

Bhuvan Shome – An Analysis with Reference to 5 Codes of Roland Barthes

Anketa Kumar

PhD Student, Department of Indian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia,

Abstract

The paper aims to disentangle the hidden voices in the selected Hindi movie following Barthes' theoretical framework as 'text is a galaxy of signifiers that can be unfolded and understood through the application of five codes, namely; proairetic, hermeneutic, semantic, symbolic, and cultural, on it.' Relying on content-based analysis, the study demonstrates the selected film with few shots and dialogues identified to have multiple meanings. *Bhuvan Shome* is a story about a character's personal transformation with some interesting turn of events. Bhuvan Shome's character switches off costumes from Western to rural Indian attire. These costumes connotatively undermine his innocence and makes him an epitome of imperfection. His first persona and second persona, his modernism versus traditionalism are thematic polarities of the story. There are certain referential words including western men's suit, hunter's dress and dress of Indian rural farmer men and women etc., which share the cultural knowledge of our world. Barthes tells that all narratives have one or all the five codes that work as "weaving of voice" (1974, p. 20) of that narrative (Lashari, 2013, p. 118). These codes are the proairetic, the hermeneutic, the semic, the symbolic, and the cultural code (Barry, 2002, p.151)¹. The paper presents the application of these codes on the selected shots that enhances an understanding of the viewer to justify the multiple hidden meanings with the applications of these codes.

Keywords: Costume, Hindi, Parallel, Cinema, Mrinal Sen

1. Introduction

Roland Barthes was a French Linguistic and a renowned critical narratologist who abandoned the traditional concept of interpreting a narrative according to the closed structure of the text or according to the fixed point of view of the author while writing. He also states that a text in the narrative is a galaxy of signifiers which can deliver multiple meanings by the participation of the reader (Barthes, 1974) or viewer in case of films in a meaning producing

¹ Barry P. (2002). *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 2nd Edition Manchester, UK

phenomenon. He proposed a theory of five codes which helps the reader to unfold and understand any narrative into several meanings.

Bhuvan Shome, is a movie in Hindi language majorly spoken in India. The movie was directed by Mrinal Sen and released in 1969. The movie was funded by the National Film Development Corporation of India, the central agency established to encourage production of high-quality films in the country. The film won three National Awards because of its simple yet unique narrative technique coupled with unusual presentation. *Bhuvan Shome* is a story about a character's personal transformation with some interesting turn of events. It is an emotional drama with an underlying sense of humor. There are several ways to approach 'Bhuvan Shome'. At one level, it can be described as a film about a man's bird hunting adventure in desert region of Gujrat in India. At another level, it can be study of a strict bureaucrat who finds it difficult to survive outside the comforts of his cocooned existence. The film creates an argument upon as a treatise of human solitude and longing for companionship². The paper applies Barthesian five codes on hindi film *Bhuvan Shome* directed by Mrinal Sen. Relying on step-by-step text-based analysis method applied to selected shots, the study aims to explore the concealed meanings, multiple voices, and so also the depth of story The film has been discussed several times on the basis of unique and first of its kind but it has rarely been analyzed on the grounds of the literary code system.

2. Research Methodology

The method is derived from textual analysis process which is conducted through step by step method. Step-by-step method is used by Barthes in his *S/Z* with which he divides *Sarrasine*, a French novella, into lexias and then applies the five codes on it³. Though in the paper, we do not divide the target text but divide the selected movie into frames like lexias, to follow a few other steps proposed by Barthes.

At the beginning, the film was studied carefully to identify its embodied suspense, enigmas, symbols, binary polarities of the characters as portrayed in the film and cultural references that are five elements of Barthes' theory. It was found that the story has several shots, dialogues and words that may be interpreted in multiple ways, then, we divided the movie into five segments corresponding to the characteristics of the five codes.

3. Analysis with Application of 5 Codes on *Bhuvan Shome*

3.1 The Proairetic Code

² Khan Ali M. (2019, September 29). The Many Layers Of 'Bhuvan Shome': Revisiting A Mrinal Sen Classic (Web log message). Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.in/murtaza-ali-khan/the-many-layers-of-bhuvan-shome-revisiting-a-mrinal-sen-class_a_21464998/, Retrived September 29, 2019

³ Heath Stephen. (1977). *Image Music text: Essays selected and Translated by Stephen Health*, (E Book), Retrieved from https://monoskop.org/images/0/0a/Barthes_Roland_Image-Music-Text.pdf, Retrived September 29, 2019

The code is also termed as the “narrative code” (Eagleton, 1993, p. 120). It refers to those elements of a narrative that creates tension in its plot. These elements play dual role in a text. For example, they proclaim that something is going to happen and secondly, they make the viewer attentive and respondent to resolve the tension. Here, the viewer tries to get Advance knowledge about the actions by asking some of the questions as ‘What will be the reaction of a certain action?’

This code is the *narrative code* by which the viewer’s focuses on actions and specifies its reactions. The action and reaction system upraises interest in the viewer. The action starts in the story with the opening shot of fast moving railway track with Indian classical alap in the background that paves the way for some action packed in the movie for the viewers.



Picture 1 (left): Railway Track explained with Proairetic code



Picture 2 (right): Freeze frame with close up of main charecter *Bhuvan Shome*

(Image source: [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E), Retrived from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E>, Retrived on June 29, 2019)

The next scene in which this code that can be unraveled is through in the freeze frame technique that is used in the film by Mrinal Sen where he particularly freezes the frame focused on the facial expressions of Bhuvan Shome with the explanation of that particular instant with the help of background narration or character speaking of himself. In the beginning of the film Bhuvan speaks of his intention of firing the other railway officer who is working unethically by accepting bribes from the passengers in the train. These intensions are not directly spoken of instead is narrated by freezing the frame. This particular freeze frame brings the focus on the nominal character of the story *Bhuvan Shome* who is a widower civil servant who works at a high post in the Indian railways and lives in Calcutta. He is known for his strict and adamant behavior among his subordinates and having fired his own son from his job when he failed to meet Bhuvan’s standards for discipline.

By freezing the frame on the face of the character put forths notion of the negative aspects of this particular charecter and makes the the viewers think that something bad is going to happen in the movie because of the shady aspect shown of the charecter.

3.2 The Hermeneutic Code

The code refers to mysterious elements of film where the viewer concentrates on enigmatic scenes and tries to know that why it is happening⁴. The story has an abundance of puzzling elements. At the first glance, the title of the story, *Bhuvan Shome*, appears as an enigma. Although the title catches the interest of the viewers but it also has some mystery in its meaning. It obliges the viewers to ask why the story is entitled as such. It also compels viewers to raise several questions about the significance of this title. For example, a viewer may think what should be the genre of this story. Is it an irony? Is it a comedy? Is it a satire attempt to satirize the Indian bureaucracy? Is it a cultural story? Is it a modern story? It is a mystery, a riddle for a viewer who cannot understand the theme until they know the meaning of this title.

The suspense starts when the character is shown roaming the dark room alone thinking of his monotonous life and his values that has dawned on him. The dark room is a symbol of emptiness that he has in his life because of his disciplinarian attitude.



Picture 3 (left): Bhuvan Shome in dark room explained with Hermeneutic code

Picture 4 (right): Shot of riots during partition of Bangladesh

(Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E>, Retrieved on June 29, 2019)

The next scene in which can imply Hermeneutic Code is the one where director is trying to show the times of partition of Bangladesh from India, where viewers are left to decide of temperament of the movie as a political satire. Or these shots were merely to show the times of this story. This enigma is partially resolved when the narrator narrates the new found interest of Bhuvan Shome's in bird hunting as a pursuit to break out from his monotonous

⁴ Selden, Widdowson & Brooker.(2005). A readers guide to contemporary literary theory, Retrieved from <https://www.uv.es/fores/contemporary-literary-theory-5th-edition.pdf>, Retrieved on August 15, 2019

life. This particular frame with animation of bird flying on Bhuvan Shome's head is quite a comical representation of his newfound interest. Now through this visual, the viewer's understand Bhuvan Shome's agony and looks forwards to his accomplishment of his new found interest in hunting shown with use of an animation sequence of birds flying over his heads as a part of the narrative. But, the enigma related to his strict and inflexible attitude of this character remains equivocal, debatable and for the viewers.



Picture 5 (left): Bhuvan taking lessons on Bird Hunting narrated with animated birds flying over his head



Picture 6 (right): Bhuvan Shome on the voyage to Bird Hunting

(Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrived from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E>, Retrived on June 29, 2019)

Further in the scene where Bhuvan Shome leaves for hunting amid dry and desert region of Gujrat, gets up early in the morning and pictured sleeping on the bullock cart is another example of equivocal scene. This scene depicts Bhuvan Shome as naïve to hunting but yet enthusiastic to pursue his new endeavors. This picture might make the viewer's laugh but ponder over the situation carefully at the same time. In order to run away from his tedious and lonely life for a while, he goes on bird hunting in a rural area in Gujrat. Bhuvan Shome is shown not to be a skillful hunter.

All the mentioned jamming, snares and partially explained scenes are resolved in the end when Bhuvan Shome after hunting a duck returned it to the village girl instead, *Gauri* who helped her in his pursuit throughout the film, symbolizing his new found self because of the bird hunting adventure in Gujrat. At another level, the film can be seen as a powerful character study of a strict bureaucrat who finds it difficult to survive the moment he steps outside the comforts of his cocooned existence.

3.3 The Semantic Code

The target film has few Semantic Codes. There are several ways to approach *Bhuvan Shome*. Connotation in the various parts where Gauri is trying to help Bhuvan Shome can be observed as an approach of the film as a social commentary on the great rural-urban divide in India. While a powerful bureaucrat living in the city is cruel to everyone around him, the people in the village are friendly and helpful even to strangers. It can be observed as a film about human companionship and trust. How Bhuvan Shome blindly trusts the unknown young girl during his bird hunting expedition.

Initially, Bhuvan is reluctant about Gauri's childlike suggestions to make his hunt successful, but due to her simplicity and affection, which he has begun to admire, he does as she tells him to do. In one of their conversations, she tells him how an unreasonable 'big officer' this person called Bhuvan has been who is about to fire her husband from his railway's job as he was involved in a case of bribery. Bhuvan is left with having to choose between his principles and an act of kindness.



Picture 7 (above): Gauri showing mirror to Bhuvan to help him get dressed up for Bird Hunting (Image source: [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E), Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E>, Retrieved on June 29, 2019)

Gauri holding mirror also gives depiction of her helping Bhuvan find his new self who is open to learning new things and breaking his old beliefs. Denotation on these scenes can also be perceived as hint of eroticism that runs through the movie. Many of the scenes shows that

Bhuvan Shome grows fond of the young village girl, there are a few scenes in the movie that indirectly suggest the possibility of sexual attraction.

3.4 The Symbolic Code

The principle of this code is to identify textual antithetical elements that “*allow multivalences and reversibility*” (Seldon, et al., 2005, p. 152). The first focus of the reader is to recognize tension in simple binary polarity system. In the target text binary oppositions are interwoven in the thematic structure that either submerge or reverse to the previous state. There are two examples of symbolic code.

The first example is conflict between Bhuvan Shome’s first persona as a strict disciplinarian depicted wearing Western suit, represented as a Westernized Indian officer of high rank working in Indian Railways. The main character in the left side of the picture is shown to be wearing classic western suit along with the waistcoat and white collared shirt with tie. To convey the appearance furthermore the character is wearing sunglasses and is often times shown to be having cigar. Apart from Costume functioning as 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.



Picture 8 (left): Bhuvan shome as strict disciplinarian (Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E>, Retrieved on June 29, 2019)

Picture 9 (right): Bhuvan shome in a Indian rural attire on Bird Hunting expedition (Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E>, Retrieved on June 29, 2019)

As the story progresses, Opposite to his self, Bhuvan Shome wears a dress of a rural Indian farmer on persuasion from village girl named Gauri that connotes surrender of his earlier beliefs and having a new perception on the humanitarian ground.

Second antithesis is between Bhuvan Shome and Gauri as character of Binary opposites in the film. The difference in the spectrum between the two characters is an approach for a social commentary on the great rural-urban divide in India. The film pits together two polar opposite characters in Bhuvan and Gouri. Bhuvan is an old man, living in an urban environment and lacking vibrancy. On the other hand, Gouri is a young girl, living in a rural environment, full of energy and innocence. Bhuvan is trying to hunt down birds, and Gouri has a myna as her pet. When it comes to hunting, in order to make the birds feel comfortable around Bhuvan and let him get close to them, Gouri makes him wear the local clothes. He has brought his own lunch on the trip, but Gouri makes him eat the local food. A man reluctant to change was learning the lesson of adaptability in a different environment. When he realizes his decision to dismiss Gouri's husband will impact her life, his principles become more flexible, which help him escape monotony.

3.5 The Cultural Code

This codes pertains to those elements which share a common knowledge of the world. Here, the reader focuses on the physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary and historical properties of characters of the story to identify a common knowledge (Barthes, 1974; & Felluga, n.d.).

The story encompasses the costumes that are reflection of the Western world to the attire of the rural Indian village. Bhuvan Shome is seen wearing what is called "Modern Western Male Attire" specifically the man's standard suit of jacket, trouser, shirt, and tie (Zelinsky 2004, p.84). Gauri's heavily hand embroidered lehenga and choli and dupatta embellished with mirror work is indicative of her belonging to Rabari tribe in Gujrat that lives in Giri region in India. Her wearing Bindi on her forehead is indicative of her following Hindu belief (p.129).

The part of the film Gauri is shown doing embroidery on the piece of fabric is indicative of her practicing the craft.



Picture 10 (left): Gauri's handcrafted and mirror embellished skirt (Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E>, Retrieved on June 29, 2019)

Picture 11 (right): Gauri doing hand embroidery on her attire (Image source: www.youtube.com, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bvJW-5Z33E>, Retrieved on June 29, 2019)

The word "bhale" (Dave, p.43) is a reply to "avo jo"(Dave, p. 77). These are Gujrati words. Avo Jo implies "Come back again" where Bhale is reply to Avo jo means "All right". It is a salutation in regional langagaue named Gujrati.

4. Conclusion

The codes helps reader to understand the theme in a new dimension. The semantic meanings of the words "Bhuvan Shome" gives in-depth understanding to the ironic representation of Bhuvan Shome's transition till the end of story which ruptures his traditional beliefs. The antithetical code helps viewer to understand the psyche of characters and how cultures represents identity of man. The cultural code gives light to the embodied Eastern and Western cultures, especially differences in modern British and Indian rural clothing systems.

References

1. Eagleton T. (1996). *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd Edition, Blackwell publishers ltd.UK
2. Shahraz Q. (2007). A pair of Jeans. In Muneeza Shamsie, *Contemporary short stories by Pakistani women*, pp 157-168, Oxford University press, Karachi
3. Zaib Sabah, Mashori Mustafa Ghulam (2014). *Five Codes of Barthes in Shahraz's Story A Pair of Jeans: A Post-Structural Analysis*, ELF annual Research Journal 16, pp 171-184
4. Linda W. and Lillethun A. (2018), *Fashion History: A Global View*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, UK
5. Dave J. (2015), *Colloquial Gujarati: The Complete Course for Beginners* by Jagdish Dave, Routledge Publishers
6. Banerjee S. and Srivastava A. (1988), *One Hundred Indian Feature Films: An Annotated Filmography*, garland Publishing, London & New York
7. Naik D. S., *Traditional Embroideries of India*, APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi