

Quarreling with the Self: Identity Crisis in Milan Kundera's Novel, *Identity*

- Naresh Kumar Vats

Abstract: The term 'Identity' cannot be defined precisely. Every one of us lives a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life. How to behave, what to wear (expressions as well as clothes) and who to be are the decisions one makes every day. A person understands the self reflecting upon his/her biography. Personhood is a concept, and what a person is understood to be in one culture may not be the same in the other cultures – culture is simply the ways we live. The traits from which biographies are constructed may be understood and interpreted variously in different societies and cultures. However there are elements that are common to all cultures. With this basic understanding I attempt to study Milan Kundera's novel, *Identity*. The novel deals with identity which is ever shifting, fleeting and complex like self. The novel explores the question of human identity and whether it is possible for the two people in love (Chantal and Jean Marc) to understand each other in a world eternally trapped on the level of the physical, and the psychological. The female protagonist, Chantal is quite unsure about her comfortable present that her past seems to threaten her from all the sides. She exhibits a paranoid personality. She fears her past, fears her passing youth, and fears that soon no one would like her. She is all body, a physical being, a material. To her, very existence means sexual attention. She has lost control over her life, her thoughts, her wants and desires. It is this loss of control that has weakened her self-image. Her obsession with sexual attention is so overpowering that it seeps deep into her consciousness and smears her dreams with obscenities and erotic suggestions. "She recalled her metaphor and saw a rose withering, rapidly as in a time-lapse film until all that was left of it was a skinny blackish twig, and disappearing forever in the white universe of their evening: the rose diluted in the whiteness." (*Identity*, 39)

Keywords: Identity crisis, Culture, dream, paranoia, delusion, self image, erotic, personality

The term 'Identity' cannot be defined precisely. Everyone of us lives a biography reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life. How to behave, what to wear (expressions as well as clothes) and who to be are the decisions one makes everyday. A person understands the 'self' reflecting upon his/her biography. Personhood is a concept, and what a person is understood to be in one culture may not be the same in the other cultures – culture is simply the ways we live. The traits from which biographies are constructed may be understood and interpreted variously in different

societies and cultures. However there are elements that are common to all cultures.

With this basic understanding I attempt to study Milan Kundera's novel, *Identity*. *Identity* was originally written in French, and translated from French to English by Linda Asher. The novel deals with identity which is ever shifting, fleeting and complex like self. The novel explores the question of human identity and whether it is possible for the two people in love (Chantal and Jean-Marc) to understand each other in a world eternally trapped on the level of the physical, and the psychological.

The novel opens at a hotel in a small town on the Normandy coast where the leading lady of the narrative, Chantal is waiting for her lover, Jean-Marc who is to join her for vacation. Chantal has divorced her husband after the death of their five year old son to live her life independently with her lover, who is four years younger. Torn by the inner fatigue, Chantal falls asleep and is taken into grip by a dream that leaves her exhausted in the middle of the night. In fact, it is her past that is packaged as a dream which involves her long dead mother, her former husband, his sister and his new wife. Her former husband makes her erotic suggestions and his new wife kisses her which she finds repulsive as she "tried to slip her tongue between Chantal's lips. Tongues licking each other had always disgusted her". (*Identity* 6) Her aversion to saliva and a feel of wet lips of a woman has no actual connect with a particular memory but may be a total outcome of various experiences that find symbolization in dreams. She once indulged in that sort of wet kiss when she first met Jean-Marc and they instantly discovered that they wanted each other. She pressed her tongue into Jean-Marc's mouth. The kiss was the medium their bodies chose to communicate the immediacy of the urge of their bodies; the gratification of which never reached their souls. After that it (mouth kiss) never happened.

The zeal of their tongues was not a sensual necessity but an urgency to let each other know that they were prepared to make love, right away, instantly, fully and wildly and without losing a moment. Their two salivas had nothing to do with desire or pleasure, they were messages... that is why, during their lovemaking ... their mouths probably ... held no further interest for each other, did not touch, did not lick, and did not even register that scandalous mutual uninterest. (49)

Psychologically speaking, "dreams are a form of thinking that employs unusual symbols. The interpretation of the symbols is difficult". (Introduction to Psychology 56) Symbols employed in dreams have highly personal meaning. Freud believes that when we are asleep our defense mechanisms go for a bit of relaxation, and our unconscious conflicts and the urges of our id strive for expression. Chantal dislikes dreams because dreams are based on the past experiences. She feels that their effects nullify the present which she cannot afford.

Unlike the polyphonic complexity of Kundera's earlier novels, *Identity* follows a tighter and more conventional form. The novel has a dream-ending. In fact, the plot of the novel is all dream. The ending of the novel

may seem to be a serious flaw in the narrative. But the novel broods upon the identity of Chantal, of Jean-Marc and, of course, the identity of the novel itself. The story is but Kundera's dream narrated in words.

The female protagonist, Chantal is quite unsure about her comfortable present – her past seems to threaten her from all the sides. She exhibits a paranoid personality. People with paranoia experience delusions that are often so logical and believable that people are tempted to buy them. Instead of, or in addition to, persecutory delusions, people with paranoia may also show delusional jealousy. They may believe unjustly, that their lovers or spouses have been unfaithful and collect evidence in order to justify their suspicion. Sometimes they experience delusions of grandeur – they believe they are Godlike and that others are jealous of their power and intelligence. Paranoid people appear normal until something happens to activate their delusions. Chantal is quite happy and normal in her office where she is with her work group.

Chantal was in her office with two women, her colleagues. But this was no longer the same woman as that morning; she was talking in a louder voice than he was used to from her, and her gestures were quicker, brusquer, more imperious. (33)

She fears her past, fears her passing youth, and fears that soon no one would like her. She is all body, a physical being, a material. To her, very existence means sexual attention. She has lost control over her life, her thoughts, her wants and desires. It is this loss of control that has weakened her self image.

Her obsession with sexual attention is so overpowering that it seeps deep into her consciousness and smears her dreams with obscenities and erotic suggestions. The sensation of the licking of the tongue of that lady is so “disagreeable” (7) that she goes to “the bathroom to gargle and wash out her mouth for a long time”. (7) Being lost in thoughts of flirting and getting involved in sexual relations is, obviously, an escape route for her. She decides to deny her past. Walking towards the shore she thinks of 'whispering invitations' to the men who are strolling with their families. Similarly, she feels tempted to tease the morning strollers and the people having fun with kites and yachts on the sea wall.

Again the notion of a treacherous seduction struck her: she would come up behind the man holding the two lines and watching the noisy flight of his toy with his head thrown back; into his ear she would whisper on erotic invitation in the lewdest words. His reaction? She hadn't a doubt: without glancing at her he would hiss: 'Leave me alone, I'm busy! (14)

Her fear of rejection is so overpowering that she is convinced that “I live in a world where men will never turn to look at me again.” (13) She speaks his misery to her lover, Jean-Marc, who experiences a surge of concern: “And me? How can you be thinking about men not turning to look at you when I go chasing endlessly after you wherever you are?” (24) Back at their Paris apartment Jean-Marc tries to interpret and

understand her dejection. He thinks that it is because she is getting older and losing her physical charm – “No, what she needs is not a loving gaze but a flood of alien, crude, lustful looks setting on her with no goodwill, no discrimination, no tenderness or politeness – setting on her fatefully, inescapably. Those are the looks that sustain her within human society. The gaze of love rips her out of it.” (36) Kundera expresses the gradual loss of physical charm due to aging in beautiful words in *Identity*.

... he imagined the story of her body : it was lost among millions of other bodies until the day a look of desire settled on it and drew it forth from the nebulous multitude; then the number of such looks increased and sat afire this body, which ever since has been moving through the world like a torch; now is its time of radiant glory but soon the look will start to grow fewer, the light to dim little by little, until the day when this translucent, then transparent, then invisible body will pace the street like a small itinerant non-being. On this journey from the first invisibility to the second, the phrase 'men don't turn to look at me any more' is the red light signalling that the body's gradual extinction has begun.” (36)

In his novels, Kundera is more concerned about the words that shape his characters than with the characters' physical appearance. In his non-fictional work 'The Art of a Novel', he says that the reader's imagination automatically completes the writer's task. Kundera, as a writer, wishes to focus on the essential; the physical details are not very important in understanding of the character. A specific trait or feature may become the character's idiosyncratic focus. According to François Ricard, Kundera conceives an overall view instead of delimiting his ideas to the scope of just one novel at a time. His themes and meta-themes exist across the entire range of his work. Each new book exhibits the latest stage of his personal philosophy. Some of these meta-themes include exile, identity, life beyond love, life beyond art, and history as continual return. Kundera's many characters are intended as expositions of one of these themes at the expense of their fully developed personality.

In *Identity*, Jean-Marc thinks that Chantal's emotional upset will be eased if he writes her passionate love letters in order to reassure her of her beauty and charm. “These were letters not of seduction but of admiration. And if seduction was all present in them, it was conceived as a long term project.” (66) After a short period of confusion she is sure that it's Jean-Marc who wants to trap her. The strain of the first letter runs in the all the subsequent letters that follow – “I follow you around like a spy – you are beautiful, very beautiful.” (40) First she hides the letters from Jean-Marc as “That would embarrass her, as if she'd meant to boast!” (41) Later she develops an apprehension that the letters are actually an entrapment; that Jean-Marc might want to get rid of her as he is younger than her and she is getting old; and he is just looking for a reason to walk away.

... He's too correct for that, too nice. But as soon as he's sure she is betraying him, that she is capable of betraying him, he will leave her... Now she sees that her fear was a forewarning.” (87)

On the contrary, he has no such intention. He just wants her to get rid of her depressing thoughts. He simply wants to give her some pleasure and lift her spirit. He never tries to foresee her reaction. At the most he would have thought that she would jump with happiness and say – “Look! Men haven't forgotten about me yet, after all!” (89) Although the letters at first induce some passionate lovemaking, ultimately they result in estrangement between the two lovers – they lose their identity as lovers. In fact, Chantal always faces what may be called identity crisis. She confesses, in the early pages of the novel, to Jean-Marc that she has got two different faces.

... I've learned to draw some pleasure from the fact, but still, having two faces isn't easy. It takes discipline! You have to understand that whatever I do, like it or not, I do with the intention to do well. If only so as to not to lose my job. And it's very hard to be a perfectionist in your work and at the same time despise that work. (26)

She confesses that she wears the scoffing face when she is with him, and the serious face when in office. Even in office she recruits one person whom she likes and the next who is fit for the job. “... I behave half as traitor to my company, half a traitor to myself. I am a double traitor. And that state of double treason I consider not a defeat but a triumph...” (27) In the end, she ends up getting trapped in an orgy where she is surrounded by naked people. This orgy leaves Chantal with an utter sense of loss – she is unable to recognize her physicality.

... their organs rising up, shrinking down, thick, thin. It makes her think of a field with earthworms rearing upright, bending, twisting, falling back. Then she sees not earthworm but snakes; she is repelled and nonetheless still aroused. Except that this arousal does not stir the desire to make love again, on the contrary, the more aroused she is the more she is repelled by her own arousal for making her aware that her body belongs not to her own self but to this boggy field, this field of worms and snakes.” (142)

She, naked, feels herself stranger and helpless at that place. Here she faces the ultimate crises of identity; she is denied her name as well as her freedom to go home. She needs to reclaim her identity beginning with her name. “What she wants to achieve first, as an indispensable minimum, is to have this man call her by her name, her real name.” (150) Though this orgy and crisis is all a dream, Chantal has always faced an inner confusion. Even she is not sure about her sentiments for her dead child. She is not sure whether she should be sad or happy about her son's death.

The memory of her dead son filled her with happiness and she could only ask herself what that meant. The answer was clear: it meant that her presence at Jean-Marc's side was absolute and that the reason it could be absolute was the absence of her son. She was happy that her son was dead.” (39)

Chantal confesses her 'dark thoughts' to her child's grave that his departure has set her free. “... that I've come to understand your death as a gift and that I've finally accepted that dreadful gift.” (55) As a teenager,

Chantal identified with rose fragrance which is to her a metaphor of adventure. In adulthood, the identity shifted to “a sweet promiscuity”. (37) Her metaphorical adult identity of “the journey through men” (37) fell dormant in her marriage. Now, freed from her marriage and her son, she often feels nostalgic about that teenage fragrance of adventure. Now she identifies with something ethereal, and vague.

She recalled her metaphor and saw a rose withering, rapidly as in a time-lapse film until all that was left of it was a skinny blackish twig, and disappearing for ever in the white universe of their evening: the rose diluted in the whiteness.” (39)

Identity of Chantal is so fascinating, so complex, so intriguing, and at times, so repulsive that along with Jean Marc and Milan Kundera it throws the readers also into a whirling vortex of emotion; but the last chapter comes as a breather. The dreadful dream is over, both emerge out of the “treacherous fantasy” (152) and regain the identity of lovers.

Notes:

According to Tylor, E's model of culture, 'culture' is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

When we focus upon our behavior we become aware of a set of feelings and attitudes and a certain sense of 'who we are', this is 'self'. Looking at various theories attempting to explain 'self' we see two sets of meanings. One has to do with 'self-concept' or 'self-image' – our attitudes about ourselves, our picture of the way we look and act, the impact we believe we have on others, and our perceived traits, abilities, foibles and weaknesses (self as object). The second set relates to the processes by which the individual manages, copes, thinks, remembers, perceives and plans (self as process).

In psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud describes several defense mechanisms which enable the ego to cope up with the id's urges. The id's unconscious demands are often instinctual, infantile and amoral, which must be blocked by the ego and superego. Because of this conflict, anxiety and guilt are aroused. Often the ego can cope with the anxiety through rational measures, but when it fails to do so, it resorts to unrealistic protective measures which soothe the painful anxiety. These unrealistic protective measures are called defense mechanisms. These defenses deal with the problem indirectly, distort reality and leave an undesirable gap between actual reality and the way the individual sees reality.

References:

- Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity, 1991
- Hall, C.S. and Lindzey, G., *Theories of Personality*, New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Limited, 1985.
- Holliday, A., Hyde, M. and Kullman, J. *Intercultural Communication*, New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Jameson, F., *Postmodernism – or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997
- Kundera, M. *Identity*, New Delhi: Penguin India, 2004.
- _____ *Slowness*, New Delhi: Penguin India, 2003.
- _____ *The Art of the Novel*, New Delhi: Penguin India, 2004.
- _____ *Testaments Betrayed – An Essay in Nine Parts*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1995.
- Morgan, C.T., King, R.A., Weisz, J.R., and Schopler, J., *Introduction to Psychology*, New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Ltd., 1996.

