

## READING INTO THE FELINE: A CULTURAL/SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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### **ABSTRACT**

*There is a correlation between wording and worlding: the structural pattern of the world we live in is intricately connected to the structure of the narrative that outlines our life in the world. Since Pre Socratic period philosophers have studied the motivation of signs to prove the intrinsic connection between words and the objects they designate. Heraclitus for instance, argued that there is a natural relation between the two, while Democritus concluded that the two are in an arbitrary relation. Heraclitus therefore states that “having harkened not to me but to the Word (Logos) it is wise to agree that all things are one.”(Greenspan and Shanker 50). The process of naming originated from the World, drawing it into an inevitable and necessary relation between words.*

**KEYWORDS:** *A Cultural/Semiotic Analysis, Inevitable and Necessary Relation between Words*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The term Semiotics as a “doctrine of signs” was first used by the empiricist John Locke in his work *Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (2-12). Before the coining of this term in English language, a similar word “semeiotics” designating a branch of medical science that referred to the symptoms of disease or natural signs was popular. According to Locke, semiotics as a general study is important because speculative sciences only studied the nature of things and practical sciences only dealt with maintaining control over things, but both negated the relevance of studying semiosis or the action of signs on the two sciences in their development. Therefore, he proposed that along with sciences concerned with the attainment of speculative truth or knowledge of things, it is also necessary to have semiotics, the science which deals with the signs as the mind makes use of both in acquiring knowledge of things and in developing control over things.

Semiotics or semiotic studies is the cenoscopic study of signs and sign processes, and it includes semiology and semiosis and deals with the various aspects of symbolism, signification, indication and communication of signs. Semiotics in its comprehensiveness is closely related to linguistics which specifically studies the structure and meaning of language, while the former also deals with the non-linguistic sign systems. It is also related to anthropology and hence Umberto Eco in his “Introduction” to *A Theory of Semiotics* observes that every cultural phenomenon can be studied as communication and states that “the whole of culture must be studied as a semiotic phenomenon” and that “all aspects of culture can be studied as the contents of a semiotic activity”(22). There is a subset of semiotics, the bio semiotics which studies the sign processes, specifically the communication of sign systems in living organisms. Semiotics can be broadly classified into Semantics which study the relation between signs and their meaning (*denotata*), Syntactics which is about signs in formal structures (*designata*) and attributes of signs and symbols in combinations and Pragmatics which is mainly about the relation between signs and sign using agents and the various sociological, biological and psychological aspects that govern the sign processes.

The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) who proposed the science of semiotics and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) with his science of semiology are the two pioneers of semiotics. It is to be noted that they lived in the same era and this time period can be taken as the most important period for semiotics. According to Saussure, language is only one of the semiological systems and linguistics explains the structure and pattern of all the semiological systems. Semiology, for Saussure, is a science that studies the life of signs within a society and shows the constituents of signs and the rules that govern them (11). Saussure envisions Semiology as an empirical science that deals with the functions of signs and the rules which regulate them.

But for Peirce, symbols are the most significant aspect of semiotic analysis which form the woof and warp of all thought patterns and language. We can differentiate between a symbolic sign as in natural languages, where there is a one-to-one correspondence between a sign and its interpretant, and linguistic signs which are governed primarily by conventions and are hence arbitrary. Peirce also founded philosophical pragmatism and defined semiosis as the triadic process where an object influences a sign which further determines an interpretation or interpretant which is again a sign that leads to further interpretants and perpetuates itself. The object in the first stage can be anything which is immediate to the sign and its meaning, which it immediately expresses, or dynamic, where the object remains for what it actually is. Thus, Peirce defines

A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respects or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (CP 2.228)

According to Peirce, semiosis or the process of extracting meaning in a sign process comprises of the sign, object and interpretant. Object is that for which the sign stands; interpretant does not refer to the person or the interpreter, but refers to its signification or conception of the sign: it is the mental effect generated from the relation between the sign and its object. Peirce defines, the basic sign structure as “anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I will call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former” (CP 2.478). The object mediates the interpretant of a sign and therefore signification is also a process of mediation that approximates the meaning of the sign.

In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Umberto Eco replaces sign with sign function where there is a correlation between an expression and its content. Eco states: “I propose to define as a sign everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else” (16). He refers to the arbitrariness involved in the function of a sign. He further states that a sign is always a function: “element of the expression plane conventionally correlated to one (or several) elements of a content plane” (48). Eco points to the double meaning of signs interlocked between institutions and institutional practices.

Ferdinand de Saussure, bridged the relation between semiotics and linguistics through his proposal of a dualistic notion of signs, where signifier stands for the form of expression and signified for the mental concept. According to him, sign is arbitrary as there is no one-to-one relationship between the sign and its meaning. Thus, to him, this arbitrariness deprives the words of any inherent meanings but it works through differentiation and binary opposites to construct meaning

of signs. Mikhail Bakhtin on the other hand, propounded the idea of trans-linguistics, which theorizes the role of signs in everyday practices. For Saussure, sign is a stable concept, where the signifier and the signified share an arbitrary but still an orderly relation. But for Bakhtin, sign is a dynamic concept with multiple meanings to be inferred. Bakhtin explains: "...signs are in a condition of multi-accentuality, where signs are capable of eliciting different meanings, signification and connotations in different social and cultural conditions" (Bakhtin 47). He refers to the condition under which signs produce meanings especially the polysemic capacity of linguistic signs. Bakhtin calls this linguistic characteristic "multi-accentuality," which he identifies in Dostoyevsky's poetry: the openness of a sign to multiple interpretation.

Roman Jakobson, who studied the poetic functions of language, proposed a six fold communication paradigm in which the poetic function can be differentiated from other functions of language. In "Linguistics and Poetics," Jakobson argues that any sign process should contain the six constituents: sender, receiver, context, code, contact and message. The sender is the point of origin of the message and the receiver is the end point of the speech act. Code is the uniform set of rules which both sender and receiver should know and share for the effective understanding of the message (361). For instance, two people talking should know a common language for meaningful interaction to happen. Communication is primarily the process of transferring messages from the sender to the receiver through a medium. Semiotics is also the study of sign processes which basically involve the transmission of signs the meanings of which have to be decoded by the receiver. This process of the creation of meaning from signs through the interpretation of the linguistic environment is studied under the branch of Semiosis. For semioticians, language is at once a signification and a communication. Consequently, semiotics has differences with linguistics. Under semiotics, signs, sign systems and sign relations encompass all the contingent features in the widest analogical or metaphorical sense. Thus, semiotics is also concerned with the non-linguistic signification, while philosophy of language is more concerned with the natural languages. Cognitive semiotics, on the other hand, is about the methods and theories which are evolved together from linguistics, cognitive sciences and other disciplines which provide new lights on signification through language and sign processes manifested in cultural practices.

Semiotics, particularly Cultural Semiotics, is a science where culture becomes a symbolic activity which creates signs and designates meaning to the world around us. Semioticians, according to Marcel Danesi begin their study with signification and then move on to communication. In *Messages and Meanings: An Introduction to Semiotics*, Danesi states that semioticians thus study and analyse the deep and super structures and become social critics who, while interpreting the cultural codes, constructs, structures and systems to bring out the latent prejudices, motives and agendas behind such representations. It is pertinent to raise questions like who creates such images, codes and symbols along with the functions they serve in a medium and also who controls them and their functioning. For instance, the female condition of hysteria, which is clinically proved today as result of eating disorders or post-traumatic disorders, was once considered an erratic female behaviour consequent to possession by evil spirits and hence the victims were mercilessly treated. A cultural study shows that such victims were the ones who actually voiced their mistreatment within the society, who tried to break away from the conventions and strictures of the culture, and were thus considered insane for their non-conformist behaviour.

In this connection, a study on the various animal motifs we come across in creative and practical discourses provide interesting insights into the functioning of cultural semiotics. For instance, we have the lion for valour and for majesty, the fox for cunning and so on. While these are based on the general animal behaviour, there is the other side of the case where the strong and ferocious animals denote the male gender and the meek and passive animals are used to refer to

the female. Several examples can be cited. In any context where there is a reversal of the case, like a meek animal used for a man, it is presented as a rare case of abnormality. Thus, if a woman is shown shrewd and strong, it is divulged that she appears to be outside the gender roles assigned to her and hence 'she is like a man.' Therefore, aggressive women are considered abnormal and even treated as outcasts. Women are always represented with images like dove, swan, fish, and so on and there seems to be a hidden agenda behind such representations where women are compared with either pet animals or other meek ones. In fact, docility, passivity, compliance and meekness are the virtues women are expected to imbibe and adhere to. These are the values they are expected to learn from their mothers or culture and tradition. The concepts of female chastity and virginity are still emphasized and used by men as weapons to exercise absolute control over female sexuality.

Cat, often considered as the friend of the solitary woman, is also undoubtedly the most well-groomed of the pet animals. Of the two genders, the male and the female, the gender that is considered as the one that "should be domesticated" is the female gender. One never speaks about grooming a member of the male gender to make him fit for the home. A cat that is not friendly and homely is never picked and provided; it has to cater to our needs and be necessarily cute and endearing to enjoy the privileges. A wild cat and a "non-conforming" woman are never accepted at home. Thus, the duo, share a similar fate. Denise M. Driscoll, a social psychologist, count cat as the indicators of human cultural adolescence as they entered human experience where people were making the difficult transition from hunting and gathering to settled communities engaging in sedimentary agriculture.

Semiosis becomes a meditational process where every thought becomes a sign and interpretant at the same time and elicits another sign or interpretant and moves on towards larger meaning formation and understanding. This repetitive process contributes to the making of symbols. The four aspects of semiosis as defined by Charles Morris contribute at this stage of meaning analysis. According to him, any semiotic activity has a sign vehicle which orients the person, interpreter of the process, the designatum or the object of reference, and the interpretant which is the cognitive reaction elicited in the mind of the interpreter. This process, has commonly been regarded as involving three factors: that which acts as a sign, that which the sign refers to, and that effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter. These three components in semiosis are called, respectively, the sign vehicle, the designated, and the interpretant: the interpreter can be included as the fourth factor. These terms make explicit the factors left undesigned in the common statement that a sign refers to something for someone (Morris, 228). Despite the apparent arbitrariness in the signification of signs, there is a pattern in the structure of signs, with every element contributing to the effect of signification.

In the contemporary times, pervaded by popular culture and visual media, the mechanism of a conscious sexist agenda is at work in using the symbol of cat to represent women. Thus, in the case of the tamed pet cat or the tamed female, the expectation is the amusement of man. Cats are established as the symbol for femininity and female sexuality, especially due to its charming appearance and timid mannerisms in the presence of the public. A cat always moves away from a crowd and the patriarchal society expects the same from women. A deciphering of the various representations of media and culture clearly reveals that men and the privileged male gaze are authorized to deal with both cats and women in manners satisfactory to them. The objective is to transpire the sexual inherent politics in the gendered reality of animal images used in creative expressions. As part of the expressions of language and culture, they get entrenched in the social psyche. Language is androcentric and writers, irrespective of gender, use the male-centred language for creative expressions. Women's use of the male-centred language resembles a colonial situation where the colonised use the language of the colonizers. It is in this context that we call patriarchy sexual colonialism. One of the patriarchy's aims of

the use of male-centred language is to keep women in perpetual subordination. In ancient and medieval literature, the images of women, slaves, servants and animals are used in exchangeable positions. Thus, gendering of animal images like cat-woman analogy is a patriarchal strategy appropriated to restrict the identity formation of woman and regulate women's social mobility.

The inherent sexual politics in the gendered reality of cat imagery can be analysed within the theoretical framework of Cultural Semiotics. Cultural Semiotics deals with symbolic activities which create cultural signs and attribute meanings to the world we live in. Thus, cat/woman analogy can be studied on the grounds of such political associations as cultural norms, history, traditions, religion, region and the like which create cultural codes that people follow and comprehend as natural. This is how phrases like "cat walk" or "cat fight" acquires the connotations they have today. It is pertinent to realize that men create such images, codes and symbols along with the functions they serve in a medium and control them and their functions. The ultimate objective of such latent politics is to perpetuate the subordination of women and to reinforce patriarchy.

It is quite arbitrary that some animals come to represent man and others woman. This is clearly a case of symbolization where there is a strategy to portray the genders the way man intends to do as a case of looking glass identification. This takes us to the important aspect that all cultural expressions are primarily made by man. Be it literature, films or visual arts, the pioneers are always men and the stage is already conquered by them. Since women began to fight and win the chances of their participation, their works have constantly been evaluated in comparison to those of men. The standards, rules and norms of all expressions have already been made by men and women are expected to follow the male-made norms which definitely favour men. There is a latent politics of gender endemic in the gendered reality of aesthetic in general and animal imagery in particular.

Men generally give away the idea that "we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us." In a gendered world, the feminine is domesticated and thus given a differentiated and biased status. The projected image of woman is always that of a docile and meek creature, and every member of patriarchal society expects her to be as tender as a cat. John Gregory in his treatise, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, thus counselled his daughters to keep both modesty and secrecy. He advised them that a woman's life meant a saga of suffering and only religion could help them to alleviate their pain. He further advised them that women must endure all the sorrow with complacency and appear to the outside world as happy and serene. His daughters could realise that the world cares only for the mask of tranquil femininity in order to conform to patriarch norms or to become a "true woman," any woman should sacrifice her autonomy and accept herself as the cultural Other of men. For her, the dichotomy between the private and public female selves, the two destinies related to the domestic space and the public domain, is highly incompatible. She often hesitates to choose between being a "true woman" completely by forsaking her individual self or selecting a life of autonomy by becoming a woman who refuse to conform. This is because a woman's social identity is different from her individual (domestic) identity. But for a man, his social identity merges with his individual (domestic) identity. As far as a man is concerned, there is little difference between his public and private lives, but for a woman she has to choose between the two, as a successful independent life can be attained at the cost of her lost femininity as perceived by the society. The pivotal argument revolves round the question who defined the concept of femininity and its cardinal virtues.

In every individual there is a will to power, a desire to gain an integral identity, but in the arduous journey of life, the individual becomes afflicted with the uncertainty whether he will be able to attain the goal. In a woman, this complex experience takes the form of rejection and she protests against her femininity, which expects her to submit herself, sacrifice her identity and compromise all her virtues. Though psychoanalysts argue that this development is due to the penis envy, in reality the situation of a woman forces her to accept total submissiveness. She gets perturbed on looking into her own restricted existence on account of her gender and therefore she easily gets attracted to the privileges enjoyed by the male Other. The animal motifs used in creative expressions are clearly gendered to reinforce the patriarchal contention that the male is strong and powerful, while the female is weak and submissive. This is a patriarchal strategy used to consolidate the phallogocentric structures of society and the patriarchal social order. This is part of the covert gender politics inherent in the discourses of literature, media, visual cultures and popular culture. In a cultural “stigma” where the matrix of cultural signs, semiotic systems, system of values and all similar spaces are appropriated to perpetuate and consolidate the position of patriarchy, cultural semiotics and this analogy of association of male/ferocious animals and female/weak animals come useful to know the unknown and to rupture the deep layers of patriarchy to better the advancement of woman and society at the end. Like many other strategies of patriarchy cat-woman analogy is appropriated as a fascinating metaphor that entraps women to labyrinths of patriarchal oppression.

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