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Denotative and Connotative Meanings in the Dialogue of *Capernaum*: A Semiotic Approach to Nadine Labaki's Work

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Abstract

The study of denotative and connotative meanings in the Arabic language remains limited, particularly regarding how meanings evolve within social and ideological contexts in films. Most previous research has predominantly focused on semantic analysis without considering the connotative aspects that shape social perceptions and representations. This study aims to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings of selected Arabic words using a qualitative approach through the perspective of Roland Barthes' Semiotics. Data were collected through non-participant observation and note-taking, while analysis was conducted using extralingual referential analysis, employing both comparative and contrastive methods. The findings reveal that words such as قيود, الجحيم, الإيجار, خادمة, and الهارب in the film *Capernaum* carry connotative meanings that reflect social constraints, suffering, exploitation, oppression, and the loss of identity. This study affirms that language is not merely a tool for communication but also an ideological instrument that represents social realities. This study implies that connotative meaning can enrich linguistic studies and provide deeper insights into language use across various social and cultural contexts.

Keyword: *Capernaum, Semiotics, Roland Barthes, Denotation, Connotation*

Abstrak

Kajian tentang makna denotatif dan konotatif dalam bahasa Arab masih terbatas, terutama yang menyoroti bagaimana makna berkembang dalam konteks sosial dan ideologis dalam sebuah film. Sebagian besar penelitian sebelumnya lebih berfokus pada analisis semantik tanpa mempertimbangkan aspek konotatif yang membentuk persepsi dan representasi sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis makna denotasi dan konotasi dalam beberapa kata bahasa Arab menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui perspektif Semiotika Roland Barthes. Data dikumpulkan melalui non-participant observation dan note-taking, sementara analisis dilakukan dengan extralingual referential analysis, menggunakan comparative dan contrastive analysis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kata-kata seperti قيود, الجحيم, الإيجار, خادمة, dan الهارب dalam film Capernaum memiliki makna konotatif yang mencerminkan belenggu sosial, penderitaan, eksploitasi, ketertindasan, dan kehilangan identitas. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa bahasa bukan sekadar alat komunikasi, tetapi juga instrumen ideologi yang merepresentasikan realitas sosial. Penelitian ini berimplikasi pada pemahaman bahwa makna konotatif dapat memperkaya kajian linguistik serta memberikan wawasan yang lebih mendalam mengenai penggunaan bahasa dalam berbagai konteks sosial dan budaya.

Kata Kunci: *Capernaum, Semiotika, Roland Barthes, Denotasi, Konotasi*

Introduction

Language, as a means of communication, manifests in various forms of media, one of which is film. As an artistic and cultural product, film serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium for conveying social, cultural, and global issues.¹ By integrating visual, auditory, and narrative elements, film has the capacity to evoke emotions, foster critical awareness, and represent the social realities experienced by individuals and groups within a society.² In this context, film often

¹ Reni Lailina Hidayah, “Makna Referensial Pada Komik Bahasa Arab Nawâdhîr Jûhâ Li Al-Athfâl,” *Alibbaa’*: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab 2, no. 1 (February 19, 2021): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.19105/ajpba.v2i1.4130>.

² Roland Barthes, *Elemen-Elemen Semiologi* (Hill and Wang, New York: IRCiSoD, 1968).

functions as a medium of social critique, highlighting inequality, injustice, and the political and cultural dynamics within a community.³

One film that profoundly embodies social critique is *Capernaum*, directed by Nadine Labaki. This film, based on real-life events, explores themes of poverty, social injustice, and the marginalization of children and refugees in Lebanon.⁴ Employing a realist approach, *Capernaum* delves into the lived experiences of a street child, Zain Al-Rafeea, whose story was inspired by Labaki's research on incarcerated Syrian children in Lebanon.⁵ The film serves as a reflection of social realities marked by suffering and deprivation, which are often underrepresented in mainstream media discourse.

To comprehend the underlying meanings within *Capernaum*, an analysis that goes beyond its explicit narrative is required—one that uncovers the implicit meanings embedded within its cinematic structure. In this regard, Roland Barthes' semiotic approach is particularly relevant, as it allows for an in-depth examination of symbols, signs, and narratives that construct meaning within the film. Barthes distinguishes between two levels of signification: denotation, which refers to the literal or objective meaning, and connotation, which is shaped by social, cultural, and ideological contexts. Furthermore, Barthes introduces the concept of myth as a second-order sign system, wherein connotative meanings can generate specific ideological discourses.⁶

Semiotic approaches have been widely utilized in previous studies. For instance, Yaskur examined semiotic aspects in facial expressions and intonations in the Arabic-dubbed version of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, concluding that linguistic meaning is subjective and

³ Andi Hamsiah et al., *Pengantar Bahasa Dan Sastra Indonesia* (Jambi: PT. Sonpedia Publishing Indonesia, 2023).

⁴ Sara Aridi, "'Capernaum' Is Not Just a Film, but a Rallying Cry," *The New York Times*, December 14, 2018, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/14/movies/capernaum-nadine-labaki.html>.

⁵ Alima Nuri Ayati et al., "Realisasi Hak Anak Dalam Film Capharnaum Karya Nadine Labaki (Kajian Strukturalisme Obyektif)," *Az-Zahra: Journal of Gender and Family Studies* 1, no. 2 (June 20, 2021): 88–105, <https://doi.org/10.15575/azzahra.v1i2.11606>.

⁶ Sri Rijati Wardiani, "MUSLIMAH'S CLOTHING BRAND, IDENTITY, AND MYTHS IN BARTHES SEMIOTIC STUDY," *EL HARAKAH (TERAKREDITASI)* 21, no. 1 (June 12, 2019): 83, <https://doi.org/10.18860/el.v21i1.6188>.

context-dependent.⁷ Wibisono and Sari analyzed denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings in the film *Bintang Ketjil*, emphasizing the role of informal education in child development.⁸ Fiddin investigated representations of violence in *Capernaum* using Johan Galtung's theory, identifying 59 scenes of structural violence, 19 of cultural violence, and 39 of direct violence.⁹ Additionally, Maulidiyah's study revealed that connotative meaning encompasses a broader scope than denotation, as demonstrated through the analysis of the words *sā'iq*, *uskuf*, and *umarā* in the film *Amīrat al-Rūm*.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Nursalim and Permata explored denotation, connotation, and myth in the film *Pasukan Garuda: I Leave My Heart in Lebanon*.¹¹

Although prior studies have examined semiotic aspects in various films, there remains a research gap in exploring the denotative and connotative meanings in *Capernaum* as a social critique of Lebanese reality. Most existing studies have predominantly focused on thematic or structural analyses without emphasizing how the film constructs ideological discourse through its intricate sign system. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings in *Capernaum* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Specifically, this research addresses two main questions: (1) What are the denotative meanings embedded within *Capernaum*? and (2) How are connotative meanings conveyed through various elements of the film?

Method

This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to analyze signs, symbols, and meaning systems in the film *Capernaum*. This approach focuses on two levels of meaning—denotation (literal

⁷ Muhammad Yazid Yaskur, "Film Spongebob Squarepants Episode 9 'Uh, Bulu Babi,'" n.d.

⁸ Panji Wibisono, "Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes dalam Film Bintang Ketjil Karya Wim Umboh dan Misbach Yusa" 1, no. 1 (2021).

⁹ Muthi'ah Fiddin, "Pesan Kekerasan dalam Film *Capernaum* Karya Nadine Labaki," n.d.

¹⁰ Miya Maulidiyah, "The Makna Denotasi dan Makna Konotasi Dalam Film Animasi 'Amirotur Ruang' Karya Hadi Mohammadian: Semiotika Roland Barthes," *Al-Ma'rifah* 18, no. 2 (December 1, 2021): 151–162, <https://doi.org/10.21009/almakrifah.18.02.04>.

¹¹ Misbah Priagung Nursalim and Syafiqa Ayu Permata, "Makna Semiotik dalam Film *Pasukan Garuda: I Leave My Heart in Lebanon*," *Disastra: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia* 6, no. 1 (April 30, 2024): 63–77, <https://doi.org/10.29300/disastra.v6i1.3309>.

meaning) and connotation (ideological or implicit meaning)—which play a crucial role in shaping the film's conveyed social messages. By referring to Barthes' order of signification concept, this research explores how the film's visual, auditory, and narrative elements construct representations of social critique and humanitarian issues.¹²

A qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach is adopted in this study. The qualitative method is chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the signification process and the interpretation of meaning within a socio-cultural context.¹³ The descriptive-analytical approach aims to systematically describe and analyze observed phenomena by emphasizing the subject's perspective, the process of signification, and the implications of meaning embedded in the film.

Data for this study is collected through non-participant observation and note-taking techniques. Non-participant observation enables the researcher to examine the use of language, as well as visual and auditory elements in the film, without directly engaging in the interactions or communicative events depicted.¹⁴ This technique is applied to observe and analyze dialogues, character expressions, and cinematographic aspects that contribute to meaning construction in Capernaum. Note-taking serves as a supplementary step to document findings related to the film's denotative and connotative meanings. The collected data includes excerpts of dialogues, scene descriptions, and symbolic elements that contribute to the transmission of social messages.

The data analysis is conducted using the referential analysis method, also known in linguistic studies as the extralingual matching method.¹⁵ This method is employed to interpret meaning based on factors beyond the language system itself, such as social context, ideology, and cultural values that influence the production and interpretation of signs in the film.

In practice, this study applies three primary techniques in data analysis. First, the comparative equivalence analysis technique is used to

¹² Tyler James Bennett, "Second-Generation Semiology and Detotalization," *Linguistic Frontiers* 4, no. 2 (September 1, 2021): 44–53, <https://doi.org/10.2478/lf-2021-0010>.

¹³ Feny Rita Fiantika et al., *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* (Padang: PT. Global Eksekutif Teknologi, 2022).

¹⁴ Mahsun, *Metode Penelitian Bahasa: Tahapan, Strategi, Metode, Dan Tekniknya* (Jakarta: PT RajaGrafindo Persada, 2014).

¹⁵ Oktavian Aditya Nugraha, "Pemerolehan Bahasa Anak Usia 4 Tahun Kajian Semantik Penyimpangan Tuturan Anak," *Kajian Linguistik dan Sastra* 2, no. 2 (August 31, 2018): 104–110, <https://doi.org/10.23917/kl.v2i2.6733>.

match the denotative meanings of signs in the film with lexical references, such as dictionary definitions or standard meanings in language. This technique ensures that the interpretation of signs in the film is grounded in objective foundations and aligns with their literal meaning. Second, the contrastive comparison analysis technique is applied to compare denotative meanings with connotative meanings shaped by the film's social, cultural, and ideological contexts. This technique helps identify how the fundamental meaning of a sign evolves into a more complex meaning through its association with specific social realities. Third, the essential meaning analysis technique is employed to identify the fundamental meaning of signs in the film and connect them with broader symbols or concepts within social and cultural discourse. This technique allows for an analysis of how signs in the film function not only as communicative tools but also as reflections of larger ideological values.

To ensure data validity, this study implements data triangulation by verifying findings from multiple sources, including film dialogues, visual symbols, and auditory elements. This approach ensures that the interpretation of denotative and connotative meanings does not rely solely on a single aspect but is supported by consistent evidence from various elements within the film. By comparing and correlating data from these three sources, this study enhances the accuracy of its analysis and strengthens its findings in uncovering the social and ideological representations embedded within the denotative and connotative meanings of Capernaum.

Results and Discussions

This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyze the system of signs in the film Capernaum, specifically concerning denotative and connotative meanings. Barthes argues that language is a system of signs that not only represents objective reality but also reflects the ideology and social values of a given society at a particular time.¹⁶ Expanding upon the concepts introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes extends the scope of semiology through a two-level analysis of meaning: denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (implied meaning influenced by social and cultural contexts).

Within Barthesian semiotic interpretation, a denotative sign consists of a signifier and a signified. However, at the connotative level,

¹⁶ Alex Sobur, *Semiotika Komunikasi* (Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2003).

a denotative sign can function as a connotative signifier, which is then associated with a connotative signified.¹⁷ This process illustrates how a sign can acquire additional layers of meaning through social construction and the ideological frameworks embedded in its use.

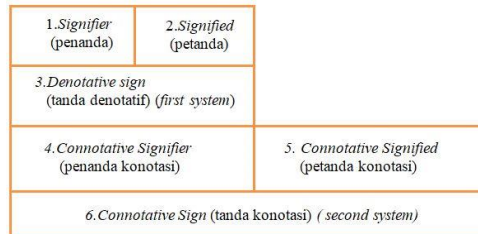


Figure 1. Roland Barthes' Sign System

Through this approach, the study identifies the denotative and connotative meanings of selected dialogues in Capernaum. Data is collected through non-participant observation and analyzed using the extralingual referential method to establish connections between linguistic signs and the social realities they represent. The analysis results are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Data Findings

Time Stamp	Dialogue	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
05:43	"زين الحاج، فك قيوده واتركه اقرب من مقاعد البدلاء"	Rope, chain for binding	Social restraints and lack of freedom
13:02	"هذا ليس منزلاً، إنه حظيرة خنازير! إلى الجحيم معكم جميع"	Hellfire, extreme heat	Suffering and poverty
23:59	"إهدئ. إنه يناقش الإيجار مع والدك"	Rental	Exploitation
29:28	"أنت ترسل لها أن تكون خادمة تلك الأحمق؟"	Female servant	Oppression
54:20	"هذا الصبي يعيش مثل الهارب هنا على هذه التربة"	A person who flees	Loss of identity

¹⁷ Meliyana and Medo Maulinza, "Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes: Citra Perempuan Mandiri Dalam Film Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens," *Jurnal Sosial dan Humaniora* 1, no. 3 (2024): 328–343, <https://doi.org/10.62017/arima.v1i3.934>.

Based on the table, the researcher analyzes data from Capernaum to identify denotative and connotative meanings as follows:



Figure 2. Zain Undergoing Trial

: "المحكمة في جلسة. زين الحاج، فك قيوده واتركه اقترب من مقاعد البدلاء. سعاد وسليم الحاج."	القاضي
: "نعم."	سعاد
: "المدعي محتجز. فهو حاضر وغير مقيد، أرني يديك."	القاضي

One of the most pivotal scenes in Capernaum occurs at 05:43, where the main character, Zain Al-Hajj, a 12-year-old boy, is escorted by prison guards from Roumieh Juvenile Detention Center to the courtroom. With an expressionless face, Zain faces the trial, attended by his parents, Souad and Selim Al-Hajj, his lawyer Nadine Al-'Aalam, and several other witnesses.

The trial begins with the judge addressing Souad, who appears unaware of the reason for her summons. When the judge inquires about Zain's age, it is revealed that he does not possess a birth certificate, making his age estimable only through medical examination. The trial proceeds to discuss the stabbing incident involving As'ad, the shopkeeper where Zain worked. In a shocking moment, Zain declares, "أريد مقاضاة والدي" ("I want to sue my parents."). This statement marks a crucial turning point in the film's narrative, symbolizing resistance against social injustice. It is evident that Zain is suing his parents for bringing him into the world and subjecting him to an unworthy life devoid of love and proper care.

In the dialogue excerpt above, the word قيود (quyūd), which literally means "rope" or "chains," serves as a significant symbol in understanding the social structure represented in the film. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis is applied to identify the denotative and connotative meanings of this sign, as presented in the following table:

Tabel 2. Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the Word قيود (Quyūd)

Category	Description
Signifier	قيود (Quyūd) - Rope, chain for binding/restraint
Signified	An object used for tying or wrapping, made of plastic or metal
Denotative Sign	A binding tool used to restrain or limit a person's movement
Connotative Signifier	A binding tool used to restrain or limit a person's movement
Connotative Signified	A symbol of social oppression and lack of freedom
Connotative Sign	The metal handcuffs serve as a symbol or sign of social oppression and lack of freedom

From the table above, it is evident that the word قيود (quyūd) in this scene functions not only as a literal restraining tool but also carries a broader connotative meaning, representing social constraints and lack of freedom. Within the film's context, the handcuffs placed on Zain symbolize how children from impoverished families in Lebanon experience not only physical limitations but also social, legal, and economic restrictions that hinder their fundamental rights. Lebanon faces structural issues that leave many children like Zain without birth certificates, depriving them of access to education, proper employment, and protection from exploitation. Thus, the handcuffs in this scene serve as a powerful social critique, highlighting the system's failure to protect children and uphold their basic rights.



Figure 3. Souad and Zain's Siblings Cleaning the House

زين الحاج : "سحر!."
 سعاد : "هذا ليس منزلاً، إنه حظيرة خنازير! إلى الجحيم معكم جميعاً. اخرج من هنا. سوف تصعقون جميعاً بالكهرباء! اخرج! هذا البيت لعنة! لذا اذهب للعيش في الشارع."
 سليم : "هناك متسع كبير!."

At minute 13:02, a scene in Capernaum depicts Zain Al-Hajj returning home in a fit of anger after leaving As'ad's shop. In an earlier conversation, As'ad said, "أنا أفقده" ("I miss her."), but this statement was

directed at Sahar, Zain's sister, not at him. As'ad gave Sahar bread and instant noodles, but Zain, enraged, threw the food into the trash as an act of defiance against As'ad's intentions. Upon arriving home, Zain is confronted with worsening living conditions, with water flooding the floor of their dilapidated house. His mother, Souad, overwhelmed by life's struggles, erupts in anger due to their mounting hardships. In a moment of intense frustration, Souad exclaims, " هذا ليس منزلاً، إنه حظيرة " ("This is not a house! this is a pigsty! To hell with all of you!"). This expression reflects Souad's profound despair over their dire living conditions.

The word الجحيم (al-jahīm), which literally means "hell" or "blazing fire," serves as a symbolic representation of the social and economic conditions experienced by the characters in the film. To analyze the meaning of this sign, Roland Barthes' semiotic approach is used, focusing on both its denotative and connotative meanings, as shown in the table below:

Table 3. Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the Word "الجحيم" (Al-Jahīm)

Category	Description
Signifier	الجحيم(al-jahīm) - hell, intense fire
Signified	Fire that repeatedly burns human bodies until their sins are expunged
Denotative Sign	A place of eternal suffering for those who disobey divine commandments, filled with unrelenting flames
Connotative Signifier	A place of eternal suffering for those who disobey divine commandments, filled with unrelenting flames
Connotative Signified	A metaphor for suffering, poverty, and social injustice
Connotative Sign	The word الجحيم (al-jahīm) in this scene symbolizes a life of hardship, social oppression, and unlivable conditions

From the table above, it is evident that the use of the word الجحيم (al-jahīm) in Souad's dialogue is not solely a reference to religious hell but also conveys a broader connotative meaning. This word encapsulates a life filled with suffering, despair, and poverty experienced by Zain's family. In a social context, this expression reflects how life for impoverished communities is often equated with hell, where they must endure economic deprivation, uninhabitable environments, and lack of state protection. For Souad, the poverty she endures creates an immense

psychological burden, making her feel as though she is living in a state of perpetual suffering, akin to the torment of hell.



Figure 4. Zain Angry at Souad Due to As'ad's Arrival

“أم؟ ماذا يفعل أسعد ووالده هنا؟” :	زين الحاج
“لا تجعل المشهد.” :	سعاد
“لقد راهنت بأني سأفعلها. ماذا يفعل أسعد هنا؟” :	زين الحاج
“إهدئ. إنه يناقش الإيجار مع والدك.” :	سعاد
“أراهن بذراعي أنك تتاجر هذه الدجاجات لسحر.” :	زين الحاج

At minute 23:59, the film *Capernaum* portrays an emotional conflict between Zain Al-Hajj and his mother, Souad, following the arrival of As'ad and his father at their home. In this scene, Zain, who has endured a harsh life working at As'ad's grocery store, returns home to find several chickens on the stairs. He quickly realizes that these chickens belong to As'ad, who happens to be inside the house. Suspicious of their presence, Zain's concern intensifies when he learns that they are discussing a matter related to his younger sister, Sahar, who has recently experienced her first menstruation, a cultural marker of female maturity in their society. Filled with anger, Zain accuses his mother of accepting chickens in exchange for Sahar, implicitly signifying a child marriage transaction.

One key term in this dialogue that warrants analysis is الإيجار (al-ījar), which in Arabic means "rental." Souad utters this term while trying to explain to Zain that they are merely "discussing the rent" with his father. However, in this context, the term carries a deeper meaning beyond a simple economic transaction.

The use of الإيجار (al-ījar) in this scene not only conveys its denotative meaning as a form of renting goods or property but also holds a broader connotative significance, representing the exploitation of individuals in vulnerable positions.

Table 4. Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the Word "الإيجار" (Al-Ījar)

Category	Description
Signifier	rental – (al-ījar) الإيجار
Signified	Utilizing someone else's property by paying a financial compensation for a specified period
Denotative Sign	An activity where one uses another's property in exchange for financial compensation based on an agreement
Connotative Signifier	An activity where one uses another's property in exchange for financial compensation based on an agreement
Connotative Signified	Exploitation of individuals, particularly in child marriage contexts
Connotative Sign	The term الإيجار (al-ījar) in this scene symbolizes exploitation, specifically in the form of child marriage as an economic transaction

From the table above, it can be observed that in the context of Capernaum, the term الإيجار (al-ījar) does not solely refer to rental in the economic sense but also serves as a symbol of exploitation arising from social inequalities. In this scene, the use of the term "rental" indicates that Sahar, as a young girl, is treated as a transactional object, where her family is willing to marry her off to As'ad to alleviate their economic burden. Child marriage, as depicted in Capernaum, remains prevalent in some Lebanese communities, particularly among impoverished populations. Despite Lebanese law setting the minimum marriage age at 18, this practice continues due to social norms, economic pressures, and cultural influences that permit child marriage with parental or judicial consent.



Figure 5. Souad Forcing Sahar to Be Handed Over to As'ad

سحر : "من فضلك، لا تجعلني أذهب! أريد ذلك، أتوسل إليك! من فضلك لا تجعلني أذهب!"
 سعاد : "إذا رجعت، سوف أتغلب على حماقة منك."
 زين الحاج : "إلى أين تأخذونها أيها الأوغاد؟ أنت ترسل لها أن تكون خادمة تلك"

الأحمق؟“
 سحر : ”أريد البقاء مع أخي.“
 سعاد : ”هذا ليس من شأنك.“
 زين الحاج : ”إنها مجرد طفلة يا أمي!“

At minute 29:28, Capernaum presents a dramatic scene illustrating the coercion of Sahar into marrying As'ad, which her family perceives as a solution to their financial struggles. After As'ad and his father arrive to propose to Sahar, Zain's parents begin considering their daughter's marriage as a means of escaping poverty. However, for Zain, this decision represents a betrayal of his sister. In this emotionally charged moment, Zain yells angrily, accusing his family of turning Sahar into a "servant" for As'ad. He pleads for his sister to stay, but his parents force Sahar onto a motorcycle, taking her away. The sound of the departing vehicle symbolizes Zain's loss and helplessness, marking a turning point that strengthens his resolve to fight against the injustices that have shaped his life.

In this scene, Zain uses the word *خادمة* (*khādimatu*), which literally means "female servant," to describe how his sister will be treated after being married to As'ad. This term has a denotative meaning as someone who assists in household tasks in exchange for a salary. However, in the film's context, its meaning expands to signify exploitation and oppression experienced by Sahar.

Table 5. Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the Word "خادمة" (*Khādimatu*)

Category	Description
Signifier	female servant - (<i>khādimatu</i>) خادمة
Signified	Someone who assists with household tasks in exchange for a salary
Denotative Sign	A term for individuals responsible for helping perform others' duties and receiving financial compensation
Connotative Signifier	A term for individuals responsible for helping perform others' duties and receiving financial compensation
Connotative Signified	Representation of systemic oppression of women, particularly in child marriage
Connotative Sign	The term <i>خادمة</i> (<i>khādimatu</i>) in this scene symbolizes exploitation and female subjugation, especially within child marriage contexts

The table demonstrates that in Capernaum, the term *خادمة* (khādimatu) extends beyond its literal meaning of a domestic worker and conveys structural oppression faced by women in patriarchal societies. The choice of this term in Zain's dialogue highlights that Sahar is not merely being married off but is also being subjected to forced labor within her husband's household. Instead of being a union based on love and mutual agreement, this marriage is framed as an economic transaction, where a girl's body becomes a bargaining tool for family survival.

Globally, child marriage often leads to physical and psychological exploitation of young girls. Girls who marry at an early age frequently drop out of school, face restricted access to education, and experience a higher risk of domestic violence. In Sahar's case, her marriage to As'ad places her in an extremely vulnerable position, stripping her of both her childhood and autonomy as an individual.



Figure 6. Tigest Negotiating the Price for an Identity Card

أسفرو	: "من غير اسمك إلى تيجيست؟ فعلت. اركض إلى صديقك من يقول أنها تستطيع الحصول عليه مقابل 900 دولار. لا تتصرف بذلك."
تيجيست	: "من فضلك إفهم، لم أستطع الحصول على 1500 دولار."
أسفرو	: "أنظر إلى هذا؟ هل يبدو هذا مزيقاً؟ لن يزعجك أحد بهذا. المرأة التي تنتمي إليها هذه فقاعة! انفجرت في مليون قطعة. لم يكن لديها أحد ولا عائلة. ولم يطالب أحد بالجثة. لن تضطر إلى التزييف علامة جمالك بعد الآن."
تيجيست	: "حسناً، لكن أعطني مزيداً من الوقت."
أسفرو	: "عزيزتي، لقد أخبرتك بالفعل يمكنني توفير 1500 دولار لك. فقط أعطني يونس وتصريحك مجاني."
تيجيست	: "لا تذكر يونس مرة أخرى، هذا لن يحدث أبداً. أبداً!"
أسفرو	: "هذا الصبي يعيش مثل الهارب هنا على هذه التربة. إذا اكتشفوا عنه يوماً ما، سيتم طردكما. أنت تبقيه تحت الأرض مثل الفئران."

At minute 54:20 the film *Capernaum* portrays the harsh reality of Tigest, an undocumented Ethiopian refugee living in Lebanon with her son, Yonas. In her struggle to survive, Tigest takes on odd jobs and hides Yonas in the restroom of the store where she works. To obtain legal

identification, Tigest negotiates with Asfour, a man who offers counterfeit identity documents. Asfour proposes that Tigest change her name to "Tigest" and promises a fake identity card for a price ranging from \$900 to \$1,500. As her situation becomes more desperate, Asfour pressures Tigest to give up Yonas in exchange for documentation, arguing that her son is merely a burden.

In this dialogue, Asfour refers to Yonas as "الهارب" (al-hāribu), meaning "fugitive." This term not only carries its literal meaning but also serves as a metaphor for the social reality experienced by undocumented refugee children. The term underscores how these children, lacking official recognition, are forced into a perpetual state of hiding and survival.

Table 6. Denotative and Connotative Analysis of the Word "الهارب" (Al-Hāribu)

Category	Description
Signifier	fugitive – (al-hāribu) الهارب
Signified	A person who has committed a crime and is sought by law enforcement
Denotative Sign	A term for an individual fleeing from legal authorities due to criminal actions
Connotative Signifier	A term for an individual fleeing from legal authorities due to criminal actions
Connotative Signified	A symbol of identity loss, marginalization, and the absence of legal protection
Connotative Sign	The term الهارب (al-hāribu) in this context illustrates how undocumented refugee children exist in legal and social limbo, forced into constant fear and uncertainty

The use of the term "الهارب" (al-hāribu) in the film highlights the phenomenon of undocumented children who are often treated as fugitives within legal and social systems. Yonas, born to a refugee mother without legal status, lacks any official documents proving his existence in Lebanon. Without identification, he is denied access to healthcare, education, and legal protection, making his life an unending flight from authorities.

The act of forging identification by Tigest reflects a survival strategy commonly adopted by refugees. For them, possessing a fake identity is the only means to secure employment and avoid expulsion. However, this practice carries significant consequences, as falsified identities do not grant legitimate legal rights, leaving refugees in a state of perpetual insecurity.

Discussions

Nadine Labaki's *Capernaum* has been the subject of extensive academic research concerning the social, economic, and legal challenges faced by marginalized children.¹⁸ From a linguistic perspective, the film not only represents social realities through visual narratives but also employs language as an instrument that constructs and reproduces meaning within specific contexts.¹⁹ Through semiotic analysis, scholars can explore how language in the film serves as a tool for understanding structures of power and social injustice.

In semantics, words carry both denotative and connotative meanings.²⁰ In this film, the term قيود (quyūd, "shackles") does not merely refer to a physical restraint but also forms a metaphor for the social oppression faced by children in impoverished environments. From a linguistic standpoint, this demonstrates how the meaning of a word can shift depending on its social context.²¹ Similarly, the term الجحيم (al-jahīm, "hell"), used by Souad to describe her home, carries deeper connotations beyond its literal meaning. Semantically, this term not only represents physical suffering but also psychological and emotional distress caused by extreme poverty. The use of such rich connotations illustrates how language in *Capernaum* is employed to construct a more complex social reality.

From Barthes' semiotic perspective, language is not merely a tool for communication but a system of signs that shapes social and cultural realities.²² Each word in *Capernaum* can be analyzed as a signifier with

¹⁸ Sindy Febrianisa, Muhammad Nazar, and Fouad Larhzizer, "CHILD EXPLOITATION OF THE CHARACTER ZAIN IN THE FILM CAPERNAUM BY NADINE LABAKI," *jurnal.stain-madina.ac.id* (December 25, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.56874/ej.v5i2.1930>.

¹⁹ Germain Poizat, Simon Flandin, and Jacques Theureau, "A Micro-Phenomenological and Semiotic Approach to Cognition in Practice: A Path toward an Integrative Approach to Studying Cognition-in-the-World and from Within," *Adaptive Behavior* 31, no. 2 (April 15, 2023): 109–125, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10597123211072352>.

²⁰ Mustafa Aziz Amen and Hourakhsh Ahmad NIA, "The Effect of Cognitive Semiotics on The Interpretation of Urban Space Configuration," in *Proceedings Article (Alanya Hamdullah Emin Paşa University, 2021)*, 260–274, <https://doi.org/10.38027/ICCAUA2021227n9>.

²¹ Akbaş, G. (2019). Semiotic Analysis in Space and Communication. *A+Arch Design International Journal of Architecture and Design*, 5(2), 89-101.

²² Nurhasanah Purba and Khairunnisa Tambunan, "Semiotic Analysis of Roland Barthes on Wardah Advertisement Version 'I Face of Indonesia,'" *LingLit Journal*

a signified meaning specific to a given social context. For instance, the courtroom scene showing Zain in shackles does not only depict his physical confinement but also symbolizes the powerlessness of impoverished children within an unjust legal system. Furthermore, the term الهارب (al-hāribu, “fugitive”) used for refugee children in the film demonstrates how language construct social identity and frames individuals within specific categories. In Barthes’ analysis, this phenomenon is part of the concept of myth, where meanings that appear natural are, in fact, ideologically constructed through language.²³

Through a linguistic analysis of Capernaum, it can be concluded that meaning in language is not confined to its denotative aspect but also encompasses deeper connotative dimensions. From Barthes’ semiotic standpoint, language functions as a system of signs that reflects social and cultural complexities.²⁴ By exploring the meanings behind each word and symbol, one can understand how language both shapes and is influenced by societal perceptions and constructed meanings.

Analyzing the denotative and connotative meanings in films like Capernaum provides deeper insights into how language not only reflects social realities but also actively participates in shaping them. Through a linguistic perspective, particularly in semiotics, it becomes evident how every word used in the film carries a meaning that extends beyond its literal interpretation. Thus, semiotic analysis in Capernaum not only aids in understanding the social realities depicted in the film but also reveals how word choice and linguistic structures contribute to the collective perception of broader social issues.

Scientific Journal for Linguistics and Literature 2, no. 3 (September 27, 2021): 113–126, <https://doi.org/10.33258/linglit.v2i3.511>.

²³ Nur Syasya Qistina Mazeree et al., “A Semiotic Analysis on Confession of a Shopaholic Trailer: Roland Barthes Approach,” *LET: Linguistics, Literature and English Teaching Journal* 13, no. 2 (December 25, 2023): 212–232, <https://doi.org/10.18592/let.v13i2.11640>.

²⁴ Vicky Dianiya, “REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL CLASS IN FILM (Semiotic Analysis of Roland Barthes Film Parasite),” *Profetik: Jurnal Komunikasi* 13, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 212, <https://doi.org/10.14421/pjk.v13i2.1946>.

Conclusion

A linguistic analysis of the film *Capernaum* addresses two primary research questions: the denotative and connotative meanings embedded within the film. At the denotative level, words such as قيود (quyūd) mean "rope" or "chains," الجحيم (al-jahīm) signifies "hellfire," الإيجار (al-ījar) refers to "renting," خادمة (khādimatu) means "female servant," and الهارب (al-hāribu) denotes "a fugitive" or "one who escapes." Literally, these words carry straightforward meanings as defined in Arabic dictionaries. However, through the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes, these denotative meanings evolve into more complex and ideologically charged connotations. قيود (quyūd) not only signifies "chains" but also represents the social constraints that bind individuals. الجحيم (al-jahīm) symbolizes extreme suffering caused by injustice and poverty. الإيجار (al-ījar) implies exploitation within an economic system that oppresses marginalized groups. خادمة (khādimatu) reflects the subjugation of women within a patriarchal social structure, while الهارب (al-hāribu) illustrates alienation and the loss of identity experienced by individuals forced to flee in inhumane circumstances.

Thus, *Capernaum* demonstrates how language functions not merely as a tool for communication but also as an instrument of social critique. The transformation of meaning from denotation to connotation highlights how linguistic signs construct deeper narratives, convey ideological messages, and evoke emotional responses from the audience. This study confirms that a semiotic analysis can reveal hidden layers of meaning within cinematic language, thereby opening avenues for further research, such as discourse analysis of dialogue structures or an investigation into the role of linguistic registers in shaping social representations in audiovisual media.

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