

Article

On “Sexual Deviance” in Milan Kundera’s novels

Sobre o “desvio sexual” nos romances de Milan Kundera

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ABSTRACT

In Milan Kundera’s novels, sexual deviance occurs repeatedly. Taking some of Kundera’s representative novels as research perspective, this article tries to analyze the causes of sexual deviance for different genders. Through text analysis, it is not difficult to find that the major reasons for men’s sexual deviance are to seek sexual stimulation, to prove masculinity or to make up for regret. For women, sexual deviance occurs mainly to take revenge on irresponsible husbands, to pursue feminism or to satisfy basic physiological needs. Incest and naked parties are two extreme forms of sexual deviance in Kundera’s novels. For Kundera, incest can cause irreparable harm to the family members. Therefore, it belongs to a kind of social spiritual ecological problem. Nude party is a medium for Kundera to express his ethical thoughts, which expresses the author’s respect and recognition of women’s social status. Subsequently, the article focuses on the trauma brought by the sexual deviant behavior to family members and the reactions of those victims. Through in-depth analysis, the article aims to summarize Kundera’s attitude towards sexual deviance. Different from the traditional concept, Kundera’s attitude towards the third party in sexual deviance is quite tolerant which reflects his critical attitude towards traditional ethics. Through the analysis of sexual deviance in Kundera’s novels, this paper aims to provide some enlightenment for solving the similar problems related to sexual deviance in real life.

Keywords: Sexual deviance; Milan Kundera; Trauma

RESUMO

Nos romances de Milan Kundera, o desvio sexual ocorre repetidamente. Tomando alguns dos romances representativos de Kundera como perspectiva de pesquisa, este artigo procura analisar as causas do desvio sexual para diferentes gêneros. Através da análise de textos, não é difícil descobrir que as principais razões para o desvio sexual dos homens são procurar estimulação sexual, provar a masculinidade ou compensar o arrependimento. Para as mulheres, o desvio sexual ocorre principalmente para se vingar de maridos irresponsáveis, para perseguir o feminismo ou para satisfazer necessidades fisiológicas básicas. O incesto e as festas nuas são duas formas extremas de desvio sexual nos romances de

Kundera. Para Kundera, o incesto pode causar danos irreparáveis aos familiares. Portanto, pertence a uma espécie de problema ecológico espiritual social. A festa nua é um meio para Kundera expressar seus pensamentos éticos, que expressam o respeito e o reconhecimento do autor ao status social das mulheres. Posteriormente, o artigo enfoca o trauma trazido pelo comportamento desviante sexual aos familiares e as reações dessas vítimas. Através de uma análise aprofundada, o artigo pretende resumir a atitude de Kundera em relação ao desvio sexual. Diferente do conceito tradicional, a atitude de Kundera em relação ao terceiro no desvio sexual é bastante tolerante, o que reflete sua atitude crítica em relação à ética tradicional. Através da análise do desvio sexual nos romances de Kundera, este artigo pretende fornecer alguma iluminação para a resolução de problemas semelhantes relacionados com o desvio sexual na vida real.

Palavras-chave: Desvio sexual; Milão Kundera; Traumatismos

1 INTRODUCTION

Deviance is a term in sociology that refers to deviation from or violation of common norms of social behavior. The concept of “deviance” was first put forward by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Later, Robert Merton further developed this concept in constructing anomie theory. Sexual deviance is a common type of deviance in social life. It mainly refers to having sex with someone other than the legal spouse. Milan Kundera is “one of the most influential writers in contemporary world literature” Zhao (2023:135). He has won many important literary awards and has been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature several times. “Sex” is a topic that Kundera is most interested in. This theme appears repeatedly in his novels and becomes an important motif in his literary creation. Because of the frequent description of sexual love in Kundera’s novels, some scholars have questioned about his moral orientation. A few researchers have even described his novels as erotic. The author does not agree with the above evaluation. Different from pornographic novels that simply describe sexual behavior itself, Kundera’s novels mainly focus on “sex” in the description of the characters’ pursuit of sexual behavior and the changes in the characters’ inner world before and after the occurrence of sexual behavior, thus triggering readers’ rational reflection and philosophical thinking on “sex”. For Kundera, “sexuality becomes a vehicle for expressing a variety of interwoven threads of commentary

upon human characteristics, and for ultimately casting a pall of hopelessness and meaninglessness over mankind's fundamental existence" (Sturdivant, 1985:131). In addition, the development of sex in Kundera's novels is based on the elaboration of the contradictory relationship between "spirit" and "flesh", which also reflects Kundera's unique understanding of the paradox of modern life. Therefore, his novels should be classified as philosophical ones. My viewpoint can be demonstrated in an interview between Philip Roth and Kundera, during which Kundera confessed: "I feel that sex scenes can create a very strong light that reveals the essence of the characters and the circumstances of their lives at once" (Gao, 1994: 43). In the sexual themes of Kundera's novels, sexual deviance occurs repeatedly. This article will analyze the causes of sexual deviance in Kundera's novels from the perspective of male and female respectively. Incest and naked parties are two extreme forms of sexual deviance in Kundera's novels. This paper will also pay attention to them. Subsequently, the article will analyze the trauma brought by the sexual deviant behavior to family members and the reactions of those victims. Through in-depth analysis, the article aims to summarize Kundera's attitude towards sexual deviance. In the end, this paper will discuss the significance and value of the study of neutral deviant behavior in Kundera's works.

2 CAUSES OF SEXUAL DEVIANCE IN KUNDERA'S NOVELS

In Kundera's novels, both men and women commit marital sexual transgressions. However, the causes vary greatly among different genders. The following will analyze these causes from the perspective of men and women respectively.

2.1 Causes of sexual deviance for male

2.1.1 To seek physical and psychological stimulation

In Kundera's novels, many male characters seek physical and psychological stimulation through sexual deviance. These men want to experience different female

bodies through having sex with them. However, while they enjoy the pleasure of sexual transgression, they are reluctant to take responsibility. In *Farewell Waltz*, Klima seizes every chance to seduce young women and has sex with them. To top it all off, he found an absurd justification for his infidelity by declaring: "Every new infidelity makes me love her (his wife) more than ever" (Kundera, 2013: 35). Once, Klima had a one-night stand with Lucina in a spa town. After the merry, he did not want to bear the responsibility. So, he refused to reply to Lucina's letters and avoided to meet her when she came to the theatre to seek him out. However, Lucina is a person with a strong vanity and material desire. She is unwilling to give up this chance to climb the high career, and the unexpected pregnancy undoubtedly gives her a perfect opportunity. She sent the news to Klima in the first place, forcing the panic-stricken trumpeter to approach her in a fake attempt to persuade her to have an abortion. After being repeatedly rejected for an abortion, Klima's mental state nearly collapsed. He only wants to enjoy the physical and mental stimulation of sexual transgression and doesn't want to take responsibility for it. Klima's deviant behavior is similar to Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In his eyes, each woman is unique. He "was obsessed with the desire to find that one in a million and conquer it. That, in his view, is the point of infatuation with women. He is infatuated not with women, but with the unimaginable part of every woman, in other words, the one millionth thing that makes a woman different from the rest" (Kundera, 2014: 147). As a result, he emphasized his inevitable love for Tereza while constantly taking mistresses.

2.1.2 To prove masculinity

It is an unchangeable law of nature that everyone gets older with each passing day. With the passing of time, the suave youth will gradually become a despised old man. However, many unattractive men cannot accept this harsh truth. In Kundera's novels, some male characters do not want to have sex with women in their deviant behaviors. What they are looking for is a sense of satisfaction from proving their attractiveness by

having an affair with a woman. In *The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire*, Martin is always ready to seduce the beautiful women he meets. He went around chatting up beautiful women, teasing them with ambiguous language, and going after any woman who might have sex with him. Although Martin is highly experienced in theory, he seldom puts theory into practice. In the story, Martin has given up a one-night love affair with a beautiful nurse just to go back to play cards with his beloved wife. It shows that Martin is interested only in the novelty of pursuing “sexual” partners instead of having sex with them. Similarly, Harwell also made it a pleasure to seduce women into bed. However, Harwell’s charm wore off gradually as time went by. It shows the frustrating reality of aging and the importance of sexual behavior while young. Since nobody can do anything to change the natural law of ageing, what Harwell could do is to prove his attractiveness from constant escapades with different women.

2.1.3 To make up for past regrets

In one’s life, there are always many regrets. Many men miss their sexual partners and want to have sex with them again to make up for what they have not achieved. This situation also appears in Kundera’s novels. In *Make way for those who die first to those who die last*, the hero fell in love with a 40-year-old married woman when he was a college student. After dating for some times, they had a sexual experience in a dorm room with the lights off. Afterwards, the hero regretted not seeing his lover’s excited face and vowed to have sex with the lights on the next time. However, the heroine disappeared from his world after that sexual experience, which became the regret of his sexual history. Fifteen years later, the reunion with the woman gives the hero a perfect opportunity to make up for his regret. Although the woman is nearly 60 years old, the hero cannot resist his excitement and insists on having sex with the heroine. In the end, Kundera opts for an open-ended ending, which means an ending without an ending and leaves it to the readers’ imagination. Despite this, it is reasonable to expect that both end up with no excitement afterwards. In *Ignorance*, Joseph had met Irena

at a bar in Prague before he exiled into a foreign country. At that time, they have made a good impression on each other. After the meeting, they never see each other again. Many years later, Joseph returned to his native land and met Irena by chance. Although he was not interested in the middle-aged woman, Joseph still dated and had sex with her. His sexual deviance was just due to an attempt to make up for the past regret.

2.2 Causes of sexual deviance for female

2.2.1 To avenge her husband's transgression

In daily life, sexual transgressions of husbands will bring great psychological trauma to their wives. Facing male's sexual infidelity, many women in Kundera's novels take revenge to solve the problem. In *The Joke*, Elena and Zemanek fell in love at first sight in college and got married shortly after graduation. But as time goes by, Elena's appearance faded gradually. Like any other fickle man, Zemanek got tired with his wife. What's more, their relationship was strained by squabbles over domestic travails. Because of this, Zemanek committed sexual affair with his student. To revenge the husband's sexual deviance, Elena was trying to find a new lover. As a result, she became a pawn in Ludvik's plan for revenge. Similarly, in retaliation for Tomas's sexual escapades, Tereza had sex with an engineer. Revenge is sometimes done by hurting oneself to punish others. However, instead of healing, the wounds continue to grow. Instead of getting even achieving inner balance through revenge, Tereza was driven into deeper pain. Eventually, she suffered from depression because of this.

2.2.2 To pursue feminism

In a male-dominated society, men take the initiative in sexual behavior. However, there is a special group of women who dominate erotic relationships in Kundera's novels. The famous French writer Simone de Beauvoir put forward in *The Second Sex* that "one is not so much 'born' as 'formed' to be a woman" (Beauvoir, 1998:526).

For these women, sexual transgression was a means of demonstrating their feminism. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Sabine is a special case among women. She stood out from childhood against all dogmatic ethics. During her time at school, she was ignorant of the traditional ideas taught at school and focused only on aesthetic ideas she appreciated. Dissatisfied with her father's restrictions on her love, she chose to elope with a man. Because of her unique proud temperament, she has attracted many men. Unlike other women who just want to get married, she used this advantage to change her relationship with men. When she had sex with Tomas, she no longer obeyed him passively. She looked at him from the mirror, leaving everything about him under her gaze. Similarly, Sabine has taken absolute initiative in her relationships with other male lovers. She never intended to be with a man forever, but simply enjoyed the thrill and pleasure of sex. When Franz gave up his reputation and family for her, she chose to leave because of the strong feminist consciousness in her heart. Because Sabine knew that only in this way could she be free and independent, and would not be assimilated by the patriarchal ideology. In addition to Sabine, Tomas has once met a "strange woman" in his quest for sex. The woman was very ugly, but she had a kind of roughness that was different from other women. To Tomas's great surprise, when he ordered her to take off her clothes, she ordered him to do so in return. Finally, after a long period of persistence, each side undressed the other. This woman has something in common with Sabina. Both reveal a unique temperament of rejecting male power from their hearts. They represent a small part of women who are unwilling to be subject to men. As a result, they have issued a voice of female awakening and challenged the male power system with their brave actions.

2.2.3 To satisfy basic sexual needs

Sexual need is one of the most primitive human desires. In Kundera's novels, many women lose the opportunity to experience sex because of various reasons. They engage in sexual deviance to satisfy their basic physical needs. The heroine of *Make*

way for those who die first to those who die last has become a widow after her husband died, and her son became a stumbling block to her sexual life. Although she is an old woman, she still wants to have a passionate sex life. After meeting her former lover unexpectedly, her inner world experiences a complicated contradictory process. On the one hand, she was excited to have sex with him. On the other hand, she was worried about her son's criticism. Eventually, her desire for sex led her to abandon her family responsibilities. In *Life is Elsewhere*, Jaromil's mother had a chronic lack of sex. To satisfy her basic sexual needs, she had sexual escapades with her son's art teacher in the studio. Of course, it's not enough to rely on occasional sexual transgressions to satisfy sexual needs. In the long run, it will only make people lonelier.

3 TWO SPECIAL KINDS OF SEXUAL DEVIANCE IN KUNDERA'S NOVELS

3.1 Incestuous behavior

Incestuous behavior refers to the sexual activity or desire with close relatives apart from spouse. It is a very harmful behavior because it goes against family ethics. In world literature, "incest" has been an important motif. In Sophocles' tragedy, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother due to a series of accidents, which is a classic example of incest in Western literature. *Hamlet* is the most famous tragedy masterpiece of William Shakespeare, in which Gertrude married her brother-in-law Claudius shortly after her husband's death. This incestuous behavior caused Hamlet a great deal of pain and contributed to the formation of his melancholy character. In Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, mother's abnormal feelings for Paul (her son) also belong to a kind of incestuous behavior. As a contemporary writer concerned with social life, Milan Kundera also realized the social harm of incestuous behavior. To provide readers with some ethical enlightenment, he has merged many incest plots into novels. In *Immortality*, Laura falls in love with Paul (her brother-in-law). She often sits on her Paul's lap in front of Agnès (her sister). Because of this, the two sisters had a big fight after which their relationship

was broken. Later, Agnès was killed in a car accident. Shortly after her funeral, Laura insisted on marrying Paul despite everyone's opposition. Moved by Laura's bold love, Paul's incestuous desire was thoroughly aroused. With an incestuous impulse, he began to make love with her violently. "Incest is a real phenomenon in real life, and it can cause serious emotional damage to family members and can lead to a complete breakdown of family relationships" (Zhao, 2016:78). For an incestuous feeling, Paul broke his vows to Agnès and completely departed with his daughter. Similarly, Agnès's love for her father can also be defined as a kind of incestuous behavior. In her mind, father was her only lover. It was her obsessive love for her father that made Agnès unable to accept any love that was being given to her. Eventually, her mental world becomes so distorted that it leads to a car accident. In the novel, the emotional entanglement between Goethe and Bettina also belongs to incestuous behavior. Bettina was the daughter of a woman who Goethe had loved in his youth. She admired Goethe's talent and wanted to be his woman. Because of his unusual social status, Goethe has been repressed his feelings for Bettina to keep a proper distance. It was not until Bettina announced her engagement that Goethe could not help touching her breast. "He took a long and greedy look at the young woman whose breasts had never been touched" (Kundera , 2011: 73). However, rational ethical consciousness eventually pulled Goethe back from his incestuous feelings, and his incestuous behavior stopped there. Besides, in *Farewell Waltz*, Olga has a special affection for Yakubu (her adoptive father) that goes beyond the love of father and daughter. Before Yakubu was about to leave the motherland, she stood naked in front of him and had an incestuous relationship with him. Incest is a very harmful mental ecological problem, which will destroy the harmonious development of family relations and cause irreparable harm to the whole family. Through the medium of fiction, Kundera advise us to set up correct ethical values, control our inner evil desires, and avoid the occurrence of Incestuous behavior.

3.2 Nude party

Nude party is also a special kind of sexual deviance in Kundera's novels, which implies the author's moral and ethical tendency. In *Immortality*, a female student who returns to the Czech Republic after studying in France has established a club for young women. Members were required to be naked. Then they are asked to stare at each other in front of a large mirror. The heroine of *Identity* has attended a debauchery party at the end of the novel. At the party, she was naked and chased like prey by a lesbian. In *The book of Laughter and Forgetting*, a feminist called Barbara has gathered a group of young men and women in her villa. They were all naked, and freed to have sex with anyone. In Kundera's novels, women are no longer men's dolls. They act equally in sexual relationships as men. In essence, the nude party is a kind of resistance and rebellion of some independent women against the unfair patriarchal ethics, which reflects Kundera's respect for women.

4 THE HARM OF SEXUAL DEVIANCE

Sexual transgressions can cause great damage to family relationships. There are many examples to prove this in Kundera's novels. For instance, the promiscuous men have brought great psychological trauma to their female partners. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Franz had many marital transgressions. His irresponsibility hurt his wife who loved him deeply. At first Mary-Claude took an evasive attitude, forcing herself not to think about her husband. Finally, she could not bear to give up the marriage to heal her psychological trauma. Sabine was wise enough to end her emotional entanglements with Franz. In this way, she has reduced the negative effects of trauma successfully. Comparatively speaking, Tereza is more helpless in her relationship with Tomas. On the one hand, she couldn't stand the husband's deviant behaviors. On the other hand, she didn't have the courage to leave him. As a result, she had to use the method of active amnesia to heal the trauma. Forgetting is also a form of avoidance

in essence. Active forgetting forcibly suppresses the traumatic memory below the level of consciousness, allowing us to temporarily block the memory and prevent it from flowing into cognition. But memories have the possibility of awakening one day. Avoidance seemed to help Tereza gain a peaceful mood, but in fact it has deepened her pain. She was afraid of the dark, woke up from nightmares, and eventually suffered from deep depression. In Kundera's novels, most women appear powerless when facing emotional trauma. Escape is the only way they can use to ease the inner trauma. Of course, there are some exceptions. A few women take sexual transgressions to revenge their husbands, which hurts men as well. In *Life is Elsewhere*, the husband's indifference has caused Jaromil's mother to go down in a deep sigh. To revenge her irresponsible husband, she deliberately distanced herself from him and even secretly committed adultery with a painter. Her betrayal caused great psychological trauma to the husband. He became silent and unhappy. As a result, his health deteriorated.

In addition, sexual deviance can lead to a loss of security, which brings great psychological trauma to the family members as well. In *Life is Elsewhere*, the disharmonious relationship between husband and wife caused by sexual deviance also has a huge impact on the son. Growing up in such a family atmosphere, Jaromil became a person with extreme inferiority. In *Immortality*, the sexual transgressions of father and aunt caused great psychological trauma to Agnès's daughter. She could not forgive her father's behavior and eventually moved out of the family home.

5 KUNDERA'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SEXUAL DEVIANCE IN MARRIAGE

Kundera has a different attitude toward male and female sexual deviance. According to his viewpoint, only the combination of soul and body can keep the love relationship lasting and harmonious. In Kundera's novels, men's sexual transgressions are mainly about satisfying their own desires. In the process of sexual transgression, body and soul are separated. Therefore, he regards it as an irresponsible and immoral act. However, Kundera is more tolerant of women's sexual transgressions. For those

female mistresses, he has great sympathy and understanding. In social life, once a man has sexual deviance, most people will condemn the third party from the perspective of traditional ethics. Facing the encroachment of a rival, the original couple would often abuse the third party. For this point, Kundera has a different view. In Kundera's novels, many couples treat their rivals in love with tolerance, and even make friends with them. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the encounter between Teresa and Sabine is surprisingly harmonious. Among Tomas's lovers outside, Sabine is the most understanding one. She has a rebellious but generous disposition since childhood. Knowing Tereza's trouble, she volunteered to help her rival in finding a job. Later, when Tereza realized the unusual relationship between Tomas and Sabine, she paid a visit to her home. Sabine shows Tereza her paintings and talks with her about her unique view of life. After the face-to-face communication, bad feelings slowly eliminated between them. They talked and laughed and even took nude photos of each other. In fact, it took a lot of courage for Tereza to take nude photos. Since childhood, her mother told her that naked women were the least valuable thing in the world. Under the education of this kind, Tereza has formed a sense of shame for the naked body. Although the shame faded after she left the family to live with Tomas, the shadow of her childhood remained in her memory. Therefore, to undress in front of an outsider is to face the painful memories of her childhood again, which undoubtedly requires great courage and a great sense of trust in the other side. Kundera's arrangement of this plot seems bizarre, but it is rich in allegorical implications. It reflects the mutual pity of women oppressed by men. For thousands of years, men have occupied a dominant position in society. Therefore, women have always been regarded as the supplement, opposition and object of men. They are politically and economically attached to men, and even ideologically restricted and bound, with no place to vent their inner repression. Living in the patriarchal society, both Tereza and Sabina are the objects of male gaze. Like a pair of lonely twins with different life experiences, they are both victims of male society. From their bitter rivals in love to their full trust at the end, they not only reflect the

mutual understanding between women, but also reflect the helplessness of women in the patriarchal autocratic society. Kundera paid much attention to the living conditions of women and showed great sympathy for women oppressed by male power. In his view, women should not define themselves as subordinate to men, but should have their own lives and pursuits. However, due to the deep-rooted consciousness of male supremacy formed over thousands of years, it is not easy for females to win their own voice in social life.

6 CONCLUSION

As a kind of primitive instinct of human beings, sex is one of the most beautiful flowers of life. In some people's minds, sex and love can be separated. This is also an important reason why sexual deviance occurs repeatedly in our lives. However, the cost of sexual deviance is large. It would cause great trauma to the family members. As a literary writer who shows great interest in real life, Kundera is aware of the impact of sexual deviance on family life. Through the literary medium of fiction, he subtly incorporates sexual deviance into the subject of sex, thereby leading the reader to ethical thinking. By combing the neutral deviant time in Kundera's novels, we can find a serious spiritual ecological problem. That is, the distortion and deformation of people's love philosophy. It is precisely because of the lack of a correct guidance of love ethics that people will mistakenly link love with selfish desires, resulting in a deformed view of love. As a wise literary master, Kundera is aware of the evil consequences of this serious spiritual ecological problem. With the love tragedies caused by sexual deviance in his novels, Kundera inspires readers to re-examine the value of love to find a rational love philosophy. Besides, Kundera's attitude towards the third party in sexual deviance is quite different from the traditional concept, which reflects his critical attitude towards traditional ethics. Although his views may not be entirely correct, they also provide us with new ways of thinking. To sum up, the comprehensive study of sexual deviance in Kundera's novels is of great value because it not only provides a

new perspective for the study of his works, but also provides useful enlightenment for solving similar problems in social life.

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