



## The Pathbreaking Science of Semiology: A Case Study on Feluda's Riddles

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### Abstract

Satyajit Ray(1921-1992), the name is enough to explain his 'hold' in the world of both Literature, fiction and filmmaking. There are these movie buffs who still ponder on how Ray has carved out a 'niche' for himself through his "path-breaking middle-of-the-road" cinema, leading the Indian New Wave Cinema Movement ('60 s- 70s) along with a few other notable filmmakers of Bengal. However, Ray's craft is not so easy to re-produce so we humbly derive inspiration and find joy in what he has left behind for us, studying and re-studying its anatomy! His nuanced techniques made him earn a fanbase that is infinite and unfathomable, and even includes the younger generation. The detective Feluda, our very own next- door "Dada" as painted by Ray has remained a child's classic from the time of its inception but today it becomes more and more delightful for the children to read and watch.

Satyajit Ray excels in the craft of intertwining words; he plays with them in the most subtle and delicate of ways. It is here that Ferdinand De Saussure's Semiology comes into play. The paper explores the semiotic dimensions embedded in Satyajit Ray's Feluda series, examining how linguistic riddles, symbolic codes and puzzles reflect the foundational principles of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiology. Through textual analysis of selected Feluda narratives, the study demonstrates how signifier-signified relationships operate within detective fiction. His detective collection makes it a lucrative source of study for a student of Linguistics.

**Keywords:** *Ray, Feluda, Semiology, words, riddles.*

### The Concept

Mitter, Prodosh C.Mitter...21, Rajani Sen Road, Ballygunge, Calcutta, this name rules the heart of all avid consumers of fiction and detective tales. Arthur Conan Doyle's 'Sherlock Holmes' or Agatha's 'Hercule Poirot' had already enthralled a huge audience with its thrilling narrative by then. At such a situation, Feluda makes his debut as a detective through Sandesh Patrika in the '60s. Bengal had never come out with its own detective "hero" before Ray introduced us to Felu Mitter. Feluda (as his sidekick Topesh used to call him) is sharp, reliable, witty, a typical Bengali in his habits, etiquette and outfit was passionate in solving mysteries. It is through Feluda that readers travel to a number of places, visits archieval past even outside the confines of India still not embodying any socio-political



upheavals that Bengal was going through then. Feluda carries his “Indianness” wherever he goes. The rich heritage, culture and architecture all beautifully captured in his stories. Feluda is the ‘desi-Indian’ hero that every household craves for. He is an amiable character par excellence.

In an essay ‘Goyenda Kahini te Satyajit Gharana’ explores how Feluda was never bound by familial structure in that way, be it the institution of a nuptial like Sharadindu Babu’s Byomkesh Bakshi, yet wins heart. Topesh/Topshe/ Tapeshe Ranjan Mitra is more like an Indianised “Watson”, named after a “fish”, a teen for whom Feluda is a hero, he accompanies him in every adventure, at times gives his insight in any case and pens down the incidents. It is through Topesh’s narrative that we, the readers come to know their whereabouts. “Topesh” serves as the embodiment of all young Feluda fans dotting the common household. Reading out a Feluda book series on a Sunday noon was a common sight even few days back in every Indian household, holding the hardcover format tightly in our hands.

Feluda keenly opens his ears to several filaments of knowledge and is a keen observer of events that shapes him as a detective both in and out. He is a “bhradralok”, a private investigator who has no inclination to commercial benefits. The clients visiting Feluda mostly are connoisseurs of some choicest culture or items, who were affluent in their own areas and ready to provide Feluda with his due remuneration. The idea of pseudo-naming an individual is also embodied through the character of ‘Jatayu’, aka Lal Mohan Ganguly who accompanies them from the trip to Sonar Kella. Jatayu is a crime-thriller writer, down-to Earth, stuffed with humour even in the wildest of situations. He stands as the voice of ‘chillaxed(chill and relax) Bengali’, is carefree and happy-go-lucky. He believes in the Art of ‘Living Life to the fullest.’ It is Lal Mohan and Feluda’s companionship that will add to the essence of their adventures. Feluda is totally different from the “Prakhar Rudra” character as penned by Lal Mohan who has super-human attributes. The best feature of a Feluda story is we fall in love with the trio, Feluda the leader of the team never overshadows or undermines the two but it is with effective collaboration among the three that they find victory at events.

Saussurean Semiology : Ferdinand De Saussure is a genre in itself when it comes to the contribution he had extended to the world of Semiology and text interpretation in the most uncanny of ways. These two different worlds – the classic character Feluda and Saussure’s version of semiology shares a close association. It is Feluda’s detective logic or the use of “magajastro” that will lead to the remedies of the riddles and cases both. If we trace Ray’s familial history, Sukumar Ray highly excelled in the art of “non-sense syllables” rhyming each and every line, it is this trend that Feluda is seen keeping alive through his work on riddles. Language, symbols getting utmost importance in the riddles. The entire series of detective fiction, Feluda, is a great source of translation too thus shedding its necessarily “Bengali” roots and diving into other languages exploring them. Semiology is the interpretation of elements, an analysis of its meaning similar to the phenomena of decoding where we decode a language text to know its meaning. It is the study of “signs” system, originally from



America. The major proponents were Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. There are two concepts attached to Semiology- signifier and signified. Be it a verbal or visual sign, semiotics help us everywhere. Semiotics can have various application, various cultural identities is also decoded via Semiotics. Signifier is the physical sign of the form be it a sign, image or word and signified is the mental concept that evokes meaning. Roland Barthes have further expanded on Semiology with denotation and connotation concepts. However, we will restrict ourselves to the view of Saussure analyzing some popular Feluda riddles.

### **Semiotic Structures & Feluda Narrative**

Kicking off with Badshahi Angti(1969 first published) we first see a English-Greek translation by our very own Feluda himself. Lucknow in English is spelled as ‘L-U-K-N O U’ following its rules and code. It is the Britannica which aided him in this regard.

There’s a song, at an instance where Banabihari Babu at the climax of the story suddenly sings out,

“Jab chor chale Lucknow nagari  
Tab haal ad par kya guzri!”

Then suddenly Banabihari Babu starts decoding some words , Steal meaning Horn, Horn meaning Shing, Sing meaning Gaan , Gun meaning Kaman, Come on meaning I-saw, I saw meaning “ami dekehechilam” in Bengali, Topshe here finds it very interesting and instantly picks it up to learn it.

Next in line is Gangtoke Gondogol(first appeared in the year 1970), caught in the settings of Gangtok, we see the interplay of words at various layers and levels as the story unfolds. ‘YOUR SON MAY BE IS A SICK MONSTER...PRITEX.’ Lalmohan Ganguly is astonished at this statement. PRI stands for Private. TEX is the plural form of TEC. TEX stands for detective. SICK stands for Sikkim. MONSTER is Monastery. The IS here should be replaced with IN. Now the sentence looks complete, Your Son May be in a Sick Monastery. This is how the riddle gets solved. Readers who delve deep into the subject matter will easily understand its meaning well, leading to easy comprehensibility.

In Sonar Kella(published in the year 1970) we find Sidhu Jetha talking in some queer language. Sidhu Jetha is the go-to-person for Feluda. Like every family has that one head usually respected for their seniority and called by some name as a mark of respect. “Jetha” too in Bengali household stands for that. Exhibition is made “Issh Ki Bhishon,” Impossible is “Aam Poche Bel”, Dictionary is “dekosh-naari”, Governor is “Gobor-Naaru” ...he had this habit of weirdly translating each and every English word into Bangla. A remarkable example of Semiotics usage and Encoding-Decoding.

On another instance, the kerosene lamp-lit paper held letters like

“IP 1625+U  
U--- M “

P here is Pokhran, the number 1625 is the year of arrival in Pokhran. M is Meter, like a Taxi meter



which is an Indicator. This meter can also be “Mitter” standing for the investigator himself. The “I” and “U” portion of the equation was a bit erotic and especially connected through a “+” sign added to the problem. This ‘letter’ was found crumpled in Lal Mohan’s suitcase . The three will doze off to sleep just to get awakened by the train, leaving the mystery here at the close of the 9th chapter of the novel.

The biggest and probably the best riddle to me was discovered in the novel “Ghurghutiyaar Ghotona” (released in ’75) where we see a glimpse of how British imposed codes were actually mastered in the Indian subcontinent as Sri Kalikinkar Majumdar of Ghurghutiya, a place in Nadia district writes to Feluda for paying a visit at his abode. This place has no electricity, the road is kuccha. Kalikinkar Babu has got this code for Feluda which needs to be solved-

“trinoyon O trinoyon- ektu jeero” following the British style/accent where they used to say “Darwaza band karo” which apparently seems to hint at “closing of the door” however, getting it decoded once turned to be something shocking, like “there was a brown crow.” Therefore, what we see from the above mentioned gibberish is actually a riddle which gets easily solved by Feluda as

39039820, as simple as that. Kalikinkar babu taught his parrot the code lest he forgets the key for the “treasure chest.” An absolute case of Saussure’s semiotics find its vent through this instance. For the very first time in a Feluda story we see how from a mere phrase, can a numeric ‘value’ be decoded as to open the chest.

Next in line comes the novel “Samadder er Chabi” translated to Sammader’s Key (published in 1976) where in the first chapter and scene we see Feluda sharpening his “magajastro” over some calculations of letters in few names of famous personalities. Now what are they and what do they indicate. For instance, the name ‘L-I-N-C-O-L-N’ amounts to 7 alphabets same as ‘K-E-N-N-E-D-Y’, Feluda brings in light some unknown facts related to both of these personalities’ demise and how their wives were beside them at the time of murder! Interestingly the murderers ‘John Wilkes Booth’ and ‘Lee Harvey Oswald’ both of their names contained 15 letters each! A situation that evokes goosebumps on the readers’ as well as Topshe’s part as he clearly was engaged in its calculation in front of Feluda. A guest by the name of Samadder drops in to bring in a halt in their conversation.

Manibabu, the companion to Feluda and crew to the Samadder house visit is seen unlocking the door following a number code like ‘8, 2, 9 and 1’ . Here also a numeric play is applied.

Tracing the family tree of the Samadders, Feluda very mysteriously will urge Topshe to refer to the notes of Sargam in a musical note, like ‘Sa, Ni, Dha, Pa and so on... and to count the suddho, kori and komol...it is these characters that will later help Feluda to get the key and solve the mystery. In English what we essentially call ‘Key’ is thus a “Chabi” in Bengali as the title too goes.

In ‘Joto Kando Kathmandu te’ ( a 1980 released book) we see a notebook in Feluda’s hand , the first page of which bore the following in chronology-

1. Only L S D ki?



2. ASK C P about methods and past cases

In the second page, lines like-

AB related something needs to be known at the earliest. (translated)

Ring up P C M, D D C. (as instructions)

In the third page, is written the phone number of Feluda's residence.

LSD is a drug popularized by the Hippie (of America) . The scientific name of which is Lysergic acid diethylamide. This chemical brings down serotonin level in a human for some time. We see a stunned Lalmohan Ganguly after these statements.

Coming next in line is Chinnamastar Abhishap( year of release-1981) where in a ruled page there is written few letters in green ink- OKAHA, RKAHA, LOKC. Lal Mohan Ganguly in line with his usual behaviour declared that there is nothing special in these words. It's a matter of "child's play!" Pritin Babu as a matter of fact understands that it will only be possible for Feluda to solve the letters. Like "Kailash" becomes "koi lash" as in "where's the dead body." (the name of the house)

As the novel progresses, the codes are unravelled - LOKC in Bengali can be "elokeshi" hinting at something bedraggled, messy. OKAHA in Bengali "Who has come?" Now Lal Mohan is all equipped with the necessary knowledge and examples where such letters in Bengali conveyed some meaning after arrangement. It was customary to the Chowdhury family to speak and write in such a fashion. At the very end of the novel, we see a rock on which is inscribed – A.B.C; 15.5.23. Such play with letters and numbers dots Feluda stories in abundance, each coming with both a mystery and an underlying meaning, waiting to be decoded and solved in steps.

Royal Bengal Rahasya, another thrilling tale at the very onset of the plot comes up with the lines

“muro hoye buro gacch  
Haath gono bhaat pach  
dik pao thik thik jobabe.  
falgun taal jor  
dui majhe bhui for  
sondhan dhonday nobabe.”

Rapt in adventure centering Mahitosh Singha Ray- the great animal 'hunter' and his family near Bhutan adjacent area still excites the readers like anything. It is these lines that will ultimately lead to "guptodhon" as in treasure. Mahitosh's deceased brother is also somebody who prefers to talk in "heyal" or riddles. It is his 'bogus' words that will help Feluda and team unravel the hidden mystery behind a death and hidden truths centering the family.



Last but not the least, in Golokdham Rahasya we see the play of various variables X, Y and Z which Feluda uses so as to arrive at a conclusion regarding the murder!

Most of the Feluda stories have been turned into a film that too by Ray himself, where these concepts of semiology is explicitly touched and stated. Feluda is somebody who eagerly takes to his diary, scribbles and comes at a conclusion. Unlike modern-day use of gadgets like smart phones or smart watches, the stories offer a ride on a time-machine to the past.

In each and every case, we find how the use of signifier (the signs, texts, languages) signify something which is called the signified. Feluda stories and it's riddle solving is thus solving a puzzle, each time there's the presence of a signifier signifying something, heading towards a specific conclusion of a narrative. In addition to this phenomena, we see an extensive use of mass media channels in the Feluda stories be it communicating through letters (the clients doing so), symbols, codes, letters, signs, etc. only with the intention of solving the case.

Modern-day relevance of Semiology: Stepping out from its literary perspective, semiotics have entered into the digital sphere. Semiotics or Semiology is highly applicable in this 'tech-driven world' where increased Computer programming is seen and practised. The Java scripts offer modern approach to Semiology. Increased coding followed by Computer error, conversion of Computer codes into a readable language is part of Semiology application in the modern days. These scripts or codes form the basis of 'Software Application', the software we use all day everyday in our phones or tablets or Computers. The successful decoding of all such scripted codes lead to a destination, that is output. Even in WhatsApp, the end-to-end encryption follows a code. These codes are necessarily distinct and unique to every programming. Necessarily encompass the use of alphabets. Every system has its own code of conduct and a program runs on that. Everything has a programming language behind it. What we see in Feluda tales, the use of "+" and all other equations now popularly come under the purview of syntax. Feluda tales for this reason still remain relevant as ever in this modern world where the importance of it is felt more and more in today's landscape. Moreover, readership of books have now been based on a subscription level, where people still feel free to subscribe to these tales where nostalgia plays a dominant role. In this era of e-book and technological determinism, the stories of Feluda revisited remains a part in shaping child's classic. The use of Semiotics to me in the avenues of Literature has never been done so poignantly before. The careful solving of every problem drawing from the basic postulates of Semiology is worth mentioning in this regard. So, for anybody studying Semiotics can easily take on to this as a great study source.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of selecting and defining the intriguing Semiotic concepts is to create effective communication because they carry different meanings and convey powerful messages. The Semiotics



theory provides a framework for understanding how signs and symbols function with meaning all over the world. It helps in communication by improving branding by communicating the required meaning and it influences consumer decision-making. Another important function of semiotics is that it tells the story and demonstrates the image's aesthetic beauty. Choosing and employing signs and symbols not only aids comprehension but also communication in various industries. The paper thus intended to tap into the application of semiotics in broader literary works like Ray did by unconsciously subscribing to the Saussurean point of view, thereby gifting us with pieces par excellence.

Semiology is the 'study of signs system.' Influences both literary and cultural studies. Feluda not just in movies and story books but offers a dignified approach through all mass media channels practically like radio and modern-day OTT series. Even in the era of OTT, the cases and stories of Feluda abound offering a large fandom subscribing to it unanimously. The dynamic interaction between the signifier and signified is exemplified in Feluda's stories.

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