

# **“The Cultural Semiotics of Contemporary Indian Poetry in English- A Study”**

## **SYNOPSIS**

Submitted to

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara

for the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

## **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**2016**

# **The Cultural Semiotics of Contemporary Indian Poetry in English- A Study**

## **SYNOPSIS**

Most research on Indian poetry in English has focussed on either the general thematic aspects or the changing perceptions of English as the medium of poetic expression in India. Though the language of Indian poetry in English has been analysed for structural aspects and for nativisation, the very process of creation of such poetry or its reading demands further research. Thus there is a need for understanding the processess of signification from a cultural semiotic perspective, an area relatively unexplored by critics and researchers of Indian poetry in English. Moreover very little work on contemporary Indian English poetry in this direction is available. The underlying hypothesis for the study is that the principles of 'Cultural Semiotics' can provide a framework for analysing the processes of signification in the contemporary Indian Poetry in English.

Application of semiotic frameworks to literary texts helps in revealing the ways in which meaning is produced by the structures of interdependent signs, by codes and conventions. Theories of semiotics proposed by theorists such as Saussure, Pierce, Barthes, Greimas, Jakobson etc. have proved beneficial to understand the processess of signification in literature and move beyond hermeneutic function of literary research. The present study attempts to analyse the cultural semiotics of the contemporary Indian poetry in English and develop a framework for understanding the processes of meaning creation and evolution of such poetry as a cultural text, based on the frameworks proposed by Lotman, Todorov, Kristeva, Barthes, Rifaterre, Williams etc. The study may also help develop an alternative methodology for literary research.

The term 'contemporary' for the purposes of this research refers to post 1990 period. Though Hoskote (2002) and King (2001) consider 1980 as the point of departure, the researcher proposes to see 1991 as the dividing line. Major socio-cultural changes happened in India because of the economic liberalisation and globalisation processess which began in the 1990's. The other shaping forces which gained prominence in the 90's are the rise of 'global' terrorism, the satellite TV, ubiquitous media, internet

revolution and lately web 2.0 or social media(blogs, facebook, twitter etc.) . The study is based on poetry published around this period by poets born in 1960's and 1970's like Tabish Khair, C. P. Surendran, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Sampurna Chattarji and Jeet Thayil etc. These poets are considered the second generation of modernist Indian English poets. Some later poems of earlier generation poets born around 1950's, considered part of the 'canon', such as Vikram Seth, Eunice de Souza and Dilip Chitre, has also been considered provided they were published after 1990. This second generation of modernist Indian poets, unlike the earlier poets, are not involved in the cultural politics of Indian English. King argues that "the earlier poets often had a thinness of texture, an unwillingness to take chances, an avoidance of lyricism, obscurity, the wild, the political, the deviant. The poets who followed would explore these regions"(333).

Regarding contemporary Indian poetry in English, Ranjit Hoskote observes in his anthology, *Reasons for Belonging* (2002) that the 'anxiety for belonging' is no longer there in the Indian poets writing in English. Eunice De Souza(2008) in her introduction to the anthology of post-independence poetry observes about the Indian poets writing in English that they embark on a search for meaning, through an examination of themselves, their relationships with people, the environment and the world.

These poets present a new sensibility and thematic variety. The contemporary Indian English poets present new processes of signification where they draw their myths and metaphors from diverse cultures, history, religion, contemporary urban spaces, and media. Some of their themes may be 'conventional' but represented in contemporary language using words like 'spam', 'password' etc., signifying through a blend of contemporary as well as redefined myths.

The contemporary Indian poets writing in English have interactions with more than one parallel cultures and almost all are at least bilinguals. Kachru locates the 'literariness' of bilingual poets in "a blend of two or more linguistic textures and literary traditions" (161). Poets such as Vikram Seth, Tabish Khair, Sudeep Sen have lived, worked or had education across countries such as India, US, UK and China. This unique situation lends them access to different sign systems. Therefore their poetry demands a different poetics. They are not products of one culture in the conventional sense of the term. To

understand the diverse parallel trends in their poetry which at once represent immediate reality and also draw on canonical traditions, and to understand their interactions with culture we have to move from the conception of culture as ‘a bundle of primary and secondary modelling systems’ to the notion of ‘semiosphere’, as proposed by Lotman. This is also a shift from static to dynamic thinking. Through the semiospheric point of view, culture takes the shape of a heterogeneous whole bustling with multiple rhythms of development and transient dominants.

This research has attempted to find answer to the following research questions:

1. What signification processes do contemporary Indian poets writing in English employ in their interaction with culture?
2. What role does the contemporary Indian English poets’ exposure to different cultures and bilingualism play in shaping the literariness of their creative expression?
3. What are the different parallel trends in contemporary Indian poetry in English and what semiotic framework can be used to explain the co-existence of such diverse parallel trends?
4. How Indian poetry in English evolves as a cultural text?

The study follows a qualitative exploratory research design. A framework for analysing the texts has been developed based on the tools and principles of cultural semiotics especially the Tartu Moscow School of Semiotics (TMSS). This framework is used to analyse the processes of signification used in the selected texts and to explore the cultural semiotics of contemporary Indian poetry in English.

The term ‘cultural semiotics’ is usually associated with the Tartu school of semiotics led by Lotman. In *Universe of the Mind* (1990), Lotman defines culture as ‘an open hierarchy of texts functioning as models of the culture they belong to. In being models they retain the distinctive features of the culture in question and thereby also define its boundaries to non-cultural or alternative cultural areas’. The cultural semiotics of Jurij Lotman is directed toward the interdependence of regular and irregular conditions, stable and unstable semiotic processes, and the socially and semiotically highly tense relationship of centre and periphery. Johanson and Larsen define cultural semiotics as

a discipline that investigates the cultural process, its presuppositions and the structure of the cultural universe, taking the symbolic processes as its point of departure.

The study uses the term 'cultural semiotics' not necessarily limited to Lotman's definition but in a more general sense and draws not only upon Tartu semioticians, Lotman's later notions of culture vs. nature, and semiosphere, Kristeva's 'intertextuality', but also recent developments in cultural studies. The study aims to explore Indian English poetry as a cultural semiotic text.

Any study of contemporary literature faces the challenge of dealing with not a static object but a dynamic process which is in continuous flux. As Lotman remarks that literary historians take a retrospective look at literature and thus consider events as predestined. Though cultural events never happen like that. In *Culture and Explosion* he mentions that there are explosive moments which trigger a chaos which settles down after a certain time. It is this settled sequence of events that is recorded by literary historians. Thus dealing with contemporary literature or culture demands an analysis of these explosive events and both gradual and accelerated developments as they are emerging. As a researcher I have chosen to research contemporary poetry as, being a 'contemporary' myself, I am very much a part of the same emerging events and share the same cultural semiotic zone or what Lotman calls the 'semiosphere'. This notion of culture as a dynamic process has parallels in Raymond Williams' notion of dominant, resident and emerging cultures. (Williams 121-127).

Lotman proposes that a period's literary and ideological consciousness, worldview, and the aesthetics of its trends and currents, have a systemic quality. These categories are not a loose conglomerate of various convictions concerning the world and literature, but a hierarchic group of cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic values. Lotman's analysis of the artistic text relates both text and author to the supraindividual public sphere of a given period. In reality, all sign phenomena are immersed in a specially organized continuum: called by Lotman semiosphere. From the semiospheric approach, culture takes the shape of a heterogeneous whole bustling with multiple rhythms of development and transient dominants.

## **Chapterization:**

The thesis is divided into five chapters:

### **1. Introduction**

The chapter introduces how the contemporary Indian Poetry in English(CIPE) needs a different framework for its study and highlights the research gap that exists as most existing studies have been limited to poetry before 1990s and thematic analysis or the politics of using English as a language of creative expression. The chapter also lists the research questions, primary texts and a brief introduction to the Tartu Moscow School of Semiotics(TMSS) and Cultural Semiotics and how such framework can be used to effectively study the signification processes of CIPE.

### **2. Cultural Semiotics: Towards A Methodological Framework**

The second chapter presents an overview of the growth and development of the cultural semiotics theories especially the Tartu Moscow School of semiotics (TMSS). The chapter begins by differentiating between the cultural studies and the cultural semiotics. 'Cultural Semiotics' as a methodology is usually associated with Tartu Moscow School of Semiotics and its chief proponent is Yuri (also spelt 'Jurij' in some English transliterations) Lotman. Lotman's 'Cultural Semiotics' proposes a holistic study of culture and the processes of meaning generation. Lotman's chief contribution to the field is probably the notion of 'Semiosphere' and 'Cultural Explosion'. In this chapter an attempt is made to discuss the evolution of cultural semiotics, to define the key concepts associated with it and discuss why and how cultural semiotics could be used to study the diverse trends in contemporary Indian poetry in English. The cultural semiotics of Juri Lotman is directed toward the interdependence of regular and irregular conditions, stable and unstable semiotic processes, and the socially and semiotically highly tense relationship of centre and periphery. For any semiotic system two fundamental questions are to be described, first its relation with the world that lies beyond its borders and second relation between its static and dynamic processes. For the first Lotman says that a minimum of two languages is required to reflect a given reality. The space of reality cannot be represented by a single language, it can be expressed only through an aggregate of languages. Each of these is reciprocally dependent on the other due to the incapacity of each to express the world independently. They reflect the same reality in diverse ways. The relationship between multiplicity and

unity is a fundamental characteristic of culture. Johanson and Larsen define cultural semiotics as a discipline that investigates the cultural process, its presuppositions and the structure of the cultural universe, taking the symbolic processes as its point of departure. Cultural isomorphism and textuality of culture are the basic principles of cultural semiotics. Lotman propounds that all sign phenomena are immersed in a specially organized continuum called 'Semiosphere' and beyond this semiotic space the existence of semiosis is impossible. No culture/text/sign exists in isolation. He also proposes that gradual development marked by predictability and sudden acceleration (explosive) marked by unpredictability are complementary states in culture and this unpredictability introduces history to the element of free choice. Both the states are required for the dynamic development of culture.

### **3. A Brief Cultural History of Indian Poetry in English(Till 1990)**

This chapter outlines the development of Indian poetry in English beginning from the Anglophone poets of colonial India. Though most anthologies because of their nationalist concerns consider Derozio as the beginning, this study taking the cultural semiotics approach includes all those poets who draw from the Indian 'semiosphere' as part of Indian English poetry thus even ethnic British poets who were either born and lived or brought up in India or who imbibed and represented Indian ethos in their poetry as part of the cultural history of Indian poetry in English. These include poets such as Jones, Horsford, Carshore, Leslie and Page etc. The chapter presents a cultural history of the evolution of Indian poetry in English based on three aspects: the language, the locus and the identity. It discusses the cultural politics of the use of English as a language of creative expression and the changing attitudes to the language till contemporary times where that anxiety of belongingness seems to have finally rested. The chapter also discusses the racial-cultural hybridity of the earlier poets and the quest for being identified with the nationalist canon. The chapter traces the development of indigenous poetry in English beginning with early poets like Derozio, Kashiprashad Ghose, Madhusudan Dutt, the 'writers workshop' poets to post- independence poets like Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Chitre, Das and Sheth etc. The chapter also looks at how the canon of Indian English poetry was formed.

#### **4. Cultural Semiotics of Contemporary Indian Poetry in English**

This chapter forms the bulk of the study and applies cultural semiotics framework to analyse the contemporary Indian poetry in English (CIPE). The major poets studied in this chapter are Jeet Thayil, Sudeep Sen, Tabish Khair, Ranjit Hoskote, Sampurna Chatterjee, Sujata Bhatt, Bibhu Padhi, Arundhati Subramaniam, Anand Thakore, Anjum Hasan, Robin S. Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Desmond Kharmawphlang, Meena Kandasamy and Tishani Doshi. The chapter begins with an introduction to these poets dividing them into the core and the periphery. Some of them are further categorized as the women poets, the dalit poets and the emerging voices. The chapter applies basic concepts of the cultural semiotics framework such as semantic tropes, semiotics of myth and symbolism, semiosphere, boundary mechanisms, cultural memory and amnesia, unpredictability, intertextuality and intersemiosis to understand the signification processes of the CIPE and its evolution as a cultural text.

#### **5. Conclusion: Unlimited Semiosis**

The last chapter presents the final conclusions of the study and recommendations for further research. The chapter discusses the growing semiosphere of Indian poetry in English and delimiting its boundaries. It observes that it follows a pattern of unlimited semiosis with unique boundary mechanisms. Further it shows how what is considered the core of CIPE from an outsider perspective actually lies at the geographic periphery. Thus these borders are relative. This paradox of core and periphery is central to the CIPE. CIPE can be best analysed not as individual poems but as a system through the framework of cultural semiotics which helps in getting a holistic view. The chapter finally concludes with suggestions for further research in the area.



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