

Article

## *Murder on the Orient Express: A Mystery- Detective Novel by Agatha Christie with a Semiotic Eye*

Ms. Hongal Pratibha Kallappa

Research Scholar, Dayanand College of Arts, Latur, Maharashtra, India;  
[pratibhapatil22288@gmail.com](mailto:pratibhapatil22288@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Detective stories are one of the thrilling branches of Mystery fiction. This branch remains incomplete without suspense and mystery. The crime has occurred, and the clues remain in semiotic signs; it is shrouded in mystery. Thriller is the heart of the mystery, which is discovered by suspense and semiotic signs. Hence, it is essential to recognise that mystery and semiotics intersect, and both the author and the reader share the thrill of this journey. Here, researchers analyse the in-depth mystery genre in Agatha Christie's selected novels through semiotic analysis, examining the secret clues within signs, codes, and icons. Christie has achieved a great position as a crime writer. The detective stories and Agatha Christie were a tremendously successful pair in the twentieth century. Semiotics is broadly used as an interdisciplinary study that encompasses all manner of communication. Literary semiotics has been a field of research that has explored various aspects of Linguistics. Semiotics is the study of signs, encompassing the analysis of signs, symbols, and icons. It is a study of signs and the behaviour used. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, demarcated it. Semiotics is one of the finest analyses of the literary work, *Murder on the Orient Express*. This is an excellent novel with a plethora of signs and symbols, which prompts readers to decode it; a semiotic study makes this task easier.

**Keywords:** Semiotic; Detective stories; Mystery fiction

### Introduction

Semiotic studies are individually attractive to those fascinated by signs in general and the meanings they interpret from them. It is a fascinating science that allows a semiotician the liberty to consider anything or any feelings as a sign and construe it to

convey an idea. When semiotic theories are applied to literature, they help readers understand the text, the writer, the socio-cultural background, characterisation, and many other diverse interpretations. This term, rooted in Structuralism, refers to an approach to literary analysis that employs the techniques of linguistics to understand the process by which meaning is generated and understood, not only in literary works but in all forms of communication and social behaviour. The term semiotic is derived from the Greek word 'Semeion', denoting a sign. In modern usage, the concept of semiotics refers to a theory of Signification. Semiotics attempts to explain the combination of systematically essential characters, context, and historical symbols in literature. Semiotics is the study of signs; the term sign is used in linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure to define a word. Saussure argued that words were not symbols with corresponding referents, but signs composed of two inseparable parts: the signifier and the signified, which is the concept elicited in the mind by the signifier.

Saussure's model, on the other hand, is as follows:

$$\text{SIGN} = \frac{\text{Signifier}}{\text{Signified}}$$

It also describes signs, symbols, and icons. It is the study of signs and sign-using behaviour. One of its founders, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, demarcated it.

Agatha Christie was an English versatile writer; she flourished in her career as a crime novelist, short-story writer and playwright. She is known as the "Queen of Crime" and the "Queen of Mystery" for her detective novels and her use of words. She is widely celebrated for her ingenious plotting and ability to craft compelling mysteries; her age is enjoying a space as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. She is the most highly read author of the twentieth century. Her novels are a pack of semiotic signs, symbols, and icons, along with their signifier and signified meanings, presented by the researcher in this paper.

### 1.1.Objectives

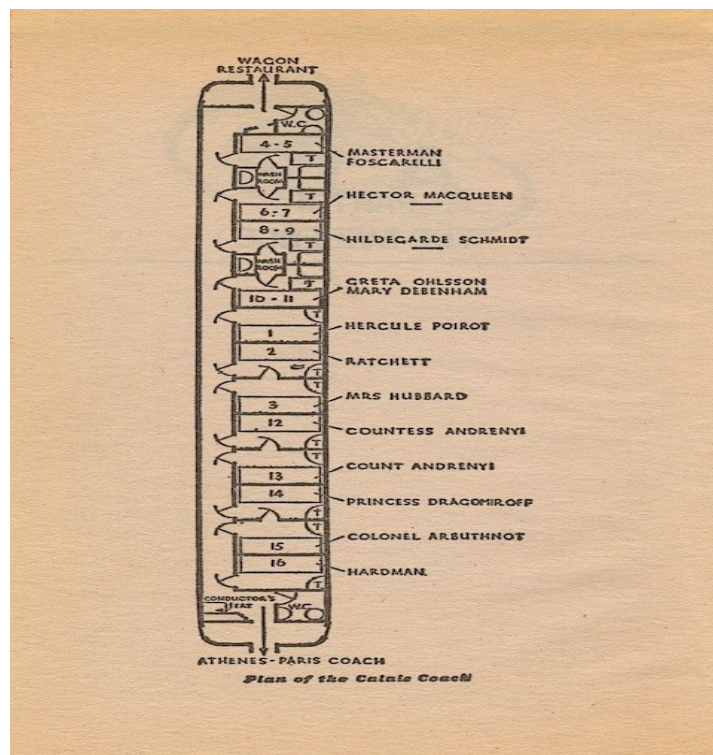
2. To analyse and comprehend the 'Mystery Fiction with a Semiotic analysis of the novels.
3. To scrutinise and analyse the Mystery Semiotic Components in 'Murder on the Orient Express'.

### 1.2. Methodology

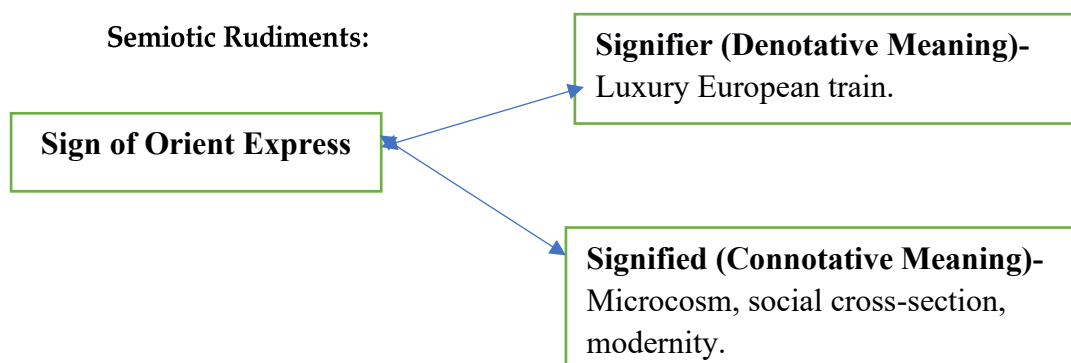
The study's method is qualitative. The research methodology encompasses several key aspects, including the research method and data analysis technique. The research is analytical, descriptive and interpretative. The research tried to describe and analyse the relationship of signs, icons, symbols, and their semiotic analysis with the content analysis technique

### 1.3. Mystery and Semiotic Analysis of *Murder on The Orient Express*

## 1.3.1. The Train and Wagon-



(<https://paperbackpalette.blogspot.com/2019/06/the-cover-art-of-agatha-christies.html>)



The structure of the train and the compartments semiotically represent the social class, comprehending the weather and circumstances that make this novel suspenseful. The novel opens in Syria, and it is nearly five o'clock on a winter's morning. Winter signifies a mysterious atmosphere, and Christie crafts the scenario that allows Poirot to solve the mystery according to his tactics, in an unbiased manner. The train was travelling from Istanbul through Belgrade, Yugoslavia (now Serbia), on its way to Paris from 1919 to 1939. The train used across several countries supports the author in developing a variety of characters from different nationalities to come together on the train. The passengers and crew come from several countries, including the United States, Belgium, Russia, the United Kingdom, and Greece. Hungary, Sweden, Italy, France and Germany. The passengers represent a variety of nationalities. However,

readers ultimately discover that all the passengers and crew members are connected. This train is a symbol of globalisation, it connects multiple countries and cultures that would not be connected otherwise.

The real-life Express was a luxurious train running from the far East through Continental Europe, terminating in France. In addition to a powerful engine. It was created from several coaches that were both added to and destined for various cities. The Calais Coach is one of the previously described coaches attached to the Orient Express. The first connected in the far East and the last port city of Calais, where passengers could make connections for England. The Journey represents the search for truth and justice. The train is a miniature of society, and the linear path symbolises the predictability of justice. The Restaurant Car, where passengers dine. In this picture, Mr. Ratchett and Hercule Poirot are seated at one table, where Mr. Ratchett requests Poirot to handle his case because he knew that nobody desired to kill him. Poirot denies his proposal because he knew that Ratchett was an evil-minded person; finally, he was murdered. In this novel, the train and its compartments played a significant role. M. Bouc speaks about the people in this train as, "All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages." (*Murder on the Orient Express*, chapter 3, part 1)

Hercule Poirot and M. Bouc discussed the diverse community gathered on this train. When Poirot thinks about it, he realises that America could be a collection of people living in one place. At the end of the novel, he wonders how all the passengers might be linked. The structure of the train and the compartments are attached. This train signifies multiple meanings and layers of mystery.

### 1.3.2. The Semiotic 'H'



(<http://www.mysteryplayground.net/2017/07/murder-on-orient-express-clues-ornament.html>)

In this novel, the handkerchief found at the crime scene carries rich semiotic meaning. A handkerchief with the monogrammed letter "H" was found. The Handkerchief is fingered towards Princess Natalia Dragomiroff for the reason that the initial of her name is "H", which was planted in Ratchett's cabin. This handkerchief signifier of Femininity and Class is crafted as delicately embroidered with the initial

“H”, which signifies that the woman belongs to an upper-class family. This is the traditional method by which Christie demonstrates wealth and a majestic society. The sign of “H” is misdirected to Poirot, but finally Poirot realises the handkerchief belonged to Hildegrade Schmidt, the maid. It is also a symbol of justice, with each finger pointed not at an individual murderer, but at the associated moral murder of many people. It also symbolises hidden sorrow, the grief that is rooted in Daisy Armstrong’s case.

The Handkerchief, which Agatha Christie used in her novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*, plays a vital role in the novel. Its signifier is a handkerchief, but it signifies on multiple layers, such as,

1. An Upper Class Symbol,
2. A Cultural sign of grief,
3. As a misleading clue,
4. Ultimately, a piece of a complex puzzle about justice and vengeance.

Poirot suspects that the handkerchief may have been planted to divert attention from someone connected to the Armstrong family.

**1.3.4. The Gold Button**—This was also found at the scene of the crime, from a Wagon Lit uniform jacket. It is the small clue that helped Poirot reveal the mystery. This button was planted in Mrs. Hubbard’s compartment. Mrs. Hubbard would be eager to tell the whole story of a stranger man who passed through her compartment, the button suddenly found in her compartment, but Poirot’s detective mind thinks differently from the others. The button, Semiotically, represents the more profound meaning within it.

- 1) It signified the Identity and Disguise:

The golden button is supposed to be part of a methodically uniform. Its detachment symbolises murder, revenge, and deception. It is a small clue that distracts Poirot. It pretends to be something they are not. The murderers create a false identity.

- 2) Culpability and Evidence:

It is a minor item, but it cracks the symbol of guilt. Without a single word, it connects the murderers to the crime, showing how words and physical signs can convey deep meaning.

### **1.3.5. The Red Kimono-**

The Red Kimono dress is the mysterious clue in the novel. The scarlet Kimono dress symbolises the malevolent struggle between the secretive criminal and the detective Hercule Poirot. In the early morning, a woman rushed from the Ratchett’s compartment when he was stabbed. Poirot peered into the hallway, and after the investigation, he asked questions about the scarlet silk Kimono. He asked each female passenger on the train whether she owned one, but no one was ready to accept the reality about the kimono. In this novel, Poirot finally discovers the Kimono in his luggage, which signifies that the game they played was a dangerous one. In the investigation Poirot acknowledged that one man also observed that a woman in the Red



Kimono and explains to the Poirot that, "It was far down the corridor, and she had her back to me. She had on a kimono of scarlet with dragons on it." (*Murder on the Orient Express* pg.no.72)

The Kimono was embroidered with a dragon on it. The kimono was part of the intricate cover-up, with different passengers playing the roles to confuse the investigation. The signifier of a red silk kimono, exotic and very luxurious, found Poirot mysterious and misguided, but it signified many symbolic and layered meanings. The Red Kimono is a key symbolic element, and analysing it proportionally means examining how it reflects duality and opposites within the narrative, specifically in terms of disguise, gender, justice, and revenge. A masqueraded woman also wears a red kimono, and later it is suggested that a man could have worn it also; here, gender expectations and roles are challenged.

This case is an excellent example of moral justice. Ratchett escaped justice in the United States, and due to the morality of murder, does he have the right to kill a man to whom the law has acquitted him? The Red Kimono is a symbol of justice and the law. Therefore, the case was resolved not by law but by moral justice; the kimono is a part of this emotional narrative form, standing in distinction to the usual logical deduction. In this novel, there is a Wagon Lit attendant who matches the description given to Poirot by M. Hardman and is observed by Hildegard Schmidt, Colonel Arbuthnot, and M. MacQueen. Further to confuse the issues. A red herring was drawn across the train, and one mythical woman in the red kimono. A kimono, traditionally Japanese style, but Western European train with Western characters, a contrast between the East and West. This reflects how the murder itself interrupts the standard order, which is foreign, dramatic and symbolic rather than straightforward.

#### 1.3.6. The Snowstorm as Reflect as Semiotic Sign.

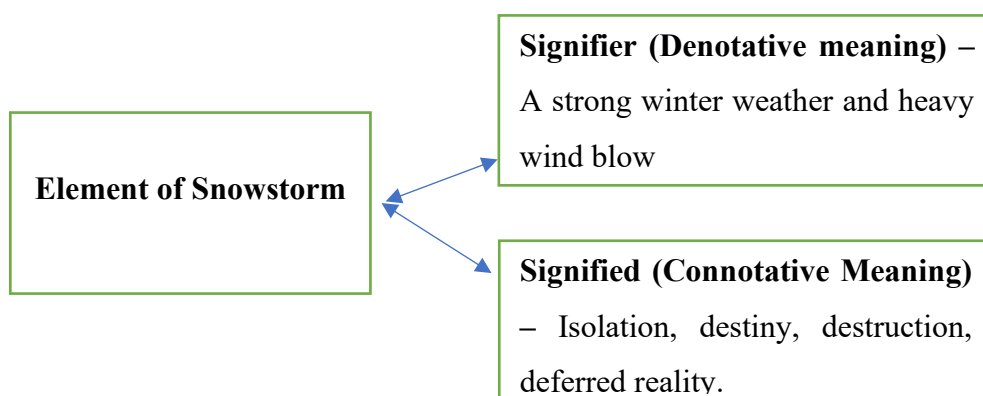


(<https://thegatewayonline.ca/2017/11/watch-men-episode-105-murder-orient-express/>)

The natural force gets stuck in a snowdrift, symbolically representing Isolation and Entrapment. The snowstorm trapped the train in Yugoslavia, where a murder was discovered. The snowstorm occurs between Vinkovci and Brod, situated in northeastern Croatia. The story begins in Istanbul. The story was inspired by several real-life events in 1929, including the time the Orient Express was trapped in a Blizzard in Cerkezkoy, Turkey, for six days. This incident happened when Christie was travelling on the Orient Express, when the train was stuck due to the heavy rainfall and flooding,

which inspired Agatha Christie to write a novel. The incident features a snowstorm and a murder plot, and Christie wrote this novel in 1934. The snowstorm plays a very decisive role in this novel. Here, Agatha Christie writes, "The snow and all, and nothing doing. Just hanging about and killing time. I would like to get busy after someone or something." (*Murder on the Orient Express* pg.no.157)

#### Semiotic Rudiments:



A semiotic analysis of 'Snowstorm in the Orient Express', which refers to Agatha Christie's popular novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, particularly the snowstorm that stalls the train, is a magnificent, rich study in signs, symbols, and meaning-making processes. Semiotics, the study of signs, symbols, and meaning-making processes, encompasses both denotative meaning, which refers to the literal or explicit meaning, and connotative meaning, which refers to the associated or implied meaning.

The Role of the Snowstorm is red-hearing and creates a great suspense in the atmosphere in several ways, such as

1. The Orient Express was trapped in a snowstorm. This occurrence halted the train's journey, trapping all the passengers together in a confined space.
2. The snowstorm can be seen symbolically as pure, white, a clean mask, but it hides the darkness of the truth behind the murder.
3. The snowstorm is denotatively a severe weather event characterised by heavy snowfall, very low visibility, and strong winds. Because of these, the train is physically stuck in the Yugoslavian mountains. Its connotation isolates the characters from the real outside world and forces them to antagonise their secrets. They are trapped in their psychological entrapment.
4. The snowstorm engenders a confined space, a closed circle, which is a perfect example of classic mystery, known as a 'locked-room' mystery. Here, no one can enter or leave the place.
5. The classical measure of Time and Space in the mysterious novel, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, stands still, creating an adequate space for crime and allowing Poirot to investigate in this frozen montage.

6. The storm reacts like destiny or justice, holding the train in place until the crime is resolved. The train is a symbol of the criminal's murder.
7. Detective Hercule Poirot is a semiotician. He is a faithful interpreter of semiotic signs, including clues and gestures. He reads the signs and understands the signifiers, including the perceptible clues, and finds the signified or hidden meaning. He mirrored the hidden clues and resolved the crime mystery. He decoded the cultural texts with their actual meaning.
8. The Murder of Ratchett is a Criminal act of stabbing which symbolises justice, ritualistic punishment, collective crime and guilt about it.

This novel is an example of predictable detective novel, where the detective investigates a crime and solve the mystery, Hercule Poirot moves in the whole novel with self-assuredness that always fascinates the readers but readers are astonished in the end of the novel, in traditional mystery, detective resolved the problem and criminal was punished and synchronization apprehend the society. Christie changed this classical method of mystery stories and stressed the importance of Justice. She inverted the roles of criminal and victim. This is an excellent example of Christie's ability to portray the perspectives of both the criminal and the victim. However, the reader and Poirot struggle with the ethical allegations of killing the killer, which creates the tension between the legal and moral magnitudes of justice. In the article of Mega Asri "*A family and their revenge in Agatha Christie's novel Murder on the Orient Express*", she described how the family took revenge by killing the villain on the train and fight for the justice, the novel talks about the sociological approach as well as sentimental approach towards the Armstrong family.

#### 1.4. Conclusion

*Murder on the Orient Express* was written when she was in Turkey. She wrote this novel in a hotel, specifically the Pera Palace, located in Istanbul. Christie travelled for the first time by this train in 1928; she had a real-life experience of travelling by the Orient Express. This was a fascinating experience, which she draws on in her writing. Christie described in her autobiography,

"All my life, I had wanted to go on the Orient Express. When I had travelled to France or Spain or Italy, the Orient Express had often been standing at Calais, and I had longed to climb up into it. Simplon-Orient Express-Milan, Belgrade, Stamboul....". (*An Autobiography: Agatha Christie*, p. 323)

Christie may have been inspired by a real event which happened in 1929. A snowstorm trapped a train fifty miles away from Istanbul, but no murder occurred; hence, this event became the setting of Christie's novel. Christie was praised for her clever plot, moral indistinctness, and atmospheric setting. The novel's inventive plot and the solution are among Christie's most significant and original, as she makes all the suspects guilty. This twist was memorable and one of the great works of crime fiction. The setting of Christie's novels is symbolic and sophisticated.



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