








## ARTICLE

# The Symbolism of Shoes in Heritage, Art, and Literature: A Semiotic Study

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to trace literary and non-literary examples and references that center on the *shoe* as a symbol—whether those that have gained prominence within Arab culture or universally across cultures. It seeks to analyze this symbol within its appropriate historical and social contexts, shedding light on its overt and hidden meanings, as well as the symbolic connotations of the shoe that influence both the conscious and unconscious minds of speakers across various discourse types and genres. The study employs a semiotic approach to analyze the shoe's symbolism, supported by a socio-historical perspective. Drawing on a variety of sources, it reveals the full impact of the shoe's meanings within the examined contexts. The study concludes that the shoe holds a central position in human thought—not merely in terms of material utility but also in intellectual and cultural dimensions. Some examples uncover historical and social layers unique to specific eras or groups, while others demonstrated global resonance, becoming ingrained in the collective memory across societies. Conversely, some remained confined to their own cultural or temporal environments. The shoe's

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symbolism extends into philosophy, art, and literature, where creators have employed it in diverse ways, making it a significant marker in human thought—whether in religious texts, artworks, or literary works. The study illuminated multiple meanings associated with the shoe, including defilement, degraded subordination, punishment, comfort, poverty, stinginess, and humiliation, among others.

**Keywords:** Shoe Symbolism; Semiotic Analysis; Cultural Symbols; Literature and Symbolism; Heritage and Identity; Historical Symbolism; Metaphor in Literature

## 1. Introduction

The term *semiology* comes from the Greek root, derived from the word *Sema*, which means “sign” or “symbol”. Essentially, semiology is the study of signs and is translated as “semiotics” or “semiology” in various languages <sup>[1,2]</sup>. It is an organized study of how signs function in social life, governed by cultural rules, such as greetings, eating habits, and social behaviors <sup>[3]</sup>. The European scholars preferred the term *semiology*, following the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, while American scholars leaned towards *semiotics*, influenced by the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. In North African Arabic, the term *Semiya* (سيمياء) is commonly used, which is adopted in this study <sup>[3]</sup>.

Saussure's semiotics focused on studying all linguistic and non-linguistic systems of expression within a social dimension, assigning social functions to these signs <sup>[4,5]</sup>. Although it included non-linguistic signs, such as military greetings and ritualistic practices, Saussure regarded language as the primary system, integrating linguistics into semiotics. On the other hand, Peirce's approach leaned more towards logic and philosophy <sup>[6–10]</sup>.

The key difference between these two schools lies in their starting points for semiotic analysis. Peirce introduced the concept of *semeiosis* or *semiotic process*, which involves three components: the *representamen* (the sign itself), the *object* (the thing the sign represents), and the *interpretant* (the meaning derived from the sign). Later thinkers in his line of thought focused on individual perception of signs, distancing social elements from this process. In contrast, Saussure emphasized the *speech act cycle*, which requires at least two participants, thus making social interaction an inherent part of semiotic analysis <sup>[11–15]</sup>.

According to Kristeva et al. <sup>[16]</sup>, semiotics seeks to study both verbal and non-verbal systems, including languages, as they are systems of signs intertwined with cultural structures. The study of human experiences is not taken literally but is understood as part of an artistic process. The understanding of signs depends on cultural coordination, as it is through social conventions and usage that the meanings of signs are established. This view is supported by the belief that cultural frameworks are

essential to interpreting the full dimensions of human actions <sup>[17–21]</sup>.

The social factor is crucial in understanding the symbolism of objects in semiotics, as it requires the reader to reflect on the social circumstances governing it. Moreover, the contextual factor is equally important, meaning that an object might carry a certain meaning in one situation and lose it in another, becoming just an ordinary item with no particular significance. For example, the Latin cross is a symbol of the Christian religion and holds meaning when it appears on a religious monument or hangs from the necklace of a Christian woman. However, it has no communicative function when placed inside a glass cabinet in someone's house or a museum, where crosses are preserved for their artistic value. Similarly, an English maid may not attribute any symbolic value to rice while preparing it, but rice gains its symbolism when thrown at newlyweds as a wish for fertility. Thus, the semiotic nature of an object or event depends on the function assigned to it <sup>[22–25]</sup>.

This convergence between semiotics and sociology is important for several reasons, the most significant being that semioticians agree that systems of signs and symbols emerge from society, much like language <sup>[26–30]</sup>. These symbols have no inherent value or meaning outside the society that produces them. Additionally, there is an overlap in the methodologies employed by both semioticians and sociologists. One of the points where the two fields meet is that semiotics focuses on reconstructing systems of meaning and examining social representations without linking them to their social conditions, akin to the formalism of George Simmel, the sociological philosopher, who proposed identifying constants in social life, independent of its content. In this sense, semiotics is concerned with social appearances without delving into their essence and details <sup>[31]</sup>.

Nothing is exempt from being symbolized, not even shoes. Shoes, under their various names—(shoe, sandal, slipper, clogs, boots, etc.)—have diverse symbolic meanings, especially in their entry into art, literature, and culture. Since humanity invented shoes, they have been diversified and adapted in form, usage, and symbolism. They have appeared in religious myths (shoes of the gods), philosophical legends, and folk myths, as well as in poetry,

storytelling (realistic, fictional, humorous, romantic, and dramatic), and finally in political discourse, so to speak. This study explores the symbolism of shoes as a “sign” and the meanings they symbolize in various cultures, based on comparative studies across different artistic and narrative realms, aiming to highlight the most important symbolic connotations associated with shoes. These meanings have appeared in different historical periods, languages, and cultures [32–36].

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

The problem of this study stems from the striking contrast between the frequent appearance of shoes in literary and artistic texts and the noticeable scarcity of semiotic studies that have given this symbol adequate attention. Although shoes have appeared in numerous myths, literary, artistic, and religious texts as elements signifying existential, political, and social meanings, most of these representations have remained outside the scope of systematic semiotic analysis. Accordingly, the study seeks to explore how shoes have been encoded and symbolically loaded in various contexts and to interpret their semantic transformations within the different social and cultural frameworks in which they were produced. The study aims to answer the following questions:

- To what extent can the shoe symbol bear profound and sometimes contradictory cultural meanings, reflecting the dynamic and transformative nature of the sign across multiple texts and discourses?
- How has the symbolism of the shoe manifested and evolved as a multi-dimensional semiotic sign in literary, cultural, and artistic discourses, within diverse civilizational and popular contexts?

### 1.2. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its engagement with a topic that has not received sufficient attention in the fields of literary and semiotic studies, despite its rich symbolic resonance in the human imagination. The study sheds light on an everyday object that has long accompanied humans materially, yet has not been examined symbolically in proportion to its presence in texts. It contributes to the enrichment of the Arab semiotic field by offering an in-depth reading of the shoe as a transformative cultural sign. The study also highlights the role of cultural and historical context in the reproduction of meaning, and demonstrates how the sign can intersect with psychological and social dimensions to generate new semantic structures. In doing so, it paves the way for similar studies that investigate other everyday symbols in Arab culture, aiming to document and analyze them within an encyclopedic framework that connects the symbol to the collective imagination.

This study offers a unique contribution to the fields of cultural studies, semiotics, and literary criticism by investigating the underexplored yet deeply resonant symbol of the *shoe*. It foregrounds how a seemingly mundane object can hold profound connotative power across history, societies, and artistic expressions. By framing the analysis within both semiotic and socio-historical methodologies, the research bridges abstract symbolic interpretation with tangible cultural narratives.

Its significance lies in providing scholars with a foundational typology of the symbolic functions of the shoe in various discourses—literary, religious, and artistic—thereby opening pathways for future research in symbolic studies and intertextual cultural analysis. The study's interdisciplinary nature enriches our understanding of how objects acquire layered meanings and how these meanings reflect deeper social, psychological, and philosophical dimensions of human experience.

## 2. Methodology

The study adopts an analytical-semiotic methodology as its main theoretical framework, through which the symbolism of the shoe is traced across different contexts. The semiotic approach focuses on studying signs and symbols within systems of meaning. In this research, the shoe is viewed as a “sign” or “signifier” to which meanings (signifieds) are assigned—meanings that take shape depending on the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which the shoe is used. This methodology draws inspiration from the two main schools of semiotics:

- The Saussurean approach, which emphasizes the social dimension of the sign and assumes its shared nature within society.
- The Peircean approach, which focuses on the process of meaning production through a triadic relationship between the sign, its object, and its interpretant, while also incorporating the individual's role in interpreting signs.

Additionally, the researcher complements the semiotic method with social and historical perspectives, ensuring that the sign (the shoe) is not analyzed in isolation, but rather in light of the contexts in which it appears. The study seeks to understand the meanings associated with the shoe across different cultures and historical periods. To achieve this, it draws on literary, religious, artistic, and folkloric sources—including texts, myths, proverbs, stories, and visual artworks—to compile a rich body of symbolic data that reveals the transformations and contradictions of the symbol across time and cultures.

## 3. Literature Review

Al-Muqayd [29] explores the contemporary poet's

engagement with Arab heritage through the use of popular mythical symbols, which enrich the poem with expressive power, artistic and dramatic tools, and social, political, intellectual, and psychological connotations. These symbols reflect the poet's awareness of his people's crises, his stance on various issues, and his aspirations toward them. Accordingly, the literary analysis in this research focuses specifically on the mythical popular symbols deeply rooted in the Arab collective consciousness, as employed by Arab poets in their poetry—such as *Sindbad*, *Scheherazade*, *Shahryar*, *Zarqā' al-Yamāma*, and *al-Zabbā'*. These figures are represented through artistic and dramatic devices such as symbolism, masking, and dialogue, and are imbued with diverse semiotic meanings infused with modern perspectives and interpretations that harmonize with these symbols and their rich connotations. The analysis demonstrates what Roland Barthes describes as the “play of signifiers” within the poetic text.

In his new book *“The Symbolism of the Shoe and the Foot in Literature and Art”*, Najm<sup>[37]</sup> argues that the psychological dimensions of the foot and the shoe—within their varied and multifaceted relationship—differ depending on the psychological profiles associated with masculinity and femininity, particularly in the context of *sadomasochism*. Drawing on insights from psychology, Najm identifies a dialectical duality in how the female foot moves between the sacred and the profane. For instance, the feet of goddess statues in Greek, Roman, and later Germanic art were often covered to preserve their purity. The Inquisition criticized the artist Murillo for portraying the Virgin Mary in paintings where her feet were visible. Similarly, some Spanish paintings depicted nude women whose feet alone were clad in socks or shoes. In Wagner's operas, foot-kissing symbolizes both the sacred and the profane simultaneously. Through extensive literary examples from poets such as Jamil Buthayna, Ahmed Shawqi, Nizar Qabbani, and Elias Abu Shabaki, Najm demonstrates that the foot does not carry a fixed meaning across all contexts.

The book explores the relationship between the foot and the shoe—suggesting that the shoe is a prison imposed on the foot by modern civilization, yet it is also an object of desire and a tool of authoritarian power. Najm recalls the goose-step of Hitler's soldiers, whose studded boots inspired terror. He cites General Patton: “A soldier in shoes is just a soldier, but with macho boots, he becomes a warrior.” The shoe also masks reality, as shoemakers rarely tailor their products to actual foot sizes. People choose shoes based on personal taste, not fit, and only psychological analysis can reveal what a shoe truly reflects about character.

Najm also sees the shoe as a symbol of movement, travel, and departure—all of which metaphorically point to death. This idea explains certain Western traditions, such as placing the deceased's shoes beside their bed to symbolize

eternal absence. In analyzing the Persian-derived title “Pasha” (*ba*: shoe, *shah*: king), Najm outlines a symbolic connection between the foot and the shoe, where base humility meets arrogant superiority. He cites a historical ritual: a concubine would raise the king's foot and wrap it around the visiting dignitary's head; moments later, she would lift the king's foot away. This practice led to the term “Foot Council” being used to describe the courts of certain Ottoman pashas.

Najm notes that upright posture distinguishes humans from animals, giving the foot a pivotal role in expanding brain capacity and enhancing sexual life. Walking upright diminished the role of olfactory stimulation and emphasized visual attraction, making human arousal less dependent on time or specific circumstances. Thus, *bipedality* is a uniquely human trait, the foundation of grace, and every walk reflects the walker's personality. Different gaits throughout history—conveying beauty, pride, or joy—were captured by composers like Wagner and Chopin, and by poets alike. As civilization grew, the rhythm of footsteps came to represent the city itself.

In urban life, streets are recognized by the sound of footsteps, which poets liken to vibrant, comforting melodies—or somber, painful, and familiar rhythms. Najm ultimately argues that the foot surpasses the hand in expressive potential, as evidenced by works of art from Michelangelo, Renoir, Ingres, and others who filled their canvases with evocative depictions of feet.

Saraya's study constructs bridges between myth on the one hand and literature and art on the other, through an analytical reading of representations of the shoe inspired by mythology<sup>[31]</sup>. It examines a selection of works ranging from short stories to visual art, which revolve around two main types of relationships between characters and the shoe: the master-servant dynamic, and the symbolic pairing of Jocasta-Jesus-Oedipus. Power serves as the central axis around which these relationships are structured. We analyze how the theme of the shoe is represented in literature and art, or how the studied works handle the shoe motif as it appears in various myths. The study also investigates how imaginative creativity can draw from a simple object of everyday life—such as the shoe—to explore dimensions of social and political life. Thus, it presents a new perspective on the image of power through the lens of literary hermeneutics.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1. The Shoe in Poetry

The symbolism of the shoe has manifested differently among poets, representing dichotomies such as poverty and wealth, humility and arrogance, praise and insult, as well as birth and mourning. The symbolism of the shoe has evolved, and the examined poetry presented a historical develop-



mental view of its meaning among poets, revealing what has persisted and what has fallen away. In pre-Islamic poetry, the symbolism of the shoe pointed to some of the customs and traditions of that time, as seen in the verses of Al- Al-Dhubyani (d. 18 before hijrah), praising the Ghassanids in the Levant:

يصونون أجسادًا قديمًا نعيمها  
بخالصة الأردن خضر المناكب  
رفاق النعال طيب حجاتهم  
يحيون بالريان يوم السباب

*"They protect bodies whose past pleasures are preserved by the fine collars and green shoulders.*

*They wear soft shoes, and their footsteps revive the region on the day of the sands."* [32] (p. 112).

The wealthy Ghassanids, who wore garments with white sleeves and green shoulders, adopted delicate shoes (soft shoes) as a symbol of civilized elegance. The delicate nature of their footwear symbolizes the refined class, accustomed to palaces, celebrations, and pride. This represents an early image of professional footwear, a creation of human society that has persisted in modern times.

Similarly, Al-Khansaa [33] (d. 24 after Hijrah) wrote:

ألا ليت أُمي لم تلدني سوية  
وكنّت ترابا بين أيدي القوابل  
وخرت على الأرض السماء فطقت  
ومات جميعا كل حاف وناعل

*"Would that my mother had not given birth to me whole, and that I had been dust between the hands of midwives. Then the heavens fell to the earth, and all barefooted and shod perished."* [33] (p. 112).

The luxurious Ghassanids, who wore garments with white sleeves and green shoulders, adopted delicate shoes (soft footwear) as a symbol of civilized elegance. The softness of the shoes was characteristic of an elite environment accustomed to palaces, celebrations, and pride. This is an ancient image of professional footwear that humans have developed into the modern era.

Similarly, Al-Khansaa [33] expressed in her poetry:

ألا ليت أُمي لم تلدني سوية  
وكنّت ترابا بين أيدي القوابل  
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*"Would that my mother had not given birth to me whole,*

*And that I had been dust between the hands of midwives.*

*Then the heavens fell to the earth, and all barefooted and shod perished."* (p. 112).

Al-Khansaa was deeply affected by the death of her brother Sakhr, and from that moment, she became a symbol of mourning among poets [33]. But when sorrow overwhelmed her, she found no escape but to curse the world, including all people. She could not find a way to enumerate everyone except by dividing them into those who are barefoot and those who wear shoes, ensuring no one was left out. This reflects the reality of poverty in pre-Islamic times, where many could not afford footwear. These customs evolved in their relationship to shoes. While in pre-Islamic poetry, shoes symbolized poverty or wealth, they also reflected extreme luxury during the Abbasid and Umayyad periods. For example, the poet Bashar ibn Burd (d. 168 AH) said:

إذا وضعت في مجلس القوم نعلها  
تضوع مسكا ما أصابت وعنبرا

*"When she placed her sandal in the assembly, it exhaled the fragrance of musk and amber."*

It is said that the reference here is to the mother of Caliph Al-Mu'tadhid, and they would place musk, amber, and other perfumes in her sandal. Bashar's poem not only describes its beauty but also subtly draws attention to the extravagance and wastefulness of the caliph's mother [38].

The shoe was also used in harsh invective, such as in the mockery by Ibn al-Rumi (Ali ibn Abbas) (d. 280 AH) when he ridiculed someone by reminding them of their vile and contemptible life, saying:

أحجبني عمرو وقد عاش حقة  
حببته خف ومركبه نعل

*"Will Amr block me, although he lived a while, his lover's foot and his sandal are his ride."* [34] (p. 262).

The poet Al-Mutanabbi (d. 354 AH) used the shoe in his unique metaphors in praise of Sayf al-Dawla al-Hamdani. He wanted to illustrate his high status and noble position, saying:

فيا أيما قدم سعيت إلى العلاء  
أدم الهلال لأخصبك حذاء

*"With whichever foot you strive toward greatness, the crescent adorns your feet as shoes."* [35] (p. 1/67).

In his praise of the person seeking high status, Al-Mutanabbi compares the crescent's land to the shoe of his feet, meaning that his elevated status surpasses even the crescent, highlighting his greatness and superiority.

Similarly, in his invective, he says:

وتعجبني رجلاك في النعل أنني  
رأيتك ذا نعل إذا كنت حافيا

*"I am amazed by your legs in sandals, for I've seen you wear sandals, though barefoot, because of your coarse legs."* [35] (p. 4/87).

"I am amazed" here expresses astonishment, not approval. He wants to convey the ugliness and roughness of the person's legs, indicating that when he saw them in sandals, he was shocked, since he had already seen him as barefoot due to the coarseness of his legs, likening them to the sandals themselves.

With Al-Ma'arri (d. 449 AH), we find a different meaning, as he leaned towards existential philosophy and the philosophy of things in his poetry <sup>[36]</sup>. His *Luzumiyyat* is a clear example of this, as seen in his view on trust and reciprocity in his poem:

يخونك من أدى إليك أمانة  
فلم ترعه يوماً بقول ولا فعل  
فأحسن إلى من شئت في الأرض أو أسيء  
فإنك تجزي حذوك النعل بالنعل  
*"Whoever betrays the trust given to him,  
never cared for it by words or deeds.  
So be kind to whomever you wish on earth or  
harm, for you will be repaid with the sandal for  
the sandal."* <sup>[36]</sup> (p. 223).

In another instance, where he metaphorically compares humans to beasts, he speaks about the human preoccupation with life's necessities, such as the need for shoes to protect from the dirt, stating that the head (mind) does not have the same needs as the feet, which are practical and physical, as seen in his verse:

فلتلبس الوحش نعماً لا حذاء لها  
تقي التراب ولا للهام ترحيل  
*"Let the beast wear sandals, which shield  
it from the dust, but the head requires no such  
covering."* <sup>[36]</sup> (p. 172).

In his existential philosophy, emphasizing that clay returns to clay and dust returns to dust, he advocates humility in walking on earth, urging people to lessen the weight of their shoes on the earth, for in his view, it is nothing but the bodies of humans and their ancestors across the years, as he says:

خفف الوطء فما أظن أديم  
الأرض إلا من هذه الأجساد  
*"Tread lightly, for I believe the skin of the  
earth is only made of these bodies."* <sup>[36]</sup> (p. 201).

Thus, the sandal in his poetry takes on philosophical dimensions concerning existence, life, and the relationships between people.

In the modern era, the symbolism shifted towards contempt, humiliation, and degradation. For example, Ahmed Shawqi, who followed the path of the ancients both in form and meaning, used the sandal to describe a people whose souls were base, having grown up in such degradation, symbolizing this degradation through the sandal as seen in these verses:

كيف لا تشمل الدناءة قوماً

نشأوا في الصغار حين استهلوا

هم لعمرى أنل من قدم

النعل نفوساً والنعل منهم أجل

*"How can baseness not include a people  
Who were raised in lowliness from their very  
first cry?"*

*By my life, they are more humiliated than  
the sole, of a shoe in spirit — indeed, the shoe  
is more noble than them."* <sup>[37]</sup> (p. 238).

Similarly, Al-Mazni <sup>[39]</sup> described a friend he had to discard, comparing it to discarding an old, worn-out sandal, in his verse:

نبذتك نبد النعل رث أدعيتها

واني على أمثال ذاك لقادر

*"I threw you away like an old sandal, and  
I am capable of such with others like you."* <sup>[39]</sup>  
(p. 217).

The symbolism of the sandal in these verses belongs to the traditional symbols that emphasize humiliation and degradation, describing the enemy as being lower than the sandal itself.

## 4.2. The Symbol of the Sandal in the Modern Poetry

With the evolution of modern poetry, the symbol of the sandal began to acquire deeper and more varied meanings. For instance, in the poem *Grave Digger* by Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, he says:

نذر على لئن تشب لأزرع من الورود  
ألفاً تروى بالماء وسوف أرصف بالنقود  
هذا المزار.... وسوف أركض في الهجير بلا حذاء  
وأعد أحذية الجنود

وأخط في وحل الرصيف وقد تلطخ وقد تلطخ بالدماء

*"I vowed that if you grow, I will plant a  
thousand roses,*

*Watered with the tears of the wounded,*

*And I will pave the way with gold.*

*This shrine... and I will run barefoot in the  
scorching heat,*

*Counting the shoes of soldiers,*

*Treading through the mud of the sidewalk,*

*Which is stained with blood."* <sup>[40]</sup> (p. 293)

In Al-Sayyab's state of extreme misery and the intense tension of poverty, war, and destruction, which become his source of livelihood, the sandal is employed with two contrasting symbols. While he takes off his sandals, symbolizing joy and freedom, he runs barefoot among the corpses of the dead, and between the shoes of the soldiers, representing the countless bodies left by war.

In his poem '*In the Maghreb*', the sandal becomes a

symbol of confronting the enemy, toe to toe, and when the foot is left barefoot, it indicates that the enemy has gained full control over its owner, as in:

فأُمسى تأكل الغبراء  
والنيران من معناه  
ويركله الغزاة بلا حذاء  
بلا قدم  
وتنزف منه، دون دم  
جراح دونما ألم  
فقد مات

*"So the dust consumes it,  
And the fire is its meaning,  
And the invaders kick it, barefoot,  
Without feet,  
And it bleeds without blood,  
Wounds without pain,  
For it has died."* [40] (p. 87)

The discarded sandal in battle is like a usurped identity, leaving the foot unknown and the soldier crippled, awaiting a blow that will surely defeat him.

For Al-Sayyab, bare feet symbolize defeat—whether through war or the human's internal defeat in his homeland, due to poverty and hunger, as in:

ما زلت أضرب مترب القدمين  
أشعث، في الدروب  
*"I still walk, my feet covered in dust,  
Disheveled, in the alleys."* [40] (p. 137)

Here, "dust-covered feet" is a metaphor for being barefoot, not having shoes, which symbolizes extreme poverty, preventing him from even protecting his feet from the obstacles in his path.

As for Nizar Qabbani [38], he used the symbol of shoes extensively in his poetry, representing various meanings, including the relationship between shoes and power, as in:

يا ملك المغول  
يا وارث الجزمة والكرباح  
عن جحك أرطغول  
*"O king of the Mongols,  
O heir to the boot and the whip,  
From your ancestor Ertuğrul."* [38] (p. 95)

Here, the shoe symbolizes the immense power of the ruler, alongside other tools that maintain his authority, such as the whip, and it is something passed down from one ruler to another, representing the humiliation exercised by a regime that crushes its people.

He also says:

لأنني  
حاولت أن أكشف عن حزني وعند بلاني  
ضربت بالحذاء  
... أرغمني جندك أن أكل من حذائي

*"For I tried to reveal my sorrow,  
And in my misfortune,  
I was beaten with the shoe...  
Your soldiers forced me to eat from my shoe."*  
[41] (pp. 12–13)

The shoe of the ruler here is different from that of the ruled. The shoe of the one who strikes and oppresses is unlike the shoe of the one who is struck and oppressed. The former symbolizes tyrannical authority, while the latter symbolizes the defeated person, both representing humiliation and degradation. These symbols continue to revolve around dictatorship and the oppression of the people, as in:

إن لماذا يأكل الكبار كافيًا  
ونحن نأكل النعال؟  
إن لماذا يشرب الضباط وسكيا  
ونحن نشرب الأوحال

*"So why do the rich eat caviar,  
And we eat the soles of shoes?  
So why do the officers drink whiskey,  
While we drink the mud?"* [41] (p. 57)

In a moment of extreme despair, the defeated and oppressed person is reduced to humiliating himself and his dignity before the victor and ruler, leading him to grovel in submission, as in:

اسمح لنا بأن نبوس السيف في يديك  
اسمح لنا أن نجمع الغبار عن نعليك  
*"Allow us to kiss the sword in your hand,  
Allow us to collect the dust from your sandals."* [41]  
(p. 66)

The culmination of oppression made the individual lower his head (a symbol of his dignity) to the shoe of his ruler, which symbolizes inferiority and vileness. Yet, at the same time, it also represents power and tyranny. The individual or the people, generally speaking, at the peak of their helplessness, are nothing but an old, worn-out, and hole-ridden shoe. Qabbani said:

ونحن منخورو منخورو كالنعال  
*"We are corroded, corroded like shoes."* [38]  
(p. 15)

The most sorrowful aspect is that the intellectuals and media figures of the people have become mere mouthpieces for the authority, echoing what it desires:

وإذا أصبح المفكر يوقا يستوي الفكر عندها والحذاء  
*"And when the intellectual becomes a  
trumpet, thought and the shoe become one."* [41]  
(p. 71)

The symbolism in Nizar Qabbani's work is centered around his rebellion against the oppressive authority and his

rebellion against intellectuals who bow to its tyranny and its degradation of the people, as well as against media figures and poets who embellish the shoes with their words that crush their people. If it were up to the poet, he would cut off the fingers of those who write in favor of tyranny. Qabbani said:

وقطعت أصابع من صبغوا بالكلمة أحذية الخلفاء  
 “And I would cut off the fingers of those  
 who painted with words the shoes of the  
 caliphs.” [41] (p. 113).

Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati [42] expresses the symbol of the shoe in the best possible way, representing the state of poverty and hunger in his poem *The Village Market*:

الشمس، والحرير الهزيلة  
 والذباب  
 وحذاء جندي قديم يتداول الأيدي، وفلاح يحرق في الفراغ:  
 في مطلع العام الجديد  
 يداي تمتلنان حتما بالنقود  
 وسأشتري هذا الحذاء  
 “The sun, and the thin horses,  
 The flies,  
 And the shoe of an old soldier passing from  
 hand to hand,  
 And a peasant staring into the void:  
 In the beginning of the new year,  
 My hands will surely be filled with money,  
 And I will buy this shoe.” [41] (214)

The acquisition of the shoe—specifically an old soldier’s shoe, weathered by dust and scratched by sand and roads—becomes the ultimate dream for the poor peasant, who, despite still not having money, will save every penny to buy this shoe, which he hopes will protect his feet from the stones and dust of the fields.

In his poem *Approximate Images of a Bourgeoisie Writing Poetry*, the shoe takes on a different symbolism: the shoe of the enemy who will judge the defeated, yet the one who is defeated by hunger and poverty in his exile. The shoe here symbolizes the degradation of dignity and the humiliation that one might experience in exile. Al-Bayati said:

إن جاء يوماً رفع الراية للأعداء  
 وجاد بالخلد إلى الصافع، والقفا إلى الحذاء  
 ولعق الحذاء  
 “If one day, the flag is raised for the  
 enemies,  
 And the cheek is offered to the shoe,  
 And the shoe is licked.” [42] (p. 411)

In Darwish's poetry, which he dedicated to his homeland (Palestine), he deeply cared for it, and became the unchallenged poet of Palestinian soil [43]. He etched its history, its myths, and its truths, carving poems that remain

forever, sanctifying Palestine and its Arab identity. Like most modern poets, Darwish also delved into symbolism, using the shoe as one of his prominent symbols with different meanings. In his poem *The 151st Psalm*, he tries to solidify the historical significance of the land:

أورشليم! التي أخذت شكل زيتونة  
 دامية...  
 صار جلدي حذاء  
 للأساطير والأنبياء  
 “Jerusalem! That took the form of a  
 bloody olive tree...  
 My skin has become a shoe  
 For the myths and the prophets.” [43] (p. 95)

This symbolizes his deep-rootedness in the land, which was trodden by prophets, leaders, and great figures throughout history, and he has carried them all on his back. This gives the land and its inhabitants a sacred dimension.

In his famous poem ‘*In Praise of the High Shadow*’, Darwish uses the word *shoe* (or “boots”) to refer to the Palestinian fighter who embodies the highest ideals of sacrifice. He creates a dream for future generations and establishes a history for the Palestinians who sacrifice their blood to defend their land and its sanctity. Darwish said:

الله أكبر  
 هذه آياتنا فاقراً  
 باسم الفدائي الذي خلقنا  
 من جزمة افقا  
 باسم الفدائي الذي يرحل  
 من وقتكم لفدائه الأول  
 الأول الأول  
 سندمر الهيكل  
 “God is Great,  
 These are our signs, so read them,  
 In the name of the fighter who was created  
 From a shoe,  
 In the name of the fighter who departs  
 From your time to his first sacrifice,  
 The first, the first,  
 We will destroy the temple.” [43] (p. 24)

## 5. Conclusions, Implications and Future Prospects

The shoe has assumed diverse symbolic meanings across religious texts, art, and literature, as interpreted by artists, poets, painters, writers, and others in various fields. These meanings span existential, social, philosophical, and political dimensions. In religious contexts, the shoe symbolized something impure or an instrument of punishment, while in art it represented comfort, poverty, stinginess, or humiliation. In prose and narrative, it symbolized the owner, and in poetry, it symbolized degradation, humiliation, and sometimes hunger, poverty, and defeat.



This study has revealed the dense and deeply symbolic presence of the shoe within the structure of literary and poetic texts, particularly in Arabic poetry. The shoe was not merely a utilitarian object or a passing material detail, but rather evolved into a multifaceted symbol reflecting existential and human conditions, and expressing moral, social, and political struggles.

In the poetry of Abdul Wahab Al-Bayati, for example, the shoe becomes a symbol of hunger, poverty, and alienation in exile, or of a simple dream sought by a farmer in the face of life's harshness <sup>[42]</sup>. In the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, the shoe surpasses its association with humiliation, becoming in certain contexts an embodiment of Palestinian resistance or a historical witness to the sacredness of the land once trodden by prophets <sup>[43]</sup>. As for Nizar Qabbani's poetry, the shoe symbolizes subjugation and humiliation under a tyrannical authority, as well as the moral degradation of intellectuals when they turn into tools in the hands of power.

This diversity in symbolic usage reveals the immense interpretive potential of the shoe in Arab culture, where the aesthetic merges with the political, and the everyday intersects with the mythical. Through this study, it became clear how a single symbol can carry contradictory meanings depending on the context in which it is employed, highlighting the ability of poetic texts to reshape the world and produce new meanings through simple symbolic tools <sup>[44–48]</sup>.

This study represents an initial step toward mapping the representations of the shoe in Arabic literature. Its scope could be significantly expanded through comparative analyses with Western and Asian literary traditions, particularly by tracing the symbolism of the shoe in novels, epics, and global theatrical texts—a task that requires effort in translation and cross-cultural semiotic analysis. While this research has focused primarily on poetry, narrative fiction and cinema also offer fertile ground for examining the symbolic role of the shoe in character construction, social class, and psychological relationships. Future studies would benefit from incorporating these additional genres.

Furthermore, this research opens the door to parallel studies of other everyday objects, such as the hat, shirt, glasses, or cane, analyzing their symbolic roles in expressing identity, authority, disability, or rebellion. It is recommended that future work integrate semiotic analysis with anthropological, psychological, and sociological approaches for a deeper understanding of the contexts in which symbols are produced and reconfigured within the cultural imagination.

A particularly urgent scholarly need exists for the creation of an encyclopedic compendium documenting visual and material symbols in Arab culture—including the shoe—and traces their historical development. Such a project would contribute to preserving the collective

symbolic memory and facilitating future research in this field.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, N.Y.R., M.A.R. and T.I.A.-M.; methodology, N.Y.R.; validation, N.Y.R. and Z.M.M.; formal analysis, M.A.R.; investigation, M.A.A.-A.; resources, T.I.A.-M.; data curation, Z.M.M., M.K and M.D; writing—original draft preparation, M.A.A.-A., M.K and M.D; writing—review and editing, M.A.R.; visualization, Z.M.M.; supervision, M.A.R.; project administration, T.I.A.-M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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