

“Insignificance conjoined with humor”- A Review of Kundera’s Novel “The Festival of Insignificance”

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Abstract— *The story of human instincts and passions is very old. From Sophocles’ ‘Oedipus’, to Ovid’s, ‘Metamorphoses’, Virgil’s, ‘Aeneid’, and Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’ and then description of this instinct could be seen in Hardy’s, “Tess of the D’Urbervilles and Lawrence’s, ‘Lady Chatterley’s Lover’.*

The theme of sex and sexuality has many aspects in literature. Specially in dying Victoria age, Hardy has deftly taken this issue and in twentieth century, Laurence also took this issue under cover.

But now in this post-modern era, sex and sexuality is dealt with openly. Kundera is an exceptional writer of this age. He has been member of communist party, that’s why taking the structure unity of Soviet Union, under Stalin, and its massive pressure on Stalin’s Comrades, by Stalin, the story of the novel reveals this aspect along with the new thinking of the new world, in which we are living now. This age also could be termed as the age of ‘Late Capitalism’, where there is a severe contrast present between ‘Capital’ and ‘Production’. But apart from it Kundera has very keenly written this novel with taking various themes, like suicide, European thinking after post-war, gender and fear of women not to produce children, and other issues after post-war, in a light vein. He has also described the life of France, a cultural hub of Europe. So, in a sense post-modern novel but with the description of its own Kind. He says that it’s the age of triviality or in other way of ‘Insignificance’.

Keywords— *Navel, Humor, Insignificance, Irony.*

The novel starts with an unusual concept about female sexuality. This novel may be about “Insignificance” and has remarkable remarks of Kundera’s Wife on the flap. Vera his wife says to her husband: “You’ve often told me you meant to write a book one day that would have not a single serious word in it....I warn you: watch out. Your enemies are lying in wait”. The wife of Kundera may be right, but one thing is clear, critics are not enemies, but they raise faithful opinions, which see a writing in all its aspects and give a wide scope to it.

The background of the novel is set in posh and fashionable France, where Kundera lives now. The unusual concept of female sexuality lies (Kundera, 2015, p. 3) in his opinion,

in navel of a woman. He says that buttocks, (Kundera, 2015, p. 3) breasts, and thighs have a different kind of attraction for men about female gender, but navel has a strange dimension. The novel has seven parts and several sub-portions. The first part with the title “Introducing the Heroes” generates the discussion of female sexuality or seductiveness lying in the navel. Alain (Kundera, 2015, p. 3) the major character of the novel, in a day of June, sees girls in Paris street, wearing T- Shirts cut very short, showing their naked navels, and trousers belted below the T-shirts. The character Alain thinks disturbingly that in women of today, their seductive power lies now not in thighs, buttocks, breast, but in navels, a hole located at the center of the body. Reflecting on this triviality he thinks that if a man (or an era) sees the center of female seductive power in thighs, how it could be defined, particularly about its erotic orientation? He improvises an answer, (Kundera, 2015, p. 3) that thighs then should be long like roads, so that in the erotic achievement, these long thighs create a magic of inaccessible. Alain further ponders if (Kundera, 2015, p. 3) (an era) or a man sees in female breast the sexuality then the erotic orientation, comes up about the sanctification of a woman, Virgin Mary suckling Jesus and male sex on its knees before the noble mission of the female sex (Kundera, 2015, p. 3). Then inquiring about the female sexuality or the seductiveness in the center of buttocks, means to Alain, brutality, high spirits, the short road to goal, a goal all the more exciting for being double but above all, the female seductiveness if lie in the naked navel, is a disturbing thing for Alain, a man and also for an era (Kundera, 2015, p. 4).

After leaving the problem of navel, Kundera moves to introduce his other hero, Ramon. When Alain was thinking about the female center of seductiveness, Ramon was approaching at the edge of Luxembourg Gardens. Here, an exhibition was set and several people were watching it. He had to face a long queue and therefore, he avoided to watch the exhibition. He decided to move to the park where, atmosphere was bit agreeable. In the park where there were statues of queens of France, there were also statues of Balzac, Hugo Dumas, and Berlioz. Ramon felt a bit relief over here (Kundera, 2015, p. 4). This description is to set the background of the novel which is posh and fashionable

France. France is the cultural hub of Europe, and even British people aspire to see Paris and France.

The third hero is introduced, climbing the stairs of his doctor's office. Ramon at that time was strolling in the park. The name of the hero is D'Ardelo. He is specially visiting the doctor to know whether the suspicious symptoms in his body were due to cancer or not. The irony is that right after three weeks, his birthday has to happen. He is thinking about his distant birthday and near death. And after meeting with the doctor having a smile on his face, he thought that death had turned away. He lived near the park and started to set out to return across it. While he was walking amid the greenery he was having a good sense of humor. He saw the statues also of the queens in white marble, salute them and then broke into laughter (Kundera, 2015, p. 6).

In the portion "The secret charm of a grave illness", the writer describes a carefree attitude to death. Ramon encountered D'Ardelo in the gardens and they have been friends a year ago. D'Ardelo talks about the inner power of a woman by giving example of great madame La' Franck. He tells Ramon that her husband died in her arms, she dined with friends and myself, though her eyes were red with tears, but she was laughing. This is the inner strength of a woman and her love of life. This seems to be strange satire on our attitude towards dying people. We think, even sitting at the death of anyone, with an impression that we will never die. But this case is different. This seems to be snobbery. Kundera here, has ridiculed our customs about death. (Kundera, 2015, p. 7)

D'Ardelo describing the story of famous madam La Franck, recalls his own mental condition at about quarter of an hour in the doctor's office. He has tears in his eyes and he thought that he had lived a harsh and tyrannical ordeal of death all the previous month. He asks to arrange a small cocktail party and say to Ramon for its arrangement. Ramon asks about his visit to doctor. D'Ardelo replies in a secretive way that he is suffering from cancer. He was satisfied with celebrating his death and birth at the same time (Kundera, 2015, p. 8). How amusing? D'Ardelo has hidden his disease. Why? Why did he lie? (Kundera, 2015, p. 10)

In the next portion "Ramon's Lesson on Brilliance and significance" is that the brilliance is defined to set women in competition, and seduce them. Writing about the insignificance, there is a view of novelist that woman when being won over by the man, where woman sets herself free becoming incautious and then easily accessible (Kundera, 2015, p. 12). Kundera has also defined Narcissism. According to Ramon, describing the personality of D'Ardelo to Charles he is a Narcissus. He doesn't take pride in him but undervalues. So, he is snob (Kundera, 2015, p. 15).

And in the part two this portion "Memoirs of Khrushchev" as a gift has been introduced and the character Ramon and Charles have talked about the story of twenty four partridges.

In the portion "Brilliance and insignificance, a character a certain theater actor Caliban has also been introduced.

Part two "The marionette Theater"

This part starts with the story telling of Stalin. The writer says (Kundera, 2015, p. 20) when Stalin gets relaxed after wearing; he liked to tell his comrades different stories. One story is this that one day I took out gun; I put on parka, and trek some thirteen kilometers. There I found a stock of partridges on the tree. I counted them, they were twenty four. But I had twelve shells. I fired and twelve partridges were killed, then I trek thirteen kilometers home again I come back after trekking thirteen kilometers and twelve partridges were still perched on trees and I shot them dead (Kundera, 2015, p. 21). This story according to Kundera, through mouth of his character, is cited by Khrushchev in his memories, and he reports, that as the character Caliban laughed, nobody dares to laugh. This story has been written with purpose by Kundera. It is not humor, but ironical satire. Kundera wants to show that the strict suppression on the comrades by Stalin broke their nerves as Stalin quite often told this story. They could only pass the comments on urinary vessels after leaving Stalin, pissing in line. But even there they had a fear that Stalin might have been hearing them. This is not a spontaneous humor by Kundera but a conscious effort on his part. Moreover, this is humour touching satire (Kundera, 2015, p. 21).

This story teller General Stalin in the end comes out as mustachioed men, having a gun, wearing a parka, and with his friend Kalinin. Kalinin is interesting character. He urines and disappears from the stage making a speech and during that time opera performed, and again after one minute Kalinin was on the stage again. Stalin had a strange love for his this comrade. He named the Prussian city Konigsberg, after the last war as Kaliningrad.

There is also an interesting note about Kalinin in this novel. When he attended the meetings, his trousers remained wet and wet. And when this man becomes disguised quoted, above (Stalin), wearing parka and having a gun, comes out with Kalinin or his friend, he shots at the nose of a queen's statue and takes it off and his friend pissed at the back of another queen's statue (Kundera, 2015, p. 115). This is something significant. Because after Stalin, Russia underwent a change. But even then the shot and urine tell that as a monumental character of history, we remain. Though history couldn't be reversed, but changed. And one day as Kalinin pissed on back of the statue of the queen, Europe will also follow him. This is an episode of mockery again and not of a humor.

While discussing about their ages and their girlfriends' ages after Stalin's story all the four, friends, Alain, Ramon, Charles and Caliban laughingly move the description of the novel.

Alain and Charles often think about their mothers. This is the third part of the novel. Alain recalling his mother delves in the enigma of navel. He remembers the woman who saw his son's navel and after putting finger in it, She kissed him and then he never saw her again (Kundera, 2015, p. 36).

A woman trying to suicide. A young man being drowned to save her from killing herself. She resolves this phenomenon of death in this way, that someone has died, but someone is alive as fetus in her belly (Kundera, 2015, p. 38).

A strange continuity of life.

It is strange assertion of yourself to die with your own determination and on your own will. The rejection of motherhood has been a phenomenon at work after post war. Its roots are in that capitalist society of Europe, where new values of a new market system have evolved. It is not nineteenth century Europe, where the people had a large family and they were conventional and conservative. Today's Europe is different. The competitive market has blown away all the values of European community and this is also due to the fact that Europe has directly or indirectly and invisibly waged a very long war.

Kundera tries to create fun in the portion "Angels". He simply means fun through the mouth of the characters, "Charles and Alain". This is also an attempt to create humor, and deliberately.

Part four is the climax of the novel. Here, they are all at the D'Ardelo's house. Caliban is speaking Pakistani, unable to create fun, because the language written is not Urdu, but if heard may have another impact. Caliban is terrorized and made afraid in the end as being Pakistani (Kundera, 2015, p. 54). This is as now the image of every Pakistani. Caliban is told that he might be suspected and jailed. This is the self-explanatory portion of the cocktail party. But it is also based on sarcasm.

The last and the seventh part "The festival of insignificance" starts with the imaginative voice of Alain's mother who has tried to suicide once due to her hatred of his father and also she doesn't want to give birth to baby. He talks with her photograph. His mother calls him idiot and why? Because his idiocy comes from his ridiculous goodness. This makes him an apologizer. A man whose mother didn't want him to come in the world (Kundera, 2015, p. 103).

All of them discuss about show of navel by the girls. They thought this is fourth dimension of sexuality. The one being breast, second thighs, third buttocks and fourth the navel. As the novel begun with the navel as the

center of female sexuality so in the last part it is discussed as the center of female's individuality as all navels are same (Kundera, 2015, p. 104).

The character says that this is sign of new individuality, where individuality of your own is an illusion. And navel is the symbol of fetus also. All the people of this new century's sign have to live under it. D'Ardelo after disclosing about his disease, says that we should love and inhale insignificance. According to him everything is useless, insignificant and trivial (Kundera, 2015, p. 105). But right at that moment, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Kaganovich are thumping and thumping the tables of Kremlin. They are shouting. What are they shouting? He has left us away. Who has left them away? He who is crying in Luxembourg gardens. He is wearing parka, and a gun in his hand. He is saying and apologizing that my friend will never piss on noble ladies of France. The sound in Kremlin is getting higher and higher. All the comrades are now lamenting. He has gone away stealthily. All of us are his victims. And there the march of insignificance drums out kremlin and extends to France. What is insignificance? That, which has been enacted or that which is just celebrated as cocktail party. Definitely, from the chaos of insignificance, a unity of significance may arise. The novelist has tried to write a humorous novel. He has tried to define teasing, sarcasm and satire. It is all these three techniques of writing, not humor. And Kundera should attend to the warning of his wife.

REFERENCES

- [1] Kundera, M. (2015). *The festival of insignificance*. (A. Linda, Trans.). U.K.: Faber & Faber. (Original work published 2013)