Milan Kundera is one of the most eminent writers and intellectuals to emerge from Czechoslovakia. His literary portfolio consists of novels, poems, plays, short stories and essays. His most famous novels include *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), *The Joke* (1967) and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978). He has written two books of essays, *Testaments Betrayed* (1993) and *The Art of the Novel* (1986). In 1979, he was deprived of the Czechoslovakian citizenship by the Czech government as a reaction to his book BLF.

Like many of the generation of young Czechs during the Second World War, Kundera was disillusioned by the horrific experiences of the war. Impassioned by the revolutionary political environment of the war era, he became a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1948. However, two years later he was expelled from the Party on account of “anti-party activities.” Upon rectifying this fiasco, he was readmitted to the Party, only to be expelled once again in 1970. His contrapuntal and individualistic standpoint on socialism and the invasion of his native country by Russia discomfited the party officials, resulting in an irrevocable eviction this time. Along with those of thousands of intellectuals, Kundera’s literary writings and political opinions were considered too seditious by communist standards to continue. His books were banned, his basic right to work in the academic world was abolished, and finally his name was deftly erased from the history of the Czech Republic. In 1975, Kundera immigrated to France, where he has resided ever since.
Milan Kundera’s name belongs to that pantheon of writers who have devoted their life and work in highlighting the perverted logic of totalitarian regimes founded on the utopia of harmony, conformity and equality. There is a proclivity in academic circles to read his work through the lens of politics, often relegating profound aesthetic and philosophical considerations to the periphery. Together with Ludvík Vaculík and Vaclav Havel, Kundera is considered the vanguard of Czech dissident writers, despite his vociferous abhorrence for the label “dissident.”

“Such a pigeonholing description,” as Joshua Patrick Beall says, carries “ideological baggage” (237). As Kundera reflects:

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\text{... my books were received ... in the most clichéd way imaginable, and in the most schematic way. My work was seen largely as a literature of opposition to the Soviet regime. This was a purely journalistic interpretation. What is journalistic thinking but rapid thinking and thinking in clichés? (Elgrably 61)}
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Such terminology, according to him, is over-simplistic as it limits the compass and profundity of art. His novels cannot be straight-jacketed as conventional genres of political and historical novels. They resist a clear demarcation between the political and the philosophical. They warrant the dissolution of stipulated expectations and canonical borders that separate the political from the personal or the philosophical. Rather his novels are a coalescence of history, politics, humanism and philosophy. They explore the complex existential predicament of people living in a highly politicized world. A conventional bifurcation along the lines of politics and metaphysics only fails to understand the complexity of his work and life.

Kundera’s novels emerge out of the political and social quagmire of his country. They illustrate the moral, political and cultural lacuna at the core of the communist regime. They are often regarded as incisive expressions of protest against hegemonizing structures of governance
and the dehumanizing atmosphere of cultural repression. They are particularly considered as an indictment of the communist regime and its devious machinery. Kundera's writing evokes the doleful reality of the politically stultifying environment in a totalitarian environment. They explore the dreadful aspects of a totalitarian regime which include despair, autocratism, atrocities, debasement, and turmoil. This idea is structurally fortified by the repetitiveness and circularity of his narratives. Kundera's literary spaces raise a poignant question: how can people resist disillusionment living under ideological systems and totalitarian regimes? His answer is, by fostering an atmosphere of individualism, plurality and political liberalism.

The central preoccupation of BLF is the violent and dehumanizing atmosphere of political repression and its pernicious erosion of the culture of Central Europe. The novel's chronology covers the communists' succession in 1948, the Russian invasion in 1968, and the subsequent years of "normalization" in the 70s. Characteristic of his literary style, the novel is interspersed with Kundera's metaphysical ruminations and digressions at crucial junctures. It is divided into seven parts, which at first impression, appear disparate from one another. However, the seven narratives are entwined by the thematic omnipresence of the tropes of forgetting (memory) and laughter. BLF is a poignant meditation on the theme of memory, forgetting and laughter. As the author makes it evidently clear, it is about "laughter and forgetting, about forgetting and Prague, about Prague and about the angels." Kundera calls Czechoslovakia the land without memory. Prague, "a city without memory" (215), the resounding declaration in Kafka's novel is a prognostication of a future communism-ridden Czechoslovakia, where forgetting or amnesia is

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2 Milan Kundera. The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. Trans. Aaron Asher. (London: Harper, 1996). 227. All subsequent references, unless mentioned otherwise are from this edition and they have been incorporated into the text.
engineered and manufactured like the “Soma pill” in Brave New World. The novel can be considered a eulogy to those who were erased by official history and are now “disappearing like a procession moving away into the fog, invisible and forgotten” (33).

Kundera’s characters are immersed in a world where imposed forgetting and constant surveillance is a persistent reality. In a landscape where the tentacles of the communist regime infiltrate all aspects of the public and private life, the politicization of memory is as banal as the sky under man’s head. The novel ruminates on the precarious nature of memory, personal and national, which is constantly under the threat of forgetting and erasure in a totalitarian social and political climate. Organized forgetting is a travesty of fundamental, substantive political and cultural existence and rights. And for this reason, Ruxandra Măndoiu says, the problem for Kundera is not the impossibility of accumulating a past, but the horrific consequences of being forcibly severed from it . . . and thus the most terrifying prospect in life is the loss of this past through forgetting. This is Kundera’s own dilemma as an exile, it is the dilemma of his native country whose customs were systematically destroyed through a process of “organized forgetting” and replaced with official Soviet ideology. (157)

The novel fluctuates between a political treatise and a philosophical doctrine on memory, existence and subjectivity. But the dialectics of this pendulum are not so neatly segregated; they are not quite antithetical to each other. The novel refutes a reductive and univocal construal of memory-politics nexus. It posits an interlocking political-cultural-philosophical memory complex. In Kundera’s vision, memory as a philosophical and a political phenomenon converge. They are not mutually exclusive. This is what Kundera refers to as “being human.” The
existential realm is the trap in which man finds himself, a trap that is multi-faceted—personal, political and social.

### 3.1. Czechoslovakia and Communism

A montage of flashcards evincing the history of Czechoslovakia would include: the defeat of the Republic party in elections and the rise of communism, Stalinism, Prague Spring and de-Stalinism, Russian invasion and occupation, reinforced Stalinism, and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. These successive stages of suppression and invasion are the markers of the turbulent political realities of Czechoslovakia.

In 1948, the communist party of Czechoslovakia overpowered the Democratic Party to form the national government and the nation became a member of the Soviet bloc, a confederation of countries unified under Stalinist communism. The triumph of the Soviet Union in the Second World War was interpreted and celebrated as a victory of communist parties, both in Russia and Czechoslovakia, against not only Hitler’s forces, but also against the domestic bourgeoisie which had exploited “the people before betraying them to imperialist fascism” (Abrams 4). Antonin Novotny, the General Secretary of the Czech Communist party, was the first president of the communist Czechoslovakia. The establishment of a communist state was followed by a period of dehumanization and disenchantment.

August 21, 1968 marked another critical juncture and a new beginning in the history of Czechoslovakia. On this day, Soviet troops invaded the nation and brought about a premature termination to the social-cultural-political reform movement, Prague Spring. This movement was initiated under the auspices of the then Czech president, Alexander Dubcek, and it aimed to establish “socialism with a human face” (qtd. in Măndoiu 163). The Prague spring initiated a series of measures that allowed moderation in state surveillance and conformity to the harsher
communist dictates. It allowed the fostering of a spirit of independent thought and free debate. The Prague spring was “an unbelievable gaiety, it was a carnival!” (19). It was moreover, says Kundera, an “unprecedented experiment” in the history of Czechoslovakia. Repelled by the horrors of communism which they had embraced and legitimatized, the people rejected history’s “old formula” in which one group or race was at war against another. Instead “a generation of men and women rebelled against their own youth,” their youthful ideals that had deviated from the envisioned path, and sought to “recapture and tame their own act” (18-19). Czech culture endeavoured to liberate itself from The Iron Curtain. In Paul Isaac Howard’s view this unforeseen event was “not only a profound violation of Marxist dialectics, but of the bedrock modern assumptions regarding the progressive trajectory of history. For the first time, a Communist country of its own volition successfully rejected the demands of Europe’s great Revolutions (the French and Russian)” (32). The people repudiated all notions of the Enlightenment and positivist history.

“If the Prague Spring represents a time of euphoria in the political and social history of Czechoslovakia, then,” Michael Long writes, “that the following two decades were in many ways a time of depression” (qtd. in Wason 6). The Soviet annexation of Czechoslovakia was a reactionary event against the politics and ideals of the Prague Spring that were contrary to the Soviet-type communism. It was rationalized as salvaging the sanctity of Soviet Communism. The communist regime in Czechoslovakia, in the view of Kieran Williams, had failed to meet Soviet expectations of “proper political conduct (‘political love’)”. Therefore, she continues:

The armed intervention was intended to install a more reliable regime in Prague, intimidate the ‘counter-revolutionary’ forces into submission, and signal to the
world that the Soviet Union would only enter détente from a position of strength, with its sphere of influence unassailable and united. (qtd. in Măndoiu 163-64)

The Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia was not only a political infringement, but also a brutal onslaught on the cultural and historical integrity of the nation. The military occupation was equivalent to political and cultural violence. After the invasion, the country’s political sovereignty was severely undermined when a government handpicked by the Soviet establishment was instated as a replacement for Dubcek and his administration. Gustav Husak, a puppet of the Soviet Master was appointed to lead the satellite government in Czechoslovakia. The invasion was followed by a draconian period of “normalization.” Even though Czechoslovakia theoretically remained independent, the authoritarian regime which followed the unwarranted invasion introduced a series of severe measures to sabotage all manner of radical, oppositional ideas and to help the nation “regain the path it had lost in its liberalizing experiments of the Prague Spring” (Măndoiu 165). Timothy Garton Ash describes the period of normalization as “systematic abnormalization”, and the Czech journalist Jiří Dienstbier has dubbed the latest incarnation of Communist Czechoslovakia “Absurdistan” (qtd. in Wason 7). All cultural and political reforms that the Prague Spring had brought about under the patronage of Dubcek were abolished.

The legitimization of Soviet invasion and interference was achieved through the distortion of collective memory and the institutionalization of a soviet-sanctioned history. History writing itself came under the purview of constant surveillance under communism. Historical understanding had to conform to the central tenet of the Marxist methodology—envisaging history as a class struggle. As Miloš Rezník and others note:
The Communist Party directed and controlled all central and regional institutions. And political pressure in the 1970s became even stronger: among the preferred topics were regional and local “progressive revolutionary traditions,” the history of workers and the communist movement and anti-fascist communist resistance. (62)

Writers and historians considered dissident were exiled, proscribed or executed. Recalcitrant intellectuals were replaced with inept cronies of the Communist regime. Individuals without the required competence for a particular profession were appointed in the new Government. In ULB, Tomas notes:

During the five years that had passed since the Russian army invaded Tomas’s country, Prague had undergone considerable changes. The people Tomas met in the streets were different. Half of his friends were had emigrated, and half of the half that remained had died. For it is a fact which will go unrecorded by historians that the years following the Russian invasion were a period of funerals: the death rate soared (222-23).

Sabina recalls that after “the Communist coup all the castles in Bohemia were nationalized and turned into manual training centers, retirement homes, and also cow sheds” (106). The freedom of the press and media was curtailed. In art and literature, all forms of experimentation were forbidden and only “social realism” was permitted. For the country’s academic, cultural, and artistic elite, it meant the abandonment of hope for an intellectual life free from government intrusion. The legitimatization and institutionalization of texts became an ideologically governed process. As Kundera remarks: “There are no traces of Franz Kafka left, nor of T.G Masaryka, who in 1918 founded the Czechoslovakian Republic—there is nothing left that Russian
totalitarianism would find hard to swallow" (Finkielkraut 35). In theatres, Czechs watched Soviet films encouraging them to denounce friends and family members who had resisted the regime. Jaroslav, another character in *The Joke*, reports that the traditional themes of love and loss had been replaced by socialist ones: “We sang about ploughing up old border plots to make one immense collective field out of a multitude of private ones . . .” (154). In his essay “The Power of the Powerless,” Vaclav Havel describes the banal reality of a complex political environment:

> [G]overnment by bureaucracy is called popular government; the working class is enslaved in the name of the working class; the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his or her ultimate liberation; depriving people of information is called making it available; the use of power to manipulate is called the public control of power, and the arbitrary abuse of power is called observing the legal code; the repression of culture is called its development; the expansion of imperial influence is presented as support for the oppressed; the lack of free expression becomes the highest form of freedom; farcical elections become the highest form of democracy; banning independent thought becomes the most scientific of world views. (qtd. in Măndoiu 165-66)

For Kundera, the Soviet invasion was a colonization of the Czech psyche and culture. It sought to erase the tabula rasa of cultural and national memory. The invasion led to the dissolution of those elements which had been the foundation Central European Civilization. As Kundera asserts in an interview with Alain Finkielkraut:

> It wasn’t the culture of the opposition that was killed; it was culture in general. Everything that was important, authentic and of value had to be destroyed. . . . If we consider the ’60s as the period of the progressive westernization of a
Socialism imported from the East, then the Russian invasion of '68 marked the definitive moment of cultural colonization of a western country. All that has characterized the West since the time of the Renaissance . . . tolerance, a methodical doubt, a plurality of thought, the personal nature of art (and man too, of course)—all this is destined to disappear there. And all this brain-washing far from being simply a provisional measure, is part of a long-lived, patient and coherent strategy designed to move a country into the sphere of another civilization. (35)

3.2. Utopia and Totalitarianism

Creating a paradise on Earth is an ancient dream and archetype of mankind. While the notion of utopia has precursors in Plato’s idea of an ideal state or the “republic,” Aristotle’s politics and the Christian concept of man’s exile from “the garden of Eden,” Thomas More’s text (1516) is considered the paradigmatic literature on utopian discourse. Utopia meditates on the “best construction of a republic” (qtd. in Grosz 133). It has been conceptualized in myriad ways over the course of literary and philosophical history. Utopia is the universal language, in Thomas More’s words, of “‘social dreaming’ and transcending the present with its imperfections.” In More’s text, life on the island, founded by Utopus, is marked by an austere observation of reason, moral regulation and equitable distribution of resources. It is a society characterized primarily by homogeneity, unity and discipline. It is therefore defined as in Barbara Goodwin’s words as “a perfect society which is viewed as an integrated totality.” J. C. Davis, further, sees “totality, order [and] perfection […] [as] cardinal characteristics of the utopian form” (qtd. in Kragset 11).
The term utopia is deliberately equivocal. The etymological dissection of the word reveals a
pun at the core. Utopia firstly translates into a “good place” or an ideal place, which at the same
time is also a “no place,” that is, a non-existent place. Therefore, a utopia implies an ideal
commune and hence is an imaginary construction. It has been described by Frederic Rouvillois
as an “equivocal ideal,” “an impossible ideal” and “a generous chimera.”

Utopias are incumbent in that they serve as criteria for the present-day social and political
practices and systems. In Lyman Tower Sargent’s view they act as a “cognitive estrangement”
by subjecting naturalized systems of thought to rigorous analysis and critique. It is a “constant
mirror held up to the present,” Sargent continues, “showing the faults of contemporary society, a
distorting mirror in the reverse showing how good we look.” It prompts man to see the blatant
hiatus between what is and what ought to be and envision alternate realities. It is a “vehicle for
presenting alternative to the present. It is a glimpse of a functioning society at a moment in time
containing what the author perceives to be better” (575).

However, a perfunctory glance at the historical catalogue of the last century shows that
utopias are concomitant with the most egregious cases of violence and human rights’ violation.
Utopian ideologies envision a harmonious society with social and political stability. To achieve
their ends, they have to negotiate with conflicting or oppositional narratives on morality, history
and culture. Utopia is built on the erasure of individual differences and freedom. Human
interactions, social norms and moral codes are institutionalized according to state dictums.
Harmony is achieved at the expense of individualism and “otherness.” Difference, Rouvillois
observes, is an “anathema to an idea of homogeneity that sanctions extermination of the other as
a matter of principle.” Utopia, therefore, signifies divergent ideas of optimism, perfection,
idealism and totalitarianism.
While dreams and blueprints of a better world are imperative for the sustenance and proliferation of mankind, the ominous predilection for violence, repression and exclusion that is central to utopias cannot be overlooked. All formulations of utopia are also cognizant of the potential for totalitarianism and absolutism that “the ideal” entails. The actualization of the utopian ideals often necessitate draconian measures and practices that curtail individual thought and action that is conceived as dissident in any way. Davis succinctly notes that “harmony and perfection requires “discipline of a totalitarian kind” (qtd. in Kragset 11). It is in the materialization of its impossible ideals that utopias transform into dystopias. The claustrophobic environment of regimentation, regulation and monitoring by state vigilantes is best foreordained and expressed in Kafka’s and Huxley’s novels where people are psychologically and physically modified to fit into an idealized image of society. Therefore, “Institutional pursuits of the Good,” Salomon J Terreblanche claims “carry the germ of totalitarianism in its core” (303). It is precisely because of their transcendental and authoritarian nature that utopias are often identified with totalitarianism. The horrors of the two World Wars, Stalinism and fascism give credence to the idea of utopia as totalitarian. In search of its objectives, utopias can warp the ideals that form its cornerstone beyond belief. All authoritative discourses and ideologies of nationalism are premised on the idea of a utopia. The overarching plans for every aspect of life, for the organization of human relations in the public and private realm borders on totalitarian impulses. In Todorov’s view utopia transmogrifies into utopianism (that is totalitarianism) when the ideals that are at the heart of various ideologies and philosophies become tools of totalitarian oppression (Terreblanche 309). In an interview with Philip Roth, Kundera concurs that totalitarianism is not only hell,
but also the dream of paradise—the age-old dream where everybody would live in harmony, united by a single common will and faith, without secrets from one another. . . . Once the dream of paradise starts to turn into the dream of reality, however, here and there people begin to crop up who stand in its way, and so the rulers of paradise must build a little gulag on the side of Eden. In the course of time this gulag grows even bigger and more perfect, while the adjoining paradise gets even smaller and poorer.

A utopia is foremost a political state. The state appropriates the role of a doctrinaire guardian or parent and its word becomes the gospel. Utopias and totalitarian regimes are governed by, to use Mark Olssen’s expression, “normcentricity” (533), in which dissent and individuality are repressed. Harmony and equality are envisioned as conforming to the state’s idea of sole truth. Man’s humdrum existence is under the constant vigilance of the state; transparency in private and public life is observed; morality is the new law; and subjectivity and dissidence are prohibited. A utopia, therefore, in Rouvillois’ words, is a “premonition of totalitarianism and its institutionalized schizophrenia” and totalitarianism is the “tragic execution of the utopian dream.”

Totalitarian ideologies like Communism, the much adulated leviathan of the twenty-first century, are based on the utopian vision of collective will and ownership. They are founded on the premise of an all-encompassing collectivity and unity that precludes individual differences. Guinevere Liberty Nell describes utopian totalitarianism as

metaphysics played out in social sphere: the transcendence of personal ego must come in the form of submission to society, and the ultimate sacrifice must be physical. The willingness of the individual to sacrifice himself must be a
willingness to submit his material form, not just his mental ego, to the greater
good and the collective will.

Disparate aspects of life and culture are forgotten and rejected in the pursuit of the greater and
common good. The common denominator of Marxism and totalitarian ideologies like Stalinism
is the inherent belief of salvation mankind is capable of achieving. Communism “fused the
unifying power of European nationalism (a shared ethos and common mission) with
Enlightenment ideals (egalitarianism and rationalism) in the service of utopian social
engineering” (Howard 29).

The discourse of utopia and the discourse of memory are intertwined intricately. A
preoccupation with the past is pervasive in all societies, even more so in a totalitarian one, which
needs to vindicate the present. Tiiu Kreegipuu and Epp Lauk note that in order to “govern the
present and future, one also has to govern the past – the ways that the preceding regimes,
processes and events are remembered, interpreted and assessed” (42). Forgetting or amnesia,
therefore, becomes a pivotal element of a utopia. The formation and durability of the ideologies
of totalitarianism warrant the reconstruction of the past. An ideologically “correct” official
memory is presupposed and sanctified. All individual interpretations and remembrances that are
antithetical to official constructions of history are conveniently expurgated. In such societies,
memory is threatened either by enforced oblivion or by consecration and remembrance of a
manipulated past. The construction of nation and nationhood bears similitude to utopian
architecture in that many aspects of its past reality which are discordant with its visions of the
present are rewritten or simply forgotten. This is one element that unites all constructions of
nationhood—their propensity to relegate insalubrious past realities into the oblivion. Ernest
Renan has observed that “the essential element of a nation is that all its individuals must have
many things in common but it must also have forgotten many things” (qtd. in MacDonald 1).

Similarly, Milliken reflects that national discourses

work to define and to enable, and also to silence and to exclude, for example, by

limiting and restricting authorities and experts to some groups, but not others,

endorsing a certain common sense, but making other modes of categorizing and

judging meaningless, impractical, inadequate or otherwise disqualified. (qtd. in

MacDonald 2)

Ideological remembering and forgetting, therefore, is a necessary condition for the existence

and perpetuation of totalitarian ideologies. Totalitarian systems and utopias desire the end of

history, to triumph over, as Rouvillois says, “the anguish of time and the accidents of history.”

They contain the promise, the utopian vision of deliverance from the shackles of history, from

the burden of the past. They envision a more natural and rational order as opposed to what their

predecessors had been living in. The canvas is cleaned, following Plato’s injunction, so that the

social world can “start afresh and build up again in a brand new rational world” (qtd. in Sargent

570). A utopia strives for changelessness, statis or timelessness. The past and the future collapse

into the present, which is eternal and conceptualized according to the political realities of the

day. History, therefore, has to be purged and rewritten. As Rouvillois notes:

Marxist systems . . . describe the advent of Communism as signalling the end of

humanity’s prehistory and the beginning of its true history; a history, according to

Engels, that will no longer dominate human beings, but which will be “the result

of his own free action . . . with full consciousness [he will] make his own history.

The rejection of history entails a re-textualization of the past. This re-textualization is a

form of amnesia, or as Russell Jacoby says, “social amnesia,” in which “memory is driven out of
mind by the social and economic dynamic of the society.” A totalitarian society is based on “reification,” which Jacoby describes as the “social illusion” that sustains the “status quo by presenting the human and social relations as natural and unchangeable.” This illusion is created by re-historicizing the past and making the present a natural progenitor of a dysfunctional past. The past is ceased and an illusion of timelessness is created. But all “reification is a forgetting,” since, Jacoby further says, it embodies a “social loss of memory” or a “forgetting and repression of the human and social activity that makes and can remake society” (4).

3.3. Idyll and the “Desert of Forgetting”

The “basic event” of the book, as Kundera tells his readers, “is the story of totalitarianism” (qtd. in Kimball 208). He equates totalitarianism with a utopia, which he names as “idyll” in the text. BLF maps out the political, cultural and social contours of a nation inflicted with a perverted utopia in the guise of communism. It engages with the devastating experiences of Kundera’s fellow citizens, whose dreams of a revolution to install an “idyll” were shattered, leaving them disillusioned. In BLF amnesia is a “clear-cut metaphor for individual and national destruction” (Kussi16). The novel illustrates the processes of organized forgetting instituted by the state machinery in order to obliterate all vestiges of social, political and cultural life in Czechoslovakia that do not bolster the “idyll” or the system of governance led by the communist party.

The communist accession to power in Czechoslovakia in 1948 was not a consequence of a bloody revolution, but was envisaged by “the more dynamic, the more intelligent, the better” (10) half of the nation. To conceive the communist regimes of Central Europe as the handiwork of criminals, incarnation of evil, in Kundera’s perception, is erroneous since it overlooks “a basic truth”—that these structures of power were formulated by “enthusiasts [who were] convinced
they had discovered the only road to paradise” (ULR 170). The communists had an “imposing program” for the nation, a “plan for an entirely new world where everyone would find a place.” Not content with the “tiresome and threadbare moral principles,” with which the opponents “tried to patch the torn trousers of the established order,” a large number of people amenable to the communist vision set about “to realize their dream, that idyll of justice for all” (11). The idyll of communism was, claimed the communist government official Jaroslav Stránsky, “closer to the sources of beauty and the good” and “the source of the future’s moral, artistic, social and scientific values” (qtd. in Abrams 5). The narrator describes the idyll as a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man and man against other men, but rather where the world and all men are shaped from one and the same matter. There, everyone is a note in a sublime Bach fugue, and anyone who refuses to be one is a mere useless and meaningless black dot that need only be caught and crushed between thumb and finger like a flea. (11)

Kundera identifies the idea of “idyll” and “for all” as an impossible dream. Despite all its claims to egalitarianism, an idyll is absolutist and exclusionary. The communist idyll ensures the facade of “justice for all” by resorting to violence in the form of mass executions and deportations and acculturating the Czech population and making it conform to its idyllic image. The communist system’s functionality is dependent on the immersion of individual subjectivities into a singular uniformity. Carlos Fuentes notes that “the most favoured genre in the culminating period of Stalinism was the idyll” because of the correspondence between totalitarianism and “the immemorial and fascinating dream of a harmonious society where private life and public life form but one unity and all are united around one will and one faith” (14). By the mid-sixties, however, the architects of the idyll or the “guardians of the idyll” were horrified at the sight of
the monster they had created. Their repugnance at the distortion of their beautiful dream led them to demolish their cherished idea, “to recapture and tame their own act.” However, Russia, “which had composed the enormous fugue for the entire terrestrial globe, could not tolerate the scattering of the notes” (19) and hence decided to reconstruct and restore the idyll. On the fateful day of August 21, 1968, the narrator informs the readers:

Russia, . . . sent an army of half a million men to Bohemia. Soon about one hundred twenty thousand Czechs had left the country, and of those who remained, about five hundred thousand had been forced to leave their jobs, for isolated workshops in the depths of the country, for distant factories, for the steering wheels of trucks—that is to say, for places where no one would ever hear their voices. (19)

Administration of repression and violence was contiguous with a revisionist historical enterprise. Kundera remarks that political opponents of the Soviet Union, who had been making “noisy proclamations” were at times granted clemency. However, “culture was never amnestied” (Pillai 58). A multitude of human lives were erased from human memory to “leave nothing but an unstained age of unstained idyll” (33). In totalitarian societies, in the words of Howard, “history is the first casualty of ideological necessity. Rather than reality refuting ideology, ideology must reach back into time and refute history by erasing it” (25). This refutation, as the novel illustrates, is actualized through the political tools of ideological forgetting and remembering. After the communist accession to power, the Party arrogated to itself the sole privilege to historicize the past according to centralistic communist principles.

To lend credibility to the idyll’s mirage of historical continuity, it was imperative to devise a self-validating, cogent rationale for the invasion and subsequent occupation. One of the ways to
justify the coup and legitimize their occupation was the manipulation of historical memory into a new official history that presented the invasion as a natural consequence of the antecedent, tumultuous historical developments—the Prague Spring. As Rubie Watson has noted: “Under state socialism, Marxism-Leninism was not one ideology or political economy among many, but rather was the inevitable and glorious outcome of a discernible historical process” (qtd. in Haukanes 166). The existing models of historical writing were replaced with Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist historical understanding of the past. The past was erased and rewritten to make it adhere to the propagandistic vision articulated by the new idyll. The “newly revived idyll” is an engineered memory which erases all vestiges of the antipodal past from the new historical vision:

And because not even the shadow of a bad memory should distract the country from its restored idyll, both the Prague Spring and the arrival of the Russian tanks, that stain on a beautiful history, had to be reduced to nothing. That is why today in Bohemia the August 21 anniversary goes by silently and the names of those who rose up against their own youth are carefully erased from the country’s memory, like mistakes in a schoolchild’s homework. (19)

In the official history under communism the year 1948 was celebrated as “Victorious February . . . the moment when the working people under the rule of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia won over the reactionaries, and definitively decided on the socialist development of our motherland.” The Prague Spring was described as “an attempt by right-wing and anti-socialist forces to get rid of communist rule,” and the invasion as “help from friends in a time when socialism was threatened” (Haukanes 166). A number of concerted attempts, which Vera Schwarz terms as, “the technologies of amnesia” (qtd. in Nauruzbıyev 14) were then undertaken by the state in the nationwide project of establishing a culture of political and historical amnesia,
to expurgate the repercussions of the Prague spring and to attain normalization. However, “normalization” became a mere “euphemism for re-Stalinization” (Pillai 63). The novel illustrates some such technologies of amnesia—massive fabrication of historical records, distortion of historical events, renaming of streets and demolition and reconstruction of monuments—adopted by the state to tamper the nation’s memory. The occupation, therefore, is paralleled by symbolic invasion to undermine a people’s past. As Milan Hubl, a historian and friend of Kundera, says in the novel:

You begin to liquidate a people . . . by taking away its memory. You destroy its books, its culture, its history. And then others write other books for it, give another culture to it, invent another history for it. Then the people slowly begins to forget what it is and what it was. The world at large forgets it still faster. (218)

In AN, Kundera says that his novels often present historical events that have “forgotten by historiography.” To prove his claim, he gives the example of the “officially organized massacres of dogs” in Czechoslovakia, following the Russian invasion. This episode, he continues, has been completely erased from official and public memory. However, the event is significant from an “anthropological” (37) point of view and, therefore, ULB recounts the systematic execution of dogs throughout the nation. People were educated through the state’s control of media and language about the hazards of keeping dogs as pets for human health and the beauty of their national parks and streets. The novel ULB features a dog, Karenin, as one of the main characters, along with the many erased human voices that populate the textual spaces of Kundera’s novels.

If a utopia is place where time has frozen, it is also a place that is “no-place,” as the etymology of the word in Greek signifies. Not only the temporal markers but also the spatial contours are disfigured and re-imagined so as to adhere to the new idyllic vision. The novel
illustrates the architectural re-textualization of the tangible sites of memory in the public space. Material landscape is always a part of the larger political-cultural matrix and is always marked by conflicting symbolic investments by belligerent political fractions. Evidence of repeated cultural invasions and rewriting of history in Czechoslovakia is physically present in the city’s architecture, street names and monuments. The streets, the narrative shows, testify to the continual invasions by foreign powers:

The street Tamina was born on was called Schwerinova Street. That was during the war, when Prague was occupied by the Germans. Her father was born on Cermokostelecka Avenue. That was under Austria-Hungary. When her mother married her father . . . it was Marshal Foch Avenue. That was after the 1914-1918 war. Tamina spent her childhood on Stalin Avenue, and it was on Vinohrady Avenue that her husband picked her up to take her to her new home. And yet it was always the same street, they just kept changing its name, brainwashing it into a half-wit. (216-17)

The continual renaming of streets and the demolition and erection of monuments are evidence of the polemics of and struggle over national memory. The changing of street names is exemplary of the textual underpinnings of the authoritative regime to obliterate people’s memory and their sense of the past. As Antonim J. Liehm claims:

Nowhere during the past sixty or thirty years have so many monuments been erected and torn down as in the USSR and the other socialist lands. They were turned out on a factory production line—nowhere has so much emphasis been put on the fact that this a world without a past, one pieced together from the present, even from the most part from the future. Nowhere have so many believed . . . that
a past which is denied or, rather, disowned, no longer exists and has never existed.

For only thus could the present function, of course, only thus could it be credited.

(34)

With each invasion, the space of public and national memory was wiped clean and re-imagined so much so that Prague became a paradigm of historical and cultural forgetting," teeming with the “ghosts of monuments torn down.” As the narrator notes:

Wandering the streets that do not know their names are the ghosts of monuments torn down. Torn down by the Czech Reformation, torn down by the Austrian Counter-Reformation, torn down by the Czechoslovak Republic, torn down by the Communists; even the statues of Stalin have been torn down. In place of those destroyed monuments, statues of Lenin are nowadays springing up in Bohemia by the thousands, springing up like weeds among ruins, like melancholy flowers of forgetting. (217)

A similar incident is evoked in UBL. On returning to the small spa town where they had met six years before, Tomas and Tereza find that the Czech street names were replaced with Russian names, creating a miniature Russia and appropriating the national past: “Moscow Square, . . . Stalingrad Street, Leningrad Street, Rostov Street, Novosibirsk Street, Kiev Street, Odessa Street. . . . a Gorky Cinema, Cafe Pushkin. All the names were taken from Russian geography, from Russian history” (165). These reconstructed monuments and renamed streets (texts) of material space constitute a disruption in the flow of history, a rupture that amounts to an orchestrated forgetting of the past. “The Soviet presence became the embodiment of an aggressor never before encountered in Czech history, which erased, transformed, and replaced native signs with the signs of a foreign authority” (Mândoiu166-77).
3.4. Devils' laughter and Forgetting

This chapter employs the idea of laughter, as it features in Bakhtin’s critical theory, for textual analysis. The notion of laughter derives from Bakhtin’s concept of carnival as outlined in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics and Rabelais and His World. This chapter focuses on the use of laughter as countermemory in the interpretation of the text. Laughter provides both form and content to countermemory.

Laughter breaks through the silence resulting from enforced forgetting. It provides liberation from the tyranny of established institutions and prevailing truths. Like the carnivalesque mode of storytelling, it is, therefore, transgressive, subversive, political, ambivalent, self-reflexive and performative. It expresses the “joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position” (Bakhtin, PDP 124). It is characterized by a freedom from received notions of truth and reality. Laughter encourages a freeplay of meaning and views. It chafes at the seriousness of the official culture. Everything that is absolutist and sacrosanct is subjected to play and scrutiny. It parodies the monologic official discourse and its claims to absolute truth and meaning. As Bakhtin says:

The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretence of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities. (45)

In the grotesque world the id is uncrowned and transformed into a funny monster. (RHW 49)

All authoritative versions of truth and traditional axiomatic ideas are challenged and dismantled. Laughter is a “current of slippery ambivalence” (Elliot 130). Through it, “the world is seen anew,
no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. . . . Certain aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter” (Bakhtin, RHW 66). Laughter opens up new horizons and brings in new perspectives. Excoriating grand, imposing narratives of nationhood, which ostracize opposing elements, through playful means, laughter creates a platform for subjugated stories and memories to be heard. It, can, therefore, be considered as a new epistemology of the subjugated and the forgotten. It allows for the articulation of popular and anti-canonical truths, as well as highlights the taken for granted as artificial. Laughter addresses the tragic and the comic. Illuminating an array of grievances, it also provides a window of hope.

Kundera’s revision of history and recovery of memory is playful in nature. In his novels, we encounter an aesthetics of laughter and memory. They are, as John O’Brien says, “filled with light-hearted semantic and metafictional play” (97). Kundera himself describes his novels as “light-hearted games” (qtd. in O’Brien 97). Real autobiographical experiences are combined with fictional accounts in laughable and comic ways that elicit carnivalesque laughter, featuring in the form of “devil’s laughter” (87) in the novel. Such laughter is deconstructive as it offers a critique of governing practices. The shifting, paradoxical and absurd images prompt a rethinking and rewriting of canonical, consecrated ideas of truth and history. The restorative, corrective, oppositional and political potential of laughter destroys the monolithic seriousness of the communist regime. Kundera’s playful and deconstructive readings remind the readers of the ambiguity, textuality and forgetfulness that are at heart of all metanarratives. The playful, subversive nature of laughter is employed to diffuse and dismiss enforced forgetting. The liminal, forgotten figures and erased chapters of memory and history are resuscitated in the textual space of the novel touched with shades of pathos and comedy. They resurge from the
shadows of oblivion packed with laughter, sometimes raucous and sometimes sardonic, directed against the mechanisms of organized forgetting.

Kundera offers a metaphysical discourse on laughter in the section “The Angels.” The angels’ laughter extols the rationalized structuring of the world. “They are the partisans not of Good, but of divine creature” (86). They manifest, in the words of Roger Kimball, “an angelic blindness to everything problematic and unaccommodating about experience” (206). They gloss over the many limitations of the human condition. They revel in the apparent unity, continuity and meaningfulness of life. Angelic laughter is then an affirmation of the apparent utopian or idyllic conception of the world and for this reason it aligns itself with all authoritative discourses. Angels, as Roger Kimball claims, “acquiesce in illusion and refuse to acknowledge the lie at the heart of the utopia they crave” (37).

Devil’s laughter on the other hand is subversive and seditious. It challenges all that is “finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook” (Bakhtin, RHW 3). It mocks the uniform and rational world of the angels. It denotes the “absurdity of things” (87) and “refuses to grant any rational meaning to that divinely created world” (86). Devils’ laughter does not give comfortable and convenient answers; it does not re-iterate platitudes about history and meaning; rather it creates a space for scrutiny and scepticism. It is, Herbet Eagle says, “an existential assertion of the right of individuals to judge and to mock God’s world of the apparent ‘laws’ of his history” (164). The old and the established are refamiliarized in a new light, giving new significance to them. Devils’ laughter questions the invidious practices and techniques of normalization and amnesia used by the regime. It calls into question the singularity of historical narratives. Laughter exposes the holes and gaps in official and public remembrances of the past. The devils’ laughter occupies an
ambiguous, in-between space “‘where the bridge between a cause and an effect is ruptured.’ At this juncture, there is liberty, digression, the incalculable, a lack of reason, the opposition of eighteenth century rationalism and Liebniz” (Adams 135).

The novel evokes many laughable images, metaphors and accounts to undermine the silence of forgetting around the past and to highlight the textuality that is inherent in all historical and nation building processes. In the section titled “The Angels,” the narrative blends autobiography and fiction to relate a laughable account that not only recovers the forgotten and erased past but also highlights the discursivity of the self. After being ostracized by the new power structure, Kundera “lost the privilege of working” (58). During such trying circumstances his friends came forward to help him. With the help of one such friend R., he started writing an astrological column under a fictitious name for a communist magazine. R. presents Kundera to her boss as a renowned physicist who wished to remain incognito. Respecting this condition and without disclosing his true identity, the editor-in-chief, who had immense clout in the Husak regime, asks “Kundera the astrologer” for his personal horoscope. Kundera being cognizant of the man’s past and true character concocts a horoscope that cautions the party official about the pain and suffering awaiting him if he persists with his unkind attitude towards others. Such an ominous prediction brings about a change in the editor-in-chief’s character as well as delightful humour. This anecdote is an instance of the devil’s laughter, of heightened irony when a blacklisted writer is asked to make astrological prediction for a “Moscow-trained Marxist believing in horoscopes” (86), when an effaced past rewrites the future of the oppressive present.

As the narrator-author reflects:

The only amusing thing about it all was my existence, the existence of a man erased from history, from literature, from literary histories, and from the
telephone book, of a dead man now returned to life in an amazing reincarnation to preach the great truth of astrology to hundreds of thousands of young people in a socialist country. (84)

Another such real historical anecdote that morphs into a laughable account is that of Vladimir Clementis. In a series of flashbacks, the novel disinters a historical vignette which has been “airbrushed” from official history and all photographs through the use of controlled amnesia. On February 1948, communism officially replaced the meretricious ideals of bourgeois liberal democracy. On a balcony, facing a cascade of thousands of citizens, Klement Gottwald, the newly appointed president made the momentous announcement about the formation of the communist government to lead the nation. As he made this announcement, from the top of a balcony on an atrociously cold day, his confederate, Clementis removed his cap and placed it on his comrade’s naked head. This innocuous and simple gesture of solicitude was transmitted to and blazoned at every corner of the nation by the frenzied media, the propaganda machinery of the regime, in order to, as Maria Nemcova Banerjee says, “serve as the inaugural icon of the dawning age of harmony and innocence” (143). This new ideological history was then introduced and disseminated into the public discourse. Every child recognized it, “from seeing it on posters and in schoolbooks and museums” (3) and the event was appropriated as an intrinsic part of the national “idyll” of Bohemia.

However, the perpetuation of memorialization is contingent on the ever-changing political realities. Every new political makeover is succeeded by a pernicious and systematic re-engineering of the people’s memory. After a brief period of four years, which witness a major restructuring of Czech politics, many dissident leaders and intellectuals along with Clementis are indicted on the charges of treachery against the state and, consequently, sentenced to death. The
executions precipitate a process of rewriting and remapping the annals of the Czech history. With great celerity, all remnants of Clementis, including the image on the balcony, are relegated to historical oblivion, leaving behind only the cap that was placed on Gottwald’s head. The narrator remarks playfully: “Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Where Clementis stood, there is only the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald’s head” (4). This last relic, the hat, of that notable event when “the history of Communist Bohemia began” (3) is, to use Banerjee’s terms, “the leitmotif of organized forgetting” (144) mocking the monumental vision of history. The image of the hat and the forgotten event parallel the mock crowning-decrowning ritual that is centrifugal to the carnivalesque. Laughter is produced by inversion of normative expectations and norms. The crowning ceremony, in an unexpected reversal of fortune, is followed by capitulation and dethroning (in the form of execution and erasure from history).

The story is not risible on account of inherent comical elements, but as the author dictates in his metaphysical account of laughter, the narrative produces laughter as it foregrounds the contingent underpinnings of memory discourse in national narratives and myth-making systems. Devils’ laughter is a form of countermemory that lays bare the contingencies, the indeterminacy and fragmentation of history. It reveals the constructedness and textuality that the natural and the normal mask. It further highlights the inability of totalitarian discourses to appropriate the past. Clementis is now a political and social hazard to the unity of the hegemonic official account and hence conveniently “airbrushed” from it. Untethered from its stable historical referent, the hat is a “joke,” a loose cannon, a “free floating signifier” among a plethora of signifiers that invite multiple and dissident readings of the past. The laughter that the text produces, then, is on account of the revealed meaninglessness, provisionality and absurdity when things are devoid of
their traditional anchors of meaning. It raises questions of historical epistemology and verisimilitude. It provides a new, alternative approach to history and remembrance. It creates multiple alternative positions of narration. The hat adrift in a sea of referents draws attention to the various processes of remembering and forgetting that characterize the erasure of the collective past. Laughter functions as a new epistemology that is always in a state of becoming or fluidity and a methodology to diffuse enforced amnesia and interrogate the past.

The masquerade of unity and completeness worn by the communist utopia is shattered by the “forgotten fur hat,” revealing a world of ambiguity, irony and provisionality. The displaced hat, symbolizing Clementis’ erasure from the pages of history, reminds the readers of the strategized rupture between the past and the present. In its “quintessential pursuit of the utopian project,” a totalitarian state is, therefore, according to Rouvillois, marked by a “break with bestial origins.” History is rewritten and a new origin is ascribed to it. The hat on Gottwad’s head and the narrative behind it illustrate that the origin is always a textual construct, not a priori. The origin is, as Derrida says, is an “always already” transcription. Everything begins with an act of textualization, “with reproduction” (qtd. in Pirovolakis 69). On a similar note, Adams remarks:

... The concept of an original is only a disabled metaphor. The narrative, or history, had always already begun, and it changed a little each time in the telling, so now history is a story that never ends. What is myth, but a collection of stories endlessly retold... and thus all history is myth. (141)

Drawing a parallel between totalitarian states and utopias, Misurilla perspicaciously notes that in Thomas More’s text, Utopus, the founder of the island, is a man with “no origin or past; and his creation does not base its claims to legitimacy on genealogical affiliations with ancestors.” This makes a utopia, in her view, “anti-historical” and “profoundly radical.” Since a utopia does not
recognize any historical connections with the past “The “present” of Utopia is no “heritage” passed down from the past to the present as a precious legacy, to be carried forward, cultivated, and made to grow.” The idyll necessitates forgetting or suppression of the “other[ed]” past. The establishment of a new order is described as the “second coming,” as the inception of a new era with no ties to the past. This enforced gap wearing the mask of a unified history is a point of violence and a nation’s new origin.” As Bhabha says:

... the will to nationhood, ... is itself the site of a strange forgetting of the history of the nation’s past: the violence involved in establishing the nation’s writ.

It is this forgetting ... that constitutes the beginning of the nation’s narrative.

(310, Original Emphasis).

The idyll is, therefore, founded on fundamental violence, that of, amnesia. By virtue of its “Promethean project” of establishing a more “natural order,” Rouvillois notes, an idyll makes a “tabula rasa of the past” in order to “install the reign of the new self.” To strip off the old self and create a new identity warrants not only the eradication of ineffectual practices and institutions, but also forgetting the past. Communist intellectuals, Bradley F. Abrams notes

strove to create what they called a “new Czechoslovakia,” which would be explicitly Slavic and socialist, by carrying out what they termed a “revision of the national character.” This revision entailed ... reorienting the national self-understanding eastwards, toward the great Soviet Union. (3)

The discourses of totalitarian ideologies like communism, fascism etc as well as those of nationalism, named by Sabrina in ULB as “kitsch,” require a forgetting, or an omitting, of “the perplexed histories of the living people, their cultures of survival and resistance” (Bhabha 311).
3.5. Problematics of Memory

Laughter is self-reflexive. While Kundera documents the voices silenced by the communist regime, he also explores the complex interplay between remembering and forgetting under and after socialism. The political character of memory is relegated not only to the active field of power and politics but also to the domain of human existence in the private realm. In a deconstructive move, Kundera subverts a straightforward dichotomy between the binaries of memory and forgetting. He destabilizes the conventional expectations of associating forgetting with authoritative state forces and remembering with the oppressed. Kundera has observed that “the psychological mechanisms that function in great (apparently incredible and inhuman) historical events are the same as those that regulate private (quite ordinary and very human) situations” (AN 118).

Mirek, one of the main characters of the novel, is an ex-communist turned dissident in Communist Czechoslovakia in 1971. He is one of those who witnessed the Soviet invasion and the collapse of Prague Spring. His strident attacks on the regime arouse the wrath of Party officials who are determined to root out any subversion. After being proscribed from the Party for his maverick ideas, he is forced to take menial jobs at building and construction sites, instead of any intellectual or academic work, which is his true calling.

In order to counter the natural vagaries of memory and time and the more virulent processes of remembering and forgetting installed by the communist security apparatus, Mirek maintains a personal journal, which records the minutes of all political meetings, clandestine or officially approved. Mirek believes that “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” Mirek’s fastidious maintenance of his journal is considered sheer callousness by his friends. However, for Mirek “To hide and feel guilty would be the beginning of defeat”
His journals are testament to those who have been erased from the official annals. The Soviet invasion did not deter people like Mirek to abjure their political convictions. Consequently, they were expunged from the pages of history, from living memory. Mirek was one of those countless lives erased. He is “only a white stain, a circumscribed fragment of the void . . .” (20).

Nevertheless, a few paragraphs further cast a shadow of doubt on Mirek’s professed reasons. Mirek’s underlying principle seems to be an attempt to prevaricate the truth. More than ensuring justice for those who have been forgotten, Mirek is interested in carving out a place for himself in the great drama of history. Coterminal with the communist idyllic of the past is the creation of a personal grandiose epic by Mirek. Despite repudiating the Party and all that it symbolizes, Mirek is enthralled by the idea of historical determinism and necessity. He is relentless in his attempts to create an immemorial place for himself in history. He “cherishes his ‘destiny’ as a historical actor because he shares the Communist illusion that only what is ultimately affirmed by history has weight and meaning” (Howard 30). In his endeavour to sanitize and rewrite his past, Mirek assumes the perquisites of an author. He extrapolates the “invioable right” of an author—to revise his own text if it displeases him—in order to falsify his past and rewrite his memories in order to make them commensurate with his newly adorned role of an audacious spokesperson against the Party and what it stands for. He wants to enjoy the same prerogative that a sculptor has to his statue. His relation to his life “was that of a sculptor to his statue or a novelist to his novel” (15). He wants to be, both, the subject and the author of his destiny.

However, Zdena’s existence on the pages of his history prevents him from truly becoming the author of his destiny. As the narrator says: “Zdena’s existence deprived Mirek that author’s prerogative. Zdena insisted on remaining on the opening pages of the novel and did not let
herself be crossed out" (15). Twenty five years ago, Mirek had an affair with a fellow communist, Zdena. At that time, both were ablaze with communist fever and visions of a great future for the nation. The party was used by Mirek as a platform to achieve success and self-definition. In order to ingratiate with the party officials, Mirek had worn the mask of rebelliousness and crafted a yarn of “legends and lies.” Just like the lies which the communists made people live, Mirek invented false stories about leaving his wealthy family of farmers and the “age-old rural tradition of attachment to the land and to property” (24). After their separation, Zdena remained loyal to the party, condoning and even welcoming the Soviet invasion, thus arousing shame in Mirek for loving her.

Realizing that the surveillance team are tightening the noose around dissident intellectuals, Mirek’s friends advise him to dispose his contentious papers. Against the better advice of his friends, Mirek embarks on a personal mission to retrieve the love letters and erase the uncomfortable aspects of his own past. Kundera asserts that Mirek was “in love with his destiny, and even his march toward ruin seemed noble and beautiful to him” (14). On his journey to Zdena’s house, Mirek realizes that he is being tailed quite conspicuously by the secret police. However, dismissing these ominous portents, he resolutely arrives at Zdena’s house to cross her out of his history. This moment is unfortuitous since at that very moment, the secret police make a move and ransack his house for the incriminating political papers.

Mirek’s attempts to retrieve and destroy the letters seem misplaced and laughable, considering his life and those of his loved ones are threatened. Mirek presents many specious defences for his affair and for his aversion to Zdena: his working class background and suffering, his low status in the hierarchy of the regime, his youth and so on. However, a more sinister, ulterior motive is revealed by his circuitous remembering. In his march towards a self-
determined historical horizon, Mirek has spaced out the past and the present: “... for him the world’s space had become a negative, a waste of time, an obstacle slowing down his activity” (28). While on the way back to his home, Mirek, after years of relentless pursuit of his putative historical apex pauses to let his memories flood him, if only for a brief period. During this hiatus in his apparent historical progression, Mirek confronts what he has been circumventing—Zdena’s physical ugliness, especially her large nose and, more importantly, his love for her despite her ugliness. Zdena’s ugliness and her enduring, ludicrous loyalty to the Party and Soviet Communism repulse him. This love for Zdena is, for Mirek, corroborated by the love letters exchanged between them.

Mirek’s love for an ugly woman is a metaphor for his zeal for the communist ideals, his youthful visions of a communist state which later turned out to be perverted. Her large nose is only a subterfuge to deny and forget his own love for the idyll and its “ugliness,” for the communist past which does not neatly fit into his new narrative. He feels an uncontrollable desire “to extend his arm far back to the past and hit it with his fist. The desire to slash the painting portraying his youth” (28). Zdena’s ugliness becomes more pronounced because it reminds him of his tenacious faith in the communist dogma. Her physical ugliness only amplifies Mirek’s own ugly past, his fatuous devotion to the Party, reminding him of the “aesthetic inadequacy of his youth” (Banerjee 144). Mirek’s erasure of Zdena is an attempt to efface all traces of an ugly past (his communist past) personified in Zdena and her unflinching loyalty to the party rhetoric, to impose self-amnesia on a version of his past that is at loggerheads to his new political and metaphysical aesthetic. It is an attempt to efface his own culpable past, as a communist fanatic and upstart, from his new, grand narrative of history and identity, and to escape responsibility and guilt by suppressing that past. Drawn by the linear march of history,
Mirek does not realize he is, even after twenty five years, creating history out of a matrix of "legends and lies." His "autobiographical mythmaking," as Beall claims, is "a lie because it excludes the more banal considerations that motivate his actions. Ultimately, Mirek's self-mythologizing is the consistent theme of his life" (249).

Mirek tells Zdena that he wants to look back at his past, to find his beginnings and his roots, to discern where he had gone wrong. He is definitely looking at his past, but with an aversion to it, and with an inclination to rewrite it. "For all his insistence on the importance of recording history," Howard claims, "Mirek's quest to render his life into a work of art embodies the will to forgetting" (36). Like the author of a novel, and even more sardonically, like the communist regime itself which he repudiates, Mirek participates in the reworking of his memories by erasing certain disturbing parts of it in order to conform his revised past to an idyll that he draws for himself. Mirek is inadvertently mimicking those he disdains. This is made evident by the fact that any fear of confiscation of his compromising political papers, which could lead to his imprisonment or execution, is overshadowed by a more personal quest—to recover and destroy his old love letters to Zdena. He has an inkling that the secret police are close to apprehending him and, therefore, he must hasten to conform his past to his new idyll: "... he'd had the feeling he could not wait much longer, because his destiny was rapidly coming to its end and he must do everything to make it perfect and beautiful" (13). Zdena's earnest request to recant his political views is mistakenly understood by Mirek as a last ploy by the communist regime to grant him clemency for the acceptance of his apparently seditious views. However, Mirek is not perturbed by a life behind bars. Since he craved "a life that was remarkable, picturesque and heroic," imprisonment meant "a noble conclusion to a noble story" (Cockerill
Forgetting, therefore, is an instrument in the organization of power and the manipulation of
the past in order to impose a new meaning. As the narrator says:

He had erased her, her and his love for her, he had scratched out her image until
he had made it disappear as the party propaganda section had made Clementis
disappear from the balcony where Gottwald had given his historic speech. Mirek
rewrote history just like the Communist Party, like all political parties, like all
peoples, like mankind. They shout that they want to shape a better future, but it’s
not true. The future is only an indifferent void no one cares about, but the past is
filled with life, and its countenance is irritating, repellent, wounding, to the point
that we want to destroy or repaint it. We want to be masters of the future only for
the power to change the past. We fight for access to the labs where we can
retouch photos and rewrite biographies and history. (30-31)

Mirek’s story is a comic variation of the Czech nation’s history. Both are, as Michael
Richard says, “engaged in autobiographical exercises, in making History out of history” (222).
The communist textualization of the past is analogical to that of Mirek’s. By erasing the elements
that are hostile to his grand narrative, Mirek intends to preserve his destiny or at least “its
grandeur, its clarity, its beauty, its style, its intelligible meaning” (14). Mirek’s manipulation of
memories in the facade of his own idyll is governed by his notion of historical determinism—
another idyll. “Mirek’s will to forgetting is so powerful that he has forgotten that he is willing it”
(Howard 31). Mirek’s incarceration succeeds in landing him on the communist idyll like
“Clementis’s hat stayed on Gottwald’s head.” The prison is a “splendidly illuminated scene of
history,” an “ending for the novel of his life” towards which he had been “drawn irresistibly to, .
. . the way Flaubert was drawn to Madame Bovary’s suicide” (33).
Through the examples of Mirek and Clementis, the text evokes Devils’ laughter which erodes the totalizing aspirations of the communist idyll and presents multiple, convoluted facets of forgetting and repression of collective memory in the nation state of Czechoslovakia. It allows for new articulations of the past. On the one hand, there are technologies of structured amnesia enforced by the mechanisms of power and the drastic “cleansing” of “anomalies” from the national archives and narratives, as evinced by the airbrushing of Clementis. On the other hand, Mirek’s self-imposed amnesia is paradigmatic of, to use Richard S. Esbenshade’s expression, the “re-repression of memory” (84) in the post-socialist period. Post-1989, and even years before that event, there has been a proclivity in former socialist states to rewrite the communist past, to suppress the memories of the communist reign in order to rehabilitate “normalcy” in the region. Zhanara Nauruzbayeva claims:

... post-socialist discussions of memory-politics register forgetting as a voluntary and furthermore therapeutic, necessary instrumental process. In most cases such forgetting is linked with the nationalist agendas that have overtaken the political landscape in several post-socialist societies. (14)

As the old regime crumbled away, new political configurations undertook to monitor the history-writing process. Much “discursive work” was done to reformulate the communist period as an “artificial and undesired episode in the nation’s history” (Haukanes 167). Similar to the normalization era following the Soviet invasion, the normalcy desired in the post-1989 period is totalitarian since it is another idyll in the making which Esbenshade says, involves an “unwillingness to confront the painful legacy of an ‘abnormal social system’” (83), specifically its own incriminating role. In a new historical enterprise, the memories of the former regime are repressed and new histories are forged that fit the current political configurations.
Mirek’s story is loaded with irony and innuendo. While adulating his resoluteness in preserving the past and acknowledging the need to do so incumbently in a culture of political and historical amnesia, the text through a humorous and playful storyline mocks the alternative memory discourse in Czechoslovakia after the collapse of communism. Mirek’s inclination to sanitize his past of unsavoury elements, then, is symbolic of an increasing tendency by former communist nations to rewrite the national, historical palimpsest. While he combats the devious forces of institutionalized amnesia by preserving his memories of resistance, he is also embroiled in the suppression of memories that attest to his own culpability in the formulation and materialization of the idyll of communism. As Esbenshade asserts: “Various totalizing claims on the construction and determination of the national narrative have called forth equally totalizing counterclaims” (84). The absolutist version of national memory as envisaged by the communist regime in Czechoslovakia is countered by another equally totalizing construction of the past, embodied in Mirek’s attempts to forget certain aspects of his past. Memory, here, predominantly figures as an insidious practice of forgetting, erasing or tinkering with the past. The memory of the communist era becomes entangled in the politics of contemporaneity. Laughter, therefore, is self-reflexive. It is directed at the diktats of remembering imposed by official history as well as against the unreasonable and equally amnesiac “alternative” memories created by the new state-machinery post 1980s.

The idyll, therefore, is characterized not only by political and cultural tyranny, but also by a narcissist valorisation of its ideas of truth, memory and history. The idyll is a self-enclosed system of signification. The erasure of contentious truths and memories displays its penchant for transcendental truth and reality. The idyll is tantamount to a unilateral, authoritative history from which dissonant memories have been expunged. The idyll of communism must “forget the past
because the limitations and ambiguities that the past places upon the present are anathema to the
tautologies of ideological history” (Howard 102). By forgetting inconvenient aspects of the past,
the idyll presents an illusion of untrammelled and natural progress of history towards a desired
apotheosis. The communist idyll precludes playfulness any meaninglessness, ambiguity, gaps,
inconsistencies and discord. It signifies a closed horizon of history, truth, meaning and memory.

As Fuentes notes:

Idyll is the name of the terrible constant, . . . the frozen eye of two movements,
one leading us to reconquer the harmonious past of the origin, the other promising
the perfect beatitude of the future. They confuse themselves in one movement,
one history . . . between these two movements in the idyllic process of becoming
one, history will not let us, simply, be ourselves in the present. The commerce
history consists in “selling people a future in exchange for a past.” (15)

The idyll underscores the textual formation of nation and history. It is a space without
memory or a space with a highly ideological memory. “Immutable eternal ideologies,” Herbert
Eagle says, “have no use for memory and history” (179). Through the instance of Mirek,
Clementis and the countless others effaced, Kundera demonstrates that memory, history or any
other form of representation produces, what Foucault has called, “effects of truth” within
discourses:

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the
types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms
and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means
by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the
acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (130).

Kundera is not incognizant of the capriciousness of memory and its problematics of referentiality. Mirek, in addition to the idyll, is a case in point of the thematic and technical affinity that Kundera sees between power, textuality and the remembering processes. Memory manifests a complex interplay between historical referent and textuality, which is endemic to all idylls and narratives of nations. Istan Rev notes: History writing is never born of remembering; the forgetting, the discarding of elements that can’t be fit into the new history are just as much a part of the reconstruction of history as remembering” (qtd. in Esbenshade 86). The opening scene of the novel illustrates how the idyll of communism hegemonizes forgetting and amnesia through the manipulation of history. The novel demonstrates how individual and collective memory is inextricable from textuality and modes of political oppression. Transient and contingent conditions of memory-history production foreground memory’s frangible ties to the past and its complicity in mechanisms of power. In the act of remembering or “bear[ing] witness,” one must acknowledge “contingency in the very act of giving ‘the past back its lost body’ ” (Pifer 68). As the characters illustrate, memory is fallible and malleable, it is a series of selections and erasures that characterize what is remembered and what is forgotten. These selections and erasures mark memory, like identity and history, as a construction. Although it is true that historical events have political, social and bodily repercussions, it is also true that the reconstruction of those events also have socio-political consequences. There is no essential memory that lies outside the constructedness of discourse. Built upon the structures imposed by individuals or institutions, meaning is applied to memory. Memory, in one sense, becomes a conduit through which
meanings are created rather than discovered. Meaning is, thus, manufactured, transcribed, and contextualized through memory.

3.6. Laughable Metaphors of the Idyll and Forgetting

The seven sections of the novel parallel and complement Kundera’s stance on politics and memory by underscoring and contextualizing Czechoslovakia’s political condition in figurative terms. The novel evokes metaphors and images of the circle, ring dance, the children’s island and the nudist island, endowed with comical and political overtones, to debunk the idyllic conception of reality as envisioned by authoritarian ideologies.

The first laughable image that the narrative draws is that of the circle or the ring dance. Kundera associates the lyrical and totalitarian delirium of the regime with that of a group of people holding hands and dancing in circle. The circle epitomizes the angels’ laughter. The circle and ring dance are paradigms of the communist manifesto of idyll and the state’s control of memory. The ring dance is based on the pernicious dialectics of remembering and forgetting, an abstract ideological institution enticing dancers to its dance and hoping to promote its continued survival. The dance is a self-enclosed space, where dissonant voices are unwelcomed and immediately silenced. The narrator remarks that during the communist period there were many anniversaries and festivals celebrating the self-styled victories of the Party. While the communists danced and sang together in a circle dance on the streets of Prague in the 1950s, many intellectuals and dissidents were being repressed or executed. Stephen Conway describes the revelry of the ring dance as a “communal orgy of forgetfulness.” There was no thought for the lost comrades, those who had been hanged or languished in cells not so very far away. Kundera recollects how the French poet Paul Eluard betrayed the dissident Czech surrealist Zavis Kalandra when he did not object to his unfair sentence. In his interview with Roth,
Kundera described Eluard as the greatest exponent of the “poesy of totalitarianism.” The day Kalandra was hanged, Kundera walked down the streets in Prague, observing the celebrating and dancing Czechs, with Eluard, among them reciting his “angelic verses”:

. . . the dancing young Czechs, knowing that the day before, in the same city, a woman and a surrealist had been swinging from the end of ropes, were dancing all the more frenetically, because their dance was a demonstration of their innocence, in shining contrast to the guilty darkness of the two who were hanged, those betrayers of the people and its hopes. (92-93)

While they were holding each other in the dance of the angels, “old justices were redressed, new injustices were perpetrated” (91). Angels’ laughter, exemplified by the ring dancers, induces forgetting of their historical realities and oblivion of differences. Devils’ laughter, illustrated by the text, on the other hand, critiques this forgetting. In a self-confessional mode, Kundera declares:

I too once danced in a ring. It was in 1948. . . . Like a meteorite broken off from a planet, I left the circle and have not yet stopped falling” (92). It is then that the narrator understood “the magical meaning of the circle,” once a “circle closes up. . . there is no way back. (92)

Those who have “fallen” have been systematically erased from national and collective memory. Outside the circle lies anonymity and oblivion. Those who are deemed incompatible with mutually accepted public memory (circle) are consigned to this stygian place. The circle is closed—implying the closure of meaning and the occlusion of unheard and dissident memories.

“For Kundera, Nina Pelikan Straus asserts, “the circular discourses of communism . . . are
murderous in their intentions; they not only enable the vaporization of cultural ideas but of human beings who live by these ideas” (204).

Circle dancing is a metaphor for a totalitarian utopia, a metaphor for “the intoxicating lure of the group, the mob . . . the stock response” (Kimball 205). Such a circle is impervious to the contingency of history or to the accidents of the past. Circles eliminate or categorically exclude voices of dissent, voices that bring the weight of discord or uncertainty. They circumscribe all gaps and indeterminacies within an illusory idyll of the past. A circle purports unity, stability and homogenization. It draws everyone, Havel claims, into its “sphere of power, not so they may realize themselves as human beings, but so they may surrender their human identity in favour of the identity of the system, that is, so they may become agents of the system’s general automatism” (qtd. in Mândoiu 172-73). It is a dance of suppression of individuality and difference, of forgetting and oblivion. For those within the circle there is sense of freedom which is expressed as weightlessness. The circle, according to Stephen Conway, “posits itself as a universal structure, with neither need nor desire to appeal to anything beyond its boundaries, individuals are encouraged to create similar circular notions of self.”

The figures of the closed circle, the circle dance and the idyll represent the repudiation of univocal meaning. Like the angels’ laughter, dancers in a circle become the symbolic image of the ideological power of communism. “A circle which magically protects the true believer from the perils of scepticism,” observes Pearl K. Bell, “is also a circle that suffocates the individual dancers in a closed ring of solidarity” (8). For Kundera, those who put their faith in communism were victims of ideological essentialism, as are the girls in “The Angels” who assign a single, ironically semiotic and deconstructive meaning to Ionesco’s Rhinoceros, dancing “in a solipsistic circle, trusting in the security of their ideology and meaning” (Berlatsky 66). The function of the
circle is to homogenize an otherwise disparate group, to guarantee singularity of meaning. As Hazard Adams and Leroy Searly remark: “The desire for closure as guarantor of meaning and intelligibility becomes the instrumentality of repression” (qtd. in Pifer 70). This circular dance of the idyll freezes textuality, suppresses the imaginative and individual, the creative potential that textuality entails. It is an escape from memory and history, a denial of all that is ambiguous, paradoxical and incomplete. Devils’ laughter, on the other hand, produced by the image of people dancing in circle, acknowledges and is circumscribed within the contingent.

The communist utopia is further parodied by two counter images—the children’s island to which Raphael takes Tamina and a nudist private beach on an abandoned island. Through these two humorous portraits, the novel undercuts the propensity of absolutist ideologies and philosophies to erase the past. Both the images are interestingly those of islands (insular), resonant of the island Utopos in Thomas Browne’s texts. Both are symbolic representations of totalitarian impulses to homogeneity and closure; a desire to exist outside textuality or to dissemble it. Like the communist utopia which induces amnesia by manipulating the past, both the children’s and the nudist’ islands are marked by a rejection and erasure of their past. The past with all its ambiguities, indeterminacies and contingencies is wiped clean so as to envisage an imaginary present and future. Both these images provide comic effect in the novel. Yet, the laughter produced is not without its objective. It is directed against totalitarian and utopian ideologies that shirk the past and foster historical amnesia to sustain a shackled present and to create an illusory future.

The account of children’s island features in the section dealing with the central character of the novel, Tamina. Even though this character is present in only two of the seven parts of the novel, the thematic “variations” (227), in the form of forgetting, remembering and laughter
revolve around her. The character for Kundera epitomizes man’s struggle against the forces of amnesia and oblivion. Originally from Prague, Tamina and her husband Pavel emigrate to a provincial West European town following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. A few years into their stay in Western Europe, her husband Pavel, who had been a scholar in his native country, dies of a serious illness. After her husband’s death, which is followed by a futile attempt at suicide, Tamina resigns herself to silence and starts working as a waitress in a small cafe, becoming a mute audience to her customers’ diatribe. As years pass by, Tamina realizes the frailty of memory, its irrevocable erosion with time and by the onslaught of political amnesia and graphomaniac culture. Graphomania, according to the narrator, is a global phenomenon wherein an individual considers himself to be a writer enclosed within a vault of his own words, impervious to any form of genuine dialogue with the world at large. It is an outgrowth of modernist alienation, narcissism, cultural decadence and amnesia. In the world of “graphomaniacs,” everyone is insecure of their identity. The world of graphomaniacs is inhabited by selves that are increasingly becoming uniform and indistinct from one another. Graphomania enforces uniformity and dissolves the fine distinctions in subjectivity and the line between the private and the public.

Displaced from her native land, Tamina is an alien drifter in this modern landscape, in which people have forgotten their past and lost any kind of understanding with their fellow beings. Tamina is liked among her customers for the sole reason that she “knows how to listen to people” (110). She is the only good listener who is not absorbed in her interiority and is ready to show a genuine interest in others’ lives. However, she is enveloped in a din of endless voices, competing for attention and assertion of their subjectivity on the other. In such a graphomaniac world, inundated by a clamour of myriad, cacophonous noises, Tamina’s silence, symbolized by
a “golden ring” in her mouth, “convulsively shut” (142), is a means of preserving her memories and individuality. Tamina comes to realize, “her entire being contains only what she sees . . . far behind her” (119). And as her past begins to shrink, disappear, fall apart, Tamina begins shrinking and blurring as well.

Tamina devises many contrivances to preserve and recover her dead husband’s last remnants. She repeatedly tries to revive the past by creating an exact replica of the by-gone era. Despite many stratagems, she fails to piece together the broken chronology of events that transpired in her life. She cannot piece together the vacations they took, the Christmases and New Year Eves which have been lost, or the list of pet names that her husband used for her. These are “reference points” (117), in what Kundera calls, the “rhythms of time” (118). She practises a mnemonic exercise in which she selects the facial features of her customers at the café to reconstruct the features of her dead husband. Other men become “material for sculpture” to Tamina, as she attempts to reshape “the contours of the face” of her dead husband (116).

Naming Tamina a “spiritual athlete in her devotion to memory,” Banerjee reflects:

Tamina’s quest to restore the past by the faithful exercise of disciplined memory represents the quixotic journey turned inward. Her project, like Don Quixote’s, is predicated on an ingenuous belief that words and images in the mind possess the power to resurrect the past; and she too sets forth on an adventure in which the highest pathos consorts daily with all the varieties of laughter. (146)

Her failure to restore the fading face of her husband suggests that a literal reproduction is impossible and without an imaginative bridge, all access to the past is lost. Like Mirek and the Party, Tamina deludes herself into the rehabilitation of the past as it was. Her faithful reproduction of the past becomes equally totalitarian and morbid. Tamina’s exercise in memory
restoration depends upon creating an idyll of the past without any slippage in meaning and reality. Such an endeavour seeks a “metaphysics of presence,” in Derridean sense, that aspect obliterates “differences so that an original ‘ideal,’ the image of her husband’s face, will be present once again” (Brand 214)

Tamina, ultimately, ventures on a personal mission to recover her journals, left in the hands of her mother-in-law, when she left Czechoslovakia. These diaries are not only a record of and testament to an era with her now dead husband, but also a chronicle of her history, the history of her nation. The journals provide corporeal anchors to a receding past, helping her preserve her identity. Since she does not wish to return to her homeland, she contrives a way to get them back from her mother-in-law. When her friend Bibi announces that she will be going to Prague on vacation, Tamina foresees an opportunity to recover her diaries and seeks the help of her friend. She tries to convince her French friends to make a trip to Paris in order to retrieve those fragments of the past. When Bibi’s plans for the trip do not materialize, she begins a sexual relationship with Hugo so as to entice him to undertake the trip to Czechoslovakia. However, the relationship ends in physical and emotional frustration due to Tamina’s detachment.

When her last resort, Hugo, refuses to retrieve her diaries, Tamina envelopes herself in the silence of her interior existence; she stops playing the role of a keen audience and puts up a barrier between the outside world and herself. One day she meets a young man names Raphael who offers to take her away “to a place where things are as light as the breeze. Where things have lost their weight. Where there’s no remorse.” This stranger offers her to accompany her on a journey the sole object of which is to “Forget [her] forgetting.” Tamina is captivated by the “unbearable lightness of being,” “where things weigh nothing at all” (224). Since her endeavour to restore the diminishing past with life fails, this journey, like the idyll, promises her the
consolation of being rid of the forgetting she has fought against for so long. Raphael takes her to the edge of sea shore where a young boy waits for her next to a boat. The river she circumnavigates is connotative of the mythic river of forgetfulness in Greek mythology, the Lethe River. Tamina, along with the boy, rows to an unnamed island whose only inhabitants are children. The island typifies More’s island in Utopia. The island provides Tamina an escape from the gravity of memory that characterizes the cumbersome world at large burdened with the past. Upon arriving on the island, Tamina becomes a part of the undifferentiated mass, losing her identity in the process. She succumbs to the communal rituals and games on the island.

Tamina’s sojourn on the mysterious island edifies the theme of memory further. Tamina has to submit to the established protocols of the games practised by the children, who are fascinated with her mature body; and, she becomes an object of reverence and awe. “Tamina’s movement toward infancy is a movement toward an ideal of paradise where one has to desensitize oneself into a state of total surrender of memory” (Pillai 64). Tamina encounters an opportunity to live in a world where the borders of memory have no meaning. “She had “fallen far back to a time when her husband did not exist, when he was neither in memory nor in desire, and thus there was neither weight nor remorse” (241).

Tamina’s time on the island is an incessant present without a past, without memories of her husband. She realizes the absence of any desire for his presence either physically or mentally. As the narrative progresses, the reader becomes aware of the latent tension between Tamina and the children, which soon erupts into an open conflict during one of the games. When Tamina refuses to yield to their dictums, the earlier reverence of the children towards her turns into open hostility and viciousness, resonant of the oppression and violence inflicted by the regime on dissidents. Tamina’s story culminates with her final attempt at escaping the island of paradise.
While her previous attempt after the death of her husband was motivated with the desire to end life, the second is prompted by the desire for life. However, Tamina realizes that her swimming is futile because the island has not receded; she has been expanding her energy to remain still. Soon she succumbs to exhaustion as her body becomes heavier and heavier, pulling her under the water.

The children’s island is a dystopia in disguise—where innocence, forgetfulness and conformism have been perverted by being realized to the utmost degree possible. It is a perversion of the aphorism “no man is an island.” It is a caricature of the Czech nation and a metaphor for historical and political amnesia engulfing it, a land without memory as prognosticated by Kafka. As the narrator says:

The time of Kafka’s novel is the time of a humanity that has lost its continuity with humanity, of a humanity that no longer knows anything and no longer remembers anything and lives in cities without names where the streets are without names or with names different from those they had yesterday, because a name is continuity with the past and people without a past are a people without a name. (216)

In its juxtaposition of the inane and often oppressive children’s games and rituals on the amnesiac island with the politics of memory practised by the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, the text produces devils’ laughter. The island is a land without memory and history, an infantile world without names. It is a microcosm for the communist regime—a world of constant surveillance and a “desert of forgetting.”

The novel ends with the account of another character, Jan and his trip to a nudist beach. The nudist island is a parody of the communist idyll on two fronts. First, it mocksthe totalitarian
utopia with its emphasis on repetition, uniformity, sameness and homogeneity. Difference or “otherness” is banished from this idyll. Second, both are characterized by the erasure or forgetting of the past—the “airbrushing” of dissidents from the official history and the rejection of the legacy of Judo-Christian thought by the nudists. The beach is a “natural paradise,” a haven for vacationing nudists who “did not accept traditions that burdened mankind,” who rejected “the hypocrisy of a society that cripples body and soul.” Clothes—an artificial veneer—according to this group represents the “enslaving burden of the Judeo-Christian tradition” (312). Amnesia therefore is critical for the construction of a natural paradise. As Pifer comments:

The idyll of “perfect harmony,” perfect freedom, “perfect solidarity” requires that the accumulated legacy of the past—the traditions, norms, structures and systems of a civilization, the cultural language by which its members have identified themselves to one another and themselves—be not altered but erased. (72)

By discarding these external shackles the nudists achieve harmony with nature. As Edwige announces: “They’re as beautiful as nature . . . Human ugliness is the ugliness of clothes” (310).

The nudists, like Mirek, erase the memory of an imperfect history to create their own idyll. Freed from their constraints, they are rendered into oblivion, into the hell of a “single, undifferentiated being” (219). Released from the trappings of the past, they are suspended in an illusory present. At the beach, a nude man’s sermon on the end of Western civilization and its decadent traditions is undermined and rendered laughable by the narrator’s curt observation that as “the others listened with interest . . . their bare genitals stared stupidly and sadly at the yellow sand” (312). Released from the tenterhooks of the past, their bodies become empty and homogenous containers. The sight of naked bodies as an undifferentiated mass overwhelms Jan, bringing to his mind the image of the Jews walking naked into the gas chambers. Nakedness
instead of symbolizing freedom becomes uniform, repetitive, suffocating, disciplinarian and totalitarianism. On this account, Pifer observes:

The German nature participated in the dream of an Aryan paradise, . . . Genocide, the attempt to erase a people and their history from the face of the earth, is one outgrowth of that totalizing impulse, or "collective lyrical delirium," which makes the nude bathers so eager to free themselves of the fetters of the past. (72).

The nude man's expiation to the assembled crowd on the freedom entailed in nudity is concomitant with another similar image, that of Husak's clarion call for "infantocracy." In a parody of the re-naming of streets and falsifying of memories, Kundera re-christens Gustav Husak, the president instated by the Russians after the enforced removal of Dubeck, as "the president of forgetting." At an intersection of personal and national history, the author recalls the day when his father passed away. That day, recognized as the "Internationale," was resonant with the singing voices of children who were under the tutelage of "Pioneer Organizations," groups formed to indoctrinate budding citizens with the ideals of the idyll of communism. On the day that Kundera's father died, a ceremony is organized in order to confer the title of "honorary pioneer" to Gustav Husak by the children's group. At the end of the ceremony, the President addresses his assembled audience of children with the words, "Children you are the future! Children! Never look back!" This highly significant speech equates children with forgetfulness and oblivion. The state of childhood precludes memory of the past. As the narrator points out, children "bear no burden of memory." The President's injunction "never to look back" is a reminder of the idyll's pervasive penchant for circumventing the "burden of memory." The
desire to unburden history’s ponderous weight involves surrendering one’s collective as well as individual memory, the source of identity.

In this regard, the state is abetted, the narrator notes, by pop music. Describing an autobiographical moment, when he was taking a walk with his ailing father, the author observes that the nation played loudspeakers to cover their sadness, to invite “the occupied country to forget the bitterness of history and indulge itself in enjoying life” (248). Similarly, the children’s island “resounds with the shouting of a song and the din of guitars” (258). Music, in the narrator’s view, has “returned to its primeval state.” (248). He further says that the “president of forgetting” had implored to the famous pop singer, Karel Klos, who left the country, to return. Pop Music and the totalitarian regime congregate to create a land without a problematic past. As the narrator says:

Think about it: without batting an eye, Husak allowed the emigration of doctors, scholars, astronomers, athletes, stage directors, filmmakers, workers, engineers . . . but he could not bear the thought of Karel Klos representing music without memory, the music under which the bones of Beethoven and Ellington . . . are forever buried.

The President of Forgetting and the Idiot of Music were two of a kind. They were doing the same work. “We will help you, you will help us.” Neither could manage without the other. (249).

Totalitarianism, Kundera tells Philip Roth in an interview, “deprives people of memory and thus retools them into a nation of children.” The children’s island supports Rouvillois’s view that in utopias (totalitarian societies) the role of parents is greatly diminished. Drawing on Tommaso Campanella’s ideas, he says that their mere value is in the “utilitarian pursuit of the best possible, healthiest, and most beautiful progeny.” Children belong not to their families;
rather they are the “children of the state.” The image of childhood symbolizes the inane “infantocracy” taking over the nation, leaving them in a state of suspended paralysis. The constant tempering with the processes of remembering and forgetting induces a state of cultural, historical and political apathy in citizens, rendering them into a puerile state. The children of the island exist in an almost prelapsarian state of innocence which is infinitely light, “where repetitions are not variations” (215). In such a world, the past is not a burden or weight “because the essential ideal remains eternally unchanged” (Brand 216). Kundera delivers a stroke of comic genius by comparing the encomium delivered by a “man with an extraordinary paunch” on the nudist island with that of Husak’s call to the children of the nation to never look back. Their liberation from the bondage of the past is ahistorical and atemporal. Both celebrate liberation from the enslaving burden of the past and embrace a stagnant and illusory future. Laughter therefore grounds us to our shifting and contingent historical reality. It facilitates the development of a new alternative historical consciousness.

3.7. The Struggle of Man against Forgetting

While the previous sections illustrated the abuse of memory in the hands of power, the following section foregrounds memory as a site of power struggle, where entrenchment of oppressive power takes place as well as the destabilization of power. The sites of “strange forgetting,” which formed the narratives of origin, are transformed into sites of counter-memories. These alternate memories interrogate the very epistemologies of totalitarian system or idylls by problematizing and splintering their power edifice. Through the narratives on Tamina and Mama, the novel presents alternative perception of remembering and forgetting. Yet, these counter-memories are never outside the purview of textuality. These processes do not provide an
essentialized, transcendental version of the past. They are as much characterized by the processes of selectivity and forgetting.

On a metaphysical level, the novel through the “various variations” on the central theme foregrounds the elusive and fallible nature of human memory and condition. On a political level, they elucidate “forgetting is a form of repression” (Beall 241). Tamina is a metaphor for an émigré. Tamina’s story is an allegory for the state of Czechoslovakia. The two parallel stories of the death of Tamina and Kundera’s father are parables for the gradual erosion of Czech culture as it crosses the “desert of forgetting.” Towards their end, both are suspended in an infantile world. Tamina is the “experimental self Kundera invents in his effort to embrace the sordid reality of Prague, divested of its past” (Pillai 61). “The silence of my father,” the narrator writes, “[and] the silence of the hundred forty-five historians, who have been forbidden to remember . . . forms the background of the picture I am painting of Tamina” (221). Tamina’s eventual death, then, anticipated by the title of Part Six, is to be read as a manifestation of forgetting.

Mirek’s idolization of History, like the idyll of communism, is an assault on memory and life. Mirek struggles to retrieve the letters (past) in order to rework his memories. This revision as the writer makes it clear is no different from the stance of communist historians in their attempt to airbrush and reconstruct the past. Both originate with a desire towards a utopian ideal. Both gravitate towards an apocryphal past. Both take “Nietzsche’s advice to heart, and elevated the art of forgetting—in service to life—to a science” (Howard 25). Their selectivity and rewriting entails a violence and denial—it excludes the other voices, memories repugnant to them. Even though they exhibit machinations of textuality of memory, this textuality does not foster life but stifles it. As Mirek hurtles towards his goal, “he is entirely ignorant of the
dimensions of space, time and memory that surround him—in short, of the ‘life-world’ in which human life alone has meaning” (Howard 37).

Tamina’s attempts to escape the island of forgetfulness are attempts at restoration of life. “She does not want to give back to the past its poetry, she wants to give the past back its lost body. What is urging her on is not a desire for beauty. It is a desire for life” (119). Even though she fails, she dies struggling to achieve it, which constitutes not only the tragedy of life but “The struggle of man against power [and] forgetting.”

The problematics of memory are resolved for Kundera through the use of laughter and through the textualization of the past in service of life, not for its negation. While the other characters, Mirek and the Regime, are fixated on rewriting the past to achieve self-mastery and closure, Mama, in section two of the novel, textualizes the past in service of life. The second part of the novel is not a divergence from the perspective of politics and history, rather it personalizes and preserves the historical which is under an invasion of political and global amnesia. In this section, the reader is introduced to Karel and Marketa, the couple who are facing marital discord on account of the husband’s repeated infidelities. Karel claims genuine love for his wife and considers his philandering escapades separate from love and affection.

The setting of the narrative is the visit of their mother-in-law during their night of sensuality, with their occasional playmate Eva, for whom not love but only friendship and sensuality existed. Adhering to their motto “as far from Mama as possible” (37), the couple warm up to her because of her increasing senility. Now no longer a figure of terror and apprehension, Mama, Karel realizes, has developed a “faulty vision” that gives her a unique perspective to life: “what appeared large to them, she found small; what they took for boundary stones, for
her were distant houses” (40). Karel realizes that his mother has envisioned an inverted world where Soviet tanks on their soil are relegated to the background and innocuous things like fruits become centre stage. Some time prior to the Soviet incursion, Karel recounts, Mama had become infuriated with the local pharmacist who had failed to come, without an apology, to pick ripe pears. While the nation was preoccupied with Soviet presence, Mama was unable to forgive the pharmacist. Considering her nonchalant and childish then, Karel now wonders whether Mama was eventually right. On a grand scale of things, he understands now, historical character of events becomes less pivotal to the life-world and enduring things like seasons and pears.

However, Mama is not impervious or immune to her changing historical reality. She weaves these historical and political changes in the web of her life like a work of creation. Enjoying Eva’s company at her son’s house on the fateful night, Mama ventures to recount a specific memory of the formation of the Chezechoslovakian state. On the eve of the collapse of Austria-Hungary at the end of the war, Mama recited a poem at a school ceremony in order to celebrate the founding of the Republic. However, she could not finish the poem as she forgot its last stanza. Believing that she had completed reciting her poem, the audience applauded her performance. Mortified by her mistake, she ran to the bathroom and only came out after much coaxing by her principal who assured her that “she had been a great success” (45). At this point in the story, Karel interjects to correctly point out that Mama was still in high school during the war, that is, at the time Czech nation was created, she had already finished her graduation. Not admitting her mistake to her family, Mama feels “abandoned among her recollections, betrayed . . . by the failure of her memory” (46).
After much strained thought, she recalls that the poem had been performed at a Christmas celebration. Instead of acknowledging her mistake, she decides to play with her memories and chronological order by fabricating an alternative memory—the principal had invited her after graduation, because she had been the best at recitation, to deliver a patriotic poem when Czechoslovakia was formed. While the professed reason to concoct such a story is to assert her significance in her fading days and to maintain her status as an equal to her son, she textualizes the past because she thinks that as a patriot she deserved that honor and needed the amnesiac present, in the figures of her children and Eva, to reverberate with the forgotten stories, songs and flags of the past. She exercises her imagination and creatively reinvents herself.

Through the disparate narratives reflecting on the theme of forgetting, power and laughter, Kundera transforms the conflictual and ambiguous space of remembering and forgetting into a productive relationship between textuality and referent. Truth cannot be unproblematically mapped on to the historical referent. It is always contingent on imaginative, textual construction and interpretation of the past, a construction that bears responsibility and serves life.

The last section of the novel is interestingly named borders. The precursor to this part is Tamina’s culminating section which delineates her struggle against forces of enforced forgetting and kitsch and her eventual demise in that struggle. Tamina fails to achieve the desired goal—memory of the lost past, which is slowly fading away. Yet she realizes its indispensability and perishes fighting for it. Tamina is on the border between forgetting (laughter of angels, idyll) and remembering (devil’s laughter). Kundera does not reject the idea of an being on the border since “the good of the world” depends not on a triumph of the angels over the devils, but on a balance between angelic teleology (necessity) and demonic freedom (will)” (Howard 21). Human drama takes place between these borders.