

## EXPLORING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF BOYS WILL BE BOYS A BARTHESIAN READING

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper explicates the underlying structure of the title chapter of Sara Suleri's memoir *Boys Will Be Boys* (2003). Though interesting yet complex, the selected text creates difficulty for the novice readers to understand the theme of the narrative. Therefore, to make the text understandable for the naïve readers, the paper applies Barthesian theory of five codes for the theory helps a reader to unfold the tightly woven structures of a narrative (Barthes, 1974; Zaib and Mashori, 2014). Following code-based textual analysis, the study observes that the target narrative embodies all the proairetic, hermeneutic, semic, symbolic and cultural voices. From beginning to end, the narrative seems enigmatic and suspenseful to the reader wherein different words like "pip", "mozzi" and "hodgepodge" stand for their connotative meanings. Similarly, binary polarity is structured in the delineation of the characters of girls and boys. Further, the text is enriched with the cultural references of East and West. Finally, the paper argues that the exploration of the narrative in the light of Barthesian five codes makes the reading understandable for the naïve beginners.

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**Keywords:** Five Codes of Barthes, Enigma, Readerly Text.

### INTRODUCTION

The present paper applies five codes of Barthes on the title chapter of Sara Suleri's memoir *Boys Will Be Boys: A Daughter's Elegy* (2003). This memoir possesses multi-flavors of English, Urdu, and Persian language etc. due to which it is supposed to be written by the author for multilingual readers. In Pakistan, its title chapter (*Boys Will be Boys*) is studied separately as a short narrative. It is included in the syllabus of Masters and M. Phil students of English Language and Literature wherein most of the students find the text difficult in reading. To make the text easy for the novice readers, the paper provides Barthesian reading of the text.

Roland Gerard Barthes, the French linguist, belongs to the domain of structuralism as well as post structuralism due to which Lodge (2000)

calls Barthes as the follower of “Saussure and Jackabson”, structuralists, as well as of “Derrida and Lacan”, the poststructuralists (p.145). His theory of five codes presents a shift from structuralism to post-structuralism which helps the reader to dig out the hidden meanings of a narrative (Malik, Zaib and Bughio, 2013). It further assists critics to interpret the text into five voices or to explore it in five different ways (Barthes, 1974). Therefore, keeping up the five codes’ theory, the paper relies on code-based textual analysis method. The study first implements the proairetic code and focuses on the sequences of the events of the text. Then with the application of hermeneutic code, the study explores the complexities of plot of the narrative. Further, with the implementation of the semantic, symbolic, and cultural codes, the study explicates the characterization, binary oppositions, and common knowledge of the world, respectively. Finally, the paper describes the selected chapter into multiple meanings that is supposed useful for the naïve readers.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

In *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives* (1975), Barthes presents his structuralist perspective by arguing that the meaning of a text lies in the closed structure of the narrative. Then, in *Death of Authors* (1977), he mentions that the meaning of a text does not lie in its closed structure while it can be derived via participation of a reader in the reading of the text. Through this argument, Barthes’ shifts his approach from structuralism to post structuralism. Further, the concept of a reader’s participation in a meaning making phenomenon of a text, brings Barthes close to the critics of “reader response theory” (Mozaffarzade, 2013). With all these complexities in Barthes’ writings, his theory of five codes seems to fall in his post-structural approach which further invites the reader to critically look into the text from different angles.

#### Five Code Theory of Barthes

Being an anti-traditional narratologist and poststructuralist, Barthes proposes a theory of five codes namely the proairetic, the hermeneutic, the semantic, the symbolic and the cultural codes. These codes are also known as “weaving voices” of a narrative (Barthes, 1974). Barthes (1974) further claims that all the narratives are entangled by these codes and by disentangling the network of the codes, a reader can explore five different voices in a narrative. These codes are explained below:

**The Proairetic Code (ACT):** The proairetic code refers to those elements of a narrative which create tension in the plot. This tension compels the reader to read the narrative action by action by guessing what

is going to be happened next (Eagleton, 1993; Barry, 2002). By anticipating different conclusions, the reader further wishes to resolve unexplained mystery of actions.

**The Hermeneutic Code (HER):** Being the code of enigmas, the hermeneutic code concerns to the puzzling and enigmatic elements of a narrative (Seldon, *et.al.*, 2005). The mysterious and unexplained elements of a story compel the reader to solve the riddle by asking some logical questions of his knowledge. The reader ponders on these mysterious elements of the text and attempts to understand as to why this is happening and what is the obstacle behind the event? Barthes (1974) also proposes some key terms namely “snare”, “equivocations”, “jamming”, and partial answers to further explore the function of this hermeneutic code. The term *snare* implies to “deliberate evasion of truth”, and the word *equivocation* entails “jumble of truth and snare”. Likewise, the word *jamming* refers to the partial explanation or overcrowding of words (Lashari, Afsar and Sangi, 2012). These terms according to Zaib and Mashori (2014) may be defined as the sub codes of the hermeneutic code.

**The Semantic Code (SEM):** The semantic code refers to the elements or words in a narrative that possess connotative meanings (Barry, 2002). According to Barthes, every story has many *characters, places and objects* that stand for their denotative as well as connotative meanings. By identifying the suggestive meanings of the semantic elements of a narrative, a reader can comprehend the theme of the text (Eagleton, 1998).

**The Symbolic Code (SYM):** The symbolic code pertains to the binary polarities, antithetical, and contrasted elements of a text. A reader can identify this code in “multivalences and reversibility” (Seldon, *et. al.* 2005; Mozaffarade, 2013). This is the deeper and more connotative level than the sematic code (Lashari, *et.al.*, 2012).

**The Cultural Code (REF):** Being the referential code, this code provides the common knowledge of the world. In every narrative there exist some psychological, physiological, social, cultural, and economic references (Seldon, *et. al.*, 2005) that invite the reader to share the general knowledge about the world. Therefore, this code offers the reader to explore all the worldly knowledge embodied in the target narrative.

Herein, to disentangle its tightly woven narrative structure, the Barthesian five codes’ theory is selected to implement on *Boys will be Boys*. By this the study endeavors to transfer the writerly text into readerly text and to make it explicable for the beginners or novice readers.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In *S/Z* (1974) Barthes applies five codes on Balzac's *Sarrasine* and tries to convert the writerly text into readerly text. He follows a few steps including the division of lexias and re-writing of their semantic and symbolic meanings etc. (Verde, 2006). Here, the present study employs Barthesian five codes' model on the selected narrative through simple text-based method of analysis. At first, the study observes the textual elements (or codes) of actions with their reactions and enigmas (that are the elements of proairetic and hermeneutic codes). Secondly, the study focuses on the somatic and antithetical elements of the text (that are the elements of semantic and symbolic codes). Then the study unfolds the elements of culture (i.e. the cultural code). By doing this, the study endeavors to simplify the construction of plot, art of characterization and theme of the story i.e., the overall structure of the narrative.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The title chapter *Boys Will Be Boys* centers around Suleri's personal life wherein she glimpses over her humorous and pathetic life experiences with her family members. Written in first person voice, every paragraph of the narrative opens with a new setting and new event. Concerning diction, the text seems perplexing and problematic. It is Suleri's unique and personal style of reflection where she composes words according to her own choice and experience (Tallat, 2013).

### Application of Bathesian Five Codes

**The Proairetic Code:** Purwanti (2013) mentions that the proairetic code focuses on the elements of action and the reaction in a narrative. By the application of proairetic code on the selected narrative, the study finds that action in the narrative starts from the very first line when the narrator (Suleri) speaks about the agreement among her sisters. She states that "...my sisters and I decided that each of us would always wear the same perfume. Not precisely the same, that is, but whatever we happened to be wearing at the moment..." (p.130). Here, the recommended action is the wearing of same perfume and same dresses at certain occasions. Then the sentence, "we must have come to this decision... at Lahore" (p.130), announces that it is the trip to Lahore where the sisters decide to act upon the suggested idea of having sameness in their identity. Though, all the sisters wear same socks, frocks, and scarfs yet "on the subject of perfume I [Suleri] believe they cheated" (p.130). With these remarks, the narrator shows the disloyalty of her sisters with Suleri (who is the narrator herself).

Then the sentence "...when we children were invited to his [father's] dear friend for luncheon" (p.131), is related with the action of invitation for children (viz., Suleri, Ifat, Tillat and Shahid) in Karachi at their father's friend (Sadiq). All the children take lunch calmly except Shahid who observes the mess and remarks "Bater, quails, give me two! if not two then four!" (pp.131-132). In reaction Mr. Sadiq "allowed us to eat noiselessly and nothing" (p.132). By this sentence, the narrator highlights the greedy nature of her brother in case of eating.

Now the coming sentence is related with the excursion of the children in Rawalpindi as "... we should take a day trip to Nathia Gali and have a picnic in the hills" (p. 132). After this, the narrator speaks about another excursion of her family to the home of Tillat in England where they arranged a mehfil-e-mushaira..." Then the setting changes with the line: "on my last time to Lahore ----- the last time I saw you, pip--- you were barely back from the hospital" (p. 134). With this sentence of action, Suleri relates the event of the ill health of her father. She remarks that at her last visit to Lahore, her father was too ill to read newspapers himself. It was she who read "surkhi after surkhi" (p.134) for her father. By this, the narrator shows herself as an obedient daughter who remains loyal to her father. Here she further mentions her inability to read the Urdu newspapers as "I spelled out with the diligence of an eight-year-old, 'bubble-o-nihar" (p.134). All these actions proceed with the fragmentary account of several excursions without any chronological sequence.

Further the sentence, "...Nuz and I driving through Clifton in Karachi..." (p.136), relates with another excursion of Nuz and Suleri to Karachi at Abdullah Shah Ghazi Shrine to know their fortunes from Totas, the fortune teller. Both sisters are told some suspenseful future as Suleri's fortune card mentions "you are a very bad woman. Mend your ways or else be gone!" and Nuz's card says, "guide yourself accordingly" (p. 136). However, the story ends in elegiac mood when Suleri speaks, "My fingers were inky, damp, as they realized the true tragedy of newsprint" (p. 137). And then the whisper was:

لازم تھا کہ دیکھو میرا رستہ کوئی دن اور  
تہا گئے کیوں؟ اب رہو تہا کوئی دن اور  
غالب

The exploration of the action code provides an understanding to the reader about the plot of the narrative specifically how an action converts

into reaction. Here by using some unexplained proairetic codes/elements, the narrator gives hints to the reader to envisage the upcoming actions or hidden meanings embodied in the codes. For instance, by mentioning the names of different picnic trips at Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, and England, Suleri is inviting to the reader to think about the joyous life of her family and an equal freedom to all children either girls (namely Tillat, Nuz and Suleri) or boys (namely Shahid). Then, the narrator, Suleri, shows her affection with her father by taking support from Ghalib's poetry. The death of her father makes her emotional and she says that why did he left her so soon? As he has gone alone so he must wait for some more time—This is the only way to meet again.

**The Hermeneutic Code:** This code pertains to the enigmas and perplexing elements where a reader focuses on why is something/it happening? (Selden, *et.al.*, 2005). The chosen text is enriched with mysterious actions. At first, the title of the text, i.e., *Boys Will be Boys*, appears as a mystery for the reader who urges to know that why the narrative is designated with such title? What is the meaning of this title? What is there that the author wants to convey through this title? These questions seem unanswered in the text. Perhaps the narrator here highlights some of the follies of her brother Shahid and her Papa and wants that these boys should be boys in their attitudes and behavior. On the other side, the title still seems equivocal to the reader.

Now, it is also puzzling for the reader that why the narrator suggests the idea of wearing same perfume and same dresses? (p.130). Then the sentence "... so that over the continental drift that we spread ourselves there would be a way of allaying that aching distance", again appears problematic for the reader. Here, some questions arise in the reader's mind that why the narrator uses such complex phrases like "continental drift and aching distance"? Tallat (2013) observes that due to the Eastern and Western cultural adaptation, Suleri has her own peculiar writing style (p. 101). She (Suleri) uses words that derive meaning from her own personal experiences (p.107). Based on this criticism of Tallat (2013), the reader can understand that the word *continental drift* is used by Suleri in the target text to bring closeness in her family which is spread over the European continent. Further, the mysterious idea of the sisters in wearing same dresses and same perfumes seems to resolve. The reader perceives that by wearing same things, Suleri wants to break the cultural differences among her sisters.

Further, the reader also startles when the narrator mentions the characters with different impressions. For-example, the name of her sister

Nuzhat is also used as “Nuz” (p.130) and “Nuzzi” (p.131). Likewise, her father is mentioned as “pip” (p.131) and then as “papa” (p.132). Moreover, General Zia ul Haq is mentioned as “Zulu haq” (p.134) and “Zulu” (p.135). All these nick names (which may be designated with different meanings) make the reader curious to know why the narrator uses these short and somehow abstract names? This is again an unanswered question of the text.

The sentence “as we know, food can be cruel and unusual” (p.133) is an equivocal sentence. Why the narrator perceives “food” as cruel? Tallat and Ghani (2004) mention that food is used as a metaphor in Suleri’s first memoir entitled *Meatless Days* (1991). Having this knowledge, the reader can idealize that the author is using herein the same metaphor of food. By criticizing the overeating habit of her brother and father, Suleri calls the food as cruel for health. She talks about the food as the symbol of greed.

Again, the phrase *English rain* when the narrator remarks that “I stared at the English rain” (p.133) creates suspense for the reader. The reader asks that why is the rain called as English? The reader perceives that the narrator is using the word English because at the time of raining she is at her sister’s home in England.

**The Semantic Code:** There are several codes that connotatively give strength to the memoir. The title of father as “pip” represents the pip’s extraordinary love for his native land. Niaz (2009) states that: the title *pip* symbolically refers to his “patriotic and preposterous” disposition. The word “mozzi” when the narrator remarks that “Tillat is the best Mozzi among us” (p.133) symbolically stands for her religious attitude. The narrator also remarks about Tillat, “the girl raise her index finger to do Ashadon La Allah Ilalah atleast two times in a day, if not five times” (p.133). The word “hodgepodge” (p.134) represents the diverse nature of Pakistani people. Pakistan seems a mixture of different cultural and political affairs, as Zullu announces that “Pakistan is hodgepodge”. Moreover, it can also be suggested that Pakistan is a mess for all. Here anyone (either a political leader or a foreign supporter) can come and make a good place in this mishmash country as the Zul Haq himself did.

Shahid’s statement, when he is offered to take pink tea as, “no no! Pink is for girls!” (p.132) symbolizes his traditional mindset due to which he designates girls with some lighter and weaker effects. Likewise, the abstract translation of Urdu poetry into English by Suleri and Shahid represents their irrationality. The line of Ghalib’s couplet is translated by



Suleri as “who lives, until your hair can reach its head?” is as under: (p.133).

کون جیتا ہے تری زلف کے سر ہونے تک  
غالب

Similarly the Urdu stanza is translated by Shahid wrongly.

جگن، جھوٹ مت بولو  
خدا کے پاس جاتا ہے  
نہ ہاتھی ہے، نہ گھوڑا ہے  
وہاں پیدل ہی جاتا ہے!

Darling, darling do not lie,  
Sonner, later we all die,  
We don't go there in coat and paint,  
We don't go there on elephant!

These translations from Urdu to English symbolize their (Suleri and Shahid's) inability and immaturity to understand the essence of Urdu poets (Ghalib and others).

Further the narrator's use of different nick names for the characters as *Nuzzi, Nuz, Zul, Zulu, Pip, Papa*, represents Suleri's unstable nature where she recalls these characters according to her emotional attachment with them and with the events of her past time.

**The Symbolic Code:** This code focuses on contrasted pairings and binary polarities of the text (Barry, 2002; Purwanti, 2013). The target chapter presents contrast between Suleri's fidelity and her sister's infidelity towards the matter of wearing same perfume (p.130). This is the first example of the symbolic code. The boldness of the narrator, Suleri, versus the weakness of her father in the matter of Nuzhat's death is the second example of this code. Here the narrator quotes the weary remarks of her father at the death of Nuz “she should have been making this trip for me”. “Of course she should have, I responded with bravado” (p.131).

Third example of the code is the polarity between Shahid and his sisters' viz., Suleri, Ifat Tillat and Nuz. All over the text, the narrator highlights Shahid's foolishness and irrationality. At first, when Shahid was offered by the host Sadiq for taking pink tea, he refuses as “no, no!



pink for girls.” All the girls laughed at him (p.132). Then his anxiety of great eating at Sadiq’s home when he remarks “I forgot to eat the lentis” is also ironized by the narrator. In contrast girls are shown more courageous and a bit rational.

**The Cultural Code:** There are several words, sentences and verbal sayings that provide common knowledge about the world. First, the word *perfume* refers to the Western fashion. In Western countries girls usually wear perfumes. Secondly, the idea of wearing same *socks*, *frocks* and *scarfs* (p.130) identify two cultural costumes (the costumes of Asia and Europe). *Socks* i.e., slipper or shoe is a common fashion all over the world. The article, *frock* is the reference to Western dress (Jenkins, 2003). Though it is also used in East but the fashion is peculiar to West with specific reference to the Victorian era in England. Otherwise the mention of *scarf* is the reference to Asian especially Muslim culture. Muslim girls are advised to cover their heads with the head cloth as scarf.

There are the references of so many food dishes like quails, baby chicken, rice, (p.131) and lentis (p.132). All these dishes are Asian. They are mostly eaten in Asian countries including Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Similarly, the game “Kabaddi / kodi kodi” (p.137) is the reference of a Pakistani game. It is the most favorite game in Punjab, the province of Pakistan.

There is, also, a reference of “Totas as fortune teller.” According to Mills, Claus and Diamond (2003) this tradition is peculiar to Pakistan and India where different people have good faith in the fortune cards that totas (parrots) find, out of hundreds of cards. These cards have some written account considered to be the fortunes of people.

The following table summarizes some of the important five codes’ textual references and their thematic analysis for further clarification of the novice readers of the text.

TABLE

Proairetic Code	Textual References	Thematic Analysis/ Explanation
1: Action of wearing the same perfume.  Reaction:  Reaction:	“...my sisters and I decided that each of us would always wear the same perfume. Not precisely the same, that is, but whatever we happened to be wearing at the moment... (p. 130)” “we must have come to this decision... at Lahore” (p. 130). “on the subject of perfume I [Suleri] believe they cheated” (p. 130).	The narrative starts with the central idea of wearing the same perfume which clarifies the mild nature of Suleri. It is Suleri who wants to bring sameness in all her four sisters by wearing same things. This idea is practically applied at the trip of Lahore. Though, all the sisters wear same frocks, socks and scarfs but they do not wear same perfume. There arises the theme of deceiving or cheating.
2: Action of Invitation.  Reaction of Mr. Sadiq.	“...when we children were invited to his [father’s] dear friend for luncheon” (p. 131). “... [he]allowed us to eat noiselessly and nothing” (p.132).	This action of invitation of children brings before the reader the habits of all four children. When children especially Shahid shows his eagerness to eat more and more so Mr. Sadiq, the host, allows them to eat noiselessly.
3: Last visit to Lahore:  Reaction of Suleri:	“on my last trip to Lahore --- -- the last time I saw you, pip---- you were barely back from the hospital” (p. 134). “I spelled out with the diligence of an eight-year-old, ‘bubble-o-nihar” (p. 134).	Here, Suleri explains about her last trip to Lahore before her father’s death.  Suleri’s act of reading the newspaper’s headings like an eight-year-old child shows that she loves her father greatly. Here arises the theme of love; love between Suleri and her father.
4: Excursion of Suleri to Karachi.  Fortune of Suleri:	“...Nuz and I driving through Clifton in Karachi...” (p. 136).  “you are a very bad woman. Mend your ways or else be gone!” (p.136).	This excursion highlights Suleri’s nature that she is fond of outing. At this trip, Suleri and Nuz also visit the fortune teller at Abdullah Shah Ghazi’s Mazar or shrine to know their fates. Tota, the fortune teller, warns Suleri to mend her ways.

Hermeneutic Code	Textual References	Thematic Analysis/Explanation
Jammings	Title: <i>Boys will be Boys</i>	The mystery of this title is unresolved in the text.
Unexplained Terms	“... so that over the continental drift that we spread ourselves there would be a way of allaying that aching distance” (p. 130).	Continental drift and aching distance are two unexplained terms. However, the context clarifies that all the family members live so far which is the matter of sadness for Suleri.
Mysterious names	“Nuz” (p. 130) and “Nuzzi” (p.131) “Zulu haq” (p. 134) and “Zulu” (p. 135).	These different expressions show that Suleri is an emotional girl who reminds her family members as per her emotional attachment with them.
Equivocation	“food can be cruel and unusual” (p. 133)	Food is used as a device to criticize the greedy nature of Shahid.
Enigma	“I stared at the English rain” (p. 133)	English rain is an enigmatic phrase but the context shows that Suleri is calling the rain English because she is in England at the time of raining.
Semantic code	Textual Reference	Thematic Analysis/Explanation
	“Pip” (p. 131).  “Mozzi” (p. 133).  “Hodgepodge” (p. 134).  “no no! pink is for girls!” (p. 132)	Suleri calls her father “pip” which semantically makes him a patriotic man. Suleri calls Tillat as mozzi which connotatively shows that Tillat is a religious girl. Suleri uses the word of hodgepodge for Pakistan which shows that Pakistan is the mishmash country for all foreigners. These remarks of Shahid shows that he is a man of traditional mindset who conceives himself superior to her sisters and selects pink color, as the lighter effect, for his sisters.

Symbolic Code	Textual Context	Thematic Analysis / Explanation
Symbolic code has deeper meaning than semantic code. Therefore the context of the narrative shows three sets of binary oppositions.	1: Binary opposition between sisters 2: Opposition between Suleri and her father 3: Opposition between brother and sisters.	Suleri is shown a sincere girl whereas her sisters are shown careless and infidel. The text shows that Suleri is bolder than her father. Shahid is shown as irrational and traditional minded brother whereas her sisters are shown intelligent and open minded girls.
Cultural Code	Textual Reference	Thematic Analysis/ Explanation
1: Names of foods.	Quails, baby chicken, rice, (p. 131) and lentis (p.132).	These foods refer to the Asian culture. Especially in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India rice, lentis are common dishes.
2: Names of Clothes.	Scarf, socks and frock (p. 130).	Scarf is the reference of Muslim culture. Socks and frocks are both common in East and West.
3: Names of games:	Kabaddi / kodi kodi (p. 137)	Kabaddi is the reference of Indo-Pak game especially liked in the province of Punjab, Pakistan.
4: Fashion	Tota as a fortune teller (p. 137) Perfume (p. 130).	This game is famous in Pakistan and India. Wearing perfume is the reference of Western fashion.

## CONCLUSION

To simplify the complexity in the narrative structure of *Boys will be Boys*, the present paper provides its Barthesian reading and observes all the five codes in it. Here the proairetic code illustrates the actions and reactions of the story. The hermeneutic code reveals the underlying mysteries and enigmas about the actions. Both the codes work together to develop the plot of the story. "Pip, mozzi, hodgepodge" etc. are the symbolic words used in this text by which Suleri criticizes the psyche of Pakistani people. By using the word hodgepodge, she specifically points out her national leaders who conceive Pakistan as a hodgepodge. Suleri versus her sisters, Suleri versus pip and Shahid versus all his four sisters are the antithetical or binary polarities of the story. By these polarities,

Suleri develops the theme of nostalgia. Moreover, the words as “frock, scarf, quail, rice, kodi kodi and perfume” etc. are the referential codes that provide common knowledge about different cultures in East and West. With the application of these codes, the study unfolds the target text into multiple meanings that are expected to be useful for novice readers to understand the narrative structure.

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