CHAPTER –I

INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka is one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. Since the Second World War he has received unbelievable critical acclaim from writers and critics in Europe and the United States and elsewhere. In fact, one can perceive Kafka’s echo in every culture and literature. Credit for this immense popularity goes to the excellent English translation of Kafka by Willa and Edwin Muir. Kafka in his life was known only as a writer of short story. His short stories contain many technical and thematic components which find adequate expression in his novels. Since Kafka had a very critical view of his works; he had published only a few stories in his lifetime and asked his friend, biographer and literary executor Max Brod to burn the rest. Brod defied the will of his ailing friend and got his works published. Had he obeyed and implemented the will of his friend the world would have been deprived of one of the finest writers of the twentieth century Europe whose greatness is justifiably compared by critics with Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Tomas Mann.

Max Brod not only published Kafka’s unpublished short stories and novels, but gave a comprehensive interpretation to his works. He published even his personal writings like the diaries and the letters, edited Kafka’s works and wrote an important biography of Kafka. He made sincere and serious effort in protecting his friend from sinking into oblivion. In doing all this he gave an image of Kafka which later critics
found daunting to challenge, and many of them came under its sway. Brod, as his biography shows, traces the development of Kafka with remarkable punctiliousness. As they belonged to the same religion, culture, language, and shared social and political experiences Brod’s observation regarding Kafka as a man and writer shaped the response of many critics. He has paid equal attention to Kafka’s personal secrets such as his troubled relationship with his father and his abortive engagements with women. That is, through literary, biographical and historical details he made Kafka a religious thinker.

Max Brod’s interpretation of Kafka is typically Jewish. He thought that Kafka deals with the dilemma of man God relationship. That is, the inability of man to understand the mystery of God. This theological interpretation held great sway over the consciousness of many critics. For instance, an important critic as well as translator of Kafka Edwin Muir considered Kafka as a writer of allegory. Since Kafka’s writings are characterised by sheer autonomy, they are susceptible to be read as allegory fables and parables. In a famous commentary on Kafka Muir compared Kafka’s *The Castle* with Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. The idea is that Kafka’s early critics gave his writings a religious meaning as has been pointed out (in Chapter II The Terror of the Trial, and Chapter III The Enigma of the Castle) of this study.

For the critics with biographical approach to Kafka there are certain events of his life which they regard fundamental to the understanding of his works. They think that in writing his puzzling stories
and disconcerting and enigmatic novels those experiences shaped his consciousness. For instance, Kafka’s troubled relationship with his father is commented upon by them. His famous letter to his father has been a subject of critical curiosity. Many critics, even Brod, think that it was through his estranged relationship with his father that Kafka tried to understand the incommensurability in the relationship between man and God. This observation holds some grain of truth. For instance, one can easily perceive the technique of culpabilisation which Kafka deployed in *The Judgment* and developed in his novels he seems to have learned by his estrangement from his father. In Kafka’s stories the image of father is of a domineering personality against whom the powerless son can neither resist nor rebel.

Charles Neider, the psychoanalytic critic provided a new breakthrough to the understanding of Kafka’s writings. His reading of Kafka’s writings as expression of the author’s oedipal relationship with his father marks a new approach to Kafka. He radically departed from the religious and allegorical readings of Kafka. Similarly Erich Heller and Albert Camus elevated Kafka to the level of a symbolic writer. Their approach is existential. In their opinions Kafka is concerned with the existential dilemma of man. One can perceive influence of Kafka, conscious or unconscious, on Camus’s *The Outsider*, a classic story of modern man’s alienation. In Kafka and Kundera alienation is a dominant theme.

Prominent Kafka scholars such as Ritchie Robertson and others have tried to place Kafka in broader historical, social and political
context. Their primary aim is to reveal how Kafka responded to contemporary historical and social problems, how those issues affected his writings. That is, how external conditions determined the imagination of the writer. Since Kafka was a member of the minority Jewish community living under the erstwhile Austro-Hungarian Empire, some critics have attempted to see the reflection of the contemporary situations in his writings. For instance, *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka* 2000 ed. Julian Preece, is a latest attempt which has brought out different approaches to Kafka. All these approaches: religious, psychoanalytic, existentialist, historical and social constitute different aspects of Kafka studies. Most of these approaches have been referred in (Chapter II and chapter III) of this study. As one explores literature on Kafka the observation by Susan Sontag that Kafka has attracted critics like leeches does not seem to be an exaggeration. The vast literature on Kafka can hardly be attributed to any other modern writer.

Since the Second World War Kafka has become the centre of all types of critical enquiry. Critics from Europe to the United States and elsewhere have been perplexed by Kafka’s writings. In the world of Kafka everybody has found something to say. If all great philosophers succeeding Immanuel Kant have found it impossible to bypass the question of Enlightenment, all great critics, writing in different languages, have found it equally difficult to ignore Franz Kafka. This continuous fascination for Kafka has turned him into a phenomenon, a cult figure, whose voice reverberates in all types of discourses: philosophical, historical, political and literary.
In the first two chapters of this study an attempt is made to discuss different aspects of Kafka studies (Chapter II The Terror of the Trial and chapter III The Enigma of the Castle) present textual discussion followed by critical interpretations by prominent Kafka critics. These two chapters serve as a background for the study of the phenomenon of power which is the especial concern of (chapter IV titled Understanding Franz Kafka’s Perception of Power).

Power is a recent phenomenon. Power as it is understood and studied in different discourses is a peculiar problem of the twentieth century. There are certain phenomena which have always been with man, but there are moments in human history when those phenomena assume a shape which was never expected. This is true about power. The very idea of man’s social relationship is based on this hypothesis. But before the twentieth century the nature of the problem was very different. For instance, a writer could see power in terms of good and bad. There was a possibility to see power with a human face, or to associate with it certain moral obligations.

As one enters the world of Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera the very idea of power as good or bad seems to be vanishing. The world of Kafka and Kundera demands that the old category of good or bad, moral or immoral power, should be discarded in order to understand the problem of power. Thus they force the reader to rethink about the phenomenon whose impact is invisibly visible on every aspect of human existence. In Kafka power is omnipotent and omnipresent. It is no longer
in human control. It is indifferent, ruthless, irrational and uncontrollable. It follows its own will, its own rules, its morality has nothing to do with human morality, it exerts its own force. For instance, one may ask why the Court punishes Joseph K while he has done nothing, and that the Court will not gain anything in return by executing him, one is always at loss to know why K is being harassed, why he remains an outsider? Probably one will not get any definite answer.

Kafka and Kundera in different ways try to enforce this cardinal point that there is no rational way of understanding power. This is a denial of the great Western myth that man is a rational being, and that human reason can explain everything. Kafka exposes this myth by showing that confronted with power human reason is ineffective and futile. Neither Joseph K nor K is able to know the mysterious working of their respective institutions. They seem to be lost in a maze without any exit.

Most of Kafka’s characters are official functionaries. They are associated with certain institutions. Institutions in Kafka do not seem like the ordinary institutions. They seem to have assumed a dimension of platonic reality hence the perpetual mystery and misunderstanding between those who run those institutions and those who are condemned to remain outside. Therefore, those who are outside the domain of power can never understand its working. Kafka does not make a distinction between God’s power and man’s power. His hypothesis is absolute: Power can not be rationalised irrespective of whoever exercises it. The
power of father is as mysterious, ambiguous and irrational as that of state and God.

Soren Kierkegaard in his *Fear and Trembling* deals with the mystery of the divine power. Man with his finite reason cannot understand the infinite reason of God. In the nineteenth century the western civilisation made attempts to make a compromise between religion and human reason. This compromise, also known as ‘Victorian compromise’ was necessitated by the clash between religion and science. Kierkegaard is very critical of human reason. He thinks that man cannot rationalise divine power. Kafka goes ahead and enters into a territory where the traditional line of thinking about power is irrelevant. In Kafka power is by its very nature mysterious. It is sheer negative and irrational force that wills its own will. Georg of *The Judgement* is as hapless before the authority of his father as Joseph K of *The Trial* before the Court. Kafka vehemently denies every possibility of intelligibility regarding power. He is equally indifferent to the idea of resistance and rebellion. It is a negation of human rationality, individuality, will and progress. Human life is surrounded by certain myths which create an illusion of freedom. Kafka has a very uncanny perception of human existence. He projects an enigmatic image of existence in which nothing is intelligible. In his famous and most complex story *Investigation of a Dog* Kafka raises fundamental existential questions which are inexplicable. In this discursive story, which reads like a fable, the writer envisages a depressing vision of life in which man is an isolated and alienated being. Man’s whole quest for knowledge and material progress is just to
camouflage the real condition, to avoid the fundamental question of life. Kafka has a very ironic perception of everything regarding man. He seems to suggest that the whole philosophical and scientific knowledge take man away from the existential reality. The idea is that our life is constantly in a mode of escape.

Isolation and alienation constitute a recurrent theme in postwar European literature. Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* is a very good example of the problem of alienation. For Kafka alienation is not a product of social, economic or political inequality as a Marxist writer can emphasise, rather it is an existential condition which is reflected in man’s perpetual inability to communicate with his fellow beings. This is a typical image of man as an outsider. This is the theme of Albert Camus’s masterpiece *The Outsider*. In Camus the individual is alienated from society, while in Kafka the individual is not only alienated from society but even from himself. All Kafka’s heroes reflect the tendency to withdraw into their shell. This is an image of life devoid of every trace of heroism.

Kafka believes that confronted with power man is helpless. In his work *The Trial* power is a monster which can crush the individual. It instills fear and guilt in the individual. This is the psychological impact of power on human consciousness. Since Kafka’s perception of power is abstract, he thinks that inducing a sense of fear and guilt is a characteristic of every power. The idea of fear and guilt is inseparable from the operation of power. For instance, as Kundera often shows in his novels in a totalitarian state even the presence of an ordinary police
officer has great effect on the psyche of the people. Tomas of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is as helpless before the state police as Joseph K before the agents of the Court.

Power not only induces fear and guilt it also seeks obedience. It wants to be worshipped. In order to be deified it fulfils some of the wishes of the individual. It is through partial recognition that power generates hope. The Castle fulfils some of the demands of K. He is given some promise, however false, through letters. The letters from the Castle are a source of hope for K in distress. They give him an illusion that, to use a phrase from modern bureaucracy, his case is in process. This is the reason he never gives up his hope. He always thinks that he would be able to meet his master and his problem would be solved. In an allegorical sense his hope is similar to man’s eternal hope to meet his God. But his case keeps on languishing in the inaccessible Castle about which he is totally ignorant. In a metaphysical sense one can say that cut off from his transcendental root man is simply ignorant, all his actions are meaningless, and his speech absurd.

Kafka is essentially a symbolic writer. As his more mature work *The Castle* shows that he is little concerned with what type of power the Castle is, nor is there any trace of any political ideology in his work. He simply conducts an ironic inquiry into the behaviour of power, and brings out certain aspects of power which were hardly explored before him or if so, they were generally associated with the divine power. It can be argued that Kafka is neither concerned with divine power not with state power,
he is interested in power per se, power as a phenomenon in itself. Mystery, ambiguity, irrationality, arbitrariness, unintelligibility, the tendency to induce fear and guilt, forcing the individual into self-accusation, self-justification, self-humiliation are essential characteristics of power. In Kafka the power of father is as unintelligible as that of state or God.

Milan Kundera also tries to show, as is discussed in Chapter V titled An Exploration of the Dynamics of Totalitarian power in Milan Kundera, and in chapter VI Probing into the Lightness of Being, man’s tendency to model himself on God. Once man acquires power he starts behaving like God turning the world of men into a hopeless fragility and their fortunes into an ineluctable powerlessness. This powerlessness of man before power what he calls the unbearable lightness of being is a fundamental concern of Kundera.

In the words of Martin Heidegger one of the fundamental problems with man is that he never accepts what he is and constantly comports himself with the kind of beings which we are not. This reflects our ‘forgottenness of our understanding of being’. Unlike Kafka Heidegger and other philosophers like Foucault and writers like Sartre, Camus and Kundera lived through Europe’s most disastrous era. These writers experienced in their real life man’s tendency to have monopoly over power. Heidegger’s observation that modern man is suffering from the ‘forgottenness of our understanding of being has a different meaning. He thinks that if science is concerned with the physical world and theology
with God, philosophy is concerned with being. But in another sense it also reflects a moral view of the existential condition of man. Man can create hell if he tries to transcend his human condition.

The postwar philosophers and writers experienced a possibility of being of which Kafka had no real experience. That is why Kafka’s perception of power seems prophetical and universal; it goes beyond the limits of time and place. The helplessness of man before power is an eternal condition which cannot be changed. The only horrible experience which he had was of the First World War. His diaries show that he was a very keen observer. Moreover, he had a first hand experience of the working of bureaucracy and of the plight of people in heavily bureaucratised world. These experiences seem to have given him an insight into the working of the power which acquired a horrible and mysterious shape just after his death. The rise of Communism, Nazism and Fascism manifested dimensions of power which Kafka had already conceived in a symbolic form. The postwar Europe very soon realised the irrationality of power which had converted the world into a concentration camp. Problematisation of life with the proliferation of bureaucracy, reduction of human freedom, marginalisation of man became a common reality.

To the postwar writers Kafka’s provocative writings began to seem prophetic revelations. Kafka’s perception of power as an indifferent and alien force, condemning man to conformism, obliterating the distinction between the public and private became common experience. The concept
of power became so overwhelming that it affected and penetrated into all
type of discourses: philosophical, historical, linguistic and literary. There
developed an ironic consciousness about every metaphysical thought. The
struggle by linguists and philosophers against the unity of meaning and
truth can also be seen as a negation of everything which seem fascistic.
Kafka, in fact, can be seen as a precursor of a problem that haunted
Europe after his death. In this respect he was far ahead of his time.

Kafka’s conception of power and his vision of human life are so
fascinating that writers and critics have often resorted to him in every
paradoxical situation. This is the reason that a writer like Milan Kundera
has great respect for him. What fascinates Kundera about Kafka is the
possibility of life which was never discovered before him. Kundera had a
very devastating political and historical experience. He lived in an
Orwellian society deprived of freedom and individuality. There is a very
strong resonance in his writings of the Kafkaesque especially in The Joke,
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The Unbearable Lightness of
Being created by the horrors committed by the state.

While making comparison between Kafka and Kundera’s
perception of power one should be careful to the fact that they are very
different authors. They belong to different historical conditions and write
in a very different style. The narrative style of both the authors is very
different. Yet the irrational and arbitrary behaviour of power in both the
writers look similar. All the aspects of power which Kafka discovered in
a symbolic form Kundera has described in his novels in a very concrete
and recognisable form. Again one can draw a line of distinction. Kafka’s perception of power is universal and transcendental. Man is always helpless before power irrespective of whoever exercises it. This existential condition cannot be altered. Kundera explores the same helplessness of man before a totalitarian power which emerged at a particular point of history. The conditions and contexts in both the writers are very different but the unintelligible and ruthless behaviour of power is very much similar.

Kundera, like his contemporary such as Camus, seems to be horrified at how political power controls human life. Writing under Communism after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia he experienced the political nightmare which left an indelible mark on his life. The Soviet soldiers invaded and occupied this small nation and imposed a totalitarian regime which started a ruthless process of purgation and cleansing of the society of all those non-conformist individuals who had the potential to raise their voice against the state aggression. Kundera often laments that after 1968 life in Prague suddenly became similar to the one depicted in the books of Kafka. Thus Kundera grapples with the same theme under a different situation, and with a different method.

Kundera constantly tries to focus on the encirclement of human life by political power. The loss of freedom, marginalisation of individual, disappearance of privacy, the invisible threat and fear, and the tenuous and unbearable fragility of existence are recurrent themes in his novel, as
has been discussed in (chapter V and chapter VI) of this study. Kundera shows deep disillusionment about the world in which we exist. He is anguished with the unprecedented infiltration of power into human life. The miracles of science and technology have led to the gradual enslavement of man. These developments have turned man into a cog in a big machine. Now state can use all types of technology to keep individuals under surveillance, negating freedom and privacy. Kundera thinks that denial of freedom is a typical tendency of totalitarian power.

Kundera has a very pessimistic view of life, a peculiar problem of the postwar European mind. Although he is directly concerned with a totalitarian power, he seems to suggest that the problem of power is everywhere the same. That is, our fundamental existential condition looks everywhere the same irrespective of the political dispensation. The loss of freedom, marginalisation of man, bureaucratisation of the daily life, the problem of forgetting are not specific to any particular region or society. They can be perceived even in a democratic society.

For Milan Kundera totalitarianism is a typical tendency of the modern state power. Therefore, his novels should not be read merely as a critique of a totalitarian state or a reflection of a regional problem, rather they present an exploration of the general condition of man. He is not concerned with the political history but with the existential history, a history annihilated by political aggression. In his works The Joke, Life is Elsewhere, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, The Unbearable Lightness of Being Kundera explores how life is complicated by power,
how external circumstances condition the very possibility of being. Confronted with an incomprehensible power life seems to be fortuitous and uncertain. Kundera records some real historical incidents and persons to show man’s tendency to mould himself in the image of God. Man can exercise power over man in the same way as God over man. If in Kafka power is mysterious, arbitrary and transcendental, in Kundera human power is equally mysterious and unintelligible. This is the unusual similarity between the perception of power of both the writers which is the fundamental concern of this study. Both the authors try to explode the traditional distinction between divine power and human power. It is a denial of the intelligibility of power. Negation of knowledge is a prominent theme in Kafka and Kundera. The more we claim to advance the more unintelligible the world around us becomes. The irony is that we simply do not know how power affects us. Hence man is constantly being trapped by certain conditions which he can neither know nor escape. This is the tragic absurdity of human life.

One of the focal points in Kafka and Kundera is to lead the reader in a condition with no exit. Though in Kafka everything is abstract, and Kundera depicts a concrete world which is recognisable, yet at the bottom. It seems that the behaviour of power in both authors is by its very definition mysterious. The mystery, arbitrariness, and ruthlessness which Kundera experienced under the tyranny of Communist totalitarianism are the features of even the democratic state. A democratic power is as tyrannical as a totalitarian power. If the adjectives like Kafkan or Kafkaesque can be applied to a totalitarian power, they have suddenly
become part of common lexicon to describe democratic totalitarianism. That is why Kafka seems central to the understanding of the world in which we exist.

Kafka has projected such an image of human life which suddenly seems similar to the contemporary world characterised by the crimes committed by democratic powers. If at one time the Kafkan reflected the condition of life under Stalinist regime, today it reveals the pathetic condition of man under a democratic regime. For instance, the caption ‘Kafka’s in Guantanamo Bay’, the flashing headline of an article by James Meek published in The Guardian, which appeared in Hindustan Times on (6 December 2003) provides a glimpse of life in a prison camp erected by a democratic power. It is inhabited by people who neither know where they are, why they are there and what crime they have committed. Languishing in the notorious prison cells they seem to have been forgotten by the law. This is the terrible picture of life which Kafka depicted in his stories like In The Penal Colony and The Trial. James Meek wants to shock the reader out of complacency about the democratic power. As Albert Camus contemplating the postwar western history observed that in the name of democracy we have created a world which is neither just nor free.

Kafka and Kundera are very deterministic about power. That is, there are tendencies inherent in power which cannot be rationalised. In the older discourses regarding power, there was a clear division between positive power, the power of God and the negative power, that of the
Satan. Kafka and Kundera insist that one cannot grasp power in the older religious and moral terms. The older categories have to be discarded in order to understand power. It leads to the oversimplification of a phenomenon which is complex. Today political power is characterised by its satanic and negative tendency, it has its own justification. It cannot be subjected to morality. It is not subservient to any human rule. It follows its own mechanism, hence one cannot impose an ideological or moral interpretation on power.