

FROM EXISTENTIAL CODE TO EXPERIMENTAL SELF: A SURVEY OF NARRATION AND CHARACTERIZATION IN MILAN KUNDERA'S THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

Mohsen Masoomi

Department of English,
Islamic Azad University, Sanandaj Branch,
IRAN.

mmasoomi@iausdj.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

Dismissing most of the traditional novelistic structures, Milan Kundera utilizes particular narrative devices to illustrate his own aesthetic of the novel, which emphasizes parallel explorations of related themes, active philosophical contemplation and the integration of dreams and fantasy with realistic analysis. Kundera succeeds in upgrading his specific subjects, characters and contexts to the worldwide level. Such success is attained through the implementation of various stylistic devices particularly narrative techniques. The multiperspective narration of the story gives more freedom to the readers in approaching the mind and consciousness of the writer. In addition, readers become encouraged to conjure up the imaginary being or the experimental self of the characters while taking advantage from Kundera's relevant contemplation of existential code formula for characters; a fact which helps them more in a better understanding of the writer's technique in characterization.

Keywords: Milan Kundera, characterization, narration, existential code, experimental code.

GENERAL OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE

Milan Kundera's touching, thoughtful and philosophical novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, originally written in Czech language and completed in 1982 when Kundera was residing in Paris, was first published in 1984 in France. The version under study here is the paperback edition of the English translation from Czech by Michael Henry Heim in 1984. The story is set in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1968. The protagonist, neurosurgeon Tomas, is a passionate womanizer, who yet loves his wife. He is at the same time attracted and repelled by women. Tomas and his photographer wife Tereza defect to Switzerland after the Soviet invasion of 1968. But Tereza cannot stand Tomas's infidelities and returns to Czechoslovakia on an impulse. Tomas follows her, giving up his good job. On his return to Czechoslovakia he becomes a window cleaner. Eventually, to escape the attention of the secret police, the couple moves to the Czech countryside, where they live in happiness and humility and after a few years die in a traffic accident.

The novel uses a seven-part narrative to implement musical variations on the themes of love, desire, innocence and history. While fascinating the readers with lively possibilities of fiction, the novel presents a profoundly revolutionary portrait of occupied Czechoslovakia and the lives of its characters from 1960s to 1970s. Dismissing most of the traditional novelistic structures, Milan Kundera utilizes specific narrative devices (such as polyphony) to illustrate his own aesthetic of the novel, which emphasizes parallel explorations of related themes, active philosophical contemplation and the integration of dreams and fantasy with realistic analysis. It is believed that such a structure illustrates "an overt desire to destroy the classical notion of "novelistic development" (exposition, peripeteia [sudden change], rebounding, knotting and denouement)" (Scarpetta, 1999). Such different style is also believed to be one good reason for the novel's success as it "withheld[s] so many of the things we expect from a work of fiction, such as rounded characters [...] a tangible milieu, a well-placed plot" (Banville, 2004). Moreover, Kundera's novel remains popular and trendy because it upgrades the specific subjects, characters and contexts to the worldwide level; the situations and dilemmas created in the story, the questions raised throughout the characters' life journeys, the problems faced by characters in 1960s-70s Czechoslovakia are not really that different from those faced by the

contemporary man in every other continent: “His manner of storytelling progresses by successive waves and by means of digressions and remarks that transform the private problem into a universal problem and, thereby, one that is ours” (Calvino, 2003).

Through his philosophically complex fiction, Kundera explores the conflicting forces of personal yearning, public and private ethics, and social rule. His writing here is characterized by its inquisitive tone, integration of dream, realism, and that abstract contemplation which is competently interpolated into an inventive narrative structure. As a disquisition on the nature of human existence and relationships, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being's focal point is the intertwined lives of four characters – Tomas, Tereza, Sabina and Franz*. Though the novel is not typically considered as a psychological one in its genre, one might perceive how Kundera is concerned with the underlying psychological mechanisms that shape his characters' both private and public lives. A deep reading of the novel indicates that these mechanisms show different frequencies, even though the writer rarely examines inner thoughts of his characters. Such psychological inflections among the characters, the use of multiple perspectives, and repeating themes and concepts throughout the text produce a counterpoint effect that reflects the novel's musical structure as well. In addition and as a reminiscence of the variations in a musical composition, each character represents a particular motif that is explored throughout the novel in various contexts.

EXISTENTIAL CODE AND EXPERIMENTAL SELF

Among Kundera's direct references to the creation process of his work, there are two remarkable testimonials. One is that he exerts the term “existential code” while elaborating on the nature of the interconnection of his characters and prime themes and motifs: “As I was writing *The Unbearable Lightness of being*, I realized that the code of this or that character is made up of certain key words. For Tereza: body, souls, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Tomas: lightness, weight. In the part called “Words Misunderstood,” I examine the existential codes of Franz and Sabina by analyzing a number of words: woman, fidelity, betrayal, music, darkness, light, parades, beauty, country, cemetery, strength. Each of these words has a different meaning in the other person's existential code” (Kundera, 1986).

The second instance reveals itself when Kundera is called “parsimonious” about his characters' past in the novel. When Christian Salmon asks Kundera about the absence of physical appearance of the characters or his preference for the analysis of situation over psychological motives, Kundera's reply is quite appealing: “A character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental self. The reader's imagination automatically completes the writer's. Is Tomas dark or fair? Was his father rich or poor? Choose for yourself” (kundera, 1986).

Kundera's references may well be analyzed through Georges Poulet's formulation on the relationship between the writer and the reader, where a book becomes the container of consciousness and a place for confluence of two consciousnesses – the writer's and the reader's. He posits that through reading a book one gains direct access to the ideas, feelings and modes of dreaming and living of another one (Poulet, 1972). Accordingly, Kundera's readers can experience and imagine the most appropriate “self” for each of the characters after they arrive at essence of their existential code.

NARRATION AND CHARACTERIZATION

There have been various reviews on the narrative style, characterization and the role of the narrator in Kundera's masterpiece. As a matter of fact, such reviews display the space between those existential and experimental codes. The more we penetrate into the writer's consciousness, the less will be the distance between the two codes. However, the codes presented by Kundera himself may seem the least but not the last.

The fact has been elaborated that “Kundera employs music both thematically and structurally to foster a type of narrative [...] that resists any singular, univocal, synthesizing interpretation” (Henson, 1993). The significance of music as a “compositional strategy” for Kundera, and the “non-linear organization of the novel's sections” are other important techniques further emphasized by Henson. He observes significant parallels between *polychronic* narration and Kundera's strategy: “ULB is set within an

overtly political-historical context: most of the events of the novel revolve around the Prague Spring and its aftermath.[...] Kundera employs narrative methods that force the reader to reflect upon both the “eternalizing” and the “linearizing” tendencies of narrative (personal, collective, or aesthetic)” (Henson, 1993).

The *directing* function and the function of the *creator* for the narrator in the novel are two vital speculations which have been emphasized upon to illustrate the significant function of the narrator as that of any other character in the story. It is believed that these two functions most clearly relate to the theme of freedom. By adopting these two functions, the narrator of the novel makes him visible in the story and gains “a potential omniscience through which he could control his fictional personae and their world completely” (Pichova, 1992). By attributing qualities similar to that of a broad-minded character to this powerful narrator, Pichova also maintains that “the narrator intentionally limits his powers to avoid subjugating his characters to the same totalitarian rule they try to escape on the thematic level” (Pichova, 1992). All this structural openness, however, provides the characters with what could be called textual freedom, according to Pichova. She indicates that it is by utilizing a narratological technique such as *repeating prolepsis* or *advance notice* – which “fragments the narrative through temporal disorder,” that the narrator exerts his directing function. The narrator’s power and control over the textual world, in fact, originates as well from directing function: “the narrator tears down the conventions of the Socialist Realist novel, or more generally, any novel that is totalitarian in its presentation. Instead, he strives for a narrative that can free its fictional personae on the structural level” (Pichova, 1992).

Accordingly, the narrator of the novel has a major contribution in providing a clear description of the characters’ coming into existence: “The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own ‘I’ ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author’s confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become” (Kundera, 1984).

Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, Franz, Tereza’s mother, Marie-Claude, Simon, Young student, tall engineer and some other characters are introduced by the narrator in this novel, but the first four names are the chief characters. There have been miscellaneous standpoints about these characters regarding the structural pattern and thematic implications of the novel. Once, the entire story is put in a tragedy framework played by “a significantly reduced cast of characters,” among whom Tomas does not quite resemble a tragic hero but rather represents the tragic possibility of human existence as an option for his time (Banerjee, 1992). Moreover, Sabina and Franz are tagged as “antiphonal” characters who come into the scene whenever Tomas and Tereza are absent. This categorization is embedded in a larger viewpoint which conceives the performance of these characters as instruments in a concert “each playing his or her existential code in strict relation to those of others” (Banerjee, 1992).

Finding an infusion in characters’ stories, Michiko Kakutani (1984) maintains that characters in the “*Lightness*” are trying to find a balance between two visions of the world – between commitment and freedom. “The former leads to entrapment, in terms of both personal relationships and political ideology; the latter, to rootlessness and the loss of identity. How each of the four main characters deals with this dialectic forms the broad story line of the novel” (Kakutani, 1984).

E.L. Doctorow’s stance on the case of the novel’s characters seems harsher. “Subservience” to Kundera’s willpower is what Doctorow (1999) finds in characters’ behavioral pattern in the novel. He posits that every major and minor character in the story “exemplify” a specific contradiction about “the essential identity of opposites.” Making an analogy to the real world, Doctorow further adds: “The paradox of the essential identity of opposites describes an intractable world in which human beings are deprived of a proper context for their humanity. The author who ostentatiously intrudes in his characters’ lives and tells them how to behave mimics, of course, the government that interferes deeply in its citizens’ lives and tells them how to behave. Tomas and Sabina and Franz and Tereza were invented to live under two tyrannies, the tyranny of contemporary Czechoslovakia and the tyranny of Mr. Kundera’s despair” (Doctorow, 1999).

Tomas, the protagonist of the novel, is a smart and brilliant surgeon in Prague who belongs to the Czech intellectual circle, which was silenced after the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968. He is not a devoted or vigorous political dissident, but in a similar fate with other elites, Tomas loses his job because he refuses to retract an anti-Czech Communist article he published in a newspaper. Preferably, Tomas would like to avoid politics in favor of being a free man or an independent thinker who acts as he chooses. Tomas's career and fate has some other exemplars as well: "The first thing to note about this character's fate is that it is a gloss on Orwell: To destroy Tomas, Mr. Kundera is saying, the powerfully inertial police apparatus doesn't have to expend the energy required to torture him. It need only send around an affable plainclothesman with a letter to be signed. Once the policeman appears, no matter how Tomas responds his life is ruined" (Doctorow, 1999).

Tomas faces much turbulence in his own personal life. Having divorced long ago and lost contact with his ex-wife and son, Tomas becomes a light-hearted womanizer who seems unencumbered just before meeting Tereza. After marrying the emotionally needy Tereza, Tomas finds himself trapped between the genuine love for his new selfless, loving wife, and his womanizing which he cannot give up easily. Tomas attempts to practice a philosophy of lightness. As he considers sex and love two separate and unrelated entities, thus he loves only one woman but sleeps with many women, and sees no problem with the simultaneity of these two behaviors.

In many ways, especially sexually, Tomas is "light," a libertine. Contrary to Franz or Simon, Tomas isn't a romantic idealist. Rather he acts in the opposite direction to perfect ideals of love and politics in his life; hence, his fervent lover, Sabina, who understands him well, calls him the "complete opposite of kitsch." His character bears such a unique individualism which doesn't let Tomas identify himself as a political liberal or as a faithful husband. However in an overall evaluation, Tomas's character may not reveal a profound change over the course of the novel. We see him just growing a little more cynical, as he becomes uncertain of his once firm views on life and being. His love for Tereza and eventual exile to the countryside rein in his erotic adventures, though we never know if he really loses the desire for sex with many anonymous partners since "feminine calm had eluded him all his life." Nonetheless, there is at least one significant indication, on two levels, that Tomas isn't a static character. Besides his falling in a true love with Tereza, the apparent expository sign – which can also be considered as the climax of the story – is Tomas's decision to accompany Tereza in their different life in the country which, in turn, will put an end to his philandering experiences. On a different level relevant to the same indication, it is through Tereza's dream that readers infer how Tomas has performed a drastic change in his life and career; at the end of the dream Tomas turns into a rabbit, handed over to Tereza.

Sabina is Tomas's most-desired mistress and closest friend. Jolanta W. Wawrzycka (1992) conceives that "it is the female character of Sabina who provides the context for the notion of betrayal in Kundera's novel. She is also the only character who after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia emigrates and remains in the West" (Wawrzycka, 1992). (As a talented painter, Sabina betrays, successively, her family, her art school, her lovers, and ultimately her country; for her "betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent..." (Kundera, 1984). Kundera recounts her sense of betrayal "in a way that condemns her to what he calls a "lightness of being," by which he means a life so lacking in commitment or fidelity or moral responsibility to anyone else as to be unattached to the real earth" (Doctorow, 1999). In a recent review, Geordie Williamson reaffirms that Sabina "escapes from communist Czechoslovakia to the West, only to be ground down by what is called a perpetual struggle against the unbearable banality of her situation as an émigré artist" (Williamson, 2009).

Correspondingly and according to Wawrzycka, Kundera has "inscribed himself into Sabina's character" and has tried "to explore the notion of betrayal" through a female character for a somewhat relevant reason. As Wawrzycka relates it, the answer could be found in two justifications on the basis of the significance of the term betrayal for the author. On one hand, if Kundera conceives betrayal as a negative conduct and Sabina as a symbol of "disobedience," then all this "loneliness and displacement" in her life is in conformity with "an old dramatic and novelistic convention requiring that the heroine who dared, who trespassed, who defied patriarchal codes be killed off" (Wawrzycka, 1992). Yet there is another level. On the other hand, if betrayal is taken as a positive behavior by

Kundera, then his implicit identification with Sabina gives way for a much more profound meaning: “The fact that Kundera’s two main female characters in this novel are artists in exile[...] points to his recognition that women [...] are perpetual exiles from the men’s world of wars and political conflicts which destroy, dismantle, dis/ease; they are exiles from love, such as represented in the novel by Tomas’s love for Tereza, for Sabina, and for the trail of women he “marked” as his; they are exiles from the paternal/patriarchal concept of love that basically forbids on all levels of *pater familias*” (Wawrzycka, 1992).

However, Sabina is as gorgeous and original as her artwork; early in life, she identifies kitsch, or bad, sentimental, propaganda art, and tries to live her life as an attack on kitsch, thus her relationship with Tomas is based on their mutual lightness; the usual romantic kitsch has no place in their love affair. She cares deeply for both Tomas and Tereza, but ultimately her desire for freedom leads Sabina to leave her love, Franz, and lose all contacts with her past. In this regard, her character doesn’t show great changes from the beginning to the end. Her pursuit of freedom leads her to complete isolation and freedom in America. Sabina seems also to be the “lightest” character in the novel as “it is through Sabina that lightness is shown to be a “semantic river,” that is to say, a web of associations and images and words on which is based her amorous agreement with Tomas, a complicity that Tomas cannot find again with Tereza, or Sabina with Franz” (Calvino, 2003).

Tereza is Tomas’s new wife. She grew up in a small Czech town, under a vulgar and aggressive mother. Seeking escape from that small world, Tereza worships books, culture, and compassion. Identifying Tomas as a savior, she falls in love instantly and permanently. As Banerjee relates it, “Tereza, who enters Tomas’s flat with *Anna Karenina* under her arm and a heavy suitcase soon to follow, is a young woman of no particular outward distinction” (Banerjee, 1992). Yet, Tereza represents an image of innocence and purity which is mostly depicted in the leitmotif of Tomas’s love for her: “She seemed a child to him, a child someone had put in a bulrush basket daubed with pitch and sent downstream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed” (Kundera, 1984).

Tereza and Tomas are deeply in love, but make each other miserable. In Prague, Tomas’s womanizing drives Tereza to the verge of insanity. Although she attempts to understand her husband and cannot argue with him logically, Tereza cannot expose her love, body or sexuality; instead it is through a series of recurring nightmares that she makes herself heard. Tereza is not vulgar or kitsch in any familiar sense; however, where Tomas and Sabina are light, she is heavy. This heaviness in part originates in Tereza’s compassion and intelligence. She finds some achievement in her work as a photographer, especially during the Soviet takeover of Prague; she does some dangerous and rebellious work as a photojournalist. Tereza changes considerably during the course of the novel, as she is ever more forced to recognize the impossibility of her youthful dreams. There is a great and fateful moment in Tereza’s life when she leaves Tomas in Zurich and returns to Prague alone after construing an incompatibility between herself and Tomas: “he was strong and she was weak.” Seeing that she feels as weak as her country “which stuttered, gasped for breath, could not speak,” she makes up her mind to go back to Prague as “when the strong were too weak to hurt the weak, the weak had to be strong enough to leave” (Kundera, 1984).

Franz is a literature professor at the University of Geneva. He falls in love with Sabina, whom he mistakenly considers a liberal and romantically tragic Czech nonconformist. Sabina considers both of those identities kitsch. He is agonized by the fact that he must betray his wife in order to continue his affairs with Sabina. Finally he dares to leave his wife. To Sabina this act seems an unhappy and sentimental choice. Franz creates meaning in his life by attaching solemn weight and importance to concepts and events. Thus, he identifies strongly with the political conviction and European liberal left and adores marches and parades. Franz also lives for the strong emotions of love and idolizes his dead mother. All these make him nearer to kitsch in his ideas and taste, though he is a noble, kind and compassionate man and shows a sympathetic character. However abandoned by Sabina, he finds relief in the arms of an ordinary young student who loves him. Only at the very end of his life does he suspect he may have made some erroneous judgments; this realization comes too late, however, as his idealism and naiveté lead to a pointless death in Bangkok. Franz seems incapable of lightness, as assigns the first and second violins to Tomas and Sabina in a supposed string quartet concert seeing

that they “share the same erotic timbre,” but “Franz’s part would be lower strings – a bit heavy-footed, he sustains his melodic line with grave feeling, like a cello” (Banerjee, 1992).

CONCLUSION

Contrary to what some critics believe to be interrupting and overriding, Kundera’s contemplations on the existential codes of his characters add much to the structural design of his work. At least, readers find pertinent clues for entering the consciousness of the writer through applying these codes. However, sometimes these codes overlap and most of the time they do not. The important point is that readers may sympathize with one character or other through their own spectacles. Comparing such existential codes helps readers to go into inner thoughts of the characters and this leads them to major themes and motifs of the novel. Accordingly, Kundera gives more freedom to his readers to decide on the real “self” of each character, since he asserts the vital role of the reader to experience and imagine the characters. What helps readers to arrive at a better position is the polyphonic narration of the same story. Again this specific technique gives the readers a chance to avoid current fixed clichés of a character-type. The imaginary being or experimental self of each character makes them more diverse and ambitious as they move beyond fixed frameworks for characterization.

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