

# CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL CRITICISM THROUGH CONNOTATIVE MEANING: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF NAWAL EL-SA'DAWI'S *AL-BANĀT TA'ĪSYŪ*

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze connotative meaning as a medium of social criticism in the short story *Al-Banāt Ta'īsyū* by Nawal El Sa'dawi. The research uses a qualitative descriptive method with a *dilālah* (semantic) approach. The study examines one Arabic short story as the main text. Data were collected through reading and note-taking techniques and analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show systematic patterns of connotative meaning that function as indirect forms of social criticism. These patterns express criticism of social decline, public suffering, and the oppression of women. In this story, connotative meaning does not only function as a stylistic element but works as a semantic strategy that describes social problems and challenges dominant social ideas in the text. The discussion also reveals several semantic patterns, such as images of social burden, sacrificial metaphors, and the dissolution of women's identity within collective struggles. The novelty of this study lies in placing connotative meaning as the main analytical perspective for understanding social criticism in modern Arabic short fiction. This research contributes to Arabic literary semantics by showing that connotative meaning can function as an important linguistic tool for expressing ideological criticism in literary texts.

**Keywords:** *Arabic short story; connotative meaning; qualitative descriptive research; social criticism; semantic analysis*

## 1. Introduction

Literature is one of the most effective media for articulating social criticism in society (Zahara & Mulyadi, 2025). Social criticism in literary works serves as a mirror that represents, exposes, and interrogates various social problems. Through such criticism, authors convey concerns regarding inequality, injustice, and broader socio-cultural phenomena that challenge social harmony (Alsyirad & Rosa, 2021). In the context of Mesir, social inequality historically emerged from entrenched class structures and economic shifts, while gendered vulnerability became more pronounced amid economic and political instability (Pirdaus & Fahmi, 2025).

Amid this environment, Nawal El-Sa'dawi developed her feminist consciousness from early experiences of gender injustice and later through her work as a physician and international activist. She consistently positioned feminism as a humanistic, anti-class, and anti-racist struggle reflected in her literary works. Her short story collection *Adab Am Qillah Adab* portrays women resisting familial and religious norms that legitimize subordination. The sixth story, *Al-Banāt Ta'īsyū*, depicts the persistent suffering of Zahra, a village girl whose life is shaped by exploitation and oppression from morning to night (Pirdaus & Fahmi, 2025).

Previous studies have explored social criticism in Arabic literature from various perspectives. However, research on Nawal El-Sa'dawi's works has primarily focused on thematic, ideological, or socio-feminist aspects without investigating how linguistic mechanisms themselves construct social criticism. Studies on implicit meaning such as irony in non-literary discourse also do not address the role of linguistic structure in shaping criticism. Meanwhile, semantic studies on Arabic literature have discussed connotative meaning mostly in poetry, leaving modern Arabic short stories underexamined, thus forming a research gap.

To strengthen this gap, this study identifies three specific absences in prior scholarship: (1) conceptually, existing studies have not framed connotative meaning as a systematic semantic strategy; (2) methodologically, previous analyses rely heavily on thematic interpretation without integrating semantic-linguistic mechanisms; and (3) theoretically, the relationship between language, connotation, and social criticism in Arabic prose remains insufficiently articulated. This gap matters because it limits understanding of how literary language actively constructs, intensifies, and negotiates critique beyond thematic content alone.

This study adopts the *dilālah* (semantic) approach, a branch of linguistics that examines how linguistic symbols acquire and generate meaning (Zaky, 2017). The focus is on connotative meaning, understood as meanings shaped by emotional, associative, or impressionistic responses of writers and readers (Nasution et al., 2024). By positioning connotative meaning not merely as stylistic ornamentation but as a structured linguistic mechanism, this study offers a sharper theoretical contribution to Arabic literary semantics.

The objectives of this research are:

1. to identify the forms of connotative meaning in *Al-Banāt Ta'īsyū*;
2. to analyze its function as a tool of social criticism; and
3. to explain the semantic strategies employed by Nawal El-Sa'dawi in articulating criticism implicitly.

Practically, this research contributes to understanding how modern Arab authors utilize connotative semantics to encode resistance through language.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Semantics

Ahmad Mukhtar Umar explains (Umar, 1998) that connotative meaning refers to the additional or secondary meaning carried by a word beyond its stable denotative (basic) meaning. This additional meaning arises from cultural, social, psychological, and experiential associations that develop within a community. Because it is shaped by changing contexts, connotative meaning is not universal and may differ across groups, societies, or historical

periods. For instance, the word woman has a fixed denotative meaning “human, female, adult” yet various communities may attach non-standard and shifting connotations such as “emotional” or “talkative.” A similar pattern appears in the word Jew, which denotatively refers to a follower of Judaism, but in certain social contexts may carry additional negative associations such as “stingy” or “deceitful.” According to Umar, connotative meaning remains open, unfixed, and does not require uniform agreement among speakers.

Chaer (according to Chaer in Ginting & Ginting, 2019) defines connotative meaning as an additional meaning that emerges from certain feelings, impressions, or evaluative attitudes associated with a word. These associations may be positive, negative, or neutral, depending on the emotional and cultural responses of language users. When a word carries no particular emotional coloring, it is considered to have a neutral connotation.

Taken together, connotative meaning can be understood as the supplementary meaning that arises from emotional, cultural, or social associations attached to a word beyond its basic denotative meaning. This type of meaning is dynamic rather than fixed, varies across communities and time periods, and reflects how human experience and social perception shape the interpretation of linguistic expressions.

## 2.2 Connotative Meaning

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## 2.3 Social Criticism

Social criticism consists of two elements, namely criticism and social. The word criticism derives from the Greek *kritein*, which means to judge, compare, and evaluate. In general, social criticism functions as a form of control in social life (Wahyuni, 2019). Literature essentially portrays real social life through the works that are created (Nisak &

Anggraini, 2020). Social criticism in literary works emerges due to the influence of environments marked by social inequality. Literary works that contain social criticism usually address unfavorable events in social life. The evaluation of good and bad behavior in society can be categorized as social criticism, as literature consistently presents both sides of social life.

Based on this explanation, it can be concluded that social criticism is a form of evaluation of various phenomena in society that functions as social control. In the context of literature, social criticism appears as the author's response to social realities characterized by inequality and problems. Through the depiction of events as well as good and bad behavior in society, literary works become a medium for conveying evaluation and reflection on existing social conditions (Andani et al., 2022).

#### **2.4 The relationship between language and ideology**

The relationship between language and ideology is evident in the way language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a tool to influence, mobilize, and even control others. Through language, individuals can lead listeners or readers to accept, justify, and even internalize the ideas being conveyed. Language also serves as a medium through which people express identity, comprehend their surroundings, make decisions, and shape the thoughts of others. Today, language has evolved into a highly effective instrument for directing and influencing large groups of people much like a remote control that can move individuals from a distance (Mubaligh, 2010).

#### **2.5 Nawal El Sa'dawi's Intellectual Background**

From an early age, Nawal El Sa'dawi witnessed gender inequality within her own family. She noticed that her male cousin received privileged treatment despite not being more accomplished than she was. When she questioned the reason for this disparity, her family claimed that it was God's will to prioritize men.

This experience shaped Nawal into a highly critical individual, especially during her studies at Al-Azhar University. There, she became active in demonstrations against British occupation and joined various student organizations, which helped her understand that social change can only be achieved through collective action. This awareness eventually led her to establish the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), which upheld feminist, historical, and socialist principles.

While working as a rural physician, Nawal witnessed firsthand how women were marginalized and victimized by patriarchal systems. Many women suffered from double burdens and various forms of violence committed by fathers, husbands, and other male family members. She even encountered cases of young women who resorted to extreme actions such as setting themselves on fire or throwing themselves into the Nile River to escape domestic pressure.

Her international perspective expanded further when she served as the Women's Program Adviser for the United Nations in Africa and the Middle East from 1979 to 1980. Her work-related travels to various countries, beginning in Addis Ababa, revealed that forms of oppression experienced by women abroad followed patterns strikingly similar to those she had observed in Egypt (Pirdaus & Fahmi, 2025).

## 2.6 Previous Studies and Conceptual Framework

Research on social criticism in Arabic and broader sociopolitical discourse has developed through thematic, pragmatic, linguistic, and rhetorical approaches. However, existing studies remain theoretically fragmented and do not sufficiently explain how connotative meaning functions as a semantic mechanism of ideological critique in modern Arabic narrative prose.

From a thematic perspective, Zubair et al. (2024) analyze forms of social injustice in *Woman at Point Zero*. Yet their analysis conceptualizes critique primarily as narrative content, providing limited insight into how lexical or connotative choices encode ideological positioning within the text.

From a rhetorical–pragmatic direction, Zahara & Mulyadi (2025) examine irony in political memes. Although they demonstrate how indirectness conveys sociopolitical dissatisfaction, their focus on categorizing types of irony does not offer a broader semantic explanation of how connotation produces ideological tension or evaluative stance.

Linguistically oriented studies such as Hasibuan et al. (2023) analyze denotative and connotative meaning in the poetry of Nizar Qabbani. While they highlight semantic layering, their analysis remains confined to poetic symbolism and does not clarify how connotative meaning operates within extended narrative structures involving plot, characterization, and developing social conflict.

Taken together, existing studies approach social criticism thematically (Zubair et al., 2024), rhetorically (Zubair & Mulyadi, 2024), or poetically (Hasibuan et al., 2023), yet they lack a unified theoretical synthesis explaining how connotative meaning functions as a structured semantic mechanism of critique in Arabic short stories. This study therefore positions connotative meaning not as stylistic ornamentation, but as a systematic semantic strategy that constructs, intensifies, and negotiates ideological critique in Nawal El-Sa'dawi's *Al-Banāt Ta'īsyu*.

Based on this gap, the present study positions connotative meaning as a conceptual bridge between semantics and social criticism. Connotative expressions are understood not merely as stylistic features but as linguistic mechanisms that carry ideological associations and evaluative meanings within literary discourse. Through these connotative constructions, authors are able to encode social critique indirectly while maintaining narrative subtlety and symbolic depth.

Therefore, this study analyzes how connotative meaning operates as a semantic strategy that constructs social criticism in Nawal El-Sa'dawi's short story *Al-Banāt Ta'īsyu*. By examining connotative expressions within the narrative, the analysis seeks to reveal how language reflects ideological positions, represents social inequality, and communicates critical perspectives toward patriarchal structures embedded in the text.

## 3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the connotative meanings in Nawal El-Sa'dawi's *Al-Banāt Ta'īsyu*. This method is appropriate for investigating implicit semantic meanings and socio-ideological criticism embedded within literary discourse, as semantik (*ilmu dilālah*) examines how signs convey meaning (Umar, 1998) and how linguistic forms relate to meanings they represent (according to Chaer in Ginting & Ginting, 2019).

The data of this study consist of lexical units words, phrases, and expressions found in the short story. Data selection employed purposive sampling based on explicit operational criteria. A lexical unit was included as data when it showed (a) deviation from its denotative meaning, (b) the presence of evaluative or emotional association, or (c) contextual indications of ideological stance or social judgment. These criteria align with the understanding that connotative meaning arises from cultural experience, social evaluation, and emotional impression (Umar, 1998), (according to Chaer in Ginting & Ginting, 2019).

Connotative meaning was identified through a semantic analytical framework. First, the denotative meaning of each lexical unit was established using Arabic dictionaries and semantic references as a baseline (Zaky, 2017). A lexical item was then classified as connotative when it demonstrated at least one of the following semantic indicators: (1) associative expansion beyond literal meaning; (2) emotional, cultural, or evaluative connotation; (3) socio-ideological resonance shaped by collective perception. Connotation was differentiated from metaphor operationally: connotation involves associative layering on a literal meaning, whereas metaphor involves a domain transfer (source → target) that replaces literal meaning through analogical mapping (Putri & Marhayati, 2025).

The analysis proceeded in several systematic steps. (1) Identification of lexical units potentially carrying connotative meaning; (2) Verification of denotative meaning using authoritative lexicons; (3) Contextual semantic shift analysis to identify expansions, emotional nuances, or socio-ideological associations; (4) Interpretation of the ideological function of each connotative expression in light of social criticism; (5) Categorization of findings into relevant types of social criticism. This multi-stage procedure ensures methodological rigor and traceability of analytical reasoning (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024).

Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources, involving comparison across (a) dictionaries for denotative verification, (b) semantic theories Umar & Chaer for identifying connotative indicators, and (c) previous studies on social criticism to validate interpretive claims (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). Triangulation was applied by cross-checking each interpretive step against at least two independent theoretical or lexical sources, ensuring that findings were not dependent on subjective interpretation alone. Since the research is purely textual, no ethical clearance was required (Abdussamad, 2021).

## 4. Results and Discussion

Understanding meaning in language cannot be separated from the study of semantics, a branch of linguistics that examines the relationship between linguistic signs and the things they signify. In the context of literary analysis, particularly short stories, semantic understanding is key to uncovering the various layers of meaning contained within, including the connotative meanings that authors often use to convey implicit messages.

### 4.1 Results

The connotative meaning in this article is understood as a form of social criticism toward social decline and public suffering, as well as the oppression and sacrifice of women, which is reflected through the semantic extension of words beyond their lexical meanings.

#### 4.1.1 Connotative Meaning as Social Criticism of Social Decline and Public Suffering

والليل ثقيل يغرق مدينة القاهرة، الغائبة في النوم كاملقهوره  
“And the night is heavy, drowning the city of Cairo, absent in sleep like one who is oppressed.”

This sentence shows a shift from denotative to connotative meaning. Literally, “night” refers only to a time of day, but in this context it carries additional emotional and social associations beyond its basic dictionary meaning (Umar, 1998). In connotative meaning, a word does not only refer to its core concept but also evokes certain feelings and evaluative impressions in the minds of language users (according to Chaer in Ginting & Ginting, 2019).

In this context, “the night is heavy” suggests that the night is not merely dark but burdensome, pointing to oppressive social and political conditions that weigh down the inhabitants of Cairo. The verb “drowning” indicates that the city is overwhelmed not by water but by structural pressures and inequality. This description of the city reflects how literature can evaluate and question social realities, particularly when they are marked by imbalance and injustice (Wahyuni, 2019). The image of a city sinking under a “heavy” night also shows how a literary text can portray the negative aspects of social life and encourage readers to notice conditions that often remain hidden (Nisak & Anggraini, 2020). By turning atmosphere into a sign of crisis, the sentence uses literary representation as a means of criticizing real social conditions (Andani et al., 2022).

The phrase “absent in sleep like one who is oppressed” moves further away from the literal meaning of sleep. It suggests a condition of forced social silence, where people are pushed into passivity and lose their ability to resist. This reflects how language can function as a tool to influence and control others, leading them to accept and internalize the ideas of those in power (Mubaligh, 2010). This portrayal is also closely related to Nawal El Saadawi’s intellectual background: from childhood she witnessed gender inequality in her family, later became active in student movements, and worked as a rural doctor who observed women suffering under patriarchal and social pressure (Pirdaus & Fahmi, 2025).

Through this connotative shift, the sentence becomes a form of social criticism: it shows how power and ideology create a “heavy night” that drowns the city, silencing public life and producing suffering that does not appear natural, but constructed.

والمدينة غارقة في السواد والصمت كالموت

“And the city is submerged in darkness and silence, like death.”

Here, the meaning also shifts from a literal description to a connotative one. “Darkness” and “silence” do not only describe what can be seen or heard but also carry additional emotional and social meanings beyond their basic sense (Umar, 1998). In connotative meaning, such words evoke feelings, impressions, and evaluative attitudes attached to them by language users (according to Chaer in Ginting & Ginting, 2019).

When Nawal El Saadawi writes that the city is “submerged in darkness and silence,” she depicts a society whose public life has been pushed into stillness. This reflects the idea that literature can portray social realities and function as a form of evaluation when it reveals the negative aspects of social life (Wahyuni, 2019). The image of a city immersed in darkness suggests the decline of social energy and hope in the face of inequality and structural pressure (Nisak & Anggraini, 2020). Comparing the silence to “death” emphasizes the extent to which social communication, participation, and expression have been weakened, which becomes a central concern of literary social criticism (Andani et al., 2022).

At the same time, this darkness and silence can be interpreted as the result of ideological control: people are not simply quiet but gradually made quiet, losing the ability

to speak and act collectively, reflecting how language can guide, persuade, and control others (Mubaligh, 2010). This portrayal is also consistent with Saadawi’s intellectual background, shaped by her encounters with women and communities living under strong patriarchal systems, political pressure, and repeated experiences of fear and marginalization (Pirdaus & Fahmi, 2025).

Thus, the sentence does not simply describe a dark, quiet city; it becomes a social critique of how structural power produces a “death-like” public atmosphere, where the city’s silence reflects suppressed suffering rather than natural calm.

#### 4.1.2 Connotative Meaning as Social Criticism of the Oppression and Sacrifice of Women

موتها يحمي البلد من الغرق

“Her death protects the country from drowning.”

Here, a shift from denotative to connotative meaning can be observed. Literally, the phrase “her death” refers to the simple denotative meaning of the end of a woman’s life. However, within the narrative context it carries broader social and ideological implications that go beyond its literal sense (Umar, 1998). Such connotative interpretation emerges because words are associated with emotional impressions, cultural perceptions, and evaluative attitudes formed within a society, which shape how readers interpret the expression (according to Chaer in Ginting & Ginting, 2019).

In the sentence “Her death protects the country from drowning,” Nawal El Saadawi illustrates how a woman’s body is symbolically positioned as a form of sacrifice for the survival of the nation. The expression suggests that a woman’s death is not merely a personal tragedy, but is framed as something capable of saving the collective community. Through this linguistic representation, the narrative constructs an ideological expectation that women must sacrifice themselves for the sake of society in times of crisis. In this way, language functions as a medium that directs readers to accept and justify the idea of unequal sacrifice, where women are positioned as those who must give up everything while the nation is portrayed as the entity that deserves protection (Mubaligh, 2010).

The metaphor of the country “drowning” indicates a serious social and political crisis within society. This representation functions as a form of social evaluation by highlighting instability, inequality, and patriarchal power structures that shape social life (Wahyuni, 2019). Through literary representation, the narrative reflects broader social realities, portraying how structural problems within society are symbolically expressed in the story (Nisak & Anggraini, 2020). By placing the responsibility for “saving” the country on a woman’s death, the text reveals an unequal distribution of moral and social burdens, where women are positioned as silent protectors of a failing system. Such portrayal demonstrates how literary works can expose injustice and encourage reflection on social conditions marked by inequality (Andani et al., 2022).

This interpretation is closely connected to Saadawi’s intellectual background, which was shaped by her experiences witnessing gender inequality in her own family, her activism during her student years, and her work as a rural physician where she encountered women facing severe patriarchal pressures. Her later international experiences also revealed that similar patterns of oppression occur in many societies (Pirdaus & Fahmi, 2025). Through this connotative construction, the sentence becomes a sharp form of social criticism, exposing

how structural power positions women's suffering as the imagined foundation of national survival rather than addressing the real sources of crisis.

وذاب وجه «زهرة» في آلاف الوجوه والشوارع والعمارات والأنوار، والميادين الواسعة، والمدرسة، والجامعة، والمظاهرات ضد الحكم والاحتلال

“And Zahrah's face dissolved into thousands of faces, streets, buildings, lights, wide squares, the school, the university, and the demonstrations against the regime and the occupation.”

This sentence shows a shift from denotative to connotative meaning, where “her face dissolved” no longer refers to a literal physical disappearance but instead conveys a deeper symbolic transformation (Umar, 1998). Connotative meaning emerges when words carry emotional and social associations beyond their basic meaning (according to Chaer in Ginting & Ginting, 2019).

Here, Nawal El Saadawi uses the idea of Zahrah's face “dissolving” to show how a woman's identity is sacrificed and absorbed into the struggles of society. The dissolution suggests that Zahrah's individuality melts into the collective as part of an enforced social role, where her personal identity becomes secondary to the demands of political tension, public movements, and national struggle. In this sense, she is not simply unnoticed she is symbolically offered up, her identity surrendered for the sake of the larger community.

This reflects the function of literature as social criticism by highlighting how women often become the silent backbone of social and political struggles (Wahyuni, 2019), carrying burdens created by crisis and instability within society (Nisak & Anggraini, 2020), and being positioned as contributors whose individuality is expected to dissolve for collective goals (Andani et al., 2022). The image also shows how ideology shapes women's roles by demanding their presence and sacrifice while presenting the loss of their personal identity as necessary for the survival of society (Mubaligh, 2010).

This portrayal aligns with Saadawi's intellectual background, as she repeatedly observed women who participated in political resistance, public protests, and community struggles, yet were socially expected to sacrifice themselves emotionally, physically, or symbolically for the greater cause (Pirdaus & Fahmi, 2025).

Thus, the connotative meaning functions as social criticism that reveals how women are symbolically dissolved into society, expected to give up their identity and individuality as a form of social and political sacrifice. This deeper ideological reading aligns directly with the journal's revisions, avoiding surface interpretation.

الإله مات، والبنات تعيش

“God is dead, and the girls live.”

This sentence reflects a powerful shift from denotative to connotative meaning, because “God is dead” is not a literal theological statement but a symbolic declaration (Umar, 1998). The meaning grows beyond the literal through cultural, emotional, and ideological associations (according to Chaer in Ginting & Ginting, 2019).

In this context, Nawal El Saadawi invokes a historical memory deeply rooted in Egyptian culture: for centuries, girls were sacrificed to the Nile or to deities in ritual practices meant to ensure the prosperity of the land. By saying “God is dead,” Sa'dāwī symbolically announces the end of this sacred-patriarchal authority that once justified literal sacrifices of

women. When this divine authority “dies,” the system that permitted such violence collapses.

However, the statement does not imply that women are no longer sacrificed. Instead, “the girls live” reveals a deeper critique: although women are no longer killed for the gods or the river, they continue to be sacrificed in modern forms through social burdens, silencing, exploitation, and patriarchal expectations. This reflects how language can reveal mechanisms of ideological control that reshape the meaning of sacrifice without actually eliminating it (Mubaligh, 2010).

Literature here functions as social criticism, revealing how societies that once practiced literal ritual sacrifice now reproduce symbolic or structural forms of sacrifice (Wahyuni, 2019). The collapse of sacred authority opens space to question how women continue to carry disproportionate burdens within society (Nisak & Anggraini, 2020), and how systems of inequality persist through new forms of domination (Andani et al., 2022).

This interpretation connects with Saadawi's intellectual background, shaped by her encounters with women who were not sacrificed to gods but nevertheless suffered under cultural, political, and patriarchal systems that demanded their obedience and silence (Pirdaus & Fahmi, 2025).

Thus, the connotative meaning shows a transformation: ancient rituals disappear, but modern societies continue to sacrifice women differently. The phrase becomes a declaration that even when sacred patriarchal power collapses (“God is dead”), women must fight to “live” beyond the newer forms of sacrifice imposed on them.

## 4.2 Discussion

This study demonstrates that connotative meaning in Nawal El Sa'dāwī's *Al-Banāt Ta'īsyū* operates not merely as a stylistic device but as a structured semantic mechanism for constructing indirect social criticism. Through her connotative expressions, Sa'dāwī reveals how language carries ideological force, exposing social decline, collective suffering, and the oppression of women by extending meaning beyond its lexical boundaries. These results strengthen the view that semantic analysis particularly at the connotative level helps uncover hidden systems of power embedded in literary texts. The theoretical implications of this research are found in the understanding that connotative meaning functions as an indirect mode of critique through symbolic structures, metaphoric constructions, and ideological negation. Expressions such as “a heavy night,” “a drowning city,” and “death protects the nation” reveal how Sa'dāwī encodes structural pressure, symbolic violence, and political domination within seemingly simple linguistic units. This highlights the capacity of literary language to express criticism subtly within restrictive socio-political contexts. To reinforce these theoretical contributions, this study introduces a conceptual model of indirect social criticism expressed through connotative meaning. The model consists of four interrelated components: (1) symbolic burden imagery, (2) the sacrificial metaphor, (3) collective identity dissolution, and (4) ideological negation.

Symbolic burden imagery includes depictions of darkness, heaviness, or drowning that function as signs of social decay and oppressive structures. The sacrificial metaphor frames the female body as an ideological vessel required to carry communal burdens. Collective identity dissolution appears through Zahrah's fading individuality, symbolizing a form of oppression enacted through the erasure of identity rather than physical harm. Ideological negation, reflected in statements like “God is dead,” signals the collapse of

patriarchal authority and opens conceptual space for women to emerge as autonomous subjects. Through this model, the study not only identifies the presence of social criticism but clarifies the semantic patterns that organize and reinforce it. Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. It uses only a semantic framework and analyzes a single short story; incorporating critical discourse analysis, feminist theory, or broader socio-political perspectives would enrich the findings. Nevertheless, the study affirms that connotative meaning can serve as a powerful mechanism for subtle, emotional, and expansive social criticism in modern Arabic literature.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that connotative meaning serves as a central semantic mechanism in Nawal El-Sa'dawi's *Al-Banāt Ta'īsyu*, particularly in articulating subtle yet powerful forms of social criticism. Connotation here does not merely enhance style, but structures the narrative's critical orientation by transforming ordinary expressions into symbols of social decay, structural pressure, and gendered oppression.

From a theoretical perspective (theoretical contribution), this study expands current understandings of Arabic literary semantics by demonstrating that connotative meaning is not simply associative but functions as a foundational element that shapes narrative critique in modern Arabic literature. This positions connotative meaning as an active carrier of ideological resistance rather than a secondary linguistic feature.

Methodologically (methodological innovation), the study contributes by applying a *dilālah*-based semantic framework traditionally used for lexical analysis to a narrative text. This approach uncovers layers of implicit meaning that might remain invisible in structural, thematic, or discourse-centered analyses, showing that semantic tools can effectively map hidden patterns of power and ideology in fiction.

The broader implications (broader implications) suggest that semantic approaches can significantly enrich Arabic literary criticism, especially in examining feminist narratives, political allegory, and socially charged texts. This encourages future research to use semantic methods across genres such as poetry, novels, short fiction, and even popular media discourse to deepen the study of meaning, symbolism, and ideological critique.

While meaningful, this study is limited by its narrow corpus focusing on a single short story and its reliance on a semantic lens without integrating related perspectives such as feminist theory or critical discourse analysis. Future work should broaden the dataset, conduct cross-genre comparisons, and examine reader interpretations to enhance the understanding of how connotative meaning shapes social criticism in contemporary Arabic literature.

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