

THE OBMUTESCENT ONEIRIC LOOPS:
KUNDERA'S USAGE OF DREAMS AS A TOOL TO EXPLORE REALITY IN *IGNORANCE*

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ABSTRACT

Kundera's world fame is the fame of a writer who has succeeded in raising the uniqueness of the Czech experience to a universal plane and in transforming it into a key which can unlock the door to a thousand other, till now uninterpreted, facets of experience. Kundera's mode of narration unites dream, multi narratives, philosophy to frame the fact that the voices remain independent and to include a diversity of points of view and to these formal discoveries, Kundera has himself added chronological displacement, indivisibility of the whole, and the equality of various voices. Another aspect is the position of author; it is simply one of the multiple, independent consciousness with in the novel. While Kundera's oneiric vision explores the ambivalence and offers a contrapuntal relationship between dream and reality, it frames a replica of contemporary world. Considering dreams as a frequent element in Kundera's oeuvre, In this research article "The Obmutescent Oneiric Loops" it discuss how the dreams thereby acquire a presence that is fully equal to that off the "real" stories, and their role in depicting the characters and unfolding the multilayers of an interior life.

Keywords: dreams, ignorance, identity, Czech, hopelessness, psyche

Discussion

Oneiric narrative; that is imagination, freed from the control of reason and from concern for verisimilitude, ventures into landscapes inaccessible to rational thought that explores the ambivalence and the problem of disunity in contemporary world. The old physiologist, Burdach, to whom we are indebted for a careful and discriminating description of the phenomena of dreams, expressed this conviction in a frequently quoted passage,

The waking life, with its trials and joys, its pleasures and pains, is never repeated; on the contrary, the dream aims at relieving us of these. Even when our whole mind is filled with one subject, when our hearts are rent by bitter grief, or when some task has been taxing our mental capacity to the utmost, the dream either gives us something entirely alien, or it selects for its combinations only a few elements of reality; or it merely enters into the key of our mood, and symbolizes reality (474).

Kundera's novel committed to the philosophy, narrative and dream of unity, "Dream" theme of the novel often become a metaphor in the works, plays an important role. His dream of using in line with its so-called wisdom of uncertainty is the spirit of the novel and the oneiric narrative structure appear to be a pivotal point of his novel's construction.

Being known for his experimentalism, Kundera's passion for ambiguity leads him to fuse dreams with reality. To Kundera, as he states in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* "Dreaming is not only an act of communication; it is also an aesthetic activity, a game of the imagination, a game that is a value in itself." (40) Think, for example, of Irena's dreams in *Ignorance*. "She is in an airplane that switches direction and lands at an unknown airport; uniformed men are waiting her at the foot of gangway, in a cold sweat, she recognizes the Czech police. From the very first weeks after emigrating Irena began to have strange dreams." (15) In Hildebrandt's words "Whatever the dream may offer us, it derives its material from reality, and from the psychic life centered upon this reality." (127) However extraordinary the dream may seem, it can never detach itself from the real world, and its most sublime as well as its most ridiculous constructions must always borrow their elementary material either from that which our eyes have beheld in the outer world, or from that which has already found a place somewhere in our waking thoughts; in other words, it must be taken from that which we have already experienced, either objectively or subjectively.

Loyal to the tradition of French Revolution, the communist countries hurled anathema at emigration, deceived to be the most odious treason. Everyone who stayed abroad was convicted in absentia in their home country, and their compatriots did not dare have any contact with them. Irena here by mentioning the airport as 'unknown', she is steering to the innermost hesitancy within herself. Moreover her understanding of the gun holding men as 'Czech' police is arresting the hope of a secured future, for which she had emigrated for. The dubiety that she had confronted while relocating self, from her native land to an alien like zone, and those reminiscence of her past life encounters can be etched from her old emigration dream.

"Another time she is strolling in a small French city when she sees an odd group of women each holding beer mug run toward her, call to her in Czech, laugh with fake cordiality, and in terror Irena realizes, that she is in Prague. She cries out, she wakes up." (51) Hop cultivation and beer production in Bohemia have successfully developed since the beginning of the second millennium. The climatic conditions and very early laid scientific foundations of the art of brewery caused that beer gradually gained dominant position in the Czech environment and in the end became the 'national drink'. Irena's vision of 'odd women' holding beer mugs, do epitomize Czech culture, and Irena's approach to the dream is precisely out of dismay. The retrospect of her nativity, doesn't even serve her secureness of home, but only the fright of oddness. At first, the reasons for condemning drunkenness, beer and taverns were primarily religious: alcohol was portrayed as a tool of abhorrent sins, which were inevitably and deservedly followed by a punishment. Especially in songs with family and marital life themes the motives of beer and pubs appear as negative elements causing the break-up and poverty of the family. Kundera views sexuality and eroticism as the 'deepest region of life and therefore feels that the question of mankind's *raison d'être*, when posed to sexuality, is the deepest question. In the expression of this belief in his writings, sexuality becomes a vehicle for expressing a variety of interwoven threads of commentary upon human characteristics, and for ultimately casting a pall of hopelessness and meaninglessness over mankind's fundamental existence. Considering, the image of beer holding women as an alarm against her immoral life, the terror that she felt is due to her own guilt and it does questions her self-worth. To Irena relationships were an aid to guard her from the weary load of insecurities. Irena while being in Paris, she watch the years rolling by, and "on posters, on billboards, on the covers of magazines displayed on the newsstands, women stripped and couples kissed and men strutted in underpants, while amid the universal orgy her own body roamed the streets, neglected and invisible. Moreover, evincing to the need of individual acceptance, the conveying idea is the urge for sensual attention. To Irena "meeting Gustaf had been a festival. After such a long time, her body, her face, were finally being seen and appreciated." (28) Further Irena do indicate the sexual boredom with Gustaf. She began to harbour a vague scepticism that her body had not entirely escaped the fate it was apparently destined for all along. To Gustaf, the relationship with Irena was "not for any adventure, a new youth, a freedom of the senses, but for a rest. Let's not exaggerate; her body didn't go untouched; but her suspicion grew that it was being touched less than it deserved" (29). Irena's this disinclination over love life, leads her to choose Josef over Gustaf. Being impuissant to procure the patriarchal bliss of virtuousness, Irena's guilt is menacing her by the vision of women holding beer mugs.

The collapse of communist regimes of Eastern Europe in 1989 put an end not only to an ideology, but to a perennial European character, the *Émigré*. After decades of being pitied as the Great victim or despaired as the Great traitor, he or she was now free to go back home, perhaps even morally obliged to do so. But what is home? Is it merely a place or something more tenuous and less easily attainable? After the fall of Czech communism in 1989, Parisians began to wonder why Irena is not hurry back home to help. Her Parisian friends seem to consider it, her patriotic duty. When her Parisian friend Sylvie urges her to go back home to her country; "What are you still doing here?"(3), and Irena's reply was out of contention. "You mean this isn't my home anymore?"(3) This exchange suggests that 'home' may be a relative phenomenon, that today's home may not be tomorrow's. Also, the query is, how does the dream image of odd women with beer mugs, and the frightful reaction of Irena forge the aspect of patriotism with in her?

Gustaf's move to Prague demonstrates an ignorance of Irena's reality similar to Sylvie's: When Gustaf informed Irena, that he is thrilled to have a connection with her city, "Rather than delight, she felt some sort of vague threat." (24) He believes that by doing so he is forging a connection with Irena's city, which, actually, is from her own perspective is no longer Prague but Paris. Her reply was not of an *émigré*, who wishes for a great return to homeland. "My city? Prague isn't my city anymore." (23) Even she seeks comfort in hoping: "The police barrier between the communist countries and the west is pretty solid, thank God. I don't have to worry that Gustaf's contacts with Prague could be any threat to me." (24) Irena doesn't find rapture in bridging back to her Homeland in any facet. In fact for her "emigration was perhaps the best outcome for her life" and even the intruding narrator voice questions Irena for her patriotic concerns. "What was that she just said to herself? The police barrier is pretty solid, thank God? Did she – an *émigré* everyone pities for losing her homeland- did she actually say, thank God?" (24) The synonymous proclivity is been emulated when Irena wakes up out of fright by dreaming of women holding beer mugs. While one of the Czech proverbs says that "Beer makes beautiful bodies" and this is plain view all around the Czech lands. Beer and the drinking there of are ingrained in Czech culture, society and history. So much so, that the beer industry is considered a part of national heritage. While beer in Czech holds a cardinal influence on the patriotic framing of people, the oddness and trepidation that Irena felt by the presence of beer holding women who talk Czech, defines Irena as an unpatriotic.

Also, Irena's old emigration-dreams have a monotonous ascendancy on her. She once again had the recollecting vision of her emigration dream, while the reunion party was taking place in Prague. "beer mugs in hand and laughing noisily, a bunch of women rush up to her, she makes out Czech words, and understands, horrified, that she is not in France, that she is in Prague and she is doomed.(41)" The vision of her old emigration dreams interrupting the party; delineate the strangeness that she felt in her return to homeland. Even Irena's psychic frame is explored through her emigration dreams. She find herself blank out in her homeland, encircled by her own native people. To Irena, her guests were looping to a strange bunch of women who laughs falsely, that Irena find as 'noise'.

In Bohemia, people don't drink good wine, and there is no custom of laying down vintage bottling's. But Irena bought this old Bordeaux with all greater pleasure: to surprise her guests, to regain their friendship. But she was appalled to find them snub her wine for their beer and lift their mugs to toast, Health to Irena! Health to the daughter who's returned. (37)

Although Irena tries to calm herself by willing to see it as a pleasing directness; 'Isn't beer the holy libation of sincerity? The potion that dispels all hypocrisy, any charade of fine manners? (36). But Irena, for sure had an understanding: that "rejecting the wine was rejecting her". Her as a person she is now, coming back after so many years.(40)"

Although with a life behind her, a difficult life that she is proud of, Irena failed to convince her existence and experience as relevant to her guests. "She tries delicately to take up topics they raise and lead them toward what she wants to tell them, but as soon as her remarks move away from their own concerns no one listens."(38) This divergence between their choices reflects everything that stand between them: her long absence from the country, her foreigner's ways, her wealth that encase Irena as an extrinsic. Although she hoped to look out whether she can live and feel home in Prague, eventually it kept fading and same obscurity and forlornness

leads Irena to the sudden vision of her odd dream. The self-dilemma that Irena faced was outwardly portrayed here. Even when Milada raises a question: "It's not easy, returning, is it?"(39) Irena's reply to her, do stamp the remoteness of strife's and grinds that she has been through in all these years. "Everybody thinks we left to get ourselves an easy life. They don't know how hard it is to carve out a little place for yourself in a foreign world. Can you imagine-leaving your country with a baby and with another one in your belly. Losing your husband. Raising your two daughters with no money..." (40) Irena here questions the permanence of home; it also raises doubts about the authenticity of the self.

Even at the party, when one of her guest demands wine, it doesn't make Irena believe that they are convinced by her survival and preferences, and there she is gripped by the vision of her old emigration dreams. The solitariness that she felt as an émigré in her homeland, leads her to the vision of her people as bizarre, and in Prague she is imposed to visage the certitude of her cataclysm as an individual, that reflects in her emigration dream. "Back in the room after party, she thinks back over her party, once again her old emigration-dream comes back and she sees herself surrounded by women, noisy and hearty, raising their beer mugs.in the dream they were working for the secret police with orders to entrap her." (44) Apart from the preceding dream the women aren't odd now, Irena finds them familiar, and the setting of the dream is not mentioned. Unlike before the women aren't running towards her. In fact she is surrounded by them. In consequence, Irena's further movement has been confined and this contour the influence of the former party. Even her female friends leaving no surveillance or curiosity in her experiences and viability, were interrupting her conversations and left her voiceless. In a soliloquy addressed to Sylvie, Irena let off, her shackled presumptions;

I could go back and live with them, but there'd be a condition: I'd have to lay my whole life with you, with all of you, with the French solemnly on the altar of the homeland and set fire to it. Twenty years of my life spent aboard would go up in smoke, in a sacrificial ceremony. And the women would sing and dance with me around the fire, with beer mugs raised high in their hands. That's the price I'd have to pay to be pardoned. To be accepted. To become one of them again. (46)

A sacrificial ceremony of Irena, for what she is in the present and thus restricting her for what she is to the future. Without a future it symbolizes her death. Death of Irena, an émigré. The transmitting idea here is, in order to acquire acceptance, Irena should surrender herself, her twenty years of life as an émigré and her future of being an émigré. In the dream, the women were working for the secret police to entrap her and it is the recurring thought of the party, which lead her to this dream. Being at the party, Irena had sensed the same entrapping experience with her old friends. Their questions were of a particular kind: "questions to check whether she remembers what they remember, and Irena felt with this interrogation, they are trying to stitch her old past onto her present life. As if they were amputating her calves and joining her feet to her knees." (43) And the same fear of surrendering is been reflected in her dream as well. The fear of a life without any future. "She was gripped by the same panic she used to feel in her emigration-dreams; through the magical power of a dress she could see herself imprisoned in a life she did not want and would never again be able to leave."(32) The dream and the dress here stand as a metaphor for prison. While in Prague, the choice of summer dress made by Irena had left her in sheer ambiguity and all she found was the same fabrics, the same colors, the same styles she had known during the communist period. Even though in 1989, communist regime had an end in Czechoslovakia, the experiences and menaces that Irena had endured in the former period made a ramification on her till date. "She tried on two or three dresses and was uncomfortable. Hard to say why." (30) Irena doesn't find them ugly or bad, but "they reminded her of her distant past." (31) As the dress here evokes the memories of a past period of communist regime, and the exotic disquiet that Irena discerns from it, reflects the confined sentiments of Irena being a Prague citizen in her former life. Thus her past encase a prison for Irena, and thus it makes arduous to move forward in her life.

By using mirror reflection as a tool, Kundera assembles the out-turn of dreams long-standing. While Irena by gazing at her reflection on the mirror, "she was stunned: the person she saw was not she, it was somebody else." (31) Even as *Ignorance* questions the permanence of home, it also raises doubts about the authenticity of the self, as in this moment when Irena glimpses her reflection in a department store mirror. In the ascendancy of the dress, Irena was withdrawn to the reminiscence of a bygone communist spell, and that souvenir of past,

frames Irena as an alien to herself. When she looks vacantly at that reflection, it was she living a different life, the life she would have lived if she had stayed in Prague. The years of totalitarian rule in Czechoslovakia, from 1948 to 1989, were dark and dismal days, indeed. After the 1948 coup, Communist ideology permeated citizens' lives and dominated all aspects of society. Czechoslovakia's political decisions were dictated by the Soviet Union, and the country continued to rely on the Soviet Union even during the 1980s. Those who did not comply with socialism were not only interrogated, intimidated and put under surveillance but also subject to house searches, during which the Secret Police invaded citizens' privacy while searching for illegal literature. Bribes abounded; the presence of bugs in homes prevented people from speaking openly; there were long lines at the shops; people were imprisoned for filing complaints or signing petitions. Furthermore, the rich turned poor as owners of extravagant housing were given new accommodation in the country. Tradesmen were chosen to head companies. Members of the intelligentsia were forced to do menial jobs such as cleaning streets or washing windows. If a citizen defected, the family left behind was severely punished. People socializing with dissidents were interrogated and accused of subversion.

This woman was not dislikeable, she was even touching, but a little too touching, touching to the point of tears, pitiable, poor, weak, downtrodden. This was a realization to Irena, that in Prague she would be forced to lead a different life, an imprisoned life that may force her to carry another personality within self. With the feeling of self-pity, Irena was gripped by the same panic she used to feel in her emigration-dreams: "through the magical power of a dress, she could see herself imprisoned in a life she did not want and would never again able to leave. (31)

Kundera's critique of human relationships is interlaced with his critique of the communist system, which obviously made him quite unpopular with the authorities at the time. Though largely philosophical and inevitably influenced by Kundera's surroundings and experiences in Prague and with the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Kundera's novels remain popular because they elevate the specific contexts and characters to the universal; the problems faced by characters in 1960s-70s Czechoslovakia are not really that different from the problems faced by us today. In fact, it can be argued that Kundera's novels are driven by exactly what drives most people – inter-human relationships, addictions, and sex. Kundera in *Ignorance* had described relationships that are often marked by suspicion, incomprehension and outright hostility. Throughout the novel, relations were portrayed vastly unsatisfying and this is, of course, the point. Love is fleeting and ultimately meaningless.

What she wants now is "love with no gratitude at all!" However, what prevalent here is Kundera's fascination with sexual relationships and especially with representation of women. This is a major motif for him which at the same time has been focused on in many critiques. While it is believed that by looking at people through the prism of erotic relationships, Kundera tries to reveal much about human nature, yet his preoccupation with sexuality in his works, almost to the point of obsession, suggests a debatable complexity and ambiguity of his works as well. Even so, for Kundera, sex and lovemaking is an important instrument which enables him to delve into the minds of his characters in all his mature works. We find Chantal from '*Identity*' complaining, "men don't turn to look at me anymore", and comparable in *Ignorance*, Irena even made a thought to frame her love life as adventure, to seek for the desired bliss and to wipe out the pride of her prime virtue. "She was sincerely devoted to martin; she was sincerely devoted to Gustaf. But was that something to be proud of? Isn't gratitude simply another name for weakness, for dependency?" (138)

Suddenly, like a gust of wind: the high-speed parade of old emigration dreams, old anxieties: she sees women rush up, surround her and, waving beer mugs and laughing falsely, keep her from escaping; she is in a shop where other women, salesgirls, dart over to her, put her into a dress that, once on her body, turns into a straitjacket. (138)

Kundera's emphasis on an inescapable mind/body duality accompanied by an inability to achieve satisfaction in either state is portrayed here. Her recollections of old emigration dreams interrupting her thought of an adventures love life, thus frames her dream as a replica of paralysation. That is, even though she knew what she need in her life, she is forced to remain motionless. Commenting on the Kunderian characterisation of women hood that encased within social obligations and moral questioning, such as Helena in '*Joke*', Chantal

in 'Identity', so as Irena in *Ignorance*. "For she has never chosen any of her men. She was always the one being chosen. Martin she came to love, but at the start he was just a way to escape her mother. In her liaison with Gustaf she thought she was gaining freedom. But now she sees that it was only a variant of her relation with Martin." (137)

In words of Hildebrandt: "It has already been expressly admitted that a dream sometimes brings back to the mind, with a wonderful power of reproduction, remote and even forgotten experiences from the earliest periods of one's life." (23) Also the behaviour of memory in dreams is surely the most significant for any theory of memory whatsoever. It teaches us that "nothing which we have once psychically possessed is ever entirely lost" (Scholz, 34). Certainly, Milan Kundera is one of those writers who have utilized these ingenious forms of expression to depict humanity with all its dilemmas, ambiguities and complications in the existing era. Kundera's method has been to graft abstract philosophical ideas with fictional invention to create narrative cyborgs: intellectually speculative, formally experimental, intermittently essayistic, yet warm-blooded, grounded in human experience. His characters are not mere automatons, programmed with pure theory and set to shuffling: they are sophisticated neural networks that grow through those dilemmas of love, history, nation and politics the author obliges them to confront.

"At the university she used to be seduced by the dreams of voyages to distant stars. What please to escape faraway into the universe, someplace where life expresses itself differently from here and needs no bodies". In the novel *Ignorance* the most complex characterization is not of Irena, Gustaf or Josef, but the mostly invisible Milada, the high school girl who was in a relationship with a high school boy, was characterised by Kundera with a question of ambivalence and is also a quest of complexities. The suicidal attempt made by Milada in her school days, was to overcome the dismay in her relationship, and the self-disgust for Irena was unbearable, and "she wanted to get free of it at any cost; she wanted to reach some greatness in which her pettiness would disappear; a greatness before which he would disappear; a greatness before which he would ultimately have to bow down; she wanted to die" (104) and for her suicide was a way to elevate her supremacy, and also as an evidence for her platonic love towards the high school boy. While the dream is defined as the psychic activity of the sleeper, here Milada's dream voyages to distant stars do exemplify her suicidal tendency that is still prevailed in her innermost self. Also it underlines her desire to attain a non-physical, ideal bond, which is only possible by an escape from the animalistic world.

Another interpretation of Milada's dream-voyages is also credible. In order to keep people ignorant about her ear, she has developed via enormous discipline an elaborate system of precautions, "shunning deep connections or romantic relationships and finding a hairdresser far from anywhere that might lead to chance encounters with friends." (176) her decision to become invisible is still one that makes her lonely and unhappy, while its necessity unavoidably testifies to the continuing presence of the oppressive regulatory bodily norms that generate this necessity. The dream voyages to distant stars that had seduced Milada once, is symbolising her urge to attain this exigency and Milada wishing she could escape to another planet where she would not feel so oppressively defined by her mutilated form.

Some critics have admired Kundera's style, focusing on his use of humour and his sense of play in narration, particularly in terms of the liveliness of his erotic themes, while a number of critics have criticized his narrative techniques as disorienting, usually because of his disjointed plotting, episodic characterizations, and authorial intrusions. Through oneiric construction Kundera brings diversity in point of view and voices. Irena's old-emigration dreams and Milada's dream voyages to distant stars explodes multiperspectivity by contriving themes such as psychic gruelling, ambiguities faced in a modern world, question of moral ethics, malaise and discontent in relationships, imprisoned authentic self, query of an irksome return to homeland and bizarre patriotic concerns that brings unfinalizability and a question out of harmony.

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