Uncovering implicit life values in T*axi Driver* season 1: a semiotic analysis of moral messages through Roland Barthes' framework

Ria Sukma Dewi[1], *Rizky Lutviana[2]

[1]Universitas Terbuka Denpasar, [2]Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang

Abstract

The Korean drama Taxi Driver Season 1 presents a compelling narrative that combines intense action with emotional depth, tackling pressing social issues such as crime, revenge, and systemic injustice. This study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyze the embedded moral messages in episodes 3 and 4 of the series. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research focuses on interpreting signs, symbols, and cultural myths to uncover implicit life values conveyed through the storyline and visual elements. Findings reveal that the drama makes extensive use of symbolic representations—most notably, the taxi as a metaphor for justice and a vehicle for vigilante retribution. These symbols reflect widespread societal disillusionment with the justice system's inadequacies, particularly in safeguarding marginalized individuals and holding perpetrators accountable. The drama critiques institutional corruption and explores the ethical tension surrounding extrajudicial actions taken in the pursuit of justice. Despite its thematic emphasis on revenge, Taxi Driver ultimately conveys a deeper moral message that advocates for ethical restraint and lawful responses to injustice. The narrative encourages viewers to critically reflect on the societal structures that enable injustice and the moral consequences of bypassing those structures in pursuit of personal or collective retribution. In conclusion, Taxi Driver Season 1 functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural text that invites ethical introspection and a reevaluation of personal and societal values in the face of moral and legal dilemmas.

***Keywords:** Semiotic Analysis, Roland Barthes, Moral Message, Korean Drama*

Introduction

In recent years, Korean dramas have become a powerful medium for sharing moral, social, and cultural values with a global audience. With their engaging storylines and emotional depth, these dramas go beyond simple entertainment. They often highlight important issues such as justice, inequality, and social solidarity, encouraging viewers to reflect on real-world problems (Hare, 2021). One drama that stands out in this regard is *Taxi Driver* Season 1. This series successfully blends action and psychological drama with deeper themes like revenge and social justice. Episodes 3 and 4, in particular, tell the story of characters seeking justice outside the legal system, exposing the struggles of victims trapped in an unfair society (Grange & Lian, 2022).

This study focuses on how Korean dramas, especially *Taxi Driver*, use visual and narrative elements to deliver meaningful messages. These moral lessons are rarely stated directly. Instead, they are embedded in symbols, character actions, and plot development—requiring audiences to read between the lines (Neofotistos, 2023). Through these methods, the drama invites viewers to think critically about the legal and social systems around them.

To better understand how these symbols work, this research applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Barthes explains that signs can carry meaning on three levels: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (implied meaning), and myth (wider cultural meaning) (Madisson & Ventsel, 2020). Using this framework, the study explores how *Taxi Driver*'s symbols and storylines convey deeper messages about morality, justice, and community values.

The main character, Kim Do Gi, represents more than just a revenge-seeker. His actions point to a larger issue: the failure of legal systems to protect the innocent. The drama gives a voice to victims who have been ignored or mistreated by institutions meant to help them. This message resonates strongly with audiences, particularly in South Korea, where cultural values such as collectivism, family loyalty, and the emotional concept of han—a shared feeling of deep sorrow and injustice rooted in historical struggles—shape how stories are understood.

By analyzing key scenes from episodes 3 and 4, this research aims to uncover how visual and narrative symbols in *Taxi Driver* function not just as artistic tools, but as carriers of powerful moral messages. Barthes' semiotic approach helps reveal how each scene holds both surface-level meaning and deeper interpretations that critique modern society (de Lima et al., 2025;Der, 2024). This study also considers how South Korean viewers, influenced by their cultural background, may interpret these symbols differently than international audiences.

While earlier studies have used Barthes' semiotics to analyze classic films or broad cultural symbols, few have applied this theory specifically to Korean dramas. For example, (Long & He, 2021) explored cultural myths through language but did not look at popular media. (Neofotistos, 2023) focused on visual color symbolism in older films, while (de Lima et al., 2025) used semiotics in artificial intelligence-generated stories. None of these studies addressed how popular TV dramas convey moral messages. This research fills that gap by showing how Korean dramas, especially those like *Taxi Driver*, serve not just as

entertainment but also as a form of social critique.

Other researchers have looked at Korean and Asian dramas using different theories.(Li, 2022), for instance, compared how doctors are portrayed in Korean, Chinese, and American medical dramas using media framing theory. (Huma, 2015) examined changes in Pakistani television dramas across decades, focusing on how Western influence altered content and values. While both studies offer useful insights, they did not explore how symbols and narratives work together to communicate moral ideas, nor did they use semiotics as their main tool.

What makes this study unique is its modern focus: using semiotic theory to analyze the moral and social messages hidden in a popular Korean drama that has gained international attention. As Korean dramas grow more influential worldwide, understanding how they communicate these values becomes increasingly important. This research aims to show that *Taxi Driver* is not just a story of revenge but a meaningful reflection on justice and the human need for fairness and dignity (Zigon, 2020).

In summary, this study uses Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to examine how *Taxi Driver* Season 1—particularly episodes 3 and 4—delivers moral messages through its use of symbols and storytelling. It reveals how Korean cultural values influence both the making of these dramas and the way audiences interpret them. By doing so, this research highlights the important role that popular media plays in shaping our understanding of justice, community, and moral responsibility in today's society.

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with (Smith, 2023) semiotic theory as the main analytical framework. This approach is appropriate for exploring how visual media communicates deeper meanings through symbols and narratives. Barthes' theory—focusing on denotation (literal meaning), connotation (implied meaning), and myth (cultural meaning)—guides the analysis of selected

scenes in the Korean drama *Taxi Driver* Season 1.

Data for this study includes scenes from episodes 3 and 4, chosen for their strong moral and symbolic content related to themes such as justice, revenge, and solidarity. These scenes are analyzed using a thematic coding process based on Barthes' semiotic model to identify relevant signs and their deeper meanings.

Secondary sources, including books and journal articles on semiotics and media studies, support the theoretical background and help contextualize the findings.

The data analysis consists of three main stages:

1. Data reduction – selecting and focusing on scenes with strong symbolic content.

2. Data presentation – describing key visuals, dialogue, and actions that reflect moral values.
3. Conclusion drawing – interpreting how these elements convey deeper social and ethical messages.

By combining scene analysis with semiotic theory, this study aims to reveal how *Taxi Driver* functions not just as entertainment, but as a vehicle for moral and social critique.

Results and Discussion

The drama *Taxi Driver* Season 1 explores themes of social justice, revenge, and the struggle against injustice faced by victims of crime. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, an analysis of the symbols in this drama reveals how visual and narrative elements reflect the characters' social values, trauma, and moral struggles. Symbols such as the taxi, physical violence, and bread carry not only literal meanings but also connotations that shape the narrative of injustice, redemption, and hope. This study aims to identify the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in key scenes to understand the moral messages and social values conveyed by the drama.

Table 1. Symbols, their meanings and moral messages in *Taxi Driver*

Fig	Time	Scene Description	Denotative Analysis	Connotative Analysis	Myth	Moral Message
1	18:43	Introduction of Park Jung Min's moral dilemma.	Taxi as an ordinary transportation tool.	Taxi as a symbol of moral choice, representing revenge or justice.	Injustice can lead to extrajudicial action.	Revenge is not a solution for peace. True justice comes through empathy and legal process.
2	32:15	Park Jung Min recalls painful memories and contemplates revenge.	Flashback to Park Jung Min's tortured past.	Trauma and desire for revenge seen as a way to overcome suffering.	Injustice creates a moral justification for retaliation.	The importance of seeking legitimate justice despite trauma and hardship.
3	23:27-23:57	Park Seung Tae bullies Park Jung Min for his "fishy smell."	Physical insult regarding body odour.	Body odour as a symbol of social impurity and discrimination.	Social norms target those who don't fit accepted standards.	Discrimination and bullying based on superficial characteristics are harmful.
4	24:03-24:24	Park Jung Min experiences physical violence from bullies.	Physical violence inflicted by bullies.	Power imbalance where the aggressors dehumanize the victim.	Physical strength and group power dominate individuality.	Bullying and violence often stem from power dynamics and social norms.
5	25:38-25:50	Ongoing extortion of money from Park Jung Min by bullies.	Financial exploitation and manipulation.	Bullying as a tool for economic and social control.	Power and control through money and fear.	Social justice and respecting individual dignity are essential in stopping cycles of oppression.
6	34:39	Park Seung Tae regrets his actions after seeing Kim Do Gi's battle.	Regret depicted through anxiety while eating bread.	Bread as a symbol of atonement and humility.	Redemption can begin with small actions and sincerity.	Redemption starts with regret and a sincere effort to make amends.
7	38:28	Park Seung Tae decides to work at a bakery to atone for his sins.	Humble actions taken for redemption.	Bread symbolizes humility and an attempt to make moral amends.	Redemption achieved through humility and hard work.	Change comes through responsibility and taking action to improve oneself.

The semiotic analysis of *Taxi Driver Season 1* reveals how symbols, signs, and myths within the scenes represent deeper moral, social, and psychological themes, particularly related to justice, revenge, and redemption.

Each figure introduces a new aspect of Park Jung Min's and Park Seung Tae's journeys, highlighting key issues of power, social norms, and personal transformation.

a. Figures 1 and 2 address the moral dilemmas of Park Jung Min, who grapples with revenge and justice. The taxi symbol in these scenes emphasizes the moral crossroads the character faces, where the desire for retribution conflicts with his internal sense of justice. Barthes' analysis shows that revenge is often justified as a means to right the wrongs experienced, though ultimately, it leads to greater violence rather than resolution. These scenes teach viewers that true justice comes not from personal vengeance but through legal processes and moral values.

b. Figures 3, 4, and 5 portray the brutal bullying that Park Jung Min endures. In these scenes, physical violence, economic exploitation, and discrimination are depicted as mechanisms of power used to oppress those who do not conform to societal standards. The connotative meanings suggest that power dynamics are often skewed in favour of the strong, and weaker individuals are subjected to societal ridicule, violence, and manipulation. The moral lesson here is the importance of social justice and respecting each individual's dignity regardless of physical, economic, or social differences.

c. Figures 6 and 7 focus on Park Seung Tae's regret and his attempt at redemption. In these scenes, bread becomes a symbol of humility and atonement, reflecting a deep desire for change. Barthes' myth suggests that redemption is attainable through small, sincere actions like taking responsibility for one's mistakes. These scenes teach the viewer that acknowledging wrongs and making amends is a process that requires humility and effort, offering a path toward personal transformation.

This drama displays strong psychological elements in each character, by delving deeper into their dark side and internal conflicts that arise from past trauma. This phenomenon has a great emotional impact on the audience, who are then faced with moral questions about what should be done when the legal system fails to provide justice. The widespread popularity of this drama, evident in its consistently high ratings, indicates that many viewers relate to the themes explored, making it an even more relevant subject for analysis. One effective approach to gaining a deeper understanding of the moral messages in this drama is by applying Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (Amen & Nia, 2021). Barthes provides the view that the symbols and signs contained in a work are not only for direct communication purposes, but can also carry deeper and hidden meanings, which can only be understood through careful analysis of the various elements in the story (Wilson & Daddario, 2023)

Figure 1. Scene 18.43

Figure 2. Scene 32.15

In *Taxi Driver* Season 1, at 18:43, viewers are introduced to the moral dilemma faced by Park Jung Min. After hearing that the Rainbow Taxi service can help him get revenge on Park Seung Tae, he begins to think hard about whether to use the service or not. At this moment, feelings of confusion and hesitation are very clear in his facial expressions. Denotatively, the taxi is simply a regular mode of transportation, but within the context of the story, it evolves into a symbol representing a significant moral decision. It becomes more than just a vehicle; it symbolizes the journey that can push an individual toward extreme measures in the pursuit of justice or revenge. In connotation, the taxi becomes more than just a physical tool; it depicts the path taken by the character to seek revenge for the suffering he has experienced. The conflict between the craving for revenge and the sense of doubt reflects the moral ambiguity in human existence, particularly when confronting injustice that has altered someone's life.

At 32:15, Park Jung Min's inner tension grows. He remembers the painful times at his new school, where he had to experience torture every day. These bad memories haunt him, and he feels that revenge is a way to overcome his suffering. In connotative analysis, the torture he experienced not only includes physical violence, but further illustrates a deep sense of loss of control and helplessness. This leads the audience to understand how trauma can change one's perspective on the world and justice. In terms of myth, the torture experienced by Park Jung Min becomes a symbol of greater injustice in society. The myth that develops here is that injustice, if not addressed by the existing legal system, can drive individuals to take extrajudicial action as a form of legitimate retaliation, even though such actions risk damaging higher moral values.

From Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective, this tension not only reflects an individual's inner journey, but also touches on a larger ideology of justice and revenge. The denotation of this image is that Park Jung Min is facing a real dilemma, but further connotation reveals a deeper meaning: justice sought through violence or retaliation. The myth in this case conveys the idea that individuals who feel wronged may believe that they have the right to seek justice by any means, even by using violence or illegitimate means. This creates a narrative in which retaliation is seen as a legitimate way to repay a moral and social debt, even though such actions may risk causing further damage to the individual and society as a whole. In a world full of injustice, this myth serves to justify actions that are fundamentally contrary to social norms.

In terms of the moral message contained, this story teaches us that revenge is not a solution that can bring true peace. Although Park Jung Min feels a strong desire to take revenge for his suffering, this drama implicitly invites the audience to question whether this action will truly restore peace to his life. The moral lesson conveyed is the importance of pursuing rightful justice and upholding higher moral principles, even when the legal system appears to be unjust at times. The life values contained in this drama are the importance of self-control and the awareness that revenge will only create a greater cycle of violence, while true justice is achieved through empathy, patience, and the correct legal process.

Figure 3. Scene 23.27-23.57

Figure 4. Scene 24.03-24.24

Figure 5. Scene 25.38-25.50

At 23:27 to 23:57, in *Taxi Driver* Season 1, it is seen how Park Seung Tae begins to bully Park Jung Min by calling him a fishy smell. This insult stems from Park Seung Tae's hatred of the fishy smell that he considers disturbing his sense of smell. In Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, this incident can be seen from a denotative perspective as an act of bullying that focuses on physical differences felt by one individual. The denotation of this scene is simply an expression of insult to someone's body odour that is considered not in accordance with accepted social standards. On a connotative level, the portrayal of the fishy odor clinging to Park Jung Min carries a deeper significance, symbolizing social 'purity,' which is frequently used to discriminate against individuals deemed different or who fail to meet societal expectations. The myth that emerges here reflects the notion that those labeled as "unclean" or "non-conforming" to social norms are often subject to mockery or harm, indicating that such social injustice is perpetuated by prevailing societal standards.

At 24:03 to 24:24, Park Jung Min is taken to the rooftop by Park Seung Tae and his friends, where he begins to experience physical violence for the first time as a result of the fishy smell that interferes with Park Seung Tae's sense of smell. In semiotic analysis, this scene not only depicts the physical violence experienced by Park Jung Min, but also shows the victim's helplessness in the face of persecution. Denotatively, this scene shows physical actions in the form of beatings and

torture carried out by the aggressor group against the victim. However, in a deeper connotation, this scene depicts the imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, where the perpetrator feels he has the right to degrade the victim simply because of physical reasons that are considered imperfect or unpleasant. The myth created here is the idea that physical strength and group power are more valued than a person's individuality or uniqueness. In this context, the culture of bullying that grows in society often creates space for weaker individuals to be exploited emotionally and physically, for reasons that seem trivial.

At 25:38 to 25:50, In this scene, Park Jung Min is shown being repeatedly extorted and physically abused by Park Seung Tae and his peers, forced to pay money each week under the threat of continued violence. At the denotative level, this scene clearly depicts acts of financial exploitation intertwined with physical aggression. Connotatively, the extortion represents not only the abuse of power but also a system of social control where dominance is maintained through fear, humiliation, and manipulation.

On the mythical level, this scene communicates a larger social ideology: that power and authority can be enforced not just physically, but economically. In the world of *Taxi Driver*, money becomes a symbol of domination—used to control, silence, and dehumanize victims. This reflects how social hierarchies are often sustained by coercive economic pressure in school settings, where students with higher social capital exploit those who are socially or economically vulnerable.

Psychologically, this repeated exploitation illustrates the internalized trauma and learned helplessness experienced by victims like Park Jung Min. He becomes trapped in a cycle where resistance feels impossible and silence becomes a form of survival. Socially, the scene reveals how school violence operates as a microcosm of wider societal injustice, where institutional failures (such as the absence of adult intervention or accountability) allow abusive systems to thrive.

Furthermore, this moment can be read through the lens of Confucian social structure,

where hierarchy and obedience are emphasized. While Confucianism generally promotes harmony and respect, its distorted application in hierarchical school environments may justify bullying under the guise of seniority or status. In this way, Jung Min's suffering reflects a corrupted moral order, where those with perceived "social authority" misuse it for oppression.

The moral lesson derived from these three scenes highlights the importance of social justice and the need to respect the dignity of every individual, regardless of their physical, social, or economic differences. Within the context of *Taxi Driver*, the injustice faced by Park Jung Min reflects a broader societal issue, where individuals who are considered "different" or who do not conform to established norms often become targets of discrimination and violence. Through the series of physical abuse and extortion experienced by Park Jung Min, the audience is encouraged to reflect on the urgent need to build collective awareness to break the cycle of bullying and violence in society.

The scene powerfully demonstrates that unchecked power—whether physical, social, or financial—can perpetuate cycles of injustice. Park Jung Min's experience serves as a critique of societal systems that allow such exploitation to go unpunished. The underlying moral value emphasizes the urgent need for justice, empathy, and the protection of individual dignity, especially for those silenced by fear.

More deeply, the moral message conveyed is about empowering individuals to stand up against injustice and how collective strength should be used to uplift one another, not to oppress. By portraying a reality filled with social conflict and inequality, the drama invites viewers to consider how they can contribute to creating a more just and inclusive environment. The life values embedded in these scenes—such as empathy, the courage to resist injustice, and the importance of social solidarity—are highly relevant to everyday life, especially in the ongoing effort to build a more peaceful and respectful society.
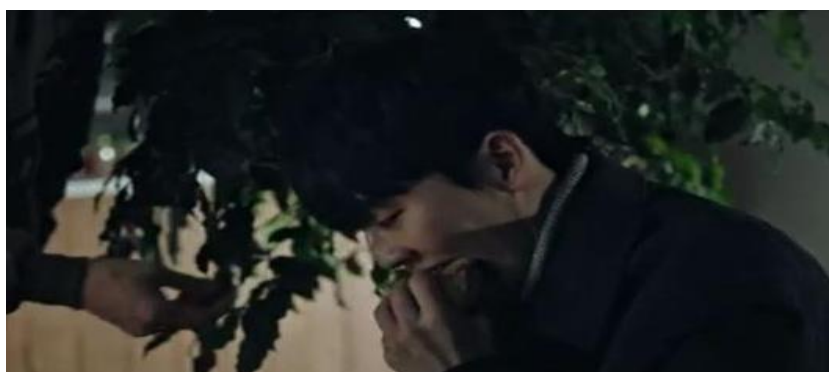
Figure 7. Scene 34.39

Figure 7. Scene 38.28

At 34.39, the scene depicts Park Seung Tae showing signs of regret after witnessing Kim Do Gi engage in a brutal fight with the thugs he had hired. This moment marks a turning point for Seung Tae, who had previously shown no remorse. From a semiotic perspective, the denotative level presents Seung Tae eating bread in visible anxiety. Connotatively, the bread transcends its literal function, symbolizing humility, inner reflection, and the beginning of atonement.

On the mythical level, the bread becomes a symbol of sincere repentance and a modest attempt to improve oneself. Psychologically, this act reflects the internal conflict arising from guilt and shame. Socially, the scene resonates with the deeply rooted Confucian values prevalent in South Korean culture, where self-cultivation, moral responsibility, and restoring harmony are essential ideals. Furthermore, the concept of shame culture plays a significant role in shaping Seung Tae's behaviour. In such cultural contexts, moral failure is not only an individual burden but also a social blemish. Therefore, the anxiety he experiences while eating bread embodies the psychological pressure caused by guilt, social shame, and the desire to restore personal integrity within societal norms.

At 38.28, the scene continues with Park Seung Tae taking a decisive step toward redemption by working at a bakery. This humble job reflects his moral effort to atone for past actions. Denotatively, the scene shows him distributing bread and apologizing for his past behaviour. Connotatively, the bread once again serves as a symbol of humility, personal sacrifice, and a desire to rebuild one's moral identity.

On a mythical level, this act is a representation of classic redemption, where hard work and humility are seen as noble paths toward moral restoration. Within the framework of Confucian ethics, the act of taking responsibility and engaging in corrective behaviour is viewed as a crucial step in regaining moral virtue. Simultaneously, the Korean shame culture influences the need to redeem not only personal dignity but also familial and social honour. Seung Tae's transformation, therefore, is not merely individual, but embedded in the larger context of collective moral expectations.

The moral message contained in this scene is that sincere regret can initiate a change in life. In real life, a person is often faced with the responsibility to correct mistakes, although it requires a process that is not easy. The value taught is that every individual has the opportunity to change and correct mistakes, no matter how big the mistake is. The process of redemption often begins with small steps full of humility, and simple actions, such as working hard or taking responsibility for one's actions, can have a big impact on self-change. Bread, in this case, serves as a symbol of sincerity and

Discussion

The symbolic representation of personal transformation and moral responsibility found in *Taxi Driver* aligns with previous studies that emphasize the moral dimensions conveyed through visual storytelling. What distinguishes *Taxi Driver* is its consistent use of symbolic gestures (such as silent acts of kindness or characters choosing not to seek revenge) to evoke a sense of moral ambiguity, challenging the audience to interpret right and wrong through their own cultural and emotional frameworks. Unlike earlier works that often present clear moral binaries, this drama emphasizes complexity and inner conflict — traits that resonate with Barthes' concept of myth, where cultural narratives are subtly embedded in everyday signs.

In the context of today's society, especially amid rising social tensions and a

Conclusion

This study finds that *Taxi Driver* Season 1 conveys strong moral messages beneath its crime-thriller surface. Using Barthes' semiotic theory, symbols such as the taxi serve not only literal functions but also represent moral journeys and ethical dilemmas. The drama critiques social injustice and the failure of legal systems, portraying revenge as a flawed response that often perpetuates violence. It emphasizes that true justice must be rooted in ethical principles, patience, and respect for humanity.

The drama functions as moral pedagogy, encouraging viewers — especially younger audiences — to reflect critically on

effort to improve the situation. The life value contained in this scene teaches the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions, trying to improve oneself, and appreciating every opportunity to make amends. This case, serves as a symbol of sincerity and effort to improve the situation. The life value contained in this scene teaches the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions, trying to improve oneself, and appreciating every opportunity to make amends.

growing call for justice reform, the messages portrayed in *Taxi Driver* hold significant relevance. The drama encourages reflection on how individuals and communities respond to injustice — not only through punishment, but also through compassion and accountability.

This suggests that popular media can function as a platform for moral discourse, shaping public attitudes toward social responsibility. The portrayal of characters who actively choose to change and repair their wrongdoings sends a powerful message: transformation is possible, and it starts with individual accountability.

Moreover, by presenting moral issues in a culturally resonant format, such narratives can contribute to a broader ethical awareness among viewers, encouraging empathy and critical reflection in real-life social situations.

issues like abuse of power, systemic failure, and collective responsibility. It integrates Confucian values, promoting moral integrity, self-restraint, and the dangers of unchecked revenge.

Future studies can explore the psychological impact of trauma on character decisions and moral reasoning, examine the social impact of such dramas on viewers' perceptions of justice and the legal system, conduct comparative studies with other media that address similar themes, or investigate cross-cultural audience responses to understand varying interpretations of justice and morality.

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