The shortest way to define semiotics would be to say that it is a study of signs. And one of the broadest is that of Umberto Eco who states that "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign".[1] A text is an assemblage of signs (words, images, sounds, gestures) constructed and interpreted with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication.

Broadly speaking, there are two divergent traditions in semiotics stemming respectively from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1914) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure wrote that:

> It is ... possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology (from the Greek semeion, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them.[2]

While for the linguist Saussure 'semiology' was "a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life", to the philosopher Charles Peirce, the field of study which he called 'semiotic' was the "formal doctrine of signs".[3] Working quite independently from Saussure across the Atlantic, Peirce borrowed his term from the seventeenth century British philosopher John Locke. Acting as another bridge between traditions, Umberto Eco in his *Theory of Semiotics* (1976) sought "to combine the structuralist perspective of Hjelmslev with the cognitive-interpretative semiotics of Peirce".[4]

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[1] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 7.
[2] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana 1983), 15-16.
[3] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Writings* 8 volumes. Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 2.227.
[4] Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999), 251.

Peirce believed that "we think only in signs".[5] But "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign," he added.[6] My work employs the Peircean distinctions between the *sign* and the *object* within a broadly Sausserean framework. Pierce said that:

A sign ... (in the form of a *representamen*) is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the *representamen*.[7]

The interaction between the *representamen*, the object and the *interpretant* is referred to by Peirce as "semiosis". Umberto Eco uses the phrase "unlimited semiosis" to refer to the way in which this could lead (as Peirce was well aware) to a series of successive interpretants (potentially) ad infinitum.[8]

In incorporating the Peircean distinctions to emphasise (of course indirectly) the referential potential of the signified within the Saussurean model, my work makes use of three modes:

i. Symbol/ symbolic: a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional – so that the relationship must be learned, language in general, numbers or the traffic lights, for example.

ii. Icon/ iconic: a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified, a portrait or cartoon for example.

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[5] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Writings* 8 volumes. Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 2.302.
[6] Ibid., 2.172.
[7] Ibid., 2.2228.
[8] Ibid., 1.339.

iii. Index/ indexical: a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way to the signified – this link can be observed or inferred. Examples would include 'natural signs' (smoke, footprints), medical symptoms (pain, a rash), measuring instruments, 'signals' (a phone ringing), personal 'trademarks' (handwriting) and indexical words ('that', 'this', 'here', 'there').

Symbolic signs such as language are usually highly conventional; iconic signs always involve some degree of conventionality; indexical signs 'direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion'.[9] "All words, sentences, books and other conventional signs are symbols," said Peirce.[10] A symbol is a sign "whose special significance or fitness to represent just what it does represent does in nothing but the very fact of there being a habit, disposition, or other effective general rule that it will be so interpreted take, for example, the word "man". These three letters are not in the least like a man; nor is the sound with which they are associated".[11] It is clear that Peircean symbols are not limited to words.

Turning to icons, Peirce declared that an iconic sign represents its object "mainly by its similarity".[12] Peirce originally termed such modes, "likenesses".[13] He added that "every picture (however conventional its method)" is an icon.[14] Susanne Langer argues that "the picture is essentially a symbol, not a duplicate, of what it represents".[15] For Peirce, icons included "every diagram, even although there be no sensuous resemblance between it and its object, but only an analogy between the relations of the parts of each other".[16] "Many diagrams resemble their objects not at all in looks; it is only in respect to the relations of

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[9] Ibid., 2.306
[10] Ibid., 2.292.
[11] Ibid., 4.447.
[12] Ibid, 2.276.
[13] Ibid., 1.558.
[14] Ibid., 2.279.
[15] Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite & Art* (New York: Mentor, 1951), 67.
[16] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Writings*, 8 volumes. Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 2.279.

their parts, that their likeness consists".[17] Semioticians generally maintain that there are no 'pure' icons – there is always an element of cultural convention involved.

An index 'indicates' something: for example, "a sundial or clock indicates the time of day".[18] An indexical sign is like "a fragment torn away from the object".[19] The relationship is not based on "mere resemblance";[20] "similarity or analogy" is not what defines the index.[21] While a photograph is also perceived as resembling that which it depicts, Peirce noted that a photograph is not only iconic but indexical: "photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent".[22]

It is easy to slip into referring to Peirce's three forms as "types of signs", but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive: a sign can be an icon, a symbol and an index, or any combination. Peirce was aware of this: for instance, he insisted that "it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality".[23]

The reason for opting for a semiotic method to study the works of Amit Chaudhuri was this: semiotics can help to denaturalise theoretical assumptions in academia just as in everyday life. For a writer whose writing and music are so rooted to the everyday, semiotics seemed, to me, the most suitable approach to study the texts. Stuart Hall said that our "systems of signs ... speak us as much as we speak in and through them".[24] Chaudhuri's work demands that we locate and interpret the signs at work in his

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[17] Ibid., 2.282.
[18] Ibid., 2.285.
[19] Ibid., 2.231.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 2.305.
[22] Ibid., 2.281.
[23] Ibid., 2.306.
[24] Stuart Hall, 'Culture, the Media and the "Ideological Effect"', in *Mass Communication and Society* ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch & Janet Woollacott (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 328.

semiosphere for as Voloshinov declared, "whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too".[25]

In Chaudhuri, that ideology is the ideology of the impure, a challenge to the illusory claim of the 'authentic', a claim, as a boatman, to many streams, the 'then' flowing through the 'now', the 'here' moving to the 'there' and, also, the aesthetics of the air where nothing is ever separate, where tiny particles cohabit with each other abandoning difference. "The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut," said Foucault,

> beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network ... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands ... Its unity is variable and relative.[26]

Texts are framed by others in many ways. The debts of a text to other texts are seldom acknowledged. And, even if they are, in the scholarly apparatus of academic writing, debts to other traditions are never recorded. Claude Levi-Strauss's notion of the bricoleur who creates improvised structures by appropriating pre-existing materials which are ready to hand is now well know within the field of cultural studies. The bricoleur works with signs, constructing new arrangements by adopting existing signifieds as signifiers and "speaking" "through the medium of things".[27]

My focus is primarily on Chaudhuri the bricoleur, and his focus on the optic, not just because Chaudhuri's semiotic is primarily visual[28] but because, as Messaris says, "with regard to images, most people in most societies are mostly confined to the role of

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[25] Valentin N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 10.

[26] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1974), 23.

[27] Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), 20.

[28] "Things start with me, often, with images. An image is a necessary impetus for me to write. It's a visual thing for me." See Sumana R. Ghosh, "Aalap: In conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" in *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition* eds. Anu Shukla and S. B. Shukla (Delhi: Swarup and Sons, 2004), 181.

spectator of other people's productions".[29] Chaudhuri's "production" of images links him to, as I will show in the following chapters, European modernism for, as Glen Macleod says,

> The ancient parallel between literature and the visual arts – i.e. painting, sculpture, and architecture – becomes newly relevant in the twentieth century. Painters were the first to explore the revolutionary possibilities of Modernism, so that painting became the leading art form. Modernist writers often patterned their literary experiments on parallels drawn from the visual arts.[30]

The Impressionists, Monet and Manet, especially the latter, the post-impressionist Cezanne, Matisse during his "Fauve" phase, Duchamp and Dali, Joan Miro's "automatism" – all of them have influenced Chaudhuri and this is especially evident in his early work. His evolution as a writer (and musician) can be discerned in his move towards a more home-bred tradition, to Tagore and Jamini Roy, both products of Bengali modernity, both having realised their aesthetic through a negotiation with the 'outside'.

This may, all very well, be forced into the paradigms of postcolonialism; as Meenakshi Mukherjee says,

> It (postcolonialism) brings severely into question the old idea of the autotelic nature of literary text and the sealed anti-septic notion of 'artistic' value uncontaminated by the political circumstances of its production and reception – forcing everyone involved in the discipline to rethink the limitations of the Eurocentric/ universalist aesthetic norms.[31]

But Mukherjee almost answers the question as to why Chaudhuri's texts do not yield returns when investigated through the postcolonial filter.

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[29] Paul Messaris, *Visual 'Literacy': Image, Mind and Reality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 121.
[30] Glen Macleod, 'The Visual Arts' in *Modernism* ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 194.
[31] Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee, ed. *Interrogating Postcolonialism* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000), 4.

Because the post-colonial analytical strategies work best where the dispossession of language, religion and culture has been of the most severe order there is just a possibility that any reading of a so-called post-colonial text might get subtly tilted in that direction, or only those texts might get highlighted that lend themselves to such readings.[32]

This has been the postcolonial critic's problem with Chaudhuri's work: as Arun P. Mukherjee says,

Its (postcolonialism's) vocabulary is too generalised and too monolithic;[33]

"too monolithic" to deal with texts, like the subject of this work, which talk about the poetics of enrichment that the cultural encounters produced. In texts like Chaudhuri's, where the provincial manages to survive, by waging little wars on the forces of globalisation, postcolonial discourse fails to create meanings, or ruptures through which meaning-making might become possible.

Chaudhuri's work, in spite of being situated in, what Homi Bhabha adapting Freud's *das Unheimliche* terms, "unhomeliness – that is the condition of extraterritorial and cross-cultural initiations",[34] cannot be called, what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in an unfortunate nomenclature, termed "minor literature" – the literature of minorities, immigrants, and others who live in, write in, and are "forced to serve" a "deterritorialised" European "language that is not their own". In this literature, "everything takes on a collective value," in contrast to "major literatures," in which "the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background."[35] Chaudhuri's work is situated in the cusp of these two, "minor" and "major" literatures – he is a miniaturist but not a 'minorist'; in his work there is no hierarchy between foreground and background, between character and context. And in this, again, he owes

[32] Ibid., 7.
[33] Ibid.,19.
[34] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 9.
[35] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19, 17.

his allegiance to the early European painters, but also to figures like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, in whom there is no 'real' distinction between the personal and the political.[36]

In his essay, "Poles of Recovery: From Dutt to Chaudhuri",[37] Amit Chaudhuri writes about a few writers in whom "the impulses of 'disowning' and 'recovery' are seen to shape ... substantially, the history of modern Indian writing".[38] The essay turns out to be as much an analysis of the emergence of the modern in Indian writing as a manifesto of the self at work in his writing. The introductory paragraph sees the invocation of his own history of writing in, what is, a formal essay in an academic journal:

I, a Bengali, had grown up in Bombay, and, not having been taught Bengali in school, didn't know it well enough to write poetry or fiction in it. My literary models and aspirations belonged to the English language; yet, secretly, I'd been troubled by what my inquisitor implied: that you can't achiever anything worthwhile in literature unless you write in your 'own' language.[39]

This discovery of his own disquiet leads him to other discoveries:

... in the genesis of modernity in Bengal and India – is another narrative, to do with the secular, middle-class Indian self's struggle between disowning and recovering its 'Indianness', a struggle that ... I discovered was also a paradigm around which a substantial part of modern Indian literature and culture was structured.[40]

During the course of the essay, Chaudhuri quotes Ramanujan –

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[36] Writing about Dutt's poem, "Tilottama Sambhava" which makes use of the "grand mythology of our ancestors", and then quoting the poet's letter to his friend, Raj Narain, Chaudhuri writes, "Dutt's remarks, and, indeed, the poem he was them working on, record the relocation of the mythic – which, till then, had been situated in the culture of a community – within the half-truths and subconscious of a new, colonial bourgeoisie". See Amit Chaudhuri, 'Poles of Recovery: From Dutt to Chaudhuri', *Interventions* Vol. 4(1), 93.

[37] Amit Chaudhuri, 'Poles of Recovery: From Dutt to Chaudhuri' *Interventions* Vol. 4 (1) 2002, 89-105.

[38] ibid., 89-90.

[39] ibid., 90.

[40] ibid., 90-1.

Even one's own tradition is not one's birthright; it has to be earned, repossessed .... One comes face to face with it sometimes in faraway places, as I did;[41]

it is, as if, Chaudhuri is talking about himself and reminding himself about his own 'recovery' of tradition at the same time. For this is Chaudhuri talking about himself:

"We don't know where, in us, the West begins and the Indian starts. We don't know where they become interchangeable terms, where in the word 'Bengali', the West or colonial begins and the Indian or native starts."[42]

Difference, after all, is a condition of our existence rather than a conscious decision, a condition that produces the aesthetic of the aleatory, a condition over which the writer or the subject of the writing has only as much control as he does over the reflection in the mirror or the colour of the sky.

In tracing the sources and resources of traditions in Chaudhuri's work, I have chosen to focus on the social semiotic, the body, food, clothes, the colloquial, the visual of the everyday that is usually not loaded with signification that binds them in Chaudhuri's eye;[43] this is not only because an analysis of the social semiotic downplays the rhetoric of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion', the conceit of a postcolonial club, but most importantly because Chaudhuri is a writer of the everyday. "The stuff we are made of – that interests me."[44]

"The movement between one world and another within the same space," says Chaudhuri, "that is the kind of movement which, for me, substitutes for what the other novelists call narrative. I'm more interested in that kind of movement between two different worlds, this inner and outer, sometimes two incompatible cultural worlds which can be signified

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[41] Ibid., 98.
[42] See Sumana R. Ghosh, "Aalap: In conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" in *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition* eds. Anu Shukla and S. B. Shukla (Delhi: Swarup and Sons, 2004), 168.
[43] "Bangla was, for me, a graphic experience.... It resonated for me in many ways.", ibid., 166.
[44] Ibid.,184.

by the use of *shajana* tree and Colgate toothpaste in the same sentence."[45] That is why Chaudhuri's texts live like postcards, carrying possibility of meanings to places where they travel, where the postcard carries, at one and the same time, the fingerprints and handwriting, and the marked stamps of journeys. The new composite form that enacts the cross-cultural energies, made of a union of disparate fragments of post-colonial inheritance, is, in Chaudhuri, a matter of seamless intercultural fusion. His works sometimes melds, at other times sets these resources against each other. The result of this intercultural dynamic is transformative – a work that would have been unimaginable within the confines of one or another culture.