

The Function of Four Elements in the Qur'anic Story of Moses (As) and Pharaoh: A Semiotic Approach

Faeqeh Nakisa¹ , Seyed Reza Mirahmadi² * , & Ali Akbar Noorsideh³ 

Vol. 12, No. 2, Tome 62
pp. 153-184
June & July 2021

Received: 7 February 2020
Received in revised form: 22 July 2020
Accepted: 7 September 2020

Abstract

The four elements have a key position between ancient myths. Also they have gained the attention of many philosophers, physicians, and mysticians. These elements have also represented in literature, and Gaston Bachelard categorizes human material imaginations based on the elements of water, fire, soil, and wind. According to Bachelard, to recognize the original poets one should consider their closeness from these elements and their distance from these elements. He believes that the artistic works get their dynamics from the depth of relation with four elements which widely represented in an artistic form in Surah *Al-Qasas*. The semiotic square depicts the dynamic verbal process and relies on the speech relation. The aim of the present research is to find the effect of four elements on semiotic transformation to discover their effects on the hidden and abstract layers of the text. In this way the authors have attempted to study the function of these natural elements within the story of Moses and Pharaoh by adopting a descriptive-analytical research methodology. The results showed that the four elements have considerable similarity to the target community of Moses Prophecy (Egyptian society). Water is the beginner of sloving humanity. Fire is a sign of change and rebirth. The highest frequency belongs to the element of soil. Also the four elements of the communication axis figure out contradiction opposition in the semiotic axis of mission and guidance.

Keywords: Four Elements, Semiotic Square, Gaston Bachelard, Surah *Al-Qasas*, story Moses and Pharaoh

1. PhD Candidate in Arabic Language and Literature, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran.

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0255-2055>

2. Corresponding Author, Assistant Professor, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran; Email: rmirahmadi@semnan.ac.ir,

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4340-2811>

3. Assistant Professor, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1158-1395>

1. Introduction

Greimas' semiotic model, an analytical tool utilized in the field of linguistic research, is based on binary contrasts or semantic categories. Greimas places the abstract meanings of the text in a double opposing structure and depicts the dynamics of the meanings of the stories using the semiotic square. In this structure, binary pairs, one with a positive value and the other with a negative one, shapes a conceptual network, which determines the relationship between the implicit layers of the text and the underlying syntax of the narrative. The semiotic square is one of the dimensions of semiotics that illustrates the process of mobility and dynamics of speech, acting as the building block of the discourse system.

The semiotic structure of discourse consists of both formal and implicit meanings. Since the four elements are reliant on material imagination, and according to Bachelard theory, these elements also express implicit concepts and create double opposing images, the opposition of the natural elements in the story of Moses and Pharaoh can be analyzed based on the contradiction of semiotic square categories alongside Bachelard literary theory concerning the four elements. Bachelard analyzes literary images in accordance with the four elements of water, fire, earth and wind. To him, the literary image needs the representation of these elements for its development.

2. Questions and Hypotheses

The primary question raised in the present study is "What is the role and function of opposing categories in deepening the story of Prophet Moses (pbuh) and Pharaoh?" The second question is "What is the message conveyed by four elements in the trajectory of the protagonist and antagonist? The third question is concerned with the effectiveness of the four elements, and their effect on the progress of the semiotic evolution of the story.

The assumption is that these elements are affirmative concepts in the protagonist axis and privative concepts in the antagonist axis. As regards the other two questions, the authors assume that the four natural elements have influenced the semiotic evolution of the story and deepen the implicit meanings.

3. Research method

The authors have used both theories of semiotic square and Bachelard theory of imagination criticism to study the semiotics of four elements in the story of Prophet Moses (pbuh) and Pharaoh in Surah Qasas. Thus, an integrated approach has been adopted in this paper. The authors first explain and analyze the four elements of water, wind, earth and fire based on Bachelard theory of imagination critique using a descriptive analytical method. Then, using the semiotic square, these elements are investigated in the form of opposing categories. By doing so, the authors analyze the opposition of these elements as well as the trajectory of the protagonist (Prophet Moses (pbuh)) and antagonist's (Pharaoh) actions in four affirmative and privative situations and their relationships.

4. Innovation

Despite the wealth of scholarly attention on semiotic theories, the semiotic square has been rarely applied to the analysis of Quranic stories. In this regard, the necessity and importance of the present research is not only limited to the analysis and application of this method to the analysis of Qur'anic stories, but also to the integration of this linguistic approach with Bachelard literary criticism, which is a new approach in the realm of literary and Qur'anic research.

5. Results

Using the semiotic square and the four elements of Bachelard in the analysis of the story of Moses (pbuh), the authors found that these elements have contributed to advance the conjunctive and disjunctive discursive processes of the story. In such a way, their formal meanings have deepened the implicit meanings in the story. As a result, the semiotic evolution has been successfully conveyed to the reader. The results also revealed that the four elements correspond to the community of Prophet Moses (pbuh) (Egyptian society). Water marks the beginning of human salvation. Fire symbolizes change and rebirth. Earth element is used more frequently in a prominent manner. Also, in the semantic axis of mission and guidance, the four elements of the communication axis create a contradictory opposition.

In the end, it should be argued that a certain linguistic acumen has been exercised in the selection of Quranic words by the narrator, which inspires tangible images for the reader. The immersion of Pharaoh and his companions in the sea is a familiar image for the Egyptian readers, for they believe that water embodies the annihilation of this world. Therefore, the richness of words in the story of Moses and the juxtaposition of linguistic combinations in producing thrilling and conceptual images should not be overlooked. Though an element of liberation, water may also indicate the end of life. In fact, the contradiction in nature has highlighted the beauty of the syntax and discourse of the story of Prophet Moses (pbuh), because beauty emerges from the juxtaposition of the opposites.