



The Symbolic Use of Mountains in Balochistan's Visual Art: Culture, Identity, Memory, and Visual Representation

Umbreen Faqir Hussain^{*a}, Dr. Anila Zulfiqar^a, Fatima Saeed^a

a. College of Art and Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

ARTICLE INFO

Received:

June 03, 2026

Revision Received:

July 08, 2026

Accepted:

July 11, 2026

Available Online:

July 12, 2026

Keywords:

Balochistan, visual art, semiotics, Roland Barthes, mountain symbolism.

ABSTRACT

Mountains dominate the physical and psychological landscape of Balochistan, and this topographical feature is a perennial subject for exponents of Balochistan's visual art. This paper examines four oil paintings by two contemporary painters of Balochistan, Abdul Hameed Baloch and Kaleem Khan, which each use the mountain subject to express concepts of cultural identity, collective memory and regional belonging in their work. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic triad of denotation, connotation, and myth, the article reads into each painting its literal denotation, its connotation in cultural terms, and the ideological myth in which the mountain (after having been naturalized as a signifier of Baloch identity) plays its role. The painting examples under analysis are the idealized depictions of winter pastures, nomadic encampments, a bazaar by the river with snow-clad mountains behind, and a resting mule caravan in the mountains' shadow. In each of these four images, the mountain is depicted as an architectural formation: it anchors its inhabitants, human or animal, and cultural infrastructure into a cultural geography. Although Baloch landscape painting appears stylistically indebted to realism and impressionism, we argue that it ideologically functions to create and stabilize the regional art historical identity of Balochistan. The paper contributes to the broader discourses on landscape, memory, and marginality by undertaking a semiotic analysis of a neglected regional art tradition in South Asia.

1. Introduction

Possibly it is an irony of fate that Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province by area, occupies a marginal space in the country's art history, despite being the site of a vigorous visual culture. The harsh mountains, desert basins, and long coast along the Arabian Sea have psychologically marked the province to the extent that for its people the mountain has ceased to be a geographic fact and become a cultural sign (Khan & Buriro, 2020). In the works of both Kaleem Khan and Abdul Hameed Baloch, this sign is not relegated to the background: it organizes the entire order of the work, creates the scale, and absorbs the figures who move through it, causing the landscape and the human figure to become visually inseparable (ArtNow Pakistan, n.d.).

This inseparability is the problem this paper takes up. Baloch visual art and image-based cultural production have only been described in journalistic writing, whether exhibition reviews, short artist profiles, or the like. These mostly describe mood and technique, but do not analyze how meaning is produced (Dawn, 2016; Sibtain, 2011; Ali, 2021; Ahmed, 2016). When art critics reach for a common vocabulary to describe mountains, they use the words rugged, unflinching, timeless, resilient, without pausing to ask why these adjectives describe mountains with such regularity, or what this conceptual economy does. I start with an account of mechanisms in order to explain not just that mountains recur in this body of work, but how a repeated visual

* Correspondence to: College of Art and Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

E-mail address: umbreen.hussain@yahoo.com (U. F. Hussain).



motif acquires ideological weight until it reads as natural. Roland Barthes's (1977) model of signification from denotation through connotation to myth might have supplied just that model of analysis. Its absence from writing about visual culture in Balochistan is surprising given the model's proven usefulness elsewhere for advertising, national iconography, and landscape traditions across the region (Barthes, 1977). This absence is not for want of a usable method already circulating in Pakistani scholarship. A recent semiotic reading of gendered imagery in contemporary Chinese and Pakistani painting suggests that tracing denotation-connotation-myth through a national body of work can reveal ideological patterning invisible to purely descriptive criticism (Riaz, 2024). That precedent confirms that the method travels; and, to date, the method has not yet been turned toward the regional and topographical concerns - mountain, memory, marginality - that occupy this paper.

2. Literature Review

The province's mountains have always been more than symbolic, and Balochistan has always been at the crossroads of Persian, South Asian and Central Asian cultures. Its physical geography is ideally suited to isolation, providing refuge and insulation for the peoples and their cultures that have faced successive waves of pressure from the Persian, British and later Pakistani states (Ahmed & Khan, 2017; Dashti, 2012). In this history, the mountains function as something closer to a political actor than a passive backdrop: they made certain kinds of political and statecraft difficult and certain kinds of cultural autonomy possible, and this dual function of shelter and defiance is precisely what recurs, transposed into a visual register, in the paintings I examine. Oral narrative, poetry, and music in the region regularly cast the mountain as a figure of endurance and resistance, and it is this pre-existing cultural discourse, rather than any single artist's invention, that visual artists inherit and translate into paint. (Dashti 2012) But painters working in this tradition are not creating symbols out of nothing; they are giving a well-known verbal and performative form a new visual grammar, and that process of translation is itself worth studying, since something must be gained and lost when a spoken figure of endurance becomes a rendered mass of pigment on canvas. This lack of care has been compounded by the literature on Pakistani art, which has treated the national canon in surveys that overwhelmingly privilege Punjab and Sindh over Balochistan, which, when it is discussed, is treated as an inconsequential regional footnote rather than a visual tradition with its own logic (Naqvi 1998).

Some artists have made the mountain a central theme of their oeuvre, but seeing how differently Khan and Baloch approach the subject will benefit an understanding of their respective works. For instance, Jamil Baloch's eight-and-a-half foot sculpture Koh (mountain) uses black acrylic to signify the glacially-paced destruction of local culture. On this reading, the mountain is not a source of comfort but a site of loss. The mountain goes on whereas the people do not (Sibtain, 2011). In the case of the two works by Doda Khan Badini and Fahim Baloch in *Narrative Balochistan*, the mountain takes on both the weight of the subjects' agony and the heroism of their defiance (Ali, 2021). Kaleem Khan's London series *Colors of Balochistan*, with the mountain represented in "gauzy light" against the "unflinching" brushwork of the artist, may be read as at once an evocation of the threat and an indication of the tenderness that is characteristic of the wider tradition (Ahmed, 2016). The inverse development is illustrated by the work of Abdul Hameed Baloch. Deviating away from easy-to-read figurative scenes of turbaned herders, he approaches abstraction in his ink and watercolour washes: while retaining the rocky, dust-like palette of his native area, he does not represent it, believing that the mountain-as-sign can survive the disappearance of the mountain-as-recognizable-form. Taken together, this variety of works suggests that artists of different styles, whether realist or abstract, sculptural or painted, are ascribing to the mountain a similar cultural function, a suggestion that something other than individual whim is at stake.

No one prior to this essay has attempted to subject Barthes's model to this corpus. Nor has the diachronic question of what work the mountain-as-motif is doing across different artists in the corpus been systematically addressed. This article will do so by analyzing four representative artworks, two by Kaleem Khan and two by Abdul Hameed Baloch, produced between 2010 and 2024, when each artist produced meaningful bodies of land art stressing the Balochistan landscape. Note that technological limitations mean I am seeing reproductions, and reading published commentary by others rather than talking with the artist. These limitations necessarily mean I am only making claims about how a work would be read by a viewer with a certain cultural-linguistic horizon of expectation. This is a limitation rather than a disabling condition, since semiotic analysis is concerned semantically with the use of signs within particular codes shared ordinarily by the culture, it is not concerned with recovering the private intention of the author; the myth this paper traces is a property of its reception at least as much as its production. Moving from description to interpretation to ideology, it asks what this pattern of artistic representation implies for the production and naturalization of regional identity through landscape painting more generally, and what alternative images of Balochistan are displaced by the persistence of this particular myth.

The contribution of this paper is less archival than methodological. The paintings themselves are familiar and well-studied by critics and gallery visitors, but in a sustained way the question of how, mechanically, they generate the meanings so consistently attributed to them has not been asked. The semiotic approach to them takes for granted that Balochistan's visual culture is a

worthy subject for art historical inquiry, rather than mere art historical description. The distinction is meaningful for how art production in Balochistan can be incorporated into the larger trajectory of art in Pakistan, rather than being sidelined, an outcome that otherwise seems inevitable.

3. Materials and Methods

The present study is a qualitative, case-study reading of four paintings, two by Kaleem Khan and two by Abdul Hameed Baloch. I do not present an analysis of a (relatively) representative sample of mountain paintings, for the focus of the study is not to show their commonplace occurrence but to explore, in fine-grained detail, how they are made meaningful within specific paintings. This is an interpretive task and as such, I would prioritize depth of reading over breadth of sample.

The two artists were purposively sampled as both have decades of creating imagery of mountains and each was well-known across Balochistan's small, but active, contemporary art community. Each artist's work was then screened against four criteria to select the four images that appeared in this article: 1) a mountain or mountain-like topography is prominent within the image, structuring the image; 2) a reproduction is available of sufficient quality to allow a detailed visual reading; 3) the image was representative of the artist's other landscapes, avoiding idiosyncratic exceptions that are not readily read as part of a larger artistic practice; and 4) critical or exhibition status, avoiding works that may be read in isolation because the commentary has not been preserved in a published form. But the secondary literature - reviews, commentary and theory on Baloch visual culture, and semiotics - is used as background context and theory rather than as primary evidence, and is treated throughout with the appropriate caution given its largely journalistic rather than scholarly origin.

The analytic framework is Barthes's two-order model of signification (Barthes, 1977). The first order, denotation, is the literal inventory of what is visible in an image, independent of cultural reading: color, form, composition, brushwork, and subject matter. It is schematic and descriptive, not anticipatory, because it is only a means for reaching agreement about what is being described before interpretation can begin. Connotation, the second order, is the system of cultural, emotional and ideological association that attaches to denoted content. Barthes treats connotation as always ideological and thus "to express and justify the dominant values" of a period. Thus any connotation of a landscape painting can never be separated from the cultural politics of that landscape as a landscape of ideology. Myth, finally, is what happens when a connotation is repeated and naturalized until it no longer reads as constructed at all - when a culturally and historically specific meaning is experienced by a viewer as timeless and self-obvious, as if the mountain simply is endurance rather than having been made to signify it (Barthes, 1972, 1977).

Each painting is analyzed in three parts, the first being a denotative description, which establishes what is seen in the painting - figures, terrain, color, brush strokes and distance - without cultural inference, so that the interpretive claims made later may be checked against a stable descriptive survey. Second, a connotative reading would ask what these images meant in a Baloch context, for example, endurance, isolation, shelter, continuity. The critical and historical literature already available on the subject is helpful in providing pointers on what connotative readings one might employ and on how these could be justified. Third, a mythic reading would ask how these connotations repeat throughout an artist's oeuvre and from artist to artist to become naturalized knowledge about Baloch identity, rather than one possible way of picturing it among several. Fourth, important points of convergence and divergence between these artists' strategies would need to be analyzed to show how this myth is structured. In particular, I show that figurative and near-abstract modalities mobilize the mountain in them to achieve similar ideological goals, even if the formal techniques efficacious in doing so differ. The four analyzes are then braided into an argument about what the mountain does ideologically in Baloch landscape painting as a genre, as opposed to each work independently, the others irrelevant.

4. Results and Discussion

Kaleem Khan: the riverside bazaar



Figure 1: Kaleem Khan, riverside bazaar beneath a snow-covered peak

Khan often put a settlement in the foreground below a mountain which filled the upper two-thirds of the image, as in the riverside example discussed. In this painting are vendor carts, hanging fabric, parked vehicles and low buildings in the bottom half of the canvas. A single snow-covered mountain, a solid mass painted with a thick impasto brushwork, rises above the settlement in the upper two thirds of the painting, mirrored in the still water below. It is both a solid mass and a liquid reflection. Khan's colors go from ochres and greys at the bottom of the composition to a blueish white at the top, separating the two register even while the composition as a whole stresses their unity. Khan also treats figures as part of the landscape rather than simply occupying space in the background of the scene, as evidenced by the mountain's shadow below and sky above (Ahmed, 2016).

Read connotatively, the gulf between the market and the soaring mountain does at least two things at once: the mountains of Khan have "a dark density, underscoring the fragility of mankind", and a marketplace becomes "nothing more than a speck against their fierce majesty". The peak appears "in a gauzy light" rather than a state of menace, and these two meanings would appear inconsistent, yet do not contradict in the painting (Ahmed, 2016). For the relationship itself, fragility and reverence are not oppositional, but rather two sides of a single relationship, like a person shrinking in size before something they also love. This paradoxical symmetry between fragility and reverence is what the river's frame helps to establish, collapsing the distance between the abstract, elevated and distant mountain, and the raw, empirical and mercenary bazaar into one single image, not two layers of experience, without any help from explicit narrative.

At the mythic level, the text naturalizes a certain claim: that Baloch commercial and domestic life, however ordinary its daily texture, was in fact permanently sheltered by, and continuous with, the mountain above it. Khan's own description of a way of life that "may not have changed much in the last century" confirms the point: the bazaar itself is a timeless expression of settlement beneath an eternal guardian, rather than a historically contingent site of commerce. And the myth of continuity is meaningful here: if the ordinary transactions of commerce acquire their cultural importance because the mountain dignifies them by eternalizing them, the painting achieves the quite unnoticeable shift in perspective that allows the ordinary social transaction to be read as a symbolic statement about Baloch permanence by quietly asserting the equivalence of the vendors and their reflections with the mountain above them.

Kaleem Khan: Quetta and its mules

Figure 2: Kaleem Khan, mule caravan on the outskirts of Quetta.

Khan applies the visual language of riverside painting to the urban terrain of Quetta in his later works. Here the mass of dark blue and violet mountain behind a group of mules and their handlers on pale sunlit ground in the foreground is built up with the same loose and expressive strokes as in his earlier landscape. Unlike the riverside painting, the peak in this canvas is not so precisely rendered: this is atmospheric, rather than geographic. The shift in focus away from topography to light and shadow is a formal choice with connotative implications, rather than simply a stylistic choice (Ahmed, 2016).

There is, of course, a connotation here as well. The mountain is a fixed point against which change can be measured. Khan has described his daily process of observing "the change" in the streets of Quetta. The mountain is his background. Change can only be perceived against the backdrop of something that does not itself change. The now-looser brush strokes suggest, rather than depict, the mountain, which has become an internalized presence rather than an observed one, nearer to memory than to vision. The resting mule caravan resembles the mountain pass not as an obstacle to be traversed, but as a route with its own history as a corridor of trade and mobility, thus drawing greater importance to the mountain-pass as a symbol of economic history and anthropological toil. The image fits within a wider regional history of caravan trade across rugged country.

This painting thus mythically extends Baloch identity from rural encampment into urban street without rupture, arguably its most important ideological advance. Since, Khan holds that "it is difficult to paint landscape without its dwellers", people and place cannot be separated even in analysis, let alone in life. Filling in this historically normalized metaphysics with the Mehrgarh civilization, Khan promises that even modern-day Quetta and its residents descend from civilizations millennia old. The myth constructed features unbroken descent: urban modernity becomes absorbed into identity defined by the mountain, and written with such impressionistic brushstrokes that its legibility apparently does not depend on documentary fidelity; the mountain can be gestured at with a few loose strokes of the brush, and instantly recognized as the ground of Baloch identity.

Abdul Hameed Baloch: the winter valley

Figure 3: Abdul Hameed Baloch, figures in a winter valley.

Earlier figurative work by Baloch appears to favourite abstracted human figures in turbans and customary attire in a topographically defined space. The painting in question is of a winter valley. It shows a wide valley with scattered snow, dry orange-brown grass in the foreground, two tiny figures on a path, a thin red-brown band of wetland, and a continuous range of blue-violet peaks in the background set in darkness. Unlike the vertical dramas of Khan's works, this composition is horizontal in design and shows the range of mountains as a backdrop rather than hanging overhead.

Together, the cool palette, the small scale of the human figures relative to the mountain, the dried grass and patches of snow that suggest a transitional season, not quite winter nor yet spring, and the soft rendering of the mountain range all seem to work towards the harmony of enclosure and exposure. Where the mountain functions as a boundary and a protection, holding the valley within rather than merely lying above it, the use of customary dress makes a similar point about rootedness: the identity of the figures, their culture, is represented as inextricably tied to the terrain, and their clothing is not an arbitrary detail in this otherwise incongruous locale. The elements of the painting are rather two expressions of the same cultural fact.

Mythically, the Baloch figure is naturalized. The mountain conceals him at his front, protects him from his enemies, but, at the same time, it does not chastise or threaten the crossing of inhospitable terrain and the indigenous striving that it entails; the body's traversal becomes fit, not tortured or forced. The land-cradle is no longer alien, but an almost timeless immanent world, completing the semiotic circuit between landscape, as an imaginary repertoire, and the cultural identity it presupposes. What this painting in its entirety communicates is not that hardship is something to be escaped but that hardship and dignity are one and the same; this is precisely how myth works in Barthes's sense, making a historically produced way of living seem like the natural expression of the land.

Abdul Hameed Baloch: the encampment beneath storm clouds

Figure 4: Abdul Hameed Baloch, nomadic encampment beneath a storm-toned sky.

Earlier figurative paintings by Baloch often focused on stylised human figures, their turbans and regional costumes standing out against a topographical background. This winter valley scene is representative of this phase. The lower foreground is a broad valley, speckled with snow, at the time of day with dusk. The valley is filled with dried orange-brown grasses, a thin strip of a red-toned wetland, two diminutive figures on the path, and a blue-violet mountain range fading out into a darker blue sky. Unlike Khan's other works, this time, the composition is horizontal. The landscape becomes a disappearing line between the mountains.

In addition to the mountain itself, the use of cool colors and the very small size of the figures, compared to the mass of the mountain, give the impression of solitude and fortitude. The scene also suggests a bleak late winter/early spring time, as signified by the brown tufts of dried grass and sparse melting patches of snow. The mountain range's atmospheric tonality is an enclosure as much as it is an exposure; the valley is firmly enclosed by it, even if it is also contained within. This also makes the customary costume connote rootedness, as it relates the cultural identity to the land it is from and is not broken by the presence of the costume. The figures' clothing is the two variants of a cultural entity, not a costumed individual standing in an alien landscape.

In mythic terms, the painting naturalizes the Baloch subject as born to traverse, in silent dignity, even the wildest and most barren of frontiers, by representing the mountain in the familiar role of frame rather than enemy. The natural fit of subject and setting provides the intellectual justification for it. This is not a case of adaptation to a changing environment, but of perfect co-adaptation, of landscape and cultural signifier being perceived as almost one. Nothing in the painting suggests that hardship is something that must be overcome. Hardship and dignity are presented as one state of existence, the way of life myth, in Barthes's sense, works: it makes a historically produced way of living appear to be the land's own natural expression.

Abdul Hameed Baloch: the encampment beneath storm clouds

Figure 4: Abdul Hameed Baloch, nomadic encampment beneath a storm-toned sky

In contrast, Baloch's later works completely eschew legible humans and approach near abstraction using diluted ink, watercolour and washes (described as "stunning, elusive and monotone (Sibtain, 2011)"). The painting captures enough detail to constitute a map; there is an open green grassy plain on which is a line of closely grouped, round huts or tents, herds of goats mixed with (for example) cattle, a straight column of smoke above that and a continuous row of mountains under a heavily clouded and stormy sky. This turn away from the clearly rendered human form does not mean that they are not present, but rather that they are displaced onto traces - smoke, livestock, houses - that suggest habitation.

Connotatively, the encampment is at the foot of the mountain, rather than by choice in the open, indicating cognitive awareness of the environment in which the mountain is a windbreak. It marks distances and safe places, not a background for wilderness. The smoke gives a sense of domestic continuity under threatening conditions, holding the balance between storm and inertia in camp. The grazing stock suggest a pastoral economy structured directly and completely by the mountain environment, from drainage and shelter to grazing. The painting's formal contradictions - at once calm and urgent, spare and complex - mirror what critics have read as the tensions of Baloch cultural identity itself, caught between tradition and change, a reading that the storm-toned sky makes almost literal (Sibtain, 2011).

This mythologizing of the mountain serves to naturalize the nomadic way of life as ancient, autonomous, and well-suited to the highland environment, rather than contingent upon historical developments. Baloch's even more abstract work takes this further. The "certain silence" of his paintings and their apparent lack of a world "beyond the frame" give aesthetic permanence to cultural identity as something which cannot be defined from the outside. Building on the rocky, dust-colored palette, he prevents the mountain myth from becoming placeless abstraction, disconnected from geography (Sibtain 2011). For both figurative and abstract registers of mythic operation the mythic behavior remains the same: the way in which history has made a relationship between men and land is represented as if it could not be otherwise, whether in the representation of huts and herds or in wash and gesture.

4.1. Comparative reading: two strategies, one myth

Khan and Baloch's paintings are hung together, pursuing the same mythic destination but arriving in different ways. Khan's picture is about crowding and integration. The market, the mule, the loads and handlers, their reflections, the mountain itself are all folded together, as though human busyness and geological permanence were simply two objects in the same visual field, entirely unconflicted. Where Khan's connotative work depends upon density - more figures, more incident, more surface detail - Baloch's depends upon absence, on what the frame withholds. Baloch's work is characterized by subtraction: the figures dwindle until they disappear, and the mountain is left to carry meaning almost unaided. There are huts, smoke and livestock to suggest the presence of men. In the end, however, the mythic proposition of both image economies is the same: Baloch life, in community or alone, in the modern city or in the desert wilderness, is legible through the narration of the mountain that surrounds it. From this convergence of disparate image economies one can argue that what is being represented is a convention of cultural expression, rather than coincidence in a style. If a single painting might plausibly be read as an individual artist's

private symbolism, two artists arriving at the same underlying structure by opposite formal means becomes difficult to explain except as evidence of a motif that precedes, and exceeds, either artist's individual practice.

4.2. Discussion

Thus the mountain in Baloch landscape art performs three overlapping kinds of cultural work across the four paintings, and it is helpful to examine each before assessing what they might add up to as a whole.

The first is identity-construction: at the denotative level, all four works are about the topography of the land which at the connotative and mythic levels has connotations of belonging, continuity, and regionhood. This is consistent with the view of landscape as not a neutral transcription of nature but a cultural construction infused with social value and historical memory (Mitchell 2002; Schama 1995). Research continues to show that spatial and symbolic semiotics work together across artistic and cultural domains, and that landscape operates as a multilayered sign system in which all visual elements are absorbed into a continual process of cultural reinterpretation (Lavrenova 2025). Where Khan and Baloch diverge from this aspect of the claim is in how the human figures are integrated into the composition. Rather than being superimposed against the mountain, Khan circumscribes the vendors amongst the mountains that echo their shapes; Baloch co-opts the tiny travellers into the valley that recedes behind them on the river's banks. In both examples person and place are pictured as one unit rather than a figure/ground relationship. This conforms with Rose's (2016) conclusion that viewers (or readings) of an image depend as much on the discourse through which it is viewed as they do on the image itself. Any spectator without access to Baloch discourse would view these pieces as exercises in picturesque aesthetics, oblivious to the ideological work the mountain is doing in them.

The second function is that of the collective memory. The abstracted mountain in Khan's and Baloch's work is therefore a literal and metaphorical one. Nora's (1989) term *lieux de mémoire* (literally memory spaces, physical places that come to hold collective memory through repeated cultural association) is a way of saying that this is a process, with the same mountain painted over and over again on dozens of canvases becoming a place in itself. Schama (1995) was right to claim that memory is as much a part of how landscapes are made as geological processes. What makes Khan's Quetta paintings different is that, while the mountain is the relatively stable term in the opposition of stability and change, the memory-function it serves in this specific instance is not simply compositional: if you took the mountain away from the picture, there would be no record of change. The difference between Baloch and Khan is one of expression. Baloch longs for quiet, while Khan is enchanted by the city's visible churn, but among them both, the mountain endures in one place, not the human city. This is how a mountain can remember without being subject to the work of memory.

In the third mode, closer to resistance than memory strictly speaking but related to it, Cosgrove (1998) argues that landscape is a medium through which power and identity are expressed and Mirzoeff (2015) argues that representation is a means of maintaining marginal subjectivities which the national narrative marginalizes and makes invisible. More recent work in geography, in a more explicitly political direction, has to a degree followed suit and noted that landscape has long excluded other voices. If, in order to make livelihood visible, Mason and Riding (2023) call for landscape research to be reconfigured around materiality and decoloniality, then Balochistan's repeated appearance in the national discourse of art, after decades of Punjab and Sindh dominance (Naqvi, 1998), is itself a claim to visibility. Not by political proclamation, but through sheer persistence of a single recurring motif across decades of practice by more than one artist. Baloch's spare, quiet compositions and Khan's dense compositions full of figures seek to claim in different ways the space that might otherwise be a default for tourist and state-sponsored renditions of the region as scenery, a picturesque mountain scrubbed of the people who actually live against it, intended as the backdrop for the postcard view of a viewer passing by, rather than as a document from someone who belongs there. This refusal is arguably the paper's most original observation, linking a political problem of who is in the frame and how densely, to an aesthetic choice that exhibition commentary has always presented in terms of mood and technique. Studied through the lens of Jamil Baloch's *Koh* and the *Narrative Balochistan* exhibition, the same refusal is stated, not with the two painters on whom the paper has so far focused, but more architecturally through sculpture and a group show than less materially and individually through painters (Sibtain 2011; Ali 2021).

These three functions do not combine into a single unambiguous meaning, but this is not a disadvantage of the approach. Chandler (2007) and Eco (1976) argue that visual signs are polysemic, giving rise to different and often contradictory meanings according to the cultural codes used by viewers, and Barrett (2011) suggests that a valid interpretation need not be singular as long as it is supported by visual evidence. The mountain in this work is at once shelter and threat, continuity and confinement, pride and loss - Jamil Baloch's black-acrylic *Koh* insists on loss where Khan's gauzy light insists on tenderness (Sibtain, 2011; Ahmed, 2016) - and it is this ambivalence which gives the myth its durability. A symbol that could mean only one thing would be relatively easy to argue with or replace; one that could absorb contradiction without losing coherence is much harder to

dislodge, which may be one reason why the mountain is such a common motif even when the artistic styles are so dissimilar - from Khan's documentary realism to Jamil Baloch's near-abstraction.

It is worth noting that this is a limitation of semiotics, not of this analysis of paintings: since Barthes's account finds meaning by analyzing the final text and its associated discourse, it cannot make empirical predictions about how the paintings are actually likely to be read by viewers, nor about whether Baloch audiences read the mountain in the same way as non-Baloch audiences do. The account here is thus best understood as an account of what the paintings make available to be read, not as an account of how any specific audience has, in fact, read them, which may be important if one imagines that the argument has a wider purchase.

5. Conclusion and directions for future research

This article applies Roland Barthes's denotation-connotation-myth theory to four paintings by Kaleem Khan and Abdul Hameed Baloch to examine the symbolization of mountains in Balochistan's public art. In both the documentary realism of Khan's bazaar scene and the near-abstract ink washes of Baloch's later work, the mountain is a shorthand cultural sign that connotes stalwartness, home, adversity, and permanence, and it's a myth that naturalizes the Baloch identity and the region's highland geography as both ancient and inseparable from the people's self-conception. The fact that this occurred in both thickly worked oil as well as thin watercolor wash indicates that the use of mountain iconography in this manner was a structural convention of the genre - rather than dependent upon the painting style used to support that iconography - is the paper's primary finding.

By foregrounding a dimension of Balochistan's visual culture that has been left largely to exhibition journalism by other scholarship, we hope to identify a semiotic methodology that may be usefully extended to a larger corpus of regional South Asian art and help further study of any region with a similar motif that appears with such frequency. In continuation of this project, a larger sample of paintings, and of artists such as Jamil Baloch, Mazhar Baloch, and Nisar Ahmed who depict the same terrain in different ways, may be studied to see if the mythic pattern identified here obtains any more generally. Interviews with Baloch artists could tell us how much of this naturalization is conscious, and how much is convention. Interviews could also help us compare this trend to the long traditions of landscape painting in Pakistan's mountainous areas, to tell how particular a Balochistan phenomenon this is, and how common. Extending the analysis beyond painting to poetry, music and oral narrative, where the motif of the mountain is at least as well established and probably much older, and combining semiotic analysis with ethnographic work on artists and audiences could then add to our understanding of how and why this landscape should come to carry so much cultural weight, and at what cost to the alternative ways in which Balochistan could be pictured.

None of this in any way weakens the present analysis: two artists, working in two different decades and in nearly opposite formal registers, have independently arrived at the same underlying structure of meaning, using the mountain to fuse people and place into a single, apparently timeless identity. The fact that this convergence has occurred is no accident of subject matter. Much of the regional landscape is repeated without the ideological weight of the ones considered in this paper, as a result of a describable semiotic process. That, really, is the point of this paper: to show the mechanism of this process, not to suggest that the Balochistan mountains do not merit the reverence with which painters have treated them, but rather to show how such reverence is built up to the point where it seems less a matter of artistic taste than more a simple fact of the land.

References

- Ahmed, M., & Khan, G. (2017). The history of Baloch and Balochistan: A critical appraisal. *South Asian Studies*, 32(1), 39-52.
- Ahmed, S. (2016, November 10). With simple landscapes, painter Kaleem Khan shows us the unseen Balochistan. *Dawn Images*.
- Ali, F. (2021, November 2). Paintings capture architecture, culture and society. *ArtNow Pakistan*. (n.d.). From whispers to screams: The evolving art of Balochistan.
- Barrett, T. (2011). *Criticizing art: Understanding the contemporary* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). Hill and Wang.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-music-text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Fontana Press.
- Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The basics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Cosgrove, D. (1998). *Social formation and symbolic landscape*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Dashti, N. (2012). *The Baloch and Balochistan: A historical account from the beginning to the fall of the Baloch state*. Trafford Publishing.
- Dawn. (2016). Exhibition review: Baluchistan art exhibition.
- Duncan, J. S. (1990). *The city as text: The politics of landscape interpretation in the Kandyan kingdom*. Cambridge University Press.

- Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Indiana University Press.
- Khan, G., & Buriro, G. A. (2020). The role of the British vis-a-vis the Kalat Confederacy and the Pakistani Federation: An overview of historical events. *Biannual Research Journal Grassroots*, 54(1), 1-16.
- Lavrenova, O. (2025). Art and landscape: Modes of interaction. *Arts*, 14(6), 160. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts14060160>
- Mason, O., & Riding, J. (2023). Reimagining landscape: Materiality, decoloniality, and creativity. *Progress in Human Geography*, 47(6), 769-789. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325231205093>
- Mirzoeff, N. (2015). *How to see the world*. Pelican Books.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (Ed.). (2002). *Landscape and power* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Naqvi, A. (1998). *Image and identity: Fifty years of painting and sculpture in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.
- Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de memoire. *Representations*, 26, 7-24.
- Riaz, M. (2024). Comparative semiotics of womanhood: Portrayal of Chinese and Pakistani women in contemporary paintings. *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 20(4), 597-624. <https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2024-2029>
- Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Schama, S. (1995). *Landscape and memory*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Sibtain, M. (2011, January 4). Dark yet delicate portrayal of Balochistan's cultural degradation.