



The Representation of Critique through the Sign System in Abdul Rahman Yusuf's Poem 'Amā'imukum

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Submitted/Received 26 Jan 2026

First Revised 20 Jul 2026

Accepted 29 Sept 2026

Publication Date 17 Oct 2026

Keywords:

Abdul Rahman Yusuf

'Amā'imukum

Representation of critique

Roland Barthes

Semiotic

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes critique in the poem 'Amā'imukum by Abdul Rahman Yusuf, a contemporary Egyptian resistance poet whose work is known for its sharp social and political commentary, using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The study aims to reveal how the system of signs in the poem constructs ideological meaning through three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Employing a qualitative-analytical method, the research applies close reading to symbols, imagery, and inter-sign relations within the poetic text. The primary data consist of the poem itself, supported by Barthes' semiotic theory and scholarly works on contemporary Arabic literature. The findings reveal that critique in the poem is not conveyed explicitly, but is constructed through the transformation of religious, legal, and power-related symbols naturalized as social truths. At the level of myth, the poem dismantles the grand myth of the sanctity of religion and law as moral guardians by presenting them as symbolic systems appropriated by power to legitimize violence and oppression. These findings affirm that 'Amā'imukum functions as a form of ideological critique that challenges the dominant structures of meaning in contemporary Arab social reality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Arabic poetry often works as a medium of social, political, and moral critique, particularly within the Arab world, which is marked by authoritarianism, social inequality, and the instrumentalization of religion in practices of power (Al-Anshor & Syahid, 2023). This is evident in post-2013 Egypt, where the al-Sisi government tightened state control over religious institutions by restricting mosque sermons to Al-Azhar-credentialed scholars and assuming full administrative authority over mosques (Bano & Benadi, 2017). From the twentieth century through the post-Arab Spring period, poetry has become an important space of expression for poets to respond to these dynamics through satire, metaphor, and socio-religious symbolism (Shiddiq & Rofiuddin, 2024). In this context, critique is not merely articulated explicitly, but is constructed through symbolic structures that represent power relations among the state, religious elites, and society.

One prominent poet within this tradition of critique is Abdul Rahman Yusuf, who is widely recognized as a poet of resistance (*syi'r al-muqāwamah*) in contemporary Egyptian Arabic literature. His poetry consistently criticizes authoritarian regimes, the manipulation of religion by official institutions, as well as corruption and repression carried out by state elites (El-Sabawi, 2025; Yusuf, 2025). Through satire, irony, and the use of religious symbolism, Yusuf constructs an aesthetic as well as political strategy aimed to challenging dominant power narratives and opening spaces for anti-hegemonic discourse (Yusuf, 2025). This strategy is particularly evident in his poem *'Amā'imukum*, which was published online on July 24, 2023 (Yusuf, 2023), and articulates a sharp critique of moral authorities who deploy religious symbols to conceal hypocrisy and the abuse of power.

A number of previous studies indicate that poetry is frequently employed as a medium of social and political critique through various approaches. Research grounded in the sociology of literature shows poetry as both a reflection of and a response to social realities (Fadli et al., 2024; Salsabila et al., 2025), while Roland Barthes' semiotic approach has been applied in analyses of Arabic poetry to reveal denotative and connotative meanings, particularly in religious and emotional poems (Azizah & Hidayatullah, 2023; Cahyani & Akmaliyah, 2025; Rohmah, 2020). Nevertheless, these studies generally do not position myth as the primary mechanism for ideological interpretation, especially in contemporary Arabic poetry that connects religious symbols with relations of power. Moreover, based on the existing literature, no study has specifically examined Abdul Rahman Yusuf's poem *'Amā'imukum* using Barthes' semiotic framework; existing studies on Yusuf's works instead employ other semiotic approaches, such as Riffaterre's model (Yusuf, 2025). Riffaterre's model primarily examines textual and poetic unity, explaining how the matrix and hypogram establish coherence between a poem's ungrammatical surface features and its underlying meaning. However, it does not fully address how symbolic associations become naturalized as self-evident within an ideological order. Barthes' concept of myth, by contrast, examines this second-order signification by revealing how connotative meanings are naturalized as taken-for-granted truths that sustain particular power relations. Since *'Amā'imukum* critiques the naturalization of religious and legal authority as instruments of political power, Barthes' framework is essential for exposing the ideological mechanisms underlying the poem's critique, a dimension insufficiently addressed by Riffaterre's

model.

Based on this condition, there remains a limitation in existing scholarship that systematically examines mythological mechanisms in contemporary Arabic poetry as a means of naturalizing ideology through socio-religious symbols. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by applying Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to the poem '*Amā'imukum*'. The novelty of this research lies in its interpretation of myth as a second-order system of signification that reveals how religious symbols function to construct and normalize relations of power in contemporary Arabic poetry. This study offers a critical model for understanding how religious discourse is appropriated and instrumentalized within the legitimizing apparatus of contemporary authoritarian regimes. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how the system of signs in '*Amā'imukum*' operates at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth in articulating social and moral critique, while simultaneously illuminating the broader mechanisms through which religious authority is mobilized in the service of political power.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative-analytical approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to examine the representation of social critique in Abdul Rahman Yusuf's poem '*Amā'imukum*'. Barthes' semiotic framework, encompassing the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, constitutes an established method in cultural and literary studies (Barthes, 1986, 1991). Accordingly, this research focuses on the application of the framework in textual analysis rather than on reiterating its theoretical exposition.

The primary data consist of the full text of the poem '*Amā'imukum*', which comprises 34 verses (*bait*) organized into four thematic stanzas, as published on the poet's official website (Yusuf, 2023). The theoretical and contextual literature underpinning the analysis includes Barthes' foundational works, particularly *Mythologies* and *Elements of Semiology*, as well as scholarly studies on modern Arabic literature relevant to the socio-political context of the poem. The analysis is conducted through close reading of diction, imagery, and recurring symbols within the text. Each element is examined sequentially at the level of denotation to identify literal meaning, connotation to interpret cultural and affective associations, and myth to reveal processes of ideological naturalization. For analytical transparency, only representative stanzas are presented, selected based on three criteria: (1) the density of religious, legal, and power-related symbols; (2) the clarity of transitions across denotation, connotation, and myth; and (3) their thematic relevance to the poem's critique of the naturalization of religious-political authority. Stanzas with similar symbolic patterns are not discussed separately, as the analytical framework applied to the selected examples is considered replicable across comparable poetic texts. The findings are presented using an informal method in the form of narrative exposition, enabling the relationships among signs and the direction of social critique in the poem to be conceptually understood prior to more in-depth ideological interpretation (Sudaryanto, 2016).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

Based on a visual examination of the poem '*Amā'imukum*', the text is divided into four sections marked by asterisks (***). These markers work as indicators of discourse segmentation, signaling thematic transitions between sections of the poem. This structural division is subsequently analyzed as an integral component of the poem's meaning-making process.

Section 1. The Myth of Religion Transformed into a Legitimated System of Corruption

The first section of the poem '*Amā'imukum*' consists of seven stanzas that articulate three forms of critique. The first form appears in the first and third stanzas, which present symbolic oppositions within each stanza. The second form appears in the second and fourth stanzas, where the poet employs analogies comparing '*Ulamā'*' to dogs. The third form is found in the fifth, sixth, and seventh stanzas, which depict contrasts between symbolic representation and moral reality.

In the first and third stanzas, Abdul Rahman Yusuf conveys critique through an ironic symbolic relationship between symbols of piety and animalistic imagery. This can be observed in the following stanza excerpts.

(Yusuf, 2023) عَمَائِمُكُمْ لَهَا ظُفُرٌ وَنَابُ

/ '*amā'imukum lahā zufrun wa-nābu* /
'Your turbans have claws and fangs'

The tension in this verse is constructed through a symbolic opposition between a religious sign, namely '*amā'imukum*' (your turbans), and animalistic symbols represented by *zufr* (claws) and *nāb* (fangs). The turban conventionally signifies honor, scholarly authority, and moral responsibility. In contrast, claws and fangs, as bodily organs of predatory animals used to grasp and wound, connote violence, threat, and domination. This opposition places the two symbolic domains in direct semantic conflict.

Through this symbolic contrast, the poem depicts that religious authority no longer work as a moral protector of society, but rather as a potential source of harm and oppression. The critique articulated by the poet is directed not merely at individual wearers of the turban, but more broadly at religious institutions and authorities perceived to have lost their ethical orientation. Consequently, the turban, mythologized as a sign of piety and moral elevation, is transformed into a symbol of fearsome and repressive power.

Furthermore, in the second and fourth stanzas, the critique is articulated through a simile that equates '*Ulamā'*' with dogs. This can be observed in the following excerpt.

(Yusuf, 2023) نَصِيبِي فِي الْهَيْجَاءِ هَيْجَاءُ كَلْبٍ

/ *naṣībī fī al-hijā'ī hijā'u kalbin* /
'My share in satire is the satire of a dog'

The symbolic analogy between the '*Ulamā'*' as the subject of critique and the dog is articulated through the expression *hijā'u kalbin* (the satire of a dog). By designating the object of satire as a "dog," the poet is not referring to the animal in a literal sense, but rather equating certain individuals with these bestial attributes. This analogy underscores that the group being criticized has willingly surrendered its integrity and moral principles in the service of power, thereby forfeiting its dignity

as an ethical subject.

Thus, the expression *hijā'u kalbin* does not merely function as a personal satire, but constitutes a sharp critique of the degradation of the 'Ulamā's role in Egypt. The poet highlights the transformation of 'Ulamā' from guardians of society's ethical values into symbolic agents of power, who consciously relinquish their integrity in exchange for proximity to political authority. This critique reinforces the poem's overarching message concerning the collapse of moral authority when religion is reduced to an instrument for legitimizing power.

Meanwhile, the criticism articulated in the fifth, sixth, and seventh stanzas is conveyed through representations that stand in stark contrast to moral reality. This can be observed in the following poetic excerpt.

(Yusuf, 2023) حَنِيتٌ بَاتَ يَمْدَحُهُ حَبِيتٌ

/khanīsun bāta yamdaḥuhu khabīsun/

'A degenerate one is praised by another degenerate.'

The depiction of social figures is articulated through a symbolic equivalence between two subjects who are both morally degraded, namely *khanīs* and *khabīs*. *Khanīs* does not merely denote effeminacy in male behavior, but has evolved as a symbol of the loss of courage, resolve, and *murū'ah* (moral honor). In this classical context, the term signifies a degradation of *murū'ah* rather than a modern category of identity. Meanwhile, *khabīs* represents active moral corruption and an authority capable of conferring legitimacy. By juxtaposing these two figures, the poet does not simply condemn individuals, but exposes a distorted social relationship in which cowardice is validated by corruption, thereby normalizing moral decay as an acceptable social order.

From the three excerpts above, it can be observed that at the denotative level, the first section presents religious symbols and social relations that appear familiar within everyday religious life. At the connotative level, however, these symbols are transformed into representations of moral corruption that has been naturalized, whereby religion ceases to function as an ethical guide and instead legitimizes domination.

Taken together, the first section constructs a myth in which religion is transformed into a sanctioned system of corruption through an interconnected chain of symbols. The tension between symbols of piety and violence signifies a shift in religious authority, from a source of moral guidance to an instrument of domination, while the metaphorical comparison of 'Ulamā' to animalistic figures underscores the loss of dignity and ethical integrity resulting from submission to political power.

Section 2. The Myth of Religion and Law Naturalized as a Machinery of State Violence

In the second section, Abdul Rahman Yusuf composes seven stanzas that focus on exposing the hypocrisy of 'Ulamā' and the various forms of injustice they inflict upon society. In this section, the critique is no longer conveyed implicitly but articulated explicitly, thereby reinforcing the poet's critical stance toward the religious authorities he challenges. The hypocrisy of the 'Ulamā' is clearly depicted in the opening stanza, in which a sharp contrast emerges between the religious image they project and the social practices they actually perform. This representation can be observed in the following stanza.

وَيَتْلُونَ الْكِتَابَ عَلَى بُكَاءٍ. وَكَمْ تَالٍ وَيْلَعُنُهُ الْكِتَابُ (Yusuf, 2023)

/wa-yatlūna al-kitāba ‘alā bukā’in, wa-kam tālin wa-yal‘anuhu al-kitābu/

‘They recite the Scripture amid tears—yet how many a reciter is, in fact, cursed by the very Scripture he recites.’

At the denotative level, the verse presents the ‘*Ulamā*’ reciting the Holy Scripture in tears, a conventional image of piety within Islamic tradition, commonly linked to devotion and humility. Connotatively, however, these tears are emptied of inner sincerity and reconstituted as signs of performative piety, where ritual and affect are strategically displayed to serve worldly interests.

Within Islamic culture, the Qur’an is understood not merely as a text to be recited, but as a comprehensive guide for life and a moral standard by which human conduct is judged. Through this contradiction, the criticism articulated in the verse seeks to expose a religious illusion, namely, a form of symbolic piety that conceals moral corruption. In this way, the sacred text remains authoritative and untarnished, while its readers are, paradoxically, judged and condemned by the very scripture they recite.

This reality is empirically grounded in the socio-political context of contemporary Egypt. In official religious practices, the emotional recitation of the Qur’an frequently appears in state ceremonies, television broadcasts, and institutional pulpits. Qur’an reciters and ‘*Ulamā*’ perform intense displays of religiosity in the public sphere, while at the same time the institutions to which they belong are involved in legitimizing repressive policies, silencing criticism, and neglecting social justice.

In addition to the hypocritical behavior described above, this section also presents a critique of the ‘*Ulamā*’s unjust attitudes that have direct implications for the oppression of the people or the *ummah*. This portrayal is developed in the second through seventh stanzas, where religious authority is depicted as actively legitimizing practices that harm the populace. Moreover, religious discourse is instrumentalized to maintain asymmetrical power relations, turning religion into a tool of oppression that normalizes the suffering of the *Ummah*. One stanza that illustrates this critique reads as follows:

فَتَاوَاهُمْ تُقَتِّلُ فِي بِلَادِي كَجَنْزِيرٍ يَدُوسُ وَلَا يَهَابُ (Yusuf, 2023)

/fatāwāhum tuqattilu fī bilādī, ka-janzīrin yadūsu wa-lā yahābu/

‘Their fatwas kill in my homeland, like a bulldozer that tramples without fear’

The stanza above presents a direct accusation against the role of religious authority in social violence. The term *fatāwā* refers to religious rulings, in which the *mufti* plays a central role in shaping and interpreting legal-religious issues through juridical question-and-answer practices. Meanwhile, the use of the intensive verbal form *tuqattilu*, derived from the *fa‘ala* pattern, signifies actions that are repetitive, systematic, and deliberate, thereby reinforcing the representation of violence as an ongoing practice. In addition, the imagery of *janzīr* (iron chain) and *yadūsu* (to trample) intensifies the depiction of power as cold, mechanical, and annihilating toward those it crushes.

Accordingly, the stanza asserts that their fatwas repeatedly cause death in the poet’s homeland and operate like an iron chain that crushes without fear. Fatwas, which are traditionally understood as mechanisms for preserving life and justice, no longer function as moral guidance for the

community; instead, they transform into instruments of power that legitimize killing without remorse and expose a dark myth of religion appropriated by political interests. Through the fusion of these two images, the poet delivers a sharp critique of the normalization of violence cloaked in sacred language, in which religious law becomes a chain of oppression that crushes society without any fear of moral accountability.

Thus, at the level of denotation, the second section of the poem presents Qur'anic recitations and fatwas as formal religious practices. However, at the level of connotation, these practices are transformed into symbols of false piety and mechanisms for legitimizing power, in which religion and law are naturalized as sanctioned instruments of violence. Through the image of scripture that condemns its own readers and the depiction of fatwas as iron chains that crush without fear, religion is no longer represented as a source of justice or the protection of life, but rather as an instrument of power operating mechanically and without ethical accountability. Consequently, the poem articulates a myth of religion and law that have lost their ethical function and have been normalized as engines of violence within an unequal social order.

Section 3. Religion and Law Appropriated by Power and Naturalized as a Legitimate Order of Truth

This third section consists of nine stanzas that thematically develop a critique of religious authority through two main focal points. The first stanza functions as an introduction by highlighting the contradiction between the religious image projected by the '*Ulamā*' and the reality of their actual conduct. Meanwhile, the second through ninth stanzas extend this critique by exposing various forms of reprehensible behavior exhibited by the '*Ulamā*' as consequences of this initial contradiction. The contradiction between image and reality is illustrated in the following stanza.

لَهُمْ شَرَفٌ تَعَقَّنَ فِي الْمَخَازِي. فَتَأَنَّفُ مِنْ نَجَاسَتِهِ الْقَحَاب (Yusuf, 2023)

/lahum syarafun ta'affana fī al-makhāzī, fa-ta'nafu min najāsatihi al-qihābu/

'They possess an honor that has rotted amid disgrace, so foul that even prostitutes recoil from its filth'

This stanza conveys a sharp moral critique through a reversal of meaning between the concepts of honor and impurity. At the denotative level, the stanza states that the object of criticism still possesses *syaraf* (honor), yet this honor has *ta'affana* (putrefied) within *al-makhāzī*, namely disgrace and shame. The corruption is depicted as so extreme that even *al-qihāb* (prostitutes) recoil from its impurity. The term *syaraf* conventionally denotes social dignity and moral nobility, whereas *ta'affana* is commonly used to describe the decay of a corpse, thus signaling the internal death of ethical value.

At the connotative level, the stanza does not reject claims to honor in a formal sense; rather, it mocks a symbolic honor that continues to be publicly displayed by elites despite having lost its ethical foundation. This honor remains visually and rhetorically present, yet it is morally hollow due to hypocrisy, corruption, and the legitimation of violence. The reference to *al-qihāb* functions as a radical ethical mirror: a socially stigmatized group is paradoxically portrayed as still possessing a sense of moral limit and shame, while religious elites are depicted as having exceeded even the boundaries of acceptable moral impurity.

Through this inversion, the stanza dismantles the myth of moral hierarchy, revealing how honor is aligned with status and power rather than with justice and integrity. The poet thus asserts that symbols of honor and piety do not guarantee genuine moral nobility; when shame disappears from the elite, their moral position collapses to a level lower than that of those whom society traditionally marginalize.

Within the Egyptian socio-political context, this imagery refers to a condition in which religious and political elites continue to claim dignity, piety, and moral legitimacy, despite their demonstrable involvement in practices of repression, injustice, and disregard for public suffering. Titles of religious authority, sacred symbols, and the language of sanctity are continuously reproduced to preserve an image of honor, while concrete actions fundamentally contradict the values of justice, trustworthiness, and compassion that constitute the ethical core of religion. It is this contradiction that renders such “honor” a form of moral carrion, socially recognized yet ethically decayed.

In addition to the loss of honor, the third section further elaborates on the various reprehensible behaviors of the ‘*Ulamā*’, which can be observed in lines two through nine. One example of such a line reads as follows.

(Yusuf, 2023) أَكِفَّاءُ أَمَامَ الْحَقِّ دَوْمًا. وَأَكِفَّاءُ إِذَا أَمَرَ الذِّئَابُ

/akiffā’un amāma al-ḥaqqi dauman. wa-akfā’un izā amara az-zi’ābu/

‘They remain inert before the truth at all times, and remain inert when commanded by the wolves’

The above verse exposes the irony of competence within a corrupt moral order. Denotatively, it states that they are *akiffā’* (capable, competent, and equal) both when confronted with truth (*al-ḥaqq*) and when obeying the commands of the *al-zi’āb* (wolves). The terms *akiffā’* and *akfā’* in Arabic carry inherently positive connotations, referring to capability and effective action, while *al-ḥaqq* represents an absolute moral standard, and *al-zi’āb* literally denotes predatory wild animals.

At the connotative level, however, the verse reveals ethical blindness. These individuals are not competent in defending the truth; rather, they excel at avoiding it, managing it to evade moral responsibility. In the presence of truth, they deftly delay, divert, or obscure it. Conversely, when commanded by “wolves”, symbolizing predatory rulers or oppressive elites, they act swiftly, obediently, and without hesitation. In Arab cultural imagination, wolves are often positioned as symbols of danger and threats to social cohesion, unity, and solidarity due to their cunning and ferocity. Through this juxtaposition, the poet delivers a sharp critique: competence that is devoid of conscience becomes a primary engine of injustice. The most dangerous are not the ignorant, but the clever, skillful, and ever-ready servants of the predatory power.

At the denotative level, the third section of the poem presents honor, competence, and religious authority as formal attributes that continue to be associated with the ‘*Ulamā*’. At the connotative level, however, these attributes are exposed as decayed honor and competence stripped of moral conscience, through which religion and law are appropriated by power and naturalized as a legitimate order for the perpetuation of injustice and violence. These reprehensible behaviors follow a systemic pattern, exploiting religious competence and authority to serve an oppressive regime. Religion is instrumentalized to justify inequality and violence. Consequently, this section

underscores that when religious authority submits to power, moral values are transformed into empty symbols that uphold injustice as something socially accepted and normatively sanctioned.

Section 4. The Myth of an Inverted Social World and the Silencing of Truth

In the final section, the fourth part of the poem *‘Amā’imukum* consists of eleven verses organized around two main focal points. Verses one to three describe the attitudes and behaviors of the *‘Ulamā’*, which are portrayed as deviating from Islamic teachings, particularly in the moral and social practices they display. Verses four to eleven, in contrast, represent the poet’s stance of resistance against these deviations, either through direct critique or through the affirmation of moral positions that contradict the religious authorities being criticized. This structure indicates a transition from exposing transgressions to conveying the poet’s moral resistance. The depiction of the *Ulamā’s* deviation from Islamic teachings can be observed in the following verse.

بَرِيءٌ مِّنْهُجِ الْإِسْلَامِ مِنْهُمْ. عَلَى الْفَحْشَاءِ قَدْ شَبُّوا وَشَابُوا (Yusuf, 2023)

/barī’un manhaju al-islāmi minhum. ‘alā al-fahsyā’i qad syabbū wa-syābū/

‘The path of Islam is innocent of them. They have grown up and aged in immorality’

The verse asserts a clear separation between the path of Islam and the subjects under critique, while also explaining the root of their corruption. Denotatively, the first line states that the *manhaj al-islāmi* (the path of Islamic values, principles, and ethics) remains pure and bears no responsibility for them, whereas the second line indicates that they have grown up and aged amid depravity and moral transgression. The word *barī’* functions as a declaration of exoneration, while the sequence *syabbū wa syābū* marks the entirety of their life journey from youth to old age.

Connotatively, the poet not only defends Islam from negative perceptions caused by deviant religious practices but also attributes full blame to humans who use religion as a facade. The depravity is depicted as a foundational way of life that is perpetuated and normalized. Through this verse, the poet conveys that Islam remains pure, while the violence and corruption committed in its name result from the collective moral failure of those claiming to speak on behalf of the religion. Therefore, the verse emphasizes that oppression does not originate from Islamic teachings but from the ethical shortcomings of individuals who misuse it.

After highlighting the reprehensible behaviors far removed from Islamic teachings, Abdul Rahman Yusuf conveys resistance to these attitudes in lines four through eleven. One of these lines reads as follows.

لَكُمْ يَوْمٌ قَرِيبٌ سَوْفَ يَأْتِي. تَطِيرُ بِهِ الْعَمَائِمُ وَالرِّقَابُ ! (Yusuf, 2023)

/lakum yaumun qaribun saufa ya’tī. taṭīru bihi al-‘amā’imu wa-ar-riqābu!/

‘A near day awaits you; it shall come, when the turbans and necks shall be swept away!’

The first line of the verse declares that a day is imminent, as indicated by the phrase *yaum qarīb* (a near day) and reinforced by *saufa ya’tī* (it shall come), which conveys certainty. The second line depicts turbans being cast aside and necks threatened. The term *al-‘amā’im* (turbans) symbolizes religious authority, while *ar-riqāb* (necks) refers to the center of life and the most vulnerable part of the human body. Taken literally, the verse announces the arrival of a significant event accompanied by the loss of symbols of honor and the threat of physical punishment.

At the connotative level, the phrase *yaum qarīb* (a near day) transforms into a day of retribution, signifying the collapse of power and the accountability of those responsible for their deeds. The flying turbans symbolize the loss of religious legitimacy and the downfall of the symbolic authority of the religious leaders who previously hid behind an image of piety. The threatened necks represent the loss of personal safety. On that day, the turbans will not protect the necks; power built upon the guise of piety will lose its safeguard.

Situated within contemporary Egyptian realities, the image of “flying turbans” represents the potential collapse of religious authority that has long underpinned repressive power. Egyptian history suggests that figures and institutions that appear unassailable, whether political or religious, can suddenly lose legitimacy. In such moments, the symbols of piety that once shielded the elites become meaningless. The turbans no longer serve as a moral shield, but rather fall away alongside the collapse of public trust.

The threat to *ar-riqāb* does not merely signify physical death, but rather the loss of existential security: reputation, authority, and moral claims that have sustained their positions. When the day of reckoning arrives, whether understood in divine or historical terms, the turbans are powerless to protect the necks. Power built upon the image of piety, yet devoid of justice and integrity, will lose its symbolic protection.

Thus, at the denotative level, the fourth section of the poem depicts moral depravity alongside a warning of an impending day of reckoning. At the connotative and mythic levels, however, this section constructs an image of an inverted social order, in which the sacred detaches itself from those who exploit it, while truth is deferred and suppressed until it ultimately emerges as the collapse of the symbolic legitimacy underpinning religious authority. Religion withdraws from those who perpetrate deviations, whereas claims of sanctity reveal the moral corruption that delays justice until the moment of accountability in the future.

3.2 Discussion

Overall, the analysis of the four sections of the poem *‘Amā’imukum* suggests that Abdul Rahman Yusuf’s critique operates not merely on the level of emotional rhetoric, but through a systematic and layered semiotic mechanism. At the denotative level, the poem presents religious practices, figures of *‘Ulamā’*, and social relations that appear normal and customary within religious life. However, at the connotative and mythic levels, these signs transform into a system of meaning that reveals the ideological process: how religious symbols are seized, naturalized, and deployed as instruments for legitimizing power and violence. Thus, the findings affirm that Yusuf’s critique is not aimed at religion as a normative teaching, but at the ideological mechanisms that deplete religious ethics of their value and replace them with political functions.

This semiotic reading is grounded in established interpretations of the poem’s symbolic vocabulary. The turban conventionally signifies honor, scholarly authority, and moral responsibility within Arab cultural tradition (Stillman, 2003), while the dog is widely understood as a symbol of blind obedience, servility, and lost honor when attributed to humans (Meisami & Starkey, 1998). Similarly, *khanīs* signals a degradation of *murū’āh* rather than a modern identity category (Ibn Manzūr, 1997), *fatāwā* denote religious rulings issued through juridical interpretation by a *mufti*

(Hallaq, 2009, p. 9), wolves function as culturally recognized symbols of danger, cunning, and threat to communal cohesion (Almasharfeh, 2025), and *ar-riqāb* (necks) conventionally represent the most vulnerable center of life (Vera-Jiménez et al., 2020). These lexical-cultural meanings, together with the Quran's established status as a comprehensive ethical and moral guide (Efendi & Iskandar, 2024; Jaiyeoba et al., 2024), constitute the interpretive foundation on which the connotative and mythic readings above are built.

These findings expand the understanding of Barthes' concept of myth within the context of contemporary Arabic literature. Barthes argues that modern myths are constructed through signs whose meanings have been culturally naturalized, operating through connotation to transform cultural ideologies into common sense (Faiz et al., 2025). The poem '*Amā'imukum*' suggests that the same mythological mechanism also functions in Arab political poetry, particularly through religious symbols historically perceived as sacred. In this poem, the turban, *fatwās*, Qur'anic recitation, and scholarly titles no longer operate as markers of ethical conduct and moral protection; rather, they function as signs naturalized to justify domination, violence, and the silencing of dissent. In other words, the poem illustrates that myths operate not only through visual banality, but also through symbolic sacrality, which renders them even more resistant to critique.

Furthermore, the findings of this study reveal that Yusuf's critique is systemic rather than personal. The poet does not merely condemn individual '*Ulamā'*' but exposes the structural relationship between religious authority and political power. Through symbolic oppositions, between piety and bestiality, honor and defilement, truth and obedience to the 'wolves', the poem suggests how religious and intellectual competence work optimally when directed to serve power, yet becomes paralyzed when confronted with demands for truth and justice. This pattern indicates that the primary problem is not ignorance or lack of knowledge, but intelligence severed from ethical conscience.

In the contemporary socio-political context of Egypt, these findings resonate with the reality that religious institutions and figures often lose moral independence due to state co-optation (Mohiuddin, 2022). '*Amā'imukum*' captures moments in which religion ceases to function as a corrective force against power and instead becomes part of a legitimizing apparatus that normalizes violence and injustice. At this point, religious myths operate effectively: moral corruption is no longer perceived as a deviation but as an accepted component of the legitimate social order. Criticism of this condition is easily delegitimized through accusations of opposing religion, allowing the myth to sustain itself through mechanisms of symbolic silencing.

This dynamic is well documented in the post-2013 Egyptian context. Following the removal of President Morsi, segments of the religious establishment openly endorsed the legitimacy of the new state power and justified the military takeover and repressive measures against demonstrators (Al-Anani, 2021; Fadel, 2020; Malsin, 2014; Salameh et al., 2020), while sermons, fatwas, and preaching spaces became subject to systematic state regulation, transforming the '*Ulamā'*' from moral correctives into instruments of social discipline (Al-Anani, 2021; Bano & Benadi, 2017; Malsin, 2014). Religious figures who retained public visibility despite compromised moral independence continued to receive institutional legitimacy and were reframed as defenders of state-sponsored narratives

rather than critical voices (Al-Anani, 2021; Bano & Benadi, 2017; Salameh et al., 2020), functioning as ideological gatekeepers who reframe dissent as a threat to both religion and the state. In several documented cases, *'Ulamā'* issued fatwas permitting violence against protesters by labeling them *khawārij* (Bano & Benadi, 2017), while religious rhetoric affirming state violence in the name of “maintaining stability” further illustrates how religious institutions have been mobilized to consolidate political legitimacy in this period.

This same pattern of institutional co-optation extends to the poem's imagery of decayed honor and moral inversion. Within the Egyptian socio-political context, religious and political elites have continued to claim dignity and legitimacy despite documented involvement in repression and injustice, reproducing the language and symbols of sanctity even as their conduct contradicts the ethical core of religion. Certain *'Ulamā'* and official religious figures, possessing intellectual authority and institutional access, have proven capable of formulating sophisticated religious arguments and issuing precise fatwas when called upon to legitimize repressive policy, yet this same competence is rarely exercised in defense of victims of oppression. Criticism of religious authority in this context is frequently suppressed under accusations of undermining religion itself, while the intergenerational recruitment and socialization of *'Ulamā'* within state-aligned institutions reflects a structural normalization in which moral compromise is inherited rather than incidental. Egyptian history nonetheless suggests that figures and institutions perceived as unassailable can suddenly lose legitimacy, lending the poem's closing image of “flying turbans” a resonance beyond poetic metaphor: religious authority sustained primarily by the performance of piety, rather than by justice and integrity, remains vulnerable to collapse.

Previous studies on contemporary Arabic poetry have largely approached such texts as expressions of socio-political protest (Al-Anshor & Syahid, 2023) or as spaces of symbolic response to authoritarianism and religious instrumentalization through satire and metaphor (Shiddiq & Rofiuddin, 2024), while studies specifically on Abdul Rahman Yusuf's poetry have focused on establishing textual and poetic unity through Riffaterre's model (Yusuf, 2025). This study's primary contribution lies in extending beyond these approaches by reconceptualizing contemporary Arab political poetry as a site of ideological analysis that exposes the operation of religious myths within the relationship between religion and power. By employing Barthes' semiotic framework, this study suggests that the social critique in *'Amā'imukum* operates at the underlying structures of meaning that render the injustice appear sacred and legitimate. The implications of these findings are significant for Arab literary studies, religious studies, and political discourse analysis, as they show how literature can serve as a site for the deconstruction of ideology when formal moral institutions are co-opted by power.

Rather than functioning solely as political satire, *'Amā'imukum* articulates a sustained ideological critique of religion's transformation into a system that legitimizes moral corruption. In this poem, truth does not appear as a normative solution, but as a threat to the collapse of symbolic legitimacy when moral contradictions reach a point of saturation. At that moment, as Yusuf implies, the turban no longer protects the neck, and symbolic sanctity loses its shielding power in the face of ethical accountability.

4. CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the critique in Abdul Rahman Yusuf's poem '*Amā'imukum*' is constructed through a multilayered system of signs, rather than merely through rhetorical denunciation. At the denotative level, the poem presents religious symbols, acts of worship, and the authority of '*Ulamā*' as socially normal and legitimate realities. However, at the connotative and mythic levels, these symbols function as ideological devices that obscure power relations, normalize violence, and legitimize inequality. Thus, the poem's critique is not directed at religion or law as normative teachings, but at the manner in which both are appropriated and interpreted within structures of power.

The overarching myth deconstructed in this poem is the myth of the sanctity of religion and law as guardians of truth and justice. Through a series of interrelated symbols, religion and law are represented as a system of meaning naturalized by power, whereby corruption, violence, and oppression appear legitimate, normalized, and even morally sanctioned. By exposing this myth, '*Amā'imukum*' underscores the role of literature as a medium of ideological critique that not only represents reality but also challenges the symbolic foundations that sustain it.

This study nonetheless has several methodological and analytical limitations. The analysis focuses solely on a single poem, '*Amā'imukum*', and on symbols deemed most representative in constructing mythological critique, so the findings are not intended to be generalized to all works by Abdul Rahman Yusuf or to contemporary Arabic poetry as a whole. Furthermore, the application of Barthes' semiotic framework positions the analysis at the level of meaning and ideology, without delving deeply into reader reception or the sociological context of the production and circulation of the text.

Nevertheless, these limitations underscore the contribution of the study, namely providing a focused critical reading of how poetry functions as a medium for deconstructing ideological myths and opening avenues for further research. Future studies could expand the corpus to include other resistance-themed poems by Abdul Rahman Yusuf. Methodologically, subsequent research could employ Critical Discourse Analysis, particularly Fairclough's three-dimensional model of text, discursive practice, and social practice, to trace more explicitly how linguistic choices in Yusuf's poetry encode and reproduce power relations between religious authority, the state, and society. Combining Barthes' semiotic approach with CDA would allow future studies to move beyond the level of symbolic meaning examined here toward a more contextualized analysis of how such texts circulate, are received, and function within broader socio-political struggles in the contemporary Arab world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Gadjah Mada, for its institutional support, and to Malik Aljabar Muhammad and Amalia Faradilla for their assistance in English language correction and manuscript layout review.

DECLARATION OF AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

The authors used the language model Claude Sonnet 5 (by Anthropic) in preparing this manuscript. Claude was employed to evaluate and strengthen the manuscript's structure and argumentation, to enrich its language, to refine conceptual terminology, and to verify factual and bibliographic accuracy. All output produced by this tool has been reviewed, edited, and validated by the authors, who bear full responsibility for the entire content of the manuscript.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The authors declare that no funding was received for this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
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Zulfa Purnamawati	✓			✓				✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
C : Conceptualization	I : Investigation						Vi : Visualization							
M : Methodology	R : Resources						Su : Supervision							
So : Software	D : Data Curation						P : Project administration							
Va : Validation	O : Writing - Original Draft						Fu : Funding acquisition							
Fo : Formal analysis	E : Writing - Review & Editing													

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors state no conflict of interest.

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