



The Nexus between Sophocles' Oedipus and Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

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“A novel examines not reality but existence... Making a character alive means: getting to the bottom of his existential problem. Which in turn means: getting to the bottom of some situations, some motifs, even some words that shape him.”

Milan Kundera

In the backdrop of these statements, this essay attempts to critically analyze the significance of Sophocles' Oedipus as one of the central motifs instrumental in shaping the life of the novel's protagonist, Tomas. The essay tries to explore how Tomas' instinctive metaphorical analogy between the play and his meeting Tereza gets so inextricably intertwined with his life that the historical situation of his country becomes an existential dilemma for him.

Before delving into the central argument of the essay, it becomes imperative to understand the larger context facilitating the question of existential crisis within the text. Kundera's novel, is “set on a stage half created by Kundera's imagination and half by Czech history” (Kimball, 9) of 1960s and 1970s. In this respect, the challenge posed by Communist regime against the privacy and integrity of an individual's existence becomes an echo of the “Crisis of European humanity” to borrow the words of Edmund Husserl. This crisis can be contended to be rooted in the one-sided nature of the European sciences which reduced the world to a mere object of technical and mathematical investigation, “merely a thing to the forces of technology, politics and history that posses him, bypass him and surpass him.” It is to present this crisis of human situation, novels for Kundera become “explorers of existence.”¹ Located within this framework is Tomas in *Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) whose life gets shaped around an ancient Greek play.

¹ Phrase used by Milan Kundera in “Dialogue on the Art of Novel”

As mentioned in the introduction, the instance in which Sophocles' Oedipus gets linked to Tomas' life occurs when Tereza unexpectedly comes to meet him in Prague in the beginning of the novel. Associating her with "a child who had been put in a bulrush basket and sent downstream to him" his reflections on ancient myths lead him to reading a translation of Sophocles' text. This instinctive analogy subsequently alters the two important dimensions of Tomas' life: First, his love-life, which till then was not anchored around anything except his "erotic friendships" with his "mistresses," gets fixated on Tereza. Second, his fascination with the story of Oedipus grants him a metaphorical tool to understand the political situation he was situated in. While the former gets him caught up into an "aggression of love" which he had been trying to escape from, the latter adds on a new

existential question emerging from entanglement of personal and political.

The fundamental question in the Czech political debates which gets linked with Sophocles' Oedipus was: were Communists innocent because they claimed unawareness about the atrocities committed in the name of Communism? Tomas concluded that Communists being unaware, as they claimed, didn't absolve them of the guilt for all the misfortunes that befell the nation similar to how the unawareness had not absolved Oedipus of his guilt for parricide and incest. The publication of a truncated version of an article written by him containing these views paves way for his direct implication in the historical crisis of his country altering his life once and forever. We are told that the Oedipus metaphor, due to truncation of the article, was rendered more outrageous to the political cauldron than the article had intended.

In the follow-up, it can be argued that the theatrical play (Sophocles' Oedipus) which had shaped his personal and political dynamics ends up making his life itself a theatre. The staged episode of Tereza with the engineer and the orchestrated interrogation Tomas has with the man from the ministry substantiates the argument. Tomas' life gets arrested in the theatre of communist politics threatening not just his existence but Tereza's too. The association with Sophocles' text which began on a random analogy when he met Tereza becomes a point of no-return for Tomas echoing the Nietzschean idea of "no eternal return" which the novel opens with.

The last reference of Oedipus in the scene when Tomas meets his son, Simon, completes the cycle of the motif in the novel. Tomas is impelled to think about what brought him to Oedipus in the first place and is reminded of Tereza: "she had landed at his bedside like a child sent in bulrush basket." This reminder makes him realize that his life is deeply anchored around his love for Tereza and he quits his medical practice to leave for countryside with her, away from the political humdrum. The metaphor of Sophocles Oedipus' germinates in the realm of love only to engulf Tomas' life on all fronts and finally takes him back to the same realm of love after a toss on the plank of politics.

On a deviant note, critics like Hana Pichova have tried to delineate significance of Sophocles Oedipus' in the novel by proposing a "close reading" of the Greek Play: "The idea that Oedipus "plays" the parts of prosecutor, judge and punitive agent is clear from a close look at the play. While this could be one of the

ways of approaching the role of Sophocles' Oedipus in the novel, in the light of Milan Kundera's statements quoted in the beginning, this essay considers any attempt at closely reading the Greek play to understand its significance in the novel beyond the scope of its arguments.

With the above discussion, it is strongly evident that from his "inaptitude for love"² to his medical practice to his relation with the political mesh in his country, every significant aspect of Tomas' life gets redefined from the very moment the analogy of Oedipus strikes him. The transformation which ushers in his life unfolds the existential crisis of his times which the human situation lay burdened with in the face of various forces ready to tear it apart every moment. The novel can be contended to be the "explorer of existence," as it investigates this crisis in its character's life by binding it to the motif of Sophocles' Oedipus.

Works Cited

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2. Kundera, Milan. "Dialogue on the Art of Novel." *The Art of the Novel*, Translated by Linda Arsher, 1986, pp 23-47.
3. Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Translated by Michael Henry Heim.
4. Pichova, Hana, and Marjorie E. Rhine. "Reading Oedipus in Milan Kundera's 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being.'" *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1997, pp. 71–83.
5. *JSTOR*,

² before he met Tereza