Chapter Four: Milan Kundera and His World

4.1. Introduction: Milan Kundera, Biography and His Works

4.1.1. Biography 216
4.1.2. Style and Attitude 228
4.1.3. Major Works 231
4.1.4. Controversy 243
4.1.5. Literary Achievements 245
4.1.6. Awards 246
4.1.7. Notes and References 247

4.2. Intra/Extra–textual Features of The Joke and The Unbearable Lightness of Being

4.2.1. The Joke 249

4.2.1.1. Intra-textual Features 249

4.2.1.1.1. General Overview and Structure 249
4.2.1.1.2. Plot and Setting 255
4.2.1.1.3. Narration, Narrator and Characterization 263
4.2.1.1.4. Themes 272

4.2.1.2. Extra-textual Features 277
4.2.1.3. Notes and References 284

4.2.2. The Unbearable Lightness of Being 289

4.2.2.1. Intra-textual Features 289

4.2.2.1.1. General Overview and Structure 289
4.2.2.1.2. Plot and Setting 296
4.2.2.1.3. Characterization 309
4.2.2.1.4. Narration and the Narrator 317
4.2.2.1.5. Themes 321

4.2.2.2. Extra-textual Features 326
4.2.2.3. Notes and References 334
“Biography: sequence of events which we consider important to our life. However, what is important and what isn’t? Because we ourselves don’t know (and never even think of putting such a silly question to ourselves) we accept as important whatever is accepted by others, for example, by our employer, whose questionnaire we fill out: date of birth, parents’ occupation, schooling, changes of occupation, domicile, marriages, divorces, births of children, serious diseases. It is deplorable, but it is a fact: we have learned to see our own lives through the eyes of business or government questionnaires...” (Milan Kundera, Immortality)

4.1. Introduction: Milan Kundera, Biography and His Works

4.1.1. Biography

The Franco-Czech novelist, short-story writer, dramatist, poet, critic and essayist Milan Kundera was born on April 1, 1929 in Brno, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) into a highly cultured middle class family. His father, Ludvik Kundera, was a well-known pianist and musicologist who collaborated with the famous Czech composer Leos Janacek. From early years on, Milan Kundera learnt to play the piano with his father and later was educated in music under the direction of Paul Haas and Vaclav Kapral. This music education in his young age appeared later as musicological influences and references found throughout his works. In addition to musical themes, terms and analogies in most of Kundera’s novels he has even gone so far as including notes in the text to make a point. Peter Kussi, a translator of Kundera into English has expounded on this theme: “The musical form of Kundera’s novels, in which the tension between precision and freedom is expressed in terms of theme and variations, also poses difficulties for the translator. In Kundera’s novels certain words and phrases appear again and again, like musical leitmotifs...” However, at the age of nineteen, he decided that music was not his true vocation. Kundera completed his secondary school studies in Brno in 1948 and then studied literature and aesthetics at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague. After two terms, he transferred to the Film Faculty of the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Prague, where he first attended lectures in film direction and script writing. In 1952 he began teaching cinematography at the Prague Academy.

Kundera came from a generation of young Czechs who had had little or no experience of the pre-war democratic Czechoslovak Republic. The ideologies of such idealistic and progressive students were greatly influenced by the experiences and
atrocities of World War II and the German occupation. Still in his teens and much attracted to Marxist philosophy, which seemed to promise a new freedom and peace, Kundera joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia which seized power in 1948. In 1950, his studies were briefly interrupted by political interference. In fact, Kundera tended to have a complicated relationship with the Communist Party but then was expelled in 1950 together with another writer named Jan Trefulka, because of criticizing the totalitarian nature of party and conducting anti-party activities; Trefulka described the incident in his novella *Happiness Rained on Them* (*Prslo jim stesti*, 1962). This event also greatly influenced Milan Kundera and later appeared in his autobiographical novel *The Joke* (*Žert*, 1967); he re-joined the party in 1956 and was re-expelled in 1970. Afterwards, he was also expelled from the University, lived among workmen, played in a jazz band and wrote poetry.

Kundera has experienced many ups and down during his relatively long and difficult expedition to reach literary maturity. In 1945, Kundera first published translations of poetry by the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in the journal Gong in Brno-Královo pole; in 1946, a surrealist poem by Milan Kundera, written undoubtedly under the influence of cousin Ludvík Kundera (born in 1920), a well-known Czech writer and poet in his own right, was printed in the journal Mladé archy (The Young Notebooks).

The first literary works he produced (three volumes of poetry and a play) were essentially Communist propaganda, though they didn’t always conform to the tenets of socialist realism approved by the state. It was five years after the communist takeover of power in Czechoslovakia and during the period of widespread Stalinism that Milan Kundera’s first book came out in 1953. It was a collection of lyrical poems, *Man, a Wide Garden* (*Clovek zahrada sira*, 1953). This was immediately condemned by the Communists for using surrealist techniques and lacking universality. But the young author and many of his contemporaries saw this as unorthodox departure from the poetics of literature which had been by this time fully enslaved by the orthodox communist dogma. As Jan Culík puts it, “the period after the communist takeover of power in February 1948 produced attempts at “socialist realism” in Czech literature. Poems and novels were written about the “mass proletarian movement,” the “class struggle” and the “successful progression of society
towards communism”. It was propaganda, made up of cardboard cut-out and empty political clichés.” It was in such atmosphere that, in this first collection of poems, Kundera attempted to assume a critical attitude towards this type of literature, but he still did so from a strictly Marxist point of view. Nevertheless, he boldly transgressed against most of the tenets of the then only permissible literary method of socialist realism, as disseminated by the official state and party literary propagandist Ladislav Štoll.

*Man, a Wide Garden (Clovek, zahrada sìra)* is a collection of low profile verse in which the author systematically attempts to illustrate and enliven the official Marxist dogma by personal experience. Thus the poet feels encouraged when he hears a young boy, playing in Brno near a railway track, singing the hymn of the left-wing movement, the Internationale. Kundera uses the atmosphere of the familiar Czech surroundings as a symbol of comfort and peace. In all his work written before leaving Czechoslovakia, Kundera is firmly rooted in his home environment. In *Clovek, zahrada širá*, the communist regime in Czechoslovakia is for Kundera a guarantor of all the values associated with his home: of everything that is comfortable and reassuring.

Kundera wrote two other volumes of poetry, *The Last May (Poslední máj, 1955)* and *Monologues (Monology, 1957)* while teaching at the academy – though he later renounced these works as adolescent and insignificant. The long poem *The Last May* had a positive mythical hero, the Communist militant and writer Julius Fucek, who was executed by the Nazis during the Second World War. Full of bathos, the work conforms to the creed of socialist realism and the strictly official communist version of history. Some commentators have speculated that Kundera had been commissioned to write this propagandistic piece and did not really believe in what he was writing. Yet some others believe that his poetry displayed a critique of “socialist realism,” though still from a Marxist point of view. He tended to reject political propaganda as a theme and instead stressed the importance of natural, authentic human experience.

*Monologues (Monology, 1957)* is a collection of poems in which Kundera highlights between lovers. Here he rejects political propaganda and again stresses the
importance of natural, ordinary, authentic human experience. *Monologues* is a book of love poetry of a rational, intellectual inspiration. Many poems are based on paradoxes. (“I cannot live with you, you are too beautiful.”) Some of them highlight the tension between emotion and the intellect and the irrationality of love which often conquers even those who would be guided by the intellect alone. These are also typical Kunderaesque themes, developed later in his work. In some of the poems, the poet is physically repulsed by women, while being attracted to them. Erotic passion can be a burden. The sexual impulse is disconcerting. Lovemaking can sometimes assume the form of escapism which hides unpleasant reality. The theme of the pettiness of everyday female concerns, which makes women unaware of what is really going on in life, re-appears in this collection, as does the theme of one’s beloved native country. Women are obedient, while men are warriors who try to understand the meaning of existence. While doing so, they invariably break their heads against impenetrable walls. Some of the poems deal with the dilemmas of infidelity; others are preoccupied with the fear of ageing and death. The theme of treason is present here in a slightly different form. The latest version of *Monologues*, published in 1965, includes a poem in which the man’s principal traumatic experience is being unjustly accused and condemned by his party colleagues at a political meeting – the theme of Kundera’s early expulsion from the communist party, the main theme of *The Joke* (Žert; 1967), re-appears again. A woman’s love is offered as a healing instrument for all the ills that the man has experienced in the world.

Despite his success with this type of writing, Kundera was never comfortable being labeled a poet. He claimed that he was actually relieved when he lost the aptitude for writing poetry at the end of the 1950s.

From the middle of the 1950s, Kundera was an icon in communist Czechoslovakia. He wrote for a number of literary magazines and his articles were followed with considerable interest. In 1955, his article “O sporech dedickych” (“Arguing about our inheritance”) stood up for the heritage of the Czech and European avant-garde poetry, which until then had been condemned as decadent by official communist literary scholars. Kundera defended avant-garde poetry from a strictly communist point of view. He argued that even his politically orthodox poem
about Julius Fucík, *The Last May (Poslední máj)*, could not have been written without the legacy of Czech and international avant-garde poets.

During the early 1960s, Kundera attained literary prominence in his homeland by serving on the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Writers Union from 1963 to 1969 and on the editorial boards of the journals *Literarní noviny* and *Listy*, a mouth-piece of the “Prague Spring.” Meanwhile, he published a critical work about Czechoslovakian novelist Vladislava Vancury, *Umení románu: Cesta Vladislava Vancury za velkou epikou (The Art of the Novel: Vladislav Vancura’s journey to the great epic, 1960)*. This literary study which analyses the writings of an outstanding Czech interwar avant-garde prose writer (and member of the communist party) Vladislav Vančura is a strictly Marxist defense of experimentation in the field of narrative fiction. The work was significantly influenced by the Hungarian Marxist theoretician György Lukács and his concept of the development of the epic – but writers were not allowed to quote Lukács in Czechoslovakia at that time.

A part of Kundera’s literary prominence in this time goes to his talent as a playwright as well. Kundera’s first play, *The Owners of the Keys (Majitelé klíču, 1962)* was staged in Czechoslovakia and abroad. Although Kundera’s plays were less known in the West, they were highly regarded in his homeland, as it was very successfully staged at the National Theatre in Prague by the experimental director Otomar Krejča. *The Owners of the Keys*, set in a provincial town during the German occupation, has been called one of the most important plays of the post-Stalinist period. In this play, Kundera again attempted gently to humanize totalitarian communism from within the framework of its own, official referential system.

The setting of the play is conventional, but Kundera has given the story and the characters his own, mildly reformist content. He has again filled the play with many typical Kunderaesque motifs which are developed later in his mature work.

The story of the play, *The Owners of the Keys*, reveals that a young couple is sharing overcrowded accommodations with their in-laws in a small Moravian town during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. Young man Jiří Necas and his twenty-year-old wife Alena live in one room in the small flat, while Alena’s narrow-minded
and pedantic parents, the Krutas, live in another room in the same flat. The cramped conditions, the narrow-mindedness of the parents and the uncontrollably destructive emotionalism of particularly the female characters (a typical Kundera theme) are the source of conflict. On a Sunday morning, Jiri is contacted on the telephone by Vera, a woman whom he knew when he temporarily became involved with the communist resistance movement. Vera is on the run from the Gestapo and needs Jiri’s help. While trying to do so, Jiri clashes with the limitedness of his in-laws and the childlike innocence of his wife. Vera turns up in the flat and raises the suspicion of a Nazi concierge. Jiri is forced to kill him. He hides his dead body in the flat. Now it is necessary for everyone in the flat to run away, before the Gestapo arrives. But Jiri cannot tell his wife and her parents what has happened. Their reaction would be unpredictable. They would create a tantrum, attract the attention of the Nazi secret police and everyone would be killed. The parents keep harping on about irrelevant matters, accusing Jiri of having temporarily appropriated both sets of keys to the house, locking them inadvertently inside the flat for twenty minutes on the Sunday morning. In despair, Jiri tries to lure away Alena from the flat, but she decides on a whim that she will not go out this morning. Eventually, Jiri and Vera leave on their own, abandoning Alena and her parents to certain death.

The Owners of the Keys is a protest against destructive primitivism. It is a play written from a communist point of view and members of the communist resistance are given the expected high place in the official political pantheon. The characters are still sufficiently black and white in order for them to conform to the tenets of “socialist realism”, prevailing at the time. The play contains lyrical interludes, “visions”, in which the main character, Jiri, emotionally probes his own situation, the experience of his life and his relations to people close to him. This is lyricism which the author later came to reject. Kundera’s afterword to the printed version of The Owners of the Keys of 1964 shows that his tendency to explain and interpret his own work to the reader dates back to this early stage of his literary career.

Kundera’s first mature period started in 1958 (or 1959) when he “found himself as a writer” while working on his first short story, “I, the mournful God” (“Ja, truchlivy Buh”, 1958), which was later included in the first of the three thin volumes of Laughable Loves (Smešne lásky, 1963, 1965, 1968), but was ultimately
left out from the definitive Czech edition of this book in 1981 because it was redundant to the seven-part structure of the collection which Kundera imposed upon it. “I, the mournful God” was written as relaxation during the hard work on the play The Owners of the Keys. Similar to most of the texts in Laughable Loves, “I, the mournful God”, is a dazzling miniature drama of cherished human relationships. Most of these short stories are based on bittersweet tales which deal with sexual relations of two or three characters. This is in the line of Kundera’s assertion that looking at people through the prism of erotic relationships reveals much about human nature. Consequently, Kundera amends the ancient Don Juan theme. As Jan Culík puts it, for Kundera “the modern Don Juan, however, no longer conquers women. He just boringly collects them because the convention of the day demands this. Kundera regards Laughable Loves as his first, truly mature work. He likes it best of all his work because the collection “reflects the happiest time of my life” (the liberal 1960s).”

More liberal members of the communist party, mainly writers and intellectuals, started to campaign for freedom in Czechoslovakia against the will of the bureaucratic and totalitarian communist party machinery during the second half of the 1960s. Becoming more disillusioned with the communist system, it was in a 1967 speech opening the Fourth Czechoslovak Writers Congress that Kundera explicitly reprimanded censorship and other repressive tactics used against writers. He called for freedom of writers, stressing the importance of preserving a separate Czech identity, which could only be done if Czech literature and culture are allowed to develop in complete freedom. The speech became a landmark in the history of independent, self-critical Czech thought. However, it is believed that Kundera had his own innovative ways for coping with the state policy concerning censorship. His three series of short stories, Laughable Loves (1963-69), which dealt with the themes of love, sex, and self-deception, focused on individual characteristics without attacking directly the system itself. In his review of the book Paul Theroux noted, that a “writer who keeps his sanity long enough to ridicule his oppressors, who has enough hope left to make this ridicule into satire, must be congratulated.”

Kundera’s resistance to the official restrictions on literature led to his involvement with the reform movement of 1968 known as “Prague Spring,” in which
Czech artists and intellectuals led a cultural revolution denouncing governmental repression of the arts. Advocating a more liberal socialism, they supported President Alexander Dubcek, who introduced “socialism with a human face” during his brief tenure in office. Such a short epoch of reformist activities was suppressed by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. This stopped the liberal direction of Czech culture and government shifted the country toward a repressive Soviet-dominated communism. Soon after, communist authorities banned over 400 authors for refusing to accept or cooperate with the new regime, including Kundera, who continued to speak out against the ill effects of an oppressive state on Czech literature and history. Consequently, Kundera became one of the authors, whose books were removed from libraries and banned from legal publication. In 1969 Kundera was fired from his teaching post. In the meantime his second novel, *Life Is Elsewhere*, was refused publication, and the following year, he was expelled from the Communist Party and the Writers Union. Access to his work was banned, and Kundera was reduced to making a living by writing an astrology column under a fictitious name. Nevertheless, Kundera remained committed to reforming Czech communism, and argued intensely with Vaclav Havel in print, saying that everyone should remain calm while hopeful to see the outcomes of the Prague Spring later. However, Kundera relinquished his reformist dreams finally and moved to France in 1975.

Though refused publication in his native country, *Life Is Elsewhere* was published in France and the United States, winning the Prix Medicis (1973) for best foreign novel in France. Quite possibly and due to the success and acclaim of that novel, Kundera was offered a teaching post at the University of Rennes in France, where from 1975 to 1980 Kundera worked as a professor of comparative literature. In subsequent interviews, the author confessed that the departure from the harsh atmosphere of occupied Czechoslovakia brought him profound relief. Yet, he continued to look at his native country from the new, French, vantage point with a mixture of affectionate melancholy. Since 1975, Kundera has lived in France with his wife, Vera Hrabánková. In 1981, two years after the Czech government deprived him of his citizenship, he became a French citizen. In 1980 he was appointed professor at École des Hautes Études en sciences sociales, Paris.
Life being a giant joke, perpetrated on members of the human race, is the main theme of Kundera’s perhaps most profound novel The Joke (Žert, 1967). In this novel, Kundera for the first time profoundly developed the major theme of his writing, namely the warning that it is impossible to understand and control reality. This skeptical attitude is evidently linked with the history of Kundera’s own personal disillusionment with communism. The Joke is a challenge to the optimistic proposition, advanced by the communists in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, who believed that reality can be mastered and controlled by Man’s intellect and that Man can be the creator of his own destiny. Here, Kundera employs his particular and stylistic irony to point out that the communists’ optimistic belief in a supreme human intellect, the culmination of rationalist optimism of the Enlightenment, produced nothing but a shattered world. Most Western critics at first labeled The Joke as a political novel (or more directly as a protest against Stalinist totalitarianism), whereas, this could only be considered as one of many possible themes in the novel. Kundera correctly objected to such an underestimated interpretation. He pointed out that the 1950s in Czechoslovakia attracted him as a scene for the novel only “because this was a time when History made as yet unheard of experiments with Man. Thus it deepened my doubts and enriched my understanding of man and his predicament.”

The Joke proficiently conveys the dreary atmosphere of triumphant Stalinism in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s, whose propaganda and attitude to life was based on officially manipulated lyricism. Kundera again warns against the destructiveness of emotions, elevated to the status of truth. This is what some Czech critics of the 1960s properly understood from The Joke as a work which probes the deepest essence of human existence. The story of The Joke is based on a tale. A young communist student makes an innocent joke in order to win a girl, who is attending a political training course at a summer camp. The hero of the novel, Ludvík Jahn, frustrated by her absence, sends her a provocative postcard, which gives rise to a witch-hunt. Ludvík is expelled from the party, forced to leave university and ends up as a member of a penal army unit, working in the mines. Many years later, in the 1960s, Ludvík thinks an opportunity has arisen to revenge himself on a fellow student, Pavel Zemánek, the main perpetrator of his downfall. He seduces his wife, thus hoping to destroy their marriage. But Zemánek no longer lives with his wife and by seducing her, Ludvík Jahn actually helps him. Moreover, as a chameleon-like creature,
Zemánek is now a liberal reformer, fighting against communist authoritarianism in his country, and is therefore extremely popular with students at the University where he teaches. Thus Ludvík realizes that Man is never in control. There is no point in trying to revenge oneself. “Everything will be forgotten. Nothing will be redressed.”

The most shocking experience of Ludvík Jahn is the realization that his closest friends did not hesitate to vote for his expulsion from the Party because the Party had ordered them to do so. In a similar incident, the soldiers in the penal unit Ludvík served in, ruthlessly subject an innocent individual to undeserved torment. Whenever Ludvík finds himself in a group of people, he always wonders how many of them would be willing to send their fellow mortals to death, only because the collective has demanded this.

The structure of *The Joke* is derived from the principles of musical composition. It is polyphonic, pluralist, and strictly mathematical. Four main characters tell their stories, often recounting the same events from their own points of view. By confronting their accounts, the reader comes to the conclusion that each of the characters is the victim of his or her own fallacious interpretation of reality. Further, the characters in *The Joke* make numerous philosophical paradoxical and witty statements about life around them.

The protagonist, Ludvík Jahn, is proud of his intellectual, analytical abilities. But he fools himself when believing that he is in full, rational control of his life. Even his actions are based on emotional impulse, just as the actions of the thoroughly “lyrical”, fully emotional characters (Zemánek’s wife Helena) who behave in a blatantly limited, embarrassing and destructive way.

It was in Paris in 1982 that Kundera completed the novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (*Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, first published in Czech in Toronto in 1985, first published in French in spring 1984 and definitive French edition 1987), his most popular work with Western readers and critics alike. It was particularly this novel which made Milan Kundera an internationally well-known author, especially after it was turned into a film by director Philip Kaufman in 1988. However, Kundera was unhappy with the film. Neither this movie nor Jaromil Jireš’s film version of *The
Joke, made in Czechoslovakia in 1968, do justice to the complex, polyphonic structure of Kundera’s novels. Kundera, however, likes Jireš’s version of The Joke. Some Czech critics think that the best film ever made of a work by Milan Kundera is Nikdo se nebude smát (Nobody will laugh) the 1969 Czech film of a short story from Laughable Loves, directed by Antonín Kachlík.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being returns to a more traditional narrative storyline, although even here the narrator continually interrupts it, explaining to the reader what he means and examining highlighted problems from different angles. In this novel, Kundera uses the principle of playfulness and variation as an instrument to examine matters from all sides. He tells the stories of two couples, Tomas and Tereza and Sabina and Franz. The author again compares and contrasts a number of major themes of his work. The Unbearable Lightness of Being examines Nietzsche’s myth of Man’s eternal return. Kundera concentrates on the fact that Man lives only once. Man has consciousness and reason, but his life is unrepeatable. Hence one cannot correct one’s mistakes. This realization is obviously still connected in the author’s mind with his attempts to live down the experience of his communist youth. Since life is unrepeatable, we experience dizzying lightness, a total lack of responsibility.

The idea of lightness, which Kundera takes from the Greek philosopher Parmenides, and which originally meant playfulness, turns into lack of seriousness, into meaningless emptiness. Kundera also deals with the concept of kitsch, which he has taken over from the German writer Hermann Broch. Kitsch is a beautiful lie, which hides all the negative aspects of life and deliberately ignores the existence of death.

A number of typical Kunderaesque themes recur in the novel. The main hero, neurosurgeon Tomas, is again a passionate womanizer, yet he loves his wife. He is at the same time attracted and repelled by women. The mother of his wife, Tereza, a typical “lyrical” character, is an aggressive proponent of the notions of collectivism, optimism and lack of privacy. Tereza however is shy and yearns for privacy. Destructive lyricism is again associated with left wing political ideology, both in Eastern Europe in the 1950s and in Western Europe in the 1980s. It is comical that people often interpret the same phenomena and events each in their own way, due to
their differing experience, mentality and background. Thus, understanding between people is impossible. Tomas and his photographer wife Tereza defect to Switzerland after the Soviet invasion of 1968. But Tereza cannot stand Tomas’s infidelities and returns to Czechoslovakia on an impulse. Tomas follows her, giving up his good job. On his return to Czechoslovakia he becomes a window cleaner. (Czech critics complained that this does not ring true. Of all the professionals who were forced to abandon their work and support themselves in menial jobs after the post 1968 clampdown, medical doctors were an exception - they were not persecuted in this way.) Eventually, to escape the attention of the secret police, the couple move to the Czech countryside, where they live in happiness and humility and after a few years die in a traffic accident.

While being hailed as a masterpiece in the West, this work became the subject of fierce controversy among independent critics within Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. Perhaps misunderstanding that the narrator’s emphatic pronouncements are to be taken by the reader as only one of the many polyphonic voices, as an invitation to critical thinking, Czech commentators felt that the author’s vision of reality was too black and white to be convincing.

Kundera now rejects and suppresses most of his literary output produced in the 1950s and the 1960s. He asserts the right of the author to exclude from his work “immature” and “unsuccessful” pieces of writing, the way composers do this.

Milan Kundera is an extremely private person and he guards the details of his personal life as a secret, which is, as he says “nobody’s business”. In doing this, he has been undoubtedly influenced by the teaching of Czech structuralism, which argues that literary texts should be perceived on their own merits, as self-contained structures of signs, without the interference of extra-literary reality. In an interview with the British writer Ian McEwan, Kundera said: “We constantly re-write our own biographies and continually give matters new meanings. To re-write history in this sense – indeed, in an Orwellian sense – is not at all inhuman. On the contrary, it is very human.”

Kundera feels that it is impossible to produce an objective history of politics, just as it is impossible to produce an objective autobiography or a biography. He strictly controls the public information about his life. In the latest French editions
of Kundera’s works, his “official biography” consists only of two sentences: “Milan Kundera was born in Czechoslovakia in 1929 and since 1975 has been living in France.”

4.1.2. Style and Attitude

Milan Kundera has been described as the greatest Czech author since Kafka, and his latest book (The Curtain) has united critics around the globe in high praise for his ability to write beautiful prose. This book charts Kundera’s personal journey through the history and evolution of the novel as an art form. Although his early poetic works are staunchly pro-communist, his novels escape ideological classification. Kundera has repeatedly insisted on being considered a novelist, rather than a political or dissident writer. Political commentary has all but disappeared from his novels (starting specifically after The Unbearable Lightness of Being) except in relation to broader philosophical themes. Despite political readings of his work, Kundera has refused the label of “dissident writer” and emphasized the autonomy of art from all political ideologies. In October 1977 he told his exiled compatriot George Theiner: “If you cannot view the art that comes to you from Prague, Budapest, or Warsaw in any other way than by means of this wretched political code, you murder it, no less brutally that the worst of the Stalinist dogmatists.” Although some reviewers have considered his work in the context of exile literature or have labeled him a “dissident” writer despite his protests to the contrary, most critics have noted the complex structure of his novels, identifying that component as one of the integral aspects of his art.

Kundera has defined the novel as a “poetic meditation on existence.” Like Robert Musil (1880-1942), Kundera uses the genre as a vehicle for reflections on the essence of the European culture. His style of fiction, interlaced with philosophical digression, is greatly inspired by the novels of Robert Musil and the philosophy of Nietzsche. Kundera takes his inspiration, as he notes often enough, not only from the Renaissance authors Giovanni Boccaccio and Rabelais, but also from Laurence Sterne, Henry Fielding, Denis Diderot, Robert Musil, Witold Gombrowicz, Hermann
Broch, Franz Kafka, Martin Heidegger, and perhaps most importantly, Miguel de Cervantes, to whose legacy he considers himself most committed.

Kundera’s characters are often explicitly identified as images of his own imagination, commenting in the first-person on the characters in entirely third-person stories. Kundera is more concerned with the words that shape or mould his characters than with the characters’ physical appearance. In his non-fiction work, *The Art of the Novel*, he says that the reader’s imagination automatically completes the writer’s vision. He, as the writer, wishes to focus on the essential. For him, the essential does not include the physical appearance or even the interior world (the psychological world) of his characters.

François Ricard believed that Kundera compiles his works with regard to an overall oeuvre, rather than limiting his ideas to the scope of just one novel at a time. His themes and meta-themes exist across the entire oeuvre. Each new book manifests the latest stage of his personal philosophy. Some of these meta-themes are exile, identity, life beyond the border (beyond love, beyond art, beyond seriousness), history as continual return, and the pleasure of a less important life.

Many of Kundera’s characters are intended as expositions of one of these themes at the expense of their fully developed humanity. Specifics in regard to the characters tend to be rather vague. Often, more than one main character is used in a novel, even to the extent of completely discontinuing a character and resuming the plot with a brand new character. As he told Philip Roth in an interview in *The Village Voice*: “Intimate life [is] understood as one’s personal secret, as something valuable, inviolable, the basis of one’s originality.”

Kundera’s early novels investigate the twofold tragic and comic aspects of totalitarianism. He does not view his works, however, as political commentary. “The condemnation of totalitarianism doesn’t deserve a novel,” says Kundera. According to the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, “What he finds interesting is the similarity between totalitarianism and the immemorial and fascinating dream of a harmonious society where private life and public life form but one unity and all are united around one will and one faith. It is not accidental that the most favored genre in the
culminating period of Stalinism was the idyll.” In exploring the dark humor of this topic, Kundera seems deeply influenced by Franz Kafka. 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 (luckily he was hiding away in France). 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.

In his mature works of fiction, Kundera creates an independent, self-contained world, which is constantly analyzed and questioned from a philosophical point of view. However, it would be wrong to regard Kundera as a philosopher. He is a proponent of no concrete school of thinking. He greatly enjoys playing with his storylines and while analyzing them rationally, he opens up an infinite way of interpreting the presented facts. As Kvetoslav Chvatík has pointed out, Kundera’s mature fiction highlights the semiotic relativity of the modern novel, seen as an ambiguous structure of signs. Playing with these signs enables Kundera to show human existence as infinitely open to countless possibilities, thus freeing Man from the limitedness of one, unrepeatable human life. In concentrating on the sexual experiences of his characters, Kundera analyses the symbolic social meaning of these erotic encounters, thus being able to deal with the most essential themes concerning Man.

According to Kundera, he is a writer without a message. For example, in the Art of the Novel, his first book of essays, he recounts a story in which a Scandinavian publisher wavered over going ahead with The Farewell Party because they didn’t like his apparent anti-abortion message. He explains that not only was the publisher wrong about the existence of such a message in the work, but, “...I was delighted with the misunderstanding. I had succeeded as a novelist. I succeeded in maintaining the moral ambiguity of the situation. I had kept faith with the essence of the novel as an art: irony. And irony doesn’t give a damn about messages!”
Often described as ironic, satiric, pessimistic, and erotic, Kundera’s work is difficult to capture in a brief summary, which amuses the novelist because he dislikes the Western media’s penchant for reducing art to brief explanatory descriptions. Once, when asked in all seriousness by Antonin Liehm why he so often used the joke as a literary device, Kundera lightly replied that it was because he was born on April Fools Day!

Novelistic unity for Kundera does not exist in a predetermined set of rules. He uses a common theme and a structure based on musical polyphony to tie the sections of his novels together. The lengths and arrangements of chapters, subchapters, and sections are used to create mood and a sense of time, much like in a musical composition. Instead of following the linear story of a character or set of characters, Kundera connects sometimes seemingly unconnectable stories through their related themes and existential situations.

4.1.3. Major Works

Kundera has written in both Czech and French. In fact originally, he wrote in Czech but from 1993 onwards, he has written his novels in French. He revises the French translations of all his books; these therefore are not considered translations but original works. Due to censorship by the Communist government of Czechoslovakia, his books were banned from his native country, and that remained the case until the downfall of this government in the “Velvet Revolution” in 1989. His books have been translated into many languages.

Milan Kundera was one of the most important and talented novelists to emerge from the death throes of the old Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. However, his novels are not merely political tracts but attempts to discover possible meanings for the existential problems facing all human beings. In his novels, Milan Kundera sought to discover the answer to the question: What is the nature of existence. His novels represent the psychological motivations, emotional complexes, and erotic impulses of vulnerable characters who question their various aspects of their identities when faced with political events and social values beyond their control. Kundera often infuses authorial commentary into his narratives, presents events in disjointed time frames.
and from multiple perspectives, and patterns his novels in a manner similar to musical compositions. Dismissing traditional novelistic structures, Kundera uses these narrative devices to illustrate his own aesthetic of the novel, which emphasizes parallel explorations of related themes, active philosophical contemplation, and the integration of dreams and fantasy with realistic analysis.

Avoiding the straightforward linear narrative, Kundera constructs his novels by putting together a series of seemingly unconnected “stories” that are nonetheless related through theme or situation. The stories are arranged specifically through chapters, subchapters, parts, or sections to suggest a sense of time or to create a mood. Often the narratives are interrupted by bits of philosophy, autobiography, or psychological conjecture. The distancing nature of his writing style has been deemed modernist, and even postmodernist, yet Kundera is quick to connect his work to the long tradition of the Central European novel.

Celebrated internationally as one of Europe’s most outstanding contemporary novelists, Kundera has lived in exile in France since 1975. He began his writing career as a poet and dramatist before he wrote the fiction that brought him international critical attention, most notably the novels *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (*Le livre du rire et de l’oubli*, 1979) and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (*L’Insoutenable l’égèreté de l’être*, 1984). Kundera has considered *Immortality* (1990), which portrays such figures as Goethe and Hemingway, his most accomplished version of the “novel as a debate”.

Noteworthy, the architecture or “polyphonic composition” in which the coherence of the work is achieved through thematic unity of his early novels is mostly based on the number seven. Also Kundera’s widely translated collection of essays, *The Art of the Novel* (1987), was divided into seven parts, as well as the essay novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979). In his second version of *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera admits that the number seven is an important principle of the mathematical structures of his novels. Number seven appears in many of his works. *Life Is Elsewhere* is composed as a seven-part musical composition, observing the laws of the sonata. The individual parts of the novel are composed in varying tempos. Jaromil’s story is told dispassionately by a critical, third person observer. Towards the
end of the novel, the angle of vision suddenly changes. Jaromil disappears from the centre of our attention and becomes an insignificant, irrelevant character. This is the first novel that Kundera completed as a banned writer. In this and in his subsequent novels, he radically simplified his language, knowing that he was writing for translators into foreign languages because his work could now no longer be published in his native country. Here is a brief survey of Milan Kundera’s major works:

**The Joke**

In his first novel, *The Joke* (Zert, 1967) Kundera gave a satirical account of the nature of totalitarianism in the Communist era. He had been quick to criticize the Soviet invasion in 1968. This led to his blacklisting in Czechoslovakia and his works being banned there. He spent two years battling the censorship board before *The Joke* was deemed acceptable for publication in its original form. The book was published on the eve of “Prague Spring,” when the grip of Stalinism weakened for a period. *The Joke* simply talks about how reality takes its revenge on those who play with it. It exposes the dangers of living in a humorless world. *The Joke* focuses on Ludvik, a university student who firmly embraces Communist ideology. After Ludvik sends a postcard in which he playfully parodies Marxist slogans to his zealously political girlfriend, she shows it to Zemanek, a fervent, humorless Communist student-leader, who has Ludvik expelled from both the university and the party. Years later, after Ludvik has been drafted into the army and forced to work in a coal mine, he seeks revenge by seducing Zemanek’s wife, who, unknown to Ludvik, has been separated from her husband for two years. As many of Kundera's works are dominated by a form based on the number seven, *The Joke* is also constructed in seven parts.

The main themes of the novel are the Joke that History (or God?) perpetrates on Man, revenge, forgetting, identity and the crisis of language. The motive of one’s native land, extremely dear to Kundera, reappears at the end of the novel, when everything is collapsing around the main character. Ludvík turns, somewhat unconvincingly, to his native heritage but even that can give him only a partial consolation, since even his home has been despoiled by the arrogance of rampant official rationalism-turned into lyricism. The motif of sexual revenge in *The Joke* has
been questioned by some critics. They have wondered whether it is actually possible to make love to someone as an expression of hatred.

**The Book of Laughter and Forgetting**

Kundera published *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in 1979 in France. This book told of Czech citizens opposing the communist regime in various ways. This book illustrates the need for memory to overcome forgetting in order for an individual to achieve self-preservation. An unusual mixture of novel, short story collection and author’s musings, the book set the tone for his works in exile. Critics have noted the irony that the country that Kundera seemed to be writing about when he talked about Czechoslovakia in the book, “is, thanks to the latest political redefinitions, no longer precisely there” which is the “kind of disappearance and reappearance” Kundera explores in the book. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* portrays numerous characters who are linked thematically yet never interact. Focusing on the repercussions of forgetting personal and cultural histories, the metaphysical implications of laughter, and how ideological doctrines often lead to deluded notions of good and evil, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* suggests that memory is a form of self-preservation in a world where history is usually distorted by cultural forces.

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* was first published in the United States in 1980 and then was republished with an interview the author gave to American novelist Philip Roth in 1981. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* together with his other famous book *The Farewell Party* became the most well-known of Kundera’s literary output, forming the basis of his reputation as a contemporary writer of modernist fiction.

**The Unbearable Lightness of Being**

In 1984, Kundera published *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, his most famous work. The book chronicled the delicate nature of the fate of the individual and how a life lived once may as well have never been lived at all, as there is no possibility for repetition, experiment, and trial and error. In 1988, American director
Philip Kaufman released a 172 minutes film version of the novel. Although the film was considered moderately successful, Kundera was upset about it. It is said that he has since forbidden any adaptations of his novels.

Kundera made his international breakthrough with *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, set in 1968 Czechoslovakia, just prior to the Soviet occupation. The protagonist in the story of four relationships is a Prague surgeon Tomas, who is trapped between love and freedom, politics and eroticism. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* treats similar themes and centers on the connected lives of two couples – Tomas and Tereza, and Franz and Sabina. This novel examines the hardships and limitations that can result from commitment yet also reveals the lack of meaning for life without such responsibility. In addition, each character represents a particular motif that is explored throughout the novel in various contexts, reminiscent of the variations in a musical composition.

At the beginning of the novel, Kundera refers to the myth of eternal return a “life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance.” But if everything recurs in the same manner ad infinitum “the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make.” Kundera asks, which one is more preferable of the opposing poles, weight or lightness? It is in this way that Kundera has brought the novel toward philosophy and incorporated essayistic elements into his writing, creating his own concept of the novel as “a feast of many courses.” *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* delves into the greatest existential problems that people are faced with: love, death, transcendence, the sense of continuity or “heaviness” that is provided by memory, and the contrasting sense of “lightness” that is brought about by forgetting. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera presents the lack of values as lightness; necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound: only necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy has value.

*Immortality*

In 1990, Kundera published *Immortality*, which became his last novel in Czech. It was more cosmopolitan than its predecessors and its content was more
explicitly philosophical, as well as less political. It would set the tone for his later novels. *Immortality* is spiked throughout by authorial intrusions commenting on the writing process of the narrative and is the first of Kundera’s novels to be set in France. The book considers the way media manipulation, popular culture, and capitalist technocracy distort the perception of reality. Besides presenting a love triangle among its principal characters, *Immortality* also contains dialogues between such notable literary figures as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Ernest Hemingway. A later publication entitled *Immortality* was released in 1991 in England. In addition to the title subject, the book also treats the subjects of the Romantic era, ideology, the cult of images, and selfish individualism.

*Life Is Elsewhere*

*Life Is Elsewhere* (*La vie est ailleurs*, 1973) is a satirical portrait of Jaromil, a young poet, who was bullied by his doting mother to develop an artistic temperament and runs away to write; this novel exposes the way poetry can contribute to the hysteria of revolution and presents Kundera’s belief that youth is a “lyrical age” laced with neuroses, romantic illusions, and endless self-contemplation. It deals with revolutionary romanticism and with lyrical poetry as a whole, exploring, among other things, the volatility of the marriage of the two. The central theme of *Life Is Elsewhere* is misunderstanding of reality. Here the young Communist poet, Jaromil, who is dominated by his mother, becomes the elated servant of a Stalinist regime, and dies a meaningless death.

*Life is Elsewhere* (1973), Kundera’s second novel which was immediately banned in Czechoslovakia, won the prestigious Médicis Prize. The original Czech text was published in 1979 by the émigré press run by Josef Škvorecký, Kundera’s friend, who had settled in Canada in 1969. The book was published in the United States in 1974.

*The Farewell Party*

*The Farewell Party* (*La valse aux adieux*, 1976) concerns the destructive nature of sexual politics and self-deception. Set in a Czechoslovakian resort town
famous for infertility treatments, this novel chronicles the aftermath of a one-night stand that results in pregnancy and addresses such ethical issues as abortion, sperm-banking, and suicide. It satirizes a government-run health spa for women with fertility problems while simultaneously addressing serious, ethical questions. The health spa and fertility clinic that is the setting is only a four-hour drive from the unnamed “capital,” but it might as well be in another, timeless, world. The barren ladies splash about in the mineral waters, hoping by their miraculous immersion that flowers will bloom in the desert. And they do flower, the ladies, little suspecting that the source of insemination is the direct injection administered by the Mad Scientist, Dr. Skreta, from his own personal sperm bank. Saul Maloff (novelist and critic) believes that:

Kundera, himself an internal exile in post-Dubcek Czechoslovakia, has fashioned the kind of novel still possible for an Eastern European writer who declines to submit in the face of crushing penalties. As if oblivious, he remains faithful to his subtle, wily, devious talent for a fiction of “erotic possibilities…and enterprises” (Philip Roth’s phrase in introducing the American edition of Kundera’s stories) in a setting “beyond justice.” In the foreground, his women and men plot their intricate designs, while the clowns in their funny costumes prance about with looped poles on the hunt for woebegone pups, and babble about law and order. In the background is “the capital” from which authority flows. “The Farewell Party” is the kind of “political novel” a cunning, resourceful, gifted writer writes when it is no longer possible to write political novels.” This book was also published in the United States.\(^{23}\)

*Slowness*

*Slowness*, Milan Kundera’s first written in French rather than his native Czech—is a philosophical tragi-comedy that will delight, disgust, and challenge any reader willing to engage with its bizarre and compelling logic. Fans of Kundera’s
earlier work will find themselves on familiar ground here: the long philosophical asides; the multiple points of view; the black humor; the cold, cerebral eroticism.

Under pressure from Kundera’s forceful associative intellect, a meditation on slowness versus speed moves into more esoteric discussions of Epicureanism, the art of amorous conversation, the relation of speed to memory, the provincialism of his former comrades from Communist Europe and more. As delightful as these diversions are, they ultimately serve the book’s central quest to understand the existential nature of “the dancer.” What is “the dancer”? This is vintage Kundera: the novel always raises more questions than it answers.

*Slowness*, is a fictional triptych that features the simultaneous stories of the narrator and his wife (Milan and Vera Kundera) en route to a French chateau; an eighteenth-century chevalier and his mistress engaged in a highly stylized sexual encounter at the same chateau; and an entomologist, an exiled woman ex-scientist, and her groupie who are attending a conference at the chateau on the day of the narrator’s arrival. The action of the entire novel apparently takes place in a single location over the course of a single night through a telescoping of time, a device sometimes read as a parody of the classical rules of unity of action. However, confrontations lead to a hilarious climax, but readers will find that *Slowness* is a moral tale weightier than it first appears.

*Identity*

*Identity*, published in 1998, is a suspenseful story of the “the anxieties of love and separateness,” according to review in the Boston Globe. Kundera’s slight novel is deceptively French in feel. Fifty-one chapters over a bare 168 pages, less than thirty thousand words, it fits comfortably on a shelf alongside much that has recently been written in France. His second novel written in French (after *Slowness*), the tale is a light and slight one, gently exploring the issue of identity with a Kunderian spin. It is a small book, and perhaps it disappoints that there is not more to it, but that seems to have been Kundera’s intention. For what it sets out to do we found it perfectly satisfactory – not a brilliant or necessary book, but a comforting, engaging short read that prods one to think. The novel explores the question of human identity and
whether it’s possible for lovers to understand each other in a world that is forever trapped on the level of the physical and the shallow. In *Identity*, Kundera trades the polyvocal complexity of his earlier novels for a tighter, more conventional form. Populated by only two main characters, *Identity* is Kundera’s shortest novel. But although light in pages, *Identity* sets out to tackle a hefty subject – the nature of human identity.

Despite its heavy theme, the central plot of the novel is fairly simple. One day, Chantal notices that as a woman already possessed by a lover, other men no longer look at her. Distraught, she tells Jean-Marc. Misunderstanding the cause of her distress, Jean-Marc begins sending Chantal anonymous love letters to reassure her of her beauty. “I follow you around like a spy – you are beautiful, very beautiful,” states the first. As the anonymous love letters continue, this secret divides the lovers, and a domino effect of misinterpretations follows. When Chantal finally discovers the sender of the letters, she imagines entrapment – not reassurance – as Jean-Marc’s goal. When Jean-Marc discovers that Chantal keeps all the letters, he imagines infidelity, instead of curiosity.

**Ignorance**

As a novel that offers insight into exile and memory *Ignorance* (*L’ignorance*) was written in 1999 in French and published in 2000. It was translated into English in 2002 by Linda Asher. Czech expatriate Irena, who has been living in France, decides to return to her home after twenty years. There she meets an old flame. The novel examines the feelings instigated by the return to a homeland, which has ceased to be a home. In doing so, it reworks the old theme of Odysseus. It paints a poignant picture of love and its manifestations, a recurring theme in Kundera’s novels.

No matter if you can ever go home again, Milan Kundera’s *Ignorance* deals with the happenings when you actually get there. *Ignorance* is the story of two Czechs who meet by chance while traveling back to their homeland after 20 years in exile. Irena, who fled the country in 1968 with her now-deceased husband Martin, returns to Prague only to find coldness and indifference on the part of her former friends. Josef, who emigrated after the Russian invasion, is back in Prague to fulfill a wish of his
beloved late wife. By the act of providence, the two have met before in their former lives, and the previously-evaded passionate encounter is now destined to become obvious. However, much parallel to the story of Odysseus, every homecoming results in a conflicting set of emotions so powerful that one has to question whether the journey is really worth the pain. Proficiently tackling the philosophical and emotional themes of endurance, memory, love, loss, and nostalgia, Kundera continues to shock readers with his masterful ability to understand and articulate issues so central to the human condition.

Laughable Loves

Kundera’s collection of short stories, Laughable Loves, addresses the illusory nature of love and the consequences of using sexuality to gain power and influence. In these stories, some characters use sexual encounters to exercise their personal power; others see them as a gauge of self-worth. One of his best-known stories, “The Hitchhiking Game,” involves a young couple who engage in role-playing while on vacation, but the game ultimately reveals the painful implications of their relationship. They pretend that they do not know each another and that they have just met for the first time. The boy at the wheel of pretends he is a womanizer. The girl plays being a hitchhiker who looks for a sexual encounter. The game destroys their relationship. In “Symposium” a doctor refuses a sexual encounter with a nurse as an assertion of independence. Fred Misurella believes that “Nobody Will Laugh” is a story about lying and contains in miniature many of the elements of Kundera’s first novel, The Joke. “The Golden Apple of Desire” is another story in this book and as Misurella adds it contains elements of Kundera’s other novels: in its title a major image from Immortality and in character and event the married Don Juan theme so powerfully developed in The Unbearable Lightness of Being. In “Let the Old Dead Make Room for the Young Dead,” an autumnal story, Kundera presents a pair of former lovers, meeting again in a small Czech town after fifteen years, who make the futile attempt to bring together their younger with their present selves. “Dr. Havel after Twenty Years” and “Edward and God” are two more stories in this book.
Both *The Art of the Novel* and *Testaments Betrayed* discuss Kundera’s ideas about the aesthetics of the novel, the former outlining in seven sections the formal development of the European novel and the latter suggesting in nine parts that critics of the novel form have betrayed the profound sense of humor that informs the novelistic tradition, particularly with respect to the novelist Franz Kafka.

Kundera’s most important work, outside of his novels, is his nonfiction work, *The Art of the Novel*. Published in 1988, the book outlines his theories of the novel, both personal and European. True to the nature of his novels, this book does not consist of one long essay but of three short essays, two interviews, a list of 63 words and their definitions, and the text of a speech. In *The Art of the Novel* Kundera explains how the history of the novel and the history of European culture are inextricably bound together. Starting with Cervantes and passing through the works of authors such as Richardson, Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Proust, Joyce, Mann, and Kafka, he traces the route of the experience of existence. This route starts from a world of unlimited potential, moves to the beginning of history, the shrinking of possibilities in the outside world, the search for infinity in the human soul, the futility of this search, and into the realm where history is seen as a monster that can offer nothing helpful.

In 1995, Kundera published a book-length essay of literary criticism, *Testaments Betrayed*, which is organized after Nietzsche’s books, with each of its nine parts divided into small sections. Its main, recurring theme focuses on Kundera’s firm belief that writers and other artists’ prerogatives should be defended and their intentions respected by editors, publicists, and executors.

*The Curtain*

*The Curtain* is the third essay Milan Kundera has written that focuses specifically on the novel. The novel-form is what Kundera loves and is fascinated by. *The Curtain* is an extended essay on the novel, and it begins with a brisk and idiosyncratic history of the form. Cervantes first tore open “the curtain that hides
life’s prose,” “the curtain of preinterpretation” of ideology, inherited beliefs, false grandeur – everything we use to blind ourselves to the real texture, and real beauty, of everyday experience. *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne’s late-eighteenth-century comic masterpiece, went further, dethroning the tyranny of story, of dramatic action, to assert the value of the ephemeral and insignificant. Balzac introduced History itself – the sense of inexorable change – and as a compensatory gesture, description in its fullest form, the minute recording of appearances as a way of saving them from their imminent dissolution. Dostoyevsky gave the novel an unprecedented density, packing his scenes with a thickness of event and coincidence that achieves a beauty transcending the prosaic nature of ordinary life. Flaubert, by contrast, insisted on detheatricalizing the novel, revealing not just the humble or insignificant dimensions of daily existence but its boredom, stupidity and pointlessness. Finally, Tolstoy contrived to keep Anna Karenina’s suicide an enigma – for our deepest motives, he believed, are a mystery.

The seven-part essay does also consider other aspects of literature, beginning with the evolution of the form: notions of history and progress are different for the novelist/artist: “The novelist’s ambition is not to do something better than his predecessors, but to see what they did not see, say what they did not say.” Of particular interest is Kundera’s consideration of the concept of ‘world literature’. He finds two differently provincial attitudes towards it: large nations can resist the idea of world literature “because their own literature seems to them sufficiently rich that they need take no interest in what people write elsewhere”, while small nations: “hold world culture in high esteem but feel it to be something alien, a sky above their heads, distant, inaccessible, an ideal reality with little connection to their national literature.” The tour he offers, and the appealing and appropriate examples he finds to make his points, make for a powerful essay in support of the novel as well as an interesting history of the form.

It goes in the book blurb of the masterpiece: “In this entertaining essay Kundera deftly sketches out his personal view of the history and value of the novel in Western civilization. Too often, he suggests, a novel is thought about only within the confines of the language and nation of its origin, when in fact the novel’s development has always occurred across borders: Laurence Sterne learned from
Rabelais, Henry Fielding from Cervantes, Joyce from Flaubert, Garcia Marquez from Kafka. The real work of a novel is not bound up in the specifics of any one language: what makes a novel matter is its ability to reveal some previously unknown aspect of our existence. In The Curtain, Kundera skillfully describes how the best novels do just that.”

An Encounter (A Meeting)

Milan Kundera’s recent book, Une Rencontre (An Encounter/A Meeting), published by Gallimard in French language was presented to the market on May 4th 2009 and it amounts to 203 pages. First reviews reveal that this book is an excellent endeavor in re-evaluation and admiration of many painters, musicians and writers who are vastly known around the globe: Bacon, Rabelais, Malaparte and Césaire, Milosz and Schoenberg, Janacek and Tolstoy, Celine and Anatoile France. But at the same time Kundera praises some figures far from fashion; he remembers an Icelander forgotten (Gudbergur Bergsson, who was able to mention the mysteries of childhood like no other), a Czech poet unknown (Linhartova Vera, who wrote the final pages of exile, the antipodes of any “moral weeping”), a painter distant (Ernest Breleur, incomparable wonderful Caribbean Explorer).

4.1.4. Controversy

On October 13, 2008, the Czech weekly Respekt prominently publicized an investigation carried out by the Czech Institute for Studies of Totalitarian Regimes, which alleged Kundera denounced to the police a young Czech pilot, Miroslav Dvoracek. The accusation was based on a police station report from 1950 which gave “Milan Kundera, student, born 1.4.1929” as the informant. The target of the subsequent arrest, Miroslav Dvoracek, had fled Czechoslovakia after being ordered to join the infantry in the wake of a purge of the flight academy and returned to Czechoslovakia as a Western spy. Dvoracek returned secretly to the student dormitory of a friend's former sweetheart, Iva Militká. Militká was dating (and later married) a fellow student Ivan Dlask, and Dlask knew Kundera. The police report states that Militká told Dlask who told Kundera who told the police of Dvoracek’s presence in town. Although the communist prosecutor sought the death penalty, Dvoracek was
sentenced to 22 years and ended up serving 14 years in communist labor camp, with some of that time spent in a uranium mine, before being released.

After *Respekt*'s report (which itself makes the point that Kundera did not know Dvoracek), Kundera denied turning Dvoracek in to the police, stating he did not know him at all, and could not even recollect “Militská”. This denial was broadcast in Czech, but is available in English transcript only in abbreviated paraphrase. On October 14, 2008, the Czech Security Forces Archive ruled out the possibility that the document could be a fake, but refused to make any interpretation about it. (Vojtech Ripka for the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes said, “There are two pieces of circumstantial evidence [the police report and its sub-file], but we, of course, cannot be one hundred percent sure. Unless we find all survivors, which is unfortunately impossible, it will not be complete,” adding both that the signature on the police report matches the name of a man who worked in the corresponding National Security Corps section and, on the other hand, that a police protocol is missing). Dvoracek has recently had a stroke and still believes he was betrayed by Iva Militká; his wife said she doubted the “so-called evidence” against Kundera. Dlask, who according to the police report told Kundera of Dvoracek’s presence, died in the 1990s. He had told his wife Militká that he had mentioned Dvoracek’s arrival to Kundera. Two days after the incident became widely publicised, a counterclaim was made by literary historian Zdeněk Pešat. He said that Dlask was the informant in the case, and Dlask had told him that he had “informed the police.” Pešat, then a member of a branch of Czechoslovak Communist Party, said he believed that Dlask informed on Dvoracek to protect his girlfriend from sanctions for being in contact with a agent-provocateur. As Kundera’s name still appears as the informer on the police report, this still leaves open the possibility that Kundera informed on Dvoracek to the police (and not the Communist Party branch) separately from Dlask, or had been set up by Dlask to do the deed itself.

German newspaper *Die Welt* has compared Kundera to Günter Grass, the Nobel Prize winner, who in 2006 was revealed to have served in the Waffen-SS in the Second World War. On 3 November 2008, eleven internationally well-known writers came with announcement to the defense of Milan Kundera. Among novelists, who supported Kundera, were Philip Roth, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, J.M.
Coetzee, Orhan Pamuk, Jorge Semprún and Nadine Gordimer. Among signatories were four Nobel Prize laureates.

4.1.5. Literary Achievements

Fiction

- *The Joke (Žert)* (1967)
- *The Farewell Waltz (Valcik na rozloucenou)* (Original translation title: *The Farewell Party*) (1972)
- *Life Is Elsewhere (Život je jinde)* (1973)
- *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (Kniha smíchu a zapomnění)* (1978)
- *The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí)* (1984)
- *Immortality (Nesmrtelnost)* (1990)
- *Slowness (La Lenteur)* (1993)
- *Ignorance (L’Ignorance)* (2000)

Drama

- *The Owner of the Keys (Majitelé klíčů)* (1962)
- *Two Ears, Two Weddings (Dve uši, dve svatby)* (1968)
- *The Blunder (Ptákovina)* (1969)
- *Jacques and His Master: An Hommage to Diderot in Three acts (Jakub a jeho pán: Pocta Denisu Diderotovi)* (1971)

Poetry

- *Man: A Wide Garden (Clověk zahrada širá)* (1953)
- *Monologues (Monology)* (1957-1964-1965)
4.1.6. Awards


It has always been rumored for the past few years, at least, that Kundera is considered for the Nobel Prize for literature.
4.1.7. Notes and References


2  Much of the biographical and bibliographical information presented here has been taken directly (with some modifications) from various online sources such as:

- Gale Literary Databases, online at: <http://www.galenet.com/servlet/LitIndex/kundera>/.


- Homepage dedicated to Milan Kundera online at: <http://www.kundera.de/english/>.

- Part of University of Glasgow Homepage dir., by Dr. Jan Culík, online at: <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Kundera.htm>/.


5  Ibid.

6  Ibid.


8  Jan Culík, op. cit.


11 Such brief biographical statements can be seen in the first page of the editions of both novels discussed in this study.


17 Ibid.


21 Ibid., p.4.


25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 This news was published by Petr Tresnáčk and Adam Hradilek and could be read at the following link: <http://respekt.ihned.cz/english/c1-36380440-milan-kundera-s-denunciation.>. [21 April 2010].
Chapter Five: Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5.1. Multi-layer Evaluation: A Perspective through the Prism</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1. Pankaj Mishra’s Selected Works</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2. Milan Kundera’s Selected Works</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 5.2. Notes and References                                  | 385  |
5.1. Multi-layer Evaluation: A Perspective through the Prism

Up to this part of the study, the *intra/extra-textual* features of the selected texts have been explored and reviewed as far as possible. At this point there will be a multi-layer evaluation of the selected texts which are, by and large, both product of and engaged with the forces of globalization. Considering the relationship between globality, globalization and the chosen texts from Mishra and Kundera, here two relevant levels of assessment are concentrated upon. At one level, the selected texts are observed as bearing the reflections of some dimensions and effects of globalization within their events; being thematized within the texts globalization becomes more directly traceable. In the meantime and in a different function, some parts of these selected texts are developed into platforms which could evoke, support and interpret various social, political, literary, and cultural aspects of globalization. The ideas and occasions which are reviewed at this level can partly clarify the topographical status of the selected works in relation to globalization and its debates. Of course, it may be noted that the qualities mentioned at this level are not necessarily applicable in a collective mode to all four selected texts. However, some of the features referred to in the discussion of this level may fit into the *intra-textual* section of the approach, as well.

The other level of the assessment is based on the observations perceived through the prism of Grabovszki-Deshpande-Israel which was elaborated on before this in chapter two. Evaluating the selected texts through the speculative filter made from the triad combination of relevant ideas and reflections of these three scholars in modern literary sphere is what gives more coherence to the structure of the study. On one hand, some of the features referred to at this level mostly fit into the *extra-textual* part of the approach. And on the other hand, the results or outcomes arrived at this level assist and support the construction of a viewpoint about how writers and their works under study ascend to a soaring level of globality. Quite naturally some elements from both levels can meet when a common denominator (such as language) appears. Consequently in order to improve the function of the analytical approach here these two levels are considered side by side.
5.1.1. Pankaj Mishra’s selected works

Pankaj Mishra’s works contain a running critique of the effects of the new era and globalization in India, while focusing on one main love story in *The Romantics* and on the travels around the subcontinent in *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India*. At the same time apparently Mishra does not link those effects historically to certain ‘-ism’ or ‘-ization’ in the kind of systematic way we find in other writers’ works. And yet in his texts discussed in this study, we can find characters that move back-and-forth between the East and the West in their real life or in their dreams as they long for fulfillment in cultures other than their own. Accordingly, culture clashes, search for identity, and quest for a better life-pattern in a rapidly changing world become prevalent topics. Various forms of dislocation, disruption, migration and mobility could be traced in both texts with different levels, keeping in mind that a country like India – with around 22 national languages and 844 dialects together with its geographical vastness as well as cultural diversity – quite suits to be considered as an appropriate setting for a writer’s groundwork; the subcontinent is actually a world itself within a country. Following Pankaj Mishra’s narration, the reader comes to know more about the challenges of treating categories like the local and the global, the personal and the historical, and the cultural and the economic as if they represented fixed distinctions.

In *The Romantics*, Pankaj Mishra explores various themes amongst which class and caste problems, the meeting of the East and the West, modernization against tradition, culture clashes, migration, identity, transition and changes heading for a modern India are all set within the background of the changing landscape of the Indian holy city of Benares in the late 1980s and 1990s, where one can see the emerging prosperity of the new middle class India. The moment we come to know better about the protagonist Samar or other characters like (ironically-named) Miss West, Rajesh and the group of bohemian Westerners, then we involve in a world of ideas and concepts which best clarify the above-mentioned themes. The presence of Samar with Brahmin origin and Rajesh with humble origin as major characters in the story asserts on the chronic problem of class and caste. Confrontation of the East and the West is sometimes symbolized in the mind of the protagonist Samar who reads books from Proust, Schopenhauer and Edmund Wilson and resides in places with
strong ties to Eastern religion or philosophy (Benares is an example), or even is symbolized in the name of the character Miss West who has been living in India for a long time. Of course, such East-West meeting is embodied more positively and in a larger scale if we consider how foreigners romanticize the mysteries of India or how Indians romanticize the freedoms of the West. Modernization, tradition and the effects of cultural differences are partly represented in the lifestyle and careers of the characters, too. In this regard, Mark is the character who romanticizes the mysteries of India and is finally absorbed in this infatuation and Anand is the character who romanticizes the attractions of Paris and is finally overwhelmed in this fancy.

The East-West panorama bears another advantage in the novel as well. In such a setting, the romantics of different lovers are globalized for their unique or even sometimes similar qualities. The relationships between Miss West and Christopher, Catherine and Anand or Catherine and Samar remind us about the same motif of unfulfilled love stories, no matter if it is seen in a local or global scale as they are stories of mankind; these motifs seem familiar to many readers.

However it’s not only through characterization that we get a better understanding of the greater themes developed in the story. Also through narration and the depiction of the novel’s setting we are reminded about transition, culture differences, etc. as relevant examples of these cases have been fully explored in chapter three. The narrative structure of The Romantics with its dependence on the first person narrator proves to be outstanding, and can be considered as a proof in Nico Israel’s definition of newer forms in the literature of globalization; moreover the novel’s narrative shows certain qualities for itself, as for example, Pankaj Mishra allows, at some parts of the story, the characters’ actions and thoughts to speak for themselves, a technique to let readers reach their own assessment. However that special form of the narrative structure of the novel is making its grand effects; this sense remains with the reader that it’s not possible to distinguish Mishra from his hero, Samar. It is such a stance for Samar that helps him to travel from being a local hero to a global one, to approach “the world very tentatively, through hesitations, indecisions, blind alleys and reevaluation” and emulate many other great fictional heroes. It is through the accounts of this gifted narrator that we come to know about the interconnectedness of human beings all around the globe; in fact, happenings from
local to distant locations are revealed in the story to prove the intensification of social human relations. In this way, we come to know about a handsome young Sadhu who speaks Hindi with Sanskrit accent in a remote temple in India, or a tedious middle-class woman (Catherine’s mother) in Paris who complains about his would-be groom for spilling water on her bathroom floor.

As part of man’s life in the modern globalized era, the identity search becomes another important theme in the career of modern characters such as Samar, Rajesh, Catherine, Mark and Anand. This search for identity is, in turn, intertwined with the theme of transition and migration for characters like Samar (in a smaller scale within the subcontinent) and Catherine (in a larger scale beyond borders). For Samar it’s a long journey from Allahabad to Benares, Mussoorie, Dharamshala and again back to Benares. Catherine turns this quest to a relative failure. For Rajesh it remains vague and unclear if that uptight life could reach any peace or stability. Anand’s destiny is of a sad kind, as he remains trapped in his happy past days with Catherine and cannot get through that tumultuous journey of identity search. There are also many instances in the novel which emphasize on the cultural biases or preferences of the people involved, even though they are concerned about other cultures as well. Such cultural expressions are at the core of identity problem. At one usual gathering, Debbie is telling Catherine that she is more eager to go to Latin America rather than coming to India as she feels this urge after reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera* but Catherine contradicts her idea since she herself prefers Milan Kundera as “he says serious things about contemporary life.”¹ In addition to the identity and cultural expressions conveyed by the mentioned writers themselves, here we can see how the characters’ identities are also passed on to the readers of *The Romantics*, as to assert the concept that “it is through our culture that we define our identities even to ourselves.”²³

Among the outstanding mechanisms we may refer to in the novel is the characterization of Rajesh, his life story and the related accounts about his character. In fact, his case is one of the good examples of the expression and thematicization of globalization in the novel. This manifestation best indicates social, political, cultural and literary connections worldwide. Accordingly, Mishra describes Rajesh as a student with humble origins but so much talented and full of ambitions for his
generation. On the surface, he is a rebellious student who leads some movements in the campus but an in-depth analysis reveals more than this. Through pages 245 to 251 of the novel, Samar discloses a precious part of this analysis. Samar receives a letter from Rajesh after a very long time. The content of this letter together with the underlined sentences by Rajesh in the xeroxed copy of Edmund Wilson’s essay on Flaubert which he once had lent Rajesh makes Samar ponder more about his mysterious friend:

In the hard and mean world he had lived in, first as a child labourer and then as a hired criminal for politicians and businessmen, Rajesh would have come to know well the grimy underside of middle-class society. What became clearer to me now was how quick he had been to recognize that the society Flaubert and Wilson wrote about wasn’t very different from the one he inhabited in Benares.  

As a matter of fact, Rajesh makes a fabulous account when he finds similar grounds in his own life history and the western intellectuals’ writings. This link, in the first place, may seem just as a literary one functioning between writers and readers in distant places in the world, but in a further measurement it is indicative of the association of social, cultural and political trends which is achieved in the process of globality. Rajesh’s remarks reveal that he had read this novel, too. And that makes him sympathize with the familiar characters in Flaubert’s novel. He sees Gustave Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* as his own life story and identifies with the people in this novel. It is by the help of Edmund Wilson’s essay that he draws his own conclusion about the novel. What is more, the significance of Samar’s evaluation of this occurrence should be noted. In a second reading, Samar’s perceptions about the novel gain more grounds:

The protagonist, Frederic Moreau, seemed to mirror my own self-image with his large, passionate, but imprecise longings, his indecisiveness, his aimlessness, his self-contempt. Also, the book – through its long, detailed descriptions, spread over many years, of love affairs that go
nowhere, of artistic and literary ambitions that dwindle and then fade altogether, of lives that have to reconcile themselves to a slow, steady shrinking of horizons – held out a philosophical vision I couldn’t fail to recognize. Something of Hindu fatalism seemed to come off its pages, a sense of life as drift and futility and illusion, and to see it dramatized so compellingly through a wide range of human experience was to have, even at twenty, with so little experience of anything, a chilling intimation of the life ahead.\textsuperscript{5}

Moreover, Samar interprets Edmund Wilson’s commentary on Flaubert as the association between life and literature:

Wilson’s denunciation of capitalism here had an old-fashioned Marxist ring. Nevertheless it was a good passage in that it offered a small glimpse of Wilson’s way of finding connections between life and literature. But why had Rajesh underlined it? Again, how had he interpreted it?\textsuperscript{6}

If Samar appraises Wilson’s work as a link between life and literature and if Rajesh appreciates Flaubert and Wilson as he finds the manifestations of their accounts in his own life, then the immense impact of borderless forces can be felt:

Reading the same book but bringing another kind of experience to it, Rajesh had discovered something else; he had discovered a social and psychological environment similar to the one he lived in. He shared with Flaubert and Wilson – so far away from us in every way – a true, if bitter awareness of its peculiar human ordeals and futility.

‘To fully appreciate the book,’ Wilson had written of \textit{Sentimental Education}, ‘one must have had time to see
something of life.’ Rajesh had exemplified this truth even as he moved into a world where he couldn’t be followed.\(^7\)

In *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India*, Pankaj Mishra describes the social and cultural changes in India in the new context of globalization through the form of a travelogue. Together with his taste in literary non-fiction, Mishra uses this form to make a sharp insight into the minds of the people all around India. With the aim of depicting India in transition, Mishra describes the lives of various everyday people all through a huge undercurrent of economic and social change which in turn is changing the quality of people’s values, customs, hopes and dreams. And what makes his attempt a fairly different and outstanding one is Mishra’s focus on small towns. Moreover, since this phenomenon of transition, according to Mishra, has a new and unsettlingly vague nature, then a principal tone of defensive irony and humor has been adopted in his book. Such ironical tone is organized in accordance with and at the service of a powerful dislocation Mishra implements in his work. To borrow the phrase from Amitav Ghosh, it is possible to claim that Pankaj Mishra tries to locate himself through the travelogue, so he does it by the act of dislocation at several points in the book. This needs much talent and energy since the writer himself is an insider. However, Pankaj Mishra distances himself from his immediate environment in order to make a better judgment and “it is with this dislocation that the writer moves from the particular to the universal,”\(^8\) as Shashi Deshpande maintains it.

Undoubtedly, it is Pankaj Mishra’s stylistic attempt and mannerism that has led to a different form within literary non-fiction in his debut. This is to say that for presenting a different form of travel-writing, this attempt could be considered in the same thought-line as of Nico Israel when Mishra creates his own form of expression inside the popular genre of travelogue writing to show how *life is englobed*. As a matter of fact, though in this book we experience the autobiographical, memoir structure typically associated with many other travelogues, the structural design resembles another register which is mostly referred to as *travel novel*.\(^9\) Accordingly then in *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India* you can trace some of the structural qualities of a literary work as well as the fascinating adventures of various geographical settings. Moreover, as a reassertion of Nico Israel’s viewpoint
on the appearance of newer forms of expression in contemporary literary productions, Mishra’s satirical and humorous voice shines throughout this book. And just in order to enhance the aesthetic attractions of the work in hand, Pankaj Mishra exercises his sensibilities on various topics, indeed. He makes an amalgamation of themes, facts, scenes, and characters to produce a tangible account of a nation’s life in the last decade of twentieth century. Different themes from cultural, social, political, religious and literary grounds are dealt with in this travel book: caste and class problems, discrimination, infrastructures and the emergence of new economies, tradition against modernity, corruption, some aspects of human rights, education, transportation problems, and so on.

Among different themes which are elaborated on in this travelogue, there is a reference to the ambitions and practices of the India’s finance minister at the time and the new waves of economic reforms. This is to assert the fact that these changes need more time to take effect. The narrator reveals that in some parts of the subcontinent such as Bangalore there have been great progresses, for example, in building up new shopping-malls which showed no sign of the expected reception. Later Mishra makes an association between economic globalization and ethical, social and cultural problems experienced by the people. This happens when he comes to know that some hotels at Kovalam Beach do not admit Indians. Here the writer makes direct remarks:

But India wasn’t a tourist economy – at least, not yet. All the more disturbing, then, it was to know about places where the shoddy practice of poor parasitic nations had crept in. In India, they were an unpleasant reminder of old colonial hierarchies: whites at the top, Indians somewhere at the bottom, finding their own different levels of degradation. They spoke, at least in certain quarters, of the growing damage, after just forty-seven years of independence, to national self-esteem; and they were the unexplored darker side of globalization.¹⁰

During his travels around the country Pankaj Mishra exemplifies about the culture and customs of the people he meets and sometimes he describes their personal
attitudes and preferences. In the meantime, he refers to his own individual taste and tendencies as well. Aside from personal outlooks, this could be interpreted as to show the great challenges and changes in the attitudes and viewpoints of the new generation in India which the writer himself is a part of. Pankaj Mishra keeps on projecting different names of writers during his own travels. Sometimes the outcome is funny: the middle-aged policeman at the hotel in Bundi wants to know if Iris Murdoch (whose novel the narrator is reading) is the wife of Rupert Murdoch or no. Mishra’s response is negative, though it doesn’t seem convincing for the policeman. But at other occasions it becomes a pleasant experience; the narrator is talking to George, a medical representative from Kerala. Mishra, then makes a beautiful combination of global and local tastes:

This was what perhaps I had long wanted to do – discuss
Thomas Mann on a rainy morning in Kerala over genuine
South Indian coffee and I was happier than at any other
time on my travels so far.11

Chapter nine of the book deals with one of the most brilliant scenes of Mishra’s craftsmanship in juxtaposing different generations’ wants and desires. The passengers’ interactions in the cabin on TN Express train create one of the best representations of the motif of transition and change in the modern India. At one side, we see Mr. Rastogi, the young journalist from Delhi, and on the other side, we meet the middle-aged Mr. Goenka, the Marwari businessman based in Madras. The three men chat about various social, political, and economic topics (including South and North Indian conflicts and corruption) until Mrs. Shukla and her variously-addressed daughter (Rita, Sunrita or Ritz) come into their cabin. Mrs. Shukla is escorting her daughter to Bombay in order to find a career for her in fashion modeling. Contrary to Mr. Rastogi who shows interest to be helpful for the young girl and her mother, Mr. Goenka doesn’t take part in their conversation and even behaves and talks in an offensive mood. Mishra’s instantaneous mental judgment here is noteworthy:

To the tradition-bound Mr. Goenka – whose own daughters probably wore nothing more modern than a salwar-kurta, who hesitated for days before daring to ask his permission
to go to a restaurant with college-friends, and who languished at home after reaching a certain age, embroidering old cushion-covers, waiting for marriage – to an old-fashioned tyrant like Mr. Goenka, the fact of a mother encouraging her daughter into a dubious profession like modelling could have only seemed an appalling indecency.12

There are also many other scenes and events in the book which remind us that “travel in fact facilitates the consolidation of social identities–particularly affiliations with race, class, gender, nation and empire.”13 In a further extension, it can be claimed that this facilitation also develops into the realm of cultural identities. Travelogues then become much more valued writings if seen as a means for documenting this consolidation of socio-cultural identities. On one hand, we are once again reminded about the grand role of culture as a defining element of identity (as emphasized by Shashi Deshpande and many others). Accordingly, there are some examples in the book which refer to positive aspects in the course of consolidation of socio-cultural identities of a nation’s existence while at the same time reveal one of the turning points in India’s recent history. One such moment is when Mishra describes a background for his visiting Mrs. Mary Roy:

Mrs. Roy, in a celebrated court case in the mid-eighties, had taken on the entire Syrian Christian Church, and won. She had contested the legality of a pre-independence Succession Act that denied women their rightful share in paternal property, allowing them only a pitiable fourth of the son’s share. Amazingly, this Act, which stood automatically repealed after India became a republic in 1951 and promulgated its own Succession Act, had been allowed to govern property distribution for thirty-five more years. Finally, Mrs. Roy took up the cudgels on behalf of Syrian Christian women, and filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court. That was in 1983. In 1986
came the historic judgement declaring the old Succession Act null and void.\textsuperscript{14}

On the other hand, it is through the same facility that we come to know about some dark sides of the same culture as well. In chapter fourteen of the travelogue about nine pages are specified to the occurrence of foreign women harassment and molestation particularly in Benares. Recalling the bad experiences they had been through, Jane, one of the two British tourist cousins, whom Mishra comes across on the train, denounces the situation:

I suppose the shock was greater because of that, [happening in Benares] and also because we had just come up from the South where we had faced absolutely no problems at all. We really had been looking forward to Benares. From all that I’d read about it, it seemed like the cultural capital of North India. And I suppose having seen it now, it \textit{is} in a way. But culture isn’t just about the past, about old temples and musical traditions and things like that. I think it also has something to do with the present moment, with how people treat each other in daily life, civic manners, a certain basic decency towards women, older people, and if you take that criterion, Benares comes right at the bottom of all Indian cities we visited.\textsuperscript{15}

Such indecent situations of women harassment together with the analysis made by this British tourist, on the surface, seem to be in disparity with what Mishra refers to as India’s great “tolerance for otherness”\textsuperscript{16} but indeed it is through same quote from Jane that Mishra emphasizes on the importance of culture in the present day of India and on the need for more positive social and cultural transformations. However, through his parallel perspective and in his 2006 afterword on the book Mishra himself has elaborated on the fact that he attempts to depict the rise, expansion and appearance of the middle class India which is “just as culturally ambitious and politically conservative as those classes that have emerged in modern Europe and America.”\textsuperscript{17} Such a new and ambiguous phenomenon reflected through Mishra’s travelogue
skillfully portrays India’s new cultural, social and political challenges which are part of other major global transformations.

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Having Grabovszki’s definition in view, we may admit that the literary relations are really intensified if you peer into Pankaj Mishra’s selected works and his literary career in general. Similar to some other writers’ position in the world, Pankaj Mishra’s status as a writer is a reflection of the definition of globalization proposed by Grabovszki. This is to say that Mishra’s works are a good example of intensification of literary relations, literary communication and production. Of course, if we are recalling Grabovszki’s emphasis on the principle of development of electronic media, cultures of information and the modern mediums such as internet (earlier mentioned in chapter two) then there are different points regarding Pankaj Mishra’s status. As a matter of fact we might claim that Mishra’s first works are produced in a context where still “a piece of literature is always linked with the name of a person” since the old models of literary communication are prevalent in India – and many other parts of the world – even though there have been great progresses in IT technology worldwide. This is to say that like many other parts of the world, literature in the subcontinent is yet bound up with the traditional medium of book although in a simultaneous procedure, various internet websites, journals or blogs provide literary productions – as well as interactions – for their miscellaneous fans. However investigating the manifestations of literary productions through electronic media around the globe reveals different patterns. For instance, if you search for Mishra’s books on the internet you will get a number of references to regional or international publishers’ homepages through which it is possible to order his books in various editions of paperback or hardcover. And contrary to some other writers such as Milan Kundera, till date, Pankaj Mishra’s books, for whatever reason, are not available in the electronic format (eBook, audio-book, pdf, djvu, kindle, etc.). In the meantime, it is through the same medium of internet that Pankaj Mishra’s most recent articles in Guardian newspaper become instantly accessible worldwide (through its guardian.co.uk homepage). In addition, the current news of Mishra’s professional career and his participation in different literary events around the globe are conveyed through World Wide Web. It seems that Mishra is quite familiar with the significance of mediascapes – and their power in disseminating information and shaping images.
for the world – as he has been contributing his literary and political essays to mass media for a long time.

From another perspective and true to Grabovszki’s emphasis on the prerequisite tool of literary institutions as leading to a better circulation and knowledge of literature, we can claim that Pankaj Mishra is lucky enough to find the gateway of literature at a very early stage of his life. This lays the foundation for his future career. In fact, the start point for Mishra goes back to his early experiences with reading great books from his father’s rich library in his family hometown:

My first memory of a book is of a red clothbound volume printed in England: Queen Victoria by Lytton Strachey. This was in the mid seventies, in my family home in a North Indian small town, which was hundreds of miles away from a bookshop. There were other books in the house, clothbound editions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, some novels in Hindi, my first language, and also translations in Hindi of Bengali fiction, books on meditation, theosophy, and holy Indian men – my father read books for spiritual instruction – and a few volumes of Shakespeare, English classics by Dickens and Thomas Hardy.19

For Mishra the next steps are taken gradually but quite systematically as he later on contributes reviews and articles on various topics to regional, national and international journals and magazines. Also working as the chief editor with Harper Collins India marks a turning point at the outset of his professional career. This experience might be perceived as related to another major concern through Ernst Grabovszki’s perspective, i.e. the monopoly of media businesses, enterprises, and publishers. As a matter of fact, by getting published at Picador Mishra himself experiences direct cooperation with media giants which according to Grabovszki show an escalating propensity towards the globalization of their operations. Picador is an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd. which is one of the largest general book publishers in the UK. Pan Macmillan itself is part of the Macmillan group, which operates in
over 70 countries worldwide. Besides Picador, their imprints include Macmillan, Pan, Boxtree, Sidgwick & Jackson, Tor, Macmillan Children’s Books, Young Picador and Campbell Books. Accordingly the literary institutions such as publishers, libraries, bookstores, and so on have played a major role in both creating a literary perspective for Pankaj Mishra and in forming the circulation and knowledge about his works.

The function and importance of the publisher as a vital literary institution in the process of production has been emphasized before this in chapter two of the study through Shashi Deshpande’s viewpoint. Accordingly, we can claim that one significant element which has globally popularized Pankaj Mishra’s writings is undoubtedly adopting the effective policy of collaborating with famous West-based agents and publishers. Due to their vast operational scope, such publishers have successfully introduced Mishra’s works into various international literary tastes. These Western publishers and agents also market Pankaj Mishra’s works in a relatively great scale. Yet the current marketing procedures for books with their focus on the fast recovery of the money for the publisher include some *modus operandi* which do not seem pleasant to many, as Deshpande criticizes about the modern methods and manners about marketing for books which usually downgrade the cultural, artistic or literary productions to the level of consumer goods. However, here in Mishra’s case we can claim that those troublesome marketing techniques are either rarely conducted or at least done according to Mishra’s own style and consent; unquestionably he is not making a show-person of himself in this regard as far as his event appearances, book launches, interviews and other performances with the media are concerned.

Pankaj Mishra has truly benefited from what Deshpande posits as the migration of writers, intellectuals and scholars from around the world to the West. Accordingly, these erudite migrants validate and endorse writings from their own countries, while they stabilize their positions in famous Western universities and institutions. For Mishra, this benefiting, of course, happens in two direct and indirect ways. Indirectly, he has taken advantage from the overall endorsements of the earlier educated migrants who entered the Western academic canon long before him. This in part is related to the status of the Indian literature in the world. Not limited to diasporic writings all over world, now-a-days many great Indian-origin writers are
part of literary movements or schools globally; some are authorities in major literary mainstreams. And more directly, for instance, Mishra ventures to introduce and edit major essays from celebrated writers like V. S. Naipaul (who is a Nobel Prize winner in 2001). Undoubtedly, endeavors like this draws more attention to Mishra’s own style of writing as well and gives more validity to his works.\textsuperscript{20} 

The smooth, lucid and yet attractive structure of Mishra’s selected works here conform to become a good testimony for Deshpande’s speculation that a sort of varied readership should be considered by the writers. We might rightly consider Pankaj Mishra as one of those \textit{citizens of the world} who can address the world with ease, when he presents the unfamiliar in his selected works to make them exotic enough, while removing the unexplainable. In both works \textit{The Romantics} and \textit{The Butter Chicken in Ludhiana}, there are many occasions which refer to customs, rituals, and habits that are mostly local and regional; or they portray characters that live in remote areas dealing with their daily routines and most of the events just refer to regional problems. Yet, they do not seem redundant or perplexing at all; the language of these works provides a transparency through which readers can easily identify with the characters in their definite world. Of course, in these books we also read about foreign people residing in India but the focal point remains the subcontinent. Since this sense of belonging to a region does not block the ways to the core of the occasions or events in the novel or the travelogue and the ordinary reader is not confused by the world the characters inhabit (as in the critiques mentioned in the third chapter of this study, there has been no reference to any probable ambiguity in this regard), then we can quite fairly judge that Mishra’s selected works become easily accessible to a larger cosmopolitan readership, even though you do not find the name of any clamorous celebrity in them. 

The global readership of Pankaj Mishra’s selected works, in part, owes credit to the English language medium. This medium has paved Mishra’s way into the global market of writing and has made his works visible to the world. This comes from the fact that, as it has been emphasized in chapter two, English is the language which is used by a great number of people around the world and thus a suitable medium for literature as well. Hence, literary productions like Mishra’s selected works travel more easily in this borderless territory and exhibit their qualities for a
larger global reader. Additionally, this exposure brings about various consequences, each of which again asserts the significance of \textit{English as the language of globalization}. Of course, this is not an exclusive story. The success of Mishra’s works resembles many other similar cases. Likewise and just at the outset, different local and/or international critics review and analyze the works and after some time their market expands as readers become interested to read them even in their own languages – a demand which, in turn, leads to the translation of these works. Undoubtedly, other parameters of literary institutions such as the role of publishers and agents are involved in this process.

    However, picking English as the language of communication is the most natural and suited selection for Pankaj Mishra. Natural, because this is the language he experiences from his early childhood while browsing his father’s library (which contained both books from English and Hindi) up to later opportunities when he publishes reviews in regional journals; a fact which is shared by Shashi Deshpande in a greater scale just to recall an important phase of the subcontinent’s history besides showing a portion of other intellectual’s educated lifestyle:

    All those books in Ghosh’s grandfather’s cupboard, all the classics in my father’s library at home, were in English – either originally written in the language or translated into it. This language, like the literature it embraced, travelled to us in India and to many others through the world, on the backs of the British Empire.\textsuperscript{21}

    In another relevant polemic, Deshpande posits that the selection of language is a clue for reaching to various readers around the world. In other words it is through the medium of language that most readers try to identify with the characters in a new world defined by the writer:

    Literature, especially the novel, is a writer’s response to society. Ideas are worked out through people and their lives. And these lives are lived in a particular region which has a social, political and cultural context – all of which is

- 356 -
intrinsic to the novel. The writer, in other words, creates a definite world. Since identification is one of the major doorways through which a reader enters fiction, how did the novel reach readers for whom the world so created by the writer was an unfamiliar one?22

Though the above-mentioned sentences are exemplified mainly with novel, because of the essence and nature of their function these features are not confined to one genre at all. In fact, it is with much delicacy and subtlety that Mishra applies the same qualities to his debut and attempts to make as wide a doorway as passable for larger groups of people to come through and grasp his ideas and concepts. In the meantime, he also inserts Hindi phrases and sentences in his literary travelogue or travel novel *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* to add to the taste and flavor of the scenes. In addition to other purposes, this is a part of the *local color* device Mishra intends to implement. But in order to transmit whatever goes on in this particular world to the international audience, Mishra adopts the English language to attain his aims seeing that any attempt to address larger numbers of people requires its own proper means such as English language rather than limited local regional ones. Accordingly, through this medium he manages to deal with big themes of self-retrospection, love, loss, grief, the meeting of East and West, caste, the changes in modern India after the liberalization of Indian economy in 1990s, the rise of a new middle class in India with its own patterns of ambitions, manners, and customs and many others. In this way, English turns out to be the most suited language for communicating such regional as well as universal themes. Emphasizing on the vital role of the English language, Pankaj Mishra himself elaborates on the current reasons for its magnificence:

Marx did not take the hegemony of English as the global language into account; he could not have predicted the immense cultural power of Anglo-American publishing to create and shape not only academic canons but also popular cultural and intellectual trends. Certainly, the so-called “boom” in Indian writing in English is due not only to the rise of a new generation of talented writers – these had existed previously – but also to the vastly increased
preference for “ethnic” literature among the primary consumers of literary fiction: the book-buying public of Western Europe and North America.  

Looking from a vantage point, Shashi Deshpande attaches this kind of preference to the concept of the significance of identity even in our current propensity for globality:

However much the world opens out to us, there is an intrinsic human sense of rootedness, of wanting to belong, a desire to stake out our own little territories, which leads to a greater involvement with all that is closest to our lives, arising from our immediate environment, from our individual situations. The fierce ethnic conflicts in different parts of world, even at a time of the erasing of national boundaries, seem to indicate that in a world of increasing globalization, ethnic identities are, as a matter of fact, becoming increasingly important.

However, in Mishra’s case, the function of language is not merely limited to the authority and value of English in his career. Undoubtedly, being translated into other languages can be considered as one of the reasons (or effects) for the wide-ranging reception of Mishra’s selected works. In other words, the role of translation in publicizing Mishra’s selected works has been a remarkable one. This function of translation, as it was described in chapter two, is in close connection and at the center of globalization of literature. Translating The Romantics and Butter Chicken in Ludhiana into European languages and henceforth the globality of Mishra’s ideas could be interpreted from different perspectives. It can be considered as a continuation of the process of colonization and decolonization which Venuti contemplates upon. If seen through Venuti’s perspective, then it may be assumed that Mishra’s original works together with their translations are acting as weapons with which the colonized people (or writers as their voices) are rioting against the colonizers. Or even these translations can be taken as a different and abnormal symptom in Cronin’s elaboration on the imbalance of translation traffic (from
economically wealthy nations to poorer ones). Whatever the construal, at least, it can be claimed that a demand or need has been recognized. As Mishra maintains, a part of this necessity originates from the growing market for ethnic literature. This same fact, which was referred to previously, is pinpointed by Nico Israel:

In any case, glancing back at the last fifteen years, the contemporary books that literature students in US and UK universities tend to read come from a significantly wider geographical area than formerly, even if those books are largely written by a handful of Western-educated Anglophone authors.25

As it was stated in chapter two, according to a general consent and by definition, translation aims, at least, at two important tasks: transmitting texts across boundaries and communicating across languages and more significantly building a part of social, cultural, literary, political and economic existence in a community. Emphasizing on the strategic role of translation, Mishra maintains that historical processes such as colonialism, the Cold War, and globalization “were not what Goethe had in mind when he first spoke of ‘world literature’ to Eckermann. In fact, Goethe said nothing about how a world literature might come into being; he merely hoped that there would be more translations – and this is worth noting – into European languages from non-European ones.”26 And as a professional writer who is quite well-acquainted with the functions of translation, Pankaj Mishra truly recognizes the big picture as well:

Globalization, the quickening of communication and commerce, has meant that texts move across frontiers with relative ease. A literary novelist like García Márquez is read more in the English-speaking world than any writer from England and America; and many more people read him in translation than in Spanish. Paul Auster has a French reputation greater than his American one. Indeed, there are writers, such as Indian writers in English, whose major audience exists outside their country of origin. For the first
time in literary history, a writer in England or America can expect to write a novel and hope for it to be translated into several European languages within two years. Indeed, some literary novels originally written in English are first published in Holland, before they reach readers in the UK or US.\(^{27}\)

Pankaj Mishra also refers to the fact that there is an imbalance in translation traffic of literature and that despite a promising market of translation outside the English-speaking world, still the Anglo-American publishing centers in the English-speaking world have the complete authority in shaping the world literature by “publishing only those foreign works that reflect to some extent the already existing images within America and Britain of the foreign cultures they originate in.”\(^{28}\) Moreover, Mishra draws attention to a number of key elements in defining the world literature such as domination of market realism in determining the availability of non-Western texts in the West, the ideological contexts of production and consumption, political and economic conditions. He also shares the idea with Shashi Deshpande on the continuation of the existence of national and local literature side by side with global literature:

For this globalized literature responds to a global market and just as a world market for consumer goods dominates national economies but does not replace them, so globalized literature will continue to have a world market but will not replace local and national literatures.\(^{29}\)
5.1.2. Milan Kundera’s selected works

Milan Kundera’s fiction and essays profoundly deal with the interlacing of aesthetics and politics, of personal and social issues in modern era which he sees as vanishing by pressures to conform. Such issues are reflected on in his works through his specific unique style. For instance, commenting upon his idea of novel as an investigation of human life in the world (which is itself considered as a trap), Kundera avers that as a major event the First World War should be viewed differently:

Wrongly “world.” It involved only Europe, and not all of Europe at that. But the adjective “world” expresses all the more eloquently the sense of horror before the fact that, henceforward, nothing that occurs on the planet will be a merely local matter, that all catastrophes concern the entire world, and that consequently we are more and more determined by external conditions, by situations that no one can escape and that more and more make us resemble one another.30

As it can be inferred from the above quotation, Milan Kundera quite skillfully refers to different points in a wide range from the semantic significance of the words to the concepts such as interconnectedness of the world orders and so on. This is the specific style of Milan Kundera. Indeed, it is well known that most of Kundera’s thought on art and politics is the object of literary experimentation in his novels, either in the thematic structure of the novels themselves, or in self-standing reflections and digressions formulated by the characters or the narrator. Furthermore, Kundera’s attempts to view the big picture have always been remarkably intertwined with the lines of his stories in the selected novels of this study. His mature work declares a warning about the fact that human beings are actually unable to find true and accurate interpretations of reality as human perception is imperfect. “The primary impulse for this cognitive skepticism is undoubtedly Kundera’s traumatic experience of his younger years when he uncritically supported communist ideology.”31 In this way, Kundera’s works take multiple registers. Once, they represent the writer’s personal responses to his surrounding milieu and take the shape of individual revelations; they
examine intellectual issues and concepts too. Or at another time they become landmarks for hypothesizing about various methods which may lead to the real truth of man’s life. Not surprising, a variety of vital themes and issues are dealt with in Kundera’s novels which boost his charisma. As Olga Carlisle maintains Kundera “has brought Eastern Europe to the attention of the Western reading public, and he has done so with insights that are universal in their appeal. His call for truth and the inner freedom without which truth cannot be recognized, his realization that in seeking truth we must be prepared to come to terms with death – these are the themes that have earned him critical acclaim, [...]”

No doubt, Kundera speaks via a world-conquering voice for a broad audience but what’s more, the appealing quality of his works is derived from their universality in scope:

Kundera constantly speaks up for the particular values related to Central European culture, but at the same time he “universalizes” his fiction by erasing the “regional” qualities that may have rooted it in its specific local environment. He can thus be said to attempt a blurring of the work’s local inflection in order to make it more translocally mobile.

Even so, finding a direct and straight reference to a phenomenon like globalization in Kundera’s selected works seems a rare case. Instead, we find various registers which are one way or another relevant to the social, political, cultural and literary principles most counted on in the same process of globalization. This is to say that as a portion of literature and literary studies, Milan Kundera’s selected works and their relevant reviews or criticisms are developed into a platform for evoking, supporting and interpreting different social, political, literary, and cultural concepts within and relevant to the realm of globalization (e.g. world literature, postmodernism and translation studies). Also one good example of this situation is found in Kundera’s allusions to the problem of nation-state while he makes references to Communism, and Russian invasion.

For a prominent intellectual who is firmly grounded in the tradition of Central European literature, Kundera’s themes relate to the dominant mainstreams in debates
of literary globalization as well as social, cultural and political spheres and thus add more to the globality of his works. Some of these themes relate to disciplines like world literature (and hence comparative literature), modern and postmodern literary surveys, and translation studies. Of course, due to Kundera’s wide range of interest (music, film, history, art, philosophy…), then his developed themes transcend a narrow literary framework. Hence, through his fictional oeuvre, Kundera develops themes of love and sex, sexuality and women’s status in society, hatred and revenge, politics and government, a nation in transition, tradition and modernization, displacement, migration, exile and mobility, kitsch, folk music, the personal and cultural identity, cultural politics of identity, man’s relationship to history, and many others. Also it can be added that the fate of the individual in modern society, especially in modern Communist society becomes a major thematic focus for Kundera’s fiction, from The Joke through The Unbearable Lightness of Being. This concern mostly originates in Kundera’s appreciation for the wisdom of the novel as “a counter to the leveling influence of modern society. In the midst of an environment hostile to private life and the integrity of the individual, the novel appears as a sanctuary where the precious essence of European individualism is held safe as in a treasure chest.”

Undoubtedly, Kundera’s selected novels have earned him much international critical acclaim. He has always been appreciated for juxtaposing biographical and fictitious elements in his novels and for simultaneously exploring various motifs. Atkinson and Silverman believe that “the construction of selves, through the relationship between the personal and the political, is precisely Kundera’s topic. In The Joke, a couple makes a sense of their relationship in the context of Eastern European version of Kitsch. In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, the alternating desire for personal lightness (no commitments) and weight (being committed) is played out by selves who emerge within a cultural order.” However, even though many critics have focused on the political disillusionment that is perceived in Kundera’s works, Kundera has claimed that putting too much emphasis on the politics of his novels is a great mistake, and that he especially dislikes being classified as a dissident writer.
Some critics have admired Kundera’s style, focusing on his use of humor 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. However, prevalent in his selected novels 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:

His flashiness here becomes an asset, however, blending nicely with his fictive strategy, which is to separate the splendid and various experiences of sex – the area of lightness and the will, conquest, curiosity and enterprise – from the heavy, fated and involuntary area of love. Love shapes the novel, sex provides the commentary: a facile arrangement, perhaps, but effective.\(^{36}\)

Correspondingly, almost two different critical approaches have been implemented in reading sexuality in Kundera’s novels. The first approach focuses on a feminist interpretation and suggests that Kundera’s female characters are usually perceived through the eyes of men, who seldom see women as more than sexual beings. Kundera almost never describes the inner world of his female characters but is mainly preoccupied with their appearance. Followers of this approach believe that if men are represented as complex characters, Kundera de-emphasizes their physical appearance and, rather, explores their inner life. Women are mainly represented like dolls, deprived of all depth and complexity, and as a result, are treated by men accordingly. But in the second approach which is quite opposed to the earlier view of Kundera, women gain superiority as the majority of men are represented as weak, cowardly, violent, dishonest people, often lacking any capacity for any inner growth,
whereas Kundera’s female characters are much more human, more honest, more intelligent, often more independent and capable of inner development.

As a major postmodernist writer who has succeeded in communicating the East European experience of life under totalitarian communism to a large worldwide public, Milan Kundera has faced varied judgments regarding his migration to France in 1975, and henceforth his dual Franco-Czech status and his writing in French. Although he was recognized as an important literary figure in his homeland early in his career, a series of critical attacks on his writings from Czech quarters have been augmenting since he left, particularly for what has been perceived as his abandonment of his Czech heritage for the adoration of Western European and American readers and critics. But at the same time some other critics make out this posture of Kundera very differently and of course, more positively:

Most recently, he has used his experience of life both in the East and in the West for commenting on contemporary Western civilization. Milan Kundera’s knowledge of life in Czechoslovakia under Soviet rule has led him to important insights regarding the human condition of people living both in the East and in the West. […] In Czechoslovakia after World War II, Kundera was a member of the young, idealist communist generation who were trying to bring about a “paradise on Earth,” a communist utopia. It was not until their middle age that they realized that the communist regime had abused their idealism and that they had brought their nation into subjugation. This realization resulted in a feeling of guilt which Milan Kundera has been trying to exorcise by his literary work in which, especially after leaving for the West, he has been able, by contrasting the Western and the East European experience, to elucidate important aspects of contemporary human existence.37

The Joke has been variously labeled as realistic, political, ideological, and psychological in type or genre by different reviewers, even though Kundera simply calls his novel only a love story. Such discrepancy in assessing the novel could
mistakenly be interpreted on the surface as a paradox in critics’ views since at the same time many critics truly believe that much beyond such delimiting tags Kundera has passed the regional qualities for a novel and has thus conquered a universal domain. But in a closer look these different labels converge and hence indicate more power and talent of its writer. It could be claimed that while The Joke acknowledges all the above-mentioned tags, it isn’t confined to a local world and reaches out much beyond its setting. However, reflecting the spiritual and political history of a post-war country, this cult book tells the story of Communism in Czechoslovakia between the years 1948 to 1965 and traces the loss of idealism and the desperate reliance on hollow images, through the experiences of its characters. The novel deals with folk culture and prehistory in an absurd environment. Strangely enough, the character who remains inwardly most loyal to Communist ideals also values the folk traditions of the country’s past. Even though the novel immediately became a bestseller and was translated into different languages, it resulted in Kundera’s expulsion from Czechoslovakia and his emigration to France.

Regarded as Milan Kundera’s finest achievement by many critics, this early novel takes a grand place in his writer’s literary career. Viki Adams believes that The Joke seems “to embody his [Kundera’s] later themes of history as myth and, at the same time, to provide the rationale for proclaiming Kundera as a modern humanist.”

Craig Cravens observes Kundera’s position in this novel outstandingly different from his other works:

In a sense, The Joke is a quintessentially modernist novel – a large, labyrinthine edifice that creates the impression of a single, overarching consciousness controlling and arranging the characters and events of the fictional world. One of the themes this novelistic consciousness emphasizes, however, is the impossibility of such grand, monologic, narrative structures or consciousnesses to engage and make sense of the world. This is the point at which we first glimpse the postmodernist Kundera to come. In The Joke, characters approach the psychologically mimetic, but in his later novels Kundera will subordinate his characters to the quasi-
authorial, philosophically ruminative voice of the narrator. Kundera’s novels become a place where, as the author himself states, “man thinks, God laughs” (Kundera 1986, 158). In this first novel, Kundera’s God is still silent.39

David Lodge believes that The Joke is an exemplary case of modernist novel which is “generally characterized by a radical rearrangement of the spatio-temporal continuity of the narrative line.”40 He further adds that as manifestly a “modern” novel while reading The Joke, we feel “an overwhelming sense of a creative mind behind the text, its “implied author,” who constructed its labyrinth of meanings with love and dedication and immense skill over a long period of time, during which the design of the whole must have been present to his consciousness.”41

Among different impressive elements leading to the high degree of magnetism of the novel, two factors are usually referred to in major reviews. One of these significant constituents of the novel is undoubtedly its structural design. Implementing techniques of multiple narrations and polyphony composition are among structural devices in the novel which have been noticeably lingered upon by most readers and reviewers. As Søren Frank posits “Kundera’s first novel, The Joke, changed the literary landscape in Czechoslovakia, on the one hand because of its polyphonic form and stream of consciousness technique, on the other hand because of its critique of Marxist politics and its erasure of the Czech nation’s folkloristic traditions.”42 Furthermore, Søren Frank adds that “in spite of the nonlinear, a-chronological, and polyphonic structure of the novel, the underlying story line still occupies a central role in the novel. The polyphony is a polyphony of perspectives on the story and the events that constitute it, and one of the reader’s main tasks is to reconstruct what happened.”43 As it was mentioned in chapter two, the story of novel has four distinct narrators, and it is through the interwoven first-person narratives that we receive the same events and characters treated from several points of view. Through this pluralist and polyphonic structure of the novel the author compares and contrasts the testimonies of a number of different protagonists, thus forcing the reader to come to the conclusion that reality is unknowable; the warning that it is impossible to understand and control reality becomes a dominant theme stressed upon later by Kundera in many of his works. It is then believed that this skeptical attitude is
evidently linked with the history of Kundera’s own personal disillusionment with communism.

Such connection between theme and structure brings us to another incredible feature in Kundera’s style. As Søren Frank notifies, the quality and merit of Kundera’s themes with their political, social and cultural implications are quite remarkable. Accordingly, developing various attractive themes in *The Joke* and following a task of forming a chain of thematic unity in his literary career is the second important element acting as the attraction force for Milan Kundera and the vast reception of his novels. Through this thematic unity, which shapes an integrated nature for Kundera’s works, we identify different subject matters. In fact, thematic unity is the continuity which forms Milan Kundera’s *opus or oeuvre*. Kundera’s perpetual readers perceive a technique of repetition of ideas, themes and motifs within each one of his novels including *The Joke* and all through his oeuvre as well. Thematic unity, Francois Ricard states, causes theme to appear openly in the novel and gives a key role to theme in the process of creation of a novel so that making theme “the most visible, the most immediate, and the most “constraining” element of the novelistic structure.” Ricard further adds that thematic unity, in short, is what frames and makes polyphonic proliferation possible; it organizes it and offers it room to open out; without it polyphony would only be cacophony.

Whether worked out steadily within and by the story or developed on their own and outside the story (digressions), the themes of *The Joke* play a major role in acquiring a high rank in modern literature hierarchy with few precedents or parallels. Kundera featured many great themes in *The Joke*: Life being a giant joke, perpetrated on members of the human race, is one of the main themes. The theme of this divine joke, which history or God, or fate, perpetrates on mankind is prevalent from the early pages of the story until the end. Dealing with the outcomes of an ever-evolving joke played upon one’s life also makes the destiny of the protagonist of the novel more attractive to the readers. This theme is at times mingled with the themes of revenge, forgetting and identity in *The Joke*. In fact, these are among the rampant themes from the very beginning until the end of the story. Other theme-words such as nationalism and totalitarianism (in its different shapes from everyday life to government dominance) can be found in the novel, too. All major themes of the novel are often
linked to another theme-word, i.e., identity, which itself works in close connection with the characters in the novel. The identity of a character, a group of people, or even a nation is configured in any scene of the novel which is related to the major themes already mentioned. The search for identity finds its manifestation in characterizations of Ludvík, Helena, Lucie, Jaroslav, and Kostka. Such appearances on one hand remind the readers about man’s lifestyle in the modern globalized era, while on the other hand they cause a feeling of sympathy with any of these characters. And yet all three parts of Barbara Day’s proposition seem quite applicable to *The Joke*:

The predominant theme in Kundera’s writing is that of identity: not simply the identity of the inner self, but with whom and with what a person identifies his or her self. In the work Kundera completed while living in Czechoslovakia this theme has three strands: identification with (or commitment to) an ideology; identification with (or desire for) an idealized self-image; and identification with a history and a tradition.\(^{46}\)

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* also functions on many different levels as it follows Kundera’s law of thematic unity and hence provides the readers or critics a multitude of literary theoretical frameworks for their discussions. This may also add some degrees of complexity to the task of reading. The novel can be seen as a love story, a detailed study of kitsch, a psychological study, a political commentary and a dramatic account of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, or a philosophical study starting with Kundera’s fascination with Fredriech Nietzsche and Parmenides. Also many reviewers find the binary oppositions in the novel worthy of close attention. Still other literary critics pinpoint the novel’s structure in that it follows a musical composition the same as a symphony, with its introduction and reintroduction of themes and events. Many of the themes in the novel are introduced only to reappear later in a different key in this musical composition. Yet, at its most fundamental level, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is about the equivocacy and paradoxes of human existence, as each person oscillates between lightness and weight; between Nietzsche’s concept of life as an ever-disappearing phenomenon and the belief that all
is eternal return; and specifically between dream and reality. In this way, the structure of the novel intertwines with its themes through a new style:

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a work which was hailed in the West as a masterpiece, Kundera’s preoccupations with insufficiencies of perception, lyricism, privacy and misunderstanding are re-examined in a polyphonic structure with a more traditional narrative line.47

This different style of Kundera’s novels written in France is what has often been noticed by many reviewers. Barbara Day believes that in these novels (including *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) Kundera “abandons continuous narrative for a structure which resembles film collage. He juxtaposes one narrative with another, moves backward and forward in time, fictionalizes historical characters, and treats fictional characters as real by bringing them into dialogue with the author-narrator.”48 She further asserts that the fate of two exiles, Tereza and Sabina are contrasted in the novel, where one is drawn back to her homeland till she dies and the other drifts to America. Mazes of unexpected encounters, uncertainties, and betrayals, both political and personal have also drawn the attention of this critic in the novel.

The motif of perpetual transition is also another point being distinguished in Milan Kundera’s career. During an interview with Kundera, Jane Kramer says: “Your characters are rarely at home. They are always in some sort of moral or philosophical transit, when they are not actually going somewhere. Your ideas chase each other around. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is like a chase in which Nietzsche’s “heaviest of burdens,” his idea of eternal return, is chasing Parmenides’ idea of “lightness” around the world.” And Kundera responds: “You know, I started this chase, this novel, 25 years ago. The idea was there, but I messed it up completely, ridiculously. All I was left with were two characters – the girl Tereza and the man Tomas – and one scene of Tomas looking out of a window and saying to himself *Einmal ist keinmal*. Meaning “one time is no time.” *Once is not enough*. Meaning that man, living his one life, is condemned to that one fatal experience. He can never know if he was a good man or a bad man, if he loved anyone or if he had only the illusion of
love. He gets older and older, entering each new moment of his life equally innocent, and then one day he is old without ever knowing what old age is. His old age is merely his newest experience. He enters it as stupid as he entered the world. *Einmal ist keinmal.* That is the idea that haunted me for 25 years.”

Just as it has been elaborated in chapter four, many important devices have been systematically utilized in the structure of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* Setting is one of those fundamental instruments to give more coherence to the work. Kundera uses his setting for at least two important reasons if not for many others. As we know the novel is set during the 1960s in Czechoslovakia. The fact that Kundera himself experiences the Prague Spring as well as the Soviet invasion makes a real scene of pathos out of the story. The novel then turns to a love story which juxtaposes the love affairs of its four main characters with the upheaval of the Russian invasion. In this way, the issues of love come into sharp contrast with the issues of hate. Moreover, it is the setting that allows Kundera to use his novel as a vehicle for a reflection on the effects of the totalitarian regime on the creation of art and, by extension, on the creation of life itself. In addition, the setting provides the basis for the writer to make greater explorations on the topic of nation-state. This is done quite implicitly in the light of allusions to Totalitarianism, Communism, and Russian invasion and its relevant consequences.

Another important device in configuration of Milan Kundera’s style in the novel is the vital role of the narrator. Very early at the beginning of the book, a narrative voice undertakes a meditation on the ideas of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and classical Greek philosopher Parmenides. This voice *creates* and *participates* in the story while remaining somehow outside the story. Later in the story, the narrator tells the reader that he has “been thinking about Tomas for many years,” (p.5) implying it is the author-as-narrator who has given Tomas his fictional existence. However, while it may be easy to make the assumption that the “I” in the story is Kundera, it is also possible to consider the narrator as yet another character in the story itself, somehow a part of Kundera yet also separate from him. One reason Kundera may choose to create a narrator is as a device to frequently remind the readers that what they are reading is fiction, not reality. In fact, authorial intrusions made through this narrator have two effects. While on one hand they place the story in
the realm of fiction, at the same time, they make the author seem more present to the reader. Accordingly, the author is speaking directly to the reader in a kind of conversation. As another effect, it can be claimed that Kundera’s narrator also serves the function of constructing the philosophical structure of the novel. Since he is separate from the story, he has the ability to comment on each of the characters beyond their knowledge. This distance allows the reader to share privileged knowledge with the narrator that is hidden from the characters. It also leads the reader to trust that the narrator is reliable.

However, as referred to in chapter four, Hana Pichova believes that there are narrator’s dual functions of directing and creating which most clearly relate to the theme of freedom in the story. In addition, by adopting these two functions the narrator of The Unbearable Lightness of Being makes himself visible in the story, controls his fictional personae and their world, and alters the conventions of the Socialist Realist novel or any other novel that is totalitarian in its presentation. Such standpoint against totalitarianism comes into close connection with the structure of the novel as well. In this regard, Yvon Grenier maintains “understandably, Kundera conceives the novel as intrinsically incompatible with authoritarianism, especially in its most radical form: totalitarianism. In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, the narrator proclaims: “In the realm of totalitarian kitsch, all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions. It follows, then, that the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions.” And the “person who asks questions” is, par excellence, the novelist, the writer, the artist, and this because they are not longing for final solutions.” It is through exposing certain digressions or even theme-words such as “kitsch” that Kundera follows his task of asking questions.

As it has been discussed before, Kundera puts considerable energy into defining, describing, and investigating the role of the theme-word kitsch in a communist society. As a German word that loosely means sentimental, inferior, and/or vulgar art, Kitsch claims to have an aesthetic purpose but in reality it tends to simplify intricate thoughts and ideas into stereotypical and easily marketable figures. It easily appeals to the masses and to the lowest common denominator. For kitsch to be kitsch, it must be able to arouse an emotional response that according to the book “the multitudes can share.” Kitsch then becomes a necessary tool for the intellectual
and emotional control of a general public in a totalitarian culture. According to Kundera, in an order which always forces its members to feel the same way about a particular event or state of being, kitsch best works its magic. As he writes, “Those of us who live in a society where various political tendencies exist side by side and competing influences cancel or limit one another can manage more or less to escape the kitsch inquisition: the individual can preserve his individuality; the artists can create unusual works. But whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of totalitarian kitsch.”

Kitsch, according to Kundera, is devoid of irony, since “in the realm of kitsch everything must be taken quite seriously.”

From another relevant perspective, Kundera believes that kitsch is the linking component behind all religions, credos and political parties that believe in the Grand March. According to him, most European credos, whether religious or political, claim that the world is good and human existence is positive: “categorical agreement with being” as Kundera calls it. He points out that something like shit, however, has no place in any of these doctrines. Instead, their aesthetic ideal is kitsch, which can be considered “the absolute denial of shit.” In other words, in order to present a consistent, idealized, and romantic view of the world, all of these credos wipe out whatever is uncomfortable to them, whatever does not fit. Such dishonest and neutered way of looking at the world results in the aesthetics of pale pastel paintings of family scenes, or photographs of identical laughing children with red Communist kerchiefs around their necks, to mention just some samples from the novel. Just as nothing inappropriate can be allowed in the aesthetic of kitsch, individuals cannot be allowed either. The Grand March, therefore, is based on people marching in step, screaming slogans together with one voice. Sabina points out that this “ideal” is actually much worse than any violent or imperfect totalitarian reality. Commenting upon Soviet films shown in Communist countries, the narrator asserts that:

The current conventional interpretation of these films is this: that they showed the Communist ideal, whereas Communist reality was worse. Sabina always rebelled against that interpretation. Whenever she imagined the world of Soviet kitsch
becoming a reality, she felt a shiver run down her back. She would unhesitatingly prefer life in a real Communist regime with all its persecution and meat queues. Life in the real Communist world was still livable. In the world of the Communist ideal made real, in that world of grinning idiots, she would have nothing to say, she would die of horror within a week.57

Accordingly, understanding kitsch brings the reader to an understanding of Sabina: it is not Communism that fends her off; it is Communist kitsch such as the May Day parades and the art of social realism. And those who condemn kitsch, or for that matter call it kitsch, must be banned for life because it is the expression of individualism that highly threatens the totalitarian regime. Kundera concludes, “In this light, we can regard the gulag as a septic tank used by totalitarian kitsch to dispose of its refuse.”58

It is then through such a skillfully-designed structure that Milan Kundera incorporates his grand themes into his integrated coherent novel. While on one hand these themes become an integral part of the story, on the other hand, they enhance their intrinsic qualities by going beyond the apparent setting or milieu. Commenting upon a passage from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Italo Calvino has concluded that Milan Kundera’s “manner of storytelling progresses by successive waves (most of the action develops within the first thirty pages; the conclusion is already announced halfway through; every story is completed and illuminated layer by layer) and by means of digressions and remarks that transform the private problem into a universal problem and, thereby, one that is ours.”59 In fact, Kundera makes us once again interrogate many of the taken-for-granted aspects of our own lives. This happens mostly when we delve into the core of his work; *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is driven by exactly what drives most people globally: inter-human relationships, love and obsession, desire and oppression and also exploration of concepts such as freedom, inexperience, pain, necessity, responsibility, weight, lightness and so on.

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- 374 -
Italo Calvino’s approach to Kundera’s style and particularly his focus on the structure of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* brings us to the discussion of newer or different forms of fiction which has been an area of concern for many critics and writers in contemporary debates of literature. Quite expectedly, a remarkable part of these discussions have been done in a context of globalization debates. In addition, as Nico Israel maintains the relationship between globalization and these very forms of contemporary literature bears a complex nature (as these two entities are intricate themselves), yet such association has been promising, as many writers have created newer forms of expression to represent and express humankind’s present-day situation.

Certainly, Milan Kundera is one of those writers who have utilized these ingenious newer 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.”

Kundera’s selected works are alive with many creative devices. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* he uses a seven-part narrative to implement musical variations on the themes of love, desire, innocence, history, and to show many other provocative images and unusual relationships and ideas. Through his philosophically complex fiction, Milan Kundera explores the conflicting forces of personal yearning, public and private ethics, and social rule. His writing here is characterized by its inquisitive tone, integration of dream, realism, and that abstract contemplation which is competently interpolated into an inventive narrative structure. In addition, as it has been mentioned before, in writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Kundera dismisses most of the traditional novelistic structures and employs specific narrative devices like *polyphony* to illustrate his own aesthetic of the novel, which emphasizes parallel explorations of related themes, active philosophical contemplation, and the integration of dreams and fantasy with realistic analysis. This assimilation is best
manifested by Kundera. Though in the selected works under the study we do not experience the kind of *magic realism* employed in some other works of Kundera (as exemplified by David Lodge in passages from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*\textsuperscript{61}), Tereza’s dream-scenes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* mostly remind the readers about the possibility of such a device. A brilliant example of such dreams happens in Part Four, Soul and Body when the text suddenly shifts from the reality scene of chapter ten into dream-scenes in the following chapters and then returns to the reality scene again in chapter fifteen. These dreams are so beautifully intertwined into the mainstream of the events that one even may not notice their fantasy nature on the first reading.

*The Joke* also has its own specific configurations; though it “has the precise formal articulation and ironic bite of the two cycles of short stories that preceded it, the first two notebooks of *Laughable Loves* […] the imaginative scope here is much vaster, and the complex intellectual resonances sound poignantly lyrical, as seldom after again.”\textsuperscript{62} However, *The Joke* is mainly dominated in its structure by the plane of ideas; much of the narrative of the novel consists of flashbacks and the repeated inversion of jokes has made a lively rhythm for the novel. It is believed that, such inverted jokes together with folk culture best exhibit elements of a great tragedy. Moreover, this multiperspectival novel displays its author’s outstanding style of narration. Four first-person narrators and their internal monologues give an undisputable quality to the work. In one word, the techniques of multiple narration, polyphonic composition and the writer’s fascination with numbers (especially number 7) have been at the center of attention for a majority of readers and reviewers as structural devices in this novel. In this way Milan Kundera presents his own exclusive style in depicting life.

Italo Calvino’s attitude of Kundera’s style and more specifically the final phrase in his quote also brings us to the discussion of *identification* which has been an area of concern for many critics and writers. As Shashi Deshpande posits “identification is one of the major doorways through which a reader enters fiction.”\textsuperscript{63} Hence, many readers all around the globe enter the definite world of Kundera and his novels no matter even if the world created by him seems an unfamiliar one. While identifying with different characters in various settings, many readers share their own
emotions and feelings with those characters as they feel that their problems are similar; readers generalize themes and events of the novel to their own situations. Undoubtedly, this process signifies Kundera’s proficiency in characterizing the novel and its components as an artistic form; a genre like novel with its distinctive nature provides the fullest representation of society. Kundera best knows that the novel, with its bulk of detail, ideally provides an abridgment or crystallization of social life that registers both the objective conditions of society and the particular subjective reactions of individuals to those conditions during decisive moments of historical change.

Another methodological aspect of Milan Kundera’s selected novels is related to the way he puts certain points of reference in his writings. As Deshpande elaborates on this issue, the international frames of reference become an important and essential factor for the readership of a work. Making a comparison between two different novels, one more local and the other more global, Deshpande arrives at a conclusive formula for a better readership of a work, which necessitates keeping the exotic unfamiliar within the text and removing the unexplainable. Premeditated or no, this is exactly happening in Kundera’s sonorous novels. While there are many occasions introducing substantial parts of Czech customs, traditions, culture and social backgrounds or references to certain familiar names and titles, at the same time we can find descriptions of strange characters and their attitudes or citation about eccentric ideas and thoughts from the author-narrator which adds much to the attractions of the selected novels. On one hand, readers encounter bizarre occasions mostly created through Kundera’s special and rather unique viewpoints on the existence of human beings. On the other hand, there are many evidences from the events, actions, motifs, titles and themes of the selected novels that seem quite familiar and attractive for the current readers from all around the globe. Moravia and Moravian folk art, music and songs, Communist Party, May Day parade, Soviet film Court of Honor, Ride of the Kings, Julius Fucik, Lightness and Weight, Kitsch, The Grand March, Oedipus, Nietzsche and Parmenides, Exile and Migration, Einmal ist keinmal (one time is no time), Es muss sein (it must be so), Prague Spring and many other examples cover a part of those evidences.
As it was mentioned before, according to Shashi Deshpande the migration of writers, intellectuals and scholars from around the world to Western capitals and universities has always been considered as an important factor in the globalization of writing. Accordingly, Czech literature and particularly Milan Kundera’s writings have also been affected by and benefited from what Deshpande claims. Of course, such a phenomenon has its own exclusive patterns, stages and history which might not have any equivalent in other literatures. Czech literature, in fact, has experienced much turbulence in its history. In twentieth century, the relative freedom and experiments in Czech literary era, which reached its peak during the Prague Spring of 1968, came to a sudden end the same summer, with the Soviet invasion which reinstated the strict censorship of the 1950s, shut down most of the literary magazines and newspapers, and silenced authors who did not conform. As a result and during a new emigration wave, many authors fled to the U.S. and Canada (Josef Škvorecký), France (Milan Kundera), Germany (Peroutka), and Austria (Pavel Kohout). It is noteworthy that, there existed a relatively weak Czech émigré literary tradition in the West between 1948, the communist occupation of Czechoslovakia, and 1970. But the arrival of new dissident émigrés after 1968 encouraged Czech émigré cultural life a lot. Some writers in this post 1968 émigré community managed to set up publishing houses in the West in the early 1970s and from the late 1970s onwards Czech émigrés in the West collaborated with their dissident colleagues within Czechoslovakia very intensely. During these years and before the fall of Communism in 1989 Czech émigré literature became that kind of writing which attempted to compare and contrast life in Czechoslovakia to life in the West, to plan the process of psychological adjustment of people who left Czechoslovakia for the West, and to broaden the horizons of Czech literature, by enriching it with international experience. Now contemporary writers such as Ivan M. Jirous, Jáchym Topol, Miloš Urban, Petr Šabach, Patrik Ouředník, and Petra Hůlová are famous figures in Czech literature known to the world.

Such brief history of a part of Czech literature also brings us to other important and yet complicated web of publishing industry and western agents, marketing for literary productions, and the role of mass media in publicizing Kundera’s literary status. A part of this complication is related to Kundera’s permanent migration to France – which causes his closer dealings with western
publishers and agents – and also writing in both Czech and French languages which produces other important consequences (for example, The Unbearable Lightness of Being was originally published in Czech by 68 Publishers, Toronto, 1985, but did not come out in the Czech Republic until the autumn of 2006, by Atlantis, Brno). Of course, a remarkable extent of such interactions is quite connected to Kundera’s own personal posturing toward social, cultural, political and literary events within and outside his home country. However, there is no doubt that Milan Kundera has been dealing with various difficulties during his interactions with these institutions of publishing. His complaint letter in Times Literary Supplement, which shows Kundera’s grievances about the first version of The Joke published in a reconstructed distorted manner in 1969 by Macdonald at London, might be considered as an example of these burdens. As it is already known Kundera eventually manages to publish a definitive version for The Joke just to get rid of his deep worries about this book.

There is no doubt that another important factor in broadcasting Kundera’s literary career is the great role of mass media. But it should also be noted that Kundera has always tried to play the game according to his own rules. This means that he has been very selective in his interactions with the media. The number of his interviews, then, is quite limited and he mostly keeps a safe distance with the current political trends. Once he justifies his tough pessimistic attitudes on this topic, which are by and large shared by some other writers as well:

INTERVIEW: Cursed be the writer who first allowed a journalist to reproduce his remarks freely! He started the process that can only lead to the disappearance of the writer: he who is responsible for every one of his words. Yet I do very much like the dialogue (a major literary form), and I’ve been pleased with several such discussions that were mutually pondered, composed, and edited. Alas, the interview as it is generally practiced has nothing to do with a dialogue: (1) the interviewer asks questions of interest to him, of no interest to you; (2) of your responses, he uses only those that suit him; (3) he translates them into
his own vocabulary, his own manner of thought. In imitation of American journalism, he will not even deign to get your approval for what he has you say. The interview appears. You console yourself: people will quickly forget it! Not at all: people will quote it! Even the most scrupulous academics no longer distinguish between the words a writer has written and signed, and his remarks as reported. In July 1985, I made a firm decision: no more interviews. Except for dialogues co-edited by me, accompanied by my copyright, all my reported remarks since then are to be considered forgeries.64

This is not of course the first or the last time for Kundera to scorn mass media. During an interview and while he wants to comment upon the so-called cycle of forgetting or what is called most people’s tendency towards personal and cultural amnesia as referred to in the criticism about his work The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Kundera shows his mistrust again and says “Television, the media, technology in general are the major instruments of forgetting. […] Paradoxically, in the mass of information that the technological age brings, memory is lost at ever greater rapidity. We’re bombarded by too much banal information that totally fails ever to remind us of our past.”65

Despite such scornful approach towards media and modern technology and even though Kundera shies away from public or mass media, it is believed that this is a boon to have him alive to give such good and frank comments and to share viewpoints about his works and terminology. As a matter of fact, it is through the same media that Kundera’s attitudes and the news of his literary productions are conveyed. Yet it is obvious that Kundera imposes his own style in many businesses related to his works. As Deshpande reminds us, now-a-days most publishers and agents tend to use the author as part of the selling of their books. In fact, new methods of marketing have penetrated as an inevitable part of this business into process of selling books as well. Interviews, public worldwide readings, signing sessions, and TV appearances have become regular activities for marketing a book. “The author’s personality and looks are used to sell the book; the better the show-person the author
is, the greater the sales.”

Though Kundera has co‐operated with many big publishing companies such as Harper Perennial, Faber and Faber, Penguin, and Gallimard, for sure he has not taken part in such commercial promotions as his works owe their widespread readership to high quality of his writing rather than marketing methods. However Kundera has always been at the center of attention in mass media. It was after the big controversy caused by the accusations (of having collaborated with Czech police in his youth) published in Respekt magazine in 2008 that once again media spotlighted Kundera. It is believed that ironically “Kundera has become a victim of the very tendencies he denounces in his novels and essays: obsessive focus on the personal lives of authors, the over‐politicization of art, and the public’s love of scandal, exacerbated by a media indifferent to the individual’s right to privacy.”

Although reminding the negative aspects of the impacts of mass media and literary institutions might seem quite agonizing, these tools still play a major role in the production and readership of a literary work. As spotlighted by Nico Israel, in recent years immense changes have occurred in these areas; there have been great progresses in consolidation of the publishing industry, with multinational conglomerates becoming more powerful. In addition, an exponential extension of the reach of literature has occurred due to the expansion of the World Wide Web and online bookselling. Kundera’s works also have experienced part of this consolidation. His selected novels have been published by Harper and its different imprints Harper Perennial, Harper Collins and Harper & Row. Also his works could be ordered online and they are available in electronic formats, too. Such modern developments in the publishing industry can also be related to Ernst Grabovszki’s discussion on the intensification of literary relations and communication. Grabovszki’s speculation about the role and function of literary institutions asserts the redundancy of traditional publishers in the new era. This idea comes from the point that the definition for text or the medium of book in the traditional perspective will no longer be prevalent in the modern process of production and consumption of literature. From this point we can make an improvement and claim that modern publishers indeed have already understood the new demands and therefore they are making huge advancements in selling electronic formats of the books as well. Moreover, Grabovszki’s analysis on the problematics of the development of electronic media makes useful clarifications to
propose principles on the ways and manners literature should be dealt with in its different manifestations while taking into consideration the content of various media:

The following questions can be posed: How is literature discussed? What rank does literature hold within the program of a radio or TV station or within literature-related sites on the World Wide Web? Which literature is discussed (high-brow, trivial literature, etc.)? Is there also foreign literature that receives attention or only literature in the national language(s) and if yes, is it dealt with in its original language or in translation? Especially radio or audio media allow to present literature in an authentic way. Audio books, for instance, may intensify the authenticity of literature by presenting a text read by its author in the original language.\(^6\)

This contribution, in turn, can be interpreted as those essential steps which Kundera has always been wishing for to be observed in the world of media in order to establish more humane communications.

As it has already been noted, another important tool in the globalization of literature is the factor of language which is considered as a key parameter in the production process of Kundera’s novels as well. Though, along with many other scholars, Deshpande believes that English is the most suited language for the purpose of globalizing a novel, it seems that Kundera’s writing doesn’t necessarily follow any certain formula in this regard as he has written in both Czech and French. In fact originally, he wrote in Czech (e.g. *The Joke* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) but from 1993 onwards, he has written his novels in French (e.g. *Slowness, Identity, Ignorance*, and *An Encounter*). While such a shift in the language of writing is an indication of Kundera’s lofty knowledge and awareness about various functions of language, at the same time it shows his adaptability in different phases of his personal and professional career. In a rare case, only once Kundera reveals “I write my essays in French, but my novels in Czech, because my life experiences and my imagination are anchored in Bohemia, in Prague.”\(^6\) However the factor of language plays its
significant role from a different perspective and in relation to another principle that is translation.

Translation has always been a vital and yet challenging process for Milan Kundera. Even after his books were banned in Czechoslovakia, Kundera continued to write in Czech language and became a bestselling international success only thanks to the wide-ranging translation of his novels. He admits that such a world-wide readership is a result of translation: “…And yet for me, because practically speaking I no longer have the Czech audience, translations are everything.” But this was only a rare case of his approval of translation. In fact, Kundera has been expecting to receive exact copies of his Czech originals rendered in the foreign languages; an ideal which never occurs, hence he reacts even more sensitively: “I once left a publisher for the sole reason that he tried to change my semicolons to periods.” And yet his negative reactions to the process abound: “The shock of The Joke’s translations [In 1968 and 1969] left a permanent scar on me.” He even tells one interviewer “Translation is my nightmare. […] ‘I’ve lived horrors because of it.’” Although such confrontational attitudes regarding translation have been repeatedly stated many times by Kundera and this has invoked lots of criticism, he has remained determined on this stance.

Kundera’s concern about fidelity finally compels him to engage in the demanding task of reviewing and editing the translation of all his novels, the long history of which is even explained at the end of 2003 edition of The Joke. Kundera revises the French translations of all his Czech novels between 1985 and 1987 and declares them to be the authentic version of his body of work. In response to the fact that many translators attempted to translate from the French rather than the Czech versions, Kundera manages to verify the French translations with the purpose of creating new ‘originals’ from which translations into other languages could be made. Michelle Woods believes that “the process of revising the French translations not only addressed problems with the transference from one language (Czech) to another (French), but also allowed an opportunity for Kundera to rewrite the novels. In some cases, where the material was too culturally specific, Kundera deliberately altered the translation to make it more accessible to a French readership. In other cases, he dealt with elements of the novel – and not the translation – with which he felt dissatisfied by omitting, altering and adding material.” Michelle Woods further adds that
“Kundera has been criticized for his policy of fidelity on two counts: firstly, because he rewrites the translations and deliberately alters them so they do not necessarily correspond to the Czech ‘originals’; and, secondly, because ‘fidelity’ — in the traditional translation sense — is now widely regarded to be an impossibility.”

Moreover, the translation theorist Lawrence Venuti considers Kundera as an author who exploits translators, and believes that “Kundera seems unique not only in scrutinizing and correcting the foreign-language versions of his books, but also in asserting his preferred translation practice in wittily pointed essays and prefaces.” He further adds that “Kundera’s thinking about translating is remarkably naïve for a writer so finely attuned to stylistic effects.” The main reason for such a criticism, according to Venuti, is that Kundera apparently refuses to accept that a translation automatically incurs changes because of the cultural differences between languages; each language containing culturally untranslatable differences that need to be transformed in order to make the translation understandable, Venuti posits. Despite all these discussions (and accusations), Kundera still remains suspicious of translations which perform a work of domestication.
5.2. Notes and references:


4 Pankaj Mishra, op. cit., p.250.

5 Ibid., p.155.

6 Ibid., p.249.

7 Ibid., p.251.

8 Shashi Deshpande, op. cit., p.177.

9 See the explanations about travel novel in pages 32-33 and note 32 for the first chapter of Stephen M. Levin’s book, The Contemporary Anglophone Travel Novel: The Aesthetics of Self-Fashioning in the Era of Globalization, where he asserts that “the novel frequently presents a more multi-dimensioned view of the motives and fantasies that sustain the adventure.” He also admits that “the idea that novelistic speech represents a form of “heterogeneous discourse” originates with Mikhail Bakhtin. Writing in The Dialogical Imagination, Bakhtin argues that a novel acquires thematic unity by connecting all of its compositional elements through a “social diversity of speech types.” These speech types include direct authorial narration, the stylized speech of individual characters, forms of oral everyday narration, and forms of “semiliterary” narration (such as a letter or diary). Bakhtin referred to this diversity of speech forms in the novel as “heteroglossia” (262–63).”


11 Ibid., p.155.

12 Ibid., p.134.


14 Pankaj Mishra, Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India, p.158.

15 Ibid., pp.211-12.


Shashi Deshpande, op. cit., pp.176.


Ibid., p.11.

Ibid.

Ibid.


- 386 -


33 Søren Frank, Migration and Literature, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.p.82.


41 Ibid., pp.145-46.

42 Søren Frank, op. cit., p.201.


45 Ibid.


Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*,p.244.

Ibid., p.245.

Ibid.

Ibid.,p.241.

Ibid.,p.242.

Ibid.,p.246.

Ibid.,p.245.


Shashi Deshpande, op. cit., p.172.


66 Shashi Deshpande, op. cit., p.175.


68 Ernst Grabovszki, op. cit., p.48.

69 Olga Carlisle, op. cit.

70 Milan Kundera, The Art of the Novel, p.121.

71 Ibid., p.130.

72 Ibid., p.121.


75 Ibid.,p.4.


77 Ibid.
4.2.2. The Unbearable Lightness of Being

As it was mentioned in the methodology section, in dealing with texts under study the researcher will conduct the survey in two related areas of approach: intra-textual and extra-textual; here the intra-textual features of the text under study such as: Structure, Plot and Setting, Narration and Narrator, Characterization, and Themes are of main concern.

4.2.2.1. Intra-textual Features
4.2.2.1.1. General Overview and Structure

Long before publishing The Unbearable Lightness of Being Milan Kundera has established himself globally as one of the most unique and significant voices in contemporary fiction. Much of this international acclaim undoubtedly traces back to the distinctive attributes or qualities found in his earlier books such as The Joke, The Farewell Waltz, and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. As it was mentioned before, Kundera’s debut novel, The Joke, which described life under Communism with harsh satire and sarcasm was published when Soviet tanks had invaded the Prague and consequently the hopeful days instigated by the Prague Spring movement for artists, writers and intellectuals all come to an abrupt end. It was no surprise, then, that the attention given to this debut novel by the readers at that time came with a price for its author, as Kundera came to be labeled as a dissident writer, an accusation which finally led to his expulsion from the Institute for Advanced Cinematography Studies in Prague. Moreover his books were banned and his life became “unbearable” just as his own characters’ lives in The Unbearable Lightness of Being.

Milan Kundera’s touching, thoughtful and philosophical novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, with its many provocative images and unusual relationships and ideas, was originally written in Czech language and completed in 1982 when Kundera was residing in Paris. This novel was first published in 1984 in France (title in Czech: Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí, in French: l'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être) and the version under study here is the paperback edition of the English translation from Czech by Michael Henry Heim in 1984 published by Faber and Faber. Amounting to 305 pages, the novel uses a seven-part narrative to implement
musical variations on the themes of love, desire, innocence and history. While fascinating the readers with lively possibilities of fiction, the novel presents a profoundly revolutionary portrait of occupied Czechoslovakia and the lives of its characters from 1960s to 1970s. Dismissing most of the traditional novelistic structures, Milan Kundera utilizes specific narrative devices (such as polyphony) to illustrate his own aesthetic of the novel, which emphasizes parallel explorations of related themes, active philosophical contemplation, and the integration of dreams and fantasy with realistic analysis. Guy Scarpetta believes that such a structure illustrates “an overt desire to destroy the classical notion of “novelistic development” (exposition, peripeteia [sudden change], rebounding, knotting and denouement). In fact, everything happens as if, for Kundera, a sense of musical composition took on increasing autonomy in the face of plot’s traditional necessities”.¹ Such a unique style is believed by John Banville to be one good reason for the novel’s success:

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* had a remarkable success when it was published in English in 1984. Here was an avowedly “postmodern” novel in which the author withheld so many of the things we expect from a work of fiction, such as rounded characters – “It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived” – a tangible milieu, a well-placed plot, and in which there are extended passages of straightforward philosophical and political speculation, yet it became a worldwide bestseller, loved by the critics and the public alike.²

For most readers, this novel is highly philosophical and at the same time inevitably influenced by Kundera’s experiences in Prague and with the Czechoslovak Communist Party (Kundera’s critique of human relationships is interlaced with his critique of the communist system), yet Kundera’s novel remains popular and trendy because it upgrades the specific subjects, characters and contexts to the worldwide level; the situations and dilemmas created in the story, the questions raised throughout the characters’ life journeys, the problems faced by characters in 1960s-70s
Czechoslovakia are not really that different from those faced by the contemporary man in every other continent:

His manner of storytelling progresses by successive waves (most of the action develops within the first thirty pages; the conclusion is already announced halfway through; every story is completed and illuminated layer by layer) and by means of digressions and remarks that transform the private problem into a universal problem and, thereby, one that is ours.\(^3\)

In fact, it can be argued that by opening new angles Kundera makes us once again cross-examine many of the taken-for-granted aspects of our own lives, that Kundera’s novel is driven by exactly what drives most people globally: inter-human relationships, love and obsession, desire and oppression and also exploration of concepts such as freedom, inexperience, pain, necessity, responsibility, weight, lightness, and most interesting of all the relativity theory of relationships.

Through his philosophically complex fiction, Milan Kundera explores the conflicting forces of personal yearning, public and private ethics, and social rule. His writing here is characterized by its inquisitive tone, integration of dream, realism, and that abstract contemplation which is competently interpolated into an inventive narrative structure. As a disquisition on the nature of human existence and relationships, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*’s focal point is the intertwined lives of four characters – Tomas, Tereza, Sabina and Franz. Though the novel is not typically considered as a psychological one in its genre, one might perceive how Milan Kundera is concerned with the underlying psychological mechanisms that shape his characters’ both private and public lives. A deep reading of the novel indicates that these mechanisms show different frequencies, even though the writer rarely examines inner thoughts of his characters. Such psychological inflections among the characters, the use of multiple perspectives, and repeating themes and concepts throughout the text produce a counterpoint effect that reflects the novel’s musical structure as well. In addition and as a reminiscence of the variations in a
musical composition, each character represents a particular motif that is explored throughout the novel in various contexts.

Commenting on this musical structure, John Barnard asserts that “Kundera’s own explanation of the novel’s overlapping and interrupted structure” brought about by the writer in The Art of the Novel is “misleading” in its musical analogy. Bernard further pinpoints that Kundera’s criticism rather “provides a cover for his creative practice” than betraying the core of the composition. Through his thorough analysis, John Bernard enumerates some outstanding characteristics in the structure of the novel. First is the “constant exchange between his [Kundera’s] sceptical critical intelligence and his belief in the autonomy of his fictional characters.” According to this critic, “the novel persistently draws attention to its fictiveness.” As the second feature in the formal structure, Barnard refers to the “impression of spontaneous free-flowing playful inventiveness, following up and working out an initiating image or idea.” He further asserts that:

The narrative continually trips the reader up. What seems real is suddenly revealed to be a dream. On occasions we cannot be sure of what is or is not true. There are re-tellings of the same events by different characters, and the chronology continually leaps backwards and forwards. Despite its apparent playfulness and spontaneity, the novel is extremely tightly structured (in that respect it is quite unlike Cervantes, Sterne or Diderot), and its patterning reveals the wider issues involved in the characters’ personal dilemmas. These are precisely the issues leading to the tension between affirmation and doubt which characterize the novel’s conclusion.

The third important characteristic in the formal structure of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, according to John Barnard, is repetition which has been a thematic concern for the writer as well. He believes that by opening the novel with Nietzsche's “mad myth” of the “idea of eternal return” and the “German adage”,

- 292 -
Einmal ist keinmal (“What happens once might as well not have happened at all”), Kundera wants to make a contrast with what happens in reality for human beings, to remind that repetition is impossible in the realm of human existence. Barnard also maintains that “The importance of repetition to the novel is apparent in the list of contents: working in order through the title for each part, briefly linking it to the novel’s chronology and parallel narratives demonstrates this.”

Elaborating on the structural pattern of The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Guy Scarpetta considers each of the seven parts of the novel as a “movement” which corresponds directly to the “focal differences”, regardless of modifications in register, point of view or moment of enunciation. He proposes a design in which “each part is centered on one or two characters, caught from within and commented on from without. Thus, Parts 1 and 5 focus on Tomas, Parts 2, 4 and 7 on Tereza, Parts 3 and 6 on Sabina and Franz. The architectonic formula would thus be A-B-C-B-A-C-B.” Based on such a well-organized construction, then, this “process of multiple focus” paves the way for “the displacement of discourse time with respect to narrative time […]”; the exposition of several perceptions of the same event […]; and finally the authorization of a set of thematic variations and counterpoints.”

Part One of the novel entitled, “Lightness and Weight” opens with a reflection on Nietzsche’s doctrine of the “eternal return”—a reflection that itself returns to become one of the book’s leitmotifs. This theme is in close connection (juxtaposition) with the book’s original title considered first by the writer, “The Planet of Inexperience.” Kundera relates to this title in The Art of the Novel: “Inexperience as a quality of the human condition. We are born one time only, we can never start a new life equipped with the experience we’ve gained from previous one. We leave childhood without knowing what youth is, we marry without knowing what it is to be married, and even when we enter old age, we don’t know what it is we’re heading for: the old are innocent children of their old age. In that sense, man’s world is the planet of inexperience.” Also in this first part of the novel we learn about Tomas’s erotic life and his hoary relationship with Sabina. It is through narrator’s reflection on lightness and weight that the reader is reminded about the division Parmenides made between positive and negative poles. Tereza’s arrival in Tomas’s life and their marriage, Prague Spring of 1968 and Russian invasion, arrival of the mongrel puppy
Karenin into the scene, the brief period of exile for Tereza and Tomas in Zurich and their separate return to Prague are all among the incidents of this part as well.

In Part Two, “Soul and Body”, we read about the same events in the same years of 1962 to 1969 but this time from Tereza’s viewpoint. Here the narrator tells us that the German adage he quoted earlier in previous part, “Einmal ist Keinmal”, gave birth to Tomas, while it was a rumbling stomach which procreated Tereza. It can also be argued that this repetition of events from a different angle causes a re-evaluation or reshaping of what could be considered a very definitive version in first part. This new account augments the “weight.” Tereza’s dreams are also dealt with in this part.

In order to provide the readers with another viewpoint on his themes, Kundera passes the microphone to Sabina in Part Three, “Words Misunderstood”. Here we follow Sabina’s life as an exile, first in Geneva (1968 to 1972), then in Paris (1972 to 1975). By introducing a new character like Franz in this part, readers also find out the story of Sabina’s affair with this married Swiss academic, which she breaks off suddenly. In 1975 Sabina learns in Paris from Czechoslovakia that Tomas and Tereza have been killed in a road accident. Structurally, this news is in complete harmony with the writer’s intention to avoid any linear plot. Another outstanding point in this part is the special narrative technique of implementing sections titled “A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words” to convey certain themes as well as characters’ definite ideologies.

Similar to Part Two, Part Four is also entitled, “Soul and Body.” It is told mainly from Tereza’s perspective. It is set in Prague between 1969 and 1973, a period which includes the Communists re-establishment of a police state in Czechoslovakia. Here we hear that Tereza has to work in a bar, is still suffering from Tomas’s philandering. She continues to have dreams, too. This section along with some philosophical themes of the human essence and identity, elaborates on the spying and privacy issues from socio-political aspects.

In Part Five, which bears the heading “Lightness and Weight” just the same as Part One, we turn to Tomas’s perspective again. This section covers the same years, 1969 to 1973, which were once narrated from Tereza’s viewpoint. Consisting of Tomas’s psychological and professional downfall, this part of the narrative shows him
much weaker and less weighty than before. We find out about Tomas’s refusal to
disavow a newspaper article he had written sarcastically to criticize Communist
officials (who refuse to take responsibility for their wrongdoings in the past). Aside
from a tough time for Tomas who is deprived of his job at the hospital, we come to
read some illuminating discussions on the differences between sex and love during the
narrator’s digressions. The recurrent presence of the narrator in many parts of this
section is noteworthy as well.

Part Six, “The Grand March”, is characterized by Kundera himself with words
such as “fortissimo” and “prestissimo” to bear “a rough, cynical mood, full of
events.”

In fact besides telling various events about Sabina’s and Franz’s lives, through 29 short chapters (or “measures” as Kundera himself puts it) in this section we get a noticeable extent of “digressions” ranging from different variations of
“kitsch” (as a metaphor for particular types of ideas, social causes and memories),
rejection and privilege, sexual excitement (and its discrepancy with sexual pleasure),
and shit (or the original sin, as some critics infer) to God’s image, and the basic faith
of “a categorical agreement with being.” Commenting on the structural design of
Part Six, Kundera says:

There the polyphonic quality is most striking in Part Six:
the story of Stalin’s son, a theological meditation, a
political event in Asia, Franz’s death in Bangkok, and
Tomas’ burial in Bohemia are connected by the prevailing
question: What is kitsch? That polyphonic passage is the
keystone of the whole structure. The whole secret of its
architectural balance is right there.

He further explains that secret consists of two items. First is the point that
characters’ life stories are “interpolated” into the essay-type format of this part to
perform as case studies to be examined. Second is the “chronologic displacement” as
he asserts it. Indeed the events in Part Six happen just after the events in Part Seven.

The seventh and final part, “Karenin’s Smile”, is set on the collective farm in
the countryside to which Tomas and Tereza escape from Prague. Here we read about
the sad death of Karenin, the female dog (who is referred to with masculine pronoun all the time). Fred Misurella asserts that:

Having taken care of human concerns […], Kundera moves to animal life in the final section and writes about it in a way that loses none of the seriousness or wit of the previous pages. In so doing, he hints at an animal’s conception of man (the cow parasite, as Tereza imagines it) and discusses from that point of view the injustice in man’s biblical claim to dominion over animals. As a result, the major emotional event – and climax – of this section becomes the illness and death of Karenin, Tereza’s dog, while in a turnabout of the usual narrative logic Kundera merely hints at the tragic accident ending Tomas and Tereza’s existence.¹⁴

This last part concludes with the final evening of Tomas and Tereza’s life. As Kundera puts in The Art of the Novel, this finale is described for him with qualities such as pianissimo and adagio to arrive at a smooth tempo. Kundera believes “because of that dislocation [of chronological events], the last part, despite its idyllic quality, is flooded with a melancholy that comes from our knowledge of what is to happen.”¹⁵

4.2.2.1.2. Plot and Setting

The story is set in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and just contrary to what a novelist may normally do, in the opening and in part one of the novel, “Lightness and Weight,” the writer commences with a grave philosophical debate of lightness versus heaviness. Here Kundera portrays Nietzsche’s philosophy of eternal return: that all things we experience happen again and again infinitely; Kundera wants to know the significance of this “mad myth.” Thus the narrator tells us that while such an idea appends great weight to experience but in the meantime the opposite is possible as well: “Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror,
In this way Kundera doubts if any meaning or weight can be attributed to life, since there is no eternal return. In the second chapter of this part, the narrator turns to the division that Parmenides (a Greek philosopher of the 6th century BC.) made between opposing poles: the light synonymous with the warm, the fine, the full, as of being which was positive, while the heavy synonymous with the cold, the coarse, the empty, as of nonbeing was negative. It is against the background of such themes that, the narrator starts the story of Tomas, a surgeon living in Prague.

Tomas is recalling moments of his first meeting with Tereza while “standing at the window of his flat and looking across the courtyard at the opposite walls, not knowing what to do,” since he doesn’t know to name this new relationship “hysteria or love.” However, Tomas spent an hour with the waitress Tereza after meeting her in a small town café. Ten days later, she visits him in Prague. While there, she falls seriously ill; after spending a week taking care of her, Tomas sends her home. Some days after he becomes glad when Tereza calls and tells him she has come to Prague on business. After they meet and make love, Tomas realizes Tereza lied about having business in Prague; far from coming to the city for a brief visit, she had arrived with Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina under her arm and with her entire life packed into one heavy suitcase:

Only two days ago, he [Tomas] had feared that if he invited her to Prague she would offer him up her life. When she told him her suitcase was at the station, he immediately realized that the suitcase contained her life and that she had left it at the station only until she could offer it up to him.18

Resting by Tereza’s side and just the way she grips his hand while asleep, reminds Tomas of a recurrent metaphoric image:

Again it occurred to him that Tereza was a child put in a pitch-daubed bulrush basket and sent downstream. He couldn’t very well let a basket with a child in it float down a stormy river! If the Pharaoh’s daughter hadn’t snatched
the basket carrying little Moses from the waves, there would have been no Old Testament, no civilization as we now know it! How many ancient myths begin with the rescue of an abandoned child! If Polybus hadn’t taken in the young Oedipus, Sophocles wouldn’t have written his most beautiful tragedy.19

It is during Tomas’s mental conflict to decide about the status of this “neither mistress nor wife”20 that we learn about his former life and come to know that he had been divorced ten years back, an occasion which he “celebrated” just the “way others celebrate a marriage.” He tries for custody of his son for a while but then gives up, deciding to forget about his wife and his son and even his own parents since “the only thing they bequeathed to him was a fear of women. Tomas desired but feared them. Needing to create a compromise between fear and desire, he devised what he called ‘erotic friendship’.”21 Thus, after this event he sets certain principles to stay as a cheery bachelor womanizer with a life-style into which “no woman could move in with a suitcase” but now Tereza’s presence changes every rule, as Tomas puts up in his heart a sort of tenderness, passion and love for her. Despite his tenderness for Tereza, Tomas continues his other “erotic friendships.” And surprisingly, he asks his closest friend and mistress, Sabina, to find Tereza a job in a darkroom. As Tereza learns about Tomas’s infidelity, he first denies everything, and then tries to justify himself and explain that love and sex are separate for him, but she is not convinced and as a sign of psychological pressure and stress a series of dreadful dreams cram into her mind every night.

Kundera then narrates Tereza’s serial nightmares, contents of which clearly show her fear and jealousy of the other women Tomas sleeps with. However, Tomas loves Tereza and thus allows her to move in with him, marry him, and be an obvious part of his life, but at no point can he stay sexually faithful to her. In the meantime Tomas also buys Tereza a dog so that she has a constant companion and they name the dog Karenin, even though the dog is a female.

Kundera also describes the Russian invasion of Prague in 1968, the political turmoil thereafter and how Tomas and Tereza move to Zurich in Swiss, because of the
new situation and great suppressions made by the state in their homeland. Sabina also emigrates to Swiss and has been enjoying artistic success in Geneva. She and Tomas meet in a hotel room; Sabina wears nothing but lingerie and a bowler hat, and the two fall into each other’s arms. Tomas continues his infidelities for months after arriving in Zurich. After six to seven months in Zurich, the reader learns that Tomas came home one day to find a letter on the table from Tereza in which she explains that she lacked the strength to live abroad and has left to return to Prague. Since the Czech borders have been closed, Tereza’s return to Prague means she will not be allowed to leave the country again. For a few days Tomas feels relieved, but this does not last long and he follows Tereza back to Prague.

The second part of the novel, “Soul and Body,” examines the story of Tomas and Tereza from Tereza’s perspective. Starting this part with what seems to be a beforehand response to a question may never be asked, Kundera then goes directly to Tereza’s life form and existence in his story:

It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived. They were not born of a mother’s womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation. Tomas was born of the saying ‘Einmal ist keinmal’ [what happens but once might as well not have happened at all]. Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach.22

Arriving at Tomas’s flat for the first time, Tereza feels humiliated by her rumbling stomach. She feels that the soul and body are entirely separate entities; she has always hated the body. Accordingly, Kundera tells us that Tereza was born of the conflicting duality of soul and body and how throughout her childhood she tried to see herself through her body, but failed. Tereza looks like her mother, who was an unkind and rude woman, who was a beauty in her youth but married early because of pregnancy. She left her husband and young daughter to live with a crook; after Tereza’s father got into political trouble, Tereza was sent to live with her mother and stepfather. Her mother’s beauty faded with three more children and the misery of her own life, and she took out all of her frustration on her eldest daughter. Tereza’s
mother took pleasure in torturing and embarrassing the shy, sad girl. Tereza dropped out of high school early to take care of her mother and younger half-siblings. Her mother, attempting to fight the reality of her own faded beauty, paraded about the house naked, spoke in public about her sex life, and refused to allow Tereza to lock the bathroom door, to demonstrate that all human bodies were equal and natural. Tereza’s only consolations were books, dreams of a cultured life, and the idea of an individual soul different from the bodies surrounding it.

Tereza longed to leave the small town in which she was born and lived until she met Tomas. Kundera tells us the story of how Tereza was working as a waitress at a small hotel restaurant and that she met Tomas during one of her shifts. The day she met Tomas she noticed a series of coincidences and recurrences of the number six that led her to believe that she and Tomas were fated for one another. In fact, Tereza can hardly help from falling in love with Tomas, for she first sees him surrounded by the objects she associates with a lovely, longed-for life.

As Tomas’s infidelities still continue, we then hear more about the first dream that Tereza had and the horror she experienced during it. Putting more emphasis here Fred Misurella points out that:

The dream also becomes Tereza’s way of telling Tomas that his affairs with other women deny her individuality, making her the same as they are, even though she reasons during the day that she is, in fact, different and special. Torn by the contrast between her reasonable daytime self and her nightly terrors, she also exposes an impossible division in Tomas’s life. He fears that Tereza wants to die, and the fear fills him with guilt. He cannot be both Don Juan and Everyman, libertine and husband.23

Also we find out that Tereza’s natural intelligence and self-education help her learn photography. She promotes from darkroom assistant to staff photographer with Sabina’s help. Yet thinking constantly of Tomas’s affairs, Tereza decides to try and make other women’s bodies something she and Tomas share, rather than something
that divides them. Thus she befriends Sabina and goes to her studio, where Sabina shows her paintings and describes her artistic ventures. The two start to have a quasi-sexual nude photographing session; Kundera describes how Tereza takes nude pictures of Sabina where “the camera served as both a mechanical eye through which to observe Tomas’s mistress and a veil by which to conceal her [Tereza’s] face from her.”24 But soon Tereza becomes “disarmed” as Sabina asks to take nude pictures of her as well.

We then return to the occupation of Prague as during the Soviet tanks invasion, Tereza finds new meaning in her photography, doing dangerous and seemingly important work documenting the invasion; later she refers to this photography as an action “done out of passionate hatred.”25 Moreover, she also photographs young Czech women torturing celibate Russian soldiers by parading in tiny miniskirts and kissing random people in the streets. But these pictures later turned out to incriminate the Czechs and once she realizes this, she decides to leave Prague together with Tomas. When she and Tomas move to Swiss, Tereza takes these photos with her and offers them to a magazine, but quite unexpected for her the editor says they are outdated and a woman photographer – with a nudist beach photo story – even suggests Tereza take pictures of gardens, which she refuses to do.

Tereza tries to settle down in Zurich, but it seems a useless effort; she has nothing to do while Tomas works in the hospital or sees other women. Feeling too weak, she begins to perceive her relation with Tomas as a wrong idea from the very beginning as she thinks “in spite of their love, they had made each other’s life a hell.”26 All this sadness and lack of concentration is intensified when once she receives a phone while at home one day from a woman speaking German and asking for Tomas. When she says that Tomas is not there, the woman starts laughing and hangs up without saying good-bye. After this incident, Tereza feels as if she has lost the last bit of her strength and decides to return to Prague, of course, taking Karenin with her. Once back in Czechoslovakia, she contemplates moving to the country, but she does not go and on the fifth day Tomas returns to Prague, too. That night she hears the bells in the church belfry strike six times, which reminds her of the significance of that number on the day she met Tomas and once again she is filled with the splendor of fortuity.
Part three, “Words Misunderstood” starts with the introduction of Franz into the scene. He is a lover of Sabina. He is a good-looking and guilt-ridden married professor of philosophy who has spent all his life doing the right thing, conducting a normal life: making a family, supporting the right liberal causes, lecturing, and publishing paper. And just in the same path he is trying to keep his secret affairs with Sabina away from his wife as far as possible. During a meeting between Franz and Sabina in her studio at Geneva she puts on a bowler hat, on which there is a thorough description in the second chapter of this part. Sabina remembers the first time this bowler hat became an accessory part of her lovemaking scene. In Prague, Tomas put it on her head as a joke, and both looked at her image in the mirror, growing aroused. Sabina thinks the hat undermines her dignity as a woman. She thinks about wearing the hat in her lovemaking with Tomas, and muses it was “far from good clean fun...it was humiliation” - a humiliation she provoked and enjoyed. The bowler hat originally belonged to Sabina’s grandfather, a mayor in a small Czech town, and was then passed down to Sabina’s father. After her parents’ death, rather than fight her brother for inheritance rights, Sabina told him she would just take the hat. The bowler hat became an erotic object for her and Tomas, and eventually came to symbolize their affair and their time in Prague. Now it begins to stand for Franz’s misunderstanding of Sabina.

Kundera symbolizes this bowler hat as “a motif in the musical composition” of Sabina’s life. He further claims that as grownups the musical composition of Sabina and Franz are complete so that “every motif, every object, every word means something different to each of them.” Thus he utilizes a lexicon of all their misunderstandings to make an interesting record of Sabina’s and Franz’s conversations. Accordingly Woman, Fidelity and betrayal, Music, Lightness and darkness, Parades, The beauty of New York, Sabina’s country, Cemetery, The old church in Amsterdam, Strength, and Living in truth are the various entries defined or rather discussed in this dictionary.

We know that because Franz felt responsible for his mother’s misery after her husband left her, he behaves like a good son just dutifully and rather feebly toward women, seeking his mother in every woman he loves. When Franz tells his wife,
Marie-Claude, about having an affair with Sabina, she reacts firmly and aggressively and this response shocks Franz and shatters his long-lived image of women:

He had always told himself he had no right to hurt Marie-Claude and should respect the woman in her. But where had the woman in her gone? In other words, what had happened to the mother image he mentally linked with his wife? His mother, sad and wounded, his mother wearing unmatched shoes, had departed from Marie-Claude – or perhaps not, perhaps she had never been inside Marie-Claude at all. The whole thing came to him in a flash of hatred.  

Sabina, on the other hand, is planning to put an end to her lifelong pattern of betrayal, while in the meantime she feels increasing distaste for Franz since she “felt as though Franz had pried open the door of their privacy” after disclosing their secret to Marie-Claude. That night when they make love in the hotel room at Rome and Franz again closes his eyes, she thinks of him as “a newborn animal, still blind and whimpering for the dug.” In fact “the idea that he [Franz] was a mature man below and a suckling infant above, that she was therefore having intercourse with a baby” becomes a lot unpleasant and disgusting for Sabina. That night, both are drunk with joy, Franz because he thinks he will spend the rest of his life with Sabina, Sabina because she has resolved to leave Franz the next day.

The next day, Franz surprisingly finds out Sabina has left. More upsetting is the fact that she does not want him to know her new address. Franz understands nothing. Later he finds a small apartment in the old part of Rome and starts living alone for the first time in his life. Preferring the ideal to the real, he finds happiness imagining Sabina as a guiding presence in his life. He starts living with one of his students, a kind young girl with thick glasses who is not pretty but admires Franz just in the same way Franz admired Sabina. Franz’s wife refuses to grant him a divorce, but he lives happily with his new mistress, sharing his ideals and dragging her to Czech dissident expatriate conferences.
Sabina moves to Paris after four years living in Geneva. There she has a feeling of melancholy and rarely finds words to express her vertigo as “her drama was a drama not of heaviness but of lightness. What fell to her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being.” Three years passes for her in Paris when one day Simon, Tomas’s son, informs Sabina by letter that Tomas and Tereza have died. It is hard for Sabina to tolerate this shocking news. She thinks of death and tries to calm herself by taking a walk in a cemetery; she goes to Montparnasse Cemetery.

Sharing the same title with Part two, Part four is also entitled, “Soul and Body” again. In this part, we read about Tereza and Tomas after they move back to Prague. The first chapter here begins with Tereza sniffing Tomas’s hair and finding the smell of other women’s genitals on it. As a daily routine Tereza rises every morning to have breakfast with Tomas, despite his protests; he would rather eat alone, but since their daytime schedules conflict, Tereza refuses to give up this chance to spend time with him. No longer allowed to take photographs, we learn that, Tereza is now working at a hotel bar. A former ambassador also works at the reception desk; she listens to him talk to a man whose son was identified by the police as a dissident. Tereza suddenly understands that the Russian police have been using the photographs she and other photojournalists took during the invasion.

There are two points Tereza directly refers to in this part. One is the term “concentration camp” which she mentions it when remembering her family and her careless mother who didn’t respect Tereza’s privacy at all. The second point is her challenge with body-phobia. She engages in some flirtations with male strangers which can be considered as an attempt to release herself from her fears of the body. Tereza now considers flirting with the men there just in order to better relate to Tomas’s distinction between physical sex and the emotions he has towards her. She meets a tall man (who introduces himself as an engineer), goes to his apartment, where she finds Sophocles’ *Oedipus* among the shelved books and thinks of it as a sign from Tomas. She winds up having sex with this stranger:

But then it occurred to her that she was actually being sent to him [the engineer] by Tomas. Hadn’t he told her time and again that love and sexuality have nothing in common?
Well, she was merely testing his words, confirming them. She could almost hear him say, ‘I understand you. I know what you want. I’ve taken care of everything. You’ll see when you get up there.’

Before this daring action by Tereza, she had another dream sequence in which Tereza asks Tomas to help her. He directs her to Petrin Hill, where a man with a rifle helps three suicidal people kill themselves, and then turns to her. She tells him no, and that it wasn’t her choice, and leaves the hill understanding that Tomas sent her to die. However it may not be so irrelevant if one claims that this dream acts as a powerful stimulus for Tereza to decide to go to visit that engineer. However, Tereza never meets that engineer again as he never arrives at the bar. The bald customer that gave her a hard time earlier at the bar calls her a prostitute and hints that people are watching her. The former ambassador confirms that he is in the secret police, and after their conversation Tereza grows convinced that the engineer was in the secret police too, and that she was set up for blackmail.

Tereza and Tomas drive through Prague. The city has changed, and grown ugly. Russian words replace the original and traditional names. This began from the early days of invasion when people started to pull down street signs everywhere just in order to confuse and mislead Russian army. In another dream sequence, Tereza watches park benches float by in the river, and realizes the city is bidding her farewell. She wants to die.

The fifth part, “Lightness and Weight,” as Fred Misurella puts it, “returns to Tomas and his perceptions, showing him as much weaker and less weighty than he has been up to this point, an ironic narrative change since the story of this section consists primarily of Tomas’s professional and psychological descent, a situation requiring some symbolic weight.” Back from Zurich and upon his return to the hospital in Prague, the chief surgeon asks Tomas to sign a paper retracting an article he wrote in 1968. Tomas criticized the Czech Communists in that article using the tale of Oedipus written by Sophocles. In fact, he compared the Czech Communists to Oedipus. Like Oedipus, the Communists claim they did not know what they were doing, and could not predict the consequences of their actions. Unlike Oedipus,
however, the Communists use their ignorance to pardon themselves of guilt, and remain in power. Tomas praised Oedipus for accepting responsibility for his actions, and faulted the Communists for using lack of knowledge to justify their wrongdoings.

As Tomas refuses to sign the retraction paper, he looses his job in the hospital and even after finding a new job at a clinic as a general practitioner, they put more pressure on him to give up and sign the statement which besides “words of love for the Soviet Union” and “vows of fidelity to the Communist Party” says that Tomas was used by the editors of the journal that published the Oedipus article. Tomas doesn’t surrender and this battle leads him to shift to a totally different job, a window-washer. This new job, in turn, gives Tomas the opportunity to revert to “his bachelor existence” as he begins womanizing again. Indeed, Tomas enjoys this job because he has a high reputation around Prague and often rich people request that he come over to “wash windows” when in reality they just want him to have coffee or drinks with them. He also meets many women this way whom he can have sex with and some would even invite him back several times. Going through some of Tomas’s new erotic experiences, the narrator in the novel says that if two classes of womanizer exist, lyric and epic, Tomas falls into the epic class, because everything interests him and nothing disappoints him.

As another important event narrated in this part, we read that two dissidents contact Tomas, an editor with a big chin and Tomas’s son, Simon. Both men admire Tomas’s daring refusal to comply with the police. However, they too want him to sign a petition against the rough treatments of political prisoners. Tomas stares at his son, noticing he stammers and blushes. Though Tomas feels his relationship with his son is at stake, finally he thinks of Tereza (who has complained of being harassed by the secret police) and refuses to sign.

As time goes on, Tomas and Tereza realize that Prague has deteriorated so drastically and decide to move to the country on Tereza’s suggestion. Tomas knows this would mean finally giving up on his womanizing. Tomas thinks how ridiculous it is that sex and love are somehow linked in the human brain, and thinks in an ideal world he would be excited at the sight of a swallow instead of a woman, so as not to upset Tereza:
...he was suddenly certain he had just discovered the solution to all riddles, the key to all mysteries, a new utopia, a paradise: a world where man is excited by seeing a swallow and Tomas van love Tereza without being disturbed by the aggressive stupidity of sex.

In this way, Tomas realizes he would leave any happiness behind for Tereza.

Part six, “The Grand March,” begins with a story about the death of Stalin’s son, Yakov, in a German camp. He had a quarrel with the British prisoners over the fact that he habitually made a mess in the toilet. Ignored by the German officer in charge and humiliated over the idea that he should be judged because of shit, Yakov commits suicide. Yakov was unable to accept the lightness of being. Kundera praises Yakov, Stalin’s as the only metaphysical death of World War II. We have transitions to a philosophical discussion regarding shit and kitsch. The religious problem of shit is then raised – does God have intestines, did Adam defecate in the Garden of Eden? Kundera links the base or mean associations of defecation with eroticism. We also learn about Sabina’s hatred for kitsch, particularly communist kitsch. Now that she is in America, Sabina can see kitsch again when a senator smiles at children. She tries to escape kitsch but understands that her life is not devoid of it.

Franz is enjoying his life in Geneva, with his mistress. A friend invites him to join the Grand March on Cambodia. So Franz decides to march to Cambodia and demand the amnesty of political prisoners. They arrive at the Cambodian border through Thailand. Horror is what they ultimately receive there, as one American photographer dies on the minefields and the march fails. As the party is on the streets of Bangkok at night, several men approach Franz and ask for his money. Franz tries to use his martial arts on the gang, but he is hit on the head and the next thing Franz realizes he is in the hospital back in Geneva. Franz dies in the hospital and Marie-Claude claims the body, arranges a lavish funeral, and has the words “A return after long wanderings” written on his tombstone. Simon orders “He wanted the kingdom of God on earth” written on Tomas’s grave. Correspondingly, Kundera makes some comments regarding these engravings on gravestones and how the people who die have no control over what phrase commemorates them eternally.
In the meantime, Kundera discusses four categories of human beings who need to be seen. This classification is done “according to the kind of look we wish to live under.” The first three categories are those who need a public of unknown eyes, those who need a public of familiar eyes, and those who want to be in the eyes of the person they love. “Tereza and Tomas belong in the third category.” Kundera characterizes Franz as a member of the fourth category of men which is “the rarest” as well: dreamers who live to be seen and appreciated by an imaginary being. For Franz the imaginary person is Sabina; for Tomas’s son Simon, also a dreamer, that person is Tomas.

Part seven, “Karenin’s Smile,” describes Tomas and Tereza’s quiet, peaceful life in the countryside together; a different lifestyle which has the implications of a self-wanted exile for some critics. In this section, Karenin dies, just some days after he develops a wound on his leg because of cancer. Tereza and Tomas put Karenin to sleep (euthanasia) after spending some final moments with him and Tereza thinks the dog is smiling before his death. Tomas also receives a letter from his son and the two begin to communicate more frequently. In the country, Tomas and Tereza’s relationship becomes much better than before because Tomas is no longer sleeping with other women; indeed she is happy because they are finally alone, and Tomas is finally all hers.

In chapter six of this part, we have Tereza’s dream in which Tomas is called to report to the local airfield. They get on a small plane and after landing three men who look like officials shoot at Tomas. His body shrinks into a small rabbit, which is caught by one of the men and is given to Tereza. Later in the dream she finds herself in Prague, and finds the house in which her parents once lived. Tereza holds on to the rabbit and knows she can keep it forever. Tomas also tells Tereza he has been receiving letters from his son. Tereza watches him work and realizes how old he has grown, and suddenly feels guilty for everything she has put him through. She realizes that she has forced him further and further away from his original life as a successful surgeon in Prague, just to make him prove he loves her. Tomas is now weak and old, like the rabbit from her dream.
A young farm worker hurts his arm while working, and Tomas relocates it for him. That night, in celebration, they all go out dancing at a hotel bar in a nearby town. While on the dance floor, Tereza confesses her guilty feelings to Tomas, who tells her that he is happy. Their room in the hotel resembles the bedroom Tereza dreamed of as a child.

The last page of the novel says that Tomas and Tereza go to sleep at the hotel room after spending the evening dancing along with the other people of the collective farm, but the reader already knows that they are finally going to die in a truck accident.

4.2.2.1.3. Characterization

The narrator of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* has a major contribution in providing a clear description of the characters’ coming into existence:

The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally found of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own ‘I’ ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author’s confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.36

Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, Franz, Tereza’s mother, Marie-Claude, Simon, Young student, tall engineer and some other characters are introduced by the narrator in this novel, but the first four names are the chief characters. Kundera is considered “parsimonious” about his characters’ past in the novel and when Christian Salmon asks Kundera about the absence of physical appearance of the characters or his preference for the analysis of situation over psychological motives, Kundera’s reply is quite appealing: “A character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental self.”37 And further adds that “the reader’s imagination
automatically completes the writer’s. Is Tomas dark or fair? Was his father rich or poor? Choose for yourself.”

There have been miscellaneous standpoints about these characters regarding the structural pattern and thematic implications of the novel. As one of them, M.N. Banerjee puts the entire story in a tragedy framework played by “a significantly reduced cast of characters.” He believes that:

Tragedy, both in its archetypal mythic form and in its modern illusionistic variety, speaks through the pages of Kundera’s text in numerous intricate allusions to *Oedipus the King* and *Anna Karenina*. The tragic analogue controls the line of action that centers on Tomas and Tereza. These lovers, however share the novel with two other major characters, Sabina and Franz. […] Tomas is not quite a tragic hero but rather represents the tragic possibility of human existence as an option for his time.

In addition, M.N. Banerjee tags Sabina and Franz as “antiphonal” characters who come into the scene whenever Tomas and Tereza are absent. This categorization is embedded in a larger viewpoint of Banerjee which conceives the performance of these characters as instruments in a concert “each playing his or her existential code in strict relation to those of others.”

Finding an infusion in characters’ stories, Michiko Kakutani presents another evaluation on the characters’ function:

[...] his [Kundera’s] characters already possess the resonance of figures in a fable. In “*Laughter and Forgetting,*” individuals were preoccupied with finding a balance between two visions of the world – one reflecting perfect order and reason; the other, total randomness and absurdity. In “*Lightness,*” they search for a similar balance between commitment and freedom. The former leads to
entrapment, in terms of both personal relationships and political ideology; the latter, to rootlessness and the loss of identity. How each of the four main characters deals with this dialectic forms the broad story line of the novel.  

As a well-known author, E.L. Doctorow, presents some unique critique about the relation between the characters and themes within the book. Though Doctorow uses the terms “conceptualist fiction” and “generic brand, no frills fiction” to label Kundera’s masterpiece, he believes that the novel is written by an author with a “first-rate mind.” “Subservience” to Kundera’s willpower is what Doctorow finds in characters’ behavioral pattern in the novel. He posits that every major and minor character in the story “exemplify” a specific paradox about “the essential identity of opposites.” Making an analogy to the real world, E.L. Doctorow further adds:

The paradox of the essential identity of opposites describes an intractable world in which human beings are deprived of a proper context for their humanity. The author who ostentatiously intrudes in his characters’ lives and tells them how to behave mimics, of course, the government that interferes deeply in its citizens’ lives and tells them how to behave. Tomas and Sabina and Franz and Tereza were invented to live under two tyrannies, the tyranny of contemporary Czechoslovakia and the tyranny of Mr. Kundera’s despair.

Tomas, the protagonist of the novel, is a smart and brilliant surgeon in Prague who belongs to the Czech intellectual circle, which was silenced after the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968. He is not a devoted or vigorous political dissident, but in a similar fate with other elites, Tomas loses his job because he refuses to retract an anti-Czech Communist article he published in a newspaper. Preferably, Tomas would like to avoid politics in favor of being a free man or an independent thinker who acts as he chooses. Tomas’s career and fate has some other exemplars as well:
The first thing to note about this character’s fate is that it is a gloss on Orwell: To destroy Tomas, Mr. Kundera is saying, the powerfully inertial police apparatus doesn’t have to expend the energy required to torture him. It need only send around an affable plainclothesman with a letter to be signed. Once the policeman appears, no matter how Tomas responds his life is ruined. After losing the privilege of practicing medicine, Tomas shifts to jobs such as window-washing and farming, descending to the lower class of society in search of a peaceful life.

Tomas faces much turbulence in his own personal life. Having divorced long ago and lost contact with his ex-wife and son, Tomas becomes a light-hearted womanizer who seems unencumbered just before meeting Tereza. After marrying the emotionally needy Tereza, Tomas finds himself trapped between the genuine love for his new selfless, loving wife, and his womanizing which he cannot give up easily. Tomas attempts to practice a philosophy of lightness. As he considers sex and love two separate and unrelated entities, thus he loves only one woman but sleeps with many women, and sees no problem with the simultaneity of these two behaviors.

In many ways, especially sexually, Tomas is “light,” a libertine. Contrary to Franz or Simon, Tomas isn’t a romantic idealist. Rather he acts in the opposite direction to perfect ideals of love and politics in his life; hence, his fervent lover, Sabina, who understands him well, calls him the “complete opposite of kitsch.” His character bears such a unique individualism which doesn’t let Tomas identify himself as a political liberal or as a faithful husband.

However in an overall evaluation, Tomas’s character may not reveal a profound change over the course of the novel. We see him just growing a little more cynical, as he becomes uncertain of his once firm views on life and being. His love for Tereza and eventual exile to the countryside rein in his erotic adventures, though we never know if he really loses the desire for sex with many anonymous partners since “feminine calm had eluded him all his life.” Nonetheless, there is at least one
significant indication, on two levels, that Tomas isn’t a static character. Besides his falling in a true love with Tereza, the apparent expository sign – which can also be considered as the climax of the story – is Tomas’s decision to accompany Tereza in their different life in the country which, in turn, will put an end to his philandering experiences. On a different level relevant to the same indication, it is through Tereza’s dream that readers infer how Tomas has performed a drastic change in his life and career; at the end of the dream Tomas turns into a rabbit, handed over to Tereza.

Sabina is Tomas’s most-desired mistress and closest friend. Jolanta W. Wawrzycka conceives that “it is the female character of Sabina who provides the context for the notion of betrayal in Kundera’s novel. She is also the only character who after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia emigrates and remains in the West.” As a talented painter, Sabina betrays, successively, her family, her art school, her lovers, and ultimately her country; for her “betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent...” Kundera recounts her sense of betrayal “in a way that condemns her to what he calls a “lightness of being,” by which he means a life so lacking in commitment or fidelity or moral responsibility to anyone else as to be unattached to the real earth.” In a recent review, Geordie Williamson reaffirms that Sabina “escapes from communist Czechoslovakia to the West, only to be ground down by what Janet Malcolm, in her review of the novel, called a perpetual struggle against the unbearable banality of her situation as an émigré artist.” Geordie Williamson also comments on another frame of reference shared by some other critics:

Kundera shares with Sabina the émigré’s necessary betrayal and subsequent disappointment. He, too, escaped from totalitarian kitsch into a free world possessed of what John Updike calls our more subtle enslavements. It is the same world that inspired James Joyce to write the following: No man can be a lover of the true or the good unless he abhors the multitude; and the artist, though he may employ the crowd, is very careful to isolate himself.
Correspondingly and according to Jolanta W. Wawrzycka, Kundera has “inscribed himself into Sabina’s character” and has tried “to explore the notion of betrayal” through a female character for a somewhat relevant reason. As Wawrzycka relates it, the answer could be found in two justifications on the basis of the significance of the term betrayal for the author. On one hand, if Kundera conceives betrayal as a negative conduct and Sabina as a symbol of “disobedience,” then all this “loneliness and displacement” in her life is in conformity with “an old dramatic and novelistic convention requiring that the heroine who dared, who trespassed, who defied patriarchal codes be killed off.”48 Yet there is another level. On the other hand, if betrayal is taken as a positive behavior by Kundera, then his implicit identification with Sabina gives way for a much more profound meaning:

The fact that Kundera’s two main female characters in this novel are artists in exile[...] points to his recognition that women [...] are perpetual exiles from the men’s world of wars and political conflicts which destroy, dismantle, dis/ease; they are exiles from love, such as represented in the novel by Tomas’s love for Tereza, for Sabina, and for the trail of women he “marked” as his; they are exiles from the paternal/patriarchal concept of love that basically forbids on all levels of pater familias. It can only be speculated to what extent Kundera’s own exile affected his attitude toward betrayal; he seems to harbor a pervasive ambiguity about the ethical undertones of this complex notion and project it into Sabina’s character.49

However, Sabina is as gorgeous and original as her artwork; early in life, she identifies kitsch, or bad, sentimental, propaganda art, and tries to live her life as an attack on kitsch, thus her relationship with Tomas is based on their mutual lightness; the usual romantic kitsch has no place in their love affair. She cares deeply for both Tomas and Tereza, but ultimately her desire for freedom leads Sabina to leave her love, Franz, and lose all contact with her past. In this regard, her character doesn’t show great changes from the beginning to the end. Her pursuit of freedom leads her to complete isolation and freedom in America. As a strong-minded woman whose
thought “is the most lucid in the novel, perhaps, as well, the coldest and most cruel,”
Sabina seems also to be the “lightest” character in the novel as the Italian celebrated
writer puts it quite comparatively:

Sabina, as the representative of lightness and the bearer of
the meanings of the book, is more persuasive than the
character with whom she is contrasted, that is, Tereza. (I
would say that Tereza does not succeed in having the
“weight” necessary to justify a decision as self-destructive
as that of Tomas.) It is through Sabina that lightness is
shown to be a “semantic river,” that is to say, a web of
associations and images and words on which is based her
amorous agreement with Tomas, a complicity that Tomas
cannot find again with Tereza, or Sabina with Franz.

Tereza is Tomas’s new wife. She grew up in a small Czech town, under a
vulgar and aggressive mother. Seeking escape from that small world, Tereza worships
books, culture, and compassion. Identifying Tomas as a savior, she falls in love
instantly and permanently. As M.N. Banerjee relates it, “Tereza, who enters Tomas’s
flat with Anna Karenina under her arm, and a heavy suitcase soon to follow, is a
young woman of no particular outward distinction.” Tereza represents an image of
innocence and purity which is mostly depicted in the leitmotif of Tomas’s love for
her: “She seemed a child to him, a child someone had put in a bulrush basket daubed
with pitch and sent downstream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed.”

Tereza and Tomas are deeply in love, but make each other miserable. In
Prague, Tomas’s womanizing drives Tereza to the verge of insanity. Although she
attempts to understand her husband and cannot argue with him logically, Tereza
cannot expose her love, body or sexuality; instead it is through a series of recurring
nightmares that she makes herself heard. Tereza is not vulgar or kitsch in any familiar
sense; however, where Tomas and Sabina are light, she is heavy. This heaviness in
part originates in Tereza’s compassion and intelligence. She finds some achievement
in her work as a photographer, especially during the Soviet takeover of Prague; she
does some dangerous and rebellious work as a photojournalist.
Tereza changes considerably during the course of the novel, as she is ever more forced to recognize the impossibility of her youthful dreams. There is a great and fateful moment in Tereza’s life when she leaves Tomas in Zurich and returns to Prague alone after construing an incompatibility between herself and Tomas: “he was strong and she was weak.” Seeing that she feels as weak as her country “which stuttered, gasped for breath, could not speak,” she makes up her mind to go back to Prague as “when the strong were too weak to hurt the weak, the weak had to be strong enough to leave.”

Franz is a literature professor at the University of Geneva. He falls in love with Sabina, whom he mistakenly considers a liberal and romantically tragic Czech nonconformist. Sabina considers both of those identities kitsch. He is agonized by the fact that he must betray his wife in order to continue his affairs with Sabina. Finally he dares to leave his wife. To Sabina this act seems an unhappy and sentimental choice. Franz creates meaning in his life by attaching solemn weight and importance to concepts and events. Thus, he identifies strongly with the political conviction and European liberal left and adores marches and parades. Franz also lives for the strong emotions of love and idolizes his dead mother. All these make him nearer to kitsch in his ideas and taste, though he is a noble, kind and compassionate man and shows a sympathetic character. However abandoned by Sabina, he finds relief in the arms of an ordinary young student who loves him. Only at the very end of his life does he suspect he may have made some erroneous judgments; this realization comes too late, however, as his idealism and naiveté lead to a pointless death in Bangkok.

Franz seems incapable of lightness, as M.N. Banerjee assigns the first and second violins to Tomas and Sabina in a supposed string quartet concert seeing that they “share the same erotic timbre,” but “Franz’s part would be lower strings – a bit heavy-footed, he sustains his melodic line with grave feeling, like a cello.”

To conclude this part, it would be worthwhile to look at major characters’ “existential code” from Milan Kundera’s own point of view:

As I was writing The Unbearable Lightness of being, I realized that the code of this or that character is made up of
certain key words. For Tereza: body, souls, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Tomas: lightness, weight. In the part called “Words Misunderstood,” I examine the existential codes of Franz and Sabina by analyzing a number of words: woman, fidelity, betrayal, music, darkness, light, parades, beauty, country, cemetery, strength. Each of these words has a different meaning in the other person’s existential code.56

4.2.1.4. Narration and the Narrator

There have been various reviews on the narrative style and the role of the narrator of Milan Kundera’s masterpiece. Italo Calvino, Cary Henson, Francois Ricard and particularly Hana Pichova are among those whose assessments will be briefly dealt with here. Italo Calvino believes that Milan Kundera has built up his narrative on a simple truth: “It is impossible to act according to experience because every situation we face is unique and presents itself to us for the first time.” He also asserts the significance of digressive elements of Kundera’s narrative style:

Among so many writers of novels, Kundera is a true novelist in the sense that the characters’ stories are his first interest: private stories, stories, above all, of couples, in their singularity and unpredictability. His manner of storytelling progresses by successive waves (most of the action develops within the first thirty pages; the conclusion is already announced halfway through; every story is completed and illuminated layer by layer) and by means of digressions and remarks that transform the private problem into a universal problem and, thereby, one that is ours.57

According to Calvino, while this sort of development in Kundera’s style acts as “an ironic filter” which alleviates the pathos (of the situation), it also enables him to construct a “diary of his thoughts and moods” out of his provisional manifestations;
a feature reminding of what Laurence Sterne and Denis Diderot did in eighteenth century.

Cary Henson, from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, elaborates on the fact that “Kundera employs music both thematically and structurally to foster a type of narrative […] that resists any singular, univocal, synthesizing interpretation.”58 He further discusses the significance of music as a “compositional strategy” for Kundera, and highlights on the “non-linear organization of the novel’s sections.” Quoting from David Lodge who believes the “radical rearrangement of the spatio-temporal continuity of the narrative line”59 to be a major characteristic for the modernist novels, Henson asserts that, “the disruption of spatio-temporal continuity forces the reader to reorder events, in other words, to “return” to various points in the text in order to coordinate them in a way the narrative does not.” Also, by considering the narrative style of the novel in the light of the notion of polychronic narration, 60 Henson relates that:

Although ULB may not represent a classic example of polychrony as Herman defines it, the parallels between polychronic narration and Kundera’s strategy are significant. Kundera seems intent on achieving precisely the effects that Herman ascribes to polychronic narration. As in Herman’s example, ULB is set within an overtly political-historical context: most of the events of the novel revolve around the Prague Spring and its aftermath.[…] Kundera employs narrative methods that force the reader to reflect upon both the “eternalizing” and the “linearizing” tendencies of narrative (personal, collective, or aesthetic).61

Emphasizing on the significant role of the narrator as that of any other character in the story, and through a weighty analysis, Hana Pichova62 focuses on the directing function and the function of the creator for the narrator in the novel. She believes that these two functions most clearly relate to the theme of freedom. She posits that by adopting these two functions, the narrator of The Unbearable Lightness of Being makes himself visible in the story and gains “a potential omniscience
through which he could control his fictional personae and their world completely.” By attributing qualities similar to that of a broad-minded character to this powerful narrator, Hana Pichova maintains:

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, however, the narrator intentionally limits his powers to avoid subjugating his characters to the same totalitarian rule they try to escape on the thematic level. Furthermore, the narrator’s choice of narratological strategies and organization reflects his desire to create a textual world that in no way resembles the oppressive world he describes thematically. In other words, the narrator does not put up barbed-wire fences to enclose his characters. He chooses an open-ended structure for his narrative. In this way, the characters’ desire for freedom on the thematic level is supported by the narrator, whose choice of narratological techniques enables him to free the characters on the structural level.

All this structural openness, however, provides the characters with what could be called textual freedom, according to Pichova. She then indicates that it is by utilizing a narratological technique such as *repeating prolepsis* or *advance notice* – which “fragments the narrative through temporal disorder,” that the narrator exerts his directing function. Pichova also relates that “the narrator takes charge of the internal organization of the text by manipulating time through the chronological displacement of events.” Next, she presents some examples of that *advance notice* in the text. One such sample is an allusion to Tereza’s constant love for Tomas:

It may well be those few fortuities (quite modest, by the way, even drab, just what one would expect from so lackluster a town) which set her love in motion and provided her with a source of energy she had not yet exhausted at the end of her days.
As it was mentioned before, the narrator creates a textual world over which he has a range of power and control. This in fact originates from directing function. Hana Pichova posits that “the narrator tears down the conventions of the Socialist Realist novel, or more generally, any novel that is totalitarian in its presentation. Instead, he strives for a narrative that can free its fictional personae on the structural level.” It is through the same procedure that Kundera’s narrator gains visibility within the text; there are many instances in which the narrator reveals himself with “I” pronoun. Though this presence “subverts his potential power,” he still keeps immense power through the role of creator of fictional personae. It was emphasized by the narrator that the characters “are not born of a mother’s womb,” rather they are made out of a situation, a thought, or a phase. If we believe, what the text itself says, that Tomas is born of the narrator’s thoughts, or that Tereza is born from a situation, then “the narrator therefore assumes the creative act of an author,” Hana Pichova says. “He no longer participates in the text merely as a director, he is a creator, an absolute authority, and as such enjoys the privilege of complete omniscience whether it relates to the outcome of the story or to the characters’ consciousness.”

In addition to narrative features stated above, it would be invaluable if we have a look at some commentaries of dreams within Milan Kundera’s narratological structure. Correlating Tereza’s most prominent dream (featuring Tomas in a basket hanging over a pool) with “feminist connotations” and as an embodiment of “an inner search for identity,” Fred Misurella maintains that this is a theme Kundera has dealt with many times before, but here with more details. Considering dreams as a frequent element in Kundera's oeuvre, Francois Ricard lists two characteristics for them: “First, they[dreams] are rarely mere visions but nearly always adventures; that is, tales in which all the usual ingredients of narration are to be found – sequential action, settings, characters, and even dialogues.” For the second feature he claims that these dreams “enter the polyphonic composition of the novel on an equal footing together with the other narrative ‘lines.’”[…] Dreams thereby acquire a presence that is fully equal to that of the “real” stories, and their role in depicting the characters and in examining meanings is as decisive as the role of any other component of the novel.” Francois Ricard then develops a relation between dream and “reality”:
The first case [dreams] is illustrated in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Tereza’s serial dreams, which tell a second story alongside that of her liaison with Tomas – an internal, strange story whose main themes do reverberate in the first story, but without the two worlds merging in the narration, and with the reader always knowing in which of the two he finds himself. Elsewhere the distinction only arises after a fairly long moment of hesitation.\(^{72}\)

4.2.1.5. Themes

As in *The Art of the Novel* Milan Kundera himself elaborates on the concept of a theme, two significant disciplines are delineated there. First the way he works out themes “steadily within and by the story”. As one technique, which may seem quite familiar for modern readers, different themes appear between the lines of an event in the story. They have a smooth fusion with what happens during the action of the whole story. On the other hand, *digression* is another technique he uses; “abandoning the story for a moment,” he develops the theme on its own and just outside the main story:

All of the reflection on kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for example, is a digression: I leave off telling the novel’s story to go at my theme (kitsch) *directly*. Considered from that viewpoint, digression enhances the discipline of the composition rather than weakening it.\(^{73}\)

The second important discipline is the way Milan Kundera coins his themes as he maintains it to have an “existential inquiry.” Indeed, he defines themes in certain theme-words and gives existence to them through his characters and events; he transforms them into categories of existence:

The novel is built on those few categories the way a house is built on its pillars. The pillars of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: weight, lightness, soul, body, the Grand
March, shit, kitsch, compassion, vertigo, strength, weakness.\textsuperscript{74}

Accordingly, lightness versus weight (heaviness) has been cross-examined by many reviewers as a key motif of the text. This is in fact a dichotomy unresolved even to the end of the novel; among the four characters even Sabina who is more characterized with lightness, doesn’t prove to be necessarily happy or sure of her choices in life. However, this motif is once connected to Parmenides, as a philosopher of lightness to whom weight is negative. For the narrator, lightness of being is synonymous with a lack of (serious) meaning in life. Sabina is introduced as the extreme example of lightness since she always resists being tied down. Tomas may come in the next rank as he attempts to practice a philosophy of lightness especially when it comes to his reflections on sex and love or when he tries to avoid political parties and living a dissident life. But on the other hand there are some evidences that Tomas is gaining some amounts of weight through the course of the novel.

Bob Corbett mentions at least two cases where Tomas does find serious meaning attached to being. The first case refers to Tomas’s “Es muss Sein” in relation to Tereza when Tomas returns back to Prague from Switzerland following Tereza’s decision, “even knowing that somehow this is crazy and he is condemning himself to misery, but he must go, it is his fate and he returns.”\textsuperscript{75} This case is exactly where the significance of allusions to Beethoven and its link to the central motif of lightness versus weight haven been discussed by some critics.\textsuperscript{76}

The second incident refers to Tomas’s Oedipus article. According to Corbett, for reasons Tomas himself hardly understands he refuses to retract the article and his refusal causes him to be banned as a physician and condemned to low-level manual labor, first in Prague and later on a collective farm in a rural area. Hence, Tomas resistance to give in to the Communist’s so-called legitimacy adds more heaviness to his being.

Kundera also associates heaviness with Nietzsche and the philosophy of eternal return. Kundera wonders if any meaning or weight can be attributed to life, since there is no eternal return: if man only has the opportunity to try one path, to
make one decision, there is no point of comparison and hence no meaning but instead an unbearable weightlessness. However, at first sight, those characters who are heavy cannot accept this unbearable lightness of being, and seek to attach a meaning (weight) to what they consider important in life. Tereza and Franz are both heavy characters. Being heavy emotionally, Tereza even seeks more heaviness to give her a sense of meaning. She cannot cope with the lightness around her; she is almost driven to insanity. Franz, interpreting all the events of his life as heavy, is led to an early and unnecessary death. Fred Misurella presents a rather different commentary on the binary of lightness/weight:

Extending Kundera’s rumination on lightness and weight, we can place the desire for sex (Eros) on the side of lightness and the desire for love (shared sleep and death – or its personification, Thanatos) on the side of weight. Lightness implies movement and energy; weight implies stillness and falling. In an interesting combination of these two themes Tomas lives on both sides of the balance by means of his two principal lovers: Sabina, the artist with whom he shares sex and no obligations, and Tereza, with whom he shares love and a desire for rest.  

*Oedipus Rex* theme is frequently used in variations to expand into the form of a motif during the novel, Fred Misurella believes. The fact that “the dog [Karenin] takes to Tereza immediately, becoming child and husband to her,” “Tereza’s dream about marching in step (Oedipus’s lame foot, from being tied to a stake and abandoned in the woods as an infant, is a sign of his inability to march correctly, or in step),” “exploring the characters of Franz and Sabina in pointedly Oedipal ways” in the dictionary provided in part three, the analogy of Oedipus’s blindness and “Franz’s closed eyes while he makes love to Sabina, underlining his blindness to the Oedipal nature of their love,” and Tereza’s decision to enter the so-called unknown engineer’s apartment in part four while she spots a copy of *Oedipus Rex* in the bookshelves there and some other allusions are all different variation on which Fred Misurella expatiates.
As mentioned before, Kitsch is another outstanding challenging theme in the novel. In part six, “The Grand March,” Kundera makes a somewhat etymological allusion on the term:

‘Kitsch is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all Western languages. Repeated use, however, has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning: kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.\(^8^0\)

For Kundera this elaboration is in close connection with the basic faith of “a categorical agreement with being.”\(^8^1\) Coined by him, this phrase signifies that most European credos, whether political or religious, state that the world is good and human existence positive. He then mentions that something like shit has no place in such credos; instead their ideal aesthetic is kitsch which can be deemed as “the absolute denial of shit.” Accordingly, Kundera takes for granted that all of these credos eradicate what is uncomfortable to them, what does not fit to their false perspectives and in this way they try to present an idealized, consistent, and romantic view of the world. Just as nothing inappropriate can be allowed in the aesthetic of kitsch, individuals cannot be allowed either. The Grand March, therefore, is based on people marching in step, screaming slogans together with one voice.

As the mouthpiece of the writer, Sabina’s remarkable reflection on kitsch is noteworthy here. As Kundera asserts “Sabina’s inner revolt against Communism was aesthetic rather than ethical in character.”\(^8^2\) What seemed disgusting for her was that “mask of beauty” the Communist world tried to wear and cover its ugliness. Sabina points out that this “aesthetic ideal” or kitsch is actually much worse than any violent or imperfect totalitarian reality. Sabina’s perspective shows a panoramic view:

Sabina is wholly accurate in her perception of the relation between kitsch and Communism: what she loathes and fears is not Communist ‘reality’ – persecution meat queues,
overcrowding, everlasting suspicion and shabbiness, all of which is quite honest and tolerable – but Soviet idealism. ‘In the world of Communist ideal made real’, the world of Communist films and ‘grinning idiots’, ‘she would have nothing to say, she would die of horror within a week.’

John Bayley posits that for Sabina love is a kind of kitsch, “a breaking of faith and truth, spoiling an honest relationship.” He further adds:

Sabina associates the kitsch of love with the overwhelming kitsch of the Communist regime, seeing any long-term personal fidelity or integrity as if it were an analogy of that apotheosis of kitsch, the ‘Grand March’ towards the gleaming heights of socialism. This Kundera suggests is the vilest outcome of the totalitarian kitsch of our time: that it negates any natural and individual pattern of responsibility and weight in private life. Indeed, in a Communist regime there is no private life, but only bottomless cynicism on the one side and measureless kitsch on the other.

Assuming “the weight of love and death in Tereza” to be the real antithesis for kitsch, John Bayley conceives that it is with this weight that Tereza surrounds Tomas, as “Kitsch has no answer to death (‘kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death’), just as it has no relation to the true necessities of power and love.”

In a fairly critical point of view E.L. Doctorow, who recognizes Kundera’s right not to be labeled as a dissident author from Eastern Europe but to be taken seriously as an innovative novelist, expresses his concern over one different theme in the book:

One recurrent theme in the book is that the ideal of social perfection is what inevitably causes the troubles of mankind, that the desire for utopia is the basis of the world’s ills, there being no revolution and therefore no
totalitarianism without it. This idea has currency among expatriate Eastern European intellectuals, and perhaps their bitter experience entitles them to it. But the history of revolutions begins, more likely, in the desire to eat or to breathe than in the thought that man must be perfected.\(^8\)

And just through an attempt to show what could be at the core of the novel, Italo Calvino comments on another prevalent theme in Milan Kundera’s novel:

The universal-existential problematic also involves that which, given that we are dealing with Czechoslovakia, cannot be forgotten even for a minute: that ensemble of shame and folly that once was called history and that now can only be called the cursed misfortune of being born in one country rather than another. But Kundera, making of this not “the problem” but merely one more complication of life’s inconveniences, eliminates that dutiful, distancing respect that every literature of the oppressed rouses within us, the undeserving privileged, thereby involving us in the daily despair of Communist regimes much more than if he were to appeal to pathos.\(^9\)

In addition to what Kundera considers to be the major themes of the novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* really includes a large list of themes, motifs, and symbols besides what already stated here: sexuality, politics, the body, faith and religion, betrayal, chance, books, crow, animals (and Karenin, the dog), bowler hat, and suitcase.

### 4.2.2.2. Extra-textual Features

Considering extra-textual characteristics of the novel in this section, the researcher will explain about the context in which the book is located and feedbacks and reactions about *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. These include the significance and reception of the text, and also its influence and popularity as a
successful writing experience. To attain this, two sets of datum will be presented here: one is the information about different editions, translations or any other probable reproductions of the book and the second is the availability, importance and quality of reviews referring to the text.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being has been published since spring 1984 in various formats of paperback and hardcover in different publications such as HarperCollins, Faber and Faber, Bt Bound, Harper & Row, Harper Perennial (US), Hanser (Germany), and Gallimard (France). Its pagination ranges from 305 to 352 in these editions. Audio editions of the book have also been available from publishers such as Books on Tape (1998), and ISIS Audio Books (May2002). Various translations in different languages around the world have been reported on this title and through online surfing or checking some popular video clubs it becomes clear that at least one movie production has been made on this book in United States, using the adapted screenplay written by Philip Kaufman and Jean-Claude Carriere. The 170-minute film was directed by Philip Kaufman in 1988 and the cast were: Daniel Day-Lewis (Tomas), Lena Olin (Sabina), and Juliette Binoche (Tereza).

There is a huge bulk of reviews, analyses and comments on The Unbearable Lightness of Being whether in print or online. In addition to those thorough, comprehensive and systematic critiques referred to directly up to this point in the study, there are some other assessments which either evaluate the novel chapter by chapter with a special focus on every character or scene, or assess the work with specific attention paid to certain themes implemented by Milan Kundera (e.g., Central Europe, eroticism, kitsch, the Prague Spring, and totalitarianism). In some other categories reviewers pay more attention to structural, historical or stylistic features of the novel as well. Here we might have a look at some of these critiques very briefly and selectively.

Among reviews done on this book the one written by Gregory Kimbrell is worthy of note. He refers to the book from a historical point of view and asserts that for a complete understanding of the novel one should definitely know Czechoslovak history:
Kundera, however, disagrees. What is a reader who is seeking to do an historical analysis of Kundera’s novel to make of his opinion, and what implications does his opinion bear on the historical analysis itself? Even if the contents of the novel cannot be directly related to Czechoslovak history, it may nevertheless be the case that Kundera’s opinion is itself rooted in historical circumstances.  

Accordingly, in order to find out the relation of Kundera and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to history, Kimbrell first tries to detect and catch Milan Kundera’s attitude towards history and the ways in which it has influenced the creation of his novel. He further reaffirms that the best way to approach the novel is as a philosophical text which investigates existential questions.

Reflecting on his opinion that Kundera is opposed to Communism, Robert Thomas points out that “beneath this opposition, however, was a belief that Communism was but a surface manifestation of a deeper conflict between individuality and collectivism.” He then quotes Sabina to show how she expresses a great appreciation of the depth of collectivism:

> Behind Fascism, Communism, behind all the occupations and invasions lurks a more basic pervasive evil and that the image of that evil was a parade of people marching with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison.

In a relevant discussion in another section of his analysis, Robert Thomas relates that “the individual could suffer for choices made.” He then brings the example of Tomas who is deprived of his professional job at the hospital and forced to work as window-washer at last. He believes that though the character suffers for his actions, there is a sense of “individual triumph” in the meantime: such a character has “chosen life rather than “to become a shadow” in the service of collectivism.”
Another notable study, carried out in 2007 by Anna Zalizniak and Irina Mikaelian, focuses on the metalinguistic technique and conceptual analysis in Milan Kundera’s style. Taken for granted that the discussion of words’ meaning characterize a major part of Kundera’s novels, the researchers then believe that a specific metalinguistic technique has been developed which creates a certain definition for a particular word and its relevant unique concept in a particular language:

Such a definition is then translated into another language [when translated], and the corresponding word starts being used as a secondary sign, that is, as a signifier of this definition. When the correlation between the source word and this definition is achieved, the function of the signifier can be transferred to any approximate synonym of the language in which the novel is written or into which it is translated.89

In a practical application of such hypothesis this study then considers a “linguospecific emotion” that corresponds to the concept conveyed by the Czech word *soucit* (‘compassion, sympathy’) and projects itself through Tomas’s particular kind of love shown in different ways for Tereza and Sabina.

James S. Hans analyzes Kundera’s conception of beauty and shame in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. According to Hans, the novel “provides a serious revision of our conceptions of the nature of beauty, and in so doing it forces us to reconsider the relationship between the aesthetic and our daily lives.”90 Through the connections between the beautiful and the shameful, James S. Hans asserts that “the novel also registers the ways in which our attitude toward these most fundamental regions of human existence affect our political disposition as well, for Kundera demonstrates throughout the book that even as all human relationships have something to do with questions of power, so too do the manifestations of power reflect the individual’s attitude toward his or her sense of beauty and shame.” Pondering on such human experiences brings us to the Nietzschean question that “what it means to be wholly human, what it would mean if we were finally capable of accepting existence on the terms through which it presents itself to us.”91
Analyzing the meaning of crowds, parades, and other large public gatherings in Kundera’s works, Martha Kuhlman examines how the crowd enters into Kundera’s works through the double lens of Czech and French experience. She pays attention to Sabina’s definition and hatred of parades (especially the May Day one) which is in sharp contrast with Franz who “saw the marching, shouting crowd as the image of Europe and its history.” Providing facts from Kundera’s different works and The Unbearable Lightness of Being, she claims that “suspicion of mass movements and crowds is a central preoccupation of Kundera’s novels,” as she finds Kundera’s narrator totally disapproving: “The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch.” Commenting on the significance of such a statement and its procedure for Kundera, Kuhlman also elaborates on the “totalitarian kitsch.” Finally she scrutinizes Kundera’s novels to find out how the crowd functions as “the common denominator between his Czech-inspired novels and his French works.”

As it was mentioned before, among the long list of critiques written on the works of Milan Kundera, at least, three of them, presented separately in 2003 in Kosmos journal by Petr A. Bilek, Petr Hruby, and Michelle Woods, show a rather different nature. Bilek’s essay places Kundera’s work and publication history within the context of Czech history and nationalism. Through this study Bilek tries to see what they refer to when Czech critics, literary historians and interpreters say “Milan Kundera,” especially between the 1960s and 1990s. As Bilek traces it back “Kundera happened to become a nucleus for Czech dissident criticism after 1984.” This in part was related to the appearance of The Unbearable Lightness of Being in French and also due to Kundera’s achievements in his journalism and a well-focused campaign to promote the cultural concept of Central Europe as well as his own poetics of the novel. As in 1985, Milan Kundera becomes a central issue in both Czech dissent and exile criticism, Bilek reminds us about Milan Jungmann’s stance against The Unbearable Lightness of Being which, according to him, was “written just for the Western readers who do not know anything about the reality of the 1960s and 1970s Czechoslovakia.”

In “A Very British Bohemian? The Reception of Milan Kundera and his Work in Great Britain,” Michelle Woods chronicles British critical reaction to Kundera’s
work. Woods asserts that Kundera paradoxically has been accepted as an intellectual and at the same time, rejected because “he is one, reverberates within British media discourse.” She further traces the history of translation of Czech writers since the Second World War into British culture which caused people there to become familiar with only a limited number of them including Milan Kundera; this scarcity is compared with a wider publication history of Czech literature in the US. Michelle Woods also quotes from Jasper Rees who in a 1992 article in The Daily Telegraph suggested that “Czech literature had received greater prominence in “British publishing” in the previous decade and that this was “Thanks not least to Kundera” and the success of The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Woods refers to some drastic criticism on Kundera as well when she reveals that in 1984 Christopher Hawtree declared that The Unbearable Lightness of Being “could easily have become a hideously pseudish con-trick,” but, it concedes, finally “everything does take its place” in the novel. Kundera has become even a gauge for pretension, reviewers criticizing other novelists trying to be too Kunderian – the majority view being that while Kundera somehow gets away with it others do not.

Woods also refers to the rapid changes in British bookselling scene over the last two decades, “moving from small independent bookstores to homogeneity in the high street dominated by Waterstones.” Emphasizing on the role of bookstores and publishers in the book-marketing vista, Michelle Woods states how the selling of Kundera’s work has been affected

In each Waterstones bookstore, present in the majority of sizable towns in Britain, there is invariably a “Contemporary Fiction” or “Cult Fiction” or simply “Fiction” promotion table which will have a copy of The Unbearable Lightness of Being on it. If in 1994 the novel was one of the top ten sellers in one London Waterstones store, it is probable that the visibility of the novel is one of the factors in its sales. The novel’s inclusion in Waterstones 1997 list may also be partially attributed to its in-store promotion; certainly after the 100 list had been released,
Waterstones heavily promoted the books on the list, providing special Top 100 tables and shelves.\textsuperscript{95}

However according to what Michelle Woods sees in the British literary scene, due to “the lack of measured and real analysis of Kundera’s aesthetic project or a sustained analysis of his individual works and their relation to each other,”\textsuperscript{96} the mentioned \textit{paradox} still remains:

Measuring Kundera’s impact on the English language, George Steiner noted that “the title of one of his fictions, \textit{The Unbearable Lightness of Being} has entered the language.” The statement reveals a paradox in the impact of Kundera’s work in Britain – while the novel’s title and Kundera himself have become common reference in British media and the particular novel remains a bestseller, in some senses it could be argued that both names have become a synecdoche for at best the entirety of his work and at worst almost nothing at all. The constructed and temporarily accepted perceptions of who Kundera was, or is, and why he and his work are important, have evolved into empty self-referential symbols. The familiarity of the symbol, however, is not an innocent familiarity – it serves to belie the foreignness of the work.\textsuperscript{97}

And finally another orderly study on Kundera’s global acceptance is provided by the critic Petr Hruby in “Milan Kundera’s Czech Problems.” Citing from more than 30 critics here, Hruby examines the wide range of critical assessments regarding Kundera’s works, both in Czechoslovakia and internationally. Considering Kundera as “a highly successful and accomplished writer who managed to mesmerize many literary reviewers by his intellect, wide knowledge, and literary charm to such a degree that most of them only try to explain him and with admiration just slavishly follow his innovative creativity and reasoning,” Hruby tries to find out if Czechs appreciate Kundera’s very successful career as an exiled writer much less than Westerners do. In one part of his essay he says:
The editor of *Slovník ceských spisovatelů od roku 1945* (Dictionary of Czech Writers since 1945), Pavel Janousek, wrote: “Between 1985 and 1988, on the pages of journals *Obsah* (samizdat) and *Svedectví* (Paris) there was a wide discussion among (Czech) dissident and exiled writers about the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* based on the fact that Kundera’s work is, as a rule, accepted much less unambiguously and evaluated much more critically than in foreign countries.” All of the dissident writers criticized him harshly.⁹⁸
4.2.2.3. Notes and References


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.


12 Ibid., p.89.

13 Ibid., p.77.


15 Milan Kundera, op. cit., p.77.


17 Ibid., p.5.

18 Ibid., p.9.

19 Ibid., p.10.
Ibid., p.6.

Ibid., p.11.

Ibid., p.37.

Fred Misurella, op. cit., p.114.


Ibid., p.67.

Ibid., p.71.

Ibid., pp.82-3.

Ibid., p.84.

Ibid., pp.84-5.

Ibid., p.111.

Ibid.

Ibid., p.113.

Ibid., p.147.

Fred Misurella, op. cit., p.125.

Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, p.231.

Ibid., p.215.


Ibid.


Ibid., p.28.

Ibid., p.27.


Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, p.87.

E.L. Doctorow, op. cit., p.28.


Ibid.

For further information see Jordan Elgrably’s interview with Milan Kundera printed in page 67 of Critical Essays on Milan Kundera, ed., Peter Petro.

Italo Calvino, op. cit., pp.57-8.

Maria Nemcova Banerjee, op. cit., p.201.


Ibid., p.71.

Maria Nemcova Banerjee, op. cit., p.222.


Italo Calvino, op. cit., p.55.


60 Cary Henson, op. cit. Henson also maintains: “By way of conclusion, I would like to consider these issues in light of concept recently proposed in narrative theory. In an article published in the journal Narrative ("Limits of Order: Toward a Theory of Polychronic Narration"), David Herman examines the complex and problematic narrative situations posed by the Anna Seghers story entitled “The Excursion of the Dead Girls” ("De Ausflug der toten Madchen"), written in Mexico in 1942-43, while Seghers was in exile from Germany. According to Herman, in its mixture of personal and collective history, fantasy, dream, memory, and hallucination, this story encodes "temporal structures resistant to linearization... [and] invokes and subverts reading conventions associated with narrative as a discourse genre" (78). In order to characterize this narrative, he develops the notion of polychronic narration: [Polychronic narration] is not a complete absence of sequence or the lack of definite sequence but instead a kind of narration that exploits indefiniteness to pluralize and delinearize itself, to multiply the ways in which the events being recounted can be chained together to produce the narrative itself, (75) [P]olychrony entails sequences of situations and events that unfold just by referring and cross-referring to other ways in which the same situations and events could be sequenced. The sequencing itself, by compelling reflection on what it means to build sequences, encodes the time-act of reading. It is not that, with polychrony, sequence is detemporalized, spatialized; rather, sequence is anchored in time (and space) in a different, more multidimensional way than it is in nonpolychronic narratives. (90, note 6).”

61 Cary Henson, op. cit.


63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.


66 Hana Pichova, op. cit.


68 Hana Pichova, op. cit.


Ibid., pp.107-8.

Ibid., p.108.

Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p.84.

Ibid., p.85.


See Cary Henson. He believes: “The importance of Beethoven in ULB and its connection to the central motif of the novel – lightness versus heaviness – has long been noted. We are first introduced to this theme early in the novel, (but, I should note, late in the ‘story’), after Tereza has returned to Prague, and Tomas is still in Zurich. In characterizing what everyone sees as Tereza’s “crazy” decision to return to Prague, Tomas simply replies, “Es muss sein”—“It must be” (32). Here, the authorial narrator indicates that this phrase, taken from the motif of the last movement of Beethoven’s last quartet (opus 135 in F major), “was actually Tomas’s first step back to Tereza,” because she had made Tomas buy Beethoven’s sonatas and quartets (32).


Ibid., p.118.

Ibid.


Ibid., p.241.

Ibid., p.242.


Ibid., p.24.


Italo Calvino, op. cit., p.56.


91 Ibid.


94 Ibid.


96 Ibid.
