

**COVALENT NARRATIVES: EXPLORING
THEMATIC RESONANCE VIA VISUAL
ELEMENTS IN SELECTED ANIMATED
DOCUMENTARIES**

BY

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**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES,
RAWALPINDI**

September, 2025

Covalent Narratives: Exploring Thematic Resonance via Visual Elements in Selected Animated Documentaries

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BS, University of Gujarat, 2022

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

In English

To

FACULTY OF ARTS & HUMANITIES



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES, RAWALPINDI

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NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES

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Thesis Title: Covalent Narratives: Exploring Thematic Resonance via Visual Elements in Selected Animated Documentaries

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Registration # 92 MPhil/Eng Lit/Rwp/F23

Master of Philosophy

Degree name in full

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ABSTRACT

Title: Covalent Narratives: Exploring Thematic Resonance via Visual Elements in Selected Animated Documentaries

This study focused on the selected animated documentaries *Funan* (2017) and *The Breadwinner* (2018), with the goal of investigating the affective and cognitive effects of ‘covalent narratives’ in animated documentaries. The study examined how narrative and visual symbolic acts could improve audience involvement and the story’s thematic depth by fusing Roland Barthes' theory of semiotic codes with Mieke Bal's concept of narrative focalization. The analysis focused on elements such as perspective, character development, and narrative structure, with the aim to explore how these texts’ narrative and visual approaches add to the emotive resonance and thematic depth within the genre of animated documentaries. The significance of this study lies in its potential to bridge gaps in existing research, particularly in the context of animated documentaries as a way to gain a better understanding of how narrative and visual strategies impacted emotive qualities and cognitive responses, ultimately enhancing the storytelling power of animated films with regard to themes like identity, resistance, and cultural oppression. The study's conclusions demonstrate that animation is a creative medium that improves thematic depth and emotional resonance in documentary storytelling, in addition to being an aesthetic option. *The Breadwinner* and *Funan* successfully captivated audiences with complex depictions of tragedy, resilience, and cultural identity through the use of focalization and symbolic language. The idea of "covalent narratives" brought to light the dynamic interaction between artistic depiction and factual substance, illustrating how animation enables a more nuanced and personal comprehension of oppressed human situations. By highlighting the importance of semiotic cues like attire, color, and location in expressing identity and surviving, the study strengthened the emotional effect of the films. This study added to current academic discussions by demonstrating how animated documentaries are powerful mediums for memory, resistance, and sociopolitical commentary.

Keywords: *Animated Documentaries, Covalent Narratives, Cultural Heritage, Survival, Personal Transformation, Narrative Techniques, Visual Storytelling*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Zainab Younus, for her unwavering support, intellectual guidance, and encouragement throughout the writing of this thesis. Her insightful feedback, constructive criticism, and belief in my dedication provided me the clarity in thoughts and confidence to complete this journey. It is an honor to learn under her mentorship.

To my beloved parents, thank you for being my steadfast pillars of strength and a constant guiding light. Your endless prayers, belief in me, and quiet sacrifices carried me through every challenge. This achievement is a reflection of your patience and unconditional support.

To my spouse, your steady encouragement, patience, and thoughtful presence made a lasting difference in this journey. Your support during difficult times reminded me to stay grounded and focused even when the road seemed uncertain.

To my sisters, thank you for being my cheerleaders and emotional anchors. Your support, motivation, and shared laughter gave me the strength to keep going. From thoughtful advice to simple gestures of care, you helped lighten the weight of this journey in countless ways.

This thesis is not just the result of an academic endeavor—it is an outcome of shared strength, support, and resilience. I am deeply grateful to each one of you for walking this path with me.

DEDICATION

To the untiring efforts of my parents and to all those who raise their daughters to be
strong, wise, and fearless—
the truest reflections of their love, values, and strength.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A marriage of opposites, made complicated by different ways of seeing the world. The former conjures up thoughts of comedy, children's entertainment, and folkloric fantasies; the latter carries with it the assumptions of seriousness, rhetoric, and evidence (Honesty Roe 1).

'Covalent Narrative' is a term that captures the fusion of documentary realism and animated imagination. It frames animated documentaries' integration of factual and creative storytelling. Documentaries can be viewed as literary works, emphasizing symbolic structure, narrative strategies, and the interpretive opportunities that come with considering documentaries as narrative texts. In this study, the relationship between animation and documentaries is examined, with a focus on how animated form reframes our perceptions of subjective experience and factual representation. Animated realism's documentary status is complicated by blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction by fusing inventive visuals with lived experiences. These blurry lines are examined, emphasizing how they influence narrative structure and emotional resonance.

According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the term "covalent bonding" within chemistry is described as an interatomic interaction that occurs when two atoms share a pair of electrons. I came across this definition while assisting my younger sister in understanding chemical bonds. This led me to wonder about how a similar phenomenon can also be applied within the perspective of storytelling. When atoms in chemistry share electrons, they form covalent bonds, which are meaningful and long-lasting associations. A thought was provoked by this principle: what if storytelling worked similarly? What if the various components of storytelling—fact and fiction, truth and imagination, past and present—interacted like chemical processes without being viewed as distinct entities, creating relationships that modify meaning? This is how I came up with the phrase "covalent narratives" to characterize the dynamic interactions between animation and documentary genres where different story parts come together to form a coherent and

emotionally compelling whole—not by forced juxtaposition, but through a shared interchange of meaning.

Thus, for my study, I am recontextualizing the idea of "covalent narratives" to link together the genres of animation and documentaries. This phrase is meant to explain how these two genres combine to provide a singular narrative experience. Animated documentaries combine visual storytelling techniques with real-life narratives, similar to how atoms are linked together through shared electrons in a covalent bond. Animation used within the genre of documentaries can serve to illustrate abstract concepts, memories, and emotions, thereby augmenting narrative depth. My study shows how this 'covalent' relationship can allow animated documentaries to surpass the constraints of standard documentaries. When viewed through this conceptual lens, animation stops being merely a means of simplification or embellishment and instead becomes an essential component of the documentary form, creating meaning through its special capacity to depict trauma, memory, and the invisible aspects of reality.

For my research, I have analyzed the animated documentaries *Funan* (2017), directed by Denis Do, and *The Breadwinner* (2018), directed by Nora Twomey, to explore the intersection of visual storytelling with the creation of thematic insights. The study focused on elements of narratology such as perspective, character development, and narrative structure in terms of the theme of personal transformation. The aim was to highlight how characters in films undergo significant changes that reflect their struggles and resilience in challenging situations. It investigated how these themes influenced the plot and added to the overall storytelling by also highlighting them through visual elements.

By examining the unique characteristics of this genre, the analysis has revealed how animation can serve as a powerful medium for expressing thematic depth and conveying complex narratives and emotions. Furthermore, the use of visual techniques contributed to the emotive and cognitive responses and made the themes more prominent and emotively impactful.

1.1 Documentary as Literature

A film, viewed as a literary text, is “a finite, structured whole composed of signs. Signs can be linguistic units” (Bal 05). Spoken speech as well as visual components are examples of these indications. For example, the narrative of an animated documentary is created by combining visual style, color, and voice in a way similar to how a novel uses language to tell a tale. But these films' significance and influence go beyond their immediate story, touching on larger subjects and arousing strong emotions. For instance, the narrative text of the animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) is made up of eerie music, animated visuals, and a disjointed plot that symbolizes the protagonist's shattered memories. This is an excellent example of how a film may be thought of as a literary book, with the story being carefully constructed through a variety of cues that elicit strong emotive and intellectual reactions. The story is conveyed not just by the plot but also by skillfully designed visual components. This shows how films can work as literary texts, where the interaction of linguistic, auditory, and visual indicators creates narrative meaning and offers a wealth of material for literary interpretation.

A documentary is a film or video that provides a report about a real-life subject, event, or issue. Its purpose is to enlighten, educate, or offer a viewpoint on real-life occurrences or circumstances. It frequently does this via narrating, presenting interviews, and producing video. John Grierson, in his 1932 essay “First Principles of Documentary,” criticized Hollywood films for focusing on fictional, artificial stories rather than depicting the real world. This raises the question of Grierson's possible thoughts on the use of animation in non-fiction storytelling (Kriger 02). Although Grierson respected realism, the use of digital or hand-drawn artificial backgrounds may seem to contradict that. Animation has become a potent weapon in the documentary genre, providing a “creative treatment of actuality” (Kriger 02). For instance, the first animated picture depicting the actual German submarine torpedoing of the *Lusitania*, *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918) by Winsor McCay, is seen as a forerunner of contemporary animated documentaries (Kriger 02; Ceccarelli 118).

Robert Flaherty's film on *The Eskimo People in Canada* (1992) marked the beginning of the documentary movement and the development of documentary

filmmaking. The emergence of this novel cinematic method coincided with a moment of notable societal transformation, marked by the Great Depression and escalating international tensions. These circumstances led to a need for a deeper understanding of societal issues and a more comprehensive interpretation of current events. Thus, the documentary idea was vital to the evolution of film and had a long-lasting influence on radio and television (Rose 1).

The fields of journalism, anthropology, and sociology—all fields with a strong element of storytelling - are the foundations of documentary cinema; early formats included newsreels and travelogues that explorers carried back with them. Documentaries, by their very nature, are fueled by debate, drawing their dramatic aspects from opposing ideas and points of view. Every human situation has some element of controversy at its foundation, which makes it a good topic for a documentary. Presenting different points of view and influencing public opinion on these contentious subjects is the responsibility of the documentarian. It would be as absurd to argue that propaganda is evil in a democracy as it would be to assert that free speech and the ability to persuade others of one's point of view are fundamentally defective (Rose 1).

Carl Plantinga's *What A Documentary Is After All* (2005) was published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. It examined the conventions of documentary as a genre, the relationship between representation and reality, and the ways in which documentaries used visual and narrative strategies to convey truth and authenticity. His work highlighted a crucial aspect of documentary filmmaking when he suggested that, contrary to popular belief, documentaries are essentially based on the moving picture's ability to "show us the world" (Plantinga 2). Plantinga then asserted that the power of a documentary lies in its capacity to make use of the visual richness and depth of the snapshot, as well as the indexical, causal relationship that exists between the photograph and the pro-filmic scenario. Because of this relationship, the picture is guaranteed to be more than just a still image; rather, it is a dynamic representation that has a direct bearing on the actual events it portrays. So, a documentary is a film that presents and interprets reality through this real, visual linkage, combining the simple story and thematic structures that the moving picture allows with the more in-depth narrative that a documentary presents.

1.2 Animation and Documentary

The fusion of animation and documentary filmmaking has created a unique genre that blends imaginative visual styles with factual storytelling. Animated documentaries use the creative freedom of animation to present real-world events and themes in a way that is both engaging and thought-provoking. This genre has gained prominence for its ability to address complex issues, evoke emotive responses, and offer new perspectives on historical and contemporary events.

Animation has been used in educational and social films to illustrate abstract concepts, with early examples including *The Einstein Theory of Relativity and Evolution* (1923) by Max and Dave Fleischer and Disney's *Victory Through Air Power* (1943). The genre gained recognition when Norman McLaren's *Neighbours* (1953) won an Academy Award for Best Documentary (Short Subject), showcasing animation's power to address significant issues. The popularity of animated documentaries continued to grow in the 21st century, highlighted by works such as *Mosaic Films' Animated Minds* (2003), which won Best Animation at the Banff World Media Festival, and notable films like *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), *Flee* (2021), and *So Much for So Little* (1949) (DelGaudio 190).

Bill Nichols's article "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde (2001)" in the *Chicago Journal* provides an important historical viewpoint on the documentary cinema genre, pointing out that Scottish-born director John Grierson had a big impact on the genre's evolution. Nichols quoted Grierson's analysis of the ideological and financial limitations that had shaped the development of cinema:

There is money for movies that will do well at the box office and for movies that will produce propaganda. Only these. These are the rigid guidelines that have forced cinema to grow and will keep it growing (Nichols 06).

This insight underscores the dual pressures faced by documentary filmmakers, navigating between commercial success and propagandistic objectives. Grierson's perspective, as presented by Nichols, reveals the foundational constraints that have shaped the evolution of documentary filmmaking. These constraints have influenced how documentaries balance their role in representing reality with their function in conveying specific ideological messages. Understanding these historical and economic limits provided a

deeper context for analyzing contemporary documentaries' approach to storytelling, developed thematic depth, and audience engagement.

YG¹ stressed that animation is a flexible medium that can be used to examine any issue during a debate about the potential of animated documentaries, saying, "CG² can be anything." It is an instrument. It is only a tool, nothing more. (Kriger 07). Additionally, he emphasized that animation should not be restricted to entertainment for young audiences. This was a perspective that Winsor McCay expressed as well, since he was irritated by the idea that his creations were "only for kids" (Kriger 07). YG's perspective underscores the potential of animation as an art form capable of addressing a wide range of subjects, including serious documentary content.

Animated documentaries are acknowledged as a "complex and at times contradictory form of masking, whereby exposure and disguise converge" (Ehrlich 4) in modern visual culture. They are a "highly relevant and realistic self-reflexive documentary aesthetic" (Ehrlich 5) because of this duality, which enables them to negotiate the complex link between reality and representation. These films, which combine documentary and animation techniques, encourage audiences to interact critically with the stories they are told, ultimately illustrating the complexity of our post-truth world. Animated documentary is defined in the context of the special issue as a hybrid medium that incorporates animated elements into conventional documentary procedures. Skoller, in his article "Introduction to the Special Issue Making It (Un)Real: Contemporary Theories and Practices in Documentary Animation" in *Sage Journals* (2018), points out that

Traditional social, historical, and scientific documentary films have begun integrating animated elements and digital graphics into films so as to allow for speculative and subjective imaging in situations for which there are no

¹ Yooni Goodman is an Israeli animator known for his work in the field of animation, particularly in the context of social and political issues. He gained prominence as the lead animator for the acclaimed animated short film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), directed by Ari Folman.

² CG is computer-generated imagery, sometimes known as computer graphics.

images or language to otherwise express experience or states of mind (Skoller 211).

When a traditional documentary might not have the essential visual representation, this integration enables speculative and subjective imagery.

Documentary filmmaking, literature, and animation come together in their goal of exploring and representing the human experience, each using different but complementary methods. While literature uses prose to explore real-world issues and emotions, documentaries rely on visual and auditory elements to show actual events, and animation often re-enacts or visualizes data to make it easier to understand (Ehrlich 11). Both forms address universal themes like identity, conflict, and morality, and each faces its own set of challenges, such as narrative voice in literature and representation in documentaries (Ehrlich 33). Studying animated documentaries specifically showed how these formats mixed storytelling techniques to enhance our understanding of human experiences and societal issues.

1.3 Animated Documentary

The term "animated documentary" describes a type of hybrid filmmaking that blends the factual and testimonial elements of documentary cinema with the creative potential of animation. Animated documentaries employ stop-motion, computer-generated, or drawn images to portray memories, testimony, and events that might not otherwise be seen, in contrast to traditional documentaries that use live-action film to authenticate reality. Because of this, the genre works especially well for depicting trauma, subjectivity, and histories for which there is no archive support.

Judith Kriger's *Animated Realism* focuses on the artistic techniques and production methods that enable these films to use affective and symbolic methods to communicate truth (Kriger 13). Together, these pieces imply that animated films are an extension of documentary reality rather than a departure from it, allowing filmmakers to explore realities that go beyond what the camera can capture.

Additionally, the way animated documentaries are framed academically relates to previous work on animation and documentary theory. Paul Wells's *Understanding*

Animation (1998) was one of the first books to acknowledge the potential of animation to address documentary issues. Wells argues that animation is a visual language that can communicate truth and ideology rather than just being a type of fiction (Wells 6). Later researchers were able to investigate how animation may serve as subjective interpretation, historical reconstruction, or witness because of this early understanding. By highlighting the fact that truth can sometimes be discovered in symbolic and imaginative forms rather than in direct photographic portrayal, animated documentaries subvert the conventional context-sensitive expressions of documentary film.

Animated documentaries, in general, have become an essential kind of modern storytelling, providing a medium where creative imagination and factual reality converge. Animation's artistic flexibility and the documentary's dedication to truth combine to create a hybrid medium that offers fresh perspectives on memory, trauma, and cultural experience. Together, academics like Annabelle Honess Roe, Nea Ehrlich, Judith Kriger, and Paul Wells demonstrate that animated documentaries are an extension of realism rather than a break from it, extending the possibilities of representation beyond what a camera can capture. This places animated documentaries as a significant contribution to both film studies and visual culture, as the form is particularly effective at addressing silenced voices, inaccessible histories, and interior experiences.

1.4 Historical Background of the Selected Films

The particular films chosen for this study are based on actual historical traumas influenced by social injustice, political instability and war. The two selected films, *Funan* and *The Breadwinner*, are based on significant historical events that affected the Cambodian and the Afghan heritage for a long time. *The Breadwinner* takes place in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, where harsh interpretations of religious law severely restricted women's rights, stifled dissent, and terror were used as a mechanism to govern. In addition to this showcasing resilience in the face of persecution, the film depicts the psychological and emotional costs of living under dictatorship, especially for women and children. However, *Funan* takes place in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, under the violent rule of the Khmer Rouge, who carried out one of the most catastrophic genocides in history. Through mass executions, forced labor, and famine, more than two million people died.

Families were split up, intellectuals were persecuted, and the whole country's cultural identity was methodically destroyed.

Both the selected films redefine individual and group survival through compelling visual storytelling in addition to being cinematic echoes of historical suffering. Their historical contexts offer the structure for examining themes of resistance, optimism, change, and loss. Using these narrative and visual techniques, this study investigates how historical themes are used in fiction and animated documentaries to elicit strong feelings and thoughts in viewers.

1.5 Overview of the Selected Films

Nora Twomey's *The Breadwinner* (2018) is a powerful animated adaptation of Deborah Ellis's 2001 novel of the same name, which tells the story of Parvana, an 11-year-old girl living under Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The film stands out as an animated documentary due to its deeply rooted narrative in real-life events and its commitment to representing the lived experiences of those who have endured the harsh realities of war and oppression. *The Breadwinner* tells the story of Parvana, an 11-year-old girl living in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. After her father is unjustly arrested, Parvana must disguise herself as a boy to support her family, as women are forbidden to work or even go outside without a male escort. She takes on dangerous jobs to provide for her mother, sister, and younger brother, while also searching for a way to rescue her father. Throughout her journey, Parvana finds strength in storytelling, using it as a means to cope with her harsh reality and maintain hope amidst the challenges she faces. Ellis's 1990s interactions with Afghan women living in camps as refugees served as the basis for *The Breadwinner*. The work was strengthened by the sincere voices from these interviews, which highlighted the struggles and resilience of mothers and kids in a country torn apart by violence. The animation portrays life under the Taliban in a realistic manner, highlighting the toll that the severe laws of the regime take on both individuals and families. It does this by bringing their voices to life.

Funan (2017), directed by Denis Do, is an emotionally intense animated film that tells the harrowing story of a Cambodian family during the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s. The film follows Chou, a young mother, and her husband, Khuon, as they are

brutally uprooted from their home in Phnom Penh and forced into labor camps with their young son, Sovanh. Separated from Sovanh during the chaos of their forced relocation, Chou and Khuon endure unimaginable hardships, driven by the hope of one day reuniting with their child. Denis Do's deeply personal narrative is inspired by his own family's experiences, particularly his mother's survival under the Khmer Rouge. Through the film, Denis Do explores themes of resilience, hope, and the enduring strength of familial bonds in the face of overwhelming adversity. *Funan* not only sheds light on a dark chapter in Cambodian history but also serves as a testament to the power of love and determination amidst unimaginable suffering. The film depicts the brutal realities of Chou and Khuon's lives during the Khmer Rouge, as they endure maltreatment, malnutrition, and the continual danger of violence. They have to battle not only to survive but also to cope with the psychological and emotional toll of their situation while desperately searching for any information about their son, who has disappeared from sight.

1.6 Blurring Boundaries: Animated Realism and the Documentary Status of *Funan* and *The Breadwinner*

Regarding their animation structure and storytelling style, *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* may seem like unusual choices for documentaries. Nonetheless, their method of using animation to depict historical truths, political tragedy, and personal experiences place them in line with the documentary tradition in both form and purpose. These films fall under the umbrella of what Nea Ehrlich refers to as animated documentaries, a hybrid genre that blurs the boundaries between artistic interpretation and factual representation and enables filmmakers to capture memories, collective trauma, and inner truths in ways that traditional live-action film cannot (Ehrlich 15).

The fact that these films depict actual historical and political events is one of the main reasons they qualify as documentaries. Denis Do's personal family background during the Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia served as the inspiration for *Funan*. Similar to this, Cartoon Saloon's production and Nora Twomey's directing of *The Breadwinner* are based on the sociopolitical reality of Afghanistan under Taliban authority. Both films depict historically authentic locations and events, although through the medium of animation, and are based on extensive research and careful attention to ethnographic, cultural, and political

detail. Judith Kriger notes that animated documentaries frequently serve as witnesses, bringing to life situations that are "otherwise invisible or inaccessible" in traditional filmmaking (Kriger 43).

Furthermore, these films offer subjective perspectives and emotional truths that capture the inner landscapes of those impacted by oppression and war, going beyond simple factual retelling. The transmission of trauma, memory, and dread is facilitated by the symbolic representation and narrative abstraction made possible by animation. This supports Stella Bruzzi's contention that documentaries are performative, dialogic, and interpretive forms of inquiry rather than being strictly characterized by commitment to objective fact (Bruzzi 16). In this way, *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* are not only retelling the events; they are also examining how they felt, how they were remembered, and how they still influence resilience and identity.

These movies also represent what I refer to as covalent narratives, a theory that uses an illustration of chemical bonds to explain how individual memory and group trauma can be combined to maintain both uniqueness and shared meaning. The capacity to establish intellectual and emotional connections between the audience and the subject is what gives these animations their documentary quality. Instead of losing their individuality, the narrative's constituent parts unite to create a potent new structure that is both politically charged and emotionally genuine, much like atoms in a covalent bond.

Films use this covalent structure to create what can be called a kind of chiaroscuro in narrative space, an artistic technique where light and shadow are juxtaposed to create depth and emotional intensity. Just as chiaroscuro in painting highlights form through contrast, the covalent narrative structure in these films uses emotional and thematic opposites—like the innocence of childhood versus the brutality of war—to build narrative complexity. The "light" within this structure often emerges through animated imagination, moments of inner strength, and personal memory, while the "dark" is rendered through depictions of historical trauma, displacement, and loss. Rather than separating these elements, the covalent bond holds them together in tension, creating a layered storytelling space where meaning is formed not by one side alone, but through their interaction. These animated documentaries create knowledge by alternating between the literal and the

metaphorical, the visible and the invisible, much like chiaroscuro in visual art creates form through the interaction of shadow and illumination.

In light of their dedication to historical authenticity, emotional truth, and social critique, *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* are deeply rooted in the evolving field of documentary filmmaking, even though they may not fit neatly within traditional definitions of the genre. By bringing the often-invisible horrors of displacement and war to light, these films use animation not to obscure reality, but to engage viewers in a profoundly emotional and intellectually stimulating encounter with it.

1.7 Thesis Statement

Animated documentaries utilize the creative freedom of animation to depict real-world events through imaginative yet emotionally resonant storytelling. This study investigates *Funan* (2017) and *The Breadwinner* (2018), analyzing how visual symbolism and narrative perspective are employed to explore themes of identity, resistance, and cultural oppression. Drawing on Mieke Bal's theory of focalization and narratology, alongside Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the research argues that these films construct **covalent narratives**—a dynamic fusion of animation and documentary that deepens thematic complexity and enhances emotional engagement with historical realities.

1.8 Research Questions

1. What visual and narrative strategies have been employed in the selected works to highlight the themes of identity, resistance, and cultural oppression?
2. How does the use of semiotic codes and symbols contribute to the representation of these themes?
3. How effectively does the interplay of narrative techniques and visual storytelling enhance the emotive impact of themes within animated documentaries?

1.9 Significance & Rationale of the Study

For the purpose of enhancing our understanding of how animated documentaries convey complex themes and evoke emotive and cognitive responses, this study integrates Roland Barthes' semiotic theory with Mieke Bal's narratological concepts. This study offers

a thorough examination of the ways in which these films employ narrative and visual techniques to tackle important themes related to personal development, updating our understanding of visual culture and animation studies. This study tries to uncover the nuanced ways in which animated documentaries like *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* use signs, symbols, and narrative structures to effectively transmit themes.

Integrating Bal's investigation of narrative perspective and structure with Barthes' attention to signs and codes provides an advanced approach that improves our comprehension of the ways in which these films affect us. By filling in the gaps between theoretical frameworks and real-world applications, this study advances scholarly discourse and offers insightful information to practitioners and scholars alike.

1.10 Delimitation

In order to provide a thorough critique, this research will concentrate on two animated documentaries, namely *Funan* and *The Breadwinner*. To maintain relevance in the modern era, the study will only include films that have been released in the previous 20 years. Furthermore, the analysis will prioritize its narrative visuality while concentrating on thematic elements.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The chapter has been divided into three sections: an examination of previous studies on animated documentaries, a review of studies on specific works like *Funan* and *The Breadwinner*, and a literary and textual representation analysis.

The first section explores how the media depicts abstract topics, personal stories, and historical events in ways that are frequently not possible for traditional live-action documentaries. In the second section, the impact of visual narrative on audience engagement and emotional depth is discussed in relation to particular animated documentaries. In the third section, the significance of visual metaphors, symbolism, and narrative frameworks in these films is examined.

Collectively, these conversations offer a thorough review of existing literature, which helps contextualize the present study within the fields of animation, documentary realism, and literature, while highlighting how their disciplines intersect with each other.

2.1 Studies on Animated Documentary

In Nea Ehrlich's examination of the concept in *Animating Truth: Documentary and Visual Culture in the 21st Century* (2021), two prominent definitions of animated documentary are discussed. Ehrlich notes that animated documentaries can capture and express contemporary realities, stating, "The goal of experimental documentaries has shifted away from the attempt to portray ostensibly objective truths... Instead, the field of documentary... primarily attests to a diversity and complexity of forms, paradoxes, and discrepancies" (Ehrlich 16). Contemporary animated documentaries focus on diversity and complexity, recognizing that reality is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a single narrative. This allows them to explore contradictions and nuances within social, political, and cultural contexts, reflecting the complexities of modern life.

Ehrlich argues that the constructed nature of animation allows it to question traditional realism, suggesting that "it may be animation's overt contractedness that makes it more rather than less realistic" (Ehrlich 9). She further elaborates that "several theorists

have claimed animation is a more honest approach to documentary" (Ehrlich 9). Pointing out that animation offers a more truthful approach to documentary filmmaking by simply acknowledging its manufactured nature.

Ehrlich's argument, in my opinion, lends support to the notion that the constructed nature of animation enhances rather than diminishes its documentary function, because, in contrast to traditional documentaries, which may give the impression of objectivity, animated documentaries embrace their artificiality, which encourages viewers to interact critically with the story. This transparency enables animation to represent abstract concepts, memories, and emotional truths that live-action footage cannot capture, thereby providing a more nuanced and honest study of reality, which is consistent with Ehrlich's claim that their overt constructedness makes them more, rather than less, realistic.

Animations are better in reality; however, we have an alternate view as well. Honess Roe *Against Animated Documentary* (2016), describes "animated documentaries as too 'creative' and 'imaginative' to be classed as documentaries. They are, at their core, too fictional" (Roe 2). He suggests that animated documentaries are often viewed as overly creative and imaginative, leading some critics to argue that they do not fit the traditional definition of documentaries. This perspective posits that the fictional elements inherent in animation make it difficult to classify these works as true documentaries, which are typically expected to present factual content in a more objective manner. These definitions illustrate the evolving nature of animated documentaries and the diverse ways they address non-fictional content.

In my opinion, animated documentaries use artistic expression to portray true events and feelings, pushing the limits of factual storytelling. According to Honess Roe, they are too fictional to be legitimate documentaries due to their imaginative nature (Roe 2). Roe is focusing only on the animation part that seems too fictional to her. Just because something is animated does not mean that the characters are not real, the incidents are not real, and that the historical validity of the events in the documentary is not factual. The idea might be contested because subjectivity is incorporated into all documentaries through narration and editing. Animation provides a different visual language for communicating reality and life experiences. It is better to view animated documentaries as a development

of documentary storytelling rather than as an opponent to them. Critics asserted that their stylization casts doubt on authenticity by blurring the line between fact and fiction. Nevertheless, animation offers a potent way to depict elusive stories and subjective realities.

In accordance with Benjamin C. Storm and Julia S. Soares' argument in *Memory in the Digital Age* (2021), "the affordances of different social media platforms influence the kinds of posts generated and how such posts are likely to affect people's well-being and autobiographical memory" (Storm and Soares 22). This realization emphasizes that not every social media post is the same; sites that let users construct permanent, intricate personalities are probably going to have a big impact on autobiographical memory and self-perception in the long run. Similarly, emotionally and intellectually stimulating media, like animated documentaries, can improve memory recall through the use of "distinctive narrative and visual strategies to captivate audiences more deeply" (Storm and Soares 22). Animation is especially good at promoting empathy and understanding because of its special ability to depict intricate internal dialogues. Compared to typical documentaries, animated films have been shown to produce "significant variations in emotional reactions" (Storm and Soares 22), which ultimately result in higher emotional responses and a more lasting connection to the topic.

Storm and Soares' argument, in my opinion, emphasizes how various media influence autobiographical recall and emotional engagement. Self-perception is permanently impacted by platforms that enable users to create enduring digital identities (Storm and Soares 22). In a similar vein, animated documentaries improve memory recall by externalizing interior sensations and emotions through their distinctive narrative and visual strategies. Films show how animation heightens feelings and creates stronger bonds with viewers. Animation becomes a potent tool for memory preservation and comprehension enhancement because emotionally charged media elicit stronger recall. Compared to typical documentary formats, animated documentaries are more emotionally impactful and engaging because they provide a unique approach to portraying trauma, suppressed memories, and historical events.

As stated in Anastasiia Gushchina's article "*Towards a Materialist Theory of Animated Documentary* (2023)," animated documentaries question the traditional view of animation as immaterial by highlighting the ways in which the use of physical materials—such as puppets, clay, and paper cutouts—reintroduces a physical connection to reality. As she puts it, "animated documentary creates a physical space for experiences that are impossible to witness directly" (Gushchina 08). A rebuilt environment offered by animation enables viewers to interact with horrific or inaccessible events in a safe and controlled way, in contrast to live-action documentaries, where reality is frequently erratic and unpredictable. According to Gushchina, "the real world's space comes across as unsafe—as an environment that cannot be controlled or altered" (Gushchina 04). Physical discomfort is caused by the material characteristics and layout of this area, which act as triggers. Conversely, the animation environment that recreates the event provides an emotional haven while preserving the tangible link between the events depicted and the designed graphics (Gushchina 08). This viewpoint emphasizes the twofold purpose of animated documentaries: they provide an emotionally engaging and aesthetically pleasing environment without severing their connection to reality. Rather, by bridging the gap between historical occurrences and subjective perception, the medium's materiality strengthens its documentary role. Her work is important because it discusses the ontological status of animated documentaries and highlights the ways in which material-based animation improves viewers' emotional and cognitive engagement. By highlighting the labor-intensive nature of these animations, she offers a materialist framework that expands our knowledge of how form and medium affect meaning in documentary storytelling.

Paul Wells, in *Close Up: Film and Media Studies* (Vol. 4, No. 2, 2020), argues that animation is an especially effective medium for depicting the condition of autism, particularly in animated documentaries. He explains that animation has the special capacity to convey in a visual form the reflective and creative mental processes that are frequently connected to autism. Animated documentaries can imaginatively depict the inner experiences of people with autism, in contrast to typical documentaries that depend on live-action material to portray reality. This covers the ways in which individuals with autism may interpret and engage with their environment.

Animation is a particularly appropriate medium with which to reveal the condition of autism because it can represent in itself the introspective results of self-absorbed imaginative activity, which is part of the distanced psychology of autistic thinking (Wells 25).

Wells thinks that animation can more sensitively and nuancedly portray these psychological and emotive aspects, giving a more profound understanding of autism than other media would be able to provide. This is because of animation's expressiveness and versatility.

In *The Emotional Impact of Animation on Its Audience* (2024), Changchun Cai explored how a variety of narrative and audio-visual strategies in animated documentaries elicit powerful emotional reactions in viewers. Character development, structured storytelling, and visually appealing aspects are some of the ways that animation improves emotional engagement. In animated documentaries, character development is essential. Viewers may readily relate to the feelings of animated characters, which are "the central vehicle for emotional expression" (Cai 4). The viewer empathizes with the characters' journey as they overcome obstacles and develop, which increases the story's emotional effect. Sound is also very important. "Each part of the soundtrack holds a different emotion, from the beginning of the story to the gradual transition to the climax" (Cai 3). Specifically, sound effects "aid the resolution of the images" and deepen the story's emotional impact (Cai 4). These audiovisual components enhance the story's emotional depth and aid in expressing the characters' emotions. Additionally, for animation to be relatable to the viewer, "a character's emotions must be visualized." Since the characters' emotional journeys frequently strike a deep chord with viewers, the visual depiction of a character's emotions facilitates a deeper level of connection (Cai 4). Animated documentaries emotionally engage viewers through sound and character development. Because of these components, animated documentaries are effective storytelling tools that evoke deep empathy and enduring emotional bonds with viewers.

Sharik Stephanie Jimenez, in the article "The Representation of Women in Disney Animated Films (2022)," writes that the way that women are portrayed in animated films, especially those in the Disney canon, exposes ingrained prejudices that have a big impact

on how viewers view trauma and gender. "In the eight films studied, it was found that 63.3% of the characters were in the form of males, while 36.6% were females." (Jimenez 6) is one of the concerning differences in character representation that Sharik Stephanie Jimenez addresses in her study. This significant gender disparity perpetuates traditional standards that depict women as reliant and in need of male support, in addition to reflecting a lack of female agency. According to Jimenez, "the high percentage of obvious female traits... perceived demands of support by the male characters were associated with the female representation of extreme need and assistance" (Jimenez 22). Animated documentaries, on the other hand, frequently depict women's experiences more realistically and nuanced, especially when it comes to trauma. The emotional complexity of women's lives is often explored in animated documentaries, in contrast to Disney animated films, which sometimes use shallow plots. In stark contrast to Disney's propensity to portray female characters in stereotypical positions, they offer a platform for filmmakers to showcase genuine hardships and resilience. "Women as directors and producers tend to focus on the power of women and the place of women in society" (Jimenez 6) is what Jimenez observes, suggesting that female creatives frequently work to portray women in an authentic way in order to promote a more empowering narrative. Disney films are criticized for perpetuating harmful stereotypes, but animated documentaries can challenge these prejudices by highlighting the actual anguish that women endure over extended periods of time. Jimenez contends that the representation of women in films can "have a positive or negative impact on our society" (Jimenez 5). This demonstrates the capacity of animated documentaries to subvert traditional narratives and offers representations that speak to women's real experiences, thereby promoting compassion and understanding.

In animated documentaries, this flexibility allows for the visualization of internal thoughts, emotions, and memories, offering a deeper understanding of the subject. Levitt's view that animation isn't limited by the need to directly mirror reality but instead thrives on transformation and creativity makes it an ideal medium for documentaries that aim to convey deeper truths in innovative ways. This ability to go beyond literal representation allows animated documentaries to explore and communicate complex narratives in a way that live-action might not be able to achieve.

In embracing hybrid forms that incorporate animated imagery - whether hand-drawn or digitally generated - into its narrative structure, Jeffrey Skoller, in his work "Introduction to the Special Issue Making It (Un)real: Contemporary Theories and Practices in Documentary Animation (2024)" in *Sage Journals*, draws attention to a crucial shift in the understanding of documentary filmmaking. This "popular acceptance" shows that viewers are becoming more receptive to creative storytelling approaches that combine classic documentary methods with animation. The expectations around the "truth claims of non-fiction forms" are therefore changing as a result; scholars and filmmakers are starting to realize that the "reality effects" of the photographic trace are no longer the only factor that determines a documentary's legitimacy. Rather, the addition of animation enables a more comprehensive investigation of reality, where meaning can be expressed through personal experiences and creative interpretations (Skoller 1).

Although Ehrlich and Wells provided insightful analysis, there are still gaps in our knowledge about animated documentaries. There is a lack of agreement over definitions of genres, a dearth of empirical studies on the effects of animation on audience responses in comparison to traditional forms, and a need for research on how animated documentaries handle a wider range of social topics. Furthermore, it is frequently disregarded how viewers' interest and emotive reactions are affected by personal transformation. Filling in these voids will improve the scholarly conversation about animated documentaries and their place in visual culture.

Research on animated documentaries from the past has shown a significant shift in the genre, with an emphasis on how incorporating animation improves the emotive resonance and the complexity of the story. This change opens up new possibilities for a more in-depth analysis of reality, challenging accepted notions of authenticity and expanding the parameters of documentary storytelling. The standards for what constitutes an acceptable documentary are changing as viewers come to accept these hybrid formats more and more, seeing the value of artistic license in conveying complex ideas.

2.2 Review of Studies on the Selected Works

In examining *The Breadwinner* (2017), the themes of gender and religious discrimination are crucial to understanding the story. Kurniati and Tisnawijaya (14) discuss

in their article *Gender and Religious Identity: Intersecting Axes of Discrimination in The Breadwinner Animated Movie* (2017) how the protagonist's challenges are deeply rooted in Afghan society, where she faces overlapping forms of oppression. This analysis draws on various theories, including gender studies, feminism, and literary analysis, to explore the protagonist's experiences. Gender studies highlight how the patriarchal society under Taliban rule limits women's freedom, reflecting the broader discrimination they face. Kurniati and Tisnawijaya emphasize that the protagonist's struggle symbolizes the wider challenges experienced by women in such restrictive environments. Feminist theory adds another layer, showing how the protagonist resists and challenges these societal norms.

Deta Maria Sri Darta and Diah Kristina, in their article, i.e., “The Representation of Women Characters in the Movie *The Breadwinner* (2018)”, state that female characters are portrayed as largely oppressed under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, reflecting a society where they are forbidden from leaving their homes without male accompaniment (Darta and Kristina 45). The film illustrates the struggles faced by women, depicting them as marginalized and powerless, yet it also attempts to showcase their resilience and strength in adversity. However, this portrayal is complex; while the narrative aims to highlight women's survival and agency, it simultaneously reinforces patriarchal narratives by introducing male characters as heroes, suggesting that women cannot fully thrive without male support (Darta and Kristina 8). This dual representation complicates the depiction of the female protagonist, Parvana, as the film adaptation introduces male characters that overshadow her empowerment, a contrast to the original novel, where her strength is more pronounced (Darta and Kristina 6).

The film *The Breadwinner* can be analyzed through the lens of propaganda, particularly in how it advances certain ideological interests while rejecting others. Almughni, Edward, and Fauzi, in their article, i.e., “*Breadwinner's Propaganda within the English Foreign Movie's Depiction of Middle-East*” (2020), argue that the film strategically voices advocacy against the people of Kabul, thereby aligning the narrative with Western interests rather than offering an unbiased portrayal of life in Afghanistan. This approach serves to attract sympathy from Western audiences by framing the narrative in a way that benefits one side, particularly the perspective of the Western author in a Middle Eastern context. The authors suggest that this form of propaganda is not merely a

storytelling choice but a deliberate effort to shape audience perceptions in favor of Western narratives, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on the depiction of the Middle East in English-language films (Almughni 4).

Díaz Sanz in his article “Films, world politics and the International Relations Classroom, learning to do a postcolonial analysis of *The Breadwinner* (2022)” suggests that postcolonial analysis provides a valuable way to understand international reality, especially compared to the more traditional views of realism or liberalism. This approach challenges established ideas and offers a more critical perspective on international relations (Sanz 6). In her study of *The Breadwinner*, Diaz Sanz argues that using a postcolonial lens helps to explore how the film reflects global power dynamics, cultural representation, and the effects of colonialism. By examining the film in this way, we can better understand how it either supports or challenges existing views about the Middle East, offering deeper insights into how international relations are depicted in the global media.

Jordan Mintzer in the Annecy 2018 review ‘*Funan*’: *Film Review*, the author observes that *Funan* vividly portrays the harrowing experiences of a family enduring years of separation, starvation, and forced labor, all while struggling to hold on to hope. He notes that the film’s intense and somber subject matter makes it more appropriate for adults and teenagers rather than younger viewers. Mintzer acknowledges that while the film does incorporate some narrative clichés, its detailed and sensitive portrayal of a particularly dark chapter in Cambodian history stands out as a notable achievement. The film's careful documentation of these traumatic experiences is seen as a significant contribution to animated storytelling, providing a powerful and educational depiction of a complex historical period (Mintzer).

Laurent Billeter's film review of *Funan* in Annecy International Animation Film Festival 2018 highlights the film's attention to even the smallest details, which may stem from the audience's instinct to protect itself from the depicted cruelties. This attention contributes to a paradoxical yet logical sense of realism in the film. Billeter observes that the French filmmaker explores a lesser-known historical period, addressing aspects of history that have faded from European memory. The film delves into the experiences of

individuals forced to endure a dictatorship and foreign ideologies while also challenging and questioning certain contemporary societal values (Billeter).

Keith Watson in “Review: As Testimony of War, *Funan* Doesn’t Color Outside the Lines (2019)” argues that the film provides a counterpoint to Spielberg’s more constrained portrayal of historical tragedies by blending the grim narrative with vivid hand-drawn animation. Watson praises the film’s depiction of rural Cambodia, noting how the animator captures the bucolic beauty of the landscape—such as rolling clouds in flooded rice paddies, dramatic sunsets, and the mysterious aura of abandoned temples. This attention to nature highlights its persistence amidst human suffering, offering a poignant yet clichéd story of survival against adversity (Watson-Film Review).

Chris Perkins in *Animation for Adults* (2019)—an online film review—emphasizes that *Funan* is largely depressing and has very few humorous or lighthearted moments. Without using overt on-screen violence, the film captures the terrible reality of life in such repressive conditions while maintaining a constant sense of fear and threat. Perkins praises the movie for its restraint, pointing out that it never comes across as exploitative. He also stresses that *Funan* challenges the sometimes-constrained notions of the medium by demonstrating how animation can explore a wide spectrum of stories (Perkins).

Funan preserves a genuine representation of horror and brutality under restrictive conditions, as Tobias Dunschen in his review *Arras 2018: Funan* in his assessment. He observes that, by eschewing lyrical or humanist embellishments, it successfully alludes to death and pain without actually depicting them. Even if it occasionally deviates from this approach to depict scenes of senseless cruelty, this strategy maintains the film's emphasis on realism (Dunschen).

Linked with reviews of films and other children's animations, research on feminist themes by scholars like Izzah Shahid in her research article “Elements of Feminism in Language of Children’s Animations (2019).” Her study demonstrates how feminist ideas are conveyed both orally and nonverbally in children's animations. The study examines fourteen chosen animations and finds that they challenge conventional preconceptions while promoting gender equality, education, and women's empowerment. Lugina Ayu Salamina, in her research article “Depiction of Feminism Concept in Disney Animated

Movie: *Encanto* 2021 (2023),” intersects with studies on animated documentaries by focusing on how visual storytelling shapes societal perceptions. Shahid’s work examines how feminist language in animations like *Frozen 2* and *The Powerpuff Girls* helps instill gender equality in young audiences, while Salamina critiques the portrayal of gender roles in Disney films. Both areas of research reveal how animations, whether in children's media or documentaries, use visual and narrative strategies to challenge and redefine societal norms, underscoring the broader social impact of animation as a medium.

My study centers on the need to examine how storytelling techniques impacted emotions in animated documentaries, specifically regarding the themes of personal transformation in the selected works. Despite extensive research on animated films and documentaries individually, the integration of these genres had not been thoroughly explored, especially through the lenses of semiotic theory and focalization. My study aimed to address this gap by first focusing on how thematic elements in these films contributed to emotive engagement and then analyzing how narrative structures, including plot and character development, influenced audience perception. Lastly, I examined how visual strategies like animation style and imagery affected the narrative as a whole. I introduced the idea of covalent narratives, which explained the relationship between thematic, narrative, and visual components. My goal was to understand how these components worked together to enhance storytelling and emotive resonance, helping the reader gain a deeper understanding of the stories in the chosen works.

2.3 Literary and Textual Representation

This section examines the literary and textual representation in animated documentaries, emphasizing the role of narrative structures, symbolism, and visual metaphors in meaning-making. By analyzing the ways in which these films employ written and visual text to create meaning, this section explores the ways in which language, dialogue, and intertextual references improve narrative and how textual elements work in conjunction with animation techniques to reinforce themes of identity, resistance, and personal transformation in the chosen works. It also has a direct bearing on the study's main goal, which is to comprehend how narrative strategies affect viewers' emotions in animated documentaries. This section illustrates how textual and literary techniques influence

audience perception, elicit strong feelings, and enhance audience involvement with the stories by utilizing semiotic theory and focalization. Additionally, it examines how these films' combination of textual and visual narrative produces multiple interpretations, advancing our knowledge of their emotional and cognitive effects. By this, the study emphasizes how textual and literary elements serve as essential parts of animated documentaries, adding to their emotional resonance and narrative depth.

2.3.1 Taliban Rule in War-Torn Afghanistan

In war-torn Afghanistan, the Taliban's rule has been characterized by strict ideological control, socio-political upheaval, and extreme human suffering. The country's fabric has been deeply scarred by decades of conflict, and the Taliban's governance has been marked by restrictions on freedoms, repression of dissent, and the reshaping of societal structures. The imposition of strict laws, which disproportionately affect women and marginalized groups, has garnered international attention, and the cycle of war, displacement, and resistance continues to shape Afghanistan's uncertain future. There are several literary and cinematic genres that depict Taliban rule in war-torn Afghanistan, and each one provides a unique perspective on its effects. Novels and short stories, frequently told from the perspectives of those engaged in battle, craft personal tales of persecution, survival, and resilience. Through first-person narratives and historical material, documentaries portray the harsh reality of life under Taliban control in an unvarnished manner. These experiences are portrayed in films, whether they are fictional or are based on actual events, emphasizing the psychological and emotional toll they have taken on Afghan society. In the meantime, memoirs and poetry act as firsthand accounts, preserving voices that might otherwise be silenced and providing insightful analyses of trauma, defiance, and the resilience of the human spirit.

The war drama *Osama* (2003), which is set in battle-torn Afghanistan, offers a very intimate look at life under Taliban control. *Osama* concentrates on the civilian experience, especially the persecution of women in a patriarchal society, in a way that is rare in this genre, which frequently focuses on the psychological and emotional implications of conflict. *Osama* shows how the Taliban's rule destroyed daily life, highlighting the human cost of political and ideological domination, in contrast to traditional war films that might

focus on military tactics or bravery on the battlefield. These films shift their attention from the frontlines to the emotional and social landscape of war, capturing the often-unseen sacrifices and strength of individuals trying to retain a sense of self during violence and fear. Through such narratives, the genre gives voice to those who are affected by conflict—offering a raw and intimate glimpse into the human cost of war. Themes of survival, identity, and resilience are central in war dramas like *Osama*, while the protagonist's struggle to navigate life while disguising herself as a boy reflects the broader social and gender oppression under the Taliban.

In Khaled Hosseini's powerful war novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), two women, Mariam and Laila, are shown enduring the persecution and chaos of war-torn Afghanistan under Taliban control. The novel highlights the themes of love, sacrifice, survival, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of violence and social upheaval as it examines the deep emotional and psychological toll of years of turmoil. The burka is a major symbol in the book, signifying the Taliban's subordination of women and strict gender norms. The burka is transformed from a simple article of clothing into a representation of invisibility and the deprivation of women's identities and rights. For Mariam and Laila, the burka represents the limitations on their autonomy, rendering women anonymous and powerless in the community. It draws attention to how much women are oppressed and deprived under Taliban control, where their existence is hidden behind this constricting garment. The poetic line "One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, / or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls," which Hosseini introduces in Chapter 6, represents the beauty and potential of the women's lives that are frequently obscured by the oppressive conditions they endure. The power, resilience, and unrealized potential of Afghan women, such as Mariam and Laila, whose actual value and potential are hidden by their social positions and the political environment, are symbolized by the "thousand splendid suns." This quotation is a potent metaphor for the love, optimism, and individual victories that endure in spite of the repressive forces at work. Mariam and Laila's relationship grows stronger as they work through their hardships and losses, empowering them to resist the constraints imposed upon them. Although the burka is a symbol of oppression, it also serves as a background for the protagonists' actions of resistance and personal growth. Through poetic imagery like the "thousand splendid

suns" and symbolic items like the burka, the story captures the beauty and tenacity of Afghan women's lives despite the harshest conditions.

Emmanuel Guibert, Didier Lefèvre, and Frédéric Lemercier's graphic novel, *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders* (2003) depicts the compelling, true story of a photographer's journey in the 1980s through Afghanistan with Médecins Sans Frontiers (Doctors without Borders). During the Soviet-Afghan War, the book chronicles the photographer's own experiences traveling to distant areas of Afghanistan with a medical team. This work describes the war in graphic and poignant detail, highlighting the terrible circumstances under which humanitarian workers and the local populace both lived. The story is gripping not just because of its historical setting but also because it provides a personal, human viewpoint on the agony brought on by the conflict and the tenacity of those providing humanitarian assistance. *The Photographer* is a unique combat narrative in the graphic novel form, offering a nuanced, multifaceted perspective of Afghanistan during a turbulent time. The book depicts the severity of war, the terrible facts of the fight, and the crucial role played by humanitarian groups such as Doctors Without Borders through the use of visual storytelling. Readers can interact with people's personal experiences, the psychological effects of the conflict, and the difficulties of delivering medical care in a conflict zone thanks to the distinctive fusion of documentary and visual art created by the use of photography and artwork. In addition, the book discusses the political and cultural facets of Afghanistan at this time, showing how the Soviet invasion and the ensuing war impacted the everyday lives of many Afghans while offering a glimpse into the greater geopolitical fight. By including the real-life photographer's photos, the story becomes more believable and gives readers a close-up view of the effects of war. As far as thematic concentration goes, *The Photographer* examines not only the direct repercussions of conflict but also the long-term impacts of trauma, displacement, and the larger international reaction to humanitarian emergencies. It is a powerful reminder of the human cost of war and the value of humanitarian assistance in reducing suffering during hostilities.

My Forbidden Face: Growing Up Under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story (2001) is a memoir written by Latifa, a young Afghan lady who describes her life in Afghanistan during the Taliban's repressive regime. The book is a first-hand narrative of

the harsh limitations placed on women under the Taliban's rule, offering an intimate and sentimental viewpoint on the consequences of these laws. Latifa's story is a powerful account of bravery, survival, and defiance in the face of severe persecution. She tells readers about the profound changes in women's and girls' daily lives that occurred after the Taliban took over Afghanistan. They forbade women from exercising many fundamental liberties, like going to school or working outside the home, and they forced them to wear the burka. The dramatic effects of these changes on Latifa and her family are depicted in her memoir, especially the difficulties of adjusting to a life restricted to the home with little opportunity for education and personal development. Latifa's internal conflict as she confronts her identity, desires, and the restrictions imposed on her by a dictatorship that controlled every aspect of her life is also shown in the memoir. She opposes the Taliban's attempts to crush her spirit, and her story is replete with instances of defiance and revolt. Latifa's bravery in exposing the atrocities and injustices women endured under the Taliban is among the memoir's most potent features. Latifa still longs for independence, education, and a future outside of her house and burka, even though she is constantly in danger of assault and punishment.

Latifa's memoir provides a detailed account of her life both before and after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. She discusses Kabul during the Soviet-Afghan War in the first few chapters, a period of intense turmoil but also of comparatively greater independence and fortitude. According to her, "War, fighting—that's all I've known, really, since my birth on the first day of spring, 20 March 1980. But even under the Soviets, even under the rocket fire of enemy factions, even amidst the ruins, we still lived freely in Kabul (Latifa 6). This quotation emphasizes the difference between the sense of freedom that the people of Kabul experienced and the brutality of war. Latifa was still able to engage in activities like socializing, dressing up, and getting ready for festivities, and life continued on somewhat normally despite the ongoing danger of violence and the devastation all around them. But when the Taliban show up, everything is different. Latifa's statement, "It's true that the rockets don't rain on us anymore," emphasizes her sentimental memories of Kabul. Rather, the city is shrouded in a death-like silence (Latifa 153). This dramatic change exemplifies how the tumult of battle gives way to an oppressive silence. Under Taliban rule, Kabul is a place of oppressive quiet where fear and stringent laws, especially

for women, inhibit the vitality of life. Instead of the sounds of celebration or daily life, the city is now filled with an unsettling, oppressive calm that represents the loss of liberties and a bleak future. “Yesterday life was still ‘normal’ in Kabul, despite the ruins and the civil war. Yesterday, I went to the dressmaker’s with my sister to try on the dresses we were to wear at a wedding that was to take place today. There would have been music. We would have danced. Life can’t just stop like this on 27 September 1996!” (Latifa 4) highlights the emotional weight of the changes brought about by the Taliban. In an instant, the dreams and aspirations of women, like Latifa and her sister, are upended as the society they once knew is destroyed by the new regime.

When Latifa's memoir shifts from a time of turbulent but experienced reality to one of glaring oppression and silence, it effectively captures the trauma of losing a way of existence. These quotations highlight the psychological toll that the Taliban's rule has on Kabul residents, particularly women who are unable to live freely, engage in society, or even imagine a life outside the home.

2.3.2 Cambodian War and Khmer Regime

Members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), and consequently Democratic Kampuchea, which ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, were commonly referred to as the Khmer Rouge. Norodom Sihanouk came up with the term in the 1960s to characterize the diverse group of communist-led rebels in his nation, whom he sided with following the uprising that took place in Cambodia in 1970.

The Khmer Rouge rule and the Cambodian War have been extensively studied in a variety of literary forms, including as documentaries, memoirs, and novels. These works offer a nuanced picture of the horrors and immense human suffering that occurred during this troubling period in Cambodian history. Two million people are thought to have died under the cruel rule of the Khmer Rouge, which was enforced by Pol Pot between 1975 and 1979. The terrible genocide and forced labor period has influenced a lot of Cambodian and international literature as writers and filmmakers have tried to cope with the loss and suffering. The highlighted stories of people and groups surviving under the Khmer Rouge in novels delve into issues of identity, memory, and survival. A personal perspective on the violence and psychological harm imposed on the Cambodian populace is provided by

these literary works. Contrarily, memoirs and autobiographies offer first-person recollections from survivors, describing the horrific specifics of their experiences with honesty and emotional profundity that humanizes the historical disaster. Additionally, documentaries provide a priceless historical perspective by preserving the experiences of survivors and attesting to the extent of the destruction through testimonials, archival films, and interviews. The Cambodian War and the Khmer government are portrayed in various genres as both historical occurrences and a profound human experience that calls into question our conceptions of morality, resilience, and collective memory. They act as a tool for historical preservation and guarantee that the opinions of people impacted by the rule are heard and remembered. These pieces contribute to international conversations on the nature of justice, human rights, and reconciliation while also offering a forum for contemplation on the long-lasting psychological and cultural effects of the Khmer Rouge's crimes.

The historical drama *The Killing Fields* (1984) is based on the actual experiences of journalist Dith Pran in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge rule. The film, which is based on the lives of two journalists, American Sydney Schanberg and Cambodian Dith Pran, *The Killing Fields* is a 1984 British biographical drama film about the Khmer Rouge dictatorship in Cambodia. It was produced by David Puttnam for his business, Goldcrest Films, and directed by Roland Joffé. The main plot of the film is on the friendship between American journalist Sydney Schanberg and Cambodian interpreter Dith Pran, who worked in Cambodia in the 1970s. With Pran's horrific experiences under the government contrasted with Sydney Schanberg's attempts to flee the nation, the film's emotional core is the friendship between Schanberg and Pran. The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, committed one of the bloodiest genocides in contemporary history, killing an estimated 1.7 million people. With the goal of establishing an agrarian socialist utopia, the administration carried out forced labor, starvation, and mass murders in an effort to eradicate anybody considered an "enemy" of the state, including professionals, intellectuals, and members of ethnic minorities. Its portrayal of the systematic destruction of Cambodia's population and culture remains one of the most powerful cinematic representations of the genocide, and it also helped bring the brutality of the Khmer Rouge to the attention of the world, helping to raise awareness of the genocide and its lasting effects on the country. *The Killing Fields*

received widespread acclaim, including seven Academy Award nominations and winning three. It is a deeply emotional and poignant portrayal of the Khmer Rouge's atrocities, highlighting both the trauma and the enduring power of friendship, survival, and the human spirit.

The Khmer Rouge, under the leadership of Pol Pot, supported communist forces and denounced American engagement in Vietnam as part of their anti-imperialist position. They were also wary of Vietnam because they thought it would have an impact on Cambodia. Due to activities like bombing Cambodia during the Vietnam War, the United States and other international powers, including historians, have argued about their role in the establishment of the Khmer Rouge. A chilling window into the intellectual underpinnings, acts, and outcomes of the dictatorship is offered by the words and comments of a variety of people, from Khmer Rouge leaders themselves to foreign missionaries and citizens. These narratives shed light on the intricate connections between the history of Cambodia, the Vietnam War, and the emergence of the Khmer Rouge, providing understanding of the radical ideology of the dictatorship, its heinous methods, and the social change it aimed to impose.

The Khmer Rouge saw the Vietnam War and the larger Indochina War as a war between the forces of revolution against imperialism. The colonial view that Cambodia had once been a thriving and developed civilization before it became destitute and unchanging under foreign domination is reflected in the first statement written by French missionary Charles-Emile Bouillevaux, who made it about 1858.

Everything I saw at Angkor proves to me unequivocally that Cambodia was once rich, civilized, and much more heavily populated than it now is, but all these riches have disappeared, and the civilization has died out (Bouillevaux para 01).

Though based on colonial prejudices, Bouillevaux's statement highlights the idea that Cambodia had lost its previous glory, which the Khmer Rouge aimed to restore by destroying the remnants of its past and establishing a new, idealized society. The Khmer Rouge considered themselves at the forefront of this change, framing their revolution as a return to a pure, idealized agrarian society free from corruption and outside influence.

The language used by Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge officials demonstrates their conception of "Year Zero," which John Pilger - an Australian-born British journalist—characterizes as the beginning of a time when family structures, emotions, and intellectual endeavors would all come to an end.

No country has ever experienced such concentrated bombing. This unleashed 100,000 tons of bombs, the equivalent of five Hiroshimas. The bombing was their personal decision, made illegally and secretly. They bombed Cambodia... .. And I mean Stone Age in its literal sense (Pilger para 04).

The idea of "Year Zero" was essential to the regime's effort to fundamentally alter Cambodian society. In order to establish an agrarian utopia where only hard work and deference to the government were valued, the Khmer Rouge sought to eradicate all traces of pre-revolutionary Cambodia, including its cultural, educational, and social institutions. The goal was to completely reimagine Cambodia and eradicate anything that the Khmer Rouge considered "corrupt" or "counter-revolutionary."

Leading Khmer Rouge official Khieu Samphan in August 1976 went on to explain the regime's plans for Cambodians, saying that instead of playing in Western ways, the children would care for cattle, assist with manual labor, and construct the infrastructure required to establish the country's intended agrarian society. He states:

We have overcome all our obstacles, undertaking actively our production work based mainly on the principle of self-reliance. Since liberation, we have Particularly, we have solved the problem of food..... Nevertheless, we constantly have to strengthen our revolutionary vigilance, for our experience has taught us that the enemy will never give up their dark schemes to destroy our revolution (Samphan 20).

The regime's attempt to eradicate all forms of cultural expression and replace them with labor-oriented practices is demonstrated by the sharp contrast between pre-revolutionary life, which had included toys and leisure activities, and the new revolutionary lifestyle. In favor of mindless devotion to the state, the Khmer Rouge aimed to eradicate any sense of

individuality, family, or personal fulfillment. Bun Yom, Cambodian civilian, describing the events of April 1975:

The Khmer Rouge approached the house in vehicles, yelling over megaphones for everyone to get out of their houses... .. I saw 13- and 14-year-old children wearing green uniforms. I asked someone 'Who are these kids wearing green uniforms?' He said they were communists called the Khmer Rouge... I saw these kid-soldiers pointing guns and yelling at people to get out of their houses and walk faster. They said, 'All people, do not worry about your houses... You will just be gone for a few days and then you will come back...' And so we walked (Yom para 08).

Bun Yom's description of seeing young Khmer Rouge soldiers, some as young as 13 or 14, demonstrates how the regime used child soldiers to enforce its policies. The Khmer Rouge used children as a tool in this attempt to dismantle social and familial structures, as they were frequently indoctrinated at a young age and turned into tools of terror, policing their own communities and enforcing the regime's brutal policies. This comment illustrates how completely the Khmer Rouge leadership and the people's reality are at odds. By pledging temporary exile yet making no such promises, it demonstrates the regime's methodical approach to uprooting families and displacing the populace.

It is hard to completely understand the human cost of the Khmer Rouge's rule, given that millions of people endured executions, hunger, forced labor, and other horrors. Yasuko Naito, a Japanese widow of a killed Cambodian official, made a statement describing the events of April 1976 that eloquently describes the terrible suffering endured by the Cambodian people under the government. "Life is worse than a cow's.... There is no rice ration unless we work. I ate a rat. It was delicious... God, please forgive me for the ordeal I have suffered." The horrific realities of life under the Khmer Rouge, when basic essentials were scarce and human life was devalued to the point where even actions of survival turned into acts of desperation, are starkly brought home by her story of eating a rat to survive.

Rithy Panh, a Khmer Rouge survivor himself, directed the 2003 documentary *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. At the former Security Prison 21 (S-21) under the Khmer Rouge, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Rithy brought together two former inmates

with their former captors. The film reconstructs the psychological and physical abuse perpetrated on inmates using stories from survivors and former Khmer Rouge guards. It is a potent examination of trauma, memory, and historical documentation since it makes use of reenactments and archive material.

The Cambodian-American biographical thriller film *First They Killed My Father* (2017) was written and directed by Angelina Jolie and Loung Ung. The film is based on Ung's memoir of the same name. While her siblings are taken to labor camps under the Khmer Rouge dictatorship, 5-year-old Loung is forced to train as a child soldier in this 1975 film. The narrative portrays the cruelty of war, the tenacity of the human spirit, and the profound psychological wounds caused by genocide from the viewpoint of a child. Through themes of trauma, memory, and loss, Loung's journey serves as a compelling illustration of the long-lasting effects of past violence.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter, which is divided into three sections, has looked at the literary and textual depiction of animated documentaries, the analysis of two chosen works, and their research. The examination emphasizes how the genre uses creative visual strategies to communicate complicated truths in a unique way. By going over important studies and examining thematic and stylistic components, it shows how animation can be used as a medium for both art and documentary, providing fresh perspectives on personal and historical narratives. The prior findings enhance the comprehension of how animated documentaries subvert conventional documentary norms by employing visual narratives to elicit profound emotional and cognitive reactions from viewers.

Building on such discussions, the study methodology is covered in the following chapter, which outlines the theoretical framework and analytical strategy utilized to investigate the thematic depth and visual storytelling strategies of animated documentaries.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter has been divided into seven sections: an outlook of research design, rationale for selection of films, theoretical perspectives for the studies (i.e., Roland Barthes's theory of semiotics and Mieke Bal's concept of focalization and narratology), conceptual framework of the study, method of analysis, and key terms of the study.

The first section is about outlining the research design. It describes how the study was organized and conducted in order to achieve the goals. The second section explains the selection of films, i.e., *The Breadwinner* and *Funan*, as primary subjects. These films were selected due to their potent narratives and pertinence to the study's emphasis on trauma and animated emotional storytelling. The theoretical perspectives that inform the analysis in this study are described in the next two parts. Roland Barthes' semiotics theory is used to evaluate visual signs and meanings, while Mieke Bal's ideas of focalization and narratology are used in the study to analyze narrative structure and point of view in animated storytelling. The conceptual framework that directs the examination of the chosen films is presented in the next section. The last section describes the analysis process, which combines semiotic and thematic analysis to interpret the films' narrative and visual components. To help with the study's analysis and comprehension, key terms semiotics, focalization, and narratology are defined.

Overall, this study expands the ways in which animated documentaries employ storytelling to elicit both cognitive and emotional reactions. A greater comprehension of how animation communicates intricate concepts is provided by the integration of semiotics and narratology. The emotional and thematic richness that animation offers to documentary filmmaking is further illuminated by this study.

3.1 Research Design

This research is grounded in the interpretivism paradigm, which focuses on analyzing the narratives, character development, and visual storytelling techniques in the selected films. Interpretivism emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings individuals assign to their social world, focusing on human agency and the complexity of

social interactions. It contrasts with positivism by prioritizing subjective experiences over objective, universal truths (Grix 82-83).

This research is based on content analysis and thematic analysis of animated documentaries and is thus qualitative in nature. Qualitative research explores human experiences and social phenomena through non-numerical analysis, focusing on the meanings and interpretations behind people's actions and beliefs. It aims to provide rich, contextual insights into the complexities of human behavior (Grix 128-129). This research focuses on analyzing the narratives, character development, and visual storytelling in the selected animated films to examine how interpretations and responses to the visual elements in these films are formed, looking at the meanings created from individual perspectives.

This qualitative interpretivist approach facilitates a rich analysis of both narrative and thematic depth, aligning with the focus on the complex interplay between animation and documentary, with the experience that can facilitate understanding about how these themes impact through emotive and cognitive elements.

3.2 Rationale for Selection of Films

This study focuses on two animated films: *Funan* and *The Breadwinner*. I chose these films because they offer powerful storytelling and explore personal transformation amid significant historical and cultural challenges. *Funan* is set during the Cambodian genocide and deals with themes of loss, survival, and resilience. The film reflects real historical events, giving me a deep look at how individuals cope with trauma and how these experiences shape their identities. *The Breadwinner* follows an 11-year-old girl named Parvana in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. It addresses issues of gender oppression, family dynamics, and survival. Parvana's transformation, as she disguises herself as a boy to support her family, for instance, highlights the themes of courage and resilience.

The historical and cultural background presented in the films affects the experiences and hardships of the protagonists. As such, empathy for the characters' experiences is fostered through the use of narrative and visual elements. These films handle complex themes through animation, making difficult subjects accessible to a wide

audience. They not only tell compelling stories but also comment on important socio-political issues.

My research intends to demonstrate how animated documentaries employ narrative and visual storytelling tools in conjunction by providing a thorough examination of the ways in which *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* use their distinct storytelling techniques to tackle important societal and personal themes. By analyzing these films, I aim to show how animated documentaries can effectively communicate messages about personal transformation and resilience in challenging situations.

3.3 Theoretical Perspectives for the Study I—Roland Barthes' Theory of Semiotics

The study employs semiotic analysis to decode the symbolic meanings of visual elements. As such, a combination of semiotics with narrative techniques will be analyzed to understand how different viewpoints within the story affect the audience's connection and interpretation through emotive elements. This framework enables a detailed exploration of how strategies, such as character perspectives and visual motifs, influence the thematic depth and emotive elements of the films.

The semiotics technique of Roland Barthes is used in this study as a framework for examining signs and their meanings in cultural contexts. A number of crucial steps that show how Barthes' ideas changed over time might be used to understand his methodology. Barthes initially applied a structuralist approach, which emphasizes the fundamental laws governing cultural processes. He outlined two fundamental elements of a sign in his seminal work, *Elements of Semiology*: the "signified," which stands for the idea or concept connected to that sign, and the "signifier," which is the form of the sign, such as a word or image. This framework makes it possible to analyze how signs work in a closed system and uncover the principles that govern how they should be interpreted. According to Barthes, all forms of signs, whether in language, fashion, or popular culture—grasp how meaning is created in various cultural situations and require a grasp of this classification scheme.

As his theories developed, Barthes turned his attention to connotation, which deals with the more profound associations and meanings that signs convey. He used the term "myth" to describe how cultural myths influence how we interpret signs. According to Barthes, signals frequently have hidden meanings that represent and uphold social norms. His later works show this change in emphasis as he attempted to reveal these hidden meanings in order to show how media and consumer society shape attitudes and perceptions. His approach is therefore a useful tool for examining how indications, even those that seem clear-cut, can be deceptive.

Barthes' semiotic theory provides a framework for understanding how signs function within cultural texts and how these signs convey meaning. The goal of the study is to demonstrate how narrative devices and visual components support thematic storytelling by utilizing Barthes' ideas of signifiers and signified as well as the larger semiotic systems in these films.

3.4 Theoretical Perspectives for the Study II—Mieke Bal Concept of Focalization and Narratology

A framework for understanding the narrative structures in these films is provided by Mieke Bal's concepts of focalization and narratology. Narratology, according to Bal, is the study of stories and the systems that produce them. It is an umbrella term for a collection of theories about stories, narrative texts, pictures, spectacles, events, and other cultural artifacts that tell a story (Bal 03). By defining and characterizing the essential elements that distinguish narrative texts, including films, narratology offers useful tools for analysis and interpretation. One of these tools is Mieke Bal's concept of focalization, which centers on the relationship between the focalizer, the agent who perceives, and the focalized, the object being perceived. Focalization draws attention to the vision, whether internal or external to a character, through which events are presented (Bal 132). This relationship between the one who sees and what is seen is key to how narratives are shaped. It plays a vital role in influencing how viewers understand and emotionally engage with a film, as it frames the perspective from which the story unfolds (Bal 135). Storytelling, according to Bal, is by definition subjective since each narrative is told from a specific point of view. By emphasizing the vision, whether internal or external to a character, through which

events are viewed, focalization draws attention to this subjectivity (Bal 132). The underlying narrative structures that direct perceptions and comprehension of the ideas conveyed in animated documentaries are made clearer by this approach. Focalization and narratology shed light on how animated documentaries, which combine visual and narrative aspects, direct mental interactions with the tale.

A text is a finite, structured whole composed of signs. These can be linguistic units, such as words and sentences, but they can also be different signs, such as cinematic shots and sequences or painted dots, lines, and blots (Bal 05).

Bal's definition emphasizes that texts are not limited to written or spoken language; they also include visual and cinematic elements. In this framework, a film is as much a text as a novel, because both are structured wholes made up of signs—whether these signs are words on a page or visual images on a screen. In contemporary narrative studies, the definition of a "literary text" has evolved to encompass various forms of media beyond traditional written literature. Films, particularly those with rich narrative structures, are increasingly recognized as literary texts. Like novels or plays, films tell stories through a combination of elements. This recognition allows for the application of literary theories to film analysis, enhancing our understanding of their narrative strategies and thematic content.

Mieke Bal's concepts of focalization and narratology are essential for comprehending narrative structures in the visual arts, cinema, and literature, among other media. The perspective that a story is perceived or viewed from is referred to as focalization. Due to Bal's work, we can better comprehend how various points of view affect the meaning of a story. By providing instruments to analyze and decipher the layers of meaning within narrative texts, renowned cultural theorist and critic Bal has made a substantial contribution to our knowledge of how stories are created and experienced.

Focalization is a critical concept introduced by Bal. It refers to the perspective through which the narrative is presented: "Focalization is the relationship between the vision, the agent that sees, and that which is seen. This relationship is a component of the content of the narrative text" (Bal 135). This concept underscores the subjective character of storytelling, which makes it essential for comprehending the substance of a narrative

text. Every narrative presents events from a specific point of view, which affects how the audience understands the story. This focalization, or point of view, is an important component of narrative analysis since it affects the storytelling technique and the audience's response through emotive elements. Narratology deals with the narrative's structure, whereas focalization concentrates on the story's "who sees" and "who perceives" elements. It is important to comprehend whose viewpoint is being provided and how the audience interprets the story as a result of this representation. Bal highlights that the psychological and emotional dimensions of characters are just as central to focalization as their physical point of view. This is particularly significant in animated documentaries, where the choice of focalizer can deeply influence how the audience connects with the story. Narratology allows us to break down the structure of these films, examining how they weave together different narrative elements to tell a cohesive and compelling story. Focalization helps us understand the impact of perspective on the narrative. By analyzing through whose eyes we are seeing the story and how this influences our interpretation, we can appreciate the nuanced storytelling techniques that make these films so effective.

3.5 Cognitive and Affective Engagement of the Audience

Funan and *The Breadwinner* employ what I refer to as "covalent narrative," a storytelling technique that connects the literal with the symbolic, the real with the representational, to better explain the emotional and cognitive engagement they evoke. Through the use of a combination of emotive visuals and stylized realism, these animated documentaries skillfully connect personal experiences and global history, as well as individual pain and collective memory. The way they enable viewers to inhabit a liminal realm between fact and feeling—one that promotes introspection, empathy, and meaning-making—is what makes them so appealing, not just their aesthetic beauty or narrative tension. Although this type of storytelling is artistically animated, it however serves the fundamental documentary purpose of provoking viewers to seek the truth and engage in social critique.

Critical response provides further information on the emotional commitment of the audience. *The Breadwinner* earned a 95% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. The film's "graceful, unflinching narrative" (Rotten Tomatoes, 2018) and its portrayal of a young girl's tenacity

in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan were praised by critics. As a "harrowing but beautifully told story that resonates with viewers of all ages," the Los Angeles Times complimented it. Industry reactions also support the film's influence and broad audience engagement; in 2022, Canadian media behemoth Corus Entertainment purchased Aircraft Pictures, The Breadwinner's Canadian co-producer, underscoring the movie's global relevance and ongoing relevance in the world's animation markets (Ravindran, 2022).

Similarly, Denis Do's film *Funan* won the renowned Cristal for Best Feature at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival. In an article for The Hollywood Reporter, Jordan Mintzer praised Funan's emotional frankness and "visual simplicity that doesn't distract from the trauma it conveys," calling it "an intensely personal account of survival" (Mintzer, 2018). These evaluations highlight how, in addition to being amused, viewers become emotionally and intellectually engrossed in the experiences of the films, responding not only to what they observe but also to what they understand and internalize as a result of the films' covalent stacking of symbolism and truth.

It is also supported by audience reactions as documented in academic forums and post-screening discussions that both films leave a lasting impression. Animated documentaries "invite emotional authenticity through stylized realism," according to Nea Ehrlich in "Animating Truth, allowing for a different kind of connection than live-action documentaries (Ehrlich, 2021, p. 76). In this way, animation serves as a medium for the clear and impactful communication of emotional realities. Instead of merely recounting historical tragedy, *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* transform it into a visual grammar that encourages both sensitivity and reflection by switching between realism and imagination.

According to Judith Kriger, animation offers a special visual perspective that makes it easier to convey reality, particularly "psychological and metaphorical truth" (Kriger, 2024). The films' use of narrative contrasts similar to chiaroscuro—between trauma and memory, color and muted minimalism, light and shadow—improves this interaction.

The captivated audience response is therefore not only personal; it is supported by industry acquisition, critical acclaim, and the directors' structural decisions. These films use covalent narrative techniques to blend sociopolitical commentary with emotional depth, making viewers active contributors to meaning creation rather than passive

consumers. This is exactly what sets animated films like *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* apart in the rapidly changing field of factual storytelling, which depends as much on emotional and cognitive engagement as it does on creative innovation.

3.6 Conceptual Framework of the Study

The prism through which I viewed animated documentaries was created by combining Roland Barthes' semiotic theory with Mieke Bal's concept of focalization. By breaking down the symbolic layers of visual and auditory signals, Barthes' method helps us see how meaning is created through the application of cultural codes. Key insights into how visual elements impact cognition and emotion are provided by this structural examination. On the other hand, Bal's focalization highlights how the observer, whether internal or external to the narrative, affects how meaning is received by situating these symbols within specific narrative angles. By revealing the interplay between the symbolic content of the signs and the perspective from which they are viewed, this dual application offers a deeper understanding of how visual storytelling affects audience engagement.

Mieke Bal's idea of focalization and Roland Barthes' semiotic theory provide a potent analytical framework for analyzing how animated documentaries use visuals and signs that evoke cognitive and emotional reactions. Mieke Bal's idea of focalization focuses on how narrative perspective affects what is seen and understood inside a story, whereas Roland Barthes' semiotic theory concentrates on how meaning is created through signs and symbols. Bal is more interested in how these forms are seen and presented within the narrative structure than Barthes is in the relationship between the signifier (form) and the signified (idea). Barthes highlights how meaning arises from the combination of sound and picture when he argues that "the sign is a slice of sonority and visuality" (Barthes 48); in contrast, Bal investigates how the observer's position, whether internal or external, influences how that sound and image are understood. According to Barthes, "a sign is not an object but the mental representation of the thing" (Barthes 50). Bal, on the other hand, questions how narrative agents frame and filter these mental representations inside a story. Bal provides techniques for examining the presentation of visual and auditory signs from a certain perspective, while Barthes provides a means for breaking down the symbolic layers that are included in those signifiers. Bal illustrates how visual cues, like color,

gesture, or sound, are blended into a character's or narrator's field of view, altering our perception of the narrative's emotional tone. Barthes shows how these signals function symbolically in animated documentaries.

The cultural conventions that give signs meaning are broken down by Barthes' semiotics, while Bal's narratology shows how viewpoint affects narrative access to meaning. While Barthes encourages us to decipher the meaning structure, Bal forces us to consider whose meaning we are deciphering and whose perspective the world is being presented through. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how animated documentaries use indications and narrative placement to affect viewers' emotional and cognitive responses in this integrated manner. Barthes gives us the tools to understand what is being conveyed, while Bal asks us to think about how and from whose perspective that conveyance is perceived. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing animated documentaries' multiple levels of meaning, showing how narrative influences the message and the audience's reaction to it.

A flow chart has been incorporated in order to clarify the connection between the two main frameworks in this investigation. Mieke Bal's concept of focalization and Roland Barthes' semiotic theory coincide, as this image demonstrates. While focalization establishes how meaning is shaped and guided through narrative viewpoint, semiotics supplies the fundamental language of signs that are used to generate meaning. When viewed via a certain lens, visual signs acquire depth and emotional resonance, as demonstrated by the intersection of these two. They provide a sophisticated method for examining how meaning is created in animated storytelling when combined.

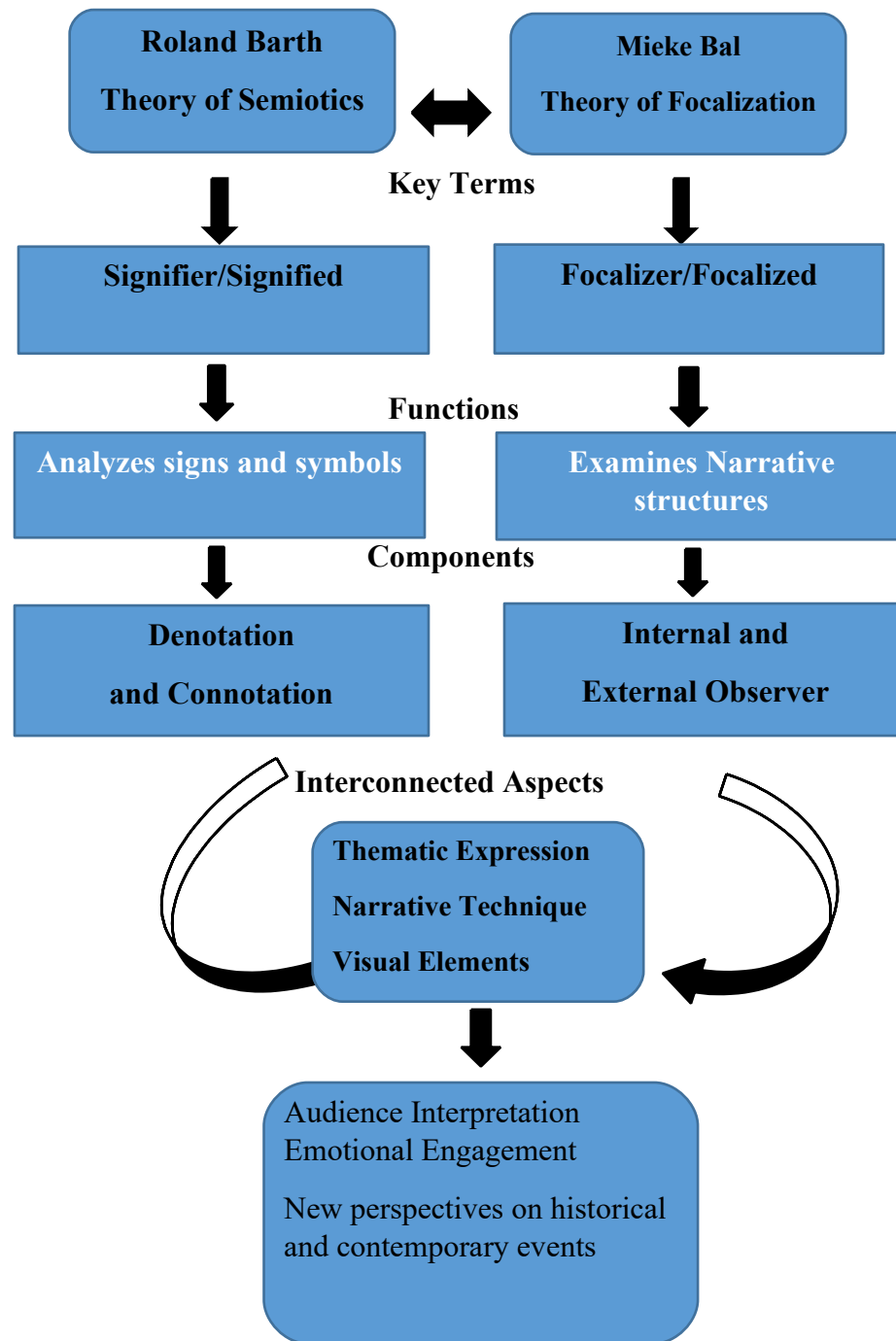


Diagram: A Representation of Framework

3.7 Method of Analysis

Establishing the historical and geopolitical foundation of the films is the initial part of the analysis since it gives crucial background information for comprehending the films and their applicability in the real world. The construction of meaning through signs and symbols is then examined using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which highlights the interaction between the signifier and the signified (Barthes 38). The notions of denotation and connotation developed by Barthes are also utilized to sharply focus on the details in storytelling in order to convey complex ideas and arouse emotions (Barthes 89-90). The focalization notion developed by Mieke Bal is then presented. Focalization—the relationship between the vision, the agent that sees, and that which is seen—is necessary in order to comprehend how the narrative viewpoint affects audience involvement (Bal 135). This step investigates how the viewer's understanding and emotional attachment to the story are impacted by changes in viewpoint.

As a direct response to Research Question 1, the analysis will focus on how visual strategies like color schemes, framing, character placement, and symbolic motifs—such as Parvana's disguise in *The Breadwinner* as an act of resistance or Chou's hair cutting in *Funan* as a symbol of loss and forced transformation—emphasize themes of cultural oppression, identity, and resistance. To demonstrate how these thematic issues are strengthened, narrative techniques including voice-over (like Parvana's father's storytelling sequences), silence (like the quiet of *Funan*'s rural settings), and pacing will also be assessed.

In order to determine how semiotic codes—such as cultural symbols, reoccurring items, and visual metaphors—support or challenge the representation of identity and resistance, they will be examined in relation to Research Question 2. For example, the subdued colors and desolate fields in *Funan* suggest oppression, relocation, and the erasing of cultural identity, while the burqa in *The Breadwinner* serves as both a denotative garment and a connotative sign of systemic control. Within the sociopolitical situations depicted in the films, the emphasis here will be on both the literal (denotative) and suggestive (connotative) interpretations of these signs.

Lastly, the analysis illustrates how narrative structures and visual storytelling techniques operate in parallel to improve theme investigation, evoke complex emotional responses, and boost audience engagement by fusing Barthes' semiotic theory with Bal's narratological framework. In doing so, the analysis moves beyond a theoretical level and directly links the films' thematic and visual components to the research questions, offering a thorough framework for investigating how animated documentaries use narrative and symbolic techniques to negotiate cultural realities.

3.8 Key Terms of the Study

The main terms and concepts defined by Roland Barthes and Mieke Bal, which are central to the analysis of the animated documentaries, include the following:

- **Sign and Signifier:** Barthes' semiotic theory revolves around the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behavior. He defines a sign as consisting of two parts: the signifier and the signified. Barthes emphasizes that meaning is constructed through the interplay of these elements within a cultural context, stating. A sign is not a thing but the mental representation of the thing. This concept is crucial for analyzing how visual and auditory elements in the films convey complex themes and emotions.
- **Denotation and Connotation:** Barthes distinguishes between denotative meanings and connotative meanings. This distinction helps in understanding how visual elements in the films communicate both straightforward and layered messages, enhancing the narrative's emotive depth and thematic richness.
- **Focalization:** Mieke Bal's concept of focalization refers to the perspective through which a story is narrated. It involves the relationship between the focalizer and the focalized. Bal's definition emphasizes how different perspectives influence the audience's interpretation and engagement with the narrative. This concept is essential for analyzing how the films present their stories and guide perceptions.
- **Narrative Structure:** Bal's narratology encompasses the study of narrative systems and structures. He defines narratology as an umbrella term for theories

that analyze stories, narrative texts, and cultural artifacts that tell a story. This framework provides tools for understanding the essential elements that distinguish narrative forms, including plot development, character arcs, and thematic exploration.

- **Visual Codes:** Both theorists highlight the importance of visual codes in storytelling. Barthes' semiotic analysis allows for the examination of how visual elements function as signs that convey meaning, while Bal's narratological approach focuses on how these visual codes interact with narrative structures to enhance thematic depth and emotive engagement.

Barthes' semiotic theory and Bal's narratological concepts provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the selected animated documentaries. By defining key terms such as semiotics, denotation and connotation, focalization, narrative structure, and visual codes, the research can effectively explore how these elements contribute to the films' thematic richness and emotive resonance.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

This chapter has been divided in two sections: the analysis of the selected animated documentaries *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* that examines storytelling techniques in the impact of narrative depth and emotional engagement. With this it will focus on elements such as perspective, character development, and narrative structures. Before analyzing the corresponding animated documentary, this section offers a comprehensive historical overview of the Afghan War and the Khmer Rouge. By employing Barthes and Bal's theories, this analysis explores the interplay of visual elements and narrative structures in creating meaningful viewer experiences.

4.1 *Breadwinner*

4.1.1 Overview of the Plot

The Breadwinner, the animated documentary directed by Nora Twomey, is an animated adaptation of Deborah Ellis's novel, which tells the story of an 11-year-old girl living in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The film stands out as an animated documentary due to its deeply rooted narrative in real-life events. This film tells the story of Parvana - after her father is arrested, she disguises herself as a boy to support her family, as women are forbidden to work or even go outside without a male companion. She takes on dangerous jobs to provide for her family while also searching for a way to rescue her father. Throughout her journey, Parvana finds strength in storytelling, using it as a means to cope with her harsh reality and maintain hope among the challenges she faces. Ellis's interactions with Afghan women living in camps served as the basis for *The Breadwinner*. The work was strengthened by the sincere voices that highlighted the struggles and resilience of mothers and kids in a country torn apart by violence. The animation portrays life under the Taliban in a realistic manner by highlighting the toll that the severe laws of the regime take on both individuals and families.

4.1.2 Historical Context

The sociopolitical climate of Afghanistan and the geopolitical aspirations of foreign countries are the root causes of the Afghan War, a complicated and protracted struggle.

During the Saur Revolution in April 1978, the monarchy of Muhammad Zahir Shah was overthrown by the Marxist-leaning People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), marking the beginning of the contemporary era of this turbulent history. Through programs including land reforms and the advancement of women's rights, the PDPA aimed to secularize Afghanistan while advancing a radical agenda of social reform and modernization. However, many Afghans' firmly held religious views and customs ran counter to these policies, which led to strong opposition from Islamic groups all over the nation.

The Soviet Union backed the PDPA government militarily in December 1979 as unrest grew. This signaled the start of a ten-year conflict that was distinguished by the mujahidin's ferocious resistance. The United States and its allies, including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, saw the conflict as a crucial front in the Cold War and gave the mujahidin money, weapons, and training. These American-backed combatants promoted an Islamic identity in their resistance by exploiting local grievances and anti-Soviet sentiment by framing their fight as a jihad, or holy war.

Islamization is the process by which Islamic rules and concepts are incorporated into politics, the legal system, education, and culture, among other facets of society. This phenomenon, which is frequently impacted by historical, cultural, social, and political circumstances, can take on various forms and intensities. During the conflict, it came to define Afghanistan's sociopolitical environment. In reaction to the secular policies of the PDPA, the seeds of Islamization were planted. By portraying their fight as a jihad against the communist regime and outside interference, resistance organizations used Islamic precepts to justify their opposition. This signaled a dramatic change as extreme interpretations of Islam gained traction during the Soviet-Afghan War and started to dominate the political discourse. Mullahs gained significant power during this time, spreading a militant interpretation of Islam that appealed to the sentiments of the population. External powers, especially the United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, supported the mujahidin and emphasized Islamic identity in their struggle against communism, further intensifying this process. As the war dragged on, more stringent interpretations of Sharia (Islamic law) took hold, changing Afghanistan's sociopolitical structure.

Afghanistan's Islamization came to a peak with the establishment of the Taliban in the middle of the 1990s. The Taliban, who promised peace and order, took over the nation in 1996 after emerging from the chaos of the civil war. Afghan society was fundamentally changed by their strict interpretation of Islamic law, which was a defining feature of their administration. Women were subjected to harsh restrictions under the Taliban, which excluded them from public life, work, and education. Women had to wear the burqa, and those who were thought to have committed moral violations faced severe penalties.

The Taliban's concept of a "pure Islamic state" led to a number of human rights violations and a change in Afghan society in accordance with their own interpretation of Islam. The Taliban's concept of a "pure Islamic state" led to a number of human rights violations and a change in Afghan society in accordance with their interpretation of Islam.

Women's rights have been significantly impacted by the process of Islamization in Afghanistan. Before the Soviets' invasion in 1979, women in urban areas enjoyed relative freedom, including access to education and employment, although this progress varied by region and socioeconomic status. The PDPA's modernization efforts initially advanced women's rights but were met with resistance from Islamist factions who saw these reforms as a threat to traditional Islamic values. The rise of the Taliban in the 1990s marked a turning point, as women faced severe restrictions under their rule, including a ban on education, employment, and even leaving the house without a male guardian, as well as the requirement to wear the burqa. These measures were enforced through violence and intimidation, and compliance was enforced by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue. There were attempts to rebuild Afghan society and restore women's rights after the U.S.-led invasion in 2001. Laws protecting women's rights were established, and many women were able to return to school and work. But advancements were still not uniform, especially in rural regions where customs still restricted women's liberties. Despite these developments, women nevertheless lived in a dangerous environment because of the continuous fighting. Concerns regarding the degradation of women's rights were rekindled in August 2021 when the Taliban regained power. Reports show systemic restrictions on women's education and work, despite the Taliban's initial claims of a more moderate approach. The fact that so many female professionals and activists left the nation for good or went into hideouts highlights how precarious gender equality is in Afghanistan.

A gripping depiction of life under a system that denied women fundamental rights, such as the ability to appear in public without a male guardian, *The Breadwinner* is set in Taliban-controlled Kabul in the early 2000s. Instead than being fabricated, this setting is based on actual historical circumstances. Human Rights Watch (2001) said that during Taliban rule, “women were not allowed to work, girls were not allowed to go to school, and any female found outside the home without a male escort risked being beaten or arrested” (p. 21). Intricately intertwined throughout the film's narrative and visual framework, these restrictive rules served as the sociopolitical backdrop for the film and demonstrated the severe limitations imposed on women and girls under Taliban rule.

Parvana’s decision to cut her hair and dress as a boy to support her family is rooted in a culturally known practice called *bacha posh*—a survival strategy in which Afghan girls are temporarily raised and presented as boys to bypass societal restrictions. As Helen M. Kinsella explains in *Sex as the Secret: Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, some Afghan families employed *bacha posh* as a form of silent resistance under Taliban rule, allowing girls limited access to public roles within a highly gendered surveillance system (Kinsella 4). This cultural phenomenon adds symbolic depth to Parvana’s transformation, highlighting how gender identity in the film operates as both performance and resistance.

Moreover, the film’s engagement with visibility and voice aligns with broader real-world critiques of how Afghan women have historically been silenced, not only in domestic spaces but also in international discourse. Activist Samira Hamidi, a member of the Afghan Women’s Network, captured this exclusion powerfully during a NATO meeting in Wales, where she held a sign reading, “*Talk to Me, Not About Me*”—a statement that, as Kinsella notes, exposes how global institutions often marginalize Afghan women’s perspectives even when discussing their future (Kinsella 4). *The Breadwinner*, through Parvana’s internal focalization and acts of storytelling, subverts this silencing by granting a narrative voice to a young girl who refuses to be erased.

By rooting its plot in the historical and cultural realities of Afghanistan—particularly through *bacha posh* and the politics of voice—*The Breadwinner* transcends animation to become a layered commentary on gender, survival, and representation. The

film becomes both an aesthetic expression and a form of counter-narrative that restores visibility to the silenced and power to the disguised.

According to the U.S. Policy Study (2024), the situation for Afghan women under Taliban authority deteriorated even after the conflict. Women continued to be largely excluded from social and political life due to significant barriers to their access to public participation, work opportunities, and education. International reactions to the humanitarian catastrophe brought on by these measures, such as U.S. sanctions, relief initiatives, and diplomatic pressure, are covered in the study. Despite international censure, the Taliban's inflexible position on women's rights persists, which exacerbates Afghanistan's social and economic problems.

The Taliban's reflect the complex interplay of traditional values, foreign interventions, and the concept of Islamization in shaping Afghanistan's sociopolitical fabric. The Taliban initially garnered support by promising stability in a war-torn nation; their draconian measures and association with terrorism drew international condemnation. Afghanistan's history of conflict is driven by the foreign powers, local dynamics, and competing ideologies and continues to pose challenges for reconciling traditional values with modern governance, leaving a lasting impact on the region's socio-political landscape.

4.1.3 Analysis

The Breadwinner is much more than a fictional cartoon or animated film. It is an in-depth animated documentary that connects live reality and visual narrative. The film is a potent medium that cuts over cultural and geographical barriers to illuminate the hardships endured by individuals, particularly women and children, during Taliban control in Afghanistan by fusing a fictional story with parts based in terrible realities.

Despite being a work of fiction, Parvana's journey draws heavily from the experiences of actual Afghan families that had to live under the harsh conditions of Taliban-run Afghanistan. The difficulties she has in providing for her family, purchasing food, and gathering water while concealing her true identity are similar to those encountered by many women navigating a society ruled by men under stringent Taliban regulations. By doing this, the film becomes a vehicle for recording and disseminating unsaid truths rather than merely being an entertaining film. One unique feature is the use

of animation as a storytelling aid. This decision is not only stylistic; it is highly deliberate and strengthens the story's emotional and intellectual effect. A distinct layer of abstraction offered by animation enables the film to address challenging subjects like oppression, violence, and loss in a way that is nonetheless understandable to a wide range of audiences, even younger ones. Animation softens the severity of these topics while retaining their emotional impact, in contrast to live-action films that may be overly graphic or overwhelming.

The film's documentary-style approach is reinforced by its visual design. Because it captures the tone and atmosphere of the narrative, the use of color is especially remarkable. The dismal and depressing atmosphere of her life is evoked by the dark, subdued tones used to show scenes of her sufferings under Taliban authority. On the other hand, the folklore stories she narrates to her little brother are accompanied by vivid and colorful images that represent resilience, hope, and the enduring spirit of Afghan culture. The value of narrative as a source of identification and survival is further highlighted by this juxtaposition, which also illustrates the inventiveness and resilience of people in trying circumstances.

Authenticity on a cultural and historical level is another important component that raises the documentary's level. With its detailed portrayal of Afghan streets and marketplaces, as well as its incorporation of traditional attire, cuisine, and customs, the film fully immerses audiences in the lives of Afghans. These particularly help to create a realistic portrayal of life in a nation rocked by war and strife, offering a greater comprehension of its hardships and resilience.

The film is considerably improved by the storyline's integration of Afghan culture. Parvana's story not only serves as a coping mechanism for her and her family, but it also pays tribute to the beauty and depth of Afghan cultural past. Viewers are reminded by these stories that Afghan traditions are rich even in the face of instability. By enabling audiences to identify with Afghanistan on a human level, these elements aid in the film's debunking of stereotypes and encouragement of empathy.

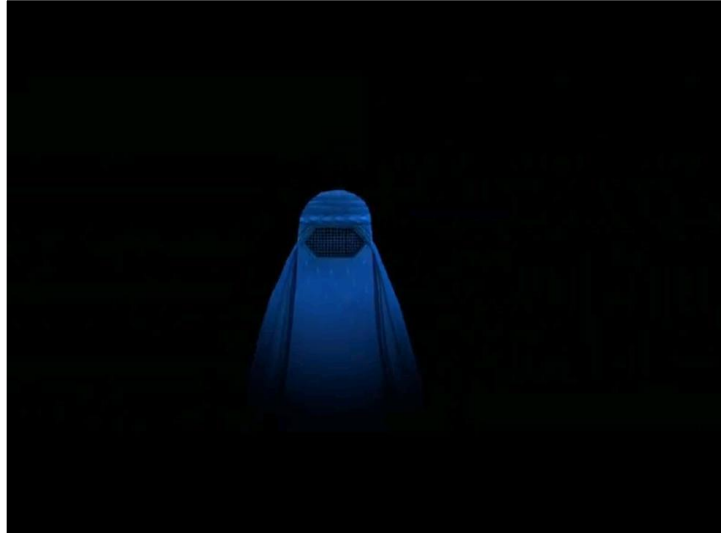
The story is one of empowerment and tenacity. Parvana's resolve to protect her family and exercise her agency in a society that tries to repress her is a compelling

illustration of how resilient women and children can be when faced with hardships. Since her voyage emphasizes themes of gender inequity, familial ties, and the effects of conflict on daily life, it speaks to people everywhere. A work of great relevance, *The Breadwinner* tackles more general global challenges while concentrating on Parvana's personal experience. Along with providing insight into the everyday lives of Afghans living under Taliban control, it also conveys a global message of bravery, optimism, and the resilience of the human spirit.

Mieke Bal's narratology, especially the idea of focalization, and Roland Barthes' semiotic theory can be used to analyze *The Breadwinner* in a way that enhances our comprehension of the way this film uses visual symbolism and narrative perspective to create meaning. The term focalization, as used in Mieke Bal's theory of narratology and focalization, describes the attention on whose perspective the story is being told from in order to effectively convey the narrative (Bal 135). By concentrating on a character's inner condition, internal focalization enables the viewer to experience the world through that character (Bal 136). Nearly all of *The Breadwinner* is told from the perspective of Parvana, a young Afghan girl negotiating life under Taliban authority. The viewer's experience is shaped by her perceptions, feelings, and changing understanding of the world around her. This results in an intimate narrative lens that emotionally renders political violence and familial grief. Because of this focused perspective, the viewer is able to observe and experience her metamorphosis, particularly when she cuts her hair and takes on a masculine persona in order to provide for her family, which represents a change in her sense of agency and self.

Additionally, Roland Barthes' theory of signs can be used to study the semiotic significance of this shift. The semiotic theory of Barthes examines how actions and visuals serve as signs with both connotative and denotative meanings. In this sense, Parvana's haircut becomes more than just a plot device; it represents liberation, transgression, and a break with strict gender stereotypes. Additional visual components serve as indicators of complicated cultural and emotional realities, such as the burqa's oppressive presence, and the juxtaposition between Kabul's grim reality and Parvana's internal stories' elaborate, fairy tale-like animation.

Gender is a key to power. It is to be believed and is considered a taboo that under the Taliban's regime, women are denied their fundamental rights, including the ability to appear in public without a male escort or to engage in any economic activity.



Scene: A world of Abyss

This (*The Breadwinner* 00:05:02) is the visual representation of the oppressive environment in which Parvana and other women live under Taliban rule. It emphasizes the restrictions placed on them. This moment serves as a backdrop for Parvana's journey, highlighting the challenges she faces as she navigates a world filled with danger and despair. The dark imagery evokes feelings of entrapment by symbolizing the societal constraints on women, making them invisible pieces of objects in a society. The burqa is not just a piece of garment but a barrier—a type of wall, a boundary that hides individuality and imposes silence. This perspective aligns with Bal's notion that objects and settings in a narrative are not neutral (Bal 137); they carry emotional and ideological weight depending on how they are presented. Parvana's observations of women cloaked in burqas reveal her understanding of their loss of freedom. The darkness surrounding the characters reflects the societal constraints that reinforce the oppressive narratives based on the exploration of the theme of gender identity. The composition may evoke feelings of claustrophobia, drawing the audience into the characters' experiences. The darkness serves as a metaphor for the oppressive environment.

This scene uses darkness as a signifier of oppression by showing it to be more than simply a lack of light. The depiction of a small, dark space evokes feelings of terror and despair, mirroring the inner conflicts of the characters, especially women who are subjected to social norms. They feel vulnerable and trapped. By using darkness as a signifier, the figure elicits strong emotional responses from the audience, creating an atmosphere of tension and desperation that allows viewers to bond with the characters' situation. Additionally, the visual representation of darkness reinforces the theme of invisibility, where women are frequently forced to navigate their lives in the shadows, both literally and metaphorically. This demonstrates how a simple element, like a dark space, can convey complex themes of enslavement, enriching the narrative and deepening the audience's emotional engagement with the characters' experiences.

Bal's concept of focalization explores how the story is mediated through specific perspectives in the film (page xx). Parvana's view of her world is shaped by the cultural and political oppression of women. The darkness and the anonymity enforced by the burqa serve as external focalized elements that reinforce Parvana's internal struggle. The dimly lit settings, such as the shadowy streets or confined spaces, echo the societal constraints placed on women, symbolizing their lack of visibility and agency. This focalization evokes a sense of entrapment and vulnerability, making the audience experience the claustrophobia and fear that define the women's existence. The burqa, seen through Parvana's eyes, not only constrains movement and visibility but also represents the societal erasure of individuality, creating a focalized tension between survival and agency. Darkness becomes a metaphor for the oppressive environment where women are invisible and powerless. By using Parvana's experiences as illustrations for these symbols, the film not only challenges oppression but also arouses viewer empathy, which increases the impact and reliability of women's struggles.

Roland Barthes's theory focuses on the concepts of signifier and signified. These concepts analyze how *The Breadwinner* uses the burqa and darkness to represent dominance and oppression of women in a society. These elements function as signs that carry meanings within the film's narrative and visual structure. *The Breadwinner's* depiction of women in burqas in dimly lit spaces is a powerful representation of oppression, representing the weight of societal erasure and patriarchal survival. The burqa is acting as

a signifier, a piece of cloth that represents multiple meanings, as explained by Barth in his concept of the garment system (Barth 26). Three interconnected layers—the real garment, the represented garment, and the described garment—make up the system's conceptualization of garments as a semiotic system. People's actual, tangible clothes are referred to as the "Real Garment." The visual representation of that apparel, whether it be in pictures, drawings, or ads, it is known as the Represented Garment, and it serves to moderate how people view the item. The vocal or written description of the clothing, which is available in fashion magazines or catalogs, shapes the way that people understand it through language. Because it turns clothes into a linguistic sign system, creating cultural meaning and ideology even when the actual object is not there, the Described Garment is especially significant to Barthes. Through this triadic approach, Barthes demonstrates how fashion communicates through the visual and linguistic framing of clothing in the media and culture, in addition to what we wear. The garment system is the idea that clothes are more than just things that are worn. They are also a set of signs that express meaning, like language. Clothing conveys social, cultural, and ideological implications.

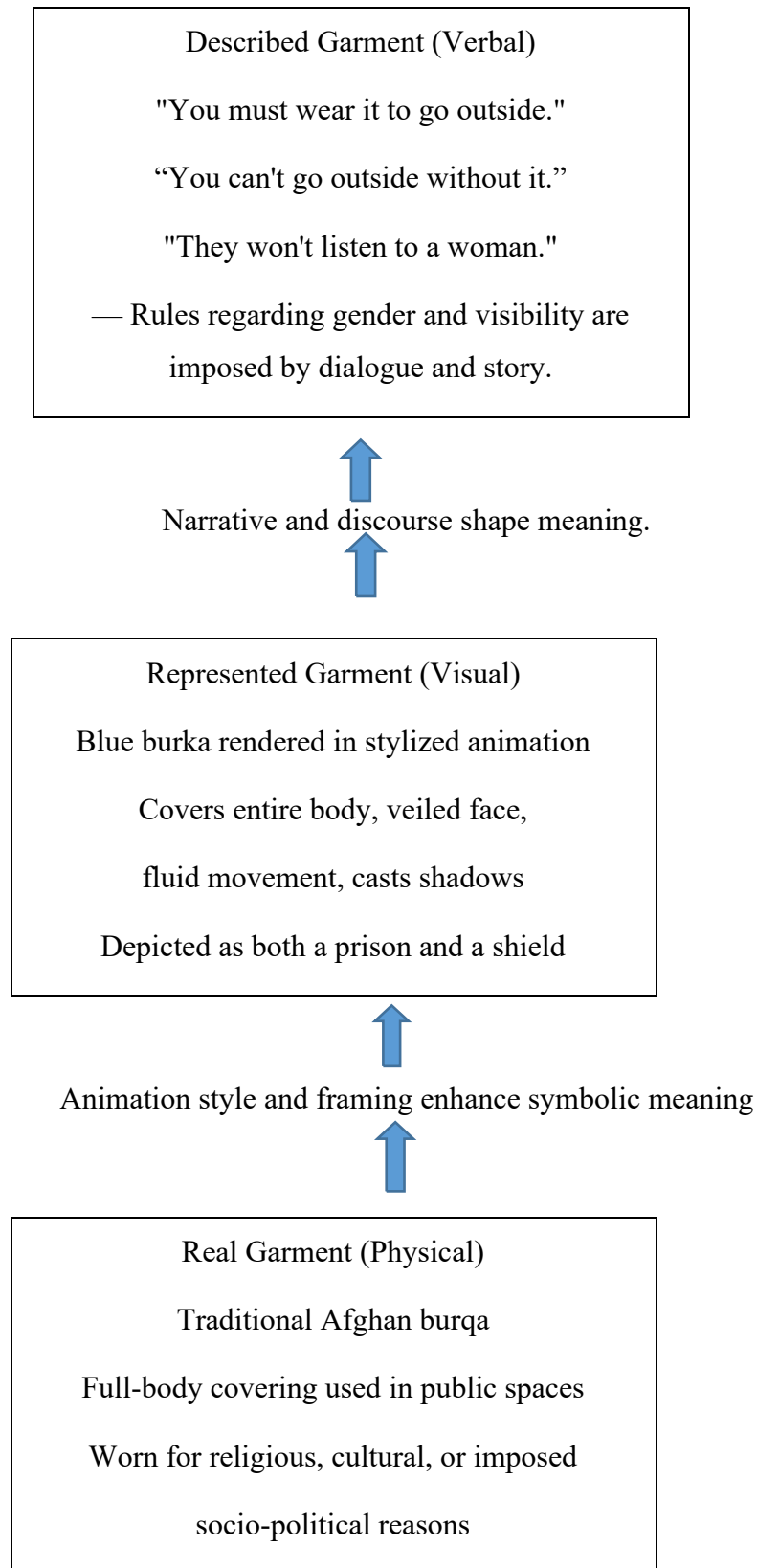


Diagram: The Garment System —*The Breadwinner* Burka

It signifies oppression by symbolizing how women's identities are erased in a male-dominant society. The enforced oblivion of the burqa in *The Breadwinner* visually symbolizes the erasure of female agency and individuality, reducing women to invisible presences in public space. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic lens, the burqa operates as a sign — its denotation being a garment, but its connotation revealing a deeper ideological system of control, fear, and gendered suppression. However, this symbol carries a paradoxical duality: while it represents oppression, it also becomes a survival strategy. In the terrorized visual landscape of Taliban-controlled Kabul, the burqa serves as a form of protection — allowing limited movement and visibility in an otherwise hostile environment. This visual duality reinforces how women navigate and adapt within oppressive systems. Mieke Bal's concept of focalization further deepens this reading: we often see through Parvana's eyes, which frames the burqa not as a static symbol but as a dynamic negotiation of identity and resistance. Darkness, as another crucial signifier in these scenes, encodes fear, danger, and the ever-present threat of violence. The shadowy visual settings mirror both the literal danger women face and the metaphorical societal invisibility imposed on them. This interplay of visual codes and narrative perspective addresses my research questions by illustrating how animated documentaries like *The Breadwinner* use semiotic and narrative strategies to explore themes of survival and transformation while evoking strong emotional and cognitive engagement from the viewer.

The burqa's association with darkness produces a metaphor for women's oppression. They represent a world in which women are hushed, kept concealed, and compelled to live in the shadows. In the background, Idrees's voice is showcasing the dominance of males over the opposite gender. He asserts, "I saw you serving, woman. I saw it with my own eyes" (*The Breadwinner*, 00:02:02). The strict gender rules that are upheld in the context of the film are reflected in this line, which is spoken with contempt and is meant to establish authority. Layers of tension and anxiety are added by the background voices in this moment, which represent the ongoing attention and criticism Parvana and her family face. This scene effectively highlights the limitations that society places on women and establishes the tone for the film's examination of defiance and fortitude in the face of such injustice. These elements, which are not only part of the scene but have deep significance according to Barthes' semiotic perspective that highlights the

social and emotional hardships faced by women in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. The visual representation of Parvana's persona, which is dark when she is portrayed as a girl and light and colorful when she presents herself as a boy, is a potent metaphor of the junction of gender and power. She dresses like a boy in scenes that are brighter and more colorful, suggesting freedom and movement on both a social and physical level. A feeling of agency, independence, and empowerment characterizes these times. Parvana's oppression, confinement, and the limitations society places on her because of her gender, on the other hand, are reflected in the muted and darker visual environment when she is depicted as a girl.

The burka serves as a visible reflection of the restrictions and control placed on women in Afghanistan during the Taliban's rule, in addition to being a symbol of modesty or religious observance. The blackness around her represents her mental condition, reflecting her emotions of anguish, repression, and despair. A visual indication that conveys the emotional and mental strain of living under a government that restricts women's and girls' rights, the burka's physical and metaphorical restriction serves as a metaphor for the emotional weight of depression.



Scene: Birth of a Parallel World

As shown in the scenes (*The Breadwinner* 00:10:35) and (*The Breadwinner* 00:26:30), the concept of freedom is perceived as more easily accessible to men than to women due to the historical and political structures that have shaped gender roles in the region. For men, the concept of freedom is characterized by power, control, and the capacity to act in public, whereas, for women, freedom has sometimes been characterized by defiance of social norms and the struggle for fundamental rights. This highlights the sharp contrast between the freedoms allowed to men and the restrictions placed on women. Parvana's transformation into a male represents her and the women's struggle against the oppression based on gender that restricts her autonomy. The viewer's emotional reaction is colored by this contrast, which uses light and dark to visually connect the themes of gender and power. In addition to strengthening the narrative, the visuals help the audience grasp how gender impacts one's ability to exercise personal authority and independence, particularly in a sociopolitical setting where being a woman or girl is associated with oppression and limited opportunities. Through these nuances, it effectively communicates the internal and external problems encountered by Parvana, making it a great illustration of how animation, particularly visual tactics, may be utilized to investigate complex emotional and cognitive reactions tied to gender and power dynamics.

Parvana's disguise as a boy becomes her entry into a world from which she is excluded. This transformation is not just about her survival; it is a direct challenge to the enforced gender norms that dictate women's invisibility and subservience. The decision is not just about her survival but also an assertion of power within a society where women are oppressed, suppressed, and voiceless. By choosing to present this moment from Parvana's perspective, the film emphasizes her agency within a restrictive system. This aligns with Bal's view that focalization allows the narrative to reflect not only the character's internal state but also the social dynamics (Bal, page 09). Parvana's disguise grants her freedom. It exposes the nature of empowerment. The focalization emphasizes the constant tension she faces, as the threat of being discovered becomes visible in her every action. This is central to understanding the societal constraints placed on women in her world. Her ability to access the public sphere and provide for her family at a significant personal risk.



Scene—A Hint of Change

As shown in the Scene (*Breadwinner* 00:01:46), Parvana undergoes a dramatic transformation from a young child to take the persona of a boy, Atish, which is represented by her relationship with clothes. The transformation is foreshadowed in the opening scenes of the film, where Parvana's favorite clothes are put up for sale in her father's shop, and later when she takes on a male identity. The clothing in this moment serves as a symbol of Parvana's gendered status as a female, drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. They represent her feminine identity and conventional social norms and are rich in cultural significance. According to Barthes' theory of signification, Parvana's decision to sell her beloved clothing is not just a financial transaction but also a visual sign-change that signals the impending dissolution of her bond with her previous identity as a girl bound by social norms. She rejects the passive identity that has been forced upon her, symbolically, by leaving those clothes behind.

As the narrative goes on, Parvana undergoes a dramatic change in both her physical and emotional characteristics as she takes on the male identity of Atish. According to Barthes' semiotics, this shift would be interpreted as a transition from one set of signs—the girlhood signs—to another, signifying a new identity—an identity of a boy. The shift from feminine to masculine attire highlights Parvana's mental and emotional transformation as she adopts a powerful persona that enables her to deal with the restrictive

environment she lives in. Clothing thus becomes more than just fabric; it becomes a significant symbol of Parvana's quest for survival and self-determination.

From Mieke Bal's narratology and focalization, this transitional moment is also important for the audience's perception of Parvana's inner world: Early on, the emphasis on Parvana's relationship with her favorite clothing emphasizes her emotional attachment to her identity as a girl and the impending sense of loss when those clothes are no longer hers; as Parvana transforms into Atish, the change in focalization reveals her internal transformation—her subjective experience of this change and her developing sense of agency. Through this shift, Bal's framework enables us to comprehend how Parvana's clothing is not only a visual symbol but also a narrative device that conveys her increasing autonomy and rejection of traditional gender roles (Bal 06). A visual foreshadowing of Parvana's transformation occurs when her favorite clothes are put up for sale at the start of the film. This phase in the narrative can be understood as a symbolic and cognitive turning point. When the garments are for sale, Parvana's life enters a new phase where her identity is determined by her capacity to assume a new position in the world, symbolized by her adoption of Atish's male character, rather than by social norms.

Bal's theory allows us to see how the narrative uses Parvana's internal perspective to highlight these risks and limitations. By focusing on her fear and determination, the film underscores the emotional and psychological toll of living in disguise. The audience becomes aware of the fragility of her empowerment. Internal focalization serves to deepen the audience's emotional involvement with her struggles. The viewer is placed directly within Parvana's subjective experiences.

Parent-child relationships, particularly between fathers and daughters, often serve as a powerful and more emotional bond. These bonds are marked by trust, love, and guidance. The relationship between Parvana and Nurullah encapsulates these dynamics, providing emotional resilience and thematic depth to the story. Nurullah tells her a story about their land's history. Nurullah says, "Let's continue our study, alright?" and Parvana replies, "Yes, Baba" (*The Breadwinner*, 00:02:20). It is a sweet scene that emphasizes the close relationship between a father and daughter. Particularly in light of the repressive social pressures that surround them, the simplicity of their interaction communicates

warmth and mutual reliance. In addition to reflecting the emotional and intimate intimacy in their relationship, the term "Baba" as a term of affection captures the familial love that drives Parvana's path of self-discovery and resilience. The scene is dominated by Parvana's internal focalization, emphasizing her admiration and emotional connection to her father. The shots of her listening to her father convey her reliance on his wisdom and storytelling as a source of comfort and identity. The narrative perspective in *The Breadwinner* highlights Nurullah's function as Parvana's emotional fulcrum, bringing the audience's perspective into line with Parvana's, in accordance with Mieke Bal's idea of focalization. His narratives serve as a means of cultural resilience and preservation, reaffirming the connection between individual stories and collective memory (Bal 145). Émile Benveniste's theory of deixis, which emphasizes how narrative constructs the speaking subject through positional markers like "I," "you," or "here," enhances the analysis in this context. Benveniste argues that the essence of language is not in reference but rather in the subjectivity needed to communicate (Benveniste 22). This concept makes a compelling case for the cultural significance of narrative in forming subjectivity and resistance by illuminating the junction of individual and collective identities.



Scene: A bond of Strength and Resilience

As shown in the scene (*The Breadwinner* 00:05:15), this scene is not only a father-daughter moment but also has the richness of symbolic meaning. This scene perfectly captures the

emotional bond between Parvana and her family, bringing to light their common challenges. The characters' expressions and body language emphasize the idea of resilience by expressing a sense of support and mutual understanding.

Through Parvana's perspective, the audience gains an understanding of the emotional bond she shares with her family, particularly with her father. By adopting her viewpoint, the film immerses viewers in her experiences, thoughts, and feelings, allowing them to witness the depth of her relationships. This internal focalization underlines how these familial ties serve as a source of strength amid the hardships the individuals endure. The audience observes how Parvana pulls resilience and optimism from her connection with her father, which is particularly crucial in a setting marked by persecution and misery. Their encounters' emotional weight highlights the value of family as a support system, demonstrating that these ties are not only intimate but also essential for surviving in difficult situations. Viewers can also understand the subtleties of love, trust, and guidance that defines Parvana's relationships by seeing them through her eyes. This viewpoint highlights that, in spite of the outside challenges individuals face, the resilience they acquire from family relationships is essential to their capacity to persevere and withstand.

Nurullah's voice, the words he speaks, his presence as a father, and the act of storytelling itself are playing the main role in the life of Parvana. Nurullah's storytelling serves a dual purpose. It acts as a vehicle for cultural preservation, passing down the history and values of their land to his daughter. His calm tone underscores the importance of oral traditions in maintaining cultural identity in the face of adversity. Nurullah narrates a story to Parvana about the past—the history. He says,

A fractured land in the claws of the Hindu Kush mountains, scorched by fiery eyes in the northern desert ... Stories remind us of the great cost. Everything changes, Parvana. Stories remind us of that (*The Breadwinner*, 00:02:52 - 00:05:13).

Through these simple but powerful symbols, the film communicates how vital it is to keep history and traditions alive, especially in times of hardship. On the other hand, the story functions as a source of personal strength for Parvana. It also represents the survival and resilience of their family and culture, even in the midst of political and social oppression.



Scene: The Birth of Hope and Strength

The three scenes in a single frame in *The Breadwinner* emphasize the concepts of strength, bravery, and kinship ties. A tale of bravery is depicted in the first scene, which represents Parvana's inner strength as she faces the threats in her environment (*The Breadwinner* 00:18:10). In the second scene, Parvana is narrating her brother a story, illustrating her function as a family storyteller and guardian (*The Breadwinner* 00:17:49). Last but not least, the third scene shows the boy's journey, reflecting Parvana's own fight for survival and highlighting their shared courage and fortitude (*The Breadwinner* 00:30:41). Storytelling is an effective method that operates as a kind of resistance in addition to communicating survival and resilience. By recounting a boy's trip, Parvana demonstrates how the boy's hardship is similar to her own. *The Breadwinner's* storytelling is a dynamic, open place where meaning is always being created, according to the text, as a site of meaning production. Every aspect of the boy's story, including his suffering and tenacity, has layers of significance that mirror Parvana's own survival, making her retelling of it a

semiotic act. The idea of the "*Death of the Author*" as put out by Barthes is consistent with Parvana's empowerment via narrative (Bal 60). Her story becomes an active process of fending off the forces that seek to silence her rather than only a passive recounting. The narrative perspective affects our perception of a story and heightens Parvana's storytelling's emotional impact. According to Bal's idea, the narrator is both the character and the one who determines the story's meaning, highlighting the connection between the narrator and the narrative. From her perspective, Parvana's narration produces two layers of experience: she is the one who feels the trials and the one who turns them into a tale of survival. Because of his extreme adversity, the youngster in her story becomes a reflection of herself, and his journey mirrors the emotional and physical one she is going through. The story gains depth from this dynamic focalization since it allows us to witness the boy's difficulties and comprehend them via Parvana's perspective.

Through her internal focalization, the audience witnesses how her father's words inspire hope and resilience, qualities that become central to her character arc. Nurullah's voice, calm and deliberate, contrasts with the turmoil of their environment, symbolizing stability. The story itself is rich with imagery of a past that serves as a metaphor for hope. Through Parvana's perspective, the audience feels the profound impact of her father's words, not just as a narrative device but as a testament to the power of oral traditions in forging identity and resilience. The interplay of light and shadow in this scene—with the warm glow highlighting Nurullah's face—visually reinforces his role as a guiding figure in Parvana's life. The camera work in this scene is instrumental in aligning the viewer's perspective with Parvana's. Close-up shots of her face capture her attention and emotional connection to her father. By this moment, through her internal focalization, the film immerses the audience in her experience, showcasing the profound impact of her father's words on her identity and strength.

Bal's framework helps to trace how the narrative is not merely narrated about Parvana, but through her, shaping the viewer's access to the world via her inner thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. The political and personal aspects of the story are interpreted via the complex, emotive lens created by this internal focalization. The film can also be interpreted as a system of sign where visual components, such as Parvana's shifting appearance, the use of light and shadow, or her father's stories, serve a symbolic purpose.

thanks to Barthes' semiotics. These indicators refer to more general themes of identity, resistance, and memory; they are not neutral; rather, they are emotionally and culturally laden. By doing this, *The Breadwinner* creates a strong bond between the audience and Parvana's changing inner world while conveying significance both narratively and visually.

The family is able to maintain their identity even during the most difficult circumstances since the story serves as a kind of resistance. By using the focalized perspective, telling stories turns into a survival tactic. Nurullah's history is not merely about the past; it is also about how the stories that people choose to remember and tell each other affect the present and the future. The emotional weight of this scene is important, as the act of storytelling not only strengthens the bond between father and daughter but also carries a sense of hope and resilience.



Scene: A shattered world

As shown in the scene (*The Breadwinner* 00:10:22), she is a child caught in a terrifying moment. This is to symbolize the devastation caused by war and the impact of Taliban rule on Afghan society. The imagery of destruction serves as a powerful reminder of the loss of normalcy and safety. The camera rarely leaves her perspective, creating a sense of confinement and tension, as if the audience is trapped within her limited point of view. Parvana, as the focalizer, is powerless in the face of the soldiers' violence, and this powerlessness is felt deeply by the audience. In this way, the audience is not just a passive

observer but is drawn into Parvana's internal world. The audience feels her confusion and the heartbreaking realization that her father is being taken away from her. The focus on Parvana's point of view through internal focalization allows the film to evoke a stronger emotional response and heightens the sense of injustice and loss of identity. The event becomes not only an act of personal loss for Parvana but also an illustration of the systemic oppression.

A visual setting that reflects the characters' emotional experiences is created by the muted colors and broken imagery, which successfully evoke a sense of sadness and despair. Barthes asserts that these visual components function as signifiers with emotional significance. Muted colors like grays, browns, and dull tones generate feelings of sadness and gloom, signifying the loss of vitality and life in a place devastated by conflict. The lack of vibrant hues serves to further emphasize the concept of hopelessness, implying that the pain of war has eclipsed happiness and optimism. The fractured graphics, characterized by broken photos and fragmentary arrangements, likewise reflect the chaos of living in such places.

The narrative is improved by the muted colors and disjointed imagery. These muted colors highlight the characters' experiences of hopelessness and despair in a world filled with conflict. Together, these artistic decisions bring to light the psychological and emotional toll that war takes by allowing the viewer to empathize with the individuals more deeply and understand the far-reaching consequences of their situation. This fragmentation shows how trauma impacts the character's mental and emotional states. It not only mirrors the chaos in the outside world but also represents the psychological fragmentation they go through.

The arrest of Nurullah also serves as a catalyst for Parvana's courage and resilience, pushing her to take on the responsibility of being the family's provider. This scene is important because it encapsulates how oppression is not just a form of pain and suffering, but it is also a force that can speed up the acts of resistance and change, especially through Parvana's development, who actively resists oppression. Her development demonstrates that oppression, while painful and limiting, can also serve as a powerful force for personal transformation and resistance. Through this event, Parvana's journey becomes a broader

metaphor for the human capacity to overcome the constraints imposed by unjust systems, illustrating the profound strength that can emerge from even the most oppressive circumstances.

The arrest of Parvana's father acts as a signifier that focuses much more than the literal act of a man being detained by the soldiers. The physical actions involved in the arrest, including the soldiers' approach, the handcuffing of her father, the aggression in their demeanor—serve as signs that convey a meaning beyond their context. These actions are framed in a way that communicates the brutality and authoritarian nature of the Taliban regime. The arrest symbolizes the systemic suppression of an entire population. The fact that Parvana's father, a former teacher, is targeted and detained without explanation acts as a signifier of the social and political oppression enforced by the Taliban. The film's thematic examination of injustice resonates strongly with this physical act of imprisonment, which turns into a symbol of the devastation of intellectual and cultural freedom. The arrest represents the loss of security and stability in Parvana's life. Parvana is thrust into a world where she must face the threats of an oppressive culture alone after her father abruptly gets arrested, as he serves as a symbol of both safety and a link to the outside world. In Afghan society under the Taliban, where women and children like Parvana are oppressed not just by physical violence but also by the denial of education, freedom, and opportunity, the symbol can also stand for the imposition of strict gender roles. Since the Taliban's rise to power frequently involved the repression of information, free thought, and artistic expression, the imprisonment of Parvana's father—an educated man—is also a symbolic act of stifling intellectual discourse.

The home is a representation - a place of security, comfort, and family unity. In the film it's a world of ease where Parvana and her family live together, share meals, and experience a sense of normalcy despite the threat of Taliban oppression. The destruction of their home symbolizes the larger cultural and personal devastation the family faces. Parvana's father's imprisonment results in the family's displacement, leaving them without a secure home. When the soldiers arrest her father, it marks the beginning of their displacement. His imprisonment is an act of political violence, but it also triggers the literal destruction of the family's sense of home. With the loss of the father, the stability of the family is shattered. The home becomes a place of fear rather than comfort, where the

oppressive forces threaten to tear apart the very fabric of their lives. The loss of home signifies the loss of cultural heritage. Under the Taliban, educational institutions are closed. Parvana's father's work as a teacher, which represents an intellectual and cultural connection to the past that is stripped away. Their home is destroyed after his imprisonment, signifying the loss of not just a place to live in but also a way of life that is based on freedom, education, and cultural identity. The family's displacement thus becomes a symbol of the broader cultural erasure taking place in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The family's experience of displacement is not only isolated to Parvana but is also a reflection of the experiences of many Afghan families during the time of the Taliban's rule. The film captures the widespread destruction of homes and lives of the people, where families were torn apart, either by violence, imprisonment, or displacement. Parvana's home represents all those who have lost their place of belonging. The destruction of her home becomes a microcosm of the larger tragedy of the Afghan people—facing a loss of not just home and identity, but also a hope for a better future. It sets in motion a narrative of survival and resilience. Parvana and her family must negotiate a world in which home is a faraway memory rather than a haven.

The catalytic moment of the film is the moment of transformation - when Parvana cuts down her hair to disguise herself as a boy to support her family. This act of haircutting is deeply symbolic, representing identity, resistance, and cultural oppression. It is an important moment in both the narrative and character arc, marking her introduction into the adult world of survival and sacrifice. This life-changing moment is serving as a catalytic reaction for Parvana's transformation. When Parvana cuts her hair, she disguises herself as a guy and takes on the persona of "Atish" in order to obtain the freedom she needs to provide for her family. This action changes the focus from passive resistance to active resistance.

The audience is able to see Parvana's mental state and resolve up close because of the camera work in this scene, which includes close-ups of her face while she cuts her hair. The audience realizes that the act is about more than just survival; it's also about taking back control of her identity because of this close focalization. The animation highlights her subconscious actions by inviting the audience to sympathize with her struggle. Bal's narratological concepts help us recognize how the external action of cutting hair links to

the larger narrative of resistance and self-discovery. It shows Parvana is not only reacting to the events around her but also actively shaping her own destiny.

In *The Breadwinner*, Mieke Bal's idea of focalization and Roland Barthes' semiotic theory may both be used to critically analyze Parvana's decision to cut her hair and adopt a masculine identity as a visual and narrative pivot. Bal claims that focalization is about how vision is filtered and influenced by narrative actors rather than just who can see (Bal 06). Here, the viewer is progressively brought into line with Parvana's changing consciousness, first as a scared young woman bound by gendered expectations and then as an independent agent negotiating the dangerous landscape of Taliban-run Kabul. By allowing the audience to experience the psychological conflict between being visible and invisible in public, her haircut signals a change in focalization. Hence, the metamorphosis is not just exterior but also serves as a lens through which the story is relived.

By interpreting visual codes as systems of signs with culturally charged meanings, Barthes' semiotics expands on this interpretation. Hair cutting serves as a symbol of rupture—between youth and adulthood, quiet and speech, obedience and defiance. The short hair functions on what Barthes would refer to as the connotative level, which is where deeper ideological meanings are found, and becomes a symbol of both sacrifice and survival. During this phase, the animation's subdued color scheme and striking contrasts highlight Parvana's emotional burden and the loss of innocence. Such visual components are not neutral according to Barthes' theory; rather, they are laden signifiers that tell stories of pain and resiliency without the need of words.



Scene: A moment of oblivion

As shown in the scene (*The Breadwinner* 00:23:09) when Parvana decides to change her appearance by cutting down her hair, it's not just a physical act; it is about a deeply emotional and cognitive choice. This event is a mirror of the larger social forces that determine how people ought to act according to their gender. In addition to being personal, Parvana's battle is representative of the difficulties encountered by several women in comparable restrictive settings. She defies the conventions that aim to keep her in a subservient status as she tries to fulfill the job of breadwinner.

The scene's representation of oblivion represents a significant loss of the character's agency. The depiction of a character in a contemplative moment implies a halt or stillness in which the character is obviously preoccupied. The direct portrayal of their mental state is provided by this literal representation. The meaning behind this imagery, however, goes far beyond its obvious interpretation. The character's thoughts are tinged with feelings of bewilderment and powerlessness, which mirror the emotional strain placed on them by their situation. People who live in repressive environments frequently have a sense of helplessness and despair, which is reflected in this internal fight. Their inner thoughts and the harshness of their surroundings are not in sync, as seen by the stark contrast between the moment's quiet and the upheaval and volatility of their external reality. The illustration

highlights the character's inner suffering by focusing on their moment of oblivion. It implies that the character is facing insurmountable obstacles that make them feel stuck and unsure of their future. The visual components that surround the character—which could include muted or dark colors, broken images, or other oppressive symbols—further amplify this sensation of powerlessness. In addition to reflecting the character's own struggle, the figure's depiction of loss of agency also speaks to the experiences of many people dealing with comparable social pressures. The spectator is ultimately invited to sympathize with the character's predicament and comprehend the intricacies of their identity and agency in a difficult world by this imagery, which ultimately captures the emotional weight of their situation.

Through her internal focalization, we see how the act represents a loss of innocence but also a step toward survival. The audience is made aware of her internal conflict as she navigates the emotional weight of this transformation. Through Parvana's eyes, the audience not only witnesses her physical transformation but also experiences her internal evolution from a girl bound by societal constraints to a young person finding her way through a patriarchal system. The camera pauses on Parvana's actions, making the audience feel as if they are sharing in the intensity of the moment right there with her.

The use of light and shadow in this figure creates a contrast that enhances the feeling of oblivion. Dark, muted colors dominate the scene, evoking a sense of isolation and despair. The visual outlooks contribute to the overall mood of the audience by drawing them into Parvana's emotional state.



Scene: Parvana's Haircut: Transformation and Trap

As shown in the scene (*The Breadwinner* 00:23:50), the scene where Parvana cuts her hair is important for understanding her character and the narrative. Parvana's transition from a girl to a boy in order to survive in a culture ruled by men is symbolized by this crucial event. Her situation is complicated, as evidenced by the haircut, which represents both empowerment and the loss of her identity. The scene begins by focusing on the internal focalization of Parvana. Close-up shots reveal her emotions, like fear and determination. The audience is better able to comprehend Parvana's struggle and the pressure she faces from society because the scene is shown through her eyes, giving them a sense of her conflicted feelings—fear of losing her identity and resolution to protect her family. The sequence in which Chou reaches for the scissors is focalized through her internal state, revealing a profound personal transformation. As Mieke Bal argues, focalization is not merely about point of view, but about emotional access — here, the audience sees not only what Chou sees, but feels the weight of her decision. The careful visual framing of her gaze toward the scissors, followed by her hesitant act of cutting her hair, serves as a powerful semiotic moment. Using Roland Barthes' framework, the scissors and the act of hair-cutting function as symbolic signs — denoting a change in appearance, but connoting a deeper rejection of passivity and a movement toward survival. The completion of this act

by her elder sister reinforces the theme of shared resistance, with sisterhood becoming both a literal and symbolic support system. This moment communicates Chou's inner struggle, while visually representing the loss of her previous identity and the acceptance of a new, hardened self. As her altered appearance is met with silence and stares, the transformation becomes not only personal but socially recognized — signaling a turning point in both the narrative and in her character arc. This scene responds directly to my research questions by demonstrating how visual storytelling strategies — through gesture, gaze, and semiotic symbolism — amplify the emotional and cognitive impact of personal transformation in animated documentaries.



Scene: New Birth

As shown in the scene (*The Breadwinner* 00:23:27 and 00:24:20), she is depicted as a little child who is conscious of her surroundings yet is nevertheless constrained by them. The silent strain and the recognition that change is required are captured by the camera's focus on her face. This introspective moment highlights her emotional turmoil as she mulls over the risky course she is about to follow. The focalization changes in the second picture following Parvana's haircut. Her new look, which represents her external transformation and the start of her adventure as a guy, is now the main subject of the camera. The transformation of her image in the mirror signifies not just a surface-level alteration but

also a more profound narrative shift in which Parvana adopts a resistance role. In addition to being purely physical, this transformation has narrative significance since it signifies the point at which she takes on a new identity to protect her family and negotiate the world. The viewer is inspired to view her from a different angle, as someone who now possesses agency and the capacity to influence her own fate, by this change in focus, which reflects the change in her identity. Parvana says, “Do I look like a boy?” (*The Breadwinner* 00:24:22), a scene that captures a significant transformation in her character.

The first scene, in which Parvana examines herself in the mirror prior to cutting her hair, serves as a signifier—a visual cue with deeper cultural and personal meaning. Her long hair in this instance symbolizes her previous identity, which is connected to her early years and her role as a girl in a society that restricts women; the signified in this image is not only her appearance but also the identity she must abandon in order to survive in a patriarchal, oppressive world. The second scene, in which Parvana has short hair, is a new signifier and signifies her transformation, signifying her adoption of a male disguise in order to get away from the Taliban's restrictions. Here, the act of resistance, the survival strategy, and the assertion of agency in the face of hardship are given significance. She herself feels compelled to represent a new, stronger version of herself, which perfectly captures the change in her identity and role.

In these two scenes, the camera angles highlight the change even more. The close-up of Parvana's face in the mirror in the opening image concentrates on her expressions, conveying a feeling of introspection and discomfort. The reflection points to a turning point in her life, where she has to decide between preserving her past and surviving and living in a society that expects her to fit in. Using the same reflective surface with a different viewpoint, the second shot's framing of her short hair in the mirror stands out from the first. The change in her reflection represents the narrative's progression from victimization to empowerment and from passivity to action. By emphasizing the survival and the emotional sacrifice, this shift in the camera's visual framing of her supports the story's thematic transition.

The hair itself is a potent signifier that carries several levels of meaning in the context of the hair-cutting event. Denotatively stated, Parvana's haircut is merely a way for

her to disguise her gender. Parvana's change into a boy is a vital survival strategy in Afghanistan's cultural environment, where women are severely constrained by the Taliban's harsh regulations. But the hair-cutting scene has far more symbolic weight on a connotative level. Cutting one's hair can be interpreted as a rejection of conventional norms, as hair is frequently linked to identity, gender, and social positions. Long hair represents femininity, youth, and vulnerability in many cultures, whereas hair cutting frequently denotes a turning point or act of defiance.

The color and framing in visual storytelling significantly enhance the emotional weight of moments. It illustrates the tension between Parvana's newfound freedom and the societal limitations she faces. Colors play an important role in evoking specific emotions; muted tones like gray and brown symbolize despair and oppression, reflecting Parvana's struggles. In contrast, brighter colors during her moments of empowerment signify hope and individuality by creating a visual contrast that emphasizes her desire for freedom amidst oppression. Close-ups of her face allow the audience to connect with her internal conflicts, while wide shots can depict her isolation within a vast, oppressive environment. This contrast serves as a visual representation of her struggle against societal standards. The filmmakers successfully portray Parvana's journey by deftly fusing these components, enabling audiences to empathize with both her persona and the broader themes of oppression and resilience.

In *The Breadwinner*, Parvana's choice of cutting her hair goes beyond simple disguise; it is a symbolic and visual act of defiance against the gender norms that constrain her. According to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, hair functions as a sign; it was once associated with femininity, obedience, and domesticity, but it is now reinterpreted as a sign of survival and rebellion. In addition to hiding who she is, Parvana actively creates a new identity by cutting off her hair, which enables her to function in a culture that routinely silences women. Since the audience sees this act through Parvana's emotional lens rather than from an outside viewpoint, Mieke Bal's concept of focalization aids in further unraveling this metamorphosis. The viewer is made aware of the emotional and cognitive weight of her choice by focusing on her hesitancy, resolve, and apparent transformation. This scene exemplifies the film's overarching visual and narrative approach, which uses personal transformation through intimate symbolic gestures. In doing so, it directly answers

my research questions by demonstrating how focalized visual storytelling and semiotic codes combine to increase the viewer's emotional and cognitive engagement with animated documentaries.

In a symbolic break with the expectations society places on her, Parvana chopped off her hair and dressed like a boy. Her act of disobedience against gender norms is an attempt to regain her agency as well as to survive. Parvana's transformation from an observer of the oppression around her into an active participant in resistance emphasizes how oppression can spark personal transformation that leads to collective resistance. The scene highlights the powerful implications of even minor actions of resistance. Parvana's decision to take on a male identity and provide for her family represents a break from the cycle of oppression, suggesting that the fight for agency, even in a small personal way, can challenge the larger systems of control. It conveys the idea that individual acts have the capacity to upend unfair power dynamics.



Scene: A Time of Change

As shown in the scene (*The Breadwinner* 00:22:58), Parvana's transformation from a daughter to the family's breadwinner is symbolized by the scene in which she finishes tapping her father's picture. Her father's torn picture is a signifier—it represents both the loss of her father and the effects of the Taliban's violence on Parvana's family. The incomplete image of her father's face represents the trauma and disruption caused by the regime, and the signified is not only the physical image of her father but also the emotional and societal void left in his absence. As Parvana uses a pen to draw the missing smile on another piece of paper, this act becomes a new signifier, symbolizing her attempt to emotionally and physically repair what was damaged. The pen-drawn smile turns into a representation of hope and agency as Parvana assumes the position of breadwinner and fills the void left by her father's absence. She is assuming responsibility for her family's survival by finishing the picture.

The point of focus changes as we move from the first picture of the ripped photograph to the second one in which Parvana paints the smile again. The camera emphasizes the emotional impact of the loss in the opening frame by focusing on the unfinished image. Parvana is the main point of this focus, expressing her grief and sense of unfulfilled potential. Her hands and the drawing process become the main focus as she starts to sketch the smile. Here, the camera highlights her employment of the pen to symbolically repair her father's picture, signifying her shift from a passive observer to an active participant in the family's survival. The attention on her hand, which is moving purposefully, strengthens her sense of accountability.

Intimate camera work is used here, maybe combining a medium view of Parvana's face and a close-up of her hands to convey her resolution and focus. A subtle change in camera perspective could emphasize Parvana's increasing resolve and character development. The scene's emotional tone is mostly communicated via the background music. At first, the creepy and melancholy music captures the gloomy atmosphere and the sorrow Parvana experiences following the death of her father. The repressive atmosphere she lives in, which restricts her and her family's freedom, is highlighted by this song. However, as she finishes the smile, the music changes a little, becoming less melancholy and more joyful—signaling the change in Parvana's role. The change in musical note reflects her emotional metamorphosis, signifying her acceptance of responsibility and the

rise of hope in a pessimistic world. The new, slightly more upbeat tone signifies the start of her journey as the breadwinner, signifying a transition from hopelessness to resilience.

This moment highlights how visual signs convey layered meanings. By combining the signifier and signified, Barthes' model of the sign enables us to understand Parvana's ripped photograph as more than just a tangible item. The broken and unfinished picture of her father becomes a visual representation of both political tyranny and personal grief. In addition to being a simple absence, the missing facial part is a symbolic representation of the Taliban's eradication of father authority and the shattered identity of a family. According to Barthes, signals are dynamic and take part in a mythic system of meaning production, where the myth is one of resiliency and healing (Barth 12). By using a pen to draw the smile, Parvana transforms the action into a new signifier that shifts the focus from mourning to agency. The meaning changes from death and despair to life, action, and emotional healing with this pen-drawn addition. Although the smile is not "real," its symbolic weight conveys emotional truth, turning the picture into a symbol of defiance and survival.



Scene: A Cracker in Ashes

As shown in the scene (*The Breadwinner* 00:35:25), the audience can see how Parvana's mindset shifts from her fear and uncertainty to determination and her responsibility. The texture and color of the scene enhance the meaning by creating a stark contrast between the remnants of the past and the harshness of the present. This figure represents 'hope' amidst destruction. The imagery of a small, fragile object in a devastated landscape symbolizes the resilience of the human spirit and the possibility of rebuilding. Her view of the shop and the work she does there is now entwined with the need to survive. Through her eyes, Parvana portrays the scene, making her survival instincts the main focus. This changes how the environment is perceived, not just as her father's workspace but as a crucial place for her family's sustenance. The symbolic weight of the shop, a space of knowledge and communication, now reflects Parvana's personal strength and her resilience. As she steps into her father's shoes, her sense of defiance grows. Her actions convey a strong resistance against the patriarchy and the restrictions imposed on women. Through her eyes, we understand how the act of taking over the shop represents an act of quiet rebellion, asserting herself in a society that seeks to strip away her rights. Her Internal focalization allows the viewer to experience her struggle with her identity as a girl forced into a male disguise. She has mixed feelings since she understands that taking on the job of breadwinner requires her to give up her upbringing and take on a duty that society doesn't often identify with her gender. The directors emphasize the emotional impact of the scene by maintaining a stationary camera. Since her father's teaching in the business is a silent act of disobedience in a society that severely restricts females' access to education, the shot's static quality serves to further emphasize the concept that Parvana is doing something important and revolutionary but also risky. This quiet heightens the scene's emotional effect by providing a contemplative place where viewers may comprehend the significance of the moment without being distracted. The scene of a shop is essential for exploring this evolving sense of identity. Her inner truth struggles with losing her purity and realizing that she must adapt herself to a society that forces women to adopt constrictive identities if she wants to remain alive.

The audience perceives the shop's changed significance as an extension of Parvana's developing identity rather than just a physical location, and she becomes the focalizing agent. The way she interprets the space determines its meaning; it becomes an

active source of resistance rather than a passive, inherited structure. The store is no longer solely her father's, according to Bal, who sees it as a symbolic battleground where Parvana must choose between selfhood and survival. Additionally, the shop is seen as a signifier through the theory of Barthes, since its offerings represent identity, knowledge, and resistance. According to Barthes, the act of occupying that space and carrying out traditionally male tasks turns into a myth: a manufactured story of resistance inscribed in the image of a girl disguising as a boy and regaining agency via her father's teachings. By presenting Parvana's internal turmoil and spatial exchanges as profoundly symbolic acts influenced by culture, gender, and power, these theoretical tools enable us to see beyond the literal narrative.

This connects the themes of survival and the power of storytelling. It is the illustration of hope in the darkest times - a flicker of hope that can inspire change and resilience. The visual representation of this hope serves as a reminder of the strength found in community and shared narratives.



Scene: An Embodiment of whole

As shown in the scene (*The Breadwinner* 00:49:50), Parvana and her friend Shazia, who has also disguised herself as a boy, sat together in a scene that represents the larger social

difficulties under the Taliban government. This moving scene, where two teenage girls take on male identities in order to survive, illustrates the fortitude needed to withstand repressive conditions.

The disguise articles that Parvana and Shazia are wearing—i.e., clothes, cropped hair, and altered mannerisms—are the signifiers in this scene. In a culture that deprives women of agency, these external indicators represent agency, independence, and survival. But the signified is more than just that; it symbolizes the structural oppression of women and the extent to which they have to go to survive in a patriarchal culture. Their disguises represent the erasure of individuality and identity in the face of social restraints and go beyond simple survival. Boys' subtle acts of defiance against the system that deprives them of their humanity, such as sitting and sharing stories or dreams, symbolize their resistance to the odds.

Described Garment (Verbal)

"I'm able to obtain food. I'm able to make money.

"I'm a boy—I can go out now."

"I don't want to be a girl!"

Spoken lines highlight that in a patriarchal setting, wearing male attire gives one access, authority, and invisibility.

The way clothes define survival and gender roles is established through dialogue.



The emotional impact and urgency of dressing like a boy are established through narrative voice and dialogue.



Represented Garment (Visual)

Short hair, loose clothing and shirt

Dark, muted hues, baggy silhouette, and no scarf

Presented differently than other women and girls

Emotional tension and change are highlighted in visual storytelling.



The contrast between movement and restriction, visibility and disguise, is emphasized by the animation style and framing.



Real Garment (Physical)

Men's attire: short hair, loose attire

Afghan boys' clothing worn in public

used as a disguise to get into public places and survive.

Not merely a garment, but a cultural instrument that has been re-signified via usage.

Diagram: The Garment System —Clothes as Code: wearing Resistance

The act of dressing like a boy serves as a narrative and symbolic metamorphosis, indicating a change in Parvana's internal resolve as well as her outward identity. The garment functions as a coded signifier that conveys resistance within a patriarchal context, according to Barthes' theory. It transforms into a socially constructed emblem that subverts gender stereotypes and grants entry to areas that are otherwise off-limits, going beyond simple apparel. The boy's clothing gives Parvana the ability to move around, be seen, and speak in a society where women's visibility is restricted. The way the clothing rewrites the meaning of her body in public space is highlighted by the visual portrayal of this transition, which is further supported by subdued tones and immobile frame. As Barthes would imply, the connotation (freedom, defiance, and survival) unmask the deeper cultural and ideological meanings woven throughout the narrative, while the denotation (clothing) is straightforward.

Parvana and Shazia's shared perspectives serve as the major point of this scene. Their world of multiple identities—being girls at heart but having to adopt a boy's persona in order to survive—draws the viewer in. Their conversation, nonverbal cues, and body language all convey this dualism. The narrative is anchored by their discussions of their goals and hardships, which demonstrate how the problems of women and children under the Taliban government are reflected in their individual experiences. Bal's idea of focalization also highlights how their common experience represents a larger social story. As Shazia states about her dream in the scene,

I'm saving up too. Whatever money I can hide from my father, I keep, and it's mounting up to a nice little sum. See? I'm not going to stay here forever, you know. Have you ever been to the sea? No, neither have I, but... I've heard that the moon pulls the water onto the shore and then backs out again. I want to see that! I want to put my feet on the warm sand and have them cooled by the lapping water. What about your father? Does he depend on you? I am a good son. But he is not a good father. What will you do by the sea? I'd buy things and sell things as I do here, but for myself. There are people who go to the edge of the water just for nothing. They just sit there, and they look at the sea with their sunglasses on, or swim about on floating

tubes. So, I could sell them. You're amazing. But sell things. And maybe I'll join you (*The Breadwinner* 00:42:51).

The external world, represented by Shazia's aspirations to go to the sea, and Parvana's inner battles—her silent courage, anguish, and yearning for freedom—are alternately highlighted. These divergent points of view demonstrate both their personal tenacity and their shared representation of countless others in similar situations.

Close-ups of their faces highlight the minute details of their feelings, such as Shazia's longing for hope and Parvana's steely resolve. The two girls are positioned closely together in the frame, symbolizing their relationship and common suffering. Both their unity and the weight of the repressive world they live in are reflected in the composition.

The Breadwinner is an animated documentary that pushes the limits of visual storytelling by utilizing animation to portray the unvarnished emotional realities of oppression in a manner that live-action alone might find difficult to accomplish. It is more than just a straightforward coming-of-age tale; it uses Parvana's journey to examine the resilience needed to face injustice and the transformational potential of storytelling. Through its powerful character arcs, symbolic narrative structures, and rich visual language, the film not only illuminates the grim reality of war-torn Afghanistan but also honors the spirit of human ability to discover agency and hope even in the direst circumstances. The human soul's continuing strength is demonstrated by Parvana's fortitude and her use of storytelling as a form of resistance, which remind us that survival is not only possible but also profoundly significant even in the face of terrible suffering. It becomes a universal meditation on the value of bravery, identity, and the act of reclaiming agency through imagination and narrative. It is a powerful example of the ability of storytelling to record and humanize pain because of the way that animation and documentary approaches are combined to enhance the emotional and cognitive impact.

The Breadwinner's symbolic motifs and visual language, especially in scenes of defiance and metamorphosis, show how animated documentaries can evoke both political and personal narratives. These strategies directly address the research questions, particularly when analyzed from a semiotic and narrative perspective. A similar dynamic

is seen in *Funan*, where visual codes of transformation, silence, and gesture are also used to encode resistance and survival.

4.1.4 Emotive Impact

In *The Breadwinner*, a potent combination of narrative depth and visual storytelling heightens the emotional relevance of Parvana's story. In order to elicit emotional shifts between hopelessness and despair, Nora Twomey uses striking color palette contrasts, such as the dull browns and grays of war-torn Kabul and the vivid, mythological hues of Parvana's imagined world. The film "transforms harsh realities into digestible visual metaphors," as Ravindran notes. The format of the tale-within-a-tale, in which Parvana recounts the boy's and the elephant king's fantasy, serves as a coping strategy as well as a parallel story that enhances the theme of bravery and selflessness.

Additionally, the viewer may relate to the protagonist's inner conflicts through the use of close-ups on the eyes of the characters, especially during quiet passages. In line with Mieke Bal's theory of focalization, which holds that "the emotional perception of events becomes a key narrative device," the interaction of these visual signals and the development of the story arouses empathy. This is made clear in the scene where Parvana witnesses her father being carried away; in addition to action, her shaky body language and a subtle change in background noise highlights her powerlessness and terror. The emotional goals of the documentary form are met by this type of storytelling, which is synced both visually and narratively and elicits a strong emotional reaction from the audience.

Subtle visual cues like Parvana cutting her hair, which is a symbolic act of disobedience and bodily metamorphosis, have a great deal of emotional impact. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory states that every visual sign becomes a layered signifier, conjuring deeper cultural and emotional implications. These symbolic pictures, when paired with eerie sound design and muted hues, produce empathy and cognitive reflection. According to scholarly observations like those made by Judith Kriger (2024), the use of animation in documentaries enables imaginative realism, which makes psychological realities much more vivid than they would be in live action. This is particularly evident in the way that animated metaphors offer Parvana's internalized anxieties and desires a visual representation.

The Breadwinner is ultimately a story of survival as well as an emotionally engrossing experience for viewers throughout the world, thanks to the way narrative and visual storytelling approaches interact to enhance the emotional impact of its central themes—loss, identity, and resistance.

4.2 *Funan*

4.2.1 Overview of the Plot

Funan, an animated documentary directed by Denis Do, offers a gripping examination of individual and societal pain during the genocide in Cambodia in the late 1970s. *Funan* not only tells a story of survival but also serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable adversity. The film follows Chou, a young mother, and her husband, Khuon, are brutally uprooted from their home in Phnom Penh and forced into labor camps with their young son, Sovanh. Separated from their son during the chaos of forced relocation, Chou and Khuon endure unimaginable hardships, driven by the hope of one day reuniting with their child. The film explores how conflict shapes and challenges both individual and social identities, especially as it relates to the circumstances of its main character - the young mother. Denis Do's deeply personal narrative is inspired by his own family experiences, particularly his mother's survival under the Khmer Rouge. Through the film, he explores the themes of resilience, hope, and the enduring strength of familial bonds in the face of overwhelming adversity. *Funan* not only sheds light on a dark chapter in Cambodian history but also serves as a testament to the power of love and determination. The film depicts the brutal realities of Chou and Khuon's lives during the Khmer Rouge, as they endure maltreatment, malnutrition, and the continual danger of violence. They have to battle not only to survive but also to cope with the psychological and emotional toll of their situation while desperately searching for any information about their son, who has disappeared from their sight.

4.2.2 Historical Context

One of the bloodiest wars of the 20th century, the Cambodian War is complicated and stems from a number of historical, political, and social elements. The horrific era of

the Khmer Rouge, a radical communist movement that first appeared in Cambodia in the late 1960s, lies at the center of this history. It was a major factor in the terrible history of the nation, especially when Pol Pot was in power from 1975 to 1979. During this disastrous time in Cambodian history, the government worked to eradicate all challenges to its goal of an agrarian, classless society. Political instability, societal unrest, and the effects of the Vietnam War, which spread to Cambodia and intensified pre-existing complaints against the government, were some of the causes that contributed to the Khmer Rouge's ascent to power.

When the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh in April 1975, they promptly ordered the evacuation of the city, leaving millions of Cambodians to work on collective farms in the countryside. Radical social engineering was used by the regime to classify people according to their alleged allegiance to the state, eliminate Western influences, and destroy established institutions. Because they were perceived as dangers to the regime's agrarian philosophy, intellectuals, professionals, and even people who wore glasses were especially at risk. Mass executions ensued in what came to be known as the "killing fields," where the Khmer Rouge methodically killed an estimated 1.7 million people by starvation, forced labor, and executions, permanently altering the course of history. 'Fear and mistrust' dominated every part of life as a result of the Khmer Rouge's terrible policies. A culture of mistrust that would linger in Cambodian culture long after the dictatorship was destroyed was created by the ruthless measures used to ensure loyalty to the state and to turn people against one another. Instead of providing instant respite, the 1979 fall of the Khmer Rouge after a Vietnamese invasion brought a foreign presence that further muddled the national narrative, creating sentiments of betrayal and escalating fears of outside intervention.

The Khmer Rouge's effects on Cambodian women were severe and persisted long after the regime's overthrow. Cambodian women's lives were drastically and intricately altered by the years 1975–1979, which were characterized by intense violence and social unrest. The ideology that the Khmer Rouge propagated aimed to change society by doing away with traditional family structures and class divisions, and this vision had important consequences for women.

Funan draws its emotional force from historical atrocities carried out by the Khmer Rouge during the Cambodian genocide. The film's visual and emotional weight is rooted in documented experiences of imprisonment, torture, and dehumanization under the regime of Democratic Kampuchea. David Chandler, in *Voices from S-21*, recounts how Vietnamese journalists discovered a killing compound in Tuol Svay Prey filled with decomposing bodies, blood-smeared floors, and iron beds used for chaining victims—reflecting the same disturbing silence and invisible violence that *Funan* animates in its subdued but harrowing visual style (Chandler 2–3).

The extensive documentation of forced confessions and lists of supposed traitors in S-21—the Khmer Rouge's most infamous prison, shows how people were systematically erased and forced into guilt by association (Chandler 6). This bureaucratic dehumanization parallels *Funan*'s portrayal of characters stripped of their identities and reduced to survival instincts under ideological brutality.

Women were depicted by the Khmer Rouge as equal partners in the revolutionary battle, and everyone, regardless of gender, was expected to work in the fields and produce rice in their new agrarian society. Women were thus forced to work long hours in hard agricultural jobs under a rigid labor system. The regime required women to work, frequently at the expense of their family duties, upending their traditional roles as homemakers and caregivers. The administration also outlawed private property and family units, forcing all families to live in communal settings. This undermined traditional support networks and had a significant negative psychological impact on women who were separated from their spouses and children. The use of sexual violence as a means of oppression and control was common under the Khmer Rouge. Women experienced horrific treatment, including forced marriages, sexual enslavement, and widespread rape, typically carried out in detention camps and during the purges. Women were frequently seen as tools for the state's reproductive objectives, forced into unions that would produce a new generation of obedient citizens, and the ideology of the dictatorship cloaked these actions in a façade of revolutionary fervor. The long-lasting stigma associated with female sexuality and reproduction as a result of this horrific legacy affected women's bodies and autonomy.

The representation of women's suffering in *Funan* is firmly rooted in the historical tragedy faced by Cambodian women under the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge instituted a national policy that aimed to regulate reproduction and destroy traditional family structures by arranging forced marriages, according to the Cambodia Study on Opportunities for Reparations for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence, which was published by REDRESS Trust, Kdei Karuna, and the Global Survivors Fund (Redress 17). These forced couplings were not only symbolic; they frequently involved instantaneous consummation under duress and were a component of the regime's larger population control and dominance plan.

The report also shows that sexual violence was pervasive and took many heinous forms throughout the Khmer Rouge's rule. Survivors recounted experiences involving rape before execution at death fields, gang rapes, sexual servitude, and genital mutilation. The regime's severe rationing policy, which purposefully impoverished the populace, had the terrible side effect of exposing many women to sexual exploitation in return for food (Redress 18–20). Ninety-six percent of the 82 survivors who were questioned for the report had been in a forced marriage, while other survivors reported being raped, gang-raped, or pregnant against their will (Redress 20).

This background heightens the emotional impact of *Funan*, where the protagonist's role as a mother is destroyed by a regime that used gendered violence and starvation as weapons. Chou's suffering is made more emotionally intense by the film's use of focalization, which centers the narrative around her point of view. Her perspective serves as the prism through which we observe the weakening of familial ties, the loss of agency, and the unspoken fortitude of motherhood in the face of dehumanization. By placing the audience in her shoes, the film highlights both her own loss and the larger gendered trauma that Cambodian women endure, turning personal suffering into a shared memory.

In *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge*, historian Ben Kiernan recounts how former Khmer Rouge leader Chhit Do revealed the strategic use of American bombings by the Khmer Rouge to manipulate public sentiment. Following intense aerial attacks during the Cambodian Civil War, Khmer Rouge cadres would take villagers to witness the scorched earth and vast craters left behind. This

physical devastation, combined with the psychological trauma of constant bombing, created a fertile ground for propaganda. As Chhit Do explains, villagers were often so shocked and afraid that they wandered mute and disoriented for days. The regime exploited this vulnerability, offering ideological explanations and promises of protection that resonated deeply with a population desperate for safety. This emotional manipulation blurred the line between fear and loyalty. Chhit Do admits in an interview that the bombings, though unintentional in effect, ironically aided the Khmer Rouge's rise by deepening public anger and grief, thus encouraging cooperation with the regime. Some villagers, having lost loved ones—including children—to the bombings, saw the Khmer Rouge as the only force resisting foreign aggression. By capitalizing on this resentment, the Khmer Rouge positioned themselves as both avengers and saviors, using trauma as a political tool to mobilize support and radicalize youth (*Ben* 23).

The psychological effects of this trauma echoed for generations. Survivors of the Khmer Rouge were left to face a world of loss, witnessing the deaths of friends and family and occasionally even having to turn on those closest to them. Their capacity to reintegrate into society after the fall of the government was limited by the lingering trauma of these events, which led to post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues. Women were further disadvantaged by social stigmas associated with sexual abuse and the death of loved ones, which prevented them from fully engaging in the reconstruction of society after the war.

It is noteworthy that the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime also sparked women's activism and political participation, despite the oppression they endured during that time. As part of the country's subsequent recovery efforts, which included the creation of NGOs and community organizations, women assumed leadership positions to promote justice, reconciliation, and the rights of survivors. The inclusion of women in these capacities demonstrated a change in how society views issues and an understanding of the importance of gender-focused strategies in political discourse and humanitarian responses.

Films like *Funan* inquire about the long-held belief that animation is only used for fictional storytelling by using the medium to record actual happenings. *Funan*, an animated documentary directed by Denis Do, describes the terrible effects of the Khmer Rouge

government in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. The film explores themes of survival, family, and resilience in the face of political oppression, all of which are based on Do's mother's own experiences. *Funan* is a crucial piece of documentary film because, in contrast to conventional cartoons or made-up stories, it uses animation as a means of telling a very intimate and historically accurate tale.

The Khmer Rouge era, one of the darkest eras in Cambodian history, is the setting for *Funan's* story. In their attempt to turn Cambodia into an agrarian utopia, the Khmer Rouge killed around two million people and caused widespread famine, forced labor, and exile. Chou, the main character of the film, and her family are fictionalized versions of actual victims of these crimes. The film humanizes historical horror by focusing on a family's journey, making it approachable to modern viewers while honoring the memory of those who perished.

4.2.3 Analysis

In *Funan*, animation is a narrative requirement rather than merely a stylistic decision. The scope and emotional complexity of the events portrayed may be difficult for live-action or conventional documentary formats to convey. Denis Do—the director—is able to respectfully and evocatively recreate scenes of brutality, displacement, and survival using animation. The ability to depict memories, feelings, and symbolic moments—like Chou's battle to preserve her dignity and hope in the face of tremendous despair made possible by the medium. For example, the film's subdued color scheme conveys the desolation of the time period, and the intricate landscapes highlight how terrible the working camps were. A certain amount of abstraction is also produced by animation, which spares viewers from the overt graphic nature of live-action and enables them to contemplate challenging subjects like pain and loss. By allowing viewers to relate to the characters' hardships and reflect on the larger ramifications of historical violence, this abstraction serves to close the gap between the personal and the universal.

Denis Do's research and dedication to authenticity ensure that the film remains a faithful representation of the Khmer Rouge era, even though the characters and dialogue may be dramatized. *Funan* is firmly rooted in real events, drawing from the lived

experiences of the filmmaker's family. The hallmark of a documentary is its commitment to truth and reality, even when the medium is animation.

Funan uses animation as a way to preserve history and offer witness to the misery that millions of people have undergone, in contrast to cartoons, which commonly prioritize entertainment. Instead of the fanciful aspects that are usually associated with animation, it provides a realistic and heartbreaking depiction of human perseverance. Documentary status is strengthened by the film's emphasis on actual events and its goal of enlightening and educating viewers about Cambodia's past.

Funan is fundamentally a narrative about survival and the enduring power of kinship ties. The use of animation enhances the film's emotional impact by enabling viewers to empathize with the characters on a deep level. The film also looks at themes of sacrifice and resilience. Chou's determination to reunite her family mirrors the resilience of countless Cambodians who endured unimaginable hardships during the Khmer Rouge regime. By focusing on one family's story, *Funan* provides a microcosmic view of a national tragedy, making the historical events more tangible and impactful for the audience.

The artistic choices in *Funan* enhance its documentary nature. The characters' harsh lives under the Khmer Rouge are reflected in the use of minimalistic imagery. Soft yet subdued colors are used to depict the landscapes, which simultaneously highlight Cambodia's natural beauty and the destruction caused by the regime. The film's dismal tone is emphasized by the lack of overtly expressive animation, which keeps it rooted in its documentary. Throughout the narrative of the film, symbolism is essential. Cutting hair, for example, is a recurrent theme that symbolizes loss and transformation; it is a symbolic gesture that mirrors the characters' psychological and physical challenges. These kinds of visual metaphors enhance the narrative and enable the audience to interact with it both intellectually and emotionally.

The narrative structure of the film is centered on the character Mother Chou. She is not merely a narrative device; she is the core of the film's emotional resonance. This choice of perspective is significant because it allows the audience to experience her fears, hopes, struggles, and resilience in the face of the horrors committed by the Khmer Rouge regime up close. By concentrating on Chou's journey, the film highlights the subjective experience

of trauma, making the historical events more relatable and impactful. By focusing on Chou's journey, the film turns historical events into a profoundly relatable and impactful experience, drawing the audience into Chou's emotional turmoil. Instead of being positioned as passive observers, the audience is drawn into Chou's emotional turmoil and experiences her pain and struggles firsthand, strengthening the thematic exploration of trauma and resilience. The narrative structure of *Funan* adeptly transforms the historical context of the Cambodian genocide into an intimate, deeply personal story. This approach heightens the emotional resonance and reliability of the events depicted. By centering on Chou's journey, the film transcends a mere recounting of historical facts, immersing viewers in the emotional and psychological experiences of its characters. This focus on the human cost of war enables the audience to empathize with individual struggles while simultaneously comprehending the broader gravity of the historical events.

The vibrant colors and aesthetics stand in stark contrast to the story's terrible realities, enhancing the audience's emotional response and thematic comprehension. The beautiful Cambodian landscapes in the film are a symbol of beauty and promise. In contrast to the harsh and horrific experiences of the individuals, these vivid images inspire a sense of life and vibrancy. This visual representation of duality is important because it serves as a reminder of both the tenacity of nature and the enduring spirit of the Cambodian people, in addition to highlighting the harsh realities of the characters' lives. In the midst of sadness, the environment's lushness becomes a sign of optimism, implying that life and beauty endure even in the most terrible circumstances. The use of darker tones and chaotic imagery in scenes that depict violence and despair are powerful symbols of suffering and loss; they are unsettling and disturbing, effectively communicating the trauma experienced by the characters; and they allow viewers to feel the impact of the Khmer Rouge regime on individuals and families. This interplay of symbols, where beauty and brutality coexist, deepens the film's exploration of identity and cultural oppression by inviting viewers to grapple with the complexities of human experience, where moments of hope are often entwined with profound suffering.

Funan highlights the universal themes of identity, resistance, cultural oppression, love, grief, and survival in addition to the difficulties that its protagonist endures. A deeper connection to the film's subjects is fostered by this multi-layered narrative structure, which

invites spectators to consider both their own experiences and the larger implications of war and displacement. *Funan* is a moving reminder of the human spirit's tenacity and the value of family ties in overcoming hardship.

Chou, who represents the hardships of motherhood, resilience, and survival under the Khmer Rouge dictatorship, becomes the emotional center of *Funan*. Her fortitude is characterized by her unflinching resolve to keep her family together in the face of unspeakable acts of violence, rather than by physical fights, as is the case with typical depictions of wartime heroes. Chou's story illustrates the severe psychological and emotional costs of war as she faces malnutrition, forced labor, and being separated from her son, establishing her as the guardian of survival and family harmony. *Funan* uses her personal experiences to examine the gendered effects of conflict, showing how emotional fortitude and maternal strength become essential resources for resilience and resistance.



Scene: A World of Normalcy and Love

In *Funan*, as shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:00:41)-(*Funan* 00:00:43), the lively city, the hustle and bustle of life, and people involved in their own affairs of life. In the beginning of the film, a typical, peaceful existence in the family's house is shown, complete with the daily commotion of daily tasks. As shown in the Scene (*Funan* 00:01:34) and in (*Funan* 00:02:42), it creates a world of cultural stability and familial affection by utilizing vibrant colors, vibrant scenery, and upbeat background music, which evoke a feeling of security and routine. However, this vivid depiction contrasts sharply with the violence and loss that will shortly ensue, which heightens the tragedy of this serene existence's final

destruction. Chou's family and their everyday lives before the Khmer Rouge's ascent to power are presented to the audience. The family is depicted in a conventional, close-knit setting, going about their daily lives together, playing, cooking, and spending time. These everyday moments have been thoughtfully planned to create a feeling of coziness, closeness, and family unity. Chou and her family's routine activities, including cooking, highlight a feeling of normalcy and cultural continuity.

The interactions within the family are a reflection of the fundamental principles of support, care, and unity, which stand for both their individual identities and the more general cultural stability of Cambodian society prior to the turmoil of war. The film highlights the importance of family ties, showing how these relationships provide emotional support and a foundation for the characters' sense of self. The home becomes a sanctuary that offers safety and comfort, giving a stark contrast to the violence and oppression that will follow. The peaceful existence of the family is not just a depiction of domestic life; it also represents cultural identity, where the family's traditions, values, and customs are an integral part of who they are. This first portrayal of normalcy serves as a poignant symbol of the peaceful and stable existence that will soon be upended.

To portray the aliveness of life before the arrival of the Khmer Rouge, the film makes use of vivid hues and a vibrant color scheme. Warm hues of red, orange, and yellow dominate the screen, indicating vigor, energy, and the warmth of family relationships. These hues support the notion that life was comparatively peaceful and stable prior to the Khmer Rouge since they are connected to comfort, joy, and a sense of belonging. As a visual shorthand for the family's sense of emotional stability, these vivid, rich hues highlight how comfortable they feel in their house.

Equally important is the background music, which sets the tone for the family's world before the Khmer Rouge, creating a sense of warmth and security. The vibrant, upbeat music that accompanies scenes of family interactions creates a sense of joy and positivity, reinforcing the idea that life is full of possibility and hope, that the characters are enjoying the simple pleasures of everyday existence, like laughing, cooking, and interacting with their community.

Loss is also hinted at by the picturesque portrayal of life before the Khmer Rouge. The happy pictures of the family's everyday existence act as a moving reminder of what is about to disappear. As the film goes on, the cheerful background music and vivid colors that represent safety and contentment will gradually give way to darker hues. The vibrant music will give way to melancholy, discordant noises, and the bright colors will give way to colder, more subdued hues as the family deals with the violence and turmoil of the Khmer Rouge dictatorship. This change highlights the frailty of tranquility and the destructive power of outside forces by visually and acoustically signaling the breakdown of the family's world.

Denotatively speaking, the film opens with a straightforward account of a family's existence: a mother, father, and child living in a quiet, homely setting. A cozy and loving house is simply represented by the use of bright, upbeat music and a color scheme of warm reds, yellows, and oranges. The audience is accustomed to these sights and sounds because they conjure feelings of coziness, safety, and ordinary joy. On a denotative level, the audience observes a family going about their daily lives in harmony with their surroundings. Within the framework of a pre-war family, the vibrant, warm hues and lively music suggest cultural identification, stability, and hope. Not merely symbols of comfort, the color scheme and music convey a lifestyle that is closely linked to one's cultural and personal identity. These components serve as symbols for the family's customs, roles, and cultural practices, presenting a steady, unified identity that is firmly anchored in Chou's cultural history. A visual and aural reminder of Cambodian culture prior to the Khmer Rouge's devastation is the vibrant music and the warm colors. These cultural icons are eventually supposed to be destroyed when the Khmer Rouge invades, upending this world. The music gets tense or discordant as the violence starts, and the colors change to darker, more subdued hues. In addition to indicating the disintegration of the family's physical surroundings, this shift in the visual and aural world also symbolizes the dissolution of their cultural identity due to oppressive forces. These semiotic changes highlight the emotional destruction of losing one's identity in the face of violence and war, and the family's home, which was previously a symbol of cultural continuity and stability, is now in danger of being destroyed.

Chou's experience of domestic life—her relationships with her family, the delight of daily chores, and the coziness of her home—is highlighted in the serene, pre-war episodes. The audience experiences the safety and coziness of family life via Chou's point of view. We are invited to view the world through Chou's eyes because of the close-up images of her and her family members and the usage of personal interactions. We feel Chou's sense of security and inclusion in the family because the audience is emotionally invested in her. This emotional connection is essential to enhance the effect of her loss of her home and family eventually. Because of the interior focus, there is a feeling of mutual loss, making the devastation of her world. This point of view also strengthens the story's foreshadowing. The audience becomes sensitive to the little things in Chou's life that highlight its frailty as she navigates the world as a wife and mother. This adds a sense of disruption to the subsequent Khmer Rouge upheaval. The ensuing trauma and violence are not only outside occurrences; rather, they infiltrate Chou's inner reality, causing the audience to experience the emotional destruction on a deeper level.

Mieke Bal's idea of focalization, which reveals how the story is emotionally mediated via Chou's perspective, can be used to better analyze this depiction of household life prior to the war. The film creates a subjective lens that places the viewer in her real emotional world by showing the early moments from her personal point of view through close-ups, household chores, and her interactions with family. By placing viewers inside Chou's head, Bal's theory enables us to investigate how the visual narrative evokes empathy and raises the emotional implications of the narrative's subsequent disruptions. Furthermore, the examination of the film's use of color, sound, and vision is enhanced by Roland Barthes' semiotic theory of denotation and connotation. Warm hues and lively music represent a happy home life on a denotative level, but they also represent cultural identity, emotional stability, and the transience of peace on a connotative one. Once the Khmer Rouge's violence starts, these signs transform into potent meaning-carrying symbols that physically encode the loss of identity and cultural disruption. A comprehensive comprehension of how *Funan* creates meaning through viewpoint and symbolic imagery is provided by the combination of Bal's narratological focus and Barthes' semiotic lens.



Scene: A Depiction of Loss

In *Funan*, as shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:03:01)-(*Funan* 00:03:06), the scenario where the previously cheerful family environment is completely upended—food plates are thrown away, empty and flipped, and there is chaos everywhere. The depiction of loss, pain, and the breakdown of familial and cultural stability is aided by the use of silence, the haphazard arrangement of objects, and the change in sound and color. For Chou, in particular, this abrupt interruption of the family's daily routine is a profoundly psychological experience as well as an external one. By using focalization, we are able to see things from her point of view as the chaos develops, and this particular instance becomes a mirror of the emotional and mental turmoil she experiences. Violence now disturbs the once-comfortable setting, which was full of the indications of everyday life and familial affection. For Chou and her family, this means losing everything that stood for safety and cultural identity. More than merely a physical disturbance, this disturbance of the peace implies the dissolution of the family's identity. The spilled plates, the tumultuous scene, and the abrupt nothingness all represent the loss of both societal and individual stability. The family's world has been brutally ripped apart, marking a dramatic change in theme. More broadly, this incident illustrates how the Khmer Rouge's totalitarian power destroyed

family ties and cultural legacy. At this moment, the narrative's thematic focus shifts to loss, both psychological and physical.

This concept is further enhanced through the film's shifting color palette. Before the onset of violence, the family's world is portrayed with warm, vivid tones — visually signifying harmony, safety, and cultural identity. As the narrative progresses and disruption takes hold, these hues darken into muted, desaturated tones, symbolizing emotional rupture and the erosion of familial unity. From a semiotic perspective, color operates as a code: its denotative function is aesthetic, but its connotative value constructs emotional meaning. Light, once a sign of security, is replaced by shadows that encode loss, fear, and displacement. Mieke Bal's concept of focalization deepens this reading, as these visual transitions are framed through the emotional perspective of Chou — allowing the viewer to experience the psychological collapse alongside her. These visual strategies do more than shift the film's setting; they communicate the protagonists' inner turmoil and cultural disintegration. In this way, the scene directly addresses my research questions by showing how animated documentaries use visual and narrative symbolism to evoke powerful emotional and cognitive responses, while representing themes of survival and cultural fracture.

The abrupt change in sound tone from lively music to eerie silence, or to more dissonant, unsettling noises, marks the transition from hope to despair. Silence helps to emphasize the emotional weight of this shift. Where there was once the reassuring hum of family life, the sudden silence after the disruption speaks volumes. In this context, silence serves as a semiotic code representing the absence of life, the lack of joy, and the disappearance of normalcy.

The semiotic theory of Barthes supports the interpretation of the scene's visual cues. A sense of disturbance and loss is conveyed by the flipped plates of food, the quiet, and the messy house. These components just demonstrate that the family has been split apart in their denotative sense, but their connotative connotations have far more emotional weight. For example, the overturned dishes represent aggression and the breakdown of order, indicating that the stability of the family has been irreparably disrupted. As

previously stated, the silence signifies the absence of life, joy, and hope in addition to the absence of sound. It's the sound of trauma, the permanent loss of something valuable.

The meaning of the visual and auditory clues is further enhanced by Bal's concept of focalization. Chou's emotional state is externalized through the ruin of the physical surroundings as the family's home is upended. The once cozy and well-organized house is now shattered and strange. From Chou's point of view, the loss of the tangible, material world mirrors her psychological loss of security, cultural identity, and family. Chou's interior focalization helps the audience experience the trauma that ensues, transforming the tone shift from an external incident to a profoundly personal catastrophe.



Scene: Life at Stake

In *Funan*, as shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:05:30), there is a critical moment that switches the focus from the broader background of loss and violence to a deeply intimate experience for the characters involved. The theme of personal security loss and the breakdown of family togetherness under repressive regimes is heightened by the brother being held at gunpoint. Chou's world was previously largely experienced by the public from her

viewpoint as a wife and mother, where family life was seen as a sign of security and comfort. This notion of family protection is directly called into question by the brother's encounter with violence, which transforms the house from a place of comfort and support into one of great risk and terror. Chou's focalization allows us to experience the events as she does, which is emotionally charged and tense with terror, rather than only witnessing them from a distance. Both Chou and the audience experience a personal crisis when the brother is threatened with a gun. Given that her family's existence is now in jeopardy, we can feel her desperation and powerlessness. This moment also signifies a change in thematic focus: state-sponsored violence directly threatens family ties and innocence. Family members are either at odds with the Khmer Rouge's ruthless apparatus or are turned against one another as a result of the violence, which no longer only comes from outside sources.

Extremely far and occasionally wide shots are likely to be used to frame the brother being held at gunpoint in order to intensify the emotional exchange. The viewer can concentrate on the psychological significance of the situation by focusing on the brother or the muzzle of a gun, which establishes intimacy and immediacy. The viewer is emotionally drawn into Chou's world by this visual choice, which makes her feel confined, helpless, and desperate. The gun frequently serves as the focal point of the shot's tension, highlighting its threat to the brother's life and serving as a metaphor for the outside power that has broken into their house.

In this situation, the gun is more than just a tool; it is a representation of oppression and violence. Its existence represents the brother's personal peril as well as the larger political conflict in which the family is currently embroiled. Because of his position at gunpoint, the brother's identity is redefined as a victim of governmental power rather than a member of the family. In addition to being Chou's brother, the brother at gunpoint now represents the human cost of political repression and war. His destiny ends up serving as a metaphor for the fate of innumerable others entangled in the same struggle.

The conversation between the brother and the comrade reveals the repressive environment and power relations that have supplanted the normalcy of family life. When the brother asks, "We also have a very young child with us. We're almost out of food and

water as well. Are you sure there will be bombings? Where are you taking us? We just— (*Funan* 00:05:30),” it reflects the fear of the unknown and the deprivation that the family is suffering. His questioning is not only an investigation into the practical issues of survival; it is also a manifestation of his mounting distrust and defiance of the regime's authority, as well as an innate need to comprehend the path his family is taking in the face of the regime's cruelty. The child's presence emphasizes the family's vulnerability even more. The brother's worries are related to safeguarding the future generation as well as practical survival. However, the comrade's response—“Silence! Obey! Ankar knows what's best for you! Silence! Ankar does not tolerate any revolutionary thoughts (*Funan* 00:05:34).”—is emblematic of the brutal repression of free thought under the Khmer Rouge. The regime's authoritarianism is demonstrated by the order to be quiet and the demeaning claim that it knows what is best for people. Individual ideas and dissent are silenced, illustrating how tyranny deprives its people of their humanity. This conversation highlights the brother's helplessness as he is coerced into obedience by the threat of violence in spite of his inquiries.

The film filters the emotional weight of the brother's danger through Chou's eyes, allowing the audience to internalize her fear, helplessness, and desperation. Mieke Bal's theory helps us understand how narrative meaning is shaped not just by what is shown, but by who sees it and how they see it. Chou's focalization makes the personal dimensions of political violence become sharply felt, shifting the audience's engagement from distant observation to emotional immersion. This intense scene can be further illuminated by using Bal's concept of focalization, which enables us to interpret how the narrative perspective is emotionally channeled through Chou's subjective experience. In addition, Barthes' theory makes clear the symbolic significance of the scene's spoken and visual components. In terms of denotation, the gun is a physical weapon; nevertheless, in terms of connotation, it represents state brutality, systemic oppression, and the suppression of opposition. Likewise, the comrade's loud speech and autocratic tone indicate more than just instant authority; they also represent ideological repression and the erasing of individuality. We discover how the film's speech, gestures, and objects convey multiple meanings by using Barthes' semiotic lens. This turns commonplace symbols into potent messengers of trauma, resistance, and dehumanization. By combining Bal and Barthes, it is possible to understand

the film's visual and narrative techniques more deeply and demonstrate how both narrative perspective and symbolic representation influence and amplify personal anguish.



Scene: A Painful Attempt

As shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:10:25), Chou's desperate search for her missing son is more than just a natural maternal urge; it is a powerful act of defiance against the regime's attempts to eradicate her cultural and personal identity. As a mother, the loss of her kid represents the dissolution of familial bonds that were formerly essential to Cambodian culture and represents the loss of a piece of herself. "Now do as you're told. Comrade, please. It's our son. He's lost. Let us look for him, please. Get back in line. Ankar will provide for him. He's only three, Comrade (*Funan* 00:10:25). " The Khmer Rouge used violence and intimidation to crush any individual or family resistance, as demonstrated by the comrade's harsh response, which demanded she return to the line and surrender to the dictatorship. In a way, Chou's quest for her son is an act of personal rebellion in an effort to overthrow the regime's persecution. She fights for agency and resists being made into a mere cog in the communal machine that the Khmer Rouge demands in her quest to retrieve her lost kid.

The Khmer Rouge regime's violence is not just physical but also cultural. The dialogue and visuals are infused with the regime's ideology that seeks to eradicate traditional family structures, cultural practices, and any sense of individuality. The comrade's declaration, "Nothing is yours! It's the people! It's Ankar's! Owning property is capitalistic! It corrupts the people and the revolution! (*Funan* 00:11:11)" reflects the regime's destruction of personal and cultural heritage. Property, including the family car, is seized by the state, erasing the concept of personal ownership, a key part of cultural identity. The destruction of such symbols is a symbolic act of cultural tyranny, where private life and family ownership are viewed as disruptive to the communal ideological purity imposed by the dictatorship. It goes beyond simply depriving individuals of their material possessions. The Khmer Rouge portrays the foreign influences—such as cultural identities, religious customs, and traditional family roles—as "poisonous" to the ideological revolution they wish to impose. The personal and communal identities of people like Chou and her family are being sacrificed for an arbitrary political objective, which is a direct form of cultural genocide. The comrade's violent abduction, Chou's frantic search, and her separation from her son serve as visual analogies for the disintegration of personal identity, cultural continuity, and familial institutions. The cultural erasure Chou experiences as a mother and the broader systemic injustice that is destroying Cambodian society are both depicted in these scenes.

In order to represent the breakdown of the person within the state, the film depicts her being displaced from her position as a mother and the violence that deprives her of her power to protect her child. This physical act of being pushed symbolizes not only a moment of personal failure but also the Khmer Rouge's attempt to dominate every element of a person's life through force and ideology.

The comrade's resistance to Chou is a potent symbol of the regime's hold on the individual from a semiotics perspective. A tangible representation of the Khmer Rouge's repression of individual freedom and the severing of family ties is the physical force used to quiet her—violently pushing her back. Chou's dignity and autonomy are taken away by the demeaning gesture of seizing her hair, which makes the act noteworthy as well. This backlash represents the regime's assault against cultural and personal identity as well as its overall control over human emotions and relationships. In this way, the comrade's conduct

serves as a cultural and ideological enforcer, intentionally rejecting personal relationships and the value of familial bonds while imposing obedience to the state's values. Chou's struggle to resist is a potent, visceral manifestation of individual defiance. Her frantic search for her son in spite of the comrade's orders represents a parental act of defiance against the eradication of her family and identity. She clings to her position as a mother and her right to defend her kid, refusing to give up to the regime's power at this precise moment. Her mental and physical resistance serves as a declaration of her humanity in a society that aims to take it away. Her resolve shows a silent but powerful opposition to the regime's dehumanizing power, even as the comrade forcefully pulls her back.

Chou's internal focalization allows the viewer to experience the comrade's pushback, engrossing them in her subjective struggle and enhancing the emotional impact of her resistance. Her point of view influences how we interpret the violence—not only as a physical assault but also as an assault on her motherhood and autonomy. Chou's act of resistance—her unwillingness to comply, her frantic attempt to escape—clashes against the regime's brutal repression at this pivotal time in the story. Her will to defend her identity and family is confronted with the forceful imposition of ideological authority, turning the resistance into a symbolic moment of confrontation. Her resistance, despite being flung back, is an important plot point that highlights the power struggle between individual initiative and authoritarian oppression.

Mieke Bal's theory highlights how the viewer is positioned to experience the narrative through Chou's internal perspective, provides the greatest explanation for this confrontational scene between Chou and the comrade. In order to make her suffering and rage seem more intimate to us than purely observational, the film aligns the camera and emotional focus with her. The violent act of being shoved, yelled at, and denied her child is turned into a highly subjective sensation of emotional and ideological violation by this internal focalization. We are able to understand Chou's immediate suffering as well as the symbolic breakdown of her mothering duty through her eyes. Roland Barthes' theory further explains how this scenario transmits numerous layers of meaning. In addition to being actual acts, the comrade's violent orders, the confiscation of her personal belongings, and the act of grabbing her hair are cultural symbols that carry overtones of oppression, dehumanization, and identity erasure. From a Barthesian standpoint, the words and acts of

the dictatorship serve as a system of signs that uphold ideological dominance ("Ankar knows best," "Nothing is yours"). They deprive people of their agency and present conventional cultural values—like motherhood, family, and property—as dangers to the revolutionary ideal. Bal and Barthes work together to unravel the way *Funan* combines ideological, emotional, and visual elements to create a potent portrayal of individual resistance to institutional oppression



Scene: A Positive Image of Looting—Ankar

As shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:14:01), the systematic destruction of identity, dignity, and cultural legacy is what occurs when people steal personal belongings, especially jewelry worn by women, during times of persecution and conflict. The Khmer Rouge's widespread goal of destroying individuality in favor of a communal, state-controlled worldview is symbolized by their theft of possessions, particularly those associated with tradition and personal history. Jewelry is a semiotic symbol of social standing, heritage, and familial relationships that is frequently handed down through the generations. Its destruction reinforces the regime's attempt to turn people into nothing more than

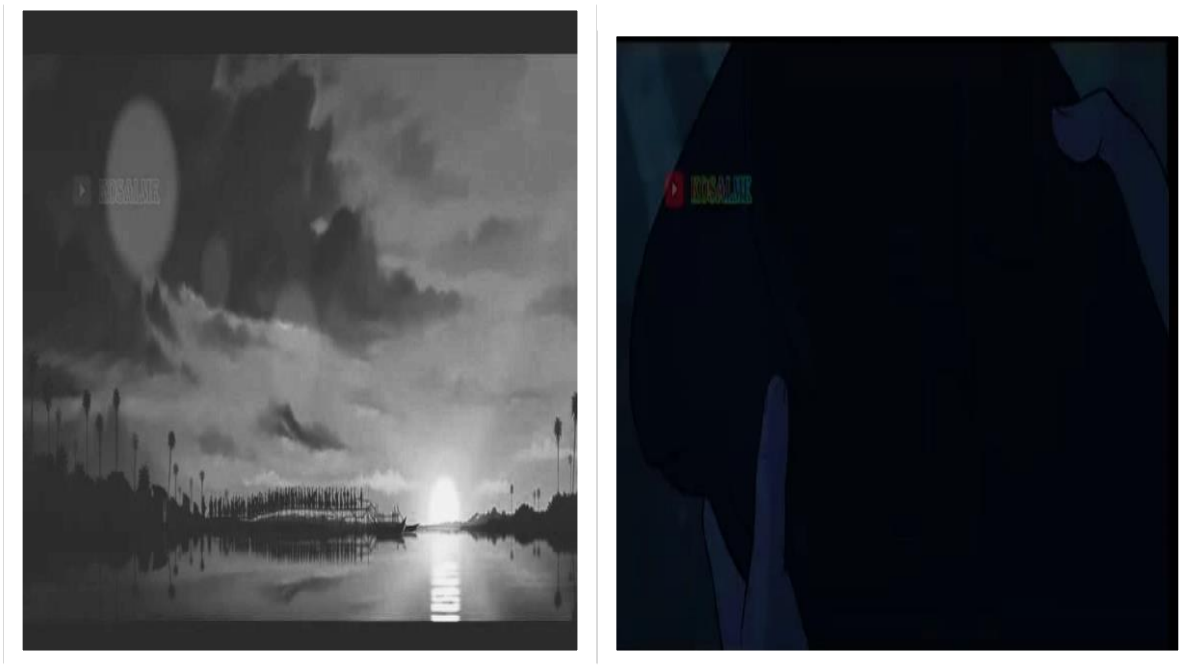
revolutionaries by symbolically robbing them of their cultural and personal identity. Chou resists the cruel powers around her by keeping her valuables and jewelry hidden and holding onto the reminders of her identity and history (*Funan* 00:14:08), as (*Funan* 00:14:16). Her connection to her past life, her family, and her cultural heritage are all being preserved by this act of defiance, which goes beyond simply safeguarding tangible possessions. When forced to submit, hiding these things turns into a tacit act of defiance, a means of preserving one's identity while everything else is being methodically taken away. Her disobedience serves as an example of how resistance may be found in the smallest, most intentional acts of preservation—it is not necessarily obvious or loud.

The jewelry serves as a symbol of cultural and personal identity from a semiotic point of view. The denotation of physical loss is represented by its forcible confiscation, while the connotation encompasses the ruin of one's own history and independence. Chou transforms these items into hidden representations of resilience by concealing them, rejecting the forced erasure. The act of hiding them serves to further the notion that, even in the face of severe persecution, identity cannot be completely eradicated. In an effort to protect her identity and history from oppression, Chou has hidden these belongings in an act of silent resistance. Her modest but intentional gesture challenges the myth of complete submission and shows that cultural memory and individual dignity may be preserved even under the most trying circumstances.

Internal focalization allows us to experience this scene from Chou's point of view, highlighting her internal conflict—fear, resistance, and an unwavering loyalty to her past—and increasing the emotional tension. This act of concealing belongings acts as a narrative counterbalance to the regime's domination, establishing a period in which Chou actively regains power, if briefly. The fight between oppression and resistance is thematically reinforced by this, demonstrating that a person may still exercise their agency and fight back even in the face of forced servitude.

The jewelry's warm golden tones, which symbolize stability, history, and life, are prominent prior to the heist. The scene's colors turn into drab, desaturated tones as they are forcibly captured, mirroring the mental and physical void that is left behind. Chou's hands are shown in close-up clutching the jewels before she conceals them, underscoring the

moment's emotional and symbolic significance. Her internal conflict, where fear and resistance coexist, draws the spectator in. Chou is half covered in darkness, signifying both survival and concealment, as she stealthily hides the objects. A graphic metaphor for her brittle resistance to persecution is produced by the interaction of light and shadow. After Chou conceals her belongings, screams and frantic footsteps—distinguish into a charged quiet.



Scene: Darkness That Forces Uniformity

As shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:15:17–00:16:59), the darkness that descended upon the cabin after the setting sun made everything appear alien and unwelcoming, even though it was situated at the edge of a vast stretch of grassy land. The tall grasses had been green and vibrant, but now they were silent shades of brown and gray, as if the heavy, dense air had drained them of all their color. The land continued in all directions, dead and boundless under the dusk sky's weight. No color, no warmth, just a uniform, chilly emptiness. "You need to get rid of your old clothes," a voice broke the silence, sharp and unwavering. "They're perilous. We're all the same now. We all serve Ankar! (*Funan* 00:16:59)." The Khmer Rouge's insistence on black clothing in *Funan* is a potent visual symbol of oppression, signifying the regime's efforts to eradicate individuality and impose total

control. People are reduced to faceless workers whose only goal is to serve the state as a result of this enforced sameness, which erases cultural and personal distinction. The loss of gender expression, cultural legacy, and personal identity is symbolized by the black fabric, which turns into a semiotic tool of suppression. Under Ankar's leadership, the uniformity of clothing turns people into just workers, depriving them of their individual identities and rendering them indistinguishable.

Within Barthes' Garment System (Barthes 26), Chou's attire serves as a semiotic device in *Funan*. The actual outfit is a reflection of the Khmer Rouge Cambodia's compulsory black uniform. The portrayed clothing, which is displayed in subdued hues and gradually deteriorated, graphically represents Chou's mental and physical deterioration. The discourse largely omits the specified outfit, highlighting how clothes turn into a quiet symbol of survival and identity loss. When language stops speaking, this layering shows how pain and dehumanization are communicated through visual narrative.

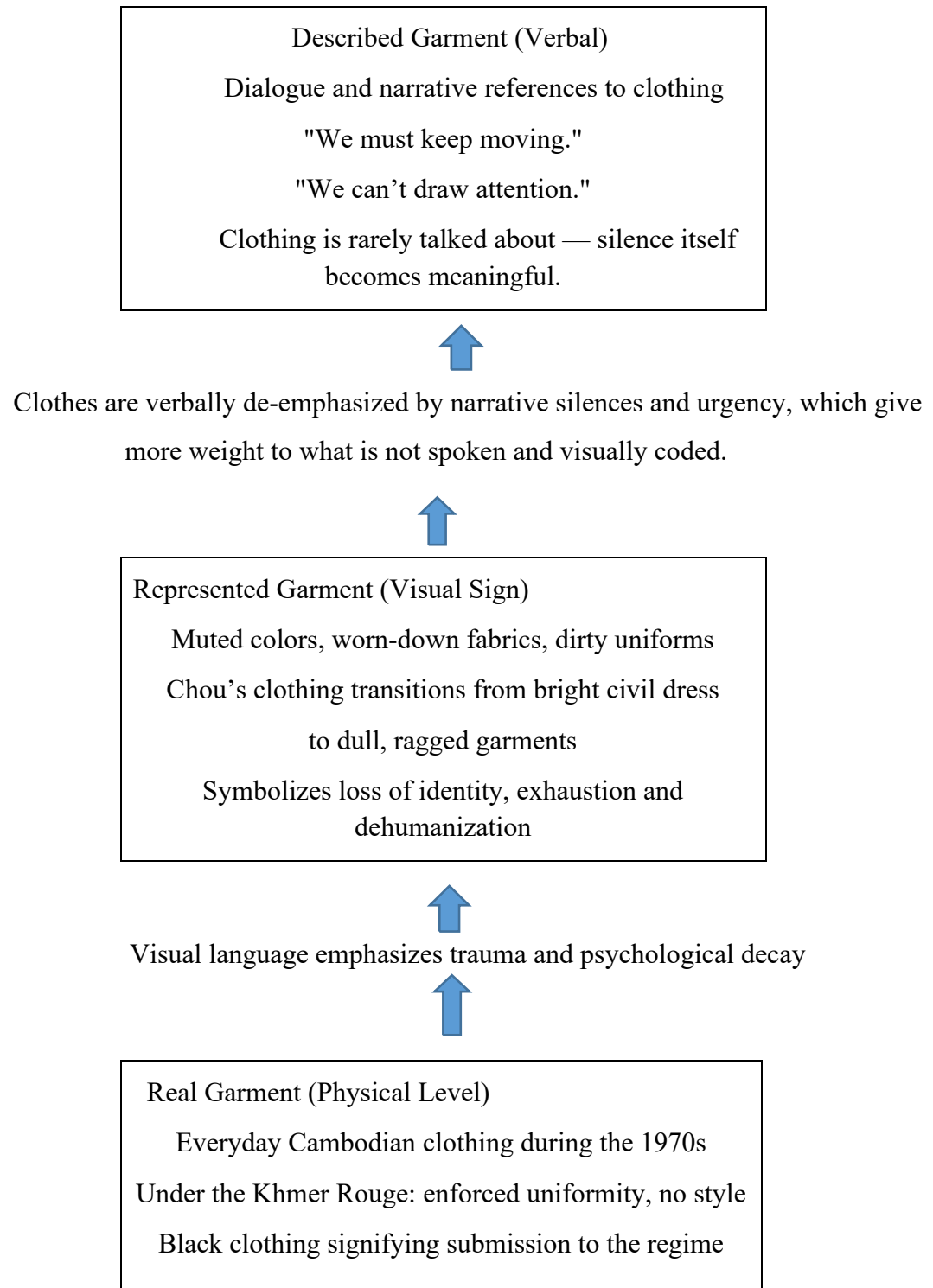


Diagram: Barthes' Garment System —in *Funan*

The attire is just a uniform on a denotative level, being the same for both men and women, dark, and loose. Connotatively speaking, though, it represents the Khmer Rouge's collectivist philosophy, which aims to deprive people of their individuality and cultural uniqueness, the erasing of identity, and the repression of the feminine. Instead of reflecting light, the black fabric absorbs it, visually enhancing the oppressive darkness enforced by the state.

By using internal focalization, we are able to bring the audience into line with Chou's subjective experience. Instead of seeming broken, Chou's respectful gestures and straight posture guarantee that she is unique even in the face of forced outward sameness. The fabric's movement as she walks or close-ups of her fingers adjusting it serve to highlight her inner strength. Originally a means of repression, the black clothing turns into a symbol of perseverance and how identity may endure through embodied resistance even when it is physically eradicated.

Chou's colorful, traditional attire in the pre-war images contrasts with the rough, subdued dress of the labor camp, signifying the institutionalized repression of individuality and cultural heritage. The regime's goal to eradicate feminine and individualistic manifestations is seen in the lack of adornments, especially for women, which reduces identity to a basic role within the community. Chou fights back against this imposed homogeneity in subtle but significant ways. Despite having to wear the black clothing, she refuses to let it define her submission. Simply maintaining her dignity through her gentle actions turns into acts of defiance. Her inner resistance is demonstrated by the fact that she wears the forced garment while still maintaining a resilient demeanor. Her stance, her resolute stare, and her refusal to crumble under the strain of work all demonstrate her resilient spirit even as the dictatorship tries to eradicate her identity. Although the black clothing may represent oppression, Chou's reluctance to let it define her demonstrates that identity endures despite pressure to fit in.

Chou's vibrant, traditional clothing in the pre-war scenes contrasts sharply with the rough, subdued clothing in the labor camp, signifying the Khmer Rouge regime's methodical erasure of individuality and cultural legacy. Through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, clothing functions as a sign since it transmits ideological meaning

in addition to signaling a change in social circumstances. While the uniformity of the labor camp clothing represents institutional control and a loss of identity, traditional dress suggests identity, family, and cultural continuity. The viewer perceives these changes from Chou's point of view, which heightens the emotional effect of this loss. Mieke Bal's focalization further intensifies these visual choices. In line with my research questions about how visual symbolism and semiotic codes convey deeper emotional and thematic content within animated documentaries, this change in costume design reflects broader visual and narrative strategies employed in *Funan* to represent the themes of cultural repression and survival.



Scene: Transition for Equality

In *Funan*, as shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:19:02), she was surrounded by men and women, some of whom were hardly visible in the low light. Their faces were hollowed out by dread and tiredness, making them resemble shadows. To her left, an elderly man with severe facial creases stared blankly ahead. A young girl's tiny figure shook as she gripped her sleeve, her eyes closed in fear. Chou's eyes moved to another woman in the area, who had a straight back and an enigmatic countenance. Did they all have the same thought? That they would no longer be their own when they came forward? The words hung in the air, pressing down like a stone.

"ANKA is happy to welcome you..... ANKA, the Communist Party, has united the Khmer people. It will treat new people well. It will free you from the imperialist yoke that has enslaved you. New people, those that have been made dirty by capitalism. You have all been perverted by our American enemy. But ANKA is good, and ANKA forgives. It will purify you. But know this, new people. There are traitors among you. We shall destroy them. ANKA sees all, ANKA hears all. Long live ANKA! Long live ANKA!" (*Funan* 00:18:46).

Chou sees the scene as someone caught within it, experiencing its claustrophobic actuality, rather than as an observer, which heightens the emotional impact of this moment thanks to Mieke Bal's concept of focalization. Her surroundings and the people in them are more than just background; they are manifestations of her inner terror, with each character expressing a unique take on the same unsaid anguish. The repetition of ANKA's phrases, the faceless characters, and the color uniformity all serve as a visual erasure of the ego.

ANKA's speech offers a picture of unification and cleansing, but below it is compulsion and control, which is another example of Roland Barthes' concept. The newcomers are accused while also being told they are forgiven. "Long live ANKA!" is not merely a catchphrase; it is a directive and an expectation. They must believe, or at least act as though they do; merely complying is insufficient.

The audience is brought into Chou's mental state as she stands among the "new people," not as an objective observer but rather as a subject engulfed in fear, confusion, and self-loss, thanks to Bal's focalization lens. Chou's interior confusion is reflected in the framing of hollowed-out faces, shaking bodies, and expressionless looks; her eyes linger on people who appear to be broken extensions of her own anxiety. Through her eyes, the lack of individuality and the consistent postures represent a shared emotional landscape rather than merely being visual features. By making the collective dread intimate and immersive, Bal's theory explains how this internal focalization heightens the scene's emotional gravity. At the same time, the language of the state functions as a system of signs designed to erase identity and impose ideological submission, as demonstrated by

Barthes' theory. In addition to being rhetoric, the repetitive shouting of "ANKA sees all, ANKA hears all (*Funan* 00:18:40)." serves as a technique of symbolic violence, substituting institutional dominance for individual will. Despite being presented as charitable, the speech is full of accusing dichotomies, such as forgiven/traitor, clean/dirty, and new/old. These dichotomies are filled with connotative meanings that modify identity through coerced ideology. Even the flat color scheme and cold lighting serve as semiotic cues for communal erasing and depersonalization. Bal and Barthes work together to explain how this particular instance reflects Chou's psychological disintegration as well as the larger governmental apparatus that aims to eliminate individuality in favor of ideological homogeneity.



Scene: Loss of identity

In *Funan*, as shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:19:56) where Chou's hair is cut down, is a moment that can be deeply analyzed through Mieke Bal's concept of focalization. The haircut scene is a significant emotive and symbolic moment for Chou, the protagonist. Through internal focalization, the audience experiences the scene from Chou's perspective,

closely tied to her subjective experience. The act of cutting hair symbolizes a profound loss of identity and agency, marking her transformation from a mother and wife to a survivalist under the Khmer Rouge regime. The internal focalization emphasizes Chou's emotive turmoil, allowing the audience to connect deeply with her struggle, enhancing the scene's emotive depth.

In contrast, external focalization can be observed in how the animation frames the act of cutting hair. The close-up shots of the scissors, the tension in Chou's hands, and the hair falling to the ground create a sense of detachment that contrasts with the internal focalization. This external perspective highlights the harsh reality of Chou's situation, forcing the audience to confront the physical brutality and emotive qualities of the regime. The external focalization serves to ground the scene in the broader socio-political context.

Funan's haircut scene serves two narrative purposes. Chou loses a piece of herself in order to adjust to the harsh realities of her surroundings, which on one level symbolizes themes of resistance, identity, and survival. On another level, it represents a turning point in her psychological development, when inner conflicts come to the surface in a subdued yet potent act of metamorphosis. The scissors and hair serve as symbolic codes, referencing Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. Although cutting is a denotatively straightforward act, it implies a break with the past and a coerced redefinition of selfhood. This scene functions on several levels using Mieke Bal's focalization paradigm; we are shown the wider socio-political significance of Chou's behavior while also being taken into her subjective emotional state. By combining the political and the personal, the film is able to make statements about gendered resistance and identity erasure under authoritarian governments. The sequence so immediately answers my study questions by demonstrating how animated films use visual symbolism and layered focalization to enhance the story, arouse strong emotions, and challenge oppressive regimes.

In this scene, Bal's theory of shifting focalization is clearly evident. At first, the focalization is internal, representing Chou's viewpoint and feelings on the haircut. But as the scenario develops, the focalization changes to an outsider or even omniscient perspective. This change enables us to see the haircut as a wider symbolic act of resistance in addition to Chou's personal loss. The film enhances the audience's comprehension of

the characters' inner world and the wider thematic implications by adding levels of complexity and depth to the story through the presentation of the scene from several points of view.



Scene: A Rebellious Agenda

In *Funan*, as shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:26:09), Ankar aimed to establish a collectivist society by eradicating individuality and familial ties. Suppression of any dissent was achieved through psychological control, forced labor, and starvation. Chou, who was first obedient to protect her family, quickly realizes that she must rebel within herself in order to survive under Ankar's control. Her resolve to locate her son, Sovanh, in spite of the risks, turns into a defiant act in and of itself. She clings to her identity as a mother, refusing to accept the imposed narrative that personal ties are irrelevant. Chou is a symbol of defiance against the Khmer Rouge's repressive rule. In addition to surviving, her journey involves resisting the dehumanizing systems that Ankar imposed. The strength of mother resistance is one of *Funan*'s most powerful themes. In contrast to Ankar's efforts to destroy the family, Chou remains steadfast in her desire to get back together with Sovanh. She refuses to let the dictatorship destroy her humanity by holding onto memories of her former life despite

the constant misery she endures. Her quiet defiance—maintaining optimism, quietly opposing Ankar's philosophy—shows that rebellion need not be loud; it may also take the form of persistence and love.

The utilization of visual themes throughout the film conveys deeper levels of emotional and thematic meaning. These include the sharp visual disjunction between past and present, the contrast between light and darkness, and the recurrent images of hands reaching, grabbing, and letting go. These recurrent images serve as symbolic codes through Roland Barthes' semiotic lens: light and shadow are not just aesthetic choices but also signals of safety versus danger, hope versus despair. In a similar vein, the hands theme becomes a visual shorthand for survival, loss, and connection; each move carries unexpressed emotional weight. The trauma of memory and displacement is further reinforced by the temporal contrast between the subdued, desaturated present and the colorful, warm-toned past. By placing the audience to experience these visual transformations through the protagonists'—especially Chou's—internal emotional lens, Mieke Bal's concept of focalization enhances these readings. These visual techniques immediately support the film's exploration of issues of survival, cultural fragmentation, and human transformation because they are not just illustrative but also narratively and psychologically expressive. Therefore, the interaction of subjective perspective and symbolic imagery closely relates to my research questions, showing how animated documentaries employ narrative and semiotic devices to enhance their emotional and cognitive resonance.

Ankar's attempt to eradicate Chou's cultural and personal identity that is hindered by the anchoring points of her fractured recollections. The audience may experience her anguish directly through the film's narrative structure, which alternates between her internal perspective and the external world. Restrictive focalization allows viewers to empathize with Chou's viewpoint, transforming her disobedience from an overt political statement into a profoundly intimate experience.



Scene: Power That Feeds on Women

In *Funan*, as shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:40:22), the harsh reality of surviving under oppression is shown in the conversation between Chou and a woman who has been sexually assaulted by her Khmer Rouge associates. A horrifying illustration of power, survival, and the dehumanization of people under authoritarian control is the Khmer Rouge's forced usage of women. The dialogue, "I couldn't get anything. I know what you think of me. But I regret nothing." "You left him here for a whole week when you slept with the comrades. If it were my son, I would... You would do what you had to. He's a good boy. Be careful for me. Show him love and guide him through this hell (*Funan* 00:41:01). "Being exploited by comrades is reframed as an inevitable means of endurance, and the phrase "We do what we can to survive" serves as a symbol of forced submission. Chou's silence turns into yet another signifier, signifying defiance. Her refusal to accept the same outcome represents a different kind of survival, one motivated by a resolute search for her son. Internal focalization is how the scenario functions, especially from Chou's perspective. Like Chou,

the audience feels the discourse through silent tension, unsaid anguish, and an unwavering sense of purpose. By talking about her son and pleading with Chou to keep him safe, the raped woman shifts the scene's thematic weight by projecting her maternal optimism onto Chou. The two women's disparate survival tactics—one through grudging compliance, the other through unrelenting resistance—are highlighted by the contrast between them. The scene's emotional depth is visually enhanced by the muted animation style. While muted hues accentuate the uncomfortable mood, close-ups of their features capture subtle reactions, such as Chou's silence and the other woman's tired acceptance. The sequence becomes a potent commentary on survival, resilience, and the toll that war takes on women's bodies and decisions as a result of the interaction of semiotic meaning and focalization.

According to Barthes' semiotic theory, women's bodies serve as battlefields for the exercise of domination, and this violence serves as a literal and symbolic signifier of control. The fact that Chou refused to be used by her Khmer Rouge allies shows how strong she is and how determined she is to find her son while being forced to do so and living in terrible conditions. Her body is a contested territory from a Barthesian semiotic standpoint, where resistance denotes a more profound statement of agency and motherhood, while submission may provide momentary respite.

Chou is positioned as an internally focused protagonist in Bal's narratology, enabling audiences to feel her moral fortitude, repressed pain, and silent resolve. A thematic tension between survival via endurance and survival through resistance is reinforced by her character's juxtaposition with others who are compelled to submit. The film's use of close-up shots, muted colors, and tight framing to highlight her loneliness and internal conflict visually conveys her suffering. She withholds her body and emotions from those who would shatter her, and her silent defiance is strengthened by the lack of dramatic facial reactions. She resists oppression by taking advantage of every opportunity to regain control, refusing to let violence dictate her course, even if she is compelled to work and is not allowed to actively search.



Scene: Result of Genocide

As shown in the scene (*Funan* 00:00:57)-(*Funan* 01:18:25), Chou is shown as a lively and caring mother, and the warm, rich hues that surround her highlight their close relationship and the sense of safety she gives her kid. Her long hair, kind features, and easygoing demeanor all convey her function in a secure, caring setting. Her appearance has altered significantly by the time she meets up with her son at the end of the film, though; her face is etched with lines of pain and exhaustion, her body is weak, and her hair is cut short. In place of the once vivid color scheme, subdued, desaturated tones are used to represent the weight of trauma and the passing of time. The reunion is quiet and distant, in contrast to their happy former encounters, highlighting how war and separation have radically changed them both. Chou's fortitude in the face of unfathomable loss is reinforced by the contrast between these two expressions, which also emphasizes the terrible effects of cultural oppression.

After being apart from her kid for years because of the harsh laws, Chou finally gets to see him again. Chou, now weak and appearing older than her years, is standing in

front of her son, who has also changed—he is now older, more cautious, and more distant. Before they eventually reunite, the frame first separates them, highlighting their physical and emotional separation. Chou's resilience is highlighted by this crucial turning point from survival to a precarious reunion. Her slow demise has been portrayed in the film, yet her spirit has not wavered. Even though she isn't totally happy, this reunion is the result of her resistance and fight.

Chou's journey from a hopeful mother to a survivor exemplifies the fortitude needed to resist oppression. Her frailty represents the price of enduring institutionalized brutality and cultural erasure rather than defeat. Chou's environment has been dominated by earthy, desaturated tones throughout the film, signifying oppression and hopelessness. The color scheme becomes somewhat warmer as she is reunited with her child, indicating a shaky revival of a sense of hope. Once, Chou's face had now become serious, with sorrow etched on it. Their shared trauma is emphasized by the lack of obvious emotion. Her son's hesitancy visually symbolizes the emotional rift brought on by the war, just as her own does. Because of her small frame and tightly cropped hair, Chou visually resembles the countless people who have endured hardships under the rule. She has struggled, as evidenced by her changed body, and her short hair, which is frequently a symbol of loss or forced change, shows how war has changed who she is.

Mieke Bal's idea of focalization profoundly enhances this emotionally charged reunion because Chou's inner experience shapes the entire narrative arc. In addition to witnessing a reunion, the audience is also experiencing its weight from within Chou's emotionally damaged world. Her weary eyes, shifted stance, and tentative embrace convey a lot through her narrowed viewpoint—not happiness, but the tacit acceptance of being alive and irrevocable loss. According to Bal's theory, the reunion—which is influenced by the trauma shown by Chou's gaze—is not a resolution but rather the result of emotional fortitude. Parallel to this, Roland Barthes' semiotic theory enables us to interpret Chou's short hair, the change from vivid to subdued color schemes, and her emotionally reserved body language as signs of psychological and cultural upheaval. Once a neutral characteristic, short hair now connotes identity loss, sacrifice, and forced change. The subdued tones indicate the loss of life and tradition, signifying the eroding of pre-war identity as well as the passing of time. These indications represent a history of oppression,

the brittleness of mending, and the difficulty of survival rather than just a physical reunion. Using Bal and Barthes, this last scene is transformed into a multi-layered visual testament to the terrible effects of cultural trauma and the silent fortitude of those who experience it.

4.2.4 Emotive Impact

Denis Do creates an emotionally compelling story in *Funan* that centers on a mother's horrific struggle under the Khmer Rouge. The film's eerie realism is enhanced by its subdued color palette, smooth animation, and extended quiet scenes. These artistic decisions are consistent with Barthes' semiotic theory, which holds that visual cues, like the protagonist's hair cut, function as symbolic ruptures that signify emotional collapse and metamorphosis. The emotional tone is reinforced by the animation technique, which prioritizes unrefined facial expressions and natural tension above overdone motions.

Do's purposeful use of little speech heightens the emotional impact even more. Instead of using melodrama, the scene where Chou has to let go of her child is depicted through long-term framing and delicate lighting changes. The audience can "read" emotion through cinematic silence thanks to this visual-narrative strategy, which promotes both emotional and cognitive engagement. Animated films "invite affective responses not in spite of abstraction but because of it," as noted by Judith Kriger (Kriger 48). Thus, the film's visual lexicon not only tells the story but also evokes strong feelings about loss, maternal sacrifice, and remembrance. Chou, the mother, continues to be the narrative focal point, and it is from her point of view that the audience witnesses forced relocation, famine, and the psychological effects of losing her son. Mieke Bal's theory, which highlights how emotional identification rises when the viewer is strongly connected to the events of a single character, is consistent with this single-point focalization. Chou's silence, anguish, and occasional breakdowns are emotionally heightened as the audience adopts her viewpoint.

Cutting her hair, a recurrent motif in both movies, also has profound symbolic meaning in this context. Chou interprets it as the loss of her former identity, womanhood, and autonomy. These behaviors are indicators of a larger cultural trauma according to Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective. The emotional effect of these images is conveyed through their visual codes, which speak to audiences of all languages and cultural

backgrounds without the need for verbal explanation. “Animated documentaries foster an emotional realism that transcends the factual,” as Nea Ehrlich (2021) states, and *Funan* demonstrates this by using minimal dialogue and emphasizing facial expressions, pauses, and environmental cues—rain, landscape, and sounds that convey despair or fleeting hope.

4.3 Viewers’ Response and Audience Engagement

It is not sufficient to study the semiotic codes and narrative structures of *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* separately; viewers' reactions must also be taken into account as a component of the films' meaning-making process. Animated documentaries, because of their hybrid format, actively influence viewers' perceptions and emotions of reality rather than just portraying it. These films are influenced by the viewers' own cultural understanding, emotional sensitivity, and historical awareness, and the final effect is determined by the interaction between the text and the audience. Moments like Chou's hair cut in *Funan* or Parvana's metamorphosis in *The Breadwinner* have a greater emotional impact since viewers are able to empathize with these characters' hardships. By allowing viewers to become witnesses in addition to telling experiences of oppression and resistance, these films establish a participatory mode of viewing that connects viewers to the sociopolitical realities they depict. Because it emphasizes how well narrative and visual techniques may evoke empathy, introspection, and moral engagement, taking into account viewers' reactions therefore adds a crucial component to the research.

The cutting of Chou's hair is a very powerful scene in *Funan*. In addition to its symbolic meaning of forced change and identity loss, the sequence causes spectators to feel uneasy and to bear witness, making them imagine the humiliation and erasure that many women suffered under the Khmer Rouge. The film's environment is transformed into a shared affective space of loss and perseverance by the harsh landscapes and subdued color schemes, which further heighten the emotional distance. Strong empathy is also evoked by the portrayal of family separation, particularly the mother's desperate quest for her kid; viewers are dragged into the anguish of forced fragmentation and the frailty of interpersonal ties.

In the same way, *The Breadwinner* uses narrative and visual techniques to influence viewer reaction. Parvana's disguise as a boy serves as a narrative technique of symbolic

resistance and survival, inspiring admiration, camaraderie, and emotional affiliation in the audience. As a visual sign, the burqa functions as both a connotative indicator of gendered restriction and systemic control as well as a denotative cultural garment. Her father's storytelling sequences, on the other hand, enable viewers to move between narrative layers—myth, memory, and reality—and experience the conflict between creativity and limitation through the use of shifting focalization. All things considered, these strategies immerse the audience in the emotional logic of the characters' lives rather than merely narrating a tale.

This combination of technique and reception is supported by academic voices. Nea Ehrlich highlights that these films frequently deal with a form of "emotional truth," in which effect provides a different way to understand meaning outside of rigorous historical portrayal (Ehrlich 82). Judith Kriger argues that by bringing invisible traumas to light, animation encourages audience participation with situations that would otherwise be unavailable. Within the confines of conventional filmmaking, she notes that animated films frequently serve as witnesses, giving shape to circumstances that are "otherwise invisible or inaccessible" (Kriger 43). Kriger goes on to say that animation is increasingly being used to provide new information about the real world that cannot be captured through photography. The same way that early photographers like Eadweard Muybridge utilized photography to depict movement that was invisible to the human eye, modern filmmakers use animation to expand visibility and depict realities that are difficult to depict with photography. In this way, animated documentaries broaden our understanding and experience by bringing to light both hidden and visible aspects of reality that are beyond the scope of vision (Kriger 70).

Critical reviews echo these theoretical claims. Rotten Tomatoes has given *The Breadwinner* a 95% approval rating, praising its "awesome visuals... accompanied by a narrative that dares to confront sobering real-life issues with uncommon—and richly rewarding—honesty" (The Breadwinner). It is "a work of striking beauty and affecting emotional heft," according to Kenneth Turan of the Los Angeles Times, who highlights how the narrative framework and Afghan-inspired score completely engross spectators (Turan). The film avoids sentimentality while maintaining emotional effect because it is "so urgent and far-reaching that it never settles into the comforts of a coming-of-age story,"

according to IndieWire (Review: *The Breadwinner*). The National emphasizes how Parvana's envisioned stories' happier imagery, which offers emotional solace in the face of injustice, contrasts with the "lo-fi 2D animation and dull colours" which add to the despairing nature of proceedings (Film Review: *The Breadwinner*)."

Similarly, *Funan* received a 93% critic score on Rotten Tomatoes, with critics praising the film's "inextricable intertwining of beauty of the visuals and horror of the situation" ("Funan"). According to Roger Ebert, it is a "powerful animated drama" composed of "carefully choreographed set pieces," and without its familial foundation, the experience could be excruciatingly depressing (Ebert). It is "heart-wrenching yet absolutely beautiful," according to Common Sense Media, which also highlights how it preserves emotional accessibility while introducing Western viewers to a lesser-known period of Cambodian history ("Funan Movie Review"). Additionally, critics draw attention to the contrast between the beauty of nature and the destruction caused by conflict, which heightens the emotional tension and strengthens audience identification.

Beyond critics and scholars, everyday audience voices further illuminate how viewers engage. IMDb users have given *The Breadwinner* a 7.7/10 rating, with one reviewer writing: "This is why 2D animation will never die ... Both the individuals and the situations are as realistic as feasible. It moved me. (Veinctor) The film is described as "beautiful and uplifting" by another user, who suggests it for both younger and older audiences. Reviews of *The Breadwinner* by users On the other hand, strong support for emotional effect overrides a few remarks about tempo or narrative economy. Critics bring out structural flaws in *Funan's* user reviews, although they also praise the "beautiful animation" ("*Funan* user reviews"). The scholarly and critical consensus that the films have both symbolic complexity and a profound emotional impact on viewers is supported by these popular responses.

Thus, taking into consideration the reactions of viewers broadens the scope of analysis beyond the theoretical and textual. It shows how narrative and visual techniques mediate emotional experiences and create links between individual viewers and collective histories, in addition to representing cultural and political realities. The reception component becomes crucial to comprehending how *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* function

as affective memory pieces, creative interventions, and tools of cultural involvement since it reveals how viewers feel, ponder, and occasionally even question these portrayals.

Acts of resistance by the characters in *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* are closely linked to their individual identities, the cultural oppression they experience, and the narrative frameworks that influence their growth. The difficulties of negotiating gender and societal conventions under repressive governments are made clear by each character's resistance, which becomes an essential part of their development.

Parvana's resistance in *The Breadwinner* is a clear reaction to the Taliban regime's cultural and gender-based oppression in Afghanistan. A significant change in her approach to navigating the inflexible, male-dominated society around her is symbolized by her choice to adopt the male identity of Atish. Parvana's resistance to a system that restricts women's rights is both an act of survival and an assertion of her agency. Her transformation into Atish challenges the social norm that restricts women to the private realm and signifies a change in identity in addition to a physical one. Parvana's use of the male identity to gain access to opportunities, obtain resources, and ultimately defend her family constitutes cultural defiance in this resistance. The narrative structure follows Parvana's journey of self-discovery and character development through this externalized shift in identity, highlighting how cultural oppression forces people to adapt and resist in order to survive. Her resilience is seen as she navigates her dual identity, learning to balance her true self with the role she is forced to play, and ultimately becoming the "breadwinner" for her family in a society that would otherwise deny her such a position.

Funan, on the other hand, uses Chou's function as a mother to illustrate resistance that is based on the Khmer Rouge regime's cultural repression in Cambodia. As a mother, Chou's resistance is closely linked to her resolve to keep her family safe and intact, unlike Parvana, whose resistance is externalized through a gender switch. By focusing on preserving her family while navigating the harsh forces around her, Chou's disobedience is a silent but potent act of cultural resistance. Her identity as a mother becomes her means of resistance; by remaining loyal to her protective role, she fights against societal control and external aggression. Through *Funan*'s narrative structure, Chou's survival journey—which is closely tied to her identity as a mother—shapes her evolution. Her battle is both

intensely personal and politically significant because her opposition is not shown through explicit behavior but rather by her unwavering dedication to her child's safety and welfare.

Both films emphasize the various ways that identity and resistance interact under cultural oppression by utilizing their own narrative frameworks. The transition of Parvana's identity from a constrained feminine role to that of a male family leader is a defining feature of her character development in *The Breadwinner*. Through this transformation, her resistance is shown, indicating the extent to which she must go to overcome oppressive social institutions. In contrast, Chou's character growth in *Funan* is demonstrated by her capacity to withstand outside influences while preserving her individuality as a mother. A more subdued, internalized kind of rebellion, her opposition puts family ties ahead of personal survival. Both instances show how narrative structure and character development can shed light on the nuanced yet significant ways in which people fight against cultural oppression as the characters' identities change in reaction to the repressive cultural forces they encounter. Both Parvana and Chou serve as excellent examples of how resistance frequently manifests itself in hidden ways, such as through identity transformation or the steadfast love of family, demonstrating how cultural oppression not only limits people but also influences their innovative, adaptable reactions to empowerment and survival.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the key findings of the study on animated documentaries, with a particular focus on *Funan* and *The Breadwinner*. These films demonstrate how animation can improve storytelling by giving real-life events more emotional depth and complexity. One of the main concepts discussed is "covalent narratives," which holds that animation and documentary work together like a strong bond, much like atoms share electrons in chemistry. By fusing facts with imaginative visuals, animated documentaries produce a more captivating story that viewers can relate to. Ultimately, animated documentaries turn traditional storytelling into a rich exploration of human experiences, making important themes more accessible and meaningful. The study emphasizes how these films connect with audiences, allowing them to feel empathy for the characters. Viewers can better understand the struggles and resilience of the people portrayed through perspective and character development, among other storytelling techniques.

5.1 Findings of the Study

This study highlights the transformative storytelling power of animation, which adds emotional depth and complexity to stories. The capacity of animated documentaries to evoke empathy in viewers is one of the main conclusions. Animation creates a stronger bond between viewers and the story topics by offering rich emotional experiences and granting access to the inner conflicts of the characters. The media turns factual information into an emotionally engaging and immersive experience rather than just presenting it (Ehrlich 9, 16).

The use of narrative techniques, especially focalization, is crucial in influencing how viewers perceive a story. Filmmakers can manipulate point of view to influence how viewers interact with the narrative and characters. This technique dramatically raises cognitive and emotional engagement. *The Breadwinner* and *Funan* are two examples of animated documentaries that take viewers on intricate emotional journeys that enhance their comprehension of cultural identity, trauma, and recovery. Animation's capacity to

broaden conventional documentary formats into deeper examinations of the human condition is demonstrated by the use of focalization (Cai 4).

The concept of covalent narratives, which conceptualizes the interdependent relationship between animation and documentaries, is introduced in the study. Animation is a crucial narrative element in this framework rather than a decorative touch. Documentary realism and artistic vision can be combined to create animated documentaries that successfully interest viewers while tackling difficult social topics. Ehrlich's claim that "animation can more honestly address reality than live-action documentaries because of its manufactured nature is supported by this (Ehrlich 9)."

The study demonstrates how *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* use symbolic imagery, narrative layering, and visual metaphors to illustrate cultural trauma and resistance in order to answer the first research question, which states, What visual and narrative strategies have been employed in the selected works to highlight the themes of cultural heritage, survival, and personal transformation? These strategies align with earlier studies that emphasize animation's ability to reflect complicated histories and elevate underrepresented voices (Salamina; Shahid).

In *The Breadwinner*, for example, Barthes' theory of the garment system is echoed by the heroine Parvana's change through clothes, which is a powerful representation of gender and identity (Barthes 26). The burqa becomes a multi-layered signifier that both symbolizes oppression and resilience. While the act of cross-dressing (00:01:46) symbolizes both defiance and survival, visually ominous and stifling sequences (00:05:02, 00:26:30) highlight the erasing of society under Taliban authority.

Visual transitions in *Funan*, such as the tumultuous scene at the family dinner table (00:03:01–00:03:06), use chaos and stillness to represent cultural breakdown and emotional rupture. When a sibling is shown at gunpoint at a crucial juncture (00:05:30), the emphasis shifts from societal trauma to intensely personal stakes. A remark like "Get back in line... Ankar will provide for him" (00:10:25) illustrates the severe control that totalitarian governments wield.

The second research question examines how visual indicators aid in the viewer's comprehension and asks how the employment of semiotic codes and symbols contributes

to the representation of these themes. Identity markers include things like traditional attire, placement in space, and color schemes. The study demonstrates how signs build up layers of meaning and elicit strong emotional reactions by drawing on Barthes' semiotic theory (Barthes 26; Cai 3). Unlike live-action, animation in both films allows the symbolic context to more effectively depict inner struggle and socio-political restrictions. For instance, *The Breadwinner's* soundtrack, which corresponds to emotional shifts in each scene, enhances the emotional resonance of each stage of Parvana's journey when combined with visual symbolism (Cai 3). By combining semiotics and sound, symbolic elements are transformed from merely visual motifs into emotionally charged symbols of struggle and identity.

The integration of storytelling techniques such as voiceover, juxtaposition, and flashback with expressive animation improves emotional engagement, as evidenced by the third research question, "How effectively does the interplay of narrative techniques and visual storytelling enhance the emotive impact of themes within animated documentaries?" *Funan's* shifting timelines highlight the lasting impact of tragedy, while *The Breadwinner* depicts internal strife through voiceovers and stylized imagery. According to Storm and Soares, emotionally charged media, such as animated documentaries, might improve emotional recall and autobiographical memory, resulting in "significant variations in emotional reactions" (Storm and Soares 22).

The findings highlight how effective animation is at narrating stories about trauma, identity, and survival. By presenting both the facts and the personal events that led up to them, animated documentaries enable viewers to empathize with the content on a deeper level. This method is transforming our perception of documentaries by demonstrating the power of imaginative storytelling as a vehicle for emotional truth and cultural resistance.

This study finds that animation redefines the way narratives are created and interpreted when taking into account the medium's wider influence on the act and art of storytelling. Animation offers an interpretive lens that prioritizes affect, symbolism, and subjectivity, in contrast to traditional documentary approaches, which frequently rely on literal facts and photographic realism. Using this method, filmmakers can portray psychological states, repressed memories, and cultural trauma that might otherwise go unnoticed. Thus, animation makes it possible to express both factual and metaphorical

facts, resulting in a multi-layered storytelling style where imagination and reality coexist. *Funan*, for instance, shows how animation can convey the rhythmic nature of trauma and memory in ways that live-action would not be able to through his graphic transitions between still and chaotic periods. Comparably, *The Breadwinner*'s artistic depiction of Parvana's tenacity demonstrates how animation elevates the story above the realm of physical reality while providing interpretive depth and emotional authenticity. These illustrations demonstrate how animation can be both a medium and a transformative narrative art form that changes the way that documentaries are produced.

It is also vital to place *Funan* and *The Breadwinner* in the larger social and political contexts that influenced their creation in order to build on these discoveries. These films' representations of pain, survival, and identity are highlighted in the textual analysis, but the historical and cultural settings in which they were produced influenced their very production.

5.1.1 Context of Production and Socio-Political Facts

Funan and *The Breadwinner*'s production demonstrates both direct involvement with urgent social and political concerns as well as artistic choices. Denis Do's film *Funan* is based on Cambodia's history under the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979), a government that committed mass murder, forced labor, and cultural erasure. Based on his mother's experience, Do uses the movie as a means of reclaiming memory from a time when people's voices were brutally repressed. The way it was made relates to Cambodia's continuous battle with remembering, recounting, and recovering from a collective trauma that is still politically sensitive in the nation. By turning personal experience into a public story, the movie makes the claim that animation may be used as both artistic representation and political testimony.

The brutal reality of Afghanistan during Taliban rule, when women and girls were denied access to education, mobility, and a voice, is also the setting for *The Breadwinner*. The film, which was produced by Cartoon Saloon with Angelina Jolie's help, shows a global understanding of the need of elevating Afghan women's voices at a time when international concern for female rights is at an all-time high. Jolie's participation guaranteed global exposure, but equally crucial was the production team's choice to seek

advice from Afghan storytellers, consultants, and cultural specialists, which anchored the story in political responsibility and authenticity. In this approach, the movie serves as a cultural intervention, exposing resiliency, familial ties, and day-to-day survival under persecution rather than the dominant media's depiction of Afghanistan as a place solely associated with war and terrorism.

The involvement of filmmakers, teams, and global sponsors demonstrates how animated documentaries are cooperative works influenced by moral and political values. *The Breadwinner* tackles the gendered violence of modern political regimes, while *Funan* tackles the legacy of authoritarianism and genocide. Both films are situated at the nexus of art and action. The circumstances surrounding their creation demonstrate that these movies are cultural artifacts that directly address historical trauma, political silence, and social resistance rather than being purely storytelling exercises. The study emphasizes how animated films can serve as both artistic creations and contributions to current international discussions about representation, memory, and justice by bringing these sociopolitical realities to light.

5.2 Implications of the Study

The foundation of this study is the way that visual storytelling techniques in animated films, specifically *Funan* and *The Breadwinner*, affect viewers' emotional and mental responses. The insights gained are important from a theoretical, practical, and sociocultural standpoint.

This study's main theoretical contribution is the development of the idea of "covalent narratives," a framework that encapsulates the complementary relationship between artistic animation and factual narration. This idea provides academics with a fresh perspective on the hybrid nature of animated documentaries. Documentary and animation work together to form a narrative structure that is both emotionally and intellectually compelling, much like atoms in a covalent relationship.

This contradicts conventional wisdom that views documentary and animation as diametrically opposed genres. Rather, it encourages new interdisciplinary research that sees them as complementary forms that can use subjective and symbolic visual languages

to expose complex truths. This work adds to discussions in media theory, visual culture, and documentary storytelling by presenting animation as a valid epistemological method.

Documentaries using animation have a lot of promise as teaching resources. Teachers can use these films to make difficult subjects like gender inequity, violence, and historical tragedy easier to understand. In school settings, the emotionally charged stories and captivating visual style promote empathy, improve memory recall, and stimulate critical thinking. Additionally, this study offers a useful model for fusing creative strategies with reality for filmmakers and digital storytellers. It implies that employing animation enhances audience connection and message delivery by amplifying the affective power of storytelling in addition to safeguarding identities and reconstructing inaccessible history.

According to the study, animated documentaries are crucial for changing historical memory and elevating underrepresented voices. As demonstrated by *Funan* and *The Breadwinner*, which focus on the lived experiences of women and children in war-torn areas, these films contribute to international discussions about gender politics, resilience, and displacement. By providing emotionally charged substitutes for official histories and contesting prevailing narratives, they aid in the formation of public memory. Deeper viewer introspection and social discussion on identity, trauma, and justice are encouraged by these stories' blending of the personal and the political. In terms of culture, these films serve as guardians of endangered customs and languages by bringing the voices of marginalized groups to a worldwide audience. In addition to enhancing cultural diversity in media portrayal, this fosters empathy and cross-cultural understanding in these more divisive times.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study also draw attention to the wider significance of animated documentaries in influencing historical narratives, political discourse, and audience perception, with implications that cut across a number of fields, including documentary theory, visual culture, media representation, and cognitive film studies.

1. Animated Documentaries' Influence on History and Public Memory
2. Animation's Emotional and Cognitive Impact on Storytelling

3. Ethical Consequences of Using Animation to Represent Trauma
4. Real-World Applications for educators
5. Animation's role in Maintaining Cultural Identity
6. Questioning Gender Norms and Media Representation

This study makes a number of suggestions for future research on animated documentaries in order to increase knowledge and promote discussion in this area:

1. Animated Documentaries as a Different Kind of Archive
2. Animation Function in Postmodern Visual Culture
3. Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies
4. Impact of Technology on Animation Styles

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