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The Ten *Mu ʿallaqat* from a Cultural Perspective: A Semiotic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the *Ten Mu ʿallaqat* from a cultural semiotic perspective, analyzing how pre-Islamic poets conveyed complex societal values through symbolic language deeply embedded in their oral traditions. By employing semiotics as an analytical tool, the research examines how metaphors, symbols, and allusions transcend literal meanings to reflect deeper interpretations rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of the Jahili era. The *Mu ʿallaqat* are treated not merely as artistic expressions of individual experience, but as mirrors reflecting the collective consciousness, ideological constructs, and existential concerns of early Arab society. The study highlights the significant influence of oral performance, historical conditions, and geographical landscapes on the formation of symbolic systems within the poems. It argues that specific elements—such as deserts, ruins, swords, beloved women, and animals—serve as semiotic signs conveying themes of tribal identity, honor, nostalgia, survival, and metaphysical contemplation. These signs, when decoded, reveal intricate layers of meaning that unveil the cultural logic and spiritual ethos of the time. Additionally, the research traces the recurrence of key motifs and how they interact to form a symbolic network that communicates a worldview shaped by struggle, memory, and belonging. Through this lens, the *Mu ʿallaqat* emerge not only as literary masterpieces, but also as dynamic cultural texts that continue to influence Arab identity, aesthetics, and linguistic imagination. The study ultimately affirms the relevance of semiotic analysis in uncovering the enduring legacy and cultural depth of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.

Keywords: Pre-Islamic Poetry; the Ten *Mu ʿallaqat*; Cultural Semiotics; Symbolism; Oral Culture; Metaphor; Allusion

1. Introduction

Pre-Islamic poetry stands among the most distinguished literary traditions in Arab heritage, encapsulating cultural and social values that prevailed in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam. The Ten *Muʿallaqat* hold a unique place as monumental expressions of poetic creativity in that era. These odes, however, are not merely emotional or aesthetic compositions—they are intricate semiotic structures embedded with diverse symbols and meanings that reflect the cultural, social, and political realities of Jahili society [1].

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, offers a powerful analytical framework to understand these poetic structures. It enables readers to uncover deeper layers of meaning beyond the literal wording [2]. Through this lens, the pre-Islamic poet—whether expressing pride, engaging themes of war and mortality, or depicting moments of love—employs a rich symbolic language that transcends the surface level, inviting the reader into a broader interpretive experience [3].

This intensive use of symbolism provides insight into the broader dimensions of Jahili life. Geographical and historical factors, along with oral traditions, significantly influenced the formation of these symbolic systems, rendering pre-Islamic poetry a cultural artifact whose meaning extends beyond mere artistic value [1].

This research aims to investigate the interplay between language and symbol in the Ten *Muʿallaqat*, positioning them as exemplary models of literary excellence. The study explores how the poets integrated metaphors, symbolism, and allusions to construct multilayered meanings. It also considers how oral culture contributed to shaping the semiotic system in Jahili poetry [1].

Ultimately, this paper seeks to demonstrate that pre-Islamic poetry is not simply traditional literature, but a vehicle for expressing complex cultural and cognitive worldviews. Deciphering its symbols is crucial to understanding the depth of this rich Arab legacy [2].

1.1. Research Problem and Questions

Although the Ten *Muʿallaqat* have been the subject of extensive rhetorical and literary studies, few approaches have examined them through the lens of cultural semiotics. This study seeks to fill this gap by asking the following key questions:

1. What are the dominant cultural symbols present in the Ten *Muʿallaqat*?
2. How do these symbols function as semiotic signs within the structure of the poems?
3. What cultural values and societal beliefs are encoded within these poetic signs?

1.2. Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyze linguistic symbolism in the *Muʿallaqat*: Exploring how pre-Islamic poets employed language as a symbolic system, where metaphors and allusions served to express multilayered meanings [4].
2. To examine the semiotic mechanisms in poetic texts: Studying the construction of poetic signs, especially symbolic tools such as metaphors, allusions, and spatial markers, and how these devices deepen interpretation [5].
3. To investigate the impact of oral culture and poetic traditions: Analyzing the influence of oral performance and cultural memory on shaping the semiotic framework of the *Muʿallaqat* and its transmission of meaning [6].
4. To identify key cultural and social symbols: Highlighting recurrent symbols—such as those associated with pride, warfare, love, and death—and examining how they reflect the collective values of Jahili society [7].
5. To demonstrate that pre-Islamic poetry embodies a cultural and intellectual structure: Showing that these poems function not merely as personal expressions, but as symbolic systems that articulate the worldview and ideology of their time [8].
6. To open interpretive horizons for pre-Islamic texts: Encouraging multilayered readings of the *Muʿallaqat* by applying semiotic analysis, thereby enhancing their relevance in contemporary cultural discourse [9].

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a cultural semiotic analytical approach to examine the poetic structure and symbolic complexity of the Ten *Muʿallaqat*. As these odes are among the

most sophisticated literary achievements of pre-Islamic Arabia, they serve as ideal material for analyzing how symbols, metaphors, and allusions encode cultural meanings [10].

The Methodology Includes:

- A close textual analysis of selected verses from the *Muʿallaqat*, focusing on recurrent symbolic motifs such as ruins, weapons, nature, and feminine imagery.
- Application of semiotic tools (e.g., signifier/signified, binary oppositions, cultural codes) to interpret how linguistic signs create multilayered meaning [2–4].
- A contextual analysis that situates the symbols within the socio-historical environment of the Jahili period [1,5].
- Incorporation of oral tradition studies to understand how performance and memorization shaped the symbolic resonance of the poetry [7].

By combining semiotic theory with literary and historical insights, the research explores how pre-Islamic poets structured meaning through symbolic language to express deeply rooted tribal, spiritual, and existential concerns [6,8].

3. Results

Semiotics—the study of signs and how they generate meaning—offers a powerful tool for interpreting poetic texts as symbolic systems rooted in cultural context. Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the founding figures of modern semiotics, defined a sign as composed of a signifier (sound or image) and a signified (concept or meaning) [11]. The interaction between signs forms a relational network that conveys meaning in context.

Building on this, Roland Barthes expanded the scope of semiotics to include all cultural expressions, emphasizing that anything—from language and literature to art and fashion—can be read as a system of signs This cultural turn in semiotics is particularly relevant to the analysis of pre-Islamic poetry, where every image, trope, or motif carries culturally encoded significance [12].

In the Arab world, semiotics has become increasingly relevant in literary criticism. Jaber Asfour, a leading Arab critic, stressed its value in unveiling the deep symbolic dimensions of Arabic texts, enabling the reader to access meanings hidden beneath rhetorical surfaces [2]. Similarly, Mustafa Nassef emphasized the need for semiotic analysis to understand pre-Islamic poetry not as surface-level rhetoric, but as a layered cultural artifact that embodies the worldview of Jahili society [13].

Cultural semiotics, a subfield that focuses on how meaning is generated within specific cultural settings, provides the framework for this study. It emphasizes the relationship between text and context—how the poetic image resonates with the lived experiences, values, and ideologies of its culture. From this perspective, the *Muʿallaqat* emerge not only as poetic masterpieces but as symbolic expressions of a complex social and intellectual order [14].

Discussion: In analyzing the cultural semiotics of the Ten *Muʿallaqat*, particular attention is given to how poetic images and symbols express the cultural and emotional depth of Jahili society. The symbolic landscape of these odes encompasses spatial references, emotional registers, and conceptual values such as courage, chivalry, tribal pride, loyalty, love, and generosity. These are not merely literary tropes but manifestations of the underlying cultural ethos of pre-Islamic Arabia.

3.1. Spatial Symbolism

Place as a Carrier of Memory and Identity. One of the most prominent semiotic features in *Muʿallaqat* poetry is the symbolism of place, where physical locations transcend their geographical reality to become vessels of memory, longing, and cultural rootedness. Places serve as emotional landmarks, anchoring the poet's experiences, recollections, and identity.

In his Muʿallaqa, Imruʾ al-Qais opens with the famous lines:

<div dir="rtl">

قِفَا نَبْكِ مِنْ ذِكْرَى حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزِلِ   بِسِقْطِ اللَّوَى بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوْمَلِ

</div>

"Stop, let us weep, recalling a beloved and a dwelling,
At the site of Sakt al-Lawa, between the places of Dukhul and Hawmal" [1]

These verses transform geographic markers into symbols of nostalgia and emotional rupture, where "Dukhul" and "Hawmal" become semiotic sites of love, memory, and loss. The symbolic function here is not merely referential

but culturally performative, as it evokes both personal and tribal memory, positioning the place as a site of identity construction.

Similarly, Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma begins his ode with:

أَمِنْ أُمِّ أَوْفى دِمْنَةً لَمْ تَكَلَّمْ

بِحُومانَةِ الدُّرَّاجِ فالمُتَثَلَّمِ

"Is it from Umm' Ufwā, the place that has not spoken,
By the Hamānah of the partridge and the broken-down ruins?" [2]

is thus not a setting but a semiotic signifier of transience, honor, and cultural loss [15].

This usage transforms the mute ruin into a speaking symbol of time's passage and emotional permanence. The place becomes a character, embodying the poet's memories and reflecting the collective identity of the tribe. The ruin

3.2. Place and the Rooting of Collective Memory

In the *Muʿallaqa* of Al-Harith ibn Hilliza, the theme of spatial rootedness continues:

بَعْدَ عَهْدٍ لَنَا بِبُرْقَةٍ شَمَّاء

فَأَدْنَى دِيارِهَا الخَلْصَاءُ

"After a time for us in the land of Baraqah Shammaa,
Then we approached its purest dwellings" [3]

Here, the name of the place functions as a marker of

social continuity and ancestral belonging. The poet invokes the purity and nobility of the location to reflect the tribe's honor and its rooted place within the cultural map of Jahili society. Place becomes synonymous with heritage, loyalty, and tribal authenticity.

This symbolic association is deepened in another verse:

آذَنَتْنَا بِبَيْنِهَا أَسْمَاءُ

رُبَّ ثَاوٍ يَمَلُّ مِنْهُ الثَّواءُ

"Our farewell has been announced by its names,
Perhaps a dweller will grow weary of staying there" [4]

Here, the act of naming itself acquires a semiotic function—marking the emotional rupture and collective sentiment of departure and dislocation. The place is no longer inert geography; it is a cultural semiotic field where memories, losses, and values intersect.

poet's return to ruins, valleys, and named deserts is a return to his collective memory, and the evocation of place becomes a strategy of cultural preservation.

Moreover, the semiotic richness of these spatial references reveals the complex interplay between language, place, and identity in Jahili poetry. They function as cultural maps, where each location anchors a set of emotions, values, and historical affiliations, turning poetry into a mirror of collective consciousness.

3.3. Cultural Implications of Spatial Symbolism

Through these examples, it becomes clear that spatial symbolism in the *Muʿallaqat* is not decorative but deeply structural. These places operate as metaphorical containers of emotional depth, social honor, and tribal identity. The

3.4. Places and the Pain of Nostalgia

The *Muʿallaqat* poets frequently link the concept of "home" with memory and emotional loss, portraying abandoned dwellings as echoes of a once vibrant social life. In his opening verse, Labid ibn Rabīʿa captures this sense of desolation:

"عَفَتِ الدِّيارُ مَحَلُّهَا فَمُقَامُهَا

بِمَنَى تَأَبَّدَ غَوْلُهَا فَرِجَامُهَا"

"The dwellings have vanished, their place is gone,
And in Mina, their abode remains, where the goblins' turmoil is eternal" [1]

Here, the verb " عفت " (vanished) evokes a sense of irrevocable erasure—of both place and memory. The physical space becomes a semiotic sign of impermanence, while terms like " غول " (goblins) and " فرجام " (remnants) function metaphorically to suggest natural and societal decay. These images emphasize the poet's awareness of time's passage and its destructive force upon spaces once filled with life, love, and meaning.

3.5. Emotional Landscapes: Love and Sacred Space

In Al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī's ode, the connection between place and emotion is heightened through his invocation of "Dar Meya":

'يَا دَارَ مَيَّةَ بِالْعَلْيَاءِ فَالسَّنَدِ'

"O dwelling of Mayyah, in Al-ʿAliya and the Sand!" [2]

This line transforms geographical markers into symbols of emotional grandeur and social elevation. "Dar Meya" becomes a sacred emotional site, one that encapsulates the memory of love and noble status. The landscape here is not neutral; it is charged with personal history, representing a lost world of emotional intensity and spiritual connection [16].

As the poet later laments the desolation of this place, he suggests a shift from attachment to detachment, where the beloved space, once central to identity, becomes a silent witness to loss and time's erosion. Through this transformation, the place evolves into a symbol of transience and fading emotional worlds.

3.6. Places and the Collapse of Civilization

Ubaid ibn al-Abras continues this symbolic treatment of space by illustrating radical transformation and social collapse:

"They were replaced by beasts,
And their condition was changed by calamities" [3]

The replacement of humans with beasts is a stark metaphor for the dissolution of social cohesion and the collapse of civilized order. Here, the poet laments not just environmental ruin but the semiotic death of cultural space—where places once governed by custom and dignity have been overrun by chaos. From a semiotic perspective, this shift marks the loss of cultural meaning, as the familiar is displaced by the wild, and the ordered by the anarchic.

This symbolic imagery reflects a collective anxiety about the fragility of social and tribal systems in the face of time, conflict, and nature's force. The use of such motifs across the *Muʿallaqat* reinforces the poet's role as a custodian of memory and a witness to the dissolution of once-vital cultural spaces [17].

3.7. Places and Psychological Conflict

In the poetry of Ṭarfa ibn al-ʿAbd, the psychological dimension of place emerges vividly. In a moment of poetic stillness, he writes:

"And my companions halted with me on their mounts" [1]

This moment of arrest, though literal, functions symbolically as a psychological stasis. The poet becomes frozen in front of ruins, overwhelmed by the emotional weight of memory. The physical stop mirrors the inner tension between the urge to move forward and the inescapable pull of the past. Within the framework of cultural semiotics, this moment signals the tyranny of remembrance, where the poet's emotional landscape becomes inseparably linked to place and identity [18].

3.8. Places and the Return of the Self

In his iconic Muʿallaqa, ʿAntara ibn Shaddād opens with a question charged with existential and cultural implications:

"Did the poets leave any trace,
Or did you recognize the home after confusion?" [3]

Here, "the home" transcends physical geography to become a metaphor for identity, rootedness, and collective memory. The poet expresses a longing not just for a place, but for a reconnection with the self. Later, he deepens this

emotional invocation:

> *"O home of ʿAbla in the wilderness, speak to me,*
> *And greet me in the morning, O home of ʿAbla."* [4]

The repetition of the place name reveals the poet's refusal to let go of the emotional bond with his past. "The home of ʿAbla" functions here as a semiotic vessel of love, belonging, and continuity—a point of emotional reference that grounds the self across time and loss [5].

3.9. Places and the Journey of Challenge

In the poetry of Al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, the journey motif acquires a semiotic function that reflects life's adversity and resilience:

> *"Thrown by the harsh fate,*
> *Its beak sharp as the sound of a sword upon the fabric."* [6]

Here, the metaphor of "being thrown" suggests forcible displacement, while the "beak" becomes a symbol of piercing experience and swift transition. This is not merely a journey through space—it is a narrative of survival and existential endurance.

He continues:

> *"As if my journey, when the day passed us by,*
> *Was on the high plains, with a solitary companion."* [6]

The transition from day to night symbolizes a movement from light to obscurity, certainty to uncertainty. Within the semiotic framework, this shift becomes a metaphor for inner transformation, where physical motion mirrors psychological growth. The poet's journey becomes a dialogue between self and world, navigating change while carrying the weight of memory and the burden of identity [7].

3.10. Places as Symbols of Loss and Absence

In pre-Islamic poetry, *place* frequently transcends its geographic function to become a semiotic site of loss and nostalgia. The image of *ruins* (أطلال) is particularly potent, representing the remnants of relationships, homes, and eras

that can no longer be reclaimed. For Ṭarfa ibn al-ʿAbd, the depiction of ruins carries both personal and cultural connotations:

> *"To Khawla, there are ruins by the lands of Thahmud."* [1]

These ruins are not neutral markers—they symbolize the irreversibility of time and the pain of emotional disconnection. In this context, place becomes a metaphor for the simultaneous death of memory and geography, a symbol that connects human sorrow to cultural erosion [2].

A similar tone is found in ʿAntara ibn Shaddād's poetry:

> *"And ʿAbla settles in the wilderness,*
> *And our people are in sadness, from al-Sammān to al-Mutathallim."* [3]

Here, ʿAbla is not merely a lover—she embodies the homeland, with her associated places symbolizing emotional desolation and social fragmentation. "Al-Jawāʾ" and "al-Sammān" function as semiotic spaces of absence, reflecting the emptiness left by loss, both personal and collective [4].

3.11. Symbolism and Social Values

The *Muʿallaqāt* are not limited to expressions of love and grief—they are rich in symbolic representations of tribal ethics, especially generosity and hospitality, which were central values in Jahili society. In his famous line, ʿAntara ibn Shaddād proclaims:

> *"If you give me the mask, I will receive the guest with the strength of a warrior."* [5]

The *mask* here symbolizes protection and readiness, while the *warrior* reflects courage and tribal responsibility. This expression reinforces the poet's dedication to hospitality as an identity marker, illustrating how poetry functions as a medium for encoding social expectations and virtues.

These symbols highlight the tension between cultural tradition and potential modern reinterpretation. By preserving such values in poetic form, the *Muʿallaqāt* become both historical documents and tools of cultural transmission.

3.12. Semiotics of Fate and Destiny

Pre-Islamic poetry offers a compelling view of the existential philosophy of early Arabs, especially their perception

of fate, destiny, and the unpredictability of life. In one striking line, ʿUbayd ibn al-Abras writes:

> *"Every person of fortune may lose it,*
> *And every person of hope may be deceived."*[6]

This reflects the deeply ingrained belief that human agency is limited, and that destiny operates beyond rational control. The *semiotics of fate* becomes evident through such verses, where time, luck, and misfortune are seen as active agents shaping human experience.

3.13. Social Structures and Tribal Identity

Social relationships in the *Muʿallaqāt* are shaped by a rigid tribal hierarchy, where lineage defines one's place in the world. The poetry often explores tensions arising from this structure, such as the poet's admiration or frustration toward societal status.

In this regard, the poetry of al-Aʿshā offers insights into gender and class by portraying women of high social status, respected not only for beauty but for their tribal prestige. The semiotics of *status and nobility* inform how desire and respect are mediated through the lens of tribal belonging[19].

3.14. The Home as a Symbol of Continuity and Prestige

In Labīd ibn Rabīʿa's poetry, the *home* takes on profound symbolic resonance as a marker of intergenerational legacy:

> *"He built for us a high house,*
> *Whose height reached the old and the young."*[8]

The *high house* symbolizes not only physical stature but moral continuity. It reflects the semiotic link between space and values, suggesting that the home preserves cultural integrity, social bonds, and familial pride across generations. Through this image, the poet situates the house as a metonym for community, memory, and identity.

3.15. Semiotics of Power and Obedience

In al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī's verse:

> *"Whoever obeys you, benefit him with*

your obedience as you have obeyed him, and guide him to righteousness."[20]

We witness a symbolic representation of mutual loyalty as the foundation of political legitimacy. In this semiotic context, obedience is not passive submission but a reciprocal structure of power, rooted in ethical duty and leadership. Authority here is validated not through coercion but through just conduct and moral alignment, reflecting a broader cultural view of power based on wisdom and mutual respect.

3.16. Semiotics of Tribe and Ancestral Glory

ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm's poetry is renowned for celebrating tribal pride:

> *"We inherited glory, and Maʿadd knows it;*
> *we fight for it until it is clear."*[2]

Here, *glory* becomes a symbolic inheritance, passed down like sacred treasure, with the tribe assuming collective responsibility to preserve it. The act of fighting is not merely military—it is cultural resistance against the erosion of honor, underscoring the tribe as a repository of identity and moral obligation.

3.17. Semiotics of War, Justice, and Resistance

In pre-Islamic poetry, war is infused with ethical and symbolic value. In Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā's verse:

> *"He who does not defend his land with his weapon will be destroyed,*
> *and he who does not wrong others will not be wronged."*[21]

The *weapon* becomes a sign of justice—a means not just of aggression, but of protecting rights. War here is both a sacred duty and a trial of manhood, where failing to uphold honor is equated with societal death.

Similarly, in another verse:

> *"He who gives good to the undeserving,*
> *will find his praise turned into blame."*[3]

This reflects the moral semiotics of justice—where generosity must be accompanied by discernment. Kindness without judgment leads to dishonor, reversing the cultural

symbol of praise into shame.

3.18. Semiotics of Sacrifice and Bravery

In al-Aʿshā's line:

> *"We fight them and then kill them."* [22]

The act of killing is not glorified as violence—it symbolizes tribal valor and collective defense. War is framed as sacrifice, where blood signifies existence, continuity, and honor. The sword becomes an **extension of the self**, an emblem of identity.

3.19. Semiotics of Conflict and Inner Struggle

ʿAntara ibn Shaddād writes:

> *"If you are determined to separate, then*
> *your journey will be in a dark night."* [5]

The *night* here operates as a metaphor for uncertainty and existential pain, while *separation* suggests moral deviation or loss of communal grounding. The journey becomes a symbol of internal conflict, echoing a tension between love and duty, or tradition and freedom.

3.20. Semiotics of the Sword and Heroism

ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm declares:

> *"Our swords, like theirs, are wielded by*
> *skilled hands."* [23]

The *sword* here represents not just combat but skill, legacy, and righteousness. The ability to wield it is a cultural marker of authority, masculinity, and ancestral continuity. It is a sign of both power and honor.

3.21. Semiotics of Chivalry and Virtue

ʿAntara enriches the image of the knight:

> *"Like the merchant's horse, leading your*
> *challenges to meet you."* [24]

Chivalry here is not brute force but intelligence, leadership, and moral clarity. The warrior is not only a fighter but a strategic mind, embodying the ideal Arab hero: strong, wise, and just.

3.22. Semiotics of Beauty, Chivalry, and Femininity

Imruʾ al-Qays fuses the feminine with heroic imagery:

> *"The day I tied my mount for the virgins,*
> *Its saddle seemed like cloves."* [6]

Here, beauty and chivalry are intertwined, with the feminine representing not vulnerability but a cultural incentive for valor. The saddle becomes a sign of elegance and readiness, uniting aesthetics with action.

3.23. Semiotics of Strength and Resilience

al-Aʿshā writes:

> *"Like one who butts a rock to break it."* [4]

The *rock* symbolizes steadfastness, and the struggle against it becomes a metaphor for unyielding determination. This image glorifies persistence and resistance, framing them as virtues equal to (or greater than) victory.

3.24. Semiotics of War and Grief

In al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥilliza's verse:

> *"I see none of those I once knew; I cry*
> *today in helplessness."* [7]

Tears here represent emotional vulnerability, perceived as weakness within the warrior ethos. This contrasts with the dominant ideal of stoic endurance, reinforcing the cultural valorization of bravery over sorrow.

3.25. Semiotics of Death and Existential Struggle

In pre-Islamic poetry, death is not perceived as a mere biological endpoint, but as a symbol of honor, transcendence, and identity. As Ṭarfa ibn al-ʿAbd writes:

> *"I carry my worries even at the moment*
> *of death."* [1]

Here, death is not release, but a continuation of existential responsibility. This reflects a cultural vision in which human value lies in the persistence of consciousness, even in the face of demise. The poet is defined not by fear of death,

but by his endurance of dignity.

In al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī's words:

"Do not throw me into a corner I cannot defend,

even if your enemies rebuke you with generosity." [2]

Honor here takes precedence over life itself. The poet equates surrender with shame, reinforcing the semiotic bond between survival and resistance.

Researcher Mohammed Abdullah emphasizes that such verses reflect a cultural ethos where bravery overrides fear, and defeat equals dishonor [25].

Similarly, al-Aʿshā proclaims:

"If you kill a great man, it will not be a clean cut." [4]

Here, death becomes a mark of greatness, and its violence a symbol of sacrifice for meaning. According to Khaled Said, this vision of death as a source of immortal memory is central to the pre-Islamic worldview [26].

Al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥilliza writes:

"If you dig between Milḥat and al-Sāʿiq, you will find the dead and the living together." [6]

This poetic vision blurs the boundary between life and death. Sami Yusuf argues that this symbolizes the convergence of religious belief and tribal ethos, where dying for honor assures continuity beyond the grave [27].

ʿUbayd ibn al-Abras echoes this spiritual dimension:

"By God, every good is attained, and speech becomes more convincing through it." [8]

Here, divine invocation gives death a soteriological value, suggesting that destiny, death, and divine will are interconnected in the Jahili moral universe [28].

3.26. Semiotics of Women: Between Perfection and Loss

In the *Muʿallaqāt*, women are not merely love interests—they are semiotic archetypes representing beauty, memory, longing, and identity. In Imruʾ al-Qays's verse:

"If they rise, musk exudes from them; My companions stopped their mounts beside her." [29]

Here, the woman becomes an icon of ideal beauty—not just physical, but spiritual and natural. The scent of musk signifies harmony and inner serenity. She is a metaphor for completeness, where human longing meets divine elegance.

3.27. Semiotics of Women and Loss

Loss is another key theme. Imruʾ al-Qays writes:

"My cure is a burning tear, And the tears of my eyes poured out from love." [11]

Tears here symbolize emotional authenticity and dignified grief. As Abdul Rahman explains, crying is not weakness, but a ritual of expressive strength, representing inner struggle between reason and emotion [30].

3.28. Semiotics of Spiritual Femininity

In Ṭarfa ibn al-ʿAbd's line:

"A gentle one, whose graceful gait sways beneath fine silk." [13]

Feminine beauty becomes an expression of soul-body harmony. According to Abū al-ʿAlāʾ, this symbolizes not sensuality, but spiritual wholeness, where the woman embodies aesthetic transcendence [31].

3.29. Semiotics of Women and Social Status

In al-Aʿshā and Imruʾ al-Qays's poetry, feminine presence marks social distinction. The latter writes:

"A noble lady, her features like sculpted elegance; She walks gently like a hesitant cloud." [10]

Here, walking becomes a semiotic act, expressing grace, status, and refinement. As Hussein argues, beauty is not ornamentation but a language of power, in a society where semiotic prestige shapes identity [32].

3.30. Semiotics of Jewelry and Social Status

In pre-Islamic poetry, jewelry operates as a semiotic marker of social distinction and female influence. As al-Aʿshā notes:

> *"You hear the whisper of jewelry when it is removed."*[1]

Jewelry is not mere adornment—it becomes a visible sign of wealth, honor, and elevated societal position. A woman adorned with gold or precious stones represents prestige and symbolic power, not only among her kin but in the broader tribal imagination[33,34].

3.31. Semiotics of Loyalty and Human Connection

Loyalty in pre-Islamic culture was a foundational virtue, tightly connected to place, tribe, and memory. In Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā's verse:

> *"When I recognized the house, I said to its inhabitants:*
> *Good morning to you, O house, and peace be upon you."*[3]

The act of greeting the house reflects deep emotional loyalty, where places become repositories of memory and sacred links between people and their pasts. Loyalty here transcends individualism—it is communal and spatially embodied[35].

In another verse, Zuhayr asserts:

> *"You have become in a good position, far from disobedience and sin."*[5]

This reinforces the connection between moral integrity and loyalty to social contracts, where tribal alliances serve as bulwarks of justice and cohesion.

3.32. Semiotics of Attachment and Emotional Depth

In al-Aʿshā's verse:

> *"I attached her casually, and she attached herself to a man."*[6]

The poet contrasts transient attachment with serious emotional commitment. The line becomes a commentary on the cultural weight of loyalty, where genuine attachment is associated with honor, stability, and enduring value.

3.33. Semiotics of the Soul and Inner Virtue

The concept of the soul (النفس) in *Muʿallaqat* poetry embodies ethical tension and psychological conflict. In al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī:

> *"The soul said to him: I see no desire."*[7]

Here, the soul functions as a moral guide, separate from the poet's impulses. This reflects the pre-Islamic valorization of self-discipline and chastity, where the soul monitors desire and urges moderation[36].

3.34. Semiotics of Farewell and Existential Transition

Farewell in pre-Islamic poetry is never simple—it is a metaphysical rupture. In al-Aʿshā's line:

> *"Say goodbye to Hurayra, for the caravan is departing."*[9]

The *caravan* becomes a symbol of irreversible time, where farewell marks a passage from emotional stability to existential displacement.

In another verse:

> *"Can you endure farewell, O man?"*[10]

This rhetorical question reveals human fragility in the face of loss. Farewell here is not a moment but a crisis of being, highlighting the poet's confrontation with emotional helplessness[37].

3.35. Semiotics of Nature and the Human Psyche

Nature in the *Muʿallaqat* mirrors the poet's emotional state. Imruʾ al-Qays writes:

> *"You see the footprints of the camels on the barren land,*
> *and tears filled my eyes from longing."*[38]

Here, nature absorbs the poet's grief. The earth becomes an empathetic surface, reflecting sorrow and extending the poet's emotional field into the landscape.

In al-Aʿshā's poetry:

> *"Her walk is like the cloud passing swift-ly,*
>
> *neither slow nor hasty."* [39]

The beloved's movement mimics natural rhythm, portraying beauty as ephemeral and cosmic. The *cloud* evokes time's fluidity, reminding the reader of life's impermanence.

3.36. Semiotics of Celestial Beauty

In another line:

> *"She smiles at the sun as a shining star."* [40]

The beloved is likened to a celestial force—a star that embodies light, perfection, and divine beauty. Such imagery elevates human love into a universal aesthetic order, suggesting that beauty connects the soul to the cosmos [41,42].

3.37. Semiotics of Nature and Time

Nature in the *Muʿallaqat* is not a passive backdrop; it is an active narrative force. In Labīd ibn Rabīʿa's verse:

> *"The floods cleared the ruins as if they were slabs with pens that write their history."* [43]

Nature here participates in historical inscription—the floods become a metaphor for time, and the ruins, transformed into living documents, serve as archives of memory. As Al-Husseini argues, this comparison reflects how natural transformation symbolizes the passage of time and the continuity of memory in Jahili culture [27].

4. Conclusions

The *Ten Muʿallaqat* stand as monuments of pre-Islamic cultural consciousness, representing more than just poetic excellence—they are semiotic repositories through which we access the values, beliefs, and emotional landscapes of a complex society.

Through a cultural semiotic lens, this research uncovered layers of meaning embedded in the poetry's imagery, symbols, and metaphors—ranging from ruins and nature, to war, death, women, time, and the soul. Each poetic symbol was shown to carry cultural and social significance, reflecting values such as tribal honor, loyalty, resistance, and existential awareness.

These poems transform everyday experiences—from travel and warfare to love and loss—into codified symbolic acts, offering insight into how pre-Islamic Arabs structured their world. Far from being abstract or decorative, these symbolic systems function as tools for constructing identity, memory, and meaning.

When we speak of the semiotics of the *Muʿallaqat*, we refer to an intimate cultural archive, where the poet assumes the role of interpreter and mirror. He does not merely observe reality, but reconstructs it linguistically and symbolically, giving voice to the spiritual, social, and emotional concerns of his people.

In conclusion, the *Ten Muʿallaqat* remain not only literary masterpieces but also living cultural texts—texts that allow us to access a civilization's spiritual and symbolic universe. Analyzing them through the lens of cultural semiotics reaffirms their enduring status as a cornerstone of Arabic heritage, and opens new possibilities for understanding how language encodes culture, memory, and being.

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H.M.A.-S. guided the research and wrote the introduction, methodology, findings, and discussions. I.K.A collected the samples and edited the language. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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