

**RENEGOTIATING KITSCH AND RHIZOME:
A POST-IDENTITARIAN PERSPECTIVE ON
MILAN KUNDERA'S *THE UNBEARABLE
LIGHTNESS OF BEING* AND *THE FESTIVAL
OF INSIGNIFICANCE***

BY

NAYAB MURAD



**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES
ISLAMABAD**

JUNE, 2023

**Renegotiating Kitsch and Rhizome: A Post-Identitarian
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of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance***

By

NAYAB MURAD

BS English Language & Literature, Women University Swabi, 2018

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

In English

To

FACULTY OF ENGLISH STUDIES



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES, ISLAMABAD

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Thesis Title: Renegotiating Kitsch and Rhizome: A Post-Identitarian Perspective on Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance*

Submitted By: Nayab Murad

Registration: 1900-M.Phil./Eng/Lit-F19

Master of Philosophy

Degree name in full

English Literature

Name of Discipline

Dr. Sibghatullah Khan

Name of Research Supervisor

Signature of Research Supervisor

Dr. Muhammed Safeer Awan

Name of Dean (FAH)

Signature of Dean (FAH)

Brig. Syed Nadir Ali

Name of DG

Signature of DG

Date

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I Nayab Murad

Daughter of Murad Ali

Registration # 1900-M.Phil./Eng/Lit-F19

Discipline English Literature

Candidate of **Master of Philosophy** at the National University of Modern Languages do hereby declare that the thesis **Renegotiating Kitsch and Rhizome: A Post-Identitarian Perspective on Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance***, submitted by me in partial fulfilment of MPhil degree, is my original work and has not been submitted or published earlier. I also solemnly declare that it shall not, in the future, be submitted by me for obtaining any other degree from this or any other university or institution.

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ABSTRACT

Title: Renegotiating Kitsch and Rhizome: A Post-Identitarian Perspective on Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance*,

This research aims to trace the patterns of Kitsch and Rhizome in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) and *The Festival of Insignificance* (2016) to interpret aesthetic and identity marginalization, identity metamorphosis, and post-identitarian Rhizome in postmodern (con)texts. To explore the relationship between Kitsch and marginalization, and the metamorphosis of rooted identity into post-identity, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and Rhizome, and Catherine A. Lugg's concepts of Kitsch and resistance and subversion of kitsch together supply a theoretical framework to this study. In the selected novels, Kundera's characters exhibit nomadic strains that go from the peripheries to the centre and from there to new peripheries. This shifting of centre and periphery not only dismantles the binary but creates yet another binary. Focusing on renegotiation of kitsch, I argue that kitsch promotes marginalization. Lugg's perspective on subversion and resistance against Kitsch helps rationalize the impacts of political Kitsch on aesthetic and identitarian marginalization. Broadening this milieu to the identitarian context, this research aims to analyse the centre/periphery and rooted/rootless binaries and subsequently conceptualizes post-identitarian Rhizome. Through textual analysis of the selected texts, the study attempts to explore the renegotiation of kitsch to develop a debate on identity in postmodern (con)texts. Hence, the major purpose of this research is twofold: to explore the relationship between political kitsch and marginalization, and the shift from rooted identity to post-identity to explore the emergence of rhizomatic identity in the postmodern era. The study will contribute to the debates on post-identity with reference to kitsch and rhizome to renegotiate the underpinnings of these concepts and rationalize post-identity.

Keywords:

Kitsch, Rhizome, post-identity, postmodernism, migration, post-migration, history.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

TULB for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

TFI for *The Festival of Insignificance*

TAN for *The Art of the Novel*

LL for *Laughable Loves*

TJ for *The Joke*

ATP for *A Thousand Plateaus*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful to Allah Almighty for giving me the strength to not give up on my dreams. He has been with me through all the storms, guiding me and lighting my path with wonderful people.

I owe my sincerest and humblest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Sibghatullah Khan whose extraordinary knowledge, wit, and humour were the highlights of every session during this process. I am indebted to him for his remarkable guidance at every stage and I must say my progress would not have been the same without his mentoring. I am also grateful to him for not letting me become a pretentious and conceited writer.

I am greatly indebted to all my teachers who have been teaching and guiding me for two decades. I owe my sincerest gratitude to Ms. Humaira Ahmed for all her kindness, Ms. Khadija for all her patience and appreciation, and Ms. Rabiya Amir for my feminist awakening. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my teachers who taught me in my Bachelors.

All my gratitude would be incomplete without mentioning Sajmas Urooj, who helped me throughout this journey in all the ways possible. Next to my supervisor, she has been a constant source of support and encouragement during this challenge. She has been my best cheerleader, my therapist, my teacher, and my nemesis at every step. I am also thankful to my classmates for the joyous learning environment and healthy discussions during coursework, and friends who supported me and helped me. I am most thankful to Muhammad Numan for his constant support and valuable feedback.

I am grateful for all the support I received from my family.

Dedication

To Hanno,

To my parents for always hyping me up,

To my siblings for doing all the chores so I could study,

To my supervisor for not letting me become a pretentious and conceited writer,

To Virginia Woolf and Franz Kafka.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is a time of the redrawing of maps, of intense deterritorialization and reterritorializations: people are passing borders, but borders are also passing people.

—Søren Frank, *Migration and Literature*

This research attempts to examine Kitsch and Rhizome in Milan Kundera's novels, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*¹ (1985) and *The Festival of Insignificance*² (2015) translated into English by Michael Henry Heim and Linda Asher, respectively. In this study, I propose that Kunderian fiction renegotiates Kitsch and Rhizome to develop a discussion on post-identity in Postmodern (con)texts. To do so, the fictional representation of characters in the diasporic or nomadic settings is explored to rationalize the relationship between kitsch and marginalization, political kitsch and identity, and the metamorphosis of identity into rhizomatic identity or post-identity. The study triangulates Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concepts of 'Rhizome' and 'deterritorialization and reterritorialization', and Catherine A. Lugg's concepts of 'Kitsch' supplemented with 'subversion and resistance against Kitsch' to conceptualize the kitschification of aesthetic and identity marginalisation in late 20th and early 21st-century postmodern (con)texts. Moreover, the study attempts to criticize and deconstruct the historical binaries that are constructed to legitimize ideologies, particularly the dichotomous hierarchies of aesthetics; high and low art, and of identity; native and migrant.

The purpose to select this area of research is the growing international awareness of literature produced in/on exile and emigration that repositions the traditional definitions of identity. Identity is affected by social, cultural, economic, gender, and political foundations. Considering all these notions wherever applicable, my focus,

¹ See Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Faber and Faber, 1984). Henceforth, I shall use TULB as abbreviation of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* for my parenthetical citations across my thesis.

² See Milan Kundera, *The Festival of Insignificance* (Faber and Faber, 2015). Henceforth, I shall use TFI as abbreviation of *The Festival of Insignificance* for my parenthetical citations across my thesis.

however, is on the political underpinnings of identity with reference to aesthetics as an ideological propaganda. I argue that Kunderian renegotiation of kitsch, particularly political kitsch, can serve as a niche for the development of rhizomatic identity. Since the study engages with the concepts of Kitsch and Rhizome from a post-identitarian perspective, in the following discussion, I aim to create a trajectory from identity to post-identity and then explain and relate Kitsch and Rhizome to post-identity.

In this research, though my focus is primarily on the postmodernist approach towards identity, I have also included the traditional and modernist definitions of art and identity to ground my arguments and propose resolutions in a larger context. By traditional, mainstream, and modern ideologies, I mean the essentialist thoughts and ideas that foreground the structuralist and colonial principles of ontology and epistemology. While post-identitarian thought foregrounds poststructuralist and postcolonial schools of thoughts.

In the postmodern era, identity is a complex phenomenon characterised by uncertainty, ambivalence, and rootlessness that lead to post-identitarian multiplicities. We are well past the time when identity used to be inherently a sociological concept. It has become a rapidly developing concept in politics, identity studies, migration studies, and cultural studies. Moreover, the recent introduction of post-identity in the fields of humanities has unsettled the mainstream concept of identity. It foregrounds an opposition to the way identity is traditionally ascribed, perceived, and argued. The investigation of identity (trans)formation throughout history inevitably raises the question of whether the traditional rigid definitions of identity are applicable to society and cultural studies in a postmodernist era, or do we need a different and more encompassing working definition of the term? Furthermore, in postmodern (con)texts, the diasporic experiences challenge the claims of social identity theorists that identity is given to a person as a self-concept derived from the social groups to which an individual belongs (Tajfel and Turner, 7, my paraphrase).

Now, debates on identity have shifted the focus from “given” identity to a complex ‘becoming’ of subjectivities. Christopher Miller aptly captures this notion, he writes that “identities are ‘negotiated’ rather than natural; contingent, constructed and imagined rather than unmediated and necessary” (1113). How identities are formed in relation to ‘tradition’ and power, what are the parameters of identity, and whether there are alternatives to identity, are some probing questions that feature post-identitarian

critiques. In simpler terms, identity is no more a strictly defined concept of ‘being’ but rather a fluid notion of ‘becoming’. However, that is not to say that social, cultural, and political concerns do not affect identities anymore, on the contrary, this study aims to extend the concept of socially constructed identity to propose an inclusive and fluid explanation.

Rebecca Kay argues in “Identity and Marginality” that identity is determined by wider social, cultural, political, and economic contexts, however, because of political disparity and power struggle, “identities may be divisive and repressive or even rebellious and subversive” (1). The fissure created due to the uneven relationships of power and authority contributes further to the need of redefinition of identity. The current study approaches this problem with reference to politicization of artistic production and perception, and how it affects the newly conceived concept of post-identity. The exploration and interpretation of the symbiotic relationship of art, politics, and identity enables me to capture the multifarious picture of this topic informed by aesthetic, social, and political philosophy. Furthermore, though postmodern anti-essentialism rejects the inherent ontological foundations, this does not contradict my interpretation of the trinity of art, identity, and politics as symbiotic.

Robin James in his article “Is the Post- in Post-identity the Post- in Post-genre?” quotes Wendy Brown that “**identity politics**” is the **traditional** liberalism's exploitation of social identities to disproportionately “distribute access to citizenship and identity” (22). Traditional social identity comes with certain assumptions and myths. Mainstream categorization of identity is mainly based on differences among different groups and disapproving of each other based on nationality, religion, race, gender, and sexuality rather than the ideology itself. Disapproving a person or group because of an ideology they adhere to, needs to be replaced by disagreement with the ideology without marginalizing anyone. I argue that mainstream identity politics creates more of us-versus-them binaries. Although this is not a novel idea, what I aim to bring into the conversation is that political kitsch perpetrates identitarian and aesthetic marginalization, and through resisting and subverting this political kitsch, Kunderian fiction carves a place for post-identity. Moreover, my study aims to find a middle ground between identitarian and post-identitarian discourse. The purpose of this study is not to homogenize “us” and “them” binaries but to find a niche where marginalisation can be deconstructed without rejecting the concept of identity altogether. This calls for

an upgradation of our definitions of poetics and politics of art and identity.

To explain identity and post-identity, to theorize a workable definition, I first explain the prefix ‘post-’ as it is read, written, and interpreted in academia. Derived from the Latin “post-” which means ‘after’ or ‘later’, words beginning with ‘post-’ refer to something in the past or which has happened. Most ‘post-’ terms imply that the word that follows refer to something that can be and should be overcome. In academia the prefix ‘post-’ has always been subjected to critique as well as variations in interpretations. The embedded prejudice and assumptions about the prefix ‘post-’ have never been settled to entirely divide or merge the preceding and following epochs. The frequently used ‘postified’ terms such as postcolonial, poststructural, and postmodern convey that ‘post-’ does not only refer to a state of ‘afterwardness’ in a temporal sense but it explains the re-telling and re-reading of a concept and its outcomes, thus always retaining the master signifier. ‘Post-’ means, “to retell the history [...] and to rethink the whole field beyond the hegemonic discourse” (Peterson et al. 25). Prefix ‘post-’ usually signals a discursive passage and transition to a new and yet unknown vocabulary, discourse, or episteme. Prefix ‘post-’ insinuates not just rejection but an extension in terms of progress and is often synonymized with “progress” (James 22). This can be explained through how post-colonialism is a progression of and digression from colonialism since post-colonial narratives rejects the totalizing narratives of colonial literature as well as advances the existing narratives by adding post-coloniality into the debate. Similarly, postmodernism is a postified and progressive outcome of modernism. Postification, thus, refers to the subjugation and modification of outdated root word. Erol Yildiz’s definition of ‘postmigration’ is perhaps a fitting stencil for the postified concepts. Postmigration, he writes, is “the radical questioning of the conventional view on migration” (25). Similarly, the postified concepts, more or less, put forward the same incredulity in front of the rigid conventional dichotomies of Western philosophical tradition. Postification of every concept entails in itself the sense of what it averts or extends, i.e. the sense implied by its root word. ‘Post-’, therefore, does not signify an end to any such phenomena as identity or modernity.

In this study, I argue that postification of identity (post-identity) averts the traditional rooted notions of identity through a radical questioning of the conventional approach to identity and expands its meaning to highlight the contemporary issues of identity. Simply put, post-identity as a poststructuralist and postmodernist concept

indicates the rejection of universally generalized roots of identity due to shared anti-essentialist underpinnings of postmodernism and poststructuralism. Post-identity, hence, shifts the assumptions which underlie a particular concept of politically consequential identity (Roof 1, my paraphrase).

The term post-identity does not refer to an end of identity, but rather to the general impact that earlier and ongoing debates on culture, arts, and politics, in particular, have had on identity formation. In post-identity, the ‘post-’ suggests liquidity and flexibility that differentiates adaptable ideologies from rigid and regressive ones. Post-identity, therefore, challenges traditional notions of identity politics, which focus on the ways in which individuals and groups are defined by their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or other social categories. It suggests that in a rapidly changing and diverse world, the fixed categories of identity are becoming less relevant. Post-identity theorists argue that individuals should be able to define themselves on their own terms, based on their unique experiences, interests, and values. They emphasize the importance of recognizing and celebrating diversity, but also highlight the limitations of identity-based politics, which can sometimes lead to tribalism and exclusion.

In *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman writes that identity has turned into a task of becoming and we can no longer rely on the ‘given’ identity. Keeping the fashion process in a perpetual state of “becoming” is one of the fundamental human impulses these days (19 my paraphrase). Humans now have the opportunity to choose an identity and hold onto it for as long as they like by being able to “shop around in the supermarket of identities” (135). Due to the liquidity of ideas and oscillation of conceptual nuances, it is hard to pinpoint the question of identity as something compact and unidirectional. By subjugating and modifying identity with post-identity, the present study seeks to deconstruct rigidities and binaries prevalent in identitarian poetics and politics. To do so, I turn away from essentialist concepts and adopt an inclusive and fluid rhizomatic (anti)structure³ to explore political kitsch and rhizome in identity politics.

Now that I have briefly positioned post-identity, the key terms Kitsch and Rhizome need to be introduced to further explain the relationship between art, identity, and politics.

³ See Mhairi Vari’s *Perpetual Doubt, Constant Becoming*, The Dark Precursor. P. 408

Arts and aesthetics are on an equal footing with politics, sociology, and anthropology in the sense of hierarchies and binarism, that is to say, that the way “fundamental dualism of the Western tradition” (ATP 1028) has constructed the identity binary of the native and outsider, it has similarly borne hierarchies in arts and aesthetics. The main challenge in addressing the binary of Kitsch and art lies in the fact that art, conventionally seen as the zenith of visual culture, becomes increasingly difficult to define over time. In the aftermath of modernism and postmodernism, the question “what is art?” has become capricious, and its resolution even more arbitrary and unstable. In the following discussion, I explore the high/low binaries of art and kitsch, and its connection with identity.

The German word ‘*kitsch*’ implies an artistic creation that makes use of rubbish dumps. Traditionally, travel souvenirs, replicas, and posters of syrupy, sentimental subjects are often classified as kitsch. The Online Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable (second edition) defines Kitsch as art with poor taste due to “excessive garishness or sentimentality”. Clement Greenberg, Tomáš Kulka, Herman Broch, and several others have written on the subject of kitsch, and although, they are not my main theorists, I have included them in this study briefly in order to contextualize my argument in the debates revolving around the value, perception, and reception of kitsch.

Tomas Kulka proposes three fundamental qualities of kitsch: it portrays themes and objects that are charged with ordinary emotions; those themes or objects are immediately and readily identifiable, and it does not enrich the critical understanding of the audience regarding those objects and themes (Kulka 37-38). Greenberg’s essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch” positions kitsch as the opposite of the criticality and progressiveness by placing it opposite the classics. For him, kitsch is “the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture” that “welcomes and cultivates insensibility” (10). Compared to avant-garde, Kitsch evokes “unreflective, emotional responses” (Kulka 26) which, when placed in Western art tradition, indicates the way white straight male has dominance over women, queers, and people of colour, or the way natives have dominance over immigrants. Postcolonial history is rampant with White prestige and immigration struggles that show how this binarism ascribes intellect to one and “unreflective emotions” to the other. Similarly, kitsch often exists at the bottom of the hierarchy of artistic value. The oft loathed by the avant-garde, “low culture” decorative items, greeting cards, extravagant posters of historical figures, and all forms of

commercial illustration are examples of kitsch.

All these definitions and characteristics ascribed to kitsch advocates binarism. Kitsch has always been colonized and condemned by “high art”. Decanonizing aesthetics and identity, I argue that Kunderian fiction indicates a renegotiation of kitsch by not only applying the term to the so-called high art of heroism and war but also focusing on the political and metaphysical undertones of the term, the underlying sentimentality of human existence. According to Kundera, there are different kitches; existential, political, identitarian, totalitarian, and so on. Kundera employs a broader spectrum to expose Kitsch. He defines Kitsch as:

The aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being in a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist... it excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence. (*TULB* 130)

On the surface, this definition may seem very straightforward but before going into the depth, one must consider what Kundera meant by “shit”. To avoid being unifocal, I add four accounts of the term shit: theological, metaphysical, philosophical, and political. Kundera writes that faith, in religion or politics, is based on the first chapter of Genesis, which says that “the world was created properly, that human existence is good”, he calls this faith “a categorical agreement with being”. But if the world and human existence are perfect, then why is shit immoral? Kundera questions the ontological basis of creation that “either shit is acceptable, or we are created in an unacceptable manner” (*TULB* 245). In its metaphysical sense, shit is the essence of being human with all the eccentricity of the ugly and the humane. Thus, kitsch is the denial of individuality and eccentricity. In moral philosophy shit or bullshit is an aesthetic and ethical deficiency, a “fake and phony attempt to establish a new reality” (Botz-Bornstein 2), in other words, an indoctrination of something that has no ontological basis. Thus, one can argue that the indoctrination of an “established reality” such as the Grand March of history is shit, which leads us to the fourth perspective: political kitsch. Political kitsch in this regard is a propaganda that is enacted for shaping the direction of public policy because “kitsch has a political utility” (Lugg 103). Similarly, Kundera equates kitsch with brainwashing because it involves pretending to care about the values of the nation and demonstrating a utopian picture when in fact the reality is worse, as he writes:

No one knows this better than politicians. Whenever a camera is in the offing,

they immediately run to the nearest child, lift it in the air, kiss it on the cheek. Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements. (*TULB* 248-249)

Therefore, though the term kitsch is popular in the sphere of arts, it is not only related to the arts, but it is also “a form of behaviour with regard to life” (Borch 49). Kitsch also catalogues political, social, and cultural ideologies in terms of high art and low-brow art, centre and periphery, and in-group and out-group binaries.

Catherine A. Lugg, in her book *Kitsch: From Education to Public Policy* (2002), writes that Kitsch is traditionally defined as a “beautiful lie that neither challenges nor subvert the larger social order because it must pacify, not provoke” (5). In other words, kitsch does not engage its audience in a critical and intellectual encounter rather it presents a kitschified image of life that does not require intellectual interpretation. It sentimentalizes average experiences and appeals to the beliefs and emotions of vanity, prejudices, and unjustified responses of the audience.

At this point, a provocative question arises; Why does kitsch exist? What is its purpose? And how to deal with it if we must? Susan Sontag, in her “Notes on Camp”, argues that the primary purpose of the camp is “to dethrone the serious” (26). As for Kitsch and camp, though slightly different, are often used interchangeably, Sontag’s claim is applicable to both forms of art. In Kunderian definition of kitsch, the lack of irony and humour in political kitsch is associated with the denial of essential metaphysical conditions of humans such as emotions, or ‘shit’ as Kundera would say. Moreover, Lugg proposes two ways of dealing with kitsch; resistance and subversion. As the names indicate, resistance involves an active opposition of kitsch while subversion involves a disinterest in kitsch to sabotage its purpose.

I have further adopted this concept of resistance and subversion of kitsch in post-identitarianism. Aligning post-identity with kitsch, I argue that renegotiation, resistance, and subversion of kitsch devise a rhizomatic territory for post-identity. In the following section, I briefly discuss how rhizome relates to kitsch and rationalizes post-identity.

In the late 20th century, as postmodernism stretched its branches to other spheres e.g., social, cultural, and political fields, the essentialist and rooted metanarratives were challenged. Deleuze and Guattari are among the prominent thinkers of this era, who in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), presented the idea of Rhizome along with

nomad thought, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and body without organs. According to them “rhizome is an anti-genealogy”, it rejects the idea of a “genetic axis” or deep structure (11). It does not welcome a structural or generative model. According to them “multiplicities are rhizomatic and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities” for what they are and the process of their becoming (metamorphosis). Thus, rejecting roots, Deleuze and Guattari write:

Rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes a metamorphosis. (*ATP* 21)

Rhizome is a network of connections without a defined centre or periphery due to constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization. It promotes diversity over the notion of unity or the One, as well as open-ended creation over the replication or existing patterns. However, it should be noted that the purpose of this study is not to homogenize contradictions into the One. The unification must be interpreted in terms of ‘parts and whole’ analogy, thus, a rhizome is a whole containing the parts without erasing individuality.

Political kitsch hegemonizes certain art forms and/or identities, **it is renegotiated** and decanonized by mean of resistance and subversion which leads to fluidity in aesthetics and identity to formulate post-identity. Under postmodernism’s proclamations of liquid or fluid identity, the present research aims to justify post-identity as a product of constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization that leads to the emergence of the rhizome. Deterritorialization is a process through which an existing territory is dominated by any outer entity. While reterritorialization is the process through which the newly empowered entity establishes its own state apparatus. Deleuze and Guattari, therefore, claim that these two processes constantly follow each other and highlight the nomadic flow from the centre to the periphery, and then from there to a new periphery (*ATP* 53, my paraphrase). Apparently, it seems that the shift from centre to periphery not only dismantles the binary but creates yet another similar binary. Therefore, any attempt to renegotiate a notion would end up wane. However, if the nomadic flows are modified by introducing Rhizome into the theoretical framework, it provides a new perspective on the centre/periphery and rooted/rootlessness since Rhizome favours multiplicities.

Moreover, rooted identity should not be confused with the root structure of rhizome. I have used the terms root or rooted identity in arboreal sense. The reason is

that contrary to rhizome, the arboreal structure denotes hierarchical structure of roots, stems, and offshoots. Analogous to essentialist thought, arboreal structure emphasizes the stability of a tree in its static roots. On the other hand, rhizome is a fluid structure that defies hierarchies and, therefore, is likened to postmodern ideology. The rhizome, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is not an entirely disordered and anarchic structure. Primarily defined as a fluid work, it also consists of “despotic formations” and “knots of arborescence” (*ATP* 20), however, such arborescence is not hierarchical but anti-structural.

Overall, this study, as a critique of canonized forms of aesthetics and identity, argues for a methodology that connects different “forms” of art and identity in a mode of rhizome through which the arboreality of Western tradition can be overcome in postmodern (con)texts. However, it does not promote homogeneity to get rid of individual/subjective specificities but rather a multitude of multiplicities where networks can exist without subordinating one another. In other words, each network, in itself a multiplicity, coexists within a multitude of multiplicities.

1.1 Locating Milan Kundera’s Fiction in the Post-identitarian Poetics and Politics

Now that I have established a workable niche for my argument, it would be instructive to locate Kundera in the post-identitarian poetics and politics and what makes his work a suitable subject for this analysis.

In postmodern ‘border writings’⁴, the 19th-century European concept of the subject is replaced by disintegration into cultural, linguistic, and political deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Milan Kundera, as an exiled/border writer in modern and postmodern eras, provides an abundance of errantry and nomadic themes. These border notions such as nomadism, peripheries, rootedness, and rootlessness create a multifaceted notion of aesthetics and identity which plays a crucial role in the emergence of post-identity. Unlike the traditional definitions of art and identity, this study aims to find flexible definitions and explanations of these notions. Moreover, the structural design of Kunderian fiction, according to Søren Frank, is itself rhizomatic as he writes that the a-chronological structuring of the narrative framework, in which coherence is built on

⁴ See Emily Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (1991)

thematic issues rather than the causality of "what-happened-next," turns Kundera's novels into rhizomes (126-127, my paraphrase). Furthermore, Frank's conclusion that Kundera's novels are rhizomic, does not serve as one of my conclusive statements, instead as one of the justifications for selection of the primary texts for this study. Moreover, my study focuses on how political kitsch promotes marginalisation and how resistance and subversion of it leads to post-identity formulation.

Kundera draws upon avant-gardist as well as kitsched ideologies in his novels. Marginalisation of migrants, liquidation of identity, and political kitsch are pungent themes of his novels. The thematic and structural alignment of Kunderian fiction with post-identity is what makes his work a better area of research from this particular perspective.

Certain historico-political factors need to be highlighted in order to provide an insight into the times and situations that shape Kunderian fiction as diasporic/post-migrant literature. Czechoslovakia's Communist Party came to power in 1948, joined with the Soviet Union, and established the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Alexander Dubcek, a reformist, became the leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia on January 5, 1968. His reign is known as the Prague Spring Movement⁵ since it saw a surge in the political and press freedom. Due to this movement and the country's ongoing changes in the social and political domains, the Soviet Union decided to invade in 1968. Due to the Soviet invasion and its effects, over 300,000 Czech residents emigrated to other nations. Literary and artistic output in the post-1968 Czech republic was not purely aesthetic as in terms of art for art's sake rather writers and artists became vehicles of rebellion against the totalitarian regime. Prague Spring Movement gave the writers a status in the political commentary that no other group had. Politics remained a constant element and the Czech writers, like Havel and Kundera, were often censored and even arrested and forced to retract their statements against the regime. And some would become the regime's apologists or "Kremlin's puppets" as Peter Steiner stated. Pro- or anti-government, whatever their ideology was, there is no doubt that "their literary output is always secondary to these political undertakings" (Steiner 7).

⁵ The Prague Spring Movement was a time of student-led protests and political liberalization in the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovak. Starting on January 5, 1968, the movement continued until 21st August 1968, when the Soviet Union sent half a million Warsaw Pact soldiers to invade Czechoslovakia to suppress the reforms. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera referred to it as "that dizzying liberalization of communism which ended with the Russian invasion" (131).

Kundera was also a political activist who was kicked out of the party twice. His novels were later prohibited in his birthplace, and he was **politically exiled**. In 1975, he migrated to France and was granted French citizenship in 1981. The Prague Spring Movement, which resulted in the liberalisation of Czechoslovakia, as well as the reactionary Soviet invasion and mass emigration of Czechs provide a significant historical and political context for Kundera's novels.

Milan Kundera, oft-referred to as a Franco-Czech novelist, incessantly attempted to keep his public and private life separate. All of the revised French editions of his literature include his official biography: "Milan Kundera was born in Czechoslovakia. Since 1975, he has been living in France." In *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera defends himself against the "biographical furore" and claims that biography ought "to be bracketed when reading a novel" (266). This debate is prevalent in postmodern era because contrary to the traditional social definition of identity, a postmodern, postmigrant concept of identity is oscillatory. Moreover, literature readership has always had a tussle with the author and more so due to "The Death of the Author" (1967).

Søren Frank argues that Kundera condemns the totalitarian effectuation of censorship and the erasure and rewriting of history in order to make it more amenable to the party doctrines. However, even though he upholds the gap between his present and past, his work and life, and condemns the biographical furore, he does not refrain from using an autobiographical voice in his novels. This presence of the author-narrator while at the same time bracketing biography seems contradictory to critics such as Søren Frank, however, Kundera addresses this issue of biographical data of the author in *The Art of the Novel* as follows:

I dream of a world where writers will be required by law to keep their identities secret and to use pseudonyms. Three advantages: a drastic reduction of graphomania; decreased aggressiveness in literary life; the disappearance of biographical interpretations of works. (144)

Michel Foucault argues in "What is an Author?" that a certain number of notions intended to replace the privileged status of the author actually seem to perpetuate that privilege and therefore suppress the real meaning of the author's disappearance (301, my paraphrase). Kundera's fiction is typified by heteroglossia and polyphony. The

narrative shifts constantly from one character to another, even “Kundera’s own persona in the novel shifts without warning from Kundera the author to Kundera the narrator to Kundera the character” (DelBonis-Platt 9).

On the other hand, postmodernists, such as Rebecca Walkowitz, argue that the literary merit of a work of literature depends “more on a book’s future than on a writer’s past” (534). What happens within the text is more important than what has happened to the author. Moreover, the aim of exploring post-identitarian rhizome in this research is not to police Kundera on his biographic factuality or fictionality or marginalise any person, author, or character due to their biographic information or the lack thereof, rather it proposes an acceptance and renegotiation of the dishevelled and complicated narratives of identity in the postmodern con(texts). This, however, does not ask to refrain from considering the biographical, historical, social, political, and identitarian aspects that inform the selected primary texts.

After a brief introduction of Kundera and his fiction, below I have introduced the selected novels to provide an overview of why these novels are selected for this study. The first novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, is a philosophical novel that investigates identity, multiplicity, assimilation, and rebellion. It proposes a reconciliation “between modern and postmodern, between memory and forgetting, between irony and commitment” (Adams 133). It contains its share of Kundera’s polemical views on the modern and postmodern era. The story largely revolves around four characters; Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, and Franz in the wake of the Prague Spring Movement and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in the 1960s which disturb the lives of many people who were either exiled or migrated to other states. All these four characters migrate from Prague to different places; Tomas and Tereza migrate to Zurich, and Switzerland; Sabina to Geneva then New York, Paris, and later to California, while Franz, after parting from Sabina, moves to Thailand to join human rights protests and dies in a fight. These multiple displacements and replacements create a rhizomatic setting for the identities of these characters.

In conjunction with the theme of migration, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* employs the fluctuation of identity and its implications in diasporic literature that represents diasporic communities. The novel also incorporates postmodernist features of novels i.e., non-linear narrative, multiplicity, opacity, and author’s direct comments

upon the events which make this novel apposite for the analysis of identity and post-identity in postmodern (con)texts.

The second novel, *The Festival of Insignificance*, is Kundera's most recent novel with a farcelike narrative that tackles the themes of individuality, sex and sexuality, humour, history, and post-war life in France. The plot revolves around the lives of Alain, Ramon, Charles, D'Ardele, and a theatre actor known by his stage-name Caliban. Caliban and Charles serve as waiters at events. Caliban sees this as a prospect to take up different personae e.g., he pretends to be a Pakistani at D'Ardele's birthday party. This charade of identity and the illusions of individuality are at the centre of my discussion on identitarian Kitsch.

Considering Kundera's description that a novel is a "meditative interrogation" or "interrogative meditation" (TAN 31), one could argue that the selected novels —*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance*— can be considered as texts that reflect on and interrogate the role of art and identity in 20th and 21st century. Besides, both novels exhibit streaks of history as a product of ideological agendas.

Both novels have similar thematic structures, but the internal design/orchestration is different, **thus allowing to create a trajectory** from identity to post-identity (from rooted to rhizomatic identities) in Kunderian fiction. By highlighting Kitsch and Rhizome in the selected texts, the research propounds subversion and resistance against Kitsch as a basis **for** post-identitarian rhizome. The study further argues that certain factors create marginalisation indicating a hierarchical structure within social strata that determines the inclusion or exclusion of artistic and/or political practices as well as the possibility of the existence of a framework that must be followed in order to be accepted.

Part of my larger argument is that in the postmodern condition, the conventional norms of high/low binaries of art or culture are inapplicable. Secondly, I argue that the representation of migrant, diasporic, and nomadic identities are best analysed under a new post-identitarian perspective which is inclusive of, but not limited to, the interpolations of art, culture, politics, and post-identity in a rhizomatic structure of multiplicities. Therefore, instead of analysing the selected novels from an identitarian perspective, the present study invokes a post-identitarian lens to examine the selected novels. By post-identitarian, I mean a poststructuralist network of multiplicities that

rejects the notion of roots or belonging and, thus, does not pin down identity to a single root.

Furthermore, being an anti-essential notion, post-identitarianism is congruous with a renegotiation of kitsch and rhizome to challenge the conventional labels of binarism. Thus, it seems to be useful to situate kitsch and rhizome in a political milieu and scrutinize the concepts of aesthetics and identity to orchestrate a framework for the postmodern (con)texts that questions directly or indirectly the binarism of art and identity such as centre/periphery, high/low, us/them, and native/outside. Therefore, in this study, I explore the strategies used by mainstream politics of aesthetics and identity that create in-group and out-group binaries, how different factors prompt the renegotiation of Kitsch and Rhizome in Kunderian postmodern (con)texts, and what would be the outcome of such decanonization in politics of aesthetics and identity.

1.2 Delimitation

This study exclusively focuses on Kitsch, Rhizome, and post-identity politics in postmodern con[texts]. The research is delimited to Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance*. The purpose of delimiting the study to these two texts is to conceptualize a trajectory of identity metamorphosis in Kundera's early fiction towards his latest work.

1.3 Thesis Statement

Milan Kundera's novels, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance*, engage with postmodern representation of aesthetics and identity through tracing the patterns of Kitsch and Rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of deterritorialization, reterritorialization, Rhizome, and Catherine A. Lugg's concept of resistance and subversion of Kitsch support the study of these post-identitarian nuances in the selected texts.

1.4 Controlling Research Questions

This study attempts to investigate the following questions:

1. What are the strategies used by mainstream politics of aesthetics and identity that create in-group and out-group binaries in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance*?
2. How do different factors prompt the renegotiation of Kitsch and Rhizome in the selected texts?

3. In what ways do resistance and subversion of political kitsch and the emergence of rhizome challenge rooted identities in the selected texts and engage with their repercussions in the politics of identity and aesthetic representations?

1.5 Research Plan

The study comprises six chapters. In chapter one, I explain the situatedness of post-identitarian poetics and politics. Apart from discussing the thesis statement, research questions, significance, and theoretical underpinnings of this research, this chapter aims to discuss contemporary trends in identitarianism and post-identitarianism with reference to the selected works. I map a trajectory of identitarianism and post-identitarianism in the modern and postmodern debates to contextualise the post-identity poetics and politics.

In chapter two, I review the selected secondary texts to contextualise my research in the existing scholarship. The secondary sources reviewed in this chapter narrow down the focus of this research and lead to specific and significant questions and discussions in accord with my theoretical framework.

In chapter three, I discuss the theoretical context of this research by locating kitsch and rhizome and their application in the selected novels. The framework of this thesis is orchestrated on the triangulation of Deleuzoguattarian⁶ theory of rhizome and Catherine A. Lugs' theory of Kitsch and subversion and resistance against kitsch. The research follows a qualitative research method and textual analysis adopted from Catherine Belsey's "Textual Analysis as Research Method." This chapter also explicates the relevance of my argument and therefore my selected texts with the selected theory.

Chapters four and five comprise the textual analysis of the selected texts. The analysis is carried out qualitatively employing Catherine Belsey's "Textual Analysis as Research Method" and by deploying Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome and Lugs' concepts of Kitsch and subversion and resistance against kitsch. In chapter four, I analyse *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In chapter five, I analyse *The Festival of Insignificance*. I scrutinise the texts in the light of my research questions and the theoretical perspectives of Deleuzoguattarian theory of rhizome and Lugs' concepts of

⁶ I have taken the term "Deleuzoguattarian" from Sadie Plant and have used it as a compound word to refer to Deleuze and Guattari. For details, see Sadie Plant, "Nomads and Revolutionaries," *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessment of Leading Philosophers*, vol. 3, edited by Gary Genosko, (p. 1100).

kitsch and subversion and resistance against kitsch.

In chapter six, I conclude the discussions by discussing the identified patterns of targeted themes in the selected works and state my findings comprehensively. Further, I also discuss the future implications of the understudied subject matter.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Kundera's fictional and non-fictional works, chiefly his earlier novels, are widely explored from political and philosophical standpoints. This research, however, is significant in the sense that it aims to triangulate political, social, and aesthetic philosophy of identity and art with postmodern concept of rhizomatic identity in diasporic literature. The study highlights the postmodernist nomadic nuances of rhizomatic verses rooted identities in the selected novels to explore the identitarian and aesthetic marginalisation and post-identitarian rhizome. The study also aids in generating a discussion on kitsch and rhizome to renegotiate the underpinnings of these concepts and rationalize post- identity.

Furthermore, though the communist regime in Central Europe has come to an end, Kundera's fiction and its contemporary interpretations are still relevant to the current debates on kitsch, rhizome, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, identity, and post-identity because totalitarianism as a political system as well as an ideology still interferes with different aspects of society, including political, economic, social, aesthetic and identitarian. Totalitarian ideologies in politics, art, and identity often uses censorship and propaganda —which are principal strategies of political kitsch— for suppressing the public. Moreover, modern-day limitations on individual freedom and media/knowledge production and distribution are also some remains of totalitarianism.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The literature review serves the purpose to contextualise my study in the contemporary critical scholarship. By studying the related secondary sources, I aim to locate and address the gaps in the existing corpus of identitarian and post-identitarian discourses in postmodern (con)texts.

In this chapter, I present an overview of how identity has morphed and been under the spotlight since the onset of postmodernism. The larger body of this chapter consists of an in-depth review of books, theses, and articles on Kunderian fiction, post-identity, and rhizome and kitsch. This chapter, therefore, covers and conveys the primary theoretical constructs that inform my argument and define my analytical and reflective research in the subsequent chapters. Moreover, this informs the foundation on which my reflection on post-identitarian rhizome and kitsch is based.

2.2 Literature Review

I have arranged the literature review into four parts in order to maintain conceptual clarity so that my progression is coherent and unambiguous. The purpose of these reviews is to contextualise my study and identify knowledge gaps in the existing scholarship. I have examined books, thesis dissertations, and articles that fit into the following categories:

1. From Identity to Post-identity
2. Rhizomatic Interpretations of Multiplicities
3. Privileged and Marginalised Arts and Identities
4. Locating Kunderian Fiction in the Contemporary Scholarship

2.2.1 From Identity to Post-identity

In the previous chapter, I established a trajectory from identity to post-identity and then explained and linked kitsch and rhizome to post-identity. Following the same terrain, I first review the secondary sources that fall into the thematic category of post-identity,

and then move on to rhizome and kitsch to progress my argument of how art and identity are related and how its renegotiation may prompt the emergence of post-identity in postmodern (con)texts.

Rainer Bauböck, in his “Cold Constellations and Hot Identities: Political Theory Questions about Transnationalism and Diaspora” (2010), starts off with the question of how transnationalism and diaspora are related in different academic and theoretical disciplines. His chapter⁷ predominantly emphasizes the political aspects of diaspora and transnationalism as he writes that “political theory’s strength lies in the striving for analytical consistency in conceptual analysis and normative judgements” (296), however, in doing so, Bauböck largely focuses on how things are from the perspective of political policy. In other words, his argument is based primarily on a descriptive analysis of a single aspect of identity and, therefore, neglects the fact that if everything goes according to the utopian political policy that operates in equality, the migrants still will not feel at home in the host-country or the homeland. Below I have discussed my objections and propositions.

Bauböck argues that “emigrants have crossed the state border but remain inside the national community” (311), however, this supposed presence in the homeland is **scarred** by the experiences of migration in the case of forced dispersal. And in the case of voluntary movement, the immigrants are often considered betrayers. Not to overlook the obviously problematic treatment of minorities by the political policies.

Bauböck advocates dual citizenship as a step towards a transnational community of equal right since they are given the right to vote. However, referring to German authorities revoking the German citizenship of twenty thousand immigrants of Turkish origin in 2005 on the basis of possession of dual citizenship, he also argues that states whose citizenship regimes have become entangled with each other through large-scale migration and political policies insinuate marginalisation (301). He further writes about the fluidity and ease of movement that comes with EU citizenship, but also mentions that the “third-country nationals are subjected to extensive immigration control when entering the EU” (308). However, he does not mention that this totalitarian act of inclusion and exclusion is a factor affecting the binarism of privilege and

⁷ Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods, edited by Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

marginalisation. I find this incongruous because the argument of equality is no more applicable and generalizable. Another example presented by Bauböck is that of Mexicans migrating to the border regions of the US. However, the migration across Mexico-US border and the “Mexican rhetoric about building a global nation through emigration” (313) is not helpful in eliminating cross-border marginalisation considering the wall between Mexico and the US borders during Trump’s regime.

The point of departure here is that my study, although incorporates identity politics, is not limited by it rather uses it to vindicate my argument of marginalisation of migrant identities and the rhizomatic proposition of post-identitarian politics that also consider social, cultural and anthropological aspects of identity. Instead of compiling a descriptive analysis of ‘what is’, my study focuses on, in Deleuzoguattarian terms, ‘what can be’.

Niobe Way and Onnie Rogers review how cultural stereotypes interact to create a context within which people construct, experience, and interpret their ethnic and racial identities to re-evaluate the sociocultural roots of identity development. In “[T]hey Say Black Men Won’t Make It, But I Know I’m Gonna Make It’: Ethnic and Racial Identity Development in the Context of Cultural Stereotypes” (2015), the researchers have reviewed their data collected from multicultural and multiracial sample of students attending six middle schools and three high schools in the United States. They counter argue the Eriksonian perspective on identity due to its “tendency to treat race, ethnicity, gender, and other social categories as “natural” and static rather than as socially constructed and dynamic (271). The analysis mainly focuses on the interpretation of the interviews conducted with the aforementioned sample and deduce that cultural stereotypes affect the development of identity. They propose that “understanding ethnic and racial identity within the micro and macro-contexts in which they exist allows for a more theoretically rich understanding of identity development (282).

I find two gaps in this study; first is that their sample comprise only adolescent students who are, in some way, a minority —Black, Hispanic, Asian and so on— but not necessarily migrants, and the second gap is that, though this research highlights certain important aspects of identity in the contemporary era, they focus on the affective factors of cultural stereotypes and how it hinders the development of race, ethnicity, and gender. My study, on the other hand, extends this argument to intervene that identity politics is in fact more than emotional attachments to a single or multiple characteristics of

individual or collective identity and that political agendas and propagandas may as well hinder the construction, reception, and interpretation of identity.

Furthermore, Robin James's "Is the post- in post-identity the post- in post-genre?" (2017) expands the argument of post-identity through a comparative study of post-genre musical practices and post-identity politics by analysing Taylor Swift's 'Shake It Off' and Diplo's experiences as a DJ, producer, and impresario. To make her case that multi-genre pop practice counts as post-genre and that genre transgression is influenced by the identity of the artists, she draws on the theories of critical race theorists Cristina Beltran and Jared Sexton's critiques of post-racial politics and Sasha Frere-Jones' indie rock miscegenation.

According to James, identity politics play a significant role in American pop music genres. Stereotypes based on gender, colour, sexual orientation, and class are used by the music industry to define, express, and enforce genre boundaries as well as determine the worth of various genres, styles, and songs. She concludes that "post-identity politics and post-genre aesthetics do not just share a common 'post-', they intersect" (31). Only those artists who are legible as post-genre practitioners are those who reside on the "non-black" side of the post-identity colour line and who seem to have moved past the traditional white racism.

James's essay focuses on how transgressing one genre may result in affecting another genre. Although there is no reference to kitsch or rhizome, the relationship between music and identity resonates with one part of my argument. On the other hand, my study expands the gap in implication and analysis of this essay by applying Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhizome, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and Lugg's notions of resistance and subversion to Kundera's selected novels.

2.2.2 Rhizomatic Interpretations of Multiplicities

Caleb Bailey's "An Alternative Border Metaphor: On Rhizomes and Disciplinary Boundaries" (2019), utilising Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome, analyses two key texts; *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* (2002) by Laurence Ricou and *Fronteras Americanas* (1993) by Guillermo Verdecchia. The essay investigates how a border that is seen as a rhizomatic line of flight might ensure that "borderland cultural productions retain the multiplicity of the identities" (1) and thus challenges the idea of the border as a static, dichotomous object.

The Arbutus/Madrone Files investigates the subtleties of the Pacific Northwest while Verdecchia's play *Fronteras Americanas* explores the borders of North America and challenge the disparity in representations of the margins. Bailey argues that *Fronteras Americanas* "throws out rhizomatic lines of flight in every direction, creating surplus connectivities and proliferating multiplicities" (10). Crossing the US-Mexico border, the protagonist's quest for identity goes underground to grow rhizomatic offshoots and, therefore, erupt the earlier constructed discursive plane. According to Bailey, the transnational and the rhizome are parallel: "mobile, complex, flexible, hybridized" (6). He concludes that the theorization of borders as rhizomes adds reflexivity to the metaphor of border and, thus, allows transgressive potentiality. He argues that "to theorize rhizomatically involves dismantling the dualisms and binaries" (13). However, my study contends the absence of post-identitarian and post-art binaries and how they are affected by political kitsch in Bailey's study. His focus is primarily on the North American borders. Criticizing North American borderland cultures through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome is a widely researched topic. The present study, however, applies Deleuzoguattarian rhizome to investigate the border studies and marginalized identities of Central European literature. Moreover, my research argues how art and identity are linked and how the binaries of in-group and out-group can be dismantled through a rhizomatic approach.

Furthermore, Jeong Kyung Park, et al. claim in "African hip hop as a rhizomic art form articulating urban youth identity and resistance with reference to Kenyan *genge* and Ghanaian hiplife" (2019) that hip hop, as a widespread cultural phenomenon, is a compound assemblage of narratives and metanarratives. Utilizing the concept of the rhizome from Deleuze and Guattari, this study attempts a 'mapping' of rhizomatic characteristics in African popular music with specific reference to Kenya and Ghana. The study utilises both primary and secondary data. Primary data comprise of interviews conducted in the field with hip hop musicians, music critics and young fans of hip hop culture. Secondary data includes existing and recorded *genge* and hiplife music from selected artists, along with interviews of artists that were obtained from public sources.

The paper interprets different genres of music as rhizomes, which makes further genres through different combinations. The authors argue that hip hop was not, and has never been, a homogenous category, but rather its popularity is interconnected with other events and continuous multiplicities that have no distinct beginning or end, no

centre or periphery, and no inside or outside. Hip hop as a rhizome in Kenya and *genge* in Ghana underwent multiple and ongoing transformations through which it underwent several multiplicities (105, my paraphrase).

Relating music to political and social movements as well as cultural assimilations, they conclude that through hip hop, marginalised urban youths living in impoverished environments engage in a cultural practice that allows them to express their identities and resistance (117, my paraphrase). This conclusion echoes a portion of my argument that is: kitsch as a transgressive genre is a rebellion against the totalitarian aestheticism. However, this article does not elaborate on the high/low binaries in art/music and how the perception of art (hip hop, in this case) affects the identity of its adherents.

2.2.3 Privileged and Marginalised Arts and Identities

Under this section, I have reviewed secondary sources that utilize kitsch either as its subject or its perspective. Drawing from a variety of art critics such as Dorfilles, Kulka, Broch, Calinescu, Brinkley, Sontag, and others, Monica Kjellman-Chapin's "The Politics of Kitsch" (2010) presents a brief but insightful discussion on the usage of the term "kitsch", its history, and related literature. She questions what kitsch itself, as a persistently pejorative conceptual category in art history, really signifies? The essay primarily argues that kitsch has always been presumed as uncritical, derogatory, and schmaltzy, however, as kitsch migrated from modernism to postmodernism "a different transformation is taking place whereby kitsch can be mobilized as critical" (38).

Apparently, this article is very much in line with my argument which revolves around the trajectory of kitsch from being the lesser art to being a source of rebellion and transgression of the normative, however, the most obvious gap in Kjellman-Chapin's essay is the lack of social, cultural and political implications of kitsch on identity and vice versa. The essay is predominately centred on the visual arts, its rules and marketability. Kjellman approach to repositioning kitsch could have served the as a framework for this study, as she renegotiates the binary of kitsch and art in an attempt to reevaluate kitsch, however, my research incorporates the concepts of kitsch in visual arts with political, social, and cultural institutions and their effects on identity, thus, providing a framework that originates from aesthetic philosophy into identity politics. Therefore, Lugg's approach is more practical due to its inclusion of the socio-cultural and politico-aesthetic perspectives on the relationship between identity and kitsch.

Moreover, in *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1987), Matei Calinescu writes that kitsch is “fabricated by technicians hired by business; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice of buying or not buying” (243). I counter this claim on the basis of its assumption that kitsch involves only selling and buying cheap and sappy tourist souvenirs. Calinescu’s charge of kitsch’s passive receptivity cannot be generalized to the entire audience of kitsch. In my study, I discuss in detail how the audience of kitsch are not passive but rather actively participate in the consumption of kitsch or actively resist or subvert it.

Gregory Freidin’s analysis in “Transfiguration of Kitsch: Timur Kibirov’s Elegies for Soviet Civilization” comprise Kibirov poetry collection *Sentiments* (1994) and establishes that in his nostalgic and satiric poetry, he presents “a tribute to the post-Soviet kitsch” (22). Freidin draws a comparison between Disneyland and the Soviet Union. He argues that the Soviet’s penchant for spectacular parades and rallies, sports Olympiads, feats of outer space exploration, and party congress galas are all similar to theme park entertainments. Except for one difference, Disneyland charges for admission into its space of enchantment; the Soviet Union charged only those who wanted to leave because they grew disenchanted.

Although my research does include the totalitarian characteristics of Soviets, Freidin’s article is based on the recollections of a Russian poet, Kibirov. My study, on the other hand, provides an insight into Soviet kitsch from the perspective of the victims of Russian invasion. As the Czechs were occupied by the Soviets, Kundera has been on the receiving end of the Soviet regime and, therefore, brings new insights into these Soviet and post-Soviet eras.

2.2.4 Locating Kunderian Fiction in the Contemporary Scholarship

In the introductory chapter, I briefly located and reviewed Kunderian fiction in order to link it with the research statement of the present study. Following are the relevant secondary sources that I have reviewed to locate my selected thematic perspectives in the existing scholarship on Kundera’s fiction.

Paula S. DelBonis-Platt’s dissertation titled *(De)Presenting the Self: Milan Kundera’s Deconstruction of The Public Persona Through Paradox* (1997) theorizes that through the use of paradox, Milan Kundera deconstructs the public persona.

DelBonis analyses eight novels by Milan Kundera, published up till 1997, two critical works *Testaments Betrayed* and *The Art of the Novel*, and his play *Jacques and His Master* from a Derridean deconstructionist perspective. Her study focuses on four major areas – the multiplicity of the persona; the question of body and soul in constructing the persona; the historical context of persona; and the persona’s representation through communication. She argues that Kundera attains this deconstruction via paradoxes. Instead of establishing nothingness that is devoid of truth, Kundera discloses “a world of excess – the excess of human possibility, as well as the excess inherent in the postmodern sign” (DelBonis-Platt 2).

While talking about a plurality of persona, DelBonis writes that through oppositions, Kundera investigates binary figures beyond the terrestrial borders (19, my paraphrase). He deconstructs pairs by revealing the ever-present presence of the opposite side. She argues that in Kunderian fiction the notion of the Other creates the multiplicity of the persona and thus the division of the private and the public selves. She further contends that “the formation of a persona necessitates witnesses” ~~in other words, a living mirror that reflects the individual’s action and message~~ (21-22). Discussing the creation of the self by the other, DelBonis highlights the Kafkaesque and Orwellian nuance of Kunderian fiction in which the “Other” oftentimes echoes Foucault’s panopticon. However, not everyone rejects the gaze of the Other, some seek reinforcement of their persona or existence through the gaze. Moreover, she argues that Kundera does not side with one aspect of the persona but rather investigates the inability to discern between the two sides (19, my paraphrase).

DelBonis reasons that Kundera’s fiction deconstructs the long-appreciated superior status of the soul. Just as postmodernism proposes the incredulity of metanarratives, Kundera renegotiates the focus from the soul to the body as a physical embodiment of the self. Body, though the opposite of the soul, is equally intriguing for Kundera. He pursues a unity that will unite the body, soul, and persona together, yet this unification is ever elusive and paradoxical and ends up in further deconstruction of the self. DelBonis concludes her arguments with the proposition that in deconstructing the persona, Kundera’s use of paradox becomes “pure subversion by instituting a demand for ultimate relativity” (115-116), wherein the individual opens up himself to a world of infinite signs and codes in the fluctuating narrative voices.

The reason this thesis is relevant to my study is the deconstructionist nuances

that are targeted by the researcher and the formation and subversion of persona as well as the instability of metanarratives on which identity is based. The study mainly focuses on the deconstruction of persona, body, and soul from philosophical and existential perspective. This approach limits the social, political, and cultural implications of identity in Kundera's fiction which my study aims to explore.

Elena Syvokaite in her thesis "Being Beyond Borders: An analysis of Being and Existence in Sartre's *Nausea* and Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*" (2018), advances comparisons between the two authors from an existential perspective. Syvokaite applies Sartrean concepts to Kunderian fiction to demonstrate that the realization of our radical freedom should not require authoritarian conditions. She outlines Sartre's philosophical notions in relation to his first novel *Nausea* (1938) and argues that Sartre's philosophy establishes the ground for a borderless being because he explicitly suggests "being-beyond-being".

Syvokaite elaborates Friedrich Hegel's notions of being-in-itself and being-for-itself in Sartrean philosophy to arrive at "being-for-others". It is the latter, she says, that is significantly explored in the works of Kundera. His characters are anguished by their existence being imposed and demanded by the "Other". What happens in the presence of the Other is that the character's position as the creator of meaning is disrupted and decentralised. Sartre calls it bad faith: to hold a belief as a fact that we are not what we want to be but something "Other" has set for us (Syvokaite 11, my paraphrase).

Syvokaite argues that according to Sartre there are two imperatives to being: internal and external. The internal imperative is being powerful and therefore characterized by an inducement to revolt. While external imperative is the "Other". She argues that it is easier to defy social conventions and escape rules set out by an outsider than rules created by the individual themselves. Quoting Jolanta W. Wawrzycka, she argues that Kundera has designed Sabina's character in a way to illustrate the possibility of escape from "all the restraints that various socio-political circumstances and institutions incessantly impose upon us" (Syvokaite 14). Sabina thus recognises that the Other obstructs her freedom; that the Other conditions her being. In other words, it suggests that we impose borders upon ourselves with fruitless imperatives of "Es muss sein!"

This work helps validate the foundation of my argument as it deals with the

existential undertones of Kundera's novel, however, the focus of my study is largely on the social, political, and philosophical metamorphosis of identity thus attempting to extend the current status of identity in Kundera's fiction particularly, and in postmodern diasporic literature generally.

Parastoo Nasrollahzadeh's dissertation, *Exploring Kitsch: Kundera's The Unbearable Lightness of Being and Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five* (2017), aims to show how Kitsch influences the characters' lives and contributes to the narrative composition of the novels. The thesis mainly explores the various and complicated expressions of kitsch as a mode of representation or discourse. He concludes that kitsch is "l'art de pacotille"⁸ and aesthetically deficient. Kitsch lacks originality, creativity, and imagination while high art is superior to kitsch because it informs intuition about reality (Nasrollahzadeh 3-6). In the second chapter, he further explains how kitsch is explored in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* through the analysis of the term's original metaphysical undertones in connection with shit. The third chapter examines the second novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and its stylistic aspects, such as the autobiographical function and narrative structure in general. I, however, mainly focus on Kundera's novel in this review since the explanatory details of *Slaughterhouse-Five* are not relevant to my study.

Nasrollahzadeh considers *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* a "meta-kitsch"⁹ novel. He argues that Kundera's use of kitsch is not based on morals or ethics but rather on aesthetics. Sabina's protest against Communism is not ethical but rather aesthetic. She stands on the opposite side of totalitarianism and thus kitsch. She protests totalitarian kitsch, she even manages to conceal her Czech ancestry, a desperate attempt to get away from the kitsch that others tried to create of her existence. However, Nasrollahzadeh points out Kundera's assertion that "none among us is superman enough to escape Kitsch completely", even Sabina's character has her share of kitsch which is evident in her ideal of home, "all peace, quiet, and harmony, and ruled by a loving mother and wise father" (32). Thus, the argument of kitsch as an aesthetic and not ethical concept is succeeded by Sabina's detestation of totalitarianism on aesthetic grounds. Tomas, who is considered to be the opposite of kitsch has a kitschified character. He believes his womanizing is an imperative that has enslaved him —an "es muss sein!"

⁸ French phrase which means "cheap art". For more details see *The Curtain: "Kitsch and Vulgarly"* (33).

⁹ A novel about kitsch that itself employs kitsch aesthetics.

Tomas believes that his love for Tereza inverts his “es muss sein”, since Tereza is the opposite of his womanizing, however, she becomes the enslaving imperative, “es muss sein” of his life thus forcing him to succumb to kitsch. Tereza, on the other hand, is always associated with weight. She has a kitsch of her own to struggle with: “the conflict of body and soul” (Nasrollahzadeh 41). These character analyses portray each character with relation to kitsch and advances the central argument of the dissertation that is how the use of kitsch affects Kundera’s characterization.

While Nasrollahzadeh focuses on exploring the complexity of Kitsch in narration and its impact on the characterization in both novels, my study deals particularly with the political kitsch and its impacts on identity. Moreover, how kitsch is rejected or subverted in Kundera’s novels and thus leads to the emergence of post-identitarian Rhizome.

John Bayley in his essay “Kundera and Kitsch” (2003) writes that according to Kundera, the Communist regime is one of the vilest consequences of the totalitarian kitsch since it defies privacy and individual pattern of responsibility. However, Bayley further argues that Kundera’s notion of Kitsch oversimplifies the entire question. Because if his definition of kitsch is accepted and applied, all art would be as full of kitsch as any Hollywood or Soviet film. Kitsch according to Bayley, does not identify an absolute concept; but rather denotes a tendency or style (25-26, my paraphrase). This renegotiation provides an opportunity to dismantle the rigid definitions of western thought and thus helps relocate the hierarchies of aesthetics and identity. Moreover, my study proposes that Kundera renegotiates kitsch by emphasising its political hegemony.

The second novel that I have selected for this study is relatively recent novel by Kundera and is not widely researched. In the available academic resources, I did not find substantial material on this novel in the English language – though I do not claim that it has not entirely been critically analysed. I did find multiple online newspapers and journal reviews on this novel, some of which I have included here.

Mubasher Mehdi in his review “Insignificance conjoined with humour – A Review of Kundera’s novel, *The Festival of Insignificance*” (2018) highlights the themes of human instincts and passions, sex and sexuality, and post-War European society. The main claim throughout the review is an attempt to show that the novel is not only humorous but also ironically satirical (Mehdi 529). Mehdi argues that the story of

twenty-four partridges shows the Stalin's suppression of his comrades. They could only comment on Stalin's story at the urinary vessels. Similarly, Madame La' Franck's reaction to her husband's death is an example of an attitude of insignificance towards death. Mehdi argues that Kundera ridicules customs about death (529). He further describes Alain's obsessive thinking about the navel as the centre of female seduction, however, he has not given much attention to the interpretation of this metaphor and what it could mean. One of the novel's most relevant scenes to my study is Caliban at the cocktail party. Mehdi focuses on how this Urdu-speaking Pakistani is unable to jest and consequently becomes a joke himself for 'being' a Pakistani (529). He concludes the review with the question; what does insignificance mean? The pretension or its celebration as a cocktail party? My study provides an elaborate account of the theme of insignificance with reference to post-identity.

Diane Johnson in her "Review of Kundera's *The Festival of Insignificance*" published in *The New York Times*, claims that laughter, jokes, sexuality, despair, and death, among the novel's main themes, are more or less enhanced via superficially allegorical figures. Reiterating the apathetic attitude of the characters, Johnson writes that the fragmented hope of changing the world is still present in Kundera's novel in its ongoing engagement with the Soviet regime and Stalin (Johnson). Stalin assumes a huge presence in the narrative by dominating three chapters of the novel. For, Johnson Stalin is a representation of "unresolved issues".

Although Johnson believes that the world has run beyond some of the concerns that still preoccupy Kundera and that what he has to tell us seems to have less relevance. My study counters this statement by focusing on how totalitarianism is still prevalent in different shapes for different purposes. One point that is similar to my study is Johnson's interpretation of Kundera's use of laughter as a symbol. She writes that when Kundera talks about laughter, he sees it as a tangible form of attack, an act of self-defence, or a responsibility, not as a subjective expression of approbation or surprise, as we typically perceive it (Johnson, my paraphrase). This resonates with my study in the sense that kitsch and rhizome in post-identitarian (con)texts can be argued to work as a self-defence mechanism —a form of resistance or subversion. I argue that Kundera uses laughter in the "post- joke" sense to dismantle the metanarrative of history.

Further illustrating this symbol of laughter, Jonathan Rosen in "Does Kundera

Still Matter?” (2015) questions whether Kundera is merely indicating that he is a literary purist committed to the freedom of aesthetics rather than a political writer by exercising his unrestrained imagination and humour? He writes that in Kundera’s fiction there is a positive kind of humour which is ironic, critical, and satirical and a negative kind of laughter which is naïve, joyous, and subservient. Rosen argues that the novel provides a prospect to consider what happens to Kundera’s fiction once the backdrop of Soviet oppression is eliminated. The need for a shelter saturated with Western values and protected from European betrayals is evident in *The Festival of Insignificance*. Rosen goes on to say that while the novel may be a textual template of European culture, that culture has become so tired and introspective that it has deteriorated into little more than navel-gazing (Rosen).

Leo Robson highlights a similar aspect of Kunderian fiction in his review of *The Festival of Insignificance* titled “In Milan Kundera’s First New Novel in 15 Years, the Novelty Begins to Wear Thin” (2018). Robson argues that Kundera’s fainting, idea-laden, anti-realist eccentricity is owing in part to the writer’s lack of involvement and in part to developments in literary society. Kundera’s innovative methods have been replicated or outdone, and the task now is to surpass his own originality. Robson’s review examines Kundera’s abilities in fiction writing as well as his dissident stature in the realms of literature and politics. Comparing *The Festival of Insignificance* with Kundera’s previously published novels, Robson writes that “it displays a sensibility by now almost entirely French”. The characters, the setting, and the history are French – compared to his previous works that comprise an amalgamation of variety– a novel without suspense, without building a plotline, without depicting an era, a culture, or a place.

Kundera, after Kafka, is perhaps the most important and widely read Czech novelist. However, he has always turned down the dissident stature and any political affiliations despite his novels being replete with such themes. Moreover, Robson explains that avoiding identification with any political ideology or moral philosophy is “an act of resistance and rebellion against the novelist’s presumed commitments”, not of evasion or passivity. My thesis addresses this paradox of Kundera’s refusal to “participate” in the diasporic tradition, yet his oeuvre is mainly based on themes of national sensibilities, and identities, with equally important existential themes creating a sort of fissure in this debate of post-identity.

Leyla Sanai's "Review of *The Festival of Insignificance*" published in *The Independent* (2015) highlights the typical Kunderian nuances in the novel. Leyla writes that there is a simple touch, a trick that makes the novel readable while accentuating the horrors of history, particularly the Stalin era. Like all other novels by Kundera, paradox, irony, and humour are common. Philosophical ideas, the appearance of angels, and jokes turning dangerous are some other prototypical elements of Kunderian fiction that Sanai lists. One point that I wish to highlight here is, Sanai's statement that there are "no inessential scenarios" in *The Festival of Insignificance*. This is important because most of the reviewers of this novel fail to mention that every word, phrase, and scene, or the lack thereof is in no way inessential; they are what makes the novel unique. Every word and sentence display the author's selection and its outcomes. Almost all the reviews encapsulated in this chapter have not explored the theme of kitsch and post-identity in this novel. My study attempts to fill these gaps by exploring and analysing the novels from a post-identitarian perspective with reference to rhizome and political kitsch.

In this chapter, I examined a variety of secondary sources to locate the gaps in the contemporary critical corpus that my study aims to address. While reviewing the secondary sources, I discovered that hardly any secondary source addresses the question of post-identity in the selected novels. However, a number of publications that relate to some aspects of the study in a considerable way inform my literature review and contextualize my project in the existing literature. While selecting the secondary sources to be evaluated, I kept the theoretical framework in mind so that each review is meaningfully related to some aspect of my research and leads to major findings. This project aims to fill these gaps through textual analysis. In the next chapter, I have discussed the theoretical framework and research methodology of this study.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I first outline the theoretical framework I have used to analyse the selected novels of Milan Kundera. Secondly, I discuss the research methodology and method that I am going to use for the exploration and interpretation of my research premises.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This research focuses on tracing the patterns of kitsch and rhizome in the selected novels of Milan Kundera —*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance*— to rationalize the metamorphosis of identity into post-identity. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of Rhizome supplemented with deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and Catherine A. Lugg’s concept of resistance and subversion of Kitsch together supply a framework for this study. A triangulation of these theories is made possible based on the underlying constructions of these concepts because they share a common denominator of resisting the essentialist grand narratives. I draw a parallelism between the marginalisation of kitsch with marginal identities to generate a debate on the questions of identity in postmodern (con)texts and develop a case for post-identity. Largely, the intersections of postmodernism, postcolonialism, postmigration, and deconstructionism orchestrate the theoretical context of this study. Therefore, though I have employed the above particular theories of kitsch and rhizome as theoretical lenses to analyse the selected texts, I have read and situated Kundera’s fiction in contemporary postmodern and post-identitarian contexts where the aforementioned theories converge.

I argue that the way kitsch is marginalized in the traditional approach towards aesthetics, certain anti-essential identities, such as diaspora, are marginalized in traditional identitarianism. The reason for making this parallelism is the symbiotic relationship between art and identity, for example, kitsch artists face vocational identity marginalisation due to the “low artistic value” of their art because kitsch is considered

low art. The identities of a kitsch artist and a migrant have shared experience of belonging and abandonment. Thus, there is a connection between art and identity, and binaries in one domain promotes binaries in the other. Moreover, since all art forms are ideology laden, there is no apolitical approach towards a study of art and identity.

The problem is not that kitsch is bad art and must be condemned, the problem is the existence of an ideology that considers ordinary human needs and sentiments as kitsch in a pejorative sense. In this study I argue that Kunderian fiction challenges the stance that kitsch is bad art and proposes a renegotiation of ideologies that enforce such categorization and demand blind obedience from the masses. In this particular case it is communism. However, the idea is not limited to only communism but also throws light on present-day totalitarianism in identity politics.

My theoretical framework starts off with artistic kitsch and then renegotiates this concept by integrating Kunderian concept of political kitsch and its impacts on identity. And, moreover, how resistance and subversion of political kitsch can expediate the emergence of post-identitarian rhizome. Since the research attempts to theorize post-identitarian rhizome in the realm of aesthetics and politics as a strategy to decolonize and reterritorialize kitsch and migrant/rootless identity, therefore, it is crucial to examine the subversion and/or resistance to kitsch, and deterritorialization and reterritorialization to explore the emergence and metamorphosis of post-identitarian rhizome in postmodern (con)texts. Below, I discuss the theoretical notions which endorse my critical analysis:

1. Marginalisation ‘in’ Kitsch and Marginalisation ‘of’ Kitsch in Contemporary Politico-aesthetic Discourse
2. Resistance and Subversion
3. Rhizome and Its Applications in Post-identitarianism

3.2.1 Marginalisation ‘in’ Kitsch and Marginalisation ‘of’ Kitsch in Contemporary Politico-aesthetic Discourse

Art has been and most probably will remain one of the most important aspects of political representation. “Art is inherently political because artists build on and play with their audience’s sense of history, culture, and reality” (Lugg 4). Ever since Plato wrote about the evils of poetry and Aristotle felt the need to amend those fractures; art, literature, and every other field of knowledge have been subjected to some sort of marginalization. But the dilemma of marginality and superiority is not only an inter-field problem but also an

intra-field. There is the subjugation of one field of knowledge by another field i.e., the academic rivalry between STEM and humanities, and there is the subjugation of one form of art by another form such as tragedy and comedy or as we are discoursing in this research, the case of art verses kitsch and camp.

As I discussed in the introductory chapter, the binary of art and kitsch is based on the claims that kitsch uses baser emotions and unreflective thoughts and is readily discernible while art, specifically high art, avoids the sugary and syrupy imagery and focuses on critical and creative themes and objects. Kitsch is said to blur the division between reality and false or between art and non-art and therefore is a greater enemy of art than fake art. All these criticisms attributed to kitsch create a binary of kitsch and art.

The way a form or piece of art is perceived also says a lot about the people that are being represented in the art as well as by whom are they represented and to whom: creator, content, and audience. Moreover, “we associate socially devalued genres with socially devalued people” (James 21) which leads to the stigmatisation of certain genres and marginalisation of certain identities. The subjugation of art is endorsed by totalitarians and the subjugation of people is brought upon by the tactical use of art. Art constructs realities and worlds as opposed to just reflecting reality. Meandering through a person’s consciousness, art mocks, affirm, evoke, confuse, challenge, and stir up deeply engraved beliefs and principles. By using symbols, art subverts conventional conventions by giving viewers or readers a variety of viewpoints and, thus, modifies perception (Lugg 4-5, my paraphrase).

Similarly, political kitsch for Kundera is one where politicians cover up their political propagandas with pretentious beauty and unison in order to unionize the masses into submission. “Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements” (*TULB* 132). Political ideologies utilize kitsch to structure “individual thinking and action toward working for a larger group and larger political goals” (Lugg 25) and, therefore, it is a propaganda that uses well-known and understandable narrative to influence the public. From art to politics, kitsch uses clichés that do not require reflection and judgment or are not questioned by the masses. Thus, it functions as “a powerful political construction designed to colonize the consciousness” of its subjects/audience (5). Lugg’s arguments are applicable to this research because like Kundera, she highlights the actual kitschiness of political policies which use propagandist tactics under the mask of “brotherhood” and “the Grand March”.

In its essence, kitsch is anything that denies the existence of “shit” in human existence and colonizes the individual consciousness. Postcolonial history is rampant with White prestige and immigration struggles that show how this binarism ascribes intellect to one and “unreflective emotions” to the other. Such “Manichean” approaches to difference have been critiqued as “alteritist”, for “perpetuating the rigidity of the self/other binarism governing traditional discourse on colonialism” (Suleri 11). In other words, the way postcolonialism and feminism are often discussed in parallel due to the power struggle between colonizer/colonized and man/woman hierarchies, I have invoked the symbiosis of art and identity because there is a similar power struggle between kitsch/high art and rooted/migrant identities.

Therefore, I aim to explore how Kundera debunks the myths of Europe’s history particularly in art and political arenas as Lugg states, “kitsch remains a fine staple within the political environment because of how well it goes with our cherished stereotypes” (108). Debunking such stereotypical, normative, and rigid boundaries of art and identity, this study explores questions such as how new political and social identities emerge, how the voices that are silenced and excluded are acknowledged or acquire agency, or simply put, how the set norms are challenged.

3.2.2 Resistance and Subversion

In this discussion, I address the problem of dealing with kitsch. Lugg presents two reactions with which kitsch is dealt: resistance and subversion in her book *Kitsch: From Education to Public Policy* (2002). According to her, whether functioning as bad art, political discourse, or public policy, “kitsch is too easy, too convenient, too simple” and must be recognized as such; only then can it be resisted or subverted (112). Once recognized, kitsch becomes vulnerable to rejection, distortion, co-optation, and outright parody.

Resistance involves creating hard-defined boundaries against Kitsch. A common form of resistance is that of “tuning out” (107). That is to refuse participation in any action or ideology. Acknowledgement, demystification, and old-fashioned idol smashing are powerful antidotes to a kitsch-driven political environment. The second reaction to kitsch is subversion or appearing to accept kitsch while “using its very parameters to undermine its power” (109). Subversion involves insignificance or indifference towards kitsch. It turns the kitsched ideals of politics into a “joke”, for example, political humour,

parody, and satire quickly shred the kitsched garb of the totalitarian rulers.

Furthermore, the idea of breaking stereotypes and “demolishing the idols” in Lugg’s concept of resistance and subversion enables me to conceptualise renegotiation of kitsch and rhizome in the selected texts as my study speculates that the art mainly classified as kitsch is actually an act of idol-smashing of high-art. Hence, the aim of this research is to renegotiate the political, and aesthetic hierarchies.

In this project, I aim to analyse the text under these two approaches toward kitsch. This helps the analysis to progress in terms of the character’s response to kitsched ideals in both novels. The reason to employ this particular lens is that, since I propose in my argument that political kitsch marginalizes certain art forms that threaten its beautified (kitschified) cover of the ugly reality, therefore, by extending this notion to the politics of identity due to its symbiotic relation to art, I argue that the aesthetic marginalisation can provide a base to identitarian marginalization.

In the selected novels, political kitsch is resisted or subverted on different level i.e., on the textual level where the characters attempt to resist or subvert the kitsch of the totalitarian regime and reassert their individual identities, and on paratextual level where Kundera resists and subverts the totalitarian narratives of art and identity. I argue that through this act of resistance and subversion, the kitsched ideology of totalitarian metanarratives are renegotiated. This renegotiation thus furthers the emergence of post-identity by redrawing the boundaries of identity politics and aesthetics.

3.2.3 Rhizome and Its Applications in Post-identitarianism

A Web or network is a rhizomatic anti-structure of multiple nodes connected to one another without forming a hierarchy. This study employs the concept of rhizome as per *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari. The main task in their work is that of overturning Platonism through the anti-genealogical concepts such as rhizome and nomadology. The book mainly focuses on formulating a philosophy or science, particularly nomad science, which might afford some solutions to the problems of social organizations in the contemporary world. These plateaus are characterized by “continuous, self-vibrating regions of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end” (*ATP* 22).

Deleuze and Guattari outline certain principles/characteristics of a rhizome which I have listed below:

1. **Principle of connection and heterogeneity:** A rhizome can be linked to anything at any point.
2. **Principle of multiplicity:** A multiplicity consists exclusively of determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot grow in quantity without altering their quality. The outside defines multiplicities through deterritorialization, which affects how they alter and interact with other multiplicities.
3. **Principle of asignifying rupture:** A rhizome can be split or separated at one spot, but it will still grow on one of its old or new lines/nods.
4. **Principle of cartography and decalomania:** A rhizome resembles a map rather than a trace. It always has numerous entrances. Contrary to tracing, which always returns “to the same” entry, a map contains several entrances. Any structural or generative model cannot be applied to it. Any notion of a genetic axis or profound structure is alien to it (*ATP 7-9*).

The concept of the rhizome as explained by Deleuze and Guattari is a pluralistic, varied, and dynamic form. A rhizome is an interconnected web, a convergence of dynamic relations that produces bulbs here and there, and continues to grow outward. It stands for the idea of dynamic, diverse pluralism that incorporates the vertical and horizontal connections in a rhizome network. Rhizome rejects the notion of “genetic axis”, deep-rooted, arboreal structures, and generative models. According to them this anti-genealogic, (anti)structure of rhizome creates multiplicities. These rhizomatic multiplicities uncover arborescent pseudomultiplicities. A rhizome is a network of nodes linked to each other without a definite centre or periphery. This, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is due to the constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization that take place in rhizomatic multiplicities.

Here, I argue that stigmatized art and identities upon dismantling the hierarchies alter the centre and periphery. In Deleuzoguattarian terms, this phenomenon is called deterritorialization and reterritorialization. In deterritorialization, the structure and organization of a territory –social relation– is changed, transformed, or demolished by an outsider. The establishment of a new territory by the newly built apparatus (the newly established power) is called reterritorialization. It is the reorganization of a territory after deterritorialization. Moreover, “there is no deterritorialization [...] that is not accompanied by global or local reterritorializations [...] one is the reverseside of the other” (*Anti-Oedipus 316*). Each rhizome is made up of lines of segmentarity that

determine how it is stratified, territorialized, and organized, as well as lines of deterritorialization through which it constantly escapes. Each time segmentary lines implode into a line of flight, there is a rupture within the rhizome. Nonetheless, these lines of flight (*ligne de fuite*)¹⁰ are also a part of the rhizome. There is always a connection between those lines. Because of this, it is impossible to hold a dualism or dichotomy, even the rudimentary ones as simple as “good” and “evil”.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization stress that the nomadic waves move back and forth between the centre to the periphery. That is to say that the peripheries that move to the centre then move from there to the new periphery “falling back to the old centre and launching forth to the new” (*ATP* 74). This shift from centre to periphery may not only disassemble the binary but create other similar binaries. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they address this tension between centre and periphery in the following manner:

There is no question, however, of establishing a dualist opposition between the two types of multiplicities [...], that would be no better than the dualism between the One and the multiple. There are only multiplicities of multiplicities forming a single assemblage, operating in the same assemblage. (34)

Therefore, rhizome is instrumental in the exploration of the arboreal nature of rooted identity that flows from roots (centre) to branches (periphery). The rhizome does not have a defined centre, and therefore lacks defined peripheries. It negates the notions of roots and of being rooted and instead, proposes an intertwined rhizomatic root system, a network spreading either underground or above the ground, without roots taking over permanently. How it disapproves the root and still is a root system only means that the former term is to be interpreted as the lowest/stable part of the arboreal hierarchy, while the later denotes a rhizomic network of roots with no hierarchy.

As discussed in the introduction, the aim of this study is not to homogenize different forms of art and identity into one. The theoretical foundation of this study is based on constant process of “becoming” rather than static “being”. A rhizome is

¹⁰ Brian Massumi, translator of *A Thousand Plateaus*, notes that “*fuite*” not only denotes the act of fleeing or escape but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance (the vanishing point in a painting is a *point de fuite*). This opens up a new approach to interpret the demolition of borders.

denoted as 'n-1'¹¹. It is only when the 'One' is removed that the continuous multiplicity, which differs from part to part and varies every time it is divided, becomes possible. Thus, a rhizome is a multiplicity that removed the 'One' that reigns over and unifies everything (Yi-Jinkyung 13:58 - 14:44).

The being and becoming of an entity or territory and the subsequent contention of centre and periphery is equated to a structure with its specific regime of signs, which transforms "reciprocal presupposition"¹² into the hierarchical superiority of one term over the other (Holland 58). Similarly, deterritorialization and reterritorialization presuppose each other. Wherever there is deterritorialization, there will always be reterritorialization. Deterritorialization and reterritorialization comprise both sides of the same coin.

Thus a rhizome differs greatly from roots and radicles. The Rhizome itself takes on a variety of shapes, including bulbs and tubers – nodes or connecting points – and ramified surface expansion in all directions. A body composed of plateaus has "many 'specific regions of intensity', each sufficient unto itself but also connected and connectable to others" (Genosko 1096).

In the earlier section of this chapter, I discussed political kitsch and its impact on identity politics and aesthetic, and Lugg's two approaches to deal with kitsch: resistance and subversion. I argued that through these two approaches, Kunderian fiction helps construct a rhizomatic niche for the emergence of post-identity because rhizome too counters the idea of universally generalized roots. It is relevant to my study due to its exilic and post-identitarian nature because of a commonality of roots/rootlessness since both challenges totalitarian kitsch and rooted hierarchies. Therefore, taking the notion of rootlessness and multiplicity, this study attempts to conceptualize the notions of up-rootedness and the emergence of rhizomatic identities as a result of resisting or subverting political kitsch.

3.3 Research Methodology

In the introduction to *Research Methods for English Studies*, Gabriele Griffin writes that choosing a specific research project is, to a substantial extent, dependent on selecting the

¹¹ The "n-1" refers to the constant 'becoming' of rhizome that is always one step behind the "ONE". Rhizome is a multiplicity minus the ONE.

¹² Reciprocal presupposition, derived from the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, means that two entities, for example, expression and content, coexist without preceding or subduing each other.

appropriate research methods, methodologies, and research skills. Research methods involve how you conduct research, while methodologies concern the critical theories and perspectives applied to the work such as feminist or postmodernist. Knowing the process of conducting the research might influence the outcome (Griffin 6, my paraphrase).

For this project, I have done close reading of the selected novels augmented with political, post-identitarian, and aesthetic lenses. This research is interpretive and exploratory in nature and applies and employs a qualitative methodology. I have interpreted the text using my theoretical framework which is a triangulation of Deleuzoguattarian concepts of rhizome, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and Catherine A. Lugg's concept of kitsch, and subversion and resistance against kitsch. In addition to this, I have also brought in other theoretical perspectives to avoid being myopic and monofocal. Below, I have given a precise account of interpretive and exploratory research and qualitative research methodology.

In *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, John W. Creswell defines qualitative research as a means for examining and understanding the meaning people or groups ascribe to a social or human situation (Creswell 4). Qualitative research aims to find out and narratively depict what certain people do and what their actions mean to them. It describes the “how” and the “why” of a research inquiry. It is a “meaning-relevant” approach that focuses on differences in forms of things that make a difference in meaning (Erikson 87, my paraphrase).

The use of theory in qualitative research is diverse. The researcher “may generate a theory as the end product of a study” —for example, in grounded theory. Or it “may come at the beginning” and provide a lens that directs the questions and their exploration and interpretation (Creswell 49). The latter applies to my research. The existent theory is vital as it provides me with the tools to scrutinize the texts to investigate my research questions. To balance the contention between the application of existing theory and my theoretical triangulation, I have contextualized my study in the existing scholarship; the chapter on literature review serves this purpose in my study.

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods specifies exploratory research and interpretive research as follows.

Exploratory research is a broader methodological and systematic practice

intended to support the discovery of generalizations based on the description and comprehension of a research problem. The evolving generalizations are usually numerous and diverse. These generalizations include but are not limited to “descriptive facts, folk conceptions, cultural artefacts, structural arrangements, social processes, and belief systems usually present in the group, the process, the activity, or the situation under study” (Given 327).

Interpretive research is an “epistemological framework” and practice based on Max Weber’s notion of *verstehen* (understanding) and the inseparability of understanding from interpretation that is concerned with “philosophical and methodological ways of understanding social reality” (Given 464). As an anti-naturalistic framework, interpretive research is appropriate for my project which is invested in analysing anti-essentialist and rhizomatic notions in postmodern (con)texts.

The question of the subjectivity of the researcher and their spatio-temporal situatedness is crucial to the research process as it might affect the perspective with which the analysis is carried out and consequently the findings. According to Hans Georg Gadamer’s thesis on hermeneutics, no interpretation of a literary work can be independent of the cognitive subject, the only conclusion we can reach approximates an understanding (Gadamer 19). Hence, I do not claim objectivity. My interpretation of Kundera’s works is one of many possible interpretations. Gadamer’s hermeneutics acknowledges the relationship between the pre-understanding of the researcher and everything that addresses this understanding. This pre-understanding can be used to initiate a larger set of observations, experiences, and cultural reference points that may broaden the interpretation.

3.4 Research Method

This research is qualitative in nature and employs textual analysis as a research method. Since my project is the study of politics of identity and aesthetics to conceptualize rhizomatic identity, I have selected this particular method due to its predilection towards social and cultural studies and the role that cultural and political contexts play in shaping the texts, because these concepts largely intervene in migratory and identitarian setups and literature produced in exile. I will give a brief explanation of my research method in the next two paragraphs.

Texts are the products of their respective cultures, and to interpret them, a

researcher has to be equipped with some tools. Catherine Belsey in her article “Textual Analysis as a Research Method” (2005) defines textual analysis as “a research method that involves a close encounter with the work itself” (160). She posits certain questions: What is the text about? What kinds of pre-understanding might illuminate it? What is the importance of locating the work textually and historically? How the text itself can set the direction for the research that will produce further understandings? And to what extent can we expect to arrive at a conclusive analysis? (160-161, my paraphrase).

Belsey further writes that research is distinctive from other kinds of studies as it is “original” and contributes to the existing body of knowledge. However, she also opines that “interpretation always involves extra-textual knowledge” (163), hence, the originality does not mean that the research should not have any link to the previous works but rather involves an assemblage of ideas that have not been put together in that particular way. This angle of the textual analysis highlights the main aim of my study which is to interpret and understand the ways rooted and rootless identities and the marginalisation of art and identity is perceived in different cultural, social, and political contexts. The aim is to bring about a different perspective to the selected area of study.

To conclude this chapter, I have given a brief summary of my textual framework in the first half and research methodology in the second half. I have employed textual analysis based on Catherine Belsey’s “Textual Analysis as a Research Method” (2005). Being consistently inquisitive and critical of the textual and historical contexts of the text, textual analysis is a conducive method for my study.

In Milan Kundera’s novel, one encounters an intersection of art and politics and how it influences the perspectives of the characters and the way they are perceived by the reader. Taking the interconnection of art, identity, and politics in consideration, the analysis of the selected texts would be based on the premise that political kitsch in the realm of aesthetics and identity politics creates hierarchical binaries that marginalise specific art forms and identities.

With the theoretical framework, research method, and methodology explained in the foregoing pages, I have set out to analyse the selected novels of Milan Kundera in the forthcoming chapters.

CHAPTER 4

THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND AESTHETICS IN *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING*

The first and last mistake is to judge the Other on one's own terms.

—Appiah, "Is the 'post' in 'postmodern' the 'post' in 'postcolonial'?"

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I have read *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* from the following thematic angles – the grand narratives, totalitarian kitsch, the migrant victim, the politics of identity and aesthetics, and post-identitarianism. The analysis revolves around the poetics and politics of identity and aesthetics in the postmodern (con)texts. It questions how the metanarratives have totalized and marginalized specific kinds of art and people, and their perception. Furthermore, it addresses the renegotiation of kitsch and rhizome and their repercussions in identitarian and aesthetic representations in the selected novels.

The themes I have mentioned above, some of them have received a fair amount of critical notice, but I intend to debate the politico-aesthetic notions in Kundera's fiction in relation to the contemporary discourse of kitsch and post-identitarian rhizome to deliver an understanding of the multifaceted nature of art and identity.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984) is a philosophical novel that explores identity, multiplicity, assimilation, and rebellion. It opens with Nietzsche's philosophy of the "eternal return" to explore the lightness of life that he contrasts with Parmenides's concept of heaviness. The story rotates on Tomas, a surgeon by profession and adulterer by passion, who embraces lightness until he meets Tereza who has an idealistic outlook on life, love, and politics. Tomas writes an article about the communist party in a newspaper, comparing their and Oedipus's guilt. He is asked to revoke his statement or resign from his position. Choosing the latter, he moves around until finally settling with

Tereza in a countryside where they die in a truck accident. The other equally important character is Sabina, a free-spirited artist, and lightness personified. She does not let go of any chance to free herself from owning any ideals, labels, and commitments. She chooses “an aesthetical indignation instead of an ethical position, expressing aversion to Communist kitsch” (Stan 153). She has a brief affair with a teacher named Franz, who is a blend of everything Sabina detests – idealism, Grand Marches, political activism, and kitsch.

These four characters migrate from Prague to different places due to the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia; Tomas and Teresa move to Zurich, and Switzerland; Sabina goes to Geneva and then to New York, Paris, and later to California, while Franz, after separating from Sabina, goes to Thailand to join human rights protests and dies there. These multiple placements and replacements create a rhizomatic setting for the identities of these characters. Besides the rhizomic structure of the novel, the four characters —Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, and Franz— and their interlocking relationships and individual perspective on life, art, and politics adds a thematic level of rhizome to this novel.

Vicki Adams in “Kundera’s Search for Self in a Post-Modern World” writes that one can clearly see a deconstructionist view of the modern world in Kundera’s work and his attempt “to address the concept of identity in the deconstructed, postmodern world of his novels” (235). Kundera’s novels are an assemblage of philosophy, art, history, psychology, and fantasy. He not only subverts the world of fiction but also dismantles “the hierarchical structures which have classified the portrayal of marginalized groups” (Kurt 3). Kundera injects polyphonic and rhizomatic elements in his novels to explore and question the metanarratives of art, politics, philosophy, and identity.

In this chapter, I argue that *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, along with the incredulity of metanarratives, engages with the variability and fluctuation of identity as well as its implications in the literature that represents diasporic communities. Moreover, it is not only a commentary on socio-political conundrums under the communist regime in Czechoslovakia but also an elaboration on Milan Kundera’s theory of novel writing. The novel incorporates postmodernist elements such as non-linear narrative, multiplicity, and metacommentary of the author, making this novel apposite for the analysis of kitsch and rhizome and post-identitarianism in postmodern (con)texts.

Before starting the socio-political dialectics of art and identity, first I have explored process-oriented philosophy and its applications in the origins, being, and becoming of identity and the challenges these notions pose.

4.2 Being and Becoming

“Being” and “becoming” are significant metaphysical attributes of Kunderian fiction. In Kundera’s novels this conflict between being and becoming links the existential with the political in the sense that it is enforced by the government or the party. The power dynamics of this enforced collectivism are what lies at the heart of Kundera’s work. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas, Tereza, Tereza’s mother, Sabina, and Franz are navigating their being and becoming through their search for either weight or lightness. In this section, I have analysed how Kundera establishes this metaphysical theme and what are its ramifications in the politics and poetics of art and identity in the postmodern (con)text.

With the dawn of postmodernism, previously held metanarratives of art, literature, music, history, and other fields were abandoned. This incredulity towards the set traditions and norms led to a revolutionary celebration of individuality and creativity. Art and its being and becoming have been subject to this discussion since the ancient Greeks. Gabriel Laderman suggests that there are two theories of art. The first is Parmenidean in the sense that “an intrinsic art quality of abstract relationships can be isolated from the objects represented, their subject matter, and their theoretical conceptions” (148). In other words, an abstract idea of the ‘being’ is separate from the process. Laderman calls this the theory of “being”. The second theory is Heraclitean, theorizing the painter in the act of creation and regarding all art as “becoming”.

Philosophers, such as Parmenides, who favour the concept of “being”, believe that things are the way they are in the world. They look at the world spatially because they think about existence in terms of subjects and objects. They believe that in this world, “what is, is, and what is not, is not”, what we perceive as change, which is going on in the universe all the time, is actually an illusion (West 3:15 - 3:29). On the other hand, the school of thought that favours “becoming” or the process-oriented philosophy, such as Nietzsche, Bergson, Deleuze, and Guattari, does not believe that there is a way that things are the way they are in the traditional sense of that phrase. According to this belief, things are fundamentally a process of constant change. Therefore, in this category of philosophy, we see the revolt of the contemporary against the authority of the ancients

e.g. Plato. However, the process-oriented philosophy does not negate the “being”. It acknowledges that there is an aspect of ‘you’ that is being. In a split second, ‘you’ are what you are but by the time you blink or breathe, you will have changed in small incremental ways. This being and becoming echoes the rhizomic concept of post-identity where deterritorialization and reterritorialization are taking place and identity is no more a static being rather a constant becoming.

In *The Festival of Insignificance*, Kundera renounces Kant’s idea of *das ding an sich*. Kant believed that behind every representation, there is something objective, a “ding”, which is fathomless but real, nonetheless. In contrast, Kundera presents Schopenhauer, who proclaimed that “to bring that representation to existence [...] there must be a will” (TFI 89-90). Kundera’s notion of being and becoming coincides with the process-oriented philosophical thought that argues against the transcendence of “meaning, law or simply an authority” (Günzel 3). Kundera argues that we are the process that we undergo to become someone. What we call faith, “is a categorical agreement with being”, and such agreements are kitschy. From the start Kundera introduces the metaphysical nuances of Nietzsche and Parmenides’s ontological arguments. The paradoxical fact that human beings are concurrently the only tools we have to try to understand the chaos of existence puts limitations on the credibility of human interpretation. However, the history of mankind and philosophy argue that we humans are rational creatures, and that human reason is what separates us from the animals who rely more on instinct. This division of “instinct” and “intellect” is dominant in Bergson’s philosophy who believed that the intellect or reason is capable of being the tool with which “being and becoming” can be interpreted, while instinct is not.

Similarly, Deleuze talks about metaphysics through the metaphysical framework of becoming rather than one focused on being. Holland claims that their philosophy is not the absolute “What is it?” but a speculative “What can become of it? (54). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they insist that ‘difference’ and ‘becoming’ should have precedence over ‘identity’ and ‘being’. According to them, ‘being’ is a transitory, subsidiary, and illusory suspension (or ‘contraction’) of becoming. Becoming on the other hand is always primary and fundamental (Holland 18-19). Being constrains repetition to work with the least amount of variation and prioritises ‘what is always the same’ above ‘what is different or could become different’.

Tomas’s becoming rabbit —becoming-animal— informs Deleuzoguattarian

idea of becoming minoritarian.

His body was quickly shrinking before her eyes. She was so shocked that she froze and stood stock-still. The more Tomas's body shrank, the less it resembled him, until it turned into a tiny little object that started moving, running, dashing across the airfield. (*TULB* 302)

Elaborating on being and becoming, Deleuze and Guattari state that “becomings involve an asymmetrical alliance between a subject and a medium of becoming” (*ATP* 104). Man, who is the subject of the becoming, is removed from the majority, while the medium of the becoming, which is an animal, gets detached from the minority, as they write, “we do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity” (*ATP* 39-40). Deleuze and Guattari warn that the man obviously does not become an animal or a woman; nor does he imitate them as a molar entity: rather, since “majority implies a state of domination”, (*ATP* 292) the man ceases to be the majoritarian-male by integrating an element of minoritarian-animal. Becoming-animal does not require a resemblance to the animal but rather “the production of the molecular animal – whereas the ‘real’ animal is trapped in its molar form and subjectivity” (Holland 275). Thus, one can argue that Tomas’s being ‘male’ is deterritorialized and then reterritorialized by ‘becoming-animal’. To look at it another way, Tomas minus majoritarian-male, which Deleuze and Guattari call “n-1”, is an attempt to turn him into a rhizomatic multiplicity.

4.3 The duality of lightness and weight

The fictional and non-fictional work of Kundera displays a spontaneous use of oppositions. The oppositions and binaries seem to come natural to him and add to his work a constant tension of control between the binaries. In Kunderian world, “lightness is opposite to weight, soul to body, fidelity to infidelity, path to road; lyric to epic, scepticism to fanaticism, political to aesthetic; and the novel to totalitarian ideology” (Jefferson 124). This dualism and the privilege and marginalisation attached to one or the other end of the pole is an essential component of socioeconomic and politico-aesthetic debates that encircle identity construction. When one component of the binary is assigned some privilege, it automatically deprives the other component of equality and thus marginalises it. In this section of the analysis, I argue that the deconstruction of such binarism decentres the power structure of discourses and how it impacts the politics and poetics of aesthetics and identity.

For Kundera, the lightness/weight dichotomy is the most enigmatic, most

ambiguous. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera examines Parmenidean and Nietzschean dualism of light/dark, fine/coarse, warmth/cold, and being/non-being. On one side of the opposition are positives as Parmenides called them: “light, fineness, warmth, and being”. On the other hand, the negatives. Everything coarse, cold, dark, and ugly is considered negative according to this division. However, the line of demarcation “holding these oppositions in place is unstable and permeable” (Jefferson 124-125). Kundera does not side with either. Incredulous of both, he argues that this division may seem “childishly simple except for one difficulty: which one is positive, weight or lightness?” Kundera asks (*TULB* 5). But was Parmenides correct or not is not so much important as how Kundera deals with lightness and weight.

Kunderian oppositions are not solidified in favour of one or the other half of the dichotomy, they are never rigid and static but in constant motion and thus one set of oppositions leads quickly to another. And although he does not explicitly hierarchize these binary oppositions, or approve of one over the other, the reader can quickly infer that the lightness is favourable than weight, becoming is favourable than being, and freedom through betrayal is better than being a puppet of the regime.

The first oppositional dichotomy is that of lightness and weight. In the novel, lightness is associated with the characters who are rebellious in nature —libertines, as Sabina would call them— because they do not adhere to any political regime. Sabina and Tomas are associated with lightness while Tereza, her mother, Franz, and his wife Marie-Claude are situated in the territory of weight. The territory of lightness is marked by insignificance while the territory of weight is marked by seriousness. However, this division too is not so stark and definitive. Each of these characters exhibits both lightness and weight. Tomas’s character is actually on a spectrum of light/weight dichotomy and tilts toward insignificance or seriousness from time to time as the novel progresses. For instance, Sabina tells him:

“You seem to be turning into the theme of all my paintings, she said. 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)

Tomas’s life is in jeopardy because of the conflict between the libertine and the Tristan.

This double exposure stigmatizes him in the eyes of others. In the eyes of his paramours, he carried the stigma of his love for Tereza; in Tereza's eyes, he bore the stigma of his adventures with the mistresses. Tereza and Sabina signify the two irreconcilable and yet equally enticing poles of his life (*TULB* 23-28, my paraphrase).

Sabina follows the dichotomy of lightness and weight more strictly than others. However, this does not mean that she has no 'weight'. She knows "nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown", the realm of betrayals —betraying the communist kitsch. But on the other hand, Sabina is also depicted to be yearning for a 'kitschy' and sentimental life —for example, the mawkish song about the two brightly lit windows, and the bowler hat that is her only link to the past. Her affair with Franz gives away more about her Tristan traits that she keeps bottled up. Before breaking up with him she can't not think about the time she wanted to kneel before him and beg him to hold her and never let her go. She wanted him to stay and put a halt to her betrayals (114, my paraphrase). Moreover, the duality is apparent in Sabina's paintings as well. All her paintings "featured the confluence of two themes, two worlds, that they were all double exposures" (*TULB* 62). However, her story is "not of heaviness but of lightness. What fell to her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being" (*TULB* 121). Once again, Kundera's portrayal of lightness and weight emphasises lightness.

The next binary in the novel is that of body and soul. This duality falls almost entirely into the woman's domain in Kundera's novels (DelBonis-Platt 34). Tereza and her mother are the prime examples of this body and soul duality. Since childhood, Tereza is always trying to see herself in the mirror, scrutinizing her body. This act of staring in the mirror in an attempt to find some semblance to the essence of being Tereza is vital to her characterization since she is born of an "irreconcilable duality of body and soul" (*TULB* 39). Although Tereza is usually placed on the weighty end of the spectrum, she is persistent in search of herself, and thus due to this irreconcilability of her body and soul, she is in a constant state of becoming.

Tereza's mother, on the other hand, belongs to the Parmenidean category. For her, everything is what is visible. She insists that Tereza live with her in her world where youth and beauty are insignificant, where individuality is invisible. According to her "the world is nothing but a vast concentration camp of bodies, one like the next, with souls invisible" (*TULB* 46). Since childhood, Tereza had seen nudity as "a sign of concentration camp uniformity, a sign of humiliation" (*TULB* 56) and that it is the denial

of privacy. Her constant struggle to find uniqueness in her body and her soul in that body is more of a rebellion against her mother.

Linda Martín Alcoff proclaims that “social identities use the body’s outward physical appearance to be the determinate constitutive factor of subjectivity, indicating personal character traits and internal constitution” (183). Kundera does not outrightly reject this notion, though he does put more emphasis on the inner self e.g., in the case of Tereza. She would often wonder what would happen to her ‘I’ if her nose started growing each day. She wondered what would happen if several parts of her body started to expand and shrink. How long would it take her to look like a different person? Would she still be Tereza if she did not look like herself? “Of course,” answers Kundera, “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” (*TULB* 136).

The irreconcilable duality of Tereza’s body and soul is also evident in her encounter with the engineer. During their coitus Tereza believes that her soul is not involved in the act, only her body is being touched and embraced.

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. The body that had betrayed her and that she had sent out into the world among other bodies. (*TULB* 151)

What is the relationship between Tereza and her body then? Is her soul an omniscient onlooker on her body? Does her body have the right to be called Tereza? “If not, then what did the name refer to? Merely something incorporeal, intangible?” (*TULB* 136) Kundera calls it the betrayal of the body against the will of the soul. Tereza’s whole existence is an act of the body’s betrayal against the soul. Her rumbling stomach is the imperative out of which Tereza was born in Tomas’s world. In a way, Kundera demolishes the hierarchical duality of soul and body through Tereza’s constant struggles of becoming. It also gives a rhizomatic trait to the oppositional dichotomy of body and soul. No matter how the body morphs into different shapes and sizes, it is bound to the soul and vice versa. This also demonstrates that the potential of becoming is linked to the relationship between body and soul, contrary to Western tradition, which neglects the body and focuses only on the soul.

Kundera, although considered a modernist, constantly repositions the duality

between positive and negative which makes his approach inherently postmodern since it allows an array of interpretations and repudiates a constant hegemony of one or the other half of the dichotomy. In other words, from Deleuzoguattarian perspective, this repositioning is an instance of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Kundera's universe is both “firmly grounded in polar opposites and built on shifting sands” that constantly alter the point of reference and create abrupt switches in perspectives that relocate the oppositions (Jefferson 125).

A question arises as we read Kundera constructing and deconstructing each duality; must you choose a side? Must you either be a libertine or a Tristan? Must one out of the body and soul be preferred? In one of his interviews, Kundera asserts that for him the question of body and soul is a fundamental question in the metaphysics of love (Kundera 407), the theme of fidelity and infidelity may provide some insight into this. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera writes that from early on we are told that betrayal is heinous. “But what is betrayal? [...] Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown” (*TULB* 89). The Grand March of history forces the masses to submit to fidelity and patriotism, to choose one's country and one's party above everything else, the abstract being over the concrete becoming. It tells that one is a good subject only when one does not resist or subvert the kitsch of the regime.

Returning to Deleuze and Guattari, when the fluid becoming reterritorializes the static and rigid identity, a post-identitarian rhizome emerges. And since rhizome is an (anti)structure, it does not build hierarchies but a pool of multiplicities where neither soul nor body is dominant but correlative.

Gulcehre Kurt in her analysis of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* invokes Foucauldian notion that “the discursive practices, held by the power, decide on the facts by hiding the information of certain minority's realities” (8). Whoever has the power can control the discursive practices and can write and rewrite history. History always sides with those who write it. To explain it in Deleuzoguattarian terms, “history is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus” (*ATP* 23). The truth is then similar to any magazine, or a textbook published in the “MINISTRY OF TRUTH”¹³ in George Orwell's *1984*. Moreover, Kunderian novels

¹³ Ministry of Truth in *1984* is one of the four institutions of the government of Oceania. Its purpose is to rewrite history by changing news, entertainment, arts and literature for the sake of Party's doctrines.

resonate with the Foucauldian notion of history and truth in the sense that truth, in fact, is “the history of an error” (Foucault 144). Thus, Kundera dismantles the privileged end of the binaries by demonstrating that the grand narratives lack foundations, and the ontological boundaries between reality and fantasy are blurred. The deconstruction of one ontological binary affects the whole hierarchy that stood on it. Therefore, the rejection of lightness/weight and body/soul binaries – by means of dismantling the modernist metanarratives – also rejects the sociological and anthropological identitarianism which is stood on the us/them, native/immigrant, and rooted/uprooted identifies.

4.4 Resisting Kitsch: The Grand March of History

Kundera’s fiction is predominantly concerned with the exploration of grand narratives and their tendency to erase the individual identity and rewrite history. Like most postmodern writers, Kundera is incredulous of history’s exclusivity to the truth. Almost all his work —fictional and non-fictional— is an attempt to dismantle the grand narratives of history attached to not only the Czech nation, and his own tumultuous political status, but also the metaphysics of human existence.

This section of the analysis is roughly divided into two parts. In the first part, I explore and interpret what the Grand March of history is, Kundera’s attitude towards history, and the relationship between kitsch and the Grand March of history to interrogate how the grand narratives totalize and marginalise social, cultural, political, and aesthetic phenomena. In the later part, I explore and analyse how kitsch is dealt with in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and how Kunderian fiction repositions kitsch and contributes to the possibility of a rhizomatic approach toward a post-identitarian construction. I argue that Kundera questions the ontological grounds of the metanarratives of aesthetics and identity. He repositions kitsch through several metaphors and images in his fiction. One such tool is the image of the Grand March in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the Grand March refers to “the image of Europe and its history” (98), “a procession of rushing, galloping people” (263) marching and shouting for the regime. Kundera’s description of the Grand March informs totalitarian nuances of the communist regime; a regime that demands uniformity.

Since my study follows postmodernist school of thoughts, the metanarrative of the Grand March inherently conflicts with the postmodern ideology in the novel. To explain this, a brief account of the grand theory is needed. Grand theory is a totalizing

ideology that claims to have a universal/collective objective access to human life and its affairs. It interprets the world in terms of totalizing grand narratives, with regard to historical records of social, political, and cultural movements in an attempt to explain social and political life. The postmodern theory, on the other hand, explains social life in fragmented narratives.

To understand Kundera's deconstruction of the kitsch through the image of the Grand March of History in this novel, it is necessary to refer back to the definition of kitsch and how it functions in Kundera's fiction. I have already established in the introduction and theoretical framework that in aesthetics, kitsch is everything that is sentimental, too easy, and cliché. However, Kundera defines Kitsch as "the absolute denial of shit" in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; "Kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence" (*TULB* 246). Moreover, in the introduction chapter, I discussed different realizations of kitsch such as metaphysical, theological, philosophical, and political. Considering the above different perspectives, I argue that compared to the traditional definitions of kitsch as an artistic deficiency, "l'art de pacotille", culturally inferior, morally corrupt, Kunderian fiction repositions kitsch and allows the spectators and the readers to differentiate between different types of kitsch. It also allows to give the due value to kitsch art and recognize the actual kitschiness of the totalitarian Grand March. To establish that totalitarianism is a kitsch propaganda, I have explored and interpreted the political scenarios in the text below.

Kundera explains that a society where multiple political groups "exist side by side and competing influences, cancel or limit one another, can manage to escape the Kitsch inquisition" (*TULB* 249) somehow to a more or lesser degree, individuality and creativity are preserved. But "whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of totalitarian kitsch" (*TULB* 249). Kitsch is totalitarian because according to Kundera totalitarianism insists that "everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life" (*TULB* 249). In totalitarian regime, the slightest display of individualism, doubt, irony, or any other deviant behaviour is banned. The collectivism must be taken seriously because in the realm of kitsch there is no place for irony, insignificance, or lightness. Because any deviation from the collective is a revolt against the regime and suspicion of grand narratives may lead to a suspecting life itself. In totalitarian kitsch, all questions are excluded, and answers are given in advance,

therefore, anyone who questions the regime is “the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch” (*TULB* 134). Hence, totalitarian kitsch is conformity, and conformity is exemplified by the Grand March.

After establishing that there are various possible interpretations of shit and kitsch, what difference does it make? It helps renegotiate the mainstream definition of kitsch, of identity, and of the Grand March of history that holds up the hierarchies of power and creates binaries of domination and subordination. Renegotiating such rigidities creates a possibility for the emergence of the rhizome. Eugene Holland proposes that history always contains linear and transversal development. The linear development controlled by “a power centre” e.g., the state, is paralleled by “a set of potential becomings aimed in multiple directions orthogonal or transversal to that line of historical development” (Holland 136). The linear narrative of history is resisted and subverted by transversal lines of multiplicities. Kundera’s version of history composed of transversal lines resists the kitschy, utopian history of totalitarianism.

In the theoretical framework, I have discussed two ways of dealing with kitsch proposed by Catherine A. Lugg in her book *Kitsch: From Education to Public Policy*; resistance and subversion. Resistance involves a refusal to participate in kitsch, thus, it is an active effort to stop kitsch from being indoctrinated into one’s mind. Resistance involves boundaries against kitsch. A common form of resistance is that of “tuning out” (Lugg 107), which is a refusal to participate in any action or ideology. Acknowledgement, demystification, and idol smashing are powerful antidotes to a kitsch-driven politics. Subversion on the other hand is signified by apathy towards kitsch, which means to acknowledge its insignificance. Once kitsch’s sugar-coated emptiness is recognized, it loses its power.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* the characters deal with the totalitarian Kitsch through resistance and subversion. Tomas, the protagonist of the novel, stands on the opposite pole of the kitsch. His ideals of love, politics, and nationalism are exemplified by resistance against kitsch. His and Sabina’s relationship stands on this one principle: distaste for everything kitschy. She would tell him, “the reason I like you [...] is you are the complete opposite of kitsch. In the kingdom of kitsch, you would be a monster” (*TULB* 12). Tomas’s sexual adventures are lightness personified. He overturns the seriousness of fidelity with insignificance. Examined closely, his formula of the “erotic friendship” would be the pinnacle of “going against the standards” of 19th-

century morality and fidelity. He would tell his paramours that “the only relationship that can make both partners happy is one in which sentimentality has no place and neither partner makes any claim on the life and freedom of the other” (*TULB* 11). This emphasis on the flipside of the coin is what enables the text to reposition the established and accepted norms. Compared with the loveless marriage of Franz and Marie-Claude, Tomas’s rejection of making any claim on the life and freedom of the other (partner) is suggestive of overturning the totalitarian regime in the backdrop of the novel that claims complete control over people’s lives and what happens within the borders and across the borders.

Kitsch is more efficiently resisted and subverted through Sabina’s character. For her, weightlessness is the only answer, the only way out. Her lifestyle must express subversion of kitsch. Her significance in the territory of lightness, and her utter disregard for the totalitarian kitsch allows an in-depth interpretation of overturning and repositioning kitsch. In Paris, her French friends are amazed when they come to know she does not want to fight the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia. But for her, a more alarming occupation is that of the kitsch of the Grand March of History. Sabina says that “her enemy is not communism, her enemy is kitsch”, the kitsched ideals of communism and their pretence. She believes 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. (*TULB* 99)

Sabina could be called Kundera’s mouthpiece. She does not detest that which Kundera calls shit in its metaphysical sense, but she does hate the fidelity that binds one to a piece of land that more often than not necessitates bloodshed. Kundera talks about this concept in *The Festival of Insignificance* as well, he writes that human rights and freedom comprise “only pointless things, for which there is no reason to fight or to write great declarations!” (102-103) In other words, Stalin’s great declarations and deeds are not nobler than his son who died for shit. Kundera writes:

Stalin's son laid down his life for shit. But a death for shit is not a senseless death. The Germans who sacrificed their lives to expand their country's territory to the east, the Russians who died to extend their country's power to the west—

yes, they died for something idiotic, and their deaths have no meaning or general validity. (*TULB* 242-243)

One can conclude that shit and kitsch —often considered immoral— are, in fact, not the culprits. Taking or giving lives to extend the power of a regime is immoral, ostracizing people from individuality and human needs is immoral.

Kundera's characters are hardly static; those who are often ignored in the territory of lightness also exhibit some degree of resistance towards kitsch. Besides Tomas and Sabina, who are the most scrutinized characters when it comes to kitsch, there are other 'minor' characters such as Tereza's mother and Franz's daughter. James Hans offers a detailed account of Teresa's mother and her break with the Kitsch of youth and beauty. She resists kitsch, but also exercises her kitsched totalitarianism, and always blames others for her failed life. Hans's description of her is useful here. He writes:

Tereza's mother is a terrorist, a totalitarian who seeks to impose her own kitschy image of reality onto others out of resentment and denial of who she herself really is, and in this, she resembles all too much a great many political movements based on resentment and denial as well. (Hans 87)

She makes gestures that seem to deny the world of totalitarian kitsch rather than uphold it. She deals with kitsch through resistance as well as subversion. "Tereza's mother blew her nose noisily, talked to people in public about her sex life, and enjoyed demonstrating her false teeth" (*TULB* 45). Her demeanour is a grand gesture, a casting off of youth and beauty resonates with my argument of dethroning the totalitarian kitsch through insignificance/indifference towards it. A kitsched resistance against kitsch, thus, establishing "an aesthetic of denial rather than acceptance" (Hans 83).

In the next example, Alain, a naive painter, is explaining his new painting approach to Franz's daughter Marie-Anne, and she starts whistling. "Will you tell me why you are whistling? Franz whispered. Because I do not like to hear people talk about politics, she answered out loud" (*TULB* 105). What I find surprising here is why did Kundera put this line in Marie-Anne's mouth? The painter is talking about his art, and she says she does not want to hear about politics? Was his art political? Probably. Was all art political at that time? At least in the novel. Does it make all art kitsch because it has political utility? Certainly not. Sabina's art is political in that sense because communists had banned the abstract art, her abstract art is a rejection of communist

politics. Since all art is political in one way or another, Catherine A. Lugg's charge of political utility against kitsch is repositioned by Kunderian fiction. What makes a political ideology kitsch is a fissure between its reality and pretence. Kitsch art never pretends to be something it is not. Therefore, the hierarchy between kitsch art and high art is based on the same ontological bases on which Orwell based "all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others". A fascist, communist art critic might say something like, all art is equal, but some art is more equal than others, and this principle can be extended to the current situation of marginalized identities.

4.5 The Stigma of Migration and The Migrant Victim

Etymologically the word migration is derived from a Latin term 'migrare', which means "to depart from a place", "to wander" or "to move away". Søren Frank in his book *Migration and Literature*, explains that the notion of movement is essential to the idea of migration. However, according to Deleuzoguattarian nomadology, a nomad is not necessarily displaced geographically. Migration indicates "oscillatory and inconclusive processes" (Frank 8). The 19th-century European concept of the subject is substituted with the emergence of the "non-unified subject" in a postmodern era. In this chapter, I have utilized both nomadic and mainstream discourse of migration.

Before jumping into the details, I would like to give an outline of the forthcoming discussion so as to keep a track of my arguments. The first part consists of the definition, history, and challenges of migration. The second part consists of an overview of Kunderian fiction in relation to the theme of migration and an analysis of the role of migration, return to the home country or the impossibility thereof, and its consequences on the post-identity debate. The aim here, primarily, is to connect identity marginalisation with political kitsch in the novel.

In Kundera's novels, the themes of exile and migration have received extensive critical acclaim, but in the present study, I aim to highlight and analyse Kundera's writings to provide an understanding of how migration and its renegotiation challenge the binaries of rooted and uprooted identities in postmodern contexts with reference to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Furthermore, this inquiry explores that the postmodern literature repositions migratory aspects of post-identitarian discourse.

Migration—a voluntary or involuntary act of leaving one place for another—is a primitive human behaviour. Early humans migrated from one place to another in

search of food, shelter, safety, in general, for better chances of survival. Modern human migrates for similar reasons; however, the world geography is not the same as it was a number of years ago. The laws of international borders, nationality, citizenship and refugee upsurge have reshaped the image of migration entirely. Migration is also linked with momentous global events such as “revolutions, wars, the rise and fall of empires, economic expansion, nation-building, and political transformations” (Koser 4). ~~World wars, civil wars, colonization and decolonization, economic crisis, and totalitarian regimes have played an active role in the upsurge of migration.~~ Because of its location between two sources or two cultures, migration literature is not only appropriate in one location but also modifies in another. In-betweenness, according to Deleuze and Guattari, indicates the instability of each position as well as a movement into an entirely new dimension. It does not refer to a back-and-forth movement between fixed positions. The border crosser or the migrant is both “self” and “other.” A “subject” that emerges from both sides of the border, “from double strings of signifiers of two sets of reference codes” (Hicks 1039). The border crosser is thus linked to the border machine in terms of identity, legality, and human rights. In Paul Patton's words, “nomads are essentially deterritorialized, which is not to say they have no territory, but rather that it serves them as a pure surface for a mobile existence, always en route across a borderless terrain” (1154).

The former concept of the European “centre” is renegotiated as the former “peripheries” are conquering territory. The migrant has been in the spotlight since the twentieth century. Instead of being an anomaly, migration has become the norm and thus has led to a renegotiation of identity, roots, and homeland. The emergence of dual and triple nationality has also contributed to the emergence of transnationalism. So, who is a migrant? The UN defines anyone “living outside their own country for a year or more”, as a migrant (4). Khalid Koser in his book *International Migration* ascertains that “the traditional distinction between countries of origin, transit, and destination for migrants has become increasingly blurred” (Koser 7). Although categorizations are helpful to simplify the reality, simple as much as this definition sounds, the ground realities are not so simple. It does not account for the difference between migrants and refugees or exiled people – a distinction that often gets oversimplified. It can be deducted from the above discussion that a migrant is anyone who lives out of his home country. On the other hand, a refugee, in Saidian terms, is someone who flees or is

banished from their own country. Thus, all refugees are migrants, but all migrants are not refugees. Clarification of this distinction may prove helpful for my argument that while the immigrants who migrate to other countries for scholarships and jobs are deemed smart and intelligent as well as privileged in their homeland, the exiled immigrants face backlash from their home country and are marginalised as the Great traitors¹⁴. This theme of traitor and protector is rampant in Kunderian fiction, and the traitor identity is largely ascertained to those who go against the political kitsch of the regime.

Cristina Stan in her article “Identity and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera” quotes Mihăieş and Tismăneanu, asking what the actual Central-European identity predicament is, “to whom does it truly belong? To those who left or to those who stayed?” (149). I interpret Kundera’s views on migration to be bifold: migration as resistance and migration as kitsch. In migration as resistance, I argue that Kundera presents migration as a form of resistance against totalitarianism. Formulating a challenge to those in power and questioning the normative ideas of society and politics in order to resist the subordination is a significant theme of Kunderian fiction as well as Kundera’s past experiences. In Saidian terms, most people are aware of only one culture or home, migrants are aware of at least two. “This plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal” (Jefferson 116). In other words, those who envision cultural, political, and metaphysical realities beyond boundaries suspect the authorities. For example, how in America Sabina is portrayed behind barbed wires, displaced, and her art is considered as her struggle against the communist occupation of her country when in fact she does not want to be labelled as such. Ann Jefferson explains that Kundera “does not seek to take advantage of ‘the halo of misfortune’ which the West is so happy to bestow upon the Czechs” (123).

The second interpretation of migration is that which informs migrants who use

¹⁴ In *Ignorance*, Kundera writes on the dichotomous treatment of the immigrant; how an immigrant is considered “either the Great Traitor or the Great Victim, according to one’s outlook” (12). A similar train of thought can be located in *The Curtain*, where Kundera questions, “what did it even mean at the time, to be a traitor to our country? Someone joining up with commando bands to slit the gullets of his fellow citizens? Not at all: a “traitor” was any Czech who decided to leave Prague for Vienna and participate peacefully in German life over there (25).

the 'victim card'. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, migrants are treated by others with a touch of pity. Kundera demonstrates, through the character of Sabina, his revulsion for emigre communities raising fists and waving flags in the Grand March and united only by "their defeats and the reproaches they addressed one another" (*TULB*97). My argument is further supported by Sabina's visit to a gathering of fellow emigres who were debating their willingness to fight against the Russians. Sabina realizes that in the asylum, all these migrants are in favour of fighting and asks them: "why don't you go back and fight?" which garners a distaste among the group of people. The grey-haired man with a long index finger pointing at Sabina says "you are all responsible for what happened. You, too. How did you oppose the Communist regime? All you did was paint pictures" (*TULB* 94). What they do not realize is that Sabina's anti-realistic art is her own way of resisting the kitsched stereotypes of the totalitarian regime and the victim card of migration since abstract art was said "to sap the foundations of socialism" (*TULB* 61). Moreover, the diaspora community faces a wondering gaze of the host people because they seem to exude a degree of exoticism. "Franz greatly admired Sabina's country [...] the words prison, persecution, enemy tanks, emigration, pamphlets, banned books, banned exhibitions" stirred in him a feeling of curiosity complemented with envy and nostalgia (*TULB* 101).

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes that as a transitional and translational phenomenon, there is no resolution to the liminality of the migratory experience because both the conditions are ambivalently linked to the 'survival' of the migrant existence. Moreover, the question of cultural diversity becomes problematic when one lives in the transitional period between Lucretius and Ovid, stuck between a "nativist" atavism and a postcolonial urban assimilation (321, my paraphrase). We find a similar notion of liminality in the case of Tereza articulating her struggles in the foreign country:

Being in a foreign country means walking a tightrope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood. (*TULB* 73)

The host country maintains the kitsched stereotype regarding migrants as Lugg writes that they are usually seen as "the subhuman junkie in desperate need of a fix". (109) In addition to the 'flag-waving' emigres, Kundera also draws attention to the difficulties in the foreign country and the kitsched attitude of the people there, which stays even

after staying there for seventeen years¹⁵. Such is the case of Sabina during her painting exhibition:

[...] a picture of herself with a drawing of barbed wire superimposed on it. Inside she found a biography that read like the life of a saint or martyr: she had suffered, struggled against injustice, been forced to abandon her bleeding homeland, yet was carrying on the struggle. Her paintings are a struggle for happiness. (*TULB* 251)

Becoming a citizen in the host country or returning home are some ways that migrants stop being migrants, however, it is not so simple due to “the difficulties of measuring the time dimension in migration, inconsistencies in recording changes of residence, and a lack of consensus over definitions of citizenship” (Koser 21). Kundera draws a similar picture of returning home in his novels such as *Ignorance*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and *The Joke*. In *Ignorance*, Kundera asks “is the epic of the return still pertinent to our time?” (20) In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he refers to it as “the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return” (*TULB* 4). For Kundera, a homecoming that does not consider time and memory is irrelevant.

The myth of homecoming is undermined (challenged) in Kunderian fiction since Kundera believes that a homecoming that does not consider the temporal and memorial aspects is no homecoming. The classic Homeric idea of homecoming is challenged in Kundera’s *Ignorance*. Time and memory are unstable variables that affect the border crosser as well as those who stay behind. Stuart Hall writes in “Minimal Selves”, that “migration is a one-way trip. There is no ‘home’ to go back to. There never was” (44). In Kunderian terms, the home ceases to be home after one crosses the border. Moreover, for a border crosser, the host land is equally hostile as Irena in *Ignorance* says that those who stay behind have no idea what it is like to carve a space for yourself in a foreign land. The stigma remains whether the immigrant is on one side or the other side of the border. They are stigmatized as betrayers in the homeland and victims in the foreign land. The impossibility of the return is attached to the stigma of leaving one’s home country.

Kundera’s perception of patriotism and nationalism has certain undertones of

¹⁵ See Kundera’s account of Arnold Schoenberg in *Ignorance*, (p. 8).

fascism. He addresses the kitsched attitudes of those who stay behind; dying for one's country is heroic while leaving one's totalitarian regime is treacherous. In the selected novel, during the Russian invasion, Tomas asks Tereza if she could live in a foreign country, and her answer surprises him because he thinks that during the invasion Tereza risked her life for the country by taking photographs of the Russian tanks, how could she be "so nonchalant about leaving it"? A similar incident could be found in other novels of Kundera as well, such as *Ignorance* where N. asks Josef, "how could you ever have emigrated? You are a patriot!" (*Ignorance* 56) Similarly, in *Laughable Loves* Jan and his friends experience the disillusionment of patriotism—their will to die for a cause utterly devoid of meaning for them—"the bond tying them to their country was a mere illusion" (179).

By and large, one cannot reject the liquidating effect of migration on the traditional conceptions of identity. In Deleuzoguattarian terms, the mainstream conception and construction of identity have been deterritorialized by entering the foreign borders, as Frank suggests "the migrant, by embodying a difference within, instigates a deterritorializing movement" (27). This new space—deterritorialized territory—is reterritorialized by the rootless identity of the post-identitarian rhizome. Similar to Deleuze and Guattari's nomads, migrants are a transgressive war machine, which challenges the very existence of the codes through which hierarchies of the power structure are formed; they stand as outlaws to their home and host countries. Their nomadic refusal is also the exploration of a new set of moral, aesthetic, and political codes, proposing a transversal interpretation of the dialectics of identity.

4.6 'Es könnte auch anders sein': A Case of Rhizomatic Multiplicities

As Deleuze and Guattari ascertain that there is no one single possibility that a rhizome would connect in a particular way, on the contrary, there are multiple possibilities that can lead to multiplicities. "One of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways" (12), they write in *A Thousand Plateaus. The Unbearable Lightness of Being* employs a similar approach to the possibility of multiple outcomes and thus creating a rhizome. In this section, I have taken the metaphor of "Es könnte auch anders sein" as a rhizomic possibility in the text as a result of resisting and/or subverting the totalitarian kitsch. In the novel, the characters are not trapped in

their being but are constantly in flux for attaining what they could be. “Es könnte auch anders sein” of Tomas is one such realization:

Seven years later, Tomas concludes that the love story of his life exemplified not *Es muss sein!* (It must be so), but rather ‘*Es könnte auch anders sein*’ (It could just as well be otherwise). (*TULB* 34)

Tomas’s “*es muss sein*” enables him to escape his fate of lightness. He chooses becoming Tristan over the libertine. He makes his decision by choosing significance over insignificance. It could have been a life of lightness. As for Tereza, she would have married any other person if not Tomas. They both have entirely different conceptions. For Tomas, their meeting is “no destiny, [...] a chance set of circumstances, and that ‘*es könnte auch anders sein*’. On the other hand, for Tereza, their meeting is “precisely a mark of destiny, and proof, [...] that ‘*Es muss sein*’” (Jefferson 134).

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari establish that a process repeated a hundred times would yield hundred different results. An event such as evolution could have creative iteration, as Holland notes, “it only has determinacy when read retroactively; it could always have happened otherwise” (19). The possibility of “*es könnte auch anders sein*” is the flip side of the Western thought of transcendence, which reduces all to the One. When the Truth is debunked, and the One disappears, that is the emergence of the rhizome “*n-1*” —a multiplicity minus the One. It is when this One is removed that the continuous multiplicity, which differs from part to part and varies every time it is divided, rhizomatic multiplicities becomes possible. Thus, the rhizome is a multiplicity from which the centre is eliminated. Moreover, “multiplicities are defined by the outside” (*ATP* 9), their nature undergoes metamorphosis every time they are connected to other multiplicities and hence remain in a constant state of becoming. This leads us back to the beginning of this analysis “being and becoming”, and thus gives a sense of “roundness” to the whole argument of being repositioned by becoming. This is precisely a postmodernist thing to arrive at, a rejection of one single Truth and embracement of ‘*petit recites*’. Because rhizome is denoted as ‘*n-1*’. it is always in the state of becoming, always another step to achieve.

The “*es muss sein*” and “*es könnte auch anders sein*” deterritorialize and reterritorialize each other and as a result, the meaning is always “*en milieu*”, in the state of ‘*becoming*’. Kundera prompts his audience to acknowledge that the idea of what

Europe truly is does not belong exclusively to western Europe. His perspective seeks to relocate the centre and periphery of the West in relation to Central Europe. In Foucauldian terms, Kunderian fiction seems to suggest that if one looks at history, one finds that “there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated” (Foucault 142). Moreover, Kundera uses his position in the ‘glocal’ space to turn his gaze back to the Eastern Europe and relocate the cultural tradition of Czechs which appears marginal in the Western Europe. In Ann Jeffers’s words, “he has neatly reversed the perspective and made Prague the distant centre” (127).

As the novel progresses, we see that Sabina, Franz, and Marie-Claude have their own “es könnte auch anders” moments. Sabina whose longing for a sentimental life, and a house with dimly lit windows, is always invaded by betrayals against the totalitarian kitsch. In other words, she is betrayal personified. Her destiny typifies lightness. Franz and his wife, stuck in a kitschy marriage, acknowledge the multiplicity only after their separation. These everyday examples of rhizomatic possibilities suggest that there could be a whole map of such possibilities and that the flip side of the binary is not to stay subordinated forever.

Deleuze and Guattari proclaim that life and therefore history is not a sketch but a map, “a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight”. (*ATP* 21) In other words, the sketch or the linear narrative is reterritorialized by the map thus undoing the whole fabric of the rigid grand narrative.

One must not forget, however, that the rhizomatic multiplicities established so far are not the same as the universal collective networks. A rhizomatic multiplicity is that which does not unify other multiplicities to merge them into the One but on the contrary, it is detachable and connectable at any nod, thus preserving the individual becoming of each entity or identity. To put it another way, Eduard Glissant’s notion of opacity and transparency might elaborate on the analogy of rhizomatic multiplicities. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant presents the ideas of transparency and opacity. Unlike his previous belief – *The Caribbean Discourse* – here he shifts his focus from rooted identity to a more singular belief that is opacity. Transparency, on one hand, is the desire to make something transparent and universally general. For Glissant, transparency is the erasure of diversity; it is a mirror held by Europe to reflect others, to generalize and

universalize the identities of diverse people. While opacity, on the other hand, is the right to accept and be accepted without appropriations. Therefore, transparency is totalitarian collectivism while opacity preserves individuality.

By opacity or the state of being opaque, Glissant proposes the concept of singularity in cultural multiplicity. But it is not enclosure of multiplicity into a union but rather a subsistence in an irreducible singularity. Opacity for Glissant connotes something where individuality is preserved. It means to acknowledge someone's identity as a whole; without appropriation; to approach opaque, rather than look at the surface of being. "Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics" (Glissant 190). Their ability to coexist and converge, and to weave into the fabric is what likens opacity to rhizome. The opaque is not obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced (Glissant 191, my paraphrase). It is through the rejection of uniting the singularities, that opacity is of interest in a rhizomatic milieu. Hence, opacity becomes a form of subjective and communal recognition that "abrogates the hierarchical nature of power" (Murdoch 885). Putting it another way, opacity is a medium that resists the Western universalism in order to preserve diversity. Hence, just like a rhizome, it reterritorializes eurocentrism, not through hierarchy but through networks that abolish the primacy of any one centre of understanding.

In this chapter, I have analysed Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* using textual analysis as a method. I employed Deleuzoguattarian rhizome, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and Lugg's resistance and subversion to explore the politico-aesthetic theorization of kitsch and rhizome. I have focused mainly on the themes of being and becoming, the Grand March as a perpetrator of totalitarian kitsch, marginalisation of kitsch and identity, resistance and subversion of kitsch, and the emergence of post-identity. I argued and explored that such postmodern concerns affect the personal, and social identities as well as art.

The next chapter on Kundera's *The Festival of Insignificance* is an extension of Kundera's poetics and politics of art and identity. This recent novel, I argue, is different from Kundera's earlier work, however, the postmodernist themes of incredulity of grand narrative, implicit/explicit theorization political and aesthetic of kitsch, and post-identitarian rhizome are common denominators between the two novels.

CHAPTER 5

THE POST-JOKE MANIFESTO: ART AND IDENTITY IN THE POST-JOKE ERA OF *THE FESTIVAL OF INSIGNIFICANCE*

The everyday. It is not merely ennui, pointlessness, repetition, triviality; it is beauty as well [...] ~~these trivial circumstances stamp some personal event with an inimitable singularity that dates it and makes it unforgettable.~~

—Milan Kundera, *The Curtain*

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I have read and analysed the second novel selected for this study - *The Festival of Insignificance* (2015). In my analysis, I have mainly focused on the metaphor of the navel as a Kunderian renegotiation of the centre and periphery, resistance and subversion of kitsch, post-identity, post-joke era, and the illusion of individuality. The analysis is connected to the previous chapter in more than one way, as I have attempted to link this novel with *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to draw a trajectory of Kunderian poetics and ideology over the course of time. This exploration aims to establish that Kundera's views on art and identity have become quixotic and sarcastic yet indifferent. The themes of insignificance, recentring of the seductive powers, and an utter disregard for anything serious give away a slightly different Kundera than the one in *The Joke* (1967), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), *Identity* (1998), and *Ignorance* (2003).

Before starting this study, I had to select between the two novels: *Ignorance* (2003) and *Festival of Insignificance* (2015), to be studied along with *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). Thematically, *Ignorance* might provide a more coherent analysis of the migratory and totalitarian kitsch because of the migrant characters at its centre, however, *The Festival of Insignificance* – because is it Kundera's most recent novel - allows me to compare it with his previous works and create a trajectory of

Kundera's politics and poetics of art and identity. It gives me an opportunity to explore the progression of Kunderian politics and poetics diachronically. The theme of insignificance which typifies subversion of kitsch and relocates the centre and periphery is at the heart of this chapter.

The post-joke that I have used in the title of this chapter is significant because humour and jokes play a vital role in this novel. Kundera uses it as a tool to demystify history. Furthermore, post-joke signifies a sense of postification in the compositional strategies of Kunderian fiction and, thus, a transgression into post-genre characterized by rhizomatic composition.

The Festival of Insignificance is a farcical novella that revolves around the themes of individuality, sex and sexuality, humour, history, and post-war life in France. It is an exploration of sentiments, friendship, eroticism, humanity, history, politics, and psychology. Polyphony, dialogues, reflections, narration, and its variation certainly contribute to blur what is real and what is not. Kundera's language and style are characterized by clarity, wit, and liveliness. It also adds to the fast pace and quick denouement of the novel. The figures and tropes not only embellish the text but emphasize the relevant passages and support their meanings. A humorous touch is used to make the book effortlessly enjoyable while paradoxically emphasising historical horrors – in this case, the totalitarian Kremlin Stalin – and making them seem more menacing than grave reverence would. There are no inessential events. A single subject is explored from numerous angles. The philosophical ideas are not explicitly stated; rather, they are presented as hypotheses by characters or the author, further demonstrating the author's deftness. Overall, it is a combination of the characters' lives and fantasies, satirical and exaggerated historical accounts, and the author's own philosophical reflections (Sanai). The conclusion of the novel results in a series of questions about what part of it was the fictional world of the novel and what belonged to the misconceptions experienced by its characters.

Written in seven parts, the novella lacks story compared to Kundera's previous works. The plot has a more non-linear narrative and is not dominant. Compared to Kundera's previous novels, there is no grand erotic or romantic story. Kundera distances himself from the linear story that dominated the 19th-century novel. The plot comes together with various anecdotes, play of ideas, and jokes. In an interview, Jason Weiss asks Kundera that "discussions, the play of ideas, are always present amid your stories

[...] does it ever worry you that you might be getting too close to the realm of ideas and lose the story?" Kundera responds that "I like for everything to be reflected upon [...] But not one which is philosophical; rather, a novelistic reflection" (406). However, this novel is not just about presenting a reflection on insignificance, but also about its aesthetic and semantic value.

The plot orbits around the lives of Alain, Ramon, Charles, D'Ardelo, and Caliban. The novel starts with Alain contemplating the significance of the placement of the navel. Alain's mother abandoned him when he was little, and the only connection he has with her is the image of the navel. At the same time, Ramon is strolling in the Luxembourg Gardens and runs into his friend D'Ardelo, who just returned from a doctor's office, inquiring if he has cancer. However, despite not having cancer, he tells Ramon that he is dying soon, just so he can collect sympathy from his friends on his birthday. It seems absurd to seek sympathy for non-existent cancer. But then, "in Kundera's world, absurdity is the one constant" (Massie). Ramon hires Charles and Caliban for D'Ardelo's birthday party. Caliban is a theatre actor, but he is out of work and therefore serves as a waiter at parties with Charles. Caliban often takes up a different persona e.g., at the cocktail party he pretends to be a Pakistani and makes up a gibberish language that he calls Urdu. This charade of identity and the illusions of individuality are at the centre of my discussion on post-identitarian kitsch.

Alain's navel-gazing and his imaginary conversations with his mother also occupy a substantial proportion of the novel. The tension in the novel remains intact by its obsession with long-dead figures like Stalin, Khrushchev, and Kalinin and its existentialist need to contemplate the meaninglessness and insignificance of life. The *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, the story of Kalinin's bladder, and Stalin's story of twenty-four partridges, demonstrate Kundera's fascination with history and historical, and political figures. The ending is phantasmagorical, blurring past and present, real and fantasy. The five friends meet at the Luxemburg Gardens, where they witness Stalin shooting the marionette of the Queen of France while Kalinin pisses behind another. A group of children begins to sing "Las Marseilles" and a carriage comes and leaves with Stalin and Kalinin.

Speaking in Deleuzoguattarian terms, the storyline is more like an assemblage of dots; the short and quick-paced chapters depict a diversity of perspectives on history. The distortion of real and imaginary throughout the novel provides a postmodernist

depth to the plot. Stalin's office and his comrades, the falling angels at the cocktail party, and Alain's conversations with his absent mother make a non-linear narrative. It is more a collection of anecdotes than a novel. It offers not a narrative so much as a collection of vignettes, or reflections: the novel as a set of asides (Ulin). However, it does not offer a commentary, which is far too great a weight for this "intentionally inconsequential novel to bear", so the most useful way to read it may be as an epilogue (Ulin).

The Festival of Insignificance shares its key themes with Kundera's earlier novel which has led most critics and reviewers to believe that the novel is an epilogue to Kundera's earlier work and that the novel is not the best of Kundera. In David Ulin's words, it is a "slight, incidental, a book in which little happens", while Allan Massie contends it "inconsequential in matter, whimsical in manner". The only praise they seem to shower on this slim novel is to read it as an epilogue to Kundera's work. But these critiques and reviews overlook the fresh attitude towards the theme of insignificance, meaninglessness, humour, and its execution.

In this chapter, I argue that this novel creates a counterpoint to his previous work. That is not to say that the focus of this chapter is to make a list of contrasting elements, the focus of this analysis is to prove that this novel is not just an epilogue or summary of Kundera's fiction but an extension of his ideology and poetics. I support this argument by structuring a trajectory of Kundera's views on art, identity, kitsch, and migration to establish a forte for post-identity.

5.2 The Navel: A Kunderian Relocation of Margin and Centre

Kundera's novels begin with a brief and necessary semantic analysis of the words and concepts of his title: eternal return in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and navel in *The Festival of Insignificance*. A metaphor for insignificance is the navel, which is explored in a number of ways, including its erotic potential, its connection to motherhood, the procreative function of sex, its relationship to angels, and uniformity – unlike other erotic body parts, all navels have a similar appearance.

The novel begins with Alain reflecting on the metaphor of the navel. He asks that if the female seductive power is associated with the thighs, buttocks, or the breasts; it might be because they are "metaphoric images" of romance. "But how to define the eroticism [...] centred in the middle of the body, in the navel?" (*TFI* 3) Alain sees the female body as a landscape, a territory and hence one could argue —in

Deleuzoguattarian terms— that the territory of seduction which was territorialized by thighs, buttocks, and breasts is deterritorialized. And then reterritorialized by the navel. This process of deterritorialization destroys the established narratives. Traditionally, the centre of seduction and procreation has always been the genitalia. Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man places the genitals at the centre while Kundera relocates the centre and emphasizes the navel's divine connection with the origin of man. But again, a certain dialectic applies, the navel becomes more important, and the importance of the other centres is terminated. Margins become relevant, the centre becomes peripheral, and there on the periphery, they lose all ideological significance except comic.

Foucauldian views on deconstructionism, according to Adams, hint at the possibility of history being made up of interpretations, not facts; that any sign/event is already an interpretation of another sign/event (135, my paraphrase). Similarly, for Kundera history is *einmal ist keinmal* —anything that happens once might not have happened at all. In the current novel, Kundera revives historical characters with insignificance as part of a joke. The joke in question is actually the insignificance of grand narratives of war, nationalism, and fascism that created hierarchies of power. According to Kundera, the borders of such power hierarchies are only made visible through repetition as he claims in *The Laughable Loves*:

The border is not a product of repetition. Repetition is only a means of making the border visible. The line of the border is covered with dust, and repetition is like the whisk of a hand removing the dust. (180)

Thus, the renegotiation of the centre through repetition makes the borders visible and does not make the earlier border subordinate to a new centre, instead, it deterritorializes the foci and reterritorializes them by demolishing the borders. Rather than shifting power dynamics, such renegotiation is an attempt of Alain to understand himself and his relationship with his mother. In the last chapter of the novel, Alain has an imaginary conversation with his mother still trying to unravel the mystery of the navel and the human creation. His mother tells him about a dream she had of a giant tree that represents the creation of humans:

Men and women attached to cords, turned into an enormous tree, a tree whose branches reached to the sky [...] the gigantic tree is rooted in the vulva of a little woman, of the first woman, of poor navel-less eve. (*TFI* 80)

The image of the tree – an arboreal structure that is the opposite of the rhizome – is soon demolished in the next passage:

I dream of an assassin way down below, slashing the throat of the navel-less woman [...] what I was dreaming of was not the end of history, the abolition of any future; no, no, what I wanted was the total disappearance of mankind together with its future and its past, with its beginning and its end, [...] I wanted the total annihilation of the tree that was rooted in the little navel-less belly of some stupid first woman. (*TFI* 80-81)

Human history likened to a rhizome can be connected at any point and therefore, is a network of connections but so is it detachable and therefore each entity retains its individuality. In other words, the history is connected at each point and so is it detachable, and since temporal linearity is a thing of past; past, present, and future are connected and disconnected not necessarily in a particular order, therefore, history is arbitrary in nature, and the consequential interpretation is deconstructed into a postmodern comic reflection in this novel. Moreover, Kundera also explores the fall of history through the figures beyond the terrestrial borders such as angels. Postmodernism has a vague fascination with fallen angels, for instance Gabriel García Márquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and Kundera's *Laughter and Forgetting*.

What is that fall a sign of? A murdered Utopia, after which there will never be another one? An era that will leave no trace? Books, paintings, flung into the void? A Europe that will no longer be Europe? Jokes that no one will ever laugh at again? (*TFI* 93)

This passage summarizes Kunderian deconstruction of history. A phantasmatic scene of the fall of angels is a symbol of the collapse of history, of the totalitarian utopia, the identity of Europe, as well as the politics and poetics of books and paintings.

In *The Art of the Novel* Kundera asserts that all novels address the "enigma of the self" (23) Ann Jefferson, in her article "Counterpoint and Forked Tongues: Milan Kundera and the Art of Exile," points out that the characters in Kunderian fiction are faced with an "impossible quest for the self" (132). According to her, this pursuit is impossible because identity is deeply interconnected with others, who we are is dependent upon what others think we are. Kunderian fiction also involves characters who require the authorities to determine their identities. Alain is one such character. To

understand and accept his identity he has to figure out the creation of human beings. *The Festival of Insignificance* begins with Alain gazing at women's navels on the streets of Paris. Gazing at the navel is Alain's exploration of the creation of humans.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines gaze as to stare intently, or deliberately at something. The intent behind the gaze is vital for its meaning. The gaze's meaning has evolved from just "looking" and has the connotation of "intent" looking. Historically speaking, the gaze is associated with art and the spectator; a dynamic medium that bridges the gap between art and social theory. Much later, psychology and existential philosophy extended the meaning of the gaze to psychoanalysis and the self. One's own gaze, in the case of Lacan's mirror stage, or the gaze of the other such as in Sartre's phenomenological ontology plays a crucial role in the structure and construction of one's identity. For Jean-Paul Sartre, the gaze is "the battleground for the self to define and redefine itself" (Reinhardt).

Foucault broadens this notion into the domain of surveillance. Thus, gaze, as a medium for spreading domination, causes power dispersal. Power manifests in the gaze and permeates even the existence, sustaining itself not through outer force but rather inner penetration. Therefore, the gaze is relevant to the formation and deformation of dichotomies and hierarchies of identity due to its ability to manipulate power structures and agency. Other words for the verb seeing do not have the similar ability to incorporate politics with art history and social theory. A certain power dynamic is inherent within the gaze as a medium (Reinhardt). The exploration of this theme is relevant to my research as a postmodern strategy to understand the role of the gaze in identity formation and assignment.

Due to the Czech successive occupations by the Germans and Russians, the Czechs always struggled to construct their national identity "in relation to a national Other" (Jefferson 118). Kundera elaborates this in the second part of *The Curtain*, "Die Weltliteratur". He writes that Europe contains small nations along with the large nations, which are always on the defensive mode against History—a force that is bigger than them and does not take them into consideration (21-22, my paraphrase). Similarly, Deleuzoguattarian rhizome is defined in relation to others. Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by deterritorialization, according to which "they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities" (*ATP* 9). Whatever the navel represents; rhizomatic possibilities, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, or renegotiation of grand narrative,

Kundera ascertains that “in our millennium, we are going to live under the sign of the navel” (TFI107).

Kundera's poetics are built on binary oppositions for instance light and dark, serious and comic, home and foreign, acceptance and refusal, and animosity and friendship. Yet he manages to suspend the value in the middle - en milieu – and thus constructing rhizomatic multiplicities that impede the rigidity of grand narratives. For him, language is “not a stable and self-equivalent signal” (Kalantzis and Cope 206) but flexible and can adapt according to the context. Hence, it is a constant flow of becoming. This fluidity of meaning is what Bakhtin calls “heteroglossia”, *The Festival of Insignificance* is also characterized by heteroglossia. This coexistence of multiple narratives gives it a rhizomatic structure, connected yet detachable. It is a polyphonic novel, altering perspectives, narratives, dialogues, and reflections as well as repetitions of stories, events, themes, and images. Polyphonic, polygeneric, and polyhistoric, the novel deconstructs unified and universal truths and presents a novel perspective on history informed by fantasy and insignificance i.e., the character of Stalin. It is his most postmodernist novel in form and content. His previous novels such as *The Joke*, *Immortality*, and *Ignorance*, despite being cynical of the totalitarian seriousness, still address the matter quite seriously, whereas the recent novel; *The Festival of Insignificance* paints the history with irony and laughter. Like most of his earlier novels, Kundera does not hide the process of the creation of the novel. How each character came into being. His characters also acknowledge their master's (Kundera) presence. Secondary, random figures are brought to the forefront. However, the consistent semantic concretization is reconciled in this novel with insignificance. It does not lead to a clearly defined framework of interpretation; it frees from the tyranny of meaning. This is the case, for example, with D'Ardelo, who lies to Ramon about his cancer without knowing why. His inability to understand his lies makes him laugh. As if the characters were no longer able to rationally permeate the meaning of their actions. A tyranny of meaning means absolute seriousness, while *The Festival of Insignificance* is triviality personified.

5.3 Subversion of Political Kitsch

In the previous chapter, I talked about Lugg's proposed strategies for dealing with kitsch: resistance, and subversion. Resistance is characterized by an active refusal of something one believes to be kitsch. Subversion on the other hand is characterized by

remaining unbothered by kitsch even though acknowledging its insignificance. In this section, I aim to explore and analyse that *The Festival of Insignificance* utilises subversion of kitsch as an attempt to deconstruct the social, cultural, and political high/low binaries of aesthetics and identity. Although the term kitsch is nowhere used in this novel, the author's treatment of the postmodernist themes in the novel, and other implicit references are analysed in this section to arrive at a novel understanding of those themes and metaphors. Moreover, what we have established in the previous chapter provides a context to Kundera's earlier philosophy of art and identity which allows me to compare and contrast his recent ideas on the subject. In this section, I explore and analyse how Kundera's views on kitsch have changed, if at all. In the previous chapter, I concluded that Kundera renegotiates kitsch by associating its traditional derogatory characteristics with totalitarianism while absolving the kitsch art from disparagement. In this novel, Kundera presents two different sides of the case of kitsch —not limited to only totalitarianism or aestheticism— but an all-encompassing view of everyday kitsch. Moreover, I argue that Kundera keeps the plot moving by creating tension between the kitschman¹⁶ (D'Ardele) and the advocate of insignificance (Ramon) not just to demonstrate how kitsch is dealt with but formulate a reconciliation between the kitschman and the advocate of insignificance.

Postmodernism is often dubbed as the celebration of everything the modernists detested. This detestation of one side of the binary affected the power dynamics in the social, political, and cultural aesthetic arenas which then often led to marginalisation. The modernists upheld the grand narratives of history, politics, geography, identities, and aesthetics. While postmodernism is incredulous of everything apocryphal, essentialist, and fixed. The charade of stable meaning is deconstructed by postmodern theorists and artists. Furthermore, such a liberating movement helped art and literature overthrow the fixed rules prescribed by the traditions since the ancient Greeks. Thus, postmodernism brought forth a paradigm shift in the politics of aesthetics and identity. In other words, totalitarianism —totalitarian kitsch as Kundera would call it— is dismantled by the fabulating and polyphonic narrative of postmodernism.

The Festival of Insignificance is nothing short of a grand nonchalance towards

¹⁶ A person who enjoys kitsch is called a kitschman in the mainstream theories of art such as Kulka's and Broch's.

the grand truths held dearly by Europe. It is a celebration of irresponsibility in the face of political kitsch. In *The Curtain*, Kundera differentiates between resistance and subversion. He asserts that the rebel keeps on writing, “eager to stand up against everything and everyone, will not realize how obedient they themselves are; they will rebel only against what is interpreted (or pre-interpreted) as worthy of rebellion” (55). “Insignificance, my friend, is the essence of existence” (*TFI* 113), says Ramon in his hymn to insignificance in the last chapter of the novel. Insignificance according to him, is ever-present in horrors, wars, and disasters, even when people do not want to see it. And further adds, “but it is not only a matter of acknowledging it, but we must also love insignificance, we must learn to love it” (*TFI* 113). Botz-Bornstein addresses a similar notion in his essay “Aesthetic Experiences of Kitsch and Bullshit”. He proclaims that only when kitsch is appreciated as kitsch, one can play with certain kitsch motives in a ‘cool’ fashion and appreciate them in the form of “self-conscious subversions [or] as part of irony” (Botz-Bornstein 4-5).

Though I have not done exhaustive research on the topic, most of the entries I did consider for this study, almost all reject kitsch—in its traditional sense—as low art except one, a group of painters who are self-proclaimed “kitsch-artists”. One painter, Odd Nerdrum, who started The Kitsch Movement¹⁷, caught my attention enough to make me expand my discussion to include his ideas about kitsch art. Nerdrum’s kitsch is simultaneously a revolt against modernist sensibilities and a reclaiming of the mimetic techniques of the Old Masters. Nerdrum and his followers celebrate kitsch art. However, for a nonprofessional, their art is nothing like the sentimental syrupy art often called kitsch. Nerdrum’s works such as *The Murder of Andreas Bader* (1978), *Twilight* (1981), *The Night Guard* (1985), and *Dawn* (1990) emit Rembrandt and Goya more than the decorative pieces at travel shops do. This makes it even more difficult to categorize art and kitsch as two different categories, more so when kitsch itself includes binaries like high-kitsch and low-kitsch. Nerdrum calls his work high-kitsch.

Nerdrum's embrace of kitsch is problematic outside the kitsch as well. At his exhibition in Oslo, he apologized in a public speech for impersonating as an artist, and

¹⁷ Founded by the Norwegian figurative painter Odd Nerdrum, the Kitsch Movement is a group of contemporary painters—self-proclaimed Kitsch artists—who have rejected the modern usage of the term “art”. They follow Aristotelian tradition of imitation in favour of avant-garde.

those who have been labelling his work as kitsch are correct to label him so. For me, the problem here lies in the fact that Nerdrum's acknowledgement and enforcement of kitsch do not deconstruct the hierarchy between kitsch and art rather he solidifies it even more by insinuating that the kitsch artists are not really artists. Unlike Nerdrum's embracement of kitsch, for Kundera's characters rather than creating further high/low binaries, embracing kitsch involves embracing insignificance. However, one needs to consider that Kundera's renegotiation does not aim to bring forth a revolution in the field of art but a retirement from the responsibilities of grand truths and totalitarian kitsch. In "Milan Kundera: Fictive Lightness, Fictive Weight", Bayley writes that "the only escape from the congealed political kitsch of the regime is into the lightness of total irresponsibility" (88).

In the third and fourth chapters of this research, I talked about Catherine A. Lugg's approaches to dealing with Kitsch i.e., resistance and subversion. At a closer look, one can see that Lugg's strategies presume that the audience know when they encounter kitsch. The person dealing with kitsch is expected to play an active role in resisting or subverting kitsch. Compared to Lugg's two ways of dealing with kitsch, Bornstein presented three ways in which one can encounter kitsch: a) to reject kitsch because one has recognized it as kitsch and does not want to deal with it; b) to accept kitsch because one does not realize that one is confronted with kitsch; c) to accept Kitsch though one has recognized it as kitsch (3). Although Lugg's framework does not include the second meaning of dealing with kitsch, but since in this novel Kundera has given us a 'kitschperson' in the character of D'Ardelo who comes vis a vis with Ramon, I would like to explore his character and draw a connective line between him and those who embrace kitsch knowingly.

We are introduced to D'Ardelo in part one of the novel called "Introducing the Heroes". He meets his doctor who tells him that he does not have cancer. However, he lies to his friend Ramon about it and tells him that he is dying soon, maybe to collect people's sympathies at his birthday party. The first thing we get to know about him is that "he would go to impossible lengths to get them to pay attention to him" (*TFI* 13). Denis Dutton states that kitsch is, to a good extent, about narcissism because it is not merely found in "the area of religious or sentimental art... but in philosophy and intellectual discourse as well". It is also about "a keen sense of self-congratulation and attempted self-justification" (Botz-Bornstein 7-8).

My concern here is to counter Hermann Broch through the character of D'Ardelo. Walker contends that Broch confronts kitsch on ethical grounds saying that kitsch is “not only culturally inferior, but morally corrupt” (17) and therefore propagates evil. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas, in his article on the crimes and punishment of the communists, states that crimes committed without knowing are still crimes. He gives the analogy of Oedipus, how he killed his father and married his mother unknowingly. However, that did not absolve him from the punishment. Similarly, the communists are responsible for their crimes too even if they claim innocence because they did not know (*TULB* 171). To link this example with people who unknowingly endorse kitsch and according to Broch are propagators of evil, are they really criminals? And should they be punished?

According to Kundera's pattern, “kitsch as a lie”, a person who endorses Kitsch is a criminal. Like Hermann Broch before him, Kundera reckons that kitsch is controlling and evil (*TULB* 245). Except it is not so simple a predicament. Firstly, Kundera does not explain his kitsch pattern in the context of ethics and morals. Secondly, as we have concluded in the previous chapters, the Kitsch that Kundera condemns is not the same kitsch Broch, Kulka, Greenberg, and the likes condemned, on the contrary, he condemns the totalitarian kitsch. The paraphernalia of “shit”, “irony”, and “sentiments”, which are often associated with kitsch, are not condemned by Kundera. Kundera renegotiates the traditional definition of Kitsch and directs his criticism towards totalitarian Kitsch because “the totalitarian Kitsch that Kundera experienced was presented as a utopian world from which all irony had been banished” (Botz-Bornstein 9). On the contrary, D'Ardelo is not a hegemonic character controlling the lives of people around him. He is just a narcissist who happens to enjoy kitsched sentiments as Kundera explains:

A Narcissus is not proud. A proud man has disdain for other people, he undervalues them. The Narcissus overvalues them, because in every person's eyes, he sees his own image, and wants to embellish it. (*TFI* 15)

D'Ardelo does not intend to do any harm to others. His sole purpose is to appear more likeable. The aim here is not to argue that since D'Ardelo's kitsch is not totalitarian, it is not kitsch. “Kitsch is not false, but simply fake and phony efforts to present an alternative reality which is “not inferior to the real thing” (Botz-Bornstein 2). However, although D'Ardelo lies about cancer and is called a narcissist, Kundera's characterizing of D'Ardelo does not seem to condemn him like he condemns the kitsch of Grand March

and totalitarianism. Another way to explain D'Ardelo's kitsch is to bring Tomas back to the stage. It amazes me how Kundera's characterization too comes in dichotomies. Tomas could strikingly stand on the opposite pole against D'Ardelo. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, when Tomas keeps contemplating the retraction of his article, Kundera the narrator wonders "how could someone who had so little respect for people be so dependent on what they thought of him?" (179). Is Kundera insinuating that Tomas is proud and looks down upon people? Yes and no. Yes, because he detests those people whose only worry is to share the humiliation of becoming the Kremlin's puppets, and for Tomas, they support kitsched ideologies. No, because we hardly find any traces of malice in Tomas. D'Ardelo, on the other hand, does not recognise the kitschy sentiments but even if he would, he is too narcissistic to care about it. Moreover, "anyone worried about losing face must remain faithful to the purity of his own kitsch" (*TULB* 259).

When in the last chapter of the novel, Ramon emotionally advocates the importance of insignificance, however, he understands that "his hymn to insignificance has not succeeded in pleasing this man so attached to the gravity of grand truths" (*TFI* 114). D'Ardelo's attachment with grand truths does not bother Kundera or his character or readers for that matter, because the novel successfully creates a "post-historical"¹⁸ world where grand narratives do not matter anymore.

5.4 Post-identity in the Post-Joke Era

Humour, irony, and absurd jokes are an important part of Kunderian fiction. In *The Curtain*, Kundera declares that jokes, anecdotes, and funny stories are the best evidence that a sharp sense of the real and an imagination that ventures into the implausible can make a perfect pairing (46). Jokes enable him to combine the real and the imagery. Jokes and anecdotes are not used as innocently as Kundera claims. Kunderian function often employs such elements to critique the totalitarian regime and its ideologies. Kundera demonstrates the history of a nation through a joke. His first novel *The Joke* (1967) describes the consequences of a satirical postcard sent by a Czech student to a young woman he wants to seduce. But the joke ends up in a joke that is no more humorous.

In *The Festival of Insignificance*, Kundera has painted a world of post-joke. Post-joke era is characterized not by an aversion to jokes or banishing them the way totalitarian kitsch banishes irony and advocates seriousness rather post-joke era is

¹⁸ See Vilém Flusser's *Post-History* (1983).

indifferent toward jokes and their effect. In the post-joke era, people do not know what a joke is anymore. Kundera's manner of ironic and humorous interpretation is revealed through numerous anecdotes about Stalin and his entourage. Stalin's story of twenty-four partridges from *The Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev* is one such example. The story goes like this: one day Stalin went out hunting. He saw twenty-four partridges on a tree. He only shot twelve because he ran out of gunshots, so he went back to get more gunshots. When he returned, the twelve partridges were still sitting there. Now, what infuriated his comrades was that it is impossible to imagine that he fired twelve gunshots and the partridges did not fly. Charles reads this to his friends and Caliban goes: "the only thing I find unbelievable in that whole story is that nobody understood that Stalin was joking" (*TFI* 21).

Kundera further explains that is not astonishing that nobody understood Stalin's story as a joke "because nobody around him any longer knew what a joke is. And in my view, that is the beginning of a whole new period of history" (*TFI* 21). It is essential to the semantics of the novel that Stalin's story is not subjected to the binary outline of truth/false, because the joke deviates from this alternative. In modern history, the atrocities of the totalitarian regimes are of such a scale that "only the 'overt lie' of the fantastic and the grotesque can represent them" (Adams 137). Kundera dismantles Soviet history through jokes. In an interview Weiss asks Kundera about his concern with the rational, and if he has ever considered surrealism where the irrational is central. Kundera responds: "I am not going to oppose the irrational with the rational. That opposition does not even mean much to me" (Kundera 407). His response resonates with Deleuzoguattarian concept of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The melancholy of Stalin's joke in *The Festival of Insignificance* is that the target audience is missing, and also because history no longer speaks to the fate of human beings. Humans lack history as their unifying basis. In *The Festival of Insignificance*, history enters the novel only in ghostly form.

Through the element of jokes Kundera overturns another binary of truth/false, that is of identity. Caliban, the theatre actor who is out of work, serves as a server at parties along with Charles. He sees the work as "an occasion to shift identities from time to time" (*TFI* 52). For D'Ardelo's birthday party, he chooses to become a Pakistani and speaks a made-up language to baffle the guests. As Kundera says that even the best of jokes loses its vigour after a while, Caliban's joke of identifying as someone he is

notable wears down soon because people do not understand him and therefore are not entertained by his joke. His laborious masquerading goes in vain and becomes “an actor without an audience” (*TFI* 53). Madame D’Ardelo’s nonchalant disinterest in his appearance or language further proves the pointlessness of his invented identity.

Despite all the apathetic responses, there is one person for whom Caliban is a symbol of exoticism: Madame D’Ardelo’s Portuguese maid. Kundera describes the natives’ reaction to immigrants in most of his novels, which comprises a touch of awe and sympathy. The maid is intrigued by Caliban’s oddity and ambiguous language. She could not take her eyes off “so exotic a creature” (*TFI* 54). Caliban too seems smitten by her not because she too is an outcast, a Portuguese, but because she is the only one interested in him. However, pretending to be a Pakistani and speaking a made-up language, Caliban soon becomes a prisoner of his joke. When the Portuguese maid confesses her feelings for him, he understands her, but he cannot step out of the role of a Pakistani who does not understand her. Jokes become traps in a post-joke world. Ramon gives a detailed account of the post-joke era which cannot be taken seriously or resisted vehemently but can only be dealt with insignificance and indifference:

Charles and you invented this Pakistani-language farce to entertain yourselves [...] The pleasure of a hoax was supposed to protect you. In fact, that has always been our strategy. We have known for a long time that it was no longer possible to overturn this world, nor reshape it, nor head off its dangerous headlong rush. There has been only one possible resistance: not to take it seriously. But I think our jokes have lost their power. (*TFI* 75)

Ramon warns them of the consequences a joke can bring forth in this era. Caliban could get arrested and if he tells the police he was only joking, he would be put in jail because not understanding the joke, the police will think he is up to no good and has got something to hide. Had Caliban been a character in *The Joke*, he would have been arrested. Caliban’s joke and its failure and possible arrestment thence provide an insight into the totalitarian kitsch where jokes are banned, and everything must be taken seriously. In fact, so seriously that the people have forgotten what a joke is. This is “the twilight of joking! The post-joke age!” (*TFI* 77). And as Kundera suggests, the only way to avoid this kind of banishment is to resist it with indifference and embrace the insignificance. Post-joke era characterised by insignificance dismantles the farce of totalitarianism. That is the essence of existence.

In a parallel way, the post-philosophy conflicts with main/stream social philosophy often because of how it gives rigid verdicts on phenomena that are considered anti-essential and fluid in postmodernism. Parallel to joke and post-joke, a comparison may be drawn between identity and post-identity where everything previously considered essential and inherent is now insignificant. Identity was believed to be based on self-conception and self-perception. On contrary, Christopher L. Miller in his essay “The Post-identitarian Predicament in The Footnotes of *A Thousand Plateaus*” explains that the old building blocks of identity have been forsaken by some anthropologists and have started to deal with a more “fluid and vaporous concept”. Identity is thus defined as a “relation”, “a gap” or “a difference”. Due to the cultural studies “the unveiling of identity constructions” a more radical approach has emerged. Identity thus is “not only a construction but an "identitarian" prison from which we might or must escape” (1114). Deleuzoguattarian notion of the nomad thought asserts that nomad thought is a way to conceive of individuality free from the confines of identity because nomads do not necessarily abide by geographical boundaries. This rejection of the conformist views on identity enables Kunderian fiction to renegotiate identity politics seriously in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and comically in *The Festival of Insignificance*.

The political layer of the text is closely related to the topic of insignificance with irony, satire, and mystification. The depiction of Stalin and his collaborators, or their mentioned transformation, indicates a relativization of their human significance to the point of insignificance. Furthermore, Caliban’s anti-identitarian jokes and Ramon’s speech on the post-joke era and their attitude towards it provide an insight into Kundera’s resistance against the totalitarian regimes through insignificance.

Besides jokes, Kundera further spins and interweaves the theme of existence and identity in the last chapter of the book through Alain’s imaginary communion with his mother in which she sheds light on the illusion of individuality. A large portion of the chapter is particularly dedicated to Alain’s mother’s speech, a full-length reprehension of what is meant by individuality. Addressing Alain, she says:

Of all the people you see, no one is here is by his own wish. Of course. What I just said is the most banal truth there is. So banal, and so basic, that we have stopped seeing it and hearing it. (*TFI* 102)

The banality and insignificance of this ‘truth’ stem not only from a political strategy but from the images, metaphors, and vocabulary of kitsch, but as Foucault argues that the “genealogical analysis shows that the concept of liberty is an invention of the ruling classes” and not fundamental to man's nature or at the root of his attachment to being and truth (142). Alain’s mother further elaborates the rigid norms of the self and identity in the following passage:

Do you know what it is to carry your ugliness along through your whole life? With not a moment of relief? Or your sex – you never chose that. Or the colour of your eyes. Or your era on earth. Or your country. Or your mother. None of the things that matter. The rights a person can have, involve only pointless things, for which there is no reason to fight, or to write great declarations! (*TFI* 102-103)

Kundera’s clever insertion at the end gives this passage a political tint. In the light of his oeuvre, fighting for a regime is as foolish as writing great declarations for something pointless. The things that matter in life are rendered insignificant because “what we have not chosen we cannot consider either our merit or our failure” and to rebel against one’s unchosen fate is as foolish as to take pride in it (*TULB* 87). Hence, insignificance is not the same as worthlessness, insignificance can thus be understood as something normal, a new normal, not primarily negative.

After the conversation between Alain and his mother on the illusion of individuality, the next chapter directly moves on towards rejoicing this illusion. All five friends head to the Luxembourg Gardens. Ramon says: “uniformity rules everywhere. But in this park, it has a wider choice of uniforms. So, you can hold on to the illusion of your own individuality” (*TFI* 105). A similar anecdote can be found in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

Not only were their bodies identical, identically worthless, not only were their bodies mere resounding soulless mechanisms—the women rejoiced over it! Theirs was the joyful solidarity of the soulless. (56)

Kundera suggests that this realization is like someone removed the blinds that had kept us from seeing the essential thing: “that individuality is an illusion” (*TFI* 106).

Kundera ascertains that humour is not just jumping out of a comic situation or

story to make us laugh. Its discreet light is present in all walks of life. He gives an example from Don Quixote where a young artist, who thinks Quixote is a madman, becomes quite smug and aglow upon hearing praises for his artistic abilities from Quixote. Kundera argues that if one rereads this passage while keeping in mind the young artist's assumptions and then his smugness, the whole scene becomes comic. In Kunderian fiction, existentialism coupled with the absurd and the surreal uphold “laughter to be an essential element of man’s defiance” and further suggests that when Kundera writes about laughter, it might be because he perceives it as “a material form of aggression, an actual act of self-defence, even a duty”. (Johnson). In occupied Czechoslovakia, laughter was a strategy against the regime. Theatre was full of irreverent films about Soviet tyrants. Yet, this should not be used as a proof that people loved the regime, but rather their indifference stemmed out of the embracement of insignificance, in other words, the subversion of totalitarian kitsch.

In this chapter, I have analysed Milan Kundera’s novel *The Festival of Insignificance* using textual analysis as a method to explore the politico-aesthetic theorization of kitsch and post-identitarian rhizome. I have focused mainly on three areas – the novel as Kunderian relocation of margins and centres, resistance and subversion against kitsch, and post-identity in the post-joke era.

Kundera portrays history as a narrated story or as an interpretation and demonstrates the fabrication of truth. In this novel, the everyday life and its mundaneness form an implicit counterpart of history. Deconstructing the grand narratives of history, art, and identity, the novel challenges the endless irony of history through humour. With this, my argument circles back to the initial part of this chapter that *The Festival of Insignificance* is a post-joke manifesto where laughters and jokes are not solely added for the sake of humour but to subvert the hierarchies of identity and aesthetics. In the next chapter, I conclude my thesis.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

After the textual analysis of the selected novels in the previous chapters, a thorough discussion of the findings is needed to see if this research is aligned with its basic research premise and the research questions. To do so, I have reassessed my primary argument in this chapter and explained why it was necessary to explore this subject matter the way I have done it. This project explored *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Festival of Insignificance* through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of Rhizome, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization and Catherine A. Lugg's idea of resistance and subversion against kitsch. In this project, I have employed a qualitative research method based on Catherine Belsey's textual analysis. My research design has been exploratory and interpretative in order to investigate the selected novels using the aforementioned theoretical framework to answer my research questions.

I started off with the premise that the ontological bases of aesthetics and identity in the mainstream discourse are renegotiated in Kunderian fiction. I began this project with an exploration of kitsch in the modern context and moved on to the postmodern context to establish that kitsch is marginalized in the mainstream poetics and politics of aesthetics. Moreover, this marginalisation is also aligned with how identity marginalisation is constructed and promoted through political kitsch. In addition to exploring the causes of marginalisation of art and identity, I have also examined its ramifications in postmodern aesthetic, social, cultural, and political (con)texts.

I have explained in the earlier chapters that my arguments are primarily postmodern in nature, yet I have included, briefly, modernist notions of aesthetics and identity to avoid being unifocal. Moreover, I have argued that as the prefix 'post-' entails its root word; postmodern entails modern and post-identity entail identity, therefore, contextualization of the postified terms in the root word was useful. A brief overview of my thematic perspectives is given below:

The first thematic perspective of my research thesis was that kitsch is marginalized in mainstream arts, media, and literary discourses. Kitsch is considered at the lowest of the aesthetic hierarchy and sometimes it is not considered art at all. My objective was to establish a link between the marginalisation of kitsch and identity and

argued that art and identity have an interdependent connection and, therefore, the marginalisation of one affects the other.

The second thematic perspective comprises the exploration of Kunderian relocation of marginalized art and marginalized identities. In this discussion, I argued that Kunderian fiction renegotiates kitsch and rhizome through certain postmodernist strategies such as a rejection of grand narratives, rhizomatic book structure instead of arboreal book, and embracement of rootless identities or, more precisely, eliminating the need for roots. As discussed in the introduction chapter, I have used the term root/rooted in the arboreal sense as it denotes the hierarchical structure of roots, stems, and offshoots. While rhizomatic structure denotes the merging of roots, stems, and offshoots to demolish hierarchies.

In addition to aesthetic foundations of kitsch, I have discussed four different interpretations of the term kitsch: metaphysical, theological, philosophical, and political. In this research, I have focused mainly on political kitsch as a hegemonic force in identity politics which leads to marginalization. Further on, I have used the marginalisation of kitsch as a reference model for the marginalisation of the immigrant identity based on the symbiotic relationship between art and identity. I have argued that political kitsch promotes binaries and therefore leads to marginalization, and resistance or subversion of the political kitsch challenges its forte that is a beautiful lie of public marching in union – the Grand March of History is one example. I further argued that resistance and subversion of political kitsch creates a territory for the emergence of post-identitarian rhizome.

The third thematic angle encompasses a thorough discussion on how renegotiation of the marginalized binaries can lead to a rhizomatic multiplicity as an attempt to dismantle the hierarchies which have prevailed in the poetics and politics of art and identity for centuries. In this discussion, I have highlighted how the traditional sociological, cultural, and political contexts of art and identity are overrated and an all-encompassing rhizomatic definition of art and identity is needed to reconfigure the existing structures. I argue that resistance and subversion of political kitsch challenges the normative definitions and categorizations of art and identity and furthers the emergence of post-identity.

This overview of my thesis rationale, theoretical context, and thematic perspectives indicates that I have analysed the selected novels utilizing a triangulation of Deleuzoguattarian notions of rhizome, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and

Lugg's theorization of resistance and subversion. Together, they provide a theoretical context that is effective in exploring the post-identitarian nuances in Kunderian fiction. Moreover, to strengthen my arguments and vindicate my theoretical framework, I have incorporated a variety of ideas from various fields of knowledge such as politics, sociology, and philosophy in general, and Parmenides' idea of Lightness and Darkness, Nietzsche's eternal return, Heraclitan process-oriented epistemology, Kantian "das ding an sich", and Foucauldian theory of power and genealogy in particular.

Now at the end of this project, it may be discerned that I have explored, and analysed the texts eclectically according to the requirements of the textual analysis and theoretical perspectives. At this stage, it would be appropriate to have a look at the major findings of the research to see if each question is answered sufficiently and effectively. Below, I have discussed all three research questions as affirmative statements to justify my findings.

The strategies used by mainstream politics of aesthetics and identity create in-group and out-group binaries that lead to marginalisation and stigmatisation of art, such as kitsch, and identities, such as immigrant identities. In the introduction chapter, I discussed that kitsch is believed to portray objects or themes that are sentimental, and immediately and effortlessly identifiable. That is to say that it does not require a critical understanding of those objects and themes and, therefore, does not sharpen the critical artistic capabilities of the audience. Moreover, Kitsch is not just accused of debauchery on the aesthetic grounds but also on ethical grounds. Although, Kulka, Greenberg, and Broch are not my primary theorists, I have included them in this study briefly in order to contextualise my theoretical framework in the debates revolving around the value, perception, and reception of art and its impacts on identity (trans)formation.

Focusing on anti-essentialist underpinnings of postmodern literature, I argue that Kunderian fiction renegotiates the traditional concepts of kitsch by extending its meaning to totalitarian narratives. In other words, Kundera deterritorializes traditional kitsch and reterritorializes it with political kitsch. In this research, I have particularly focused on political kitsch in the selected texts to argue that it is a strategic propaganda of totalitarian regimes to control the masses and dictate their identities.

Furthermore, I have discussed the socio-cultural and politico-aesthetic notions of the symbiotic relationship between art and identity. I have argued that the kitsch art, kitsch artist, and kitsched sentiments are often associated with people who are at the margins in the European tradition. In this case, I have particularly focused on

migrant/nomadic characters in the text and how their art and literature are reflective of their identities. I have argued that such marginalisation of art can provide an insight into the exploration of its effects on the identitarian marginalization.

In theoretical framework, I have discussed that kitsch as art is closely related to the political and cultural arenas of a society and, therefore, affects the way art and identities are perceived and hierarchized. Catherine A. Lugg's concept of resistance and subversion of kitsch was useful in speculating that Kunderian fiction resists and subverts political kitsch and therefore concretizes post-identitarian rhizome. Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome is instrumental since it is anti-genealogical, anti-essential, and anti-structural, and therefore, is capable of theorizing post-identitarian, rhizomatic multiplicities that challenges the rooted essentialist concepts of art, identity, and politics.

In the textual analysis of the first novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I have discussed and uncovered that the marginalized groups, whether aesthetic or identitarian, are stigmatized by the mainstream metanarratives which result in the in-group and out-group binary. In the novel, the 'us vs. them' dichotomy is found in the procedures of Tomas's statement revocation. The way the secret police keep a barrier between the pro- and anti-government people is an example of the totalitarian hegemony. Sabina's abstract art at her university is stigmatized, and in foreign lands her identity is stigmatized. The mainstream identity politics stigmatizes the immigrants by compelling them to look like victims of foreign occupation. For the foreigners, the exiles carry a halo of struggles but are also forced to assimilate and conform to the norms and values of the new land. Moreover, I have also discussed that the marginalized identities, the border crossers, are stigmatized and humiliated through political kitsch in the homeland for betraying their country.

In the second novel, *The Festival of Insignificance*, my discussion reveals that history has played a vital role in the formation, perception, and reception of the normative ideals of art and identity. Marginalized people often use identities, both individually and collectively, as a means of challenging normativity. Thus, the contemporary social and political developments reveal that dominant groups often have the power to define and subordinate 'other' identities, values, and perceptions.

Kundera employs different factors that prompt the renegotiation of kitsch and rhizome in the selected texts. To reach this finding, I have done an extensive but not exhaustive textual analysis of the selected novels of Kundera. Although, historically and

chronologically, Kundera is considered a modernist writer, however, due to postmodernist poetics of Kunderian fiction, I have categorized the selected novels postmodern. I argue that Kundera renegotiates the concepts of kitsch through a rejection of grand narratives in social, cultural, political, and aesthetic spheres.

In both the novels, I have directly or indirectly discussed Kunderian poetics of counterpoints, humour, polyphony, and the fabulation of history as strategies that prompt the renegotiation of kitsch and rhizome. Both the novels are rhizomatically structured and oppose the linear storytelling of the 19th-century novel tradition. Moreover, in this discussion, I have answered the second question that the mainstream definitions of kitsch are renegotiated by Kunderian fiction as it highlights the actual kitschiness of the totalitarian regime. Kunderian fiction deterritorializes the aesthetic marginalisation through postmodernist poetics and reterritorializes the totalitarian regime by its kitsched politics. Decanonizing aesthetics and identity, I argue that Kunderian fiction indicates a renegotiation of kitsch by associating the term with the normative dominant groups as well as the metaphysical connotations of the term.

I have demonstrated in the textual analysis that in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera deconstructs totalitarian Kitsch through the image of the Grand March of History. History is side-lined while scepticism of normative social, cultural, and identitarian politics is foregrounded. In the analysis of *The Festival of Insignificance*, I have explored the abovementioned strategies that challenge the ‘us vs. them’ binaries and High and low-brow art hierarchies. Utilizing Catherine A. Lugg’s conception of resistance and subversion of kitsch, I have elaborately addressed the strategies used in the selected novels to resist and subvert kitsch.

The question of resistance to the normative, rigid categorization of identity is one of the key themes of Kundera’s poetics. It is in large part related to the reconfiguration of history. In *The Festival of Insignificance*, the boundary line of significance is not drawn by history, but by human beings themselves: some always feel right, and others suffer a constant sense of guilt. At the same time, it does not matter at all which side of history they are on.

In the textual analysis of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I have also uncovered the links between identity and kitsch, which leads to renegotiating the traditional conceptions of aesthetics and identity. Sabina resists being labelled as a martyr struggling against the communist occupation of her country; she resists being categorized and branded in her relationships. Other characters, like Tomas, Tereza,

Franz, and Marie-Ann, also display multiple instances of resisting and subverting kitsch.

Resistance and subversion of political kitsch and the emergence of rhizome challenge rooted (arboreal) identities in the selected texts and engage with poetics and politics of aesthetics and identity in postmodern (con)texts. After establishing that kitsch is renegotiated through deterritorialization and reterritorialization, I argue that this repositioning deconstructs the rooted identity because when political kitsch is resisted or subverted, the rigid boundaries of meta-narratives are liquidated. This liquidation leads to the emergence of post-identity which has shifted the focus from “given” identity to a complex phenomenon typified by rhizomatic multiplicities.

Post-identity as a theoretical perspective challenges the traditional concepts of identity and questions the categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and nationality in contemporary discourse. In this research, I have discussed that identity is not fixed or essential, but rather a fluid and dynamic construct that is constantly evolving and changing over time. Further, I have argued that identity categories are often used as a tool of oppression and discrimination. In practical terms, a post-identity approach involves promoting a more inclusive and fluid understanding of identity that recognizes the diversity and complexity of the process of becoming.

In this project, I have explored and analysed that post-identity politics can provide an antidote to overcome identity-based marginalisation which prompts the formation of in-group and out-group binaries in different walks of life. It is evident from the enfranchisement of the minorities and marginalized in the postmodern (con)texts that the traditional identity-based privilege is in the process of being deconstructed. The research uncovers that the mainstream conception and construction of art and identity has been deterritorialized by kitsch and rhizome in postmodern (con)texts and therefore, calls for a new framework since “the easy, positive means of identity definition—based on ready-made categories like gender, race, ethnicity, and nation—have become unsatisfactory” (Miller 1114). It is no more the norm to dominate the world and uphold the values of a single culture. In this era, we need to recognize the rhizomatic multiplicity of our time. Every culture has an independent system of values, and meaning is produced by the dynamic interactions of these different cultural values. A new architecture of the rhizome may emerge from this recognition.

In the postmodern (con)texts, the global penetrates the local, while the local disperses into the global. The world is accelerating rapidly and yet compressing at the same time. Borders are blurring and collapsing into each other, and the identity

construction is influenced by new coordinates. Therefore, as revealed through this investigation, since the world has become a global rhizome, the post-identitarian approach may provide new insights into the debates on art and identity and introduce an adaptable variation of the traditional approaches; an approach characterized by inclusivity and equality in order to dismantle the outdated hierarchies of aesthetics and identity.

6.1 Recommendations for Further Research

My study provides a post-identitarian framework for future research on how identities are structured in relation to tradition and power. Moreover, it highlights the limitations of traditional definitions of identity and provides an insight into the possibilities of post-identity with reference to political kitsch. There is a vast potential to explore the hierarchies of art and identity in the contemporary literature and media. This research may serve as a foundational brick for post-identitarian explorations. Following are a few recommendations for future investigations where my research findings may prove useful.

Renegotiation of kitsch and rhizome can be applied to media studies, particularly the films that deal **with the** subject matters deemed derogatory and schmaltzy in the mainstream media. *Pink Flamingos* (1972), a glamorous, hyper-realistic, and nihilistic comedy directed by John Waters, may be explored and re-evaluated through the post-identitarian perspective. Drawing its inspiration from 1950s kitsch, the film is a taboo-breaking to the mores of a hetero-normative society. Rather than attempting to convert a culture that finds its creators repulsive, *Pink Flamingos* celebrates that revulsion and deems it beautiful and, therefore, is a potentially insightful subject for future research.

Postcolonial and postmodernists literature may be analysed through this framework due to its active engagement with themes of identity, othering, and reversal of social and artistic hierarchies. Sam Salvon's *Moses Ascending* (1975), for example, may be explored from this perspective. Moreover, the post-identitarian framework is potentially useful in the exploration of post-humanist and futurist studies. Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood* (2000), formerly known as *Xenogenesis*, is a sci-fi trilogy that questions the future of anthropology.

Visual arts may also prove as a useful subject for a post-identitarian analysis of postmodern aesthetics. Lucio Fontana's paintings, especially *La fine di Dio* (1964) from

his collection *Concetto Spaziale*, suggest avant-garde iconoclasm, yet the glittery ornamentation evokes outmoded forms of kitsch. Fontana attacks the idealism of twentieth-century art by combining modernist aesthetics to industrialized mass culture and critiques modernism's purity in a way that anticipates both pop art and postmodernism. He seems to challenge Clement Greenberg's dictum that avant-garde and kitsch are diametrically opposed. Moreover, his art may be investigated as an act of becoming; making art as a performance to highlight the Heraclitan and Deleuzoguattarian notions of becoming over being.

In general, the findings of this research provide an infrastructure for future renegotiation of aesthetic and post-identitarian critiques in the contemporary discourses challenging gender norms, sexual, religious, and racial marginalisation, as well as the aesthetic values of a society. It may also be used to theorize the rhizomatic approach towards the marginalized identities of Muslims in diasporic contexts such as Mohsin Hamid's and Nadeem Aslam's fiction. It may also prove useful in the wake of digital identity due to its rhizomatic interpretation of webs and networks.

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