

*Impact of Semiotic Analysis of Images on Students: A Case Study of Images  
Published in Time Magazine, Asia*

Nayer Fardows, Edwardes College Peshawar, Pakistan  
Sarah Nayer, Edwardes College Peshawar, Pakistan  
Shakeel Jaffar, Edwardes College Peshawar, Pakistan  
Rakhil Mariam, Edwardes College Peshawar, Pakistan

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to explore impact of semiotic analysis of images on students during their learning and teaching phase for which images published in TIME magazine, Asia during the period from 2014-2015 were taken as sample. Semiotics is an in-depth study of images by minutely examining their elements. The composition and construction of images were also a part of this research. This study also analyses the bias and stereotypes which are created through different images and how these biased images affect the students. Qualitative and quantitative approach was applied to conduct this research. Literary theories and questionnaires were filled up by the target population. The results found out that students are affected in a very negative way as some images conveyed immense biased effects. This research also discusses the theory of 'US AND THEM'. Some images also conveyed the message of depravity of third world countries and the superiority of western world over them. This research would help the researchers who want to excel in the field of semiotics in order to understand the concept of composition of images and its elements. It also contains an insight into how images are used to change the mindset of our society.

Keywords. Semiotic Analysis, Images, Composition and construction of images

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## Introduction

Technology has become an important part of our lives. The knowledge of science has directed mankind to perform wonders in the world. The solution to each and every problem is now available in the market. This technology has led us to believe and like what is visually shown rather than what is portrayed in the text. Images play a very important role in the society of our time. Visual communication has become an important tool of our daily life. Arthur Brisbane published these words in his newspaper in 1911, "A picture is worth a thousand words." (Brisbane). It is a proverb that refers to the fact that an image can sometimes be more influential and effective than the text. It also symbolizes the goal of visualization in our society. If I take the example of educational institutions, visuals are a major part of the courses as they help in the understanding and learning of students. A simple phenomenon of evaporation can be better understood with the help of diagrams rather than that from written books. Even a sweet has images of cartoons on its wrapper to attract the children. From television to magazines, newspapers to advertisement boards and media to books, everything contains images. The National Education Association has also declared that, "Western civilization has become more dependent than ever on visual culture, visual artifacts, and visual communication as a mode of discourse and a means of developing a social and cultural identity." (Gentry). Generally people preserve information more quickly with the help of images. Those people who work in offices use images to give presentations. Images enhance the level of understanding to a great extent. Religious images affect our society to a significant extent. Religious images are those which represent a religious theme, purpose and a perspective. Almost every religion in this world has specific images related to it and each society admires them on individual and collective basis too. Worshipping an image is also very common in Hinduism. This shows that images have become a primary medium for explaining and absorbing ideas in societies. The images of KhanaKaaba, names of Allah, and verses bring about great satisfaction to the Muslims. Similarly, the Christians have their own images of Jesus Christ which holds a very significant place in their houses as well as in their hearts. These images are often used as a trick to make people sentimental and spend lots of money on them. These images are sometimes used in order to play with the emotions of people who are religiously so blind that they do whatever they are told to do. Our society appreciates images very much. We always prefer television over radio because of the visuals. Though I agree that when only radios existed and televisions were found only in a few houses, the imaginative quality of people was very strong. But it is today's demand that our society is making a quest for the best. Television gives them an opportunity to enjoy the advertisements, news, drama serials more. Most of the learning that takes place in our society and most of the knowledge that people have gained is a result of visual communication. The term Semiotics was originally introduced by John Locke in the English language for the first time (Semiotics). It was termed as a synonym for "doctrine of signs". Semiology is the study of signs and the processes which indicate the signs. It also involves symbolism, signification and communication. Semiology is just another name used for Semiotics. It is that branch of science that deals with sign language, how signs are used in signaling the messages and how symbols play their part in the society. Semiotics is very close to the study of linguistics because in

linguistics we study the structure and meaning of language in detail and in semiotics we try to find out the relationship between society and images and meaning of signs in a detailed way. So more or less, these two fields are similar to each other. The only difference is that semiotics studies the non-linguistic features in the system too.

### **Research Methodology**

Compositional interpretation is the method which has been used for this research. This method includes the careful analysis of images and their composition. This method offers a way of looking minutely at the content and formation of images. A close reading of images is done through the compositional interpretation. But when using this method, it depends on element of intuition and sensibility. The word “composition” represents how an image is composed with the help of different elements. Though the aim of this method is to describe an image completely and as attentively as possible, still the notion of composition can be divided into several elements. The first part is the content of the image and the know-how of what it is showing. Sometimes it is very obvious what is shown through an image but many a times, one does not interpret the actual meaning of the image. Some images hold certain kind of symbols which need to be understood. The second important element of an image is the use of colors. The color itself describes the intensity or the value of the image. They may be used to highlight a certain fact in the image. These colors also develop relationships between two or more parts of the image. The internal organization of the image is also a very important part of this study. The background often creates a balance with other components of the image. The depth of an image can be seen through its internal organization. The organization of an image offers a specific view to the viewers. The compositional interpretation also talks about the effects of the images on the spectators. It is highly formalist in its approach and focuses on the entire image. There is no inter-relation between the text and the image, rather only the image is discussed in this method. It also addresses how an image might be used and interpreted by the viewers.

### **Analysis**

Semiotics is a philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deal with the functions in both artificially constructed and natural languages and comprises mainly of syntactics, semantics and pragmatics (Pedersen). Semiotics is very helpful in media. It allows the media to study and read texts and images analytically and better understanding of the audience. Semioticians often place signs and their systems in the relationship in which they are transmitted. The way meaning is transmitted depends upon different things, for instance, the body movements of a person, the discourse uttered by someone or even by the facial expressions of a person. In order to create a word for a thing, our society needs to agree upon the simple or denotative meaning within its language. But when such a word is formed, it can convey the meaning only within the limits of the language’s grammatical structures and its codes because codes are the representatives of the values, norms and the culture of the society. They can always add new shades to the connotations of different words and sentences in every

field of life. Semiotics magnifies the range of sign systems and their relations and enhances the definition of a language in a different manner.

There is another type of semiotics that is called Pictorial semiotics. This type of semiotics is related to art history and theory. But this pictorial art has delimited its analysis of images to a particular number which is later called the work of art. They only analyze some particular images which have more significance over the rest. Pictorial semiotics focuses on the properties of pictures and how these properties help in conveying the meaning to the audience. (Saussure)

Visual semiotics is also a form of semiotics that is related to the analysis of visual signs and images. The study of meaning erupted from semiotics which is also a philosophical approach of a semiotician in order to interpret messages in accordance with their signs and structure. The study of semiotics has been greatly successful and progressive in France regarding the literary and linguistic context (Alan M. MacEachren). Ferdinand de Saussure is one of the most important linguists in this field. According to him a sign can be anything. It can be a word or an utterance or even a sound and visual things. He divided the sign into two components, that is the signified and the signifier. I have already discussed these concepts earlier. Berger also states this in his work that the consequence of finding meaning always arises from the fact that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is typically conventional. In simple words, he means that every sign is assigned a meaning by the mutual understanding of the society and whatever meaning they feel is appropriate is given to the word. So when we agree upon a meaning, we claim it to be the ultimate meaning whereas there can be different shades of meaning as I have already mentioned. Different words can mean different things for different people. Even the visual signs can have hundreds of different meanings. For example, rose is a symbol of love and passion but it is possible that it might be just a simple flower for many people. Similarly, susu is a term used for milk in Indonesian language (bhasa Indonesia) but in Urdu language it is used for urination. So, different words can have different meanings for different people belonging to different regions and countries. An association known as The International Association of Visual Semiotics was formed in 1989. This association holds an international status in the world so it recognizes only three official languages. These include French, Spanish and English. This organization works mainly in art and its theory for the progress of visual semiotics and works.

Apart from adjusting and justifying the nature of pictorial signs, semiotics also tells us about the way every sign differs from another. A pictorial sign is always different from a painting or a drawing. The signs make them differ from each other. A pictorial image usually conveys a message and holds a certain meaning.

Semiotics is basically an umbrella term used to describe both the two leading figures in the field of linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Semiotics can be applied on anything. May it be the mass media, radio, films or even magazines and posters. It is actually a media research technique. Before conducting a semiotic analysis, it is compulsory to find out the nature of signs so that a theoretical

framework is formed on which the whole research is based. Branston and Stafford presented their ideas in this way, “Semiotics, also sometimes referred to as 'semiology' is the study of signs - or the 'theory of signs' the social production of meaning by sign systems” (Stafford). Since Saussure was a very dominant linguist in the field of linguistics, so this sort of study is based heavily on the linguistic concepts as many of the terms that I have used are the linguistic ones. Images are known to be the representative of reality. They often change the whole scenario of the world. The significance of my research is that we come to know the key strategies for the construction and presentation of any image. This study also helps in providing information about how ideological bias exists in the images. The element of bias is mostly presented in different images but the audience does not always perceive it in that way. The very minute details in an image can convey messages that are either stereotyped or biased. My research would help other researchers understand the concept of bias conveyed through images and also how the image is constructed in order to manipulate the society. A total of fifty images were studied for this research. A few are discussed below.

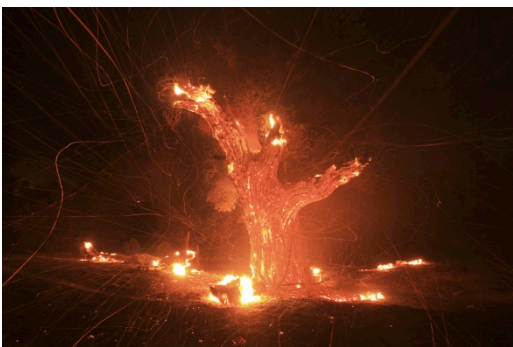


This image is of Japanese women, all standing in proper rows, wearing uniforms and of course showing uniformity. There is a stereotype about the people of Japan that they are very reserved, shy, and serious in nature. This stereotypical view can be seen in many advertisements on the television and even jokes are cracked about the seriousness of the Japanese now. Whenever a Japanese person is shown in movies or advertisements, he is portrayed as a very reserved and sophisticated person. The reality is quite opposite. The Japanese are very hard working and focused. They are as friendly as any other nation fellows and very welcoming too. Secondly, women are always stereotyped in the manner that they are weak, fragile and not capable of competing with men in the practical world. It has always been a hot issue whether women are as capable as men. This issue has been solved to a great extent because now women are working in the same manner as men are and they are facing the same challenges as the men. The picture shows these two stereotypes and is actually supporting the stereotypical view about women in the world. The women standing together in the image as one show the strength and uniformity of the Japanese women. They are wearing the same clothes which are more like a uniform. This shows their equivalence to men in being disciplined and one can see the association with the army and that the army is a male dominated area shows that a conclusion can be drawn that the women in the picture are being shown as equivalent to men in discipline. The consistency and evenness can be seen in their bright eyes which convey a promise that

they would do something benefiting for their gender and nation as well. They are all looking in the same direction which shows that their focus is on the same goal and together they would achieve it on any cost. The identity cards that each one of them is wearing depicts that they belong to one organization and they have all joined hands in order to accomplish their goal. Their vision is the same and they would do wonders when composed in this way.



This image is one of the scenic beauties of nature. The photographer has captured multiple lightning strikes in a single image which is a very rare accomplishment. A thunderstorm began building at Grand Canyon on August, 30. The photographer captured the beautiful moment of lightning striking three places at the same time and recorded this ferocious barrage in his camera. The image shows a contrast of light and darkness. More precisely it shows light in darkness. Chiaroscuro is an art that deals with the very strong contrast between the light and dark. In this image, the light is shown in patches between clouds too. The significance of light would not be realized if there is no darkness. So the light here can be interpreted as a symbol of hope in the times of darkness. Nature is always a hope to mankind as it saves us from many lethal substances and provides shelter too. The different aspects of nature have been shown in this image. Clouds, lightning, mountains, trees, and the sky add to the beauty of nature. Another important thing is that there is no man-made machine or any technological development shown in the image. Everything that can be seen is natural. It is shown as a place where the humans have not yet reached. The purity of nature has been depicted in this image.



Another image shows a tree that is on fire. It has been called a flame tree. The image was taken in California. It is an ancient oak tree that has been burning in the silver fire for quite some time. The tree is a symbol of life and life has been burning in our world. Innocent lives are burned to death in our society. The image conveys a

message that human beings are the cause of the destruction of nature. Mankind is progressing day by day but they are making a progress against the nature. Every year, California faces huge fire burns. This happens because of the development of science which affects the atmosphere so much that the forests catch fire and nature burns down.



The scene of courage and struggle has been shown in this image. The true human spirit and effort for freedom has been conveyed through this image. The image shows a demonstrator protesting against the government of turkey in Istanbul. The scene of riot has been shown here. The man standing on top of all the steel rods and gates that are on the ground is waving a flag. This shows his continuous efforts to get their goal. The fluttering flag also connotes the struggle of the protestors and their will power. The man is totally exposed to the tear gas as he struggles in the middle of the riot. His fellow men are also shown in the background but they have masks over their face to protect themselves from the tear gas. A contrast has been shown here. The man with the flag in his hand is shown as the true patriot of his nation. His actions evoke feelings of sympathy and support in the hearts of the viewers. This image also shows that the government is the one causing all the destruction and the innocent people are suffering its actions. Every nation usually faces these kinds of problems. But here specifically, the bad side of the government is shown. The strength of a common man is conveyed in this picture



Another image of nature has been shown through this picture. The nature is shown to be very powerful here as strong waves of a sea have been shown here. Some people are standing on the field house watching the amazing ride of an American pro-surfer Garret Mcnamara also known as GMAC. This wild ride took place in Portugal and the amazing wave is at least a 30 meter wave. The man is weak in front of nature but still the American surfer survives this wave and enjoys his ride. The message conveyed

through this image is that man is weak in contrast to nature but somehow we still survive in this world of nature.

## **Results/Findings**

The aim of my research was to analyze the construction of images and how different images contain stereotypes and biases in them. I selected particular images published in a very prestigious and fan-oriented magazine, TIME, Asia. My research consists of analysis of different types of images. These images are political, ideological, natural and social. I have also focused on how images are created and what message they convey to the audience. Images have some characteristics like colors, contrast, and background, according to which they are published. These characteristics help us understand the actual meaning of the image. Through images, typical stereotypes and biases are presented in a euphemized way. The images which I have analyzed clearly show that the bias against the Muslim countries is presented and superiority of the west is depicted through those images. One of the images was related to the Korean government it clearly explained that the USA is a supreme authority and it has been oppressing the Koreans because of their nuclear weapons and dictatorship and images that bring out only the dictatorship and strict state control are related to the country thereby promoting negative feelings against the country. Another image was related to car racing where the blacks were shown to be a part of the game while earlier they were not allowed to participate in such games. So in a way, the good side of the whites is brought to the front that whites are so caring and concerned about the equal rights of blacks. Here nominal representation of the African Americans is foregrounded to cover their victimization. Another image depicted the story of how a Russian terrorist was arrested in Boston. A clear bias can be seen against the terrorist as his identity is revealed on the spot. If it had been an American citizen, the identity would have been kept hidden by the government officials just because the criminal was a native citizen. Even when a beautiful scenic view of nature is published, it is shown in the western part of the world as if the only beautiful places exist there and nowhere else. Another image shows the satellite view of Pearl Qatar which is an artificial island in Doha. That image also shows that power and wealth only belongs to the Arabic people in this world. The stereotypical view is presented that only the Arabs are rich. The images where the load shedding of electricity is shown in Pakistan are all shown to be dark. This shows a stereotypical view of the west that east is still in the dark and they are somewhere far behind the west in development. Some images show the destruction and dead bodies of people lying in the rubble. Now, the story of survivors could have been portrayed through the images too but the photographer presented the story of the one who passed away in the disasters. The hopelessness and loss of identity is shown through these images. These kinds of images also prove the stereotypical view about our country that only destruction is what our nation would face ahead. Even the people of Pakistan are shown sitting idle in these images. So the bias against our people is clearly depicted in these images. The angle from which the image is taken is also very significant. The photographer always presents every image from a unique point of view. Sometimes, it is done to show the power of an object, sometimes to point out the weaknesses and sometimes to hide the weaknesses. One of the images was related to the construction and working of oil



wells. The angle from which the image was taken hid the background which was nature. This was purposefully done in order to prevent the environmentalists from making an issue about how oil wells are destroying the nature. On the other hand, nature is presented to be very powerful and human is presented as weak. Nature is presented to be present where no human has any access. Even the king of the jungle, lion, is shown as a very powerful species of nature and the view of a prey is also presented as very weak and that there is no escape possible for it. The terror and strength is conveyed through these images. The angle of the images is deliberately settled most of the times to create meaning.

The research also analyzed the contrasts of different aspects in many images like that of light and dark or fire and water. These contrasts are involved to make the audience realize the importance of a specific feature in the image. For example, if darkness is not there, the significance of light cannot be realized. The same goes for the other contrasting features. The background of the images also plays a significant part in making the image intensely powerful. The image of the Korean government shows only the government oriented people in it. No civilian is shown in the image. This shows the audience that these images were taken on a planned trip. The devastated building images show iron rods scattered in the background which is interpreted as the downfall from strength to pieces. The image is propagandist as it promotes the view that the people of the country are under strong dictatorial control of the government and the regime is repressive. The image seems to be the mouthpiece of the US government in its endorsement of the western view of North Korea. This research can be very productive as it would help the teachers who teach in their institutions with the help of images, understand the characteristics of images and it would also help them select the appropriate images to teach in the classrooms. This research would also help other researchers to comprehend the study of semiotics in a better way. The study of nature can be taught as an individual subject in institutions once they get a grip over the knowledge of characteristics of images.

This study would open a new horizon for the students of English studies. The study shows that the fields of images and media are not off limits to the students of English. They have a lot to offer the world in terms of the analysis of the images and particularly how meaning is constructed in images to create a hegemonic view of the issue.

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