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Reviewing Political Motifs in Kafka and Kundera: A Czech Story

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Abstract

This paper explores political motifs in the writings of Franz Kafka (1883-1924) and Milan Kundera (1929). These writers although hailed from Czech ethnicity and dwelled on social and political concerns of the region, do not represent the Czech canon of literary writings. Kafka's work is considered either among German or Austrian literary tradition and Kundera was stripped off his Czech nationality and later came to be classified under French literature. This makes an intriguing case to study as to how their incisive and often lacerating criticism of socio-political conditions in general and communist ideology in particular cost their literary fortunes in their immediate literary and academic environs.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, Milan Kundera, Political Motif, Communism, Velvet Revolution, Czech Literary Tradition

Political and literary histories of the erstwhile Czechoslovakia in European sce nario have remained copiously checkered with ideological convulsions and makeovers. Political frameworks in this part of the world have been redefined or revoked by the native intellectuals. The political consciousness of Czech people predominantly manifests itself in the canon of Czech literature. It becomes evident when one finds how for the greater part classification of Czech literary history remains full of nomenclatures marked by political turn of events. Its literary history is a prolonged tale of controlling dissident voices, co-opting and relinquishing the thematic alternative of Catholicism, forging ideological consensus through politically approved literary style of 'Socialist Realism' or at times even expelling the writers from its national canon. It was a time when Czech literature was conceived of with a tripartite categorization, viz., 'legal literature', 'illegal literature', and 'exile literature'.

The political framework serves as a significative necessity in Czech literature in that almost whole of creative enterprise gains in significance for the reader only when it is placed within its political context. The historical backdrop of Communism and the rise of democratic liberalism form archetypal repertoires in Czech fiction. Franz Kafka (1883-1924) and Milan Kundera (1929) are two such major writers who etched out Czech life and culture in the imagination of the world and yet none has formal recognition as a Czech writer. Franz Kafka lived for the most part of his life in Prague (then in Austria-Hungary) and made the place a literary constant in all his works. He is, however, subsumed under either German or Austrian literary history. And Milan Kundera, born in Brno, was stripped off his Czech nationality in 1979 and who later wished to include and classify his writings under French literature. These writers were either wished away or

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disowned by the State for their non-conformity. They, nonetheless, used Czech setting and its political disposition as their literary motifs and parodied human rationality and fickleness of institutionalized relationship in connection with ideological excesses that inconvenienced the Communist regime of their time. Although both of them lived in different times with quite different political developments, their lampooning took a dig against the common evil of totalitarianism.

An overview of the slice of political events happening during and after World War-I will be opportune here. It was when Kafka actively wrote. During the World War I, Czech themes pertained to inhumanity, violence and terror. The avant-garde writers of the time split into proletarian socialist, Catholics and communist authors. Later, in the wake of global economic slump of 1930s political crisis befell the Czech people that witnessed the polarization between the left (Communist) and the right (anti-German and Fascist) and threatened the free expression. Kafka offered his *chef d'oeuvre The Trial* (1925) in this decade. By 1941, most of the free newspapers, magazines and publishers were shut down and writers were silenced. It is during the World War II that either the Czech writers were published, banned or exiled depending on the line of thought they adopted. The postwar Czech literature was intricately enmeshed by the political ideologies. Literature under the communist regime, however, allegorically kept flashing the streaks of freedom and democracy. Later, literary works and authors were valued not only for their literary quality but also for their resistance to the regime. Nonetheless, 1948 was the year of a round victory of the Communist and the caesura of all forms of civic liberty—any literature contrary to the regimented perspective was controlled and the authors were persecuted. Other political parties were outlawed or downsized. The 'Secret Police' exercised unrestrained power. All economic assets became state property. These excesses of the Communist force were checked by the following short lived reform movement. A Slovak communist named Alexander Dubcek in 1968 introduced a reform movement called Prague Spring that essayed to project 'socialism with a human face'. Literary activities were somewhat liberalized and they broadened in scope beyond the officially approved style of 'socialist realism'. National economy was decentralized. The USSR alarmed of these reforms that could weaken the communist control of Czechoslovakia invaded the country and stalled the reform programmes. In the late 1980s the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia grew. A non-communist dissident dramatist turned leader, Václav Havel, became the new elected Czech president. This transition from communist to non-communist rule in Czechoslovakia happened peacefully without any gory conflict and it came to be known as the 'Velvet Revolution'. The new leadership reinstituted democratic institutions in Czechoslovakia. Freedom of the press and other political freedoms were restored.

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New laws were passed to revoke the legacy of communism from the legal system. The early 1990s was the time of economic growth and political growth. By then Kundera had already gained wider recognition and his philosophical and experimental novel *Immortality* came out in 1991. The political scenario, seemingly steady though, was seething with more activities. In 1993, the democratic Czechoslovakia broke apart into two nations: Czech Republic and Slovakia.

I

Kafka's settings remind one a condition in time after the Munich agreement of 1938 when Czechoslovakia was handed over to Hitler. In this new situation Prague was beautified with formal exterior but it continued with its sordid social reality. Kafka's literary consciousness was part of this unreality of Prague, his native place. He was never a citizen-believer in ideal Republic though; he reviled the unreal state character for wedging a misbegotten ideology-driven bureaucratic consciousness into the psycho-social behaviour of the citizens. He was dubbed a negative writer, self-indulgent, morbid to the point of being anti-social, bourgeois and supremely anti-Marxist. Until 1963 calling out Kafka's name in public was political taboo in his own country. Kafka, considering the plight of his day, portrayed man at the mercy of faceless sinister elements as were instituted by the communist bureaucracy whose agents of action were both wicked and stupid.

Kafka's protagonist Joseph K. in *The Trial* is the dissident voice who survives by isolating himself from the forged political consciousness. But his voice is heard in its inarticulacy; his non-conformity lies in his non-committal compliance with the communist system of law. This non-conformity in spirit figuratively stands for a virtue of democracy a virtue of disobeying respectfully. For this virtue of non-conformity is informed of the freedom of choice and discretion. Aspired by such democratic values, the Republic of Czechoslovakia was first mapped out of Austria-Hungary Empire in 1918. Ironically, its national history has it that the political values, like laws, of the country were either levied or lifted by the policy makers as and when it suited their purpose.

The Trial raises the questions on law-courts, bureaucratic red-tape, and man's utter inability to locate oneself in the imagined ideological structures such that bring about notional and rational bonding between the governing system and its citizens. In *The Trial* the horror of Joseph K.'s situation is that nobody within the novel challenges its facts. His arrest is literal; it is ridiculous and cannot be justified by any reasoning, whether political or legal. As if questions of propriety of action and feasibility of occurrence brought nothing to bear on rationale of cause and effect. In this regard, David Pryce-Jones in his 'Appreciation' to

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the 1935 edition of *The Trial* notes that all other characters—his uncle, lawyers, clients at the bank, the painter—exhibit their formal concern over his awful situation without questioning its probability. Nobody in the book acts in any way that proves the plot is improbable, and its improbability therefore is accepted. If this is a surrealist dream, there seems no waking from it, for the reality is incessantly displaced and condensed. It is displaced by the rigmarole of legal and bureaucratic institutions and condensed by the moments of Joseph K.'s escapes into fitful pleasure fulfilment. Joseph K.'s story exists as an allegory for the mankind where the truth of existence is lost to the ostentatious structures of civil society; the meaning of simple utterance is lost to the arcane jargon of civic discourse. It is the fate of *homo politicus* in the modern world.

The dubious fate of *homo politicus* in the civil society acts as an allegory in most of Kafka's writings which Deleuze and Guattari classify as 'minor literature'. The minor literature, as they aver, 'does not come from a minor language; it is that which a minority constructs within a major language'. Kafka inherited an ethnic rupture as a Jew using the German language for expression. That is, Kafka although writing in a major language, brought into it the elements of his Jewish minoritarian culture that produced something entirely new—a minor literature. Deleuze and Guattari identify three characteristics of a minor literature: a) it has deterritorialization of language; b) it sets an individual in immediate relation to politics, and c) such writing offers the 'collective assemblage of enunciation'. Frist, Kafka's Prague German imbued with Jewish culture is a deterritorialized language in that it put him at odds with both German and Czech cultural and territorial identities. Second, the *homo politicus* of Kafka invariably connects individual issues with familial, commercial, bureaucratic and juridical ones. Having everything political in nature is the second characteristic of minor literature. Third, it does not become a work of a 'master' or 'author' but it erases the authority of an individual voice and enunciates a non-individual, collective voice seeking revolution. Kafka succeeded in producing an active solidarity among people, for although banned for years, he kept flaring up the impulse for revolution in Czech youths. All his protagonists are non-individuals. Josephine the mouse in his story "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" renounces his individual talent to merge into the collective enunciation of the crowd of heroes of its people. In "The Investigations of a Dog" the lonely researcher joins the assemblage of collective enunciation of the canine species. The names of protagonists 'Joseph K' in *The Trial* and just 'K' in *The Castle* more than just designating a narrator or character play out as an assemblage that turns mechanical; an agent that becomes all the more collective. It stands for any *homo politicus* who is locked into his or her solitary life.

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Kundera locates *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) in a political framework with clearer space-time boundaries. The story unfolds during the Communist period, particularly from the Prague Spring to Soviet Union's invasion in 1968 and its aftermath. Oppressive external situation casts socio-political 'heaviness' or burden on the lives of Czech people which the characters seek to redeem by breaking free of communist ideology at intellectual level and puritanical moral obligations at emotive level. At philosophical level, the Nietzschean posit of 'eternal recurrence' of life is challenged that imposes 'heaviness' on human life. Nietzsche held that such heaviness could be either a huge burden or benefit depending on individual's choice. This view is challenged by reasserting Judeo-Christian belief that there is only one life to live which occurs only once. This modern *carpe-diem* allegory rejoices emancipation from any form of institutional control over mind and body.

Notable it is to observe that again one comes across an instance where the overtly weak institution of fine arts and literature is turned into a platform that allows space to engage critically with the public sphere. And the attempts of Communist regime to quash and abuse this 'free-space' are mocked in an instance when the Secret Police goes on air muckraking a novelist called Jan Prochazka who had bitterly lashed Communism. It is indicative of a public gesture quite topical though, that non-committalism was the new value emerging in totalitarianism. The Czech intellectuals represented by Tomás, Tereza, Sabina and Franz reject ideological and moral values which Europe held in esteem at a given point in history.

Tomás sets an interesting parallel between the Communists and Oedipus. The Czech Communists in the wake of Soviet invasion put up a public defence that they were deceived. That the promise of their ideological allegiance should not have led to such a sorry state of affairs that not only compromised Czech polity internationally but jeopardized its very freedom. The Communists were guilty of misguided intellectualism and fatal allegiance. Compared to them, the character of Oedipus emerges as one towering figure in that he owned up his guilt by punishing self and wandered away from Thebes. The ideological excesses then must be set right by other populist means. The Union of Czech Writers, therefore, attained "considerable autonomy within and dealt with issues forbidden to others. Consequently, it was the writers' paper that raised the issue of who bore the burden of guilt for the judicial murders resulting from the political trials that marked the early years of Communist power." (ULB, 171-172) Tomás, for a change, took to the role of a writer condemning the whole Communist regime for escaping with impunity. More than his statement, however, it was his use of figurative comparison with Oedipus that flared up public imagination which the Communists perceived as an intimidating call. With such views in print, Tomás, in fact,

committed *corpus delicti*. The progressive Communists persecuted him until he stepped down from the position of a surgeon to general practitioner and thence to a window washer. In fact, such ideological excesses meant to ring down the curtain on intellectual freedom. The Czech painters, philosophers and writers were brought to such a pass that they relinquished their position and became window washers, parking attendants, night watchmen, boilermen in public buildings or taxi drivers. Nonetheless, it is common knowledge that such political anxiety to regiment the differing and thereby opposing point of view only restores the tenacity of creative and free thinking in hard times.

In oppressive times, literary and artistic activities undaunted by their intimidating contexts assume a dissenting voice that dares catcall any power structure indulging in excesses. It has been true for all literary cultures in different times and particularly so for Czech literature.

Kundera's *Immortality* (1991) is set in different political framework but with no dissimilar significance. Although overtly apolitical, this novel lets in the political overtone as a subtext. Kundera does not expressly invoke the memory of regimental communist past in this novel. However, his characters share disbelief in the meta-narratives of all political forms, be it communist or democratic. Democratic values of freedom of choice and discretion are inverted for ulterior motives. The means of mass communication such as radio takes free opinion on another level. It is used as a means to tailor one's image in public opinion. Being of self is shadowed by seeming or appearing. The *free-play* of human actions in a free society makes the image of a person more valuable than the actual self-examination by the person; that is, in the modern world 'imaging' invariably supplements 'being'. Paul who anchors radio shows devised a news program on air which would frequently shift to some entertaining material. He designed a show whose contents easily switched over from serious to non-serious, news of tragic event with light humour, for he was convinced that his generation has lost the sense of discriminating serious from non-serious and that both are just inversions of each other. The new world does not deign to look into the particulars but is content with what is apparent. This makes him theorize on 'Imagology'—a science of forging an idealized image that remains unaltered forever. To him, the new free world values only imagoes. He says, '…in the last few decades, imagology has gained a historic victory over ideology'. And democratic environment best suits the purpose of imagology. It is the world of Baudelair's 'Dandies' and 'Flaneurs'; the first seeks attention by all means whilst the latter wants to be the part of the crowd and yet avoid all attention. In both the cases the plurality of company is fetishized. The public space is too wide and open for all that hardly any individual makes a memorable impression. When everyone is busy seeking attention or being a part of the crowd, only

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appearances come to matter. Thus, imagology becomes stronger than reality.

One of the major thematic concerns of the novel is human wish to control one's public image and posthumous recognition: how one is going to be remembered by the people—of present and time to come. Kundera deftly situates his literary concerns in democratic political framework where characters cunningly abuse their freedom of expression, participation and intervention so as to distort the historical facts and thereby control them in future. Freedom of intervention is tactfully manipulated by a woman called Bettina, who curries favour with all the important public figures; lures them into pseudo-intimate relationship; brings them to written exchanges with her, and later when the public figure is dead, she distorts historical fame due to the deceased by interpolating her version of past with them. She makes her memoirs circulate among the intelligentsia to gain in literary fortune. In fact, she surreptitiously steals away the dead author's literary fortune and encashes it for herself.

III

Kafka and Kundera instead of making polity or ideology as their subject, locate their interpretation of a human life in civil society in a framework which is unmistakably political. Quite in Jürgian sense, they show how a vehicle of public opinion, i.e., literature in this case, mobilize and charge the 'public sphere' in the political realm. It would be opportune here to elaborate little more on this. Jürgen Habermas while considering the intellectual role the bourgeoisie play in the political realm, traced the historical developments right from the times of feudal Europe. His purpose was to seek the origin of the Enlightenment ideal of reason. He observed that before the emergence of bourgeoisie (a class having wealth without having land-lordship or nobility) the socio-juridical privileges of power and right were distributed among the monarch and the traditional order or 'estates'—the nobility (the 'first estate'), the clergy (the 'second estate') and the commons (the 'third estate'). The monarch and the first two estates relentlessly exploited their positions. In the wake of new economic structures, the bourgeoisie gained social but not political power through its 'private' wealth, i.e., the pool of wealth but having no legitimate influence over the public sphere of the state. In this political framework, the bourgeoisie had no way to transform its increasing social and economic power into political power. So, this new class was helpless but to discard the whole political structure. The important change began with the transformation of the public sphere—the rise of 'civil society' in its current form. In the civil society the private person can gather without acting in any official capacity and share their views openly. It proliferated in the form of the salon, coffeehouses, literary

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meets, public readings, newspapers, periodicals, etc. The bourgeois intellectuals, thus, while functioning in their private realm, came to pro-actively engage with the public sphere in the world of letters. In fact, it is the critical reasoning of private persons on political issues that give rise to a public sphere in apolitical form which is literary activity. Both private and public spheres avail themselves a space in literary discourse for critical public reflections. Kafka and Kundera in enunciating the collective scepticism in their political frameworks assume the role of bourgeois intellectual.

One may also look at this obtaining situation by reversing gaze at these writers, for they present to us with utmost craftsmanship the western idea of 'nation-state' as a problematic in their socio-political contexts. A noted cultural historian Stephen Toulmin observes the synthetic nature of the western 'nation-state' and holds that in its apparatus the idea of 'nation-state' forged an artificial ordering of individual parts, not brought together by cohesion as in organic community, but united by fear. (Toulmin 1990: 211-12) Governance by the state was carried out with a worldview of cosmos that was seen to be governed by value-free mechanical laws. This situation was heralded particularly after new advancements proposed by Descartes, Bacon, Newton, Locke, and Kant among others who dissociated mind from body; philosophy from theology; physical laws from organic view of cosmology. The subsequent mechanist view of material life thus grew in absence of biological and social value system. By these values it is meant here a worldview that can offer a non-adversarial relationship of social communities with nature; mutual respect for the other ways of life. However, what seized the momentum with advancement of knowledge was individualistic humanism. The nation-state became a field of execution. Governance by the state in this worldview was carried out by man with artificial ethos. This model necessitated bureaucracy promising objectivity by reducing subjective decision making. Functional competence was valued over personal interaction and in this system people turned into replaceable parts in social machinery. It was a unique progress in the history of western civilization as opposed to the ancient oriental concept of organic community, for the western model presented an artificial ordering of its members united by anxiety of chaos and fear of instability. This collage of unity is understandable through the assertion of human rights and impersonal and bureaucratized government apparatus. In the modern society then isolated individuals and their impersonal public imago are linked together only by a consensus that serve their own interests, bearing no truck with humanity at large. This is the split of spiritual and material; organic and mechanistic; individual and societal; community and nation-state. The resultant tension of psycho-social instability and forced synthesis of cultural plurality inherently resides in these cases and in other creative instances in the form of an archetypal motif—a motif

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common to many modern European writings.

In both Kafka's and Kundera's texts referred to here, the idea of free 'civil citizenry' applies itself as a trope. The values of free citizenry loomed large in the authorial critique of their socio-political settings. In Kafka's discourse it was absence of such values in his immediate surroundings whilst in Kundera's it was a parody of them. There is no telling whether or not these two Czech intellectuals consciously perceived behind an idea of free 'nation state' a rational which was perpetrated by European value system for so long—a rationale that was built on the bases of binary logic, longing for order by rational and physical control, and hierarchical syncretism. Western social history is replete with instances of shock, turbulences and collapse when this metaphysical rationale breaks down and fails to serve what it promises. Works of Kafka and Kundera collectively signify iteration of an immanent discord in the principles viz. free-nation, civil-citizenry, propriety of thought and action among others ever so cherished in European polity. These texts review their own view of civilians' lives in political frameworks.

These ruminations, however, point to a fact that literary discourse and ideological structures in literature have always been intricately interweaved with each other. Novels in most literary traditions have yielded to offer polysemic latitude to voice the difficult, resist the unreasonable, and pitch forward the disbelief. These two major writers lived for most part of their life in Czech parts. With their creative insights, they relentlessly wreaked havoc on intellectual and ideological shams. Their uncanny contribution helped Czech writing earn a place in the world literature. And yet do we not see the rationale of free 'nation-state' again dangling when both these writers get stripped off their claim to Czech literary tradition? In the history of ideas, would it at all matter for a country to be of first or second world where nonconformity of thought is reckoned for its threatworthiness? Questions of this sort ensure one that Kafka and Kundera as writers of modern bureaucratized, enfranchised European civil society wrought the apogee of socio-political metanarrative of their time for the posterity to review.

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