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Book Review

KAIROS

by Jenny Erpenbeck, tr. Michael Hofmann, Granta Publications, 2023,
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Kairos by Jenny Erpenbeck, tr. Michael Hofmann, Granta Publications, 2023, pp.400, ISBN 9781783786138

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The ordinary act of a father deciding to move due to the political situation, a mother's insistence on a child's care, a young woman's insistence on bearing a child, a child's excitement for food. Love has to be paid for. Who pays for such love acts? It is the unconscious everyday act of the powerless and selfless. Laden with the want for morality and bearing the consequences of going against them, life moves from simplicity to complexity with age. Age is significant in this novel *Kairos*. A young woman of 19, Katharina, falls in love at a fortunate moment with a married man, Hans, who is 34 years older than her. 'Kairos' refers to the Greek god of fortunate moments. The power of everyday life is bound to establish the fleeting nature of fortunate moments. That is what transpires in their life as well.

Along with the life of Katharina and Hans, the fleeting nature of fortunate moments plays out in the arena of nations. Just as their life together falls apart, so does their beloved country, East Germany. The unification of East Germany with West Germany brings the fall of the former. One is left asking why there are not fortunate moments anymore. The birth of two nations West Germany and East Germany was the failure of the modern nations to build consensus after World War II.

The novel is set in late 1980s Berlin, with the main characters living in the Eastern border of the Berlin wall, with Soviet sensibilities. Katharina and Hans meet each other in 1986, and as the world around them collapses their relationship experiences the same fate. The first part of the novel is held by Hans's knowledge of the past and present. The adult-child relationship is quite evident in this part. Through Hans, Erpenbeck makes sense of the disturbing past of Hitler's regime and its aftermath. The second part is held by the violence of love, first unleashed by Hans in his inability to balance marriage and love, and lastly by Katharina. Bertolt Brecht's life is an important allegory of what Katharina experiences. Katharina, like Brecht in his time, finds herself in America, safe from the political turmoil of Europe.

Erpenbeck is sympathetic to the complexities of history and does not give an overbearing representation of capitalist capture of democracy and values thereof. She gives a voice to the defeated ideologies. She questions the Western desire to create a world of their own. The Berlin wall was the result of the disagreements of the two ideologies of capitalism and socialism. Not having a consensus or agreement is also a wall. For Erpenbeck, the desire for individual supremacy is bound to push the strong away from consensus. She questions the West's attitude as much as she questions the violence of the Stalinist regime.

The difference of man and woman is also starkly brought about by Erpenbeck. Faced with absolute violence, following independent will through silence becomes the 'form of resistance' for women. Of men and women, who is more occupied with love? Erpenbeck puts forth a picture that man is afraid of the description of love. Touch is less meaningful to him compared to the reasons for touch. People hurt in love could be quite cruel, man more so. Jenny Erpenbeck asks in the novel,

“Is it the case (here) that day after day, silently, people come to an understanding of their own lives by way of the understanding of others?”

Man’s demands resemble what a nation’s demands. The amphitheatre of the nation divides the people based on a future that is beautiful as well as insecure. A nation must reinvent itself again and again through events, wars, failure, success and a pompous show of it- triumph in world cups, medals in Olympics. Nation is verbosity, and it alone allows one ‘body’ to become ‘body politic’. The Soviet’s betrayal of the nation of East Germany runs parallel to the lover’s betrayal of each other. Nation rests on memory, but can memory rest without body? Nation is the division of bodies and ideologies.

Life in the modern times provides freedom to the individual with the construction of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, making relationships exist; relationships that are founded on the curtailment of individual freedom. Marriage is one such relationship. Hans is already married and exercises the freedom of being a man to fall in love with Katharina. She, on her part, knows about his marriage and still dreams of marrying him. Is there not a contradiction in the definition of freedom when we see ourselves yearning for a traditional institution like marriage all the while being free?

Irrationality of the surrender of freedom by the individual is an essential part of modern life. This finds representation in contemporary novels. The reasons for this irrationality vary from one novel to another. In the novel *The Milkman*, author Anna Burns looks at the madness of society in forming rumours. Han Kang’s protagonist, in her novel, *The Vegetarian*, is driven to irrationality by the violence of her father. Douglas Stuart’s novel *Shuggie Bain* projects the story of Shuggie’s mother, driven irrational by addiction to alcohol. *Kairos* follows the same trajectory of irrationality. Only, in this novel the movement away from reason is driven by the changes in the meaning of nation and love.

Hans fails to love Katharina in her context and reason. His knowledge of the nation is changing and he imposes, albeit in love, his understanding of the nation and love on Katharina. Hans’ age provides him with a history that is knowledgeable at first but eventually overbearing for her. When love fails, Hans takes the path of rationality. A man is equipped with power over woman, the relation itself is fraught with power, that is defined largely in terms of political rationality.

Michel Foucault in his 1982 article “The Subject and Power” implores us to investigate the ‘forms of resistance’ in order to understand what power relations are about (p 778). The failure of the character of Hans to account for his power in the society, within the family and in relation to love brings forth an array of the forms of resistance from Katharina. Her specific form of resistance is met with further violence. Hans records his retributed words in cassettes and forces her to listen to them. The emotionality of violence and resistance is controlled by the discipline of violence itself. Freedom collapses into discipline, putting an end to love.

The sense of possession and dispossession determines the human emotion. Modern institutions that are the representatives of the modern state puts a lot of pressure on the emotions of the individual. Possession of a secure identity is regularly dispossessed by the modern state. The certainty of dispossession of identity gives rise to what Rousseau calls in his book *The Social Contract* the ‘precarious’ individual. ‘Can this ‘precarious’ individual love?’ is the question Jenny

Erpenbeck cracks open in her novel *Kairos*. *Kairos*, the God of fortunate moments, is evoked to represent the lack thereof, for a successful life lived in love.