Max Brod thought that Kafka is concerned with man God relationship in his novels, an old theme that has been a preoccupation of many writers. One can see that man God relationship is based on power equation. Man is powerless vis-à-vis God. Since God is supreme man with his finite reason cannot understand the infinite power, will and justice of God. A critical examination of Max Brod’s interpretation of Kafka reveals that his views on Kafka are deeply saturated with Jewish faith. Judaism projects the concept of God as a supreme authority who can punish man without any rationale. Therefore, in man God relationship man is always at the receiving end. In the works of Franz Kafka the image of man as an alienated, isolated and helpless entity seems to be more susceptible to religious interpretation. In this study of the theme of power in Kafka and Kundera an attempt has been made to see how the condition of man which Brod perceived in man God relationship is a condition of man everywhere. That is, man is helpless not only before the power of God but even before the power of man. It is an attempt to project Kafka as a writer, not as religious thinker. It is a conscious departure from theological and allegorical readings to a secular and symbolic reading of Kafka (see chapter IV Understanding Franz Kafka’s perception of power).
The Trial discussed (in chapter II the terror of the Trial) is Kafka’s only complete novel. When Max Brod published it, just after Kafka’s death, along with the remaining novels which were left incomplete by the author, it received unexpected critical attention. After the Second World War when his English translation became available Kafka came to be credited with prophetic vision. The appreciation of Kafka as a writer of prophetic perception is understandable given the horrible experiences of wars and their debilitating impact on western consciousness, belief and institutions. The novel deals with the life of a young man who is arrested, accused without having done anything wrong, put on trial and condemned to death. The terror of this story lies in its utter senselessness. But one can perceive here, as has been pointed out (in chapter IV Understanding Franz Kafka’s perception of power), one of the important techniques of Kafka of making familiar unfamiliar. Through this technique of defamiliarisation Kafka raises some philosophical questions regarding man’s ability to know what happens around him. That is, man is simply unable to know how things affect him. At the deeper level it is a denial of man’s claim over knowledge and, of the possibility of rational explanation of life.

The examination of the story of The Trial reveals a terrific image of the human existence in a senseless world. Of all the critics whose critical opinions have been discussed (in chapter II Terror of the Trial) Brod’s view is of central significance. He tried to infuse a meaning in the novel which neither refuses nor affirms anything. Brod believed that The Trial deals with the theme of the divine justice. That is, in man God
relationship, man with his finite reason cannot understand the will of God. There is an unbridgeable gap between God’s will and human morality. Seen from human perspective Joseph K’s execution seems to be irrational and absurd. It symbolises an eternal misunderstanding between God and man. Similarly another important critic of Kafka Charles Neider gave a psychoanalytic interpretation to the works of Kafka. He rejected all theological and allegorical reading of Kafka. Neider’s approach to Kafka is both scientific, objective and technical. While another set of psychoanalytic critics such as Calvin S. Hall and Richard E. Lind have adopted a quantitative and analytical approach to Kafka. Most of the critics, discussed in (chapter II) of this study have adopted religious, biographical and psychoanalytic approach to *The Trial*. Attempts have also been made to read it as a detective story of crime and punishment. In whatever way one looks at *The Trial* the predicament of Joseph K is inexplicable.

The first two chapters of this study (chapter II and chapter III) deal with the interpretations of the major critics whose views have made a breakthrough to the understanding of Kafka. All these critical notions constitute different aspects of Kafka studies (chapter III The Enigma of the Castle) like the preceding (chapter II) comprises of the discussion of the text followed by a critical review of the literature on Kafka. *The Trial* and *The Castle* are very different novels. They deal with different situations of their heroes. For instance, in *The Trial* Joseph K faces a ruthless, omnipotent and omnipresent power before which he is defenseless. He is simply unable to know the mysterious working of the
Court and the way his fate is decided. On the other hand, K of *The Castle* faces a power which is inaccessible and indifferent to his plight. He makes every attempt to communicate with the Castle but in vain. Unlike Joseph K of *The Trial*, K of *The Castle* is free and does not face any verdict from the authority. His real predicament lies in futile waiting to have a meeting with the Castle about which he does not know anything. In this respect his condition seems to be more tragic. In both these novels and in some of his short stories Kafka discovered certain aspects of power (as discussed in chapter IV) which find very strong echo in the works of Milan Kundera particularly in *The Joke*, *The Book of Laughter of Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and other novels.

*The Castle* is, in fact, Kafka’s masterpiece, and one of the greatest fictional works of the twentieth century. It has received immense critical attention that can hardly be surpassed by any other literary text. Its hero has become an iconic figure, a metaphor for the explanation of all types of paradoxical situations. It has been subjected to religious, allegorical, psychoanalytic, historical and existentialist interpretations. A young man called K comes to a village ruled by the Castle. He claims to be a Land Surveyor. His claim is neither accepted nor rejected hence the problem. Unlike the villagers K insists on his rights. Since he claims to be a Land Surveyor appointed by the Castle it creates a dramatic clash between him and the Castle. He becomes involved in a desperate struggle to meet the Castle but in vain. Villagers are suspicious of his identity and motive as he is a stranger. They regard his assertive behaviour as a threat to the Castle whose authority they have accepted without any question. Though
K keeps on labouring in the bureaucracy of the Castle to meet his inaccessible master, the Castle seems to be totally indifferent to his plight. The interesting thing is that though the Castle remains inaccessible, K never loses his hope to meet him. The dilemma of K has been a subject of all types of interpretations yet it seems to be inexplicable.

It can be argued that Franz Kafka is neither a religious thinker nor an allegorical writer, he is essentially a symbolic writer. It is important to understand the symbolic nature of Kafka’s writings in order to grasp his conception of power. In (chapter IV Understanding Franz Kafka’s perception of power) a humble attempt has been made to comprehend that dimension of Kafka’s perception of power which has not received sufficient critical attention. Max Brod and some other critics believed that Kafka deals with man God relationship, and some other later critics emphasised on the fact that Kafka deals with the predicament of the minority Jewish community in an alien Europe. All these views, given their historical, social and political context, have their own value and truth. But when one sees Kafka as a symbolic writer the implications of his works go beyond the temporal limits. It transcends time and place. His writing assumes not only autonomy but universality. The second implication of a symbolic writing is that in a symbolic work the author disappears behind the work. This disappearance of the author which Roland Barthes and Michael Foucault so desperately sought, Kafka made it a condition for an intelligent work. In the words of Milan Kundera, a great work is one which knows more than its author.
One of the most significant aesthetic features of Kafka’s writing is the suspension of the unity of time and place. For instance, in *The Castle* there is hardly any reference to time and place. It is a radical departure from the nineteenth century when it was an unthinking innovation to write a novel without any reference to time and place. The Castle has no definite locale. The only clue is that the village is covered with snow, hence it is a very cold place. So one can guess that it might be a place in Europe. But it is difficult to relate it to any definite geographical location. Similarly there is hardly any reference to time as it is found in the nineteenth century fiction or in the works of Kundera. It is difficult to speculate with any degree of certainty about the actual time in which the story takes place. So it can be any period of human history. But Kafka provides an important hint to the reader by mentioning the telephone. Both in *The Trial* and *The Castle* he mentions that the Court and the Castle run their bureaucracy through telephone. The insertion of the telephone seems to be deliberate. It serves an important purpose in the scheme of the novel. Kafka probably wants to make the reader conscious that the story belongs to the modern time, the contemporary world of the twentieth century.

The third important feature of Kafka’s symbolic writing is the delineation of nameless characters. For instance, the hero of the Castle is a person without any name. He is simply called K. Moreover, he is totally rootless and desperately wants to take root in a world which seems to be incomprehensible. The reader, similarly does not know whence he has come. There is neither any reference to his family nor to his physical
appearance except that he is taller and physically stronger than other people in the village, nor is there any exploration of his inner world, his feelings and emotions. Both Joseph K of the Trial and K of the Castle are preoccupied with their respective problems. The former wants to get out of a mysterious Court, the later desperately seeks entrance to the Castle which seems to have no key. Thus the heroes of Kafka are in a trap. They are not heroes in the classical sense, they are rather anti-heroes. They have been stripped of every trace of heroism, individuality and freedom. It is a possibility of life that Kafka and Kundera have explored in different ways.

Franz Kafka’s indifference to time and place and to the traditional conception of fabricating realistic characters shows that his concern lies somewhere else. He wants to grasp the mystery and ambiguity of power. He seems to suggest that in order to understand power and its impact on human existence time and place are either of secondary importance or they count for nothing. Kafka’s writing enjoys immense autonomy, an autonomy which poststructuralist philosophers and critics like Foucault and Barthes try to highlight in their own ways. The former wages a war against historical condition while the later against the critical tradition. It is because of its autonomy and self-sufficiency that Kafka’s writing has made possible both dissemination and undecidability of meaning. (It is interesting to note, especially with reference to the works of Kafka, the contribution of literature to the genesis and development of literary theory. The work of Kafka because of its free use of language, has
symbolically projected many ideas about man, language and the world before they became obsession of philosophers, linguists and historians).

In chapter IV Understanding Franz Kafka’s perception of power of this study the central concern is to go beyond what Brod, Muir, Heller, Camus, Neider and other great critics of Kafka have observed. It can be argued that Kafka is, in fact, neither concerned with divine power, nor with state power. He is neither so much concerned with man God relationship, nor with the state citizen relationship. He is primarily obsessed with power per se. He makes an investigation into the nature and behaviour of power in abstract form. For Kafka power is an enigma, a mysterious, ambiguous and complex phenomenon. He conducts a diagnosis into the nature and functioning of power. That is, how power works and how it behaves. For him power is a self-contained phenomenon like God, it does not require time and place, it is absolute, and monolithic. Kafka thinks that in the face of power the individual is always powerless irrespective of whoever exercises it, be it father, state or God. In power relation those who are outside the circle of power are always helpless. In Kafka power follows its own morality irrespective of who exercises it. There cannot be any rational interpretation of power. It cannot be demystified. It is a negation of human reason. Belief in human reason has been the cornerstone of western philosophy since Aristotle. Kafka exposes the futility of human reason in knowing and demystifying the phenomenon which affects man the most.
One can trace Kafka’s unique consciousness of power and his disconcerting image of man in his puzzling short stories. Had Max Brod committed the incendiary act by following the will of his friend, Kafka’s already published short stories were enough to justify his greatness as a writer. Of his many stories *The Judgment* is of special importance to understand Kafka’s conception of power. The story of a son and father contains the seed which germinated in his novels. This classic story reveals many aspects of power. First the father accuses the son of something which is baseless. Second the sense of fear and guilt which overwhelm the son. Third the inability of the son to understand the situation. Finally an element of surprise that makes human reason quite futile. All these aspects of power figure even in the works of Milan Kundera in a different context.

*The Judgment* is just a microcosm in which Kafka explores how power behaves. Power not only generates fear and guilt, it demands obedience. Kafka thinks that powerful can punish powerless but powerless cannot do anything. It is a negation of human will, individuality and freedom. Moreover, power can create a context in order to punish powerless. The idea is that the behaviour of power is essentially tyrannical, irrational and absurd. Put it negatively it means if power is not tyrannical it will lose its identity. By inducing fear it seeks deification.

Joseph K gets up one morning according to his routine, suddenly two strangers enter his room and declare his arrest. This is one of the finest examples of Kafka’s ability to make familiar unfamiliar, and to
fuse reality and fantasy, rationality and irrationality. Intrusion of surprise into human life constitutes an important theme in Kafka especially in *The Metamorphosis*. What Kafka challenges is human ability to rationalise life. That is, there cannot be any rational interpretation of human existence, a recurrent theme of the postwar literature.

Joseph K is accused, while neither he nor the reader knows what crime he has committed. He is put on trial, whereas his fate has already been decided in the inaccessible Court. At last he is put to death. For most of the critics it symbolises the power of God over man. In Judaism the idea of God is of omnipotent and absolute authority. But read symbolically this provocative story seems to be neither so much concerned with God’s power over man nor state power over its citizens. If in *The Judgment* one can perceive the influence of Kafka’s troubled relationship with his father, in *The Trial* the impact of Jewish faith on the writer can not be ignored. But in a symbolic writing the author always tries to transcend his immediate experiences.

Joseph K is baffled as the two strangers intrude his room. There are two things which are the source of his bafflement. First the blatant violation of his privacy and the intrusion of the irrational in human life when it is surrounded by serenity. Kafka suggests that violation of privacy is a typical tendency of power. Every power demands transparency, it obliterates the boundary between the public and the private. Kafka visualises a possibility of existence without privacy. The idea that individual has a private life is one of the important elements of
western individualism. Kafka, and later on Kudnera, cast doubt on the possibility of individualism. Kundera thinks, as has been emphasised (in chapter V An Exploration of the Dynamics of the totalitarian power in Milan Kundera and in chapter VI Probing into the Lightness of Being) that power can exploit all types of technology to deprive people of their privacy. The loss of privacy for Kundera symbolises loss of freedom, a recurrent theme of the postwar literature.

Power has always fascinated writers who tried to grasp it in different ways. For instance, the traditional assumption has been that it is only divine power which is arbitrary and irrational. This is the line of thinking adopted by Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard in his *Fear and Trembling*. The idea is that man with his finite reason cannot understand the will of God. There is always an unbridgeable gap between human thinking and divine will. Kafka has put this comfortable assumption to question. He is not concerned with the typology of power rather with the pathology of power.

Kafka explores the complexity of human existence in his works. All his characters face some mysterious power in the form of institutions in which they are trapped. It is a situation characteristically called Kafkan or Kafkaesque. The adjective Kafkan is a metaphor for a situation which is incomprehensible. It involves the reversal of the traditional logic and morality. It symbolises a possibility of existence that is peculiar to the world in which we live. There is a very strong reverberation of the Kafkesque in Milan Kundera. Joseph K of *The Trial* and K of *The Castle*
face huge Labyrinthine institutions, they can neither escape nor understand. Kafka suddenly turns the world into a cage which neither offers freedom nor intelligibility. The Court and the Castle follow their own rules which have nothing to do with human laws.

When the world becomes unintelligible human life suddenly seems to be a mistake. Joseph K’s struggle to get out of the Court is futile, similarly K is condemned to remain an outsider. Their life is a mistake made by somebody, somewhere in the mysterious realm of power. In the face of power the individual is left in a state of awe and wonder. It is this utter helplessness of man before power which Kundera calls unbearable lightness of being. In Kafka power is quite mysterious. Unlike philosopher Michel Foucault who thinks that the working of power can be explained, Kafka simply denies any possibility of explaining or understanding power. Foucault’s perception of power is atheistic, Kafka’s theistic. That is why it is difficult to dispel theological dimensions from the world of Kafka.

Kafka has unravelled different aspects of power in his works. For instance, when Joseph K is accused he is unable to know his crime. As the gravity of his case takes hold over him, a stage comes when he himself searches in his life in order to find any disorder that can justify the accusation. In Kundera, similarly, characters are often forced to accuse themselves. What Kafka ties to suggest is the psychological impact of power on the powerless. Confronted by an enormous and incomprehensible power the powerless accuses himself. What is more
baffling is that sometimes the powerless himself seeks recognition of his guilt. The punished desperately wants to know, like the father of Amalia, what crime he has committed in order to justify the senselessness of the punishment. This ironic situation is quite comic. But if the persecution of the individual is comic then what is tragic? Kafka not only tries to blur the traditional distinction between comic and tragic, he wants to change our very perception of the comic. Comic in Kafka is not the counterpoint to tragedy rather it designates an existential possibility stripped of freedom, individuality, will and heroism, a mode of life deserted by the grandeur of tragedy, hence the lightness of being.

Kafka believes that in the face of power freedom of action is an illusion. Projection of the world as a maze and the struggle of man that leads to nowhere is a denial of any meaning that can be attached to life. Kafka and Kundera both problematise in their own ways the very idea of human self, they simply do not see any hope, that is why they make depressing reading. In the works of Kafka and Kundera the image of human life is hyper-pessimistic. Both the authors share their similar perception of the irrational behaviour of power, and ironic views on human existence. Apart from these similarities they are much different from each other. They belong to different historical conditions and write in a very different style. Their narrative style is very different, yet the projection of the behaviour of power in both the author looks very much similar. But it should be noted that Kafka’s perception of power is universal and that of Kundera’s historical. Kafka thinks that confronted with power man is always helpless irrespective of however exercises it.
The unintelligibility of power generates a sense of awe and wonder in the powerless. Kundera sees the helplessness of man before a totalitarian power. He shows that what man can make of man. The implied idea is that if historical conditions change the behaviour of power and possibility of life would also change. Kafka, on the other hand, does not promise any such hope or possibility.

One of the important points of this study is to show that Kafka is neither a writer of religious allegory nor a man of prophetic vision. His mode of perception is symbolic. He is neither interested in history nor in ideology. What interests him is power for its own sake. He thinks power is abstract, mysterious, it induces fear and guilt, its psychological mechanism works in its own way forcing the individual to culpabilise himself. It seeks obedience and demands conformity, and erases people’s privacy. All the values which the west had discovered, defined, cherished and glorified, and which since the Renaissance were individualised, achieved an equilibrium and entered into communication suddenly seem to be illusions. All the dimensions of power which Kafka symbolically presented in his works suddenly became part of the real life in Europe when man attempted to model himself on God. So Kafka projected an image of power and of human existence which history discovered later.

Just after the Second World War the western writers, philosophers and intellectuals were confronted by a power marked by aggression and totalitarianism. Milan Kundera writing at a particular time of history under a definite context of the troubled history of his country tries to
show that even the state power, the power exercised by man over man is as arbitrary, irrational, mysterious and wilful as divine power. This is the invisible and stunning similarity between Kafka and Kundera’s perception of power which is the central argument of this study. Kundera explores a totalitarian power, a power exercised by man over man. Yet the behaviour of what seems to be metaphysical or theological power in Kafka, and of the totalitarian power in Kundera seems to be identical. What Kundera tries to suggest is that man exercises his power in the same way as God. Man had always this illusion that we live in an intelligible world and our institutions are based on rational propositions. Kundera challenges this assumption.

Unlike Kafka, Kundera’s work is embedded in history. In his novel time and place are very important. He is preoccupied with the horror committed by the state. He was deeply affected by the Communist totalitarianism and the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. He suddenly perceived the disconcerting images of life in the books of Kafka turning into reality in the daily life of the people. There is a very strong resonance of the Kafkaesque in all Kundera’s works especially in *The Joke*, the Book of *Laughter and Forgetting*, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In his works Kundera constantly tries to show the production of the Kafkaesque in a broad social dimension: the gradual concentration of power tending to deify itself, the complex bureaucratisation of social life and the resulting depersonalisation, dehumanisation and marginalisation of the individual, deprivation of
people of their privacy, erosion of memory and liquidation of self and identity.

In his novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* Kafka projected power as a mystery. Confronted with power the powerless is helpless. He can neither apprehend nor escape it. In the face of power human freedom is an illusion and rationality futile. Kafka reveals the irrational behaviour of power in a way that no writer had probably done before him. In a symbolic form Kafka has projected such an image of life in which there is neither any change nor any progress. There is a determinism: man is helpless before power irrespective of whoever exercises it. Power creates a sense of awe and wonder in the powerless. The powerless is condemned like K to simply gaze at its incomprehensible mystery. What in Kafka seems to be an eternal condition of man Kundera experienced and described it as a historical phenomenon, unlike Kafka in Kundera there is a recognisable historical and political context. He writes against a particular type of ruthless government whose behaviour seems to be similar to what Kafka projected in his works. Kundera believes that had certain people not acquired so much power or had there not been a totalitarian regime the life of the Czech people would have been rather different. It is an affirmation of an alternative mode of life. In Kafka there is no such possibility: man’s helplessness before power is an eternal condition.

For Kundera totalitarianism is just an attitude of power in the twentieth century. Though he is directly concerned with the Communist
totalitarianism, he observes that totalitarianism is a characteristic of power that can be perceived even in the working of a liberal democratic power. The modern state consolidated by technology can determine the fate of a powerless state and nation in one click. Whoever acquires power behaves in the same irrational and arbitrary way irrespective of the political ideology. For Kundera the invasion and occupation and imposition of a totalitarian regime by the Soviet forces over the hapless Czechoslovakia is just an extreme example of state aggression. What happened to that small nation of the central Europe can happen to any nation.

Franz Kafka projected an image of life that fascinated the postwar writers. One can find Kafka be mentioned in all paradoxical situations in every type of discourse. Milan Kundera has great fascination for Kafka. Both the authors try to grasp the problematisation of human existence by power. They have explored the same theme but in different ways. Their attitude to life is existential. They focus on the complexity of life. Unlike Kafka, Kundera has included all types of discourses in a synthetic narrative to comprehend the existential predicament. He constantly refers to real historical incidents, philosophical discourses, political incidents and fuses them in the form of fiction. In this way he has developed a unique method to apprehend human life. This fusion of history, philosophy and fiction is absent in Kafka.

One of the fundamental obsessions of Milan Kundera, like that of Franz Kafka, is with the possibility of being. That is, confronted with
power, what is the existential possibility. Kundera is anguished over the marginalisation of man. In the face of the power which follows its own will, there does not seem to be any possibility to block its path. As the state became stronger the space of individual freedom was radically reduced. The loss of freedom and marginalisation of man constitutes terminal paradoxes of Europe, a phenomenon which started at the outset of the twentieth century. As it has seen discussed in (chapter VI Probing the Lightness of Being) of this study that the empowerment of the state by science and technology has ironically led to the enslavement of man. Kundera persistently tries to show in his works how political power uses all types of means to erase people from their past, to make them forget their present plight, to deprive them of their privacy. As the external conditions became impregnable, heavy and uncontrollable, human existence became lighter and lighter. The lightness of being is an existential condition characterised by the loss of freedom, marginalisation of man, isolation and alienation, negation of human knowledge, self and will.

All Kundera’s characters are product of certain complex situations. Their life hinges on the whimsical nature of power. They seem to be the victims of oppressive regime. In all Kundera’s work’s along with other themes, the persecution of the individual by the oppressive state apparatus is a recurrent theme. Like Kafka, Kundera tries to reveal the irrational operation of power and its negative impact on human existence. The most embarrassing revelation is that power constantly affects human choices, the possibility of life, yet man is unable to know it, hence the
bafflement. Kundera thinks that the external conditions of politics and power have become so heavy that life is losing its meaning and value. He seems to be ironic of all type of myths about man and his world. Kundera seems to be preoccupied with what man was and what he is.