Social Semiotic Analysis of the Language of Discrimination in Fiction

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Attempts at description are stupid: who can all at once describe a human being? Even he is presented to us, we only begin that knowledge of his appearance which must be completed by innumerable circumstances. We reorganize the alphabet; we are not sure of language.

George Eliot

Lead In:

Literature, being a semiotic mode of representation, seems to be a linguistic codification of various socio-cultural and socio-political actions and interactions. It is interesting to revisit the manner in which creative writers 'use' signs to represent classified units of a particular community and construct a 'symbolic community' in his/her fiction. Since every community is different, the signs used by one social/cultural community are likely to vary across communities. A good comparison would show how individual creativity chooses signs from the changing social circumstances and new social identities to design and locate real social stratification into a textual one. The paper attempts to take a close at how social semiotics helps us in negotiating the social dimensions of meaning, and of the power of human processes of signification and interpretation (known as semiosis) in shaping individuals and societies.

Social stratification refers to the "hierarchical ranking of person into groups based on shared socio-economic" (in West) and socio-cultural (in countries like India) "conditions". It is to "rank some individuals and groups as more deserving than others; from this a social hierarchy is formed which is a set of ranked statuses from highest to lowest…" which also includes "a condition of social inequalities in which people have unequal access to *wealth, power* and *prestige*; and social differentiation is a process in which people are set apart from different treatment by virtue of their statuses, roles, and other social characteristics" This paper makes an attempt to analyze and compare various socio-literary symbols (language) of social stratification: class, caste, status and power by looking at the dimensions of text, genre, discourse and/or metaphors and analogy.

We would try to understand, signs depicting racist, class-conscious and caste-based stratification respectively in *To Kill a Mockingbird, Emma,* and *Untouchable.* Therefore, this paper aims at studying social images, behaviours, settings, designs with special reference to how *signs* interact and the way in which these may be/are connected to organize our societies as they are today. The attempt made here is to look through literature rather than at.

II

Theoretical Framework

Social semiotics is a branch of the field of semiotics studying human signifying behaviour in specific social and cultural space and time, and which also attempts to elucidate the very construction of 'meaning' as a social-collective practice. That is how by and large "social semiotics can include the study of how people design and interpret meanings, the study of texts, and the study of how semiotic systems are shaped by social interests and ideologies, and how they are adapted as society changes" (Hodge and Kress: 1988).

Subsequently it ushers "social meaning-making practices of all types, whether visual, verbal or aural in nature" (Thibault: 1991). The paper takes up semiotic model to understand/compare the very idea of social stratifications and how language becomes instrumental in manipulating this into the vicious circles of division and discrimination with respect to the texts mentioned above. In this respect, social semiotics was influenced by, and shares many of the preoccupations of pragmatics and sociolinguistics and has much in common with cultural studies and critical discourse analysis.

First, we need to realize that a sign is primarily a stimulus outline consisting of meaning, though not all the time. The difference between the various kinds of sign has to do with how the meaning is related to the very framework of this stimulus.

The term sign is generally classified as: icons, indices and symbols. Icons have a physical similarity between the signal and the meaning and an index has a correlation in space and time with its meaning, but a symbol is an arbitrary pattern (usually a sound pattern in a language) that gets its meaning primarily from its mental association with other symbols and only secondarily from its correlation with environmentally relevant properties.

II

Comparing Socio-Literary Symbols of Social Stratification

While exploring socio-literary symbols we need to look at two categories; social codes/signs because in a broader sense all semiotic codes are 'social code' and representational codes.

(a) Social Codes:

1. verbal language (phonological, syntactical, lexical, prosodic and paralinguistic sub-codes) as language differs from one social strata/community to another;
2. bodily codes (bodily contact, proximity, physical orientation, appearance, facial expression, gaze, head nods, gesture, posture);
3. community codes (roles, clothing);
4. behavioural codes (protocols, rituals),

(b) **Representational Codes**: especially textual codes wherein language and social make up of 'signs' can be understood with reference to

1. aesthetic code (as now we have various versions of 'Aesthetics' of Dalits or Blacks)
2. genre, rhetorical and stylistic codes; narrative.[2]

Icons/iconic of Caste, Class and Race:

By icons/iconic of caste, class and race refers to a mode/channel in which the signifier of any of these three categories is perceived as similar to or imitating the signified, noticeably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it, being similar in possessing some of its qualities: a portrait, onomatopoeia, metaphors, gestures for instance. When read *Untouchable* we find many such verbal caste icons denoting their location in the society first physical followed by mental through which we construct the picture of a particular caste. For example, the exposition of the novel documents:

> The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate, from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer-men, the barber, the water carrier, the grass-cutters and other outcastes form Hindu society…and altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in. (Untouchable, 1)

The same is the case with *Emma* wherein we find the possession and names of the houses according to the class-hierarchy that the characters, so the society of the time, practice. The Woodhouses with Hartfield, Mr Knightly with Donwell Abbey, the Westons with Randalls. Of lesser importance are other homes such as the Elton's vicarage, the Martins' farm, the Bates' modest rooms, and so forth. Further, in *To Kill a Mockingbird* blacks, being farm labourers remain/are kept aloof from the Maycomb society.

These iconic signifiers seems to be highly evocative due to the nouns and adjectives used to describe caste (scavenger, a sweeper-boy, babus, Shaib, Maharaj, Sarkar, Sir, Your Honour), class (in *Emma* words like rank, order, degree and condition were often used in preference to the word class) and race (in *To Kill a Mockingbird* Folks, Nigger, Negroish, Blackies). There are reasons for calling this words icon, for as Kent Grayson observes, "because we can see the object in the sign, we are often left with a sense that the icon has brought us closer to the truth than if we had instead seen an index or a symbol" (Grayson: 1998) He adds:

> Instead of drawing our attention to the gaps that always exist in representation, iconic experiences encourage us subconsciously to fill in these gaps and then to believe that there were no gaps in the first place. This is the paradox of representation: it may deceive most when we think it works best (36).

Whether a sign is iconic, indexical or symbolic depends primarily on the way in which the sign is used. The same signifier may be used ironically in one context and symbolically in another: a photograph of a woman may stand for some broad category such as 'women' or may more specifically represent only the particular woman, Dalit Woman, Black Woman for instance, who is depicted. Signs cannot be classified in terms of the three modes without reference to the purposes of their users within particular contexts.

Index/indexical of Social Stratification:

In Latin, index really meant the *index finger*. It is a mode of understanding sign in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is *directly connected* in some way (physically or causally) to the signified.

An 'index' denoting to the social differentiation is defined by some *sensory feature* and is an indication of social identity. For example A**,** (something directly visible, audible, smellable, etc) that is associated with and thus implies or suggests B*,* something that can be perceived and understood by an animal.

For instance, when untouchables are described by White British officer as, "Dirty-black untouchables…nigger servants…blackies"(*Untouchable*, 112,113). The narrator introduces Emma to us by emphasizing her good fortune: "handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition" (*Emma*, 23) Even during the beginning of the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, everything was a lie. "Mr. Ewell's face grew scarlet. He stood up and pointed his finger at Tom Robinson "I've seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayell" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 96). Lee uses the word scarlet to show that Mr. Ewell was feeling angry at Atticus for contradicting him, yet was feeling guilty for telling a lie. Following his false accusation, Mr. Ewell exploded towards Tom and Atticus to reinforce his false statement. This gesture of accusing Tom Robinson hits our senses, which is why these signs become important because they directly point to their meaning.

Iconic and indexical signs are more likely to be read as 'natural' than symbolic signs when making the connection between signifier and signified has become habitual.

Symbol/symbolic of Social Stratification:

Symbols are modes in which the signifier does *not* necessarily resemble the signified but which is basically *arbitrary* or simply conventional so that the relationship is to be learnt, language in general, for instance. Symbols used for social stratification are very much culture specific that is why subject to common agreement that a community holds collectively. "…from Brahmin's white to the grass-cutter's coffee and the Pathan's swarthy brown"(*Untouchable*, 35) Here, Mulk Raj Anand has tried to symbolize colours with castes which is by and large synaesthetic effect generated by these signs. "*Posh, posh,* sweeper coming, the undertone, 'Untouchable, Untouchable was in his heart" (Ibid, 44) These word-associates are critical for anchoring the meaning of a word without requiring any correlation in space and time between the signal (the sound of the word) and its meaning. That is how it needs a culture/community specific interpretation, so *Posh, posh* can be considered a warning call. Further in *To Kill a Mockingbird* Mr. Gilmer believes that Tom must be lying, must be violent, and must lust after white women, simply because he is black.

Here, black is substituted by crime. We need to discuss the mobility of the various strata of a given society and the symbols used for it. For example in *Emma*, in a class conscious society, a limited degree of class mobility had always been possible in English society. The great agents of mobility were money and marriage, very often in combination; and *Emma* offers us some case-studies in upward

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mobility of various kinds. The Coles, for instance, who give a dinner-party in Chaper-26, represent the type of *neo-riches* who were to become much more common in Victorian middle class society. The similar is not possible in the Caste based society nor in racism practicing society wherein rigidity so profound. We learn that they are 'of low origin' and 'only moderately genteel' (*Emma*, 113), but as a result of being engaged 'in trade' they have, like Mr Weston, prospered and have begun to change their style of living; having lived quietly during their early years in Highbury.

Semioticians generally maintain that there are no 'pure' icons - there is always an element of cultural convention involved. Thus what becomes interesting is the purpose/s of the language that writers use for the social stratification. By that an attempt has been made to look at the density of the various problematic issues that occur in the discourse of discrimination and resistance simultaneously. As Kent Grayson puts it, "when we speak of an icon, an index or a symbol, we are not referring to objective qualities of the sign itself, but to a viewer's experience of the sign" (Grayson: 1998). Tracing from reader response theories, I have tried to see the reader's experience of these signs and how they describe and define, so to say, categorical *identities.*

No	Levels	Class	Caste	Race
**Social Semiotic Classification of 'Sign' of Social Stratification**					
1	Icon	Higher classes	Scavenger, Sweeper	Negro
2	Index	Condition	Untouchable	Blacks-White
3	Symbol/Symbolic	Rank, Order, Degree	Shaib, Maharaj, Sarkar, Dog, Swine	Folks-Nigger

Untouchable seems to an example **castist** i.e., socio-religious-economic-political discrimination at all levels of Indian society. Writing under the Gandhian influence, Mulk Raj Anand depicts the story of Bakha, a young boy of eighteen in *Untouchable*. The narrative does not have a traditional plot but dwells upon a day's life account of Bakha-an untouchable. Putting words in Bakha's mouth, Anand describes the predicaments of untouchables in India:

> We are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung, I hate it too. That's why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrine every day. That's why they don't touch us, the high-castes. The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep telling me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Muhmmadan. They don't mind touching us, the Muhmmadans and the Sahibs. It is only the Hindus, and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper-untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an untouchable! (*Untouchable,* 43)

Time and again, he gets humiliated by highcastes they have been excluded to entertain minimum social, economic, religious or even humanitarian prestige.

Racist i.e., socio-economical-political discrimination appears everywhere in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example; Tom Robinson lost his case and got sentenced to life in prison, because he was black. The jury was very biased on this matter and so the result was inevitable. There are incidents in the novels making discrimination manifest for example, when Calpurnia enters into church, she changes her language and speaks in a "coloured" dialect rather than a proper language that she uses in Atticus's household. Curiously Jem asks her the reason behind such alteration, and she explicates that the churchgoers might think she was "putting" on airs fit to beat Moses" if she spoke "white" (language of the Whites) in church. This speech reveals the gulf between blacks and whites in Maycomb society. Not only do class distinctions and prejudice divide the two races, but language does as well.

Emma represents purely socio-economic discrimination which is very much visible in the Victorian English society. Society of Highbury correspondence with Emma's Class and the social levels immediately above and below it. She does not show us the aristocracy (the Churchills, who are great landowners) or the labouring. Apart from a few servants who make only fleeting appearances, all the characters in the novel belong to the middle class-not in itself of course a single class but one involving many levels and discriminations, and including such varieties of occupation, income and status as professional men, landowners and tenant farmers. Even within these three groups there are further discriminations: among the professional men, for instance, John Knightly is a London lawyer who is evidently successful and prosperous, Mr. Perry a small town-physician, and Mr Elton a clergyman, while the bates, who are pathetically poor, owe their social status to the fact that Mrs. Bates is the widow of a former clergyman.

We can divide the characters of the novel into two groups: those whose social status is fixed, and those who are at least potentially mobile. In the first group, for example, Mr Woodhouse and Mr Knightly, and on a lower level such families as the Bates and Martins. In the second group are Harriet Smith, Jane Fairfax and Augusta Hawkins-Mrs Elton. The marriage becomes instrumental in changing socio-economic status, as Emma tells her friend that "she herself has none of the usual inducements of women to marry" (*Emma, 99*) that is, the desire for social position and economic security.

The power politics is exercised paradigmatically in all these systems of social

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stratification/differentiation and writers employ a peculiar language-sign pattern-which becomes a kind of verbal stimulus to which we being part of any of these stratification provide response. Moreover, binaries of stratifications: rich/poor, white/black, savarnas/untouchables lead to sympathetic discourse, making division, distribution and especially discrimination is made more and more visible and intelligible. Enumerating these levels of discrimination in an order from top to bottom, we may say that worst is the Race discrimination because one can easily hide one's caste and class identity (physicality of it) whereas it is not the same with hiding one's racial makeup due to biological appearance. Next in line is Caste discrimination as it is directly associated with one's profession and mobility from one caste is not possible. Last is the class-based stratification, here discrimination does not suit well because the issues of social prestige do not reach up the level of discrimination. Discrimination becomes more visible when words connoting to discrimination are used as *adjectives*.

Lead Out:

Social stratification based on class, caste or race has some kind of capitalist notion governing behind in, for hierarchy is decided by taking into account 'power structure' which is earned-gained by an economic higher-lower status. Now, when a writer indulges into this whole idea of depicting people and positions they have, he/she tires to voice his/her *parole* from the available *langue* which is, by all means, social construct. Hence, writers appropriate the language and dwells upon the capitalist, so political, *semiosis* to understand distribution (of wealth, so to say), division (into various strata), and consequently discrimination.

Endnotes:

1. E. Wilma van der Veen

   http://stmarys.ca~evanderveen/wvdv/class_relations/social_stratification.htm

2. Chandler, Daniel *Semiotics for Beginners*

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5. Lee, Harper, *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Grand Central Publishing, London, 1960. Print

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