



Intertextuality and Platonic Eros: A Metafictional Study of Plato’s *Symposium* and Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

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Abstract

The present research focuses on the theme of love, its importance and application through intertextuality in postmodern fiction under textual analysis of Plato’s *Symposium* and Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The authors may use, consciously or unconsciously, the intertextual links among various sources of texts to present a newfangled version of historical events. The objectives of such intertextuality may include reinterpretation, appreciation and criticism of the undertaken subject. This approach of revisiting the history and marking ties with preceded happening(s) to formulate an up-to-date version lies in the archetype of postmodern perspective. The researcher aims at exploring how Milan Kundera has made effective use of intertextuality and redefined love in postmodern paradigm. Further, this is to reconnoiter how Julia Kristeva’s model of intertextuality can play an effective role in forming connections among hypertexts and hypotexts. The main stance is that the authors have been re-writing the same stories over and over again by employing text(s) within their own dense web of discourse. Furthermore, the future researchers can use Kristeva’s model to trace the intertextual connections among texts to denote their influence and inspiration for their contemporary value.

Keywords: Love, Intertextuality, Postmodern, Revisting, History, Hypertext, Hypotext

1. Introduction

Love has always been a traditional theme in the Hellenic literature. That is how the term ‘Greek Love’ evolved in literature that accentuated the homophile demeanor of the Greeks toward love and was used as euphemism for pederasty and same sex relationships. The word love is an obsolete form of ‘lufu’, Germanic in its origin which means feelings of love, sexual attraction, affection and friendliness. It originated from Indo-European root shared by Sanskrit ‘lubhyati’ which means desires (Oxford Etymology, 2000, p. 272). Neumann (1965) in the article “Diotima’s Concept of Love” demonstrates that the approach of love is based on the longing for acquiring both good things and happiness. The lover would always pursue beautiful things to make them his/her own. Unlike conventional teachings of Socrates, he expresses the views of Diotima about love and explicates that in order to gain beauty and happiness eternally; both men and women conceive fertility. To her, this stands as an innate human characteristic to reproduce their off-springs and transferring the essence of immortality to the heirs. Through this process, the same sentiments and objectives of love are bequeathed to the successors and, they too, continue to practice the same instincts and cravings in life. Erich Fromm (2003) defines love in *The Art of Loving* as “Love is the only satisfactory answer to the problems of human existence” (p. 3). Love exists in various forms, such as love of parent for the child, affectionate love, sensual love and the love for God and also with oneself. Fromm mentions the point that since different cultures acquire specific customs and norms from their ancestors, hence they practice the notions of love imitating their specific inheritance. For example, the focus of love in the current era is seductive physique as well as eminent reputation. The common viewpoint is that loving someone is not an abstruse act but finding the suitable counterpart is challenging.

The Victorian age suffered from these challenges as socially finding the partner depended upon various mediators, social references and marriage suitors. The society felt pride in practicing celibacy, and physical bonding before marriage was considered socially awkward. However, it went through the last few decades that fashion of quixotic and stimulating love with consent (in both homo and heterosexuality) materialized in the Western culture. These days, the couples can indulge in enamored relationships with mutual consensus without having to promise the wedlock or lifelong relationships. Later, Fromm narrates that it’s only due to love that the humans are able to reproduce and that impotence is not some physical inadequacy but inability to produce and express love. In contemporary era, the concept and expression of love has changed, for human beings have limited it to merely the practice of corporeal and erotic pleasures. Shehabat (2016) in “Depiction of the Theme of Love” describes that the unilateral meaning of love has not reached any consensus as numerous ontologies, mostly contradicting with each other, exist in societies dwelling in the same country. These variable approaches toward this phenomenon have also interpreted “Platonic Love” as physical coupling, conjuring and profligacy. The exciting influence of modern media, cinema and multiethnic fashion movements have contributed to the pluralistic and heterogeneous definitions of the term ‘love’. Consequently, this semantic paradox has invigorated the man to indulge in somatic voluptuousness without worrying about reproduction. Emmett (2011) outlines love as a healing and binding connection among living beings. He suggests that mutual love can bring harmony and peace whereas forced love exterminates the essence of understanding and reconciliation. Olthuis (2012) in the article “A Vision of and For Love” mentions that post-postmodern view of love lies in acknowledging God as ipsum amore; the source of love. He further suggests that God existed even when nothing came into being and He, with the mighty strength of love created everything. Hence, we can live immortal even after physical decay only by means of loving or being loved by someone (p. 6). Sigmund Freud conditions love as being pivotal force in shaping a healthy mind ready for work and appropriate companionship and further holds that positive emotions of love make us consciously or unconsciously choose the right path in life (Daniell, 1985, p. 54).



Sternberg (1986) in “A Triangular Theory of Love” regards intimacy, passion and commitment as essential constituents of the psychological phenomenon of love. According to his tripartite theory, intimacy is the very first interaction among humans that involves acquaintance, affection and bonded feelings. On the other hand, affection incorporates motives that embolden amorousness, physical magnetism and sexual gratification. Commitment invokes romantic feelings of love and coerces the lover to form sturdy emotional and physical ties with the beloved. Sternberg stresses on the fact that to achieve true and real intimacy of love, the amalgam of above-mentioned trilogy is mandatory.

2. Literature Review

The traces of intertextuality can be found in texts in all ages even from ancient Greek Platonic and Aristotelian to postmodern writings of Jacques Derrida, Eliot and Woolf. Identifying the presence of some reference text is the subject of “interpretation” which may function as representation or depiction of some particular theme or motive in the text. This may very well serve consciously or inadvertently to refer to some other source of text. To Worton (1991), “this very concept has widely been used in postmodern writings which has inspired not only the meaning by establishing intra-textual connections but has also alloyed various features of antique and contemporary forms of writing” (p. 45). Intertextuality mainly relies on pastiche, allusions, calque and parody. Direct and oblique references made among various texts influence the understanding of reader and serve as literary discourse strategy. The text can thus invoke as many meanings and interpretations as are the readers of the text. Ronald Barthes and Julia Kristeva paved way for a textual signifying system and later helped understand the complex web of semiotics through etymological analysis of texts. The conventional form of intertextuality does not require referencing, punctuation or any innuendo but prevails in the form and content of the text.

Lesic-Thomas (2005) in “Behind Bakhtin: Russian Formalism and Kristeva’s Intertextuality” points out that intertextuality is an effective yet dubious idea for it traces its origin and inspiration in other texts. Graham Allen relates the very term analogous to “postmodernism”, “imagination” and “history” due to its complexity and vagueness. Intertextuality though coined by Kristeva, was inspired by Bakhtin’s concept of “dialogic” which stressed on the notion that text does not stand autonomous in structure but parodies the fragments from assorted sources of history. Texts therefore are not merely depiction of present, in most cases the past-ness of the past is also depicted in contemporary texts to create interpretative complexity and structural density in it. Intertextuality is the main constituent of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon (1988) proposes that the “text contains one or more references to other texts and this intertextuality examines not only contemporary but also the historiographic characteristics” (p. 124). Therefore, it highlights the sense of presence tied with past, due to which the authenticity of past can be analyzed from contemporary texts whether it’s literary or historical. As per Hutcheon, the authors have always been re-telling and repeating the stories which existed in a specific period of time. This way, the writers actually stole the stories and wrote them with their own linguistic construct and thematic patterns. The influence of philosophy and literary theory upon literature strained it to reassess the functionality of historicity which not only brought to light the past-ness of past events but also the discourse which dominated connotation of meaning. This very re-visiting of history has determined the intertextual links whether direct or indirect as well as affinity of stories with other stories. Postmodern historical fiction these days has problematized the essence of accuracy and credibility of the inherited discourse; since the traces of textual ties to the core of events are intangible and sometimes lacking their parental connection. That is the crossroad of history where meanings and connections are blurred and the authors here, tend to contaminate or admix with various factors borrowing from their own culture or belief system. Here, it relies on the discretion of authors who can imitate, parody even subvert the conceived notions by adding or abolishing certain features of events. For example, the term American Literature emphasizes that the whole literature has been written by American native authors and bears no external or historically intercontinental influence. The absence of context is what it claims to possess but the traces of their text with numerous external texts evinces that nothing is formed without a specific context be it contemporary or historical. Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is a highly intertextual fiction. Kundera employs intertextual elements like adaptation, relocation, parody and allusions in the novel. He has used several references and conventions from Plato’s *Symposium*. The content of love has been discussed by Greek philosophers in *Symposium* where each of them expresses his views and understanding about love. Kundera intertextualizes the same thing in his fiction *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, in part five, “litost” and makes the philosophers and poets arrange a symposium-like gathering to express their views on the ontology of love.

The above data on Eros and Intertextuality as well as their various ontologies, importance and implications hold prodigious value, yet the primary objective of this research is to reconnoiter what role intertextuality plays in postmodern fiction. Further, this is also to explore how Kundera has established the intertextual connections of Hellenic notion of love with Plato’s *Symposium* in his fiction *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

3. Research Methodology

The present research lies in qualitative paradigm and is postmodernist in perspective. The model of Intertextuality by Julia Kristeva has been applied on Plato’s *Symposium* and Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The researcher will make comparative textual analysis of both the texts to explore the nature of intertextual connections formed by Kundera. The study is non-empirical and qualitative in nature. The primary texts include *Symposium* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, whereas the secondary texts include Julia Kristeva’s *The Kristeva Reader*. The other sources include data from related online, printed journals, books and dissertations.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The present study will employ the postmodernist model of Intertextuality by Julia Kristeva to discuss how intertextuality can play an integral role in forming connections of past with the present. This research will also explore how Greek notions of love are still applicable in contemporary fiction and how Kundera creates intertextual connections from Plato’s *Symposium* in his fiction *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

Intertextuality as a term was first coined by Julia Kristeva in her essay, “Word, Dialogue and Novel” in 1969 which was inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Dialogism”. Kristeva (1986) affirms that text lies in relational values with pre-existing text(s) and cannot be evaluated as stagnant or absolute entity. Any word in the text contains alliance or relationship with other words and the meaning without contextual words or references does not seem palpable. This approach swerves from traditional, fixed meanings and forms an “intersection of textual surfaces” (p. 36). In other words, the intertextuality is what invites the plurality of meanings by combining various texts at one place. This way, it revisits the past texts and merges it with contemporary text for reinterpreting and revising the meanings. As Bakhtin defines “word as the minimal structural unit, he situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he insets himself by rewriting them” (p. 37). That is how the diachronic thoughts are transformed into synchronic concepts. Kristeva further delineates that since “word” acts as the minimal unit in discourse, it thus acts as a mediator and establishes the connection of past with contemporary notions. Kristeva’s work on intertextuality in the middle of twentieth century accorded with the conversion from structuralism to post structuralism and helped bring about literary changes in the discourse.

According to Bauer (2011), intertextuality means the “connection of a text with some preceding text whether direct or indirect” (p. 8). The texts in fiction, poetry or prose mark influence and ties with other related or similar texts and may impact the course of interpretation and semiotics. This can be expressed in several ways including direct or indirect referencing, quotation, calque and allusion. It is generally believed that the author of a text has reviewed several other texts, hence, the shadow of contamination of read-texts is inevitable and that is what paves way for multiplicity of interpretations and contexts. Intertextuality can be traced on various levels such as on lexical level which includes characters, cliques and iconographies and also at syntax level, which is limited to chronicle expansion and sequential advancement

of the plot and style which includes but is not limited to labels, techniques and methods. The French literary theorist Gerard Genette in his famous work *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au Second Degree* mentions five rudimentary kinds of intertextuality named as:

- i. Transtextuality
 - ii. Paratextuality
 - iii. Metatextuality
 - iv. Architextuality
 - v. Hypertextuality
- (p. 12)

In this regard, Genette outlines transtextuality as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (p. 13). To his definition, the allusion of a text with some related text(s) can exist in a direct or indirect way. He further brings to light that Julia Kristeva’s idea of intertextuality is an elementary concept but focuses solely on one out of many possible textual approaches. However, the author may mention source text through quotation, allusion, calque and plagiarism. Secondly, Genette delineates that paratextuality surrounds the main body of the text. It can encompass numerous traits like subtitle, caption, heading, infrapaginal, postfaces and several other kinds of tributary indications. Paratextuality is not limited to texts only and can partake in movies to influence preview, artworks, merchandise and periodicals. Third in the row is architextuality, which has been defined as “the designation of a text as part of a genre or multiple genres through various defining signs” (p. 18). The text may allude to more than one genre in the formation and specific transformation might be an unconscious effort and could well be identified by the readers or the audience. This type of textual admixture is more common in movies.

In the same vein, metatextuality deals with blend of source text with the resultant text without directly mentioning it; resulting in appreciation or discernment. The consequential text would bring to discussion or even extension of some or all constituents of the source text. Hypertext is what “Genette regards as the influenced derivative form of some foregoing hypotext” (p. 19). For example, Homer’s *Odyssey* as a hypotext resulted in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Secondly, the hypotext, *Beauty and the Beast* leads to the formation of Angela Carter’s *The Tiger’s Bride*. Thus, through direct effects and references, hypotexts are transformed into certain genre like pastiche, parody, burlesque and imitation.

4. Data Analysis

Keeping in view, the above mentioned several forms of transtextuality, Milan Kundera has also established intertextual connections in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, matching with Plato’s *Symposium*. As mentioned in the text, “Wine was poured into three glasses, and Eva went swaying to the record player, chose a record, and continued swiveling through the room to the music” (p. 54). We find the similar reference at other occasion that, “If he could have believed that Merketa needed their little orgies out of pure sensuality—she as the worse one of the couples—they would certainly have given him pleasure” (p. 56). Both excerpts from the text mention that all characters engaged in the activity consume wine as well as enjoy the music. Kundera also highlights that they are engrossed in the Greek orgy where drinking, dancing and music are the essential components.

In ancient Greece, orgies were a common practice among the aristocrat class. The erotically charged men and women would gather at a party to engage in unrestrained sensual activities for pleasure. Drinking was held as an essential ritual for paying tribute to honor the god Dionysus. The glasses and cups, from which the rich guests were served alcohol by the slaves, had obscene images painted on them. Kundera makes this textual connection with *Symposium* and mentions that Marketa, Karel and their friend Eva, planned an orgy and engaged in a three-some activity. The wine was also served just before the commotion. Actually, Karel was a philanderer and Marketa was well cognizant of it. In order to maintain her husband’s fidelity and to move forward, she herself decided to sacrifice for this group activity. Later, Karel is referred to as Sisyphus, “He saw himself as Sisyphus. Really as Sisyphus? Wasn’t it Sisyphus Marketa had compared herself to?” (p. 57). The aforementioned reference to Sisyphus mentions the king of Corinth in Greece who was eternally sentenced by Zeus to roll a massive boulder up the hill and roll it back when it reaches atop. Here, Kundera names Karel as the Greek ruler, Sisyphus, pointing out that his inner conflict and psychosomatic penance never cases to end. As a matter of fact, Kundera also quotes the pushing of heavy boulder up the hill as a metaphor for the miserable suffering of all three characters involved in that orgy. The stout influence of Greek mythologies is evident on Kundera at another point, “Since James Joyce, he said, we have known that the greatest adventure of our lives is the absence of adventure. Ulysses, who fought at Troy, returned home by crisscrossing the seas, he himself steering his ship, and had a mistress on every island—no, that is not the way we lead our lives. Homer’s *Odyssey* has been taken inside...Ithaca summoning us—now-a-days they are only the voices of our interior being” (pp. 124-125).

The transtextuality plays a double role here, since James Joyce refers to Homer’s *Odyssey*, Kundera intertextualizes the intertextualized text. The Philosophy Professor while smoking a pipe narrates the account of Troy. He states that the lack of adventure is what makes our life more adventurous. He further remarks that Ulysses was the greatest gladiator of his times who fought audaciously in pursuit of Helen and even sailed the ships for decades. Actually, the epic poem “*Iliad*” narrating the account of Odysseus was written by Homer in 8th century B.C. The poem has been intertextualized and thematically parodied by the modernist, Irish author, James Joyce as *Ulysses*—the onomastic Latinisation of Odysseus. Eventually, Kundera indicates that Ithaca still inspires us today but its spirit has remained merely in our hearts as an abstract phenomenon, the expression of which is perplexing. Ithaca was the island in the Ionian Sea under monarchy of Odysseus and remained as the most significant place in *Iliad*. Bibi relates her feelings to the voice of inner-self yelling that she is sometimes overwhelmed with the flimsiness of her desires but remains unable to express them.

The Greek god, Apollo, can also be traced in Kundera’s text when he narrates, “Petrarch, you are an incorrigible worshipper”, Boccaccio interrupted. “I can imagine how these girls who started a poetry club invoke you as their Apollo” (p. 181). Among the poets and philosophers in the arranged meeting, Petrarch starts narrating his love-account with a young girl. He introduces the girl as one of the students of the college he sometimes attends as a guest of honor. Boccaccio sporadically adds that he could envisage how those girls in the poetry club could entreat Petrarch as Apollo. In fact, Apollo stands as one of the twelve Olympian gods in primeval mythology residing atop Mount Olympus. He was the son of Zeus and God of archery, music and poetry. Kundera uses him as a metaphor for Petrarch, emphasizing that Apollo can still be invoked and adulated in the postmodern fiction. We find this textual connection in *Symposium* when Agathon praises Eros as an influential god of love. In his words, “It was by following where his desire and love led him that Apollo discovered the arts of archery, medicine and prophecy, and this makes Apollo a pupil of Love” (p. 31).

In the given excerpt, Agathon states that the gods mentored human beings in the arts of archery, medicine, music and poetry. Since gods themselves were poets, hence they taught the Muses and other mortal disciples the art of poetry so that they could embellish themselves and praise gods in an esteemed manner. The same idea is related by Kundera as he regards that the girls’ group regard Petrarch as Apollo in the arts of poetry. This intertextual construction ascertains Plato’s influence on Kundera and we trace such a connection at another point, “Tamina refilled the cups, delighted that the two men, who had descended into her apartment from Olympus of mind, were being nice to her friend” (Kundera, 1996, p. 124). Tamina is absorbed in discussion with the philosophy Professor as well as others and feels that the men treated her friends nicely. She assumes that they have cascaded from Olympus, the mythical residing mountain of Greek gods. We find this reference in Alcibiades’ speech,

My claim is that he (Socrates) is just like those statues of Silenus you see sitting in sculptor’s shops. The figures are produced holding shepherd’s pipes or flutes...And aren’t you a flute player? In fact, you are a much more amazing

one than Marsyas. He used instruments to bewitch people with the power of his mouth, and so does anyone who plays his flute-music today. I'm counting the tunes of Olympus as really Marsya's, because Marsyas was Olympus' teacher. (p. 54)

It is clear that Kundera refers to the Greek god in the text when Tamina regards that the two men in her apartment were from Olympus. In the same way, Alcibiades comments as if Socrates were from Marsyas of Olympus.

Agathon comments that he is going to praise Socrates' ingenuity and resourcefulness in an unusual manner which might be regarded as eccentric by some of the guests. Agathon compliments Socrates by calling him Marsyas, the mentor, who trained Olympus in playing the flute. Similarly, Kundera has also made insightful usage of the same noun as a metaphor for the men who taught Tamina and other participants. At another point in the text, Kundera writes, "The Persians conquered the Peloponnesus when the Spartans made one military mistake after another. Just like the child refusing to play in tune, they were blinded by tears and refused to take any reasonable action, being capable neither of fighting better nor of surrendering or fleeing" (pp. 206-207). Kundera mentions the Greek city of Peloponnesus who went to war with Persians but lost it, just because they made several blunders. Making such mistakes in a row resulting in failure is called 'listost', i.e., self-torment and ceaseless misery. Kundera quotes an example of the child who was learning piano from his teacher. When the boy could not play well during the lesson, the teacher scolded him and asked him to play more vigilantly. The student, despite following his mentor's advice, started playing erroneously with intention. This way, the student did not learn and consequently suffered from *litost*, just like the Spartans. Kundera's text is replete with direct references to Greek gods and the primordial traditions associated with them. These intertextual connections not only revisit history and its customs but also mark its influence and cogency in the postmodern fiction as we find Kundera doing this at several occasions in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. We find in the text, "Jan imagines that the Greek gods at first passionately participated in the adventures of humans. Then they settled in on Olympus to look down and have a good laugh. And by now they have been asleep for a long time" (pp. 296-297).

In the given excerpt, Kundera narrates that a piano artist started playing a waltz rhythm with his left hand but the performance did not go well as the audience started laughing. Then he comes to the point that the Greek gods, at first, engaged with humans in their domestic chores and performed well. With the passage of time, they realized that the rebellious instinct of humans would either cause their own destruction or bring chaos in divine prestige. The gods resolved to stay aloof from mortal creatures and descended to Olympus where they could maintain their holy status. Similarly, Aristophanes in *Symposium* relates that the humans existed as 'androgynous', in round-shaped form having four hands and four legs with two identical faces. These humans, at that time, possessed immense powers and ultimate resilience. Homer narrated their story to Ephialtes and Otus that they climbed up to heavens and started attacking gods to siege the holy throne. This made gods furious and, "Zeus had an idea: I think that I have a plan by which human beings could still exist but be too weak to carry on carry on their wild behavior. I shall now cut each of them into two" (Plato, 1999, p. 23). This is how Zeus cut the humans into equal halves and made them weaker and more dependent on Olympian gods. David Halperin claims this very idea in "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality" and writes that, "Zeus at length took pity on them, moved their genital to the side their bodies now faced, and invented sex, so that the bereaved creatures might at least put a terminus to their longing and devote their attention to other, more important matters" (p. 37).

Primarily, the writer creates text under the influence of the idea and experience gained from some text that is already present in his or her mind. The author may directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, refer to that specific text in his own work. In other words, the text cannot stand as absolute or autonomous entity but would always refer to or contaminate with one or several other texts. It is possible for the readers to identify the source of text (hypo-text) from which the secondary text (hyper-text) was influenced. Thus, both the authors and readers already have glimpse of some similar or associated text(s).

5. Conclusion

The researcher has undertaken the comparative textual analysis of *Symposium* by Plato and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by Milan Kundera. It is evident that Kundera has formed several intertextual connections in his fiction, which refers to the stout effect of Athenian culture and traditions. In Greek culture, orgies were held by the aristocrats where only the selected participants were invited and engaged in excessive drinking, erotic music and sexual intercourse. This remains similar to the modern Swinging parties, but unlike orgies, the participants in Swingers share their own spouses with other couples for carnal gratification. At several occasions, Kundera refers to the orgies when Karel, Marketa and Eva start playing music. Then, they start pouring wine in the glasses and eventually engage in a threesome activity. Karel is named as Sisyphus—the Greek ruler who was damned and punished by the god Zeus of rolling an extremely heavy boulder forever. This never-ending compensation has metaphorically been related to the characters involved in erotic tripartite. In explaining the concept and nature of love, the fellow participants in *Symposium* acclaim each other's speeches. Following the same token, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the views delivered by the selected members are appreciated by other fellows. Consequently, Kundera has reinterpreted the concept of love by establishing textual ties with the Greek mythologies and holy figures like Cupid, Zeus, Apollo, Sisyphus, Olympus, Homer, Odyssey, Troy, Marsyas, Socrates, Orgies and the city of Peloponnesus.

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