

WOMEN AS CREATOR OF A SIGN SYSTEM

Though clothes may seem like a trivial thing, in fact, many factors are involved in our choice of clothes. Clothes are an everyday necessity, from going to work, going out for fun, going for interviews, attending a meeting, etc. All these activities involve a decision on what clothes to wear and when. The choice that we make can be done consciously and unconsciously. It shows who we are, what we are, how we feel when we wear particular apparel. Clothes are no longer an item used only for protection; it became an integral part of our 'being', for example, the clothes that we wear are well integrated with our identity. Some attire is limited in its use, that is, in terms of circulation, and some clothes are commercialized etc. Different types of clothes have their corresponding significance. The fact that many designs, colours, form, etc. of the traditional attires have been passed down through many generations makes me wonder about the past life of these communities. Since their garments are an integral part of their individual identity and their social identity, studies about their attires will guide us to the past and present life of our societies. It is a sign about our own self; hence I have elected to work with the theory of semiotics as the study of sign to helps us understand the meaning of our clothes.

Globalization fuelled the boom in garment industries which further expanded the size and market of these industries. The effects of globalization have reached the farthest regions of the world. We can notice the far reaching effects of globalization, in this case, in terms of clothes. The cheaper prices of such clothes and the exclusion of the costly process of production make Western wear more attractive and this pushes their demands further. With regards to Western clothes, almost everyone is wearing the same designs and colours and there does not seem to be much scope for variations because a unique or distinct design or clothes become quickly commercialized for mass production. In such scenario, traditional garments stand out for their unique designs. This factor may sustain or support the production of the traditional garments and also, their differentiation from other commercial clothes makes them more desirable and valuable.

In this paper I will employ the theoretical framework of semiotics to analyse the functions and meanings of the traditional garments. Semiotics helps us understand the messages transmitted through our clothes. It also guides us in our analysis of our apparels by following a certain structured framework like the explanation of the relationship between material things and their corresponding

signifieds. Since, we can no longer live without clothes, it seems appropriate that we make a careful observation of the different roles they play in our lives. Semiotics will help us in explaining the relationship between material things and the values it had for the people. Semiotics will also helps us in understanding the structure of the relationship between material things like garments, and its importance to people. Semiotics as a study of signs will provide us a clue about why we value some things or objects more than the others. It will explain the rationale behind such choices.

I choose the theory of semiotics because we, as human beings, express and communicate with each other in many different ways. We communicate through speech, words, gestures, facial expressions, pictures, and many more; these are all signs through which one sends a message or information to others. It is important for me because semiotics helps us in explaining even a simple act of communication.

The act of us putting on clothes is like a painter creating a work of art on the canvas. The painter conveys a message or an idea through his paintings. Similarly, we convey who we are, what we feel, etc. through the clothes we wear. Since our own body is an expression of our 'self', the fact that we choose to cover also becomes an extension of our 'self' within our society. Marcel Danesi also explains that at the denotative level, clothes signify cover for protection, where the clothes can have many different connotations, it can be cultural and it can also be social (1). The fact that every community has their own clothes signifies that they use different dress codes. Every community has their own understanding of the clothes they make or use. The separation of clothes for men and women can also be read as a code of our understanding of our sexuality and gender. The fact that some men wear *kurta* in India and some wear *poncho* in Peru reveals different dress codes. We have to understand their respective societies to understand and to decipher the dress codes. Danesi also argues that, "For some semioticians and cultural historians, the history of clothing fashions is the history of a culture" (2). The change in their garments also denotes a change in the structure of their society. The clothes or garments also denote the roles every member of a community is expected to perform within a society.

It is important to indicate that every profession has a particular type of clothes prescribed by the function that they employ, for example, doctors, firemen, lawyers, policemen, priests, soldiers, etc. have their own distinct clothes. This helps others to identify them easily. On a denotative level, it shows the type of profession practiced by the user of the uniform. However, on a connotative level, it can have different meanings. The uniform of doctors and lawyers can express a certain sense of superiority and better skills, while the uniform of the soldiers can be seen as expressions of

bravery and courage, while that of the policemen can express a sense of power, and so on. The connotations of such uniforms vary according to the observer, for example, to some people a lawyer's uniform could mean shrewdness, whereas, a soldiers' uniform too could have connotation of oppression and brutality for some members. To understand the different connotations one has to understand the nature and workings of a society.

There are certain codes and messages that are embedded within the signs, with regards to traditional attires there are certain codes and messages that are implied. The method of deciphering the codes and understanding the messages varies with the group or society to which a person belongs.

Attires during the course of times became a part of the 'social construction of reality'. In the early stages clothes were made to cover the bodies, to serve as protection from the weather condition. However, as time passes by, the traditional attires came to be used as an object that represented certain concepts as it was considered a sign of belonging to a certain community. The traditional clothes thus became a bearer of sign. As Charles S Peirce writes "Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (3). Thus traditional attires serve as a sign because of the fact that they signify the group one belongs to, the gender of the user, the status and so on. According to the Saussurean model of sign, a 'signifier' (*signifiant*) and a 'signified' (*signifie*) constitutes a sign. Saussure further explains that the 'signifier' is the material (or physical) form of the sign and the 'signified' is the concept or the idea to which the sign refers to. Umberto Eco states that a 'signified' can mean 'a mental image, a concept and a psychological reality' (4). Saussure also emphasizes that the signifier and the signified are 'intimately linked' [...] 'each trigger the other' (5). While Daniel Chandler argues that, "[...] common sense tends to insist that the signified takes precedence over, and pre-exist, the signifier [...]" (6). He also writes that "No sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs [...]. The value of a sign is determined by the relationships between the sign and other signs within the system as a whole." (7).

Saussure's model of the sign is on language; nevertheless the analogy can be applied to other areas as well, in this case, we have applied it to traditional attires. He emphasized the negative differences between various sign system, that is, a sign can be characterized by the fact that it is different from other signs. We can say, for instance, that certain tribal community in Tripura has its own distinct traditional attire which separates them from other tribal communities within the same state and from other tribal communities in other states. Their traditional attires carry their own distinct signifier, which shows that they belong to a particular group or community. When we

consider the traditional attires as a signifier we also need to consider the *arbitrariness* (my emphasis) of the sign. There is nothing in the traditional attire that suggests or implies the idea of their group or identity. There are no similar characteristics between the traditional attire and their community or group, it is just that the members of the group chose them as a signifier, which in turn can be replaced by other signifiers if the groups so wish. This also indicates to the fact that the sign system does not pre-exist our existence.

It is not that the sign system already existed before we became a group or community; it is just that we chose one particular sign system to define one particular reality or fact. Once a particular signifier is established or accepted which links it to a particular concept or idea, it becomes almost fixed or rather it becomes difficult to change the sign system, for example, once the traditional attire becomes a signifier which signifies that they belong to a particular group, some members of the group become concerned when other members of the group decide not to use or wear the traditional clothes, and this explains the restrictions or prohibitions on wearing western clothes. This arises from the concern that the community will lose its distinct identity if they discard their traditional attires. As Daniel Chandler indicates, “If one accepts the arbitrariness of the relationships between the signifier and the signified then one may argue counter-intuitively that the signified is determined by the signifier rather than vice versa”(8). If we go by what he says then the prohibition on wearing clothes other than the traditional attires seems blown out of proportion. We, as intelligent beings have the capacity and the skill to create an entirely new signifier which links it to the same signified (object, or idea, or concept). The restriction or prohibition may also explain our aversion or reluctance to change. The arbitrariness of the sign also points out that different community in Peru and India have distinct attires which serve as a signifier of belonging to a particular group. As Levi-Strauss says, “the sign is arbitrary *a priori* but ceases to be arbitrary *a posterior* – after the sign has come into historical existence it cannot be arbitrarily changed”, (9). The statement is true because the younger generation inherits the sign system which was followed by the earlier generation. However, it is also true that the future generation, in the course of time, will change or modify the existing sign system or create an entirely different one. As we have witnessed, the future generations chose not to wear their traditional attires but still identify themselves strongly with a particular group or community. Once the future generation has decided to create a different sign system the coming generation again inherits it and eventually create a different sign system or modify the existing sign system should they want and so this process continues.

The sign system of Charles Sander Peirce includes three elements; the *representamen*, an *interpretant* and an object. As Chandler explains, the Peircean model of the sign as:

“[...] a unity of what is represented (the object), how it is represented (the representamen) and how it is interpreted (the interpretant)” (10). In the case of traditional attires, what is represented (the object or the idea) is the idea or the sense of belonging to a particular group, how it is represented (*representamen*) is the different types of traditional attires of one particular group, how it is interpreted (the *interpretant*) is how the members of the group interpret the traditional attires. The *interpretant* can be the kind of message or image created in the minds of the other members of the group when they see one of their members wearing traditional clothes. It is possible that the traditional attires evoke the same image, idea or message in the minds of the members of the group, and it might evoke a different idea or image for the other members. Another situation that arises in the way the traditional attires are interpreted by members other than those belonging to that community. As Chandler explains, “[...] in the Peircean sense, symbols are based purely on conventional association” (11). In this sense traditional attires are symbolic sign systems that have no resemblance to its signified, which is the idea or the image of belonging to a particular group. It is just adopted as a signifier through conventions or traditions or customs.

Theo van Leeuwen in *Introducing Social Semiotics* states that in the field of social semiotics the term ‘resource’ is more appropriate than ‘sign’. The term ‘resource’ does away with the notion that what is represented by the sign system pre-exists and what is represented in the sign system is not affected by the use of the sign. According to Leeuwen, “resources are signifiers, observable actions and objects” (12) that form a part of the system of communication of a group or a society. These interlinkages contain two semiotic potentials. One is a theoretical semiotic potential which is the use of the resources in the past that was not known or lost to the user and the ways in which the resources could be used. The other is an actual semiotic potential which is the past uses of the resources that the user is actually aware of and which the user considers as important or relevant for his needs and interests now. Leeuwen also emphasizes that the use of resources is related to the social context of the group to which the user belongs. The group may have certain rules that necessitate the appropriate and correct use of resources, or the members of the group are free to use of resources as they see fit. Once certain ‘resources’ are recognized for its semiotic potential, the ‘resources’ can be employed for expressing certain meanings. The most common example is, that traditional attires as a ‘resource’ can be utilized to express the separation of men and women and it can also be used to expressed other meanings as well. As Leeuwen explains, the analysis of the

‘semiotic potential’ of certain ‘resources’ provides us with the knowledge of how that semiotic ‘resources’ had been utilized in the past, in the present, and how it could be utilized in the future for expressing a certain message(13). It expands our knowledge of the semiotic resources and its uses in the present and its potential in the later stages.

According to Umberto Eco a single sign system has different interrelated contents and the message of the sign can be called a text and this text can actually be considered a discourse. For example, a woman wearing traditional attire conveys a message of assertion that she belongs to a particular group. Single attire possesses different connotations which Eco also called ‘multileveled discourse’ (14). We can then argue that traditional attire can be considered as a text and hence can be analysed or examined as one. It is also possible to conjecture that maybe she is perhaps trying to assert her financial power given the fact that the fabric of her attire is of excellent quality. It can also be seen as a way of asserting her superiority within the group. The complex design of her attire also proves her superior skills in making the attire while showing how much money she has. It is, however, important to examine whether her fellow members interpret the message the way she wanted them to do. The answer to this question is that there exist certain codes in her group or community which guarantees that the messages she wanted to transmit through her apparel was interpreted by others in her community.

If we have to understand the significance of the traditional garments, we have to consider as an object which contains a messages that are not overtly available in plain sight. We can consider it as code that needs to be solved in order to understand the message. Certain messages are embedded in the signs. The addresser creates a certain code for this message and it is the addressee who decodes the message. A successful communication occurs when the addressee is able to understand the code of the message. To be able to decode the message involves certain understanding of the context of the message. According to Chandler, “[...] since the meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated, codes provide a framework within which signs make sense” (15). He also said that “The conventions of codes represent a social dimension in semiotics: a code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework” (16). He also emphasized that as the relationship between the signifier and the signified are arbitrary in most of the cases, we need certain codes in order to understand the sign system. Traditional attires can be considered as commodity codes which can be placed under the category of social codes. Such codes provide a framework to construct a message that is appropriate to a particular group.

Traditional attires are divided under different sub categories: it can be attires that are made exclusively for both men and women, for example, there exists a strict division of attires for men and women, and cross-dressing is frowned upon. Such type of codes helps us to understand the social structure of a particular group. Traditional attires presented by the bride to the groom's family members during the wedding ceremony among the Tangkhul community in Manipur also serve as a code to understand the society social structure of a particular group or community. Attires which can be worn only on certain occasion also serve as a code to understand the group or society. Such existing codes help us to understand the role of traditional attires as a sign system in a particular society.

We can utilize the analogy of the 'logonomic system' (17) in *Social Semiotics* (1988) of Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress to explain the creation of a sign. According to them a 'logonomic system' is a set of rules that are prescribed in the production and reception of meanings. This can also be considered as a social code of the semiotics of traditional attires. Women as producers of traditional attires create a signifier and the relationship between the garment as a signifier and its signified can be arbitrary, which is similar to Saussure's theory of arbitrary nature of the sign system of a language. According to Hodge and Kress analysis' the 'logonomic rules' are taught by parents, teachers and employees. In our case the 'logonomic rules' of the traditional apparel are taught or explained by women to their men and eventually to their children. But as we have witnessed these rules were challenged by the future generations. The future generations may continue to follow the rules established by their parents, they may change the 'logonomic rules' of traditional attires that was established or followed by their parents. This demonstrates that certain changes or contestations are bound to occur in the production and reception of a sign system. Women as producers of the traditional attires decide what is appropriate for women and men.

According to Eco, the meanings of the sign are taken from the system (18). The system in our case is the culture of a society. Attire can acquire the value of a sign based on the sole reason that it is different from other attires. Each community creates their own sign system based on the system of their community. It can be a natural system or it can be their cultural system and it can also be their social system. The traditional attires tell us a story about the users of the attires. The concept of a text and a discourse as explained by Hodge and Kress can be applied here. The attires can be considered as a text that tells us something about the communities. If the garments are a text then the culture of these two communities can be considered as a discourse. Discourse here would mean the knowledge about their societies, their knowledge of the outside world and their awareness of their

natural surroundings. The materials of the text are drawn from this discourse. Traditional attires as a text are created based on the materials that are available to these communities.

Western societies have greater legitimacy on how one should adorn oneself on account of their powerful economic and political influence. They have the power to decide which clothes should be the norm or the mode. Keeping this statement, when we adopt the 'western' clothes, we relinquish our power to create a meaning or a signifier. We no longer create our own sign system but are now copying the sign system of the western nations. Since clothes are an important part of a society, we are in fact following or learning the social system of the western societies.

Valentin Voloshinov on his critique of Saussure's theory of speech as an individual phenomenon stated that, "The form of signs is conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants and also by the immediate conditions of their interactions' (19). Let us take the tradition that some women in India, covering their faces with their shawls or their saris. They do so when they go out of their house and also in front of their husbands. Not all women follow this practice but some women do. It is meant as a sign of respect and submission to men. It is a sign of a society where the rights of men and women are not equal. It is also a sign of male chauvinism and a patriarchal society.

This act of covering the face is also an act of making oneself invisible or not being present at the moment. It can thus be read as a sign of self denial of the 'being' of women. Such act also signifies a society where women are given a secondary role in the societal setting of the community. The act of covered faces creates a meaning of muzzling the voices of such women. Such attires act as a signifier of non-existence. Let us compare this with a scene in a film where a narrator is telling a story. In such cases, the narrator is physically missing from the scene, but only his or her voice is present in the scene. This implies that the narrator is not important in the film; it is her or his voice that matters.

When Christopher Columbus reached America in 1492 carrying the banner of Spain and the cross, he and his men as a part of the Spanish empire undertook the task of clothing the natives of America. This act of clothing the natives is an act of turning natural men into 'civilized' beings. When the Empire came into contact with the natives, they had no clothes on their bodies. They were not aware of the necessity or importance of clothes. The concepts of shame and modesty that the 'civilized men and men knew of were inculcated into the minds of the natives.

The teachings of the concept of modesty became a part of the ‘civilizing process. The natives’ interaction with the women and men of the Empire also brought the concept of Christian morality into their societies. Conversion to Christianity was also a part of the “civilizing” process of the indigenous communities. The entry of Empire into the indigenous societies brought drastic changes in their lives. They were taught the meaning of these garments. The natives on their part also create their own meaning and understanding of the clothes. The act of clothing created a new meaning and taught them to be ashamed of their own bodies which were an entirely new concept for the natives. They were also made aware of the ‘imperfections’ of their bodies. Here, we need to remind ourselves that the Empire’s arrival in America was also the period of Spanish Inquisition created by Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile.

The indigene’s contact with Spain brought a new understanding of the sign system of attires or clothes. They had learnt to differentiate a captain from a soldier, a friar from government officers, based on the clothes that they wore. They could also distinguish the type of men and women based on their actions, but the first thing they saw was the clothes on the men of the Empire and women too in the later stages of Spain’s colonization of America. The clothes became an important signifier of the positions and ranks of the men and women of the Spanish Empire. They became an important part of a person’s identity. The process of “transculturation” as defined by Fernando Ortiz were adopted by the indigenes, the natives began to imitate the clothes of the Spanish women and men. Transculturation involves three processes: first is the acquisition of new culture, second is the loss or displacement of the original culture, and third is the creation of new culture which is a mixture of the elements of the old or original culture and the foreign culture (20). The clothing of the natives is also an imposition of the identities and values of women and men of the Empire. Clothes evolved over time depending on the social and cultural changes of a community or a society. In this sense, changes that occurred in the Empire were transferred to different societies in America. Clothing in the garments of the Empire served as a protection for the natives in the sense that it sends a message to the colonizers that the indigenes had been subjugated to the rule of the Empire. The indigenous communities kept fighting back by using subtle means, like, the combination of their traditional garments with the western attire. The combination of *poncho* and long pants is a case of hybridity that results from cultural exchange between different communities.

According to Hodge and Kress, a context becomes a part of the meaning as can be seen in the analysis of the three colours of traffic signals. Everybody is expected to obey the message of the traffic signals without question. The non-compliance of the rules could lead to injuries or fines. It

shows the authoritarian character behind such signals. Everybody must express their solidarity to the authority which controls and manages the system. If somebody decides not to obey the rules, it would seem as though he is challenging the message of power of the authority. Using this analogy of power and solidarity, we can observe that the attires within a certain community also show similar characteristics. Power in the case of the attires would mean convincing or making other members of the community use particular apparel. He or she is controlling the behaviour of others, in the sense that she or he is making others wear the attires that she or he chosen. Hodge and Kress point out that, “[...] solidarity is an effect of power just as power is an effect of solidarity” (21).

As one individual secures approval from others, he or she possess certain degree of power and control over them, but it is also true that his or her power or control is derived from the approval or the consent given to him or her by others. By clothing the natives, the Empire usurped the power of deciding the kind of clothes that they considered appropriate for the indigenous population. The indigenes learnt the clothes making techniques and used it to invent attires that can be considered as their own.

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