

INTERROGATING INTIMACY: THE MULTIFACETED DIMENSIONS OF LOVE IN MILAN KUNDERA'S *LAUGHABLE LOVES*

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Abstract

Milan Kundera's *Laughable Loves* is a collection of seven short stories. The stories are a mixture of love, laughter and loss. Kundera portrays love in a complex and paradoxical way. It is a source of happiness and sorrow, liberty and slavery, lightness and heaviness. This paper aims to explore the diverse natures of love along with its complexities prevalent in the portrayals of the characters. His inspection of love is more philosophical rather than idealistic, often intricate and most of the times ironic. This paper delves into the patterns of the intimate relationships and raises questions about their manifold aspects of depiction in the collection. The stories examine intimacy through varied dispositions, circumstances and perceptions. Each of the stories explores Kundera's insights on the psychological and emotional distinction in the expression of love. The map out of the relationships offers both serious and trivial, genuine and deceitful nature of human beings. His characters, in these stories, often find themselves struggling with the unpredictability of life and trying to find out the meaning of life in an apparently meaningless world.

Keywords: Love, Absurdity, Intimacy, Ambiguity, Despair

Introduction

Milan Kundera was born in Brno in Czechoslovakia, but he was later exiled to France. In his early life, he was an ardent follower of Stalin and was an active member of the Communist Party. Due to a joke, delivered in an off-guard moment to a friend regarding communism, he was expelled from the party, and, - was forced into exile by the Stalinists subsequently. His first few books were written in Czechoslovakia but the rest of the books were written while living an exiled life in France. He died at the age of 94 in France in July 2023. To his readers as well as in European literature, Kundera wanted to be remembered as a French author rather than a Czechoslovakian. His debutant novel was *The Joke* (1967) which received huge appreciation worldwide. His other remarkable works are *Life Is Elsewhere* (1973), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), *Immortality* (1990), and *Identity* (1997). It was *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* which brought him into the limelight. Its popularity led him to another height in the field of contemporary literature. His fiction offers a great deal about history, politics, identity, humor, psychology and the absurdity of human existence. His

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works are not devoid of communism, since he was obsessed with it throughout his life. In this regard, Jane Smiley (2008) rightly says, "For Kundera, the nature of humanity is influenced or even altered by communism,"

Kundera states in the "introduction" of his essay *The Art of the Novel* about his preference while writing any piece of literature; "From time to time, I like to intervene directly as an author, as myself...my thoughts have a tone that is playful, ironic, provocative, experimental, or inquiring" (Kundera, 1990). Surely, we get the touch of these elements in most of his works, including *Laughable Loves* which reflects his ironic and playful nature through most of the male characters in the stories. According to him, this book is very close to his heart as it reminds him of his happiest phase of life (Kundera, 2013).

Laughable Loves, published in 1969, is his second book comprised of seven short stories. Initially, it had ten stories but in the definitive version, three stories were excluded. Some stories are divided into several sections with chapter titles that grabs the attention of the readers in an enchanted way. A few stories are about complex erotic desires blended with comic elements whereas some others have a serious tone underneath. Love is shown as a painful experience that ultimately results in despair and disgrace. In this collection, "personal identity is shown to be ambiguous, and love often appears to be tainted by uncertainty" (Snyman & Crous, 2014). Through pain and pleasure, Kundera exposes some of the hidden and unresolved features of the human psyche.

Laughable Loves: A Brief Outline

The first story of this collection is titled as "Nobody Will Laugh". It is a story of a young art history lecturer, Klima, who likes to make fun of other people but ultimately pays for his playfulness. A person named Mr. Zaturecky desperately runs after Klima as he promises to write a review of the article written by Mr. Zaturecky. He agreed to review whimsically in spite of knowing the fact that the article was of second-class measure and full of plagiarism. But Mr. Zaturecky took Klima's consent seriously and started running after him though in vain. Thus begins a sequence of unfortunate events which ends up in sacking Klima from his job and losing his partner Klara whom he allured previously with the hope of managing a better job for her.

"The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire" is divided into several mini-chapters with different headings like "The Insidious Nature of Excessive Faith" and "In Praise of Friendship," to give us better ideas of the two prominent characters' inner

psyche. Here we find an unnamed narrator who is a university professor of Greek Culture and his friend Martin, a modern-age Don Juan, whose life revolves around pursuing women. Martin is forty and happily married to a beautiful young lady whom he esteems highly. Though he claims to love and respect his wife, he obsessively runs after women and collects their names for boarding (dating) them in the future. But the irony lies beneath the fact that he never boards anyone, on the contrary, abandons them at the eleventh hour of reaching his goal.

The third story, "The Hitchhiking Game", is about a young man who plans to take his girlfriend on two weeks' vacation in the countryside. They start their journey by driving a car. On the way they stop at a gas station and suddenly his ladylove proposes to play a game of role-playing. The young man agrees and plays the role of a stranger and his beloved a hitchhiker. So, he pretends to give her a lift on the way and she accepts. At one point of their role-playing the young man fantasizes to be a client while his beloved a lascivious girl. To his utter surprise, the young girl starts behaving truly lustfully which makes him feel like he never knew the other side of his beloved. He tries to stop the game but the girl insists on continuing it which creates a disgust feeling in the young man's heart and a repulsiveness towards the girl arises in his mind. He changes his destination and instead of going to the previously booked resort, enters a cheap hotel where he treats her like a courtesan. The girl feels extremely humiliated but cannot come out of her role-playing for a while. Finally, she tries to make him understand that she was just playing her role and it is over now. So, from this very moment, they should treat each other as a real couple who genuinely love each other, but the young man feels bitter at the very thought that he had the notion of her as a pure and shy girl but it was all his mistake that he possessed a wrong idea about her all through the year during their courtship. Eventually, the story ends with the young man's frustration with how he would spend the rest of the thirteen days of the vacation with her.

Though "Symposium" is a short story, it consists of five acts like a play. In each of the acts, the story progresses with many different small sections revealing the characters' actions and ideas. The action of this story takes place in a hospital where five people are talking to each other during the night shift for their duties. They are the chief physician of the hospital, Dr. Havel, an unnamed thirty-year-old female doctor, a nurse named Elizabet and a young intern Flajsman. Dr. Havel is a Casanova who can easily convince any woman due to his good looks and extremely attractive physical features. Nurse Elizabet is desperate to get him but he rejects her from the very beginning. After several turns and twists, the story ends with Flajsman falling in love with Elizabet. Actually, the chief physician's constant provocation and persuasion give Flajsman a false view of Elizabet being in love with him. So, he reciprocates to her with love and Elizabet finds solace in him, whereas Dr.

Havel has had a short fling with the thirty-year-old female doctor. It is a comedy of notions and erotic blunders. The entire story is tangled with sensual misinterpretations and sensitive delusion.

The fifth story of the collection "Let the Old Dead Make Room for the Young Dead" is about a woman of fifty and a thirty-five-year-old man who meet all of a sudden after fifteen years in a provincial town. He is divorced now and has a small bald patch on his head whereas the lady is a widow with one son. Twenty-five years back she got married and lived here for a while with her husband before leaving for Prague. Ten years ago, her husband died and before his death, he asked her to bury him here. Once a year she visits his grave but this time she comes to know that the lease on the grave has expired and his dead body has been replaced by another. She feels really upset that she has forgotten to renew the lease and how she would face her son back at home with this fact. But the officer at the cemetery tries to rationalize her by saying "Let the Old Dead Make Room for the Young Dead" which ultimately becomes the title of the story. So, hopelessly she decides to return to Prague but on the street, she unexpectedly meets with this thirty-five-year-old man with whom she had a short entanglement fifteen years ago. The man along with the lady goes to a nearby coffee shop but it is too crowded, so he offers her to go to his apartment where they can have a little chitchat along with a cup of tea or coffee. She agrees and goes to his apartment together. There the man reveals how enchanted he has been with her beauty since their first rendezvous which took place at his school dormitory fifteen years ago. He now sheds new light on the past events, and gradually takes her into his arms. Though she responds initially but a moment later withdraws herself from him because all of a sudden, she feels conscious of her age and the scars on her belly. She feels reluctant from within and the thought of her son rushes into her mind, who since his father's death cannot tolerate seeing her mother otherwise but a widow. Then again, she starts contemplating the words of the official at the cemetery and comprehends nothing lasts forever and new things should be given place in the place of the old ones, and now she deliberately gives herself to the man.

In the story, "Dr. Havel after Twenty Years", Dr. Havel is presented before us just after twenty years from his first appearance in the story "Symposium." Dr. Havel is older now and is suffering from gallstones. To cure himself, he goes to a spa. There after a couple of days, he feels lonely, so he tries to get the attention of the young women around him but fails miserably. So, to get back his lost charm in the eyes of women, he plans to use his wife. His wife is a young, beautiful and famous film actress in the country. He asks his wife over the telephone to visit him in the spa. When she comes, Dr. Havel takes her out to show the surroundings of the spa. As she is an actress, everyone, including the women who ignored Dr. Havel previ

ously, looks surprisingly at them. The next day his wife goes back to Prague as she has a previously fixed shooting schedule. After her departure, Dr. Havel finds the scenario of the spa has changed. Those women who were neglecting him two days ago, are now wishing to visit his place and giving him a feeling of an alfa male who can control everything and everyone like twenty years back.

In "Eduard and God", the protagonist of the story Eduard is a young man who has recently joined a school as a teacher. He is a follower of Stalin's communist party so obviously a non-believer in God. Unfortunately, he falls in love with a girl named Alice who is a regular churchgoer. To conquer her completely he pretends to be an ardent believer of God and attends church every week with her. One day he is found crossing himself on the street beside a church by the janitor of his school and the very next day he is summoned before the school committee and the directress of the school who is a Stalinist. He is interrogated about his religious views by them. Though he does not believe in God, he falsely says he can't but believe in the existence of God. The committee wants to sack him from his job but the directress takes charge of re-educating him about the non-existence of God, and in one of the re-education sessions, she seduces him. In the meantime, Alice comes to know about the young man's brave confession regarding God before the committee and starts believing him as a martyr. Previously, during their evening walks she never allowed him to touch her fondly but now she wants to give herself to him. This surprises the young man and he takes complete advantage of the situation. But later on, he casts aside her saying if she can betray the providence of God, she can also betray him in the future. At the end of the story, being an unhappy man, he goes to a church to search whether God truly exists or not.

Discussion

The phrase "interrogating intimacy" suggests a detailed and complete study of these relationships compared to the established concepts of love and intimacy in the traditional sense. In most of the stories in *Laughable Loves*, Kundera presents ambiguity in the men-women relationships and raises questions about the nature of love and intimacy. To Jaromil, the protagonist in *Life Is Elsewhere*, "Love means all or nothing" (Kundera, 2020) but in *Laughable Loves*, love is not just a mere emotion and the purity of the heart but rather a game played by the people who claim to be in love with each other. It starts with the notion of everlasting unity but ultimately turns out transient and paradoxical. The lovers claim to know each other thoroughly, while they are unknown to themselves. As Nietzsche (2023) says, "We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers." Kundera's use of irony and humor makes it more impossible for the characters to understand each other's psyche. According to Kundera (1990), the comic is far crueler than the tragic, "as it brutally reveals the

meaninglessness of everything". In "The Hitchhiking Game", primarily we see the lovers in a jovial mood when they agree to start role-playing games. They are teasing one another and enjoying the light-heartedness of their respective roles. But the young man at one point, cannot take it any further, and tries to stop her beloved from role-playing, but the girl finds it exciting and continues her game which ends up with complete humiliation and degradation "and the girl soon passed from sobbing to loud crying and went on endlessly repeating this pitiful tautology: I'm me, I'm me, I'm me..." (Kundera, 1999), to indicate the lover that the game is over and it is her real self, but it is too late for the young man to consider her anymore as a pure, innocent and chaste girl and love her like before. To him, the girl "crossed the forbidden boundary" (Kundera, 1999).

Kundera, in this collection, often mixes eroticism with a sense of impermanence through misunderstandings and contradictory emotions. Characters chase for gratification and intimacy while struggling with existential crisis which ultimately creates anxiety in their minds and results in the certainty of despair. They often find themselves in awkward situations which turn out to be unanticipated hilarious outcomes. In "Nobody Will Laugh", we see Klima's playful approach to Klara and his hide-and-seek with Zaturetsky results in losing his prestigious job as a university teacher as well as losing Klara, his fiancée whom he promised to provide a better job, who before leaving him advised, "another time be honest and don't lie, because a man who lies can't be respected by any women" (Kundera, 1999). For Klima, it is a "joyful cruelty," which is "necessarily cruel, by virtue of the carefree attitude it exudes when faced with the most fatal destiny as well as the most tragic considerations" (Rosset, 1993).

The stories quite often navigate supremacy in relationships, showing how intimacy can be mingled with tricks, control over the other and compliance. Here intimacy is portrayed as a vigor rather than a pure passion that can either dominate or be dominated by the other. Goldfarb (1992) is right in asserting, "The stories in *Laughable Loves* are [Kundera's] most explicitly non-political," and yet "they are about the ironies of domination and subjugation." In the language of Maria Nemcova Banerjee:

"The world of Edward, which he shares with Martin and Dr. Havel and all the other sophistic lovers and their victims, is a small socialist country with sealed borders, where a man can travel from the center to the periphery and back again in the space of a single afternoon...But in the place of sensuality they find only a phantom freedom, a verbal artifact that functions as the dialectical negation of a ubiquitous external power that has posited itself as the only permissible image of God" (Banerjee, 1992).

Kundera gives a picture of sexuality as “the focus where all the themes of the story converge and where its deepest secrets are located” (Sturvidant,2003). In this collection of short stories, Kundera uses sexuality as a tool for expressing hidden threads of human psychology and shows when a lover is exposed to his beloved or vice-versa, it ultimately makes them suffer with hopelessness and provides a notion of the absurdity of their existence. In “Eduard and God” we see the “very reserved and virtuous” (Kundera, 1999) Alice’s presence, almost at the end of the story, reminds Eduard of “those long, futile weeks when Alice had tormented him with her coldness” (Kundera, 1999) and never allowed him to be intimate with her as she considered it fornication which is forbidden by God. And when he has turned out a religious martyr in the eyes of Alice, thinks Eduard bitterly, “how easily and remorselessly she [is] now betraying her God of No Fornication” (Kundera 1999). Now, when she is completely at his disposal, Eduard “feels no joy at all” (Kundera, 1999) instead a “disgust” and “physical aversion” dwells in his inner self. From a Kunderan perspective the location of human existence is “where the bridge between a cause and an effect is ruptured” (Adams,1993). Later on, Eduard finds his life’s one of the finest experiences of intimacy with the unpleasant-looking directress who once took the responsibility of re-educating him on communism. It proves Proust’s observation on human psychology, “one can only recreate what one loves by repudiating it” (1970).

Kundera’s characters are fond of playing games, sometimes through role-playing while some other times through the psychological game. Martin from “The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire” is obsessed with the games of “sighting” and “boarding” women whereas Dr. Havel from two different stories, “Symposium” and “Doctor Havel After Twenty Years”, loves to play mind games with the opposite sex to take advantage of the prevailing situation like a modern age Don Juan. These two characters like others in the collection, defy the traditional perspectives of love and intimacy. Consequently,

“Each of them will come little by little to see in the other a monstrous, terrifying double, a mixture of god and beast. This frightening perception is accompanied by hatred and fear. The partners in the couple will no longer recognize each other” (Oughourlian, 2010).

But, Peter Kussi praises Kundera for his exclusive narrative style while portraying these gamers’ games, “Kundera, with an ironic smile, constructs fictional worlds in which patient investigation by narrator, characters and readers is rewarded by glimpses into the rules of the game” (Kussi, 2003). The knowledge of a human being gets contaminated when it develops as an imitation of others’ feelings rather than genuine emotions of their own (Le Grand,1999). As we see this sort of imitative

nature in Martin's unnamed friend. He does whatever Martin expects from him to do even if it is about playing the game of love and power.

In the "Let the Old Dead Make Room for the Young Dead" we find a psychological conflict in the mind of the fifty-year-old woman. She finds it wiser to seize the moment but the thought of her "mother fixated" son takes her away for a while from the man whom she feels earnestly to be involved with. Even social norms, conventions, and the guilt of the conscience strikes her mind, yet scrutinizing everything, she comes to a concrete decision of embracing her momentary love.

Conclusion

From the traditional perspective, love is often considered as a pure and deep feeling between two human beings who possess mutual respect and a close emotional connection with each other. Intimacy is not just about physical proximity but rather a combination of mental, psychological and cerebral integration with a commitment to staying with each other during life's ups and downs. In contrast, Kundera's demonstration of love and intimacy in *Laughable Loves* is based on a Latin aphorism "Carpe Diem" meaning "Seize the day" which simply suggests enjoying the moment while lacking emotional connection, accountability, loyalty, faithfulness and commitment to one another. Subsequently, we find most of the characters are the victims of deception, manipulation, and infidelity and suffer from psychological and existential crises. Despair is a common feature at the end of each story, and love is used as a tool to reveal the hidden insecurities of every human psyche. By investigating love through these wide-ranging frameworks, Kundera brings to an end its innate ambiguities, viewing that love is not a sole, effortlessly defined feeling but a multilayered involvement that can be both frightening and amazing.

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