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## **“The Donkey King” among the kings of the world: Semiotics of Animation**

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## **Abstract**

Movie posters, images, props and objects reflect deep meanings through film semiotics. These meaningful images reflect socio-cultural aspects of a society. At the same time, some socio-political aspects are there in the structures of all pseudo-democratic norms. This paper is set out to examine movie posters and images of one of the five animation films produced in Pakistan, “The Donkey King” is released by Talisman Studios. Images were selected as per their themes and popularity index. Those images were analysed by using descriptive qualitative approach. Roland Barthes semiotics theory (1968) was applied for identifying verbal, non-verbal, denotative and connotative meanings of selected images. Hidden ideologies are then uncovered in signs of images, letting the audience know about the messages and the

greater purposes of the producers. This analysis helped revealing Orwellian nature, social taboos and myths that are intertwined in socio-political scenarios. The analysis shows that these two semiotic modes complement and supplement add the denotative and connotative modes of meaning. The analyses of facial expressions, props and gestures can be very helpful for future studies on animations.

**Keywords:** social semiotics, connotative meaning, denotative meaning, animation, film semiotics

## **1. Introduction**

Animation Films are produced to entertain society and highlight some issues that are otherwise covered due to many reasons. Animated films are art forms that combines story and socio-political phenomena, in real life or in imagination. Literary texts and films are same in communicating imagery and symbols. Gestures and actions express thoughts. The settings, plot, characters, conflicts and symbols in posters and pictures can be analysed using literary theories. Power of imagination in lives of humans are picturised in film narratives as well as in literature of a story.

For this research study animated movie “Donkey King”, is taken. It is a project of the Geo Films and was produced by Talisman Studios. It is directed and produced by the famous animation director, Aziz Jindani, Zeeshan Karimi. This movie was a tremendous success. The posters, title songs and teasers were appreciated by the audiences from all age groups. It was widely appreciated and accepted as a fun watch, tells us about bitter realities in a humorous Orwellian storyline. In the present study the researcher explored socio-cultural significance of the characters, setting, plot and themes. Images were organized in three categories as per their theme. Film reviews, Journalists and analysts claim that this movie is full of hidden messages and meaning.

So, its trailers, teaser, posters and images have signs with socio-political significance. In one of the interviews producers links it with Machiavellianism in modern democracy. The donkey king attracted attention from audiences across all age groups. Children were found to be singing the title songs in the galleries of their schools, after its release. It's the second attempt of the producer after trying his luck with Commander Safeguard in advertisement and that rewarding experience led the producer in establishing "Talisman Animation Studios".

Animated action opens up in Azad Nagar, where next in line to the throne is not able and thus king's adviser Fitna (Fox) told him to have democracy. Finally, they put the garland of throne in the neck of Jaan Mangu, so-called famous character of the film. His selection was merely an election and thus the animal who was considered to have no brains is the one ruling the country. One thing that is common in Pakistani animations is their stance in presenting pure Pakistani culture in terms of settings, dress codes, regional languages, props, objects and dialogues. Wide spread popularity of "The Donkey King" that is in fact Pakistan's – most expensive ever-animation, shows a soft corner of viewers towards their own identity.

## **2. Research Questions**

2.1 What are the differences in design, typography and colour tone of the images of the main character's past and present?

2.2 What is sociocultural association of the characters and the lyrics of "Khotay Da putter" (son of a donkey) that made it successful despite the fact that it is pseudo-humorous?

2.3 What are the hidden messages in connotative and denotative meanings of the images, which become signs in three categories from "the donkey King"?

### **3. Review of Literature**

Semiotics is derived from Greek word 'Semion', which denotes a sign. Semiotics is the study of signs that investigates sign processes and their functions in different forms or an observation of signs with denotative and connotative meanings. This representation can be cultural, linguistic or visual. Semiotics is deeply rooted in structuralism, portraying patterns of symbolism in analysing literary or linguistic texts as done by Saussure (1915) or an observation of sign and interpretant observed by Peirce (1931). Contemporary semiotics and visual arts can be very helpful in understanding consumer insights in emerging trends and opportunities.

Saussure (1915) classified signs into signifier, which is the sound, image, or word, and the signified, which is the concept or meaning the signifier represents for the analysis of visual signs such as drawings and paintings along with linguistic signs such as sounds, words and physical response. In reality it is focused on three modes of signs that are language as words, image as pictures, physical representation and object. This theory led to the development of the theory of social semiotics (Royani, 2014). Visual semiotics further reveals direct meaning of language showing the world and interactions. Magazines, posters and paintings are recognized as texts that carry interpretations of meanings. (Jewitt, 2004). Through social semiotics, Barthes theory is now expanded through the analyses of visual image, such as such as the photography, advertisements and movement picture. Saussure advocated that signifier and signified are in an arbitrary and conventional relationship that mean differently to different people.

Peircean semiotics observed signs and interpretant. The effect the sign has on the receiving mind is called the interpretant. The interpretant may not be identical to the sign's object (something called as "miss-understanding") but it is eternally prevented from assurance of this match or mismatch because the only way available is the verifying the match to use additional signs! Peirce's understanding of formal semiotics was based on philosophic logic that deals in triadic relation such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant. This relationship is not possible into actions between pairs. He divided signs into sign, object and interpretant in order to find how signs combine, and how some signs embody or incorporate others.

In Peircean semiotics, signs that have an arbitrary or conventional relation to their objects are called symbols. But there are two other kinds of sign-object relations which are not completely arbitrary: icons are signs that resemble their objects, and indexes are signs that relate to their objects by some actual contact or environmental contiguity. Peirce focused his attention on relationship of a sign, its object and its interpretant, either immediate (present in the sign) or mediate. Peirce's theory can be termed as cognitive semiotics due to its closeness with the theory of knowledge.

Semiotics of images was studied by Barthes (1968). Most of his work was related to the advertisements and it is applicable to photography as well where pictures are understood and meanings are exposed. Barthes stated that Semiology 'aims to take in any system of signs whatever their substances and limits like; images, gestures, musical sounds, and objects. Barthes considered semiology as a linguistic part covering the great signifying unities of discourse.

Barthes focused his attention towards two levels of meanings in visuals and packages

of advertisements while distinguishing signs into verbal, that are texts of the poster such as title, names of the cast, release dates etc. and non-verbal signs are the images supporting verbal signs. First level of denotation or basic meaning is what people identify in literal terms. According to Bouzida (2014), a denotation is "what we see" in the picture or what is "there" in the picture. According to author Clive Scott, this is another way of saying that a photograph has both a signified and a referent, is both coded and encoded. Photo is the signifier and signified is the literal meaning or what is actually represented by the image. Connotation is the implied meaning of the image that takes into account immediate cultural value from what is seen and not what is actually there. When sign meets the feelings or emotions of their users and consider cultural norms, interaction or connotation occurs Fiske (1990). Barthes considers connotation as a process that unites signifier and signified (Barthes 1968). Additional meanings are thus attached to the first signifier and it is understood through multiple objects such as colour, camera angle, lighting etc. Coded iconic messages in the storyline are portrayed through images. Reader applies conventional knowledge for encoding an image. Non coded messages go for "literal" denotation without considering the perspectives of the larger societal code. Non coded messages have no deeper meaning and the image is exactly what it shows.

Bakhtin's philosophy of language can be termed as literary semiotics as per its closeness to literary criticism. His concepts of social, ideological and verbal signs present confrontation instead of anticipation and confirmation regarding official semiotics and its Saussurean, Peircean, Morrisian and Husserlian, etc., matrixes. Literary semiotics allows perception of alien words—not only the word of the other person but also the word of others as it resounds within the word of the "same"

subject.

Halliday (1976) argued against traditional narrow focus on written language and separation between society and language. He exemplified the origin of a semiotic approach in his book '*Language as Social Semiotic*' and presented the idea of Systemic Functional Grammar that revolves around three metafunctions. For him languages evolve as systems of "meaning potential" or as sets of resources which influence what the speaker can do with language, in a particular social context.

General framework of linguistic origins of social semiotics is now extended to 'semiotics of social Networking'. Now it is taking sounds and visuals into consideration while identifying different modes of communications and their combinations in traditional and digital media, in order to approach semiotics of culture.

Subfields of social semiotics were developed by Van Leeuwen who was a Dutch linguist. He worked on multimodality as well. Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design is built on Halliday's framework and it provides new "grammars" for other semiotic modes such as visual and aural modes. These new grammars are socially formed and are changeable sets of available "resources" for making meaning and they reflect the fact that images "can 'say' (some of) the same things as language – in very different ways" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 50). These grammars are shaped by semiotic metafunctions of Halliday. New representations of these metafunctions are as follows:

1: The Experiential metafunction concerns "the representation of interactions and conceptual relations between the people, places and things depicted in images"

2: The Interpersonal metafunction in their approach, meanwhile, concerns the “complex set of relations that can exist between images and their viewers.

Bouzida (2014) observed sign system of visual image and non-verbal communications. In fact, semiotics is the representation of signs in linguistic and nonlinguistic manifestations that involves the notion of signifier and signified for the analyses of media signs and their cultural representations.

Film aficionado, Omar Ali Khan, presented a detailed relationship between cinema and society. He noticed common roots of film making in India and Pakistan. He observed cinematic codes and their mutual relationships, cinema and society (2017). Culture is represented in animations through dress codes, locations, language and their objectives. Disney has tried to present many popular cultures of the world culture since 1923 through animations, such as Native Americans in Pocahontas, Arabs in Alladin and Chinese tradition in Mulan. Thus, animation has proved to be a powerful tool for analyzing social dimensions of meaning. Such methods can social semiotics crosses boundaries to evaluate forms of culture (Hodge, 2014). Madiha Jamil (2017) analyzed the reflections of cultural and natural identities in animation films of Pakistan. This study attempted to describe the phenomenon of cultural identity that is articulated in 3 Bahadur and Burka Avenger. This study revealed the messages portrayed through semiotic presentations of animations. The researcher advocated the need to define local trends and norms while keeping cultural complexity and diversity in view, the way these are defined in other areas of the world, such as Middle East. Pakistani animators are at work since 1990 and these productions represent domestic content breaking the tradition of exporting their skills to the global market such as Hollywood productions (Jamil, 2017).



## **4. Methodology**

In this descriptive qualitative analysis, meanings are interpreted through theory of social semiotics. Fundamental aim was to identify clothing and objects which function as ‘signs’ in relation to other images, gestures and written words.

Moreover, Barthes’s theory is applied to uncover the meaning (denotative meaning, connotative meaning and myth). Images were selected on the index of their popularity among people and usage in advertisements. After selection, images were classified into pairs and categories. Finally, both images were coded as per their themes and then compared to assess their hidden connotative and denotative meanings. Researcher described significance of signs and analysed them using Barthes theory of social semiotics.

Images were collected through Google search engine. After collecting images researcher organised them in three categories. Two images of each category were then resized for harmony. Researcher kept the ratio of 244 (horizontal) and 200 (vertical) pixel ratio keeping aspect ratio off. These measurements were taken to minimize the load of different sizes. These images are used to illustrate semiotics represented in the film.

Category A: Theme of Donkey as King with Crown

Category B: Theme of Donkey in his original getup

Category C: Theme of Donkey as Father and Son

## **5. Data Analysis**

Category A: Significance of main characters, King to be in his casual work clothes as a washer man “Dhobi” and Miss Fitnah, The fox with her cunning smile



Table1: Theme of Donkey as King with Crown

	1-Signifier	2-Signified	3-Sign
Denotation Primary Sign System	A crown Gown	Ornament made from jewels and gold	The power
Connotation Secondary Sign system	Form Dress and ornaments used by kings' wear	Concept The power	Signification The power

Category A images show that power belongs to the forces behind selection of the king. (Past)Fox, often thought very cunning. Identified in cultural stories in Pakistan. Donkey as a stupid animal. The Donkey King foregoes the standard reliance on a strong story and plotline and the film tend to use implicit images. The images and objects raised social talks about hidden messages. This allows societal powerful and powerless, imagine the situations without having a definite answer. Main character of the film in his casual work clothes show his carefree nature in the first place. Second image of the category also confirms its denotative meanings and direct messages. On

connotative level, images represent misery and powerlessness of commoners. At the same time there are nonverbal messages in the images. There is only one verbal sign and it is in the form of text printed on the future king. This text ‘Dream On’ shows that character has very high dreams and he can be an easy target to those out hunting. In the second image, chemistry between Miss Fitna and future king is in their gestures and looks. Both have a position in the society of animals and all verbal and nonverbal signs confirm their positions, power and powerlessness or dreams of power respectively.

Category B: Significance of main characters, The Donkey King with Crown and clothing and Miss Fitna, The fox with her cunning smile (Present)



Table 2: Theme of Donkey in his original getup

	1-Signifier	2-Signified	3-Sign
Denotation	A headband T-Shirt	Piece of cloth Casual wear	
Connotation	Form Dress used by commoners	Concept The powerlessness	Signification The powerlessness

Both images have a clear relationship and coded iconic messages portray meaning through verbal and nonverbal messages of the images.

This message is easily understood and the images represent a clear relationship. Thus, image of a king with crown for example might imply power in life, authority or happiness. Both images show high levels of iconic coding that can be understood in the larger societal code. King in the crown and gown is not how it looks. Denotative meanings show power and denotatively, king is powerless. Other image in the pair confirms deeper meaning where fox show her powers and humiliates “The King”. The image is not what it shows.

Category C: Significance of the relationship between father and his son (king)



Table 3: Theme of Donkey as Father and Son

	1-Signifier	2-Signified	3-Sign
Denotation	A Crown and eye-glasses Kings dress and casual wear	Piece of cloth Casual wear	
Connotation	Form Dress used by commoners	Concept The powerlessness	Signification The powerlessness

Images reflect a feeling of 'Zootopia' but star-studded cast of legendary actors give viewers' vibes of social phenomenon that can be anywhere. On Denotative grounds, these images reflect strong bonding between father and son. Again, verbal and non-verbal messages confirm hidden chemistry of smiles, gestures and postures. Connotative meanings are arbitrary and are confirmed by the rules and conventional cultural values. Movies have their own themes and all elements in a movie collectively confirms those themes. Images, props, objects, posters, songs and dialogue represent certain meaning potentials that are otherwise hidden. The cinema has its own specific genres that is hard to get mixed up. Some examples are the western, the gangster film, the opportunistic "dramatic comedy" in the French style, etc. Image code "A" represents several signs that are equally representing meaning for the viewers. These images represent characters and thus makes the audience visualize their roles in the society. Lingshu Hu (2018) in his research was observed that Chinese films were the only known source of drawing attention of the audience towards social phenomenon of representing the image of an ideal man, from the findings of China (1949) After the release of title songs, teaser with politically charged dialogues and posters, movie was the talk of the town and everyone was discussing interpretations of hidden images. Producer find himself amused with different guess works and claimed that it's a social story that shows broad cinemascop of Pakistani animations. Talking to Dawn, Jindani reasoned: "The idea for the story came like the apple dropped in front of [Isaac] Newton cinemascop of Pakistani animations.

Almost all of the characters maintain harmony of socio-political phenomenon presented in the images. Chacha Pehalwan in the voice of Ismail Tara is another voice

of wisdom by veteran comedian Ismail Tara. Mangu is a dhobi (cloth washer) by profession who is receiving advice from the framed picture of his late father. Producer kept a social tone through the script. Urdu and Punjabi proverbs, idioms and marked phrases used here and there add spice to the Orwellian democracy in Azad Nagar. Script is very tricky and references from film and television are used here and there.

A legal petition against the release of film claimed that title song making fun of Raja cast and then it was further raised that character and dialogues are humiliating for the current prime minister was clarified and rejected by the court.

This highest grossing animated film ruled cinemas in South Korea and Spain and Catalonia. In Korea it was released alongside a slate of other international animated films including Angry Birds 2 and Wonder Park. Its release and acceptance show its wide perspective. Its theme is very common for democracies where hidden agendas and ruling powers change from one pillar of the country to the other one. Its popularity in other countries of the world, three dubbings in Spain shows its popularity and acceptance. It was released under three different titles “El Rey Burro” “El Rei Ruc” and “AstoErregea”. Its release in Turkey, Russia and Korea was another landmark.

## **6. Results and Discussion**

Findings show grounded significance of this Orwellian’ tale expressing game of power in democracy. It was a box office hit of 2018 and became highest grossing animation in the history of Pakistan.

Analysis of images reveal hidden meanings. These meanings can be interpreted through signs. First category of the images shows the main character in the getup of

king with crown. In the image A1 King's smile shows that he is enjoying his new powers. A2 shows himself in the same getup but humiliated by another character 'Miss Fitna' or the fox. Connotative meanings show the cunning nature of the fox and powerlessness of the king in this image. This animation received appreciation of global cine distributors after its acceptance and appreciation mastermind of the theme, Aziz Jindani remarked in an interview that the story with universal insights can cross geographical boundaries and barriers. (Nation) Film's international release in Russia, South Korea and Spain proved that the idea of Orwellian democracy is very much global and deeply rooted in the structures of societies. Film was dubbed in multiple local languages. Through this producer gave the message of its strong theme that was globally appreciated.

Second category of analysis show "The king to be" in his casual work clothes and get up. Again, his smile shows his carelessness. However, the words printed on his shirt reflect that he is dreaming of becoming a king. Image B2 shows the relationship between Miss Fitna and "The king to be". Philosophically, there's a bit of an Orwellian touch to the plot. No, not an awful lot of Animal Farm, (Dawn, October 14th, 2018).

Though it looks like Zootopia, it has Orwellian touch and after its release Pakistani film industry is in its quixotic situation. In a seminar organised by Pakistan International Film Festival (PiFF) on 'Potential of Animation in Pakistan – Challenges and Opportunities' where the success of 'The Donkey King' was celebrated with a dialogue on improving the quality of the upcoming animations.

Through this analysis of meaningful expressions, linkage between signs and societies

is determined. Language was understood in western philosophic traditions and its origin dates back to the times when objects and words semiotic speculations. Social dimensions of meanings are emphasised in this analysis. Genre of this animation shows its roots in Orwellian democracy. Social semiotics finds its place across boundaries and meanings are unblocked and uncovered. Differences of traditional cultures are often ignored. In his research Isfindyar observed that artistic pictures and images invite readers to the cinema. Finally, social semiotics expands the horizon of the analysis involves all cultural codes of messages represented in advertisements, slang, fashion and tattoos. Isfindyar (2017).

People produce and communicate information through focused social settings. These settings can be family settings or well institutionalized contexts that are hemmed in by habits, conventions and rules. Social semiotics is the name given to those attempts used through films, posters and images. Reading *Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, one of the most influential books on the topic. Kress, Gunther R., & van Leeuwen (1996). Various researches use his frameworks for multimodal analyses. In his book, he offered his interpretations on the analysis of visual images. Visual semiotics as a sub-domain of semiotics are dealt in terms of three metafunctions discussed by Halliday. Kress and van Leeuwen have adapted these meta functions in order to reflect the fact that images “can ‘say’ (some of) the same things as language – in very different ways” (KvL 2006: 50). In her research Gabriella Torres observed elements of images from the World Link EFL textbook and analyzed how they worked together to produce meaning. Barthes (1968) advocates articulation of film semiotics and thus offered a new dimension to researchers working with new media. This is how film ‘speak’ and it was a true application of semiotics based on theories



developed by Saussure (Christian & Taylor, 1974). He further suggests that a specific underlying theme is easy to be connoted through film semiotics as that of the nuclear bomb in Godzilla. Thus, visual semiotics are in line with advertisement, film and fashion industry. Here posters and images invite audiences for communicating messages in a certain way.

Third category of analysis was focused on the image of sound track ‘Khotay da Puttar’ (Son of a donkey) that was released as a celebrity bonus track on June 16<sup>th</sup>, Father’s Day. Mangu’s legacy was penned in lyrics by Asrar and Aziz Jindani, featured with the voice and musical composition and now it is an ode to all father-son relationships. Its pseudo-humorous approach took the audience by storm and left some of them dumb-stuck in their shivering thoughts of Orwellian democracy and others, thinking of having another family-fun-pack on a weekend night. Its acceptance and likeness by all ages proved that everyone is curious about hidden meanings in posters and sound tracks. Audience wanted to know more about the events in the sequence as it was the talk of the town. It was hard to discuss interpretations without watching it. So, cinemas were full of anxious societal images. ‘Khotay Da Puttar’ (Son of a donkey) was liked because of its Punjabi touch, lyrics and its deeply rooted themes. Its denotative meanings cannot be understood without digging deeper into its cultural denotation. This phrase was used in Pakistani culture for so long. It can be very difficult to interpret it without context. It can be funny or abusive at the same time. Movie posters carry many semiotic elements that are worth analyzing and researchers can figure out how ideas and concepts are illustrated in posters (Hermawan, 2011). Just like the movie itself, the song’s animation is on point. The song is released for Father’s Day and conveys a strong message about being humble

and polite towards the people. It also gives a message to be a responsible leader and take care of your people by being kind and looking after them. The song follows the same theme as the movie by being funny and entertaining but conveying a message at the same time. Jan Mangu's father is seen following around reminding what he is and what he should be doing. The lyrics are very interesting and the song is very catchy. The Tabla in the background added the perfect desi style in the song. Listen to the song and you surely won't be able to stop yourself from listening to the song again and again. Movie posters as art forms, are now evolved in various aspects namely aesthetically, technically, socially, ideologically (Shahid 2018). Researchers noticed swift development of Pakistani animation industry with creative minds of technically savvy animators (Nasir, 2018). Pakistani cinemascope is now using linguistic powers of phonetics, pragmatics, semiotics and musicology to draw social images. This union of linguistic tools have given voice to the social thought and now rhythm, melody, timber in music as well as speech, casual everyday soundscapes and sound tracks are creating musicological sources. In his book 'Cinema and Society' Omer Ali Khan described 'cinophilia' in Pakistan and he observed varieties of different genres in Pakistani industry. The film is basically a blend of entertainment and politics. Based on the result of the analysis, it concludes that those images express social and political norms in societies. The film ruled box office as after running for over 25 weeks, it made Rs 24.75 Crores.

## **7. Future Implications**

The results and methods of this study can be used to analyse socio-political phenomenon expressed through visuals and animation films. Film semiotics and visual analysis can be very helpful in the realization of socio-cultural patterns of a

society (Shahid, 2018).

## **8. Conclusion**

“The story chose the language of animation itself.” Images selected by then researcher have their socio-political significance. These images have connotative and denotative references that are expressed in the analysis using Bathes Theory. Title of the film support the analysis and confirms its socio-political significance in society. Though it is produced in Pakistan, but its worldwide appreciation remarks its meaning richness through semiotics. Characters and storyline further states hidden meaning in this Orwellian animation. Analysis of first category shows the power through clothing and crown. At the same time image shows the powerless ness of crown and king where fox is backing all decisions and ruling from behind. Smiles show the frugalness of the king and his crown. Analysis of second category shows the change of getup. Here again smile shows simplicity and careful gestures of common people. Casual clothing of commoners shows powerlessness. Finally, third category shows that the voice of wisdom is always there in one form or the other. Here, father strongly holds the place in the mind of the king and controls his thoughts through directions. All images have one common feature and that is the smile of the main character, The King. Producer uses this semiotics that were present in the society for so long. These signs have connotative and denotative meanings, expressed through images. Based on Bathes theory “The King”, in three different categories denotes power, whereas its connotative meaning is powerlessness in crown and the gown of king. Third category, again hits the world like storm. Title of this song is in one of those widely spoken languages of the subcontinent. Title phrase, “Khotay da Puttar” (Son of a donkey) was used in the society in many ways. To scold, to abuse, to teach or to have some humour.

According to Burty each element used in a movie poster carries its own meaning (Burty, 2013). “A photograph is always invisible; it is not it that we see” (Barthes 1968).

To sum up, *The Donkey King* is a fun watch semiotic rich film. It’ll make you laugh here and there, and think about the game of power in socio-political situations in societies. “*The Donkey King*” has proved itself and now it is standing heads and shoulders above the others.

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