

**BEYOND THE VISIBLE: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SURFACE AND HIDDEN
MEANINGS IN THE NCA THESIS EXHIBITION 2026****Nidaa Zahra**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on works of the NCA Thesis Exhibition 2026, discussing each one of them at two levels: what is visible and what is hidden. Visual art never lies on the surface; the visual qualities of colour, form, and composition are not merely aesthetic effects, but carriers of emotion, cultural memory, and symbolism. This paper adheres to the procedure of discussing how each artwork can tell you more than the picture itself, both in terms of personal identity and social experience and in terms of philosophy. Rather than viewing such works as whole objects, the paper views them as loci of meaning; a brushstroke, a shape, a space composing in such a way that their meaning can be multifaceted and change depending on who is looking and where. Grounded in the semiotic theories of Saussure (1983), Barthes (1977), and Peirce (1958), and enriched by feminist and visual-culture frameworks from Pollock (1988), Butler (1990), Ahmed (2004), and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this paper reveals the layered communicative power of three artworks by emerging Pakistani women artists. It is not the desire to tell what is supposed to be so, but to show the interpretive possibilities that images could have, and how seemingly trivial images are full of meaning such that one feels like lingering in contemplation.

Keywords: Semiotic analysis, surface meaning, hidden meaning, composition, visual grammar, feminist art, cultural communication

Chapter 1: Introduction**1.1 Background**

Art has forever been an important tool of expressing emotions, thoughts, unspoken feelings, and profound meanings. Artists often use visual signs, symbols, and patterns; like colour, form, texture, and composition; to convey ideas and experiences. However, what is in a piece of art is not always simple; it is always accompanied by some hidden meaning. Pieces of art can be associated with several hidden symbols, which are based on non-articulated feelings, experiences, and societal problems. The semiotics of artworks can be analyzed as the analysis of signs and symbols. As Chandler (2017) notes, artifacts serve as cultural indicators that mirror larger social, political, and historical realities. The NCA Thesis Exhibition 2026 features many artworks that convey profound themes. A semiotic analysis of some of the artworks will, therefore, help us to figure out the hidden meaning and feeling that the artists looked to convey. Berger (1972) famously argued that the way we see things is always affected by what we know and what we believe; a principle that grounds this paper's approach to visual interpretation.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does semiotic analysis help in interpreting the visible and hidden meanings embedded in the artworks of the NCA Thesis Exhibition 2026?

2. How are visual elements such as colour, composition, symbols, and spatial arrangement used to construct multiple layers of meaning in the artworks?
3. In what ways do the artworks reflect cultural, social, personal, and philosophical narratives through visual representation?

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To examine the surface (denotative) and hidden (connotative) meanings represented in the artworks of the NCA Thesis Exhibition 2026.
2. To analyze how visual signs and artistic elements contribute to the construction of meaning within the artworks.
3. To interpret the cultural, social, personal, and philosophical messages conveyed through the artworks.

1.4 Problem Statement

Although NCA artworks appear visually beautiful and decorative on the surface, many viewers do not understand their underlying meanings or the message that the artwork is conveying. The problem is that there is a gap between what we see (surface meaning) and what the artwork truly is (underlying meaning). Many viewers enjoy colours, forms, and compositions, but miss signs and symbols, cultural references, and the true meaning embedded in the artworks. As Eco (1976) argues, signs always operate within cultural codes ; shared conventions that are not always legible to viewers unfamiliar with the specific cultural context in which an artwork was produced. This interpretive gap between surface and depth is the central problem this paper seeks to address.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

- The study is limited to only those artworks from the NCA Thesis Exhibition 2026 that were publicly available online.
- Some artworks could not be included due to the unavailability of their images or visual documentation on public platforms.
- The research relies on online images of artworks, which may limit detailed visual observation and interpretation.
- Semiotic interpretation is subjective; therefore, meanings may vary according to different viewers and perspectives.
- The interpretations presented in the study may not fully represent the artists' intended meanings.
- Due to time and accessibility constraints, not every artwork from the exhibition could be analyzed in the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Semiotics is the art of studying signs and symbols and their interpretation in communication and culture. Ferdinand de Saussure described a sign as being made up of two components: the signifier (physical representation of a sign) and the signified (the thought or idea that the signifier signifies). This theory helps researchers understand the role of images, words, and symbols in communicating meaning. Roland Barthes made further contributions to semiotic theory by elaborating the meanings of denotation and connotation. A literal meaning of an image is known as denotation, while the deeper cultural or symbolic meaning is known as connotation. This model assists scholars to understand works of art not just in light of their outer look (Saussure, 1983).

Visual arts and media studies have extensively applied semiotic analysis in deciphering the way colors, shapes, and symbols communicate ideas and feelings. The scholars also elaborate that signs make meaning through interpretation. Charles Sanders Peirce states that a sign operates on a connection between the sign, the object, and the interpretant ; that is, the meaning comes about as the viewer interprets the symbol (Peirce, 1958). Semiotics has traditionally

been considered an initial method of interpretation of meaning in visual and cultural texts. The signifier (form) and signified (concept) conceptualized by Saussure (1983) formed the framework for understanding the construction of meaning as socially produced rather than inherently existing. This structural method stresses that the visual components of artworks ; including color, composition, and texture ; are signifiers that trigger certain conceptual associations. Further elaborating on this, Peirce (1958) proposed a three-fold model of the sign ; the representamen, object, and interpretant ; emphasizing the interpretive role of the viewer in the production of meaning. This model is especially applicable to visual art, in which meaning is not predetermined but a dynamic process produced between the artwork and the viewer.

Roland Barthes went a step further to develop semiotic analysis, making a distinction between denotation and connotation and giving a multi-layered meaning to images (Barthes, 1977). Denotation is an immediate, literal interpretation of an image, while connotation encompasses the cultural, ideological, and emotional associations beyond what is seen. Barthes further believed that pictures can carry mythic connotations, which strengthen dominant cultural discourses and ideologies. Semiotic analysis has found application in the field of visual arts to understand the symbolic representations made in the works of art. Researchers believe that artifacts serve as cultural indicators that mirror larger social, political, and historical realities (Chandler, 2017). In this perspective, artworks are not merely aesthetic objects but communicative systems that encode complex meanings. Moreover, recent research argues that the interpretation process is subjective and that the viewer plays an active role in creating meaning according to his or her cultural background, experience, and worldview (Hall, 1997). This is in line with the interpretive plasticity of works of art, in which there can be multiple interpretations simultaneously. In general, semiotic theory is an extensive method of studying both visible and invisible aspects of art; by studying the functioning of signs at various levels of meaning, researchers can draw more profound conclusions about the emotional, cultural, and ideological messages expressed through visual language.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) extended semiotic analysis into the domain of visual grammar, proposing that images ; like language ; possess a systematic grammar: a set of resources that image-makers draw upon to construct meaning. Their framework identifies three metafunctions in images: representational (what is depicted), interactive (the relationship between image and viewer), and compositional (how elements are arranged in space). This tripartite model provides a rigorous analytical vocabulary for examining the spatial organisation, colour choices, and compositional dynamics of artworks such as those in the NCA Thesis Exhibition 2026. Rather than treating visual elements as mere decoration, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework reveals them as meaning-bearing structures that systematically encode cultural values and ideological positions. Their concepts of the "ideal" and the "real" ; the positioning of aspirational content above and material content below in a visual composition ; and of "given" and "new" ; familiar information on the left and novel information on the right ; provide particularly illuminating tools for the analysis of the three artworks examined in this study.

Berger (1972) influentially argued in *Ways of Seeing* that the act of looking is never innocent or neutral; it is always shaped by the viewer's cultural assumptions, historical position, and ideological commitments. Images, for Berger (1972), are always situated within specific social relations of power and knowledge, and the conditions under which they are produced and received fundamentally shape their meaning. This insight is directly applicable to the analysis of Pakistani artworks, whose visual vocabularies are deeply embedded in particular cultural, religious, and gender politics. Understanding how viewers see these works ; what they notice,

what they overlook, what they assume ; requires attention to the broader social contexts that condition perception.

Rose (2016) has argued that visual methodologies must attend not only to the meaning of images but to the conditions of their production, circulation, and reception. An image's meaning is not fixed at the moment of its creation; it is continuously remade in the dynamic encounter between image, context, and viewer. Rose's (2016) framework emphasises the importance of reflexivity in visual analysis ; of being aware of one's own position as a viewer and the ways in which that position shapes interpretation. Crucially, Rose (2016) also stresses the importance of attending to the materiality of the medium ; the specific physical properties of glass, thread, or metal ; as itself a bearer of cultural and symbolic meaning, not merely a neutral support for visual content.

Mitchell (1994) introduced the concept of the "imagetext" to describe works that blend visual and verbal registers in complex, mutually constitutive ways. His argument that images possess a kind of agency ; that they do not merely represent a pre-existing world but actively participate in the construction of meaning and knowledge ; is directly relevant to the artworks analyzed in this study, all of which use visual and material means to make arguments and demands that exceed straightforward representation. For Mitchell (1994), images are not passive illustrations of ideas but active participants in cultural discourse, capable of challenging, subverting, and transforming the social realities they engage.

Eco (1976) developed a comprehensive theory of semiotics that extended Saussure's structural linguistics into a broad account of cultural sign systems. Eco (1976) argued that signs always operate within codes ; shared cultural conventions that determine which signifiers correspond to which signified meanings. Crucially, codes are not universal but cultural and historical: the same visual sign can carry radically different meanings in different cultural contexts. This insight is particularly important for interpreting Pakistani artworks for audiences unfamiliar with the specific cultural codes ; the significance of red thread, the weight of domestic utensils, the resonance of Urdu script ; that these works deploy.

Bal and Bryson (1991) argued for a more rigorous application of semiotic methodology in art history, contending that artworks function as texts in the semiotic sense ; structured systems of signs that can be read, interpreted, and contested. Their intervention challenged the tendency of traditional art history to focus on individual artists and masterworks, and instead directed attention to the communicative and ideological functions of images as cultural artefacts. Bal and Bryson (1991) further argued that semiotic analysis must attend not only to the signs that are present in an image but to those that are absent ; to the meanings that are withheld, suppressed, or rendered invisible by the image's visual organisation.

Feminist scholars have made crucial contributions to the visual analysis of artworks by and about women. Pollock (1988) argued that feminist art history must attend not only to the presence and absence of women in the art historical canon, but to the spaces of femininity ; the bounded, domestic, private spheres ; that patriarchal culture has assigned to women and that art has both reinforced and contested. Nochlin (1971) famously asked why there have been no great women artists, pointing to the systematic exclusion of women from the social and institutional conditions ; the freedom, the training, the patronage ; that have historically been required for artistic recognition. Both scholars insist that the interpretation of artworks by women must be situated within this broader feminist critical project, attentive to the structural conditions that shape both the production and reception of women's art.

Butler (1990) introduced the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not an innate essence but a set of repeated performances ; acts, gestures, and behaviours ; that, through their repetition, come to appear natural and inevitable. The domestic labour depicted in *Unspoken Burden* and the legal violence encoded in *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd* are, in

Butler's (1990) terms, precisely such performances: cultural scripts that are endlessly rehearsed and enforced, at enormous cost to the women who are required to perform them. Butler's framework is essential for understanding how the apparently mundane and the apparently legal can function as instruments of gender-based oppression.

Ahmed (2004) developed a cultural politics of emotion that reframes feelings not as purely private, internal states but as cultural and political phenomena. Emotions, for Ahmed (2004), are "sticky" ; they accumulate around particular objects, bodies, and signs, creating charged emotional landscapes that shape social life. This framework is particularly illuminating for the analysis of *Unseen Transparency of Tears*, in which the tear operates as precisely such a sticky sign ; dense with accumulated meanings of vulnerability, sorrow, intimacy, and release that exceed any individual emotional experience and speak to broader cultural and social realities.

hooks (1995) insisted that art by marginalised communities ; including women ; is inevitably political: produced within and against structures of domination, it must be understood as a form of cultural resistance. Her concept of the "oppositional gaze" ; a mode of looking that refuses the passive, objectifying terms of dominant visual culture and demands recognition as an active, desiring subject ; is directly relevant to the feminist artworks analysed in this study. Similarly, Mulvey's (1975) influential concept of the "male gaze" ; the tendency of visual culture to position women as objects to be looked at rather than subjects who look and act ; provides a critical framework against which the subversive visual strategies of these artworks can be understood.

Rancière (2004) proposed that art and aesthetics are inherently political in that they participate in what he calls the "distribution of the sensible" ; the contested organisation of what is visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, sayable and unsayable, in social life. Art, for Rancière (2004), has the capacity to redistribute the sensible: to make visible what has been rendered invisible, to give voice to what has been silenced. Each of the three artworks analyzed in this study participates in such redistribution, bringing into visibility the emotional, domestic, and legal experiences of Pakistani women that have been rendered invisible by dominant cultural and political discourses. Finally, Mirzoeff (1999) introduced visual culture as a field of inquiry concerned with the way in which social relations are visualised, imagined, and contested through images, technologies, and practices of looking ; a framework that situates the analysis of these artworks within the broader politics of visibility and representation.

Elkins (2003) draws attention to the irreducibly affective dimension of visual experience ; the fact that images communicate through registers of sensation and feeling that exceed the capacity of language to capture. This insight is directly relevant to the present analysis, which, while deploying semiotic and theoretical frameworks, acknowledges that something in the visual experience of each artwork always exceeds analysis: some residue of feeling, of immediate sensory encounter, that attests to the power of visual art as a medium of communication precisely because it can say things that language cannot.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

The paper will comment on some works of art in terms of its application to the method of visual analysis ; denotation (surface meaning) and connotation (deeper meaning). The meanings are expressed in two levels. The denotation or literal meaning in the artwork is the former: it is what is directly visible and reflected in the works of art. The second is the connotation; it is the connoted meaning of the artworks. It is at this level that the audience will be able to experience and come to know various kinds of feelings, cultures, as well as social messages or issues that are being promoted by the works of art. Most artworks, as a rule, have some connotations behind them, which describe human realities, feelings, and emotions. Each viewer can interpret it based on his or her own vision.

This two-layered analytical approach is grounded primarily in the foundational semiotic theories of Saussure (1983) and Barthes (1977). Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified provides the structural basis for understanding how visual elements ; colour, form, composition ; function as signs within a system of cultural meaning. Barthes's (1977) distinction between denotation and connotation gives this analysis its two-tiered character, enabling the examination of both the immediately legible surface of each artwork and the deeper cultural, ideological, and emotional meanings that underlie it. Peirce's (1958) triadic model of sign, object, and interpretant further enriches this framework by emphasising the active role of the viewer in the production of meaning. These foundational frameworks are supplemented, in this analysis, by the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the feminist art historical frameworks of Pollock (1988) and Butler (1990), and the cultural-political frameworks of Ahmed (2004), hooks (1995), and Rancière (2004).

In this theoretical approach, all artworks are treated by first describing the surface meaning ; what is depicted ; and then by explaining the emotional, social, or symbolic meaning of the artwork through its hidden or connotative layer. This movement from surface to depth, from the visible to the invisible, from the literal to the symbolic, is not merely a methodological procedure but itself an interpretive argument: it insists that visual art always means more than it shows, and that the full communicative power of an artwork can only be accessed through sustained, theoretically informed critical attention.

3.1 Research Methodology

This work follows the qualitative research method, with semiotic analysis as its fundamental structure for studying the chosen pieces of art. Instead of using quantitative measures, the method is based on understanding visual signs and symbols within the works, which provide the basis for a more profound and nuanced interpretation of the meaning of the work. The analysis works on two levels of meaning: the denotative or surface level meaning of the artwork, and the underlying or connotative meaning of the artwork. This two-layered analysis is based upon the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) and Roland Barthes (1977), the foundational frameworks of which form the conceptual tools upon which the analysis is based. The qualitative methodology is further informed by Rose's (2016) framework for visual methodologies, which emphasises close attention to the materiality, composition, and social context of visual images, and by the feminist analytical frameworks of Pollock (1988) and Butler (1990), which orient the analysis toward the gendered dimensions of the artworks' content and form.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

4.1 Artwork 1: Unseen Transparency of Tears ; Khushi Khan

Unseen Transparency of Tears is a masterpiece by Khushi Khan, an emerging designer whose work is presented at the NCA Thesis Display 2026, marking her as a prominent new artist in the contemporary Pakistani art scene.



Figure 1: <https://www.instagram.com/kbykhushi>

Surface Meaning

At first sight, the work seems to be floating on glass ; a kind of pattern in stasis. The artwork has curved lines that could represent a ribcage without a heart, or a tree that is frozen, with its branches pointing upwards. The surface of the glass is no longer totally smooth; instead, it holds dark lines and small curves, like the glass is full of plans of movement. The lines in the artwork come in a variety of patterns: some expanding out in nearly 360 degrees, others forming congested, layered patterns.

The artwork seems to be a snapshot of a moving landscape, as though the glass itself has absorbed and captured the memory of movement, preserving it as if it were still in motion but now frozen in time. "The photograph is an undeniably powerful medium. Free from the constraints of language and harnessing the unique qualities of a single moment frozen in time" (McCurry, as cited in Quotlr, 2024). The surface holds within itself an architecture ; a line that does not shout and a curve that does not dominate. There is an organised complexity here. The patterns diverge in several different directions at the same time; they branch out and they fold inwards. The whole structure seems more like a growth. The image is not created but recorded ; a silent documentation of a process that has already taken place and has left its mark in the shadows and glass.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) observe that visual compositions create meaning through the organisation of elements in space ; through proximity, salience, and framing. In *Unseen Transparency of Tears*, the branching, radial patterns create multiple focal points rather than a single centre of attention, producing what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) would describe as a "polycentric" composition that resists the viewer's desire for a single interpretive key. This visual complexity mirrors the emotional complexity of the subject matter: grief, joy, exhaustion, and love resist reduction to a single legible form. Rose (2016) emphasises that the materiality of a visual work ; the specific qualities of its medium, surface, and texture ; is itself a bearer of meaning, not merely a neutral vehicle for content. The glass medium is precisely such a meaning-bearing material: its transparency and fragility, its capacity to shatter, its reflective and refractive properties all contribute to the work's visual and conceptual effect. There is a latent vulnerability built into the very choice of glass as medium. Mirzoeff (1999) argues that the act of looking is never simply perceptual but always interpretive, shaped by cultural conventions and prior experiences of looking. Viewers approaching *Unseen Transparency of Tears* without prior knowledge of Rose-Lynn Fisher's research on crystallised tears may see only abstraction; viewers aware of this context encounter something entirely different ; a documentary record of emotional experience rendered in biological form, an archive of the body's invisible interiority.

Underlying Meaning

"An image of beauty is used to communicate something that can be complex, using creativity to highlight the meaning behind the science" (Clayton, 2024). The artwork *Unseen Transparency of Tears* elucidates the tremendous meaning that the tear can carry ; the smallest and most fleeting of human gestures, but with it comes a whole world of unsaid feeling. The pattern that is preserved in the glass is not random but the residue of tears. Fisher's own words, when viewing these crystallised formations, were that they were "like an aerial view of her own emotional terrain, which is not a terrain in nature" (Fisher, as quoted in Smithson, 2017). The forms our tears create stay to remind us of the beauty and healing power of what is so often overlooked.

Fisher saw tears not as a mere biological product, but as a sign of our inner life bursting its boundaries ; spilling over the walls of language and ideas ; in the immediacy of grief, catharsis, and love; in primal and yet nuanced ways (Fisher, as cited in Smithson, 2017). The chemical

intricacy of emotional tears gives rise to correspondingly complex and diverse crystal patterns when these tears are dried. It is a reminder that there is a beauty so subtle which is present even in our weakest moments.

These complex shapes are the beautiful arts of human tears as they manifest themselves in the spectrum of all human emotions: joy, tenderness, sadness, sorrow, and others. As Hunt (2023) states, teardrops remain a powerful visual motif in art, capable of conveying emotions across cultures and time periods. In the face of the microscope, what is on the outside looking in as an elegant declaration of feeling is on the inside looking out as an agreeable combination of memory and pain, acceptance and love, and suffering.

Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions are not merely internal states but "sticky" cultural phenomena that accumulate around certain objects and bodies, shaping social life in ways that are both personal and deeply political. The tear, in this framework, is not simply a biological secretion but a culturally saturated sign, charged with meanings that vary according to gender, age, social position, and cultural context. In many cultural contexts ; including Pakistan's ; women's tears are simultaneously expected and dismissed: required as evidence of appropriate emotional response but discounted as signs of weakness or irrationality. *Unseen Transparency of Tears* makes this cultural contradiction visible by revealing the extraordinary structural complexity of what is ordinarily dismissed as nothing ; showing that even the most overlooked human gesture carries within it a world of differentiated experience.

Elkins (2003) notes that visual experience resists complete verbalization ; that images communicate through registers of affect and sensation that exceed the capacity of language to capture. The crystalline patterns of dried tears communicate something about emotional experience that no verbal description can fully convey: the specificity and irreducibility of felt experience, the way in which each moment of sorrow, joy, or exhaustion leaves a uniquely configured trace. Each crystal pattern, in this reading, is as singular as a fingerprint ; a material signature of a subjective state that is both universal (all humans cry) and irreducibly individual. Bal and Bryson (1991) argue that semiotic analysis must attend not only to the signs that are present in an image but to those that are absent ; to the meanings that are withheld, suppressed, or rendered invisible. In *Unseen Transparency of Tears*, what is absent is as significant as what is present: the face, the body, the specific biographical context of the tears are all withheld, leaving only the chemical and crystalline residue of emotion. This absence insists on the universality of emotional experience while preserving its irreducible particularity.

4.2 Artwork 2: Unspoken Burden ; Zainab Aziz

Zainab Aziz is a visual artist and sculptor at NCA. She has done many works, but *Unspoken Burden* is one of her masterpieces which marks her as a budding artist in Pakistani art.



Figure 2: <https://www.instagram.com/zaniabaziz>

Surface Meaning

The artwork is immediately recognisable as a vertical stacking of objects. The plates, bowls, pots, lids, and cutlery are combined in one rising form and tilted at varied angles with each other. The surface of the metal reflects light in an uneven way ; some areas are bright, others are in shadow ; which creates a sense of rhythm between what is prominent and what is obscure. As Odintsova (2026) states, "shadow, in turn, conceals, absorbs, and holds ambiguity." The forks and spoons on the very top create a sense of climax. The bottom of the artwork is simple, solid, and heavy.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identify verticality as a key compositional resource for encoding social and symbolic meaning. Objects placed high in a composition are typically associated with the "ideal" ; aspiration, promise, and transcendence ; while objects placed low are associated with the "real" ; the everyday, the material, and the earthly. In *Unspoken Burden*, the tall vertical column of kitchen utensils simultaneously invokes both registers: its aspiring height implies a weight that should be acknowledged and valued, while its domestic contents locate it firmly in the material reality of everyday life. The tension between these two compositional registers formally enacts the tension between the dignity that domestic labour deserves and the dismissal it typically receives. Rose (2016) notes that the site at which an image is displayed fundamentally shapes its meaning. Exhibited in the context of an art gallery, these ordinary domestic objects are estranged from their usual context and rendered strange and significant in ways that encourage critical reflection on their social meaning ; an effect that Rose (2016) describes as the productive defamiliarisation of the everyday. Mitchell (1994) argues that objects can become images ; can acquire a kind of visual agency ; when they are placed in contexts that invite looking rather than using. The kitchen utensils in *Unspoken Burden* are precisely such transformed objects: removed from the kitchen and placed on a plinth, they demand to be looked at rather than used, and in doing so, they make visible the invisible labour they ordinarily represent.

Underlying Meaning

is an investigation into the invisible burden of domestic life ; the invisible and unrelenting work that takes place in the kitchen ; and the women's bodies that are most frequently and relentlessly subject to it. Wienclaw (2021) explains that historically, women have been primarily responsible for childcare and housework. Each item in this artwork is a part of the kitchen where we eat, where we prepare the food, where the dishes must be washed, where the surfaces must be cleaned, and this cycle continues all over again the next morning, without pause and without remembrance.

Haslett (2025) states that cooking is often "a burden shared by so many women around the world" and describes women as being "yoked day after day to a task" they may not want to do. The pile of utensils represents this burden. The artwork shows the cruelty that this labour is always invisible because it is so well-kept. There is no dramatic scene for a woman in the kitchen. It does not make a lot of noise. It collects pot after pot, plate after plate, and day after day.

The artwork makes the point that the weight of what is familiar and gendered is extraordinary and unacknowledged. The pressure in the kitchen is not merely physical in nature. It is a pressure to feed those around you without your own voice being heard ; a pressure so naturalised that one feels transgressed if one does not do it, and nothing is recognised if one does. In my daily life growing up in a multicultural family, I saw firsthand the relentless pressures on women quite consistently situated within the kitchen, where culinary heritage becomes a site of both oppression and resistance (Soni, 2025). Namrata (2025) argues that the act of cooking is reduced to an unending cycle of unpaid, invisible labour. The artwork shows

the state of the woman who comes back to the kitchen not by choice but by the force of expectation, habit, and silence ; this is always an unspoken burden, like the burden she carries each day.

Butler (1990) argues that gender is constituted through repeated performance ; that the naturalness of feminine domestic labour is an effect of its endless repetition rather than its cause. The sculpture *Unspoken Burden* makes this performative repetition visible: each utensil in the stack represents not a single act of cooking or washing but thousands of repeated acts, accumulated over years and generations. Pollock (1988) has argued that the spaces of femininity ; the domestic interiors, the private realms to which women have been historically confined ; are not neutral backdrops for women's lives but ideologically charged spaces that actively shape feminine subjectivity and experience. The kitchen, in this reading, is not simply a room but a site of power: a space in which gender relations are enacted, enforced, and reproduced on a daily basis.

hooks (1995) insists that the politics of visual representation are inseparable from broader struggles for recognition and justice ; that to make women's domestic labour visible in the space of an art gallery is itself a political act, a demand that this labour be recognised as significant, meaningful, and worthy of attention. Nochlin (1971) famously observed that the conditions of women's lives ; including the very domestic labour represented in *Unspoken Burden* ; have historically prevented them from achieving the freedom, the solitude, and the institutional support required for artistic recognition. The double irony of the work is thus striking: it is precisely the subject matter that has been used to exclude women from art ; domestic labour ; that has here become the substance of a significant work of art. Mulvey (1975) argued that dominant visual culture positions women as objects to be looked at rather than subjects who look and act. *Unspoken Burden* inverts this dynamic: it is the objects themselves ; the utensils, the implements of domestic labour ; that are displayed for looking, while the woman who uses them is conspicuously absent. This absence is itself a form of critique, drawing attention to the invisibility of the women who perform this labour and the extent to which their subjectivity has been effaced by its demands.

4.3 Artwork 3: Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd ; Yumna Salman

Yumna Salman is a text-based visual artist whose work is a means to visualising written language. Her work *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd*, presented at the NCA Thesis Display 2026, is one of the most politically charged in the exhibition, directly referencing the Hudood Ordinance of 1979, promulgated by General Zia ul-Haq.



Figure 3: <https://www.instagram.com/baekhud>

Surface Meaning

The red thread has been laboriously woven, stitch by stitch, into a net-like pattern that is at the same time dense and permeable ; solid like a cage, but open like a net. The white background enhances the work done. White creates a surface that makes every element upon it more exposed and more vulnerable (Odintsova, 2026).

Within this border, the top quarter of the work is filled with Urdu writing, hand-crocheted in thread in neat but urgent horizontal rows that trend downward. The text is readable, but tactile, too. It is not machine-printed or painted, but stitched. As the eye descends, the work is transformed. The upper thread is light and fine, and the masses of red fibre become increasingly heavy and voluminous. By the lower third of the work, the fibre has unravelling folds that extend beyond the frame of the composition. The bottom is not neat and tidy, but rather unconfined.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that vectors ; directional lines and movements within a visual composition ; play a crucial role in organising the viewer's attention and implying agency and action. The downward-trending rows of crocheted Urdu text in *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd* function as such vectors, drawing the eye inexorably downward from the structured, contained text above to the unravelling folds below ; formally enacting the movement from law (structured, authoritative, from above) to its human consequences (unravelling, overflowing, ungovernable from below). Rose (2016) emphasises that the choice of medium is never arbitrary in visual art: the specific material properties of thread ; its flexibility, its capacity to be cut or unravelled, its traditional association with women's domestic craft ; carry meaning that would be lost if the same visual effect were achieved through a different medium. The act of crocheting text ; of writing through the patient, repetitive labour of needle and thread ; enacts in its very process of production the gendered labour that the text's content critiques. Mirzoeff (1999) notes that visual culture always operates within specific regimes of looking ; cultural frameworks that determine what can be seen, by whom, and under what conditions. The public display of this work in a prestigious art gallery disrupts the private, domestic, invisible regimes within which thread craft has traditionally been practiced and dismissed, insisting on its recognition as both artistic medium and political statement.

Underlying Meaning

Limit, Justice, Final Boundary (*Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd*) is not only a work of art. The red thread is not "trimmings." In this context, it is the colour of blood ; of punishment to the body, suffering that has been legislated and sanctioned. Buchholz (2025) states, "Since red is the color of fire and blood, it signals both danger and vitality." The structural metaphor of the piece is the net onto which the red thread is developed ; a network in the shape of a cage. In this cage, the female body is enclosed by a legal and social structure which delimits and ultimately condemns it. The net is holding the thread, and the law is holding the woman.

Along the composition, the words *Insaaf* (Justice) are repeated ; not to say that justice is being done, but as a demand for something that has been systematically denied. The text has a direction pointing outwards, as if to accuse, or as if to indicate a direction denied. The fringe dangling at the bottom is no ornament, but overflow ; the stuff of silence that has been withheld too long, that at last tears itself free. The line of the *Aakhri Hadd* is not meant to protect the body; rather, it is meant to stress the body. It is not a line of protection but a line of wounding ; a line not marked to delineate what can hurt the body, but to mark the exact point at which it is expected to break: silently and without witness. The Hudood Ordinances were widely criticised as discriminatory and oppressive toward women, remaining untouchable for 27 years despite opposition from human rights organisations, jurists, and women's commissions across Pakistan who unanimously recommended their repeal (Dawn, 2018). The artwork is not about

the continuation of that silence; it is about the rupture being visible, it is about the rupture being felt.

Butler (1990) argues that juridical power ; legal authority ; does not merely regulate pre-existing subjects but actively produces them, inscribing upon bodies particular identities, vulnerabilities, and possibilities for action. The Hudood Ordinances, in this framework, did not simply punish women's transgressions; they produced a particular kind of female body: vulnerable, controlled, and perpetually subject to punishment. Yumna Salman's work makes this process of legal production visible through the very materiality of the red thread ; woven into patterns that simultaneously constrain and overflow, contain and unravel, exposing the instability of the legal structure that claims total authority.

Pollock (1988) has argued that feminist art must find formal and material strategies adequate to the task of making visible the mechanisms of patriarchal power ; mechanisms that typically operate through the naturalisation of domination as tradition, religion, or social order. *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd* achieves this through its formal strategy of making the net visible: the structure of containment is not hidden but displayed, made the explicit subject and medium of the work itself. Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "male gaze" ; the tendency of dominant visual culture to position women as passive objects of looking ; is directly relevant here. The red thread looks back: its urgent colour, its accusatory text, its overflowing folds refuse the passivity of the object and demand recognition as a subject making a claim. hooks (1995) calls for an "oppositional gaze" ; a mode of looking that refuses the terms of dominant visual culture and insists on the active, politically engaged subjectivity of the looker. *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd* enacts precisely such an oppositional gaze: it refuses the silence and invisibility that the Hudood Ordinances imposed on women, and demands that their experience be seen, felt, and reckoned with. Rancière (2004) argues that art has the capacity to redistribute the "sensible" ; to reorganise what is visible and invisible in social life. By taking the private suffering of women under discriminatory law and placing it in the public, prestigious space of an art gallery, this work performs precisely this redistribution: it makes a private injustice a public concern, and demands a political and ethical response.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Findings

5.1 Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze three works of art from the NCA Thesis Display 2026 through a semiotic analysis ; a form of visual art analysis that reads visual art as a system of signs with both literal and cultural meanings. This work follows the qualitative research method, with semiotic analysis as its fundamental structure for studying the chosen pieces of art. Instead of using quantitative measures, the method is based on understanding visual signs and symbols within the works, which provide the basis for a more profound and nuanced interpretation of their meaning. The analysis works on two levels: the denotative or surface level meaning of the artwork, and the underlying or connotative meaning. This two-layered analysis is based upon the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) and Roland Barthes (1977), whose foundational frameworks form the conceptual tools upon which the analysis is based.

The primary finding from the analysis is that all three pieces address the phenomenon of revealing the concealed. As Rancière (2004) argues, art has the capacity to redistribute the "sensible" ; to make visible what dominant culture renders invisible ; and each of the three works analyzed here performs precisely this redistributive function. *Unseen Transparency of Tears* makes apparent the inner emotional landscape of sorrow, affection, and fatigue that the body holds and releases through tears, which are typically overlooked and disregarded. *Unspoken Burden* uncovers the mundane work of the kitchen, done by women, absorbed into the rhythms of the household, without any weight or importance being attributed to it. *Hudood*,

Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd reveals the violence of a law which, through religious and moral rhetoric, existed for decades but in practice condemned women for offences against themselves (Dawn, 2018). In all three cases, the artwork cannot be simply unseen or limited to a straightforward depiction of its subject; rather, the argument is inherent in the materials, colours, textures, and shapes of the artwork itself.

The semiotic framework deployed in this analysis draws on Saussure's (1983) foundational distinction between signifier and signified, Barthes's (1977) distinction between denotation and connotation, and Peirce's (1958) triadic model of the sign. As Eco (1976) argues, signs always operate within cultural codes ; shared conventions that determine which visual forms carry which meanings ; and understanding these codes is essential for interpreting the culturally specific visual vocabularies that the NCA artworks deploy. Chandler (2017) similarly observes that artworks function as cultural indicators that mirror larger social, political, and historical realities, a principle richly confirmed by all three works analyzed here.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) provide a particularly useful analytical framework for examining the compositional strategies employed in these works. Their concepts of the "ideal" and the "real" ; the positioning of aspirational content above and material content below ; illuminate the spatial logics of all three works. In *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd*, for instance, the descent from structured text above to unravelling thread below enacts precisely the movement from ideal (justice, law) to real (suffering, constraint) that Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identify as a key compositional resource for encoding social meaning. Similarly, the towering column in *Unspoken Burden* exploits vertical compositional dynamics to create the impression of weight, accumulation, and precarious instability that formally echoes the social situation it depicts.

Berger (1972) argued that the way we see art is never innocent: it is always shaped by ideological assumptions, cultural conventions, and social positions. This insight is directly relevant to the analysis of the NCA artworks, which carry meanings shaped by specific Pakistani cultural, religious, and gender contexts that may not be immediately legible to viewers unfamiliar with these contexts. A viewer without knowledge of the Hudood Ordinances, for instance, might see *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd* as a formally interesting textile work; a viewer with this knowledge encounters a pointed political critique. Hall (1997) similarly argues that the meaning of cultural representations is not fixed but negotiated in the encounter between image and viewer, and that different viewers ; with different cultural competences and social positions ; will produce different, sometimes conflicting readings of the same image.

Rose (2016) emphasises that visual methodologies must attend not only to the content of images but to the conditions of their production, circulation, and reception. The fact that these works were produced for and exhibited at the NCA Thesis Exhibition ; a prestigious context within Pakistani art education ; is itself significant: it means that the works were produced under institutional conditions that both enable and constrain artistic expression, and that their political content was produced and received within a specific cultural and institutional matrix. Mitchell (1994) argues that images possess a kind of agency ; that they do not merely represent but actively intervene in the construction of cultural meaning and knowledge. Each of the three works analyzed in this paper can be understood in these terms: they make claims ; about the value of emotional experience, about the weight of domestic labour, about the injustice of discriminatory law ; that demand a response from the viewer.

The feminist dimension of the analysis draws on the theoretical frameworks of several scholars. Pollock (1988) argues that feminist art history must attend to the spaces of femininity ; the domestic, private spheres ; that patriarchal culture has assigned to women and that art has both reinforced and contested. Each of the three works analyzed here engages with such spaces:

Unseen Transparency of Tears with the interior space of the emotional body; *Unspoken Burden* with the domestic space of the kitchen; *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd* with the juridical space of the law. Butler (1990) provides the framework for understanding how these spaces are not merely backdrops for women's lives but active sites of gender production ; spaces in which femininity is performed, enforced, and potentially subverted. The works analysed here all, in different ways, make this process of gender production visible and subject it to critical scrutiny. Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions are not merely private and personal but cultural and political ; that they accumulate around particular objects, bodies, and signs, creating emotional landscapes that shape social life. This framework illuminates the emotional charge of all three works: the tenderness and grief accumulated around the crystallised tear in *Unseen Transparency of Tears*; the exhaustion and resentment accumulated around the pile of domestic utensils in *Unspoken Burden*; the rage and sorrow accumulated around the red thread and Urdu text in *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd*. In each case, the artwork functions as what Ahmed (2004) calls a "sticky" object ; a cultural site at which charged emotions accumulate and are made available for collective reflection and response.

hooks (1995) insists that art by marginalised communities is inevitably political ; a form of cultural resistance that demands recognition. The emerging Pakistani women artists whose work is analyzed in this paper are precisely such cultural workers: their art is not merely aesthetic but political, a demand for the recognition of experiences ; emotional, domestic, legal ; that have been systematically dismissed and devalued. Mulvey's (1975) concept of the "oppositional gaze" ; a mode of looking that refuses passive objectification ; is enacted in each of these works: the viewer is not positioned as a detached aesthetic consumer but challenged to take a position, to feel the weight of what is being shown, and to respond.

Bal and Bryson (1991) argue that semiotic analysis must attend not only to what is present in an image but to what is absent ; to the meanings that are suppressed, withheld, or rendered invisible. In all three works analyzed here, absence is as significant as presence: the absent face and body in *Unseen Transparency of Tears*; the absent woman in *Unspoken Burden*; the absent voice in *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd*. These absences are not accidental but deliberate ; they are the formal means through which the works make their arguments about invisibility, silence, and suppression. Elkins (2003) notes that visual experience exceeds the capacity of language to capture it ; that images communicate through affective and sensory registers that resist full verbalization. The analysis in this paper has attempted to bring semiotic and theoretical frameworks to bear on these works while acknowledging that something always exceeds the analysis: some residue of visual and emotional experience that can be gestured toward but not fully captured in words. Mirzoeff (1999) reminds us that visual culture is always bound up with questions of power ; who can look, who can be looked at, whose images count as art, whose are dismissed ; and this study takes these questions as central to its interpretive project.

5.2 Findings

Each of the three works ; *Unseen Transparency of Tears*, *Unspoken Burden*, and *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd* ; has been reviewed on two levels: what is on the surface of the artwork and what is hidden beneath it. Despite being still, non-moving pieces, each artwork gives an impression of movement and tension. The glass surface in *Unseen Transparency of Tears* exhibits branching patterns, dark curved lines, and structures resembling frozen rivers or landscapes. The patterns are not immediately identifiable to the viewer; there is no information about them from the surface, and they look more like abstract patterns ; yet they still possess a degree of complexity that invites the viewer to dive deeper and discover their meaning (Barthes, 1977). In *Unspoken Burden*, kitchen utensils are piled in a tall column that appears as though it is about to collapse, but never does. In *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd*, the deep red thread is woven into a net-like design that resembles a cage, with Urdu words and arrow-like

symbols written in rows as part of the weaving process. Towards the bottom, the red thread escapes from the net and extends outwards in thick, raw folds that cannot be contained within the borders of the net.

The connotative level of the analysis takes the concept beneath the surface, and the meaning of each artwork could be completely different from what its surface suggests. The fact that these glass shapes are dried human tears changes the way the whole work is read, as pointed out in *Unseen Transparency of Tears*. The abstract pattern on the surface is the physical truth of human pain, love, and fatigue: small, unnoticed, unseen, yet containing worlds of feeling (Ahmed, 2004; Hunt, 2023). In *Unspoken Burden*, the ordinary kitchen utensils challenge the culture's failure to recognize the weight and dignity of everyday, repetitive, largely unseen labour; labour that Butler (1990) identifies as a cornerstone of gender performance and Pollock (1988) situates within the gendered spaces of femininity.

In *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd*, the deep red is read as blood, punishment, and urgent demand; the white background accentuates this reading, the red against the white emphasising the violence of the red (Buchholz, 2025). On the deepest level, all three works address the same subject from differing perspectives: the suffering, work, and experience of women have been rendered invisible and out of view. In *Unseen Transparency of Tears*, the invisible internal process becomes literally visible; in *Unspoken Burden*, the unacknowledged labour of the kitchen is monumentalised; in *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd*, the private suffering of women under discriminatory law is made a public claim (Ranci re, 2004; hooks, 1995). Together, the three works constitute a powerful argument; made in visual and material rather than verbal terms; for the recognition and value of women's experience in all its dimensions: emotional, domestic, and juridical.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The semiotic analysis of the three artworks from the NCA Thesis Exhibition 2026; *Unseen Transparency of Tears* by Khushi Khan, *Unspoken Burden* by Zainab Aziz, and *Hudood, Insaaf, Aakhri Hadd* by Yumna Salman; has demonstrated that visual art functions as a complex, multi-layered system of communication that operates simultaneously on denotative and connotative levels (Barthes, 1977). At the denotative level, each work presents a visually coherent and formally accomplished image: patterns in glass, stacked kitchen utensils, crocheted red thread. At the connotative level, each work makes a powerful argument about the lived experience of women; an argument that is all the more compelling for being made through visual and material means rather than through language (Eco, 1976; Mitchell, 1994). In semiotic analysis, it is found that two distinct but interacting sets of meaning exist in all works of art. Signs and symbols show immediate and identifiable messages through colour, shape, construction, and imagery on the surface. These denotative meanings are the first level of interaction between the work of art and the viewer; a "visual language" that can be understood in general terms among different viewers and situations (Saussure, 1983; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). However, the richness of any work of art lies in the connotative and underlying meanings; the meanings implied and contained in the signs and messages which can only be seen and appreciated with careful, critical attention. These underlying meanings are embedded in cultural codes, historical backgrounds, psychological affiliations, and ideologies that are brought by the artist or are embedded unconsciously in the artwork (Chandler, 2017; Hall, 1997).

The theoretical frameworks mobilized in this analysis; including Saussure's (1983) structural semiotics, Peirce's (1958) triadic sign theory, Barthes's (1977) distinction between denotation and connotation, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, Eco's (1976) theory of cultural codes, and the feminist critical frameworks of Pollock (1988), Butler (1990), Ahmed (2004), and hooks (1995); have proven productive tools for revealing the multiple layers of

meaning encoded in these works. Each framework illuminates a different aspect of the works' communicative complexity, and their combination produces a richer and more nuanced account than any single framework could provide. The contributions of Berger (1972), Rose (2016), Mitchell (1994), Mirzoeff (1999), Mulvey (1975), Nochlin (1971), Rancière (2004), Bal and Bryson (1991), and Elkins (2003) have further enriched the interpretive vocabulary available for this analysis.

The findings of this study have implications both for the study of visual art and for broader social and cultural analysis. They suggest that visual art is not merely a form of aesthetic pleasure but a powerful mode of cultural communication ; capable of making arguments, expressing experiences, and demanding recognition in ways that complement and sometimes exceed the capacity of language (Eco, 1976; Mitchell, 1994). They suggest, further, that the artworks of emerging Pakistani women artists deserve sustained critical attention: not only for their aesthetic accomplishment but for the cultural and political work they perform in making visible the experiences ; emotional, domestic, juridical ; that dominant discourse has systematically rendered invisible (Rancière, 2004; Mirzoeff, 1999).

To summarize, semiotic analysis becomes an effective means of tapping into the full communicative potential of any art piece. The viewer can achieve richer, more complex, and personally resonant meanings by going beyond surface appearances and by questioning the signs, codes, and symbols that lie beneath (Berger, 1972; Rose, 2016). Reading semiotically, art stops being a passive visual experience and becomes an active dialogue between the work, its creator, and the ever-changing world in which it is received and interpreted. As Elkins (2003) and Bal and Bryson (1991) remind us, semiotic analysis must maintain a productive humility: it can illuminate but not exhaust the meaning of images, and the residue of visual and emotional experience that exceeds analysis is itself a testimony to the power of art as a medium of communication.

The semiotic analysis of surface and underlying meaning in the artworks of the NCA Thesis 2026 demonstrates how surface-level signs ; composition, colour, medium ; are transformed into deep, cultural, psychological, or ideological meanings (Barthes, 1977; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). It reaffirms that art is not only aesthetic but a complicated, coded system of communication entrenched in social and historical situations. The research highlights how visual elements in artworks function as signs conveying deeper meanings: surface analysis found colours, patterns, shapes, and composition, while underlying meanings revealed symbolic, psychological, and cultural interpretations. It claims that art is not only aesthetic but is a complex, coded system of communication, embedded in social and historical contexts (Eco, 1976; Chandler, 2017).

Future research might productively extend this semiotic analysis to a wider range of works from the NCA Thesis Exhibition 2026 and from other exhibitions of contemporary Pakistani art. It might also employ other methodological frameworks ; including discourse analysis, postcolonial theory, and reception studies ; to complement the semiotic approach taken here, producing an even more comprehensive and nuanced account of the communicative power and cultural significance of this vibrant and politically engaged body of work.

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