

UMBERTO ECO'S NOTION OF SEMANTIC PLURALITY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF TEXTS

MUDASIR RAHMAN NAJAR

Research scholar:

Email: mudasirmail92@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Though, there has been a traditional way of interpreting a text in a single format in view of author's biographical tendencies, the shift has occurred in multiple ways. In this paper, the plurality of interpretation is argued a very significant aspect in the contemporary times in view of the literary leanings of Umberto Eco for the discovery of various other levels of comprehension and the interpretations thereof. There is no denial of the notion that interpretation vary as the exchange of linguistic and semantic understanding of reader with the concerned author varies. Since, Eco's literary tendency shown greater affinity towards some of the deconstructive characteristics, he has the literary vision for the exploration and extension of textual world with regard to the world of interpretation, meanings and knowledge. Eco emphasises a sort of systematic inference that plays as the main key to the scientific characteristics of his novels in the interpretation and understanding of any literary texts. Further, the nature of parody is heavily loaded with the tendency of extending the possibilities of interpretation beyond the traditional way of approaching the text. No doubt, this extension of interpretation is always at the risk of mis-readings, but it has to be justified on the linguistic, semantic and philosophic grounds. That may lead them to a comparatively valid interpretation of any literary text and would obviously opens the new way understanding any social, political, cultural, intellectual aspect of any text.

KEYWORDS: *Language, Literary texts, Interpretation, Meanings, Plurality*

UMBERTO ECO was born in Piedmont, Italy, in 1932, and studied philosophy at the University of Turin. He is the author of over a dozen books on semiotics, literary theory, and cultural criticism as well as the best-selling novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) and, most recently, *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989). Eco's ambition to pursue truths traces back to his other career as a distinguished professor of semiotics, and his practice to analyze the semantic development across the varied structures of language. He also claims for the plurality of meanings but under the set format of interpretations. There, as per his studies, are different modes of interpreting a particular text that leads to the numerous meanings beyond the genuine level of interpretations. Meanings are hidden everywhere, they argue — a view not far from that of the conspiracy theorist. Which is not to equate scholars with cranks. Only to note that

Eco is professionally attuned to clandestine meanings, and to the risk of overinterpretation. Umberto Eco is a voracious writer and has the potential to cope with the contemporary issues in terms of fact and fiction; reality and imaginary; truth and lie with many other issues. Eco has very progressive approach with dynamic inclinations. His vision is very inclusive and integrated in the interpretation and understanding of literary world.

Mieke Bal in *The Predicament of Semiotics under the caption, Theory of Literature, Amsterdam*, says that in this book, the theory of deconstruction has been analysed and critiqued on mainly two levels: as the one group of scholars do not agree on the unjustified power relation and the effects thereof, so the other group of scholars are not happy with the effects that interpretative liberalism push to the world of theoretical systems of logic. Here Eco wants to assert on the determination of semiotic construction for the projection of semantic validity and the claims of truth. Eco is vehemently in support of elastic nature of semantic determination of language especially in the social context.

The solution to Eco's problem has been advanced by his opponent, Derrida himself, when the latter denied that deconstruction is a plea for indeterminacy. What is at stake is undecidability, which is something else altogether (Derrida 1988: 148). It is precisely the tension between the (obvious) limits bound up with the rules of sign systems like language, as well as with social constructions of identity and community, and the impossibility of exactly pinning down or predicting actual interpretations that underlies Eco's plea for the indistinguishability of pragmatics (study of social context of language) from both semantics and syntactics. The same tension also underlies deconstruction as a practice of the enhancement of this tension in order to promote reflection on interpretation beyond rigid systems and logical enclosure. (Mieke Bal, 549-550)

The above quote is very important as it carries the divergence of Eco's literary tendency to some of the deconstructive characteristics. This also means that Eco has the literary vision for the exploration and extension of textual world with regard to the world of interpretation, meanings and knowledge.

As Eco himself addresses in *Reading My Readers* as an inclusive approach wherein text is left in the world of readers in terms of their collective competence and power of interpretation. They will interpret the text as per their linguistic compatibility and intellectual capabilities.

When a text is put in the bottle-and this happens not only with poetry or narrative but also with the Critique of Pure Reason-that is, when a text is produced not for a single addressee but for a community of readers, the author knows that he/she will be interpreted not according to his/her intentions but in accordance with a complex strategy of interactions that also involves the readers, along with their competence in language as a social treasury. ... Thus, every act of reading is a difficult transaction between the competence of the

reader (the reader's knowledge of world) and the kind of competence a given text postulates in order to be read in an economic way. (Eco, 881-882).

This means that there is an exchange of sign and signification- cultural, linguistic, philosophic and intellectual that plays a vital role in the assertion of interpretations of the texts.

Umberto Eco in his book *The Limits of Interpretation* is interesting in modern symbolism that he believes is in tone with semiotic laws. He says if symbols on the one hand claims the definiteness in their meanings but on the other hand the same symbols indicate to the fragmentary nature in terms of their meanings. In this connection, there is an ambiguous network of meanings across the series of symbols. Eco quotes from the book in the following lines:

One witnesses in both cases a form of "fundamentalism." In the former case, every text speaks of the rational and univocal discourse of God; in the latter, every text speaks of the irrational and ambiguous discourse of Hermes. (Eco, 20).

Moreover, Guy Raffa in Eco's 'Scientific Imagination' in an essay says that in Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* both of these forms of interpretation are projected in the novel as indicated with the quote from the referred essay as below: Forces obsessed with the "rational and univocal discourse of God" – namely, Jorge and the Inquisition – inflict the most damage and pose the greatest threat to social and scientific progress in *The Name of the Rose*.... (Longitude and Love, 34-35). Even Raffa in another essay from the same collection asserts on the link of hermetic interpretation with the scientific interpretation in the following lines as, "Historiography has shown us," Eco observes, "that it is impossible to separate the Hermetic thread from the scientific one or Paracelsus from Galileo" (Eco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation, p. 34 (New. ESSAY Raffa, 45) Thus, the conclusive mode of the interpretation is the nearest form of objective interpretation; and it provides the way to genuine form of truth.

In *Theories of Authorship and Intention in the Twentieth Century: An Overview*, Dario Compagno says that there is a stand in the contemporary times with the notion of author, as some critics say that author is the main source of interpretation of texts. Some other say that there is a proper share of readers in the interpretation of texts. There has been a strong point in the assumption that language is not definite as it carries the varied meanings as per the contexts. This indicates to the vast fields of author's intentions within the textual structure equally responsible for the interpretation as is the linguistic competence of the readers. Even the famous philosopher Jacques Derrida refers to the indefinite semantic characteristics of language and denies the ideal format of system of language. So, there are no stable meanings. This indeterminacy of language that is responsible for the emergence of ambiguities leads to the plural nature of interpretation of the literary texts. That is reason some linguists find that there is need for the measures to be taken for the definite structure of language. With this result, meanings are to be developed by the linguistic exchange of semantic analyses equally by the author as well as the readers.

Formal analyses neglected all that was beyond the ‘text’ (maybe a revealing name or date, significant for the author’s life); now Deconstruction neglects any stable core of meaning, what the author most clearly wanted to say, and puts on the same level of relevance what the author did want to write and what the reader adds by him- or herself: ‘no longer reduced to a “single message”, the text is opened to an unlimited variety of interpretations’ (Burke 1998, 43). (Dario Compagno, 43)

Umberto Eco is through a little bit varied but goes with the deconstructive inclination of multivalent interpretation of texts and believes in the mutual exchange of linguistics analyses for the communication of meanings.

Umberto Eco indicates to the intension of the author to reach to the depth of thematic layers of any work of art. As per his notion of literature, most of the literary works are ‘intentional’ that is based on the author’s planning. This means that the exchange of semantic understanding is must for the valid, if not a definite, meaning of any particular text. In this idea, the following quote is quite relevant here:

To interpret is then a matter of cooperating with the author’s intention, as it is put into form in the work (Eco 1979). For Barthes and Derrida the author’s intention was a dull limit that the critic had to avoid, while Eco looks for an intention that is public (*intentio operis*, as in Eco 1990), and not ‘in the head’ of the author, defined up to the smallest detail before even taking up the pen (*intentio auctoris*).¹² Without intentions we could not give form to acts and texts (that are both the result of intentional activities), and intentions are neither hidden in the brain nor private experiences accessible only to oneself. (Dario Compagno, 49-50)

The above quote emphasises that intention of author is equally responsible for the emergence of textual reality.

Cinzia Bianchi and Manuela Gieri in *Eco’s semiotic theory* links the literary feats of Umberto Eco to the other related critics and philosophers in literature. They say that Eco is influenced by the linguistic and semiotic notions of Saussure and also got inspired and reacted to the theory of interpretation propounded by Roland Barthes in terms of interpretation of signs and communication of meaning. He also believes in the ideas of Charles S. Peirce in the process of their interpreting the text with the analyses of semiotic construction. In consideration with the Peirce’s ideas with regard to the inferences from the various situations, Bondanella writes about the methods of analyses as propounded by Peirce himself as follows:

According to Peirce, abduction (or hypothesis) is one of the three types of logical inference that regulate our reasoning. Deduction allows one to comprehend that what we perceive can be brought back to a given general rule. Induction allows one to come to a general rule even though moving from particular and individual cases. The reasoning Peirce defines as abduction is slightly more complex, since it proceeds by tentative and hazardous acts of inference ... The example par excellence of abduction is the act of criminal

detection. Facing the scene of a murder, the detective forms a hypothesis starting from the traces left by the murderer; such a hypothesis must then be verified by comparison with other data (such as the relationships between the victim and the murderer, the alibi of the suspect, the motive, and so on) before the correct solution, the identity of the criminal, can be discovered. (Peter Bondanella, 18-19)

This type of systematic inference is obviously the main key to the scientific characteristic of Eco's novels where in the reason and empirical evidences are pivotal in the interpretation and understanding of the literary texts.

Cinzia Bianchi, Clare Vassallo in *Introduction: Umberto Eco's interpretative semiotics: Interpretation, encyclopedia, translation*, indicates to the Umberto Eco's notion about the translation of literatures in which he says that it is more fruitful to translate a book into any other language here English language. Because, translations widen the magnitude of interpretations of the texts and lead the numerous elements from the source languages to the target language. So, in this way, a new world of experiences can be integrated to the existing walk of life and existing store of fields of knowledge. Eco expresses this very idea in the following words:

Eco argues that translation is a genus of the species of interpretation. He reminds us that a translation or interpretation always says something more and therefore can never say exactly the same thing as the original. There is a mediation of meaning that necessitates some form of manipulation on the part of the translator and that leaves open the possibility, as in all forms of interpretation, of a range of uses and mis-uses, of readings and mis-readings, of deliberate and accidental manipulation of the intended meaning of the text. (Cinzia Bianchi, Clare Vassallo, 6)

This clarifies the trend of translation as a step forward toward the semantic and intellectual expansion. Because, with this a lot of experiences of varied level and nature help to enrich the target language in the process of translation.

Massimo Leone in *Fundamentalism, Anomie, Conspiracy: Umberto Eco's Semiotics Against Interpretive Irrationality* highlights the idea that being overconfident and categorical in the assertion of meanings of texts in speaking immaturity and irrationality. Because, language is indeterminate in the projection of definite meaning and this justifies its pluralistic nature of interpretations.

In reality, denying that alternative interpretations of a text are possible is equally irrational, from Eco's perspective, as affirming that any interpretation of a text is possible. The first claim rejects the idea that a multiplicity of cultural patterns encoding and decoding social meaning might exist; the second admits this multiplicity but see no rational, inter-subjective ways to choose among them, or at least to rank them (Leone 2016). Most of Eco's theoretical work, as well as its fictional counterpart, can be seen as a sophisticate, monumental

attempt to conceptually dismantle these positions while showing their burden of heavy moral consequences. (Massimo Leone, 222)

In the above quote there is categorical support to the plurality of interpretations but one interpretation cannot be easily preferred over the other without the valid and pragmatic proof especially on the linguistic and structural basis.

Now, the issue of conservative type of readers and interpreters are obsessed with the traditional type of interpretation that is more habitual and ideological in nature. Because, the motivations for these interpretations are enforced by some social and political conspiracies in order to motivate the societies and communities for their own self-styled goals. This is how Leone has asserted on this very idea:

As the hermeneutics of deconstruction rejects any interpretive habit, claims that every habit is an imposition of power, and operates for its dismantlement, so conspiracy theories insinuate that mainstream social and political beliefs are nothing but poisonous habits that powerful lobbies instill in citizens. Moreover, as deconstruction, so conspiracy thought aims at the reactivation of semiosis, mainly through denigration of mainstream truths as public lies. (Massimo Leone, 226)...

The above text is vehemently emphasising that there are good chances of emergence of discourse based on the conspiracy in order of claim power and truth.

In, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation: World, History, Texts*, while claiming the consent from the most radical deconstructionists, Eco is quoting Karl Popper's theory of scientific research that asserts on the multifaced interpretation of texts even beyond the grasp of author and reader. This means that Eco has elastic approach with regard to the interpretation of texts.

In terms of Karl Popper's theory of scientific research, this is enough to disprove the hypothesis that interpretation has no public criteria (at least statistically speaking). One can object that the only alternative to a radical reader-oriented theory of interpretation is the one extolled by those who say that the only valid interpretation aims at finding the original intention of the author. In some of my recent writings I have suggested that between the intention of the author (very difficult to find out and frequently irrelevant for the interpretation of a text) and the intention of the interpreter who (to quote Richard Rorty) simply "beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose," there is a third possibility.⁶ (Eco, 144-45)

Hence, there is a way open to pluralistic nature of interpretations based on the different linguistic and structural analyses.

Since some texts are interpreted in one way and some texts are interpreted another way; but some other texts are overinterpreted beyond their genuine structuralism. A very general assumption is there that there are some strict reservations with regard to the interpretation of

sacred texts. Because there is always a notion of blasphemy and atheistic tag even if with the slightest of variation from the traditional parameters in the interpretation of any sacred text.

But in the case of texts which are sacred, properly speaking, one cannot allow oneself too much license, as there is usually a religious authority and tradition that claims to hold the key to its interpretation. Medieval culture, for example, did everything it could to encourage an interpretation that was infinite in terms of time but nevertheless limited in its options. (Eco, 168-169)

That means when there is less or no space for the interpretation of these types of texts, there is less or no chance of deconstructive or pluralistic interpretation of these texts.

Umberto Eco in *The Limits of Interpretation* under the caption ‘Two Models of Interpretation’ says that there is always an idea running through the mind of an interpreter that his interpretation is good / right or bad/ wrong. This is a serious concern with critics. Eco says that we cannot claim which interpretation is right but we can say that the interpretation that is not in consonance with the coherence and internal structure of a text is wrong interpretation. This idea has been expressed by Eco under the caption, ‘The Falsifiability of Misinterpretations’ in the below mentioned lines:

This rule says that the internal coherence of a text must be taken as the parameter for its interpretations. But in order to do so, one needs, at least for a short time, a metalanguage which permits the comparison between a given text and its semantic or critical interpretations. Since any new interpretation enriches the text and the text consists in its objective Linear Text Manifestation plus the interpretations it received in the course of history, this metalanguage should also allow the comparison between a new interpretation and the old ones. (Eco, limit 62)

That means this metalanguage is an ordinary language but possessing some strong semantic and stylistic characteristic that determine the validity of standard interpretations.

Mony Almalech in *Umberto Eco in His Own Words* under the caption ‘Colour as Cultural Unit: Challenges and Developments’ talks about the colour symbolism that has been attached to some cultural and traditional ideas and helps a lot in the interpretation of texts.

I realized that this intuition that the colour words in the novels receive from the context meanings such as ‘love’, ‘love passion’, ‘killing’ for Red; ‘pure’, ‘aristocratism’ for White; ‘poisonous’, ‘dirty’, ‘afflicted’ (in one novel), ‘life’, ‘repose’ (in different novels) for Green, etc. must be scientifically corroborated. Ergo, context causes categorization, similar to what Eco called ‘The colours of national flags are not colours [...] they are expressions correlated to cultural units, and as such are strongly categorized.’ (1985: 174). At the end of the 20th century, I returned to Bulgairin novels (Almalech 2001) with rich scientific instruments. (206)... (Torkild and Bent, 211)

This means that colour has its own place in the structures of human perception and take part in the making of social semantic system.

Melissa Dinsman in *Eco, Derrida, Joyce, Borges: Interpretation and Hallucination* under the caption, 'Parody, Play, and Purposeful Deconstruction: A Discussion of Umberto Eco's Hermeneutic Theory in Relation to His Parodic Practice' tries to analyse the variations and standards in different literary texts with regard to Eco's notions of interpretations. Eco agrees on the stand that deconstruction is a reading strategy and favours the multiplicity of interpretations and is in search of indeterminacies both in linguistics and semantics. He asserts this as, 'Eco includes deconstruction as a form of interpretation that has "an interest in the textual roots of the interpretive phenomenon"' (Limits 44). However, there arise some criticism contrary to Eco's notion about the theory of deconstruction. As Jonathan Cullar says that, "...He (Eco) wants to say that texts give a great deal of scope to readers but that there are limits. Deconstruction, on the contrary, stresses that meaning is context bound...but that context itself is boundless: there will always be new contextual possibilities that can be adduced, so that the one thing we cannot do is to set limits"' (120–21). Since, Eco's literary tendency shown greater inclinations towards some of the deconstructive characteristics, he has the literary vision for the exploration and extension of textual world with regard to the world of interpretation, meanings and knowledge. This deconstructive inclination of multivalent interpretation of texts determines to a large extent in the mutual exchange of linguistics analyses for the communication of meanings and the assertion of reality in the multiple ways and numerous modes.

Further, the nature of parody is heavily loaded with the tendency of extending the possibilities of Interpretation. The parallel interpretation to any text is to be defended on the bases of linguistic and another semantic parameter that stand genuine to the principles of the literary notions of the times. This would widen the level of comprehension and interpretation of literary texts. This extension of interpretation is always at the risk of mis-readings that have to be justified on the linguistic, semantic and philosophic grounds. This indispensable characteristic of interpretation beyond the state of interpretive finality is asserted in the below mentioned quote:

Eco's parody, much like deconstruction (a radical hermeneutic), illustrates that a mis-reading can be a valid reading, as long as it engages with the text. But engaging with the text should not be confused with textual limits. By definition, parody "uses" the source text, and, as "Granita" has shown, "use" can result in productive interpretations. From Eco's privileging of parody as a form that "must never be afraid of going too far" and its connection to deconstruction, this paper has traced deconstruction to hermeneutics, and thus, to Eco's own interpretive theory of textual intent. Thus, Eco's parodic writing suggests that the path to interpretive success lies between Rorty's pragmatism and Eco's *intentio operis*. Mis-readings, then, as long as they enter the critical debate, are essential to literary criticism; in fact, they are the only readings possible, as no interpretive theory will ever be the ultimate and final reading of a text. (Melissa Dinsman, 85-86).

This means that there is scope for the device of parody that helps author to invent the innovation in semantic and philosophic grounds. Readers at the same time would have the opportunity to

exercise their linguistic plays for the more inventions and discoveries within the structure of any text.

Thus, the above analyses lead to the conclusion that there is no denial to the fact that interpretation vary as the exchange of linguistic and semantic understanding of reader with the concerned author varies at the same time. This exchange of sign and signification- cultural, linguistic, philosophic and intellectual plays a vital role in the assertion of interpretations of the texts. Eco emphasises a sort of systematic investigation that plays as the main key to the scientific characteristic of his novels wherein the reason and empirical evidences are pivotal in the interpretation and understanding of texts. This interpretation and understanding of texts that is based on semiotic play of sign with semantic representation on the basis of numerous contexts. Hence, the emergence of the semantic plurality across the structural parameters of literary texts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bianchi, Cinzia and Clare Vassallo. "Introduction: Umberto Eco's interpretative semiotics: Interpretation, encyclopedia." Semiotica, no. 206, pp. 5-11. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282801506>. PAPER

Bal Mieke. The Predicament of Semiotics. Review of "The Limits of Interpretation by Umberto Eco". Poetics Today, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Autumn, 1992), pp. 543-552. Duke University Press. Stable URL:<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772873>

Compagno, Dario. "Theories of Authorship and Intention in the Twentieth Century." Journal of Early Modern Studies, vol. 1, n. 1 (2012), pp. 37-53. University of Siena, <http://www.fupress.com/bsfm-jems> (dario_compagno@neomedia.it). PAPER

"Eco, Derrida, Joyce, Borges: Interpretation and Hallucination." © Otto Lehto, 2008. PAPER

Eco, Umberto. The Limits of Interpretation. Indiana University Press .1994. BOOK

Eco, Umberto. "Reading My Readers." JSTOR (Comparative Literature). MLN, Vol. 107, No. 5, (Dec., 1992), pp. 819-827. The Johns Hopkins University Press Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2904818> . PAPER

Eco, Umberto. "Interpretation and Overinterpretation: World, History, Texts." The Tanner Lectures on Human Values. March 7 and 8, 1990, Clare Hall, Cambridge University. LECTURE

Leone, Massimo. "Fundamentalism, Anomie, Conspiracy: Umberto Eco's Semiotics Against Interpretive Irrationality." De Gruyter/TCS, pp. 221-229, University of Turin, Italy. PAPER

Almalech, Mony. "Umberto Eco in His Own Words." Edited by Torkild, Thellefsen / Sørensen, Bent. De Gruyter Mouton. Issue No. August 2017, pp. 206-213. PAPER