

## A Reading of Berber Poetry in Light of Textual Approaches with Semiotics as a Model

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### ABSTRACT

Textual methodologies focus on the premise that the literary text constitutes an autonomous world—self-sufficient and internally coherent—deriving its significance from its own structures and internal systems rather than from external contexts or references. Unlike pre-textual critical approaches, which often relied on contextual or author-centered perspectives, textual approaches place the text itself at the core of inquiry, treating it as a communicative entity shaped by an intricate network of linguistic, aesthetic, and semantic relations that guide its interpretation. Modern critical thought has contributed greatly to this shift, most notably through structuralism, which seeks to uncover the internal architecture of the text—its phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic layers—and to understand how these elements interact to form the text's overall system. Alongside structuralism stand theories that examine linguistic deviation within literary discourse in order to reveal the expressive and aesthetic traits that distinguish one writer's style from another. Semiotics, the study of signs, further enriches this perspective by viewing the text as a constellation of signs that generate meaning through their relational patterns. In this study of Berber poetry, samples are analyzed with the aim of identifying semiotic signals and offering a renewed reading capable of revealing the subtle, often concealed indications that shape the aesthetic experience of the poem. Through a methodical, text-based reading, we trace signs, symbols, and underlying meanings to uncover the hidden layers and ambiguous connotations embedded within the poetic discourse.

**Keywords:** Berber poetry, textual reading, meaning, semiotics.

### INTRODUCTION

Textual approaches represent an important turning point in the history of literary criticism. They emerged in direct contrast to contextual (external) methodologies, which traditionally sought to link the text to the circumstances of its production—such as the author's life (the psychological approach), his environment (the sociological approach), or his era (the historical approach). In opposition to these perspectives, textual approaches emphasize the idea that the literary text is a world unto itself—an autonomous entity that derives its meaning from its form and its internal systems, independent of external references or contexts.

In a manner that diverges from pre-textual critical practices, the focus here shifts toward the text as a message that reveals an internal network of relations governing its structures, thereby guiding its interpretation—whether linguistic, aesthetic, or semantic. Modern critical theory has contributed significantly to constructing a theoretical environment grounded in the notion of structure. This gave rise to structuralism, which seeks to uncover the

internal architecture of the text—phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic—and to explore the relations and functions that shape the text's overall system.

Equally important are stylistic theories concerned with analyzing textual style through measuring linguistic deviations that produce aesthetic effects, thereby revealing expressive features that distinguish the style of one writer from another. Semiotics, the science of signs, also plays a central role in this paradigm; it studies the text as a formation composed of signs that necessarily generate meanings, and it seeks to examine how these signs contribute to the production of meaning within the text.

Furthermore, reception theory and reader-response criticism must not be overlooked, as they grant primacy to the reader over all other elements. Within this framework, reading becomes the final stronghold of criticism—celebrating interpretation that focuses far less on the message and the sender (author) and far more on the receiver (reader), whose centrality was emphasized through the contributions of Jauss and Iser.

We must acknowledge that textual approaches, in general, sought to bring a theoretical rigor to literary criticism by distancing it from emotional or impressionistic judgments, and by emphasizing analytical mechanisms derived from well-established theoretical frameworks capable of dismantling the core of the text. This shift has made it possible to probe the depths of the text as a self-contained fabric, while also providing analytical foundations that uphold the role of the text that pushes the interpretive process toward a deeper engagement with the internal structures of the text in order to uncover its meanings.

Textual approaches view reading as an internal process of analysis and deconstruction of the literary work, since the meaning of the text resides within its own structure and form. However, these approaches do not entirely disregard external references—such as the author, society, or history. Accordingly, the reader directs effort toward examining linguistic and syntactic relationships, which then enable the text to unfold into broader concepts and meanings that connect it to external contexts. Yet this act of reading must be grounded in a systematic and methodical process. It is also essential for the reader to maintain a balanced, intermediary position, for the critical task ultimately involves employing scientific methodologies to formulate evaluative and qualitative judgments, thereby identifying the text's competence.

It remains to be noted that reading theory emerged because it found a fertile theoretical foundation that allowed it to position the reader as an active element within the critical equation. In short, reading within the framework of textual approaches is a profound exploratory journey into the linguistic and aesthetic boundaries of the text itself.

## Section One: Semiotics

### Introduction

The manifestations of everyday life have increasingly become a semantic topic for semiotic studies in all their varieties. Every human action, behavior, or pattern of interaction is essentially a sign—an existential marker that communicates, through diverse symbolic forms, why one act is performed rather than another, and why it assumes a particular shape rather than a different one. These are the very mechanisms at work in linguistic structures: meanings shift within a system of correspondence, drawing nearer to a specific signification, or within a system of opposition, moving away toward an alternative one. This dynamic movement—this interplay of convergence and divergence—within literary and artistic texts forms the underlying principles through which they generate meaning, often drawing upon insights and conceptual tools offered by other disciplines.

For this reason, the semiotic approach is considered one of the significant contemporary critical methodologies that aim to analyze the literary text as a system of signs, symbols, and signals. This approach has undergone substantial development over recent decades and has gained a prominent place in modern Arabic critical studies, particularly in the analysis of poetic texts.

### Semiotic Reading: Concept and Interpretive Openness

Semiotics has drawn the attention of many scholars, particularly because of its foundational principles concerning binary signification, beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure, who viewed the sign as a dual entity composed of the signifier and the signified. These two components are bound only by the semantic relation established within the linguistic system in which the sign exists—its meaning being determined by that system. The relation between the two elements is what constitutes the sign itself. A sign, therefore, assumes the presence of an intermediate referent (an object) that determines the meaning of the signifier; in other words, the signifier has no meaning except through this referent. This triadic structure of the sign consists of the **signifier**, the **signified**, and the **interpretant**.

With Charles Sanders Peirce, the notion of the sign expands beyond language to encompass all modes of perception, for the entire universe is a network of signs. Meaning and referentiality are inferred through the mechanism he termed *semiosis*. Peirce also linked semiotics to logic—indeed, he considered it another name for logic, describing semiotics as “the formal theoretical study of signs.” Consequently, semiotics has been defined as “the science of signs” or “the science of signals,” concerned with the study of sign systems, symbols, and signals across the various domains of life and culture.

Roland Barthes defined semiotics as “the science that studies the life of signs within social life.” In a similar vein, the critic Mohammed Meftah observes that semiotics views the poetic text as “a system of signs that interact with one another to produce meaning, seeking to uncover the laws that govern this system and the mechanisms through which meaning is generated within it.” Semiotics may therefore be understood as a discipline that connects signifying elements in literary and artistic structures to their referential frameworks within the broader cultural context. Through this process, the reader’s extraction of meaning creates a shared interpretive ground among readers.

Saeed Allouch, on the other hand, ties semiotics to culture and its manifestations, defining it as the study of all cultural phenomena as systems of signs embedded in reality, that cannot easily be encompassed. It comprises “a set of inquiries concerned with the ways in which human beings produce their behaviors, that is its meanings—along with the ways in which these meanings are consumed. The term *semiotics*, when transferred into Arabic, has suffered from a lack of terminological stability due to the diversity of its Western equivalents. Consequently, its conceptual fields and schools within Western thought multiplied, producing specialized branches of semiotics: narrative semiotics, communication semiotics, and cultural semiotics—each concerned with analyzing literary texts according to the perspectives and methodologies of its scholars.

Semiotics can greatly assist in uncovering cultural phenomena by treating them as communicative objects and semantic systems. Culture, in this sense, involves assigning functions to natural objects and naming them. This approach stresses that language forms the foundation of all semiotic systems, given its essential role in preserving and transmitting ideas—particularly through cultural elements such as the text, the image, and advertising.

**Semantic semiotics** distinguishes itself by examining linguistic structures—phonological, morphological, syntactic, and structural—through the study of language use and lexical rules. It explores sentence types and their variations, categories of nouns and derivations, and all matters related to linguistic rules and their exceptions, seeking to uncover the relationships among them and the reasons behind their changes and transformations, whether within or outside their natural contexts.

The branches of linguistic semiotics have multiplied according to the structure of signification and the forms it takes, including narrative and dialogic semiotics. The semiotic method concerns itself with analyzing the narrative and dialogic structures of poetic texts and uncovering their meanings and signals. Semiotics has become a discipline drawing from linguistics, philosophy, logic, psychoanalysis, and anthropology, expanding its scope to all situations in its search for meaning wherever it emerges in different texts.

**Symbolic semiotics** examines symbolic systems whose structures interact through semantic displacement—from the symbols present in texts toward other meanings and semantics—by tracing their cultural semantics wherever they appear in the text’s historical and cultural contexts. This is grounded in the belief that “human beings do not live in a purely material world; rather, they live in a symbolic world. Language, myth, art, and religion are the elements of this world.”

These threads create the fabric of symbolism... The practical world of human beings is not a world of raw facts in which a person lives solely according to his immediate desires and needs; rather, he lives his passions and dreams amid imaginative emotions, in hope and fear, illusions and truths.

We also find the **semiotics of the rhythmic structure**, where the rhythmic structure is considered the main framework of the Arabic poem in general, due to its adherence to the traditional prosodic meters of Al-Farahidi as an external rhythm, along with the rhyme that shapes its musicality in harmony with those meters. There is also the internal rhythm, which completes the emotional musicality of the poem through sound patterns and rhetorical devices such as antithesis, paronomasia, repetition, and punctuation marks with their semiotic significations.

We will attempt to explore the necessities of reading through **communicative semiotics (intentionality)**, which studies the sign through its functional communicative aspect based on a social foundation. It examines the methods of communication, since communicative intent is present in all linguistic and non-linguistic systems, and no interpretation of meaning can be achieved without referring to the communicative context, as this context represents the primary function of language.

For this reason, we find that **Roland Barthes** opens semiotic studies to various subjects from everyday life—such as theater, cinema, sports, and architecture—as indicators and signs of mass culture. For him, semiotic inquiry lies in the study of systems and the signifying structures within them.

From this, we can conclude that literary systems, with their different genres, rely on the use of linguistic signs in writing, and on generating additional composite codes to determine the modes of literary signification. Poetry, for

example, employs rhythmic systems and modes of visual imagery in poetic imagination as its own specific codes; theatre, likewise, employs linguistic and suggestive codes. A sign does not function independently, but rather within a multilayered context, and its position within that context determines its function. Thus, **semiology** is a critical method that seeks to develop linguistic concepts and literary techniques, making them capable of embracing creative syntheses.

In the sense that there is within it a longing and a tendency toward attaining an object of value, it is considered, in this sense, the foundation of every action, deed, and interaction. It is a necessary condition for the existence of any semiotic process. Therefore, intentionality appears as an essential manifestation of semiotics, which necessarily seeks a receiver for its discourse within the mechanism of communicating with the audience. This is what distinguishes it from textual approaches that emerged alongside it, such as structuralism, which is concerned with the text within its linguistic boundaries. Semiotics, on the other hand—by focusing on communication—restored to the reader an essential role in reception, as criticism came to be regarded as “an inductive–deductive practice.”

This approach is based on releasing signs as free signifiers, unrestricted by lexical meanings, allowing the text to acquire a creative reading dynamic that relies on the imaginative power of the sign as it interacts with the stimuli it carries and those emerging in the mind of the recipient. Thus, the reader becomes the maker of the text.

After all of this, we find ourselves arriving at various indicators that open for the receiver the pathways through which they may read the literary text with a semiotics unique to their own cognitive capacities. Through this, the reader perceives the degree of harmony between relationships and meanings in the language of the text, as well as its grammatical and structural patterns, in order to interpret the resulting meanings—whether as surface-level meanings close to vision and lexical interpretation, or as deeper structures perceived by another reader through semantic deviations according to their functional, social, historical, cultural, and other contexts.

### Semiotic Reading in Berber Poetry

Here, we find that in this study we have approached the subject as readers of ancient poetry, along with its historical affiliations to the state that adopted poetry as a tongue expressing the thoughts and ideas of its people. Thus, we sought to delve somewhat into the symbolic significations that represent the expressive and hidden layer of the text, as well as the interpretive meanings stemming from the symbolic systems that pay attention to the implicit dimension of literature. The texts we shall present—and the semiotic indications we will uncover within them, which shift toward symbolism through various systemic signals across psychological, social, and cultural dimensions—will reveal to us the intentions poets sought to convey in what they deemed necessary to be remembered.

Symbolism occupies, within semiotic significations, a scope that extends far beyond the systems indicated by the bare lexical forms of the symbol. The shift toward intended meaning does not occur through language alone, nor does it directly point to its apparent form and meaning; rather, the reader must discern what lies behind these meanings—hidden signals that may be connected to psychological or social signs—thus expanding the interpretive horizon beyond the linguistic structures in which these signs are found. If we were to begin from this perspective, these texts would indeed confirm what we have observed within them of profound symbolic indications, such as the dualities of anger and forbearance, or love and hatred...

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#### From the poet's verse in *al-Kāmil* meter:

The people of aggression and corruption among mankind  
are likened, in description, to fierce creatures.  
Their wrongdoing becomes, for others, a form of reform,  
through punishment and being fastened to the trees.  
Their sight becomes a lesson whenever they are seen  
upon the trunks or high upon the ramparts.  
Thus, retribution becomes a safeguard for people of wisdom,  
and justice remains familiar in every place.

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He directs the apparent meanings toward hidden ones, pushing symbols to their furthest semantic potential. We find that he perceives, in the unpleasant smell of the bodies displayed on the walls of Marrakech—the capital of the state—the scent of pride: the fragrance of victory achieved over his enemies, an aroma that friends celebrate and foes resent.

The symbol, subtly pointing to purely psychological factors, becomes a sign of an emotionally charged willpower—one in which the part stands in for the whole, representing it and pointing toward it. Thus, the word (**corruption/decay**), which denotes alteration and impurity, is set alongside two symbolic structures: the display upon the walls, and **the sight itself as a reminder of triumph**. These two combine to form an outward meaning



The poet views that lineage—which once weighed upon him as a burden—as something he has finally cast off, symbolizing a personal detachment from ancestral ties. He leans instead on personal significations that elevate the individual, in contrast to those who consider lineage the measure of honor, prestige, and noble standing. To the poet, such lineage represents nothing more than another face of illusion and distorted notions of status, while true dignity lies in courage and the sword.

As for the meanings indicated in the words “ḥasbī” (my sufficiency), “al-bīd” (noble women), “‘umrī” (my life), and “al-‘ulā” (loftiness), these are signifiers that form a harmonious semantic system moving toward glory and immortality—toward honor and lineage that extend until the end of one’s life. They stand in contrast to the meanings of “za‘amtum” (you claimed), “far ‘an li-aṣṣlikum” (a branch of your origin), and “‘anhu arghab” (I do not wish to belong to it), which denote a desire to reject that claimed lineage.

Here, the poet reveals a subtle intention: to remove himself from the constraints of lineage, an idea he indicates breaking through the word “al-tafarroq” (separation).

This subtly indicates that the poet has restored to himself his true value, for he sees that noble courage—and not tribal affiliation—is the genuine name of the individual. This represents the difference between a sign’s surface-level meaning and what it indicates in its deep semantic dimension. These are the manifestations of symbolism referred to by Peirce, who describes them as habits and laws that approach universals more than abstract truths.

From these universals, we may detect an internal rebellion in the poet’s semantic revolt against lineage, after a long period of suppressed tension. His statement “my soul finds greater ease in parting from you” expresses nothing other than the individual finally finding himself. It is a sign in which the signifier expands toward a level that explodes the idea, bringing it to a stage of revelation and disclosure.

Yet in another poem, we see a different meaning of “lineage,” as shown in the following verse (from al-Wāfir meter):

Have you not heard, and have you not seen, the baseness of a household?

In whose horses’ traces we were raised?

There stands Yunus and the sons of his father,

leading the Berbers in bewilderment.

The verses reveal the poet’s sense of pride through the word “Berbers”, whose symbolism is the very element whose meanings we will examine. This takes us into the semiotics of the sign, which nearly becomes the text itself. The most prominent sign in the poem is the word “Berbers”, a sign that cannot be separated from its linguistic context nor from the system in which it was written—so that it may first reach the reader, and then move beyond the surface structure toward the deep structure of its political, social, and cultural meanings.

Semiotics assumes that the text contains both a surface and a deep structure, and put more plainly, the reader sees in the poem nothing more than the word “Berbers” in the context of battle. Yet this points to a larger existential symbolism, far surpassing the word’s superficial appearance in the text. It moves toward an existential indication of the ideological, political, and historical symbolism embedded in the term—a perspective the reader perceives, or must perceive, after any semiotic reading of the poem.

Especially since the Berbers historically suffered from a demeaning perception, evidenced by their aversion to the label “Berbers” due to the insult implied in the name. Under the pressure of such rigid accusations directed against them, symbols in their poetry appear dense and veiled—oscillating between pride in their descent from a well-known Arab ancestor, and an existential reaction rooted deep within them due to their history of fierce wars with the Arabs.

Thus, their belief that they occupied a position unqualified for a life like that of the Arabs manifests in their poetry through semantic displacements and conscious, veiled allusions that subtly proclaim they are equal and worthy of their peers. This is what led to the appearance of the phrase “Commander of the Faithful” (Amīr al-Mu’minīn) in the following text.

And I am the Commander of the Faithful, crowned,

Granted a crown of sovereignty through honor and trustworthiness.

The poet seeks to present himself as a lofty symbol of reclaiming sovereignty, or of being more deserving of it than any other caliphs—fortified by the crown of integrity and generosity. This meaning is reinforced by the word “inni” (indeed, I) which begins the verse, strengthening the primary compound signification he directs first as a declarative message to others, and second as a psychological affirmation to himself.

What we mean is that the discourse suggests, first, that no one but he has the rightful claim to this authority, and second, that he alone is fit and chosen for this crown which he refuses to see bestowed upon anyone else. These are two layers of meaning derived from a single signifier.

A similar meaning appears in the following verse.

I have possessed the land of the West entirely, in its entirety,  
And all the lands of the East lie folded within my grasp.

It suggests an undefined force implied through the poet's "grip," and we can still observe that the meaning continues to move toward a semiotic reading of the discourse in this verse, for it is an open declaration of domination. What distinguishes the sign within this systemic meaning is not merely its agreement in denotation, but its orientation toward a stronger symbolic value.

The stronger signification appears in "within my grasp", an expression that reflects the poet's merging with sacred symbols—perhaps alluding to a near-divine comparison, reminiscent of "the rolling up of the scrolls" (ṭayy al-sijill lil-kutub). This serves to reinforce a sense of power seeking a secure foundation that it fears losing.

This is further supported by the lofty, elevated tone, which we read in the following line:

People differed in all things except our glories;  
In deeds of honor and high rank they voiced no complaint nor disagreement.

Here, the Berber discourse continues—this time in a heated tone. And since poetry is language and imagery, we shall read it semiotically, relying on the dense layers of meaning carried by the text. The historical record, in this sense, becomes a psychological expression that stores turning points which at times resemble unequal opportunities, giving declarations of pride a stronger intentional force after centuries of psychological or actual loss.

The indexical act in the verb "lādhū" (they sought refuge) shifts toward material realities that embody the emotional states described as the output of a lived and tangible experience: "in serving us." This indicates that there are two levels of signification:

The first includes "everything human practice produces through gestures, standing at the limits of directly observing utilitarian human behavior."

The second sheds the general meaning and heads toward a specific meaning, pointing to direct interpretation that activates events and objects.

This means that meaning is not a ready-made entity, but the result of interconnected relations that refer to a more distant subject. These deeper references are clearly expressed through superiority, which functions as a contextual symbol leading to the interpretation of the entire system of meaning.

What the reader perceives in these verses is a clear reference to identity, one the poet takes pride in when it is authoritative and dominant—whether in the present caliphate or in "successors from among our sons". It is an identity of the present and of forever.

The contrast between the symbols of service and obedience, on one side, and the meanings of sanctity, ease, and caliphate, on the other, forms complementary dualities that become evident through symbolic comparison with the "other." These shine as a definition fused with an ideology founded on difference.

The poet, therefore, indicates his identity through this otherness—an otherness that shifted toward possession and caliphate over a long span of time, during which his people distinguished themselves from all others.



We also found that Berber poetry preserved the rhythm and structure of the classical Eastern Arabic qasida and attempted to maintain its form. The construction of signs within the poem indicates an attachment to authenticity and a rejection of disappearance, granting the text a halo of self-sanctity and historical resistance.

In conclusion, Berber poetry—when viewed first through the lens of reading and second through the semiotic perspective—is a multi-layered literary product. It cannot be regarded merely as spoken language; rather, it is a semantic language pulsating with meaning, and the study of its signs has demonstrated the presence of mechanisms through which Berber identity is affirmed.

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