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Editor-in-Chief

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www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

Semiotics: A Literary Genre Universal

Rajashree Pandiyan

Research Scholar

&

Dr. Palany Arangasamy

Professor of English,

Periyar Maniammai University,

Vallam, Thanjavur,

Tamil Nadu.

Abstract

Semiotic studies are distinctively attractive to whoever is interested in signs at large and the meaning it interprets. It is a very interesting science that allows a semiotician the liberty to consider any thing or any feeling as a sign and interpret it to convey an idea. When semiotic theories are applied to literature it helps a reader to understand the text, the writer, the socio-cultural background, characterization and arrive upon diverse interpretations. Literary semiotics (or semiotics in literature) has been a field of research for quite some time but it has concentrated more on the linguistic aspects. Semiotics in literature leads to an aesthetic pleasure. This paper also focuses on the historical background of semiotics and attempts to draw attention to it as a universal genre.

Keywords: semiotics, signs, symbols, structuralism, literary semiotics

Semiotics is a branch of communication and study of signs and symbols. Strictly speaking, this comes under non verbal communication. Some objects that are visual and non verbal may be used to communicate rightly or wrongly in a limited area as that of a green light indicating a positiveness and of a red light, a danger. A set of boulders put nocturnally on a major highway is indicative of a deliberate scheme of waywardly robbers to loot lorries and cargo movers. A white flag from the enemy soldiers is an indication of not only a plea for ceasefire but also an abject surrender. A purr from a cat, a growl of a wild beast and a long cry from a neonatal cow respectively indicating of inimicality, impending attack and a despondency to see her calf. But in various genres of literature such as prose, poetry and drama, any statement may be impregnated with an image or symbol or a cue to convey an idea not perceptible in a cursory reading. Understanding the allegorical or a sotto voce statement involves the efficiency or the comprehensive power of the reader.

Anything that is symbolical can be categorized under semiotics. Gestures, deliberate cough and gruff may be made symbolical to convey a news or information. Scholars have been interested in the role of signs for many centuries. In fact, the first definition of "sign" was given by ¹Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.E.), who treated it as a medical symptom (e.g., sore throat is a symptom of cold, knee pain is a symptom of arthritis). However, it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that semiotics

was developed as a separate field, thanks to the works of Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, and Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist. Semiotics has been the study of signs and sign behaviour in human society, ever since.

Even though the credit of categorizing semiotics as a discipline goes to European scholars, sporadic application of conveying the information by citing natural occurrences has already been there in Tamil literature. A poetic literature, 'Mukkoodar-Pallu' of the 18th Century, in one of its stanzas says the lightning that glares on the sky above the coastal Kerala and over the horizon of Eelam Island herald the onset of monsoon rains. The wind that sweeps and swirls goes around since yesterday and the frogs with coarse skin began crying. These are the symptoms of the rain that is to befall soon.

Symbolically indicating the natural occurrences such as silent heralding of news mostly in poetry has been there even in ancient Tamil literature but the credit of categorizing it as a separate generic element goes to the European scholars.

We may not realize but, semiotics can be applied to all sorts of human endeavours including cinema, theatre, literature, music, dance, art, history, politics, religion, and even to advertising. We knowingly or unknowingly display a variety of signs or gestures in order to convey a message. For a semiotician (one who practices semiotic analysis), a shirt, a haircut, a television image, anything at all, can be taken as a sign, as a message to be analyzed and to discover its meaning. Semiotics is the systematic study of these signs. Semiotics draws attention to the layers of meaning that lay hidden in a set of signs. For example the five interlocking rings on the Olympic flag or even a simple traffic signal convey a news or an instruction. 'Semiotics is a science that studies the role of signs as a part of social life' (Chandler p7)

The modern form of semiotics took shape in the late 19th and early 20th century because of two great thinkers, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), an American philosopher, and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1915), a Swiss linguist. Peirce first coined the term 'semiotics' and Saussure called his study as 'semiology'. Without knowing of each other's work, Peirce and Saussure established the fundamental principles of modern semiotics.

As Saussure said 'semiotics is the science of signs', this definition immediately raises the question, what are 'signs'? Signs are objects, images, symbols, words, gestures that are intentionally created and used to share information in human society. A simple example could be a red light in a traffic signal, which signifies 'stop'. A famous contemporary semiotician ²Umberto Eco defines signs as 'anything that stands for something else'. Saussure's semiology saw the role a sign played in social life, whereas in Peirce's semiotics the formal doctrine of signs was closely related to logic. Peirce also declared that, 'every thought is a sign...'

To understand the study of signs and its behaviour it is essential to know few terms that are associated with semiotics.

The application of semiotics to the interpretation of popular culture was pioneered in the 1950s by the French semiologist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) in a book entitled *Mythologies*. The basic principles of semiotics had already been explored by linguists and anthropologists, but Barthes took the matter to the heart of his own contemporary France, and analyzing the cultural significance of everything from professional wrestling to striptease, from toys to plastics. Christian Metz (1931-1993), Algirdas Greimas (1917-1992), Umberto Eco (b 1932) and Julia Kristeva (b 1941) are some of the other modern theorists of semiotics.

The rise of 'structuralism' (Signs behaving in structured patterns) as a way of studying signs gave way to many new further improvements in research. It is difficult to separate European semiotics from structuralism. Some of the major structuralists include not only Saussure but also Claude Lévi-Strauss (b 1908) in anthropology that saw his subjects as a branch of semiotics and Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) in psychoanalysis. However contemporary semiotics has moved further to explore the use of signs in specific social situations.

Semiotics has emerged nowadays as an important field of study. To understand its origin and history it is essential to know about the persons who have contributed largely to this subject. I would like to focus mainly on the pioneers Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure.

According to Saussure, semiology is 'the study of the role of signs as a part of social life. He studied the role that a sign plays in human communication. His ³'dyadic' model of a sign with both a signifier and the signified plays an important role and is considered to be a widely accepted model.

Saussure offers a simple model in which a sign is composed of a "signifier" (a form which a sign takes) and a 'signified' (the concept it represents). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as 'signification'. This model can be understood with a simple example. Let us consider a 'house full' board outside a cinema hall, which is the 'signifier' and it signifies that all the tickets are sold out. A sign must have a signifier and a signified. Each unique pairing interprets a unique meaning. For example an outline of a wine glass with a tall stem on a packing carton stands for 'fragile' which means the box contains fragile items, but the same sign in a bar would mean 'drinks'. Saussure declared that 'nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign'.

Saussure saw linguistics as a branch of semiology; he believed it to be only a branch of this general science. If one wants to discover the true nature of any language system, if he considers the rites, customs, rituals etc as signs, rather than only the linguistic aspects, Saussure believes that it will be possible to see them in a new perspective.

At around the same time when Saussure was formulating his 'dyadic' model of the sign, an American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce was also working on his 'triadic' model. This model consists of:

- The representamen : the form which the sign takes.
- An interpretant : not an interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign.
- An object : to which the sign refers.

The model could be understood with the help of a simple example. Within Peirce's model the red light in the traffic signal would consist of

- The representamen : a red light facing traffic at an intersection.
- An interpretant : the idea that a red light indicates vehicles to stop.
- An object : vehicles that stop

Though Peirce's contribution has been widely recognized and appreciated, his unfamiliar coinage of terms in semiotics has been an important factor in limiting the influence of a distinctively Peircian semiotics.

Scope of Semiotics:

The scope of semiotic studies is very broad. Among the objects of semiotic analysis are literary works, clothing, advertisements, music, architecture, urban planning, human-computer interaction, sports and games and law. All these objects are regarded as "texts." When people interpret these semiotic objects, they gain an access to the world and make it meaningful. They always try to capture the most immediate meanings; however, these meanings are presented in an indirect way. With the development of new information technologies, the line between the natural world taken for granted and the constructed world becomes more and more blurred. This could have certain advantages (e.g., the use of "virtual reality" for educational purposes) and possible disadvantages (e.g., increase of violence, especially among youths, due to the influence of mass media).

Semiotics is applied to the study of both the structural organization of texts ("structural semiotics") and the different social meanings these texts may generate ("social semiotics"). Thus, semiotics moves from language to all modes of representation employed in production and interpretation of texts. Semiotics can reveal the signifying practices behind ideology, power, and gender. Semiotics emphasizes the role of signs in the construction of reality and demonstrates how the "real world" can be challenged and changed. Ultimately, semiotics can help people to understand how they construct their identities, that is, make sense of them.

Semiotic studies are distinctively attractive to whoever is interested in signs at large and the meaning it interprets. It is a very interesting science that allows a semiotician the liberty to consider any thing or any feeling as a sign and interpret it to convey an idea. When semiotic theories are applied to literature it helps a reader to understand the text, the writer, the socio-cultural background, characterization and the

psychological impact it creates. Literary semiotics (or semiotics in literature) has been a field of research for quite some time but it has concentrated more on the linguistic aspects.

Literary semiotics is more than analyzing a text linguistically, it must include the aesthetic value of the verbal art and help the reader explore the “imaginary world” the author creates. This kind of an approach serves the purposes of aesthetic impact, enjoyment and a better understanding of the text. When Semiotics is applied to fiction it leads to a continuous quest for meaning. - ⁴Linda Rogers ‘I like to think of semiotics as the natural function of reading signs that exist in nature and are created by and for people. We see footprints in snow, the beginnings of spring, the raised eyebrow of a friend, and hear the tone in the voice of a loved one. We act within an interweaving of signs and symbol systems. When we examine them, we can know why and make choices.’ This is an interesting way of looking at literary semiotics.

Semiotics in literature leads to an aesthetic pleasure. Be in poetry, drama, and novel and even in short story semiotics plays a role in arousing the interest of readers, sometimes it demands the attention of readers to unearth the subtle or hidden meaning of a given statement. What is clearly explained cannot be symbolic. In dramas, irony is an oft-repeated device. Normally in a triple context of audience, an actor and a listener, what the actor speaks is partially understood by the listener but its double-meaning is understood only by the audience. This symbolic utterance can also be brought under semiotics. Other than this, a lot of meaning and significant utterances such as a tremor from the sky or on the earth, a lightning or thunder may be made by the dramatist to tacitly communicate a notable event in the course of the play.

Similar indirect indications to convey something significant occur in novels also. No novelist should occupy the role of a proponent to give a first- person narrative. A typical narrative for school going children may have been from the narrator but not so in a novel of wide spectrum or a broad coverage. A novelist must allow his characters to speak and act; allow a lot of episodes, incidents, incidents and occurrences to contribute to the wholesomeness of the novel. It is in these depictions figure the semiotic communications. The aim of this essay is to elicit what all that is found related to semiotic revelation. One way of understanding any fiction is not only to be aware of the story but also other inputs of really significant and literary value such as irony, in medias res, suspense including symbolic representation and semiotics.

Understanding fiction means much more than the retelling of the plot, the narration, the style or the characterization. The factual aspects are only a tip of the iceberg. To ‘read between the lines’ and continuously question the aesthetic relevance of the stretch of the text with respect to the author’s purpose and as a result try to give semiotic interpretations to the signs and symbols used by the author. Much depends on intuition, understanding of the text and its creator. Keeping this aim in mind any novel such as ‘Wuthering Heights’ of the 19th century by Emily Bronte or even a contemporary novel such as Ulysses by James Joyce may be studied as an appropriate piece of art. Both the author’s background and the novel’s setting allow immense scope

in a semiotician to analyze the signs and symbols used to narrate tales that remain evergreen in the readers' memory.

Footnote:

1. Hippocrates: Was an ancient Greek physician of the Age of Pericles (Classical Athens), and is considered one of the most outstanding figures in the history of medicine. He is referred to as the father of Western medicine
2. Eco, Umberto. A Theory of Semiotics. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press/London: Macmillan, 1976.
3. The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified (Saussure 1983, 67; Saussure 1974, 67).
4. Edited by François Victor Tochon, Marcel Danesi, and Linda Rogers. International Journal of Applied Semiotics.

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