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## VARIATIONS ON AESTHETICS AND EXISTENCE: PROBING INTO THE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

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**Abstract:**

*All great literature is existential, not in the ideological sense but in the novelistic sense. It is devoid of passion and ideology, yet all feelings of pain and pleasure flow through it. Refutation of emotion and ideology in works of literature invariably amounts to the negation of a specific form and purpose of knowledge. Thus, the insight one gets from literature is very different from the knowledge attributed to historical and philosophical discourses. The primary aim of art is not to provide knowledge but to renew and refresh one's perception of existence by deploying a set of artistic images, metaphors and symbols. It is this fusion of aesthetics and existence that Milan Kundera has achieved comprehensively in his classic novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which this paper aims to explore. In the process of complex novelistic composition, Kundera has created a profound existential image of the modern man under a totalitarian condition, elements and semblance of which are not very difficult to find in other modes of political dispensations irrespective of ideological differences. This observation brings to one's consciousness the nature and behaviour of political power and its impact on human existence.*

**Key Words:** *Kundera, aesthetics, existence, lightness, power.*

The equation between aesthetics and existence is very complex. It is through the language of art that man tries to understand himself. It is probably in this sense that literature is considered a record of human consciousness which may not be entirely independent of historical determinism or that of the contemporary ideology. Nevertheless, the polyvalent nature of an image or symbol is charged with some kind of kinetic energy to unleash a series of suggestions and significations, which set it free from temporal immediacy. Yet, a work of art, and so is true of the images and symbols of which it is composed, is not free entirely from historical determinism, otherwise it will become abstract. Similarly, a literary work, or more precisely the novel, distinguishes itself from history not only in the elements of its organisation and composition but also in its perception. Thus, unlike history, the novel is basically an investigation into human existence, as Kundera avers. But, contrary to philosophy, it hardly conceives of its concern without historical context. And, at times, a great novel can combine in itself all these aspects in a polyphonic mode of narration of which Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is an important postmodernist contribution to the contemporary European novel.

A work of art is history in the same sense history is a work of art. Apart from technical correspondence, a work of history tells a lot about the past of mankind and sheds light on the immediate course as well. This perhaps is the secondary function of a literary work. All great works of literature help one see through historical reality. The whole tradition of realistic novel, which in its elaborate description of the concrete phenomena seem to have more in common with history, is based on the same proposition. If a novel deliberately tries to ignore this function, it may not succeed without being abstract. Element of representation is in fact inherent in the very medium the writer employs, which imposes some constraints on his creative process. Unlike historian, the novelist deals neither with facts nor with the general categories of the human world. His concern is primarily the individual. Even if he expands his horizon of

interest and develops an anthropomorphic interest, he cannot overlook the individual in his concrete being, his peculiarities, disposition and idiosyncrasies. Secondly, the novelist does not work on some pre-formed notions of reality. Though he relies on observations and experiences, he essentially deals with language, with the stylistic elements of his craft and with a mode of perception often characterised by irony and humour, which render him incapable of being categorical about anything human. This anarchic nature of the novel, its antilyrical ontology, is antithetical to all forms of ideology of totalitarianism and tyranny of truth. The logic of its anarchic aesthetic lies in the disposition that has least respect for authority and temptation for conformity. This nonengaging nature of the novelistic art symbolises for Kundera “an outlook, wisdom, a position that would rule out identification with any politics, any religion any ideology, any moral doctrine, any group; a considered, stubborn, furious *nonidentification*, conceived not as evasion or passivity but as resistance, defiance, rebellion” (*Testament Betrayed*: 158). Kundera's fascination for the novel goes beyond its generic identity. His perception of the novel with freedom is loaded with aesthetic as well as existential connotation.

The preceding observation underlines the fact that the novelist is not bound by historical materialism. One can recall Shklovsky's insistence on the nature of artistic composition that underscores art as a stylistic phenomenon. According to Shklovsky, it is the nature of art “to extricate [itself] from the facts of life” (2005, 73). The novelist works with freedom to make experiments with his medium and artistic devices to develop an artistic form which is presumed to be relatively unique. It is in this sense that he exercises his autonomy. Since the novelist is concerned with the individual's existence and lived experiences, unlike philosopher, he does not see them as abstract entities. But, if one finds in them some sort of historical parallel that is perhaps accidental. Such distinctions are necessary to be drawn and maintained to understand Kundera's masterpiece *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. It is one of the most innovative works of fiction in which he has conducted a remarkable novelistic mediation through history and philosophy. He has brought in a fusion of disparate strands which reflects the maturity of his art and depth of his vision. This alchemy of aesthetic and existence is profoundly illuminating.

In his theory of the construction of plot, Shklovsky makes an insightful observation: “Disharmony is one of the laws of art” (2011, 94). Seen from a philosophical perspective, Shklovsky's theorem contains the essence of art and life as Kundera's novel reveals. If a work of art is composed through a series of disharmonious and discordant, binary elements, contrasting figures and devices, paradoxical images and situations, the concatenation of fortuitous situations which determine the existential possibility of the individual flows along the same line. It implies that an element of surprise, or that of uncertainty, is inherent in human existence, contrary to the general assumption founded on what Kundera seems to identify with lyrical attitude. This is what Shklovsky seems to suggest through his theory of dissimilarity on the aesthetic plane. That is, the primary aim of a genuine literary work is not to imitate life. It is in fact an admission of the elusive nature of life. If life happens to resemble to the one the image of which seems to emerge out of an artistic composition, it is perhaps accidental. It somehow brackets all sociological and psychological readings of literature as a less rewarding exercise.

In a work of radical aesthetic experiment, Kundera has constructed his narration that goes beyond what has been associated with the tradition of realism. In this respect, Shklovsky's another maxim is equally worth cognizance: “Art, in the multiplicity of its experiments, in the long search for methods, is creating paths along which all mankind will pass” (2011, 109). If one manages to take a philosophical view, it seems to imply that a genuine work of art neither denounces nor indicts. It simply points to the possibility of existence that Kundera suggests had remained so far undiscovered.

Reflecting on the relation between writing and being, Sartre makes a philosophical observation of anthropological significance. Sartre writes: “Each of our perception is accompanied by the consciousness that human reality is a 'revealer', that is, it is through human reality that 'there is being, or to put it differently, that man is the means by which things are manifested. It is our presence in the world which

multiplies relations” (27). If the purpose of writing is to create and relate beings; it offers one an anthropological insight into the unconscious nature of man's artistic and aesthetic endeavour. This engagement takes many forms. It may be more objective. But it cannot be totally neutral. Man's artistic endeavour has been motivated by the consciousness, as Sartre maintains, that “we are essential in relation to the world” (28). All forms of human struggle lies perhaps in this perception reflected in Sartre's formulation. For Kundera artistic endeavour is to apprehend the contradictions of being, not like a philosopher but like a novelist. Unlike Sartre, Kundera's perception of existence is rather concrete. He thinks of this question in relation to concrete historical and political conditions without ever being categorical, hence the fusion of philosophy and fiction.

Kundera has a very strong historical consciousness. He writes against the recognizable historical and political background of his country. Born in 1929 in Czechoslovakia, he wrote his first novel *The Joke* in 1965, which could not see the light of the day till 1967 due to state censors. Written under the tyranny of Communist regime which took over the country in 1948, the novel is important to trace the author's artistic and intellectual evolution. He suffered a nightmarish experience when Soviet Union invaded and occupied Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Soviet forces imposed their totalitarian will on the helpless people of the small country of the central Europe and launched a systematic purge and extermination of their opponents whom they considered dangerous individuals. Like many contemporary writers, historians and artists persecuted by the state apparatuses, Kundera became a persona non grata. This cataclysmic experience led him into exile in France. This trauma constitutes the identifiable backdrop of almost all of his writings in the form of leitmotifs, hence the fusion of the fictional and autobiographical, the elements of nostalgia and alienation. This is why Kundera considers his characters as the unrealised possibilities of his own self. Nevertheless, in order to maintain the autonomy of his art, he repeatedly insists that his novel is not an expression of his personal experience; rather, it is an inquiry into the phenomenology of existence. “The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become”(ULB,218).The whole novel is in fact a variation on this theme to reveal what Kundera calls in a philosophical metaphor the unbearable lightness of being.

Kundera is a very innovative writer. *The unbearable lightness of Being*, which is indeed his tour de force, is an important work for his theory of narration and art of characterisation, which he has presented in a cogent exposition throughout the novel, adding an element of metafiction. The narrative interwoven and developed on the paradigm of musical composition is a radical aesthetic experiment in a significant transition from the tradition of realism. In his search for new methods and techniques, *The Unbearable lightness of Being* marks a break from realistic as well as psychological novel. Since he is preoccupied with the predicament of existence in the contemporary context, he has largely renounced the art of constructing plot and delineating characters as one finds in the traditional realistic novels. By constructing a polyphonic narrative and employing an intrusive and autobiographical narrator, as Frank correctly underlines: “Kundera's novels strike a balance between dialogic and monologic tendencies” (119).

In Kundera's scheme of thing, it is not the genealogy and sociology which make the character realistic. Similarly, the unity and identity of the individual does not depend on the continuity of consciousness. Kundera's theory of characterisation corresponds with his perception of existence. He tries to bring his art parallel to his vision of being, offering the reader an intuitive glimpse into what he calls lightness of being. The character in a novel is a product of certain situations, fragment of events which determine his existential possibility. According to Kundera: “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 that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about”(ULB,218). Tomas and Tereza, Franz and Sabina are the product of certain situations. Their dilemma can be understood against the fictional and historical situations which constitute the whole narrative. It does not mean that they are merely like artistic devices and have no realistic appeal. In fact, they may look less interesting in

the traditional sense of the realistic character, but they can fascinate one's imagination in relation to the context of their emergence.

Since Kundera is preoccupied with existence, he deploys a host of symbols, images, metaphors, words like binary codes and a set of situations fictional as well as historical, which can serve as objective correlative for the paradox of his characters. His art of constructing the plot reveals meticulous sense of selection and rejection for condensation on the same lines T.S. Eliot has developed the plot of his narrative on the density of allusions in his *The Waste Land* (1922) to describe the meaninglessness of existence. This oneiric mode of narration requires assiduous sense of selection of events and incidents from a variety of sources, art, history, fiction and philosophy integrated into the narrative marked by digressions and philosophical reflections on art, language and culture, the fascistic tendency of the contemporary political power and the progressive disintegration and death of the values of enlightenment in an age under the growing siege of totalitarian power.

The foregoing observation is based on the argument that for Kundera writing is neither a spontaneous process nor entirely a mechanical operation; it is a struggle that demands both skill and intuition. Similarly, the end of literature, if it has any, is not entertainment, but to sharpen one's consciousness about existence. Kundera's uncanny vision of art goes parallel to his existential preoccupation. *The Unbearable lightness of Being*, like most of his novels, is constituted of seven parts; the elements of each part engage with each other in such a complex whole, without affecting the composition that one can appreciate only if one grasps the interrelations between them. It involves systematic selection of incidents and coincident. The unity of the structure of the narrative is based on such arrangement of juxtaposition: lightness, weight, body, soul, fidelity, betrayal and so on. Thus, Kundera does not perceive the unity of plot on the continuous progress of linear narration. His narrative is marked by digressions; chronological displacement and repetition in which the effect can be given in the beginning and the details of the causes are either displaced or delayed. Displacement and violation of chronological order in favour of non-linear progress of narration set the novel apart from history.

His polyphonic narrative, developed on the paradigm of music, is a departure from the linear Progress of narrative. It is the simultaneous presentation of many motifs which are interconnected yet maintain their relative autonomy. It brings in his narrative elements of variation as well as repetition. Kundera seems to suggest that his art and aesthetics profoundly correspond to the complexity of the nature of contemporary man's fragmented and fortuitous existence, which can be apprehend only through innovative composition of rifts and ruptures. He makes his novelistic diagnosis with a remarkable sense of humour and irony that at times go to the point of being outrageous. There are polyphonic qualities in part six of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: the story of Stalin's son, a philosophical meditation, a political event in Asia, Franz's death in Bangkok, and Tomas's burial in Bohemia are connected by the prevailing question, what is Kitsch. Part six of the novel is in fact a philosophical essay on Kitsch. Here Kundera selects and compresses fragmented lines of his characters as illuminating situations. In this mode of narration, the causes of the events are explained in the way one finds in a detective story. For example, the outcomes of events of the relations between Tomas and Tereza, Franz and Sabina are reported first but the actual causes that led to the beginning of their relations are postponed or at times dislocated. This technique of dislocation and chronological displacement brings in an element of retardation. This is how the story of Tomas and Tereza is unfolded. Close study of his magnum opus, *The Unbearable lightness of Being*, offers one a deep insight into the writer gifted with remarkable artistic acumen, capable of conducting great experiment with the art of the form.

The perception of existence in a trap is perhaps not new. There has been a tradition in literature that deals with this theme in a metaphysical context, such as in the man God relationship. That is, man's helplessness and ignorance against the divine will. Confronted with divine power, everything is incomprehensible. This is the theme which Danish philosopher Kierkegaard has taken up in his *Fear and*



*Trembling*. But Kundera's thesis is not theistic; rather, it is atheistic. Confronted even with the power of the state the individual is equally helpless. He places this existential dilemma in the contemporary history of his own country as a symbolic situation the implications of which go beyond temporal and spatial immediacy and ideological categories. At a symbolic plane, Kundera's novel seems to suggest that the behaviour of the power of the modern state against its people is not very different from the one associated with divine authority of which the totalitarian state is an extreme possibility. A streak of tyranny is inherent in the modern state power irrespective of the ideological dispensation. Equipped with the unprecedented technological power, the contemporary world has converted itself into a trap where the behaviour of the state power is as arbitrary, irrational and beyond moral scrutiny, as that of the divine authority. At a philosophical plane, it is a negation of will, individuality, reason, freedom and heroism. This is what Kundera philosophically calls the lightness of being. The whole novel is a play of variation on this theme from different angles. His philosophical essay on Nietzsche's idea of eternal return, an important motif in the novel, is a variation on the same theme. Kundera approaches the myth of eternal return by negation. That is, what happens only once. This fortuity in fact defines the plight of his characters. The incorporation of the philosophical essay on the Nietzschean idea of eternal recurrence, as an existential code, is aimed at exploring the predicament of Tomas and Tereza. By reinterpreting the myth through negation Kundera seems to suggest the essence of art: It is through negation that art exposes contradictions.

Kundera's interpretation of Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence reinforces that the circular motion of time is bound to change one's perception of a temporal phenomenon. Nietzsche identified eternal recurrence with the heaviest burden. Kundera renders this equation into an ontological paradox through an artful reversal: what happens only once. If eternal return is the heaviest existential burden then non-recurrence implies lightness or something insignificant. Kundera redefines the equation. That is, it is not recurrence but its absence which defines existence. It is this fortuitous nature of existence that he paradoxically calls the unbearable lightness of being in a mode of narration Merrill classifies as "meditative, reflective and ironic" (79). Kundera puts his thesis in the following terms:

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 live 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 ... *Einmalist Keinmal*, says Tomas to himself. What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all (ULB, 7-8).

In part five of the novel, which is a variation on part first, Kundera contemplates: "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" (ULB, 219). Though the paradox of being seems to have been put here apparently in metaphysical term, Kundera's perception is neither abstract nor purely philosophical. It operates in the backdrop of the historical condition which informs all his writings. The writer's disillusionment has something to do with the kind of the world, which he metaphorically calls a trap, in which the contemporary man is living of which his characters are symbolic representation.

Kundera's dialectics of existence implies that in the face of nonrecurrence nothing can be planned. This fortuity is accentuated not in metaphysical but in historical and political sense in the novel. It is from this perspective that one can grasp the plight of Tomas. A doctor by profession and a womanizer, Tomas meets Tereza, a provincial waitress in Prague. Their meeting is a matter of sheer coincidence. They made love and departed. Tomas is still in a dilemma whether to call her back or not, because he associates love with seriousness and responsibility. A few days later, Tereza enters in his life with a heavy suitcase. Despite all his planning, Tomas could not return her. He is taken up with compassion. It was because of the

compassion that he follows Tereza from Zurich to Prague after his country came under Russian invasion. How could Tomas know that his mistress was leading him into a trap. Had Tomas not gone to the provincial hospital and to the restaurant where Tereza was a waitress, he would not have met her. His fateful life rests on some fortuitous events. He was born out of those poetics of fortuities. On the other hand, Tereza's life rests on a series of betrayals which imply lightness of being: "our day to day life is bombarded with fortuities, or to be more precise, with the accidental meetings of people and events we call coincidences. 'Co-incident, means that two events unexpectedly happen at the same time, they meet'" (ULB, 50).

Helpless of man against impulses often leads to tragedy, a theme which Flaubert and Tolstoy have taken up with remarkable profundity. The relation between the inner self and outer event is inverse. Kundera's characters are trapped in a world at a time when the outer chain of events and the inner ones run on independently side by side even when they try desperately to link them up in vain. All romantic notions of life represented by lyrical attitude are the by-product of the energy of optimism which fails to see this fundamental contradiction of being both at the personal level as well as political level. The Communist enthusiasts who collaborated with the regime, which perpetuated atrocity on the helpless people in the name of establishing paradise on the earth, were as ignorant of facts as Tomas entertaining illusions in his private life in his erotic adventure with his mistress in pursuit of freedom without any place for sentimentality and accountability. In his existential code fidelity and freedom are antithetical ideas, hence the betrayal. It was during the frenetic erotic adventure that Tomas met Sabina, a painter who helped him find a job for Tereza in a weekly in Prague. The relation between them is of a very fortuitous nature. It seems to have little depth and sanctity. For Tomas, it is a way of avoiding jealousy in Tereza against his mistresses. All her dreams symbolise her weakness, lightness and betrayal, which created compassion in Tomas for her, the feeling which becomes his fate. Later on, to assuage her sense of insecurity and infidelity he married her.

A novel or play which ends in marriage has traditionally been considered to have positive denouement. Kundera conceives another possibility: the seeds of tragedy lie hidden in the very situation founded on optimism. *The Unbearable lightness of Being* is also about such existential ignorance of man, more so at a time when the destiny of the individual is no longer independent of historical and political forces, a negation of private life and identity. When people lose their private identity, they develop deep sense of nostalgia and alienation. Kundera's characters's indulgence in sexuality is an expression of their helplessness. When people are reduced to their physical existence, they become what he calls lightness of being. Kundera's perception of his characters, sexual indulgence is not moral but existential.

Since Tereza is weak, she identifies herself with the helpless people of her occupied country and decides to stay with them. She risks her life while taking images, as a journalist, of the persecuted people protesting against the occupation. The Russian forces kidnapped the then leader Alexander Dubcek to Moscow, forcing him to make confession against his will. This horrible event constitutes a leitmotif in the novel. It seems to suggest that a totalitarian power has something vicious about itself. It humiliates and exterminates those whom it considers dangerous individuals. Persecution and deportation of writers, intellectuals, historians and artists who fell from the favour of the power inform all writings of Kundera who himself became a victim of the purge. His characters, like Tomas, Tereza, Franz and Sabina, are political fugitives condemned to live on the margin of life. They do not look like hero in the traditional sense, they are rather anti-hero, or what Frank aptly says "heroes of non-being"(85). The implied idea behind the narrative of persecution is that had the Russian not invaded and broken the lives of these people, their destiny would have been rather different. But it should not be confused with an alternative image of utopia. There is a deep anguish in Kundera's narrative at how the fate of the small country is decided by a superpower and how the existential possibility of its people is being determined in an age of shrinking space.

On the lightness of being, Kundera conducts his aesthetic variation from different angles. After the

invasion, Tereza has a series of dreams of nudity which seems to symbolise a life without privacy. It also reveals the general condition of life in a totalitarian state. It is not only a denial of privacy, it goes deeper to deprive the individual of his consciousness, inducing conformity, or, more viciously, reducing to a soulless existence. Such pernicious tendency can perhaps be perceived in general behaviour of the political power irrespective of political ideology. Kundera's characters do not have any private life. They have been reduced to their physical existence. Therefore, indulgence in sexuality has little to do with pleasure and more with the expression of helplessness. Deprived of their private identity they look melancholic and nostalgic of which Tereza, reduced to a cow herder, are the most pathetic image. To capture this condition of utter helplessness and weakness, Kundera employs the word vertigo, as an objective correlative. Such words and images work like montage in his narrative. They are charged with a variety of connotations in the synthetic narrative, which they normally do not have in their ordinary application. This is what the word 'Kitsch' symbolises. It denotes different forms of social, political and cultural ugliness that permeates totalitarian society. A totalitarian attitude is defined by its attitude of the denial of reality. Kitsch symbolises the same attitude. Being a denial of reality, Kitsch is synonymous with lyrical disposition in Kundera's personal aesthetic vocabulary. Such attitude sometimes characterises the general spirit of a time that can be perceived in the daily life of the people.

A totalitarian society, or Kitsch, is antithetical to all forms of scepticism, irony and coexistence of a plurality of truth. Kundera perceives it as a typical attitude of the contemporary power of which state censorship is the most vicious institution. It somehow induces obedience and conformity in the individual at different levels of social existence; this is the primary function of all state repressive institutions in the modern capitalist society. The unconscious aim of such institutions is to promote misery of the people, to dehumanise and depersonalise. Though they assumed to be founded on humanistic principles, functioning on such principles is accidental.

The study of *the Unbearable Lightness of Being* offers one an insight into the nature of the operation of totalitarian power in the authorities' reaction to Tomas's Oedipus article. At another plane, it makes one aware of the danger of metaphor. When Tereza came to meet Tomas, he imagined her as a child abandoned in a basket. This image kept on recurring to his imagination in its biblical as well as mythical associations. (One can here recall Shklovsky's insightful observation on the nature of art and man's existential probabilities: "Art, in the multiplicity of its experiments, in the long search for methods, is creating paths along which all mankind will pass". There is perhaps something prophetic about art.) It was with this in mind that Tomas became interested in Sophocles, *Oedipus*. Abandoned as an infant, through a series of fortuitous events, he is saved and accidentally kills his own father and sleeps with his mother. In the meantime, his subjects hit by plague are suffering. When he realizes through a set of fortuitous developments that he is the cause of the curse and the gravity of his sin, he plucked out his own eyes in self-punishment. One can see through the contrast in Oedipus's reaction to his unconscious action, his sense of guilt, and the self-justifying reaction of the collaborator and communist enthusiasts who in a mood of self-denial are not able to see the atrocities perpetuated on their fellow countrymen between the behaviour of the power of the past and that of the present. Modern power is not only shameless, it is marked by the banality of indifference. For Tomas, Oedipus's reaction raises a fundamental question about ignorance and innocence.

Since the implications of Tomas's article did not go down well with the official circle, the chief surgeon reminded him of what was at stake and tried to persuade him to retract to Tomas's great embarrassment. It is not simply a matter of free speech; Kundera's novel seems to make a critical diagnosis into the tyranny of power and its psychological impact on the consciousness of the powerless. As Tomas came under pressure to write self-criticism, or, for that matter, confession, the absurdity of which reminds one of something medieval. There is Kafka about self-criticism. It involves auto-culpabilisation. Kundera observes: "Self-Criticism: the subjection of the accused to the accuser; the renunciation of his self; a way

of nullifying himself as an individual”(TB, 230). Tomas finds the whole situation incomprehensible. Confronted with power, the powerless is not only wrong; his whole behaviour takes the appearance of something pathological. He comes under the apprehension of being under the constant gaze of the authorities, of the police, the secret agents. He consequently loses his sleep and recedes into the countryside. Faced with a totalitarian power, the powerless not only goes through self humiliation and depersonalisation, as Tomas from being a prominent doctor becomes a window washer, he withdraws himself from the world, recedes into an insignificant entity, the unbearable lightness of being.

Tomas is trapped in a bizarre condition where his intention and the consequences of his actions seem to be working on cross purposes. The whole situation looks at times ludicrous, yet it is so terrifying and grim. A totalitarian power not only persecutes individuals on suspicion; it reduces them into non-entities. In such a situation the individual can survive only through conformity by erasing all traits of individuality. This is what Kundera calls totalitarian Kitsch. Sabina's reaction to the grand march is based on this perception. She sees it as a denial of individuality, to induce conformity and intellectual imbecility. It is a denial of the fundamental fact that people live together yet they are different from each other in their outlook and disposition:

Those of us who live in a society where various political tendencies exist side by side and competing influences cancel or limit one another can manage more or less to escape the Kitsch inquisition: the individual can preserve his individuality; the artist can create unusual works. But whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of *totalitarian Kitsch* (ULB, 249).

The novel places the existential paradox of the contemporary man into historical perspective: the birth of the modern era, the rise and fall of man. Kundera's perception is here both philosophical and anthropological with which Tereza seems to be preoccupied while looking after the herd of cows in the company of dying Karenin. Man invented God to legitimise his dominion over nature. But he was not able to realize this dream till the advent of the Modern Era when Descartes took a decisive step in placing man at the centre of the universe. “Man is master and proprietor, says Descartes, whereas the beast is merely automation, an animated machine, a *machinaanimata*” (ULB, 284). Cartesian dream of man as a supreme being denies animal a soul. While pondering over it Tereza was often reminded of the paradoxical reversal of the Cartesian dream about man in a totalitarian state which erases all traits of individualism and humanism into process of dehumanisation which helps one see what man has made of man.

The image of human existence that one finds in Kundera's novel is not only a negation of Cartesian dream, of free will and choice, it is just the opposite of what is projected in classical tragedy glorifying individual heroism, the residue of which remained perhaps with mankind till the birth of the technological era and the emergence of strong social and political institutions which gradually reduced the individual and his subjective virtues to parenthetical elements. Unlike the traditional hero or warrior, he is no longer capable to confront and overthrow the power and its institutions. All classical virtues of man including dignity and courage seem to have shredded and disintegrated in the Kunderean world of Kitsch which reduces the individual's capability to act to degree zero. All his actions are repetitive gestures of obedience and conformity to the will of the power whose behaviour seems to have taken the appearance of a metaphysical dispensation.

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