

**INTERSECTION OF LOVE, HISTORY AND INDIVIDUAL
CHOICE IN KUNDERA'S *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING***

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Abstract

My article, "Interaction of Love, History and Individual choice in Kundera's The Unbearable Lightness of Being" deals with connection among love, history and individual choice in Milan Kundera's novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Kundera's themes are exile, identity, life overlapping the borders among (art/ love / seriousness), history as continual return and the pleasure of a less important life. He takes up different human feelings and things and finds them contrary to their appearance. The ideal love turns out to be lust, lust into soul-searching, history into trifle and the serious into the ridiculous, the sublime into the mundane and lofty missions into an excuse for one's craving for power or security. In his novel of ideas which probes the plight of Czechoslovakia under the occupation of the former Soviet Union, the writer brings out the contradictions through the portraying of relations between Tomas-Tereza, Tomas-Sabina, Franz- Sabina etc. History offers limited possibilities at a given point and human has to choose under the penalty of inactivity or certain end. The thin lines between loyalty and betrayal, conformism and individualism, privacy and publicity, subjective and objective attitude are taken up for critical scrutiny.

Keywords: History, Choice, Kundera, Betrayal, Czechoslovakia

INTERSECTION OF LOVE, HISTORY AND INDIVIDUAL CHOICE IN KUNDERA'S *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING*

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Milan Kundera is a novelist who has emerged from war-torn Europe and the totalitarian communism that crushed Czechoslovakia's body and soul. His writings are a product of a novelist's anguish and active reaction and resistance to the fact of Soviet imperialism. The argument that Soviet Union had not been really socialist would not remove the fact of domination of a small nation such as Czechoslovakia (now Czech and Slovakia) by its Big brother. In the present context of Globalization, small nations, their languages and cultures are suffering from the domination of the mightier powers. The significance of Kundera's works in general and his *The unbearable Lightness of Being* lies in the fact that what had happened to Czechoslovakia yesterday is getting repeated in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and many other nations due to the impact of global capitalism and American aggression in the name of restoration of democracy. Chomsky writes 'States are not moral agents; they are vehicles of power, which operate in the interests of the particular internal structures of their societies' (63).

Kundera's novels are not mere political tracts but attempts to unravel innate contradictions in human condition. Kundera quotes Herman Broch 'The only morality for a writer is knowledge.' and expresses his idea that only a literary work that reveals an unknown fragment of human existence has a reason for being. To be a writer does not mean to preach a truth; it means to discover a truth.¹

Orhan Pamuk says that 'the art of the novel lies on our ability to believe simultaneously in contradictory states' (4). Reading Kundera today makes us realize that although times have changed, the fate of people has not changed much. Indians who have experienced the British Imperialism yesterday are subjected to the overpowering influence of the domination of the lone super power today. Sartre writes, 'reading is a pact of generosity between author and the reader' (13).

Kundera 'has succeeded in turning the Czechoslovakia of his youth into a vivid, mythical, erotic land.' ² In his *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera analyzes the intertwined history of novel and Europe (29-30), refers to suspending moral judgment as morality of the novel(7) . He also comments 'because of its personal nature, the history of an art is a revenge by man against the impersonality of the history of the history of humanity.'³ Kundera writes ,

I often hear it said that the novel has exhausted all its possibilities. I have the opposite impression: during its 400-year history, the novel has missed many of its possibilities; it has left many great opportunities unexplored, many paths forgotten, calls unheard. ⁴

Kundera's themes are exile, identity, life beyond the border (art/ love / seriousness) history as continual return and the pleasure of a less important life. His novels take up different human feelings and things and find them opposite of what they appear to be. The ideal love turns out to be lust, lust into soul-searching, history into trifle and the serious into ridiculous, the sublime into the mundane and lofty mission into an excuse. Kundera says,

My lifetime ambition has been to unite the utmost seriousness of question with the utmost lightness of form. Nor is this purely an artistic ambition. The combination of a frivolous form and a serious subject immediately unmask the truth about our dramas (those that occur in our beds as well as those that we play out on the great stage of History) and their awful insignificance. We experience the unbearable lightness of being. ⁵

Jim Travnick writes, 'The epic of great history is woven together with the epic of a love story.'⁶ Kundera brings out the contradictions of history, freedom and love through the portrayal of relations between Tomas-Tereza, Tomas-Sabina, Franz- Sabina etc. In the novel, Tereza is a girl who tries hard to please her mother who sees Tereza as guilty of robbing her freedom, ridicules her shyness about her body and does not allow her to lock herself in a bathroom to avoid the prurient interest of her step-father. Tereza has experienced a rupture with her mother who is domineering. She finds book and music as means of entering new world. She becomes a bar girl and falls in love with him by coincidences – Tomas, a book in his hands, Beethoven's music etc. She wants to celebrate her uniqueness through her relationship with Tomas and does not mind his small infidelities in the beginning. She goes to Sabina's studio, takes and gives some nude photographs. She even photographs Russian invasion and is advised to be independent by another woman photographer. She is like 'her country , which stuttered, gasped for breath, could not speak'(Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness* 71).

Kundera intersperses the history of Czechoslovakia with the fate of individual characters. Jan Prochazka, an émigré novelist's private and casual remarks are made public by the spies and he is driven to illness and death. Tereza sees herself in a dream parading naked along with other women. To her, nudity is a sign of concentration camp uniformity, a sign of humiliation "and the parade as a joyful solidarity of the soulless" (Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness* 54). She finds the world as a concentration camp where "the complete obliteration of privacy" takes place followed by brutality. In her home which is like a concentration camp for her, she stands before a mirror and ruminates whether her soul would survive if her body turned grotesque. Kundera says that

life when one can't hide from the eyes of others - that is hell. Those who have lived in totalitarian countries know it, but that system only brings out, like a magnifying glass, the tendencies of all modern society. The devastation of nature; the decline of thinking and of art; bureaucratization, depersonalization; lack of respect before personal life. Without secrecy, nothing is possible - not love, not friendship.⁷

Border Between Love-Mundaneness, Betrayal- Fidelity:

When Tereza smells that Tomas's acts of infidelity continue, she lives as a soul with him and sends her body in search of free love. She becomes a bar girl, starts flirting and seen as cunning by some. Tomas sends her to climb Petrin Hill where people are shot to death out of their own choice. Tereza shrinks back from death in the last minute and fears that the strong Tomas would not forgive her cowardice or betrayal. She starts an affair with an Engineer who traps her at the behest of the secret police in the form of a rescuer from her troubles in bar. She realizes that her betrayer is her body rather than her soul. (Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness* 154). Kundera says that

'kitsch is a desire to please at all costs. To speak well of animals and look skeptically at children can't please the public very much. It might even irritate it slightly. Not that I have anything against children. But the kitsch of childhood annoys me.'⁸

She is afraid of her secret and the possible loss of love based on fidelity. Tomas may not throw her out but the fragile edifice of love based on fidelity would collapse. Tomas loses his job when he refuses to compromise over an article written by him, turns into a window washer rather than a betrayer. During the period of stress, he observes the smiles of the compromised and the intransigent. Through his fall, the betrayers hope to regain their honour whereas the latter hope to showoff their courage. He is also obsessed with the finding the uniqueness of every woman he meets not through her gait, culinary practice or artistic taste but through sexuality. In case of Tereza, his love preceded without any

necessity to uncover anything. The author-narrator says, “love begins at the point when a woman enters her first word into our poetic memory”(Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness* 203).

Kundera writes that his characters are his “own unrealized possibilities’, He is attracted as well as repelled by them in an equal measure. Yvon Grenier quotes Kundera, “a novelist must systematically desystematize his thought, kick at the barricade that he himself has erected around his ideas”⁹

In the *Unbearable lightness of Being* , Tomas’s Hamletian dilemma is , “Is it better to shout and hasten the end, or to keep silent and gain thereby a slower death” (210). Tomas returns to Prague, listens to the nightmarish fears of Tereza regarding rejection by him and her ghostly face with holes in the place of eyes. He is profoundly moved by her condition but remains undisturbed by the fate of the planet or his country or his neighbors. To him love and sex are separable. He recalls the platonic myth that says that people are originally hermaphrodites until God split them into two and making love as the longing for the half of ourselves we have lost”(Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness* 233). He wonders whether he would not betray his ideal girl for the sake of Tereza.

The kitsch of love, patriotism and peaceful home :

Humans see fidelity and love as ideal and sex and infidelity as physical. Referring to the death of Yakov, Stalin’s son to escape censure over his dirt in a common latrine , the novelist sees it not as senseless as the deaths of the Germans and Russians in service of imperialism and the supreme Leader. The Soviet regime uses the gulag as a septic tank to dispose of its refuse. He uses the term ‘Kitsch’ which means the complete denial of shit literally and figuratively and everything else that is seen as disgusting in life.

Franz sees fidelity as a virtue and betrayal as a cardinal vice. Sabina sees betrayal as glamorous. Franz, the son of a Viennese mother –French father was a Swiss and appears as an epitome of Europe to Sabina. He finds music as freedom from words and find her more attractive by ‘superimposing the painful drama of her country on her person.’(Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness* 100). Sabina sees extremes as a veiled death wish in art and politics. Franz sees light as the Sun of righteousness and the flame of intellect. He and Sabina see darkness as the infinity and the refusal to see what is there.. She breaks from the fellow émigré politicals. The city of New York attracts her but repels Franz. Sabina his weakness is called goodness and his definition of love as renouncing of strength alienates her from him. While Franz sees truthful living as a public matter, she sees it as a private issue. Repelled by Franz’s need for mothering and to punish his intelligence, kindness and powerless strength, Sabina leaves for Paris. Until then her betrayals proved adventurous

and what fell to her lot was not the burden but unbearable lightness of being.’(Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness* 118). Kundera queries “one could betray one’s parents, husband, country, love, but when parents, husband, country, and love are gone –what was left to betray? “(*Unbearable Lightness* 118) .

Sabina’s kitsch of peaceful home takes her to a rich and old American couple in New York who provides a studio for her. Franz , an idealist who lives for the imaginary eyes of the absentees seeks Sabina’s appreciation and joins a march to the Cambodian border to help the people, faces a cold reception and turns realistic. He gets mugged by miscreants, is flown home and dies in the hands of his first wife Marie- Claude whom he hates a lot.

In reference to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera says, “There, I wanted dream, narrative, and reflection to flow together in an indivisible and totally natural stream. But the polyphonic character of the novel is very striking in part six: the story of Stalin’s son, theological reflections, a political event in Asia, Franz’s death in Bangkok, and Tomas’s funeral in Bohemia are all linked by the same everlasting question:

What is kitsch?” This polyphonic passage is the pillar that supports the entire structure of the novel... kitsch is the absolute denial of the existence of shit. This meditation on kitsch is... based on a great deal of thought, experience, study, and even passion. Yet the tone is never serious; it is provocative.¹⁰

Kundera criticizes that man takes his control over other creatures as his right and would not relish his slavery to an alien. In the novel, the author-narrator says that our possessiveness made us mechanical and insensitive to the lament of an animal or the grating of a wagon wheel. Our behavior is based on our needs and we are not sure about the share of emotions such as love, antipathy, charity or malice and the constant power play among humans. Kundera writes “Perhaps a man itched to the cart of a Martian or roasted on the spit by inhabitants of the Milky way will recall the veal cutlet he used to slice on his dinner plate and apologize (belatedly) to the cow” (*Unbearable Lightness* 278).Will mankind be wiser in its next life on another planet?

Kundera rejects totalitarian world based on either Marx or Islam and says,

The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude. In a world built on sacrosanct certainties the novel is dead.... people nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties. ¹¹

Conditional love-unconditional love

In the novel one also finds strange bond between the dog Karenin and Tomas-Tereza. Tereza gets angry when Tomas refers to the dog in the present perfect sense. Unlike a man, a dog does not become conscious of body-soul dichotomy. Tereza thinks that her love for Karenin that shows unconditional love is more than what she feels for Tomas. Lovelessness is due to unrealistic demands on the partner and the desire to change one's partner. Tereza observes her husband Tomas reading letters from his son regularly and suspects him of infidelities. She regrets her mistake later on and for turning Tomas, a surgeon into a rustic by making him follow her from Zurich to Prague. Tomas's unhappiness is due to non-repeatability on linear time and missions he has taken up. Tomas says in the end of the novel, "Missions are stupid. I have no mission, No one has, And it's terrific to realize you're free, free of all missions (Kundera, *Unbearable Lightness* 305). Grenier remarks that Kundera refutes the definition of ideology as a foundational, coherent, and rational set of positions. Ideologies have dramatic, even tragic consequences, but as intellectual constructions, they remain light and flimsy, genuine smokescreens for the crude quest for power, security, and emotional fulfillment.¹²

History and individual choice

Milan Kundera writes that human life occurs only once and in any given situation, we can take only one decision which is unique. History is akin to an individual's life in this sense. There is only one history of the Czechs which will end one day and it is unrepeatable. In 1618, the Czech estates challenged the emperor in Vienna courageously, faced the thirty-year war and the near total destruction. After the Munich conference in 1938, the Czechs were made scapegoats to Hitler and their caution and capitulation led to their slavery. The Russian invasion in 1968 raised the death rate in the country, degradation of intellectuals and despair in body and soul of former Czechoslovakia. In the novel. Tomas thinks that the history of Europe or Czechs is unrepeatable. Is it as light as individual's life? Alan Taylor writes that Kundera sees history as a joke and a product of anti-agency of humans which means the outcome is the contrary to the intentions of the actors.¹³

To a remark by Philip Roth that Kundera's prose is a kind of psychoanalysis of politics, the latter replies that the metaphysics of man is the same in the private sphere as in the public one and forgetting is also such a problem affecting individuals and politics. When a big power wants to deprive a small country of its national consciousness it uses the method of *organized forgetting*. Kundera refers to the conscious erasure of contemporary Czech literature, dismissal of historians from their posts and rewriting of history and demolition of statues in his country under the occupation of the former Soviet Union and says that a nation which loses awareness of its past gradually loses its self. And so the political situation has brutally

illuminated the ordinary metaphysical problem of forgetting that we face all the time, every day, without paying any attention. *Politics unmask the metaphysics of private life, private life unmask the metaphysics of politics.*"¹⁴ (Italics mine).

At this juncture, one can say that whatever may be the machinations of powerful States and dogmatic groups, writers like Kundera have done their job magnificently. Rushdie writes, 'what one writer can make in the solitude of one room is something no power can easily destroy.' (59).

Bob Corbett writes that Kundera seems to accept that only an eternal recurrence allows one to survive absurdity of existence but also states that the survival itself is impossible as history runs on linear line.¹⁵

Grenier sees the Kundera's appeal in the ensemble of insights on politics and their origin in what can be called an artist's perspective... His conjugation of politics and culture is also refreshing in an era that is characterized by the balkanization of knowledge.¹⁶

End Notes:-

¹ "A Talk With Milan Kundera." Interview by Carlisle, Olga. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.

² "A Talk With Milan Kundera." Interview by Carlisle, Olga. Web. 29 Mar. 2012.

³ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, p.16. Kundera also castigates "the morality that stands against the ineradicable human habit of judging instantly, ceaselessly, and everyone; of judging before, and in the absence of, understanding. From the viewpoint of novel's wisdom, that fervid readiness to judge is the most detestable stupidity, the most pernicious evil. Not that the novelist utterly denies that moral judgment is legitimate. If you like, you can accuse Panurge of cowardice, accuse Emma Bovary accuse Rastignac—that's your business, the novelist has nothing to with it" (7).

⁴ Milan Kundera. Interview by Philip Roth. Web. 30 Mar. 2012.

⁵ Milan Kundera. *Interviews* by Christian Salmon. Web. 30 March 2012.

⁶ Jiri Travnicek. "Twenty-two years later :A second reading of Milan Kundera's "The Unbearable Lightness of Being." Web.29 March 2012

⁷ "A Talk With Milan Kundera." Interview by Carlisle, Olga. Web. 29 March 2012.

⁸ "A Talk With Milan Kundera." Interview by Carlisle, Olga. Web. 29 March 2012.

⁹ Yvon Grenier, "Milan Kundera on Politics and the Novel." *History of Intellectual Culture* 6.1(2006): n.pag. Web.29 March 2012.

¹⁰ Milan Kundera Christian Salmon "Interviews" *Paris Review*, The Art of Fiction No.81.n.p.

¹¹ Milan Kundera, "The Most Original Book of the Season" Interviews by Philip Roth Web.30 March 2012.

¹² Grenier, Yvon. "Milan Kundera on Politics and the Novel." *History of Intellectual Culture* 6.1(2006): n.pag. Web.29 March 2012.

¹³ Alan Taylor, "Anti-Agency: The Rhetorical Situation, Guilt, and the Power of Laughter in the Novels of Milan Kundera. Web.30 Mar.2012. Taylor writes, "Laughter is the only way for humanity to deal with "the horror of the absurdity of existence" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 60). Readers of Kundera's novels may find only a partial salvation in laughter."

¹⁴ Philip Roth, "The Most Original Book of the Season" Interviews .Milan Kundera.30 Nov.1980. Web.Mar.2012.

¹⁵ Bob Corbett, Rev. of *The Unbearable lightness of Being* By Milan Kundera. Trans. by Michael Henry Heim. New York: Perennial Classics, 1999. Web. Mar.2012. To Corbett, in a world of objective meaninglessness one must fall into nihilism unless one's acts recur eternally, thus giving our acts 'weight, the weight of eternally recurring choices'.

¹⁶ Yvon Grenier. "Milan Kundera on Politics and the Novel." *History of Intellectual Culture* 6.1(2006): n.pag.Web.29 March 2012.

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