Introduction

To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it, so says Barthes in his *S/Z*, hailed as the most gloriously obsessive and pedantic inquiry into the act of reading ever produced, while making a differentiation between readerly and writerly texts (Nicol 227-28). Kundera’s world is “profoundly pluralistic” (sic) as Dostoevsky’s world (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 22). The principle that helps to achieve pluralism in the novels of Kundera is polyphony. This dissertation attempts to read Milan Kundera’s novels chronologically in the light of Bakhtin’s theory of polyphonic novel as is laid down in his works, especially, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* and *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*.

Literally many-voiced, the term polyphony as applied to novel has its origin in Bakhtin’s study, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, where Bakhtin discussed the “problem of polyphony” (27) and first began to draw his crucial distinction between “monologic” and “dialogic” (“polyphonic”) tendencies in language and literary texts. “The essential dialogicality of Dostoevsky’s works is indeed not limited to the outward, compositionally expressed dialogs carried out by his heroes. *The polyphonic novel as a whole is thoroughly dialogical*” (sic) (*Problems* 34).

The alternative aesthetics of polyphonic novel has an alternative history which Bakhtin and Kundera trace in a parallel way. For Bakhtin novelistic discourse has a lengthy prehistory going back to centuries or even thousands of years. It was formed and matured in the genres of familiar speech found in conversational folk language and also in certain
folkloric and low literary genres, which were not given even scant consideration in literary studies. One of the most ancient and widespread forms for representing the direct word of another (dialogic work) is parody. Lucian (C.120-180AD), the second-century sophist and the author of around one hundred and thirty works, most of them dialogues that hold up to ridicule the pretensions of his age as expressed in works like *Lexiphanes*, is one of them.

The parodic epic poem “War between the Mice and the Frogs,” a parody of Homer written around 500 BC also belongs to the polyphonic line of novelistic development.

Roman literature of the Hellenistic period was especially important for the speech diversity within language and laughter. What Bakhtin calls an important stylistic problem of the Hellenistic period was the problem of quotation. “The forms of direct, half-hidden and completely hidden quoting were endlessly varied, as were the forms for framing quotations by a context, forms of intonational quotation marks, varying degrees of alienation or assimilation of another’s quoted word” ([Dialogic Imagination](#) 68). Here the quotations very often exhibit deliberate disdain rather than reverence. Bakhtin also found the laughing, parodic-travestying literature of the Middle Ages extremely rich. The relationship of another’s word was equally complex and ambiguous in the Middle Ages. The “other’s word” found enormous presence through quotations that were openly and reverently emphasized as such, or that were half-hidden, completely hidden, half-conscious, unconscious, correct, intentionally distorted, unintentionally distorted, deliberately reinterpreted and so forth. “The boundary lines between someone else’s speech and one’s own speech were flexible, ambiguous, often deliberately distorted and confused” ([Dialogic Imagination](#) 69).

At the waning of the Middle Ages with its great parodic literature and during the
Renaissance the parodic–travestying word broke through all remaining boundaries. It broke through into all strict and straightforward genres. It reverberated loudly in the Cantastorie (medieval singers of the Carolingian epic in Tuscany). It also penetrated the lofty Chivalric romance. Finally there arrived on the scene the great Renaissance novel – the novel of Rabelais and Cervantes. It is precisely in these two works that the novelistic word, prepared for by all the forms from ancient times till then revealed its full potential and began playing titanic role in the formulation of a new literary and linguistic consciousness. Don Quixote begins with the parodic sonnets. Though they are impeccably structured as sonnets Bakhtin could never possibly assign them to the sonnet genre: it is rather the object of representation; the sonnet here is the hero of the parody. In Don Quixote they appear as part of the novel. Shakespeare, together with Rabelais, Cervantes, Grimmelshausen and others, belongs to the line of development in European literature in which, argues Bakhtin, the germs of polyphony ripened and of which Dostovesky became the culminator. However in his book Dialogic Imagination Bakhtin extends upon his thesis and identifies polyphony in later European novelists also. In the text he analyses several examples from Dickens’s novel Little Dorrit to illustrate that the novel is a polyphonic one.

Bakhtin in his essay “Discourse in the Novel” in Dialogic Imagination distinguishes two stylistic lines in novel. The novels of the “First Line (sic) with its dogmatic pretensions to lead a real life is replaced in the novels of the Second Line (sic), by a trial and self-critique of novelistic discourse” (414). To the first category he assigns the high Boroque novel, chivalric romance, works like Amadis, Simplicissimus and those of Rousseau and Richardson. To the second category he assigns parodic epic, the satire novella and the picaresque novels and works like Gargantua and Pantagruel by Rabelais, Don Quixote and
the works of Fielding and Sterne. Don Quixote is so rich in inserted genres, which serve the basic purpose of introducing heteroglossia into the novel, of introducing an era’s many diverse languages. The first category introduces extraliterary genres of everyday life and “literarize” them eliminating their heteroglossia, replacing it everywhere with a self-imaged, “ennobled” language (Dialogic Imagination 410-11). As a counterweight to “literariness” novels of the “Second Line” foreground a critique of literary discourse as such, and primarily novelistic discourse. “This auto-criticism of discourse is one of the primary distinguishing features of the novel as a genre.” Thus Don Quixote with its picaresque adventure novel form and auto-critical has enormous significance in the long history of literature (Dialogic Imagination 412). As regards his commitment, whether it is to God, country, people or individual, Kundera unequivocally affirms his faith: “I am attached to nothing but the depreciated legacy of Cervantes” (The Art of the Novel 20).

Indeed for Kundera the founder of the Modern Era is not only Descartes but also Cervantes. His history of the novel includes novelists like Rabelais, Sterne, Diderot, Balzac, Falubert, Vancura, Gombrowicz and Rushdie. For Kundera, the roots of the crisis, acknowledging Edmund Husserl, of modern man is as Heidegger phrased it “the forgetting of the being.” With the rise of science beginning in the Modern Era in Galileo and Descartes man who is propelled into tunnels of specialized discipline could only see the world as a whole or his own self, less clearly. With Cervantes the great European art of novel, which is nothing but an investigation of this forgotten being, took shape. The great existential themes Heidegger analyses in Being and Time, which he considered, neglected by all earlier European philosophy had been unveiled, displayed and illuminated by the four centuries of the European reincarnation of the novel. By its unique way novel discovered
the various dimensions of existence one by one. Cervantes and his contemporaries enquired into the nature of adventure; Richardson began examining what happens inside; Balzac discovered man’s rootedness in history; Flaubert explored the terra previously incognita of the everyday life; Tolstoy focused on the intrusion of the irrational in human behaviour and decisions. Proust probed the elusive past while Joyce did it on the elusive present. Since the beginning of the Modern Era novel served man in his “passion to know,” which Edmund Husserl considered the essence of European spirituality leading to scrutinize man’s concrete life and protect it against the forgetting of being. “The sole raison d’etre of a novel is to discover what only the novel can discover” (The Art 4-5). A novel that does not discover the hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel’s only morality.

For Kundera to take with Descartes the world as based on thinking self is to adopt an attitude that Hegel calls heroic. But to take with Cervantes, the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths (truths embodied in imaginary selves called characters), to have as one only certainty the “wisdom of uncertainty” is an equally courageous step (The Art 6-7). Hence, “I feel therefore I am is a truth much more universally valid (than ‘I think, therefore I am’) and it applies to everything that’s alive” (Immortality 225). Besides, Kundera considers Flaubert’s discovery of stupidity as an inseparable dimension of human existence as perhaps the greatest discovery of a century so proud of its scientific thought. For him that discovery is more important than the most startling ideas of Marx and Freud (The Art 162-63).

A few years back, the Norwegian Academy of Sciences and Letters addressed one hundred writers form all over the world with a single question of selecting the best novel, ever written, for them. Of the one hundred, fifty opted Don Quixote by Miguel de
Cervantes. Considering the runnersup Dostoevsky, Faulkner and Gracia Marquez, in order, this was a crucial victory (Fuentes, “In Praise of Novel” 610). This incident is a validation of Bakhtin and Kundera’s point in their valorization of Don Quixote and the tradition of novel that it represents. Carols Fuentes, as well, has no doubt that the Cervantes’ book is the “founding cornerstone of the novel” (“In Praise of Novel” 611).

Don Quixote set off into a world that opened wide before him. The early European novels are journeys through an apparently unlimited world. In Balzac’s world, time no longer idles happily by, as it does for Cervantes and Diderot. In Balzac the distant horizon has disappeared and we are hemmed in by towering social institutions, like the police, the law, the world of money and crime, the army and the state. At the time of Emma Bovary the horizon shrinks further to the point of a barrier for vision. The lost infinity of the outside world is replaced by the infinity of the soul. Then “the great illusion of the irreplaceable uniqueness of the individual” which for Kundera is one of Europe’s finest illusions blossoms forth. The juggernaut of history continued, relentlessly. By the time we reach Kafka daydreaming can no longer replace reality because that itself became unreal. The infinity of the soul, if it ever existed, became a useless appendage (The Art 9).

Kundera devoted two of the five parts to Broch and Kafka in the The Art of the Novel and a considerable part of Testaments Betrayed and The Curtain to Kafka. With what he calls the pleiad of Central European authors, Kafka, Musil and Broch to whom he adds from time to time Hasek and Gombrowicz, the novel entered a new phase. There is no longer any attempt to enter character or to develop a linear plot. The author is happy to interrupt the action with meditations on culture and metaphysics. Even the notion of the plot no longer holds. The work develops polyphonically, by means of play, of dream, of
thought, and of a perspective which encompasses a much larger view of history than that of
single individuals. The novelist is no longer a teller of tales or a recorder of truth, but an
experimenter with character, situation and tone. “All great works (precisely because they are
great) contain something unachieved,” says Kundera, talking about The Sleepwalkers by
Broch (The Art 71). Therefore they become an inspiration for future writers. Kundera
obviously is not ready to blindly and unquestionably follow anyone. Kundera addresses his
art to the world and for him addressing it through a system sounds compromise.

What the present study is trying to analyse is that Kundera’s novels with the only
exception of The Farewell Party are “polyphonic composition[s] that brings heterogeneous
elements together within an architecture based on the number seven” (The Art 96). On his
unwavering mechanical repetition of number seven for parts in all novels, Kundera says it is
not because of any “superstitious flirtation with magical numbers” or any “rational
calculation” but because of “a deep unconscious, incomprehensible drive” which he “cannot
escape” (The Art 86). As regards the metaphoric application of the term polyphony to
literature, Kundera says “for want of a better term” he is calling it polyphonic (The Art 74)
while the “lack a more appropriate designation” drives Bakhtin to “turn this metaphor into
the term “‘polyphonic novel’” (Problems 18). Some of the important features of the
polyphonic novel are: one, the image of polyphony “simply indicates new problems which
arise when the structures of the novel go beyond the bounds of ordinary monological unity”
(Problems 18) whereas Kundera’s novels are always an attempt “to escape the unlinear”
composition and “to open rifts in the continuous narration of the story” (The Art 74); two,
“The essence of polyphony is precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent, and as
such; are combined in a unity of higher order than in homophony” (Problems 17). Kundera
agrees: “Indeed one of the fundamental principles of great polyphonic composers was the
*equality of voices,* no one voice should dominate, none should serve as a mere
accompaniment” *(The Art* 75); three, “epic wholeness of an individual disintegrates” in a
polyphonic novel – man ceased to coincide with himself *(Dialogic Imagination* 37).
Kundera’s novels bear witness to the fact that “The great illusion of the irreplaceable
uniqueness of the individual – [is] one of Europe’s finest illusions . . .” *(The Art* 8).
Polyphonic novel is marked for its “fundamental unfinalizability” and therefore a
polyphonic conclusion precisely for that reason remains from the ordinary, monological
point of view, uncompleted *(Problems* 34). For Kundera too the “novelethic exploration of
the theme . . . has no end and no conclusion” *(The Art* 130). Finally “*The Polyphonic novel
as a whole is thoroughly dialogical.*” All of the relationships of the internal and external
parts and elements of Kundera’s novels have a dialogical character, and the whole of the
novel is constructed as a “*great dialog*” *(Problems* 34).

Thus Kundera and Bhaktin explain novels on same terms. Kundera’s novels fit with
Barthes’s analysis of a text in his essay “The Death of the Author” as a “multidimensional
space in which a variety of writings, none of them original blend and clash” *(Lodge and
Wood* 167). The text here becomes a tissue of quotations, though not always direct, but
hidden and half hidden, from innumerable centres of culture. They all are based on “already
known” or the already said. For instance the “already known” in *The Book of Laughter and
Forgetting* is Orwell’s famous theme, the forgetting that a totalitarian regime imposes *(The
Art* 130) while in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* it is Nietzsche’s idea of “eternal
return”; in *Life is Elsewhere* it is eponymously the poet, Rimbaud’s words; the concept of
immortality in *Immortality* is also an already discussed from Plato onwards. In the hands of
Kundera the polyphonic vision of the novel has further widened. His novel is not even an exclusive preserve of man. (This is elaborated in the section on the Unbearable Lightness). Though only once, he is not even averse to use graphics in the novel when situation warrants it, as in Immortality.

For Kundera “satire is a thesis art” which is damn “sure of its own truth” and therefore his relation to his characters is never satirical but ironic (Testaments Betrayed 202). Not only satire but all literary production and form that act against “the wisdom of uncertainty” (The Art 7) is reactionary and monological for Kundera as well as for Bakhtin. On this count, Kundera and Bakhtin denounce poetry, especially the lyrical one. For Bakhtin the language of the poet is his language; he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression, according its unmediated power to assign meaning, that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention. This however does not mean that heteroglossia is completely shut out of a poetic work but the possibilities are limited and particular to some poetic genres (Dialogic Imagination 285-87). Bakhtin’s claims, taking cue from Bakhtin himself has later been contested. However poets from Robert Frost, the first poet to read at a presidential inauguration (in America) and who thought that artists ought to celebrate participation in august occasions of the State, to Elizabeth Alexander, Yale Professor and the fourth inaugural poet (for Barack Obama) and the Poet Laureateship of Britain are enough to legitimize the apprehensions regarding the intersection of poetry and politics (authority). Kundera is against “pale-faced Romantics” whose staple form was lyricism (Immortality 95). For Bakhtin “characteristic of romanticism is the direct authorial world” without any slant toward conditionality expressing its monological point of view (Problems 166).
Kundera therefore makes an equation as “Novel = antyrical poetry” (The Art 143). Kundera believes that in the age of excessive division of labour, of runaway specialization, the novel is one of the last outposts where man can still maintain connections with life in its entirety. Kundera sees himself as one who explores some great themes of existence by means of experimental selves in “the trap the world has become” (The Art 48). Summoning Cervantes’ Don Quixote’s defeat without grandeur Kundera says: “For it is clear immediately: human life as such is a defeat. All we can do in the face of that ineluctable defeat called life is to try to understand it. That – that is the raison d’être of the art of the novel” (The Curtain 10).

Milan Kundera and Mikhail Bakhtin: Two émigrés

Milan Kundera

Milan Kundera was born in April 1929 in Brno, Czechoslovakia as the son of Ludvik Kundera, a famous pianist and Milada (Janosikova) Kundera. Although he once studied piano, Kundera when nineteen decided to stop it. In 1948 he left Brno to study scriptwriting and directing at the Film Faculty of the Prague Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. During this time like many other idealistic and progressive students who had witnessed the atrocities of World War II he joined the Communist Party. In 1952 he started teaching cinematography at the Prague Academy and in 1932 he published his first collection of poetry Clovek Zahrada Sira which was immediately condemned for using surrealist techniques and lacking universality. Kundera wrote two other volumes of poetry, Posledni maj (1955) and Monology (1957) but he later renounced these works as adolescent and insignificant. In the early 1960s Kundera achieved fame in his homeland by serving on the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Writer’s Union from 1963 to 1969 and on the editorial boards of the journals Literarninoviny and Listy. Meanwhile he published a
critical work about Czechoslovakian novelist Vladislava Vancury, Unemi romanu (1961) and his first play Majitele klicu (1962, The Owners of the Keys) was staged in Czechoslovakia and abroad. Kundera married Vera Hrabankova on September 30, 1963. During this period he turned his attention to writing fiction. Despite his fame Kundera had to wait for two years fighting the censorship before his first novel, Zert (1967, The Joke) was deemed acceptable for publication in its original form. In a speech in 1967 inaugurating the fourth Czechoslovak Writer’s Congress, Kundera attacked censorship and other repressive tactics used against writers. During the Prague Spring of 1968 Kundera’s fame and popularity reached its acme. But when Russian military forces invaded Czechoslovakia later in 1968, Kundera was expelled from the Communist Party and also from his teaching position at the Prague Academy and his works were proscribed. In 1975 at an invitation from University of Rennes in France to teach comparative literature he left his country for good to settle in Paris. “The only thing left for me to do was to leave my country,” says the Kundera in The Book (75). The authorial narrator puts the whole matter of his expulsion/exclusion as follows in the same text:

I too once danced in a ring. It was in the spring of 1948. The Communists had just taken power in my country, the Socialist and Christian Democrat ministers had fled abroad, and I took other Communist students by the hand, I put my arms around their shoulders, and we took two steps in place, one step forward, lifted first one leg and then the other, and we did it just about every month, there being always something to celebrate, an anniversary here, a special event there, old wrongs were righted, new wrongs perpetrated, factories were nationalized, thousands of people went to jail, medical care became free of charge, small shopkeepers lost their shops, aged workers took
their first vacations ever in confiscated country houses, and we smiled the
smile of happiness. Then one day I said something I would better have left
unsaid. I was expelled from the Party and had to leave the circle. (65)

The principal works of Kundera are: The Joke 1967 with definitive English edition in 1992; 
on the illusory nature of love and the consequences of using sexuality to gain power and
influence; Life is Elsewhere 1973, with definitive English edition in 1986; The Farewell
Party 1976 with definitive English edition, based on Kundera’s revised French text, in 1998
on the disastrous nature of sexual politics and self-deception; The Book of Laughter and
Forgetting 1979, with definitive English translation in 1996, on certain themes like
“laughter and forgetting, about forgetting and Prague, about Prague and the angels” (The
Book 66); The Unbearable Lightness of Being 1984, with English translation in the same
year; Immortality 1991 translated to English in the same year with its locale as France for
the first time in Kundera; Slowness 1995 translated into English in 1996 by Linda Asher,
Kundera’s first novel to be written in French, a lyrical meditation on speed and time,
memory and forgetting, art and kitsch; Identity again originally published in French and
translated by Linda Asher in 1998, an exploitation of the theme of identity through the
simple story of a couple Jean-Marc and Chantal; and Ignorance also published in French in
2002 and translated by Linda Asher into English in the same year where Kundera again
returns to the theme of exile with the novel having locale at Prague and France. Kundera
also wrote three books of essays; The Art of the Novel published in 1986 and first published
in English translation in 1988; Testaments Betrayed published in 1993 and translated to
English in 1995 by Linda Asher, and The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts published in
2005 and translated to English in 2007 by Linda Asher. These books discuss Kundera’s
ideas on the aesthetics of the novel. The first one outlines in seven sections the formal
development of the European novel. The second one is a defence in nine parts of the
profound sense of humour in which the title deriving its name from the betrayal of “poor
Kafka” by his executors and editors who paved the way for having “Kafka as the fusion of
experience and work” rather than “the artist Kafka who troubles us with his puzzling
aesthetic” (270). The third is about the curtain of the ready-made perception of the world
that each individual has and the work of the novelist who rips through the curtain revealing
what it hides.

**Mikhail Bakhtin**

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975), the Russian theoretician has been
associated with a range of disciplines apart from literary studies like philosophy, semiotics,
cultural studies, and anthropology. This is because central to Bakhtin’s oeuvre is a seminal
and dynamic perception of language. Due to the impact of structuralism and
poststructuralism in the second half of the twentieth century the role of language in
signification became foregrounded and also became axiomatic to the Western epistemology.
It was during this time that Bakhtin as a theoretician was revealed to the West. Bakhtin’s
emphasis upon language as actual utterance, as discourse and his rejection of structuralist
idea of language as a monolithic conception system made him suitable for the
poststructuralist milieu.

Mikhail Bakhtin was born on November 16, 1895 in Orel, south of Moscow. Bakhtin
joined the University in 1913 in Odessa and the next year got transferred to St. Petersburg
University and studied philology under Russia’s leading intellectuals. He graduated in 1918
and became a teacher in a school in Nevel. Bakhtin settled first in Nevel and then in
Vitebsk seeking relief from the chaos that followed the Russian Revolution. In both these
places he became a member of a small intellectual group, which engaged itself in debates, lectures, demonstrations, and manifesto writings that characterised life at the unusual time. This association engaged Bakhtin in seeking by himself some of the important problems that concerned the philosophers then. Some of them are the status of the knowing subject, the relation of art to the lived experience, the existence of other persons, and the complexities of responsibility in the area of discourse and in the area of ethics.

From a very early age Bakhtin was immersed in philosophy, especially in ancient Greek, Hellenistic and modern European ones. The “Bakhtin circle” which was formed in 1918 included musicologist Valentin Voloshinov, the journalist and organizer of literary events Pavel Medvedev, both of whose names became linked with Bakhtin’s in disputes over the authorship of many texts written in the 1920s. Bakhtin was in the thick of intellectual and philosophical debates until 1924 not only in his friends’ study circle, of which he was the centre, but also in public forums organized by the local Communist Party committee. Just before its transformation into Leningrad in 1924, Bakhtin came back to Petrograd. Bakhtin then eked out a living, on his wife’s meagre earnings, without a job because he was politically under suspicion due to his intellectual association with banned groups of orthodox believers in the catacomb church. Besides, he was also incapacitated because of amputation of his right leg in 1938 consequent to severe osteomyelitis. Bakhtin therefore devoted his whole time to his intellectual pursuits.

The period 1924 to 1929 was a very prolific period in Bakhtin’s career. He abandoned his difficult style in favour of popular one. He (and others) would later claim that he published some works from this period in the names of his friends Medvedev (The Formal Method in Literary Study 1928), Voloshinov (Freudianism: a Critical Sketch 1927; Marxism and the Philosophy of Language 1929), and Kanaev (a two-part article,
Contemporary Vitalism, 1926). Many subsequent scholars questioned the claim, though. In 1929 he published Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art with his own name later revised and considerably expanded as Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics and this, on polyphonic novel, argued against the hegemony of absolute authorian control. This book which underlined the need always to take others and otherness into account thus emphasized plurality and variety.

In 1929 Bakhtin was arrested without informing him of any reason. Presumably it was part of an action against intellectuals associated with the underground church. Though it seemed that he would be sent to the terrible hard labour camp to meet with death, Bakhtin was sentenced to an easier exile in Kazakhstan. His very bad health and the intervention of his old friend Kagan, who had become a flourishing mathematician in the prestigious governmental commission on Soviet energy reserves and the wife of Maxim Gorky at the instance of Bakhtin’s wife, Elena Alexandrovna, saved Bakhtin from this camp. Bakhtin was then sent to Kustenai where he worked in day time teaching the semiliterate former partisans who now ran Kazakhstan how to do bookkeeping while at night continuing his studies on the history of the novel. Here with ample help from Kagan and Kanaev in the form of books Bakhtin completed many monographs on novel including the very important “Discourse in the Novel” (1934-5) and the long essay “On Chronotope” (1937-38) which are part of the book, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. The other two essays of the book are “Epic and Novel” and “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse.” While in Problems Bakhtin argued that polyphony belonged to Dostoevsky’s novels alone, he later changed his position and acknowledged the establishment of polyphony throughout world literature. The significant point for Bakhtin, then, is not that polyphony is peculiar to Dostoevsky’s novels but that it is a distinguishing feature of the novel in all of its dialogic dimensions (Murray 75).
Though Bakhtin’s term of exile ended in 1934 he remained in Kazakhstan for two more years doubting possible re-arrest if returned to Leningrad or Moscow. In 1941 Bakhtin completed a book on Rabelais to be submitted to the Gorky Institute of World Literature for a postgraduate degree. The book subtly undermined the official doctrine of Socialist Realism. In 1947, his dissertation on Rabelais was accepted after great controversy and he was given not the degree of Doctor but the lower one of candidate. This thesis was later published as *Rabelais and His World*, in 1965. By this time Bakhtin had become a successful university teacher at Saransk and became something of a local legend. In his book *The Curtain* while asserting the fact that “to judge a novel one can do without a knowledge of its original language,” Kundera corroborates the matter by stating that we have entered the era of world literature, with ample evidence including the fact that Rabelais “was never better understood than by a Russian, Bakhtin” (36).

After 1963 there was a dramatic change in Bakhtin’s fortunes. Then a second edition of the Dostoevsky book appeared followed by the publication of the Rabelais book in 1965. Both these books created a sensation in Soviet Union and Bakhtin became a celebrity. The death of Bakhtin’s wife in 1971 made him dejected for months. He was finally permitted to move to Moscow (where residence was restricted) in 1972 where he led a quiet life till his death on 7 March 1975. In 1975 *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics*, a collection of Bakhtin’s major essays outlining a historical poetics for the novel was published immediately after his death. The four essays, which constitute *Dialogic Imagination*, are taken from this work.

Bakhtin and Kundera make for a tantalizingly neat pairing not only for their experience at the hands of the state totalitarianism but also for their passionate advocacy of the ethical significance of the modern European novel (Benson 300).