

ISSUES OF CHANGE, DISCLOSURE AND LONELINESS IN MILAN KUNDERA'S NOVEL SLOWNESS

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Abstract: *Slowness* discusses change in terms of time, surroundings, atmosphere as well as perception of life. The novel starts with Kundera's reflection over the changes that have come about in terms of technological interference while reflecting on the difference between the direct experience of human body and technologically-mediated thrill; experience as subjective and liberating as sex too is perceived in materialistic term. The paper also looks at today's life in India where feeling of loneliness is consuming numerous young as well as old people for several reasons, and the tribe of lonely people is growing at a depressingly high rate, despite cyber options like facebook. The novel *Slowness* talks about 'disclosure' and 'display'. Kundera introduces the concept of 'dancer' and differentiates between a dancer and a politician. A politician seeks 'power' whereas a dancer seeks 'glory'. A dancer resorts to a bit of politics, and a politician has a little of dancer, but both are different. The novel mentions three types of judo: 'moral judo', 'exhibitionists judo' and 'amoral judo'. The concept of 'moral' or 'amoral', or 'immoral' by extension, is only relative. A dancer, an exhibitionist, or a politician decides to take a stance in accordance with his needs and/or the type of audience available to him.

Keywords: change, exhibitionism, materialism, morality, subjectivity

Introduction: In Kundera's view the novelist is an explorer, he sees novel as great prose form of writing through which an author thoroughly explores through his characters some great themes of existence. His characters are 'experimental selves'. For Kundera the novel is 'the European novel'. The world of novel is essentially open where the individuals can breathe, imagine, create and recreate themselves.

"The novel is the imaginary paradise of individuals. It is the territory where no one possesses the truth, neither Anna nor Karenin, but where everyone has the right to be understood, both Anna and Karenin." (The Art of the Novel: 159)

Slowness is the first novel by Milan Kundera written in French. *Slowness* is translated into English by Linda Asher. It's a story of change; Kundera discusses change in terms of time, surroundings, atmosphere as well as perception of life. In present time Kundera and his wife Vera observe changes in a hotel – in France several *châteaux*¹ "have become hotels: a square of greenery lost in a stretch of ugliness without greenery; a little plot of walks, trees, birds amid a vast network of highways." (Slowness: 1) The novel starts with Kundera's reflection over the changes that have come about in terms of technological interference – "Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man." (4) *Slowness* discusses the difference between the direct experience of human body and technologically-mediated thrill.

"...the runner is always present in his body, forever required to think about his blisters, his exhaustion; when he runs he feels his weight, his age, more

conscious than ever of himself and of his time of life. This all changes when man delegates the faculty of speed to a machine: from then on, his own body is outside the process, and he gives over to a speed that is non-corporeal, non-material, pure speed, speed itself, ecstasy speed." (4)

According to Kundera, experience as subjective and liberating as sex too is perceived in materialistic term. As explained to him by an American woman thirty years ago, he still remembers.

"...a lecture (chillingly theoretical) on sexual liberation; the word that came up most often in her talk was 'orgasm'; I counted: forty-three times. The religion of orgasm; utilitarianism projected into sex life; efficiency versus indolence; coition reduced to an obstacle to be got past as quickly as possible in order to reach an ecstatic explosion, the only true goal of lovemaking and of the universe." (4)

Osho says: "It (coition) brings a few moments of utter purity and joy and innocence too. It brings a few moments of timelessness, when suddenly there is no time left. It brings a few moments of egolessness too, when in deep orgasmic spasm, the ego is forgotten. It gives you a few glimpses of the Divine..." (The Speaking tree, New Delhi, 29/05/2011: 04)

The perception of life and its dynamics has changed according to the changing priorities. Life has become very fast paced; people are forced to move about breathlessly in order to fulfill requirements of speed-infested life of this century quite unlike the "the amblers of yesteryear". (Slowness: 4) Looking at today's life in India, feeling of loneliness is consuming numerous young as well as old people for several reasons. Especially young people, because of their

career aspirations, have to shift to faraway places simply to find themselves completely shorn off emotional support system. Compelled by the needs of career, privacy and upward mobility today's youth is getting away from the notion of joint family; and the result is emotional isolation. Increasing sense of materialism is taking a heavy toll on conjugal life. Who should be happily married couples, end up as tragic situations. Loneliness can be physical as well as emotional. The latter loneliness is far more traumatic: the sight of one makes the other bitter and lonely. The crisis does not stop at just that: it is infectious. John Cacioppo of the University of Chicago in a study says that normally if one person in any given network or group of people articulated feelings of loneliness, sooner or later that feeling would find resonance in others. Those who were in immediate contact with the agents of loneliness were around 50 per cent more likely than average to feel lonely themselves. In India, the tribe of lonely people is growing at a depressingly high rate, despite cyber options like facebook. (as quoted in TOI, p. 17, April 30, 2011) Friends collected on social networking sites, who would hug, kiss, feed, poke, or/and kick you virtually, fail to provide emotional support much needed to fully functional personality.

"It is entirely possible that the talent for acquiring is facing extinction in a highly competitive world – which is probably why technology now comes to our rescue, supplying total strangers for friends. But the damage is done. Networking has effectively replaced emotional ties. And the world's a little sadder for the change." (TOI, Apr. 30, 2011)

The novel discusses within this novel

1. Point de lendemain (No Tomorrow) first published around 200 years ago – first in 1777, 1779, 1780, 1802, and then in 1866 with the author's name as Vivant Denon.
2. Les Liaisons dangereuses by Choderlos de Laclos, in which Kundera discloses the plot, with currents of love and hatred crossing one other. The story of Laclos says that nothing is secret in the world: "everyone seems to live inside an enormous resonating seashell where every whispered word reverberates, swells into multiple and unending echoes." (Slowness: 10)

(Well, yes, the undercurrent of the 18th century novel still exists in the forms of Wickileaks, Niira Radia Tape Case, 2G Scam and several other things 'once secret' that are a 'common knowledge' now.)

Slowness talks about 'disclosure' and 'display'. I feel this is how we can understand the world of past and present. Today the tendency to display has assumed the dimensions of exhibitionism. Display is almost a defense mechanism that people today employ in order to save their ego from collapse. Kundera talks

about the filters applied in the reportage of 'civil war' and 'famine' in Somalia which "cut down only children". (12-13) The press has become just an instrument of fame as well as defame – a photograph clicked at the right moment from the critical angle, or some words cleverly phrased or critically timed does the wonder. It is the whole game of creating 'profitable impressions'. For example, dying children (not adults) in Africa are shown on TV "because a dying child counts more than a dying adult".(16) Even religion is not spared from manipulation.

Kundera introduces the concept of 'dancer' through Pontavin, a character in *Slowness*. He differentiates between a dancer and a politician. A politician seeks 'power' whereas a dancer seeks 'glory'. A dancer resorts to a bit of politics, and a politician has a little of dancer, but both are different. A dancer is not out to impose any social scheme or ideology on the people but will do all he can to keep the entire stage all for himself and the spotlight focused all to himself. He does it by manipulating the moral or ethical ideas of his audiences – Kundera terms it 'moral judo'.(18) Unlike a politician, a dancer openly says no to all secret deals, and applies his 'moral judo' in full public view. Here a dancer has an advantage over others as "he is protected by the world's attention". (19) His admirers can go to any limit in order to protect him. The most recent examples in India are the public gatherings, protest marches and rallies by God-men, activists, self-styled custodians of society, politicians, and individuals with all these traits rolled into one.

"But he has his anonymous admirers who respond to his splendid yet thoughtless exhortation by signing petitions, attending forbidden meetings, demonstrating in the streets; those people be treated ruthlessly, and the dancer will never yield to the sentimental temptation to blame himself for having brought trouble on them, knowing that a noble cause counts for more than this or that individual." (19)

The novel mentions three types of judo: 'moral judo'(18), 'exhibitionists judo'(25) and 'amoral judo'(25). An exhibitionist wants to show himself off. On the other hand a dancer wants to prove himself more moral than others without executing any secret pact. He does it openly to his audience which is big and anonymous; an abstraction – without any face or a specific look. The concept of 'moral' or 'amoral', or 'immoral' by extension, is only relative. A dancer, an exhibitionist, or a politician decides to take a stance in accordance with his needs and/or the type of audience available to him. I agree with Kundera that every one of us has a dancer in him; the degree depends upon the requirement or situation. Pontevin says: "... there's certainly some dancer in every one of us, and I grant you that I, when I see a woman coming, I'm a good ten times more dancer than other

people are. What can I do about it? It's too much for me." (26)

Performing 'judo' is *Es muss sein* a German phrase Kundera used in his another novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. "Muss es sein? (Must it be?) *Es muss sein!* (It must be!)" (32) Lifted from Beethoven, the phrase floats the idea of overriding necessity in everyone's life when there must be something that must be. Hence, there are situations in life when 'judo' is *Es muss sein*, and *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss* (32) 'the difficult resolution' is a grave necessity that provides an individual the necessary weight that would steer him in the lightness of his being.

Notes: As per Wikipedia entry Château (plural *châteaux*; French pronunciation: /ʃat o/ for both the singular and the plural) is a manor

house or residence of the lord of the manor or a country house of nobility or gentry, with or without fortifications, originally—and still most frequently—in French-speaking regions. The word *château* is also used for castles in French, so where clarification is needed, the term *château fort* is used to describe a castle, such as *Château fort de Roquetaillade*. Care should be taken when translating the word *château* into English. It is not used in the same way as 'castle', and most *châteaux* are described in English as 'palaces' or 'country houses' rather than 'castles'. For example, the *Château de Versailles* is so called because it was located in the countryside when it was built, but it does not bear any resemblance to a castle, so it is usually known in English as the Palace of Versailles.

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