

Hair symbols as representations of love and loss in Nizar Qabbani's poetry: a semiotic study of Roland Barthes

*Bima Sakti¹, Misbahus Surur², Moh. Mahrush Ali³, Whida Rositama⁴

^{1,2}Arabic Dept., Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang, East Java, Indonesia

^{3,4}English Dept., Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang, East Java, Indonesia

Abstract

The study aims to demonstrate how Nizar Qabbani's poem Tauud Sya'rii Alaika uses hair as a symbol to depict love and close relationships and the experience of losing someone. The study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to demonstrate how hair transforms from its basic meaning to its deeper cultural meaning. The poem uses hair as a physical body part to create a symbolic framework which conveys emotional experiences and painful memories and future aspirations. The research employed descriptive qualitative methods together with Barthes' semiotic analysis technique which examines the signs and meanings and myths present in the poem's text. The primary data source is the poem from Al-Hubb poetry anthology which contains the Nizar Qabbani work about love. The secondary data sources included relevant books and scientific articles and journals. The researchers collected data through literature study and text analysis while using Miles and Huberman model to analyze data through three steps which included data reduction and data presentation and drawing conclusions through verification process. The analysis shows that a woman's hair is not merely understood as a physical part of her body, but rather transcends its biological dimension with her lover. Hair is presented as a symbol of love, emotional closeness, and loss, enriched by the imagery of autumn and the stars as a representation of the woman's inner journey and emotional story. This simple yet meaningful symbol is used to express the dynamics of the profound journey of love and separation between herself and her lover, while also reflecting the values and cultural traditions surrounding them.

Keywords: Roland Barthes, semiotics, hair symbolism, poetry.

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Introduction

In literature, especially poetry, poets often use common symbols to express the theme of love and loss for their beloved, such as wind, rain, clouds, light, the moon, rings, and shoes. These symbols serve as a way for people to express their emotions. One example is Nizar Qabbani's poetry, which uses hair to represent love and intimacy, as well as to show emotional connections through symbolism (Jihan & Dwi, 2025). Contemporary poetry uses more complex language that contains multiple layers of meaning. Readers are asked to interpret the meaning based on their personal knowledge and life experiences. Therefore, through word choice, writers develop a style based on their understanding of reality. Figurative language serves as a central component that defines the structure of poetry, achieving greater aesthetic value through the use of this figure of speech that serves many purposes. Figures of speech make the verses of poetry more expressive and have their own appeal (Siswanto & Azalina, 2023).

*Corresponding author: **Bima Sakti**, Address: Arabic Dept., Faculty of Humanities, UIN Malang, Jl. Gajayana No. 50, Malang City, East Java, Indonesia 65144, Email address: bimas010503@gmail.com . ©2025 Leksika. All rights reserved.

Hair is an important visual feature of the human body and is often discussed in everyday life and in literary works (Lam, [2025](#)). In literature, writers use symbols such as hair to convey a wide range of emotions, including happiness, love, and sadness. Literature is generally considered a reflection of life and social reality, offering readers new perspectives on real events and phenomena. Through the study of literary works, readers can better understand aesthetic language and develop a deeper appreciation for the cultural values embedded in the text (Zahro, et, al [2023](#)). Literary works contain important elements such as figures of speech, imagery, rhyme, and meter, which poets deliberately use to create aesthetic effects (Handayani & Nur, [2025](#)). Style is central to the study of poetry because poets carefully choose and refine words to express profound emotions and meanings. Poetry reflects the aesthetic values of its time and maintains its distinctive identity through unique writing patterns and thematic expressions.

This research focuses on Nizar Qabbani's poem, *Tauud Sya'rii Alaika*, where hair functions not only as a physical characteristic but also as an emotional symbol representing intimacy and the relationship between two individuals. The choice of hair as the main symbol of the emotional journey of love distinguishes this poem from others. However, readers often have difficulty understanding the hidden meaning in poetry. Therefore, this study applies Roland Barthes's semiotic theory to uncover a deeper interpretation (Salwa, et, al., [2025](#)).

This study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which is based on Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of signs (Sabawana, et, al., [2023](#)). Barthes divides the meaning of signs into two main levels, denotative and connotative, and introduces the concept of myth as a continuation of connotative meaning. The first step in the analysis is to understand the denotative meaning, namely the direct or basic meaning of a sign (Aini & Jadidah, [2022](#)). Connotative meaning becomes a myth when it reaches public acceptance throughout society. Barthes defines myth as a general understanding that people accept without questioning its ideological basis (Pelawi, et, al., 2025). Therefore, Barthes' theory allows researchers to discover the visible and hidden meanings that exist through cultural and ideological frameworks (Kafita & Suryaman, [2023](#)).

Studies that have examined Roland Barthes' semiotics include (Mus, [2024](#); Antonia, [2023](#); Höglund, [2022](#); Azizah & Marfina, [2023](#); Amad & Ghafar, [2025](#); Shudifat, [2024](#); Fadilah, et, al., [2025](#); Resmi, et, al., [2024](#); Jumiarni, et, al., [2024](#)). The major difference between previous studies lies in the semiotic, stylistic, and descriptive approach, especially focusing on linguistic elements such as sound, diction, imagery, and technical classification of icons and indexes. The similarity lies in the use of Roland Barthes' semiotics by shifting the object studied. Nizar Qabbani's poetry uses hair as a linguistic element, which develops into a symbol of relationships that express love and loss.

This research is expected to provide new contributions to literary studies, particularly those focusing on the analysis of symbolism in poetry. This study examines how the representation of love is constructed in literary texts through the use of symbols, as well as how the experience of loss and alienation is interpreted as a consequence of love and separation. Therefore, this study aims to reveal how Nizar Qabbani's poem *Tauud Sya'rii Alaika* utilizes the symbol of hair to represent love, emotional closeness, and the experience of loss in human relationships.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach (Ahmad & Wilkins, [2025](#)) and a semiotic framework based on Roland Barthes' theory. The study examines how hair functions as a symbol of loss, love, and

alienation in the poem *Tauud Sya'rii Alaika* through an analysis of its textual signs, revealing both literal and implied meanings, according to Roland Barthes's semiotic framework, which examines how symbols create social understanding. This study uses primary data, namely the poem *Tauud Sya'rii Alaika*, found in Nizar Qabbani's collection of poems about love. Secondary data consists of books and journals, as well as scholarly articles examining semiotics and Roland Barthes' theory, as well as literary studies on poetic symbolism. The data collection method involved a literature review and text analysis. The literature review drew on references from various sources explaining semiotic theory and previous research on poetry as emotional expression.

Data analysis in this study was conducted interactively and continuously, as proposed by Miles and Huberman (Miles, et, al., [2014](#)). This process is not linear, but rather interconnected until the researcher obtains a complete understanding and accountable conclusions. In the data reduction stage, the researcher selects and focuses on data relevant to the research objectives. Data in the form of words, sentences, and paragraphs in *Tauud Sya'rii Alaika'* poem were read in depth to identify representations of love and loss through the symbolism of hair. Information obtained from journal articles, books, and web sources related to Roland Barthes's Semiotic theory and the social context was also selected. Data not directly related to the theme of love and loss was eliminated. Data reduction aims to sharpen the focus of the analysis so that only essential elements are used to construct a clear and directed research narrative.

After the data reduction, the researcher presents the data in the form of analytical descriptions and thematic groupings. Poetry excerpts are displayed and classified into specific categories, such as the emotional connection between individuals, the experience of loss due to separation, distance, or death, and nostalgia for the past. This data presentation allows the researcher to see patterns, relationships between concepts, and the social meanings contained within the text. By displaying data, researchers can understand how poetry reflects social reality and systematically plan further analysis steps.

The final stage is drawing conclusions, which are carried out gradually and continuously verified throughout the analysis process. Researchers interpret the findings based on Roland Barthes's Semiotic theory, specifically regarding how signs are represented and interpreted in diverse cultures and communication contexts. Conclusions regarding love, loss, alienation, and memory are strengthened by textual evidence from the poetry and supported by secondary literature. The verification process is carried out to ensure the consistency and validity of the findings so that the research results truly reflect the social meaning contained in Nizar Qabbani's work (Prasetyo, [2023](#)).

Results and Discussion

This table displays 49 stanzas of Nizar Qabbani's poem *Tauud Sya'rii Alaika'* in Arabic together with their Indonesian translations. The main character experiences love and loss throughout the poem's eight stanzas which show his emotional depth and inner conflicts that arise from his relationship that ends in separation.

تعود شعري عليك

My Hair Is Yours Poem

No	Poetry Verse	Translation
1	تعود شعري الطويل عليك	My long hair has grown accustomed to you.
2	تعودت أرخيه كل مساءً	I used to let it down every night.

3	سنابل قمح على راحتك	Like a wheat stalk in your palm.
4	تعودت أتركه يا حبيبي	I used to let it fall, my love.
5	كنجمة صيف على كتفك	Like a summer star on your shoulder.
6	فكيف تمل صداقة شعري؟	How could you ever get tired of my hair's friendship?
7	وشعري ترعرع بين يديك.	My hair grows in your hand.
8	ثلاث سنين..	Three years...
9	ثلاث سنين..	Three years!
10	تخدربي بالشؤون الصغيره.	You intoxicated me with little things.
11	وتصنع ثوبي كأبي اميره..	You made my dress like a princess.
12	من الأرجوان..	From violets.
13	من الياسمين..	From jasmine
14	وتكتب إسمك فوق الضفائر	And wrote your name in braids
15	وفوق المصابيح.. فوق الستائر	Above the lamp. On the curtain.
16	ثلاث سنين..	Three years
17	وأنت تردد في مسمعي..	You repeated in my ear.
18	كلاماً حنوناً.. كلاماً شهياً..	Soft words. Sweet words.
19	وتزرع حبك في رئتيا..	You planted your love in my lungs.
20	وها أنت.. بعد ثلاث سنين..	And now you're here. Three years later.
21	تبيع الهوى.. وتبيع الحنين	Selling passion, selling longing.
22	وتترك شعري..	And leaving my hair behind.
23	..شقياً.. شقياً	Alas...alas
24	كطير جريح.. على كتفيا	Like a wounded bird on my shoulder.
25	!حبيبي	My love!
26	أخاف اعتياد المرايا عليك..	I'm afraid the mirror will get used to you.
27	وعطري. وزينة وجهي عليك..	My perfume. And my makeup are all for you.
28	أخاف اهتمامي بشكل يديك..	I'm afraid I care too much about the shape of your hands.
29	أخاف اعتياد شفاهي..	I fear the familiarity of my lips
30	مع السنوات، على شففتك	over the years, on your lips.
31	أخاف أموت	I fear death
32	أخاف أذوب	I fear melting
33	..كقطعة شمع على ساعدك	Like a piece of wax on your forearm.
34	فكيف ستنسى الحرير؟	How could you forget silk?
35	وتنسى..	And forget...
36	صلاة الحرير على ركبتك؟	The soft prayers of silk on your knees?
37	لأنني أحبك، أصبحت أجمل	Because I love you, I become more beautiful
38	وبعثرت شعري على كتفي..	I spread my hair over my shoulders.
39	طويلاً.. طويلاً..	Long... long...
40	كما تتخيل..	Just like you imagine.
41	فكيف تمل سنابل شعري؟	How could you get tired of my hair?
42	وتتركه للخريف وترحل	Letting it fall with the autumn and then leaving
43	وكنت تريح الجبين عليه	When you could rest your forehead on it
44	وتغزله باليدين فيغزل..	Twirling it in your hand, it would spin.
45	وكيف سأخبر مشطى الحزين؟	Then how will I tell my sad comb?
46	إذا جاءني عن حنانك يسأل..	If it asks me about your tenderness.
47	أجبنى. ولو مرةً يا حبيبي	Answer me. Just once, my love.
48	إذا رحمت..	If you leave
49	ماذا بشعري سأفعل؟	What will I do with my hair?

The analysis of the poem *My Hair is Yours* reveals 12 stanzas which tell a story about love and loss. The first stage of analysis begins with understanding denotative meaning which represents the basic meaning of a sign. The second level is connotation, which is the additional meaning that arises from social experiences, cultural values, or specific ideologies inherent in society. Connotation exists as a subjective element which changes according to the social environment of each individual reader (Rudianto & Andriani, 2025). All the stanzas create poetic symbols which show how deeply the main character loves her partner and how deeply she experiences loss. The song uses hair and dresses and seasons and wounds as its imagery to show an emotional journey which starts with beautiful togetherness and ends with a separation that creates deep emotional wounds.

Love and intimacy

The poem uses poetic language to express love through three different ways which show romantic love and intimate relationships and everlasting love. The poem presents relationship dynamics through which readers can analyze their own identities and understand how people connect with one another.

تعود شعري الطويل عليك

My long hair is used to you

The poem uses the words *my long hair is used to you* to show that hair is a physical part of the body that grows from the scalp. The term *long hair* refers to a physical body part which grows from the scalp. The sentence shows that the person has developed a physical connection to long hair as they learned to handle its presence. The passage describes how objects constantly connect with the target person because they have either touched or seen the objects or both through their shared activities. The study of long hair reveals deeper meanings which go beyond its basic definition because the hair extends beyond its visible length. Across multiple societies, people recognize that long hair serves as a standard indicator of feminine identity, which encompasses all behavioral patterns that belong to women according to social customs and cultural traditions. The image represents a collection of attributes which includes gentleness and sensitivity together with nurturing ability and elegance. The interpretation of this meaning depends on the particular cultural context which includes both historical events and personal life experiences. The expression demonstrates how hair functions as both a body part and a storage space for memories that connect two people together (Biasini & Wijayanti, 2021). The expression creates a romantic and nostalgic atmosphere which shows deep emotional ties between people.

تعودت أرخيه كل مساءً

I let it decompose every night

At the denotative level, the verse *I let it down every night* indicates a concrete and literal action, namely the habit of letting my hair down every night. This meaning is straightforward without any additional symbolic interpretation. Hair is a body part that holds significant significance, both psychologically and socially. Since ancient times, hair has often been referred to as the human crown because of its position at the very top of the head, thus being considered a symbol of honor and prestige. While the act of letting it down is a daily routine performed by characters repeatedly. At the connotative level, the act of letting hair down carries a deeper emotional meaning. In various cultures,

letting hair down is often associated with openness of feeling, longing, sadness, or intimacy. The word habitual indicates the repetition that makes the act an inner ritual, not just a physical habit. The nighttime, synonymous with silence and self-reflection, further reinforces the impression that this act is a private moment for remembrance, experiencing love, or coping with persistent feelings of loss (Abdiani, 2020). This atmosphere provides a space for a person to delve deeper into their deepest thoughts and emotions. In conditions without external interference, the process of remembering, reflecting on love, and experiencing loss becomes more profound, intense, and authentic.

At the mythical level, these connotative meanings develop into ideological constructs considered natural by society. Women's loose hair is often associated with the image of women as emotional, gentle, and faithful in love. This representation fosters the notion that women naturally express their feelings through their bodies, including their hair. However, this meaning is the result of a cultural construct that is continually reproduced (Setiaji, 2019). In Balinese culture, hair is a symbol of spirituality and respect, and must be neatly arranged or tied up in a bun as a form of respect during prayer. The tradition of Mepunia Rambut (offering hair) is also a symbol of loyalty and safety. This verse not only depicts a simple custom but also reflects ideologies about femininity and the expression of love within a specific cultural context.

Nostalgia (heartwarming and painful memories)

Emotional perception is manifested in sadness through ceaseless memories of seeing your own reflections, as described in the following line of the poem.

كنجمة صيفٍ على كتفك

Like a summer star on your shoulder.

The phrase conveys its actual meaning through its denotative definition. People understand summer on someone's shoulders and jewelry sparkling on your shoulders as literal expressions that do not contain any hidden meanings. The phrase hair glitters like stars needs a literal interpretation which shows that it states hair emits light like a celestial body, which cannot occur in real life. The phrase summer stars on someone's shoulders defines a concept that states stars actually rest on shoulders, because stars exist in distant space and cannot touch human bodies (Rahmelia & Prihandi, 2023). People can understand jewelry sparkling on someone's shoulders through its literal meaning, because people can wear accessories that designers create to rest on their shoulders.

The phrase has evolved into a more symbolic and poetic meaning through its connotations. People associate summer stars with their beautiful appearance and bright glow, as well as their ability to evoke warm, nostalgic feelings. Special moments with loved ones. Shared memories, whether joyous, sad, or simple moments, are depicted as sparkling jewelry on the shoulders (Ekawati, et, al., 2025). This evokes positive feelings from their past. The people closest to us become more precious to us because they are always there in good times, bad, and sad, and leave us with deep sorrow for their loved ones. Romantic relationships increase positive affect and indicators of relationship quality in experimental and diary studies, supporting the idea that remembering the past evokes warm feelings toward the partner as well as strengthening shared relational representations that make the partner feel closer and more valued (Dewi, 2022).

Acceptance and letting Go

The process of genuine acceptance and letting go of a loved one leads to inner peace, which is their ultimate goal. The process of acceptance requires people to acknowledge the situation and their emotional responses while facing challenging emotions without judgment.

فكيف تمل سنابل شعري؟ وتتركه للخريف وترحل

How could you ever get bored with my hair friendship? Just leave it to autumn and go.

The meaning of the stanza containing the line How can you ever tire of the friendship of my hair? Let it fall and go can be understood through three different ways of interpretation as outlined by Roland Barthes within his semiotic framework. The sentence illustrates a question that examines how my hair functions as a part of my body through its physical presence, indicating my personal relationship to it and my symbolic relationship to it. The way I handle my belongings in the fall indicates my acceptance of change and loss, whatever comes my way. The way people separate themselves from their hair when they experience changes at the core of their being indicates that hair is a fundamental part of their identity (Williams, 2024). The sentence contains many meanings that go beyond its basic definition. People use hair to demonstrate their personal identity and individual character, as well as their preferred methods of dress. Through style, or the way they style it, individuals can project their self-image to the world. Hair serves as a visual component and a means of expressing emotional and social connections. People interpret the process of touching hair, including combing and stroking it, as an act that creates an emotional bond of closeness between individuals or as a gesture that points to romantic attraction. People perceive touching hair without permission as a violation of another person's personal boundaries.

In this context, love is understood as something that can be measured through shared ownership (Atika & Harda, 2024). This view places closeness and relationship quality on a material basis, making shared ownership of goods or assets the primary indicator in assessing the relationship between two people in love. As a result, relationship satisfaction and commitment are no longer based on emotional depth. This perspective also impacts relational dynamics, as individuals tend to prioritize personal happiness and autonomy over fulfilling their partner's emotional needs. This has the potential to create tension and dilemmas in intimate relationships, when love is reduced to possession rather than authentic emotional connection.

However, when acceptance is genuinely practiced, individuals can experience relief from the pressure, stress, and anxiety that arise amidst unexpected life changes (Reyka, et, al., 2023). In the context of love and loss, the experience of loss does not always mean physical separation from a loved one. Loss encompasses a wide range of emotional dimensions, such as deep sadness, fear of separation, nostalgia, and the process of understanding that loss is a natural part of life. This process reflects an individual's inner struggle to accept the reality that a relationship can ultimately end through separation or transformation.

Loss and emotional wounds

Loss causes deep emotional wounds, which can appear in the form of sadness accompanied by shock, grief, anger, or feelings of emptiness.

وها أنت.. بعد ثلاث سنين.. تبيع الهوى.. وتبيع الحنين

And now you're here. Three years later. Selling passion, selling longing.

The sentence *And here you are, three years later, selling passion, selling longing* establishes a meaning which shows how a person has changed from their previous state when he used to share his feelings but now he sells his emotional ties through his work. The word *sell* literally refers to the commercial activity of exchanging goods or services for profit. The phrase shows that people now use their most private and deeply emotional experiences as products which they can sell. The sentence expresses a meaning which goes beyond its initial interpretation because it contains more complicated elements. The act of selling passion and nostalgia creates a strong feeling of disappointment which shows that people think someone has broken their trust through his actions (Angesty, 2024). People view love and memories as sacred and intimate bonds which they transform into commodities for trading which serve their financial interests. The situation presents a strong moment of irony because the object which should remain perfect and valuable has lost its authentic worth because people now use market principles to assess its worth.

In this context, when someone feels love, they are driven to improve the well-being and happiness of their loved one. They are even willing to make sacrifices for their lover's well-being, hoping that this kindness will one day be returned to them. Personal happiness often arises when they see their loved one happy or when their dreams and hopes are realized (Hakim & Rusadi, 2022). However, they ultimately experience betrayal. Their lover no longer shows support and empathy when they face difficulties or problems. They no longer attempt to understand their feelings or provide moral encouragement to help them improve themselves, be more patient, and accept life's challenges. This change in attitude then manifests in the decision to end the relationship, reflecting a waning sense of commitment and a loss of mutual support within the relationship.

وتترك شعري.. شقياً.. شقياً.. كطيرٍ جريحٍ.. على كتفيا

And left my hair. Alas..alas. Like a wounded bird on my shoulder.

The poem's stanza presents a definition that suggests that someone who fails to properly care for their hair has committed a delinquent act. The term *hair* refers to the hair that grows on the human body, while the term *wounded bird* describes a bird weakened and helpless by its injuries and now perched on someone's shoulder. The line gains its emotional power through its poetic expression when examined at this connotative level. The hair left behind as a result of delinquency, which suggests intimate contact between two people, now exists as a memento resulting from their physical and emotional connection. The metaphor of the wounded bird creates a mood of mourning because hair represents a fragile creature, indicating the inner damage a person has suffered and their weakened state (Sari, et, al., 2023). The shoulder serves as the bird's perch, suggesting that its intimate space has become a source of grief. Tangled and unkempt hair represents the remnants of a love that brings pain, while the shoulder becomes a place to bear emotional pain after two people separate. Popular culture creates the belief that women experience love through sadness and inner pain, which women find beautiful in their suffering.

إذا رحنت.. ماذا بشعري سأفعل؟

If you leave, what will I do with my hair?

The line "If I go, what will I do with my hair?" from the poem presents a complex meaning that can be examined through Roland Barthes's three semiotic theories: denotative meaning, connotative meaning, and mythical meaning (Ulfah, et, al., 2023). The phrase expresses the question of how one should handle one's hair when others are away because it describes what one can do with it by cutting, coloring, styling, or leaving it as is. This simple statement contains basic elements, but its emotional power extends to a variety of situations that people can interpret through various ways of understanding. This pre-trip question aims to ensure that hair will not get in the way of the trip or to get expert advice on choosing an appropriate hairstyle. A similar post-trip question indicates concerns about changes or damage to hair that may occur during the trip and includes methods for protecting hair. Questions about changes in appearance serve as a gateway to exploring self-transformation more fully because they show how hair functions as a central part of your appearance.

The emotional meaning of this situation emerges through its connection to love and loss. The question "What will happen to my hair?" shows how someone reacts to the death of a person they loved. The question shows two different meanings which extend beyond the physical aspect because it shows how people now handle their emotional battles and their relationship problems. The question has deep significance yet it contains an emotional aspect that most people find hard to understand (Euprasia & Soetjningsih, 2024). Some people use their hair to express their feelings about a lost love because it is their primary means of expressing their emotions.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates that women's hair in Tauud Sya'rii 'Alaika's poem operates as a multi-dimensional symbol which represents beyond its biological function by showing affection and close relationships and past experiences and psychological suffering. The research study uses Roland Barthes's semiotic framework to examine hair meaning through its direct interpretation and its associated meanings and its cultural representations which enable physical gestures of daily life to show how women experience their emotions. The elements of autumn and wounded birds and stars that appear on the shoulders of the character create visual representations which demonstrate how different cultures show love through physical body movements. The study results demonstrate that Barthes's analysis proves essential for uncovering hidden ideological elements within poetic language while it expands the knowledge about how women appear in contemporary Arabic literary works. The poem uses hair as a symbolic archive which documents the entire process of love and loss and the different ways people push back against societal expectations that restrict how women show their feelings.

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