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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Semiotic Reading of Mari Evans' "I Am a Black Woman" through Thick Description

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The precedence of poetry can be traced to ancient times when man first realized that he could combine speech with rhythmicity and musicality to convey and express his inner-most thoughts and passions. The strengths and advantages attributed to poetry are galore; however, few think of employing it as a source for retrieving cultural facts. In the current study, the endeavor of the researcher is to display how poetry can be utilized to extract cultural concepts which are embedded in the mass cultural consciousness of a people by scrutinizing their poetry. The complexity of notions, expressed through poetry, can be revealed one's verses are deconstructed and the poem is perused scholarly to single out hypograms which are the units carrying the essence of meaning. The inevitable result would be the revelation of different layers of meaning which are convoluted into leitmotifs and only a thorough analysis and meticulous reading can exhibit the relationship between signs, signifier and the signified. As both poetry and cultural studies share the characteristic of being implicit, it is necessary to employ methods which aid clarity and lucidity. A sophisticated analysis requires the use of thick description, a method which cleaves the kernels of thought to display intended meaning and acts as a viable catalyst expediting the process of comprehension through interpretation.

**Keywords:** Cultural Studies, Hypogram, Interpretation, Semiotic Analysis, Thick Description, Variant.

## Introduction

Regardless of one's profession, purpose or preference, the miraculous power of words is non-negotiable. Should the expertise of a poet who is well aware of the manifold techniques that cooperatively form expressive images be taken into consideration, the satisfactory result would be poetry that procures creative depictions out of the most mundane events, simultaneously

evoking thought and pleasure. The current study proposes that if techniques which aid to deconstruct and de-familiarize notions implicitly expressed in verse be utilized, in an innovative turn, poetry could potentially reveal facts about the cultural beliefs of a specific race or ethnic group. The concentration of this study is to perceive poetry, particularly that of Mari Evans', from a novel perspective and by deconstruction, to perform a thorough analysis seeking cultural phenomenon which disclose sentiments and convictions. Poetry, from this outlook, is the means of implicitly re-presenting and re-shaping "black thought" which is presented in the form of notions or signs and can extend the horizon of meaning should the various connotative layers be considered. Currently, this issue has earned the attention of both anthropologists and ethnographers besides thinkers who are interested in cultural studies.

Poetry, by definition, is not only a concise but also a highly expressive method of conveying thoughts and feelings. Part of the attraction which poetry has for many readers is that it offers notions in an implicit way, defying all kinds of straightforwardness which might prove to be blunt and offensive by resorting to explicitness which puts forth realities. The poet depends on various figures of speech and seeks credit in the fact that words possess multiple meanings inherently; thus, with only a few meticulously chosen words, much can be conveyed. The main objective suggested in this study is to discover how expressed concepts can disclose cultural beliefs rooted in the unconscious mind of individuals by surfacing and exposing them through interpretation. In order to access the deeper meaning of a poem, the reader needs to concentrate on imagery, the figurative language and the various symbols which need decoding.

Mari Evans (1923-2017), the celebrated American Black poetess is a prolific artist who attempts to work in various genres. In the late 1960s, she made contributions to the Black Arts Movement to remind members of their commitment to their race. Evans eagerly kindles into wakefulness a particular kind of consciousness which urges the Black minority to ask questions and demand responses. She enacts her beliefs in her poetry, and as Robert L. Douglas states, "Her poetry reverberates with ideas of resistance, mental insurgence and linguistic identity grounded in Black idiomatic traditions that can be heard in the everyday speech of common folk" (*Resistance, Insurgence and Identity* 151). Moreover, she works assiduously to enlighten Black individuals about the principles which hold priority in their culture as she specifically turns to women and junior members of the Black race and reminds them of humanistic values, such as self-esteem and dignity.

Clifford James Geertz (1926-2007), an outstanding anthropologist, is currently celebrated as the father of symbolic and interpretive anthropology. In the zenith of his studies, and in order to evade the positivistic and scientific approach imposed on anthropology which had gained popularity in the 1950s, he argues that anthropology should be defined from a novel perspective. Due to its extensible nature, anthropology can enable scholars to analyze layers of meaning, providing evidence and trespassing over the borders of surface-level meaning. The outcome, as might be speculated, is not to render complexity but to promote and enhance clarity. With the intimacy existing between anthropology and other branches of human sciences in mind, Geertz

draws on history, cultural studies, philosophy, psychology and literary criticism in order to decode the meanings embedded in terms, expressions and symbols which he finds a plethora of in all cultures. As words inherently enjoy the attribute of carrying multiple meaning and artists advertently opt for implicit expression, it is essential to resort to a means which will enhance interpretation and so, he introduces the concept of “thick description” as a useful means in interpretation. This is a method which emphasizes the multiplicity of relationships between the signifiers and the signified and can “capture and record the voices of lived experience” (Norman Denizen 99), and by virtue of the same merit, possesses the potentiality to extend the gamut of comprehension, both in length and breadth.

Michael Riffaterre (1924-2006) is one of the most influential contemporary literary critics of the twentieth century. He is reputed to advocate a structuralistic approach in his magnum opus, *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978), in which he introduces a systematic and procedural analysis of poetry, consisting of four basic steps and initiated by a bi-phased procedure; heuristic and retroactive readings. This is carried out in order to discover matrices and models, the physical and understood kernels of meaning. Next, he suggests readers seek hypograms, the units of meaning, spread throughout the poem, which strengthen the ties between the mimetic and poetic level. He guarantees that perusing poetry through his proposed framework will provide optimal perception and complete the task of discovering the poet’s intended meaning. Since the publication of his eminent work, many academicians have applied his semiotic analysis to the reading of poems for the sake of achieving thorough comprehension.

### Literature Review

As expected in most fields of study, innovation is a desirable goal; nevertheless, it is a fact widely acknowledged by scholars that new ideas and thoughts can be obtained from through study of what has already been carried out in that particular field. Original concepts can stand on strong pillars if they are supported by research and findings that have already shed light on assumptions and theories made in elaborating claims. To make progress and open portals to new perspectives, it is essential to discover what has already been sought and presented about the topic under study. The following section shall display a list of works carried out by investigators who have analyzed poetry from a semiotic angle.

It is interesting to note that the amount of critical work carried out to present the challenging relationship between semiotics and poetry is quite considerable as the topic is inter-disciplinary and by nature quite intriguing. However, the present study, due to limitations imposed on any researcher is bound to present the findings of articles on semiotics in poetry and Michael Riffaterre’s outstanding work entitled *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978) which stands at the core of all the studied papers on this topic. In his magnum opus, Riffaterre emphasizes several keys points in analyzing poetry from a semiotic point of view. He introduces and elaborates on several key terms in the field of poetic analysis, namely “hypograms”, “accumulation” and “structural

matrix”; moreover, suggesting a technique in reading poetry which is performed in two stages: heuristic or exploratory and the retroactive.

The paper entitled “Semiotics of Poetry: The Meaning of Form” (1974), presents the theoretical views by Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992) and Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) as to the relationship between linguistics, semiotics and poetics. The value of “signs” in poetry reveals that poetry is a literary form that is characterized by the relationship between content and expression. Furthermore, the article reflects the views of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Julia Kristeva (1941- ), Jean-Claude Coquet (1928-2023) and Jean-Louis Houdebine (1934-2015), elaborating on the “semanalysis” of texts in search of structuralist models which tend to deconstruct the logical systems on which structural methodologies depend on.

A book review entitled, “Cultural Studies through Literary and Semiotic Approaches: A Review Article of New Manuals by Walton and Thwaites, Davis and Mules” (2009) by Maya Zalbidea Paniagua mainly focuses on David Walton’s eminent work, *Introducing Cultural Studies: Learning through Practice* (2008) as one of the most dependable contemporary referents on cultural studies. The aim of the paper is to support a creative approach to cultural criticism, as proposed by the book, to the recording of historical events and changes within the field. The reviewer critiques Thwaites, Davis and Mules’ work entitled *Introducing Cultural and Media Studies: A Semiotic Approach* (2002) in which she warns of a lack in methodology, in the field of cultural studies which imperils the authenticity of collected data.

In a paper entitled “Application of Michael Riffaterre’s Semiotic Theory in Analyzing Nima’s ‘Phoenix’” (2011), Alireza Nabiloo applies Riffaterre’s reading technique to the poem in order to search for meaning in the text while considering linguistic implications. The researcher suggests that there is a close relationship between the covert and internal accumulation of elements and systems in the text. Ultimately, the structural matrix of the poem is surfaced and the intended meaning of the poem which indicates feelings of apathy and despondence prevailing in the society of the poet’s era emerges as the internal truth of the art work. Another article, “Forgive Us, O Life! The Sin of Death: A Critical Reading of Michael Riffaterre’s Semiotics of Poetry” (2011) by Per Backstrom pursues two objectives: the first is to present a semiotic-based analysis of poetry as a fundamental method and the second is to make a reminder of the predicaments in applying the approach. The investigator points out that there is a clear distinction between the language of prose and poetry as the latter is mainly referential and not merely mimetic.

The paper entitled “The Effort to Increase the Students’ Achievement in Poetry Mastery through Semiotic Method” (2017), by I Wy Dirgeyasa elaborates on Riffaterre’s semiotic reading method and claims that since the method proposed is systematic and procedural, it really enhances students’ potentiality to perceive the “intended meaning” in poetry. The suggested method consists of four consecutive steps. The proposed steps were applied respectively to the poem under consideration in the present research.

Rusmitha Sipahutar, in “An Analysis of Semiotic Riffaterre in Walt Whitman Selected Poem” (2019), attempts to analyze Whitman’s poem by employing a descriptive-qualitative method and tends to exhibit Riffaterre’s claim made in *Semiotics of Poetry* by arguing that unsustainability of expression in poetry includes, displacement, distortion and creation of meaning. Interpretation of “O, Captain, My Captain” and “I Hear America Singing” are used as examples of how poetry can be read according to Riffaterre’s model, supplying the writer of this article with practical cases of approach application.

In “Michael Riffaterre’s Semiotics on William Shakespeare’s *A Madrigal: A Semiotic Analysis on Poetry*”, (2020) the objective of Putri Intan Sari Pradani is to discover the extent to which Riffaterre’s theories can be applied to Shakespeare’s poem by applying a qualitative-descriptive method through a semiotic analysis.

“Walt Whitman’s Poem *I Hear America Singing: A Study of Michael Riffaterre’s Semiotics*” (2021) by Najihuddin Sain analyzes a specific poem by employing the theorist’s semiotic approach relying on a qualitative-descriptive method. In the study, indirect means of expression including displacement, distortion and creation are investigated. The study concludes that an in-depth interpretation which yields the intended meaning is extracted when the poem is read in a bi-phased procedure. The methodical search for the proposed concepts was put into practice in the present work as well.

“Cultural Semiotics and the Related Interpretation” (2021) by Jinshun Long is a study which intends to elaborate on several key concepts in cultural semiotics and its significance as it influences the act of interpretation. It is emphasized that every cultural sign surfaced through cultural analysis indicates a meaning which is embedded in the context and is of use when interpreting. Another article entitled “J. K. Tatengkeng and Robert Frost’s Poems: An Application of Michael Riffaterre’s Semiotic Model” (2021), by Karmila Mokoginta, tends to exhibit the results of applying Riffaterre’s semiotic model to six particular poems, belonging to two different poets and in a comparative article. Riffaterre’s reading procedure, carried out at two levels, is put into practice and evidence about the intended meaning is extracted by focusing on linguistic knowledge.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Approach***

Poetry accounts for a unity that is not only formal but also semantic and is rife with signs that need to be deciphered if the intended meaning and the concepts which the poet has in mind are to be conveyed. According to Riffaterre, the language of prose is mimetic and so it is characterized by a grammatical sequence of linguistic units which are highly dependent on the feature of “referentiality” or direct relationship. This mimetic process is complex and subject to variety and multiplicity, just as reality is. However, the main attribute of poetic language is that it is indirect and the different semantic units composing the poetic text work together to infer a specific meaning (*Semiotics of Poetry 2*).

Analyzing the language of poetry, then, calls for expert investigation and in his outstanding work, Riffaterre proposes that there are suggestive steps which can aid readers obtain the “significance” of the lines. Ideas are never put forth directly in poetry but are communicated via figures of speech. “Indirection” occurs due to displacement, distortion and creation of meaning, respectively taking place in metaphor, metonymy, personification, synecdoche, simile and contradiction, juxtaposition or irony. The creation of meaning occurs when the text acts as an organized concept composed of various signs acting as unified linguistic units. In all three cases, meaning is created through a process of perceiving signs and is carried out in the readers’ minds.

A semiotic reading of the poem in two stages reveals that for a thorough analysis, one should not be content with the denotations. Rather the poem can be completely appreciated once words are scrutinized with regard to the multi-layeredness that convolutes the various signs existent in the text. This fact must not be ignored, as previously mentioned, that “the semiotic process really takes place in the reader’s mind, and it results from a second reading” (*Semiotics of Poetry* 4). The focus of reading, at this stage, are units which carry meaning and appear in the form of words or phrases. The matrix, or as defined by Riffaterre, the absent structure that is operating in the poem and is only actualized in the “variants or ungrammaticalities” (13) is observed at this level. Variations are discovered through encoding in order to disclose whatever is concealed; meanwhile, taking notice of disorder and distortion. This, in turn, points to ungrammaticality which calls for an extra-textuality recreating meaning. A transformation takes place by means of “conversion”, through which words are altered by a paradigmatic exchange or “expansion” functioning at a syntagmatical level. Words and lines are also determined horizontally with reference to hypograms, constituted in clichés or descriptive systems. Riffaterre replaces the notion for theme-word by the suggestion of a key term, otherwise known as the “hypogram”. Eventually, there is a transition from meaning to significance which “is necessitated by the “interpretant” or the link between the mimetic and the poetic level of language. In this phase, the reader’s mind is fused with information, although implicitly inferred, but very essential to bringing hyper-textuality into effective action.

Since ideas in poetry are highly referential, it is essential to take notice of Geertz and his notion labeled as “thick description”, which concisely defined, is an explanation of any human social action that not only elaborates man’s physical behavior but also focuses on the context or the circumstances under which this behavior occurs. It consists of immersing oneself within a context of a specific culture while noting particular, detailed references about social actions and the behavior of agents. “Thick description” is quite a useful technique for it can provide a subjective elaboration and an enriched content with the result that collected data can gain sophisticated value. Moreover, it showcases the totality of a phenomenon to enable full grasp of the findings which is labeled as, “mélange of descriptors” (Paul Robinson, “From Suttee to Baseball to Cockfighting, 11). Applying thick description is to resort to a methodological act which heavily relies on the influence of semiotic developments in culture.

“Thickness”, in regard to the present study, derives from the layering of detailed information which is embedded in the heart of hypograms, i.e. the leitmotifs or the notions that mirror cultural phenomena and carry the gist of meaning within their cores. Norman Denzin’s explanation of the term, in *Interpretive Interactionism*, verifies what has already been stated and proposes, “Thick description creates verisimilitude --- that is, the realistic description produces for readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described” (100). In conclusion, thick description, while aiding interpretation, builds up description, providing significance for experiences that are expressed symbolically.

## Methodology

Mari Evans’ poetry is a rich source of signs and through deconstruction and interpretation, the researcher is able to discover a profuse collection of matrices, variants and hypograms which readily facilitate the conveyance of information and deepen comprehension. No doubt, the first step towards discovery of signs is meticulous reading of texts. In his prestigious work, *Semiotics of Poetry*, Michael Riffaterre describes this process in *Semiotics of Poetry*:

Decoding the poem starts with a first reading stage that goes and follows the syntagmatic unfolding. The first, “heuristic reading” is also where the first interpretation takes place, since it is during this reading that meaning is apprehended. ... The second stage is that of retroactive reading. This is the time for a second interpretation, for the truly hermeneutic reading. As he progresses through the text, the reader remembers what he has just read and modifies his understanding of it in the light of what he is now decoding. (5)

Accordingly, the initial act of confronting the text and making an attempt to comprehend it requires the reader to administer a bi-phased reading procedure. The next step would be to extract and concentrate on the variants and hypograms i.e. the Saussurian “paragrams” or leitmotifs, generated in the poem serving as important indices in attaining an in-depth understanding. The hypograms might appear in various forms; words, terms, notions or concepts maintained overtly or implied in subversion. The above-mentioned reading procedure is followed in analyzing the poem under study in this research.

All symbols are attached to denotative and connotative meanings which readily conform to the value system adopted by the reader. As Panofsky argues in *Studies in Iconology*, signs are “polysemic” in nature (51-53) and consist of layers of meaning, highly dependent on the context in which it is used and typically dependent on the interpreter’s class, age, gender, and ethnicity. Considering Barthes model of signification, at the first level of reading, only the definition provided by a dictionary is assumed in which the symbol composed of the signifier and the signified is contemplated. At the second level, the figurative meaning of signs is taken into account and the reader avails to additional background knowledge to discover meaning. At this stage, connotations are to be considered for they reveal associations that are an inseparable part of the sign and essential to thorough comprehension. The compilation of denotative or connotative signification “generates ideology, which is characterized as the third level of

signification” (Long 3). The researcher clearly acknowledges the application of a semiotic reading in obtaining results and findings.

The term “thick description” coined by Gilbert Ryle (1900-1976) but developed by Clifford Geertz, suggests that it is not sufficient to concentrate on and describe physical behaviors, but essential to extend our scholarly outlook towards the content of these actions so that an interpretation is possible. Numerous human actions might have various meanings and it is the duty of any investigator to be acquainted with these nuances. This qualitative research technique, which highlights the researcher’s intellectual efforts, provides subtle and detailed descriptions of observed situations. The main objective in thick description is to form an understanding of the significant and complex cultural meanings, underpinning any instance. This process involves providing a background, necessary for comprehension while seeking the relevance and intentions that underlie any social interaction or phenomenon. The researcher actually goes beyond a superficial look at mere facts by presenting details and disclosing the webs that define social interrelationships. The use of “thick description” requires interpretation and is dependent on various factors which might be a functional element or a cultural implication playing a key dramatic role in shaping human cognition accompanied by signs. In addition, it must be noted that signifiers are not isolated units which are detached from the cultural background of the users of the language. They host figurative meanings which can be thought of as a set with a myriad of possible referents. The means of thick description was employed so as to discover the connotative meanings and synopsise the path to perception in the present article.

Interpretation completes the task of bringing meaning to the semantic units of the text, intricately folded in layers, in order to discover the historical, social and cultural notions which are putatively concealed but are to be conveyed through the variants and hypograms in the poem, as the poet wishes. Once the text is deconstructed, it becomes evident that there is more than what meets the eye in a heuristic reading. Provided the semiotic analysis suggested by Riffaterre is completed, in the wake of a semiotic reading, while the connotations, variants, matrices and hypograms are elaborated on, the enthusiastic researcher can attempt to discover the poet’s “intended meaning”.

Worthy-of-note to the completion of the methodology section is considering the notion of intertextuality which attempts to discuss the relationship between three distinct texts; one text with a cultural- historical context, a second one which is the literary work and the reader’s mind as the third. When determining meaning, it is essential to contemplate all the inter-related texts and to compare data suggested by all of them. There are merits to inter-textuality, such as promoting the idea that no text is truly isolated and its advantages can be appreciated once insight is given to pre-existing elements. Life experiences gained and shared through inter-textuality intensify the multi-layer status of knowledge while a sense of connection and continuity is enhanced and the reader becomes involved in a broader literary heritage than what a simple investigation can provide.



The appropriate research method selected for this study is basically qualitative-descriptive and concentrates on making systematic and precise descriptions based on facts enabling the researcher to collect information while exploring the characteristics of phenomena rather than attempting to explain the underlying causes or mechanisms of how or why events occur. This, in fact, means to admit that reality exists within various dynamic contexts and is discriminately perceived depending on the subject. Given that reality is multiple and subjective, the researcher is able to focus on understanding human experiences in its own context.

## Discussion

### *Musicality and Thick Description*

Among all the noted poems by Mari Evans, this paper will particularly focus on “I Am a Black Woman” which appears in a poetry collection by the same title. The piece is quite remarkable due to its subject matter ---- the eternal struggle of the Black individual in life. This toil is depicted artistically by creating a synesthetic image of sweet tears being played like an arpeggio in minor key. We read:

I am a black woman  
the music of my song  
some sweet arpeggio of tears  
is written in a minor key  
and I can be heard humming in the night. (*I Am a Black Woman* 11)

The accumulation of the variants, song, minor key, humming and heard circumventing the matrix of music induce the reader to look for beyond-the-text information by concentrating on the variant “arpeggio”. Originally from Italian, the term means to run the fingers along the chords of a harp recreating the image of one running along the path of life. Currently, the term refers to a type of “broken” chord in which the composing notes are “individually” sounded in a rising or descending order, necessarily containing “three” pitches. The arpeggio is highlighted in genres where there is a significant emphasis on melody and ornamentation, as marginal properties of musical pieces. The unique choice of the variant arpeggio and its hyper-textual characteristics, in a network of meaning, infer sensations and images. Just like an arpeggio, the Black life is not only broken and desperate but also represented by sweet tears of despair, streaming down a face. The matrix “continuity” is bold here as music, life and tears are characterized by a flowing movement. The song of the Black woman is actually her years of life that resemble an arpeggio and must be “individually sounded”, since each person is destined to live one’s own life. It is characterized by a “rising or descending order”, just like all the vicissitudes one has to encounter in one’s trajectory and “consisting of three different pitches” just like the three various stages of life; childhood, adulthood and seniority. An arpeggio is played to create melodic and ornamental effects, the implicit reference to life’s intricacies and minor details. Arpeggio is also an important part of jazz improvisation, evoking the notion that life is an improvised phenomenon since no one really knows what will take place next in the

course of a lifetime. The comparison between the Black woman's life and playing an arpeggio is a precise and artistic comparison through which not only ideas but feelings are transferred.

### Anti-War Protests as Hypograms

In the late 1960s, Evans made great contributions to the Black Arts Movement and literally became a political activist. Her sentiments about the involvement of people, many of them young, and all the lives that were lost as a result of, what she understood to be, a nonsensical ideological-political bigotry, has always been pronounced in her poetry. We read,

and heard my son scream all the way from Anzio  
for Peace he never knew... I  
learned Da Nang and Pork Chop Hill  
in anguish  
Now my nostrils know the gas  
and these trigger tire/d fingers  
seek the softness in my warrior's beard (*I Am a Black Woman* 11)

The repetition of three place names, Anzio, Da Nang and Pork Chop Hill, all bases for American troops after World War II, evokes memories of all the atrocities which occurred at those sites. In Italy, at an army base in Anzio, heavy combat took place and records have stated that about 40,000 soldiers embarked the beach at Anzio of which 29,200 became casualties. 4,400 died, 18,000 were wounded and 6,800 were captured or were called missing. Da Nang, an army base in Vietnam, became the site of combat between the American troops and the Viet Cong. An air base stationed at Da Nang served as a primary entry point for American service members and the main depot for Agent Orange, the herbicide containing health- hazardous chemicals, namely dioxin. This was sprayed sporadically over the wooded parts of Vietnam which was suspect of providing coverage for Vietnamese combatants. Breathing excessive amounts of the afore-mentioned chemical can cause death and that is why the act was denounced as war crime against humanity. The outcome of the war was the loss of 300,000 veterans and 400,000 civilian lives. Pork Chop Hill was another war front where the American Seventh Infantry Division, the Chinese and North Korean forces confronted each other in deadly attacks which once again led to the loss of many lives, mostly soldiers in the prime of their youth. The variants son, scream, Peace, anguish, gas, trigger, tired and warrior's beard accumulate and recreate what would encircle the matrix of war. The leitmotifs or hypograms youthful death, atrocity and bloodshed are the foci in this section of the poem. Many anti-war protestors, at the time when public rallies were held, would agree with Evans that nothing is more precious than human life and to force an individual by drafting him and sending him to the war zone to combat and kill other human beings for the sake of political greed on the part of the supremacy is not only illogical but also sinful. Evans refers to all the youth drafted to fight in these wars as "son" highlighting the passionate emotions exchanged between mothers and their offspring as they are urged to meet their deaths in war zones. The intended meaning

of the poet is quite evident by the place names she chooses. There were numerous demonstrations held in protest to missions abroad and Evans is definitely one of those many voices.

### **Slavery as Leitmotif**

Another horrendous phenomenon that is forever inscribed in the collective historical consciousness of mankind is slavery, the grievous narrative of how, otherwise, free individuals were kidnapped from their motherland in Africa to be sold into slavery in the New World. Ages may pass but the story of the inequality, suffering, torture, trauma and pain that characterizes slavery will still be the subject of many proclamations. Seemingly, all Afro-American writers feel a strong commitment to resurrect scenes from the days of slavery when the voice of the oppressed minority was not heard. Mari Evans, likewise, as an active member of the Black Arts Movement, feels that it is her mission to recreate scenes of horror inflicted on her predecessors with the outcome of warning against human condescension and humility, in any form, whether physical or mental. In her poem, we read,

I saw my mate leap screaming to the sea  
and I/ with these hands/ cupped the lifebreath  
from my issue in the canebrake  
I lost Nat's swinging body in a rain of tears (*I Am a Black Woman* 11)

The variants leap, screaming, sea, hands, lifebreath, canebrake, swinging body and tears accumulate to evoke the matrix of slavery and a miserable condition, in order to resuscitate, after so many bygone days, the wretchedness of being forced into slavery. What is implicitly inferred is the historical fact of how native Africans were transferred in vessels, by waterways to their destination. Once aware of their dismal fate, some individuals would attempt escape by jumping off the ship, little knowing that the depth of the ocean water would be as treacherous as the ruse of the slave drivers. With their feet chained together, the slaves had only their hands free to manipulate chains, twist manacles and cup their breaths in order to survive. Later the same hands would part the cane brake as the slaves attempted to break their confinement and try to escape to freedom through sugar cane plantations. In the process, many "swinging bodies" would be lost and cried over, bodies that had become limp due to weakness from hunger or pain or were caught by slave hunters and hanged in punishment. The leitmotif of slavery is completely bold in this section as the story of man's suffering in slavery is retold and Evans' intended meaning of reviving the anguish that runs parallel to slavery is asserted.

### **Oscillation of the Black Identity between Signifier and Signified**

Arguably, the theoretical aspect of the claim made in this study can be put in practice and applied in this part of the poem. We read in the final section of the poem,

I  
am a black woman  
tall as a cypress

strong  
 beyond all definition still  
 defying place  
 and time  
 and circumstance  
 assailed  
 impervious  
 indestructible  
 Look  
 on me and be  
 renewed (12)

The heuristic reading displays a simple metaphor in which the Black woman is compared to an object, namely a cypress tree. Thin description reveals a similitude which provides for the ground of comparison emphasizing tallness as the ground of comparison. However, what really establishes a relationship between the signified and the signifier is obtained through the employment of thick description while adding and bringing peripheral meaning to the signs. Thick description explains the reason why this particular tree was chosen as the vehicle in this metaphor and not any other tree. A partial explanation lies in the multi-layer connotative and figurative meanings related to the cypress. From antiquity, the cypress tree was assumed symbolically as the sign of immortality and eternal life. With roots that penetrate to great lengths into the earth, it stands, lofty and erect, a firm link between mundane life and life hereafter. In ancient Greek mythology, Cyparissus who was grief-stricken after accidentally killing his pet stag, begged Zeus to let him mourn perpetually and the god transformed him into a cypress tree on which droplets of sap can be seen oozing down the trunk, very much like tears trickling down a face. In this sense, the cypress tree signifies everlasting sorrow. In both Middle Eastern and European cultures, the cypress is a symbol of mourning associated with death and the underworld. Dendrology informs us that the cypress is thickly buttressed at the base which gives it a firm stand against all meteorological elements despite its height, making it quite invulnerable. Noteworthy in the connotative level is the naturalistic fact that the reddish-brown bark of the tree turns gray as the tree ages. The similarity between this fact and what happens to human hair as an individual declines in years is quite illustrative as to the choice made for the vehicle of the comparison. To the Romans, the cypress was a symbol of respect and dead bodies were placed under this tree for some time with the hope that the stateliness of the tree would eventually assist the deceased person reach heaven. The provided information is to be regarded when the poem is read through what Riffaterre defines as a ‘retroactive’ reading which helps to explain the poet’s choice and Geertz’s thick description method. Intelligent choices made by the poet convey background information concerning the relationship between the tenor, I, and the vehicle, cypress tree, in her comparison.

In Black culture, a woman has an intriguing position which renders it difficult to determine her identity. Most of the times, she is regarded as insignificant, marginalized and neglected, used as a sex object and a hatching machine and destined for tedious house chores.

She is belittled, humiliated and harassed both physically and mentally making life an unending tragic drama of sorrows. Her feeling of grief, over her predicaments, could be accompanied by intermittent crying which is the first and foremost reaction to misery. Yet, there is hope for the roots in the ground which make her stand firm in encountering hardship. In juxtaposition, the “mother” figure in the Black culture is formidable, indomitable and worthy of respect. With strength, she teaches and preaches perseverance and determination, a reminder of how a cypress is fortified at its base. Grieved and traumatized by the injustice imposed on her throughout the years of her life, the Black woman stands tenaciously to face difficulties as she sets an example for others of her kin and race. All this information is obtained through analyzing the variant “cypress” as the core of the poet’s intent via comparison and accumulation. Evans relies on the collective cultural understanding of her readers and is confident that her particular choice will recall the untold predicament of the Black woman throughout history. Moving beyond the collective level, there are individualistic motives which the poet informs readers about. To Evans, the strength of the cypress is of a unique kind which is unlike whatever is imagined, surpassing “all definition, place and time”. The definition of the variant “assailed” as a signifier summons a host of signified concepts. When one is “assailed”, the individual is attacked, criticized harshly which, in itself, narrates the painful story of the Black women and her trajectory, moving on from neglected childhood, to oppressive adulthood and hence inequitable seniority. Moreover, the adjective refers to and elicits the image of being broken down as the result of numerous and repeated blows and this fact, as adroitly employed by the artist, recounts how the Black woman is and has been treated. In order to emphasize the state of the Black woman, Evans adds another adjective to her list --- the signifier “impervious” with yet again a range of meanings that can be analyzed both denotatively and connotatively. The impervious individual is unaffected by hardship, impermeable to difficulties, resistant to calamities and undisturbed by tribulation. Thus, the poetess stipulates her opinion straightforwardly and maintains that she holds an excessively high opinion for the women of her race. The adjective “indestructible” warns adversaries and ill-wishers of the fate of all who want to oppress and defeat a Black woman--- they are subject to failure for the Black woman is firm against misfortune and will withstand all trials. The last verse of the poem is quite elucidating too as she concludes her point by making a demand of the reader. The meaning of the verb “look”, once regarded connotatively and supported by thick description, moves beyond the simple act of using sight to notice something. It becomes the imperative request of perceiving and observing with the ultimate intent of sharing an experience, albeit dismal and misfortunate, of the ebbs and flows in the life course of the Black woman, who will restore herself and rise phoenix-like from the ashes of her ruination to a hopeful future of expectations. The experience will “renew” life, reinvigorating interest in generating ambitions for a more vivid and fruitful future.

## Conclusion

Evans' poetry is distinguished by profuse imagery and in order to reach the connotative level, it is necessary to interpret and decode the various signs. Riffaterre introduces a semiotic analysis of poetry in four steps which, once administered, aids in achieving fullness of comprehension. Geertz suggests that culture and whatever is embedded in our collective consciousness is semiotic in nature and in order to enhance the study of cultural signs, one must necessarily resort to convenient tools which facilitate interpretation, namely "thick description". The intentional selection of the poem, the critical reading and the tool which facilitates the critical process required meticulous and prior thought.

The philosophical view of universalism holds that human thought is essentially harmonized and homogenized and it is basically due to this fact that once the act of retroactive reading is completed, via interpretation, there will be little complexity at the level of comprehension, from all aspects and for all participants, in deriving meaning from a text. Hence, from the view point of semiotics, provided various signifiers are perceived, determining the signified becomes quite convenient as a feasible act.

Obviously the presented evidence indicates that the semiotic analysis of Evans' poem is actually a journey into the enigmatic world of signs and symbols, hopefully destined to procure profoundness for research. Intertextuality between the poem as one text and the reader's mind as the second, enhances interpretation, widening scopes to disclose the manifold convolutions which hold unfamiliar or unrelated notions at first glance but then display information that leads readers to the "intended meaning". By attaining deep insight into what is revealed through unveiling various layers of meaning, the gamut of cognizance will broaden and this will inevitably result in the pleasure of enjoying poetry twofold.




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## نشانه‌شناسی فرهنگی در شعر منتخب ماری ایونز با عنوان "من زنی سیاه پوستم" با روش توصیف پر مایه

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### چکیده

پیشینه شعر به ازمنه‌ی دیرین برمیگردد، آن زمان که انسان به این درک رسید که میتواند موسیقی و اوزان را با هم بیامیزد تا درونی‌ترین افکار و احساسات خود را به شیواترین وجه ابراز دارد. نقاط قوت و مزیت‌های شعر بی‌شمارند، اما اندک‌اند کسانی که به جز سرگرمی از آن در راستای کشف حقایق فرهنگی بهره‌جویند. در این تحقیق محققان بر آن هستند که استفاده‌ی نوینی را از شعر مطرح سازند و آشکار کنند که چگونه میتوان از شعر بهره‌گرفت تا مبانی مرتبط با فرهنگ از درون آن استخراج شود. در هم پیچیدگی ایده‌ها زمانی هویدا میشود که شعر در ابتدا واسازی شده و هیپوگرام‌ها که واحدهای اصلی حامل معنا میباشند نمایان گردند. نتیجه‌ی بی‌شک اشراف بیشتر بر معنای لغوی و مجازی شعر خواهد بود. لایه‌های معنایی در موضوعات تکرار شونده در هم آمیخته‌اند و تنها تجزیه و تحلیلی دقیق و فراگیر میتواند رابطه بین نشان‌ها، دال‌ها و مدلول‌ها را آشکار سازد. از آنجایی که شعر و مطالعات فرهنگی در یک رابطه‌ی تنگاتنگ و استنباطی قرار دارند، لازم است که از روش‌هایی که به آشکارسازی معنایی مدد میدهند استمداد بجوییم. استفاده از توصیف پر مایه از سویی هسته‌های معنایی را شکافته و نیت شاعر را آشکار میسازد و از سوی دیگر به عنوان یک کاتالیزور به فرآیند درک و تفسیر شعر سرعت میبخشد.

**کلیدواژگان:** تفسیر، توصیف پر مایه، متغیر، مطالعات فرهنگی، هیپوگرام، نشانه‌شناسی.

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