Preface

Entering a Kundera novel is like entering a crossroads; it leads to many thoroughfares, highways, passages and for an uninitiated and careless reader very often to some blind alleys. Kundera is easy to read but difficult and time consuming to understand. Very often while reading Kundera one has to go back, to confirm, reject and clarify what is understood and then proceed. In fact, Kundera himself wants a novel to be read once, twice or many times over to be understood. Indeed when I first read Kundera, in Immortality, looking for a single centre, for the single truth, for the right way, though it struck me as a rich text, I lost way. Initially as was habituated I looked for a prophet, a historian and a biographer in him. He is none of these. He is neither a moralist nor a moralizer. He is just an explorer of the enigma of the self.

But when I was initiated into Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony it struck me as an artistic key to Kundera’s novels. Later when I read Bakhtin’s texts in original I realised that he is the best guide to Kundera. A common praise for a novel is to say that I see myself in the character. In Kundera I have seen myself and the people with whom I interact, the way in which we interact and the way all our discourses are. I have the sense that the author knows me and is writing about me and others that I know and our grievances. This for Kundera is also a proof that the novel is being read as a novel. Kundera’s ideas like “unbearable lightness of being” truth as multiple and narrative, family’s private totalitarianism, omnipresence of earsplitting noise and cacophonic music are all realities we are forced to live with.

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