

## **Metaphor and Meaning in Goenawan Mohamad's *Surat Cinta*: A Semiotic-Pragmatic Approach**

Metafora dan Makna dalam *Surat Cinta* karya Goenawan Mohamad:  
 Pendekatan Semiotika-Pragmatik

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the pragmatic functions of metaphors in Goenawan Mohamad's poetry, with a particular focus on *Surat Cinta*, to elucidate how metaphors convey profound meanings and nuanced emotions. Utilizing an eclectic methodology that combines semiotic-pragmatic and stylistic approaches, this research examines the interplay between linguistic elements and poetic expression. The theoretical framework is grounded in Jakobson's poetic function theory, Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, and Peircean semiotics, all of which facilitate an analysis of how metaphor functions as both a cognitive and symbolic device. The study employs library research methods, selecting *Surat Cinta* for its rich metaphorical structure and auditory features that exemplify Mohamad's poetic style. The findings underscore the deliberate and creative use of metaphor as a defining characteristic of his poetry, often incorporating personification and extended metaphor to indirectly present abstract concepts. This indirectness engages readers in an interpretative process, fostering a deeper connection with the text. Additionally, an analysis of sound style reveals the poet's use of rhyme, alliteration, and rhythmic variations, which enhance musicality and reinforce metaphorical meaning. *Surat Cinta* is recognized as one of the most popular love poems in Indonesia. This research contributes to a broader understanding of how poetic form influences meaning in Indonesian literature, demonstrating that metaphor and sound patterns collaboratively shape poetic interpretation. By integrating semiotic and pragmatic perspectives, this study emphasizes the interdependence of form and content, positioning Mohamad's poetry as a notable synthesis of linguistic artistry and thematic depth.

**Key words:** *Pragmatics; Goenawan Mohamad; Love Poems; Metaphors*

### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini menyelidiki fungsi pragmatis metafora dalam puisi-puisi Goenawan Mohamad, dengan fokus khusus pada *Surat Cinta*, untuk menjelaskan bagaimana metafora menyampaikan makna yang mendalam dan emosi yang bernuansa. Dengan menggunakan metodologi eklektik yang menggabungkan pendekatan semiotik-pragmatik dan stilistika, penelitian ini mengkaji interaksi antara unsur-unsur linguistik dan ekspresi puitis. Kerangka teoretis didasarkan pada teori fungsi puitis Jakobson, teori metafora konseptual Lakoff dan Johnson, dan semiotika Peircean, yang kesemuanya memfasilitasi analisis tentang bagaimana metafora berfungsi baik sebagai perangkat kognitif maupun simbolis. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kepustakaan, memilih *Surat Cinta* karena struktur metaforisnya yang kaya dan fitur-fitur pendengaran yang mencontohkan gaya puitis Mohamad. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi penggunaan metafora yang disengaja dan kreatif sebagai karakteristik utama dari puisinya, yang sering kali menggabungkan personifikasi dan metafora yang diperluas untuk secara tidak langsung menyajikan konsep-konsep abstrak. Ketidaklangsungan ini melibatkan pembaca dalam proses interpretasi, menumbuhkan hubungan yang lebih dalam dengan teks. Selain itu, analisis gaya suara mengungkapkan penggunaan rima, aliterasi, dan variasi ritme oleh penyair, yang meningkatkan musikalitas dan memperkuat makna metaforis. *Surat Cinta* dikenal sebagai salah satu puisi cinta paling populer di Indonesia. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih luas tentang bagaimana bentuk puitis mempengaruhi makna dalam sastra Indonesia, menunjukkan bahwa metafora dan pola bunyi secara kolaboratif membentuk interpretasi puitis. Dengan mengintegrasikan perspektif semiotik dan pragmatik, penelitian ini menekankan saling ketergantungan antara bentuk dan isi, memposisikan puisi Mohamad sebagai sebuah sintesis penting dari kesenian linguistik dan kedalaman tematik.

**Kata kunci:** *Pragmatik; Goenawan Mohamad; Puisi Cinta; Metafora*

## INTRODUCTION

Poetry, as a form of literary art, uses language not merely to convey information but also to express the emotions and worldview of the poet. Structurally, poetry is characterized by its arrangement of words into distinct lines (Sayuti 1985). Moreover, its language often deviates from everyday linguistic norms, creating a unique aesthetic experience (Teeuw 1983). According to Riffaterre (1978), such deviations in poetic language emerge due to a convention of expressive deviations, which encompass: (1) displacing meaning, (2) distorting meaning, and (3) creating new meaning.

Analyzing the language of poetry through a pragmatic approach provides an avenue for uncovering hidden meanings. Understanding poetry requires knowledge of language systems, literary conventions, and cultural codes (Teeuw 1983, 12). This is particularly relevant in interpreting the implicatures within the metaphors of Goenawan Mohamad's poem *Surat Cinta*. These implicatures involve symbolic expressions embedded in metaphorical language, where meanings are conveyed indirectly through figurative expressions (cf. Forgács 2022; Gibbs 2023).

The language of poetry has long been a source of fascination for scholars, particularly because of its density, ambiguity, and rich potential for multiple interpretations. Traditionally, literary scholars have examined poetry through various lenses, such as formalism, structuralism, and post-structuralism, focusing on elements like meter, rhyme, and symbolism. However, a more contemporary and insightful approach to understanding the language of poetry comes from the field of pragmatics—the study of language in use and the relationship between language and context (Grundy 2019; Yule 1996). By analyzing poetry through a pragmatic lens, we shift the focus from purely linguistic structures to how meaning is communicated, negotiated, and interpreted in specific social, cultural, and situational contexts (e.g. Capone 2023; Sarwat et al. 2024; Sinha 2021).

Pragmatics involves the study of how speakers and writers use language in particular contexts to achieve communicative goals. The central tenet of pragmatics is that meaning is not determined solely by the literal content of words but also by contextual factors, including the speaker's intentions, the social roles of participants, cultural conventions, and the situational context in which language occurs. In the realm of poetry, this means examining how the poet's use of language interacts with the reader's interpretive process, considering the poem's context, its socio-cultural references, and its emotive, psychological, and cognitive impact on the reader.

This study demonstrates how a pragmatic approach can be applied to the analysis of poetic language, emphasizing the role of context, the interaction between the speaker (or poet) and the audience, and the broader social and communicative functions of poetry. Recent research by Rahayu (2022) and Sinha (2021) shows the trend of corpus-based metaphor analysis in Indonesian poetry, but semiotic-pragmatic approaches to Goenawan Mohamad's work are still limited. Capone's (2023) recent study on the poetic function of metaphor in a multicultural context is also relevant to enrich the theoretical framework. One of the fundamental contributions of pragmatics to the study of language is the emphasis on context. In pragmatic theory, meaning is shaped by the context in which it is used, which includes both the immediate situational context (time, place, and participants) and the larger cultural and social context. This is especially relevant for poetry, where the text is often ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations.

Pragmatics examines how contextual factors interact with linguistic meaning to facilitate the interpretation of an utterance (Sperber & Wilson 2005, 468). Since pragmatics focuses on the relationship between language structures and external contexts, meaning in pragmatics is inherently tied to context. Context, in a broad sense, includes prior discourse, participants in the conversation, their relationships, shared knowledge, communication goals, and the social and physical setting of the interaction (Cruse 2006, 136-137). Pragmatics, therefore, seeks to explain how an appropriate interpretation of utterances is achieved. Understanding the nature of pragmatics allows us to address questions such as, "What does this utterance mean?" and "Why was it expressed in this particular way?" (Bassols 2003, 2).

Understanding the pragmatics of metaphor in poetry involves exploring how contextual elements—such as social, cultural, historical, and personal factors—shape the way metaphors are interpreted by readers or listeners. The connection between pragmatics and metaphor in poetry is crucial because it moves beyond the cognitive and conceptual dimensions of metaphor (as discussed in fields like cognitive linguistics) to consider how the social and situational context influences meaning construction. This review will examine key scholarly contributions in this area, focusing on the relationship between metaphor, context, and interpretation in poetry.

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Language conveys not only conventional meanings but also implicatures—additional meanings inferred by readers or listeners beyond the literal sense. Implicature, a concept introduced by philosopher Grice (1975) in his theory of conversational implicature, refers to the meanings indirectly conveyed by an utterance rather than being explicitly stated. Grice's framework distinguishes between what is said (the literal meaning) and what is implicated (the inferred meaning), with implicature depending on the context, the speaker's intentions, and the listener's inferences. In poetry, implicature becomes a crucial tool for conveying subtle, complex meanings, where the poet often relies on the reader's ability to infer ideas, emotions, and associations beyond the literal words on the page.

In poetry, implicature operates within a condensed and heightened linguistic structure, allowing poets to communicate deep layers of meaning through suggestion, ambiguity, and subtext (see also Natsir et al. 2021). By analyzing implicature in poetry, we uncover how poets use indirectness to engage readers, evoke emotional responses, and create interpretive richness. Implicature in poetry serves as a key mechanism for conveying meaning indirectly, encouraging readers to engage in the interpretive process and derive multiple layers of significance from the text (e.g. Rahayu 2022). By flouting Grice's conversational maxims, poets create a space for meaning to emerge through inference, ambiguity, and suggestion. This approach not only enhances the depth and complexity of poetic language but also encourages a dynamic relationship between poet and reader. Poetry, in this sense, is not merely a form of communication but a collaborative act where implicature allows the poem's meaning to unfold through context, emotion, and personal interpretation.

Sunyono (1990, 14) states that implicature, as a pragmatic aspect, focuses on understanding an utterance's intended meaning based on context. For instance, in the following lines:

*Bukankah surat cinta ini ditulis (1)*  
*Ditulis ke arah siapa saja (2)*

In line (1), a rhetorical question emphasizes that love, like a love letter, transcends restrictions or conventions. Line (2) implies that love is universal and can be addressed to anyone, regardless of background or circumstances. The poet stresses the unconditional nature of love for all living beings.

Analyzing implicatures in poetry involves presuppositions as shared knowledge between the poet and readers. Understanding metaphors in poetry entails determining the most fitting implicatures based on presuppositions and contextualized meaning. According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1986, 94), any implicit meaning shaped within a specific context constitutes a figure of speech. Figurative language, specifically, represents a form of implicit linguistic function, where the denotative expression is replaced by a connotative one.

While conventional meanings are standardized in dictionaries, implicatures are dynamic, localized, and shaped by societal understanding. These meanings are not documented in formal lexicons and are subject to rapid evolution within specific communities. Differences between implicature and conventional meaning may lead to ambiguities and potential misinterpretations (Sudaryono, 2000, 13-14). Consequently, context becomes essential in ensuring clarity of meaning, as the inferred meanings in poetry must align with the appropriate context and precise word choice.

Metaphors, as a crucial element of poetry, provide an effective means of conveying new ideas. They enable poets to describe and interpret complex concepts by relating them to familiar ones. Metaphors also facilitate the communication of intricate ideas, encouraging readers to independently infer the intended meanings (Black 2011, 233). Metaphor is a central feature of poetic language,

allowing poets to convey complex ideas, emotions, and experiences in a condensed, often indirect form. While the study of metaphor has traditionally been grounded in cognitive and linguistic frameworks (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), the integration of pragmatics into metaphor analysis offers fresh insights into how metaphors operate in poetry.

Most of the research on Goenawan Mohamad focuses on the political aspects in Catatan Pinggir, while an in-depth analysis of metaphors in his love poems has not been done with a semiotic-pragmatic approach. Based on the theoretical framework of Lakoff & Johnson (1980) and Jakobson (1987), this study answers: (1) How do metaphors in Love Letters represent the concept of universal love? (2) What role do sound patterns play in reinforcing the pragmatic meaning of metaphors? This research not only extends the application of Lakoff & Johnson's theory in the context of Southeast Asian literature, but also provides an interdisciplinary analytical model for Indonesian-language poetry that can be adapted in postcolonial studies.

## METHODS

This study employs an eclectic methodology, integrating linguistic and literary approaches through a semiotic-pragmatic framework enriched with stylistics. These frameworks complement each other by allowing a multi-layered analysis: semiotics guides the identification of metaphors, uncovering their symbolic and structural functions, while pragmatics provides contextualized interpretations, focusing on how metaphors convey meaning within the poem's communicative and cultural setting. Stylistics, particularly sound analysis, further enhances the understanding of how phonetic and rhythmic elements shape the reception and interpretation of metaphors.

The data consist of a selection of Goenawan Mohamad's poems, with a primary focus on "Surat Cinta". The selection process was based on three key criteria: (1) the prominence of metaphor as a central stylistic device, (2) the poems' thematic relevance to Mohamad's broader poetic vision, and (3) the presence of distinctive sound features such as internal rhyme, alliteration, and assonance, which contribute to the overall poetic experience. These poems were collected through library research, involving extensive reading, listening, and annotation to identify recurring patterns in metaphor usage and sound structures.

For data analysis, the study integrates heuristic and hermeneutic approaches. The heuristic approach was applied in the initial phase of analysis, where poems were systematically examined to identify key metaphorical patterns, linguistic choices, and sound structures. This phase involved categorizing metaphors based on their conceptual function (e.g., personification, extended metaphor) and mapping their occurrence within the poetic text. The hermeneutic approach was then employed to interpret these findings, situating metaphors within a broader cultural and literary context to uncover their deeper symbolic meanings. By synthesizing these methods, the study provides a holistic understanding of how metaphor, sound, and poetic form interact to create meaning in Goenawan Mohamad's poetry.

## RESULTS

This section explains the basis of comparison used. We are familiar with elements comparing non-human entities with humans (personification) as well as comparisons between humans and objects or animals (depersonification).

### Metaphor in Personification Comparison

Personification is a figure of speech where animals, plants, or objects are depicted as human.

#### 1. hujan yang jatuh ritmis, menyentuh arah siapa saja

This poem employs nature metaphors to describe love. The phrase "*hujan yang jatuh ritmis, menyentuh arah siapa saja*" translated to English as: "*rain falling rhythmically, touching directions of anyone*" illustrates that love, like rain, has the power to touch and affect every individual indiscriminately, regardless of who or what they are. Unlike the poem "Hujan Bulan Juni" (Sapardi), which uses rain as a symbol of loneliness, Mohamad interprets rain as an inclusive force. This difference shows that nature metaphors in Indonesian poetry are not monolithic, but are closely related to individual poetic visions.

2. **bukankah surat cinta ini berkisah  
berkisah melintas lembar bumi yang fana**

The statement “*berkisah melintas lembar bumi yang fana*” translated to English as: “*passing through the pages of this fleeting earth*” emphasizes that love has the power to transcend time and space. Despite the transient and impermanent nature of the earth, love has the ability to endure and surpass those limitations.

3. **“seperti misalnya gurun yang lelah  
dilepas embun dan cahaya”**

This line depicts love as a source of life and renewal. Life without love is represented by the phrase “*gurun yang lelah*”, translated as “*a weary desert*” in English. Love is likened to “*embun dan cahaya*” or “*dew and light*”, which heal barren and desolate conditions. In stanza 5 (*diepas embun dan cahaya*), despite the use of nature metaphors, there is no dominant final rhyme pattern. This indicates Mohamad’s varied poetic strategies in balancing sound structure and meaning.

### Sound Aspects

The sound aspect in poetry plays an important role, particularly in making the poem sound beautiful when read aloud. The choice and arrangement of words in poetry are often based on their sound value to influence the reader’s or listener’s thoughts and reactions. Wellek and Warren, as cited by Sayuti (1985), state: “*The role of sound in literary works occupies the first level among various norms present in such works.*” They argue: “*Every work of literary art is, first of all, a series of sounds out of which arises the meaning*” (Wellek & Warren 1977, 158).

Furthermore, according to Pradopo (2004), the concept of sound style includes the use of specific sounds to achieve particular effects, especially aesthetic ones. This style includes repetition of sounds (assonance, alliteration) and rhyme, which can occur at the beginning, middle, or end of lines.

### Rhyme

Repetition of sounds in poetry typically takes the form of rhyme patterns, explained through concepts such as assonance and alliteration. Rhyme serves as an aesthetic pattern or linguistic beauty based on sound repetition. Perrine (1984, 182) states: “*First, the repetitions are entirely a matter of sound... making enough impression on the ear to be significant in the sound pattern of the poem.*” Additionally, sound repetition functions as a tool for evaluation and reinforces symbolic meaning, which is closely tied to emotions. As Perrine (1984, 177) explains: “*The poet, unlike the man who uses language only to convey information, chooses his words for sound as well as meaning, and he uses sound as a means of reinforcing his meaning.*” In general, the types of rhyme that appear in poetry are:

1. **Initial Rhyme (Anaphora)**

Anaphora refers to the repetition of a linguistic unit, such as a word or phrase, at the beginning of consecutive lines or sentences (Sumarlam 2013). Its function is to emphasize and highlight the importance of meaning while creating intensity.

**Bukankah** surat cinta ini ditulis  
ditulis ke arah siapa saja  
**Seperti** hujan yang jatuh ritmis  
menyentuh arah siapa saja

**Bukankah** surat cinta ini berkisah  
berkisah melintas lembar bumi yang fana  
**Seperti** misalnya gurun yang lelah  
dilepas embun dan cahaya

The anaphora in the opening lines of this poem draws the reader’s attention to a specific point. The repetition of “*Bukankah*”, “*Seperti*” underscores a sense of “hope” the poet wishes to emphasize in describing key characteristics of the subject.

## 2. Internal Rhyme

Internal rhyme occurs when rhyming words appear within the same line or between two lines, as Perrine (1984, 180) notes: “When one or both rhyming words are within the line.”

Bukankah **surat cinta** ini ditulis  
ditulis **ke arah siapa saja**  
Seperti hujan yang jatuh ritmis  
menyentuh **arah siapa saja**

Bukankah **surat cinta** ini berkisah  
berkisah melintas lembar bumi yang fana  
Seperti misalnya gurun yang lelah  
dilepas embun dan cahaya

The internal rhyme in the poem is evident in the recurring sound patterns within the second lines. This creates harmony and balance between the inner sounds of the poem, producing a poetic atmosphere that evokes emotions in the listener.

## 3. End Rhyme

End rhyme occurs when rhyming words appear at the end of lines, as Perrine (1984, 180) explains: “When both rhyming words are at the ends of lines.”

Bukankah surat cinta ini **ditulis**  
ditulis ke arah **siapa saja**  
Seperti hujan yang jatuh **ritmis**  
menyentuh arah **siapa saja**

Bukankah surat cinta ini **berkisah**  
berkisah melintas lembar bumi yang **fana**  
Seperti misalnya gurun yang **lelah**  
dilepas embun dan **cahaya**

Based on the findings related to end rhyme in the poem above, a pattern of sound alignment was identified in pairs such as *berkisah* and *lelah*, *ditulis* and *ritmis*, *siapa* and *saja*, as well as *fana* and *cahaya*. The consistent use of end rhyme in each stanza reflects the poet's skill in crafting poetic language.

The end rhymes in the poem, such as “*berkisah*” and “*lelah*,” “*ditulis*” and “*ritmis*,” also “*fana*” and “*cahaya*”, creates consistency, showcasing the poet's skill in crafting poetic language. The findings of the final rhyme pattern (story-telling, mortal-light) support Jakobson's theory of poetic function, where the repetition of the phoneme /a/ in the final position creates a mnemonic effect that reinforces the concept of universal love.

## DISCUSSION

Goenawan Mohamad's “Surat Cinta” skillfully employs natural symbolism to convey the essence of love. Rain and dew symbolize love's ability to refresh, give life, and evoke hope, while the weary desert represents emptiness that is revitalized through dew and light, reflecting a process of renewal. Strong visual imagery, such as *hujan yang jatuh ritmis* and *gurun yang lelah dilepas embun dan cahaya*, illustrates how love profoundly influences life, reinforcing its nurturing and transformative power. This natural symbolism—rain as a life-giving force and the desert as emptiness transformed—is a recurring theme in Indonesian poetry, where nature conveys spiritual and existential ideas.

Applying Jakobson's poetic function theory, the poem's structured auditory elements function as meaning-making devices rather than mere decorative tools. Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory further explains how love is conceptualized through nature (rain, dew, light), emphasizing its nurturing role and universal significance. The nature metaphors in “Surat Cinta” are in line with the principles of ecocriticism that emphasize human-environment interaction. However, unlike Western poetry that often separates nature and humans, Mohamad unites the two through personification—a strategy that reflects the Javanese culture of *manunggaling kawula Gusti* (the union of servant-God).

The poem's simple yet effective structure, with the repeated phrase "Bukankah surat cinta ini" ("Isn't this love letter"), reinforces the theme of enduring and consistent love, unaffected by time or circumstance. This repetition creates a meditative tone, portraying love as a universal force that transcends boundaries. Mohamad invites readers to reflect on how love extends beyond individuality, making it a shared and inclusive experience.

Through strong natural symbolism and evocative imagery, "Surat Cinta" demonstrates that love is not confined to personal relationships but rather a force that gives meaning to the transient world. The poem ultimately presents love as an eternal theme that surpasses space and time. The poem's implicit meanings emerge through metaphors, personification, and depersonification, where shifts in meaning deepen interpretation. Metaphors extend beyond their literal definitions, requiring contextual understanding. In line with the research question, metaphors in "Surat Cinta" function as cognitive tools that shape the perception of love as a transcendent force—according to Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) theory. However, this finding extends the theory by showing that cultural context influences the selection of metaphor domain sources (e.g., rain vs. fire in Western poetry). Additionally, while often overlooked in metaphor formation, sound placement plays a crucial role in reinforcing meaning. The harmony created by initial, internal, and end rhymes enhances both aesthetic and symbolic impact, shaping the reader's auditory experience while reinforcing the poem's themes.

## CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that the beauty of a poem depends on the precision of word choice, sentence construction, and their strategic placement within the composition. A poet's intended experience is conveyed through language that is not only rational but also emotionally charged and imaginatively layered. This deliberate crafting allows poetry to transcend literal meaning, evoking wonder, reflection, and connection in its readers.

By employing symbolism and imagery, poetry articulates universal themes such as love, life, and human existence in a way that is both profound and personally resonant. This finding not only confirms Lakoff & Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphor, but also shows that local cultural contexts (such as the Javanese concept of *rukun*) influence the selection of metaphor source domains. Thus, metaphor theory needs to be globally adapted, not crudely universalized.

Through Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, we understand that metaphors in poetry are not merely stylistic choices but cognitive tools that shape human perception and emotional response. Similarly, Jakobson's poetic function theory emphasizes how structured language—particularly repetition, rhyme, and rhythm—enhances both the aesthetic and interpretative experience of a poem. These literary elements guide readers toward deeper engagement, allowing for multiple interpretations shaped by individual experiences.

The poet's exploration of love and existence gains depth through poetry's ability to capture universal human emotions in a form that is accessible yet intellectually stimulating. By integrating pragmatic meaning with symbolic depth, themes like love and transience become more impactful, moving beyond abstract concepts to lived human experiences. Rather than simply presenting ideas, poetry invites introspection, allowing readers to reflect on their own emotions, relationships, and existential understandings.

Ultimately, poetry's unique power lies in its dual impact—emotional and intellectual. A well-crafted poem transcends time and cultural boundaries, creating a lasting impression that connects individuals to each other and to the shared tapestry of human experience. In this way, Goenawan Mohamad's "Surat Cinta" exemplifies poetry's enduring ability to shape, transform, and elevate human thought and feeling.

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