

ISSN: 0976-8165

Vol.8, Issue-V (October 2017)

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

*8th Year of Open Access*

*The Criterion* 

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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## Looking through the Iron Curtain: Dynamics of Totalitarianism in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

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**Article History:** Submitted-19/07/2017, Revised-30/10/2017, Accepted-06/11/2017, Published-20/11/2017.

### **Abstract:**

The paper aims to reflect upon the existential possibility, peculiar to the postwar Europe and the rise of Communist ideology, as it appears in the works of Milan Kundera especially *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The postwar central and Eastern Europe experienced a tyranny of political power that resulted into a corpus of literature designated as literature of the Iron Curtain. The cataclysmic situation created an incomprehensible existential dilemma that Kundera has given a phenomenological description in his novel. Although Kundera is deeply rooted in history and geography, the philosophical discourse he has developed on the dynamics of power and existence has some wide and profound implications, offering the reader some insights even into the life beyond the Iron Curtain. Therefore, the underlying argument is that Kundera's novel should not be confined to history and geography. It would, similarly, be a far less rewarding reading to take it for a satire on totalitarian regime. The insight one gains from the novel reveals certain tendencies of state power and its impact on human existence that characterise probably the contemporary world irrespective of ideological differences and political dispensations.

**Keywords:** Kundera, existence, power, memory, forgetting

### **Introduction**

Milan Kundera was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1929. He wrote his first novel *The Joke* in 1965, but it was not published till 1967 due to state censors. Written under the Communist regime, which took over Czechoslovakia in 1948, the novel is of great importance to trace the artistic and intellectual evolution of the author. It gives the reader certain glimpse of the mechanics of the mind which can see through what happens in the human world, an indispensable duty and quality of the artist to face and study the present. *The Joke*, as the dynamics of the title suggests, reveals Kundera's disposition which underwent greater philosophical sophistication in his later works, particularly, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1978) and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). He is one of those writers, George Orwell, for one, who seems to have little respect for authority. He is sceptical and critical of power into whatever forms it exist and operates, a philosophical attitude that one can find in western philosophy, more prominently since Immanuel Kant, a spirit that characterises the whole postmodern attitude of which Michel Foucault is considered a great

exponent. The sudden death of what embodies the values of enlightenment under the suffocation of totalitarian power and its implications for human existence constitute one of the fundamental themes of Kundera's writings.

Kundera's first novel *The Joke* explores the life, fortunes and erotic adventures of a young Czech student called Ludvik. Written in seven parts, like most of Kundera's novels, *The Joke* has a definite historical setting, that is, the 1948 Communist take-over of Czechoslovakia and its political consequences, dream and disillusionment, a theme on which Kundera develops a lasting and definite perspective. In the context of the incomprehensible rise of tyranny, Kundera intermittently focuses on the condition of culture, art, language, literature, history and music of Bohemia. Unlike the current name Czechoslovakia, Bohemia seems to offer the reader a historical perspective about his country. In his scheme of things, Bohemia reminds one nostalgically of the pristine glory, evocative of its art and culture, language and history that have suffered irretrievable mutilation with the changing political conditions.

Since Kundera is rooted in history, the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia determined his whole perception of power and human existence, which he has developed into novelistic and philosophical discourse. The 1968 Russian invasion was a traumatic moment for Kundera and his countrymen when Russia imposed a vicious Communist regime of terror, oppression and destruction. Kundera lost his position in the university and his books were proscribed in his country. He was eventually forced into exile in France where he has been living since 1975. This experience of suffering and persecution has affected his writing profoundly. Thus, for Kundera, as his novels show, literature is not a matter of entertainment. His novels, like the works of the whole generation of postwar writers documenting the tyranny of Communism and massacre of the values of enlightenment and humanism, represent, what Bell designates "novels of protest against oppression and injustice" in "the form of brutal realism" (07).

On the artistic and stylistic level, one can further argue that, for Kundera, writing is not a matter of the spontaneity of imagination; rather, it requires deliberate structuring of plot and construction of narrative. And, in this respect, Kundera differs from his predecessors writing in the mode of traditional realism. His artistic experiment is based on the post-modernist logic, that is, the discovery and development of a host of techniques and symbols to describe the unprecedented human phenomena. Since Kundera confronted an unusual human condition, he conducts a variety of artistic experiments to impress upon the consciousness of his reader. This is how he perhaps strives to strike a balance, and also to mark a distinction, between literature and history. Such innovations in fact define the whole post-modernist literature. Kundera's narrative displays a remarkable fusion of aesthetics and existence.

### **Structure and Narration**

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is rightly considered, as Kimball observes: "Kundera's most accomplished work" especially because of its narrative innovations (36). Kundera has developed his narrative technique on the model of music, on the play of variations, which involves selection of a series of incidents and events, set of

characters historical as well as imaginary. The whole narrative is interspersed with leitmotifs unfolded through the self-conscious narrator, who is often intrusive, representing the artistic self of the author.

Kundera often interrupts and arrests the progress of narration by deploying the technique of digression. It is not unusual to find comments on contemporary history, politics, art, language and culture, even on the art of writing the novel, in a mode marked by repetition, transference and displacement, suspense and postponement. Thus, Kundera has added adroitly elements of metafiction to his narrative. It affirms, as Kimball emphasises that “Kundera is indisputably a writer of enormous talent”(34). Kundera writes of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: “This entire book is a novel in the form of variations. The individual parts follow each other like individual stretches of a journey leading toward a theme, a thought, a single situation, the sense of which fades into the distance”(165). All the seven parts of the novel, with different sets of characters and incidents that deliberately disturb the chronological and linear progress of narration, are not without thematic unity. It not only marks a departure of considerable significance from the tradition of realistic narrative but also shows Kundera’s profound interest in his craft and art of composition. Thus, Kundera has made a crucial contribution to the development of postwar European fiction. By constructing a polyphonic composition and employing a strong intrusive and autobiographical narrator, as Frank argues, “Kundera’s novels strike a balance between dialogic and monologic tendencies”(119).

Kundera’s obtrusive narrator, however, frequently draws upon fictional, autobiographical and historical materials. This apparently paradoxical equation brings into focus the terminal nature of the predicament of the characters and their author, offering some strange insights into the paradigm of novel and history. The narrator in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is not only intrusive, who even occasionally refers to himself as the author ‘Milan Kundera’, in Merrill’s definitive observation “the narrator of Kundera’s novel is meditative, reflective and ironic”(79).

One of the important dimensions of Kundera’s narration is the displacement and mutation of the chronological order. By challenging the unilinear progress of narration, Kundera seems to maintain a fundamental difference between history and fiction. Since he defines his novels as an exploration of human existence, the narrative in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is elliptically composed in which only those events, images, metaphors and symbols are integrated which are relevant to the author’s existential preoccupation. It means that for a writer like Kundera novelistic composition is a self-conscious operation which involves deliberate process of distinction, selection and rejection in the development of the plot. On the poetic plane, one can discern an analogy between Kundera and T.S. Eliot’s art of narration in *The Waste Land* (1922). Kundera is an extremely experimental and innovative writer. He uses the novel’s internal receptivity to expound his concept of narrative style, theory of novel and aesthetics. It defies the traditional system of novelistic classification denying reductive reading.

The above observation does not mean that Kundera's characters are subordinate to the author's thematic obsession and do not have any real and autonomous existence. Here one has to be a bit qualified regarding Kundera's concept of character and his philosophy of existence, as it challenges the idea of characterisation one finds in the realistic novel. His narration and characterisation are defined by remarkable precision and parsimony. He provides only those details about the background of his characters which can help the reader to understand their predicament. They appear and disappear in the story like fragments. The hypothesis is that what make a character realistic in a novel are not the biographical details, but the event and incidents which determine one's existential condition. A character acquires his or her individual identity only in relation to what determines his or her life, the rest are of secondary significance. The proposition has led Kundera to deploy a set of images such as, laughter, forgetting, devil and the angel, graphomania, circle dance, and his theory of *litost* to foreground the existential dilemma, what Kundera calls the unbearable lightness of being, of which Tamina in the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is one of the most potent symbols.

### **Nature and Operation of a Totalitarian Power**

Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is a reflection on human condition in a totalitarian state. The whole novel is about the plight of the central character Tamina upon which all the seven parts of the novel can be read as variations. "It is a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina is absent, it is a novel for Tamina. She is its main character and main audience, and all the other stories are variations on her story and come together in her life as in a mirror"(165). One can read her story as an account of the existential dilemma of a Czech émigré, a victim of an alien occupation. One can find an analogy of suffering between Tamina and her author. Critics of Kundera have read his works from this angle, underlining the artistic, linguistic problem and psychic mutilation of the writer in exile, as Miletic has tried to discover (15-88). The pain of the loss of contact with one's own country, its language and culture, Kundera has documented with a poignant sense of nostalgia. One can perceive the author's deep identification with Tamina whom he has delineated into one of his most tragic characters.

Kundera's narrative often draws upon the catastrophic history of his country. The 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia was a nightmarish experience for him. In his writings, particularly, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, there is a detail account incorporated in the narrative about what happened to the helpless people when the Soviet Union imposed a reign of tyranny unleashing visceral horror that could break the will of the subjugated people. For Kundera, a writer of profound historical consciousness, the Soviet invasion has some symbolic meanings around which he has developed an insightful philosophical discourse on the nature of human existence and the propositions of freedom and survival (this aspect has been taken up later in this paper). He seems to be anguished how certain strong and alien power can determine the fate of a small and powerless country. The Soviet Union not only occupied Czechoslovakia, it imposed a totalitarian regime against the will of the people which

started a systematic programme of political purgation, massacre of culture, fabrication and liquidation of history, falsification and corruption of language and literature, harassment, persecution, execution and banishment of those intellectuals and writers considered to be dangerous individuals, forcing them either to conform or to perish. Many prominent individuals, whom Kundera has referred in the novel, were forced to survive in a denigrating and self-humiliating condition, a theme of depersonalisation which informs the whole novel. Thus, Kundera recalls the horror in the aftermath of the invasion:

Russia, composer of the master fugue for the globe, could not tolerate the thought of notes taking off on their own. On August 21, 1968, it sent an army of half a million men into Bohemia. Shortly thereafter, about a hundred and twenty thousand Czechs left their country, and of those who remained about five hundred thousand had to leave their jobs for manual labor in the country, at the conveyor belt of an out-of-the-way factory, behind the steering wheel of a truck – in other words, for places and jobs where no one even could hear their voices(14).

Many of the dissidents, victims of the political persecution, were gradually forgotten and became invisible. The author himself became a *persona non grata* which he has described through the magical metaphor of circle dance in (the part third of) the novel. It symbolises that under the modern totalitarian state one has either to conform with the will of the power or one would be destroyed. So long one dances in a circle one survives, once one is out of the circle, one gets alienated. It is a negation of free will and individuality, of the very idea of scepticism. That is, it is stupidity and conformity that ensure one's survival. If one takes a philosophical view of, it one can argue that continuity of historical consciousness is a threat to power. A totalitarian state with Fascistic tendencies tries its best to confuse, break or even obliterate it, a proposition which Kundera has put in a magical aphorism, which is in fact the central theme of the novel : “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (03).

The question of memory and forgetting constitutes the central obsession of Kundera. All his characters are marginalised, depersonalised and alienated entities. There is a very strong element of nostalgia, which reflects Tamina's existential futility. When individual are deprived of their private identity, they develop a huge sense of nostalgia. The way Kundera has delineated them, as fragmented entities seems to suggest that, since it is difficult to have any illusion of a free and complete individual in a totalitarian state, characters in his novel are the symbolic representation of the individuals in the real life. They seem to be uprooted, erased from their past. Kundera seems to suggest that erasing people's memory and denying them of their past, or rendering their life so difficult that they simply cannot care for their past, is the existential dilemma of the modern man. The author makes a diagnosis into this paradox by deploying a set of characters, symbols and images, and by fusing history and biography, reality and fantasy. The whole narrative is interspersed with digressions, aphorisms, verbal clichés and philosophical contemplations.

There are two aspects of forgetting. There are conditions in which the power deliberately renders life of the people parenthetical through violence and oppression. The second one is that in which the individual himself desperately wants to erase his past in an attempt to re-write it. The first part of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* deals with this ironic parallel. Mirek, an outspoken political dissident, who has fallen out of the favour of the regime, behaves in his private life like the Communist regime. He is desperate to erase the traces of his mistakes of the youthful days with Zdena. Kundera sets this paradox in an existential perspective in which what happens happens only once:

we are all prisoners of a rigid conception of what is important and what is not. We anxiously follow what we supposed to be important, while what we supposed to be unimportant wages guerrilla warfare behind our backs, transforming the world without our knowledge and eventually mounting a surprise attack on us (197).

When the Communist took over Czechoslovakia in 1948 revolution, Clementis stood by the Communist leader Klement Gottwald, when the latter was to address people from the balcony of a Baroque palace in the old town square in Prague. The revolution was driven by the dream of establishing paradise on the earth. It was a grandiose programme whose champions were called dynamic and intelligent. Possessed by the lyrical attitude, they and their collaborators wanted to turn their dream into reality, to create an idyllic world. They simply could not realise, but after it was too late, in the illusion of paradise they were creating hell :

And suddenly those young, intelligent radicals had the strange feeling of having sent something into the world, a deed of their own making, which had taken on a life of its own, lost all resemblance to the original idea, and totally ignored the originators of the idea. So those young, intelligent radicals started shouting to their deed, calling it back, scolding it, chasing it, hunting it down (09).

One can hardly miss Kundera's ironic perception to what he calls lyrical attitude, the lack of scepticism in the politics and economy of existence, which a totalitarian power induces in the people beyond the pale of ignorance. Four years later, the same Clementis, who once accompanied Gottwald, suffered political purge. He was convicted of treason and executed. His name and image were washed from history. He became a shadow erased from the memory of the people. One can see the irony in Kundera's contrasting portrayal of Clementis and Mirek's existential predicament. If Clementis was turned into a shadow, and there remained nothing on Gottwald's head but the hat of Clementis, Mirek is struggling to erase the traces of his own past with Zdena, a laughable situation, the gravity of which lies beneath the surface, a conspicuous quality of Kundera's narrative. The ability to render an existential predicaments laughable, rather ludicrous, while the whole situation is so gruesome, has something to do with Kundera's uncanny perception of human existence.

For almost twenty five years Mirek and Zdena lived together, but the political situation has affected their life so badly that they are heading in different directions. In a totalitarian society it is not only the public but even the private life and relations are



determined by political ideology. The classical notion of individuality, emanating from the philosophy of humanism, is either blurred or abolished into the claustrophobic atmosphere. Kundera, who so strongly identifies with western values of humanism and enlightenment, is disconcerted by the whole dehumanisation and depersonalisation of the individual. In the words of Miletic : “Kundera considers the public and private sphere’s of life to be distinct, opposed poles of existence..... Any attempt to realize in concrete existence a fusion of political and individual is doomed not only to fail, but also to generate a dangerous illusion” (224). In a totalitarian state people do not have private life. Equipped with sophisticated means of surveillance and interception, the state and its institutions can penetrate into the core of existence. To illustrate this phenomenon at a philosophical level, the author has given Tamina’s struggle to protect her private self from the gaze of the power the most depressing description in (parts four and five of) the novel.

In a totalitarian state there are only two possibilities of survival: either to conform and collaborate and remain silent or to face persecution and execution. Those who happen to be on the other side of ideological spectrum, like the characters in Kundera’s novel, are chased and confiscated by secret police, imprisoned or banished. Thus, they become invisible and forgotten. In this respect, Kundera readily blends personal and political in such a way as if he is one of the characters in his own novel. He wants to realise himself through the situations and characters he creates. He was suspected, suspended and marginalised and eventually went underground and started writing astrology column under a pseudonym for his survival. Later on, his identity was discovered by the agents of the state, its horrific consequences for his friends, Kundera has converted into a moving narrative. He tells the story of his own plight under the tyranny of totalitarian state, yet the story has broader meaning and appeal. Though, literature, unlike history, is a documentation of individual consciousness, nevertheless, it has universal appeal. He describes his fall from the circle of the power in a mode that is both comic and tragic.

Kundera has structured his novel in such a way that it has different narrative strands. In part six of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera tells his personal story, the story of his father’s death. The death of his father is as pathetic as that of Tamina at a different plane. Tamina is indeed, as Pichova cogently remarks: “one of the most heart-wrenching heroines in all of Kundera’s fictions” (46). She is the symbol of the individual uprooted from time and place. Tamina, a fugitive who lost her husband when they tried to sneak through the border of Czechoslovakia, desperately struggles to preserve her personal memory. After 1968 invasion, when the authorities started hunting down the political opponents and adversaries, Tamina fled from her country to avoid persecution. Deprived of her home and her personal assets, she started her struggle for life and became a waitress in a café in France. Before her departure, she had left her photos and letters with her mother-in-law in order to avoid confiscation and arrest by the police. The idea that her personal letters become a prey of an alien gaze was an unbearable apprehension for her.



In the struggle to remain in touch with her past and to preserve the memory of her deceased husband, Tamina makes all possible effort to regain the letters she exchanged with her husband. In this respect, she seeks in vain help of her new acquaintances like Bibi and Hugo. She is seduced and badly exploited by Raphael before she meets her tragic end. She experiences a series of humiliation and betrayal. She is a symbol of a fortuitous existence in a world where individual's will carries no weight against the overwhelming external conditions. Like all Kundera's helpless characters, she is reduced to her body, before she became a shadow. In order to dramatise her helplessness at a symbolic level, Kundera has incorporated his philosophical essay on *Litost* in the narrative. It is an attempt to diagnose into the psychic operation of the individual confronted with an incomprehensible power. It symbolises existence without will and soul, a denial of all the vestiges of the virtues associated with humanism and heroism.

### **An Existential Discourse**

Although Kundera is concerned with the possibility of human existence under a totalitarian condition at a particular point of history, the immediate history of Czechoslovakia in particular, and the postwar European history in general, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* can be read as an existential discourse with implications which go beyond history. This is perhaps the suggestion which one can hardly overlook at the symbolic level of the text. The existential outlook, which Kundera's novel personifies, emerged in Europe with the inception of the twentieth century, with that impersonal march of history and politics which no civilisation had perhaps ever experienced in the past.

Wars and violence, terror and destruction inflicted deep wound upon European sensibility and determined its whole consciousness. The assumption that historical and political circumstances determine the existential condition of man is a postwar European reality. This is what Sartre seems to underline in his observation: "History flowed in upon us; in everything we touched, in the air we breathed, in the page we read, in the one we wrote" (164).

Kundera is obsessed by the contemporary historical and political forces. What he experienced, and describes as totalitarian power is, in fact, a tendency of the state power peculiar to the modern time, when man has started exercising his power over his fellow beings like divine authority. Totalitarianism should not be identified only with the particular form of political dispensation with concentration of power and oppressive institutions, the same behaviour of power one can perceive in other modes of governance with different ideologies. Kundera reflects: "I have come to realize that the problem of power is the same everywhere, in your country and ours, East and west. We must be careful not to replace one type of power with another" (107).

With the birth of the modern Europe, man was possessed with the spirit to know the material world and the acquisition of knowledge was supposed to enlighten, emancipate and empower humanity. This grand discourse on progress generated its own illusion. This is how Kundera relates the problems of the present with the past, a

disillusionment which is common to almost all his contemporary writers and philosophers. The humanistic ideas accompanied with inordinate ambition for knowledge has paradoxically consolidated the power of the state, while the individual has been losing his traditional ground. The Fascistic tendency of the state power can be traced back to the postulates which led to the rise of the modern Europe. Camus observes that this “strange and terrifying growth of the modern state can be considered as the logical conclusion of inordinate technical and philosophical ambitions” (146). There perhaps has never been any serious effort to alter this equation of power. All revolutions in the name of human freedom have paradoxically been counterproductive, undermining and compromising the position of the powerless. Reflecting on the paradoxical birth of the democratic era, Camus writes: “All modern revolutions have ended in a reinforcement of the power of the state. Seventeenth Eighty nine brings Napoleon; 1848 Napoleon III; 1917 Stalin; the Italian disturbances of the twenties, Mussolini; the Weimar Republic, Hitler” (146).

This disillusionment with history makes one conscious that it is a great fallacy to see power from moral perspective. The nature of power is to dominate and usurp the freedom of the other irrespective of ideological differences. The difference between a democratic and totalitarian power is not what is often mistaken but in the methodology and its operation. Insight gained from Sigmund Freud makes one conscious that the unconscious aims of human institutions and practices are dramatically opposed to the propositions consciously associated with them. This is perhaps one of the reasons for an impregnable opaqueness in the behaviour of all social and political institutions. The fundamental, rather, unconscious instinct of all power is not to let man be a free individual. That is why every power tries to erase memory of the people and all its associations, to undermine all modes and possibilities of reactions and resistance in the process of perpetuating itself. Totalitarian state may employ all oppressive measures, including violence and persecution, to obliterate the memory of the people, at times even forcing them to falsify their own memory. It may disturb historical continuity; annihilate culture, corrupt language, as one can see in the novel of Kundera. It may even reduce the individual to the body in a process of depersonalisation. For instance, Kundera’s characters are not only alienated entities, they have been reduced to their physical existence. They indulge in mechanical erotic adventure. Kundera does not take a moral view of their sexual indulgence, he, rather, seems to draw the attention of the reader to their pathetic condition, their utter helplessness. The recurrent theme of sexual indulgence in Kundera is an expression of, what Sturdivant calls, “helplessness and meaninglessness over mankind’s fundamental existence” (27). It reveals the individual’s precarious existence with, in Miletic’s phrase, “polysemic marks of fragile identity” (308).

If one takes totalitarianism as a metaphor, the tendencies it signifies are very much operative, in the garb of abstract illusions, even in the so called democratic societies, where state can manipulate sophisticated means to usurp people of their mental freedom, keep them away from facts, rape their privacy on dubious propositions. In this way, it may not only promote enslavement, howsoever concealed,

but adopt different instruments, which are least suspected of their banality, to make people less conscious. For instance, to be concrete, besides beneficial role, the political, economic and cultural institutions, contrary to general assumptions, often tend to promote ignorance and confusion in the people and keep them away from arriving at facts which affect their daily existence. Critical analysis of the operation of some of the entertainment and advertising agencies in the contemporary capitalist societies reveals the same pernicious role in blurring peoples' rational faculties and dulling their consciousness as force and violence in a totalitarian society. When men are pushed into desperation, as if they are governed by some impersonal forces, they can neither have their individual identity nor can they form any coherent view of the world around them. Their personality and perception are fragmented and existence looks so fortuitous and fragile that Kundera philosophically calls lightness of being. Kundera's unique away of exposing the utter helplessness of the individual before the political power and its institutions reads like a parody of Nietzschean idea of individuality and free will.

With the increasing power of the state to penetrate into the life of the people, totalitarianism has become almost an attitude to life, a phenomenon of the contemporary world. People may not realise it unless they face a borderline situation. With the progress of civilisation, mankind has gradually come to be governed by certain political and economic forces which seem to be entirely impersonal imperatives. Huxley and Orwell, the two most remarkable men of the twentieth century, had apprehended this phenomenon long ago. Under such a condition, the state may indulge into all sorts of absurd activities, misplace its priorities, in order to promote the plight of the people and perpetuate itself. It is also an admission to the sceptical mind that the power of the state to improve the fundamental social condition of man is very limited, but its power to promote existential plight is so immense.

Kundera's perception of power and existence is very deterministic. In his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* there is neither any abstract nor Utopian notion about the behaviour of power and human condition. Yet one can hardly fail to perceive that had state not acquired so much power, the existential condition of the ordinary people would have been very different. Kundera's exposition of the behaviour of the totalitarian power makes an illuminating reading into human instinct to imitate divine power. Although Kundera's observation looks extreme, there are phases in history when life looks like the one depicted in his novel. There was a time when confronted with the power, the powerless could escape or even overthrow it. With the ascendancy of modern state power, such expression of human will, individuality, rebellion and heroism has become an illusion, a sense of helplessness and futility, which Kundera has suggested through the metaphor of *Litost*. Therefore, it is through conformity, as the circle dance symbolises, or rather, through obedience and submission that one can hope for redemption. This kind of existential paralysis of man one can find only in the myths and allegories of the past, which deal with man God relationship. In Kundera, one sees the helplessness of men against his own fellow being at the helm of the power. Kundera is a kind of novelist who does not offer any illusion of freedom. That is why his novel, which deals with an extreme situation, makes a very depressing reading.

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