

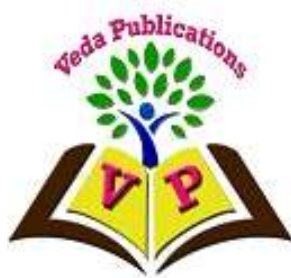


ELUCIDATING THE EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLE OF CZECHOSLOVAKIANS

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ABSTRACT



Czechoslovakia, a central European country was occupied by Austro-Hungarian Empire after First World War (1914- 1918). Later Germans occupied it during the Second World War (1939-1945). It was liberated in 1945 by Soviet and American forces. In 1946 Communist party won the elections and occupied Czechoslovakia until the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Czech was peacefully dissolved and became the independent states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia on 1 January 1993. Modern Czech literature is divided into numerous periods like 19th century, the avant-garde of interwar period, the years under Communism and the Prague Spring, and the literature of the post-Communist Czech Republic. Milan Kundera (1929 -) comes under the year of Communism and Prague Spring. In his two novels *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he described the gloomy life of Czechs, who were under the control of Communists from 1948-1989.

Keywords: *Exile, Absurdity, Communist Regime, Struggle, Existence, Identity, Facticity, Authenticity.*



BACKGROUND STUDY

In the late sixties writers like Ferdinand Peroutka, Pavel Kohout, Ivan Klima, Ludvik Vaculik and Milan Kundera conflicted with the Communists. They tried for a free exchange of ideas and protested the rising suppression of political criticism. The important journalists and writers main conflict with the government arose at the 4th Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers (1967). Kundera expresses his views rhetorically to the point. H. G. Schauer in his article Our Two Questions questioned: "What is the role of our nation? What is our role in the history of mankind? What is the nature of our national existence? Are we as secure in our own house as we think we are? Is our national existence really worth the effort? Is its cultural value really so enormous?" (*Writers Under Siege* 117). These questions raised predominantly from the end of the 19th century. Kundera was strictly against to all the forms of censorship. He demanded the socialist and realistic art. He called all his contemporary writers to revolt against the power of bourgeois. Kundera criticized the Writers Union after it had supported the ideas of pluralism. In 1969, Milan Kundera and Vaclav Havel disputed to reform Communists and the young sixties generation of writers. Kundera's essay *Our Czech Destiny* describes Prague Spring 1968 and its impact on the world. In the essay, *Our Czech Destiny* Kundera said: "The Czech autumn was perhaps of even greater importance than the Czech spring"; so hope was not lost for further developments from the events of January." (*Writers Under Siege* 123). Kundera describes the life of common people under the dictatorship but he is not a political writer. In his work *The Art of the Novel*, he narrated avant-garde movement and avant-garde novelist Vladislav Vancura. Kundera's heroes and heroines were tried to escape the normal and dull life in the land of weak. He described the lives of many other individuals and portrayed Czech society from 1948 to the mid-sixties in his works. He lost his Czech citizenship because of his anti-Communist activities and became a French citizen. He reflected French culture more and more after he had gotten French citizenship. "Kundera stressed that Bohemia and Moravia were not part of Eastern Europe but were part of Western civilization, particularly of the culture

of Central Europe. According to Kundera, what particularly distinguishes the Central European novel, by writers such as Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, Jaroslav Hasek, Hermann Broch and Witold Gombrowicz, is skepticism and the way it exposes all myths". (*Writers Under Siege* 170)

Kundera secured good name and fame after he had exiled to France. Exile literature began with the writers who had gone out of the country and had lived in difficult circumstances. The writers of exile removed the domestic art scene and conserved the older literary language. They stressed the values of home and the homeland. Milan Kundera was one of the best writers in exile literature. He nominated for Noble prize along with Gunter Grass, Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Milan Kundera is a postmodernist. His father was a musicologist. His cousin was Ludvik Kundera (1920) a poet, essayist and translator. Kundera studied composition, literature and aesthetics at Charles University. His contemporary writers were Jan Trefulka, Ivan Klima, Pavel Kohout. He, Jan Trefulka and another friend were excluded from the Communist Party after a student rag. Trefulka focused this episode on his short story *Happiness Rained on Them* (1962). Kundera inserted this same episode in his novel *The Joke*. He completed film production and script-writing at the Film Academy in Prague 1958. He became a senior lecturer in 1964. In the sixties, he defined a school of thought to reform Communism. In all his works, he accorded Czech culture deliberately. Kundera said that Czech culture had long isolated from the rest of the world, by Nazism, Stalinism, and had endangered by the loss of history. Kundera books were not published after 1970 but they appeared in translations. He exiled to France in 1975, where he taught in the universities of Rennes and Paris. He came to the attention of the public of France, by focusing Czech and Central European democratic culture. He lost his Czech citizenship in 1978 and became a French citizen in 1981. His books were written and published in French from the mid-eighties. Milan Kundera comments in first- person point of view and his characters comment in third- person point of view. He concentrates on psychological condition of



characters more than their physical condition. In his non-fiction work *The Art of The Novel* he said, the reader's imagination automatically had completed the writer's vision. He uses themes like exile, identity and life beyond the border in his entire work. He presents more than one main character throughout his novel. His early novels present tragic and comic aspects of totalitarianism. He is influenced by Franz Kafka and his dark humor. Kundera considered himself as a writer without a message and he said: "I was delighted with the misunderstanding. I had succeeded as a novelist. I succeeded in maintaining the moral ambiguity of the situation. I had kept faith with the essence of the novel as an art: irony. And irony doesn't give a damn about message." (Kundera, Milan (6 March 1988). "Key Words, Problem Words, Words I love" *The New York Times*. Retrieved 13 November 2010) Kundera blends philosophical elements in his works. And, his philosophical works narrate a compromise between memory and forgetting, between irony and commitment. Kundera in six of his works like *Joke*, *Life is Elsewhere*, *Laughable Love*, *The Farewell Party*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* describes his thought of identity in a postmodern world.

This paper particularly confines towards the analysis of Kundera's two important novels *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979) and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). These two novels describe man's relationship with history and equate historical events with an individual's life absurdly. His absurdity and the lack of a rational structure in historical events are helpful to understand his concept of individual identity. Kundera's motifs and unbelievable events are brought together with real facts. "As Lodge has said: "The outrages of modern history in those regimes are of such a scale that only the 'overt lie' of the fantastic and the grotesque can represent them." (*Bloom's Modern Critical Views Milan Kundera* 137) Kundera characters look back into prehistory through their memories to find themselves. His characters also represent an opposite side of European history, its outsiders and its victims. Kundera expresses his cry and fire in the belly indirectly through his themes in these two works. In the land of inherent who sit like

idles when their national flag is taken away by someone else. Milan Kundera exiled physically from Czechoslovakia but his soul rounded around Czech land even after he had exiled to France. Because, it was the land where he was born, struggled, chased and lamented for liberation.

Czech literature is divided as official, unofficial, and exile literature. Official authors are not like unofficial and exile writers, their works are published and available in libraries. Unofficial authors are also called as samizdat writers. Their works are banned but circulate secretly among their friends and later spread in manuscripts. Exile writers are not like official and samizdat writers. They write whatever they like but their works are banned and not recognized by people. Exile writers came into limelight after their works had translated into other languages. For example, Ludvik Askenazy, Ota Filip translated their works into German; Vera Linhartova, Milan Kundera translated their works into French; Jiri Grusa translated his works into German. Most of the famous writers are gone into exile for different reasons. And, all the great works of exile writers are banned at home and published by Czech publishing houses in the West. So, it is very difficult to estimate the development of Czech literature in exile. This chapter elucidates six major exile writers like Peroutka Ferdinand (1895-1978), Souckova Milada (1899-1983), Blatny Ivan (1919-1990), Divis Ivan (1924-1999), Skvorecky Josef (1924-2012) and Milan Kundera (1929-).

Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979) segregated into seven parts as Lost Letters, Mama, The Angels, Lost Letters, Litost, The Angels and The Border. And, each part of the novel is divided into a few numerical sections. These seven parts deal with seven different stories. But, the major characters of these seven parts struggle similarly for existence. Kundera portrays dissimilar characters in each part and in between describes his biography to justify his theme identity. Part one is about Mirek. Part two focuses on Karel. Part three centres around Madam Raphael. Part four and six is about Tamina. Part five narrates about a student. Part seven illustrates Jan. The main themes of the novel are laughter, forgetting and memory. Kundera wrote this novel after he had exiled to France. So, two-thirds of



the incidents occurred in Prague and the remaining third occurred in West.

Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) is divided into seven parts as Lightness and Weight, Body and Soul, Words Misunderstood, Body and Soul, Lightness and Weight, The Grand March as well as Karenin Smile. And, each part has alienated into a few numerical sections. The main themes of the novel are lightness and weight as well as body and soul. The novel describes four major characters like Tomas, Tereza, Sabina and Franz. Part one and five of the novel focuses on Tomas. Part two, four, and seven illustrates Tereza. Part three and six elucidates about Sabina and Franz. The four major characters of the novel struggle in-between two words. Tomas and Sabina struggle in-between lightness and weight, Tereza and Franz struggle amid body and soul.

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* exhibits the existential and psychological struggle of the characters. The characters of Milan Kundera are not merely the characters, they are a replica of Czech inhabitants. The two novels storyline is different but the characters of two novels struggle for identity and existence in the land of invasion. The novels describes the major concepts of existentialism like identity, absurdity, facticity, authenticity, the other and the look, angst and dread as well as despair. The novels also elucidate Communist era and the grim life during Communist regime. Milan Kundera expresses his characters struggle and his struggle obliquely with his valiant pen. All the chapters provide a complex evaluation of the novels have taken up for study in the light of existentialism and thereby evolve a fresh insight and critical approach. This paper explores all these aspects to the best possible extent as Milan Kundera succeeds in interpreting the state of Czech from 1948-1989

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