

Systems Theory and Literature: Application of Interpretive Structural Modeling to Jeet Thayil's *These Errors Are Correct*

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Abstract: Systems Theory studies the structure and fundamentals in terms of relationship and integration, through which different aspects and elements emerge leading to the creation of a whole. It is an approach of totality and wholeness which focuses on the relationship and correspondence between the constituent parts of a system. A distinctive feature of the Systems Theory is that it develops across numerous disciplines leading to the attainment of knowledge and perspectives related to the other domains or disciplines. Its concepts are not rigid but flexible, so it keeps evolving. It is the Systems Theory that bridges the gap between science and humanities, leading to the elimination of age-old differences and gaps between literature and science. This elimination leads to the evolvment of a new and innovative relation and connection between the two extremely different disciplines i.e., science and humanities. The Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) approach is one of the approaches incorporated under the Systems Theory. It focuses on discovering the relationships among the elements, which tend to focus on a specific issue or a problem. ISM is used when we encounter systems with complex structures and in literature, we quite often come across structurally complex texts.

This paper aims at applying the principles of the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) approach to the complex literary system; the poetic system, *These Errors Are Correct*, to resolve its structural complexity. This study aims to analyse and make an interdisciplinary study by incorporating the key elements of the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) approach in literary interpretation.

Index Terms: elements, integration, totality, wholeness, complexity

I. INTRODUCTION

“System theory is a general science of wholeness... The meaning of the somewhat mystical expression, the whole is more than the sum of its parts is simply that constitutive characteristics are not explainable from the characteristics of the isolated parts. The characteristics of the complex, therefore, appear as new or emergent...” (Bertalanffy, 25)

In recent times, Literary Studies has witnessed expansion with the efforts of some literary scholars who have provided a new dimension to it by relating literature to Systems Science. According to Peter Checkland, a famous Systems Scientist, Systems Science is transdisciplinary in nature. The term ‘Systems Theory’ was coined in 1949 in a book entitled ‘General Systems Theory’ by the Austrian-American biologist Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who considered a general system as any theoretical system of interest in different disciplines. His theory transcended the traditional disciplinary boundaries and led to the emergence of various interrelated and corresponding elements of several disciplines into a whole. Therefore, it is rightly stated that Systems Theory bridges the gap between Science and Humanities as the concepts of this theory are flexible in nature. It leads to the elimination of the age-old differences and gaps between literature and Science.

In a generic sense, systems are there everywhere in the world, from the solar system to the rail network systems, social systems, natural systems, the internet and the World Wide Web and many more. In fact, the entire universe is one system, made up of several interconnected and interacting parts or elements. Referring to the application of Systems Theory to literature, eminent Systems Scientist and the founder of the Systems Society of India, Revered Prof. P.S. Satsangi states:

Literary systems are perceived intuitive systems which belong to the typology of human activity systems rather than other types such as natural systems, designed physical or designed abstract systems. Accordingly, they represent soft ill-defined problems or concepts or situations which are complex. (46)

Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM), one of the theories under the umbrella term, Systems Theory, is an approach or a methodology for discovering the relationships among different elements, which tend to focus on a specific issue or a problem. The term ‘Interpretive’ refers to different judgements and analyses provided on the basis of the elements and

'structural' means the organized and systematic relationship among the elements in a system. It is a well-defined methodology for identifying the relationships among the specific elements, defining a problem or an issue. It deals with defining complex issues that occur due to the presence of numerous elements. It becomes difficult to deal with such a system that is not structured. Therefore, it is the ISM model that helps in structuring these several elements in a systematic manner.

The ISM model owes its foundation (1974) to John Nelson Warfield's perception of enabling a systematic and organized study of a large number of elements. This holistic combination of the different elements would ultimately lead to the formation of a structured system. It is an emerging methodology that works as a support and assistance for individuals and groups for understanding complex and problematic situations. In this approach, different elements are put together in a structured and systematic manner.

The ISM approach determines the manner in which the different elements are related to each other. It establishes a structure based on the interaction and relationship among the elements i.e., through a mutual relationship a systematic structure is extracted. This model tends to help in forming order and direction in accordance with the complexity of relationships among the different elements engaged in a complex situation. This complexity of the issue or any system becomes complex because of the presence of a large number of elements and the interaction among these elements. When the number of elements is more in a system and the interactions are not very straight forward then it becomes complex.

Jeet Thayil's *These Errors are Correct* is one such structurally complex literary system. Jeet Thayil born in Kerala in 1959 is a performance poet, songwriter and a journalist. He has published four collections of poetry i.e. *Gemini* (1992), *Apocalypse* (1997), *English* (2004) and *These Errors are Correct* (2008). He gained his education in Bombay, Hong Kong and New York. In 2012, he wrote the libretto for the opera, *Babur in London*, in collaboration with the composer Edward Rushton. His first novel, *Narcopolis* (2012), was shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. He won the DSC prize for South Asian Literature. He has also been the editor of *Divided Time: India and the End of Diaspora* (2006), a book of essays: *the Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (2008) and *60 Indian Poets* (2008). Thayil's works are noted for their innovative kind of lyricism and his outside influences as in most of his works he has borrowed different lines from the works of other renowned writers.

These Errors are Correct by Jeet Thayil is a poetry collection including various poems with a tone of pain and grief of losing someone. This book is a blend of trauma and pain of the death of the poet's wife, Shakti and the physical and mental pain related to drugs, through which the poet suffered himself. The themes in Thayil's most of the poems are pain, loss, misery, trauma, disappointment, dissatisfaction, the hatred for oneself and the desire to die as he was addicted to drugs because of suffering in guilt and alienation after the death of his wife. It was this feeling of guilt in him for he was not present with his wife in her last moments that drive the content in most of his poems. Many of the critics opine that his poems are the reflection of his own personal life i.e. he has highlighted his own life in isolation and alienation, his miseries, imagination of the past traumatic events and his life as an addict. As can be seen in the following lines,

"This is Bodhgaya where a leafless tree gives more shade than a house. ..." (Thayil, 68)

In the above lines from the poem, *Not Remembering* Thayil has given a picture of his life when his wife was with him where even a tree could give him comfort but after the death of Shakti, this tree has become leafless. In other poems like *Premonition* and *Spiritus Mundi* the poet has continued with his lamentation and his inclusion of the theme of death as can be seen in the following lines,

"...

and of the houses, three, inside my head.

In the streets, death, in saffron or green,

..." (Thayil, 92)

In one of the poems, *A Cure*, he has mentioned about his life period when he was under drugs and his doctor advised him to write in order to cure himself which gradually made him free from his addiction and also made him pursue his passion for writing.

There are various aspects in the poetry collection, *These Errors are Correct* which make it complex in nature such as the different ways in which the poet stresses on his pain and trauma through which he suffered after losing his young wife, his complex style of writing as he has used numerous sub themes to focus on a central theme of pain and also the use of numerous references in his poems as he has borrowed the first line of his poems from the works of other prominent personalities. This is a unique feature of the writing style of Jeet Thayil. As it can be seen in the following lines, where the first line has been borrowed by Thayil from Curtis Bauer,

"Forget the sea, let it fade.

How much longer can the craziness last?

It'll stop

as soon as you imagine a new lost

landscape." (Thayil, 19)

In his poems, Thayil has not presented the factors responsible for the miseries and pain in his life in a very indirect manner he has expressed his grief and pain. In almost all the poems in the poetry collection, he is referring to his beloved wife and the suffering which he faces each and every day due to her loss. There are numerous factors that can be observed through an in-depth understanding and analysis of his poems, which are the cause of pain and grief in his life. The identification and understanding of these factors in the poems, add more complexity to the structure of the poetry collection, ‘These Errors Are Correct’.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review conducted reveals that some research initiatives have been taken in the application of Systems Theory in literature with reference to other systems methodologies, but, so far, no in-depth research work has been undertaken in the application of Interpretive Structural Modeling in literature. Following are some important research initiatives in the domain of literature:

A review entitled, ‘The Poet and the Pause’, published in the magazine, ‘Open’ by Madhavankutty Pillai (December 16, 2015) examines the poetry collection, ‘These Errors are Correct’, by Jeet Thayil, as a “chart of evolution of a man and his art in all its splenderness.”

III. METHODOLOGY

On probing into the complexity of the poetry collection, it emerges that the presence of the numerous factors in the poems in an indirect manner to highlight the miseries in the life of the poet himself, makes the poetic system complex. It is noted that each and every element / factor is connected with the other element. The incorporation of the numerous factors and causes in the poems give birth to the complex poetic system, These Errors Are Correct. To resolve the complexity present in the poems by Thayil, these numerous factors or causes have been taken into consideration as the elements for the formation of the Interpretive Structural Model (ISM) and the trigger question taken for this is, ‘What are the factors responsible for the causing of pain and trauma in the poet’s life.

For the formation of Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM), the following steps are taken into consideration.

Structural Self Interaction Matrix (SSIM)



Reachability Matrix



Canonical Form



Diagraph



Interpretive Structural Model

While applying Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) to the dramatic system, the adopted perspective is literary and descriptive, not mathematical and prescriptive.

The possible Structural Self Interaction Matrix (SSIM) for the complex poetic system, These Errors Are Correct is as follows (Figure 1):

V	V	0	V	V	0	0	V	V	V	V	V	1 Death of his wife
X	X	0	A	A	A	A	A	X	A	X		2 Mental illness
0	0	A	A	0	A	0	A	X	X			3 Addiction of drug and alcohol
X	A	0	0	A	A	0	A	A				4 Depression
0	A	0	0	X	0	0	A					5 Isolation and Alienation
V	V	0	0	V	A	A						6 Feeling of guilt
V	0	V	V	0	X							7 Previous experiences
V	V	V	X	V								8 Exposure to the painful past
V	X	0	0									9 Dissatisfaction
0	0	0										10 Desire to be loved
0	0											11 Need for purpose to live
V												12 Disappointment and hatred for himself
												13 Desire to die

Figure 2: Reachability Matrix_These Errors are Correct

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1
2	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
3	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
5	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
6	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
7	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1
8	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
9	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
10	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
11	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
12	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
13	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

Figure 3: Final Reachability Matrix_These Errors are Correct

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
2	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
3	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
4	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
5	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
6	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
7	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
8	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
9	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
10	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
11	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
12	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
13	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

Figure 4: Canonical Form_ These Errors are Correct

	2	3	4	5	12	13	9	11	6	7	8	10	1
2	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
3	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
4	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
5	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
12	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
13	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
9	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
11	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
6	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
7	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
8	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
10	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

Figure 5: Diagraph_ These Errors are Correct

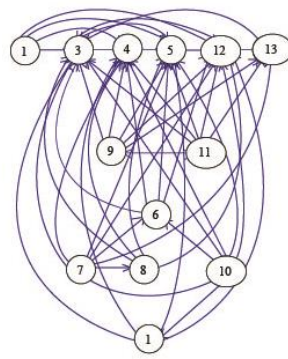
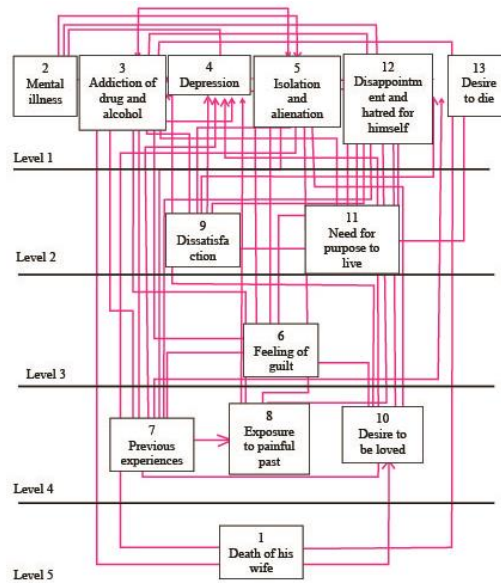


Figure 6: Interpretive Structural Model (ISM)



The application of the Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) to the poetry collection, *These Errors Are Correct* is an attempt to make a visible representation of the complex structure of the poetic system. For the development of the Interpretive Structural Model (ISM), the present study identifies the large number of factors presented in an indirect manner by the poet as the problem or the issue, which makes the structure of the poems complex.

The resultant ISM shows that the complex relationship among the various factors result as the cause for the pain and grief in the life of the poet. After the formation of the ISM, we obtain a comprehensive graph model with five levels. Depending on the degree of influence and connection the elements are placed at a level. The least influential ones or those elements which have no kind of influence on the other elements are placed at level 1 such as mental illness, drug addiction, depression, isolation and alienation, disappointment and hatred for himself and the desire to die. These elements are influenced by the other elements. At level 2, we have two elements that influence each other that are dissatisfaction and need for purpose to live. At level 3, there is one element which influences the other elements as well is influenced by the other elements i.e. the feeling of guilt. At level 4, the three elements i.e. previous experiences, exposure to traumatic events and desire to be loved are more prominent in influencing the above elements. The last level i.e. level 5 has the one most prominent factor or issue among the numerous other issues expressed by the poet in his poems and that is losing someone. The resultant ISM clearly brings out that the most prominent factor or cause for the pain and trauma in the life of the poet is the loss of his beloved wife. It is at the highest level which depicts that it is the major cause for the issues in the life of the poet, giving rise to grief and pain in his life.

Thus, the large number of factors interweaving together to bring complexity in the poetic system, *These Errors Are Correct* makes it complex in nature. Therefore, the Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) methodology has been applied to this literary system to resolve its complexity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus, by applying the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) approach to literature, it can be said that it helps in presenting a structured model because it can identify the relationships among the numerous factors and can also assert those which have the highest level of prominence and influence on others. This has been proven by the present research as the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) has been applied to the poetic system, *These Errors are Correct*, which has simplified and made it easily comprehensible in nature.

Therefore, it can be stated that the scope and relevance of Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) in the field of literature is very high and wide in nature. It helps in making a complex literary system easy and simple to understand by resolving its complexity. Through the present study, it can be strongly asserted that Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) is a beneficial approach in resolving the complexity of the highly complex literary system. This approach gives an insight into the collective understanding of the relationship of the system. As Bertalanffy rightly states,

“System is a complex of interacting components, concepts characteristic of organized wholes such as interaction, centralization etc.”

V. REFERENCES

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