Franz Kafka (1883-1924), one of the greatest and representative writers of the twentieth century, was born in the city of Prague, the erstwhile part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was the son of a strong, energetic and domineering father, a successful businessman, and of a rather meek and contemplative mother. As a Jew he was a member of a nationally and culturally minority community. He attended German elementary schools, then went to the German university in Prague and got the degree of law in 1906. Then he took up employment in the workers, Accident Insurance Institute in the Kingdom of Bohemia. His study of law and working experience of the Insurance Company gave him an insight into the working of bureaucracy. The image of a bureaucratised life is a dominant theme in his writings.

As his biographers Max Brod and Gustav Janouch have noted, Kafka was persecuted all his life by a father complex, a guilt obsession, which found expression in his stories and novels especially in *The Judgment* (1912). At this micro level of the family, by engaging the son and an old father in a quarrel Kafka tried to capture the tyrannical tendency of power, fear, guilt and helplessness of the individual which constitute central theme of his works. Similarly Kafka was badly troubled by his failed relationships with women. All these experiences shaped his sensibility as a writer. His personal writings such as his diaries show that he was a very keen observer of the historical and political happenings. That is, he was not an isolated person writing some gloomy stories.
After the Second World War Kafka became one of the most celebrated writers of Europe. There was a large league of imitators and admirers. With his uncanny perception he projected such an ironic picture of the existential condition of modern man, his rootlessness, isolation, marginalisation that attracted the attention of every critic from Europe to America. The postwar European writers realised that Kafka is essential to the understanding of the contemporary world. Milan Kundera is one of those writers who have great respect for Franz Kafka. He has a few thing in common with Kafka especially his existential outlook.

Milan Kundera, the son of a famous pianist, was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1929. A novelist, literary theorist and cultural critic Kundera is deeply rooted in the cultural and literary traditions of central Europe. With his experimental, ironic, sceptical and relativising mode of writing he is regarded one of the prominent postwar writers. He regards Franz Kafka, Herman Broch, Robert Musil, Jaroslav Hasek and Witold Gombrowicz as his predecessors, and proudly associates himself with them. He is equally fond of Cervantes, Rabelais, Diderot and Sterne.

Kundera’s career was mired by political conditions. After the 1948 Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia he became supporter of the Communism. But very soon he became critical and disillusioned. Therefore, he was expelled from the party, an experience that formed the material of many of his novels. He published his first novel *The Joke* in (1967). The publication of *The Joke* caused a sensation and established
Kundera as a prominent author from central Europe. All his subsequent works deal with the problematisation of human life by politics and power. It reflects his concern with the ground realities of existence.

Kundera had a traumatic historical experience. In 1968 Czechoslovakia was invaded and occupied by the Soviet Union. The Soviet forces imposed a totalitarian regime on the helpless people. The ruthless regime under Alexander Dubcek started a clinical process of political cleansing, arresting, harassing, confiscating, persecuting and killing historians, writers and intellectuals. Kundera himself was deprived of his teaching post and was forced to leave his country for France. This real historical experience reverberates throughout his novels especially in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978) and in his classic work *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). He brilliantly fuses history and fiction in an experimental mode of writing.

The objective of this study entitled “A study of the theme of power in the works of Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera” is to explore the behaviour of power as reflected in the writings of both the authors. They lived in different historical and political conditions and wrote in different style; yet what Kafka conceived about power and its effect on human existence Kudnera experienced in his real life which forms dominant theme of his works. Kafka showed that power is essentially mysterious, arbitrary and unintelligible irrespective of whoever exercises it, that is, power cannot be rationalised as it transcends human reason. The
powerless cannot understand the working of power. From Kafka’s baffling concept of power the metaphysical dimension seems to be inseparable. That is, whoever exercises power exercises it like God creating a sense of bafflement and wonder leaving the individual just gazing at its mystery helplessly.

With the unexpected turn of western history, propelled by the unprecedent development of science and technology, Kafka proved to be the precursor of the problem which Europe confronted in concrete form. In his novels Kundera repeatedly reveals man’s tendency to exercise his power like God. He makes a very profound analysis of the totalitarian power and realises that at the bottom it behaves in the same irrational way as the transcendental power. The individual is as helpless before the authority of the state as before divine power. It is an attempt to show how Kafka and Kundera deal with this same theme in different ways. Though both the authors belong to different historical conditions and write in a very different style, yet the irrational operation of power in their works is very much similar. They intend to change the consciousness of the reader regarding power which has deeply affected every discourse in the postwar Europe.

In the present study an attempt has also been made to trace the development of the critical literature on Kafka. The references mention religious, psychoanalytic, existential, historical and sociological approaches. An attempt has been made to discuss the interpretations of
prominent critics whose works I have found myself available in English. As for Milan Kundera the references mention only a small portion of critical literature I have found available in English.

As a primary source the translation of Kafka’s short stories and novels by his original translators Willa and Edwin Muir has been used throughout this study. Milan Kundera wrote his novels in Czech, but later on, as he stayed in France, some of his novels are written in French. Therefore the translation of his most authoritative translators Linda Asher, Michael Henry Heim, Peter Kussi, Suzanne Rappaport and Aaron Asher have been used throughout this study. A select bibliography at the end lists the books and sources studied and consulted for this study. To document sources endnotes have been used throughout this study.