



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2. Issue 3., 2015 (July-Sept.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE CHANGING FACES OF IDEOLOGY: A POSTCOLONIAL READING ON MILAN
KUNDERA'S *THE JOKE*

CERIN BABU

Guest lecturer, Vimala College, Thrissur, Kerala

Kombara House, Shanti Nagar

Kuttichira Road, Ollukkara Kalathode, Thrissur, Kerala



CERIN BABU

ABSTRACT

In this postcolonial era, it is never inappropriate to say that terminologies, for instance, Empire and its colony, colonizer and the 'other' etc. are all things of the past. Nevertheless it is only proper to mention that they have never fully vanished. Heated discussions, debates, theories and criticism on the topic of colonialism during these postcolonial times itself is a proof for the existence of such a phenomenon called colonialism; a process similar to that in the past yet in a whole new avatar of economic policies, political ideologies and thought processes.

Discussing apparently the personal journeys and destinies of its four major characters, Milan Kundera's 'not so political novel', *The Joke*, connotes the existence of such a seemingly unassuming yet dangerous colonizer (adorned in the new garb of an ideology). The renowned Czech writer and a much celebrated author Milan Kundera makes it a point that his novels are not mere political novels but much more. Chorusing his opinion, this paper attempts at unveiling this 'more' factor of the 1967 novel, *The Joke*. Keeping in mind the political and philosophical implications in the novel, this paper attempts to discuss the possibilities of analysing Milan Kundera's *The Joke* as a postcolonial text.

Key words: postcolonialism, ideology, colonizer, communist regime, subject.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

"Only a literary work that reveals an unknown fragment of human existence has a reason for being. To be a writer does not mean to preach a truth, it means to discover a truth,"- Milan Kundera

Milan Kundera, Czech Republic's most recognized writer is one among those great literary figures who urges their readers to comprehend the whole world as a question. Kundera belonged to a generation of writers whose ideology was greatly influenced by the experience of World War II and the German occupation of Czechoslovakia. Although his early poetic works are staunchly pro-communist, his novels escape ideological classification. Kundera insisted for long that the novel should be a work of art, not a political or ideological statement. He considers himself to be a writer without a message. He succeeded in turning the Czechoslovakia

of his youth into a vivid, mythical, and erotic land and his characters are often explicitly identified as figments of his own imagination. He is more concerned with the words that shape or mould his characters than with their physical appearance.

“Ay, in the grove of the temple and in the shadow of the citadel I have seen the freest among you wear this freedom as a yoke and a handcuff” (Gibran 57).

Though Milan Kundera’s *Joke* draws its inspiration from the story of a girl who was arrested for stealing flowers from the cemetery, the novel is not a mere love story. It has deep political undertones and bears testimony to the author’s belief regarding the function of the novelist, which is to show people’s philosophy of the nature of men’s existence’. Kundera advocates his firm political belief, which is ‘to protest against the mutilation of works of art in the name of an ideological doctrine as practiced in the socialist countries of Europe.’ Individual freedom and native heritage were to be supposed the major concerns of Kundera. His vision of a state and its people totally free from the shackles of ideological domination is seen reflected in the novel. The whole novel is emblematic of the struggle of the mankind for freedom – physical, spiritual, and psychological. The novel was published in 1968 and appears as polyphony of 4 narrative voices – Ludvik, Helena, Jaroslav and Kotska. The characters and situations described in the novel were representations of Czechoslovakian society during its first twenty years of communism (1947-65). The novel subverts Karl Marx’s saying that religion is the opium of people. Kundera replaces it saying that ‘optimism is the opium of the people, a healthy atmosphere stinks and long live Trotsky’ thus questioning the authority of the Stalinist regime. The work gives a satirical account of the nature of totalitarianism in the communist era. However Kundera refuses to consider his work as a political commentary. According to him, the condemnation of totalitarianism does not deserve a novel.

The Joke tells the story of how Ludvik’s life undergoes a drastic change as consequence to his silly prank of sending a post card to his lover Marketa intent on teasing her. The postcard later turns out to be the vehicle for his expulsion from the communist party. He was sentenced to prison being branded an ‘anti-communist.’ On his return, he plots revenge against Zemanek, the leader of the communists who sentenced him to prison, and executes a plan to seduce Zemanek wife, Helena. The plan backfires when he finds that Zemanek is having an affair with a younger woman and is happy to be relieved of the burden of Helena. Helena, distraught by the discovery that Ludvik’s love was a ruse, attempts to commit suicide by consuming an entire bottle of analgesics. Her plan also fails because the bottle which she thought to be filled with analgesics contained only laxative pills. The novel also narrates the incidents that occurred during Ludvik’s sentence in prison. He falls in love with Lucia; a girl with a tragic past who leaves him in due course of the novel. Ludvik was unaware of Lucia’s past life and her whereabouts which he later comes to know about from his friend Kotska. One of the narrative voices in the novel is that of Jaroslav, Ludvik’s friend, who is a member of village music band. Jaroslav, a rustic to the core, was part of a Moravian folk ritual known as the ‘Ride of the Kings’. Though the novel advances through four different narrative voices of Ludvik, Kotska, Jaroslav and Helena, their lives intertwine and emerge to be a united whole towards the end. Kundera sets his novel in the picturesque landscape of Moravia where history manifests itself as joke before his characters.

Moravian society portrayed in the novel can be considered as a microcosm of the whole world and communist ideology as a representative of all the dogmas and ideological doctrines ever imposed on mankind. The novel also reflects on the detrimental effects of blind adherence to such ideologies, the various defense mechanisms constructed by men within themselves, and its consequences. A parallel reading of ideologies is also apparent in the novel which makes us equate an ideology to a colonizer, consequently, conferring the title of the ‘colonized subjects’ to the supporters of the ideological doctrine. Communist ideology which is portrayed in the novel as a dictator dictating the life of the Moravians can be thus equated to a ‘mighty colonizer.’ Instances from the novel regarding the cruelty meted out to the people who are branded as anti-communists and its impact on the tradition and culture of the native Moravians testifies the colonialist face of communism. The objective here is to establish the idea that blind adherence to any ideological doctrine will prove to be a more threatening colonizer, if not treated with intellect and reason.

An ideology is a set of conscious and unconscious ideas that constitute and govern one's mindset, perceptions, and actions. It is a comprehensive vision, a way of looking at things when used in a philosophical context. For each individual, his/ her ideology is a set of ideas that may or may not have a factual basis, but are subjective choices that serve as the seed around which further thought grows. The word ideology encompasses within itself a wide panorama of meaning. *The Glossary of Literary Terms* by M. H. Abrams defines ideology as follows: The beliefs, values and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by recourse to which they explain, what they take to be reality constitutes their ideology. In fact human consciousness is constituted by ideology. In the present times ideology is used in a variety of ways, ranging from a derogatory term for any set of political ideas that are held dogmatically and applied rigorously; to a neutral name for ways of perceiving and thinking that are specific to an individual's race, sex, nationality, education or ethnic group. The dictatorial and deteriorating influence of ideology is discussed in the background of Milan Kundera's much celebrated novel *The Joke* which speaks about the Czechoslovakian society during the first twenty years of its communism. Communist regime and its ideologies plays the role of a colonizer thus dictating suppressing and exploiting the Moravians in every way possible – politically, economically, socially, culturally and even psychologically. It affects the Moravian society adversely.

Colonialism brings about profound changes in the society which will turn out to be a mere residue of colonialist suppression and exploitation. The people are treated as anonymous masses to which even self-identity is denied. The novel presents more or less the same situation. Once Ludvik has been branded as an anti-communist, he had been labeled with the black insignia and sent to military barracks – a blow to his dignity and integrity. The boy commander at the barracks seems to be described by the author vividly that it alludes to the image of the colonizer. He takes after the European missionaries of the colonial era out on a mission to 'civilize' the barbarians in the barracks. It is evident that the communist regime established its supremacy over the various facets of social life – art, literature, politics, religion, culture et al. It is evident through the words of Jaroslav that modern civilization represented by Jaroslav's son Vladimir was already pushing the Moravian traditional folklore and ethnic culture into the background in favor of the new trends and lifestyle resultant of communist occupation. The Moravian society possesses all the characteristic traits of a post colonial society. They fall prey to the communist regime who managed to impose their party ideology upon the people irrespective of their individual differences. There is no mention of a religion or caste in the novel, both being hallmarks of personal freedom of choice and expression. The communist control over art and literature is evident in the novel. Contemporary art and literature confined itself to Stalin's definition of art: socialist content in a national form. It was more propagandist than a means of individual expression. Cenek, one of Ludvik's companions in the military barracks was chided by the young boy commander according to whom for his painting which brought forth anti-party sentiments. The communist party exercises an unquestionable authority over the lives and minds of men - "You are a party member, and the party has a right to know exactly who you are and what you think" (Kundera 43).

Ludvik, the protagonist of the novel, is among the so many other characters who were the victims of the overwhelming force of the communist ideology. He lost the right to continue his studies as consequence to his expulsion from the party. He was sentenced to the penalty of serving in the military camp among the soldiers with the 'black insignia.' He describes his years in the military barracks as a 'penumbra of depersonalization'. It was a dreadful time in his life. He was gripped with the feeling of guilt as had to confront the death of his friend Alexej. He says: "I felt that his death concealed a reproach to me, as if he had wished to let me know that the moment the party banishes a man from its ranks that man has no reason to live" (Kundera 115). His allegiance to the communist philosophy made him an alien among his friends who stood for Moravian tradition. His friend Jaroslav finds himself in great dilemma regarding his feelings towards Ludvik. It was a moment of realization for him. "The gulf between us was much deeper than I had thought. It was so deep that it didn't even permit us to finish conversation" (Kundera 157). Ludvik has been through military service, a prison sentence, and several years in the mines. It was years of hardship. He had been in prison even during the death of his mother. Jaroslav recalls: "They had robbed him of his mother. They had covered her up with a heavy marble stone guarded by a white angel..." (Kundera 118). On his return from prison, he had a

hard time getting permission to complete his last two years at the university. It was as if being expelled from the party had branded him for life. Wherever he went he was distrusted. He was being followed and had his every word taken down. After the entire trauma that he underwent due to the silly prank in his life, he was never able to come into terms with reality. The indigenous culture and tradition takes a back seat in the history of Moravia as it is determined by the communist regime of the time. Communist principles and philosophy are being promoted to an elevated status and others are pushed back to fit into more marginalized roles. Ludvik is representative of the 'adopt' phase of this communist colonialism because he confers the party ideology with more significance than it actually deserves, abandoning his indigenous roots. In fact the novel portrays the whole of the Moravian society as a consumer of alien forms of intellectual substance – alien to their culture and tradition- which had a crippling effect on both the individual and the society. Education provided by the state mechanism was such that it is characterized by loyalty to the state and knowledge of Marxism. Individual interests are given little importance. Men are reproached by the communists for 'traces of individualism' and 'intellectual tendencies'. There is a certain sense of anonymity regarding the question of self identity. They were not addressed by their names but called as 'comrades'. They are made to believe that they have no right to exist outside the party ideology. It is as though, those expelled from the party is even denied a place in history.

All the dogmas and ideologies that exercise a total control over the logic and rationale of mankind grip the mind so much so that the whole life turns around it. These ideologies – political, religious, or philosophical – have a colonizing effect upon the psyche of men which in turn proves to be threatening to their individual self and the society. In case of one's adherence to an ideological doctrine which is not steered by the voice of reason and intellect, the situation is no different. The victims of such colonialism will attempt to give meaning to their self suffering by adhering to violence which, in every possibility, will prove to be detrimental to their individual self and society. Similar to a colonized subject who will try to assimilate a totally alien culture, men whose life and mindset is controlled by a certain ideology will evolve a self-image within himself in order to protect their self-esteem in the face of defeat, indignity, exploitation and violence – an image of dual identity. The predicament of the survivors of such ideological onslaught will be pathetic as they tend to indulge themselves in a more mature self criticism which will lead to self denigration, sense of exile and estrangement.

Colonization was a mission for the Europeans to 'civilize' the native 'other'. In the present postcolonial era, however this 'noble civilizing mission' is undertaken by various ideologies. Behind the façade of a pro-human strategy, these ideologies/ ideological constructs attain an elevated niche in the social consciousness of man. These ideologies propounded by men of knowledge make its way into the conscience of man who often fails to understand the concept in its varied dimensions. Similarly the dominant ideological dictum of the society whether that be propounded by a religious, social, philosophical or political institution can be threatening at times to such an extent that it can control the aspirations and imagination of the people or the society. In countries whose power structure is dictated by political ideologies, they enjoy absolute hegemonic control over the people and their psyche. They achieve this by means of instilling in them the twin emotions of fear and respect for the dominant ideologies. One of the major threats posed by ideological domination is that people lose their individuality and find it difficult to articulate their own thoughts and perspectives. This happens as a result of the excessive influence of these dogmas over the mindset of people. This could result in a conscious/ unconscious detachment of a person from his own character-- amnesia of the self; similar to the cultural amnesia that occurs in a colony and as consequence to the imperial domination by a foreign country. The dominance of any particular ideology urges the victimized set of people to follow and imitate or 'mimic' as well as to assimilate the idea which gives it an unquestionable authority over the people. Like a colonizer controlling the natives, it is possible that an ideology can emerge to become the signifier of authority, dictating even the thought processes of the people. Here again to use the postcolonial terminology, the individual self will attain a sub-altern status, of that of a 'muted subject'. The term hegemonic control gains significance because the consent of the subjects to the existing power structure is procured through these ideological inducements. It is apparent that the people living under the constraints of such dictums, is not

unlike the 'inferior other' of the colonial era. They are denigrated to the status of the marginalized and the oppressed. For instance, subjects of the totalitarian states are in a plight similar to the marginalized 'other' of the European colonial mission.

If in a colony, the colonizer enjoys the supreme status of a sovereign self, then, in a totalitarian state the political ideology act as the imperial authority while the subjects are nothing but slaves of the ideology. In such a system, both the individual and the society are silenced. Attempts are made by the individuals to cope with the situation. Like a colonized subject, they also try to adapt to the situation. However their inner self remains in constant conflict. The conflict occur between the natural instincts in him and the principles of the ideology instilled into him by the institution- religion, society, politics et al. -resulting in hybridity of thought processes and perceptions. To dismantle these ideological constructs and to get rid of its influence is a herculean task, difficult but not impossible. Thus we can say that in the postcolonial times, ideological doctrines enjoy the status of a 'mighty colonizer' and the whole world in itself is a colony. The inner landscape or the inners cape of men proves to be the microcosm of the outside world under the dictates of ideologies and dogmatic beliefs. Hence to fight against such assault is necessary and is possible only by a psychological erosion of the dictating ideology. An internal rebellion is thus inevitable because once it is uprooted from one's inner self; little will be its influence on the society as well.

WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2009. Print.
- Aschcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed. U. K.: Manchester UP, 2012. Print.
- Devy, G. N. *After Amnesia*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009. Print.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Joke*. Great Britain: Faber & Faber, 1992. Print.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: The Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983. Print.
- Wolfreys, Julian, ed. *Introducing Literary Theories: A Guide and Glossary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2001. Print.
-