

The Semiosphere and the Intersemiosis of Sudeep Sen's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The notion of Semiosphere is a central concept in Lotman's cultural semiotics. The paper is an attempt at using the cultural semiotics framework popularized by Lotman of the Tartu Moscow School of Semiotics to analyse Sudeep Sen's poetry. In the Lotmanian conception culture is seen as a hierarchy of text within texts immersed in a semiotic continuum i.e. the semiosphere, outside of which no semiosis can exist. Sudeep Sen presents a range of cultural polarity and stylistic plurality. His interest in poetry, architecture, photography and music make him blend multiple languages and generate new meanings from their mutual (un)translatability. The tension between the discrete (verbal) and continual (iconic-spatial) languages underlies the semiotics of his poetry. The paper looks at some of the newer poems (1998-2015) of Sudeep Sen collected in *Fractals*(2015) to explore the semiosphere, relationship between the core and the periphery, the interaction with the external spheres and the inter-semiotic tension.

Keywords : Semiosphere, Intersemiosis, Sudeep Sen, Lotman, Cultural Semiotics, Entropy, Continuous and discrete.

Sudeep Sen, a contemporary Indian English poet, is a Bengali, educated in Delhi and New York, and presently divides his time between London, Delhi and New York. His interest in poetry, architecture, dance, photography and music make his poetry multi-textured and multi-layered. Multiple semiotic systems (languages) and their mutual (un)translatability, the tension between the continuous (iconic-spatial) and the discrete cultural languages underlie the semiosis in his poetry. His poems represent imaginative spaces which occupy a zone of secrecy that is limitless, expansive, and full of mystery. Sen in an interview to Ziaul Karim explains that "it is a space that allows for creative unfurling of ideas and energies because so much of that area is unknown, untapped, uncharted, waiting to be realised, experienced and learnt." His poetry is marked for not just innovative rhyme schemes but also visual structure and presentation.

Sen received a degree in English literature from Hindu College, University of Delhi and a master's degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of

Journalism in New York City and a master's degree in English and creative writing from Hollins University. He was an international poet-in-residence at the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh, and a visiting scholar at the Harvard University. His major works in poetry include *The Lunar Visitations* (1990), *Postmarked India: New and Selected Poems* (1997), *Lines of Desire* (2000), *Distracted Geographies* (2003), *Rain* (2005), *Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations 1980-2015* (2015), *Path to Inspiration* (2017). He has also edited many anthologies of poetry including an editor on many anthologies, including *The and Midnight's Grandchildren: Post-Independence English Poetry from India* (2004) and *HarperCollins Book of English Poetry by Indians* (2012). His poems have been translated in about 25 languages and have appeared in major international anthologies.

This paper looks at some of his poems published in the first section titled 'Newer Poems' in the collection *Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations 1980-2015* which covers over thirty five years of his poetry and

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translations. The collection has a wide range of poems including lyric, haiku, free verse, prose-poems and ekphrastic poems. The themes range from death, illness, love, sex, religion etc and are inspired by art, music, literature, mythology, photography, cinema and architecture.

According to Lotman the text serves the three functions of natural languages namely creative function or generating new meanings, artistic function or iconism and the function of memory or acting as a condenser of cultural memory. Meaning generation is the accumulation of new information through the translation of texts between two or more different codes. Higher untranslatability has more potential for new information generation. This is even true of translations between different semiotic systems, for example transformation of a novel into a film.

According to Lotman dialogue is an ontological principle of the semiosphere, “dialogue presupposes asymmetry in the difference between the semiotic structures (languages)” (143). Further he states that the dialogic situation, i.e. need for dialogue precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of language in which to conduct it: the semiotic situation precedes the instruments of semiosis. The untranslatability or limited translatability between two asymmetric semiotic systems becomes a trope in Sen's poetry. He tries to translate the movements and patterns of dance into verbal poetic language in 'Bharatnatyam Dancer':

Spaces in the electric air divide themselves

In circular rhythms, as the slender
grace of your arms and bell-tied ankles
describe a geometric topography, real, cosmic,

One that once reverberated continually in
A prescribed courtyard of an ancient temple
(125)

In this poem Sen experiments with a new line-end rhyme scheme abacca-dbdeed-fbfggf and so on to map the actual classical dance step pattern and beat- ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta. Similarly the left hand margin indentations have also been matched to the same scheme and form.

The creative function is related to Lotman's notion

of polyglot text. The text belongs to two or several languages simultaneously. Lotman says that the human consciousness is heterogeneous and within one consciousness there are as if two consciousnesses, one perceiving the world as a discrete system of coding and another as a continuous system. The basic unit of the discrete system is sign and of the continuous it is the text(36). The discrete and the continuous languages represent the minimal pair of languages. Peeter Torop in his foreword to Lotman's Culture and Explosion observes that Lotman in his article “The Phenomenon of Culture”(1978) describes a typology for distinguishing between static and dynamic aspects of cultural languages. Here also he mentions that the cultural languages divide into the discrete and the continual (iconic-spatial) and this forms the primordial dualism. In discrete languages signs come first and meanings are created through the meanings of signs. In continual languages the text takes the primary position and the meaning emerges through a holistic text that integrates even the most heterogeneous elements. These are the two languages between which it is difficult to create translatability (xxviii).

The semiotic tension is evident when Sen endeavours to translate the continuous language of painting to the discrete language of poetry. He has written a whole set of poems on visual art, poems like 'Dali's Pate de Verre' based on Dali's Le desir hyperrational, 'Drawing Kafka Out' based on an illustration by Franz Kafka, 'Amistad' based on a painting by Tom Feeling and 'Cover Drawing' based on Imtiaz Dharker's painting. Collected in the section 'Blue Nude' the poems are sub grouped based on painters and media. The first three groups are based on the paintings by Paul Cézanne's, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse and the next three are based on visual art by various artists grouped according to media including photographs, canvas paintings and installations.

In the poem 'Sati' inspired by Henri Matisse's Baigneuse dans les Roseaux(bather in the Reeds), 1952 , Sen has lines appear as if stacked over each other resembling a funeral pyre.

She waits

At the feet

of her
husband's
pyre,

Stacking
The last
Pieces: (143)

The original painting by Henri Matisse actually shows a woman bathing in the reeds using brushstrokes outlining the woman and the reeds. This pictorial art is an iconic sign. But the poet here interprets as signifying a woman sacrificing her life on the funeral pyre of her husband. The sign is interpreted using the cultural codes that the poet has and subsequently translated into verbal sign where he attempts to capture the iconicity of the image in his mind through the stacked lines. Thus Sen's poem does not remain a mere ekphrastic poem.

The poem 'Cow- Dust Hour' is inspired by a Rokeya Sultana painting:
hoofing up fine red-dust in the air
marking an auspicious godhuli lagna

it must mean passion or yearning instead;
a force so strong that it quietly stretches
and redefines the definition of canvas,
geometry, landscape, and the seasons.” (163)

A similar theme appears in Tabish Khair's 'Godhuli' but it is not based on a visual art representation but an actual lived experience:
We inched through a gap in the herd,

Wreathed in cowdust, headlights switched on,
Casting faint, elongated shadows of cows
On this world of dust a word could touch. (98)

In Sen's poem the translation is from visual code to verbal and thus geometry and shapes dominate whereas in Khair's version it's the haptic and the kinetic.

'The Skulls' is a poem based on the French post impressionist artist Paul Cézanne's series The Skulls, oil on canvas and graphite and water colour on paper painted 1898-1905. Chief among these paintings is the 'Pyramid of Skulls'(1901) which depicts four human skulls stacked like a pyramid three of which are facing forward and seem to stare at the viewer. The fourth skull is lying down

behind the three forward facing skulls, and is only partially visible. This series of paintings is believed to show Cezanne's resignation to death.

The three gods
I worship
are dead.

They stare
From the backs
of their heads, (134)

The poet says that these skulls are like mummies from the pyramid waiting to be embalmed “in oil and graphite”. While translating the paintings into verbal poetry he combines the whole series of paintings and in his mind tries to combine the heterogeneous images into one homogenous image and interprets them using the cultural codes available to him. Such a translation causes inter-semiotic tension and leads to unpredictability. Thus translation or transmutation from one semiotic structure to another generates new meaning.

Entropy is an important concept in cultural semiotics. In information theory entropy is the unpredictability of the semantic content and high entropy means high information but redundancy is needed for a message to be decoded effectively. Thus entropy is seen as something which hinders communication but Lotman believes that in art and culture unpredictability is an intrinsic function of the system, and entropy is a necessary condition for meaning generation (26). The poem 'Entropy' inspired by Megan Randall's installations depicts how Randall's installation is “an art of abandonment”. Contemporary ceramic artist Randall has created site specific installations using porcelain. Randall explaining his art on his website says that “it examines people's reactions to site sensitive installations and fine art objects. Not recording the people but the impact that they leave behind. Entropy is the theme of my work; how both people and nature have reactions to and on specific places. In the process of my work I relinquish control, instead of having a predetermined outcome of how the work will be received. I do not mind if the work is stolen, destroyed or rearranged just as long as it is treated with the same passion used to create it. The small, functionless porcelain vessels which I produce to fill these empty

spaces convey the idea of abandonment.” Sen brilliantly captures this intended unpredictability or entropy in his poem.

As the maker lets her off-springs fly

She relinquishes control, allowing

These whites to create their own colour,

own shapes, own narratives (181)

The semiosphere is not a homogenous space. It has internal irregularity. The structural heterogeneity of semiotic space creates reserves of dynamic processes. It is this heterogeneity which acts as a mechanism for creation of new information. In the peripheral areas the structures may be more flexible and thus the dynamic processes meet with less opposition and develop more quickly. In the centre the development of “meta-structural self descriptors (grammar)” dramatically increases the rigidity of structures and slows down its development (Lotman 214). And in future the periphery displaces the centre and the former centre may be transformed into the new periphery. The relationship between the core and the periphery can be summed up in these lines from Sen's poem 'The Vortex':

Where the madness of the border and the sanity of the centre

Were at constant war, not knowing whether

The insanity belonged to the centre or sanity to the border”

“I like the periphery; it has more space at its edges,

More room to breathe and create, more room to perish unnoticed (175)

The boundary is the area of accelerated semiotic processes. These processes always flow more actively on the periphery of cultural environments trying to affix them to the core structures. The periphery grows by

incorporating external structures and then translates its semiotic structure through to the centre and in due time may 'conquer' the cultural sphere of the centre.

Sudeep Sen's poetry is not merely ekphrastic but generates new meaning through intersemiotic translation between the various asymmetric semiotic structures that comprise the semiosphere of his poetry. The asymmetry leads to semiotic tension and the untranslatability or limited translatability causes entropy or unpredictability which underlies the aesthetics or literariness of his poetry.

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