

## Chapter I

### Introduction

Nikos Kazantzakis (1883- 1957) is regarded as one of the most significant and controversial literary men of 20<sup>th</sup> century Greek literature. However, in terms of his greatness, imaginative quality, political convictions and affiliations, Kazantzakis qualifies as the true descendant of the rich Greek tradition of Aristotle and Plato. Kazantzakis is generally considered a philosophical writer who has been deeply influenced by the thoughts of Christian divine theology, elements of humanism in the Marxist theory of dialectics, Buddhist teachings on negation, and the existential thoughts of Nietzsche. In his works, he attempted to synthesize these different world views. The dualism of flesh and spirit greatly puzzled his personal life and his literary works.

Kazantzakis is part of the Greek Cultural Renaissance of the twentieth century. One of the most widely translated authors of poetry, plays, novella and travel books, Kazantzakis spent much of his life travelling and studying, bent on seeking to redefine the purpose and meaning of man's existence. In his novels such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Zorba the Greek*, by which he is best known all over the world, Kazantzakis probes the conflicts between man's physical, intellectual and spiritual natures. *The Last Temptation* was considered quite controversial when first published in 1955, and prompted angry reactions

from the Roman Catholic Church which banned it, as well from the Greek Orthodox Church which tried to excommunicate the author.

Before we go deeper into the works of Kazantzakis a brief profile would help us to understand the basic facts related to his life and career. Nikos Kazantzakis was born on 18th February 1883 in the town of Heraklion in Turkish-held Crete during the years of the fierce Cretan uprising for freedom. He was greatly inspired by his father, Capetan Michales, who was one among the freedom fighters. Young Nikos completed primary education in schools in Heraklion and Naxos. Later he joined Athens University, where he received his degree in Law. In 1908 - 09, he went to Paris to continue his studies, where the French philosopher, Henri Bergson left a lasting impression on him. "Friedrich Nietzsche on the Philosophy of Law and Society" was the thesis he prepared during his study of Philosophy in Paris. From 1910 he lived in Athens where he concentrated on his writing and philosophical translations and the Greek classical works of Plato and others. In 1911, he married Galateia Alexiou, but divorced her in 1926. From 1917 onwards, he extended his travel to places outside Greece. The first was a visit to Switzerland. Here, once again he engaged himself with the works of Nietzsche. He was appointed as the General Director of the new Ministry of Public Welfare in 1919 with the responsibility for overseeing the repatriation of the Greek refugees expelled from the Caucasus after the installation of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union. 150,000 refugees were repatriated. This monumental task was successfully concluded. The life and sufferings of refugees that he intimately

experienced influenced his later novels like *The Greek Passion* and *The Fratricides*. The mining venture he undertook on the Cretan coast resulted in his meeting with George Zorba, whom he immortalized as Alexis Zorba in his novel, *Zorba the Greek*. He made many journeys in and outside Greece. In 1921 and 1924 he visited Germany, Austria and Italy, where he visited Mussolini. For a while, he stayed in Assisi, the town of St Francis on whom he based his work, *God's Pauper: St. Francis of Assisi*. His frequent returns to Crete energized him to continue his work.

1924 was a significant year for Kazantzakis, as he met Eleni Samiou, who became his ideal companion in times of crisis and happiness. He married her in 1945. He continued his travels around Greece and during the span of 1925 to 1938 visited the Soviet Union, Cyprus, Palestine, Libya, Spain, Italy, Egypt, Sinai, Czechoslovakia and China. His great epic in lyric poetry, *Odissa* was published in 1938 but its English version *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* appeared only after his death in 1957. The prolific and fruitful period in the life of Kazantzakis was the decade starting from 1940 which witnessed his great works like *Christ Recrucified* or *The Greek Passion*, *Zorba the Greek*, *The Fratricides*, *Freedom and Death*, *The Last Temptation* and *God's Pauper*. He temporarily settled in France and travelled to the surrounding countries, but his health began to fail him.

After World War II, he became involved in politics again and was appointed Minister in the Greek Government without a specific portfolio, but he

resigned after only one and half months. From 1946 he was being constantly driven away from his homeland. In spite of the persecution, his heart always belonged to Greece. Although a restless wanderer throughout his life, Kazantzakis, hailing from the small island of Crete, remained very much a Cretan. The Greek Orthodox Church demanded the removal of some pages of his novel *Freedom and Death* and the complete withdrawal of *The Last Temptation* although the novel had not been published in Greek. At this time the Vatican placed the same book in their index of banned books. However, the ban was later withdrawn and in 1968 the Ecumenical Patriarch Athinagoras of the Greek Church said that the books of Nikos Kazantzakis had been placed in the Patriarchal Library. While returning from China in 1957 he was infected by Asiatic flu which aggravated his leukemia. He was transferred to the University Clinic of Freiburg in West Germany where he succumbed to the fatal disease on 26<sup>th</sup> October (Stavrou.www. Kazantzakis – museum)

Kazantzakis' writing is often appraised as a single body that reveals the author's philosophical and spiritual values. Most critics agree that his writings are in this sense autobiographical. Although his works seek to reconcile the dualities of human nature, mind and body, affirmation and despair, and even life and death, it is suggested that the author's ultimate concern is more with striving to overcome inherent human conflicts than in resolving them. "Every one of Kazantzakis' major works can be read as a portrayal of man seeking reintegration," explained

C.N. Stavrou, “some succeed, some enjoy a partial success, some fail, and others are completely indifferent or find integration by repudiation rather than a reconciliation of the eternal duality. In his works more importance attaches to the struggle to arrive than to the fact of arrival itself” (*Some Notes* 320).

While Kazantzakis’ stature as a unique voice in modern literature is uncontested, critical opinion about the literary quality of his individual works is frequently divided. Many hold the view that Kazantzakis subordinated his artistic concerns to the philosophical ideas he wanted to offer. All the same one can not ignore but admire the passionate poetic voice in which the author communicates with his readers. This is complemented by the realistic description, metaphors and profuse imagery that comprise Kazantzakis’ writing style. In *Report to Greco* Kazantzakis has frankly revealed his allegiances and affiliations:

My life’s greatest benefactors have been journeys and dreams. Very few people, living or dead have aided my struggles. If, however, I wish to designate which people left their traces embedded most deeply in my soul, I would perhaps designate Homer, Buddha, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Zorba. The first, for me, was the peaceful, brilliantly luminous eye, like the Sun’s disk, which illuminated the entire universe with its redemptive splendor; Buddha, the bottomless jet-dark eye in which the world drowned and was delivered. Bergson

relieved me of various unsolved philosophical problems which tormented in my early youth; Nietzsche enriched me with new anguishes and instructed me how to transform misfortune, bitterness and uncertainty into pride; Zorba taught me how to love life and to have no fear of death. (445)

This revelation, apparently, is the key to the thoughts and influences of Kazantzakis which are transparently expounded in all his works without any conscious concealment on the part of the writer. Kazantzakis, though he is known as a voice from Greece, essentially and emotionally belongs to an island called Crete which is a part of Greece marked by its own uniqueness. Therefore, any discussion on Kazantzakis would be incomplete if his Cretan heritage is not traced. It must be both the starting point and the ending point of any in-depth study of his fiction, the metaphor around which all of his art and his life developed. In all analysis inevitably we return to his Cretan heritage. Kazantzakis, though he was on self exile for the larger part of his life, never denied the force of his heritage, but very ardently attempted always to transcend it.

Kazantzakis witnessed the increasing political struggles when the Cretan people rose against the Turks in 1897 and the consequent failures and tensions on his native island in his childhood itself. As years advanced such impressions became deeper and a sense of futility gripped his mind. He was a teenager when he was sent to the Franciscan monastery on the Greek island of Naxos where he learned French and Italian. It was here that Kazantzakis was introduced to the

Western Philosophies, and grew familiar with the mysteries of Christianity, in the form of a monastic school of thought. In 1906, after receiving his law degree from the University of Athens, he moved to France and became the pupil of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. It was at this time that he began his career as a writer. Early attempts were limited to translations of the works of the Western scientists and thinkers as well as compositions of verse dramas (Trosky 212).

Anyone who surveys Kazantzakis' fictional world would discover certain consistencies related to Crete and autobiographical impulses which permeate all his works. The deliberate consistency shown in his entire career is in fact the strength and weakness of his narrative technique. For Kazantzakis, Crete the fabled island served as a bright, focusing lens which helped him to illuminate and enrich the world around him. Cretan touches and influences can be found everywhere in all the literary works of Kazantzakis. Crete has always been a source of inspiration and strength for him. He says:

Compassionately, tranquilly, I squeeze a clod of Cretan soil in my palm. I have kept this soil with me always, during all my wanderings, pressing it in my palm at times of great anguish and receiving great strength, as though from pressing the hand of a dearly loved friend. (*Report* 17)

The impact of childhood existence was such that he would later say of Crete: "This soil I was everlastingly; this soil I shall be everlastingly. O fierce clay of Crete, the moment when you were twirled and fashioned into a man of struggle

has slipped by as though in a single flash” (*Report* 18). Crete seemed to be the meeting place of two contradictory forces. The idea of dichotomy between God and man actually gets ignited from the Cretan soil itself. Kazantzakis continues: “What struggle was in that handful of clay, what anguish, what pursuit of the invisible man-eating beast, what dangerous forces both celestial and Satanic!” (*Report* 18). Crete served him as a crucible where he refined the raw materials for perfection. The fundamental principles about his writings and the essential concepts of life and literature were formed from the traditional past and turbulent present of Crete.

In Crete he knew and loved ordinary uneducated people and it was to them that he always had his greatest allegiance. Though he travelled over most of the world, restless and uprooted in a self imposed exile, his native Crete remained his true spiritual home which became an important ingredient of his writing. It was in Crete that he first came to know the shepherds, peasants and ordinary people who abound in his novels. In his “Translator’s Note”, P.A.Bien says that it was in Crete that Kazantzakis first experienced the revolutionary zeal and ardour and unparalleled heroism of the highest order (*The Last Temptation* 509). During a nostalgic visit to Knossos in Crete he had the opportunity to enjoy and experience the frescoes and paintings and columns in the queen’s apartment. While watching them, he was “overwhelmed by inexpressible gladness and sorrow for this extraordinary world which had perished for the doom of every human exploit” (*Report* 454). A particular fresco of flying fish corresponded to his ‘soul’s



concerns and hopes'. "I experienced great agitation and fellow feeling as I gazed at this flying fish, as though it was my own soul I saw on that palace wall painting which had been made thousands of years before" (*Report* 454). While deeply contemplating over the ancient fresco he murmured to himself, "This is Crete's sacred fish, the fish which leaps in order to transcend necessity and breathe freedom." This is a never-ending attempt "to transcend man's destiny and unite with God, in other words with absolute freedom." Kazantzakis feels that "every struggling soul seeks the same thing: to smash frontiers" (454). Kazantzakis reflected that Crete should have been the first place "on earth to see the birth of this symbol of the soul fighting and dying for freedom." The flying fish symbolizes the soul of the struggling, indomitable man. "Shaken and disturbed, I reflected that it is here in this terrible moment of confrontation between the Cretan and the abyss that Crete's secret lies concealed" (*Report* 455). This revelation of a great mystery made him identify himself with the ancient past and its great unknown artists.

He found the solution, as well as other forms of the mystery, not only in union with the Minoans or with the great, anonymous rebels of his father's and grand father's generations; he found it also in the artists of the Cretan Renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: it is no accident that his spiritual autobiography is a *Report to Greco*, to the man he called "grandfather," the greatest of his precursors. (Levitt, *Cretan* 8)

All through his literary pursuits Kazantzakis had been trying to build a bridge between God and man. However, he was not a bewildered human being awed by the omnipotence and the might of God. He asserts that there is a synthesis which supplements each other. He also believes that God is being built by man. This apparent interdependent dualism is the essential concept of God and man in Kazantzakis. It is not acquired from any external sources, but mostly inherited.

From his father's side Kazantzakis' ancestors were bloodthirsty pirates on water, warrior chieftains on land fearing neither God nor man. On the other hand his mother's stock was "goodly peasants who bowed trustfully over the soil the entire day, sowed, waited with confidence for rain and sun . . . and placed their hopes in God" (*Report* 24). These virile and vibrant contrasts he inherited continue to structure his works. "Fire and soil", he writes, "How could I harmonize these two militant ancestors inside me?" (24). It has been his duty to reconcile the primordial irreconcilables and to transform the ancestral darkness which lies deeply buried in him, and glow it up into light. Kazantzakis admits that the sediment of darkness continues to remain in his heart and it is an oppressive and insatiable duty for him to fight it. The age old paternal ancestors are thrust deep within him and it is very difficult for him to discern their faces in the fathomless darkness. Kazantzakis strove to transubstantiate these inhuman ancestors into men. "I was finally able, by blending the voice of the visible world and my hidden inner voices, to penetrate the primordial darkness beneath the mind, lift up the trap door and see" (*Report* 27).

While tracing the parental stock of Kazantzakis, it can be seen that two currents of blood, Greek from his mother and Arab from his father, ran in his veins. This significant blend had positive and fruitful consequences, and gave him strength to continue his creative work. He writes, “My struggle to make a synthesis of these two antagonistic impulses has lent purpose and unity to my life” (*Report* 30).

The literary life of Kazantzakis is primarily related to the politics of Crete in particular, and Greece in general. Crete provided him with the raw materials for his major works like *Freedom and Death*, *The Greek Passion* and even *The Fratricides* to some extent. The undercurrent of these novels is the strife between Crete and Turkey.

But what influenced my life incalculably far more than schools and teachers, far deeper than the first pleasures and fears I received from viewing the world – was something which moved me in a truly unique way: the struggle between Crete and Turkey. (*Report* 67)

Had this struggle not been there, his life would have taken a different course, he remembered. Crete was the seed. From this seed the entire tree of his life germinated, budded, flowered and bore fruit. The struggle for the freedom of Crete stirred Kazantzakis’ youthful imagination and shaped his political convictions. However, he braced himself with a sort of self-education and cherished the conviction that to gain freedom for Crete was only the first step; he had to continue the struggle forward: in order to gain freedom from the inner Turk

- the ignorance. In course of time, as he grew up, his mind broadened, the struggle intensified as well. It crossed the bounds of Crete and Greece and Turkey and embraced the purviews of wider dimensions of history of mankind where good and evil perpetually struggled and battled in a recurring whimsical fancifulness.

Kazantzakis' childhood was filled with horrible stories of Turkish atrocities and the sacrifice of helpless Cretans and their brave chieftains. What he describes in *Freedom and Death* is, in fact, the photographic reproduction of the actual scenes he had seen in his childhood. "It's a terrible thing to be born a Cretan" became the terrible truth for Kazantzakis. The fictional world that we find in *Freedom and Death* is not fictional at all. Cretan life with all its glory and misery is a creation not of the artist's imagination alone but of ancestral memories and everyday life of a kind of the folk tradition in which Kazantzakis was raised. He elevated this heritage to a narrative as consistent as the life itself, though sometimes it appears to be hyperbolic to the modern reader (Levitt, *Cretan* 25).

Despite his inherent spiritual quest, political and geographical peculiarities of Greece have had a deep impact on the creative abilities of Kazantzakis. The essence of his contradictions truly originated from his own cultural milieu of Greek life. He felt that Greece's spiritual as well as geographical location carries with it a mystic sense of mission and responsibility. As two continually active currents collide on her land and seas, she has always been a place subjected both geographically and spiritually to incessant whirlpools.

Greece's position is truly tragic; on the shoulders of every modern Greek it places a duty at once dangerous and extremely difficult to carry out. We bear an extremely heavy responsibility. New forces are rising from the East; new forces are rising from the West. Greece is placed in the middle; it is the world's geographical and spiritual crossroads. (*Report 175*)

By means of their struggle the Greeks sanctified each region and by means of beauty and disciplined passion they converted each region's physical nature into something metaphysical. Kazantzakis believes that it is a sacred and most bitter fate to be a Greek. The agonies of the times impose a tragic duty on every Greek. They think, love and struggle.

The struggle today is spreading like a conflagration, and no fire brigade can ensure our safety. Every man is struggling and burning along with all humanity. And the Greek nation is struggling and burning more than all the rest. This is its fate. (*Report 176*)

His ancestors lived not only within the inner core of Kazantzakis but came to life in various characterizations in his works. In *The Greek Passion*, *The Fratricides*, *Zorba the Greek*, *Freedom and Death* and other novels and plays, Kazantzakis focused on his ancestors and examined and reexamined their personalities (Lea 5).

Apart from the parental, geographical and political influences, Kazantzakis was greatly touched by many literary and religious personalities from the East and the West. One of those who exerted a tremendous force in the life and attitude of

Kazantzakis, was Buddha. Buddha had been a passion for Kazantzakis ever since his youthful days. It was in Vienna in 1922 that Buddha philosophically intervened in the intellectual and spiritual arena of his mind. There he strongly embraced the doctrine of complete renunciation, of complete mutation of flesh into spirit. Buddha, like Christ, was for Kazantzakis a superman who had conquered matter and mind. He intensely experienced Buddha; it was such an unusual ascetic mystical struggle. Later in 1956, a year before his death, he was finally able to publish his play *Buddha*. It was a project that had obsessed and haunted him most of his life. But Kazantzakis did not have any allegiance to any particular school of Buddhism. His *Spiritual Exercises* is the culmination of Buddhist influence and other oriental religions.

“My method”, Kazantzakis said, “does not involve a denial of spirit and body, but rather aims at the conquest of them through the prowess of spirit and body” (Bien, *Buddha* 252). Though he has been trying to harmonize them, this attempt exerted a great deal of stress on him, because to remain “Buddhistically aloof from the events” and to desire to participate in the “world’s ephemeral shadow dance” was an internal conflict for Kazantzakis (252). He could never have been a Buddhist disciple in the strict sense of the word, though he was enchanted by the Buddhist resignation from active life. He said that one should harmonize within oneself “to create a new synthesis unknown in nature, and to play masterfully upon life and death as upon a double flute”. For Buddha, all the beauties on the earth and human struggles to sustain this life mark only a

“phantasmagoria of nothingness”. But Kazantzakis does not negate life altogether. Rather, he feels that we should know the secret of world’s vanity first. Our salvation comes only after the cessation of all desires and the welcoming of death as a release from life’s torments. Buddha helped him to continue his struggle to experience not only the vanity of all human endeavour but also, simultaneously, the eternity of every moment (Bien, *Buddha* 259). What Kazantzakis has learned in the course of his internal struggles is to transform this inherited metaphysical position into an existential validity. By arriving at this stage he created his own essence and this fact of human consciousness gives him a pride and dignity. In this unique way Kazantzakis transforms Buddhism into a strangely affirmative, valid and noble reaction to the fact of death. For Kazantzakis negation and annihilation of desires are not merely an intellectual abstraction to evade the responsibilities through the sieve of metaphysics. Therefore, the view of complete negation of life practised and propagated by the ardent Buddhists is not acceptable to Kazantzakis. He is of the view that the irreconcilables are to be reconciled and all contraries are to be placed in the stream of evolving time. Regarding the Buddhist sense of the futility of all actions, he makes us arrive at the ultimate futility by undergoing a process. This process, according to Kazantzakis, is of getting actively involved in life -- living the life or loving the life, and not negating life altogether. He insists that our passivity and resignation must be earned by indulging in the living stream of life. Activism and futility are reconciled with each other, because activism, according to Kazantzakis is the precondition of the genuineness of the Buddhist

position. Kazantzakis argues that we can never conquer desire if the desire has never been felt. In this way, he justifies the frantic attempts of human beings to make their world a better place. At the same time he warns us that we must not justify this striving in terms of the material result it produces, since such results are so hopelessly deceptive and ephemeral (Bien, *Buddha* 269). Moreover, mad pursuit after the pleasures of life would spoil the spirit of the fundamental meaning and value of life.

Apart from Buddha, Bergson and Nietzsche were the other dominant intellectual stimulants for Kazantzakis; and they strongly influenced Kazantzakis' thought and life. He was particularly interested in the concepts of Nietzsche outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that the primary tension in human nature exists between man's physical drives and his intellectual and spiritual endeavour. This idea of conflict is central to Kazantzakis' themes. But he was also profoundly attracted to Bergson's concept of progressive spiritual development as man's attempt to escape the constraints of his physical and social existence and to unite with the *elan vital*, which is the universal creative force of life (Trosky 212). Though many had influenced Kazantzakis, Bergson and Nietzsche, influenced him the deepest. However, like Bacon, Dostoevsky, Plato and Machiavelli, he drew intellectual sustenance from all. Therefore, a basic awareness of these individual influences on Kazantzakis' thought is a necessary prerequisite to a deeper and better understanding of his literature and politics. In fact, his philosophic and spiritual mentors were Nietzsche and Bergson (Lea 15). Bergson's vitalism, the



idea that the life force which can conquer matter and baser elements in human beings, impressed him tremendously, and this vitality and the positive lead are the marked differences we find in Kazantzakis in contrast with the nihilistic influence of Nietzsche. Kazantzakis' philosophical base is a mixture of Bergson from whom he borrows the notion of *elan vital*, whereas Nietzsche passed on his great pessimism, the concept of the Superman and the myth of eternal recurrence. Kazantzakis' vision of the universe is totally dynamic. He asserted that everything in this universe is in the process of an endless evolution forced upon matter by the spirit. The spirit is imprisoned in matter, and its struggle to escape and transcend matter constitutes the universe. Everything must be subordinated to the great thrust of the spirit. Each individual thing and man is merely a stepping stone for the spirit (Chilson 72).

Writers on Kazantzakis often define certain stages to see the extent of influence exerted by great figures in formulating his political thoughts and intellectual development. Nietzsche, Bergson, Buddha, Christ, St. Francis and Odysseus preoccupied Kazantzakis' mind at different periods. But Pandelis Prevelakis, Kazantzakis' disciple, confidant and biographer, in his 400 Letters says that "The fourth prophet – in order to win Kazantzakis after Nietzsche, Christ and Buddha was Lenin." Kazantzakis himself had written about his "spiritual longitude and latitude" to Prevelakis who was only "startled to see it pass from Lenin to St. Francis". The nature of his different stages suggests that his thought was a collage of the philosophical attitudes reflected in great names. One would be

amazed to see “communist activism and Buddhist resignation” in the personality of Kazantzakis. (Prevelakis 27) However, Georgopoulos in his study, *Kazantzakis, Bergson, Lenin and the Russian Experiment*, is trying to establish a unique argument that the integral character and the thread that lent it continuity was the philosophy of Henri Bergson. “I can say,” he asserts, “that the single philosophical star that showed the way to Kazantzakis from the early days in Paris to the very end of his career was Bergson” (34). The ambivalent nature of his attitude towards Lenin and Communism was determined by his influence on Bergson’s thoughts about humanism and vitalism. In addition, Kazantzakis’ love for Russia was born in his early childhood years in enslaved Crete which awaited its emancipation by the military intervention from Moscow. However, his leniency towards the left wing and enthusiasm for Socialism and his admiration for Lenin and communist Russia took its full shape when he was in Vienna in 1921-24. Kazantzakis continued to remain a fellow traveller or communist sympathizer without being a member in any party outfit; and it was for this reason that he was targeted by the right and left in Greece. It is natural that his exposure to human misery and the economic and political injustices around him must have aroused his socialist feelings and fashioned his initial commitment to Lenin and the Russian Revolution. Even when displaying his heartfelt affinity towards Lenin, Bergson’s humanistic philosophy occupied the core of Kazantzakis’ mind. That’s why he could not wholeheartedly embrace Communism and Marxism and their over dependence on science and materialism. Kazantzakis felt that Communism failed

to provide new paths for the spirit to evolve, because life for both Kazantzakis and Bergson was synonymous with movement, heterogeneity, novelty and creation (Georgopoulos 43). Notwithstanding his profound disagreements with Marxism, Kazantzakis referred to Marx as “the legislator of the era”. He saw Marx’s doctrine as having provided the slogan and faith for our times, though he disagreed with the philosophical basis of that slogan, or with the hopes of that faith. But he was convinced that this defined the contemporary need for a new and higher culture. Communism is a new renaissance. It is for this reason that he stated that we ought to be communists, but the enlightened ones. He believed that the duty and the agony of the creative thinker of the contemporary world would be to define this new slogan of Communism. However, he knew very well that Bergson’s evolution would find more refined embodiments of the spirit than those promised by Marx (Georgopoulos 44).

Bergson’s lectures that he had attended in Paris were deeply imprinted in Kazantzakis’ memory. Being his teacher, Henry Bergson had been a formidable influence in shaping the thoughts and writings of Kazantzakis. In contrast to Nietzsche, Bergson is responsible for animating and enriching him with a positive point of view. Without the cheerful and calm philosophy of Bergson, Kazantzakis’ characters would have been dull. Though Zorba is the outcome of the direct impact of Nietzsche, the character acquires magnitude through Bergson’s fresh sparkling ideas about life and the efforts to attribute meanings to it. This has been the yearning of the generations over the years. From Bergson, Kazantzakis

acquired a creative pulse for change that was always promising and new. In addition, Bergson contributed spirit, vitality, movement and intuition. This assimilation is precisely the secret in the success of the character of Zorba:

Without Bergson, Kazantzakis' Zorba would have been a dry dogmatist or a fanatic cynic. This can be projected through Bergson's ideas a fresh, sparkling and variegated attitude that breaks the monotony of human existence, condemned to follow faithfully the same hard-beaten path of disciplined routine and regulated behaviour, a dark black path that leads to nothing new and startling and beautiful. (Poulakidas, *Kazantzakis* 267)

It is obvious that both Kazantzakis and Bergson believe that only when one is able to sense the creation in its totality, and conceive it even intuitively and mystically, that one can give life a meaning and purpose. It is this overall view that enables man to realize his freedom and destiny in their full meaning (Poulakidas 268). Bergson points out that it is not a mere casual operation that determines man's destiny, but freedom itself is something instrumental in determining the destiny. Being a true student of Bergson, Kazantzakis proceeds with the affirmation of man's irrevocable freedom which is his destiny, and therefore destiny can be interpreted as evolution (Poulakidas 268). The concept of destiny, man's freedom and meaning and meaninglessness of life are logically and beautifully expressed in *Zorba the Greek*.

Of Kazantzakis' novels, the one that best illustrates Bergson's concept of time is *Freedom and Death*. Here Kazantzakis attempts to crystallize Bergson's abstractions and elaborate thoughts into a literary language. The mystery that Bergson's philosophy created is carried into the works of Kazantzakis. He believes that man's spiritual boundaries are limitless and they are not restricted by the material world or man's nature or reason (Poulakidas, *Kazantzakis* 272). Bergson's philosophy spelled out a positive, affectionate, and affirmative worldview, whereas Nietzsche had stripped off the human factor from man's history by teaching eternal recurrence, and revealing the abyss with its nihilistic implications. Bergson taught a creative evolution that provided existential potentiality to history. Because of his intense concern with the divine element in man, Kazantzakis defied the belittling implications of evolutionary biology by following Nietzsche and consistently emphasizing the boundless potentiality in man. In a like manner, Kazantzakis followed Bergson and attributed to man, and particularly to the artist, the elevating capability to grasp the meaning of the creative life-pulse in the world (Lea 12, 20). Thus, Kazantzakis owes much to Bergson for humanism whereas, for the thoughts of existentialism he was influenced by the indomitable Nietzsche alone.

Andreas Poulakidas observes that Kazantzakis' major characters are predominantly Nietzschean in their laughter but his secondary or minor characters are Bergsonian in their comic appearance. They have been intended to arouse laughter from the reader. The Bergsonian laughter from the comic characters

seems to balance out the Nietzschean laughter from the tragic characters. The former are the *laughable*, the latter are the *laughing*. Zorba, Captain Michales, and Father Yanaros laugh at the meaninglessness of existence but they themselves are never laughable. They always maintain a tragic and serious laughter. According to Bergson, comedy:

begins, in fact, with what might be called a growing callousness to social life. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without touching himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow beings. (Poulakidas, *Kazantzakis* 274)

In *Zorba the Greek*, the boss falls into this category, because he has lost the true feelings for life and finds himself lost from the society. We can find similar characters in *Freedom and Death* in which the Metropolitan and the Pacha, the representatives of their respective communities, turn out to be clowns, because they have lost their touch with reality. At a time of crisis, they attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable parties. This ludicrous act on the part of serious leaders makes their own people lose their respect for them. The Metropolitan in particular delivers sweet and flowery speeches and false hopes when commitment, action and strength are required.

Nietzsche is one of the deep and lasting influences on Kazantzakis' personal and literary life. He identified himself with Nietzsche and discovered the co sufferer in him. For Kazantzakis, Nietzsche is an antichrist who struggles harder than Christ himself. He makes this point clear by presenting the two

dialectical forces -- Lucifer and God. Saint Blasphemer's impious rejection of God implies that the "good and evil are enemies". Higher observation reveals that "good and evil are fellow workers." But the most startling truth that he learned from Nietzsche was this: "good and evil are identical" (*Report* 320). In fact, Kazantzakis started a contest with Nietzsche. As time went by, this contest became obstinate and even without his own knowledge this struggle transformed and finally became an emotional and intellectual embrace. Kazantzakis learned that the same could happen when 'good' wrestles with 'evil'. While accepting the adversary or by giving recognition, 'the great synthesis' can be achieved. Kazantzakis' life has always been a quest to reach the summit - the 'great synthesis' or 'Cosmos' as he put it. It was this rare knowledge that made Kazantzakis create Zorba. Nietzsche's thoughts are successfully ventilated through the character of Zorba who represents the good and the negative impulses of man at the same time. In his early acquaintance with the works of Nietzsche, Kazantzakis was terrified by his impudence and arrogance. Despite his unyielding mind, sarcasm and cynicism, Kazantzakis plunged into the works of Nietzsche which was "a bustling jungle full of famished beasts and dizzying orchids" (*Report* 319-320). He was swept away by Nietzsche's idea of man making himself into the superman by his own will and perseverance. His deep indebtedness to Nietzsche made him go on a pilgrimage to all the towns in Germany where Nietzsche had lived. Nietzsche taught him that the only way a man could be free is

to struggle and later to lose himself in a cause, to fight without fear and without hope of reward.

Nietzsche also taught him to distrust every optimistic theory. Kazantzakis knew that man's womanish heart has constant need of consolation. He believed that every religion which promises to fulfill human desires is simply a refuge for the timid, and unworthy of a true man:

I wanted whatever was most difficult, in other words most worthy of man, of the man who does not whine, entreat, or go about begging. Yes, that was what I wanted. Three cheers for Nietzsche, the murderer of God. He it was who gave me the courage to say, that is what I want! (*Report* 338)

The impact of Nietzschean concepts on Kazantzakis was on various levels. There are differences and similarities. For example, the philosopher-narrator in *Zorba the Greek* represents Kazantzakis' ideas, and Zorba represents Nietzschean concepts. The differences between the two men can be illustrated through the Nietzschean concept of weak pessimism and strong pessimism. Both characters tend to be fatalistic. Zorba represents the Dionysian principle and Nietzsche an ethic of resilient pessimism and activism in the face of universal disorder. Nietzschean ideas served to illustrate the necessity for revaluation and suggested to Kazantzakis that the old order should be changed and new systems initiated. Kazantzakis found this new sense of life in the works of Tolstoy also. This seemingly incongruous combination of two different sets of ideas can be seen in



the character of the philosopher–narrator who can't give up life altogether. The humanism of Tolstoy and the ardent desire to life are explicit in the philosopher though he withdraws himself from the activism of life as opposed to Zorba. Kazantzakis has his own world view of life; therefore he disagrees with Nietzsche who totally rejects life. Kazantzakis had always been striving for a mystical combination of Oriental, Christian and Western philosophies of art in all his literary pursuits. For him, the most basic natural law of the universe is the transubstantiation of matter into spirit (Merrill 110).

It was the philosophical thoughts of Nietzsche, Bergson and Buddha that enriched and beautified the structure of *Zorba the Greek*. The philosophies of these three great masters work hand in hand in Zorba. The greatness of Kazantzakis is that his mind was receptive enough to amalgamate anything foreign. Nietzsche inspired both the life and works of Kazantzakis. He continued to be a literary and philosophical source book and a support for his own developed ideas. There are resonances from Nietzsche everywhere in the works of Kazantzakis. He converted these devices and themes to suit his own needs. The cycle of eternal recurrence binds man to its inevitability. This thought makes man to free himself and to resist the forces of fate. The character of Zorba is the outcome of such a thought in Nietzsche. “The cleansing fire, the perilous ascent, the silence at the edge of the abyss” in *The Saviours of God* are essentially Nietzschean (Levitt, *Cretan* 93). However, Kazantzakis tries to restore hope to a world doomed to the eternal cycle and endless suffering. His heroes do not feel

terror as those of Nietzsche. They can accept both life and death. Almost all heroes of Kazantzakis, Priest Fotis and Manolios in *The Greek Passion*, Jesus and Judas in *The Last Temptation*, Father Yanaros in *The Fratricides*, Francis in *God's Pauper* and Zorba in *Zorba the Greek* reach divinity but remain tied to mankind (94). The words of Zarathustra predict those of a humanist Jesus and Zorba, "My will clings to mankind; I bind myself to mankind with fetters" (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra* 164). Naturally, the Jesus of Kazantzakis has learned to love the earth and his death is insisted on by his best loved disciple Judas; it is also an act of strength and fulfillment.

Kazantzakis learned the basic concepts of life and its ultimate futility from the thoughts of Nietzsche. The Dionysian principle suggests that life is brutal and bitter and irrational, yet that one must learn to accept it with ironic laughter (Merrill, *Zorba* 103). Creation of a character like Zorba is certainly rooted in the Nietzschean concept of irony. This irony is based on the realization that there are multiplicities of dualities in life. These dualities are irresolvable because they are part of the ongoing dialectic. The essential irresolvability of things, must lead to the recognition of a universe of antithesis. For these thoughts Nietzsche is often classed as an anti-rationalist, but the fact is that he opposes reason only when reason is opposed to life, or to whatever makes life possible (Merrill, *Zorba* 107).

Much has been written about Kazantzakis' reverence for Nietzsche. His philosophy was obviously shaped by Nietzsche's for it concerns itself with many of the fanciful, brilliant, and brutally penetrating intuitions and insights of

Nietzsche. Kazantzakis' great teacher before he met Zorba, was Nietzsche. This philosopher-poet assisted Kazantzakis in breaking away from the barriers of his traditional and cultural past (Poulakidas, *Kazantzakis' Zorba* 234-35). He saw in Nietzsche a rich metaphysical critique of the de-spiritualization of contemporary man. It was through Nietzsche's famous proclamation "God is dead!" (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra* 124) that Kazantzakis first saw clearly the abyss, the void of nothingness, that he had barely sensed in his early years. Nietzsche's vivid philosophy portrayed to him the ultimate capacity and the potentiality of man in the world (Lea 16). However, his was the struggle not for disintegration and discord, but for harmony and peace. In all his literary life and career Kazantzakis had been attempting a happy blending of the thoughts of "the great sirens Christ, Buddha and Lenin." He acknowledges that it was a complex and painful task for him to create a mosaic of these contradictory personalities: "I struggled all my life to save myself from each of these sirens, without denying any one of them, struggled to unite these three clashing voices and transform them into harmony" (*Report* 493). This dialectical endeavor is Kazantzakis' inner quest to transmute diversity into unity, which gives rise to the central tensions in Kazantzakis' thought for artistic synthesis.

Kazantzakis remained relatively unknown as a writer for much of his career, finally achieving popularity during the last decade of his life with the 1946 publication of *Zorba the Greek*. His fame was intensified by the controversy

surrounding several of his subsequent works, beginning with his description of modern Christianity. The major works of Kazantzakis are: *The Last Temptation*, *Zorba the Greek*, *The Greek Passion* or *Christ Recrucified*, *Freedom and Death*, *The Fratricides*, *God's Pauper: St. Francis of Assisi*, *The Saviours of God: Spiritual Exercises*, *Report to Greco*, and *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*.

*The Last Temptation* is a portrayal of an uncertain, emotional Christ troubled by the temptation to renounce his calling and to live as an ordinary man. The furor raised by *The Last Temptation*, when it was published in 1955, brought the author worldwide notice and established his reputation as a significant writer. His portrayal of Christ is profoundly human which helps us to understand him and love him and to pursue his Passion as though it were our own. Kazantzakis emotionally reveals:

If he had not within him this warm human element, he would never be able to touch our hearts with such assurance and tenderness; he would not be able to become a model for our lives. We struggle, we see him struggle also, and we find strength. We see that we are not all alone in the world: he is fighting at our side. (Prologue to *The Last Temptation* 8-9)

Through the sheer power of imagination Kazantzakis reconstructs the last temptation that Christ suffered, Jesus' vision of a domestic life in which he falls in love,

marries, has children, and lives to a ripe old age. Such thoughts about the joys of domestic happiness and comforts have to be repudiated when he decides to die on the cross. Thus it becomes a great challenge for Christ, and hence Kazantzakis says:

Every moment of Christ's life is a conflict and a victory. He conquered the invincible enchantment of simple human pleasures; he conquered temptations, continually transubstantiated flesh into spirit, and ascended. Reaching the summit of Golgotha, he mounted the Cross. (Prologue to *The Last Temptation* 9).

Kazantzakis' *Zorba the Greek* is a masterpiece, second only to *The Last Temptation*. It is a delightfully refreshing story which in its exuberance does not seem to make excessive demands on the intellect, and yet its spontaneity and casualness in narration may lead the readers to assume shallowness. In fact the whole novel is a very carefully constructed philosophic parable treating the clash and eventual fusion of the forces of different temperaments and attitudes which make up the theme of the novel. It is unfolded in the form of a series of philosophical and existential questions and answers between a bookish intellectual and an unsophisticated peasant in an unspecified Cretan coast. Kazantzakis himself has admitted in one of his letters that *Zorba* was mainly a dialogue between a scribbler and a great man of the people, a dialogue between the

advocate of mind and the great popular spirit (Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis* 486).

*The Greek Passion* is the first novel written by Kazantzakis which probes the nature and meaning of Christ's crucifixion in a political context. *The Greek Passion* concerns the inhabitants of Lycovrissi, a Greek village, which was under the domination of the Turks in the 1920's. The novel opens with the village elders casting the town people in their roles for the following year's enactment of the crucifixion in the annual passion play. Consequently the actors begin to assume the identities of their characters, as a result of which, crime, hypocrisy and prostitution begin to decline in the village. The protagonist, Manolios, chosen to play the role of Jesus, takes up the blame of others and offers to sacrifice himself as the murderer of the Turkish ruler's assistant. Or else, every one of the villagers would have been executed one by one. Eventually, as the real culprit is booked, Manolios is spared. Further, when the starving refugees seek protection, Manolios accommodates them in Christian fashion by sharing his land and possessions with them. Manolios' deeds infuriate the village priest, who deems him a heretic and incites the residents to demand that the Turkish officials sentence and condemn him to death. The villagers, with the aid of the priest, eventually murder Manolios by re-enacting a twentieth century version of Christ's martyrdom.

*Freedom and Death*, the most explicitly Cretan of his novels takes its origin from a famous event of local history, the unsuccessful revolution of 1886 against

the Turkish rule. *Freedom and Death*, as the title suggests, is the nostalgic dream and the heart breaking cry of every Cretan. Cretans continue their struggle for political independence. But they rarely win the battle they have been waging over the years. In *Freedom and Death* Kazantzakis' personal history has been altered considerably, yet many of the episodes and characters are unmistakably drawn from his own life. Captain Michales, for example, resembles Kazantzakis' own father. The myth of Captain Michales is most dramatic. He finally dies the futile heroic death that his father might have desired for himself. The Europeanized nephew of Michales, Kosmas, a man of letters and a socialist returning to his homeland, is based loosely on Kazantzakis himself. Helen Kazantzakis records in her biography that *Freedom and Death* is not only a tragic story about the struggle for freedom but the soul's passionate longing for liberation as well.

*The Fratricides* is about internecine strife in the village in the Epirus during the Greek civil war of the late 1940's. The political ideology of Communism and Christian spirituality and its universal brotherhood are sharply contrasted at a much deeper level. Each character and each act is played against the backdrop of the modern Greek tragedy. The novel at times seems almost a dramatization of *The Saviours of God*. The physical description in *The Fratricides* is characteristic of Kazantzakis. Epirote Castillo, the centre stage of novel which resembles some village in Crete, becomes a microcosm of the entire world; and the brother-killing that fills the hills provides a forceful comment on the human condition at large.

Many of the villagers including Captain Drakos, the son of Father Yanaros the local priest, shift to the mountains and join Communist rebels. It is Holy Week and with murder, death and destruction being perpetrated every day, Father Yanaros feels that he himself is bearing the sins of the world. The characters are drawn out of the notions of Greek Tragedy with Father Yanaros as a hero who thrusts himself out in wild-eyed fashion from the page. Like an Old Testament Prophet he wrestles with angels and the demons in disguise.

The very choice of the subject matter in *God's Pauper: St. Francis of Assisi* shows Kazantzakis' intense interest in asceticism and primitive Christian ethics. Throughout the novel, Kazantzakis compares and contrasts the primitive church with the institutional one and finds the latter wanting in many worthwhile and important qualities. Specifically, St. Francis' life is a continuous struggle to elevate the spirit above the flesh to subdue all demands of the flesh and to live in absolute poverty. In the prologue to the novel Kazantzakis admits that he had altered and added some details in the life history of St. Francis; it is

....not out of ignorance or impudence or irreverence but from a need to match the Saint's life with his myth, bringing that life as fully into accord with its essence as possible....Art has this right and not only the right but the duty to subject everything to the essence. It feeds upon the story, then assimilates it slowly, cunningly, and turns into a legend. (*God's Pauper* 1)



*The Saviours of God* is the culmination of Kazantzakis' spiritual exercises. It is poetic and philosophical in content and spirit. Its poetry is apparent in its language of personal and spiritual confession. It is like vivid dream imagery. Above all, *The Saviours of God* is Kazantzakis' strikingly original conception of the relationship between man and God. The notions of creative evolution expounded by Bergson and the existential thoughts of Nietzsche are combined into a unique set of discourses in *The Saviours of God*. According to Kazantzakis, God is the result of whatever the most energetic and heroic people value and create.

*Report to Greco* is the romanticized autobiography of Kazantzakis. It is rather the summing up, by the great artist, of a lifetime's ideas, work, experiences and friendships. In *Report* he searches for the roots of his own genius and describes his early interests. His wife, Helen Kazantzakis notes that,

The *Report* is a mixture of fact and fiction – a great deal of truth, a minimum of fancy. Various dates have been changed. When he speaks about others, it is always the truth, unlettered, exactly what he saw and heard. When he speaks about his personal adventures, there are some small modifications. (*Report* 9)

However, it is a book of epic themes, dominated by Kazantzakis' agonized search for a means to combine his love of life and art with his ceaseless quest for spiritual truth.

*The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* is the monumental work of Kazantzakis, and his greatest achievement. It is considered to be “one of the great encyclopedic works of our time, encompassing the major motifs of our civilization and Homer’s, bridging the gap of our common heritage not only for Greeks but for all those to whom Homer is both ancestor and guide” (Levitt, *Cretan* 115). It retells the spiritual exercises by means of picture, metaphor, character and plot and functions at an allegorical as well as autobiographical level. *The Odyssey* is a highly poetic work of epic dimensions in the language of personal and spiritual confession. A kind of dream imagery permeates the whole work. Above all, it explains the author’s strikingly original conception of the relationship between God and man. God, to Kazantzakis is neither the Christian nor the Hebrew divinity, and not even the ultimate force beyond man’s reach. Kazantzakis believes that like man, God “is a process in being, a natural force of great creative potential”, which is “ceaselessly striving to purify material into spirit” (Levitt, *Cretan* 12). In *The Odyssey* Kazantzakis wants to convey the message that man as an artist can create his own mythology, can control the progress of his life and the life of mankind. His Odysseus impels us to be the masters of our own myths, to make of our lives a work of art that is worthy of belief. This is the central theme of *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, and indeed of all Kazantzakis’ life and art (Levitt, *Cretan* 138).