

RESEARCH
ARTICLE**The Semiotic Dynamics of Opening and Closing Lines in the Mu'allāqa of Labid ibn Rabi'a****Siham Oucif**

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze women's entrepreneurial action in Algeria in light of digital transformations, through a socio-communicative approach that seeks to understand the relationship between women's entrepreneurship and digital communication as a new variable for women's social and economic empowerment. It also explores how digital transformation contributes to reshaping women's roles within the entrepreneurial field, turning entrepreneurship from a purely economic activity into a communicative act governed by the logic of interaction and influence in the digital space.

The article is based on a theoretical analysis of the trajectory of women's entrepreneurship, including its emergence, social representations, and challenges, with a focus on the Algerian context, which has witnessed gradual transformations in women's perceptions of self-employment and economic initiative. The article also discusses the concept of digital entrepreneurship as an alternative space that has enabled women to overcome many traditional barriers and challenges thanks to its flexible characteristics.

Furthermore, the article proposes a sociological approach to understanding how Algerian women interact with the digital environment as a new domain for self-assertion and participation in the public sphere, through what is now known as digital women's entrepreneurship.

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Introduction

Pre-Islamic poets celebrated space not merely as backdrop, but as an active presence in their poetic gatherings. They etched its contours—inhabited or barren—into verse, letting its joyful and melancholic memories stir their imagination. In this space, boundaries dissolve. The reader is drawn into a landscape of journeying, immersed in a mental space where knowledge and unknowing blur. Memory merges with presence, the self becomes emotionally saturated, and through poetic description, the reader drifts into vivid, distant realms—offered, as Proust might suggest, the illusion of inhabiting what cannot be reached¹.

Place holds a powerful presence in the Arabic poetic tradition, especially in the Jahiliyyah corpus where the ruins motif (ṭalal) emerges as central. This device reflects a deeply rooted link between poet and environment. It sustains

¹ See: Genette, G. *Figures II*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969, p. 43.

the poet's craft, reconciles him with the chaos of existence, and invokes a living memory that clings to the past in longing and contemplation—of time, of permanence and decay.

Indeed, *ṭalal* stands as a structural hallmark at the outset of Jahili poems. It operates as a solemn invocation, lending the poem a sacred tone. As was once said, "The purpose of the ode begins with the mention of dwellings, traces, and ruins—he mourns, weeps, converses with the abandoned site, and halts his companion—using it as a bridge to speak of the departed."

I. Methodology and Problem Statement

Semiotics is a critical-analytical framework that emerged in the early twentieth century to study the structural organization of sign systems, both linguistic (poetry, narrative, rhetoric) and non-linguistic (fashion, cinema, theatre, advertising). It operates not through thematic interpretation but through a formalist investigation into sign production, meaning differentials, and the symbolic logic of signifiers. Semiotics does not inquire what the text says, or who speaks it, but how meaning is produced—through structure, form, and relational difference.

This study applies the procedures of semiotic analysis to the syntagmatic architecture of the opening (*ṭalal*) and closing lines in Labid ibn Rabi'a's *Mu'allāqa*. These two segments constitute the poem's semiotic paratext—framing its poetic world and encoding its most condensed symbolic energies. They not only initiate and conclude the poem, but also function as metonymic anchors that infuse the entire poetic structure with meaning, rhythm, and ontological tension.

To unpack this mechanism of signification, the analysis identifies four types of signs that structure the poem's symbolic economy:

1. Semantically Displaced Sign

A sign that undergoes a semantic shift through narrative progression. For instance, a character initially likened to a blooming flower may later be described as withered and defeated. Though the referent remains stable, its signified is transformed by contextual evolution. This form of displacement reconfigures the semantic value of the signifier across the discursive continuum.

2. **Contextual Sign.** A sign whose form remains stable, but whose meaning is context-dependent. A bouquet of flowers may indicate congratulation in one situation and condolence in another.

3. **Compound Sign.** A sign constructed from the fusion of two discrete semiotic units. Each unit retains its own signified meaning, but their conjunction generates a third, emergent signification. For example, the pharmacy emblem—featuring a chalice and a serpent—combines the referents of remedy and health, producing a composite symbol of therapeutic medicine.

4. **Explanatory Sign.** A sign pair wherein the second sign elucidates the first. This occurs, for instance, when a text introduces a character, followed immediately by descriptors or biographical cues.

II. The *Ṭalal*: Space, Identity, and Living Memory

The *ṭalal*—the remnants of an abandoned dwelling—imparts a transformed semiotic function to space. It expresses the profound emotional and existential attachment of the pre-Islamic poet to his environment. The spatial detail is not external to him—it is constitutive of his identity. For this reason, the poet strives to preserve the bond with these vanished places, reacting to them with a full range of sensory and affective engagement.

Through this dynamic interaction, the poet cannot be dissociated from the spatial domain. The *ṭalal* becomes a depository of memory, imagination, and artistic potential. Its landscape holds impressions and recollections that nourish the poet's creative core. It becomes a space charged with contrasts—between vitality and silence, between permanence and decay. In that interplay lies its aesthetic power.

² Ibn Qutayba. *Al-Shi'rwa-l-Shu'arā'*, ed. Aḥmad Maḥmūd Shākir, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1987, p. 175.

Consider the lines of al-Hārith ibn Ḥillizah:

Asmā' gave us notice of her departure—
How many a dweller becomes wearied of dwelling.
She warned us of her parting, then turned away—
Oh, that I knew when reunion might come.
After a stay at BurqatShammā'³—
The nearest of her homes was al-Khalsā'⁴.

Zuhayr ibn AbīSulmā writes:

Is there a trace of Umm Awfā's encampment still speaking
In the expanse of Ḥawmānat ad-Durrāj and al-Mutathallim?⁵
Her dwelling at the twin Raqmatayn seems
Like faded tattoos on a woman's wrist.

ʿAntarah ibn Shaddād declares:

Have the poets left anything for those who follow?
Or did you recognize the dwelling after illusion faded?
O abode of ʿAbla in al-Jiwā'⁶—speak!
I bid you good morning, home of ʿAbla, and farewell.

Labid ibn Rabīʿa laments:

The abodes have been effaced—their sites and standing places,
At Minā, their ghosts have endured, their bounds unknown.
The trenches of Rayyān—how faded their markings,
Worn as though time had signed them in decay.⁷

In these verses, the poets of the Muʿallaqāt present us with a lyrical canvas where the emotional charge of separation and the absent beloved converge with the topography of memory. The poetic subject stands alone before the void, evoking sensations that collapse temporal boundaries—linking present solitude to past intimacy, and both to an open, uncertain future.

The ṭalal enters the poet's consciousness as both memory and fracture. It marks distance—geographic and emotional. What once teemed with life has turned silent, and that silence echoes inward. The site becomes a mirror of the self: disoriented, solitary, suspended between what was and what remains.

This encounter isn't just poetic convention. It speaks to something elemental. To stand before ruins is to feel time pressing in—past familiarity clashing with the uncertainty ahead. For the pre-Islamic poet, this confrontation is more than nostalgic—it's existential. One scholar⁸ has noted that the poet's address to the deserted campsite enacts a recognition: that identity, like landscape, erodes and survives in fragments.

³BurqatShammā' is a compound toponym frequently used in pre-Islamic poetry. Burqa refers to a rocky or arid expanse, while Shammā' denotes elevation or ruggedness. Together, the name evokes a harsh, distant terrain—often symbolic of loss, estrangement, and the emotional geography of the ṭalal motif.

⁴Al-Khalsā' refers to a wilderness or open desert terrain, typically characterized by its remoteness and barrenness. In pre-Islamic poetic usage, it often marks the edge of inhabited space—a liminal zone that underscores themes of exile, distance, and the severance of human bonds.

⁵Ḥawmanat al-Durrāj and al-Mutathallim are desert sites once inhabited or familiar to the poet, later abandoned and reduced to traces—dimen—the weathered remains central to the ṭalal motif in pre-Islamic poetry.

⁶Al-Jiwā' is a desert plain, often invoked in pre-Islamic poetry as a symbol of love lost and memory made sacred.

⁷Labīd ibn Rabīʿa. The Dīwān of Labīd ibn Rabīʿa. Beirut: DārṢādir, p. 163.

⁸Muhammad Zaki al-Shamawi. Issues in Literary Criticism and Rhetoric. Alexandria, Egypt: Arab Book House for Printing and Publishing, p. 147.

III. Semantic Structure in Labīd ibn Rabīʿa's Muʿallaqa

The pre-Islamic natural world offers a vast space in which the conflict between man and his environment unfolds. It shapes the poet into a contemplative philosopher, forced to reflect on existence itself. He stands bewildered before the commotion of life, its movement, and the certainty of death—a force that collapses all distance and grants, paradoxically, a sense of stillness. In this silence, the self—fragmented and lost—turns to the ṭalal for solace.

To question existence is also to interrogate the self. It is a moment in which the poet pauses, weighing his inner world and contemplating an unknown fate. Labīd ibn Rabīʿa says:

The dwelling is wiped away—its place and its traces—
at Minā, where wolves made their haunt, and the stones took root.
Even the outlines at al-Rayyan were stripped bare,
faded like parchments weathered and sealed.
The ruins linger after those once near have gone,
and years have passed, making lawful and unlawful alike obsolete.

The poet lists a range of place-names—Minā, Mount Ghūl, al-Rijām, al-Rayyan—each rendered precisely and with semantic displacement. The marks left on each site speak of desolation and ruin, once brimming with life, now void. Gradually, this bleak vision gives way to renewal:

Rain fell on the spring pastures, stars blessing them,
the thunderclouds generous, drenching the dry earth.

Here, the image of death recedes. Rain enters the poem as a symbol of life, endurance, and fecundity. Spring emerges in beauty and splendor, and a new image replaces the old: that of permanence, continuity, and return.

This second tableau is enriched by further elements tied to vitality and youthful abundance. Labīd continues:

The high branches of the wild tamarisks rose up,
and in both valleys, gazelles and ostriches gave birth.
The spring is still, fixed in its place,
its wild goats resting, their horns lifted to the open sky.

This is another vision of the ṭalal—not of absence, but of the possibility of inner stillness within cycles of decay. It captures that contradiction: stability embedded within transformation. Yet it does not erase fear. The poet remains suspended in anxiety, sorrow, and unease before the inevitable; he stands again before the ruins, searching not only for understanding, but for peace:

So I stood questioning them—how does one question
mute and ancient things that speak no words?
They were once full, and now all have gone—
only traces and dry desert thorns remain.

The shift from past to present is marked by conflict between nature's slow renewal and time's steady erasure; the poet revisits the ṭalal, once vibrant, now hollowed out. What he finds is not just ruin. It is the echo of loss. Of people gone. Of a place no longer speaking. It is not memory that unsettles him—it is what memory can no longer hold. This silence becomes personal. The site of absence turns into a mirror. What once was outside—the ruin, the abandonment—seeps inward. The poet doesn't only grieve for others. He feels himself slipping toward the same end. At that point, the poem stops being a lament. It becomes a struggle with something larger. Not time, but being itself. What stays? What fades? There is no final answer. Just a doubling: presence set against erasure. Staying alive while knowing everything ends.

IV. The Semiotic Features of the Opening Sentence in the Poetic Text

Textual paratexts garnered increasing attention, in contemporary literary criticism, for their capacity to orient reading practices and frame interpretive dynamics. For instance, Gérard Genette, in *Paratexts*, classified these paratexts into two types: peritexts and epitexts. The present analysis is concerned with a specific form of internal peritext which is the poem's opening and closing lines, and the narrative postures and actantial structures each of them encodes.

Within Labid's Mu'allāqa, close reading suggests that the opening sentence is articulated as follows:

The dwellings are effaced—their location and permanence—
At Minā, phantoms endure; Ghawl and Rijām lie desolate.
The trenches of Rayyān—erased, their signs worn thin,
Weathered as if time had etched them in silence.

This opening utterance is neither ornamental nor incidental. It is a product of poetic deliberation and formal economy. It introduces a disoriented and internally conflicted subject whose existential and social situation is compressed into a scene of desolation. The spatial setting is static, subdued, and haunted by loss—a ruinous expanse that semantically mirrors the subject's fragmentation. Already within these first lines, the poem presents what will become its central semiotic core: the transformative utterance that anchors the narrative shift:

The trenches of Rayyān—erased, their signs worn thin,
Faint traces remain after the departure of their companions—
Seasons have passed; their sacred and profane times alike are gone.

From a semiotic standpoint, the opening is structured through two interlocking sequences marked by syntactic and semantic parallelism:

The dwellings are effaced—their location and permanence | ↔ | Faint traces remain after the departure of their companions | | The trenches of Rayyān—erased, their signs worn thin | ↔ | I stood and questioned them—how do we question? | | At Minā, phantoms endure; Ghawl and Rijām lie desolate | ↔ | Why this ruin? How? What resolution? | | Weathered as if time had etched them in silence | ↔ | No answer, only absence. |

The interrogative compound "I stood and questioned them..." initiates the narrative memory circuit. It prepares the reader to descend into the depths of ruin, foregrounding the existential relation between the poetic self and the lost domains of love, permanence, and inhabited space. Yet, the ruins also stand as a space beyond the subject's control. The poetic self, while possessing intent and desire, lacks the capacity to act—rendered powerless before a counter-subject that holds the means of action (power, will, knowledge, and duty).

This opening emerges from a temporal fold saturated with anxiety, disorientation, and emotional arrest. The tone is muted, the landscape devastated. The speaker's inquiry into the causes of this transformation is explicit, while the search for its remedies remains implicit. The poetic self is marked by epistemological lack—it cannot fully grasp the mechanisms of ruin and impermanence. This inability constitutes a key thematic constraint. Without the acquisition of the modalities of doing (will, ability, knowledge), the poetic subject remains incapable of engaging in a successful narrative program. The reader, in turn, is drawn into the same suspended configuration.

This actantial structure becomes clearer when mapped:

- **Sender (desire)** → Tranquility
- **Object of value** → Permanence, continuity, stability
- **Receiver** → Poeticsubject
- **Helper** → Equilibrium, calm, memory, contemplation
- **Opponent** → Ruin, entropy, temporal erasure

Tranquility acts as the narrative sender—its absence catalyzes the poetic quest. Stability, permanence, and existential grounding constitute the sought-after object. The self, in pursuit of this object, is aided by introspection, memory, and a reflective stillness. Yet these are countered by a destabilizing force: the encroachment of loss and entropy.

As the actantial program unfolds, the opposition gains strength. The value of tranquility—initially intact—is gradually dismantled. The poem charts a transformation: from existential steadiness to disintegration. This progression culminates in the loss of historical continuity and, ultimately, the symbolic annihilation of those who once lived.

V. The Semiotic Features of the Closing Sentence in the Poetic Text

The opening sentence in a poetic text typically functions as a condensed nucleus—a compact formulation that anticipates the semantic architecture of the entire composition. It invites the reader to engage actively, to trace latent meanings and thematic tensions encoded in its structure, thus positioning the reader as a co-agent in the unfolding of poetic knowledge.

By contrast, the closing sentence signals the end of this semantic condensation. It expands upon what had been previously withheld, offering clarity on the reasons behind the poet's initial unease, the silence that enveloped the landscape, and the signs of desolation that pervaded the spatial field. Toward the end, the tone begins to shift. Memory stirs—not through grand declarations, but in a line that returns to the land:

Spring pastures drank from the stars,
and the thunderclouds gave them steady rain.

The closing statement quietly circles back. It alludes toward the opening line, offering not direct answers, but subtle resolutions. What first appeared as the earliest sign of relief now unfolds into a muted resolution: the self's internal struggle begins to recede. A sense of calm takes shape. The poem leads us through this final contraction, toward its conclusion, layering meaning through restraint. The final sentence offers this proposition:

Be content with what God gives,
He alone divides the share among creation.
When trust was offered, the worthiest carried it.
He raised for us a house—its heights drawing old and young alike.

This final utterance performs a closure not only in the structural sense but also in the narrative and ontological senses. It resolves the semiotic arc by shifting the subject from the position of the not-knowing (ignorance, vulnerability, unrest) to that of the knowing—a state marked by submission to a higher will, and by restoration of internal equilibrium.

VI. Narrative Structure in the Poetic Text

1. Surface Structure (Structure de surface)

Texts unfold as the result of an underlying system composed of rules and interrelations that organize the patterns through which meaning is shaped. This system is expressed through two interdependent levels: the surface structure—which is observable—and the deep structure, which governs the underlying semantic oppositions, disjunctions, and embedded meaning.

The surface structure encompasses two principal components:

- the **narrative component** (composante narrative)
- the **discursive component** (composante discursive)

1.1. The Narrative Component

The narrative component unfolds as a succession of states and transitions, articulated through one or more narrative programs. These programs are constructed from two types of utterances:

- **state utterances** (énoncés d'état)
- **action utterances** (énoncés de faire)

State utterances describe the relationship between the subject and the object. Action utterances, by contrast, reflect the intervention of a transformational act carried out by an agent or opposing force—initiating disruption and triggering a shift between the subject and the object of value. This disruption prompts the subject to seek restoration of equilibrium through reappropriation⁹.

Transformation in this context may take one of two forms:

- A **disjunctive transformation**, where the subject is disconnected from the object
- A **conjunctive transformation**, where the subject becomes reunited with it

Identifying which applies requires mapping the opposing forces in the text and the values contested between them.

For a subject to act meaningfully, it must possess the relevant modalities of doing—that is, the necessary actantial qualifications:

- **Obligation** (falloir-faire)
- **Volition** (vouloir-faire)
- **Power** (pouvoir-faire)
- **Knowledge** (savoir-faire)

1.2. The Discursive Component

The discursive component, which follows the narrative one, is semantically denser and more complex. It is the rhetorical and imagistic elaboration of the narrative skeleton. Discursive analysis involves tracing the thematically charged images embedded in the text and examining their movement across domains of meaning. These figurative units contribute to discursive isotopies, generating thematic roles and defining the trajectories of actants as they move through the poetic structure.

The Mu'allāqa invites the reader into a symbolic imaginary rich in layered metaphors and visual resonance. Two dominant images can be extracted as structural pillars of the poem—images around which additional ones orbit:

- **"The dwellings are effaced"** ('afat ad-diyār) → evokes the vitality once possessed by space and the presence of beloved figures.
- **"Ruins"** (diman) → gestures toward permanence, memory, and the paradox of survival through absence.

The image of diman (ruins) appears from the outset in the opening line, acting as a semantic nucleus. Lexically, it connotes an abandoned place filled with residual traces. On a figurative level, it conveys solitude, silence, metaphysical stillness, and death. This dual register—literal and metaphorical—anchors the poem's narrative and discursive architecture.

⁹ Joseph Courtès, *Narrative Forms: Uncovering Meaning in the Narrative Text*. Translated by Abdelhamid Bourayou. Algiers: Dar al-Sabil for Publishing and Distribution, 2009, p. 56.

From this, it becomes evident that the narrative logic of the Mu‘allaqa is structured by two opposing forces:

- Disruption (déséquilibre)
- Equilibrium (équilibre)

The state of disruption involves two narrative positions:

- Anxiety and disorientation
- Lack—specifically the lack of knowledge and separation from both the object of value (immortality, presence of the beloved) and the modalities of doing.

Lack typically initiates a counter-project—a desire to overcome the loss through narrative agency. If successful, the subject transitions from subject of state to subject of action, culminating in acquisition of the value-object. If unsuccessful, lack persists, generating frustration and narrative stasis.

To break this cycle, the poem introduces a second structural element: rebalancing. This includes two sub-elements:

- The transition from anxiety to a desire for repose
- The formulation of a mediating narrative program, aimed at suspending entropy and preserving traces of life through memory and space—symbolized by the inhabited diyār

This final state of balance presents the poetic self as:

- Resigned to fate and divine decree
- Committed to the ideal of life’s preservation, even as he relinquishes the possibility of its permanence

The poet thus shifts from seeking possession of life’s value to acknowledging the dialectic of being and vanishing, internalizing the paradox without demanding resolution.

The narrative unfolds linearly across three implicit temporal phases¹⁰:

- A. Pre-narrative (Before)
- B. Narrative (During)
- C. Post-narrative (After)

The poem opens in phase B (during), omitting the initial equilibrium of phase A, which is only inferred retrospectively. This absent phase reflects a prior state of peace, possession, and ontological stability—intentionally suppressed by the poetic self, whose focus lies in the rupture that followed.

Phase B stages the central transformation. The ruin (daman) is a narrative and symbolic disjunction. It introduces destruction as a counter-agent that fractures the relationship between the subject and the object. This is crystallized in the lines:

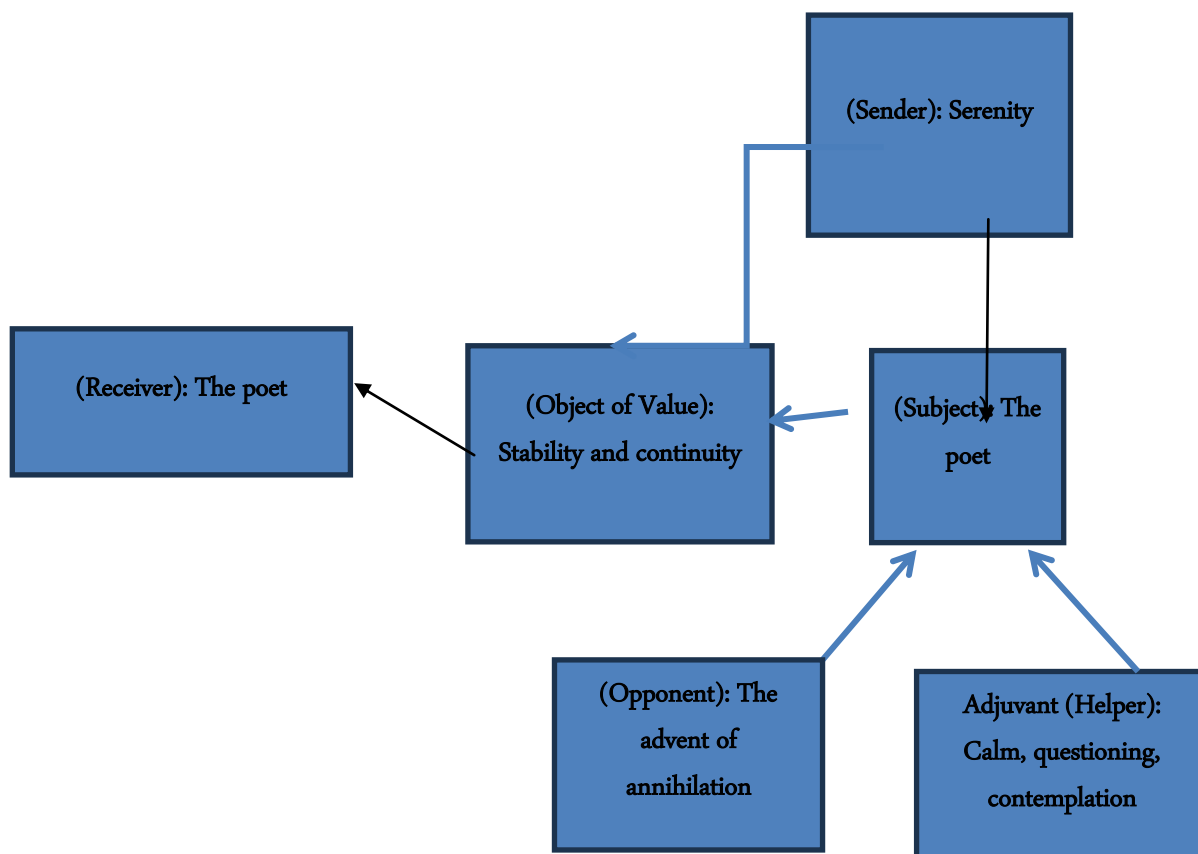
Ruins remained after the companions’ departure—Seasons have passed; sacred and profane alike are gone.

¹⁰See: Abdelhamid Bourayou. *The Narrative Trajectory and Content Structure: A Semiotic Study of Selected Tales from One Thousand and One Nights*. Algiers: Dar al-Sabil for Publishing and Distribution, n.d., 2008, pp. 23–24.

Lexemes like *tajarama* (to crumble) and *ta'abbada* (to become eternalized in ruin) denote a radical shift in temporality. These verbs carry the semantic weight of loss, fear, and bewilderment—marking the gap between before and after.

The final phase (C) represents the subject's reorientation, marked by equilibrium laced with concealed loss. While the poet concedes separation from the beloved and the destruction of space (disjunction), he does not render this explicitly. Instead, the pain is interiorized. The concealment of this trauma functions as a protective gesture—minimizing the catastrophe's emotional force. Although the poet expresses resignation, a latent hesitation remains.

This structure produces the following actantial diagram



Conclusion

The foregoing analysis underscores the methodological efficacy of semiotic inquiry in uncovering the operational mechanisms of the *ṭalal* motif—specifically through the function of the poem's opening utterance. This initial segment operates as a condensed cluster of signs, a charged semiotic nucleus that prefigures the entirety of the *Mu'allāqa*. It encapsulates the thematic trajectory and symbolically enacts what the rest of the text gradually unfolds. In this light, the body of the poem becomes a prolonged explication of what was densely encoded in the *ṭalal*.

Conversely, the closing utterance marks the terminus of the narrative and opens a reflective horizon. It does not merely conclude the poem; it redirects the reader toward an emerging existential posture. Through its tonal shift and thematic realignment, the final lines gesture toward the poet's evolving worldview—one that approaches a form of early philosophical consciousness within the pre-Islamic poetic tradition.

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