

“Do as you please, comrades, make a dog of me, spit on me too”: Initiation Ceremonies, the Rape of History and the Ravages of Political Fanaticism in Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*

Verita Sriratana

Department of English Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

Email Address : Verita.S@chula.ac.th

Abstract

Adamant and impatient upon hearing that his first novel, *The Joke* (originally published in the Czech language in 1967), had been read and referred to as a direct and critical blow on Stalinism in Czechoslovakia, Milan Kundera (1929-) was quick to articulate his (in)famous (far from) laughable plea, “Spare me your Stalinism, please”, and his equally (in)famous (far from) laughable claim that *The Joke* is, in fact, a love story. A love story turned sour, the novel is often read and understood as a story of comically tragic/tragically comic destruction brought about by the three lines of political satire which the main character, Ludvik Jahn, lovingly and jokingly wrote on a postcard to Marketa, his object of lust and juvenile affection. In this paper, however, I propose that *The Joke* is more a story of rape. It portrays the processes and consequences of physical and ideological rape. Like Lucie, the character who suffers from the guilt and terrors of gang rape, we are not only gang-raped by the (in)different changing regimes and political fanaticism, but also ravaged into silence and oblivion by History, who, according to Kundera, “enjoys a good laugh”. Through my analysis of the novel’s depiction of initiation ceremonies, which are meant to preserve the purity of the past and the spirit of humanity, I propose that the rape of history and the ravages of political fanaticism take place when love is miscommunicated and ceremonies are misused and misinterpreted. *The Joke*, like rape, is no laughing matter.

Keywords: Milan Kundera, Czechoslovakia, Communism, Rape, Subaltern, Czech literature in English Translation

Introduction: *The Joke* and the Unbearable Silence of Intimate Betrayal

In his 1982 preface to the English translation of *The Joke*, his debut novel which was originally published in the Czech language as *Žert* in the year 1967, Milan Kundera (1929-) expresses his indignation upon hearing that his work has been read and referred to as a political satire: "When in 1980, during a television panel discussion devoted to my works, someone called *The Joke* 'a major indictment of Stalinism,' I was quick to interject, 'Spare me your Stalinism, please. *The Joke* is a love story!" ("Author's Preface" xi). However, instead of veering readers and critics away from political interpretation of the novel, Kundera's (in)famous (far from) laughable plea and equally (in)famous (far from) laughable claim paradoxically produce the opposite effect. A love story turned sour, the novel is often read and understood as a story of comically tragic/tragically comic destruction brought about by the three lines of political satire which the main character, Ludvik Jahn, lovingly and jokingly wrote on a postcard to Marketa, his object of lust and juvenile affection, to attract her attention and lure her into engaging in physical consummation of their shaky relationship. The postcard, bearing the life-changing messages, is a loving and laughable attack on Marketa's seeming oblivion towards the existence of a desperate lover as reflected in her letter sent while attending the Czechoslovak Communist Party (*Komunistická strana Československa* or *KSČ*) training course. It is comically as well as tragically clear that Ludvik's message is written only in the context of a private joke:

[S]he [Marketa] liked everything: the early morning calisthenics, the talks, the discussions, even the songs they sang; she praised the "healthy atmosphere" that reigned there; and diligently she added a few words to the effect that the revolution in the West would not be long in coming. As far as that goes, I quite agreed with what she said; I too believed in the imminence of a revolution in Western Europe; there was only one thing I could not accept: that she should be so happy when I was missing her so much. So I bought a postcard and (to hurt, shock, and confuse her) wrote: Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik. (*The Joke* 34)

Here, it is clear that the only issue which Ludvik finds it painfully difficult to accept is Marketa's lack of interest in him and in their relationship. The fact that Ludvik fully subscribes to Marketa's political statement is a testimony that he, in fact, shares her political creed and allegiance to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. This claim finds its resonance in Maria Nemcova Banerjee's analysis of *The Joke* in *Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera*: "Despite its overt allusion to politics, it [the postcard's message] is more emphatically not a political statement" (22). Most readers will not hesitate to subscribe to the notion that the novel is a political comedy disguised as a love story, and that it is a summation or a longer sequel of the seven short stories which originally appeared in the Czech language prior to the year 1968, but were almost

immediately banned after their first appearance, and were later published in one collection under the Czech title *Směšný lisky*, or *Laughable Loves* in English translation. My initial question is this: Are we lovingly and laughably descending into the pitfall of misinterpretation and miscommunication, which form the main joke jokingly joked in *The Joke*?

Kundera has, in fact, started a joke, which started the whole world (of readers and critics) *(mis)reading* his work. Upon closer look at the (in)famous "Author's Preface", The joke of misunderstanding is amplified as Kundera has left a serious (un)laughable clue as to the incident upon which the book is based and around which it evolves. This clue reveals that Ludvik Jahn is *not* the main victim of the almost unbearable punishment as a result of his own joke. After stating that he started to conceive of the idea of *The Joke* and started to write the novel when he was 33 years old, or in 1962, Kundera places his vision of a character named Lucie Sebelka, the victim of gang rape committed by the friends she trusts, on centre stage:

[A]nd the spark that started me off was an event in a small Czech town: the arrest of a girl for stealing flowers from a cemetery and offering them to her lover as a gift. As I thought it over, a character took shape before my eyes, the character of Lucie, for whom sexuality and love are two completely different, irreconcilable things. (xi)

In the above extract, though Kundera offers an absurd understatement of rape and though rape trauma is ridiculously reduced to tautological division of love and sexuality, one should not be fooled into thinking that Kundera undermines Lucie's plight and sweeps the politics of rape under the rug of a love story *cum* political satire. Further clues can be found in Lucie's surname, Sebelka, a diminutive form of the Hungarian word "sebet" which means "wound". Lucie can be regarded as the hidden wound of the novel as she is the only character who does not voice out and reveal the story of her wounds. We only know her story through the point of view of Kostka, a Catholic Communist with whom Lucie falls in love after having her heart broken by Ludvik. Silently wounded and wounded to silence, Lucie is subjected to violence and suppression, as opposed to self-imposed exiles and punishment described in the confessional accounts of the other characters. While Ludvik bitterly rues the mishap which prevents him from taking revenge on Pavel Zemanek, the friend who destroyed his life, readers should not forget that Lucie does not even possess the same luxury of ruing the mishap which prevents her from taking revenge on six of her friends who committed gang rape as part of the gang's initiation ceremony. For how can rape ever be avenged, let alone mentioned without unbearably aggravating the victim's unspeakable pain?

In this paper, I propose that *The Joke* is a story of the unbearable silence of Lucie's suffering and, hence, a story of *rape*. I also propose that the novel portrays the process and impact of physical as well as ideological rape. Like Lucie, who suffers from the guilt and terrors of gang rape, other characters in the novel

and outside the novel (including us readers) are not only gang-raped by the (in)different changing regimes and political fanaticism, but also ravaged into silence and oblivion by History, who, according to Kundera, “enjoys a good laugh” (“Author’s Preface” xii). Read as a treatment of the politics of rape, *The Joke* is no laughing matter. At this point a question arises: Would our muffled laughs subside and turn into suffocated sobs if *The Joke* was read as a treatment of the unbearable sadness of rape committed by someone or by an ideology we have come to trust, in other words, of “acquaintance rape”? In *Intimate Betrayal: Understanding and Responding to the Trauma of Acquaintance Rape*, Vernon R. Wiehe and Ann L Richards define “acquaintance rape” as a painful oxymoron of complete trust and ultimate betrayal, and consider it as part of “intimate betrayal”: “An acquaintance—a friend, date, family member, neighbor, employer—someone known, someone trusted, violently violates that relationship. The victim is intimately betrayed” (ix).

Through my analysis of the novel’s depiction of initiation ceremonies, which are meant to preserve the purity of the past and the spirit of humanity, I propose that intimate betrayal by history and political fanaticism takes place when love is miscommunicated and when ceremonies are misused and misinterpreted.

I shall begin my textual analysis with the most obscure, yet the most hauntingly memorable, figure in the novel: Lucie Sebetka.

Lucie Sebetka: The Unspeakable Wounds of Rape and Vladimir Clementis’s Fur Cap

Readers come to learn of Lucie’s “wounds” only through the points of view of two men who are her former lovers: Ludvik and Kostka. The notion that the story of rape tends to be told only through the male point of view and viewed as a spectacle only through the male eyes, often underplaying the female voice, finds its resonance in Nicola Gavey’s statement in *Just Sex?: The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*:

Despite long-standing recognition of the sparse existence of heinous rape as a serious crime, rapes were more often silenced, denied, minimized or condoned. Crucially, public discourse on rape was sorely missing a woman’s point of view... Rape is in many ways still tolerated in our society, but no longer without fierce contestation on multiple fronts. (17)

Though Lucie as a person is undermined by the totalitarianism of men’s—to evoke Jean-François Lyotard’s term—“grand narrative”, her haunting spectre and apparition, tinged by both Ludvik and Kostka’s guilt and longing, nevertheless permeates throughout *The Joke*. For Kostka, “Lucie’s soul had been in eternal flight, a flight from both past and future. She had been afraid of everything. Past and future for her were watery depths. In her distress she clung to the leaky boat of the present as to an uncertain refuge” (*The Joke* 237). For Ludvik, “the figure of Lucie emerged to remind me that every attempt to right the wrongs done me had ended with my wronging others” (*The Joke* 310). “The wrong” which Ludvik has “done” to Lucie is later

recounted by Kostka, Lucie's friend who hides his lust for Lucie's "virginal mind" under the guise of a spiritual mentor: "Until that time Lucie had known neither belief nor unbelief. I suddenly felt a moment of vertigo, something akin to what a lover must feel when he discovers no male body has preceded his in his beloved" (*The Joke* 227). A married man who has no intention of leaving his family for Lucie, Kostka also counts as one of the people who commit the crime of intimate betrayal. Kostka perceives the mind of Lucie as a place which he can claim as his own and as a place upon which he can imprint his Catholic faith in the same way that Ludvik perceives the body of Helena, Pavel Zemanek's wife, as a territory which he can (re)claim as part of his plan to take revenge on the man who destroyed his life: "but the body was here, a body I had stolen from no one, in which I'd vanquished no one, destroyed no one, a body abandoned, deserted by its spouse, a body I had intended to use but which had used me and was now insolently enjoying its triumph, exulting, jumping for joy" (*The Joke* 201). Though his revenge is futile in his eyes since Helena has been living her own life separated from her husband and since Pavel has been in relationship with a blossoming young woman "whose beauty immediately reminded me of the painful imperfection of the body I had been with yesterday afternoon" (*The Joke* 269), Ludvik nevertheless views the female body as men's conquest and prized possession.

The story's sad irony is magnified when readers learn that Kostka is also Ludvik's old friend. Kostka is not in the least aware when he recounts the story of Lucie's past to Ludvik that it is Ludvik who is Lucie's former lover and, most importantly, the man who attempted to rape her in Ostrava:

It was a very small room. Dangling crookedly from the ceiling was an unshaded, obscenely naked light bulb. A bed was by the wall, a picture hanging over it, and in the picture a handsome man in a blue robe kneeling. It was the Garden of Gethsemane, but Lucie didn't know it. That was where he had gone with her, and she had fought and screamed. He wanted to rape her, ripped off her clothes, but she eluded him and ran, far away. (*The Joke* 230)

One account of rape leads to another. According to Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, "[t]he body of a raped woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield, a parade ground for the victor's trooping of the colors. The act that is played out upon her is a message passed between men – vivid proof of victory for one and loss and defeat for the other" (38). It is this short and painful line uttered by Lucie, "[b]ecause he [Ludvik] was nasty and brutal, like all the others" (*The Joke* 231), which leads Kostka back to Lucie's unspeakable and unbearable past. The gang rape incident happened when Lucie was 16 years old. The perpetrators are the friends in her group, who persuaded her—with success—to take part in a twisted initiation ceremony:

She spread her legs. She was afraid, she knew what it meant, but she obeyed. Then she screamed and the blood flowed out of her. The boys roared, raised their glasses, and poured the raw sparkling wine down their leader's back, over her body and between her legs, and shouted something about Christening and Initiation, and then the leader stood up from her and another went to her, they each took their turn in order of seniority until it came time for the youngest of all, who was sixteen like her, and Lucie couldn't take any more, she couldn't stand the pain any more, she wanted to rest, wanted to be by herself, and because he was the youngest she dared to push him away. But just because he was the youngest he refused to be humiliated. He was one of the gang after all, he belonged fully! And to prove it he slapped her across the face, and no one in the gang stood up for her because they all knew that the youngest was in the right and was merely claiming his due. (*The Joke* 232-233)

After rape had been established as the gang's tradition, Lucie repeatedly subjected herself to this rite of passage: "Then it happened over and over, either in the same flat or in other ones, and out in the fields too. It became a habit with the gang" (*The Joke* 233). When asked by Kostka why she did not refuse to take part in the gang's "habitual" rape sessions or quit the gang altogether, Lucie gives a harrowing reply: "there was no way out, forward, backward, anywhere" (*The Joke* 233). Trapped in her insecurity and loyalty to the gang, where she felt she belonged, and trapped in the habitual judgement which her hometown, Cheb, imposed upon "loose women" like her, it was impossible for Lucie to find her way out of the vicious circle of female subjugation:

[I]t was common knowledge that she went around with the gang, common knowledge too that she gave its members everything a young girl could give. She was the shame of all Cheb, and at home they beat her black and blue. The boys got varying sentences, and she was sent to a reformatory. She spent a year there—until she was seventeen. She wouldn't have returned home for anything on earth. That is how she came to live in the black city. (*The Joke* 233)

It is remarkable that only a chance arrest of some members of the gang who had earlier committed petty crimes helped release Lucie from the hell of habitual rape, which is a crime of no laughing matter. It is not difficult for readers to speculate what would have happened to Lucie had the police had not barged in on the gang members performing their heinous ceremony. Kundera's understated depiction of how women who

are victims of intimate violence, such as acquaintance rape, suffer in silence reflects Catherine MacKinnon's assertion made in *Are Women Human?: And Other International Dialogues*:

The other way violations of women are obscured is this: When no war has been declared, and life goes on in a state of every hostilities, women are beaten and raped by men to whom we are close. Wives disappear from supermarket parking lots. Prostitutes float up in rivers or turn up under piles of rags in abandoned buildings. These atrocities are not counted as human rights violations, their victims as the *desaparecidos* of everyday life. In the record of human rights violations they are overlooked entirely because what is done to her is also done to men. Her suffering has the dignity, and her death the honor, and her legal status the recognition of a crime against humanity. But when a woman is tortured by her husband in her home, humanity is not seen to be violated. Here she is a woman—*only* a woman. Internationally, her violation outrages the conscience of few beyond her friends. (180-181)

Lucie is one of the many female “desaparecidos” [“disappeared ones”], who are not only culprits of sexual violation, but also culprits of oblivion whose fate is sealed by the passing of time and by political ideology. Upon hearing a Moravian folk song, which seems to preserve the history of a bygone era, Ludvik, who is consumed by guilt, reminisces about the woman whom he intimately betrayed and whom he did not know intimately at all:

In the distance I could hear the drunken plaint of a drawn-out Moravian song (in which it seemed to me were enthralled the nostalgia of the steppe, of the long rides of the mercenary Uhlans, and suddenly Lucie emerged in my mind, the story of long ago that at this moment resembled the drawn-out song and spoke to my heart, through which (as through the steppe) so many women had passed without leaving a trace, just as the rising dust leaves no trace on that flat, broad square, settles between the cobblestones and rises again to fly off on a gust of wind. (*The Joke* 250)

It is upon the silent “desaparecidos” or, to evoke Gayatri Spivak, the silent “subalterns”, forever spoken for and (mis)represented, that regime after regime firmly establishes itself. It is also upon these silent subalterns, condemned to obscurity, that social tradition is founded. The irony lies in the fact that ceremonies, which are supposed to exist to preserve and rescue the past from oblivion and which are supposed to function as symbolic markers for each stage in an individual's life from the cradle to the grave, produces the opposite

effect. My argument finds its resonance in Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, a novel published under the title *Le Livre du rire et de l'oubli* in 1979 after he migrated to France. The novel begins with the story behind the famous photograph of Klement Gottwald (1896-1953), Moravian-born President of Czechoslovakia after the 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état, which marked the beginning of four decades of Communist dictatorship, and Vladimír Clementis (1902-1952), Slovak-born prominent member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party who spearheaded the coup and later succeeded Jan Masaryk (1886-1948) as Foreign Minister:

In February 1948, Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to address the hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens packed into Old Town Square. It was a crucial moment in Czech history—a fateful moment of the kind that occurs once or twice in a millennium.

Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing next to him. There were snow flurries, it was cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. The solicitous Clementis took off his own fur cap and set it on Gottwald's head.

The Party propaganda section put out hundreds of thousands of copies of a photograph of that balcony with Gottwald, a fur cap on his head and comrades at his side, speaking to the nation. On that balcony the history of Communist Czechoslovakia was born. Every child knew the photograph from posters, schoolbooks, and museums.

Four years later Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history and, obviously, out of all the photographs as well. Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. Where Clementis once stood, there is only bare palace wall.

All that remains of Clementis is the cap on Gottwald's head. (3)

Photo manipulation seems a typical story and the name of the game in this particular era, particularly when the photographed person, with a twist of fate, falls out of the leader's or the regime's favour. Clementis's downfall is a case in point. Accused for being a Trotskyite-Titoist-Zionist "bourgeois nationalist", convicted in the Šliinský show trial and later hanged in 1952 (Jancura), Clementis is the embodiment of a statement made by Kundera: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (*Book of Laughter and Forgetting* 3). It can be said that Clementis lost his battle against power and oblivion. Apart from the fur cap which remains on the photo as the only evidence of his devotion to the Party, two smoking

pipes and some tobacco, the only remnants of Clementis's last days, were passed on to his wife after the execution (Jančura). Clementis's ashes never reached his family or hometown as the secret police scattered them somewhere on the road near Prague (Jančura). The regime leader's initiation ceremony on the balcony, an attempt to seal authoritative power with an official public speech, not only marked the momentous event of Communist victory, but also ironically subjected even the leader's own kind to unjust, as well as obscure, persecution and abject oblivion.

And what is left of Lucie's wounds? In Lucie's case, it is the gang's initiation ceremony which ironically violated and subjected her to silence and humiliation. Running away from Ostrava, where Ludvík almost succeeded in restaging the nightmares of rape, Lucie was arrested by the authorities for having stolen flowers at a cemetery for Ludvík. Kostka describes the recurrent symbolic meaning of rape, of being trapped and rendered powerless by men, which has become the fateful motif of Lucie's life as follows:

And yet I felt a strange pain when I heard how Lucie was trapped. Even now I can't suppress a twinge in my heart when I imagine the director and the chairman rummaging through her suitcase, fingering the most intimate articles of her private life, the tender secrets of her dirty linen, looking where it is forbidden to look.

And I have the same agonizing feeling whenever I imagine her haylined lair with no means of escape, with a single door blocked by two hefty men,

Later, when I learned more about Lucie, I realized to my astonishment that in both these agonizing images the very essence of her fate was directly revealed to me. These two images represented *the situation of rape*. (*The Joke* 221)

The Joke is, in this regard, Lucie's story. It is a story of the situation and politics of rape which subtly criticises how rape itself is conditioned and, in turn, has the power to condition social values, of which the most concrete representation can be seen in initial ceremonies. I therefore subscribe to Tanya Horeck's argument in *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* that "[r]epresentations of rape, and the figure of the raped woman, ..., operate as the ground over which the terms of the social – and the sexual – contract are secured" (9). The oxymoron of memory and forgetting, which forms part of the rationale behind social ceremonies, is magnified when readers consider Lucie's traumatic experience of the ceremony of gang rape against the backdrop of Jaroslav's views on folk tradition.

The King behind the Veil: Communism, Ceremonies and the Ravages of Time

Jaroslav, a folk musician whose distinctively Slavic name stems from strong pagan tradition (the word

“jar” means spring in the Czech and Slovak languages), is Ludvik’s childhood friend. Reluctant to join the Communist Party at first: “For us the February Communist coup meant a reign of terror” (*The Joke* 138), Jaroslav, an aficionado of Moravian folk tradition, eventually becomes a staunch supporter of the regime of which objectives are to revive and promote folk culture as the only legitimate art and culture which can rightfully serve the mass: “The Communist Party supported us. So our political reservations quickly melted away. I myself joined the Party at the beginning of forty-nine. And the others from the ensemble soon followed me” (*The Joke* 143). Since, in his view, “[n]o one had ever done so much for folk art as the Communist government” (*The Joke* 141), Jaroslav decides to devote his life to the preservation of Moravian folk culture and to the art politics of Soviet’s socialist realism: “The Communist Party went all out to create a new way of life. It based its efforts on Stalin’s famous definition of the new art: socialist content in national form. And national form in music, dance, and poetry could come from nowhere but folk art” (*The Joke* 141). A dedicated “engineer of the human soul” (Zhdanov 16), according to Stalinist art policies of his time, Jaroslav is an epitome of the kind of artist defined and approved by Andrei Zhdanov (1896-1948), director of the Soviet Union’s cultural policy, in his speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934:

It [being engineers of the human soul] means, in the first place, that you must know life to be able to depict it truthfully in artistic creations, to depict it neither “scholastically” nor lifelessly, nor simply as “objective reality”, but rather as reality in its revolutionary development. The truthfulness and historical exactitude of the artistic image must be linked with the task of ideological transformation of the education of the working people in the spirit of socialism. This method in fiction and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism. (15)

Dedicated to preserving “historical exactitude” (Zhdanov 15), Jaroslav refuses to view himself and refuses to let others, especially his son, view him as a folklore fanatic: “Your papa is not just a crackpot folklore addict. Maybe he is an addict, but he goes deeper than that. He hears in folk art the sap that kept Czech culture from drying up” (*The Joke* 128). He believes that his mission is to safeguard the glory of the Czech nation as well as pass on the torch of Slavic history and civilisation to the younger generation:

The folk song or folk rite is a tunnel beneath history, a tunnel that preserves much of what wars, revolutions, civilization have long since destroyed aboveground. It is a tunnel through which I see far into the past. I see Rostislav and Svatopulk, the first Moravian princes. I see the ancient Slavic world. (*The Joke* 133)

Apart from preservation work, true to the assigned role of a human soul’s engineer, Jaroslav also creates

works of art, or in this case musical composition, which are meant to serve the Party's "ideological transformation" (Zhdanov 15) of workers:

And we didn't sing only the traditional lays about brigands slitting their beloveds' throats, we wrote new pieces all our own, songs about Stalin or about the plowed fields or the harvest or cooperative farms. No longer was our song just a memory of the past. It was alive. It was part of contemporary history. It accompanied it. (*The Joke* 141-142)

Kundera does not create a flat character out of Jaroslav. The person articulating the above lines is far from being a dull mouthpiece of Stalinist art politics: "My love for it [folklore] dates back to the war. They tried to make us believe we had no right to exist, we were nothing but Czech-speaking Germans. We needed to prove to ourselves we'd existed before and still did exist. We all made a pilgrimage to the sources" (*The Joke* 128-129). Mutual gain, which benefits both the state and the individual, is the name of the game and therefore the most effective and efficient way for a regime to rule and thrive. Jaroslav's pure passion for folk culture and strong nationalist inclination supplement and perpetuate the policies of a regime which (mis)uses and (mis)appropriates nationalism and pan-Slavism in folklore as part of the pro-Soviet propaganda:

Capitalism had destroyed this old collective life. And so folk art had lost its foundations, its reason for being, its function. It would be useless to try to resurrect it while social conditions were such that man lived cut off from man, everyone for himself. But socialism would liberate people from the yoke of their isolation. They would live in a new collectivity. United by a common interest. Their private and public lives would merge. They would be connected by a host of rituals. Some they would take from the past: harvest festivals, folk dances, customs bound up with their daily work. Others they would create anew: May Day, meetings, the Liberation anniversary, rallies. (*The Joke* 141)

I propose that Jaroslav's story can be read as an allegory of post-coup Czechoslovakia, a totalitarian state falsely declares itself to uphold "people's democracy" and subjects itself to the Soviet Union under the guises of nationalism and national interest:

On 9 May 1948, three years to the day after the official liberation of Prague by the Soviet army, the Czechoslovak Republic adopted the constitution that set the seal on the country's fate as a totalitarian police state. Czechoslovakia, the last country in Europe to fall behind the Iron Curtain, was to remain under the control of the KSČ, itself kept under the watchful eye of the Kremlin, for the next forty-one years. But unlike other Soviet satellites of Central and Eastern

Europe, the Czechoslovak People's Democracy was neither forced to go Communist nor to ally itself with the Soviet Union. It did both voluntarily, acting in what looked to the political leadership of the day to be national self-interest. (Heimann 150)

It is the delusion of love which serves as the strongest handcuffs of voluntary punishment: "the vanity of power manifests itself not only in cruelty but also (though less often) in gentleness" (*The Joke* 89). It is the illusion of self-interest which drives individuals to voluntary subjugation. Like Ludvik, Jaroslav realises only when it is too late that his profound love for folk tradition has not only been miscommunicated, in that it has served as part of the Communist state apparatus: "The cultivation of folk art was an integral part of Communist education" (*The Joke* 253), but also been misunderstood by his son, Vladimir, and his wife, Vlasta (which means "homeland"). Chosen as king for the Ride of the Kings [*Jzda králů*] ceremony because of his father's merit and life-long dedication to folk culture, Vladimir, whose Slavic name means "universal ruler", refuses to take part in this ancient Moravian ceremony and conspires with his mother in deceiving his father, leading his father to believe that the substitute on horseback who acts as king in Vladimir's stead is really his son. To help readers of this paper understand the (un)laughable bitterness of this betrayal from Jaroslav's perspective, I shall offer a brief overview of the Ride of the Kings tradition.

Each year, in a number of small towns in South-Eastern Moravia, along the Czech-Slovak border, a young boy is elected or chosen as king. He is to wear a woman's dress, hide his face behind a veil and put a rose in his mouth so as to keep silent throughout the ceremonious ride through town and, in some cases, between towns. His heralds recite verses and call out to onlookers for gifts and donation. The origin of this tradition is obscure. As Ludvik speculates in the novel, the transvestism involved might serve as a "protection from evil spirits" (*The Joke* 262), a reflection of pagan superstition. The ceremony's emphasis on young men, he continues to speculate, might suggest that it is part of "[b]oyhood rites of passage" (*The Joke* 262). The figure of the king might hark back to the Hungarian king Matthias I who tried to escape from the Czech king Jiří (George) of Poděbrady. However, some people believe the tradition to be older than this particular legend:

When the defeated Hungarian king Matthias was fleeing from Bohemia to Hungary, he and his cavalry were forced to hide from their Czech pursuers here in the Moravian countryside and beg their daily bread. The Ride of the Kings is said to be a reminder of that historic event of the fifteenth century, but even a brief perusal of old documents shows that the tradition of the Ride is much older than this. (*The Joke* 262)

Whether or not the true legend or rationale behind the Ride of the Kings can ever be known is not important.

I propose that *The Joke* demonstrates how tradition and its concrete manifestation, ceremony, are empty signifiers of which original meanings have been ravaged by time and, as a result, obliterated from collective memory. The true meaning of ceremonies, like the mute king on horseback, is hidden behind a colourful veil of changing regimes. The Ride of the Kings evolved from its supposedly Hungarian (and Great Moravian Empire) origin to a ceremony considered quintessentially Czech and to a folk tradition which unites the mass according to the Socialist doctrine:

So in the beginning of our century we had folklore societies springing up, taking folk art out of the songbooks and bringing it back to life. First in the towns, Then in the countryside as well. And most of all in Moravia. They worked to revitalize the folk rituals, the Ride of the Kings, they supported folk ensembles. (*The Joke* 129)

Traditions can be usurped and hijacked to support and propagate a particular ideology. According to Jaroslav's account, before the Communist Party offers full-fledged support for the restaging of the ceremony, the Ride of the Kings has been used as a part of a nationalist campaign against the Nazis who invaded and occupied the region:

The war gave us new impetus. In the last year of the Nazi occupation, the Ride of the Kings was staged in our village... The Ride turned into a demonstration. A host of colorful young men on horseback, with sabers. An invincible Czech horde. A deputation from the depths of history. That's how all the Czechs saw it, and their eyes lit up. I was fifteen at the time, and they chose me king. I rode between two pages and had my face veiled. I was proud. And my father was proud, knowing they had chosen me king in his honor. He was a village schoolmaster, a patriot, everyone admired him. (129)

With Jaroslav crowned as the king whose face was hidden behind a veil, the ceremony was transformed into a resistance movement befitting the spirit of the age.

Traditions can also be used as examples or testimonies of the impossibility of authentic communication and signification:

"And why is it called the Ride of the Kings when there is only one king involved? What does it all mean? No one knows. There are a number of hypotheses, none of them has been proved. The Ride of the Kings is a mysterious rite, no one knows what it means, what it wants to say, but just as Egyptian hieroglyphs are most beautiful to those who cannot read them (and perceive them as mere fanciful sketches), so too, perhaps, the Ride of the Kings

is beautiful because the content of its communication has long since been lost and gestures, colors, words come more and more into the foreground, drawing attention to themselves and to their own aspect and shape. (*The Joke* 262)

Within the timespan of only one generation, what the Ride of the Kings meant for the young Jaroslav is completely lost on Vladimir. For Jaroslav, to be crowned king is a once-in-a-lifetime event:

All the basic situations in life occur only once, never to return. For a man to be a man, he must be fully aware of this never-to-return. Drink it to the dregs. No cheating allowed. No making believe it's not there. Modern man cheats. He tries to get around all the milestones on the road from birth to death. The man of the people is more honest. (*The Joke* 148)

For Vladimir, however, to be crowned king means the opposite. Instead of accepting the honour of being chosen as king and regarding it as the community's way of honouring and expressing appreciation for his father, Vladimir runs away to a motorcycle race:

Nowadays people couldn't move a finger on their own. Everything was arranged from above. Before, the boys used to elect the king themselves. Now, Vladimir had been suggested to them from above to please his father, and everyone had to obey. Vladimir was ashamed to be a privileged child. (*The Joke* 305)

Vladimir's disregard for folk tradition, which, for Jaroslav, means everything in the world, is perhaps the most painful betrayal of all. This betrayal is rendered more painfully unbearable upon the realisation that his wife, Vlasta, conspires with his son in arranging for a stand-in to fool him into believing that his pride and joy is actually on the horse and taking part of the ceremony he deems sacred. As the identity of the fake king who hides behind a colourful veil is revealed, the constructed-ness of meanings and ideologies hidden behind many colours and insignias of changing regimes are also exposed. Jaroslav's universe of fairytales and folklore collapses. What is worse, Vlasta, the embodiment of his home and his "homeland", has betrayed him and deprived him of comfort and certainty. Such is the tragedy which befalls the old king who is dethroned by change and ravaged by time: "The street belonged to the Ride of the Kings, home belonged to Vlasta, the taverns belonged to the drunks. Where do I belong? I am the old king, abandoned and banished. A righteous pauper king without heirs. The last king" (*The Joke* 308).

Conclusion: Too Much Love Can Kill You

According to Banerjee, "[o]ne of the paradoxes of this period was that the victims of Communism were often the very devotees who had helped usher it in" (12). This might remind readers of this paper of the

plight which befell Vladimir Clementis mentioned in the previous section. I shall conclude this article with a discussion of three characters whose faith in and loving devotion to the regime turn into fanaticism and lead to ideological rape: Ludvik, Marketa and Alexej.

I shall begin this paper's last section by returning to Ludvik and Marketa.

Though Ludvik makes fun of the regime, he is nevertheless a staunch supporter of the Communist Party. It is his miscommunication of love, not his overt dissidence towards the regime, which sends him to a meeting with the Party's University Committee, of which members not only have read but also have had in their possession Ludvik's postcard. To his horror and humiliation, the Party's committee, led by his friend Pavel Zemanek, the Party chairman, unanimously vote in favour for his expulsion from the Communist Party and, what is worse, from the university. After the verdict, Ludvik enlists himself in a military labour camp and works in the mines in Ostrava for five years. The dire consequence which Ludvik must bear is a result of his failure to communicate his love and affection to Marketa who, lacking Ludvik's kind of humour, is notoriously incapable of understanding jokes:

[S]he [Marketa] was a girl of trusting simplicity; she was unable to look behind anything; she could only see the thing itself; she had a remarkable mind for botany, but would often fail to understand a joke told by a fellow student; she let herself be carried away by the enthusiasm of the times, but when confronted with a political deed based on the principle that the end justifies the means, she would be as bewildered as she was by a joke; (*The Joke* 34)

It is the characters' failure to unconditionally accept each other and look at each other through eyes unclouded by his/her own illusory expectations and self-gratifying judgement, that not only wrecks their relationship but also condemns one of them to unnecessary punishment: "The psychological and physiological mechanism of love is so complex that at a certain period in his life a young man must concentrate all his energy on coming to grips with it, and in this way he misses the actual content of the love: the woman he loves" (*The Joke* 33). Though aware that Marketa might not understand his joke, Ludvik nevertheless expresses his longing for her in his own loveable and laughable satire, which Marketa does not find loveable and laughable in the least. The inevitable outcome is total miscommunication:

[I]t all goes back to my fatal predilection for silly jokes and Marketa's fatal inability to understand them. Marketa was the type of woman who takes everything seriously (which made her totally at one with the spirit of the era); her major gift from the fates was an aptitude for credulity. (*The Joke* 31)

Marketa's loyalty to the Communist Party blinds her from the fact that the postcard was written by the young man who only seeks her attention. After handing the postcard over to the Party's Committee, Marketa asks to

see Ludvik and showers him with her sweet words. Whether or not Marketa loves him is a matter undermined by the real inspiration behind her display of affection:

[Y]es, she had acted badly in deciding not to see me anymore; no man is completely lost, however great his mistakes. She recalled the Soviet film *Court of Honor* (at that time very popular in Party circles), in which a Soviet medical researcher places his discovery at the disposal of other countries before his own, an act bordering on treason. She had been especially touched by the film's conclusion: though the scientist is in the end condemned by a court of honor consisting of his colleagues, his wife does not desert him; she does her best to infuse in him the strength to atone for his egregious error. (*The Joke* 45)

Upon being asked if she thinks he has really committed an unforgivable crime, to which she replies yes, and if he has the right to remain in the party, to which she replies no, Marketa shows that her love for Ludvik is nothing but a shadow of her political fanaticism, which manifests itself in the form of a popular Soviet film. Unable to admit his ridiculous charges, Ludvik is unable to accept Marketa's token of love. The reason for their incompatibility lies not in mutual hatred, but their "love so right" which has "turned out to be so (laughably) wrong", or which has been wrong and illusory from the start. Their relationship, which is based on self-gratifying delusion and miscommunication, can never be consummated:

I knew that if I joined the game Marketa had thrown herself into, and which she appeared to be living wholeheartedly on the emotional side, I would gain everything that I had sought in vain for months: powered by a Salvationist passion as a steamboat is powered by steam, she was all ready to give herself to me. On one condition, of course: that her Salvationist urge be fully satisfied; for that to happen, it was necessary that the object of salvation (alas, I in person) would have to agree to acknowledge his deep, his very deep guilt. And that I could not do. I was minutes away from the long-desired goal of her body, but I could not take it at that price. (*The Joke* 45)

Ludvik and Marketa can be read as two different types of political fanatics. The categories can be seen laid out, I propose, in "The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire", a short story published in the *Laughable Loves* collection:

When you believe in something literally, through your faith you'll turn it into something absurd. One who is a genuine adherent, if you like, of some political outlook, never takes its *sophistries* seriously, but only its *practical aims*, which are concealed behind these *sophistries*. Political rhetoric and *sophistries*

do not exist, after all, in order to be believed; rather, they serve as a common and agreed upon alibi. Foolish people, who take them seriously, sooner or later discover inconsistencies in them, begin to protest, and finish finally and infamously as heretics and apostates. No, too much faith never brings anything good— (68-69)

Ludvik can be counted as “a genuine adherent”, who possesses the kind of wit and humour to joke about the regime’s sophistries, whereas Marketa can be counted as one of the “foolish people” who cannot look past the sophistries to the practical objectives of a political thought. It is the latter type of conformist, the foolish and superficial type who does not possess the intelligence and sense of humour which will enable him/her to laugh at the regime, that does more harm to both his/her opponent and the very regime to which he/she dedicates her life. In the case of Alexej, however, we encounter a special category of political fanatic which, I propose, is the most dangerous and destructive of all: the intellectual fool.

Alexej, son of a high-ranking Communist official, betrayed his father by informing the authorities about his father’s subversive behaviour, leading to his father’s arrest: “he had renounced his father for betraying and defiling the most sacred things his son knew” (*The Joke* 101). Like Marketa, Alexej is unable to look past the jargons and sophistries of his revered god named socialism. Unlike Marketa, however, Alexej does not have a moment of guilt or a moment of hesitation in which he rues the crime of betrayal committed to his father. He lives on an intellectual’s illusion, purged of all human sympathy, that the punishment to which he subjects his father and also himself is a trial meant to assess the level of one’s love and loyalty to the regime. Through Ludvik’s point of view, we come to learn that Alexej, faithful to the spirit of “engineer of the human soul” like Jaroslav, exhibits his intellectual and artistic talent by composing a poem about his noble voluntary incarceration:

As soon as he found out I had been a Party member myself, he opened up to me a bit; he confided that come what might, he was determined to pass the supreme test life had placed before him and never betray the Party. Then he read me a poem he wrote (the first he had ever written) when he heard he was to be transferred to our regiment. It included this quatrain:

*Do as you please, Comrades,
Make a dog of me, spit on me too.
But in my dog’s mask, under your spittle, Comrades,
I’ll remain faithfully in the ranks with you. (The Joke 88)*

Alexej’s “dogged” dogmatic views expose the (un)laughably pathetic self-delusion which renders intellectual fools like himself not only *useless* for they fail to employ their intellectual capacity to question and criticise the

regime, but also *dangerous* for they enhance the regime's power in the most destructive of ways: "according to him [Alexej], the line between socialism and reaction held everywhere and our barracks were simply a means of defending socialism against its enemies" (97). Returning to "The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire", I argue that these pseudo-intellectual conformists can be compared to Judas Iscariot who, according to one particular book, betrays Jesus out of absolute fanaticism and exceptional, though blinded, love/faith in God:

I thought about Judas Iscariot, about whom a brilliant author relates that he betrayed Jesus just because he *believed* in him infinitely; He couldn't wait for the miracle through which Jesus was to have shown all the Jews his divine power, so he handed him over to his tormentors in order to provoke him at last to action; he betrayed him because he longed to hasten his victory. (73)

Like the dogged, devout and dogmatic Judas who betrayed Jesus out of love and respect for God's power and glory, Alexej betrays his own father out of love and respect for the Communist Party's power and glory. Alexej's demise, unsurprisingly, is similar to Judas's. Upon learning that he has been expelled from the Communist Party, Alexej is unable to stand the unbearable pointlessness of being cast away from the Party which he loves. As a result, just like Judas who hanged himself, Alexej commits suicide.

If the most pressing role of Humanities in this present rapidly changing world under changing political regimes is to connect, preserve and, most importantly, question personal and collective memories, to touch and acknowledge the wounds of personal and collective (hi)stories, then this paper serves as a small contribution to such a hopeful mission. For readers in Thailand, a complacent place reeking of "healthy atmosphere" (*The Joke* 37) which serves as a veil behind which physical and ideological rapes are hidden from view, a place where initiation ceremonies, especially those which take place among university students adhering to the illusion of power, led to death and abject oblivion, Milan Kundera's *The Joke* is no light-hearted laughing matter. But even if it should be a mere joke to some, it is undeniable that this joke is one which is harshly played upon those who think it so.

Whether we like it or not, *this joke is on us*.

And history is terrible because it so often ends up a playground for the immature: a playground for the young Nero, a playground for the young Bonaparte, a playground for easily roused mobs of children whose simulated passions and simplistic poses suddenly metamorphose into a catastrophically real reality. (*The Joke* 87)

Bibliography

- Banerjee, M. N. (1992). *The Joke or Uneasy Rider*. Terminal Paradox: The Novels of Milan Kundera. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, pp. 11-51.
- Brownmiller, S. (1993). *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.
- Gavey, N. (2005). *Just Sex?: The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. New York: Routledge.
- Horeck, T. (2004). *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*. London: Routledge.
- Heimann, M. (2011). *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- Jancura, V. (2008). *Ako pykal irok za smrt Clementisa*. [“How irok Atoned for Clementis’s Death”]. Pravda.sk (19 January 2008), from <http://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/156475-ako-pykal-siroky-za-smrt-clementisa>
- Kundera, M. (1984). *Author’s Preface*. *The Joke*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim. New York: Penguin Books, pp. xi-xvi.
- _____. (1978). *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim. London: Faber and Faber.
- _____. (1999). *The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire*. *Laughable Loves*. Trans. Suzanne Rappaport. London: Faber and Faber, pp. 47-75.
- _____. (1992). *The Joke*. London: Faber and Faber.
- MacKinnon, C. A. (2006). *Are Women Human?: And Other International Dialogues*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Wiehe, V. R. & Richards, A. L. (1995). *Intimate Betrayal: Understanding and Responding to the Trauma of Acquaintance Rape*. California: Sage Publications.
- Zhdanov, A. (1950). *On Literature, Music and Philosophy*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.