



AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Quest for Truth through Interrogation: A Study of Questioning in Indian Cultural and Narrative Representations

Arzuman Ara

Associate Professor,

EFL University, Shillong Campus.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14107739>

Article History: Submitted-18/09/2024, Revised-14/10/2024, Accepted-19/10/2024, Published-31/10/2024.

Abstract:

Ignorance and search for truth have been a paradigm in many literary and cultural representations. The characters in such representation often undertake journeys and seek truth in different ways. In this article, an attempt is made to study questioning from multiple perspectives where questioning is seen as a means of accessing truth to free oneself from ignorance. The study expands across different genres from classical texts like the *Upanishad*, and the *Geeta* to modern literary writings and films in India. Taking clues from the linguistic structures and the philosophical deliberations upon questioning as a quest for truth, here, questioning is seen as a representation of a journey from ignorance to truth and how they affect the narrativity of the texts. Thus, questioning is postulated here as a linguistic, philosophical, literary, and aesthetic mode of representation.

Keywords: truth, ignorance, questioning, interrogation, quest.

Introduction

The search for truth is a continuous endeavour of philosophers and thinkers. Questions, as a mode of inquiry in the quest for truth, represent the passage of transition from ignorance to knowledge – knowledge of the truth that can lead to wisdom to live a better life for humans. Thus, questioning bridges ignorance and knowledge and frames a foundation for knowledge-building when one attempts to remove ignorance. The quest for truth and knowledge is also understood in relation to many other concepts and registers like ignorance, understanding, rationality, reasoning, and so on. Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Beyond Good and Evil* has compared truth with a woman and concluded that "all philosophers, in so far as they have been dogmatists, have failed to understand women" (2023: 4). Nietzsche's claim signifies that quest

for truth has not reached any destination, hence, as a matter of quest, questions remain. Nietzsche puts a series of questions in Chapter I of the book signifying how philosophy is a matter of inquiry through raising questions. In Philosophy, questioning is a major concept in the framing of epistemological paradigms by different thinkers which is, perhaps, epitomized by Kant's "What is Enlightenment?". Concepts of cogito, metaphysical intellect/categories, experiential knowledge, etc. have led to further questioning of knowledge forms which have culminated in critical questioning, for example, Freirean approaches to pedagogy have placed questioning (dialogic pedagogy) at the core of critical awareness.

This article is an attempt to understand how questions are used in the mimetic arts like literature and films with examples from some select texts and films. This is a qualitative study that seeks to interpret the linguistic signs of questions as cognitive and cultural signifiers. In our understanding of questions as a mode of inquiry, we also touch upon the other related concepts associated with the construction of the meaning of questions in the macro perspective of philosophical thoughts. This willy-nilly also considers that all the questions do not have answers and that all questions are not necessarily aimed at getting any answer to them. Question and answer are not seen as binaries as night and day, but seen as co-related phenomena in communication and meaning-making.

Question in linguistic structure and semantic signification:

Questions are the interrogative forms for asking something. It is assumed that a question seeks an answer either in negative or affirmative form. As a linguistic structure, questions are formed following certain grammatical rules and conventions of usage. Different languages have different interrogative structures. For our convenience, let us take English as an example. The English language has "Wh-questions" which include interrogative structures starting with – What, Who, When, Where, and How. For example-

What is a question?

Where do the questions come from?

When do you have a question?

Who is asking a question?

How to answer a question?

Along with that, the English language also has “Yes/No” kind of answers for questions that start with forms of “be” verb. For Example-

Is it a question?

Are they asking any question?

Was there any question?

Were the answers difficult?

The English language also uses forms of "do" for structuring interrogative questions. For example-

Do you have any question?

Did you answer the question?

Interestingly, the forms of both "be" and "do" can be used as negative-interrogative forms of questions. For example-

Is it not cold today?

Was it not a difficult question?

Don't you like to play football?

Didn't you say eat food today?

Remarkably, the English language has another convention of asking questions by using a tag question added to a statement. For example-

The question is a difficult one, isn't it?

Linguists use the technique of IC analysis (immediate constituent analysis) to discover the underlying statement behind a question which is often an affirmative sentence morphed into an interrogative form with the help of "wh-", "be" verb forms, "do" forms, and tag questions. The world language Esperanto has "ĉu" that replaces "be" verb forms and "do" forms as used in English. The English tag question is replaced by "cu ne?" in Esperanto. An interesting fact about Esperanto is that both "cu" and "cu ne" are used without any changes in the sound or form across the different tenses. For example-

Cu vi havas rizo? (Do you have rice)

Vi havas rizo, cu ne? (You have rice, don't you?)

The "wh-" questions are replaced in Esperanto as -

Kie- where

Kiu- who/which

Kia- what kind of

Kiam-when

Kio- what

Kies- whose

Kial- why

Kiom- how much/many

Kiel- how

Similarly, other languages have their interrogative structures for questioning. The question forms or the interrogative forms represent not just the structure of a language but are also important semantic markers. Semantically, many question/interrogative forms are not any questions, but they are statements. For example, the famous line from Kabir's doha, "Kya tan mañjta re, ekdin mati mein mit jana" (what/why this rubbing of the body to clean it, it will become mixed with soil one day) is a statement about the transitoriness of human life though the sentence starts with "kya" which is a question marker in Hindi/Hindustani language. Hindi also has ambiguous tag questions with both negative and affirmative components. For example, "Main jaa sakti hun (kya), han ya nahi?" (May I go? Yes or no?). Notably, many proverbs and idioms have interrogative structures though semantically they are statements and not questions. In many folklore traditions too, questions and answers between two people or two groups of people are often woven into singing for entertainment and imparting traditions. Sitakant Mahapatra's *The Unending Rhythm* (1992) gives several such folklores in the question-answer and dialogic forms, such as the Baha Song:

This is the day of days, the season of seasons

The mahul trees are all in flowers

And honey drops from the flowers

Do they not know, the boys and the girls

Do they not know the mahul flowers are smiling, full of honey? (p.229)

The question form here brings out the hidden inner passions of the young people with the metaphoric example of the flowers. Similarly, one *Jatra* song of the Oraons goes as

Mother, for whom are you in debt
And who has brought you wealth?
The daughters have pushed you to debt
The sons have brought you wealth. (p. 298)

Here, we get a glimpse of the social practices that lower the position of women/daughters in society. Thus, in folk traditions, interrogative forms serve more than mere functions of asking questions.

Question and Ignorance

In our popular understanding, ignorance is considered in a negative light. The famous Indian actress Zeenat Aman wrote on her Instagram post that, "The shame lies not so much in being ignorant, but in choosing ignorance" (26 June 2023). We have a prejudiced outlook towards ignorance and we often ridicule people for their ignorance in our socio-cultural pattern of behaviour. Ignorance is seen as a lack – a lack of intelligence, rationality, and also of common sense. One's acceptance of ignorance leads one towards questioning, reflecting, and realization which can be called "conscientization" in Freirean terms. Freire's dialogic approach follows the method of "Socratization" which has a three-stage development (Durant 2006:8). The first stage is the stage of "Opinion" where individuals have certain cherished beliefs without rational examination; the second stage is the "analytic" stage when the individual questions those beliefs leading to scrutiny and examination of them; the third stage is the "Synthetic" stage of reconstruction and justification of those beliefs. It is a well-known fact that Socrates raised more questions than answers to justify the validity of knowledge. Referring to Socrates, Jonny Thomson (2021:255) mentions about two kinds of ignorance, viz. "Being ignorant of our ignorance" and "Socratic ignorance;" Socratic ignorance is also considered as "epistemic virtue" as in it "we're awoken from our sleep by turning a critical eye on everything we think we know, and also on what we don't" (ibid, 256). Questioning, thus, forms the very basis of getting rid of ignorance by knowing things and phenomena. Our ignorance and questioning and their representation have also been subjected to and shaped by various socio-

cultural, ideological, and economic structures; the domains of Discourse Analysis deal extensively with such practices of questioning. Interestingly, in many of the religious narratives, God's intention is not encouraged to be questioned; rather, the Greeks had created several narratives "to justify the ways of God to Man". The rich can avoid questions and judicial interrogations by manipulating evidence or by bribing the stakeholders. The females and social marginals are not allowed to speak which leads to the famous interrogative contention, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak.

Questioning in Religious Scripture: *The Vedas and Bhagawad Geeta*

Man's questions regarding his origin have led to making the religious narratives in scriptures and prayers. Questions are, thus, our ontological vocation. Questioning is represented in literary narratives in many and varied ways. In the *Chandogya Upanishad* Sanat Kumar's question to Narada reveals the essence of the *Ekamevadvityam Brahma*. *Chandogya Upanishad'* Chapt.1, Sec.1. Verse. 4 has a series of questions such as – "What? What is the Rig? What? What the Sama? What? What the Udgitha? (nd)" Chapt.1, Sec.VIII. Verse. 4 and Chapt.6, Sec.1. Verse. 4 initiates the revelations with a question, "What is that subject, O Lord?" (nd). Chapt.6, Sec.VIII. Verse. 4 and Verse.6 have question on "What is its cause...." (nd). Interestingly, there is a *Prashna Upanishad* as a part of the *Athrava Veda*. Here *prashna* (question) is aligned with *jijnasa* (query) which is a quest to know – "Who am I?". Swami Lokeswarananda, in his byakhya (explanation) of the *Upanishads* says about "If a *shishya* is truly curious (*jijnasu*), then the *Acharya* is pleased to teach him.... The *shishya* would approach the *Acharya* with utter humility and pray, '*Bhagwan*, kindly accept me as your *shishya*. I do not know anything'" (2018:151). Swami Lokeswarananda lists the essence of the questions of the *shishyas* of Guru Pippala:

From where have we come? What is the source of life (*Jeevan*)? Which senses reveal the universe to us? Which is the main sense? Where is the origin of life/soul(*Prana*)? How does the soul enter the body? And how does it leave the body? Who sleeps and who keeps awake? What happens in the time of dreaming? What is the source of happiness/bliss (*Ananda*)? If a human being meditates upon the 'Aum' then where does he go and what does he gain? And at the end, what is the supreme essence (*Parama Satta*)? And where is that? (ibid, 151-2)

Swami Lokeswarananda has pointed out that such questions have a similarity with the *Mundaka Upanishada* which leads to the realization of the *Atma Tatva* and *Advaita Tatva*, a

kind of self-realisation leading to the understanding that the whole universe is the manifestation of ONE. The questions raised by the disciples made Guru Pippala realise that they were not ordinary learners, rather, they were pursuer of *Brahma Jnana*. Here the questions (*jijnasa*) form the relationship between, not just the Guru and the *shishyas*, they form an epistemic relationship between the Brahma and the *Jeevas* in the form of the disciples of Pippala. Although sage Pippala gets six of such disciples, in their *jijnasa* they represent the quest of the entire humanity. Thus, these questions are not just a set of linguistic utterances, they are the reflections of one's souls, one's intellectual and cognitive abilities, and one's deep hankering for *nirvana*.

The *Chandogya Upanishad* has a similarity with *Bhagawad Geeta* when we look at the relationships between the questioner and answerer. In the *Bhagawad Geeta*, Arjuna acts like a moral and modern critic who questions the god-incarnate Krishna regarding the rationality behind a war with one's own blood relations and rulers leading to the visual disclosure of the divinity of Lord Krishna in front of Arjuna. The narrative of disclosure of *Viswarupa* of Lord Krishna thus holds a significant part of the narrative of *Bhagawad Geeta*. Arjuna's questions lead Krishna finally to reveal himself in a visual form; the fluidity of orality of questions, thus leads to visuality, rather a visual materiality for the senses of sight, albeit from the physical human material visuality to a divine visuality which is visible only to Arjuna and Sanjaya. Such is a power of questioning that even God has to change his form! Interestingly, this again leads Arjuna to ask, "Who are you?" to lord Krishna which further reveals more about divinity. In a counter-reading act of the text, Arjuna appears to be more powerful in controlling the discourse through his questions. Mahanamabrata Brahmachari in his *Geeta Dhyana* (2003:43) says, "The direction-less and sad Arjuna bestows all to the will of Sri Bhagwan for getting the direction of virtue. When Bhagwan started uttering the *geetas*, Arjuna could not accept all the words of the Acharya (Krishna); he often asked questions like an intelligent boy, for which the speaker's speech got immensely regulated" (translation mine). Brahmachari maintains, "The form in which the script *Geeta* is shaped, it would not have been so if Arjuna was a silent listener" (ibid, 43). Brahmachari elaborates, "Arjuna has three confusing questions – the first verse of the third chapter, the first verse of the fifth chapter and the first verse of the eighteenth chapter. Bhagwan had to say a lot to answer those three questions. Basically, the essential shape of the *Geeta* is drawn on the three questions and their answers" (ibid, 46). Arjuna's questions were based on knowing about – *Sthitaprajna*, *Vice*, *Brahma*, *Adhyatma*, *Karma*, *Adhibhuta*, *Adhijajna*, *nistha*, and *death*. The foundation of such an endeavour is to find on what is the

foundation of truth and that truth should be validated with arguments (*vada-vichara*). It may be noted that the concept of *vada-vichara* can also be accepted as an equivalent to the dialogic approach of western philosophy. Thus, the questions and answers in such narratives make them dialogic narratives.

Questions in Literary Writings

Questions and interrogative forms have been important aspects of literary writings. Questions are a popular rhetorical device in literature though many might consider such a use of language as 'non-pragmatic'. In many a place, questions are also put in the form of inversions. They have been used for both linguistic/stylistic/semantic modulations and also to raise literary aesthetics. Questions in literary rhetoric are used for both affective and cognitive responses – to make things create an effect of "defamiliarization" so that they appeal and attract the attention of the readers. The questions of W. H. Auden in "The Unknown Citizen" evoke the condition of the modern "hollow man"- "Was he free? Was he Happy? The question is absurd:/Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard." "What is this life if full of care/We have no time to stand and stare?" in W. H. Oavies' "Leisure" is an interesting example of using a question as a rhetorical device in literature. The tone set by the interrogative mode is not equally conveyed if the message is presented in other syntactic forms. The lines lose their literary appeal if that are transformed to another syntactic structure. Like poetry, fiction too uses questions and interrogation for literary aesthetics. Balunga's questions in Nityananda Mahapatra's *Gharadiha* – "Where is freedom? How far is it? In which village is it?" refrain the condition of the post-colonial man.

Questions in Films and Media

In media, too, questioning has become part and parcel. The famous anecdote of Arnab Goswami, "The nation wants to know" has become a refrain of democratic demands on information (through questioning). When the veteran journalist Ravish Kumar claims that he just wants to ask questions to the Prime ministers, it opens up a gamut of debates and issues about both politics and media. In popular films too, questions have been used for various purposes. The suspense thrillers always have questions about who/why/where/how of an event. The entry of Gabbar Singh in the movie *Sholay* marks a viciousness with the question, "Kitne aadmi the?" with the accompaniment of background music evokes curiosity and fear about the speaker. Similarly, Amithabh Bachchan's question to Shashi Kapoor (Ravi) in *Deewar*, "Aj mere paas building e hain, property hain, bank balance hain, bangla hain, gari hain, kya hai

tumhare paas?" and the response "Mere paas Maa hain" marks an important landmark in the history of films in India. The scene with the question is, not only a turning point and a poignant moment of crisis in the film but also a moment of heightened battle between good and evil, between conscience and greed. The popular TV serial Mahabharata (B R Chopra) has a series of questions to depict the mental conflict and agony of the characters.

In a film like *Judai*, questioning by Hasmukhlal played by Pares Rawal leads to comic reactions and interestingly, it is only questions by Kader Khan (Kaajal's father) that puts off Hasmukhlal termed as the "Sawali Jumla" (questioning mess). The irrational nature of the questions here reminds us about the comedy of manners and comedy of humor as they project the irrational and inconsistent part of human behaviour and psyche.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is clear that questions have been used as a means to perform multiple functions in different narrative and textual forms. Questions are used as a means to impart knowledge about divinity. Nonetheless, the inner quest for truth and knowledge to know and understand the unknown is reflected by the questions. At the same time, the outer socio-cultural domains and traditional practices use question forms for imparting knowledge and values. They are used in literary writings as well as other media for their both linguistic and semantic qualities. They are used to arouse emotional responses from the listener/reader/audience. They are also used for entertainment and marketing of entertainment products like films. In all our cultural forms, the questions remain perennially important.

Works Cited:

Aman, Zeenat, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/Ct9CQshrOTs/>> 26 June 2023. also reported on <<https://www.outlookindia.com/art-entertainment/-news-298263>>, accessed

Brahmachari, Mahanambrata, *Geeta-Dhyan*. (in Bangla). Sri Mahanambrata Cultural and Welfare Trust. 1993.

Durant, Will. *The Story of Philosophy*. NY. Pocket Books. (1926) 2006.

Lokeswarananda, Swamy. *Upanishad*. Ananda. 1999/2018.

Mahapatra, Nityananda, *Gharadiha*, translated as *Bhite* in Bangla by Sukhendu Mohan Das, Sahitya Akademi. 2002.

Mahapatra, Sitakant. *The Unending Rhythm: Oral Poetry of the Indian Tribes*. M.C. Mittal. Inter-India Publication, New Delhi. 1992.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Arushi Book Enterprise. 2023.

Thomson, Jonny. *Mini Philosophy/A Small Book of Big Ideas*. Wildfire. 2021.

Upanishad, Chandogyogya. <https://scriptures.redzambala.com/chandogyo-upanishad/chandogyogya-upanishad-chapter-6.html> accessed on 31 July 2023.

Filmography:

Chopra, Yash. Dir. *Deewar*. 1975.

Kanwar, Raj. Dir. *Judaai* 1997.

Sippy, Ramesh. Dir. *Sholay*. 1975.