THE REPRESENTATION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE FILM *CAIRO 678*: A ROLAND BARTHES SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of sexual violence against women in the Egyptian social drama Cairo 678 (2010), employing Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The film was chosen for its bold exploration of the critical issue of sexual violence in Cairo's public spaces and women's resistance against it. Using Barthes' framework of denotation, connotation, and myth, this research aims to reveal how the film's visual and narrative signs depict sexual violence while dismantling patriarchal myths that normalize such acts. The study adopts a descriptive qualitative method, with data consisting of scenes, dialogues, and audiovisual elements from Cairo 678. Data collection techniques include documentation-based observation and literature review. Barthes' semiotic analysis is applied through stages of sign identification, denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural and emotional meaning), and myth (naturalized ideology). The findings demonstrate that Cairo 678 explicitly portrays various forms of sexual violence against women, ranging from non-verbal harassment and physical assault to severe collective sexual violence. This representation operates not only at the denotative level but also constructs powerful connotations of victim helplessness, anger, and trauma, while critiquing the failures of social and legal systems.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Women, Film, Semiotics.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence against women is a global issue that has long been in the spotlight. This issue not only has a profound impact on the victim personally, but also has a major impact on the overall social and cultural structure. In many parts of the world, including the Middle East, women are often subjected to sexual violence in public spaces. Unfortunately, these acts are often normalized or ignored, both by society and by the legal system that is supposed to protect them. According to Hakim in (Aqillah et al., 2025) The view of women in any part of the world always puts them under the dominance of men. Women often experience gender injustice because they are considered weak beings compared to superior men. Often women are treated in the form of violence because of their inferior position.

In many cases, women are positioned as weak, exploited and sexual objects. According to Noviani (2018), cases of violence against women are high and can occur anytime and anywhere. Sexual violence itself includes various forms of unwanted sexual activity, both with and without direct physical violence. In forms involving assault, victims can suffer

serious physical injuries, while other forms can leave deep psychological trauma (Salamor & Salamor, 2022). Therefore, it is important for society and legal institutions to not only be aware of, but also actively prevent and deal with acts of sexual violence so that women can feel safe and valued in every sphere of life.

According to Harkristuti Harkrisnowo, violence against women can be categorized into three main forms: physical, psychological/mental, and sexual violence. Sexual violence itself is defined as all forms of sexualized attacks against women, whether or not they involve intimate relationships, regardless of the relationship between the perpetrator and victim. The distinction between physical and sexual violence is important because sexual violence is not limited to physical contact. There are various forms of non-physical sexual harassment that often occur, such as unwanted sexual attention. Some examples of behaviors that constitute sexual harassment include: The telling of sexually explicit and offensive jokes, indecent comments that embarrass or hurt feelings, inappropriate questions about personal life or sexual activity, sexual demands as a condition of employment or promotion, touching or touching certain body parts without consent.

Law Number 12 of 2022 on the Crime of Sexual Violence in Article 4 paragraph (1) in detail classifies various forms of sexual violence, including:

1. Non-physical sexual harassment
2. Physical sexual harassment
3. Coerced use of contraception
4. Forced sterilization
5. Forced marriage
6. Sexual torture
7. Sexual exploitation
8. Sexual slavery
9. Digital technology-based sexual violence

Catcalling, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as a whistle, call, or comment of a sexual nature, falls under the category of non-physical or verbal sexual harassment. According to (Tauratiya, 2020), the acts covered in article 4 include a variety of behaviors such as, sexual whistling or staring, sexual utterances, demonstration of pornographic material or expression of sexual desire, touching or poking at certain body parts, gestures or signals of a sexual nature. These behaviors can have a variety of negative impacts on victims, ranging from discomfort and offense, feelings of degraded dignity, to more serious physical and mental health problems.

Film as a medium of art and mass communication has great power in reflecting, criticizing, and shaping social perceptions of an issue. Films are able to portray complex realities, open up space for discussion, and evoke empathy from the audience. Film is a form of literary work that uses audio-visual media to convey a story and message. As Effendy (1986: 134) states that as a medium of communication, film combines elements of imagination and reality in delivering its message. This medium functions as a means of creative expression for the maker as well as an entertainment medium that contains educational value for the audience. So that movies become a medium in delivering messages to the public about social issues, stories about life and various events in the form of videos with a long duration (Rahayu et al. 2024).

Movies have proven to be a very effective means of communication due to their unique ability to convey messages. Through a series of artistic images, movies not only provide entertainment but are also able to convey educational values in an emotional and evocative way. Its ability to touch feelings, stimulate critical thinking, and provide motivation makes movies a transformative medium. More than that, movies present a new experience for the audience through visual symbols that are full of meaning (Imanto, 2007). As a narrative medium, film is built through a complex system of signs to convey various messages. Every element in a film - from literary, linguistic, dramatic aspects to cinematic techniques - contains layers of meaning that can be explicit or implicit, realized through various symbols arranged artistically (Toni & Fachrizal, 2017)

In this context, the film Cairo 678 (2010), an Egyptian social drama directed by Mohamed Diab, emerges as a work that dares to explicitly raise the issue of sexual violence that is rampant in Cairo's public spaces.

Sexual violence against women in Egypt's public spaces reached its peak in the period 2010-2014, an era that ended with the passing of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Law (Law No. 14/2014). UN Women data (2013) shows 99.3% of Egyptian women experienced sexual harassment, while an Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR, 2008) survey revealed 83% of local women and 98% of foreign women were victims, with only 12% reporting due to stigmatization. Ironically, 62% of Egyptian men admitted to harassment, reflecting the normalization of gender-based violence in a patriarchal culture. According to (Ebaid, n.d.) in Problems with the laws of sexual harassment in Egypt, the laws related to sexual harassment in Egypt are weak and not explicitly regulated, despite attempts to pass anti-sexual harassment laws in 2005, 2008, 2010 and 2012, all of which failed. Existing procedural rules impede victims' access to justice with onerous requirements, such as requiring victims to detain the perpetrator until the police arrive or take them directly to the police station. In addition, law enforcement is weak at both the executive and judicial levels, especially at the executive level as very few cases actually make it to court.

Cairo 678 (2010) comes as a cinematic response to this crisis. Released four years before the 2014 Law, the film brutally depicts three cases of harassment-non-verbal, physical, and collective-on Cairo's public transportation, a space that according to The Guardian (2012) became "a daily locus of sexual terror".

The movie tells the story of three women from different backgrounds who experience sexual harassment and then form a team to fight back until women's victory is achieved through various efforts and trials. The three women try to get their rights in different ways even through the unthinkable. Three female characters-Nelly, Fatma, and Seba-struggle against the sexual harassment and injustice they face in their daily lives. Through a strong and realistic narrative, the movie not only depicts individual experiences, but also reflects the broader social conditions in Egyptian society, against the backdrop of a patriarchal culture.

The film depicts the epidemic of sexual harassment that in the early 2000s was even seen as the "norm" in Egyptian society. Conditions were exacerbated by the absence of a specific law criminalizing sexual harassment at the time, where violence against women was more often considered a "family disgrace" rather than a crime that needed to be prosecuted. This bitter reality is brutally visualized in the film, such as the scene where the police reject the victim's report with the symbolic phrase, "It's none of our business - take care of it yourself".

Seeing the urgency of the issue and the power of the film medium, this study aims to analyze how the film Cairo 678 represents sexual violence against women. This study uses

Roland Barthes' semiotic approach that allows in-depth analysis of the signs (visual and narrative) in the film, starting from the level of denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural and emotional meaning), to finally dismantle the patriarchal myths that perpetuate the violence. The choice of Barthes' theory is considered relevant because of its ability to reveal the hidden meaning and ideology behind the signs displayed. Through this analytical approach, this research is expected to illustrate the complexity of the representation of sexual violence in a particular cultural context and the film's contribution to the deconstruction of myths that harm women.

From event after event that occurs in this film in the context of sexual violence against women, the author is interested in researching using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory.

Etymologically, the term semiotics is rooted in the Greek vocabulary semeion (sign) and seme (interpretation of signs) (Sobur, 2013). In its terminological development, semiotics has evolved into a scientific discipline that studies various phenomena - ranging from physical objects, social events, to cultural practices - as complex sign systems. One of the semiotics figures is Roland Barthes. Roland Barthes in his theoretical framework maps semiotics into two strata of meaning: denotation as the primary level and connotation as the secondary level (Rusmana, 2014: 200). At the denotative level, signs operate through a stable signifier-signified relationship, producing a culturally agreed literal meaning. Barthes asserts that denotation forms a first-level signification system that is denotative-objective. Meanwhile, connotation emerges as a second-level signification system that is subjective-cultural, where denotative meaning is expanded through ideological associations and collective experience. In this context, Barthes (via Rusmana, 2014) pointed out that literary works paradigmatically represent this secondary meaning system, where language as a basic denotative system is processed into a more complex meaning structure.

The denotation stage limits the analysis of the sign to its literal meaning, which is the basic understanding that is objective and linguistic. However, when moving on to the connotation stage, the analysis expands to consider the interaction between the sign, emotions, and the cultural values behind it. Unlike denotation, which is explicit, connotation works implicitly and subjectively, often unconsciously, forming deeper and more complex layers of meaning. Connotation works on a subjective level so that its presence is not realized (Septiana, n.d.). In Barthes' semiotic theory, there is also myth as a second-level meaning system. In Barthes' semiotic framework, myth operates as a second-level system of meaning that requires the existence of a first-level system as its foundation. In other words, myth is a dual construction that integrates the basic linguistic system with a more complex semiotic system. The process of mythization occurs when the entire first-level sign system is adopted as a signifier or form in the second-level system (Fatimah: 2020). Through Barthes' redefinition, myth is essentially a secondary semiotic system that is fundamentally built through the mechanism of connotation.

Based on previous research entitled Representation of Sexual Violence in the Film Like & Share (Roland Barthes Semiotics) written by Ni Putu and Saiffudin in 2023. The research used Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Researchers identified how verbal and non-verbal cues depict sexual violence in the movie Like & Share. This study discusses 5 discussion points as a result of the review, namely women as objects of sexual attraction, the existence of power and dominance of patriarchal culture, the powerlessness of a woman in dealing with sexual violence, violation of privacy and finally victim blaming. Then the thesis by

Fitriani in 2017 entitled Representation of Sexual Violence against Deaf Children in the Film Silenced. This research is based on Roland Barthes' research. The main focus of the research is to reveal the meaning of denotation and connotation as well as the myths built through visual and narrative signs in the film. The movie Silenced was chosen because it depicts a case of sexual violence in a school for the deaf, which reflects a real social issue in South Korea. The method used is Barthes' semiotic analysis by examining three levels of signification: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural meaning), and myth (naturalized ideology). The approach used by the author has similarities with the approach written by Fitria. The difference with the author is in the different movie titles that are the object of research. The research written by fitria helped the author in how to analyze the representation of sexual violence against women visualized through a semiotic approach.

Therefore, the author is interested in analyzing the signs in the film Cairo 678 with Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to reveal the layers of denotation, connotation, and mythical meanings contained in the visual elements and dialogue of the film.

METHOD

In general, approaches are often equated with methods. However, they actually have fundamental differences. Approach refers to the way or strategy used to approach an object or problem, while method more specifically refers to the technical steps in collecting, analyzing, and presenting data (Rohanda, 2016). The approach used in this research is Roland Barthes' theory.

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach. Qualitative research emphasizes deepening a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study, with a focus on exploring meaning, context, and the complexity of interactions between concepts, rather than on numerical measurements (Rohanda, 2016). The descriptive qualitative research format was chosen to provide a comprehensive and in-depth explanation of the phenomenon that is the focus of the study. The purpose of applying descriptive qualitative methods in this research is to present detailed, structured, and in-depth data to provide answers to the research questions posed. The descriptive method itself is a research technique that seeks to describe various facts, characteristics, and interrelationships between the phenomena studied systematically and objectively (Djajasudarma, 2010). This research data is in the form of Cairo 678 film directed by Mohamed Diab which is a social genre/gender criticism using Egyptian dialect Arabic with a duration of 1 hour 40 minutes and aired in 2010. The data source used in this research is Youtube BDflix in the form of the film Cairo 678 by Mohamed Diab which was uploaded on April 30, 2020.

This research utilizes a listening-based documentation technique as the main data collection method. The research procedure began with in-depth observation of the movie Cairo 678 through a complete viewing process and selection of key scenes. The selected scenes were then documented through the screenshot technique to facilitate further analysis. In analyzing the data, Roland Barthes' semiotic approach was applied by exploring the various signs that appear in the film, both audio such as dialogue and sound effects, and visual including images, body language and facial expressions. All these sign elements were then examined for their relationship between signifier and signified to reveal the implied representation of sexual violence. The final stage involves categorizing the findings based on the main themes related to the issue of sexual violence in the film.

As for analyzing data using content analysis, which technique deals with the content of communication verbally in the form of language and nonverbally (Rohanda 2016). The steps of data analysis carried out by the author are the Sign identification stage, then the stage of describing the representation of sexual violence against women in the film Cairo 678 using Barthes' analysis in the form of denotation, connotation and myth analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cairo 678 is an Egyptian social drama film directed by Mohamed Diab, inspired by a true story. Three women from different backgrounds are victims of sexual violence in Cairo's public spaces. The film depicts their struggle against social stigma and a legal system that fails to protect victims. As explained in the methodology section, this research uses Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The analysis process begins by examining the interrelationships between the various scenes in the film, then examining the meaning of the visual and audio signs contained in Cairo 678.

Image & Time	Audio/ Scene	Denotation	Connotation	Myth	Types of Violence
Gambar 1. Adegan 1 Menit 00:02:27	The sound of music echoes	Taxi driver sticks out his tongue	The taxi driver tries to flirt and seduce Fayza	Sticking out your tongue with the intention of flirting is non-verbal sexual harassment	Non physical sexual harassment
Gambar 2. Adegan 2 menit ke 00:04:46)	Bus noise and the hustle and bustle of the highway	A man holds Fayza's ass	A man satisfies lust	Grabbing a woman's buttocks is a disgusting act of physical sexual violence	Physical sexual harassment
Gambar 3. Adegan 3 menit ke 00:31:59) Gambar 4. Adegan 3 menit ke 00:32:00) Gambar 5. Adegan 3 menit ke 00:32:03)	Man: "Where did you go, baby? Show us what you're hiding, the best part of you is right here..."	A man calls out and holds a woman's ass	Man satisfies lust by groping buttocks and catcalling	Actions showing verbal sexual harassment and non-verbal sexual violence	Physical & non-physical sexual harassment
Gambar 6. Adegan 4 menit ke 00:32:03)	The noise of buses and the hustle and	A man lowers the zipper of his pants	A man commits sexual abuse	The actions of a man towards a woman in this situation	Non-Verbal Sexual Abuse

Gambar 7. Adegan 4 menit ke 00:32:03)	bustle of the Cairo highway	and brings himself close behind Fayza's body		constitute non-verbal sexual violence
Gambar 8. Adegan 5 menit ke 00:14:57)	Bus noise and the hustle and bustle of the highway	Dozens of men gathered around Seba	Men satisfy their lust by groping Seba's entire body	Sexual violence collectively coexists with physical violence	Sexual torture & physical sexual abuse
Gambar 9. Adegan 6 menit ke 00:24:23	Roadway noise	A motorist groped Nella's breast	Rider commits violent breast-breaking to fulfill lust	Breast-assault is a form of physical sexual violence	Physical sexual harassment
Gambar 10. Adegan 7 menit ke 00:24:36	-	A man in a car sniffing the air	Man teases and degrades Nella by kissing from a distance	Sexual harassment does not have to involve physical contact	Non-physical sexual harassment

The representation of sexual violence in the film Cairo 678 often shows an imbalance in power relations between the perpetrator and the victim. Perpetrators tend to be in a dominant position, while victims experience powerlessness in voicing their experiences and obtaining justice. This phenomenon cannot be separated from the patriarchal social structure and class differences that are rooted in society. As explained by Kamla in (Arianty & Budiharjo, n.d.), patriarchy as an ideology places women in a subordinate position compared to men, where social control and dominance are in the hands of men.

This condition is in line with the findings of Shiyam, Supriadi, and Rohanda (2022) in their analysis of the film Wadjda, that women's struggle in a patriarchal society requires courage to challenge cultural constructions and systemic gender injustice. In Cairo 678, the three female characters Fayza, Seba, and Nelly face forms of sexual harassment that represent the social system's pressure on women's bodies and voices.

Non-Physical Sexual Harassment: Gestures, Stares, and Catcalling

In Scene 1 (00:02:27), a taxi driver sticks out his tongue while looking at Fayza through the rearview mirror. Although there is no physical contact, this action is objectively sexually charged. The connotation of this gesture is that of degrading seduction, and mythologically suggests that sexual violence can come in symbolic forms. It reflects what Umam, Rohanda, and Khomisah (2023) call a subtle but systemic process of abuse of women's dignity, which is often not perceived as violence due to cultural ignorance or neglect.

Catcalling also appears in Scene 3 (00:32:03), when Fayza experiences verbal abuse on the street. The Oxford Dictionary defines catcalling as a sexually charged comment towards

someone in a public space. Tauratiya (2020) adds that this form is classified as non-physical harassment that disturbs the victim's psychological comfort. In this context, voice **and** language become instruments of power to dominate women's space.

Physical Sexual Harassment: Unauthorized Touching and Sexual Assault

In Scene 2 (00:04:46), harassment in the form of physical touching occurs when Fayza's buttocks are grabbed by a man on the bus. The crowded and noisy situation adds to the complexity, making public space a hotbed of violence against women. This relationship is similar to that described by Saladin and Rohanda (2023) in Dlumū Lā Tajiffu, where women experience oppression perpetrated by a masculine patriarchal and ecological environment.

Something similar happens in Scene 5 (00:14:57), when Seba becomes a victim of mass sexual abuse. Unidentified hands forcibly grope her body, reflecting a form of sexual torture. Seba's facial expression, which switches from anxiety to panic, signifies the trauma that occurs instantly. As stated by Setiawati and Rohanda (2022) in their study of Ihsan Abdul Quddūs' work, women's bodies are often used as symbolic objects of social subjugation legitimized by the dominant culture.

The breast-robbing scene in Scene 6 (00:24:23) becomes the climax of trauma for Nelly. This act of violence is not only physical, but also symbolic as a form of violation of bodily integrity. This shows that sexual violence does not recognize social class boundaries. According to Putri et al. (2024), sexual violence can be committed by anyone, regardless of social background, and tends to occur in both public and private spaces.

Sexual Violence as Power Relations and Social Powerlessness

The scenes in this movie show that sexual violence occurs in the context of unequal power relations between the perpetrator and the victim. In Scene 4, a man deliberately lowers the zipper of his pants and brings his body closer to Fayza. Although not touching, this action signifies symbolic threat and harassing dominance.

This relational inequality was also analyzed in the film Ar Rihlah by Rohmani, Rohanda, and Dayudin (2024) who mentioned that the inner conflicts of female characters often arise due to the pressure of patriarchal culture that confines the freedom and rights of women's bodies. In Cairo 678, acts of harassment are structured in such a way as to reinforce masculine dominance, while victims are often helpless due to social pressure, shame, or fear of stigma.

Transformation of Victims into Subjects of Resistance

The transformation of the victim's role into an opponent is clearly illustrated when Fayza, who was initially silent, finally fights the perpetrator by stabbing her vital organs (Scene 3). This shows a shift in the position of women from passive objects to active subjects who demand justice. This is in line with the view of Shiyam et al. (2022) that the struggle of female characters in patriarchal culture is a long process that requires courage against oppressive norms.

Fayza's actions are not mere revenge, but a symbolic form of restoring women's dignity and agency. It is a resistance to social myths that blame victims, as well as a call to abolish the culture of silence and impunity towards perpetrators.

CONCLUSION

The film Cairo 678 explicitly and clearly represents various forms of sexual violence against women in Egyptian public spaces, ranging from non-verbal, physical harassment to collective sexual violence. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, this research reveals that the representation of sexual violence in the film operates on various complex layers of meaning. It does not stop at the literal denotative level but also builds strong cultural and emotional meanings (connotations) about the helplessness, anger, and trauma of victims. In addition, the film critically dismantles patriarchal myths that normalize violence against women and criticizes the failure of social and legal systems to provide protection. These myths are both structural (institutionalized in law and culture) and cultural (internalized through everyday practices). The film successfully exposes them through visual/narrative signs analyzed with Barthes' semiotics, especially at the level of connotations and myths.

As a mass medium, film has proven to have transformative power in dismantling social taboos, creating spaces for critical dialog, and building collective consciousness. Cairo 678 emphasizes the role of cinema not merely as a mirror of reality, but rather as a catalyst for change - connecting field facts about the epidemic of sexual harassment in Egypt with policy advocacy, culminating in the passing of the Anti-Sexual Harassment Law in 2014. The film records the historical trajectory of how the accumulation of sexual violence cases and civil society pressure eventually forced the Egyptian government to enact legal sanctions against perpetrators of sexual harassment.

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