Creative Saplings, Vol. 05, No. 11, November. 2026, **ISSN-0974-536X,** https://creativesaplings.in/

Power, Innocence and Musical Harmony in Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance*

Nipam Kumar Saikia Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Biswanath College (affiliated to Gauhati University), P.O.: Biswanath Chariali, District: Biswanath, PIN: 784176, Assam, India.*
Email: professorsaikia@gmail.com
DOI:

Abstract

With his signature serpentine sentences of incredible length and notoriously epic paragraphs, László Krasznahorkai's 1989 novel The Melancholy of Resistance is densely and darkly complex and can be interpreted in multiple ways. While many have interpreted it through apocalyptic, political, historical, philosophical, and surrealistic lenses, this paper seeks to explore its core thematic framework. The themes of imagined apocalypse, humankind's frailties, decay, and susceptibility to manipulation in the novel are already explored. But this paper argues that the intersection of power, innocence, and music—explored through its three major characters, Tünde Eszter, György Eszter, and János Valuska—forms the novel's core thematic framework. Through careful examination of these three characters' actions, psychology, and impact on the plot, this paper will attempt to shed new light on The Melancholy of Resistance.

Keywords: *László Krasznahorkai, The Melancholy of Resistance, Tünde Eszter, János Valuska, György Eszter.*

Introduction: "It passes, but it does not pass away"

László Krasznahorkai's second novel, *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989), and his first novel, Satantango, published four years earlier in 1985, define him as a novelist. Like his first novel, *The Melancholy of Resistance* is darkly and densely complex, and carries a Kafkaesque atmosphere. Krasznahorkai explicitly acknowledged the influence of Franz Kafka in his Paris Review interview with Adam Thirlwell. Enough has been written on *The Melancholy of Resistance* as a political allegory. John Hodgkins goes a step further. He argues that the novel functions as an allegory addressing unaddressed historical traumas. While many have interpreted it through apocalyptic, historical, philosophical, and surrealistic lenses, some have explored its themes of imagined apocalypse, humankind's frailties, decay, and susceptibility to manipulation. Krasznahorkai establishes the novel's thematic weight right from its unattributed epigraph ("It passes, but it does not pass away"). Though the epigraph's meaning seems to be in flux, I would like to look at it as an echo of the novel's central theme. Three characters that drive its narrative possess contrasting personalities: Tünde Eszter is recklessly ambitious, János Valuska is incorrigibly innocent, and György Eszter is highly intellectual. They have different passions: Tünde Eszter's passion is for power, János Valuska's for heavenly bodies, and György Eszter's is for music. The plot is deceptively simple. In the harshest part of

Article History : Received: 01 October. 2026. Accepted: 21 November. 2026. Available online: 25 November. 2026. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s). **Licensing :** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License **Conflict of Interest**: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

winter, a peculiar travelling circus arrives in an anonymous decaying town. Nobody in the town is ready for such entertainment. The circus has a dead whale, the largest in the world, to display, and a notorious freak, named Prince, to hypnotise the audience. As the crowds swell, a sense of impending catastrophe looms over the town. Bizarre rumours about the sinister intention of the circus party spread like wildfire. Fear, rumour, and manipulation ultimately contribute to extremely senseless, violent riots. It is crushed ruthlessly. At last, the decaying town comes under the control of a new authoritarian leader for the worse. Readers become confused because the novel does not adequately explain the causes of the events or the town's decaying state. And then, to make matters worse, Krasznahorkai has written it in his signature serpentine sentences of incredible length and notoriously epic paragraphs. Readers are likely to lose the unifying thread of the sentences or the paragraphs. Messages are not easily decipherable. But then reading this novel is a rewarding experience. Existing scholarship analyses the novel through the lens of the character János Valuska. But I would like to analyse it through the lenses of the aforementioned three characters. My central argument is that through the collision of three distinct forces—power, innocence and music—represented by the three characters, Krasznahorkai creates the tragic melancholy of the title.

A World of Disorder

Divided into three parts, each with a title, the first part of The Melancholy of Resistance, entitled "An Emergency", does not begin with any of the three major characters. Rather, it begins with Mrs Plauf. Among the three major characters, we meet only Tünde Eszter physically toward the end of the novel's first part. We meet György Eszter and János Valuska in the novel's second part, "The Werckmeister Harmonies", where the main action takes place. But from Mrs Plauf's perspective, we learn about the backgrounds of all three major characters. She, who hates to come out of her petty-bourgeois comfort zone, is on a train ride sitting in the midst of hoi polloi in a heavily crowded booth in the dead of winter. It can be said that her train ride is part of Krasznahorkai's whole project of presenting a world of disorder. He first presents a rural railway platform, and then, through her train ride, slowly takes the readers to an anonymous town, laying bare every layer of his dystopian world step by step. It then depicts a chain of mysterious events in that world.

For Mrs Plauf, apparently a representative of the town's petit bourgeoisie, the train ride is a nightmare. She, a 58-year-old woman, considers herself a respectable, harmless woman who views the world beyond her well-maintained apartment as threatening and hates the train ride, but cannot avoid it. Surrounded by unwashed, uncouth rustic passengers, she, a holder of a worthless first-class ticket, cuts a sorry figure. In front of her, a man hits a peasant

woman, his co-passenger, severely in the crowded train, but nobody reacts, as if nothing has happened. To make matters worse, she notices one of the passengers, an "unshaven man, swigging from a bottle of stinking brandy" and wearing "a dirty broadcloth coat," is eying her lustfully (Krasznahorkai 8). When he fails to rape her physically, he subjects her to utter humiliation, and she feels he has raped her mentally. Krasznahorkai describes this disgustingly disintegrated world poignantly and poetically: "One's daily habits were disrupted by a sense of ever-spreading all-consuming chaos which rendered the future unpredictable, the past unrecallable and ordinary life so haphazard that people simply assumed that whatever could be imagined might come to pass" (Krasznahorkai 3). We as readers afterwards find ourselves amid the disturbing realities of an unnamed town, where bureaucracy and education deteriorate, a huge water tower sways above the tiny houses surrounding it, a Catholic Church clock remains immobile for decades, trains don't run on time, the streets overflow with rubbish, coal is scarce in the harshest winter, telephone lines fail, and the streetlights are broken, leaving the powerless, innocent inhabitants like Mrs Plauf nervous as she makes her way home cautiously after dark. The anticipation of some hideous inevitable catastrophe, or impending doom, is in the air.

Innocence and János Valuska

Among the characters, it is undoubtedly János Valuska who wins readers' sympathy. He is dangerously innocent. Though his innocence makes him vulnerable and leaves him exposed to forces he cannot control, it exposes the limitations of conventional ideas about intelligence, rationality, and social competence. In such a highly depressing novel where everyone is frustrated in one way or another, he stands out as an extremely positive character, an angelic figure beneath his idiotic exterior. Hence the existing scholarship on this novel applies the label "protagonist" to him. The internet, incidentally, informs us that the given name János means "God is gracious." He is indeed gracious in a god-like way, not at all concerned with the ill omens in the town. Our way into the events of the story in the second part, the longest part, of the novel, entitled "The Werckmeister Harmonies", is through him.

Mrs Plauf is János Valuska's mother. She, who now lives alone, married twice and lost both her husbands. Valuska is her disowned son from her first husband. Her first husband was ruined by alcohol, and Valuska resembles him. She is ashamed of her only son's incurable simplicity and passion for stargazing. To her utter frustration, he becomes a postman who wanders through the town delivering newspapers and narrating the cosmos to himself and sometimes to others. He, a pitiful figure with a sunken chest and "warm-liquid eyes", lives in the sleeping space of Harrer's laundry room on rent, owns nothing, "has no possessions to speak of—beyond his postman's cloak and the leather-strapped bag, and cap and boots that

went with it" (Krasznahorkai 72). He loves to keep his gaze on the heavens and considers the town insignificant compared to the harmonies of heavenly bodies. Harsh realities of the town do not affect him. He has a firm belief in the basic goodness of the universe and the harmony of the heavenly spheres. Because of the way he speaks, dresses, drinks, and performs, the people around him tolerate him as an idiot. Mrs Plauf is happy to be separated from him.

In one of the novel's most memorable scenes in the second part, Valuska organises a kind of ceremonial dance in Peafeffer Bar, a reenactment of the dance of the celestial bodies, with drunken regulars taking the place of the Sun, Moon and Earth, spinning around each other in drunken equilibrium. He often stages this performance there. In return, he sometimes gets a glass of wine. But then it is he who realises that the epidemic of catastrophe in the town is born out of the infection of the imagination. Though ill omens abound, they are not some genuine, daily increasing certainty of disaster. His observations are scientific. Beneath his idiotic exterior, he is not only intelligent, but also prophetic:

> Contrary to what anyone might think, it had not escaped Valuska's notice, the evidence being so readily available, that everyone he met was preoccupied by the notion of 'the collapse into anarchy', a state that, in the general opinion, was no longer avoidable. Everyone was talking about 'the unstoppable stampede into chaos', the 'unpredictability of daily life' and 'the approaching catastrophe' without a clear notion of the full weight of these frightening words, since, he surmised, this epidemic of fear was not born out of some genuine, daily increasing certainty of disaster but of an infection of the imagination whose susceptibility to its own terrors might eventually lead to an actual catastrophe, in other words the false premonition that a man who had lost his bearings might succumb to once the inner structure of his life, the way his joints and bones were knit, had loosened and he carelessly transgressed the ancestral laws of his soul—if he simply lost control of his undemeaningly ordered world …(Krasznahorkai 98)

But the irony is that he is disgustingly passive and falls an easy prey to Mrs Tünde Eszter's manipulative scheme.

Power and Mrs Tünde Eszter

In Foucault's understanding, power works "through institutionalised and accustomed discourses that open up delimited forms of action, knowledge and being", and it "is dispersed and without a specific source or agency" (Bedford/St. Martins 206). He argues that power is knowledge and knowledge is power. These views of Foucault can easily be applied to Mrs Tünde Eszter, the novel's villain in the traditional sense. It is she who really captivates readers. All the other characters pale in comparison to her. She is the only character in the novel who is dynamic and decisive, and who drives the narrative through energy and extraordinary manipulative design. She unexpectedly arrives at Mrs Plauf's apartment late at night. Her entry injects a fresh energy into the novel. At the time of her arrival, Mrs Plauf is seeking solace in her well-decorated, tidy apartment after the nightmarish train ride.

Tünde Eszter is the estranged wife of Mr György Eszter. She is a physically and mentally robust woman who has uncontrollable lust for food, men, and power, and is a genius in manipulative politics—the novel features graphic scenes depicting her wild copulation with a police chief and a colonel. But the greatest of all is her thirst for power. A genius at propaganda and manipulation, she can change like a chameleon as circumstances demand and can go to any level to get things done her way. To Mr. Eszter, she is "that dangerous prehistoric beast" from whom he is happy to be separated (Krasznahorkai 112). She has recently been appointed president of a new women's committee. She gets this position through the police chief by manipulating him through her sexual energy. As president, she effectively establishes an organisational framework to gain political power. Why does she, who does not take a single step without calculation, unexpectedly arrive at Mrs Plauf's apartment late at night? To answer this question, we are to dive into the novel's main episode.

Mrs Tünde Eszter's Conspiratorial Politics

As mentioned earlier, a circus party arrives in the town. As everything in the novel is depressing, so is the circus. It is a very peculiar kind of circus, without music, acrobats, dancing elephants, monkeys, or smiling clowns. It has only the corpse of a gigantic whale to show. It claims the corpse is the largest whale in the world. Mrs Plauf saw the spectacular advertisement for it.

The most important point is that it is Tünde Eszter who paves the way for the circus party to come to town despite the town administration's objection, not for the entertainment of townspeople, but to fulfil her vaulted ambition to gain power. She knows that the townspeople are in desperate need of a saviour, not of such absurd entertainment. She also knows that wherever this circus party goes, it creates chaos. She wants a crisis to happen in the town so she can use it to gain power to control the town, in the guise of its saviour. She does not have any vision. She wants power just for the sake of it. To her, power is power, and she wants to accumulate it.

In accordance with Tünde Eszter's expectation, the circus prompts bizarre rumours: word spreads that the circus folks have a sinister purpose. This rumour spreads paranoia among the people who are already repelled by the sight of the dead whale. The cigar-smoking director, worried about profit and control, quarrels with Prince, a peculiar man who loves to wreak chaos among people, whom the director has hired as a freak to show in the next act. Though he is a grotesque figure, his words exert an extraordinary influence over the crowd. That is why he is hired. But he disobeys the director. Unable to speak Hungarian, he babbles high-pitched gibberish which his factotum translates as a refusal to recognise the director's

authority. The director then fires both Prince and his factotum, and comes out of the truck to inform the crowd that the show is over for the day. The real chaos ensues. Prince is faceless because he never directly appears, and he is the opposite of Valuska. To me, The Prince and Tünde Eszter are two sides of the same corruptive force. While the Prince is its demagogic side, Tünde Eszter is its political side. It is indicated that the faceless Prince incites the townspeople to destroy their own community. But we don't get sufficient proof of it in the novel.

As soon as the real crisis begins, Tünde Eszter gets ready to capitalise on the bizarre rumour about the circus party and weaponizes people's paranoia against them to gain total control of the town. She launches a political movement called "A Tidy Yard, An Orderly House" to sell hope. Through it, she wants to present herself as the leader to protect the townspeople. She knows that she, a scandalous woman, is not taken seriously by the townspeople. Krasznahorkai writes:

> It wasn't just Mrs Eszter's 'scandalous past, loose morals and currently confused family situation' that made her the perennial topic of her friends' conversation, but also the fact that in her colossal arrogance she refused to acknowledge either that, on the one hand, her rude, bumptious and pushy manner and 'gaudy clothes, so befitting her tub-of-lard figure' offended the more respectable families in the neighbourhood, or, on the other, that her impudent attempts to curry favour through displays of hypocrisy—'enough to put a chameleon to shame'—excited both distaste and opposition. (Krasznahorkai 35)

Now, she gets ready to manipulate and blackmail her estranged husband to make her movement a success.

György Eszter and Music

Mr György Eszter, Tünde Eszter's husband, is a local celebrity, and one of the most important aspects of the novel is his conflicting engagement with music. Initially, he had a sublime view of music. He had sacrificed the precious years of his life to the pursuit of pure pitch:

> Ever since he was young he had lived with the unshakeable conviction that music, which for him consisted of the omnipotent magic of harmony and echo, provided humanity's only sure stay against the filth and squalor of the surrounding world, music being as close an approximation to perfection as could be imagined, and the stench of cheap perfume in the stuffy hall together with Frachberger's senile croakings represented a crude violation of such transparent ideality. (Krasznahorkai 116)

He rightly became the dictatorial director of the local academy of music. In his studies of music, he came across the work of composer Andreas Werckmeister, who proposed a novel twelve half-tone musical registers from which all musical instruments could be precisely tuned. He spent years studying Werckmeister Harmonies, after which the second section of the novel is entitled, each vibration of which, he believed, consisted of an endlessly deep series

of harmonics and frequencies that could give pure aesthetic pleasure. Believing it to be pure pitch, he worked on it to become a perfect musician. In the process, he became famous in his community. But then he discovered that they were not pure tones. They were based on incorrect calculations. He had the guts to declare that Werckmeister Harmonies and, for that matter, the whole canon of Western music is built on a lie. None of his colleagues supported him. All of them adhered to the Werckmeister scale. Furious, he resigned his post as director of the academy of music and retreated to a secluded life. He becomes unnaturally sick of the world, so much so that he no longer leaves his house, only rising occasionally from his bed. But his passion for music never dies. He starts devoting his time to tuning his piano to a pure system that rejects Western musical tuning. He is the novel's only character who genuinely admires Valuska for his angelic nature and enjoys his company. He is thoroughly aware of the level of degeneration going on in his town. But he has taken a hands-off approach to the whole situation because he believes

> …the undeniable fact that nature herself had laid down her tools and finished her regular task, that the once-brotherly bond between heaven and earth was well and truly broken, and that the last act had assuredly begun wherein we were orbiting alone among the scattered detritus of our laws and 'would soon be left staring, as fate had decreed, idiotically, uncomprehendingly, watching and shivering as the light steadily withdrew from us'. (Krasznahorkai 105)

He is a disillusioned misanthrope. But the townspeople's respect for him does not wane. That is why his estranged wife wants to use him to give her movement intellectual legitimacy. She anticipates an outright rejection from him. Naturally, she is afraid of approaching him directly. She, therefore, unexpectedly arrives at Mrs. Plauf's apartment late at night with a manipulative scheme. She wants Mrs Plauf to compel her son to serve as the mediator to persuade her husband to become the figurehead of her political movement, and to blackmail him that if he does not cooperate, she will move back into his house. She knows very well that her husband will be terrified by the prospect of her return and ultimately agree. But Mrs Plauf refused to be her manipulative tool. Her 'no' was "like a poisoned arrow stuck in a tree" for Tünde Eszter (Krasznahorkai 44).

The Collision

In the meantime, the mob goes wild. Marauders wreck everything in the town. They cut trees, break buildings, rape women, kill humans, animals, and birds, so much so that the army has to come to put down the violence ruthlessly under the guidance of Tünde Eszter. For every decision, the town administration relies heavily on the decisive Tünde Eszter. Even the colonel depends on her. She finally succeeds not only in seducing the colonel, but also in becoming the town's de facto leader. She skilfully hides behind the veneer of order, and no longer needs her husband's help.

From the very beginning, the people in Kossuth Square are not at all interested in the dead whale. They, who see the dead whale as an occasion for something violent, are waiting for the next act which does not take place. Valuska is the only awe-struck beholder of the corpse. For him, it is a breathtaking marvel, a proof of god's grand design even though it is dead. Looking at it, he thinks, "How enormous! … How extraordinary a creation! … What a deeply mysterious person the Creator must be to amuse Himself with such extraordinary creatures (93)!" But he gets a chance to overhear the conversation between the director and his factotum. It is, again, he who, for the first time, senses the crisis and warns the emergency committee headed by Tünde Eszter on time. But, under the influence of Tünde Eszter, the powerful people associated with the committee are either compromised, distracted, or indecisive.

Mrs Eszter sends Valuska back to the site of the violence to get the actual report. When he finds himself in the midst of the mob, one thought comes to his mind: he should protect Mr György Eszter. But then he is encircled by a group of marauders. His death becomes imminent. As luck would have it, at the intercession of one of the marauders, a man in "a dirty broadcloth coat," whom we met on the train, who tried to rape Mrs Plauf, Valuska remains unharmed. But the marauders bring the town to pieces, in front of his eyes. For the first time, Valuska's gaze comes down from the heavenly bodies to his ugly real world. His notion of harmonious cosmos is shattered. Here comes the moment of melancholy of resistance: he begins to lose his inherent innocence. The worst is that Valuska is a participant in the violence in the eyes of the authorities. Tünde Eszter now has the power to eliminate him easily. But, instead of killing him, she applies the label of insanity to him and sends him, now a thoroughly broken man, to a local mental asylum. She kills him mentally.

Mr György Eszter's persistent quest for a pure musical tuning clash with the chaos of the outside world. At last, Tünde Eszter breaks into his house, where he meekly submits to her power. He is pushed out of the main living space of his own house and put into the back room to lead an isolated life forever. He seems to have realised, at last, that returning to pure harmony is impossible. This is another moment of melancholy of resistance.

What happens to Mrs Plauf? On learning that her son is in the march with the marauders, the mother in her becomes restless. She rushes out into the rampage to retrieve her son home. But she falls an easy prey to a marauder. She is killed by none other than the man in a "broadcloth coat", a person of her old acquaintance we met on the train. Before killing her, he raped her.

In a vulgar scene, we see Tünde Eszter feasting on the canned cherries preserved by the deceased Mrs. Plauf, as if she were tasting her victory over her. The same woman delivers an emotionally charged speech over the grave of Mrs. Plauf in the novel's last section, entitled "Sermo Super Sepulchrum". She says:

> Someone we loved, someone who did what she had to do, someone to whom modesty was a byword, someone whose life we all celebrate, particularly now, at her death. And in her life we celebrate courage, courage that puts us all—you, me, even her own self—to shame, because, my fellow citizens, this simple woman was the only one among us who dared to resist those whom none of us opposed. Was she a hero? I ask myself. Yes, most certainly: that noble word is the right one for Mrs József Plauf, and with all my heart I endorse it. (Krasznahorkai 316)

Her speech is a pack of lies. After her speech, Krasznahorkai gives an extended scientific description of the process of decomposition of Mrs Plauf's body in the language of a medical textbook. With that, the novel comes to an end.

Conclusion

Although the immediate threat to the decaying town has subsided for the time being, a lingering sense of danger never really leaves. It might cycle into a new chaotic form at any time. Or we can say, the immediate terror passes, but the psychological damage it has caused remains rooted in the town's community. In other words, violence does not pass away. We can say that the epigraph ("It passes, but it does not pass away") refers to the novel's central theme. If we keep aside the other angles—apocalyptic, political, historical, philosophical, psychological, linguistic, and surrealistic—of this dense novel, what becomes conspicuous as its foundational framework is the intersection of three forces: power, innocence, and music represented by Tünde Eszter, János Valuska, and György Eszter, respectively. In the collision of these three forces, greed for power emerges victorious. With all his goodness, Valuska is confused, passive, and powerless. So is György Eszter, the ineffectual intellectual in the novel. The town authority is incompetent and indecisive. The townspeople live in a state of constant, suffocating dread. In such a depressing world, it is Tünde Eszter who acts decisively. She knows exactly what she wants, and she gets it her way. Eliot rightly said, "So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good: so far as we do evil or good, we are human: and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least we exist" (Eliot 391). Eliot seems to have said this for people like Tünde Eszter who do not suffer from inaction even in a decaying world. But then her success is for the worse of the town's community. The decaying town's crisis does not pass away.

Works Cited:

Eliot, T. S. "Baudelaire." Selected Essays, Faber and Faber, 1932, pp. 380–91.

Hodgkins, John. "Not Fade Away: Adapting History and Trauma in László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance* and Béla Tarr's Werckmeister Harmonies." Adaptation, vol. 2, no. 1, Mar. 2009, pp. 49–64. https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apn023.

Krasznahorkai, László. The Melancholy of Resistance. Translated by George Szirtes, Tuskar Rock, 2016.

Krasznahorkai, László. Satantango. Translated by George Szirtes, Tuskar Rock, 2020.

Krasznahorkai, László. "The Art of Fiction No. 240." Interview by Adam Thirlwell. The Paris Review, no. 225, Summer 2018, https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/7177/the-art-of-fiction-no-240-laszlo-krasznahorkai. Accessed 21 Sept. 2026.