

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED POEM IN RUPI KAUR'S MILK AND HONEY

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the semiotic elements in Rupī Kaur's poetry collection Milk and Honey by applying Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory. The objectives of the study are to identify the signifiers and the signifieds in ten selected poems and to explain the messages conveyed through their interaction. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method combined with content analysis to examine how meaning is constructed through the relationship between visual illustrations and poetic texts. The data were collected using literature study and purposive sampling. Ten poems were selected based on their thematic representation across the four main sections of the book: The Hurting, The Loving, The Breaking, and The Healing. The findings reveal that each poem contains unique visual and verbal sign systems that reflect emotional experiences, identity, trauma, love, and personal growth. The interaction between signifier and signified in each poem contributes to the overall meaning and message, illustrating the depth and complexity of the poet's expression.

Keywords : Semiotics, Signifier, Signified, Rupī Kaur, Milk and Honey

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis unsur-unsur semiotik dalam kumpulan puisi Milk and Honey karya Rupī Kaur dengan menggunakan teori semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi penanda (signifier) dan petanda (signified) dalam sepuluh puisi terpilih, serta menjelaskan pesan yang disampaikan melalui hubungan antara keduanya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik analisis isi (content analysis) untuk menelaah bagaimana makna dibentuk melalui hubungan antara ilustrasi visual dan teks puisi. Data dikumpulkan melalui studi pustaka dan teknik purposive sampling. Sepuluh puisi dipilih berdasarkan representasi tematik dari empat bagian utama buku: The Hurting, The Loving, The Breaking, dan The Healing. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa setiap puisi memiliki sistem tanda visual dan verbal yang merepresentasikan pengalaman emosional, identitas, trauma, cinta, dan pertumbuhan diri. Interaksi antara penanda dan petanda dalam setiap puisi memberikan kontribusi terhadap makna dan pesan keseluruhan, serta menggambarkan kedalaman ekspresi penyair.

Kata kunci : Semiotika, Penanda, Petanda, Rupī Kaur, Milk and Honey

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a system of sound symbols used to communicate, interact, and convey meaning orally, in writing, or through signs. According to Kridalaksana (in Istiqomah & Nugraha, 2018), language is described as a system of sound symbols used by members of a community to cooperate, interact, and express their identity. This view is in line with Chaer (2011:1, in Aisha & Noviadi, 2018), who states that language is an arbitrary system of sound symbols used by a community to cooperate, communicate, and identify themselves. Based on the two expert opinions above, it can be concluded that language is a system of sound symbols used by society to cooperate, communicate, and identify themselves. One of the sciences that studies language is linguistics.

Linguistics is a science that studies language scientifically. Linguistics not only studies language as a means of communication, but also examines its structure, function, use, and development systematically and objectively. According to Chaer (2007) the term linguistics comes from the Latin word *lingua* which means “language”. Linguistics is defined as a science that makes language the object of its study. Meanwhile, according to Kridalaksana (2000) linguistics is a discipline that studies language or studies language scientifically. So based on the opinions of the two experts above, it can be concluded that linguistics is a science that studies language in human life.

By understanding linguistics as a science that studies language, this discussion can be continued to a broader discussion, namely semiotics. Semiotics is the science that studies signs. According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) semiotics comes from the Greek *semeion* which means sign. Semiotics is the science that studies signs in social life, how signs function, and how signs can produce meaning. He calls semiotics a part of linguistics and emphasizes that signs consist of two main elements, namely the signifier and the signified, which unite to form meaning. Signifiers are the physical form of signs, which can be sounds, images, words, or symbols. Meanwhile, signifieds are concepts, ideas, or meanings related to the signifier. In his book *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) provides a concrete example of the concepts of signifier and signified. He explains that the word “tree” is a *signifier*, which refers to the sound pattern or the written form /t-r-ee/ that can be physically perceived. Meanwhile, the *signified* is the concept or mental image of a tree, such as a tall plant with a trunk, branches, and leaves. Saussure emphasized that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, meaning it is not natural but based on social convention within a language system. Therefore, meaning does not arise from one element alone, but from the interaction between the two.

Apart from Ferdinand de Saussure, an understanding of semiotics was also put forward by Charles Sanders Peirce. According to Charles Sanders Peirce (in Sanchez-Ovcharov & Suarez, 2024), semiotics is the science that studies signs and the process of forming meaning from these signs. Peirce explains that signs consist of three main components: representamen (the physical form of the sign), object (something referred to by the sign) and interpretant (the meaning or understanding produced). These signs can be divided into three types, namely icons (which resemble their objects), indexes (which have a causal relationship with their objects), and symbols (whose meaning is determined by cultural agreement or convention). From the explanation of the two experts above, it can be concluded that semiotics is a science that studies signs.

However, signs and semiotic signs are two different things. Signs are used to convey information, warnings, or directions in everyday communication, such as a red traffic light meaning stop. In contrast, semiotic signs are analyzed within semiotic theory to convey meaning through the relationship between the signifier (the physical form, such as images or words) and the signified (the concept or idea represented). For example, an image of green nature not only indicates "natural beauty" but also symbolizes "sustainability" or "environmental awareness". Signs focus on practical functions in communication, while semiotic signs explore the deeper relationship between form and meaning within cultural, social, and ideological contexts. All semiotic signs are signs, but not all signs are semiotic signs.

A key aspect of semiotic signs is the symbol, which relies on a conventional relationship between the signifier and the signified. Unlike other signs that have a direct connection to their meaning, symbols derive their meaning from cultural or social agreements, such as the dove being understood as a symbol of "peace" due to cultural conventions, not because of the bird's inherent qualities. Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, chosen as the theoretical foundation for this study, it can be concluded that semiotic signs work to form or convey meaning through the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is conventional, meaning that the meaning of a sign is determined by cultural or linguistic agreements, not by a direct or natural relationship. Therefore, semiotic signs convey meaning through a system of signs that are accepted and understood within a specific social and cultural context.

In line with the understanding of semiotics as the study of signs and meanings, literary works can be viewed as a complex sign system. In literary works, every word, symbol, and narrative structure acts as a sign that carries meaning, either directly or

implicitly. This shows that semiotics is not only relevant to language, but also to understanding the various layers of meaning in literary texts. According to Plato (in Ayuningtyas, 2019), the world in literary works is an imitation of the real world, which also contains a world of ideas. He stated that literary works form a social world that is a reflection of reality. One of literary works is poetry.

According to Sumardi (in Lafamane, 2020), poetry is a work of art that uses language in a concise manner, with a harmonious rhythm and metaphorical and imaginative word choice. Sumardi's opinion is further strengthened by Emily Dickson's view. According to Dickson (in Diehl, 2005), poetry is a structured form of language, not only as a means of expressing ideas, but also as a deep emotional experience. Based on the opinions of the two experts above, it can be concluded that poetry is a literary work to express feelings using language concisely and imaginatively.

The data for this research consist of ten selected poems from the poetry book *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur. Several poem titles selected in the book *Milk and Honey* as research data are poem 1 (to fathers with daughters), poem 2 (the art of being empty), poem 3, poem 4 (the perfect date), poem 5, poem 6, poem 7, poem 8, poem 9, and poem 10 (women of color). Rupi Kaur's poem *Milk and Honey* was chosen as the research data for several reasons. The main reason is because there are illustrations in each of her poems that are characteristic of this poem, so the semiotic approach is the right approach to analyze this research. Another reason is because Rupi Kaur's writing style is simple but has deep meaning. This is why researchers are drawn to studying the poem *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur, as it enhances awareness of how language and literary forms interact to convey deep and multidimensional meanings. The purpose of this research is what are the signifiers and the signifieds found in ten selected poems from *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur and how does the relationship between the signifier and the signified convey messages in the selected poems from *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur using a semiotic approach

This research reviews relevant studies. The first article by Harfi (2020), "*Semiotic Analysis in the Poem Aku Ingin by Sapardi Djoko Damono*" which concluded that the poem conveys sincere love through sacrifice. This differs from the current study, which examines Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey*. The second article by Fadhila (2021), "*Semiotic Study of Poetry Dalam Doaku by Sapardi Djoko Damono*" which identified various icons, indexes, and symbols. Unlike Fadhila's work, this research focuses on *Milk and Honey*. The third article by Saddiah (2021), "*A Structural Analysis of Rupi Kaur's Selected*

Poems in The Sun and Her Flowers" which analyzed intrinsic and extrinsic elements. In contrast, this study applies a semiotic approach to Rupī Kaur's *Milk and Honey*.

2. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the best outcomes in this study, it adopts a descriptive approach utilizing qualitative methods. Creswell (2018) defines qualitative research as an approach used to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or social groups attribute to social or human problems.

This study applied content analysis as part of the research method. Content analysis is used to interpret the meaning of textual and visual data systematically. It helps to identify patterns, themes, and symbolic elements in the poems. In this research, content analysis was used to examine the interaction between signifiers (such as visual illustrations) and signifieds (the concepts or meanings) to uncover how meaning is constructed in each selected poem.

The data for this research consist of ten selected poems from the poetry book *Milk and Honey* by Rupī Kaur. Several poem titles selected in the book *Milk and Honey* as research data are poem 1 (to fathers with daughters), poem 2 (the art of being empty), poem 3, poem 4 (the perfect date), poem 5, poem 6, poem 7, poem 8, poem 9, and poem 10 (women of color).. *Milk and Honey* is one of Rupī Kaur's works that is very popular and in demand by people all over the world. Rupī Kaur is a Canadian poet, writer, and illustrator who is known for her simple yet profound writing style. This book was first published in 2014 and quickly gained widespread attention from readers all over the world. *Milk and Honey* consists of four main parts, each of which describes a different theme: *The Hurting*, *The Loving*, *The Breaking*, dan *The Healing*. Each of which reflects different emotional and personal experiences such as trauma, love, pain, and recovery.

The stages of data collection in this qualitative research are:

- a. Reading and understanding the contents of the poems in *Milk and Honey*;
- b. Marking the semiotic elements in the poems;
- c. Selecting relevant poems and elements;
- d. Analyzing the signs and meanings contained in each poem, and
- e. Compiling a report on the results of the analysis.

This research used purposive sampling to select ten poems from *Milk and Honey* by Rupī Kaur. According to Creswell (2014), purposive sampling is a technique where the researcher intentionally selects data that is most relevant to the research objectives. The selected poems represent the four main themes of the book: *The Hurting*, *The Loving*, *The Breaking*, and *The Healing*. Each poem was chosen based on the presence of strong

semiotic elements, particularly the interaction between visual illustrations (signifiers) and poetic text (signifieds), which are essential for semiotic analysis and thematic representation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following is an explanation and findings about the analysis of semiotic signs (signifiers and signifieds) in several titles of *Milk and Honey* poems by Rupi Kaur which cover four main themes, namely *The Hurting*, *The Loving*, *The Breaking*, and *The Healing*.

a. Theme : The Hurting

Number of Poem : 1

Title : to fathers with daughters

Signifier	Signified
A faceless girl who looks simple and fragile	Feelings of loss of identity, emotional vulnerability, and the impact of wrong parenting.
Message : Through signifiers and signifieds, semiotic signs work together to produce the meaning that harsh and contradictory communication and parenting patterns can leave long-term psychological impacts on girls. So that overall this poem conveys the message of the importance of clear parenting patterns based on affection, so that girls can grow up with a clear emotional understanding.	

Number of Poem : 2

Title : the art of being empty

Signifier	Signified
A human skeleton, with simple lines showing ribs, and roots extending from under the body as if planted.	The skeleton depicts emptiness, fragility, and loss of human essence. While the roots at the bottom have the meaning of attachment to something, perhaps family or an environment that actually restrains or eliminates identity.
Message : Through a semiotic approach, the relationship between the signifier and the signified work together to build a comprehensive understanding of the poem. The illustration conveys an emotional state that is not explicitly stated in the text, while the text clarifies the intended direction of the visual meaning. so that the message conveyed through the relationship between the signifier and the signified in this poem is the	

importance of freedom in forming self-identity, as well as the need for a healthy space to grow without binding pressure.

b. Theme : The Loving

Number of Poem : 3

Title : -

Signifier	Signified
An illustration of a human eye depicted in detail, complete with strong eyebrows and a focus on the pupil of the eye.	The illustration of the eye symbolizes the values inherited by the mother figure, who is seen as a source of wisdom, regarding the character's understanding of love (choosing a partner).
<p>Message :</p> <p>Through semiotic signs, the relationship between the signifier and the signified both do not stand alone, but complement each other to convey a unified and emotionally touching message. Through the relationship between the two, this poem conveys the message that true love grows from values, experiences, and self-awareness, not from momentary feelings, but from a deep appreciation of the values instilled early on by the mother figure, who is seen as a source of wisdom, with the character's understanding of love.</p>	

Number of Poem : 4

Title : the perfect date

Signifier	Signified
A hand holding an open book, with a relaxed position, folded legs, and an atmosphere that indicates the activity of reading together.	Depicting emotional intimacy, comfort, and closeness rooted in simplicity. An open book symbolizes openness, intellectual bonding, and emotional exchange between two individuals.
<p>Message :</p> <p>The relationship between the signifier and the signified creates the meaning that intimacy does not always have to be about big or luxurious things, but with simple things like listening to someone read attentively. So this poem conveys the message that complete love can grow from small things and daily activities done with sincerity, where comfort and presence are the highest forms of affection.</p>	

Number of Poem : 5

Title : -

Signifier	Signified
Illustration of a human figure in the form of a simple geometric frame like a mannequin	Identifying the basic nature of human beings and emphasizing the meaning that human existence and hope are not tied to the physical, but to the essence or soul.
Message : The relationship between the signifier and the signified works together to form the meaning that humans can not only be seen from their physical form, but also from the hopes, feelings, and emotional relationships symbolized by the text and illustrations in the poem. So through semiotic signs, this poem conveys the message that true love does not depend on physical appearance, but on the depth of emotional relationships and inner bonds between individuals.	

c. Theme : The Breaking

Number of Poem : 6

Title : -

Signifier	Signified
Illustration of a cup of black coffee with simple steam lines	A cup of black coffee symbolizes the meaning of bitterness that is still faced or enjoyed even though it causes pain.
Message : The relationship between the signifier and the signified work together to form an emotional meaning that humans often remain attached to something painful rather than having to lose it completely. Through semiotic signs, this poem conveys the message that humans often choose to accept the darkest part of someone they love rather than lose it completely, even though it is full of pain. This poem shows that love, even in its broken form, can still be present in a quiet and subtle way.	

Number of Poem : 7

Title : -

Signifier	Signified
An illustration of a woman's face, with only the lips, neck and strands of hair shown with special emphasis on the open lips.	Vulnerability, sensuality, emotional intensity and openness to deep love, but also emotional surrender that can cloud one's sense of self.

Message :
 Through the relationship between the signifier and the signified, the seventh poem conveys a message about vulnerability, sensuality, and emotional intensity that love, although it looks beautiful, deep love can cause the loss of one's emotional boundaries and self-identity.

Number of Poem : 8
Title : -

Signifier	Signified
Illustration of a woman sitting with her body folded, her head bowed, and her hands hugging her knees and there is a horizontal line below the illustration of the woman.	Illustration of a woman sitting with her body folded, head bowed, and hands hugging her knees and there is a horizontal line that depicts a boundary or surface.
Message : Meaning is formed because of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In this context, the illustration supports the text in the poem. The illustration of the individual looking down reinforces the theme of vulnerability and self-reflection, so that the combination of text and image forms a message that loving others is important, but loving yourself is a part that should not be forgotten because loving yourself is the key to recovering from painful love.	

d. Theme : The Healing
Number of Poem : 9
Title : -

Signifier	Signified
Illustration of a tree shaped like a human body, with branches resembling hands reaching upwards and the middle body looks like a woman with roots below.	The human figure merging with the tree depicts the process of growth and healing that comes from awareness of one's own existence.
Message : Meaning is formed from the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Both work together and complement each other to form meaning. So this poem has the meaning that loneliness is not just a negative feeling, but a signal to introspect and	

reconnect with oneself. The message conveyed by this poem emphasizes the importance of rediscovering and loving oneself after going through a phase of heartache and loss, true healing begins from within and from the courage to make peace with the wound and reconnect with oneself.

Number of Poem : 10

Title : women of color

Signifier	Signified
Illustration of a woman's back with rough lines resembling wounds, a circle on the head and untidy lines.	The back shown without a face represents the space where wounds are secretly stored, while the circle on the head implies mental pressure that continues to weigh o
<p>Message :</p> <p>Through the relationship between the signifier and the signified, the tenth poem conveys the message that struggle and pain are part of the story that cannot be forgotten, although not all of them can be told. However, the best healing process comes from the courage to accept wounds and emotional burdens as part of one's identity and strength.</p>	

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the research and analysis, it can be concluded that this study analyzes poems in *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur using a semiotic approach to reveal meaning through the relationship between signifiers and signifieds. Using qualitative methods, it was found that the text and illustrations in the poems complement each other to convey deep messages that are in line with the theme. For example, in the theme *The Hurting*, the illustration of a faceless girl depicts emotional vulnerability caused by improper parenting. In the theme *The Loving*, the illustration of the eye reflects love based on the recognition of essential values. In the theme *The Breaking*, the illustration of a woman curling her body and bowing her head expresses emotional withdrawal and inner conflict, symbolizing the pain of letting go and the fear of being alone. Meanwhile, in the theme *The Healing*, the illustration of a tree shaped like a human body symbolizes introspection, self-healing, and a relationship with existence. This approach shows how language and visual elements work together to create complex meanings while strengthening the relevance of semiotics in analyzing contemporary literary works.

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