HERMENEUTICS OF VOID: A STUDY OF PARALLACTICAL MODES OF BEING IN MILAN KUNDERA'S FICTION

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Candidate of **Doctor of Philosophy** at the National University of Modern Languages do hereby declare that the thesis **Hermeneutics of Void: A Study of Parallactical Modes of Being in Milan Kundera's Fiction** submitted by me in partial fulfillment of PhD degree, is my original work, and has not been submitted or published earlier. I also solemnly declare that it shall not, in future, be submitted by me for obtaining any other degree from this or any other university or institution.

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ABSTRACT

Title: Hermeneutics of Void: A Study of Parallactical Modes of Being in Milan Kundera's Fiction

Milan Kundera's fiction transcends his spatio-temporal situatedness. He is a contemporary writer with a nostalgic yearning for the ontology of the self. He explores certain paradoxical positions that take on different meanings and contours if observed from opposite angles. The change in perspective turns binaries like the individual and political, body and soul and universal and particular into two conflicting standpoints. It is a kind of illusion to use the same language for both of these conflicting positions as these are mutually untranslatable (Zizek 4). In Kundera's fiction, we see that this tension is brought forth to explore the dimensions of the 'self' and how these dichotomies define and limit his characters' existence. The mutual untranslatability of these warring positions engenders a gap, a void at the center of human experience, and Kundera's fiction may possibly be exploited to investigate the nature of this gap. Slavoj Zizek understands this gap not as 'nothing' or 'pure void' but a positive entity – a site where the two contrary points split into two. This parallactical positioning makes these ontological modes appear as two but Zizek's radical stance attempts to demonstrate their inherent ONENESS. Zizek uses Hegelian/Marxist theoretical framework to talk about the positivity of the void and his insights are employed to analyze Kundera's fiction to explore the nature of ontological divides. This research project is a study of Kundera's fiction using Zizekian concept of parallax view to explore whether it is possible to find a common ground for the mutually untranslatable phenomena like the individual and political, body and soul, and the universal and the particular. This would open new vistas for looking into these modes of being from a radical angle and offer a critique of increased polarization between them as observed in the recent decades.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AN for Art of the Novel

TJ for The Joke

TULB for The Unbearable Lightness of Being

Immortality for Immortality

LIE for Life is Elsewhere

TPV for The Parallax View

LTN for Less Than Nothing

TPF for The Plague of Fantasies

TTS for The Ticklish Subject

ITR for Interrogating the Real

HS for History of Sexuality

DP for Discipline and Punish

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DEDICATION

To my Teachers

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence.

— Milan Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 44

Every novel, like it or not, offers some answer to the question: What is human existence, and wherein does its poetry lie?

— Milan Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 161

In his fiction, Milan Kundera deals with different modalities of 'being' and this study intends to explore the antagonism lying at the heart of these modalities. In the selected texts of Kundera, namely *The Joke, The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* and *Immortality,* the schisms between the personal and political, the body and soul, and the universal and particular are read from a parallactical perspective. After Renaissance, a cleavage was introduced at the heart of 'being' when it was split between subject and object. The conscious subject or being reflects upon the world of unconscious objects, and, a schism came to exist between them. Termed as "the cancer of the doctrine of subject-object cleavage of the world" (qtd. in May 49) by Ludwig Binswanger, this fissure further transformed 'being' or human subject into an empirico-analytical object. The outcome of such a stance was an increased tendency to consider human beings as objects to be controlled and categorized. This Enlightenment vision "- centred on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls…" (Foucault, *HS* 1:136) caused a kind of existentialist oblivion. In the 20th C, this mechanistic approach culminated in an attempt to fit individuals in grand political and social structures. The rise of Communism and Fascism in the previous century is an attestation that how an individual 'being' was envisaged as an amalgam of unchanging essence and static substances. Instead of being conceived as emerging, becoming and existing, this 'being' was transformed into an ideological cog, a bureaucratic effect of power relations. To comprehend 'being' in essentialist terms can only lead to

generalizations and abstractions. This also gives birth to another split between truth and reality—a fact can be scientifically true and yet not real.

It is not that this propensity of interpreting 'being' in pure mechanistic vein did not have its deterrents. As early as the 19th C, the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach attacked Hegelian philosophy as a system of "subordination and succession" (54) in which every successive entity engulfs its predecessor and its rigid temporality leaves no room for spatial co-existence. He asserts:

> To be sure, the last stage of development is always the totality that includes in itself the other stages, but since it itself is a definite temporal existence and hence bears the character of particularity, it cannot incorporate into itself other existences without sucking out the very marrow of their independent lives and without robbing them of the meaning which they can have only in complete freedom. (54)

It is evident that Feuerbach understands Hegelian teleological and rational philosophy as a totalitarian system that engulfs and colonizes other modes of being. Feuerbach has used the analogy of a plant to drive home his point. The flower, to him, is the temporal culmination of a plant but, in its process of development, it does not cancel the spatial outspread of leaves. The flower, more often than not, does not sit on a leafless stem. In the similar vein, the relationship of man and his historical development with nature around him is not a despotic relationship. The development of one mode of being does not, necessarily, entail the suppression of the other (55).

Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher, diagnosed this crisis of being from the perspective of human individual. He also rejected Hegelian rationality on the grounds that its absolute wholeness swallows the individual subjectivity. Such a system strives to achieve pure objectivity that not only is impossible but also undesirable. Truth cannot be objective because its roots lie in the individual and the drive towards objectivity can only transform human beings into automatons. Truth, according to Kierkegaard, is not objective but relational. He was of the view that the criterion of objective truth is founded on the principle that the non-human object is the centre and the focus should be on its relationship with the knower. His idea of subjective truth perceives this relationship from a different angle: "For objective reflection the truth becomes something objective an object, and the thing is to disregard the subject. For subjective reflection the truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the thing is precisely, in existing, to deepen

oneself in subjectivity" (161). Thus, Kierkegaard challenged the subject-object divide and based his idea of truth on subjective experience.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 19th C German philosopher, also has something to say about totalizing discourses, like that of reason, that colonize and take over the individual mode of being. It would be a misinterpretation to assert that Nietzsche was against reason in general. He took cudgels against a form of reason that was alienated from the subject. For him, philosophical reflection is not directed outside but must be a mirror to the self. And individual can give meaning to his existence only through meditation, a meditation whose centre is the individual himself or herself. This thrust towards scientific objectivity is a disease rendering man lifeless. Walter Kaufman summarizes Nietzsche's concept of being in these words:

> Man's task is simple: he should cease letting his "existence" be "a thoughtless accident" (1). Not only the use of the word Existenz, but the thought which is at stake, suggests that the third Meditation is particularly close to what is today called Existenzphilosophie. Man's fundamental problem is to achieve true "existence" instead of letting his life be no more than just another accident. (158)

This implies that being, according to Nietzsche, is not some chance event. It is something that must be controlled and planned by the individual. In a society, an individual is forced to look at himself/herself from the gaze of the other and, thus, he or she fails to realize their true being. Any outside ideal or institution that attempts to shape and reshape the being of an individual must be overthrown, as is exhorted by Nietzsche.

Perhaps the most comprehensive account on the nature of being in the modern times is that of Martin Heidegger. His book *Being and Time* is focused on the question "what we really mean by this expression "Being"?" (31). Heidegger asserts that ontology, in the western philosophical tradition, has always approached the question of being at the 'ontic' level or, in other words, treated it as an object. This, according to him, is not the right way to answer this question. Human beings are not like objects, their 'Being' or Dasein has a peculiar attribute:

> Da-sein is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its being this being is concerned about its very being. This is constitutive of the being of Da-sein to have, in its very being, a

> relation of being to this being. And this in turn means that Da-sein understands itself in its being in some way and with some explicitness. (10)

The question of being is not a question of knowing about the self or the world. We are not the subjects reflecting on the nature of the world but we are engaged in it. When we think about a tool, a hammer for example, we do not contemplate its contours and features. For us, it is something to put to some use and it is in this use that we truly know what a hammer is. In corollary to this, Heidegger rejects Descartes' division between the thinking self and the material self. When we consider our 'self' as an object of knowledge, we want to fashion it according to some pre-conceived notion. This is when our existence becomes 'unauthentic.' An authentic ontological inquiry dispenses with the dichotomy between subject and object.

Heidegger opines that human beings are born in a particular historical situation and they have no control over their gender, geography, language, nationality and other such factors. The question is can they come out of these traps and live an authentic[1] life? What form of 'being' they can have? This has also been debated by Jean Paul Sartre in his book *Being and Nothingness* when he differentiates between three kinds of 'being'; being-in-itself, being-for-itself, being-for-others. Being-in-itself is simply a being that is not conscious like animals or objects. On the other hand, he defines being-for-itself as being what it is not and not being what it is — when a person sticks to a pre-defined social identity and does not realize that he has potentialities. The most relevant of his formulations is that of 'being-for-others.' Sartre is of the view that the entity that we refer to as our 'self' does not lodge in us: "As I appear. to the Other, so I am. Moreover, since the Other is such as he appears to me and since my being depends upon the Other, the way in which I appear-that is, the moment of the development of my self-consciousness-depends on the way in which the Other appears to me" (237)

Milan Kundera, the Czech novelist, also shares this opinion that the subject-object binary has contributed to blur an immediate cognizance of 'being.' Kundera has 'being' as his idée fixe and his fiction is a cogitation on its modes and potentialities. In his Jerusalem address,[2] Kundera has pointed to the fact that the European age of Reason ventured to compartmentalize and categorize the world into quantifiable scientific data and the repercussion of this one-sided relentless pursuit of objective knowledge was what can be termed 'forgetting of the being'[3]: "By persisting in using his reason like a knife to cut open the fruit of the world, neither sensing the living ripeness nor understanding itself in the act

of penetration, man has reduced himself and the world in which he lives to pure instrumentality" (Banerjee 3). This instrumentality has inculcated this habit of the mind to look for certainties and absolutes and the contraries of existence were put aside as mere anomalies. In his book *Art of the Novel*, Kundera criticizes this performative principle that, in search of objective truth, has externalized the essence of 'being.' Science has compartmentalized knowledge and thus it has striped man off the ability to understand his 'being' as a whole. Kundera comments: "Once elevated by Descartes to "master and proprietor of nature," man has now become a mere thing to the forces (of technology, of politics, of history) that bypass him, surpass him, possess him. To those forces, man's concrete being, his "world of life" (die Lebenswelt), has neither value nor interest: it is eclipsed, forgotten from the start" (*AN* 4). 'Being,' with all its potentialities and ambiguities, was colonized by totalitarian metanarratives like 'grand march of history,'[4] class struggle, and democracy. Metanarratives are, fundamentally, symptomatic expressions of the human desire to find absolute answers to every question posed by existence. Novel is the only art form that celebrates the ambiguity and relativity of 'being' and no wonder that its emergence coincides with the advent of modern scientific and philosophical outlook. Hence, if the Age of Reason caused this 'forgetting of the being,' it also gave birth to a new form of art — novel that created new vistas to explore 'being.' The genre of novel is grounded in relativity, ambiguity, and ambivalence of existence; hence, its truth is not totalitarian and equivocal. This new genre established a dialectical relationship with other spheres of knowledge which were grounded on grand narratives of history and progress and individual's aspirations and ambitions had no place in their design. Renaissance envisaged man as master of nature but technology turned him into an object – a commodified entity. This tension between the antagonist modes of being proved to be the main focus of novel. According to Kundera, novel stages this antagonism by creating a fictional spatio-temporal setting where the possibilities of ontological freedom can be formulated and realized (*AN* 164).

I have selected Milan Kundera's works for my PhD dissertation, firstly, because of his status as an emigree writer. Thus, his works are not confined to a specific geo-political locale. Secondly, Kundera lived in Communist Czechoslovakia and later migrated to France. He experienced life under an oppressive regime where the individual mode of being was colonized by the political. On the other hand, France was a Capitalist country in which individual freedom had a completely different meaning. His novel *The Joke* was written

when Kundera was living in Communist Czechoslovakia and *Immortality* when he was settled in France. *The Bearable Lightness of Being* serves as a bridge between the two phases of his life.

1.1. The Rationale of the Study

Kundera considers his fiction as an instance of "antimodern modernism" (*AN* 140) in the sense that he rejects the technical gymnastics of the high modernism but his anti-modernism does not get translated into postmodern in which his works are situated. The form and content of his fiction do not exhibit this postmodern celebration of 'loss' and undecidability that is the hallmark of the literature written in the latter half of twentieth century. We can say that Kundera, in his fiction, is more concerned with the tension between different forms of being—personal and political, body and soul, universal and particular. Kundera's works have not been interpreted from this angle before and there is a research gap to be filled in. The point of investigation is whether Kundera sees this antagonism as inherently irreconcilable or there is a possibility for sublation into a higher entity. In this study, I intend to explore the nature of this antagonism and the possibility whether this 'nostalgia' for the lost being is authentic or not and, more importantly, whether Kundera's belief that the novel as an art form can rediscover this 'being' is justified and if so, up to what extent.

In the context of Kundera's fiction, this inherent antagonistic slant between the modes of being like the individual and political, body and soul, and universal and particular can be seen from the perspective of 'Parallax' as conceived by the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek. Zizek defines parallax as:

> …the illusion of being able to use the same language for phenomena which are mutually untranslatable and can be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible. Thus, there is no rapport between the two levels, no shared space—although they are closely connected, even identical in a way, they are, as it were, on the opposed sides of a Moebius strip. (*TPV* 4)

Parallax is an apparent displacement of an object, caused by a change in the observational position. Zizek is interested in the "parallax gap" separating two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible, linked by an "impossible short circuit" of levels that can never meet. The study is an exploration of how Kundera's presentation of different modes

of ‘being’ in his fiction reflects Zizekian parallax view and is, furthermore, focused to investigate if there is a possibility to fill this parallax gap. Zizek’s ontology, like that of Husserl, Sartre and Heidegger, is not phenomenological but founded on the concepts of ancient Greek philosophers, specifically, Parmenides. Parmenides believes in the oneness of ‘being’ and for him the division between the subject and object or two contrary modes of existence is fallacious:

> The true being is the ‘One’, which is infinite and indivisible. It is not, as in Heraclitus, a union of opposites, since there are no opposites. He apparently thought, for instance, that ‘cold’ mean only ‘not hot’, and ‘dark’ means only ‘not light.’ ‘The One’ is not conceived by Parmenides as we conceive God; he seems to think of it as material and extended, for he speaks of it as a sphere. But it cannot be divided, because the whole of it is present everywhere. (Russell 66)

Zizek’s ontology conceives One in materialistic terms and, unlike Parmenides, he does discern a split in it. Throughout my study, I have capitalized ONE as to distinguish it from its other uses.

As far as the use of the term ‘hermeneutics’ in my title is concerned, “In its most basic sense hermeneutics refers to the many ways in which we may theorize about the nature of human interpretation, whether that means understanding books, works of art, architecture, verbal communication, or even nonverbal bodily gestures” (Porter and Robinson 1). The basic purpose of hermeneutics was to establish an authentic method to lessen the arbitrariness of the interpretation. Though the history of the field can be traced back to antiquity, its purview and rudimentary principles were first theorized in Renaissance. “Renaissance formulated theological hermeneutics (hermeneutica sacra) and philosophical hermeneutics (hermeneutica profana), as well as ·juridical hermeneutics (hermeneutica juris)” (Grondin 1). I would like to disclaim here that I have used the term ‘Hermeneutics’ to designate the interpretative nature of my argument and it simply refers to interpretation of void; it does not, in any way, point to the field of Hermeneutics.

Milan Kundera belongs to Czechoslovakia and as his earlier novels are set in his native country, it would be useful to situate his texts in the history of his country. For this, I present here a short history of Czechoslovakia and the literary backdrop in which Kundera’s novels are to be read.

1.2 Locating Milan Kundera's Fiction: History, Politics and European Novel

In order to locate my primary texts, I put forward my argument in two sub-sections. In section I, I briefly look into the history and politics of Czechoslovakia spanning over the period in which these texts were written. The selected works have a strong politico-historical slant and it is in order that the readers of this thesis should be familiar with the history of the country in which these novels are set. In part II, I discuss the literary history, specifically pertaining to fiction, that provides with the background of Milan Kundera's fiction.

1.2.1 Czechoslovakia – Political History

Maria Dowling, in her book comments upon the political situation in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War with a special focus on the rise of Communist Party. In 1945, President Benes returned to Prague with a heightened consciousness of the political jam his country was in. Relations between Czechs and Slovaks and the position of the minorities were the issue at hand that demanded a subtle and diplomatic handling. The Communists had read the script well and they were determined to manipulate this political uncertainty in their favour. The ministries of information, education, social welfare, agriculture and Interior were occupied by the Communists which means they were practically in control of everything. From 25 January 1946 onwards, the government decided to deport German minority and in next few months almost 800,000 Germans were shifted. Most of these Germans were rural citizens and owned agricultural land. The Communists exploited this opportunity by re-distributing the land amongst the local farmers and thus they gained peasant support. Round about six million acres of confiscated land was reallocated and the fact that the ministry of agriculture was controlled by Communists helped their cause (82). Maria Dowling states:

> After the liberation they set about what Josef Korbel has correctly called 'the Communist subversion of Czechoslovakia'. They demanded and organized the formation of working-class mass movements, and over-all trade union organization, factory councils and a worker's militia. The last was dissolved in 1946, but secretly reactivated and rearmed by the Communists for the coup of 1948. All these organizations were swiftly infiltrated by the Party. (82)

William Mahoney is of the view that May 1946 elections were reasonably fair and The Communist Party had a marginal victory acquiring 38.12 per cent of the votes. Under the leadership of Gottwald, Communists were able to bag nine key positions in the government. The Communist party extended its influence in the months to come. The significant member of Czechoslovakia Communist Party like Gottwald, Clementis, Zapotocky and Slansky were adherent to Stalinist[5] form of government and his policies. In Feb1948, the Communists mobilized the party workers and trade unionists in their support and about a quarter of a million people protested in Prague (199). Mahoney avers:

> On February 21, a quarter of a million people gathered in Prague's Old Town Square at the behest of the Communists, who continued to look to the trade unions and mass organizations for political support and possible mobilization as a militia. Prime minister and KSC˘ leader Gottwald called upon Benes˘ to accept the resignations and allow Gottwald to form a new government that would include Masaryk, but otherwise reflect stronger Communist influence. (200)

The Communist Party purged the government of all democrats. President Benes was rendered ineffective and the student's protest of 24th February was brutally crushed. On 25th February, Gottwald announced the new government from a balcony in Wenceslas Square. There seemed to have no hope left for democracy (Mahoney 201).

Jan Masaryk, who was the foreign minister, "sprang from the window of his room into the courtyard below. There his body was found some hours later by the guards" (Powell 338). Many quarters expressed this apprehension that it was not suicide. On June 7, 1948, President Benes resigned from presidency on account of bad health and on 14 September, he died. He was the last democratically elected president until December 1989 (Dowling 109). After that the Communists, through a series of legislations, put an end to democratic and civic freedom in the country. The Communists tried many democrats on fabricated charges and one example was Milada Horakova. She was tried and hanged in 1950 on charges of treason. Many others also suffered her fate. In 1949, in the name of class warfare, 10,000 people were arrested and were sent to forced labour mostly in mines at Jachymor and Pribram:

> Repression was most pervasive during the "Stalinist" era which began late in 1948 and lasted into the 1960s. This period was characterized by Soviet-inspired witch-hunts for suspected enemies of socialism, the importation of Soviet political and

> economic ideas and practices, and the mobilization of society for the rapid construction of socialism. (Evanson 1)

Maria Dowling also discusses the communist onslaught on clergy and the Church. The Party first kept on appearances by putting forward the idea of religious freedom but soon it proved to be just a façade:

> Church and State were in conflict over four main issues. The government demanded that the clergy take an oath of loyalty to the Communist regime, and that hierarchy withdraw its prohibition on clergy taking political office. For its part, the Church wanted the freedom of Catholic schools, associations and the press to be restored, and demanded compensation for property it had lost through nationalization and land reforms. (113)

Through 'Catholic Action' the communists tried to divide the lower clergy from the Bishops. Moreover, they put this restriction that any order from the top Catholic hierarchy must first be read and approved by the Party[6] before it is delivered to the local clergy. The priests who defied these laws were imprisoned and fined. New legislation made clergy the paid govt servants (Dowling 114).

After invalidating opposition, the Communists turned to each other. Following Soviet Union, many trials were held against fellow Communists on various charges. "The most spectacular of these was the trial of KSC first secretary Rudolf Slansky and thirteen other prominent Communist personalities in November and December 1952. Slansky was executed and many others were sentenced to death or to forced labour in prison camps" (Gawdiak 58).

In 1968, there was a shuffle in the top hierarchy of the Party and Novotny was replaced by Alexander Dubcek as first secretary. "Slovak politician Alexander Dubcek was the greatest rival of Novotny, maintaining loyalty to the Soviet Union but favoring reformed socialism through democratization and economic reform" (Stoneman 104). "Prague Spring" is the name given to the resultant political and economic reforms because of these changes. There was this feeling that economy needs an over-haul and must be accompanied by political reforms. Under Novotny, the economy had been consistently declining. Ota Sik, a professor of Economics, proposed decentralization of economy with least government intervention. His proposition was based upon the idea that there is room for private enterprises even in socialist economy. When he presented these reforms in 1962,

these fell on deaf ear as Novotny's government was reluctant to diverge from Stalinism. By 1967, the economic plight became so alarming that the party adopted Sik's formula (Korda and Moravcik 54). On the other hand, political reforms included the principle that government and society should be run by experts and not just by Party's functionaries. The role of the Party should not be considered absolute rather it should be put under critical scrutiny. There were some other notable incidents from socio-cultural sphere like Writer's union and student's protest. These also contributed to bring about Prague Spring.

Novotny was forced to resign as first secretary in January 1968 and from presidency in March. General Ludvik Svoboda became the new president. Despite the early endorsement of Czech reforms, Soviet soon became suspicious and started showing concern that anti-socialist elements in Prague were getting more powerful. No doubt, the atmosphere was changing. After Dubcek became the Party Secretary, he introduced many new reforms and tried to give the Party a human face (Stoneman 104).

> Externally, Dubcek proposed opening relations with Western powers and other nations of the Soviet bloc, opened trade routes, allowed private enterprise, and proposed a ten-year transition democratized socialism that would allow multiparty elections.16 Arguably the most significant reform of the Action Program, however, was the reestablishment of personal liberties to the people of Czechoslovakia. (Stoneman 104)

After the censorship was lifted, there was this demand that the people who were wrongfully persecuted under communist rule must be rehabilitated. The number of such people was as high as 62,000. On 6 April, a new government body was formed with Oldrich Cernik as prime minister, Ota Sik and Gustar Husak as deputy premiers and Josef Pavel as minister of the Interior. Under the new set up, many political, social and economic reforms were introduced (Dowling 107).

Dowling states that all these reforms, dubbed as "Prague Spring," caused a stir in the Warsaw Pact[7] countries. These socialist countries had the fear that Dubcek government was losing its grip on the situation and the Party might lose power. On 15 July, the Warsaw Pact leaders dispatched a letter to Dubcek which contained strong criticism of the reforms and a demand that these reforms must immediately be halted. Dubcek made a speech to the nation to get the public on his back and thus sent a moderate though unflinching reply to the Warsaw Pact countries. At the end of July, there were negotiations between

Czechoslovakia and Soviet leaders in the town Cierna nad Tisou and, apparently, there was an accord. But deep down a storm was brewing. Many of the old guard communists like Drahomir Kolder, Alois Indra, Milos Jakes and Vasil Bilak did not approve of the Prague Spring and plotted to overthrow the government with the help of Soviet military invasion. On 21 August 1968, Soviet army accompanied by soldiers from other Warsaw Pact countries invaded Czech Republic. The leaders of the Communist Party were kidnapped and taken to Moscow. In the days to come, they were psychologically tortured and coerced to sign the document that would officially put "Prague Spring" to death (Dowling 119).

Under the pressure of Soviet Union, all reforms of the Prague Spring were rolled back and the freedom of any sort was curtailed. There were some demonstrations and riots but those were curbed using brute force. The following two decades were called the period of 'normalization' in which the Czech society had to go through strict regulations and censorship to deal with any dissent. Many intellectuals and other celebrities left the country to escape persecution and censorship and Milan Kundera was one of them. Dowling notes:

> "Many intellectuals as well as ordinary citizens chose the option of emigration; 170,000 had fled the country by 1971, a figure that would rise to 244,000 by the time of the velvet revolution in November 1989. Among the more eminent exiles were the writers Josef Skvorecky and Milan Kundera and the film director Milos Forman" (127).

Milan Kundera settled in France in 1975 but all of his landmark novels are set in his native country. One of my primary texts, *Immortality*, is set in France and it deals with Kundera's world view after the end of the historical period that proved to be formative for his vision as a writer. Kundera associates himself with a certain philosophy of fiction writing that he believes, in the true sense, is not only the study of 'being' but also captures the spirit of the genre of novel. This philosophy is the hallmark of many European novelists and can be found in the writings of such early writers as Cervantes and Fielding too. After locating Kundera in the history of his country, it is convenient to situate his work within this tradition. I have done this in the next section.

1.2.2 Milan Kundera and Czech Literary Tradition

Modern Czech literature originated in Franz Kafka who, "created an absurd fiction which progressed into an absurd reality in post-war Czechoslovakia" (Kunes 237). Kafka seems to have set the stage for the coming writers of fiction in Czechoslovakia as we see

that there is a close relationship between fiction and history in the works of many of his successors. For a long time, Kafka's remained obscure and no serious attention was paid to his contribution to Czech literature. In 1948, after communist party came to power in Czechoslovakia, he was branded as a writer of 'bourgeois' degeneration and thus excluded from the official history. This was something that Kafka had already anticipated and, in his works, he clearly depicts such a society that was based upon humourless bureaucratic control. Apparently, Kafka's works are more psychological and existentialist than political but can they be placed outside their spatio-temporal setting? The sinister and dark atmosphere that is so characteristic of his fiction is the outcome of his own situatedness and is to be understood in that backdrop. Roger Garaudy comments:

> Kafka is not a revolutionary. He awakens in people the consciousness of their alienation; his work, in making it conscious, makes repression all the more intolerable, but he does not call us to battle nor draw any perspective. He raises the curtains on a drama, without seeing its solution. With all his might he hates the apparatus of repression and the deception that says its power is God-given. (109)

Through minimalist description and without drawing any inference, Kafka makes his readers see the absurdity and oppression of political regimes and how the soul of individuals is crushed under the burden of grand narratives.

Jaroslav Hašek, a contemporary of Kafka, also depicts a world where bureaucratic control has replaced all other forms of human values. The only difference is that Hasek uses humour and absurdity to drive home his point. His novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, tells a number of farcical incidents during World War I in which we see how army is not an institution related with valour and bravery but an oppressive administration. In Kafka, the stupidity and idiocy of the human situation under such bureaucratic regimes is elevated to a metaphysical level and its absurdity is clad in a sinister cloak. By contrast, in Hasek, this absurdity is fully brought to the fore through humour. Svejk, the soldier, does not counter the official narrative by bitterness but by getting himself immersed in it. He does not believe in it because it is based upon any reason, he follows it because it is totally irrational and demands an illogical response. Comparing Kafka and Hasek, Peter Steiner comments: "…these two Prague authors...described two human types that at first glance seem far apart and contradictory, but which in reality complement each other" (26).

Another important novelist whose works may be placed in the same shelf as that of Kundera, is the Austrian Robert Musil. Though unfinished, his novel *The Man Without Qualities*, is considered a significant contribution to the Modernist literature. Just like Kundera, his fiction is also philosophical. "Robert Musil was not a professional philosopher. He was a novelist - and according to the widely accepted canon, his contribution to the twentieth-century novel is only matched by very few" (Nanay 3). He philosophizes in his fiction but, unlike Kundera, he does not do it directly. He would reveal his philosophical leanings through his characters: "Musil does not give us explicit philosophical theories. He simply shows us characters in various situations. But if we manage to put together these situations in the right way, we encounter philosophical ideas as clearly" (Nanay 4). This indicates that for Musil, novel is not just a tool to convey his philosophical ideas. He integrates both content and form to create an intellectual and aesthetic tour de force.

Witold Gambrowicz, a Polish avant-garde writer, is known for his ironical and paradoxical distancing. The most significant aspect of his works is a profound psychological insight and his apolitical stance towards many matters. Though he does analyze the class difference and social disparities but his tone is always ironical and he never advocates the erasure of individual essence in favour of the collective interests. He writes in his *Diary*:

> … the individualistic philosophy we have known up to now has done itself in and that the greatest disillusionment that awaits mankind in the near future is the bankruptcy of collectivist philosophy, which conceives of the individual as a function of the masses but really subordinates it to such abstractions as social class, state, nation, and race. (43)

Novelists, as we see in this case too, more often than not, are wary of the grand narratives that define and limit the individual development. This trend is dominant in most of the Eastern European writers of 20th Century, perhaps, reason being that this century saw too many totalitarian regimes demanding the sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the political.

Hermann Broch, the Austrian novelist is another significant Modernist writer whose works explore the rift between the personal and political. In 1938, he was arrested by the Nazis for being a Jew but later he managed to get out of Germany and moved to United

States. This experience proved formative and enlightening and made him realize the importance of individual resistance against the totalitarian regimes. Broch has this belief that in the time of political chaos, writing literature is a kind of luxury and amounts to escapism. Nevertheless, he did write literature though he was very careful in choosing his subject matter. He took up the conflict between the individual aesthetic expression vs a totalitarian political aspiration in his novel *The Death of Virgil*. The novel deals with the last days of the classical Roman poet Virgil who has this apprehension that his great epic poem *Aeneid* would be used by Augustus to justify his totalitarian regime. The historical setting is basically a device to draw attention to the current political persecution going on in Hitler's Germany. Kathleen L. Komar comments:

> What is of interest here from the point-of-view of the politics of subject matter is Broch's depiction of Vergil as an "ethical" or moral poet par excellence, his focus on the desire of Vergil to burn his greatest poetic work when he finds it essentially false, and finally the triumph of Augustus in salvaging the Aeneid for his own purposes of political propaganda. (Komar 53)

The argument presented is that a poet does not just have an aesthetic function to perform, he should also think about the social and moral implications of his work. The irony is that Augustus threatens Virgil and he delivers the manuscript to him and that was used by Augustus for political propaganda. Hence, we see that political conscience of the individual is presented as having ambivalent quality, as it was also evident in case of Broch himself.

Vaclav Havel, though a dramatist, is another revolutionary responsible for awakening political consciousness in Czechoslovakia. His writings emphasize, "the ability of seemingly impotent individuals to transform their societies through assuming responsibility for their humanity and living in truth" (Carey 200). His play *The Garden Party*, written in the absurdist vein, explores, just like Kafka, the hopelessness of individual before a bureaucratic system. The life in a rigid bureaucratic social system turns every aspect of being meaningless and absurd. The individuals try to search the meaning of their being but fail. The principal character Hugo Pludek makes a speech towards the end of the play that reveals the absurdity of existence in the most poignant manner:

> ... we are all a little bit all the time and all the time we are not a little bit; some of us are more and some of us are more not; some only are, some are only, and some only are not; so that none of us entirely is and at the same time each one of us is not

> entirely;... I don't know whether you want more to be or not to be, and when you want to be or not to be; but I know I want to be all the time and that's why all the time I must a little bit not-be. (74-75)

His play *The Memorandum* also traces the schism between the authoritative social structure, including language, and how individuals break in trying to cope with them. In *Mistake*, a play set in prison, "foregrounds the human tendency — regardless of political system — toward totalitarianism, not only politically but privately as well" (Carrey 206). The play reveals how human beings internalize the oppressive systems and whenever they find chance, they would enact the similar subsystems. In the play, the prisoners, who are already victims of an oppressive judicial system, establish a similar repressive hierarchy to persecute the weaker. There is an indication that the desire to control and subjugate those who are weaker than ourselves is something that is part of human psyche.

This is how the novels of Kundera (selected for this project) participate in the novel writing tradition that is so characteristic of Eastern Europe. The split between different modes of being that we find in Kundera's fiction are, in fact, a product of socio-political landscape in which these works might be located. The literary landscape of the region stand witness to the historical and political changes that constituted its social structure. We find that the existentialist antagonisms have introduced a certain playfulness and irony in the works of these writers. Milan Kundera's fiction is also an outcome of this tradition.

1.3 Situatedness of the Researcher

Milan Kundera, the Eastern European, or more specifically the European, as he prefers to be labelled, lived and wrote in a singular socio-historic setting and his works are situated in that mise en scène. The history of Czechoslovakia, its cultural heritage, geography and above all the political upheavals, First and Second World Wars, the rise of Communism, Prague Spring, provide the backdrop and stimulus for Kundera's literary oeuvre. How can I, a researcher hailing from an entirely different spatio-temporal milieu, state my relevance with this research? It would be redundant if I, in this age of postmodern 'differand,' assert the universality of literature and art. Notwithstanding, there may still be made a case in favour of my selection of primary texts. My primary focus in this research is the study of modes of being and their mutual antagonism. Though the texts selected were not written in the context of our society, we do experience the same antagonisms and adherence to one or the other has a bearing on our existential itinerary. Our social

'episteme' is evolved in such a way that we tend to be polarized in our social behaviour. Milan Kundera, in his fiction, disapproves of this one-sidedness. I find his works relevant because his exploration of ontological indeterminacy may also counter the partisanship that has plagued our society. This one-sidedness became more pronounced after 9/11, as we found ourselves caught in the crossfire of War on Terror. The religious division, which had been simmering beneath the surface prior to 9/11, came to a full boil after it. This, in turn, brought forth political and economic instability and our society is still struggling to evade this causal nexus. The angle, provided by my research to look at ontological field, might be helpful to reconceive our existentialist choices.

1.4 Delimitation

Kundera is a prolific writer and, apart from writing fiction, he also comments upon narratological issues and debates. I have delimited my research to three of his novels, *The Joke* (Definitive Version), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim), *Immortality* (Translated from the Czech by Peter Kussi). Firstly, this selection is itself parallactical in the sense that if *The Joke* is the most political of Kundera's novels while *Immortality* is the least, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* serves as a kind of gap that separates the two. Secondly, these three texts stage the tension between ontological antagonisms in the most emphatic and pronounced manner. Moreover, even though these three texts focus on various contestations, this research is delimited to three of these, the individual and political, body and soul, and universal and particular.

1.5 Thesis Statement and Research Questions

In view of the research questions (listed below), the thesis statement of my dissertation is: *Ontological situatedness of a human subject manifests itself in disparate forms like one's instinctual/biological self's existentialist concerns and aspirations are often at variance with the proviso of one's political actuality. Likewise, the body has a certain spatio-temporal locale that consistently yearns to transcend this materiality and the dialectic of a universal principle and its particular manifestations consistently shape and reshape the ontological dimensions. In the fiction of Milan Kundera, the paradoxical representation of these three ontological antagonisms---the individual and political, body and soul and universal and particular---causes a 'parallax gap' which might not be a 'pure nothing' but an explorably positive ontological category in itself.* The thesis statement addresses some of the central issues that I intend to explore in this research and the lens

applied to read my primary texts. In view of the thesis statement, I have studied my selected texts to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How does Kundera highlight apparently irreconcilable gaps lying at the core of human existence in his novels *The Joke, The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Immortality*?
2. What is the ontology of these gaps? How can their 'nothingness' be interpreted to have a positive content?
3. Is there any possibility for the sublation of these gaps? In what ways can this possibility be realized?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in the sense that it makes parallactical reading of modes of being in Milan Kundera's fiction. Though there are a lot of works available on Kundera's fiction, his works have never been studied from the perspective of antagonistic modes of being. Moreover, it is not just the study of these modes but how their antagonism is parallactical in nature. This study explores how characters in Kundera's fiction are caught between these antagonisms and how their association with one or the other affects their being. This dissertation critically analyses the ontological situatedness of the characters and their attempt to escape their facticity. Moreover, this project is located in the field of existentialism, psychoanalysis, politics and philosophy. Kundera's characters are born in a specific politico-historical setting and this setting affects their psychological make up. Their life choices are influenced by this psychology and in turn transform their being. Western literature, since the time of Greeks, has the tradition of staging the antagonism between different modes of being. We can discern this in the agonizing search for personal truth on one hand and concern for state on the other in *Oedipus Rex*. The same conflict between the individual will and the authority of the state is brought forth in Sophocles' *Antigone*. With the advent of novel in the 17th C, literary presentation of this conflict grew more complex and nuanced. The 19th C European novel has explored the antagonistic modes of being in all forms and manifestations. If philosophy and science have subjected 'being' to the grand narratives of history and reason, the novel has, somehow, rescued it from this hostile takeover. The novel has done that by refusing to acquiesce to the absolutes and extremities:

> What do novels teach us? What truths can they tell us at a time when so many of us no longer believe in absolute truths and one image of life that fits all? Friedrich Nietzsche's truths, and to some extent Franz Kafka's and Fyodor Dostoevsky's as well, are indeed communicated more directly than those of Leo Tolstoy and Anthony Trollope, but even they are rarely final and universal. (Just, "Poetic" 176)

Kundera's narrative style is peculiar in the sense that in his fiction we hardly find any pre-conceived ideas or theories. His tone is conversational and he consistently poses questions to his readers. He would look at both sides of the question and, more often than not, leave it unanswered. This undecidability is a practical manifestation of his avowed claims regarding the function of the novel. The "spirit of questioning, answering, and then problematizing the answer" (Just "Poetics" 180) is what the novel is all about. As a research, Kundera appeals to me because for him no character or situation in his fiction is a finished product. He incessantly questions a character's point of view and behaviour and them problematizes it by contrasting it with the point of view of some other character. Through this technique, he not only reveals the inherent contradictions lying at the heart of 'being' but also reaffirms his belief regarding the relativistic nature of the novel. Through the process of reading, the reader discovers this on his/her own that his/her relationship with the text is also not absolute. The act of reading is not about finding the 'Truth' with capital 'T.' It is about coming to terms with the contraries lying at the heart of our existence.

The claim of universality and inclusiveness, as we have observed in our culture as well, has rendered 'being' monolithic and unbending. The cultural, national and religious narratives are so constituted that the contrary modes of being hardly find any space to realize themselves. Human experience is defined by antagonistic existentialist codes. These codes help us define the meaning of our existence. The point is that these codes are not fixed or unchanging. They are fluid, as is life. We should learn not to stick to one code and reject the other. In our culture, the ideological apparatuses, literature included, dish out a fossilized and archaic world view. An exploration of the contrary modes of being, both at the creative and critical level, may help us see the fluidity and unfixity lying at the heart of 'being.' I believe that a research like this may pique the interest of the future researchers to explore the contraries of being in other literary works.

Notes

[1]. Martin Heidegger and other existentialist philosophers use ‘authenticity’ in a specific context. For them, an authentic existence is one in which we do not live our lives by choices made by others or under the external pressure of society or other forces. An authentic existence is that which is based upon an individual’s own choices.

[2]. The Jerusalem address is included in his book *Art of the Novel* as an essay titled Jerusalem Address: The Novel and Europe.

[3]. The term is originally used by Martin Heidegger in his book *Being and Time*. Often it is translated as ‘forgetfulness of being’.

[4]. German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is of the view that human history is linear and every age is an improvement upon the previous one. Moreover, history of the world is ‘teleological’ — it is moving towards a particular goal. He elaborated on this idea in his book *Philosophy of History*. He comments: “The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom” (33). Hence, the purpose of history is the conscious of freedom and this can be actualized through the concept of a rational state. Communism and related political systems took their inspiration from Hegel. These believe that the state is rational and freedom lies in one’s submission to its dictates and regulations. Communist countries enacted a very powerful theory and practice based on this ‘long march of history.

[5]. Joseph Stalin was the Communist leader of USSR at that time. He came into power after the death of Lenin and ruled Russia with an iron fist. All the Communist countries, which were part of the Russian bloc, had to follow his economic and political policies. Czechoslovakia was one such country.

[6]. I have used the word Party with capital ‘P’ across my thesis to refer to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

[7]. Warsaw Pact, formally Warsaw Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, (May 14, 1955–July 1, 1991) treaty establishing a mutual-defense organization (Warsaw Treaty Organization) composed originally of the Soviet Union and Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. (Albania withdrew in 1968, and East Germany did so in 1990.) The treaty (which was renewed on April 26, 1985) provided for a unified military command and for the maintenance of Soviet

military units on the territories of the other participating states". For details see, Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Warsaw Pact" 23 May 2019. 2 June 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Warsaw-Pact>.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

A vast array of scholarship is available on the works of Milan Kundera and a critical survey of some of these assorted works would be useful in order to find out points of interaction with my project. There is also the likelihood of bringing forth gaps in the existing scholarship. As my project includes studying Milan Kundera's works from three major angles, the personal and political, the body and soul, and universal and particular, hence, the sources for review range from a critical survey of the relationship between subjectivity and power, philosophical formulation of the soul-body duality, an introduction to the concept of universal and particular as it exists in the Western thought and a review of critical readings of Kundera's oeuvre. This chapter has three major parts — Introduction, Review of Scholarship and Conclusion. As this literature review is thematic in nature, I have divided it into four sub sections in keeping with the themes discussed.

2.2 Literature Review

In order to keep thematic clarity, I have divided literature review into four sections so that my progression may have coherence and lucidity. The objective of this review is to contextualize my research and find research gaps. I have reviewed books and articles that fall into following four categories:

I. A history of the practice and theory of the technologies of the self. I have, in this section, primarily, focused on the three volumes of *History of Sexuality* by French philosopher Michel Foucault.

II. A survey of the opinions held by some notable philosophers on the issue of existence of soul and its relationship with the body.

III. A critical overview of the distinction between the universals and particulars as it stands in Western philosophical tradition.

IV. A review of some critical interpretations of Kundera's works. The works are selected pertaining to their relevance with my project.

2.2.1 Subjectivity and Power

In his three volumes of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault traces the patterns of power and its relation to the self in different historical epochs. Though his focus is on sexuality and sexual behaviours yet the linkage between the formation of subjectivity and power is evident. As I intend to establish the connection between the political ideologies and individual desire, it would be relevant to have a look at Foucault's exposition. The first volume of *History of Sexuality* deals with the Greek culture of 5th C B.C, the second with the Roman period and third with the Victorian period. Foucault demonstrates, in relation to sexual practices and philosophy, that how the idea of the self was an ontological question in the classical period but after Renaissance and especially in the Victorian period it became more of an epistemological problem. The study provides some brilliant insights regarding the formation of self in the framework of power and ideology and though the emphasis on self and its care seem to belong to the private domain but how it was dialectically linked with political structures. As my concern here is more with the relation between the political and individual, I would delimit my analysis of Foucault's work to this particular problem and would examine just those parts of the works that specifically deal with the question of subjectivity.

In *History of Sexuality Vol 2: The Use of Pleasure* (1992), Foucault analyses the forms of subjectivity found in the Greek civilization. At the onset, Foucault makes it clear that the mode of subjection is basically the way an individual perceives himself in relation to the injunctions of the social order and why and how he thinks it to be his duty to put them in practice. One may follow a specific rule or regulation because it is inscribed in the social practices and being a member of a group, one finds it one's obligation to follow it. Spiritual tradition and the realization that one is heir to it can also make one practice certain social directives. But "one can also practice fidelity in response to an appeal, by offering oneself as an example, or by seeking to give one's personal life a form that answers to criteria of brilliance, beauty, nobility, or perfection" (Foucault, *HS* 2:27) and this last statement more or less describes the Greek attitude towards the self. The volume 1 of the *History of Sexuality* deals with the evaluation and description of this statement and its nuances.

The purpose of every philosophy of the self is always to prescribe certain limits and define boundaries for social conduct of an individual. This is the reason that the conception and formation of the self has a strong connection with an ethical framework. We may say that the formation of a 'subject' is basically the formation of an 'ethical subject' and it is a process in which: "…the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself" (Foucault, *HS* 2:28). There cannot be a moral action without moral conduct and no moral conduct without a moral action. Following this line of thought, we can say that, for Greeks, the formation of the subject was based upon a certain idea of the self that has a mastery over his own will. Greeks were aware of the fact, though Freud theorized it a long time after, that by nature human beings are slaves to their instinctual desires, and if left unchecked, they may follow these desires to the detriment of their own self. This instinctual self must be channelized and controlled and a certain regimen and discipline is needed for this purpose. Foucault states: "The accent was placed on the relationship with the self that enabled a person to keep from being carried away by the appetites and pleasures, to maintain a mastery and superiority over them…" (*HS* 2:31). The same idea is expressed by Plato in *The Republic* when he divides the human self into two parts, the better and the worse and asserts that if the better part is in control, then we can say that this person is the master of himself and if his worse part is dominant then it means that the said person is weaker than himself. This master-slave relationship between the two split selves of a single individual is the foundation of Greek subjectivity. The idea of the ethical subject in this case does not appeal to some exterior supernatural agency or the concept of salvation rather it is founded on one's relationship with one's self. Foucault observes:

> In other words, to form oneself as a virtuous and moderate subject in the use he makes of pleasures, the individual has to construct a relationship with the self that is of the "domination-submission," "command-obedience," "mastery-docility" type (and not, as will be the case in Christian spirituality, a relationship of the "elucidation-renunciation," "decipherment-purification" type). (*HS* 2:70)

Here a question can be raised about the purpose of all this rigorous control and abstention. What was its social significance, or to be more precise, if this was the idea of the subject then

on which moral and ethical principle it was based upon? The answer to this question lies in Greek idea of the ‘polis’ and the role of the individual in it. For Greeks, the individuals who have to perform a political role in the polis were supposed to be the very incarnation of virtue and moral ideals as they cannot inspire their subjects if they do not abide by these principles themselves. If an individual cannot control his own self then how can he command others and demand that they should practice restraint and abstention? Here we see how Foucault has linked the idea of the self with the exercise of power and social role. Foucault is of the view that care of the self was a precondition for anyone who aspired to rule others. It was believed that a person who was ignorant of himself, could never exhort and lead others. Such a person was not only supposed to take care of his soul but also of his body. He had to join the gymnasium and exercise daily, practice hunting and warfare. The Greek form of democracy consisted of a body of free male citizens who would actively take part in the affairs of the state and as these citizens were responsible for the fate of the city, so their individual choices had collective repercussions. Each individual was to put himself under a rigorous discipline in relation with his body and soul. Freedom and justice were the two qualities that were admired and it was understood that both are basically linked with a certain balance. This balance is social as well as individual. A society cannot survive without having the concept of justice and freedom and same is the case with an individual and his relationship with himself.

For Greeks, moral value did not depend upon being in conformity with an external code of behaviour rather it was related with the use of pleasure. How one manages and regulates one’s life according to a particular principle of pleasure, its hierarchies and values: “The principle according to which this activity was meant to be regulated, the "mode of subjection," was not defined by a universal legislation determining permitted and forbidden acts; but rather by a savoir-faire, an art that prescribed the modalities of a use that depended on different variables (need, time, status)” (Foucault, *HS* 2:91). The idea of moderation on which this concept of the self was based, extended to all spheres of human activity especially to diet and health. Foucault quotes the example of Nicocles to demonstrate the relationship between moderation and power. As a king, Nicocles set this principle for himself that when it comes to government, one should govern oneself more strictly than one’s people. If a king is a slave to desire then he can never be a just king for others. He was of the view that a king must serve as a model for the people so that his conduct might become a kind of general principle:

> Thus, the prince's moderation, tested in the most hazardous of situations, and ensured by the continuous exercise of reason, serves as the basis of a sort of compact between the ruler and the ruled: the latter can obey him, seeing that he is master of himself. One can demand the subjects' obedience, since itis warranted by the prince's virtue. (Foucault, *HS* 2:74)

This is how Nicocles invoked reason and logic to exhort his people that they should follow and obey him as he was a person who was a master of himself. The austerity of the king was one of the components of political structure.

The concept of sin and Fall that Christianity associated with sexual pleasures was unknown to Greeks. Though the Greek did not endorse the excess of this pleasure, their condemnation was not based upon some spiritual principle or salvation. Their belief was founded on a more practical foundation, excess of such pleasures can damage one's self. Again, we see that the emphasis is on the construction of the self in relation to a formal or aesthetic principle. The sexual act of an individual caused anxiety but the reason of this anxiety is not some metaphysical evil. It is unsettling because it threatens the ethical essence of the subject. If this passion is not curtailed, it might cause depletion of energy and the death of the individual without heirs (Foucault, *HS* 2:136).

Conformity to nature was considered important as it was the guarantee of balance and harmony. Any activity is not bad in itself rather how it is conducted and what is its relationship with one's self, that would determine its effect. The individual was supposed to act like a skilful captain of the ship, steering and guiding the vessel to its destination. He is a person who had a measure of time and space and who knows in general how to conduct the affairs in a perfect and moderate manner. This moderation would help him master the energies and drives that can wreak havoc if left unattended. The resultant self would be a product that would not be ephemeral like the body as it would become permanent like a work of art.

The gist of the argument is that for Greeks, subjectivity at first was a master-slave relationship with oneself and then it would extend to the social body. Greeks never thought of subjectivity as an adherence to some divine or metaphysical framework with a purpose of salvation in the next world as was conceived by Christianity in the later epochs. Their concept of the self was grounded in the real-life situations with concrete and tangible outcomes. One

should be a master of one's baser self because only then one could become a proper ethical citizen and ruler. A person who lacks restraint could not possibly govern and command others. The relationship with self and power was established in the Greek culture through an invocation to the logos and reason and not to a theological injunction. We would see how this paradigm shifted in the later historical periods.

In *History of Sexuality: Vol 3 The Care of the Self* (1990), Foucault presents an analysis of the concept of the self in the Roman period. The analysis reveals that even in the Roman period the practices related to sex and marriage were not codified and still there were no strict lines of demarcation between what is natural and what is unnatural. The primary concern of the Romans was to establish the status of an individual in relation to familial, civil and other functions. Despite the fact that there are many texts written in this period which deal with the question of self and how it should be involved or not involved in the acts of pleasure but it has not taken the legal form yet. The matter was still considered private and it was not the prerogative of the state to punish individuals whose behaviour was deviant and perverse. Foucault observes: "They urge individuals to be more austere if they wish to lead a life different from that of "the throngs"; they do not try to determine which measures or punishments might constrain everyone in a uniform manner" (*HS* 3:40). The emphasis on the legal aspect of acts of pleasures was added in the later societies especially under the influence of Christian church.

We come to this question: what was the concept of the self in the Roman period? Foucault is of the view that in the Roman period, just like the Greek example, the stress was still on one's relationship with one's self. Man is a rational being and it is not advisable that he should allow himself to get indulged in excessive pleasures that can damage his soul and self-respect. The law or the code was not invoked to remind the individuals that they should exercise restraint rather the belief that it is one's duty to take care of one's self is the main theme of such acts. Through these prescriptions and manuals, related with relationship with one's self, we come to know a lot about subjectivity the way it was understood in the Roman period. Foucault opines that the individual was supposed to be very careful of certain things that play a role in keeping balance between one's body and soul. Exercises and regimen were prescribed to maintain a health mind-body relationship (*HS* 3: 41). One of the obvious reasons that gave birth to this comparative 'individualism' in the Roman period could be the ever-decreasing role of individuals in the political sphere. In this way, it was not because of the

influence of political and legal authority that individuals started focusing more and more on their 'self' and its care but rather the opposite is true: "Being less firmly attached to the cities, more isolated from one another, and more reliant on themselves, they sought in philosophy rules of conduct that were more personal" (Foucault, *HS* 3:41). But it is also true that the idea of the care of the self was present in the ancient societies in one form or the other. As we have seen that it was one of the dominant themes in the Greek period despite the fact that in that period the distinction between the private and the public did not exist. Hence, we can say that when this attitude of the care of the self emerged in the Roman period, it was not totally based upon the isolation of the individuals from the public sphere.

One thing that can be said about the difference in approach towards the care of the self in Greek and Roman period is that, for Greeks, care of the self was linked with government that implies if one wishes to govern others, one must first learn to govern oneself. As we can see this injunction in the advice given to Alcibiades by Socrates when he exhorts him that if he wants to become a good governor, he must take care of his own self first. But in the Roman period the emphasis was not how this care of the self is linked with governing others, but rational principles were invoked to justify it. Foucault elaborates the precept of caring of the self in these words:

> It also took the form of an attitude, a mode of behaviour; it became instilled in ways of living; it evolved into procedures, practices, and formulas that people reflected on, developed, perfected, and taught. It thus came to constitute a social practice, giving rise to relationships between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times even to institutions. And it gave rise, finally, to a certain mode of knowledge and to the elaboration of a science. (*HS* 3:44)

Apuleius rationalizes this principle by using the analogy of the body. He says that all men take care of their eyes, face and other limbs but forget to take care of their soul and this is totally irrational. For a man to live a happy life, it is necessary that the soul should be taken care of.

The same theme is analysed in Epictetus, though from a different angle. He is of the view that it is natural that man should take care of himself as this is the primary difference between him and other animals. The animals are born with a finished but limited being as they have to perform a limited function. On the other hand, man has to improve and develop himself

and this is the reason that gods have bestowed upon us the faculty of reason so that we can use it to take care of our 'self.' The rationale behind this care of the self was so emphasized that Apuleius went as far to say that "…without shame or dishonour, ignore the rules that make it possible to paint and to play the zither, but to know how "to perfect one's own soul with the help of reason" is a rule "equally necessary for all men."(qtd in Foucault, *HS* 3:48).

The Stoics Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius also devised certain procedures to take care of the self. It was stressed that a certain time should be allocated in daily routine of a person for self-analysis. The analysis should be rigorous and one should take into account one's past as well as present so that a bigger picture might emerge. Such contemplations enable one to have a connection with oneself, to put the past in its perspective, to plan ahead for the future, an analysis of one's thoughts and actions (Foucault, *HS* 3:50). There is another point to ponder and that, at first glance, appears to be paradoxical but in a closer inspection reveals that it is very much related with the subject — a rigorous physical regimen and exercises. It appears paradoxical because one wonders how can a civilization pay so much attention to the body when their primary concern is care of the soul? But actually, this is justified if we keep in view that Romans had this concept that there are physical ailments that can communicate between the body and soul. The ills of the soul can manifest themselves in the body and vice versa. The letters of Seneca shed light on many such ailments and impairments that can get transferred between the body and soul.

In the light of the above exposition, it is clear that a comparative stricter outlook regarding the 'self' in the Roman period was not a product of tightening of the norms or moral code. We see that no specificities were introduced in the general mode of behaviour and pleasures and the 'self' was still a private sphere yet untouched by the hand of the law. Foucault says: "The change had much more to do with the manner in which the individual needed to form himself as an ethical subject. The development of the cultivation of the self produced its effect not in the strengthening of that which can thwart desire, but in certain modifications relating to the formative elements of ethical subjectivity" (*HS* 3:73). Moreover, the newly conceived ideas in this age directed at the ethics of the self, morality, pleasure and other matter was not a sign of decadence rather it was founded in search for a new kind of personal ethics. The ethics that would re-define one's position, social role, and obligations.

In his *History of Sexuality Volume, I: The Will to Knowledge* (1990), Michel Foucault traces the origin of state's control over individuals to the 18th and 19th C epistemic shift. The sovereign power in the ancient times had the privilege over life and death as the king was a pseudo patriarch who is responsible for bringing children into the world and consequently, he has the right to take their life. Later, the perimeters of this right were reformulated and the sovereign power could only exercise this right in certain conditions; cases when the sovereign's own life was at risk. If he thought that there was a threat from an external enemy, he had the right to wage war and order his public to defend the state. Though he was not putting his people to death, indirectly he exposed their life. Foucault says: “But if someone dared to rise up against him and transgress his laws; then he could exercise a direct power over the offender's life: as punishment, the latter would be put to death. Viewed in this way, the power of life and death was not an absolute privilege: it was conditioned by the defence of the sovereign, and his own survival” (*HS* 1:135). We can assert that in those societies, power was exercised through the principal of subtracting that involved coercing the subjects to fight for the sovereign, pay taxes to him and provide different services. If they failed to do that, the sovereign had the right to take their life or punish them in whatever manner he deemed suitable. Foucault brings up this historical phenomenon to contrast it with the transformation that took place in power relations in the period following Renaissance in the European countries.

In the 17th and 18th C, this right went through a transformation and its contours were shifted to " incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the force under it" (Foucault, *HS* 1:136). The right to put death now became to sustain and develop life. The philosophy behind the wars was no more the defence of the sovereign king but the survival and existence of the masses. Foucault asserts: “Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital” (*HS* 1:137). This paradigm shift is paradoxical to say the least, as following this principle, many regimes were able to slaughter and kill mass populations in the name of management and defence of life.[1] Power is no more exercised through the threat of death but through the promise of existence. This does not imply that power has become less coercive or less destructive rather the opposite is true: “The atomic situation is now at the end point of this process: the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the

power to guarantee an individual's continued existence" (Foucault, *HS* 1:137). In other words, it is necessary to kill in order to live. Another feature of this shift towards control and management of life was that the capital punishment, the right to execute in the name of the sovereign king or state, was also exercised less and less. The reason for this was not any humanitarian considerations rather that state thought it a contradiction to apply death penalty when its very legitimation was based upon administration of life.

In the 17th C, this new face of power took two forms that are interrelated with each other. The first aspect was based upon the belief that human body is a machine and in order to master its forces, it must be disciplined, controlled, tabulated and measured. This was the result of the rise of Capitalist economy that put human body at par with machines and which needs scientific precision in order to perform well. The second formulation was focused on human body as a biological specimen that has certain functions and needed to be monitored from that angle. This is the rationale that became the basis for the collection and maintenance of the statistical data regarding births and mortality, health and so on.

According to Foucault, the classical age or 18th C replaced sovereign's right over life and death with this new concept that he calls 'bio-power' (*HS* 1:140). There was an increased focus on discipline and control in the institutions like army, schools and prisons and then there were also departments specifically assigned to keep the records of birth and death rates, migration, health and so on. Foucault says: "This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of phenomena of population to economic processes" (*HS* 1:141). This process of the production of docile bodies was twofold; firstly, it was centred on the optimization; secondly, this fact was also kept in view that this optimization might not make the population difficult to govern. On the one hand, this optimization was used by the capital system to enhance the work force and on the other, many other institutions used the data to maintain and control the population. The conscientious record keeping and statistical tabulations were also used to hierarchize and segregate the masses in order to maintain the hegemony. Bio-power was used to adjust the place of men in the capitalist economic system, increasing their productivity, maximization of profit. This was the period, according to Foucault, in which for the first time the life of human beings entered into history and became a subject of

power/knowledge. Before that the life of an individual was never put under such a scrutiny but now the individual started to grasp the definition of a living being and what it means to have a body and how can this body be sustained and its potential realized. The death of the masses, that would become the subject of politics and government in only exceptional cases like that of famine or natural calamities, now entered into the political body as power's area of intervention. Foucault elaborates:

> Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. (*HS* 1:143)

Since Aristotle, man had been an animal with a political existence but bio-power transformed this very living aspect into politics. The law and its implications were also transformed as the purpose of law was no more the distribution of death rather its teleology was based upon correction and reformation. The individual who violates the law must not be put to death rather he should be reformed and normalized. The prison was no more a place for punishment but an institute to rehabilitate. Paradoxically, the resistance against the power also relied on life and its accessories. The political demands were now based upon one's right to life, its sustenance and other related matters. This demand for right to life is unprecedented in the ancient societies as the individual was unproblematically a smart part of the social body and his personal life and inclinations were of no significance. In other words, the individual was expected to submit to the social, political, and religious discourses and his own volition was not taken into account. He was expected to define himself in relation to these over-arching structures. When life became the central concern of power, the resistance against power also took the same route.

An analysis of Foucault's exposition of the technologies of the self in the different periods of European history has made this clear that the relationship between power and self had evolved and transformed through history. The prescriptions regarding self-restraint and control have always existed but insofar as one can see that in the ancient cultures the emphasis was more individual centred and the self was not considered a terrain to be treaded upon by the political power. Though Foucault did not complete his history and did not provide us an

outline of these technologies in the Christian epoch, we may infer that this control over the 'self' by an external authority originated in the same period. Towards the end, in the period after Renaissance, this control over the 'self' manifested itself in form of 'bio-power' when the epistemological tools were used to collect more and more data about the individuals for an efficient management of the population. We can discern that how this political control increased and in the 20th C, under the influence of technological revolution, became more and more coercive. This itinerary is significant in order to understand the antagonism between the individual and political in Kundera's fiction. My first selected text *The Joke* was written when Czechoslovakia was ruled by The Communist Party. While *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Immortality* were written when Kundera was living as an emigre in France. The publishing dates of these novels also coincide with Kundera's experience as an individual in relation to changing political milieu. Therefore, the review of Foucault's history of sexuality is valuable to contextualize my research.

In his book *Subjectivity* (2004), Donald E. Hall has elaborated the idea of subjecthood as found in Lacanian psychoanalysis. He says that Lacanian subject is the outcome of Symbolic order of language. It is the 'word' that defines us and through the signification process of the word we lead our lives. Our sense of self is fragmentary and incomplete and we hope that language can make it whole. This fragmented subject takes different social positions to make his/her life meaningful. The Symbolic order of language constructs fantasies of wholeness in form of ideologies. The subject adheres to one ideology or the other to keep himself or herself in this illusion that he is an agent and his self is not split. Hall opines:

> Not surprisingly, Lacan was intrigued by literary and aesthetic representations of fluidity and metamorphosis, states imperfect and ambiguous, that unsettle our notions of the natural, the fixed, and the complete. This offers one avenue for the use of Lacan in literary and cultural analysis. Lacan explores the always-threatening return of fragmentation; however, our adult identity may be secured, in his attention to "imagos of the fragmented body." (83)

The ideologies can be political, religious, social or cultural and the subject's sense of wholeness is derived from them. These fantasies of completeness do not just work at the individual level but cultural and national unity is also always fragmentary.

Lacan's concept of the subject and its critical implications are relevant to my project as Kundera's fiction deals with the idea of individual and collective unity. The Communist Party, in his novels, desires to portray Czechoslovakia as a utopia founded on egalitarianism and liberty. On the other hand, the individual subject is caught between these fantasies of wholeness at the collective level and the bitterness of perceived reality at the individual level. This antagonism is staged time and again, though in different settings and contexts, in Kundera's fiction. My research project, therefore, gets contextualized in terms of Lacanian concept of subjecthood.

In their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari have elaborated how, in the time of computers and cybernetics, our sense of the self has become even more complicated. Their insight is based upon the idea that, traditionally, human beings have used machines to perform a particular function. Machines were, in a way, slaves to human will. After the cybernetic revolution of 70s, a change has been observed in the nature of this relationship:

> [C]ybernetic and informational machines form a [new] age that reconstructs a generalized regime of subjection: recurrent and reversible "humans-machines systems" replace the old nonrecurrent and non-reversible relations of subjection between the two elements; the relation between human and machine is based on internal, mutual communication, and no longer on usage or action. (Deleuze and Guattari 458)

This relationship, now, is based upon mutual interaction. The book was written in 1987 and cybernetics had not been as advanced as of now. If we look around us today, it is evident that Deleuze and Guattari's take on the matter was just a tip of the iceberg. Today, with the advent of Artificial Intelligence, human subjectivity is no more a communication with the machine but it is getting synthesized into it. Does this mean that subjectivity is being transformed into robotics? Is it that the future human being would be a cog in a machine without agency and free will? The thought is quite unsettling, though, not far-fetched.

Deleuze and Guattari's insight regarding human subjectivity and its increased dependence on machines may not appear totally irrelevant in the context of Kundera's fiction. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia expected the individuals to fully ascribe to its official ideology. Such personal spheres like marriage and love were not outside its purview. If an

individual is expected to surrender fully to an ideology, does it not make him behave like a pre-programmed robot? It does and, at this juncture, Deleuze and Guattari become relevant to the discussion underhand. Subjectivity is a complex issue and, in my analysis, I would discuss how the political mode of being attempts to colonize it.

In the first part of my literature review, I mostly focused on three volumes of *History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault. The rationale behind this is that Foucault has traced the historical development of the relationship between the self and power. As the individual and political mode of existence is one of my thematic concerns, it helped me put this in its proper context. This part has established the connection between the self and power and how the concept of 'self' was understood in different European epochs. We would see how this idea of the 'self' and its relation with power appears in the fiction of Kundera. In the next section, I have reviewed some works related to the analysis of my primary text with a focus on the body and soul.

2.2.2 The Body/Soul Dichotomy

The debate whether soul exists or not dates back to Greeks and throughout history many notable philosophers and psychologists have touched upon the subject. In my research project, I have not used the concept of soul in its religious context. In his works, Kundera uses the dichotomy between body and soul in a strictly secular sense and, therefore, I would discuss different perspective brought upon the subject by some imminent thinkers. I have reviewed the viewpoints of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke and also contemporary scientific understanding of soul-body relationship. The goal is to contextualize my data analysis and set it in the proper perspective. I admit that this debate is quite extensive and, in fact, constitutes a major component of the philosophy of mind and I have barely scratched the surface here. My objective is just to set the stage for the later interpretation of my selected texts; hence, I understand, a brief exposition is enough to serve my purpose.

In his dialogue "Meno" (1961), Plato has asserted that soul and body are not identical but distinct entities and thus he may be considered the first major philosopher to put forward the idea of mind-body dualism. To him, knowledge was possessed by the soul even before the body came to exist. A man cannot be ignorant as he can always recall the knowledge that was known to his soul before it entered in his body. He avers:

> Thus the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is. So we need not be surprised if it can recall the knowledge of virtue or anything else which [. . .] it once possessed [. . .] for seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection. (80)

The body is just like a prison for the soul and, in many ways, is evil. The purpose of the soul is to seek a higher truth but the body distracts it from this purpose. It is lured by the carnal pleasures and thus loses sight of its object. Reason and knowledge are the true foods for soul and it is nourished by them.

Plato's stance on mind-body dualism is not acceptable by the modern scholars but he was the first philosopher to establish the link between the two. He also discussed how the two interact with each other. This duality, introduced by Plato, is responsible for a debate that still rages on — the nature and function of soul and how it connects with body. As we see, that Kundera's fiction also deals with dualism though his treatment is not in the Platonic vein. In the fiction of Kundera, this duality appears in many forms and manifestations and I would divulge into it in my analysis.

In their book, *A Brief History of Soul* (2011), Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro have discussed Aristotle's concept of soul and how it differs from that of his teacher, Plato. Aristotle is of the view that soul is that entity which is responsible for life in body. Everything has soul, even the plant kingdom, though they do not have the powers of perception and sense. In order to distinguish organisms with respect to the kind of soul they have, he has ascribed them having different kinds of soul. The lowest kind of soul is the 'nutritive' soul or, to be more precise, it is the principle that is responsible for the growth and degeneration of an organism and plants possess this kind of soul. The second kind of soul is the 'sensitive' soul, found in animals, who have power of perception and sensation. The third kind of soul is possessed by human beings: "According to Aristotle, a human being possesses a kind of soul that is one step further up the ladder from the kind that is possessed by beasts. The kind of soul in question is one that enables a human being to think, suppose, and know. Its possession renders a human being a rational animal" (Goetz and Taliaferro 20). Plato believes that the connection between a body and its soul is contingent because the soul could have any body and it would not make any difference. Aristotle does not hold with this opinion. His point of

view is that the soul is the mover of the body and it is through the soul that body acts and functions. If the relationship between the two is contingent, then this connection won't be possible. Aristotle looks at soul-body relationship from a different perspective. He thinks that the soul is like the form while body is its content. The content is something that is not the part of the form, but its actuality or potential:

> By saying that the soul is a vital principle or a "first actuality" that informs its body, Aristotle intends to make clear that the soul is not, as Plato claimed, a primary substance that either does exist or could have existed on its own before it entered a body, or does or could survive the dissolution of the body and (once again) exist independently. (Goetz and Taliaferro 22)

For Aristotle, primacy of soul is not viable and what exists is not just the soul or the body but a composite of the two, an individual. In order to perceive the difference between two sense perceptions, the soul and body must act as one and not as two distinct entities. Otherwise, it would be impossible to categorize the sensory data. This does not imply that Aristotle considers soul and body to be of the same substance. They are distinct with respect to their nature, as body is material and soul is non-material. The point is that both work in unison and can't be taken as contingent.

Aristotle's view negates soul-body dualism but he maintains that soul exists and is distinct from body. His stance is different from Plato in the sense that he does not think soul as existing on its own. It depends upon the body for its actualisation. Hence, the soul cannot have any 'body', as its relationship with the body is not contingent. I would demonstrate how, in the fiction of Kundera, certain characters question this relationship too. Even, in some cases, they ponder over the possibility of the existence of one without the other. Aristotelian insight is crucial here as it provides the context for my argument.

The next significant figure in relation with soul-body problem is Rene Descartes. In *A Brief History of Soul* (2011), Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro have also shed light on Descartes conception of soul based upon his method of doubt. He started by doubting everything, even his sense perceptions, but one thing that he felt he cannot doubt is that this doubt resides in him, in his self. This 'self' is not the body but it is that part of our being that 'thinks and this thinking part is, in fact, mind. Descartes is the first major thinker who declared

mind and soul as one and the same thing. Moreover, he rejects the notion, held by Plato and some other philosophers, that it is the soul that gives life to the body. He puts forward this interesting idea that the body is a self-contained mechanism and works on the principle of machine. The body would perform its designated functions even if there were no mind to control it. This leads him to another implication that is contrary to the ancient idea of the soul as the life-giving force to the body; it is not the departure of the soul that makes a body dead rather it is the malfunction of the body because of which the soul has to depart. Descartes has made another very significant observation as well:

> Not only does Descartes break with the views of his predecessors when he maintains that soul does not give life to the body and that death is the irreparable brokenness of the mechanical body, but he also parts ways with those who came before him by holding that the soul is not located in the space occupied by its physical body (Goetz and Taliaferro 71).

The body is extended, it has spatial coordinates but the soul does not exist in space. On the other hand, the mind is something that thinks and is not located in space. When a person refers to himself/herself as 'I', he/she are, actually, referring to their mind or soul and this mind or soul does not exist in space. Furthermore, the body is composed of parts and is divisible but not the mind, as it possesses a wholeness. The question is if soul is not located in space, how is it connected with the body? How does it feel pain and sensations that reside in the body? Descartes answers this question by saying that the soul is connected with the body through one organ — pineal gland, and pineal gland is linked with body through a system of nerves.

Though Descartes has diverted from many of the established beliefs of his age but his theory of soul-body relationship does not hold water in the modern times. His idea that it is through the pineal gland that the soul interacts with the body cannot be scientifically tested and still seems to be a metaphysical speculation. Descartes believes in causal interaction between body and soul which is based upon the concept that an individual considers his body as his own only because his soul is causally connected with his body and not with any other body. This particular belief holds some ground but this does not explain some very fundamental questions regarding soul-body relationship. In Kundera's fiction, soul-body relationship appears in various contexts and it is hard to pin it down the way Descartes has described.

In his treatise, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1975), British philosopher John Locke has linked the idea of human soul with his materialist conception of universe. He writes: "I presume 'tis not the Idea of a thinking or rational Being alone, that makes the Idea of a Man in most Peoples Sense; but of a Body so and so shaped joined to it; and if that be the Idea of a Man, the same successive Body not shifted all at once, must as well as the same immaterial Spirit go to the making of the same Man" (Locke 8). Apparently, Locke seems to assert that the thinking being is immaterial or, in other words, a soul. But Locke is not referring to the traditional idea of human soul as upheld by Plato or Aristotle. He thinks that a rational or thinking being is basically a person and this person is a consciousness that is able to think about it over a span of time. The personal identity is, in fact, memory. The consciousness goes through different states and different phases throughout its existence but it can remember itself as having one identity. Locke asserts:

> Self is that conscious thinking thing (whatever Substance [. . .] whether Spiritual, or Material, Simple, or Compounded, it matters not) which is sensible, or conscious of Pleasure and Pain, capable of Happiness or Misery, and so is concern'd for it self, as far as that consciousness extends. [S]elf is not determined by Identity or Diversity of Substance [. . .] but only by Identity of consciousness." (23)

In a way, Locke rejects the traditional idea of soul as distinct from matter. He believes that God can make matter 'conscious' and bestow upon it the faculty of thinking. This consciousness is not something different from matter but 'thinking matter.' It conjoins our sense of identity through memory. Soul, in its traditional meaning, does not exist. Here we see that Locke is one of the earlier materialists who denied the existence of human soul and replaced it with consciousness. In Kundera's fiction, soul might be taken as consciousness, though, it would be too simplistic a reading. The idea of the soul, as presented in Kundera, is very complex and has a protean aspect about it.

In her article, "Soul, Brain and Mind" published in *From Soul to Self* (1999) Edited by M. James C. Crabbe, Susan Greenfield discusses how the discussion of soul in the contemporary world is reduced to brain and consciousness. She raises this question whether it is possible to throw light on soul from the perspective of science. For this she makes two assumptions. First, consciousness is the product of brain and it does not exist outside it. Second,

consciousness cannot be defined in a certain way. Modern imaging instruments like CT scans and PET scans have enabled scientists to study the structure of brain and observe what area of it is associated with vision, sound or language. The problem is that brain functions are not localized. Many parts of the brain take part in performance of different functions a phenomenon that is called 'parallel processing.' This implies that there is no single part of the brain that can be associated with consciousness. Another observation related with consciousness is that it is always of something or it always has a stimulant. Greenfield summarizes this argument in these words:

> I would like to suggest that consciousness is spatially multiple, yet effectively single at any one time. It is an emergent property of non-specialised groups of neurons (brain cells) that are continuously variable with respect to an epicentre, where an emergent property is taken to be a property of a collection of components that could not be attributable to any single member of those components. (112)

Greenfield argues that epicentre for the conscious is a single neuron in the brain and it accumulates more neurons around it. These neurons form connections with other neurons and thus become responsible for all our sensations, feelings and emotions. Brain produces certain chemicals and those chemicals recruit the function of some specific neurons at a given moment and as a result the brain would feel a particular sensation. Greenfield concludes that consciousness is not something supernatural. It is just the assembly of neurons at a given moment that can be measured quantitatively. She hopes that with the invention of innovative imaging technologies, very soon, it would be possible to prove this hypothesis positively. Kundera does not believe in the theological idea of soul but he also does not seem to endorse this notion that the soul is simply an accumulation of sensations. His idea of human soul is based upon the premise that the soul is the transcendent part of body. It is not mere connection between neurons.

After this brief exposition of body-soul debate as it stands in the Western intellectual tradition and how it is related with my research project, now, I would venture forth to my third theme, the concept of Universals and Particulars. This problem has also its adherents and adversaries and needs be contextualized to link it to my data analysis.

2.2.3 The Problem of Universals and Particulars

Joseph Agassi and Paul T. Sagal, in their article “The Problem of Universals” (1975), have reviewed the debate between Platonists and Democritianists. The ancient Greek philosopher Democritus is of the view that, ontologically, this universe is composed of atoms that exist in space. On the other hand, Plato rejects Democritian version and says that ‘real’ things exist in the world of ‘Forms’ outside space and time. Platonism believes in the existence of abstract entities whose ‘particular’ examples can be found in this material world. These abstract entities are, basically, universals. Democritianism denies the existence of anything outside space-time realm and thus it rejects universals. This leads to some anomalies. For instance, if we take a symphony of Beethoven and compare it with its performances by different people through the years, what is the relationship between the two? Is not it the symphony as conceived by Beethoven is a universal while its individual performances its examples or particulars? Same is the case with proper names. There can be one proper name like Smith and thousands of individuals might be called by this name. What would Democritians say in such scenarios? Agassi and Sagal think that the problem of universals does not seem to have a bottom line, at least in epistemology, though its relevance and significance cannot be denied. For example, even in the field of mathematics, universals cannot be dispensed with. They assert: “… numbers are not the sorts of things which exist in space and time; they are indeed paradigmatic nonconcrete entities. Hence mathematics seems to be Platonic (— non Democritean) par excellence” (291). The gist of the argument is that the distinction between universals and particulars is not just a metaphysical speculation rather something having empirical repercussions.

Micheal J. Loux, in his book *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (2006) introduces the problem of universals but he has named the waring schools of thought as Realists and Nominalists. He opens the discussion by saying that in our world we can categorize objects in different classes like colours, shapes and kinds. This classification is necessary to make sense of the world around us. Sometimes these classifications may be subjective but in most of the cases they are objective. This implies that objects in this world inherently possess some features and attributes that make them similar to other objects and this is the reason that we classify them as belonging to the same category. Plato is of the view that certain Forms can have multiple examples e.g. blueness is a concept or general category and

the objects that have blue colour are its examples. Many philosophers today do not use Plato's language and instead use terms like 'instantiation.' Philosophers who agree with Plato on the issue of universals are called 'realists' while the school of thought that opposes this line of thinking is called 'nominalists.' Nominalists put forward a completely different explanation for the shared attributes between the objects. The realists are of the view that there can be many kinds of universals like monadic, symmetrical, asymmetrical. Then there is also the question of degree. Loux explains:

> Several particulars can agree in belonging to a single kind; they can agree in possessing a single property; and several pairs, triples, or generally, n-tuples of particulars can agree in entering into a single relation. And realists want to claim that attribute agreement of any of these forms is subject to degrees. A dog and a cat agree in kind: both are mammals; but their agreement in kind is not as close as that tying two dogs. (20)

This implies that a universal can be exemplified by its particulars in properties, kinds and relations but these in turn are subdivided into further categories and thus many other universals may exist under one umbrella universal. Loux's elaboration of universals is more detailed and he has also discussed their other attributes as well but the topic requires an extended space and, also, is out of the scope of this project.

Douglas Ehring, in his article "Distinguishing Universals and Particulars" (2004) has focused on spatial location to make a distinction between the two concepts. For him, a 'universal' is that which has the capacity to be present at more than one place at the same time. On the other hand, a 'particular' is the one that lacks this characteristic. Ehring elaborates: "The universal 'being a chair' can be wholly present in two places at the same time, but no particular chair can be in two places at the same time. Universals are repeatable across space at the same time, but particulars are not" (Ehring 327). This also includes just the potential for multiple locations. Ehring further notes that the principle of identity is also involved in the conception of universals and particulars. The principle states that two things are identical if they share all their inherent properties. Universals need exact identity but particulars don't. This distinction made by Ehring is limited in many ways as it just focuses on one aspect of

difference between the two philosophical concepts. The problem is quite complex and it requires a multiple angle review of the debate that has raged on since Plato.

In his article, "Universals and Predication" published in *The Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics* (2002), Bruce Aune has categorized three theories pertaining to universals and he has termed them 'A-theories', T-theories' and 'P-theories.' A-theory is basically a reference to Aristotle's formulation of the idea of universals or to more recent D.M Armstrong whose idea is a contemporary take on the issue. According to this theory, universal is a recurring entity that can be present in more than one place at the same time. The rationale for this is that there are many particular objects which exist in more than one instances and seem to have one, or more than one, characteristic common. As Aune comments: "There is such a thing as identity of nature, and this nature, which can be present in two things, is a universal" (131). The question is whether this sameness should be complete or even partial is acceptable? For example, if two objects belong to two different classes but share the same colour, can they be considered the particular instantiations of one universal? This anomaly cannot be resolved by the adherents of 'A-theory.' For the believers of T-theory, this problem does not exist. They say that one attribute of one particular can be identical to one attribute to another particular. They don't believe that universals are repeatable, every instance of them is unique. On the other hand, a P-theory denies that universals exist in space-time at all. According to this theory, any statement that has a predicate like 'Apples are red,' would only be true if the subject — apple has some relation with the object — colour red. The P-universal is an object that can be thought of as having some kind of relationship with the subject. Basically, the P-theory understands universals not as Platonic Forms but as concepts. P-theory does not attempt to consider predication rather it just tries to develop the relation between the subject and predicate.

H.B Acton, in his article, "The Theory of Concrete Universals" (I) (1936), argues for another category of universals that are termed as 'concrete.' The adjective 'concrete' is usually used for particulars as opposed to the universals as they have material existence. Acton quotes F.H. Bradley to elaborate on the theory of concrete universals. According to Bradley, an abstract universal, in itself, cannot exist. It is just a concept and its existence would be deduced from the particulars in which it gets reflected. On the other hand, a concrete universal is an individual who is a combination of differences but still has an identity. As an instance, he cites

Julius Caesar who is individual but when he performs different roles in life, his identity is reflected in all these roles even though the roles themselves are different like the role of a king, a warrior, a book writer, a husband etc. In opposition to this, Bradley has also defined abstract particulars:

> It often happens that an in- separable aspect of something may be considered or thought of apart from the totality to which it belongs, but although this is possible it could not exist apart from its totality. Something which is not only considered in isolation from a complex from which it is in fact inseparable, but is also mistakenly supposed to exist part from it, is called an "abstraction." (Acton 421)

The term 'abstract particular' describes something that can never exist. Whatever exists, maintains its identity in differences, and thus is universal. Nothing in this world exists that does not have differences in its identity. Then what would be an 'abstract particular'? An abstract particular would be an entity that would be totally same in its identity and would not have any differences. Such an entity cannot exist. Acton upholds that this is, basically, another way of intervention in the age-old debate. The concrete universals are basically 'particulars' as defined by other philosophers. Bradley does not think this categorization as satisfactory and this is the reason that he has introduced these new terms 'concrete' and 'abstract.'

The objective of this exposition is to contextualize one of my thematic lenses and relate it with the fiction of Milan Kundera. In his novels, the particularity of different modes of being, like subjective expression and universal demands, appear in different manifestations. Is love, a particular emotion, be transformed into something universal? How the universal claim of the state comes into conflict with the particular aspirations of its members? These questions are significant in relation to the lives of characters in Kundera's fiction. Here, I have discussed some of the concepts related with this debate. In my analysis, I would also be using Zizekian ideas of universal and particular as my theoretical lens.

Now that I have provided the backdrop for the three angles, I move to the critical review of selected research works related with Kundera's fiction in general, and my selected texts in particular. The aim is to provide an overview of the existing scholarship and point to the gap in the research.

2.2.4 Milan Kundera and Critical Debates

Burt Feintuch in his article, “The Joke, Folk Culture, and Milan Kundera's *The Joke*" (1987), interjects that Milan Kundera has used the ironic reversal to reveal the seriousness of a joke in the most effective manner. *The Joke* constructs a world in which speech acts do not perform their formal function; the jokes are not funny; laughter is a political necessity. The novel “is ostensibly about the disastrous consequences of a joke enacted innocently but received humourlessly” (Feintuch 21). This reversal of the formal function does not remain limited to the humour alone, it also extends to other modes of social life. The most significant of such mode, that serves as a prop in the novel, is the portrayal of folk culture in Czechoslovakia. Feintuch perceives a kind of intersection between the jokes and the folk culture; one being in the sphere of the personal, the other in the public. He points to the fact that how, in a culture obsessed with political seriousness, a joke may not reach its intended destination. In the novel, the joke is both a “model and a metaphor” (Feintuch 25) as it serves both thematic and formal purposes. The episodes of the novel are structured like joke, with characteristic twists and turns, and the focus is on a single situation. The difference between the jokes in the novel and an ordinary joke is that these jokes “are not told; they are lived” (Feintuch 25). For the characters in the novel, the jokes are always unpleasant and this is so because joke are always funny for the people who are not involved in that particular situation. A funny situation is funny for the onlookers and not for the person who experiences it. Marketa is the butt for joke, but in case of the postcard, the joke comes back to Ludvik himself. The only difference is that it is not funny anymore. Feintuch comments, “In each case, the joke or joke-like episode, points up the tension between the humane — as exemplified by playfulness, love, friendship, humour, and the like — and the inhumane, as exemplified by those who have forgotten how to laugh” (27). In the army, Ludvik finds out that his colleagues are also the victims of some joke-situation. The point to ponder is that often the inhumane treatment suffered by the characters is the result of some inhumane impulse. Ludvik’s love story with Lucie also has the characteristics of a joke went wrong and what was supposed to be a humane experience ends up on a bitter note. Ludvik is caught while sneaking back into the barracks after his futile attempt to find Lucie and is sentenced to ten months of imprisonment. Ludvik’s attempt to avenge himself against Zamanek also comes to nothing. He seduces Helena to spite her husband but he finds out that, actually, it is a kind of favour to him as he is already ending

their marriage. After that, he treats Helena in a rude manner and tells her that he does not love her but this inhumane treatment incites humane response from her and she tells him that she is in love with him. The joke of the novel does not end here. Helena attempts suicide but instead of taking analgesics, she takes laxatives which causes further humiliation for her. Feintuch notes that folk culture that was considered warm and humane once, now is turned into something opposite. Jaroslav's hope that his son would play the role of the king dashes to the ground. Towards the end, when Jaroslav and Ludvik play together in the ensemble, it seems like a happy ending but soon Jaroslav suffers a heart attack and is taken to hospital. Even the punchline of *The Joke* is not funny.

Feintuch's exposition is quite enlightening as he has pointed out the alignment of a joke to the humane aspect of existence and thus drawing a line between two kinds of laughter — the laughter of the individual happiness and the laughter of the political correctness. Looking at his argument from this angle reveals that Feintuch is vying for this schism that exists between the political and the personal albeit in an indirect manner. The article points to this divide between two ontological modes but does not explore it any further. How the individual clashes with the political is not the scope of this article. The article does raise the issue and invites further investigation. Moreover, the discussion of folk culture as a backdrop and formal metaphor, though not explored in detail by Feintuch, may be used for my project to drive home my argument regarding the parallax between the individual and political.

In his article, "A Modern History of Humour amid the Comedy of History" (2005), Mark Weeks expands the debate taken up by Feintuch a bit further. Weeks begins by saying that despite the fact that Kundera is not the funniest of the modern writers, humour is the 'point de capiton' of his fiction. Weeks quotes Kundera as saying:

> I learned the value of humour during the time of Stalinist terror. I was twenty then. I could always recognize a person who was not a Stalinist, a person whom I needn't fear, by the way he smiled. A sense of humour was a trustworthy sign of recognition. Ever since, I have been terrified by a world that is losing its sense of humour. (qtd in Weeks 131)

Weeks considers this stance as defiance against political correctness promoted and endorsed by the Stalinist regimes. He compares this vision of Kundera with that of Bakhtin[2] who has

also conceptualized humour as a kind of interruption, a break in the ideological and historical flow of grand narratives. The difference is that Bakhtin still considers humour as something linear, riding on the grand march of history and progress. Here Kundera parts ways with Bakhtin. Kundera does not associate humour with any linear progression of history, towards the 'Absolute' and this makes him appear less optimistic. Kundera's humour seems to be pitted against the ideological optimistic laughter promoted by The Party.[3] The same anti-laughter stance, in Marks' view, served Kundera well when he emigrated to France and found himself in a world defined by "ahistorical cosmology of desire" (132).

Another important distinction made by Weeks, in relation to Kundera's fiction, is that Kundera understands humour not in the material and historical terms as is the case with the political ideology of his time. For him, like music, humour has a temporal and aesthetic aspect. This is not surprising as Kundera's father was a professor of music and he made his son to study and practice this art form in his youth. Humour and music are used as tools to break the artificial continuity of existence imposed by historical progression of time. Weeks comments: "While that sensitivity to time renders history important to Kundera, he refuses to subjugate the aesthetic to the historical, maintaining them throughout his work in critical dialogue, and/or aesthetic counterpart" (132). Here we can see that Weeks, too, introduces the parallactical gap between humour and politics or, in other words, between the individual ideal of happiness and the idea of collective gaiety promised by the grand political slogans.

Mark Weeks traces three strategies of control in relation to humour that he thinks coincide with Kundera's fictional works:

> Firstly, traditional representation such as thee aggressive marginalization of humour under Stalin; then the recuperation or rehabilitation of laughter to serve neo-revolutionary historical narratives, a strategy which might actually be discerned in Bakhtin; finally, the endless reproduction of laughter, until its temporal effects are submerged beneath its function as a signifier and as a privileged icon of fast free-floating signification — the postmodern phase. (132).

The Joke was written to attack the Stalinist phase in which the personal, playful humour was marginalized. The novel attacks the joyful optimism that was promoted by the state machinery. Ludvik, the protagonist, though himself a communist, can't stand the joyful optimism that

pervades everything around him. The postcard he sends to his class fellow Marketa is meant to mock this seriousness but we see that his humour is not taken as humour. The joke turns his whole life upside down. The personal playfulness draws political ire for Ludvik. The joke does not end here as we see that how he continues to go through situations that have the structure of a joke.

Weeks is of the view that the idea behind the sacrilegious aspect of light-heartedness and playfulness has its roots in the belief that such an attitude undermines the very purpose of these movements. By quoting Thomas Hobbes who opined that people who are working towards a serious goal, does not have any moment to laugh, also, Henri Bergson who discerns a latent pessimism in laughter, Weeks makes us see the inherent insecurity that lies at the heart of such political projects. Despite the fact that Ludvik looks at this official optimism with a sceptical eye, he is not cured of it even after his expulsion from The Party. In the mines, he continues to make attempts to find his way back in. What finally cures him of this 'ailment' is the experience of a personal emotion of love. In Lucie, he finds someone who has nothing to do with history and the grand march of freedom. She is characterized by a slowness. The schism between the injection of The Party to laugh and the ahistorical personal experience Ludvik feels in the presence of Lucie is an interesting point but Weeks does not delve into it any further. The split is, basically, a split between the personal and political and I intend to expand on it a bit further in this project.

Another theme highlighted by Weeks in this article is that of 'existentialist void' that is the focus of reflection in *The Joke*. He says that Kundera yokes together laughter and death and this opens an existentialist void in the mind of his characters. Ludvik contemplates suicide and the thought induces a feeling of laughter in him. Towards the end, Helena takes laxatives instead of sleeping tablets and this also causes an amusing situation for Ludvik and the readers. Here, no doubt, the void has a different connotation but I intend to use a philosophical formulation of void in this project to bring forth my argument that how the void gives birth to parallactical ontological modes.

In her article, "Forgetting in the Ground of Kitsch and Falling with Kundera and Heidegger" (2013), Sasa Horvat has also discussed the parallax of the personal and political albeit from a different angle. She has compared the concept of kitsch found in Kundera's novel

The Unbearable Lightness of Being with Heidegger's idea of Falling (*Das Verfallen*) discussed in his book *Being and Time*. According to Heidegger, an individual 'authentic' life is based upon the choices an individual makes for himself or herself. When an individual lets others decide what is good and valuable for him, he or she, in Heidegger's terms, experiences a *Das Verfallen* or Fall. In this case, 'the others' are community members or the people living in the neighboured. Heidegger calls them "the they." In his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera has used a similar concept to designates the choices made by his characters. Kitsch is a term that is used for 'garbage art' but in the novel it is used for the acceptance of all the values, morals and styles of life that are promoted by a culture as desirable and acceptable and if a person does not adhere to them, he or she would be cast out.

Horvat quotes examples of the events in the lives of three major characters of the novel to drive her point home. Sabina is an artist and she hates everything that is promoted by Communist regime and considers it kitsch. Finally, she leaves her country thinking that in the Western liberal democracies, this kitsch would not torment her. She is wrong. Kitsch is also there though in a different form. This implies that kitsch is not just a feature of a totalitarian regime but adherence to a different ideology gives birth to a different kitsch: "Depending on how somebody answers the question how is the world created, a different type of kitsch is borne: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, Fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national or International" (Horvat 165). Horvat asserts that this is what happens to Tomas when he refuses to sign the retraction of his article. The public opinion, always a representative of the kitsch, has already decided for Tomas that what should he do. There is one group of his colleagues who think that he would surely sign the retraction. There is a second group that has refused to sign something like this and now they are looking at Tomas with a moral high ground. Tomas is surprised that how can all these people believe in advance that it is not in him to resist. Horvat says: "Now it has become clear that Others, under the moral of totalitarian kitsch, decide what norm of behaviour is good for society. If kitsch is controlled and used by politicians to model the behaviour of people, then kitsch shows itself in a function of modelling moral norms" (168). Tomas decides not to live according to kitsch and refuses to sign the document. He loses his job, in fact, many jobs, and towards the end we find him living as a peasant in the countryside. At last, when the authorities, the proponents of kitsch, see that Tomas is socially dead, they leave him in peace.

Horvat's angle is quite close to what I intend to find in the selected texts of Kundera. The parallax between the individual point of view and the political ideology is one of the main objectives of my study and this relationship between individual authentic ontology and kitsch, as explored by Horvat, falls in the same category. The point of diversion is that Horvat has just traced the difference between the two ontological modes and then associated them with death. My purpose is to find out the nature of this gap and to look for the sublation of the two. Horvat provides one or two very interesting insights for my project but the essential argument must be taken a bit further. My study would attempt to fill in this gap.

"Laughter and Ironic Humour in the Fiction of Milan Kundera" (1984), is another article in which Bruce Donahue has taken up the issue of laughter and humour. Donahue, from the very beginning of his article, links humourlessness with grand narratives and asserts that the Truth with capital T always disparages irony and laughter. Donahue comments: "Like many other writers from the 'East', Kundera's experience with the myth of Marxism-Leninism have taught him harsh lessons about how humourless any Truth with capital T can be once it is embodied in an institution with power" (67). Though Kundera has always denounced the label of a political writer, his fiction does contain a scathing exposé of totalitarian ideology. It does not mean Kundera has a proclivity towards nihilism. In fact, Kundera is also wary of the "nihilistic truth which denies the meaning of everything" (Donahue 67). This implies that when Kundera expresses a sceptical attitude towards Truth with a capital T, it does not mean that he is inclined towards nihilism. His outlook is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment humanism and he desires a society where ideologies may not determine individual choices. Donahue observes that Kundera uses irony to destroy the myths that govern us and also considers irony and humour a strong weapon of the individual against these myths. Novel is aligned with the personal because political ideologies always present truth from a single viewpoint. On the other hand, novel presents before us many perspectives.

The parallactical gap that exists between the personal and political, one of the angles that I intend to use to analyse Kundera's fiction, is staged in different ways. Donahue finds this parallax in the difference between personal ironical stance and humourlessness of political ideologies:

> The characters with a sense of humour delight in the ironic joys of life (just as the ironic perspective of the narration allows the reader to see the tentativeness of human truths and consequently the humour in the human condition) but continually encounter the social and political humourlessness inherent in systems that are sure of their truths and unwilling to temper them with irony. (68)

This illustrates that Kundera's characters do not face the meaninglessness of existence rather their dilemmas are caused by people and institutions that are unwilling to share their ironical perspective. In a world, governed by fanatical laughter, the characters with ironical standpoint become the victims. Laughter stands in opposition to irony. Laughter is political while irony is personal. Laughter makes one sure of everything, inculcates a sense of false confidence. Irony enables one to demystify the political myths and brings out one's humanity. The tragedy is that there are not enough people who have this kind of sense of humour.

Apart from humour and irony, another main feature of Kundera's fiction discussed by Donahue is the totalitarian character of history. European idea of history, influenced by Hegel and Marx, is based upon linear development. It is a march towards progress and the individual should join this march. Donahue quotes Kundera in his article with reference to his commentary on Hasek's novel. The comments reveal Kundera's take on this European idea of history, that's why, I am quoting it here:

> It is not war that is grotesque in Hasek's novel, but History, that is to say the concept which pretends to rationalize the irrational stupidity of war, pretending to give it sense. European thought formed by Hegel and by Marx conceives of History as being the embodiment of reason, seriousness par excellence. . ..
>
> The Good Soldier Schweik brutally disrupts this order of things and asks a question: what if that rationalization which means to present the chain of events as reasonable were only a mystification? What if history were simply stupid? (qtd in Donahue 70)

The totalitarian regimes, like that of Stalin, invoke the rational development of history to justify their actions. In the process, the individual and his personal freedom is crushed. In *The Joke*, and also in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, we see how characters' lives are destroyed and their personal ambitions are thwarted because of this overarching conception of history.

Donahue has touched on the same issue that I am going to discuss in my project albeit from a different angle. He has come to the subject from the perspective of irony and humour and how these are aligned with the personal in contrast to laughter that is associated with political ideologies. Donahue has just analysed this binary but he has not developed this concept further to bring out the internal relationship between the personal and political. I intend to bring to light the parallactical relationship of the two and, if possible, to describe the nature of this relationship.

In her article, "The Narrator in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*" (1992), Hana Pichova has brought the relationship between a totalitarian and individual entity to the fore from a different perspective. She has tried to interpret Kundera's novel by looking into the role of the narrator in relation to the characters. Pichova asserts that the narrator can exercise the same power over the characters that in real life is exercised by the grand political ideologies. Her scheme is to find out the practice of freedom on the part of the narrator at the structural level that, at the level of content, is denied to the characters by the totalitarian politics. She claims: "In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, however, the narrator intentionally limits his powers to avoid subjugating his characters to same totalitarian rule they try to escape on the thematic level" (217). In this way, the purpose of the narrator is to create such narrative strategy that may not be similar to the world we find at the thematic level. Pichova terms this device "textual freedom" (217) and upholds that the purpose of such a narratological scheme is that "the character's desire for freedom on the thematic level is supported by the narrator, whose choice of narratological techniques enables him to free the characters on the structural level" (217). In order to explore her research question, Pichova does a structural analysis of Kundera's novel. She compares the original Czech text with its English translation to bring to light the structural subtleties that support her claim. She analyses the narrative techniques like 'advance notices,' 'structural parody of Socialist Realism,' 'narrative self-consciousness' and gives us a glimpse into the parallactical relationship of the personal and political from a unique perspective. I would like to mention one example here. Pichova notes that unlike the narrator of conventional and Socialist Realist novel, Kundera's narrator is not all powerful. He does not claim to know everything about his characters nor he attempts to control their life choices. Pichova goes to the original text to prove that the narrator does not think that his characters are already fully developed. The narrator says about Tomas:

"Myslim na Tomile ui fadu let ..." ["I have been thinking about Tomas for many years ...."]. This reveals that the narrator has not finished thinking about his character. She asserts that, in the original Czech text, Kundera has used present tense about the origin of the character of Tomas: "In the very sentence in which he describes how he created a character; the narrator backs away and grants the character the power to create himself. Characters may have been given life by the narrator, but they develop on their own throughout *The Unbearable Lightness of Being"* (222). This one stance is enough to demonstrate that the narrator, at the formalistic level, wants to give that freedom to his characters that they cannot find in their lives. The novel, thus, stages the parallactical gap between the personal and the political at the structural level too.

In my project, though the concern would be the same, the focus would be more on the thematic analysis. Moreover, my purpose is not just to point to the relationship that exists between certain individuals and an overarching power (in case of Pichova's article, the narrator and his characters). My intention is to seek the parallactical modes of being that have arisen out of Nothingness and despite their inherent incommensurability, they might be ONE. Pichova's article does contribute to enable me to formulate my stance.

In his article, "Homo Homini Lupus: Milan Kundera's *The Joke* (1990)", Frances L. Restuccia has also commented on the political side of Kundera's fiction. His chief contention is that despite a prolonged denial that his novels should be read and evaluated aesthetically rather than politically, Kundera is a political writer. Kundera claims to be a writer of the personal and not of the political as he has asserted, time and again, that *The Joke* is a love story. It clearly implies that being a love story makes the novel a personal narrative devoid of any political message. The question is whether the personal can be separated from the political? There can't be a simple, straightforward answer to this question. The individual lives in a social formation and the social formation is always grounded on the relations of power. These power relations, or in plain words politics, affect one's life, one way or the other. Restuccia is of the view that individuals, living under totalitarian regimes, develop a pathological sadomasochistic attitude towards other individuals. "…men victimized by the Communist Party in turn become the victimizers who wield power over and even brutalize other men and, more dramatically, women" (Restuccia 282). In order to validate his argument, Restuccia brings in Freud and some other thinkers. Especially, he quotes from *Civilization and its Discontents* in which Freud says

that men are aggressive by nature and always consider their neighbour as a potential victim of their aggressive or erotic instincts. In this article, Restuccia wants to prove that this instinctual aggressiveness of an individual, under the totalitarian regimes, turns against other individuals. Perhaps the reason is that when the individuals become political victims and cannot do anything about it, their aggression turns towards the other individuals who are weaker. Restuccia quotes the examples from *The Joke* to demonstrate that how the frustration of Ludvik and some other characters turns against other individuals:

> Mistreated horribly by the Communists, Ludvik in turn attempts physically to force Lucie, a young, sensitive, melancholy woman he comes to love, to have sex with him. Although he testifies that the "total desire" he feels for Lucie precludes violence, it seems, given the wrestling match that ensues between them, that his desire gets entangled intricately with violence. (285)

This is really a novel argument to look into this relationship between the individual and political. In fact, this argument suggests that I should also bring in the psychological element in my research. Though the overall logic of Restuccia is a bit different from mine. He has just studied the impact of the totalitarian politics on the individual from the psychological perspective. I intend to look at this relationship from a parallactical angle and see how this parallactical angle makes them appear two instead of ONE.

In his review of Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality*, titled "The Misanthrope" (1992), Craig Sleigman has criticized Kundera for his alleged thematic and formalistic innovations. He has levelled this allegation that that *Immortality* is "nothing but digressions and reflections and then more digressions" (12). Sleigman asserts that Kundera's previous novels, despite having authorial interventions and self-consciousness, veer towards realistic tradition. But he has changed his scheme in *Immortality*, "creating two planes of figures — the traditional fictional plane, and a "real" one that includes him as a character — and then intermingling them" (Sleigman 12). Sleigman does not see this formalistic innovation as a success and claims that it has brought an element of artificiality in the narrative. *Immortality* is the first novel of Kundera that is not set in his native country Czech Republic and "the depths of love and anguish that this small wonderful country has always kindled in him have given way to impatience and irritation" (Sleigman 12). Sleigman traces the origin of this impatience and

irrigation in Kundera's dislike of the 'West'. "…publicity, mass culture and its melodramas, the world of singers, fashions, fancy food stores, and elegant industrialists turning into tv stars" (12). Also, Kundera does not endorse the destruction of privacy in the Western countries. If in his native country, it was the Communist police that destroyed it, in the West this was done by the journalists.

Another allegation that comes from Sleigman is that the heroine of *Immortality*, Agnes, is a misanthrope. She does not feel any solidarity with human species. She wants to take refuge in nature and avoid any human contact. She is living in a world she has ceased to love. Sleigman asserts "Having come to "disagree with the world in which all of us live," Agnes gets her author's endorsement but the other characters are mainly the targets" (12). Moreover, Kundera has made other characters his targets because he thinks that they are "Homo Sentimentalis,' human beings who have raised feelings to a category of value" (Sleigman12). In the light of these observations, Sleigman has deemed *Immortality* a failure.

I think that Sleigman's attack on *Immortality* does not take into account the relationship between an individual and the social structure he is part of. Why is it that Agnes feels alienated from the people around her? Can we simply describe it as her misanthropy? I beg to differ with Sleigman in this regard. In my project, I intend to explore this attitude of Agnes from the perspective of the parallax that exists between the individual and the political, body and soul, and universal and particular. My contention is that the analysis of Agnes and some other characters through these parallactical views, would reveal a more nuanced explanation of the motives of these characters. Deeming it misanthropy is too simplistic a reading of the novel.

Ivan Sanders, in his article "Mr. Kundera, the European" (1991), has discussed Kundera from the perspective of his Europeanism. Even though Sanders has mentioned other works of Kundera as well, the main focus is *Immortality*. The West has tended to read Kundera as a voice of dissent against Communist oppression. For many such readers, *Immortality* proves to be an uncomfortable reading as it also portrays a bleak picture of Western liberalism. Sanders opines that *Immortality* puts forward this thesis that:

> Human values can shrivel in a democracy, too: they can be trivialized by a different kind of crassness and coarseness, like the popular media. His emancipated, urbane

> characters can experience the same sense of abandonment, the same Angst, as can the harried subjects of political dictatorships. (107)

Sanders believes that Kundera's fiction propagates a humanism that seems to have disappeared in the mists of nationalism and political dogmatism. Kundera is not a writer of one nation, or one language (his transnationalism is well established), but he is a citizen of Europe. His faith in European culture has made him discern a collective heritage of European culture:

> Kundera has always viewed his writings as contributions not just to Eastern (or Central) European life but to the culture of Europe generally. The great modern age in Europe which began with Descartes and Cervantes — when cultural values filled the place left vacant by religion — is now, Kundera argues, in danger of coming to an end. (Sanders 108)

In *Immortality*, Kundera has presented Goethe as a character. This also is a nod to Goethe's status as a "quintessentially European phenomenon" (Sanders 108). The point is that Kundera also aspires to play the same role in resurrecting the European humanist tradition as was played by Goethe. Kundera does not want to be recognized as the writer of one 'region' but "demands to be judged as a European writer" (Sanders 108).

Sanders' analysis of Kundera's European heritage demonstrates the fact that Kundera does believe in one grand narrative — his version of European culture. Though he rejects the grand march of history as propagated by Hegel and Marx, he has his own conception of European history from the perspective of cultural humanism. This angle is significant for my project as I intend to explore this relationship between the individual and the political narratives. Kundera seems to advocate the freedom for the individual against the political ideologies but at the same time he himself does believe in this another grand narrative. My project would focus on this issue from a parallactical view.

Steven Unger has reviewed Milan Kundera's book *The Curtain*, in his essay titled "Kundera's Variations: Passing thoughts on Novel and Nation" (2008). The review is focused on the concept of "Die Weltliterature", a phrase Kundera borrowed from Goethe, meaning 'world literature.' Unger claims that the phrase was conceived in the 19th C, and Goethe's use of the term must not be confused with the contemporary obsession with 'literature without boundaries,' promoted under the banner of globalization. The term in Kundera's book, implies

an identity espoused through a regional affiliation, beyond the geographical boundaries. For Kundera, Unger asserts, geographical boundaries are political while novel is an aesthetic phenomenon transcending these artificial categorizations. Kundera supports the idea of fiction inspired by great European novelists like Rebelais, Cervantes, Sterne, Laclos, Diderot, Stendhal, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Proust. Though this invocation to a particular discourse about novel betrays Kundera's earlier claim that he mistrusts all grand narratives: "For someone whose fiction regularly conveys a mistrusts of master discourses associated with politics, it is no small irony that Kundera's literary tastes favour a "high "canon of European writers" (Unger 59). In *The Curtain*, Kundera gives a special status to writers like Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, Jaroslav Hasek, Witold Gombrowicz. The rationale for this special treatment is that Kundera discerns a specific trans-historical and trans-national trajectory that connects and contextualizes the works of these writers.

Secondly, Kundera propounds, novel has its own epistemology both grounded in and divorced from the political landscape that is its genesis. This epistemology is not political or historical, but aesthetic. *The Curtain* is an attempt to link the art of novel with the history of his region. But Kundera's conception of political history is not grounded in Hegelian/Marxian model of progress: "To understand what Kundera means by political history, it is helpful to note that he sets the sense of history he applies to art in general and to the novel in particular at a critical remove from associations with progress or improvement" (Unger 59). Kundera makes himself clear that it is not the purpose of the novelist to write something that would be considered an improvement on previous works.

This review by Steven Unger is significant as it establishes the relationship of a novelist and his work with an over-arching structure — in this case the regional and political context. A novelist has the same relationship with his regional and historical setting as an individual has with his socio-political situatedness. The irony is that Kundera, throughout his oeuvre, condemns the colonization of the personal space of the individual by the grand totalitarian narratives. But here he seems to be in favour of reading a work of literature under the umbrella of a grand narrative. Unger's article has analysed the relationship between the individual and political from a unique perspective and it would contribute to bring a valuable insight to my project.

Peter Petro in his article, “Milan Kundera’s Search for Authenticity” (1981) takes into account many of Kundera’s works to look for the authentic ground motif that is essential to them. His point of departure is that Kundera, in his works, searches for an authentic existential experience. This authentic experience is supposed to have been lost due to political upheavals that his country went through in the 20th century. Petro believes that politics is not the only culprit here. The ethical relativism and secular humanism also played their part to bring Czech culture to this state of affairs. Petro traces the influence of many Czech writers of the 20th century that contributed to this loss of authenticity but he thinks that Kundera, despite using their literary arsenal, does not belong to that creed. He holds the view that these writers wrote literature that can be termed ‘destructive’ albeit a misleading term in their context: “Of course, to say that it was "destructive" might be misleading; one should remember that it was liberating too. In Kundera's dialectic, one goes with the other; and, unfortunately, vice versa as well” (45).

Petro thinks that Kundera’s works have two principal themes, sex and politics. Superficially, both these topics seem to belong to two opposite realms of the individual and political. The analysis of these two at a deeper level reveals that both use the same machinations and chicanery to bring about the desired results. The realm of the political is about power and often the ethical boundaries get blurred to achieve this end. Same is the case with the personal sphere of sex. Both sexes, at the individual level, seek dominance and control over the other and no holds are barred in this game:

> On the one hand we have the intimate, personal, individual, on the other the collective, social, political. For Kundera these two spheres are connected, for "the regime only sets into action a mechanism which has already existed in ourselves. The task of the novel is not to pillory manifest political reality, but rather to expose scandals of a more anthropological character. (Petro 45)

Michael Cooke, in his article “Milan Kundera, Cultural Arrogance and Sexual Tyranny” (1992) has also presented the same argument. Though the main focus of the article is Kundera’s cultural narcissism regarding his native country, this thought is presented by Cooke to elucidate one of his points. He asserts:

> Sexuality for Kundera, far from being a private realm of freedom, is more often a microcosm of power struggle, nearly always involving the domination of one person over another, of strength over weakness. In *The Joke*, Ludvik's quest for Helena is an expression of his desire for revenge on Zemánek, but his tyranny (of sexuality) shows itself to be as brutal as any regime's; the reader finds himself increasingly unwilling to accept that Ludvik's obsessive violation of women (of Lucie as well as of Helena) does not run deeper than a purely external or indirect motivation. (82)

The argument that the political also exists in the individual realm of sexual relationships is an interesting one as it may lead to the argument that both are inherently ONE. Petro has not developed this notion further as, in the article, he veered to other directions. This argument is one of the main research areas of my project and I intend to delve a bit deeper into it. There exists a research gap and a further probe is needed to expand on it.

In “Kundera’s Use of Sexuality,” (2010), Mark Sturdivant has observed another paradox in the fiction of Kundera which concerns the physical and the spiritual. In his discussion on Kundera’s short story “The Hitchhiking Game,” he interprets how this difference in perspective also changes one’s existentialist boundaries. In this story, the young, unnamed female initially believes that her boyfriend never separates her body from her soul and that she can live with him wholly. However, Kundera suggests the implausibility of such an attitude in a game which the couple chooses to play: through changing identities, and fuelled by mutually possessive jealousy and relentlessly heightening eroticism, the two characters’ thoughts and actions offer another example of the author’s viewpoint expressed via sex-dominated circumstances. To her boyfriend, the girl grows more attractive physically as she withdraws from him psychically. As he muses that the illusion of her co-existing goodness and beauty which he worshipped is real only within the bounds of fidelity and purity and that beyond these bounds she ceases to be herself. The young man realizes that the girl he loved was a creation of his desire, his thoughts, and his faith and that the real girl now standing in front of him is hopelessly alien, hopelessly ambiguous. As the game merges with life, the two characters—the girl a prostitute, the boy her client—plunge into frenzied intercourse in which there are soon two bodies in perfect harmony, two sensual bodies, alien to each other. This sexual act causes the girl to acknowledge her irreversible mind/body duality as she, feeling horror at the

thought, realizes that she has never known such pleasure as that which she experiences beyond the forbidden boundary of love-making without emotion or love (Sturdivant 154).

Again, we see the two divergent stances related with two antagonistic modes of being and the shift from one to another is also a shift in the existentialist framework. There are dramatic and usually unhappy sexual liaisons throughout Kundera's work, generally centring on his characters' inability to combine love with sexual passion. Physical love rarely merges with spiritual love, he concludes sadly in *The Joke*. Particularly revealing are Tomas's reflections on erotic friendship in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. They exhibit a thoroughgoing aestheticism that not only typifies Kundera's treatment of erotic matters but also says a good deal about the underlying sensibility of his work.

In a pamphlet, "Milan Kundera and the Struggle of the Individual" (1991), Robert Thomas has brought out another dichotomy that exists between two ontological forms of being, the personal and political. He says that the struggle of an individual is not just against the opposite collective ideology but he attempts to reassert himself in the personal sphere too. The public and the private cannot be separated and exist together. For Thomas, Kundera envisages individual choices as the driving force of history and society. Robert Thomas writes:

> The public and the private move together and interweave until they are inseparable. If in Kundera's novels the individual living in truth is contrasted with the falseness of the collective then the principle of choice between these two powers is always at the forefront of his work. For him the individual is not simply the subject of historical forces but the arbiter and motor of history. (libertarian.co.uk)

The problem is that an individual is always made to suffer for the choice he makes. This dichotomy is a significant one as one of the important elements of the present research but Robert Thomas has just pointed towards this dichotomy and has not delved further into it as a way of showing how such antagonisms exist together and if there is any possibility of reconciliation (libertarian.co.uk).

In her article, "Images of the Crowd in Milan Kundera's Novels: From Communist Prague to Postmodern France" (2001), Martha Kuhlman has discussed in detail the representation of the crowds in the works of Milan Kundera and how the individuals are affected by the collective euphoria. She has pointed the fact that many 19th and 20th Century

literary works explore the impact of crowds on individual psyche and also how these crowds induce ambivalent emotions of fear and desire. She begins her analysis by examining Kundera's novel *Life is Elsewhere*. In this novel, the protagonist Jaromil is swept off his feet by the revolutionary fervour of 1948: "When he uses revolutionary jargon, he transcends himself, emptying his identity into a collective swarm that is both monstrous and magnificent" (Kuhlman 90). Jaromil feels that by blending in with the crowd, he has become more powerful and his being is transformed into something else: "Jaromil discarded his own speech and chose to act as a medium for someone else. Moreover, he did so with a feeling of intense pleasure; he felt himself to be part of a thousand-headed multitude, one organ of a hydra-headed dragon and that seemed magnificent" (Kundera, *LIE* 128). Kundera criticizes Jaromil for having this sense of false belonging to the crowd and points out the dangers inherent in such a belonging. Kuhlman also quotes Kundera's 1986 introduction to the novel in which he states that branding Jaromil as a bad poet is to miss the point. The monstrosity unleashed by the crowd is contained in all of us and it is just that it needs a proper occasion to come out (Kundera, *LIE* iv). Kuhlman thinks that the issue of identity in Kundera's novel is linked with his personal experiences:

> To understand Kundera's rejection of collective identity, one needs to recall that he has first-hand knowledge of Communism, not only as a dissenter, but as a believer. After World War II, the Communist Party was welcomed as a victor over the Nazis, and was regarded by many intellectuals as the most progressive and avant-garde movement of the time; Kundera was no exception to this trend. (91)

We already know that Kundera got in and out of the Party a number of times during his youth. But when he was in his thirties, he had started to get disillusioned. His first novel, *The Joke*, is an indication of this disillusionment that he was going through. There is some truth in this but this should be accounted for that Kundera, even as a Party member, was not attached to its collective ideology in an absolutist way and did keep a critical distance. Kuhlman admits this fact that the past of the writer is irrelevant in the interpretation of his works, though, it is quite necessary to understand their historical context. We should approach his works from the perspective of a sceptic who lived through a horrible war and then saw his country plunged into oppression. Kundera himself says that in his youth he did try to harmonize individuality with collective political ideology but later on he started to question his own convictions. Antonin Liehm, in his book *The Politics of Culture*, quoted Kundera, saying: "I proclaimed

that only those individuals should become Communists who have a love of people. But when this era was over, I asked myself: Why? Why should one love people anyway?" (141). Kuhlman thinks that this was the turning point for Kundera. He started to come out of collective euphoria as we can discern in his first novel *The Joke*. Kuhlman has also analysed *The Joke* and to contextualize the story, she has quoted historical events that prove that such a committee did exist in Communist Czechoslovakia that would try the deviant behaviour like that of Ludvik. During the trial of Ludvik, Zamanek alludes to a book by Julius Fucik that was considered a kind of Bible for the revolutionaries in the post-World War II Czechoslovakia. Peter Hruby, with reference to Fucik's book, describe in detail the rituals and emotions associated with May Day parades and how individuals would lose themselves in the collective madness (16). These images described by Fucik clearly indicate how individual identity gets submerged in the crowd. USSR created a narrative in which all Communist countries were enjoined in a single identity. In this way, the individuals lost not only their personal identity but also their national association. The same phenomenon is highlighted by Slavenka Drakulic in her essay "First Person Singular." She says; "So in Eastern European countries, the difference between 'We' and 'I' is far more important than mere grammar. 'We' means fear, resignation, submissiveness, a warm crowd and someone else deciding your destiny. 'I' means giving individuality and democracy a chance" (2). This mentality also prevailed in the sphere of creative arts. Dusan Hamsik, a reporter in the 1967 congress of writers, explains that the writers were compelled to conform to a particular brand of Socialist Realism in which the Party was the "choir master" while the writers were "chorus singers" (32). Kuhlman thinks that Kundera has successfully defied this Socialist Realism by making *The Joke* a 'polyphonic text.' The polyphony is achieved through the variation in point of view and other devices like arrangement of the chapters in seven parts. The structure and various viewpoints of the same narrative provoke "scepticism in the reader who must negotiate and question conflicting versions of the same story" (Kuhlman 94). These narrative innovations do not allow the novel to posit a collective "We" either at the level of the narrator or the reader. The colonization of the" I" by the "We" is avoided through this technical dexterity on part of Kundera.

Next Kuhlman analyses Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. In that novel, Kundera, as the narrator, tells us about his own fascination with May day parades and the environment of festivity that surrounded them. He felt this fascination when he was young

and an active member of the Party. This fascination was short lived as the purge of 1950 forced Kundera to change his stance about this collective ideology and appeal of the crowds. In the novel, a character Madame Raphael is so obsessed with revolution and crowds that she wants to be the part of any cause just to feel the euphoria of it all. Sometimes she wants to join Methodist Church, sometimes Marxists, Feminists, or whatever ideology is in fashion (89). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, this desire to relate to a crowd is described in terms of kitsch and Kuhlman has shown that kitsch is not just an ideological tool used by totalitarian regimes but it is also prevalent in so called liberal democracies. Matei Calinescu has divided kitsch into two categories; propaganda and entertainment:

> Limiting ourselves, for the moment, to literature, we can distinguish two very comprehensive categories, each one comprising an indefinite number of species and subspecies: (1) Kitsch produced for propaganda (including political kitsch, religious kitsch, etc) and (2) Kitsch produced mainly for entertainment. {…} we should recognize, however, that the vision between the two categories can become extremely vague: propaganda can masquerade as 'cultural' entertainment and, conversely, entertainment can be directed towards subtle manipulative goals. (236)

One aspect common to both forms of kitsch is that both employ a cheap sentimental approach to sell their products. If Kundera's early works deal with totalitarian kitsch, his later works, after he moved to France, are about entertainment kitsch. As Longinovic has mentioned that in the absence of totalitarianism, consumer kitsch — mediocrity, conformity, and mass production — increasingly becomes the target of his French novels (85). In *Identity*, instead of the oppression of Communism, the characters have this uneasy feeling all the time that through the surveillance cameras, somebody is watching them. Chantel, one of the characters, thinks that she is being watched by cameras and also, she is just another body in the crowd and nobody turns their head to look at her. This points towards another dilemma faced by postmodern man, being supervised and at the same time lost in the crowd.

Kuhlman's analysis of Kundera's novels with reference to representation of crowds and their relationship with the individuals, reveals many points of entry into the debate. As we have seen, she has brought different critical viewpoints to demonstrate how an individual identity is affected when he or she becomes part of the crowd. My project is focused on the

political and crowd can be taken as an apt metaphor for it. The political mode of being is also informed by adherence to a community or a group. Though there are many points of convergence, my project aims to explore the relationship between the political and personal modes of being and how this relationship is parallactical. Kuhlman's has limited herself to the analysis of representation of the crowds but stops short of developing this relationship between the individual and the political. In my study, I aim to fill this gap and explore this from another angle.

Conclusion

I have reviewed the works related with perspectives, the personal and political, body and soul, universal and particular, and also the existing critical scholarship on works of Milan Kundera. The review of literature provides a backdrop to my analysis of the three selected novels in the forthcoming chapters. The works dealing with my three perspectives and Milan Kundera's fiction are myriad and it was hard for me to make a selection. I reviewed only those works that have an immediate bearing on my project. Some of the works that I have not reviewed here are cited across my study in the chapter-wise analysis of my primary texts. In keeping with the works I have reviewed, the research gaps I have found in them, and the theoretical roadmap that my research questions ask me to follow, I have formulated my theoretical framework and research methodology in the next chapter.

Notes

[1]. This insight is significant in the context of this project. The ontological gap that exists between the personal and political became pronounced in post-Renaissance Europe. In the 20th C, all totalitarian regimes exercised power in the name of masses. They made people believe that all regulations and restrictions are for their own future good. In Kundera's fiction, this conflict between individual desire and political conflict is explored in detail and I would come to that in my analysis chapters.

[2]. Bakhtin's term for this kind of humour, the humour that can disrupt and intervene, is 'Carnival.' Carnival is a kind of literary and art form that brings together diverse cultural and folk forms. It gives people a feeling of affiliation with the group. In a carnival, even eccentric and odd behavior is acceptable. It challenges social taboos. For a detailed discussion, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[3]. Across my thesis, I would use The Party to refer to the Communist Party ruling Czechoslovakia during the time Kundera's earlier novels were written.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The Literature Review provides me the clarity of perspective regarding the theoretical lens that I deploy to read my primary texts. Moreover, this enables me to establish what research methodology or method would be apt for my investigation. In this chapter, pursuant to the gaps I have found in my literature review, first I would discuss the theoretical framework of my study that I intend to employ to read the selected novels of Milan Kundera. Secondly, I have elucidated the research methodology and method that I am going to use for my project.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Parallax is the change visible when an object is seen from two different perspectives. Slavoj Žižek's *The Parallax View* includes many perspectives on parallax. In it, Žižek uses parallax as a metaphor for the gap that opens up whenever two irreconcilable points of view co-exist. Zizek's book is structured around manifestations of parallax in three main areas: philosophy, science, and politics. In philosophy, parallax is the ontological difference between subject and object; in science, it is the difference between the conceptual Real of mathematical formulae and our own experience of reality; in politics, it encompasses all irreconcilable social antagonisms between individuals and groups, for example 'class struggle' (Zizek, *TPV* 11). Though Žižek's concept of parallax is clearly defined, his definition is wide, and so the concept is widely applicable. Accordingly, throughout the book, Žižek layers parallax onto parallax, like a palimpsest, in order, for example, to suggest that the co-existence of religious belief and doubt is itself caught up in a parallax, inasmuch as it inspires in the believer both a feeling of anxiety and a consciousness of the more 'comical' elements of religious belief (Zizek, *TPV* 387). Each example of parallax thus implies others, existing within a network of parallactical relationships infinitely extendable in multiple directions.

Milan Kundera's fictional world is constructed on paradoxical relationships between different modes of being, and in his view, grand narratives, like history, progress and rationality, have dulled and obscured the link with our own 'self.' The avowed aim of his fiction is to unfetter 'being' from these chains and set it free. His novels explore the tension between the demands of grand narratives which see individual hopes and aspirations as insignificant compared to the collective goal of history or spirit. Here the question is whether 'being' is the product of socio-historical forces or autonomous and whether it can exist in isolation. These two positions engender a 'parallax gap,' a shifting of perspective and point of view that apparently remains irreconcilable.

Slavoj Zizek's Hegelian methodology may be applied to interpret Kundera' text. Zizek also discerns a parallax gap between different modes of perception and he explores whether there exists a possibility to sublate or mediate this gap. Zizek's theorization of the parallax is really radical in the context of contemporary postmodern celebration/mourning of the death of grand narratives. The application of this theorization on the tension between the two ontological positions found in the fiction of Kundera may be foregrounded to open a space where this concept of mediation or sublation may be played out or redefined. For this purpose, the study intends to bring into play the Zizekian ontological categories like universal and particular, Hegelian triad and his materialist re-inscription of Hegel through Lacanian psychoanalysis. The intention is to highlight these 'parallax gaps' and to map out the possibility of a common ground, if any. Though Zizek's discussion of parallax is confined to three spheres — philosophy, science and politics, many of his interventions may be utilized to interpret a literary text.

Before I venture further, it is in order, that I first explicate my theoretical framework and trace the itinerary of Zizekian formulation so that its appositeness to my study may well be elucidated. To explicate my position, I have divided this section into the following headings:

3.2.1 The Parallax Object

The parallax view is about the respective position of the observer and the observed or to be more precise, the subject and the object. The relative position of the subject can cause a shift in the perspective e.g. from a moving vehicle the nearer objects seem to move faster as compared to the objects farther away. The same phenomenon is evident when we think that we

are looking at one object but a slight shift in our position reveals that, in fact, there are two objects. Slavoj Zizek, though, wants us to observe the opposite parallax, from a position where the two objects appear different but if we change our perspective, we come to know that they are actually ONE object. Zizek's magnum opus, *The Parallax View*, is basically the exposition of this parallactical move and how he attempts to demonstrate the nature of the ONE. [1]

3.2.2 Unpacking the Void

The question "how did reality came into being?" is not only an enquiry into 'being' or 'something' but it is also an enquiry into 'Nothing' or 'non-being.' 'Something' must have originated from 'Nothing' and this nothing just can't be brushed off as mere 'Non-entity' as without the grounding of nothing, being could not have originated. As Hegel has opined:

> And further, that which is-beginning, already is, and equally, as yet, is not. The opposites being and non-being are therefore in immediate union in it: in other words, it is the undifferentiated unity of the two. The analysis of the beginning thus yields the concept of the unity of being and non-being, or (in a more reflected form) the unity of the state of being differentiated, and of being undifferentiated, or the identity of identity and non-identity. (211)

Hegel's exposition is crucial because he is positing 'Nothingness' as the ground on which 'Something' or 'Being' is founded. In his re-reading of Hegel through a materialist lens, Zizek has attempted to bring forth this concept of 'Nothingness' or 'Void' as something positive and not mere 'Nothing.' There is nothing positive or material out of which reality was born rather the search for any foundation or grounding of reality always leads to 'Nothing' or Void. Zizek opines: "One should thus reject the "positive" ontology which presupposes some zero-level of reality where things "really happen' and dismisses the higher levels as mere abbreviations, illusory self-perception, and so forth. There is no such zero-level: if we go "all the way down;' we arrive at the Void" (*LTN* 733). Zizek's dialectical materialist method does not concern with the question that why after all there is Being rather the question is opposite, instead of Being why is there Nothing? "…how is it that, the more we analyze reality, the more we find a void?" (Zizek, *LTN* 925). To put it briefly, we perceive reality as something concrete, something positive, but in actuality it does not have the ontological depth or consistency.

Zizek asserts that the difference between two waring philosophies of Materialism and Idealism is not that the belief in Materialism is that only matter exists and reality is inherently material. On the contrary, the philosophy of Materialism differs from Idealism because of the notion of Void or Nothing (Zizek, *LTN* 60). Democritus, the first known Materialist, is of the view that Nothing or Void has a positive existence. Zizek explicates this in these words:

> In order to get from nothing to something, we do not have to add something to the void; on the contrary, we have to subtract, take away, something from nothing. Nothing and othing are thus not simply the same: "Nothing" is the generative void out of which othings, primordially contracted pre-ontological entities, emerge-at this level, nothing is more than othing, negative is more than positive, once we enter the ontologically fully constituted reality, however, the relationship is reversed: something is more than nothing, in other words, nothing is purely negative, a privation of something. (*LTN* 60)

In the beginning, there was only the Void and the Void got split to create something. In this way, something was not added to 'Nothing', on the contrary, something was subtracted from the Void. Looking at it from this perspective, the void seems to be something more positive, though after something came into existence, the whole notion was reversed and now it seemed as if something is positive and nothing is negative.

The void was split into two — into 'Nothing' and 'Something', 'Non-being' and 'Being.' We can see here that this is 'pure' or 'minimal' difference — not the difference between two positive entities but a difference between a thing and itself or between the Void and Something, a Something that did not exist separately but was alienated from the Void. This alienated Something is what constitutes material reality or the ONE. Being a dialectical materialist, Zizek believes that ONE or the Absolute is not a metaphysical entity rather it is substantial. This implies that the first split, the minimal difference, occurs in the Void when it gets separated from itself and turns into ONE or material reality:"…at the beginning (even if it is a mythical one), there is no substantial One, but Nothingness itself; every One comes second, emerges through the self-relating of this Nothingness. In other words, Nothing as negation is not primarily the negation of something, of a positive entity, but the negation of itself" (Zizek, *LTN* 378). This takes us to the next question, "Is this ONE complete, unified and whole?" Zizek is of the view that this ONE of material reality is not whole and complete

as a further split is introduced in its constitution. This split is the split between the Real and the Symbolic.[2] The Symbolic order qua reality is an incomplete account of the Real and language with its chain of signifiers attempts to represent the Real but this attempt is always a failed attempt leaving behind many fissures and gaps which consequently render material reality 'Not-All' or incomplete. Furthermore, the split between the Real and the Symbolic also lies at the heart of 'selfhood' and this leads us to the problem of subject and object.

3.2.3 The ONE and the Minimal Difference

In *The Parallax View*, Zizek attempts to resurrect the Materialist interpretation of the universe. The fundamental problem with the materialist interpretation is that of the subject or consciousness. If there is only matter in this universe, then, how out of this dead matter, the consciousness or thought was born or, in other words, how the subject rose out of the object. The ONE is the material reality or the universe has only ONE constitution but the question to be asked is that how this material reality, this ONE, split into two? How did the conscious thought come into being and the ONE was split into a subject — the one who thinks and perceives, and the object — one which is perceived. When this ONE is split into two, now it does not coincide with itself, it is different from itself as the nature of the subject is completely opposite to that of the object. In his book, Zizek ventures to prove that how these two apparently opposite phenomena are, in fact, ONE, hence the parallax:

> The key problem here is that the basic "law "of dialectical materialism, the struggle of opposites, was colonized/obfuscated by the New Age notion of the polarity of opposites (yin-yang, and so on). The first critical move is to replace this topic of the polarity of opposites with the concept of the inherent "tension," gap, noncoincidence, of the One itself. This book is based on a strategic politico-philosophical decision to designate this gap which separates the One from itself with the term parallax. (Zizek, *TPV* 7)

The difference between the subject and the object which Zizek deems as 'pure' or 'minimal difference' can be illustrated through the example of a human 'self.' If I am the human 'self' then there is one 'I' that is, at the imaginary level, which is performing the act of perception or, in other words, my consciousness and then there is my body, my visible and concrete part, which can be perceived by my consciousness and it is the object. There is a pure or minimal difference between the I — who perceives and the 'me' — that is being perceived. This is

minimal difference as in real terms it is no difference at all, “Another name for the parallax gap is therefore minimal difference” (Zizek *TPV* 18). So Zizek asserts that his book, “is based on a strategic politico-philosophical decision to designate this gap which separates the ONE from itself with the term ‘parallax’” (*TPV* 7). The concept of parallax, in a way, describes the relationship between the ONE with its own self and it is also the relationship between the subject and the object.

3.2.4 Subject, Object and ‘objet petit a’

In *The Parallax View*, Zizek attempts to read Marx and Hegel through Lacan so that the split in the ONE can be explained using the framework of ‘Dialectical Materialism.’ ‘object petit a’[3] or simply ‘objet a’ is an incomprehensible element of ‘I’ that is perceived as an ‘object’ or in other words it is the objective part of the subject that appears in the object. For instance, what is the reason or the cause that the subject wants a particular thing or object? What makes a subject desire something? Zizek says that the subject does not know why is it that he or she desires an object as the reason is unknown to the said subject. The desire of the subject is unintelligible and incomprehensible as it is Unconscious. The subject desires a person or thing without knowing the reason of this desire. If I am asked why is it that I want a specific object, what are the qualities that make that object appear desirable to me or in case of a person why is it that my love object is a particular person and not somebody else; I would not be able to answer these questions. This implies that when I desire some object or person, there is some element that is the reason or object cause of my desire but this element actually does not belong to that object or person. It is my Unconscious or unknown part that makes me see that object in a different light and makes me desire it. Is not it that in this way the subject is the part of the object? Lacan termed this unknown element or object cause of desire as ‘objet a.’ Another angle to this formulation is that the nature of my desire is linked with objective reality in the sense that objective reality is not whole or complete. If it were complete, then there would have been no future, no uncertainty, no chance. This ‘lack’ in the objective reality is caused by ‘objet a’ which is the object cause of my desire but it is unknown to me. My desire is actually the desire to make this unknown known, so that I may become transparent to myself, I may remove the stain of ‘objet a.’ ‘Objet a’ is unconsciousness which I cannot know.

‘Objet a’ is not in possession of the subject and the subject believes that it is possessed by an ‘other.’ I believe that this other, my counterpart, has something that is more than him or her and he/she can complete me. This is the reason that we desire what we desire. We do not fully coincide with our own image of ourselves and thus a gap can be found at the very heart of the subject. This gap or lack is the very origin of our desire as we want to become whole and overcome this difference. The ‘objet a’ is the reason that I am split from within and thus I cannot coincide with my own self. It is something that is part of me, part of the subject, but actually I do not own it as it lies out there in the object. The parallax is created when we look at the ‘objet a’ from another angle and find out that in itself ‘objet a’ does not possess a quality or essence that can make it desirable. This implies that ‘objet a’s’ fascination is totally dependent upon the subject for whom it is the object cause of desire. There is something in it which can only be seen from the perspective of the subject. The ‘objet a’ is only visible from a particular angle and this is the reason that Zizek has deemed it the ‘parallax’ object. The existence of the ‘objet a’ is in the objective reality but it is only visible from the perspective of the subject so in a way it is dependent upon the subject for its being. Consequently, not only that the subject cannot fully coincide with itself because of the ‘objet a,’ the reverse is also true as the ‘objet a’ is also not the objet without the subject. The objective reality is also not complete as there is a split in it and this split or gap is occupied by the subject. The presence of the unconsciousness of the subject in the objective reality in form of ‘objet a’ creates a gap in it and thus renders it incomplete or to use Lacanese ‘Not-all.’

3.2.5 There is only ONE

There is only ONE or in other words, there is only material reality and in the above section we have seen that how subject and object appear to be two but the change in perspective makes them appear as ONE. The subject and object are interwoven and both modify each other. Zizek’ s concept is materialist because though ONE appears as two, as the subject and the object, the subject is not separated from the object. It remains interwoven into it owing to its desire for the ‘objet a.’ The lesson of the psychoanalysis is that human beings originate in materiality, transcend it through consciousness but still keep moored in it through the unconscious desire for the ‘objet a.’ Zizek’s materialism is ‘dialectical’ because the subject and the object — the binary opposites, do not remain separated but interact and alter each other. The subject is present in the object which means that there is some part of the subject that is

inaccessible to itself, its unconsciousness but this also has repercussions for the object, as it implies that there is something in the object that is totally dependent upon the subject. This is the reason that the objective reality is incomplete or Not-all.

This incompleteness of reality gives birth to human desire which is basically the desire to complete objective reality. We, as subjects, want to fill in this gap in the objective reality, to tell us that everything is known to us and there is no stain or gap in the reality. We tell ourselves that we know why is it that we want some object but for this we have to render our unconsciousness as transparent and this is where 'fantasy' comes in. A fantasy is an imagined scenario through which we tell ourselves that we know everything and we know that why a particular object is desirable to us.

3.2.6 The Parallax View and Sublation

The parallax view makes ONE to appear as two but can there be a possibility of a third perspective that can enable us to see the ONE or to put it in Hegelian language, can there be a synthesis or sublation[4] of the two polar opposites? The 'void' is created when a thing cannot coincide with itself and gets split. The difference thus engendered is not the difference between two positive entities but it is the difference between a thing and its void. This 'void' or the 'gap' lies at the very heart of being and, in fact, it is this very 'split' that is responsible for the dialectics or antagonisms that define all ontological fields; political, existential and philosophical. The presence of the subject in the object and vice versa renders ontology 'not-all' or incomplete and this in turn gives birth to antagonistic ideological forces to cover up this void. Fantasy[5] is such an attempt to render this unwholesomeness as whole. In other words, the 'void' is not empty rather it is something 'positive' or material that engenders the chain of being; "[w]hat, ultimately, 'there is' is only the absolute Difference, the self-repelling Gap" (Zizek, *LTN* 378). But the reconciliation of these two waring perspectives is not possible in the traditional sense of the word. According to Zizek, the two terms in a parallax are never mediated or sublated, not just because they are irreconcilable (that being the case too) but also because this very gap is responsible for progress and innovation:

> …the two dimensions are not mediated or united in a higher "synthesis;' they are merely accepted in their incommensurability. This is why the insurmountable parallax gap, the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral

> common ground is possible, is not a Kantian revenge over Hegel, that is, yet another name for a fundamental antinomy which can never be dialectically mediated or sublated. Hegelian reconciliation is a reconciliation with the irreducibility of the antinomy, and it is in this way that the antinomy loses its antagonistic character. (*LTN* 950)

For Hegel, the very acceptance of this gap or void with its waring perspective is what generates further movement as closing the gap would culminate in putting an end to continuance and evolution. The Hegelian sublation or reconciliation is the acceptance of the antagonism as antagonism and not its resolution or synthesis.[6] "…antagonism is "reconciled;' but not in the sense that it magically disappears-what Hegel calls "reconciliation" is, at its most basic, a reconciliation with the antagonism" (*LTN* 951). This not only applies to the material reality but also to the human subject, a subject becomes a subject, a socialized entity, only when it gets split between 'I' and 'me' otherwise the subject would be an animal or a robot. The subject is split because of the split between the Real and the Symbolic and without this split the subject cannot exist. Without this parallax, every signifier would have matched every signified as the Symbolic would have represented the Real as it is. In the absence of the chain of signifiers, there would not have been any contingency, chance or uncertainty and human beings would cease to be subjects. They would have rather been automatons without free will and agency. The subject cannot be successfully included in any ontological account other than the account established by Zizek in which reconciliation is basically the acceptance of incompleteness and parallactical view.

3.3 Research Methodology

I have made a philosophical/literary reading of the selected texts of Milan Kundera, this research, in its nature, is exploratory. It applies and utilizes qualitative methodology for the analysis of data. I have, mostly, come up with my own interpretations of the given texts using my theoretical framework, but I have also brought in other perspectives to avoid being unifocal. R. Walker has defined qualitative research in these terms: "Research is called qualitative if it is about determining "what things 'exist' rather than to determine how many such things there are" (3). This seems to be an apt definition as project's focal concern is 'existence' and 'being.' Usually, qualitative research moves towards theoretical formulations

but, in order to do so, the application of extant theory/ theories is vital. A well conducted qualitative research attempts to keep balance between its application of extant theories and its own theoretical formulations. To achieve this balance, a researcher must ground himself/herself in the existing scholarship and the chapter related with Literature Review serves this purpose in my project. Kathy Charmaz has pointed to the fact that there is a thin line between being informed and pre-formed; "…our research needs to be theoretically informed but not theoretically pre-formed" (80). Therefore, she advocates that a researcher should sensitize himself with the concepts that alert him/her to look for points of interest. These sensitizing concepts just provide a point of departure and not a permanent and rigid exploratory tool. In my research methodology, I have adhered to this approach. My theoretical framework, the use of parallactical view of Slavoj Zizek, is a point of departure in the sense that it provides me the lens to critically evaluate my selected texts without being a pre-formed theory. Charmaz further exhorts the aspirant researcher that "Researchers should consider a range of theoretical ideas to look at their material and choose the theoretical direction that offers the best fit" (80). This also implies that a researcher should not just limit himself/herself to one perspective but also bring in other approaches to validate his/her point of view. For this, I have utilized some other theories and concepts as well so that my investigation may not be limited to a singular framework.

Charmaz also raises another very important question regarding qualitative research; "To what analytic level should qualitative researchers aspire?" (81). In her view, there are two main aspirations — descriptive and theoretical. Descriptive means that the researcher just describes the data while theoretical involves formulating an abstract theory at the end of the analysis. My research is descriptive in nature as literary research is not generalizable. The main problem is how to contextualize my qualitative research? Jurgen Habermas, in his book *Theory of Communicative Practice* (1984, 1987), has differentiated between two critical concepts; lifeworld activities and system level phenomena. The lifeworld activities designate the immediate cultural background against which the individuals understand the world and act accordingly. On the other hand, system-level phenomena are related with the political, economic and legal system in which they live. To oversimply it, it is the distinction between individual existence and social structures. Though qualitative research can be conducted on these two separate planes, I intend to derive some theoretical insight from the analysis of

lifeworld activities of the characters in Milan Kundera's fiction and how these activities relate to or determine the system level phenomena.

The question of subjectivity of the researcher and his historical and spatial situatedness is always central when it comes to qualitative research. Hans-Georg Gadamer is of the view that all forms of interpretation are grounded in the cultural and historical background of the researcher. The preconceptions of the knower bring into play his ethnocentrism that has a positive aspect. He states: "To interpret means precisely to bring one's own preconceptions into play so that the text's meaning can really be made to speak for us" (398). In a way, these cultural biases must not be considered as negative but provide the foundation for the understanding. As Ferrara comments:

> Without cultural prejudice, experiences would be without a reference point, buoyless and incoherent. Ethnocentrism is positive when it alerts researchers that their view of the meaning of an educational setting is always through their own pre- understandings as prescribed by their cultural context. (11)

But ethnocentrism may prove detrimental if the researcher over-generalizes his findings. This indicates that subjectivity and cultural situatedness of the researcher are positive elements, if not taken to extremes. I have selected the works of Milan Kundera for my research whose cultural milieu and situatedness is far removed from my own socio-historical context. In qualitative research, as I have mentioned earlier, subjectivity and historical contextualization of the researcher play a very important role. Martin Heidegger, in his book *Being and Time*, has also pointed to this fact. He is of the view that human beings are 'thrown' into this world and this thrownness is always in a designated space and time. Human beings are not separated from their spatio-temporal settings and the process of self-discovery always takes place in a cultural world (183). Our culture is always a reference point for us through which we make sense of the world. The subjectivity of the researcher is something that may not be disregarded. My research, though done in a completely different cultural and historical setting, might bring in another angle, at least, I hope so. This does not mean I intend to over-generalize my findings but I venture to draw some parallels that might be relevant to my own cultural situatedness. The objective is to institute a different slant to the selected area of research.

3.4 Research Method

According to Gabrielle Griffin, "Research methods are concerned with how you carry out your research" and "the choice of method will depend on how you carry out your research" (3). Since my research is the study of parallactical modes of being in the fiction of Milan Kundera and my research questions are exploratory in nature, I have used Textual Analysis as my principal research method. A brief elaboration of my research method is given below.

3.4.1Textual Analysis

In his book, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*, Alan McKee has delved deep into the nature and mechanics of textual analysis. Primarily, he opines, textual analysis is "a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world" (1). It is a "methodology" or to be more precise "a data-gathering process" (McKee 1) for the researchers who want to "understand the ways in which members of various cultures and sub-cultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live" (McKee 1). Texts are the products of their respective cultures and a researcher reading a text needs to employ some tool, perspective or theory to understand them. A text consists of verbal signs and construction of meaning involves complex processes. Analysis is never done in isolation and the focus should not only be words on the page but also what other factors play their role in making sense of a text.

Catherine Belsey, in her article "Textual Analysis as a Research Method" (2005) has discussed in detail some of these issues. She begins her article by positing certain questions: "How important is textual analysis in research? What is it? How is it done? And what difference does it make?" (157). She answers these questions by saying that "…textual analysis is indispensable to research in cultural criticism, where cultural criticism includes English, cultural history and cultural studies, as well as many other disciplines that focus on texts, or seek to understand the inscription of culture in its artifacts" (157). She further notes that research is different from other forms of study as it makes "a contribution to knowledge" (160) and also it "uncovers something new" (160). But research, she asserts, needs to be 'original', not in the sense that it should not have a link with the works of the past. In her view, research should "involve assembling ideas that have not been brought together in quite that way before" (160).

The question is how different ideas can be brought together? Belsey is of the view that textual analysis is never 'pure' which implies that it does not just confine to the selected text as "interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge" (160). Extra-textual knowledge is derived from culture, individual experience, biography, and secondary sources. A text can be interpreted by bringing in ideas from these sources and any idea would be good as other. Would not this approach be total subjectivism? An individual can interpret any text in whichever way he/she thinks suitable. Belsey finds the solution of this problem in the concept of an ideal 'reader' propounded by Roland Barthes. Any work of art or literature is created for a supposed reader or viewer. The appeal to this supposed viewer or reader can rescue textual analysis from this solipsism. It is important to mention here that this ideal reader is not an individual so the question of individual and subjective interpretation does not arise. Who is this 'reader' then?

Belsey refers to Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" to elaborate on the nature of this ideal 'reader.' This reader is the 'destination' of a text. Barthes says:

> …a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader: the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of. (148)

This implies that the focus of a text is not the writer but the reader. One thing that must be kept in view is that this reader is not an individual. This supposed ideal reader is not a particular person. In the broad sense, he is all people. This reader is the destination of all possible interpretations of a work. This implies that interpretation does not mean to bring in the viewpoint of a single individual. It is something more subtle, more complex. It involves joining all the cultural threads a text invokes or is constituent of. When we read a text, we are supposed to call into play all the possible interpretations of it. We can do this if we understand the relationship between a text and the reader. "There may be a dialogue within the text, but the text itself engages in dialogue with the reader" (Belsey 163).

Conclusion

In order to conclude this chapter, in the first paragraph, I have summarized my theoretical framework and in the second, I have mentioned some final thoughts on research methodology.

In the fiction of Milan Kundera, we discern a notion of 'being' split into two waring positions that appear to be two but a Zizekian parallactical shift can make them appear as ONE. This implies that we may apply the concept of ONE, propounded by Zizek, to the parallax of the personal and political, body and soul and universal and particular. The analysis of the specified texts would be based upon the hypothesis that these modes of being are parallactical and possibility of their being ONE would be explored. The shift from one to the other causes a parallactical gap and apparently both the positions appear to be irreconcilable but this 'gap' or 'void' which designates the incompleteness of one mode of being is something that is essential otherwise there would have been no struggle, no probability and no contingency. The 'void' is not empty or devoid of content but actually it provides the space, a battle ground for different ideological content to fight for their supremacy. The 'void' is the difference between a mode of being and its own void and thus it can be described as the minimal difference. In other words, the study would attempt to prove that the gap between the two opposite modes of being is to be inscribed back within the first mode itself.

Textual analysis is an act of reading that invokes multiple cultural texts and threads to make sense of a selected work. The idea is to say something new through a rigorous process of reading and piecing together the relevant insights. I have employed this method because my project is also a process of reading Milan Kundera's novel through the lens of Zizek's parallax. Earlier, I have made this clear that Zizek is not the only thinker I have invoked for my analysis. Whatever relevant cultural thread served my purpose at a given point, I have utilized. Textual analysis, being consistently inquisitive, is conducive for the exploratory nature of my research. I am also alert to the fact that in such kind of analysis, a researcher should not try to find the final answers. There is no final signified and the act of interpretation is just a montage of signifiers and the analysis is not exhaustive in any sense of the word. The project is not an attempt to provide closure to the selected texts. With this methodology and method at my disposal, in the next chapters, I have set out to analyze the selected novels of Milan Kundera.

Through the analysis of these novels, I have sought to find answers to my research questions employing the method and theoretical framework I have illustrated in this chapter.

Notes

[1]. In philosophy, ONE might refer to two concepts. In its theological interpretation, ONE is 'unity of being' or God, who is the origin or source of creation. Everything that exists in this world originated from Him. Hence, there is only one being and everything else is His extension. On the other hand, secular philosophers interpret it in material terms. They are of the view that reality is material. This universe is made up of matter. So, matter is ONE. Even consciousness originated in matter and that is how the split between subject and object was introduced. Here, following Zizek, I would be using ONE in its materialist connotations.

[2]. Here, Zizek is using Lacanian distinction to prove his point. The Real, for Lacan, is the pre-linguistic state, more like Kantian 'thing-in-itself. While Symbolic is the realm of language that tries to explain the Real through its signifiers. Symbolic is, in other words, our daily reality, the world of symbols, through which we understand our surroundings. The Real is lost to human beings the moment it is symbolized. So, Material reality is split into The Real and Symbolic.

[3]. The 'a' in French is actually for other. For Lacan, the other (other with small 'o') is my imaginary counterpart, something or someone whom I think can complete me, can make me whole. I believe that this 'other' possesses something that I do not have. Basically, it is not this something or someone itself which is important rather this something or someone owns something that is more than them. In other words, I love in you something which is more than you. Some incomprehensible, inexplicable element that I think is owned by You but actually it is my own unconsciousness that I see in You. The objet a does not lie out there, in the other, out there — it is something that belongs to me, in my subjectivity, though I seek it in You, the object.

[4]. Sublation is a Hegelian notion apropos his logical method of 'dialectics'. Hegel is an Idealist and he believes that 'idea' is real and matter is just its shadow or manifestation. The development in the realm of ideas takes place through dialectics. Dialectics is a process in which one idea (thesis) appears and then, after a while, is challenged by a counter idea (antithesis). The process does not stop here and then there is the coming together of thesis and antithesis called synthesis. Sublation is Hegelian term for this resolution of opposites at a higher plane. In the course of my project, I would attempt to prove that Parallax is somewhat opposite to Sublation.

[5]. In Zizekian philosophy, fantasy is not a concocted or false representation of something. On the contrary, Zizek thinks fantasy as the constituent element of reality, or in some cases reality itself. The reality that surrounds us is incomplete and have splits in it. Human beings have this desire to make it complete. We cannot stand these

holes or fissures that lie at the heart of our ontology. Hence, we create fictions or fantasy to give us the illusion that reality is complete. Looking at this from this angle, reality is a set of ideologies; political, social, individual. These ideologies are attempts to cover up the ontological incompleteness and thus, in their nature, are like fantasies. For a detailed discussion on the topic, see Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso Books,2008).

[6]. This is Zizekian re-appropriation or re-reading to Hegelian philosophy. Traditionally, Hegel's dialectic is understood in terms of sublation as resolution. Zizek interprets it as the acceptance of incommensurability.

CHAPTER 4

BETWEEN LAUGHTER AND SADNESS: MILAN KUNDERA'S *THE JOKE* AND TRAGI-COMEDY OF EXISTENCE

> *The odd thing was that the seriousness took the form not of a frown but of a smile …*
>
> — Milan Kundera, *The Joke*, 31

> *…a grave joy that proudly called itself "the historical optimism of the victorious class," a solemn and ascetic joy, in short, Joy with a capital J.*
>
> — Milan Kundera, *The Joke*, 31

4.1 Introduction

Milan Kundera started his career in the post Second Word War Czechoslovakia, a crucial period in the history of the nation. "During his early career he moved in and out of the Communist Party: he joined in 1948, was expelled in 1950, and was readmitted in 1956, remaining a member until 1970 ("Milan Kundera"). His love-hate relationship with the Communist Party clearly demonstrates the conflict between his personal ideals and the situation at hand. He observed and experienced the antagonism inherent between the personal and political domains and this helped him develop an ironic and tongue in cheek perspective in his practice of fiction writing. Owing to his political activism, more than once, he lost his job and his books were banned. In his fiction, one of his major concern is the witty exploration of this tendency of grand narratives to erase individual consciousness and historical facts.[1] *The Joke*[2] appeared in 1967 and it chronicles the lives of certain characters under Communism. In his book *Testament Betrayed*, Kundera describes the four major characters of the novel in terms of four different forms of Communism. Ludvik represents Communism that is the direct outcome of Voltairean rationalism; Jaroslav wants to re-enact the nostalgic folklore Communism; Kostka thinks that the real spirit of Communism is reflected in the Bible; Helena sees its essence in the enthusiastic emotional response to the personal and political (13). These

four personal versions of the political mode of being serve as the four threads that inform the structure of *The Joke*. Man's existence cannot be separated from his immediate spatio-temporal coordinates, so is the case with these characters. Kundera mourns the fact that modern political order "reduces man's life to its social function" and in turn "social life is reduced to political struggle" (*AN* 17) and in all this the 'being' of man is the ultimate casualty.

The story of *The Joke* is narrated through the perspectives of four characters; Ludvik Jahn, Helena, Kostka, Jaroslav. The novel serves as a satirical commentary upon the oppressive regime under the Communist party of Czechoslovakia. In his university days, Ludvik is a staunch Party supporter. His plans for the future are chalked out as he aspires to join academia after his graduation. He writes a jesting postcard to his class fellow Marketa and she turns this postcard to the student body of the Party. The Party holds a trial and Ludvik's own friend Pavel Zamanek, who is presiding, strips him of Party membership and condemns him to Black Insignia as a punishment. Ludvik's dreams come crumbling down. He develops a deep hatred towards The Party and, specifically, Zamanek. After many years, he plans to take revenge upon Zamanek by seducing his wife Helena. He seduces her and has sex with her. To his chagrin, he comes to know that Zamanek doesn't care about his wife anymore and, in fact, he has done him a favour. Moreover, when he meets Zamanek, he finds him a completely different person, sharing some of his own ideas about The Party. Kostka and Jaroslav are friends to Ludvik and their stories highlight the religious and folk aspects of Czechoslovakia. Ludvik confesses to Helena that he has no interest in her and it was all a joke. *The Joke* ends with a joke, though, nobody laughs.

On many levels, *The Joke* is not only a commentary upon socio-political ontology under Communism in Czechoslovakia but also is an elaboration on Milan Kundera's theory of the novel. Kundera upholds: "…humour is not an age-old human practice; it is an invention bound up with the birth of the novel" (*TB* 5). Humour is a lightening flash that enables us to see 'being' in its ironies, uncertainties and incongruities. Totalitarian kitsch attempts to mask these uncertainties and presents 'being' as unified and whole. The novel, in its essence, is at odds with kitsch and its raison d'être is to echo 'God's laughter.' *The Joke* stages the inherent paradoxes of being and how these are at variance with the seriousness of the state ideology. In this chapter, I have read *The Joke* from three thematic angles — the personal and political, body and soul, universal and particular and I have utilized Zizekian parallax view as my

theoretical lens. In keeping with the three thematic angles, this chapter is further divided into three sections.

I

4.2 Seriousness of a Joke

Does a society mired in exactitude and seriousness have any room for a joke? Ludvik, one of the main characters of *The Joke*, has to find this out in a hard way when a personal joke lands him in a political controversy and his life is turned upside down. He is a university student and a Party enthusiast who has envisioned a bright academic career after his graduation. He tends to poke fun at a beautiful fellow student Marketa, who, in a way, embodies the Geist of the age — intelligent but too credulous and serious. "Of course, fun went over badly with Marketa, and even worse with the spirit of the age" (*TJ* 31). This is the age that dawned after Feb 1948 when The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia came into power. Obviously, the age demands extreme seriousness in every sphere of life but the irony is this seriousness is to be expressed not through a scowl or a glower rather its medium was smile — a mendacious, dissimulative grin. Ludvik narrates:

> It was the first year after February 1948; a new life had begun, a genuinely new and different life, and its features, as I remember them, were rigidly serious. The odd thing was that the seriousness took the form not of a frown but of a smile, yes, what those years said of themselves was that they were the most joyous of years, and anyone who failed to rejoice was immediately suspected of lamenting the victory of the working class or (what was equally sinful) giving way individualistically to inner sorrows. (*TJ* 31)

Thus, an individual does not find any reason to smile is labelled as one who has something against the rise of working class or worse still, he has succumbed to melancholia arising out of some personal outlook on life. This implies that an individual is supposed to blend into this collective euphoria, this impersonal joy. The joy arising out of one's inner being — or if we may call it one's soul — is not allowed in this society. In the eyes of her fellow students, Marketa might lack certain subtleties that a social being is supposed to possess but she was the very incarnation of the Party spirit, an exemplary believer in the rise of proletariat and she

shared this sober joy that has nothing to do with one's inner being and psychological makeup. Ludvik, on the other hand, considers himself far superior to her in every aspect; he is more intelligent, well-read and knows more about Marx and revolution. Then what is his drawback? The fault that lies with him is that he still possesses that self that lies outside the ideological structures or to use Lacan's term out of the Symbolic order of language. Ludvik admits, in his youth, he was a jovial person by nature. This sense of fun does not go well with the spirit of the age. The spirit of the age does not permit irony or humour and promotes a kind of official optimism," a solemn and ascetic joy, in short, Joy with a capital J" (*TJ* 31). Donahue comments on this concept of joy and humour in these words:

> The characters with a sense of humour delight in the ironic joys of life (just as the ironic perspective of the narration allows the reader to see the tentativeness of human truths and consequently the humour in the human condition) but continually encounter the social and political humourlessness inherent in systems that are sure of their truths and unwilling to temper them with irony. (68)

In other words, the Party spirit would not allow the 'joy' which laughs at the incongruities, follies, contradictions and paradoxes of existence. Moreover, there is no room for the 'joy' that bubbles forth out of one's deep inner self and makes one the part of nature's grand design. The Party would define the 'Joy' in its own terms, a collective consciousness arising out of the grand march of history towards some teleological necessity. Ludvik, though a believer in revolution and Party spirit, somehow, does not partake in this 'Joy' in an absolute manner. This does not indicate that Marketa, somehow, successfully got rid of her biological self and now is completely submerged in the Symbolic. Rather the point is that her Symbolic self is more dominant as she has allowed herself to come too close to ideology. We encounter an interesting ironical gesture here, something that the Party misses completely. As we see that the Party punishes or demeans those who entertain a cynical distancing towards ideological mechanism. Paradoxically, the very people who can keep this distance, who are ironical in their take on the political, are its most efficient purveyors.

In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Zizek presents an analysis of Stanley Kubrick's movie *Full Metal Jacket* that portrays recruits of a certain Marine Corp as non-conformists who do not care about military regulations and regularly disobey the orders of their superiors. Zizek

interjects by saying that actually the very soldiers who appear to be non-conformist and non-professional, when the time comes, prove to be the most efficient war machines. On the other hand, one particular recruit who would follow the military code in letter in spirit, in other words, who got too close to military ideology, ends up killing his colleagues and committing suicide: "…. the film ends with a soldier who, on account of his over - identification with the military ideological machine, 'runs amok' and shoots first the drill sergeant, then himself; the radical, unmediated identification with the phantasmic superego machine necessarily leads to a murderous passage à l'acte" (Zizek, *TPF* 27). The Party expects this kind of 'over-identification' and Marketa is the perfect embodiment of it. No wonder, she does not appear in the novel again as her kind proves to be not only self-destructive but also, they are a major risk for the very ideology of which they are staunch adherents. Another such character in *The Joke* is Pavel Zemanek, the husband of Helena, who plays a crucial role in Ludvik's expulsion from the Party. During his university days, he too over-identifies with the Party ideology and completely sets aside his friendship with Ludvik. Towards the end of the novel, when he meets Ludvik again, Ludvik is astonished to know that he is no more that Zemanek who would sacrifice the personal for the political. Zemanek's over-identification and subsequent disillusionment demonstrates the adverse impact of coming too close to ideology.

In an interview with Arthur Holmberg, Kundera has stressed the importance of humour at the level of individual existence and how this humour gets lost in the grand political slogans: "In totalitarian regimes one quickly learns the importance of humour. You learn to trust or mistrust people because of the way they laugh. The modern world frightens me because it's rapidly losing its sense of the playfulness of play" (26). It comes as no surprise that humour, irony, paradox and play are the hallmarks of his narrative style. Kundera goes on to say that *Jacques the Fatalist*[3] is his favourite novel as its most glowing feature is its play. The novel negates seriousness and also brings forth those paradoxes and oppositions that lie at the heart of Enlightenment project. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera comments:

> "I learned the value of humour during the time of Stalinist terror. I was twenty then. I could always recognize a person who was not a Stalinist, a person whom I needn't fear, by the way he smiled. A sense of humour was a trustworthy sign of recognition. Ever since, I have been terrified by a world that is losing its sense of humour" (232).

Here we can see that Kundera is using the semantics of humour to connote a kind of resistance against the over-arching political structures which delimit and suffocate the individual existence. Mark Weeks discerns a parallel between Kundera's conception of humour and Mikhael Bakhtin's term "heteroglossia"[4] as both understand humour as something ambiguous, evading political correctness and sobriety. Weeks also notes that both men experienced life under oppressive regimes and as a consequence to their intellectual opposition to this suppression, both were persecuted in different ways (131). Mark Weeks also points out that laughter and humour, the way it was conceived in the context of Communist states, was a teleological necessity, a grand march of history to a goal. Its essentialist optimism was linked with linearity of time and history and thus it precluded a kind of one-dimensional logos while for Kundera humour has an altogether alternate semantic field. For him, humour is associated with irony, play and multiplicity and thus can't be subjected to a monolithic and all-inclusive grand narrative. In other words, for him humour is individualistic and relative as opposed to political and absolute. Weeks observes that Kundera, in his fiction, has created this binary between laughter and optimism and though this formulation seems paradoxical, it is based upon a strong argument. Laughter is something personal while optimism is characteristic of oppressive political regimes. His characters suffer because their personal happiness is always in conflict with the collective joy.

Kundera's works also trace the itinerary of how humour went through different phases in the latter half of the 20th C. The playful humour was suppressed in the totalitarian states like that of Stalin; secondly, there was an endorsement of humour under the revolutionary zeal of 1968 and then laughter as an endless signifier under postmodern pastiche. Weeks asserts:

> …firstly, traditional repression, such as the aggressive marginalization of humour under Stalin; then the recuperation or rehabilitation of laughter to serve neo-revolutionary historical narratives, a strategy which might actually be discerned in Bakhtin; finally, the endless reproduction of laughter, until its temporal effects are submerged beneath its function as a signifier and as a privileged icon of fast, free-floating signification — the postmodern phase. (132)

The most important aspect of this itinerary is that each phase is associated with a certain political outlook and this outlook takes over the individual playfulness and personal joy. The

conflict between individual outlook and the political ideology is staged in the novel through the seriousness of the joke or in other words, there is a parallactical gap between the two views. Out of the three phases of laughter mentioned by Weeks, we can safely say that *The Joke* belongs to the first phase — repressive ideology. The official ideology of the state is based upon the need for seriousness and any attempt at irony, paradox or humour by an individual is taken as a slight, a mockery or indignation. It amounts to questioning the very gravity of the revolution as "no great movement designed to change the world can bear to be laughed at" (*TJ* 203).

Another conjecture relevant with our discussion is the political prop of optimism promoted by the state and a peculiar kind of laughter associated with it. Here we should keep this in view that laughter under the Stalinist regimes in general and in case of Czech Republic in particular, was not understood in terms of irony, paradox or playfulness as Kundera conceives it in his fiction and tags it with the individual and the personal. Optimism and laughter, as in state ideology, have a political dimension and in a convoluted paradoxical sense more in line with political seriousness. Cynicism and pessimism are not just individual moods or psychological states rather a form of political scepticism against the revolution and its ideology. Ludvik was made sharply aware of this fact when he appeared before the committee and had to explain his joke which he sent to Marketa:

> Do you consider yourself an optimist? they went on. I do, I said uneasily. I like a good time, a good laugh, I said, trying to lighten the tone of the interrogation. A nihilist likes a good laugh, said one of them. He laughs at people who suffer. A cynic likes a good laugh, he went on. (*TJ* 28)

Here we clearly discern the parallax that exists between Ludvik's idea of optimism and humour and the way it is understood by the official ideology. The postcard, from the perspective of Ludvik, is just his way of poking fun at the grim and serious Marketa and at the time he does not realize that this was understood as an act of rebellion by the Party and there would be too serious repercussions for him.

Laughter is also linked with the teleological idea of history — history as the progression of the Idea as conceived by Hegel. The official ideology of the state is based upon this momentum of time — the movement of history towards a particular end and Ludvik, earlier in

the novel, does consider himself a traveller on this road. He thinks that he is standing near the wheel of history, as if his being has a pre-defined goal or object. His expulsion from the Party and his bitter experience in the coal mines change his perspective a bit but it is his meeting with Lucie that really marks the beginning of a new phase in his life. "Yes, it must have been the slow pace that fascinated me; she had a slowness about her that radiated resignation: there was nowhere worth hurrying to, nothing worth fretting over. Yes, maybe it really was that melancholy slowness that made me follow her . . ." (*TJ* 56). Lucie is someone Ludvik has never come across while travelling on the road of history. She is an anti-thesis of everything he used to believe in and this, perhaps, is the reason that he is fascinated by her. Lucie suffers and suffers continuously as her personal melancholy and aloofness cannot be accommodated in the grand march of history.

4.3 The Politics of Love

The coerciveness and intrusion of the political in the personal is discernible even in those aspect of existence that are usually deemed private. Helena, in her early days of marriage, used to think that her marriage with Pavel was basically an affair of the heart, something afforded by the soul-to-soul connection they both had. It was seven years later, when her daughter was five, that in a heated argument, Pavel revealed that it was not love rather he married her for the sake of Party discipline. Helena recalls: “Seven years later, when little Zdena was five, I'll never forget it, he told me we didn't marry for love, we married out of Party discipline” (*TJ* 17). This was really traumatic for Helena but even for her, in the beginning, the boundaries between the public and private did not exist. She, too, used to believe that love meant to support and fight side by side and she did provide all possible support to Pavel, before and after marriage. She recalls how they would not meet all day and could not even find time to eat. Pavel would come home late at night and it always seemed as if they were living like two passengers in a waiting room waiting for their respective buses. Helena always envisioned her role as that of a helping hand; to look after her husband, to do all the chores for him and to be always there whenever he needed her. She would wait for him till midnight when he would return after attending long meetings. She would take notes for him and prepare speeches. He would consistently remind her “…that the new man differed from the old insofar as he had

abolished the distinction between public and private life, and now, years later, he complains about how back then the Comrades never left his private life alone" (*TJ* 17).

We see that both Helena and Pavel, initially, completely identified with the official ideology of the Communist Party and consistently attempted to erase the marking between the public and the private. Even as private an emotion as love was to be politicized and turned into a public duty. But the question to be asked is for how long can this state of affairs last? Can an individual and personal experience of love be turned into a political gimmick – a teleological necessity? As we see that Pavel, after so many years, is now complaining of the blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private. In an interesting turn of the events, as we can see in the above quotation, Pavel does come to realize the futility of this all. He realizes that there is some kind of division between the public and the private though, by that time, he had already not only destroyed his relationship with his wife but also, as the Party office holder, has ruined the lives of many young men like Ludvik. Donahue comments: "When the irrationality of history is rationalized or used to justify future actions, helpless individuals are crushed in its path" (70).

The gap between the two parallactical positions does exist as Helena, though she would try to shield herself through denial, also comes to realize this after a few years of her marriage. After she was disenchanted with her marriage and love, Helena starts to have many affairs. Irony of it all was that as a party member she always had a strict policy against extramarital affairs and would punish party workers for that. The other office holders and workers of the Party started to poke into her own private life in order to expose her hypocrisy and double standards. Here the political and the individual merge again as Helena was using political power to meddle with the private lives of others and in reaction, they started to expose her own liaisons which she confesses was quite disgruntling for her. Her colleagues and subordinates would talk about her as if she were a beast, a monster. They call her a hypocrite as she would preach piety and fidelity in marriage while she herself would violate these values incessantly.

Helena would use her power as The Party office bearer to meddle into the personal affairs of the people. Helena goes on to provide the raison d'être of her disciplinary actions against others by saying that she did not want them to suffer unhappy marriages. The point to consider is that how can she think that she can use her position as the Party office bearer to pry

into the private affairs of her colleagues? She herself is the victim of this intermingling of the political and individual. Does she think that her political status empowers her to think for the private too? Apparently, this seems to be so. This clearly indicates that under the Communist Party, when this fusion of the political and individual took place, the people in general also incorporated this ideology and for them the two spheres became one. Kundera, being a humanist, does not agree with the politicization of the personal. Donahue observes: “Like a traditional Enlightenment humanist Kundera respects the dignity of human life and abhors any system or set of beliefs that endanger it” (Donahue 74). This ideology is so powerful that Helena, despite her unhappy marriage and meaninglessness of her life, still believes that the public and the private spheres are one. She defends her actions by saying that it may not be becoming of one to meddle into other’s private affairs and she should have minded her own business but she has always followed The Party ideology according to which there is no division between the public and the private: “I've always believed that man is one and indivisible and that only the petty bourgeois divides him hypocritically into public self and private self, such is my credo, I've always lived by it, and that time was no exception” (*TJ* 21).

Helena is not realizing the fact that basically her unhappy state of mind is the result of the melding together of her private life with the political sphere. She continues to cherish the dream of teleological necessity and the negation of the individual perspective for a collective cause though her personal experience negates this possibility. Not only her married life fell into disarray because of the encroachment of the political but also towards the end of the novel when she thinks she has finally found happiness again with Ludvik, that too proves to be an illusion as for Ludvik she was just a pawn in his game of revenge. Paradoxically, Ludvik’s personal revenge is also the result of a party matter and here, too, Helena becomes the victim of politics. Another significant point to note here is that Helena, in the above excerpt, seems to endorse the Cartesian idea of a coherent and unified self which is also in accordance with the political ideology of the Party. The idea of the stable self, that man is stable and unified, is convenient as it rules out the possibility of split and resistance.

It is significant to note that towards the end of the novel when Ludvik is trying to express his love for Helena, he invokes the traditional idea of love as something personal – a connection between two souls. He asserts that he wants to express his love as something that has arisen out of an authentic self. He dissociates himself from those who live their lives in

keeping with prevalent ideologies and tells her that he is a person who knows, at the level of his personal authentic self, what does he want. He states that he is a simple and straight forward person and to him it means to have an authentic self. People, throughout their lives, never come to realize their true self. Their identity is even unknown to them:

> They are nobody and they are nothing. First and foremost a man must have the courage to be himself. So let me tell you right away: I'm attracted to you, Helena, and I desire you, even though you're a married woman. I can't put it any other way, and I can't let it go unsaid. (*TJ* 181)

The whole statement is paradoxical at more than one level. Firstly, Ludvik is insinuating that he is not a person who is a slave to some external rules and regulations or, in other words, of some political ideology. When he is trying to define the terms “simple and straightforward,” he is implying that people who are ideological puppets are not direct and true to their feelings while he is. Keeping in view the case of Pavel and Helena, it seems to be a valid statement as their love and marriage proves to be a sham, an ideological misrecognition which they thought was love. But on the other hand, when Ludvik is uttering these words, he also does not mean them. He is basically trying to use the personal emotion of love as a weapon against Pavel and thus his notion of ‘simple and straightforward’ is basically not as simple and straightforward. The passion of revenge that seemed to have driven Ludvik mad was also the result of a political action of Pavel and Helena is betrayed again.

4.4 The Personal and Political are ONE

The political sphere is split and so is the personal. The unity and coherence envisaged at both these levels of existence is an illusion and the gaps and fissures inherent in their constitution are not just empty spaces or void but these are the points which guarantee the dialectical movement that spurs social progress. The humanist idea of the self as a unity was an attempt to veil the presence of this split but the Poststructuralists have demonstrated this fact that the social order just provides us a number of subject-positions and these positions are never fixed. Davies and Hare have defined the subject-position as under:

> A subject position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights for those that use that repertoire. Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage

> point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (44)

This clearly indicates that human beings, through the mediation of language, come to look at the world from the perspectives provided by the social order. These perspectives or positions are mostly binaries and adhering to one entails the exclusion of the other. The self, then affiliates itself with the narratives surrounding these positions like what it means to be a father or a son or a political worker and so on. These positions not only invoke the emotional and psychological associations but also help developing a specific understanding of the social, political and existentialist field and the subject would always look at himself or herself from that angle. It is significant to note that these multiple 'subject positions' are always contradictory and possibly at war with one another which implies that the subject is always divided, split between contentious positions. Chris Weedon in his book, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, also points to the same fact: "Subjectivity is most obviously the site of the consensual regulation of individuals. This occurs through the identification by the individual with particular subject positions within discourses" (112). These subject positions turn subjectivity "precarious, contradictory and in process" (Weedon 33) but the political and social ideologies attempt to efface this split and pose the subject as unified and free of contradictions. The dominant ideology would present only one subject position as viable and authentic and suppress all others though it is not possible. The split at the heart of subjectivity would always render the subject contradictory.

In *The Joke*, though the state demands an unquestioned adherence to the official ideology and for this they try to efface the inherent split of the individual, it is quite evident that this can't be accomplished. Ludvik, in his student days, always looked at himself as a Party stalwart whose identity is dependent upon the Party. Though he himself and the Party propaganda tries to suppress the split in his subjectivity, he has this epiphany time and again that his Party affiliation is just one of his many subject positions. He asks himself this question and admits this fact that there is no 'single' Ludvik: "But which was the real me? Let me be perfectly honest: I was a man of many faces" (*TJ* 33). Ludvik analyses that he would put on different masks at different occasions like he would pretend to be older and wiser in the

presence of Marketa to impress her. Moreover, he would attempt to appear mysterious and profound to her as if he has some hidden facets to his personality and if Marketa is curious, she may probe further to explore them. As irony and humour require a detached outlook, Ludvik would take on such an air to incite the curiosity of Marketa.: “I made believe I had an extra layer of skin, invisible and impenetrable. I thought (quite rightly) that by joking I would establish my detachment, and though I had always been good at it, the line I used on Marketa always seemed forced, artificial, and tedious” (*TJ* 33).

These different versions of the same self, or subject positions leave even himself guessing which one of it is the authentic self: “Who was the real me? I can only repeat: I was a man of many faces” (*TJ* 33). Ludvik is a staunch supporter of the Party, an individual who has fully internalized the Party mantra, and despite the fact that the Party ideology downplays the ontological forms other than the political, still he finds his self to be split and in process. At different occasions, he would find himself playing different roles and most of these roles would be in contradiction with one another: “At meetings I was earnest, enthusiastic, and committed; among friends, unconstrained and given to teasing; with Marketa, cynical and fitfully witty; and alone (and thinking of Marketa), unsure of myself and as agitated as a schoolboy” (*TJ* 33). Ludvik wonders which one of his ‘selves’ was his real ‘self.’ Was the last one that of a school boy the real one? But soon he realizes that all of his selves are real. It is not the case that he is a hypocrite or something or has a different self for each occasion. In fact, he himself admits, he is young and his subjectivity is in the making and he has not reached at the point when he can claim to have an authentic self:

> No. They were all real: I was not a hypocrite, with one real face and several false ones. I had several faces because I was young and didn't know who I was or wanted to be. (I was frightened by the differences between one face and the next; none of them seemed to fit me properly, and I groped my way clumsily among them.). (*TJ* 33)

Here Ludvik seems to have missed the point. It is not that he is young and he does not know what he wants to be and this is the reason that he cannot have an authentic self. On the contrary, the authentic and unified self is an illusion, a myth and one’s self is always in process and never a finished project.

Ironically, after Ludvik is sentenced to serve in the mines as punishment for the postcard, another image of his 'self' gets stuck on him though he has nothing to do with it. This image is the image of person who was not loyal to the Party, who is a Trotskyite.[5] Ludvik tries very hard to dispel this image not only before the student committee of the Party but also later he visits the company office many a times to clarify his position. The more he attempts to justify himself, the more this image gets stuck on him. He opines: "I came to realize that there was no power capable of changing the image of my person lodged somewhere in the supreme court of human destinies; that this image (even though it bore no resemblance to me) was much more real than my actual self;" (*TJ* 50). Ludvik says that the image of being a Trotskyite, which was thrust upon him, was not a 'real' image and does not describe him but now it was much more real than his actual self. The question is "Does Ludvik has a real self?" Was not it that his previous image of a Party stalwart also thrust upon him? How can he consider one image as real and other as unreal? Also, he says that now he thinks that he has no right to accuse this image that it does not bear any resemblance to him as perhaps this image is real and he is guilty of not associating himself with it. This instance clearly shows that this idea of the authentic self is an illusion. If Ludvik complains that the image of being a Trotskyite is not real, how can he claim that his image of being a Stalinist is real? Is not it that both are subject positions that are external to his self? But this does not mean that if these subject positions are external, there might be an internal authentic 'self' hidden somewhere in the attic of his personality. At the end of the day, Ludvik is just an amalgam of different subject positions — a pure difference without any positive content. But it is not just Ludvik who has this image of himself thrust upon him externally. He notices that other Party members, members of the investigation committee and even Marketa herself, all of them have put on a mask and were trying hard to live up to the expectations associated with the mask. This mask, this illusion of an authentic and stable 'self,' is quite comforting and it helps an individual find a foothold in all this confusion we call existence. But unfortunately, this self is just another subject position offered by the social order and when it clashes with other possible subject positions, it splits the 'self' into many segments or to use Poststructuralist jargon, it 'decentres' the self. Ludvik comments that at the time of postcard interrogation, he was just twenty years of age and his interrogators were hardly one or two years older. They were all just young boys and they just had to put on the masks of hardcore revolutionaries:

> And what about Marketa? Hadn't she modelled herself after the female saviour in some B movie? And Zemanek, suddenly seized by the sentimental pathos of morality? Wasn't that a role as well? And myself? Didn't I run back and forth among several roles until I was tripped up and lost my balance? (*TJ* 87)

The gap between the political and the individual is not just an empty void and the parallactical reading of the novel reveals this. It contains the positive difference — the space where the two spheres realize each other. The individual happiness cannot be experienced without the political or collective happiness. But this does not imply that the individual happiness might be sacrificed. The political, in return, should provide the essential conditions to realize the individual happiness as Peter Petro opines: "On the one hand we have the intimate, personal, individual, on the other the collective, social, political. For Kundera these two spheres are connected…" (45). But this connection must not be sought in the forced merger of the one into the other. *The Joke* not only can be read as a novel that brings out this parallactical dimension of the individual and political, it also attempts to posit the individual as the ONE — there is only the individual and the political is just an upshot of it. When the individual cannot coincide with itself and splits to create difference which basically a difference not between two positive terms but a difference between a thing and its void. But how does this split occur? Earlier, in Chapter 3, I quoted Catherine Belsey that how textual analysis is a research method based upon the premise that "interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge" (160). Therefore, I am bringing in some other sources to shed light on the genesis of the split between the personal and political.

The parallax engendered by the individual libidinal thrust and the political/collective demand for the renunciation of this thrust for some grand teleological end, seems to be the central concern of many philosophical, psychological and fictional works. This teleological end is fundamentally some ethico-ideological superstructure inscribed in the collective consciousness that envisages an individual just as a pawn in its grand design. The precise moment when a human being ceases to be an individual or an ego and becomes a subject is the moment the parallax between the individual and the political comes into being. As discussed earlier, it is customary to trace the itinerary of subjectivity to Descartes' formulation "Cogito ergo sum" (53) but Zizek locates it in Hegel's more ground level thesis of the subject as "night of the world." Hegel comments:

> The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity— an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here— pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful. (204)

What is really striking in this exposition is that here Hegel is going against the mainstream philosophical proposition of his time — the Enlightenment conception of the subject as the light of reason. This particular shift is significant as it paves way for the transformation of a biological self into a proper ideological subject. The subject does not have a positive content, it is a pure nothing, a Void and it requires the support of Symbolic order to exist. Language, with its power of signification, dissects the body into two by separating the linguistic self from the biological self and this linguistic self is what we call the subject. The subject does not exist positively, in material form. Zizek is of the view that the moment we use a word for a thing, we cause the death of the thing as the use of the word designates an absence. The word takes on the thing, replaces it and in a way, it takes its life (Zizek, "Rossellini" 38). Zizek also asserts: "It is thus as if the frenzy of the revolutionary upheaval brings us back to the zero-level of subjectivity in which the subject is confronted not with constituted reality but with the spectral obscene proto-reality of partial objects floating around against the background of the ontological Void" (*TPV* 44). The Void is the zero level of subjectivity when the subject has not acquired any positive content, it is a lack yet to be filled. This lack is filled by the Symbolic order and the genesis of the subject takes place. Zizek is very particular that the two opposites must be strictly distinguished: the axis ego-id and the axis subject-Truth (*TPV* 149). If ego-id is the storehouse of different drives and impulses then the Subject-Truth is an agent of some anonymous Truth and it is this Truth that defines its existence. Zizek stresses:

> The subject proper is empty, a kind of formal function, a void which remains after I sacrifice my ego (the wealth that constitutes my "person"). The shift from ego to subject, from the axis ego-id to the axis subject-Truth, is synonymous with the emergence of the ethical dimension proper: I change from an individual, a person, into

> a subject the moment I turn into the agent of an impersonal Truth, the moment I accept as my task the endless work of bearing witness to this truth. (*TPV* 150)

If we follow Hegelian line of reasoning, we clearly arrive at the proposition that the subject is not a positive entity but a mere formal function that serves to posit the individual as a social being fully immersed in cultural ideology. The individual "as night of the world" (Hegel 204) is just a mélange of psychological drives and to be a proper functionary of language and Symbolic order, it must be transformed into an ethical and political being. This transformation requires the subject's allegiance to an impersonal Truth — a religious belief, a political ideology or any other philosophy of existence. This impersonal Truth does not just demand compliance rather it stipulates the subject to assume the role of a witness to its being true.

The biological self, 'the night of the world,' cannot exist on its own as it is nothing but a repository of drives and must go through the split to act as a proper social being or in other words must become a subject. The process of subjectivity introduces a split at the heart of the individual as one half of it enters into the Symbolic order of language while one half remains outside. The subject is colonized by the political and social ideologies and his identity is established through the subject positions he has assumed but the biological self remains outside and basically the biological self would always disrupt the unity of the subject. This is the reason that the subject is never fully subjected to a subject position as there is always a gap that bars this absolute identification. This implies that initially there was just ONE, the biological individual but this biological self could not coincide with itself and must split into two. Following Zizek's ontology, we can assert that the split does not engender two different positive entities rather it is the minimal difference — a difference between a thing and its void, a pure difference. The political field which appears to 'ex-ist' actually is the part of the ONE — the individual and this leads us to an all-important inference that the individual and political are basically ONE and not two different ontological dimensions and it is the parallax that makes them appear as two. Zizek elaborates: "In other words, the gap between the individual and the "impersonal" social dimension is to be inscribed back within the individual himself: this "objective" order of the social Substance exists only insofar as individuals treat it as such, relate to it as such" (*TPV* 5).

By far, we have established the ONENESS of the individual and the minimal or pure difference that splits the ONE but it is still to be proved how the relationship between the two is dialectical or in other words, how the one is inscribed in the other. For this, I would turn to Sigmund Freud. In his book, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud enumerates three sources of our unhappiness: "…the superior power of nature, the frailty of our bodies, and the inadequacy of the institutions that regulate people's relations with one another in the family, the state and society" (24). Freud further elaborates that the first two — the superior forces of nature and the frailty of the human body seem to be out of man's control but the regulation of social institutions is something that human beings think they can shape to maximize their happiness. Even a cursory glance at the political history of mankind reveals that this has never been so. In fact, the suffering caused by nature and the frailty of human body are dwarfed by the calamities man has brought onto himself and this leads us to the question that in this case who is the main culprit? The Freudian answer to this question is also nature but not the external nature comprising of elements rather the psychic nature of man — the id. The id is the reservoir of man's primary instincts and drives or his biological self that follows the pleasure principle — it demands instant gratification of its lusts. The primitive man lived as an individual and supposedly was free to gratify his various lusts as there were no social institutions, morality or law. Civilization, according to Freud, was a special process and the humanity went through this process "in the service of Eros" (*Civilization* 58) "…the word 'civilization' designates the sum total of those achievements and institutions that distinguish our life from that of our animal ancestors and serve the dual purpose of protecting human beings against nature and regulating their mutual relations" (*Civilization* 27). But here there is a rub. The individual knows this fact that civilization is necessary, that he cannot survive alone but the entry into the civilization entails a sacrifice — the sacrifice of id. The pleasure principle on which id works must be renounced as is demanded by civilization and this does not go well with the individual. In his book, *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud comments: **"**It is remarkable that, little as men are able to exist in isolation, they should nevertheless feel as a heavy burden the sacrifices which civilization expects of them in order to make a communal life possible" (6). Here we discern an interesting twist. The individual, as we have noticed, was basically an amalgam of instinctual drives but as compared to the animals he was weak and could not survive alone. The individuals had to form a social formation in order to protect themselves or in other words

they had to transform themselves into political beings. The institutionalization of law and morality was compulsory for the smooth running of the social relationships though this institutionalization was in conflict with the biological self of man. There is in the individual a yearning for a utopian social order and in every social utopia thus conceived, there would always be an element of individual desire that could disrupt it. Eros, according to Freud, is a very strong libidinal force and it was under its influence that the individual rose above his instinctual needs and aggressivity to form civilization.[6] Freud describes this process thus:

> What happens to him to render his aggressivity harmless? Something very curious, which we would not have suspected, but which is plain to see. The aggression is introjected, internalized, actually sent back to where it came from; in other words, it is directed against the individual's own ego. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego that sets itself up as the super-ego, in opposition to the rest, and is now prepared, as 'conscience', to exercise the same severe aggression against the ego that the latter would have liked to direct towards other individuals. (*Civilization* 60)

The social formation, through its moral norms and laws, turns the individual against himself so that his aggression might not be used against the social order. Is not then the 'political' actually one split part of the 'individual?' Is not it the parallactical view that makes us see the ONE as two? Why is it that the 'political' appear distinct from the 'individual'? Actually, as the social structures evolved and grew more and more complex, the scope and the dominance of the political grew manifold. As we see in Foucault, eventually this political dominance culminated in the concept of 'biopower' in the Neo-Classical age. This was the period, according to Foucault, in which for the first time the life of human beings entered into history and became a subject of power/knowledge. Before that the life of an individual was never put under such a scrutiny but now the individual entered into the political body as power's area of intervention. Foucault comments:

> Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body." (*HS* 1:143).

Moreover, we can study this dominion of the political onto the individual in the 20th C in its most definitive form with the rise of Fascism and Communism in many European countries. Under these extreme political ideologies, the coordinates of individuality were completely erased and the individual was coerced to completely subject himself/herself to the political. Is not it ironical that how the 'political' originated in the 'individual,' in his Eros, but in the evolutionary process of history the political came to colonize the 'individual' itself? The polarity between the two ontological modes widened so much that both appear to be completely separated. Zizek's parallactical view enables us to see these two polarities as ONE and through Freud, I have also traced the itinerary of this ONENESS. After this rather long detour, now I would again turn to the text at hand.

By far we have established the ONENESS of the two apparently opposite ontological modes of existence — the individual and political but the question is how the two are inscribed into each other or, to use Zizek's materialist terminology, how the relationship between the two is a dialectical relationship? In the previous sections of this chapter, I analysed the parallax between the individual and political in Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke*. Now I would venture to show how, in *The Joke*, both are inscribed into each other and have a parallactical relationship. My focus would be on the characters who, living under a totalitarian regime, were asked to erase their biological self and completely surrender to their ideological self which is a construct of the symbolic order. After his many experiences with the Communist Party in the Czech Republic, Kundera's attitude towards grand narratives tilted towards scepticism. Kundera's fiction, in many ways, is an attempt to rescue the individual from the grand narratives as he demonstrates that how an individual never becomes a total subject and his biological self — the remainder, always disrupts and intrudes into the Symbolic self.

In the previous section titled "The Politics of Love," I discussed how official ideology of the state has turned even the personal emotion of love into political and The Party promoted this ideology that there is nothing personal and even if there is, it must be surrendered to the political. The political ideology does not realize that the "subjective understanding of experience is a far cry from official Marxist dogma, in which history has one meaning and one meaning alone" (Sanders 105). I also ventured to bring out the impact of this colonization of the individual terrain by the political and how it destroys the psyche of different characters. The characters like Ludvik, Marketa, Pavel and Helena are wholly immersed in the official

ideology and it seems that they have handed their individuality over to it. We see how this has damaged their 'self' and relationships and after so many years they are disenchanted with the political slogans and teleological necessities. Now I would look at the text to reveal the fact that these characters get back to their 'self' or 'individuality' again or, to be more precise, they rediscover it through their own 'rites of passages.'

Helena suffers through a rough marriage, a marriage she thought was of love but later on her husband reveals that he married her out of Party discipline. Moreover, it was not just Pavel who was so entrenched in the Party ideology, Helena herself used to think that being in love means to play a supportive role in the political endeavours of her husband. It is curious to read her tell-tale of the incident when for the first time she thought she was in love with Pavel. It was a political rally, not a traditional romantic rendezvous by any standards. She narrates how the event of her falling in love took place during a celebration. The politicians were standing on the stage and thousands of people were gathered in the Old Town Square. Everybody was chanting and singing revolutionary songs and suddenly Helena notices that in the commotion, Pavel was singing something of his own. It was an Italian revolutionary song that was popular at that time. Helena was enchanted by this gesture of him and thought "That was Pavel all over, he was never satisfied with reaching the mind alone, he had to get at the emotions, wasn't it wonderful" (*TJ* 16).

If we look at the vocabulary, we dully realize that it is fully immersed in ideological jargon even though Helena is narrating the very occasion that made her fall in love with Pavel. For example, it was the anniversary of the Liberation but for her the whole scenario resembled a fairy tale. Like a romantic setting, there was music too but the song being sung was a revolutionary anthem. Moreover, the reverie that really caused her to fall in love was not some personal affiliation or a romantic gesture on the part of Pavel rather it was the realization of the fact that how Pavel not only could reach the mind but he was also adept at touching the emotions. Helena recalls:

> And in the midst of all the enthusiasm and emotion, I don't know how it happened, I suddenly seized Pavel's hand, and he squeezed mine, and when things died down and another speaker stepped up to the microphone, I was afraid he'd let go, but he didn't, we held hands all the way to the end of the demonstration and didn't let go even

> afterwards, the crowds broke up, and we spent several hours together roaming through Prague in all its spring finery. (*TJ* 17)

The above passage clearly illustrates how the political is inscribed into the personal. A political gathering and a political emotion are giving birth to a personal sentiment. This inscription of the political back into the individual is what The Party was attempting to establish. For The Party, the collective march towards the dictatorship of the proletariat is the teleological end that must be reached at. The individual and his desires are of no significance rather a hinderance in this march and are to be set aside. As Kundera comments:

> Totalitarian society, especially in its more extreme versions, tends to abolish the boundary between the public and the private; power, as it grows ever more opaque, requires the lives of citizens to be entirely transparent. The ideal of life without secrets corresponds to the ideal of the exemplary family: a citizen does not have the right to hide anything at all from the Party or the State, just as a child has no right to keep a secret from his father or his mother. In their propaganda, totalitarian societies project an idyllic smile: they want to be seen as "one big family." (*AN* 110)

The official propaganda would subject the most intimate and personal element of the psyche to the external and political. The question to be asked here is whether the inner self of man, the biological self or the id can be completely set aside? Both Freud and Kundera would say in unison, ‘No.’ The political may attempt to erase the individual but the individual can never become an absolute ideological cog and it is a matter of time when it would disrupt the supposed unity of the subject.

Helena gets disappointed in Pavel and sought solace in the arms of other men and here we see that through a circuitous route, her individuality re-emerges. The love she felt for Pavel wears off very soon and she again feels that longing, that desire. Even Pavel realizes the fact that their marriage was a sham, devoid of any personal feelings. After the early enthusiasm which lasted just a few years, Helena lost hope and then she started to look for real love or, to be more precise, a love that was not the outcome of political moment but a personal one. Though the novel does not dwell much on her life and how her quest for love fared, we can conjecture that much that this did not go well for her. The affairs proved to be little detours that would terminate in a blind alley and the road to true love was nowhere in sight. She dwells:

"I, a married woman, have had a few affairs, the difference is I was always looking for love, and if I made a mistake, if I didn't find it, I'd turn away in horror and look elsewhere, even though it would have been much simpler to forget my girlish dreams of love…" (*TJ* 21). What is this girlish dream of love? It seems that Helena herself cannot define it. It was the desire to be loved that arises from the depth of one's deep inner self. This desire has nothing to do with teleology of history or Party discipline or support. Helena thinks that she has found this love in form of Ludvik — the ideal of love, her dream. This love is something that is closer to the personal emotions and feelings and can transform her personality. She states:

> …so I keep looking for love, desperately looking for love, a love I can embrace just as I am, with all my old dreams and ideals, because I don't want my life to split down the middle, I want it to remain whole from beginning to end, which is why you took my breath away that day we met, Ludvik, dear, dear Ludvik-----.(*TJ* 22)

The interesting aspect of the above excerpt is Helena's desire to keep intact the wholeness of her life and how she wants to avoid the 'split.' What is this desired wholeness? How can this wholeness be split? She is desperately looking for love, a love she can embrace with her whole being with her old dreams and fantasies. This indicates a yearning of the 'self' to coincide with itself, to be complete in itself. It is a state in which the biological self, the personal, does not experience any kind of lack and the ego is not turned against itself. The love she experienced with her husband Pavel does not arise out of her being rather it seemed a kind of super-ego injunction — Thou shalt love for the Party. This love is not pure love as it entered into the being from without, in form of an injunction and consequently introducing a split in her 'self.' Here we witness an exposition of "the isomorphism of ordinary human behaviour and the sadism of militaristic governments" (Restuccia 282). Helena believes that Ludvik is the answer to all her prayers and her first date with him is a totally different experience as compared to her feelings for Pavel, invoked during the anniversary of Liberation as described earlier. Here, we notice that the text uses personal and intimate language as if the whole scenario is perceived through a personal lens and is not just a foreground of some grand political backdrop:

> …we stopped, my heart was pounding, there we stood face to face, and Ludvik bent over slightly and gave me a gentle kiss, I tore myself away from him, but then took him by the hand and started running again, I have a little trouble with my heart now and

> then, it starts beating wildly after the slightest bit of exertion, all I have to do is run up a flight of stairs, so I slowed down a little and got back my breath, and suddenly I heard myself humming the opening two bars of my favourite song, Oh, brightly shines the sun on our garden . .., and sensing he recognized it, I began to sing it out loud, without shame, and I felt years, cares, sorrows, thousands of gray scales peeling off me ….(*TJ* 24)

This paragraph, as we can see, is totally different from the one which recounts the details of Helena's falling in love with Pavel. It is more personal, more intimate, having a kind of warmth and emotional intensity. Helena mentions this time that all the atmosphere seemed romantic to her and she felt young and rejuvenated. She starts to act in a silly manner, like a teenage girl on her first date and who does not know how to restrain herself. Then she hums the tune of a song and again we see that even the song has the element of personal warmth in it and in contrast to the revolutionary song sang by Pavel on that day of celebration, this is about home and garden and sunshine. Weeks describes this political fervour int these words: "The tunnel image quietly intrudes upon the scene what master narratives of historical momentum and grand mythologies of endless desire − both of which subscribe to an immersion of the self in a moving mass, a momentum − would seek to occlude, to forget: the inevitability of the individual's death" (146). She sings this song loudly and it seems that the past with its repository of disappointments and regrets is peeling off her and this is the moment when for the first time Helena defies the political in the real sense and returns to the personal. The question is, does this return to the personal has any happiness in store for her? She thinks that Ludvik is the answer to all her prayers, a love that she has dreamed off throughout her life, but is it?

We come to know that Helena sinks even further into distress as Ludvik does not have any intention of continuing their relationship. I would analyse his motives a bit later and here my focus is on the reaction of Helena after she was rejected by Ludvik. She has already mentioned this to her husband that she has a new friend and now suddenly out of the blue, Ludvik comes to her and snaps off his ties with her. She is shaken and does not know what she is doing. She goes to District Committee building and searches for some painkiller in the pockets of Jindra's coat which was hung there. She takes the bottle which was full and this thought flashes upon her mind that these pills are poisonous if taken in excess. The idea comes

to her suddenly, in a flash. She is not thinking about committing suicide but, at that moment, the thought of being no one, to have no consciousness grips her mind. She recounts: "I just imagined myself no longer alive and suddenly I felt such bliss, such strange bliss that I wanted to laugh and maybe really did begin to laugh" (*TJ* 286). As previously discussed, laughter, as understood by the political ideologues of the time, was associated with joy ─ a humourless, unequivocal laughter that lands Ludvik in trouble with the Party. Helena, too, laughs here but her laughter is more of a personal kind, a laughter at the irony of fate and circumstances. After she has taken the pills, the whole bottle of them, she thinks she has ended her life and these are her last moments and she is thinking about Ludvik who has hurt her beyond repair. Even at that time she is hoping that perhaps there has been some mistake and Ludvik would come back and save her or in the worst-case scenario, he would find her dead there and realize that he has lost something precious. She writes a suicidal note to Ludvik and he does come in a panicked state, thinking that the worst might be waiting for him that would give him "years of sleepless nights" (*TJ* 302). But is there a dignified end to our comic existence? It seems not, and the same fact was noted by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer when he said: "…as if fate wished to add mockery to the misery of our existence, our life must contain all the woes of tragedy, and yet we cannot even assert the dignity of tragic characters, but, in the broad detail of life, are inevitably the foolish characters of a comedy" (Schopenhauer 322) and Helena's fate was no different. The pills Helena has taken were not analgesics rather laxatives and they did nothing other than humiliating her more in the presence of Ludvik. She comes out of the washroom with her skirt down and the whole scene is comical, if not for the characters involved, at least for the readers. The planned end which is supposed to be tragic, proves to be otherwise.

Freud has asserted that an individual may respond to the loss of a loved object in two ways; in form of mourning or in form of melancholia. In both cases, the ego rejects the external world and seems to lose interest in everything though there is a slight difference between the two mental states. Mourning, according to Freud, is normal but it is conscious and the ego, after a while, comes to term with the loss and invests the libidinal economy in a different object and thus returns to normal living. On the other hand, in case of melancholia the ego starts to identify with the lost object at the unconscious level and this leads to a pathological condition. Freud states: "This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given

rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him" ("Mourning" 244). Freud further notes that both mourning and melancholia might be induced by "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" ("Mourning" 242). One thing to be divulged here is that both mourning and melancholia are experienced at the personal level as this is significant to drive my point home — how in *The Joke*, Ludvik returns to the individual after the loss of the political. The loss of an ideal in form of the Party affiliation has affected Ludvik so much so that he just cannot come out of it and as we see that even after 17 years, he still harbours the grudge and is a tormented soul. If we use Freudian diagnosis, we can safely assert that he is a melancholic, if not completely then up to some extent.

Ludvik lost the most prized ambition of his life — his career in academia and his status as a prominent ideologue of the Party. To make the matters worse, he was sentenced to serve in Black Insignia, a para military organization working in the coal mines. The normal psychic development would have taken its course through the process of mourning and, in a while, he should have come to terms with this loss and moved on. In his case, this does not happen. Even after fifteen years, he hates Zemanek whom he holds responsible for his expulsion from the Party and is planning to settle his score with him through an affair with his wife Helena. Zemanek was the president of the student's body in the university and though the decision against him was voiced by the whole committee, somehow, Ludvik believes that Zemanek is the only one to be held accountable. From the Freudian perspective, we can analyse this behaviour from two angles. Firstly, as Freud has elaborated, mourning is characterized by the love of the lost object but melancholia has an ambivalence about it — the individual develops a kind of love-hate relationship with the object of love. Clewell elaborates this Freudian insight in these words:

> In contrast to the predominant feelings of love that he believed made the completion of mourning possible, the melancholic has ambivalent feelings of love and hate for the other. This ambivalence stems from "a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person" and renders it impossible for the melancholic to give up the attachment, at least until the grievance has been brought into consciousness and settled. (59)

Ludvik considered Zemanek his friend and thought that in the proceedings against him, Zemanek would take his side. Zemanek was not of any help and Ludvik was expelled from the Party and thus his love for the Party and for his friend turned against Zemanek. Here we may ask this question that why is it that instead of hating the Party, Ludvik just directs his hate to one individual? This leads us to the second angle of looking at this problem. Though the context is different, this phenomenon can be deemed as transference — a process through which an individual transfers his or her feelings for one person onto the other. Ludvik loves the Party, identifies with it and thinks that his life is defined through it and when he is expelled from it, he transfers his hatred towards the person who was chairing the hearing — Zemanek. Ludvik musses that there are people who claim that they can love humanity in general while others contradict this and assert that love can only be experienced in the singular. Ludvik agrees with the second group and thinks that love and hate cannot be directed at collective entities:

> But try directing your hatred at mere abstract principles, at injustice, fanaticism, cruelty, or, if you've managed to find the human principle itself hateful, then try hating mankind! Such hatreds are beyond human capacity, and so man, if he wishes to relieve his anger (aware as he is of its limited power) concentrates it on a single individual. (*TJ* 271)

Hatred is a personal emotion and it is always directed towards other individuals and this admittance of Ludvik really proves this point. In the state of melancholia, Ludvik's love for the Party turns into love-hate and finally just into hate against one individual that further leads to this passion for revenge against him. It is melancholia because Ludvik never moves on. He keeps himself attached with that feeling of loss and this is the reason that even after so many years, he plans to take revenge upon Zemanek. Petro observes: "In other words, revenge in Kundera's world has a boomerang effect, and actually benefits the intended victim" (46).

The disillusionment of a love incited by a political necessity leads Helena to seek a more authentic experience and she thinks that she has found it in form of Ludvik. On the other hand, Ludvik's resentment and feeling of loss takes him on the path of hate and revenge. As mentioned earlier, hate is also a personal emotion and, in many cases, in the interpersonal relationships, love turns into hate quite easily. Helena thinks that she is deceived by her husband in love, that his love was just a political stint and nothing more and this is the reason

that she turns to Ludvik for some authenticity. On the other hand, Ludvik thinks that it was Zemanek who had deprived him of his true calling, the life in academia. He plans that he would humiliate Zemanek through his wife. He admits: “Everything that had gone between Helena and myself was part of a precise and deliberate plan” (*TJ* 175). He was careful to “orchestrate the love story” (*TJ* 175) he was getting involved in and he intends to plan it such an air-tight way that nothing is left to chance. He is not interested in Helena because she was attractive or young or possesses any female attributes of significance “but purely and simply because her name was Zemanek and her husband was a man I hated” (*TJ* 175). Even in this apparently personal relationship, we can discern a parallactical dimension as both are looking at the same phenomenon from opposite angles. Helena wants it because, for her, Ludvik’s love is a dream come true but for Ludvik it is something to get even with Zemanek, a person he hates. Ludvik states: “From then on everything went exactly according to plan. The plan I'd dreamed up had fifteen years of hatred behind it, and I was confident, without quite knowing why, that it would come off without a hitch” (*TJ* 178). For Kundera the absurdity of all this is ironical and somewhat comic. Seligman comments upon this amalgam of the personal and political in Kundera in these words: “This nexus-pleasure and power- has provided him with his major themes (the psychology of eros, the absurdities of totalitarianism) and his minor ones (the absurdities of eros, the psychology of totalitarianism” (12).

Ludvik plans the whole scene meticulously, borrowing a room from Kostka and inviting Helena to meet him on the occasion of The Ride of the King. He pays attention to every detail of the scene but his real purpose was not pleasure but something else. What he wanted was to “take possession of one particular alien intimate world” (*TJ* 194), an act in which he would be a man “ravaging his fugitive prey” (*TJ* 194). Ludvik is not interested in Helena’s body and he questions himself, “What, then, was my soul doing while my body was making love to Helena?” (*TJ* 195). This is a significant question as it implies that even in this intimate personal contact, Ludvik was not one person rather he was split into two. One part was physically there with Helena, making love to her while the other part, probably his soul, was somewhere else. He says: “My soul had seen a female body. It was indifferent to this body. It knew that the body had meaning for it only as a body that had been seen and loved in just the same way by someone who was not now present; that was why it tried to look at this body through the eyes of the third, the absent one…” (*TJ* 195). The third one is, no doubt, Zemanek

and through the body of his wife, Ludvik is trying to take his revenge. After the act, Ludvik goes to the washroom and sees his face in the mirror and finds himself smiling and then he bursts into a laugh. This laughter was a personal laugh, having the satisfaction of a job accomplished. Ludvik thinks that he has avenged his rancour and sadness of seventeen years and, somehow, he has got even with Zemanek, the man responsible for all this. He wants to be alone, to "savour the rare delight of sudden solitude, rejoice in my joy" (*TJ* 196). After that fateful event of the postcard, the joke gone awry, it is for the first time that he feels happy and contented: "Yes, I was satisfied; perhaps I was even completely happy. I felt victorious, and as far the ensuing minutes and hours, they were superfluous and had no interest for me" (*TJ* 196). Happiness, this ever-elusive sentiment that human beings always seek and become sadder and sadder in the process. Is there any thing called 'happiness' without any strings attached, without any baggage? It seems not. In case of Ludvik, the feeling does not last long. Donahue observes: "The individual's struggles against fate or history are often petty or insignificant, but one, nevertheless, always senses a strong sympathy for the individual's suffering. Ludvik's frustrated life-history's joke-is a human tragedy" (71).

Helena deems their encounter once in a life time experience for her and when Ludvik manifests scepticism, she says that it is true and he and her husband are the only two men on Earth she ever felt in love with. Ludvik expresses displeasure over this comparison to which Helena assures him that her love for her husband is a thing of the past and their daughter is the reason that they don't get divorced. Otherwise, they are living like strangers. No doubt, Ludvik was not expecting this. His interest in Helena was totally extrinsic, not lodged in her body or soul and the fact is that he made love to her unattractive body just because she belonged to Zemanek. Now that Ludvik comes to know that she is not important for her husband, she completely losses her charm. "Now that she stood before me bare, without a husband or any bonds to him, utterly herself, her physical unloveliness lost all its power to excite and it too became only itself: a simple unloveliness" (*TJ* 200). The satisfaction and laughter that Ludvik has experienced a short while ago was gone, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. All this planning, this passion for revenge, this getting even with the person who had destroyed his life, all was a sham, absurd, nothingness and only, "the body was here, a body I had stolen from no one, in which I'd vanquished no one, destroyed no one, a body abandoned, deserted by its spouse, a body I had intended to use but which had used me and was now insolently enjoying

its triumph, exulting, jumping for joy" (*TJ* 201). So, it ends with a whimper instead of a bang for Ludvik but the worst is yet to come. Feintuch notes: "What he had taken for a joke was the truth; in much of his life up until then, the truth had turned out to be a joke" (32).

The worst is his meeting with Zemanek though it is quite sudden and unexpected. Zemanek is there with one of his students, a one Miss Broz, young, pretty and everything what Helena is not. It is evident that she is more than a student. Ludvik observes that Zemanek is still the same, little has changed about him, apparently. The biggest surprise is a complete change in the ideological make up of Zemanek. It is evident that he does not care about the Party anymore and when Ludvik asks him about his professorship, he tells him that he teaches philosophy:

> …his use of this word struck me as revealing; a few years ago he would still have said Marxism, but in recent years this subject had so declined in popularity, especially among the young, that Zemanek, for whom popularity had always been paramount importance, delicately concealed Marxism behind the more general term" (*TJ* 270).

At this moment, Miss Broz interjects, "…teachers of Marxism had a political pamphlet in their skulls instead of a brain, but that Pavel was entirely different" (*TJ* 270). Is this the same Zemanek who had ruined the life of Ludvik because of the Party ideology? Because he had written a postcard? Ludvik is in for surprise after surprise today and to add to his chagrin, Miss Broz especially mentions this fact that Zemanek always takes up cudgels against the University authorities and he is not liked by the people in power. Does this imply that Zemanek has shunned the political and entered the field of the personal mode of being? Ludvik comes to know that Zemanek has completely diverted from his former views and, now, he and Zemanek might have same opinions on certain matters. The thought is horrifying for Ludvik. How is it possible? People change and there is nothing unusual about that. In fact, it is a very common feature of human nature. But in case of Zemanek it is unacceptable. He cannot allow it as his whole plan was anchored on the premise that Zemanek would have remained the same: "But it was precisely in Zemanek that I had not expected this change; he was petrified in my memory in the form in which I'd seen him, and now I furiously denied him the right to be other than the man I'd known" (*TJ* 271).

How ironical it is that Zemanek, the president of the student union, who in many ways was the incarnation of the Party, and for whom just a postcard was enough to condemn Ludvik to a life of suffering and pain, was no more a believer in the Party and its ideology and Feintuch interprets this in terms of the existence of a past in the present: "As Ludvik gradually discovers the farcical tragic joke fate has played on him, so too does he, and the reader, realize the severance of genuine ties to the humane past and the artificiality of the way the past exists in the present" (32). In fact, now he shares with Ludvik the same outlook in many things. The whole revenge scheme of Ludvik was built on the premise of consistency. He still thinks that Zemanek is a Party stalwart and that his marriage is a successful one and he would have felt humiliated to know that his wife is having an affair with Ludvik. Ludvik, to his displeasure, finds out that nothing is permanent, that everything changes and it is he who has not changed. It is he who did not let go and, in the end, it is he who is the loser again. Since his expulsion from the Party, the whole existence of Ludvik hinged upon his hatred of Zemanek and now he is left with nothing — not even hatred.

4.5 The Individual, the Void, the Political

In the previous section, I explored the dialectical relationship between the individual and political modes of being and demonstrated how the two are inscribed into each other. Using Zizekian insight, I also elaborated how the difference between the two is not a difference between two distinct phenomena but it is a 'minimal difference' — a difference which comes into being when a thing cannot coincide with itself and splits into two. I applied this theoretical formulation on Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke* to trace out the minimal difference between the individual and political modes of being. Moreover, I brought in Freud to corroborate my point that there is only the individual and political is just a kind of extension of the former and both ontological modes are fundamentally ONE. The 'minimal difference' or Void that exists between the two is responsible for creating the parallax view and apparently, it is 'pure nothing,' a negativity, a vacuum but is not it that this void that spurs the dialectics of being and makes social, political and existential field what it is? Without this gap, this void, things would have been stagnant and self-contained and no forward movement would have been possible. On this account, Zizek claims that the parallax cannot be synthesized or sublated and it must be accepted in its incommensurability.

Towards the end of *The Joke*, we observe that despite the circuitous route taken by the individual as it comes back to itself through the political, the parallax is still there. The feeling persists even at the end that both cannot be reconciled. Take the example of Zemanek, a party stalwart, who does not care about his personal friendship for the sake of the Party and, in a way, destroys Ludvik's life for this political cause but at the end, we find him a different man. He does not believe in the Party and its ideology anymore but through Miss Broz we come to know that now he has become a sort of rebel and picks up fights with the authorities. She proudly declares that Zemanek is disliked by The Party officials as he consistently raises questions regarding the outdatedness of the curriculum. Moreover, he wants his students to know about philosophy other than Marxism as well. The most shocking news broken by Miss Broz is that "how he'd saved a boy they were about to expel for some boyish prank (an altercation with a policeman) that the chancellor (Zemanek's enemy) had wished to present as a political misdemeanour…" (*TJ* 270). Zemanek and fight for a boy who was involved in a prank? Was not it that Ludvik had tried to assert time and again during his hearings that the postcard affair was just a prank, a joke? It is obvious that Zemanek does not hold the same principles anymore but it does not mean that the political and personal, for him, are reconciled. The battle is still on though the banners have changed hands. Zemanek is as much an ideologue as he was before.

Who is that one character who has accepted this incommensurability in its totality? Perhaps Ludvik. After all this battle with himself and with others, all this blame game, all this hatred, and when he has hurt more than one woman in this process, Ludvik does seem to realize that there is no resolution. The closure he sought all through his life, does not exist. Things must be accepted as they are, with their antagonism, with the void, as there can never be a return to the ONE – the lost unity. Suddenly, he realizes this fact that nothing in human life is permanent. People live their lives as if mankind, objects actions and other things will always be there. In fact, this is not so: "The truth lies at the opposite end of the scale: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be rectified. All rectification (both vengeance and forgiveness) will be taken over by oblivion. No one will rectify wrongs; all wrongs will be forgotten" (*TJ* 245). In other words, people always look for closure, the denouement for the tragedy of life, but actually none such resolution exists. No wrongs will ever be rectified and no differences be reconciled. The acceptance of this void, this parallax is the true sublation, the only closure

that ever be. Zizek sums this up aptly through the example of lovers divided by love and political ideology and this example perfectly applies to the lives of the characters of *The Joke*. He argues:

> Recall the example of the revolutionary lovers living in a permanent state of emergency, totally dedicated to the Cause, ready to sacrifice all personal sexual fulfilment for it, but simultaneously totally dedicated to each other: the radical disjunction between sexual passion and social-revolutionary activity is fully recognized here, for the two dimensions are accepted as totally heterogeneous, each irreducible to the other, and it is this very acceptance of the gap which makes the relationship non-antagonistic. (*LTN* 950)

The real message of the novel is not to go back to that mythical unity when there was only ONE and this antagonism between the individual and political did not exist. The novel purports the opposite point; the void between the two waring positions is not 'nothing' rather it is a negativity that defines and thrust forward all the positivity. This gap or void must be accepted in its ontological dimension but how this void ought to be constituted, how the contours of the antagonisms must be set, that is another question and beyond the scope of this study.

II

In this section, I would analyse the parallax that divides another mode of being, body and soul. In this postmodern world, the idea that human beings have souls is scoffed at as the contemporary intellectual environment is defined by materialism and its resultant secularism. Neurosciences, psychology and other related disciplines assume that human body is just a reservoir of bio-chemical processes and there is nothing more to us, or beyond us. Human beings think, act and feel through certain reaction and processes in the body and our emotive and intellectual decisions cannot be attributed to something that is transcendent of our material existence. Daniel Dennett summarizes this material conception of the soul in these words:

> The prevailing wisdom, variously expressed and argued for, is materialism: there is only one sort of stuff, namely matter—the physical stuff of physics, chemistry, and physiology—and the mind is somehow nothing but a physical phenomenon. In short, the mind is the brain. (33)

But human soul and its ontological contours have remained the central focus of philosophical discourse throughout human history. Plato believed that the soul is something that gives life to body and any life-giving power is itself perishable (105) while Aristotle is of the view that the soul is not something that exists on its own rather it is a part of body (736). The debate took the shape of mind-body dualism in the modern philosophy and its first modern proponent was Rene Descartes. It should be kept in view that the belief in soul is grounded in theological doctrines and even its use in philosophical debates always has religious connotations.

In my discussion, I would analyse the parallactical division between body and soul but here I would use soul in its non-religious meaning, the way it is implied by Kundera. In the novels, the soul is not some substance that exists beyond the body and would outlive it. Kundera takes it as some kind of 'non-material' essence of our 'material' existence or to use the vocabulary of Existentialism, it is 'transcendent' aspect of our 'imminence.' If body is spatial, the soul is temporal and, apparently, both these coordinates are diametrically opposed, but I would attempt to bring out the ONENESS of these two. The body and soul appear to be two because of the parallax view and the shift in angle can yield a completely different perspective to them.

4.6 The Droll Corporeality of the Soul

The Joke primarily deals with ironies of existence and thus it is a record of internal expectations coming in conflict with outer reality that always ends up in a humorous situation. The novel also deals with another important parallax of being — the duality of body and soul and in preface to the Harper and Row edition of the novel, the author himself has described it as, "a melancholy duet about the schism between body and soul." In his fiction, Kundera seems to present this duality not in religious terms but for him the soul is something through which the body tries to transcend its situatedness. Ludvik, as we have seen, wants to have his revenge as he thinks that Zemanek is responsible for destroying his life and career. The revenge that he seeks is basically to have an affair with his wife, Helena, thinking that this would cause embarrassment and mental torture for Zemanek. He makes an elaborate plan to develop relationship with Helena and then inviting her to an apartment where he would use her body for the satisfaction of his soul. Ludvik believes that he controls the past. Cravens comments: "Time in Ludvik's narration is not open. It is not allowed to assume the semblance of the

present tense" (95). This delusion has made him believe that he knows the outcome of his actions in advance: "This is because Ludvik's experiencing self is the hurting self. By continually drawing attention to the pastness of his story, Ludvik creates the impression that his tale already has a predetermined conclusion" (Cravens 95).

The contrast is significant here as it is the soul that demands satisfaction and revenge but it is the body that must be used for this purpose. When Helena is sitting naked in front of him, Ludvik is not thinking about her body, he is imagining as if Zemanek were there and he is looking at him. At this moment, Helena is just a piece of flesh for Ludvik, her body an instrument, to be used against her husband. Helena, on the other hand, has signed up for something else. She thinks that Ludvik is the man she has searched for throughout her life. Through the communion between her and his body, she can experience that love that is described as the spiritual connection. Ludvik is using her body and does not have any interest in her soul while Helena thinks that the body is just a milestone and the destination is the soul. Ludvik is looking at the body of Helena but he is indifferent to it. His mind seems to have transported and having a telepathic experience. He is looking at her from the perspective of Zemanek. He attempts to record this spectacle not with his eyes but with the gaze of the absent third:

> …that was why it tried to become the third one's medium; it saw the naked female body, the bent leg, the curve of belly and breast, but it all took on meaning only when my eyes became the eyes of the absent one; then, suddenly, my soul entered his alien gaze and merged with him; not only did it take possession of the bent leg and the curve of belly and breast, it took possession of them in the way they were seen by the absent third. (*TJ* 194)

Here, it is evident that Ludvik's body and soul are alienated from each other. He is performing an act of love through his body but his soul is not in it. Once Kundera made a very interesting comment upon the psychology of the people who commit atrocities. He observed: "The dialectics of the executioner and his victim is very complicated. To be a victim is often the best training for an executioner. The desire to punish injustice is not only a desire for justice, pure and simple, but also a subconscious desire for new evil" ("Comedy" 7). This is an apt description of the psyche of Ludvik. He suffered prosecution but now he wants to turn the

tables on his oppressor. He is not thinking about the moral implications of his act. In his musings, he thinks about destroying the body of Helena not realizing the fact that Helena is as innocent as he himself was in the postcard episode. He thinks of her body objectively, insensitively. The two bodies are writhing in the physical passion and one of them is his body but he has nothing to do with it. And then, he commands his body "to be itself again, to intervene in the connubial coitus and destroy it brutally" (*TJ* 194). The soul stands back, enters into another body, comes back to reclaim its own body again. Here we should stop and ask this question; what is the relationship between the body and the soul? In the fiction of Kundera, on which ontological plane do they exist? The above lines reveal something significant here. The body and soul have their own modes of being and both may experience completely distinct sensations and experiences. Ludvik's body is making love to Helena, his soul is having its own reveries. It is, in fact, having outer body experience, turning its own body into an object and observing it as an outsider. For Ludvik, then, in the act of love, the soul does not play any part. He says: "Physical love only rarely merges with spiritual love" (*TJ* 170). He implies that the soul is just a catalyst in the process but he admits that the soul enjoys a kind of superiority over the body as it brings into the act a third element — fantasy: The soul comes up with strange and extraordinary ideas during the moments of physical pleasure. Thus, it proves that the dimensions of the soul are far advanced as compared to the body. The soul takes us into the realm of the unknown and makes the experience of physical intimacy more pleasurable than it actually is. But for Ludvik, generally, the converse is true. In the novel, we see him with two women — Lucie and Helena and in both cases, it is the body he focuses on. Soul is something that rarely comes into play for him. While making love to Helena, he dwells on the other possibility: "Or conversely: think of the joy it takes in disparaging the body by leaving it to its push-pull game and giving free rein to its own wide-ranging thoughts: a particularly challenging chess problem, an unforgettable meal, a new book...." (*TJ* 170). He does confess that the union of the body is not unique and, in some cases, even the union of souls may take place (*TJ* 170) but what is rare for him is, "is the union of the body with its own spirit in shared passion" (*TJ* 170). This rarity is the reason that, at this moment, with Helena, his soul is objectifying his own body. Moreover, he was not able to understand Lucie's love for the same reason. Restuccia traces the route of this violence towards women in politics: "…men victimized by the Communist Party in turn become victimizers, who wield power over and

even brutalize other men and, more dramatically, women" (282). For years, Ludvik kept on wondering what could have been the reason that Lucie resisted his advances and could not come up with any plausible explanation. Now, when he meets Kostka who tells him about Lucie, Ludvik realizes that his opinion of her was grounded in the physical and he did not realize that for her, it was something related with the soul. Ludvik revisits those days and recalls how in that dark room, with the street lamp light shining through the curtains, Lucie had struggled against his advances. At that moment, he thought she was doing it for the sake of modesty as she was a virgin. But the opposite was true. She was putting up a fight because she was not a virgin and was afraid that he would not like it. Perhaps there was another explanation too; the return of the repressed traumatic experience of her youth:

> Or there is another explanation (which corresponds to Kostka's view of Lucie): her initial sexual experiences had marked her deeply and had deprived the act of love of the meanings most people give it; they had emptied it entirely of tenderness and affection; for Lucie, the body was something ugly and love was something incorporeal; the soul engaged the body in a silent, dogged war. (*TJ* 251)

At that moment, as was his wont, Ludvik was thinking Lucie's struggle in terms of the body as he thought she did not want him to know that she was not a virgin. This made him annoyed and edgy and he forced himself on her. It never occurred to him that her resistance might have some other cause. He comes to know, years later, that Lucie had a traumatic experience and, as a result, she had started to abhor physical intimacy without the communion of the soul. For Lucie, the body was something ugly, something odious and she wanted to get away from it. Ludvik, of course, does not take into account these considerations and he frightens and traumatizes her even more. For Kundera, every individual soul has a specific configuration and "it is through this configuration that the character's situation and the sense of his being are defined" (*AN* 54) and Ludvik's one-sidedness does not allow him to see this possibility. The parallactical positioning of Ludvik and Lucie is making them look at the schism of body and soul from their respective perspective.

4.7 The 'terra incognita' between Body and Soul

When Lucie comes across Kostka, after she had run away from Ostrava, in a rural district, she is still going through her dismal experience of love with Ludvik. Kostka, too,

eventually, falls in love with her but he does not force himself on her. Initially, he would just talk to her about nothing in particular, just to calm her. Kostka says that he would not ask her any questions rather he would just talk to her. He would tell her about herbs and plants and how they could be used to treat various ailments and Lucie just listened (*TJ* 227). Here we can see that Kostka's approaches her in a completely different manner. He does not even ask her anything about her past. He just talks to her. After some time, he starts to tell her about Jesus and about belief in religion and Lucie absorbs everything. After a while, Lucie also confesses to him the reason of her running away from Ostrava. She tells him that there was a soldier who hurt her but she was not in love with him. We know that she is talking about her experience with Ludvik. When he asks her why did she run away from him, she tells him that the soldier was as brutal as the others. When Kostka insists that she should tell him about the others, she opens up. She tells him about her traumatic experience of being raped by some youths when she was sixteen. She lived with them for six months and in those six months, she was raped and humiliated a number of times. This is when she developed a hatred of her body and contempt for physical intimacy: "Everything on this earth which belongs to God may also belong to the Devil. Even the motions of lovers in the act of love. For Lucie, these had become the province of the odious. She associated them with the bestial adolescent faces of the gang and later with the face of the insistent soldier" (*TJ* 236). Ludvik has one parallactical view — of the body and his spatial coordinates completely ignored the other parallax. Kostka knows about this other view and he also knows that Lucie should be approached from that angle. He would talk to her every day and he teaches her to forgive herself and he tells her even physical love is not bad if it is done properly. The weeks pass and one day when Kostka and Lucie are alone in the fields, among the apple blossoms, Kostka notices a smile on her lips. This is the first time he has seen her smile. Until then she was trying to flee her past and future and she had been afraid of everything. But Kostka has changed her. He has made her smile. When he sees her smile for no apparent reason, Kostka also feels a sudden sensation in his soul, a sensation that has nothing to do with the senses, it is something immaterial. Perhaps, it is the communion of two souls. Kostka says:

> I kneeled on the gnarled stem of an apple tree and for a moment again closed my eyes. I heard the breeze and the velvet bells in the white treetops, I heard the birds trilling,

> and before my closed eyes their song was transformed into thousands of lanterns carried by invisible hands to a great ceremony." (*TJ* 237)

At this moment, Kostka feels a hand on his face and hears Lucie saying that he had been so good to her. "And the voice added, more faintly: "I love you." (*TJ* 237). Kostka, though he considered it a sin, surrenders to this moment of weakness and they make love, then and there, among the fields. Lucie does not resist this time. Her parallactical position has been incorporated.

This body and soul parallax takes on a circuitous route for both Kostka and Lucie and their relationship takes on a turn when the body and soul merge to become ONE. Kostka was helping Lucie out of his belief, in other words, not for any physical or material reasons, or did he? Could it be that this connection he sought to establish with the soul of Lucie was just a pretext to get to her body? We cannot be certain about this. These are what Pochoda calls "overlapping delusions" (312) of the characters. He does admit that this relationship should not have progressed to that level: "What should not have happened happened. When I saw Lucie's calmed soul through her smile, I knew I'd reached my aim and I should have left. But I didn't" (*TJ* 238). Kostka successfully awakens the female inside Lucie, through her soul he brings her to accept her body. The irony is, the moment he awakens this physical side of hers, he is afraid of it:

> Lucie was happy, glowing, she was like the spring, which all around us was gradually changing into summer. But instead of being happy, I was horrified by the great female springtime at my side, which I myself had awakened and which turned all its unfolding blossoms towards me, blossoms that I knew were not mine, must not be mine. (*TJ* 238)

Kostka awakened the bodily desire in Lucie through the route of the soul but now that it is awakened, he has second thoughts. He starts to develop other concerns like he has already a family and this is a sin that he is committing. The second level irony is that he continues to have this relationship of the body just because he does not want to hurt the soul of Lucie. Kostka states:

> I did not wish to break off this beginning of intimacies for fear of wounding Lucie, yet I did not dare go on with them, knowing I was beyond my rights. I desired her, yet at

> the same time I was afraid of her love, unsure of what to do with it. Only with the greatest effort was I able to maintain the natural tone of our former talks. (*TJ* 238)

This uncertainty is caused by the realization that he thought he was the healer of the soul for Lucie, but now, Lucie has handed him over her body too. He is not sure what to do with it. This also makes him question his own intentions. Kostka begins to doubt himself. Was it that his interest in Lucie carnal in nature from the outset? The spiritual assistance that he provided to her, was it just spiritual or lurking behind it was the desire for the physical? This causes a split in his 'self.' He begins to question his own motives. Was it that he was helping her as a good Christian or he just desired her body? Was he using religion as a pretext? This ushers in an extreme sense of guilt: "I felt that the moment I yielded to my sexuality I had soiled the purity of my original intention and been stripped of all my merit before God" (*TJ* 238). Unfortunately, it is impossible to know, not only for the readers, but for Kostka himself what really were his intentions. Though the body and soul seem to be two different modes of being yet it is just a parallactical angle that makes them appear as two, in reality, they are ONE. Kostka thinks that his assistance to Lucie is grounded in soul and then, without his will, it encroaches upon the body. He fears for his soul that he had "been stripped of all my merit before God" (*TJ* 238) but at the same time he continues this physical relationship for the sake of the soul of Lucie. At first, it was the body connection that could have caused hurt to Lucie so her soul must be touched. Now, if this body connection is undone, then the soul of Lucie could be injured. But all these considerations do not make Kostka break this relationship. Even he constructs this spiritual argument; if he just thinks about his own salvation, is not he going against the spirit of Christian belief which is grounded in the love of the creature of God? He thinks that, perhaps, his merit and piety are nothing in the eyes of God. Is not it that Lucie, as a creature of God, more important than his own purity?

> Must I throw her back into despair merely to save my own purity? Will God not despise me all the more? And if my love is sinful, what is more important: Lucie's life or my sinlessness? It will be my sin, only I will be the one to bear it, only I myself will be lost through my sin! (*TJ* 238)

From soul to body and back, this is the circuit that defines their relationship and this, also, proves the ONENESS of the body and soul. Both modes of being are ONE. To use Zizekian

framework, we can assert, there is only the body, but this body cannot coincide with itself. It must come out of its instinctual drives and rise beyond itself. The body rises beyond itself when it splits from itself and extends into the soul — the immaterial part, that is, in a way, opposite to the body, yet, grounded in it. The two seem to have two opposite modes of being, but, in fact, it is a parallax. This shift in perspective enables us to see the inherent ONENESS of the two. Lucie goes through a traumatic experience when she was sixteen and this experience makes her hate her body. Her brief stint with Ludvik also comes to nothing as he wanted to have physical relationship with her. With Kostka, she develops the communion of the soul, thinking that he is not after her body. This communion of the souls, ironically, prepares her to accept her body. Kostka, too, begins this relationship at the level of the soul, it leads to the body, and now he does not want to end it for the sake of the soul of Lucie, though, he is using defence mechanism to deny his own physical desire.

4.8 The Body and Soul are ONE

Helena, in many ways, is quite opposite to Lucie. She does not hate her body; she thinks it is the royal road to her soul. It is through the body one achieves that harmony, that music, whose coda is the union of two souls. If Lucie denies her body and thinks it odious and eventually accepts it only when she has developed the connection with the soul of Kostka, Helena thinks that it is the body that is central in this debate. After their love making, Helena expresses her feelings to Ludvik in a passionate way. She tells him that it has just been eight days and she already feels that she never loved anyone more than she loved him. Then she makes an unusual assertion:

> …the body is more honest than the soul, and my body knows that it has never experienced anything like yesterday, sensuality, tenderness, cruelty, pleasure, pain, my body has never dreamed of anything like it, our bodies made their vows yesterday, now our heads have only to go obediently along, I've known you just eight days and I thank you, Ludvik. (*TJ* 260)

We can say that Helena is quite unconventional in this regard. Usually, it is believed that our physical drives are blind and irrational and under their influence we can commit irreparable mistakes. Helena has the opposite stance. She tells Ludvik that her mind or soul can deceive her but the body is more honest than the soul. She is defining their connection not through their

mental compatibility but through the adjectives of the body like sensuality, pleasure, pain, tenderness. Unlike Kostka and Lucie, whose souls formed the bond first and that later was translated into the physical, for Helena the vow was made through their bodies and their souls must follow the suit. She tells Ludvik that she never experienced anything like this in her life. The physical encounter, for her, has paved way towards something beyond: "She swore that she never lied in love, that I had no reason to doubt her" (*TJ* 198). Further she illustrates that since their first meeting, she knew that there was something between them, some connection between their souls. How can the instinct of the body be fool proof? Is not it that this very same instinct leads us astray? Is not this that compels us to commit atrocities and irrationalities? The common belief is thus. But Helena has got a point here. As we have discussed, in the context of Kundera's fiction, the soul is not some independent substance, distinct from body but an extension of it. When the body desires to transcend its own materiality, its own imminence, it splits from itself and creates this abstraction — the soul. The body is material, mortal, spatial and in relation to its functions, ugly. The need for the soul is, basically, to go beyond these attributes of the body. So, the body splits from itself and gives birth to soul that is immaterial, immortal, temporal and beautiful. As we have seen, in the case of political, that how the political is something that rose out of the individual, but, after it came into being, it transforms into an independent ontological mode and is defined against the very entity that gave birth to it. Same is the case with the soul. The soul is born out of the body but later it turned out to be its binary opposite. The parallactical analysis of the two helps us see the two as ONE. This is the reason that I assert Helena has a point when she says that the body has its own fool proof instinct. The body is not divorced from the transcendence of the soul, it is at ONE with it. It can sublimate, to use Freudian term, itself into the attributes of the soul. For Helena, the physical can be sublimated to something higher and her body has done it. She tells Ludvik: "that naturally I'd impressed her with my intelligence and my élan (yes, élan: I wonder how she discovered that in me) …" (*TJ* 198). Ludvik cannot believe that, in such a short time (they met just eight days ago) she can claim to know his élan. But Helena thinks it is quite natural and tells Ludvik: "…our two bodies had immediately entered into that secret pact which the human body signs perhaps only once in a lifetime" (*TJ* 198). The pact is not between the two souls but between the two bodies.

Out of the four major characters of *The Joke*, Ludvik is the only one who seems to be completely dislocated in relation to the parallax of the body and soul. This dislocation, as we have already seen, does not allow Ludvik to get involved with a woman in the real sense. Kostka, who has known Ludvik for many years, believes that the fundamental flaw in Ludvik is his lack of forgiveness. Forgiveness, though, a religious category and is aligned with spirituality, is something that is needed for a healthy social existence. To Kostka, forgiveness is a metaphysical feat, only possessed by the Divine. Still, up to some extent, forgiveness is a social necessity too, as without it we cannot have a positive existence. In his ruminations, Kostka addresses Ludvik and tells him about his fatal flaw: "…you still remember the plenary meeting when everyone raised their hands against you and agreed that your life should be destroyed" (*TJ* 235). Ludvik has never forgiven them for that. Moreover, Ludvik has taken the committee as a representative of mankind in general. The day Ludvik got expelled from the university, he started to mistrust and hate everybody. The impact of this general hatred is that, for Ludvik, the other human being is just an object, incapable of imparting or receiving compassion and love. This incapacity to forgive has become his curse: "*Because to live in a world in which no one is forgiven, where all are irredeemable, is the same as living in hell* (Italics original). You are living in hell, Ludvik, and I pity you" (*TJ* 235).

The problem with Ludvik is that he thinks about people in spatio-temporal terms and for him a person is not a set of characteristics or attributes but what position he or she occupy at a particular place and time. This situatedness of his outlook traps him in a particular historical moment and, consequently, he judges and relates to people through those fixed coordinates. Zemanek presided over the meeting in which Ludvik was expelled from the university and, for him, even after years, Zemanek is still sitting in that chair, in the same room. Same is the case with Lucie. Though he claims to love her, his love is also a situatedness in the barracks and desolate streets of Ostrava. Though he claims he was totally involved in Lucie, body and soul, and everything, his involvement was confined in a particular setting. "I was totally involved, totally intense, totally concentrated, and I now think of those days as a paradise lost (an odd paradise guarded by a dog patrol and echoing with a corporal's commands)" (*TJ* 105). In the course of the novel, we see that these claims of ONENESS of body and soul prove to be false. When he leaves Ostrava, he does not contact Lucie again as he finds himself unable to think of her in any other location. Her love for a woman is time and

place bound and the change in these coordinates, also, leads to change in his emotional state. He presents the argument that human beings are defined through their facticity, their spatio-temporal existence. Hamlet can't be thought of without the backdrop of Elsinore or Ophelia: "Likewise, Lucie without the Ostrava outskirts, without the roses handed through the barbed wire, without the shabby clothes, without my own endless weeks of despair, would probably cease to be the Lucie I'd loved" (*TJ* 163). It is evident that Ludvik does not think about a woman in relation to herself. He thinks of her what she means to him in a particular moment. The examples he quotes here are also related with context and situatedness. Lucie, as body or soul, does not matter, what matters is her situatedness. This is the reason that I assert that Ludvik has a somewhat distant connection with these two modes of existence. As I have already discussed, how Ludvik, during his love making session with Helena, distanced his body and soul from the present and imagined himself as Zemanek, who is watching him performing the act with his wife.

This distancing stops him to develop any connection with anybody, of body or soul. He distances himself from Lucie after she leaves Ostrava and makes no attempt to find her afterwards. After years, when he does see her, in a hairdresser shop, he pretends as if he does not know her. Moreover, after he has made love to Helena and comes to know that Helena does not hold any significance in the life of Zemanek any more, he loses all interest. Now he starts to notice the ugliness of her body and wishes her gone. It is a body that was the part of his revenge plot. Now, it appears, this body has no appeal for him. He has not stolen it from Zemanek. He intended to use this body, instead, it has used him. Cooke comments:

> In *The Joke*, Ludvik's quest for Helena is an expression of his desire for revenge on Zemánek, but his tyranny (of sexuality) shows itself to be as brutal as any regime's; the reader finds himself increasingly unwilling to accept that Ludvik's obsessive violation of women (of Lucie as well as of Helena) does not run deeper than a purely external or indirect motivation. (82)

The other characters experience, or think can experience, ontological completeness by aligning themselves to one mode of being. Through this one mode of being, they move towards the other. In other words, they do have the capacity to participate in the ONENESS of body and soul. This ONENESS does not indicate merging one with the other. It implies the acceptance

of the fact that the soul is an extension of the body and it is the parallactical view that makes them appear as two. Moreover, this division or schism must be taken as essential component of ontological field and ought to be accepted in its incommensurability. Ludvik, owing to his misalignment with these ontological modes, cannot traverse the itinerary. This lack has engendered in him a kind of generalized propensity to hatred. The cure for this hatred is 'forgetfulness' and he does realize this towards the end of the novel when he says: "No one will rectify wrongs; all wrongs will be forgotten" (*TJ* 245). Only this oblivion can make somebody come out of the situatedness of a wrong and help him move forward.

III

The parallax between a particular and its universal is another thematic pattern that emerges and re-emerges in the fiction of Milan Kundera and in this section, I would explicate this mode of being. As we have seen, the distinction between the particular and universal was first introduced by Plato and later philosophers also contributed their share to keep the debate alive. In this analysis, I intend to use Zizek's appropriation of the Hegelian notion of Universality and Particularity. Through the years, Zizek has revisited and re-evaluated his concept of universal and particular, and, here, I would interpret the selected texts in line with these variations. In his book, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Zizek refers to the distinction between 'abstract' and 'concrete' universality. Zizek quotes the example of a subject's primary and secondary associations to demonstrate his point. Human beings are born into a family, and, our primary allegiance is always to this institution. On the other hand, the state, in which we are born, also demands that all particular allegiances of the individuals must be sacrificed at its altar. The state claims that it is universal but insofar as it does not include a very important particular element — family into it, then, according to Zizek, it is an 'abstract' universal. In the classical literature, *Antigone* is the example of such a conflict between the universal and its particular content. How can this abstract universal turn itself into a concrete universal? According to Zizek, the "universal secondary identification" only becomes concrete "when it reintegrates primary identifications, transforming them into the modes of appearance of the secondary identification" (90). The universal must allow its particulars to be accounted for, otherwise, it would remain an abstract universal and would not achieve the status of a concrete universal. The point to ponder is that this outlook attempts to

close this parallactical gap between the two opposites of universal and particular and posits them as ONE. The universal cannot attain its notional completeness until it includes its opposite into it.

4.9 "In its *forlornness* and its *abandonment*": From Particular to the Universal and Back

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia posited history as a 'grand march' towards emancipation and, invariably, all aspects of human existence were defined by it. The 'grand march' was 'universal' and all other features of life mere 'particulars.' These particulars were supposed to take part in the realization of the universal. In the novel, we find at least two very important parts of Czech culture and society that were 'universal' in their own right but were left out by the grand march of history. In other words, the universal of grand march of history would not take into account these particulars. The grand march, in Zizek's terms, is a secondary identification. The most important primary identification with respect to culture is the folk music of Czechoslovakia. Kundera was trained as a musician and this reflects in his fiction. There is a detailed and authentic discussion on folk music and its significance in Czech life in *The Joke*. The description tells us that for the people music is a primary identification: "The ancient countryside had lived a collective life. Communal rites marked off the village year. Folk art knew no life outside those rites" (*TJ* 140). The folk songs cannot be differentiated from the culture and setting out of which they have sprung. A poem, Kundera tells us, expresses the uniqueness and individuality of its creator, not so the folk song. The folk song is not individual, not standing in contrast to its surroundings:

> The romantics imagined that a girl cutting grass was struck by inspiration and immediately a song gushed from her like a stream from a rock. But a folk song is born differently from a formal poem. Poets create in order to express themselves, to say what it is that makes them unique. In the folk song, one does not stand out from others but joins with them. (*TJ* 140).

This primary identification with one's culture should also be understood in 'universal' terms. The collectivity and shared values of folk music are extended from one generation to the other. The music is not possessed by one single individual, it is shared by all. Moreover, these songs are associated with different cultural events and occasions and thus have a functional value.

These functional aspects make them even more rooted in the culture. It is impossible to understand them out of their specific context and function. Some songs are meant to be sung at weddings, some at harvesting festivals, some are carnivalesque, some for dancing, some for mourning. These must be understood in their proper context and setting. Such functionality and situatedness of a cultural feature may appear arbitrary and insignificant to some people and they may interpret it as something 'particular' to a certain area or a cultural group. Actually, for the people of that group, this feature is as universal as anything else. It is through this feature that they define and identify themselves. Their reality is constructed through this association.

As Communism presents itself as 'universal,' Ludvik thinks that this primary identification — music, should be blended into it. He thinks that the folk music of Moravia, his town, has remained stagnant for centuries and thus it has lost its edge. This primary identification of the people is significant but more important is the secondary identification, — taking part in the 'grand march of history.' The grand march of history can achieve its true universal status if it takes into account the primary identification of the folk culture. Ludvik believes that, like jazz, their folk music should attempt to go mainstream, to become part of grand march of history. He says:

> Our folk music, in contrast, is a motionless princess from bygone centuries. We have to awaken it. It must merge with the life of today and develop along with it. It must develop like jazz: without ceasing to be itself, without losing its melodic and rhythmic specificity, it must create its own new and newer phases of style. It isn't easy. It is an enormous task. A task that can be carried out only under socialism. (*TJ* 140)

Ludvik draws a parallel between Communist ideology and folk art by asserting that both strive for a universal collectivity. Communism is the ideology that calls for universal ideal of equality and shared values. Same goes with folk art. Folk art is also a collective expression. As mentioned earlier, it has its roots in all aspects of community existence. Ludvik upholds that folk art cannot perform its ordained function because "Capitalism had destroyed the collective way of life. Folk art had lost its footing, its sense of itself, its function" (*TJ* 141). Ludvik thinks it futile to work for the revival of folk music under the prevalent conditions. Capitalism has promoted individualism and this in turn has destroyed collective spirit. It would be useless if

an attempt is made to revive the spirit of folk music under such conditions. Only socialism can bring back the collective spirit because it is the only true 'universal.' It has freed human beings from a life of alienation. It has coalesced the public and private spheres. Human beings, under this new system, would create new customs and rituals. These festivities would arise out of egalitarian spirit of the masses. Socialism, in Ludvik's view, is doing a great deal to revive the collective spirit of folk music in order for it to merge into the grand march of history and progress. He states: "No one had ever done so much for folk art as the Communist government. It earmarked enormous amounts for setting up new ensembles" (*TJ* 141). Socialism has decried all forms of Western music as they are based upon false sense of collectivity. All forms of western music like jazz and tango have become obsolete under the 'dictatorship of the masses.' The Party has opened new vistas of social existence. If we describe Ludvik's point of view through Zizekian lens, socialism is the 'concrete universal' as it attempts to merge the primary identification within it. In this way, the particular content of folk music and the universal collective spirit of socialism, though, apparently in opposition, are parallactical standpoints and are, in actuality, ONE.

Ludvik's stance about folk music and socialism goes through a transformation after his expulsion from the Party and the university and his stay at the mines. After many years, Jaroslav, his childhood friend, meets him and during their conversation he finds out that Ludvik does not believe in revolutionizing folk music anymore. Jaroslav tells him that his band has tried to change the tone of folk music to make it more palatable for the modern audience: "The most important thing was that we'd created our own *contemporary* folklore, new folk songs with something to say about life we live it now" (*Italics original*) (*TJ* 155). Ludvik's response is quite unexpected: "It was precisely these new songs that jarred on his ears most of all. What pitiful imitations! And what fakery!" (*TJ* 155). This really shocks Jaroslav. Jaroslav always thought that Ludvik was for the modernization of folk music. He wanted it to mingle with the collective spirit of socialism. Ludvik replies that it was really a utopian and idealist thinking at that time and nothing else. Jaroslav tells him that the songs they composed under the influence of this utopia still exist and they sing them. Ludvik does not agree: "You may sing them, you and your ensemble, but show me one other person who does. Show me one collective farmer who sings your collective farm songs for pleasure" (*TJ* 155). Ludvik retracts his previous advocacy of the radicalization of folk music. Now he believes that it was mere

propaganda and joining the two is like a badly sewn-on collar as Kuhlman opines: "Soviet-influenced Communism appropriated religious and folk traditions, emptied them of their original content, and used them for its own ideological ends" (99). Does this mean that merging the primary and secondary identification is always a pseudo unification? Ludvik seems to agree now. His days of revolutionary zeal are gone and the passion is substituted with nihilistic and cynic outlook. Basically, the same cynicism that became the cause of his dismissal from the Party. Ludvik might not have known this but from inside, perhaps, he is a cynic after all. The excessive identification with The Party ideology has made people so "cynical that they have lost their fundamental ability to experience human emotions (Donahue 70)

Towards the end of the novel, Ludvik does come out of this cynicism and his passion for folk music returns. The revival is not for the radicalized union of the folk and political ideology but it is the rediscovered love for the music he played and loved in his youth. This happens to him after his episode with Helena and Zemanek and the realization that how futile his hatred was. When he meets Jaroslav in the fields, he has this epiphany that all through his life, he has missed his friend and these surroundings. He confesses:

> …for at that moment I was filled with a sorrowful love; love for this world I had abandoned years ago, for this world, distant and ancient, in which horsemen ride around a village with a masked king, in which people walked around in frilled shirts and sing songs, for a world that for me is merged with images of my hometown … (*TJ* 311)

Here, it is evident that Ludvik is rejecting his secondary identification with the political ideology of the regime, rejecting it as the true 'universal.' In his youth, he surrendered to the official standpoint and its claim to be a universal and in the process, he distanced himself from his primary identifications, his childhood friends, his village, folk music. Now at the end, he has allowed himself to let go of that bitterness, that hatred that had consumed him throughout his youth. When he was expelled from the Party, he was left out of the universal march of human history and progress. The realization has come to him that the universal was a false universal. True universal is the feeling of love for one's immediate and primary associations. He "could love it" because he has found this love in its "forlornness", "in its forlornness and its abandonment" (*TJ* 311). He states:

> "…it was abandoned by pomposity and publicity, abandoned by political propaganda, abandoned by social utopias, abandoned by the swarms of cultural officials, abandoned by the affected adherence of my contemporaries, abandoned (even) by Zemanek; this abandonment has purified it; purified with someone with not long to live; illuminated it with an irresistible ultimate beauty; that abandonment was giving it back to me. (*TJ* 311)

As I mentioned earlier, Zizek, throughout his career, has been revising his definition of the 'concrete universal.' The first definition mentioned above was later substituted with a second one. Zizek quotes the example of Christian religion by saying that Christianity claims:

> …you could participate in social life, occupy your determinate place in it (as a servant, peasant, artisan, feudal lord) and remain a good Christian — accomplishing your determinate social role was not only seen as compatible with being Christian, it was even perceived as a specific way of fulfilling the universal duty of being a Christian. (Zizek, *TTS* 91)

The problem with this claim is that it was never realized in its true spirit. According to Christ, Christianity is a universal religion and it does not have any room for particularities like nationhood, religion, social status or gender. Actually, this was never the case. In the real-life situations, human beings are discriminated on the basis of their religion, nation, social status and gender. Zizek is of the view that this kind of universality negates all the particular content but in actuality it allows the oppressive structures to continue. Then how can 'universal' be a 'concrete universal.' In order to achieve that status, the universal must cease to be "a neutral-abstract medium of its particular content" and also it must "include itself among its particular subspecies" (Zizek, *TTS* 92). Wendell Kisner in his article, "The Concrete Universal in Zizek and Hegel" sums up this position in this way: "…in order for universality to become concrete, it cannot remain aloof or indifferent with respect to its particular content but must include itself in its particulars" (Kisner). In order to reach this standpoint, Zizek brings in Ernest Laclau's concept of "Hegemonized Universal." According to this version, a universal in itself is always 'empty,' devoid of any content. It needs a 'particular' to fill in its space. At any given moment, this universal can be "hegemonized by some particular content that acts as its stand-in" and thus universality becomes a "battleground on which the multitude of particular contents fight

for hegemony" (Zizek, *TTS* 101). This battle goes on forever. One particular claims that it is a true universal but then another particular replaces it and claims the same, and so on.

4.10 "A casting of divine blame on us": The Downtrodden and the Failed Universals

In *The Joke*, we discern this second version of universal and particular as well. Through the character of Kostka, we come across two universalities which are at war with each other — Communism and Christianity. Both ideologies lay their claim to the universal. Both assert the inclusiveness of their doctrines that they represent universal ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity. Kostka believes that the true Christianity is the only universal principle that stands with the downtrodden: "But being a Christian means living differently. It means taking the path Christ took, imitating Christ. It means giving up private interests, comforts, and power, and turning toward the poor, the humiliated, and the suffering. But is that what the churches were doing?" (*TJ* 208). This implies that Christianity is the 'concrete universal' but the problem is that it is represented by the people who have digressed from its true message. The Communist ideology claims to be the new universal, a substitute for religion. The religion has failed the masses and now its Communism that should dethrone its universality and take its place. Kostka is aware of the fact that a true universal is the one that is inclusive and represents all strata of society. The main objective is this representation. If Christianity has failed the downtrodden of the world, it's natural that some other universal would rise and claim the vacant position. Therefore, Communism's rise is the failure of Christianity and the Church that represents it. Kostka is also aware of the fact that, despite being godless, Communism's claim to work for the downtrodden is appreciable. He does not see it as a discrepancy to be a Christian and a sympathizer of Marxism at the same time even though many religious people did not agree with his stance. They chided him for supporting an atheist movement like Marxism. They hoped that he would change his viewpoint after a while but it did not happen. He still believes that the union of Marxism and Christianity is possible.

For Kostka, the difference between the two universals is just a parallactical difference, a question of perspectives. In actuality, both are ONE. Kostka believes that Communism is a kind of censure of Christians by God. Christians left the poor and the oppressed alone and sided with the oppressors and thus Communism is God's way of reprimanding them. He avers

that the working-class movement is basically a Christian movement as God is always on the side of the down-trodden. The church, instead, condemned this movement and sided with the oppressors. They started to call the working-class movement as godless and evil. “And now they reproach it for being godless. The Pharisees! Yes, the socialist movement is godless, but I see in this a casting of divine blame on us, on Christians. Blame for our hardheartedness toward the poor and suffering” (*TJ* 209). Kostka things that both Christian and Communist ideologies are the same, both are based upon faith. He does not agree with Ludvik that Communist thought originated in European scepticism and rationalism which are rooted in secularism. He believes that a socialist society can also be founded by the people who believe in God. For being a socialist, one needs not to be a someone who believes in the materialist interpretation of the universe. He asserts: “I am altogether certain that the line of the European spirit which stems from the teachings of Jesus leads far more naturally to social equality and socialism” (*TJ* 224). In this vein, Kostka interprets Communism in terms of religion, an ideology based upon faith. He says that even the Communists, whom he knows personally, are not sceptics but staunch and ardent believers. He thinks of many Communists who cannot be branded as sceptics and, in their outlook, are like believers. For example, the chairman who put Lucie in the care of Kostka, though a Communist, is a believer — believer in the cause of humanity. The post-World War II revolutionary era in Czechoslovakia was not a period of doubt, it was a period of belief. The Communist promise resembled a great deal with religious promise of future bliss and its believers also took it with the same zeal. They defined and lived their lives by this promise. Ludvik is one such example. When he was expelled from the Party, he thought his life had come to an end, it has lost its meaning: “True, the Marxist teachings were purely secular in origin, but the significance assigned them was similar to the significance of the Gospel and the biblical commandments. They have created a range of ideas that are untouchable and therefore, in our terminology, sacred” (*TJ* 224). This ONENESS of the Communist and Christian ideology and their perceived objective of exalting the poor and the downtrodden gives this parallax a completely different perspective. For Kostka, the objective is more important. The difference in parallax should not be perceived as the difference in their objective. The point to consider is that both ideologies blame each other for the fallen nature of societies, for injustice, for inequality but both have failed the masses. Just like Christian ideology, Communism also proved unsuccessful in bringing solace to the poor of the world.

Kostka is so much committed to the proclaimed objective that he was even comfortable with Communism if it would take its ideology to its logical conclusion. But he is disappointed as the Communist ideal, just like Christianity, has failed the masses.

Kostka liked that age of ideology because of its zeal and fervour and hoped that one day it would live up to its promises. Until 1948 coup, Kostka was respected by the Communists as he would "expound on the social content of Gospel, inveigh against the rot of the old world of property and war, and argue the affinity between Christianity and Communism" (*TJ* 210). Up till then, the Communists just wanted to expand their influence to all sections of the society and also wanted the believers on board. But after Feb 1948, things were not the same. Kostka took the side of some students who were being expelled from the university because their parents were anti-Communist. Following his ideology of helping the downtrodden, Kostka raised voice in their favour. When he protested in favour of those students, the university administration did not like it. Despite his religious leanings, he was tolerated by The Party because he wanted to act as a bridge between Socialism and Christianity. After his protests, the administration used his religious leanings against him and he had to leave the university. This clearly indicates that even the Communist ideology, like that of Christian one, was not concerned with the plight of the masses, they were more interested in fighting ideological battles. They were ready to punish the people just because they did not conform to their ideological standpoint. The same was true in case of Christian church. The Christian church was against Communism not because it failed to live up to its promises, they were against it because they were secular. Here the parallax between two universals, that make them appear as two, actually is ONE, on two different planes. Both universals claim that their purpose is to exalt the downtrodden, and both are failed attempts. Still, Kostka believes that the present age was worse than the previous period of ideological fervour. People are either fanatics or do not believe in anything at all as Donahue avers: "…extreme-fanatical belief in a truth or all-encompassing cynicism-displace emotions and values" (70). The present age is more and more an age of disenchantment and absence of any belief, religious or secular. He believes that even the secular Communist ideology, despite its drawbacks, was better than the mindlessness of the present age. He opines:

> This was a cruel religion. It did not elevate you or me among its priests; perhaps it injured both of us. Yet despite this the era that has just passed was a hundred times

> nearer to my heart than the era that seems to be approaching today: an era of mockery, skepticism, and corrosion, a petty era with the ironic intellectual in the limelight, and behind him the mob of youth, coarse, cynical, and nasty, without enthusiasm, without ideals, ready to mate or to kill on sight. (*TJ* 225)

Kostka's parallax of being is not limited to the oscillation between the two universals of Christianity and Communism. There is another parallax of primary identification with his family and the secondary identification with his Christian faith. Kostka has a wife and a son and he feels strongly about his responsibility towards them. When he gets into trouble at the university and is about to lose his job as a lecturer, his wife tries to persuade him not to surrender and should do something to save his job. She wanted him to think about his son and the future of the family. Like any other woman, nothing else mattered to her. But Kostka is not thinking about the particular mode of being of the family and its liabilities. He is thinking about the universal identification that he has with Christian faith. The family is particular while his faith is universal. Kostka decides to go for the universal while his wife stands for the particular. "I was afraid of this burden, and in my mind, I heard Jesus' words: "Take therefore no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (*TJ* 213). Just like Antigone who chooses her family over the state, Kostka chooses his belief over his family. Here we see that Christianity is understood as an abstract universal as it fails to include in itself the primary identification of the family. But Kostka betrays both the particular and the universal when he gets involved with Lucie and, thus, by committing this sin he goes against the teachings of Christ. He also is guilty of infidelity to his wife and betrays the particular institution of the family too. The problem is that Kostka does not remain loyal to Lucie too. In form of Lucie, Kostka experiences this rare experience of love. He says: "I had her happiness within my power" (*TJ* 246) but he runs away and admits, "No one has ever wronged her as I did" (*TJ* 246). Then it occurs to him that his belief is not the pure belief. He just uses it to avoid human contact and obligations. He runs away from Lucie just like he ran away from his wife who was a teacher and lived in a small flat. He admits: "And suddenly the idea comes to me that I invoke supposed divine appeals as mere pretexts to extract myself from my human obligations" (*TJ* 246). This means that Kostka did not leave university fifteen years ago because he wanted to dedicate his life to his faith, that he wanted to work for the downtrodden. He left it for a very commonplace and ordinary

reason. He admits to himself that the reason he quit his university job might be that he did not love his wife and wanted to get away from her. He did not want to fulfil his filial obligations. He did not have the heart to divorce his wife. She was a good wife and he could not hurt her. In this psychological suffocation, the voice of God seemed a gust of fresh air to him and he went away. Does this mean that just like Ludvik, Kostka also comes to the realization that his parallactical modes of being and his choices were just sham, that it is all meaningless? The thought is quite unsettling as the idea is associated not with the grandeur of tragedy but with comic absurdity which is totally unacceptable. Kostka prays to God that He may speak and reveal to him the true purpose of his being. “O God, is it truly so? Am I so wretchedly laughable? Tell me it is not so! Reassure me! Make yourself heard, God, louder, louder! In this chaos of confused voices, I cannot seem to hear You” (*TJ* 246). The chaos of voices does not convey a clear message.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed Milan Kundera’s novel *The Joke* using textual analysis as a method. I employed Zizek’s parallax view to study the split that exists between three modes of being, the personal and political, body and soul and universal and particular. The focus was on four main characters — Ludvik, Helena, Kostka and Lucie. These characters have a certain ‘facticity’ and this facticity defines their being. Ludvik, in his youth, defined his ‘being’ through The Party and its political ideology. This changes when he gets expelled from the Party and university. This event transforms his being and through a process of condensation, he directs his hatred against one person, Pavel Zemanek. Later events are unfolded in relation to the reaction of Ludvik. It all starts with a joke and, in a way, ends with a joke. Through this joke, this absurdity, Kundera has unmasked the ontological schisms that define our being. As I have shown, the very possibility of ontological field is dependent upon these splits. The void that separates the two modes of being, gives birth to parallactical view. Another significant point that can be garnered from this discussion is that the identification with one mode of being causes disruption in the socio-political field. This insight can be applied to our culture as well where this partisanship has given birth to intolerance and parochialism. This parallax makes the two modes appear as two despite their inherent

ONENESS. In the next chapter, I would analyse my second primary text *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, employing the same lens.

Notes

[1]. Despite its political undertones, Kundera himself tries to underplay the ideological nature of his fiction in his interviews. When in an interview in 1982, someone dubbed his novel *The Joke* as an indictment of Stalinism, Kundera quickly interrupted and asserted that the novel has nothing to do with Stalinism rather it is a love story.

2. See Milan Kundera, *The Joke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992. Print). Henceforth, I shall use *TJ* as abbreviation of *The Joke* for my parenthetical citations across my thesis.

[3]. *Jacques the Fatalist* is a novel by French philosopher and writer Denis Diderot.

[4]. Heteroglossia is the term introduced by Bakhtin in his paper "Discourse on Novel." It refers to the diverse elements of speeches that constitute a novel.

[5]. Leon Trotsky was a Russian Marxist politician, theorist and a close aide of Lenin. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, he became a very important member of the Communist government. After the death of Lenin, when Stalin came to power, he was branded as a traitor and had to escape Russia. In the Stalin era, being a Trotskyite was considered anti-revolutionary in many Communist countries. When Ludvik writes 'Long live Trotsky in his postcard to Marketa, he meant it as a joke, but this was used against him and he was expelled from the Party.

[6]. Later on, Freud went on to define another as powerful but opposite force i.e. Thanatos or the death drive. Death drive is different from id. Id simply wants the gratification of its various lusts. Thanatos is the drive to annihilate everything. An impulsive urge to destruction.

CHAPTER 5

THE IRREPARABLE SCHISMS: MILAN KUNDERA'S *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING* AND CONTRARIES OF EXISTENCE

> *The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become*.
>
> — Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 221

> *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?*
>
> — Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 8

5.1 Introduction

Milan Kundera published *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[1] in 1984, living as an émigré in France. The memory of prosecution of the masses, particularly, of the intellectuals in his native Czechoslovakia was still fresh as the process had not yet come to an end. Kundera had the luxury to observe the events from the outside and this is the reason that his this novel is less acrid in political terms. This does not imply that the novel does not possess the "political unconsciousness," to use the Jamsonian phrase, but still it seems to have a kind of *liberte* not found in *The Joke*. The writer is more focused on the characters, and though the political backdrop does shape the lives of these characters, they seem to have more autonomy, more agency and wherever they don't seem to possess it, it is as if chance is governing their existence. Does this mean Kundera take an existentialist turn in the said novel in order to dig deeper into human individuality away from the *sturm und drang* of political arena? The question is a complicated one and I would explore it in detail and my contention would be that despite the apparent shift in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the individual is still mired in the political and the parallax is still there though not as pronounced as in *The Joke*. Moreover, the other ontological schisms are more noticeable in the novel, with a detailed commentary by the author on their nuances. Still, perhaps, it is the first novel of Kundera that heralds a thematic

shift and we see that in his later novels the political issues become implicit and the individual existence takes centre stage.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being centres on four characters; Tomas, Tereza, Sabina and Franz. Tomas and Sabina have embraced 'lightness' and they do not like lasting commitments and responsibilities. On the other hand, Tereza and Franz designate 'weight' and heaviness. Tomas is a famous surgeon who has many female friends. When Tereza comes into his life, he also takes her just another diversion. With the passage of time, she starts to grow on him and, eventually, he marries her. He writes an article in a newspaper comparing the guilt of the politicians of the Communist party to Oedipus Rex. After the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, he comes under investigation for this article. He has to resign and do odd jobs and finally moves to countryside with Tereza where both of them die in a road accident. Sabina, a painter, has a special friendship with Tomas. She also hates oppressive politics of the Communist party and its brand of Socialist Realism. She leaves her country and settles in Switzerland. There she has a brief affair with Franz but when she finds out that he is committed, she leaves Switzerland and moves to the States. Franz is an idealist who likes grand marches and political activism. He leaves his wife for Sabina but Sabina disappears. He goes to Cambodia to raise voice against political atrocities but is killed in a street scuffle.

The four major characters of the novel — Tomas, Tereza, Sabina and Franz have different perspectives about life, relationships, politics and these perspectives have parallactical dimensions. Not only these characters consistently raise questions about the meaning of their existence but their own make up is based upon certain existentialist questions. Peter Kussi avers:

> Kundera interrogates his characters, poses questions to his various narrator-personae, engages his readers and puzzles them into questioning them- selves. He is after clarity, definition, with a French faith in lucidity and a Czech mistrust of absolutes" and this "patient investigation by narrator, characters and readers is rewarded by glimpses into the rules of the game (206).

Like the previous chapter, this chapter is also divided into three sections and in each section, I have read the novel from the perspective of one thematic perspective. The first section deals

with the personal and political, second with the body and soul and third with universal and particular.

I

5.2 From Lightness to Weight and Beyond

The parallax between the personal and political in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is not as explicit as it is in *The Joke*. I would begin with Tomas who, apparently, seems to be an apolitical person, devoid of ideological content, fully engrossed in the 'personal.' Tomas is so individualistic that he does not think himself responsible for any other human being. After his divorce, he also stops caring for his son: "Why should he feel more for that child, to whom he was bound by nothing but a single improvident night, than for any other?" (*TULB* 11). He meets his son again after a long time and does not feel anything − love or compassion or feeling of loss. The only thing he noticed was, "that when concentrating the boy slightly raised the left side of his upper lip. It was an expression he saw on his own face whenever he peered into the mirror to determine whether it was clean-shaven. Discovering it on the face of another made him uneasy" (*TULB* 216). This objectivity or lack of compassion clearly illustrates that the cornerstone of Tomas' character is 'lightness'[2] and the weight of responsibility that love or relationships bring with it is beyond him. He has an air of aloofness and indifference towards the events that are occurring around him. When he got divorced, he let his ex-wife take his son with her and after that on one pretext or other, when she would not allow him to meet their son, Tomas decided not to see him at all. This was quite a shock for Tomas' parents and they also boycotted him. Tomas was not affected by the loss of these connections which, for most other people, are defining features of existence. The narrator comments:

> It is my feeling that Tomas had long been secretly irritated by the stern, aggressive, solemn "Es muss sein!" and that he harboured a deep desire to follow the spirit of Parmenides and make heavy go to light. Remember that at one point in his life he broke completely with his first wife and his son and that he was relieved when both his parents broke with him. (*TULB* 196)

He snapped his relationship with his wife, son and parents because of his "Es muss sein."[3] For Tomas, there are only two things which are important — his profession and his liaisons with

different women. Even these liaisons are not meant to be serious as he has devised a fool proof strategy not to allow any such relationship to turn into something else. Affiliation, whether personal or political, always brings with it a kind of 'weight,' a burden and Tomas was not willing to carry this burden. Restuccia has observed that Kundera's "reflections on literature would indicate that his concern is not with public but with private life" (281) and the character of Tomas is fully in line with this description. Even in his relationships, he is obsessed with individuality of his partners. His experience as a surgeon has provided him an important insight that human brain does not contain anything that makes one individual different from the other. What is this 'I' we are so obsessed with? How one 'I' is different from another? There is no scientific evidence to help us in this regard. Tomas could not find the answer in physiology so he started to have relationships with different women, to search for idiosyncrasies, small details which make one woman different from the other. Tomas knew that, quantitatively, if a woman has, say one million parts, then except one millionth part, she is just like any other woman. It is just that one millionth part that makes her dissimilar and his quest was to find that part. The narrator says that Tomas is obsessed with finding that small idiosyncrasy that makes a woman different. Scarpetta and Anzalone observe: "The novel places in opposition romantic obsession, which seeks THE woman in every woman, and can only lead to disappointment, and the libertine obsession, whose donjuanism aims at the uniqueness of each woman, her "formula" (110). This obsession with the discovery of individuality makes Tomas stands apart from the people who try to merge their self in some grand ideological narrative. This lightness remains his defining feature till he meets Tereza. She comes into his life like a child "put in a bulrush basket daubed with pitch and sent downstream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed" (*TULB* 6) and though he tries to resist the 'weight' of his relationship with her yet she continues to grow on him and a time comes when Tomas finds himself married to her. Still Tomas' being is environed by the personal and we do not see any shift towards the political but that was soon to be changed.

It was 1968 and a debate started regarding the innocence of Communist leaders involved in atrocities culminating in murder and torture. The leaders, of course, were not ordinary criminals rather they were convinced that they had discovered the only road to happiness for the masses and whosoever resisted them was a public enemy. Later on, when their crimes came to light, there was a public outcry and the people shouted at them and blamed

them for the present state of affairs: “And the accused responded: We didn't know! We were deceived! We were true believers! Deep in our hearts we are innocent!” (*TULB* 176). Though Tomas was never ardently interested in politics, through newspapers he would follow the debate. He thinks that the issue is not whether the Communists knew about their atrocities or not. Not knowing about something does not take away the moral responsibility of an action. This reminds Tomas of Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex.*[4] He reflects: “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” (*TULB* 177). Tomas draws this comparison between the Communist leaders and Oedipus to highlight the moral corruption of these so-called politicians and their lack of guilt. Oedipus commits incest and parricide but he was not aware of his crimes and when he becomes conscious of them, he could not bear to look upon the horror he wrought upon himself, his family, and the city. This realization, this moral guilt is so strong that he blinds himself and asks Creon to send him away from Thebes to avoid this horror. But the Communist leaders do not have this moral courage and sense of guilt. After torturing and executing their own fellow citizens for years, now, they were playing innocent by claiming that they did not know and they were doing it for a noble cause:

> When Tomas heard Communists shouting in defence of their inner purity, he said to himself, as a result of your "not knowing," this country has lost its freedom, lost it for centuries, perhaps, and you shout that you feel no guilt? How can you stand the sight of what you've done? How is it you aren't horrified? Have you no eyes to see? If you had eyes, you would have to put them out and wander away from Thebes! (*TULB* 177)

After some deliberation, Tomas decides to write it in form of a letter and sends it to a newspaper. Though he is not pleased with their editing and the final version that appeared in print is far from the way he has imagined it, it was a political statement and a very crucial one in the given circumstances. Alexander Dubcek is in power and the other Communist leaders are looking towards their Russian masters for help. They are anxious that the public might demand that these leaders must be brought to justice. At this critical juncture, Tomas’ letter gets published. The narrator comments: “When Tomas's letter appeared, they shouted: See what things have come to! Now they're telling us publicly to put our eyes out!” (*TULB* 178). The Russians decides to act and they occupy Tomas’ country. Can we say that this one article

became the prime mover of the events that followed? Perhaps not. But it does tell us something about Tomas. For the first time in his life, Tomas decides to come out of the individual perspective and comments upon the political. Tomas never thought that his cursory comments upon an ongoing political situation may cause such an upheaval. The chief surgeon calls him in one day and asks him about his letter to the newspaper. We should keep this in view that this happens after Tomas' return from Zurich, a decision he had to make because of Tereza when she decided to return to Prague, leaving Tomas behind. Does this mean that the subsequent events in the life of Tomas could have been avoided if he had not followed Tereza back to Prague? The answer is yes and the 'lightness' Tomas always yearns for is now being replaced by 'weight.' John Bayley comments on this dichotomy of lightness and weight in the novel in these words:

> Lightness of being is associated with the author's voice, with the cinema and sex, with irresponsibility and definition, with politics. Weight or heaviness of being, on the other hand, is associated with love and fidelity, suffering, chance, fiction, form and content ('The sadness was form, the happiness content. Happiness filled the space of sadness'), death. (8)

The chief surgeon asks Tomas whether that letter holds any personal significance for him or was it just an impulsive response of no consequence. Though Tomas admits that the letter does not hold any importance, the thought of retracting it is disturbing for him as it entails a kind of choice — a choice between honour and passion. Tomas feels that if he retracts his letter it would be a dishonourable thing to do and he would feel embarrassed. On the other hand, if he does not retract then he might lose his job and his work is very important for him. It is to be noted here that here work is related with the personal while honour is something beyond the individual, a socially structured concept. At the personal level, his work is his passion and there is this opinion that the chief surgeon, on his retirement, would hand the charge over to him which implies that the prospects are bright for Tomas. But one thing that bothers him is the fact that his colleagues know that he is asked to retract his letter and they are also confident that he would do that. Does this mean that in their opinion Tomas is not a man of principle? That for the sake of personal he can sacrifice his political opinion? "That was the first thing that struck him: although he had never given people cause to doubt his integrity, they were ready to bet on his dishonesty rather than on his virtue" (*TULB* 181). The reaction of his

colleagues and acquaintances can be divided into two categories; firstly, the people who themselves have signed such retractions are expecting the same from Tomas as if they want him to be the part of their brotherhood of some kind; secondly, the people who had not signed would also ask Tomas about the matter in a tone of moral superiority as if they know that he would sign and, in this way, would be less pure as compared to them.

Tomas finds himself dwelling on the smiles and scorns of these people and this is really curious as he is a man who would not care less what others think of him. After some days he finds himself unable to sleep because of these thoughts and it is quite uncharacteristic of him: "It was completely illogical. How could someone who had so little respect for people be so dependent on what they thought of him?" (*TULB* 183). We have already established this fact that Tomas' sphere is personal and he cannot bear the gaze of others to be fixed on him. In fact, his choice of profession also indicates a kind of shrinking away from the public gaze where he is only answerable to individuals — his patients and if something goes wrong, he can personally clarify things. Now at this moment, he suddenly finds himself under the scrutiny with innumerable eyes fixed upon him and he is completely at a loss and does not know how to react: "The interest they showed in him was as unpleasant as an elbowing crowd or the pawings of the people who tear our clothes off in nightmares" (*TULB* 184). Tomas tries to convince the chief surgeon to find an amicable solution of this problem but the authorities do not yield and Tomas has to leave. This episode calls to mind Martin Heidegger's concept of the 'others' and Horvat links this with Tomas' dilemma in these words:

> First, it is interesting to point out that Others said about Tomas that he was the best surgeon. Second, Others believed that he will be next head of department in hospital, because the chief surgeon was getting on towards retirement age. The third thing said, when the word broke out that he has been given a choice is that he will definitely sign it. (167)

We see that Tomas, for the first time, is looking at himself through the lens of others. After this episode, Tomas had to work at a distant clinic and the travelling was very tough. After a year, he got a job in the city but had to work as a general practitioner and not as a surgeon. His dallying with the authorities were not over yet. One day a secret police agent visits him and tries to investigate the nature of his letter and the identity of the editor out of him. On his

second visit, the agent proposes that Tomas can get his job back if only he writes a retraction but the draft of the proposed retraction is even more preposterous than before. Not only the draft contained the retraction of his Oedipus article but also it was full of praise for the USSR and its Communist ideology. Moreover, it condemned those elements in Czechoslovakia who were against The Party or its programs. Tomas realizes that the said retraction would not only be a source of embarrassment for him but also it would cause problems for the editor whom he does not even know. The parallax between the individual and the political resurfaces again. On one side, Tomas has his personal ambition, his life's calling, his work as a surgeon and on the other, there is this duty to the public, to the others. The choice is not a simple one. Basso holds this view that

> … the very existence of polar extremities (north and south, lightness and heaviness, fidelity and infidelity, privilege and excrements) causes a radical, inherent indecisiveness, because the poles are indistinguishable. Disorientation thus becomes an internal condition of the subject, not an external confusion. (78)

In other words, the polar opposites can be reduced to the political and personal. The political and the individual cannot be separated as both are ONE. The subject position of doctor is in conflict with the subject position of a social being and Tomas cannot sacrifice others for his personal end. Tomas returns the statement with a vague promise that he might write his own as he has this fear that they might publish this retraction even without his consent to make a case against the editor. The next day he resigns from his post at the clinic and becomes a window washer as he believes that now no one would suspect him of writing a retraction after accepting such a low social position. Tomas thinks that metaphors are dangerous and can lead to love. In this case, the metaphor of Oedipus does something opposite. Hana Pichova and Marjorie E. Rhine comment: "Love itself, then, is not why metaphors might be dangerous. Thinking about Oedipus does not lead Tomas to a deeper love of Tereza; rather it leads him to a "dangerous," publicly voiced interpretation of the political" (75). But the letter episode is not over yet.

It has been two years since Tomas started working as a window washer when one day he happens to meet the editor of the newspaper which published his letter. Astonishingly, the other person present in the room was none other than Tomas' own son. He knew his son by

face but never talked to him and now it was quite strange sitting opposite to him and noticing some of his own tics projected on his face. Apparently, Tomas' son has joined hands with the editor and they wanted to get a petition signed by the Czech intelligentsia demanding the release of political prisoners. Tomas happened to be on their list just because he wrote that Oedipus letter. Despite feeling slightly flattered, Tomas tries to convince the editor that they should get it signed by the people who really matter as he does not consider himself belonging to the category of intelligentsia. His son interjects at this moment and tells him that the people who really matter, people with influence, would not sign as they are afraid: ""Which doesn't mean we don't go after them," the editor continued, "or that we're too nice to spare them the embarrassment." He laughed. "You should hear the excuses they give. They're fantastic! " (*TULB* 214). It does seem as if the editor and Tomas' son are not concerned about making any difference and as if the cause of political prisoners is just one of their takes on making others embarrassed. The editor tells Tomas that these significant members of the society do not want to sign but also they don't want their estimation to sink in the eyes of the editor and his comrades. The individual mode of being consistently seeks the approval of the social or the political.

After a while, the editor hands Tomas over a statement requesting the president to grant amnesty to the political prisoners. While reading the statement, it occurs to Tomas that such a statement would not serve any purpose, in fact, it might be used against the very cause it espouses. Then what is the purpose of this exercise? At this moment, Tomas' son intervenes: "The main thing is to make the point that there still are a handful of people in this country who are not afraid. And to show who stands where. Separate the wheat from the chaff." (*TULB* 215). Suddenly, Tomas is wary of all this design; what is the motive here? Do they really want to free political prisoners or they just want to separate the wheat from the chaff — sort out who is the conformist and who is the dissenter? For Tomas, both motives can't go hand in hand rather it seems plain that the real purpose was to embarrass the people in the eyes of their fellow citizens. If Tomas signs the statement, he would incur the wrath of the authorities but he would surely have a moral superiority over those who did not. Here we notice another twist. The political is being used for propping up the narcissistic self. The editor and Tomas' son and their other colleagues are not concerned about making any real difference rather this very act of theirs may undermine the cause they are fighting for. What is at stake here is the narcissistic

satisfaction that we are the dissenters, that we did not surrender to oppression and thus we are superior to the people who did. This inscription of the personal into the political again points towards the ONE-ness of the individual and the political. The political is just an extension of the individual and its psychological economy is the same. Just like the individual who seeks narcissistic props to make himself appear significant in the eyes of his/her social circle, the political mode of being works on the same plane or may be used to serve the same purpose.

For Tomas to sign or not to sign, both choices appear like a threat. "In his opinion, their reasons were just so many excuses and their excuses a smoke screen for cowardice" (*TULB* 215). When Tomas tells them that he needs some time to think it over, they respond that there is no time as they have to submit the petition tomorrow. Yet another strategy to overwhelm the people and not allowing them to think. At this juncture, Tomas notices something uncanny on the face of his son — how the boy raises the left side of his upper lip while concentrating. It is something he has seen every day on his own face while shaving. It is really unsettling to discover this on the face of some other person. Here the narrative voice intervenes and puts forward an analogy of an amputated arm. What if somebody's arm gets amputated and one day, he finds out that it has been implanted on somebody else? The analogy is apt here as a very personal gesture is printed on the face of a person sitting opposite who, very interestingly, at the moment, is representing the political. As we have seen, that the political is an extension of the individual but when the personal emotions, motives and complexes are projected onto the political and take the form of a collective neurosis, they are always harmful for the individual mode of being. While Tomas is brooding over the endless possibilities and pros and cons of signing this petition, his son asks him a rather direct question: "Are not you on the side of the persecuted?" (*TULB* 216). The question is a simple one but Tomas immediately realizes that actually the nature of this question is not political but personal, though it is phrased in the terminology of the political:

> Tomas suddenly saw that what was · really at stake in this scene they were playing was not the amnesty of political prisoners; it was his relationship with his son. If he signed, their fates would be united and Tomas would be more or less obliged to befriend him; if he failed to sign, their relations would remain null as before, though now not so much by his own will as by the will of his son, who would renounce his father for his cowardice. (*TULB* 216)

Does this mean that behind the façade of the political, Tomas' son is seeking something personal — a bond with his father? Tomas left his wife and son a long time ago and never bothered to have any sort of contact. His son might have missed him and there is this likelihood that he looked up to him as a famous surgeon and now as a non-conformist. His mother was a staunch Communist and she certainly would have brought up her son on the same lines. If Tomas' son has joined this anti-communist group perhaps it was not for some vague political ideology, it might be for very personal motive — getting close to his father. On the other hand, Tomas cannot possibly accept this outcome. If he signs, he would inevitably become the part of the group and a comrade of his son. This personal angle to all this is not acceptable to him. "Heaviness and lightness, love and sexual adventures, promise of meaning and craving for freedom: all these remain, for Tomas, equally enticing but fundamentally irreconcilable pursuits. (Just, "Poetics" 180). Still, for a moment he weighs the question and decides that there is no harm in signing the petition. When he is just about to sign the paper, first the editor and then his son compliments him that the letter he wrote was an excellent piece, a true act of resistance. Tomas replies that owing to the ideas expressed in that letter, now he cannot work as a surgeon which is his personal ambition. The editor counters this by saying: "But think of all the people your article helped" (*TULB* 217). Tomas wonders how could that letter help anyone? For him, helping people always had a completely different connotation. His idea of helping people is linked with the practice of medicine. For him, it is an absurd concept that an article can help somebody in any way. Here again we see that the parallax of the political and the individual is making the characters look at the same event from completely different angles. For Tomas, helping people does not pertain to getting involved in some grand political struggle, to work as an activist or to challenge an oppressive regime. For him, helping had always been associated with curing some individual of his or her pain. We can say that for Tomas, helping people was not an obscure and vague gesture, related with some utopian social order, rather a concrete act. This is again a personal point of view coming in conflict with a political one. Moreover, it is not just the editor and his comrades who believe that the true help is a political gesture but the government also believes in that. The government did not consider the significance of the services Tomas was rendering to the people at the individual level through his work as a surgeon. He just writes a letter and because this letter had a political message so they think that in order to work as a surgeon, Tomas must retract this letter. Neither

the regime nor the dissenters care about Tomas' significance as a practitioner of medicine. They think that helping people just implies adhering to one political ideology or the other. Tomas, as we have seen, is a person who always associates himself with lightness and for him the personal can never be political or vice versa. He cannot conceive this particular notion that ideas can save lives: "Maybe it helped people, maybe it didn't," he said (in a voice still cold, though he probably did not realize it), "but as a surgeon I know I saved a few lives" (*TULB* 217). The parallax is clearly discernible here. For Tomas, existence is about lightness and individuality and its essence does not lie in some greater good rather the belief in some greater good always undermines the individual happiness. His son intervenes here by saying that ideas can also save lives and he tries to emphasize the significance of Tomas' letter in the current political situation:

> "You know the best thing about what you wrote?" the boy went on, and Tomas could see the effort it cost him to speak. "Your refusal to compromise. Your clear-cut sense of what's good and what's evil, something we're beginning to lose. We have no idea anymore what it means to feel guilty. The Communists have the excuse that Stalin misled them. Murderers have the excuse that their mothers didn't love them. And suddenly you come out and say: there is no excuse. No one could be more innocent, in his soul and conscience, than Oedipus. (*TULB* 218)

But Tomas is not convinced as he thinks that it was not his intention to punish anyone. For him, it was just a thought and he cannot care less about it now, especially, when his letter went through such modifications before it was published. He started to express his point of view but restrains himself as it occurs to him that this conversation might have been tapped and he does not want to give this impression to the regime that he regrets writing the letter: The Party wants him to retract his letter and he cannot fulfil their wish. The editor seems to be perplexed by this line of reasoning and he asks Tomas that what made him change his mind. To this, Tomas replies that he still wonders that why is it that he wrote the letter in the first place. At this, he suddenly recalls how he came upon the thought, a thought that completely changed the course of his life. The idea occurred to him because of Tereza and the metaphor of the bulrush basket. When Tereza came in his life, it seemed as if she was a child, a foundling, sent to him in a bulrush basket. This was the reason that he started to read the classic stories of foundlings like Moses, Romulus and Oedipus. At that moment he was not aware of "the danger that is said to

reside in the metaphor comparing Tereza to a found child, specifically to Oedipus, seems connected to the strictures and risks of love" (Rhine 71).

We have seen that Tereza signifies weight and she is the one who brings the burden of responsibility and relationship in the life of Tomas. If we associate lightness with the personal, something linked with personal desire and pleasure and take weight as responsibility and relationships and one's obligation towards one's fellow beings then it can be understood as political. Tomas had lived his life in lightness and he does not give any weight to relationships like parents and children and so on. When Tereza enters his life, something is changed. It was a fortuity, a chance. She brought with her metaphors and metaphors inevitably weighs one down and the same happens to Tomas. Tereza is the first woman Tomas allows to stay with him, and, then, it is because of her that he leaves Prague and goes to Zurich, and, again, she is the reason for his coming back. Most importantly, it is Tereza because of which he reads the stories of the foundling children and the guilt of Oedipus reminds him of the current political scenario, and, then, the chain of events that force him to leave the life of a famous surgeon and become a window washer. It is a personal sentiment of love that compels Tomas to exchange the lightness with weight, or, in other words, the political is born out of the personal. Because of this metaphor for arrival of Tereza in his life, Tomas reads the story of Oedipus and then decides to comment upon the current political situation in a letter to editor and this letter lands him in hot waters with the regime and he loses his position as a surgeon and is forced to accept a menial job. Again, we see that, in Kundera, the political and the personal are ONE. The political is inscribed in the personal but the process does not stop here.

Tomas refuses to sign the petition and the thought that makes him do so was the thought of Tereza holding a wounded crow in her hand. One morning, Tereza had brought a crow that was wounded by the children. She was holding it in her hands like a child and the image is imprinted on Tomas' mind. When he is just about to sign, his son says something that brings back the image of Tereza. His son says, "It's your duty to sign," (*TULB* 219) and Tomas does not like this comment. The comment is related with weight, responsibility, political affiliation. Once, Tomas has accepted the weight because of his personal love for Tereza, now he rejects this duty in favour of the personal. The image of Tereza holding the crow, Tereza dogged by the state agents, her hands trembling, all these images flash across his mind in less than a second: "She was all that mattered to him. She, born of six fortuities, she, the blossom sprung

from the chief surgeon's sciatica, she, the reverse side of all his "Es muss sein!" -she was the only thing he cared about" (*TULB* 219). The trajectory of the personal to the political and back again is complete. Tereza had brought all this weight with her and this weight had spilled over to other modes of being for Tomas but at this moment, when the editor and Tomas' son ask him to do his public duty, Tomas refuses to do that and this too for the personal reason of his love for Tereza. Tomas had always resisted the weight and during the years of his relationship with Tereza, he always wanted to escape the weight of love and the weight of responsibility. Daniel Just observes:

> Although Tereza's heaviness (her serious attitude toward life and desire for conjugal love, symbolically represented by the heavy suitcase she brings with her when first visiting Tomas in Prague) does not suit Tomas's preference for lightness (his inquisitive and experimental attitude toward life, his insistence on living alone and without obligations), he for some reason cannot resist her heaviness. ("Poetics" 179)

At this moment, the only thought that haunts him is what may happen to Tereza if he signs the letter? Perhaps, he cannot make any political change but he can at least try to make her happy. There is always the risk that after he signs the letter, there might be more visits from undercover agents and Tereza would be more terrified.

Unlike the character of Ludvik in *The Joke*, Tomas had never defined his life through a political ideology and it was an unfelt influence of Tereza that he briefly ventured into the mode of the political and the price he had to pay for that was the loss of his personal ambition — practice of medicine. After he wrote that letter and refused to retract it, people had started to look at him from another angle. He was now a symbol of dissent and resistance for them and was supposed to have this public duty to stand against the regime. Tomas does not want to accept this role despite paying the price for it. This is the reason that at this critical juncture, he realizes the fact that, for him, Tereza is the most important person in the world and he cannot afford to lose her. This must be kept in view that Tomas has always associated Tereza with weight but at this moment it seems as if her love is the only lightness in this weight of being:

> He felt a sudden, unexpected intoxication come over him. It was the same black intoxication he had felt when he solemnly announced to his wife that he no longer wished to see her or his son. It was the same black intoxication he had felt when he sent

> off the letter that meant the end of his career in medicine. He was not at all sure he was doing the right thing, but he was sure he was doing what he wanted to do. (*TULB* 220)

The itinerary back to the personal should not be taken as a transformation as the essential contours of Tomas' being remain the same. On the contrary, it is a kind of acceptance that though he has always associated Tereza with weight, actually, she designates a kind of weightlessness in his life. With this acceptance the itinerary of his character comes to an end. For Tomas, one choice is never better or worse than the other choice, as life, the way we experience it, is not something that can be changed. In this life, we do not have any real choice. We can never know what decision is better as we do not have anything to compare our decisions with. The events of life happen just for once. In the absence of a sketch or a plan, life is just a series of events that only occur once and thus there is no 'eternal recurrence' as Nietzsche would have made us believe. If something happens just once then, in actuality, we don't have any control over events as we don't know where our choice would lead us: "Einmal ist 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" (*TULB* 8).

5.3 The Weight of Being No One

Commenting upon the significance of Tereza in the life of Tomas, the narrator remarks: "…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" (*TULB* 6). Though the metaphor of the basket and child invokes an image of lightness yet there is nothing light about Tereza. She weighs down things, like a planet with a strong gravitational pull that makes everything to orbit around it. To the chagrin of Tomas, she does that in an unfelt and insubstantial manner, like a spider's web trapping a fly. Theoretically, the web is so flimsy and light that anyone, even a fly, can break out of it, but in reality, the web was inescapable as Tomas comes to realize shortly. She is unpretentious, insignificant and apparently does not stand out in any manner and yet she proves to be the most important woman in Tomas' life. When Tereza arrives in Prague and spends some time with Tomas, he has this notion that if he would invited her to stay at his place, she would offer him her life. Her life is weight, responsibility, a burden and Tomas does not want to get himself embroiled in all this:

> Only two days ago, he had feared that if he invited her to Prague, she would offer him up her life. When she told him, her suitcase was at the station, he immediately realized that the suitcase contained her life and that she had left it at the station only until she could offer it up to him." (*TULB* 9)

When both go to fetch the suitcase from the station, Tomas is surprised that why is he doing this as it is against his principle but he does, and that's how Tereza becomes a part of his life.

The moment Tereza becomes part of Tomas' life, gradually and unpretentiously, she starts to colonize his being. Tomas wants to continue his routine, his rendezvous, his liaisons with other women but Tereza would not have it. When she finds the letter of Tomas' mistress Sabina in a drawer in which Sabina has expressed the wish that Tomas should make love to her in her studio, Tereza starts to have nightmares — nightmares about Tomas and other women:

> Her dreams recurred like themes and variations or television series. For example, she repeatedly dreamed of cats jumping at her face and digging their claws into her skin. We need not look far for an interpretation: in Czech slang the word "cat" means a pretty woman. Tereza saw herself threatened by women, all women. All women were potential mistresses for Tomas, and she feared them all. (*TULB* 18)

In the next cycle of her dreams, she finds herself among a large company of dancing women and a man with a hat who would shoot any woman who does not do a proper knee bend. The man was Tomas. Yet in another cycle she finds out that she is dead and lying lifeless among the corpse of other dead women. All these dream cycles, basically, signify Tereza's deep insecurities and fears and as she cannot express them at the conscious level, they consistently recur in her dreams.

Tereza's mode of being is about weight but is it personal or political? It is a complicated question as it invokes contradictory interpretations. If we look at her so called 'self,' we come to know of its circularity of drives, the centripetal force that orbits around its own centre. Tereza, in an unassuming manner, desire things to move around her. She never demands it, never asks for it verbally but it's her aura, her silence or something else, that affects the others in this way. She is a child in the basket and one has to pick her up, one cannot simply let her move on. We see that how she becomes part of Tomas' life and, though, he has never allowed

any woman to disrupt his existential dimension, she leaves him no choice. The question is if her mode of being is personal then how is it different from that of Tomas'? Tomas does not allow anybody to enter his well-guarded personal space but he also does not intrude upon the space of anybody else. Tereza, in an indirect way, wants to colonize the space of others and though she lacks any political contour, her presence amounts to the kind of weight associated with a political ideology. Just like a political ideology, she wants complete interpellation on the part of her lover and just like an ideology her demand is not direct but implicit. Tereza's being can't be seen through the political lens, that's for sure, but her aura tries to control the people she loves. In her, we see a new form of political — a personalized political. It is political in the sense that it exerts power on the other, though, at the personal level. Her relationship with Tomas is a political relationship in a confined personal sphere. Rochelle Gurstein has aptly remarked: "Kundera's genius lies in his ability to chronicle a world in which people, seeking the meaning of life within the narrow precincts intimate relations, respect or fail to respect the limits that safe- guard the private realm" (1262). Tereza, despite belonging to the personal, does not respect the personal boundaries of others, albeit unconsciously.

Tereza does not believe in political activism nor does she have well-formed political opinions. She does reveal some kind of political bent during the Russian occupation of Prague in 1968 when she takes many photographs of Russian soldiers and tanks for newspapers. She would not keep the photographs but hands them over to foreign journalists. One day, she photographed a Russian officer threatening some protestors with a gun and was arrested. Soon, she was in the streets again, shooting with her camera. For a brief moment, Tomas and the readers come to think that she is doing it for the sake of her country but on the tenth day of occupation she suggests to Tomas that they should leave the country and go to Switzerland. Tomas asks, "You've been out there risking your life for this country. How can you be so nonchalant about leaving it?" (*TULB* 26). To this she replies that now Dubcek is back so the situation is different. Her argument does have weight as the first week of resistance was so full of energy and fervour with lots of banners and posters condemning Russian attack and all that but it did not last long. Now that Dubcek is back, the sentiments are not the same:

> In the meantime, the Russians had forced the Czech representatives to sign a compromise agreement in Moscow. When Dubcek returned with them to Prague, he gave a speech over the radio. He was so devastated after his six-day detention he could

> hardly talk; he kept stuttering and gasping for breath, making long pauses between sentences, pauses lasting nearly thirty seconds. (*TULB* 26)

Tereza is aware of the fact that now Prague uprising is over. After the compromise, many lives and job are saved but the country, for a long time, would remain in the iron clutches and would continue to stutter and stammer like its leader. Tereza's argument is sound but is it really the reason that she wants to leave the country? Tomas knows this fact that the reason is something else — not a political one, but personal. The whole week after the occupation, Tereza spent her night in the streets, capturing pictures. This was the week when she did not dream her usual dreams and now that the euphoria is over, she knows that her dreams would come back. This is the real reason that she wants to leave Prague. An external political event has provided her a diversion to forget about her inner demons. Hana Pichova elaborates:

> While Tereza is framing the outer world, history in its making, she is also taking aim at an inner, personal world in which she is experiencing for the first time an unknown sense of self-worth and meaning. She catches a glimpse of a self that is independent, balanced, happy, and liberated from the pains of jealousy. (*The Art* 95)

Does this mean that the outward political turmoil has brought inner peace for Tereza? It seems so. There is another point to be considered here. In the last chapter, we have explored the ONENESS of the personal and seen how the political is just an extension of it, giving birth to the 'minimal difference.' Here, in case of Tereza, we discern that the difference is not well marked. Apparently, her mode of being is personal, as she thinks and makes decisions on the same plane, but when she takes part in the short movement of resistance against the Russian occupation, it does seem as if the minimal difference' is there and her 'self' gets split to form the political, but this proves to be an illusion as after a short while she decides to leave the country for the pure personal reasons: "It doesn't bother you that Sabina has also emigrated to Switzerland?" Tomas asked. "Geneva isn't Zurich," said Tereza. "She'll be much less of a difficulty there than she was in Prague" (*TULB* 27). This conversation clearly shows that Tereza was taking part in the resistance for the personal reasons — in order to avoid the dreams. Her sudden decision to leave the country and going to Switzerland is also totally personal. Hence, it appears that Tereza is all and all personal without any political dimension. Even when she seems to be acting in the political sphere, the reasons for that are always personal. But

there is another dimension to her character. As we have seen that, in the novel, she is aligned with weight and though, individually, her weight is confined to just the personal sphere yet this has certain political repercussions. Tomas comes back to Prague because of her as her weight drags him behind her and the result is disastrous in many ways. First, he is asked to retract that letter and when he refuses to do that, he has to let go of his job, a job that is his passion. Even later, the letter continues to haunt him and finally he cannot practice medicine anymore and becomes a window washer and then is forced to live in the country. What does it imply?

The political cannot be separated from the personal. Even if one denies the political, like Tomas and Tereza do, one cannot escape its net. One way or the other, even our most personal choices get entangled in the political and have political repercussions. Tereza photographs the resistance for the personal reasons and her decision of leaving her country is also based upon the same reasoning. The problem is, her being is connected with Tomas and he is the one who bears the fallout of all this. Apart from losing his job, social status and even his city, in a way, his death is also an outcome of these series of choices by Tereza. In fact, the very letter written by Tomas was indirectly inspired by the arrival of Tereza in his life. This clearly indicates that the personal and political are ONE and cannot be separated. Like Tereza, one may be doing it just under the influence of personal whims and reasons but, in the long run, how this may affect us, it cannot be foretold. Tereza's heaviness takes up the 'lightness' of Tomas as Cooke has commented: Tomas, having given up Prague and womanising in favour of rural monogamy, seems to lose his essence (an essence of 'lightness') completely. Tereza's dream, in which her husband is shot and transformed into a rabbit in her arms, signifies a final submission on the part of Tomas" (82).

In Zurich, Tereza again confronts a situation in which she finds this ONENESS of the personal and political. Here, she does not have a job and spends most of time at home alone. She would go to long walks or spend some time learning German and French grammar and apart from these activities, she is free. It is during these leisurely times that she would recall again and again the speech Dubcek gave after he returned from Russia. Tereza is apolitical enough to forget what he said in that speech but what she still remembers are the pauses that he would give between sentences. Dubcek was taken by the Russian military to some secret location in Russia, coerced to sign a compromise document and returned to his own country. When he returns, he is a changed person, broken and humiliated. Tereza consistently recalls

his long pauses during his speech to the nation. Those pauses conveyed a kind of helplessness and despair.

The masses hated Dubcek that he did not show any courage and acquiesced before the Russians, that he did not stand up to them, that he was weak. But now that Tereza is looking back at the event, she does not feel any aversion at all. She understands that one cannot confront superior forces. The weakness is no more repulsive for her. “She realized that she belonged among the weak, in the camp of the weak, in the country of the weak, and that she had to be faithful to them precisely because they were weak and gasped for breath in the middle of sentences” (*TULB* 73). This sudden empathy with the fallen political leader is not because of some political reasons rather Tereza starts to look at Dubcek from the angle that he too was weak in the presence of a superior power. She is also weak in presence of a superior power — Tomas and his infidelities. She compares this personal weakness with the political weakness of Dubcek and realizes that both are the same. Here again we see that the personal and the political merge into one another for Tereza. She cannot recall the content of Dubcek’s speech, only its form, which was punctuated with pauses. She can recall it only because she thinks that Dubcek was also weak and he did not have a choice as she, too, does not have a choice. For Tereza, the ONENESS of the personal and the political has a strange connotation and a different implication.

5.4 The Gaze of the Political

Franz, on the other hand, is not like any other character in the novel. He is an academician, and an ardent lover of art and culture. If the other principal characters in the novel define their ‘selves’ through the personal and for whom the political is something they are trapped in, for Franz, it is quite the opposite. He strongly believes that it is the political sphere where one’s true ‘self’ is revealed. The difference in the two subject positions — between the political and the personal is, for him, totally worthless. One’s being should be transparent and open to interpretation, without any secrets and lies. The narrative voice comments:

> Franz, on the other hand, was certain that the division of life into private and public spheres is the source of all lies: a person is one thing in private and something quite different in public. For Franz, living in truth meant breaking down the barriers between the private and the public. He was fond of quoting Andre Breton on the desirability of

> living "in a glass house" into which everyone can look and there are no secrets. (*TULB* 113)

The difference between Franz and the other major characters of the novel is that they have directly experienced the supremacy of the political in their homeland. Tomas, Tereza and Sabina are all Czech citizens who have lived under a totalitarian regime and also under a foreign occupation and, for them, this intrusion of the political into the personal is painful and uncalled for. Franz, on the other hand, is a Swiss and for him subjugating one's self for a grand teleological end holds a certain fascination. He believes in the Grand March of history, the development of the Hegelian Spirit, the Dialectics towards some grand ideal and thus the political mode of being has a romantic undertone for him: "The Grand March is the splendid march on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness; it goes on and on, obstacles notwithstanding, for obstacles there must be if the march is to be the Grand March" (*TULB* 257). The time he had lived in Paris, he would attend all political meetings and demonstrations. This belief in the supremacy of the political is something that is not shared by the other characters of the novel. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a transitory novel for Kundera as he was moving away from the political mode of being to the more personal one. This is the reason that despite the political backdrop of the novel, the main characters like Tomas, Tereza and Sabina do not define themselves in political terms. Their identity is not linked to a political ideology or to the belief in Grand March. Franz is the only exception. When he was living in Paris, he would take part in protests, whatever might be the cause. He has the desire to fight for an ideology, to chant slogans, to raise fists. For him, the whole European history was a Grand March, from one struggle to another. As Franz does not have a personal experience of a regime that is founded on this belief of the Grand March, he only shares its optimism and not its fallouts. He is not aware that how such regimes turn back and colonize the personal as we have seen in the case of Ludvik. So, we can say that Franz's optimism regarding Grand March of history is naïve and uninformed. In fact, this naivety lands him in trouble in Cambodia and he was killed in a scuffle — a rather unheroic death away from the public eye.

If in case of other characters, political is an intrusion into the personal, for Franz it is the other way around. He always looks at the political from a personal angle. In fact, he is the only character who truly believes in the ONENESS of the two. Tomas wants to control his mistresses and even in his love making sessions, he commands them. Franz cannot even dream

of doing that. When you believe in Grand March, you submit your personal to it and erase your individuality. Franz extends this submission to the personal as well. For him, love is a kind of surrender, a total submission to the other. The narrator comments: “The only explanation I can suggest is that for Franz, love was not an extension of public life but its antithesis. It meant a longing to put himself at the mercy of his partner. He who gives himself up like a prisoner of war must give up his weapons as well” (*TULB* 83).

His love for Sabina is not just love for a person, he loves and idealizes her country as well. He thinks of Czechoslovakia as a damsel in distress, needs to be rescued. Whenever Sabina talks about her country and its occupation by Russia, he would feel a kind of longing, a desire to fight for the cause of liberation of Sabina’s country: “Franz greatly admired Sabina's country. Whenever she told him about herself and her friends from home, Franz heard the words "prison," "persecution," "enemy tanks," "emigration," "pamphlets," "banned books," "banned exhibitions," and he felt a curious mixture of envy and nostalgia” (*TULB* 102). Franz has this weakness for revolution but this weakness does not stand alone, it is always connected with his love for Sabina. When Sabina is gone and he is living with his student mistress, he gets the opportunity to be the part of a political walk for the people of Cambodia. Cambodia was a victim of Vietnam War and after the war ended, it was occupied by the Vietnam army. There is a famine and people are dying as there is no proper medical care. Some Western intellectuals decide to march to the Cambodian border to show solidarity to the victims and also to bring the issue to light. At first, Franz does not want to go but then he thinks of Sabina: “Wasn’t Cambodia the same as Sabina's country? A country occupied by its neighbour’s Communist army! A country that had felt the brunt of Russia's fist! All at once, Franz felt that his half-forgotten friend had contacted him at Sabina's secret bidding” (*TULB* 258). This is the reason that he decides to join the walk and as we see that it proves fatal for him. He was killed by some robbers in the street and the brawl that results in his death is also, in his mind, a kind of show put up by him for Sabina. Calvino sees a link between the character of Franz and the ideology of totalitarian regimes and Kundera’s veiled criticism of them:

> In accordance with the agonized imperatives of Franz’s sense of duty, Kundera brings us to the threshold of the most monstrous hell generated by ideological abstractions become reality, Cambodia, and describes an international humanitarian march in pages that are a masterpiece of political satire. (58)

Here we clearly discern this ONENESS of the personal and political. Though Franz defines the personal through the political lens, even his political can't be separated from the personal. His love for Sabina, a personal sentiment, comes in the way whenever he is thinking about the political situation of her country or any other country. It is this love that becomes the reason that he joins the walk for Cambodia and even he fights those robbers imagining Sabina that how she would admire his physical strength: "Heavenly bodies know all and see all. If he went on the march, Sabina would gaze down on him enraptured; she would understand that he had remained faithful to her" (*TULB* 259). The two apparently contradictory modes are blended and experienced as ONE.

5.5 The Lightness of Being

Among the four principal characters, Sabina seems to be the least political. She is an artist and strongly believes in the individuality of artistic expression. Kuhlman observes: "According to the cultural politics of Socialist Realism, artists must serve the interests of the masses and produce optimistic, progressive works for the party" (93). Therefore, the Communist regime of Czechoslovakia would always assert a kind of naked realism in arts and discourage abstractions or personal idiosyncrasies. Even when she was in academy, Sabina would secretly paint such paintings in which the abstract would peep through the realistic façade. Sabina, like Tomas, defines her ontology in terms of lightness and, literally, unlike Thomas, she does stick to this mode throughout her life. Even in her will, she expresses the wish that her body should be cremated after her death and the ashes be strewn over the sea: "Tereza and Tomas had died under the sign of weight. She wanted to die under the sign of lightness. She would be lighter than air. As Parmenides would put it, the negative would change into the positive" (*TULB* 273). The political ideologies with their fake grandeur and ceremonies have never appealed her and for her the political slogans, revolutions, ideologies, crowds have always presented an ugly picture. She never has romanticized such images.

Unlike her lover Franz, Sabina never feels any fascination for the May Day parades or any such political gatherings. In fact, during her academy years when she used to live in a dormitory, it was compulsory for the students to attend May Day parade. The whole building would be combed so that no student is left behind. On such occasions Sabina would hide in the lavatory until it was over. When she was living in Paris, there was a demonstration regarding

the first anniversary of the Russian occupation of her country. The participants were raising fists and slogans against Russia but the most peculiar thing was that Sabina was not feeling anything, no outrage, no solidarity, nothing: “She liked the slogans, but to her surprise she found herself unable to shout along with them. She lasted no more than a few minutes in the parade” (*TULB* 100). Ann Jefferson comments upon her character: “Through his painter-heroine Sabina, Kundera demonstrates his distaste for flag-waving emigre communities which are held together only by 'their defeats and the reproaches they addressed one another” (116). Her French friends were quite surprised at her this apolitical side and when questioned regarding her lack of interest, she was unable to provide a satisfactory explanation. The reason was that she could not make them see the evil that lurks behind grand marches and political slogans:

> She would have liked to tell them that behind Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions lurks a more basic, pervasive evil and that the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison. But she knew she would never be able to make them understand. Embarrassed, she changed the subject. (*TULB* 100)

Sabina believes that the authentic form of existence is the personal one. Truth is not discovered in Grand Marches but experienced at the level of the personal mode of being. She believes that the existentialist truth can be grasped away from the eye of the public. Under the gaze of prying eyes, one can never do anything that can be called as true or genuine. Whenever one is in public, one puts on a mask, thus, denies the truth. Similarly, love is also a totally private sentiment and she does not have any issue to keep her love affair with Franz a secret. Unlike Franz, she would never conceive her love as something public or political. Only by keeping one’s love private one can really live in truth. We see that how diametrically opposed her views are from those of Franz but, surprisingly, these differences are not her reason for leaving him. She leaves him because he designates weight and she cannot bear to live under any kind of heaviness. Human beings tend to associate the responsibilities and dramatic situations with heaviness. They struggle with this situation as if they are carrying some heavy burden on their shoulders. For Sabina, existence is not something that is associated with burden and heaviness rather it is the lightness that defines her. When she leaves Franz, apparently, there is no reason. What might have been going through her mind while she made this decision? Did he, in any

way, hurt her? “No. Her drama was a drama not of heaviness but of lightness. What fell to her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being” (*TULB* 122). Sabina is different from other characters because she not only rejects the political but also the personal at many levels. She never is able to maintain an intimate relationship with anybody over a longer period of time. She has left her family, her country and towards the end even the continent. She has betrayed everyone and every entity in her life. Initially, these betrayals were a source of excitement and joy for her. The problem is these betrayals have a limit. After one has betrayed everybody and everything, there is nothing left. At the end, there is just a vacuum and she feels this emptiness around her: What if that emptiness was the goal of all her betrayals? (*TULB* 122). Perhaps, this is the case that the goal of all her betrayals is that emptiness at the heart of being. The question is ‘does this emptiness really exist?’ What if the very content of this emptiness is ‘void’ itself? The void which is positive, which has an ontological dimension. The positive void is not just a lack, a nothingness rather it is something that exists and Sabina wants to find this gap. The problem is that this void must be separated from itself to create something new. Otherwise, this emptiness or void is unbearable in itself.

II

The Unbearable Lightness of Being also delves into the parallax that exists between body and soul, and, in this section, my discussion would be focused on this parallax. As I have mentioned earlier, Kundera does not conceive soul in its religious context. It is some aspect of our existence that transcends the materiality and spatiality of our body and, in this novel, the same transcendence is explored from a different angle as compared with *The Joke*. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the contraries and paradoxes are more pronounced but the emphasis falls a bit differently. The novel is more personal, more philosophical and to some extent, more existentialist. The parallactical modes that drive forward *The Joke* are redefined here.

5.6 Irreconcilable Duality of Body and Soul

The body and soul are two different modes of being, and to the philosopher’s chagrin, the nature of the schism between the two is incomprehensible, to say the least. In *The Joke*, we observed, in case of some characters at least, this split can be sublated to a higher unity or they like to think that there can exist this unity between the two. One thing is to be clarified here;

there is a difference between the thought that the body and soul can experience a synthesis at a higher level, and, the belief they are inherently one and soul is merely a function of the body. The latter thought is entertained by many materialist philosophers and scientists. In his book, *Philosophy of Mind*, Jaegwon Kim has expressed this stance in these words:

> The general idea [. . .] is that because each of us has a soul, we are the kind of conscious, intelligent, and rational creature we are. Strictly speaking, we do not really "have" souls, since we are in an important sense identical with our souls-that is, each of us is a soul. My soul is the thing that I am. Each of us "has a mind," therefore, because each of us is a mind. (29)

In the novel, Kundera has stated the same in words of his own:

> A long time ago, man would listen in amazement to the sound of regular beats in his chest, never suspecting what they were. He was unable to identify himself with so alien and unfamiliar an object as the body. The body was a cage, and inside that cage was something which looked, listened, feared, thought, and marvelled; that something, that remainder left over after the body had been accounted for, was the soul. (*TULB* 39)

But now the body is, no longer, an unknown territory. We know about the functions of different body parts. We know the heart pumps blood, lungs get oxygen through the nose, and so on. If body is the machine, the face is its instrumental panel that registers different sense impressions, feelings and emotions. Ever since man has been able to know about his body, he seems to have tamed it, at least up to some extent. What is the soul then? Scientific knowledge explains everything in materialist terms. As every organ of the body has its corresponding function, the soul is also the function of the brain. Man has also "…learned that the soul is nothing more than the gray matter of the brain in action. The old duality of body and soul has become shrouded in scientific terminology, and we can laugh at it as merely an obsolete prejudice". (*TULB* 39). Kundera does not seem to agree with this scientific and materialist belief. This belief clearly suggests the oneness of the body and soul but this kind of oneness is not the focus of my study. The ONENESS, as I have previously elaborated, is between two parallactical modes of being, that appear to be TWO, but, are actually ONE. This ONENESS presupposes that there exists a parallax between the two and the question that needs exploration is whether there is a possibility to prove that both are ONE. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*,

Kundera has looked at this duality from a different perspective and my analysis would be an inquiry not only into this perspective but also how the two modes interrelate with each other.

Tereza is the only character who is the focus of lengthy reflective passages in the novel, specifically, in relation to the split between the body and soul. Therefore, in this section, her character would be the anchor of my analysis. Tereza likes to see herself in the mirror but vanity is not the reason for it. Since her childhood, she has certain questions in her mind about the relationship between her body and soul. What if her nose starts to increase in size or her face is exchanged with someone else's? Would she still be Tereza?

> Of course. Even if Tereza were completely unlike Tereza, her soul inside her would be the same and look on in amazement at what was happening to her body. Then what was the relationship between Tereza and her body? Had her body the right to call itself Tereza? And if not, then what did the name refer to? Merely something incorporeal, intangible? (*TULB* 139)

It is evident in this passage that Tereza believes that the soul exists on its own. It is an independent, self-reliant and self-contained mode of being. The problem is what is its relationship with her body? Can her soul be transferred to some other body, and if it can be, what would be her identity then? Would she continue to be Tereza after this transference? These questions appear to be naïve but these have haunted Tereza since her childhood. Gurstein has commented on this presentation of duality between body and soul in these words: "By unflinchingly portraying existence at the brink, Kundera draws the reader both to the unsettling recognition of how effortlessly and by what familiar means the body can be split apart from the soul…" (1260). Human beings, usually, may raise question related with this schism between the body and soul but Tereza is different. She tends to negate her corporeal existence and completely sides with the soul. What are the factors that are responsible for this approach?

5.7 The Unbearable Similitude of the Bodies

Ann Jefferson is of the view that in the fiction of Kundera, the female characters are always discussed in relation to soul-body dichotomy. She comments: "…soul to body (this opposition is almost always implied in Kundera's female characters, but explored most fully in the figures of Olga in *The Farewell Party*, Tereza in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and the two sisters Agnes and Laura in *Immortality*" (124). Tereza's perception of her soul, in many

ways, is derived from her relationship with her mother. Her relationship with her mother was a relationship of the Fall and the resultant Guilt. Her mother always thought that she had to marry a useless man because she got pregnant with Tereza. Therefore, Tereza is responsible for all ensuing misfortunes in her life and she made certain that Tereza ought to be aware of her guilt and punished for it. Along with some other idiosyncrasies of her mother, one that peculiarly stood out, was that she would openly display her body for everyone who cared to look. At one occasion, Tereza rushed to close the curtains so that nobody from the outside might look at her. In order to embarrass Tereza, her mother told and retold this story to her friends. It appeared as if her mother deliberately wanted to undermine the youth and beauty of her daughter, as she herself was old and ugly. Since her daughter was, in a way, responsible for all this, so, she had to be punished. She wanted her daughter to keep in her world of shame and immodesty. In that world, youth or looks does did not matter. All bodies were similar. Tereza's infatuation with her body, her long looks at herself in the mirror, are not a reflection of any vanity on her part. In fact, the opposite is true; she wants to get rid of her body. Her mother wanted her to believe that this world is some kind of Turkish bath where all naked bodies are sitting together. In this world, modesty does not exist nor does uniqueness and identity. Scarpetta avers: "Her mother embodies "naturalism," shamelessness, the denial of sin and the will to proclaim the innocence of the body even in its least appetizing aspects" (112). All bodies are the same and there is no need to hide one's body. Her mother would not even permit her to lock the bathroom door:

> Your body is just like all other bodies; you have no right to shame; you have no reason to hide something that exists in millions of identical copies. In her mother's world all bodies were the same and marched behind one another in formation. Since childhood, Tereza had seen nudity as a sign of concentration camp uniformity, a sign of humiliation. (*TULB* 57)

This really has made Tereza loath her body as she longs for a uniqueness and dissimilitude with the other bodies around her. The body cannot provide this uniqueness, so, it must be sought somewhere else. Perhaps in the realm of the soul. She wants to be something unique and unlike other human bodies surrounding her. She wants her face not just a face, but a mirror in which her soul is reflected. Tragically, this is not the case. Her face is there for everybody to see while her soul has to conceal itself in the depths of her bowls.

When she meets Tomas in the restaurant, for the first time, she thinks that he is someone who does not belong to the realm of the bodies. He has an open book on his table: “No one had ever opened a book in that restaurant before. In Tereza's eyes, books were the emblems of a secret brotherhood” (*TULB* 47). This brotherhood is actually the brotherhood of the souls and Tereza desperately wants to connect with someone, who, in her opinion, has a similar soul. According to Daniel Just, Tereza considers Tomas as a “Soul” person because “when she first saw him in a town where no one read he was carrying a book, she soon becomes aware of his obsession with women and thus “body” (“Poetics” 179). This is highly ironical. She thinks, in Tomas, she has finally found that soul mate that she has yearned for, or is it? Apparently, it seems that Tereza’s fate has followed her to Prague as well. She has escaped the world of her mother where bodies were identical and she was just another organism of flesh and blood there, without any uniqueness. The problem is that Tomas also belongs to the realm of the bodies. He does not care about the souls of the women he is with. For him, every woman is just another body, though, not without its peculiarities. In a short while, Tereza comes to the awareness that her escape from the realm of the bodies was just an illusion. For Tomas, she is not unique, she is just another body without soul. When she starts living with Tomas, she comes to know about his relationships with many women and at this time she realizes that, for him, she is just another woman. She starts having these dreams in which she is in the company of many naked women. Those women are controlled by Tomas who orders them around to do different things for him. The most horrible aspect of the dream is that all women are identical. They seem to have left behind their souls and, now, they were just bodies.

A soulless body is dead or a machine that can perform certain functions but it cannot claim to have any uniqueness. Surprisingly, as Tereza observes, that all those other women are really celebrating this soullessness, this similitude. Tereza is horrified. She is back in the realm of bodies, in the world of her mother. She hoped that after she left her mother’s home and town, she would be able to escape the world of similar naked bodies. She thought that with Tomas, she would achieve some kind of uniqueness. Unfortunately, Tomas, in a way, also belonged to the realm of bodies. He did not make any distinction between them. He would kiss, stroke and touch them in the similar fashion. Tereza has the feeling that she has been moving in a circle.

To be an exception in the life of Tomas is what Tereza desires the most. Tomas does not think about his women in this way. For him, all women in his life are a series of exceptions. Zizek illustrates this point in this manner: "Recall the standard male seducer's list of female conquests: each is 'an exception,' each was seduced for a particular je ne sais quoi,[5] and the series is precisely the series of these exceptional figures" (*ITR* 294). This implies that for Tomas, every woman has something 'exceptional' about her and his lover affairs are basically a quest for these exceptionals. Tomas would admit that all bodies are the same. Still, there is some unimaginable small part that distinguishes one woman from the rest. When he looks at a woman, he could almost perfectly imagine how will she look naked. But there is always a small gap between imagination and reality and this small gap would make him restless. This restlessness would not go away when he would be able to see that woman naked. It would go still further: "How would she behave while undressing? What would she say when he made love to her? How would her sighs sound? How would her face distort at the moment of orgasm?" (*TULB* 199). The significant point to note here is that Tomas tries to find this unimaginable in the realm of the body, during the moments of passion. Tereza cannot agree with this. For her, the realm of the bodies is the realm without any distinctions and uniqueness. She thinks she has left this behind when she left her mother's home.

5.8 The Body, the Soul, and the Void

If the body and the soul are two parallactical modes of being, with no middle ground, then is it possible to negate the one and completely side with the other? If we study the character of Tomas, we do have this feeling that he is partial to the body. His endless affairs, his indifference to his parents and his own son, his apolitical stance, everything points to this direction. Does this mean Tomas is a man who completely negates his soul and just lives for the body? On the other hand, Tereza veers towards the other extreme. She seeks escape from the body and its similitude:

> Suddenly she longed to dismiss her body as one dismisses a servant: to stay on with Tomas only as a soul and send her body into the world to behave as other female bodies behave with male bodies. If her body had failed to become the only body for Tomas, and thereby lost her the biggest battle of her life, it could just as well go off on its own! (*TULB* 139).

Can Tereza live without her body then? Can she simply dismiss it and entirely have an existence of the soul? Is this parallax resolvable? We can answer this question by resorting back to our initial formulation that the soul is an extension of the body — result of the minimal difference. There is a gap between the two but this gap, this void, is not just 'pure nothing' but a proper ontological space which is the ground for such schisms to be pitted against each other. Without this ground, this void, we cannot have an ontological dimension, contingency, and freedom. As I mentioned earlier, Textual Analysis as a method, is eclectic in nature and borrows from all cultural sources to interpret a text. In order to interpret the parallactical relationship between body and soul, I would like to invoke Slavoj Zizek's explication of Hegelian dialectic. In his book, *The Ticklish Subject*, Zizek rejects the vulgar interpretation that Hegelian dialectics are about sublation. Hegelian idea is much more radical than this. Zizek cites Colin Wilson who has opined that in the ancient world, human beings had this direct link with the natural world. The anti-thesis of this holistic approach was modern compartmentalization of knowledge that has divorced humanity from its surroundings. The vulgar interpretation of this phenomenon would be that there should be a Hegelian synthesis in which the ancient holistic approach is combined with the modern technological progress. But Wilson does not opt for this synthesis and his book takes on a radical turn. Instead of going for the 'return to the lost ancient unity' or advocating a Hegelian synthesis of this unity with modern technological progress, he goes for a third option. Zizek elaborates:

> He locates its source in the force of imagination: the Western principle of self-consciousness and individuation also brought about a breath-taking rise in our capacity of imagination, and if we develop this capacity to its utmost, it will lead to a new level of collective consciousness, of shared imagination. So, the surprising conclusion is that the longed-for next step in human evolution, the step beyond the alienation from nature and the universe as a Whole, 'has already happened. (*TTS* 70)

The question is what happened 3500 years ago and what's its significance? Thirty-five hundred years ago, the process started when the western civilization experienced the split or fall from the unity of nature. The radical step is not to take this fall as a kind of loss but a next step to evolution: "The Fall is already in itself its own self-sublation; the wound is already in itself its own healing, so that the perception that we are dealing with the Fall is ultimately a misperception…" (Zizek, *TTS* 71). The movement should not be seen as one extreme (thesis)

coming in conflict with its opposite (anti-thesis) and then both sublate to a higher unity (synthesis). The genuine Hegelian insight would be that the second movement, that is perceived as a fall or wound, should be taken as its own healing. Out of this second movement the real progress would take birth.

This insight may help us solve this conundrum that exists between the body and soul in the context of the novel under discussion. The gap or void between two parallactical modes of being should not be repaired as this is a wound that is its own healing. The body got split from itself and gave birth to the soul. The soul seems to be its anti-thesis. The synthesis won't be sublating the two into a higher unity. In fact, it would be the recognition of new possibilities in this split. The parallax between the body and the soul comes to ONE when the soul realizes the fact that in itself it cannot have a being and for its existence it must rely on the body and vice versa. Tereza's parallactical position, from the perspective she always looks at Tomas, is a position from where she can only see her soul. From this angle, the body is merely an obstruction, a stumbling block, preventing the communion of the souls. She does not take into consideration the role of the body in bringing the souls together. Even during their intimate moments, Tereza would scream, not a scream of pleasure but a scream that would block all the other sensations: "What was screaming in fact was the idealism of her love trying to banish all contradictions, banish the duality of body and soul, banish perhaps even time" (*TULB* 54). Can these contradictions be banished altogether? Or should these be banished? Tereza does not come to terms with these contraries fully and this is the reason that in the whole course of the story, she remains dissatisfied.

Once in the novel, Tereza does try to shift her parallactical standpoint when she attempts to look at her existence from the perspective of the body. It is the incident when she is working in a bar and meets an engineer. He invites her to come to his flat. Initially, she is reluctant as she finds herself unable to enter a relationship totally based upon the body. After a while, she relents and the reason being that she shifts her perspective and looks at it the way Tomas would describe it: "Hadn't he told her time and again that love and sexuality had nothing in common?" (*TULB* 152). If she goes to the flat of the engineer and has sex with him, it would be "testing his words, confirming them" (*TULB* 152). It seemed as if Tomas is urging her to make this decision, whispering in her ears, "I understand you. I know what you want. I've taken care of everything. You'll see when you get up there" (*TULB* 152). Finally, she does

decide to go to the flat but even in this, she has the feeling that the decision is not her own, she is just following the command of Tomas: “Yes, all she was doing was following Tomas’s commands” (*TULB* 152). Tereza is trying to shift her parallactical position but at the same time she does not want to take responsibility for that. She thinks that it is the position of Tomas and if it were not for him, she would not have changed her standpoint at all. She would just enter the situation, put forth her body and say: “It wasn’t my choice.” (*TULB* 152). This transference indicates that actually this shift is not a complete change of perspective, more like an experiment, to prove something to Tomas and herself. The point when the engineer starts to make love to her, Tereza’s mind completely dissects the two modes of being of the body and soul. Now it seems to her as if her soul were standing outside, alienated from the body, and it has nothing to do with the events happening in the room. When the engineer starts to touch her body, it seems as if all her panic and anxiety is dissolved: “For the engineer’s hand referred to her body, and she realized that she (her soul) was not at all involved, only her body, her body alone” (*TULB* 154). Her body, it seems, is betraying her as it is responding to his touches. Is it that the body wants to be just another body? Does it desire to join the realm of her mother and Tomas? Perhaps: “The body that had betrayed her and that she had sent out into the world among other bodies” (*TULB* 154). The body is a traitor, betraying the soul and Tereza, at this moment, is with her soul, dismissing the body. Gurstein opines: “Tereza finds herself hopelessly stranded the border. Her soul, split from her body, voyeuristically observing her body - objectified and degraded – experiencing pleasure, revealing in all its horror what casual sex with a stranger share with pornography” (1274). This episode recalls to mind the lovemaking scene between Ludvik and Helena in *The Joke*. Ludvik also has an outer body experience when he feels as if his body was making love to Helena but his soul has transformed itself into Zemanek, looking at the proceedings. Ludvik’s purpose is revenge but Tereza is just doing it to know what it feels to be on the other side of the parallax. She thinks that her body is not her own and she is not responsible for any of its actions. He asks her to undo the buttons on her blouse but she refuses to comply. It seems she has disconnected the bond between her body and soul and her soul is not responsible for the acts of her body. Tereza cannot experience happiness in physical relationships because her soul actively resists it. Igor Webb comments that in Kundera’s fiction, sex always takes the centre stage but, ironically, one hardly finds any satisfactory physical relationship amongst his characters: “Kundera's vision of sexual relations

is famously intellectual: reflective, philosophical, speculative, lucid? But also cold, bleak, and hopeless. There is not a single happy relationship in all of his work, and precious few instances of happy sex" (358). Can it be said that Kundera's characters side with one mode of being and ignore the other? Is it possible to separate these two modes of being in this manner? It is true that both appear to be TWO but this is just the result of the parallax. It is the parallax that splits their ONENESS and makes them appear as TWO. The void that splits them is also the space where both realize each other and blend into ONE without losing their separate parallactical modes.

Tereza does come to this realization in her encounter with the engineer. For a brief moment, she feels as if the body and soul are supplementing each other. She thinks that her soul won't be a part of this escapade, would remain aloof. On the contrary, the soul starts to feel pleasure, albeit in a secret way. "The excitement she felt was all the greater because she was excited against her will. In other words, her soul did condone the proceedings, albeit covertly" (*TULB* 155). The body is going against the will of the soul and the soul is enjoying it covertly. This is something significant because it proves Tereza's whole premise false. Tereza thinks that the body and soul are different modes of being and even though the pleasure of the soul may be shared by the body, the body's pleasure is of its own, not felt by the soul. If she wants to feel pleasure, her soul should remain quiet. The moment her soul tries to take active part in the acts of body, she would stop feeling pleasure. The excitement that she is feeling now is the result of this thought that her body is acting on her own. It has refused to obey her soul. This clearly indicates that Tereza, though unconsciously, believes in the unity of the body and the soul. She has always condemned Tomas' stance that body can enjoy without the soul. For her, the pleasure of the body is of its own, the soul does not partake in it. At this moment, her body is enjoying but her soul is also taking part in it. She does not have any relationship with this engineer and yet her soul is secretly involved in the lovemaking. This does not stop here. Her reluctant soul starts to become ONE with the body and at this moment, Tereza realizes that her soul is looking down at her body from a different angle. The narrator interjects:

> When her soul saw her naked body in the arms of a stranger, it was so incredulous that it might as well have been watching the planet Mars at close range. In the light of the incredible, the soul for the first time saw the body as something other than banal; for

> the first time it looked on the body with fascination: all the body's matchless, inimitable, unique qualities had suddenly come to the fore. This was not the most ordinary of bodies (as the soul had regarded it until then); this was the most extraordinary body. (*TULB* 155)

Paradoxically, it is with this stranger, with whom Tereza has no connection of the soul, that her soul first looks at her body in a new light. The soul looks at the beauty of her body and admires it, feels at one with it. The soul, at that moment, realizes the uniqueness of her body that it is not just a body, it is something special. It is paradoxical because Tereza has always thought that she has the connection of the soul with Tomas but never in his presence, her soul has become aware of this uniqueness. It is a stranger through whom she, briefly, comes out of unbearable similitude of the bodies. The epiphany is very brief as the next moment, Tereza tries to fight it off. She looks at the face of the engineer and at that moment this thought occurs to her that this is her first and last time with a stranger. She would never ever get involved in such an act again. The anger that she feels is not directed at the engineer, she is angry with herself. She is angry that her soul is taking part in the pleasures of the flesh. For Tereza, it is betrayal on the part of the soul. She has always thought of her soul as something superior and sublime, how can it side with the body? The thought nauseates her and she is enraged. This instance reveals that Tereza is capable of experiencing the sublation of the body and soul to a higher level, where both maintain their parallactical gap yet their interaction takes place at an elevated plane. The problem is that Tereza is so enmeshed in her parallactical standpoint that she does not allow this dialectical movement. This is the reason that, in the novel, she is associated with weight.

III

In Zizek's oeuvre, we also come across a third approach to the problem of 'universal' and 'particular.' This third approach is even more Hegelian as compared to the first two. In order to explicate it, Zizek uses the analogy of a 'violin concerto.' When a violin concerto is written, initially, it's just another music piece. Through the ages, whenever it is performed by various musicians, every performance would be an attempt to touch the spirit of the 'written' piece. All these performances are the 'particulars' of the original. The written piece was not a

'universal' when it was written. It gains this status through its 'particular' performances or in other words through these 'particulars' the 'universal' is revealed. Zizek comments:

> Here we have an example of Hegelian 'concrete universality': a process or a sequence of particular attempts that do not simply exemplify the neutral universal notion but struggle with it, give a specific twist to it — the universal is thus fully engaged in the process of its particular exemplification; that is to say, these particular cases, in a way, decide the fate of the universal notion itself. (*TTS* 102).

Here, Zizek is trying to redefine the 'particulars' as instances that actively engage with the 'universal' and, actually, determine it. This notion helps Zizek define 'universal' that is not at variance with its particulars.

Zizek discusses in detail the notion of exploitation as forwarded by Marx to introduce his third approach to the idea of 'universal.' The general understanding is that exploitation of the workers can be eradicated if the workers are paid the full value of their labour. The problem of exploitation of the labour does not originate in value, its real origin is the commodification of the workers. Even if the workers are paid well, their very status as a commodity, along with other commodities, is the source of exploitation. The human labour is not a commodity like any other commodity in the market. It is an exception. The exploitation is when this exception starts to operate in the market system just like any other commodity. The exchange function of commodities is universalized by even including the 'exception' into its operation: "…the universalization of the exchange function: the moment the exchange function is universalized — that is, the moment it becomes the structuring principle of the whole economic life — the exception emerges, since at this point the workforce itself becomes a commodity exchanged in the market" (Zizek, *TTS* 180). The universalization of the exchange process depends upon this exception — something that is not the part of it but treated as such. Zizek calls this kind of exception "constitutive exception." The exception helps make a notion 'universal.' If this exception is taken out of it, it won't be a universal anymore as there would, at least, one notion on which it does not apply. But because this exception is not actually a part of the universal, so it undermines it. In other words, its serves as symptom of it: "…the symptom is an example which subverts the universal whose example it is" (Zizek, *TTS* 180). The economic exchange system is presented as 'universally just' system but, in fact, it is hegemonized by the notion of

justice that serves the interests of only one class — bourgeois. When this universal claim of justice includes in it the exploitative commodification of human labour, this undermines it. The bourgeois justice is particular, though it claims to be universal. It includes in it the notion of justice for all classes but actually it is not just for the working class. Working class is a 'particular' that undermines the claim of 'universality' of another 'particular' — bourgeois concept of justice. It includes in it one content that is 'exception' to it. This exception undermines its claim. In this way, this universality contains in it its own particular.

5.9 Love and Its Particularities

The Unbearable Lightness of Being poses many questions pertaining to our ontological dimensions and the most important of these is that of love. As we have seen earlier, for Tomas, love is something that has a lightness about it, its very essence is the lack of any sort of heaviness that we associate with responsibilities and commitments. For Kundera, lightness is something "which is opposed to irrevocability, to exclusive univocity" (Calvino 56). The idea so haunts him that he stops meeting his son after his first wife divorces him as he cannot bear the unbearable burden of family reliabilities. His definition of love is associated with lightness but he also has a sort of fear that his mistresses might demand something more, something consistent. In order to avoid this conundrum, he has devised a new kind of relationship which he calls "erotic friendship," a relationship "that can make both partners happy" and in which "sentimentality has no place" and the partners should have no claim on each other's life (*TULB*, 12). To ensure that these friendships may never transform themselves into something more, he would meet his mistresses in intervals. The sequence has been maintained by him for a long time now and the rule was applicable to everyone, even to Sabina, with whom his friendship is a bit deeper. When Tereza comes into his life, she is treated in the same manner initially — just another number in the long existing series. Tereza is not ready to accept this. In Tomas' idea of love as a 'universal,' she cannot be just another 'particular.' She believes that her love is different, that it does not fit in all the other loves of Tomas. Here the parallel can be noted between Tereza's claim of love and Zizek's example of human labour as a commodity. Just as the human labour is treated like any other commodity by the capitalist exchange system and still the bourgeois social order claims to be universally just, similarly, Tereza's love is treated by Tomas as just another "erotic friendship." The love of Tereza is the 'constitutive exception'

that undermines the very ‘universal’ notion of Tomas’ love. Even Sabina notices that the ‘constitutive exception’ is undermining the ‘universal’ of Tomas’ being. She tells Tomas,

> You seem to be turning into the theme of all my paintings,". The meeting of two worlds. A double exposure. Showing through the outline of Tomas the libertine, incredibly, the face of a romantic lover. Or, the other way, through a Tristan, always thinking of his Tereza, I see the beautiful, betrayed world of the libertine. (*TULB* 22)

The impression of Tomas, the libertine, is undermined by this other side of him. This ‘constitutive exception’ changes and transforms the ontological dimension of Tomas. As we see that he has to lose his job, leave his country, come back for her sake, has to work as a window washer and, at the end, has to live at a farm. The heaviness of Tereza’s ontology weighs him down.

The nature of relationship between Tomas and Tereza can also be interpreted through the Zizekian lens of ‘hegemonized universal.’ According to this concept, the universal is itself empty, devoid of any content, waiting to be hegemonized by a particular. When this particular hegemonizes it, it claims to have become ‘universal.’ In this interpretation, universal is "battleground on which the multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony" (Žižek, *TTS* 100). In the life of Tomas, there have been many kinds of love. He was married once so he had the experience of matrimonial love. His relationship with Sabina is also a unique one, a different kind of love. His escapades with different women have their own flavour. It is the love of Tereza that hegemonizes the formal space of his love. The hegemony is not achieved easily, it is through a battle, and a fierce one too. Initially, Tomas is not ready to relent to this hegemony, in fact, he resists it. A time comes when Tereza’s love successfully takes control of the poetic memory of the universal:

> The brain appears to possess a special area which we might call poetic memory and which records everything that charms or touches us, that makes our lives beautiful. From the time he met Tereza, no woman had the right to leave the slightest impression on that part of his brain. (*TULB* 208)

In this case, the universal must be understood as a ‘void,’ a formal vacuum, where different ontological modes fight a fierce battle for dominance. The void is not ‘empty’ in the ordinary sense of the word. It is the ground for the ontological modes to realize themselves. It provides

the ‘ground zero’ of existence, a nothing that can give birth to something. When different ontological modes fight their battles in it and one ‘particular mode’ wins the battle, it does not mean that the other modes are simply dismissed. The other modes are also there and the hegemonized particular is defining itself through opposition to these modes. Tomas’ love for Tereza can only be understood if it is posited against his other relationships. Her love is distinguished only because of them, otherwise, it appears ordinary and commonplace. In a strange twist, the universal and the particular stand together, appear as ONE.

When it comes to Sabina’s love-life, we can discern another parallax — between the established notion of the devotion of two lovers and Sabina’s personal notion of freedom. The universal idea of love, as entertained by the majority of the population, is based upon the eternal unity of lovers, of their being one in every possible scenario of life. The hurdles must be overcome to attain a permanent state of bliss. In fact, a whole genre of literature — Romance, is dedicated to this motif. The love of particular individuals should adjust or mould itself according to this notion. Sabina does not uphold this view in matters of love and relationships. Her existentialist mode is defined through lightness of being — a lightness that stands opposite to the burden of responsibility and commitment. Her relationship with Tomas is based upon the same principle. Tomas, too, before Tereza, used to uphold this opinion. After Tereza, though it takes a long time, he does eventually come to the universal notion of a dedicated lover, fully committed to his wife. While in Geneva, Sabina is in a secret relationship with Franz. Franz is already married and has a daughter. He keeps the relationship secret for some time but later he admits this to his wife. He feels as if he has become absolutely free: “He felt like a rider galloping off into a magnificent void, a void of no wife, no daughter, no household, the magnificent void swept clean by Hercules' broom, a magnificent void he would fill with his love” (*TULB* 117). Franz, at the moment, is thinking that having no wife, no daughter, no household would give him freedom. He would get rid of all the heaviness that has weighed him down throughout his life. The resultant void would be filled with the love of Sabina. The problem is that the idea of love he has in mind is also associated with heaviness and burden. The commitment, the reliabilities, consciousness of fidelity, everything weighs one down and by coming out of one kind of heaviness, he would enter into another. Sabina knows this very well. This is the reason that she has always wanted to keep their relationship a secret. When Franz tells Sabina that he has told his wife about her, she feels as if he has betrayed her, as if

he has broken some unwritten sacred pact. From now on, she would have to share everything with the wife and daughter of Franz. Franz would divorce his wife and then he would ask Sabina to marry him and, eventually, she would replace his current wife in his bed. She would become the centre of gaze of everyone she and Franz know in Geneva. She would not be allowed to be her 'self' but to play a role of herself: "Once her love had been publicized, it would gain weight, become a burden. Sabina cringed at the very thought of it" (*TULB* 115). It is evident that Sabina has a particular notion of love that does not involve commitment and heaviness. The universal idea of love, as upheld by Franz and Tereza, does not include in itself this other aspect, this lightness. When Franz breaks this news to her that he has told his wife about her and then they make love, Kundera summarizes their respective states of mind in a very apt manner: "Franz was riding Sabina and had betrayed his wife; Sabina was riding Franz and had betrayed Franz" (*TULB* 115). Sabina has already betrayed Franz as she knows that she is making love to him for the last time. Maria Nemcova Banerjee sums up the difference between their notions of love in these words:

> Her consciousness is thrilled to the edge of vertigo when she feels the intensifying pace of the moving reel under her feet. Franz, for his part, needs to hold on to a fixed mental point. Moved by a secret nostalgia for a lost arche of being, he translates it into a compulsion to follow the European left's Grand March toward a disappearing telos. (220)

When Franz arrives at her flat next day, she is already gone, never to return. Sabina cannot let the heaviness of love weigh her down. She leaves the country and eventually the continent. Not only in her profession she refuses to accept the universal notions but also in matter of heart she remains loyal to her particular viewpoint.

5.10 The Universal and Immediate Identifications

Another angle through which the parallax between the universal and particular can be viewed is the universal demands of the state and the particular desires of the individuals. I have already discussed this perspective in the first section of this chapter but here I would like to delve into it from a different angle. In the first section, I discussed how the political tries to colonize the individual desire and how this conflict results in parallactical modes. Here my focus would be the claim of universality of the state and whether it includes in itself the

particular desires of the individuals. The aforementioned Zizekian take on the universal and particular would be my lens. As I have discussed earlier, a universal cannot achieve the status of 'concrete universality' if it does not include in it the 'immediate identifications' of the individuals in it. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the 'immediate identifications' are personal ambitions of the two characters — of Tomas and Sabina. The parallax can be discerned between the particular desire and the universal claim and I would analyse these two characters from this standpoint.

Tomas is a surgeon and he thinks that his work defines his 'self.' He is an accomplished practitioner in his field and this also makes him useful for the general public. After the events of 1968, when the issue of his Oedipus letter comes to the fore and he is being asked to retract his letter, Tomas knows that two things are at stake here: "…his honour (which consisted in his refusing to retract what he had said) and what he had come to call the meaning of his life (his work in medicine and research)" (*TULB* 179). His honour is one particularity for which he may have to sacrifice his meaning of life. Tomas refuses to retract his letter and as a result he has to leave his job at the hospital. For some time, he works in a suburban clinic and when the state agents come after him there, he has to quit the medical profession altogether and starts working as a window-washer and, eventually, as a farmer in a remote village. Here, we see that the state claims to be a universal, being inclusive of the immediate identification, but, in actuality, it is not so. The state demands complete allegiance from its members at the cost of their self-respect and personal ambitions. The state not only takes away Tomas' immediate identification, it also deprives the public of a good surgeon. It is ironical, to say the least, because the state claims to be universal on the ground that its ultimate end is collective good. In serving the collective good, it serves the individual. The letter episode reveals that, in this case, the state is not serving the collective good. In fact, it is not only working against the interest of one particular individual — Tomas, it is also depriving people of a good surgeon who wants to serve them. This proves that the state is just an 'abstract' universal and not a 'concrete' one. The original parallax between the individual desire and the universal claim of the state should be ONE, its parallactical view just a matter of perspective. Since the state is not taking into account the particular desire, it is denying this ONENESS and thus its claim to universality is a false claim.

The same is the case with Sabina. She is an artist and strongly believes in art as an expression of one's inner core of being. She is living in a country in which the official ideology of the state is based upon Stalinism. Stalinism forces the artists to subject their artistic creativity to official dogma and Kuhlman summarizes this in these words: "According to the cultural politics of Socialist Realism, artists must serve the interests of the masses and produce optimistic, progressive works for the party" (93). The artist is supposed to be 'realistic' and by realistic they mean that art should propagate Marxist philosophy. As "…art that was not realistic was said to sap the foundations of socialism" (*TULB* 63). Anything that is abstract or can be interpreted in some other way is not acceptable: "In the spirit of the wager of the times, she had tried to be stricter than her teachers and had painted in a style concealing the brush strokes and closely resembling colour photography" (*TULB* 63). During her student years, once she happened to drop red paint on the canvass. She was painting a building site and this red paint trickled down and appeared as if there is a crack in the background and the building site is painted on that crack. At first, she was horrified as the perceived impression of the painting was totally against what was taught by the state and expected of artists. It had made the painting abstract. This inspired Sabina to paint more painting in the same vein. She completed a series of them and she gave them the title, "Behind the Scenes." Of course, she could not exhibit them anywhere otherwise she would have been expelled from the institute. She kept them hidden: "On the surface, there was always an impeccably realistic world but underneath, behind the backdrop's cracked canvas, lurked something different, something mysterious or abstract" (*TULB* 63). Just like Tomas, Sabina's 'immediate identification' here is her art. She wants to express her 'self' through this medium but the state wants artists to conform to official ideology. The state claims to be universal, though, it does not include in itself the 'particular' of Sabina's artistic expression. Again, we see that the universal is not concrete but abstract. The parallactical difference of viewpoints cannot be sublated into a higher unity because the universal does not accept the validity of the particular. The particular is seen as something totally unauthentic and ought to be suppressed, using brute force. In such a state of affairs, the particular may not survive or rely on some other means to express itself. We see this in Sabina when she turns her painting into an ambivalent expression, conforming to official ideology at the surface level but being subversive at a deeper level: "On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth"(*TULB* 63).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, to explore the parallax that lies at the heart of ontological modes of being of the characters. Daniel Just has commented that "…in many respects *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is a book of questions. Like most novels, it encourages readers' active engagement with the text by stimulating their faculties of questioning, but it also, through the narrator, directly poses and answers questions" ("Poetics" 177). This is an apt estimate of the scope of Kundera's novel. When Kundera wrote this novel, he was living as an exile in Paris. He was a detached observer, and not a partaker, of political mise en scène of his native country. In a way, it is less politically inclined as compared with his earlier novels yet it posits very strong questions. The focus of the novelist seems to have shifted more towards the exploration of other ontological schisms. We can discern long philosophical commentary by the narrator on the potentialities and possibilities of existence. The three modes of being that were my angles of analysis, the personal and political, the body and soul, the universal and particular, appear in this novel at a more personal level. The presence of the political, the grand march of history, that seem to overshadow the lives of characters in *The Joke*, is no more the main focus in this novel. In fact, the novel seems to be a transition work in the literary career of Kundera as his later works became more and more apolitical. If we look at our cultural milieu, we find a discernible dip towards the political and cultural mode of being that does, invariably, lead to a disregard for the individual. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera has brought the personal, the body and the particular to the fore and this throws light on our own one-sidedness as well. We should not take this impression that Kundera favours the individual or the body or the particular. The point is that one-sidedness, in whatever context, should be avoided. In the next chapter, I turn to my third selected text *Immortality*.

Notes

[1]. See Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Trans. Michael Henry Heim. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984. PDF). Henceforth, I shall use *TULB* as abbreviation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* for my parenthetical citations across my thesis.

2. In the novel, characters are characterized through a binary opposition of lightness/weight. Kundera, from the very beginning illustrates this point that the Greek philosopher, Parmenides thought that weight was something negative. Human beings should have a 'lightness' in their approach. They should reject all philosophies and ideologies that try to weigh them down. On the other hand, German philosopher Nietzsche thought that existence is defined by weight. In the novel, Tomas and Sabina define their being through lightness, while Franz and Tereza are characterized by weight.

3. "Es muss sein" is a German language expression. It means 'it must be.' It is an imperative that governs the lives of characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The characters think that they have free will. They do things based upon their volition. Kundera has put forth the idea that, in real, our lives are governed by certain fortuities, or fate and to make a choice is a kind of an imperative, not free will. Tomas had to take in Tereza, it was a kind of imperative of fate for him. The resultant events sprang forth from this 'Es muss sein.'

[4]. For a detailed discussion of the significance of Oedipus motif in the novel, see Hana Pichova and Marjorie E. Rhine, "Reading Oedipus in Milan Kundera's "*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*"(*Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1997), pp. 71-83).

[5]. 'I don't know what' — the seducer continues to seduce women and is consistently curious about them but when asked what is the difference between one and the other, he does not know.

CHAPTER 6

MORTALITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS: MILAN KUNDERA'S *IMMORTALITY* AND PURSUIT OF TRANSCENDENT MODES OF BEING

> *Do you realize what is the eternal precondition of tragedy? The existence of ideals that are considered more valuable than human life.*
>
> — Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, 134

> *What is unbearable in life is not being but being one's self.*
>
> — Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, 287

6.1 Introduction

Immorality,[1] Milan Kundera's sixth novel, appeared in 1988 and its thematic structure is in consonance with the prevalent historical epoch. The significant thing about it is that its setting is not Czechoslovakia rather France, the home to its author since 1975. Does this indicate that Kundera, in this novel, is no more concerned with the issues faced by his countrymen? Or is there a pattern in this shift? The novel was written in the twilight years of The Cold War when the demise of the Russian Communism seemed imminent and the forthcoming order, though yet ill-defined, was in the offing. *The Joke* deals with the lives of characters waning under Communist rule in Kundera's native Czechoslovakia and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* explores the state of affairs before and after the Russian occupation of the country in1968. In *Immortality*, it does seem, the author has come to grips with the fact that the days of ideology and Grand March of history are well-nigh their end and this might be the reason that he decides to take up the issues which would concern humanity in the years to come. The novel is definitely, in its essence and mood, a post-Cold War narrative though its appearance one year prior to the fall of Iron Curtain[2] makes it a bit anachronistic.

Immortality has two timelines: in the contemporary world, it is centred on the character of Agnes, her husband Paul and her sister Laura. In the 19th C, it focuses on the German polymath Goethe and his relationship with Bettina. Agnes is living in Paris and she thinks that

her relationship with her husband Paul is going nowhere. Though, she finds it hard to leave him and her only daughter. She dreams of settling back to her native country Switzerland. She has warm memories of her father who was a mathematics professor. Laura, her sister, is different from her in many ways. Through the contrasting delineation of their characters, Kundera introduces many binaries in the novel. At the end, Agnes has a fatal accident while coming back from Switzerland and Laura marries Paul. In the second timeline, the relationship between Goethe and his ardent fan Bettina is explored. There are also conversations between Goethe and Hemingway in the afterlife. Through these characters, Kundera sheds light on the nature of existence, self and immortality.

Like my previous chapters of data analysis, there are three sub-sections in this chapter as well and in each of these I have analysed the said text using my thematic perspectives. In the first section, I would read the text to study the parallax between the personal and political.

I

Before I venture further and analyse the said text in relation to the parallax between the personal and the political, it is in order that first I should set the scene for the related historical era, as it would help understand the things in their proper context. As I mentioned earlier, though the novel was written before the fall of Iron Curtain, it actually deals with the social condition that followed it. Actually, the said condition was already at hand in the West and as Kundera had been living there for quite some time, he must have a first-hand experience of it. The first thing we notice about *Immortality* is that it is a 'post ideological' novel. The word ideology is being used here in the context of the conflict between liberalism and communism, the conflict which pretty much defined the 20th Century. The Revolution of 1989 saw many Eastern European countries like Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Romania rising against the Communist rule and this culminated in the dissolution of USSR in 1991. The dissolution of USSR was proclaimed as the victory for liberalism and Francis Fukuyama termed it as the 'end of history' and "an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism" (3). Using Hegelian idea of the development of spirit through historical epochs or history with a teleological end, Fukuyama claimed that the world, or at least the Western civilization, has reached the pinnacle and this pinnacle is the political and economic liberalism: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular

period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (4). The ramifications of this statement are many and some of them had already appeared in the 1980s. The end of history and ideology means that now the willingness to sacrifice for some ideal would no more be a part of social and political life: "the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands" (Fukuyama 18). But the question is whether it was the end of the age of ideology or the beginning of a new one? The triumph of liberalism and free market economy gave birth to a new kind of ideology and though this ideology has many facets, I would delimit my discussion to consumer culture, media and culture of the self as these issues are most relevant to the topic at hand.

Allan Murray went on to say that this new ideology is basically the ideology of America: "America's free market ideology is now world's ideology and the nation's internet and biotechnology businesses are pioneering the technologies of tomorrow" (qtd in Miller 490). The ideology of liberalism is defined by: "…neoliberalism's mantra of individual freedom, the marketplace, and minimal government involvement in economic matters. This provides the intellectual alibi for a comparatively unimpeded flow of capital across national boundaries, and the rejection of labour, capital, and the state managing the economy together" (Miller 490). The culture born out of these economic and social conditions would not be a culture of grand political ideologies and slogans rather it would be based upon narcissistic individualism — a culture of the self. On the surface level, it appears that this culture is apolitical to say the least, but we would see that its political essence is covert rather than overt.

6.2 The Hermeneutics of the Self

Vicki Adams' opinion that "In Kundera's own fiction, one strongly senses a deconstructionist view of the modern world and an example of Kundera's attempt to deal with the concept of identity in this deconstructed world of his novels" (135) seems befitting as 'self' and its technologies in the contemporary age are the central focus of his novels. Though Kundera's novel cannot be said to have a protagonist, Agnes seems to be one character that may be described as the central character of *Immortality*. It is not that the narrative revolves

around her but she shares some of the sensibilities of her creator. It is through her that we come to know about one of the major concerns of the novel — what is SELF? In the earlier works of Kundera, we do find some passages here and there dwelling on the nature of self but in this novel, Kundera have extended his earlier formulations. Very early in the novel, we see Agnes pondering over the question of the self and how people assert this self in the real-life situations. Agnes happens to visit a sauna and sitting with other women, she notices how these women carry themselves and force their way as if they want to thrust their 'self' onto the face of the people around them. For example, there comes a young girl and the moment she enters the room, she states fives facts about her 'self.' Her manner is quite loud and bold as if she wants to make these points very clear and the other women present should pay heed to her declaration. She informs them that she likes to take hot saunas, she likes to be proud of herself, she despises to be modest, she likes to take her showers cold and does not like them hot:

> With these five strokes she had drawn her self-portrait, with these five points she defined her 'self' and presented that self to everyone. And she didn't present it modestly (she said, after all, that she hated modesty!) but belligerently. She used passionate verbs such as "adore" and "detest," as if she wished to proclaim her readiness to fight for every one of those five strokes, for every one of those five points. (*Immortality* 13)

On the road, she comes across a black-haired girl who have removed the silencer of her motorcycle and was creating a lot of noise. Agnes realizes that in the case of this girl too, the impulse is the same. If the sauna girl was verbally articulate about her 'self,' this girl has allowed her motorcycle to do the talking for her. It is not the motorcycle that is making such a noise, it is the self of that girl. The muffler is not attached to the engine, but to her soul. She wants everyone to listen to the loud noise of her soul. The question is why do human beings desperately want to flaunt their 'self'? Is there something special and unique about one's 'self' that others do not possess? Lacanian psychoanalysis posits forth this premise that our sense of the self is totally imaginary as it is a consequence of mirroring: "The mirror stage has the important function of bringing fragmentary drives together and creating some sense of identity, albeit a false and narcissistic one" (Milton 69). Her conversations with her father had taught Agnes that there is nothing unique about us. Just like a mechanical object is manufactured in a factory and the engineers have a prototype, a blueprint chalked somewhere and all the manufactured samples are merely recreations of that prototype, the case of human beings is no

different. In the advanced technological societies, prototypes are created through computers and when a computer recreates a commodity, it does not create something different or distinct from the other commodities of the same category. Her father was of the view: “The computer did not plan an Agnes or a Paul, but only a prototype known as a human being, giving rise to a large number of specimens that are based on the original model and haven't any individual essence” (*Immortality* 13). Similarly, all cars are made following a prototypical model. They only differ in serial number. In case of human beings, our faces serve the purpose of this serial number. Our faces are not unique or special, just arbitrary instances. What initially is a chance, a mere accident, later, becomes so important to us that we start to consider this as our ‘self’ — a unique, distinct, whole being. We are not aware of this fact in the early two or three years of our life but with the passage of time, whenever we look in the mirror and see a face reflected there, we start to associate this face with a coherent idea of the ‘self’ without realizing the fact that it is merely a coincidence. Agnes asks herself: “Why all this passion? When we are thrust out into the world just as we are, we first have to identify with that particular throw of the dice, with that accident organized by the divine computer: to get over our surprise that precisely this (what we see facing us in the mirror) is our self” (*Immortality* 14). This is a mirage, an illusion which first appears as an abstraction and later, we start taking it as something tangible and concrete. Does this imply that this false and narcissistic identity takes on concrete parameters so much so that we attempt to defend it with tooth and claw? It does seem so. If we stop believing in this illusion that our face reveals our unique ‘self,’ our existence would not be the same. Moreover, we do not just believe in this myth, we also fight for it. Perhaps, in this way we convince ourselves that we are not mere copies of a prototype.

All this effort, these loud statements, removed mufflers, everything is basically an expression of the desire to be counted not as a variant of a prototype. In order to avoid being a variant, he or she wants to assert their individuality, rather thrust it onto others. Only this way they would be able to, in the words of Fyodor Dostoevsky, “convince himself that he is a man and not a piano-key!” (38). It is not just the face that becomes a hallmark of our identity and our self but also the name that we bore. We do not realize that our name is completely arbitrary that we could have easily been called by some other name instead of the present one. We always think that there is some special connection between us and our name and thus we carry it like a feather in the cap wherever we go:

> "We got our names, too, merely by accident," she continued. "We don't know when our name came into being or how some distant ancestor acquired it. We don't understand our name at all, we don't know its history, and yet we bear it with exalted fidelity, we merge with it, we like it, we are ridiculously proud of it as if we had thought it up ourselves in a moment of brilliant inspiration." (*Immortality* 36)

A time comes when an individual starts to question the centrality of his face or his name to his idea of 'self' and this is the moment when everything starts to crumble around him. This imaginary 'self' and its props hold a special importance for us and any doubt regarding their authenticity would lead to an existential crisis.

It is interesting to note that *Immortality* was written in the period when the Western societies had already entered the phase of history described by Fukuyama as the end of all ideological structures. In the absence of ideological props and fantasies, the individual turned to his own 'self.' The end of history entails a kind of nonchalance to the past and future and it is the present one should live for. As mentioned earlier, I am using textual analysis to read my selected texts. Textual analysis utilizes external cultural texts to analyse the given text and, in this study, I have used such resources to validate my argument. At this point, I would like to bring in Christopher Lasch's book *The Culture of Narcissism*. In his book, Christopher Lasch has analysed this strange obsession with the 'self' which emerged as a fad in the 1970s. Though the immediate context of the book is America, one cannot help notice that it applies to all modern societies as well. Lasch notes:

> To live for the moment is the prevailing passion-to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future. It is the waning of the sense of historical time-in particular, the erosion of any strong concern for posterity-that distinguishes the spiritual crisis of the seventies from earlier out- breaks of millenarian religion, to which it bears a superficial resemblance. (5)

This indicates that our adherence to history and ideology gives us an existential motif and in the absence of this motif, we may turn to the void of our 'self'': 'Since "the society" has no future, it makes sense to live only for the moment, to fix our eyes on our own "private

performance," to become connoisseurs of our own decadence, to cultivate a "transcendental self-attention." (Lasch 6). But as we have noticed, the 'self' is merely a construction, an illusion and though we may continue to take it as something unique on the basis of our face or name and fight for it, its uniqueness can't be established. An individual must first make himself or herself believe that they are distinct from others, they have certain habits, choices, styles and tastes and they can advertise these as distinct. This process involves what Kundera terms as 'addition' — an individual would pile on different attributes and characters in order to make his or her 'self' appear unique. Kundera describes the character of Agnes' sister Laura as someone who would do this sort of insertion: "…in order to make her 'self' ever more visible, perceivable, seizable, sizable, she keeps adding to it more and more attributes and she attempts to identify herself with them (with the risk that the essence of the self may be buried by the additional attributes)" (*Immortality* 111). The process is not dissimilar to advertisement in which certain qualities of a product are enumerated to make it stand out from other products. But here we encounter a paradox. An individual consistently flaunts this uniqueness and wish to make other people concur with his idea of the 'self' but if the other people concede to this demand, it would, invariably, result in the loss of their uniqueness:

The process of addition can take on many shapes and manifestations; for some it is in their self-assertion as we have seen in the case of sauna girl, for some it is through the removal of silencer on their bikes, for some it is success in their career, and the list goes on and on. This leads us to a very interesting yet shocking formulation — our love for anything or anyone in this world is not for the sake of love but it is just a statement about our 'self.' In *Immortality*, in the part that deals with another epoch of history — with Goethe, the writer has made this claim by positing certain questions about the love of music and art that individuals proclaim. The question is whether it was Beethoven's music that captivated Bettina? "or was it rather what the music represented" for her? Does love for art really exist and has it ever existed? Is it not a delusion?" (*Immortality* 89). What really makes this an authentic assertion is that the same piece of music might mean different for different individuals. Take the example of Lenin who proclaimed his love for Beethoven's Appassionato. The question is, "…what was it that he really loved? What did he hear? Music? Or a majestic noise that reminded him of the solemn stirrings in his soul, a longing for blood, brotherhood, executions, justice, and the absolute? Did he derive joy from the tones, or from the musings stimulated by those tones, which had

nothing to do with art or with beauty?" (*Immortality* 89). Looking at these props for 'self' from this angle, it is quite clear that whatever we do, whatever we manifest, it becomes a kind of advertisement, a propaganda for our 'self.' But we can posit another question here; why do we need this advertisement, this propaganda? Does it mean that our idea of the 'self' and its uniqueness depends upon the opinion of the others? Does it mean we want to prove, not to ourselves, but to others, what our 'self' is?

6.3 The Self and the Gaze of the Other

Despite the fact that our 'self' is an illusion, there is one concrete dimension of it — our image in the eyes of the others. We might construct different ideas about our 'self' and delude ourselves about our imaginary characteristics, but the fact is that the only thought that haunts us is how others think about us. This image in the eyes of others is so valuable to us that all our lives we play and act different roles so that we can lodge it in the vaults of people's mind. Often is the case that our role-playing hardly conforms with our inner feelings and thoughts but because we want others to think about us in a certain way, so, we would never let them know our true emotions. In this way, the 'self' is a spectacle, a theatrical performance, in which we take on different roles and characters to convey a certain impression to our audience:

> "…our self is a mere illusion, ungraspable, indescribable, misty, while the only reality, all too easily graspable and describable, is our image in the eyes of others. And the worst thing about it is that you are not its master. First you try to paint it yourself, then you want at least to influence and control it, but in vain: a single malicious phrase is enough to change you forever into a depressingly simple caricature." (*Immortality* 143)

This is what happens to Paul when he gets dismissed from a radio broadcast on the basis that the sponsors of the program does not want him. The producer of the program has a nickname the Bear and even though, up till now, Paul has had no difference of opinion with him or even if there was, he never articulated it. After he gets dismissed, the scenario is no more the same. Paul, the Bear and some other colleagues are sitting together and Paul is trying to convince the Bear that he should have stood up to the sponsors. Both are trying to defend their opinions, not because they have a firm belief in their opinions but the reason is that they want to prove to the other colleagues present there the rightness of their claim. The narrator comments: "Look at those two. After all, their dispute won't change anything, it will lead to no decision, it will

not influence the course of events in the slightest, it is quite sterile and unnecessary, confined to the cafeteria and its stale air, soon gone when the cleaning lady opens the windows" (*Immortality* 135). But again, the focus is not to defend one's opinion rather the focus is to make this small audience believe that I am the one who is right. Paul has manifested vehemently that he has this stance regarding the issue. Now he thinks that this stance has become a part of his 'self' and it is his duty to defend it and if someone is attacking this stance, it simply amounts to attacking his 'self.' Same is true in case of the Bear. They argue as if it is a matter of life or death for them. If one concedes his defeat, he would think as if he had lost some part of his self. The opinion or the argument does not matter. Once they have expressed a point of view, now they think it is their duty to defend it at every cost.

The point is that the 'self' is imaginary and it is lodged somewhere else — in the minds of the others. This is the reason that we care so much what others think of us. The 'diploma' episode that happened to Bernard Bertrand is an instance how this image in the eyes of the others affects us and haunts us. Bernard, who is a journalist, comes out of the radio station and there comes a person who hands him over a diploma on which it is written that Bernard is declared a complete ass. This seems to be a trivial episode, a prank may be, something to be laughed at and brushed aside, at least that is how the others looked at it. For Bernard, the recipient of this certificate, it is not. The problem is that the whole episode is about the image of the 'self' lodged in the eyes of others and even if a single person comes to us and passes some derogatory remarks about us, we would feel as if our 'self' is being threatened, the whole edifice is crumbling. When Paul tells Bernard that he should treat it as a joke, he replies: "Yes, I know, you'll say it was all a joke, and of course you're right, it was a joke, but I can't help it. I've been thinking about it ever since, and I can't think about anything else" (*Immortality* 141). It is at this moment Paul realizes the gravity of the situation, that how important the opinion of others is for us: "As long as we live with other people, we are only what other people consider us to be" (*Immortality* 142).

This harbouring of the 'self' in the other is also discussed by French Existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre elaborates how the 'gaze' of the other defines our 'self' and changes its contours. Take the example of shame. Shame in itself is nothing. Even if I have done a shameful deed, I can live with it and make peace with it. It becomes problematic only when my act is observed by someone else. Sartre comments:

> I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture. This gesture clings to me; I neither judge it nor blame it. I simply live it. I realize it in the mode of for-itself. But now suddenly I raise my head. Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I am ashamed. It is certain that my shame is not reflective, for the presence of another in my consciousness, even as a catalyst, is incompatible with the reflective attitude; in the field of my reflection I can never meet with anything but the consciousness which is mine. But the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other. (221)

Here the emphasis is on somewhat paradoxical mediation of the other in the constitution of the 'self.' Why is it that Bernard cannot forget this incident of receiving a ridiculous certificate from a complete stranger? Why is it affecting his life and behaviour? He cannot even keep up appearances with Laura, his lover. The reason is that the awareness of the existence of a person who thinks ill of him makes Bernard to look at himself through the gaze of an 'other.' The moment he gazes at himself as an 'other,' he is no more a 'subject' rather an 'object,' object of an inquiry, judgement and persecution. "Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me" (Sartre 222).

Paul makes an effort to comfort Bernard who is visibly distraught but he does not realize, though he is stating the fact, he is making the situation worse. He says: "Thinking about how others see us and trying to make our image as attractive as possible is considered a kind of dissembling or cheating. But does there exist another kind of direct contact between my self and their selves except through the mediation of the eyes?" (*Immortality* 142). His words echo those of Sartre that without the mediation of the 'other,' there can't be a 'self.' Paul takes it even further by saying that such an extremely personal emotion of love is construed upon this idea of our image lodged in the mind of our beloved. Love is also imagining, building and doggedly following our image in the mind of an 'other': "Can we possibly imagine love without anxiously following our image in the mind of the beloved? When we are no longer interested in how we are seen by the person we love, it means we no longer love" (*Immortality* 143).

6.4 The Politics of the ‘Self’

Up till now we have discussed the imaginary nature of the ‘self’ and how it is dependent upon the ‘other.’ The question is; is there no conflict between the personal — the ‘self’ and the political? It does seem as if the political is absent from *Immortality* and the conflict between the two, one of the hallmarks of Kundera’s fiction, is not the concern of this novel. Earlier, I have pointed out that how the Western societies went through a transformation which consequently led to a culture of the ‘self.’ Apparently, this new kind of individualism promoted by liberal democracy is apolitical and with its proclamation of the End of History, it sets out to celebrate the cult of individuality. Christopher Lasch, in his book *The Culture of Narcissism,* has elaborated in detail the different features of this culture. Before I come to the political, I would like to refer to this text as it would help me elucidate my point.

According to Lasch, 70s was the decade when the Western world in general and America in particular, entered into the phase later dubbed as the ‘End of History.’ As I have discussed earlier, Fukuyama heralded this after the demise of USSR, a bit later in 1989, but the tremors were already felt in the 70s. We have seen in *The Joke* how ideologies provide a bedrock on which the edifice of the ‘self’ is erected. Identification with a certain ideology not only gives the ‘self’ a concrete dimension but it also provides a certain teleology to an otherwise absurd existence. When the age of ideology gave way and the End of History was ushered in, the ‘self, in a way, lost that bedrock. In the absence of this defining feature, the ‘self’ turned inwards and a new kind of culture sprang up which can be called as the ‘culture of the self.’ The end of history means that there is no historical sense or responsibility towards the future rather there is only the present moment. The ‘self’ regresses into itself, a kind of dark primitive reservoir of drives. Lasch comments: “Archaic elements increasingly dominate personality structure, and "the self shrinks back," in the words of Morris Dickstein, "toward a passive and primeval state in which the world remains uncreated, unformed." The egomaniacal, experience-devouring imperial self regresses into a grandiose, narcissistic, infantile, empty self: a "dark wet hole,” (12). Lasch claims that the heady days of the ‘teleology of history’ taught the individuals that, for the moment, they should live for the grand cause and the realization of the ‘self’ should come later. In other words, we can assert that the question of the ‘self’ got lost in the grand political slogans and march towards progress and Absolute.[3]

But in the 70s, even among the die-hard revolutionaries, there was a heightened awareness that the ‘self’ and its demons must also be exorcised and

> politics has to explain among other things why personal growth and development have become so hard to accomplish; why the fear of growing up and aging haunts our society; why personal relations have become so brittle and precarious; and why the "inner life" no longer offers any refuge from the danger around us. (Lasch16)

The answers to these questions led the individuals to regress deeper into the intricacies of their inner life and they started to take refuge in private existence. Privatism emerged as a new philosophy, a new outlook though such kind of privatism was detrimental in many ways. If the ideologies do not exist anymore and consequently there is no anchor for the ‘self’ then this option to regress into an inner life is also not a proper choice. Private life can take on the very features that are characteristics of the political and then one cannot exercise the option of running from one’s ‘self.’ Nevertheless, it gave birth to a new kind of politics, politics of the ‘self,’ in which the ‘self’ emerged as an ideology, something to fight and die for. Instead of the split between the personal and the political, a new paradigm was introduced in which the ‘self’ itself became political. Now the split is between the ‘self’ and its politicisation. The question is what was the nature of this politicisation?

Christopher Lasch has elaborated this phenomenon by positing that the ‘Consumer Culture’[4] is promoting a specific kind of individuality in which individuals are incited to become self-driven consumers. The ‘self’ is being treated like a political field and it is the battleground where all political battles are being fought. He comments:

> [This] has altered the balance of forces within the family, weakening the authority of the husband in relation to the wife and parents in relation to their children. It emancipates women and children from patriarchal authority, however, only to subject them to the new paternalism of the advertising industry, the industrial corporation, and the state. (74)

This new politics does not aim at territorial expansion nor its purpose is to construct grand narratives rather it targets the ‘self.’ This ‘self’ is defined by “the globalization of commodity and cultural flows, with the increasing role of shopping as entertainment, with the increasing democratization of fashion” (Sassatelli 11). The ‘self’ has become an ideology in itself and

instead of grand marches we have now sophisticated advertisements; instead of human rights now we have consumer rights:

> these range from the identification of freedom with private choice to the consolidation of impersonality and universalism as recommendable codes of conduct for social relations; from the idea that human needs are infinite and undefined, to the expectation that each individual can (and must) find 'his/her own way', as personal as possible. (Sassatelli 11)

This indicates that the parallax in the postmodern societies should not be looked for between the personal and the political but between the 'self' and its politicisation. This is a new kind of ONE, a new kind of 'minimal difference' and this divides the 'self' from itself. It would be interesting to analyse some of the main characters from the perspective of this politicisation of the 'self' and how this 'minimal difference' manifests itself in their behaviour.

The character of Laura in the novel is an absolute embodiment of the politicisation of the 'self' or the 'self' founded on the principle of exhibitionism. Laura is different from her sister Agnes as she believes in outward manifestations of the 'self': "There are two methods for cultivating the uniqueness of the self: the method of addition and the method of subtraction" (*Immortality* 111) and Laura has opted for the former. For her, 'self' should be worn at the sleeves, to be flaunted and shown off and the best way to do that is to add certain gestures and airs to one's everyday conduct so that these added features may substitute the real 'self' and one can simply put on a mask to convey a feeling or an emotion. Take the example of Laura's cat. She made her cat an attribute of her 'self' so much so that she would treat it as a litmus test for her lovers. If her lovers want to have her, they will have to bear with the cat with all its idiosyncrasies. The way Laura would use her cat to exercise power over her lovers clearly suggests that basically it is not just cat the animal that she cares about rather through the cat she wears some attributes of her 'self' as an attire and caring for the cat implies caring for her this attribute. For her, it is not important whether her cat shares any of her personality traits. The important thing is that she has decided to grant her cat this status. When the cat would tease and torment her lovers, it is just a litmus test for them. If they want Laura, they have to bear up with the cat.

The ’self’ of Laura is actually the politicised version of the ‘self,’ a ‘self’ which is used to manipulate and manoeuvre others. Another example of adding some external object to her ‘self’ is her use of dark glasses. After her miscarriage, dark glasses became an important outward feature of her ‘self’ — an emblem of her inner grief: “She wore them almost constantly and apologized to friends: "Excuse the glasses, but I've been doing a lot of crying and I can't show my face to people without them” (*Immortality* 103). Initially, she might have used them to hide her tears but now these glasses served another purpose. Now she uses them just to convey this message that she is sad. The glasses have taken the place of tears. The mask does not hide something behind, the mask is itself something, in this case an attribute of the ‘self.’ Perhaps, behind the mask, there is only nothingness and putting on the mask gives this ‘nothingness’ a semblance of ‘something.’

When the certificate of being a complete ass is bestowed on Bernard, naturally, he becomes depressed. Laura is never interested in his personal life so when in her company, he seems to be preoccupied, she does not try to look into his ‘self’ to find the cause. Rather she assumes that he is having an affair with some other woman and does not love her anymore. This is another proof of Laura’s narcissism. One day, when he is at her apartment and his mind plunged in dark thoughts, he absent-mindedly tries to stroke Laura’s cat but in turn the cat bites and scratches his hand. As Bernard was already in a gloomy state of mind so he reacts violently and when Laura comes in the room, her response is curious. She says: “She demands that whoever strokes her really concentrates on it. I, too, resent it when someone is with me but his mind is somewhere else” (*Immortality* 147). Is this a statement about the cat or about herself? We can never be sure as Laura treats her cat as an outward manifestation of one of the attributes of her ‘self.’

Laura does not know Bernard nor does she want to. Perhaps, this is the reason that she makes a poor judgement and decides to ask him to marry her. If she had been interested in him and his inner ‘self,’ she might have tried to understand what inner hell he is going through. On the contrary, Laura has a strange notion of love. She proclaims that she is only interested in the love of Bernard. She has never asked him about his family. At time, when he would utter something about them, she would refuse to listen. She would not even ask him what kind of problems he has. Laura is completely ignorant in this regard — she does not want to know anybody. Knowing somebody else entails a kind of effacement of one’s own ego. It requires

an element of empathy, being able to walk in their shoes. Laura can never do that as her ‘self’ is the quintessential narcissistic self, orbiting around its own axis. As Lasch has asserted; “Love " as self-sacrifice or self-abasement, "meaning" as submission to a higher loyalty — these sublimations strike the therapeutic sensibility as intolerably oppressive, offensive to common sense and injurious to personal health and well-being” (13). It is impossible for Laura to love in the traditional sense of the word as that kind of love has become outmoded in the ‘culture of the self.’ Instead of keeping Bernard as a secret trophy of hers, she panics and asks him to marry her. Bernard had always thought about their relationship as a kind of adventure, a best kept secret. Laura is an older woman and there is this a priori understanding that she must be discreet. For him, she was a kind of escape from his meddling family and now if he marries her, it would mean he has given his family license to pry and meddle in his married life. This would take away all the excitement.

Laura might not like to know about Bernard, whom she claims to love, but she surely wants to leave a permanent impression on him. This is again a narcissistic self-assertion totally oblivious of the feelings of her lover. She does not want to know about his family or his job and even the reason for his gloominess yet she wants him to think about her. Still, they make passionate love but this is not enough for Laura. She tells Agnes that, for her, making love is not everything. This is really unusual for a woman who believes in the outward and material attributes of the ‘self.’ She says:

> It's not a question of making love. It's a question of his thinking of me. I have had lots of men and today none of them knows anything about me nor I about them, and I ask myself why I bothered to live all those years when I didn't leave any trace of myself with anyone. What's left of my life? (*Immortality* 176)

Here it is clear that even for a person like Laura, for whom ‘self’ is a tool to get what she wants and which needs to be flaunted here and there, the image in the mind of an ‘other’ is very important. She thinks that her ‘self’ would have a ground, a foundation, if its image is lodged in the mind of her lover. The battle that ensues between her and Bernard is not caused by a genuine heartache rather it is because of the imposition of the ‘self’ on the other. We see that how Laura uses this politics of the ‘self’ to subdue not even Bernard but her sister Agnes too. She consistently uses the threat of suicide to make others care for her, to focus their attention

on her and share her suffering. Her constant bickering has now another complaint added to it — the hints that she is contemplating suicide. This would tire Agnes out. She would feel as if she is responsible to talk Laura out of this silly idea and she would attempt to convince her for hours. It is of no use as Laura does not seem to be affected by it. Throughout their conversation, Agnes is consistently thinking about Laura and her threat of committing suicide. As mentioned earlier, Laura uses her 'self' to manipulate others, hence, she would not directly say that she is thinking about suicide. She would just mention that she has this intention of doing 'something.' It is her ominous tone and the way she would utter 'something' that causes anxiety in the mind of her sister. The question is, is she really thinking about self-immolation? In fact, she has no such plans. This 'something' is basically going to bed with another man to get even with Bernard. Suicide or infidelity — effacing one's body or using it to get back at her lover; both these acts are political in the sense that they are meant to be executed to control another person. Laura knows this very well and she knows how to use this weapon. We see that she does neither of these things. Instead, she starts collecting for the benefit of lepers.

When Bernard leaves for Martinique to spend some time alone, Laura decides to follow him. Agnes is against this decision but again Laura plays a game and says that if Paul asks her not to go, she will change her mind. Paul thinks it against his principles to impose his ideas on anyone so he refuses to forbid her. This again is a tactic used by Laura to make others care for her so that if something goes wrong, she will have someone to put the blame on. This game continues on the phone too when she calls Paul and Agnes from Martinique and hints at having a loaded revolver with her and thus suggesting she is adamant in her decision. Of course, this makes Agnes and Paul restless and they try to persuade her to let go this foolish thing. When she comes back, Agnes confronts her and there is an ugly exchange between the two. At this moment, Agnes realizes something: "It suddenly became clear to her that it was no longer a question of Bernard: that entire suicidal drama had nothing to do with him; most probably he would never find out about it; that drama was intended only for Paul and for Agnes" (*Immortality* 202). The realisation is not a pleasant one. Agnes loves her sister and she cannot imagine that her sister would exploit her love for her just to prove some point and in the process tease her and her family. For Laura, 'self' has exactly the same purpose, that is to be used for one's own benefit, a tactical asset.

6.5 The Publicization of the Self

In the postmodern societies, the politicisation of the 'self' has another dimension as well and Kundera terms it 'Eleventh Commandment' — Tell the truth. In totalitarian regimes, the power to impose this commandment lie with the police and other government agencies who could force any individual to tell anything in the name of security. In liberal societies, it has taken another form — journalism:

> "After all, people do need some commandment to rule over them in our century, when God's Ten have been virtually forgotten! The whole moral structure of our time rests on the Eleventh Commandment; and the journalist came to realize that thanks to a mysterious provision of history he is to become its administrator, gaining a power undreamed of by a Hemingway or an Orwell" (*Immortality* 123).

Journalists can question anybody about their private lives, idiosyncrasies, moral failings, just about anything and the individual must answer the questions. American journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward exercised this power in an absolute way when they made President Nixon to lie and then made him admit that he lied. The president had to bow before the power of journalists and thus a new kind of politics was introduced — the politics of meddling into the 'self' of the others. If Laura likes to use her own 'self' as a weapon to manoeuvre the others, the journalists have the power to use the 'self' of others against themselves. Tell the truth, is the paradigm of the new age but what is the nature of this Truth? Is it ontological or epistemological? Is it philosophical or scientific? Religious or moral? The moment one phrases these questions in one's mind, one realizes that in our age these truths do not matter: "…it is not a question of God's truth, for which Jan Hus died at the stake, nor a question of the truth of science and free thought, for which they burned Giordano Bruno" (*Immortality* 124). It is more concerned with

> …what did C do yesterday? what is he really thinking deep in his heart? what does he talk about when he gets together with A? and does he have intimate contact with B? Nevertheless, even though it is on the lowest ontological story, it is the truth of our time and contains the same explosive force as did the truth of Hus or Giordano Bruno. (*Immortality* 124)

It's evident that this truth is about the 'self,' the 'self' of the others and the journalists claim to have a right to it. 'Self' in the present age has become a public property and even if one puts a signboard out with words 'No Trespassing' inscribed on it, one cannot escape this incessant prying and meddling. *Immortality* is also a veiled satire on Capitalist liberalism and the centrality of surface level phenomena in it. Ross comments on the novel in this context: "An ideology that insists only on the surface play of images and makes iconoclasm its driving purpose runs a high risk of opening the door to totalitarianism even as it champions democracy" (341). If the Communist regimes had their secret police, democracies have their journalists. The destruction of private life has its psychological repercussions as, after a while, people also stop caring about it. The journalists hound for anything scandalous, anything inappropriate which they can quote out of context and turn an ordinary sentence into a news or a scandal. While making speeches, the politicians might utter many sentences but how these sentences are to be interpreted and quoted in print and electronic media, they don't have control over it: "…it will depend on Bernstein or Woodward which of the fifty thousand sentences that he uttered will be released to the newspapers or quoted on the radio" (*Immortality* 124). In order to avoid that, politicians have started giving live interviews as they think that here they won't be misquoted. But the conundrum is that the journalists would ask him questions he does not want to answer and thus he would be made a fool in front of the entire nation. Even in the post-ideological societies, based upon the culture of the self, the 'self' is not personal in the strict sense of the word. It can be pried and probed like a surgeon cutting open the body. Even the common people are not spared this torture as they are always under surveillance in the modern states. Kundera specifically criticizes this lack of privacy in the modern societies where "Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere" (Foucault, *DP* 195). This consistent realization of being seen not only makes the 'self' an object to be studied and scrutinized but also takes away the very groundwork of our being. If life does not have a private dimension, it can turn into hell. The totalitarian governments tend to make it certain that nothing escapes from their prying eyes. While in the so-called liberal democracies, this function is performed by journalists. Human beings require a certain level of privacy as some relationships like love or friendship cannot flourish under magnifying glass.

6.6 The Self and its Negation

In an age in which the 'self' has become an exhibit, something to flaunt about, something politicised and controlled, does there exist a possibility for escape? How can one avoid this panopticon where one is an object of scrutiny? In *The Joke* and up to some extent in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the characters had to confront the political, which though an extension of the self, had started to exist on its own with an intention to colonize the very 'self' of which it was an off shoot. In *Immortality*, the 'self' has been exteriorized in such a way that it has taken a political dimension and despite the fact that there does not exist an outside political authority, it is playing the role of one as such. As we have observed, and he has also made it very clear in his interviews, Kundera does not like this politicisation of the 'self' and upholds the opinion that the 'self' is something private. In *Immortality,* Agnes does share this point of view of her creator.

Agnes is the only character in the novel who has a different idea of the 'self' and in a way she desires to get away from it. Unlike her sister, she wants to subtract the attributes of the 'self' even if she has to come face to face with nothingness at the end. She believes that even our face and name are not contingent part of our 'self' but are accidental attributes. She might have come to hold this opinion under the influence of her father who also believed in the 'effacement of the self.' Agnes recalls how her father hated crowds and he would never fight with anybody even when his life was at stake:

> …he is on a sinking ship; there are only a few lifeboats and there isn't room for everyone; there is a furious stampede on deck. At first Father rushes along with the others, but when he sees how they all push and shove, ready to trample each other underfoot, and a wild-eyed woman strikes him with her fist because he is in her way, he suddenly stops and steps aside. And in the end he merely watches the overloaded lifeboats as they are slowly lowered amid shouts and curses, toward the raging waves. (*Immortality* 25)

Can we call this nihilism? Perhaps not. It is not that Agnes' father does not love life or does not want to live. It is just that this very thing people call the 'self' and for which they shove and push others, he can't stand it. He would never push anybody to make room for himself and this also involves his desire to be alone. If he is left behind on that sinking ship, at least, he

will have the opportunity to die at peace, without the prying and scrutinizing eyes of the other people. Agnes shares this attitude of her father and we see that she does not have anything common with the people around her. "And she once again had the strong, peculiar feeling that was coming over her more and more often: the feeling that she had nothing in common with those two-legged creatures with a head on their shoulders and a mouth in their face" (*Immortality* 43). It is not that she has always been like that. She used to enjoy the company of her friends, she married Paul and at the time she thought she was in love with him, she has a daughter whom she thinks she loves and she also has Laura for whom she cares. But the problem is that the feeling of being distinct and aloof was not for particular people. It is for people in general. There was a time when she would take interest in different modes of being, like, politics and society. Then, a time came, she stopped having this sense of belonging to humanity in general. Initially, she resisted this way of thinking. She thought it was amoral and odd. With the passage of time, she stopped fighting it. One cannot have any control over one's feelings, she would tell herself. "she was no longer able to torment herself with thoughts of their wars nor to enjoy their celebrations, because she was filled with the conviction that none of it was her concern" (*Immortality* 43). At the surface level, it seems heartless to think of people in these terms. In fact, this can be interpreted as egoistic or even narcissistic. This would be a flawed interpretation because Agnes does not have any grand notions about her 'self.' She does not think herself superior to anybody rather she has a 'negative' idea of the 'self'— 'self' as something not positive. Moreover, this allegation of being heartless cannot be levelled against her because she is so sympathetic to the poor. She would always give them money:

> …even her handouts to beggars were based on negation: she gave them money not because beggars, too, belonged to mankind but because they did not belong to it, because they were excluded from it and probably, like her, felt no solidarity with mankind. No solidarity with mankind: that was her attitude. (*Immortality* 43)

This leads us to a very interesting hypothesis. We have established earlier, at the beginning of this section, that the gaze of the other plays a very important role in the constitution of the 'self.' What if we invert this assertion and say that if you do not need others and their company, you also do not have a 'self,' at least in the traditional sense of the word. The 'self' desires recognition, it hinges on the opinions of the others, its very existence is social. If the subject does not feel solidarity with his/her species, it would imply that he/she won't have an image

of the ‘self’ in their mind — an image they want to protect and preserve. Lacan is of the view that the subject consistently demands recognition because it cannot be sure about it. The ‘self’ is imaginary, consequently, it wants to be reassured that it exists. “The subject turns to an ‘other’ that is its image. It is the place of alienation and misrecognition that explains why the subject always demands recognition, given that no one can have the certainty of being one’s own image. The demand for recognition is to make the image consistent” (Hoven 130). Agnes does not have this image of her ‘self’ that needs exhibiting and recognition. If she does not care about the other people, does not need them to be there for reassurance, then it indicates that she wants the negation of her ‘self.’ When she thinks about life after death, the first thing that comes to her mind is what if the next world is just a permutation of the present one? In that case, she would have to live with the same kind of people and hear removed mufflers of their ‘selves.’ Just like here, solitude may not be possible in the life after death. It is just the fear of not being alone in the next world that makes her cling to this life. She is sitting in a deck chair and could hear the sound of constant chattering of women. This babble of female voices would be even lounder in the life after death as dead outnumber the living: “Eternity as the sound of endless babble” (*Immortality* 14). This would really creep her out: “…the idea of hearing women's voices forever, continuously, without end, gave her sufficient incentive to cling furiously to life and to do everything in her power to keep death as far away as possible” (*Immortality* 14). For Agnes, even the voices of the others are unbearable as they are advertisements for their ‘selves,’ consistently chattering like ads on radio. Ever since her father’s death, she has been going to Switzerland, her hometown, twice or thrice a year. Paul and Brigitte think that she is sentimental about her father’s grave and this is the reason for her visits. This is not the whole truth. These visits are actually her escape, escape from family, from the city, from the people, from mufflers of the ‘self.’ In fact, she dreams of coming back to Switzerland for good. The only problem is how to break this to her family. Whenever she thinks about living in Switzerland, she would think about writing a letter to her family telling them about her decision and expressing the wish that she would like to hear from them now and then. The most disturbing thing about this is that she does not even want to hear from them: “This was the most difficult thing to express and to explain: that she needed to know how they were, even though at the same time she had no desire whatever to see them or to be with them” (*Immortality* 31). How can a woman, apparently happily married, dream of such things and

after that not even wanting to hear from her family? But the voice of solitude is always so alluring and sultry. She wants to surrender to it, to merge her 'self' in to it: "She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of a hunting horn coming from the depths of distant forests. There were paths in those forests; her father stood on one of them, smiling and inviting her to join him" (*Immortality* 31). But this is all a dream and Agnes does not have the courage to do that. Why? Does she care about her image in the minds of her husband and daughter?

There is some evidence that proves that she does care about her image. She also has a recurring image of a person in her mind who often visits their home (she knows he is death). Paul does not know who he is. Agnes wants to talk to that person alone, in the absence of Paul. The reason being that she knows what question he would ask her. He would ask her whether she would like to live with her husband in the next world too. Agnes knows that in the presence of Paul she would not be able to tell him the truth that she does not want to live with Paul in the life hereafter. Why does Agnes care what would Paul think of her? Is she afraid that he would think, ""No love ever existed between us and no love exists between us now?" (*Immortality* 46). Why is it impossible for her to say this aloud? Agnes thinks that for last twenty years they have been living in this illusion that they love each other and even though it is an illusion yet she would not like to break it: "And so whenever she imagined this scene, she knew that when it came to the visitor's question she would capitulate and declare against her wishes, against her desire, "Yes. Of course. I want us to be together in the next life" (*Immortality* 46). The illusion of love? Or we can be bold to say that she does not want to hurt Paul, that her empathy does not allow her to break somebody's heart. But in such situations, do we really care about the feelings of other people or do we just don't want them to have a bad image of us in their minds?

If we look at Agnes from this angle that she is sticking to her marriage and family not out of love but because she does not want to ruin her image in the mind of her husband and daughter, then we can say that Agnes does care about her 'self' and how it is perceived by the others. Apart from this, Agnes does seem to be Kundera's answer to the question of 'self' in the postmodern age. In an age, characterized by narcissistic exhibitionism, Agnes is a disavowal, a Bartleby figure, who would prefer not to. Zizek has poignantly used the character of Bartleby the Scrivener from Herman Melville's story to posit a radical political stance based upon pure negation. Zizek is of the view that power, in the vein of Foucault, anticipates all

possible points of intervention/resistance and thus the very acts that intend to defy it, actually, reinforce it. The solution to this conundrum, in Zizek's view, is Bartleby politics:

> "This is how we pass from the politics of 'resistance' or 'protestation', which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation...This is the gesture of subtraction at its purest, the reduction of all qualitative differences to a purely formal minimal difference" (Zizek, *TPV* 393).

Agnes is a Bartleby figure as she refuses to take part in the politicisation of the 'self.' Whenever, there is an opportunity to the expression of the 'self,' Agnes would 'prefer not to.' This is an ultimate gesture in the sense that actually it is not pointed at the negation of the being but negation of the 'self.' "What is unbearable in life is not being but being one's self" (*Immortality* 287). This is a significant assertion because 'self' is an off shoot of the Symbolic Order and a product of society. Even before we had a 'self,' we had a being and Agnes actually wants to search that being which, in the progression of history, got trammelled under the heavy weight of the 'self': "The Creator, with his computer, released into the world billions of selves as well as their lives. But apart from this quantity of lives it is possible to imagine some primordial being that was present even before the Creator began to create, a being that was—and still is—beyond his influence" (*Immortality* 287). Agnes wants to go back to this primordial being that existed before the 'self' and before its image was lodged in the minds of others. She strived for that being all through her life but was not able to get to it. Perhaps, she does get to it during her final moments when she thinks of hurrying up her dying so that she would not have to see Paul. At that moment, when her body is breathing its last, she might have reached where she had always wanted to. When Paul and Brigitte finally reach the hospital, she is already dead and Paul looks at her face: "that peculiar smile he had never seen on her face, that unknown smile in a face with closed eyelids wasn't meant for him, it was meant for someone he did not know, and it said something he did not understand" (*Immortality* 300). Paul does not understand this smile, how could he? He is just another believer of the 'self,' its exhibitor, while the smile on Agnes' face is basically the negation of that 'self.' She finally has her wish fulfilled which she had thought about earlier, while in Switzerland: "When she lay on the ground that day and the monotonous song of the stream flowed into her, cleansing her of the self, the dirt of the self, she participated in that primordial being, which

manifested itself in the voice of fleeting time and the blue of the sky; she now knows there is nothing more beautiful" (*Immortality* 287).

II

In this section, I would analyse the schism between the body and soul in *Immortality* and how this is more pronounced in this novel as compared to other works under discussion. *Immortality* is a novel written in the so-called 'post-ideological' era and it explores some of the very important concerns of this age. As I have discussed in the previous section, 'self' emerged as the alternate ideology in the postmodern era and its 'point de capiton'[5] is not the transcendent and abstract soul but the pleasures of the body. One particular aspect of the body that is not usually taken into account is death and how it has a bearing on the lives of the people. Death brings an element of meaninglessness into all human endeavour, a realization that whatever we might do, it would eventually come to nothing. Reality is socially constructed but this reality is incomplete as death lurks behind everything. The sense of being ephemeral prompts a desire for something permanent: "…all reality is socially constructed, as a consequence of Man's incompleteness, but human beings require stable meanings and cannot live in permanent awareness of the socially constructed and precarious nature of everyday reality, and they are forced to clothe these certainties with permanent significance" (Turner 117). The quest for this permanent significance may take many forms but in the contemporary world it is manifested itself in the desire to preserve one's body, culture of the self, and seeking some kind of transcendence to the corporeal situatedness. *Immortality* deals with spatio-temporal aspect of our existence and our quest to go beyond it. For this, Kundera has constructed two parallel narratives, one in the contemporary world, the other is in 19th C Germany. In both narratives, we can discern the split between the body and its transcendence — the soul and how this split defines different characters. Now I would analyse characters in the novel from this perspective.

6.7 Can There be a Body without Soul, and Vice Versa?

In *Immortality*, the most pronounced conflict between the two modes of being, of the body and the soul, is staged between the two sisters, Agnes and Laura. For Laura, it is the body that defines the self and the soul is not something she would waste a thought on. As we have noted, for her, even love is totally physical, devoid of any connection between the souls. She

asks her sister, "What does it mean when somebody attracts you? How can you exclude the body from such a feeling? Does a person whose body you erase still remain a person?" (*Immortality* 107). The emphasis on the corporeal mode of being has made Laura conscious of the significance of the body in all earthly matters. For her, body is something that has individual, social and political functions and it can be used as a tool for the said functions. Laura "perfectly identified with her body" (*Immortality* 107) and for her it is just like a "well-furnished house" (*Immortality* 107) where she is totally at ease. Her interpersonal relationships are also defined through the body and its sexual function. It is the body that connects a person with another person and the most conspicuous offering one can offer one's lover:

> "For Laura the body was sexual from the beginning, a priori, constantly and completely, by its very essence. To love someone meant, for her: to bring him one's body, to give him one's body, just as it was, with everything, inside and out, even with its own time, which is slowly, sweetly, corroding it" (*Immortality* 107).

This indicates that for Laura, contrary to the traditional notion, love is to be approached through physical relationship. Love is not a soul-to-soul connection but a totally physical experience. She is having relationship with Bernard but she does not care to know about him. She does not want to know about his family, her parents, his professional life, his feelings and emotions. Everything is superficial and absurd. For her the only reality is the reality of the body. The narrator comments on her lack of intimacy that, perhaps, Laura loved Bernard dearly and that's the reason that she refuses to know him. Her constitution does not allow her to know anybody. This reveals the fact that Laura looks at love from the parallactical point of the body and cannot possibly understand the traditional notion of it. Laura thinks about Bernard not as a person with feelings, emotions or a certain disposition. For her, he is a pure body. Even in his absence, she would think of him in terms of his physical features and not through the qualities of his soul. Laura knows Bernard by heart — she knows his physique and for her knowing a person just amounts to this. She thinks that she is the only person in the world who 'really' knows him thus challenging the established idea of knowing the other person. The last authorial comment is interesting as well as contradictory. The question is whether it is a comment on Laura's idea of love or love in general? If it is a comment on Laura's idea of love and it claims that knowing one's beloved is just an illusion then does it mean the author endorses this idea of love as propounded by Laura? If Kundera deems it love, does it mean that

he considers it authentic? On the other hand, if his comment is general then this can mean that knowing one's beloved is an illusion even in case of soul-to-soul connection. From this angle, both forms of love are unauthentic as one can never claim to know the other. In other words, if Laura's love is not proper love, then the traditional notion of it also does not hold any value.

When the body is treated as a physical object, a weapon or something that can be given and taken, then it becomes an important tool to exercise power. In other words, it begins to have an exchange value or symbolic import. When Bernard gets that certificate declaring him an ass, he becomes gloomy and distanced. Since Laura does not discuss anything with him, she does not bother to pry him to know the real cause of his depression. She assumes that Bernard has some other woman on his mind and he wants to leave her. With this assumption, she decides to go to war by bringing in the only arsenal she knows — her body. Kundera describes the whole scene of their love-making in which Laura uses her body as a weapon to take hold of her presumed lost territory. This weapon is her body and the lost territory is the love of Bernard. So, she makes love to him ever so fiercely. The battle imagery is significant here. Laura is not making love for the sake of pleasure. For her, it is a war and her body is the weapon, and the battleground too. This leads us to an interesting hypothesis and I would like to frame it as a question; does Laura give the same status to her body as other people give to their souls? As I have discussed earlier, the soul is some transcendent part of the body. The body is imminent, grounded in its spatio-temporal coordinates while the soul transcends these coordinates and goes beyond space and time. But what if a person decides to bestow the same transcendence to her body? If we analyse the working of Laura's mind, we do come to this conclusion that she does not treat her body as other people do. In the above quote, we notice that she is not making love for the sake of pleasure but she is treating it like other people treat psychological conflicts. Moreover, traditionally, when people talk of love, they take it as an experience in which one person delivers his/her soul to the other. For Laura, it is the body that must be offered for the same purpose:

> To Laura, loving somebody meant delivering to him one's body as a gift; delivering it the way she had a white piano delivered to her sister; putting it in the middle of the house: here I am, here are my one hundred and twenty-five pounds, my flesh, my bones, they are for you and I will leave them with you. (*Immortality* 178)

The language used by the narrator, clearly makes the case for my argument here. When she says that she is here, her flesh, bones, and she is leaving these for her lover, these are the same expressions a lover would use while talking about the soul. The body is a gift to a lover and just like the soul is defined through a person's psychological or mental manifestations, the body is defined through sexual activity. The body is not sexual in the moments of physical passion, as Agnes believes, but it is sexual in its very essence. This point is further elaborated when during a conversation with Agnes, Laura claims that she does not make love for the sake of pleasure. It is her way of connecting with her lover. Laura complains that things are not as they used to be between her and Bernard, though they make love like mad. This astonishes Agnes as she thinks that making love is the sign of good relationship. For Laura, it is not. What is the use of making love if her lover is not thinking about her afterwards? Laura asserts that when she and Bernard are making love, he seems to be with her. The moment they cease, his mind seems to be somewhere else: "It's not a question of making love. It's a question of his thinking of me" (*Immortality* 176). She says that she had many relationships in her life but those men would not even remember her now. She wants to leave a part of herself with somebody. Initially, she was happy with Bernard as she was always in his head: "Because for me that's the only real life: to live in the thoughts of another. Otherwise, I am the living dead" (*Immortality* 176). Laura's statement seems paradoxical. If she thinks that making love is not important but whether her lover thinks about her afterwards or not, that's more important, then does not it reveal a traditional approach towards love in which not the body but the soul is more significant? Apparently, it does seem paradoxical but a closer reading shows that it is consistent with Laura's parallactical position. Laura does not believe in knowing somebody in the traditional sense of the word. As mentioned earlier, she has never attempted to peer into the soul of Bernard. She does not care about his personality. She thinks about Bernard in the physical sense, in terms of his physical features and presence. In the above quote, when she says that she thinks Bernard does not think of her anymore, she does not mean he should think of her soul or her 'self.' What she means is that he should think about her in physical terms. To live in the thought of other is, basically, to live in the thought as a body. This is a unique position from which to perceive this dichotomy but, in a way, this stance does come to see the ONENESS of the body and soul. The soul is not something divorced from the body, but its extension, and Laura is treating it as such by elevating her body to the status of the soul.

If Laura's existential dimension is characterized by her body, her sister Agnes considers her body a weight, a liability, to be lugged along. The body with its bio-chemical functions, weaknesses and oddities, is something that must be kept hidden from the eyes of the others. This clearly is a philosophy totally in conflict with that of her sister. Unlike her sister, Agnes does not take the body as sexual, a priori and given: "For Agnes the body was not sexual. It only became so in exceptional moments, when an instant of excitement illuminated it with an unreal, artificial light and made it desirable and beautiful" (*Immortality* 109). This is in a way a traditional view about the body. The body is something that is to be abhorred and its beauty is not persistent. It achieves an aesthetic dimension only in the moments of sexual excitement and only during those moments, it becomes something to be desired:

> "For Agnes, the erotic was limited to a second of excitement, in the course of which the body becomes desirable and beautiful. Only this second justified and redeemed the body; as soon as this artificial illumination faded, the body became once again a dirty machine she was forced to maintain" (*Immortality* 178).

This implies that Agnes considers herself a soul trapped and encumbered by her body. The essence of being a human does not lie with the body of a person, it is some transcendent substance that should be searched beyond it. It is a paradox that Agnes likes physical pleasure, not because she is in love with her body but because sexual communion helps her escape its ugliness: "And perhaps it was precisely because of that, though nobody knew this about Agnes, that she was obsessed by physical love and clung to it, for without it there would be no emergency exit from the misery of the body and everything would be lost" (*Immortality* 109). Agnes uses this escape from her body as a necessary diversion otherwise "the very same dissatisfaction can induce despair and suicidal tendencies" (Ross 344) in someone who confronts this lack of selfhood and identity.

The body in this case achieves a kind of transcendence in exceptional moments and Agnes yearns for that in sexual intercourse. This implies that for Agnes, the real essence of existence is not in the body but somewhere else, may be the soul. It is the soul that must shine forth in every mode of being, the body is just an exception and ought to be treated as such. This is the reason Agnes was horrified when Laura insinuates that she would commit suicide and let Bernard discover her dead body sprawled on the floor of his home. Agnes cannot even

imagine that one can thrust this monstrosity, the dead body upon one's lover. It would be totally against the sentiment of love and she would never do it. If it were for her, she would have dispensed with her body completely. If body is sexual and its appeal is maximum during the moments of passion, how can Laura allow her lover to see her body in this disgraceful state? How can she permit him to find her when her body has lost all its enchantment and sexual attraction? This would be a matter of shame for Agnes. The body is beautiful and charming when it has physical sentiments attached with it. In ordinary situations, it becomes a mere machine, an object like the piano gifted to them by Laura. The piano is a metonymic substitute for the body of Laura, a substitute she has brought to their home just to incense Agnes. Laura is aware of the fact that Agnes thinks the body as reprehensible and cannot stand it. She deliberately brings this piano as a gift so that it may consistently remind her sister of her body:

> She wanted to place that body in the middle of their living room and leave it there. To let it lie there, heavy and motionless. And if they didn't want it there, to force them to pick up that body, her body, to force one of them to take it, one by the arms, the other by the feet, carry it outside, and drop it behind the house the way people secretly dispose of useless old mattresses late at night. (*Immortality* 205)

Laura knows that her sister does not like the piano and still she cannot throw it away. She knows that Agnes has emphatic nature and she cannot hurt the feelings of others. The piano is a metonymy for her body and as Agnes cannot throw it out, she also cannot get rid of Laura. Goodness is always exploited in this world, and Laura knows how to.

6.8 From Being to Non-Being and Beyond

In our day-to-day situations, we tend to take many things for granted, like continuity of life, our goals, our possessions — as if all these would remain the same. In his book, *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter L. Berger has demonstrated that how some 'marginal situations' can rupture this illusion of continuity and normality. By 'marginal situations' he means experiences that force us to perceive the instability of our existence. These situations compel us to realize how our meaning systems are arbitrarily constructed fictions. He is of the view that the major 'marginal situation' that we face is our confrontation with mortality which challenges the "cognitive and normative operating procedures" (Berger 23) of our existentialist reality. This implies that confrontation with death can expose individuals to an existentialist dread and make

them question their identity and sense of the self. It can question the "business as usual" (Berger 43) that characterizes our lives. How do individuals tackle this dread? Death is inevitable and confrontation with death is absolute but the experience of death is linked with the imminence of our bodies — it just affects the spatial aspect of our being. What if we can transcend this situatedness of our bodies and live through time? Would not it solve the enigma and give us a consolation that some part of us may transcend mortality? It does, and human endeavour, consciously or unconsciously, has been grounded on this assumption.

Milan Kundera's *Immortality* has two parallel narratives; one concerning the contemporary world, the other with some historical figures of 19th C. The 19th C narrative delves deeper into mankind's infatuation with immortality in general and that of artists in particular. Art, literature, science, philosophy, and other forms of human knowledge are just shots at immortality, so the writer tells us. The centre of discussion in this section is the German polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his unusual relationship with Bettina von Arnim, a painter and a writer. Bettina von Arnim has written a biography of Goethe and the novel consistently refers to it. Kundera comments on this biography and through it he sheds light on Bettina's obsession with great men of her time and, how through them, she wanted to extend her arms towards immortality. As mentioned earlier, the obsession with immortality is not the religious belief in the immortality of soul after death. It is, "… the different, quite earthly immortality of those who after their death remain in the memory of posterity. Everyone can achieve immortality to a smaller or greater degree, of shorter or longer duration, and this idea already starts occupying people's minds in early youth" (*Immortality* 54). This transcendence, this life beyond the body, creates another parallax between the body and soul. Human beings cannot get rid of this thought that how would their name survive after they are gone. The body is spatially located and one day it would be no more. The question is how can one control one's image in the eyes of posterity after one is dead? The religious soul survives after one's death in life hereafter but this image serves as our trace in this world. Therefore, we can take this trace as the soul in the worldly or secular sense of the word. Literary or public figures are more obsessed with the 'soul' they leave behind and, in fact, they mould and structure their being in relation with their non-being after their death. In the novel, Kundera has also introduced some episodes in which Goethe is talking with Ernest Hemingway after his death. Both literary

figures are still concerned with their trace in this world. Hemingway is quite worried that people do not read the books he has written but are more concerned about his personal life:

> "You know, Johann," said Hemingway, "they keep bringing up accusations against me, too. Instead of reading my books, they're writing books about me. They say that I didn't love my wives. That I didn't pay enough attention to my son. That I punched a critic on the nose. That I lied. That I wasn't sincere. That I was conceited. That I was macho. (*Immortality* 91)

Hemingway, or any public figure for that matter, wants to control his transcendent image. The problem is that this image is lodged somewhere else, in the vault of public gaze. Even when one is alive one cannot have any influence on this image and after one's death one is completely at the mercy of future historians, critics and journalists. In response to Hemingway's plaint, Goethe tells him one of his dreams. He dreamed this when he was alive. In the dream, his masterpiece *Faust* was being performed as a puppet show and Goethe himself was the puppet master. In the middle of the performance, he realized that the audience were not sitting in the theatre. They have moved to the back stage and, instead of watching the performance, they were watching Goethe. Goethe is unsettled and leaves the theatre. But the crowd follows him in the streets, even to his study. Hemingway's concern and Goethe's dream, both are based on the argument that we, the literary figures, should be judged not on the basis of our personal lives rather people ought to study our works and through these works they must remember us. But is not the work of a writer also an attempt to build an image of himself or herself in the mind of other people? Yes, it is. Through the works of a writer, the audience does form an image of him or her. Then what is the difference between the image of the personal life of a writer or the image seen in the works? Perhaps, the difference is that the human beings have a very limited control over their body and the emotional and other baggage it comes with. The works of a writer are deliberate and planned and thus they can present an edited version of their 'self.' This might be the reason that Hemingway and Goethe are desperate that the people should approach them through their works and do not pry into their personal lives. Goethe further explains to Hemingway that mortality is undeniable and yet human beings do not know how to cope with it. We refuse to believe that we would die one day. "Man doesn't know how to be mortal. And when he dies, he doesn't even know how to be dead" (*Immortality* 240). This further explicates man's obsession with his immortality, to leave a remainder of their spatial

existence in form of a temporal being. Goethe pertinently remarks that death is the most basic experience for us and yet we do not want to die and do not know how to remain dead. The image that is constructed through the works of a writer is still an image and have not we already seen that even the 'self' is also an imaginary construct. If both are constructs, then, one is the same as the other. The writers prefer the one constructed through their works because they somehow control it. While they exercise less control over the one they have in their real life.

We can never be certain of the intentions of the historical Bettina von Arnim but in the novel, she is presented as someone who wants to attain immortality through her connection with great men of her time. McAlpin is of the view: "Although she first came to the attention of the reading public by publishing *Goethe's Correspondence with a Child* (1835), her correspondence with a writer she adored, Brentano-von Arnim is now celebrated as a major nineteenth-century German author in her own right" (294). Goethe is a great writer, and an old man too, and it seems natural that he thinks about immortality: "But is it possible that Bettina, an unknown young woman, also thought about it, and at such an early age?" (*Immortality* 72). To this, the writer comments that human beings begin to think about immortality from an early age and Bettina is no exception. Moreover, there is another reason too that she is so obsessed with the idea, as she belongs to the generation of the Romantics who romanticised and fetishized death:

> They all lived in transcendence, they surpassed themselves, stretched their arms far out into the distance, to the end of their lives and far beyond their lives, to the outer reaches of nonbeing. And as I have already said, wherever there is death there is also immortality, her companion, and the Romantics addressed death as familiarly as Bettina addressed Goethe. (*Immortality* 73)

Bettina lives in the age of Romantics and, thus, is dazzled by death. For Romantics, death is not something that annihilates the body, it is something that can give one a shot at immortality. The physical extinction and immortality go hand in hand. Does this mean that the body can be sacrificed at the altar of the soul? Perhaps, yes. Here the parallax is of a different nature. It is not the parallax of looking at the ONE from two different points. It is thinking about one in terms of the other, the transience of the body gives rise to the idea of the permanence of the soul. The notion extends and grows in such a manner that it engulfs the body and the being

becomes just a tool to transcend its own imminence. The fact is evident in Bettina's increased fixation with Goethe as he gets older. The reason is that Bettina does not care a bit about the decay of his body, the body is least of her concerns. He is twice of her age, that also is irrelevant. In fact, the decay of the body is something that anticipates death and, consequently, immortality:

> It was so beautiful that she did not in the least mind Goethe's almost toothless mouth. On the contrary, the older he got, the more attractive he became, because the closer he was to death, the closer he was to immortality. Only a dead Goethe would be able to grasp her firmly by the hand and lead her to the Temple of Fame. The closer he was to death, the less willing she was to give him up. (*Immortality* 73)

Thus, the body's materiality is traded for something abstract, something that lasts in time. According to Zygmunt Bauman, this is an "ultimate failure of rationality" that human beings cannot come to terms with "transcending power of time-binding mind and transience of its timebound fleshy casing" (Bauman). This failure of rationality, in fact, makes us see the body in term of soul and results in the yearning for something that can outlive our fleshy tabernacle. The ONENESS of the body and soul takes on a different angle here. The parallax it engenders has perplexed many great minds in history. In this section, we noticed that how Goethe also looks at his mortal body from the perspective of the soul and the same sentiment is shared by Hemingway as well. The body wants to escape its spatial coordinates and aspires to be immortalized in form of a temporality and this temporality is what we can call soul.

III

In this section, I would analyse *Immortality* from the parallactical mode of universal and particular. In the previous chapters, I approached the problem of the universal and particular through Zizekian lens. Here, I intend to look at it from a different perspective. As we have seen, human beings always put their 'particularity' at the centre of everything. We tend to think ourselves as unique beings with unique set of traits and idiosyncrasies and we perceive our 'self' in opposition to the whole world surrounding us. We are a 'singularity,' and none like us ever existed or can exist. This line of thought, this self-aggrandisement, does not limit itself to the attributes of our personality alone. It may go beyond it and make us believe that all our attributive properties like family, tribe, religion or nationality are '*sui generis.*' This

narcissism originates in the 'self' and then extends itself to the other spheres as well. On one hand, we feel pride at these associations but, ironically, we also desire to preserve our singularity, our distinctiveness and resist when some narrative, claiming to be 'universal,' attempts to incorporate our particularity into it. Perhaps, this desire that we have to transcend our mortality, to extend our arms towards the future, has its seeds in this belief that we are 'particular.' Let's suppose, for a moment, we consider the possibility that there are no 'particulars,' only 'universals.' Where would it lead us? What if there is no 'particularity' or 'individuality' in our being? If we come to this realization, would we still pursue the actualization of our 'self'? Would we still yearn for immortality?

6.9 "As their bearers and incarnations": Being and its Non-Specificity

Immortality opens with the narrator's reflections about a woman he has observed while he is sitting on a deck chair in his health club. The woman is old, round about sixty or sixty-five. She is getting swimming lessons from a life guard. When she is about to leave, she moves a few steps, turns her head and waves at the guard. The narrator says that at that very instant he feels a pang in his heart. The reason being that the gesture and the smile are not that of a sixty-year-old woman but of a twenty-year-old girl: "That smile and that gesture had charm and elegance, while the face and the body no longer had any charm. It was the charm of a gesture drowning in the charmlessness of the body" (*Immortality* 3). At that moment, it is the gesture that appears beautiful to the narrator and he forgets the age of the woman and the fact that she is no longer beautiful. The next morning, when he wakes up, he still finds himself thinking about the gesture. This makes him ponder over the uniqueness of a character or a person. Don't we think of a person as someone unique, having particular qualities of character, habits and traits? Yes, we do. But if we just think about the uniqueness of a gesture performed by a particular person, we would come to know that a gesture we associate with a person, is not unique at all. The narrator asks a very crucial question: "How then is it possible that a gesture I saw performed by one person, a gesture that was connected to her, that characterized her, and was part of her individual charm, could at the same time be the essence of another person and my dreams of her?" (*Immortality* 7). The answer to this might startle us, or even unnerve us. The author thinks that yesterday, at the health club, when he observed the gesture

of that woman, the gesture revealed something about her personality, about her essence. But is it really so? It can't be, because:

> If our planet has seen some eighty billion people, it is difficult to suppose that every individual has had his or her own repertory of gestures. Arithmetically, it is simply impossible. Without the slightest doubt, there are far fewer gestures in the world than there are individuals. That finding leads us to a shocking conclusion: a gesture is more individual than an individual. We could put it in the form of an aphorism: many people, few gestures. (*Immortality* 7)

We have not delved into other aspects and traits of our personalities yet. We have just deconstructed one human feature that we always think as 'particular' and unique to a person — a gesture, and we have reached at this disconcerting conclusion that a gesture does not reveal anything about our particularity. In fact, as the author has evidenced, a gesture is more unique as compared to an individual. This implies that a gesture is not the property of an individual, it does not express or reveal anything about him or her. No human being is capable of inventing a genuine gesture: "…on the contrary, it is gestures that use us as their instruments, as their bearers and incarnations" (*Immortality* 8). The thought is unsettling because it takes away the illusion of our uniqueness and particularity and transforms us into just another face in the crowd. Stephen Ross comments upon the transference of waving gesture in the novel from one character to another in these words:

> This defeat of the gesture's potential for significance on the basis of Laura's appropriation repeats Agnes's own appropriation of the gesture from Father's secretary. The apparently originary gesture of the novel, its alpha and omega, is revealed to be a "theft or forgery" (37), an image that precedes and exists outside the novel and no more belongs to Agnes than it belongs to Laura or even to Father's secretary, for that matter. (347)

Agnes comes to realize the non-specificity of her being through a conversation with her father. When she was young, she used to have long walks with her father. On one such walk; she asked this question to her father whether he believed in God or not. His answer was quite peculiar. He said, "I believe in the Creator's computer" (*Immortality* 12). Her father would never use the word 'God' but 'Creator.' It was as if he wanted to think about God as an

engineer, nothing more nothing less. An engineer just constructs a machine and after that he has nothing to do with it. Agnes' father liked to think about the Creator in this way. This implies that it is of no use to pray when something goes wrong in one's life. The Creator created us and after that he has nothing to do with us. He simply loaded a program in the computer of this universe and went away. The program is running even in his absence. But this is not an advocation of fatalistic view of the universe. It was not coded in the program that there would be a war in a specific year or something like that, "but only that man is aggressive by nature, that he is condemned to wage war, and that technical progress would make war more and more terrible" (*Immortality* 13). The program just sets in code the possibilities — in a given situation man has the tendency to act in a specific manner, it does not force him to act in that way. This leads us to a very unsettling conclusion. This means that the Creator just created a prototype of human beings, he did not create individual person with 'particular' traits and set of habits: "The computer did not plan an Agnes or a Paul, but only a prototype known as a human being, giving rise to a large number of specimens that are based on the original model and haven't any individual essence" (*Immortality* 13). The prototype is the 'universal' and we, the individuals, just its 'particular' examples. In this Platonic vein, Agnes thinks that human "essence is deposited somewhere else" (Rizza 353). The problem is that this 'particular' does not have any essence of its own. It cannot claim to have any features or elements that are absent in other human beings. Earlier, I quoted Dostoyevsky's Underground Man who states that the history of man is nothing but a consistent struggle to prove that he is a man and not a piano key. It is quite disturbing for us to be just a cog in a machine, to be mechanically predictable. This drive forces us devise new methods to prove to others and to ourselves that we are unique beings. While sitting in the saunas, Agnes observes a new girl who is consistently asserting her likes and dislikes and it seems that she is ready to fight for these. Agnes' train of thought turns towards this question and she conjectures that human beings have a great desire to set themselves apart from their fellow beings. We look into the mirror and there we see a face. We start to think of this face as unique and irreplaceable, having distinct qualities and that is how we formulate the idea of the 'self.' After we have established this idea to ourselves, we take arms and go out to fight for its recognition by the other. We live for it; we can die for it.

It seems, quite earlier in his life, Agnes' father has come to the realization that there is only the 'universal' and the 'particular' is a mere illusion constructed by the homo sapiens.

This is the reason that her father, just days before his death, tears off all his pictures. Laura is infuriated to see this but Agnes understands that her father has done this because he wants to erase the trace of himself after he is gone. He does not consider his 'self' as something unique and irreplaceable and he does not want to extend his arm towards immortality. He even leaves his wealth to some society of mathematicians as if he wants people around him to forget everything he was. Her father's self-negation has prompted some interesting thoughts in the mind of Agnes. For example, she imagines that her father is on a sinking ship and there are a few life boats. Everyone is trying to get on one of them. Initially, her father would try to rush but when he sees all these people pushing and shoving, he simply steps aside and watches all this clamour from a safe distance. This is the philosophy Agnes' father went by in the world. We do see the reflection of it in the personality of Agnes too. Agnes, unlike her sister Laura, does not assert her 'self' in any way. She wants an escape, an escape into a deep solitude, where she can be at one with nature, where there is no one to thrust their 'self' on her. Even at the time of her death, she wishes that she might die before the arrival of Paul. She wants to dissolve into nothingness without a trace. The void out of which she emerged, we all emerged, is calling her back and she answers its call. As Rizza has elaborated:

> In a Lacanian sense, she wants simply to be somewhere beyond the Imaginary and Symbolic registers, perhaps in the register of the real, which is without zones, subdivisions, localized highs and lows, or gaps and plenitudes: the real is a sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric woven in such a way as to be full everywhere. (354)

One scene in the novel, the setting of which is afterlife, when the two literary figures Goethe and Hemingway meet, also throws some light on this issue of 'particularity' and its connection with immortality. As I have discussed earlier, first an individual sets him/herself apart from the crowd, makes oneself particular, then resolves to preserve this 'particularity' forever. He or she yearns for their presumed self-image to be immortal. The topic under discussion between the two writers also revolves around the same yearning. Hemingway opines that their books would, probably, stopped being read by the people: "But people will never stop prying into your life, down to the smallest details" (*Immortality* 239). In response to this, Goethe asserts that what critics and biographers are writing about them after their death, does not in any way coincide with their true self. Hemingway does not want to believe that the details of the life of Goethe, known to the succeeding generations, are not factual. He admits that there might be

distortions here and there, but it does not mean that Goethe is completely absent from those life narratives. Goethe tells him firmly that it is true, those accounts have nothing to do with him. He goes a bit further and says that he is not even present in his own books. Goethe believes that the moment he died, his being turned into non-being, into nothingness. He says, “The instant I died I vanished from everywhere, totally. I even vanished from my books. Those books exist in the world without me. Nobody will ever find me in them. Because you cannot find someone who does not exist" (*Immortality* 239). Hemingway cannot come to grips with this thought. He intervenes and asks Goethe that if the image he left behind has nothing to do with him then why is it that he was so obsessed with this image when he was alive. Goethe counters this by saying that he was just foolish to think about his image in such a way: “That obsession with one's own image, that's man's fatal immaturity. It is so difficult to be indifferent to one's image. Such indifference is beyond human strength” (*Immortality* 239-40). He says that man only gets rid of this obsession after his death, that too, after a long time. Just before his death, he felt he had an immense creative power in him and it was difficult to digest that this would turn to nothing after him. There was also the infatuation that, at least, he would live in that image he was leaving behind. Even after his death, for a long time, he continued to think about that image. This is my argument. First, we convince ourselves that we are ‘particulars,’ that there is something in us that is unique and distinct. After this, we want to preserve this ‘particular’ essence of us forever. In *Immortality*, there are only three characters who come to terms with this ‘void,’ this nothingness, that is part of us. These three characters are Agnes’ father, Agnes herself, and Goethe. These characters have this glimpse that they are just another example of a universal prototype and this example does not have any feature or trait that sets it apart from others of its kind. They come to see that this difference between the ‘universal’ and the ‘particular’ is just the product of a parallactical shift and, in actuality, there is only ONE — the universal. This is the reason that they are ready to negate their ‘particularity’ and embrace the ‘Void.’

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed Milan Kundera’s *Immortality* from the perspective of parallactical modes of being. I used textual analysis as a method and interpreted the text borrowing from other literary and cultural sources. I have demonstrated how *Immortality*

records a shift in the cultural milieu and how this shift has affected our modes of being. Written in the post ideological age, when political and other ideologies seemed to have died down, the novel puts forward the thesis that the ontological modes are still there, albeit, in a modified form. The parallax between the personal and political is internalized as the idea of 'self' itself became a political ideology. The idea of the soul is reduced to the desire for the temporal extension of the 'self.' Moreover, the novel, in an overt way, criticizes our obsession with our 'self' by deconstructing the idea of a unique 'ego' by questioning our particularity. If *The Joke* criticizes the political one-sidedness of a society and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* presents the case for the personal, body and particular, *Immortality* apprises us of the other extreme. Too much emphasis on the personal, body and particular modes of being may also disrupt the existentialist balance. The novel is post-ideological' in relation to socio-historical era but also manifests a shift in the literary career of its author. In the next chapter, I have wrapped up my argument by harking back on my basic research premises, thesis statement and research questions.

Notes

[1]. See Milan Kundera, *Immortality* (Trans. Peter Kussi. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991). Henceforth, I shall use *Immortality* as abbreviation for parenthetical citations across my thesis.

2. "Iron Curtain, the political, military, and ideological barrier erected by the Soviet Union after World War II to seal off itself and its dependent eastern and central European allies from open contact with the West and other non-communist areas. The term Iron Curtain had been in occasional and varied use as a metaphor since the 19th century, but it came to prominence only after it was used by the former British prime minister Winston Churchill in a speech at Fulton, Missouri, U.S., on March 5, 1946, when he said of the communist states, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent." The restrictions and the rigidity of the Iron Curtain were somewhat reduced in the years following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, although the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 restored them. During the Cold War the Iron Curtain extended to the airwaves. The attempts by the Central Intelligence Agency-funded Radio Free Europe (RFE) to provide listeners behind the Curtain with uncensored news were met with efforts by communist governments to jam RFE's signal. The Iron Curtain largely ceased to exist in 1989–90 with the communists' abandonment of one-party rule in eastern Europe." For details see, Jeff Wallenfeldt, "Iron Curtain" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., n.d. Web. 9 Jan. 2019).

3. Absolute is a Hegelian concept. Hegel is of the view that the universe has an infinite mind or spirit and the finite minds are just a reflection of it. The existence of this finite mind presupposes the existence of an unlimited spirit. The reality is basically the identity and difference between the ideas and not something that exists in the material world. These ideas follow a process called 'Dialectics' and through contradictions finally these ideas reach The Idea which is devoid of contradictions. Hegel calls this Absolute.

4. "Consumer culture is a form of material culture facilitated by the market, which thus created a particular relationship between the consumer and the goods or services he or she uses or consumes. Traditionally social science has tended to regard consumption as a trivial by-product of production. However, sociologists have increasingly come to recognize the value of studying consumer culture for its own sake. It could indeed be argued that consumer culture represents one of the primary arenas in which elements of social change are played out in everyday life. Consumer culture can be distinguished from consumption per se, insofar as it is more about the relationship between the material and the cultural rather than the status and inequalities implied by the ownership

of consumer goods. In this sense consumer culture is not simply a process by which commercial products are "used up" by consumers. People's relationship to consumer culture is meaningful and reflects, and potentially reproduces, particular values and forms of status. In this sense consumer culture arguably lies at the heart of the relationship between structure and agency in contemporary society. It demonstrates the power of capitalism to reproduce the parameters within which citizens of a consumer society live their everyday lives. Consumer culture gives us the tools to express who it is we are, but while doing so it simultaneously reinforces an economic system in which the individual's ability to be free or to choose is, ironically, constrained. A number of texts have sought to understand the social significance of consumer culture and this ability to divide as well as to provide". For details see, Steven Miles, "Consumer Culture" (Oxford *Bibliographies*. Oxford University Press. n.d. Web. 9 Jan. 2019).

[5]. "The phrase is usually translated as 'quilting point' in English. It is the point where quilt makers use their needle to prevent cotton turning into a shapeless mass. In language,the point de capiton is thus the point in the signifying chain at which 'the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification' and produces the necessary illusion of a fixed meaning. Since the signifying chain has both a diachronic and a synchronic dimension, so also does the point de capiton". For details see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London. Routledge. 1996).

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

> *Not every end is a goal. The end of a melody is not its goal; but nonetheless, if the melody had not reached its end it would not have reached its goal either.*
>
> — Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 360

At the point of culmination, it is in order that I should revisit my primary argument and see why it was important to analyse my primary texts in the way I have done. In this project, my approach was qualitative and I have used exploratory and interpretative analysis of Milan Kundera's selected novels. The method, as already explained in Chapter 3, is based upon textual analysis and it is interventionary in nature. I have tried to justify it through my analysis of the primary texts. After my analysis of Milan Kundera's fiction in the preceding chapters, it may be a bit convenient to see if this research is in line with the thesis statement and whether it answers the research questions.

I started with the premise that the ontological situatedness of a human subject actualizes itself in disparate forms and manifestations. The political/individual dichotomy pits the individual against the ideological and repressive political structures. Human body, confined in its spatio-temporal coordinates, comes into conflict with the soul, its transcendental extension. Moreover, the universals/particular schism also defines 'being' and its contours. I set out to explore the representation of these ontological antagonisms in Milan Kundera's fiction. My thesis statement being that these contraries create a 'parallax gap' and this gap lies at the centre of our ontology. This gap is 'void' but this void has its own ontology and is not mere 'nothing.' I have applied Slavoj Zizek's formulation of 'parallax view' to investigate the gap that exists between these modes of being.

The first thematic perspective of my research thesis, that I studied using this parallactical view, was the antagonism that exists between the personal and political mode of being. The personal was the origin of the political, as Freud has formulated in *Civilization and its Discontents*, but later the political colonized the personal. As Freud has elaborated how in

the primitive man, the aggressive instincts towards society were transformed. I have referred to this itinerary of the relationship between the personal and political through Foucault's investigation of the technologies of the self in relation to power in his *History of Sexuality*. The objective was to argue that "this gap between the individual and the "impersonal" social dimension is to be inscribed back within the individual himself: this "objective" order of the social Substance exists only insofar as individuals treat it as such, relate to it as such" (Zizek, *TPV* 5).

The second thematic angle was of the body and soul and the nature of antagonism between these two modes of being. Though the concept of soul is understood, in most of the cases, in its theological context, in my project, it has been dealt in its secular connotation. Contemporary intellectual milieu is not conducive to the concept of soul in its religious formulation, nor it accepts soul as something immortal. Material interpretation of soul is based upon the premise that soul is, in fact, nothing more than brain and does not exist apart from it. It did not exist before a human being is born and die with him or her. Owen Flanagan, in his book, *The Problem of Soul* has mentioned that the mind is simply the brain or consciousness and human beings do not possess some metaphysical essence distinct from body (xii). Here we see how, in the contemporary world, consciousness or cognition has replaced soul. Though, in his fiction, Kundera does not uphold a theological belief about soul, his conception is not totally materialist either. He takes human soul as something that transcends our physical existence. It might not be immortal, still, it is something that resides in the material body but is not a part of it. The body's mode of being stands in opposition to that of soul. I have studied Kundera's text to prove that this schism between body and soul is parallactical.

My third thematic concern was that of universal and particular. The universal-particular debate has been around since antiquity and there have been many formulations and reformulations of the idea in the history of philosophy. The problem of universals is, usually, attributed to Plato. John Hospers, in his book *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (1956), has elaborated that Plato's view on universals, referred to as 'realism,' is based upon the idea that reality does not only consist of particulars: "There is this blue shade and that blue shade, but there is also the universal, blueness, of which the particular shades are instances. There is this cat and that cat, but there is also the universal, "being-a-cat" or "cathood", which particular cats exemplify" (355). In my project, I have utilized Slavoj Zizek's formulation of 'concrete

universal' and he, in turn, is indebted to Hegel for this notion. I have exploited this idea of 'concrete universal' for my parallactical reading of Kundera's texts.

This recapitulation of my thesis statement, theoretical framework and thematic angles suggest that I have utilized various frameworks and perspectives to analyse my primary texts. As I am done with my analysis now, it can be discerned that all these perspectives are applied eclectically in accordance with the requirements of the analysis. My investigation has provided answers (sufficiently) to my research questions and also has unfurled some more discussions that can have certain implications in literary or other related fields. This is the reason that it would be apt to have a look at why/how this research has been possible and with what findings. I have, for the sake of convenience, converted my research questions into affirmative statements and italicized them. I have discussed each statement to justify the rationale and findings of my analysis.

Kundera highlights apparently irreconcilable gaps lying at the core of human existence in his novels The Joke, The Unbearable Lightness of Being and Immortality. Right from the first paragraph of Chapter One, this study has addressed the question of 'being' and its contraries as found in Milan Kundera's fiction. Maria Nemcova Banerjee notes that the fiction of Milan Kundera is characterized by various paradoxes and one of them is "the European being-for-history as our time has experienced it" (4). This paradox is manifested in form of the schism that exists between individual existence and collective dream of the march of history. Banerjee observes that such grand narratives have presented models of humanity based upon uniformity and collective consciousness and the space for individual freedom is denied (4). The grand narratives like that of Communism, or any other totalitarian systems for that matter, attempt to colonize individual space in the name of this march of history. The individual, on the other hand, has his/her own ontological demands and does not accede to relinquish them. Kundera has portrayed this antagonism in its various forms and manifestations in his fiction. In *The Joke*, Ludvik, Helena, and Kostka have their own vision of personal destiny but this vision always crosses path with overarching political structures. Ludvik's personal communication with his fellow student Marketa, meant to be a light-hearted mockery of her seriousness, ends up having political repercussions. He gets expelled from the Party, has to bid farewell to a life in academia, and ends up working as a mine worker in a remote town. Helena falls in love with Pavel during the singing of a revolutionary song in a political gathering, thus,

crossing over the personal into the political. After fifteen years of marriage, being disillusioned with her political love, she is still searching her one true love. This search seems to have borne fruit when she meets Ludvik but the irony is that she again falls victim to a vendetta having its seeds in the political. Kostka's 'being' is also caught up between his religious belief, love for humanity and personal emotions and when these come in conflict with the political, he suffers. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas, who is an apolitical person, considers his profession and sexual liaisons as the ground of his being. After the event of 1968, he writes an article comparing the guilt of political leaders with that of Oedipus. The article gets published in a newspaper and after Prague Spring was put to death by the Communist government, Tomas is asked to retract it. When he refuses to do so, he has to work in a remote village as a physician and later has to bid farewell to his practice altogether. In *Immortality*, the antagonism between the personal and political takes a new form. The novel depicts a post-ideological society in which instead of the external political structures, the 'self' itself has been politicised. The character of Laura believes that the personal is something to be exhibited, to be flaunted. For her, the 'self' is a political slogan, having its own ideology, emblem and teleology.

The second irreconcilable ontological gap that can be found in Kundera's fiction is that of body and soul. Kundera conceives soul as the transcendent mode of imminent existence of the body. Both are diametrically opposed but interdependent ontological coordinates. In *The Joke*, Ludvik feels this pain in his soul, this agonizing desire to take revenge for that simple verdict that has turned his life upside down. In order to take revenge upon Pavel Zamanek, he decides to use the body of his wife. His intention is to torture the soul of Zamanek, using the body of Helena, and this would be satisfying for his own soul. His soul, even while making love to Helena, is indifferent to her body. Helena and Lucie, both female characters, want a communion of the soul and for them body does not matter. Lucie who denies Ludvik access to her body, eventually, grants this access to Kostka who approaches her body not directly but through her soul. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza thinks that the soul has some kind of permanence and body is insignificant. To her, her identity is contained in her soul and the body can be dispensed with. Her childhood experiences have played a great part in the formulation of this notion. Her mother always forced Tereza to consider her body just like any other body. All bodies are the same and thus nakedness is not something to be ashamed of. Tereza despises this similitude of the bodies and has the idea that the real essence of being lies

in the soul. When she meets Tomas in the restaurant and he is reading a book, she immediately has the feeling that he is one person in all this crowd with whom she has the bond of the soul. Ironically, Tomas does not believe in the bond of the soul. For him, the essence of a woman is contained in her body and this is the reason that he moves from one body to another. In *Immortality*, the body-soul dichotomy appears in form of Agnes and Laura. For Laura, existence is defined through the body. The body has individual, political and social functions and it must be understood through these corporeal aspects. For her sister Agnes, the body is not something significant. Just like Tereza, she believes that the body achieves some aesthetic dimension only in the moment of sexual excitement and only in those moments it becomes desirable. This antagonism between the two principal characters of the novel is, also, an antagonism between body and soul.

The third irreconcilable gap found in the fiction of Kundera is that of universal and particular. In my project, as I have mentioned, I used Slavoj Zizek's notion of concrete and abstract universal. The 'abstract' universal is that universal that leaves out some significant 'particular.' In *The Joke*, the state hegemonizes all sorts of particulars including two very important ones, folk music and Christian religion. Before the Party came into power, the people of Czechoslovakia defined themselves through these immediate associations. Communist ideology demanded a total adherence to the 'grand march of history' and in the process it suppressed these two aspects of culture. In the novel, the character of Jaroslav has a strong passion for the folk music of Moravia. He plays in a band and once, long time ago, he also used to play with Ludvik. He mourns the fact that the Party has neglected folk music and the new generation does not take much interest in it. Kostka represents Christian belief and how he suffers because of it under socialist regime. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the universal and particular appear in form of the relationship of Tomas with Tereza and its direct opposition to his affairs with other women. Secondly, it can be discerned in the individual immediate particular aspirations and universal demands of the state. In *Immortality*, the schism between the universal and particular appears in form of characters' desire to conceive and construct themselves as 'particular' and 'singular' and at the same time the fact that they are trapped in a world that only has 'universals.'

The next two research questions are interrelated and one cannot be discussed without the other so I have converted them in a conjoined affirmative statement.

The 'gap' or 'nothingness' lying at the core of human existence has a positive content and there is a possibility for sublation of these antagonistic modes of being but this possibility is parallactical, not dialectical. This paradox that I have investigated in my data analysis is based upon the notion of 'Void' or 'nothing' in Slavoj Zizek. He argues:

> Reality-in-itself is Nothingness, the Void, and out of this Void, partial, not yet fully constituted constellations of reality appear; these constellations are never "all;' they are always ontologically truncated, as if visible (and existing) only from a certain limited perspective. There is only a multiplicity of truncated universes: from the standpoint of the All, there is nothing but the Void. Or, to risk a simplified formulation: "objectively" there is nothing, since all determinate universes exist only from a limited perspective. (Žižek *LTN* 378).

As I discussed in my theoretical framework, the Void is not mere 'nothing.' The materialist ontology is based upon the idea that it was 'nothing' that got split from itself and gave birth to 'something.' The same is true in case of the split that exists between ontological modes of the personal and political, the body and soul, particular and universal. This split or void is responsible for giving birth to contingency and freedom. It is the void of infinite choices that propel ontological potentials. In the absence of this 'nothing,' human existence would have been stock-still. Zizek, in his book *The Parallax View*, advocates the ONENESS of reality and it is the parallactical shift that makes phenomena appear as TWO. The gap or void that separates the ONE is 'pure' or 'minimal difference' and this difference makes reality 'non-all' or incomplete. If this gap or void had been absent, there would have been ontological inertia — no progress, no subjectivity, no agency. This implies that the 'Void' should not be considered as mere 'nothing' but it is responsible for 'everything' that happens around us. In my data analysis, I investigated how these antagonistic modes of being can be found in Kundera's fiction and how a parallactical shift makes them appear as ONE.

In *The Joke*, using Freudian analysis of civilization, I proved how the personal and political though appear as TWO, are, in fact, ONE. The political mode of being emerged out of the personal but it attempts to colonize the very space out of which it was born. In the novel, we see how the Party hegemonizes every aspect of the personal. Helena falls in love in a political gathering, Ludvik harbours personal grudge because of political reasons and Kostka

suffers because of his faith. The characters come back to the personal through the circuitous route of the political. At the end, even Zamanek is no more the Party stalwart he used to be. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas, Tereza and Sabina attempt to negate the political but their personal mode of being is completely transformed owing to the political milieu in which they live. Tomas and Tereza escape to the countryside to avoid the gaze of the political and it seems that their last days were happy in a community that resembles the primitive societies before the advent of political institutions. Sabina also becomes an eternal exile to escape the political mode of being. The escape from the political can only be possible at the cost of the personal. All these characters have to renunciate their personal aspirations to accomplish this. In *Immortality*, this ONENESS is even more pronounced as the personal itself is turned into the political.

In *The Joke*, the characters adhere to either the body or the soul and do not realize that one cannot be erased for the sake of the other. Ludvik uses the body to seek the satisfaction of the soul, whether it is love or passion of revenge. Helena yearns for the union of soul and body but is disappointed. Kostka attempts to approach the soul of Lucie but ends up having a physical relationship with her. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas strives to negate the soul while Tereza attempts to deny the body. The parallax between the body and the soul comes to ONE when the soul realizes the fact that in itself it cannot have a being and for its existence, it must rely on the body and vice versa. Tereza's parallactical position, from the point she always looks at Tomas, is a position from where she can only see her soul. From this angle, the body is merely an obstruction, a stumbling block, preventing the communion of the souls. She does not take into consideration the role of the body in bringing the souls together. On the other hand, Tomas does not realize this fact that a mere communion of the bodies is not enough to experience love and intimacy. In *Immortality*, the body attempts to achieve eternity by striving to construct an image that would outlive it. This image is, basically, what can be called as soul. The characters try to control this image not realizing the fact that the image is dependent upon the body and when the body is gone that image would either be erased or transformed into something else.

The universal cannot claim to be a true universal if it does not include itself in its particulars. The relationship between the universal and its particular is a parallactical relationship and both are, in fact, ONE. In *The Joke*, we see how Communism posits itself as

a universal but it is just like any other particular. Universal is not a separate entity but at a given moment one particular rises and posits itself to be a universal and, thus, comes into conflict with other particulars. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza does not want to be one particular in the series of love affairs of Tomas. Moreover, in the novel, the state claims to be a universal but it denies space to many particulars. The relationship between universal and particular is reversed in *Immortality*. The characters attempt to transform themselves unique and 'particular', not realizing the fact that they are just one example of the universal protype of humanity.

The argument here is that, though, the three modes of being are ONE and it is the parallactical view that makes them appear two, it does not imply that an attempt should be made to efface the 'split' or 'void' between them. This 'Void' has a positive content and its effacement would lead to the absence of contingency and freedom in human existence. As I have argued, human beings cannot adhere to one mode of being and negate the other. For example, the state cannot expect its citizens to completely negate the personal and become ideological cogs. Such a project would be a disaster as human beings cannot have a robotic ontology. These antagonisms cannot be sublated to a higher synthesis but must be accepted in their incommensurability. Zizek asserts:

> …the two dimensions are not mediated or united in a higher "synthesis;' they are merely accepted in their incommensurability. This is why the insurmountable parallax gap, the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible. (*LTN* 950)

The antagonism is 'reconciled' but this reconciliation does not mean a complete effacement of the 'Void' and bringing the two terms together. Here reconciliation means that we should reconcile with the antagonism and accept it as the defining characteristic of our ontology.

Slavoj Zizek, in his book, *The Parallax View*, refers to different modes of parallax in various domains of modern theory: the parallax of wave-particle in quantum physics, the parallax of neurobiology, the parallax of ontological difference, of the discord between the ontic and the transcendental-ontological, the parallax of the Real, the parallax nature of the gap between desire and drive, the parallax of the unconscious in Freud (*TPV* 7). This research is interventionary as 'parallax,' originally a term from physics, has never been applied as a

theoretical concept to interpret a work of literature. Moreover, the three theoretical angles of the personal and political, the body and soul, the particular and universal have never been viewed parallactically, that too, in any work of fiction. The three above-mentioned modes of being are understood as irreconcilable binaries in human sciences but through my parallactical reading of the selected texts of Milan Kundera, I have demonstrated their inherent ONENESS and how this ONENESS manifests itself in the life of characters. Borrowing from Physics, Parmenides' idea of ONENESS of being, Materialist ontology, Hegelian dialectics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Zizek's reading of parallaxes in politics, science and philosophy, I have built my own theoretical argument to explore this inherent ONENESS of contrary modes of being in fiction.

7.1 Recommendations for Future Research

Daniel Just opens his article, "Literature and Learning How to Live: Milan Kundera's Theory of the Novel as a Quest for Maturity" (2016) with a quotation by Derrida in which he wonders what it means to know how to live, can this knowledge be learnt or taught? Derrida's answer to the question is not in affirmative. Life is a continuous collage of random images and experience of each of these is always unique and individualistic. This experience, perhaps, can never be taught or learned as Just observes: "Learning how to live happens within one's own life, when with some external assistance, one reflects on one's life, thereby turning it into a practice in which self-fashioning and formation by external forces coincide" ("Literature and Learning" 235). If we look towards literature, or to be more specific, fiction, can we say that it teaches us the knowledge of how to live? Contemporary criticism does not agree. It takes literature as a site for ideology, promoting a specific set of values. Still there are some scholars who do believe that literature can impart a specific kind of wisdom about life and Milan Kundera belongs to the same camp. Kundera agrees that novels should provide insights into human condition, but he asserts, as a literary genre, novel should not exhort its reader in a direct and crude manner. In his book, *The Curtain*, Kundera argues that novel cultivates a kind of maturity that rids an individual of the 'lyricism' of youth. By 'lyricism,' Kundera means, "the age when the individual, focused almost exclusively on himself, is unable to see, to comprehend, to judge clearly the world around him" (88). This lyricism, usually, is associated with one's youth but one can be lyrical even in an advanced age. Lyricism is characterized by

an excessive obsession with the one's own self, perhaps, because one does not understand it yet. According to Just: "Maturity, on the other hand, is for Kundera a state of lucidity and self-awareness in the perception of oneself and reality" ("Literature and Learning" 239). In other words, maturity is freedom from self-delusion. Novel plays a very crucial role to achieve this maturity as it lays bare the pitfalls of the lyrical attitude to life. As Just comments: "The novel is an antidote to lyricism because it examines ideas, actions and sentiments from multiple perspectives without precipitating judgement" ("Literature and Learning" 240). Novel cultivates a critical, nuanced, and liberal attitude towards life. It is a prolonged meditation on existence and it trains the reader to understand the world as a question. It has a lucidity about it and deploys a whole range of feelings and thoughts. The characters of the novel delude themselves, contradict themselves and fail in their respective ambitions. This failure and multi-perspective vision teach us that we should neither applaud nor condemn, but understand. In the words of Daniel Just: "The novel is a genre of maturity because it defuses the lyricism of self-involved judgements by cultivating a mature attitude to oneself and the world that involves individual thinking and critical reflection" ("Literature and Learning" 244). This implies that novel supplements our ability to reflect, doubt, and question and in the process to change the contours of our being. The novel is not a conveyer of truth with a capital 'T' nor it teaches moral values. Its only raison d'être is to impart a knowledge of being and how to carry oneself in the world. It is "… kind of cultural product or practice that induces change in one's mode of being and transformation in one's relation to oneself and the world" (Just, "Literature and Learning" 246).

The purpose of this prolonged explication is to place my project in a generalized contextual setting with future research possibilities in mind. As I have discussed, Kundera's fiction lays out antagonistic modes of being, and I argued, how these schisms are parallactical in nature but must be embraced in their incommensurability. I have demonstrated the ONENESS of these modes of being and the split that appears in them is, in fact, not 'nothingness' but makes possible the actualization of ontological potentialities. Cultural absolutism demands adherence to one existential mode, to the exclusion of the other. This tipping the scale in favour of one, engenders an ontological disaccord, as my analysis of the characters in selected texts of Kundera has unfolded. This absolutism is, primarily, an outcome of the 'lyrical' attitude to life I referred to in the previous paragraph. Novel, with its nuanced

and reflective constitution, can help us do away with ‘lyricism’ and usher in a genuine critical and reflective outlook on life. This critical outlook can lead us to what Heidegger calls ‘truth,’ a concept that he has developed in a syllogistic form in his essay “On the Essence of Truth.” The syllogism is that the essence of truth is freedom while freedom is ‘letting-be.’ Consequently, “truth results from giving some-thing the freedom to be what it is, that is, to let it be” (Ferrara 18). The truth does not lie in certainties rather it is a habit of the mind that can spot a harmony in discord, a parity in disparity. It is the acceptance of the fact that the modes of our being are parallactical and our freedom lies in ‘letting it be.’ In a time, when socio-political topography is begrimed with polarisation, dogmatism, and jingoistic sloganeering, the world is in dire need of this reflective attitude, this alt-narrative. I believe the ‘novelistic wisdom’ can deliver the world from this ‘Erysichthonion’[1] death drive and I conceive my research project as a subscription to the same cause.

At this juncture, I would like to dispel this notion that this research project proposes a ‘grand narrative’ or a ‘universal solution’ by advocating the relevance of the works of a Czech writer to our local setting. As mentioned earlier, Kundera envisages novel as a genre that defies ‘absolutes.’ Its raison d'être is to salvage the ‘being’ from rigidities and fixities. To posit Kundera’s outlook as a panacea for our ills would be a misreading. When I claim the relevance of my project to our local state of affairs, I intend to mean that a parallactical mode of study can help us conceive ‘being’ in relativistic terms. In the reading of Kundera’s novels, this idea has been brought forth that ‘being’ has many contraries and an extreme adherence to one or the other may prove inauspicious. The readers in this part of the world can come out of their ‘lyricism’ if a parallactical approach towards ‘being’ is fostered.

Kundera believes that novel and totalitarian truth do not belong together: “Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what I would call the spirit of the novel” (*AON* 14). I would like this research project to serve as the ‘fons et origo’ of the investigations regarding this spirit of the novel in Pakistan. The spirit of the novel is grounded in ‘being’ and its indeterminacy. There is an immense potential to explore the nature of this indeterminacy in the novels written by both Western and indigenous writers. The investigation of the ontological dimensions and their representation in novel may also be the subject of comparative studies across cultures. Kamila Shamsie’s novel *Home Fire* (2017), based upon Sophocles’ play *Antigone*, portrays the antagonism between the personal and

political in the contemporary setting and is a promising text for such an analysis. Her other work of fiction, *A God in Every Stone* (2014) lays bare the schism between one's immediate 'particular' affiliations and 'universal' claims of the state. The same conflict between immediate affiliation and universal claims may also be found in Mohsin Hamid's fiction. Haruki Murakami, the Japanese fiction writer, also explores such modes of being in his works and his novel *1Q84* (2009) is a potential text for such an investigation. Milan Kundera's other novels like *Identity* (1998) and *Life is Elsewhere* (1969) may also be analysed from the same angle. Whatever further research is carried out that deals with modes of being and their inherent schism, this dissertation is likely to serve as an authentic reference and source.

Notes

[1]. In Greek mythology, Erysichthon was a king of Thessaly. Erysichthon ordered that all the trees in the temple of goddess Demeter to be cut down. On one tree, there were wreaths considered to be the symbols of granted prayers and Erysichthon's men refused to cut it down. Erysichthon was enraged and cut down the tree himself. In the process, he also killed a nymph. The nymph, while dying, cursed him. Demeter executed the curse of the nymph by putting spirt Limos in the stomach of Erysichthon. Because of this spirit, the food he ate, would not satiate him rather made him hungrier. He had to sell everything he owns to buy food and still he felt hungry. At last, Erysichthon ate himself. For details, see Noel Robertson, "The Ritual Background of the Erysichthon Story." *The American Journal of Philology* (105.4. 1984).

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