



## HUMANITIES MEANINGS IN TULUS' *TEH HIJAU*: AN INTEGRATED SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF ROLAND BARTHES AND CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE

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### *Abstract*

*This study aims to examine the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in Teh Hijau, a song by Tulus, through a humanities perspective. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, complemented by Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs. The data consisted of the song lyrics and their production context, which were analyzed to identify signification at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings reveal that the image of a cup of green tea symbolizes a simple yet meaningful source of emotional stability amid feelings of emptiness and uncertainty. The contrast between the song's cheerful musical arrangement and reflective lyrics reinforces the idea that emotional healing does not always appear dramatic. At the mythical level, the song challenges the cultural expectation that sadness must be resolved immediately and instead promotes gradual self-acceptance. From a humanities perspective, Teh Hijau reflects a shift in how urban Indonesian youth understand happiness and emotional recovery as quiet, personal processes rather than achievements that must be publicly displayed.*

**Keywords:** emotional healing; humanities; meaning; semiotics; song lyrics.

### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji makna denotatif, konotatif, dan mitos yang tertanam dalam Teh Hijau, sebuah lagu karya Tulus, melalui perspektif humaniora. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif menggunakan analisis semiotik Roland Barthes, dilengkapi dengan klasifikasi tanda Charles Sanders Peirce. Data terdiri dari lirik lagu dan konteks produksinya, yang dianalisis untuk mengidentifikasi signifikasi pada tingkat denotasi, konotasi, dan mitos. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa gambar secangkir teh hijau melambangkan sumber stabilitas emosional yang sederhana namun bermakna di tengah perasaan kosong dan ketidakpastian. Kontras antara aransemen musik lagu yang ceria dan lirik reflektif memperkuat gagasan bahwa penyembuhan emosional tidak selalu tampak dramatis. Pada tingkat mitos, lagu ini menantang harapan budaya bahwa kesedihan harus segera diselesaikan dan sebaliknya mempromosikan penerimaan diri secara bertahap. Dari perspektif humaniora, Teh Hijau mencerminkan pergeseran bagaimana pemuda perkotaan Indonesia memahami kebahagiaan dan pemulihan emosional sebagai proses pribadi yang tenang daripada pencapaian yang harus ditampilkan secara publik.

**Kata kunci:** penyembuhan emosional; humaniora; makna; semiotika; lirik lagu.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Popular music is a form of cultural communication that functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium for the production, distribution, and negotiation of meaning within society. Through lyrics, melodies, and musical arrangements, songs are capable of representing social experiences, cultural values, and emotional dynamics that exist in everyday life. Therefore, songs can be regarded as cultural texts containing systems of signs that are worthy of examination through a semiotic approach. From the perspectives of communication studies and the humanities, the meanings embedded in a song extend beyond the literal meanings of its words, developing into connotative meanings and even myths that reflect how society understands social reality. The development of the Indonesian music industry in recent years has shown an increasing appreciation for songs that address issues of mental health, self-reflection, and everyday life as integral aspects of human experience. This phenomenon is closely associated with growing public awareness particularly among younger generations of psychological well-being, self-awareness, mindfulness, and self-acceptance. Songs that explore these themes function not only as entertainment but also as communication media that help listeners interpret and understand their emotional experiences. In this context, music becomes a medium representing the complexity of human experience, making it a relevant subject of study within the disciplines of communication and the humanities.

One Indonesian musician who is widely recognized for consistently producing reflective lyrics is Tulus. His works are characterized by the use of simple language, everyday metaphors, and symbols that are closely connected to people's daily experiences. Following the release of his album *Manusia* in 2022, Tulus released the single *Teh Hijau* on June 30, 2026. The song attracted considerable attention because it combines a warm and optimistic musical arrangement with lyrics portraying emotional emptiness, a sense of losing direction, and the gradual process of accepting negative emotions. The symbol of a cup of green tea in the song functions not merely as an ordinary everyday object but also creates a space for interpreting calmness, self-acceptance, and emotional recovery. These symbolic characteristics make *Teh Hijau* an interesting object for semiotic analysis. In semiotic studies, Roland Barthes explains that signs operate through two levels of signification: denotation and connotation, which subsequently develop into myths as socially accepted ideological constructions. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, whereas connotation represents meanings shaped by society's social, cultural, and emotional experiences. When connotative meanings become widely accepted and continuously reproduced, they evolve

into myths as systems of meaning that are perceived as natural by society. Barthes' framework enables researchers to uncover the hidden meanings embedded in language and symbols within cultural texts, including song lyrics. In addition to Barthes' theory, this study also employs Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs as a complementary analytical framework. Peirce categorizes signs into icons, indices, and symbols based on the relationship between the sign and the object it represents. The integration of these two perspectives enables a more comprehensive analysis of the symbols appearing in *Teh Hijau*, both in terms of the structure of meaning and the characteristics of the signs that construct such meanings. From a normative perspective (*das sollen*), songs as cultural products should be understood not merely as entertainment but also as representations of human experiences that embody social, cultural, and emotional values worthy of scholarly investigation. Semiotic approaches within communication studies are expected to reveal how symbols embedded in musical works shape the ways people perceive reality, including concepts of happiness, sadness, and emotional recovery. Consequently, the study of song lyrics extends beyond their aesthetic qualities to contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary cultural dynamics.

However, the empirical condition (*das sein*) indicates that previous studies on Tulus' works have primarily focused on themes of romanticism, figurative language, semantics, and representations of solitude. Nathaniel and Sannie, for example, examined the meaning of solitude in *Ruang Sendiri* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Riswari analyzed the representation of romanticism in *Jatuh Suka* through Peirce's semiotics. Meanwhile, Fauzi and Sari focused on the philosophical meanings contained in the album *Manusia*, whereas Nora, as well as Haerussaleh and Huda, examined Tulus' works from semantic and critical discourse analysis perspectives. These previous studies demonstrate that Tulus' songs are rich in symbolism and meaning; however, none has specifically explored the representation of emotional recovery in *Teh Hijau*, particularly through the integration of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs within a humanities framework. Based on the review of previous studies, several research gaps remain. First, no study has specifically examined the single *Teh Hijau*, considering that it is Tulus' latest work. Second, most previous studies employed only one semiotic approach, resulting in analyses that have not comprehensively examined both the characteristics of signs and the processes of meaning construction. Third, existing studies on Tulus' songs have focused predominantly on linguistic and aesthetic aspects, while interpretations from a humanities perspective that

position songs as representations of the emotional experiences of urban Indonesian society remain relatively limited. Accordingly, the novelty (*state of the art*) of this research lies in analyzing the meanings embedded in *Teh Hijau* through the integration of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs to reveal denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings constructed through the song's symbols. This study also contributes a humanities perspective by interpreting the song as a representation of changing ways in which Indonesia's urban youth understand happiness, emotional emptiness, and emotional recovery. Therefore, this study not only enriches the field of communication semiotics but also contributes to the development of popular culture and humanities studies in Indonesia. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to analyze the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings in Tulus's *Teh Hijau* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, enriched by Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs, and to interpret these findings from a humanities perspective as representations of the emotional experiences of contemporary urban Indonesian society.

## **II. THEORETICAL STUDIES**

### **2.1 Song Lyrics as Communication and Cultural Texts**

Song lyrics constitute a form of symbolic communication that conveys ideas, experiences, emotions, and cultural values through poetic language. From the perspective of communication studies, song lyrics function not only as entertainment but also as cultural texts that represent social reality and human experience. The choice of diction, metaphors, symbols, and narrative structures enables multiple layers of meaning to emerge, influenced by the social and cultural backgrounds of listeners. Consequently, song lyrics can be understood as media that construct, reproduce, and transform meaning within society. The study of song lyrics is important within the field of communication because every cultural text contains a system of signs that can be interpreted through various theoretical approaches, one of which is semiotics. Therefore, analyzing song lyrics is not limited to understanding their literal meanings but also aims to uncover the values, ideologies, and cultural constructions embedded in the use of particular symbols.

### **2.2 Roland Barthes' Semiotics**

Semiotics is the discipline that studies signs and the processes through which meaning is produced in social life. One of the most influential semioticians in communication studies is Roland Barthes. Expanding Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, Barthes introduced the concept of the *two orders of signification*, consisting of denotation and

connotation. Denotation refers to the primary, literal, and objective meaning of a sign, whereas connotation refers to the secondary meaning generated through cultural values, social experiences, and collective interpretations. Barthes further argues that connotations that are continuously reproduced within society eventually develop into myths. Myth should not be understood as fictional stories but rather as systems of meaning that have become naturalized and accepted as common sense, thereby shaping how people perceive reality. Consequently, Barthes' semiotic approach enables researchers to reveal the ideological meanings embedded in communication texts, including song lyrics. In this study, Roland Barthes' semiotic theory serves as the primary analytical framework for identifying the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in Tulus's *Teh Hijau*.

### **2.3 Charles Sanders Peirce's Classification of Signs**

To complement Barthes' framework, this study also employs Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs. According to Peirce, signs are categorized into icons, indices, and symbols based on the relationship between the *representamen* and the object it represents. An icon is a sign that resembles its object through similarity. An index signifies a causal or existential relationship between the sign and its object, whereas a symbol derives its meaning through social convention or collective agreement within a particular culture. These three categories of signs interact in the process of constructing meaning within communication texts. In this research, Peirce's classification is used to identify the characteristics of the signs appearing in the lyrics of *Teh Hijau* before they are further analyzed using Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. The integration of these two theoretical perspectives is expected to produce a more comprehensive interpretation of the symbolic meanings conveyed in the song.

### **2.4 Humanities Perspective in the Study of Popular Music**

The humanities regard works of art as expressions of human experience that cannot be separated from their social and cultural contexts. Popular music represents one such form of expression because it functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium through which individuals understand themselves, their social environment, and the values prevailing within society. From a humanities perspective, the symbols embedded in song lyrics are understood as representations of both personal and collective human experiences. *Teh Hijau* illustrates how an ordinary object encountered in everyday life can be interpreted as a symbol of tranquility, self-acceptance, and emotional recovery. Accordingly, the humanities perspective adopted in this study seeks to explain how these symbolic meanings reflect

changing perceptions among Indonesia's urban youth regarding happiness, mental well-being, and the process of emotional healing. These four theoretical foundations provide the conceptual basis for analyzing the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings contained in Tulus's *Teh Hijau* and for interpreting the research findings within the broader contexts of communication studies and the humanities

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive research method. The qualitative approach was selected because the objective of this research is to understand and interpret the meanings embedded in the lyrics of Tulus's *Teh Hijau* within their social and cultural contexts, rather than to test hypotheses or produce statistical generalizations. The descriptive method was used to provide a systematic description of the phenomenon under investigation through the interpretation of the sign system that constructs the meanings conveyed in the song. The analytical framework adopted in this study is Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, particularly the concept of the *two orders of signification*, consisting of denotation, connotation, and myth. This framework was employed to identify both the explicit and implicit meanings contained in the song lyrics. To complement Barthes' semiotic analysis, this study also utilizes Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs, which categorizes signs into icons, indices, and symbols. The integration of these two semiotic approaches enables a more comprehensive analysis of the processes through which meaning is constructed in *Teh Hijau*. The object of this study is the song *Teh Hijau* by Tulus, released on June 30, 2026. The units of analysis consist of words, phrases, sentences, and symbolic expressions contained in the song lyrics, as well as contextual elements related to the song's production. Primary data were obtained from the official lyrics of *Teh Hijau*, while secondary data were collected from scholarly journal articles, academic books, news reports, interviews, and official publications discussing Tulus's works, semiotics, cultural communication, and humanities studies. Data were collected through documentation techniques by compiling and examining documents relevant to the research object. The primary data consisted of the official song lyrics, whereas the secondary data were gathered through an extensive review of academic literature and supporting documents. All collected data were subsequently classified according to their themes and relevance to the research objectives.

The data were analyzed systematically following Roland Barthes' semiotic model. The first stage involved identifying signs appearing in the song lyrics to determine elements with potential symbolic significance. The second stage focused on denotative analysis to identify

the literal meanings of each sign. The third stage examined connotative meanings by interpreting how social, cultural, and emotional experiences shape the meanings of the identified signs. The fourth stage analyzed myths to uncover the ideological values and cultural assumptions represented through the lyrics. Subsequently, each identified sign was classified according to Peirce's categories of icon, index, and symbol to strengthen the interpretative process. Finally, the findings were interpreted from a humanities perspective to explain the relationship between the symbolic representations in the song and the emotional experiences as well as the shifting cultural values of contemporary urban Indonesian society. To ensure the credibility of the research findings, source triangulation was conducted by comparing the interpretation of the song lyrics with relevant academic references, official publications, and previous studies. In addition, persistent observation was applied through repeated readings of the lyrics and an extensive review of related literature. These procedures were intended to ensure that the interpretations were theoretically grounded, analytically rigorous, and academically reliable.

#### **IV. RESULT AND DISSCUSSION**

##### **4.1 Overview of the Research Object**

The object of this study is *Teh Hijau*, a song by Tulus released on June 30, 2026, as his latest single following the album *Manusia* (2022). The song explores themes of emotional emptiness, the search for inner peace, and the process of reconciling with oneself through everyday symbols that are closely connected to human experience. Unlike many songs addressing mental health that emphasize melancholic moods, *Teh Hijau* combines an upbeat musical arrangement with reflective lyrics. This contrast creates an interpretive space suggesting that emotional experiences are not always expressed through visible sadness or melancholy in either music or lyrics. This study analyzes the song lyrics using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, focusing on three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. To strengthen the identification of the forms of signs, Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs—icons, indices, and symbols is also employed.

##### **4.2 Denotative Meaning Analysis**

At the denotative level, *Teh Hijau* portrays an individual struggling to find happiness amid the routines of everyday life. A cup of green tea is presented as an object accompanying the protagonist throughout daily activities. Literally, green tea is simply an ordinary beverage consumed in everyday life and therefore carries no complex emotional meaning. The song also presents a contrast between its light and cheerful musical arrangement and lyrics that

describe feelings of emptiness and a loss of direction. At the denotative level, this contrast merely represents a difference between the musical and verbal elements without implying any deeper interpretation.

#### **4.3 Connotative Meaning Analysis**

At the connotative level, the image of a cup of green tea expands beyond its literal meaning to become a symbol of tranquility, acceptance, and self-reflection. Green tea is no longer understood merely as a beverage but rather as a representation of the simple aspects of life that remain within one's control when facing uncertainty. This symbolism suggests that emotional healing does not always require significant life changes but may begin with simple daily activities that provide comfort and emotional stability. The contrast between the cheerful musical arrangement and the reflective lyrics also produces a connotative meaning indicating that individuals do not always express their emotional conditions openly. In social life, people may continue their daily routines and even appear happy while internally experiencing emotional struggles. This meaning reflects a critique of society's tendency to judge an individual's psychological condition solely based on outward appearances.

#### **4.4 Myth Analysis**

At the mythical level, *Teh Hijau* constructs an alternative meaning that differs from the dominant narrative of happiness within contemporary popular culture. Modern society often constructs happiness as a condition that must be continuously demonstrated through productivity, optimism, and personal achievement. Individuals experiencing sadness or emotional emptiness are frequently expected to recover quickly in order to be regarded as successful in life. Through the symbol of green tea, however, the song presents an alternative myth in which emotional recovery is understood as a deeply personal journey that unfolds gradually and does not require public display. Consequently, the song challenges the culture of toxic positivity that pressures individuals to appear consistently strong and happy. Instead, it emphasizes self-acceptance as a natural and essential part of the human experience.

#### **4.5 Sign Analysis Based on Charles Sanders Peirce's Classification**

The analysis based on Charles Sanders Peirce's classification demonstrates that the central symbol in the song operates through three categories of signs. First, as an icon, a cup of green tea represents tranquility through its resemblance to the sensory experience associated with drinking a warm beverage. Second, as an index, the act of preparing and drinking green tea indicates an ongoing process of emotional recovery. Third, as a symbol, the color green has been culturally constructed within popular culture as representing freshness, balance, health,

and hope, thereby reinforcing the meanings conveyed throughout the song. The integration of Peirce's and Barthes' analytical frameworks demonstrates that meaning construction in the song depends not only on the relationship between signs and their referents but also on the cultural experiences shared by listeners. This finding illustrates how a simple everyday symbol can generate complex meanings when interpreted within a particular social and cultural context.

#### **4.6 Discussion**

The findings indicate that *Teh Hijau* represents changing perspectives among urban Indonesian youth regarding happiness and mental well-being. In contrast to dominant popular culture narratives that often associate happiness with success, productivity, and optimism, the song presents emotional recovery as a gradual and deeply personal process. The symbol of a cup of green tea functions as a metaphor emphasizing the importance of accepting one's emotional condition before attempting to change it. These findings support Roland Barthes' proposition that signs produce not only denotative meanings but also connotations and myths shaped by cultural contexts. Simultaneously, Charles Sanders Peirce's classification demonstrates how icons, indices, and symbols operate collectively in constructing the song's system of meaning. Furthermore, this study extends previous research on Tulus's musical works. Whereas earlier studies primarily examined themes such as romantic relationships, solitude, and figurative language, the present research reveals that *Teh Hijau* represents self-acceptance and emotional healing through simple everyday symbols. Consequently, this study contributes new insights to communication semiotics and the humanities, particularly regarding the representation of mental health in Indonesian popular music.

##### **4.6.1 Discussion from a Humanities Perspective**

From a humanities perspective, *Teh Hijau* can be interpreted as a cultural artifact reflecting changing values among Indonesia's urban youth concerning happiness and emotional recovery. While earlier popular cultural narratives frequently celebrated extraordinary achievements and immediate emotional resolution, this song instead emphasizes patience, acceptance, and the significance of appreciating small moments in everyday life. Such values resonate with contemporary discourses surrounding slow living and mindfulness, both of which have become increasingly popular as responses to the pressures of fast-paced and highly competitive urban life. Humanities scholarship consistently emphasizes how language including the language of song lyrics shapes individuals' understanding of their own experiences. Within this context, *Teh Hijau* demonstrates how an ordinary everyday object

can be transformed into a medium for existential reflection while simultaneously serving as a shared symbolic language connecting Tulus's personal experiences with the collective experiences of his listeners. This thematic consistency is also evident in Tulus's previous works, such as *Monokrom*, which celebrates simplicity, and *Hati-Hati di Jalan*, which emphasizes empathy and personal care. Therefore, *Teh Hijau* should not be understood merely as an isolated musical work but rather as part of the broader humanistic narrative consistently reflected throughout Tulus's discography the belief that simple aspects of everyday life deserve appreciation and profound reflection.

#### **4.6.2 Comparison with Previous Studies**

Compared with Nathaniel and Sannie's study on *Ruang Sendiri*, which examined the meaning of solitude, and Riswari's research on romantic representation in *Jatuh Suka*, the present study identifies a similar pattern in which ordinary objects and everyday situations function as metaphors for complex emotional experiences. However, *Teh Hijau* differs by specifically addressing acceptance of emotional emptiness and the ongoing process of recovery, themes that have received relatively little attention in previous studies of Tulus's lyrics, which have predominantly focused on love, loneliness, and personal motivation. These findings strengthen the argument that Tulus's discography can be understood as a coherent humanistic narrative portraying the diversity of human emotions from falling in love to ultimately making peace with emotional emptiness.

### **V.CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to analyze the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in Tulus's *Teh Hijau* by employing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, complemented by Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs and interpreted from a humanities perspective. The findings demonstrate that, at the denotative level, the song portrays an individual's effort to navigate everyday life amid feelings of emotional emptiness and uncertainty, with a cup of green tea serving as an ordinary object accompanying daily activities. At the connotative level, green tea functions as a symbol of tranquility, self-acceptance, and personal reflection, representing the gradual process of emotional healing. At the mythical level, the song constructs an alternative narrative that challenges the dominant cultural expectation that individuals must always appear happy and recover quickly from emotional distress. Instead, it emphasizes that emotional healing is a personal, gradual, and deeply individual process that does not require public validation. The application of Charles Sanders Peirce's classification further reveals that icons, indices, and symbols operate

simultaneously in constructing the song's overall meaning. The integration of Barthes' and Peirce's semiotic perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of how meanings are generated, from the identification of signs to the formation of broader cultural and ideological values embedded in the lyrics. From a humanities perspective, *Teh Hija* reflects changing perceptions among urban Indonesian youth regarding happiness, mental well-being, and emotional recovery as meaningful yet ordinary aspects of everyday life.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of communication semiotics by integrating Roland Barthes' theory of signification with Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs in the analysis of popular music. Practically, it enriches discussions in communication, cultural studies, and the humanities by demonstrating how contemporary Indonesian popular music represents issues of mental health and emotional recovery through everyday symbolic expressions. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its focus on a single song, which does not fully represent the broader thematic patterns within Tulus's discography. Future research is therefore encouraged to conduct comparative analyses of multiple songs across Tulus's musical works or to employ audience reception studies in order to explore how listeners interpret the symbols and messages of emotional healing conveyed in *Teh Hija*. Such approaches would provide a broader understanding of the relationship between popular music, cultural meaning, and contemporary emotional experiences

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