

Existential Despair in Milan Kundera's *the Unbearable Lightness of Being*

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ABSTRACT

From the time of early 20th century novel has become more oriented towards the inquiry into human existence. This existential investigation has revealed the brutal reality of the steady decrease of the horizon of individual autonomy. Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* time and again explains the discrimination of individual by the totalitarianism which follows its own determination. If power has infiltrated to the central part of human life, what existential possibility is available there for man. Kundera tries to seize an existential dilemma: the powerlessness of man to graph his life. Tomas, the central character of the novel once divorced his wife to linger bachelor and march a life of liberty. Kundera presents the ambiguity of human life in a way that discloses absolute defenselessness of the human being. Since Tomas tries to administer his private life, he features a devil that comes from the external in the shape of Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Kundera appears to make the reader cognizant of the dictatorship of political supremacy, of the mortification and maltreatment it causes on the natives. Since his aim is with the individual and his existence, he comprises those historical details, images and symbols which can help him discover the existential quandary of man in a style of recitation he calls elliptic. Kundera's characters are powerless and victims of Russian Invasion.

KEYWORDS: *existential investigation, discrimination, ambiguity, totalitarianism, defenselessness, dictatorship, mortification, maltreatment, existential quandary, elliptic*

The primary aim of any kind of literature is to make man aware of his condition and to decide his place in this universe. From the time of early 20th century novel has become more oriented towards the inquiry into human existence. This existential investigation has revealed the brutal reality of the steady decrease of the horizon of individual autonomy. Keeping this aspect at the centre, Kafka perhaps is the first modern novelist who has evoked the idea man's quest for freedom simply as illusion. Milan Kundera undoubtedly can be placed in the tradition of European Novel as so much in the novels of Kundera happens psychologically. Kundera affirms that his novels are mainly the enigma of the self.

Since the primary aim of Kundera is of existential contradiction in a world dictated by power, a world without uniqueness, space to oneself, autonomy and

honesty. As he has mentioned in his *The Art Of The Novel*:

“The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation human life in the trap the world has become.”¹

Most of Kundera's characters are born out of some intense circumstances; their life is always at hazard. They are trapped in a condition which can seize them any time. Kundera time and again explains in a multiple the discrimination of individual by the totalitarianism which follows its own determination. When authority practices its own strength of character, its own integrity, it rapidly assumes a metaphysical aspect. In traditional existentialism of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* man is shown at the mercy of God. The relationship between man and God always remained arbitrary. Man has never

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occupied any right over God's will any claim. The supreme power has always remained arbitrary, illogical and meaningless. Contrary to God Kundera presents that the power implemented by man is no less irrational and random. A man can be blamed, without ever done anything incorrect, jailed and compelled to validate his own virtuousness, and even punished. Occurrences which consists persecution of innocent human beings make significant leitmotif in the works of existential literature. It is also presented by Kafka that, an incomprehensible circumstances, in which the indict is mandatory to prove his innocence. He interrogates that how several events which happen only once and decide the life of an individual. The life of the individual records the series of chance events. It means that human life cannot be premeditated; any unanticipated happening can dislocate the whole devise.

All Kundera's characters feature a tentative life in the face of an omnipotent power. Tomas, a habitual womanizer, and moves away from the fears the weight of responsibility. He imagines that if he calls her then she will propose herself to him and if he does not encourage her then she will stay as a waitress forever. By presenting this type of dilemma, Kundera tries to seize an existential dilemma: the powerlessness of man to graph his life.

"We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives, nor perfect it in our lives to come. Was it better to be with Tereza or to remain alone? There is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison. We live everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold. And what can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself, that is why life is always like a sketch".²

Tomas, the central character of the novel, is proposed a job in a hospital in Zurich, but he is incapable to join it seeing that Tereza will not depart the country under occupation. Kundera appears to be perplexed at how individual's preferences and actions are governed by political circumstances. The political control is so devastating that individual's life has no importance. Therefore, the conventional periphery between the public and private realms of life has been windswept. So many people intellectuals, artists, philosophers, journalists just like Tomas set the way of life the in the country Which has come under Soviet invasion. Kundera, by fusing historical events of Czech nation repeatedly gives strict details of that horrible phase:

"The representatives of the country had been hauled away like criminals by the Russian army,

no one knew where they were, every one feared for the men's lives, and hatred for the Russians drugged people like alcohol. It was a drunken carnival of hate. Czech towns were decorated with thousands of hand-painted posters bearing ironic texts, epigrams, poems and cartoons of Brezhnev and his soldiers, jeered at by one and all as a circus of illiterates. in the meantime, the Russians had forced the Czech representatives to sign a compromise agreement in Moscow. When Dubcek returned with them to Prague, he gave a speech over the radio. He was so devastated after his six-day detention he could hardly talk" ...³

It is only with the help of historical occurrence that Kundera interrogates the quandary of his characters. By presenting real historical occurrences, Kundera appears to make the reader cognizant of the dictatorship of political supremacy, of the mortification and maltreatment it causes on the natives. At the same time he builds it quite apparent that he is describing the policy of the state rule which is as merciless in compelling people powerless as the legal power in Kafka's *The Trial* did. The year 1968 becomes so crucial that it has formed a chain for Kundera's novels. Since his aim is with the individual and his existence, he comprises those historical details, images and symbols which can help him discover the existential quandary of man in a style of recitation he calls elliptic. This is truly observed by the critic Scarpetta:

"The characters in *The Unbearable lightness of Being* live through grave and tragic historical situations, foremost among them the Soviet invasion of Czechslovakia and normalization, at the hands of the police. But the eye the novel casts on these situations is never directly political. Political scrutiny aims at the masses, at the collective phenomena, at common measures of denominators, whereas the novelistic scrutiny plumbs the uniqueness of each case, and through it precisely that which escapes political reason".⁰⁴

The most vital existential issue which Kundera trying to be anxious with is that is there any possibility for profligacy in a world in which the external actions are so profound that they can annihilate life at any instant. When Tereza migrated from Zurich to Prague after a few weeks, Tomas is incapable to choose whether he should pursue her or not. Since Tereza is week, she recognizes herself with the conquered people of her country. Since Tomas has cultivated deep consideration for Tereza, finally he returns to Prague: Back in Prague Tomas feels an conceit in the soldier. Since he is the part of the power Tomas perceives in his behaviour a vein of superiority. On

the other hand, he is totally powerless. Why Tomas is weightless and irrelevant? Kundera assumes that with the unparalleled dominance of power of the state the human being is destined to live on the periphery of his life. Kundera's implication is that had state not obtained such an unfathomable power the life of man would not have descended in such a dismal condition, and this condition of man, he considers the lightness of being. The concept 'lightness of being' has philosophical interpretation which absorbs the denial of all those notions about man such as autonomy, individualism, bravery, prudence and will which went into the making of Western Humanism. The suggestion is that a dictatorial power can utilize anything as a tool in order to remove people from their history. The propagation of modern science and technology is not a impartial trend. These things are guided by political power as they give out its interest in controlling people. It is not a denigration of technology, it is just an sarcastic scrutiny into everything that affects human existence. Tomas's problem would not have deteriorated so badly had there not been political chaos. His choices are fundamentally limited. It is political position which makes existence a mere chance.

The trepidation of self-engages grasping of the core of the existential problem with respect to the of existential codes. He supposes that there are certain words which may or may not have the same implication in the life of other characters but those words can explain the existential dilemma of a particular character. For example, he uses certain words such as body, soul, vertigo, weakness which compose the existential codes of Tereza. In the later chapter of the novel named as 'Words Misunderstood' Kundera interrogates the existential codes of Franz and Sabina by examining certain words such as woman, fidelity, betrayal, music, darkness, light and country. For instance, Tereza is weak, therefore, her existential code is defined by vertigo, "the insuperable longing to fall". Sabina's existential code is defined by betrayal.

"Sabina the artist of betrayal, is at heart a musician of memory like Tamina. She keeps fleeing from present stasis with head averted, only to catch beauty of her present in the act of becoming the past".⁵

Kundera interrogates the existential condition of his characters with reference to certain words and images. His proposition is that a character is an "experimental self." In Kundera's novel the characters have certain role to play and therefore they should be evaluated in that formula. Since Kundera's prime concern is the existential condition of man. It

indicates that nothing is definite in human life. Political power can demolish the life of an individual, or a incapable realm any instant of time. All his characters are feeble individuals in a world which does not propose any autonomy.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being includes many perspectives of existence. Kundera has included events in his narrative which are both imaginary and chronological. For example, one of Kundera's primary fascinations is with the dictatorship of the dictatorial power. That is, how power denies people's memory and history. He also presents how it inflicts conventionality, demands lucidity, and destroys every sketch of privacy and uniqueness, an existential prospect which became common understanding of life in Prague after the Soviet invasion in 1968. Kundera here conveys the same theme in a assortment of ways. For example, the life devoid of privacy under totalitarian regime is his pressing anguish. The individual's every act is closely and keenly observed. Every censure, or departure from the official line is considered an intentional heresy, hence he or she can be liable to any kind of penalty. It presents that a totalitarian rule performs in a numinous and fanciful way. A dictatorial rule can abuse every type of expertise to trap its adversaries.

One of the most hazardous propensities of the totalitarian rule is to change people's awareness about their memory. Every draw of the past is either changed or removed to force the people to forget their memory. After the Russian invasion of 1968, when Tomas and Tereza walk in the street of Prague they are surprised to see how the older names of streets have been changed by the Russian names. Kundera tries to imply that though the events seem ordinary, yet it features a big political scheme. What occurred to Tomas post the publication of his article not only discloses the capricious and absurd behavior of power of the tyrannical dictatorial rule, but the illicit nature of those who exercise power. Tomas becomes the prey in a world where faced with incomprehensible power human intent does not signify any worth and meaning. It is a universe where it is worthless to contest truth to bureaucratic deceit, so long as truth itself can be corrupted, or turned aside to add to suppression; a world, to be precise, where there is no longer any rational tie between an act's intentions and its effects. Post his publication of the Oedipus article Tomas abruptly came under strain from every side, from editors and from his contemporaries in the hospital who put stress on him to withdraw the article.

Moreover the system expects from him a declaration of self-criticism. In Kafka as well in Kundera the powerless person faces the power that wants

agreement to the point of self-humiliation. Tomas of *The Unbearable lightness of Being* is in front of the same destiny because of writing an article. To understand Tomas's quandary it is better to connect his condition with Kafka's hero of *The Trial*. After Joseph K was wrongly blamed, he was manipulated with the unreasonable sense of terror and remorse. He began losing his logic of confidentiality and while sitting in his bureau he is thoughtful with his case. He realises that he is being observed by imperceptible eyes wherever he moves. Here too, Tomas experiences that everyone watches him in the street. He deprives his sense of confidentiality, his sleep and mental symmetry. He cannot prevent people from chatting about his article. Finally, secluded and separated he was strained to depart the hospital and he turns into a symbol for what Kundera defines the unbearable lightness of being. Prior to all this Tomas was a sparkling surgeon; his career is shattered by political circumstances.

The sort of unpredictability, obstinacy, and vagueness with which power expects

Exaltation in Kafka can hardly be accredited to any secular power. But as one put side by side Kundera with Kafka it turns into vividly perceptible that man can act with the same silly callousness as divine power. At the metaphorical height both Kafka and Kundera appear to propose that power is illogical, random, unsolved and indefinite, it persuades fear and shame in the human being, approaching him to the verge, where he has either to obey, be conventional or suffer. Tomas in our novel is faced by a power founded not on the common sense of human principles but on its own principles. After his expulsion from the hospital he moves to work in a small clinic in the scenery place; and still he is followed and probed by a secret police. Thus he plunges into a fence of which he was so far ignorant. Whatever good, as operated by power, works against Tomas. The police spy does not only compel Tomas to withdraw his article but expects to write a new text to show his reliability to the Communist rule, a wish that puzzles him. He feels that he had been persuaded to this condition by a sequence of occasions he had never wished-for. As he recognizes that there is no way out: The following day he steps down from the clinic, believing that after he had tumbled down willingly to the lowest step of the social ladder and the police would have no more grasp over him and he would stop to interest them.

It so happens that Sometimes the individual himself degrades himself in order to evade the gaze of the rule. This is the mental force of power which induces the individual to disgrace himself in order to get away

chastisement. The dejected life of Tomas and his harassment by the authority tells a lot about hundreds of intellectuals and writers flattened by the post-1968 rule. Those who think in a different way and do not confirm with the official philosophy are opponent in the eye of rule. A dictatorial rule can hardly bear the attendance of dissenter elements. In Tomas the reader can find a glance of the images of the maltreatment of individuals which Kundera keeps on telling time and again in his novels.

The Unbearable lightness of Being is a true portrayal of despairing human existence. The idea that life cannot be premeditated, that man is merely powerless to perceive his upcoming, positions to a predicament that has always been there. But this ambiguity of life in the modern world has been provoked by political circumstances. Man makes a selection, takes feat but the consequences are designed by a power on which the individual has no command; he is merely vulnerable. By default we are all, like Tomas, in the bind. Tomas, once divorced his wife to linger bachelor and guide a life of liberty. To interrogate the core of the existence Kundera presents various codes to his characters. For instance Tomas's existential code love symbolizes weight, a trouble and liability. When all of a sudden Tereza returns to his life he seems powerless to send her back, as he is moved with empathy for her. He had divorced his wife, abandoned his son and broke off all the paternal chains just because of fear of liability. He plans for an erotic game and had so many mistresses on the provision that no one will claim upon anyone's autonomy. Tereza became envious of his immoral life. Therefore, in order to gratify her Tomas married her. Thus he acted against his own will. Not only this after his marriage with Tereza he forms relation Sabina. He finds out a job for Tereza. But he is powerless to leave his erotic life, it enhances Tereza's distrust of his disloyalty. Kundera here focuses on the code of Tomas, presents the ambiguity of human life in a way that discloses absolute defenselessness of the human being. Since Tomas tries to administer his private life, he features a devil that comes from the external in the shape of Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

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