UNIT 2 BAKHTIN’S CARNIVALESQUE

2.1 Introduction

In the previous unit, you read about the contributions of Althusser. In this unit, we will examine the work of another very important postmodern theorist, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. Specifically, we will study Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque, based on his famous essay, “Of Carnival and Carnivalesque”. As you will see, Bakhtin proposes the idea of the carnivalesque as a subversive force which can help to upset social hierarchies. However, to what extent is this universally applicable? The discussion which follows will enable us to examine this question from a gender perspective.

2.2 Objectives

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

• Provide a brief account of the Life, Works of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin’s and some key terms associated with him;
• Discuss Rabelais and his World within its literary and political contexts;
• Explain the idea of the Carnivalesque; and
• Critically analyse the Carnivalesque from a gendered perspective.
Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) is known as a philosopher, literary theorist and semiotician among others. His works have influenced writers from different traditions such as Marxism, Feminism and Structuralism, to name three. Although the Bakhtin Circle was established in 1920 and well known literary figures like Valentin Voloshinov and Medvedev were part of the group that discussed various subjects ranging from aesthetic and art, Bakhtin was re-discovered by Russian scholars only in the 1960s.

Bakhtin’s works and ideas gained popularity after his death. Much of what he wrote was initially shrouded in controversy. This was partly because of the limited access to the Russian archives for Bakhtin scholars. However, after the archives opened up, scholars obtained information that gave a new dimension to his works.

Bakhtin was re-discovered by Russian scholars only in the 1960s. There were several reasons for this late discovery of Bakhtin’s works. According to Holquist (The Dialogic Imagination, 1975), Bakhtin’s most productive periods coincided with the two darkest phases of Russian history. The first was after the Russian Revolution of 1917, which followed the civil war and famine when the country was still recovering from its losses in the world war. The second was in the 1930s, when Stalin was attempting to centralize power and purges were being conducted. This, of course, was followed by the Second World War and the fight against Nazism and Fascism. Bakhtin’s notions of polyphony, dialogism and heteroglossia, which we will read about in the upcoming sections, would be seen as very dangerous in such a political climate.

Many of Bakhtin’s works were written much earlier and published later. While some were published after his death, others were either lost or had issues of dubious authorship. In 1971 when a conference was held to celebrate Bakhtin’s 75th birthday, claims were made by the well known Soviet linguist, V.V. Ivanov that the works attributed to Voloshinov and Medvedev were mainly written by Bakhtin himself. In fact, when Bakhtin was asked whether he was the author of the books attributed to Voloshinov viz. Freudianism: A Marxist Critique (1927), Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1929) and Medvedev’s The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship (1928) he was not forthcoming in his response. This is why the debate is still inconclusive and the texts are still considered to be disputed. Bakhtin’s re-discovery in the 1960s happened in an interesting way. Students at the Gorky Institute came across his book on Dostoevsky (Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics, 1984a) and his dissertation on Rabelais that they found in the archives. They assumed he was dead and were surprised to learn that he was still
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around. They decided to publish his works. His controversial dissertation on Rabelais was published in 1965. The same year his writings from the 1930s and early 1940s were published as a collection. Bakhtin had become a cult figure even before he died in 1975. French literary critics like Julia Kristeva among others were instrumental in bringing him to the Francophile world. Later, his popularity spread to America and England. They associated him with the Russian Formalists. By the 1980s Bakhtin was one of the most popular Russian critics in the West. Bakhtin’s ideas on the potential dynamics of language got him centre stage in the west particularly in the context of the development of structuralist and subsequent deconstructive theories. The most authoritative biography on M.M. Bakhtin is by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist entitled, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1984).

### 2.4 LIFE AND WORKS OF MIKHAIL MIKHAILOVICH BAKHTIN

Bakhtin was born on November 17, 1895 in Orval, Russia, to parents who were part of an old nobility that extended back to the fourteenth century. But the family had lost its wealth by the time Bakhtin was born. Bakhtin’s father worked as a bank manager, a job that took him to several cities. Bakhtin spent his early childhood in Orel, Vilnius and Odessa. Many critics state that since these cities were multilingual, Bakhtin was influenced by the dynamic potential of language. While at Odessa he joined the local university in 1913. Later, he joined his brother Nikolai in Petersburg University. At the university, Bakhtin was shaped by German philosophy, which was very popular before the First World War. Neo-Kantianism dominated European academia and Russian universities at that time. Neo-Kantianism was a reaction to the excesses of nineteenth century positivism and empiricism. It did not see human consciousness as a blank sheet on which impressions were formed by the external world. On the contrary, it assumed that the individuals had a consciousness that made them apprehend the world in a certain way. As Simon Dentith says, “But Bakhtin’s interest springs not from these general questions in the theory of knowledge (indeed he is consistently hostile to arguments conducted solely in this dimension) but in the particular way that he can modulate this neo-Kantian way of thinking into a way of talking about the relationship between self and other” (Dentith, 1995 p. 11).

After completing his studies in 1918 Bakhtin moved to a small city, Nevel, in Western Russia. He worked there as a school teacher for a couple of years. While at Nevel he tried to write a large volume on the subject of moral philosophy but the volume was never published in its entirety. Later, a part of this work was published as an essay “Art and Responsibility” (Bakhtin, 1990). In 1920 Bakhtin moved to Vitebsk, and a year later, he
married Elena Aleksandrovna Okolovich. He had a very good relationship with her. Around 1922, Bakhtin was diagnosed with a bone disease, osteomyelitis, that eventually led to the amputation of his leg in 1938.

In 1924, Bakhtin moved to Leningrad, where he got a position in the Historical Institute. He also provided consulting services to the State Publishing House. It was around this time that he decided to go public with his writings. However, the journal that was to publish his article, “On the Question of the Methodology of Aesthetics in Written Works” closed down. It was published almost half a century later (Clark and Holquist, 1984). The late 1920 and the 1930s were a very productive time for Bakhtin. He wrote several articles and books on the novel. He also wrote his doctoral dissertation on Rabelais during this period. His first major book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* was published in 1929. He first introduced the concept of dialogism here but soon after this revolutionary book was written he was accused of links with the underground movement of the Russian Orthodox Church. Stalin purged several writers and intellectuals during the early years of his communist rule and Bakhtin too was exiled to Siberia. But due to failing health he was sent for six years to Kazakhstan instead. While at Kazakhstan he was living in a town named Kustanai where he worked as a book keeper. It was around this period that he did some serious writing. His seminal essay, “Discourse in the Novel” was written around this time.

In 1937, he moved to a town named Kimry, which was close to Moscow. It was here that he completed his work on the 18th century German novel, but with the German invasion during the war, the only copy of the manuscript was lost. From 1940, until the time when the Second World War was over, Bakhtin lived in Moscow.

Later, he took up the Chair of General Literature Department at the Mordovian Pedagogical Institute at Saransk. This same institute changed in 1957 from a teachers’ college to a University and Bakhtin became the Head of the Department of Russian and World Literature in this university. He retired from the university due to failing health in 1961. By 1967 he moved back to Moscow for medical attention. He had lost his wife by then. He died in Moscow in 1975.

### 2.5 BAKHTIN’S RABELAIS AND HIS WORLD

In this section, let us examine the literary and political contexts which informed Bakhtin’s, *Rabelais and His World* (1968) in order to gain a better understanding of the book.
2.5.1 Literary Context

François Rabelais (1494-1553) was a French writer known for his satire, grotesques and humorous preoccupation with popular festive-forms and its celebration of the lower stratum of society with all its bawdiness and vulgarity. Much of his satires and grotesques picked up on the social and political upheavals of the sixteenth century. Bakhtin saw parallels in his own life with its turbulent national history to the life and times of Rabelais. Holquist states, “he was deeply responsive to the Renaissance because he saw in it an age similar to his own in its revolutionary consequences and its acute sense of one world’s death and another world’s being born” (Bakhtin, 1984 b, Prologue xv).

François Rabelais’s first book, *Pantagruel*, was published in 1532. In this book the author celebrated with great élan the debauched life style of its protagonist, Pantagruel, upturning the official culture of the Middle Ages. This book was the first of the Gargantua series that was condemned both by the French academics and the Roman Catholic Church for its crass depiction of culture and its dismissal of church rituals respectively.

Bakhtin’s book, *Rabelais And His World* was published in 1968. The book contains seven chapters ranging from “Rabelais in the History of Laughter” to “Popular-Festive Forms and Images in Rabelais” and “Rabelais’ Images and His Time.” Bakhtin does not give a systematic analysis of the novel but draws ideas from it and uses them as an artistic practice by re-contextualizing them. For example, Bakhtin uses Rabelais’ idea of “grotesque Realism,” which stresses the material and bodily functions of eating, defecating, burping as not mere degradation but as part of a process of death and rebirth. He also draws a distinction between the grotesque and classical bodies and points out the openness of the former with its subversive potential, over the closure of the latter. Both these concepts had a special resonance in authoritarian Stalinst Russia.

*Rabelais and His World* by Bakhtin can be read at two levels. First, it links with the immediate context of Soviet History and Stalinist centralization of power. Second, it shows the explosion of official history by unofficial history. That is, it refers to the imposition of power from above and the desire to change from below. Bakhtin’s interest in folk culture is not an isolated interest. As in the case of Francois Rabelais who was influenced by the Montpellar school that developed various kinds of laughter, in the 1920s in Russia too, scholars like Zelenkin, Jakobson among others talked of the lower stratum of culture.
2.5.2 Political Context

It is the novel form in particular that Bakhtin explores in his book, *Rabelais And His World*. As Krystyna Pokmorska states “Bakhtin’s ideas concerning folk culture, with carnival as its indispensable component, are integral to his theory of art. The inherent features of carnival that he underscores are its emphatic and purposeful ‘heteroglossia’ and its multiplicity of styles. Thus the carnival principle corresponds to and is indeed a part of the novelistic principle itself” (Bakhtin, 1984 b, Foreword: x). However, it must be understood that in the 1930s in Russia, the government wanted to use the novel form to officially streamline the works of Russian writers. In 1934 the Communist Academy had a conference on the nature of the novel so that it could propagate through its social realism. George Lukacs who was a resident of the Soviet at that time participated in it. The proceedings of the conference were published in 1935 in *The Literary Critic*, which was a major theoretical journal of the time. As Holquist states that it is not by chance that Bakhtin was preoccupied by the novelistic genre in his works particularly since 1934. He adds, “The ‘grotesque realism’ of which so much is made in this book is a point-by-point inversion of categories used in the thirties to define Socialist Realism” (Holquist in Bakhtin, 1984 b, Prologue, xvii).

It is also relevant to mention here that Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was given the task as the founder of Soviet culture talked about the importance of satire and its links with the carnival. He had written a book called *The Social Role of Laughter* (1930). He saw in laughter a panacea for the common man that would prevent him from revolutions. Bakhtin saw in Lunacharsky’s ideas the revolutionary potential of his own idea of the carnival. For Bakhtin, the carnival was “revolution itself.”

Given the subversive potential of the book, how did it get published? Bakhtin’s notes on Rabelais were put together by him in 1940. While in Moscow he handed in his study to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in order to get a postdoctoral degree. The defense took place only after the War was over. The defense of the dissertation itself was fraught with controversy. One group supported the original manuscript and the other was against it. Finally, the government stepped in and the State Accrediting Bureau gave him not a full doctoral degree but the “candidate’s degree” for his dissertation on Rabelais in 1952.

The revolutionary potential of the book can be seen in Bakhtin’s words that “the carnival forms present the victory of this future over the past. . . . The birth of the new... is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the old. . . . In the whole of the world and of the people there is no room for fear. For fear can only enter a part that has been separated from the whole, the dying link torn from the link that is being born” (1984b, p. 256).
Check Your Progress:

i) What are the two levels in which Rabelais and His World can be read?

ii) Why was Bakhtin drawn to the carnival form?

iii) Why was Lunacharsky important for Bakhtin?

2.6 BAKHTIN’S IDEA OF THE CARNIVALESQUE

Bakhtin states that in the middle ages carnival played an important role in the lives of ordinary people. These people had a double sphere of life: the official and the unofficial. The first sphere was governed by the church and the feudal state and the second, was characterized by laughter, parody, songs and reversal of the official system. For him, the clown, the fool and
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comic rites subvert the official sphere dominated by the church and the state. Robert Stam, states, that the oppressive role of the church against which Bakhtin speaks is double-edged. On the one hand, he is towing the line of Stalin in being anti-clerical. Yet, on the other hand, he is speaking against the Stalinist regime, that is, the Soviet officialdom which was becoming increasingly autocratic and univocal. Terry Eagleton states that Bakhtin pits against Stalinist “official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism” with the explosive politics of the body and the erotic (Eagleton, 1981, p.144).

It is carnival’s power to subvert rigid, socially determined hierarchies that attracts Bakhtin to the carnival form. Bakhtin’s interest in social carnival is confined to its “determining influence” on literature and literary genres. In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, he says,

The problem of carnival (in the sense of the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms, of a carnival type)—its essence, its deep roots in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man, its development under conditions of class society, its extraordinary life force and its undying fascination—is one of the most complex and most interesting ...What interests us here is essentially only the problem of carnivalization, that is, the determining influence of carnival on literature and more precisely on literary genre.

(Bakhtin, 1984a, p.122).

He chooses Rabelais to demonstrate, and expand upon, his views of the carnivalesque because in Rabelais, he claims, we see for the last time the possibility of incorporating into literature the collective, dionysiac impulse to carnival (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. xxii). Since Rabelais, “the grotesque tradition peculiar to the market place and the academic literary tradition have parted ways and can no longer be brought together. ...The link with the essential aspects of being, with the organic system of popular-festive images, has broken. Obscenity has become narrowly sexual, isolated, individual, and has no place in the new official system of philosophy and imagery” (Rabelais, 1984b, p.109). The history of how this split took place, Bakhtin admits, is complex. But using the transformations in “grotesque realism” and the laughter emanating from it as important indexes, Bakhtin attempts to explain this severance in his discussion of Rabelais.

The essential principle of “grotesque realism,” Bakhtin asserts, is “degradation,” that is, de-grading or pulling down to the material level all that is abstract and high. This materialization of the abstract, the spiritual, is not demeaning; rather, it returns to the earth all forms in order to renew and realign them within the cosmic whole of life:
In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots, of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable.

(Bakhtin, 1984b, p.19).

The emphasis on body is fundamental to grotesque realism. The grotesque body is not a finished, unified, chiselled, individuated form as in the classical canon, but an open, protruding mass which constantly “outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” The orifices -“The open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the pot belly, the nose” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p.26) best portray its incompleteness and also its connection with the outside natural world.

The “material bodily principle,” pivotal to grotesque realism, “degrades and materializes” carnival laughter as well by linking it with “the bodily lower stratum” (Bakhtin b, p. 20). However, its vulgar, earthy quality has other components within its “complex nature.” With tremendous economy uncharacteristic of his otherwise expansive style, Bakhtin describes this laughter as:

First of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated “cosmic” event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.

(Bakhtin, 1984b, p.11-12)

In Bakhtin’s view of carnival folk humour, medieval festivities gain significance primarily in relation to the laughter they evoke from the people—“carnival is the people’s second life organized on the basis of laughter” (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 8). For Bakhtin, carnival laughter is liberating. It explodes the
monologism of “serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials [by offering] a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p. 6).

According to Bakhtin’s revisionary literary history, it is during the Renaissance that the carnival sense of life reaches its peak in literature. In this period the fusion of official and non-official cultures—made possible by the disintegration of feudalism and theocracy—allows “a millennium of folk humor” to enter its literature and fertilize it. Ironically, the Renaissance stress on the individual does not affect this carnivalization process. As Bakhtin observes: “However divided, atomized, individualized were the ‘private’ bodies, Renaissance realism did not cut off the umbilical cord which tied them to the fruitful womb of the earth. . . .The private and the universal were still blended in a contradictory unity” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p. 23). On the contrary, the Romantic period, Bakhtin declares, with its “private chamber character” explodes this “contradictory unity” creating a hiatus between the private and the universal. Consequently, the positive, regenerative cosmic laughter of the previous ages is “cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm” (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 38). Capitalism, and the conditions of class society in modern times, Bakhtin avers, have further broadened the gap. That is, because a new concept of realism seeks to “complete each individual outside the link with the ultimate whole—the whole that has lost the old image and has as yet not found the new one.” The effect is “a broken grotesque figure, the demon of fertility with phallus cut off and belly crushed” (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 53).

In *Rabelais And His World* Bakhtin attempted to popularize Rabelais by examining his works within the traditions of carnivalesque folk culture: “of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p. 1). But the importance of his book, “is its broad development of the ‘carnivalesque’ into a potent, populist, critical inversion of all official words and hierarchies” (Stalleybrass & White, 1986, p.7). Bakhtin perceives in the festive license of the carnival, it its collapsing of rigid hierarchies, “a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order”—a prefiguration of a vision of the world “hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p. 10).

What enables carnival to encompass and elide oppositions within its fold, for Bakhtin, is its unique positioning: “It [carnival] belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play” (Bakhtin 1984 b, p.7). This ambivalent positioning—preemptive of any principle of closure—makes carnival in his schema a
privileged chronotope (space/time coordinate). By virtue of its ability to sunder “false links [which] are reinforced by scholastic thought, by a false theological and legalistic casuistry and ultimately by language itself, — shot through with centuries and millennia of error” (Bakhtin 1984b, p.169), carnival achieves its chronotopic (see Glossary for explanation) status:

Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.

(Bakhtin, 1984b, p.7).

Bakhtin’s history of literary carnivalization is made problematic by the nature of its social determinants. As Lacapra incisively observes: “The nature of carnival is obviously bound up with the nature of the rest of social and cultural life, and its function depends, at times in complex ways, upon the variations of that mutual relationship.” However, he continues, Bakhtin “does tend to exclude or underemphasize aspects of carnivals or carnival-type phenomena that can appear only pathological from his normative and philosophical perspective” (LaCapra, 1983, p.285-86). Although LaCapra is referring to specific aspects of the Charivari (a French folk custom in which the community would bang on pots and pans and parade to the homes of newly weds. Later, this custom evolved as a form of ‘social coercion’.) in early modern Europe, his observation could well extend to Bakhtin’s response to other carnival or carnival-type activities in the modern period—the popular protests, counterculture “happenings” and other avant-garde movements of the sixties in America for instance—all of which influence in varying degrees the literature of the period. We will critique Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival and carnivalesque from the feminist perspective in the next section.
Check Your Progress:

i) What does Bakhtin see in the festive license of the carnival?

ii) According to Bakhtin’s literary history when does the carnival sense of life reach its peak?

2.7 GENDERED READING OF BAKHTIN’S IDEA OF THE CARNIVALESQUE

Bakhtin sees the “universal spirit” of the carnival as liberating in that it embraces “all the people.” This seems alluring but is problematic when we consider what constitutes “all the people.” For Bakhtin it seems axiomatic that the carnival crowd, bound by the liberating “universal spirit” of carnival, embodies “the people as a whole.” He describes the crowd as

...not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. ...

(Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 255)
This last—the fusion of the individual with the collective—is significant. It implicates a central problem presented by Bakhtin's dialogic approach: viz., the question of a prescriptive category imbricated within the descriptive which carnival, with its potential to collapse oppositions cannot diffuse. Often, this creates instances where Bakhtin makes paradoxical moves. In the passage above, for example, he valorizes polyphony, which he claims is inherent in carnival forms, while at the same time he homogenizes the source of this polyphony, that is, the carnival crowd, and makes it seem a universal, representative whole since the moment people in carnival become individuated subjects, the carnival is over (Carroll, 1983, p. 80).

But what constitutes the “collectivity,” the “people’s mass body,” and what determines “their own way”? Stallybrass and White refer to carnival’s complicitous place in dominant culture: “carnival often violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t belong’—in a process of displaced abjection” (Stallybrass and White, 1986, p. 19). Mary Russo, in her illuminating article, “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory” observes: “Social historians have documented the insight of the anthropologist Victor Turner that the marginal position of women and others in the ‘indicative’ world makes their presence in the ‘subjunctive’ or possible world of the topsy-turvy carnival ‘quintessentially’ dangerous: in fact, as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie shows in Carnival in Romans, Jews were stoned, and there is evidence that women were raped, during carnival festivities” (Russo, 1986, p. 217).

Ironically, Bakhtin’s own celebration of carnival and its potential for cosmic polyphony excludes the female voice—a point that Booth raises in his essay “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism.” Booth says, “Nowhere in Rabelais does one find any hint of an effort to imagine any women’s point of view or to incorporate women into a dialogue. And nowhere in Bakhtin does one discover any suggestion that he sees the importance of this kind of monologue, not even when he discusses Rabelais’ attitude toward women” (Bernstein, 1995, p. 166).

Interestingly, Julia Kristeva the French theorist, states that the ambivalence of carnival makes it inherently subversive. But whereas Bakhtin sees this ambivalence as collapsing hierarchies within the social order, Kristeva sees it as undermining the social order itself. For her ambivalence is the product of a convergence of two sign systems and signals to us the presence of intertextuality between the phenotext and the genotext. In Revolution in Poetic Language Kristeva describes the phenotext as “a structure (which can be generated, in generative grammar’s sense); it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee”
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(Kristeva, 1984, p. 87). On the other hand, she describes the genotext as “a process, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral (unstable, threatened by drive charges, ‘quanta’ rather than ‘marks’) and nonsignifying (devices that do not have a double articulation)” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 86).

It is Kristeva's understanding of ambivalence as the product of a convergence of two sign systems which signals to us the presence of intertextuality that makes her see carnivalism, as Toril Moi says, “as a space where texts meet, contradict and relativize each other” (Moi, 1986, p. 34). The twist that Kristeva gives to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque is slight but important. She connects the carnivalesque to the Semiotic realm. As you have seen previously, Kristeva describes this realm as not linguistic but a pre-oedipal erotic stage in which psychic energy is expressed through bodily rhythms, gestures, nonsense syllables, breathings, laughter etc. (Please refer to MWG 004, Block 4, Unit 2, section 2.3.2). The symbolic realm is related to the law and system of society, the Law-of-the-Father. By connecting the carnivalesque to the semiotic realm she emphasizes the autocritical “Permutational play” in the speaking/writing subject involving structures of desire that bring to light the unconscious of literary production. That is, she reifies the process of silent production in language prior to the appearance of circulatory speech (which is Bakhtin’s focus), and thereby, externalizes the psyche of the speaking/writing subject.

The “flagrant dialogism” of carnival expresses its subversion primarily through parody and laughter. Parody is a refusal or casting off of singular form or categorization that nevertheless retains linguistic definition. Parody is therefore quintessentially doubling and ambivalent. This discourse, which is both representative and non-representative simultaneously, also functions as a provoker of laughter. For Kristeva, laughter has deep ties to the semiotic realm.

By introducing a psycholinguistic dimension to Bakhtin’s socio-historic notion of the carnivalesque, Kristeva enables us to combine the role of the individuated speaking / writing subject in literary production with the collectivity of the people crucial to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. That is, Bakhtin and Kristeva’s notions of the carnivalesque conjointly create a productive framework in which to study carnival as both social and literary phenomenon.
Check Your Progress:

i) What is the central problem in Bakhtin’s dialogic approach?

ii) What is the twist that Kristeva gives to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque?

2.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we familiarized ourselves with Bakhtin’s life and works. We located his work, Rabelais and His World within its literary and political contexts. Besides, this we studied the idea of the Carnivalesque and “its possibility of incorporating into literature the collective, dionysiac impulse of Carnival.” This was followed by a gendered reading of it. The annotated bibliography (Section 2.10) of Bakhtin’s major works along with a glossary of his key terms (Section 2.9) should help you gain a broader understanding of this major author’s contributions to postmodern literary theory. As you read further ahead in this course, you will come across the ideas of other postmodern theorists. Try and compare some of the ideas that you have read here with the readings which follow, especially in terms of their significance to gender studies.

2.9 GLOSSARY OF BAKHTINIAN KEY TERMS

Carnivalesque: See Section 2.6

Chronotope: The word chronotope literally means “time space” and is defined by Bakhtin as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.” In a sense chronotope engages reality because the author in creating his worlds he uses the organising categories of the real world in which he lives.
Dialogism: This is a basic concept in Bakhtin. The idea of entering into dialogue or dialogic relations with anyone involves interextuality in both time and space. No meaning, word or existence can be outside of it. It is best to explain the term in Bakhtin’s own words: “no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate. It is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 259).

Dialogization can also take place between self and other, written text and performance text etc.

Heteroglossia: is at the heart of all Bakhtinian thought. The term “heteroglossia” in Russian literally refers to “different-speech-ness.” It refers to any utterance and interaction between people keeping the immediate context that can add or subtract from the meaning of the utterance. No language is neutral for him. But each such utterance also has a trace of the earlier utterances both in the past and in the future. For Bakhtin this is seen best in the novel form. “Heteroglossia” should not be confused with polyphony (See definition of polyphony). Most importantly “heteroglossia” also refers to the conflict between official and unofficial discourses within the same national language.

Ideology: In Russian the term is “ideologiya” and it does not imply any political ideology but merely the way a community views the world. This is why for him all speakers are “ideologs.”

Language: Bakhtin does not see language in the way in which professional linguists see it. He sees it as dynamic and to be understood within the context of the utterance.

Monoglossia: This refers to unified, stable languages that existed in earliest societies.
Ideology, Discourse and Gender

Polyglossia: For Bakhtin this refers to the simultaneous existence of one or more national languages in the same society as in Ancient Rome and during the period of the Renaissance.

Polyphony: This is different from “heteroglossia” in that the latter refers to the conflict between antagonistic social forces. Polyphony on the other hand refers to interacting on equal terms as the characters in Dostoevsky’s novels where the hero and the author’s discourses interact on equal terms. In his discussion of polyphony and the potential for it in literary forms, Bakhtin dismisses drama as being monologic. Obviously, he has classical drama in mind when he speaks of it as unilinear and closed as a form. He says, “drama is by its very nature alien to genuine polyphony; drama may be multi-leveled, but it cannot contain multiple worlds; it permits only one, and not several systems of measurement” (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 1984).

Speech genres: Genre, for Bakhtin, is a very fluid term. This is used to describe a set of linguistic conventions agreed upon by the speakers in a written or spoken context. He talks of two kinds of speech genre the primary and the everyday genres. The first refers to talking about the weather etc. The second is more complex in that it includes artistic and political discourses as well. For Bakhtin form in art is related intrinsically to communication. In a sense it becomes integral to the value the content is expressing.

2.10 BAKHTIN’S ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MAJOR WORKS

Rablaïs And His World (1975): See Section 2.5: Rabelais And His World

Toward a Philosophy of the Act: This was written between 1919 and 1921, and published as late as 1986. Since the manuscript was badly damaged with pages missing it has been published as an incomplete document. Bakhtin mentions in it that he intended the book to have four parts. In the first he stated he wanted to talk of communicative acts in the real world, followed by aesthetics and art in relation to the creative spirit. The two other parts were supposed to talk about ethics in relation to politics and
religion. This work is important because in it Bakhtin outlines his idea of the identity of the individual as emerging within an open, communicative context.

**Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics:** The book was published in 1929 as *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art*. Later, Bakhtin added a chapter on the carnival to it and published it as *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. The book is not just about the novelist Dostoevsky but it provides very original theories of the novel. There was, for Bakhtin, an equality that existed between the author and the characters in the novel. Bakhtin’s idea that individuals cannot be seen as complete is explored here. For him the individual self unfolds within an interactive context. In this sense, it is a collective process. Dostoevsky’s characters could do this, which accounted for true polyphony in his novels. It is lack of closure that allows polyphony to flourish. Truth emerges through polyphony. It can never be contained within one voice or one person. Bakhtin uses the idea of the carnival to illustrate his theory.

**The Dialogic Imagination:** Some of the seminal ideas in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929) are more fully developed in his book, *The Dialogic Imagination* that was published in 1975. In this book, he privileges the novel form over the epic, stating that in postindustrial society the former is more conducive to polyphony, which the epic tries to erase. Bakhtin does not see the novel as a new genre but as a coming together of past texts.

**Speech Genres and Other Late Essays:** There are six essays in this book. In it Bakhtin shifts his focus from art and aesthetics in his earlier works to problems of method and culture. For him genres are not merely confined to language but to broader communicative acts. He makes a distinction between everyday language and language as used in literature. He states that when we speak of genres we only talk of it in relation to literature but they are connected to genres outside of these as well. He talks of primary and secondary genres. The former is associated with everyday experiences and the latter is linked to legal and scientific texts.

It is important to note that Bakhtin’s key concepts like *Heteroglossia*, *Monoglossia*, *Dialogism*, *Carnivalesque* and *Chronotope* are used in understanding the ethical and political dimensions of language.

### 2.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Why does Bakhtin privilege the novel form? Discuss.

2) What does Bakhtin mean by stating that language is not static but dynamic? Explain in your own words.
3) a) Explain Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque and its significance.
b) How does Bakhtin’s approach to the carnival exclude the female voice?

4) Describe through short notes the following terms: Dialogism, Polyglossia, Heteroglossia, Monoglossia, Polyphony.

2.12 REFERENCES


**2.13  SUGGESTED READINGS**

