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Muallaqat Poetry and the Harmony of Semantic Fields: A Descriptive-Analytical Study

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Abstract

This study examines the harmony of semantic fields in selected poems from the Mu'allaqāt to explain how lexical choices and poetic structures cooperate to produce integrated meaning. Pre-Islamic poetry is widely regarded as one of the most authentic linguistic records of early Arabic culture and language, and the *Muʻallaqāt* occupy a particularly central place in rhetorical and semantic studies because of their density of imagery and expressive precision (Dayf, 2002; Anis, 1976). Using a descriptive-analytical approach, the study analyses selected poetic passages by relating lexical items to their semantic fields and by examining how these fields function within broader rhetorical and contextual structures. The analysis shows that words associated with ruins, longing, place, pride, beauty, separation, and disappearance do not operate in isolation; rather, they form cohesive semantic networks that reinforce emotional unity and contribute to the poem's artistic coherence. The study concludes that semantic harmony in the *Muʻallaqāt* is a key component of poetic unity and aesthetic effect. That semantic-field analysis offers a productive lens for understanding classical Arabic poetry more deeply.

Keywords: Muʻallaqāt, Semantic Fields, Pre-Islamic Poetry, Lexical Harmony, Arabic Poetics

Introduction

Pre-Islamic poetry is one of the most important sources for the study of the Arabic language in its early expressive purity, and it remains a foundational archive for understanding Arab intellectual, social, and emotional life before Islam. Its importance lies not only in its historical value, but also in its rich rhetorical texture, semantic density, and ability to preserve complex emotional experience in highly condensed poetic language (Dayf, 2002). Among the most celebrated products of this tradition are the *Muʻallaqāt*, which continue to attract literary, linguistic, and rhetorical analysis because of their artistic sophistication and enduring place in Arabic literary heritage.

This study focuses on the harmony of semantic fields in selected examples from the *Muʻallaqāt*. The central assumption is that isolated lexical items do not generate poetic

meaning in these texts, but rather through the interaction of words belonging to related semantic domains such as longing, ruins, memory, pride, beauty, loss, and movement. Through this interaction, the text acquires internal cohesion and emotional depth, allowing vocabulary to function as part of an integrated semantic network rather than a loose accumulation of expressions.

The relevance of this topic lies in the fact that semantic-field analysis offers a useful framework for connecting lexicon, context, and imagery in classical Arabic poetry. By identifying how words cluster around recurring experiential and symbolic domains, the analysis can show how the poet constructs aesthetic effect and emotional continuity across the poem (Anis, 1976). In this sense, the study contributes not only to literary interpretation, but also to semantic analysis within Arabic studies.

Accordingly, this article aims to analyse selected verses from the *Muʿallaqāt*, explain the lexical and rhetorical coherence of their semantic fields, and demonstrate how this coherence contributes to poetic purpose and artistic unity. The article also seeks to retain the Arabic poetic text as a core component of the analysis, since the semantic and aesthetic force of the original verses cannot be fully separated from their linguistic form.

Literature Review

Pre-Islamic Poetry as a Semantic Archive

Scholars of Arabic literature have long regarded pre-Islamic poetry as a linguistic and cultural archive that preserves the Arab worldview through its vocabulary, imagery, and emotional patterns (Dayf, 2002). Because this poetry emerged in an oral culture that valued eloquence, memorability, and expressive precision, lexical choice was rarely arbitrary. Words carried not only denotative meaning but also emotional, cultural, and symbolic associations that helped structure poetic experience.

The *Muʿallaqāt* are especially significant in this regard because they bring together recurrent themes such as ruins, travel, love, tribal honour, longing, nature, and heroic self-assertion. These themes are reflected in recurring lexical clusters, which can be usefully studied as semantic fields. Such a perspective helps explain why seemingly simple lexical patterns often generate layered meanings in classical Arabic verse.

Semantic Fields and Poetic Coherence

Semantic-field theory is useful in literary analysis because it treats words as members of interrelated conceptual domains rather than isolated dictionary units. In poetry, this is especially important because meaning often emerges from recurrence, contrast, symbolic association, and contextual interplay rather than from direct statement alone. Anis (1976) emphasises the importance of lexical semantics in revealing how words create subtle relationships of meaning in Arabic discourse, and this insight is particularly relevant to classical poetry, where economy of wording intensifies semantic effect.

In the context of the *Muʿallaqāt*, semantic fields may include domains such as ruins and desolation, longing and memory, beauty and beloved presence, movement and departure, tribe and pride, or disappearance and silence. When these fields are internally coherent and

rhetorically reinforced, they contribute to the unity of the poetic text and deepen the poem's emotional resonance.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach. Selected passages from the *Muʻallaqāt* are examined in their original Arabic form, alongside explanatory translation and literary interpretation, in order to identify the semantic fields operating within each poetic extract. The analysis then relates these fields to the poem's rhetorical and emotional context, with attention to lexical recurrence, figurative associations, and thematic coherence.

The analytical procedure consists of three steps. First, the study presents selected poetic examples from major *Muʻallaqāt* poets, including Imru' al-Qays, Ṭarafah ibn al-ʻAbd, al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥillizah, ʻAmr ibn Kulthūm, and ʻAntarah ibn Shaddād. Second, it offers a concise literary explanation of each passage. Third, it analyses the semantic fields of the vocabulary and explains how these fields interact to produce poetic purpose, imagery, and internal textual harmony.

Because the article is literary and textual in orientation, the Arabic verses are preserved in the body of the discussion rather than removed or summarised. This is methodologically important, since the semantic force of the lexical field depends directly on the original poetic wording.

Textual Analysis and Discussion

Imru' al-Qays: ruins, memory, and sensory recollection

The opening of Imru' al-Qays's *Muʻallaqah* is one of the clearest examples of semantic harmony in pre-Islamic poetry because the lexical field is built around memory, longing, and the material traces of an abandoned place (Imru' al-Qays, 1969; al-Zawzani, 2002). The poet does not merely mention the beloved or the dwelling in isolation; instead, he gathers a network of emotionally charged words that collectively construct the experience of standing before ruins and reliving the past.

English rendering	Arabic verse
Stop, let us weep at the memory of a beloved and a dwelling	قِفا نَبكِ مِن ذِكرى حَبيبٍ وَمَنزِلِ
At Siqṭ al-Liwā, between al-Dakhūl and Ḥawmal	بِسِقطِ اللِّوى بَينَ الدَّخولِ فَحَومَلِ
Then Wudḥah and al-Miqrāh, whose traces have not been erased	فَوضِحَ فَالمِقراةِ لَم يعفُ رَسمها
By what the southern and northern winds have woven over them	لما نَسَجَتها مِن جَنوبٍ وَشَمأَلِ
You see the droppings of white gazelles in their courtyards	تَرى بَعَرَ الأَرامِ في عَرَصاتها
And in their hollows, as though they were pepper seeds	وَقِيعانِها كَأَنَّهُ حَبُّ فُلفُلِ
As though, on the morning of separation when they departed	كَأَنّي غَداةَ البَينِ يَومَ تَحَمَّلوا
Beside the acacia trees of the tribe, I was a splitter of colocynth	لَدَى سَمُراتِ الحَيِّ ناقِفُ حَنظَلِ

The expressions qifā, nabki, dhikrā, ḥabīb, and manzil belong to a coherent semantic field of longing, recollection, and emotional attachment, while the named places anchor this longing in real geography and intensify its authenticity (Imru' al-Qays, 1969; Dayf, 2002). The later movement to details such as baʿar al-ar'ām, ḥabb fulful, and nāqif ḥanẓal introduces a sensory field in which visual and tactile imagery reinforce the emotional atmosphere of absence and decay (Anis, 1976; al-Zawzani, 2002). Thus, the semantic harmony in this passage arises from the integration of memory, place, and sensory trace into one unified poetic scene.

Ṭarafah ibn al-'Abd: fading traces and psychological conflict

Ṭarafah's poem presents a different kind of semantic coherence, one based on the relation between visible traces and inward sorrow (Al-A'lam al-Shantamari, 1968; al-Zawzani, 2002). The semantic field begins with ruin and lingering mark, then develops into a psychological field of grief, endurance, and emotional inability.

English rendering	Arabic verse
For Khawlah there remain ruins at the sandy plain of Thahmad	لِخَولَةَ أَطلالٌ بِبُرقَةِ ثَهمَدِ تَلوحُ
Glimmering like the lingering trace of a tattoo on the back of a hand	كَباقِي الوَشمِ في ظاهِرِ اليَدِ
My companions halted there, their riding beasts restrained beside me	وَقوفًا بِها صَحبي عَلَيَّ مَطِيَّهُم
Saying: Do not perish in grief; be steadfast	يَقولونَ لا تَهلِك أَسىً وَتَجَلَّدِ
Yet by the life of God, I cannot bear it	فَإِنّي لَعَمرُ اللَهِ لا أَستَطيعُها
Nor do I hope for life once we are scattered apart	وَلا أَرتَجي عَيشًا إِذا ما تَبَدَّدِ
I do not avoid valleys out of fear	وَلَستُ بِحَلّالِ التِّلاع مَخافَةً
Rather, whenever the people seek aid, I hasten to support them.	وَلَكِن مَتى يَستَرفِدِ القَومُ أَرفِدِ

Words such as *aṭlāl*, *washm* and place-name references generate a semantic field of survival through fading traces, in which the tattoo image becomes an especially effective metaphor for partial permanence after disappearance (Al-A'lam al-Shantamari, 1968; Anis, 1976). The following expressions, especially *lā tahlik*, *tajallad*, and *lā astaṭīʿ*, shift the text into a field of emotional struggle, showing that the poem's coherence depends on the interplay between external ruin and internal distress (Dayf, 2002). In this way, Ṭarafah's lexical network moves from visual desolation to psychological fracture without losing semantic unity.

Al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥillizah: separation, nearness, and extinction

In the verses of al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥillizah, semantic harmony is produced through recurrent words of separation, nearness, tears, and eventual obliteration (Al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥillizah, 1969; Dayf, 2002). The poem gives the impression of gradual movement, but that movement is toward fading and disappearance rather than reunion.

English rendering	Arabic verse
Asmāʾ informed us of her separation	آذَنَتنا بَينهـــا أَسمـاءُ
How often residence grows wearisome to its dweller	رُبَّ ثاوٍ يُمَلُّ مِنهُ الثَّواءُ
After a covenant with her at Barqat Shamʿ	بَعدَ عَهدٍ لَها بِبُرقَةَ شَمع
Her tears and weeping drew nearer	فَأَدانى دُموعُهـا وَالبُكـاءُ
She drew near to the tribe until I saw	فَتَدانَت لِلحَيِّ حَتّى رَأَيتُ
Their dwellings, now approached by obliteration.	مَنازِلَهُم وَقَد دَناها العَفـاءُ
Until, when they became close together	حَتّى إِذا مـا تَـقــارَبَتْ
Destruction itself came near to the people therein	وَتَدانَت لِلنَّاسِ فيها الفِناءُ

The expressions bayn (separation), al-thawāʾ (dwelling), al-ʿahd (covenant), al-bukāʾ (weeping), tadānat, and taqārabat create a tightly connected field of emotional and spatial approach culminating in extinction (Al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥillizah, 1969). This gradual narrowing of space and time produces a strong semantic rhythm, so that the poem's unity derives from the cumulative effect of lexical recurrence and directional movement (Anis, 1976). The result is a powerful image of separation not as a momentary event, but as a slow process of erasure.

'Amr ibn Kulthūm: pleasure and tribal pride

The poem of 'Amr ibn Kulthūm demonstrates semantic harmony through a deliberate transition from the field of pleasure to the field of pride and refusal (Ibn Kulthūm, 1991; Dayf, 2002). The early lexical field is one of enjoyment and festive abundance, but it later becomes one of honour, collective dignity, and resistance to humiliation.

English rendering	Arabic verse
Come, rise with your bowl and give us morning wine	أَلا هُبّي بِصَحنِكِ فَـاَصبَحينـا
And leave none of the wines of Andarīn behind	وَلا تُبقي خُـمـورَ الأَندَرينـــا
Sparkling wine, as though pebbles were within it	مُشَعشَعَةً كَـأَنَّ الحُـصَّ فيهـا
When water is mixed with it, warmed	إِذا ما الماءُ خالَطَها سَخينـا
Whenever the king imposes humiliation upon people	إِذا ما المَلِكُ سامَ النّاسَ خَسفًا
We refuse to accept disgrace among us	أَبَينـا أَن نُقِـرَّ الذُّلَّ فـينـــا

The first part of the passage revolves around ṣaḥn, aṣbaḥīnā, khumūr, and related expressions of convivial pleasure. In contrast, the second introduces al-malik, khasfan, abaynā, and al-dhull, which belong to a different semantic domain centred on honour and defiance (Ibn

Kulthūm, 1991). The poem's coherence depends on the poet's ability to move between these fields without rupture, showing that pleasure itself is embedded in a broader tribal ethos of strength and self-assertion (Dayf, 2002). In this case, semantic harmony is achieved not only through sameness, but also through meaningful transition from one emotional register to another.

'Antarah ibn Shaddād: love, place, and embodied longing

In the selected verses of 'Antarah, semantic harmony emerges through the interaction of love, place, memory, and bodily presence (Ibn Shaddad, 1988; Dayf, 2002). The poet's attachment to the beloved is inseparable from his attachment to the dwelling, and the lexical field moves between interior longing and actual physical pause before the place.

English rendering	Arabic verse
Have the poets left any patch unrepaired	هَل غادَرَ الشُّعَراءُ مِن مُتَرَدَّمِ
Or have you recognised the abode after illusion	أَم هَل عَرَفتَ الدارَ بَعدَ تَوَهُّمِ
O dwelling of ʿAblah at al-Jiwāʾ, speak	يا دارَ عَبلَةَ بِالجَواءِ تَكَلَّمي
Good morning, dwelling of ʿAblah, and be safe	وَعَمي صَباحًا دارَ عَبلَةَ وَاسلَمي
I halted my she-camel there as though she were	فَوَقَفتُ فيها ناقَتي وَكَأَنَّها
A tethered beast, that I might fulfil the need of one lingering in grief	فَدَنٌ لِأَقضِيَ حاجَةَ المُتَلَوِّمِ
ʿAblah dwells at al-Jiwāʾ while our people dwell	وَتَحِلُّ عَبلَةُ بِالجَواءِ وَأَهلُنا
Between al-Ḥazn, al-Ṣammān, and al-Mutathallam	بِالحَزنِ فَالصَّمّانِ فَالمُتَثَلَّمِ

Expressions such as *dār*, *ʿAblah*, *al-Jiwāʾ*, and *tawahhum* belong to the semantic field of longing and imagined nearness, while *waqaftu*, *nāqatī*, and *aqḍī* shift the poem into embodied presence and enacted emotion (Ibn Shaddad, 1988). This duality creates a strong psychological balance between memory and lived action, allowing the poem to oscillate between the imagined beloved and the physically experienced landscape. The rhetorical question at the opening also reinforces poetic self-consciousness, positioning the speaker within a tradition while asserting his own distinction (Dayf, 2002).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the poetry of the *Mu'allaqāt* constitutes a highly organised semantic system rather than a random assemblage of beautiful expressions. The analysis shows that semantic fields provide an internal framework through which lexical items cooperate to produce emotional unity, rhetorical coherence, and aesthetic depth. Words related to ruins, longing, memory, pride, beauty, and disappearance are not merely thematic ornaments; they are structural components in the making of poetic meaning.

The findings also confirm that the pre-Islamic poet selected vocabulary with remarkable semantic sensitivity. Through carefully interconnected lexical choices, the poet built artistic

images that move between time and place, absence and presence, grief and pride. This lexical harmony contributes directly to the internal cohesion of the poem and helps explain part of the enduring power of the Mu'allaqāt within the Arabic literary tradition.

Accordingly, the study recommends further research that applies semantic field analysis to other classical Arabic texts and connects traditional Arabic literary criticism with modern approaches to semantics and discourse analysis. The *Mu'allaqāt* remain a rich field for such inquiry because they continue to reveal the expressive and aesthetic capacities of Arabic at a highly refined level.

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