

Interpreting Trauma and Technology: A Saussurean Analysis of Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud paintings “ Strange Fruit” and “Youth, Beauty and Dreams”

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's paintings resonate deeply with Pakistan's changing cultural context in terms of themes of loss, identity, and contemporary disconnection. Although her visual narratives have gained attention for their emotional impact, there is a gap in the extant academic literature in applying formal semiotic theory to interpret her symbolism. In this research, Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic semiotic model that consists of the signifier and signified is employed as the theoretical framework to critically examine two of Masud's groundbreaking paintings: Strange Fruit (2015) that commemorates the 2014 Army Public School terrorist attack, and Youth, Beauty and Dreams (2022) that denounces digital selfhood. Following a qualitative, descriptive approach, the research includes close visual examination, theoretical mapping, and contextual correlation. Major findings indicate that Masud's visual signs i.e., Islamic geometric motifs, white kafan-like clothes, maternal loss, national trauma, smart phones, digital isolation and gold leaf act as signifiers of consumer aesthetic not as sacred symbol, The research concludes that her art serves as a layered semiotic text that balances cultural tradition with psychological modernity. The semiotic perspective illustrates how visual signs are used to create complex emotional and social meaning in Pakistani contemporary art.

Keywords: *Semiotics, Visual Culture, Pakistani Art, Psychological modernity*

INTRODUCTION

With changing digital culture and sociopolitical unrest in South Asia, contemporary artists such as Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud have developed strong visual narratives that connect with collective memory as well as subjective experience. Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud is one of the leading women artists who have created an impact through her paintings on the next generation of artists in Pakistan. Her paintings are filled with abundant details drawn from nature and surroundings (Zia, 2023). Her work showcases a complex interplay of cultural iconography and subjective expression, representing the multiplex psychological as well as political scenario of Pakistani society.

Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud is among the most influential figures in modern Pakistani art, she has done PhD in Fine Arts from Kingston University, London. She has received various Awards and Art Prizes. She has served as a principal in College of Art & Design, Punjab University Lahore for many years. She has a strong connection with academia as well as her own art practice is so dynamic. Her works features at prime locations in Pakistan and abroad to her credit.

Her paintings have been widely discussed in research and education for the dense fusion of new expression and old symbolism in her work. Subberwal, K. (2019) curated an exhibition that highlights Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's work, she tells that her work deals with different aspects of human reality.

There are layered of meanings in the paintings. It is up to the viewer to accept or deduce any interpretation. The portraits are not just purely human forms. They possess underlying social, cultural and political implications.

This paper concerns with the semiotic analysis of paintings that is the study and investigation of sign and symbols used by the artist in her works. Semiotic analysis is based on Saussure's semiotic theory. The intersection of the sign, the signifier, and the signified is usable in Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's two masterpiece paintings, that is, "Strange Fruit (2015)" and "Youth, Beauty and Dreams (2023)". Semiotics illustrates that seemingly natural pictures are essentially cultural creations, shaped by social and historical context. (Sandin, 2015, p. 379)

Analyzing both these paintings through qualitative and descriptive research, the purpose of this paper is to deconstruct the visible and underpinning story concealed within the images. Saussure's concepts offer a robust theoretical framework to dismantle the way visual forms (signifiers) interact with underlying social and cultural ideas (signified), ultimately creating sophisticated signs that speak to a big trauma as well as the rapidly evolving digital era. The research situates the paintings within a broader Pakistani socio-cultural landscape, emphasizing modernity, technological shifts, and traditional iconography.

Contextual Background: Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's body of work is frequently a mirror of the rich but confounding fabric of Pakistani society, a confluence of historical account, cultural heritage, and modern-day themes. Her works are strongly rooted in the context of contemporary Pakistani art, influenced by indigenous cultures and international modernism alike.

Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's significant selection of themes, varying from loss and mourning to the glamour of contemporary digital world, which reflects the changing ethos of Pakistan. In addition to existing literature, Rahman (2023) explores how contemporary digital devices, such as smartphones, are not just tools but culturally coded artifacts that carry powerful emotional and symbolic significance in postmodern art. The work emphasizes that technology itself is now functioning as a "signifier of disconnection" in both Eastern and Western artistic traditions. Lai (2022) also contends that in East Asian visual narratives, the smartphone has emerged to replace the symbolic use of the mirror, commonly employed to signify introspection and self-perception.

Such scholarly knowledge, in keeping with Saussurean semiotics, verifies the heuristic potential of seeing images not as discrete representations, but as part of a web of cultural meanings. It verifies that modern Pakistani artists are contributors to a larger global semiotic dialogue where signs, even if based on local trauma or heritage, have meanings intelligible in a common visual language.

Purpose of the study:

This research seeks to examine the semiotic composition of Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's works through Saussure's theory of the sign. The research centers on visual components in 'Strange Fruit (2015)' and 'Youth, Beauty and Dreams (2022)' as signifiers of cultural and emotional significance. The research ventures into themes of trauma, digital disconnection, and feminine identity. It aims to demonstrate how Masud's artwork signifies and creates meaning in the changing sociocultural environment of Pakistan. The research adds to knowledge of contemporary South Asian visual art from a semiotic perspective.

Theoretical Framework: Saussure's Semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, is generally considered to be the father of contemporary semiotics. Saussure's semiotic theory provides a basic model for how meaning is being constructed through signs. Saussure states that each sign consists of two integral parts: the signifier, which is the material or sensory form (like a word, an image, or an object), and the signified, which is

the conceptual or emotional value associated with that form (Sarıkartal, 2017). This dual organization allows us to read visual art not just as aesthetic compositions but as coded systems imbricated with deeper symbolic and cultural meaning.

Research Objectives:

To explore the symbolic and formal aspects in Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's paintings based on Saussure's theory of signifier and signified to determine how visual meaning is developed in contemporary Pakistani art.

To analyze how collective trauma, digital alienation, and feminine subjectivity are marked in Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's work through culturally resonant signifiers.

Research Question:

How do the formal aspects (such as color, imagery, and composition) in Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's paintings function as signifiers that convey complex cultural and affective meanings in the context of Saussure's model of semiotics?

In what ways do the painting 'Strange Fruit' and 'Youth, Beauty and Dreams' convey bereavement, motherhood, and technological loneliness themes through the semiotic signifier-signified relationship?

Literature Review:

Semiotics provides one approach to the study of communication that is not only limited to verbal or written language but also encompasses all types of signal or "signs" of communication. (That's why the discipline is called "semiotics," from the Greek words signal and meaning.) For example, when people are communicating to each other, they are able to use patterns of intonation or body language in addition to words to convey ideas. (McGee and Warm, 2013).

Semiotics, as built by Ferdinand de Saussure, gives a point of departure for examining meaning-making in the linguistic and visual contexts. Saussure's theory characterizes a sign as consisting of two inseparable parts: the signifier (the expression or form) and the signified (the meaning it represents). This two-part system has been employed extensively in art analysis, particularly in the study of how visual elements function as representational objects but also as culturally constructed signs.

One of such research works that brings into focus the employment of Saussurean semiotics in the study of visual culture is that of Sepehri (2024), who examined mirror-tile ornaments in Iranian-Islamic architecture. The research study employed the semiotic systems of Saussure and Barthes to establish the way classical ornamental motifs work as signifiers according to cultural ideology. In the research, the findings identify these aspects as exceeding mere aesthetic significance and becoming meaning carriers in a socio-religious context. The strategy is highly synonymous with the goals of studying Masud's symbolic images.

Similarly, Sabila and Anjani (2025) semiotically analyzed fingerprint painting on Indonesiana TV's YouTube channel. They used Saussure's theory to decipher how authenticity and local culture are represented visually. Their conclusion highlighted that even abstract or symbolic forms in art can be dissected into particular signifier–signified relations that express deeply ingrained values and identity stories.

According to Sarıkartal(2017) Among the most famous paintings, which can be highlighted as examples to comprehend the visual semiotics, is the "Cecin'est pas une pipe" (French for "This is not a pipe") by Rene Magritte, completed in 1929, from his series "Treason of Images". Magritte was also a friend with

Michel Foucault and it is documented that they had been exchanging letters. In his work, Magritte reinstates dis-course (This is not a Pipe) alongside the traditional parts of a painting; an accurate representation of a pipe, painted laboriously, taking great care to observe the plastic aspects and the proportion in similarity. But Magritte employed linguistic signs and affirmation in addition to them. There is a picture of a pipe but the text ensures that it is not a pipe. The signifier (picture of the pipe), which is meant to refer to the object, an actual pipe in life, is showing that it is not the pipe it represents but the idea of a pipe, as attested by the text. Since this painting makes reference to semiotics, it has inspired some arguments in structuralism and post structuralism. The text, the letters, are in an uncertain relation with the painting itself. The vagueness in the communication on the shared terrain of the canvas confirms that the mimetic depiction of "the pipe" loses its identity and points to nearly nothing.

My earlier work, Habib et al. (2025), sets a valuable precedent for the use of semiotic theory in the context of Pakistani modern art. Applying Peirce's triadic model, the study examined the paintings 'Hunger' and 'Beggars' by Anna Molka Ahmed to deconstruct the way visual elements operate as metaphoric and indexical signs of poverty, social displacement, and human suffering. Whereas Peirce's model prioritizes logic, relation, and process, this present study turns to Saussure's structuralism's model, which centers on relational binaries in a cultural system. Both models provide complementary avenues to deciphering the latent content in Pakistani art.

Another recent paper by Yuliani et al. (2025) examined a modern Balinese sculpture employing a semiotic approach. The authors read signs like material, pose, and surrounding environment as cultural signs loaded with religious and philosophical significance. Drawing on Saussure's model, they explained how paintings serve as coded texts interpretable in terms of visual language.

In addition, recent developments in art semiotics recognize the function of technological symbolism—specifically the mobile phone—as a new cultural signifier. This is reiterated in recent work by researchers such as Rahman (2023) and Lai (2022), who contend that artifacts of contemporary life, including smartphones and digital interfaces, are quickly becoming overarching signifiers of contemporary identity and isolation.

Together, these studies prove that Saussurean semiotics is not limited to text-based interpretation alone but offers a sound methodology for unpacking the way visual art creates layered meaning. In the case of Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's paintings, this literature provides a precedent for deciphering maternal mourning, technological selfhood, and cultural identity using the framework of form and concept. Whereas much earlier work has tended to be thematically or geographically circumscribed, the present paper broadens the use of visual semiotics to post-trauma and digital-age iconography in South Asian art.

4. Research Design and Methodology

This research adopts qualitative, interpretive research methodology based on semiotic analysis to investigate how visual signs in Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's chosen works create meaning. Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's signifier and signified theory, this research focuses on how formal visual components serve as carriers of deeper cultural, emotional, and ideological meanings.

The research adopts the descriptive-analytical approach that consists of the following steps:

Visual Semiotic Analysis: Paintings are carefully analyzed for their composition elements like color, form, texture, symbolism, and spatial layout to determine repeated signifiers.

Theoretical Mapping: These signifiers are mapped on Saussure's model to determine their respective signified meanings, with an emphasis on socio-political trauma, digital alienation, and feminine identity.

Comparative Interpretation: The two paintings—Strange Fruit and Youth, Beauty and Dreams—are compared side by side to uncover thematic continuities and changes in visual language and meaning.

Data is obtained from various sources, the artist's own words, scholarly literature on semiotics and Pakistani art, and interpretive resources available through open-access journals, art archives, and academic writings.



Figure no. 1. Painting Title: Strange Fruit

Size: 59 X 72 Inches

Medium: Oil on canvas

Displayed at Lahore War Museum

Year : 2015

Image Source: Artist's facebook post retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/share/1FipwfCMvp/>

Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud's *Strange Fruit* (2015) reimagines the religious visual motif of the Pietà as a modern South Asian backdrop of trauma as she mentions in the statement on her instagram profile. This piece takes direct inspiration from Michelangelo's famous sculpture, which depicts the Virgin Mary cradling the body of Christ, a symbol of divine suffering, sacrifice, and bereavement. Masud localizes this theme in *Strange Fruit*, substituting a Pakistani mother veiled with a martyred child, referencing visually the 2014 Army Public School (APS) terrorism massacre in Peshawar. According to Merrell (2020), Michelangelo's Pietà is the only sculpture he ever signed, underlining its personal and religious

significance. Masud reflects this depth by filling her canvas with cultural, emotional, and national symbolism.

Following Saussure's dyadic model, the painting is a stratified text where visual forms (signifiers) generate meaning through their attachment to more profound signified ideas. The central figure, a veiled woman in white is the overarching signifier of maternal mourning and religious purity. Her stance and white dress directly reference Islamic funeral rites. The burial shroud, or kafan, is also typically white and represents dignity, modesty, and spiritual transcendence (Sohil, n.d.; Islamic Foundation of Ireland, n.d.). Christian paintings similarly reflect this symbolism, where white becomes representative of redemptive suffering and sanctity (Fortune, 2022).

The child's bloodied school uniform is at the center of the emotional weight of the painting. It serves as a powerful metonym for the Army Public School (APS) tragedy, remembering the 132 children martyred in the attack. The psychological destruction of the incident is explained by Qureshi, Gulraiz, and Shahzad (2016). Masud interprets this visually through this symbolic incorporation. The child becomes more than a single victim, the representation of an entire generation lost to state weakness and violence. Mahfouz (2015) provides a comparative example, examining how martyrdom and war in Middle Eastern art are represented through identical sign systems of death, youth, and resistance.

The geometric motifs in the background are painted in white on dark colors to call upon Islamic design conventions. They are not simply ornamentation but carry theological significance: the redundancy of geometric shapes symbolizes Tawhid, or the unity of God, and is commonly employed in Islamic architecture to represent divine order (Babangida, 2017, quoted in Tajudeen, 2024). Against a landscape of emotional disorder, these motifs present symbolic contrast of spiritual balance in the face of societal trauma.

Color symbolism intensifies this story. The opposition of white chalk and darkened tones in the background creates a moral and affective polarity of life and death, innocence and violence, hope and despair. As Sabila and Anjani (2025) demonstrate in their research on visual narratives, tonal opposition acts semiotically to manage emotional response, building meaning through culture conditioned codes of vision.

Finally, the mother-and-child formation triggers universal maternal iconography. As Alam (2015) notes, Masud deliberately places her figure within Christian iconographic conventions, thereby entering a transcultural semiotic dialogue. This visual appropriation is aimed at unifying the mother's grieving into a larger discourse of religious sorrow, converting national grief into a religious allegory.

Signifier (Visual Form)	Signified (Concept)
Veiled woman in white attire	Islamic mourning, maternal grief, ritual purity (kafan)
Child in bloodstained school uniform	Lost innocence, APS massacre, national trauma
Madonna-like composition	Sacred motherhood, visual mourning, spiritual universality
Islamic geometric background patterns	Divine oneness, theological harmony, contrast to emotional disorder
White chalk on dark background	Binary of hope/despair, purity amid violence, emotional duality

Tilted, mournful posture	Resignation, unbearable loss, collective vulnerability
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Strange Fruit is a visual elegy and a refined symbolic work in which Saussure's signifier and signified play against each other to tell both individual loss and Terrorism brutality. Masud's redefinition of Pietà becomes not just a national collective grief but also an international symbol of mourning. The artist's synthesis of Islamic visual codes, Christian iconology, and socio-cultural allusions generates a transcultural field of mourning. By virtue of its semiotic composition, the painting insists on the transfiguring force of visual language, its capacity to represent trauma, religious stoicism, and historical recollection simultaneously.



Figure no. 2. Painting Title: Youth, Beauty and Dreams

Size: 22 x 26 inches

Medium: Oil, gold leaf and screen printing on canvas

Year of work: 2022

Image Source: Artist's Facebook post retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/share/1AuoWEz64W/>

Artist statement on her instagram profile tells us the young woman appears satisfied with her reflection (in this example, a selfie). This can be interpreted as a move to cyber reality. It is also a time of self-discovery, when adolescence transitions into youthfulness, with the promise of life and all its possibilities before her. (Masud, 2022).

This work represents a turn in Masud's visual vocabulary from the explicit topics of martyrdom and communal grief in the painting 'Strange Fruit' to the more internalized affective landscape of contemporary subjectivity and technologically mediated identity. According to Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic theory of signifier and signified, this painting is interpreted as a stratified semiotic system commenting on femininity, cyber-alienation, and disconnection in the modern age.

The young lady takes the visual center as the primary signifier of contemporary youth. Her body language slightly slouched and visually withdrawn combined with her focus on her mobile phone, signifies psychological withdrawal from the physical realm. This is further indicated by her distant stare, implying internal struggle or virtual withdrawal. Smartphone absorption undermines interpersonal communication through the diversion of emotional attention to technology, thus producing social withdrawal (Sriandila and Suryana, 2023, p. 2235).

The cellphone, as an indicator of technological escapism, intervenes in conventional self-referential modes previously mediated by the mirror in traditional portraiture. According to Lai (2022), in postmodern semiotics, the phone abrogates the mirror as the instrument of performance of identity. Instead of mirroring interior depth, it now displays edited realities, curated selves, and filtered beauty symbolizing the digital fabrication of self.

Masud's background imagery also enhances this contrast. The fruits and leaves painted in soft pastel hues represent natural harmony and spiritual balance in elements of classical femininity and interior life. These are interrupted visually by urban design motifs and screen printed overlays, which represent the incursion of digital culture into natural life. This tension is representative of how contemporary life is suspended between the physical and the virtual, presence and absence, stillness and distraction.

One standout feature is the gold leaf lettering, which adds a transcendent visual language. Throughout history, gold in artwork signified divine presence, holiness, and aesthetic dignity. According to the University of Murcia (n.d.), gold has symbolically been linked to the "highest and noblest dignities" of ancient cultures. This religious symbolism is reinterpreted in Masud's work, where gold becomes a symbol of commodified beauty, a commentary on the contemporary fixation on status, youthfulness, and self-presentation. Asghar, Yaseen, and Nadeem (2023) affirm that gold remains a symbol of wealth, spiritual greatness, and power in various cultural and historical contexts.

Further, the inclusion of fruit trees discreetly integrated within the scene adds another layer to the symbolism. Fruit trees in visual semiotics have traditionally symbolized prosperity, energy, and the cyclical rhythm of life (Cristea, Ursu, & Fărcaș, 2015). They are used as metaphors here in a contrasting context, standing for the organic rhythms of life against the constructed, linear pace of technological living.

Signifier (Visual Form)	Signified (Concept)
Young woman holding mobile phone	Technologically mediated identity, emotional withdrawal, digital self-performance
Slouched posture, distant gaze	Psychological estrangement, loneliness in a hyper-connected age
Mobile phone replacing traditional mirror	Loss of introspective self, shift from reflection to curation
Gold leaf	Sacred symbolism turned consumer aesthetic, commodification of youth and beauty

Delicate floral and pastel background	Lost harmony, nature as nostalgic counterpoint to urban life
Fruit trees	Life cycle, vitality, fading connection to organic, spiritual growth

Masud's *Youth, Beauty and Dreams* is a semiotic deconstruction of modern youth's splintered identity in a digitized age, who have forgot to look around or look within themselves, growing a strong disconnection from surrounding and inner self. Applying Saussure's signifier and signified framework, the painting lays bare the contradictions between self-perceived identity and self-performed identity, tradition and modernity. The visual signs of the painting whether the radiating phone, gold ornamentation, or symbolic flowers, all cumulatively tell a story of cultural erasure and psychic dislocation, where the sacred and natural are reabsorbed into digitally aestheticized consumption. This review affirms that visual art, particularly when interpreted through a semiotic understanding, is able to uncover deep social observations regarding the world we live in.

Comparative Analysis of Signifiers and Signified Elements

A comparative analysis of both artworks highlights Masud's skill at transposing semiotic forms from extremely disparate themes.

Visual Element	'Strange Fruit' (2015)	'Youth, Beauty and Dreams (2022)
Central Figure	Mourning mother and dead child	Young woman immersed in technology
Iconic Object	Religious symbols, traditional attire	City intrusions, mobile phone
Background Imagery	Islamic geometry and subdued colors	Fruits and leaves
Emotional Tone	Somber, grieving, sacred	Dreamy, introspective, isolated
Core Signified Concept	Collective trauma, martyrdom, maternal sacrifice	Alienation, modern disconnection, identity crisis

This contrastive table illustrates how Masud employs signifiers not only as a means of aesthetic expression but as culturally and emotionally loaded forms, each stabilizing extended signified meanings relative to Pakistani society.

Discussion and key findings

Study of 'Strange Fruit' and 'Youth, Beauty and Dreams' makes it clear how Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud creates richly symbolic visual stories in a semiotic language that synthesizes historic iconography with contemporary socio-cultural practices.

In *Strange Fruit*, visual signifiers like the white-clad mourning mother and the blood-soaked child's uniform create a signified environment of national tragedy, martyrdom, and maternal sorrow. They are borrowed from both Islamic and Christian visual vocabularies (e.g., kafan and Pietà) and create a transcultural lexicon of grief. The Islamic geometric ground supports spiritual balance in the face of

disorder, and the tonal opposition of white and dark further stabilizes the moral opposition of hope and desperation.

Whereas *Youth, Beauty and Dreams* relocates the emphasis from communal mourning to personal alienation, with modern objects such as the mobile phone and gold leaf as signifiers. The phone, being different from the mirror image of the past, holds an image of a mediated self, indicating a loss of genuine inner life. Gold, previously sacred, is reinterpreted as a signifier of commodified beauty and status. The fruits and leaves in background and pastel colors try to rebuild harmony but are interrupted by digital overlays, highlighting the broken identity of contemporary youth.

Visual components in both paintings serve as deliberate signifiers that create complicated meanings regarding trauma, femininity, and cultural transformation.

Ancient symbols (kafan, geometric motifs, Madonna pose) are blended with contemporary artifacts (digital motifs, smartphones, gold leaf), enabling Masud to address both historical and current situations.

Masud criticizes collective memory and contemporary isolation using a language of signs that unites spiritual profundity with technological isolation.

Saussure's theory of semiotics is useful in revealing the multi-layered visual codes and analyzing how meaning is created through composition and cultural reference.

Together, these works of art function as semiotic texts where the relationship between signifier and signified not only illustrates aesthetic choices but also more profound reflections on loss, identity, and the psychological effects of modern life in Pakistan.

Conclusion:

In this study, the paintings of Dr. Rahat Naveed Masud, titled 'Strange Fruit' and 'Youth, Beauty and Dreams', were analyzed under the semiotic theory of Saussure so that the significance of signifier and signified in visual meaning construction is highlighted. The research indicated that color, composition, and symbolic images employed by Masud are not arbitrary but purposeful; each visual component acts as a signifier with cultural, emotional, and political meaning.

In 'Strange Fruit', Masud traverses the geography of national mourning and collective trauma through symbolic signifiers like the kafan, geometric motifs, and the mother-child icon, tapping into religious iconography and the memory of APS Peshawar tragedy. *Youth, Beauty and Dreams*, on the other hand, moves to the interior landscape of the self, questioning technologically-induced alienation and commodified self, with mobile phone and gold leaf as contemporary cultural codes.

By this comparative semiotic reading, the study demonstrates how Masud brings together tradition and modernity, local and global visual languages, and sacred and digital aesthetics. Her paintings are cultural texts that provide insight into the changing psychological and social terrain of Pakistan today. Through the application of Saussure's dyadic model, not only does this research unravel visual meaning in Masud's oeuvre but also verifies the merit of semiotic analysis for interpreting art showing how paintings work as systems of signs that represent, resist, and remanufacture socio-cultural realities.

Ethical Consideration:

This study relied solely on publicly available visual art, artist statements, and open-access scholarly sources. There were no human participants involved, and visuals have been taken from artist consent and texts have been cited in due respects to intellectual property as well as academic integrity.

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