

THE MYTH OF 'ABŪ LAHAB' IN Q.S. AL-MASAD [111]: 1: ANALYSIS OF ROLAND BARTHES' SEMIOTIC THEORY

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Abstract: *The Qur'anic story of "Abū Lahab" is often misunderstood by some who assume that the story is factual-exclusive. This article is designed to examine how the concept of Abū Lahab is understood in Qur'anic terms, and how it is embodied in today's context. This research uses a library research method with a descriptive-analytical pattern, through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach as a theoretical basis. Barthes argues that the language system can be understood through two steps of semiotic reading, the first is what he calls the linguistic system (language-object), and the second is the mythical system (metalanguage). To arrive at the mythical system, it is necessary to extract meaning through the signifier system, which consists of three elements: the signifier element, the signified element, and the sign element in the second layer of the semiotic system. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic reading, the concept of Abū Lahab that is understood to be exclusively addressed to 'Abd al-'Uzzā is a myth. Abū Lahab is not a personal name, but a general and universal title. 'Abd al-'Uzzā is only one historical representation of the figure of Abū Lahab. From Barthes' semiotics, Abū Lahab is more accurately understood as 'anyone who opposes the truth and is intolerant (radical) towards other groups, not hesitating to carry out offensive resistance to them if it is not in line with their personal or group ideology or political interests'. Thus, in the modern context, anyone can potentially become "Abū Lahab" as the khitāb of Q.S. Al-Masad if they share these characteristics.*

Keywords: *Abū Lahab, Connotation, Denotation, Myth, Roland Barthes, Semiotics.*

Abstrak: "Abū Lahab" yang dikisahkan Al-Qur'an sering kali disalahpahami oleh sebagian pihak yang menganggap bahwa kisah itu bersifat faktual-eksklusif. Artikel ini dibuat untuk meneliti bagaimana konsep Abū Lahab dipahami dalam terminologi Qur'ani, serta bagaimana konsep itu terejawantahkan dalam konteks hari ini. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kepustakaan (*library research*) dengan pola deskriptif-analitis, melalui pendekatan semiotika Roland Barthes sebagai basis teoretis. Barthes berpandangan bahwa sistem bahasa dapat dipahami melalui dua langkah pembacaan semiotik, yang pertama, apa yang ia sebut sebagai sistem linguistik (*language-object*), dan yang kedua adalah sistem mitos (*metalanguage*). Untuk sampai pada sistem mitos, diperlukan upaya penggalan makna melalui sistem penanda yang terdiri dari tiga elemen, yaitu

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elemen penanda (*signifier*), elemen petanda (*signified*), dan elemen tanda (*sign*) pada lapisan kedua sistem semiotik. Melalui pembacaan semiotika Roland Barthes, konsep Abū Lahab yang dipahami secara eksklusif-spesifik ditujukan kepada ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā hanyalah mitos. Abū Lahab bukanlah nama personal, melainkan sebuah gelar/julukan yang bersifat umum dan universal. ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā hanyalah satu representasi historis yang menggambarkan sosok/figur Abū Lahab tersebut. Dari semiotika Barthes, Abū Lahab lebih tepat dipahami sebagai ‘setiap orang yang menentang kebenaran dan intoleran (radikal) terhadap kelompok lain, tak segan melakukan perlawanan yang ofensif kepada mereka apabila tidak sejalan dengan ideologi atau kepentingan politis pribadi maupun kelompoknya’. Maka, dalam konteks modern, siapa pun dapat berpotensi menjadi “Abū Lahab” sebagaimana *khiṭab* Q.S. Al-Masad apabila memiliki kesamaan dengan ciri-ciri tersebut.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Abū Lahab, Denotasi, Konotasi, Mitos, Roland Barthes, Semiotik.*

Introduction

Semiology of the Qur’an is a trendy approach in the discourse of contemporary Quranic studies that is increasingly finding its positioning today. Semiotic science is considered capable of minimizing errors in the process of understanding the Qur’an because the meaning of a particular sign does not appear on the surface of an object (*signifier*) it refers to but is seen in the concept (*signified*) that operates in a historically (*culturally*) formed system.¹

The Qur’an itself in the context of *lafaz* and meaning is related to what writers, scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, and *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* call *ḥaqīqah* and *majāz*.² From both, we can see the difference in the function of the Qur’an in its context as a symbol, sign, and signal.³ To arrive at knowledge of all three, mastery of the absolute code (*qua non*) that allows one to optimally understand the production of wide-open meanings is a necessity in reading Qur’anic texts.

This article specifically examines the myth of “Abū Lahab” in Q.S. Al-Masad the first verse with the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes (hereinafter referred

1 Arif Budiono, “Penafsiran Al-Qur’an Melalui Pendekatan Semiotika Dan Antropologi (Telaah Pemikiran Muhammad Arkoun),” *MIYAH: Jurnal Studi Islam* XI, no. 2 (2015): 297–98, <https://doi.org/10.33754/miyah.v11i2.19>.

2 See, Jalāluddīn Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān Fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasah al-Risālah Nāshirūn, 2008), 494. *Majāz* is a word that is used other than its original meaning, because of the connection (*‘alāqah*) between the original meaning and the *majāzi* meaning accompanied by indicators that prevent understanding the original meaning. See, Basyūnī ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Fayūd, *‘Ilm al-Bayān* (Kairo: Mu’assasah al-Mukhtar, 2015), 132; Mohammad Nor Ichwan, *Memahami Bahasa Al-Qur’an: Refleksi Atas Persoalan Linguistik* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2018), 219.

3 In the study of scripture, the question of signs plays an important role in religion for at least four reasons. *Firstly*, from a religious perspective, the world and all its attributes are often described as divine signs. *Secondly*, the books of revelation, which form the basic foundation of religious theology, can be considered as a set of signs that imply various meanings that need to be revealed through the process of interpretation. *Third*, the texts of revelation are generally considered a collection of signs that contain God’s message to humans. *Fourthly*, conversations about religion can be analyzed as a set of signs. See, Akhmad Muzakki, “Kontribusi Semiotika dalam Memahami Bahasa Al-Qur’ān,” *ISLAMICA: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 4, no. 1 (2014): 42–43, <https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2009.4.1.35-48>.

to as Barthes).

So far, studies on the term *Abū Lahab* have been conducted by several researchers with various variants of themes and approaches, such as Zakiatul Fikriah and Syihabuddin Qalyubi (2020) who reveal the unique literary side of *Sūrah Al-Masad*.⁴ Jendri and Umami Kalsum (2020) discuss the story of loyalty between *Abū Lahab* and his wife.⁵ Akmalia and Rizal (2023) discussed the message behind the story of *Abū Lahab* using Michael Riffaterre's semiotic analysis.⁶

Based on this search, the author has not found a specific study that discusses the myth of *Abū Lahab*. Although Jendri above discusses the same theme as this article, his study focuses not on the meaning of the myth but on the philosophical message behind the story of *Abū Lahab* and his wife. Therefore, this article can be seen as a development of the above discourse as well as providing a new perspective in understanding the figure of *Abū Lahab*.

Semiotically, the word *Abū Lahab* can be positioned as a sign. Thus, the meaning of *Abū Lahab* cannot be understood only based on a specific context. Most Muslims, when they hear the word *Abū Lahab*, their understanding often leads to a figure named 'Abd al-'Uzzā. While there is some truth to this, the nature of *Abū Lahab* cannot be understood in such a limited and simple way. Moreover, the Qur'an never explicitly states who the object of *Abū Lahab*. 'Abd al-'Uzzā is not the literal meaning (*al-ma'nā al-aslī*) of *Abū Lahab*, but-to borrows Sahiron's hermeneutic term-a historical phenomenal significance (*al-maghzā al-tārikhī*). That is, it is the message of the verse that was applicable and applied at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. As for today, the meaning of *Abū Lahab* can no longer be understood as the figure of 'Abd al-'Uzzā, because the context is different from the time of the prophet. Therefore, the problem formulations to be answered in this article are: *First*, what is the meaning of *Abū Lahab* in terms of linguistic analysis; *Second*, how is the meaning of the myth of *Abū Lahab* in today's context? These two questions will be the focus of the author's study in this article.

The two problems above will be analyzed through two stages of semiotics, the first stage is what Barthes calls the linguistic system (*language object*) and the second stage is called the myth (*metalinguage*) system. The exploration of the meaning produced through these two stages is expected to provide a new perspective on the

4 Zakia Fikriyah Rahman, "Surat Al-Lahab dalam Studi Analisis Stilistika," *TSAQOFIYA Jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Arab IAIN Ponorogo* 2, no. 2 (2020): 108–28, <https://doi.org/10.21154/tsaqofiya.v2i2.32>.

5 Jendri Jendri and Umami Kalsum, "Interpretasi Semiotika Loyalitas Suami Isteri dalam Q.S. Al-Lahab," *Jurnal Ulunnuba* 9, no. 2 (2020): 103–19, <https://doi.org/10.15548/ju.v9i2.1737>; Umami Robihah Aimanar, Uswatun Khasanah, and Nur Anisa Ridwan, "Analisis Unsur-unsur Sastra dalam Surah Al Lahab," in *Prosiding Konferensi Nasional Bahasa Arab*, vol. 9 (Konferensi Nasional Bahasa Arab (KONASBARA), Malang: Universitas Negeri Malang, 2023), 1–16, <https://prosiding.arab-um.com/index.php/konasbara/article/view/1301>.

6 Akmalia Salsabila and Rizal Samsul Mutaqin, "Mengungkap Pesan di Balik Kisah Abu Lahab dalam Al-Qur'an (111): 1-5 (Kajian Semiotika Michael Riffaterre)," *Subuf* 16, no. 2 (2023): 441–61, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22548/shf.v16i2.820>.

figure of Abū Lahab. This research emphasizes the need to read Abū Lahab in a broader and dynamic context, not limited to textual reading alone. Understanding the original meaning of a particular word or verse in the Qur'an is certainly very important to capture the main message of a verse. The main message is then used to find the dynamic phenomenal significance at the time the verse is interpreted. In the context of Q.S. Al-Masad, some still misunderstand the use of Abū Lahab in the *sūrah*. They think that the Qur'an has perpetuated the reproach of a certain person who is none other than the prophet's uncle. This is not the case. The Qur'an never mentions the prophet's uncle's real name. While it is true that the term was used at that time to refer to 'Abd al-'Uzzā, again, it was just a historical phenomenon related to the revelation of the *sūrah*, not the original meaning of Abū Lahab.

The material object of this research is the word *Abū Lahab* which will be analysed and interpreted using Barthes' semiotic theory. As for the research method, the author uses a qualitative approach because the process of collecting data is generated through a system of documentation and textual analysis.⁷ This research is also built based on library research.⁸ Where the data and information presented are obtained through extracting various sources of literature such as: books of tafsir, books of *'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, scientific journals, as well as books and other literature relevant to the theme discussed.

Roland Barthes: Biography and Intellectual Journey

Barthes was born into a middle-class Protestant family. Father was a marine officer.⁹ Barthes was born on 12 November 1915 in Cherbourg,

7 Arikunto, *Metodologi Penelitian* (Jakarta: PT. Rineka Cipta, 2002), 136.

8 Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2008), 3–10.

9 Regarding Barthes' biography, several works are specifically projected to review his life journey and intellectual career, apart from what Barthes himself has written. As far as the author knows, the most popular book written about Barthes' biography is Tiphaine Samoyault's *Roland Barthes, Biographie*. This work was published by Editions du Seuil, Paris in 2015, the centenary year of Barthes' birth. The 716-page book is based on analyses of Barthes' data and documents that are rarely (read: not) known to the public, such as his medical history, his sexual life, and other very complex aspects of Barthes' figure. Ana Delia Rogobete considers Samoyault's biography a breakthrough in understanding Barthes comprehensively, starting from the biographical events during World War I and II, the post-war period, to the Al-Jazair war in 1968. But, long before Samoyault, a similar work had been written collectively by Tiefen Samoyo and eighteen other authors, but this work was more autobiographical (in J. Derrida's terms, the Greek "oto"- "ear") because it was written based on critical "listening" focused on Barthes' voice to reflect on how the texture of his voice gave shape to his writing. Samoyo was a great admirer of Barthes who was a contemporary of his, although he was only 11 years old when Barthes died. See, Sam Ferguson, "Roland Barthes: Biographie," *French Studies* 69, no. 4 (October 1, 2015): 554–55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knv220>; Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes: Biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015); Tiphaine Samoyault and Sunil Manghani, "On Barthes' Biography: A Dialogue," *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 4 (July 1, 2020): 43–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420910471>; Ana Delia Rogobete, "Roland

France. His father died when he was still a child, while on duty. According to Barthes' account in his autobiography, the ship on which his father served was sunk by the Germans. This was the first painful period in Barthes' life.¹⁰

At the age of 19, Barthes moved to Paris with his mother, where she opened a bookbinding service to make ends meet. In this year (1934), he wanted to enter the Ecole Normale Supérieure, but this hope could not be realized due to his tuberculosis. In a very poor condition, Barthes was then placed in a sanatorium in the Pyrenees to undergo serious treatment. Dranenکو notes that during his stay in the Sanatorium, the body not only became an object of analysis for Barthes but also a character for the novels he wrote in his mind when his body was immobilized for months. These were the years when he experienced not only physical suffering but also psychological suffering (depression).¹¹

Barthes' educational career, especially in the field of language studies, began when he studied at the University of Sorbonne. There he majored in French language, literature, and classical studies ranging from Latin, and Roman to Greek. He then developed his theatre skills and classical drama with friends. He is now a lecturer in places like France, Bucharest, Romania, and Cairo. His intellectual career led him to become a leading literary figure of the time. He is also very popularly known as a structuralist thinker who developed Ferdinand De Saussure's linguistic and semiological patterns. His works are numerous and have been translated into various languages, including Indonesian. Among them are: *El grado cero de la escritura: Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1972),¹² *Mythologies* (1972),¹³ *El Grado Cero de la Escritura: Seguido de Nuevos Ensayos Críticos* (1973),¹⁴ *Element of Semiology* (1977),¹⁵ *Empire of Signs* (1983),¹⁶ *Lo Obvio Y Lo Obtuso: Imágenes, gestos, voces* (1986),¹⁷ *La*

Barthes: Biographie by Tiphaine Samoyault (Review),” *MLN* 130, no. 4 (2015): 1013–15; Galy-na Dranenکو, “Тканина життєтвору Ролана Барта в інтелектуальній біографії письменника Тіфен Самойоу,” *Pitannâ literaturoznavstva*, no. 91 (November 28, 2015): 7–22, <https://doi.org/10.31861/pytlit2015.91.007>.

10 Dranenکو, 15–16.

11 Nevertheless, Barthes claimed to be happy at the Sanatorium. He said, “I felt happy in the Sanatorium. It was the happiness of the social body. After all, the Sanatorium for tuberculosis patients is a miniature society, characterized by the social structure of society in general.” Later on, Barthes produced the writings he had proposed while in the sanatorium in the form of essays, which he titled “*Essay on a Sanatorium Community*” (1947). This work became the first sociological study in Barthes' career. See, Dranenکو, 17–18.

12 Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973).

13 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972).

14 Roland Barthes, *El Grado Cero de La Escritura: Seguido de Nuevos Ensayos Críticos* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Siglo XXI Argentina Editores, 1973).

15 Roland Barthes, *Element of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

16 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

17 Roland Barthes, *Lo Obvio Y Lo Obtuso: Imágenes, Gestos, Voces* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1986).

Aventura Semiología (1990),¹⁸ *The Fashion System* (1990),¹⁹ *Image-Music-Text* (1997),²⁰ *Crítica y Verdad* (2006),²¹ *Crítica e Verdade* (2007),²² *Placer Del Texto, El - La Lección Inaugural* (2008),²³ *El Efecto de Realidad*,²⁴ and many others. On 26 March 1980, Barthes died in a traffic accident. He is now remembered as a thinker whose ideas have inspired many, especially in the fields of literature and semiotics.

Roland Barthes' Theory of Semiotics

Semiotics originally comes from the Greek term *semeion*, which means "sign". A sign in this case is defined as something that can represent something else based on the social conventions in which it is used. From here semiotics can be understood as a discipline of social sciences to understand the world as a system of relations that has a single pattern, namely the 'sign' system.²⁵ Barthes definitively calls semiotics the science of form, because meaning is learned not from its content but from its otherness.²⁶

Zoest gives five criteria that something can be called a 'sign': *first*, it is an object that can be observed; *second*, it must be captured and digested by reason; *third*, it refers to something other than itself; *fourth*, it is representative and can be interpreted; *fifth*, there is a certain reason why it is called a sign.²⁷ When semiotics is used in studying a text, the text in this case becomes a construction of elements of signs. It is the interrelationship between the signs that gives the text its precise meaning. Since the science of semiotics covers a lot of things, especially about daily human life, it is not surprising that Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*) called it part of the sociality of human life.²⁸

As a theory of interpretation, semiotics does not merely present the actual commentary (*exegesis, tafsi'r*) of a text, but rather makes the text speak, even about something beyond itself. From a semiotic perspective, it is not enough to understand a text by looking at its fixed meaning, which has been the consensus of many people over time (*social convention*), but it is necessary to pay attention to—

18 Roland Barthes, *La Aventura Semiología* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1990).

19 Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (California: University of California Press, 1990).

20 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1997).

21 Roland Barthes, *Crítica y Verdad* (Spain: Siglo XXI Ediciones, 2006).

22 Roland Barthes, *Crítica e Verdade* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2007).

23 Roland Barthes, *Placer Del Texto, El - La Lección Inaugural* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Siglo Veintiuno Editores Argentina S.A., 2008).

24 Roland Barthes, "L'effet de réel," *Communications*, *Recherches sémiologiques le vraisemblable*, no. 11 (1968): 84–89, <https://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1968.1158>.

25 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 16.

26 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday, 1991), 110.

27 Lantowa Jafar, *Semiotika Teori, Metode, dan Penerapannya dalam Penelitian Sastra* (Yogyakarta: Deepublish, 2017), 1.

28 Yasraf Amir Piliang, "Semiotika Sebagai Metode dalam Penelitian Desain," in *Semiotika Budaya*, ed. Tommy Christomy and Untung Yuwono (Depok: Pusat Penelitian Kemasyarakatan dan Budaya, 2010), 88.

in *uṣūl al-fiqh* terms—*qarīnah* (explanations) that are outside the horizon of the text. This *qarīnah* can be the social, cultural, and political conditions surrounding the emergence of a text.²⁹

In laying the foundation of his semiotic theory, Barthes (*Element of Semiology* 1968) refers to Saussure who placed the sign in the context of communication language, in two elements namely signifier and signified.³⁰ Barthes developed this pattern into what he termed the ‘two orders of signification’. This idea includes two meanings. *First*, denotation meaning, which is a system of signification that explains the relationship between signifier and signified that produces definite, explicit, or direct meaning as found in the dictionary. *Second*, connotation meaning describes an interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or mental emotions of the reader of the text as well as the values that are generated by cultural and personal experiences.³¹

In addition to emphasizing an understanding of the signification process above, Barthes also invites readers to look at another aspect outside the sign system, namely ‘myth’. The element of myth is a distinctive feature of Barthes’ semiology, as well as opening up a new field in semiotics that emphasizes exploring the meaning of the sign system to discover the myths at work in people’s daily realities. Semiotic analysis can be applied to all types of texts such as newspapers, magazines, films, photographs, and even scriptures. In practice, Barthes used this system to dismantle “modern myths” through cultural studies.³²

Here is the pattern of Barthes’ mythological structure:

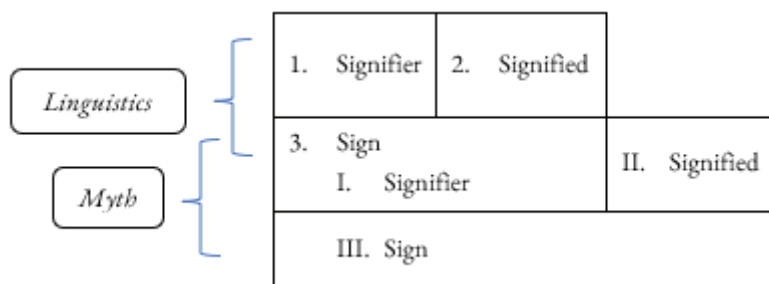


Diagram 1. Barthes’ Mythological Structure

This chart shows that the denotative sign consists of a *signifier* (1) and a *signified*

29 Ali Romdhoni, “Ushul Al-Fiqh dan Semiotika Post-Strukturalis,” *Koran Amanat IAIN Walisongo*, 2004, 102 edition, 20.

30 The *signifier* is what is said, read, and written (the material object), while the *signified* is the concept of the material object. Barthes gives an example of a bunch of roses. Behind the symbol of a bunch of roses is the meaning of passion, so the bunch of flowers here becomes the signifier while passion becomes the signified. The relationship between the two results in a third term: a bunch of flowers as a sign. See, Kurniawan, *Semiologi Roland Barthes* (Magelang: IndonesiaTera, 2001), 22.

31 John Fiske, *Pengantar Ilmu Komunikasi* (Jakarta: Rajawali Press, 2012), 141.

32 Al Fiatur Rohmaniah, “Kajian Semiotika Roland Barthes,” *Al-Ittishol: Jurnal Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam* 2, no. 2 (July 4, 2021): 130, <https://doi.org/10.51339/ittishol.v2i2.308>.

(2). At the same time, this denotative sign will also become a *connotative signifier* at the next level (I), and when it enters the realm of *myth* (III) it will experience evaporation of meaning, and form a space or become a new land for *connotative signified* (II). After going through the interpretation process, the myth behind the text or the ideological system in motion will appear, if it is related to the cultural context of the community. From here it can be understood that Barthes' semiotic work pattern does not stop at linguistic studies that revolve around denotation meaning as Saussure's construction but develops more dynamically by exploring the meaning of denotation and connotation based on the context in which the sign is lived. In this case, Barthes said:³³

“...in myth, there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the **language-object**, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call **metalanguage**, because it is a second language, **in which** one speaks about the first.

Barthes, in the above statement, affirms that in the myth there are two semiological systems, the first is what he calls the language-object (linguistic system). According to Adib Sofia, this system is engaged in the search for meaningful language (*denotation*). The second system is called *metalanguage* (metaphor-language) or meta-linguistic system which leads to the exploration of connotative meaning (*connotative system*).³⁴ This is Barthes' major contribution to the refinement of Saussure's semiological theory, which only revolves around the denotative meaning (*language-object*). Denotative meaning can be defined as explicit meaning (*tafsīr*), while connotative meaning (*myth*) is a “form of signification”³⁵ In which meaning is outside the context of the language itself (figurative meaning, *ta'wīl*).³⁶

Graham Allen in his book *Roland Barthes* reveals that mythology can change the values of a culture, as Barthes exemplifies in the case of the Bourgeoisie which signifies that French culture has changed to universal and natural values. Since it is the result of cultural construction, it is still recognized as a myth.³⁷ Through the semiotics he developed, it is clear that Barthes aims to uncover the veils of ideology or discourse created by the producers of signs, then assert that there is no relationship between myth and a fact or reality.

33 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 114.

34 Ridho Adiansyah et al., “Roland Barthes Semiotic Study: Understanding the Meaning Word of 'Azab, A Reinterpretation for Modern Society,” *QiST: Journal of Quran and Tafseer Studies* 2, no. 3 (July 24, 2023): 260, <https://doi.org/10.23917/qist.v2i3.1445..>

35 Dranenko, “Тканина життявору Ролана Барта в інтелектуальній біографії письменника Тіфен Самойо,” 10.

36 Aceng Ruhendi Saifullah, *Semantik dan Dinamika Pergulatan Makna* (Jakarta: PT. Bumi Aksara, 2018), 72.

37 Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes* (London: Routledge, 2003), 37.

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Reading of the Figure of Abū Lahab in Q.S. Al-Masad [111]: 1

تَبَّتْ يَدَا أَبِي لَهَبٍ وَتَبَّ مَا أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُ مَالُهُ وَمَا كَسَبَ سَيَصْلَىٰ نَارًا ذَاتَ لَهَبٍ

"Perish the two hands of Abu Lahab and utterly perish he. His wealth and what he laboured for will be of no avail to him. Later he will enter a turbulent fire (hell)". (Q.S. Al-Masad [111]: 1-3)

Linguistic System Analysis (Language-Object)

Sūrah al-Lahab is classified as a Sūrah Makkiyah because it was revealed in the fourth year of prophethood after the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) had preached his message secretly in Mecca. This *sūrah* is also called *sūrah* Tabbat because it is taken from the first natural word at the beginning of the verse of the *sūrah*, as well as hinting at the destruction of Abū Lahab; it is also called Sūrah Al-Masad which means *rope of coir* (in the fifth verse) because it hints at a bad picture for Ummu Jamīl, Abū Lahab's wife who participated in the hostility against the Prophet.³⁸

According to al-Suyūṭī, this is the sixth *sūrah* to be revealed: After Al-Fātiḥah and before Al-Takwīr.³⁹ The majority of commentators agree that the word "Abū Lahab" mentioned in the first verse of Sūrah Al-Lahab is a nickname addressed to 'Abd al-'Uzzā bin 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet's uncle.⁴⁰ As for the name *al-Lahab*, it hints at the patron of an uncle who tried desperately to resist the Prophet's preaching.

The word *lahab* (لهب) is a *maṣḍar* (invinitive) form of the root *لَهَبٌ - يَلْهَبُ - لَهَبٌ* which literally means *flame*.⁴¹ In the Qur'an, the word (لهب) *lahab* is mentioned three times; once in Q.S. Al-Mursalāt [77]: 31, and twice in Q.S. Al-Masad [111]: 1 & 3.⁴² Lexically, the word *lahab* means burning. It can also mean anger, or the tongue of hell (*lahab an-nār*).⁴³ In the dictionary *al-Munjid fī al-Lughah*, the word is translated as a burning fire; so burning that no smoke can be seen from it.⁴⁴

The word *Abū* (أبو) (*Abū*), according to M. Quraish Shihab, is usually interpreted as

38 Wahbah al-Zuhaylī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Munīr: Fi al-'Aqīdah wa al-Sharī'ah wa al-Manhaj*, vol. 15 (Dimashq: Dār al-Fikr, 2009), 855.

39 Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 50.

40 Unlike al-Aṣḥāhānī, he tends to think otherwise. According to him, *Abū Lahab* is not a *kunyah*, but rather a determination that the person concerned will be exposed to the punishment of hell in the future. See, Al-Raghīb al-Aṣḥāhānī, *Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'ān*, vol. 3 (Mesir: Dār Ibnul Jawzī, 2017), 437.

41 Aḥmad 'Ubaid al-Kabīsī, *Mawsū'ah al-Kalimah wa Akhawātuhā fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, vol. 10 (Beirūt: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 2017), 756.

42 M. Quraish Shihab, *Ensiklopedia Al-Qur'an : Kajian Kosakata*, vol. 2 (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2007), 501.

43 Ahmad Warson Munawir, *Kamus Al-Munawwir Arab-Indonesia Terlengkap* (Surabaya: Pustaka Progresif, 1997), 1290.

44 Louis Ma'lūf, *Al-Munjid fī al-Lughah* (Beirūt: Dār al-Maḥriq, 1986), 735.

a subject (*fā'il*) 'that always accompanies the attribute mentioned after it'. In this case, *Abū Lahab* is someone whose *lahab* (fire) always accompanies him. Abu Jahal is someone whose ignorance always accompanies him. The prophet's companion 'Abdurrahmān Ibn Shakhr was nicknamed *Abū Hurayrah* (little cat) because at one point a cat slept in his sleeve.⁴⁵ In Lombok, there is a figure named Tuan Guru Zainuddin Abdul Madjid, nicknamed '*Abū al-Madāris wa al-Masājid*' because he built many madrasas and gave recitations in various mosques on the island of Lombok and so on.

In other information, as mentioned by Abdul Mu'ti (2011), 'Abd al-'Uzzā bin 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib had a very white face, when exposed to heat, his cheeks always flushed like a blazing fire. Likewise, he had a rough, arrogant, violent, and emotional personality. His voice is also "loud" when he speaks.⁴⁶ Thus, it is not wrong to attribute *lahab* to him. Ibn 'Āshūr, as quoted by M. Quraish Shihab, gives the reason why the name 'Abd al-'Uzzā is not mentioned directly in the Qur'an. According to him, the word 'Uzzā is the name of one of the idols worshipped by the polytheists (Q.S. An-Najm [53]: 19–20), so the Qur'an is reluctant to use that name.⁴⁷

According to the author, this view is too normative and simplifies the context. Although the Qur'an was indeed revealed to respond to and answer the problems of mankind, the Qur'an is not a text that must "submit" to the context. Many of the verses are non-historical, which were revealed without certain background causes. In this context, the author is more inclined to see the use of the term *Abū Lahab* as a symbolic expression that emphasizes the "eternal mission" of the Qur'an as a book of guidance (*al-hudā*) for all time.

Correlation of *Abī Lahab* and *Dharāta Lahab*

The connection between the words *أبي لهب* in the first verse and *ذات لهب* in the third verse, among others, is the *jinās*⁴⁸ (similarity of words), where *Abū Lahab* is a simile that aims at *taṣḡir* (belittling) and *taḥqīr* (humiliating) just like *Abū Jahal* which means "fool".⁴⁹ The mention of *Abī Lahab* in the first verse is an affirmation of *Abū Lahab*'s doom—and it is proven in history, while the mention of *zāta Lahab* in the third verse illustrates the doom he will receive in the hereafter. If the *Lahab* in the first verse is a psychological description, then the *Lahab* in the third verse is a description of hellfire that is meant for *Abū Lahab* and *Umm Jamīl*,

45 M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsīr Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan dan Keserasian Al-Qur'an*, vol. 15 (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2005), 598–99.

46 Fathi Fawzi Abdul Mu'ti, *Kisah Nyata Dibalik Turunnya Ayat-Ayat Suci Al-Qur'an (Asbabun Nuzul Untuk Zaman Kita)*, trans. M. Dedi Slamet Riyadhi and Khalifurrahman (Jakarta: Zaman, 2011), 561.

47 Shihab, *Tafsīr Al-Mishbah: Pesan, Kesan dan Keserasian Al-Qur'an*, 15:598.

48 *Jinās* is when two words are similar in pronunciation and different in meaning. *Jinās* is of two kinds: *tām* and *ghayru tām*. See, Zuḥaylī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Munīr: Fi al-'Aqīdah wa al-Sharī'ah wa al-Manhaj*, 15:858. See also, Rahman, "Surat Al-Lahab dalam Studi Analisis Stilistika," 127.

49 Zuḥaylī, 15:858.

his wife.⁵⁰

If the verse had been revealed with the structure *تبت يدا عبد العزى* (*tabbat yadā 'Abd al-'Uzzā*), instead of using the words *تبت يدا أبي لهب* (*tabbat yadā Abī Lahab*), the attribution would have been personalized to 'Abd al-'Uzzā, thus excluding the possibility of it happening to someone else at a different phase. For example, the absurd phenomenon that Maryam experienced upon the birth of 'Isā. Something similar can't happen again. The Qur'an does not mention the name 'Abd al-'Uzzā in the context of Sūrah Al-Masad explicitly, indicating that its system of meaning is open to interpretation. As al-Shā'rāwī says, if the Qur'an does not refer to a specific name and story, it implies that a similar story will not occur on another occasion. But if it is the other way round, as in the case of the mention of Fir'aun's title, then it may happen repeatedly in the future.⁵¹

Mythological System Analysis: From Connotative Meaning to Myth

Based on the linguistic analysis above, the author concludes that the denotation meaning of *Abī Lahab* is the figure of an uncle of the prophet named 'Abd al-'Uzzā Ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib who has an excessive emotional tendency, so he does not hesitate to make enemies whom he hates, even though the person concerned is his relative. However, in Roland Barthes' reading of mythology, the meaning of the figure of Abū Lahab does not stop at linguistic analysis alone, especially since it has previously been explained that the mufasir understand this word as a *kunyah*, not referring to a personal name. As the next operational form, the second level of the semiotic system must be carried out by extracting the mythical meaning hidden behind the word "Abū Lahab". To reach this stage, we must pay attention to the elements of connotation meaning, by way of—other than through reference to mufasir interpretations—examining the socio-historical context surrounding the text, both the micro context (*sabab al-nuzūl*) and the macro context (the social, cultural and political conditions of Arab society at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an), so that it will reveal what is the ideological system that resides behind the context of Abū Lahab.

Before further analyzing the connotative sign, the following is the procedure for the second layer of meaning of the word Abū Lahab:

50 Her full name was Arwā bintu Ḥarb bin Umāyyah. She was the sister of Abī Ṣufyān. Arwā was a well-respected woman among the Quraysh, as she was one of the leaders of the Quraysh women. People called her "*Ummu Jamīl*". This designation was not a name, but rather a nickname for her. Because it is the tradition of the Arabs to call someone not by his real name, but his *kunyah* or nickname/title. See, Abī al-Faṭḥ al-Azadī al-Mawṣulī, *Asmā' Man Yu'rafu bi Kunyatihī min Aṣḥāb Rasūlillāh Saw* (Mesir: Universitas 'Ain Syams, n.d.), 46. See also, 'Imāduddīn Abī al-Fidā' Ismā'īl ibn Kathīr al-Dimashq, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, vol. 7 (Kairo: Al-Maktabah al-Islāmiyyah, 2017), 386.

51 Shihab, *Tafsīr Al-Misbbah: Pesan, Kesan dan Keserasian Al-Qur'an*, 15:698.

<p>I. Signifier (Abī Lahab)</p>	<p>II. Signified A nickname for ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, the Prophet Muhammad’s uncle</p>
<p>III. Denotative sign An uncle who holds excessive grudges indiscriminately</p>	<p>IV. Connotatif Signified A figure who opposes the truth</p>
<p>V. Connotatif Sign “Abū Lahab” is anyone who opposes the truth and is intolerant (radical) towards other groups, not hesitating to take offensive action against them if they do not align with his ideology or political interests.</p>	

Diagram 2. The Semiology of “Abū Lahab”

This table illustrates how myth formation takes place. In the first stage of the semiological system, we see the word *Abī Lahab* as the signifier, with the signified being the nickname (*kunyah*) for ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, the Prophet’s uncle. From this relationship of signifier and signified, we derive the sign that Abū Lahab is “*an uncle who holds excessive grudges indiscriminately.*” Why is this so? Because the Prophet Muḥammad was his nephew, the son of his sibling ‘Abdullāh. His close relationship with the prophet did not make him sympathize with him. Al-Hāfizh Abī Faṭḥ points out that Abū Lahab and his wife were the Prophet’s neighbors, but they were so keen to speak against him that they did not even hesitate to harm and threaten him.⁵²

Then in the second layer semiological system, the form of sign I (*denotative sign*) above experiences evaporation of meaning, it becomes a *connotative signifier* or signifier II for the next meaning process. When it is positioned as sign I, it is a full, complete meaning. But when it enters the second system, it becomes a container that opens up space for new meanings. To be able to find this meaning, the method taken is by reviewing the socio-historical context relating to Sūrah Al-Masad. As explained in various tafsir literature, it can be identified that Sūrah Al-Masad has a connection with the prophe’s *da‘wab*. There are several well-known narrations regarding the cause of the *nuzūl* of this verse. Al-Ṭabarī notes that the prophet preached his message in a *sirriyah* (secretive manner) for three years since his inauguration as Prophet. After the verse was revealed: “*And warn your next of kin*” (Sūrah Ash-Shu‘arā [26]: 214), he carried out the command and went up to the hill of *Shafā*⁵³ to invite his family to approach him. There he made an invitation to them that they should all glorify Allah and not associate partners with Him. Hearing this, Abu Lahab immediately responded by saying: “*Woe to you (tabban*

52 Mawṣūlī, *Asmā’ Man Yu’rafu bi Kunyatibi min Aṣḥāb Rasūlillāh Saw*, 46.

53 According to the narration quoted by Sayyid Quṭb, this event took place in the city of Mecca at a place called Buṭḥā’. See, Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān*, vol. 6 (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 2003), 3999.

laka) all day long, is this why you called us?" At that time, this *sūrah* was revealed.⁵⁴

Historical Setting: The Ideological Motives Behind Sūrah Al-Masad

In addition to paying attention to the micro aspects (*sabab nuzūl*) behind the revelation of the verse as mentioned above, we need to see how the social setting (*socio-cultural*) of the community when the *sūrah* was revealed. In this context, there is a narration from Aḥmad and Ṭabrānī quoted by Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) in his tafsir *Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān*. When the prophet at that time invited his relatives to embrace the doctrine of monotheism, Abū Lahab ('Abd al-'Uzzā) said to the audience present at that place: "O Banī Fulan, this man [Muḥammad] wants you to leave Lata and 'Uzzā, and to leave your jinn allies from Banī Mālik ibn Aqmas, to follow the heresy and error that he has brought. Do not listen to his words or accept his invitation!"⁵⁵ From this narration it is illustrated that the condition of the Arabian society, especially Mecca at that time, had a strong belief in idols, even making them worship. In addition, they were also known as a *jabiliyyah* society, a morally backward society. Adultery, drunkenness, and even killing their daughters, became a proud tradition at that time.

In addition, paying attention to the characteristics that mark the aspect of its descent is important in unraveling the ideology behind the story of Abū Lahab. In the literature of *'ulūm al-Qurʾān*, Sūrah Al-Masad is referred to as a Sūrah Makkiyah, because it was revealed in Makkah during the early phase of the Prophet's preaching. Several characteristics inherent in this phase include monotheism, tolerance, egalitarianism, justice, warnings, and calls to believe in Allah and His messenger. 'Ābid al-Jābirī (d. 2010) in *al-Aql al-Siyāsī al-'Arabī*, says the Makkiyah verses have characteristics that emphasise the attitude of humanism-universal. This humanism does not refer to certain specific appendages (such as ethnicity, religion, race, or class). So, the humanism that the Qur'an offers in this phase is not tribal humanism or sectarian humanism as practiced by the people of Mecca before, but "humanitarian humanism". In a sense, the Qur'an does not categorize humans based on tribes, but humans personally.⁵⁶

Given the above characteristics, Sūrah Al-Masad can be identified as revolving around two main fragments: *first*, giving a "warning" (*naẓīr*) to mankind in general; *second*, a strong condemnation of Abū Lahab's attitude. This narrative of condemnation can be understood through the redaction of the word *tabba* or

54 See more details in Abū Ja'fār Ibnu Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qurʾān*, vol. 11 (Kairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2010), 758-766.

55 Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān*, 6:3999. Here is the full history text:

قال ابن إسحاق: حدثني حسين بن عبد الله بن عبيد الله بن عباس قال: سمعت ربيعة بن عباد الديلي يقول: إني لمع أبي رجل شاب أنظر إلى رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم يتبع القبائل، وراءه رجل أحول، وضيء الوجه ذو حمة، يقف رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم على القبيلة فيقول: يا فلان، إني رسول الله إليكم أمركم أن تعبدوا الله ولا تشركوا به شيئاً، وأن تصدقني وتمنعوني حتى أنفذ عن الله ما بعثني به.. وإذا فرغ من مقالته قال الآخر من خلفه: يا بني فلان، هذا يريد منكم أن تلتبسوا اللات والعزى وحلفاءكم من الجن من بني مالك بن أقمس، إلى ما جاء به من البدعة والضلالة، فلا تسمعوا له، ولا تتبعوه. فقلت لأبي: من هذا؟ قال عمه أبو هب (رواه الإمام أحمد والظبراني)

56 'Ābid al-Jābirī, *Al-Aql al-Siyāsī al-'Arabī: Muḥaddadātuhu wa Tajlīyātuhu* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 1991), 60.

tabab (infinitive) at the beginning of the sura.⁵⁷ Thus, a new meaning can be drawn at the second signified level (connotation meaning) that “Abū Lahab” is “a person who opposes the truth.” This is based on the historical trajectory of Abū Lahab. This is based on the historical trajectory of Abū Lahab (‘Abd al-‘Uzzā) himself as an opponent of the truth. Al-Qarnī records details of this, such as: rebellious, stubborn, arrogant, boastful of his rank and family, and the greatest-according to al-Qarnī-was mobilizing all his property and family to fight and obstruct the preaching of the Prophet Muhammad saw.⁵⁸

From the analysis of the two micro-macro contexts above, the relationship between signifier II (the vindictive figure Abū Lahab) and signified II (opponents of the truth) gave birth to the meaning of the *myth* that became the core meaning of the word “Abū Lahab”, namely: “anyone who opposes the truth and is intolerant (radical) towards other groups, not hesitating to fight offensively against them if they are not in line with their personal or group ideology or political interests.” All the values in this *myth* are the inherent character traits of ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā. So, the term “Abū Lahab” is addressed to everyone, it’s just that at the time of the Prophet, the most prominent character in the myth of “Abū Lahab” was ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā.

The above argument is strengthened by at least two reasons. *First*, this study refers to two rules used by scholars in understanding the verses of the Qur’an, namely (1) *al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafẓi lā khusūṣ al-sabab*, (2) *al-‘ibrah bi khusūṣ al-sabab lā bi ‘umūm al-lafẓi*. The first rule emphasizes the importance of referring to the generality of the *lafaz*, while the second rule emphasizes the events that led to the revelation of the verse.⁵⁹ If the first rule is used to analyze the linguistic system of the word Abū Lahab, then the second rule is used to uncover the ideology behind the revelation of Sūrah Al-Masad.

Aksin Wijaya, an expert in the field of Qur’anic studies, emphasizes the importance of using this rule in understanding the verses of the Qur’an because, with this rule, one can absorb the values of the universal message of the Qur’an in answering reality. From these universal messages, we can contextualize or apply the meaning of a verse to the new reality in which the verse is interpreted.⁶⁰ *Second*, there is a rule of interpretation that justifies the continuation of a particular story

57 Ibn ‘Āshūr explained that every verse that begins with the word *tabba* is meant to denounce and threaten the context in which the verse is referring to. See, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir bin ‘Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, vol. 30 (Tūnis: Dār al-Ṭūnisīyah li al-Nashr, 1994), 600.

58 ‘Ā’id bin ‘Abdullāh al-Qarnī, “Durūs Al-Shaikh ‘Ā’id al-Qarnī,” Al-Maktabah al-Shāmilah, accessed May 24, 2024, <https://shamela.ws/book/7708>.

59 According to ‘Alī as-Ṣobūnī, the popular opinion held by interpreters of the Qur’an is the opposite rule, namely *al-‘ibrah bi ‘umūm al-lafẓi lā khusūṣ al-sabab*. This rule emphasizes the indispensability of a verse to be associated with the specific event that led to its revelation, but it is sufficient to look at the generality of the verse. Lihat, ‘Alī al-Ṣabūnī, *Al-Tibyān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Jakarta: Dinamika Berkah Utama, 1985), 29.

60 Aksin Wijaya, *Arab Baru Studi Ulumul Qur’an: Memburu Pesan Tuhan di Balik Fenomena Budaya* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2020), 148; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1984), 6.

if the story uses a title/nickname, not the name of the character/actor.⁶¹ These two things reinforce the author's claim that "Abū Lahab" is a dynamic-universal phenomenon. And, in today's context, anyone can potentially become "Abū Lahab" if they fulfill the conditions and criteria above.

Conclusion

This research concludes with several main points that distinguish it from previous research. *First*, Abū Lahab is enshrined in Q.S. Al-Masad is not an identity that refers to a specific subject, but a discourse that is dynamic and applies in general, it's just that at the time of the prophet at that time, the criteria that represented the figure of "Abū Lahab" was 'Abd al-'Uzzā. *Secondly*, behind the illustration of Sūrah Al-Masad, there is an ideological system to be built, including proclaiming to the public the punishment that will [surely] be inflicted on those who oppose God's message, and preventive efforts towards the community so as not to be provoked by Abū Lahab's propaganda and slander. Abū Lahab is a title of humiliation in the history of mankind.

Thirdly, a mythical reading of the figure of Abū Lahab results in the concept that Abū Lahab is, in fact, anyone who opposes the truth and is intolerant (radical) towards other groups, not hesitating to carry out offensive resistance to them if it is not in line with his personal or group ideology or political interests. These three points show that the figure of Abū Lahab is not limited to 'Abd al-'Uzzā. In today's modern-contemporary era, anyone can tend to be Abū Lahab, if the psychological reflection on him is the same as described in the analysis above. In addition, this research also answers the misconceptions of some people who question that the Qur'an is a book of blasphemy. Through this research, it is confirmed that the Qur'an never blasphemes a particular person, but it strongly condemns the actions of those who oppose the truth, are intolerant of the human rights of others, and try to harm the honor of fellow human beings. Once again, Sūrah Al-Masad is a universal guidance that is eternal and contextual, which can be interpreted according to the situation and conditions of the era in which it is interpreted.

61 See, M. Quraish Shihab, *Kaidah Tafsir: Syarat, Ketentuan, dan Aturan Yang Patut Anda Ketahui dalam Memahami Ayat-Ayat Al-Qur'an* (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2013), 322–23.

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