UNIT 1: MILAN KUNDERA: *ART OF THE NOVEL* ("THE DEPRECIATED LEGACY OF CERVANTES")

UNIT STRUCTURE:

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *discuss* the life and works of Milan Kundera
- *explain* the main issues and ideas regarding fiction as discussed by Kundera in the chapter prescribed from his *Art of the Novel*
- *elaborate* Kundera's contributions to the writing
- *assess* Kundera's reception as a theorist of fiction

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 1 of the Course on 18th and 19th Century Fiction. The entire first Block of this course is dedicated to the theories of fiction. In this unit, we shall try to discuss some aspects of the art of fiction writing as understood by Milan Kundera. You will note that Kundera's *The Art of the Novel* is the most important nonfictional work, other than his novels. Published in 1988, this book outlines Kundera's theories of the novel. The book consists of three short essays, two interviews, a list of sixty-three words and their definitions, and the text of

a speech. In *The Art of the Novel,* Kundera explains how the history of the novel and the history of European culture are inextricably linked together. To discuss his experience of men's existence, he starts with Miguel de Cervantes, one of the greatest Spanish writers, and passes through the works of other authors such as Samuel Richardson, Honore´ de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, and Franz Kafka. However, our discussions in this unit shall be limited to the first part of the book namely "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes." This chapter was first published in 1984 in *The New York Review of Books* under the title of "The Novel and Europe". In this unit, we shall try to examine how the chapter outlines the history of the European novel.

1.3 MILAN KUNDERA: LIFE AND WORKS

Milan Kundera was born in 1929 in Brno, Czechosslovakia. His father Ludvik Kundera was a famous Czech musicologist and pianist, who served as the head of the Janacek Music Academy in Brno from 1948 to 1961. His mother's name was Milada Kunderová. Milan learned to play the piano from his father, and later studied musicology. He did his schooling in Brno in 1948. At the age of 19, Kundera realised that music was not his true vocation, although his love of music would influence the structure of his novels as he patterned them after musical compositions.

Emerging as a Reformer later, Kundera began his career with three volumes of poetry published in between 1953 and 1964. At the same time, he started writing his novels. His first novel *The Joke* was published in 1967. It was inspired by a true incident in 1950. He and another Czech writer, Jan Trefulka, had been expelled from the Communist Party for "anti-party activities." *Joke* was based on this incident and it helped Kundera to emerge as a leader in the reform movement that led to the Czech Republic's "Prague Spring" of 1968—a period known for reforms and relaxation of authority.

From the end of World War II until the late 1980s, Eastern Europe was under the firm control of the Soviet Union. Any attempts by Eastern

European countries to reject Soviet control were violently squashed. During the so-called "Prague Spring", the Czechoslovakian government allowed writers and other artists a level of freedom of expression that the communist country had previously not permitted. However, the reprieve from oppression was short-lived. Soviet tanks rolled into the city and the old "order" was restored. Kundera found himself in the same position as many of the other leaders of the reform movement. His books disappeared from libraries and bookstores; he lost his job at the academy, and his right to continue writing and publishing in his native country.

Though initially, he was not allowed to travel to the West, Kundera finally secured a teaching position in France. He served as an invited professor of comparative literature at the Universite´ de Rennes from 1975 to 1979. In 1980, he took a professorship at the 'E´cole des hautes e´tudes en sciences sociales' (School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences) in Paris. The following year, he became a naturalized citizen of France.

Life Is Elsewhere (1974) is his first major work and it was published in the United States. He took revolutionary romanticism, and the volatility of the marriage among other things, as the subject matters of the book. His next book *The Farewell Party* (1976) was also published in the United States. This book satirizes a government-run health spa for women with fertility problems while simultaneously addressing serious ethical questions. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980) was republished a year later with an interview Kundera gave to American novelist Philip Roth. This book illustrates the need for memory to overcome forgetting in order for an individual to achieve self-preservation.

Kundera's most famous novel till date is *The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* which was published in 1984. In this book, he touched upon his experiences after the "Prague Spring." This novel delves deeper into the greatest existential problems that people are faced with: love, death, transcendence, the sense of continuity or "heaviness" provided by memory, and the contrasting sense of "lightness" that is brought about by forgetting. The book was adapted as a movie in 1988.

Kundera's theme in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is that life is unrepeatable; thus, one cannot go back and correct one's mistakes. This realization leads to a feeling of lightness, a total lack of responsibility. The idea of lightness, which Kundera takes from the Greek philosopher Parmenides, and which originally meant playfulness, here turns into 'lack of seriousness', or 'meaningless emptiness'. Kundera also takes over the concept of 'kitsch' from the German writer Hermann Broch: Kitsch is a beautiful lie that hides all the negative aspects of life and deliberately ignores the existence of death.

Kundera's other important works in between 1970s and 1980s are marked by his own feelings of estrangement and exile, and his homesickness for Prague. In 1989, however, the Soviet Union collapsed, and soon thereafter, the Eastern European countries were free to pursue democratic reforms and reopen their societies to the West. Kundera, a French citizen since 1981, remained in Paris. In 1995, he published a book-length essay of literary criticism called *Testaments Betrayed*, which is organised after Friedrich Nietzsche's books, with each of its nine parts divided into small sections. Its main theme focuses on Kundera's firm belief that writers and other artists' rights should be defended, and their intentions respected by editors, publicists, and executors. Kundera also wrote novels in French namely *Slowness* (1993), *Identity* (1998), and *Ignorance* (2000).



LET US KNOW

You will note that while writing his novels, Kundera followed a Musical Pattern. For him, novelistic unity does not exist in a predetermined set of rules. He uses a common theme and a structure based on musical polyphony—the use of many notes playing at the same time, usually in harmony—to tie the sections of his novels together. The lengths and arrangements of chapters, subchapters, and sections are used to create mood and a sense of time, much like in a musical composition. Instead of following the linear story of a character or set of characters, Kundera connects seemingly unconnectable stories through their related themes and existential situations.

In a 1984 interview with the British writer Ian McEwan, Kundera stated:

"We constantly rewrite our own biographies and continually give matters new meanings. To rewrite history in this sense—indeed, in an Orwellian sense—is not at all inhuman. On the contrary, it is very human."

He also asserts his right as an author to exclude from his body of work "immature" and "unsuccessful" works. In his mature fiction, he creates a self-contained world that he constantly analyzes and questions, opening up a multitude of ways of interpreting the incidents he depicts. Kundera's style of fiction, interlaced with philosophical digression, is greatly inspired by the novels of Robert Musil and the philosophy of Nietzsche. He takes his inspiration, as he notes often enough, not only from the Renaissance authors such as Giovanni Boccaccio and Rabelais, but also from Laurence Sterne, Henry Fielding, Denis Diderot, Hermann Broch, Franz Kafka, Martin Heidegger and most significantly, Miguel de Cervantes, to whose legacy he considers himself most committed.

In 1990, Kundera published another book called *Immortality*. The novel, his last in Czech, was more cosmopolitan than its predecessors, and more explicitly philosophical and less political. It would set the tone for his later novels. His most recent novel is *The Festival of Insignificance* (1914) that focuses on the musings of four male friends living in Paris.

Kundera continues to live and work in Paris.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is known as the Prague Spring? How was Kundera associated with what is known as the 'Prague Spring'?

Q 2: Mention the themes of Kundera's famous work *Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Q 3: Why did Kundera write his novels following a musical pattern?

1.4 READING THE TEXT

Kundera's discussions on fiction in *Art of the Novel* starts with a reference to a world of unlimited potential, the beginning of history, the shrinking of possibilities in the outside world, the search for infinity in the human soul, the futility of this search. He ends with a reference to history, which he terms a 'monster' that can offer nothing helpful. The following is an attempt to read the prescribed text.

"The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes"

Kundera begins the essay by referring to Edmund Husserl, who in 1935 gave lectures on the crisis of European humanity in Vienna and Prague. For Husserl, the adjective "European" meant the spiritual identity that extends beyond geographical Europe (to America, for instance), and that was born with ancient Greek philosophy. In his view, this philosophy, for the first time in History, apprehended the world (the world as a whole) as a question to be answered. It interrogated the world not in order to satisfy any of the practical needs but because "the passion to know had seized mankind." The roots of the crisis, lay for Husserl at the beginning of the Modern Era, in Galileo and Descartes, in the one-sided nature of the European sciences, which reduced the world to a mere object of technical and mathematical investigation and put the concrete world of life, *die Lebenswelt* as he called it, beyond their horizon.

Then he states that the rise of the sciences propelled man into the tunnels of the specialized disciplines. The more he advanced in knowledge, the less clearly could he see either the world as a whole or his own self, and he plunged further into what Husserl's pupil Heidegger called, in a beautiful and almost magical phrase, "the forgetting of being." Then, referring to Descartes, he states that man has now become a mere thing to the forces (of technology, of politics, of history) that bypass him, surpass him, possess him. To these forces, man's concrete being, his "world of life" *(die Lebenswelt),* has neither value nor interest: it is eclipsed, forgotten from the start.

However, Kundera thinks that it would be naive to take the severity of this view of the Modern Era as a mere condemnation. He states that

two great philosophers—Heidegger and Husserl laid bare the ambiguity of this epoch, which is decline and progress at the same time and which, like all that is human, carries the seed of its end in its beginning. According to Kundera, this ambiguity does not diminish the last four centuries of European culture, to which he feels attached. There he boldly asserted that '**the founder of the Modern Era is not only Descartes but also Cervantes.'** Perhaps, it is Cervantes whom the two phenomenologists neglected to take into consideration in their judgment of the Modern Era. By that, Kundera means: "If it is true that philosophy and science have forgotten about man's being, it emerges all the more plainly that with Cervantes a great European art took shape that is nothing other than the investigation of this 'forgotten being.'"

Kundera feels that the existentialist philosopher Heidegger in his book *Being and Time* unveiled, displayed, and illuminated all the great philosophical themes in four centuries of the European reincarnation of the novel. As in case of philosophy, the novel too, in its own way, discovered the various dimensions of existence one by one. He states that with Cervantes and his contemporaries, the novel inquired into the nature of adventure; with Richardson, it begins to examine "what happens inside," to unmask the secret life of the feelings; with Balzac, it discovers man's rootedness in history; with Flaubert, it explored the previously unknown territories of the everyday life; with Tolstoy, it focused on the intrusion of the irrational in human behaviour and decisions. The novel probed time: the elusive past with Proust, the elusive present with Joyce. With Thomas Mann, it examined the role of the myths from the remote past that control our present actions.

The novel has accompanied man uninterruptedly and faithfully since the beginning of the Modern Era. It was then that the 'passion to know,' which Husserl considered the essence of European spirituality, seized the novel and led it to scrutinize man's concrete life and protect it against 'the forgetting of being.' That is the sense in which Kundera wants to understand and share Hermann Broch's insistence on the point that "The sole *raison d'etre* of a novel is to discover what only the novel

can discover. A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel's only morality.'

Kundera asserts that the novel is Europe's creation; its discoveries, though made in various languages, belong to the whole of Europe. The *sequence of discoveries* (not the sum of what was written) is what constitutes the history of the European novel. It is only in such a supranational context that the value of a work can be fully seen and understood. He then reiterates that as God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Cervantes's character Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognise. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parcelled out by men. Thus, was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world. Then, making a comparison between Descartes and Cervantes, Kundera opined that with Descartes, the *thinking self* became the basis of everything, and thus to face the universe alone, is to adopt an attitude that Hegel called **heroic**. However, with Cervantes, the world as ambiguity, the presence of a multiplicity of contradictory truths became the basis of everything.

Kundera observed that Cervantes' Don Quixote set off into a world that opened wide before him. He could go out freely and come home as he pleased. The early European novels are journeys through an apparently unlimited world. The opening of Denis Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste* comes upon the two heroes in mid-journey; we do not know where they have come from or where they are going. They exist in a time without beginning or end, in a space without frontiers, in the midst of a Europe whose future will never end. Half a century after Diderot, in Balzac, the distant horizon has disappeared like a landscape behind those modern structures, the social institutions: the police, the law, the world of money and crime, the army, the State. In Balzac's world, time no longer idles happily by as it does for Cervantes and Diderot. It has set forth on the train called History. The train is easy to board, hard to leave.

However, it is not at all fearsome yet, it even has its appeal; it promises adventure to every passenger and with it fame and fortune.

Kundera states that the path of the novel emerges as a parallel history of the Modern Era. Isn't that Don Quixote himself, after a three-hundred-year journey, returning to the village disguised as a land-surveyor? Once he had set out to seek adventures of his own choosing, but now in the village below the Castle he has no choice, the adventure is *imposed on him:* a petty squabble with the administration over a mistake in his file. So what, after three centuries, has happened to adventure, the first great theme of the novel? Has it become its own parody? What does that mean? That the path of the novel winds up in a paradox? Kundera then provides the example of another novel.

The Good Soldier Schweik by Jaroslav Hašek is perhaps the last great popular novel. Isn't it astonishing that this comic novel is also a war novel, whose action unfolds in the army and at the front? What has happened to war and its horrors if they have become laughing matters? In Homer and in Tolstoy, war had a perfectly comprehensible meaning: people fought for Helen or for Russia. Schweik and his companions go to the front without knowing why and, what is even more shocking, without caring to know.

What, then, as Kundera wants to explore, is the motor of war if not Helen or country? Sheer 'force' that wills to assert itself as force? Yet hasn't that been behind all wars since the beginning of time? Yes, of course. However, this time, in Hasek, it is stripped of any rational argument. No one believes in the nonsense of the propaganda, not even those who manufacture it. Force is naked here, as naked as in Kafka's novels. Indeed, the Court has nothing to gain from executing K. Why did Germany, why does Russia today want to dominate the world? To be richer? Happier? Not at all. The aggressivity of force is thoroughly disinterested; unmotivated; it wills only its own will; it is pure irrationality.

Thus, according to Kundera, Kafka and Hasek help us confront an enormous paradox that is in the course of the Modern Era, Cartesian rationality has corroded all the values inherited from the Middle Ages. However, just when reason wins a total victory, pure irrationality seizes

the world stage, because there is no longer any generally accepted value system to block its path. This paradox, masterfully illuminated in Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers,* is called by Kundera terminal paradox. There are others. For example: The Modern Era has nurtured a dream in which humankind, divided into its separate civilizations, would someday come together in unity and everlasting peace. Today, the history of the planet has finally become one indivisible whole, but it is war, ambulant and everlasting war, that embodies and guarantees this long-desired unity of humankind. Unity of mankind means: No escape for anyone anywhere.

The time was past when man had only the monster of his own soul to grapple with, the peaceful time of Joyce and Proust. In the novels of Kafka, Hasek, Musil, Broch, the monster comes from outside and is called History; it no longer has anything to do with the train the adventurers used to ride; it is impersonal, uncontrollable, incalculable, incomprehensible—and it is inescapable. This was the moment (just after the First World War) when the pleiad of great Central European novelists saw, felt, grasped the *terminal paradoxes* of the Modern Era. However, it would be wrong to read their novels as social and political prophecies, as if they were anticipations of Orwell! What Orwell tells us could have been said just as well (or even much better) in an essay or pamphlet. These novelists discover "what only the novel can discover": they demonstrate how, under the conditions of the "terminal paradoxes," all existential categories suddenly change their meaning: What is *adventure* if a K.'s freedom of action is completely illusory? What is *future* if the intellectuals of *The Man Without Qualities* have not the slightest inkling of the war that will sweep their lives away the next day? What is *crime* if Broch's Huguenau not only does not regret but, actually forgets the murder he has committed? And if the only great comic novel of the period, Hasek's *Schweik,* uses war as its setting, then what has happened to the *comic?* Where is the difference between *public* and *private* if K., even in bed with a woman, is never without the two emissaries of the Castle? And, in that case, what is *solitude?* A burden, a misery, a curse, as some would have us believe, or on the contrary,

a supremely precious value in the process of being crushed by the ubiquitous collectivity?

Then Kundera ponders over the issue of death of the novel as discussed for a long time: notably by the Futurists, by the Surrealists, by nearly all the avant-gardes. They saw the novel dropping off the road of progress, yielding to a radically new future and an art bearing no resemblance to what had existed before. The novel was to be buried in the name of historical justice, like poverty, the ruling classes, obsolete cars, or top hats. However, if Cervantes were the founder of the Modern Era, then the end of his legacy ought to signify more than a mere stage in the history of literary forms; it would herald the end of the Modern Era. That is why the blissful smile that accompanies those obituaries of the novel strikes me as frivolous. Frivolous because Kundera himself lived through the death of the novel, a violent death (inflicted by bans, censorship, and ideological pressure), in the world where he spent much of his life and which is usually called totalitarian. At that time, it became utterly clear that the novel was mortal; as mortal as the West of the Modern Era. As a model of this Western world, grounded in the relativity and ambiguity of things human, the novel is incompatible with the totalitarian universe. This incompatibility is deeper than the one that separates a dissident from an apparatchik, or a human-rights campaigner from a torturer, because it is not only political or moral but also *ontological.* By this, Kundera means—"The world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are molded of entirely different substances. Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what I would call the *spirit of the novel.*"

Kundera then, by referring to an experience of reading the Russian novels, asks why hundreds and thousands of novels are still being published in huge editions and widely read in Communist Russia. Certainly; but these novels add nothing to the conquest of being. They discover no new segment of existence; they only confirm what has already been said; furthermore: in confirming what everyone says (what everyone must say), they fulfil their purpose, their glory, their usefulness

to that society. By discovering nothing, they fail to participate in the *sequence of discoveries* that for me constitutes the history of the novel; they place themselves *outside* that history, or, if you like: they are *novels that come after the history of the novel.* About half a century ago, the history of the novel came to a halt in the empire of Russian Communism. That is an event of huge importance, given the greatness of the Russian novel from Gogol to Bely. Thus, the death of the novel is not just a fanciful idea. It has already happened. In addition, we now know *how* the novel dies: it's not that it disappears; it falls away from its history. Its death occurs quietly, unnoticed, and no one is outraged.

However, Kundera questions if the novel has come to the end of the road by its own internal logic? There are four appeals to which he seems to be responsive.

The appeal of play: Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Denis Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste* are for me the two greatest novelistic works of the 18th century, two novels conceived as grand games. They reach heights of playfulness, of lightness, never scaled before or since. Afterward, the novel got itself tied to the imperative of verisimilitude, to realistic settings, to chronological order. It abandoned the possibilities opened up by these two masterpieces, which could have led to a different development of the novel (yes, it's possible to imagine a whole other history of the European novel. . .)

The appeal of dream: The slumbering imagination of the 19th century was abruptly awakened by Franz Kafka, who achieved what the Surrealists later called for but never themselves really accomplished: the fusion of dream and reality. This was in fact a longstanding aesthetic ambition of the novel, already intimated by Novalis, but its fulfilment required a special alchemy that Kafka alone discovered a century later. His enormous contribution is less the final step in a historical development than an unexpected opening that shows that the novel is a place where the imagination can explode as in a dream, and that the novel can break free of the seemingly inescapable imperative of verisimilitude.

The appeal of thought: Musil and Broch brought a sovereign and radiant intelligence to bear on the novel. Not to transform the novel into philosophy, but to marshal around the story all the means—rational and irrational, narrative and contemplative—that could illuminate man's being; could make of the novel the supreme intellectual synthesis. Is their achievement the completion of the novel's history, or is it instead the invitation to a long journey?

The appeal of time: The period of *terminal paradoxes* incites the novelist to broaden the time issue beyond the Proustian problem of personal memory to the enigma of collective time, the time of Europe, Europe looking back on its own past, weighing up its history like an old man seeing his whole life in a single moment. Whence the desire to overstep the temporal limits of an individual life, to which the novel had hitherto been confined, and to insert in its space several historical periods (Aragon and Fuentes have already tried this). But, I don't want to predict the future paths of the novel, which I cannot know; all I mean to say is this: If the novel should really disappear, it will do so not because it has exhausted its powers but because it exists in a world grown alien to it.

There he asks if the novel's *raison d'etre* is to keep "the world of life" under a permanent light and to protect us from "the forgetting of being," is it not more than ever necessary today that the novel should exist? Kundera's answer is positive. But, the point is that the idea of the novels has faced a kind of reduction not only in terms of the meaning of the world but also in terms of the meaning of works of art. Like all of culture, the novel is more and more in the hands of the mass media; as agents of the unification of the planet's history, the media amplify and channel the reduction process; they distribute throughout the world the same simplifications and stereotypes easily acceptable by the greatest number, by everyone, by all mankind. This common spirit of the mass media, camouflaged by political diversity, is the spirit of our time. And this spirit seems to me contrary to the spirit of the novel, which is the spirit of complexity as well as of continuity. Every novel says to the reader: "Things are not as simple as you think." That is the novel's eternal truth.

Besides, each work is an answer to preceding ones; each work contains all the previous experience of the novel. However, the spirit of our time is firmly focused on a present that is so expansive and profuse that it shoves the past off our horizon and reduces time to the present moment only. Within this system, the novel is no longer a *work* (a thing made to last, to connect the past with the future) but one current event among many, a gesture with no tomorrow.

Does this mean that, "in a world grown alien to it," the novel will disappear? That it will leave Europe to founder in "the forgetting of being"? That nothing will be left but the endless babble of graphomaniacs, nothing but *novels that come after the history of the novel?* I don't know. I merely believe I know that the novel cannot live in peace with the spirit of our time: if it is to go on discovering the undiscovered, to go on "progressing" as novel, it can do so only against the progress of the world.

The avant-garde saw things differently; it was possessed by an ambition to be in harmony with the future. It is true, avant-garde artists did create works that were courageous, difficult, provocative, ridiculed, but they did so in the conviction that "the spirit of the time" was with them and would soon prove them right.

Kundera winds up the chapter by stating that his answer is as ridiculous as it is sincere. He is attached to nothing but the depreciated legacy of Cervantes.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What, according to Kundera, is Edmund Husserl's legacy?

Q 5: How did the novel, according to Kundera, come to discover various dimensions of existence one by one?

Q 6: Why is the character of Don Quixote so important for Kundera?

Q 7: How does Kundera start his discussions on the art of fiction?

1.5 IMPORTANT IDEAS IN THE CHAPTER

In the chapter "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes", Kundera is found to have traced the adaptations that the novel has made over the four centuries, and different changes were enabled by an ever-evolving society. Paraphrasing Edmund Husserl, Kundera tries to argue that the modern age began when Galileo Galilei and René Descartes elevated the importance of that which can be measured, resulting in a degradation of those things that were not scientific or technical. With the sciences becoming more and more concentrated, specialised and exclusive, the world too became more and more fragmented. As men failed to comprehend the world, they failed to comprehend themselves. In *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, Miguel de Cervantes opposed this trend, as he gave due emphasis on the forgotten self of man. Kundera's argument is that it is the novel, which illuminates various aspects of man's existence.

In Kundera's view, the great novelists throughout history have modified the novel to accommodate the changes in society. Cervantes encountered a world that had lost its sense of certainty as God failed to retain the supreme position He had held in the Middle Ages. Consequently, focussing on the ambiguity confronting man, Cervantes realized that there are no absolutes, and therefore, he found himself faced with unrestrained freedom. Thus, the world of Don Quixote is one of adventure where anything was possible. A hundred years later, Samuel Richardson examined the interior life of the individual. In the 19th century, Gustave Flaubert faced a world bounded by institutions and government; he chronicled the trivial events of daily existence. In the 20th century, Marcel Proust explored the effect of the past on the individual, and James Joyce questioned the ability to know the present. Kundera's argument is that soon all accepted value systems will be discredited and abolished, resulting in a total dominance of irrationality. In addition, he asserts his views by referring to modern novelists, including Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, and Hermann Broch. Of all the genres, Kundera states, only the novel has been able to reflect the changes accompanying the emergence of modern man.

Then Kundera almost asserts that the future of the novel lies in its continuing ability to evolve. Because of the novel's inclusiveness and adaptability, the death of the novel as many would have liked to accept, cannot be foreseen. Although declared dead or at least dying by various avant-garde groups, such as the Surrealists and Futurists, and by some academicians, the novel is strong. Arguing that in a sense only censorship can destroy the novel, Kundera links the health of the genre to the vitality of Western culture.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What are the main issues raised by Kundera in the chapter "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes?"

1.6 RECEPTION OF KUNDERA'S IDEAS

Many critics tend to discuss the political disillusionment of Kundera's work, particularly in the context of his fight against Czechoslovakian social and cultural repression. But, some critics go beyond the thematics, focusing on his unique style and marking his fragmented plotting, episodic structure, and authorial intrusions as distracting. Still, many other critics praise Kundera's approach, appreciating his use of humour, his erotic themes, and his sense of narrative play.

When *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* appeared in 1984, it immediately became an international best seller, garnering awards throughout the world, including a Los Angeles Times Book Award. Contemporary reviews of the novel were largely positive. Paul Gray, in a Time review, calls the book "a triumph of wisdom over bitterness, hope over despair." Thomas DePietro observed that it is a work of "burning compassion, extraordinary intelligence, and dazzling artistry." DePietro also noted that the book "leaves us with many questions, questions about love and death, about love and transcendence. These are our burdens,

the existential questions that never change but need to be asked anew." However, not all reviewers were enchanted with the book. Christopher Hawtree, for example, in the *Spectator*, raised some reservations against Kundera's titles and finds problems with the "elliptical structure" of the work. Thus, scholarly interest in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* continues unabated.



1.7 LET US SUM UP

Milan Kundera is one of the few Czech writers who have achieved wide international recognition. In his native Czechoslovakia and the present-day Czech Republic and Slovakia, Kundera has been regarded as an important author and intellectual since his early 20s. Each of his creative works and contributions to the public political and cultural discourse has provoked a lively debate in the context of its time. In his *Art of Fiction*, Kundera dispassionately explains how novels are made and why. For this, he starts with Cervantes, passes through Richardson Honore´ de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust, and ends with Ftantz Kafka, James Joyce and Hermann Broch. In the chapter prescribed, Kundera mostly reiterates that the novel and its history constitute a specific form of knowledge not to be confused with philosophy, politics or psychology.



1.8 FURTHER READING

Kundera, Milan. (1988). *The Art of the Novel.* (*Trans from the French by Linda Asher*). Grove Press, Inc.

Milne, Ira Mark. *Gale Contextual Encyclopaedia of World Literature. Vol III.*

Web Resource:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milan_Kundera

https://www.enotes.com/topics/art-novel-milan-kundera



1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: During 'Prague Spring', the Czechoslovakian government allowed writers and artists freedom of expression which the communist country had previously not permitted… …the old "order" was soon restored… …Kundera found himself tied to the same position as many of the other leaders of the reform movement… …His books disappeared from libraries and bookstores, and he lost his job at the academy.

Ans to Q No 2: Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being* exhibits an experience of the "Prague Spring" further exploring existential problems such as love, death, transcendence, the sense of continuity or "heaviness" provided by memory, and the contrasting sense of "lightness" that is brought about by forgetting.

Ans to Q No 3: Kundera viewed the novel in terms of a unity not in terms of predetermined set of rules… …He believed in musical polyphony… …he used many notes playing at the same time, usually in harmony… …The lengths and arrangements of chapters, subchapters, and sections are used to create mood and a sense of time, much like in a musical composition.

Ans to Q No 4: The meaning of the term "European" for Husserl… …how his philosophy, apprehended the world as a question to be answered… …his philosophy interrogated the world because "the passion to know had seized mankind".

Ans to Q No 5: With Cervantes and his contemporaries, the novel inquired into the nature of adventure… …with Richardson, it begins to examine the secret life of the feelings… …with Balzac, it discovers man's rootedness in history… …with Flaubert, it explored the previously unknown territories of the everyday life… …with Tolstoy, it focused on the intrusion of the irrational in human behaviour and decisions… …with Thomas Mann, it examined the role of the myths from the remote past that control our present actions.

Ans to Q No 6: Don Quixote set forth into a world he could no longer recognise… the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity… …the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parcelled out by men… …thus, was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world.

Ans to Q No 7: Kundera's discussions on fiction in *Art of the Novel* starts with a reference to a world of unlimited potential, the beginning of history, the shrinking of possibilities in the outside world, the search for infinity in the human soul, the futility of this search… ..he ends with a reference to history, which he terms a 'monster' that can offer nothing helpful.

Ans to Q No 8: In the chapter Kundera traces the adaptations and changes that the novel has made over the four centuries… …with the sciences becoming more and more concentrated, specialised and exclusive, the world too became more and more fragmented… …in *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, Cervantes opposed this trend giving due emphasis on the forgotten self of man… …Kundera states that the novel illuminates various aspects of man's existence.



1.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: In what ways, does Milan Kundera, discuss the state of fiction in the chapter "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes" from his *Art of the Novel*.

Q 2: How does Kundera address the broader questions concerning fiction, such as its uniqueness of form, its vitality, and future in his *Art of Fiction.*

Q 3: "Kundera almost asserts that the future of the novel lies in its continuing ability to evolve." Justify your views.

Q 4: How does Kundera outline the history of the European novels? Discuss the ways in which Kundera acknowledges the

contributions of the novelists starting with Cervantes with their specific form and technique.

Q 5: Why, according to Kundera, is the nature of European science one-sided? What importance does Kundera assign to the Spanish writer Cervantes? Explain.

Q 6: What are the four appeals that have influenced the novel's own internal logic? Discuss.

Q 7: "The founder of the Modern Era is not only Descartes but also Cervantes." Justify your views with regard to the deliberations by Kundera.

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