

Womanhood, Love and Sacrifice: A Semiotic Analysis of the Novel "A Thousand Splendid Suns"

Muhajra Bibi¹

<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2025.14.3.42>

Abstract

Womanhood is depicted in literature in such a way that mirrors and emphasizes the norms of a particular society, primarily through the intricate use of mythologies of love and sacrifice. The present study analyses the semiotic relationship between womanhood and oppression in Khalid Husseini's novel "A Thousand Splendid Suns" by focusing on the myths of love and sacrifice. This study also explores how Husseini constructs and deconstructs the myths of love and sacrifice to reveal the imposition of patriarchal society on an oppressed woman. Drawing on the concepts of Ronald Barthes' Barthes' theory of semiotics, the study's findings revealed how neutral signs carry the hidden ideologies of a society. The researcher explored the various signs and symbols that represent resilience, endurance, sacrifice, and loyalty associated with womanhood. The textual analysis provides insight into significant motifs, such as motherhood, the institution of marriage, and the sacrifice of women, which showcase their ideological roles. The findings further indicate that love and sacrifice are portrayed as noble virtues; however, they advocate for patriarchal oppression. The author's deconstruction of these myths perpetuates the idea that the way socially constructed gender is represented in literature can be challenged by empowering women.

Keywords: Semiotics, Connotation, Myth, Womanhood, Resilience, Love, Sacrifice.

Introduction

Ratna (2008) notes that "a plethora of signs surrounds human life." These signs make the wheel of the human life cycle move effectively, and through these signs, humans communicate effectively. Similarly, Hermawan argues that "humans use codes to communicate, and for communication to be effective, they need to comprehend those signs." In linguistics, this understanding of signs is referred to as semiotics.

Semiotics is derived from the Greek word Semeion, meaning "sign." The English translation of this word refers to a system of signs encompassing all forms of communication that involve signs, including gestures, expressions, and written literary works in musical form or culture" (Antonia, 2023). In the words of Sobur (2006) "semiotics is the study of the world as a system of signs, serving as a fundamental unity". The term semiotics in linguistics came into knowledge through the Swiss philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure in the early 20th century. Ferdinand de Saussure states "a sign consists of two parts: the signifier and the signified". Semiotics examines the relationship between these signs and their use in the context of culture, society, and language, exploring how they convey ideas, meaning, and values. It examines signs in various contexts, including Art, literature, and daily life. "Semiotics reveals the process of sign-making, their use,

¹Research Scholar, Government Post Graduate College for Woman Mardan. Email: areeshkhan0319@gmail.com



and how they are carried by society, including the way signs are used to explore culture, identity, and human comprehension of the world around them" (Antonia, 2023, p.36).

As a scientific discipline, semiotics helps us understand the process of sign creation, interpretation, and usage. "The key concepts in semiotics include denotation (the dictionary meaning of the word or the meaning independent of context; the semantic meaning) and connotation (the associative or pragmatic meaning) and the mutual relationship of signs within the system of semiotics" (Antonia, 2023). Similarly, Antonia suggests that "being a scientific discipline, semiotics is applicable in various fields such as linguistics, literature, Art, media, anthropology, and communication to interpret communication methods. Semiotics can be applied to inspect the implied meanings embedded in signs". Thus, semiotics helps us to understand the social and cultural identities and values conveyed through signs.

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) by Khaled Hosseini is a captivating tale that tells the story of Afghan history within the context of war. Hosseini's use of language and narrative style reveals the intricacies hidden in Afghanistan's history. The author depicts women in Afghan society as an oppressed woman who embodies the patriarchal rules. The imposition of the Taliban's injustice made the woman in Afghanistan a tool of control, where she is treated as a subordinate to men.

This research employs Barthes' theory of semiotics as a theoretical framework, specifically his concepts of connotation and denotation, with an emphasis on the idea of myth. According to Roland Barthes, meaning exists at two levels: the surface level (denotation) followed by the hidden meaning (connotation). Barthes describes myth as a means of utilizing signs to create deeper, more complex meanings. These are stories constructed by society to give meaning to customs, beliefs, and other aspects of culture. These myths are often considered normal and truthful by those who accept them, while those who oppose them view them as false and exaggerated.

Thus, taking these concepts into account, this theory serves to uncover the hidden meanings embedded in Hosseini's novel, offering a lens for exploring its social and cultural background.

Problem Statement

Khalid Hussein's novel, *The Thousand Splendid Suns*, offers a vivid depiction of Afghan history, culture, and the political upheaval that prevailed at that time. Despite a masterpiece and a substantial body of research, little attention is given to the role of connotation and mythologies, which helps to foster a more profound understanding of the novel's themes. Khalid Hosseini employs a meticulous approach to explore the interplay between dictionary meaning (denotation) and emotionally charged meaning (Connotation), conveying the depth of characters and their social motives. This study examines how connotation and denotation contribute to the novel's theme. Further, Hosseini's use of metaphorical language often carries layered connotations that reflect the complex socio-cultural realities of Afghan society. Examining these layers can reveal how the characters' struggles and triumphs are intricately tied to their cultural and emotional contexts, offering fresh insights into the narrative's broader implications. This study enriches the critical discourse surrounding *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by highlighting connotations and myths that underpin its powerful storytelling.

Research Questions

1. How does the novel construct and convey the semiotic relationship between Afghan womanhood and oppression through Barthes' notion of connotation and myth?

2. How does the novel utilize semiotic codes to construct the myth of love and sacrifice in the context of war and patriarchy?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the novel's construction of the semiotic relationship between Afghan womanhood and oppression through Barthes' notion of connotation and myth.
2. To examine how the novel utilizes semiotic codes that construct the myth of love and sacrifice in the context of war and patriarchy.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of the various semiotic signs used in Khaled Hosseini's novel, "A Thousand Splendid Suns". By applying Barth's semiotic theory of signs, this study analyzed the connotative and denotative aspects, as well as various myths, in the book. Further, it exposed how the author challenged the various cultural ideologies associated with the myths. As the story is set in Afghanistan, this study also provides a deeper understanding of Afghan culture, history, and the perspectives of its people.

Literature Review

One of the most significant components of a research study is the literature review, which provides a rich and comprehensive overview of existing knowledge on a specific topic. In the words of Hart, "a literature review is the evaluation of relevant information sources in a particular subject." This chapter focuses on the literature review that has been studied.

Semiotics as a Lens Used to Reveal the Implicit Meanings in the Song's Lyrics

Lestaria and Nitisa (2022) analyze Eminem's song "Mockingbird" to uncover the denotative and connotative meanings layered in the lyrics. The research employs a qualitative method to describe and analyze the connotations present in the song's lyrics. The study's findings reveal that the song "Mockingbird" is rich in implied meaning. The poet's use of literary devices and language to create meaning. These are explored through the lens of semiotics, which provides a deeper understanding of the themes and ideas conveyed by the poet.

Effectiveness of Semiotics in Writing Poetry

Moreover, Güzel (2023) conducted a study on Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken* to analyze the denotation and connotation in the poem. The research uses a qualitative approach to uncover the associative and emotive meanings conveyed by the poet. The study's findings reveal that the words not only contain denotation but are also filled with associative meanings that provide an enhanced understanding of the poem's themes and ideas, which the speaker intended to convey to the readers. The application of semiotic theory as a theoretical framework highlights the effectiveness of semiotics in helping readers comprehend denotation, connotation, and mythologies that reflect complex human experiences.

The Inevitability of Social Context in Translation

Furthermore, the work of Bamunusinghe and Sepali (2016) highlights the significance of translation as a linguistic activity, underscoring the mutual relationship between language and culture. The study emphasizes the importance of connotative meanings that must be translated within their social context; otherwise, it may lead to misinterpretation. The study employs the

theory of Peter Newmark and Ilyas (2013), which emphasizes the idea that if a translator fails to capture the associative meaning, it can lead to a significant loss in translation quality. The source of data for the research study is the translation of the novel *Giraya* by Punyakante and its Sinhalese translation by Cyril C. Perera. The study uses contrastive and comparative analysis. The study employs a qualitative method, extracting data from the original text of the novel to explore its connotative and denotative meanings. In the discussion, the author takes an instance from the book where a Sinhalese proverb is translated into English. In this instance, the authors emphasize that connotation extends beyond expressions and social context; therefore, it is inevitable to preserve the social, cultural, and artistic quality of literature.

Connotation: A Tool for Communicating Complex Ideas

Similarly, Setiani (2020) employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the significance of connotation and denotation in poetry writing. According to the research findings, a writer can use denotation to convey the literal meaning of a word and connotation to convey the associative meaning of words. Connotation enables poets and writers to communicate complex ideas effectively through the use of words.

Exploring the Hidden Meaning in the Poem Great Love by Khalil Gibran

Researcher Antonia (2023) conducted a study on the poem "*Great Love*" by Khalil Gibran, utilizing Barthes' theory of semiotics. The researcher uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the signs. Among the five codes of Roland Barthes—the puzzle code, the connotative code, the symbolic code, the action code, and the cultural code—the researcher finds three codes in the poem: the connotative code, the symbolic code, and the action code. The findings of the research study reveal that the use of semiotic theory as a theoretical framework explores the hidden meanings of the narratives.

Semiology in Media Studies

The study by Bouzard (2014) highlights the significance of semiotics in media analysis. The descriptive approach used in this study concluded that semiotics plays a significant role in uncovering the hidden meaning represented through media. The author insists that it is impossible to fully comprehend the messages conveyed in the form of movies, cartoons, and television programs without knowledge of their cultural background. This artistic background can be explored through Barthes' notion of mythologies, which are stories that emerge from discourse.

The Violation of Women's Human Rights in Afghanistan

Nur Indah Saputri (2022) observed the violation of women's human rights in Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The study lends concepts from the feminist essentialist theory to analyze the various types of women's rights violations and the root causes of the ill-treatment of women in Afghan society. The findings revealed the existence of two types of breaches. The domestic violence emerges from treating women as housewives, imprisoned within the home's boundary. This leads to the social rights abuse of women. The research showcases that there is a misinterpretation of Islamic rules that needs to be addressed by re-examining the mutual relationship between Islamic teachings and women's rights.

From the above studies, it is clear that there is a gap in the semiotic analysis of Khalid Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, as the novel masterfully depicts the historical and social context of Afghan society. Especially, women's oppression and their sacrifices for being a woman are

associated with the honor and pride of an Afghan man. Therefore, the present study explores the semiotics of womanhood, oppression, and societal beliefs related to love and sacrifice.

Research Methodology

The researcher employs a descriptive qualitative approach to uncover the denotative and connotative meanings in the narrative of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. According to Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, connotation is the culturally rich meaning associated with a sign. This connotation is a vital part of meaning, enabling readers to understand that narratives function at multiple levels.

In the context of the present study, the semiotic relationship between womanhood and oppression is connoted by various verbal and nonverbal signs. Barthes notes that connotation is an addition to the dictionary meaning of a word. Moreover, he asserts that a sign is constituted through the mutual interplay of the signifier and the signified, and these two components cannot be separated. For instance, the word *burqa* is a sign of oppression. When one half of it is removed, the other half loses its significance as well. Therefore, a sign is the combination of the signifier and the signified. In his book *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes explains how associative meanings transform into cultural ideologies. According to Barthes, these myths are the prevalent ideologies in a society that shape people's perception of the world. Khaled Hosseini's novel perpetuates the myth of love and sacrifice in the context of Afghan society.

Data Collection

The primary source of the data is the text of the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khalid Husseini. The secondary sources include research articles, books, and other relevant studies. The present study utilizes Barthes' theory of semiotics as an analytical tool.

Theoretical Framework

The present study utilizes Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics. E.M. Griffin, in his book *A First Look at Communication Theory* (2012), explains that "Barthes, a French literary critic and semiologist, suggests that semiotics is not merely a discipline, a theory of signs, or a school of thought, but rather "an adventure." In addition, the author suggests that " the primary focus of semiotics is the study of verbal and nonverbal signs, where the verbal aspect is known as linguistics.

"Semiology deals with the study of symbols, which are defined as things that stand for something else. In the words of Umberto Eco". Semiology is the discipline that studies everything that can be used to tell a lie, because if something fails to tell a lie, on the contrary, it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot be used to tell at all. "Barthes was interested in the study of signs that appear explicit but, in reality, depict prevalent societal beliefs and ideologies" (Griffin, 2012, p. 333).

Barthes' theory of semiotics is employed as an analytical tool to study signs, particularly the fundamental conceptual elements of his theory. This theory is practical in studying signs as representations of cultural ideologies and subjective associations. According to this theory, the cultural context and subjective associations significantly influence the interpretation of signs. Barthes extends the concepts of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs, wherein a sign is the combination of a signifier and the signified. The *signifier* is the actual object, while the *signified* is the concept or idea that it conveys. Barthes modified this concept by introducing Expression (E) and content (C), emphasizing the crucial relationship between the two" (Griffin, 2012, p.336).

"Barthes defines denotation as the literal meaning of words and connotation as meanings beyond the literal sense, serving as an addition to the true meaning of a sign. He posits that one of the key aspects of language is connotation because it enables the writer to perpetuate a web of ideas through language" (Griffin, 2023).

Barthes explains his theory of semiotics through the concept of *myth*. According to Barthes, myth is an expansion of connotative meaning; myths extend connotation, deriving from people's speech in the form of ideology. "Barthes developed Saussure's concepts to describe the structure of language, specifically the structure of signs. A sign comprises two inseparable parts: a signifier and a signified. To comprehend Barthes' concept of a sign, one must understand its structure. The signifier alone is not the sign; instead, it fuses with the signified, and together they constitute a complete sign" (Griffin, 2012, p. 333).

Griffin (2012) puts it that "Saussure explains that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not fixed but rather arbitrary. However, Barthes argues that in nonverbal signs, there exists a natural relationship between the signifier and the signified." Barthes further explains that a sign cannot stand alone; rather, it is an element of a system. He maintains that not all semiotic systems are mythic and that not all signs embody ideological content" (Griffin, 2012, p.333).

Analysis and Discussion

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is an enriched tapestry of symbols, themes, and characters that provide a deeper understanding of the novel's setting, background, and Afghan cultural identity. Through Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, the following denotations, connotations, and myths are identified through a close reading of the novel. The novel establishes a semiotic relationship between Afghan womanhood and oppression through Barthes' notions of denotation and connotation, where denotation refers to the literal or obvious meaning of a sign. In contrast, connotation refers to the associative or emotive meaning of words. In the novel, the semiotic relationship between womanhood and oppression can be seen in three significant ways: patriarchal oppression, lack of availability of resources, and marginalization.

In the novel, the word "burqa" carries a denotative meaning as a type of cloth used by women to cover their bodies, and it connotes protection. The character Mariam, when she wears it, feels secure in a society where she is traumatized by her birth as a child born out of wedlock, an illegitimate child. Hosseini (2007) notes, "And the burqa, she learned to her surprise, was also comforting. It was like a one-way window. Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past" (p.1). Additionally, the burqa also symbolizes modesty and piety. Conversely, the burqa as a sign is deconstructed and becomes a symbol of oppression that a woman experiences when she is a wife. Mariam wears it because it is her husband's order, and he forces her to wear it. She feels suffocated in the burqa, which reflects her exploitation by her husband. Additionally, from the historical context of the novel, the *burqa* symbolizes the oppressive regime of the Taliban, where women are required to wear it, reflecting their control over women.

The pistachio tree connotes the childhood memories that Mariam holds for her birthplace, Herat. The tree was destroyed in the war, which signifies that the golden age has passed and that military conflicts have eradicated homes, memories, and families.

On the contrary, this tree stands for Mariam's discrimination. Mariam is not even allowed to explore her own country. Mariam, being the daughter of an influential person, is denied the opportunity to visit her birthplace, Herat. The author writes, "There is a pistachio tree," Jalil said one day, and beneath it, Mariam Jo, there is buried...the great poet Jami. Further, he explains, "I

took you there once, to the tree. You were little. You would not remember" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 4). Mariam's father only describes the famous pistachio tree where a great poet is buried, along with many other beautiful places; the places she never had access to, because allowing her to visit would expose his shameful past.

The recurring symbol of Kolba represents the marginalization of women. Nana, who gives birth to Jalil's daughter, Mariam, out of wedlock, is separated from the rest of his wives. He builds a home, *Kolba*, for her in a rural village. Nana says, "And so your father built us this rathole." (Hosseini, 2007, p.7). Denotatively, rathole signifies oppression and separation. For Nana, it is a symbol of the harshness that women endure in Afghan society.

Additionally, the term "*rathole*" refers to a crumpled house, a dark and suffocating place. However, Nana's mention of *rathole* shows the weak bond of love between her and her partner, Jalil. She was living as a housekeeper in his sophisticated home, but after having an affair with him and giving birth to her daughter, she was sent to Kolba. This *rathole* represents dehumanization. Furthermore, it justifies that it is the responsibility of the male to discipline and control the female; therefore, they confine their boundaries.

Similarly, Nana mentions that her father did not possess *dil*. The word *dil* means heart, but here it is a sign of cowardice. This is evident when she laments, "I wish my father had had the stomach to sharpen one of his knives and to do the honorable things. It might have been better for me." But he was a coward, my father. He did not have the heart for it" (Hosseini, 2007, p.5). Nana complains that if her father had been able to provide her with strength, she would not have been abandoned by society.

Similarly, she uses this term for her husband, who defends himself by accusing Nana of imposing herself on him, even though he shares the same guilt. Nana declares, "Jalili did not have the Dil either, Nana said to do the honorable thing, to stand by his family, his wives, and in-laws, and accept responsibility for what he has done" (Hossini, 2007, p.5). However, the cultural belief only blames the female for sexual sin. As Hosseini (2007) depicts this belief by putting, "You know what he told his wives by way of defense? That I forced myself on him. That it was my fault. Didi? You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world" (p.5). This reflects how a man determines a woman's fate, and she remains dependent on him for her needs and fate.

Denotatively, the word pokeroot refers to a type of extra herb. In the context of the novel, when Mariam's mother, Nana, refers to herself as pokeroot, it implies that her husband abandoned her after she gave birth to her daughter. She was considered a source of humiliation and disgrace to his social status. Such useless and extra herbs are usually uprooted from the ground, meaning Nana has accepted her fate as the reality of the culture. Hosseini illustrates it through the character of Nana when she declares, "to Jalili and his wives, I was a pokeroot. A mugwort... "A weed," Nana said. "Something you rip out and toss aside" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 8).

A woman symbolizes all the good qualities, such as beauty, wealth, physical fitness, and good moral character. If she fails to possess these qualities, she will be rejected and considered unfit for marriage. In the novel, Nana was supposed to marry a parakeet seller, but one week before the wedding, she suffered from a disease like epilepsy. When the news reached the boy's family, they refused to let their son marry her. Similarly, when Nana became part of Jalil's life, she was not treated with the respect she deserved. Instead, she refused to live with him in Herat because she would feel the distinction Jalil made between her and his other wives, who were beautiful and considered the best suitors for him. Such narratives in society have a profound influence on women's lives (Hosseini, 2007)—as seen in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

The red color of Jalil's tie represents authority, respect, and nobility. However, the reality is opposite—he hides his guilt and prioritizes his reputation over his daughter's. Whenever he visits Mariam and her mother, Nana, he wears a red tie. As mentioned in the narrative, "watch him walk through the tall grass, his suit jacket slung over his shoulder, the breeze lifted his red necktie" (Hosseini, 2007, p.5). He visits them every Thursday. The breeze lifts his tie. This connotes the stigmatization imposed by his other wives, whose force has separated his own daughter from him. The breeze symbolizes the pressure exerted by his wives to detach Nana and Mariam from his home.

The pendant, a gift given to Mariam by her father, is not only a piece of jewelry she wears, but it also stands for Jalil's regret and realization of his mistakes, as well as a parent's love for their children. However, it was too late to amend his wrong actions. The pendant is described in the novel as "and found a leaf-shaped pendant, tiny coins etched with moons and stars, dragons hanging from it." (Hosseini, 2007). The moon and stars hanging from this pendant represent the only things she has to explore, existing in the form of images, not in the real world around her.

The green hijab that Mariam wears during her marriage to Rasheed symbolizes her hope for a new beginning in life, her obedience, and loyalty to her father. Despite her unwillingness to marry Rasheed, she obeys her father to protect his honor. The Mullah asks her twice to accept the man as her husband, and she remains silent. At last, her father calls her name, *Mariam*, and she finally utters, "Yes." She said Shakily. As mentioned earlier, her unwillingness is described by the word 'shakily,' indicating that she was not confident enough; however, she had to obey her father's order. This signifies that it was considered noble to bear sufferings, but she later proves that dignity can be earned through resistance.

Tandoor denotes a baking tool; connotatively, it is a sign of oppression for Mariam. It symbolizes the tyranny that women endure as housewives. This is evident in the narrative when Mariam set out for the communal tandoor. "She was hyperventilating. Her ears buzzed, her pulse fluttered, her eyes darted from one face to another. She backed away again, but there was nowhere to go—she was in the center of the circle" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 47). She feels suffocated, as if she cannot breathe. Similarly, the conversation among the wives at the *tandoor* about their ungrateful husbands' mischiefs and lack of support makes her anxious that she may share the same fate.

The Afghan woman, as depicted in the novel, is caring—whether she is a daughter, mother, or wife. For instance, when a woman asks Mariam what gender she would prefer for her first child, another woman claims she may choose a daughter because daughters care for their parents, while sons get busy with their own wives.

Additionally, women are often associated with household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks. She looked at the ill-fitting drawers, at the mismatched spoons and the knives, the colander and chipped, wooden spatulas, these would be the instruments of her new life" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 44). The phrase *mismatched spoons and knives* represents Mariam's status as a suppressed housewife. She believes that these utensils will be the only tools she operates daily. They serve as reminders of a storm that has drowned her and left her feeling displaced.

Connotatively, the wedding veil is a sign of a woman's loss of authority after marriage. This is evident from the narrative, "a cloud that dropped the face of the moon like a wedding veil" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 54). In this phrase, just as clouds obscure the moon's glow, a wedding veil condemns a woman, restricting her choices. When Mariam gets married, she is unable to make decisions; she cannot even speak the words she truly wants to say.

A woman is bestowed with Mamta, or motherhood. Khalid Hosseini painted this by quoting, "heading toward one final cherished province; Motherhood. How delectable it was to think of this

baby, her baby. How glorious it was to know that her love for it already dwarfed anything she had ever felt as a human being" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 61). This shows that a mother can forget all the loss and pain she experiences as an individual. In the novel, the word *dwarfed* portrays this aspect of motherhood. When Mariam feels that she is going to be a mother, her love for her baby *dwarfs* all the love she has ever known. She was a solitary child, separated from her father and her ten stepsiblings. She used to play a pebble game, naming eleven pebbles after her siblings. However, the prospect of her first baby overshadows all her longing for familial love.

However, when Mariam lost her baby before its birth, she was overcome with grief. In the narrative, the phrase "whirlpool of snow" connotes her sighs. Hosseini (2007) depicts this grief when Mariam reflects upon Nana saying, "that each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world" (p. 63). She is also tormented by her husband, who avoids her and taunts her for not giving him the happiness of a child. This reflects the societal expectation that a woman must bear children. Without becoming a mother, she is perceived as incomplete and is treated merely as a vessel.

This also signifies that society defines womanhood in relation to motherhood and fertility. Infertility is often blamed on women. However, Mariam challenges this notion, proving that true womanhood is characterized by love and care, not by childbirth or societal oppression.

Additionally, Mariam is treated as an object, enduring domestic violence, which exemplifies the harsh reality of spousal abuse. Rasheed treats her like a pet, providing only shelter and food, solely for his own entertainment. Initially, he behaves well towards her, creating an illusion of security and making her believe that only he can protect her. However, this was merely a tactic to gain her trust before he started treating her like an animal. This further suggests that, in a patriarchal society, a wife's obedience to her husband is equated with true love.

The Myths of Love and Sacrifice

A myth carries a secondary meaning, as Roland Barthes argues that myths convey the cultural and ideological meanings associated with signs. The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, set against the backdrop of Afghan society, masterfully portrays its social and cultural aspects. The story both constructs and deconstructs various myths regarding love and sacrifice.

Love as the Agent of Contentment

The author deconstructs the myth that love, particularly romantic love, guarantees happiness and fulfillment. In the novel, the love between Tariq and Laila leads to significant loss and separation. Similarly, the love between a husband and wife does not guarantee a happy life. Hosseini (2007) illustrates this through the relationship between Mariam and Rasheed, which initially holds promise for a blessed life but ultimately results in bloodshed and violence. The horrifying act of physical abuse and domestic violence leads Mariam to kill her own husband (p. 190).

Similarly, Hosseini (2007) depicts the apparent love between Mariam and Jalil when she reflects, "Mariam thought of Jalil, of the emphatic, jovial way in which he had pushed his jewellery at her, the overpowering cheerfulness... Nana has been right about Jalil's gifts. They had been half hearted tokens of penance".

Through these portrayals, the author challenges the ideological construction of love, implying that sacrifice, often viewed as an essential component of love, is actually used as a tool of oppression, which is later transformed into an act of women's empowerment.

A Woman's Love is Sufficient to Change a Man

Hosseini (2007) depicts this through Mariam's initial belief in the transformative power of love. She assumes that her sincerity and devotion will soften Rasheed's heart, changing him from a crude man into a refined one. However, her efforts prove futile. Rasheed remains resistant to change, demonstrating that a woman's love alone cannot alter a man who refuses to evolve. (P. 146).

Parental Love Always Provides Safety and Security for Children

The novel constructs the myth of parental love through Nana's devotion to Mariam. She shields her daughter from societal stigmatization due to her illegitimacy, choosing to live in a crumpled house to nurture her. Mariam's visit to his father's big house in the city. The denial of her acceptance by her stepmother reminds her that her mother was the only parent to protect her. She recalls the words of her mother: "I am all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I am gone you will have nothing. You are nothing" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 29). Similarly, Laila's father ensures her safety and security through his love and support. Similarly, the novel constructs this myth through Jalil, Mariam's father. His abandonment of Mariam leads to an insecure future for her, as he marries her off at the age of fifteen to an older man and sends her to a distant place, demonstrating that parental love does not always ensure protection.

The Most Influential and Valuable Love is Romantic Love

According to Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics, myths are products of societal beliefs that emerge from discourse. The novel constructs the myth that romantic love is the most significant and valuable form of love through the relationship between Laila and Tariq. " When Tariq leaves Afghanistan and migrates to Pakistan during the war, he immediately decides to marry Laila. He persuades her that he will take her with him. Similarly, despite hardships, Laila saves money and plans to leave Afghanistan to reunite with Tariq " (Hosseini, 2007). *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Riverhead Books. This reinforces the societal belief in the supremacy of romantic love.

Sacrifice as a Myth in “*A Thousand Splendid Suns*”

A woman has to endure for the happiness of her family

" Only one skill. Moreover, it is this: tahamul, Endurance (Hosseini, 2007, p. 13). Further, the author puts, "it is our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It is all we have". From the above quotes, it is evident that Afghan society obligates women to sacrifice themselves for their families. The novel challenges this notion, questioning the expectation that women must endure suffering for the sake of others. Mariam's character embodies this sacrifice—she willingly endures her husband's torment to protect Laila and her children. As Barthes argues, myths are constructed through societal beliefs and values. Mariam is presented as a victim of patriarchal suppression, but she ultimately rejects the idea that dignity is derived from obeying societal rules. For the first time, she takes control of her own fate, choosing sacrifice not as a burden imposed upon her, but as an empowered decision, thereby redefining the concept of sacrifice in a patriarchal society.

Sacrifice is always rewarded

The second belief was that sacrifice is consistently recognized and rewarded. Mariam gives up her life to protect Laila and the children, but she does not receive recognition or justice from society. The novel challenges the notion that those who sacrifice will always be honoured. So, her sacrifice challenges the societal myth that those who sacrifice bring glory. However, her death refuses to accept the injustice. She saved Laila and her children, breaking the cycle of suffering.

Suffering in Silence is a Virtue

The novel deconstructs this myth; Mariam suffers for most of her life in silence, believing it is the right thing to do. She has suffered all the abuse that torments her since childhood. She endures the pain when she lost her mother, the denial of her father to equate her with his legitimate children, the harshness of a loveless marriage, and her inability to be a mother. Khalid Hosseini writes, " he shoved two fingers into her mouth...then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it, "Chew!" he bellowed" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 72). This suggests that Mariam's silent suffering did not make her virtuous, but instead pushed her to the brink. However, the novel suggests that standing up for oneself (as Laila eventually does) is sometimes necessary, rather than enduring endless suffering.

Only Grand Gestures Count as Sacrifice

The novel demonstrates that small sacrifices, such as Laila choosing to stay and help the orphans or Mariam offering emotional support to Laila, are just as meaningful as larger sacrifices, like Mariam's ultimate act to save Laila's life.

Additionally, communism is depicted through the myth of sacrifice. The Soviet invasion of Kabul transforms the city of blossoms and peace into a torn-out town where almost every street is filled with bloodshed and the smell of human bodies. Afghans sent their own young boys to the battlefield and lost them.

The Red Color as a Sign in the Novel Text

Furthermore, the transformation of red as a connotation shifts from society's imposition of rules on women to domestic oppression and finally to the connotation of armed forces and guns with red barrels. Barthes argues that "neutral signs alter their meaning, and this transformation leads to ideologies." The red color of Jalil's tie in the novel, which is waved by the breeze, is a sign of his dominant wives' imposition to separate his illegitimate child from him. Additionally, the red shawl that Mariam wears signifies her husband's control over her. On the contrary, the red color of the gun represents the ideology of fascism in the context of war. Similarly, the red city perpetuates the ideology of military authoritarianism. As Ronald Barthes suggests, myth is the secondary level of meaning, where a complete sign—a signifier and a signified—becomes another signified that is perceived as naturalized. Here, the red color as a sign holds a similar alteration. Firstly, it represents the pretended love for an illegitimate child, as evidenced by the red color of Jalil's tie. Secondly, it symbolizes Rasheed's love, as he gifted the red shawl to his wife. Ultimately, the red color of the barrels embodies the ideology of fascism.

Conclusion

The present study aims to explore the relationship between womanhood and oppression in the context of Afghan society, lending Barthes' concepts of denotation and connotation in the novel "The Thousand Splendid Suns" by Khalid Hussaini. In addition, the myths of love and sacrifice are also examined through Barthes's concepts of mythologies.

The study's findings reveal that the novel "A Thousand Splendid Suns" offers a vivid portrayal of womanhood and the associated oppression in Afghanistan's patriarchal society. Khalid Hussein's language choices provide several signs that explore the above-mentioned semiotic relationship; for instance, the word Burqa symbolizes the oppressive regime of the Taliban and their imposition of complex rules on women. The pistachio tree stands as a symbol of the denial of access to education and the world for an Afghan woman. Character Nana was marginalized from society since she was the mother of Jalil's illegitimate child. Additionally, this marginalization is portrayed

through a shrub pokeroor, symbolizing Nana being cast off by her husband. The sign of a rathole represents a woman sent to the boundary of society, in a relationship to a man to whom she is not a better suitor. Similarly, the word *Dil*, when used by Nana, reflects the dependence of a woman on a man, a woman who is unable to decide her own fate. A woman is a sign of beauty who has to embody all those qualities that are the desperate requirements of a man who takes her as a wife. "The ceiling she could not reach" exemplifies the confinement of Mariam to the knot of marriage. Furthermore, the red color tie of Mariam's father conveys the stigmatization imposed upon her. The control of a daughter by a father is represented through a pendant, and the images of a star and a moon from the pendant symbolize Mariam's inability to gain real-world experience. The suppression of emotions in a woman's presence by a dominant man is depicted through Nana's broken teeth. Mariam's green wedding veil is a sign of obedience to her father's decision despite her unwillingness. The image of the tandoor stands as a sign of oppression. The feeling of motherhood is signified through the word *dwarfed*; Mariam's love for her baby dwarfs all the love she has ever experienced. When she lost her child, her sighs are presented by the "whirlpool of snow"; this grief surpasses all the griefs she has ever sensed. Society obligates women to be mothers, to have children, and if they fail, they will be stigmatized. Similarly, the word *pet* depicts the domestic violence where Mariam has only been provided with clothes and shelter, and is considered an essential member of the family.

Moreover, the author explores the myth of love and sacrifice, constructing some myths while deconstructing others. The novel constructs the myth of parental love by portraying it as always protective and nurturing. Similarly, the novel also constructs the myth of love that one of the most influential love is the romantic love; character of Tariq embodies this myth where he struggles to achieve her love Laila. On the contrary, the novel deconstructs the myth that a woman's love is sufficient to change a man; Mariam fails to alter the crude nature of her husband, Rasheed. The myth that love is the agent of contentment is also deconstructed by the author, where most of the characters fail to achieve happiness through love.

Furthermore, Hosseini's depiction of myth provides the social and cultural background of Afghan society, entrenched in patriarchy and gender inequality. A woman must prioritize her own happiness for the sake of her family; she must also suffer for the sake of her family's happiness. The novel achieves this by portraying the characters of Mariam, Fariba, and Nana; their sacrifices ultimately lead to the peace of their families. On the other hand, the novel deconstructs the myth that only grand gestures are considered sacrifices. Laila's defense by Mariam through emotional support is not merely emotional support, but regarded as an epitome of sacrifice, where she shares her own husband and home with her and accommodates her. Similarly, the novel deconstructs the myths that sacrifice is always rewarded and that suffering does not claim one's own right.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that Barthes' semiotic theory, though rooted in non-verbal signs, be applied to verbal elements such as words and phrases to uncover hidden meanings in texts.

Students and teachers should utilize his concepts to enhance literary analysis and critique by examining how signs and symbols shape meaning. Semiotic analysis can also be extended to cultural artifacts and practices to reveal underlying power dynamics and ideologies. Incorporating semiotic theory into educational curricula will help students critically interpret symbols in diverse contexts.

Future research should explore the mythological structures within narratives, as analyzing mythological signs can deepen our understanding of a text's cultural and ideological significance. Additionally, combining Barthes' theory with frameworks such as poststructuralism or psychoanalysis may offer richer insights into the meaning-making processes.

References

- A'la, T. F. (2011). A semiotic analysis on the A-Mild's advertisement using Roland Barthes's theory [Master's thesis, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta]. <https://repository.uinjkt.ac.id/dspace/bitstream/123456789/979/1/97528TAZIKIYATUL%20FIKRIYAH%20ALA-FAH.pdf>
- Al-Bahrani, R., Al-Saadi, S., & Yousif, T. (2016). A detextualized social caricature as a source of plural denotations. *International Journal of English and Education*, 5(1), 76–92. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/294090732_A_Detextualized_Social_Caricature_as_a_Source_of_Plural_Denotations
- Andriyanto. (2017). Analisa semiotik denotasi, konotasi dan mitos iklan Indomie versi 45th anniversary di televisi. *Jurnal Manajemen Bisnis dan Kewirausahaan*, 1(1).
- Bamunusinghe, K., & Bamunusinghe, S. (2016). Connotation and denotation in literary translation. In *Proceedings of the 6th International Symposium on Multidisciplinary Research for Sustainable Development in the Information Era* (pp. 680–684). South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.
- Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. Éditions du Seuil.
- Güzel, S. (2023). Semiotic analysis of the denotative and connotative meaning: A study of the poem "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost. *International Social Sciences Studies Journal*, 9(13), 6809–6820. <https://doi.org/10.29228/sssj.71414>
- Hosseini, K. (2007). *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Riverhead Books.
- Isnaini, F., Setyono, B., & Ariyanto, S. (2019). A visual semiotic analysis of multicultural values in an Indonesian English textbook. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8(3), 545–553. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v8i3.15253>
- Jureczek, P. (2017). Literary translation quality assessment: An approach based on Roland Barthes' five literary codes. *Translatologica: A Journal of Translation, Language, and Literature*, 136–155. http://www.ifa.uni.wroc.pl/translatologica/vol1/9_Jureczek_vol1_2017.pdf
- Lestari, I., & Nitisari, D. (2022). Denotative and connotative meaning in lyric "Mockingbird" song by Eminem. *JUSHPEN*, 1(1), 20–26. <https://doi.org/10.31004/jushpen.v1i2.143>
- McCracken, G. (1993). The value of the brand: An anthropological perspective. In D. Aaker & A. L. Biel (Eds.), *Brand equity in advertising: Advertising's role in building strong brands*. (pp. 125–142). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Nisa, I. (2014). *Analisis semiotika pesan moral Jokowi* [Bachelor's thesis, Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta].
- Setiani, R. (2020). Denotative and connotative meaning used in writing poetry. *Edukasi Lingua Sastra*, 18(2), 85–92. <https://doi.org/10.47637/elsa.v18i2.264>
- Tyson, L. (2015). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide* (3rd ed.). Routledge.