

# Invasion, Exile, and Resistance: Milan Kundera's Biopolitics in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

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## Abstract

In this essay, I explore how Milan Kundera in his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, delineates the tyrannical biopolitics of a totalitarian state. I argue that the Soviet invasive biopolitics renders the Czech citizens alienated from their life, resources, and independence. Firstly, the obnoxious face of biopolitics manufactures exiles and fugitivity and, secondly, it destroys the dignity of an independent nation and turns it into a community of dissidents. Here, I build on Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, which in turn embarks on Michel Foucault's concept of biopower or biopolitics. Mbembe critiques the racist, fascist, and nationalist forces that institutionalize the resurgence of "othering" a community to exclude it from the nation-state and kill it. Likewise, Foucault's biopolitics interrogates the brutality of the nation-state that exercises the right of life and death over its subjects. This power takes hold of the human life: seizes that life, ends, impoverishes, and enslaves it. Thus, I focus on the all-pervasive impacts of biopolitics on the lives of individuals and argue that Kundera's strategic biopolitics against the historical backdrop of the totalitarian surveillance and exile, at length, works as a subversive tool that stages resistance through his writing.

**Keywords:** biopolitics, necropolitics, exile, invasion, resistance

Recent scholars, such as Cristina Stan and Kamila Kinyon, among others, have reconsidered how Milan Kundera deals with the totalitarian space and panopticon surveillance of a hegemonic state in his 1984 novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kinyon situates the novel within Michel Foucault's groundbreaking work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, and theorizes the surveillance mechanism of the omnipresent panoptic gaze under which Tomas and Tereza – the two protagonists – fall and operate. Foucault was specifically interested in the biopolitics of "real subjection" that is "born mechanically from a fictitious relation" (*Discipline* 202). Foucault argues that the surveillance mechanism derives its power from the fictional gaze of the authoritarian law and, thus, controls human life and behavior. Building on this theory of Foucauldian biopolitics and the fictional punitive gaze, Kinyon argues that the "fear of the gaze that the characters [of the novel] experience is connected to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and to the totalitarian regime's invasions of individual privacy" (243). Kinyon's work posits Kundera's authorial politics of creativity, exile, and agency in conversation with Foucault's biopolitics of



state surveillance. Likewise, Stan considers how Kundera's novel is obsessed "with the totalitarian space, seen as a trap for an individual's identity and personal freedom" (148). Though Stan mainly focuses on identity and "identitary separation" that "seek for a refuge in love," she frequently refers to the historical challenges and threats posed by foreign (Soviet) invasion of the geographical, cultural, and personal spaces of Kundera's characters (148). Stan finds that the Czech identity, individuality, and freedom of action and speech undergo a new social and political "struggle to resist and survive in a totalitarian space" (152-53). This line of argument again embarks on Foucault's fiction of surveillance that invades, disciplines, and punishes.

What Kinyon hints at but does not elaborate and Stan somewhat misses is necropolitics of racist, fascist, and nationalist forces, as theorized by Achille Mbembe in his book, *Necropolitics*, that determine and institutionalize the resurgence of othering a community or individuals to exclude them from the nation-state and kill. Mbembe, in his other groundbreaking essay "Necropolitics," argues that the "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics) profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror" (39). In doing so, Mbembe, in fact, builds on Foucault's biopolitics i.e., biopower. Foucault, in his essay "Right of Death and Power over Life," theorizes biopower or biopolitics that connects the brutality of the nation-state with its infatuation for racism. Foucault traces how the biopower evolves from the classical sovereign power that had the right of life and death over his subjects and consisted in the power to take away life, products, labor, property, and privileges from its subjects ("Right" 42). This power takes hold of human life: seizes that life, ends, impoverishes, and enslaves it.

To Foucault, the "power of life and death," is, in effect, a theoretical paradox: "the right to take life or let live" ("Right" 41). However, this right, through the phases of evolution, transferred from the right on the individual life onto the social body. Here, Foucault situates the origin of holocausts, wars, or genocide amid this transformation, where mass killing or wholesale slaughter takes place in the name of securing a better way of life for a group of people, excluding another. In Kundera's novel, we see how such Czech characters as Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, or Franz, in particular, and doctors, housewives, photographers, teachers, in general, are confined within the totalitarian space. They are stripped of their vocations, integrity, and freedom by a hegemonic state that decides the worth of a particular life and sets the measure of qualifications to obtain that fitness. The Czechs under the Soviet invasion are nothing short of manikins when the invasive state incessantly exercises its "right to take life or let live" on its citizens.

Following these scholarly leads, in my essay, I explore the world of the novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and show how the author, Kundera delineates the tyrannical biopolitics of a totalitarian state. I argue that the Soviet invasive biopolitics renders the Czech characters alienated from their life, resources, and independence, and then extends its clutches to the field of politics. On the one hand, the obnoxious face of biopolitics manufactures exiles and fugitivity of such characters as Tomas, Tereza, and Sabina, among others. On the other hand, it destroys the dignity of an independent nation and turns it into a community of dissidents. Thus, my essay aligns more with Kinyon's argument than with Stan's assessment. However, my argument differs from Kinyon's in some significant ways. Firstly, I focus on the all-pervasive impacts of the force and brutality of biopolitics on the lives of individuals instead of merely emphasizing the effects of the panoptic gaze of the state. Secondly, I argue that Kundera's own strategic biopolitics against the historical backdrop of the totalitarian surveillance and exile, at length, works as a subversive tool that stages resistance through his writing. In doing so, I explore how the author, Kundera, as the omnipotent creator of the narrative, exercises his sovereign power over his characters.

In the following sections, first, I will summarize Mbembe's necropolitics that hinges on Foucauldian biopolitics for the theoretical framework of my essay. Second, I will examine the deployment of necropolitics by the totalitarian state, its impact on the lives of individual characters, and their reciprocal reactions to this power fulcrum. In so doing, I will also interrogate the authorial politics of Kundera in his novelistic world that does not fall short of invasive biopolitics. I will show that Kundera, hegemonically, operates like a resilient agent of biopolitics that decides the fate of his characters similar to a hegemonic state that takes hold of the individual life: vanquishes that life, exiles, exhausts, and subjugates it. However, I maintain that Kundera's authorial hegemony does not become complicit in Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia because his biopolitics was a tool to stage writerly resistance, and that he used it to subvert the domination and control of the invading forces.

### **Biopolitics/Necropolitics and Exile**

Kundera publishes his novel under consideration in 1984, the George Orwellian prophetic year, when "Big Brother is watching" everything and controls, corrects, and disciplines every aspect of the sociopolitical life of the citizens. In the novel, Kundera, in effect, translates the metaphysics of biopolitics that Orwell prophesied in 1949. Kundera's narrative resonates with what Nikolas Rose, in his seminal essay, "The Politics of Life Itself," referring to Foucault, identifies in the modern human beings whose very natural existence as being is checked and framed by his or her politics (1). Such primary status of politics over the natural existence of life operates through the various processes of human life: birth, death, exile, and political

engagement, among others. Biopolitics is, therefore, not a politics of biology but rather a condition of being that itself becomes one with politics. The fundamental step of such biopolitics is to pull away the state from its responsibility for the whole population and the notion of national body and identity for the sake of one particular group. Thus, this biopolitics of privileging one of the groups within the nation-state is hinged on the agencies of late capitalism, consumerism, and politics that play crucial roles in manufacturing “a single, if heterogeneous, domain with a national culture, a national population, a national identity, co-extensive with a national territory and the powers of national political government” (Rose, “Politics” 5; *Politics* 62). However, under this biopower, individuals do not enjoy more control over their own lives but rather have themselves merged into a much more perplexing network of biopolitics.

This argument truly echoes what Foucault explains, in his essay, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” about how the totalitarian state, in the era of biopower, is less interested in punishing subjects with death (law) and more interested in managing and regulating life through norms, which are overseen and enforced through myriad apparatuses (social institutions). Foucault traces out the origin of this aspect of existence in the state-power of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and terms this new power over life as “bio-power” (“Right” 44). Foucault divides biopower into two categories: (i) disciplines, which govern the anatomo-politics of the individual (such as schools, which socialize people on how to behave) and (ii) regulatory controls, which govern the species-being or the overall population (such as demography, which measures and sets standards for population statistics), “imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes” (“Right” 44). The biological processes include propagation, births and mortality, health, and life expectancy, among others. Thus, the social and individual body went through the processes of rigorous control: disciplining, optimization, extortion, and integration into economic systems.

Foucault argues that the biopower opens up the strategy of the nineteenth-century states concerning the biological existence of life, species, and race. He sees the deployment of biopolitics as “a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ ... when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies” (“Right” 47). Foucault’s sociological analysis critiques the deterministic political power of the state in administering public life. This biopolitics sets up bipolar technology to subjugate and control human life that inevitably contributed to the development of capitalism, racism, and imperialist infatuation. This development stems from continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms in the domain of value and utility. Against the backdrop of this stultifyingly repressive state-policy, Foucault situates his theory of biopolitics – the mechanism of disciplining the citizens and political accession

into the life of the individuals and their community. This biopolitics of the economy makes racist groupings possible. Thus, biopolitics justifies racism and the death of others.

In “Necropolitics,” Mbembe, building on Hegel’s theory of the relation between death and the “becoming subject” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, complicates Foucault’s biopower by questioning if biopower is sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the biopolitical war, resistance, and fight against terror makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective (14). Mbembe offers the notion of necropolitics as inscribed within a negative goal of control over death, compared to biopower’s goal of control over life. Biopower is concerned with managing populations and necropower controls large populations through the management of death. In necropolitics, individuals, who have been disloyal to the sovereign and are branded as traitors or corrupt, are deemed detrimental to the whole population and their death is seen as beneficial to the state.

Mbembe identifies the imperial projects, such as plantations, colonies, and invasions as “manifestations of the state of exception” over which the state wields its right to kill to dominate communities through terror formation and necropower (“Necropolitics” 16). Mbembe, thus, by following Hannah Arendt’s and Giorgio Agamben’s examinations of concentration camps that reduce subjects down to the state of “bare life,” critiques biopower vis-à-vis “the state of exception and the state of siege” as a means to kill (“Necropolitics” 12, 16). Mbembe argues that these two states have become “the normative basis of the right to kill” that corresponds to the historical colonial power and contemporary imperialism (“Necropolitics” 16). Historically, the goal of biopolitics is to gain domination over the lives of invaded people through various modes of subjugation. Mbembe outlines several forms through which the power over invaded space manifests itself, including enacting genocide and settler colonialism in an occupied state, such as the occupation of Palestine (and Czechoslovakia in Kundera’s novel). Notably, these modes include fear and fantastical or mythological ideas around terror as a concept – both of which can be mediated by “war machines,” a term coined by Deleuze and Guattari in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (qtd. in “Necropolitics” 32).

Necropolitics, then, can overall be best described through methods and systems of the subjugation of life to the power of death – determining if and when death can or should occur. Following this lead, I argue that the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 replicates the structure of the imperial system. I extend on Mbembe’s layered conceptualizations of colonial projects to show that Kundera in his novel confirms how individual privacy and security are constantly invaded. This invasion creates a state of exception and forces the dissenters, such as Tomas to exile. Exile,

like Mbembe's theorization of slavery, is the triple loss of humanity: a loss of home, a loss of rights to a body, and a loss of political status. An exile is, though alive, in a state of injury, a state of horror, terror, cruelty, and profanity.

However, I argue that exile also provides an individual with opportunities for the recuperation of his self and freedom which, in Mbembe's terms, are "irrevocably interwoven" ("Necropolitics" 38). For those oppressed under the brutality of biopolitics, exile is "the mediator of redemption. Far from being an encounter with a limit, boundary, or barrier, it is experienced as a release from terror and bondage" (Mbembe, "Necropolitics" 39). As per individual or mass exile, I suggest that exile can be read as an agency because exile can also be subversive to the hegemonic, totalitarian biopolitics as in the case of such authors as Kundera and Vladimir Nabokov, among others. In these instances, the authorship itself functions as a subversive tool against exile. Kundera writes his novel while he is in exile in France in the 1980s. Here, I might sound like Edward Said, who, in "Reflections on Exile," argues that though "true exile is a condition of terminal loss," it has been "transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture" (173). However, I extend on Said and argue that the preference for exile over continued servitude is a commentary on the nature of freedom itself (or the lack thereof). Thus, there is always a paradox within such contemporary biopolitics. Rose reminds us of the biopolitics that should not be conceived as only manipulating life. It is also a viable agency to claim rights – it allows a perspective of being political beings, having "a universal human right" without being bound to institutional politics (Rose, "Politics" 21). Yet, this universal right is also a risk of being life, whose realm never reaches beyond politics.

### **Unbearable Lightness of Invasion and Exile**

Said maintains that "our age – with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers – is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" (173). Kundera's novel affirms Said's proposition in its engagement with the totalitarian biopolitics and history of Soviet invasion. Kundera as an avant-garde writer in exile moves back and forth in his novel among various European cities as "a dissident" and the strength of and resistance through his creativity comes from, in the words of Harold Bloom, his "having experienced the actuality of concentration camps, prison, and exile, he was driven by the need to find a new voice for old horrors" (10). Thus, Kundera captures the true horror of Cold War-era Europe, and he revolts against the totalitarian state because he is, as Robert C. Porter theorizes, an "author of life," not the "puppet of life" (4). Kundera, from the paradox of his virtuosity and frustration, creates novelistic lives and characters from the real lives he lived.

Kundera's life is interwoven with the history of European biopolitics, in general, and Czechoslovakia, in particular, in the post-World War II era. Here, following Gregory Kimbrell's hint, I summarize the relationship between Cold War biopolitics and Kundera's novel by considering his attitude towards totalitarian surveillance and the various ways in which it has influenced his novel. Kundera explains in his non-fiction work, *The Art of the Novel*:

Having experienced life under Soviet totalitarianism, I believe that there can be no rational explanation for what I found to be the absurdities and cruelties of the regime. Why did Germany, why does Russia today want to dominate the world? To be richer? Happier? Not at all. The aggressivity of force is thoroughly disinterested; unmotivated; it wills only its own will; it is pure irrationality. (10)

Tomas, as the protagonist of the novel, shares the same agony of Kundera and revolts against fate, determined not by an individual him/herself but by a demigod dictator or a corrupt politician. The novel is written within this historical backdrop of 1968 where the plot of individual strength and weakness, love affairs and sexuality, and struggles for identity intertwines with the subplot of Cold War politics of surveillance, invasion, totalitarianism, and mass exile. Here, the state decides the vocation, religion, affection, life, and death of the individuals. The state enjoys the monopoly of the right to kill or let live. It starts with the Soviet military occupation of the city of Prague in 1968 as an aftermath of the Prague Spring.

The novel is set in Prague, in the spring of 1968, when Alexander Dubček, the First Secretary of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSCĚ) from January 1968 to April 1969, was trying to make the Czech Communist government more humane under the catchphrase "Socialism with a human face." This is called the Prague Spring of 1968. The Prague Spring, a period of political liberalization in Czechoslovakia during the era of its domination by the Soviet Union after World War II, began on January 5, 1968, when reformist Dubček was elected the First Secretary. The reforms were a liberal attempt by Dubček to endow supplementary privileges to the citizens. He tried to partially decentralize the administrative issues related to the economy and, thus, moved further to the democratization of the state. His administration aimed at fewer restrictions on media, speech, and international travel. However, the more conservative factions of his party, backed by the then Soviet leadership, disliked these westernizing reformations, especially the decentralization of administrative authority. The Soviet Union and members of the Warsaw Pact sent troops to occupy the country on August 21 to halt reforms.

As an aftermath of the invasion, the writers, artists, professionals, and political activists became the target of the communist junta. Progressive writers and liberal thinkers were put under constant surveillance – many of them were forced to sign articles declaring their obedience to and admiration for the totalitarian regime. A lot of freethinkers were killed by secret agents and those who were not killed found their life permanently maimed by the state mechanism. A large number of people became emigrants. After the invasion, epitomized by the proliferation of barracks, police boxes, and other sites of violence, Dubček resigned in April 1969. The subsequent politicians turned the political wheel of the country backward by restoring the political and economic policies that prevailed before Dubček's reformation attempts. The liberal members of the Communist Party, other moderate professionals, civil servants, and liberal intellectuals were hunted down and deactivated. The government and non-government employees, who were in open disagreement with the political transformation, were stripped of public offices. The country became a police-state and the citizens turned into a community of spies, voluntarily reporting on each other for political and financial privileges. Criticism, commentary, and unfavorable analysis of politics were forbidden in media.

Kundera has had a very complicated relationship with his motherland and the Czech Communist Party. He became finally disillusioned with the communist system after being expelled several times from the party on various accusations even before the invasion. Kundera, along with other reformist communist writers, were somewhat involved in the 1968 Prague Spring. After the Soviet invasion, Kundera was dismissed from his teaching post at the Prague Film Academy and his books were banned. Interestingly, after this political separation, he experienced a sense of freedom, though temporary, in writing. In 1975, he emigrated to France and became a teacher at the University of Rennes. In 1978, he moved to Paris, where he completed *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in 1982 and published it in 1984. In 1979, his Czechoslovakian citizenship was revoked by the government as a reaction to his *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. He became a naturalized French citizen in 1981. Czechoslovakia remained occupied until 1990.

### **Kundera's Biopolitics**

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, arguably Kundera's most poignant social critique, exemplifies the ironic nature of the fate of individuals under the totalitarian biopolitics of the Soviet occupation. Occupation does not mean merely control over physical geographical space, rather it inserts and institutes "seizing, delimiting, and asserting" a new set of social, political, and spatial relations into the psyche of the colonized (Mbembe, "Necropolitics" 25; *Necropolitics* 79). Kundera's portrayal of the lack of values in the characters of his fiction and their malpractices in everyday life is intertwined with the dictatorial, corrupt ideology of the state. The offensive

political government finds its apt expression in Kundera's formulation of "lightness" through everyday activities and "heaviness" through bare necessities, where only "heavy" has a value. Kundera's double-edged critique of human to human and citizen to state relationships is intertwined with his critique of the communist system of government. This novel, as I have pointed out in the previous section, is largely influenced by Kundera's surroundings and experiences in Prague in the 1960s and 70s. It hinges on amplified Soviet presence and the tyrannical police control of the Czech population. Kundera portrays the Soviet occupation of Prague as atrocious and appalling as the deployment of necropolitics by the Nazis. The regime deploys its mechanism of controlling the cultural life of citizens with its tanks and soldiers. This dreadful policy of dominating the lives of others by force and chicanery compels the intellectuals and freethinkers to go on exile or to be permanently silent. The free speech of Czech citizens has been perpetually revoked.

Kundera's novel is replete with scenes of political subjugation, suspicion, and invasion of private space. It is a beleaguered time when a former ambassador is relegated to the reception desk at a hotel and citizens are exposed to the rigorous violation of individual privacy: conversations and, even, the funerals are recorded to study the mourners and their expressions, and incriminating chats are broadcast on state radio (Kundera, *Unbearable* 131). The story revolves around Tomas, torn between love and lust, rebellious Sabina, and emotional Tereza. The protagonist, Tomas, a Prague surgeon who, in the past, wrote an article condemning the Czech Communists, is under constant surveillance. Once married, Tomas is now a perpetual bachelor and a womanizer – never to be married again – with no intention of maintaining any relationship with his ex-wife or young son. Tereza, a café waitress, comes within the periscope of his sexual pursuits. Interestingly, Tereza considers Tomas as an intelligent but romantic dreamer and falls in love with him. The complicity arises when they start living together and Tomas is unable, rather unwilling, to give up his erotic adventures. Tereza, traumatized by her status as no better than a concubine, suffers ceaselessly from nightmares and suicidal intent. Like the repressive relationship between the hegemonic state and dissident citizens, the relationship between Tomas and Tereza functions on reciprocal suspicion and the inspecting gaze that relegates these two characters into automatons. At one point, to console Tereza, Tomas marries her but continues his sexual exploits. In the wake of the communist invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet, Tomas and Tereza flee to Switzerland, following Sabina, one of Tomas's mistresses.

Exile brings further dissatisfaction and suffering for Tereza. Tereza, earlier in Prague, found some fulfillment in her job as a photographer but now in her fugitive status in Zurich, she becomes unemployed. This situation is exacerbated by both her losing motivation for life and Tomas's continuous sexual affairs even in exile. She loses her

capacity for understanding, consciousness, and dignity. At a climactic point of the narrative, she returns to Prague allowing Tomas his utmost freedom of sexuality. Desperate Tereza becomes a bartender, enjoys a brisk affair with an engineer, and grows more miserable. She suspects that the man she was dating was a police agent, hired by the Communists to gather information for potential blackmailing. Tereza understands that totalitarian biopolitics is anti-individualistic and hence feels insecure about her privacy. Even in a peripheral life, Tereza is submerged in the vicious impacts of totalitarian surveillance. Tereza's sexual trauma and disbelief in a system of government – under which she lives – invoke Kundera's political nightmares.

Kundera's experiment in authorial biopolitics puts Tereza in a vicious circle. Tereza is well-aware of Tomas's transgressions, and she cannot put up with the situation, which manifests itself in numerous nightmares illustrating the realities of her life. Tereza differs deeply from Tomas's philosophy regarding relationship, love, sex, and marriage. For example, sex without love is impossible for her whereas Tomas believes that having "sex" without "love" is possible (Kundera, *Unbearable* 14-15). The female protagonist, therefore, suffers under the "heaviness" of subjugation while her male counterpart enjoys the "lightness" of authority. This relationship makes us understand that the ways of dominance are very relative. Kundera argues: "the only relationship that can make both partners happy is one in which sentimentality has no place and neither partner makes any claim on the life and freedom of the other" (*Unbearable* 11). Dominance – either by a patriarchal state or an overbearing domestic partner – exposes individuals to situations that we would otherwise find detestable if not consumed with the sensations. Thus, the Tomas-Tereza relationship poignantly invokes the Czech-Soviet relationship – the political concubinage of Czechoslovakia, economically and politically depending on the then Soviet. Czechoslovakia, with its complicity and conviviality, like Tereza, tried its best to woo the mighty Soviet but the Soviet state, like Tomas, only responded with its harsh biopolitics of control, command, and corruption.

However, Tomas's temporary freedom from Tereza's critical surveillance equates to Kundera's freedom from the communist bondage when he was stripped of his Communist Party membership in Prague before the invasion. This temporary freedom is not seamless because it exposes the dissident to further threats from the ruthless nation-state. This is specifically the case of a government under foreign influence because it restrains the exercise of reason – the sublime truth in democratic politics. In another melodramatic twist of the novel, Tomas gives up his pursuits and returns to Prague to Tereza. As readers can assume, coming back to Prague proves fatal for the couple. Tomas's political predicaments deteriorate. He refused the demand by the government to sign a denunciation of his anti-Communist article –

a political essay he once wrote deploying the metaphors of Oedipus and the guilt of unknowing crimes. In the essay, he condemns the Communist establishment that employs the pretext of ignorance to cover up its transgressions and crimes (Kundera, *Unbearable* 217-18, 271). Consequently, he loses his position as a surgeon. In the meantime, groups of underground dissidents against communism mushroom in the country. Tomas's young son becomes a dissident and pursues him. Tomas finds himself on the island of two-way political traffic as he hates the idea of being manipulated politically at a time when both the Communist regime and the underground rebels attempt to induce him to their side. Tomas realizes both the Soviet-backed Czech government and the dissident groups pursuing him are the two sides of the same totalitarian coin as Terry Eagleton claims: "Once the political state extends its empire over the whole of civil society, social reality becomes so densely systemized and rigorously coded that one is always being caught out in a kind of pathological 'over reading,' a compulsive semiosis, which eradicates all contingency" (47-48). Tomas tries to flee from the bleak reality – the pathological annihilation of contingency through feigned obscurity as a window-washer. Thus, like the author himself, characters in the novel undergo surveillance, espionage, and threats from the diehard political or ideological agencies. Both parties deploy similar bullying techniques in asserting their political ideologies. These agencies show identical domineering, a hegemonic attitude in their treatment of people, right to the freedom of speech, and public life as a whole.

The oppressive lived experience paves the way for Kundera's authorial biopolitics. His politics hinges on the sovereign power of the author – in his right to decide the fate of his characters: who may live and who must die, who thrives and who is to be maimed and silenced. It is an authorial control over the life, relationship, and mortality of his fictional personae. It is identical to the Communist biopolitics of control, administration, and exhortation that entirely changed the psychological milieu of Kundera as an author. This change makes it easier for Kundera to explore the strategy of authorial sovereignty in the novel: the right to create, to make suffer, and to kill. The strategy imparts deep implementation and demonstration of authorial politics. In the case of the Tereza-Tomas-Sabina triangle, politics of control and corruption is so closely attached to sex and love that it is very difficult to differentiate among them. Tereza stays with Tomas with a tormented psyche. This acceptance by Tereza is Kundera's point of departure in exploring the weakness of people, who remain rooted in a totalitarian space and pessimistically remain hopeful to gain liberty through persistence and fidelity. The very fact that they continue with their marriage and apparently find some degree of happiness illustrates that relationships, which fall well short of satisfactory standard, are possible under the threat of annihilating biopolitics. Kundera argues:

Their [Tomas and Tereza] acquaintance had been based on an error from the start ... In spite of their love, they had made each other's life a hell. The fact that they loved each other was merely proof that the fault lay not in themselves, in their behavior or inconstancy of feeling, but rather in their incompatibility: he was strong and she was weak. She was like Dubček, who made a thirty-second pause in the middle of a sentence; she was like her country, which stuttered, gasped for breath, could not speak. (*Unbearable* 73-74)

Tomas and Tereza's acceptance of their imperfect relationship epitomizes the political relationship between the Soviet and Czechoslovakia. It simply manifests the incompatibility – the fact that the weaker party in a relationship is doomed to the politics and oppression of the stronger one.

In the affair between Sabina and Franz, we see the same power fulcrum in action – the strong party enjoys an advantage in decision making or lovemaking and the weak one loses its capacity of self-representation and autonomy. This uneven relationship is Kundera's other biopolitical lab to explore the dimensions of power, autonomy, and instrumentalized human existence. Sabina, a beautiful, heedless, and gifted painter, is Tomas's closest friend and long-term lover. In Geneva, Sabina, in contrast to Tereza's trauma, enjoys a love affair with Franz, a married university professor and an idealistic intellectual. Franz is in love with Sabina's apparent romanticism and courage as a Czech dissident. He, like Tereza, suffers from psychological trauma as he must betray his wife to date Sabina. However, Sabina operates herself in a light-hearted manner: she loves physically with no psychological strings attached. She differs from Franz in her views on betrayal and politics so drastically that John O'Brien clarifies fittingly: "the time Sabina and Franz share together is the frequency of their inability to understand each other" (8). Kundera, in fact, prepares an ironically lengthy "Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words" to compare and contrast the mismatched systems – political, individual, or otherwise that can bring disasters. At the behest of her whim, Sabina abruptly leaves Switzerland for Paris and then Paris for America, leaving love-sick Franz behind.

The ploy of biopolitics does not merely split the populations based on the political, racist, and imperial assumption about killing and letting live, it conflates reason of responsibility and terror of violence. In this connection, we can contrast Sabina and Tereza. Sabina lives by betrayal, abandoning family, lovers, and, even, country – a life lacking in commitment or fidelity or moral responsibility to anyone. In contrast, Tereza is the exact opposite of Sabina in commitment, fidelity, and fixity to reality that brings her downfall. It is her unwillingness to live in exile that brings Tomas back to his fate in Czechoslovakia after he has set himself up nicely in a Swiss

hospital. The contrast between Sabina and Tereza brings to mind the similarities between Tereza and Franz. Kundera's parallelism between Franz and Tereza can be transferred to the political realm of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovakian communist government, like Franz and Tereza, enters an affair with the communist Soviet, which it cannot handle properly. Tereza, Franz, or Czechoslovakia in this political affair dedicates all resources and seeks to please the mighty partner in every possible way. By contrast, we see Tomas, Sabina, or the Soviet is the least concerned about this sacrifice or the so-called "ideal of truth" (Kundera, *Unbearable* 73). However, a totalitarian agency and its strategy of biopolitics can only see the relationships from the top and fail to grasp them bottom-up. These relationships might be beneficial for the stronger side in the bargain but bring long term harassment and political bewilderment for the weaker side.

The power fulcrum among the relationships of the various characters of the novel lays bare the biopolitics of Kundera. He explores the scopes of biopolitics – a controlling mechanism usually deployed by a totalitarian state to govern its citizens – by subjugating a set of characters under the whim and political ideology of another set. Hana Pichova argues that the novel "features a narrator whose presence in the text is no less important than that of any other character. The narrator creates his own self when he tells the story" (217). Thus, Kundera's self-creation in the narrative stages his obsession with his role as a creator of his characters and a director of their fate. Here, Kundera's "God-like" authority does not fall short of the omniscient and omnipresent roles of the communist regime or modern police-state (Pichova 219). He controls his fictional personae and their world with utmost dexterity and uncompromising severity. He manipulates the lives of his characters and their choices in a dictatorial way, rendering the characters as mere puppets in his hands. Kundera himself comments on the genesis of his character, Tomas, who is portrayed standing at a window and staring across a courtyard at a blank wall:

This is the image from which he was born ... Characters are not born, like people of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor, containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility ... the characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them and equally horrified by them. (Kundera, *Unbearable* 218)

Hence, Tomas, for his birth and his character-type, is solely dependent on, as Maria Nemcova Banerjee asserts, the "Pendulum swing" of Kundera's mind that moves through "various hypotheses ... at work in the opening meditation on the genesis of characters and the idea of eternal return" (95). The characters in the novel signify a frustrated and exhausted community and they know that nothing is going to change and there is no future different from the present. There is no space for individual

accomplishment, free-thinking, and deviations from the set course of life. Life is fixed and controlled, and its outcomes are the return to the same starting point.

Characters survive at the mercy of the author. Yet, they survive because they contribute to the politics of the author like the slaves, who are lashed and tortured but are kept alive since their labor is necessary. Kundera's despair and tyrannical attitude toward his characters get full expression when he asserts: "True human goodness, in all its purity and freedom, can come to force only when its recipient has no power. Mankind's true moral test, its fundamental test (which lies deeply buried from view), consists in its attitude towards those who are at its mercy" (*Unbearable* 285). Kundera demonstrates that human relationships are hinged on the questions of power and the manifestations of that power. The strategy of Kundera's interference is the basic exhibition of human existence and relationships in a hegemonic system. For example, consider Tomas's writing a letter to a newspaper to add his voice to fuel a public debate. Thereafter, a series of disastrous events take place as phenomena of destiny, including the Russian invasion of Prague and we see Tomas gradually turning into political oblivion. He leaves his profession, his writing, and his sexual pursuits. Finally, he is forgotten by all. He no longer matters to anyone. He has relegated himself to insignificance for maintaining his integrity and, hence, becomes untouchable.

However, Kundera's biopolitics is also his agency as it proposes some form of resistance to the ugly totalitarian control of individual lives. Kundera creates complex characters. They are either thinking puppets or willful sinners. Kundera's characters, in Jacques Derrida's words, play "a double game or double agent, serving two sides or feigning obedience to a system of the rule while simultaneously trying to undermine its rule by posing unsolvable problems" (qtd. in Adams 140). For example, we see Tomas's acts of gymnastic between weightiness and lightness. He marries Tereza but chooses to maintain his lightness of being through sexual adventures. What I argue is that, with all his pursuits – good or bad, he attains a sort of mobility in contrast to the stagnancy of the communist policy. Tomas exemplifies Kundera's post-1969 citizens in occupied Czechoslovakia. No doubt, they are a defeated community but they, as Michael Carroll points out, "pretend to speak of master's language" only to discredit the master as Caliban does in *The Tempest* (105). They do not have autonomy, but they are self-conscious about the political formations of the community and the subjection by the invaders. This self-understanding is the primary step in attaining political freedom.

Moreover, Kundera's novelistic critiquing of communist biopolitics and surveillance gets an uncanny expression in the Tereza-Sabina relationship. Before fleeing from Prague, the two women meet. Tereza is charmed by Sabina's ingenuity and

nonchalance though the friendship with Sabina does not relieve Tereza either of her jealousy or of her nightmarish trauma. As the two women grow friendly, Sabina finds Tereza a job as a photographer in Prague. Thus, the character of Tereza is weaponized with a camera and Sabina with her painting. Kundera, here, handles binaries, in Adams' terms, "the most urgent poles" of his contemporary biopolitics (133). When the totalitarian state's panoptical lens is watching and regulating every aspect of civic life, Tereza looks back to "Big brother" and the communist unrest through the lens of her camera. Likewise, Sabina subverts the necropolitics of deaths around her with her colors and sketches. Sabina as an artist recognizes that Communists, like Fascists and religious fanatics, employ sentimentalist kitsch and propaganda as their means of tyrannical control—the extremist biopolitics (Kundera, *Unbearable* 99, 250). Sabina needs freedom to pursue her experiments in painting and she feels the absence of that liberty in the hands of invaders.

In the end, Kundera sings the winning song of life against the controlled rendition of biopolitics. We see Tomas and Tereza die in a driving accident in the countryside they choose to live in, neither in concentration camps nor by the bullets of the secret police. They choose to live away from both the din and bustle of urban fame and the brutal communist political violence, and, later, are forgotten by the players of biopolitics. Sabina lives in America and Franz remains separated from his wife and finds consolation in a relationship with a young female student at his university and, later, dies in paralysis after being mugged in Bangkok in a political rally. The characters of Kundera find a way to live outside the bindings of the invasive political system. However, this comes with a heavy price of exile, relegation to oblivion, and death in a foreign land. Therefore, I maintain that the characters survive the totalitarian biopolitics but not the authorial one though Kundera's exile and authorial biopolitics, in effect, is his resistance to the communist biopolitics of surveillance, restriction, and maiming.

## **Conclusion**

Biopolitics relegates the unwanted citizens – political dissidents, religious others, and racialized subalterns – into abjection, between subjecthood and objecthood. This relegation spatializes, territorializes, and compartmentalizes the unwanted individuals. However, Kundera exercises the spatialization of his characters to rescue them from the communist necropolitics of mortality. He spreads his characters among continents. Like himself, many of them are immigrants or in permanent exile. The thing to notice about Kundera's characters is the lack of meaningful choices in their lives. Individuals in this frustrating, invaded, and colonized space enact the paradoxes of actions that are indistinguishable in consequences from their opposites. In this brutal space and time, writing a letter or an article is as dangerous as not writing any of them. The state is always watching and reprimanding. Once

the inspectors of biopolitics appear, no matter how the characters respond, their lives are maimed, resources are ruined – the outcome of the tyrannical biopolitics of the author or the state. This situation exemplifies the paradox that is fundamental in an inflexible world in which human beings are deprived of an appropriate milieu for their choices. The context has disappeared because of the tyranny of the power on relatively weaker ones: one powerful state over the weaker one (e.g., Soviet Russia invading Czechoslovakia), one stronger human character over relatively weaker ones (e.g., Tomas's tyranny over Tereza or Sabina's leaving Franz), politicians over civilians, and the author over his characters.

The author, Kundera, pretentiously intrudes into the lives of his characters and dictates their choices and actions. In effect, the writer, then, mimics the government that interferes callously in the lives of its citizens and hegemonically exercises its right to preserve, kill, or maim. Therefore, Tomas-Tereza and Sabina-Franz relationships are invented to experiment with the various shades of biopolitics and to respond to the pressure under the double-edged tyrannies – the tyranny of communist invasion and the tyranny of the author. The biopolitical split works beneath all relationships in the novel. And the “well short of satisfying” kind of relationship is exemplified in this novel through the relationship of Czechoslovakia and Russia. We can see how Dubček and Czechoslovakian authority had to accept the tyranny of strong Soviet Russia. One may hate it, as Tereza hates Tomas's infidelity or the citizens of Czechoslovakia hated the Russian invasion, but he/she has to accept it and move on.

In the end, I maintain that the novel is an attempt to understand the relationships between the conflicting agenda that totalitarian biopolitics poses and acts upon. Kundera's own system of biopolitics deals with these conflicting desires that compel the strong to turn upon the weak. I show that Kundera interferes with the lives of his fictional characters to prove his own thesis on agency and resistance in the face of the stultifying rigor of biopolitics. He shows that this discriminatory biopolitics makes individuals blind to their responsibilities, compels an individual to abandon the loving partner, and coerces another character to seek something intangible in the arms of a bullying mistress. This same biopolitics makes a country stretch its imperialist clutch on a weaker one. The absence of any responsibility – social, political, or familial – in life is the lightness of biopolitics. This absolute biopolitics exposes the absolute emptiness of a totalitarian state. Kundera, ultimately, leaving his characters on their own, stages his novelistic resistance to the totalitarian biopolitics though he makes them suffer endlessly. He resists the invasive “pure irrationality” of biopower that aims at the material annihilation of humans and communities (Kundera, *Art* 10). Kundera, with a satirical sleight of hand, constructs his fictional world with his vibrant, erring, and humane characters, who suffer but do not yield.

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