MILAN KUNDERA'S CONCEPT OF NOVEL'S NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

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ARTICLE INFO		ABSTRACT
		Essays are a unique part of Milan Kundera's literary legacy. These creations showed that creating novels is not only an emotional activity but also a very rational one. Through his essays, Kundera expressed his concept of many aspects of novel art. In particular, the novel's narrative structure was one of several points he discussed throughout his essays. This paper places Milan Kundera's views in the movement of narratological theory in general, using biographical method and comparative manipulation. Kundera imaged that the novel's narrative structure is arranged into four layers: the raw materials layer, the creating layer, the text layer, and the meaning after reception layer. He also proposed specific artistic methods to construct the novel's narrative structure: the "polyphonic" composition – the other "polyphonic" besides celebrated Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic theory - was Kundera's distinctive creation. His concept of stratification of novels' narrative structure appeared as a modern thought about novels, parallel with post-classical narratology. The research results contribute to systematizing and clarifying the uniqueness of the writer's artistic thought from the perspective of narratology, and simultaneously, provide a novel narrative model that can be applied to analyze many modern and postmodern novels.

QUAN NIỆM CỦA MILAN KUNDERA VỀ CẤU TRÚC TỰ SỰ TIỂU THUYẾT

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO		TÓM TẮT
		Tiểu luận là bộ phận đặc sắc trong di sản Milan Kundera. Các tiểu luận của ông cho thấy sáng tạo tiểu thuyết không chỉ là một hoạt động cảm tính mà còn rất lý tính. Thông qua hệ thống tiểu luận, Kundera thể hiện quan điểm về nhiều phương diện nghệ thuật tiểu thuyết. Đặc biệt, cấu trúc tự sự tiểu thuyết là một trong những điểm được ông đề cập xuyên suốt. Bài báo này đặt những phát biểu của Kundera bên cạnh sự vận động lý thuyết tự sự nói chung, sử dụng phương pháp tiểu sử và thao tác so sánh để tìm hiểu sự độc đáo trong quan niệm của ông. Kundera hình dung cấu trúc tự sự tiểu thuyết bao gồm bốn tầng bậc: chất liệu thô, hoạt động bếp núc của nhà văn, văn bản hoàn chỉnh và nghĩa nảy sinh từ quá trình tiếp nhận. Kundera cũng đề xuất những phương thức nghệ thuật riêng để kiến tạo cấu trúc tiểu thuyết; trong đó, lối "đối âm" tiểu thuyết - một nghệ thuật "đối âm" khác với lý thuyết đối âm nổi tiếng của Mikhail Bakhtin - là sáng tạo đặc biệt. Quan điểm về phân tầng cấu trúc tự sự tiểu thuyết như trên cho thấy tư duy hiện đại, gần gũi với lý thuyết tự sự học hậu kinh điển. Kết quả nghiên cứu góp phần hệ thống hóa và làm sáng tỏ tính đặc thù trong tư tưởng nghệ thuật của nhà văn dưới góc độ tự sự học, đồng thời cung cấp một hệ hình tự sự tiểu thuyết có khả năng ứng dụng để phân tích nhiều tiểu thuyết hiện đại và hậu hiện đại.

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1. Introduction

Milan Kundera published four essays including *The Art of the Novel* [1], *Testaments Betrayed* [2], *The Curtain* [3] and *Encounter* [4]. These essays expressed systematic and personality concepts on the process and the art of the novel. Many researchers have considered them to be closely linked to his novels, which were the main part of his creative career [5]-[13].

Many scholars have exchanged views on elements in Milan Kundera's novel structure and his concepts of the novel's narrative structure. Most of them went that an important narrative material in his novels is memories of Russia's attack on Prague. That experience led to deep thoughts on time and memory: his novels present anti-forcing delete individual memories. That means he defined resistance totalitarianism as resistance to forgetting personal time. Individual memory resists any interpretation [5].

About the reception, Sara Mechraoui [6] argued that Milan Kundera had left room for the reader to dialogue, based on the meaningful text layer. Although his novel has a very clear arrangement, the narrator's intervention in the overall narrative appearance is generally not too harsh [7]. The narrator freely comments and questions the actions of the characters, but the reader can choose to believe or not believe this narrator [8]. They have a great deal of dialogue when reading his novels. The face-to-face narrator is the element of the inadaptability of Kundera's novel: the film adaptation of the same name *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (directed by Philip Kaufman, 1988) has lost the person who speaks directly and establishes a clear relationship with the reader [9].

Many researchers agree that polyphony is an important narrative technique in Milan Kundera's novels. Fatma Akbulut and Bülent Çağlakpinar – while using Bakhtin's polyphonic theory to analyze the novel *Ignorance* – pointed out the main themes around which the work revolved [7]. Similarly, Daniella Cádiz Bedini [10] observed that most of Kundera's novels are based on intertwined, mirrored, and repetitive stories. Kundera has a habit of designing extremely short chapters, constantly delaying the progression of the plot when it comes to the form of autobiography, psychological analysis, and philosophy. He called this a "digressive narrative technique" with "self-consciously digressive narratives", in which different themes are posed, resolved, intertwined and transformed based on musical principles – an art form that he deeply loved and mentioned many times in his essays [11]. However, there is a common mistake in equating Kundera's concept of "polyphony" with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "polyphony". On the one hand, Mohsen Masoomi [12] analyzed very thoroughly the four narrators who are also characters in the novel *The Joke*, and on the other hand, attributed the differences among these four narrators to the "polyphony" according to Kundera's theory. Mark Harper [13] even thought that Kundera had not used many "counterpoint" techniques.

A brief overview of the above research situation shows that the preferred approach of scholars to Milan Kundera's novels is case analysis, tied to one or a few specific novels. The writer's conception of how the narrative structure of the genre is expressed in the essay has not been clearly questioned, which is the basis of this paper. In Kundera's imagination, the novel's narrative structure is stratified into four layers, established by both the writer's creating activities and the reader's reception activities. He raised his most significant writing method for building the novel's surface structure - "polyphonic". This paper also distinguishes the concept of "polyphony" that Kundera discussed in his essays from the other one of Mikhail Bakhtin.

2. Research methods

This paper places Milan Kundera's views in the movement of narratological theory in general. From there, this paper makes some initial comments on their modernity in the context of narrative research. The biographical method points out some of the influences of personal life such as his migration circumstances and family musical traditions on the formation of views. Comparative manipulation is used to clear the difference in Kundera's concept with previous literary critics when discussing a specific aspect of the narrative.

3. Findings

3.1. Milan Kundera's concept of stratifying the novel's narrative structure

Narrative structural layers, or layers of meaning in narrative texts, were early concerns. In the ancient era, when narratology had not yet been identified, Aristotle analyzed the moving elements behind tragedy's narrative structure: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song [14, p. 25]. With modern literary theory, from the 1920s, British and American scholars pointed out the factors that make up the form of literary works. There was a rich history of study analyzing the concepts of composition, space, and time before structuralism continued to illuminate them under structural perspective, dividing them into layers to reveal both the narrative surface and depths. Lubbock Percy discussed overt narrator [15], Walter Besant and Henry James said that novel is a free form but he made a deep effect on many scholars later with concepts on point of view, narrative voice, subject, wrought material, dramatic form, psychological material [16]; Josef Frank talked about spatial form [17],… The issue of narrative layering is what distinguishes narratology from traditional literary theory. While traditional analysis emphasizes the value of literature movements and complete works, narratology provides concept-tools to understand the process of formation and morphology of literary genres. Although conventional approaches can still reveal the layers of a work, narratology showed coherent thinking in defining narrative layers. This article uses the word "stratification" to describe the arranging of the novels' different elements into separate layers, including but not mandatorily their before-after sequence.

Putting narrative aspects into definite and scientific layers is a necessary operation for systematizing narrative works. Stratifying narrative structure therefore belongs to the basic issues of modern literary theory in general and narratology in particular. Modern literary theorists attempt to separate "narrative" from "narration". In the foundational stage, many scholars classified narrative into two layers: Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Seymour Chatman, Tzvetan Todorov, v.v. (e.g., fabula/syuzhet - Shklovsky) [18]. During the classical narratology phase, Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, Wolf Schmid, v.v. divided it into three layers, basically the narrated, the text, and the act of narrating (e.g., histoire/récit/narration - Genette) [18]. Post-classical narratology pays attention to "instances" and "niveaux narratifs", thus clarifying the reception process and cultural context (Arthur Asa Berger - elucidates narratology, David Herman – the text and the readers, Lev Vygotsky - psychological narratology, Karl Kao - rhetorical narratology, v.v.) [18].

So how did Milan Kundera think of this issue?

Milan Kundera wrote: "the author was faced with very complex, very heterogeneous material onto which he was obliged, like an architect, to impose a form" [3, p. 89]. The novel's narration is based on rich, diverse, yet chaotic raw materials of real life. The novel that reaches the reader's hand is a completed creation that has been processed with formal chapters and paragraphs, with a clear timeline of events and cause-and-effect relationships throughout the content of the work. Between these two layers are the writer's labor, the arrangement before and after, the processing of collected experiences into specific shapes, expressing artistic and human concepts and ideas. This imagination of the novel's narrative included obvious layers: the raw materials, the writer's efforts, and the final text.

The raw materials layer

Milan Kundera experienced many sudden events. As a citizen, he was a founding member of the Communist Party, then expelled, re-admitted, and expelled again multiple times. He was forced to stop studying, later appointed as a lecturer but eventually lost his job. He became famous but was banned from publishing books, exiled, and was misinterpreted. He had a deep awareness of life's absurdity and elusiveness. As a novelist, he affirmed the role of life material in the formation of the novel narratives. All entities in real life are not shown in a scene like a stage arrangement but are constantly changed, even interrupted, hidden behind the narrative subject.

The narrative subject is not capable of covering all objective realities; by contrast, not all realities become the subject's object of observation. Milan Kundera was loath to identify the writer's biography with the novels. He was famous as a writer in exile but was strongly opposed to political analysis of his work. In theory, he excluded biographical elements from the novel's material repertoire. In particular, his essays repeatedly mentioned "History". Capitalized "History" presented in the novel are the external forces that impact the lives and situations of humans; neither the chronicle of events in the history of country A or B, nor an explanation or a note about politicians or leaders. The natural diachronic presentation is therefore not retained on the surface of the text, Kundera strongly showed his intention to destroy the linear chronological arrangement of events.

Milan Kundera's perspective was in sharp contrast to theories about the author's origin or narrative product that have become a tradition in literary criticism. He redefined the fundamental setting of narrative: it's not a narrow setting associated with a specific person or era but an irrational, invisible force that has the power to encompass human life and is capable of ability to irresistible violently interfering with private life.

The creating layer

In the activities of selection and arrangement in the next layer of the novel's narrative structure, the role of the narrative creator - the novelist - is revealed. It is the writer who must resist the inertia of sympathetic details, lengthy descriptions, and explanations, and then remove them from the official structure. His "radical divestment" style enables the reader to look across the entire novel and protects the reader from the limits of biological memory. On the author's part, this simplification helps him go straight to the essence of things while still capturing the complexity of modern times.

In his essays, Milan Kundera did not mention the issue of language, but his creative process showed that language choice is a required step in the creating process, even a crucial point. He emigrated to France in 1975 but continued to write in Czech until 1990, producing three more Czech novels before switching to writing in French. He personally proofread the French and English translations of his novels after finding them to be seriously mistranslated. The creative language was a concern that contained many painful experiences for him. The problem of language in Kundera's novels is complex. It includes not only the change from Czech to French but also the passivity due to objective circumstances or/and his active decisions. There is also an asynchrony: although the language changed, the familiar Czech themes did not disappear or get replaced by French ones. In addition, Kundera imposed strict requirements on how his works should be translated.

The standard of maximum fidelity to the original French works helps to preserve as much of the work's form, in which the language and its effects are unchangeable choices.

The text layer

The overall text comes to the readers contains all details arranged in a fixed order, based on the novelist's intentional organization. Milan Kundera required that chapters and paragraphs be separated from the typographical signs, by clearly including boldface, line breaks, chapter numbers, or paragraph names, and that these signs must be kept intact in the whole entire text. It has not been truncated or embellished, even by the editor's notes. Besides, he highlighted two properties of novel narrative, which this paper temporarily calls *distinctiveness* and *exchangeability*.

Distinctiveness means that the novel has a different narrative style from other literary genres, in terms of time arrangement, degree of expression of the author's point of view, authenticity, characteristic narrative tone, v.v.. Milan Kundera differentiated novels from drama, poetry, and cinema. He showed that every true novel has such profound stability that it cannot be adapted to other forms. He wrote: Actions (novel) are always in a series, an action always provokes another action and sets in motion a chain of events [1, p. 289]. Actions in a novel are different, even opposite action in drama. A drama densely presents major events and actions, and thus simplifies life, eliminating countless small events that contribute to motivating characters to action. Meanwhile, the novel's narrative must be prose, defined by Kundera as routine, humility, also

boredom, frivolity, repetition, banality, illogicality, even vulgarity [3, pp. 14-16]. The novel differs from poetry in that poetry focuses on emotions while the novel tells and/or describes a story because it reflects on life through episodes, descriptions, and observations to explore a new perspective on the human situation.

On the other hand, a novel can incorporate into its text poetry, letters, dictionaries, diaries, etc. other forms of prose, and can even quote musical tablatures. This is a unique ability in novels. *Exchangeability* is the ability to learn other art forms. In fact, Milan Kundera only proposed musical references and personally realized this idea in his novels. Born in a musical traditional family and having studied music formally, Kundera admired Czech classical composers and repeatedly analyzed the artistic strategies in the works of Beethoven or Janáček. He believed that novels can get experiences from music structural techniques.

The meaning after reception layer

If Milan Kundera stopped at the above analysis, his concept of narrative layering was relatively close to classical narratologists; they often separated narrative into three layers: deep material, the author's creating activities, and surface text as a result [4, p. 6]. However, his essays also mentioned a landmark element of post-classical narratology: the reader's interpretation. According to Kundera, novels always contain gaps waiting for interpretation, and the life of novels does not end on paper. He was very conscious of addressing an implicit audience when he wrote (he called them "a public of unknown readers" [1, pp.124-129]. The narrator ostentatiously "jumps" in the middle of the narrative flow to remind the readers of the contract about the unreal. He thought about their reading experience when considering the printed letter's size and the density of pauses in the sentences, leaving space that they could imagine filling in after the writer had saved as much detail as possible. An ideal reader in Kundera's concept is someone who tries to visualize the characters rather than someone who tries to find the author's private life through characters. Then, the readers also find themselves.

3.2. "Polyphonic" – a special structural technique of Milan Kundera

The surface structure of a novel is the arrangement of formal components according to the author's content and thoughts. Depending on the approach, the structure can be considered in terms of plot organization, space-time organization, character personality expression or/and author's point of view; or a combination of all these factors. Structure does not change for all readers at any time and place. Milan Kundera demanded a novel structure that is free and liberal but compact and clear at the same time. To create an ideal novel structure, he proposed a polyphonic technique with strict requirements. The word "polyphony" used by Kundera easily evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's familiar concept of "polyphony", but Kundera's interpretation showed a different connotation.

In addition to the word "polyphony", Milan Kundera also used another concept called "counterpoint" to refer to the ideal novel structure. Both are not unfamiliar words. Bakhtin, in *Problems of Dostoievsky's Poetics*, mentioned the problem of counterpoint and polyphony [19]. Many people believe that Kundera was influenced by Bakhtin in conceptual content. Soren Frank wrote: "for us the principal analytical question is whether Kundera complies with Bakhtin's idea of dialogism, in relation to both character and reader" [20, p. 120]. In such a moment of concern, Frank attributed Kundera's concept of "counterpoint" and "polyphony" to the meaning of dialogue "in relation to both character and reader". But in my opinion, the problem was not only in the comparison between "counterpoint" and "polyphony" used by Kundera with similar words used by Bakhtin, especially since both terms were borrowed by both men from music. In music, "counterpoint" and "polyphony" are defined as follows:

The word counterpoint is frequently used interchangeably with polyphony. This is not properly correct, since polyphony refers generally to music consisting of two or more distinct melodic lines while counterpoint refers to the compositional technique involved in the handling of these melodic lines [21]. Both the terms "counterpoint" and "polyphony" in music refer to the

presence of many independent melodies in a piece of music. The difference is that "polyphony" refers to a form of music, in contrast to monophonic music; "counterpoint" is a music composition technique (it means note against note or melody against melody). Bakhtin retained the distinction between two concepts when he used them as "metaphors": a polyphonic novel is a type of novel that depicts the simultaneous interaction between different consciousnesses, expressed through voices, in an equal relationship [19, p. 43].

However, none of these contradictions and bifurcations ever became dialectical. They were never set in motion along a temporal path or in an evolving sequence. Instead, they were spread out in one plane, standing alongside or opposite one another: consonant but not merging or as hopelessly contradictory. They formed an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or as their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel [19, p. 30].

From here the word "polyphonic" came, meaning "polyphonic". And "counterpoint" was the technique of creating a polyphonic novel: "New principles appear for an artistic combination of elements and for the construction of the whole; what appears - metaphorically speaking - is novelistic counterpoint" [19, p. 43]. Bakhtin's work focused entirely on the concept of a "polyphonic novel", while the principle of counterpoint is only briefly discussed in its simplest form, the phenomenon of dialogue between characters.

When writing his essays, Milan Kundera seems to have used the two words "polyphony" and "counterpoint" in the same sense, meaning using multiple genre voices to break the linear structure of the novel, which means leaning towards technical issues. "That integration of novelistic genres into the polyphony of the novel was Broch's revolutionary innovation"; "the conditions for counterpoint in the novel are: first, the equality of the various "lines," and second, the indivisibility of the whole" [1, p. 73]. This is the first difference between Kundera and Bakhtin in inheriting music terms.

Thus, they went in two different directions when using the same terms of musical origin. They talked about "counterpoint" and "polyphony" as the combination of many elements in the same unit of work, but that "element" was different for each person. As a semiotician, Bakhtin focused on "voices", representing different ideas in dialogue. He highlighted the nature of discourse in natural life [19, pp. 30-43]. In Dostoevsky's novels - Bakhtin's object of analysis - many distinct voices exist, dialoguing with each other and simultaneously independent of the author's consciousness. Both Bakhtin and Kundera acknowledge the ability of the novel genre to resist totalitarian expressions. However, Bakhtin's polyphony recognizes the phenomenon of the self of others present in the novel as living entities, while Kundera's novels only have characters - existential experiments - set up by the author. Kundera considered himself a novelist, using "polyphony" in the sense of a specific technique when building the novel's structure. The polyphonic technique captures the complexity of life by creating multiple literature genres within the same novel. These routes tell stories in the style of short stories, and poems, v.v. or use the writing style of non-literary forms such as essays, philosophy, and reportage, v.v. thereby diversifying the approach to the work's theme. The core spirit in Bakhtin is to lower the power of the author's image, when this character's voice is no longer the solo voice. For Kundera, counterpoint is an experiment that affirms the author's power.

Polyphony in Bakhtin's theory opposes the singular monopoly of one ideology. Polyphony in Kundera's idea leads to genre lines; autonomous lines are placed side by side in the novel's space. They help readers experience many aspects of the theme themselves. The similarity between Kundera and Bakhtin, if any, should be the closeness between Kundera's concept of polyphony as explained above and the phenomenon of "plurilinguisme" described by Bakhtin in *Esthétique et théorie du roman*: British satirical literature parodied forms of minutes, journalistic reports, bibles, epics, and many other genres [22]. However, that is another complicated comparison not part of this article's content.

4. Conclusion

Milan Kundera did not mention the term "narratology" in his essays, but his concepts showed the nature of narrative research. Not only that, he put the novel in correlation with many other

literary genres, as well as compared and analyzed the novel and some non-literary discourses. This is an open way, high-level fictional thinking, grasping the movements of contemporary novels.

Milan Kundera envisioned the novel's narrative structure as consisting of four layers. Through that stratification, he showed the mobility of novel narratives in particular and fiction narratives in general. He also particularly emphasized the role of readers in constructing narrative meaning. Reading his essays in their publication timeline, we see the arguments expressed, interpreted, emphasized, re-explained, and expanded in a persistent creative process, linked between self-creation and reading other authors' works as well as viewing/listening to art forms other than literature. In particular, music inspired him to use many voices of genres to break the one-way structure of the novel. The concept of narrative structure and, more broadly, his entire body of essays will become an important reference when studying Kundera's novels. It forms an organic part of his overall creative legacy and directly impacts his narrative practice.

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