Shatranj ke Khilari – A Semiological Analysis with Roland Barthes Approach

Kumar Anketa, Kumar Sunil

Abstract--- This paper focuses on Media study which is an emerging field within visual studies. To understand the phenomenon of semiotics we have adopted Ronald Barthes approach who was born in November 19151(1), according to whom an image is a medium of communication having a signifier and signified. This approach provides a new essence to the selected movie taken as case to explain shots communicating verbally and non-verbally. The paper addresses the novel approach of semiotics allowing media to examine the signs in a given image. This analysis explains that how connotative meanings of visuals are derived even by nonverbal communication. This approach contains fresh semiotics with costume and colors as sign indicators. This paper is an attempt to understand that how semiology can be applied to visuals in media studies. The qualitative study conferring Roland Barthes perspective analyses within the messages or images are purposefully shown to the viewer. The paper will analyze Shatranj ke Khiladi (Chess players), a Hindi film by renowned director Satyajit Ray as case study of a narrative around 1856 in Awadh - a princely state in India.

Keywords--- Image, Costume, Connotation, Visual Communication, Satyajit Ray

I. INTRODUCTION

An image is considered more varied than words. The photo as a nonverbal language makes connotation very close to the viewer's internal agreement, which is heavily influenced by social and metaphysical influences. Barthes argues that in mythologies the picture occupies an important position. This plays a pivotal role in mental and emotional relaxation of the recipient. As stated by Barthes 'photography has an influence and needed to converted for interpretation hence, must be analyzed' (Roland Barthes 1972). He quotes an instance of a propagation campaigning where the candidates ornament their portrait to establish a connection between them and the viewer; here their image in the photograph cultivates to suggest the personal environment and communication. Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, described Semiotics as 'the science of signs' (Sibhan Chappman, Christopher Routledge 2009) 2. The reading of visual signs or image for analyzing and explaining its significance in the sign system is a semiological analysis. This practice signifies a symbolic communication between denotation and connotation. Every visual image comprises two messages: the first without a code or as it is, denoted and the second having a code, connoted, as Barthes explains .

The visuals presented in television, newspaper and in films stimulate the fundamental purpose of being in time and space. The image is a significant non-verbal powerful communication and is also able   to create meanings or representing the real world, signified and signifier both. Moreover, the visual image 'can also give an impression of concreteness, they can appear as a true representation of contextual events' (Harry Jamieson 2007) .

Roland Barthes remains one of the most influential thinkers in the semiotics of French school structuralism. Relatively the photographic images as a network of symbols were established and he coined his theory of denotation and connotation.

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An object has two layers, according to Barthes; the first is what it actually looks like, and the second is how it is depicted. He explains clearly that denotation is actual, while the idea of connotation is more complex and abstract. In Barthes opinion the image contains the aesthetic and ideological factors, which opened up at the connotative level to readings and multiple explanations to elucidate its importance created by multifaceted semiotic communication.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As a concept the science of semiology is used to describe the creation and perception of a symbol.' (Hadumod Busmann 2006). In addition to that Roland Barthes also proclaimed that semiology 'aims to analize any system of signs with their esence and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds or objects' (Roland Barthes 1968) all these together constitute a system of significance. While Saussure postulated semiology as a general science of signs of which linguistics would constitute only one component, Roland Barthes declared semiology to be a mere subset of linguistics .

Semiotics has become an important field in linguistics which studies the existence of signs within society. In two key semiotic principles, Roland Barthes interpreted the signs as the meaning and from the perspective of Saussure as signifier which can be studied in the following drawing:
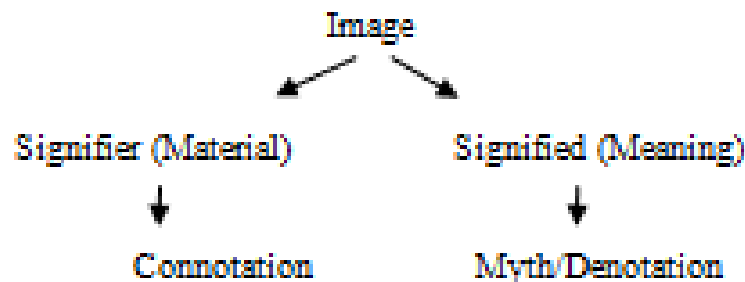

Illustration 1: Connotation and Denotation

The sign inhabits a significant place in the theoretical field and fits into a series of united ideas. Barthes termed these semiotic signs as the meaning signs which are related to the contextual purpose because they are used and carry impact at the same time. The sign as we have seen is a combination of a signifier and a signified, which is seen as amalgamation in a costume as a signifier and fashion as a signified. The signified defines psychological representation of things in relation to the outside world and is intangible in nature that is given through denotation.

III. SEMIOTIC THEORY

3.1 Denotation

Denotation is the primary level of signification, which explains the permanent or most obvious sense of the word excluding all subjective evaluations (Dictionnaire de la Langue Francaise 1993), which describes the literal meaning of the sign, therefore denotation of the visual image refers to what all people see without having any association to their culture, ideology or society. Referring to one of his quotes in which he says,

 "A garment, an automobile, a dish of cooked food, a gesture, a film, a piece of music, an advertising image, a newspaper headline these indeed appear to be heterogeneous objects. What might they have in common? This at last: all are signs.. This car tell me the social status of its owner, this garment tells me quite precisely the degree of its wearer's conformism."

This stage of signification deals with the sign that is free from any context and subjective interpretations as in connotation, such as the image of sunrise denoting the beginning of the day, and the end of night while in connotation the sunrise can be described a new day full of hope, the end of darkness, may be light …etc and many likely other interpretations.

3.2 Connotation

An idea or suggestion coming out of a spoken or written word in addition to its original meaning is a conotation (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2000). Roland explains that the way signs work 'it describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture' (John Fisk 1992).

IV. ANALYSIS WITH SEMIOTIC THEORY

It is a satirical film set in the colonial times of India during 1856. The films tells the story instituted in a region named Awadh a princly state, now called Lucknow which was in the rule of Mughal decedent Wajid Ali Shah. This character of the king is played by the actor Amjad Khan. Apart from the king there are two noblemen portrayed to reflect upper class family and these two men happen to be addicted to the game of chess. The story revolves around these two adictited nobleman. The first noblemen is played by Saeed Jafferey with the character of Mir and the second noblemen by Sanjeev Kumar as Mirza. Both continue with the game beyond and above dedicating themselves to unlimited rounds of chess, while the British continue to add the kingdom of Awadh under their reign and expel its present ruler, Wajid Ali Shah.

History defines King Wajid Ali Shah to having a refined taste in music, poetry and dance. He had progressive interest in these fields than in the dictatorship leaving the affairs of the state to his trusted and faithful administrators. Looking into this situation of King following his creative pursuits Lord Dalhousie who was the Governer General of British India along with Genral Outram executes the addition of Awadh to British Empire, thus completing a series of politically important acquisitions with Awadh being one amongst those.

The film is a political satire and Ray's subtle use of chess is a symbol of the shrewd moves by the British to capture the King. While the two men play, their marriages fall apart. Although the plot deals with heavy issues, Ray tells the story with a light touch. There are no dramatic scenes, no villains or heroes, and even the fighting at the end of the film is a mute affair .

The film sways between two storyline both revolving a shrewd game of strategy and joy becoming dangerous, ultimately leading to one's downfall. With the satirical background the story developes around the end of King Wajid Ali Shah's reign of Awadh and the two affluent addicted noblemen engrossed in their game neglecting to acknowkledge their falling city.

Picture 1: Mir and Mirza adorned in noble attire having Mughal influence of clothing playing chess. (Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDJ71VX0roM, Retrieved on August 20, 2019)

Costumes according to Barthes are Symbolic codes that are non-linguistic yet have meaning such as two characters playing chess in the picture above wearing Peshawari shawl on their shoulders and wearing topi or skull caps to cover their head. Topi had evolved into various forms and patterns during Mughal reign, like chaugoshia topi which is a four cornered cap, kamrakhi which is a cap resembling carambola or starfruit, qubba numa topi like a dome shaped skull cap and dopalli topi which was a round cap with two semicircular pieces of cloth sewn together with modest lace border falling round the head. Different classes of people worn different type of skull cap distinguishing themselves from one another. The court uniform and attire of the nawabs, could not be distinguished

much from those of the nobles, except for the quality of material used. Both the characters are seen wearing gaba which is a tight fitted tunic like garment run down till knees having straight fitted sleeves with flaps fastened with strings. Fine textured muslin, fine wool or cotton, was used to tailor all these items.

4.1 Denotation

The photograph can be read without any interpretation or with common sense acknowledging the visual meaning and give the obvious description of what we see in this image.

Characters: This image contains the profile picture of two Indian rich men smoking hukka (Smoke) while completely engrossed and concentrating on their game of chess.

The colors: Many colors appear in this photograph, like black, green, purple, orange and brown.

The costumes: Clothing of both the men is the reflection of past times of Mughal era in India.

Background (space): The background of the picture is black.

4.2 Connotation

This particular image can be viewed with different interpretations that are mainly associated to the socio-cultural background of the semiotic reader or viewer watching the image.

On applying Barthes theory onto the film viewer is allowed to have oppositional reading to above and can interpret unpleseant emotion in the picture above with different opinion. On the oppositional reading two noblemen symbolizes conflict within Indian nation while the British took over.

Picture 2 (above): King Wajid shah watching the dance along with his courtesans (Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrived from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDJ71VX0roM, Retrived on August 20, 2019)

4.3 Denotation

Characters: King Wajid Ali Shah engaged in watching dance sequence surrounded by courtesans.

The colors: Brown, Red, Golden, Yellow, Black

The costumes: Clothing of both the men is reflection of past times of Mughal era in India.

Background (space): The background of the picture is tints of beige.

4.4 Connotation

Apart from Roland Barthes Symbolic and Cultural coding applied to the above pictures saying the indulgence of King into the worldly pleasures, Semantic coding can also be applied in explaining the hidden meaning behind the scenery where the wealthy king symbolises India and his creative pursuits representing his interest to indulge in the cultural heritage of the country whereas in other picture two noblemen indulged in the game of chess representing the connotations of Lord Dalhoussie and General Outram to captivate India.

In the durbar, the nawab usually wore heavy bejewelled turbans decorated with jigha which is a bejewelled plume and a horizontal band cast, in gold designed with flowers or motifs. Sarpech or Kalgi worn in front of the turban consisting of a single feather or cluster of feather. Angrakha was a garment having opening towards the left side of the chest and a round collar. But in this particular picture we see King wearing the overcoat made out of velvet fabric and bejewelled fur demonstrating power and wealth. The colours of the attire are red that is considered to be rich colour and blue on the robe that signifies royalty. Apart from Costumes signifying Symbolic codes we can also derive Cultural or Referential codes from the picture as Barthes suggests anything which refers to external body of knowledge which can be scientific, historical, and cultural knowledge.

The character is being represented as a male royalty of Mughal culture.

Picture 3 (above): King performing the dance, King Wajid Shah wearing the headgear as representation of Hindu lord krishna (Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDJ71VX0roM, Retrieved on August 20, 2019)

Denotation

Characters: King Wajid Ali Shah engaged in the dance sequence surrounded by dancers

The colors: Blue, Black, White, Beige, Red

The costumes: Clothing is reflection of Mughal era and Kind is wearing dhoti and Kurta .

Background (space): The background of the picture is Black.

4.5 Conotation

This particular freeze frame is a depiction of Kings Pursuit in Kathak which is a dance form originating from India. King is seen wearing dhoti which are a costume of Hindu common men in those times. The headgear worn by the King has peacock feather conveying he is enacting Krishna, a Hindu god and rest of the dancers in the scene are Gopis which is scene of Rasleela that Hindu god Krishna used to indulge in. We are able to derive the particular knowledge with the help of Cultural or Referential Codes of Roland Barthes. The character portraying King Wajid Ali Shah has keen interest in dancing and poetry and likes to indulge in his different creative pursuits.

Picture 4: Khurshid's attire (Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrived from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDJ71VX0roM, Retrived on August 20, 2019)

4.6 Denotation

Character: Mirza's wife Khurshid played by Shabana Azmi

The colors: Yellow, Orange, Green

The costumes: Dupatta on her head, lehenga and choli. The exclusive female dresses were choli or angiya (bodice), kurti, dupatta or rupatta (long scraf), paejama (loose trouser). Lehenga is a loose lower garment like swinging skirt. Angiya worn underneath other garments on upper portion of the body. It was made to fit tight around the bosom and stitched to take the upper body's shape, at the back with string cords. Kurti worn over Angiya, was a waistcoat profusely ornamented with silver or gold ribbons. Salvar, another loose lower garment, was worn by both the sexes.

Dupatta, is a long scarf made of semi-transparent fabric is to cover the head and the breast. The upper class women wore dupatta made of high class muslin, called shubnum meaning night dew in english for its highly delicate structure. It was procured at very high expense.(Bhasin).

4.7 Connotation

Background (space): The background of the picture blurred to put emphasis on Khurshid's face reflecting her dilemma as an estranged wife doubting his husband's loyalty.

Picture 5 (above): Western Costumes of the General and his Captains (Image source: www.youtube.com,
Retrived from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDJ71VX0roM, Retrived on August 20, 2019)

4.8 Denotation

Characters: General and his Captains

The colors: Red, Black, Golden, Beige

The costumes: Clothing is reflection of British era during 1800's

Background (space): The background of the picture is majorly White.

4.9 Connotation

The frames above from the movie Shatranj ke Khilandi shows Genreal Outram played by Richard Attenborough sitting in the chair and Captain Weston played by Tom Altar standing at the left in the picture. Towards the right we see another English man probably of lower rank than of Tom Altar due to variation in the colour of his costume. All the characters in the freeze frame are wearing dress designed particularly for men serving in East India Company in those times. We see color variation in their costumes symbolising the difference in the ranking held in the company. Tom Altar as Captain Weston is wearing Red fitted suit with black band collar whereas Lieutinant is wearing Black fitted suit with red band collar. Both the suits have golden hem in the border of collar, cuffs and placket. Whereas General Outram's suit have golden tassles along with three golden ribbons running across his suit from the front stitched in a diagonal manner. The closure is towards right side of his chest with big size buttons. The medals that General Outram has procured in his service of lifetime are tucked into the neckline of the suit. Apart from the suits they are seen holding caps and white gloves.

V. CONCLUSION

Every single frame of the film is like a painting, the colours deliberately muted, to make the picture reminiscent of a bygone era. There is a certain mellow feeling throughout the film, primarily brought on by the hues used. One gets a sense of tragedy looming large, even when the characters aren't speaking or emoting. To add to these, of course, are some of the best performances ever assayed on screen in a Hindi film. Sanjeev Kumar and Syed Jaffrey played as the two noblemen whose love for chess knows no bounds. While Syed Jaffrey is the warm, jolly and courteous simpleton oblivious of the fact that his wife is having an affair behind his back, Sanjeev Kumar is the more aggressive of the two friends, both on and off the chessboard. Amjad Khan plays Wajid Ali Shah with great sensitivity, showing once again his stature as an actor. The Nawab of Awadh, thanks to his softer inclinations, literally gives up his crown without the British army having to shed a single drop of blood. On hearing that the British are coming to overthrow him, when his prime minister breaks down, Wajid Ali Shah remarks — 'Only music and poetry can bring tears to a man's eyes'. His long speech to his ministers upon hearing of Outram's plans is the stuff of cinematic legend, fraught with a mix of angst and defiance, and of tragedy that he would no longer be able to indulge himself with the things that gave him the greatest pleasure.

The film Shatranj ke Khilari is set in Lucknow former Awadh, India 1856. The two chess-obsessed noblemen, Mir (Jaffrey) and Mirza (Kumar) meet up every day to indulge in their passion. They are ignorant and indifferent to the upheaval that surrounds them. At the same time, the King of Awadh, surrounded by his own creative pursuits, neglects his state duties. This results in an assertion of British rule and a demanding his abdication.

The main characters portrayed in the film have been examined following the particular knowledge of Connotation and Denotation in the Semiotic Theory of Roland Barthes.

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