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SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF MUSLIMS' REPRESENTATION IN THE NETFLIX SERIES MIDNIGHT MASS

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine and evaluate the Muslim representation that can be found in the entirety of the seven episodes of the Netflix series Midnight Mass. The objectives are to determine the frequency of the Muslims representation that can be found in the series, and to evaluate their factual accuracy according to real Muslim culture and practices or not. This study employs purposive data sampling, and the primary data collection method was documentation, specifically through the analysis of screen captures. The samples used in this research were the scenes that represented Muslims, using the analysis method of Semiotic Theory by Roland Barthes as the framework. The study results show that Muslims are represented as closely accurate with real-life practices and culture, including the collective experiences that may be faced by some Muslims. This shows the gradual shift and acknowledgement of stereotypical Muslims representations turning into more accurate and deserving representations for Muslims.

Keywords: *Media, Midnight Mass, Muslim representations, Semiotic analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

The representation of Muslims in Western media has long been characterized by a binary of belonging, where characters are often reduced to either the good Muslim, the secular, state-aligned patriot or the bad Muslim, the radicalized, violent outsider (Khan et al., 2025). This reductionist framing, rooted in post-9/11 securitization discourses, often strips Muslim identities of their spiritual depth and human complexity (Hamouda et al., 2021). However, Mike Flanagan's 2021 Netflix miniseries, *Midnight Mass*, offers a significant departure from these established tropes. By centering Sheriff Hassan and his son Ali within a narrative of religious horror and small-town isolation, the series presents a nuanced exploration of faith, identity, and Islamophobia.

A semiotic analysis of *Midnight Mass* is essential for understanding how the series constructs meaning through specific signs, symbols, and narrative codes. According to Widiyastuti (2024), the series attempts to normalize the Muslim-American experience by utilizing accurate depictions of prayer and theological discourse as signs of resilience rather than foreignness. Semiotics allows for a decoding of these visual and linguistic markers such as the mispronunciation of Hassan's title as Sharif or his quiet withdrawal from pork-based social gatherings, revealing how the series highlights the subtle or residual form of Islamophobia that persists even in supposedly inclusive spaces (University of Chicago Divinity School, 2022).

This study employs a semiotic framework to examine how *Midnight Mass* portrays Muslim in the series. By analyzing the representation and interpretation of Muslim rituals and the Sheriff's role as the quintessential American hero, this research explores how the series challenges the emotive politics of fear often found in Western media. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to determine if *Midnight Mass* successfully dismantles the "us versus them" dichotomy or if it inadvertently reinforces Western ideals by projecting them onto its Muslim protagonists (Green, 2024).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite the increasing demand for diverse storytelling in global streaming platforms, the representation of Muslims in Western media remains largely confined to reductive tropes that alternate between the radicalized threat and the secularized patriot (Khan et al., 2025). While recent productions have attempted to move beyond these binaries, there is an ongoing tension in how Muslim identities are visually and linguistically coded in genres not traditionally associated with Islam, such as religious horror.

In the Netflix series *Midnight Mass* (2021), the character of Sheriff Hassan is presented as a subversion of the typical Muslim stereotype. However, the signs and symbols surrounding his character often operate within a spectra of terror framework that persists in Western subconsciousness (University of Chicago Divinity School, 2022). The problem lies in the ambiguity of these semiotic markers, such as the juxtaposition of Islamic prayer against the backdrop of Catholic extremism, which may inadvertently reinforce the otherness of the Muslim protagonist even while attempting to humanize him.

Thus, this study aims to investigate the semiotic construction of Muslim identity in *Midnight Mass* to determine the representations of Muslims that can be found and evaluate the factuality of the representations of Muslims in the Netflix series *Midnight Mass*.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To determine the representations of Muslims that can be found in the Netflix series *Midnight Mass*.
2. To evaluate the factuality of the representations of Muslims in the Netflix series *Midnight Mass*.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. In which scenes are Muslims being represented in the Netflix series *Midnight Mass*?
2. Are the Muslims represented in the series shown to be practicing the religion correctly, without being subjected to stereotypes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Representations of certain groups or characteristics in media can be found through the various signs depicted in that particular media. These signs can be found by employing the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes, focusing on his theories on the multi-layered orders of signification and the construction of "myth." According to Barthes, myth is a communication system or message that serves to communicate and justify values that were prevalent during a particular time period rather than an irrational or ineffable reality (Siregar, 2022). In other words, myth can be used to explain the ideas or concepts that people may have about a particular subject. Barthes also added that myth is a means of communication that uses the relationship of connotative meaning to deliver new messages (Mega & Tawami, 2022).

In order to construct the concept of the myth, a framework with two-level patterns needs to be applied to analyze the signs in the particular media involved. According to Roland Barthes,

there are two primary levels of sign meaning: the first level is denotation, or generic meaning, and the second level is connotation, or derived meaning (Adiansyah et al., 2023). Denotation is used to describe the literal meaning or definition of a particular subject, while connotation is used to further explain the meaning behind the literal signs, which can be associated with feelings, ideas, or emotions they suggest. Additionally, the connection between denotation and connotation is arbitrary, as it functions as the main signification system and generates an explicit meaning in terms of denotation, while the secondary system of importance is formed by the connotative meaning, which in turn produces implicit meaning. Mega and Tawami (2022) explained that denotation and connotation refer to what and how words, phrases, clauses, signs, and symbols are photographed. In media such as movies and dramas, these signs can be taken from anything that is depicted in the media, such as monologues, dialogues, and visual signs.

Muslim representation in media

It is undeniable that the media is a powerful tool which can manipulate and influence the perceptions of people towards a certain subject, specifically in this era of dependence on technology. The religion of Islam, particularly, has been portrayed negatively in the media. Islam as a whole is portrayed as a religion connected to intolerance, bloodshed, terror, and extremism. (Jamil, 2020). Taha (2023) also found that through the use of specific derogatory terms, metaphors, and over wording, several movies from Hollywood portrayed Muslims as barbaric, vicious, and violent beings who despise Americans and wish to eradicate them and by accrediting all material processes and activities, such as bombing, death, and devastation, to Muslims, the agony and plight of Americans is attributed to them. Women are not excluded in this matter. Kasirye (2024) found that The New York Times and The Guardian publications frequently depict Muslim women as terrorists and other themes, which is a major issue for them. In the media, Muslims are also rarely covered in fields other than those that involve violence. While Muslims are not visible in any other profession (such as education, the economy, or domestic politics), actors with explicitly Muslim labels are frequently linked to militaries and combat personnel (Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2023). Muslims are usually subjected to negative representations in the media, strengthening the stereotypes that deviate from real-life facts and the experiences of Muslims.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative research design focusing on semiotic analysis to decode the representation of Muslims in the Netflix miniseries *Midnight Mass*. A semiotic approach allows

for a deep exploration of the hidden meanings and cultural myths embedded within visual and auditory signs. By examining the show through this lens, this study observes how specific creative choices influence the audience's perception of Islamic identity in a Western horror context (Ibrahim & Shuaibu, 2023).

This study employs a purposive sampling technique, a non-probability sampling technique where specific elements from the population are selected. In this study, episodes and scenes from *Midnight Mass* are most productive for answering the research questions. This is the standard approach for semiotic studies because the goal is not to generalize frequencies across all media, but to provide an in-depth interpretation of specific symbolic constructions (Alghamdi, 2023).

The data selection process began with a purposive sampling search of episodes and scenes in *Midnight Mass* that portray or represents Muslim. From 7 episodes, it has been deduced that only episode 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 that actually represented Muslim with a total of 13 scenes in total.

This study follows a systematic qualitative semiotic approach, utilizing Roland Barthes' framework of signification to deconstruct the representation of Muslims in *Midnight Mass*. The procedure is structured into four distinct phases to ensure a rigorous transition from literal observation to deep ideological critique.

RESULTS

Purposive sampling of the seven-episode miniseries *Midnight Mass* identified a total of 13 scenes across Episodes 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 that explicitly represent Muslim identity, practices, or intercultural friction. To provide a transparent overview of the dataset before diving into the deep semiotic critique, these scenes are cataloged below in Table 1.

Theme 1: Devotional Accuracy, Visibility, and Ritualistic Resilience

Rather than treating Islamic worship as a monolithic or exotic plot device, *Midnight Mass* normalizes the daily practices of faith through recurring visual markers of *salah* (prayer). Scenes 5, 7, 11, and 13 track the evolution of these rituals from private domestic routines into profound symbols of survival. Denotatively, these scenes consistently feature Islamic material culture,

Table 1*Semiotic Coding of Muslim Representation in Midnight Mass*

Scene	Episode & Timeframe	Core Semiotic Focus / Narrative Function
1	Episode 1: 07:53 - 08:00	Racialized naming ("Aladdin") and peer discrimination.
2	Episode 1: 18:39 - 18:43	External recognition of Islamic prohibitions (alcohol consumption).
3	Episode 1: 22:21 - 22:25	Structural subversion of tropes via Sheriff Hassan's professional authority.
4	Episode 1: 23:32 - 23:39	Microaggressions and framing the Muslim protagonist as a perpetual outsider.
5	Episode 1: 31:37 - 31:50	Domestic visibility of <i>salah</i> (prayer) and accurate Islamic material culture.
6	Episode 2: 04:26 - 04:37	Misconceptions surrounding Islamic calendar markers (Friday vs. Sunday).
7	Episode 3: 17:04 - 17:09	Congregational domestic prayer establishing paternal Islamic leadership.
8	Episode 3: 32:44 - 35:01	Intertextual religious discourse regarding Jesus, the Injeel, and public education.
9	Episode 3: 47:49 - 51:12	Intergenerational crisis, teenage assimilation desires, and theological grief.
10	Episode 6: 23:45 - 28:48	Post-9/11 institutional surveillance and the conditional nature of Muslim safety.
11	Episode 6: 35:55 - 36:01	Individual devotional consistency amidst structural and narrative chaos.
12	Episode 7: 43:00 - 43:57	Direct Islamophobic violence and the weaponization of "terrorist" epithets.
13	Episode 7: 56:10 - 57:55	Ultimate devotional resilience (Fajr prayer) operating as structural martyrdom.

including prayer mats (*sajjadah*), copies of the Quran, and a framed photograph of a late matriarch donning a *hijab*. Connotatively, the depiction of Sheriff Hassan leading his son Ali as the *imam* establishes a household anchored by spiritual duty and shared grief, defying Western

media tropes that frequently associate domestic Muslim dynamics with authoritarianism or detachment.

The semiotic apex of this theme occurs in the exemplar analysis of Scene 13 (Episode 7: 56:10 - 57:55):

- **Denotation:** Bleeding from gunshot wounds, Sheriff Hassan and Ali kneel on a beach at dawn, performing the *Fajr* prayer facing the rising sun while the island burns around them. In a reversal of previous dynamics, Ali steps forward to lead the prayer as the *imam*.
- **Connotation:** The physical trauma of their injuries contrasted against the fluid, rhythmic prostrations of the prayer connotes absolute submission to God over physical circumstances. Ali assuming the role of *imam* signals a reclamation of his inherited faith, transitioning from a state of teenage detachment to spiritual maturity.
- **Myth:** This scene systematically deconstructs the Western media "Myth of Mandatory Compliance," as such the reductive assumption that Muslims only pray out of unthinking, dogmatic obligation. By placing the *salah* at the literal end of the world, the narrative transforms the ritual into an act of profound existential agency, framing Islamic devotion not as an aggressive threat, but as a peaceful, grounding sanctuary in the face of human collapse.

Theme 2: Cultural Ostracization and Everyday Microaggressions

Scenes 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8 expose the subtle, residual structures of bigotry embedded within the town's social fabric. Semiotically, these scenes track how the islanders view the Muslim characters through a lens of defensive curiosity or outright exclusion. Denotatively, this manifests in the casual usage of racialized language, such as a peer calling Ali "Aladdin" (Scene 1) or characters misinterpreting basic tenets of Muslim life, such as the mayor assuming communal Islamic worship occurs on Sundays rather than Fridays (Scene 6). Connotatively, these interactions convey that Hassan and Ali's presence is merely tolerated under a conditional contract of assimilation; they are perpetually viewed as cultural outsiders whose baseline differences must be policed.

This dynamic is best captured in the exemplar analysis of Scene 8 (Episode 3: 32:44 - 35:01) during a public school board meeting:

- **Denotation:** When the character Bev Keane dismisses potential Muslim outrage over the school-wide distribution of Christian Bibles, Sheriff Hassan interjects. He calmly outlines the Islamic reverence for Jesus and the *Injeel* (Gospel) while asserting that

distributing singular religious texts in a public facility violates secular boundaries. The surrounding parents visibly shift in discomfort.

- **Connotation:** Hassan's articulate theological literacy catches Bev off guard, exposing her assumption that he would react with simple, aggressive offense. The physical staging of the scene, where Hassan is isolated against a defensive majority, connotes the immense emotional labor required of minority individuals to defend public neutrality.
- **Myth:** This sequence directly subverts the pervasive media "Myth of Islamic Intolerance". Instead of confirming the stereotype of the closed-minded, reactive Muslim who despises Western institutions, Hassan is coded as the sole defender of pluralism, education, and constitutional boundaries, exposing the true intolerance as belonging to the dominant local hegemony.

Theme 3: Post-9/11 Paranoia and the "Myth of the Infiltrator"

The final theme, illuminated by Scenes 3, 9, 10, and 12, explores how historical post-9/11 anxieties continue to dictate the physical safety and social mobility of American Muslims. Denotatively, these scenes document moments of institutional and physical violation, ranging from Ali expressing a deep sense of alienation within his minority identity (Scene 9) to Bev Keane shooting Hassan while shouting "terrorist" and declaring him to have "dirty blood" (Scene 12).

The structural blueprint of this trauma is unpacked in the exemplar analysis of Scene 10 (Episode 6: 23:45 - 28:48):

- **Denotation:** Sitting with Dr. Sarah Gunning, Sheriff Hassan delivers a lengthy monologue detailing his career trajectory. He explains how his patriotic service as an NYPD officer post-9/11 was met with intense surveillance from his own department, ultimately forcing his relocation to the island where he is still viewed with suspicion. He notes that if he attempts to stop the town's escalating church crisis, the community will perceive him as a terrorist attacking Christianity rather than a lawman doing his duty.
- **Connotation:** The sheriff's badge, typically an unassailable semiotic signifier of state authority, is exposed here as a conditional garment. For a Muslim protagonist, authority does not guarantee immunity from systemic racism; rather, it amplifies the scrutiny placed upon him.

- **Myth:** This scene masterfully deconstructs two powerful social myths: the "Myth of Neutrality" (the belief that the law treats all citizens equally) and the "Myth of the Infiltrator" (the xenophobic subconscious fear that a Muslim holding civil power operates under a hidden, malicious agenda). Hassan's narrative paralysis proves that the horror of institutionalized prejudice is far more inescapable than the literal, physical monsters hiding within the town's church.

DISCUSSION

The semiotic deconstruction of *Midnight Mass* demonstrates a significant yet complex evolution in how Western television platforms negotiate Islamic identity. By transitioning from a chronological reading to a thematic critique, the findings reveal that while the miniseries actively dismantles overt, hostile stereotypes of Muslims, it simultaneously operates within modern structural constraints of representation.

Subverting the Post-9/11 Binary through "Simplified Complex Representations"

For decades, Western media has trapped Muslim characters in what Khan et al. (2025) and Hamouda et al. (2021) describe as a reductionist post-9/11 binary, forcing characters into either the radicalized threat or the secularized patriot. The semiotic markers of Sheriff Hassan systematically disrupt this dynamic. Unlike the derogatory frames identified by Taha (2023), where Muslim characters are linked exclusively to violence, Hassan is introduced as the town's primary mechanism of institutional order and civic protection.

However, this humanization operates under what Alsultany (2012) defines as "simplified complex representations," a contemporary strategy where media platforms generate sympathetic minority portrayals to project multicultural sensitivity, yet conditionally tie that sympathy to Western patriotic ideals. Hassan is not granted baseline acceptance merely for being a member of the community; his moral authority is legitimized in the eyes of the islanders (and the audience) because of his history as a patriotic NYPD officer. His safety and authority remain conditional, echoing the "Infiltrator Myth" decoded in Scene 10. As Richter and Paasch-Colberg (2023) observe, even when Muslims are removed from explicitly violent roles, their narrative arcs are still heavily policed by themes of surveillance and national security. *Midnight Mass* exposes this tension: Hassan's character is highly progressive, yet his narrative path proves that for an American Muslim, civic authority is a fragile garment that can be revoked the moment local hegemonies feel threatened.

Horrific Spaces and Genre as an Ideological Disruptor

A critical insight of this study is how director Mike Flanagan utilizes the conventions of religious horror to expose systemic Islamophobia. Historically, Western media has weaponized terms like "terrorist" to justify the exclusion or marginalization of Muslim bodies (Jamil, 2020; Yazdiha, 2020). In *Midnight Mass*, the semiotic coding of horror is inverted. The literal monster, a vampire, is welcomed into the heart of the town's Catholic church, where the community reinterprets its bloodlust as a divine Christian miracle.

When Bev Keane shoots Hassan while hurling Islamophobic slurs in Scene 12, the narrative exposes the "Myth of Islamic Intolerance". The true source of radicalization, violence, and fanatical delusion on Crockett Island is not the Muslim minority, but the insular, conservative majority. By utilizing the horror genre, the series forces a confrontation with the historical legacy of the War on Terror, proving that systemic racism and weaponized religious exceptionalism are far more terrifying and destructive than supernatural entities.

The Semiotics of Ritual and Spatial Belonging

The recurring visual depiction of *salah* (Scenes 5, 7, 11, and 13) serves a vital role in normalizing the visibility of Islamic worship (Widiyastuti, 2024). In traditional Western cinema, Arabic prayers are often used as auditory cues to build suspense or signal impending violence (Bajuwaiber, 2024). *Midnight Mass* strips away this exoticized lens. By framing the prayer within quiet domestic rooms alongside ordinary objects like copies of the Quran or family photographs, the series codes *salah* as a signifier of peace, continuity, and internal resilience.

This reaches its peak on the beach during the final dawn prayer (Scene 13). By positioning the *Fajr* prayer against the backdrop of total physical destruction, the series elevates the ritual to an act of ultimate existential agency. It provides a powerful counter-narrative to standard media representations, demonstrating that Islamic practice is not an aggressive external force, but a profound, grounding anchor in times of human crisis.

CONCLUSION

As this study relies on a single-text qualitative case study, it cannot chart broad quantitative frequencies across the entire Netflix landscape. However, this limitation is an analytical asset: focusing on a single text allows for a deep, micro-level semiotic decoding of visual and linguistic codes that large-scale content analyses often overlook.

Future research should apply this specific Barthesian framework to other prestige streaming series that feature prominent Muslim protagonists (such as *Ramy* or *Ms. Marvel*) to

track whether this shift toward nuanced representation is becoming a permanent industry standard or remains an isolated creative choice.

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