

MILAN KUNDERA—REFLECTIONS ON FLUX

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ABSTRACT: *This paper studies the concept of flux/change as portrayed by Milan Kundera in his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Change or flux has been a phenomenon which preoccupied many philosophers and thinkers since ages. Growth and decay, physical and psychological change, change in moral principles, change in successive stages of life, change in consciousness subsequent to causal determinants is the essential condition of life. Kundera reinforces the constant that is change. The stylistic fluidity of this novel corresponds to the thematic fluency. The winding structure of the novel and the authorial reflections mingle the genre of essay writing with storytelling with remarkable ease. Throughout the novel, Kundera strikes at the conventional and in so doing chalks out new terrains of thought and interpretation. The third person narratorial stance enables the establishment of intimacy with the characters and reveals the innermost depths of their psyche. During these probings, Kundera finds room to express his thoughts on recurrence, totalitarianism, the concept of Kitch and blends dream sequence with reality creating a surreal effect in a seamless narrative. The absurdity of life is encapsulated in man's helplessness and the queries of a restless soul. The idea of flux is retained in the manner in which Kundera creates moral ambiguity in a situation.*

KEY WORDS: Flux, kitch, Totalitarian, Moral ambiguity, Fluidity, Recurrence.

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Milan Kundera (1929-) a Czech-born French writer who lives in exile in France and insists that his work should be studied as French Literature. A reclusive person, his books were banned in the communist regime of Czechoslovakia. He has been several times nominated for the Nobel Prize. Having won several international awards, his books are avidly read and discussed. He believes that the reader's imagination completes the portrayal of the writer's vision. His themes include exile, identity, recurrence and memory. Kundera, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, reflects on the changing nature of life and changed perceptions after varied experience. Transition in all aspects of one's existence is the preoccupation in this novel of ideas.

Reflection on change is not a new phenomenon in the ever evolving philosophy of life. Heraclitus, (530-470) the ancient philosopher of Ephesus believed that change is the only constant in life. He viewed life as a river full of peaks and pits and swirls and says, "We both step and do not step in the same river. We are and are not." (B49a) He observed change and flow in nature," Cold things grow hot, the hot cools, the wet dries, the parched moistens," he noted. The biological decay is manifest in our bodies, growing old and dying, consuming to replicate our structure while shedding matter constantly. It is theorized that essential courage and self-control are important components to deal effectively with change. Kant (1724-1804), the German philosopher, said that the mind is not a blank state. According to him the animal spirit, the sensuous being is entirely subject to causal determination. He says the actions of a rational being must be in accordance to moral principles. Since human beings possess reason

they can choose to act hence there is a special burden on us. Other creatures are acted upon while human beings act upon chosen principles. Therefore, we must exercise our will and reason to act and not succumb to irrational impulses. Even when we exercise our reason we don't always know which action or decision will be the best. The element of choice leads to unlimited possibility and therefore a strong enigmatic quality in life. Kundera reinforces this belief. Henri Bergson (1859-1941) conceived of reality as *elan Vital*. All existence, he said, is in a state of moving, growing, becoming, and in a succession of stages which never rest at one point. Consciousness, too, grows and evolves. His concept of multiplicity is related to a unified consciousness. His concept of *elan vital* is in essence, evolution and development. Reality has to be lived not merely understood. Nietzsche (1844-1900) developed the vision of a chaotic world in perpetual change and in a state of becoming. He believed that our fundamental drive is for power as realized in independence and dominance. This will, he said, is stronger than the will to survive. Nietzsche propagated the sublimated will to power, where people turn their desire for power inwards and pursue self-mastery rather than mastery over others. At a deeper level, the will to power explains the changing nature of reality. According to Nietzsche everything is in flux; matter, ideas, knowledge, truth, emotions, everything changes. For him, the "I" is really a chaotic jumble of competing wills, constantly struggling to overcome one another. If one denies change, one denies life. All religions cite change as a condition of life. The Buddhist doctrine of life looks at the impermanence of all things. Kundera explores this concept further and finds that change/flux is pervasive in our lives.

Published in 1984, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in third person narratorial voice, is considered to be Kundera's novel of ideas. Every page teems with reflections leaving the reader pondering on the multiple variations of thought and intent behind different situations. Kundera writes this novel in an incredibly fluid form combining with great ease the elements of storytelling with innumerable reflections which pertain to the form of essay writing. Memory plays the lead role in what Kundera believes to be life. For him lost memories are akin to a loss of life. Reviving and recapturing memories is like getting back life. Kundera presents unique complexities of life with irony and wit. Every character is explored in a detailed manner building unconventional but very plausible portraits of humanity. His characters are communicative, demonstrating the belief of the author that while he does not believe in the psychological novel, his characters are not deprived of an inner life.

The very meandering structure of this novel testifies to Kundera's belief that reality is forever changing directions. The image of a river is not inapplicable. He seems to say that the physical is not critical to the understanding of a person. While words shape a personality and leave a mark about a character or a person, there is a deeper inner person which is understood only by one self. Therefore Kundera as the omniscient narrator knows his characters fully and revels in the way the characters attempt to find themselves. The experiences and reactions continuously change the direction of Kundera's characters, moreover, by participating in the mental state of the characters the reader's thoughts about life continue to be jolted, probed and dismantled. In this mutually intense intellectual engagement, the construction of the character becomes as much the writer's task as it is the reader's. Kundera believes that the essential or the essence lies not just in the psychological riddle but also in other socio-political puzzles which constitute our reality. To unravel this enigmatic being, the reader must construe the inner working of the mind through any physical idiosyncrasy or linguistic tool that the writer employs.

Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* continues the age-old debate about the recurrence of events. Is history a continual cycle or do events never recur? Kundera believes that one gets only one life so there is no point of reference. Since we cannot go back to check the consequences of taking the other option, we never know we were wrong or right about our decisions. This enigmatic quality of life is the crux of its dynamism. Kundera notes that if everything happens only once, it carries no weight, one can always forget it and move on to another experience. An experience registers only when it is repeated. Since events do not recur, we experience the *Unbearable lightness of being* and when they do, one is terribly burdened by a heavy soul. He asks, does that make the span of a single lifetime insignificant? Is that why histories are forgotten? Major events like wars and bloody revolutions leave no impact and humanity continues its practice of cruelty, control and exploitation. Tereza, in the novel, takes photographs of Soviet violence on Czech citizens because she wants to document the face of violence so that it is never forgotten and never shoved back in the archives of history. Kundera believes that violence becomes faceless because those who perpetrate it leave no mark, kill all opposition, and wipe away every trace. That is why, over time, it becomes a myth and another usurper, another tyrant can repeat the act.

Kundera's characters while being individualistic are constantly experimenting with life. He says his characters are his unrealized possibilities and that there is monstrosity in all of us. The absurdity of life is depicted in random occurrences and also in our helplessness, in our lack of belief. Thomas knows that his infidelities pain Tereza, he wishes not to hurt her but cannot stop himself from his sexual rendezvous. This is an example of recurrence which leaves a burden of gloom on the characters. Many occurrences are unlikely to occur again. For instance, Tereza and Thomas's leaving the country after the war and then going back to it. Was it their fate to suffer as an exile? Was it deserved? Was the displacement of Czechs due to Soviet invasion a mechanism of fate or made by humans? Is the universe without any apparent system of order and justice? Or is it there? Tereza goes back, Thomas follows her. She needs the land, for him she is the land. Time changes the roles in their lives. Once vulnerable, she now accepts him as her responsibility, the pattern is changed. Their journey was required for development in understanding. Is this what it's all about? Kundera implies that only those who wrestle with their thinking need to move back and forth, the physical journey is a manifestation of the restless soul which seeks to find answers. Do we hear the echo of Edgar in *King Lear*, 'Ripeness is all'?

In Kundera's words, "The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one" and he says that Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum. Time is viewed as cyclical not linear. Nietzsche described the eternal recurrence as "infinite weight." What does this mad myth signify?" Kundera argues that for something to make any effect, it must recur. Beauty, horror, sublimity all remain only a shadow if they are not experienced again and again. Something leaves a permanent mark only if it is repeated. Even something as astounding and great as the French Revolution becomes only a myth, reconstructed in history and books. Its reality disappears. The excruciating circumstances of Hitler's atrocities become only a lost memory. Kundera feels that in a world where everything happens only once, everything is pardoned, everything is cynically accepted. On the other hand, if everything was to return continually in cycles, life would become an unbearable burden. We would be buried under this huge sense of weight and responsibility, knowing that our deed is going to return. He argues that because we know that there is no return we experience *the lightness of being*. Therefore

we move on with life. On the other hand, if everything was to return continually in cycles, life would become an unbearable burden. We would be buried under a tremendous sense of gloom if we knew that all that we want to forget will return to haunt us. He argues that because there is no return we get away with what we do so then is this lightness splendid? But the sense of weight i.e. a recurring experience is what makes life intense and real and instructive. If we become free of the burden of recurrence and accountability, we are conversely just a shadow, insignificant.

When Thomas meets Tereza, he falls in love but he does not want to be burdened with responsibility? He feels a strong urge to care for her but is unable to commit himself. Kundera argues that it is but natural for man to vacillate between duty and desire because he has only one life therefore he must choose what he wants most and when? Kundera implies that one cannot compare the outcome of any action as it has no point of comparison. Can one undo ones experience if it turns awry? Life is like a live programme on air, the mistakes cannot be rectified. Anything that happens once may not have happened at all but if it is recorded and played again and again the mistake becomes glaring. The idea of eternal return echoes also in relationships. Thomas's continued need to protect Tereza leads him to marry her but his continual urge for illicit relationships depresses Tereza no end. Such an episode does not happen once in her lifetime, because it recurs, it becomes a burden for Tereza. Thomas knows how hurt she gets but attributes it to the "naïve idealism of her love." Kundera shows how cycles of feeling and emotion recur enabling us to act with malice, with love or with forgiveness.

Kundera points to the extreme tyranny of a totalitarian regime; he likens Communism to a father who is 'strict and limited'. (Kundera, 1999, p91) and says that the true opponent of such a regime is someone who asks questions. For, a tyrannical order cannot survive with queries and conscience. Karl Popper, a noted Austin British Philosopher, in his work, 'The Open Society and its Enemies' defends liberal democracy and argues that even a benign idyll like democracy as cited by Plato can develop dangerous tendencies towards totalitarianism. According to Popper, Plato's ideas are driven by a fear of the change that comes with such a liberal worldview. Popper believes in change and in liberal democracy which continues to imbue institutional improvements without violence. The readers and the characters in '*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*' are calm and questioning, often not surprised by events but horrified with the parade of falsity. Sabina would rather live in a reality than an ideal which is not achieved. The communist ideal that was propagated was far worse than the Communist reality. "She would unhesitatingly prefer life in a real Communist regime with all its persecution and meat queues. Life in the real Communist world was still liveable. In the world of the Communist ideal made real, in that world of grinning idiots, she would have nothing to say, she would die of horror within a week." (P.253) this feeling of horror is substantiated in the novel in Tereza's dream where she is made to sing while corpses float in the pool. She would dream of cats going berserk, then of her own executions in varied forms and also of life after death when 'humiliation turned into a never-ending state'. These dreams of Tereza were clearly connected to her real anxieties and were therefore not difficult to decipher. Frequently they manifested her lack of faith in Thomas. Kundera's dream narrative is exposed in Tereza's dream. The readers try to find a symbolic meaning in these dreams. Kundera expostulates that there is nothing in those dreams. "They are poems about death. Their meaning lies in their beauty which hypnotizes Tereza." (Interview Kundera.....)

Tereza in *'The Lightness of Being'* feels that if crimes are committed under cover, no photographic or documented evidence is there then soon these facts are distorted or called fabricated since all evidence is destroyed. Along with other photographers, she tries to preserve the face of violence for the distant future. The mortifying speech of Dubcek, the Czech President, defeated by the Soviets, remains etched in the minds of the Czechs because it is saved in the film. He could not utter words because of the humiliation and horror of the defeat, his pauses showed his weakness. Tereza represents the Czech sentiment when she sees his humiliation as his weakness and through him, her own weakness. Kundera shows how national humiliation trickles down to become personal and the presence of a recording and documentation continues to feed that sense of shame. The recurrence of an event when seen again and again adds to the unbearable burden of existence. Genuine alternatives in history and the role of human ideals in predetermining the future are necessarily based on change. Kundera attacks intellectual and political totalitarianism. Like Popper who was an advocate of tolerance, Kundera advocates a lack of tolerance for the intolerant. His characters actively propagate freedom of speech, belief and action. There is a strong rejection of forced authority and political manipulation. Tereza and Thomas prefer self-exile to living in a totalitarian regime even when they are not personally affected.

Through the character of Tereza, Kundera fights against the kitsch since "kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain death" (p.253) Kundera scorns the kitsch. What is kitsch? It is defined as art or design which is in poor taste because of its excessive garishness or sentimentality and thus appeals to lowbrow taste. It is that art which has limited appeal and is therefore of little value as an artistic achievement. For him, "Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements" (p.251). The "feeling induced by kitsch" "... is something that the multitudes share therefore it must derive from basic images: "the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, ...the utopian motherland..." Kundera argues that in a society ruled by one dominant political ideology, the reliance on Kitsch becomes sordidly intense. The totalitarian regime allows no deviation, no irony and no individualism. Only genuine art can tell the "unintelligible truth from the intelligible lie." In the novel, Sabina makes use of mystifications in her biography to preserve her individualism, to save her art from misinterpretation and to hide her identity. Kundera shows a grave concern with the suppression of art and creativity in a totalitarian regime which stands no opposition and therefore bans all creative and critical expression. Leo Tolstoy in his essay, "what is Art" says, Art is a ".....means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity." This feeling of well-being cannot be perpetuated in an environment where common opinion and communication is not aired. Tolstoy also explains it as a feeling that needs to be communicated therefore it is expressed by certain external signs and forms. Kundera's poetic prose explores the sense of suffocation in a repressive regime and shows his characters being shaped by their external circumstances. The delight that Kundera exhibits in his speculative wit is something that he desires for all writers and artists to experience without any restriction or fear. Genuine art, he believes, employs irony and is successful in maintaining the moral ambiguity of a situation. The misunderstanding or the doubt that good art creates is the very backbone of the writer's belief in an inclusive and non-judgemental approach to life. The realm of the novel defies assertions; it is a place for hypothesis, reflections. According to Kundera, a novelist rarely has an assertive philosophy; at best his works are intellectual exercises so the novel is a journey of discovery. His thinking is playful, ironic and provocative.

Kundera shows how thinking changes with the change in bodily needs. Our physical lives dictate our mental lives. Humanity is a conflicted tussle between physical comfort and emotional comfort. Kundera talks about a kind of Kafkaesque metamorphosis. The transformations and related actions make one's story sad. This thinking is a reflection of our modern day reality. He wonders whether we voluntarily isolate ourselves or are we involuntarily isolated because of the choices that we make. For instance Thomas and Tereza leave their homeland and cut themselves off from their fellow nationals and suffer isolation. Is human nature completely self-absorbed? Are we reduced to creaturely life by the pursuit of our selfish needs? Kundera echoes Kafka when he reflects upon the dynamics between family members. Relationships are established by behavioural patterns that are repeated. It is observed that the more one is self-sacrificing and generous, the worse he is treated as Tereza is treated by Thomas. How do attitudes change from being supportive to neglect when needs and lifestyle change? Care, communication, patience, loyalty, secrecy, shame, duty all change in the context of relationships. The actions of an unselfish person are taken for granted by the family. Tereza's fidelity and care for Thomas are accepted as given. Her goodness goes unappreciated.

Kundera strongly asserts imagination as a value in itself. He is often amused by the chronic disease of critics to decipher everything that a novelist writes. He says that by trying to find the meaning of every line we miss the beauty of imagination. The aesthetic miracle must be enjoyed for its own sake. For instance, the fusion of dream and reality as in Kafka's works. The novel, for Kundera is a form of unlimited freedom. It is a meditation on existence, seen through imaginary characters. The unity of the themes and their variations create the organic coherence. A sense of the Kafkaesque is felt in the *Lightness of Being* when external political conditions overpower people in a surreal manner evoking a feeling of stress and helplessness. Both Tereza and Thomas experience disorientation when they are confronted with exile. They lack a clear direction to escape a labyrinthine situation. Highlighting the 'irrationality at the roots of a supposedly rational world' Kundera shows how Thomas and Tereza are affected by change and are in turn influenced by the changes in their lives.

Hassan Askari in his essay, 'The Fear of Metaphor' says that the metaphor "..... is a useful ploy to turn a dull and lifeless idea into an enjoyable one." At another point in his essay he says, "The process of the birth of a metaphor is the same as the process of the birth of a dream." According to Askari, ".....the creation of metaphors calls for two kinds of courage in a writer. One, that of squarely facing his unconscious, and two, that of breaking out of the cocoon of his ego and establishing links with the world around him." The use of metaphor in Kundera shows his ability to blend different aspects of experience and give them a new meaning believing that metaphors are both important and dangerous. The suitcase is a metaphor of Tereza's life. When she comes with her suitcase, Thomas knows she has given him his life to keep. It is "large and enormously heavy." (Kundera, 1999, p.10) When Thomas links her arrival with a metaphor, he knows he is trapped. For Kundera, love is a fleeting passion and very often based on haphazard and endless strings of coincidence. The chiming of bells at six when she first meets Thomas and then again when he comes for her in Prague and listening to Beethoven as she meets Thomas, becomes a sign of beauty for Tereza. She is caught in the metaphor. This sense of beauty/ responsibility gives her the will to live and cures her depression.

For Franz the marriage bed was a symbol. His conjugal life with his wife was not "worth mentioning" but he still shared her bed because symbols are important. "All lovers unconsciously establish their own rules of the game" so any transgression unnerves one or the

other. Metaphor, says Askari, sometimes defy logic and reason, it speaks to the instinctual, life-giving dimension in man. It is used to organize and order experience. Askari says, “..... the presence of metaphor goes to prove that the writer has the capacity, small or large, to accept his experiences, acquire new ones and, if need be, crumble his earlier mental structure in favour of a new one.” According to him metaphor is a union of the unconscious with the conscious, individual with the community, man with the universe and is therefore necessary for the healing of a fragmented self. “The use of metaphor implies nothing less than the desire to get out of the dark hole of the self and move courageously forward to embrace the world.” Tereza’s suitcase is her metaphor of despair and burden and movement. Later, the same suitcase as she lugged it back to her homeland becomes a metaphor of journey and decision. She longed to be back in Prague, longed to be away from her husband’s infidelities and the disorientation of being in a foreign land.

This novel is preoccupied with the psychological drama of loss and grief—which is communicated through a range of techniques. Kundera employs third person and unreliable first person narration technique to indicate the character’s state of mind. Kundera refuses to give definitive answers to the questions he raises adhering to his belief in the moral ambiguity of a situation. The events that he unfolds are to be deduced as much by the reader as by the writer but his ponderings continue to enrich the reader’s thought. After Tereza’s departure back to Prague, Thomas is left alone and is desperately unhappy, its physical symptom is a stomach ache. He knows he had to go back to her. Kundera believes that there is only a limited capacity in human beings to experience stress, revulsion and sympathy. Thomas makes an active move to end his estrangement from Tereza. Once he is back, it dawns on Tereza that now she is responsible for him. The dynamics of their relationship had changed due to the physical conditions of their life.

Kundera’s characters manifest Aristotelian belief in consistency and growth. From the beginning we see Tereza reading and reflecting. She is projected as a person who is not a University student but is an ‘auto didact’. The vitality of her character is attributed to her dynamic mental exercises. In the theatre of her mind, complication and resolve becomes a part of the unseen plot. Tereza becomes the spokesperson of the writer in her sustained effort to interpret the world around her. This ‘plotless’ novel succeeds in showing reversals, recognition and suffering all within the mind of the characters. While physical journey is a metaphor for inner discovery, Kundera also highlights the sense of dislocation resulting in stress and alienation. The sentiment of estrangement leads to isolation and the notion that relationships are superficial and transitory. Since lack of communication creates a barrier and steadily leaves people with no sympathy towards those with whom there is no communication, Thomas hastens to bridge the gap before it is too late.

Kundera believes that “plot” with its trappings of surprising and incredible coincidences has become an extremely tasteless, trite and old fashioned aspect of the novel. He propagates a novel without a ‘plot’ that is freeing it from the element of likelihood. It is his ambition to be able to unite serious questions/ reflections in an incredibly light form. He says, “The combination of a frivolous form and a serious subject immediately unmask the truth about our dramas (those that occur in our beds as well as those that we play out on the great stage of history) and in their awful insignificance we experience the lightness of being.” (Kundera, Milan. *The Art of Fiction*. No,81.)

The simplicity of Kundera's diction deludes the reader and it is only after a pause that the reader realizes the sophisticated amalgam of realism and fantasy in both situation and dialogue. Unexplained and unfinished remarks not only add to the ambiguity in style but also reveal a perspective of the characters' thoughts and eccentricities without explicitly defining the character. Bare dialogue, brief description, almost no details of food, clothes and personal habits are given. Third person technique sets the ambience, for instance a brief description of Switzerland 'Geneva is a city of fountains large and small, of parks where music once rang out from the bandstands.' Kundera in his unique style interprets the code between lovers, {Franz}...had grown so accustomed to linking their love life to foreign travel that his "Let's go to Palermo" was an unambiguous erotic message and her "I prefer Geneva" could have only one meaning: his mistress no longer desired him" (Kundera, 1999, p82).

Kundera interprets the fear of Franz as an antithesis of Franz's successful public life. His "armour" was his public life which he shed when he met Sabina. So he put himself at her mercy altogether. Kundera believes that the myths and metaphors are the archetypes which exist and are rooted in the imagination and not derived from an ideological system. He reminds us that literature is an extension of mythology.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is a richly layered story and can be interpreted at a philosophical, Freudian and autobiographical level. Thomas's futile efforts to help his wife and Tereza's cries for help increase the moral ambiguity of the story. Kundera, in an interview by Philip Roth, says, 'Intimate life is understood as one's personal secret, as something valuable, inviolable, the basis of one's originality.' What he finds fascinating is how public and private life entwines around one's faith and will. His refusal to talk about himself suggests his inclination to place the work of the artist at the forefront rather than the artist. Kundera feels close to the Viennese novelist, Robert Musil and Hermann Broch who, like Kundera believe that the age of the psychological novel had come to an end. They believe more in what they call the 'Polyhistorical novel'. For Kundera, the 'polyhistorical' is not a form that is burdened with multiple responsibilities. He says, "The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become" (Kundera, 1999, p.221). It is a form that 'brings together every device and every form of knowledge in order to shed light on existence'. (Interview Kundera.....81)

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Kundera masters the art of 'ellipses' or the art of condensation. He believes that human proportions should not be breached. A piece of art that defies memory due to its gigantic expanse loses clarity and therefore becomes 'murky'. Kundera desires to capture 'the complexity of human existence in the modern world'. To do so he goes directly to the heart of the problem and rids his novel of 'word-spinning'. He attempts and succeeds in making "dream and narrative flow in an indivisible and natural stream." (Interview Kundera.... 81) According to Kundera, incompleteness lies in what you aim for but are unable to attain. This concept of 'incompleteness' thus leaves unlimited possibilities. Change or flux is closely attached to it. Incompleteness leads to the desire for completion thus initiating change in existing conditions. Tereza's desire to leave Prague and migrate to Switzerland was her attempt to find conditions where she may feel strong and fulfilled. In a similar way the constant desire to perfect writing inspires Kundera to seek new art forms, forms stripped of *unessentials*, forms that do not compromise clarity and forms that synthesize' narrative, Philosophy and dream and irony into a single music. *The Lightness of Being* thus both thematically and structurally incorporates the flux.

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