

Exile And Identity in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

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Abstract:

The present paper, through the study of the novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, attempts to highlight the correlation between 'exile' and 'identity'. The paper aims to understand how the experience of exile results into fragmented identity and how the attempts to reconcile are futile, how the characters are struggling with connection and disconnection with the past and the present. Kundera's literary representations of exile, based on the real experiences of Czechoslovakians in Western Europe, are multiple. But, for the sake of clearer understanding, only one of his major novels is taken into consideration.

Keywords: Exile, identity, lightness, forgetting, memory.

Exile represents for the human being an existential test that constitutes a rupture and an irreconcilable renunciation of the old life and thus refers to a kind of emptiness and absence. It is one of the key concepts of modernity. The twentieth century, which reveals this "situation of modern conflict, through an imperialist tendency and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian leaders, is the time of refugees, displacement of population, mass immigration. »¹

This drama, often focused on an issue of origin, native land and language, has a tense relationship with history and memory confiscated by the presence of the Other-dominator, and relates to violent political and economic crises. Thus, exile is linked to notions such as loss, rupture, forgetfulness, ignorance and suffering.

The exile finds himself on a kind of unstable and rickety bridge between two banks, where the new unknown territory must be appropriated and familiarized, while the old territory becomes the domain of the imagination. It is a reversal of the former situation of the exile, in which the unknown territory had belonged to the world of the imagination. The experience of exile generated many literary writings. This is the case of many twentieth-century writers such as Oscar Wilde, Kateb Yacine, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, Ernest Hemingway... The Czech author, Milan Kundera, also made exile the privileged place of his romantic adventure because of the demands imposed by the confrontation with a new environment and the particular variations of personal or resulting collective.

In his relationship to exile, Milan Kundera highlights two parameters that generate literary fiction: linguistic and memorial distance and insecure identity. The process that allows the individual to leave the social, collective framework to achieve his destiny, can be destructive rather than constructive with regard to the construction of a stable identity. Entry into a foreign world (language, culture, customs, etc.) can make an exiled person feel alienated, thus creating a fragmented Self.

This paper attempts to highlight, through the study of Milan Kundera's novel: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, how Milan Kundera's recurrent choice of exile responds to paradigms of a memory enterprise that aims at the identity salvation of experimental egos. The analysis also proposes to see how exile and troubled identity, in the literary production of the Czech writer, correspond to a feeling of imprisonment and dissatisfaction in which the Self seeks an identity.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Tamina, the main character of the story, tries to reconnect with her past. Detached from any ties to her country of origin, she is reduced to working in a seedy restaurant where she spends her time listening to the chatter and confessions of customers. In this tumult, she manages

to obtain moments of calm that dedicate to a memory exercise by trying to pick up the broken and scattered pieces of the memory of her husband's image. At first, Tamina uses a bad photograph of the deceased:

"She only had a photograph of her passport of her husband, all the other photos had remained in Prague in the confiscated apartment. She looked at this poor, stamped, tarnished image where her husband was caught from the front (like a criminal photographed by the judiciary) and looked little alike. Every day she gave herself in front of this photograph to a kind of spiritual exercise: she tried to imagine her husband in profile, then half-profile, then three Quarters. She revived the line of his nose, his chin, and she noticed every day with horror that the imaginary sketch presented new debatable points where the drawing memoir had doubts. »²

But this strategy proves to be flawed because photography fails to trigger the memory process and give Tamina an adequate memory which allows herself to be overwhelmed by the waves of melancholy. She is in a state of scarcity and her desire to resurrect the past remains unfulfilled. In his case, her memory power, as a subject wanting to be in a state of conjunction with her memories of the past, is marked by uncertainty. The photographic trace only succeeds in reconstituting an intuitive and nebulous image of her husband's being and the dynamic relationship that linked the two beings.

The passport photograph is only a fleeting and ephemeral trace that has lost all power of representation and materialization of an absent being in its totality. It has become an instrument of forgetting. In a second step, Tamina, unable to activate the event dynamics of her relationship with her husband, adopts a new memory strategy. It is in some way a memory surgery which consists of an operation to modify the image of an existing subject so that it is identical to that of her husband. The face of the unknown is inhabited by the image of the known, her husband:

"When she sat opposite a man, she used his head as a material to be carved: she stared at it and she remodeled in thought the face, she gave it a darker hue, placed freckles and warts on it, shrank the ears, colored the eyes blue. But all these efforts only demonstrated that her husband's image was irrevocably evaded. »³

This artistic work only confirms, once again, the impossibility of connecting with the past. The photo, in this case, is just an ersatz. It is devoid of any denotative value, in the Barthesian sense of the term:

"Photography is given as a mechanical analogue of reality, its first message somehow fills its substance and leaves no room for the development of a second message. In short, of all the information structures, photography would be the only one to be exclusively constituted and occupied by a "denoted" message, which would exhaust its being; In front of a photograph, the feeling of "denotation", or if one prefers, of analogical fullness, is so strong, that the description of a photograph is to the letter impossible. »⁴

Photography, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, is a narrative instrument that subverts the rules of reproduction of the visible appearance of the absent being and the representation of the past. "The photographs present in fact a fragmented world, surrounded by gaps, a fragmented reality that we like to present as total." ⁵

As a result, Tamina is torn between the lightness of forgetting and the weight of impossible memory. She drowns in a melancholic silence and dissociates herself from the world. In Milan Kundera's novel, photography does not touch the personal memory of the character of Tamina but its use is subverted to become a means of erasing and reshaping memory. collective. This ideological misuse of history provokes a memory exile that evokes a forced estrangement: it is a question of leaving one memorial site to settle in another. This imposed memorial stay presupposes an erasure of the memory of the past and a rewriting of history from the point of view of the present.

Indeed, Paul Ricoeur argues that the abuses of collective memory result from "a concerted manipulation of memory and forgetting by those in power (...) This instrumentalization then tackles forgetting. The strategies of forgetting are grafted directly onto a work of narrative configuration: we can always tell differently, by suppressing, by moving the important accents, by reconfiguring differently the protagonists of the action, at the same time as the contours of the action (...) The major danger, at the end of the journey, is

in the handling of history authorized, imposed, celebrated, commemorated in the official history. The resource of the narrative thus becomes the trap, when higher powers take the direction of this plot and impose a canonical narrative by way of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery. A reverse form of forgetfulness is at work here"⁶

The totalitarian regime takes advantage of the dictat of the image to shape a collective memory capable of adhering to the communist paradise. This is the case of the fur hat of Clementis:

"In February 1948, the communist leader Klement Gottwald stood on the balcony of a baroque palace in Prague to harangue the hundreds of thousands of citizens massed in a square in the Old Town. This was a great turning point in the history of Bohemia. A fateful moment as there is one or two per millennium. Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, and beside him, nearby, stood Clementis. It was snowing, it was cold and Gottwald was bare-headed. Clementis, full of solicitude, took off his fur hat and placed it on Gottwald's head. The propaganda section reproduced hundreds of thousands of copies of the photograph of the balcony from which Gottwald, wearing a fur hat and surrounded by his comrades, speaks to the people. It was on this balcony that the history of communist Bohemia began. All children know this photograph from having seen it on posters, in textbooks or in museums. Four years later, Clementis was accused of treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him disappear from history and, of course, from all photographs. Since then, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Where there was Clementis, there is now only the empty wall of the palace. From Clementis, only the fur hat remained on Gottwald's head. »⁷

Dissolving the past and fragmenting memory, the communist regime cuckolded the empirical world, replacing it with a simplifying historical representation.

This memory, transfigured by forgetting, constitutes a tool for recognizing the "idyll of life for all", of the "garden", of the "kingdom of harmony" where men would be "kneaded in one and the same matter", or even of the amnesiac world, which cannot fictitiously seek its mistakes in the past. That is why the totalitarian regime is obliged to fight everything that, in the abstract baggage of knowledge, may be in contradiction with this idyll.

Kundera's idyll, this state of perfect correspondence between personal memory and collective memory, is presented by the shape of the circle. This geometric figure explains the circumstances in which the author's exclusion from the Communist Party cheque and his exile to the West took place:

"That's when I understood the magical meaning of the circle. When you have moved away from the ranks, you can still get in. The rank is an open formation. Like the meteorite attached to a planet, I left the circle and, even today, I do not stop falling. »⁸

Milan Kundera then describes how circles of young socialists danced in the square of St. Wenceslas in 1950 while the prisons were filled with enemies of the people and any threat to the will of the people was neutralized. These dancing rounds of unconscious young people chanting socialist songs eventually fly away to the idyll.

To conclude, this article illustrates the effects of memory and forgetting on characters in exile in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Memory is one of the stabilizing aspects of the experience of exile because memory is a point of attachment to the homeland. However, memories are individual, and over time, the aspects of memory that are important to people change. In other words, characters who have experienced the same events remember them in different ways, and thus form different memory associations. The return from exile, which supposes to be an act intended to help the memory reconnection, paradoxically participates in the process of disconnection of memories and highlights the danger of reconstructing the relationships that lead to the destabilization of the identity of the exile.

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