

EMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF JAHILIYAH POETRY: A STUDY ON THE POEMS OF IMRU' AL-QAISM. Khaidar Barqi¹¹ Ma'had Aly Walindo, Pekalongan, Indonesia**Corresponding Author:**

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze Imru' al-Qais's Mu'allaqāt using the semiotic frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. Jahiliyah poetry functioned not only as an aesthetic expression but also as a cultural document that preserved the experiences, values, and worldview of pre-Islamic Arab society. This research employs a library-based qualitative descriptive-analytical method. The primary data are drawn from the poetic text of the Mu'allaqāt and its commentaries, while the secondary data come from books, journal articles, and other relevant academic sources. The analysis was carried out by identifying poetic symbols, interpreting their denotative meanings, and uncovering their connotative layers. The findings reveal that symbols such as al-aṭlāl (abandoned campsite), the camel, night, rain, as well as the imagery of love and women, represent longing, loss, endurance, hope, and the cultural vitality of Jahiliyah Arabs. This study highlights that Imru' al-Qais's poetry is significant not only as classical literary heritage but also as a medium for understanding cultural constructions and systems of thought in pre-Islamic society. The research further suggests the importance of integrating semiotic studies of classical Arabic literature into Indonesian academic contexts to enrich Arabic literary studies with critical and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Keywords: Classical Arabic Literature, Imru' Al-Qais, Mu'allaqāt, Semiotics, Symbolism



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INTRODUCTION

Classical Arabic literature constitutes one of the intellectual treasures deeply rooted in the traditions of Arab society, particularly during the Jahiliyah era, the period preceding the advent of Islam. At that time, literary works were not merely regarded as beautiful aesthetic expressions, but also carried broader functions: serving as a medium for documenting events, facilitating inter-tribal communication, and acting as an instrument of social legitimacy that strengthened the position of a group within the societal structure. In this context, poetry functioned as a collective archive that preserved the shared memory of a community. Through a series of poetic verses, the daily life of desert society, the cultural values they upheld, as well as the social dynamics they experienced, were recorded and transmitted to subsequent generations. It is therefore unsurprising that poets occupied such an honorable and almost irreplaceable position in Jahiliyah society. They were not merely regarded as entertainers or wordsmiths, but also considered the official spokesmen of their tribes, chroniclers who immortalized collective history, and guardians of honor who could elevate the dignity of their people through their poetry (Hitti, 2002).

One of the highest literary forms that emerged during this period was the Jahiliyah qasidah. This genre is widely recognized for its distinctive and relatively stable structural pattern. A qasidah typically begins with a description of the remnants of a campsite (al-wuqūf ‘ala al-atlāl), followed by a journey section rich in vivid imagery, and concludes with expressions of pride or even satire directed toward rival tribes. Such a structure is not merely a technical convention in poetic composition, but also reflects the worldview of desert society, which was inseparable from their nomadic experiences. The qasidah, therefore, was not only a medium of individual expression for poets, but also a collective representation of the face, emotions, and struggles of Arab society during the Jahiliyah era. The beauty of diction, the power of metaphor, and the density of symbols embodied in these poems elevated them as the pinnacle of classical Arabic literary aesthetics (Nicholson, 1969; Arberry, 2007).

Among the great poets of the Jahiliyah period, the name Imru’ al-Qais (540 M) holds a particularly prominent and distinguished place. He is often referred to as Malik al-Syu‘arā’, the “King of Poets” a title that reflects the immense recognition of his mastery in crafting words and constructing poetic imagery. His renowned work, known as Mu‘allaqāt Imru’ al-Qais, is even said to have been hung on the walls of the Ka‘bah as the highest form of tribute to the beauty and grandeur of his poetry (Allen, 2000). The themes he explored were diverse, ranging from deeply emotional love stories and profound longing, to vivid descriptions of the vast and majestic natural world, as well as depictions of arduous desert journeys filled with challenges. Through a style rich in symbols and metaphors, Imru’ al-Qais succeeded in establishing an aesthetic tradition that continues to be studied today, serving as an essential foundation for understanding the development of classical Arabic poetry (Stetkevych, 1993).

The abundance of symbolism in Imru’ al-Qais’s works opens wide possibilities for analysis through a semiotic approach. In simple terms, semiotics is the science of signs, as explained by Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), who distinguished between the signifier and the signified. This view was later expanded by Roland Barthes (1977), who emphasized that literary texts do not only contain denotative meanings apparent on the surface, but also generate connotative meanings that are much deeper—laden with cultural values, ideology, and the worldview of the author’s society. Within this framework, literature is no longer understood merely as an arrangement of beautiful words, but as a system of signs containing multiple layers of meaning. In the context of Imru’ al-Qais’s poetry, symbols such as abandoned campsites, camels, rain, and night can be interpreted in broader ways. They do not merely appear as literal descriptions, but may also be read as representations of human experience, profound longing, exhausting hardships, and the existential dynamics of Jahiliyah Arab society.

Several previous studies have also attempted to examine Jahiliyah poetry from symbolic perspectives. For example, Stetkevych (1993) emphasized the ritual and sacred dimensions of pre-Islamic qasidah, particularly the motif of al-aṭlāl, which is regarded not merely as a physical description of abandoned campsites, but also as a ritual of departure and a collective memory imbued with deep meaning for Arab society. Meanwhile, Allen (2000) highlighted that classical Arabic literature cannot be separated from its function as a medium of cultural communication, saturated with symbols and metaphors that reinforced Arab identity. Nevertheless, studies employing modern semiotic frameworks to interpret the symbolism in the poetry of Imru’ al-Qais remain relatively scarce, particularly in Indonesia. This condition presents a significant opportunity for research to contribute new insights into Arabic literary studies by offering a more critical, systematic, and in-depth reading.

Therefore, a semiotic study of the poetry of Imru’ al-Qais is of great importance. Such a study is not only useful for deepening the understanding of the aesthetics of language and poetic style employed by the poet, but also for uncovering how his poems represent the cultural values, systems of thought, and lived experiences of pre-Islamic Arab society. This research is expected to enrich our comprehension of the classical Arabic literary tradition while also presenting a more interdisciplinary perspective in literary hermeneutics, thus making a meaningful contribution to the development of Arabic literary studies at both local and global levels.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a library study (library research) employing a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach. The primary data are drawn from the poetic text of Imru’ al-Qais’s Mu‘allaqāt, along with the available commentaries (sharḥ), while the secondary data are derived from books, journal articles, and other relevant academic literature. The analysis is conducted within the framework of Ferdinand de Saussure’s and Roland Barthes’s semiotics, by identifying poetic symbols, interpreting their denotative meanings, and subsequently uncovering the connotative meanings that reflect the cultural values and lived experiences of Jahiliyah Arab society (Ukhrawiyah & Munir, 2019; Alda Azizah, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Mu‘allaqāt Poetry as a Representation of Jahiliyah Culture

Imru’ al-Qais’s Mu‘allaqāt represents the complexity of Arab Jahiliyah society. As a literary text, this qasidah not only contains the poet’s personal expressions but also serves as a cultural document that immortalizes the values, experiences, and worldview of pre-Islamic society. According to Al-Jabiri, Jahiliyah poetry functioned as a “social archive” preserving the collective memory of Arab tribes (Al-Jabiri, 2001). Therefore, any analysis of the symbolism within this poetry cannot be separated from the cultural context of Bedouin society, which lived in the desert under harsh natural conditions and a social system grounded in tribal solidarity (‘aṣabiyyah).

Through a semiotic approach—particularly Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of signs and Roland Barthes’s reflections—the poetic symbols in Imru’ al-Qais’s verses can be read as multilayered signs. The denotative meaning illustrates the literal situation in the text, while the connotative meaning reflects cultural constructions, ideology, and the collective experiences of Arab society (Barthes, 1977). In this way, semiotic reading allows us to understand the poetry not merely as aesthetic text but also as a representation of the symbolic world of Jahiliyah Arabs.

2. The Motif of al-Aṭlāl (Abandoned Campsite)

The opening verse of the Mu‘allaqāt is iconic and often regarded as an entry point to understanding pre-Islamic poetry:

قَفَا نَبِكِ مِنْ ذِكْرِى حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزِلٍ
بِسِقْطِ اللَّوَى بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوْمَلٍ

“Stop here, let us weep for the memory of a beloved and her dwelling, between al-Dakhul and Hawmal.”

On the surface, this couplet simply depicts the poet standing at the deserted campsite of his beloved. Yet, when examined more deeply, al-aṭlāl is not merely the remnants of an abandoned tent. It symbolizes longing, loss, and rupture with the past. Stetkevych (1993) describes this motif as a kind of “ritual of farewell” imbued with emotional and even spiritual significance for Jahiliyah society.

Al-Farisi (2020) regards al-aṭlāl as an icon of historical consciousness—a way in which pre-Islamic Arabs remembered and immortalized their transient past. In other words, this opening verse portrays how Jahiliyah society sought to affirm its identity amid the ephemerality of life.

3. The Camel and the Journey as Symbols

In another verse, Imru’ al-Qais portrays the camel as an essential part of his journey:

فَقُلْنَا لَهَا قَفِي فَقَالَتْ عَلَى رَسْلِكُمَا
أَلَا تَرَى كَيْفَ يَغْشَى الْفَلَاةَ سَحَابُهَا

“We said to her (the camel): stop, and she stopped gently. Do you not see how the clouds cover this desert?”

At the denotative level, the verse depicts the camel as a loyal mount accompanying the poet through long journeys. Connotatively, however, the camel becomes a symbol of endurance, resilience, and loyalty in confronting the harsh desert. Nicholson (1969) notes that in classical Arab imagination, the camel represents patience and courage.

Through Barthes’s semiotic lens, the camel may be read as a cultural myth that transcends its function as an animal. It emerges as a symbol of Bedouin identity as well as a representation of humanity’s existential journey. Zain (2018) argues that the motif of the journey in Jahiliyah poetry is often interpreted as a reflection of the search for meaning in life.

4. Night and Rain as Symbols of Nature

Imru’ al-Qais also skillfully employed natural symbols. One such example is his depiction of the night:

وَلَيْلٍ كَمَوْجِ الْبَحْرِ أَرَخَى سُدُولَهُ
عَلَيَّ بِأَنْوَاعِ الْهُمُومِ لِيَبْتَلِي

“And the night, like the waves of the sea, cast down its curtain upon me, burdening me with all kinds of sorrows to test me.”

Literally, this verse simply describes the exhaustion of a long night. Connotatively, however, night becomes a metaphor for trials, loneliness, and inner contemplation. Allen (2000) interprets night in Jahiliyah poetry as a space of reflection that reveals the intimate relationship between human beings and nature.

Rain, on the other hand, is often depicted as bringing fertility. Yet, on the connotative level, rain symbolizes hope and renewal. Such natural imagery was the way classical Arab poets conveyed collective values and communal aspirations (Azizah, 2022).

5. The Imagery of Love and Women

Love is another prominent theme in the works of Imru' al-Qais. One verse reads:

أَفَاطِمُ مَهْلًا بَعْضَ هَذَا التَّدَلُّلِ
وَإِنْ كُنْتَ قَدْ أَرَمْتَ صَرَمِي فَأَجْمِلِي

“O Fatimah, ease your coquetry, and if you have resolved to leave me, then do it with grace.”

At the denotative level, the verse portrays a personal dialogue between the poet and a woman named Fatimah. Beyond that, however, the imagery of love becomes a symbol of vitality, passion for life, and even social legitimacy. Ukhrawiyah and Munir (2019) emphasize that love poetry in the pre-Islamic tradition served both as a medium of emotional sensitivity and as a marker of the poet's social status.

Thus, the theme of love in the Mu‘allaqāt is not merely a matter of private sentiment, but part of a broader cultural narrative that highlights values of freedom, courage, and the celebration of beauty.

CONCLUSION

Imru' al-Qais's Mu‘allaqat demonstrates that literature in the Jahiliyah period was not merely an aesthetic expression, but also a reflection of pre-Islamic Arab life. Through its verses, one can discern how human experiences, such as longing, sorrow, journeys, and collective pride, are represented through poetic symbols. The motif of al-atlal, for instance, does not simply describe the remains of an abandoned campsite, but also conveys symbols of loss and memory laden with emotional and cultural meaning.

Through the semiotic framework of Saussure and Barthes, reading this poetry opens up broader interpretive possibilities. Its denotative meaning provides a concrete depiction of desert life, while its connotative meaning reflects the worldview, cultural values, and existential understanding of Jahiliyah Arabs. This is what renders Imru' al-Qais's poetry enduring and relevant, even after the passage of centuries.

Ultimately, a semiotic study of this work reveals that classical poetry is significant not only as a literary legacy but also as an entryway into understanding the cultural constructions and modes of thought of a society. This research invites readers to view the richness of the Arabic literary tradition not merely as an archive of the past but as a cultural text that can continually be reinterpreted in accordance with contemporary needs.

The implications of this study underscore the importance of integrating semiotic analysis of classical Arabic literature into academic contexts in Indonesia, both within Arabic language education and in cultural studies. Teaching classical poetry through a semiotic approach can train students to read texts more critically: not only grasping literal meaning, but also uncovering the cultural values and philosophies embedded within. Moreover, this approach may enrich Arabic literary research in Indonesia by opening new possibilities for interpreting

the works of other Jahiliyah poets such as Zuhayr, Labid, or Antarah from a fresh and more interdisciplinary perspective.

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