



FROM PERSON TO PORTENT: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SARAI'S "BEAUTY" AS A TRANSACTIONAL SIGNIFIER IN GENDER DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This research investigates the linguistic and semiotic construction of gendered power dynamics in Genesis 12:10–20. Moving beyond traditional theological interpretations, the study employs Social Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the transition of Sarai from a human subject to a “transactional signifier.” The paper argues that the text effects a “semiotic reduction,” wherein Sarai’s beauty is reconfigured as a “portent” (a sign representing both existential risk for the patriarch and a medium for material gain). Through the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the study analyses transitivity within the narrative, highlighting the grammatical marginalization of the female subject. While male characters occupy active verbal and material roles, Sarai is relegated to “passive visibility.” Thus, she is seen, praised, and taken, but she never speaks. This silence is theorized as a linguistic mechanism of erasure that facilitates the commodification of the female body. The research further interrogates the syntactic correlation in Genesis 12:16, where the phrase “...for her sake” links Sarai’s displacement directly to the accumulation of Abram’s wealth. The findings suggest that the “Beauty-as-Currency” signifier serves as a foundational template for patriarchal discourse, securing male prosperity through female objectification. This study concludes by discussing pedagogical implications for Digital Humanities, proposing that deconstructing these ancient transactional discourses provides critical literacy tools for identifying contemporary gender commodification in the phygital media and public signage.

Keywords: Genesis 12, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Gender Discourse, Transactional Signifier, Linguistic Erasure.



Introduction

The narrative of Genesis 12:10 –20 (NKJV), often categorized as the first wife-sister motif in the Pentateuch, has traditionally been interpreted through the lenses of divine providence, nomadic survival, or the fallibility of the patriarch. However, a contemporary linguistic and semiotic shift allows for a more granular interrogation of the power dynamics embedded in the text. This paper explores the transition “From Person to Portent,” utilizing a social semiotic framework to analyse how Sarai’s physical presence is linguistically reconfigured from a human subject into a transactional signifier. Therefore, in this discourse, beauty is not seen as an aesthetic attribute but an economic sign that facilitates the survival and enrichment of the patriarch at the cost of the female subject’s agency.

Meanwhile, the general understanding in the social semiotic tradition is that signs are never neutral; they are motivated by the social structures and power interests of the sign-makers (Kress, 2010). In the context of the Ancient Near East, gender discourse often functions as a mechanism for stabilizing patriarchal lineages and property rights. When Abram identifies Sarai’s beauty as the catalyst for his potential danger and demise in Egypt, he initiates a “semiotic reduction” depicting that Sarai is no longer a partner in the covenantal journey but is repositioned as a *portent* of risk. By persuading her to adopt the sign of “sister” rather than being his “wife,” Abram effectively places her in what can be called a linguistic “liminal space” where her body can be negotiated without the legal protections usually accorded a married woman in nomadic customary law (Tushima, 2018).

This commodification is further made explicit through the syntactic structures of the narrative. With the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) revealing a stark imbalance in “transitivity” referring to the linguistic representation of who acts and who is acted upon (Fairclough, 2015). Throughout the episode, Sarai is the object of verbs of seeing and taking as captured in: “the Egyptians “saw” the woman, the princes ‘praised’ her to Pharaoh, and she was ‘taken’ into the palace” (Genesis 12:14-15, NKJV). Thus, her silence throughout this transaction is not merely a narrative omission but a semiotic erasure. As noted by Claassens (2024), the “silent woman” in biblical text serves as a *Tabula Rasa* upon which male anxiety and ambition are inscribed. Furthermore, the text establishes a direct correlation between the “valuation” of Sarai and the accumulation of material wealth. The inventory of livestock and servants granted to Abram “for her sake” functions as a semiotic ledger, where the female body is the primary currency.

At this juncture, this paper argues that this ancient transactional discourse is not an isolated literary trope but a foundational template for understanding the *objectification* of women in broader linguistic landscapes. By deconstructing the “beauty-as-currency” signifier, we can better understand the enduring impact of gendered *phygital* and material representations in contemporary social discourse.

State of the Art

Contemporary scholarship in Social Semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has increasingly focused on how gender identities are not essentialist but are discursive products constructed through grammar and imagery (Magalhães, 2026). In the field of biblical studies, various scholars (including Darong, 2025) reiterate that a paradigm shift has occurred toward literacy-based and discourse-oriented approaches, where Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is used to uncover ideologies hidden within sacred texts. Therefore, gender discourse has begun to beam searchlight on the commodification of the female body, moving beyond simple objectification to analysing how female forms are strategically deployed for profit or patriarchal gain (Nwankwo, 2026). While recent studies have applied transitivity analysis to religious testaments and contemporary media (Gunawan, 2023), there remains a scholarly gap in applying these perceived “discourse technologies” specifically to the *phygital* transition, where ancient stone-inscribed narratives like Sarai’s are re-contextualized in digital and academic landscapes (Magalhães, 2026).

Review of Literature

The interrogation of gender discourse in Genesis 12 through the lens of social semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) necessitates a synthesis of three primary scholarly domains: the linguistic construction of identity, the semiotic commodification of the female body, and the *wife-sister* motif in ancient Near Eastern (ANE) literature.

To start with, the foundational premise of this review is that gender identities are not pre-discursive but are actively constructed through “discourse technologies” as marshalled by concerned authors (Magalhães, 2026). Also, social semiotics suggests that every sign, including the human form or activity, is a “motivated sign” shaped by the interests of the power-holding sign-maker (Kress, 2010) in the society. In Genesis 12, the transition of Sarai from a subject (or human) to a “transactional signifier” (or an object) is a prime example of what scholars’ term “semiotic reduction.” This has further led to Nwankwo’s (2026) observation that the contemporary commodification of the female body has its roots in ancient structures where female attributes are only “read” and “valued” by a patriarchal gaze to facilitate economic or social exchange.

Meanwhile, a significant portion of the current literature employs Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to map the power imbalances in sacred texts. In this regard, Gunawan (2023) emphasises that transitivity analysis is crucial in gender discussion, with the process basically examining who functions as the “Actor” on one hand and who is the “Goal” on the other hand. This helps reveal the ideological underpinnings of ancient narratives. It should also be noted that in the context of the Pentateuch, researchers have observed a consistent pattern of “gendered erasure,” where female characters are relegated to passive roles as in the case of Sarai in this study. In addition, Darong (2025) argues that this lack of verbal and mental processes for women is a linguistic mechanism that reinforces their status as mere objects meant to be “seen” and “taken” rather than subjects (humans) with agency and rationality. This aligns with the “silent woman” trope identified by Claassens (2024), in which the absence of speech signifies a total lack of legal and social standing.

Furthermore, some scholarship, specifically addressing the “wife-sister” episodes, observable in Genesis 12, 20, and 26, has shifted from moral defence of the patriarch to structural analysis of the transaction. For instance, Tushima (2018) provides a critical link between famine-induced migration and the use of the female body as a survival strategy. The “portent” of Sarai’s beauty is analysed not as a romantic attribute, but as a semiotic bridge that connects Abram’s safety to Pharaoh’s wealth. Also, Shingange (2024) develops this ideology by suggesting that such biblical discourses could be regarded as “foundational templates” for contemporary gendered property rights, where the female body functions as a medium of exchange.

In summary, state-of-the-art research has begun to explore the “phygital” transition, emphasising how these ancient text-signs are re-manifested in digital and educational landscapes (Magalhães, 2026). The significance of deconstructing these ancient “portents” lies in their pedagogical application. By utilizing these narratives as “authentic texts” in Higher Education, educators can foster “critical gender literacy,” enabling students to recognize the continuity between ancient patriarchal ledgers and modern media objectification (Darong & Regus, 2024). In conclusion, the literature suggests that Sarai’s “beauty” in Genesis 12 is a highly charged semiotic signifier that facilitates a shift from personhood to property. This study builds upon these established transitivity and commodification frameworks to theorize the “portent” as a specific discursive tool in gendered power negotiations.

Objectives

While the primary goal of this research is to deconstruct the linguistic mechanisms that facilitate the commodification of Sarai, the female subject in Genesis 12, the specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine how the lexical descriptor “beauty” functions as a semiotic bridge, transitioning Sarai from a human participant to a transactional object.
2. To investigate the construction and distribution of transitivity in the text, specifically looking at how the “silencing” of Sarai contributes to the stabilization of patriarchal authority.
3. To identify the linguistic “ledger” within the text by analysing the correlation between the objectification of the female body and the inventory of material wealth.
4. To develop a theoretical framework for how gendered “portents” in ancient narratives inform contemporary understandings of commodity fetishism in social semiotics.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives stated above, this study will address the following germane questions:

1. What specific linguistic processes are used to reduce Sarai's identity from a "person" (subject) to a "portent" (transactional signifier) in the text?
2. How does the lack of direct speech (verbal process) for Sarai construct a discourse of "gendered erasure"?
3. In what ways does the text establish a direct semantic link between Sarai's presence in the palace and the quantified accumulation of Abram's wealth?
4. How can the "Beauty-as-Currency" signifier be utilized as a pedagogical tool within Digital Humanities to analyse contemporary representations of gendered commodification?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design. The primary data consisted of the biblical text (Genesis 12:10–20, NKJV) containing eleven (11) sentences, fifty-eight (58) clauses, and two hundred and ninety-one (291) words. The excerpt specifically focuses on the Abram-Sarai migration to Egypt in search of greener pasture. Specifically, the clauses involving Abram, Sarai, and Pharaoh were extracted for analysis as illustrated later in this work.

The analytical framework used was Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) with the core methodology involving transitivity analysis, as developed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). This system categorizes the flow of events into four (4) specific processes (Gabbianelli, 2023; Gunawan, 2023) described as:

Material Processes	– Actions (e.g., Pharaoh "taking" Sarai);
Verbal Processes	– Speech acts (e.g., Abram "saying" to Sarai);
Relational Processes	– States of being or value (e.g., Sarai "is" beautiful); and
Mental Processes	– Perceptions and reactions (e.g., the Egyptians "seeing" the beauty in Sarai).

Furthermore, the analytical procedure was carried out in three phases:

Phase I involved Syntactic Mapping by identifying every clause where Sarai was a participant (Actor, Goal, Senser, or Phenomenon). In Phase II, Semiotic Coding was done by mapping the transition of Sarai from "Subject" to "Signifier" interrogating how the text replaces Sarai's personhood with her "value" (or portent) during the border-crossing transaction. In the final Phase (III), Social Semiotic interpretation was carried out. Thus, the linguistic findings were related to the broader socio-economic context of the narrative, specifically the accumulation of livestock as a direct result of the "beauty" signifier (Tushima, 2018).

Analysis and Discussion

Our focus is on the steps involved in the Social Semiotic and Linguistic Analysis of Genesis 12:10–20 by identifying the mechanics of the "transaction." At this level, our particular concern is about how the biblical text structures the transition from Sarai-as-person to Sarai-as-portent through the lenses of Transitivity and Semiotic Valuation. Details of the analysis are presented below.

Analysis through Transitivity:

Using Halliday's (1967) framework, transitivity is seen as involving various components relating to the presence and nature of an object of the verb (or action) in an expression. In other words, the effectiveness with which an action takes place in terms of punctuality and telicity of the verbal element, the conscious activity of the agent, and the referentiality of the object is highly emphasised (Hopper & Thompson, 1980). Thus, we analyse the processes (verbs) to see who holds the power of action leading to the grammar of erasure in the selected text. Consequently, in these eleven verses, a clear "gendered hierarchy of agency" emerges as shown in the table below.

**Verbal Processes**

Participant	Main Process Type	Textual Example	Semiotic Implication
Abram	Verbal & Material	“He said to Sarai...” “He went down to Egypt...” (vs.10 &11)	He is the Sayer and Actor ; he defines the reality and initiates the movement.
Pharaoh's Princes	Verbal & Mental	“They saw her...” “They commended her...” (v 15)	They act as Sensors who validate Sarai’s “market value” to the monarch.
Sarai	Passive Material	“She was taken to Pharaoh’s house.” (v15)	She is the Goal (object); she does not act, she is only acted upon.

As the table above shows, Sarai has no utterance attributed to her; she has no verbal processes in the excerpt all through the event. So, in the discourse of Genesis 12, Sarai is linguistically “muted” leaving her dispossessed of her voice (and being). This silence is the primary mechanism of her reduction from a subject (human or wife) to a signifier (an object of economic value).

“Beauty” as Signifier

There is also the need to examine the implication of the concept of beauty or being beautiful used to describe Sarai in the text. While one might be tempted to think in terms of romantic understanding of the word, Abram’s understanding and presentation of the term shifts our focus from the aesthetic to the economic relevance of Sarai. In other words, the analysis of the Hebrew descriptor *yapheh* (or “beautiful”) reveals that it does not function as a romantic adjective but as a portent of exchange in the text. This situation is carefully presented in Abram’s Semiotic Forecast. While entering Egypt, Abram decodes and confirms Sarai’s appearance and beauty saying:

*“Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance.
Therefore it will happen,
when the Egyptians see you, that they will say,
‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me,
but they will let you live.”* (Gen. 12: 11-12, NKJV)

Going by this text, Abram does not see a wife in that instance; he sees a condition (Sarai’s beauty and the projected Egyptians’ romantic interest in the woman) that will trigger a specific dangerous result (“*they (the Egyptians) will kill me, but they will let you live*”).

In view of the above, the semiotic interpretation of the text connects strongly to the signification shift manifesting at the levels of: 1. Denotation, referring to the assessment and admiration of the physical appearance of Sarai in terms of her beauty and attraction. This has effect on Abram’s anxiety and eventual emotional impact on both the Princes and the king. 2. Connotation, implying that Sarai’s beauty certainly constitutes danger and risk for the man (Abram). He takes time to declare this and expresses his fear plainly. So, as far as the situation is concerned, the romantic feeling expected as a natural response from a husband (Abram) is not exercised but replaced with projected sinister. 3. Myth/Ideology, referring to the practice of seeing the female body as a negotiable asset for male survival. Even though Abram and his wife are not on invitation to Egypt, the pressure of famine and the urge to secure means of livelihood propel the couple to move on.

The Transactional Gender Discourse and Divine Subversion in the Text

The climax of the transactional gender discourse within the Abrahamic migration narrative is manifested in the explicit linguistic economy of Genesis 12:16 (NKJV). Having crossed the structural and geographical border into

Egypt, Sarai's reduction from an agentive human subject to a commodified object is finalized within a literal syntactic ledger. The narrative explicitly notes that for her sake, King Pharaoh dealt well with Abram, granting him sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels

It should be reiterated that at the core of this syntactic ledger sits the prepositional pivot, a kind of mathematical operator translated as "for her sake" (or "on her account"). In a social semiotic framework, this phrase functions as a linguistic mathematical operator. It balances an equation of exchange, directly linking the "Signifier" (Sarai incarcerated within the royal palace) with the *value* (the material assets transferred to the patriarch). The grammar does not frame the acquisition of wealth as an organic consequence of nomadic fortune, but rather as a direct clause of consequence. The textual phrasing exposes the highly transactional reality of the encounter. This implies that Sarai's physical body becomes the operational medium or currency through which Abram buys his safety and wealth.

Furthermore, the material relevance of Sarai is further hyped in the "Commodity Cluster" technically presented in the text. Following the prepositional operator ("for her sake"), the text deploys an expansive commodity cluster, an inventory that enumerates seven distinct categories of wealth:

*sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants,
female servants, female donkeys, and camels.*

(Gen.12:16, NKJV)

Semiotically, this inventory operates as a socio-economic ledger. Sarai's displacement serves as the "key" that unlocks this vast property accumulation. By organizing the inventory directly after the conditional clause, the syntax structurally synthesizes Sarai's body and beauty into a broader registry of domestic assets and livestock, stripping her of personal subjectivity and reducing her into becoming the very first item on Abram's list of material wealth. However, this highly calculated patriarchal transaction is abruptly disrupted in verse 17 through an act of divine subversion that forcefully breaks the semiotic sign. The narrative records that

*"...the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house
with great plagues because of Sarai,
Abram's wife." (Gen.12:17, NKJV)*

By striking Pharaoh's household, the divine intervention acts as a radical semiotic refusal and dislodgement of the human transaction. The text introduces a severe biological and material cost, which renders the *value* of the exchange toxic for Egypt's royal house. Consequently, the narrative forces a critical linguistic shift in the closing verses as Pharaoh confronts Abram, demanding to know why he lied by calling Sarai his sister, leading to her being taken as a wife for the king. Pharaoh's command to "take her and go" effectively dismantles the deceptive "Brother/Sister" signifier-narrative, the transactional lie constructed to commodify the female subject. At this juncture, the discourse is dramatically re-anchored to the "Husband/Wife" paradigm, restoring the covenantal truth. So, through divine agency, the circuit of unwholesome exchange is broken for genuine restoration: the property transaction is annulled, the currency is returned intact, and the patriarchal ledger is thoroughly subverted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the linguistic and semiotic analysis of Genesis 12:10–20 demonstrates that this narrative serves as a foundational "market discourse." By restructuring the text through the lenses of transitivity and social semiotics, the study reveals a clear semiotic precedent where the female subject is reduced to a *portentous sign* whose primary function is to secure the material and existential protection of the patriarch. The syntactic ledger in the text establishes an explicit equation of exchange of a kind, transforming feminine identity as in Sarai's case into a negotiable asset.

Evidentially, this study holds significant theoretical, socio-critical, and pedagogical value. Thus, by framing physical beauty as a transactional signifier rather than a romantic or aesthetic attribute highly desirable in a female for life fulfilment, the research bridges the gap between ancient Near Eastern philology and modern social semiotic theory. It actively challenges the traditional, uncritical readings of biblical gender dynamics (The Gospel Coalition, 2026) by exposing the underlying economic and power-driven structures embedded within the grammar of sacred texts. Finally, by deconstructing these imperial and patriarchal ideologies, this research contributes to a broader critical effort to “delink” historical gender representations from repressive systemic frameworks (Shingange, 2024). Ultimately, this analysis provides a practical template for English Language Teaching (ELT) and the Digital Humanities (Darong & Regus, 2024). It offers students the critical literacy tools necessary to cross historical boundaries, allowing them to trace how the *ancient ledger* of gendered erasure continues to resonate in modern linguistic landscapes, from classic manuscripts to contemporary digital advertisements and public signage where women's bodies are still frequently utilized as signifiers of status, wealth, and exchange.

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