

Original Article

## SEMIOTICS AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL FOR INTERPRETING SYMBOLS IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN MODERN INDIAN PAINTINGS

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### ABSTRACT

Visual communication in modern Indian paintings relies heavily on symbols to convey meanings that go beyond simple or literal representation. These symbols come from various sources, such as cultural memories, mythology, personal gender experiences, social and political conditions, and the personal stories of artists. Together, these elements create a strong visual language through which modern Indian art shares ideas, emotions, and social issues. This paper examines semiotics as a tool for interpreting symbols in visual communication, specifically in modern Indian paintings.

The study builds on the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, focusing on how visual signs create meaning through representation and interpretation. Using a qualitative research approach, the study conducts semiotic analysis on selected modern Indian artworks to explore the symbolic roles of colour, form, line, space, and imagery. Artists like S. H. Raza, V. S. Gaitonde and F. N. Souza use abstraction and expressive distortion to express themes of spirituality, identity, and existential struggle. Meanwhile, women artists such as Arpita Singh, Gogi Saroj Pal, and Nalini Malani use symbolic imagery to tackle issues of gender, memory, mythology, and social critique. Their artworks show how personal experiences and shared cultural symbols intersect, creating layered and complex visual meanings within modern Indian visual communication.

The study highlights the viewer's active role in meaning-making, where interpretation is shaped by cultural background, visual awareness, and personal experiences. The findings indicate that semiotics provides a clear and effective framework for understanding the intricate symbolic systems found in modern Indian paintings. By placing modern Indian art within a semiotic and visual communication context, this research contributes to interdisciplinary discussions and underscores the continuing importance of symbolic interpretation in understanding contemporary visual expression at both national and global levels.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Visual Communication, Symbolism in Art, Modern Indian Paintings, Visual Meaning, Meaning-Making, Qualitative Visual Analysis

### INTRODUCTION

Communication plays a vital role in human life. After meeting daily needs, humans need communication to strengthen themselves socially and culturally. Even since ancient times, when humans had not invented language, they were still using special signs for social communication. This means that semiotics has been at work in human life since ancient times. The advent of language strengthened the social aspect of humanity, but it also led to further development of semiotics.

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Modern Indian painting is a way that artists talk to people through pictures. They use this way to tell people about what they remember from their culture what they feel inside and what is happening in the world around them. Modern Indian artists do not always paint what they see. Instead they use symbols to show what they mean. These symbols have meanings and people can understand them in different ways. The artists get these symbols from stories, spiritual ideas, things that happen to men and women and big changes that have happened in the past. They use these symbols to create a language that people can understand by looking at the pictures [Guha-Thakurta \(1992\)](#).

Modern Indian painting came about during changes. This was a time when India was ruled by countries people were fighting for India to be its own country and Indians were figuring out who they were, after being free. The artists who were making art during this time wanted to find ways to say things with their paintings. They wanted to show that they still cared about the ways but they also wanted to be part of the new things that were happening all around the world. So they started using symbols in their art to mean things of just painting exactly what they meant. This way the meaning of the painting was hidden in the pictures than just being obvious. Modern Indian painting and its artists used this method to express themselves.

Semiotics, as the study of signs and meaning-making processes, offers a powerful analytical framework for understanding how visual communication functions in modern Indian paintings. By examining the relationship between visual elements and their cultural signification, semiotics allows scholars to decode the symbolic structures embedded within artworks [Chandler \(2007\)](#). This paper applies semiotic theory to selected modern Indian paintings to examine how symbols operate as communicative devices and how viewers participate in the construction of meaning.

### **SEMIOTICS AND VISUAL MEANING: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS**

Any theory initially works normally and is later identified by a scholar, that is, it takes a long time for any written literature to become a theory. Even before the scholars, various forms of sign science were playing an important role in human life. Semiotics gained theoretical recognition in the 18th and 19th centuries. Various scholars have presented their opinions and theories about semiotics.

Semiotic theory helps us figure out how signs create meaning. Ferdinand de Saussure conceptualized the sign as a dual structure composed of the signifier (the material form) and the signified (the concept it represents) [Saussure \(1983\)](#). In visual art, colours, shapes, textures, and spatial arrangements function as signifiers that evoke culturally conditioned meanings.

Charles Sanders Peirce expanded semiotic theory by introducing a triadic model of the sign, consisting of the representamen, object, and interpretant [Peirce \(1998\)](#). His classification of signs into icons, indices, and symbols is particularly relevant to visual communication. Icons resemble their referents, indices suggest meaning through causal or associative links, while symbols rely on learned cultural conventions.

In the Indian artistic context, symbols often operate within deeply embedded cultural frameworks. Motifs such as the bindu, lotus, feminine archetypes, or fragmented bodies function as symbolic signs whose meanings are shaped by philosophical, religious, and historical associations [Kramrisch \(1976\)](#). Semiotic analysis enables an understanding of how these symbols transcend individual artworks and participate in broader systems of cultural meaning.

Roland Barthes further emphasized that visual images operate on multiple levels of meaning, including denotation and connotation [Barthes \(1977\)](#). While denotative meanings relate to what is immediately visible, connotative meanings emerge from cultural knowledge and ideological frameworks. Modern Indian paintings frequently privilege connotative meaning, requiring active interpretation by viewers.

### **SEMIOTICS AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN ART**

Visual communication plays a vital role in art, especially in painting and other related disciplines. Painting is virtually impossible without visual communication. When it comes to visual communication, the importance of semiotics naturally increases. We can say that visual science and semiotics complement each other.

Visual communication is not merely the transmission of information but a dynamic process involving encoding and decoding of meaning. In art, this process is mediated through visual signs that invite interpretation rather than dictate meaning [Hall \(1997\)](#). Semiotics positions the artwork as a site of interaction between the artist's intention, the visual sign system, and the viewer's interpretive framework.

Modern Indian artists often employ ambiguity, abstraction, and symbolic distortion as communicative strategies. These techniques resist fixed meanings and encourage multiple readings. Semiotic analysis helps reveal how meaning emerges through relationships between visual elements rather than isolated symbols [Eco \(1976\)](#).

Furthermore, visual communication in Indian art is shaped by collective cultural memory. Mythological references, ritual symbols, and indigenous aesthetics operate as shared sign systems that inform interpretation. At the same time, personal narratives and contemporary concerns introduce new layers of meaning, resulting in hybrid visual languages [Mitter \(2001\)](#).

## MODERN INDIAN PAINTING: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The history of painting in India is very old. Humans began creating cave paintings as early as the stone age. Evidence of human painting has been found in the caverns and caves of the Hoshangabad and Bhimbetka regions. These paintings depict hunting, human groups hunting, women and animals and birds. The paintings in the Ajanta caves were created over several centuries, with the earliest dated to the first century BCE. These paintings depict Lord Buddha in various forms.

The development of modern Indian painting reflects a continuous negotiation between tradition and modernity. Early modernists sought to establish a distinctly Indian visual identity by drawing upon indigenous sources while engaging with modernist aesthetics [Coomaraswamy \(1956\)](#). Post-independence artists expanded this search, addressing existential, spiritual, and political questions through abstraction and symbolism.

Art collectives such as the Progressive Artists' Group challenged academic realism and embraced expressive forms that allowed for symbolic experimentation [Dalmia \(2001\)](#). Artists like F. N. Souza, S. H. Raza, and V. S. Gaitonde developed visual languages that prioritized inner experience and conceptual depth over representational accuracy.

Symbolism became a means of articulating both personal and collective concerns. Visual signs were no longer illustrative but suggestive, functioning within semiotic systems that required interpretive engagement. This shift aligns modern Indian painting closely with semiotic principles, making it a fertile ground for visual communication analysis [Chaitanya \(1983\)](#).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in semiotic visual analysis. Selected artworks by prominent modern Indian painters were examined to identify recurring symbolic motifs, compositional strategies, and visual signs. The analysis focuses on elements such as colour, form, line, space, and imagery, considering their symbolic functions within cultural and personal contexts.

Secondary sources, including art historical texts, critical essays, and artists' writings, were consulted to contextualize interpretations. The aim is not to impose fixed meanings but to demonstrate how semiotic frameworks facilitate systematic interpretation of visual communication in modern Indian paintings [Rose \(2016\)](#).

## SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED MODERN INDIAN ARTISTS

No one has been able to achieve complete knowledge of any art form. Even the sub-branches of art have not been fully understood by any human being to this day. If someone has mastered the full range of art, they are considered equivalent to God. Therefore, humans progressed in a particular field according to their understanding of art. When humans acquired specialised knowledge in a particular field and reached a conclusion, they formulated it as a theory. In semiotics also, theories have been given by various scholars, some of which are discussed below:

### S. H. RAZA: GEOMETRY, COLOUR, AND METAPHYSICAL SYMBOLISM

S. H. Raza's paintings represent a sustained engagement with symbolic abstraction rooted in Indian philosophical thought. His repeated use of the bindu functions as a central visual sign that transcends formal geometry. Semiotic analysis reveals the bindu as a culturally coded symbol associated with creation, origin, and cosmic energy rather than a purely abstract form [Raza \(2005\)](#). The surrounding geometric shapes and vibrant colour fields operate as signifiers that reinforce metaphysical concepts drawn from Tantric philosophy and Indian cosmology.

Raza's visual language demonstrates how symbols acquire meaning through cultural convention and repeated use. From a Peircean perspective, the bindu functions as a symbol rather than an icon, requiring cultural knowledge for interpretation [Peirce \(1998\)](#). Colour in Raza's work further contributes to symbolic meaning, with reds, blacks, and earth tones evoking spiritual intensity and elemental forces [Khullar \(2015\)](#). Semiotics thus enables an understanding of how abstraction in Raza's paintings communicates deeply rooted philosophical ideas.

### V. S. GAITONDE: SILENCE, ABSENCE, AND EXISTENTIAL SIGNS

V. S. Gaitonde's non-objective paintings challenge conventional representational reading. His subtle tonal shifts, layered surfaces, and absence of recognizable imagery operate as signs of silence and introspection. Semiotic interpretation of Gaitonde's work emphasizes how meaning can emerge through absence rather than presence [Kapur \(2014\)](#).

From a semiotic standpoint, Gaitonde's paintings function as open sign systems that resist closure. The lack of explicit symbols transforms the surface into a space for contemplative engagement, where meaning is generated through the viewer's interpretive

process [Lal \(2007\)](#). His work aligns with Barthes' notion of the "open text," allowing multiple readings shaped by individual perception and emotional response [Barthes \(1977\)](#).

#### **F. N. SOUZA: DISTORTION AS SYMBOLIC PROTES**

F. N. Souza's aggressive figuration and expressive distortion function as symbolic critiques of social, religious, and moral authority. His exaggerated human forms act as indices of psychological tension and rebellion, reflecting postcolonial disillusionment and personal conflict [Souza \(1998\)](#).

Semiotic analysis reveals that Souza's distortions are not stylistic exaggerations but communicative signs. The fragmented body becomes a symbol of fractured identity, while distorted facial features signify moral hypocrisy and spiritual alienation [Mitter \(2007\)](#). These visual signs operate within a broader socio-political context, allowing Souza's paintings to communicate critique without relying on narrative realism.

#### **GENDER, MEMORY, AND SYMBOLISM IN WOMEN ARTISTS' PRACTICES**

##### **ARPITA SINGH: PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND CULTURAL SIGNS**

Arpita Singh's paintings combine autobiographical elements with symbolic imagery drawn from everyday life, mythology, and memory. Her fragmented compositions and recurring motifs such as domestic spaces, weapons, and female figures operate as signs that reflect vulnerability, anxiety, and resilience [Singh \(2016\)](#).

Semiotically, Singh's work demonstrates how personal memory intersects with collective symbolism. Objects within her paintings function as cultural signifiers, inviting viewers to decode meaning through shared social experience rather than explicit storytelling [Jain \(2006\)](#). Her visual communication relies on ambiguity, allowing symbols to remain fluid and open-ended.

##### **GOGI SAROJ PAL: RECLAIMING MYTHOLOGICAL SYMBOLS**

Gogi Saroj Pal reinterprets mythological female figures to challenge patriarchal representations embedded in traditional narratives. Her symbolic imagery transforms goddesses and archetypal women into agents of autonomy and resistance [Pal \(2012\)](#).

Through semiotic analysis, these mythological references can be understood as re-signified symbols. Traditional signs associated with submission or virtue are re-coded to express empowerment and self-definition [Thapan \(2009\)](#). Pal's work highlights how symbols are not fixed but culturally negotiable within visual communication.

##### **NALINI MALANI: SYMBOLISM, TRAUMA, AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE**

Nalini Malani's multi-layered visual practice integrates painting, video, and installation to address themes of violence, gender, and historical trauma. Her symbolic vocabulary draws from mythology, literature, and contemporary events, creating dense networks of meaning [Malani \(2014\)](#).

Semiotically, Malani's recurring motifs function as signs of collective memory and social injustice. These symbols invite viewers to actively engage with historical narratives rather than passively consume images [Chatterjee \(2011\)](#). Her work underscores the role of visual communication as a tool for ethical and political reflection.

#### **THE VIEWER AS AN ACTIVE PARTICIPANT IN MEANING-MAKING**

There are many ways to view art. Just as humans are influenced differently by the different qualities of the same God, the same art form can have different impacts on different people. A poem may be understood differently by one person, while the same poem may leave a different impression on another. Similarly, in painting, a single image has many dimensions. It depends on the viewer's perspective how they perceive it.

Semiotic theory emphasizes that meaning is not inherent in the sign but produced through interpretation. In visual communication, the viewer plays a central role in decoding symbols based on cultural knowledge, visual literacy, and personal experience [Berger \(1972\)](#). Modern Indian paintings often resist singular meanings, encouraging viewers to engage in interpretive dialogue.

Peirce's concept of unlimited semiosis suggests that interpretation is an ongoing process, where meaning evolves through successive readings [Peirce \(1998\)](#). This is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where symbols may carry different meanings across regional, religious, and generational boundaries [Appadurai \(1996\)](#). Semiotics thus highlights visual communication as a dynamic interaction rather than a fixed message.

## DISCUSSION: SEMIOTICS AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK

The application of semiotics to modern Indian painting reveals the interconnectedness of art history, visual communication, and cultural studies. Symbols operate simultaneously as aesthetic elements and communicative devices, bridging personal expression and collective meaning Bal (2006).

By decoding visual signs, semiotics allows scholars to move beyond stylistic analysis and engage with deeper cultural and ideological structures. This approach is especially valuable in the Indian context, where visual symbols are embedded within rich traditions of mythology, ritual, and philosophy Desai (2013). Semiotics therefore serves as an effective interdisciplinary framework for understanding modern Indian visual expression.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that semiotics provides a robust analytical framework for interpreting symbols in visual communication within modern Indian paintings. Through semiotic analysis, the research reveals how artists use visual signs to communicate complex ideas related to spirituality, identity, gender, memory, and social critique. The symbolic language of modern Indian art reflects an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, personal experience and collective culture.

The findings emphasize the active role of the viewer in meaning-making and highlight visual communication as a participatory process. By situating modern Indian painting within a semiotic framework, this research contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship and reinforces the importance of symbolic interpretation in understanding contemporary visual culture at both national and global levels.

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