* has already been translated into several languages, including German. The continued circulation of both authors' works demonstrates the enduring relevance of their themes and the ways in which literature travels across time and geography.

The themes explored in *The Metamorphosis* and *Blackass* illuminate how identities shape individual experiences within different social contexts. Both texts reveal how the body influences the ways people are perceived and treated. Kafka and Barrett illustrate that appearance is never neutral. It is tied to systems of value, exclusion, privilege, and recognition. Gregor's transformation exposes the social consequences of becoming unreadable or unproductive, while

Furo's transformation reveals the advantages attached to racial visibility and whiteness in a postcolonial society.

Alienation, struggles with identity, and the persistence of white supremacy are not confined to the early twentieth century or to Nigeria. They remain part of the social realities of the twenty-first century. By presenting transformation as a device that renders these structures visible, both authors demonstrate how literature can function as a mirror of the societies from which it emerges. Their works invite readers to reconsider how bodies are assigned meaning, how identities are formed and contested, and how power continues to shape the possibilities available to individuals in the modern world.

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