

## **Symbols for Hijabs in *The Proudest Blue The Story of Hijab and Family* by Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali**

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**Abstract.** This study aimed at analyzing symbols that represent hijab as depicted in *The Proudest Blue The Story of Hijab and Family* written by Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali and illustrated by Hatem Aly. This study was a qualitative study that analyze a text, so that the data were in the form of sentences and illustrations taken from the book. The data were collected by reading the book, identifying the data, and classifying the data. Then, the collected data were analyzed using the semiotic theory from Peirce. Based on the findings, there were five symbols representing hijab. The first two symbols are related to the authors' choice of color. The author uses the pink to illustrate that hijabs are related to love and the blue color that is related to religious symbol of piety and chastity or sincerity. The blue color was the most dominant symbol in the book. In addition, the authors recommend that hijab is not a whisper, a laugh, and a tablecloth. These three symbols represent hijabs as something strong, not a joke to be laughed at and not only a thing to cover. All symbols used by the author are positive ones which challenge the negative stereotypes about hijab in which it is associated with radicalism and terrorism.

**Keywords:** *hijab stereotype, symbols, symbolism*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Symbolism is not a novel issue in literature as it is popular since the nineteenth century. There are a number of definitions of symbolism from many theorists.

Symbolism commonly found in literary works is defined as using objects to represent an abstract idea so they have other meanings besides their literal meanings (Fadaee, 2011 in Yunita, 2012). In other words, writers use material things to represent immaterial things (Wulandari, 2016). Based on these two definitions, it can be said that the authors use the power of words or images to express their idea so that the words or images have different meanings besides their literal or natural meanings.

There are a number of reasons of using symbolism in literary works. First, symbolism is regarded as an interesting method to express something (Mohammed & Yahya, 2017). For example, 'her face in red' is more interesting and aesthetic than 'she is so angry'. The red color in this context has a meaning to point out an anger felt by someone. The red color stands for another meaning besides its literal meaning as one of the colors. Second, symbolism gives more highlights to the meanings that the authors want to convey (Yunita, 2017). For example, Wulandari (2016) found that Elie Wiesel in her work entitled *Night* used the word 'night' to highlight and give a deeper meaning of misery that is usually represented by darkness. Third, symbolism can share the authors' philosophy embedded in their works (Yunita, 2017). As generally understood that authors will always have an underlying philosophy expressed in their works; using symbolism can be one of ways in expressing their philosophy that they want to instill in their works. Because of the reasons above, it is understandable that many writers employ symbolism in their works because it can function as a way to express their idea more interestingly, highlight the meanings in their work and share their philosophy indirectly; these three functions can add values and aestheticism in their works.

There are three types of symbols including universal symbols, conventional symbols, and private symbols. Based on Wulandari (2016), universal symbols are symbols recognized and accepted by various cultures and societies naturally and universally. It means that those symbols are close to many cultures and daily life. For example, light is regarded as a symbol of knowledge and crossbones on a medicine bottle is as a symbol of poison in various cultures and societies. Furthermore, she explained conventional symbols or cultural symbols are words that people learn to represent something built by a certain time and place. It means that conventional and cultural symbol may have a specific meaning depending on where the symbols used. For example, in western culture, a dog is a symbol of friendship, loyalty and championship. Finally, she asserted that private symbols are symbols depending on the author's choice in which the author chooses the symbol and meaning (Wulandari, 2016). It means that the author has an authority of choosing the symbol for their story based on his/her own reasons. The symbols that the authors chose will have different meaning besides their literal meaning depending on the context of the story. Thus, it will be possible that an object used by a certain writers may have different meaning in another story written by another writers because the contexts are different.

The next question raised is 'how we can differentiate which one is a symbol or just an ordinary word'. Perrine (1994 in Yunita, 2017) explained some indicators for symbols: (1) they are frequently repeated and emphasized throughout the story, (2) their meanings are supported by the context of the story, and (3) they give different meanings from their literal meanings, or (4) they have more than one meaning. By

looking at these four indicators, it is crystal clear that symbols will always be pinned points in a story that have other meanings beyond their literal meanings. In order to understand the other meanings, the readers should look at the context of the story. Thus, a context is an important aspect in uncovering the meaning of the symbol itself.

Analyzing symbols cannot be separated from a linguistics branch called semiotics. The most basic definition of semiotics is the study of sign (Chandler, 2007). Furthermore, Chandler (2007) explains that in semiotics, it is not only about the study of what people refer as 'signs' in everyday speech, but also about anything that 'stands for' something else. This assertion highlights that anything can be symbols or signs as long as they stand for something else or have different meaning from their literal meanings.

Semiotics and the theory of signs or symbols have been developed throughout the history. Among semioticians in the history, two primary theorists are the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, and the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure's model of the sign is in the dyadic tradition consisting of a sign vehicle and its meaning (Chandler, 2007). In this model, a sign is the result of relationship between the signifier and the signified or called as signification (Chandler, 2007). In contrast, Peirce develop a triadic model about signs called as Peirce's semiotic triangle consisting of object, representamen, and interpretant (Chandler, 2007). Moreover, Chandler (2007) explains that an object is "something beyond the sign to which it refers (referent)" (2007: 29), an interpretant is "not interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign" (2007: 29), and the representamen is the form which the signs takes (not necessarily material, though usually interpreted as such) – called as by some theorists the 'sign vehicle' (2007:29). The sign itself is "the whole meaningful ensemble" (Chandler, 2007: 30). The interaction of these three components creates a semiosis process that can cover meanings carried by symbols. Therefore, this study takes the semiotics theory of Peirce for the analysis as the researchers believes in Peirce's assertion in Chandler (2007:29) that "the sign is a unity or what is represented (the object), how it is represented (representamen) and how it is interpreted (the interpretant)".

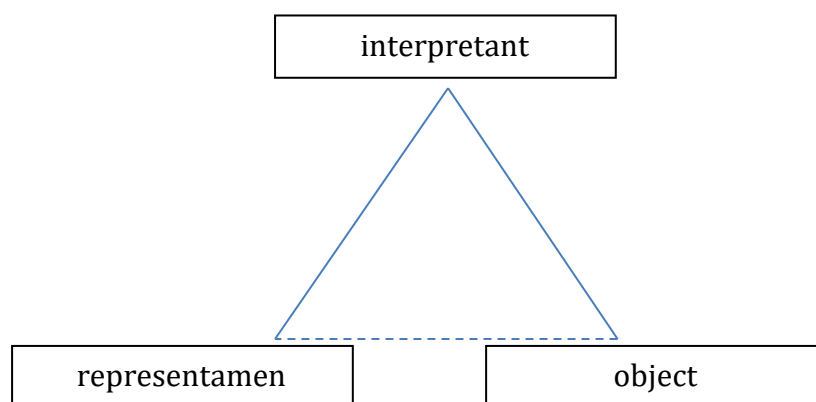


Figure 1. Peirce's Semiotic Triangle (Chandler, 2007: 30)

Peirce defined a symbol as "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the

Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object,” (Peirce, 1998: 292, in Thornbury, 2011: 50). Further, he divided signs into three categories including (1) an icon defined as “a sign to be used as such because it possesses the quality signified”, (2) an index defined as “a sign fit to be used as such because it is in real reaction with the object denoted”, and (3) a symbol is “a sign fit to be used as such because it determines the interpretant sign,” (Peirce, 1998: 307, in Thornbury, 2011: 50). Example of an icon is a map and a territory of its map, a photograph of Churchill is an icon of the original item, whereas the example of an index is a weathervane obediently moves around to point and smoke for the Ranger as an index of fire (Wulandari, 2016). Symbols can be abstract or not such as idea, object, conventional or non-conventional to represent something else (Hermawan, 2010, in Wulandari 2016).

There a number of studies using the Peirce’s semiotic theory for analyzing literary works. However, among those studies, symbolism in children’s literature especially in picture books has not been excessively studied. It is deplorable because picture books have a prominent role to children. One of the reasons why picture books are prominent is because they have visual and written features that help children to think critically (Law, 2012). Similarly, Guijarro and Sanz (2008) also asserts that picture books have visual that can add to the verbal or they can correlate to each other to make meanings in a text. Children should read and connect the text they are reading with the pictures to understand the story. Besides, picture books are indeed regarded to be important to develop children’s metacognitive skills (Sundmark, 2018). More specifically, the symbolism for hijab in a children’s picture book has not been taken sufficiently into account. In fact, a hijab is stereotyped as a negative symbol related to terrorism and intolerance (Weigchelbaumer, 2016). On the other hand, Ridouani (2011) asserted that hijab is related to a symbol of religion and chastity in general. In other words, hijabs are associated with radical actions leading to discrimination towards Muslim in general, and Muslim women more specifically. Thus, from the initial data above, analyzing symbols for hijab in children literature will shed a light and enrich studies about symbolism. It is compelling to see how authors use symbolism to depict hijab as well as counter negative stereotypes of hijab that exist in the society.

Based on the explanation above, this study took a picture book entitled *The Proudest Blue The Story of Hijab and Family* written by Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali and illustrated by Hatem Aly as the object of the study because it takes the United States of America (USA) as the setting. The USA itself is known for the growing stereotypes towards Muslims and hijabs. This study aimed at analyzing symbols for hijab depicted in the object of the study as a counter stereotype towards hijab. By doing so, this study was expected to contribute to fill the missing puzzle in the research area of symbolism related to hijab in children’s literature.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study used qualitative method in order to answer the research questions. The qualitative method used descriptions and sentences in order to analyze and understand human experiences (Mohajan, 2018). The data of this study were not in the form of numbers so that quantitative method was not an option. There were two types of data in this study. The first was the primary data in which the data were in

the form of sentences and illustrations taken from the picture book entitled *The Proudest Blue The Story of Hijab and Family* written by Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali and illustrated by Hatem Aly. The next was the secondary data taken from books or articles discussing related theory in this study. By looking at the nature of descriptive study, it is no doubt that qualitative method was suitable to help the researchers answer the research questions in this study.

There were four steps taken to collect the data. The first step was reading the picture book several times to understand and recognize the symbols in the story. The second step was identifying the data. The third step was classifying the data. The researchers classified the data based on the category of symbols found in the story. The fourth, after collecting the data, the data were analyzed using the semiotic theory by Peirce. Semiotic approach explains that codes are communicated in verbal and non-verbal forms as stated by Chandler (2007). By analyzing the verbal codes in the form of sentences and the non-verbal forms in the form of pictures, the analysis tried to capture the symbols for hijab and their relations as the counter stereotype for hijab comprehensively.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, there are some symbols to represent hijab in the object of the study. The first is 'pink' color. In the story, it was narrated that the narrator's mom loves pink hijab as stated in the following sentences, "Mama holds out the pink. Mama loves pink," (Muhammad, Ali & Aly, 2019:1).



Figure 2. Asiah, the Narrator, and Mom were choosing hijab for Asiah.

In Figure 2, it can be seen that it was Asiah's first day of wearing hijab. Asiah is the narrator's sister. Her mom is holding a pink hijab as she loves pink and suggests Asiah for wearing it. The pink color here does not solely mean a color, but it has another meaning as indicated. Figure 2 shows the interaction of object, representamen and interpretant.

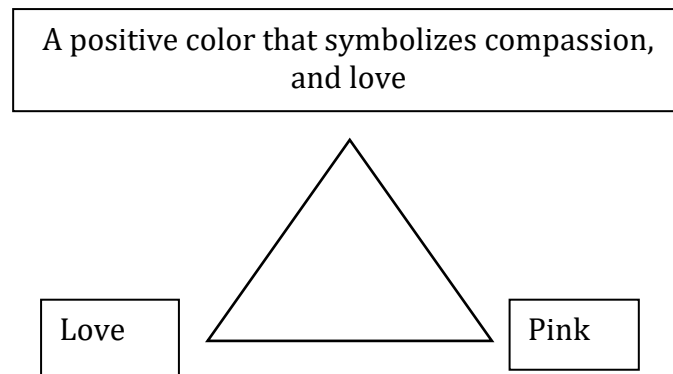


Figure 3. Pink as a Symbol

Pink color in the story stands as a symbol of a positive color that gives warm and comfortable feeling such as love and compassion. It is aligned with the meaning of pink color based on Olesen (2023) that it symbolizes compassion, love and playfulness. The author chose this color as mom's favorite color because the authors want to show that hijab is a symbol of love and positive color to give comfortable feelings. This depiction is on the contrary of hijab as a symbol of radicalism and intolerance (Weigchelbaumer, 2016). The authors demonstrate that hijab is not a dark symbol by correlating it with pink color.

The next symbol is still related to the color choice from the authors. The blue color is the most dominant symbol in the story because of three reasons: (1) it appears in the title, *The Proudest Blue The Story of Hijab and Family*, (2) the illustration is dominated with blue color, and (3) the word 'blue' is the most frequent used word in the story. In Figure 2, when the mother suggests Asiah to wear pink color, she rejects and chooses a blue hijab for her first day of wearing hijab. First day of wearing hijab is an important occasion for a girl and the authors choose blue color. It is stated that, "Behind the counter is the brightest blue. The color of ocean, if you squint your eyes and pretend there's no line between the water and the sky. It's the first-day hijab. Asiya knows it. I know it. We're sister," (Muhammad, Ali & Aly, 2019:1). The blue color is closely related to ocean that gives calmness. In addition, the sentence, "The color of ocean, if you squint your eyes and pretend there's no line between the water and the sky", points out an interesting meaning that a hijab does not differentiate someone and it is not a reason to discriminate someone because she wears a hijab.

Moreover, based on Monica and Luzar (2011), blue is also closely related to faithfulness, peace, and justice. In addition, Cerrato explains in his book entitled *The Meaning of Colors* that blue is used to symbolize piety and sincerity (11). This is aligned with what Ridouni (2011) asserts that a hijab is a symbol related to religious values and chastity. Choosing the blue color has a message that the authors want to represent hijab as a religion symbol related to faithfulness, piety, and sincerity or chastity. The blue color also gives a meaning of calmness instead of fear. The following figure explains the color blue as a symbol in the book.

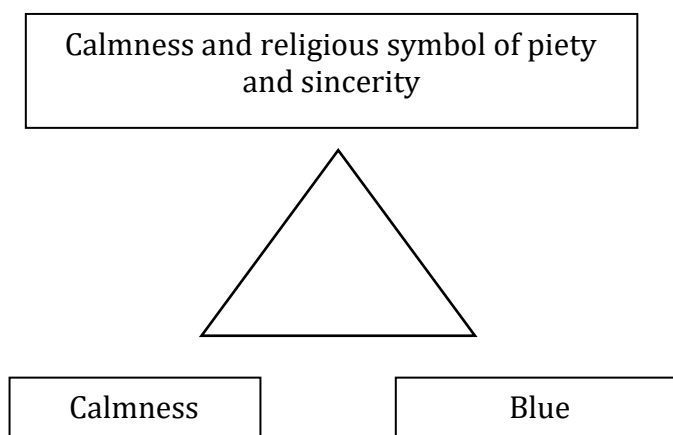


Figure 4. Blue as a Symbol

Another symbol to represent a hijab is ‘not a whisper’ as stated in the quotation, “Asiya’s hijab isn’t a whisper. Asiya’s hijab is like the sky on a sunny day. The sky isn’t whisper. It’s always there, special, and regular. The first day of wearing hijab is important. It means being strong,” (Muhammad, Ali & Aly, 2019: 9-10). Based on *Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary*, whisper means to speak very quietly to somebody so that other people cannot hear what you are saying. By saying that Asiya’s hijab is not a whisper, the authors want to convey that wearing hijab means being strong and stating their identity as a brave Muslim. The first day of wearing hijab is important because it means that Asiya is ready to face any challenges of being a Muslim girl in the US where a lot of discriminations addressed towards Muslim people. Wearing hijab makes her noticeable as a Muslim girl and she is ready for that and not hesitant in stating her identity. The Figure 5 shows the ‘not a whisper’ as a symbol for hijab.

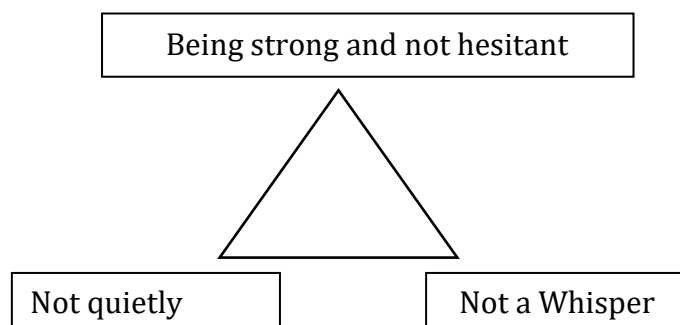


Figure 5. Not a Whisper as a Symbol

The fifth symbol found in the book is a hijab is stated as ‘not a laugh’. In the book it is narrated that some boys were laughing at Asiya who was wearing the hijab because they thought it was strange and funny. The narrator said, “Asiya’s hijab isn’t a laugh. Asiya’s hijab is like the ocean waving to the sky. It’s always there, strong, and friendly. Some people won’t understand your hijab, Mama had said. But you understand who you are, one day they will too,” (Muhammad, Ali & Aly, 2019: 15-16). From that narration, it can be inferred that some people will not understand the meaning of wearing hijab. However, as far as Asiya knows the reasons of wearing

hijab and her identity as a Muslim, it does not matter, one day people will understand and not laugh at her hijab. The following is the triadic model of 'not laugh' as a symbol of hijab as not something funny or a joke to be laugh at.

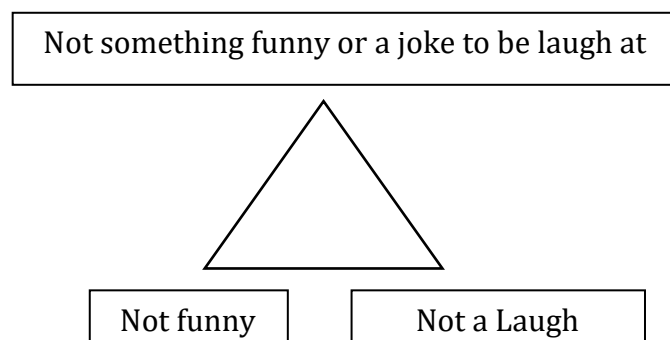


Figure 6. Laugh as a Symbol

The last symbol is hijabs are stated as 'not a tablecloth'. "Recess time is for five cartwheels in a row. I land the last one near the sixth graders. Near a boy yelling, "I'm going to pull that tablecloth off your head. Asiya's hijab isn't tablecloth. Asiya's hijab is blue. Only blue," (Muhammad, Ali & Aly, 2019: 19:21). In this data, the authors highlight that wearing hijab is not about covering or hiding Asiya's hairs, but it means more than that. In order to give the deeper meaning, the author once again pointed out the blue color which has an intention for highlighting that Asiya's hijab is not a cover like a tablecloth, but it is a symbol of religion related to piety and chastity.

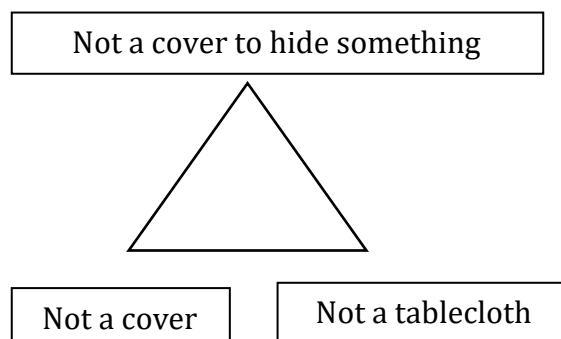


Figure 7. Tablecloth as a symbol

The data above clearly show that throughout the story, the author has an intention to represent hijabs to be something positive using positive colors, objects and dictions. The positive symbols for hijabs are on the contrary with how hijabs are usually picturized as something negative such as the symbol of radicalism and terrorism.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings explained in the previous section, it can be concluded that the authors represent hijab using positive symbols such as the pink and blue color. The pink color symbolizes love and compassion whereas the blue color represents



calmness and religious symbol related piety and sincerity or chastity. These colors counter the notion of hijab is associated with radicalism and terrorism which is far from love and calmness. In addition, the authors also suggest that hijab is not a whisper, not a laugh and not a tablecloth. The authors want to convey that a hijab is not a cover to hide something or a joke that people can laugh at. It is about giving statement of being brave and strong Muslim girls or women. These all symbols give a solid message that the authors want to counter the negative stereotypes about hijabs by symbolizing hijabs with positive ones.

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