



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Ideological Binaries Depicted in the Documentary “Don’t Tell My Mom that I am in Pakistan”: A Semiotic Analysis**

**<sup>1</sup>Dr. Sabahat Parveen\* <sup>2</sup> Muhammad Jahanzaib <sup>3</sup> Anam Ikhtiar**

1. Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Education Faisalabad Campus, Punjab, Pakistan
2. M Phil English Linguistics, Riphah International University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan
3. MPhil English Linguistics, ELT Teacher, English Access UE, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

**\*Corresponding Author:** sabahat.parveen@ue.edu.pk

**ABSTRACT**

This research abstract explores the ideological binaries portrayed within the documentary titled "Don't Tell My Mom that I am in Pakistan" through a comprehensive semiotic analysis. The documentary delves into the multifaceted landscape of Pakistan, offering a unique perspective on the nation, its people, and their experiences. Drawing upon Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, this analysis investigates the signs, symbols, and visual elements employed in the documentary to reveal underlying ideological dichotomies. By scrutinizing the semiotic resources within the film, this research aims to unveil the intricate web of meanings that contribute to the construction of ideological binaries, shedding light on how these binaries shape perceptions and narratives. Through this semiotic lens, the study ultimately seeks to deepen our understanding of how documentaries can serve as platforms for the exploration and deconstruction of ideological dualities within complex socio-cultural contexts.

**KEYWORDS** Documentaries, Don't tell my mother that I am in Pakistan, Ideological Binaries, Semiotic Analysis

**Introduction**

As mentioned above, the researcher has selected a documentary for research named “Do not tell my mother that I am in Pakistan.” It is made by a very famous channel called National Geographic and telecasted in 2016. It is the most famous documentary made on Pakistan in recent times.

Sausure held the view that signs in pictures lack a direct connection between their form and the underlying concept, a relationship he later referred to as "conventional" rather than "logical." (Saussure 1983). In the context of academic discourse, particularly regarding the specific relevance of images (referred to as 'tokens' at the time), he observed that they generally possess a customary or discretionary nature. (Peirce, 1931)

The researcher has conducted the analysis on semiotic level and to conduct it, four images are selected as data from the documentary. In the documentary, the primary organizational structure revolves around four key modes of expression: "expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive," with much of the content structured accordingly. (Nichols, 2001). The documentary is made of moving visual images. Moving image is “Challenging to dissect and analyze due to its "immediacy, spectacle, and direct impact on us.” (Hunt, Marland, & Rawle, 2010). Yet, semiotics serves the purpose of "unlearning" much of our presumed knowledge, prompting a fresh start” (Hunt, Marland, and Rawle, 2010) The researcher has tried to pick those images which have significant semiotic importance. In this documentary, the anchor visited different places

of Pakistan. The researcher has tried to pick one image from each visit. So that the images would be more authentic and representable. These images are of different types. Some of them are representing the Pakistani society and some of them are representing the thoughts and ideas of the documentary makers as well. For the purpose of analysis, the semiotic model of Peirce has been used.

### **Delimitation of the study**

This research is primarily centered on conducting a semiotic analysis of a specific set of four images extracted from the documentary titled "Don't Tell My Mom that I am in Pakistan." These selected images serve as the focal points for the analytical investigation, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the documentary's semiotic elements. The analysis utilizes Peircean semiotic model to decipher the signs, symbols, and underlying meanings within these chosen images.

### **Literature Review**

Moriarty (1995) proposed that semiotics is an approach aimed at deciphering visual messages based on their signs and patterns of symbolism. Irvine (2005) argued that all symbolic systems within a culture, such as script, imagery, and gestures, function as a secondary language or text. Halliday (1985) conducted research into the linguistic modes in speech and writing, considering them as semiotic resources capable of fulfilling three distinct social meta-functions: the social, the experiential, and the contextual.

### **The Peircean model**

When Ferdinand Saussure was starting the investigation of signs; 'semiology', a firmly connected examination was directed by Charles Peirce over the Atlantic (Saussure, 1983). He designed up his own model containing three parts, referred to as scientific categorizations of signs. He presented a triadic model, comprising of:

#### **1) The Representamen**

Representamen is a structure that sign has. It can be a picture, sound, material etc.

#### **2) Interpretant**

The feeling that's passed on through sign

#### **3) Object**

Object is a substance towards that sign is alluding (Peirce, 1931).

In the own words of Peirce, a signal as a representamen are some things that stands to somebody for one thing in some regard or limit. It tends to someone, that is made inside the psyche of that particular individual academic degree equal sign, or perhaps academic degree increasingly created sign. That sign that it makes I call the interpretant of the 11 foremost sign. The sign represents one factor, its item. It represents that object, not altogether regards, however in relevance a kind of thought, that I even have in some cases referred to as the lowest of the representamen (Peirce, 1931). All the three components inside the sign are basic. The sign conveys the implication if the commonness of what's spoken to, however it's deciphered and also the method it's shown. It's to be detected that a superb deal of semioticians trust sign and thus the vehicle of sign as specific, however in Peirce trinity model, the last is that the 'signifier' as per the Saussurean custom whereas representamen in Peircean convention. This will be tons of to be thought about as a vehicle of sign. The word of 'sign' is commonly

taken to be freely translated. The varied nature inside this which suggests may will be taken as a case; be that as a result of it would, the shape inside the Saussurean custom and representamen in Peirce model convention is that the structure a sign takes.

The procedure of semeiosis is alluded to the 3 segments that frame a signal limit resembles a name on a dark instrumentation that contains a chunk. Firstly, the small reality is that there's a case including a name on it prescribes that it contains one factor, and a quick time later when we have a tendency to browse the imprint, we have a tendency to discover what 'something' is. Technique of semiosis, or deciphering the sign, is in line with the associated with the primary concern that's seen (representamen) is that the state of affairs and name; this prompts the affirmation that one factor is inside the instrumentation. This affirmation, and what's additional the coaching of what the case consists, is given by the interpretant. Scrutinizing is also a moral story for the methodology of moving the sign.

The basic purpose to trust here is that the article of a signal is often hid. We have a tendency to tend to can't typically open it and analysis it clearly. The reason behind this will be direct if the problem may be known expressly, there would be no would really like of a signal to talk regarding it. We have a tendency to tend to merely ponder the article from seeing the name and thus the compartment and after scrutinizing the imprint and forming a psychological arrange of the problem in the structure. Consequently, the lined object of a sign is simply passed on to affirmation with the association of the representamen, the problem and thus the interpretant. Representamen is relative in aiming to Saussure's kind whereas the interpretant is commonly similar to the connoted. In any case, the interpretant includes a top quality not in any like that of the inferred: it's itself a signal inside the psyche of the middle person. Peirce saw that 'a sign tends to some individual, that is, makes inside the mind of that individual constant sign, or even a tons of created sign. The sign that it makes is called the interpretant of the essential sign' (Peirce, 1931).

### **Semiotic Analysis**

Semiotics is the study of signs and their meanings. In order to conduct semiotic analysis there are some points which are discussed in detail to do it in more authentic and understandable way.

There are five points of semiotic analysis. On the basis of these points, the semiotic analysis has been conducted.

1. Setting
2. Characters, Costumes, Props
3. Actions/ Gestures/Facial Expressions
4. Colors
5. Camera Angles

### **Setting**

Setting is the overall environment of the seen where actions are performed or observed. In any piece of literature, setting has a vital role. Writers, actors and directors depict so many thoughts and ideas with the help of setting. In film making, setting is considered as the basic need for recording or shooting. In this particular documentary, the maker selected only a few settings to demonstrate and depict the culture of Pakistan.

Although it is right that if a person is making a documentary to explore a culture or country, he cannot picturize or explore all kinds of settings but he should select all the representable settings. We can clearly see that the maker only selected settings of Karachi, Hyderabad and Lahore to picturize his documentary. It shows that there is a question mark on the significance and authenticity of this documentary. It will be further explained in image analysis.

### **Characters, Costumes, Props**

The characters presented in any kind of film have a great significance in semiotic analysis. In documentaries, every character has its own importance. Their appearance, costumes and props reflect their behaviors and personalities. Dress is a very important sign which can convey so many messages and information about a person. We don't realize but our dress choices reflect and reveal many aspects of our personalities. There are some cultural ideologies as well which are related with dress choices. These cultural ideologies are not real but due to a common perception about dresses, these ideologies are considered as right. People in Pakistan think that western dresses are for educated or rich people and eastern dresses are normally worn by poor or uneducated people.

### **Actions/ Gestures/Facial Expressions**

Our face is the most important part of our body regarding expression of feelings and thoughts. Our gestures and actions are very important components of our daily communication. In fact, the language of gestures and expressions is more impactful rather than our spoken language. Sometimes we spoke so many things without uttering a word by using these little gestures. The researcher also focused on the gestures and facial expressions of the characters just to demonstrate them more accurately.

### **Colors**

Colors are one of the most important aspects of signs. They show the nature and type of things or characters. In fact, every color has a special implied meaning. For example, red color is a sign of love, white color is a sign of peace, pink color is used to depict female gender black color in some countries is considered as the sign of sorrow and grief etc. So, in every society each color has a particular significance and meaning. Modality are going to be perverted or diminished in footage Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) specific that the tons of that's detracted from the colors of a given portrayal, which suggests the tons of that the color is diminished, the lower the modality of that image.

### **Camera Angles**

In film, the art of projection and camera angles play a very vital role. Directors use these angles to depict different characters according to their image and importance in the story. For example, if a director is showing a character from lower angel, this indicates that the character is strong and large whereas the situation is small. On the same hand if character is picturized from upper angle, this depicts that the situation is great and the character is small. So camera angles are changed according to the importance of the character and magnitude of the situation.



Late night Party



Foreigner visits the Madrassa

### **Description**

This documentary is all about binaries. The person who is a kind of host or protagonist in the documentary is looking at the culture of Pakistan in a very extreme way. In Pakistan there are three kinds of people. The rich people, poor people and the middle class. Majority of the population of Pakistani belong to middle class but the protagonist only tries to go towards very rich or very poor people. He also chooses only three cities to visit which are Karachi Lahore and Hyderabad. According to him, his purpose of making this documentary is to explore the Pakistani culture but how he can explore the overall culture by visiting only three cities. In fact, in these three cities he only selects extremely rich or extremely poor people or extremely religious to extremely liberal people. In image 1A he visits a very famous madrassa in Karachi where as in image 1B he visits a dance party on a beach where young men and women are dancing and drinking alcohol. The researcher found these semiotic elements in these images.

### **Analysis**

In image 1A change according to figure no we can see that he came to a madrassa where children are reciting the Holy Quran and immediately after that he visited a beach where a dance and alcohol party is going on. It is clearly two opposite things. In this image there is a very small room where children are reciting on the floor and image 1B there is an open air dance party. The small room in image 1A is depicting the narrow mindedness and in image 1B open air party is depicting freedom and liberty. It is very rare in Pakistan

that the people drink alcohol in open air because it is not legal in Pakistan but it seems that the protagonist deliberately chose this kind of party.

In image 1A all there are a lot of characters and in image 1B the number of characters are less which shows that in Pakistan the large number of people are in the favor of Islamic ideologies and a very few people are those who are liberal and don't follow the Islamic ideology. If we see the dress patterns of the characters, then we can see that in image 1A everybody is wearing sahlwar qameez which is considered as the dress of lower or conservative class of Pakistan, only protagonist is wearing jeans and t-shirt which shows that he is different from them he is not from madrassa culture and in image 1B every one is wearing pants shirts or different western dresses which depicts that all people in the party are rich educated and broad minded.

In image 1A the students are reciting with the help of a mullah. There is only mullah's face which can be seen in the image. Other than him, all the faces of the students are not visible which is depicting that, in madrassa, there is no room for thinking. A student should accept and obey all the things said by the mullah.

Colors are always considered as the most important part of semiotic analysis. As the researcher mentioned above, every sign has its own implied meanings. In image 1A most of the characters are wearing white color. White color is usually associated with Islam. Most of the religious personalities usually wear white dresses. In this image only protagonist is wearing black color t-shirt. Where as in image 1B he is wearing white shirt. It is commonly known that in madrassas most of the people wear white dresses why the protagonist chose black color shirt? In fact, he chose white shirt to visit a danced party. It is clearly shows that he deliberately chose black color shirt to visit madrassa because black and white are two opposite colors. He was unconsciously conveying that he is not from Islamic background or he does not follow the Islamic thoughts and trends.

In image 1A the camera angle is low which referring that the situation is large and the characters are small. Also the camera is showing only the face of mullah from front. Other than mullah every character is showed from back which indicates that there is no space of questioning in madrassa culture. Mullah has all the powers and authorities and no one can question or challenge him.

In image 1B the camera angle is again a bit lower which indicates that again it is a big situation where men and women are dancing and drinking alcohol which is not allowed in Pakistan and Islam. It is an unusual situation.



Two local women sitting in the street, hiding their faces



Foreigners in a Night party in Pakistan

### **Description**

Image 2 is about the representation of women in Pakistan. Again the documentary maker chose two extreme poles. In image 2A we can see that the women are hiding their faces from camera. This is because in Pakistan many women are not camera friendly and they do not talk to strangers especially male strangers. In fact, they are hiding their face because they thought it immoral to reveal their faces on camera.

Image 2B is totally opposite to image 2A. we can see that a young girl is talking to the protagonist in a very confident way without hiding his face. This is also a great binary presented by the protagonist. On one side there are some women who even don't want to talk or show their face and on the other hand there are some women who are fearless and doing whatever they want.

### **Analysis**

The setting of image 2A is a road in Karachi. A road where women are sitting and camera captured them accidentally. They are sitting on footpath which is showing that may be they belong to the poor class of Pakistan.

In image 2B the setting is a dance party on a beach in Karachi. It is Saturday evening. Young men and women are dancing. There are all types of liberal people there including straight bisexual and some people of LGBT community as well. The protagonist talks with a girl who is dancing.

In image 2A there are two characters sitting on footpath. They are wearing shalwar qameez with a very big Chadar. They are not friendly with camera and strangers so they are hiding their face because in many areas of Pakistan it is assumed that revealing face on camera is an anti-islamic and unethical activity.

In image 2B the young girl is wearing a western outfit. She has no problem in revealing her face in fact her dress is revealing some of her body parts as well. Now we can see that in image 2A there are two characters and in image 2B there is only one which shows that the women in Pakistan are mostly do not like to reveal their face and body. There are some women who don't have any problem with this matter but they are quite few.

In image 2A the women sitting on the footpath are showing fear on their faces because they are trying to hide their face. On the other hand, in image 2B the girl is talking to the protagonist very confidently. She has no fear on his face and enjoying the party.



The women represented in image 2A are wearing black and maroon dress which are considered as the colors of decency and dignity. Whereas in image 2B the girl is wearing a yellow dress which is a sign of liberty, freedom and life. Their outfits and color selection is also depicting their social class because in Pakistan the women who belongs to rural areas or poor population wears black, white or maroon burqas and chadar. The women who belong to high class or educated class do not wear burqas or chadar. They like to wear western dresses. Again this is showing two extremes of the Pakistani society.

In 2A the camera angle is slightly upper which shows that the characters are small and the overall situation is big. On the other hand, in image 2B the camera angle is slightly low which indicates that the character is more strong not the situation.

### **Conclusion**

Documentaries are a great source of information. They provide a lot of information in a short amount of time. They are very helpful for many purposes but tourism is the field in which documentaries can play a vital role. If we want to see a country without visa or expense, then we can watch a documentary made upon him because it can give us a lot information about that country.

In this particular research, the researcher, has chosen a documentary called don't tell my mother that I am in Pakistan to investigate that how this documentary is representing the overall image of Pakistan. Is it realistic and credible or not? For this purpose, the researcher has applied semiotic theory to analyze the documentary.

We can see in this research that this documentary is not representing the actual image of Pakistan. In fact, it is constructing binaries about Pakistan. The anchor only visits four cities of Pakistan which cannot be considered as sufficient. He selected very few places to visit which are not truly represents the culture and situation of the whole country. Secondly, he only shows the extreme sides of the society. Most of the scenes in this documentary are contradictory to each other. If we see the semiotic analysis, then we can see that somehow the anchor is trying to promote a certain ideology. He only showed they grey areas of the Pakistani society. At some points he showed some positive sides as well but he showed them ironically. He visited either very rich and liberal people or very poor and uneducated people. That's why the real representation of Pakistani society and culture is not represented. Majority of the Pakistani population belong to middle class community which the anchor totally ignored. Throughout the documentary the anchor is talking about Taliban, terrorism and these kinds of negative things. So, we can say that this documentary is not a real representation of Pakistan. Although some problems mentioned in the documentary exists in Pakistan but there are so many positive things about Pakistan as well which are totally neglected. This shows that the anchor and production company have a particular ideology about Pakistan, that's why they are only focusing and promoting negative things about Pakistan.



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