

## Social Alienation in the Digital Age: Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis of The Meaning of '*Ghaflah*' in Qs. Al-A'raf Verse 205

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### Abstract

*This study explores the concept of ghaflah in Surah Al-A'raf verse 205 as an entry point to examine the phenomenon of social alienation in the digital age through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The term ghaflah, which literally means negligence or forgetfulness, is analysed on two levels: denotative (literal meaning) and connotative (symbolic/ideological meaning). The main research questions focus on how ghaflah is interpreted semiotically and whether its meaning is relevant to current social phenomena such as doomscrolling, digital alienation, and collective awareness crises. The objective of this study is to uncover the hidden meanings of ghaflah and explain how the concept reflects the socio-psychological conditions of modern society. This research employs a qualitative-descriptive method based on literature review, using Barthes' semiotic theory as the primary analytical framework. Core references include Tafsir al-Misbah, Lisan al-'Arab, semiotic literature, and contemporary studies on digital media. The analysis is conducted in two stages: (1) interpreting the literal meaning of ghaflah using exegetical and linguistic sources, and (2) extracting the connotative meaning through Barthes' framework to uncover its ideological and mythological dimensions. The findings show that ghaflah is not merely spiritual negligence but also a metaphor for modern human alienation caused by the domination of technology and digital media. In this context, ghaflah functions as a sign of existential, spiritual, and social crises deeply rooted in contemporary life patterns. In conclusion, Surah Al-A'raf: 205 is not only theologically significant but also offers a critical reflection on the destructive impacts of the digital era on human consciousness, meaning, and spiritual values.*

**Keywords:** ghaflah, semiotics, Barthes, social alienation, QS. Al-A'raf: 205.

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengangkat konsep *ghaflah* dalam QS. Al-A'raf ayat 205 sebagai pintu masuk untuk membaca fenomena keterasingan sosial di era digital melalui pendekatan semiotika Roland Barthes. Lafaz *ghaflah*, yang secara harfiah berarti kelalaian, ditelaah dalam dua tingkatan makna: denotatif (makna literal) dan konotatif (makna simbolik/ideologis). Rumusan masalah yang diangkat mencakup bagaimana *ghaflah* dimaknai secara semiotik dan sejauh



mana makna tersebut relevan dengan gejala sosial kontemporer seperti doomscrolling, alienasi digital, dan krisis kesadaran kolektif. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah menyingkap makna tersembunyi dari *ghaflah* dan menjelaskan bagaimana konsep tersebut mencerminkan kondisi sosial-psikologis masyarakat modern. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif-deskriptif berbasis studi pustaka, dengan pendekatan semiotika Barthes. Sumber utama meliputi Tafsir al-Misbah, Lisan al-'Arab, literatur semiotika, dan studi kontemporer tentang digital media. Analisis dilakukan dalam dua tahap: (1) interpretasi makna literal dari *ghaflah* melalui tafsir dan linguistik, dan (2) pembacaan konotatif menggunakan kerangka Barthes untuk menyingkap dimensi ideologis dan mitologisnya. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *ghaflah* bukan sekadar kelalaian spiritual, tetapi juga metafora atas keterasingan manusia modern akibat dominasi teknologi dan media digital. Dalam konteks ini, *ghaflah* menjadi tanda dari krisis eksistensial, spiritual, dan sosial yang mengakar dalam pola hidup kontemporer..

**Kata kunci:** *ghaflah, semiotika, Barthes, alienasi sosial, QS. Al-A'raf: 205*

## Introduction

The development of digital technology has brought about major changes in the way humans interact and socialise. Social media, instant messaging, and other digital platforms have become an integral part of everyday life. However, this ease of communication does not always mean quality and deep social relationships (Apyanto, 2022). Behind this convenience lies a social paradox, where many people feel increasingly isolated and lonely despite being constantly 'connected' online. This situation has drawn the attention of various groups, both academics and practitioners, to understand the social impact of this digital transformation (Piwari & Sutabri, 2025).

The levels of social isolation and loneliness in modern society show a significant upward trend. According to a 2023 report by the World Health Organisation (WHO), approximately one in three adults in various countries experience chronic loneliness, which has a negative impact on mental and physical health (Kharisma, n.d.). Between 5% and 15% of adolescents experience loneliness, according to figures that may be underestimated (WHO, n.d.). In Indonesia, the Health Collaborative Centre (HCC), an institution in the field of public health and community health, also revealed the results of a survey on loneliness experienced by residents of Greater Jakarta in December 2023 (Arif, 2024).

Rapid social changes in the era of globalisation and digitalisation have had a significant impact on patterns of social interaction (Cahyono, 2018). Information technology and social media have facilitated communication and access to information, but have also triggered issues such as social isolation and a crisis in awareness of human and spiritual values. Various social studies have noted the phenomenon of alienation occurring even though individuals are connected virtually (Fajriah & Ningsih, 2024).

The Qur'an, as the main source of Islamic teachings, not only conveys spiritual and moral guidance, but also provides relevant guidelines for dealing with various social issues. In order for the meaning of the Qur'an not to be limited to textual understanding alone, dynamic and contextual interpretations in accordance with the times and current social conditions are very much needed. An analytical approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory opens up space to examine the signs and hidden meanings in the holy text, so that the messages of the Qur'an can



be understood more deeply and applied in responding to contemporary social phenomena (Jamaludin et al., 2021).

So far, studies on the phenomenon of social alienation have been conducted more from the perspectives of psychology (Warella & Pratikto, 2021), sociology (Amalia, 2013), or communication (Object, n.d.). These studies generally confirm that social media creates alienation through superficial social relationships and inauthentic self-image. ('(PDF) Interaksi Sosial Di Era Digital', 2025). Specifically, technology has a paradoxical effect: although it expands communication, social media also reinforces alienation because real interactions are replaced by virtual interactions (Hariyanto 2024). Furthermore, the intensity of face-to-face communication has decreased due to increasing dependence on digital media, which has implications for increasing feelings of alienation (Hutabarat 2024).

Other studies show that adolescents, as active users of social media, are prone to social pressure, excessive self-image, and alienation from the real environment (Nurangraini et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the phenomenon of alienation does not only occur in the realm of personal communication but also in the digital world of work, where unequal power relations cause alienation from work (Aslamiyah et al., 2024). From these various studies, it can be concluded that social alienation in the digital age has been examined through various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, communication, and cultural studies.

Therefore, it can be concluded that these studies are still limited to empirical and theoretical analysis in the social sciences, without directly linking them to religious texts, especially the Qur'an. This is where the novelty of this analysis lies, with a focus on examining the term *ghaflah* in QS. Al-A'raf verse 205 through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. This approach opens up an interdisciplinary space, connecting the denotative and connotative meanings of *ghaflah* with the phenomenon of social alienation in the digital age. Thus, this study not only enriches the treasury of Qur'anic interpretation through a contemporary perspective, but also provides a normative and ethical foundation that can be a solution to the crisis of consciousness and social alienation in modern society.

The main difference between this study and previous studies lies in its object and method of analysis. While previous studies tended to focus on the sociological, psychological, or communicative impacts of social media, this study offers a new perspective by connecting the phenomenon of social alienation with the theological and linguistic meanings of the term *ghaflah*. Its novelty lies in the use of Barthes' semiotics to unravel the implied meaning of the Qur'an so that it is relevant to the challenges of digitalisation, something that has not been touched upon by previous studies.

## Research Method

This study uses a qualitative method with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis approach. This method was chosen to explore the denotative and connotative meanings of the term *ghaflah* in QS. Al-A'raf: 205 and to trace its relevance to the phenomenon of social alienation and the crisis of consciousness in the digital age. Data collection techniques were carried out through literature study, by examining sources of interpretation such as Tafsir al-Misbah by M. Quraish

Shihab, classical linguistic references such as *Lisan al-'Arab*, semiotic literature, and contemporary scientific studies on digital media and the phenomenon of doomscrolling.

The analysis process was conducted in two stages: first, examining the literal or denotative meaning based on interpretation and linguistic analysis; second, interpreting the connotative meaning using Barthes' theory to reveal the symbolic and ideological dimensions of the phrase. This approach allows for a connection between the text of the Qur'an and the modern social context through critical reading that is interdisciplinary in nature.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the study show that the phrase *ghaflah* in QS. Al-A'raf verse 205 does not only refer to spiritual negligence in a denotative sense, but also contains complex connotative meanings as a symbol of social alienation and the crisis of modern human consciousness (Wardani et al., 2025). Through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, it was found that *ghaflah* represents a condition of loss of direction in collective consciousness due to the dominance of digital technology, such as the phenomenon of doomscrolling that erodes transcendental values. Thus, *ghaflah* becomes a sign of spiritual and social crisis in the digital age (Muhaimin, 2024).

### A. Contextual analysis of QS. Al-A'raf verse 205

Meaning: *Remember your Lord in your hearts with humility and fear in the mornings and evenings, without raising your voices, and do not be among those who are heedless.*

The word *ghaflah* comes from the Arabic غَفْلًا, يَغْفُلُ, غَفْلٌ. In terminology, *ghaflah* refers to the negligence of the human heart and mind in remembering Allah, as well as being indifferent to His guidance. In *the Arabic language*, Ibn Manzur mentions that غَفْلَةٌ means to abandon something and forget it (Alfani, 2023). Al-Fayumi said: "Al-Ghaflah is a void in the mind due to not remembering anything. Sometimes this phrase is also directed at someone who does not care because they underestimate or belittle something, as depicted in the words of Allah SWT (QS. Al-Anbiya: 1) Muhammad Quraish Shihab also defines negligence in the word *ghaflah* as not knowing or realising what should be known and realised (Shihab, 2020).

Negligence in the Big Indonesian Dictionary means carelessness; not paying attention, indifference, forgetfulness due to other work; forgetfulness (Penyusun, n.d.). Negligence is an attitude of indifference towards the primary things in human life in favour of secondary things. Negligence is a trait that is often discussed in Islam and is widely mentioned in the verses of the Qur'an. Imam Al-Junaid, a 9th-century scholar, said that negligence is a bacterium that causes all diseases of the heart (Al-mawlud, 2017).

According to Mustafa Mahmud, negligence is behaviour that results in the loss of enjoyment in worship, increases envy, suffering and regret (Mahmud, 1994). Meanwhile, Hamdani Bakran al-Dzaky states that forgetfulness/negligence is a sign of mental weakness, like a mental illness felt by humans and located in the human psyche (Bakran al-Dzaky, 2001).



## B. Denotative and Connotative Meanings of the Word *Ghaflah*

In Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, he divides meaning into two levels, namely denotative (primary meaning system) and connotative (secondary meaning system) (Astari et al., 2024). According to him, denotation is a sign whose signifier has a high level of convention or agreement. In other words, denotation is a sign that produces explicit meaning or, simply put, denotation is understood in its literal meaning (Prasetya, 2022). Meanwhile, connotation is a sign whose signifier has an openness of meaning. In other words, connotation is a meaning that can produce a second layer of meaning that is implicit or hidden (Rusmana, 2014).

The word *ghaflah* denotatively means forgetful, negligent, or unaware. When analysed using Roland Barthes' semiotic perspective, its meaning goes beyond the literal meaning to become a sign that carries complex connotative meanings. Barthes asserts that signs not only point to direct meanings (denotation), but also imply hidden and ideological meanings (connotation) that shape social and cultural discourse (Gaffar, 2014). *Ghaflah* represents a condition of social alienation and a crisis of spiritual awareness in modern humans who are immersed in worldly pursuits and technological distractions.

According to Barthes, myths are systems of signs that carry hidden cultural and ideological messages (Mulyaden 2021). As a contemporary myth, *ghaflah* describes negligence not only as an individual problem, but also as a systemic phenomenon that shapes social narratives rooted in the current mindset of society. The digital era has made *ghaflah* a symbol of collective unconsciousness towards the loss of spiritual and human values. This phenomenon shows how technological advances, which should facilitate social interaction, have instead triggered alienation and existential disorientation, trapping individuals in a false consciousness and shallow social relationships (Youvan 2024).

Within the framework of semiotics, Roland Barthes views the meaning of *ghaflah* not merely as spiritual negligence, but as a social phenomenon that reflects the crisis of modern human consciousness. The sign of *ghaflah* directs our understanding towards how technology and contemporary lifestyles shape mindsets and behaviours that distance individuals from self-awareness and transcendental values. The excessive dominance of social media, for example, encourages individuals to prioritise self-image and validation through the virtual world, thereby neglecting inner reflection and authentic social interaction. This condition makes *ghaflah* a symbol of alienation and loss of existential meaning in the context of modern socio-culture.

Michel Foucault's approach to the relationship between power and knowledge enriches this analysis by viewing *ghaflah* as a social construct produced and reproduced by systems of technological and mass media domination. The discourse of power shapes the concept of "truth," which then influences public consciousness and behaviour. *Ghaflah* is also understood as a condition that is structurally produced by technological mechanisms that regulate human interaction and the process of interpreting social reality. The phenomenon of *doomscrolling*, which is the habit of continuously scrolling through negative news on social media, is a concrete example that causes mental fatigue and social



apathy while reinforcing *ghaflah* as a manifestation of alienation and collective negligence in modern society.

### C. *Ghaflah*: Alienation in the Digital Age

Over the past few years, social media has become a major and important part of our daily lives, both for adults and young people. Social media is easy to use, allowing us to connect privately with family members and friends, and to connect freely with wider groups of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, as well as being a source of the latest news (Hansya & Ardi, n.d.).

The adverse effects of social media use on individual *well-being* have been widely documented in various studies. One form of excessive and unhealthy social media use is the phenomenon of *doomscrolling*, which is the habit of continuously scrolling through negative content. *Doomscrolling* has a significant impact on its users, which can trigger *anxiety*, *psychological distress*, and even mental health disorders such as depression (Vannucci et al., 2017). This phenomenon can be referred to as *digital ghaflah*, which describes a condition of individual negligence towards self-awareness, social environment, and spiritual values due to excessive involvement in the digital world. This is reinforced by Sherry Turkle's study, which refers to this phenomenon as the illusion of connectedness, as well as the views of Byung-Chul Han and Zygmunt Bauman, who discuss the crisis of consciousness and the fragility of meaning in modern society. This social finding reflects the reality of alienation and crisis of consciousness that aligns with the meaning of *ghaflah* in QS. Al-A'raf verse 205.

### Conclusion

QS. Al-A'raf: 205 through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach shows that the word *ghaflah* does not only mean negligence in a spiritual or ritual context, but also has broad social, societal, and mental dimensions. Denotatively, *ghaflah* refers to a state of negligence in remembering Allah. However, connotatively, especially in Barthes' system of thought, *ghaflah* speaks of contemporary myths about alienation, emptiness of meaning, and the crisis of consciousness of modern humans amid the rapid flow of technology and digital media.

Phenomena such as *doomscrolling* are forms of *digital ghaflah* that show how individuals are trapped in the habit of consuming negative information without self-reflection, which ultimately affects their mental and spiritual health. This condition reflects a deep existential crisis, in which humans lose their sensitivity to transcendental values and the true meaning of life.

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