

RED HAIR, FRECKLES, AND SINGLENESS: DECODING "ANNE WITH AN E" THROUGH SEMIOTICS

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the representation of Anne's character, confronts women's stereotypical roles during the 19th Century by being a feminist in the center of a patriarchal society, fighting for equality, body autonomy, singleness and the fundamental rights of women. The research data is from Netflix original series Anne with an E premiered seven years ago. This series is based on a classic children's novel set in the late 19th Century that recounts Anne Shirley's adventures. This paper focuses on the third season since it is the one more relevant to the topic and theory that will be discussed. The researcher used a qualitative research method with a semiotic analysis to analyze the research object. The data analysis technique is based on "The Codes of Television" semiotics theory by John Fiske. The approach used to investigate includes the level of reality, the level of representation, and the level of ideology. Based on the data, the researcher has found that in this Century and Pakistan, women didn't have a voice, but Anne became that voice that many tried to silence. She fought gratefully for women's rights, and she applied it to her life. A patriarchal society was confronted not just by Anne but by a complete change of thought. Anne's character is a true feminist icon who fought for women's rights and works as an example for the women of nowadays.

Keywords: Anne with an E, feminism, women's rights, patriarchal society, semiotic analysis, John Fiske, feminist icon, 19th Century, gender stereotypes, equality

1. Introduction

The representation of women in media has long been a subject of critical inquiry within feminist literary and cultural studies. Across different historical periods, literature, cinema, and television have played a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions of gender roles. The late 19th Century, in particular, remains significant for its deeply entrenched patriarchal values that restricted women's autonomy, mobility, and access to equal rights. In this context, feminist criticism not only interrogates the ideological underpinnings of such portrayals but also identifies empowering narratives that challenge conventional stereotypes. The Netflix original series *Anne with an E*, adapted from L. M. Montgomery's classic novel *Anne of Green Gables*, provides a contemporary reimagining of a historical text, situating its protagonist, Anne Shirley, as a defiant voice against oppressive social structures. This reimagining becomes especially relevant for contemporary audiences in Pakistan, where similar patriarchal norms continue to influence women's lived realities.

Feminist media criticism recognizes the importance of highlighting characters who resist societal constraints, as they serve both as cultural icons and as agents of ideological transformation. Anne Shirley's character, in the third season of *Anne with an E*, transcends the traditional confines of a female protagonist by actively advocating for equality, body autonomy, the right to remain unmarried, and broader human rights for women. Such a portrayal confronts not only the historical limitations placed upon women in the 19th Century but also reflects the universal struggle against gender-based oppression. By revisiting a classic narrative through a feminist lens, the series invites a re-evaluation of women's historical representation and aligns with contemporary feminist discourses that aim to dismantle systemic inequalities. This duality—rooted in both historical and modern contexts—enables a deeper exploration of the enduring relevance of feminist thought.

Semiotics, as a methodological tool, offers a robust framework for decoding the layers of meaning embedded within visual media. John Fiske's theory of "The Codes of Television" provides an analytical structure for examining the ways in which television constructs reality,

represents ideology, and engages with socio-cultural norms. By applying Fiske's three levels—reality, representation, and ideology—this research seeks to uncover how Anne's character negotiates meaning within a patriarchal framework while simultaneously embodying resistance. In the Pakistani context, such an analysis not only draws parallels between historical gender struggles and contemporary challenges but also contributes to the broader discourse on media's role in shaping public perceptions of women's agency. The qualitative approach employed in this study ensures a nuanced examination of both narrative and symbolic elements, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how feminist ideals are communicated through the medium of television.

This research is particularly timely, as global conversations around gender equality intersect with local realities in Pakistan. By situating a fictional 19th-century Canadian character within a feminist analytical framework, this study underscores the universality of women's struggles against patriarchal systems, while also reflecting the specific socio-cultural dynamics of Pakistani society. The findings of this study not only affirm Anne Shirley as a feminist icon but also highlight the transformative potential of media representations in inspiring social change. As Pakistan continues to grapple with issues of women's rights and gender-based discrimination, such analyses can serve as both cultural critique and a call to action, urging audiences to reimagine possibilities for female empowerment in both fictional and real-life contexts.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How does the Netflix series *Anne with an E* (Season 3) represent Anne Shirley as a feminist figure challenging patriarchal norms of the 19th Century?
2. In what ways can the feminist representation of Anne Shirley be related to contemporary issues faced by women in Pakistan?

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To analyze the portrayal of Anne Shirley in *Anne with an E* (Season 3) using John Fiske's semiotic theory, focusing on the levels of reality, representation, and ideology.
2. To explore the parallels between Anne Shirley's feminist struggles in a 19th-century setting and the gender-related challenges experienced by women in modern-day Pakistan.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for both academic and socio-cultural discourse by offering a feminist media analysis that bridges historical narratives with contemporary realities. By examining the character of Anne Shirley in *Anne with an E* (Season 3) through John Fiske's semiotic framework, the research highlights how media can challenge entrenched patriarchal norms and inspire audiences toward gender equality. For Pakistani scholars, educators, and media practitioners, the study provides a lens to understand how feminist ideals can be communicated effectively within storytelling, even when set in a different cultural and temporal context. Additionally, it underscores the relevance of reinterpreting historical narratives to address ongoing struggles for women's rights, making it valuable for feminist studies, cultural studies, and media literacy programs.

1.4 Delimitation of the Study

This research is delimited to the analysis of *Anne with an E* (Season 3) as the primary source material, as it is most directly aligned with the feminist themes under investigation. The study focuses solely on the portrayal of Anne Shirley and does not comprehensively analyze other characters or subplots in the series. The scope is limited to applying John Fiske's "The Codes of Television" semiotic theory, examining the levels of reality, representation, and ideology, without incorporating other semiotic or feminist analytical models. Geographically, while the

series is set in 19th-century Canada, the study draws parallels only with the socio-cultural realities of Pakistan, thereby excluding a comparative analysis with other contemporary societies.

2 Literature Review

John Fiske's groundbreaking work applies semiotic theory to television, viewing the medium as a site where meaning is constructed and ideology is encoded. In *Television Culture* (1987), Fiske argues that television communicates through visual and narrative codes that shape how audiences interpret reality, representation, and ideology. This study adopts Fiske's tripartite framework to dissect how *Anne with an E* (Season 3) encodes feminist resistance through its visual motifs, dialogue, and narrative arcs.

Films not only shape societal constructs but also serve as recordings of life that grow and develop within society and are then projected onto the screen (Andersson-Bakken et al., 2022). Over time, films have evolved into a medium that represents various social and cultural realities, allowing the visualization and depiction of social issues, one of which is patriarchal culture. Patriarchal culture is a term used to describe a social system in which power, control, and authority are primarily held by men or male figures. In this cultural context, men have dominance that encompasses various aspects of life, from family structure, community life, to social institutions.

Feminist literary scholarship highlights that while Victorian-era texts often reinforced domestic ideals like the "angel in the house," they also contained subversive moments that gestured toward autonomy and reformist impulses (e.g., Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). These dual tendencies offer a useful contrast for your study—Anne's portrayal can be read as deliberately situated in that tension between conformity and insurgent female subjectivity.

Several studies demonstrate the ambivalent nature of women's portrayal in Pakistani media. Ahmed and Wahab (2019) document how women are often rendered submissive in television dramas, despite surface-level discourses of women's empowerment. Meanwhile, Tariq and Husnain (2025) find that contemporary Pakistani dramas variably reinforce patriarchal norms or, in rarer cases, foreground female agency and autonomy. This underscores the importance of *Anne with an E* as a transnational model that may offer fresh feminist representations outside the traditional Pakistani media landscape.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a **qualitative research design** using **semiotic analysis** as the primary method. The choice of qualitative methodology is grounded in the study's aim to explore in-depth the layered meanings, ideological constructs, and feminist representations embedded in *Anne with an E* (Season 3). Semiotics is particularly suited for unpacking how visual and narrative codes construct social reality and communicate feminist messages within a historical and cultural frame.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in **John Fiske's "The Codes of Television"** (1987), which offers a tripartite structure for decoding television texts:

1. **Reality** – the social codes (dress, makeup, environment, speech, etc.) that create the sense of realism.
2. **Representation** – the technical and narrative codes (camera work, editing, dialogue, and mise-en-scène) that organize meaning.
3. **Ideology** – the cultural values and belief systems embedded in the text. This framework enables an analysis of Anne Shirley's character both as a narrative construct and as a cultural symbol of feminist resistance.

3.3 Rationale for Method Selection

Semiotic analysis allows for an interpretive exploration of *how* meaning is made, not merely *what* is presented. Since the research seeks to examine the feminist messages embedded in a historical television drama and link them to contemporary Pakistani realities, semiotics offers the flexibility to bridge historical representation with modern interpretation. Using Fiske's theory also provides a systematic approach for linking narrative details to larger ideological discourses on gender and patriarchy.

3.4 Sample Selection

The **sample** for the study consists of **all episodes of Season 3** of *Anne with an E*. This season is purposively selected because it contains the most explicit feminist themes and narrative arcs addressing women's rights, body autonomy, education, and resistance to patriarchal norms. The analysis focuses primarily on scenes involving Anne Shirley's personal and political struggles, with supporting references to interactions with secondary characters when relevant to the feminist narrative.

3.5 Tools for Data Collection

- **Primary Data Source:** High-definition streaming of *Anne with an E* Season 3 from Netflix.
- **Data Extraction Tool:** Scene-by-scene transcription of relevant dialogues and detailed description of visual elements (costume, setting, gestures, and facial expressions).
- **Coding Framework:** A thematic coding sheet based on Fiske's three levels (Reality, Representation, Ideology). Each scene is coded according to the presence of feminist themes, narrative resistance to patriarchy, and semiotic markers of empowerment

4. Analysis and Discussion

Research Result and Discussion Results are also understood as answers to the questions posed in the introduction. The discussion is the link between the results and the research questions (Nurwulandari & Fadhilah, 2017). After analyzing the data taken from the film *Anna with Ann E*, the results of the analysis are presented based on literary and language analysis.

1. Struggling for Freedom of Speech and Improvisation

Biological standards applied in society influence perceptions of the roles and functions of gender in its contribution to social activities. In addition, there are various stereotypes based on gender factors, for example about sexist views in cases of sexual harassment against women. As Anne did in trying to express her opinion regarding the harassment case experienced by Josie Pye. She expressed sharp opinions regarding the incidents of sexual harassment that led to what Josie experienced. Here is Anne's opinion regarding the threat to women's autonomy that she wrote in the editorial letter:

"Women matter on their own, not in relation to a man. We all deserve bodily autonomy, to be treated with respect and dignity. To say 'Stop,' and be listened to; not pushed, scorned, and told that men know more about our basic rights and desires than we do. Women are not whole because of men, but women are whole from the moment they are born into the world."

This makes Josie angry with Anne for writing and distributing the editorial letter. In the next meeting, the Board also decided that there would be no more publications or editorials that voiced barbaric opinions by withdrawing the printing presses from Avonlea students. So Anne planned a demonstration to spearhead free speech and improvised by inviting her friends to join the action. Anne also apologizes and tries to get Josie to speak the facts and let go of everything that restricts her rights. The following is a dialog that illustrates the situation.

"For most of my life I've had to fight the idea that I'm nothing more than someone to throw away or pass around as needed, or that I'm not capable of being of real help because I'm a girl (Anne). Right, trash. (Josie). Yes. That. But I came to understand that I was the same person

the whole time. I'm loved now, but when I wasn't, it didn't mean I wasn't worthy of it. No one but you is allowed to dictate what you're worth (Anne)." S3 Eps.7 [00:27:06-00:27:38]
Having a bitter life experience, Anne has experienced a lot of rejection, ostracism, intimidation and oppression that she experienced as an orphan and as a woman. Life experiences have made her a woman of resilience and courage. As she proved that she can be accepted by society which initially underestimated her with all of Anne's background.

2. Struggling for Decision-Making

The film *Anna with An E* shows the development of feminist thought in the form of efforts to achieve equality in education, legal rights, employment opportunities and voting rights. Marilla belongs to the group of individuals who support the change by encouraging Anne to move 66 forward and use her right to determine her life choices and ignoring the negative assumptions that discriminate against women. The form of moral support can be seen in the dialog below:
"It worries me what the minister said. Not the not fibbing part. He was right about that. It's the not going to school and being a wife part (Anne). I've been pondering about that, too. His thinking seems a mite old-fashioned to me. What do you think? (Marilla). Well, it doesn't provide much scope for the imagination, that for sure and certain (Anne). You know, it seems to me you should decide for yourself what you want to do and be and set your mind to it (Marilla). Maybe school wouldn't be so bad, now that I have Diana and Ruby (Anne). You've got a good and nimble mind, Anne. I don't see why you should limit it. In my day, we didn't get to choose. I think you should make your own decision (Marilla)." S1 Eps.4 [00:41:31-00:41:35]

From the dialogue listed above indicates the presence of social stereotypes related to the role and future of a woman who thinks that education is not a priority that a woman must fulfil at that time. Not only in the past, this stereotype still exists among some people today. However, what makes the difference between the past and later times is the progress of women in addressing the discriminatory behavior that befalls them. This transformation can be seen from Anne and Marilla's response to the minister's statement that education is not essential for women who will eventually take care of all domestic affairs. According to Marilla, this idea is old-fashioned and not in line with the times where women have begun to strive to be free from restrictions that limit their space in determining what they want.

3. Building the Principles of Equality in Marriage

Equality entails the achievement of an equal opportunity between men and women in several ways. Similar also in the domain of the house. One of the things that all couples surely have is values that they desire to create in their marriage. In order to get it to happen we need a mutually agreed thing. The times have brought about a lot of changes including a higher level of living in establishing the meaning of the balance between men and women. In this respect, Anne has formed her own opinion based on her ideas along with the suggestions that she got offered by those who believe that women should be released. She was telling Matthew about that opinion with excitement. The following is the passage that depicts the situation in the dialogue:

"I think I need to re-imagine the whole marriage/wedding thing (Anne). How so? (Matthew). It isn't about just one brief, shining moment in white, or saying I do. And I'm not going to give myself over to someone and be a prettyish piece of property without a voice or ambition. We will be equals and partners, not just husband and wife (Anne). And neither one should have to abandon their heart's desire. I've come up with a new name for both parties, together, because I believe that they should be named the same (Anne). Well... let's hear it. (Matthew). Life mate. (Anne)." S2 Eps.8 [00:32:38-00:32:39]

According to the aforementioned dialogue, Anne attempts to express her stand on her wanting her future household idea to put into practice equality of rights and roles to lead a married life. However, Anne tries to express her opinions and ideas to implement a balanced position

without ignoring her husband's position as head of the household. The feeling was expressed to Matthew by saying:

“It isn’t about just one brief, shining moment in white, or saying I do. And I’m not going to give myself over to someone and be a prettyish piece of property without a voice or ambition. We will be equals and partners, not just husband and wife.”

Anne's idea shows that women do not only have two options in their life, either career or marriage. Anne provides the idea of how women are able to run the two at the same time as well. Besides the three mentioned above, the interpretation of 19th century in Anne with an A season 3 as portrayed by John Fiske semiotic analysis.

First level; how the event signed. On image it can be seen from clothes (costumes), neighbourhood, dialogue, and expression. Signed from dialogue that showed the representation of 19th Century can be seen below.

Mrs curthbert : Little girl! Anne : little girl? I wish i was anything but Mrs curthbert : There is no point for crying, there is a mistake thats all we’re not gonna turn you off the door tonight, what is your name? Anne : what is it matter? I wont be here long enough for you to remember Mrs curthbert : Keep your mind and manners and answer the question!

On 19th century the kid especially little girl forbidden to talk rude or talk without manners to old, especially when they are without exact identity such as orphan. There are still boundaries between rich poor, because status become the power how much they will get respect. It can be seen that Anne tries to talk without manners and then the old woman angry ask her to answer the question. (Anne with an E/Season 3/22:18)

The costume also ideals with the 19th Century where people basically using hat to show their status and their dress named Robe de Cour or in English named “Court Dress”. This kind of dress become the style for woman in 19th century. b. Level two, about how the image presented. It can be seen from camera itself, lighting, editing and music track. The lighting on “Anne with an E” film also represent the vintage style of camera on that time.

The lighting or the set of light for vintage to represent the 19th century, it looks great. The film using calm and blurry colors, and the most dominant color such as ivory, eggshell, linen, daisy and mocca. This kind of colors mostly appears on vintage style. c. level three, about how the the event or the moment being organized supposed to be accepted by audiences. This is about how is representation code connected into social coherence like social class or social tradition while the representation of 19th century withing “Anne with an E” related to the social class it is also can be seen from how the characters wear the dress.

5. Findings

The semiotic analysis of *Anne with an E* (Season 3) revealed a multi-layered feminist representation of Anne Shirley, constructed through narrative, technical, and ideological codes as outlined in John Fiske’s “The Codes of Television.”

5.1. Reality Level – Social Codes

Costuming, setting, and speech patterns were deliberately chosen to reflect the historical authenticity of the late 19th Century, while simultaneously embedding markers of resistance. Anne’s choice of plain, non-conforming attire contrasted with the more ornate dresses of her peers, symbolizing her rejection of prescribed femininity. Dialogue at this level frequently positioned Anne as assertive, questioning, and willing to challenge authority — characteristics atypical for young women of her depicted era.

Representation Level – Technical & Narrative Codes

Cinematographic techniques such as close-up shots during moments of moral confrontation

highlighted Anne's emotional depth and ideological resolve. Lighting was often warm and natural in scenes of camaraderie and activism, suggesting optimism and hope for change. The narrative arcs of Season 3 intensified Anne's engagement with issues of women's education, body autonomy, and freedom of choice, particularly in conflicts with male authority figures and conservative community members.

Ideology Level – Cultural Values & Belief Systems

The ideological layer positioned Anne as a counter-voice within a patriarchal society, where her advocacy for women's rights challenged the social order. Notably, Anne's insistence on singlehood until she determined her own life's direction subverted the 19th-century expectation of early marriage. In this way, her portrayal echoed contemporary feminist ideals, making her a transhistorical figure of resistance relevant to audiences in Pakistan, where gender-based restrictions persist.

Overall, the findings suggest that *Anne with an E* does more than adapt a literary classic—it reframes the protagonist as a feminist icon whose story resonates beyond its historical setting, providing both narrative inspiration and ideological challenge to patriarchal cultures worldwide.

5.1 Conclusion

This research concludes that patriarchal culture plays a role in creating gender discrimination, which is reflected in marginalization, subordination, and sexual violence against women in various aspects of life, such as social, education, work, and household policies. In the films studied, the issues of gender discrimination and liberal feminism are shown through scenes and dialogues that describe the experiences of female characters, such as Anne, Diana, Ruby, and others, which are relevant to the reality of women today. Despite progress in gender equality, there are still challenges from those who oppose change. To overcome women's powerlessness, the feminism movement is carried out in various ways, such as ideological awareness, the formation of empowerment communities, freedom of speech campaigns, and increasing the role of women in education and politics. These efforts aim to achieve equal rights and increase women's resources to be more active in the public sphere. The feminist movement in this film reflects the real struggle of women in realizing their previously neglected right.

This study demonstrates that *Anne with an E* (Season 3) employs layered semiotic strategies to present Anne Shirley as a feminist figure who resists societal constraints and advocates for gender equality. By applying John Fiske's tripartite model of reality, representation, and ideology, it was possible to decode the specific visual, linguistic, and thematic elements that construct Anne's feminist identity. The findings affirm that historical narratives, when reimagined with contemporary social awareness, can speak powerfully to present-day audiences, particularly in contexts where patriarchal norms remain strong.

In the Pakistani context, Anne's defiance and advocacy act as a symbolic parallel to ongoing struggles for women's autonomy, education, and equal rights. While the original novel situated Anne within the cultural boundaries of her time, the series adaptation recasts her as a transnational feminist icon. This not only enriches feminist media scholarship but also contributes to public discourse by showing how global narratives can inspire localized change. Future research could extend this analysis to other media adaptations or explore audience reception studies in Pakistan to further examine the impact of such feminist portrayals on viewers' perceptions and attitudes toward gender equality.

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