

Fusion of Fiction and Philosophy: Human Existence in a World Without Eternal Return

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Abstract— The postwar European novel has added a new dimension to modern man's perception of himself and his relation with the world of his own making. In this respect, the great Czech-French writer Milan Kundera (1929–2023) has deeply fascinated contemporary novelists and critics. In his fusion of fiction and philosophy in his magnum opus *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), which the paper aims to discuss, he has discovered a new art of composition. His profound philosophical reflections on power and truth, human existence and the fragility of human values, read like a lamentation on the death of the ideas and values of European Modernity, as the paper argues. Written against a very palpable historically and politically charged atmosphere, Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is also a scathing criticism of the tyranny of the Communist regime imposed in the wake of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. But the historicity of the novel should not be overemphasized. Its philosophical and symbolic ramifications go far beyond the historicity of the text as explored in the paper. It would be far more rewarding to read it as a symbolic work which makes one conscious of a disposition of tyranny of power which one can perceive in the behaviour of contemporary political dispensations irrespective of political ideology. Furthermore, the novel makes the reader conscious of what man has made of man in a world developed on the design of the image of Christian anthropology and the idea of progress.

Keywords— Kundera, Modernism, Progress, Totalitarianism, Existence, *Lightness of Being*.

I. INTRODUCTION

In her reflections on Nietzsche's idea of eternal return, Hannah Arendt observes that the doctrine of eternal recurrence signifies the very nature of life for all organisms. The idea profoundly fascinated Milan Kundera's imagination. His *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* draws by negation for its thematic paradigm upon the Nietzschean myth of cyclical sempiternity. Kundera's novelistic essay on the idea of eternal return, a discursive digression on the paradox of human existence, is of central significance to understanding the existential dilemma of the characters, particularly of Tomas—that is, the lightness of being in a world without eternal return. Authorial interventions and philosophical digressions are important elements of Kundera's repertoire of narrative techniques. In this respect, Kundera is, as Kussi observes, "an astonishingly inventive author who uses a variety of structural ways to question his themes" (6). If Nietzsche, influenced by Wagner, as Arendt believes, brought philosophy so close to poetry, Kundera brought fiction so close to philosophy and music in his art of composition and reflections on human existence.

Kundera examines the myth of eternal return by negation. If a human phenomenon recurs as it once happened, it will alter our consciousness; if it does not recur, it will disappear and will be forgotten. Nonrecurrence signifies weightlessness. If the idea of eternal return is the heaviest burden, as Nietzsche presumed, then, to Kundera, lightness is the most splendid condition. The idea is that in human life what happens happens only once. The absence of eternal return is the terminal paradox of human existence. It is in this context that Kundera conceives Tomas and Tereza's relationship based on a series of fortuitous events and coincidences in the backdrop of political upheaval in Prague. The narrator draws upon an analogy tinged with irony to drive home that the dynamics of human life and that of physical reality do not follow the same course. One can conduct a

number of experiments in a physics lab in order to verify certain hypotheses. "But man, because he has only one life to live, cannot conduct experiments to test whether to follow his passion (compassion) or not" (Kundera 33).

Although Kundera insists that his novels are neither realistic nor autobiographical, these elements hardly fail to suggest themselves to the reader. "Characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility." Since historical reality is so concrete, it is not difficult to identify the plight of the characters in the novel with that of certain historically identifiable figures including the author himself; yet Kundera continues in the same vein of effacement to foreground what T.S. Eliot calls the 'objective correlative,' to set art apart from self, ideology and history. "The novel is not the author's confession, it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become" (Kundera 218).

II. FORTUITY OF HISTORY AND HUMAN EXISTENCE

There is a strong determinism in Kundera's perception of human existence, a denial of freedom and individuality. He draws a philosophical parallel between the existence of the individual and the destiny of a nation. That is, in the world of nonrepeatability, there are certain situations, events and even decisions which determine everything. "Human life occurs only once, and the reason we cannot determine which of our decisions are good and which bad is that in a given situation we can make only one decision; we are not granted a second, third or fourth life in which to compare various decisions" (Kundera 219). While contemplating the existence of Tomas, the authorial narrator draws upon the history of Czechoslovakia since the birth of the Modern Era, seventeenth-century Europe up to the 1968 invasion.

"History is similar to individual lives in this respect. There is only one history of the Czechs. One day it will come to an end as surely as Tomas's life, never to be repeated ... if Czech history could be repeated, we should of course find it desirable to test the other possibility each time and compare the results. Without such an experiment, all considerations of this kind remain a game of hypotheses. 'Einmal ist keinmal.' What happens but once might as well not have happened at all. The history of the Czechs will not be repeated, nor will the history of Europe. The history of the Czechs and of Europe is a pair of sketches from the pen of mankind's fateful inexperience. History is as light as individual human life, unbearably light..." (Kundera 219–20).

In the nonrepeatability of history lies the relativity of human truth. It also renders the alienated characters in the novel nostalgic, whose lives have been determined by a series of fortuitous events while their small and powerless country came under Soviet invasion and its history erased and cultural values mutilated—a tragedy that also symbolises the fate of the small and powerless country against their powerful neighbour, which constitutes the central preoccupation of Kundera. It is in the context of non-recurrence and man's utter ignorance that Kundera explores modern man's unbearable lightness of being. Individual life consists of a series of fortuitous incidents like the plot of a work of art. The fortuity or uncertainty of life is not a new idea; it has been conceived in religious metaphysics. But Kundera conjures it up in the context of postwar European historical and political realities: the rise of Nazism and Fascism, Soviet imperialism during the Cold War and its invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and imposition of a totalitarian Communist regime. These unprecedented developments serve as a dominant motif in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* where the behaviour of political power takes the appearance of a metaphysical reality. The rise of totalitarianism, which Kundera calls 'catastrophic,' Arendt considers as "the greatest evil" of the twentieth century (*Essays* 271). The paradox of postwar Europe with which Kundera is grappling in his novel, Arendt explores its history in her seminal work precisely since the Great War which exposed the very structure of European civilisation before it was taken over by totalitarian politics and mutual hostility. The rise of imperialist powers in Europe undermined the very sovereignty of small nations, a reality which Kundera deplores. Arendt writes: "Modern power conditions which make national sovereignty a mockery except for giant states, the rise of imperialism, and the pan-movements undermined the stability of Europe's nation-state system from the outside" (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* 269–270). Arendt thinks that if one traces the genealogy of tyranny since the ancient age, totalitarianism is a phenomenon peculiar to the modern age which, she thinks, has repudiated the present from the past. There were indeed despotic rulers exercising arbitrary power and equally unruly people, constantly afraid of each other. But totalitarianism is unique. Arendt further argues: "If we apply these findings, whose fundamental idea, despite many variations, did not change in the two and a half thousand years that separate Plato from Kant, we are tempted at once to interpret totalitarianism as some modern form of tyranny, that is a lawless government whose power is wielded by one man" (461).

III. PROGRESS OF KNOWLEDGE AND PURSUIT OF POWER

Man's pursuit of epistemological, technological and economic progress—a phenomenon simultaneous with the birth of the modern age in Europe, which as Grayling considers "was a revolution across the whole range of enquiries—and it required a liberation of the mind"—changed the very course of human history (16). Since the beginning of these developments, concomitant with great turmoils, which culminated in the catastrophic war in Europe, the state has acquired so much power that the individual has become insignificant. "Caught up in the vortex of this bellicose age," as Freud writes with great disillusionment, modern man seems to have no escape (169). The external forces have become so overwhelming and omnipresent, to which development of modern communication technology has added an unimaginably complex dimension for the functioning of state power, that individual will carries no weight. Freud's diagnosis is psychological while for Kundera it is an existential phenomenon. The state in possession of such power can reduce the individual to a non-entity. The power has assumed such a transcendental authority that in the face of its aggression the individual is induced with futility, a negation of individual freedom and will. The 1968 invasion, according to Kundera, by a belligerent state against a small country in central Europe offers one an insight into the tendency of power which has grown of late with discernible menace.

Totalitarianism has permeated the behaviour of modern power irrespective of political ideology. Understanding this phenomenon is indispensable to grasp the contemporary world and the world Kundera saw in the making and in which his characters are trapped—that is, a world Kundera's great contemporary thinker Arendt considers obligatory upon human imagination to address and understand. She makes an emphatic statement: "if we want to be at home on this earth ... we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with the essence of totalitarianism" (*Essays* 323). In his novelistic enunciation Kundera aims his imagination to probe into the dynamics of a totalitarian power and its propensity to reduce its subjects to their physical existence. This tendency of dehumanisation is a far cry from the political evil of the past like tyranny, despotic oppression and coercion.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is a groundbreaking work in its fusion of fiction and philosophy, fiction and history, ethics and aesthetics, variation on art and existence. The story of four Czech artists and intellectuals caught up in the brief lull of Prague Spring that ended with Russian invasion. The story in seven parts interwoven and developed like musical variation describes the lives of Tomas and Tereza, Franz and Sabina symbolising the fragility of individual lives and the turbulence and crisis of world events. As a novelist, Kundera is highly innovative. Since he is preoccupied with the predicament of the individual and his existence in an age when political power has become so omnipotent that individual will carries no significance, he tries to explore the possibility of individual freedom at a time when historical and political conditions have become so overwhelming. In this process, he has developed his own theory of the novel. Therefore, his novels symbolically, as Ownbey rightly observes, "embody his rejection of totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and any other system that devalues art by putting it to political use" (2). The way Kundera has maintained textual freedom by deploying a set of narrative strategies is at variance with the oppressive world the novel is set in, as Kundera's critic Pichova argues: "the narrator's choice of narratological strategies and organization reflects his desire to create a textual world that in no way resembles the oppressive world he describes thematically..." (217).

IV. AESTHETICS AND IDEOLOGY

Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, like *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), is primarily concerned with certain ideas and concepts of existential significance. He conceives of the novel, with remarkable aesthetic finesse, as an existential exploration with an anti-lyrical attitude, that results in what Just calls "poetics of novelistic truth" which cannot be reduced to unequivocal proposition (176). Kundera's projection of the relativity of human truth is rooted in European culture with which the novelist strongly identifies. The argument is that Kundera's creativity cannot be separated from his critical and intellectual indebtedness to European Enlightenment, as Webb rightly underlines in his study: "He is a rationalist and sceptic devoted to imagination and creativity. His rationalism, nevertheless, is the rationalism of one who employs reason to comprehend the utter unreasonableness of experience and for whom therefore one of the cardinal features of the rational is its absurdity in the face of truth" (357).

In order to problematise the equation of truth with power and that of aesthetic with ideology, Kundera deploys humour and irony in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in a fashion quite innovative. These are not merely technical devices; rather they are permeated with his attitude to human existence. In this respect, Weeks rightly draws a distinction between Kundera and his predecessors. That is, there have been and in fact are "funnier writers than Milan Kundera" but probably no great modern writer

pursued humour as persistently and seriously as Kundera (130). This aesthetic element is saturated with philosophical implications in his writing.

For Kundera irony is an attitude; it is a way of looking at human phenomena beyond their appearance. It is through this disposition that he seeks to demystify and expose totalitarian kitsch which embodies institutions of power that dehumanise individuals. Part six in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a variation on Kitsch, that is, ugliness. It is an aesthetic concept, an attitude to exclude or deny everything from human existence that is essentially unacceptable. Kundera deploys it as a metaphor to expose the hypocrisy of totalitarian politics, its tendency to impose conformity which Sabina loathes at the level of life and thought. It is invariably a denial of the plurality of ideas and relativity of truth. However, Tomas's reflection in his article on the myth of Oedipus is a philosophical digression in the same vein. Individuals with such an attitude in Kundera's writing become victims of their own laughter. Donahue thinks that "Kundera's protagonists are threatened... by people and institutions that are able to laugh out—and frequently destroy—those who do not share their truths. Thus, characters with a sense of humor are tragic victims while those with truth laugh the malicious laughter of absolute certainty" (68).

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera has augmented and achieved the techniques of narration with which he experimented in his earlier works. The novelist employs a variety of incidents and events—historical and political, literary and nonliterary allusions—selects events and arranges them in an elliptical mode of narration in which the ending is unfolding while displacing the beginning, creating suspense, a technique he seems to have borrowed from Laurence Sterne (1713–1768). Since he is preoccupied with existential problems there is an element of repetition. As a novelist, Kundera places himself in the tradition of European literary culture and admires its great novelists from Cervantes and Sterne to Proust, as Steinby's comprehensive study also shows. The novelist in fact insists on European identity in the same sense in which Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot did under somewhat different conditions. He believes that the tendency to classify, in the words of Steinby, "authors according to their nationality is misguided and argues that in European literature national boundaries are not essential. He claims to represent European culture as a whole" (11–12).

V. DILEMMA OF CENTRAL EUROPE AND AMBIGUITY OF HUMAN FATE

Kundera is deeply rooted in postwar European history, particularly central Europe, in the dilemma of which the 1968 invasion was the last nail in the coffin, with the rise of Communism as an ideology and the Soviet Union as a political power in the age of the Cold War and bipolar world order, and the subsequent attempt to erase the cultural values and identity and the memory of the past—a recurrent theme in his writing. All these factors have gone into the making of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. But despite all the determinants, the book has transcended beyond history in offering a philosophical and symbolic vision of power and individual existence, the powerful and the powerless. Nevertheless, the historical factor is so overwhelming that his polyphonic fiction can also be studied as a historical discourse.

The uncertainty of the world and futility of individual existence and fragility of freedom, the predicament of the small and powerless state and its hapless people against the tyranny and aggression of the powerful, still loom large with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It has led, as Rupnik notes, to "the rediscovery of Kundera's text" and "renewed interest" in his works (256). It has revived the debate on "civilizational break," observes Rupnik. In the backdrop of such a political and historical paradox, Kundera deploys his characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to explore the existential possibility in a world that has become a trap in which life cannot be planned because the traditional line between the public and private no longer exists. Tomas, a prominent doctor in Prague and a womaniser who seeks pleasure and freedom through his erotic adventures, meets Tereza by chance, a waitress in the bar of a restaurant in suburban Prague. In Kundera, coincidence, like counterpoint, plays a very vital role. How Tomas and Tereza met, the narrator displaces the cause after the effect. The relationship between the two protagonists can be seen through the prism of a set of fortuitous events the cause of which is suspended and displaced till the end of part one of the story when the reader is informed that they met by sheer coincidence seven years before the Russian invasion when Tomas was asked by the chief surgeon of the hospital to attend a patient in Tereza's town. The town had several hotels but Tomas was accommodated in the one where Tereza was a waitress and she happened to attend the table Tomas was sitting at. "It had taken six chance happenings to push Tomas towards Tereza, as if he had little inclination to go to her on his own" (Kundera 35). The way Kundera integrates incidents into narrative structure is quite intriguing. The elliptical arrangement reads like musical variations in which events and coincidences serve for existential fortuities.

Tereza was a photojournalist before she became a waitress in a bar. She was fired from her job several months after she returned from Zurich in the wake of the invasion. The regime could not forgive her for photographing Soviet tanks as revealed in part

four of the novel. Similarly, there were other victims of the ire of the regime who were forced into dehumanising conditions. They had been forced into existential plight by the totalitarian regime. Characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, as in Kundera's other novels, are rootless entities, war fugitives and émigrés under an unprecedented political condition whose very being serves for existential code to probe into the futility of individual existence and relativity of the values of European Modernism, Humanism and Enlightenment. The symbolic nuances have been encoded and communicated through a set of coincidences, words, metaphors, images and literary and mythical allusions which are played out throughout the novel in seven parts like variations. This art of developing the polyphonic novel is Kundera's unique contribution to the development of the European novel. Antakyalioglu is right to underline that "Kundera was a writer with a poetics of his own" (145).

Human existence is bombarded with daily coincidences of which one is hardly conscious. The happening of two incidents is often unexpected. Tereza often carries Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* under her arm. In the novel Anna and Vronsky meet in curious circumstances. They are at the railway station when someone is run over by a train. At the end of the novel, Anna throws herself under a train. The correspondence between the composition of a novelistic plot and the nature of human life is amazingly insightful in Kundera. Such philosophical analogy on art and life, scarcely drawn without humour, leaves one amused.

The relationship between Tomas and Tereza is based on sheer coincidence. In the very first meeting, Tomas was taken up with compassion. That is why he always recalls her in terms of biblical myth: the child in a basket. When she first came to stay with him, a few days after her departure, Tomas was unable to decide whether he should call her back or not. He is taken up with compassion; subsequently, he finds himself in a bind. If he calls her back he is afraid lest she should offer herself to him; otherwise, she will remain a waitress. Since Tomas has already divorced his wife and leads a life of liberty, in his existential code love and fidelity symbolise weight and responsibility. Tereza suddenly enters his life. She becomes jealous of his promiscuous life. He eventually married her in order to keep her happy yet kept on his erotic game with his mistresses. Since he is unable to give up his erotic adventure, Tereza is growing suspicious of his infidelity. As Tomas is unable to come out of the predicament of his private life, he faces a monster from outside in the form of the Soviet invasion of 1968. Kundera blends the historical and fictional with great artistic lucidity. He baffles the reader with the fact that in the contemporary world individual choices are determined by political situations. At such a critical juncture, Tomas is not able to join the job offered to him at a hospital in Zurich because he does not want to leave Tereza behind in his country under occupation. Tomas's compassion for Tereza is his fate. On the other hand, Tereza is unhappy after she discovers that he is unfaithful. Therefore, all her dreams are dreams of infidelity, jealousy and lightness. Meanwhile, Tomas is getting more comfortable with Sabina but is equally conscious of their secret meetings in her studio. Tereza and Sabina represent separate and irreconcilable poles of life, yet equally appealing. That is why he is not able to live without her in Zurich when she returns to Prague. Tomas gets melancholic over the time he had spent with Tereza. Consumed with compassion after less than a week of her departure, Tomas returns to Prague. Compassion is Tomas's fate: "*es muss sein*" (Kundera 31). The phrase from Beethoven's symphony serves as a motif for Tomas's inevitability: fate.

On the basis of his choices, Tomas bears his fate as a snail carries its shell. Kundera has deployed a set of symbols to explore Tomas's existential dilemma. Thus, unlike Parmenides, in Beethoven's binary, fate is bound with something heavy and only what is heavy has value. Paradoxically, when Tomas tries to cross the Czech border he is confronted with the columns of Russian tanks. Overcome by compassion, it was difficult for him to leave Tereza on her own in the streets of Prague. On the ambiguity of human existence, Kundera makes a philosophical observation that sheds light on the dilemma of Tomas. That is, one can conduct a number of experiments in a physics lab in order to verify certain hypotheses. "But man, because he has only one life to live, cannot conduct experiments to test whether to follow his passion (compassion) or not" (Kundera 33).

Political dissent is not a new phenomenon. Individuals have been at loggerheads with establishments. There was a time when man could reverse or change the course of his life. He could abandon the past and find a new role in the future. But in the technologically advanced world where each trace of the individual is already accessible to the power structure, such a possibility is now a thing of the past, hence the unbearable lightness of being. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* offers one an insight into the depersonalisation of individual feelings in an unidyllic age. Human emotions have lost their traditional sanctity. They are fortuitous. Had Tereza not entered his life, she would probably have fallen in love with anybody. "Tomas often thought of Tereza's remark about his friend Z, and came to the conclusion that the love story of his life exemplified not 'Es muss sein' (it must be so), but rather, 'Es konnte auch anders sein' (it could just as well be otherwise)" (Kundera 34). It reads like a parody of the traditional perception of love. It is rendered to something light and weightless. In his gloomy flashback, Tomas often goes back to seven years ago when a set of fortuitous events led him to meet Tereza. The uncertainty of life is an

old idea conceived in metaphysical philosophy and theology, but in Kundera its exacerbation beyond the pale of imagination is played out as a historical and political proposition with a dismal prospect.

Kundera's art of characterisation follows from the preceding proposition of existential condition. In this respect, he departs from the tradition of realism. His characters are not like real people or historically identifiable individuals, yet they cannot be discarded altogether. They hardly look totally divested of historical and realistic elements. They are in fact byproducts of certain situations. If Tomas was born out of 'so it must be,' Tereza was born out of the rumbling of the stomach. The reader is made aware of her dilemma through the revelation of her genealogy, her relation with her parents, particularly her mother, personification of a woman reduced to her body. The tyranny of power has dehumanised them into non-entities. The humiliation which Tomas and Tereza undergo at the hands of the regime bears correspondence with the one Alexander Dubcek had to suffer at the hands of the Russians. That is why all dreams of Tereza are dreams of weakness and vertigo. She identifies with the weak people of her country under occupation.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* the line between the public and private does not exist. A totalitarian society erases individual privacy. It can even project it as something sinister, as the morning radio programme containing the private conversations of Czech émigrés bugged by a Czech spy who had infiltrated the émigré community. It contained insignificant prattles and remarks about the regime. These trivial materials were the point of the broadcast. It all started with Jan Prochazka, a forty-year-old Czech novelist criticising public affairs even before the invasion. Shortly after the invasion the press initiated a smear campaign against him. But his popularity increased more with the smear campaign. In 1970 the Czech radio broadcast a series of private conversations that took place two years before the 1968 invasion between Prochazka and a professor friend of his. For a long time, neither of them had any idea that the professor's flat was bugged and their steps dogged. Prochazka loved to regale his friend with hyperboles and excesses. Now his excesses have become a weekly radio series. While listening to the broadcast one morning, Tereza turned off the radio and recalled an incident from her childhood regarding the raping of one's privacy. The entire incident is laughable and ludicrous. The underlying irony renders the behaviour of the power irrational and preposterous. The dynamics of communication is such that when a private communication is bugged and breached it resumes a significance little known to the subjects. Individuals keep on telling all types of things in privacy but once it is breached it acquires a very strange meaning inducing a feeling of guilt. In a totalitarian state all traces of privacy and individuality are suspected. It tends to obliterate all such signs. When people are deprived of their privacy and forced into conformity, they are reduced to their physical existence, like in a concentration camp; Kundera metaphorically calls this the lightness of being. They lose their ability to know and remember.

A totalitarian state obliterates memory either through the falsification or erosion of facts. After the invasion, all the buildings and streets in Prague were named after Russian history and geography as if the past of the country had been confiscated. It alienates Tereza when she visits places in and around Prague and finds them nameless. Moreover, life is so lacerated with spies and informers that the individual can be trapped anytime. Tereza had left her mother's home to be the master of her privacy without ever realising that her mother's room has extended over the whole world.

VI. MYTH OF OEDIPUS

It is peculiar of Kundera to develop philosophical rumination on even certain small incidents of European political history which he perceives to have passed unnoticed. His ironic reflections, interspersed with condemnation, on the Communist regime in Eastern European countries serves as a leitmotif. The beginning of part five is connected with the opening part of the novel when Tereza unexpectedly came to see Tomas in Prague. They made love the very day she felt feverish. While she was sleeping with Tomas, the latter imagined her as a baby put in a basket and sent downstream to him. All seven parts of the novel, interspersed with essayistic digressions and philosophical reflections, are variations on the author's central preoccupation with the lightness of being in an age of the tyranny of power. The philosophical essay on the paradox of Sophocles's legendary character in the eponymous play inserted in the narrative is a reflection on the behaviour of power, conscience, ignorance, guilt and punishment. Kundera wrote *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* four decades ago; its prognosis is gaining greater prominence in the twenty-first century in the age of unprecedented technological progress, the menace of which Huxley and Orwell had forewarned. The myth of Oedipus aims to offer an insight into the idea of knowledge and ignorance of power. One can find a profound analogy between the reaction of the Communist enthusiasts in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and that of Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by Arendt. Both denied to have done anything wrong, as if there was no one to be responsible, a situation in which power neutralises and depersonalises itself in a way to become faceless, a quintessence of the totalitarian power in the modern age. The story of Oedipus is so evocative and perplexing. It seems to suggest that if man is a

rational being, his true identity lies in his capability to think, to distinguish between right and wrong. When power gets intoxicated by ideology it loses all distinctive qualities which Oedipus symbolises.

Kundera thinks that it is often assumed by historians that the Communist regimes in central Europe were the works of criminals. One in fact overlooks a basic fact that these regimes were established and run by Communist enthusiasts who believed they had discovered the only way of establishing paradise on earth and ruthlessly removed those who stood in the way. Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* cuts through the reality of the iron curtain, its ideology of terror and oppression, more so at a time when totalitarian tendencies are on the rise and liberal values on the wane. The Communist enthusiasts killed the people who stood up in their way to paradise. Later it was discovered that there was no paradise. Hence, they happened to be murderers. Faced against the growing outcry that they are responsible for the misfortune of their country they responded that they did not know. They are innocent at heart, that they have been deceived. At the end, the debate zeroed in on the single line: did they really not know, or were they pretending? Tomas followed the debate closely like millions of countrymen and was of the opinion that there were definitely Communists who were not completely unaware of the atrocity and oppression. It was quite possible that most of them were not.

But Tomas thought that the question is not of knowing or not knowing. The question is whether a man is innocent simply because he did not know, is a fool in power relieved of all responsibility simply because he is a fool? One can further analogise differently: that is, a public prosecutor who called for the death penalty of an innocent man was deceived by the secret police of his country. But later he came to know that the executed individual was innocent. How does the prosecutor defend himself against such an egregious and irresponsible guilt? It was in this context that Tomas recalled the myth of Oedipus. Oedipus did not know that he was sleeping with his mother. But when he realised what he had done he did not consider himself innocent. Contrary to the conscience of Oedipus, Tomas found the defense of his countrymen banal. He was so fascinated by the tale of Oedipus that it permeated all his conversations with his friends. Eventually one day he wrote down his reflections on Sophocles's great hero to a weekly newspaper. A month later he was summoned by the editorial office and asked to change the syntactical and semantic order against his will in the process of amputation and mutilation. It happened in 1968 when Alexander Dubcek was still in power. After the 1968 invasion, as Tomas returned from Zurich to Prague and joined his duty at the hospital, he was asked by the chief surgeon to retract his article on Oedipus lest he should lose his job. Tomas perceived the tendency of censoring freedom of expression as medieval. The chief surgeon wanted to persuade Tomas to retract his article while the authorities further demanded self-criticism.

VII. TOTALITARIAN POWER AND THE NEGATION OF THE VALUES OF HUMANISM

Tomas as a doctor had a very good reputation, regarded by the people as a man of competence and individuality. Hence, the matter of retraction caught public attention, under the pressure of which he started losing his sleep. Since, unlike a politician, a professor lives a very closed life, in the circle of his immediate colleagues, Tomas had never experienced the pressure of public gaze. But nothing came to his help. He eventually was forced to leave the hospital and went on to join a country clinic far away from Prague. Since commuting daily was exhausting, he found work in a clinic on the outskirts of Prague in an inferior position as a general physician. But his problems did not end. He found himself under constant interrogation. An official from the Interior Ministry, during a conversation, asked him whether he really wanted the Communists to put out their eyes, an inference which shocked Tomas into self-defense.

Tomas eventually fell into depression as officials kept on blaming him for creating an anti-Communist hysteria, for instigating violence against the establishment. Once accused, he loses his sense of privacy as if being constantly gazed at and chased. Tomas gradually realises the entire process of entrapment. He was more shocked and flabbergasted with the official demand not only of retraction but loyalty with the Soviet Union and the Communist regime. It is peculiar of the totalitarian regime that it does not only seek obedience but demands fidelity to its ideology and loyalty with the establishment. As the pressure increased on him, he resigned from the hospital and assumes that perhaps by making himself socially insignificant and inconspicuous he will cease to interest the authorities. This is how he became a window washer. That is, in a totalitarian state, the individual can escape the power only through self-humiliation and depersonalisation, hence the unbearable lightness of being. The metamorphosis of Tomas symbolically reveals how power operates on human consciousness.

Tomas's relationship with Tereza was led by a series of laughable coincidences. It shows the futility of human existence in such a way that takes the appearance of metaphysical determinism as one finds in Thomas Hardy in a different context. Kundera deploys a set of words, symbols, metaphors, myths and allusions as a motif to explore his preoccupation with man's existential predicament. Allusions enrich his narrative with discursivity. A frivolous note, experience or idea is elevated to a philosophical

discourse, a hallmark of Kundera's narrative fusion to explore the lightness of being. As Tomas undergoes relentless interrogations and surveillance, he experiences constant humiliation. As he roams the streets in Prague and washes windows of shops for a living, he looks utterly bereft. One day Tomas shares with Tereza during an intimate conversation his experience of harassment and humiliation. She suggests an escape, which, given the pace of the progress of communication technology, offers little escape today. "'The best thing would be to move away.' 'I agree' said Tomas, 'but there's nowhere to go.'... 'What about the country?' she said. 'The country?' he asked, surprised. 'We'd be alone there. You wouldn't meet that editor or your old colleagues. The people there are different. And we'd be getting back to nature. Nature is the same as it always was'" (Kundera 230).

Tomas and Tereza eventually went to live in a small village, a life reduced to bare minimum. The natural world still provides them shelter and protection from the gaze of power. "Life in the country was the only escape open to them, because only in the country was there a constant deficit of people and a surplus of living accommodations. No one bothered to look into the political past of people willing to go off and work in the fields or woods; no one envied them" (Kundera 277). The narrator also provides a view of the countryside and life not so accessible to state power. Tomas and Tereza became familiar with the villagers on the collective farm and got friendly treatment from its chairman though he could do little for his former surgeon. Tomas became driver for a pick-up truck that took the farm workers out to the field and hauled equipment. Tereza was charged with looking after the cows. She took them out to pasture twice a day. Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* offers scathing criticism of the Communist rule.

"Under Communism, however, the village life no longer fit the age-old pattern. The church was in the neighbouring village, and no one went there; the tavern had been turned into offices, so the men had nowhere to meet and drink beer, the young people nowhere to dance. Celebrating church holidays was forbidden, and no one cared about their secular replacements... The country offered them nothing in the way of even a minimally interesting life. Perhaps it was the fact that no one wished to settle there that caused the state to lose its power over the countryside. A farmer who no longer owns his own land and is merely a labourer tilling the soil forms no allegiance to either region or work; he has nothing to lose, nothing to fear for. As a result of such apathy, the countryside had maintained more than a modicum of autonomy and freedom" (Kundera 278–79).

Kundera exposes the dark side of a society without private property and privacy. If private property is the source of all types of evil, a maxim which resonates Marxist thought with philosophical profundity, the novelist exposes the reality beyond the Marxist Kitsch. When people are divested of all signs of the private and personal their allegiance to the reality of their surroundings and its abstract meaning ceases to exist. One's loyalty to a society is in proportion to his share in the power and property.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Since the dawn of the modern age, European civilisation has been in pursuit of progress and set its goal beyond the pale of imagination of its ancestors. In the illusion of creating paradise on earth, it has tried to transcend its own identity. "The longing for paradise is man's longing not to be man" (Kundera 293). *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* alludes to the Christian anthropology that man is a being created in the image of God. Yet the plight of the protagonist of the novel offers the reader an insight into what man has done to his fellows. Man, in pursuit of becoming superman, seems to have forgotten the basic tenets of his genesis. Kundera's philosophical reflection on human existence and the relation with other non-human beings, Tereza and Karenin, between the powerful and the powerless with reference to Christian anthropology in the light of the genesis is really revealing. Tereza perceives her relation with the ailing dog as more authentic than with Tomas and even her mother. Her reflections on the relation between man and animal bring to the fore what mankind has lost in pursuit of progress and power and what he has made of his fellow being, hence the nostalgia. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a kind of novel which in the words of Wirth seeks "to illuminate the ever-unfolding mystery of all things human" (15).

It is the loss of that idyllic existence that makes Tereza so nostalgic. "Raised as we are on the mythology of the Old Testament, we might say that an idyll is an image that has remained with us like a memory of Paradise: life in Paradise was not like following a straight line to the unknown; it was not an adventure. It moved in a circle among known objects. Its monotony bred happiness, not boredom. As long as people lived in the country, in nature, surrounded by domestic animals, in the bosom of regularly recurring seasons, they retained at least a glimmer of that paradisiac idyll" (Kundera 292). It is a critique of European modernity and its eventual outcome and implications for human existence. In an allusion to the Cartesian idea of animal being without soul and the Cartesian idea of time and space Kundera writes: "Human time does not turn in a circle; it runs ahead in

a straight line. That is why man cannot be happy: happiness is the longing for repetition" (Kundera 295). In the world of unilinear progress of time, everything happens only once. In the age of speed and unprecedented technological progress, increasing dominance of state power over man, the individual is losing the image conceived in religious and philosophical thought.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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