



A Study of Existentialist Components in the Works of Milan Kundera

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse and prepare a detailed study of the various existentialist components found in the works of the renowned Czech writer Milan Kundera. A notable writer in his own regard, Kundera wrote with exquisite charm and beauty, underlining various existentialist elements of human existence and 'being' with consummate ease and grace. Quite a controversial writer for his times, Kundera lived quite an exceptional life, creating works of exceptional beauty and literary value. Despite being initially obsessed with writing about the dangers of totalitarianism and communism, Kundera made a marked shift towards writing about the mysteries of the human life and existence, keeping psychology at the centre. By delving deep into the recesses of the human mind and spirit, Kundera was able to produce a poignant study of the various issues plaguing existentialists, also termed as the notion of 'existentialist dread'. This paper will therefore provide a detailed study of the birth and origin of existentialism as a prominent academic discipline. deconstructing the notion that philosophy was actually a way of life which was a direct result of a post Kant-ian German idealism and thereby delineating its major themes and schematic domain areas and exploring how Milan Kundera used it as a succinct tool to probe into the very idea of 'human existence'. Existentialists like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Hegel have been considering the torchbearers of this literary movement that dominated the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the role of Kundera, as an existentialist critic, writer and philosopher have not been explored much, and this paper will therefore attempt to do fill that void.

Keywords: Existentialism, Schematic, Totalitarianism, Communism, Philosophy, Idealism

دراسة المكونات الوجودية في أعمال ميلان كونديرا

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المستخلص:

تهدف هذه المقالة إلى تحليل وإعداد دراسة مفصلة لمختلف المكونات الوجودية الموجودة في أعمال الكاتب التشيكي الشهير ميلان كونديرا. كان كونديرا كاتبًا بارزًا في هذا الصدد ، فقد كتب بسحر وجمال رائعين ، حيث أكد على العناصر الوجودية المختلفة للوجود البشري و " الوجود " بسهولة تامة ونعمة. كان كاتبًا مثيِّرًا للجدل في عصره ، فقد عاش كونديرا حياة استثنائية تمامًا ، حيث ابتكر أعمالًا ذات جمال استثنائي وقيمة أدبية. على الرغم من كونه مهووسًا في البداية بالكتابة عن مخاطر الشمولية والشيوعية ، فقد قام كونديرا بتحول ملحوظ نحو الكتابة عن ألغاز الحياة البشرية والوجود ، مع الحفاظ على علم النفس



في المركز. من خلال الخوض في أعماق استراحات العقل والروح البشرية ، كان كونديرا قادرًا على إنتاج دراسة مؤثرة للقضايا المختلفة التي يعاني منها الوجوديون ، والتي يُطلق عليها أيضًا مفهوم "الرغبة الوجودية". لذلك ، ستقدم هذه الورقة دراسة مفصلة عن ولادة وأصل الوجودية كنظام أكاديمي بارز ، وتفكيك الفكرة القائلة بأن الفلسفة كانت طريقة حياة كانت نتيجة مباشرة لمثالية ما بعد كانط دانغرمين وبالتالي تحديد موضوعاتها الرئيسية و مجالات المجال التخطيطي واستكشاف كيف استخدمها ميلان كونديرا كأداة مختصرة للتحقيق في فكرة "الوجود البشري". يعتبر الوجوديون مثل نيتشه وكيركجارد وهابيدجر وهيجل حاملين شعلة هذه الحركة الأدبية التي هيمنت على القرنين التاسع عشر والعشرين. ومع ذلك ، فإن دور كونديرا ، بصفته ناقدًا وكاتبًا وفيلسوفًا وجوديًا لم يتم استكشافه كثيرًا ، وبالتالي ستحاول هذه الورقة ملء هذا الفراغ.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الوجودية ، التخطيطي ، الشمولية ، الشيوعية ، الفلسفة ، المؤثر ، المثالية

Introduction

One of the most defining terms for the 20th and 21st century, Existentialism is an umbrella term used to refer to all those philosophers, who examine the nature of human condition as an essential philosophical problem. They consider the notion that this issue is best answered via ontology. Considered to be a rather broadly defined term, it will be clarified through discussing various significant themes that the existentialist philosophers and thinkers aim to address. It's imperative to note here that the majority of the philosophers ascribing to the existentialist school of philosophy belong to Europe, dating back to the late 19th and 20th centuries. The existentialist school of thought is widely considered to be one of the most significant and popular schools of thought and philosophy and existentialists like Sartre and Nitsche have revolutionised the world forever. Having a considerable influence even outside the philosophy, on other disciplines like psychology and humanities as well. Basically, a reaction against rather traditional philosophies such as Empiricism and Rationalism which primarily aim to seek a universal world order, Existentialism deals with the metaphysical realities of life. The essence of "being" and "existing" lies at the centre of the existentialist ideology and therefore it's believed by various existentialist philosophers that a person's personal experience and his/her convictions are so significant to reaching the ultimate truth of life.

Rationality however is denounced by various existentialist philosophers, as it's considered to be in bad faith, as they consider it to be a defence mechanism employed by humans as against their 'existentialist fear', the fear of 'being and existing' in this world.

1. Key Themes of Existentialism

In order to understand existentialism better, it's important to delineate and substantiate the various themes associated with existentialism. It's a known fact however, that Existentialism is a greatly diverse tradition of thought and



therefore understanding the various themes associated is rather imperative. These themes clubbed together will provide an intellectual framework across which we can discuss the revolutionary figures surrounding the fulcrum of existentialism.

a. Philosophy – An integral part of life

The first misconception around philosophy that needs to be broken is that it is just another attempt at understanding the hidden truths of life and the self. In reality it is far from being boxed within just that, limited to the preoccupations of just a few. On the contrary, Philosophy needs to be understood keeping in mind the larger idea of philosophy, being integrated as a part of life itself. That being said, there definitely is the need for theoretical philosophers who develop a detailed and elaborate set of concepts and methods connected to philosophy. However, what is even more important to understand is that our life can be lived philosophically without having any technical knowhow about philosophy.

It's interesting to note here that the Existentialist philosophers and thinkers used to locate and identify two historical precursors for this idea. Firstly, the First, the primordial and ancient Greeks, especially the legendary Socrates. Along with Socrates were the Epicureans and Stoics. As a functionary, Socrates was in today's terms called rather 'non-professional', and he in his journey towards achieving an idyllic state of mind and a god life, tended to forgo the formation a particular system or theory. He generally used to conduct his teachings in the open, another reminder of how unusual the 'existentialists' were, as compared to their contemporaries. The subsequent advancement of technology and the expeditious expansion of industrialisation in the 19th and 20th centuries were often viewed by the existentialists in a negative light as they felt that it alienated the humans from nature and from the natural and ideal form of living (case in point the English and European romanticism).

Another impact on the ideology that believed that philosophy was actually a way of life, was the post Kant-ian German idealism. Basically, a response to the Enlightenment movement of the 18th century, the famous existentialist philosophers Hegel and Schelling, both under the impact of Neoplatonists, considered philosophy as an essential activity for the humans and mankind at large, more important than looking outside and searching for external things far and wide. Subsequently in the 19th century, the famous Karl Marx quite famously denounced earlier notions of philosophy, as he believed that the main aim of philosophy is not to perceive things, but rather to change them.

The notion and idea of philosophy as an integral way of life, has been evinced as a way of life, into an existentialist idea, through a number of ways. First, the existentialists often attempted to undertake a detailed critique of the contemporary life with reference to the specialisation of both intellectual and



manual labour. However, a direct result of this was that several existentialist writers and philosophers experimented with various forms and types of writing, in order to get away from the effects of this very ‘specialisation’ discussed above. Another important notion worth discussing here is called ‘immanence’, which refers to the idea that philosophy studies life from within. For example, for Soren Kierkegaard, the renowned existentialist, the primary truths of his existence were not considered representations by him, but rather symbols and ideas, the meaning of which can be removed or divided from their respective source of origin. On the contrary, the realities and truths of existence are instantaneously experienced, lived and acted upon. Similarly for other contemporary existentialists like Heidegger and Nietzsche, it is important to identify and understand that the same philosopher who is scrutinizing and probing human existence is a therefore a human himself/herself. Lastly, the very nature of our life itself is an eternal existentialist mystery and concern and more importantly the importance of death.

b. Disquietude and Legitimacy

A crucial idea here is that human life and existence is in a few ways, primarily on its own, and anguish and disquietude are a recognition of this fact. Many existentialists tend to put more emphasis on the importance of emotions and feelings, mainly because they were supposedly less connected to having an intellectual or culturally arbitrated relation to a separate and individual existence that we discussed above. This notion finds its place in the discussions of Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s discussions revolving around the concept of “mood”, another reason how psychology gets influenced by existentialism.

Apart from that, disquietude or anguish also represents the idea of existence which recognises the notion of existing on its own. But it’s important to note here that, the meaning of the phrase ‘being on its own’ is disputed among philosophers. It might refer to the bad influence and inappropriateness of empirical evidence, morality and even rational thought, when it comes to making significant primary decisions relating to one’s existence. Further we realise that Kierkegaard sees Hegel’s religious account with reference to history in its complete spirit as an exceptional chaos between reason on the one side and faith on the other. As an alternate it may be a rather focused religious claim, the presence of an omniscient deity may not be relevant to such actions, an idea also shared by Sartre and Nietzsche. Lastly, the notion of existing and being on its own, may portray the special uniqueness of our human existence, and therefore its inability to relate to and understand its own self in terms of different types and forms of existence, an idea propounded by both Sartre and Heidegger.

Now connected to this idea of disquietude is the notion of legitimacy, an existentialist influence on the Grecian concept of ‘the good life’. Furthermore,



we understand that the legitimate being shall be able to reaffirm and identify the notion of existence, resulting in some aspects such as freedom and absurdity.

It's imperative to note here that the idea of legitimacy is seldom seen to be connected to the idea of self-reliance and individualism. This phenomenon is further reinforced with the stark contrast observed with the idea of the 'crowd' which finds place in existentialist literature. It's necessary to understand here that if originality and legitimacy involve the idea of existing on one's own, then there definitely should be some kind of merit in acknowledging and celebrating the idea of one's independence and difference from the rest. Although, certain existentialists view individualism as a cultural trend across the ages, like Nietzsche believed, and some even ascertain it to petty politics like Camus, instead of understanding it as an integral part of a legitimate existence. We can therefore conclude that the notion of individualism leads to the obscuring of a specific form of collectivity deemed important by several existentialists.

c. Freedom

Freedom becomes the next significant theme, which can be connected to the idea of disquietude. Several existentialists considered that it was during the 19th and 20th centuries, that there was a considerable crisis in values. There can be several reasons for the same, such as the resultant rise of secular societies, increase in philosophical movements which questioned the traditional value-based accounts, e.g., Darwinism and Marxism. The watershed movements of the two world wars and the subsequent mass exodus and genocide can also be life altering reasons for the same. Therefore, it becomes imperative to note that in the creation of the normative sense for existentialism, such historical precedents do not result in the issue of disquietude in the face of freedom, although it does lead to being cast into a more transcendent sense of relief.

Similarly, freedom also calls for something related to responsibility, for one's own self and also for one's actions. The sense of individualism discussed above thereby means that the individual is completely isolated and in this 'existential dread' there is nothing that could help the 'being' shoulder his/her responsibility. In a similar regard, human existence is also to be identified and understood as a phenomenon that changes arbitrarily with each changing moment, and that is the reason why as per the existentialists, when a 'being' exists as a legitimately free being, he/she automatically assume the commitment for the whole life, just like a project or assignment.

An important point worth mentioning here is that several of the existentialists take on a rather broader perspective of Kantian freedom- which refers to the understanding of freedom as autonomy. Thus, freedom is not to be understood as an arbitrary or random phenomena, but rather refers to the concept of binding of an individual self to the law. This law, more importantly refers to the



voluntary rule of law given to oneself, as a result of the recognition and validation of an individual's responsibilities to one's own self.

d. Contextuality

Another significant theme with reference to existentialism is 'contextuality'. It becomes rather essential for every existentialist scholar to understand that even though an individual's sense of personal freedom is absolute, it is always based on a specific context, thereby referring to our very significant theme of contextuality. An individual's sense of personal choice, his/her body, subsequent circumstances in the past, all have a resultant effect upon freedom. And this is the very reason which makes freedom so meaningful.

Let's presume to be in a situation, where a person in order to be portrayed as free, pretend to be detached from a given situation. In that particular scenario, the person will have no sense of what possibilities are open to him/her and what decisions need to be made as a result. Hence, the freedom that the person gets or experiences will actually be quite illusory in nature. Hence, this tangible notion of freedom finds its philosophical origin in Hegel, in a stark contrast to the concept of absolute rational freedom as propounded by Kant. Contextuality is henceforth connected to the idea we discussed above- the efficacy and necessity of viewing and thinking about the intricacies of life from within.

Milan Kundera- a controversial 'existentialist'

Milan Kundera was a renowned French writer, originating from Czechoslovakia, a prominent literary voice of the 20th century. Notable works may include, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Joke* and one of his most seminal works, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Despite being nominated multiple times for the Nobel Prize in Literature, his works were deemed to be quite controversial in nature. The communist party in Czechoslovakia were in direct opposition to his views and they even banned his works until their regime was toppled by a subsequent regime.

Kundera grew up in a traditional and conservative family in Brno, Czechoslovakia. Being influenced by his father Ludvik Kundera who was a renowned musicologist, Milan also took lessons in musicology. These lessons in a way proved to be quite significant in shaping his life ahead, which can be noticed in the multiple musical references made by Milan in his famous works. It's quite ironical that despite having starkly opposite ways as compared to Communists when it came to his works, Kundera was an avid supporter of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia during his youth. After receiving his primary education in a secondary school in Bruno, Kundera went on to major in aesthetics and literature from Charles University Prague. From there Kundera



made a rather smooth transition to another reputed institute in Prague, namely the Film Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts. It was here that Kundera took a masters course in the art of script writing and film direction. As a testament to his literary and academic scholarship, Kundera went on to become a lecturer at the same institution, mainly as a scholar on world literature. Interestingly, Kundera attempted to re-join the communist party in 1956, only to be expelled again four years later.

The initial works of Kundera could clearly be described as fiercely pro-communist. In the 1950s, Kundera wrote several essays and plays, and even translated numerous literary works. Despite publishing various poetry collections, Kundera was mainly known for his short story collection, namely Laughable Loves. Kundera also served at the reputed post of an editor at reputed literary magazines like Listy and Literarni Noviny.

Kundera's novels seemed to go against every conceivable classification of a literary form or genre. Kundera was greatly inspired by the writings and the literary style of Robert Musil. He was also highly inspired by the philosophical works and treatise of Nietzsche, influenced by the notions of frequent philosophical deviation. Other major influences on Kundera included existentialist philosophers like Kafka and Heidegger and other notable writers including Giovanni Boccaccio and Miguel de Cervantes.

Initially Kundera took to writing in Czech, but after his permanent settlement in France, he started to produce wonderful literary works in French as well, another testament to his linguistic and academic scholarship. Kundera even went one step ahead, and began to revise French translations of his previous works, during the later part of the 20th century. The first published novel by Kundera, The Joke was in itself quite a controversial book, right at the outset, as it focused on the authoritative regime of Stalin and also makes a fine critique of the rise of totalitarianism during the Communist regimes. As expected, it led to a great furore among Communist circles and the blatant criticism of the Soviet invasion led to it being completely banned by the erstwhile communist forces. A few years after the publication of his first work, Kundera published his second work in French, titled, Life is Elsewhere, in 1973. The novel deals with the life of a fictional character called Jamil a god-fearing idealist poet and how his involvement in a political scandal post the Second World War leads his life to utter chaos.

The major shift begins after that, when post writing a few controversial works mired in political scandals, Kundera began to make a marked shift by delving deep into the 'philosophical realm', especially with the publication of his seminal work, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being.' Published in 1984, this novel aims to analyse the notion of 'eternal return' which was propounded by Nietzsche. as per this concept, any single event or being is bound to reoccur



perpetually within an infinite universe. Kundera followed this with the publication of another philosophical work titled *Immortality*, which was published in 1990. It was once again observed that rather than making controversial political arguments, as in his early works, Kundera kept philosophy at the centre. Kundera amassed a lot of recognition and fame for his works, including being awarded various laurels and prizes such as the Czech State Literature Prize, the Jerusalem Prize, the Ovid Prize and even the Austrian State Prize. We will now attempt to study the various existentialist components in Kundera's works, an area that deserves a lot of focus and attention.

Existentialist Components in the Works of Milan Kundera

They say, don't judge a book by its cover. This age-old adage holds true especially for the most popular literary work written by Kundera, titled "*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*". A three hundred- and fourteen-pages long sojourn which helps the readers to gain, a deeper, and more poignant perspective, while viewing and judging the world around them. Unlike its simplistic title, it is one of the most thought provoking philosophical contemporary literary works you can ever come across.

The book was published when Communism was still not yet a spent force in Eastern Europe, towards the later part of the 20th century. It is predominantly a story portraying the lives of four lovers and their intertwined lives, as they drift through each other's lives at the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. Among the four characters, Tomas and Tereza gain centre stage as the prominent characters among them all. Tomas is a playboy who due to the sudden upheaval in his life caused due to political pressure has to let go of his blossoming medical career, while on the other side the female protagonist, Tereza is a photographer by profession, who also is madly in love with Tomas, and aspires to be the exclusive love of his life.

This book is predominantly and ostensibly the story of these four characters as Kundera formulates his novel like a never-before-seen melodic symphony of sorts, unlike building a traditional narrative, touching upon numerous leitmotifs, including political subjugation, lust and even the very nature of love. Quite interestingly this novel has been called a "novel of ideas" and the various philosophical musings within it are so wonderfully created that you are forced to reflect upon the various idiosyncrasies and poignant philosophical musings scattered across the length and breadth of this amazing novel.

Another impressive quality about Kundera is his visible warmth not just for the various characters portrayed in his novels but also for their struggles and their resultant consequences. It feels that it is an extension and a reflection of the struggles of human existence as well. What makes it even more special is that even when Kundera's characters seem oblivious about the writing on the wall,



we feel compassion for them and not condescension. That is an essential existentialist component we find in Kundera's works, which therefore makes him such a special writer.

If we deconstruct the title, the subtle beauty of it is simply breath-taking. Unlike the ambiguity of the earlier existentialists, Kundera quite firmly puts forward the notion that each one of us have the responsibility of making choices for their own selves, and this opportunity comes only once with no assurance of a successful end result. Therefore, the choices in front of us are not heavy, bogged down by unnecessary pressure, but in reality, are quite light, as free as a feather, and hence the title, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being. This Existential dilemma is put forth with such exquisite beauty and charm that you might start watching the world in an entirely new light, after reading this book.

Conclusion

Kundera writes in an article that the novelist as per him is neither a prophet nor a historian, but on the contrary an explorer of existence. The larger point Kundera attempts to make here is that undoubtedly the novel will feel to be emphasising and focusing upon the different characters and their sense of individuality and the sense of 'being' and human existence, although displayed as singular and concrete instances. This then leads us to a pertinent question therefore, that is the novelist also an existentialist?

This may seem to be a fair conclusion, but the issue with such a blanket assumption is that it seems to paint a future where both contemporary literature and existentialist literature seem co-extensive. However, existentialism is definitely much narrower than this assumption, on a single account of naming a culturally and historically specific notion, predominantly revolving around the philosophical and literary works of a certain group of French writers, philosophers and thinkers, namely Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in particular, from the early 1930s and right to the late 1950s. Even if one is to expand the scope of existentialism to incorporate all its early predecessors like Dostoyevsky and Heidegger and Kierkegaard who gave much of its conceptual subjectivity, even therefore existentialism nonetheless refers to a fairly ascertained body and work and thought. It needs to be remembered that a majority of the discussion of existentialism, may it be of the past or the present, has taken a quite broader and more liberalistic view, especially in the treatment of existentialism clubbed with literature.

When it comes to literary works, existentialism is given such a broad leeway so as to even allow varied authors as diverse as T. S Eliot, Harold Pinter, Hermann Melville, Graham Greene, W. H. Auden, William Faulkner, Vladimir Nabokov,



Emily Dickinson and even Shakespeare to be included, as a part of its oeuvre as a part of the existentialist tradition.

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