Chapter V

Conclusion: Unlimited Semiosis

The study presented in this thesis aimed to explore how Contemporary Indian Poetry in English has evolved as a cultural text and how it could be analysed by applying the Cultural Semiotics framework developed by the Tartu Moscow School of Semiotics especially drawing upon Juri Lotman's work. Indian poetry in English has continuously evolved over last two centuries and has established itself as an integral part of Indian literature overcoming the challenges of proving its identity and belongingness. The period beginning 1990 has been considered as 'contemporary'. 1990's saw the rise of globalization, internet and global terrorism. These were global phenomenon having an impact on cultures across the world. While on a more local level India saw economic liberalization, the rise of politics of social justice (such as implementation of Mandal Commission report), Hindu nationalism, separatist terrorism and resultant exodus of Kashmiri pundits and multiple terror attacks including Mumbai bombings, 26/11 Mumbai attacks, Akshardham attack, attack on the parliament. Globalization also leads to the rise of local nationalism and an accentuating of local identities (Giddens 05). Even in CIPE we can see a growing assertion of regional identities.

Contemporary Indian Poetry in English can be studied either as discrete units or as part of a totality, as a unified text with a boundary and both discrete and continuous elements spread in a continuum called semiosphere. CIPE in being a cultural text not only represents the culture but also creates it. Similar is the paradoxical nature of any research which aims to analyse it as the same will potentially alter the cultural text being a participant in the 'auto communication'/ 'self description process'. Thus the semiosis that it studies may only be a contingent semiosis as every attempt at analysis or definition will only alter it leading to a situation of unlimited semiosis.

To study any literature especially poetry if we adopt the semiosphere approach as suggested by Lotman, we can arrive at a holistic view of the text and the various sign processes or semiotics involved. In a semiosphere different languages develop at different rates. We may imagine any synchronic section of CIPE as a museum where multiple texts are presented with verbal as well as visual language, and 'artefacts' representing different worlds, poems of varying themes, lyrical and syntactic forms, complexities and constituting of memories of a diverse geographic and time span. Then it has poets, and anthologists, academics and researchers (like the tour guides and museum staff) all contributing to the 'self description' of the cultural text/s. All of them trying to translate between multiple untranslatable languages and thus generating new meanings. These self description agents also act in creating the tension between what is core and periphery. It is this 'tension' which is realized as a major trope for CIPE.

Traditional concepts of 'culture' have been associated with nation, social class or ethnic group. Such definitions have limited use when we try to understand the culture in Indian English poetry and Indian English poetry as a cultural text. Such poetry is not limited to a certain geographic region or a particular ethnic group and spreads across nations. Thus cultural semiotics offers a general concept of 'culture' which can help explain the dynamics of Indian English poetry and how it evolves as a cultural text. Cutlural semiotics studies culture as its subject. It studies sign systems in a culture as well as cultures as sign systems. Lotman's notion of semiosphere is a key concept in cultural semiotics. Cultural semiotics studies cultures as parts of the semiosphere. Cultural semiotics offers the theoretical foundations for a more scientific and objective way of analysing and comparing all cultures of the world. It also helps understand what determines the boundaries of a culture, the relations of multiple cultures within the semiosphere and how cultural exchange and change happen. The semiosphere approach also helps us get a spatial understanding of the culture of CIPE.

Culture is created from elements which develop at different rates. Thus any synchronic section will reveal the different stages of development. While there may be explosion in some layers, others may display gradual process. In Indian poetry in English, post 1990's, some poets display unpredictable or explosive trends but at the same time there are others who continue with the gradual predictable trends of the earlier poets. But both the gradual and explosive processes are part of the dynamics of semiosphere.

The semiosphere in which Indian Poetry in English is immersed continually undergoes the organizing processes which help it establish itself as a culture as different from the extra-cultural space. According to Lotman the organizing principles of semiosphere are the heterogeneity of the space, asymmetry of internal structures, binariness of internal and external spaces, boundaries acting as bilingual filters that allow for the exchange of semiotic processes and 'the development of a metalanguage' as the final act of the system's structural organisation. Indian English is that subset of the semiosphere where Indian and English overlap. Indian semiosphere is submerged in the larger global semiosphere and similarly within it has multiple regional semiospheres. Thus boundary exchanges of cultures happen at both the external boundaries which lie beyond the geo-political boundary of India as well as the internal boundaries which lie within. So on one side an Indian poet writing English may be interacting with and translating the American or British cultural artefacts into Indian semiosphere and at the same time a bilingual poet may be facilitating the exchange between regional languages and English.

The contemporary poets present a new semiotic of Indian culture and shifting core-periphery relationship. They share the characteristic traits of being polyglot and multicultural, which Indian English poets have displayed for almost two centuries. But now they are spread not just in the metropolitan centres of India but far off places like the north eastern cities and in countries like USA, UK, Denmark, Germany. The core of the contemporary Indian Poetry in English is populated by

poets born in 1960 and 1970s like Jeet Thayil, Sudeep Sen, Tabish Khair, Ranjit Hoskote, Sampurna Chatterjee, Sujata Bhatt, , Arundhati Subramaniam, Anand Thakore and some earlier generation poets like Agha Sahid Ali, Bibhu Padhi and Rukmini Bhaya Nair who are still routinely anthologized. The periphery today is covered by poets in remote corners of India and those with alternate or subversive voices and some emerging poets such as North East poets Anjum Hasan, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Desmond Kharmawphlang and Meena Kandasamy from Kerala and Tishani Doshi from Chennai.. The core is always shifting and thus these voices may soon acquire the core.

Anthologies are the self descriptive metalevel of the culture of Indian poetry in English. The description of the core of a culture is often presented as a typical "portrait" of that culture. Self description happens at two levels, at the level of individual units and at the level of the culture as a whole. Culture is a system of texts. Every culture selects from the set of these texts a small subset which its members consider key to their cultural identity. This selection indicates the emergence of a culture as a special form of self organization of society. This selection of nuclear texts to define the cultural identity can also be considered as the process of canon formation. The canon of Indian English poetry has been shaped through the various anthologies and the defense presented by the editor/s. These editors in most cases are poets themselves thus participating members of the culture they are trying to define.

Contemporary Indian poetry in English often generates new meanings through intersemiotic translation. Multiple semiotic systems (languages) and their mutual (un)translatability, the tension between the continuous (iconic-spatial) and the discrete cultural languages is the base of their poetry. Poets such as Jeet Thayil, Sudeep Sen, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Tabish Kahir experiment with visual poetry through special spatial arrangements of words. The semiosis of Nair's poems such as "Genderole" and "Computer", Tabish Khair's "Leaving Gaya Station", Sudeep Sen's "Bharatnatyam Dancer" with an end rhyme scheme and indentation matching

the actual classical dance steps, lies in the play of spaces between words. Sen's "Sati", "The Skulls" and "Entropy" and Sampurna Chatterjee's "Timeshift" generate new meanings through the intersemiotic translation between visual art and verbal poetry. Kandasamy's "Random Access Man" serves its subversive purpose through a pair of mutually non-juxtaposable signifying elements, the violent juxtaposition of mythological name 'Ram' and the acronym RAM(Random Access Memory) in contemporary language of computers.

Myths are used as auto-communicative devices by Indian poets. Lotman observes that myths have a mnemonic function and evoke an "I" to "I" auto communication. The participants of the culture already know the myth. Using Reginald Shepherd's classification we can say that myths have been used in Indian poetry in English as 'retelling', 'reliving' and 'revising'. The last one 'revise' means questioning its terms and bringing out what it represses or excludes. While poets like Thakore 'relive' myths, other contemporary poets like Kandasamy and Nair 'revise' myths for subversive purposes. This subversion is possible only because of the mnemonic and auto-communicative nature of myths.

Reconstruction and transformation of myths and intersemiotic translations of texts may also be seen as instances of intertextual relations to use Kristeva's term. The reader's interpretation of the poem is filtered through the code available to him through another text. Another type of intentional intertextuality is evident in contemporary Indian poets where they allude to works of other Indian poets. For example Anand Thakore's "Ghazal" which alludes to Agha Sahid Ali's "Call me Ishmael Tonight".

Terror and violence, whether against humanity or against nature, has been the dominant discourse in the contemporary times. CIPE seeks to use poetry as a counter terror narrative. Poets like Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Sampurna Chatterjee present the inhumanity of terrorist attacks. While Ali talks about terrorism and sufferings of people in Kashmir, poets from the north east Ngangom and

Nongkynrih present the everyday plight of citizen caught between armed insurgency and the armed forces. They also express their angst against the loss of identity in the wake of homogenizing forces and the influx of migrants and altered cultural practices. They are also concerned about the exploitation of natural resources.

Within the larger semiosphere a new sub-sphere of regional poetry is also emerging. Though we had poets writing about their native places and cultures such as Ramanujan, Mahapatra, Padhi but assertion of well defined regional identities as distinct from homogenous image of India and the evolution of sub-spheres with defined boundaries within the larger Indian semiosphere are a contemporary phenomenon. Poets from the north east such as Robin S Ngangom, Mamang Dai, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Anjum Hasan write about their unique geo-political realities and indigenous culture. They present myths, folklore, themes from their native culture. For example Nongkynrih's "Ren" is a mythological character in Khasi folklore. They talk about their local landscapes and their relationship with the hills. Unlike most other Indian poets writing in English, their poetry is politically charged emerging out of zones of conflict. Anthologies such as *Dancing Earth – An Anthology of Poetry from North East India*(2009) are the meta-level of self organization of their semiosphere.

The concept of semiosphere implies a boundary separating the semiosphere from the extra-semiotic space. The border of this semiotic space has an important functional and structural position and gives substance to its semiotic mechanism. The border acts as a bilingual mechanism which translates external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. The semiosphere is able to establish contact with the non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces through this boundary. The boundary is the area of accelerated semiotic processes. These semiotic processes always flow more actively on the periphery of semiosphere trying to affix them to the core structures. The periphery grows by translating and incorporating external structures. Poets living abroad or who have

lived abroad translate the semiotic structures of those cultures and send them through to the centre. The semiosphere of CIPE has another boundary that it shares with the regional language cultures. Bilingual and regional poets act as the translating and absorbing semiotic structures from the 'extra-cultural' space.

Bilingualism or multilingualism in the contemporary times of multimodal communication should be expanded to 'multisemeulism'. Many of the poets are competent in multiple semiotic systems, visual art, films, dance, fashion etc. Their poems often are intersemiotic translations bringing semiotic structures from another system and enriching or expanding the poetic space. Such individuals may be called 'multisemeul'.

The semiosphere of CIPE is transected with multiple internal boundaries of regional languages and cultures besides external transnational boundaries. Each message that moves across it must be many times translated and transformed, generating new information every time leading to a situation of unlimited semiosis.