

## Veil or Evil? Spotighting Women Portrayal through Semiotics Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

*The phenomenon of woman and man portrayal has been discussed worldwide. Many viewpoints such as media, politics, health, cultural studies, gender concerned on this topic. However, only a few of them was trying to seek out the language features attributed for women representation. Accordingly, to fill in this gap, this research aims at describing semiotic sign analysis of woman portrayal in media. A number of four data of Serambi Indonesia column were analyzed based on two signification semiotics interpretations of Barthes (1967). The result eventually revealed that the language features attributed for women in the newspaper are woman as animal, as properties, as trigger of sins, as peaceful guard, those are considered as terms of denotative signification meaning. Meanwhile, the connotative meaning divided into two understandings; veil and evil, introducing positive and negative representation towards women. Finally, it is expected that for further studies involve systemic functional linguistics or corpus linguistics towards other discourses as media to further develop the conclusions drawn from*

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*this present study.*

**Keywords:** *Woman, Aceh, semiotics, portrayal, signification.*

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## INTRODUCTION

There are several studies discussing on woman, mass media and portrayal. Some studies were consistent in their claim that women tend to be seen in less powerful object (French, 2012; Lerman & Callow, 2004; Das,2000; Ford et al.1998; Eldridge et al. 1997; Phillips& Imhoff, 1997 and Sullivan et al. 1988). In contrary, there are number of studies stating the balanced gender role for women (Fata et al., 2016; Steinke, 2005; Bell,2009; Shachar, 2000; White & Kinnick, 2000). Finally, there were limited study discusssing on signification meaning towards women portrayal in media. This study intended to explore in depth the issues addressed in qualitative way. In this study, researcher described the expression of women. Then the researchers analyzed the expression to figure out denotation and connotation meaning. Considering that the way people define women is a challenging and interesting discussion, this research intends to capture what people in Aceh utter about woman after tsunami attacked based on linguistics study and to grab a precise utterances and written thoughts about woman. Thus, the researcher formulated research questions as what the women portrayal of denotative and connotative meaning in Serambi Indonesiaare.

Barthes (1994) one of semiotician has been talking that signification is one of semiotics issue. Barthes said that there are three levels of understanding meaning; denotation, connotation and ideology. Denotation (which is what Saussure calls signification), at the first level, consists of signifier (markers) and the signified (elaboration). Signifier is for example a word of a sentence “she dreamt that her son will be as John F. Kennedy”. A

word of signifier is her son, a marker to identify who will be John F Kennedy. Meanwhile the signified in that sentence is a word of John. F. Kennedy, an elaboration of the question: What is her son to be in the future?

Another example is women in Aceh who did not wear veil 'hijab' are alike cattle in the market. The denotation meaning is woman as "cattle". The word of women was the signified. The word cattle, then, represented the signifier. It takes a further analysis to understand connotation and ideology meaning. Connotation and ideology meaning do not take part as the way it is written. Thus, understanding the meaning representation becomes a challenging action.

In this discussion, Barthes (1994) revisits the relationship between signifier, signified and sign. However, the relation is approached in a new way, in the relation between expression (E) and content (C), expressed as ERC. The focus here is on staggered systems of signification, or those systems in which one or more of the components in the relation (ERC) is expressed by a relation all its own. The first system lies in the level of denotation, and the second (collective), in the level of connotation; it is wider and encompasses all the elements. Denotation stands for the collectively agreed upon meaning of an image or text--comparable to the signifier and connotation represents the accompanying ideas and concepts--much like the signified and the ensuing process of the signification.

Denotation according to Hoed (2008), the denotative meaning is what the dictionary attempts to provide. Denotation is a first level of meaning, language at the level of the first or initial meaning. Denotation is a primary signifier and signified system; denotations are the first system consisting of signifier and signified. An example of signifier and signified of the first level of meaning is in the sentence of "women are bought and sold

like cattle”. The first marker means “women”, while the second marker is “bought and sold like cattle”. As a first level of meaning, meaning as in the first stage, or in other words in the sentence, denotation is the sameness between women and cattle. The similarities between women and cattle are they are sold able and tradeable.

The denotation meaning of woman and cattle are in the dictionary. For example the word woman means person who has a vagina, can have menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding; ladies (Keraf, 1997). Meanwhile the word cattle refer to ruminant animals, horned, hooped even, four-legged, bodied large, raised for the beef and dairy; ox (Kridalaksana, 2008). The Meaning of women and cattle are discussed based on the similarity of woman and cattle’s definition found in this dictionary. It becomes a challenging discussion. Because sometimes, to capture what people think about woman seem alike cattle would not stop at the denotation meaning. Then, the understanding of meaning continues to the second phase or connotation meaning. In this study, the dictionary meaning is called denotation meaning.

Kridalaksana (2008) also reinforced about denotation meaning. He said that denotation is the meaning of a word or group of words which is based on a straightforward designation on something outside the language or that are based on certain conventions; objective nature. The convention refers to a language understood by the public or language society. In addition, Nöth (1990) said that denotation means having something in common, the actual world and the networks that define it constantly refresh our manner of being together. Hence, denotation is word or phrase has a convention by community. Looking back to the meaning of denotation, Barthes (1967) explains that the denotation of a primary system of meaning is a sign which

gives a precise clarification and it is understood clearly. The researcher concluded that denotation is the initial/primary meaning.

To figure out meaning, people find it out through discourse. The term discourse is applicable in a number of ways within the extensive view of discourse analysis. Eco (1986) mentioned that there are two relevance meanings of discourse. *First*, discourse in an abstract sense is an assembly, which employs the broadly semiotic elements as opposed to and in relation to other, non-semiotic, elements of social life such as language, visual semiotics, and body language. In addition, Porcar (2011) have a preference to use the term semiosis to circumvent the common confusion of the sense of discourse with the *second* meaning. In this sense, discourse is a count noun, as a category for employing precise ways of representing particular aspects of social life. For instance, it is common to distinguish different political discourses, which represent for example problems of inequality, disadvantage, poverty, social exclusion, in different ways. The category of discourse in this second sense is defined through its relation to and difference from two other categories, genre and style.

With regard to connotation, Barthes (1967) begins with the concept of the sign, a signifying relationship, which is essentially the union of the components signifier (a term) and the signified (its concept or relation.). Ideas of content and expression are inextricable from this process. At the same time, readers are reminded that the sign is more complex than this basic formula. It is, indeed, more than the mere correlation of a signifier and a signified, but perhaps more essentially an act of simultaneously cutting out two amorphous masses.

In addition, Barker (2003) states that every element in the semiological relationship has more than one meaning. Like a sheaf of paper, each

possesses a reverse image. Signs, particularly those with utilitarian, functional origins, are known as sign-functions. The idea it is drawn from this is that reality and meaning are based on use and function; there is no reality except when it is intelligible.

Barthes (1967) imposes the signified in the relationship as the mental representation of a thing; a concept. It incorporates such elements as practices, techniques, and ideologies. It is this component of the triadic relationship, which triggers Barthes' discussion of meta- languages (languages about languages—that is, a discourse employed to make sense of another discourse.) According to Eco (1986), connotation is a second level of meaning. In other words, the connotation is the meaning of the second level. Connotation is an extended meaning of signification. Moreover, the expansion of the connotation has meaning. The expansion of the meaning is derived from the meaning of denotation. Barthes' connotation can be explained in the following illustration.

**Figure 1.** Connotative Concept Adopted from Barthes (1967)

Sr. (signifier) = rhetoric		Sd. (signified) = ideology
Sr.(signifier)	Sd(signified) →	
Sr. (signifier) Sd. (signified) Denotative		Connotative

Connotations are at the second level. The first level is called the primary system or denotation. At the first level (denotation) consists of signifier (markers) and the signified (the signified). Signifier and signified the first stage becomes the signifier in the second stage (secondary system). Barthes called the second stage

connotations. Researcher previously mentioned the denotation meaning of the sentence of “women are bought and sold like cattle”. The meaning of women here addressed to women who follow the beauty contest. Women who participate in the contest and show off the beauty are similar to cattle. Cattles and women who join beauty contest, they are both sold, taken for the advantages and victimized.

The opinions of another linguist also reinforced the meaning of connotation. According to Kridalaksana (2008), connotation is one of the aspects of meaning of a word or a group based on feelings, thoughts arising or incurred in speaker and the listener. Connotation acknowledged as an early sign of the development of meaning. Researcher concluded that the connotation is the signifier and signified at the second level and experience of the first expansion phase.

The next concept related to this research is corpus. Nöth (1990) stated that corpus is a finite collection of materials, which is determined in advance by the analyst. The corpus is a collection of a particular material or in other words a set of data.

The corpus has a time-period. Barthes (1967) says if one study the phenomenon of the press, for instance a sample of newspaper roommates appeared at the same time will be preferable to the run of a single paper over several years. If one examines the media such as newspapers, it is recommended to choose one article in the newspaper with a specific time-period. In a corpus study of semiotics, it should meet three requirements: (1) corpus must be wide enough to give reasonable hope that its elements will saturate a complete system of resemblances and differences, (2) the corpus must be homogenous as possible; homogenous in substance, and (3) homogeneous in time(Barthes,1994).

One of social discourses is newspaper. Among several newspapers in Aceh, Serambi Indonesia is a reliable and the oldest one. The newspaper of Serambi Indonesia has some columns. One of the columns is opinion. Opinion column provides the authors' ideas towards social life. Authors' idea embraces about women, politics, governance, economics, religion, education and local or national issue and others.

Hoed (2008) mentioned that talking about women becomes one of challenging and interesting part in discourse analysis. Gender talk would be many interpretations about woman in cultural studies, particularly, language studies. On one hand, Muis (2000) said that the authors' idea in newspapers about women has three insights. First, writers represent women based on their role. Second, writers define women based on their physical appearances. Third, writers describe women based on their behavior. For example in Aceh, after tsunami in 2004, women have more roles than before. Sometimes, women worked to earn for living, took care for children, etc. In additions, Aceh declared the law of sharia (Islamic laws). Based on the law, the women must wear veil 'hijab' and cover their bodies. Many people discussed this issue. People discussed about women in Aceh based on their own perspective and argument. The people commonly offers review and gave some comments related women in sharia view.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research is a qualitative research. Creswell (2000) described qualitative research as a process to understand the social problems by creating a complete holistic picture formed with words; reported a clear view of the informant and arranged in a scientific background. To avoid misconception, there are several terms to explain, such as author (refers to people who write in opinion column of newspaper of Serambi Indonesia) and



researcher or writer (refer to person who conduct this study). The researcher described the data by using semiotic analysis. Every newspaper has a section/column (Zoest: 1992). Newspaper provides a story on the phenomenon of the community. In conjunction with the newspaper, a corpus is likely to be part of showing the meaning and sign. Considering there are many sections in Serambi Indonesia, such as "Economy / Business", "Donya", "archipelago", "Panteu", "Droe Keu droe", "Islamic Consultation ", and "Opinion". The researcher decided to take one of the sections to be analyzed further. The section named "Opinion". In this case, the researcher decided to choose the corpus of "Opinion" because of some reasons.

Firstly, "Opinion" is a medium of Serambi Indonesia to accommodate public opinion about social facts.. Opinion is a genre of narrative and argumentative text. Sinclair et.al (2006) stated that narrative is a kind of writing to narrate an incident event in chronological order. Besides the argumentative text is the kind of writing that emphasizes evidence based on logical reasons and critical thoughts. The type of narrative and argumentative text are one of the good mediums to look upon the people thoughts about woman. In this case, the researcher convinced that in "opinion" there were a sufficient corpus to be discussed for woman meanings.

Secondly, the content of "Opinion" is a dependent opinion of the people of Aceh. Dependent opinion of the people of Aceh means people who argued in forms of agreement or disagreement about the social phenomenon that occurred in Aceh. Thirdly, the people who write in "opinion" should attach the copy of identification card of Aceh. Otherwise, the newspaper will not publish the writing.

As the development of technology, readers may read and access Serambi Indonesia at the official website of [www.serambinews.com](http://www.serambinews.com) without

any differences between printed version and online version. Researcher performed the following steps to collect the corpus. The researcher visited to the official website of Serambi Indonesia, then selected the "Opinion", afterwards type in search tab Opinion for some keywords, e.g. women, woman, mother, wife, *inong (woman)*, *poerumoh (wife)*, and the girl. Then the last step was saving the corpus. After having obtained the corpus, the researcher calculated it so the total of corpus was ten. The researcher started to collect the corpus from June 2006-Januari 2011. In this study, there are four opinion topics as data.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section is intended to display the findings of this research. The findings divided into denotative and connotative meaning accordingly. There are four corpus taken into account as data of women portrayal in Serambi Indonesia.

**Women as animal.** In this corpus, the author gave his opinion toward beauty contest around the world. He thought that beauty contest should have no minimum standard requirements for women. If the contest concerns on the elected most beautiful woman by requiring size, height, and breast size, so the contest is similar to medium to choose a cattle. The cattle are seen as the medium to deliver birth. The connotation of women in contest to a choosing cattle is interesting part. The author argued that there were similarities of women and cattle in beauty contest. The following excerpt indicates the connotation.

C1 (Corpus 1): ... “maka kontes lomba cantik tadi sama saja dengan mencari induk sapi yang paling mampu menghasilkan anak. Kecerdasan dan kepribadian yang konon turut dinilai itu sekedar tambahan. Karena kalau dua hal ini yang menjadi faktor utama, maka seharusnya tak usah ada prasyarat tinggi badan serta ukuran vital. Itu artinya, ada hampir 1200 perempuan yang rela dijejerkan di panggung

dan diperbandingkan satu sama lain, persis seperti memilih sapi” (Amiruddin, 2011).

C1 translation....therefore; the beauty contest is similar like choosing cattle. The intelligence and personality of women in beauty contest are additional matters. If intelligence and personality are being concerned on this contest, there will be no height and vital size as the minimum size requirements. It means there were more than 1200 women, who were voluntarily competed on stage; it is like choosing cattle.

In C1, the sentence of women on stage to be judged and assessed in beauty sides are alike choosing cattle, addressed by the author to comment the similarity between women and a cattle. If we looked up in the dictionary (Keraf, 1997) the meaning of cattle or cow is an adult female grazing quadruped. It means that cattle are kept for milk, meat and breeding. Cattle which were kept for milk, meat and breeding, are taken for its advantages. The advantages are also refers to women who had ability to breastfeeding, delivering birth, etc. The existence of woman is adhered to for her not only physical or biological capacity but also intelligence, beauty, affection and wonderful behavior.

If one of Acehnese people thinks one part of something and then he takes it into a big general drawn, it might drive into a mistaken concept. Furthermore, the author of the text correlated his opinion to one verse of Al Qur’an (Al-Baqarah). He took the translation meaning of the verse literally. He considered that if woman in beautiful contest judged by the physical performance, it means that women seemed to be likely cattle.

Based on Barthes (1994) theory, the signifier mentioned in that article is the women who participate in beauty contest and the signified seems as cattle. In short, the woman is like cattle if she participated in beauty contest. This finding is in line with Ford et al.(1998) and Sinclair et.al (2006), they find out that women role portrayal in advertising as an object. To bear in

mind, the object of advertisement tends to sell women body to the public while they earned some funds.

**Women as shelf.** The signified is woman for peace; meanwhile the signifier is shelf. The denotation meaning of shelf is a board for laying things on (Poerwadarminta,2003). The function of shelf is to display or laying things on. Regarding of display, shelf does not have things to do, by means shelf is an object to display things by someone.

C2...Sampai hari ini lembaga-lembaga PBB masih membahas tentang indikator partisipasi inong dalam perdamaian dan keamanan. Sayangnya hari ini, satu dekade setelah keputusan telah dibuat, situasi yang sebenarnya tidak banyak berubah. Proses perdamaian masih menjadi dunia laki-laki. Dan kalau pun perempuan disertakan hanya sebagai etalase. Akan tetapi seiring berjalan waktu, peran perempuan dalam resolusi konflik semakin dominan dan signifikan(Pamulutan, 2009).

C2 Translation... At present, United Nation (UN) discussed the indicators of the women's participation in peace and safety. Unfortunately, a decade after UN made the decisions; the real fact has not changed a lot. The peaceful program is still on men hands. Although the women participated in peace program, they are considered as shelf. However, recently women have played significant and important roles in conflict resolution.

This finding supports Steinke (2005) and Shachar's (2000) idea that powerful woman might take role in public area. For instance, in technology, women take place as computer scientist, chief editors, senior manager, and so forth. The skill in computer and engineering tend not to differentiate between women and men. As in this data, women play an important role in conflict resolution.

The function of shelf is to display or laying things on. With regard to the function, shelf does not have things to do; it is only a space displaying objects placed by someone. This meaning leads us to connotative meaning; women in shelf are women who passively take into account of peaceful program. Muis (2000) stated that woman interpretation may also inform how

a woman is an object, entity, item, who passively involve in the program. The first level of denotation meaning; signified and signifier, women as shelf has three connotative meanings. (1) women are assumed yet able to act and undertake the job in peaceful program. (2) women are presumed having incapability to take actions. *Third*, women are presupposed to refurbish and furnish programs of peaceful job. Therefore, the connotative meaning here, yet give women the negative perspective.

**Woman as a Trigger of Sins.** In this corpus, the author talked about women, who do not wear their veils, may become the trigger of sins for male. This corpus was published by the date of the adoption of Islamic sharia declared by Aceh Government. Based on memorandum of understanding (MoU) of Helsinki, Aceh has a privilege to apply Islamic sharia or Islamic laws. The author states:

C3: ...perempuan muslimah tidak mengumbar tubuhnya. Apabila ia mengumbar tubuhnya merupakan pemicu bagi lawan jenis melakukan kesalahan sehingga banyak terjadinya dosa. Pemerkosaan, perzinahan merupakan dampak karena perempuan tidak menutup auratnya. Sehingga peraturan harus lebih keras menghukum perempuan tersebut (Nurchaili, 2010).

C3 Translation ...Muslim women should not expose their body. When she exposed her body, she becomes a trigger of sins for male. and adultery are the effects of women who do not cover their body. The laws should punish these women.

Discussing this corpus, the author assumed that women, who does not wear veil and cover their body as the trigger of sins. The signified of this corpus is women, who do not wear veil; meanwhile the signifier is as a trigger of sins. These signified and signifiers are the denotative meaning. Furthermore, to understand connotative meaning; researcher elaborated them into two things (1).wearing veil is an obligation for women, based on Islamic laws, to cover their physical performance and (2) women should wear veil to avoid the adultery. It seems that the author elaborated that the trigger of sins

causes by women who do not wear hijab/veil. The women tend to address as an “evil”, while it is still a challenging discussion.

To bear in mind, in Islam by a close reading of the Qur’an and Sunnah and as Winter (1994) notes, Islam has a “sex positive attitude,” exemplified by Imam Nawawi’s statement: “All appetites harden the heart, with the exception of sexual desire, which softens it”. There is nothing in the Qur’an about women as dangerous sexual beings. Rather, there is the notion that men and women are fundamentally alike, being created of a single soul, and being both recipients of the divine breath. Thus there is nothing evil or undesirable about the body and its desires. Woman, although partaking in the Fall, is not held responsible for the expulsion from Paradise (Adam is). There is no original sin (God forgave them straightaway), and no impurity attached to her because of this act, as in other religious traditions (Bullock, 2010).

Hijab-wearing women often characterize the practice as empowering, contrasting the pressure on (Western) women to reveal their bodies with their own choice to cover; the first reflects patriarchal oppression while the second reflects conscious resistance to oppression. Studies conducted in Canada (Ruby 2006), France (Afshar 2008; Wing, Smith, and Nigh 2005–2006) and the USA (Droogsma 2007) reveal very similar and equally diverse motivations, ranging from religious observance and modesty, to avoiding the male gaze, resisting sexual objectification and taking control of their own bodies, to asserting a Muslim identity and resisting assimilation. Far from seeing head covering as oppressive however, there may, of course, be instances where head covering are imposed on women.

**Women are as properties.** The signified is women who do not wear veil and the signifier is women as properties.

C4 Budak perempuan sebagaimana kita baca dalam sejarah juga sering dianggap sebagai barang yang diperjualbelikan. Ketika dia masih dapat digunakan termasuk untuk pemuas nafsu dia akan dibeli. Tetapi ketika dia tidak berguna mereka tidak ada yang beli. Mungkin sebab-sebab itulah kemudian Allah mewajibkan kaum perempuan agar menutup auratnya termasuk memakai jilbab agar kaum perempuan ini tidak dianggap sebagai barang (Husita,2011).

C4 Translation woman slave as we may read in historical context, it is frequently considered as properties. If she (woman) is still eligible for object of sexual, she will be purchased. It seems as possible reasons why then Allah requires woman to cover her body so that the woman will not be considered as properties".

According to Poerwadarminta (2003), slave is a person held in servitude as the chattel. Sharia law has stated clearly the requirement to wear veil for Muslim women. It is not a negotiable position for them. The benefit drawn from this requirement, one of it, they are not considered as slave to satisfy the owner sexually. Muslim women have dignity, prestige, and pride by wearing veil and covering their body. With regard to the history of women in Aceh, Hadi (2010) told that Aceh and its history have attributed women for their elegance, strength and powerful in life. Several heroes have taken contribution to bring Aceh as it is today.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, this research is intended to seek out language features which is used to portray women in Serambi Indonesia (Aceh mass media). This should matter since there are few studies focus on linguistics features on women description accordingly. At the end, this study finds out four distinctive denotation of women portrayal, there are woman as animal, as properties, as trigger of sins, and as shelf. Meanwhile, in term of connotative

the data analysis revealed that veil and evil become the authentic contextual signification attributed for women. It is recommended for future researchers, to discuss women portrayal in depth through systemic functional linguistics.

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