

## **Chapter II**

### **Cultural Semiotics**

In the recent times there has been a major shift in the way literature is studied. We have moved beyond the hermeneutic analysis of individual texts and there has been a renewed interest in studying literature as culture, though the term ‘culture’ has always been problematic evading a comprehensive definition. We can easily see two trends in the contemporary literary studies, the first one is that of cultural studies, as pioneered by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. The cultural studies in being a neo-marxist approach have focussed on the hegemonic relationships of texts. The second, a more recent trend, though relatively less established in English literary studies, is ‘cultural semiotics’ or the “semiotics of culture” which claims to be a more scientific approach. Semiotics beginning with Saussure and Pierce developed in two separate parallel strains divided by geo-political boundaries. Semiotics, structuralism and formalism which had almost lost currency have reappeared though hugely modified as semiotics of culture with the English translations of the works of Lotman and other proponents being made available in the West.

This semiotics of culture has the potential to give a new dimension to the way literature and culture are studied. ‘Cultural Semiotics’ as a methodology is usually associated with Tartu Moscow School of Semiotics and its chief proponent is Juri (also spelt ‘Jurij’ in some English transliterations) Lotman, whose work became available in English only recently. 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 concept of ‘Semiosphere’ and ‘Cultural Explosion’. In this chapter an attempt will be 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 contemporary Indian poetry in English.

Tartu Moscow School of Semiotics (TMSS) sometimes also referred to as Moscow Tartu school of Semiotics or just Tartu School of Semiotics was led by Lotman. In “Theses on the Semiotic Study of Cultures(as Applied to Slavic Texts)” presented at the Moscow Congress of Slavists, Lotman and his colleagues Uspensky, Ivanov, Toporov, and Piatigorsky proposed that culture may be regarded as “a hierarchy of particular semiotic systems, as the sum of texts and the set of functions correlated with them, or as a certain mechanism which generates these texts.” Lotman defines cultural semiotics as a science studying the functional correlation between different sign systems. 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 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(2005) 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 (215). Aleksei Semenenko (2012) summarizes the core principles of Lotman’s semiotics as:

“the principle of *cultural isomorphism* – which postulates that all semiotic entities from individual consciousness to the totality of human culture are based on similar heterogeneous mechanisms of meaning generation – and the principle of *textuality of culture*, the assumption that culture is an exceptionally complex text that in turn consists of texts within the texts.” (146)

### **Emergence of Cultural Semiotics:**

The foundation of TMSS was laid at a symposium on the structural study of sign systems held in Moscow in 1962. At this symposium for the first time the notion of modeling system was introduced. The methodology was largely based on Ferdinand de Saussure and Hjelmslev. Though Lotman himself was not present at the symposium, he became acquainted with the semioticians like Piatigorskii, Revzin, Ivanov etc and invited them to Tartu. In 1964 the first summer school was organized at Tartu University where Lotman worked and the first volume of *Trudy po Znakovyn Sistemam* (TZS or Sign System Studies) was published. Thus 1964 is considered the birth of TMSS.

As Semenenko(2012) observes, rise of semiotics in Soviet Union was linked to cybernetics, which after being banned in 1950 as a pseudo science made a comeback in 1958 and became officially approved in 1961 by the Communist Party. It was perceived as a new methodological and philosophical paradigm. Cyberspeak placed scientific discourse in place of Stalinist ideological and manipulative discourse. This helped the academia to open new departments with special focus on cybernetics, structural linguistics and semiotics. In a way structuralism had also made a come back. What semiotics shared with cybernetics is the explicit scientific orientation. Like cybernetics semiotics was also being explored as a universal method for study of human culture. Many semiotic studies were directed towards elucidation of universals or common features of every language or culture. Structuralists and semioticians like Claude Levi-Strauss explored myths, Noam Chomsky explored generative or universal grammar. But soon semioticians

especially TMSS members became disillusioned with the universalism and excessive scientism of semiotics. Association of semiotics with Cybernetics could also have been a means of camouflage to survive in the ideologically opposed oppressive political regime in the Soviet Union. Waldstein(2008) observes that nonconformist academics developed their own strategies of mimicry and adaptation. Cybernetics was used as an umbrella term for semiotic studies as a safer alternative for the word 'semiotics'. Even the journal of Tartu university, TZS(Sign System Studies) avoided using the term semiotics though it was informally always called *Semiotika*.

### **The systemic nature of Culture:**

Culture is a semiotic system where the term 'system' as defined by Lotman(1967) is a structure of elements and of rules for combining them that is in a state of fixed analogy to the entire sphere of an object of knowledge, insight and regulation. Thus being a system it is a structure of discernible elements with specific functions, organized in a certain hierarchy and this system is distinct from other systems or non systems. Culture according to Lotman is a complex semiotic whole that in turn consists of a number of other semiotic systems.

**Communication and generation of meaning:** The first feature of culture as a system is that it serves as a means of communication between people. Here it is important to note how Lotman's model of communication differs from earlier semioticians. Saussure propounded that we are able to communicate with one another because we use the same signs and their combinations. He distinguishes between *Langue* and *Parole*, the former being the homogeneous system of signs and latter the concrete messages produced on the basis of this system. Thus communication is possible because all individual messages use the same system of language. Jakobson(1960) proposed a different model of communication where he talks about the six main parameters of communication corresponding to the six functions of language viz. referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual and

poetic. Jakobson uses the terms code and message in place of langue and parole. In both cases there is only code being shared and only one message that is being structured by the code and is transferred within it. Both Saussure and Jakobson define contact as a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and addressee. Lotman differs from this model and finds the model though useful but limited when it comes to culture. He considers the text as the main vehicle of communication and the centre of semiotic activity. He says that the earlier models of communication can only work in artificial semiotic systems designed to transfer messages with minimal distortion. Such artificial systems cannot produce any new messages. In culture any transfer of information is always a 'translation'. Lotman defines new message also in terms of translation. He says that

“If the translation of text T1 from language L1 to language L2 leads to the appearance of text T2 in such a way that the operation of a reverse translation results in the input text T1, then we do not consider text T 2 to be new in relation to text T1. (1990, 13– 14)”

Thus semiotic systems in which texts are limited to only one interpretation cannot produce new messages. Lotman illustrates this with the system of traffic signs which have only a fixed number of interpretations and a traffic sign in English when translated to any other language and that translated text translated back into English would convey the same message. Thus no new message can be created in such systems. Whereas in natural languages and especially in art, the situation is radically different: we are able to produce an unlimited number of new messages that can be interpreted in different ways. If we translate even a simple English phrase into Russian and then back to English, the result may vary, sometimes significantly. Similarly even translations from one semiotic system to another such as translation of a book into a film will produce new messages as its reverse translation would not be the same. This feature of communication is called the 'principle of asymmetry'.

Unlike Saussure and Jakobson, Lotman focuses not on similarities but on differences in communication because only difference can create meaning. There is not just a single code serving as the channel of communication but multiple overlapping codes that produce a number of new texts. That is how the text both transmits messages and serves as a generator of new messages. (Lotman 1990). This meaning generation is the creative function of the text which is even more relevant in the context of art and culture.

The creative function is related to Lotman's notion of polyglot text. The text belongs to two or several languages simultaneously. He says that the human consciousness is heterogeneous and within one consciousness there are as if two consciousness, 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.

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 text takes the primary position and 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.

**Unpredictability and entropy:** Lotman presents two basic functions of the text: communicative(transfer of information) and creative (generation of new meaning). The creative function increases the entropy as it obstructs the communicative function by increasing the unpredictability and ambiguity of the text. But in art and culture unpredictability is the intrinsic function of the system. The entropy(noise) is a necessary condition for meaning generation.

**Modeling systems:** The notion of primary and secondary modeling systems has been a trademark of TMSS but also the most controversial one. “Systems that have a natural language as their basis and that acquire supplementary superstructures, thus creating languages of a second level, can appropriately be called secondary modeling systems” (Lotman 2000a, 387, translated in Lucid 1977, 7).

Johansen and Larsen(2005) explain Lotman’s modeling systems as “A primary modeling system, such as a verbal or visual text, models our relation to the surrounding world – perception, action and communication. A secondary modeling system, on the other hand, reconstructs the primary modelling system’s organization of the relation to the surrounding world and the conditions for this relation, through myths, tales, art, science, etc (170).”

In his later works Lotman himself moved away from the original notion of modeling systems. The problem with modeling systems is that if culture is a secondary modeling system modeled on natural language as the primary modeling system then the whole concept is in conflict with Lotman’s notion of culture as a polyglot text. For Lotman culture is essentially polyglot. Thus Lotman in his later works moved to the notion of semiosphere.

### **Semiosphere:**

Lotman coined the term semiosphere in 1984 in the article titled “ On the Semiosphere” published in Sign System Studies. Here he for the first time moves away from the notion of modelling systems and sees culture as an inextricably intertwined hierarchy of sign systems immersed in semiotic space. As Zylko (2001) notes “this shift, from the conception of culture as a bundle of primary and secondary modelling systems to the notion of semiosphere, is also a shift from static to dynamic thinking. If we took the former approach, culture would resemble a motionless unit made up of semiotic systems; whereas if we follow the semiospheric approach, culture takes the shape of a heterogeneous whole bustling with multiple rhythms of development and transient dominants.”

Lotman further elaborated on the semiosphere in *Universe of the Mind*(1990) where he discusses in detail the key concepts of core, periphery and boundary and that sign systems of culture formed a semiotic continuum. Lotman(1984) in his article “On the Semiosphere” states that he calls the semiotic continuum or the sphere outside of which no semiosis exists as ‘Semiosphere’ by analogy to the notion of “Biosphere” introduced by V. I. Vernadsky. Vernadsky(1967) defined biosphere as a space filled with living matter where living matter is the totality of living organisms. Thus with analogy all semiotic space may be regarded as a unified mechanism. The primacy does not lie in one or another sign, but in the “greater system”, namely the semiosphere. The semiosphere is that same semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist. “Just as, by sticking together individual steaks, we don’t obtain a calf, but by cutting up a calf, we may obtain steaks, — in summarizing separate semiotic acts, we don’t obtain a semiotic universe. On the contrary, only the existence of such a universe — the semiosphere —makes the specific signatory act real.” (Lotman, 1984)

Peeter Torop(2009) links Lotman’s notion of semiosphere with Bakhtin’s principle of dialogism. Bakhtin proposed that any understanding is dialogic. Lotman emphasized that the dialogic situation has to be understood before dialogue. “...the need for dialogue, the dialogic situation, precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of a language in which to conduct it: the semiotic situation precedes the instruments of semiosis.” (Lotman 1990) Torop therefore contends that dialogue becomes not only a term closely associated with semiosphere, but it becomes one of its ontological characteristics.

**Border and Periphery:** As the space of semiosphere is abstract, so the boundary that separates it from extra semiotic space also cannot be visualised in concrete terms. The semiotic border is represented by the sum of bilingual filters, passing through which the text is translated into another language or languages existing outside the semiosphere. Similarly non-texts or external texts have to be translated into the one of the languages of its internal space. The border of the



semiosphere becomes very important as a structural and functional position. It helps create contact with extra semiotic space.

Lotman(2005) says that all great empires had their borders inhabited by nomad settlers. Settlers formed a zone of cultural bilingualism, ensuring semiotic contacts between two worlds. Areas of multiple cultural meanings carry out the very same function on the boundaries of the semiosphere: town, trade route and other areas forming a kind of creolisation of semiotic structures.

The boundary has another function in the semiosphere. It is the area of accelerated semiotic processes which always flow more actively on the periphery of cultural environments seeking to affix them to the core structures, with a view to replacing them. The division between core and periphery is a law of the internal organization of the semiosphere.

### **Culture as Text and Text as Culture:**

The notion of semiosphere enables us to simultaneously combine the treatment of culture as text and the treatment of text as culture as they can be treated as wholes at different levels of the same system. Lotman while considering the problem of meaning generation as the main problem of the semiotics of culture says:

“What we shall call meaning generation is the ability both of culture as a whole and of its parts to put out, in the ‘output’, nontrivial new texts. New texts are the texts that emerge as results of irreversible processes (in Ilya Prigogine’s sense), i.e. texts that are unpredictable to a certain degree.” (2000; 640)

Lotman (1970: 64-77=1981: 34-48) bases his approach on the broad concept of text according to which every artifact with a function and a coded message can be regarded as a text; he notes, however, that every culture selects from the set of these texts a small subset which its members consider important for their cultural identity. He maintains (1970=1981: 38): “The selection of a certain number of texts from

the mass of [...] messages can be considered as indicating the emergence of a culture as a special form of self organization of society”, and vice versa: “A situation in which all texts have equal value amounts to a liquidation of the culture.”

**A brief review of Lotman’s major works in the field:** Lotman wrote extensively on a wide range of subjects including semiotic theories, aesthetics, poetry, culture, Russian literature and history, and cinema etc. Out of these the following four works may be considered seminal to the understanding of his theories of semiotics of culture and most relevant to this study:

1. *Theses on the semiotic study of cultures (as applied to Slavic texts)*
2. *On the Semiosphere*
3. *Universe of the Mind*
4. *Culture and Explosion*

***Theses 1973 or the “Theses on the semiotic study of cultures (as applied to Slavic texts)”*** is the collective manifesto written under the leadership of Juri Lotman together with his Moscow colleagues Vjacheslav Ivanov, Vladimir Toporov, Aleksandr Pjatigorskij and Boris Uspenskij. This seminal work was the result of an understanding arrived at the Tartu Semiotics Summer School in Kääriku on the possibility of an integral approach to culture from the semiotic point of view. During this 1970 Summer School on Semiotics, Lotman formulated the tasks of the semiotics of culture. And in 1973 Lotman proposed to formalise the discipline of the semiotics of culture. Thus the core members of the TMSS – Lotman, Ivanov, Toporov, Pjatigorskij and Uspenskij together produced the “*Theses*” which was published in Russian and English the same year i.e. 1973. This work marked the emergence of TMSS on the international scene as well as the establishment of Semiotics of Culture as a discipline. The primary aim of the discipline as stated in the *Theses*(1.0.0) is “... the study of the functional correlation of different sign systems. From this point of view particular importance is attached to questions of

the hierarchical structure of the languages of culture, of the distribution of spheres among them, of cases in which these spheres intersect or merely border upon each other.”

The work consists of nine theses divided into subsections. The first thesis (1.0.0) defines the semiotics of culture as “the study of the functional correlation of different sign systems.” Culture as a unity consists of numerous sign systems and these exist in relation to each other. There is a difference when the concept of culture is seen from its own point of view and when it is seen from an outside point of view. From the inner point of view culture would look like a delimited sphere which is opposed to what lies outside seen as “non-culture”. But from an outer point of view, culture and non- culture appear as spheres which are mutually conditioned and which need each other. (1.2.0) The mechanism of culture transforms the outer sphere into the inner one. This first thesis also hints at the mechanisms of cultural organisation. Culture lives not just by the opposition of the inner and outer spheres(or chaos) but also continually moves within spheres and creates new chaos.

The second thesis provides a more generalised definition of culture : “Thus culture is constructed as a hierarchy of semiotic systems, on the one hand, and a multilayered arrangement of the extracultural sphere surrounding it” (2.0.0). Several cultures may also form a functional or structural unity.

The third thesis introduces “text” as the “fundamental concept of modern semiotics”(3.0.0). The text may be regarded as the primary element or basic unit of culture. The text has integral meaning and integral function. From the point of view of the investigator of culture (outer point of view) text appears as the carrier of integral function and from the point of view of the carriers of that culture it is the carrier of integral meaning. In 3.1.0 the authors observe that the concept “text” is used in a specifically semiotic sense and on one hand is applied not only to messages in a natural language but also to any carrier of integral meaning – to a

ceremony, a work of fine arts, or a piece of music. It is important to note that not all messages are considered as text from the inner point of view of culture. Out of a totality of messages, culture distinguishes and takes into account only those which may be defined as a certain speech genre, that is those which possess a certain integral meaning and fulfil a common function. Later in the thesis the authors discuss the problems in considering the text as an object of study. The first is the question of considering text as an integral sign or the text as a sequence of signs. For linguistic studies text may be a sequence of signs but for the study of culture we also need to look at texts which have to be considered as a whole which cannot be broken into discrete units. It is not a secondary one derived from a chain of signs but the primary one. The authors here signal a shift in contemporary semiotics from discrete models of formalized languages to continuous (indiscreet) text as a primary datum. The second problem is that of the “sender-hearer”. As individual texts may be composed with an orientation towards either the position of the sender or the position of the hearer, similarly the culture as a whole may also exhibit such trends. Cultures which are oriented towards the hearer would consider the “most intelligible” as the “most valuable.” A culture oriented towards the hearer regards the “authentic”, “true”, and “simple” as the highest axiological characteristics. Thus the newspaper article, documentary, essay etc occupy the highest value. For the speaker oriented culture the sphere of closed, inaccessible or even unintelligible texts will have the highest value. Prophetic and priestly texts and poetry occupy the highest place. In speaker oriented culture the audience (reader) models itself towards the creator of texts (poet) and in the other case the creator (sender) constructs himself according to the pattern of the audience. Culture may shift their orientation with time. This has relevance in literary studies as different literary genres or styles may be correlated with the orientation of the culture’s sender-hearer orientation. In 3.2.4 the discuss the role of memory in the channel of communication between the sender and receiver. Sometimes there may be a difference between the potential receiver and the actual receiver.

The fourth thesis introduces the concept of a “culture text” while defining culture as a “certain secondary language”. Then the relationship between the text in natural language and the verbal text of culture is discussed. There are three possible relationships. First the text in the natural language is not a text of the given culture. All utterances to which the culture does not ascribe value may be considered as non-texts and not preserved. Secondly the text in the given secondary language is simultaneously a text in the natural language. Thus a poem by Pushkin is at the same time a text in the Russian language. Thirdly the verbal text of the culture is not a text in the given natural language. It may be a text in some other language (a Latin prayer for a Slav) or irregular transformation of a natural language (4.0.0). The traditional histories of culture tend to consider only ‘new’ texts created by the given age for any chronological section. But texts transmitted by the given cultural tradition and those introduced from outside may function alongside the new texts. “This gives each synchronic state of culture the features of cultural polyglotism.” (4.1.1)

The fifth thesis describes the reconstruction, transmission and translation of texts. The thesis begins by defining the “place of the text in textual space” as the “sum total of potential texts.” The thesis though refers to Slavic texts has relevance to study of any literature or culture. The authors consider reconstruction of literary texts in detail in this thesis as it is considered as the primary concern of all philologists. Every reading of a poetic manuscript is to a certain extent a reconstruction of the creative process and a successive removal of the superimposing layers. The most conspicuous results of the reconstruction are achieved on the extreme levels corresponding to the semiotic categories of the signifier and the signified as these levels correspond to the textual reality at the greatest degree.

The sixth thesis (6.0.0) establishes that culture from the semiotic point of view is a hierarchy of particular semiotic systems, the sum of the texts and the set of functions correlated with them, or a certain mechanism which generates these texts.

Culture is the collective mechanism for the storage and processing of information. The essence of culture as memory is especially evident in the example of archaic texts such as folklore. “Not only do the participants in communication create texts, but the texts also contain the memory of the participants in communication.”(6.0.1) The assimilation of texts from another culture may result in the phenomenon of “polyculturality”. A single isolated semiotic system cannot constitute a culture. It needs a minimal mechanism of a pair of correlated semiotic systems. “The pursuit of the heterogeneity of languages is a characteristic of culture.” (6.1.0) A detailed definition of culture is given in 6.1.3. “As a system of systems based in the final analysis on a natural language (this is implied in the term “ secondary modelling systems”, which are contrasted with the “primary system”, that is to say the natural language), culture may be regarded as a hierarchy of semiotic systems correlated in pairs, the correlation between them being to a considerable extent realized through correlation with the system of the natural language.”(6.1.3)

The seventh thesis deals with one of the fundamental problems of the study of semiotics and the typology of cultures, the question of the equivalence of structures, texts, functions. This thesis deals with the problems of translation, untranslatability, transmission and transposition of texts. With reference to Slavic studies there are three possible cases of transmission of texts through different channels: the transmission of a certain text in another Slavic language; the transmission of a certain text created in a different tradition through two (or more ) channels (for example translations of the same Western literature into different Slavic languages); the transmission of a text through channels of which only one is ultimately represented by its realization in a Slavic language.

The eighth thesis states that to describe the life of a text in a system of culture or the working of the structures which compose it, we have to study the relations between the structures at different levels. Such interrelations may be revealed both in the appearance of intermediate levels and in the structural isomorphism sometimes observed on different levels. (8.0.0)

The last thesis describes the functioning of culture as a semiotic whole. There are “two mutually opposed mechanisms at work:

- (a) The tendency toward diversity – toward an increase in differently organized semiotic languages, the “polyglotism” of culture.
- (b) The tendency toward uniformity – the attempt to interpret itself or other cultures as uniform, rigidly organized languages.”

(9.0.0)

The two unifying mechanisms of culture are its “model of itself, the myth of the culture about itself” and the orientation of culture. A culture may be oriented toward writing or toward speech. Similarly a certain culture may be oriented toward a culture or toward the extracultural sphere.

The thesis is summed up by stating that scientific investigation is not only an instrument for the study of culture but also part of its object. From this point of view structural-semiotic studies may also be considered as phenomenon of Slavic culture.

***On the Semiosphere (2005):*** This article was first published in 1984 in *Signs Systems Studies*. This review is based on the English translation by Wilma Clark published in 2005 in the same journal. This seminal work has one of the first references to the term ‘semiosphere’ coined by Lotman to refer to “the semiotic space outside of which semiosis cannot exist.” The article begins with the reference to the two traditions of semiotics- the Peirce-Morris tradition which takes sign as the first element of any semiotic system and the second based on the theses of Saussure and the Prague school which has at its core the antimony of language and speech. As an alternative approach Lotman suggests that in reality clear and functionally mono semantic systems do not exist in isolation. “They function only by being immersed in a specific semiotic continuum, which is filled with multi-variant semiotic models situated at a range of hierarchical levels.” Lotman calls this continuum as “semiosphere” by analogy to the concept of “biosphere” introduced

by Vernadsky. This is a specific sphere passing signs and only in this space can the communicative processes and the creation of new meaning be realised. Lotman proposes that all semiotic space be regarded as one unified mechanism rather than the totality of individual texts and isolated languages as they relate to each other. He explains with this oft quoted example:

“Just as, by sticking together individual steaks, we don’t obtain a calf, but by cutting up a calf, we may obtain steaks, — in summarizing separate semiotic acts, we don’t obtain a semiotic universe. On the contrary, only the existence of such a universe — the semiosphere — makes the specific signatory act real.”

The concept of semiosphere is linked to homogeneity and individuality and both these concepts imply a boundary separating the semiosphere from the extra-semiotic space. The border of this semiotic space is the most important functional and structural position which gives substance to its semiotic mechanism. The border acts as a bilingual mechanism translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and vice versa. It is through this boundary that the semiosphere is able to establish contact with the non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces.

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.

Semiosphere needs a “chaotic” external sphere and may construct this if it did not exist. Culture not only creates its internal organisation but also creates its own type of external disorganisation. Lotman explains this by giving example of the antique civilisations which considered cultures beyond its sphere as barbarians. The antique civilisation regards itself as culturally intact through the construction of a



unitary “barbarian” world. Those who did not share a common language with the culture of antique civilisation were considered barbarian even though they may themselves be organised cultures in themselves at various stages of development. External structures outside the semiotic boundary were presumed to be non-structures.

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. And in future the periphery displace the centre and the former centre may be transformed into the new periphery.

The division between the core and the periphery is a law of the internal organisation of the semiosphere. The dominant semiotic systems lie at the core. But this core and periphery are not absolute spaces and are defined by the selected meta-language of the observer. The internal observer’s meta- language would have elements of self description which developed with the self development of the semiosphere. On the other hand the external observer may use the categories of another system.

Another organising principle of the semiosphere is isomorphism. Each part of the semiosphere may create its own whole. Like the fragments of a mirror reflecting the same face as in the mirror, they represent the part yet remain similar to the whole. The integral semiotic mechanism and the separate text are relative to the isomorphism of all the texts of the world. There is a definite parallelism between the individual consciousness, the text and the culture as a whole.

*Universe of the Mind – A Semiotic Theory of Culture*(1990) : Translated by Ann Shukman

This book is an attempt at developing a general and historical semiotics of culture. Lotman extends his idea of the text as a unity to the whole semiosphere (culture as semiosphere) as a single mechanism. In his introductory note to the book Umberto Eco observes that here we can see ‘Lotman moving beyond structuralist dogmatism and offering a more complex and articulated approach.’ The book is divided into three parts. The first part looks at the ‘text’ as a meaning generating mechanism, the second part develops his thesis of the ‘semiosphere’(culture as semiosphere) and the third part deals with the semiotics of history and cultural memory.

The first part looks at the mechanism of meaning generation. 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. The text thus produced is a new one and the translation is a creative act. Lotman believes that as creative function is a universal quality of language thus poetic language should be treated as the most typical manifestation of natural language as poetic language having a greater degree of untranslatability has higher creative potential. Regarding the memory function of texts he explains that a text has the capacity to preserve the memory of its previous contexts. The text acquires different interpretations in different contexts and these also get incorporated in the text. All these constitute the memory of the text. Thus a text creates a meaning space around itself which interacts with the cultural memory of the audience thereby giving a semiotic life to the text.

Based on his central premise that semiotic experience precedes the semiotic act, Lotman develops the concept of semiosphere in the second part. Semiosphere

according to him is the semiotic space necessary for the existence and the functioning of languages.

“The unit of semiosis, the smallest functioning mechanism is not the separate language but the whole semiotic space of the culture in question. This is the space we term the semiosphere.” (125)

Semiosphere is characterised by heterogeneity. It is filled with multiple languages ranging from complete mutual translatability to complete mutual untranslatability. At all stages of its development there are contacts with texts coming from cultures outside the boundary of given semiosphere. The structure of semiosphere is asymmetrical and the generation of new information happens by mutual translation between these asymmetrical elements. At the centre of the semiosphere is the most developed and organised languages. Self description is the final act in the semiotic system's structural organisation. The structural organisation of the semiosphere is also determined by its boundary which separates the internal and the external space. Depending on the typology of cultures every culture divides the world into 'its own' and 'their' external space. The substructures inside the semiosphere are “organised into a general system of coordinates: on the temporal axis into past, present and future, on the spatial axis into internal space, external space and the boundary between them. (133)”

The boundary both unites and separates. It is polylingual as it serves as a translating mechanism bringing texts from an alien semiotics into the semiosphere. Thus it acts as a permeable filtering membrane which transforms foreign texts to make them part of the internal semiotics of the semiosphere. The boundary not only exists between the internal and the external spheres, but the entire space of the semiosphere has boundaries at different levels between different sections of it. These sectional boundaries create a multi level system allowing for certain parts of the semiosphere at different levels of self description to form a semiotic unity.

Discussing the dialogue mechanisms of the semiosphere (culture as semiosphere), he notes that the dialogic situation precedes both real dialogue and even the existence of a language for it. The dialogue is characterised by asymmetry in the semiotic structures (languages) which the participants use and the alternating directions of the message flow. The participants alternate their position from 'transmission' to 'reception' with intervals thus producing discrete sections. This alternation can happen between the core and the peripheral structures of a given semiosphere. First the nuclear structures are the generator of texts and the receivers are at periphery. Once a saturation point reaches the structures at the periphery take over the role of generator of texts. Lotman further describes how cultures receive outside texts. First they may allow the outside texts to retain their strangeness and accept them as belonging to a higher level on the value scale. The dominant psychological impulse is to break with the past. But in the second stage the 'imported' texts and the 'home culture' restructure each other. There is tendency to restore links with the past or the 'roots'. Then the imported texts are dissociated from their national cultures by looking for a higher content in them separate from their actual national culture. And then these texts are absorbed in the receiving culture which considers itself suited to give them their rightful place. Now this receiving culture gets into a state of activity and starts rapidly generating new texts. Thus the culture at the receiving side becomes the transmitting culture and acquires the central position in the semiosphere issuing texts directed to other peripheral areas of the semiosphere. But in the actual process of cultural contacts this would happen only if there is a mutual attraction preceding the actual contact.

In the third part Lotman discusses questions of history and cultural memory. Lotman criticizes the deterministic approach of historians and says that "an historical event is always the result of one of many possible alternatives and that the same conditions do not always produce the same results" (230).

Lotman concludes by proposing that a general and historical semiotics of culture can answer the paradoxical questions of the intellectual life of humanity.

***Culture and Explosion*(1992,2005):** Lotman's final work representing his culminating thoughts on the semiotics of culture was first published in Russian in 1992 shortly before his death in October 1993. The English translation of the same by Wilma Clark and edited by Marina Grishakova was published in 2009.

The first chapter "Statement of the problem" as the title itself states is about the fundamental questions of relating to the description of any semiotic system. These questions are firstly its relation to the extra-system (that which lies beyond its borders) and secondly its static and dynamic relations. The first from a semiotic point of view represents the antinomy between language and the world beyond the borders of the language. This space lying outside of the language enters the sphere of language and is transformed into content. Discussing the dynamics of semiotic systems, Lotman says that reality cannot be represented by a single language. "A minimally functional structure requires the presence of atleast two languages and their incapacity, each independently of the other, to embrace the world external to each of them. This incapacity is not a deficiency, but rather a condition of existence, as it dictates the necessity of *the other*(another person, another language, another culture)."(2)

Thus two or more diverse languages with their mutual untranslatability (or limited translatability) reflect one and the same object in diverse ways. But the aspiration towards a single universal language becomes the kind of secondary reality created by culture. He develops this argument further to conclude that individual and collective behaviour where collective behaviour acts as the evaluative parameter for the individual stems from this relationship between multiplicity and unity in culture. Both the individual and collective behaviour together constitute the unitary whole of culture.

Lotman continues the theme of the inadequacy of monolingual systems to represent reality in the second chapter. Highlighting the limitations of the Jakobson's communication model, he says that the abstract model of

communication implies the use of the same code and the identical memory capacity of the addressor and the addressee. Such a code would be only an artificial one. According to Lotman language is “a code plus its history”. If we assume an identical addressor and an addressee possessing identical codes and fully devoid of memory then the understanding between them will be ideal but the value of transferred information will be severely limited. Actually the non-comprehension or untranslatability of two languages is a valuable meaning making mechanism and creator of new information.

The third chapter “Gradual progress” deals with the concept of cultural development. Lotman explains the dynamics of the the development of culture in terms of predictability and unpredictability, continuity and discontinuity, stability and instability of the system. A culture has both gradual and radical dynamic processes. He introduces “Explosion” as a metaphor for the radical development. Here explosion is not seen as a destructive process but as a creative phenomenon. Gradual progress is continuous and predictable whereas the unpredictable progress manifests as an explosion. “Gradual and explosive processes, although antithetical, exist only in terms of their mutual reciprocity.”(p7)

The dynamics of development of culture is further elaborated in the next chapter. Culture as a whole is created from elements which develop at different rates so that “any one of its synchronic sections reveals the simultaneous presence of these different stages.” Both explosive and gradual processes in the various spheres of culture are important. While explosive processes ensure innovation, the gradual ensure succession. The moment of explosion creates many unpredictable paths. The dominant element which appears as a result of explosion determines future development. This element may come from any element of the system or even from outside, from another system. The explosive moment is unpredictable and the dominant element decides the future chain of events. History tends to remove this moment of unpredictability and sees what occurred as the only possibility, “historically predetermined”.

In the fifth chapter Lotman suggests a mental model rather than two dimensional metaphors to describe the semantic spaces as a “specific semiotic mass whose boundaries are framed by a multiplicity of individual uses.” This model correlates to the concept of “semiosphere” presented in the *Universe of the Mind*. Semiotic space is “the multi-layered intersection of various texts, woven together in a specific layer characterised by complex internal relationships and variable degrees of translatability and spaces of untranslatability.”(p23)

In the next chapter, “thinking reed” he discusses the opposition of nature and culture. He says that the “unique quality of man as a cultural ‘artefact’ requires the opposition of his world to nature; which is understood as extra-cultural space.” He draws upon the works of Tyutchev to explain the place of culture in nature(extra-cultural space). According to Tyutchev nature is endowed with harmony opposed to the disharmony of the human soul. Animals display ritualistic behaviour whereas man has an unpredictable behaviour. Cyclical reiteration or ritualistic behaviour is a law of biological existence of the animal world including man but man as a “thinking reed” defies this and thus able to invent new things.

Chapter 7 “The world of proper names” focuses on use of proper names to categorise and classify cultural artefacts. Animal languages, as far as it is known, do not have proper names. Proper names create the tension between the individual and the general. Human consciousness is characterised by this ability to differentiate between the individual word and the “general word(for all)” and human beings establish the semantic boundary between “one’s own” and “other”.

“One of the fundamental semiotic mechanisms inherent in humanity begins with the possibility of being “only itself”; to be a thing (proper name) and to simultaneously appear to a “representative” of a group, as one of many(common noun).”(p33)

In 'The fool and the Madman', he returns to the concepts of unpredictability and explosion as generators of new texts. He begins by introducing a ternary structure of "fool-wiseman-madman" in place of the conventional binary opposition of the fool and the madman. So the binary opposition becomes a semiotic continuum with the fool and the madman on the two extremes and the wiseman as the norm in the middle. As the madman's behaviour is unpredictable, he can sometimes present his madness as a moment of genius.

In the ninth chapter Lotman discusses the unpredictability of the system as a whole. This chapter titled 'The text within the text' begins with the statement that no system exists in isolation, "any system lives not only according to the laws of its own self-description but also incorporates a variety of collisions with other cultural structures." Thus history of any culture has to be examined not only as an immanent development but also in the context of external influences. He gives the example of the "Frenchification" of the Russian nobility at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and how French became the language of fashion and especially feminine discourse. "This melange of French and Russian generated a "feminine" language of an especially "fashionable" variety."(p66) Intrusion of a foreign text is a typical case of "text within a text". Such a "fragment of text which is detached from its natural semantic network and introduced into a different semantic space" acquires a different semantic function. Such a transfer across semiotic boundaries becomes a starting point for meaning generation. This "text within a text" acts as a rhetorical device. Developing more on this Lotman concludes that culture as a whole being a text is a complex text consisting of a "hierarchy of texts within the texts". The intrusion of random elements from other texts disturbs the basic structures and leads to unpredictability of future developments.

The next chapter talks about the trope of the "inverse image" where two opposing objects exchange their dominant features. This disturbs the norm and introduces dynamism to an otherwise non dynamic sphere. He gives the example of fashion which goes beyond the boundaries of the norm and continually pushes



the boundaries of the permissible. This unpredictability becomes a “dynamic reservoir in any or all processes of development.” (p81)

In the eleventh chapter “The logic of explosion” he discusses the nature of artistic text in detail while explaining how the ‘text’ for the early formalists and structuralists were stable and isolated whereas for the contemporary semioticians it is heterogeneous and dynamic. He gives a detailed analysis of the nature of the artistic text taking examples from the works of Charlie Chaplin. The entire artistic space of Chaplin may be considered as a unitary whole or as the exchange of independent, enclosed texts. He says that “explosion can also be realised as a chain of sequential explosions, each of which changes the other, creating the dynamic multi-levelled unpredictability.”(p120) Charlie Chaplin’s works may be considered as such a chain of sequential reactions.

In ‘The moment of unpredictability’ he returns to the unpredictable nature of the explosive moment. It is unpredictable not in the sense of unlimited possibilities but in terms of “its own collection of equally probable possibilities for movement into a sequential state.” Out of these one may be realised and others dispersed into semantic space and act as carriers of semantic difference. The moment of explosion creates an unpredictable situation which after having occurred completely transforms the character of the event. A view from the future into the past tends to show the event as the only possibility. Thus the event is seen as an inevitable destination. This according to Lotman is psychologically connected to the tendency of correction in the memory or in the retelling. Similarly cultures have this psychological need to introduce corrections and to treat this corrective process as genuine reality thus transforming memory.

In chapter thirteen he discusses the dynamics of culture in terms of internal structure and external influences. The mutual tension between the immanent process of a culture and external influence determines the dynamics of a culture. The intrusion of elements of external culture can be realised in the internal structure

in three ways. Firstly to enter the internal culture the external must cease to be external and adopt a new name in the language of the internal culture to become own (*svoi*) from alien (*chuzoi*). In such a case the wider cultural context absorbs the invading elements. In a second scenario the intrusion may be so energetic that “it introduces itself not as a separate element but as an entire language which can either completely supplant the language it invades or which may form with it a complex hierarchy.”(p13) In the third case the intrusion may act as a catalyst and accelerate the dynamics of the process without participating directly. He concludes that the dynamic development of culture is accompanied by the constant transposition of internal and external processes.

In the next chapter ‘Two forms of dynamic’ he explains the difference between explosive and gradual processes. He suggests that the two terms should not be taken literally. Quoting the works of V. M. Zhirmunsky and G. A. Gukovsky as two distinct models of history of literature and culture. Zhirmunsky studied literature as a change of states completely “free from explosions” whereas Gukovsky’s studies it as a “chain of explosions.” He says that both these processes are interwoven and act upon each other and both gradual and explosive processes have an equal importance in the development of culture.

The final chapter ‘In place of conclusions’ presents a summary of the basic tenets of his semiotic theory. The fundamental basis of semiosis is not a singular sign but the relation between at least two signs and it happens in a semiotic space. “This semiotic space is simultaneously multi-dimensional in both the synchronic and diachronic sense.” It has a permeable boundary and has both gradual and explosive processes. The moment of self- consciousness defines the boundaries of culture.

***The Unpredictable Workings of Culture(2013)*** : This is among Lotman’s final and summative works. The book contains his views on history and art. Just as in *Culture and Explosion*, which was written immediately after this, he presents a detailed

exploration of explosion as a fundamental process behind change in society, culture and art.

### **Cultural semiotics as a methodology for studying contemporary Indian poetry in English**

Most studies on Indian Poetry in English have been either general thematic analysis or discussions of the nativisation of English language and the politics of the use of English as a language of creative expression. In recent times there have appeared some studies which focus on the culture in Indian poetry in English. Indian Poetry in English written by polyglot poets and marked by heteroglossia and multiculturalism presents a tension between the unifying forces and pluralism. There are diverse parallel trends which evade singular description. The culture of such poetry extends beyond geo-political boundaries and there is a continuous exchange between different cultures as the poets themselves are uprooted from their native soil and based across the world writing in a language they do not own, drawing metaphors from cultures which are most often not their own in conventional sense of the term 'culture'. Most histories/critical anthologies of Indian poetry acting as "meta structural self descriptors", have ignored poets/poems which were considered 'non-culture', 'extrasytemic' or 'unpredictable'.

Contemporary Indian Poetry in English(CIPE) seems to have overcome the politics of language and no longer sees a need to give a reason for belonging(Hoskote,2002) but poses other challenges for the researcher. CIPE (or poetry after 1990) is in a state of continuous flux and evades unifying static descriptions. Major socio-cultural changes happened in India because of the economic liberalisation and globalisation processes 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(blogs, facebook, twitter etc.) . The language of internet, news and social media have become a part of the poetic text and everyday life the core.

The immanent culture of CIPE cannot be studied as individual texts. The processes of meaning generation in CIPE as a cultural text can be better studied using the cultural semiotics as a methodology. Such a framework would help us establish the semiosphere of CIPE. It would also help understand the gradual and explosive processes shaping it. It would also help relook at the history of evolution of Indian poetry in English taking into account the unpredictable elements and explosive elements and hitherto ignored ‘non-texts’ and the emergence of new texts as the tension between the core and periphery and boundary exchanges between different semiotic systems such as fine arts, technology, social media, fashion, global politics, e-commerce etc.

Such a study of the semiosphere (culture as semiosphere) of the CIPE as a single mechanism will help us get a better understanding of its various aspects. Instead of the Lotman’s illustration of ‘calf and steaks’ maybe we could see the present study in terms of a more palatable equivalent illustration given by Umberto Eco in the introduction to Lotman’s *‘Universe of the Mind’*:

“If we put together many branches and great quantity of leaves, we still cannot understand the forest. But if we know how to walk through the forest of culture with our eyes open, confidently following the numerous paths that criss-cross it, not only shall we be able to understand better the vastness and the complexity of the forest, but we shall also be able to discover the nature of the leaves and branches of every single tree.” (xiii)