Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s “They Eat Meat”: A Study of Food Habits as Semic Code

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Abstract

The present paper invites a semiotic analysis of one short story “They Eat Meat” at two levels: semantic order and semiology order. An attempt has been made to bring out the organization of the syntactic artifice in the narrative. The significant order of signs has been analysed through the linear progression of events embodying deep existential strains where the identity of a tribal family comes into question. Performance of such a task requires the breaking down of the narrative into sequences incorporating many ensembles and further sub-ensembles wherever needed. The paper is divided into two main parts followed by a conclusion. In the first part, the linear progression of the events in the narrative is analysed along with the important ‘signs’ especially reference to food habits as semic codes as they appear in human situations. In the second part, different incidents lying at the different parts of the text are related to bring out the thematic concerns. In the narrative, identity crisis arises when the mainstream society of modern India look at the tribals and discriminate with them on the basis of their petty native food habits. At the surface level, the story “They Eat Meat” seems an engrossing tale of a tribal family (Santhals) who are recently been shifted from their rural habitant in Ranchi to the urban Vadodara and glorifies their struggle in getting themselves adapted to their new surroundings. However, at deep level, this glorification is soon questioned when this adaptation gradually converts into humiliation.

Keywords: Semantic, Semiology, Semiotic, Sign, Syntactic, and Tribals

Semiotics is a radical development in the field of humanities. It is a method of study concerned with the production of meaning in society. It is defined simply as “the study of signs” (Chandler 1). In semiotics ‘sign’ does not mean only linguistic sign but anything which ‘stands for’ something else a sign. It includes various disciplines like linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, aesthetics and literature. So semiotics is known as a multi-disciplinary science which aims at “better understanding of our own meaning-bearing behaviour” (Elam 1). Its objects are thus different sign systems and the codes at work in society and the actual messages and texts produced thereby. When we apply semiotic approach to any text, we analyse it at three levels i.e. semiotic level, semiological level and the level of mediate on. But keeping in mind the brevity and limited scope of this project, first two levels have been attempted to be analysed here.
(a) **Semiotic Order**

The semiotic organization is the organization of form. At this level we study syntactic organization or the linear progression of events which are interlinked logically. The narrative is decomposed into its signifying ensembles having existential significance. In syntactic order, arrangement of events acquires semiotic significance. It is the stage of “heuristic reading” (Riffaterre 5) where the first interpretation takes place and thereby the meaning of the text is comprehended.

(b) **Semiological Order**

It emerges at the level of content. It is the stage of “hermneutic reading” (Riffaterre 5) where the second interpretation takes place. The semiotic process really takes place in reader’s mind and it results from a second reading. As the reader progress through the text, he remembers what he has just read and modifies his understanding of it in the light of what he is now decoding. Thus he connects certain preceding and succeeding incidents and sequences through the theme or common motifs. It is the complex ideological phenomenon where reader’s imaginative faculty plays a very important role. At this level, “we try to comprehend the process of psychic generation. It is superposed level of existential reflection” (Gill 131). Semiotic level is the stage of textual decoding and semiological level is that of structural decoding. Both these levels go side by side. “Without a semiological direction the theorist will always tend to consider the work of art as a purely formal construction…” (Corti 16). It is only hidden semantic meaning that makes the syntactic organization possible.

In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse the complex identity crisis in the life of a tribal family in the story “They Eat Meat” by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar is a medical officer with the government of Jharkhand, India. When he is not busy treating patients, he reads, and writes. His stories and articles have been published in The Statesman, is stories H Indian Literature, The Times of India, The Four Quarters Magazine and elsewhere. His short fiction is included in the anthology, Alchemy: The Tranquebar Book of Erotic Stories II. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar’s novel, The Mysterious Ailment of Rupi Baskey, is remarkable for a deep and masterful observation of lives and descriptions of a tribal village.

In “They Eat Meat,” the author depicts the co-existing modern world of the tribes and the main elite upper classes. The setting of the story is Vadodra in 2000. The tribals have accepted the globalisation and have already left their jungle ways of living. They have joined the so-called civilised ways and are being educated. But still, the people of the mainstream, the upper Hindu classes, in one way or the other tend to reduce them into, the other, as part of creating subjugation. The protagonist in the story Panmuni – Jhi asks, “How can people dislike those who eat meat?” (8). Thus, the tribals who have been now settled down with the upper classes are reduced to only meat-eaters. The mainstream forced the protagonist to move back to the original world of his tribes in Odisha with his family. Thus, there is a final return to “freedom,” to eat meat in “our land” (27).

This paper is divided into two main parts — presentation of the text, and major themes and motifs, followed by a conclusion. In the first part, the linear progression of the events in the narrative is analysed
along with the important semes and signs as they appear in important human situations. Performance of such a task requires the breaking down of the narrative into sequences incorporating many ensembles, and sub-ensembles, wherever needed. In the second part, different incidents lying at the different parts of the text are related.

Presentation of the Text

In this part an attempt has been made to analyse the progression of narrative on the syntactic axis.

1. Summary of the First Sequence

The story began with the reference to the recent migration of Soren family- Biram-Kumang, his wife Panmuni – jhi and two children Rabi and Hopo. Biram Soren was a director with the Gramin Vidyut Nigam, a central government enterprise which provides electricity to villages. He had been transferred from Bhubaneshwar (Orissa), where he was staying with his family in a village outside Ghatshila, to Vadodra (Gujrat) in 2000. Now the main concern of the family in Vadodra was their food habits which they consider an important part of their lifestyle and existence. Especially, Panmuni – jhi was worried about her survival as she declared to Biram, “If I don’t get food cooked to my satisfaction, I will not eat” (2). She also made call to cousin, Jhapan – di before moving to Vadodra who was staying at Central Industrial Security Force campus in Vadodra. Jhapan – di informed her that “food habits here are very different” (3).

1.1 Apprehensions Relating Food Habits

The first ensemble is about the apprehensions of Panmuni – jhi regarding the need to change their food habits.

1.1.a
This sub ensemble indicates the rigid nature of Panmuni – jhi’s cooking habits. During her stay in Bhubneshwar, she has practised her traditional and old ways of cooking with the new techniques taking cues from “Vanita” and “Meri Saheli” (2) to cook dosa, chowmein, chilly chicken as her tummy would rumble if she eats food from restaurants.

1.1.b
This ensemble indicates the immediate concern of Soren family when Biram gets the order of his transfer. Panmuni– jhi wondered aloud,

“What are we going to eat?”

“They don’t eat jill-haku in Gujrat, do they?” (2)

1.1.c
Family and friends of Soren family in Ghatshila also enquires about how would they manage in Vadodra. The survival demands change in food habits that would ultimately “disrupt their lives” (3).

1.1.d
Panmuni – jhi calls her cousin in Vadodra to ask how is the place. Jhapan informs her “. . ., people don’t eat meat here. No fish, no chicken, no mutton. Not even eggs” (3). She also says, “People here don’t like to mix with those who eat meat and eggs. It is like that” (4).
2. Summary of the Second Sequence

In the second sequence Biram is introduced to Mr. Rao who lives with his wife Mrs. Rao at Subhanpura colony in Vadodra. The couple is of Telugu origin, from Andhra Pradesh. Mr. Rao in his first meeting with Biram enquires about his caste and his land of origin. He requests Biram not to eat meat if Biram wants to stay on rent on the first floor of his house.

1.2 Tribal Surname Equated With Dalits and Muslims

This ensemble presents the Hindu perspective of looking at the tribals.

1.2.a

Mr. Rao’s concern that his tenants are from Jharkhand indicates Rao’s suspicion of Biram’s tribal identity. He asks Biram, “Is not Soren a tribal surname?” (5). To this, Biram shockingly accepts, “Yes, we are tribals” (6).

1.2.b

Rao declares Vadodra, a “strongly Hindu city” and equates being Hindu with being pure who do not eat “meat, fish, chicken, eggs” (6), indicate that caste is playing as an important ‘sign’ to figure out the identity of a person. He says, “Tribals, even lower-caste Hindus, they are seen as impure” and “Muslims and Christians, they do not stand a chance here. He indirectly tells Biram that his family as a tribal one, a non-Hindu, won’t be accepted easily in Vadodra as they eat meat. He also uses vegetarian food as a symbol of his superiority over Biram.

1.2.c

Biram’s agreement to Rao’s condition that he won’t eat meat symbolises the beginning of identity crisis in his life. Mr.Rao himself sacrifices eating non-veg because Subhanpur colony is “so neat and tidy” (7). The conversation indirectly refers to those places where people eat meat as impure, untidy and dirty.

1.2.d

Rao, while pointing out to “the Mohammeds” (8) living in Subhanpur colony, warns Biram of his stay assuring they won’t eat meat. His act takes away the roots of Panmuni’s identity too. She “clutchched her head in her hands and kept silent . . . for a long time” (8).

3. Summary of the Third Sequence

Sorens, especially Panmuni – jhi, She have started making adjustments with her food habits. She starts eating vegetarian food. She eats meat with her family only in “Santhali-lunch afternoons” (12) organised by Jhapan-di. She compares the clean roads and greenery of Vadodra to Odisha and Jharkhand. Jhapan-di recalls Gujrat was also a “dirty” place. Only after “a plague epidemic here, . . . six-seven years ago” (11), towns and cities of Gujrat have become clean.
1.3. Shifting of Loyalties: Loss of Identity

This ensemble capture the efforts of Panmuni – jhi and her family to adapt themselves in the new city.

1.3.a

Panmuni- jhi imbibes the ideological fact that Vadodra is cleaner thus putting her origin in Odisha and Jharkhand in sharp contrast with cleanliness. she praises the hotels of Vadodra as “they are not like the hotels in Bhubaneshwar. They are different. Cleaner” (10).

1.3.b

Sorens more or less stops eating non-vegetarian food. Even a simple egg curry is sufficient in parties of Santhals. Such change or suppression of food desires with time enable Soren family to co-exist among Hindus.

4. Summary of the Fourth Sequence

In this sequence, Sorens recall their days in Odisha. They were free to cook anything. they even invited Santhals living in other places in Odisha, like Cuttaack, Paradip, Rourkela, Baripada and Koraput. They were once adivasi but now they have lost their identity conforming to Hindu norms. On the other hand, Mrs. Rao also makes an effort to give vent to her tastes. She is a non-vegetarian. Mr. Rao does not let her eat meat. So she asks for help to Panmuni and make her cook meat for her. Panmuni remains stunned with the fact. She has recently dealt with her identity crisis in adjusting with the Hindu city, but Mrs. Rao once again make her think of her real origin, her being a tribal who eats meat. The sequence also witnesses a friendship between a tribal and a Hindu who have adapted and exchanged each other’s cooking ways.

1.4 Nostalgia: re-assertion of tribal identity

This ensemble brings out the true self of Panmuni – jhi as she wants to go back to her tribal ways of cooking.

1.4.a

In the entire market of Subhanpur colony, only one shop sells eggs. Biram and Hopon struggles hard to buy such stuff as “familiar eyes spying on them” (13). Buying is not the only task, cooking itself is a mission as there is much odour when eggs are being cooked. “Disposing eggshells was a problem.” The mission of cooking was a sign of existential struggle.

1.4.b

Panmuni – jhi miss her days of freedom of Bhubneshwar and the cool breeze of the Bay of Bengal. She used to cook two-egg omelettes and “regular chicken and mutton” (14) for Rabi and Hopon. This indicates that although she has suppressed her taste buds yet she craves for freedom of eating food.

1.4.c

The demands to conform to the society she is living in make her feel constricted. The Sorens are Adivasi conforming to the norms, going to mandirs, celebrating Hindu festival, lit dhhop batti in their house. This
draws a sharp contrast with tribal cultural norms where pagan elements dominate. Their conformation to norms is the sign of imposed identity, they have become someone, which they are not.

1.4.d
The desire of Mrs. Rao to eat meat and asking Panmuni – jhi to let her fry an egg in the kitchen further questions the imposed identity of Panmuni – jhi and triggers her desire to befriend Mrs. Rao as she shares a part of her tribal identity. This sub-ensemble uses the semic code ‘food’ to reassert the identity as well as points out a faultline, a loophole, in the contrasted worlds of Hindus and tribals.

5. Summary of the Fifth Sequence

“On the morning of Wednesday, 27 February 2002” (16) Soren family whelming with nostalgia presented in sequence 4, reserved tickets for Ghatshila at Vadodra Railway Station. Suddenly, there was a chaos and news of “a train burned” travelled through the station. Biram – kumang told Hopon who was accompanying him to move quickly towards the car. There was a riot somewhere. Both of them wanted to reach home to panmuni – jhi as she won’t listen to the news on TV. Reaching home, they informed Panmuni about the riots and checked for the supplies at home. The culprits were identified as Muslims on TV channels. In the middle of of this sequence, Biram – kumang describes his predicament as prisoners. Vadodara is no more a city they could live in. Panmuni called up Rabi and told him to move to Ghatshila, their home. The only house of the mr. mohammed became victim with four women inside the house. A lighted petrol-bomb was hurled into the Mohammed’s living area. The Hindu mob “shouted obscenities, rejoiced and spat at their victims” (23).

1.5 Riots: Impact on Life of Soren Family and Mohammed Family
This ensemble refers to the riots; the communal unrest that happened in 2002 in Gujrat. The details are quite realistic and contain the effects of the religious and patriarchal ideologies on the life of people in general, and Mohammed and Soren family in particular.

1.5.a
After reaching home, Biram – kumang checks “everything in stock” (19) as curfew is expected. Even in riots, the Soren family is concerned about ‘food’ to survive.

1.5.b
The report says, “Some pilgrims had been returning from Ayodhya by the Sabarmati Express” (20), some people set fire to the train. Fifty-eight people dies. And the culprits are Muslims. The riots in this sub – ensemble proposes a communal set back and would put the life of Muslims living in Subhanpur colony at risk.

1.5.c
Panmuni - jhi made a call to Rabi who was in Cuttack. But Rabi responded the state there as “peaceful.” Still, they want him to go back to Ghatshila. Here Ghatshila signifies their home, the only safe place where they could live peacefully. The sub-ensemble establishes the significance of association to one’s land.

1.5.d
There were the only Muslim family in Subhanpur colony, Mohammeds. The only Muslim family draws an analogy with the only tribal family too. The situation seems to be replaceable and thus, forms a paradigm.

1.5.e

The slogans of “Jai Shri Ram!” and “Mussalmano, Bharat Chhodo!” (22) signify the revenge seeking Hindus that might involve genocide in the name of religion. Stones and bricks in combination with the abusive/obscene language “Motherfucking Mussalman! Hiding inside your mother’s cunt” (22) symbolises the degradation of a society where religion becomes a bigger sin than using abusive language. The entire community of Muslims is blamed in the game of identity politics.

1.5.f

The victims of the riots come out to be Muslim women of the house of Mr. Mohammed. The Muslim male members are not present, and the Hindu male mob try to snub the women under patriarchal ideologies of subjugation along with the religious ideologies.

6. Summary of the Sixth Sequence

In this sequence, the women of the Mohammed family start fighting back the Hindu mob of the sequence 5. Suddenly amidst screams for help, there is a “Clang!” (23). All kind of kitchen utensils start showering at the below standing mob. “vessels,” “spatula,” “steel degchi,” “sticks,” (23-24) and household items start coming from other rooftops too. There is display of womanhood and sisterhood. Panmuni – jhi too joins and start attacking the mob from her rooftop. Soon, there is exhibition of manhood and brotherhood too. Mob of forty fifty men want to kill Muslims but the Hindus of Subhanpur challenge the mob to kill them first. Mr. Rao along with Biram – Kumang join the men of the colony downstairs and their attack as a ‘sign’ of resistance confound the rioters. Ultimately, the rioters leave. Onwards, every evening, young men armed with sticks and whistles guard their respective houses. At night, there is police patrol. This guarding continues for a month.

1.6 Resistance: Element of Sisterhood Preceding Brotherhood

This ensemble contains the bounce-back of the residents of Subhanpur Colony.

1.6.a

Panmuni – jhi gathered some cooking utensils and stole out to help her friends (Muslim women) who had started to throw iron, steel, aluminium, tin and wooden implements to fight the rioters. Her action can be interpreted as a result of her empathy. The desire to revert back, and to reclaim identity, both as a female against men and as a tribal against ideologies of Hindus.

1.6.b

When the men shouted in anger and called the women “Cowards” (24), the women shouted back, “But if you are your father’s sons, you will come for the men” (24). Such words of subversion, put the patriarchal superiority in question.
Later, the men gathered and made the rioters board their trucks and they left. The men got together and mobilized a human chain, organised water and sand, and managed to contain the fire in the living room of the Mohammeds. This chain is a sign of unity in diversity which would ultimately serve the purpose of abolishing discrimination on the basis of caste. As caste is the extension of discrimination on the basis of food habits, the unity would end that discrimination too.

The members of the colony started to guard their respective houses with sticks and whistles. The curfew returned every night and continued up to a month. This guarding is a sign of resistance; an effort to re-claim and assert the existence, and identity of a group or an individual.

7. Summary of Seventh Sequence

The Soren family remains in Gujarat for two more years till 2004. Hopon after his board exams leaves for Bhubaneshwar with her mother. They take a house on rent. Biram applies for the transfer and ultimately gets Ranchi as new station. The whole family reunites in “a nice, sprawling, three bedroom apartment in Doranda” (27)

1.7 Re-claiming Identity

This ensemble (without having any sub ensemble) simply carries the essence of all struggle of the Soren family which starts with the conflicting food habits being tribals. Towards the end, Panmuni – jhi reaches her true home in Ranchi and exclaims “our area” (27). This phrase is her final reconciliation with her identity. She can be what she is at a place “ where no one minds what we eat” (27).

MAJOR THEMES AND MOTIF

The process of structuration can be understood properly only by positing both horizontal and vertical axis together. After discussing horizontal axis, it is the vertical axis which would be the focus in this section. In the analysis, ‘food’ is the motif which has diverse thematic extensions and configuration. ‘Food’ in each sequence is the semic code that decides the discourse of identity.

The first sequence revolves around the significance of food in the life of the main characters. ‘Food’ acts as a sign of their existence, their identity. They are those people who eat meat.

The second sequence validates caste system as a sign or indicator of one’s identity. In post-independent India of year 2000, discrimination is being made on the basis of caste. Even when tribals are not low-caste, such a discourse raises issues regarding the predicament of their minority. They are considered ‘impure’ whereas only Hindus are pure who do not eat meat.

In third sequence, Panmuni – jhi deals with her identity crisis which initiated in sequence 2. There is loss of identity with reference to ‘food’ and further with reference to place and caste. Now tribals are co-existing with Hindus, with purity and cleanliness. This sequence creates a contrast between the predicament
of tribals in tribal regions and Hindus in urban cities. The narration explains the entire existence of tribals in terms of opposition to ‘What Hindus are.’

In the fourth sequence, nostalgia as a sign symbolises a desire to go back to original roots --- tribal identity, tribal food, tribal market, tribal land, and tribal “breeze”. There is a reassertion of identity not in the course of events, but in the course of thoughts of Soren family.

In the fifth sequence, the complexities of living as a minority (in numbers) are represented indirectly. There is Soren family, Mohammed family and Women of the Mohammed --- all represent minority that is further equated to marginalisation. The fate met by the Mohammeds, refers to the fate that could be met by the Sorens. Identity of ‘being a marginal,’ at the hands of the religious and communal ideologies, is established and the aftermath of this politicised identity bears thematic concern of loss of identity. There is also imbrication of caste and gender.

In the sixth sequence, the resistance in the middle of identity crisis take the shape of sisterhood and brotherhood. Discrimination and separatism, which has started on the basis of the semic code ‘food’ and further extends to religious and gender discrimination, is subverted with an equally powerful anti-identity discourse.

In the seventh sequence, the reconciliation of the family at Ranchi signifies the reclamation of tribal identity where they are free entities – free to eat and to live their own ways.

Conclusion

The paper explores a short story “They Eat Meat” with the help of the semiotic method. In the narrative, the author has woven a story around ‘Food’ as a sign, a semic code or motif (recurrent theme) of identity with further extensions of class, caste, purity, place (land), and time (history). The syntactic analysis brings out all the thematic concerns related to food. In scope, the paper opens up queries in cultural studies and subaltern studies with the contemporary context of Delhi riots.

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