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Semiotics of 'Doors' at the Entrances of Islamic Pilgrimage Shrines Based on the Peircean Model*

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Abstract

Human beings are meaning-generators, and their pursuit of meaning manifests through interpreting "signs." Architectural elements can be perceived as signs capable of conveying valuable and significant messages. The more precise the semiotic interpretation of architectural elements, the deeper the understanding of their meaning. Since entry into any space necessitates passing through its door, the door functions as a connector between different realms, as an intermediary between a given place's exterior and interior. Given the unique architectural significance of doors at entrances of Islamic pilgrimage shrines, they can be interpreted as meaningful signs. "Being at the shrine" can be understood as a form of human presence, which is materialized at entrances of Islamic pilgrimage shrines, particularly through the focal point of the door. The door marks the beginning of a transition into a sacred space, and numerous rituals are associated with this entry point. These rituals emphasize the commencement of the rites of entrance and initiation into a holy site. This study applies semiotic analysis based on Peirce's model to examine the architectural element of the door as a meaningful sign. It seeks to answer the following questions: How can the physical characteristics of an entrance be interpreted both as a response to functional necessity and as a meaning-generating sign in the forms of index (*namāya*), symbol (*namād*), and icon (*shamāyil*)? Additionally, what concepts are semantically aligned with the door concerning the entrances of Islamic pilgrimage shrines? The research is based on a library study for data

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collection and employs a descriptive-analytical method to interpret the semiotics of doors. The findings indicate that the architectural element of the door, beyond its functional essence, encapsulates profound meanings. Semiotics offers a powerful tool for enhancing this architectural element's understanding and deep analysis, allowing for a more precise interpretation. The primary function of the door as a sign is to establish a communicative space between the exterior and the interior. The door facilitates guidance and invitation into the sacred environment by dividing the spatial domain into inside and outside. Moreover, the first rites of initiation and presence commence here—placing the hand on the chest, expressing reverence, offering salutations, and seeking permission to enter. Therefore, the door is the gateway to the realm of presence and encounter. In the entrance of Islamic pilgrimage shrines, the door can be interpreted as a symbolic manifestation of the Divine Name *al-Hādī* (the Guide), the Imam's guidance, the Perfect Man's station, and the mediator of Divine Grace.

Keywords: semiotics, Peirce, door, entrance, pilgrimage

1. Introduction

To enter any dwelling, one must first pass through its door. The door meaningfully facilitates the transition from the external domain to the internal realm. In pilgrimage, whose essence is visitation (meeting, *dīdār*), the door serves as a pathway for this sacred proximity.

In the architecture of the entrances of the Islamic pilgrimage shrines, the spatial arrangement of architectural elements centering around the shrine enables profound layers of semantic interpretation (Miqdadi et al 2023, 110). Beyond its architectural function, the door—as the first component encountered upon entering the sacred entrance—marks the initiation of the visitation rites and the request for permission to enter. Additionally, the door facilitates the experience of transitioning from the material, external world to the spiritual, internal domain; it signifies detachment from the outer world and connection to the inner sanctum.

The door acts as a symbolic passageway at the entrances of the Islamic pilgrimage shrines, transcending its physical dimensions to serve as a boundary between the material world and the sacred, spiritual space. This sign not only fulfills its functional role but also encapsulates significant concepts.

Pilgrimage is the most love-oriented and mystical form of visitation, and architecture provides the most meaningful spatial context for expressing this phenomenon. The central question arises: just as the door serves as the external intermediary of entry and guidance to the shrine—marking the beginning of the rituals of proximity to the sacred space—how can the inner manifestation of this

intermediary, in the essence of pilgrimage itself, be interpreted through the lens of semiotics?

1-1. Background

The earliest application of semiotics in Islamic art traces back to Oleg Grabar's theories in the late 20th century. His most significant contribution to visual perception is found in his book *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992). In this book, he considers ornamentations as architectural elements mediating the meaning association process.

Furthermore, in his article *Symbol and Sign in the Interpretation of Islamic Architecture*, translated into Persian by Nayyir Tahouri, Grabar (2007, 13–25) introduced semiotic and symbolic approaches to studying Islamic architecture. However, his work did not provide a clear and comprehensive methodological framework for research in this area.

1-2. Definition of Pilgrimage

In Arabic, *ziyāra* linguistically denotes "inclination" or "tendency" (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1995, 387). In terminology, pilgrimage refers to being present before the visited in a manner that expresses reverence and exaltation (Ṭurayḥī 1996, 320). It is defined as: "The intentional approach toward the visited, accompanied by heartfelt veneration, spiritual intimacy, and undertaken with the purpose of devotion and attaining spiritual perfection" (Fouladi et al 2015, 7–32).

1-3. Semiotics

Semiotics has deep historical roots as a scientific discipline, tracing back to the earliest manifestations of philosophical and scientific reasoning (Ahmadi 2009, 716). It is the study of the meaning-making process, encompassing various inquiries (Culler 2014, 104). "Anything that holds meaning within a culture qualifies as a sign and falls within the semiotic analysis domain. This expansive scope includes most humanities and social sciences fields, covering aspects of human activity such as music, architecture, cuisine, customs, advertising, fashion, and literature" (Culler 2014, 112). The primary aim of semiotics is to identify and analyze signs and symbols—whether they manifest in spoken or written language or exist in non-verbal forms (Fakouhi 2004, 299).

Two of the most prominent figures in the foundation of semiotics are the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) (Ahmadi 2009, 57). Despite the extensive developments in semiotic studies over time, the models introduced by Saussure and Peirce remain

highly influential and serve as the foundation for subsequent research (Sujoudi 2014, 12).

A sign is something that represents something else using an association. In other words, any entity that functions as a "signifier" and refers to something beyond itself can be considered a sign (Chandler 2007, 41). A sign is a tangible and observable phenomenon, which, through its relationship with an absent phenomenon, serves as its substitute or representation (Ahmadi 2009).

Charles Sanders Peirce first introduced the term sign and its tripartite classification into scientific discourse, later becoming widely adopted across various disciplines. Peirce referred to the interaction between the representamen (*numūd*),[1] the object,[2] and the interpretant[3] as the sign process (Chandler 2007, 60–61). Among the three ways he classified signs, one particular framework has gained significant recognition and application (Sujoudi 2008, 27).

Peirce categorizes signs based on their relationship with the object into three types: icon (*shamāyil*), symbol (*namād*), and index (*namāya*) (Alston 2002, 137).

An *iconic sign* is a "sign that represents its object based on resemblance, and thus signifying it" (Chandler 2007, 95). A *symbolic sign* is defined as a "sign that relates to its referent through convention or a firmly established rule, often associated with general concepts. Linguistic signs, traffic signals, and musical notes fall into this category" (Sujoudi 2008, 207). A *symbol* is a sign whose relationship between form and meaning is not based on objective similarity but rather on a conventional association (Muhsiniyan Rad 2006, 208). "The interpreter's perspective links a symbol to its referent, without such a connection necessarily existing in reality" (Chandler 2007, 69). On the other hand, an *indexical sign* is "a sign that is identified through its reference to its object and the possible connection it establishes with it. An index is a sign influenced by its object, meaning it is a sign that remains as a trace of a particular object. For instance, smoke serves as an index of fire, just as clouds indicate rain" (Chandler 2007, 208).

2. The Meaningfulness of the "Door" at the Entrance of Islamic Pilgrimage Shrines

Humans are on a continuous journey from the external to the internal, and at the entrance of Islamic pilgrimage shrines, the door serves as an apt symbol for this transitional space—a boundary between the outer and inner realms. The "being at the shrine" can be understood as a quality of presence, which, in the context of entrances of Islamic pilgrimage shrines, is materialized through the door. Thus, as the first

architectural element in this meaning-laden space, the door possesses the potential to function as a semiotic sign.

Semiotics offers a robust framework for analyzing and interpreting architectural elements. Architecture and linguistics share a fundamental similarity: just as linguistic texts convey meaning, "buildings and structures also function as carriers of meaning, requiring architects to understand the processes through which meaning is transmitted" (Nesbitt 2007, 135). Accordingly, an architectural work can be perceived as a "text-architecture" (Ra'isi 2016, 62).

According to certain contemporary theories, the viewer's inclination to engage in a particular behavior when encountering an architectural work can also be regarded as part of that work's meaning (Hospers 1992, 48). In pilgrimage shrines, visitors' inclination to place their hands on their chests, bow slightly, or express reverence upon entering the shrine is itself an extension of the architectural meaning of the entrance.

In Islamic pilgrimage sites, the door, with its dual capacity for connection and separation, functions as more than just an architectural entrance. The door's bipolar structure serves the function of demarcation and boundary and simultaneously embodies the potential for division and the possibility of union. Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) also reflects on this duality, emphasizing the door's twofold existence. As Bachelard says, "Why should the emotion embodied in doors not be considered the small entrance toward God?" (Bachelard 2013, 28).

The journeying process begins at this entrance—a meaningful passage from the external to the internal. Passing through the entrance of a place signifies a transition into a new space (Norberg-Schulz 2008, 40–43). This moment of encounter is not merely a physical presence in a sacred location but also a profound spiritual connection between the pilgrim and the shrine. The experience of being at the shrine is thus a unique form of the human's being in a sacred space, a state that can be best described by the terms "presence" and "visitation."

2-1. The Interpretation of the "Door" as an Indexical Sign

One of the primary and most significant indexical functions of the door in Islamic pilgrimage shrines is establishing communication between the external and internal spaces. The door is a boundary separating these two realms and the initial point of interaction and engagement with visitors. It instills in the pilgrim a sense of invitation and acceptance, allowing them to experience "being at the shrine."

Moreover, the door represents a unique journey of spiritual elevation, "functioning as a permit for entry into a higher realm" (Naqizada 2013, 210). It serves as a conduit for connection, guiding individuals from one point to another and facilitating a process of passage and transition. The meaning of the door thus symbolizes both connection and separation. This duality is evident in the traditional Arabic term *bāb* (door),[4] which indicates a specific movement occurring within a defined span of time (Madqalchi 2017, 19).

Furthermore, in semiotic terms, the door is an index of passage, "passing through" is a consequence of the door's presence. Even linguistically, the Persian words "*dar*" (door) and "*rad*" (rejection) share phonetic similarity, reinforcing the conceptual relationship. However, despite the shared meaning of "passing through", the door as a semiotic index can yield two opposite interpretations:

- **Door as an index of passage**: Signifying passaging through and acceptance.
- **Door as an index of rejection**: Signifying not passing (through), not being accepted.

Thus, at the entrance of Islamic pilgrimage shrines, the door functions as a opposite[5] index, signifying: inside vs. outside, *maḥram* vs. non-*maḥram*, guidance (acceptance) vs. misguidance (exclusion), apparent vs. hidden, and beginning vs. end.

2-2. The Interpretation of the "Door" as a Symbolic Sign

To analyze the symbolic meaning of the door, we must examine its conceptual equivalents in other texts, employing the intertextual reading method. The principle of intertextuality[6] asserts that no text exists in isolation (Ahmadi 2009, 58); rather, all texts are interconnected. Intertextuality underscores the relationships among texts, emphasizing that texts always interact with one another in some form. In this study, by identifying intertextual connections, we aim to arrive at a new understanding of the text centered around the sign of the door.

A notable example of symbolic usage of the door appears in the well-known hadith: "I am the House of Wisdom, and ʿAlī is its door" (Tirmidhī 1988, 637). Here, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) employs a symbolic and profound expression, describing himself as the House of Wisdom and Imam ʿAlī (PBUH) as its door.

Additionally, regarding Imam ʿAlī's spiritual authority, the Prophet stated, "If you accept the guardianship of ʿAlī, you will find him a guiding leader" (Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd 1981, 11). It is a symbolic expression of the truth that *wilāya* (spiritual guardianship; sainthood) is the key to attaining divine guidance—just as entering any physical space requires a "door," so too must one pass through the "door" of *wilāyah* to access the

realm of divine guidance. These statements reinforce the symbolic role of the door as a gateway to divine knowledge, guidance, and spiritual access.

2-3. The 'Door' as a Symbol of Divine Guidance

In addition to its previously discussed dimensions, one of the core associations evoked by the 'door' is that of showing the way, guiding, and leading (Tabataba'i 1999, 194).[7] The Quran declares: "And We made them imams, guiding according to Our Command" (Quran 21:73)[8] Again, "We appointed leaders [literally, "Imams"] from among them who guided by Our Command" (Quran 32:24).

> The Imam is a guide who leads through a divine, transcendent command entrusted to him. Therefore, Imamate, in its inner reality, is a form of *wilāya*—a spiritual authority operative within the actions of human beings. Unlike the guidance of prophets, messengers, or believers—which primarily involves counsel, moral exhortation, or indicating the right path—the Imam's guidance is not limited to advising or directing. Rather, it is to take the hand of the people and lead them to the path of truth. The Quran describes the Imam's guidance as guidance by God's Command—that is, the generation or enactment of guidance. (Tabataba'i 2005, 400-401)

One of the verses known as the Verse of Guidance is Quran 13:7, in which God says: "Those who disbelieve say, 'Why has not some sign been sent down upon him from his Lord?' Thou art but a warner; and for every people there is a guide."

The "*al-Hādī*" (The Guide) is a Divine Name, signifying His role in leading human beings toward Him. In the supplication of the 19th day of Ramadan, the divine Name appears as: "O Guide to the manifest truth" (Sayyid b. Ṭāwūs 1997, 350).

The root of the Arabic word *hidāya* (guidance) derives from *hudā'*, which, in its linguistic origin, connotes rest and stillness without movement—indicating having reached a state of final tranquility (Fārāhīdī 1990, 79). Accordingly, *Hādī* refers to the one who leads humanity forward and brings them to their ultimate tranquility (Shahbaz Thani 2023, 73). From this perspective, *hādī* does not merely indicate a path or direction, but rather the one who *delivers to* the final destination and ultimate purpose. Moreover, *Hādī* is among the titles used to describe the station of the Perfect Man (most famously used by Ibn 'Arabī), the guide of creation in both the outward and inward realms (Nasafī 2007, 75, 269, 357), the guide of humankind (Amuli 1996, 441), the intermediary between the Real and creation (Ma'il Harawi 2001, 373), and the path to the knowledge of God (Mullā Ṣadrā 2004, 156).

Thus, if the pilgrimage is regarded as a form of spiritual journey, just as the Divine Names and Attributes play a fundamental role in this journey—the connection between Creator and creation is made possible through these Names—the architectural element of the door in the context of pilgrimage assumes this mediatory function. Its guiding symbolism may be seen as a manifestation of the Divine Name *al-Hādī*. Moreover, if the aim of pilgrimage is understood as attaining spiritual perfection and proximity to the Lord, then just as the door serves as an agent of invitation and guidance toward the sacred entrance of the shrine, it may be interpreted as a symbolic sign reflecting the guiding station of the Imam. This sign functions as a bridge between the pilgrim and the Imam's spiritual station, conveying a meaningful message that leads the pilgrim toward Divine guidance and inspires a deeper pursuit of transcendence and spiritual perfection.

Furthermore, the mediatory role of the door in the entrances of Islamic pilgrimage shrines may symbolize the station of the "Perfect Man" as the "channel of Divine Grace." Corresponding to the physical door at the entrance of Islamic shrines, the Perfect Man may be viewed within the cosmic order as a door through which humanity transitions from estrangement to unity. According to religious and mystical teachings, the Perfect Human is the intermediary of Grace—this is the mystery that makes the Perfect Man the soul of the cosmos (Qayṣarī 1996, 405), transforming him into the very soul and spirit of the created world. Through this being, Divine Grace flows throughout the structure of existence.

3. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the primary purpose of creation is the knowledge of God and the attainment of perfection. In pilgrimage, one encounters a symbolic experience of reaching the sacred threshold of Divine Knowledge and entering the celestial realm of the shrine. It represents a striving to transcend multiplicity and attain the unity that the shrine represents, a journey made possible through the symbolic guidance of the door. The door marks the threshold of presence and visitation (meeting), and may be understood as a symbolic manifestation of the Divine Name *al-Hādī*, the guidance of the Imam, the station of the Perfect Man, and the intermediary of Divine Grace.

Just as other religious acts are believed to possess outer and inner dimensions, pilgrimage likewise encompasses various degrees. The outward pilgrimage—termed in this study as *ziyārat-i sar*—consists of a physical encounter with the shrine and external elements through vision. Here, the door acts as the means of entry and

guidance to the sacred threshold. In contrast, the inward pilgrimage, or *ziyārat-i sirr*, is a visionary encounter attained through spiritual unveiling, wherein nothing is sought except the Divine. The essence of pilgrimage lies not in seeing the spectacle but in reaching the intended Reality. At this level, the shrine and entrance represent an alchemical chamber, and the door, as the symbolic manifestation of the Divine Name *al-Hādī* and its application in the person of the Imam as the Perfect Man and intermediary of Divine Grace, becomes an elixir. Its guiding presence transforms the pilgrim's earthly self into spiritual gold.

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Notes

1 The form that a sign takes (which is not necessarily material).

2 The entity to which the sign refers.

3 The meaning derived from the sign.

4 In literature, one of the prevalent meanings of the word *bāb* is its reference to a "chapter" or "section." This term is used both in classical texts and in contemporary writings to denote a chapter or part of a book or treatise.

5 Although the dual opposites gained renewed attention in the twentieth century among linguists, narratologists, semioticians, and literary schools, who incorporated it into their analytical frameworks, the significance of oppositional structures was already recognized in classical thought. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle classified the world through fundamental dual opposites: form–matter, natural–unnatural, active–passive, whole–part, unity–multiplicity, before–after, and being–non-being (Chandler, *ibid*., 159).

6 The concept was first introduced by Julia Kristeva. According to her findings, every text is, in fact, an "intertext"—the product of interaction with numerous other texts, including those yet to be written in the future (Dad 2004, 44).

7 In Quranic usage, guidance is often paired with Imamate, appearing consecutively—a pairing that draws interpretive focus to the theological stature of the Imamate. Within Shiʾi Islamic belief, Imamate is a foundational doctrine. The esoteric dimension of the Sharīʿa and the spiritual life is the stage of divine proximity and sainthood (*wilāya*)

8 Notably, all Quranic references in this paper are sourced from the translation by Nasr et al. (2015). To avoid redundancy, only chapter and verse numbers are cited.