



**PARADISE IMAGERY IN THE QUR'AN:  
A Semiotic and Theological-Aesthetic Reading**

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**Abstract:** This study examines the interpretive tension in contemporary Qur'anic discourse on Paradise between literal-materialist readings and symbolic-spiritual interpretations. Previous studies on Qur'anic eschatology have largely focused on theological or literary aspects, while limited attention has been given to Paradise imagery as an integrated semiotic and theological system. Existing semiotic approaches also tend to remain conceptual without demonstrating how Qur'anic symbols function within a spiritual hermeneutical framework. Using a qualitative interpretive approach, this research analyzes selected Qur'anic verses on Paradise through the integration of Saussurean semiotics, Barthesian myth analysis, and Islamic theological aesthetics. The analysis focuses on denotative, connotative, and theological-symbolic meanings supported by classical *tafsir* and contemporary Qur'anic scholarship. The findings reveal that Qur'anic depictions of Paradise function as symbolic theological signs that guide believers from sensory imagination toward spiritual consciousness and divine proximity. Elements such as gardens, rivers, light, and companionship represent ethical refinement, peace, and transcendence rather than merely material pleasure. The study also finds that overly materialistic interpretations may reduce the pedagogical and spiritual dimensions of Qur'anic eschatology. This study contributes to contemporary Qur'anic studies by offering an operational framework integrating semiotics, *tafsir*, and Islamic spiritual theology in the interpretation of eschatological language.

**Keywords:** Qur'anic semiotics; Paradise imagery; Islamic spirituality; theological aesthetics; eschatology

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v30i1.1822>

## Introduction

THE IMAGERY of Paradise occupies a central position in Islamic theology; however, it has become the subject of increasing interpretive controversy between literalist-materialist eschatology and symbolic-spiritual readings in contemporary discourse.<sup>1</sup> In public and conservative religious narratives, Paradise is frequently reduced to a catalogue of physical gratifications, reinforcing a materialist imagination of the afterlife that dominates popular piety.<sup>2</sup> Such readings overlook the Qur'an's linguistic signals that these descriptions function as *amthāl*, or parables, intended to gesture toward a reality beyond empirical perception.<sup>3</sup> This reductionist tendency reflects a broader epistemic tension between textual certainty and symbolic depth within modern Islamic hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> The Qur'anic discourse of Paradise employs rich aesthetic language, metaphorical density, and layered imagery that resist simplistic ontological interpretation.<sup>5</sup> However, the dominance of literalist-materialist eschatology has narrowed interpretive horizons, rendering the symbolic economy of revelation under-theorized.<sup>6</sup> This situation reflects a significant interpretive problem where theological meaning is constrained by interpretive rigidity rather than enriched by hermeneutical plurality.<sup>7</sup> The persistence of this controversy indicates continuing

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<sup>1</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (State University of New York Press, 2006); Maria Massi Dakake, "Paradise, Hierarchy, and Spiritual Proximity in the Qur'an," in *The Study Qur'an*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al. (HarperOne, 2015); Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (State University of New York Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Günther, *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portraying Death and the Afterlife in Islam* (Brill, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (I.B. Tauris, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Westview Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> M. Khairullah, "Hermeneutical Reflections on Paradise and Human Ethics," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Islamic Thought* 12, no. 1 (2024): 59–78.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Lane, "Qur'anic Eschatology and the Problem of Literalism," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20, no. 2 (2018): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2018.0331>.

<sup>7</sup> Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

disagreement in how sacred language is understood and lived within modern Muslim consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Addressing this issue requires a methodological shift that recognizes Paradise imagery as a semiotic system rather than a mere eschatological inventory.

Global scholarship on Qur'anic eschatology is extensive but fragmented shaped by classical exegesis, literary criticism, and historical analysis. Classical *tafsīr* traditions developed sophisticated *balāghah*-based readings that highlighted rhetorical elegance and semantic depth in Paradise imagery.<sup>9</sup> Modern Western scholars have expanded this discussion by examining the poetics of eschatology and the narrative texture of the Qur'an, notably in the works of Sebastian Günther and Andrew Lane. Despite these contributions, contemporary studies often remain confined either to historical-critical reconstruction or to formal literary appreciation. The integration of these approaches with contemporary semiotic theory remains limited and methodologically inconsistent.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the spiritual-theological impact of Paradise imagery on the believer's consciousness is frequently bypassed. Many global studies analyze what the text means linguistically but not how it functions existentially. This gap indicates the lack of a cohesive framework that connects semiotics, aesthetics, and spiritual theology. Addressing this lacuna requires an interdisciplinary synthesis capable of bridging textual meaning and spiritual formation.<sup>11</sup>

Within the Indonesian academic landscape, Qur'anic studies have increasingly adopted toward linguistic and semiotic methodologies influenced by modern hermeneutical thought.<sup>12</sup> Scholars inspired by figures such as Muhammad Arkoun have

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<sup>8</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Al-Tabari, *Jāmi' Al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (Dar al-Fikr, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, *Scripture, Poetry, and the Making of a Community: Reading the Qur'an as a Literary Text* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> M. Rahmat and I. Abdullah, "Semiotics of Qur'anic Imagery and Spiritual Ethics," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 32, no. 2 (2021): 157–76.

<sup>12</sup> Sahiron Syamsuddin, "Pendekatan Linguistik Dalam Studi Al-Qur'an Di Indonesia," *Hermeneutik* 11, no. 2 (2017): 201–20, <https://doi.org/10.21043/hermeneutik.v11i2.4501>.

applied semiotic analysis to Qur'anic discourse, particularly in social, legal, and political contexts.<sup>13</sup> This methodological development has expanded Indonesian Islamic scholarship and aligned it more closely with global academic trends. However, the application of semiotic approaches to eschatological themes remains limited and underdeveloped.<sup>14</sup> Studies of Paradise imagery in Indonesia tend to remain normative and descriptive, reaffirming doctrinal interpretations rather than critically interrogating symbolic structures.<sup>15</sup> The mystical and aesthetic dimensions of eschatological verses are often marginalized in favor of moral exhortation or theological assertion. Consequently, local scholarship has yet to fully engage with the critical potential of semiotic theory in reading Qur'anic aesthetics. This tendency perpetuates interpretive reductionism that mirrors global literalist tendencies. Filling this gap is essential for advancing Indonesian Qur'anic studies beyond descriptive analysis toward critical-theoretical contribution.

In response to these scholarly conditions, this research formulates its primary problem around the semiotic function of Paradise imagery in the Qur'an. The study examines how linguistic and visual signs of Jannah operate beyond their denotative meanings to construct a transcendent theological understanding. This question addresses the interaction between material signifiers such as gardens, rivers, and garments and their spiritual signified. It further investigates how this interaction generates a new structure of religious experience for the reader. The study also examines the mechanisms through which symbolic imagery reshapes ethical imagination and spiritual desire. The research also examines how semiotic interpretation can mediate between literalist and symbolic hermeneutics without collapsing

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<sup>13</sup> Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Salis Ridwan et al., "Epistemological Shifts in Contemporary Indonesian Islamic Thought: A Normative Critique of Localized Philosophical Discourses," *ASEAN Journal of Islamic Studies and Civilization (AJISC)* 1, no. 2 (2024): 137–54.

<sup>15</sup> Abdul Mustaqim, "Epistemologi Tafsir Kontemporer," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 15, no. 1 (2014): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2014.1501-01>.

into relativism.<sup>16</sup> These questions situate the study within broader debates on language, meaning, and transcendence in Islamic thought. By focusing on semiotic function rather than ontological description, the research reframes Paradise as a dynamic communicative system. This formulation provides a clear analytical framework for theological inquiry.

The theoretical relevance of this study is grounded in the Islamic principle of *jamāl*, or Divine Beauty, which affirms beauty as a fundamental mode of divine self-disclosure. In Islamic theology, language functions as a hijab that simultaneously conceals and reveals truth, requiring interpretive sensitivity to symbolic form. Semiotics provides the analytical tools necessary to examine this veil by distinguishing between signifier, signified, and myth.<sup>17</sup> Theological aesthetics explains why sensory beauty is employed to communicate metaphysical reality beyond conceptual abstraction. This integration allows for a nuanced understanding of how Qur'anic language engages what classical scholars describe as the "eye of the soul". By combining semiotic theory with Islamic spiritual theology, the study transcends purely legal or doctrinal frameworks. It also situates eschatological discourse within a broader anthropology of perception and meaning. Such a framework counters reductionist readings that sever beauty from truth. The result is a more comprehensive theological model attentive to both form and transcendence.<sup>18</sup>

This study contributes to Qur'anic studies, Islamic theology, and religious semiotics by offering a synthesized paradigm of theological visuality.<sup>19</sup> It advances the argument that Paradise imagery functions as a symbolic language that points beyond literal description, where material beauty gestures beyond itself

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<sup>16</sup> Lane, "Qur'anic Eschatology and the Problem of Literalism."

<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Shariq, "The Representation of 'Judgment Day', 'Heaven' and 'Hell' in The 29th Chapter of The Holy Qur'an: A Semantic Study," *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation* 8, no. 8 (2025): 100–108.

<sup>18</sup> Mohd Manawi Mohd Akib et al., "The Paradise Concept and Discourse According to Mufassir Fakhr Al-Din Al-Razi," *Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2022): 690–701.

<sup>19</sup> A. Hanafiah, "Semiotics and Interpretive Layers of Qur'anic Metaphors," *Journal of Islamic Language* 14, no. 1 (2023): 67–89.

toward transcendent meaning. Through semiotic analysis, the study demonstrates how material signifiers dismantle human attachment to materialism rather than reinforce it. The research challenges ideological myths that have shaped reductive eschatological interpretations. It also enriches Indonesian scholarship by integrating local discourse with global theoretical frameworks. Methodologically, The study demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary integration in Qur'anic interpretation. The core argument situates Paradise imagery as a transformative sign system oriented toward divine beauty. This perspective restores the spiritual depth of eschatological language in contemporary contexts. Ultimately, the study positions Qur'anic aesthetics as a vital resource for renewing Islamic theological imagination.

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design centered on textual analysis and contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics to examine representations of Paradise as an integrated semiotic and aesthetic system. Qualitative interpretation is appropriate because the study investigates symbolic meaning, theological imagination, and spiritual discourse rather than measurable social variables.<sup>20</sup> Recent developments in religious studies emphasize close textual engagement and layered interpretation to understand how sacred language produces meaning beyond literal reference.<sup>21</sup>

**Table 1. Research Design Framework**

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Description</b>
Research Approach	Qualitative interpretive research
Research Type	Non-empirical, library-based study
Epistemological Orientation	Hermeneutical and reflective paradigm
Analytical Framework	Semiotics integrated with Islamic spiritual theology
Theoretical Foundations	Saussurean semiotics, Barthesian myth analysis, Islamic theological aesthetics

<sup>20</sup> Maggi Savin-Baden and Claire H. Major, *Qualitative Research: The Essential Guide* (Routledge, 2020); Amina Ahmed et al., *Mixed Methods Research: Combining Both Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, September 27, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> James S. Bielo, "Interpretive Anthropology and the Study of Sacred Texts," *Religion* 51, no. 3 (2021): 375–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2021.1874256>.

This research situates Qur'anic imagery within an interdisciplinary framework that bridges semiotics and Islamic spiritual theology, allowing symbolic forms and theological intentions to be examined together.<sup>22</sup> This approach (table 1) reflects current trends in Qur'anic studies that prioritize semantic depth, discourse analysis, and aesthetic meaning-making over purely historical reconstruction. The study is non-empirical and library-based, relying on systematic analysis of authoritative texts and peer-reviewed scholarship rather than field-based observation. From a hermeneutical perspective, the study adopts a reflective-critical orientation that recognizes interpretive situatedness while maintaining fidelity to the internal logic of Qur'anic discourse.<sup>23</sup>

The unit of analysis consists of selected Qur'anic verses explicitly discussing Paradise, eschatological reward, divine proximity, spiritual bliss, and symbolic representations of the afterlife. The verses were selected using a thematic (*mawḍūʿī*) approach based on three criteria. First, the verses contain dominant eschatological signifiers such as *Jannah*, *Firdaws*, rivers, light, garments, fruits, divine pleasure (*Riḍwān Allāh*), or companionship imagery. Second, the verses demonstrate strong metaphorical, aesthetic, or symbolic characteristics relevant to semiotic interpretation. Third, the selected passages appear recurrently across different surahs, enabling comparative examination of semantic coherence within Qur'anic discourse. Based on these criteria, verses related to Paradise imagery were selected from several Qur'anic chapters, including al-Baqarah, *Āli ʿImrān*, *al-Tawbah*, *Yūnus*, *al-Kahf*, *al-Furqān*, *Muḥammad*, *al-Raḥmān*, *al-Wāqīʿah*, *al-Insān*, *al-Zumar*, and other relevant *sūrah*s representing theological, sensory, spatial, anthropological, and transcendental dimensions of Qur'anic eschatology (Table 2).

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<sup>22</sup> Ayman El-Desouky, "The Qur'an as Discourse: Aesthetic Form and Religious Meaning," *Religion and Literature* 54, no. 1 (2022): 23–45.

<sup>23</sup> Abdullah Saeed, "Reading the Qur'an in the Twenty-First Century," *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies* 34, no. 2 (2022): 145–63.

Table 2. Unit of Analysis: Semiotic Categories of Qur'anic Paradise Imagery

Sub	Semiotic Dimension	Description of Signifiers	Representative Qur'anic Verses	Brief <i>Tafsīr</i> (Analytical)
A	Nomenclature	Designations emphasizing concealment, permanence, and peace	Q 2:25; Q 3:15 ( <i>Jannah</i> ); Q 18:107 ( <i>Firdaws</i> ); Q 9:72; Q 98:8 ( <i>'Adn</i> ); Q 10:25 ( <i>Dār al-Salām</i> )	The term <i>Jannah</i> denotes concealment, indicating that Paradise transcends empirical perception. Names such as <i>Firdaws</i> , <i>'Adn</i> , and <i>Dār al-Salām</i> function as semiotic markers of ontological permanence and existential peace rather than mere spatial locations.
B	Spatial–Architectural	Visual and spatial elements conveying divine hospitality and stability	Q 47:15; Q 98:8 (rivers); Q 39:73 (gates); Q 25:75 (pavilions); Q 18:31; Q 56:15 (thrones)	Spatial imagery constructs a visual theology of divine hospitality. The syntactic form “ <i>wa futiḥat abwābuhā</i> ” (Q 39:73) implies pre-opened gates, symbolizing grace that precedes human arrival and effort.
C	Sensory Attributes	Metaphors of taste and scent expressing ineffable bliss	Q 47:15 (milk, honey); Q 37:45–47 (pure wine); Q 76:17 (ginger); Q 83:25–26 (musk)	Sensory metaphors translate non-material bliss into experiential language. These signs do not literalize pleasure but function semiotically to gesture toward a joy that exceeds linguistic articulation.
D	Anthropological Symbols	Companionship figures symbolizing purity and spiritual embodiment	Q 44:54; Q 56:22 ( <i>hūr</i> ); Q 56:17; Q 76:19 ( <i>wildān mukhalladūn</i> ); Q 52:20	Anthropological figures symbolize relational harmony and the spiritualization of embodiment. A semiotic reading reveals these images as personifications of purity and companionship rather than objects of

				corporeal gratification.
E	Visual– Material Aesthetics	Symbols of honor, dignity, and transformed embodiment	Q 18:31; Q 76:21 (silk); Q 22:23; Q 35:33 (gold, pearls); Q 55:48–54 (greenery)	Material aesthetics signify the transformation of moral virtue into aesthetic dignity. The glorified body in Paradise becomes a medium of divine light rather than a locus of material desire.
F	Transcendent Realities	Ultimate non-material signifiers of divine proximity	Q 9:72; Q 98:8 ( <i>Riḍwān</i> <i>Allāh</i> ); Q 18:110; Q 29:5 ( <i>Liqā’</i> <i>Allāh</i> ); Q 39:69; Q 57:12 (divine light)	These verses affirm that the highest reality of Paradise is divine pleasure and proximity. Material delights are re- situated as signs leading toward the ultimate experience of divine presence and illumination.

The unit of analysis (table 2.) consists of Qur’anic verses that explicitly depict Paradise and eschatological reward. To ensure analytical rigor, the study applies cross-textual comparison between verses, triangulation with classical *tafsīr* traditions, and conceptual verification through contemporary Qur’anic scholarship. Recurrent symbolic patterns are identified across multiple passages to maintain interpretive consistency and semantic coherence. Through this integrative methodological framework, Paradise imagery is analyzed not as isolated metaphors, but as an interconnected semiotic-theological system shaping ethical imagination, spiritual consciousness, and the Qur’anic vision of transcendence.

### Unveiling the Eschatological Language

The study of eschatological language in the Qur’ān represents a significant and intellectually rich area within the broader discourse of ‘Aqīdah (Islamic creed) and Islamic philosophy.<sup>24</sup> The

<sup>24</sup> Muallim Lubis Taufik Taufik, “An Analytical Study on Eschatology and Reasoning in the Light of the Qur’an and Hadith: Interpretation of Selected Verses,” *Proceeding of the International Conference on Religious Education and Cross-*

analysis of Qur'anic Paradise imagery demonstrates that eschatological language in the Qur'an operates through a multilayered semiotic structure consisting of denotative, connotative, and transcendental dimensions. Across the selected verses, Paradise is consistently represented not merely as a material destination of posthumous reward, but as a symbolic system that communicates theological, ethical, and spiritual meanings. The findings indicate that Qur'anic signifiers concerning Paradise operate at multiple interpretive levels: beginning with sensory and linguistic familiarity, expanding toward symbolic interpretation, and ultimately culminating in transcendental awareness centered on divine proximity.

Paradise imagery in the Qur'an operates through a multilayered semiotic structure that transforms concrete imagery into symbolic theological discourse. Recent scholarship has increasingly examined how religious texts encode meaning through layered systems of signification. Based on semiotic categorization, the findings are organized into six interrelated dimensions: nomenclature, spatial-architectural imagery, sensory attributes, anthropological symbolism, visual-material aesthetics, and transcendent realities. Each category demonstrates how Qur'anic language transforms concrete imagery into symbolic theological discourse.<sup>25</sup>

### **Paradise as concealed and eternal reality**

The first category concerns the nomenclature of Paradise, including *Jannah* (جَنَّة), *Firdaws* (فِرْدَوْس), *Adn* (عَدْن), and *Dār al-Salām* (دَارُ السَّلَام) (Q 2:25; Q 3:15; Q 18:107; Q 9:72; Q 98:8; Q 10:25). At the denotative level, these terms designate the realm of reward promised to believers. Philologically, however, the root of *Jannah*

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*Cultural Understanding*, ahead of print, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.61132/icreccu.v1i2.37>.

<sup>25</sup> Sahrul Gunawan, "أنواع الجنة في القرآن الكريم (دراسة دلالية)" (PhD Thesis, UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, 2024). Mohammad Fakhri Wirman Hardi Gunawan, "From Signs To Values: A Semiotic Psychopedagogical Analysis Of Mahllul Qiyam," *Alinea: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Pengajaran*, ahead of print, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.58218/alinea.v6i1.2595>.

(*j-n-n*) signifies concealment or hiddenness, indicating that Paradise refers to a reality beyond ordinary empirical perception.

At the connotative level, the nomenclature encodes permanence, existential peace, and sacred security. ‘*Adn* signifies eternal stability, while *Dār al-Salām* symbolizes a realm entirely liberated from fear, conflict, and mortality. These lexical structures therefore function as symbolic markers of metaphysical tranquility rather than merely geographical descriptions,<sup>26</sup> as resumed at the following table of III. This table depicts the transformation of key Paradise nomenclature across three interpretive levels, demonstrating progressive movement from material designation to theological transcendence.<sup>27</sup>

**Table 3: lexical Structures as Symbolic Markers of Metaphysical Tranquility**

Paradise Term	Root Meaning	Denotative Level	Connotative Level	Transcendental Level
Jannah (جَنَّة)	j-n-n: concealment	Garden, reward realm	Hidden spiritual reality	Divine nearness beyond perception
Firdaws (فِرْدَوْس)	Persian origin: enclosed garden	Highest Paradise	Supreme spiritual station	Ultimate divine proximity
‘Adn (عَدْن)	Permanence, settling	Eternal dwelling	Ontological stability	Everlasting divine presence
Dār al-Salām (دَارُ السَّلَامِ)	Abode of peace	Safe haven	Liberation from mortality	Sacred security in God
Riḍwān Allāh (رِضْوَانُ اللَّهِ)	Divine pleasure	God’s satisfaction	Ultimate fulfillment	Transcendent acceptance
Liqā’ Allāh (لِقَاءُ اللَّهِ)	Meeting with God	Divine encounter	Spiritual reunion	Pure theological reality

<sup>26</sup> Muhammad Badrun, “The Significance of the Quranic Language as a Fundamental Concept of Semantics: An Analysis of Toshihiko Izutsu’s Thought,” *International Journal of Quranic Research*, ahead of print, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.22452/quranica.vol15no1.22>.

<sup>27</sup> Rebecca Ruth Gould Kayvan Tahmasebian, “Hyper-Exegesis in Persian Translations of the Qur’an: On the Disjointed Letters as Translational Challenges,” *International Journal Middle East Studies*, ahead of print, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020743824000266>; Avishai Bar-Asher, “The Ontology, Arrangement, and Appearance of Paradise in Castilian Kabbalah in Light of Contemporary Islamic Traditions from al-Andalus,” *Religions*, ahead of print, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110553>.

At the transcendental level, the names of Paradise direct interpretation toward divine nearness and eternal spiritual fulfillment. The lexical concealment embedded in *Jannah* semiotically signifies the limits of human language in fully representing the reality of the afterlife.

### **Spatial–Architectural Imagery: Theology of Divine Hospitality**

The Qur'ān depicts Paradise through spatial elements including rivers (*anhār*), gates (*abwāb*), pavilions (*ghuraf*), and thrones (*surur*), creating vivid architectural imagery recognizable to readers. Research on Islamic gardens demonstrates how Paradise imagery has contributed to shaping the history of artistic and architectural expression.<sup>28</sup> The second category consists of spatial and architectural imagery such as rivers, gates, pavilions, and thrones (Q 47:15; Q 39:73; Q 25:75; Q 18:31; Q 56:15). Denotatively, these verses construct visual representations of order, beauty, and abundance within Paradise.

Connotatively, these architectural signs symbolize divine hospitality and sacred acceptance. The Qur'anic phrase *wa futiḥat abwābuhā* (وَفُتِحَتْ أَبْوَابُهَا) in Q 39:73 implies that the gates of Paradise are already opened before the arrival of the righteous, symbolizing grace that precedes human effort. Rivers function as signs of purification and continuity, while elevated thrones symbolize spiritual dignity and exaltation.<sup>29</sup>

At the transcendental level, Paradise architecture signifies participation in divine mercy and cosmic harmony. Spatial imagery becomes theological rather than merely physical, representing the soul's stable residence within sacred presence.

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<sup>28</sup> Fatoş Adiloğlu Burcu Alarslan ULUDAS, "Islamic Gardens with a Special Emphasis on the Ottoman Paradise Gardens: The Sense of Place between Imagery and Reality," *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, ahead of print, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.29333/ojcmnt/2345>.

<sup>29</sup> Nevine Nasser, "Beyond the Veil of Form: Developing a Transformative Approach toward Islamic Sacred Architecture through Designing a Contemporary Sufi Centre," *Religions*, ahead of print, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030190>; Ari Michael Gordon, "Sacred Orientation: The Qibla as Ritual, Metaphor, and Identity Marker in Early Islam," *Scholarly Commons (University of Pennsylvania)*, ahead of print, 2018,

### Sensory Attributes: Experiential Language and Spiritual Bliss

The Qur'ān employs sensory imagery involving milk, honey, wine, ginger, and musk to describe Paradise. At the denotative level, these signs refer to pleasurable sensory experiences recognizable within human life. Connotatively, however, these signs communicate purified pleasure free from corruption, intoxication, decay, or bodily excess. Research on the semiotics of sensory experience demonstrates that sensation is emergent in joint acts of sensing and sense-making, entailing what scholars call "somatic work" (Q 47:15; Q 37:45–47; Q 76:17; Q 83:25–26). Denotatively, these elements refer to pleasurable sensory experiences recognizable within human life.<sup>30</sup>

Connotatively, however, these signs communicate purified pleasure free from corruption, intoxication, decay, or bodily excess. The expression *rahīq makhtūm* (رَحِيقٍ مَخْتُومٍ) indicates a sealed and perfected drink, while musk symbolizes refined purity and transcendental fragrance. Sensory imagery therefore functions symbolically to communicate joy beyond material imperfection.

At the transcendental level, Sensory metaphors serve as linguistic approximations of realities that surpass human comprehension. The Qur'an employs experiential language not to literalize pleasure, but to guide the imagination toward ineffable spiritual bliss.

### Anthropological Symbols: Purified Companionship and Embodiment

Anthropological imagery includes references to *hūr ʿīn* (حُورٌ عِينٌ) and *wildān mukhalladūn* (وَلَدَانٌ مُّخَلَّدُونَ) (Q 44:54; Q 56:22; Q 56:17; Q 76:19; Q 52:20). At the denotative level, these figures appear as companions inhabiting Paradise.

Philological analysis demonstrates that *hūr* derives from a root associated with purity, clarity, and radiant whiteness rather than exclusively erotic femininity. Connotatively, these anthropological symbols represent relational harmony, spiritual companionship,

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<sup>30</sup> Phillip Vannini Dennis D. Waskul, "Smell, Odor, and Somatic Work: Sense-Making and Sensory Management," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, ahead of print, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019027250807100107>.

and purified embodiment free from jealousy, domination, and corporeal corruption.

At the transcendental level, these figures symbolize the restoration of existential wholeness and sacred relationality. Human companionship in Paradise is portrayed as a perfected relational state grounded in purity and spiritual intimacy.

### **Visual–Material Aesthetics: Moral Beauty and Spiritual Dignity**

Verses concerning silk garments, gold bracelets, pearls, and greenery (Q 18:31; Q 76:21; Q 22:23; Q 35:33; Q 55:48–54) form the visual–material aesthetics of Paradise. Denotatively, these signs represent luxury, adornment, and beauty.

Connotatively, these material forms symbolize dignity, honor, moral refinement, and spiritual elevation. Silk signifies liberation from suffering and hardship, while pearls and gold symbolize incorruptible value. Greenery symbolizes life, renewal, and serenity. The aesthetic imagery therefore reflects the transformation of ethical virtue into visible spiritual beauty.

At the transcendental level, material aesthetics become manifestations of divine illumination. Beauty in Paradise is presented not as material consumption, but as the radiant expression of sacred perfection and divine grace.

### **Transcendent Realities: Divine Proximity as Ultimate Fulfillment**

The final category concerns explicitly transcendent signifiers such as *Riḍwān Allāh* (رِضْوَانُ اللَّهِ), *Liqā' Allāh* (لِقَاءُ اللَّهِ), and divine light (Q 9:72; Q 98:8; Q 18:110; Q 29:5; Q 39:69; Q 57:12). Denotatively, these verses move beyond material imagery toward direct theological expression.

Connotatively, divine pleasure and proximity symbolize ultimate existential fulfillment that transcends all sensory enjoyment. Material rewards function as secondary signs pointing toward the higher reality of God's acceptance and nearness.

At the transcendental level, all semiotic dimensions converge into the experience of divine presence. These findings demonstrate that the highest meaning of Paradise in the Qur'an is not physical

enjoyment itself, but participation in divine illumination, mercy, and eternal proximity to God.

Overall, the results indicate that Qur'anic Paradise imagery forms an integrated semiotic-theological system in which material signs continuously direct interpretation toward spiritual transcendence. Denotative meanings provide linguistic accessibility, connotative meanings generate symbolic depth, and transcendental meanings orient the reader toward the ultimate theological reality of divine presence.

### **Barthesian Semiotics and Three-Order Signification**

This study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework as the primary analytical approach for examining Qur'anic Paradise imagery. Barthes conceptualizes meaning as operating through layered systems of signification consisting of denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, language conveys literal and descriptive meaning; at the connotative level, signs generate cultural, emotional, and symbolic associations; while at the mythic level, linguistic structures transform into broader ideological or transcendental narratives (Ali & Sahal, 2025). Within Qur'anic discourse, this framework is particularly relevant because Paradise imagery frequently employs material language that simultaneously communicates theological and spiritual meanings beyond literal representation.

Previous studies demonstrate that semiotic structures in religious texts function not merely as linguistic ornamentation, but as mechanisms for constructing emotional resonance, moral orientation, and spiritual consciousness (Gunawan & Fakhri, 2026). Symbolic expressions in sacred texts create multilayered systems of meaning through repetition, imagery, and affective associations that shape ethical imagination and transcendental awareness. In the context of Qur'anic eschatology, signs such as gardens, rivers, light, garments, and companionship operate not only descriptively, but pedagogically, guiding readers toward spiritual reflection.

Accordingly, this research adapts Barthes' three-order signification into a Qur'anic semiotic framework consisting of denotative, connotative, and transcendental dimensions. The

transcendental dimension adapts Barthes' notion of myth into the theological domain of Islamic revelation, where material signs ultimately point toward divine proximity, sacred beauty, and metaphysical fulfillment. Through this framework, Paradise imagery is understood as a symbolic system that transforms sensory representations into spiritual meanings and theological consciousness.

### **Izutsu's Semantic Weltanschauung Approach**

To strengthen the semantic and conceptual analysis of Qur'anic terminology, this study also draws upon Toshihiko Izutsu's semantic approach to Qur'anic worldview (*Weltanschauung*). Izutsu argues that Qur'anic language cannot be understood through isolated lexical translation alone, because every key term functions relationally within an interconnected conceptual network that reflects the worldview of the Qur'ān itself (Badrun, 2023). Accordingly, his approach emphasizes semantic relations, conceptual structures, and the internal coherence of Qur'anic vocabulary.

Izutsu's semantic theory is particularly significant for analyzing terms related to Paradise such as *Jannah*, *Firdaws*, *'Adn*, *Ridwān Allāh*, and *Liqā' Allāh*. These expressions do not merely denote physical entities or locations, but encode ontological, ethical, and spiritual meanings within the Qur'anic worldview. Previous studies applying Izutsu's framework demonstrate that Qur'anic concepts develop meaning through interconnected layers including basic meaning, relational meaning, historical context, and worldview construction (Nasarudin et al., 2025). Through this perspective, eschatological language becomes part of a broader theological structure involving divine-human relations, morality, transcendence, and the unseen realm (*al-ghayb*).

In this study, Izutsu's semantic approach complements Barthesian semiotics by enabling a deeper examination of how Paradise terminology constructs metaphysical meaning within Qur'anic discourse. While semiotics analyzes the transformation of signs into symbolic theological narratives, Izutsu's framework clarifies how these signs operate relationally within the Qur'anic conceptual universe. The integration of both approaches allows

Paradise imagery to be interpreted not only symbolically, but also epistemologically and theologically.

### **Classical *Tafsīr* and Modern Hermeneutics**

This research also incorporates insights from classical Qur'anic exegesis and modern hermeneutical approaches in order to maintain interpretive balance between textual fidelity and symbolic analysis. Classical *tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr* remains foundational in Islamic scholarship because it prioritizes interpretation through the Qur'ān itself, prophetic traditions, and explanations transmitted from the Companions and early Muslim scholars (Hasan et al., 2025). Such approaches preserve linguistic authenticity and provide the theological foundations necessary for understanding eschatological passages within the broader Islamic tradition.

At the same time, modern Qur'anic hermeneutics has expanded interpretive possibilities by emphasizing literary structure, symbolism, rhetoric, and historical context. Scholars such as Amīn al-Khūlī and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd argue that Qur'anic language should be approached not only normatively, but also as a dynamic linguistic and cultural discourse (Hidayah & Zulfadli, 2024). Al-Khūlī focuses on literary and rhetorical analysis, while Abū Zayd emphasizes the contextual and symbolic dimensions of revelation, particularly the role of metaphor and narrative in communicating theological meaning.

The integration of classical and modern approaches is important because Paradise imagery in the Qur'ān contains both descriptive and symbolic dimensions. Literal readings alone are insufficient to explain the theological depth of eschatological language, yet purely allegorical readings risk detaching interpretation from the textual tradition. This study therefore positions itself within an integrative hermeneutical framework that combines philological analysis, classical exegesis, literary semiotics, and theological interpretation. Such an approach enables Qur'anic Paradise imagery to be understood simultaneously as revealed language, symbolic discourse, and spiritual pedagogy.

Table 4. Comparison of Interpretive Approaches to Paradise Imagery

Approach	Key Features	Methodological Tools	Strengths	Limitations
Literalist-Traditional	Material-focused, descriptive, preservation of textual surface	Classical <i>tafsir</i> , linguistic analysis	Maintains textual fidelity, accessible interpretation	May reduce transformative meaning
Symbolic-Spiritual	Emphasizes transcendent meaning, Sufi hermeneutics	Mystical interpretation, allegorical reading	Captures Qur'anic pedagogy, spiritual depth	Risk of relativism, departure from text
Barthesian Semiotic	Three-level signification: denotation, connotation, myth	Structural analysis, sign theory	Systematic framework, reveals hidden meanings	May impose Western categories
Izutsu Semantic	Weltanschauung analysis, key term study	Comparative semantics, relational meaning	Contextualizes worldview, historical depth	Focused on select vocabulary
Integrated Framework	Combines denotative, connotative, transcendental levels	Multiple methodologies interdisciplinary	Balances all dimensions, comprehensive	Requires methodological rigor

Within contemporary Qur'anic studies, hermeneutical approaches are particularly important in interpreting eschatological and symbolic verses whose meanings exceed purely literal representation. Paradise imagery frequently employs metaphorical, aesthetic, and experiential language that invites deeper theological interpretation beyond material description alone. Therefore, modern hermeneutics enables Qur'anic eschatology to be understood not only textually, but also symbolically, spiritually, and existentially.

### Sufi Aesthetics and Mystical Hermeneutics

The final theoretical foundation of this study is derived from Sufi aesthetics and mystical hermeneutics, particularly concerning the relationship between beauty, spirituality, and divine knowledge. Within Islamic mystical thought, beauty (*jamāl*) is not viewed as merely aesthetic pleasure, but as a manifestation of divine perfection and a pathway toward spiritual realization. Sufi thinkers therefore understand symbolic language, imagery, and aesthetic experience as instruments for the purification of the soul

(*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and the cultivation of spiritual consciousness (Yasmin, 2025).

This perspective is particularly relevant for interpreting Qur'anic Paradise imagery because many eschatological descriptions employ aesthetic symbols such as light, gardens, fragrance, greenery, garments, and radiance. In Sufi hermeneutics, such imagery functions not only materially, but spiritually, directing human consciousness toward divine beauty and metaphysical truth. The aesthetic language of Paradise thus becomes a form of moral and spiritual pedagogy that transforms sensory imagination into contemplative awareness.

Sufi aesthetics also challenges modern secular understandings of beauty that separate aesthetics from ethics and transcendence. Classical Muslim thinkers such as al-Ghazālī emphasize that true beauty originates from divine perfection and is reflected through spiritual refinement, moral virtue, and inner illumination. Accordingly, the imagery of Paradise in the Qur'ān can be understood as symbolic representations of sacred harmony rather than literal depictions of material luxury alone.

Through this framework, the present study interprets Qur'anic Paradise imagery as a spiritual semiotic system in which aesthetic forms function as mediators between sensory experience and divine transcendence. The integration of Sufi aesthetics with semiotics and semantic analysis therefore enables a more comprehensive understanding of Paradise as simultaneously theological, symbolic, ethical, and spiritual.

Through this semiotic decoding framework, the Qur'an presents Paradise as a multilayered symbolic discourse in which denotative imagery, connotative symbolism, and transcendental theology interact dynamically. The study therefore demonstrates that Qur'anic eschatology cannot be adequately understood through rigid literalism alone, because its language intentionally operates through symbolic and theological depths that guide human consciousness beyond material imagination toward spiritual transcendence.

The discussion reaffirms that Qur'anic imagery of Paradise is best understood as a symbolic and spiritual system rather than a

literal map of the afterlife.<sup>31</sup> Classical and contemporary Muslim thinkers emphasize that descriptions of gardens, light, garments, and companionship are pedagogical devices intended to guide the human soul toward higher awareness. These sensory images do not exist for indulgence but to awaken moral sensitivity, hope, and spiritual aspiration.

Islamic theology has long maintained that language about the unseen must operate symbolically.<sup>32</sup> The Qur'an addresses human imagination because imagination serves as an intermediary between intellect and spiritual realization. Through this lens, references to open gates, divine welcome, and perpetual peace signify ethical openness and divine mercy rather than physical movement.

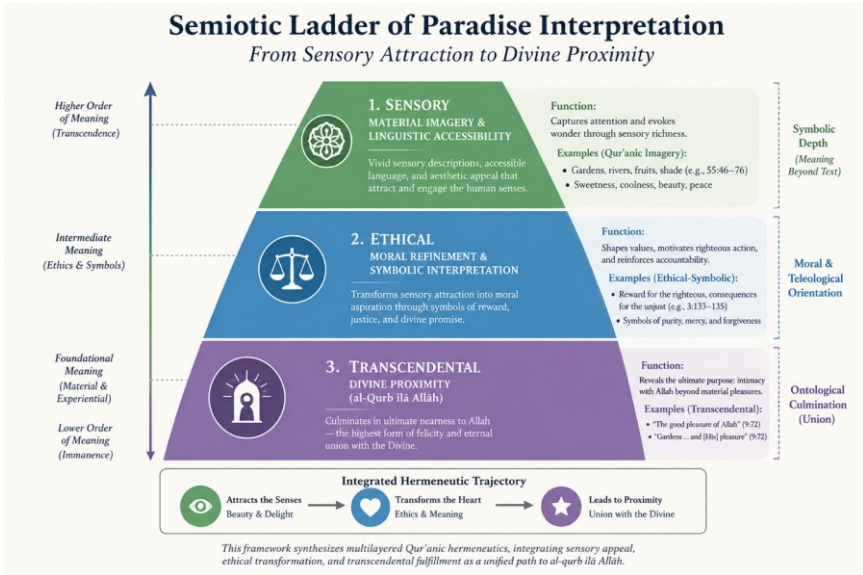
This study acknowledges that classical mufassirūn often retained both literal and symbolic elements in their readings.<sup>33</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, for instance, typically presented multiple interpretive possibilities without necessarily privileging one over another. Al-Ghazālī's mystical reading in works like *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* emphasized the symbolic dimension while not categorically rejecting literal aspects, as illustrated at the following visuals.

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<sup>31</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (State University of New York Press, 2006); Al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman (Brigham Young University Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Al-Tabari, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (Dar al-Fikr, 2001).



The present study does not argue that all Paradise imagery must be read non-literally. Rather, it contends that the semiotic and spiritual dimensions have been under-theorized in contemporary discourse, leading to an imbalance that privileges material descriptions at the expense of transformative meaning.<sup>34</sup>

The implications of this understanding are significant for contemporary Islamic life. Theologically, the findings suggest that beauty is central to divine guidance.<sup>35</sup> Educationally, it encourages approaches that cultivate symbolic literacy, imagination, and ethical sensitivity rather than fear-driven religiosity. Spiritually, it counters transactional understandings of worship by emphasizing love, presence, and excellence of character.

Viewing Paradise as a symbolic horizon rather than a deferred location reshapes how believers relate to time, hope, and responsibility. The future is no longer an escape from the present but a measure by which the present is ethically judged.

<sup>34</sup> M. Amin Hanafiah, "Aesthetic Hermeneutics and the Limits of Literalism in Qur'anic Interpretation," *Studia Islamika* 30, no. 2 (2023): 201–24.

<sup>35</sup> Reza Shah-Kazemi, "Beauty and Transcendence in Islamic Spirituality," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 50, no. 4 (2021): 471–88.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Qur'anic Paradise imagery forms an integrated semiotic-theological system in which material signs progressively direct human consciousness toward transcendental meaning and divine proximity. Through the integration of Barthesian semiotics, Izutsu's semantic worldview, classical *tafsīr*, modern hermeneutics, and Sufi aesthetics, the findings reveal that Paradise in the Qur'ān should not be understood merely as a literal geography of the afterlife, but as a symbolic discourse communicating spiritual beauty, ethical refinement, existential harmony, and metaphysical fulfillment. Denotative meanings provide linguistic accessibility, connotative meanings generate symbolic and moral depth, while transcendental meanings orient all signs toward the ultimate theological reality of divine presence (*al-qurb ilā Allāh*). Consequently, Qur'anic eschatological language operates as a multilayered communicative system that transforms sensory imagery into spiritual and theological consciousness.

The study further suggest that Paradise imagery functions as a graded semiotic ladder leading from sensory attraction toward spiritual realization. The nomenclature of Paradise, spatial-architectural imagery, sensory attributes, anthropological symbolism, visual-material aesthetics, and transcendental references collectively demonstrate how Qur'anic language transforms concrete imagery into symbolic theological meaning. Sensory and anthropological depictions involving pleasure, beauty, fragrance, companionship, and light therefore function not as hedonistic representations alone, but as symbolic mediators expressing purity, harmony, dignity, and divine intimacy. By situating Paradise within a semiotic-theological framework, this study challenges reductionist literalism without negating the ontological reality of the afterlife affirmed in Islamic theology. The research also offers an integrative analytical model for future Qur'anic studies concerned with symbolism, eschatology, and spiritual hermeneutics.

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