

Semiotics of Islamic Law: Symbolic Interpretation of Islamic Legal Text of Ibn ‘Arabi

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Abstract

Many Muslims are trapped in carrying out formal rituals of the Sharia without understanding and appreciating the nature and essence of what it contains. Many underestimate it and even dare to abandon the formal rituals of the Sharia because the formal ritual practice of the Sharia is no longer needed once its nature and essence are understood. These two extreme points have always adorned the face of Muslims, from early times to the most recent modern times. Ibn ‘Arabi was a Sufi figure from Andalusia, Spain, who paid great attention to the issue of the dichotomy between Sharia and nature. The effort he made was to give symbolic meaning to Islamic legal texts. Aimed at a deeper understanding of the Koran and by the invitation to preach to Allah through wise methods (*al-baṣīrah*). This effort aims to balance *al-kashf* and the practice of worship both in general and in detail. The important aim of this symbolic meaning is ultimately for one's safety (*bi najāti nafsibi*) in addition to preaching the teachings of Islam and the teachings of Sufism in depth. His intellectual chain was then continued by his students and then developed to this day and has an influence on the work and ideas of the next generation.

Keywords: *Sharia, symbol, ibn ‘Arabi*

Abstrak

Banyak umat Islam terjebak melaksanakan ritual-formal syariat tanpa memahami dan menghayati hakikat dan esensi yang dikandungnya. Banyak pula yang meremehkan, bahkan sampai berani meninggalkan ritual-formal syariat dengan beralasan bahwa pengamalan ritual-formal syariat tidak diperlukan lagi setelah hakikat dan esensinya dipahami. Dua titik ekstrem ini senantiasa menghiasai wajah umat Islam, mulai dari zaman awal hingga zaman modern terkini. Ibn ‘Arabi seorang tokoh sufi dari Andalusia Spanyol yang memiliki perhatian yang sangat besar terhadap isu dikotomi antara syariat dan hakikat ini. Usaha yang dilakukannya adalah melakukan pemaknaan simbolik terhadap teks-teks hukum Islam. Ditujukan untuk pemahaman yang lebih mendalam terhadap al-Quran dan sesuai dengan ajakan untuk berdakwah kepada Allah melalui metode yang bijaksana (*al-baṣīrah*). Usahnya ini bertujuan menyeimbangkan antara *al-kashf* dan amalan ibadah baik secara umum maupun terperinci. Tujuan penting dari pemaknaan simbolik ini pada akhirnya adalah demi keselamatan diri sendiri (*bi najāti nafsibi*) di samping mendakwahkan ajaran Islam dan ajaran tasawuf secara mendalam. Rantai intelektualnya kemudian diteruskan oleh para muridnya dan kemudian berkembang sampai pada hari ini serta berpengaruh pada karya dan gagasan generasi berikutnya.

Kata kunci: *syariah, simbol, ibn ‘Arabi*

INTRODUCTION

Today, many Muslims are performing formal rituals of the Sharia without truly understanding and appreciating the nature and essence therein. Meanwhile, many people also underestimate all of these formal rituals of Sharia and even dare to not do them anymore because practicing formal rituals of Sharia is considered no longer necessary if their nature and essence have been understood. Muslims have been dealing with these two extremes from the early era to the modern era. Therefore, many scholars have tried to make various efforts to bridge them.

A Sufi from Andalusia, Spain, Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240 AD), was concerned with the issue of the dichotomy between Sharia and the essence of the formal rituals. Moreover, he always emphasized the importance of implementing Sharia principles correctly while understanding and experiencing the inner and real goals of the formal rituals. Indeed, it cannot be denied that the character of Ibn 'Arabi's thoughts and writings are generally multi-valued and even appear to have double meanings, thus giving rise to controversy. As a result, many of Ibn 'Arabi's works led to controversy among Islamic jurists or fuqaha'. However, it was a consequence of his attempt to maintain balance and find a middle ground between two different, and sometimes contradictory, aspects.

In Ibn 'Arabi's era, the word *fuqaha'* had a broader meaning and referred to religious experts and scholars in general. Expertise in the field of Islamic law in every fuqaha' is inherent and accompanied by the quality of piety. In other words, Ibn 'Arabi was always surrounded by jurists, who were his Sufi teachers and students. Ibn 'Arabi calls them fuqaha, those who not only have systematic and methodological rational analysis but also accept and consider other methods of analysis, namely the method of 'revealing inner truth' (*al-kashf*).

They differ from the second group of fuqaha, whose rational analytical abilities, as Ibn 'Arabi said, are shallow, narrow-minded and inflexible, with no willingness to know or accept meaningful interpretations or *al-kashf*.¹ Ibn 'Arabi was very harsh in criticizing them. He did not hesitate to write a chapter in the book of *Futūḥāt* to only explain in detail his objections and criticisms.²

He emphasized that one very fundamental weakness in this group is the scholarship that relies entirely on quotations, which means a lack of deep understanding of the text. They lack spirituality in interpreting *natā'ij* and its symbolic *dalālah*. As we know, spirituality is the essence of

¹ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 201- 202.

² 'Arabī, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn, *Al-Futūḥāt Al-Makkiyyah*, editor: Bulāq (Miṣr: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah al-Kubrā, t. t.), volume III, chapter 366, p. 327-340.

Sharia (*lubb al-shari'ah*)³. In short, they only care about the shell and ignore the core. Actually, it is the letters in it used as a source of knowledge that hinder their views. This matter ultimately triggered Ibn 'Arabi to sometimes criticize and describe them *as su` ulama*, or liars to the Sufis and troublemakers.⁴ He stated that Sufi ideas are not theoretical ideas that rely solely on references, but rather ideas that originate from dynamic spiritual experiences.⁵

As he said, his accusation was not against the fuqaha of a particular school of thought (*mazhab*) because he did not side with any school of thought. He even claimed himself to be a mujtahid.⁶

Ibn 'Arabi never mentioned the name of a particular school of thought that he was criticizing although many people assume that he was criticizing the fuqaha of the Hanafi school, considering that this school is known for its flexible use of *qiyās*. Again, Ibn 'Arabi denied this accusation while showing his neutrality by asserting that he had no objection to the correct use of *qiyās*. However, for himself, he preferred not to use it.⁷

The above-mentioned criticisms of Ibn 'Arabi clearly show the differences, clashes of opinion, and disharmony between Ibn 'Arabi and certain jurists at that time. On the other hand, there is a lot of data showing good relations between Ibn 'Arabi and famous jurists and legal officials of that time, leading us to conclude that conflicts between Ibn 'Arabi and these jurists did not dominate or reflect his social life. In other words, only a small group of jurists opposed and hated Ibn 'Arabi. Ibn 'Arabi was not an isolated person in his society.

Opposition to Ibn 'Arabi and his ideas by conservative scholars (*ulama` al-shakl wa al-harf*) and some Sufis motivated him to use a symbolic approach in conveying ideas, especially after the events of the execution of al-Hallāj and al-Suhrawardī.⁸ Ibn 'Arabi repeatedly said that he used symbols in his various works to express his unique experiences and thoughts, especially in a

³ 'Abdul Wahhāb ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Sha'rānī, *Al-Minan Al-Kubrā* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2020), p. 42.

⁴ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah 'inda Muḥyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi* (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Quds al-'Arabī, 2019), II, p. 155.

⁵ Bakrī 'Alā` al-Dīn, *Al-Ramziyyah wa al-Ta'wil fī Fikr al-Shaykh Muḥyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi* (Dimashq: Dār Naynawā, 2017), p. 134.

⁶ Maḥmūd al-Ghurāb, "Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Amidst Religions (Adyan) and Schools of Thought (Mazahib)", in *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, editor Stephen Hirtenstein and Michael, p. 200-227.

⁷ Duktūrah Asmā` Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Ḥusayn, *Manhaj ibn 'Arabi fī Fahm al-Kitāb al-Ilāhī* (Al-Qāhirah: Maktabah Wahbah li al-Ṭab' wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 2022), p. 223. See also 'Arabī, Muḥyi al-Dīn ibn, *Al-Futūḥāt Al-Makkiyyah*, editor: Bulāq, I: p. 472, II: p. 162-163, 157, III: p. 335.

⁸ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah 'inda Muḥyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi* (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Quds al-'Arabī, 2019), I, p. 234.

spiritual context.⁹ He also used symbolic methods and suggested his readers use this method to understand his works.¹⁰ It was also used by Sufi predecessors, such as Ibn al-Farīd, Rūmī, and al-Ghazālī.

Based on his opinion, symbols contain an ambiguity of meaning intended to disguise their true intentions. Symbols also confuse scholars who belonged to the textualist/conservative category (*abl al-rusūm*) or prevent those who were not experts from understanding their ideas. The use of symbols is more universal since it does not rely on context. This is different from the use of everyday language, which is inseparable from context. The puzzle of Ibn 'Arabi through the ambiguity of meaning in this symbol reaches a very high level and can only be matched by a famous Sufi philosopher, namely Ibn Sab'īn.¹¹

Indeed, classical Muslim thinkers were already familiar with symbolic interpretation, especially in the traditions of *takwil*, esoteric interpretation (*al-tafsīr al-bāṭini*), and Sufism. Al-Hallāj, Yazīd al-Buṣṭāmī, and Ibn 'Arabī, for example, practiced logocentrism in placing the Qur'an as the center of their entire framework of thought, alongside the hadith. In this regard, he did not agree with the philosophers and theologians who used other sources.¹²

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach with a focus on textual analysis to investigate the symbolic interpretation of Islamic legal writings by the Sufi scholar Ibn 'Arabi. The study is based on library research and draws on primary and secondary sources, including Ibn 'Arabi's writings, classical commentaries, and contemporary scholarly works that discuss the conflict between Sharia and its fundamental ideas. In order to gain insight into Ibn 'Arabi's method of symbolic interpretation and his endeavor to harmonize the more profound spiritual objectives of Islamic teachings with the formal Sharia laws, a comprehensive examination of the primary texts will be undertaken.

In order to decipher and comprehend the symbolic meanings ascribed by Ibn 'Arabi to the Hadith and lines from the Quran, the research will employ a hermeneutic approach. This process comprises three stages: initially, the texts are interpreted literally; subsequently, these interpretations are situated within the historical and Sufi context of Ibn 'Arabi; and finally, the

⁹ Fathul Mufid, Kritik Epistemologis Tafsir Ishārī Ibn 'Arabi, Hermeneutik: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Quran dan Tafsir, Volume 14 Number 01 2020, p. 14. DOI: [10.1234/hermeneutika.v14i1.6837](https://doi.org/10.1234/hermeneutika.v14i1.6837)

¹⁰ He also explained various things through symbols in interpreting the verses of the Quran. Megawati Moris, Ibn Al-'Arabī's Concept of Dreams, Al-Shajarah, *ISTAC Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, IIUM Press, 2021 Volume 26 Number 1, p. 33. See also Muhammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, I, 230.

¹¹ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, I, p. 231-233.

¹² Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, I, p. 231-233.

broader implications of these symbolic meanings for contemporary Muslim practice are considered. As Ibn 'Arabi emphasised, the objective of this study is to achieve a balance between esoteric insights (al-kashf) and exoteric deeds. This process offers a comprehensive understanding of Islamic worship that incorporates both legal observance and spiritual depth.

DISCUSSION

Semiotic Horizons in the Symbolic Thought of Ibn 'Arabi

In semiotics, the meaning of a sign is not found in the object (signifier) to which it refers, but in the concept (signified) within a culturally formed system.¹³ According to Jacques Derrida's theory, commenting on someone's text creates a new text, which then constructs its own text by dismantling previous texts. Thus, he will go beyond the text by adding things that are considered lacking and not contained in the text. This is what Ibn 'Arabi did in understanding the laws of Sharia. This is different from the fuqaha who think in black and white (structural semiotics), always choose between valid and invalid, deal with conditions and pillars, and question halal and haram (binary opposition).¹⁴

The structural semiotic thinking of the fuqaha implies that language is nothing more than a mechanical system. The subject must use it based on the signs already available and a set of agreed codes. If someone wants to become a member of a language community, by taking an analogy from the Sharia system, the language user subject must use the language in a *taqlid* manner, that is, totally following (kaffah) the various agreed codes (*ijma'*, both vertical and horizontal *ijma'*).¹⁵

What is missing from structural semiotic thinking is the possibility of renewal (*ijtihad*), creativity, and productivity in language. If the potential for creativity, productivity, and the possibility of dismantling the unthinkable is opened wide, then language must be able to be released from structure and structural thinking. This is one of the critical pillars of the post-structuralist movement against the structuralists represented by Jacques Derrida. In fact, the things put forward by Derrida are a process of meaning-making through dismantling and critical analysis.

Another name for this is deconstruction. Derrida's idea was then identified with deconstructionism which shows a diametric opinion with de Saussure's structuralism. Based on

¹³ Khusnul Khotimah, Semiotika: Sebuah Pendekatan dalam Studi Agama, *Komunika: Jurnal Dakwah dan Komunikasi*, Volume 2 No. 2 July - Desember 2008, p. 288.

¹⁴ Dadan Rusmana, M. Ag. *Filsafat Semiotika: Paradigma, Teori dan Metode Interpretasi Tanda dari Semiotika Struktural hingga Dekonstruksi Praktis* (Bandung: Penerbit Pustaka Setia, 2014), p. 54.

¹⁵ Dadan Rusmana, M. Ag., *Filsafat Semiotika...*, p. 54.

metaphor, Derrida has offered a method of “deep reading” of texts, which is very similar to the psychoanalytic approach to neurotic symptoms. After ‘interrogating’, deconstructive ‘deep reading’ destroys the text’s defenses and reveals a series of binary oppositions that can be found implicitly in the text.

Derrida said that humans have a metaphysical desire to make the goals coincide with means, create limitations, and make definitions coincide with those defined. In short, Derrida asked the reader to change the habits of certain and established patterns of human thoughts. He revealed to the reader that the authority of the text is provisional and its origin is a trace. With contradictory logic, the reader must learn to use and ‘cross’ (*sous rature*) human language. Derrida wanted the reader to ‘cross’ all forms of opposition and destroy, but at the same time, maintain them.¹⁶

Two possible forms of reaction are self-rebellion or *différance*.¹⁷ The meaning of *différance* here is to ignore the results of collective objectification and direct oneself into one’s inner environment. In this narrow gap, the individual is one more time amazed or fascinated by irrational aesthetic forces. They become unresponsive to their external environment. Derrida clarified that all systems of thought that base themselves on a foundation, basis, or basic principle are metaphysical thoughts. Derrida also said that all conceptual metaphysical oppositions refer to the presence of the present as the primary reference (Derrida often used the term ‘metaphysics’ to refer to ‘being as presence’ above).¹⁸

The approach used by Ibn ‘Arabi in this context finds its relevance. He took a textual context and then played with it harmoniously. The goal is to change the reader. That is, the reader must prepare himself. Difficulties that occur cannot be simply solved by the translator or the reteller. The key is to take a single passage (often containing the full meaning of the whole), and then read it over and over again until every subtlety of the issue – for example, in the case of purification involving wiping shoes, or washing feet, or tayammum – can be easily understood.

The ultimate goal of Ibn ‘Arabi is to fight the tradition of logocentrism of the jurists whom he called *abl-al-rusūm*,¹⁹ who rely on the eternity, stability, and solidity of signs in meaning. In this regard, the alleged reputation of Ibn ‘Arabi as a wild, antinomian Sufi has been thoroughly

¹⁶ Dadan Rusmana, M. Ag., *Filsafat Semiotika...*, p. 272.

¹⁷ F. Budi Hardiman, *Seni Memahami: Hermeneutik dari Schleiermacher sampai Derrida* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit PT Kanisius, 2018), 288. The term *différance* closely related to Derrida’s desire to maintain creativity in interpreting texts. See Asep Ahmad Hidayat, *Filsafat Bahasa: Mengungkap Hakikat Bahasa, Makna dan Tanda* (Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2006), p. 222.

¹⁸ Dadan Rusmana, M. Ag., *Filsafat Semiotika...*, p. 282.

¹⁹ Dadan Rusmana, M. Ag., *Filsafat Semiotika...*, p. 259.

refuted by various recent scholarly writings. These writings show the centrality of the Sharia in Ibn ‘Arabi’s works. The distinction between Sufis and fuqaha has also recently been seen as misleading.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s works, especially *Al-Futūḥāt Al-Makkiyyah*, and more specifically in his legal-discursive discussion of the pillars of Islam, tend to uphold official (conventional) and orthodox understandings of Islam. However, Ibn ‘Arabi always emphasized the need for readers to be careful and precise in implementing the Sharia by following the example of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, moving towards consensus (*ijmā’*) and making possible adjustments.

All this confirms the strict maintenance of the practices of Ibn ‘Arabi in the Muslim tradition.²⁰ Furthermore, Ibn ‘Arabi outshone the orthodox at their own game. For example, Michel Chodkiewicz acknowledged Ibn ‘Arabi’s concern to consider every utterance (*al-keḥṭāb al-shar’i*) and God’s silence (*shukūt al-shāri*)²¹, but at the same time states that this was not enough to convince his orthodox opponents. Ibn ‘Arabi is an orthodox man, even more than that; and it is this superiority that sparked criticism of his thought throughout the centuries.

The orthodoxy is, *first*, the conventional and traditional basis of Muslim scholars is textuality/logocentrism and attention to detail. Ibn ‘Arabi, as Chodkiewicz describes above, is too textual and pays attention to detail. *Second*, conventional and traditional scholars are based on the language typical of the Arabs before and after the revelation of the Qur’an, and thus, a word in the Qur’an only has the meaning as understood by the community that first received the revelation.

Arabic is a language that continues to live, grow, and change. Meanwhile, the language of the Qur’an - which is distinguished by its writing as Arabic and its users being the Arab community - is both permanent and transcendent. As can be seen, Ibn ‘Arabi took this concept – that a word in revelation only has the meaning as it was understood by the Arab audience at the time it was revealed – and expanded it as follows: a word in revelation could have any meaning as it was understood by the Arab audience at that time.²²

Third, as Ibn ‘Arabi said, conventional and traditional scholars are of the view that only Allah and His Messenger have the right to determine the law (such as halal and haram). However, while Ibn ‘Arabi tried to maintain the continuity (immediacy) of the prophetic period, - that is,

²⁰ Mahmūd al-Ghurāb, confirming it in various other categories as befits competing sects or ‘churches’. In Graham (1993) “Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, 2: p. 515.

²¹ Ibn ‘Arabi formulated special rules for this. See Duktūrah Asmā’ Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Ḥusayn, *Manhaj ibn ‘Arabi...*, p. 218.

²² Ibn ‘Arabī, *Menghampiri Sang Mahakudus: Rahasia-Rahasia Bersuci*. Translation of *Mysteries of Purity* (Bandung: PT Misan Pustaka, 2015), p. 19.

when the Qur'an was revealed and determined the legal characteristics, when there was no mediator between the giver and the receiver of commands, between Allah and His Messenger - conventional scholars instead established a mediatory structure, which often resulted in the authority of God and the Prophet SAW being replaced by their authority. Ibn 'Arabi's method of jurisprudence is to dispel the illusion of the transparency of the mediating structure, reveal its opacity, and restore the transparency (relationship) between God's command and the obedience of His servant.²³

As the author of hundreds of books and essays, teacher of many highly gifted students, and expert in Islamic sciences, Ibn 'Arabi has absorbed six centuries of Islamic civilization and thought to revive the religious tradition. His existence is considered to play an important role by society, both by those who glorify him as the Supreme Teacher (*al-Shaykh al-Akbar*) and by those who accuse him of being the Most Heretical One.²⁴

Recent scholarship has shown how important and rich the study of Ibn 'Arabi's use of language is. Sells has explored the various formats traditionally thought to support this endeavor: rhyme, simile, symbolism, and metaphor.²⁵ Sells focused on this aspect, and Morris' recent paper on Ibn 'Arabi's spiritual authority and spiritual literalism explores the same area.²⁶

Ibn 'Arabi used various elements of language in Islamic sciences as instruments to convey undefined things. He used it to communicate the visions and insights bestowed upon him, including themes of pre- and post-Islamic poetry, folk Islam, Islamic and Greek metaphysics, scholastic theology (*al-kalām*), the Hermetic sciences of the Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic periods (astrology, alchemy and magic), Gnosticism (science of gnosis), *Shi'i* traditions, fiqh and worship, Sufi thought²⁷, the Peripatetic treasury, theology, the Qur'an, astrology, chemistry, numerology, various terminologies, and other data.²⁸

²³ Ibn 'Arabī, *Menghampiri Sang Mahakudus*:..., p. 19.

²⁴ Ibn 'Arabī, *Menghampiri Sang Mahakudus*:..., p. 20.

²⁵ See Michael Sells (1984), "Ibn 'Arabi's Garden Among the Flames" in *History of Religions* 24, 2: p. 287-315; Sells (1988), "Ibn 'Arabi's Polished Mirror: Perspective Shift and Meaning Event" in *Studia Islamica* 62: p. 121-149, and for mystical language in general, his contributions in Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn (ed.), *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith* (Macmillan, 1989). Sells combines his expertise in Medieval thought and mystics, such as Eckhart and John the Scot, with his expertise in Arabic poetry, both pre-and post-Islamic. His latest book work is very good, *Mystical Languages of Unsayng* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 1994.

²⁶ James Winston Morris (1990), "Ibn 'Arabi's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority" in *Studia Islamica* 71: p. 37-64. Like Chittick, Morris discusses the "Western" or "Arab" aspects of Ibn 'Arabi's thought through the "Eastern" dimension and Eastern thinkers, such as Mullā Ṣadrā and Rumi. Morris's work published in JAOS numbers 106-107 (1986-1987) is a reliable study of the interpreters of Ibn al-'Arabī.

²⁷ Michael Sells (1988), "Ibn 'Arabi's Garden among the Flames", *History of Religions* 23, 4: p. 134.

²⁸ William C. Chittick (1981), "Mysticism versus Philosophy in Earlier Islamic History", *Religious Studies* 17: p. 96.

Muṣṭafā²⁹ in his research added that Ibn 'Arabi also used the traditions of Egyptian Gnosticism, Hermetic science, Hindu religious traditions, Persian traditions, Greek philosophy, Neo-Platonism philosophy, Pythagorean philosophy, Stoic philosophy, Jewish Cabalism tradition, Christian tradition, Gnostic tradition, Sabeanism tradition, Islamic philosophy both in the East and West (Andalusia), Sufi traditions, and the use of the sayings of previous Sufis.³⁰ Ibn 'Arabi was a genius in using traditional religious sciences as a starting point for achieving a higher and deeper understanding.³¹

Ibn 'Arabi is known for his difficult-to-understand style of expression, complex language, and multi-layered discourse. After much hard work studying it, it turned out that the key to understanding his writings was Arabic. Every confusion can be resolved with this language because Ibn 'Arabi, more than any other writer, articulated his inner insights primarily using the framework of Arabic.

Method of Symbolism of Ibn 'Arabi

The symbol (*al-ramḥ*) is a soft sound in the mouth, a sigh from the gesture of two lips that can only be understood if spoken loudly and clearly.³² *Al-ramḥ* is a gesture with both eyes, both eyebrows, lips, or mouth.³³ According to Sufism, *al-ramḥ* or symbols are also seen as sensory or aesthetic means to convey knowledge. Symbolic representation is a reality that is inherent in the nature of something.³⁴ In the context of Semiotics, symbols are one of the five basic materials of semiotics.³⁵

In the tradition of Sufism, the Sufis have the same experience at the inner level, despite the different levels of depth. The inner experience of the mystics is an event beyond the experience of ordinary humans because the objects encountered in the inner realm are something different from the objects known in the real world. As a result, the role of language is stuck because of its inability to express the extraordinary in the inner realm.³⁶

²⁹ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramḥiyyah...*, I, p. 123-229.

³⁰ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramḥiyyah...*, I, p. 231-268.

³¹ James Winston Morris (1990), 'Ibn 'Arabi's 'Esotericism'', p. 37-64.

³² Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramḥiyyah...*, I, p. 123.

³³ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramḥiyyah...*, I, p. 123.

³⁴ Sara Kuehn, Contemporary Art and Sufi Aesthetics in European Contexts, *Religions*, 2023, 14, p. 196. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020196>

³⁵ The five basic materials of semiotics are signs, symbols, icons, indices, and signals. See Dadan Rusmana, M. Ag., *Filsafat Semiotika...*, p. 38-46.

³⁶ Taufiqurrahman, The Divinity Cosmological Model of Ibn al-'Arabi: The Relations Between Mystical and Logic, *Jurnal Fuaduna: Jurnal Kajian Keagamaan dan Kemasyarakatan*, Vol 5, No. 1, January-June 2021, p. 59. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.30983/fuaduna.v5i1.4164>

Sufis use symbols to represent the spiritual experiences they have gone through, in addition to avoiding their secrets being known by non-Sufis. Sufis speak in an inner language beyond rational reasoning so their experiences tend to be misinterpreted.³⁷ For a Sufi, symbols are an important aspect in describing their inner state of God because God is forever invisible behind the tangible forms in existence.³⁸

Ibn Arabi's thoughts in his works are written in a language full of symbols, metaphors, and ambiguities. Therefore, they can only be understood by certain people, namely those who agree and have the same knowledge as his Sufism.³⁹ Ibn 'Arabi did not give an explicit explanation of this. However, in some of his works, he indirectly showed that he used symbols in the form of signs or methods to express the reality of everything.⁴⁰

Ibn 'Arabi's symbolism is a unique method and different from what is meant in the general understanding of symbolism. If we limit the understanding of Ibn 'Arabi's symbolism to the general understanding, we will make a mistake. Ibn 'Arabi emphasized his logocentrism by repeatedly stating that his knowledge was obtained through *futūḥ* (revelation) based on the meaning of the Qur'an. This is a fundamental issue that is often overlooked in studying Ibn 'Arabi's Sufism. In fact, like other works, the entire study of the intellectual structure of Ibn 'Arabi's Sufism will be meaningless if we do not understand its roots in the holy book.⁴¹

To understand the universality of scriptural hermeneutics, it is necessary to discard all forms of preconceptions about how to understand a text. In Ibn 'Arabi's view, the Qur'an (teachings) are concrete and are the linguistic manifestation⁴² of the All-Existent, Allah. At the same time, the revealed word is colored with perfect love (*rahmah*) and guidance (*hidayah*), in accordance with His being.⁴³ Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation style brings a breath of fresh air to create a balance between the exoteric values of Islamic teachings and their esoteric values. This includes

³⁷ Mazlina Parman, Nurazmallail Marni, Sufi Symbols In Poems Of Ibn 'Arabi and Hamzah Fansuri, *Umran: International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies*, Volume 8 no. 2 (2021), p. 23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11113/umran2021.8n2.498>

³⁸ Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi* (London and New York, Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), p. 35.

³⁹ Yoshy Hendra hardiyah Syah, Pemikiran teodisi Ibn Arabi Tentang Keburukan, *JAQFI: Jurnal Aqidah dan Filsafat Islam*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2022, p. 61-85.

⁴⁰ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramḏīyah*..., I, h. 123.

⁴¹ *Paradigma, Teori dan Metode Interpretasi Tanda dari Semiotika Struktural hingga Dekonstruksi Praktis* (Bandung: Penerbit Pustaka Setia, 2014), p. 54.

⁴² Muḥammad Shawqī al-Zayn, *Al-Ṣurab wa al-Laḡḡ: al-Ta'wil al-Ṣūfi li al-Qur'an 'inda Muḥyi al-Dīn ibn 'Arabi* (Al-Mamlakah al-Maghribiyah: Mu'assasah Mu'minūn bi la Ḥudūd li al-Dirāsāt wa al-Abḥāth, 2016), p. 280.

⁴³ Dadan Rusmana, M. Ag., *Filsafat Semiotika*..., p. 54.

achieving true benefit when interpreting legal verses, which ultimately can be expected to give rise to the concept of comprehensive Islam (*kaffah*).⁴⁴

True welfare in some cases cannot be reached by reason. The main purpose of Sharia is to lead humans to this true welfare; a welfare that cannot be reached rationally.⁴⁵ On the other hand, contextually, Islamic law does not live in a vacuum, but in a society rich in values, ideas, and perceptions that are relative. At this level, the method of Islamic legal symbolism has a strategic role as a theoretical means to describe and interpret the meaning of law that is full of signs, both explicit and implicit. In the study of the semiotics of Islamic law, legal regulations are not merely read and understood *an sich* in their written form, but the written text must be explored in terms of ideas, thoughts, historicity, concepts, feelings and goals that underlie the formulation of the text of the legal regulations.

When applied to the language signs in Islamic legal texts, letters, words, phrases, clauses and sentences never have meaning in themselves. These signs only carry meaning (significant) in relation to their readers. It is the reader who connects the sign with what it signifies (signified) in accordance with the conventions in the language system in question.⁴⁶ The resulting meaning certainly has something to do with the person's background when viewing a text or verse. Metaphors, symbols, myths, stories and legends play an important role in creating meaning. They form the imagination and help represent the world and experiences that are otherwise incomprehensible. In addition, the spiritual side of implementing Islamic law is essentially a symbolic representation of the existing worldview.⁴⁷

A symbol is a sign that is considered to reflect something else and shows that there is another meaning (inner meaning) behind it and that other meaning replaces its meaning (outer meaning). In short, a symbol is a meaningful sign. Symbolism or *al-ramziyyah* in Arabic is usually one of the methods used by writers to express feelings and thoughts through signs or symbols.⁴⁸ The symbolism used by Ibn 'Arabi is believed to be able to mediate material (outward) things with immaterial (inward) things, the concrete (*hiss*) and the abstract (*ma'navi*).⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Zuherni AB, Tafsir Isyari dalam Corak Penafsiran Ibn 'Arabi, *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Mu'ashirah: Media Kajian Al-Quran dan Al-Hadits Multu Perspektif*, Volume 13, No. 2, July 2016, p. 139.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah*..., II, p. 83.

⁴⁶ Muhammad Sakti Garwan, Analisis Semiotika pada Teks al-Quran tentang "Khamar" dalam Pendekatan Semanalisis Hingga Intertekstualitas Julia Kristeva, *Substantia*, Volume 22, Number 1, April 2020, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Marianna Fotaki, Yochanan Altman, Juliette Koning, Spirituality, Symbolism and Storytelling in Twentyfirst-Century Organizations: Understanding and Addressing the Crisis of Imagination, *Organization Studies 2020*, Volume 41 (1), 2019, p. 8. DOI: <http://10.1177/0170840619875782>

⁴⁸ Cahya Buana, Nature Symbols and Symbolism in Sufic Poems of Ibn Arabi, *Karsa: Journal of Social and Islamic Culture*, Volume 25 No. 2 December 2017, p. 436. DOI: [10.19105/karsa.v25i2.1304](https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v25i2.1304)

⁴⁹ Cahya Buana, Nature Symbols..., p. 436. DOI: [10.19105/karsa.v25i2.1304](https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v25i2.1304)

In general, the purpose of using symbols in Ibn 'Arabi's work is (1) to provide depth of meaning, consolation and confidence to people who draw closer to God when, in this position, they experience emptiness and dryness of meaning in implementing the Shari'a; (2) hiding the divine meanings, from the exoteric/textual scholars (*ulamā` al-rusūm*), into enigmatic statements and as punishment for them for their jealousy and rejection of this method.⁵⁰ Two references needed to understand Ibn 'Arabi's symbolic thoughts are *al-Futūhāt al-Makkīyyah* and *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. Researchers consider two books as the main references for understanding the essence of Ibn 'Arabi's school of symbolism.⁵¹ Other books are *Mashāhid al-Asrār*, *al-Isrā ilā Maqām al-Asrā* and *Mawāqī' al-Nujūm*.⁵²

The book *al-Futūhāt al-Makkīyyah* mentions a group of people called *Anbiyā` al-Awliyā`*. They are those who maintain the certainty of the correct Sharia (*al-shari'ah al-ṣābiḥah*) for themselves and for those who follow them. They are the ones who understand Sharia best among others. However, the jurists do not accept their existence.⁵³ It is said that they are the *ablu ṭariq* of Allah, a people who understand the laws of Sharia both from the exoteric (*ẓāhiriyyah*) and esoteric (*bāṭiniyyah*) aspects. They always determine Sharia law by considering both the exoteric and esoteric aspects. They apply this to all areas of Sharia law and worship Allah according to Sharia principles, in the exoteric and esoteric aspects.

Batiniyyah people will always perform the task of integrating love and piety into legal compliance (*shar'iyyah*). The Sufis never deny the practical role. They only want to make legal practitioners or *fuqaha* aware so that they do not fall into a one-sided, rigid, and arbitrary attitude by establishing laws based on the exoteric aspects of actions without considering the esoteric aspects, namely the morals and internal consciousness of the actor.⁵⁴ Ibn 'Arabi himself said in his poem that a person's path to salvation depends on the Sharia. He even always gives reminders to

⁵⁰ Muḥy al-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī, *Al-Tanaẓẓulāt al-Mawṣiliyyah* (Al-Qāhirah: Shirkah al-Quds, 2016), p. 10.

⁵¹ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramẓiyyah*..., I, p. 70.

⁵² Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramẓiyyah*..., I, p. 231.

⁵³ Muḥy al-Dīn ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūhāt Al-Makkīyyah* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2011), I, p. 230.

⁵⁴ Historically, the *fukaha*'s method of only adhering to and punishing external actions was a reaction to resistance and a turning point in the chaos caused by the *Khawarij* who claimed the authority to punish a person's internal actions. The next Sufi group followed the reaction to the *fukaha*. However, it should be noted that this Sufi method is opposite to the *Khawarij* method. The difference is, in the Sufi method, the inner element (internal) and moral awareness are variables in assessing the validity of external actions, while according to the *Khawarij* external actions are the value or expression of a person's inner content. See the analysis of the significance of this difference for the conflict between *fuqaha`* and *sufis* and the historical development of *sufism*. Quoted from Ibrahim, "Tasawuf: Its Doctrine and Practise", dalam *Encyclopaedic Survey of Islamic Culture*, ed. Mohammed Taher, vol. 7, (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1997), p. 103.

adhere to the Sharia when someone encounters *kashf*.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabi even said that Sharia is an inseparable part of reality.⁵⁶

Symbolic Interpretation of Islamic Legal Texts of Ibn 'Arabi

In the books, *Mawāqī' al-Nujūm* and *al-Tanaẓẓulāt al-Mawṣiliyyah*, Ibn 'Arabi describes enlightenment and spiritual experiences in worship using astronomical symbols (*ramẓiyyah al-aflak*). These two books show detailed and amazing experiences in the study of worship. This experience, according to Ibn 'Arabi, is often experienced by people who are close to Allah (*min ahl Allah*) and receive special gifts (*aṣḥāb mawāhib kbāṣṣah*) which Ibn 'Arabi calls 'people who master balance' (*Rijāl al-Muwāẓanah*) or those who succeed in balancing between external actions and internal conditions.⁵⁷ The *zāhiriyyah* people can gain happiness through the legal methods they use.⁵⁸ However, true happiness will only be achieved by those who can unite both, the external (*zāhiriyyah*) and internal (*bāṭiniyyah*) sides. They are called *al-'ulama' bi Allah wa abkāmibi*.⁵⁹

Among the studies that examine the traditional aspects and manifestations of Ibn 'Arabi's thoughts, none have specifically and systematically examined his fiqh discourse, in which he elaborated the meaning and secrets of Islamic law and worship through a symbolic approach. Ibn 'Arabi considered the external (*zāhiriyyah*) parts of the Sharia as codes or symbols used to take *i'tibar (ta'wīl)* to understand the internal (*bāṭiniyyah*) parts of the Sharia.⁶⁰ This is what Sheikh Akbar explains in depth in his work symbolically. He discussed compulsion and choice in law, the sources of knowledge among the saints of Allah, all the knowledge he had learned, the reasons for establishing the Shari'a, and the special qualities, wisdom and secrets of the five daily prayers.⁶¹

With a symbolic approach, he explains that finding the inner (*bāṭiniyyah*) elements of the outer (*zāhiriyyah*) conditions of worship cannot be done easily and with certainty. He said, "Know that Allah conveys this matter in general, without explicitly indicating the external (*zāhiriyyah*)

⁵⁵ Al-Duktūr 'Abd al-Razzāq Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Tārikh al-Taṣawwuf al-Wujūdi al-Muta'akbbir: A'lāmuh-Taṣawwuratuh-al-Fikriyyah Athāruh fi al-Ḥayāt al-Rūḥiyyah* (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Khizānah al-Azhariyyah, 2019), p. 255.

⁵⁶ Al-Duktūr 'Abd al-Razzāq Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Tārikh al-Taṣawwuf...*, p. 283.

⁵⁷ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramẓiyyah...*, II, p. 69.

⁵⁸ Some people think that the exoterism only deals with things that are naturally outward, and what one must do to get to God, Morris, "Ibn 'Arabi's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority." See also Syafwan Rozi, The Spiritual Philosophy of Ibn Al-'Arabi: Between The Exoteric And Esoteric Dimension, *Jurnal Fuaduna: Jurnal Kajian Keagamaan dan Kemasyarakatan*, Vol. 6 No. 1, January-June 2022, p. 48. DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.30983/fuaduna.v6i.5521>

⁵⁹ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramẓiyyah...*, II, p. 98.

⁶⁰ Muḥammad Amin Jakfar Rohman, Perspektif Ibn 'Arabi tentang Maqashid Syari'ah, *An-Nabdab: Jurnal Kajian Pendidikan Islam dan Keislaman*, Volume 7 No. 1 October 2020, p. 33.

⁶¹ Muḥy al-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī, *Al-Tanaẓẓulāt...*, p. 10.

elements of internal (*bāṭiniyyah*) or internal elements of the external.” This condition encourages most people to study the laws of Sharia in a physical way (*zābiriyyah*) and ignore the spiritual side (*bāṭiniyyah*) except for a few capable people. The most concrete example of this is in juz I of the book *al-Futūbat* regarding worship.⁶²

When Ibn ‘Arabi produced a text with multiple layers of meaning, he not only wanted to show the existence of the text but also bound divine meanings into the text at various levels of understanding, both materially and spiritually.⁶³ In everything around us, what we can see is essentially a symbol, a signifier for the invisible (signified). Likewise, the movements of worship that have been commanded by Allah will always be related and bound to the invisible divine nature. The external (*zābiriyyah*) aspects of worship are always associated with internal matters (*bāṭiniyyah*), such as intention (*niyyah*) in the heart, devotion, knowledge of Allah (*ma’rifatullah*), closeness to Allah, and the spiritual status of a person which is obtained through this worship.⁶⁴

Although Ibn ‘Arabi received harsh criticism for his symbolic interpretation method on the issue of worship, seen from another perspective, what he did did not violate the provisions of Allah. In fact, it was a deeper understanding of the Qur’an and in accordance with the command to preach through a wise method (*al-baṣīrah*). This is what he always did and was recommended by his teachers, such as ibn al-Mujāhid, ibn Qusūm, and so on. His efforts aimed to balance between *al-kashf* and acts of worship both in general and in detail, as can be read in his symbolic books *Mawāqī’ al-Nujūm* and *al-Tanaẓẓulāt al-Mawṣiliyyah*.⁶⁵

In the book *al-Futūbat* chapter 68 entitled “Knowing the Secrets of Taharah” and chapter 69 entitled “Knowing the Secrets of Prayer,” Ibn ‘Arabi was the first to mention laws as stated by most Islamic scholars. He then conducted a detailed, thorough, and in-depth discussion as done by the tradition of the scholars of *al-Kahf* in understanding verse 282 of Surah al-Baqarah.⁶⁶ The symbolic meaning of worship does not emphasize the inner side over the outer side. He had good reasons for that.⁶⁷

Several texts show some important rules and understandings related to the symbolic meaning of the problem of worship used by Ibn ‘Arabi, which is putting the inner side (*bāṭiniyyah*)

⁶² Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, I, p. 232.

⁶³ Muḥammad Shawqī al-Zayn, *Al-Ṣūrah wa Al-Laghẓ:*..., p. 376.

⁶⁴ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, II, p. 69.

⁶⁵ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, II, p. 91-92.

⁶⁶ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, II, 104-133. See also Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Sālim, *Risalah fi Hilli al-Gharib min Aqwal al-Shaykh Al-Akbar Sayyidi Muḥyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi Raḍiyallahu ‘anhu* (Miṣr: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1994), p. 96.

⁶⁷ Dhākir al-Ḥanafī, *Ibn ‘Arabi Huma al-Qā’il* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ihsān, 2020), p. 70.

to the outer side (*zahiriyyah*) of worship, as he wrote in the book *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*. This is to justify the many different opinions of fiqh and uphold the position of worship, especially from the perspective of Sufi ijtihad thought.⁶⁸ Ibn ‘Arabi explained that the use of symbols (*al-ramz*) by combining the outer and inner sides is the method (*al-manhaj*) of most of his teachers.⁶⁹

The use of symbolism by Ibn ‘Arabi in the study of Islamic law is very rich and varied. All aspects are adapted to the need to reveal or uncover profane meanings towards the sacredness of meaning. However, the most important thing is the limitation of expressing *kitab shar’i* from inner to outer and from outer to inner, the symbolic disclosure of the five Sharia laws and *uṣūl al-ahkām* (*al-kitāb, al-sunnah, al-qiyās* etc.).⁷⁰ A concrete example is the search for meaning in prayer or other worship. Movements, procedures, readings, conditions, and secrets of worship are related to events in the universe between one another. His discussion did not ignore the divine things experienced by Muslims. This opinion is in contrast to that of the *ulamā’ al-rusūm*.⁷¹

Ibn ‘Arabi provided a comprehensive explanation of symbolism in Islamic law in this section, especially in discussing the issues of taharah, prayer, zakat, fasting, and hajj.⁷² Moreover, it can be said that all numbers and calculations in Islamic law, such as the number of prayer rakaats, zakat calculations, tawaf rounds and more, have their own meaning and are the key to understanding the secrets of Sharia. These numbers or calculations have a divine basis (*aṣl rabbāniyyūn*) or a predetermined order and are in accordance with the essence of the Sharia.⁷³ The main purpose of this symbolic meaning is for his own safety (*bi najāti nafsibi*), in addition to preaching the teachings of Islam and Sufism in depth. His intellectual thinking has been then continued by his students and then developed until today, influencing the work and ideas of the next generation.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

The purpose of Ibn ‘Arabi using symbols in his work is to (1) give depth of meaning, consolation and confidence to people who pray and get closer to God when they experience emptiness and dryness of meaning in performing the principles of the Sharia; and (2) hiding the divine

⁶⁸ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, II, p. 101.

⁶⁹ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, II, p. 98.

⁷⁰ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah*, I, p. 273.

⁷¹ Muḥy al-Dīn ibn al-‘Arabī, *Al-Tanazzulāt*, p. 10.

⁷² Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah*, II, p. 104-133.

⁷³ Abū al-Ma‘ānī Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ishāq al-Qūnawī, *Al-Risālah Al-Murshidiyyah: Al-Musammah al-Tawajjuh Al-Atamm Al-Ūlā Nahwa Al-Ḥuqq Jalla Wa Alā* (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Iḥsān, 2016), p. 86.

⁷⁴ Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, *Al-Ramziyyah...*, II, p. 92.

meanings, from the exoteric scholars (*ulamā` al-rusūm*), in enigmatic statements and as punishment for them for their jealousy and denial of this knowledge.

When Ibn ‘Arabi produced a text with multiple layers of meaning, he not only wanted to show the existence of the text but also bound divine meanings into the text at various levels of understanding, both materially and spiritually. A comprehensive explanation of symbolism in Islamic law focuses on discussing the issues of taharah, prayer, zakat, fasting, and hajj.

Everything he did was aimed at a deeper understanding of the Qur'an and in accordance with the call to preach to Allah through wise methods (*al-baṣīrah*). This is what he always did and was recommended by his teachers, such as ibn al-Mujāhid, ibn Qusūm, and so on. His efforts aimed to balance between *al-kashf* and acts of worship both in general and in detail.

The main purpose of this symbolic meaning is for his own safety (*bi najāti nafsihi*), in addition to preaching the teachings of Islam and Sufism in depth. His intellectual thinking has been then continued by his students and then developed until today, influencing the work and ideas of the next generation

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