

WOJCIECH RECHLEWICZ¹

DOUBLE IDENTITY IN CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ'S *THE CAPTIVE MIND*

Abstract

In *The Captive Mind*, Czesław Miłosz describes two mechanisms of intellectual enslavement, namely Murti-Bing pills and Ketman. Although these mechanisms are similar, in reality they function somewhat differently. I believe that the former, Murti-Bing pills, leads to more significant enslavement than the latter, namely Ketman. This is because the former blurs the distinction between fiction and reality, while the latter can coexist with the awareness of the deceitful nature of communist propaganda and even with a cynical attitude. Both mechanisms generate a double identity, albeit each in a different way. It seems, moreover, that while Miłosz describes universal phenomena occurring in different societies and at different times, these are particularly intense precisely in the communist totalitarian state.

Keywords: Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, double identity, fiction & reality

INTRODUCTION

Although much has been written about *The Captive Mind* (1953) abroad, there seems to be relatively little familiarity with the book and the issues it addresses in Poland. At the same time, it raises important and topical issues, especially for intellectuals who, to a greater or lesser extent, are almost always exposed to various kinds of pressures that modify the nature of their work and its results. One of the issues related to the matters described by Miłosz is the legacy of the communist mentality in Polish society; namely the *homo sovieticus* mentality that Józef Tischner wrote

¹ Dr. hab. Prof. KWU, Kazimierz Wielki University, Poland; ORCID: 0000-0002-8385-3038; w.rechlewicz@ukw.edu.pl.

about. However, I will not develop this thread here, but focus on the issue of identity.

Miłosz describes two mechanisms for enslaving minds: Murti-Bing pills and Ketman, with the functioning of these mechanisms being closely linked to the identity of the people who are subjected to them. In this article, I want to show that each mechanism generates a double identity in its own way, that they are universal, and can be interpreted from different perspectives – in particular from psychological, philosophical and moral points of view. Because of these stated aims, I take into account here those contents of *The Captive Mind* that are of a general nature, and omit its descriptions of four well-known writers who put themselves at the service of communist power in different ways.²

MURTI-BING PILLS AND KETMAN

One of Miłosz's fundamental aims was to depict the mindset of writers and artists in the socialist countries of the Stalinist era. The author of *The Captive Mind* finds an analogy in Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's novel *Insatiability* (1930). The novel depicts Poland facing the threat of communism posed by an occupying Mongolian-Chinese army, while pills invented by the Chinese (or Mongolian) philosopher Murti-Bing are distributed throughout the country. These pills transform one's worldview organically – those who take them become cheerful and happy, begin to treat metaphysical issues as not worth their while, with their creativity becoming socially useful. On the other hand, however, they cannot quite get rid of their old personality and eventually become schizophrenic (Miłosz 2009, 26–27, cf. Witkiewicz 1992, 93–94, 174, 348, 408, 568). Something similar, according to Miłosz, is being realized in communist countries, and the worldview being disseminated is the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist doctrine, which he calls the New Faith, supported by the Method, or dialectical and historical materialism. The assimilation and acceptance of the New Faith by intellectuals – that is, the process of taking Murti-Bing pills – is not solely based on external coercion by the authorities. A number of specific causes are at work here.

² Miłosz refers to them by the code names Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta. These refer respectively to Jerzy Andrzejewski, Tadeusz Borowski, Jerzy Putrament and Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński.

These causes include a sense of emptiness, absurdity, a belief in historical necessity, the success of the new regime, the possibility of material gain, a specific attitude to the West, and the experience of war.

The sense of emptiness is caused primarily by the absence of religion, which once provided society with a common conceptual system. The New Faith is presented by its preachers as scientific and universal, thus restoring this common conceptual system and providing the intellectual with a sense of utility and belonging. The sense of the absurd is linked, according to Miłosz, to an abhorrence of the mindlessness of the human masses, who are unaware of the conditions that determine their fate. This feeling leads to a desire to create – even at the cost of suffering – a new human being who would create his own reality.³

A key argument for the adoption of the New Faith was the belief that the victory of the new regime was inevitable, and was the result of a historical necessity. If an artist wants to create something good, it was argued, he must remain in harmony with reality and its laws. Such conformity was to be evidenced by the acceptance of the results of his work by the authorities. The conviction that change is necessary is supported by the successes of the new social system – the intellectual sees the power of the army, the effectiveness of terror, and the great masses of supporters of the new reality. It is therefore easy for him to believe that this reality is about to spread throughout the world. Party dialecticians try to convince the unconvinced that their doubts are due to possessing a class background that distorts accurate thinking. The most important factor in the new system's sense of success, however, is its strength, which obscures the shortcomings of the Method. Intellectuals vaguely suppose that the Method is about "scientifically" proving what power needs at the moment. However, they feel enslaved by the New Faith because of the force of communist rule (Miłosz 2009, 72–74). On the other hand, an intellectual who creates work along party lines obtains material benefits rivalling those of party activists, and gains a high level of social status. Above all, he can make a living from his intellectual activity or artistic creation. Many artists realize that in the West the reality is different – the artist has no state support and is subject to strict economic rules. In communist countries, by contrast, almost any artist can be useful and gain a sense that his or

³ The dislike of the mindless masses is complemented by the dislike of the bourgeoisie, felt by Miłosz himself in his young years (cf. Miłosz, 2001, p. 94).

her work has social resonance. The Eastern intellectual often sees Westerners as spiritually empty, pursuing only material values, patronizing Eastern European countries and treating them as poor relatives. Although this gives rise to a tendency for Eastern intellectuals to imitate Russian self-confidence towards the West, at the same time it is difficult for them to rid themselves of an ingrained idolization of Western models. The attitude of intellectuals towards the West is thus ambivalent.

In the end, war shows that what is considered permanent is not so at all. Under the influence of death, hunger, terror and humiliation, existing norms of behaviour disappear. Institutions and customs change, and man appears as a malleable being. Many artists are becoming convinced that creativity should be judged from the perspective – as one might say – of the “limit situations” created by war.⁴ For these reasons, the historical materialism that speaks of the volatility of the world, the decline of the West and the necessity of a new social order, seems in line with one’s experience and corresponds to certain hopes. It is worth remembering that after the end of the war, the communists did not expect total obedience from intellectuals, but only usefulness in some specific areas. For the authorities it was important, above all, to bridge the gap between them and a reluctant society, one in which well-known writers could be useful. Some of these intellectuals had represented left-wing attitudes even before the war and were averse to patriotic and nationalist attitudes; many of them were also critical of the Warsaw Uprising, primarily because many talented writers and artists had lost their lives in it. Thus, there was some common ground, facilitating agreement between some intellectuals and the authorities.

The impact of the above factors led many intellectuals eventually to accept the New Faith, which was reflected in their work and in their public support for the authorities. Miłosz believes that the process leading to this step was, however, painful for them. Like the characters in Witkiewicz’s *Insatiability*, they were internally torn: although they were troubled by a sense of guilt at having abandoned their previous values, at the same time they convinced themselves that they should opt for a new order, as the old world had exhausted its possibilities. Making a final decision removed this split to a certain extent only, more externally than internally (Miłosz 2009, 45–46).

⁴ Although Miłosz does not use this Karl Jaspers term, it seems appropriate here.

Miłosz took the word “Ketman” from Arthur Gobineau’s (1816–1882) book *Les religions et les philosophies dans l’Asie centrale* (cf. Gobineau 1900, 15). This word, simplifying, means the act of concealment. Gobineau states that people in the Muslim East believe that one who knows the truth should not reveal his beliefs to those who are in error. Furthermore, if it is necessary to mislead an opponent, one may publicly renounce one’s views or even adopt a different creed; in principle, any means of misrepresentation is permitted.⁵ The situation of practicing Ketman by Muslims hiding their faith is analogous to the situation of people in communist countries, where official social relations can be put as a kind of stage acting. This acting requires a high degree of skill, anticipating the consequences of one’s words, gestures, and facial expressions. Human behaviour in general contains a considerable amount of acting, which is in the nature of a person’s reflexive adaptation to his or her environment. In communist countries, however, this acting resembles a more conscious game. Although maintaining this constant camouflage is, on the one hand, difficult to bear, over time there is a fusion with the role and a reduction of tension. At the same time, achieving proficiency in acting gives a kind of satisfaction, and what is protected through it takes on a special value.

While the kind of Ketman practised in communist countries has innumerable varieties, certain typical forms of it can be distinguished and named. National Ketman, for example, consists of concealing national inclinations because of the authorities’ condemnation of any variation of the “national road to socialism.” In this case, one outwardly manifests admiration for the achievements of the USSR, while in reality despises the Russians as barbarians. The Ketman of revolutionary purity conceals a belief in the revolutionary spirit of the Lenin era and a negative attitude towards Stalinism. The aesthetic Ketman is the concealment of contempt for socialist realist art and a predilection for Western art. Related to this variety of Ketman is escapism – going back to old texts of high aesthetic value,

⁵ The word “kitman” is used in contemporary literature. It is understood as the act of concealing or lying by telling only part of the truth. A word with a similar meaning is “takiyya” (“taqiyya”, “takkiya”), meaning caution, fear; in Islam, especially Shi’ite Islam, this word is used for abandoning religious rites in cases of coercion or threat of harm; it is also understood as religiously sanctioned deception (Bosworth et al. 1986, 134; Campbell 2006).

publishing old authors, or writing children's books, as there is more scope for freedom in these areas (Miłosz 2009, 89–90).

The professional Ketman is particularly significant and occurs in someone who recognises that as he has no control over the conditions in which he lives, he should – he believes – make the most of his opportunities. Thus, he thinks more or less as follows:

I am like a crustacean attached to a crag on the bottom of the sea. Over me storms rage and huge ships sail; but my entire effort is concentrated upon clinging to the rock, for otherwise I will be carried off by the waters and perish, leaving no trace behind (Miłosz 1955, 65).

For example, although a scientist gives papers at conventions that adhere to the party line, in his laboratory he uses scientific methods that advance his research. In this he sees the purpose of his life and for this he pays the price: he hands over the ownership of his name and reputation to the communist authorities. A writer, on the other hand, publishes a treatise in which he uses Marxist analysis, which is permitted (for Marx is a kind of a prophet), while he pays official homage to Stalinism in the book's introduction. The sceptical Ketman is practised by one who internally rejects the New Faith and condemns the actions of the USSR, but externally accepts completely the new power and the imposed doctrine. This Ketman approaches the level of cynicism and allows a far-reaching external alignment with the requirements of the party. In doing so, the sceptic can take a kind of perverse pleasure in observing people who have been subjected to the pressure of doctrine in an unprecedented way. The metaphysical Ketman is used, among others, by those who hide their religious faith and outwardly support the authorities because of the belief that the New Faith and the pressure it exerts will be a kind of purgatory for the people, leading to spiritual rebirth. However, there are also those who publicly appear as Catholics and strive to maintain religious institutions. They often succeed, because the authorities treat the politically compliant "progressive Catholics" favourably, regarding them as a necessary evil, since the stage has not yet arrived when religion can be completely eradicated. The metaphysical Ketman, however, is not tolerated by the authorities in artists and writers as metaphysicality, delving into mystery, is not compatible with the Method.

The ethical Ketman rejects the new ethics, which is based on the principle that anything that serves the interests of the revolution is good. It

proclaims the ideal of a man who puts the good of the whole above all else, who is modest and hard-working, but who is also prepared to report any irregularities to the authorities. In communist countries, denunciation is elevated to a virtue, and this causes widespread fear. This creates a paradox: an ethic based on the cult of the community leads in a battle of all against all, in which the most cunning stand the best chance. If the ethical Ketman is practised by a high-ranking party member, which is often the case, he may be capable of committing mass murder in the name of the revolution, while trying to make up for it in his personal relationships with others. The ethical Ketman is one of the strongest in communist countries, as the new ethics have been instilled there for a short time and the old ones for centuries (Miłosz 2009, 99–100).

Miłosz emphasises that people in Western countries are unaware of the world of Ketman; moreover, they are unaware of the prospects it offers for human nature. Living in constant tension awakens hidden talents and develops the intellect. The Ketman phenomenon, therefore, has positive aspects as it involves the realisation of important goals and values against external obstacles. Although someone who cultivates Ketman suffers from an external obstacle, if that obstacle were removed, he could find himself in an even more acute void. For example, a painter who tries to smuggle the metaphysical intoxication of beauty into a painting about life on a kolkhoz would be lost if given complete freedom, since the beauty of the world is all the greater for him the less he is allowed to depict it. Perhaps the lack of an inner centre in man, as Miłosz argues, is the reason for the success of the New Faith with intellectuals – its pressure creates a sense that such a centre exists (Miłosz 2009, 103).

DOUBLE IDENTITY

The identity of the intellectuals who accept the New Faith is, as Miłosz points out, split: after the transformation brought about by the Murti-Bing treatment, they do not experience ultimate peace, as they have not completely parted with the old values; they also note the shortcomings of the new doctrine. This state of consciousness can be understood psychologically as the result of the unconscious use of defence mechanisms (or ego defence mechanisms), namely rationalisation and the denial of reality. In particular, the first would apply here, which amounts to an attempt to

convince oneself that the behaviour undertaken is rational, justified, and justifiable (cf. Gerrig, Zimbardo 2011, 440).⁶ It can be assumed that, in fact, intellectuals were embracing the New Faith primarily because of their fear of repression and of the opportunities it offered them. Few, however, can admit to themselves that they are acting under the influence of fear and the desire for personal benefit, which opens the way for the influence of the above-mentioned defence mechanisms, or in Miłosz's language, the taking of the Murti-Bing pills.

Although double identity also occurs in Ketman users, it is of a different nature to the double identity in Murti-Bing pill-takers. In the latter individuals, the schizophrenic state is internal in nature; in Ketman users, however, it is external, as the split runs along the line of "individual" vs. "social" (or "personal" vs. "public"). Furthermore, Ketman is about concealment and posturing, and such actions are conscious and deliberate, not unconscious or semi-conscious, as in the case of rationalisation or denial. It seems, however, that some authors writing about *The Captive Mind* blur the difference between the two mechanisms. Andrzej Walicki, for example, writing about the Stalinist period, recognises that he himself cultivated Ketman. By this he means his earlier conviction that since the old world was passing away, in order to save a part of it, one must join in the construction of the new world and recognise the necessity of social reforms. Elsewhere, however, Walicki distinguishes between the two mechanisms of enslavement, considering Ketman as a game that was meant to realise certain values within the framework of existing possibilities and as a specific form of defence against internal enslavement, and Murti-Bing pills as a stronger form of enslavement (cf. Walicki 1993, 24–26, 39, 262–264, 336).

It is worth noting that both mechanisms – Murti-Bing pills and Ketman – can occur simultaneously. An intellectual may be partly under the influence of the New Faith: he or she may only accept some elements of it, have doubts about it, etc., but outwardly pretend total commitment. This seems to be the case for the aforementioned Andrzej Walicki and many other authors and artists. According to Walicki, Ketman was also practised by Miłosz, this being a Hegelian or historiosophical Ketman, one based on

⁶ L. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance also seems useful in explaining the phenomenon of taking Murti-Bing pills. This theory states that a discrepancy between beliefs, attitudes and behaviour creates a state of dissonance, which causes a modification of the conflicting elements (cf. Gerrig, Zimbardo 2011, 544).

the conviction that communist rule is a necessary stage of history, but a transitional one. It is therefore necessary to submit to the communist authorities while trying to save as much of Europe's cultural heritage as possible. Miłosz's subordination, however, as Walicki writes, was conditional in that when more was demanded of him, he broke with the authorities (Walicki 1993, 331–332).

Some believe that the concepts of Murti-Bing pills and Ketman are embellishments of mere opportunism, and that Stalinism in Poland had no compelling force of the New Faith, this having been simply a matter of violence. Such a position was represented by Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski and Zbigniew Herbert, among others (Herling-Grudzinski 2010, 360; Herbert 2006, 239, 242). Many intellectuals, however, when recalling the Stalinist era, do not take such a radical position. They emphasise the ideological power of the new system's influence, above all the strength of the view of its historical necessity, and they draw attention to the fact that communism was also supported by honest, noble people, and not only by cynics and the fearful (cf. Trznadel 2006, *passim*).⁷ Andrzej Walicki aptly points out that the best-known conceptions of totalitarianism point to its capacity to enslave people internally, not just externally. Indeed, this is how totalitarianism was conceived by George Orwell, Hannah Arendt, Karl Popper, Carl Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Jacob Talmon. According to Walicki, Miłosz showed that totalitarianism had the capacity to produce psychic pressure that could not be reduced to physical terror (Walicki 1993, 345–346). However, one should also remember that this terror was the basis of the communist system. Therefore, it is hardly surprising to see Herling-Grudziński's position, as he had personally experienced the realities of the Soviet gulag. One's reading of *The Captive Mind* should therefore be supplemented, or even preceded, by a reading of Herling-Grudziński's *A World Apart* or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*.⁸

⁷ Among others, J. Łukasiewicz, Z. Kubikowski, J.M. Rymkiewicz, interviewed by Jacek Trznadel, spoke along these lines.

⁸ As for the benefits that famous writers derived from their servility to communist power, it is worth noting the case of Maxim Gorky, about whom Solzhenitsyn writes. This "patriarch of literature" – as Solzhenitsyn ironically calls him – had a palace in Moscow and a mansion near Moscow, and later lived in Sorrento, Italy, although he obviously had to travel to Moscow for money (Sołżenicyn 2021, 56–58).

CONCLUSION

Are the concepts or, rather, the metaphors or analogies of the Murti-Bing pills and Ketman universal, and if so, to what extent? If one refers them exclusively to totalitarian reality, they are not. However, such a limitation of them is not valid since these mechanisms occur in extreme, but also in any other conditions – thus, they are universal. Moreover, the categories used by Miłosz are also universal. Murti-Bing pills and Ketman are a literary take on what can, from a theoretical and scientific perspective, be interpreted through the theory of the ego defence mechanisms and in terms of simulation, concealment of one's true identity, misrepresentation or – ultimately – opportunism. From a philosophical perspective, on the other hand, some of the phenomena described by Miłosz could be considered, for example, in terms of the category of “bad faith” used by Sartre. The latter category would be particularly appropriate with regard to the belief that historical necessity cannot be resisted.⁹ Thus, it can be said that from each of these perspectives (literary, scientific, philosophical), we speak in different languages about one and the same phenomenon. It seems that the mistake of some of Miłosz's critics has been to assume that behind the notions of Murti-Bing pills and Ketman lies some mysterious, peculiar reality, not reducible to otherwise known phenomena, processes, and mechanisms. I believe that this assumption is incorrect. Miłosz himself did not see his book as a scholarly treatise, and clearly implied that its key concepts were metaphorical in nature.¹⁰

Finally, a few words must be said about the ethical dimension of double identity, especially in relation to a “schizophrenic” identity, formed under the influence of defence mechanisms. From a purely theoretical, objective point of view, referring to facts, scientific research, social psychology experiments, etc., it can be considered that most people are driven by motives such as the instinct for self-preservation or the desire for personal

⁹ According to Sartre, “bad faith” consists in the belief that a person's fate is determined by external circumstances rather than by his choices and deeds performed (cf. Sartre 1998, 53–54).

¹⁰ In one of his statements, Miłosz described *The Captive Mind* as a collection of internal dialogues of various individuals who, in front of themselves, juxtaposed various arguments for and against the New Faith. These different, opposing arguments were, as Miłosz declares, present in himself (Miłosz 2009, 15–16).

benefit. From this perspective, it is easy to recognise that we are helpless in the face of such motives, and the psychological mechanisms that conceal them. But isn't this way of thinking itself a kind of rationalisation, a self-justification? From a moral point of view – assuming one possesses freedom of choice – one would have to assume that we are capable of making autonomous choices independently of existing conditions, inclinations, or circumstances. Above all, this moral perspective suggests the idea that we are not subject to any higher “historical necessity” in the process of co-creating the social world; namely, that we shape our world ourselves. The idea of “historical necessity” thus appears to be a universal, timeless tool for justifying choices that are easier for us to make.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bosworth, C. E. et al. (eds). 1986. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 10, Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Campbell, A. 2006. Iran's Nuclear Deception: taqiyya and kitman. Retrieved from http://www.nationalobserver.net/2006_summer_campbell.htm.
- Gerrig, R., Zimbardo, P. 2011. *Psychologia i życie*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Gobineau, A. 1900. *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale*, troisième édition, Paris: Ernest Leroux.
- Herbert, Z. 2006. *Wypluć z siebie wszystko. Rozmowa ze Zbigniewem Herbertem*. In J. Trznadel, *Hańba domowa*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Antyk.
- Herling-Grudziński, G. 2010. *Murti Bing*. In G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dzieła zebrane*, vol. 2: *Recenzje, szkice, rozprawy literackie 1947–1956*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Miłosz, C. 1955. *The Captive Mind* (J. Zielonko, Trans.), New York: Vintage Books.
- Miłosz, C. 2001. *Rodzinna Europa*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Miłosz, C. 2009. *Zniewolony umysł*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Sartre, J.-P. 1998. *Egzystencjalizm jest humanizmem* (J. Krajewski, Trans.), Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literackie Muza SA.
- Sołżenicyn, A. 2021. *Archipelag Gułag 1918–1956. Próba dochodzenia literackiego*, vol. 2, Poznań: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis.
- Walicki, A. 1993. *Zniewolony umysł po latach*, Warszawa: Czytelnik.
- Witkiewicz, S. I. 1992. *Nienasylenie*, Warszawa: PIW.