Representation of Environmental Awareness in the Song *Plastic Tree*: A Semiotic Study Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's Theory

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Environmental issues caused by plastic waste have become both an ecological and humanitarian crisis. In response to this reality, this study aimed to explore how the song *Plastic Tree* by Endah N Rhesa serves as an agent of ecological critique through poetic symbolism. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach, the song lyrics were analysed as signs conveying hidden environmental meanings. Symbols such as "plastic tree," "rubber bee," and "paper bird" reflect the loss of natural ecosystems replaced by lifeless artificial objects. The analysis revealed that the song successfully builds ecological awareness and rejects superficial solutions, thereby encouraging listeners to become more reflective and concerned about their surrounding environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the phenomenon of environmental pollution caused by plastic waste has become a critical issue. This problem is urgent and requires immediate resolution at both the regional and global levels. Environmental pollution due to plastic waste also occurs in Indonesia. This is consistent with the fact that Indonesia is known as one of the countries with a high level of plastic consumption (UNEP & IGES, 2020). Recent studies revealed that Indonesian society is capable of consuming a significant amount of microplastics through daily food and beverages, such as bottled water and cooking spices (Amir, 2023). The increasing volume of plastic waste on a large scale has detrimental effects on biodiversity levels and environmental quality (Koottatep *et al.,* 2021). Therefore, Indonesia faces a serious challenge in managing plastic waste and its associated impacts (KLHK, 2021).

As the urgency of this issue continues to increase, various creative, innovative, and communicative efforts have been implemented to raise environmental awareness. Among the various forms of expression used, communication media and the arts have shown significant potential in reaching the general public. In this context, music serves as one of the most effective media due to its ability to convey messages symbolically and emotionally, thereby fostering awareness and encouraging behavioral change within society (Rabinowitch, 2020).

About the aforementioned context, one musician who has consistently voiced social and environmental issues through music is Endah N Rhesa. This independent musical duo is known for their distinctive acoustic style accompanied by meaningful lyrics. Since their debut in 2004, they have produced various works that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also reflective and educational (Kopernik, 2024). The lyrics in many of their songs are often narrative, humanistic, and grounded, enabling them to transform music into a medium that meaningfully and distinctively connects with social issues.

One of Endah N Rhesa's works that explicitly focuses on environmental issues is the song *Plastic Tree*. This song was released as part of the *Regenerate* album in 2013. Based on its lyrics, which use the metaphor of a "plastic tree," the song is presumed to reflect concerns about excessive plastic use and its impact on nature and human life. Therefore, *Plastic Tree* becomes an intriguing subject for semiotic analysis. This analysis aims to explore the hidden messages conveyed in the song as representations of social and ideological realities related to the environmental crisis, expressed through its lyrics and symbols.

Although semiotic studies on song lyrics have been widely conducted, most previous research has focused on social, cultural, or personal themes. For instance, the study by Antika *et al* (2021) analyzed the lyrics of *Lathi* from the perspective of cultural symbols and moral values using Roland Barthes' approach.

Another study by Prasasti (2023) used a Saussurean approach to interpret the meaning of the song *To the Bone*, which centers on themes of emotion and love. Meanwhile, Nasaliya (2023) explored the theme of women's struggle in the song *Kartini* by Navicula.

The three aforementioned studies indicate that semiotics has been applied to examine various social and emotional messages in music. However, no previous research has specifically analyzed the representation of environmental issues, particularly plastic pollution, in song lyrics using Saussurean semiotic theory. Therefore, this study offers novelty in the form of a distinct thematic focus, namely, ecological issues that are highly relevant and urgent in the present time. Moreover, the analysis of the song *Plastic Tree* holds significant value in providing new insights into how music can serve as a medium for ecological awareness. It also highlights the role of art as a strategic communication tool in addressing the global environmental crisis. Thus, this study is not only academically significant but also possesses practical value in supporting environmental awareness movements within society.

2.   METHODS

This qualitative study used a descriptive-interpretative approach aimed at uncovering symbolic meanings and environmental messages in the song *Plastic Tree* by Endah N Rhesa. This method was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of hidden meanings within the lyrics through contextual and critical interpretation (Sari, 2019; Fauzan & Wibowo, 2021). To analyze these meanings, Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach was used as the primary analytical framework. Saussure views a sign as a unity between the signifier, which refers to the verbal or symbolic form, and the signified, which refers to the concept or meaning associated with the signifier (Saussure, 2011; Putra & Ramadhani, 2020). The relationship between the two is neither fixed nor absolute, but is determined by shared understandings formed within society. Therefore, it can be systematically analyzed in the context of meaning representation within a text.

The data analysis was conducted through several stages. First, each segment of the lyrics was transcribed and thoroughly examined. The identification process focused on linguistic elements that potentially function as semiotic signs, such as metaphors, natural symbols, or key terms related to environmental critique (Key & Noble, 2017). Following identification, Saussure's semiotic approach was applied to classify the signs into signifiers and signifieds. Through this framework, both denotative and connotative meanings of the elements within the lyrics were analyzed to reveal the hidden representations of ecological meaning (Nurlaila, 2025).

The next stage was contextual interpretation. This interpretation was carried out by linking the results of the semiotic analysis with contemporary socio-ecological realities, particularly plastic pollution and environmental degradation in Indonesia. The purpose of this interpretation was to understand how the selected lyrics implicitly convey social critique, which may influence listeners' ecological awareness. To ensure the validity and depth of the interpretation, triangulation was conducted by comparing the findings with relevant literature in ecocriticism and environmental communication (Bans & Tiimut, 2021). Through this approach, the results were expected to systematically reveal the meanings of symbols and signs in the song *Plastic Tree*, as well as to illustrate how musical works serve as reflective media in constructing narratives of environmental awareness.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The semiotic analysis of the lyrics in the song *Plastic Tree* revealed various signs that construct a critical narrative of environmental pollution, particularly caused by excessive plastic consumption. Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's approach, meaning is constructed through the relationship between the signifier and the signified. This song uses metaphor and symbolism to convey its message implicitly and emotionally to the listeners. The following are selected lyrics from the first verse of *Plastic Tree* that contain signifiers and signifieds.

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of the Song *Plastic Tree* in Verse 1

Lyric Segment	Signifier	Signified	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
Plastic trees are all I see	*Plastic trees*	Artificial trees made of plastic	Imitation trees that are unnatural and made from plastic	A symbol of an environment that has lost its natural elements, replaced by artificial

Lyric Segment	Signifier	Signified	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
				objects due to technological or urban dominance.
Standing tall in misery	*Standing tall*	Remaining upright amidst suffering	Something that stands despite being in a state of misery	The irony of an artificial object that appears upright and strong, yet is lifeless and hollow.
Dark clouds color the ocean	*Dark clouds*	Dark and gloomy sky above the sea	A dark sky over the expanse of the ocean water	A sign of impending ecological disaster caused by increasing environmental degradation.
The ocean shrinks	*Ocean shrinks*	The shrinking of ocean waters	The reduction of sea area due to decreasing water volume	A visible effect of the climate crisis, leading to damage in marine ecosystems.

Table 2. Semiotic Analysis of the Song *Plastic Tree* in Verse 2

Lyric Segment	Signifier	Signified	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
Yellow rubber bumblebee	*Rubber bumblebee*	Artificial bee made of rubber	A bee imitation made from rubber material	The extinction of a living species due to environmental damage, eventually replaced by its artificial version.
They'll eat honey batteries	*Honey batteries*	Honey-flavored batteries	"Honey" transformed into an artificial energy source	A metaphor for the shift from natural resources to artificial substitutes.
Hanging on the plastic tree	*Plastic tree*	Artificial tree made of plastic	A man-made object used as a place to live	An illustration of the dominance of artificial objects, where living beings no longer depend on nature.

Table 3. Semiotic Analysis of the Song *Plastic Tree* in Verse 3

Lyric Segment	Signifier	Signified	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
No more singing from the birds	*No more singing*	The absence of birdsong	The disappearance of natural sounds represented by birdsong	The extinction of certain species due to ecosystem destruction, leading to ecological silence.
No more roosters crowing	*Roosters crowing*	Roosters no longer crowing	The absence of natural activity from some species in the wild	A symbol of the fading natural rhythm and harmony caused by environmental degradation.
Birds and roosters made from paper	*Made from paper*	Artificial animals made of paper	Fragile, lifeless animal imitations made from paper	A critique of an artificial world that replaces natural life.

Table 4. Semiotic Analysis of the Song *Plastic Tree* in Verse 4

Lyric Segment	Signifier	Signified	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
Paper made from wood	*Paper*	Paper made from wood	A man-made product derived	The excessive exploitation of natural resources

			from natural materials	for the production of artificial goods.
No more trees in the neighborhood	*No more trees*	The absence of trees in residential surroundings	The lack of natural vegetation in the local environment	A direct portrayal of deforestation, which affects ecosystems and the quality of human life.
So they made a plastic tree	*Plastic tree*	A plastic tree as a substitute	An artificial replacement lacking ecological function	A critique of artificial solutions that fail to address environmental problems effectively.

Table 5. Semiotic Analysis of the Song *Plastic Tree* in the Chorus

Lyric Segment	Signifier	Signified	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
Journey of reality, end of history	*Reality, end*	A journey toward mass extinction	The end of humanity's journey	A narrative of environmental destruction that may lead to future collapse if it continues.
We are our enemy	*Our enemy*	Humans as the primary cause of environmental damage	We harm ourselves	An Eco-social awareness that humanity creates ecological crises through a consumerist and destructive lifestyle.
Story of humanity, just a memory	*Humanity, memory*	The disappearance of human civilization	The story of humanity reduced to mere history	A symbol of extinction or collapse resulting from ecological catastrophe.
Oh mercy me	*Mercy*	A plea for forgiveness and compassion	A sense of ecological guilt	A call for introspection and moral reflection on the destructive impact on the environment.

Table 6. Semiotic Analysis of the Song *Plastic Tree* in the Bridge

Lyric Segment	Signifier	Signified	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
Hey Mr. Referee blows your whistle	*Mr. Referee*	A referee blowing the whistle	A figure who signals and regulates the flow of a game	A symbolic plea for an authoritative figure to take action in addressing ongoing environmental damage.

I wanna feel the air of life one more time	*Air of life*	The air of life	A desire to experience fresh and natural air once again	An expression of hope for restoring the damaged natural environment.
Don't just hang your skeleton key	*Skeleton key*	A universal key	A multifunctional key left unused	A critique of those in power who possess solutions but remain passive in the face of environmental destruction.
Help me to make the world become a better place again	*Make the world better*	The effort to improve the world	A call to collectively transform the world into a better place	A collaborative appeal and a hopeful vision for environmental recovery and the improvement of overall living conditions.

Table 7. Semiotic Analysis of the Song *Plastic Tree* in Verse 5

Lyric Segment	Signifier	Signified	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
No more apple tree, no more lemon tree	*Apple tree, lemon tree*	Apple and lemon trees that have become rare	The decline in biodiversity	Represents the loss of biodiversity as a consequence of environmental degradation.
Just a plastic tree	*Plastic tree*	Only a plastic tree	An unnatural replacement tree	A portrayal of an artificial and barren environment resulting from excessive exploitation.
It's the tree of fantasy	*Tree of fantasy*	A fantasy tree	A symbol of something unreal or imaginary	A critique of a modern world filled with illusions, consumerist lifestyles, and capitalism that disregards environmental sustainability.

Table 8. Semiotic Analysis of the Song *Plastic Tree* in the Bridge

Lyric Segment	Signifier	Signified	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
The earth, mother nature	*Mother nature*	Nature as a mother	Representation of nature as a living entity like a mother figure	A reminder of the importance of maintaining ecological balance, just as a mother

				nurture and protects.
The ocean and the sea	*Ocean, sea*	The oceans	Essential components of the ecosystem, covering most of the Earth's surface	A symbol of balanced ecosystems that are now under threat.
The sky and the mountain	*Sky, mountain*	The sky and the mountains	Major elements in the natural landscape	Symbols of nature's grandeur that must be respected and protected.
The air and the water	*Air, water*	Air and water	Basic elements that sustain life on Earth	Represents the urgent need to protect air and water quality, which are increasingly polluted.
The island and the tree	*Island, tree*	Islands and trees	Distinctive components of a balanced and ideal ecosystem	Represents an ideal ecosystem disrupted by unhealthy and extreme environmental changes.
The future generation	*Future generation*	Future generations	The descendants of humankind	A moral warning about the long-term impact of environmental destruction across generations.

Based on the findings from the semiotic analysis above, it was identified that the song *Plastic Tree* serves as a concrete example of how music can function as a medium for conveying social and environmental critique. By using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach, the song can be interpreted as a series of signs that communicate specific meanings through the relationship between the signifier, such as "plastic tree," "birds made from paper," and "honey batteries," and the signified, namely the underlying concepts of environmental degradation.

The various symbols in this song are not merely poetic imagination, but rather concrete representations of a worsening ecological reality. This is also relevant to Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, in which imitations or representations have replaced the original reality (Stibbe, 2015). Modern human life is often associated with environments that appear natural but are, in fact, entirely artificial. The song also expresses a sense of concern that, as nature continues to deteriorate, humanity tends to create false versions that have lost their ecological value.

The symbolic meanings in the song *Plastic Tree* become increasingly relevant when placed within the context of real cases of environmental pollution. Data from the Indonesia National Plastic Action Partnership in 2020 showed that the Indonesian population generated approximately 6.8 million tons of plastic waste annually, with 620,000 tons polluting the oceans. The Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry in 2021 also reported that 60 percent of river pollution in the country was caused by household waste, including single-use plastics (KLHK, 2021).

In the current state of environmental emergency, both local governments and communities often engage in practices of "greenwashing", promoting an environmentally friendly image without implementing concrete actions. Various symbolic greening projects have emerged, displacing natural green spaces (WALHI, 2023). As a result, more than 1,000 species in Indonesia are threatened with extinction due to the loss of their natural habitats (UNEP, 2020). In this context, the symbol "plastic tree" in the song reflects the failure of artificial solutions to address the root causes of environmental problems. Additionally, the signifier "birds made from paper" reinforces the message of biodiversity loss, suggesting that the once peaceful and living natural world has been replaced by fragile, lifeless symbols. Other signifiers, such as "no more singing from

the birds" and "no more trees in the neighborhood", depict a form of "ecological grief", which refers to the sorrow experienced due to the extinction of species (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Therefore, the song evokes a sense of mourning and moral awareness regarding the damage inflicted by humans upon nature.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that the song *Plastic Tree* is a musical work that symbolically voices a critique of the environmental crisis, particularly concerning pollution caused by plastic waste and ecosystem degradation. Through Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach, the song presents linguistic symbols that imply profound meanings related to environmental degradation, greenwashing practices, and the decline of biodiversity. This analysis indicates that music holds the power to serve as a reflective, innovative, and communicative medium for promoting ecological awareness. The use of several symbols, such as "plastic tree", "birds made from paper", and "no more trees", functions as a critical sign of present and future socio-ecological realities. Therefore, *Plastic Tree* is relevant not only as a work of art but also as an effective medium for environmental education and social transformation.

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