CHAPTER –V

AN EXPLORATION OF THE DYNAMICS OF TOTALITARIAN POWER IN MILAN KUNDERA

Franz Kafka’s perception of power involves representation of a phenomenon in a symbolic form, and that of Milan Kundera literalisation of the same abstract phenomenon. Kafka perceives power as an abstract reality without any context of time and place. That is, Kafka’s conception of power is not specific to any particular age or place, rather it is universal. On the other hand, Kundera’s perception of power is deeply rooted in history and geography. This is one of the fundamental differences between both the authors. Kafka perceives that power is inherently irrational and arbitrary irrespective of whoever exercises it. Whether it is exercised by God, state, or father, it is always mysterious and incomprehensible to those who are outside the domain of power. By abolishing the distinction between God’s power and the power of state, Kafka intends to suggest man’s ambition to model himself on God. Kafka’s idea of power is abstract and relative, yet in his exploration of the behaviour of power the theological dimension seems to be inseparable. As Kafka has a very deterministic view of the nature and the functioning of power his whole perception seems to be theistic. This is the reason that his early critics interpreted his works in theological terms. Kafka, first of all, denies man’s attempt to understand power. He vehemently emphasises that power is a phenomenon which cannot be apprehended. There is no possibility of knowledge of power (see chapter IV). Negation
of knowledge is a fundamental characteristic associated with divine power. Kafka believes that it is the very nature of power to deny knowledge irrespective of either it is possessed by God or man.

As different dimensions of Kafka’s perception of power have already been explored (see chapter IV), it is interesting to see how the same theme has been treated by Kundera in a different way. In Kafka power is abstract, in Kundera it is concrete. It is totally uncertain what type of power the Castle is. Kafka is, in fact, totally indifferent to the typology of power. He is concerned with the pathology of power. Kundera, on the other hand, is concerned with probing into a kind of power that is embedded into contemporary history. In other words, Kundera gives a literal depiction to Kafka’s symbolic world. What Kafka projects as a possibility Kundera shows as a reality. The latter tries to show how man imitates God, that is, how man exercises his power like God. There is an invisible and stunning similarity between the perception of Kafka and Kundera.

Unlike Franz Kafka, Milan Kundera is deeply rooted in history. He deals with a political power of which he has personal experience. He is concerned with a totalitarian power which emerged in Central Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. All the aspects of power which Kafka explored in a symbolic form, Kundera personally experienced them in concrete form under the troubled history of his country. There is a resemblance between the life Kundera himself lived and experienced
and the one Kafka envisaged but never experienced. Of Kundera’s many novels *The Joke*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* are of central significance for the understanding of his perception of power. Power constitutes one of the dominant themes in his works. Kundera explores the negative impact of political power on human existence in the context of history. He has a very painful perception of the twentieth century western history in which the western civilisation experienced what he calls the death of the modern era, the loss of the long cherished values like freedom and individuality.

Milan Kundera, the son of a famous Pianist, was born in 1929 in Brno in Czechoslovakia. He wrote his first famous novel *The Joke* in 1965, but it was published in 1967 due to state censors. Written under the Communist regime which took over Czechoslovakia in 1948 this novel is of paramount significance for the understanding of Kundera’s exploration of the behaviour of a totalitarian power. The persecution of the individual under the state is one of the fundamental themes which recur in all his works. This novel explores the life, fortunes and erotic adventures of a young student called Ludvik. Written in seven parts, as most of Kundera’s novels, *The Joke* has a definite historical setting that is, 1948 Communist take-over of Czechoslovakia. Apart from the life of individual, Kundera intermittently focuses on art, music, language, history and culture of Bohemia. He uses the name Bohemia, rather than the current name of his country, Czechoslovakia. The former name for him suggests the pristine uniqueness of the country, evocative of its art,
culture, language and history which he perceives to be going through radical transformation. He also believed that his country was losing its identity under the Communist regime. The idea is that it is not only the existence of the individual but all the social and cultural phenomena which constitute the consciousness of the individual became victim under a repressive regime. Culture which is the product of human pain, is, in fact, the first victim of the power which negates human freedom. For Kundera individuality, freedom and tolerance, the greatest human values idealised by western civilisation since the dawn of the modern era, seem to be suddenly under siege.

_The Joke_ opens with Ludvik’s return from Prague to his home town Moravia after a gap of fifteen years, where he meets Lucie who has become a hairdresser. Lucie like Ludvik is a victim of political persecution. Though Ludvik had already met her when they were engaged in an erotic adventure which reflects their alienated sensibility. The political condition has changed them so much that they are unable to recognise each other. This is the dehumanising impact of the forces of history and politics on the human existence under which man loses his identity and individuality. Depriving the individual of his identity is peculiar to totalitarian power. How power deprives individual of identity and freedom constitutes Kundera’s fundamental thematic obsession. Loss of freedom and individuality under Communist regime is the dominant theme of the novel.
The Joke is narrated by four characters: Ludvik, Jaroslav, Kostka, and Helena. Their monologues reveal their existential problems. Milan Kundera is a highly innovative author. One of the important dimensions of his innovation is the violation of chronological order. Moreover, in most of his novels the narrator often tells the end in advance and the details are brought to the reader retrospectively. On the other hand, Kafka does not make any such experiment. His method of storytelling is similar to the realistic tradition in the sense that he does not make any chronological displacement while narrating the story. Both the authors are vary different in their mode of narration. By challenging the unilinear process of composition Kundera seems to maintains a fundamental difference between history and fiction. Fiction, according to Kundera, is an exploration of human existence. The life of Ludvik is a metaphor through which the writer makes an investigation into the predicament of modern man. That is, what man can do in the face of the power which seems to be omnipotent.

The Joke, like Kundera’s other novels, deals with a particular period of his nation’s history. It deals with the 1948 take over of Czechoslovakia by Communist regime and the persecution and humiliation of the individual. The clash between the individual and social morality is a very old phenomenon. But before the twentieth century there was much space for a rebel to express his will against the power of state. Since Kafka the space for individual freedom has seen reduction. Ludvik is as helpless before the authority as Joseph K before the Court. Kundera
tries to show how a totalitarian power claims to control and regulate every sphere of man’s speech, life and activity, even his intimate relationships.

With the consolidation and concentration of political power, Kundera perceives the gradual disappearance of certain human values. He believes that it is a typical twentieth century phenomenon that power has acquired capacity to overwhelm human will, an unthinkable reality which Kafka attempted to grasp in a symbolic form in his novels (see chapter IV). On the other hand, Kundera tries to apprehend the terroristic tendency of power in concrete terms through the life of Ludvik:

It was the first year after February 1948; a new life had begun, a genuinely new and different life, and its features, as I remember them, were rigidly serious. The odd thing was that the seriousness took the form not of a frown but of a smile, yes, what those years said of themselves was that they were the most joyous of years, and anyone who failed to rejoice was immediately suspected of lamenting the victory of the working class or (what was equally sinful) giving way individualistically to inner sorrows.²

Ludvik’s monologue is based on his personal memory. He perceives that with the Communist Revolution in 1948 a different change set in the life of the people which marked a paradigm shift from what life used to be before that political change. It was a serious historical change, but in the thick of the things its gravity remained invisible to the people. This is the basic irony of human knowledge that man is always oblivious of the other side of truth. Change has always fascinated man as it
provides him hope but nobody can predict honestly what turn it will take and what price it will make man to pay. Kundera believes that it was a dangerous change in the history of Czechoslovakia as it created an epoch of concentration. That is, a period of a nation’s history when certain ideas and norms become the only truth, a dangerous development which blocks free flow of ideas, and discards other than officially approved ideas. It is a time when power imposes conformity. Forcing people to conform with the official line is a unique feature of the totalitarian power. It is a systematic denial of freedom and individuality. Freedom has always been a driving force behind all major historical development as Camus observes: “Freedom, that terrible word inscribed on the chariot of the storm, the motivating principle of all revolutions.”³ The loss of individual freedom is the dominant preoccupation of the postwar western writers and historians. Their consciousness has been so terribly shaped by the horrors of the two world wars that the freedom which Kundera believes as one of the essential features of modern humanism seems to be an illusion. This is an ironic perception of the development of history which has led to the marginalisation of the individual and concentration of the state power. “All modern revolutions have ended in a reinforcement of the power of the state. Seventeenth eighty-nine brings Napolean; 1848 Napoleon III; 1917 Stalin; the Italian disturbances of the twenties, Mussolini; the Weimar Republic, Hitler”.⁴

For Kundera the 1948 Communist Revolution which, though it created an euphoria, had serious repercussions for the individual. It
created an Orwellian world of surveillance and supervision obliterating the last vestiges of human privacy. The loss of privacy is a pressing angst for Kundera. Unlike other civilizations, the western civilisation has always taken pride in the division of life between public and private. Privacy is a realm of human life where the individual can exercise his freedom. One is free to say and do anything in privacy. Literature unlike other modes of writing has always been associated with freedom, as an expression of individual’s consciousness. Writing is essentially an individualistic act. Therefore, it encourages non-conformism with established modes of thinking. It goes against the very grain of official ideology. When Ludvik, leader of the student union in Prague University, writes to Marketa, a fellow student, some jokes in a playful mode, it is taken by the party as a challenge to the Communist ideology. Ludvik writes to Marketa in a postcard: “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik.”

Ludvik’s remark is not an intended affront to the reigning Communist ideology. It is just a personal joke to a very personal friend. But it is against the spirit of the age. It is a time when everything is taken into account seriously, and nothing that seems to go against the ideology of the power can be tolerated. What Kundera tries to show is that how a political ideology becomes a theological truth. What Kundera calls ‘agelasty, is man’s inability to tolerate the comic, the non-serious or a laughing remake, because “there is an irreconcilable incompatibility between the comical and the sacred.…” By giving an aesthetic definition
to an existential phenomenon Kundera reveals a grave problem. That is, the loss of man’s sense of humour, sense of tolerance in an age of hyper-seriousness. A totalitarian power behaves under the affectations of seriousness, it behaves with the same gravity as divine power. Since power demands seriousness and fidelity, irrespective of whoever exercises it, joke or laughter poses threat to authority, it has potential to unravel the human folly, and expose the relativity, the ambiguity of human truth.

The joke made by Ludvik determines his whole life. It marks the first stage of the disastrous events which trigger his precipitous fall. The postcard is intercepted by the authority and is construed as an expression of cynicism and betrayal to the socialist ideology. Ludvik is summoned to the District Party secretariat for interrogation. He is told that whatever he had written is against the socialist ideology, an accusation that is unthinkable for him. He protests that whatever he had written was personal, moreover, it was a joke without any subversive intention. But a joke is divested of its fun if the powerful does not take it as it is intended. Ludvik helplessly insists that whatever he had written was immaterial, a funny remark to an intimate friend. But his interrogators read its message from a very different perspective that challenges the intention of the writer. Ludvik is not only bewildered at how every letters he had written to Marketa had been intercepted by the state officials, a blatant violation of his privacy, he is taken over with a sense of fear when the postcard is read out to him. “The words sounded so terrifying in the small Party
Secretariat office that they frightened me and I felt they had a destructive force I was powerless to encounter. Comrades, it was meant to be funny, I said, feeling they couldn’t possibly believe me.”

Ludvik keeps on reiterating the same argument that the postcard was meant to be funny but it does not make any difference. He is instantly deprived of his post in the students union. There is something Kafkasque about the way Ludvik is victimised. Like Joseph K in The Trial he is overwhelmed with fear. The ability of power to induce fear in the powerless is one of the important discoveries of Kafka, a theme which recurs in Kundera with great frequency. Ludvik realises that the die is cast, and he is already in the trap as he helplessly faces interrogation. Like Joseph K who, after being accused, fondly hopes that people would come to his rescue, similarly Ludvik pins his hope on some of his comrades such as Zemanek who is likely to have some say in his case. Everybody starts avoiding him. What Kundera wants to show is the power of politics to affect the most intimate human relationship. Ludvik is suddenly reduced to a persona non-grata, an outcast thrown out of the circle of the power.

The expulsion of Ludvik symbolises the crushing defeat of human will against power. He is totally helpless. It is this helplessness of the individual against social and political forces that constitutes major theme of Kundera. As Kimball observes: “It is thus not surprising that the major thematic concern of Kundera’s fiction, from The Joke through The
*Unbearable Lightness of Being*, is with the fate of the individual in modern society, especially in modern Communist society. When Marketa tells Ludvik how she was interrogated during the party training course about her relationship with him, he realises that there is nothing hidden from them. A heavy sense of guilt and self-criticism grip him.

“….I gradually became reconciled to the idea that my words, though genuinely intended as a joke, were still a matter of guilt, and a self-critical investigation started up in my head…” Lucvik fondly hopes that his friend Zemanek might stand for him in the party, but Zemanek along with other approves his expulsion both from the post of the President of the Students Union and the university. Thus he lost his right to study and was conscripted and sent to work in the mines.

Ludvik is unable to adjust himself to the unfamiliar condition. He feels humiliated and denigrated. He is going through a process of depersonalisation. Reduction of the individuals to manual workers, for holding non-conformist attitude, is a typical phenomenon of a totalitarian power. In the contemporary world there seems to be no place for individuality and freedom. What is most painful to Ludvik is being branded as anti-socialist. He desperately tries to justify his innocence before the authority but in vain. At last he comes to the conclusion which seems to challenge the reality of his own self:

I came to realize that there was no power capable of changing the image of my person lodged somewhere in the supreme court of human destinies; that this image (even though it bore no resemblance to me)
was much more real than my actual self; and that I was its shadow and not it mine; that I had no right to accuse it of bearing no resemblance to me, but rather that it was I who was guilty of the non-resemblance; and that the non-resemblance was my cross, which I could not unload on anyone else, which was mine alone to bear.  

Kundera raises a philosophical question regarding man’s identity and self. He is sceptical about the traditional notion that man has a coherent self. If a man is not what he claims to be, if his intention seems to be immaterial, and he is forced to identify with an image which, he thinks, does not resemble with his real self then the question is where is the real self? In the face of power the concept of self is just an illusion, a shadow. Ludvik is reduced to an image with which he is unable to identify, and the irony is that he feels guilty that he does not resemble the image which carries more weight than his own self. This is what Kundera calls the unbearable lightness of being (for further details on this theme see chapter VI). The image is not something which can be cast off; it represents true reality; it acquires an existential reality and fate. It is what that represents the man. As Kundera remarks on this unintelligible power of image “there comes a moment when the image of our life parts company with the life itself, stands free, and, little by little, begins to rule us.” As one realises that it is impossible to change one’s image, it induces a sense of helplessness, isolation and alienation.

Like Ludvik there are many individuals who have been reduced to labourers and sent to the labour camp for disrespecting the authority. For
example, of Ludvik’s many inmates working in the mines sharing the same fate is Cenek, a student, who is jailed because of doing cubist paintings. Imprisonment, persecution and execution of artists are common experiences of life under Communist regime. All marks of individuality are deliberately suppressed. The persecution of artists and historians is a recurrent feature in the works of Kundera. Since art and culture are basic source to maintain the continuity of consciousness of the people, a totalitarian power which is bent upon erasing people from their memory can hardly tolerate artists and historians.

As has already been maintained a totalitarian regime is inimical to individuality. It punishes individuals by forcing them into manual workers merely to deprive them of all the traces of individuality, self-esteem and dignity. It blurs the line between the public and the private. Privacy is a domain of life where man exercises his freedom. All of Kundera’s characters are deprived of their privacy. When Ludvik meets Lucie—a factory worker who lives in a dormitory—in a cinema hall, he falls in love with her at the first sight. The relationship between Ludvik and Lucie, two desperate entities reduced to their physical existence, constitutes a love story whose threads are broken off by the political circumstances. How is it possible for them to maintain their romantic adventure in a world where there is no place for them to hide from the gaze of the power? Negation of privacy is an ultimate exertion of the power which wants to turn the world into hell and man into animal. Unlike in traditional romance where love is an expression of one’s
individuality, in Kundera the indulgence in erotic adventures is a manifestation of the existential helplessness of his characters. As they seem to be mere biological entities, eroticism seems to be the only zone where they can exercise their freedom.

In all Kundera’s fictions his characters indulge in erotic pleasure. In fact, eroticism is an important theme in Kundera. Sexual indulgence symbolises two things. First, it suggest the loss of consciousness, and second, it indicates a soulless existence. The relation between Ludvik and Lucie, for instance, based on certain fortuities, is devoid of soul. Kundera does not pass any moral judgement, rather, he simply explores a possibility of life under political oppression. That is, when men are deprived of everything human: culture, history, language, literature, individuality and freedom, when they are erased from their past, it is body which gives them an illusion of identity. As the critic Podhoretz writes in a letter to the author:

You are, for example, obviously fascinated by erotic experience in its own right and for its own sack, and that is why you write about it so much. Yet it is hard to escape the impression that sex also plays a role in your novels because under Communism it became the only area of privacy that remained relatively intact when everything else had become politicized. 12

Similarly Ludvik’s relationship with Helena who works for radio as a journalist is based on chance. They meet in a hotel, spend some hours indulging in a fantastic erotic game and then they disappear from the scene. As Helena seems to be unhappy with her husband it is Ludvik with
whom she desperately wants to fulfil her longing for adventure. All Kundera’s characters are just physical entities repudiated from the past, and have an uncertain future. Their life does not seem to have any weight and meaning. They are the products of certain political situations. Ludvik is deprived of everything meaningful in his life. Similarly Kostka, a university lecturer, is reduced to a construction worker. It is not so that these people have committed any crime, they are simply victims of a power which follow its own will and logic. Kundera seems to suggest that had these people not been under such totalitarian Communist regime their life would not have been so pathetic. Had they not been under such political oppression their destiny would not have become so fragile. It is because of the oppressive presence of political power in determining the existential conditions of the characters that a critic believes that “.. The Joke can be designated as an ideological novel…”13 But Kundera is not interested in politics like a writer with ideological commitment. He just wants to make the reader see how political power determines the whole course of individual’s life. It invariably leads one to the thesis that man is a product of history and politics which negates the whole romantic philosophy of free will, individuality and freedom. Nietzsche propounded the idea of free will in order to subjugate history. By exploiting his free will man can transcend the forces of history in the process of becoming a superman. It is an affirmation of freedom. In fact, existentialist philosophy strongly believes in human freedom to choose. But Kundera, a novelist with existentialist outlook and ironic perception, is heading in a
different direction by showing the subjugation of man by the forces of history and politics. One can see a fundamental difference between an existentialist philosopher and a novelist with an existentialist outlook.

The assumption that historical and political circumstances determine the existential condition of man is a postwar reality when the western writers and intellectuals suddenly realised that there is no escape from the monster of history. In the words of Sartre “History flowed in upon us; in everything we touched, in the air we breathed, in the page we read, in the one we wrote…” What possibility of life is there for the individual beset by the forces of history and politics? what is the impact of an arbitrary and irrational political power in a world in which “… for the first time in history, the rulers of a country have used their immense power to establish a mystique beyond the bounds of any ethical considerations”.

It is in this troubled historical context in which Kundera explores the existential condition of modern man.

Kundera’s perception of human existence is ironic. He tries to explore not only the lightness, weightlessness and insignificance but also the marginalisation and dehumanisation of man under a brutal political power. In most of his novels such as *Laughable Loves* (1969), *Life is Elsewhere* (1973) and *Farewell Waltz* (1976) (also translated as *Farewell Party*), love and eroticism, appearing in an ideologically surcharged political atmosphere, constitute a recurrent theme. Kundera tries to show how power shapes the instinctual behaviour of the people. For instance,
the *Laughable Loves* consists of a series of funny and comic stories between Klara and a university lecturer, a womanizer, who is reprimanded by the university authorities for his irregular behaviour. He holds his personal life and his love for Klara so precious that he becomes a virtual fugitive when he realises that his privacy is under jeopardy. It shows the plight of the impulses of the individual in a world that does not guarantee any freedom. He falls in the trap without doing anything wrong. Hence for him life is a game in which the individual does not have any role. It is pertinent to quote his words:

All at once I understood that it had only been my illusion that we ourselves saddle events and control their course; the truth is that they aren’t our stories at all, that they are foisted on us from somewhere outside; that in no way do they represent us; that we are not to blame for the strange paths they follow; that they are themselves directed from who knows where by who knows what strange forces.  

Kundera tries to show the mysterious working of power in concrete form. Kafka discovered the same dimension of power in an abstract context, while Kundera in a totalitarian context. The idea is that human power is as arbitrary as divine power. It can accuse and persecute the individual but the individual can neither resist nor escape it. He has to conform with the power at the cost of his own self. Depriving the individual of his self is peculiar to a totalitarian power, and a life without self is what Kundera calls unbearable lightness of being. Most of Kundera’s characters in the *Laughable Loves* as well as in other novels are nameless who seem to be confused, isolated and alienated. Cut off
from their past and future they seem to be amorphous entities. There is neither any grandeur nor any heroism in their life. That is why to Eduard, in the story titled “Eduard and God” life seems to be laughable, stripped of seriousness. That is, with the inordinate supremacy of state power man is receding in the background of insignificance. This is one of the reasons, as Kimball believes in the context of The Joke, that despite its so many other aesthetic qualities “Kundera’s work is also deeply political, drawing heavily on his experience of totalitarianism in an effort to explore the difficult spiritual landscape that his characters populate.”

By problematising the life of his characters Kundera explores how man has lost his control over his life. Man always had this illusion that it is his choice and action which determine his life. And this is one of the fundamental principles of the existential philosophy. The illusion of choice is intoxicating, it infuses man with the sense of freedom. Though literature has always shown life as a problem and making man conscious of this problem has always been a fundamental moral of literary discourse. But there was always this romantic illusion that man at the centre of the universe exercises certain amount of control over his fate. Kundera takes a very ironic look of this illusion. He constantly shows how man has been losing ground under his feet due to the amazing changes of history and politics. For instance, in his Farewell Waltz, in a complex comedy, filled with the elements of black comedy and black humour, rich in its subplots and counterplots, Kundera describes the broken destiny of his characters at a time of Stalinist purge. The writer
has deployed a juxtaposition of a set of events and characters in order to explore “the themes of helplessness and control.”

The assumption that man has no control over his fate, and that his life is shaped by the external forces of history constitutes a prominent theme in Kudnera. All his novels can be read as a contemplation on this theme. In different ways Kundera tries to show how man is taken away by political and ideological forces, a theme which the author deals with in his *Life is Elsewhere*. It was written in 1969, just after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, but was published in 1973 because of the official ban. The novel *Life is Elsewhere* unlike Kundera’s other novels can also be read as an intellectual discourse in which the author contemplates the theme of romantic love. It traces the development of the young poet Jaromil, the protagonist, from childhood to maturity. It is an attempt to understand how individual’s experiences and consciousness are shaped by art, literature, history and politics. In a postscript to this novel Kundera writes:

… for a novelist, a given historic situation is an anthropologic laboratory in which he explores his basic question: What is human existence? In the case of this novel, several related questions also presented themselves: What is the lyrical attitude? What is youth? What mysterious role does a mother play in forming the lyrical world of a young man? And if youth is the time of inexperience, what is the connection between inexperience and a longing for the absolute? Or between a longing for the absolute and revolutionary fervor?
Lyricism for Kundera is an attitude based on absolutism in art, life and politics. Revolutionary spirit is a lyrical spirit that demands total faithfulness. The writer probes into the evolution of this lyrical attitude in Jaromil. The novel is divided in seven parts which are interconnected in a narrative mode characterised by continuity and discontinuity and informed by authorial intervention. A lyrical attitude because of its extremity is an antithesis of rational attitude. Jaromil’s mother wants to make him a poet. She carefully looks after him. As one examines her life, she seems to be a rootless character who after the death of her husband longs for an erotic fantasy. She lives her life at the level of her body. The prevailing political ideology not only affects Jaromil’s impressionable sensibility but his perception of poetry as well. It affects his relationship with his mother and other people as he is gradually drawn to politics. As he tells Janitor’s son in a mournful tone:

I don’t know if you heard about it, but my dad died in a concentration camp. That reality shook me up, and now I know that the world has to be changed, radically changed. And I know where my place is …. I want to be in politics …. My mother wants me to get into esthetics … That stuff has nothing to do with life. Real life – that’s what you’re involved with!\textsuperscript{20}

Kundera is very critical of the lyrical attitude. The Communist revolution was based on the lyrical attitude. It dreamed to establish a world of absolute justice, an illusion which led to commission of various crimes. This is one of the basic problem with human truth. Once we accept truth we impose it upon others at a heavy cost, an irony that
Camus perceives with moral pungency. “There exists an obvious fact that seems utterly moral: namely, that a man is always a prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them he cannot free himself from them. He has to pay something.”

Jaromil goes through a lyrical love to lyrical duty as he starts collaboration with the state ideology of which his mother is very critical, hence the fissure in their relationship. Thus he becomes a political agent and divulges the secret emigration of the brother of his beloved, the redheaded girl. Both the brother and sister, the nameless characters, are arrested and imprisoned by the secret police of the state. This is one of the dimensions of the lyrical attitude. All political revolutions are driven by such ideological absolutism. Thus Kundera recalls the Communist take-over of his country as the brutality of the revolution became apparent even to those who were collaborators in the making of that revolution:

Today, people regard those days as an era of political trials, persecutions, forbidden books, and legalized murder. But we who remember must bear witness: it was not only an epoch of terror, but also an epoch of lyricism, ruled hand and hand by the hangman and poet. The wall behind which people were imprisoned was made of verse. There was dancing in front of it. No, not a danse macabre! A dance of innocence. Innocence with a bloody smile.

The lyric is basically an aesthetic concept characterised by subjectivity. This novel, written against the backdrop of a particular period, was titled “lyrical Age” but the writer changed the title at the last moment under publisher’s pressure. Therefore, it was titled Life is
*Elsewhere* which is borrowed from Rimbaud, the nineteenth century French symbolist poet. The lyrical attitude is a special category of human existence. Thus its meaning goes beyond aesthetics. It can reveal itself in poetry, love and politics. Jaromil a personification of this attitude passes through all these phases. The revolution based on certain illusions kept people blind of the other side of reality which history discovered later. Herein lies the limit of human knowledge as Kudnera writes:

> We are prisoners of a rigid conception of what is important and what is not. We anxiously follow what we suppose to be important, while what we suppose to be unimportant wages guerrilla warefare behind our backs, transforming the world without our knowledge and eventually mounting a surprise attack on us.\(^{23}\)

The lyric is an essential segment of every human existence, and for its appearance history can just be a catalyst. For Kundera it was the reigning attitude during the Communist revolution. The edifice of that revolution was erected on horror hidden under the serene surface of language. The language of revolution is as magical as that of poetry. Therefore “on the most serious level of its discourse, *Life is Elsewhere* examines the peculiar modern relationship between poetry and revolutionary power, finding it to be inherently incestuous. The poet Jaromil, fleeing from direct contact with everyday reality, cultivates in his self-enclosure the compensatory power of word magic.\(^{24}\)

Milan Kundera had a very horrible experience of the Communist Revolution which made him totally disillusioned. Although he himself was very much enthusiastic about the 1948 Revolution, as critics have
pointed out, he lost his interest in the Communist ideology. The most cataclysmic event of his life which determined his consciousness and finds recurrent reference in his novels especially in *The book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, his greatest works, was the 1968 Soviet invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia. In order to comprehend Kundera’s perception of totalitarian power the 1968 catastrophe is of paramount significance. The Soviet forces invaded and occupied this small central European country. They imposed a totalitarian regime by erasing its history and culture and banishing its writers and intellectuals. Kundera himself was one of the victims. His books were banned; he lost his post in the university. Therefore, he was forced to go underground as a persona non grata. He became just like Ludvik of *The Joke*.

The 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was a nightmarish experience for Kundera. In all his writings there is a strong echo of what happened to the helpless people when the alien Russian forces tried to break the will of the subjugated people. The author himself was forced to become an emigree. Recalling that horrible experience Kundera writes: “My meeting with R in the borrowed apartment was a turning point for me. It was then I came to grips with the idea that I had become a bearer of ill tidings and could not go on living among the people I loved if I wanted no harm to come to them. The only thing left for me to do was leave my country.”

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Milan Kundera is a highly innovative author. He fuses fiction, history and biography. His novels are full of real historical incidents and biographical details. On the other hand, in Kafka there is no historical and biographical reference. It reveals the different way both the writers have developed their narratives. Kundera structures the story by incorporating historical details whereas works of Kafka are characterised by magical creativity. He does not allude to any contemporary historical incident. It also reflects the difference between a writer whose consciousness is historical and the one who transcends history. Kundera is grappling with a problem of man which emerged at a particular point of history. Kafka tries to capture the eternal condition of man. That is, confronted with power man is quite helpless, he can neither escape nor understand it. He is always mistaken like K of The Castle. Moreover, in order to survive the powerless has to submit to the will of power. Kafka has also revealed the way power induces fear and guilt in the powerless. He thinks that this tragic condition of man before power can not be changed. Kundera, on the other hand, perceives the helplessness of man as a historical condition under a totalitarian power, nevertheless, he believes that the totalitarian power makes the individual helpless in the same way as the power which looks transcendental. It induces fear and guilt and its tyrannical behaviour is equally beyond understanding. This is how Kafka and Kundera share their perception of power. They seem to expose the futility of human reason, heroism, will and individuality in the face of power.
For Kundera the Soviet invasion has a symbolic meaning. These sudden changes rendered the people as helpless in relation to the state as man before God. It gave the author an insight into the way men model themselves on God while exercising power. This is what Kafka discovered much before history could establish its truth. When Kafka showed that power is a matter of wonder which cannot be understood by ordinary men, and that it is essentially irrational and arbitrary irrespective of whoever exercises it, critics believed that Kafka projected a vision of divine power. But Kundera in his personal life experienced a power which he thinks is Kafkan. That is, the owners of the state power can behave just like God but the ordinary citizens cannot do anything. He seems to be anguished how a certain powerful state, so alien and so remote, can determine the fate of a small and powerless country. The Soviet forces not only occupied Czechoslovakia, they imposed a totalitarian regime against the will of the people. Thus recalls Kundera the post invasion popular sentiment:

I could point to the popular sentiment of the Czechs on the first day of the Russian invasion in 1968 for instance: that visceral horror did not come from the fact that Dubcek’s reforms were finished, but from the infinite void that could be sensed behind the faces of the Russian soldiers, from that strangeness of a civilization that thinks differently, has a different destiny, lives in a different historical time – a civilization that came to swallow us up into its own eternity.  

Just after the invasion and imposition of the Soviet imported and supported totalitarian system, there started a phase of political purgation,
massacre of culture, liquidation of history, language and literature, harassment, persecution and execution of intellectuals and writers. In order to reveal the incomprehensible tyranny of power often Kundera recalls the horror in the aftermath of the invasion:

A half million Czechs were put out of Jobs. About two hundred writers, including the very best, were not only prevented from publishing, but their books were taken away from all public libraries and their names were erased from history books. One hundred forty-five Czech historians were removed from their posts… The great Czech cinema disappeared. Political and cultural history was rewritten: there are no traces of Franz Kafka left … There is nothing left that Russian totalitarianism would find hard to swallow …. The Russian invasion of 1968 marked the definitive moment of cultural colonization of a western country. All that had characterized the west since the time of the Renaissance….. tolerance, a methodical doubt, a plurality of thought, the personal nature of art (and of man too, of course) – all this is destined to disappear there.”

It marked the death of the values that were embraced by the western civilisation with the birth of the modern Era. Every trace of freedom, individuality, and human dignity were incinerated by those who had taken it upon themselves to manage the lives of the people. The political oppression created a condition in which the individual had either to collaborate and conform with the dictates of the power or perish like infamous entity. This historical experience for Kundera serves just as a backdrop, and his dominated country as a microcosm, to explore the irrational, arbitrary, and brutal behaviour of power and its debilitating
impact on human existence. Kafka described power as an enigma, a self-contained mystery without any historical and geographical context. In Kafka power does not need any justification, it follows its own rules which may not have anything to do with those of man. Kafka in a symbolic form shows the helplessness of man before power. Kundera’s hypothesis is that the post 1968 history of Czechoslovakia bears literal resemblance to that perception of power and vision of human condition that one finds in the books of Kafka. A hypnotic search for one’s one offence, condemnation to conformism, exclusion, erosion of privacy that Kafka projected in a symbolic mode have converged into the real world of the totalitarian state. Therefore, one can find bewildering similarity between the purely fictional and symbolic world of Kafka and that of Kundera’s Prague as depicted in his novels. Kundera himself seems to be at a loss to understand this historical fortuity: “The images, the situations, and even the individual sentences of Kafka’s novels were part of life in Prague.”28 It does not mean that Kafka was anticipating a totalitarian regime. He simply described a perception of power that is universal and eternal. What the post-war Europe suddenly confronted such as Nazism, Fascism and Totalitarianism are just extreme examples.

For Milan Kundera the 1968 invasion was both a national and personal tragedy. It terribly affected his personal life and the lives of the millions of Czech people. But in the rapid succession of historical and political happenings the significance of that nightmare, the import of that
senselessness of political power is disappearing from the collective memory imperceptibly:

These days, who still remembers the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Russian army in August 1968? In my life it was a conflagration..... my little country seemed to me stripped of the last shred of its independence, swallowed up forever by an enormous alien world; I believed I was watching the start of its death throes..... a great experience was engraved on my existential memory: ever since then, I know what no Frenchman, no American, can know: I know what it is for a man to live through the death of his nation.”

For Kundera memory is essential for the understanding of the existential condition of man. One has to have the consciousness of the pastness of the past and of its presence. Can there be any consciousness of the past without history? What happens when people are uprooted from their past? What possibility of existence is available to them? These are fundamental preoccupations which Kundera explores in his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The novel, composed of seven parts and integrated by thematic unity, is a philosophical investigation into the forgetting of being in the context of history and politics. Human existence has inseparable relationship with history. It gets affected with historical and material changes. Every historical change not only brings change to human institutions, but it also affects the whole life of man. Therefore, it is difficult to grasp existence without historical context. Has there not been such a close relationship between history and existence the novelist can hardly sustain his interest in history. The novelist is not interested in
history or politics and power per se as phenomena to be explained. His primary interest is with existence, with the life as it is lived at a particular point of history. He is interested in history and politics because of their impact on human existence. His interest in these external conditions is secondary. This is how Kundera maintains the relevance of history for the novelist:

History, with its agitations, its wars, its revolutions and counter-revolutions, its national humiliations, does not interest the novelist for itself – as a subject to paint, to denounce, to interpret. The novelist is not a valet to historians; History may fascinate him, but because it is a kind of searchlight circling around human existence and throwing light onto it, onto its unexpected possibilities, which in peaceable times, when history stands still, donot come to the fore but remain unseen and unknown.30

If power fascinates Kundera it is because of its unintelligible sway over human existence. In the contemporary world it is the political power which can determine the destiny of the people, an unthinkable reality and a unique phenomenon of the twentieth century. There was a time when power was idealised and glorified as a source of emancipation, but the modern writers, focus on its negative image. It has come to be characterised as a source for dehumanisation, marginalisation and enslavement of people. Looking on power from this angle is peculiar to the postwar European sensibility. In the sixteenth century, the Renaissance or what Kundera calls the birth of the modern Era, when man was possessed to know the material world the acquisition of knowledge was supposed to empower and emancipate humanity. In this
way a great illusion of progress was generated and disseminated. The idea of freedom and individuality became the hallmark of western thought and literature. All these humanistic ideals were based on the myth of the benevolent and emancipatory nature of knowledge. But this inordinate ambition for knowledge, instead of empowering the individual, consolidated the power of the state. This “strange and terrifying growth of the modern state can be considered as the logical conclusion of inordinate technical and philosophical ambitions.” With the turn of the twentieth century when the fascist forces came to dominate the world writers became sceptical about the dream of human progress. This is how Foucault perceives the fall of man:

Since the sixteenth century, people have always considered the development of the forms and contents of knowledge to be one of the greatest guarantees of liberation for humanity. That’s one of the postulates of our civilization, one that has been extended throughout the world. Now, it’s a fact, already established by the Frankfurt school that the formation of the great systems of knowledge has also had effects and functions of enslavement and domination.  

Foucault and Kundera are grappling with the problem of power from different angles. But they share the same disillusionment with the domination of the world by political power in which the individual is forced to live on the margin. All of Kundera’s characters are marginalised entities, victims of the totalitarian power. They seem to be erased from their memory. Erasing people’s memory and denying them their past by problematising their life is the dominant trait of the totalitarian power.
“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against
forgetting.”33 This is the primary obsession of Kundera which constitutes
the central theme in The book of Laughter and Forgetting and informs all
his novels. The idea of memory and forgetting constitutes the
fundamental segment of human existence. The author makes a diagnosis
into this theme by deploying a set of characters, words, and images and
by fusing history and biography, reality and fantasy. The whole narrative
is interspersed with digressions, aphorisms, verbal clichés and
philosophical contemplation. As the critic Eagle rightly remarks:

We encounter Kundera the consummate essayist on
questions of culture and politics in Eastern Europe,
Kundera the spinner of ironic erotic tales which
probe the interrelationships among sex, power, and
love, Kundera the ascerbic and playful satirist of
‘socialist realist, literary mores, clichés and types,
Kundera the inventor of surreal and fantastic
parables, as well as Kundera the autobiographer
reflecting explicitly on his personal experiences and
convictions and on the unanswerable dilemmas
which have shaped him as a thinker and as a
writer.34

Kundera keeps on repeating many real historical incidents to show
the way power tries to liquidate the consciousness of the people. Memory
is a threat to power hence the power makes every attempt to obliterate it.
The loss of memory makes the people forget their present plight. So long
as people remember their past they will react and may stand up against
the power. Therefore, all types of acts are perpetuated by those who wield
power in order to erase people from their past. It should be noted that
erasing people from their past making them forget their real existential condition is common to all power. For instance, the only difference is that in a totalitarian system people are deprived of their past more through violence than through consent while a democratic regime does the same more through consent than through violence. When people are made oblivious of their past, they lose their consciousness and identity, they are reduced to the level of their body, their life is bereft of freedom, heroism and dignity. This is what Kundera calls lightness of being (a theme examined in the next chapter).

In part one titled ‘Lost Letters’ of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* Kundera fuses history and fiction in order to reveal the inhuman behaviour of the totalitarian power. Meditation on the troubled Czech history constitutes the leitmotif which recurs in almost all of Kundera’s novels. There are two important aspects of forgetting. There are conditions in which the power deliberately renders life of the people parenthetical through violence. The second condition is one in which the individual himself desperately wants to forget his past in an attempt to rewrite his past. When the Communist took over Czechoslovakia in 1948 revolution Clementis stood by the Communist leader Klement Gottwald when the latter was to address people from the balcony of a Baroque Palace in the old Town Square. The Communist revolution was driven by the dream of establishing paradise on the earth. It created an illusion of equality and justice. It was a grandiose programme whose champions were called dynamic and intelligent. Possessed by the lyrical attitude they
wanted to turn their dream into reality, to create an idyllic world. But they were unaware of the implications of their dream. They simply could not realise, but after it was too late, that in the illusion of paradise they were creating hell:

And suddenly those young, intelligent radicals had the strange feeling of having sent something into the world, a deed of their own making, which had taken on a life of its own, lost all resemblance to the original idea, and totally ignored the originators of the idea. So those young, intelligent radicals started shouting to their deed, calling it back, scolding it, chasing it, hunting it down.35

Four years later the same Clementis who once accompanied Gottwald suffered political purge. He was convicted of treason and was executed. His name and image were washed from the books of history. He became a shadow erased from the memory of the people. If Clementis was turned into a shadow and there remained nothing on Gottwald’s head but the hat of Clementis, Mirek is involved in erasing the traces of his own past, a laughable situation yet immensely grave. For almost twenty five years Mirek and Zdena are living together, but the political situation has affected their relationship so badly that they are heading in different directions. Mirek started disliking the person with whom he has spent considerable amount of time of his life. “The most obvious explanation was that very early in the game Mirek had joined forces with those who vowed to hunt down their own deed, while Zdena had always remained loyal to the garden where nightingles sing. More recently she even joined the two percent of the population who welcomed the Russian tanks.”36
Kundera thinks that though the twentieth century was marked by historical upheaval, there is something unique about the history of Czechoslovakia. This small country in the heart of Europe has borne the brunt of repeated German attacks. Its boundary appeared and disappeared many times, and many times it faced the threat of extinction. The 1968 Russian invasion was one such attempt to change it beyond recognition. The Soviet power tried to impose its own version of Communism, and in the name of creating paradise ended up turning the small country into a huge prison, depriving people of their freedom, chasing, hunting and hanging political opponents:

Russia, composer of the master fugue for the globe, could not tolerate the thought of notes taking off on their own. On August 21, 1968, it sent an army of half a million men into Bohemia, shortly thereafter about a hundred and twenty thousand Czechs left their country, and of those who remained about five hundred thousand had to leave their jobs for manual labor in the country, at the conveyor belt of an out-of-the-way factory, behind the steering wheel of a truck—other words, for places and jobs where no one could ever hear their voices. 37

After the imposition of the totalitarian regime, there started a process of purging the society of the political opponents. There was only two possibilities either to conform, collaborate and remain silent or face persecution and execution. Mirek happened to be on the other side of the power. He was chased by the secret police, arrested and imprisoned. His personal property was confiscated. Thus he became invisible and forgotten. One can see the utter helplessness of the individual before the
political power. There was a time when the political dissidents could escape the wrath of the power. They might leave their country and could find a safer place anywhere in the vast world. There was a possibility of starting a new chapter of life. It is not so that before the twentieth century individual did not face political persecution, rather there was always a possibility to elude the snare. It is the disappearance of this freedom which the postwar writers lament. Kafka was one of the first writers to visualise the world as a cage (see chapter IV). Kundera is one of those writers who experienced the dizzying reduction of the world in real life. The state equipped with technology can trap the individual from anywhere. Kafka and Kundera often make depressing reading. Their mode of perception is so nihilistic that they explode every illusion of hope and freedom, individuality and heroism. Kundera once remarked: “I certainly have very few illusions about the world we live in.”

Though a very personal observation, this remark is a reflection of the postwar European mind which is still struggling to come out of the horror committed by the state in the technological era.

Kundera believes that culture is one of the first victims of political oppression. In order to erase people from their past a totalitarian state regards all the creators and protectors of culture as its enemy. In part three titled ‘The Angels’ of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, the author structures the story in such a way that it is made up of different narrative strands: the anecdote about two girl students called Gabrielle and Michelle, a discursive fable of the angel and the devil, and the most
important the autobiographical narrative, that is, Kundera tells the story of his own fall through the image of ‘circle dance’. This fictional and autobiographical incident is just a microcosm in which the fate of many writers and historians can be understood. The author tells how he became a persona non grata — an infamous and dangerous individual like Ludvik of *The Joke* — after the 1968 occupation. Kundera himself was fascinated by the image of that idyllic world the 1948 Communist revolution created in the mind of the youth. He was part of the circle dance of the angels, an ironic image of the Communist ideologues who assumed power with the promise of creating a new world. Those who remained outside the circle were devils, who were in a mood of denial of any such creation. Kundera thinks that in the contemporary world the division between the angels and the devils as good and evil is not based on any moral or ethical principle. In order to create a better world the angels do not need to conquer the devils, rather it is a matter of possessing power. Whoever has power calls the shots. “World domination, as every one knows, is divided between demons and angels. But the good of the world does not require the latter to gain precedence over the former (as I thought when I was young); all it needs is a certain equilibrium of power.”39 The idea is that if there is no balance the world will not remain a hospitable place. In the absence of any balance there can hardly be any idea of good and evil. Whoever acquires power behaves like criminals. Contemplating on this extreme and irrational situation Camus observes that unlike the Greek, who always followed the ethics of proposition and equilibrium in their thought
and action “our Europe, on the other hand, off in the pursuit of totality, is the child of disproportion.”  

Kundera readily blends personal and political in such a way as if he is one of the characters in his own works. He wants to realise himself through the situations and characters he creates. He tells the real story of the plight of his life in a totalitarian state in a fictional form, yet the story has broader meaning and appeal. On closer examination the personal seems to be universal. Though literature unlike history, is a documentation of individual’s consciousness, nevertheless, it has universal appeal. He describes his fall from the circle of the powerful in a mode that is both comic and tragic. “Then one day I said something I would better have left unsaid. I was expelled from the party and had to leave the circle.” Once out of the circle, he lost all the privileges. One of his friends whom he simply calls ‘R’ who is delicate and intelligent and who is an editor of a famous weekly, offers her generous help. Kundera started writing horoscopes. His astrology column was published under a pseudonym. He asked his friend not to divulge his name to the editorial board. This anonymity provided him freedom from being caught by the police. The horoscope excited the editor-in-chief who wanted a personal horoscope for himself. Thus Kundera started writing horoscope as a nuclear scientist under a pseudonym. He found out means for his survival on a meager amount. The whole narrative seems to be comic but it is difficult to miss the sad side of the comic. Very soon, his friend ‘R’ came under suspicion and she was fired from her post. Kundera recalls in part
three title ‘The Angels’ of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* one of his meetings with her just to describe the fear of the authority which had gripped her in the guts. The author’s personal story shows the way he was erased from the national history.

After the 1968 Soviet invasion of Cechslovakia, Gustav Husak was brought into power. Husak started an era of cultural annihilation harassing, persecuting and executing historians and writers. This was a violent and brutal way of erasing the people from their history. One of the historians, who were dismissed from universities, was Kundera’s blind friend Milan Hubl who in a meeting with the author lamented the sad demise of Czech culture:

> “The first step in liquidating a people”, said Hubl, “is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.”

In part six titled ‘The Angels’ of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* Kundera tells his personal story, the story of his father’s death. There is also a reflection on music and a description of Prague as a land of forgetting. The story of Kundera’s father who gradually lost his speech and died is as pathetic as that of Tamina whose story is narrated in part four.

In part four titled ‘Lost Letters’ Kundera tells the tragic story of Tamina who in the words of Pichova is “one of the most heart-wrenching
heroines in all of Kundera’s fiction.” She is a symbol of an individual uprooted from time and place. Tamina as a political émigré, in an alien country, desperately wants to preserve her personal memory. Her tragic story serves the writer to lodge his protest against the tyranny of power. The stories of all of Kundera’s characters seem to be an anthology of existences under a totalitarian power. It should be noted that Kundera’s immediate concern is with totalitarianism and the depersonalisation of the individual under it, but at a symbolic levels it seems to be the common existential condition in the contemporary world irrespective of the political dispensation.

After the 1968 invasion, when the police started hunting down the adversaries Tamina illegally left her country with her husband to escape persecution. Her husband died on the way. Deprived of her home and her personal assets she started her struggle for life as a waitress in a small café in France. Before her departure from Czechoslovakia, she had left her letters, photos, at the home of her mother-in-law, in order to escape confiscation and arrest by the police. As she desperately wants to revive her past and to preserve the memory of her deceased husband, she makes every effort to regain the letters she exchanged with her husband. The idea that her letters being read by alien eyes is unbearable to her. In her struggle against forgetting she seeks help of her new acquaintances like Bibi and Hugo but in vain. She is badly exploited by Raphael who deported her to the fantastic world of children’s island. Tamina is a symbol of isolation, alienation, helplessness and rootlessness. She is
exploited, humiliated, cheated and betrayed by everybody she comes across. She died as an alienated individual and disappeared like a shadow. Her tragic life reflects the helplessness of individual in the world dominated by the power which can decide the fate of the people any moment.

As one observes the appearance and disappearance of Kundera’s characters it seems to suggest that their existence is totally fortuitous and ephemeral. For example, Tamina represents the individual whose life has been shaped by external conditions. Kundera believes that there is hardly any other possibility of visualising human life at a time when political power has penetrated to every segment of our existence. The unimaginable omnipotence of political power has cast doubt on every attempt to fabricate illusions of freedom and individuality. What Kundera envisages is a paradoxical condition, a condition that reflects a new dimension of human existence in which man has been gradually transformed from the position of the subject to object. He is no longer a maker of history, rather it is history’s indifferent march which determines his existential possibility.
Notes and References

1. Deviation from the nineteenth century tradition of unilinear composition is a unique feature of Kundera’s narrative technique. For this he expresses his indebtedness to two greatest novelist of Europe Denis Diderot and Lawrence Sterne. (on formalistic features of Sterne’s novel Tristram Shandy, see Viktor Shklovsky’s excellent essay “Sterne’s Tristram Shandy” in The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000 ed. Dorothy J. Hale (Blackwell, London, 2006).


5. Kundera, The Joke 34.


13. Lubomir Dolezel, ‘Narrative symposium’ in Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*, in Peter Petro’s Collection 127. (A novel can be ideological in the sense that it advocates a particular political ideology. The writer has certain political commitments for which he uses novel as a medium. In Kundera, on the other hand, politics serves as the background against which the author tries to grasp the existential paradox.


26. Alain Finkielkraut, ‘Milan Kundera interview’ in Peter Petro’s Collection 34.

27. Finkielkraut 35.


34. Herbert Eagle, ‘Genre and Paradigm in Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*’ in Peter Petro’s collection 151. (Kundera is an extremely experimental author. He uses the novel’s internal receptivity to expound his concept of narrative style, theory of novel and aesthetics defying the traditional system of literary classification, and denying reductive reading).


