



Violence in History: A Semiotic Perspective of Different Forms of Violence

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ABSTRACT

Semiotics is this field of knowledge which is capable of providing information about the manners of comprehending meanings, through the use of signs, words, images and gestures (Bajawa: 2022). This branch of knowledge not only encompasses linguistics and literature, but also includes other disciplinary knowledge systems, such as anthropology, psychology, and philosophy. Another way, semiotics is relevant through its use is, its application in cultural and literary analysis. It can be used to understand, how meaning is constructed and conveyed in the works of literature, film, and other art forms. Masses consume these art forms either through disparate mediums, like print and electronic media (Elam: 1990). This paper focuses on the idea that semiotic applications are incessantly creating and communicating meanings through advertisements, branding, and other forms of media. All governments and business corporates are effectively employing semiotic tools in order to create and control the new political opportunities and fresh or existing markets. However, the present paper aims at discussion of semes and signs, related to the idea of violence, in the framework of history, literature, and post-colonial India. Therefore, here different forms of violence have been discussed with reference to the ancient, middle, and modern times, including the prominent fiction of the West and 21st century Indian English novelists.

Keyword: Violence, Literature, Fiction, History, Indian English Novelists

Introduction

1.1. If someone feels astonished about the creation, communication and comprehension of meaning, then the one should look into the discipline of Semiotics. The reason is quite simple, because it is this field of knowledge, which is capable of providing information about the manners of comprehending meanings, through the use of signs, words, images and gestures (Bajawa: 2022). Another reason, which motivates to look forward to this area of knowledge is, it encompasses not only linguistics and literature, but also includes other disciplinary knowledge systems, such as anthropology, psychology, and philosophy. It may surprise some people that semiotic applications are incessantly creating and communicating meanings through advertisements, branding, and other forms of media. All governments and business corporates are effectively employing semiotic tools in order to create and control the new political opportunities and fresh or existing markets. In this context, the masses are left with the options of either becoming consumers or the victims of their products. In both cases, it is necessary for the people to be aware about the manners, means, and intentions behind the production of particular meanings.

1.2. Another way, semiotics is relevant through its use is, its application in cultural and literary analysis. It can be used to understand, how meaning is constructed and conveyed in the works of literature, film, and other art forms. Masses consume these art forms either through disparate mediums, like print and electronic media (Elam: 1990).

The consumption aims at enjoying the content for entertainment, information, or decision making. The effective communication of the meaning affects the decisions of the people (Metz: 1974). Therefore, it is not only important but significant also in connection to the social and cultural context that how and which signs and symbols are used to create and convey the desired messages. Specifically, semiotics can help masses to be more aware of the methods of constructing meaning in their day-to-day lives, so that they could not be the victims, in the hands of the callous or hostile governments and corporate houses.

1.3. It is relevant here to provide some basic information about the constituents of semiotics. In semiotics, the basic unit which conveys meaning, is known as seme. A seme is the smallest unit of meaning that can be differentiated within a sign (Chandler: 2002). A seme can be a single word, image or gesture among others. In combination with other semes, a seme forms a sign, which carries a signifier and its concept. For example, in the sentence, "That blue bus runs fast", "blue" and "fast" are two different semes, which collectively form a sign, "fast blue bus". In another expression, "a blue jean", the semes would be "blue" and "jean". In a gesture, the seme would be the movement of hand, head, body or facial expression happen to be the carriers of meaning (Urvashi: 2002). However, it is important note here that meaning of a seme is not intrinsic, rather it is assigned by the society and culture, where it is routinely used. However, the focus of the present paper is to identify semes and signs, related to the idea of violence, in the framework of history. Therefore, here different forms of violence have been explored with reference to the ancient, middle, and modern times. However, following reasons have compelled to undertake the discussion on the idea of 'violence' from the semiotic perspective.

2. Violence:

2.1. The idea of 'violence' often indicates the attitudes and beliefs of a society. Therefore, the discussion on its representation in culture and literature sheds light on the norms of a particular society at different times. Calvet's argument is that violence happens in society, therefore, it is a kind of 'cultural construct', shaped by its forces such as, social, economic, and political (*The Culture of Violence*: 1993). Thus, cognizance about violence helps to comprehend power dynamics. In plain terms, the understanding can prove to be a tool to understand systemic inequalities and reveal the reasons behind oppressions and dominance. The other reason for the consideration for the discussion on the topic is that it raises critical questions about morality and ethics. These questions are often related to the justification of using violence by an individuals or state or agencies or groups. These papers and related works can provide space to explore these questions and challenge conventional systems of thinking. Nancy Armstrong's analysis on the idea suggests that there is an intertwined relations between violence and representations. Due to this reason, violence is found to be represented in the works of art, literature, films, and other forms of cultural production. These representations about violence reflect reality and give shape to our understanding and role in a particular social group (*The Violence of Representation*: 1989). The indication is that the execution of violence can have profound and everlasting effects on individuals or societies. Thus, an analysis of representation, by means of violence, can provide an insight on the psychological and emotional impacts on people. However, it is important to apprise readers about the signification of the term, violence from the standpoint of semiotics.

2.2. In this paper, an attempt has been made to identify different signs related to the concept of violence in the ancient, middle, and modern time periods. However, it is also important to discuss the manners, which transform the smallest units of meaning in a language or text into signs, which ultimately become recognizable symbols or representations of those meanings (Chandler: 2002). In the case of violence, semes like harm, aggression, brutality, can be transformed into signs through the use of language, imagery, or other representational communicative forms. For instance, in a text describing a violent event with words, such as 'attack', 'injure', and 'kill' may serve as signs for the semes of violence, discussed earlier in this paper. In the same manner, visual imagery such as weapons or illustrations can also serve as signs for the semes of violence. Moreover, nonverbal cues such as tone of the speech and body language can also be the signs for the semes of violence (Elam: 1990). Now, the readers would decide that what would they grasp and how would they react to the signs being presented before them, in connection to violence, in contemporary times.

2.3. A number of semantic elements in the form of semes, like physical force, aggression, destruction, and injury can be associated with violence. However, intimidation, vengeance, and group can also be contextualized as the semes, related to manage violence (Fanon 1993). For instance, the use of physical force involves hitting, punching, unleashing weapons, so that others could be harmed. Aggression indicates intentions to cause harm with verbal or nonverbal forms, like shouting, threatening, or intimidating conduct. Destruction includes the demolition of property and physical things, like buildings. Violence, related to injury and death, can have consequences of injuring and killing the victims (Fanon: 1993).

3. Forms of Violence in History:

3.1. In the history of mankind, violence has been used as means of wielding power and control over others in domestic and social contexts. In this form, the means of violence compel the victims to realize that they are vulnerable and powerless (Arendt: 1970). Weaponry, threats and groups (gangs) as means of violence add ferocity, which can make it more destructive and difficult to prevent. Response to this violence, sometimes happens to be vengeance i.e. motivation or feeling of revenge or retribution. In such reactions, intentions to cause harm others do not play an active role, rather these responses are intended to bring the balance in the society. It should be remembered that violence is not limited to these senses as it can acquire many a different forms. For instance, unnecessarily infringing the rights of the junior colleagues, in order to prove one's superiority over others is also a form of violence. Therefore, in this context, it is important to comprehend that violence can shape the way in which it is perceived and understood.

3.2. Instances of different forms of violence in ancient history include warfare, genocide, human sacrifice, slavery and acts of terror and intimidation by ruling powers, for example, the Conquest of Canaan in 15th century BCE. Here, Israelites, in the command of Joshua, conquered the land of Canaan and committed acts of genocide against the Canaanite people. Moreover, the Roman Republic and Empire in 509 BCE-476 CE, were popular for their practice of slavery, crucifixion, and mass execution as forms of retribution (Adrian: 2000). Additionally, the Aztec Empire, from 14th to 16th century CE, practiced human sacrifices on a large scale. Here, war-prisoners and members of the conquered tribes were sacrificed to their gods (Clendinnen: 1995). In the ancient history, the senses related to violence, can be marked as, warfare, genocide, human sacrifices, slavery, terror, and intimidation. The main intention behind these different forms of violence was to gain the control over other social clans and to establish the dominance of the particular social group, over these tribes.

3.3. Cases of violence, during middle ages, include, the Crusaders (1096-1291 CE) from Western Europe who committed acts of terror and violence against Muslims, Jews, and the Orthodox Christians. The violence was justified in their quest to reclaim the Holy Land of their ancestral gods (Drell: 2018). The Spanish Conquest of the Americas from 15th to 16th century CE is an unforgettable event. Here, the Spanish conquistadors, in the leadership of Hernan Cortes and Francisco Pizarro committed acts of genocide and enslavement against the indigenous folks of the Americas (Rubin: 2011).

3.4. The 20th century too has witnessed different forms of violence in the events, such as the Holocaust (1933-1945 CE), the Cambodian Genocide (1975-1979), and Rwandan Genocide (1994). The Holocaust refers to the Nazi regime in Germany, where acts of genocide were carried out against Jews, Romani, homosexuals, and other minorities during the World War II (Martha: 1988). The Cambodian Genocide is an example of extreme brutality. The Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia committed acts of genocide and mass murder against their own people. It is estimated that the genocide obliterated 1.5 – 2.0 people from the total population. In the similar fashion, members of the Hutu majority in Rwanda, mass-murdered approximately, 80000 Tutsi and liberal Hutu in just hundred days (Hedges: 2002).

4. Forms of Violence in 20th Century India:

4.1. In the 20th century, different forms, like communal, state, internal armed conflict, and caste-based violence, both internal and external, can be marked in India. The most significant amongst these form of violence is, the Partition of India, in 1947. The partition resulted in the creation of Pakistan and the mass migration of Lakhs of people across the freshly formed border. The event led to mass-scale violence including, rapes, massacres, and the forced religious conversions. According to an estimate, 2 to 20 Lakhs people were killed in the violence (Jalal: 1985). Another major form of violence in 20th century India was, state violence, unleashed by the then British colonial rulers, on the land of Punjab, at Jalliah Wala Bagh, Amritsar. The British government exploited a number of tactics to control the freedom struggle in India and used army forces to brutally suppress the political dissention (Chatterjee: 1996). The Amritsar massacre in 1919, was an exclusive example of brutal murdering of the thousands of unarmed Indian civilians. This is the well-known example of state - violence, during this period.

4.2. Apart from the state and partition violence, Indian people have also experienced a significant number of genocidal violence during the 20th century. In a genocide, people (generally minorities) belonging to one particular religion or faith or ethnicity are brutally murdered in the name of vengeance. However, the state agencies often seem to identify a genocide as a communal riot, just to mislead or justify the act (Phoolka: 2007). It should be marked that a communal violence refers to the violence between groups, belonging to disparate religions or ethnicities. And in a genocide, the victims are massacred, when the victims do not happen to be in a position to protect themselves from the violators and their sponsors. An exact example of this kind of violence is, the 1984 genocide of the people, belonging to the community of Sikhs (Phoolka: 2007). Thousands of Sikhs were brutally murdered, in retaliation for the assassination of the then Prime Minister,

Indira Gandhi (Jaskaran Kaur: 2018). In case of the 'internal armed conflicts', during the 20th century, different separatist movements of the armed groups prevailed in Indian territories. The justification of such violence was glamourized as, seeking independence or autonomy. The ongoing conflicts in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, since 1940, has witnessed lakhs of deaths in the region (Noorani: 2011). Similarly, the Maoist insurgency, in central India, also known as the Naxalite movement, since 1960, has resulted in countless deaths.

4.3. Indian people have also experienced violence in the form of caste-based discrimination and violence. The system of caste refers to a social hierarchy based on birth. This system of cast structures has been the feature of Indian society, since the times immemorial. In the system of a cast structure, the structures of higher and lower hierarchies are created and conflicts between them gets created to achieve their own interests, like food, shelter, clothing, health, riches, and political powers (Omvedt: 2006). The clash of the interests results in discrimination and violence, in the form of lynchings, mob violence, and forced evictions. In India, people belonging to the lower order hierarchies are generally known as 'Dalits and formerly, they were called 'untouchables. These forms of violence have resulted in a great loss of life and had a profound impact on Indian society and politics (Srinivas: 2002).

5. Forms of Violence in Twenty First Century Fiction:

5.1. The 21st century fiction, through imagination and reality, has explored a wide range of different forms of violence. For instance, the novel, *Gone Girl* is a thriller that focuses on the **psychological abuse** and manipulation in wrong gone marriage. In this non-physical form of violence, Flynn (2012) portrays psychological violence as a subtle and insidious form of abuse that can be just as damaging as physical violence. The novel follows the story of a married couple, Nick and Amy Dunne, who are painfully trying to dwell in their tumultuous and unhappy marriage. Amy has been portrayed as a victim of psychological violence, as her husband, Nick gradually manipulates and gaslights her over the course of their relationship. One of the most prominent ways that Flynn portrays psychological violence in the novel is through the use of non-credible narrators. Throughout the book, both Nick and Amy take turns telling their own versions of events, with each narrator's perspective being shaped by their own biases and experiences. This narrative structure highlights the ways in which psychological violence can lead to confusion, distorted perceptions, and a lack of trust. Flynn also explores the theme of psychological violence through the power dynamics in the relationship between Nick and Amy. Nick is depicted as the dominant partner, who gradually erodes Amy's sense of self-worth and self-esteem through his manipulation, gaslighting, and emotional abuse. Meanwhile, Amy is depicted as being trapped in the relationship, struggling to assert her own voice and maintain her independence.

5.2. The novel, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, explores political violence. The novel reveals that the road to survival leads to catastrophic events that have leapt the people into darkness and violence. Throughout the novel, the protagonist and his son are forced to confront the harsh realities of a world that has been ravaged by violence and destruction. They are constantly on the move, facing danger at every turn, as they try to find their way to safety and avoid falling victim to the violence that surrounds them. McCarthy also describes political violence in the novel is through the portrayal of the depravity and savagery of the other survivors. The protagonist encounters other people who are willing to resort to violence and brutality in order to secure food and other resources, and this serves as a powerful representation of the political violence that has brought the world to its current state (*The Road*: 2006).

5.3. Emma Donoghue's novel, *Room* (2010) explores sexual violence through the story of a young woman, Ma. The woman is held captive along with her young son Jack, in a small room. The captor of Ma, 'Old Nick' exploits sexual violence as a tool to traumatise and oppress her. In this manner, the violence turns out to be the means of upholding complete power and control over Ma. Despite the horrific circumstances of her captivity, Ma remains resilient and resourceful, demonstrating the strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Through her story, the novel raises important questions about the treatment of survivors of sexual violence and the need for compassion and support in their healing journeys.

5.4. The novel, *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis throws light on the violent tendencies of a wealth investor and banker, Patrick Bateman. This wealthy banker also happens to be violent and sadistic serial killer. Therefore, this novel turns out to be a critique of the cultural facts of a social group. In this manner, physical form of violence gets manifested in extreme brutality and distorted values, in 1980 Wall Street Culture. The novel is set in the high-stakes world of 1980s Wall Street, and through its portrayal of Bateman and the other characters. Bateman is depicted as a deeply disturbed individual who is driven by his own distorted desires and obsessions. The violence he commits is presented as a manifestation of his deep-seated psychological issues, and the novel raises important questions about the nature of violence and its root causes. By

highlighting the ways in which the pressures of this world can drive individuals to act out in violent ways, the novel raises important questions about the relationship between violence and society. Thus, *American Psycho* portrays physical violence as a reflection of the cultural and societal factors that drive individuals to act in violent ways.

6. Forms of Violence in 21st Century Indian English Fiction:

6.1. Indian English fiction is an effective tool which helps to explore the complexities of violence in contemporary Indian society, along the ways in which it affects the ordinary folks. For example, Arundhati Roy's novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reveals the issues related to political violence, including violence committed by the state and different political parties. This type of violence includes police brutality, extrajudicial killings, and human rights violations. The novel explores the impact of political violence on ordinary people, including the violence committed by the state with reference to the conflicts in Kashmir.

6.2. The novel, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (1997) focuses on domestic violence. The novel portrays the violence faced by women within families, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and the ways in which patriarchal attitudes contribute to such violence. The novel is set in Kerala and portrays different forms of violence. The novel focuses on the story of the twins, Rahel, Estha and their family, taking the backdrop of a highly caste-conscious Indian society into consideration. In this context, caste plays a key role in the determination of an individual's social status and the treatment, it would receive from the other members of the society. The novel reveals that the caste system and the stern social norms consequence into sexual and other forms of violence. The character of Ammu, the mother of the twins, is subjected to violence due to her desire for love and freedom, and her tragic fate illustrates the price that women pay for going against social norms.

6.3. Rohinton Mistry's Novel, *Such a Long Journey* explores different forms of violence, chiefly during the period of *Emergency*, when the Indian government suspended civil liberties to suppress political opposition. involving communal riots and sectarian clashes between different religious communities, residing in India. The novel throws light on the impact of these kinds of violence on common masses, by exposing the manners and means of escalating religious tensions into brutal violence. The protagonist of the novel, Gustad Nobel, a middle-class Parsi, living in Mumbai, is an honest and hardworking bank employee. He makes efforts to maintain his integrity in the environment of bribery and violence, however, deceit and corruption posit a violent threat to his family and other members of community. Thus, the novel displays the violence, political repression, communal conflict, religious extremism. Gustad's family struggles to make ends meet, and he is constantly worried about providing for his family. The violence of poverty is further amplified by the corrupt banking system, which often exploits the poor and vulnerable.

Rohinton Mistry's novel, *Family Matters* (2002) is about the exploration of different forms of violence, existing in the Indian social structures, including physical, psychological, emotional, and societal ones. The plot of the novel reveals that a family resides in Bombay and its members experience violence, happening with in their home and outside. The protagonist of the novel, Nariman Vakeel is an aging person, suffering from Parkinson disease, making him dependent on his foster children, leading to emotional and psychological violence. The novel also exposes the violence, originating due to poverty and social inequalities. Nariman's stepchildren, Coomy and Jal, while residing in a small cramped room, struggle to earn their food. The context generates a kind of desperation and depression, resulting in emotional and psychological violence. The female characters in the novel, including the wives of Coomy and Jal, are laid open to the patriarchal patterns Indian society, which limit their chances and liberties. This leads to emotional and psychological violence within the family, as well as social violence in the broader society.

6.4. Exposing caste-based violence, in Hindol Sengupta's novel, *An Unquiet Land*, is the primary focus of the work. The novel also focuses on the themes such as, discrimination and violence faced by the persons, belonging the lower cast orders, also known as *Dalits*. The novel exposes the manners in which caste-based violence affects the lives of ordinary folks. The exposition is, that cast-based societal systems perpetuate such kinds of violence. In the novel, caste-based violence has been examined through the experiences of characters who belong to different castes and are impacted by the violence, including discriminations, inequalities emerging from the caste systems in India. In this context, this is a systemic form of violence which perpetuates oppressions of the lower caste people. These lower caste folks are ill-treated through physical violence, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. In response to these exploitations and violences, these lower caste people are compelled to uphold resistance to fight against the caste system and the violence, perpetuated by the social structures. In this context, Sengupta portrays the complexities of caste-based violence and the ways in which it affects ordinary people, as well as the ongoing struggle for justice and equality in contemporary India.

6.5. The forms of violence, such as the violence of state repression and its impact on innocent people, have been explored in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Lowland* (2013). This novel is set in West Bengal from 1960 to 1970, portraying political violence, through state repression and politicized conflicts. The novel narrates the tale of two brothers, Udayan and Subhash whose lives get affected due to the political unrest of that period. The personal relations of these two brothers undergo severe violence, which sever their relations due to politically staged conflicts. In the same fashion, Salman Rushdie's novel, *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) is set in Kashmir, and explores the violence of religious and political extremism. The novel portrays the complex nature of the conflict in Kashmir, where different communities are pitted against each other. Rushdie's novel depicts how people's lives are destroyed by the violence of terrorism and extremism. The protagonist of the novel, titular clown, falls victim to the Kashmir conflict and his innocent life gets destroyed. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2005) is set in the Darjeeling district of India, and it deals with the violence, originating due to political unrest and insurgency in the north-eastern regions of India. The novel portrays the affected lives, identities, and relations of people due to political upheavals and insurrections. The novel illustrates how political violence can tear apart the fabric of a society, and how it can destroy the lives of ordinary people. The portrayal of young girl's character, Sai exposes that even the growing up in an affluent heritage does not allow a person to pick a life partner from the lower strata of society. Sai's love affair with the Nepali boy, Gyan, who is working as a cook in her house, undergoes severe criticism, only to reveal the violence taking place due to economic inequalities and class differences.

7. Deductions:

7.1 The detailed discussion on the idea of violence, in relation to the historical, cultural, and literary contexts, indicates that its different forms, such as war, genocide, slavery, domestics, brutality etc. have been a prominent part of the social structures. For instance, throughout the Western history, various forms, like police atrocities, domestic violence, slavery, genocide, and war were prevalent in different periods. These forms of violence were normalized, rationalized, and justified through the religious, cultural, and political beliefs, leading to age-old traditions of violence. The semes related to violence in Western history have been used to emphasize power relations, assert dominance, and maintain social order.

7.2. In post-independent India, various forms of violence, such as communal riots, caste-based violence, state-sponsored violence, and gender-based violence have been identified. These forms violence have been deeply rooted in India's social, political, and economic structures. Their deep penetration into these cultural institutions of Indian society has resulted into widespread discrimination, inequality, and injustice. The semes related to violence during this period have been exploited to perpetuate social hierarchies, reinforce gender inequalities, and maintain political dominance.

7.3. In the Western literature, violence has been a recurring theme from Greek tragedies to contemporary fiction. In the literature, violence has been used to explore the darkest dimensions of human nature. The exploration revealed that the consequences of the violence were lust for power, insanity to oppress, struggle for justice, and redemption. The semes related to violence in Western literature have been used to evoke emotions, create tension, and convey moral messages.

7.4. In recent years, Indian English literature has been marked by an increasing use of violence as a narrative device. Many contemporary Indian English novels deal with issues such as terrorism, communal violence, caste-based violence, and gender-based violence. These novels explore the complex social and political realities of contemporary India, and the semes related to violence are used to challenge dominant narratives, critique social structures, and offer alternative visions of the future.

7.5. In conclusion, violence has been a prominent feature of Western history, post-independent India, Western literature, and contemporary Indian English novels. The semes related to violence have been used in different ways to reflect the social, cultural, and political contexts of these different periods and places. However, it is important to note that violence is not an inevitable or necessary part of human existence, and that there are alternative ways of dealing with conflicts and achieving justice.

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