

Modern Odysseus: The Irony of Homecoming in Milan Kundera's novel *Ignorance*

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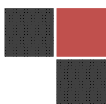
Abstract

This article explores the multifarious dimensions of the Homeric trope of homecoming as portrayed in Milan Kundera's novel *Ignorance* (2002) and shows how this novel interrogates the idea of nostalgia associated with the Diasporic notion of homeland. Kundera's text maps the journey of two emigrant characters, Irene and Josef, from their hostland Paris to their homeland Czech Republic, to which they are returning under compulsion. They discover new, annoying aspects of their homeland, which has ceased to be their "home." *Ignorance* plays upon the irony of the Odyssean homecoming. The text probes the mythologizing of homeland and the delusion about one's roots. The expected joy of homecoming is ironically replaced with disillusionment. It is a riveting modern-day reworking of the Odyssean theme of the classic "Great Return." Home as a metaphor is related to questions of identity and accordingly this novel shows that Irene and Josef's hostland is where they belong rather than their homeland. This article thus unravels and analyzes the nuanced dynamics of homecoming for modern expatriates in relation to the ancient Homeric paradigm.

Keywords: homecoming, Odyssean, roots, irony, memory.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the phenomena of emigration, the loss of homeland and the consequent identity crises have preoccupied a major proportion of writers and Milan Kundera is no exception. According to Kevin Kenny, “the number of international migrants increased dramatically in recent decades” due to political turmoils, drawing critical attention to the issues of migrants (Kenny 28). Kundera is a Czech-born French writer who has lived in exile in France since 1975, where he became a naturalized citizen in 1981. This paper aims to explore the multifarious dimension of the Homeric trope of “homecoming” as portrayed in Kundera’s novel *Ignorance* (2002) and to demonstrate how this novel problematizes the idea of nostalgia associated with the Diasporic notion of homeland. This novel maps the journey of two emigrant characters, Irena and Josef, from their hostland Paris and Denmark respectively—where they had been living for two decades—to their homeland Czech Republic, or more precisely the city of Prague, which has now been reduced to a distant memory. Significantly enough, both these characters are returning to their homeland not urged by any nostalgia or homesickness, but under different compulsions. Irena had been pressurized by her French friends to return, while Josef is returning only to fulfill his recently deceased wife’s last request. Upon their return, they can no longer connect with their homeland because everything around them has changed beyond recognition. They discover new and annoying aspects of their homeland, which has actually ceased to be their “home” any longer. For the protagonists, the present homeland is out of sync with the memories they left behind. The text probes into the mythologizing of the concept of homeland and also focuses on the delusion about one’s roots that expatriates harbor within their psyche. This paper seeks to unravel and analyze the nuanced dynamics of homecoming for modern expatriates in relation to the ancient Homeric paradigm.

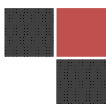
In Kundera’s narrative, the expected joy of homecoming is ironically replaced with disillusionment. The novel *Ignorance* is a riveting modern-day reworking of the Odyssean theme of the classic “Great Return.” It plays upon the irony of the Odyssean homecoming. In the very beginning of the narrative, Kundera draws elaborate parallels between the story of his protagonist Irena and the protagonist of the greatest Classical writer Homer’s famous epic *Odyssey*. Irena has spent twenty years in a foreign land just like Odysseus. While Irena left her homeland Prague in 1969 to escape from the terrible political upheavals and emigrated to France with her husband and daughter, the great Classical hero Odysseus left his homeland Ithaca to go to the Trojan War where he stayed for ten years. Then he tried to return to his native Ithaca but the gods’ intrigues prolonged his return by another ten years, thus making his absence from homeland twenty years long. Thus both Irena and Odysseus emigrated under different compulsions and stayed abroad for two decades. So far there are similarities between these two characters. Then the novelist goes on to stress the deviations of Irena’s fate from that of the Homeric hero. While Odysseus was unmistakably struck with intense nostalgia for his homeland, Kundera’s protagonist has no such longing for the place she left behind. She has rebuilt her life from scratch in her hostland Paris and has faced many vicissitudes of life single-handedly in this new city with the ultimate result that her newly forged identity has no link with Prague. She has metamorphosed into an independent woman after the untimely death of her husband Martin; a woman capable of raising her two daughters on her own without any financial assistance from anyone. Since her new life has originated in Paris, she does not feel the slightest desire to return to Prague, which has now come to signify her old life in her mind. The vision of her return does not provide her any happiness. On the contrary, she is visibly upset when her



French friend Sylvie reminds her that with the fall of the Communist regime in Czech Republic in 1989, the reason for her emigration has collapsed and therefore it is time for Irena to return to her homeland according to Sylvie. Significantly, this is the opinion of not just one friend of Irena but the entire French community who view the Czech immigrants like Irena as unfortunate people who were forcibly exiled or banished from their country. Hence the French people consider this recent political change to be a happy news for the Czech immigrants and they naturally assume that all immigrants must be eager to go back to their native land after all these unpleasant years of exile. But all these assumptions prove to be false when Irena bluntly tells her French friend that she intends to stay in Paris. When Sylvie reminds Irena that she should be in her home, she is shocked: “You mean this isn’t my home anymore? ... I’ve been living here for twenty years now. My life is here!” (Kundera 3). This profound revelation encapsulates the irony of homecoming for expatriates in the modern world. Home is a fluid concept in our age, as Christina Heckmann has rightly pointed out: “the term home is highly complicated in a complex and multicultural world like ours” (Heckmann 1). Diaspora critics have demonstrated how the floating natures of home and identity have replaced the age-old concepts of fixed home. For modern expatriates, home is not just a geographical entity but also an emotional territory, with increasing value of this latter aspect of home. Irena’s and Josef’s emotional home is in Paris and Denmark respectively rather than in Prague. Uma Parameswaran has aptly argued that: “Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too, and I would hope that we write about the world around us and not about the world we have left behind” (Parameswaran 291). Parameswaran’s observation is very pertinent for diasporic people as well as diasporic writers in a globalized age where one is always on the go.

Kundera delineates how Odysseus, though living a comfortable life while he was away in foreign lands, was intensely nostalgic for his homeland and yet the moment he found himself back in his native Ithaca, his ecstasy quickly turned into despair. The seamen left a sleeping Odysseus near an olive tree on Ithaca’s shore and when he woke up, for a moment he could not recognize where he was. The olive tree was the first thing he recognized and it left him in ecstasy. This epic scene of the “great return” is poetically retold by Kundera in order to highlight the later disillusionment of this epic hero. “The Greek word for “return” is *nostos* and *algos* means “suffering.” So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return” (Kundera 5). For Odysseus, this suffering ends when he returns to Ithaca, but the joy paradoxically proves to be very short-lived because he soon becomes aware of an unexpected turmoil in his psyche. His subjects, the people over whom he rules, go on narrating everything that happened in Ithaca during his long absence. They naturally assume that he must be interested to know these details. But surprisingly for Odysseus, this is the most loathsome part of his homecoming. He is tired with all their ramblings which are completely irrelevant for him. On the contrary, he is eager to narrate his own adventures to them. He wants to tell them all about his wanderings and experiences of twenty years. But no one ever asks him this one question. This disappointment of Odysseus forms the crux of the irony of homecoming for Irena as well. Hence it is vividly depicted by Kundera:

For twenty years he had thought about nothing but his return. But once he was back, he was amazed to realize that his life, the very essence of his life, its center, its treasure, lay outside Ithaca, in the twenty years of his wanderings. And this treasure he had lost, and could retrieve only by telling about it. (Kundera 34)

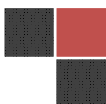


Irena's predicament on returning to Prague after two decades is exactly the same as that of Odysseus. None of her old friends wants to know anything about her past life and this realization is not just shocking but also disheartening for Irena. She feels betrayed by her countrymen who are only interested in what she remembers about the time before she left for France. Whenever she attempts to describe her French experiences, the Czech people either stop listening or deliberately steer the conversation to other topics. Frustrated, she aborts whatever little attempts she was making towards re-assimilating herself in her native Czech culture. She begins to perceive herself as a foreigner in her homeland. This intense identity crisis is poignantly described by the novelist: "By their total uninterest in her experience abroad, they amputated twenty years from her life. Now, with this interrogation, they are trying to stitch her old past onto her present life. As if they were amputating her forearm and attaching the hand directly to the elbow; as if they were amputating her calves and joining her feet to her knees" (43). Thus for her, home is devoid of any real attachment and rather becomes a burden she is forced to carry. While in Paris, she got a letter from one of her Czech friends calling her back, saying "It's high time you came back" (44). The choice of words reveal that according to the Czechs, her emigration was nothing less than a treachery and it's her sacred duty to come back. The narrator says: "... her job was to call Irena back into line: to warn her that time is short and that life is supposed to finish up where it started" (44). She feels asphyxiated by the attitude of her compatriots who rudely refuse to acknowledge her French life. At this point she yearns to narrate her miserable return to her French friend Sylvie who had compelled her to return. She wants to "get her to understand how hard it is to return home" (45). As if blaming Sylvie for the return, she wants to tell her how miserable life in her homeland would be:

I could go back and live with them, but there'd be a condition: I'd have to lay my whole life with you, with all of you, with the French, solemnly on the altar of the homeland and set fire to it. Twenty years of my life spent abroad would go up in smoke, in a sacrificial ceremony. . . . That's the price I'd have to pay to be pardoned. To be accepted. To become one of them again. (45)

Odysseus, after returning to Ithaca, similarly realized that this life in his homeland is not what he wants and that his earlier nostalgic desire for homecoming was only a chimera. Only after the fulfillment of his wish does he acknowledge that his life of wandering abroad was his real happiness and his true identity. For Odysseus as well as Irena, talking about those experiences is the only way to relive those years in their minds. They never truly assimilate into their homeland after returning because it is not their true selves.

This acute sense of unbelonging to the one's native place is manifest in another character of this novel. Josef is an expatriate who left Prague at the same time and for the same reason as Irena. Since then he has lived in Denmark where he was married to a Danish woman who had recently died. His wife, just before her death, had admonished him for his lack of interest in homecoming. She told him: "Not going would be unnatural of you, unjustifiable, even foul" (139). It is only out of a sense of national duty and to fulfill his promise to her that he had come to Prague. His return is marked by an even harsher set of circumstances which make him question whether the decision of homecoming was a wise one. Upon visiting his family's graves in the cemetery, he finds new names about whose deaths he had not been informed at all. Initially he tries to defend his relatives by reasoning that the erstwhile Communist regime kept a strict

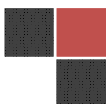


vigilance on letters addressed to emigrants and hence his people must have been scared to communicate with him. Emigrants were widely considered to be traitors who deserted their motherland during the perilous times. But this is not the actual reason behind their apathy to inform Josef about the deaths. The narrator says: “He examined the dates: the two most recent deaths were after 1989. So it was not out of caution that they didn’t write. The truth was worse: he no longer existed for them” (51). Their absolute oblivion about his existence adds to his discomfiture in his homeland. When he visits his brother and sister-in-law, he receives a very lukewarm welcome which shows their resentment to the fact of his having abandoned the family in a political crisis. They resent the fact they he went off to live a comfortable life when they were left to suffer under a despotic regime which didn’t grant them basic right to property and safety. They tell him: “You can’t imagine. We lived through some dreadful years” (63). Even Josef’s brother’s profession as a doctor at the hospital was threatened and gravely compromised due to Josef’s emigrating. They honestly tell Josef that they were indignant at the trivial reasons he cited to justify his escape which they considered extremely irresponsible. The regime was very hostile to the relatives of emigrants. This intense feeling of guilt further alienates him from his compatriots. His brief stay in his brother’s house opens up vignettes of his memory of the years before he went to Denmark. Seeing his old watch on his brother’s wrist throws him into a strange unease. It is the only episode when he gets truly nostalgic though this phase is transient. He poetically compares his homecoming to the resurrection of a dead man. Kundera describes it brilliantly:

He had the sense he was coming back into the world as might a dead man emerging from his tomb after twenty years ... continually stumbling over the leavings from his life; seeing his trousers, his tie on the bodies of the survivors, who had quite naturally divided them up among themselves; seeing everything and laying claim to nothing... (70)

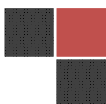
Ironically whenever he tries his best to reconnect with his homeland, he unexpectedly stumbles upon huge changes in every aspect of his native place, so much so, that he fails to own it as his homeland as such. Gazing from the window of his hotel room in Prague, he suddenly realizes that he can no longer identify the cityscape around him although it was familiar to him when he left. The changes which took place during those twenty years further detach him from the city. The narrator says: “During his absence, an invisible broom had swept across the landscape of his childhood, wiping away everything familiar ...” (52).

Recent developments in Diaspora studies have emphasized the importance of language in constructing individual identities and consolidating the feeling of nostalgia for one’s homeland. For Josef who cannot identify with the hugely changed landscape of Prague, the Czech language could have acted as a powerful and effective binding force but this tool fails as well. While dining in a restaurant, he hears the sound of conversations and is astonished by the alteration of his mother tongue. His puzzled reaction is described thus: “It was the music of some unknown language. What had happened to Czech during those two sorry decades? Was it the stresses that had changed? Apparently. ... Bent over his plate, Josef was listening to an unknown language whose every word he understood” (54-55). This disconcerting awareness intensifies his feeling of unbelonging in his native land. As an expatriate, he had always been wary of walking down the memory lane as it makes him feel displeased with himself. Added to this is his sense of guilt at having deserted his country and family. So he tries to



reminisce as seldom as possible. Like Irena, he too briefly considers settling down in his homeland again but he shrinks at the idea: “In the two days left to him, what should he do? Pay a visit to the town where he’d had his veterinary practice? Go and stand, moist-eyed, before the house he used to live in? He hadn’t the slightest desire to do that” (90-91). He practically recoils from having to do or visit anything concerned with his homeland. William Safran opines that some diasporic people “do not go home because there is no homeland to which to return; because although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically or socially, or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora” (Safran 91). The third diasporic character in the text, Gustaf, who hails from Sweden and currently a resident of Paris, is equally eager to leave behind his homeland. He opens his new office in Prague “because there he felt, even more than in Paris, cut off from Sweden, from his family, from his past life” (Kundera 93-94). Each migrant is in search of finding their true home. Irena confesses: “She felt happy in Paris, happier than here ...” (134). The process of her disengagement from Czech Republic had begun even before she set her foot in France for the first time. Her decision of migrating had set her up as a traitor in the eyes of her acquaintances and they didn’t even bid her farewell before her departure. She was “waiting for some gesture, an encouraging word, a goodbye; in vain. Had they forgotten she was leaving? Or were they pretending to forget?” (135). Neither her presence nor her absence mattered anymore for her acquaintances. She received in Paris the social acceptance which she didn’t get in Prague. In an echo of Irena and Sylvie’s conversation about homecoming, Josef tells his friend in Prague that he would soon be back home. His friend immediately asks what he means by “home” and Josef promptly replies “In Denmark.” His friend’s wife shows the natural shocked reaction: “So then this isn’t home to you anymore?” (159). His response is a clear, unambiguous “No.” In the long silence that follows, nobody asks him anything about his life in Denmark, thereby aligning him in the same category as Irena and Odysseus who faced the same anguish. This apathy serves to consolidate Irena and Josef’s decision of leaving Prague forever and settling in France and Denmark respectively. Robin Cohen’s remark, “in some cases ... a homeland is clearly an *ex post facto* construction” applies to Kundera’s protagonists (Cohen 6).

Thus Kundera dexterously depicts how each diasporic character grapples with the ghosts of memory, roots and unbelongingness while constantly trying to return to life in their hostland where they actually feel at home, without carrying any residual sense of guilt. Home as a metaphor is related to questions of identity and accordingly *Ignorance* shows that Irena, Josef and Gustaf’s hostland is where they find their true home and identity rather than their actual homeland. Avtar Brah writes, “Identity, then, is simultaneously subjective and social, and is constituted in and through culture. Indeed, culture and identity are inextricably linked concepts” (Brah 21). Kundera also delves into the paradigm of homecoming with respect to the landscape of the homeland when one returns after a long time. The novelist compares the homecoming of Irena and Josef with that of Odysseus. The epic hero’s brief euphoria on reaching Ithaca was on account of his recognition of the familiar landscape including the olive tree. But in the modern world, expatriates fail to find this moment of recognition. Irena and Josef are disconcerted with the heavy changes in every aspect of Czech lifestyle including the Czech language. So the moment of the classical “Great Return” has different implications for emigrants in the ancient Homeric age and in our contemporary times. Kundera has rightly observed:



Would an Odyssey even be conceivable today? Is the epic of the return still pertinent to our time? When Odyssey woke on Ithaca's shore that morning, could he have listened in ecstasy to the music of the Great Return if the old olive tree had been felled and he recognized nothing around him? (Kundera 54)

Thus for the modern Odysseus like Irena or Josef, the moment of homecoming is fraught with multiple ironies and paradoxes that drive them to question the age-old notions about one's roots and to seek out their true identities in a land which is not necessarily their place of origin. Home is not where one hails from; home is where one belongs.

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