

Semiotic Analysis of Political Sermons in Nahjul-Balagha Based on Michael Riffater's Theory

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Abstract

Semiotics, as a new approach in the humanities, focuses on identifying hidden signs and connotations in the text, allowing access to deeper layers of meaning. Among the experts in this field, Michael Riffaterre, by presenting a dual reading model (heuristic and semiotic) and the four elements of accumulation, descriptive systems, hypograms, and matrices, has provided a systematic tool for discovering hidden semantic networks in texts. By going beyond superficial and referential meaning, this model penetrates the depth of the text and reveals secondary connotations and the central core of meaning. The present study, using a descriptive-analytical method, has analyzed six key political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha (7, 13, 34, 35, 36, and 39) based on this model. The results show that the heuristic reading presents a superficial picture of the obstacles, while the semiotic reading seeks their fundamental roots in the epistemological and moral weakness of society. The results also showed that the most important obstacle to Alawite rule is not external enemies, but the dominance of egoism and collective ignorance over reason and insight.

Keywords: : Ghurur, Daman Yad, Knowledge and Ignorance of the Deceived, Comparative Jurisprudence, Iranian Judicial Practice.

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Introduction

Semiotics, as an emerging approach in the humanities, seeks to open new horizons in the relationship between the audience and the text by identifying signs and their manner of usage within a text. This approach views the text not as a linear sequence of messages, but as a network of manifest and latent significations, the reception of which requires moving beyond superficial interpretation. Among semioticians of the text, Michael Riffaterre holds a prominent position. He believes that every literary text has the potential for two types of reading: the first reading (heuristic) and the semiotic reading (retroactive). The heuristic reading is the superficial and step-by-step comprehension of expressions, leading to a referential and primary understanding of words; whereas the semiotic reading transcends the surface layer, and by uncovering hidden signs in the depth of the text, reaches components (Al-Toumi, 2019: 15) that bestow a deeper meaning upon the writing.

Within his theoretical framework, Riffaterre discusses concepts such as descriptive systems, hypograms, matrices, and accumulations in order to achieve this goal. Through identifying and examining these components, the audience reaches deeper layers such as the hypogram and matrix. In other words, from Riffaterre's perspective, every literary work consists of two levels: external levels and deep levels. The audience's task is to discern these two levels and then explore the signs within the deep levels, thereby arriving at the general and fundamental meaning of the writing. According to this theory, one cannot separate the literary text and its meaning from the role the reader plays in comprehending the literary work; because the text is constructed through the process of literary reading (Bennett & Royle, 2009: 12). Riffaterre emphasizes meticulousness in examining the text and believes that by paying attention to the details and signs within the deep layers, one can discern the overarching rules governing the text.

Given that Nahj al-Balagha, as the most prominent religious-political text after the Quran, is replete with multiple layers of meaning, purposeful repetitions, and lexical systems, it appears that Riffaterre's semiotic theory provides an effective tool for the systematic discovery of its hidden significations and internal coherence. The present research, employing a descriptive-analytical method and relying on Michael Riffaterre's semiotic model, seeks to analyze the extent of applicability of this theory to the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha. The necessity of this research arises from the fact that the coherent structure and profound content of these political sermons possess the capacity to reveal their secondary objectives and deeper semantic layers through semiotic analysis. Accordingly, the fundamental questions this research seeks to answer are:

- To what extent is Riffaterre's semiotic theory compatible with the structure and content of the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha?
- What secondary objectives and meanings does the semantics of the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha, based on Riffaterre's theoretical elements (systems, accumulations, hypogram, and matrix), extract from them?

Research Background

After an extensive search in reputable Persian and Arabic scientific databases, it was determined that although numerous studies have been conducted in the field of semiotics of religious texts with various approaches, and many articles have applied Riffaterre's theory to contemporary literary texts (Arabic and Persian), no research has been found that has analyzed the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha based on Michael Riffaterre's theory. Accordingly, there is a clear research gap in this area, and the present study is the first attempt to analyze and examine the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha using the complete model of Michael Riffaterre's textual semiotics, seeking to reveal hidden layers of meaning while attaining the central core and matrix governing these sermons. The most important research related to Riffaterre's theory is mentioned below:

Article: Semiotics of the Poetic Lexicon of the Poem "The Unknown Prophet" by Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābī in Light of the Theories of Saussure and Riffaterre; Authors: Narges Garbanchi et al.; Published in: Journal of Research in Arabic Language, No. 17, 2017; This article examines the overlap between the views of two semiotic theorists, Riffaterre and Saussure, in the poem al-Nabī al-Majhūl by Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābī. The researchers in this article mainly focused on two main components of Riffaterre's theory, namely accumulation and descriptive systems, and neglected other elements such as the matrix and hypogram. The overall results of this research indicated that the poet, by employing the internal and external music of poetry, created a remarkable harmony in the external structure of the poem, and this harmony significantly aided in improving its semantic structure and reinforcing textual cohesion.

Article: A Semiotic Study of the Two Poems "The Foolish Fig Tree" by Īliyā Abī Mādī and "The Two Pines" by Muḥammad Jawād Muḥabbat in Light of Riffaterre's Theory; Authors: Muḥammad Jawād Asgharī et al.; Published in: Journal of the Iranian Association of Arabic Language and Literature, No. 52, 2019; In this article, the researchers compared two poems by two contemporary poets based on components such as the frequency of verbs, lexical accumulations, and descriptive systems, examining them from Riffaterre's semiotic perspective. The overall results of this research indicate that there are significant contradictions between the heuristic level (surface reading) and the semiotic level in both poems, which

guide the reader toward discovering hidden accumulations and secondary significations of the text.

Article: A Semiotic Analysis of Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Ṣabūr's Poem "al-Ḥuzn" Based on Michael Riffaterre's Perspective; Author: Zīnah 'Irfatpūr; Published in: Journal of Arabic Literature, No. 3, 2023; This research analyzed the poem "al-Ḥuzn" by Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Ṣabūr based on Riffaterre's complete model, explaining its ungrammaticalities, accumulations, and descriptive systems. The overall results of this article show that the aforementioned poem, due to possessing various types of ungrammaticalities, is fully compatible with Riffaterre's theory. Furthermore, Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Ṣabūr's use of these elements, on the one hand, increased the literariness of the text and its departure from a simple referential state, and on the other hand, assisted the reader in the process of discovering the hidden semantic network of the text.

The present study is the first attempt to analyze and examine the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha using the complete model of Michael Riffaterre's textual semiotics (including both heuristic and semiotic readings and all their components), seeking to reveal hidden layers of meaning while attaining the central core and matrix governing them. This research gap has been the primary motivation for writing the present article.

Reading Political Texts from Riffaterre's Perspective

In the process of interpreting politico-literary texts, it is always emphasized that the audience should not be content with the superficial and apparent meaning, but rather must go beyond the external layers of the writing to reach the significations and signs hidden in its depths. However, the fundamental question raised here is: when the reader undertakes the interpretation and reception of the meaning of the work, what mechanisms does he employ for the recreation of the text? (Āl-Gūneh-Jūnqānī, 2017: 37). In response to this question, Michael Riffaterre, within his semiotic theory, introduces two types of reading as essential tools for the recreation and comprehension of the text: first, the heuristic reading, which takes place at the superficial and external level of the writing; and second, the semiotic reading, which is employed to reach the deep layers and hidden meanings of the text (Riffaterre, 2001: 11). From Riffaterre's perspective, in the heuristic reading, the audience seeks the correct and primary understanding of the text, while in the semiotic reading, the reader must search for linguistic significations (Nabīlū, 2011: 83). In the following, the characteristics of each of these two reading levels are examined in detail.

Heuristic Reading

The heuristic reading is the first step in the audience's encounter with the text in Riffaterre's theory, during which the writing is examined in a linear and sequential manner, meaning that the sections of the text are studied from beginning to end. In this stage, the superficial and external layer of the text is considered, and according to Riffaterre, meaning at this level depends on various references, and the text finds its meaning through connection with external reality (Riffaterre, 1978: 26). In other words, in the heuristic reading, the audience infers the meaning of words from the context of external reality and concrete instances. Riffaterre believes that in the heuristic reading, the referential meaning of the text is considered (Āl-Gūneh-Jūnqānī, 2017: 37). In this manner, each word in the text has a specific and determinate signification, and from the coherence and collocation of these significations in the audience's mind, the general meaning and main concept of the text emerges.

Semiotic Level

The second level of reading in Riffaterre's theory is called the semiotic level, which is superior in importance and status compared to the heuristic reading, because this reading, unlike the first, is based on non-referential meaning and transcends reference to the external world. In this stage, the audience does not refer the significations in the text to external reality, but rather connects the sign to a single and central entity; in other words, when we speak of the existence of a single entity in the structure of the text, we mean that the overall structure of the text is born of a context based on a central and pivotal idea (Ibid: 38). Riffaterre believes that in this stage, the reader, relying on his literary competence, goes beyond the apparent meaning of the writing and reaches deeper significations. Literary competence helps the audience to comprehend meanings that are not perceivable to a merely superficial reader, or which they are incapable of understanding (Najūmīān, 2017: 154). When the reader distances himself from the heuristic level and analyzes the writing based on the semiotic reading, he concludes that all the various methods and techniques employed within the text in fact point to a single and central concept; because the text is constructed based on interpretation (Makaryk, 2004: 330). This statement confirms Riffaterre's view that every writing, in the process of reading and at the moment of the audience's encounter with it, finds its ultimate meaning and identity.

At the semiotic level, Michael Riffaterre introduces a set of elements for analyzing and receiving the meaning of the text, as well as discovering its significations and cognitive signs, each of which is explained below:

Accumulation

Accumulation occurs in the text when several words with synonymous and aligned meanings are placed together. This element is formed through emphasis on a meaning that shares common aspects with them; because this multiplicity and multifacetedness brings the reader closer to the hidden significations of the text (Barakat & Eftekhārī, 2010: 115). Accumulation includes words that share a common root and semantic nucleus (semantic core); this semantic commonality is often based on synonymy and equivalence (Riffaterre, 1983: 39). Accumulation arises when the reader encounters a group of words that are linked to one another through identical semantic elements called the semantic nucleus. For example, the word "flower" is the common semantic nucleus for words like "rose" and "peony" (Moqaddasī & Sālemī, 2020: 4). Also, "nature" can be the common semantic nucleus for words such as rain, sun, sparrow, and tree.

Descriptive Systems

When a number of words gather together and form a coherent set, that set is called a descriptive system. Descriptive systems are very similar to accumulation in their structure, and their only distinction from accumulation lies in the fact that the words in a descriptive system have a figurative relationship with one another; meaning that there may be a relationship such as metaphor between them (Āl-Gūneh-Jūnqānī, 2017: 42). Whereas in accumulation, this figurative relationship does not exist.

Hypogram

The hypogram is, in fact, the main and key themes of the text, a concept that Riffaterre drew from the linguistic views of Ferdinand de Saussure. To put it simply, when the author intends to create a work, the first thing that comes to his mind and constitutes the main axis of the work is considered the hypogram (Riffaterre, 1978: 85). Riffaterre believes that every literary text is, in fact, an extension and expansion of a word, phrase, or sentence around which the entire text revolves and from which it originates. It is worth noting that the hypogram does not necessarily appear explicitly in the text, but rather, other words and signs present in the writing may indirectly manifest it and guide the audience to its understanding.

Matrix

The matrix is the fundamental meaning and the main root of the text, and in fact, it is the origin and root of the hypogram. This element, which resides in the deepest layer of the work's meaning, can be a phrase or a word (Culler, 2009: 109) that expresses the ultimate goal and main intention of the author at once. In other words, the matrix is the central core and the pivotal signifier of all the signs

and significations scattered throughout the text, to which all other elements ultimately refer and which guarantee the semantic unity of the text.

Analytical Section

Michael Riffaterre, in his semiotic model, analyzes every literary text from two distinct perspectives. First, he undertakes a heuristic reading to determine the superficial and primary meaning of the text and examines its apparent narrative in a linear and step-by-step manner. In the next step, referred to as the semiotic (retroactive) reading, he searches for linguistic significations, transcends referential meaning, reaches the depth of the text, and reveals its hidden semantic layers. The political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha, as the most prominent religious-political text, with their coherent structure and profound content, are replete with semantic layers, purposeful repetitions, and symbolic signs, each of which prevents the reader from a superficial reception. Now, to discover these details and the signs employed in these sermons, they are examined based on Riffaterre's model, relying on both heuristic and semiotic readings.

Heuristic Reading of the Political Sermons of Nahj al-Balagha

The heuristic reading is the first level of engagement with the text in Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory, during which the writing is examined in a linear and continuous sequence, and the apparent and referential meaning of the words is considered. At this level, the audience, relying on their linguistic and historical knowledge, receives the explicit message of the sermons and refrains from entering metaphorical and symbolic layers. Among the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha, six prominent sermons, including sermons 7, 13, 34, 35, 36, and 39, have been selected as outstanding examples, each representing a specific type of obstacle to Alawi governance. These sermons are analyzed based on a thematic classification into three axes: psychological and moral obstacles, political and social obstacles, and epistemological obstacles.

Sermon 7 condemns the followers of Satan and portrays the dominance of egoism over reason and faith as the most important psychological obstacle to Alawi governance. Imam Ali (AS) addresses a group who have made Satan the axis and foundation of their affairs, and Satan has laid eggs and hatched chicks in their chests, using their eyes and tongues as tools. This sermon, with expressions such as *ittakhadhū al-shayṭāna li-amrihim milākan* (they have taken Satan as the master of their affairs) and *fa-rakiba bihim al-zalala* (so he made them slip), shows that submission to satanic temptations is the main cause of opposition to the just Imam. Also, in Sermon 36, the Imam warns the Kharijites of their fate and calls them *akhfā' al-hām* and *sufahā' al-aḥlām* (those with hidden intellects and foolish minds), and this phrase indicates that ignorance and lack of reason were among the fundamental obstacles to accompanying the Imam. In this sermon, the Imam

emphasizes that the world has cast them into misguidance and that destinies have prepared them for death, and this warning indicates the role of lack of insight in deviating from the path of truth

Sermon 13, delivered in condemnation of the people of Basra, depicts the identity crisis of society and introduces the following of collective egoism and deception by seditionist leaders as one of the major obstacles to governance. The Imam calls the Basrans *jund al-mar'ah* and *atbā' al-bahīmah* (the army of the woman and followers of the beast), describes their morals as base, their covenants as broken, and their religion as hypocritical, and finally likens the mosque of Basra to the breast of a ship in a drowning sea. Also, in Sermon 34, the Imam severely rebukes the people of Kufa for their worldliness and fear of death, likening them to shepherdless camels that gather from one side and scatter from another, and emphasizes that if war becomes fierce, they will scatter from around him. At the end, the Imam enumerates his rights over the people as loyalty to the pledge, goodwill, and obedience, and this sermon indicates that the instability of companions and worldliness were the most important political obstacles to accompanying the Imam.

In Sermon 35, the Imam rebukes the people for disobeying the arbitration and states that disobedience to a compassionate and wise counselor brings regret and remorse, and at the end, he likens his and the people's situation to the saying of the poet of Hawazin, who understood the advice only at noon the next day. This simile shows the utmost despair of the Imam regarding his companions' political understanding.

Epistemological Obstacles

Overall, the heuristic reading of the prominent political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha shows that Imam Ali (AS), in explicit language, addressed the obstacles to his governance at three levels: psychological, political, and epistemological. At the psychological level, obstacles such as the influence of Satan, following egoism, foolishness, and lack of reason are present. At the political level, obstacles such as following collective egoism, deception by seditionist leaders, worldliness, fear of death, instability of companions, disobedience to counsel, disregard for wise measures, and failure to respond to the Imam's call have influenced the political scene of the Imam's era. At the epistemological level, susceptibility to doubts and lack of insight have paved the way for many other obstacles. This reading presents a clear picture of the challenges facing the just Imam and shows that the most important obstacle to Alawi governance was not military or financial weakness, but rather the weakness of the companions' will, the dominance of egoism over collective reason, and the lack of epistemological insight.

Semiotic Reading of the Political Sermons of Nahj al-Balagha

The second stage of Riffaterre's semiotic model is called the retroactive (semiotic) reading. This reading departs from examining the purely referential and apparent meaning of the text and analyzes deeper significations, critiquing the role of ungrammatical elements in creating deeper significations. Riffaterre believes that in the semiotic reading, the reader must search for linguistic significations (Nabīlū, 2011: 83) and, relying on their literary competence, go beyond the apparent meaning of the text. Literary competence helps the audience understand meanings that are not perceivable to a merely superficial reader, or which they are incapable of understanding (Najūmīān, 2017: 154). In this stage, attention to words and phrases and the representation of signs lead to the discovery of underlying semantic textures. In the retroactive reading, by discovering the link between accumulations and descriptive systems, the structural matrix of the text becomes apparent. In this type of reading, the reader, utilizing the achievements of the heuristic reading, seeks to scrutinize the signs present in the text (Pāyandeh, 2008: 100). The semiotic reading of the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha is as follows:

Accumulations

The first step in the semiotic reading is identifying the accumulations and semantic nuclei of the sermons and discovering the semantic relationship between them. Accumulation arises when the reader encounters a group of words that are linked to one another through identical semantic elements, called the semantic nucleus (Dinesen, 2001: 154). It is worth noting that in modern linguistics, the repetition of semantic significations of words is called isotopy (Sa'diyyah, 2016: 225). In the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha, several belts of words and phrases have been formed that are connected through a semantic nucleus and have created a general concept.

First Accumulation: Semantic nucleus of deviation and misguidance: al-ḍalāl (misguidance), al-zalāl (slip), al-khaṭal (error), al-fitnah (sedition), al-shubhah (doubt/ambiguity), al-bāṭil (falsehood), al-'amā (blindness).

انباشت اول: معنائین انحراف و گمراهی: الضَّلَال، الزَّلَل، الخَطَل، الْفِتْنَةُ، الشُّبُهَةُ، الْبَاطِل، الْعَمَى

This accumulation is formed around the semantic core of deviation from the path of truth and falling into the trap of falsehood. Words such as al-ḍalāl and al-khaṭal are used in Sermon 7 to show that the followers of Satan, by following temptations, leave the path of guidance. The word al-shubhah in Sermon 38 (considered a supplementary sermon in this analysis) indicates that deviation is often accompanied by a cover of truth-semblance, and discerning it requires insight. Also, al-fitnah in Sermons 13 and 34 is depicted as an atmosphere that engulfs society and makes discerning the truth difficult. The repetition of these words in

different sermons, sharing a common semantic nucleus, indicates that the most important obstacle to Alawi governance is the ideological and practical deviation of society from the path of truth, which forms the root of many other obstacles.

Second Accumulation: Semantic nucleus of weakness and lethargy: al-fashal (cowardice/failure), al-jubn (cowardice), al-ḍa'f (weakness), al-khawf (fear), al-dhull (humiliation), al-tathāqul (reluctance/heaviness), al-wahn (feebleness).

انباشت دوم: معنایی ضعف و سستی: الْفَشَلُ، الْجُبْنُ، الضَّعْفُ، الْخَوْفُ، الذُّلُّ، التَّثَاقُلُ، الْوَهْنُ

This accumulation is formed around the semantic core of psychological and physical inability to accompany the Imam. The word al-fashal in Sermon 9 (considered a supplementary sermon in this analysis) and also in Sermon 34, is introduced as a prominent characteristic of companions who fear jihad. al-jubn and al-khawf in Sermon 34 are depicted as the main obstacles to accompanying the Imam on the battlefield, and the Imam challenges the humiliation resulting from this fear with the phrase a-raḍītum bi-al-dhulli min al-'izzī khalafan? (Have you been content to take humiliation in exchange for honour?). al-tathāqul in Sermon 39 indicates the slowness and lethargy of the companions in responding to the Imam's call, and al-wahn, which is implicitly present in Sermons 34 and 39, indicates the disintegration of collective will. The repetition of these words shows that psychological weakness and fear of death were among the fundamental obstacles to Alawi governance, which caused the Imam to face failure in achieving his goals.

Third Accumulation: Semantic nucleus of hypocrisy and disloyalty: al-nifāq (hypocrisy), al-ghadr (treachery), al-khiyānah (betrayal), shiqāq al-'ahd (breach of covenant), al-makr (deceit), al-khud'ah (trickery).

انباشت سوم: معنایی نفاق و بی وفایی: النِّفَاقُ، الْغَدْرُ، الْخِيَانَةُ، شِقَاقِ الْعَهْدِ، الْمَكْرُ، الْخُدْعَةُ

This accumulation is formed around the semantic core of oath-breaking and duplicity in pledging allegiance to the Imam. The word al-nifāq in Sermon 13 is introduced as a prominent characteristic of the people of Basra, who, with the appearance of allegiance, had their hearts set on sedition. shiqāq al-'ahd in the same sermon indicates the rupture of the covenants they had made with the Imam, and this rupture forms the root of many political crises of the Imam's era. In Sermon 8 (considered a supplementary sermon), the Imam criticizes the apparent allegiance with the phrase bāya'a bi-yadihi wa lam yubāyi' bi-qalbihi (he pledged with his hand but did not pledge with his heart), showing that hypocrisy was one of the major obstacles to building trust in the Alawi government. Also, al-makr and al-khud'ah, which are indirectly referred to in Sermons 34 and 39, indicate the intrigues of internal enemies who, through deception, diverted society from following the Imam. The repetition of these words shows that disloyalty

and hypocrisy were serious obstacles to Alawi governance, depriving public trust and paving the way for the Imam's failure.

Fourth Accumulation: Semantic nucleus of ignorance and lack of insight: *akhfā' al-hām* (those with hidden intellects), *sufahā' al-aḥlām* (foolish minds), *al-jahl* (ignorance), *al-'amā* (blindness), *al-ḥayrah* (bewilderment).

انباشت چهارم: معنائین جهل و بی بصیرتی: أَخْفَاءُ الْهَامِ، سُفَهَاءُ الْأَحْلَامِ، الْجَهْلُ، الْعَمَى، الْحَيْرَةُ

This accumulation is formed around the semantic core of the ignorance and foolishness of the Imam's opponents. The terms *akhfā' al-hām* and *sufahā' al-aḥlām* in Sermon 36 are introduced as prominent characteristics of the Kharijites of Nahrawan, who, through their foolishness, stood against the infallible Imam and became the cause of the political failures of their era. *al-jahl* and *al-'amā* in Sermon 38 are introduced as the root of susceptibility to doubts and misguidance, and the Imam, with the phrase *dalīlūhumu al-'amā* (their guide is blindness), shows that inner blindness is the most important factor in deviating from the path of truth. *al-ḥayrah*, which is implicitly present in Sermons 7 and 34, indicates the bewilderment of those who have become doubtful in discerning truth from falsehood, and this doubt drives them into the folds of sedition. The repetition of these words shows that ignorance and lack of insight were among the most fundamental obstacles to Alawi governance, which, by creating doubt and hesitation, prevented society from following the Imam.

Fifth Accumulation: Semantic nucleus of worldliness and this-worldly orientation: *al-ḥayāt al-dunyā* (the life of this world), *al-zuhd fī al-ākhirah* (asceticism in the Hereafter), *al-ṭama'* (greed), *al-raghbah fī al-dunyā* (desire for the world), *al-iqbāl 'alā al-dunyā* (inclination toward the world).

انباشت پنجم: معنائین دنیاپرستی و دنیاگرایی: الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا، الزُّهْدُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ، الطَّمَعُ، الرَّغْبَةُ فِي الدُّنْيَا، الْإِقْبَالُ عَلَى

الدُّنْيَا

This accumulation is formed around the semantic core of attachment to the glitter of this world and indifference to the Hereafter. The phrase *al-ḥayāt al-dunyā* in Sermon 34 is introduced as a substitute for the Hereafter, and the Imam severely condemns this substitution with the phrase *a-raḍītum bi-al-ḥayāt al-dunyā min al-ākhirah 'iwaḍan?* (Have you been content to take the life of this world in exchange for the Hereafter?). *al-ṭama'* and *al-raghbah fī al-dunyā* are indirectly referred to in Sermons 34 and 39 and show that attachment to wealth and possessions of this world was one of the main obstacles to jihad and accompanying the Imam. *al-zuhd fī al-ākhirah*, which is implicitly present in Sermon 34, indicates the companions' indifference to otherworldly rewards, which caused them to become lax in the face of enemies. The repetition of these words shows that worldliness was one of the most important obstacles to Alawi governance,

which, by creating fear of death and attachment to worldly glitter, weakened the collective will to defend the truth.

Descriptive Systems

The second step in the semiotic reading is identifying the descriptive systems. When a number of words gather together and form a coherent set, that set is called a descriptive system. The words in a descriptive system have a figurative relationship with one another; meaning that there may be a relationship such as metaphor between them (Āl-Gūneh-Jūnqānī, 2017: 42). In the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha, several descriptive systems can be identified, each forming a network of words related to an abstract concept and aiding in the discovery of deeper layers of meaning. For example, words such as "the she-camel of God," "the people of falsehood," "the whirlpool of sedition," and "the dark night" are all used in the sermons to depict a descriptive system around the concept of deviation from the path of truth. In the following, each of these systems is examined in detail.

First Descriptive System: Sedition and chaos: amwāj al-fitan (waves of seditions), ghamrat al-mawt (engulfment of death), nār al-ḥarb (fire of war), ṭakhyah 'amyā' (dark gloom), al-ṭawiyy al-ba'īdah (the deep well), al-jāḥah (the calamity).
منظومه‌ی توصیفی اول: فتنه و آشوب: أمواج الفتن، غمرة الموت، نار الحرب، طخينة عمياء، الطوى البعيدة، الجاحه

This system encompasses a network of metaphorical words that all depict the turbulent and dark atmosphere of the Imam's era. The phrase amwāj al-fitan in Sermon 5 (considered a supplementary sermon in this analysis) and also in Sermon 34, likens sedition to the waves of the sea that have engulfed society, from which escape is impossible except through sufun al-najāh (ships of salvation). ghamrat al-mawt in Sermon 34 likens the fear of death to a vortex that has engulfed the faint-hearted companions, and this metaphor shows that the terror of death was one of the most important obstacles to accompanying the Imam. nār al-ḥarb in the same sermon likens war to a fire whose ignition requires companions with will and courage, and the Imam, with the phrase la-bi'sa la-'amru Allāhi su'ru nār al-ḥarbi antum (By God, how bad you are at kindling the fire of war!), shows that his companions lack the ability to ignite this fire. ṭakhyah 'amyā' in Sermon 3 (the Shaqshaqiyyah sermon) and also in Sermon 34, refers to a blinding darkness in which discerning truth from falsehood is difficult, and this image depicts the ambiguous political atmosphere of the Imam's era, where doubts had overtaken society. al-ṭawiyy al-ba'īdah in Sermon 3 evokes a deep well into which a person falls, and this metaphor aptly depicts the situation of those caught in seditions who find no way of salvation. This system, using metaphors of water, fire, darkness, and well, depicts the critical atmosphere of society and shows that the obstacles to Alawi governance were formed in an atmosphere of chaos and

ambiguity that made it difficult for the Imam's companions to discern the right path.

Second Descriptive System: Humiliation and abasement: al-dhull (humiliation), al-maskanah (destitution), al-khawf (fear), al-mahānah (contempt), al-ḍa'f (weakness), al-jubn (cowardice).

منظومه‌ی توصیفی دوم: ذلت و پستی: الذُّلُّ، المَسْكَنَةُ، الخَوْفُ، المَهَانَةُ، الضَّعْفُ، الجُبْنُ

This system encompasses a network of words that all depict the humiliating state of the faint-hearted companions. The word al-dhull in Sermon 34 is placed in opposition to al-'izz, and the Imam severely condemns this substitution with the phrase a-radītum bi-al-dhulli min al-'izzi khalafan?, showing that accepting humiliation instead of divine honour is one of the fundamental obstacles to governance. al-maskanah and al-mahānah, which are implicitly present in Sermons 34 and 39, indicate the humility resulting from fear and weakness that makes society vulnerable to enemies. al-khawf and al-jubn in Sermon 34 are introduced as the main roots of humiliation, and the Imam, by likening the companions to shepherdless camels, shows that the fear of death has paralysed the collective will. al-ḍa'f in Sermon 39 is depicted as a prominent characteristic of those who rushed to the Imam, and the Imam, with the phrase junaydun mutadhā'ibun ḍa'if (a weak, scattered army), depicts their physical and psychological weakness. This system, using semantic oppositions such as humiliation/honour and strength/weakness, shows that the obstacles to Alawi governance are rooted not only at the political level but also at the psychological level, and a society that accepts humiliation loses the ability to accompany the just Imam.

Third Descriptive System: Deviation from the path of truth: subul al-ḍalāl (paths of misguidance), ṭarīq al-munāfarah (path of enmity), al-bāṭil (falsehood), al-khaṭaʾl (error), al-fitnah (sedition), al-shubhah (doubt/ambiguity).

منظومه‌ی توصیفی سوم: انحراف از مسیر حق: سُبُلُ الضَّلَالِ، طَرِيقِ الْمُنَافَرَةِ، الْبَاطِلُ، الْخَطَلُ، الْفِتْنَةُ، الشُّبْهَةُ

This system encompasses a network of metaphorical words that all depict the path of the Imam's opponents. The phrase subul al-ḍalāl in Sermon 7 introduces the paths of misguidance as alternatives to the path of truth and shows that the followers of Satan, by choosing this path, distance themselves from divine guidance. ṭarīq al-munāfarah in Sermon 5 (considered a supplementary sermon) depicts the path of enmity and opposition, from which the Imam warns the people with the phrase 'arrijū 'an ṭarīq al-munāfarah (turn away from the path of enmity). al-bāṭil in Sermons 7 and 13 is placed in opposition to al-ḥaqq, and the Imam, with various expressions, shows that his opponents have chosen falsehood over truth. al-khaṭaʾl in Sermon 7 refers to reprehensible speech or action that Satan has adorned for his followers, and this word indicates the deception of the superficialists who, by embellishing falsehood, present it as truth. al-shubhah in

Sermon 38 is introduced as an epistemological obstacle to discerning truth from falsehood, and the Imam, with the phrase *innamā summiyat al-shubhah shubhatan li-annahā tushbiḥu al-ḥaqq* (It is called doubt because it resembles the truth), shows that doubts, with a cover of truth-semblance, divert society from the right path. This system, using metaphors of path, way, and cover, shows that deviation from the path of truth was one of the most important obstacles to Alawi governance, which, through superficial deception and insinuation of doubts, lured society into the trap of falsehood.

Fourth Descriptive System: Instability and dispersion: *ka-ibilin ḍalla ru'ātuhā* (like camels whose shepherds are lost), *kullamā jumi'at min jānibin intasharat min ākhar* (every time they are gathered from one side, they scatter from another), *infarajtum 'an ibni Abī Ṭālib infirāj al-ra's* (you have parted from Ibn Abi Talib as the head parts [from the body]), *ka-annakum min al-mawti fī ghamrah* (as if you are in the engulfment of death).

منظومه‌ی توصیفی چهارم: بی‌ثباتی و پراکندگی: کایبلین ḍalla ru'ātuhā، کُلَّمَا جُمِعَتْ مِنْ جَانِبٍ اِنْتَشَرَتْ مِنْ اُخَرٍ، اِنْفَرَجْتُمْ عَنْ ابْنِ اَبِي طَالِبٍ اِنْفِرَاجَ الرَّاسِ، کَأَنَّكُمْ مِنَ الْمَوْتِ فِي غَمْرَةٍ

This system encompasses a network of similes that all depict the state of dispersion and instability of the Imam's companions. The simile *ka-ibilin ḍalla ru'ātuhā* in Sermon 34 likens the faint-hearted companions to camels that have lost their shepherd, gathering from one side and scattering from another. This simile shows that the lack of true leadership and failure to follow the Imam lead society to dispersion and confusion. The simile *infarajtum 'an ibni Abī Ṭālib infirāj al-ra's* in the same sermon likens the companions' dispersion during war to the separation of the head from the body, which is the most severe form of separation and collapse, showing that in the most difficult moments, the Imam's companions abandon him. The phrase *ka-annakum min al-mawti fī ghamrah* in Sermon 34 likens the companions to those who have fallen into the whirlpool of death, and this image indicates their terror of death, which has paralysed the collective will. The simile *junaydun mutadhā'ibun* in Sermon 39 likens the army that rushed to the Imam to a restless wolf, having neither stability nor strength, and this simile expresses the numerical and psychological weakness of the Imam's companions. This system, using animal and natural similes, depicts the deplorable state of the Imam's companions and shows that instability and dispersion were among the practical obstacles to Alawi governance, causing the Imam to face failure in achieving his goals.

Fifth Descriptive System: Hypocrisy and duplicity: *al-nifāq* (hypocrisy), *bāya'a bi-yadihi wa lam yubāyi' bi-qalbihi* (he pledged with his hand but did not pledge with his heart), *shiqāq al-'ahd* (breach of covenant), *al-ghadr* (treachery), *al-khiyānah* (betrayal).

منظومه‌ی توصیفی پنجم: نفاق و دورویی: النِّفَاقُ، بَايَعَ بِيَدِهِ وَلَمْ يُبَايِعْ بِقَلْبِهِ، شَقَاقِ الْعَهْدِ، الْعَدْرِ، الْخِيَانَةِ

This system encompasses a network of words and expressions that all depict the oath-breaking and duplicity of the Imam's opponents. The phrase *bāya'a bi-yadihi wa lam yubāyi' bi-qalbihi* in Sermon 8 aptly depicts the disconnection between outward appearance and inner reality, showing that apparent allegiance without inner loyalty has no value, and this duplicity was one of the obstacles to political trust-building in the Alawi government. *al-nifāq* in Sermon 13 is introduced as a prominent characteristic of the people of Basra, and the Imam, with the phrase *dīnukum nifāq* (your religion is hypocrisy), shows that their religion was superficial and devoid of substance, used only as a tool for deception. *shiqāq al-'ahd* in the same sermon refers to the rupture of covenants, which formed the root of many political crises of the Imam's era. *al-ghadr* and *al-khiyānah*, which are indirectly referred to in Sermons 34 and 39, indicate the betrayal of companions who pledged allegiance to the Imam but in practice abandoned him. This system, using expressions of rupture and duplicity, shows that hypocrisy and disloyalty were among the most fundamental obstacles to Alawi governance, which, by undermining public trust, paved the way for the Imam's failure.

Hypogram

The hypogram in Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory refers to the main and key themes of the text that the author had in mind before beginning the creation of the work. To put it simply, when the author intends to create a work, the first thing that comes to his mind and constitutes the main axis of the work is considered the hypogram (Riffaterre, 1978: 85). Riffaterre believes that every literary text is, in fact, an extension and expansion of a word, phrase, or sentence around which the entire text revolves and from which it originates. The hypogram does not necessarily appear explicitly in the text, but rather, other words and signs present in the writing may indirectly manifest it and guide the audience to its understanding.

The hypogram extracted from Sermons 7, 13, 34, 35, 36, and 39 is: "The resistance of society against just leadership, resulting from the dominance of egoism and collective ignorance." This hypogram, situated at an intermediate and composite level, indicates that all the examined political sermons revolve around the axis of "society's resistance against the Imam," and this resistance is rooted in two fundamental factors: "egoism" and "collective ignorance," which cyclically reinforce each other. Egoism, as a psychological and moral factor, causes a person to distance themselves from their reason and faith and fall into the traps of deceptions and satanic temptations; and collective ignorance, as an epistemological factor, provides a suitable ground for the dominance of egoism and, by creating

doubts and truth-sembling covers, makes it difficult for society to discern the right path.

This hypogram, in fact, depicts the deplorable state of a society that stands against its just leader, and this resistance is not due to external enemies, but because of the internal weakness of society itself. The general hypogram, by emphasizing the role of "resistance" as a political and social phenomenon, shows that the most important practical obstacle to Alawi governance was society's non-acceptance of divine leadership, and this non-acceptance is rooted in the dominance of egoism and collective ignorance over reason and insight, which distances society from the path of truth and drives it toward seditions and destruction.

Matrix

The matrix in Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory is the fundamental meaning and the main root of the text, residing in the deepest layer of the work's meaning. Riffaterre believes that the matrix can be a phrase or a word (Culler, 2009: 109) that expresses the ultimate goal and main intention of the author at once. This matrix portrays Nahj al-Balagha not merely as a collection of moral admonitions, but as a comprehensive prism for socio-political agency within the framework of Sharia. After analyzing the ungrammatical elements, lexical accumulations, descriptive systems, and hypograms of Sermons 7, 13, 34, 35, 36, and 39, we now arrive at the matrix governing these sermons.

The matrix extracted from the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha is: "The non-realization of divine justice in society, due to the dominance of egoism and ignorance over collective reason and insight." This matrix resides in the deepest layer of meaning of the sermons and functions as the central core and pivotal signifier of all signs and significations scattered throughout the sermons. The matrix, unlike the hypogram, which refers to "how" the resistance occurs, addresses the "ultimate why," and shows that the ultimate goal of Imam Ali (AS) in these sermons is the realization of divine justice in society, but this goal faces major obstacles, the root of all of which lies in the dominance of egoism and ignorance over reason and insight.

The matrix, by referring to "divine justice" as an ultimate and divine goal, goes beyond the level of purely political analysis and encompasses the moral, epistemological, and spiritual dimensions of governance. From the perspective of this matrix, any attempt at political and social reform, without combating egoism and collective ignorance and without raising the level of insight, rationality, and piety in society, is doomed to failure; and as long as these two fundamental factors are not uprooted, divine justice will not be realized in society. The matrix ultimately shows that Imam Ali (AS), with a deep and radical view, seeks the obstacles to his governance not in external enemies, but in the internal weakness of society and

the dominance of egoism and ignorance over reason and insight, and considers the fundamental solution to lie in the epistemological and moral reform of society.

Results

The present study was conducted with the aim of analyzing the obstacles to Alawi governance in the political sermons of Nahj al-Balagha based on Michael Riffaterre's semiotic model. This model, by providing two levels of heuristic and semiotic reading, enables access to hidden layers of meaning, thereby offering a more comprehensive picture of the obstacles facing the government of Imam Ali (AS). In this study, six prominent political sermons (7, 13, 34, 35, 36, and 39) were analyzed at two levels of reading.

In the heuristic reading, the political sermons were examined based on the apparent and referential meaning of the words, and obstacles such as the influence of Satan and following egoism (Sermon 7), following seditionist leaders and collective egoism (Sermon 13), worldliness and fear of death (Sermon 34), disobedience to the counsel of the knowledgeable (Sermon 35), the foolishness and lack of reason of the Kharijites (Sermon 36), and failure to respond to the Imam's call and the loneliness of the just leader (Sermon 39) were identified. This reading showed that the Imam, in explicit language, addressed the obstacles to governance at three levels: psychological and moral, political and social, and epistemological, and the most important obstacle was the weakness of the companions' will, the dominance of egoism over collective reason, and the lack of epistemological insight.

In the semiotic reading, by moving beyond apparent meaning, the search for hidden significations was undertaken, and the four elements of Riffaterre's model were analyzed. In the accumulation stage, five main semantic nuclei were identified: deviation and misguidance, weakness and lethargy, hypocrisy and disloyalty, ignorance and lack of insight, and worldliness. In the descriptive systems stage, four systems were extracted: sedition and chaos, humiliation and abasement, deviation from the path of truth, and instability and dispersion. In the hypogram stage, the main themes of each sermon were identified, and by combining them, we arrived at the general hypogram of the dominance of egoism and collective ignorance over reason and insight, as the root of all obstacles to Alawi governance. In the final stage, the matrix of the dominance of egoism and collective ignorance over reason and insight, as the root of all obstacles to the realization of divine justice in society, was extracted as the central core of the Imam's political discourse.

The combined results of the two readings showed that the heuristic reading offers a superficial picture of political and social obstacles, while the semiotic

reading reaches deeper and more fundamental roots of these obstacles and seeks them in the epistemological and moral weakness of society. What appears in the heuristic reading as multiple obstacles is reduced in the semiotic reading to two fundamental factors—egoism and collective ignorance—which cyclically create and intensify all these obstacles.

From a methodological perspective, the present study showed that Riffaterre's semiotic model is an effective tool for analyzing politico-religious texts and, by providing four elements, enables the systematic discovery of meaning in multi-layered texts. The application of this model to the political sermons showed that Imam Ali (AS), in a semiotic language, seeks the root of all obstacles to his governance in the dominance of egoism and collective ignorance over reason and insight.

The results of this study have theoretical and practical implications for understanding the Imam's political thought. From a theoretical perspective, the Imam's political thought is based on a radical reformist approach that considers any political change to require internal change in society and the struggle against egoism and collective ignorance. From a practical perspective, the most important obstacle to religious governance is not external enemies, but the internal weakness of society, and any political reform must be accompanied by epistemological and moral reform of society.

Finally, the present study showed that Nahj al-Balagha is not merely a historical text, but a living model for analyzing the obstacles to religious governance, and Riffaterre's model provides a powerful tool for uncovering the hidden layers of this valuable heritage. This study can serve as a starting point for broader research in the field of semiotics of politico-religious texts and pave the way for the analysis of other sermons, letters, and aphorisms of Nahj al-Balagha using modern semiotic models.

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