NOVELISTIC ART AND DR. ZHIVAGO

"The novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence."

MILAN KUNDERA

The present chapter attempts to throw light on the observations of Milan Kundera on novelistic art, specially with reference to the European novel which further offers an interesting dimension to the authorial voice in Pasternak’s novel “Dr. Zhivago”. Severely censored and chastised by the political authorities for his fearless criticism, Milan Kundera’s literary career, in some ways, is similar to Boris Pasternak – both challenging the ruthless suppression of humanistic rights and advocating the spontaneous expression of creativity.

In “The Art of the Novel”, Kundera probes deeply into the wonderful legacy of the European Novel and the intricacies of authorship by suggesting a link between the existential themes Heidegger analyses in “Being and Time” and the “Narratives” of life displayed by the European novel -

"In its own way, through its own logic, the novel discovered the various dimensions of existence one by one: with Cervantes and his
contemporaries, its enquires into the nature of adventure; with Richardson, it begins to examine “what happens inside”, to unmask the secret life of the feelings; with Balzac, it discovers man’s rootedness in history; with Flaubert, it explores the terra previously incognita of petitioners of the everyday; with Tolstoy, it focuses on the intention of the irrational into human behaviour and decisions. It proves time: the elusive past with Proust, the elusive present with Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it examines the role of the myths from the remote past that control our present action.”*1

Analysing further the role of the novelist, Kundera adopts the theory of Descartes that the thinking self is the basis of everything. In the world of novelistic art, the writer distinguishes between good and evil, and his innate nature influences him to judge accordingly; the novelist, thus, creates an “apodictic and dogmatic discourse” by translating their views and opinions into language and becoming involved in ambiguity in the process. The wisdom of the novel has been questioned by Kundera as “the wisdom of uncertainty”*2, which is hard to accept and understand. Human wisdom requires that the tenets of right and wrong must be established; in “Anna Karenina”, for in stance, either Anna Karenina is the victim of a narrow minded tyrant, or Karenin is the victim of an immoral woman; either Karenin is an
innocent man crushed by an unjust court, or the court represents divine justice and Karenin is guilty.

Whether the authorial voice in the novel displays an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human or remains a natural observer to the societal forces which control human behaviour, carries forward the argument that Boris Pasternak may sometimes, in a detached manner, present a character who may be an “erring” soul in the conventional sense but also may represent a cause which is justified. The romantic liaison between Yuri Zhivago and Lara has been presented by the author as the natural outcome of mutual love between two liberated beings, and not as adultery (as indicated by ethical norms set down by society). Pasternak also remains an unbiased narrator of the life and destiny of Pasha Antipov, loving husband on one hand, detested terrorist following ruthless Bolshevik ideology on the other, Pasternak, – the authorial voice ignores moral judgement and confirms the “wisdom of uncertainty” in novelistic art, and the elusiveness of truth.

Therefore, the ‘Voice’ speaks in one of the chapters in the novel “Dr. Zhivago” – in the words of Strelnikov (the revolutionary name of Pasha Antipov)
"None of this mean anything to you. You couldn't understand it. You grow up quite differently. There was the world of the suburbs, of the railways, of the slums and tenements. Dirt, hunger, overcrowding, the degradation of the worker as a human being, the degradation of women. And there was the world of the mothers' darlings, of smart students and rich merchants' sons; the world of impunity, of brazen, insolvent vice; of rich men laughing or shrugging off the tears of the poor, the robbed, the insulted, the seduced; the reign of parasites whose only distinction was that they never troubled themselves about anything, never gave anything to the world and left nothing behind them.

But for us life was a campaign. We moved mountains for those we loved, and if we brought them nothing but sorrow, we never meant to harm a hair of their heads and in the end we suffered more than they did.""3

Kundera then proceeds to explain the "enigma of the self" which is confronted by the literary creator who again becomes the narrator. One of the fundamental questions on which the novel is based is the true image of the self. At the beginning of narrative — writing in the literary tradition, it was through action that an individual could be distinguished from another person; as Dante stated — "In any act, the primary intention
of the one who acts is to reveal his own image”, action is seen as the self—portrait of the one who acts. But sometimes, even the self may not be grasped through action; the novel, in quest for the self, was compelled to move its focus from the visible world of action to the interior of man’s life was initiated by Richardson, to be followed by Goethe, Stendhal and other writers of his country. The evolutionary ethos of the novel was discovered by Proust and then Joyce. The quest for the self has always ended in paradoxical dissatisfaction on one hand, the novel cannot breach the limits of its own possibilities—on the other hand, the quest for the self also brings in an immense triumph of cognition.

On further defining the role of the ‘self; Kundera remarks—

“The novel is not the author’s confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.”

To apprehend the self in the narrative structure of the novel, one has to grasp the essence of the existential problem. Therefore the narratorial process becomes one long “meditative interrogation. According to Kundera, the tradition of psychological realism has created some predictable norms for the writer to follow, and to maintain his relationship with the reader. For example, the writer must give the maximum amount of information about a character about his physical
appearance, his way of speaking and behaving; he must let the reader know a character’s past, because that is where all the motives for his present behaviour are located; and thirdly, the character must have complete independence; that is to say – the author, with his own considerations must disappear so as not to disturb the reader who, for the time being, has given himself over to illusion and taken fiction for reality.

The connection of the author with the imaginary, experimental self is the author’s conception of a ‘character’, as is evident from the following passage in “Dr. Zhivago” –

“Outside there was no trace of the road, the graveyard or the kitchen garden, nothing but the blizzard, the air smoking with snow. It was almost as if the snowstorm had caught sight of Yura and, conscious of its power to terrify, roared, howled and did everything possible to attract his attention, reveling in the effect it had on him. Turning over and over in the sky, length after length of whiteness unwound over the earth and shrouded it. The blizzard was alone on earth and knew no rival.

When he climbed down from the window-sill Yura’s first impulse was to dress, run outside and start doing something. He was afraid that the cabbage patch would be buried so that no one could dig it up, and
that his mother, buried in the open field, would helplessly sink deeper and deeper away from him into the ground,""5

The pathos of the above passage is striking in its poignant sense of loss as the author revisits the childhood of Yuri- who has just arrived home from the burial place of his mother. The narrative captures an intense moment in the life of the imagined character, as the author ‘disappears’ momentarily to reveal the child’s sorrow.

The novelistic art is explored further by Kundera by describing ‘polyphony’ 6 in the novel (multiple voices) by calling it an unilinear composition. In 17th and 18th Century novels there was a ‘box-like’ technique, in which stories were packed. Some novels in the nineteenth century broke out of the linear mode, which may be called the ‘polyphonic’ mode. The term has been borrowed from musicology; as one of the fundamental principles of the great polyphonic composers was the ‘equality of voices’, it becomes imperative that no ‘voice; of a character in novel should dominate that each should be the bearer of a certain viewpoint in novelistic technique.

As a summing up of the author’s role in “The art of the novel” Kundera quotes from Sartre’s short essay “What Is Writing” – that the
writer has original ideas and an inimitable "Voice". Although his voice marks his thoughts and is a part of his work the novelist does not make an issue of his ideas. He is an explorer feeling his way in an effort "to reveal some unknown aspect of existence". He is in perpetual quest for a form he is seeking and he tries to meet the demands of his dream through the voice.

But authors have always had reservations about their private life and biographies, as Flaubert has remarked –

"The artist must make posterity believe he never lived". Broch, Musil and Kafka made clear demarcations between private and public lives. The distinctive feature of the true novelist is that he does not like to talk about himself "According to a well-known metaphor", says Kundera "The novelist demolishes the house of his life and uses its bricks to construct another house: that of his novel. From which it follows that a novelist's biographers unmake what the novelist made, and remake what he unmade".

The above hypothetical statement may be largely applied to Pasternak's treatment of his novel. Although Yuri is often a spokesman of his ideology, his biography (or even his own auto-biography – "Safe Conduct") present stark dissimilarities and differences in Pasternak's
leanings, attitude and philosophy in life as well as the events which serve as the turning points of his life. Born of parents who were a musician painter due, and nurtured in an atmosphere of creativity, Pasternak’s account of Yuri’s life as a child tends to dramatize a little boy’s sorrow and emphasizes the tragic tone Pasternak’s days spent at the University of Marburg in Germany under the tutelage of Neo-Kantian Philosopher Hermann Cohen in 1912 are interesting facts from his biography and are also the central topics of a few research dissertations of an outstanding group of international scholars present at the Pasternak conference. The material in this collection focus on several aspects of Pasternak’s relation to German culture, and some of them concentrate specifically on the period Pasternak spent in Marburg and which was a turning point in his life. Disillusioned with the rational processing of life through a philosophical prism, Pasternak rejected philosophy as his ultimate career in order to rejoice in his creative intuition as a poet.

The initial article is by Evgeny Pasternak, the poets’ son. Using the Marburg episode in Pasternak’s life as an example, he discusses the general problem of the difference between factual data in an author’s life and his revision of this material for aesthetic purposes. He also points out discrepancies between Pasternak’s letters describing what occurred
in Marburg with his autobiographical description in “Safe Conduct”, where the author often condenses several events into one episode. Rather than viewing this as an imprecision, Evgeny considers it the result of artistic condensation for an aesthetic effect. Another article on the role of Marburg in Pasternak’s life, and which has hardly any resemblance to the life style/attitude of Yuri Zhivago, by Lazer Fleishman. Who posits the influence of Cohen’s Neo-Kantian Version of ethics on Pasternak. In this ethical system man can fully express himself as an individual only in union with others, and as a component part of a community. This was a lesson Pasternak carried with him for his entire life.

Zhivago, on the other hand, is a more or less docile leading protagonist, the story follows him as he is buffeted by the ‘winds of change’ in Russia from 1903 to his death sometime after World War II. “Dr. Zhivago”, the novel, is understood to be semi-autobiographical, and to the extent that Zhivago is acted upon, rather than acting himself; perhaps, it is said that Yuri Zhivago is intended to convey Pasternak’s own ambivalence about the role he had played by remaining in Soviet Union and continuing to work.
Christopher Barnes' reconstruction of Pasternak's early years, in his biography, gives us the impression that Pasternak was born into a privileged milieu, unlike the tragic undertones of Yuri Zhivago's life, which reveals a family shattered by the father's adulterous and profligate life style and the mother's early death. As Barnes summarizes–

"Pasternaks' biography consisted significantly of non-meetings, rejections and renunciations, the abandonment of music and philosophy, of the suppression of romantic artistry, unrequited love, his loss of Rilke through silence and death, and his deprivation of Europe and the civilization in which his personality was rooted". *8

In another Dissertation "The Curtain - An Essay in Seven Parts" Kundera gives an analytical account of the art of narration in relation to the past creators of prose, – Rabelais and Cervantes and the masters of novelistic art in the eighteenth century – Fielding and Sterne. Narration, he says is a recollection or simplification of the past – and thereby presenting the past as the present moment. The novelist wants to hold on to all the plausibility of life's prose – the scene becomes dramatized and tense due to its eventfulness and hence loses its plausibility.
In his assessment of the European novel and the authorial role, Kundera speaks of the essential individuality of Flaubert, who maintained that he did not write his novels to criticize or pass Judgment on to his readers. He said — “I have always done my utmost to get into the soul of things”..... The real subject of disagreement lies in what the novel really is. A true novelist never imposes on authority of the narrative pattern. As Hermann Broch has said –

“The novels’ sole morality is knowledge. A novel that fails to reveal some hither to unknown bit of existence is immoral, thus “getting into the soul of things and setting a good example are two different and irreconcilable purposes”.”

Kundera states — “it has its specific relation to the author’s “self” — in order to hear the secret, barely audible voice of the ‘soul of things’, the novelist unlike the poet or the musician, must know how to silence the cries of his own soul”.

The problematic of the ‘self’ is thus inextricably connected to “existentialism”; we are all hopelessly bound to the particular, yet unique situation of our lives. These has been, therefore, a gradual shift of the authorial voice to turn from exploration of character towards existential analysis or the analysis of situations that shed light on major
aspects of the human condition. When we attempt to explain this existential enigma in terms of the author – protagonist relationship in Dr. Zhivago, it is interesting to observe Kundera’s reflection that history with its agitations, its wars, its resolutions and counter-revolutions, its national humiliations – does not fascinate the novelist; he does not denounce or interpret it. It only interests him as far as it is a “search light” throwing light on human existence. Therefore, along with Broch and Musil, novelistic thinking was brought into the aesthetic of the modern novel. This type of thinking transforming itself into the “authorial” voice, which is independent of any preconceived idea. Although it questions, it does not proclaim truths; it lets its characters live their lives according to the myriad mystery of human life.

As Pasternak reveals his dispassionate attitude through Yuri, as stated below: [Yuri’s words at a family dinner]

"Why, for goodness sake, do I have to know everything and worry myself sick over every blessed thing? History has not consulted me, I have to put up with whatever happens, so why should not I ignore the facts? You tell me it’s unrealistic. But where is reality in Russia today? My belief is that it’s been frightened out of existence. It’s true that I want to believe that the peasants are better off and the villages are prosperous. – if I can’t believe that, then what am I to do? Who am I to
believe, what am I to live by? I've got to go on living, I've got a family.”

The true nature of the novelist, therefore, is like a painter welcoming a stranger to his studio, where he will talk more about other people (his characters) than himself – the narratives of other lives that tend to have a secret presence in his work. He will acquaint you with the history of the novel, and in doing so, will give some sense of his own poetics of the novel, that bears the stamp of his own individuality.

The world of the novelist is like that of the lyric poet, who gives voice to his inner world, so as to rouse in his readers the states of mind he experiences. Kundera observes that in the ‘lyrical’ and the individual focuses exclusively on himself; but as he begins to comprehend the world around him, he moves beyond the lyrical attitude to present a mature understanding of the world and its denizens. The maturity of the novelist rests on his passion to explore a territory of life, that he himself is unaware of, and on which he does not consider himself fit to pass judgment. This is the attitude of Flaubert while writing Madame Bovary. So Milan Kundera states –

"The anti-lyric conversion is a fundamental experience in the curriculum vitae of the novelist; separated from himself, he suddenly
sees that self from a distance, astonished to find that he is not the person he thought he was. After that experience, he will know that nobody is the person he thinks he is, that this misapprehension is universal, elementary, and that it casts on people the soft gleam of the comical”.

In the final piece of non-fiction chosen to illuminate certain aspects of the above study, the writer-critic Kundera attempts to analyse the shifting moral judgments and the persecution of art and articles. The essay is named “Testaments Betrayed” and it reveals the writers indignation, anger and sorrow at the censoring and curbing of the freedom of an artist. The importance of the individual in connection to life and art is also one of dominant themes in Pasternak’s treatment of the situations in “Dr. Zhivago”, and a significant component of the authorial voice in its critique of Communist ideology expressed through the novel. Kundera seeks to answer those questions which arises from the problematic of individual identity, he questions the ability of the novelist to regulate the inner life of his characters. Dostoevsky followed an aesthetic, in which the characters are rooted in a very distinctive personal ideology, according to which they act with unbending logic. For Tolstoy, on the other hand, personal ideology is far from a stable basis for personal identity. If personal thought is not the basis of an individual’s identity, then where do we find that basis? Thomas Mann
brought a very important contribution to this unending investigation. Timeless habits and archetypes, he says, become myths passed on from one generation to the next - they carry an enormous seductive power and control us from “the well of the past”.

Thomas Mann’s theory – that the individuality of a human being is rooted in his past and his traditional environment may be applied to Pasternak’s novel “Dr. Zhivago”, where the inner-consciousness of Yuri – Zhivago, the physician poet is conditioned and somewhat controlled by the revolutionary ardour of a large section of men and women, and to some extent, by the war. The premonitions of his uncle, Uncle Kolya (as he was called) regarding a chaotic future and violent, political backlash influence Young Yuri’s mind, and his personal ideology becomes heavily coloured by opposing forces of the ruling power of his country. The “well of the past” haunts him, as his personal relationships with Lara and his wife Tonya are often disturbed by his mother’s untimely death and the insecurity caused by the behaviour of his wastrel father (who also died when Yuri was very young).

Pasternak sketches a traditional past for Yuri, which overwhelms his future. The author therefore states:

“*He drank vodka and he wrote about Lara, but the more he crossed out and rewrote what he had written, the more did the Lara of*
his poems and notebooks grow away from her living prototype, from the Lara who was Katya's mother, the Lara who was away on a journey with her daughter.

The reason for this correcting and rewriting was his search for strength and exactness of expression, but it also corresponded to the promptings of an inward reticence which forbade him to expose his personal experiences and the real events in his past with too much freedom, lest he should offend or wound those who had directly taken part in them. As a result, the steaming heat of reality was driven out of his poems and so far from their becoming morbid and devitalised, there appeared in them a broad peace of reconciliation which lifted the particular to the level of the universal and accessible to all.)*14

Pasternak's authorial voice is discernible in the above lines as he suggests changes in the consciousness of Yuri Zhivago; the poetic sensibilities of his protagonist become alive with an all consuming passion for Lara, as Yuri transcends to the "utopian" world of the true artist.

As a conclusive statement to his ideology on the novelistic art and its author, Kundera offers a few illuminating insights into authorial participation in the novel-form. Drawing on the vast wisdom of past
writers, Kundera says that novelists have always resisted the “biographical furore”, as according to Proust.

“A book is the product of a self other than the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices; - the writer’s true self is manifested in his books alone.”

Therefore, Kundera makes the assessment that –

“If a work of art emanates from an individual and his uniqueness, it is logical that this unique being, the author, should possess all rights over the thing that emanates exclusively from him. After a centuries’ long process, these rights attained their definitive form during the French Revolution, which recognized literary property as the most sacred, the most personal of all property.” Kundera reflects on the recent trend of lack of respect for the author’s rights, an atmosphere of conflict is arising when the moral rights of the author are being violated, and they are starting to lose their aura.

In connection with the above, John O’ Brien, in his article “Meaning, Play and the Role of the author” makes some valuable observations. He states –

“In the world of books, the author is dead and has been for quite a while – as has the traditionally axiomatic idea that the author has
some say in what is being said. Yet, outside the discussions of authorship taking place within the academic circle, Milan Kundera has experienced first hand some very real implications of being on author and writing a “dangerous” text. Because of the works he authored before the Russian invasion, Kundera was fired from his teaching post, his books were removed from libraries and universally banned, and he was denied the means to support himself. Until recently his novels have been read in dozens of languages with the ironic exception of the language in which the novels were written.

The challenge to the common effacement of the author is more appropriately found however, in Kundera’s texts themselves. Kundera’s novels give voice to a powerful intrusive author identifying himself bluntly as none other than Milan Kundera Enriched by the more radical narrative examples of Sterne and Diderot, Kundera weaves an author-figure into his texts with stark, autobiographical intentions that threatened the provocative flippancy with which Roland Barthes announced/pronounced the demise of the author in his famous essay.

Still, on closer analysis, what Barthes says and Kundera does are not as diametrically opposed as one might assume. The focus of this analysis of Kundera and his authorship will be to examine these issues, appropriately concentrating on the degree to which Barthes (the author’s executioner) provides a valuable theoretical tool for the
exploration of Kundera’s authorial stance and for kind of ‘play’ that characterize his novels. Barthes’ general sense of authorship and the erotic potential of texts are strikingly close to the kind of reading Kundera’s texts invite. Contrary to the position of Nina Pelican Straus against which much of what follows can be read ................ I contend that the intrusive author-figure does not work to demand a strict adherence to historical or political context. In fact, I argue that the opposite is true”.  

He further suggests that in an insightful discussion of “The Book of Laughter and Forgetting”, Nina Pelican Straus furthers her claim that the novel is intended to be bound inextricably to Czechoslovak history, depending on the understanding that the intrusive author-figure is autobiographical in nature, not a dispersed extension or modality of the writing subject. She argues that the novel consistently parodies the over-theorization of criticism to the degree that all context is lost in the rush to reveal the chaotic indeterminacy of the text. Most polemical in her attack of deconstruction, she goes so far as to claim that in the novel, Kundera is speaking out directly against even the belief that no single interpretation is right or should be preferred over another. Straus sees deconstruction as an attempt to turn the more “obvious intentions” of the book upside down and she argues that the novels’ structure and
technique (including intrusive author) are directly related to the content ..... the recurring, simple motif that history tends to get lost or erased by others. When she contends that the strong authorial voice functions as protection against "inhuman theories" that would insist on plural meanings, she bluntly denies Barthes in the process.

According to John O'Brien –

"This is not to say that the anti-deconstructionist critic has no "fun", but that his (or her) fun must be qualified by the awareness that history, and the language which ties us to history, can never quite be "jouissant" - a mere game and plaything for the mind .......... in the sense that Roland Barthes describes it. The dehumanization of the text into a game without reference to the facts of history, is, for Kundera, simply painful.

In claiming that Kundera intends to defend against .......... and even to satirize such a critical practice, Straus later argues that his texts support this agenda with his use of "authorial commentary and self-exposure. Inscribing himself as witness and critic of his own book, Kundera cannot but remind the reader.......... (that) no reading, except what the author intends, is quite legitimate in his terms; and the facts pertinent to that reading must .......... be given priority." 18
The voice of the intrusive author, according to Straus, is an intentional narrative device employed to make the text indeconstructible. In an investigative analysis of Kundera’s observations on the author’s voice as well as his art, and a probing into his own novels by other critics, it is highly relevant to point out how contemporary readings of Dr. Zhivago and authorial participation of Boris Pasternak throw light on such issues as “intrusive author” and “self-exposure”. The “stark, autobiographical intrusions” which John O’ Brien mentions with relation to Kundera also brings Pasternak into consideration; a reading of his biographical career will reveal his passionate involvement first with music, and secondly with poetry which he brings to life with Yuri’s poems in the novel “Dr. Zhivago. Authorial commentary also remains explicit as Yuri makes a persistent struggle to oppose the oppression of Soviet authority which stifled creativity of the soul. Pasternak was a known champion of human rights against the excess of Socialist ideology; the persecution of the artist and his originality, as depicted in “Testaments Betrayed” is reflected through the spiritual crisis of Yuri, which are clearly autobiographical ‘intrusions’ from Pasternak’s own life.

In 1946, Pasternak began to draft his story of “Dr. Zhivago” but published nothing for fear of Government disapproval. But in 1956, he
submitted his manuscript to Novy Mir for publication and to the Italian publisher Feltrinelli. Dr. Zhivago was published in Italian in 1957, and in October 1958, Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

Throughout this part of his literary career ridden with ideological and political chaos, he was supported and offered companionship by Olga Ivinskaya. Olga is believed to be the inspiration beyond the conceptualization of the character of Lara in Dr. Zhivago. Their passionate love affair, government wrath on Pasternak and Olga for engaging in “anti-Soviet discourse” and subsequent imprisonment of Olga in 1949 carry definite signs of authorial intrusion in “Dr. Zhivago”. Separated from Lara and the essence of life itself, Yuri speaks out his heart in the following extract, from the poem “Autumn” in the collection of Verses as the conclusive part of the novel. The authorial voice is supposedly clearly discernible in this collection:

AUTUMN

I have allowed my family to scatter,

All my dear ones are dispersed.

A life-long loneliness

Fills nature and my heart,
And here I am with you, in a small house.
Outside, the forest is unpeopled like a desert.
As in the song, the drives and footpaths
Are almost overgrown.

The log walls are sad,
Having only us two to gaze at.
But we never undertook to leap the barriers.
We will perish honestly.

(Dr. Zhivago Poems —“Autumn”; p-482)

Notes & References:


2. Ibid; p-7.


10. Ibid; (Kundera quotes Broch) p-61.

11. Ibid; p-61.


16. Ibid; p-88.


18. Ibid; p-6.

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