



RESEARCH PAPER

Reinterpreting the Oedipus Myth: A Historiographic Metafictional Study of Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the functions of the Oedipus Article in Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in postmodern perspective particularly Linda Hutcheon's model of Historiographic Metafiction. Historiographic Metafiction is a concept introduced by Linda Hutcheon in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), which discusses the use of techniques like Intertextuality, Parody, Subversion and Pastiche by prominent postmodern writers. The significance of the overall importance of the Oedipus article has been analyzed in line with the constituents of Historiographic Metafiction like Intertextuality, Parody and Subversion and comparison has been drawn between the two works and the past and the present. The technique of Intertextuality helps Kundera incorporate the past into the present whereas parodic subversion allows the writer to challenge the Grand Narratives and revisit the past in postmodern perspective. The traits of characters in the novel impersonate the characteristics of Oedipus. The intertext of Oedipus helps Kundera develop the plot and theme of his magnum opus. Intertextuality destroys the independent nature of the novel whereas parodic subversion helps the writer maintain subjectivity and self-reflexivity. The authenticity of Czech history has been questioned and different sides of reality have been analyzed through Mini Narratives.

Keywords: Historiography, Hutcheon, Intertextuality, Kundera, Metafiction, Parody, Postmodernism, Subversion

Introduction

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, without intending any *Anxiety of Influence* pun, is Kundera (re)reading and (re)writing Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to challenge Communist history of Czech Republic? Is the presence of Oedipus in the novel, regardless of its significance in Tomas' life, a mere intertextual reference or nostalgic revisiting of the past? Does Kundera, by using postmodern self-reflexivity, show his own fall and exile through Tomas actuated by the Oedipus article?

Many esteemed researchers have discussed the significance of the Oedipus article in Kundera's novel. Hana Pichova and Marjorie E. Rhine (1997) have discussed the traces of

literary past and the similarities in Oedipus and the characters of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in their article "Reading Oedipus in Milan Kundera's "The Unbearable Lightness of Being". Pichova and Rhine identify the presence of the literary past in the novel of Kundera. The main subject of their study remains limited to studying the similarities between the two works of different ages. For them "Sophocles' play is as much about his ultimate self-deception as it is about his final self-discovery" (p.73). They show that "Oedipus constructs himself as guilty" (p. 72) through his "rash judgments" (p. 73). Pichova and Rhine limit their study to the traces of literary past only, and do not analyze the presence of Oedipus in the historical context of the 1960s Czech Republic.

Dana (2009) takes the subject of Sophocles' Oedipus from the past and Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to portray his subjective experience of living in the Socialist Romania of the eighties. In his essay, "Placing Thebes and Ithaca in Eastern Europe: Kundera, the Greeks, and I", he compares the analogies of the two literary pieces and presents the state of destructive affairs in Romania. Munteanu describes how the director of Romania Ceausescu missed all the clues about what was going on in state just like Oedipus kept missing all the clues until the final revelation about his true identity.

For Girgus (2010) the ghost of Oedipus, both in novel and film, establishes the parallel journeys of Tomas towards redemption in Levinasian paradigm and "...becomes a journey of individual transformation..." (p.143). Oedipus, along with its psychosexual paraphernalia, for Girgus, are the forces involved in the development of a Levinasian ethical individual.

Hans (2002) views Tomas and Oedipus as two characters who struggle with idea of freedom and good vs evil. For Oedipus, the total sum of a person's life is the only gauge through which it could be surmised whether a person lived for good or evil. Tomas on the other struggles with this idea time and again in the novel. Hans considers Tomas to be "more fortunate than Oedipus because he maintains fidelity and also ends up happy. Like Oedipus, he suffers greatly as a result of his fidelity to the laws of beauty, losing most of what he originally considered essential to the good life. Unlike Oedipus, the result of his sacrifice is a happy life, one beyond the imperatives he once thought should govern his choices" (p. 43).

David A. Bell (2001) uses the title of Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to write about the nationality and identity issues of French people in the time of Old Regime in his essay "The Unbearable Lightness of Being French: Law, Republicanism and National Identity at the End of the Old Regime". David studies French Revolution as a postmodern phenomenon in which he explores the paradox of history in that particular context. He invokes the essence of Kundera's novel to explore the identity issues and nationalism. Bell further uses the philosophical dichotomy of Kundera's novel to showcase identity and nationalism issues in France.

Weeks (2005) presents his article "Milan Kundera: A Modern History of Humor amid the Comedy of History" to showcase the concepts of two modern day literary giants. He analyzes the role of humor in Kundera's works which, at the same time, refers to his biographical details as well. Weeks compares the lives of Bakhtin and Kundera before analyzing different terminologies used by both the writers in their unique way. Weeks

compares Kundera with Bakhtin who had conceptualized the very concept of humor. The laughter in Bakhtinian notion works as interruptions and divergences that give rise to “a particular historical discourse” (p. 131). Kundera’s view about humor and laughter is somewhat same but it lacks optimism and does not propel any linear historical discourse. The humor in Kundera is not so much “material[istic]” or historical (p. 132).

Milan Kundera, the Czech born French writer, sets his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by parodying the historical events of the past to later question the authenticity of the historical facts through subversion. This parodic subversion allows him to put self-reflexive yet historical account in a manner indifferent from traditional historical novelists. This paper seeks to disclose the use of different postmodern strategies like multiple narration, parody, and subversion to question the authenticity of historical facts. For the said purpose, an analysis of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is conducted in line with the constituents of Hutcheon’s theory of Historiographic Metafiction.

Postmodern fiction challenges the late modernist beliefs of identity, totality and reality by using their own “imagined alternatives” (Hoffmann, 2005, p. 33). These “imagined alternatives” are used because, humans, according to Paul Goodman, “lack social imagination of alternatives to the way of life” (2011, p. 79). Fiction in 1960s confirms “both the liberating and the deconstructive drives in culture by an exuberant creation of new work, a playful and ironic attitude, and a decomposition of its own traditional logic of cohesion and integration” (Hoffmann, 2005, p. 33).

Postmodern writers have been using different strategies to rework the past. One such strategy is the use of Parody and Subversion to disband the Grand Narrative into multiple Mini Narratives. Hutcheon (1988) conceptualized these reworking tools in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* by coining the term Historiographic Metafiction. Historiographic metafiction is “a quintessentially [postmodern](#) art form, with reliance upon textual play, parody and historical re-conceptualization” (Jaggi & Deol, p. 21). “Postmodernism deliberately confuses the notion that history’s problem is verification, while fiction’s is veracity” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 112). Hutcheon’s concept is interesting because “the conventions of both fiction and historiography are simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied” as mentioned by her in her article “Historiographic Metafiction Parody and the Intertextuality of History” (1989, p. 5). It “installs” history in fiction and then blurs the boundaries of fiction and history by challenging the notion of fact. The installation of the historical events of the past and the use of multiple narration to recreate self-reflexive account of history, the paradoxical doubleness is achieved. Hutcheon claims this “doubleness” (p. 124) is achieved by taking historical discourse into account but “refusing to surrender the autonomy as fiction” (p. 124). With this, the claims of “lies and falsity” (p. 108) are replaced by “the multiplicity and dispersion of truth” (p. 108). The singularity of narrative and unity is challenged in the name of “multiplicity and disparity” (p. 90). Hutcheon suggests, “...that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (p. 110). This allows the authors to freely comment on any historical event of the past, questioning its authenticity as well as making it a self-sustainable truth.

The skepticism of postmodernism is such that it "challenges everything" (p. 209). "One of the lessons of the doubleness of postmodernism is that you cannot step outside that which you contest, that you are always implicated in the value, you choose to challenge" (p. 223). She writes that "History is not made to be absolute: it should be rethought as a human construct" (p. 16). This is not only the stance of critics but various Historiographers also have the same view. They question the writing of history as well as historical events. According to Wilde, "the one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (1997, p. 37). To do this, Hutcheon's "Historiographic metafiction's somewhat different strategy subverts, but only through irony, not through rejection" (p. xii). The use of irony helps show "discontinuity at the heart of continuity" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 11). Hutcheon analyses *The Name of the Rose*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the *French Lieutenant's Women*, as metafictional works in their historical truth and self-reflexivity. "Such self-reflexive, parodic interrogating of history has also brought about a questioning of the assumptions beneath both modernist aesthetic autonomy and unproblematic realist reference" (p. 225). Hutcheon praised various authors for the use of imaginative and innovative strategies in their works. Apart from the works mentioned above, she admired Borges and the efforts of D.M. Tomas who reworked the idea of subject-formation in his novel *The White Hotel*. According to Hutcheon, "they challenge the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness by both installing coherent subjectivity and subverting it" (1988, p.xii).

Kundera is a revisionist novelist par excellence. From *The Joke* onwards he has written one revisionist novel after the other. Where the autobiographical subtext of *The Joke* challenges Marxist Russian/Czech regime, the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* revisits Plato's *Symposium*; however, no other work matches the audacity of *Unbearable Lightness of Being* in its undertaking to challenge and revisit Czech history.

The intertextual parody of the myth of Oedipus shapes the discourse of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and "offer[s] a sense of presence of the past" (Hutcheon, p. 125). Kundera uses the intertextual links from the myth of Oedipus to, as Hutcheon puts it, "both provide[s] and undermine[s] the context" (p. 8). Tomas' Russian occupied communists Prague turns out to be a lost-state after his love affair with Tereza. This lost-state, in an attempt to dodge its fate, abandons many, including Tomas, to exile just like Oedipus was abandoned by his real parents. Tomas and Tereza went to Zurich but Tereza left Zurich for Prague and Tomas followed her. Tomas was following his fate just like Oedipus who, in an attempt run away from his fate, was dragged back by fate to Thebes. The issue of identity is evident in both the myth of Oedipus as well as in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Not only Tomas, Franz also had identity issues. He was the embodiment of Europe, his mother Vienesse, his father French and he was Swiss (Kundera, 1984, p. 101). Tomas' inspiration to write an article, mentioning Oedipus and glorifying norms of Thebes while vilifying the communists of Prague, itself an "abandoned child in bulrush basket" (p. 171), Tereza, whom he met as a result of six fortuities, same as Oedipus, by coincidence, met Laius at the crossroads on his way to Thebes. However, Kundera replaces the choral song, which foreshadows the events that follow in drama, with Beethoven's music but the purpose of both the chorus and the Beethoven looks similar in both the contexts. Had Oedipus not met Laius at the crossroads, his fate could have been different. Similarly, had Beethoven not been playing at a time when Tomas met Tereza, their love would not have "happened" (p. 35) and the events that followed could have turned up in favour of Tomas. However, just like

Oedipus, it “[was] bound to come” (Kundera, p. 172) for Tomas as the final lines of Beethoven, “Es Muss Sein (It must be!)” (p. 48), suggested. It was part of their fate which could not be escaped. Kundera also foreshadows about all these events by referring to Oedipus in the beginning of the novel:

Again it occurred to him that Tereza was a child put in a pitch-daubed bulrush basket and sent downstream. He couldn't very well let a basket with a child in it float down a stormy river! If the Pharaoh's daughter hadn't snatched the basket carrying little Moses from the waves, there would have been no Old Testament, no civilization as we now know it! How many ancient myths begin with the rescue of an abandoned child! If Polybus hadn't taken in the young Oedipus, Sophocles wouldn't have written his most beautiful tragedy!

Tomas did not realize at the time that metaphors are dangerous. Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love. (p. 10)

Tomas picked “a child in bulrush basket” (p. 171) up just like the shepherd who, out of sympathy and compassion, had taken Oedipus off from mountains to the city of Thebes. He could not let a child, with his ankles tied, die on the mountains. Had Tomas understood this metaphor, he would not have written that anti-communist article which turned him down from the position of a Chief Surgeon to a window-washer. It was the sudden arrival of Tereza in the life of Tomas that brought about the downfall of Prague. Thebes also found itself in a state of drought after the dramatic arrival of Oedipus as a result of fortuitous events. Tomas wrote his most beautiful tragedy by accepting Tereza. It seems as if communists “ha[d] chained iron balls to [Prague's] ankles” (Kundera, p. 29) where no one could write, paint, walk, and even smile as per his will. The communist-chained Prague turned down the fate of many, including scholars. Tomas is actually a representation of many writers, painters, writers and philosopher who were relieved of their positions in grueling socio-political atmosphere of Prague. “After the Russian invasion they had been relieved of their positions and became window washers, parking attendants, night watchmen, boilermen in public buildings, or at best—and usually with pull—taxi drivers” (p. 209). One must remember that Tomas was also relived off his position after accepting Tereza and writing an Oedipus inspired article. The story of Russian invaded Prague is recorded and the advantages of a nationalist communist state are elaborated by many historians. But, this “fact will go unrecorded by historians that the years following the Russian invasion were a period of funerals” (p. 226). Only those writers and artists were banned who wrote about; the reason of the death of a novelist Jan Prochazka, the reason of the death of a poet Frantisek Hrubin and the on-aired radio conversation of private individuals. And this fact should not go unrecorded that Tomas had written his article just to remind people of the high morals that Oedipus had but the ill people of communist Czech made a mountain out of a molehill. The communists kept criticizing Tomas' article despite his claims that the article had been cut “by a third” (Kundera, p. 184). The editor edited the true essence of the article by cutting it down and changing the “word order” (p. 184).

The presence of Oedipus in the novel not only provides the background or context of various events in the novel but the metaphor of “swollen feet” of Oedipus also shapes the physical features of characters in the novel. The role of fate, chance and coincidence is pretty much evident in both the myth of Oedipus and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In the novel:

Then came the time for [Tereza's mother] to marry. She had nine suitors. They all knelt round her in a circle. Standing in the middle like a princess, she did not know which one to choose: one was the handsomest, another the wittiest, the third was the richest, the fourth the most athletic, the fifth from the best family, the sixth recited verse, the seventh travelled widely, the eighth played the violin, and the ninth was the most manly. But they all knelt in the same way, they all had the same calluses on their knees (p. 41-42).

After describing their various unique features, Tereza's mother tells about the one similarity they all had; "they all had calluses on their knees" (p. 42). She married the ninth suitor, who also had "calluses on [his] knees", and Tereza was born. The way Oedipus' fate was pre-decided, Tereza was also born of a situation where her mother had no choice but to marry a man who had "calluses" (p. 42) on his knees. Oedipus bore the name "Oedipus" because of his "swollen feet" which were the result of his tied up ankles. This shows that it was Tereza's fate. Not only is this a clear reference to Tereza's Oedipus like ancestry, it is also makes clear that fate of Prague was also born like this. Kundera makes it clear by taking into account the authenticity of historical truth later in the novel, he compares two historical events in the history of Czech people. He recalls the decision of courage taken by the Czech nation in the 1618. Their decision led to the destruction of their homeland as a result of Thirty Years War that broke out. Three centuries and twenty years later the Czech nation also had to make a decision after the Munich Conference in 1938. This time they chose caution instead of courage but this led them to lose their freedom for decades as a result of the Second World War. This shows that the fate of Prague was written to be so. Whatever decision they took, it backfired them. This is how Historiographic Metafiction reunites history and fiction and questions the authenticity of historical truth.

Kundera uses irony to mark the difference at the heart of similarity. Kundera uses the technique of "parody not to destroy the past but to enshrine the past and to question it. And this is the postmodern paradox" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 6). The return to history "is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting" (p. 4). As this is not a nostalgic return, so the governing role of irony lies in creating the difference. Tomas suffered for his writing of an article in which he criticized the communists who were not ready to accept their wrongdoings. Kundera, first, uses the historical context of the state of Thebes where people felt the pang of their sufferings. They wanted to get out of that catastrophe even if it demanded death or exile of the one who committed the sin of incest and parricide, knowingly or unknowingly. Whereas in Prague of 1960s, people were not guilty even. "The accused [believed]: [They] didn't know! [They] were true believers! Deep in [their] hearts [they were] innocent!" (p. 172). Most of the writers and critics in the daily news also put up the question "Did they know or did they not?" (p. 173)

Oedipus, who had not intentionally committed any crime, plucked out his eyes just for the sake of state and self-punishment (as he had decided to punish the one for whom the plague had struck the city). Due to "not knowing" (p. 173) of Communists, "th[e] country ha[d] lost its freedom" (p. 173) just as Thebes was plagued due to "not knowing" (p. 173) of Oedipus. However, the difference lies in the feelings of guilt and acceptability. (Tomas's Oedipus article says ignorance of law is no excuse and damns the Communist regime because it uses ignorance to explain away its wrongdoings). In the novel, "It was in this connection that Tomas recalled the tale of Oedipus: Oedipus did not know he was sleeping with his own

mother, yet when he realized what had happened, he did not feel innocent. Unable to stand the sight of the misfortunes he had wrought by not knowing, he put out his eyes and wandered blind away from Thebes (p. 173)."

The article leads to a series of persuasion and secretive interrogation which engages Tomas in a situation where communists subvert the real essence of historical events to convince him. One such description is Tomas' meeting with his son, the "involuntary creation" of his physical connection. In an attempt to persuade Tomas, like other scholars, doctors, and engineers to sign the Two Thousand Words manifesto, which "called for the radical democratization of the Communist regime" (p. 208), the stage is set to showcase a famous historical event:

Tomas now glanced around the room. The walls were hung with interesting pictures, mostly photographs and posters. The drawing the editor had singled out came from one of the last issues of his paper before the Russians closed it down in 1969. It was an imitation of a famous recruitment poster from the Russian Civil War of 1918 showing a soldier, red star on his cap and extraordinarily stern look in his eyes, staring straight at you and aiming his index finger at you. The original Russian caption read: Citizen, have you joined the Red Army? It was replaced by a Czech text that read: Citizen, have you signed the Two Thousand Words? (p. 208)

Kundera refers to history and the past historical events by setting the place with various posters and photographs. In this way, he tries to create a link between the history and the position of artists in that scenario. The message is also being conveyed by Kundera through dramatic setting that surrounds Tomas. It is noteworthy, here, that Kundera refers to two of the greatest historical events that happened in the 1960s Czech. The original historical event of Russian Civil War of 1918 is first mimicked and then subverted by adding the "Two Thousand Words" manifesto. This is again an evident of questioning the past historical events. A number of intellectuals first signed it before it was signed by hundreds and thousands of other people. Anyone who claimed his signatures after the invasion of the Red Army was immediately dismissed from the job.

Historiographic Metafiction "uses and abuses the very structures and values it takes to task" (p. 106). At first, it uses historical events to create the context of the novel and then questions and challenges that context. Kundera, after choosing the Grand historical context of 1960s Prague, problematizes "the entire notion of historical knowledge" (p. 89) by reinstall[ing] historical context" (p. 89). He gives his subjective account of events to break the "master" (p. 13) narratives. The difference in pre and post-communist Prague becomes clear when Tereza's "longing for repetition" (p. 295) forces her to move to her past, a small town in Prague, with Tomas and Karenin where they had been some six years ago. Kundera believes that human "happiness is the longing for repetition" (p. 295). Tereza longs for that repetition and for her, "Nothing had changed. They stood facing the hotel they had stayed in. The same old linden trees rose up before it. Off to the left ran an old wooden colonnade culminating in a stream spouting its medicinal water into a marble bowl. People were bending over it, the same small glasses in hand. The streets were named after various famous people and leaders" (p. 161).

She loved to be there in the past she wanted to be. The same pre-soviet-invasion scenery made her happy for a moment. However, soon she realized that something is distorted. Something is not the way it used to be six years earlier. The names of streets and common places were changed after the invasion of Soviet Union. "What had once been the Grand now bore the name Baikal" (p. 161). The grand truth of history has been broken into mini subjective multiple truths. The streets in which she used to wander six years earlier were not the same streets. She went through all those streets again which were now named after the names all taken from Russian History. The streets bore names like, "Stalingrad Street, Leningrad Street, Rostov Street, Novosibirsk Street, Kiev Street, Odessa Street. There was a Tchaikovsky Sanatorium, a Tolstoy Sanatorium, a Rimsky-Korsakov Sanatorium; there was a Hotel Suvorov, a Gorky Cinema, and a Cafe Pushkin. All the names were taken from Russian geography, from Russian history" (p. 161-162).

Suddenly, it becomes impossible for Tereza to spend a night there because the image of the past, history has been distorted. The subversion of historical truth makes her sad. This is where Kundera feels for human beings. He believes; "And therein lies the whole of man's plight. Human time does not turn in a circle; it runs ahead in a straight line. That is why man cannot be happy: happiness is the longing for repetition" (p. 295). The past for Tereza was no more the past she expected. She could not get back in the cycle of time she wanted to.

The author presents the accounts of historical figures in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as well. In the beginning of Chapter 6, the reader is able to know about the reality of Stalin's death. He, then, correlates the event of Stalin's suicidal assassination with that of Franz' while he joined The Grand March in Cambodia on the request of one of his friends from Paris. Kundera creates the continuity of events and similarity in context. The reader feels till the final moment that Franz is also going to die just like Stalin. But, then, Kundera subverts the story of Stalin to create "ironic discontinuity at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 11). Instead of embracing the "electrified wire" (Kundera, 1984, p. 242) of death like Stalin, Franz went back to the buses. As far as the subversion is concerned, postmodern writers not only subvert history but the "history" itself also subverts events to hide its ugliness.

Throughout the course of the novel, Oedipus and Tomas become the two alter-egos of Kundera himself. Thebes, ravaged by the plague of murder and incest, in *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, is rewritten as Prague, desolated by Communist's plague. Even though, Tomas does not change like Oedipus, he is happy in his exile like Kundera. Thus, the novel becomes a compendium of individual histories of Tomas, Tereza, Sabina and Franz. There are no easy answers to historical questions, the only option left is to reinterpret them continuously. By not signing the petition, Tomas created for Tereza a mythical world away from the problems of the world like Lucy does for Ludvik in *The Joke*. For the exiled Kundera the only option left was to turn "Czechoslovakia of his youth into a vivid, mythical, erotic land" (Qtd in Kunes, 2019, p.63).

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