



**Jaan Kaplinski**

## From harem to brothel

*Artists in the post-communist world*

Jaan Kaplinski's 1992 allegory of transition casts doubt on the reputations of artists and writers after the collapse of the USSR...

Making art, writing, painting, making music is like making love. It is something that can be hindered, but not stopped, even less can it be ruled and controlled by somebody, be it kings, popes, or party secretaries. These people have often been jealous of artists as well as of women. They want to keep beautiful women and gifted artists for themselves, to deny them freedom to make love to whom they will and write and paint what they will. They confine the women and artists in harems, restricted areas where they are taken care of, where they have nearly everything except freedom. In a harem you must make love to your lord and you can't do it with anybody else. A harem is a restricted area you can't leave.

The Communist world was such a harem for most of its inhabitants; artists were no exception. The party and KGB jealously guarded them from dangerous Western influences, and only the most loyal and faithful got permission to visit the "Capitalist world". Even there they couldn't easily escape the Big Brother's watchful eyes. Mostly they could travel abroad only in groups that obligatorily included some KGB officers and their informers. It reminds one of the way women from the Sultan's harem were able to leave it and go to the town, accompanied and guarded by eunuchs.

At the same time, paradoxically enough, the artists felt they were important. The meticulous censorship, the special attention the KGB, the Party, and other bureaucrats paid to them, was a clear sign that they were important. The writer's pen and artist's brush had some power: otherwise the mighty state wouldn't have mobilized its secret police and many officials to guard them. The well-known bulldozing of an unofficial exposition in a park in Moscow was a big event, the artists whose works were destroyed nevertheless felt comforted by so much attention. The harem ladies knew that they had some influence on the Sultan and his dignitaries.

With the collapse of communism everything changed. The doors of the harem were suddenly left wide open and every woman could leave it. In fact, they were forced to leave, because nobody cared for them any more. The powerholders couldn't afford to have harems and they had to send the ladies away. Where could they go? Some happier ones had knowledge of something other than the art of love, they could earn some money with handwork or music. Some had relatives who took care of them. Some simply became

beggars. Many became prostitutes. It's not a long way from the harem to the brothel, or at least the way from the harem to freedom is much longer and harder.

In the past we were forbidden to make love to the rich men from the corrupt West. Now we compete for their favour and gifts. We go and sleep with them when we get a telephone call. We call girls and call boys of the Western world are the luckiest of the post-communist prostitutes. Many of our former harem-mates envy us. We are quite busy, we have to make love to many people, life has become much more expensive and insecure. Sometimes, waiting, exhausted in a big airport of the brave, free world, we ask ourselves what freedom is, where freedom is to be found, the freedom we believed in and some of our comrades died for. We ask ourselves, what is really the difference between a harem and a brothel, an odalisque and a call girl? Isn't the world that opened itself to us just a much much bigger harem with many sultans and emirs who want us to make love to them? After all, there is one difference: **they** now have much more freedom of choice.

1992

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