

The Marker of Sexuality in Nedjma's the Almond: A Semiotic Approach

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Abstract

Sexuality is the interesting issue to talk about as it is always connected to social and cultural value, especially for women as said women's bodies are cultural sites. This study is concerned to the sexuality markers used in the novel by Nedjma, The Almond. The study shows how markers have some connotative meanings based on the cultural context and religion context. This study applies semiotic approach from Umberto Eco in interpreting the sexuality markers in the novel. The method used in this study is qualitative data analysis to the collected data obtained from "The Almond" novel and the secondary data from other books, journals, dictionaries and articles (e-text) from the internet. It is found some meaning connected to the myth of Moroccan, Greek, and Egyptians cultures, also to Christian and Buddhism. This study sheds significant contribution to understand how symbols or markers have different meaning in different cultures.

Keywords: *Sexuality, Women, Semiotic*

INTRODUCTION

In the novel by Nedjma, The Almond, sexuality is the main theme encompassing desire, relationship, power, social, culture, and even religious norms. The novel "Nedjma" by Kateb Yacine explores themes of sexuality, desire, and power within the context of Algerian national identity (Hiddleston, 2013). While the character Nedjma is often viewed as an object of male desire, feminist readings suggest her significance for women's liberation in Algeria (Woodhull, 1992). Sexuality and love are recurring themes in modern Arabic literature, reflecting the complexities of conservative societies and gender dynamics (El-Desouky, 1995). In Moroccan francophone novels by female authors, themes of colonization and marriage are often portrayed as similarly oppressive experiences, characterized by hierarchy and self-denial (Kilito, 2004). These works frequently challenge social norms and legal structures, such as the Moroccan marriage code, through their characters and plots (Kilito, 2004).

The emergence of women's writing in Morocco can be seen as a form of political action and a means of claiming power (Kilito, 2004). The novel tells the story about 17-years old Badra, a girl from a traditional North African Berber village who was being a teenager wife of 40-year old man. Running away from her terrible and loveless marriage ended up meeting various women sexual lives and learned from them. Later she even had varied sexual adventures. Reflecting sexuality textually, Nedjma uses a variety of literary techniques to elaborate aspects of sexuality including symbols, metaphor, and narrative point of view.

The study to *The Almond* has been done by Nadia Ghounane (2014) focusing to the Sexual Discourse, Erotica in Today's Arabic Literature: The Case of Nedjma's *The Almond*, to see how Nedjma tries to draw a real picture about female's position in the religious beliefs and cultural norms of Moroccan society in particular and Arab world in general. The second one ranged ten years, conducted by Liyanage (2018) in the portrayal of "immoral" women characters in which Nedjma's Badra is being one of her analysis. The issue of sexuality markers by specific is so far untouched. The issue of sexuality markers in literature is a complex and multifaceted topic. Looby (2013) argues that sexuality itself is fundamentally a literary phenomenon, shaped by novelists and writers throughout history. Flannigan-Saint-Aubi (1993) delves into the role of sexual identity in textual interpretation, positing that a reader's sexual orientation, particularly male homosexuality, significantly influences how they ascribe meaning to literary texts.

These papers collectively highlight the intricate relationship between sexuality and literature, emphasizing how sexual identity not only shapes the creation of literary works but also profoundly impacts their interpretation and reception by readers. Believing that interpreting symbols may vary based on social and culture, and misinterpreting the symbols will mislead the readers understanding to the story, this study intends to see how sexuality markers represented and interpreted in the story. This gap in academic discourse extends to other areas of literature as well, with some out-of-print works offering surprising new perspectives on sexuality in literature, including examinations of underrepresented women writers of color and early 20th-century gay writings (Baer & Bassi, 2024; Venzo & Moruzi, 2021). These studies collectively emphasize the need for more nuanced and comprehensive approaches to sexuality in literature and related fields.

Narrative as the product of language is already a symbolic system which then in process as the tool to deliver the message. Narrative, as a product of language and symbolic communication, functions as a medium and a secondary modeling system in relation to natural language (Gasparov & Budgen, 1978; Strate, 2014). It serves as a tool for delivering messages and shaping moral experiences through the intersection of sequence and language (Scholes, 1980; Tappan, 1991). The study of narrative involves understanding how language mediates psychological functioning, as words and symbols provide the necessary tools for thinking, feeling, and acting (Tappan, 1991). Narrative undergoes significant changes as it is expressed through various media, from oral tradition to audiovisual formats, affecting elements such as character, plot, and genre (Strate, 2014). The analysis of narrative texts as acts of communication reveals similarities and differences with practical communication, emphasizing the importance of connotation and the expressive and appellative functions in the communicative process (Gasparov & Budgen, 1978). However, it is not only about language as in linguistic system, but as well as to the literary symbols which are being the elements in the story that could have deeper meaning than their literal meaning (Endraswara, 2013). Readers' ability to interpret the codes are essential for a better understanding to the story.

Therefore, narrative study is not merely about how codes may establish rules for systems of signification but also how they may be produced and interpreted (Eco, 1979).

Umberto Eco (1979) divides his sign concept into two which are: codes that clarify aspect of signification and sign production that clarify aspect of communication. Signification refers to the sign standing for something. Umberto Eco's semiotic theory divides signs into codes (signification) and sign production (communication) (Berger, Jr., 2015). Eco emphasizes the importance of codes in understanding language and culture, distinguishing between specific and general codes (Eco, 2003). His theory evolved from a focus on sign structure to the role of the reader in interpretation (Sallis, 1986). Eco argues that signs are "open devices" that evoke meaning, leading readers to an "infinite series of progressive consequences" (Sallis, 1986). In architecture, Eco differentiates between primary (functional) and secondary (symbolic) functions, noting the potential for "losses, recoveries and substitutions" in both categories (Eco, 2014). The communication process involves complex interpretative games that influence the (re)signification of messages, highlighting the negotiable nature of meaning (Keske, 1970). Eco's work has significantly contributed to the expansion of media studies and its relationship with various languages (Keske, 1970). The code or system of signification will determine how the expression of signs is to be correlated with their content of signs which is necessary in establishing any form of communication. Narrative is a set of communication line between narrator and narratee. Eco (1976) explains Linguistically, the codes have denotative meaning if they are interpreted literally, on another side in communication process, the code can contain connotative one. The connotative is encoded contextually and conditionally from the semantic representation (Eco, 1976). Eco then suggests studying codes into several step. In the beginning syntactic marker in line with sememe, then the sememe is interpreted literally based on dictionary, then dragging the sememe denotative to its contextual or conditional selection usually followed by event or object to have the connotative meaning.

Overall, studying sign offers various lens as it can have multiple layers of meaning to be interesting subject for analysis to see how the meaning is created, communicated, and interpreted. It is affirmed as a powerful tool for conveying ideas, emotions, and cultural values across varies contexts. Misreading the signs will create the confusion or misunderstanding to the idea of the narrated story. The purpose of this study is to analyze the markers or sign in *The Almond* to see various meaning from the sexuality markers used in the novel. It seeks to understand how sexuality is marked textually and its interpretation. This study provides insights on the important of understanding sign in which its meaning is constantly negotiated, interpreted, and transformed. It is as well as the reference to study the various meaning on sign which influence nothing specific in one society while something in other.

METHOD

This study applied qualitative research design in analyzing the sexuality markers in the novel. Sexuality referred to designation of erotic orientation with respect to object choice, i.e., the state of being sexual such as for sexual feelings, fantasies and actions (Fludernik, 2017; Lanser, 1995). The primarily data was obtained from *The Almond* by Nedjma which were collected from intensive reading, identification to all aspect related to the study, highlighting the suspected markers. Secondary data was collected from other references. The data collected was analyzed in line with Semiotic Theory by Umberto Eco (1979). The step of analysis are as follows:

- syntactic marker (related to the expression).

- *sememe* : the unit of meaning carried by a morpheme (in this study, it used the primary denotation meaning of sememe that had the same meaning of the basic word as a reader’s interpretation)
- denotation: the literal or primary meaning of the word or symbol based on the dictionary
- connotation: another meaning of the word or symbol based on the denotative meaning.
- contextual selection: cultural context, religion context, social differences and the other aspects.
- conditional selection: event or object.

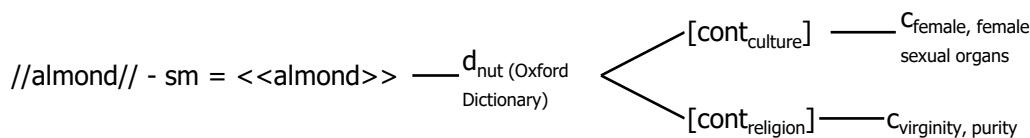
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are four sexuality markers will be discussed: almond, butterfly, dove, and lotus. In order to have broad understanding to the different on how markers interpreted, the reference from other will be fruitful in the discussion. The explanation in this part is conducted applying semantics revision model of Eco’s semiotics theory and contextual selection followed by analysis of cultural and religion context. As stated by Eco, that the interpreter is a media to deliver a denotative and connotative meaning to the receiver, therefore the reader is in the position to give interpretation to the markers. Semantic revision model allows to find; first, the women sexual identity symbols in Nedjma’s *The Almond*. Second, the sememe of the symbol based on the syntactic marker that related to the expression and interpretation of the reader. Third, the denotative meaning of the symbol based on the dictionary. Fourth, the connotative meaning used contextual selection.

In the first chapter of the novel, Badra the protagonist in the story already spills the content of the novel is about woman sexuality through the expression ‘cunt’ in “...*the most beautiful cunt..the deepest, warmest, wettest, noisiest...the most fond of cocks when they rise up like harpoons (p. 4).*” Cunt is the vulgar word for the vulva or vagina, better understood as the vulgar slang in English communities. Those finding are applied in the several parts of expression will be discussed in the following.

1. Almond

The frame of analysis based on semantic revision of Eco’s semiotics is elaborated as follows:



Generally speaking, the word ‘almond’ has almond as a sememe, in Stevenson (2010), denotatively means *nut*. Based on the contextual selection analysis to the text, the connotative meaning is influenced by the cultural and religion context. In some communities, almond also represents sweetness, charm, delicacy, and surprisingly very often connected with sex, as for example in India, the almond represents vulva, they believe that eating the almond signifies the sexual act (Biedermann, 1994; Olderr, 2012). In the *Western Journal of Surgery* by Whipple (1994), ‘almond’ is associated to female sexual organ, such as clitoris, vagina, and *gräfenberg spot* (G-spot). The reflection of sexuality is impressed in the text in the extract:

“(Driss)...You didn’t exactly protest when Saloua stuck her tongue down **your almond** the last time.”

“(Badra)...Because monsieur preferred squirting into **an almond** that wasn’t mine.”

(p. 190-191)

The passage is taken from the conversation between Badra and Driss. Sememe ‘almond’ is interpreted as *gräfenberg spot*. The ‘almond’ in the passage impresses sexual pleasure. Connotative meaning of almond in Marrocan culture can be seen at extract below:

“My mother-in-law was waiting for me, her three daughters by her side. Their ululations were too high-pitched, and the **almonds** they threw as a sign of welcome seemed like stones (p. 110).”

In the passage almond is a symbol used as a sign *welcoming bride*. However, using almond in the procession has specific meaning. The symbol of almond in several countries are interpreted as light. Even though there is no significant evidence of Roman’s conquered upon Marocco compared to France that part of Marrocan speak French, but the interpretation of almond can be related to what Roman’s concept to almond as the amulet of fertility. In the Christian tradition, the almond signifies purity of the virgin. Even in Jewish myth, almond represents something important regarding sex. From the interpretation of almond in several areas and culture, the extract above reflects the action of *welcoming bride*, connected to the context in the text, is connected to female sexual organ and will be relevant to be interpreted for virginity and fertility for the new family. Similar in the extract:

“(Driss)...You’re a *houri*, you know? Only houris recover their virginity after every coitus.”

(Badra)...I answered in cold and almost sarcastic anger:

“You’re like all the others! You want to be the first!”

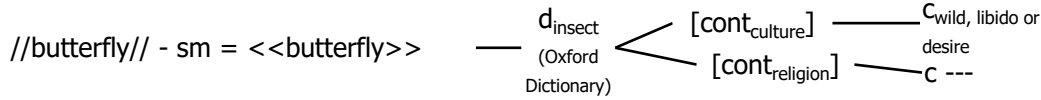
“(Driss)...But I am the first! And I don’t give a damn about the others and what they want. I want you, you, **my almond**, my butterfly!”

(p. 104)

“(Driss)...You are right, my dove! If you’re being bad just to be bad, it’s always better to choose bad things that are overpriced. Never lower yourself, **my almond**, to revel in mediocrity and be content with the ordinary. You’d anger your guardian angels if you were to starting living on the cheap (p. 186).”

The meaning of ‘almond’ at the passage is connected to the word ‘*houri*’. Houri in Islam is described as a maiden provided as a reward for faithful Muslim men in paradise. Both passages reflect the meaning of almond as the female, however the word coitus and virginity at the first extract affirm that the almond is interpreted not just as female, but more refer to the female sexuality.

2. Butterfly



Syntactic marker and sememe of ‘butterfly’ are similar as well as their denotative meaning based on Stevenson (2010) as insect. Based on contextual selection analysis, there is a myth about butterfly that being connotative meaning in some culture. The most universal interpretation of butterfly is transformation in which growing from caterpillar, to a cocoon, then butterfly. It has powerful interpretation as significant life changes and personal growth (Ferber, 1999). In Greek, Celts, and Aztecs cultures, butterfly is as a symbol of human soul (Nozedar, 2008). In Christian, butterfly interpreted as the resurrection. However, the meaning of butterfly in *The Almond* shows differently. It is close to the way the symbol of butterfly in Chinese culture. It evokes the qualities of freedom, earthly beauty, love, and romance.

“(Driss)...You’re a *houri*, you know? Only houris recover their virginity after every coitus.”

(Badra)...I answered in cold and almost sarcastic anger:

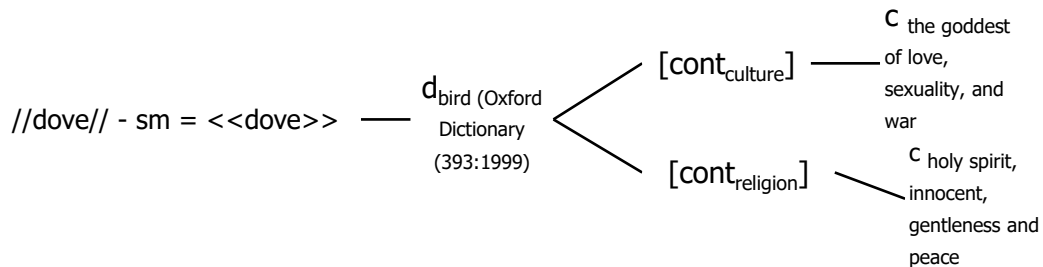
“You’re like all the others! You want to be the first!”

“(Driss)...But I am the first! And I don’t give a damn about the others and what they want. I want you, you, **my almond**, my butterfly!”

(p. 104)

In order to see the relation between butterfly and sexuality, seemingly we have to relate the meaning of the phrase: butterfly in my stomach. The phrase means someone is in nervous, anxious, or excited. Another reference stated that it refers to as well to the "feel-good" hormone or dopamine, which is released after doing pleasurable activities, such as sex. Relating to the characterization of Badra, the butterfly symbolizes wild, libido or desire. The meaning of butterfly symbolizes following the meaning of almond.

3. Dove



Sememe ‘dove’ denotatively means bird (Stevenson, 2010). In social live, dove contains connotative meaning. In most culture, ‘dove’ is a sign of messenger, refers to the story using ‘dove’ for sending piece of paper. Like in Indonesia, post-office uses ‘dove’ in its logo. In another culture, ‘dove’ symbolizes as love between lover, fidelity, even in wedding ceremony, releasing pair of ‘dove’ as a symbol of commitment and the sacred of the wedding. Involving religion context, it is cited in the bible, Matthew 3:16 and Luke 3:22, ‘dove’ is

described as the symbol of the holy spirit. Retrieved in The Catechism of the Catholic Church, ‘dove’ symbolizes wisdom, knowledge, counsel, understanding, piety, and fear of the lord, which is in picture usually seen seven doves is flying around the holy cross (Ferber, 2007).

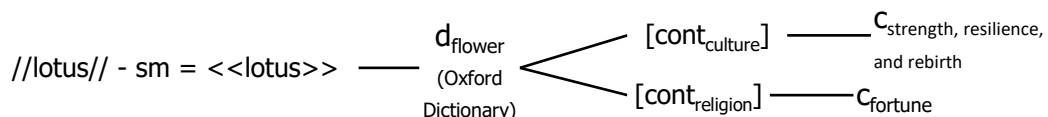
There are connotative meanings of ‘dove’ as well based on colors. Christian concept of dove beside as cited above that red one is used as a symbol of how Christ redeemed man with his blood, while speckled dove represents the twelve prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) as in the old testament of the bible. The popular one as known is white dove which is used as the symbol of innocent, gentleness and peace (Biedermann, 1994; Olderr, 2012).

“I should have known you were a homo to the bone the day Saloua shoved her tongue in your behind.”

“And if Saloua shoved her tongue in my asshole, it’s because men open up down there when they ejaculate. You have to learn it all, **my dove**. That bitch of Saloua has fiddled with too many cocks and asses not to know that elementary rule of pleasure. You, on the other hand, you don’t dare. You don’t dare do anything.”
 (p. 191)

At the extract above the word ‘dove’ has the meaning of a symbol that can be said to be similar as white dove, innocent mean pure of virgin. However, back to the context of the story, it remains us to the meaning of dove in Ancient Mesopotamia as the depiction of Inanna-Ishtar. She is symbolized as the goddess of love, sexuality, and war. Linking to the story about Badra, who is wild in her journey about her sexuality, then the meaning ‘dove’ in the text impresses the meaning as Inanna-Ishtar. Badra is innocent by her sexuality experience and later being wild in Driss eyes.

4. Lotus



The word ‘lotus’ has ‘lotus’ as a sememe denotatively means flower (Stevenson, 2010). In Western culture, lotus flower symbolizes strength, resilience, and rebirth. The concept is coming from the circle of the lotus that each evening it returns to the murky water and blooms at dawn. In Egyptian culture, lotus flower relates to the myth of Atum-Ra. The magical properties of Lotus circle life are associated with sun emerges when lotus blooms, later said as the depiction of creation and rebirth. In Buddhism, ‘lotus’ symbolizes fortune. It is common to see one of Buddhism Gods, Guanyin who is considered as the goddess of mercy and physical embodiment of compassion, sitting on the bloomy lotus. It indicates her sacredness or spiritual elevation. The lotus which is growing in the muddy water and blooming above the murk is believed as the reflection of human strength out of suffering in resisting temptation of evil (Nozedar, 2008). Within Christianity, ‘lotus’ represents fertility and piousness, even sometimes associated with the virgin Mary. Yet, lotus holds many symbolic meanings, in specific to love then, signifies various romantic emotions and strong emotional attachment.

I shivered when he whispered in my ear:

”You’ll see, one day you’ll drink me! When you feel completely confident.”
“I felt like answering him, ‘Never,’ but remembered the pleasure he had just given me. The taste of eternity. The world had suddenly become a caress. The world had become a kiss. And I was nothing but **a floating lotus flower.**”
The following day it was not only I who was in love with Driss. My genitals, too, revered him.
(p. 105)

In addition to the meaning of lotus based on the extract above, considering to the content of the story, the noun-phrase: *a floating lotus flower* means awakening of Badra’s sexuality awareness.

Discussion

This research explores how sexuality is represented in *The Almond* through the semiotic analysis of four primary symbols: almond, butterfly, dove, and lotus. Using Umberto Eco’s semiotic theory, which posits that signs derive meaning from both cultural codes and individual interpretations, we analysed how these symbols act as markers of sexuality within the text. Eco (1976) argues that meaning is not fixed but continually reshaped by cultural and social contexts. The discussion will address how each of these symbol’s functions within such a framework, reflecting both personal and societal dimensions of sexual identity.

1. *Almond as a Symbol of Sensuality and Fertility*

The almond, central to the text, serves as a multi-layered symbol of fertility and sensuality. In semiotic terms, the almond functions as a signifier whose connotation goes beyond its literal meaning as a fruit. Eco’s theory of "unlimited semiosis" (Eco, 1976) suggests that a sign’s meaning can expand continuously, depending on its cultural context. In the case of *The Almond*, the fruit signifies sexual desire and the act of discovery.

Almonds have historically been associated with fertility and eroticism in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures (Lanser, 1995). The hard shell that encloses a soft, edible center can symbolize both the barriers that conceal inner desires and the act of opening up to sensual experiences. This echoes the notion of sexual awakening, as characters in *The Almond* are often portrayed in moments of self-discovery through interactions with food, reflecting the symbolic consumption of desire. As Berger, Jr. (2015) highlights, the relationship between food and sexuality is often used in literature to symbolize intimate physical and emotional connections.

2. *The Butterfly: Transformation and Sexual Awakening*

The butterfly, frequently seen as a symbol of transformation and freedom, plays a significant role in the semiotic representation of sexual awakening. According to Eco’s theory, symbols are “cultural units” that carry cultural codes and multiple layers of meaning (Eco, 1976). The butterfly, in its metamorphic stages, signifies personal growth and the shedding of previous identities, which in this case relates to sexual maturity and liberation.

In literary symbolism, butterflies are often linked to themes of change and transformation, particularly in relation to female sexuality (Flannigan-Saint-Aubi, 1993). The metamorphosis of a butterfly, from a grounded caterpillar to a free-flying creature, parallels the characters’ journeys toward embracing their sexual identities. As Olderr (2012) explains, butterflies in literature are often used to denote the process of sexual awakening, where characters move from a state of innocence to one of experience. This idea aligns with Eco’s

notion that symbols carry cultural meanings that are constantly evolving based on their contextual use.

3. *The Dove: Ambivalence Between Purity and Desire*

In *The Almond*, the dove is a complex semiotic marker, embodying both purity and underlying sexual tension. Eco's (1976) theory suggests that signs can carry multiple, even contradictory meanings, depending on their cultural context. Traditionally, the dove has been associated with peace, innocence, and purity, particularly in Christian iconography (Looby, 2013). However, in *The Almond*, the dove also serves as a subtle marker of sexual desire, creating a tension between societal expectations of chastity and the characters' personal sexual urges.

The dove, often appearing in moments of emotional or sexual ambiguity, reflects this duality. Lanser (1995) discusses how doves in literature are frequently used to explore the contradictions between purity and sensuality, particularly in female characters. In *The Almond*, the presence of the dove in sexually charged scenes suggests an underlying conflict between the external display of innocence and internal desires. This ambivalence aligns with Eco's idea of polysemy, where a single symbol can possess multiple interpretations, shifting according to the narrative and cultural context.

4. *The Lotus: Sexual and Spiritual Awakening*

The lotus, another powerful symbol in *The Almond*, represents both sexual and spiritual awakening. In many cultures, particularly in Eastern traditions, the lotus is associated with purity and enlightenment (Tappan, 1991). Eco's semiotic framework allows us to interpret how the lotus transcends its denotative meaning as a flower and becomes a symbol of sexual and emotional transcendence within the novel.

In literary and religious symbolism, the lotus often represents the process of rising above physical limitations to achieve a higher state of awareness (Ferber, 1999). However, in *The Almond*, this process also encompasses the characters' sexual awakening. The lotus's growth from the mud to the surface of the water mirrors the characters' journeys from repressed desire to full sexual realization. According to Sen (2005), the lotus is frequently used in literature as a symbol of both eroticism and spiritual transformation, blending the physical with the metaphysical.

In Eco's terms, the lotus acts as a sign that carries both personal and cultural significance. It is a marker of the characters' ability to transcend societal constraints on sexuality and embrace a more holistic, liberated identity. This aligns with Eco's (1976) idea of "cultural semiotics," where the meaning of a sign is shaped by its cultural and social environment.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis found in *The Almond* by Nedjma, there are four sexuality markers that play a role in the development of story idea, like denotatively: almond as nut, butterfly as insect, dove as bird, and lotus as flower. However, in the interpretation for the markers in the text should be linked to the context to see the meaning behind the markers, also it is important to see the meaning based on the cultural and religion context. From the reference of both, the markers can tell its role in the development of the story. It will be interesting to see how the markers in another text play their role, that probably different text has different sexuality markers according to the cultural or social setting of the story.

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