



The Uncanny and the ‘Great Return’ from Exile: Unheimlich (Un)homecomings in Milan Kundera’s *Ignorance*

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Submitted: 07.12.2020

Revision Requested: 30.12.2020

Last Revision Received: 17.01.2021

Accepted: 22.02.2021

Citation: MacMillan, C. (2021). The uncanny and the ‘Great Return’ from exile: Unheimlich (Un)homecomings in Milan Kundera’s *Ignorance*. *Litera*, 31(1), 121-136. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2020-0093>

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Milan Kundera’s novel *Ignorance*, which focuses on the return of two emigrés, Irena and Josef, to the Czech republic following the collapse of the Communist regime there. The novel is explored from the perspective of the uncanny, the unheimlich, literally the unhomely. The uncanniness of the experience of migration, for both the migrant and the host society, has been famously explored by critics such as Homi Bhabha and Julia Kristeva. However, arguably, not only the experience of migration but also that of homecoming can be uncanny. In this context, based on work by Boscaljon et al. (2016), this paper focuses on the uncanniness of Irena and Josef’s return to their country of origin. For Boscaljon et al. homecoming following a long period abroad can be profoundly uncanny, in that the familiarity of home has become, to an extent, unfamiliar after years of absence; both the emigré and their home have changed in the meantime. Moreover, the return home can be uncanny in that the emigré may effectively be confronted with their own eerie doubles in the form of abjected past or alternative selves. In this context, Irena and Jozef find a profoundly changed Prague on their return, and their reencounter with their families and old friends, with their language, and even with their own past selves is arguably one of an uncanny (un)familiarity.

Keywords: Uncanny, Unhomely, Emigration, Return, Abject



Introduction

Milan Kundera's 2000 novel *Ignorance* deals with the theme of *nostos*, or the "Great Return" (Kundera, 2002), in this case the return of two Czech emigrés, Irena and Josef, after two decades in exile. Although Irena and Josef had met over twenty years previously in Prague, Josef has no memory of Irena when she approaches him in Paris airport, where they are both waiting to board a plane to Prague. Josef dissimulates, however, and accepts Irena's suggestion to meet, a meeting which eventually turns into an erotic encounter between the two.

Despite some difficulties, both Irena and Josef appear to have found a home in their adopted countries, France and Denmark respectively. However, once the Communist regime collapses, both are persuaded to return to their country of origin. Far from being a "Great Return", however, the visit home is an unsettling one for both characters who, changed by their years in exile, become unfamiliar to those left behind, while the landscape of their youth, and even their mother tongue, have been transformed. Indeed, as Şandru points out, "the Bohemia of the present, to which Irena and Josef return... feels like an even more foreign country than the one they have left" (2012, p. 52).

In this context, this paper aims to explore Irena and Josef's return to their country of origin in terms of the uncanny. Notably, a close semantic connection exists between the uncanny, or *unheimlich* (literally "unhomely"), as developed by Freud, and the idea of home. Indeed, the uncanny, which is "undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror" (Freud, 1955, p. 217), can be described as "homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home" (Royle, 2003, p. 1). There is, then, a remarkable convergence between that which is *heimlich* and its opposite; indeed, Freud argues that "*unheimlich* is in some way or other a subspecies of *heimlich*". Thus, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (1955, p. 340): it produces a form of anxiety (Windsor, 2019, p. 57) which emerges "when something heretofore familiar becomes strange, thus revealing that that which was assumed to be familiar might have been strange all along and vice-versa" (Yildiz, 2012, p. 54).

On this basis, the relationship between the uncanny and migration has, as is further discussed in the following section, been theorised by authors such as Kristeva, Bhabha

and Yeğenoğlu. However, the migrant's return home may also be uncanny in that the supposed familiarity of home may turn out to be unexpectedly unfamiliar.

For Homi Bhabha, for instance, the concept of home has two aspects; the first is connected with the idea of fixed and stable origins, and is familiar in every respect, including the people, the landscape and the language, while the second is associated with the idea of return, "the kind of Conradian idea that home is what you return to" (Bhabha and Stierstorfer, 2017).

However, as Boscaljon argues, "Something unheimlich haunts our efforts to return home: this lesson manifests in the agony of Gilgamesh, the plight of Odysseus, the struggle of the Prodigal Son" (2016, p.1). Indeed, spending time away from home is arguably a prerequisite for experiencing the *unheimlich* at its heart:

We cannot see what is uncanny in our home as we dwell within it: the precondition for the possibility of experiencing the uncanny is leaving the home and becoming different from the place where we first learned to know ourselves. (Boscaljon, 2016, p.2)

Specifically, for Boscaljon, two aspects of homecoming may render it an uncanny experience: we may have been changed by our journeys, so that upon our return "we have become strangers in a strange land". On the other hand, in the time we have been away our home itself may have "altered beyond all recognition" (2016, p.2).

In this context, then, after a brief theoretical discussion of the connections between migration and the uncanny, as well as the distinct yet related concept of the *abject* (Kristeva, 1981), the paper proceeds to explore the uncanny aspects of exile as portrayed in the novel. This is followed by a discussion of the uncanny in Irena and Josef's return home, which will take the two aspects of uncanny homecomings mentioned by Boscaljon (2016) above as its starting point. In addition, however, the paper will also focus on how their return home forces Irena and Josef to face the return of their own repressed, rejected and/or abjected past selves and lives. As Pireddu, for instance, notes,

The modern Ulysses does not return home confirmed in his own identity. He disperses and is estranged from himself, unable to recognise the many faces he puts on and abandons in his centrifugal movement. (2015, p.2 69)

The Uncanniness of Migration: The Homeliness of the Unhomely

The uncanny is often associated with an experience of "liminality, margins, borders, frontiers" (Royle, 2003, p.vii). While the connections between migration and the uncanny have been developed by scholars such as Bhabha and Kristeva, Ziarek notes that Freud himself refers to strangers destroying the "heimlich character of one's country" (1995, p.7). According to Bhabha, the national bond itself has an uncanny aspect in that it is perpetually threatened by the irruption of difference; although the narratives which underscore national identity appear to be stable and confident, they also involve the repression, or rather the *disavowal* of difference (Bhabha, 1994, p.203).

Thus, it is transgressions of national borders (in both a psychological and physical sense) that may destroy the sense of national "homeliness" (Ziarek, 1995, p.16). In this sense, migrants arguably symbolise the uncanny or *unhomely* aspect of national identity as they "will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse", instead articulating "the death-in-life of the "imagined community" of the nation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 236).

Like Bhabha, Kristeva associates the uncanny with the "ambivalence and liminality of the national space" (Ziarek, 1995, p. 16) which is represented by the presence of the foreigner, "the intrusion of the other in the homogeneity" of the group, which, in turn arouses "prickly passions". However, the migrant himself also experiences an uncanny challenge to his identity: "by explicitly, obviously, ostensibly occupying the place of the difference, the foreigner challenges both the identity of the group and his own" (Kristeva, 1991, pp. 41-42). Bhabha also emphasises that a sense of the unhomely is shared by migrants and those who stay put as their home becomes increasingly defamiliarised by world events and migration, provoking "the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home and the home-in-the-world" (2002, p. 141). Thus, as the uncanny "can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in an unfamiliar context" (Royle, 2003, p. 1), the very sense of feeling at home in a foreign country may provoke a sense of the uncanny in the migrant.

It is, then, this transgression of both physical and psychological borders that renders the migrant uncanny; in this sense attitudes to migration can also be understood through Kristeva's concept of the *abject* (Yeğenoğlu, 2012, p. 37). According to Kristeva, the constitution of unified subjectivity requires the expulsion of those things which

are considered “unclean, improper and disorderly”. However, the abject remains undecidably inside and outside, emphasising the impossibility of clear-cut borders (Yeğenoğlu, 2012, p. 37). Thus, for Yeğenoğlu, it is their transgression of borders, emphasising the lack of a clear delimitation between inside and outside, that “makes migrants polluting and therefore threatening”. Moreover, in crossing the border they “threaten the mastery of the subject’s control over its own space” (Yeğenoğlu, 2012, p. 38).

Irena, an exile in Paris for twenty years, realises she is still a foreigner to even her closest French friend Sylvie, who puts pressure on her to go “home” following the fall of Communism in her native country. Irena’s predicament can perhaps be compared to Kundera’s own experience as an exile in France. Although well received as a courageous dissident by the French intelligentsia during the Communist period, following the collapse of the regime he encountered increasing hostility and pressure to return home, while facing criticism for his “stripped-down” French (Mateoc, 2011, pp. 49-50)*.

Notably, Kristeva emphasises the particularity of the French case in this regard (Mateoc, 2011, p. 49); in her view, due to a set of historical and cultural circumstances, it is particularly difficult for foreigners to integrate into French society. Thus, unable to speak French in a “polished” way, they become “conscious of the handicap of never being able to become a Frenchman” (Kristeva, 1991, pp. 38-39).

While, like Kundera, Irena was previously accepted as an almost heroic, tragic exile, a “label” which she questions later in the novel, she is apparently treated as an unwanted, abject foreigner following the fall of the Berlin Wall, even by her closest French friend Sylvie. Told to go home by an indignant Sylvie, Irena feels that Paris, rather than Prague, is now home:

“You mean this isn’t my home any more”?

“... You know what I mean!”

“Yes, I do know, but aren’t you forgetting that I’ve got my work here? My apartment? My children?” (Kundera, 2002, p. 3)

* As Şandru points out (2012, p. 177), Kundera also expresses his ‘thinly hidden’ irritation at his treatment at the hands of his native country following 1989.

Thus, despite the struggles she faced bringing up two children alone following the death of her husband Martin, Irena has succeeded in creating a life for herself, an uncanny home, in Paris. Moreover, when she meets Gustaf, a kind, generous and wealthy Swede, her loneliness is assuaged and her financial difficulties are, at long last, over. However, Gustaf also turns out to be instrumental in Irena's attempt at a "Great Return" to Prague: while the Communist regime was still in place, he proposed that his firm open an office there. Instead of being delighted, however, Irena feels "some sort of vague threat" at the prospect of being even indirectly reconnected to Prague, which, she tells Gustaf "is not my city anymore" (Kundera, 2002, pp. 22-24). However, this sense of threat, perhaps surprisingly, originates not primarily from the stifling regime there but rather from the prospect of being reunited with her mother: "How can she explain that the constant proximity of the mother would throw her back, into her weaknesses, her immaturity?" (Kundera, 2002, p. 25).

The sense of threat provoked by thoughts of her native city is, however, mixed with nostalgia. Irena's nostalgia is largely experienced during the daytime, when she would be visited by "fleeting images" of Prague which would "blink on in her head unexpectedly, abruptly, swiftly and go out instantly" (Kundera, 2002, p. 16). Above all, however, the life that she has left behind returns to her in terrifying recurring dreams. Such dreams, she notes, are almost ubiquitous among exiles (Kundera, 2002, p. 16), who thus form a nightmarish, *unheimlich* "imagined community" (Pireddu, 2015, p. 275) of those who "have suffered terror or torture" (Mateoc, 2011, pp. 51-52). One of Irena's nightmares is described as follows:

She is strolling in a small French city when she sees an odd group of women, each holding a beer mug, run towards her, call to her in Czech, laugh with fake cordiality, and in terror Irena realises she is in Prague. (Kundera, 2002, p. 15)

The uncanniness of migration is also emphasised by foreigners' complex relationship to language. Migrants need to express themselves in the "half-life, half-light of foreign tongues" as they acquire the "uncanny fluency of another's language" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 139), which becomes "an artificial language, a prosthesis" (Kristeva, 1991, pp. 15-16), or a "new skin" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 5). Meanwhile, for Kristeva, the foreigner's mother tongue is borne "within oneself like a secret vault, or like a handicapped child – cherished and useless" (Kristeva, 1991, p.16).

In Irena's case, French becomes almost a surrogate mother tongue as, after the death of her husband "she had nobody left to speak Czech with, her daughters refused to waste their time with such an obviously useless language: French was her everyday language, her only language" (Kundera, 2002, p. 96). Moreover, her mastery of French enabled her to assume a position of superiority in conversation with Gustaf, who spoke the language only poorly, thus forming an equilibrium in their relationship by counterbalancing her financial dependence on him (Kundera, 2002, p. 96).

In contrast, Josef never felt quite comfortable when using his new language, Danish, except when he spoke it with his wife. With others, however, he feels clumsy in his use of Danish, so that "it seemed to him that when Danes talked they were running nimbly, while he was trudging behind, carrying a twenty-kilo load" (Kundera, 2002, p. 157).

However, although we are told little about Josef's experiences in Denmark, it becomes clear that he also manages to carve a niche for himself in his adopted country, where he works as a veterinarian and marries a Danish woman, with whom he shares a "home" of which he speaks often (Mateoc, 2011, p. 51). Indeed, on her deathbed, Josef promises his wife that he will return "home"; as she tells Josef, following the collapse of the Communist regime, "not going would be unnatural of you, unjustifiable, even foul" (Kundera, 2002, p. 139).

Importantly, then, for both Irena and Josef the decision to return home appears to have been almost imposed upon them by their friends and loved-ones. Moreover, as is explored in the following section, on their return their once familiar homeland seems to have become largely unfamiliar, although it remains haunted by uncomfortable, *unheimlich* reminders of their past lives.

The Unhomeliness of the Homely: The Return Home

Both Irena and Josef arguably experience a sense of uncanny anxiety on their return to Prague. Notably, the centre of the formerly "sleepy and unkempt" Communist city is almost unrecognisable; "it filled up with tourists, lit up with new shops and restaurants, dressed up with restored and repainted baroque houses" (Şandru, 2012, p. 262). Indeed, Prague has become a kind of open-air museum dominated by "kitchified mass-tourism" where "everything is now "on display"" (Şandru, 2012, p. 262). In this sense, Kundera

suggests that the pace of change in the contemporary world is such that a Great Return, in the fashion of Odysseus' return to Ithaca, is no longer possible:

When Odysseus 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, 2002, p. 54)

The transformation is also a linguistic one; Prague's second language has changed from Russian to English, while in Gustaf's Anglophone workplace Czech has become "no more than an impersonal murmur" (Kundera, 2002, pp. 94-95). Ironically, it is perhaps Gustaf, rather than Irena, who really feels at home in this old city with its new, cosmopolitan veneer: "'Prague is my town!' he would exclaim in English" (Kundera, 2002, p. 94). Irena, in contrast, reflects that "there is no place more alien to her than that Prague. Gustaftown. Gustafville. Gustafstadt. Gustafgrad" (Kundera, 2002, p. 136).

The predominance of English extends even to Irena's home as, accustomed to speaking English at work, Gustaf begins to speak English rather than French with her. In consequence, it is now Irena, knowing little English, who is at a linguistic disadvantage, upsetting the equilibrium in the couple's relationship. Thus, Irena effectively feels like a foreigner in her own home:

Her Great Return took a very strange twist: in the streets, surrounded by Czechs, the whiff of an old familiarity would caress her and for a moment make her happy: then, back in the house, she would become a silent foreigner. (Kundera, 2002, p. 97)

Josef, for his part, arguably experiences his mother tongue itself as uncanny on his return to Prague. For Derrida, the mother tongue may be considered one of the two primary sources of nostalgia for the exile, "a sort of second skin you wear on yourself, a mobile home" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000, pp. 87-89). However, as Yıldız argues, while the mother tongue is often considered "the site of nativity and pure origin" (2013, p. 67) providing a sense of "wholeness, belonging and affective attachment", it may turn out not to be "really monolingual, homogenous, and fully familiar" (Yıldız, 2013, p. 67), even becoming an uncanny "site of alienation and disjuncture" (2013, pp. 202-206). Similarly, in *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida

himself hints at the uncanny nature of the mother tongue (Royle, 2003, p.117) (Yıldız, 2013), particularly in his own experience as a French-speaking Algerian Jew. He explains that “I only have one language, yet it is not mine” (Derrida, 1998, p. 2); more broadly, however, he suggests that *no-one* possesses “exclusively, and *naturally*, what he calls his language”(Derrida, 1998, p. 27).

From Josef’s perspective, his native language has changed in the two decades of his exile to the point where he now perceives it as a semi-foreign language, monotonous and with a strange timbre:

Over the centuries, the music of any language probably does change imperceptibly, but to a person returning after an absence it can be disconcerting. Bent over his plate, Josef was listening to an unknown language whose every word he understood. (Kundera, 2002, pp. 54-55)

Thus, for Josef Czech now straddles the strange and the familiar; it has become, like the uncanny itself, situated “between mother tongue and foreign language” (Yıldız, 2013, p. 54).

According to Derrida, in addition to the mother tongue, the focus of the migrant’s nostalgia is the place where their loved ones are buried. Thus, they would like to return:

to the places where their buried dead have their last resting place ... the key habitation for defining home, the city or country where relatives, father, mother, grandparents are at rest ... the place of immobility from which to measure all the journeys and all the distancings. (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000, p. 87)

Indeed, Josef visits his family’s grave, a familiar place prior to his emigration. However, after two decades’ absence, not only does he have problems finding the cemetery in the changed cityscape, but the once well-known tomb itself is rendered uncannily unfamiliar to Josef. Notably, it has become the resting place of his father, aunt and uncle in the meantime, along with people whose deaths Josef had been unaware of. While he was “stunned” to learn of the demise of some of these people, he was even more unsettled by the fact that his family had not bothered to inform him of these deaths, so that Josef felt “he no longer existed for them” (2000, p. 51).

Josef thus comes to the realisation that home, for him, is not where his progenitors are buried: instead, if home is anywhere, it is in Denmark, where his wife found her final resting place. Following her death, Josef pays off his wife's family, who want to inter her in the family vault, to allow him to bury her in a grave of her own, which he would eventually share:

When she was in the grave that belonged to them (a grave for two, like a two-seat buggy), in the darkness of his sorrow he glimpsed a feeble, trembling, barely visible ray of happiness. Happiness at not having let down his beloved: at having provided for their future, his and hers both. (Kundera, 2002, p. 117)

For both Irena and Josef, however, the return to their native land is also, more generally, a confrontation with disturbing aspects of their past which had remained submerged during their period of exile. As Royle argues, "The uncanny entails another thinking of beginning: the beginning is already haunted" (2003, p. 1): Irena and Josef's return home is uncanny as it brings to light that "which ought to have remained hidden" (Freud, 1955, p.4). In this sense, then, the uncanny can be likened to a "post-traumatic symptom" in which "repressed knowledge returns to unsettle their (illusory) sense of normalcy" (Fradley & Riley, 2019, p.197).

Josef, for instance, feels no affection for his past; this "nostalgic insufficiency" is provoked by a "masochistic distortion of memory"; his memory "detested him" and "did nothing but slander him", giving him a distorted, negative impression of his former self (Kundera, 2002, pp. 74-76). Josef's original decision to migrate, while ostensibly motivated politically, can be largely explained by this malevolent memory: dissatisfied with himself, and therefore with his life, he "crossed the border with a brisk step and with no regrets" (Kundera, 2002, pp. 74-76). Indeed, during his exile:

Josef had neither reason nor occasion to concern himself with recollections bound to the country he no longer lived in: such is the law of masochistic memory: as segments of their lives melt into oblivion, men slough off whatever they dislike, and feel lighter, freer. (Kundera, 2002, p. 76)

However, such memories have not been erased; they have merely been repressed, and Josef's return to his homeland provokes the return of his masochistic memory. As

Kundera's narrator notes, then, "the life we've left behind us has a bad habit of stepping out of the shadows, of bringing complaints against us, of taking us to court" (Kundera, 2002, p. 90). Thus, Josef's past life, including the messy divorce from his first wife, comes back to haunt him on his return to his country of origin:

Quite simply, his stepdaughter's voice enveloped him in a fog of recollections: intrigues; interfering relatives; abortion; tears; slander; blackmail; emotional bullying; angry scenes; anonymous letters: the whole concierge conspiracy. (Kundera, 2002, p.90).

In addition to Josef's own "masochistic memory", his emigration was arguably motivated by his disgust at his brother's submission to the crushing post-1968 Soviet regime, symbolised by a red flag flying from his window (Kundera, 2002). As Jasper (2016, p.11) notes, exile may be understood as a "mysterious severance" that happens "when we desert one another under the pressure of overwhelming circumstances." Such severance cannot be healed, even by love, plunging us into a "lethal mixture of betrayal, resentment and cynicism" (Jasper, 2016, p. 11).

Notably, Josef's closest remaining relatives, his brother and sister-in-law experience his exile as a betrayal. They were "indignant at the paltry reasons Josef might have alleged to justify his emigration, which they certainly considered irresponsible: the regime did not make life easy for the relatives of émigrés" (Kundera, 2002, p. 64). Moreover, even on his return twenty years later, Josef finds that his relationship with his brother and sister-in-law has never fully recovered; indeed, they have almost become strangers, albeit uncannily familiar ones, to the point that Josef does not even inform them about his wife's death.

Josef's uncanny relationship with his past is, however, perhaps best illustrated by his re-reading of his teenage diary, which his father had kept as a memento following Josef's emigration. The cruel adolescent protagonist of the journal, who enjoys making girls suffer, seems like a complete stranger to the older Josef. He has largely forgotten the events described in the diary, with the exception of one genuine memory recovered by its re-reading, that of lying to his girlfriend simply in order to see her cry. This memory provokes a sense of horror in the adult Josef, who feels he shares nothing in common with his younger self, a "little snot" whom he finds "completely contrary to his tastes and to his nature" (Kundera, 2002, p. 83).

As Royle, for instance, points out, such moments where our very identity appears uncertain can be understood in terms of the uncanny: "The uncanny involves moments of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced" ... "It has to do with our sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves" (2003, pp. 2-6). In this sense, then, "it is impossible to conceive of the uncanny without a sense of ghostliness, a sense of strangeness given to dissolving all assurances about the identity of a self" (Royle, 2003, p.16).

While Josef experiences his younger self essentially as a stranger, there is a moment of uncanny recognition, of the return of the repressed, when Josef recognises the sadistic boy's handwriting as his own:

The resemblance is upsetting, it irritates him, it shocks him. How can two such alien, such opposite beings share the same handwriting? What common essence is it that makes a single person of him and this little snot? (Kundera, 2002, p. 83)

Similarly, on her return to Prague, Irena is also confronted with those aspects of her past that were repressed when she was in exile. On an earlier visit to Prague soon after the collapse of Communism, for example, Irena had had an uncanny experience in the form of an imaginary double life when she literally caught a glimpse of the person she might have become if she had not emigrated. The weather in Prague being unexpectedly hot, Irena needs to buy a summer dress. Seeing herself in a mirror in her drab, Communist style dress, she perceives her reflection almost as an uncanny *doppelgänger*, as the Irena she would have been if she had never left for France:

She was stunned: the person she saw was not she, it was somebody else, or, when she looked longer at herself in her new dress, it was she but living a different life, the life she would have lived if she had stayed in Prague ... She was gripped by the same panic she used to feel in her emigration-dreams: through the magical power of a dress she could see herself imprisoned in a life she did not want and would never again be able to leave. (Kundera, 2002, p. 31)

However, perhaps even more so than the stifling regime, her relationship with her smothering mother provided the main impetus for Irena to seek an alternative life. For

Kristeva, importantly, the decision to migrate itself is, ultimately, the consequence of abjection of the mother. It can be understood, then, as a decision to break with the maternal bond: the migrant's wandering, in this sense, is provoked by a 'secret wound' resulting from being "misunderstood by a loved and yet absent-minded, discreet or worried mother, the exile is a stranger to his mother" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 5).

As Kristeva points out, "Certainly foreigners become intoxicated with their independence, and undoubtedly their very exile is at first no more than a challenge to parental overbearance" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 21). However, a complete separation from the abject is impossible; there is no way to completely protect oneself from the "imaginary uncanniness and real threat" of the abject, which "beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4).

Indeed, Irena's marriage was, at least at the beginning, "just a way to escape her mother" (Kundera, 2002, p. 137), who enjoys the crushing effect she has on her daughter:

When she saw her daughter cowed and diminished at her side, she would prolong the occasions of her demolishing supremacy as long as possible. With sadistic zest, she would pretend to take Irena's fragility for indifference, laziness, indolence, and scolded her for it. (Kundera, 2002, p. 21)

Thus, Irena had always felt diminished in her mother's presence: to her surprise, this feeling returned when her mother, many years after Irena's emigration, visited her in Paris:

Irena had always felt less pretty and less intelligent in her mother's presence. How often had she run to the mirror for reassurance that she wasn't ugly, didn't look like an idiot...? But all that was so far away, almost forgotten. But during her mother's five-day stay in Paris, that feeling of inferiority, of weakness, of dependency, came over her again. (Kundera, 2002, p. 21)

Her desire to escape from the clutches of her mother was not, however, the direct cause of her exile; she followed her husband abroad when, constantly pursued by the secret police, he was forced to emigrate. However, as Irena tells her friend Milada, she married in order to escape her mother: "My mother pushed me towards Martin, and Martin took me abroad" (Kundera, 2002, p. 164).

Indeed, when back in Prague, Irena explains that, despite the loneliness and material difficulties that she suffered as a single mother abroad, the years immediately following Martin's death were her happiest. Thus, Irena's initial reluctance to return to her homeland can be understood as a fear of returning to the influence of a smothering mother, who eventually seduces Irena's lover Gustaf (Kundera, 2002).

Moreover, the recurrent "exile dream" populated by vociferous, beer-drinking Czech ladies that had plagued Irena in France uncannily becomes reality when, on her return to Prague, she organises a party for her old friends and acquaintances. Notably, the uncanny is connected to a "slippage between waking and dreaming" (Vidler, 1992, p. 11), or a "waking nightmare" (Royle, 2003, p. 140). At first ignoring the expensive French wine that Irena has brought, the women begin drinking beer, their laughter growing steadily louder as the alcohol takes effect. Irena thus finds herself in her nightmare, as she "makes out Czech words, and understands that she is not in France, that she is in Prague, and she is doomed" (Kundera, 2002, p. 41).

Painfully, Irena gradually realises that the women are not interested in her experiences during her exile: she feels that "rejecting the wine was rejecting her. Her as the person she is now, coming back after so many years" (Kundera, 2002, p. 37). Thus, the women reject, or abject, the mature Irena, whose two decades abroad have rendered her both familiar and unfamiliar, an uncanny stranger with "foreigner's ways" (Kundera, 2002, p. 36). In this context, Irena realises that the only way she can be accepted by her old friends and acquaintances is by allowing them 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. (Kundera, 2002, p. 43)

Thus, uninterested in Irena's life abroad, the women keep referring to events and people from her earlier life in Prague which, however, have completely vanished from her memory. In this sense she perceives not only her former friends but also her own younger self as uncanny strangers. As Irena notes, "They refused to see that after all this time, their world has evaporated from my head... It was a very strange conversation" (Kundera, 2002, p.167).

Conclusion

For both Irena and Josef, then, the experience of homecoming is an uncanny one as what should be familiar – their country of origin - has become strange. Prague itself has changed out of all recognition following the collapse of the Communist regime, and even the Czech language no longer appears the same. The sense of the uncanny, moreover, is exacerbated by the re-encounter with abjected past selves which the protagonists experience on their return “home”. These uncanny revenants of rejected lives appear, for instance, in Josef’s reacquaintance with his family and especially with the “little snot” of his teenage diary. Irena, for her part, perceives her reflection as her uncanny double, an alternative Irena who had never emigrated and was oppressed by the regime and, perhaps above all, by her own mother.

Moreover, the perception of the uncanny is heightened by the fact that, while both characters have been changed by their experience of exile, their families and friends expect them to slot effortlessly into their old lives and personalities as if they had never been away. In their inability to delete the preceding twenty years, the mature Josef and Irena find themselves uncanny strangers in a once-familiar terrain. In this context, then, it appears that only Irena and Josef are fully capable of understanding each other; in response to Josef’s question, “So who’ve you got to talk with? Who thinks like you?”, Irena replies, “No-one... You” (Kundera, 2000, p. 170).

More generally, given the importance of migration in contemporary literature, the theme of *nostos* is certainly not confined in this regard to Kundera’s *Igrorance*. While the experience of migration as depicted in literature has been explored from many perspectives, including that of the uncanny, the theme of homecoming perhaps remains relatively underexamined from a theoretical perspective. The exploration of homecoming as an uncanny experience developed in this paper, then, may arguably open up a tentative research approach for approaching other contemporary novels which deal with the experiences of a migrant who, changed by the experience of migration, returns to an (un)home which has, in the meantime, become unfamiliar in its familiarity.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

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