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The Idea of Deterritorialization as a Mode of Liberation

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Abstract

The following paper has as its central focus an analysis of the modes of liberation and deterritorialization that can be identified in novels of Milan Kundera. The idea of liberation is represented in multiple ways within literature and critical theory. The paper aims to investigate the way the desire for liberation in life also leads to a sense of alienation generating a whole gamut of tensions and consequent responses. The representations of such freedoms are varied and become a matter of exchange between nations with territorial ambitions and individuals who have the choice to either succumb to these territorial ambitions or to resist. The idea of such a resistance is itself elusive – as at times, it could be a state of mind where literature responds to the coercive politics of the state. The paper discusses critical theory in respect to Milan Kundera. Milan Kundera as a novelist evokes questions seamlessly connected to political and literary theories. The paper shall be based on a close reading of the selected texts, which shall be the basis of identifying and defining the various kinds of alienations that are apparent in the concerned works. This would also involve a comparative approach that is both intertextual and theoretical given today's zeitgeist.

Keywords: Liberation, elusive, territory

Introduction

The state acts as a central agent of territorialization through which it controls the dynamics of society. Territorialization is the state's gaze through which all forms of life are seen as extensions of the idea of territory. Territory is not simply a physical space. Territory is an oppressive realm where the idea of the freedom of life is arbitrarily controlled and regulated. Michael Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) creates a discourse around the idea of territory through the metaphor of prison. The book evokes the metaphor of prison as an apparatus of territorialisation which functions in two ways. It maintains a duality between the physical apparatus of oppression symbolised through prisons and implicitly where the state wants to control not our bodies, but our souls. Territorialisation in a non-physical form is a metaphorical extension of the horror of the symbol of prison as an established territory of surveillance in Foucault's text. Thus, surveillance becomes a form of territory in itself which is aimed at controlling people's lives in an abstract sense. The state cannot control people simply through putting everyone in prisons. The state accomplishes the task of controlling people's lives through an incorporeal and transactional discourse of territorialization where people's minds and ideologies rather than their bodies are controlled. It is a more implicit form of establishing control and oppression. The book thus establishes the idea of territory as a symbol of oppression through metaphorical tropes of prison and surveillance. *Discipline and Punish* runs the idea of territory as an oppressive realm by evoking the terror of reader's

imagination which captures more the metaphysical nature of the endlessness of the power of tyranny. It provokes the reader into an imaginative and metaphysical potential of oppression which cannot even be fought directly since it is not physical. The text goes on to terrorise the reader through forms of oppression all up for imagination. Thus, it is not enough to not be a criminal or a political prisoner to lose one's freedom. According to Foucault, everyone is a prisoner in a non-physical sense. People's thoughts, and ideologies are also regarded as territories which need to be controlled. Foucault argues that oppression is intrinsic to the very fabric of any state's constitution. The Constitution is a metaphysical territory for laws that are meant for policing the ways in which people can live their lives. There are laws and norms for love, marriage, divorce, human behaviours, education, and even existence. Territorialisation is reinforced through life's social structures, identities and values of ownerships. Marriage, too, is a form of territorialisation through which two people obligate each other to live together and perform expected roles. Human relationships, including the notion of family and parenthood, are all based on different sets of obligations that are required to be fulfilled through a consensus of ownerships and obligations between people involved and, therefore, such ownerships are all metaphorical territories. Given these realities, territorialisation is a metaphorical prison where the freedoms of life are kept under control.

Defiance against laws is undermined through fear of punishment. So, it is the constitution which ensures a

territorial enforcement of the laws through oppression. But the sense of oppression is also embedded in the social fabric of life and it is established through a consensus of morality and righteousness. Shared perceptions of morality and righteousness are used to police alternate ideas of promiscuity, dissent, freedom. The ideas of freedom and liberalism are seen as territories to be conquered and annexed. The legal apparatus and the social fabric are both extensions of the idea of territory as oppressive. In contrast to the conditions dictated by socio-political oppression stands Gilles Deleuze's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). It foregrounds the concept of deterritorialization as the idea of life being liberated into a flight of transcendence. This idea perceives life being transformed into a realm where the act of living and the act of imagination transcends all conceivable boundaries. Given this, it can also be said that deterritorialization is a form of liberation in which the forms of ownership and obligation are consciously rejected. It responds to the threat of territorialization through deterritorialization. According to the text, deterritorialization is the idea of liberation of life from forms of existential shackles. Deterritorialization is a metaphor for freedom from all forms of ownerships and obligations.

The discourse around territorialization offers to respond on two fronts. George Orwell's *1984* does it through symbolism and allegory. One of the examples of deterritorialization occurs in George Orwell's novel, *1984* (1949). In this imaginatively constructed work, the novelist fictionalised a new world-order where everything is under surveillance. Orwell's novel brings out the idea of 'thought-crime' which can be defined as an extreme, mental form of censorship and surveillance in which even the freedom of thought is not permissible. This naturally points to the unbearably oppressive atmosphere that such an existence promotes. Such oppression is perhaps the most implicit and intelligent form of oppression because it tries to curb the most intelligent human faculty—the ability to think. Thus *1984* fictionalised a realm in which the idea of freedom of thought is turned into an idea of territory which the state can control, and its characters, Winston and Julia, respond to this form of oppression through secrecy and intelligence. Winston defies the institutionalised surveillance of free thought by clandestinely indulging in it; Julia rejects the idea of her body as a territory by using her sexuality as a space for political resistance against the politics of puritanism. In their own ways, Winston and Julia are shown defying totalitarianism through their acts of deterritorialization and liberation.

There is a vast chunk of literature of resistance which responds through a form of protest in very explicit ways like Orwell's novel. Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) steers away from such explicit forms of responses. The novel responds to the oppressive form of territorialization in a very implicit fashion, where it is not the politics of the characters but an internalised sense of defiance through which characters bring a sense of alienation to their lives as a response to the authoritarian politics of the times.

The novel achieves a sense of deterritorialization through an absence of belongingness to any state of existence which can be obligating. The idea of deterritorialization is also a state of mind where one is not always fighting the state or agents of power but is fighting the very idea of life and the modes of existence. This battle is often personal and takes place within an individual who experiences a certain uprooting in life and experiences the consequent angst of rootlessness.

The idea of deterritorialization and alienation also runs strongly through Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. At times, this alienation operates geographically and at other times, it is present incorporeally. In both these respects, it underscores exile from one's roots, one's self, from one's being. The novel is set in communist Prague and traces the idea of alienation of one's identity from one's own self as life is shown progressing. This work also fictionalises deterritorialization by contesting the nature of freedom and its imaginative flights. The flight of freedom and the freedom of imagination occur on two levels in the novel. On a physical level, the novel's characters are individualists who engage with their political regimes and contest them when they run contrary to their personal freedoms.

In the novel, oppression and control take the forms of surveillance which, in turn, are methods of securing ownership and control over lives of individuals, both physically and mentally. Thus, Tereza's sexual encounter with a stranger becomes an act of surveillance when she suspects that she is being watched. Tereza intuitively feels that her sexual partner was a spy. Once this instinct surfaces, she responds by spitting into the man's face; the consequence is that the sexual act is aborted. She resists the surveillance and control over her body in her symbolic act of spontaneous and sudden repulsion during sex with a stranger. Her response underscores a moment of deterritorialization of her sexual self.

Another example of deterritorialization is seen in the rejection of the binding norms of love, commitment and marriage by the novel's protagonists, Tomas and Tereza. The relationship between them is based on an idea of freedom where even acts of infidelity are forgotten. The elusiveness of their relationship, thus, becomes an extension of deterritorialization of the conventional idea of relationship, the love between man and woman and even the self. Kundera portrays their love as an association bereft of any one of them controlling the other. This is a subtle, nuanced way of redefining love as something that transcends the conventional notion of love as a territorial exchange of mere feeling and physicality. To emphasise this aspect of love, Kundera depicts Tomas and Tereza reaching a stage of rootlessness in their lives through the choices they have made. So, Tomas has multiple affairs outside marriage but he is never morally judged by Tereza for his promiscuity. There seems to be an unspoken understanding between the two that, though alienated from each other in conventional terms, they are lovers nonetheless. Both break norms of fidelity through their promiscuities but their love remains unaltered despite their promiscuous experimentations in their lives. They eventually reach a stage where the emotional and physical distance that separates them leads to a sense of self-realisation even while generating tremendous tensions that threaten to pull them apart at the seams. They consequently question their own philosophies and revise them by deciding to distance themselves from the roots of their individual identities. And it is here that Milan Kundera's novel steers away from active sense of resistance or explicit forms of political discourse. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is not purely a political novel because it does not offer explicit political responses. Milan Kundera's characters rather go through internal odysseys of being, return and immortality way beyond matters of politics and so in a sense, the novel is also a deterritorialization of the idea of a political novel. It is a novel which responds to the oppressive political forms of power through an internalised sense of struggle within the lives of characters.

Conscience or integrity is a subterranean theme that runs deep within Kundera's modernism and alienation of forms of life. Characters created by Milan Kundera find themselves on the crossroads between freedom and submission, where the idea of dissent is an expression of one's integrity that one can either lose or have. It is not a physical conflict; it does not involve weapons or combat; it is not a battle of physical strengths. It is, rather, a war between the state and individuals being fought in the battlefield of ideas and values. It is a cerebral, bureaucratic method to control human lives not through physical coercion but through a coercion based on a shared consensus of public moralities that control the thoughts and lives of individuals. Kundera's protagonists exist fleetingly in a realm of exile, outside of all forms of territory, ever ready to leave their roots, societies, belongings, civilization and even life.

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