

Symbol of Game in Karuna Riazi's *The Gauntlet*

Fatima Zahra¹✉, Ramadhina Ulfa Nuristama²
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya^{1,2}
✉ fzaalhaddad@gmail.com

Abstract:

The Gauntlet by Karuna Riazi is a middle-grade novel that tells a story of a board game that lured children into their world and trapped them inside for the personal gain of the Architect of the game. Farah and her friends were determined to help her brother escape and go back into their world. In order to do so, they were forced to win several games that the Architect presented to them; otherwise, they would be imprisoned inside the game forever. By applying Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics theory, this study aims to reveal how the challenges Farah and her friends must face in the story work as a medium for the author to present ideas of control and liberation through the metaphor of a board game. This research is conducted through descriptive methodology, and the data is collected from the novel by finding relevant narratives and dialogues to explore how the game functions as a symbol for control and liberation.

Keywords: symbolism; children's literature; game.

Abstrak:

The Gauntlet merupakan novel karya Karuna Riazi yang menceritakan tentang papan permainan yang menjebak anak-anak untuk masuk ke dalam dunianya untuk kesenangan pribadi dari pencipta permainan tersebut. Farah dan teman-temannya bertekad untuk menyelamatkan Ahmed, adik Farah, yang terperangkap di dalam papan permainan. Untuk menyelamatkan Ahmad, Farah harus memenangkan beberapa teka-teki yang diberikan oleh arsitek gem. Dengan menggunakan teori semiotik milik Charles Sanders Peirce, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap bagaimana penulis menggunakan permainan teka-teki sebagai metafor untuk menggambarkan control dan juga liberasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, dan data dikumpulkan dengan menganalisa narasi serta dialog yang relevan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana permainan berfungsi sebagai representasi atas kontrol dan liberasi.

Kata kunci: simbolisme; karya sastra anak; game.

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature serves as one of the essential media in the moral and emotional education process for young children. The stories are presented through a simple, yet meaningful, narrative to show young children lessons in life values such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility. Children's literature functions as a learning tool for children to understand the world and build their identities through characters and situations that reflect social realities (Afash, 2024). Themes such as friendship,



family relationships, and group work commonly appear in the stories as they are relevant to the development of children. Due to the increasing interest in game-based learning in education, the theme of games has appeared more frequently in middle-grade stories. Several works of literature have woven games into their plot not only as a tool for entertainment but also as a metaphor for learning and problem-solving strategies. Through play, children are introduced to the concept of rules, adaptation to changes, and decision-making. Furthermore, the theme of games embedded into children's stories serves as a metaphor of how rules in games mirror the real world, thereby fostering children's critical thinking (Papazian, 2022).

The novel *The Gauntlet* (2017) by Karuna Riazi utilizes games in the story as a symbol of the learning curve for children. The novel follows the journey of Farah Mirza and her friends as they are trapped in a world within a board game that lures children in for the Architect's personal purpose. Riazi uses the game element not only for the setting and fantasy aspects but also as a metaphor for learning and self-control, where the main character learns about responsibility, solidarity, and the power of cooperation. Although several previous studies have highlighted the representation of cultural identity and diversity in this novel research, the examination of play as a symbol of children's education remains limited. For instance, while critics have analyzed the novel's multicultural themes, fewer have delved into its gamified structure as a pedagogical tool, overlooking how the game's challenges mirror real-world ethical dilemmas faced by young protagonists.

Several studies have been done previously for Karuna Riazi's novel *The Gauntlet* (2017), such as Nadkarni & Subramanian (2021) that examine how *The Gauntlet* (2017) and *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2017) rework the colonial narrative of the original *Jumanji* (1995), itself adapted from Van Allsburg's 1981 picture book. Both texts employ portal fantasy structures to transport protagonists into alternate worlds—a clockwork Islamic city and a jungle game realm—while centering multiethnic American identities. However, the authors argue that these narratives continue to reproduce imperialist ideologies through the gamification of empire and the orientalizing of fantastical spaces. Ultimately, they suggest that these fictional worlds reinforce cultural borders and neo-colonial nationalism by framing control or destruction of the "other" as necessary for progress. Another literary study by Ikrima & Nuristama (2025) delves into



Karuna Riazi's portrayal of South Asian cuisine, connecting the main character, Farah Mirza, to her cultural identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Semiotics

Semiotics is a theoretical framework that conceptualizes signs as the fundamental elements of communication and representation. Peirce's semiotic theory offers a lens for understanding how meaning is constructed through the interaction of signs within a communicative system. This theory explains that a sign does not have a fixed meaning, rather a perspective that is understood through three interdependent components that are the sign or representamen, the object to which the sign refers, and the interpretant, which denotes the meaning produced in the mind of the interpreter (Peirce, 1998). This component underscores the idea that meaning emerges through interpretive processes and may shift depending on cultural, contextual, and experiential factors. Within this framework, Peirce categorizes signs into three principal types based on the nature of their relationship to their objects as icons, indices, and symbols. These categories function as analytical tools for identifying how signs operate and how meaning is generated in various contexts.

An icon is a sign that signifies through resemblance or similarity to its object (Peirce, 1998). In literary analysis, iconic signs may manifest in descriptive or narrative elements that imitate aspects of reality, such as depictions of a game that resemble real children's games. An index, in contrast, is a sign that is connected to its object through a direct causal, existential, or temporal relationship (Peirce, 1998). Unlike symbols, indices are not arbitrary; their meaning depends on an actual connection between the sign and its referent. In literary contexts, indices can be used to signal social consequences or power dynamics, such as punishments within a fictional game that indicate broader systems of oppression. Finally, a symbol is a sign whose meaning is established through cultural conventions, social agreements, or learned associations (Peirce, 1998). Words like *game* function symbolically because their meanings are not inherent but constructed through shared linguistic and cultural norms. Symbols enable more abstract and layered interpretations, allowing concepts such as power, authority, or freedom to be encoded within narrative elements.



RESEARCH METHODS

This research used a qualitative descriptive design to explore the metaphor that the game represents in the novel *The Gauntlet* (2017). This method focused on providing a detailed and comprehensive description of the metaphor of the game in the novel. The researcher collected the data for this study by first reading *The Gauntlet* (2017) by Karuna Riazi to understand the whole story, then identifying problems that arise in the novel, and finally finding relevant data. The data is then analyzed through the theory of semiotics, introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Farah's little brother got trapped in the world of a board game. Farah and her friend had to go into the board game themselves to save Ahmad. The board game had its own fantastical world that lured children to play and trapped them there. To escape the world, they had to finish a sequence of games that are presented in the world, or they would be stuck forever. Farah and her friends underwent several challenges to finish this game with the help of several young people imprisoned in the board game who desired to escape and return to their past lives. However, they have to work hard and overcome difficulties to win the game, as it plays tricks on children, making it impossible for them to win. The riddles and puzzles that are presented in the story serve as a literary device to convey a broader message to the audience.

Control

Challenges and penalties in games

Children are entrapped inside the board games by an unknown identity who presented himself as the Architect of the game. He built a world filled with riddles and puzzles for children to challenge in exchange for their release. The Architect imposed a strict rule that must be followed for the task. It is shown in the urgency Aunt Zohra directed towards Farah when she realized Farah's brother had played the game. The Aunt insisted that Ahmed must be saved and rushed Farah to rescue him, "Win and destroy the game, lose and be stuck in it forever. Go now! For his sake. You have to." (*The Gauntlet*, p. 35). She emphasized that the rule was not merely a guideline but functions as a binding condition imposed by the Architect. Furthermore, upon entering the board game, Farah and her friends encountered a woman who introduced herself as Madame Nasirah, the gamekeeper of Paheli. She is tasked with relaying the rules of

the game to the enticed children. She dispelled the notion that losing the game would trap them in the city of Paheli. It is inferred that many people were stuck in the city because of the game. Madame Nasirah told them, “You lose a challenge, you stay here. That’s how Paheli’s people ended up here.” (The Gauntlet, p. 36). This also illustrates that penalties are given for failing to abide by the rules.

In one hour, Farah and her friends had to reach the location of their next challenge, but they ended up at Lailat, a night market. The place amused them, and for a moment, they forgot their challenges. Farah found a stall that had her favourite snack when the people of Paheli panicked. The Police Sand had chased Farah and her friends for straying from their games (The Gauntlet, p. 111). The rules presented in the game are non-negotiable. This shows how oppressive the game's regulations are. Players are compelled to abide by them or risk a penalty. It symbolizes control over individuals.

The Architect’s power and manipulation

The riddles Farah and her friends must solve forced them to confront their fears and weaknesses. The Architect’s design compels the children to engage with their vulnerabilities, turning the game into a mechanism of control that dictates their pace, choices, and emotional responses. Through this structure, the Architect holds power over both the game and the children’s sense of autonomy. The authority of the Architect extends to the way he pulls a trick to make the challenger fail their task.

“The game tests teams with three challenges. **However, there’s always a fourth if a team is successful. It’s a protective measure so the game players can’t easily win.** Be ready to be surprised!”

[...]. ‘Number four! **The game cheats.** It will start to reassemble itself slowly as you win the challenges.’” (The Gauntlet, p. 39)

Madame Nasirah had warned at the start that the game was not played fairly. It would manipulate the system to prevent children from succeeding. The riddles were all for the personal gain of the Architect, who found amusement in games himself.

“Farah clenched her fists. ‘That’s why you gave us another chance to win.

Because win or lose, you were never going to let us leave, were you?’”

He flashed her a big grin and nodded his head.

‘Yes, my new sister. Yes.’” (The Gauntlet, p. 154)

Farah, Alex, and Essie succeeded on all the challenges presented to them. As promised, they expected to be returned to their original world. Instead, Farah and her friends were directed to the Architect. The Architect confessed that he never intended

to return Farah to her world; instead, he wanted to keep her as his prisoner, since he needed company.

Liberation

The unity of the trapped people

The city of Paheli is crowded with children who have grown up, trapped in the game. Most of them live with the hope that a team of children will come to win all the challenges and rescue them from the board game. With the arrival of Farah and her friends, a new sense of hope emerges. Several individuals step in to offer their assistance. This collaboration of the people of Paheli is a show of resistance to a show of control. Henrietta, a lizard, introduced herself as a member of the League of Extraordinary Resistance. The lizards formed a force that resisted the game. She admitted that the league had been watching them closely, “We want this whole city, this endless game, destroyed,” (The Gauntlet, p. 88). They assisted Farah and her friends in winning the game. Another character, the gamekeeper, had also assisted them in one way. After each game Farah and her friends had won, they reencountered Madame Nasirah, who seemed to have no recollection of who they were. Later, Madame Nasirah confessed she had to play along as the Architect always observes the game (Riazi, 2017). The solidarity of the people of Paheli in defeating the game represents their effort to reclaim their liberty.

CONCLUSION(S)

In *The Gauntlet* by Karuna Riazi, the game serves as a symbol of themes of control and liberation. It puts control through its strict rules, challenges, penalties, and manipulation. The regulations compel children to abide by the rules, take away their autonomy, and create a sense of entrapment. This is reinforced by the penalties that symbolize the consequences of resisting power. The story also tells the theme of liberation through the characters’ determination and collaboration. The characters’ refusal to surrender depicts the human ability to resist oppression. Their unity with other Paheli people demonstrates the power of collective action in resisting control.

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