CHAPTER – IV

UNDERSTANDING FRANZ KAFKA’S PERCEPTION OF POWER

I call the discourse of power any discourse which engenders blame, hence guilt, in its recipient.¹

This is an important observation made by one of the greatest postwar French literary critics and intellectuals Roland Barthes. It is one of the characteristic definitions of power which is quite conspicuous in all types of postwar discourses: historical, political, philosophical, linguistic and literary. If all western philosophers since the nineteenth century have found it impossible to bypass the question of Enlightenment, all the postwar philosophers, intellectuals and writers have found it extremely difficult to evade the problem of power. Power is a phenomenon which has impregnated every discourse while it itself has remained impregnable! “The reason for this endurance and this ubiquity is that power is the parasite of a trans-social organism, linked to the whole of man’s history and not only to his political, historical history. This object in which power is inscribed, for all of human eternity, is language ..... the language we speak and write”.²

The primary aim of reference to Barthes is to show not only the obsession of philosophy and linguistics with power, but also to reveal certain aspects of power which are essentially Kafkan. Barthes believes that power generates blame and a sense of guilt in the one over whom it is exercised. He thinks that this peculiarity of power is not confined to any
single discourse but is common to every discourse: historical, political, philosophical, cultural, literary and so on. It means that power is not only a universal but an interactable phenomenon. In an aphoristic statement, that power lies in language, Barthes has touched upon one of the most complex and dominant problems of western philosophy and linguistics. In fact, the whole postwar western thought whose foundation seems to have been shaken by radical linguistic inquiry, conducted by Jacques Derrida and others, seems to be a critique of power. With the dominance of power the underlying realisation is that some of the most cherished human values such as rationality, individuality, liberty and dignity seem to be under threat. The problematic perception of power which Barthes and his contemporaries manifest is deeply rooted in that period of western history which has inflicted such a wound on western consciousness from which it has still not recovered. Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Michel Foucault, Milan Kundera and others in different modes have responded to the postwar European historical and political developments. Confronted by a political power, with science and technology at its disposal, man seems to have lost his classical identity and status.

Interestingly what historians, philosophers and writers discovered about the behaviour of the political power, and thus power became a constant theme in philosophy and literature, Kafka was able to divine and show much before them through the medium of fiction in a symbolic form. Kafka was able to discern the horrible and nightmasish existential implications of power, that is, the potentiality of power to transform
human existence into a possibility probably never dreamed by any writer. *The Judgment* (1912) written at the very outset of the twentieth century marks the birth of Kafka as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. *The Judgment* is one of Kafka’s best stories in terms of its structure and theme. Constructed on the classical pattern of story telling with a beginning, a middle and an end, it is full of dramatic qualities. The story contains the seeds of Kafka’s perception of power and existence whose germination one can see in his classic novels *The Trials* and *The Castle*.

*The Judgment* is a tale of a father and son who are at the loggerheads with each other. The story starts abruptly, a peculiar quality of Kafka’s mode of narration, when on a fine Sunday morning of the spring Georg Bendemann, a young merchant, has just finished a letter to an old friend living in Russia for some years. The friend runs a business in St. Petersburg which, though initially flourished, is now in a lamentable condition. Cut off from other Russian families he has isolated as a bachelor. Georg is conscious of his friend’s condition while writing the letter. He wants to intimate his friend of his engagement with Fraulein Frieda Brandenfeld, a girl from a prosperous family. But Georg is equally sensitive about the fact that it can generate envy in his friend.

For the last three years both friends have not been able to see each other. According to Georg’s friend the uncertain political situation in Russia does not allow him to go out of the country whereas, the irony is
that, the Russian can go wherever they like. During these three years Georg’s life has also changed. Two years ago he lost his mother, and since then he has been living with his father. But his business has prospered unexpectedly. The friend does not know about this success of the business, as Georg has not written to his friend ever since he received a letter of condolence from him. Since the death of his mother Georg is at the helm of the business. He also feels that his father has become less aggressive. All types of thoughts pass through Georg’s mind. At last on the insistence of his fiancé he writes about his engagement and wedding:

I have saved my best news to the end, I have got engaged to a Fraulein Frieda Brandelfeld, a girl from a well-to-do family, who only came to live here a long time after you went away, so that you’re hardly likely to know her.³

With this letter in his pocket Georg enters his father’s room. The father, an old and senile man, is sitting in the corner of the room reading an old newspaper. Georg thinks “my father is still a giant of a man”.⁴ This statement reveals his perception of his father. It reflects the dominance of the father over the son. He further informs the father: “I really only wanted to tell you …. That I am now sending the news of my engagement to St. Petersburg”.⁵

So far the dialogue between the father and the son has gone in a normal, reasonable and intelligible atmosphere. Then the whole situation suddenly and dramatically changes into strange, phantasmagorical and unbelievable as the father and the son fall into a heated verbal
confrontation. The father is so enraged that he blames his son of telling a lie and deceiving him. “But it’s nothing, it’s worse than nothing, if you don’t tell me the whole truth. I don’t want to stir up matters that shouldn’t be mentioned here. Since the death of our dear mother certain things have been done that aren’t right…. I beg you, Georg, don’t deceive me… Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?”

At this unexpected authoritative outburst of the father Georg is quite embarrassed and bewildered. The father not only blames the son of dereliction of filial obligation but also of keeping him in total darkness about the affairs of the family and the firm. Georg quickly realises that his old father is yet not ready to give up his power. The father is so sceptical that he questions his son’s claim of having a friend in Russia. This dramatic question, turning the real friend into a non-existent one, changes the narrative from realistic to fantastic mode.

As Georg is involved in helping his father to change his dress, he reminds his father of the meeting he had with his friend. He takes his father into another bed, and covers him with blankets. The father reacts in an incomprehensible manner. He threw up the blankets with full strength. “You wanted to cover me up, I know, you young sprig, but I’m far from being covered up yet. And even if this is the last strength I have, it’s enough for you, too much for you”. The father goes on to accuse the son of telling blatant lies, and of dishonouring the mother’s memory. The baseless acquisition suddenly grips the son into guts:
Georg shrank into a corner, as far away from his father as possible. A long time ago he had firmly made up his mind to watch closely every least movement so that he should not be surprised by any indirect attack, a pounce from behind or above. At this time he recalled this long-forgotten resolve and forgot it again, like a man drawing a short thread through the eye of a needle.\footnote{8}

In the presence of unintelligible power of his father the son remains totally powerless and speechless. He does not find any scope for reaction. As the story reaches its climax everything turns out to be unfamiliar and implausible as the father asserts his power:

So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself, till now you’ve known only about yourself! An innocent child, yes that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being: - And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning.\footnote{9}

Georg feels totally impotent and helpless. He realises the futility of resistance and rebellion, and runs out of his father’s room, and drowns himself in the water. *The Judgment*, unlike Kafka’s other short stories, contains the kernel of his perception of power. It is one of Kafka’s earliest and significant stories in which the author has tried to penetrate into the nature of power in a symbolic form. Kafka wrote in his diary on September 23, 1912: “This story, *The Judgment*, I wrote at one sitting during the night of the 22\textsuperscript{nd} – 23\textsuperscript{rd}, from ten O’clock at night to six in the morning. I was hardly able to pull my legs out from under the desk, they had got so stiff from sitting. The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing over water”.\footnote{10} Herein lies
one of the fundamental principles of Kafka’s style of writing. Writing for Kafka is an unpremeditated and free creation of imagination which later on surrealists desperately dreamed to achieve. In another entry of February 11, 1913 Kafka notes:

While I read the proofs of ‘The Judgment’ I’ll write down all the relationships which have become clear to me in the story so far as I remember them. This is necessary because the story came out of me like a real birth, covered with filth and slime, and only I have the hand that can reach to the body itself and the strength of desire to do so.  

The classic story of the quarrel between the father and the son can be read in many ways. The critics with biographical or psychoanalytic orientation regard it as an expression of the author’s personal problem with his father. Max Brod, Charles Neider, Elias Canetti and others believe that most of Kafka’s writings reflect the relationship between him and his father. In the presence of his father’s indomitable figure Kafka always felt overwhelmed. His works manifest his futile attempt to escape the authority of his father. As Max Brod quotes Kafka’s confidential Letter to His Father 1919 “My writings were about you, in them I merely poured out the lamentations I could not pour out on your breast”.

One can see the predicament of Georg before his father similar to that of the author before his father. Therefore, to read The Judgment as a subjective correlative of the author’s estranged relationship with his father is not totally unjustified, but as one explores Kafka’s oeuvre, especially his novels, his family problems, religious identity and other biographical
details disappear in the background either as of secondary importance or as totally irrelevant. The reason is that Kafka is essentially a symbolic writer; and in a symbolic writing the writer is never inside the writing, hence such a writing assumes autonomy and anonymity promising immense potentiality for meaning.

Through the troubled relationship between the father and the son in *The Judgment* Kafka explores the enigmatic behaviour of power. He unravels its mysterious nature and tyrannical behaviour. The old father is a symbol of power who exercises an authority over his son which neither the reader nor the victim can comprehend. It is one of the characteristics of power that it negates knowledge. That is, the working of power cannot be reasoned out by man. One another dimension of power is that it generates a sense of guilt in the powerless. As Georg’s father roars, he is overpowered with fear and guilt. Georg has not done anything wrong yet he is punished by the father. It means that in order to punish power does not need proof. The most depressing fact is that the individual can neither resist nor rebel. The son simply drowns himself. Thus power negates the role of will and scope of human freedom. These dimensions of power and their unthinkable existential implications for man recur in some of Kafka’s short stories and most noticeably in his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle*.

What Kafka explores is the behaviour of power. That is, how power works irrespective of who operates it. The idea is that the working
of power cannot be rationalised irrespective of whoever exercises it. It can be father, state, or even God. But the nature of power is always tyrannical, arbitrary, and irrational. Read symbolically Kafka is not interested in the power of the father over his son or of the state over its citizens, rather “Kafka speaks of a world that precedes every division, every naming. It’s not a sacred or the divine world… it is simply power”. The idea is that, Kafka is concerned with power per se. He is neither interested in divine power nor in state power nor in the power of father over son. For Kafka power is an end in itself. In this respect he is different from Milan Kundera who is essentially concerned with the totalitarian power, yet both the authors share some common ground (see chapter V).

By engaging father and son in a verbal confrontation in which the former accuses and punishes the latter, a situation which not only seems to be incomprehensible but even absurd, Kafka tries to show the mysterious nature of power and the futility of human reason to understand this abstract phenomenon. He seems to suggest man’s ambition to model himself on God. That is, man wants to exercise his power in the same way as God. Kafka’s mode of perception is deterministic. He emphasises that whoever exercises power it is tyrannical and unintelligible. The traditional assumption is that the divine power is incomprehensible which cannot be rationalised by man. While, on the other hand, man’s power has always been credited with certain degree of transparency, intelligibility and logicality. Kafka erases this
traditional division by revealing this inconvenient truth that power is unintelligible irrespective of whoever exercises it. That is, there is something in power which transcends human reason. It is not only that the power of God is transcendental (as Soren Kierkegaard has described in his *Fear and Trembling*), the power of father is equally transcendental and unintelligible. The powerful can punish the powerless but the powerless cannot understand it. What can Georg do when he is not even able to argue with his father. He is as powerless before his father as man before God. In order to punish the son the father does not require any proof nor the son demands any rationale because power demands total submission.

    Kafka observes that for punishment crime is not necessary. The powerful can accuse and punish the powerless but the powerless cannot do anything. Therefore, it is quite possible that man can be punished without knowing his crime. This theme runs frequently in the works of Kafka. For instance, *In The Penal Colony* (1914) a man is condemned to death for insulting his superior. There is something macabre and nightmarish about this story. The colony practices not only an outmoded but horrible mode of justice. An explorer is invited by the Commandant to witness the execution of the condemned soldier. As the police officer explains to the explorer – who belongs to a different country – the execution apparatus, the explorer is surprised at the mechanical and inhuman way of administering justice. He is troubled by certain questions as the following conversation reveals:
Does he know his sentence?” “No”, said the officer …. “He doesn’t know the sentence that has been passed on him?”. “No”, said the officer again, …. “But surely he knows that he has been sentenced?””, “Nor that either”, said the officer, smiling at the explorer as if expecting him to make further surprising remarks. “No”, said the explorer, wiping his forehead, “then he can’t know either whether his defense was effective”, “He has had no chance of putting a defense”, said the officer…  

The condition of the condemned soldier is similar to that of Joseph K of *The Trial* who is executed without ever knowing his crime. In Kafka the individual faces a power that defies human rationality and morality. It follows its own rule and its own morality hence it seems unintelligible, unjust, and arbitrary. It precludes every possibility for the accused to defend himself. It knows only to punish because the guilt has already been presumed, hence it does not need investigation. As the executioner tells the explorer that the only evidence against the condemned soldier is what his superior, the captain, has said against him. “The captain came to me an hour ago, I wrote down his statement and appended the sentence to it. Then I had the man put in chains. That was all quite simple”. 

In the works of Kafka such mysterious and inexplicable working of power has been described in various ways. This is why Kafka’s critics like Max Brod and Edwin Muir observed that Kafka deals with man-God relationship. In the man-God relationship man is supposed to have neither any right nor freedom, he is only demanded submission. The idea is that man can survive and enjoy freedom so long as he obeys power. When the individual is unable to obey power he faces the same dilemma as Gregor
Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* (1912). Samsa, a commercial traveler, one morning wakes up from uneasy dreams and finds himself metamorphosed into a giant insect with numerous legs. He is quite astonished and bewildered as everything turns out to be unfamiliar. Making familiar suddenly unfamiliar is a unique quality of Kafka’s style of storytelling. For Aristotle a beginning without any causal necessity would have been an absurd beginning, but in Kafka everything starts with surprising suddenness without any rationale. For Kafka surprise is an integral part of human existence. Though it makes life look absurd yet it is an undeniable fact. What Kafka tries to refute is man’s illusion of knowledge. How can Samsa knew that the next morning he would be transformed into an insect. “What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quite between the four familiar walls”. He is unable to find any rationale which can explain what has happened to him.

At such a critical point of his life Gregor is preoccupied with his everyday life. Since he cannot travel to his firm he might lose his job. His parents, and sister called Grete, are quite worried. The father informs Gregor from outside the room that the chief Clerk has arrived. It further aggravates his anxiety. He cannot unlock the room because of his physical deformity. He thinks that if the chief Clerk is not persuaded of his unusual problem he would lose his employment in the firm. The mother thinks that her son is ill, and she asks for a doctor, while the father asks for a locksmith. The family’s initial response to Gregor Samsa’s
problem is not only comic but appalling. He is struggling against his inexplicable problem inside the locked room but there is nobody to understand what has actually happened to him. Lack of communication is a prominent theme in Kafka. That is, though the individual lives in human community he is essentially an isolated being. He is unable to communicate with other fellows as no real or meaningful communication takes place. Isolation of being is a recurrent theme in Kafka’s animal fables especially in the *Investigations of a Dog* (1922) and *The Burrow* (1923-1924).

Physical deformity of Gregor Samsa causes unspeakable degradation. He thinks that if he loses his job the family would fall into a financial crisis. He clenches the key in his Jaws and desperately strives to unlock the door. As the door opens his physical contours freightened everybody. Gregor implores the Clerk about his career in a way that reveals his utter helplessness:

“Well”, said Gregor, … “I’ll put my clothes on at once, pack up my samples’ and start off. Will you only let me go? You see, sir, I’m not obstinate, I’m willing to work; traveling is a hard life, but I couldn’t live without it. Where are you going, sir? To the office? yes? Will you give a true account of all this? One can be temporarily incapacitated, but that’s just the moment for remembering former services and bearing in mind that later on, when the incapacity has been got over, one will certainly work with all the more industry and concentration. I’m loyally bound to serve the chief, you know that very well. Besides, I have to provide for my parents and my sister. I’m in great difficulties, but I’ll get out of them again. Don’t make things any worse for me than they are. Stand up for me in the firm.”

17
Though Gregor keeps on his entreaty to the Clerk, he leaves his house without giving him any assurance. As Gregor loses his utility for the family and the firm he becomes totally insignificant. The father stamps loudly on the floor to drive him back into his room as soon as the Clerk leaves the house. He is in reality reduced to an animal. “Pitilessly Gregor’s father drove him back, hissing and crying “shoo!” like a savage”. The image of the father here is important because he is a symbol of power who exercises his authority over the son in a way that denigrates and humiliates him. “Fear of a superior is central to Kafka, and his mode of resistance to such a power is transformation into something small”. That is, one can escape power only by making himself insignificant. It is only self-humiliation that can offer some freedom.

Because of his metamorphosis Gregor has become a loathsome and a kind of bogey figure. Not only his own family, even the neighbours avoid him. It is only his sister who serves him food and cleans his room. But as he has become a burden on the already fallen fortune of the family everybody loses interest in him. Gradually he is neglected and forgotten as if he does not exist any more. One day his sister says that it is too much, he should go:

“My dear parents”, said his sister, slapping her hand on the table by way of introduction, things can’t go like this. Perhaps you don’t realize that, but I do. I won’t utter my brother’s name in the presence of this creature, and so all I say is: we must try to get rid of it. We’ve tried to look after it and to put up with it as far as humanly possible, and I don’t think anyone could reproach us in the slightest.”
But the family finds itself totally clueless about how to get rid of this problem. It is not just possible to throw him away so long as they regard him Gregor. But his sister insists:

“He must go”, cried Gregor’s sister, “that’s the only solution, Father. You must just try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we’ve believed it for so long is the root of all our trouble”.

As Gregor slides over the floor he is conscious of the unnecessary trouble he is causing to his family, but he cannot do anything. Man has no control over his birth and death. The most fundamental problems of being are not of man’s personal choice. At last in the darkness of his room, crawling with little legs, hungry and tired, Gregor takes his last breath. Thus he relieves his family of an undesirable burden. The whole family feels relaxed, and goes for a stroll in the country. The celebration symbolises the triumph of life and recession of Gregor’s death into the realm of oblivion.

Kafka’s terrible and bizarre story *The Metamorphosis*, a product of magical imaginative power, a fusion of reality and fantasy, is highly symbolic. It is because of the symbolic nature that Kafka’s writings have been read as fables and parables and have given birth to so many varied interpretations. *The Metamorphosis* can be interpreted as an allegory of how physical deformity isolates an individual. It can also be construed as a symbolic story dealing with the existential dilemma of man as an alienated and isolated being. At a deeper level the family is a microcosm through which Kafka presents the dynamics of power. That is, human
relations, at any level, are based on power equation. An individual is part of the family, society, or of the world in general so long as he plays its game. Once he is out of the play of life he is condemned to die on the margin of life. He becomes an outsider in every sense of the word. In the works of Kafka (and Albert Camus) the outsider is a symbol of the alienation of the modern man. People are interested in the individual so long as he plays its game. Gregor thinks that for some mysterious reasons, which he himself does not know, he cannot play the game hence he sinks into insignificance. Kafka challenges the very idea of individuality and freedom as mere illusion.

Franz Kafka wrote some of the finest short stories at the very inception of his literary career and incorporated in them the theme that reverberates in his later works. For instance, Description of a struggle (1904-1905) which Kafka wrote at the age of twenty one, deals with the theme of loneliness and desolation suggesting an image of the world so alien and incomprehensible in which it seems impossible to live. Kafka has a very macabre perception of human life. Most of his heroes are struggling individual in a hostile world that frustrates them. His characters are suddenly caught in a senseless and helpless condition, be it Georg, Gregor Samsa, or Joseph K. All of them are victims of a situation which does not make any sense to them. A sense of helplessness at the commencement of a story makes the beginning of most of the stories of Kafka. For instance, Gregor Samsa is at a loss to understand his transformation in a bettle and his subsequent ostracism by his own
family. Similarly in *A Country Doctor* the doctor is in a state of undecidable helplessness. He is hemmed in by an unexpected problem. He has to attend to a patient ten miles away, the weather is awful, his horse has died in the night, he has no means to go to his destination. While describing an ordinary situation Kafka makes everything unintelligible. Precision of description and incomprehensibility of the situation is a quality that runs through Kafka’s works and makes them quite enigmatic.

Kafka’s heroes are often products of certain situations. The situations look comic, but the one at the centre of those situations never finds them comic. The whole crisis faced by Karl Rossamann, a sixteen year old boy, the hero of Kafka’s first novel *America* (on which Kafka worked between 1911 and 1914) starts abruptly with a comic situation. He is banished to America by his father because he was seduced by a maid servant called Johanna Brummer. The story reads like a comedy. As Edwin Muir rightly writes that “*America* is one of the happiest of Kafka’s stories”. The hero here does not face any nightmarish Court nor any elusive Castle, yet his struggle in a strange country is far from problems. In the ship he loses his umbrella and the box which contains his personal belongings. The whole new land of America seems to be a gigantic administration to him where he wages his struggle to take root and lead a decent life. He struggles against different institutions and individuals in this alien country. He is harassed by everybody as he is living a life of uncertainty. The two vagrants Robinson and Delamarche are his biggest source of nuisance.
America is an unfinished novel and is much different from Kafka’s two classic works The Trial and The Castle. This fragmented novel looks much lighter in tone, nevertheless, it describes the individual’s struggle against social institutions, the problems of employment and livelihood. Institutions in Kafka have great symbolic significance. Almost all Kafka’s heroes confront institutions: the family, the Court, or the Castle which they find excruciatingly difficult to understand. By placing his heroes between institutions which determine their whole life Kafka has discovered an hitherto unknown existential condition of man. One of the fundamental functions of literature is to make an investigation into the existential condition of man. In this respect literature is different from history and philosophy. It does not offer any solution, rather, it makes the reader conscious of the problematics of life. It reveals how a problem is being made, where the trap lies. This is the hallmark of great literature. This is what Kafka has done. By exploring the paradox of power he has grasped an existential possibility of man probably never discovered before him.

Similarly like America Kafka’s, two representative novels The Trial and The Castle are not identical. They contain different situations and different characters. For instance, what Joseph K faces is a ruthless power. He is simply unaware of everything about the Court. Though he takes some initiatives and fight his case during his trial, he simply does not know what happens to his case. In fact, he does not know anything about the way he is being trapped and his fate is decided. He is helpless
because he is forced to act. He does not have any choice. On the other hand, in *The Castle* K faces a different situation. He enters the village with a claim that he is a Land Surveyor appointed by the Castle. His claim is neither accepted nor rejected. The Castle seems to be totally indifferent to his claim. But his claim creates a dramatic conflict between him and the Castle. He demands his rights. Unlike Joseph K, he is assertive. That is why the villagers who seem to have mystical faith in the authority of the Castle are suspicious of K’s presence in the village. The villagers have accepted the authority of the Castle as given. Since K is an outsider, and claims his right, he seems to question the authority of the castle. Moreover, unlike Joseph K, K of *The Castle* does not get any verdict. He keeps on struggling in total uncertainty. Yet he does not give up his hope that one day he will meet his master and the problem would be solved. In an allegorical sense K’s hope is similar to man’s eternal hope to meet his God. In Kafka’s symbolic novels one can perceive different aspects of power. These aspects one can find in any context, in man God relationship as well as in real political relationship.

In his novels such as *The Trial* and *The Castle* Kafka has projected a power which is ambiguous and abstract. But in both the novels the power structure is hierarchical. For instance, in *The Castle* the village is ruled by the Castle. The officials come to the Inn which serves as their office and perform their duties. Kafka does not designate what type of government it is. In fact, it is neither a democratic government, nor it seems to be a kingship. The chief of the Castle is simply called Count
west-west. But Kafka highlights in detail the complex hierarchical bureaucracy which the Castle and the Court have established to run the government, to listen to people’s grievances and administer justice. Kafka gives an insight into how power establishes itself. Power is essentially based on hierarchy be it divine power or human power. The working of power is always unintelligible to the one who is outside of the power. In the face of power the powerless is always mistaken.

Franz Kafka seems to be obsessed with power and its existential implications. Kafka, heroes have become symbolic figures whose existence reflects the predicament of the modern man. His strange vision of the world has suddenly become identical to the real world. This is the reason that many critics find Kafka’s vision of man and the world prophetic. Milan Kundera, who has made some important observations about Kafka, insists that Kafka is neither a historian nor a prophet but “an explorer of existence”. It is just a matter of history that the world of Kafka has become similar to the real world of everyday, blurring the distinction between fiction and reality. Neither the world of the Court nor that of the Castle exists anywhere because Kafka envisages an extreme situation, nevertheless, the way power works in the world of the novels of Kafka, the way it snares the individual in its bureaucratic maze, it is no longer difficult to find it in the real world. The idea is that what seems to be a rare situation in Kafka history has made it a common condition.

Milan Kundera tells a real story of an engineer from Prague whose fate is similar to that of Joseph K of The Trial and K of The Castle. The
story depicts a situation which can be called Kafkan. Thus runs the real story of the engineer in the rephrased form: an engineer from Prague is invited to a professional conference in London. He takes part in the conference and returns to his country. Some hours after his return he, sitting in his office, reads in an official daily paper that a Czech engineer, attending a conference in London, has made some slanderous remarks about his socialist country. The engineer is embarrassed by this baseless and unbelievable accusation. He rushes to the office of the newspaper. But the editor tells him that he cannot do anything, because he got the article from the interior Ministry. Though it is a mistake, even the Ministry cannot do anything as they have got the report about the engineer from the intelligence officials at the London embassy. The engineer asks for retraction but is told that it cannot be done. The engineer is taken up with unusual psychosis. He thinks he is being constantly watched and followed. He is unable to sleep, and at last takes the risk to become an illegal émigré.\(^{25}\)

This real story of the engineer living under a totalitarian power, haunted by fear, is the image of an existential condition which is called Kafkan or Kafkaesque. The adjective Kafkan or Kafkaesque, in fact, expresses an existential paradox that modern man faces in a world surrounded by political institutions. What the engineer faces is a totalitarian power which accuses him of a crime he has not committed. The helpless engineer runs from office to office to get the report retracted. But it cannot be done. No body knows why. Hence fear forces
him to become an émigré. Thus the life of the engineer resembles the one in the novels of Kafka. He has been trapped in the same way by an institution as the hero of Kafka. The behaviour of power can be explained only through the image of the Kafkan. It is an image of a paradoxical situation whence the individual has no escape, because in Kafka “power is an engulfing element …. Something that allows one to sink into it, that makes every thought of returning to the outside world seem unimportant”.26

The hero of Kafka does not face an ordinary institution, rather he “…is confronted by a power that has the character of a boundless Labyrinth”.27 Joseph K of The Trial is lost in a maze, he runs from one office to another, one person to another, but never finds the ultimate authority of the Court. He simply does not know the actual working of the Court which accuses him of what and for what, he does not know. Lost in the intricate ways of the Court K cries: “I want to get away, how does one reach the outside door?”28 The mysterious Court is like a spider’s nest in which “… the farther you go up the hierarchy toward the top, the easier it is to get lost”.29

If K of The Trial faces a mysterious Court, K of The Castle is confronted by an inaccessible bureaucratic structure whose beginning and end he does not know. He comes to the village under the Castle and claims to have been appointed by the Castle as a Land Surveyor. He is neither accepted nor rejected categorically. An official ambiguity makes
his life totally uncertain. He makes hectic efforts to get his claim verified. All the communications he receives are equivocal and unreliable. Lost in a senseless bureaucracy he is unable to find any designated authority which can attend to his case. K has the illusion that one day he would be able to meet his master and the problem would be solved. “It’s my most urgent wish, really my only wish, to get my business with the authorities properly settled”. But every development K faces contains the seed of impossibility. In such an ironic situation it seems that the Castle is playing a game with him. But for K it is not a game, it is a serious matter for him. It is a matter on which his existence hinges. But what can he do against this incomprehensible bureaucratic network except to run from one institution to another which remain indifferent to his claim. Joseph K of The Trial and K of The Castle do not face any ordinary institution whose dubious transparency is inexplicable; they are, rather, struggling “in a world that is nothing but a single, huge labyrinthine institution they cannot escape and cannot understand”.

Conflict between individuals and institutions is not a new phenomenon. But before Kafka novelists perceived and described the clash between the individual and social institutions in a very different light. The hero very well knew the power he faced, and also understood its working. That is to say, the working of the bureaucratic institutions was not so mysterious and invisible as in Kafka, nor the institutions were so overwhelmingly powerful that they could crush and consume the individual. There was a time when the individual was able to escape the
punitive power of his adversary. There was always some space howsoever limited. But how can K escape the Court which seems to be omnipresent. It is because of this omnipresent power of the Court that Kafka’s early critics such as Max Brod equated the Court with divine power. The institutions in Kafka seems to be quite realistic, but their mode of working seems to be inscrutable. What Kafka challenges is the ability of human reason in the face of power. Man is simply unable to identify the institutions which determine his fate, hence his isolation. The Court and the Castle do not work in line with human law characterised by intelligibility and transparency. “In Kafka the institution is a mechanism that obeys its own laws; no one knows now who programmed those laws or when; they have nothing to do with human concerns and are thus unintelligible”.32

In a short story *The Problem of our Laws* Kafka explores the mystery of human laws. The common assumption has been that human laws, based on reason, are characterised by transparency and are understandable. Kafka suddenly problematises this hypothesis as an illusion. He tries to make the reader conscious that the most painful reality of human life is that man is ruled by laws about which he does not know anything. The laws are so mysterious that they seem to be beyond human comprehension. It is not that there are a lot of differences in the interpretation of laws, or that they are susceptible to manipulation by the powerful, rather the real problem lies in not knowing anything about them. Human laws are so mysterious that sometimes one feels that they
simply do not exist. How can one be sure of the existence of the laws which are known only to the tiny minority which exercises them? The idea is that a law is that which the powerful recognises and exercises. This arbitrary treatment of the laws by the powerful denies every possibility for the powerless to understand them. In this anecdotal fragment Kafka perceives a paradox which constitutes a recurrent theme in his novels. In the face of power Kafka vehemently denies every possibility of knowing. He has a very nihilistic attitude towards everything human: rationality, knowledge, will, freedom, individuality. Frederick Nietzsche believed that man is capable of transforming the world by exercising his will. But Kafka and Kundera deny this positive possibility as an illusion. Confronted with power man has no scope to exercise his will. The individual is at the total mercy of the power.

Jospeh K is arrested, accused, put on trial and then executed. Neither the victim nor the reader knows what crime he has committed. K does not know what authority is accusing him, hence his bafflement. “I argue this from the fact that though I am accused of something, I cannot recall the slightest offence that might be charged against me. But that even is of minor importance, the real question is, who accuses me? What authority is conducting these proceedings”.  

No writer before Kafka had probably grasped such an irrational behaviour of power in all its complexity. The inspector’s reaction to K’s anguished question is curt and cold. “You are only under arrest, nothing more”. It is not only K who does not know the power which accuses him, even the Court
functionaries do not have any idea of the Court. They just perform what they are commanded. The most puzzling thing is that they do not even care to know. What Joseph K faces is an indifferent and ruthless power.

Franz Kafka has a very uncanny perception of human condition. He has made one of the most dazzling discoveries about the unprecedented power of external conditions in determining the fate of the individual. One of the cornerstones of the existentialist philosophy is that man always has freedom of choice howsoever limited. And one of the fundamental ideas that have always informed human thought is that man is responsible for the consequences of his choice. But in Kafka man is not responsible for what he chooses or does, rather he is made responsible to the consequences of the mistake that someone else might have made. For instance, Joseph K is condemned to death for a wrong he has not committed. In fact, there is no clue in the text that any wrong has been done. The whole situation seems to be irrational and absurd. But what Kafka tries to suggest is that power can create a condition for the punishment of the innocent but the victim cannot do anything. Hence Kafka radically puts to question the very idea of human will and freedom, and makes the existence look like a trap. The life of the individual suddenly appears as a mistake, a misunderstanding committed by an invisible power.

Making visible invisible, familiar unfamiliar, and intelligible unintelligible is a unique quality of Kafka’s imagination. When Kafka’s
heroes start their struggle against their respective institutions they always have the illusion that they would be able to settle their problem, but every new development belie their hope. Though Jospeh K gets a judgement howsoever painful, but K of The Castle is of nowhere. Had he been categorically rejected he would have started a new life. He is condemned to a pathetic uncertainty. Nevertheless, K does not lose his hope and continues his struggle in the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the Castle. He goes to the village Superintendent with Klamm’s letter of appointment. They inter in a dialogue in which fiction and reality become indistinguishable. The whole dialogue seems to be a satire on bureaucracy:

You have been taken on as the Land Surveyor, as you say, but, unfortunately, we have no need of a Land Surveyor. There wouldn’t be the least use for one here. The frontiers of our little state are marked out and all officially recorded. So what should we do with a Land Surveyor?….. This is a great surprise for me. It throws all way calculations out. I can only hope that there’s some misunderstanding. No, unfortunately, said the superintendent, it’s as I’ve said. But how is that possible? Cried K. Surely I haven’t made this endless journey just to be sent back again.35

K regards his relationship with the Castle as between an employer and employee. He wants to take up his job, get accommodation and salary and live a normal life in the village. But in the absence of the official recognition he is looked by the villager as a persona non grata. The Superintendent tells K that once we needed a Land Surveyor but the file
is lost. In such a large office if a document goes astray it is never easy to trace it. As the Superintendent goes on telling the tale of official communication the whole thing become mysterious and incomprehensible to K. The Superintendent could not help asking K:

doesn’t the story bore you? No, said K, it amuses me. Thereupon the superintendent said: I’m not telling it to amuse you. It only amuses me, said K; because it gives me an insight into the ludicrous bungling which in certain circumstances may decide the life of a human being.36

The file is searched in the pile of official papers and documents but is not found. What makes K laugh is the realisation how certain bureaucratic mistake can destroy the whole life of an individual. It is the file which contains K’s life as shell contains the snail. If the file is lost K would be deprived of his identity, profession and life. “In the Kafkan world, the file takes on the role of a platonic idea. It represents true reality, whereas man’s physical existence is only a shadow cast on the screen of illusion”.37 Nobody knows who sent the letter of appointment to K, otherwise he might not have come to the village. K is a shadow of a mistake committed in the labyrinthine bureaucracy by someone else. In the world of Kafka the individual’s whole existence is inseparably linked with institutions whose unfathomable working imposes on him a philosophy of impotency, helpless and futility. In the contemporary world of bureaucracy it is no longer difficult for the reader to understand the implications of the lost file. There are situations when it might lead to unthinkable consequences. Beginning with the twentieth century the West
made radical experiments with bureaucratic institutions with mechanical procedures. In Kafka one can see an ironic exploration of the implications of the bureaucratised life for the individual. In the illusion of efficiency and transparency man created an institution which gradually curbs his freedom. And at times it goes much more deeper. For instance, as one looks upon the struggling heroes of Kafka against their respective institutions one realises that their intention does not bear any weight in the face of power. In other words, if what the Court or the Castle says is the only truth, then what about the intention of Joseph K or K? Kafka seems to suggest a denial of human self in the face of power.

Kafka is basically concerned with the unintelligibility of the world. He warns that nothing can be taken at its face value. Unlike philosophers who always want to demystify the world Kafka makes everything about life a mystery as this ordinary incident reveals. Klamm’s letter is of immense significance for K. But, surprisingly, the Superintendent does not attach much significance to it. He also reminds K that the affirmation about the Land Surveyor which Schwarzer got from the Castle is unreliable. With bewildering suddenness the Superintendent’s narrative “produces the disconcerting juxtaposition of reality and fantasy”. Everything suddenly assumes a veneer of mystery as if K is labouring under certain incurable delusion. “You haven’t once up till now come into real contact with our authorities. All those contacts of yours have been illusory, but owing to your ignorance of the circumstances you take them to be real”. The Superintendent goes on to explain the unreliability
of the telephone communication in the bureaucracy of the Castle. A telephone call from an office causes all the telephones ring in all the subordinate departments of the Castle. Moreover, it is impossible for a stranger to know the person speaking from the other end. What the Superintendent tries to suggest K can be expressed in the words of Heller that “there is no key to the Castle”.\textsuperscript{40} What Heller wants to suggest is that there is no definite interpretation of the novel. Similarly there is no reliable way for K to communicate with the Castle. K realises that he does not know anything about the Castle. Everything about the Castle remains inaccessible and inexorably incomprehensible.

Kafka wants to expose man’s inability to know anything about power. Despite all the impossibilities K never gives up his hope. He is a man of single obsession. His only aim is to meet his master and get his ‘rights’. But in the face of total uncertainty K seems to be involved in a Sisyphean effort. The implication of the Superintendent’s narrative is that power is understandable only to those who exercise it. Those who stay out of the domain of power cannot understand it. Since K is an outsider, a stranger, he cannot know anything about the power of the Castle. There is a determinism that the powerless can not comprehend the behaviour, the rationality and logic of power, because power follows its own reason, its own logic. Therefore, the powerless is condemned to live in ignorance and isolation. Such relationship seemingly does not seem to exist between the powerful and the powerless in the real world because of our illusion
that we live in an intelligible world. That is why Kafka’s vision of power looks transcendental:

But if man’s life is only a shadow and true reality lies elsewhere, in the inaccessible, in the inhuman or the suprahuman, then we suddenly enter the domain of theology.⁴¹

Kafka’s early critics gave a spiritual interpretation of K’s problem. That is, man with finite reason cannot understand the infinite will of God. The idea is that divine power cannot be understood by man. Since Kafka does not tell what type of power the Castle is, it can be a symbol of any type of power. Kafka is a symbolic writer, who has created images pregnant with meaning. It is, however, very difficult to find exact equation between the Castle and any temporal power. It seems to be an irrelevant question what type of power the Castle represents. Kafka’s concern is with the power itself, power as a self-contained phenomenon. It is not only that man cannot understand the power of God, power in itself is an enigma irrespective of who exercises it. Whoever exercises it, it seems equally enigmatic, mysterious and irrational. The power of the father in The Judgment is no less irrational and terroristic.

If the power exercised by man seems to be metaphysical or divine, it is only because it has always been our assumption that it is only the divine power which is incomprehensible. In a man-God relationship man has no rights. It demands total submission and complete conformity. There is no freedom in such relationship, or if any, it can be realised only through obedience. That is, obedience is a precondition for salvation. As
Kundera rightly observes: “whenever power deifies itself, it automatically produces its own theology; whenever it behaves like God, it awakes religious feelings toward itself; such a world can be described in theological terms”. Power not only punishes, it seeks deification. It wants to be obeyed and worshipped. In order to get obedience power fulfils some of the aspirations of the powerless. This is how the powerful keeps the powerless hooked up. For instance, by making some false promises and by letting K move in the village, where he can even enjoy certain moments with Frieda, the Castle keeps K in a delusion. So power always demands deification and submission. Kafka’s perception of power is absolute and monolithic. In Kafka the theological or pseudo-theological dimension is inseparable from power irrespective of who possesses and exercises it. All types of problems are likely to erupt once the powerless defies power. But when the powerless deifies or defies, the decision lies with the powerful. There is nothing in Georg’s behaviour which shows him as defiant of his father’s authority, yet the father punishes the son by fabricating an accusation. Similar is the case with Joseph K of The Trial. The idea is that the powerful can invent any alibi to persecute the powerless.

The Kafkan not only involves the nature of power to punish or to seek unconditional submission from the powerless; rather it also entails power’s ability to transform the consciousness of the powerless. That is, power transforms the behaviour of the individual resulting in self-humiliation and self-dehumanisation. When a person makes a mistake,
and realises it, he feels guilty. In order to relieve his guilty conscience he does penance. He willingly seeks punishment to get peace in return. But Kafka reverses the whole logic. As Kundera rightly observes: “The person punished does not know the reason for the punishment. The absurdity of the punishment is so unbearable that to find peace the accused needs to find a justification of his penalty: the punishment seeks the offence”.

In the face of an irrational power the accused himself seeks his offence in the light of which he wants to explain and justify his punishment. For instance, Joseph K is arrested, accused for something he does not know. One of his most difficult problems is to explain to people of what he is accused. He is forced to seek his own crime, a senseless situation. This is how power induces self-culpabilisation in the victim. The victim accuses himself in order to have a reasonable context for his punishment. Joseph K desperately searches his personal life in an attempt to find any detail which can justify his punishment. In a detective story the commission of the crime is certain, the only uncertainty is about the identity of the criminal. But in Kafka’s *The Trial*: “It is the guilt that is certain and the crime that is uncertain; the aim of the hero’s investigation is not to prove his innocence…. but to discover what, if anything, he has done to make himself guilty”. Instead of the Court searching for K’s offence the accused himself seeks his offence. Kafka abolishes the logical foundation of crime and punishment. The accused’s search for his offence in an attempt to make himself guilty and make his punishment look
reasonable and justified is a bewildering observation. It reveals the tyranny of power and the helplessness of the individual.

The story of Barnabas family in The Castle can explain one another aspect of the psychological impact of power on the individual. The family holds Amalia responsible for its decline and fall. Olga thinks that if Amalia had not recklessly refused Sortini’s proposal, her family would not have fallen from the grace of the Castle. It is a very unusual situation. The Castle does not pass any verdict against the family, yet the family feels guilty and isolated. The family represents an alienated sensibility. In most of his stories Kafka maintains that the existential problems are so complex that there can not be any rational interpretation. Man’s alienation cannot be explained in rational terms. How can one explain Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis and alienation? Olga tells K that it was Amalia’s rejection of Sortini’s proposal which proved to be a curse for the family “That was the morning which decided our fate”. Olga thinks that the whole family was indirectly punished, as it was despised and avoided by every inhabitant of the village. Hence the family becomes an outsider and outcast. This is the impact of fear on the consciousness of the family. Fear of power works automatically, it does not need any cause.

The Barnabas family is desperate to come out of the social ostracism. Therefore, it perceives the arrival of K in the village as a chance to get connection with the Castle. But the family can hardly feel
free in its relation with the Castle unless it is absolved of its guilt. Except Amalia every member of the family is possessed by a deep sense of guilt, and the languishing nostalgia of its lost glory. The idea is that power not only humiliates it ennobles also. That is, by doing favour to the individual power creates an illusion of ennoblement in the individual. Fallen from the favour of the Castle the members of the Barbanas family are overwhelmed by guilt and fear, their whole behaviour goes through metamorphosis. Barnabas, the youngest member of the family, becomes a messenger, and Olga becomes a prostitute. She develops promiscuous relationship with the servants of the Castle. It is a pathetic search for favour and recognition through self-humiliation.

The Barbanas are ready to make every sacrifice to get connected with the Castle. The old father of the family becomes involved in an unusual type of futile labour. His Sisyphean labour is similar to K’s effort to reach to the Castle. The old father waits everyday in the way leading to the Castle with petitions in the fond hope that some official might one day pay attention to his plight. The father is not only in search of the favour of the Castle, rather he wants to be “forgiven”. But the forgiveness for what? Given the fact that there is neither any accusation nor any verdict from the Castle against the family why the old father is degradingly apologetic is a paradox. On this radical reversal Kundera remarks:

to appeal, to request a pardon, you have to be convicted first! The father begs the Castle to proclaim the crime. So it is not enough to say that the
punishment seeks offence. In this pseudotheological world, the punished beg for recognition of their guilt.\textsuperscript{46}

Kafka’s projection of power is so absolute that it assumes a semblance of transcendental power. In his works, as it has been maintained, there is nothing which can suggest one to one equation between divine power and power of the Castle. It does not make any difference who exercises power; because power is irrational in whatever form it exists. Those who rely heavily on biographical approach and do not pay much attention to Kafka as a symbolic writer emphasise that Kafka’s mentality was affected by his estranged relationship with his father, or his abortive engagements with women, his Jewish heritage “Of all writers, Kafka is the greatest expert on power. He experienced it in all its aspects, and he gave shape to this experience”\textsuperscript{47}. Kafka was engaged to Felice on June 1, 1914 but six week later the engagement came to an abrupt end on July 12, 1914. In his diary on June 6, 1914 Kafka compared his engagement with imprisonment. “…was tied hand and foot like a criminal. Had they sat me down in a corner bound in real chains, placed policemen in front of me, it could not have been worse. And that was my engagement”\textsuperscript{48}.

Kafka’s personal life and his personal writings such as his letters and diaries seem to provide a convincing context for the understanding of his writing to some extent. It is quite possible that the writer was influenced by his personal experience. But in a symbolic literature it is difficult to find one to one equation between literature and biography.
What Kafka has projected is a symbolic view of power that seems to be abstract and universal. By abstract means Kafka does not talk about any specific power. It is quite ambiguous what type of power the Castle is. It can be a symbol of any sort of power: the power of father, state or God. His perception of power is monolithic. It interests him for its own sake. Kafka thinks that in order to understand the mystery of power the traditional categories and contexts should be suspended. By universal means Kafka’s perception of power is unrelated to any particular period of human history and society. Kafka thinks that power in any form behaves in the same way. It creates fear and guilt, it seeks obedience and demands conformity. It reduces freedom to the degree of negation. Deprived of freedom individual’s whole life looks laughable. It shows man’s tragic helplessness before power. He can neither escape nor understand power. In Kafka the futility of man before power is an eternal and universal condition.

When two strange warders suddenly invade Joseph K’s room in the early hour of the morning, and declare his arrest, he is baffled. Though everything is familiar but it is the intrusion of the unfamiliar and surprise in a familiar milieu which is the source of bafflement in Kafka. K thinks that he lives in a country with a constitution where all the laws are well in order and there is no political disorder in the country. There is nothing in the environment which can explain this sudden encroachment on his privacy. The intrusion of the unfamiliar in the life of man is a unique discovery of Kafka. By eradicating the distinction between familiar and
unfamiliar, intelligible and unintelligible, dream and reality, public and private Kafka makes the whole life look as a joke.

II

Humour is an integral part of Kafka’s perception of human existence. Brod writes that when Kafka read the first chapter of *The Trial* to his friends they found it hilarious:

> When Kafka read aloud himself, this humour became particularly clear. Thus, for example, we friends of his laughed quite immoderately when he first let us hear the first chapter of *The Trial*. And he himself laughed so much that there were moments when he couldn’t read any further. Astonishing enough, when you think of the fearful earnestness of this chapter. But that is how it was.\(^49\)

The element of joke is deeply rooted in the way Kafka tells the story. Comic is an inseparable part of a Kafkaesque story. But it is necessary to see Kafka’s departure from the traditional perception of humour. Before Kafka there was a clear line between tragedy and comedy. In Kafka the line of events constituting tragedy and comedy is never clearly demarcated. Writers before Kafka “always took the necessary precautions — and each time they gave warning that they were passing to the other side. With Kafka there is no warning”.\(^50\) Both the dimensions of narrative are inseparably fused, known as ‘black humour, or ‘black comedy’.

When K of *The Castle* goes to the village Superintendent to stake his claim as a Land Surveyor, the conversation between the
Superintendent and K reads like an allegory of the lost file. K quickly realises the irony of his fate. He finds the whole narrative ‘amusing’. But the comic in Kafka is bereft of its traditional capacity of mitigating the effect of tragedy. It does not give any psychological relief. How it can give the hero consolation when “He is trapped in the joke of his own life like a fish in a bowl; he doesn’t find it funny. Indeed a joke is a joke only if you’re outside the bowl; by contrast, the Kafkan takes us inside, into the guts of a joke, into the horror of the comic”.  

In Kafka a situation which seems to be comic and fantastic on the surface is horrific and nightmarish at the bottom. The idea is that life has not only been divested of the comic consolations it has also been deprived of its tragic dimension. This is a possibility of human existence when man is reduced to non-entity, to an amorphous life. Kafka projects a lamentable image of human existence in which man has been bereft of both tragic and comic. As Kundera remarks:

In the world of the Kafkan, the comic is not a counterpoint to the tragic (the tragic-comic) as in Shakespeare; it’s not there to make the tragic more bearable by lightening the tone; it doesn’t accompany the heroic; not at all, it destroys it in the egg and thus deprives the victims of the only consolation they could hope for: the consolation to be found in the (real or supposed) grandeur of tragedy.  

The deprivation of the life of tragedy is a negation of human will, heroism and freedom. The Greek discovered tragedy in heroism. A true tragic hero is a free individual, who makes conscious choice which
unexpectedly goes awry hence he suffers. But his suffering is full of heroism and greatness. His fall inspires awe, fear and pity, a cathartic effect on the audience. The hero of tragedy faces a moral force, he meets an atrocious fate when he violates any moral law. The nemesis is a way of restoring the equilibrium. Since the Greek believed in proportion, balance and moderation; the hero is punished when he crosses the limit. But with Kafka the idea of tragedy is reversed, Joseph K does not make any choice and his fate has already been decided in the mysterious Court before he takes any initiative. Therefore, Kafka's heroes are despersonalised, they are anti-heroes or de-heroicised personalities. Kafka’s heroes do not face any moral force, they are victim of certain institutions with incomprehensible power which punish the individual for the sake of punishing. That is, in Kafka power wills its own will, it follows its own rules and its own morality.

Franz Kafka is a symbolic writer. His perception of power and human existence is symbolic. A symbolic work is one which enjoys total autonomy from time, place and even from the personality of the author. As one carefully examines the aesthetics of Kafka it becomes quite obvious that he has deliberately either modified or rejected the conventions of the novel prevalent in the nineteenth century Europe. For instance, it is difficult to trace the locale of The Castle on the actual map. The only textual clue is that it is a very cold place. The village under the Castle is covered with snow, and the only mode of transport is sledge. So it might be any place in Europe.
Similarly Kafka has consciously rejected history. By suspending time Kafka has created a temporal vacuum. What one has in Kafka is zero time. It is difficult to relate *The Castle* with any particular time of history. Thus it can be any period of human history. The life of the villagers shows that it is a pre-industrialised agrarian society. Conditions of the peasants is very miserable, sledge is the only mode of transport in the village. But it is interesting to note the mention of telephone. It seems that the author has deliberately inserted it in the novel for two ostensible purposes. It indicates that the story belongs to the modern world. The description of the telephone emphasises the fact that the writer talks about the contemporary world of the twentieth century. It should also be noted that the technology was at its nascent stage of development at the very outset of the twentieth century, and political life was not so heavily bureaucratised, yet Kafka was able to perceive the utility of this technology, for the political power, in running bureaucracy. At the same time he also wants to make the reader aware of how technology cuts into human privacy.

One of the important qualities of Kafka is to deprive his characters of every traits of personality. For example, he does not give any detail of his character’s past life. The reader does not know anything about K’s country, culture, family and parents, or his personal predilections. Some of Kafka’s characters are nameless or simply reduced to a letter. Kafka doesn’t seems to be interested in the psychological exploration of his characters rather in the existential analysis. For instance, there is not
much of a psychological interest for the reader in K’s relationship with Frieda. If one focuses on their relationship it cannot help much in understanding K’s problem. He is preoccupied only with the Castle, other things for him are of secondary importance. K is no longer interested in Frieda like the hero of the traditional romance.

Similarly it is impossible to know what type of power the Castle is. There is neither any politics nor ideology. So it can be a symbol of divine power or state power. All these features show that Kafka’s works are symbolic. It is because of their symbolic nature that they are read like parables and fables. A symbolic work offers immense freedom of reading and accepts plurality of meaning. If a symbolic work is read by a layman who is unfamiliar with the conventions of literature, even then it makes sense. Thus one can read *The Castle* as the story of a man who comes in the world, sets some goal and makes all efforts but fails to achieve it. It is a tragedy of every destiny.

Kafka’s indifferent attitude to history, biography and geography does not amount to total rejection of the nineteenth century realism. He is a symbolic writer yet he maintains the tradition of realism. Whatever happens in his works happens under the semblance of realism. Joseph K gets up in the morning according to his routine under a very familiar situation. But as the warders enter his room everything turns unfamiliar. This is how Kafka fuses plausible and implausible, a possibility of writing fiction which many writers, especially Gabriel Garcia Marquez, appears to have inherited from Kafka. What Kafka seems to suggest at
the deeper level is that invasion of the unfamiliar, strange and inexplicable in a familiar condition is no longer an unusual phenomenon. In this way Kafka creates bafflement and wonder which shows the fecundity of his imagination.

The suspension of history is a hallmark of a writer whose mode of perception is existential as Lukacs observes. But Kafka is not an existentialist writer like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. They projected a philosophy in the form of fiction as it emerged and held its strong sway in twentieth century. It is important to distinguish between an existentialist writer as Sartre and a writer whose mode of perception is existential as Kafka. Kafka thinks that to explore the mysteries of human existence history, politics, geography are either of peripheral or of no significance. If Kafka has downplayed the significance of history, politics and ideology to the understanding of man’s existential paradox, it is only to enforce the static nature of existence. That is, there is something in human existence which always remains the same. It is a denial of western myths of linear development of time, progress and evolution. The idea that human condition is improving with the passage of time is one of the dominant myths of the western thought. Kafka seems to suggest that there can be changes in material life but the fundamental questions of life will remain the same. Criticism of idealistic ideas is very strong in twentieth century literature and philosophy. He also reveals that material development is far from problems. Instead of liberating it somehow enslaves man.
A writer is interested in history only because historical and material changes have their impact on human life. Kafka presents an ironic picture of the material progress. Whatever man creates becomes his master. There is no doubt that history and politics affect human existence. In the contemporary world it is impossible to hold watertight division when the border between the public and the private has become so porous. But the writer concerned with existence treats them as secondary. If Kafka mentions an instrument, for example, like telephone, it is only to reveal its existential implication. That is, how technology affects human privacy. Joseph K’s uncle suggests him to accompany him to the countryside in order to get relief from the tension of the trial. The Court might not reach quickly to K in the country probably because there is no telephone! It is no more difficult to understand today how technology has became a tool in the hand of power to entrap people.

The interference of political power in the life of man is not an uncommon reality in contemporary world. It is political power equipped with unprecedented force of science and technology which determines the life of individual, a dominant theme in the works of Milan Kundera. Unlike Kafka, Kundera is concerned with the negative impact of totalitarian power on the powerless people. But it can be argued that Kafka’s perception of power seems to be neither religious nor political. It is abstract and universal. Power always behaves in an irrational and tyrannical way which man is eternally unable to comprehend. No writer before Kafka had happened to explore power from this angle which involves ironisation of human reason and freedom.
As it has already been maintained that Kafka makes everything ambiguous and obscure about power. In Kundera there is a concrete historical and political context whereas in Kafka everything has been suspended. It is this ambiguity which is the source of fascination for the reader in Kafka. He is deliberately ambiguous about the Castle and K. Hence the reader can hardly be certain in the world of Kafka. For instance, it is difficult to be certain about the identity of the Castle and K. Therefore, if one examines K’s relationship with the Castle, the latter seems to have no interest in K. It is totally indifferent to K’s claim. If one takes K as an imposter, it means he makes false claim. He is a villain who wants to destroy the Castle as he asserts his power before the landlady. If the Castle, on the other hand, is taken as an imposter, it means it is a villain and K is a victim.

This ambiguity about the identity of the Castle can be explored further. For instance, Kafka does not provide any textual clue what type of power the Castle is. Whether it is a symbol of divine power, or state power, or power of father is quite uncertain. But the Castle’s total indifference to the plight of K leads one to question the very existence of the Castle. If one takes this extreme position then it leads one to another surprising conclusion: the Castle is a creation of K’s own consciousness. In order to justify his claim and demand his rights he created an authority. The concept of right is inconceivable in the absence of power. (Similarly, in a metaphysical sense, one can say that man created God in order to claim his rights and make his existence meaningful). But it is difficult to
deny the existence of the Castle in the face of the letters which K receives. The letters show that the Castle is not totally oblivious of K’s presence. But the contents of the letters are quite unreliable. The idea is that the ambiguity in Kafka is not only a source of meaning as it makes all process of interpretation circulatory and provisional, at the deeper level it is a negation of knowledge. One can only make speculation about power, it is impossible to know anything about it. By making everything ambiguous about the Castle Kafka wants to give a new insight into the nature power: the powerless can never know power. All his attempts to know it are bound to fail. The observation, held by many critics, that Kafka could never get rid of his Jewish heritage seems to be justifiable. That is, in man God relationship man can never understand the will of God. Symbolically one can say that in any power relation powerless is always wrong. (The irony of power is that if power does not negate knowledge it probably will lose its identity). Whenever he tries to know power he is always on the wrong side. This is how Kafka reveals the tragic absurdity of human existence. There is nothing positive and progressive only regression.

The ambiguity and elusiveness of power can be explained through another analogy. For instance, of many problems the modern hermeneutics has discovered one of the fundamental one is that language does not mean what it claims to say. It means that the meaning always lies somewhere else. Similarly Kafka seems to suggest that power does not intend what it claims to say. All communications between the Castle
and K are unreliable. Moreover, Kafka makes the Castle so inaccessible for K as if it lies somewhere else. Kafka denies every possibility for the powerless to know and identify with power. The powerless is always mistaken about power. No writer perhaps before Kafka had grasped the alienation and helplessness of man in such a depressing way.

It seems quite a historical coincidence that what Kafka wrote about power became a common phenomenon a few decades later. It is not so that Kafka is a prophetic or a satiric writer, rather it is because of the fortuity of human history. The only horrible political incident which Kafka experienced was the First World War. But the world was still not so horrible as it became in the postwar Europe. The rise of Fascism and Totalitarianism suddenly reflected the operation of political power similar to the works of Kafka. It has led many critics to read Kafka in social and political context as Bill Dodd has discussed in his essay.\textsuperscript{54}

With the unimaginable rise of political power in the modern history, the progressive concentration of state power with tendency to deify itself, the increasing bureaucratisation of every human activity, and the transformation of social institutions into an unbelievably boundless labyrinths leading to the depersonalisation and dehumanisation of the individual, the term Kafkan or Kafkaesque has become a symbol of the irrational power exercised in any context. With the unexpected turn of history the Kafkan became a common phenomenon just after the death of Kafka. Thus Kafka apprehended the image of a world where there is no
individual freedom, man is an instrument for the extrahuman forces like politics and technology, a pathetic image of man which Kafka conjures up in the following fable:

“ALAS”, said the mouse, the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into”. “You only need to change your direction”, said the cat, and ate it up”. 55

This is the image of a life with no exit. In this short fable, of one long sentence Kafka envisages the world turning into a prison. Where can Joseph K escape from the cage of the Court. As Kundera often shows in his novels that political power by manufacturing technology has suddenly reduced the space of human freedom.

The two private experiences which seem to have had some impact on Kafka’s sensibility were his family and the insurance company in Prague in which he worked. They might have given him some insight into the working of bureaucracy. His life in the office seems to have left some influence over his writings. Most of his heroes such as Georg Samsa, Joseph K and K are functionaries. If Kafka learned the technique of calpabilisation from estranged relationship with his father, the experience of the office gave him a deeper understanding of human life. Bureaucracy is a world of orders and obedience in which the individual works just as an agent. The officers have to execute the orders from their superior according to a mechanical procedure. It demands total depersonalisation.
Since Kafka’s heroes are employees, it is through their professional life that the writer is able to see a new possibility of human life. It is a type of life with which the contemporary reader is well aware. In the life of a functionary the most important things are cases, files, laws and obedience where the only possible adventure for Joseph K is to shuttle between the office and the lodge. K’s whole adventure involves running from one inn to another. He is neither sure of his goal nor of the way leading to it. It is the image of a man just opposite to what is found in the epic. The hero of an epic is a man of adventure, action, will and imagination. The essence of his life lies in freedom, freedom to change not only his own life but everything which lies around him. If he fails in his mission his life is tragic. By depriving his heroes of all heroic qualities, as Auden believes, Kafka writes a parody of the traditional “quest story”. What we have in Kafka is the image of an antiheroic age, a world without freedom, adventure and tragedy.

Since Kafka has envisaged a life without freedom and privacy it has led some critics to read Kafka’s works as a critique of totalitarian power. A totalitarian power abolishes the line between public and private spheres of life and imposes conformity on the individual. A totalitarian state is one in which “Nothing beyond the state, above the state, against the state. Everything to the state, for the state, in the state”. A totalitarian state is highly bureaucratised and collectivised, it erases every mark of freedom and individuality turning the whole life as that in a concentration camp. Unlike Kundera, Kafka is not concerned with a
totalitarian power. It is just a historical coincidence that the postwar Europe found life identical to the works of Kafka.

Kafka wants to capture the essence of power, its irrational behaviour and negative impact on human existence. He makes a diagnosis into the working of power: how power operates, how it induces fear and guilt in the powerless. Kafka thinks that confronted with power man is simply helpless. He can neither understand nor escape it. He projects the futility of man before power in such a way that human reason, will, freedom and heroism seem illusions. This is man’s eternal condition. In Kafka the unintelligibility of power and helplessness of man is not a historical phenomenon, as in Kundera, rather an eternal condition which cannot be changed.

Privacy is one of the essential human values. Kundera believes that Kafka’s hero does not seek social assimilation to end his isolation, rather, he desperately wants to secure his privacy. It seems that K seeks Castle’s recognition in order to get assimilated in the village and to come out of his isolation. But K is not interested in the villagers, his obsession is with the Castle. K desperately seeks to preserve his privacy in a world whence it seems to have disappeared. Wherever he goes the two assistants follow him. As he sleeps with Frieda under the bar counter, the two assistants are sitting on the counter throughout the night observing everything. The assistants who seem to be the agents of the Castle have infiltrated to the last chamber leaving no place for K to hide. This is what Foucault calls “a
A society in which power can observe people while itself remains invisible. Where can K find privacy when his two assistants have maintained their surveillance over him. He is so irritated that he even beats them. But Frieda longingly tells him:

\[\ldots\text{I feel that here in this world there’s no undisturbed place for our love, neither in the village nor anywhere else; and I dream of a grave, deep and narrow, where we could clasp each other in our arms as with iron bars, and I would hide my face in you, and you would hide your face in me, and nobody would ever see us any more.}\]

The life without privacy can be called hell. Kafka’s hero wants to escape this hell. “Not the curse of solitude but the violation of solitude is Kafka’s obsession”. What baffles Joseph K when the two warders intruded his room is the sudden intrusion in his privacy.

Kafka conceived and projected a perception of power and human existence that postwar Europe experienced in the real life. The single theme which has dominated the postwar European writers, historians and philosophers is power. In this respect, it is not an exaggeration to regard Kafka as the precursor of the theme of power. Unlike Kafka the postwar Europe is preoccupied with state power. With science and technology the political power has committed the butchery never seen on a comparable scale before the later half of the twentieth century. The greatest irony of human fate is that whatever technology men invent it enslaves and victimises them. In the context of troubled history of Europe Foucault makes as depressing statement as Kafka about power. He emphasises that
knowledge seems to have lost its significance in the face of brute political power. He thinks that there is no denying that knowledge has transformed the world yet it seems quite futile. To quote Foucault:

I know very well, and I think I know it from the moment when I was a child, that knowledge can do nothing for transforming the world. May be I am wrong. And I am sure I am wrong from a theoretical point of view, for I know very well that knowledge has transformed the world. But if I refer to my own personal experience, I have the feeling knowledge can’t do anything for us, and that political power may destroy us. All the knowledge in the world can’t do anything against that.61

The observation of Michel Foucault shows how the same theme of power and human freedom which Kafka discovered became an obsession of every writer and thinker after his death. The same theme has found its echo in all types of discourses and every writer has tried to grapple with this power puzzle in his own way. But Kafka has something peculiar about his imagination. He perceives every aspects of power without any historical and political context. Whereas for most of the writers the backdrop is postwar Europe, for example, Milan Kundera is haunted by totalitarian power, Kafka had no experience of a totalitarian state or life, yet by projecting the world as a labyrinthine bureaucracy, he unwittingly foresaw in the very process of seeing an existential condition what Milan Kundera experienced under totalitarianism. As Milan Kundera lamentably remarks that “there are periods of modern history when life resembles the novels of Kafka”.62 This is why Kafka’s writings seem prophetic and apocalyptic. That is, there is something inexplicable in
Kafka which keeps on baffling the reader, because he is, to quote Kafka, “set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible”.

The idea is that there is something in power which is bound to remain an enigma, a mystery irrespective of who exercises it. Incidentally Kafka’s symbolic perception of power found a literal expression in the real human life at a particular stage of history of which he had probably no personal experience. Writing about this Kundera notes:

The hypnotic eye of power, the desperate search for one’s own offence, exclusion and the anguish of being excluded, the condemnation to conformism, the phantasmic nature of reality and the magical reality of the file, the perpetual rap of private life etc. - all these experiments that History has performed on man in its immense test tubes, Kafka performed (some years earlier) in his novels.

The Kafkan is not a problem confined to a totalitarian state, it is invisibly present everywhere from the family to the state. Kundera presents himself an eye witness to real incidents in which an individual exercises power over another individual that he terms Kafkan. Even the behaviour of a democratic power is no less Kafkan, a sad reality that, given the present political condition, does not need much explanation. That is, there is a hidden and invisible similarity between the behaviour of a totalitarian and democratic power. Individual can come cross as enigmatic situation in a democratic society as Kafka’s hero faces in a society that still needs designation. Arden writes about his personal experience. “During the war, I had spent a long and tiring day in the Pentagon. My errand done, I hurried down long corridors to get home,
and came to a turnstile with a guard standing beside it. “where are you going?” said the guard. “I’m trying to get out”, I replied “you are out”, he said. For the moment I felt I was K”.  

In a novelistic form through symbolic perception, Kafka has presented an image of the world that seems to be an inversion of what the world was before the twentieth century in every sense. Therefore, it seems that “all attempts to make sense of human existence, by means of art as well as through the exercise of reason, are futile in an absolute sense”. The idea that life is an enigma is a dominant theme in Kafka’s works which finds a special expression in Investigations of a Dog. There is an element of determinism that fundamental questions of life cannot be explained. This is how Kafka binds human consciousness. He does not offer any freedom, hence the depression. The reader can hardly feel free in the world of Kafka which is dominated by a power that is irrational, indifferent, impersonal, uncontrollable, incomprehensible and inescapable.  

Investigations of a Dog, written in the spring of 1922 in the tradition of the fable reads like a philosophical discourse on human existence. The dog, who narrates the story in a monologic form, represents an isolated, sensitive and restless soul. He is preoccupied with some fundamental questions about which, he perceives, everybody maintains a conspiracy of silence. He raises questions about human existence, philosophical and scientific discourse, only to expose the
futility of reason in grasping the problems of existence. Even a concrete situation in Kafka seems to be ungraspable. It acquires a metaphysical dimension. What isolates and alienates Kafka’s characters is the unintelligibility of the situation in which they are trapped. Kafka’s perception of human life is hyper-pessimistic and nihilistic. The assumption that existence is a problem is not a new idea. It has always been with man but in a metaphysical sense. Kafka explores the same problem from a new angle. He shows the problematisation of life in a very concrete context. It is the political and social institutions in which his heroes are trapped. They are ordinary individuals who face an ordinary situation. But what makes it extraordinary is power. That is, power at every level assumes a metaphysical aspect. By mystifying power he denies knowledge, will, and freedom.

The postwar Europe realised that Kafkan is an image of a totalitarian power, but as the history marches forward, man has come to realise that a democratic power is no less totalitarian. Once the Soviet Union invaded and abducted its neighbours it committed most heinous crimes by killing people, destroying cultures and imposing a totalitarian system on the subjugated people. Man had still not recovered from the shock of Communism that he is confronted by a democratic totalitarianism indulging in invasion, occupation, massacre and dehumanisation of powerless people in many parts of the world. If one tries to know why political power is behaving in this infamous way, probably one will not get any answer. Hence one is confronted by a
situation called Kafkaesque. What is called Kafkaesque is not related to any particular age or place, rather it reveals an eternal paradox that transcends history. Thus Kafka was able to grasp the mystery of power which history and philosophy discovered later.

As it has been pointed out at the inception (of this chapter) that power has saturated every human discourse. It has become an obsession for the postwar philosophers and linguists. Foucault, Barthes and Derrida are grappling in their own way with every idea which seems to have assumed power. Hence they attack all metaphysical and idealistic notions such as human self or subject, reason, essence, origin, continuity, progress and universality which dominated western philosophy before the later half of the twentieth century. At the same time they are equally critical of liberal humanism. They wage their battle against every idea which looks fascist and oppressive. For instance, in the context of literary discourse Foucault perceives the idea of author as a problem. He has revealed that the individuality of the author affects the reception and interpretation of the text at many levels. What is important to note here is that Foucault is able to discern the invisible power in a discourse which has always been dissociated from it. The underlying idea is that power is intractable proposition. These poststructuralist philosophers donot offer any easy solution. They simply want to make the reader conscious how a given idea becomes problematic if we look upon it from a different angle. This line of thinking makes one aware of the fact that these philosophers seems to have inherited this ironic sensibility from literature. Moreover, it
is equally justifiable to remark that Kafka was far ahead of his time in posing a problem which became an obsession for the postwar world. The common assumption has been that it is philosophy which influences literature. But the reading of Kafka demands the correction of this misconception. It is literature which affects philosophy. If literature is illuminated by philosophy, literature also has often provided insight to philosophy. Similarly it is believed that it was psychology which gave orientation to the psychological exploration in literature in the nineteenth century. It is an indisputable fact that literature has always been concerned with the inner world of man, the world of feeling and emotion. Sigmund Freud got deep insight from literature in formulating his theory of psychoanalysis. Had he not benefited from his reading of literature probably he would not have been able to write his *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Literature, of course, makes many things possible. It depends on how one reads it. And also that it is just a matter of time when a particular idea or aspect gets emphasis.

Now it seems pertinent to ask how it is so that Kafka was able to apprehend the incomprehensible which the historians and philosophers realised later, but could not penetrate into its profundity. The problem is fundamental. Unlike novelist, the historians and philosophers work under certain limits which they cannot violate. A historian works under the constraint of time and place, he has to be accurate. Similarly a philosopher, howsoever idealistic he is, has to be logical. Unlike historian and philosopher, a novelist is not so much bound by the forces of time,
place and logic. The novelist enjoys much freedom. He makes free use of language. He can make an ambiguous statement which a philosopher cannot offer. Unlike philosopher the novelist is not concerned with truth. It is because of this independence from time, place and truth that Aristotle acknowledged the supremacy of literature over history. He believed that history depicts what has happened and poetry what may happen. The former deals with the particular, the latter with the universal. If philosophy has taken pride in precision literature indulges in ambiguity. Unlike philosophy the language of literature is symbolic. Even Derrida observes that if language of literature is different from the language of other discourses, it is because of its symbolic nature. A symbol helps the writer to say in reality more than he is aware of expressing. The symbolic use of language helps the author to grasp the ungraspable, the elusive. On the other hand it provides maximum freedom of interpretation. Critics once regarded Kafka as a writer of metaphysical allegory, now the same author is perceived to have penetrated the mystery of power, and described contemporary man’s alienation in a way that has never been surpassed. Kafka, in fact, is indispensable for the understanding of the contemporary world in which we exist. Kafka’s conception of power as an enigmatic and unintelligible phenomenon involves the denial of many of the traditional human values which the west had cherished and idealised, since the dawn of the modern era, about man and his world.
Notes and References


2. Barthes 460.


15. Kafka, In the Penal Colony 146.


23. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (1986; India: Faber and Faber, 2004) 44. (Milan Kundera has great fascination for Kafka, and shares many things in common with him. He regards Kafka,
along with Musil, Broch, Hasek and Gombrowicz, as one of the greatest twentieth century writers to have grasped the terminal paradox of the modern era).

24. Milan Kundera is deeply preoccupied with the twentieth century European history, the development of science and technology, the rise of political power since the First World War, Fascism, Communism, and Totalitarianism and their unthinkable repercussions for man.


37. Kundera 102.
41. Kundera 102.
42. Kundera 102.
43. Kundera 103.
46. Kundera 103.
47. Canetti, *Kafka’s Other Trial: The Letters to Felice* 80.
50. Calasso 139.
51. Kundera 104.
George Lukacs, The Ideology of Modernism, *Literature in The Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford University Press, 1990). Lukacs believes that one of the important characteristics of modernist literature is that the hero is deprived of personal history. In the works of Kafka and Joyce history is made either secondary or irrelevant. A Marxist critic can hardly think of existence without history.


60. Kundera 111.


64. Kundera 116.
