



Are Islamic Values Reduced and Dramatised in *Memories of the Alhambra*?

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A B S T R A C T

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This study aims to explore the plot and analyze the Islamic values and how they are displayed in the Korean drama *Memories of the Alhambra*. The method of this study is descriptive qualitative, with a semiotic analysis approach from Roland Barthes. The results show that the drama *Memories of the Alhambra* in denotation meaning, tells a game created to find the lost game master with various conflicts. The connotation meaning is that these two characters have their habits, and a very ambitious spirit related to the development of their company, J-One Holdings. The myth in this scene has pros and cons because many say religion should not be "dramatized". There is no theory that Fatima's hand is the key to heaven but in the drama Muslims believe Fatima's hand is the key to heaven, therefore there is a legend about the gate of justice on the day the key to heaven meets Fatima's hand, the gate will be opened and the Alhambra palace will collapse. Islamic values are found in the drama, namely the

value of worship, moral values, sharia values, moral values, and local wisdom values. There are plot principles in this drama, namely plot of actions, plot of characters, and plot of thought.

Introduction

The development of mass media is increasing rapidly, characterised by the emergence of various forms of mass media (Jakaria et al., 2023). Film is one form of mass media, as one of the mass media in the form of audiovisual, film becomes an aesthetic work as well as an information tool that can be an entertaining tool, a propaganda tool, as well as a political tool (Syahara et al., 2022). The uniqueness of film as a medium of communication lies in the use of traditional art techniques packaged with cinematic principles, enabling the creation of strong messages and emotional impact on the audience.

Film is an effective work because it uses traditional art techniques based on cinematic principles (Marito Siregar & Muhammad Fachran Haikal, 2024). Through visualization, sound, and dynamic storylines, film can address complex social, cultural, and even political issues in a way that is easy to understand and relatable. Film has great power to influence audiences consisting of people of different ages and demographics. In addition, film may challenge, reinforce, or even overturn ideological ideas, basic principles, and religions (Salsabila & Zainuddin, 2022).

Film serves not only as a medium for communication and entertainment but also as a powerful ideological tool capable of reinforcing, challenging, or even transforming societal values. These multifaceted roles make film an effective medium for conveying complex ideological messages while presenting challenges in ensuring these messages are accurately interpreted by audiences. When delivered persuasively, films can become a preferred vehicle for promoting specific ideas. However, this also heightens the risk of bias and potential manipulation. The diverse functions and elements within films have made them a favored and highly effective medium for transmitting messages across various audiences (Nur Aini, 2023).

The presence of Korean dramas on the global scene not only provides entertainment, but also depicts various cultural, social, and religious values. Korean dramas have become one of the popular cultural phenomena that have gained global attention in recent years (Ardia, 2014; Valenciana & Pudjibudojo, 2022). Korean dramas, commonly known as K-Dramas, have gained significant popularity among audiences across Asia. This is evident through various trends and cultural phenomena observed in multiple countries (Kurniawati & Pratiwi, 2021). Korean dramas encompass more than just entertainment; they also showcase cultural, social, and occasionally spiritual values (Arianto, 2024; Ri'aeni et al., 2019).

The drama *Memories of the Alhambra* has captivated international audiences, not only for its distinctive storyline but also for its incorporation of Islamic elements within the narrative. The portrayal of religious symbols such as the Hand of Fatima and myths related to paradise in a dramatized context has sparked debates about the representation of religious values, particularly Islamic ones, in this work. While previous studies have explored the influence of Korean culture in international television series, research focusing specifically on the depiction of Islamic values in Korean dramas remains limited.

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is a prominent framework in media analysis, often employed to examine the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded within film or series narratives. Numerous studies have utilized Barthes' approach to analyze various forms of media, including advertisements, films, and television, exploring how symbols are used to shape and convey cultural messages and values. However, there is a notable lack of research specifically applying Barthes' theory to investigate how religious values, particularly Islamic values, are represented in Korean dramas.

Existing research tends to focus on aspects of Korean culture displayed in dramas, while religious aspects are often sidelined or discussed superficially. While several studies have explored the representation of religion in Western cinema—such as Christianity in Hollywood or Hinduism in Bollywood—similar analyses of religion in Korean dramas remain limited (Belladi & John, 2024; Dadhe, 2009; Dimitrova, 2010; Gandal, 2007; Jain, 2010; Mathew, 2021; Nayar, 2010). However, the exploration of Islam's representation in Korean dramas remains underdeveloped. This gap highlights the need for research that critically

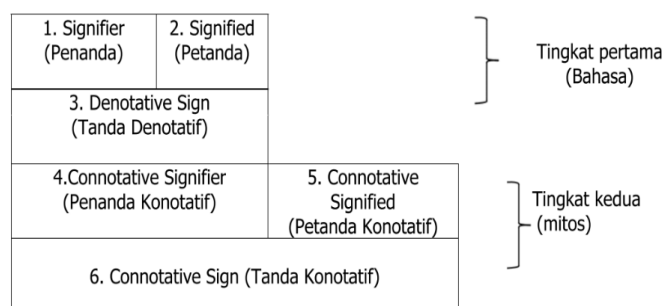
examines how Islamic values are interpreted, minimized, or dramatized within the framework of Korean popular culture.

This study introduces a novel perspective by examining the representation of Islamic values in the drama *Memories of the Alhambra* through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. This framework enables a nuanced analysis of how Korean dramas incorporate religious symbols within their narratives and character development. By dissecting the layers of denotation, connotation, and myth, the research sheds light on how Asian popular media adapt and reframe religious elements in contemporary storytelling, a subject more commonly explored in Western contexts. The primary aim is to investigate and critically analyze the portrayal of Islamic values in *Memories of the Alhambra*, focusing on how these values are either diminished or dramatized. The central question driving this study is: does the depiction of Islamic values in the play reduce or dramatise Islamic values?

Research Methods and Theoretical Approaches

This study implements a descriptive qualitative method with a semiotic approach from Roland Barthes to reveal and analyze the meaning (denotative, connotative, myth) (Gusti & Muriawan, 2024). The data for this study comprises all scenes from the Korean drama *Memories of the Alhambra*. Semiotics is one of the most interpretive communication research methods in analysing texts (Efendi et al., 2023). Barthes' semiotics divides its analysis by two meanings of signs, namely connotation and denotation. A connotative sign is a sign whose sign has an open meaning or meaning that is implicit, indirect, and uncertain, meaning that it is open to new interpretations.

In 1956, Roland Barthes who read Saussure's work: *Cours de linguistique générale* saw the possibility of applying semiotics to other fields. He had a contrary view to Saussure about the position of linguistics as part of semiotics. According to him, on the contrary, semiotics is part of linguistics because signs in these other fields can be seen as language, which expresses ideas (that is, meaning), is an element formed of signifiers, and is contained in a structure (Lustyantie, 2012; Wibisono & Sari, 2021).



Roland Barthes Sign Map (Source: Sobur, 2006) in (Wibisono & Sari, 2021)

In Barthes' semiotics, denotation is the first level of significance, while connotation is the second level of significance. Denotation can be said to be a fixed objective meaning, while connotation is a subjective and varied meaning (Nasirin & Pithaloka, 2022). To analyze the Islamic values in *Memories of the Alhambra* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, first, the drama was identified as the main object in this study. The film was chosen for its narrative complexity and potential to explore cultural and religious values, particularly in the Islamic context (Kurniawati & Pratiwi, 2021).

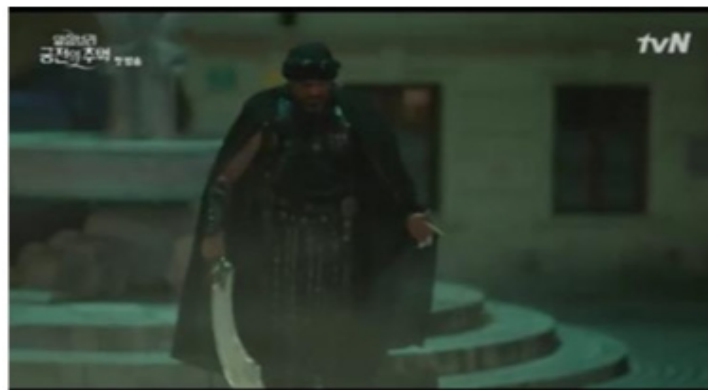
The second step involves identifying and analyzing the denotative meaning of the signs within the drama. Denotation refers to the explicit or obvious meaning of the sign, such as the setting at the Alhambra and a historical fortress in Spain, which is the main backdrop of the story. Denotation also includes key characters, such as Yoo Jin-woo, a CEO involved in the search for an augmented reality game that triggers a series of dramatic events. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, this analysis delves deeper to uncover the connotations of these signs. Connotation pertains to the underlying symbolism, association, or deeper implications embedded within the signs. For example, the Alhambra, as a setting, carries profound connotations tied to its rich Islamic heritage and stands as a testament to the grandeur and legacy of Islamic civilization in Spain.

A structural analysis is conducted to understand how these signs interact and contribute to the overall narrative of the drama. This complex narrative structure helps in exploring how values such as justice, courage, or firmness of faith, which are often related to Islamic teachings, are represented and communicated to the

audience. Important concepts from Roland Barthes, such as myth (how Islamic values can be manipulated in the narrative to create new meanings) and the difference between denotation and connotation, are applied to enrich the analysis. For instance, the character of Yoo Jin-woo is able to be understood denotatively as an ambitious CEO, while connotatively, his journey to uncover the truth behind the events at the Alhambra can be interpreted as a spiritual quest reflecting the deeper existential values.

Discussion and Results

Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis used in this research takes several points from the scene of the drama *Memories of the Alhambra* to determine the signs and markers and the meaning contained. The symbols and signs contained in the drama try to analyze the scenes.

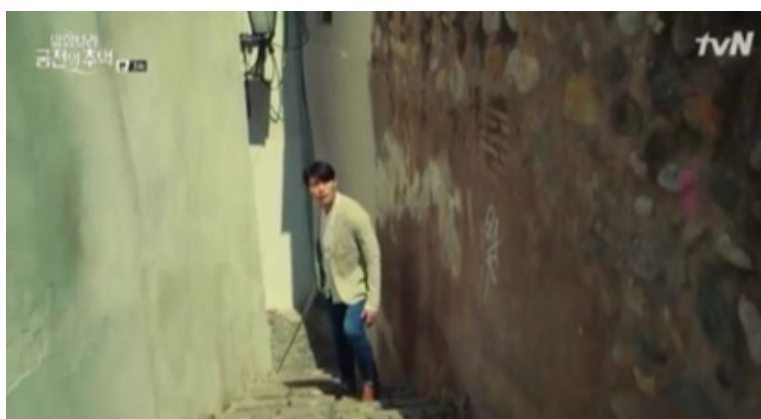


Scene minute 32.39 eps.1

Source: Author's Screenshot

Denotation	Connotation	Myths
The enemy, the warriors of the Nashid kingdom, appeared	Signalling an attack on Jin Woo	Later, Jin Woo launches an attack against the soldiers of the Nashid kingdom, who have, in fact, been became into statues admist the surrounding buildings.

Analysis: When Jin Woo was traveling and was right in the middle of the city, Jin Woo was shocked to suddenly have someone attack the buildings around him, it turned out that the game lens that was installed in his eyes was already working and ready to be played. The lens will be released by his company in the coming year. Arriving Jin Woo in a game is a game like the real world that uses AR (Augmented Reality) technology, at that place he had to defeat the Nashid royal warrior to be able to level up which in fact the statue became a statue in the middle of the building where he is now.



Scene minute 02.23 eps.3

Source: Author's Screenshot

Denotation	Connotation	Myths
Jin Woo walked through the buildings to prepare to level up.	Signalling the process of leveling up by finding the aragons around the building.	One way to prevent Jin Woo from being attacked was to dodge to avoid being hit by arrows from the aragons, which would have injured him.

Analysis: Denotation, Jin Woo walks through the buildings. Connotation, leveling up by looking for the aragons around the building. Myth, one of the ways to prevent an attack Jin Woo must avoid being hit by the arrows of the Aragon guards. Hardworking is one of Jin Woo's characters, he is trying to raise his level to duel with his best friend who has betrayed Jin Woo and now he is trying to raise his level by defeating the Aragon guards.



Scene minute 13.12 eps.3

Source: Source: Author's Screenshot

Denotation	Connotation	Myths
The beautiful and eye-catching character Emma is playing a musical instrument in a cafe.	By listening to Emma's music, Jin Woo felt that his heart was at peace.	Emma was created as a symbol of peace, but can also be cruel with her piercing eyes. That's why Emma was placed in Cafe Alcazaba, because the cafe was a gathering place for allies and other weapons. So, if anyone attacks each other, Emma will stop them and make peace with each other.

Analysis: The denotation in the picture is the character Emma playing a musical instrument in a cafe. The connotation formed from this scene is that there is a peaceful attitude towards Emma's character with a beautiful face, which attracts Jin Woo's attention. The myth in the picture above is that Jin Woo generally feels comfortable around Emma, but he also has to accept if Emma changes her character to be cruel if there is a war in the cafe. Because, she was created not only as a symbol of peace, she also punishes people who attack each other.



Scene minute 11:26 eps 13

Source: Author's Screenshot

Denotation	Connotation	Myths
Emma's character has a unique accessory on her right hand.	Emma's accessories are similar to the symbols on the AlHambra gate of justice	Emma's character bracelet and ring looked familiar, but they belonged to Fatima. Fatima's hand is in Alhambra, above the first gate known as the gate of justice. Fatima was Muhammad's daughter, and Muslims believe her hand is the key to heaven. Because of this, there is a legend about the gate of justice that the day the key to heaven meets Fatima's hand, the gates will be opened and the Palace will fall.

Analysis: The denotation of the image highlights that the character Emma has unique accessories on her right hand in the form of interlocking rings and bracelets. The connotation suggests that these accessories bear a resemblance to the symbols adorning the Gate of Justice at the Alhambra palace. The myth associated with Emma's accessories is that they believe that Emma's hand is the hand of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. According to Islamic

belief, muslims believe her hand is the key to heaven. Therefore, there is a legend about the Gate of Justice and the hand of Fatima converge, the gate will be opened and the palace will collapse.

Based on the results of research utilizing Roland Barthes Semiotics theory, *Memories of the Alhambra* is rooted in Islamic values, with its communication and representation of moral messages intricately woven into its narrative. These moral messages, carrying meanings or messages or Islamic values, are conveyed through the story, even if they include myths or elements that do not necessarily reflect absolute the truth. According to Barthes, media divides messages, therefore messages have connotative dimensions. That is what creates myths, this definition of myth does not always refer to mythology in everyday terms, such as everything that remains stable. Barthes said, myth is a meaning that is frozen by power specifically as a type of discourse type as explained by Barthes, who said myth cannot be determined by the object or material because every material can contain meaning.

As a result, some myths are found in the Korean drama *Memories of the Alhambra*. Mass communication in this context primarily pertains to how the audience engages with mass media. The plot displayed looks interesting with the plot structure, namely, the plot of actions, the plot of characters, and the plot of thought. The writers of *Memories of the Alhambra* were inspired by Pokemon Go. The main actor is portrayed as courageous and determined, preserving through challenges to complete the game and protect people around him, including his assistant.

Emma, one of the characters, effortlessly captures attention and enchants anyone who encounters her. Alongside her exceptional talent for playing playing classical guitar, she also wears beautiful clothes and luxurious accessories. Her rings and bracelets are believed to symbolize the hand of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, which believed Fatima's hand is the key to Heaven. Although there is no theory or evidence proving Fatima's hand is the key to heaven, but in the drama, they believe it is. Fatima is a representation of a woman's hand with an eye at its center and is also referred to as Hamsa, an Arabic word meaning "Five". The term stems from the legend (myth) in which Ali sought his wife Fatima for permission to take a second wife.

Surprised to hear this, Fatima, who was cooking at the time, accidentally plunged her hand into a pan of hot water while shedding tears. As a result, the Hamsa is a kind of symbol of strength. In addition, the Korean drama *Memories Of the Alhambra* features filming locations in various countries including Granada, Spain, and Barcelona. Alhambra Palace showcases numerous Islamic relics, such as these fortresses. For instance, the Generalife, which served as the royal family's retreat, is situated amidst a vast garden. The name Generalife originates from the Arabic word Jannat Al-Arif, a garden inspired by the description of the garden of paradise in the Qur'an where there is a river with clear water flowing. At the gate to Alhambra Palace, the symbol of Fatima's hand is engraved on the gate of justice, alongside the key to Heaven carved on its reverse side. In the drama, there is a scene which says that if Fatima's hand and the key to heaven were to merge, then the palace would collapse and be destroyed.

Conclusion

The Korean drama *Memories of the Alhambra* is not only entertainment, but also a mirror that illustrates how Islamic values can be integrated into its characters, settings, and narrative. Through intricate symbolism and nuanced metaphors embedded in visual and linguistic cues, the drama conveys deep moral lessons. The main focus of this study is to analyze whether Islamic values are reduced or dramatised in the process of depicting the narrative and characters in the play. The research findings indicate that *Memories of the Alhambra* incorporates Islamic symbols, such as Fatima's hand, primarily as narrative elements to support the storyline rather than as a profound representation of religious values.

Denotatively, the play centers on technological adventures and business conflicts. However, connotatively, there is a mythical portrayal of Fatima's hand as the key to heaven that has caused debate. This myth is presented dramatically but lacks a strong theological basis, thus raising controversy over the use of religious symbols in entertainment. The findings reveal that in popular media, such as Korean dramas, religious values are often simplified into symbols tailored to fit narrative and aesthetic purposes rather than to communicate profound religious messages.

This study also highlights important implications for studying religious representation in the media, especially in an era of globalization where cross-cultural

cultural production increasingly dominate the entertainment industry. Yet, this study is limited in scope to one Korean drama, *Memories of the Alhambra*. Future research is recommended to broaden the analysis to include additional Korean dramas or other forms of popular media with religious themes, so that a more comprehensive picture of religious representation in the media can be obtained. Additionally, it can be considered to examine the perceptions of viewers from different religious backgrounds in order to understand the impact of religious representation in the media on public understanding and perception.

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