DIGITAL ISLAMICATE AND HUMANITIES

Journal Of Digital Islamicate and Humanities (DIH)
Vol. 1 No. 1, April 2026 | E-ISSN: 3124-9523
Journal URL: https:// journal.zahirastudies.org/index.php/dih
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63254/dih.v1i1.41

Semantic, Semiotic, and Stylistic Analysis of the Term An-Nabāt in the Qur'an: A Qur'anic Linguistic Perspective on Ecology and Environmental Awareness

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Article History

Received : 25 February 2026
Revised : 3 March 2026
Accepted : 6 March 2026
Published : 6 April 2026

Keywords: *al-nabāt, Qur'anic semantics, ecological ethics,Islamic eco-theology*

Abstract

This study examines the semantic meaning of the Qur'anic term al-nabāt (النبات) from lexical, contextual, and relational perspectives in order to reveal its theological and ecological significance. Using a qualitative linguistic–textual approach and semantic field analysis, data were collected from relevant Qur'anic verses and interpreted through classical lexicons and authoritative exegetical sources. The findings indicate that al-nabāt does not merely denote vegetation but also symbolizes divine power, life continuity, sustenance, and moral growth, while forming a conceptual network with other ecological terms that reflects balance and divine order. The study concludes that al-nabāt functions as an āyah kawniyyah (cosmic sign) that contributes to the foundation of Islamic environmental ethics, emphasizing stewardship, balance, and human responsibility toward nature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global ecological crisis, characterized by climate change, deforestation, land degradation, and biodiversity loss, represents one of the most serious challenges facing humanity in the twenty-first century. Environmental destruction not only affects physical and economic dimensions but also reflects an ethical and spiritual crisis in modern human civilization. Nasr argues that the ecological crisis is fundamentally rooted in a spiritual crisis, namely the rupture of the sacred relationship between humans and nature as God's creation [1]. Therefore, addressing environmental problems requires a multidisciplinary approach that includes theological and ethical dimensions.

In the Islamic context, the Qur'an, as the primary source of faith and ethics, provides a strong theological foundation for building ecological awareness. Nature in the Qur'anic worldview is not presented as a neutral physical backdrop nor merely as an object of human exploitation, but as a divinely charged semiotic field. Just as spatial settings in Qur'anic narratives function symbolically and pedagogically rather than descriptively, nature itself operates as a meaningful structure through which ethical and theological consciousness is cultivated. Within this framework, the natural world is understood as a divine trust (amānah), embedded in a symbolic system that shapes human responsibility toward creation [2]. This perspective is emphasized in Islamic ecotheological studies, which place humans as khalīfah (vicegerents) on earth with moral responsibility for environmental sustainability [3]. Thus, the Qur'an holds significant potential as a source of ecological values and paradigms relevant to contemporary environmental challenges.

One of the key concepts in Qur'anic ecological discourse is the term النبات (an-nabāt), which lexically means plants or flora. In the Qur'an, this term does not merely refer to biological entities but also carries profound theological and symbolic meanings. The Qur'an presents an-nabāt as a sign of God's power, a source of sustenance for humans and animals, and a symbol of fertility and the resurrection of life after death. This understanding aligns with Khalid's assertion that nature in Islam forms part of a cosmic system governed by divine balance and order [4].

From the perspective of Qur'anic linguistics, the analysis of key terms such as an-nabāt is essential because Qur'anic language is not only informative but also symbolic and conceptual. Izutsu explains that the meaning of a Qur'anic term must be understood through its relational meaning within the overall Qur'anic worldview (weltanschauung), rather than through lexical translation alone [5]. Therefore, a semantic analysis of an-nabāt enables the disclosure of ecological meanings that are deeply integrated with theological and spiritual dimensions.

The lexical meaning of an-nabāt can be traced through classical Qur'anic lexicons. Al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī explains that the root نبت (n-b-t) fundamentally means "to grow and develop," which in the Qur'anic context signifies the continuity of life and the manifestation of divine mercy [6]. This explanation confirms that an-nabāt in the Qur'an does not stand independently but is always interconnected with water, soil, and life as a unified and harmonious ecosystem.

Although studies on environmental ethics in Islam have been widely conducted, most previous research remains thematic and normative-theological in nature. Linguistic approaches that systematically examine semantic meanings, symbolic functions, and stylistic patterns of Qur'anic ecological terminology particularly the term an-nabāt are still relatively limited. Contemporary tafsīr works, such as Tafsir al-Mishbah, demonstrate that verses concerning plants contain strong moral and ecological messages that are highly relevant to modern environmental problems [7].

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the semantic, semiotic, and stylistic dimensions of the term an-nabāt in the Qur'an in order to reveal its lexical and contextual meanings, its function as an āyah kauniyyah (cosmic sign), and the Qur'anic rhetorical strategies in constructing ecological awareness grounded in revelation.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design and Approach

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a linguistic–textual approach to Qur'anic studies. The research focuses on analyzing the semantic, semiotic, and stylistic dimensions of the Qur'anic lexeme an-nabāt (النبا ت) to uncover its theological and ecological implications. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the object of the study is textual meaning rather than numerical data, emphasizing interpretation and contextual analysis [8]. The analytical framework integrates Qur'anic linguistics and Islamic ecotheology, allowing the Qur'anic text to be examined not only as a sacred scripture but also as a discourse that constructs environmental consciousness through language and symbolism [1][5].

2.2. Data Source

The primary data source of this research is the Qur'an, specifically verses containing the term an-nabāt and its derivatives, such as Surah Al-Baqarah (2:61), An-Nahl (16:11), Al-Hajj (22:5), AsSajdah (32:27), Abasa (80:24–32), and Ali 'Imran (3:37). Secondary data sources consist of classical Qur'anic lexicons, tafsīr literature, and modern linguistic and ecological studies, including

works by Ibn Manẓūr, Al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī, Al-Ṭabari, Al-Zamakhshari, Toshihiko Izutsu, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr [6][9][10].

2.3. Data Collection Technique

Data collection is conducted through library research and textual documentation. Relevant Qur'anic verses are identified using root-based keyword tracing of ن ب ت (n-b-t). Each verse is categorized according to its thematic context: ecological, theological, sociological, or moral-spiritual. Interpretations from classical and contemporary tafsīr sources are systematically compiled to enrich contextual understanding and ensure interpretative accuracy [7][9].

2.4. Data Analysis Method

Data analysis is carried out through three interrelated stages:

2.4.1. Semantic Analysis

Examines the lexical and contextual meanings of an-nabāt based on classical lexicons and Qur'anic usage patterns, following semantic field theory [4][5].

2.4.2. Semiotic Analysis

Interprets an-nabāt as an āyah kauniyyah (cosmic sign) that signifies divine power, life continuity, and ecological balance within Qur'anic discourse [1].

2.4.3. Stylistic Analysis

Analyzes rhetorical patterns, imagery, and symbolic associations surrounding an-nabāt, particularly its linkage with water, earth, and divine action, to uncover Qur'anic strategies in conveying ecological ethics [9].

2.5. Validity of Data

To ensure validity, this study applies source triangulation by comparing interpretations from multiple authoritative lexicons and tafsīr works. Analytical consistency is maintained through transparent citation and systematic categorization of data [7].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Lexical Meaning of the Term النَّبَات (an-nabāt)

Etymologically, the term النبات originates from the root ن ب ت (n-b-t), which means to grow, develop, or emerge from the ground. According to Lisan al-'Arab by Ibn Manzhur, an-nabāt refers to everything that grows on the earth's surface, whether it has a stalk or not, and becomes a source of life for other creatures[8]. Meanwhile, in Mufradāt Alfāẓ al-Qur'ān by al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī, annabāt is understood as a symbol of life and continuity (istimrār al-ḥayāt), because the growth of plants is a sign of Allah's mercy and qudrah [5]. In the semantic dimension, this basic meaning contains two important elements:

3.1.1. The element of natural growth, the physical and biological process of emergence from the soil.

3.1.2. The element of Divine blessing that accompanies every growth, the spiritual grace (نِعْمَة) and divine decree (الْأَمْر) that accompany every instance of growth [5], [8].

These two elements serve as the basis for contextual analysis in the verses of the Al-Qur'an.

3.2. Contextual Meaning of the Term النبات in the Qur'an

The term النبات and its derivatives appear in several verses, including:

3.2.1. Surah Al-Baqarah (2):61), Concerning the request of the Children of Israel for various types of food plants.

3.2.2. Surah An-Nahl (16):11, Describing rain as the cause for the growth of النبات.

3.2.3. Surah Abasa (80):24–32), Elaborating on the process by which Allah grows plants as a food source for both humans and animals.

3.2.4. Surah Al-Hajj (22):5), Presenting the growth of النبات as a sign of resurrection after death.

3.2.5. Surah As-Sajdah (32):27), Linking rain and plants as a mercy for the dead earth.

These interpretations correspond to classical exegetical explanations found in Al-Kashshāf by al-Zamakhsharī [9] and modern commentary such as Tafsīr al-Miṣbāḥ by Quraish Shihab [6]. Through semantic and contextual analysis, it is found that the meaning of النبات encompasses four semantic fields:

3.2.1. Ecological Context : Plants as an essential element of the ecosystem (An-Nahl:11) [1], [2].

3.2.2. Theological Context : A symbol of Allah's power in nurturing life (Al-Hajj:5, As-Sajdah:27) [4], [9].

3.2.3. Sociological Context : A source of food and provision for humanity (Abasa:24–32) [6].

3.2.4. Moral-Spiritual Context : An analogy for the growth of faith and righteous deeds (Ali 'Imran:37) [4].

This contextual meaning indicates that النبات possesses not only biological value but also semiotic significance, as it serves as a sign of the vertical relationship between humanity, nature, and the Divine.

3.3. Relational Analysis and Comparison of Terms

Lexically, النبات has a semantic relationship with several other vocabularies within the semantic field of Quranic ecology:

3.2.5. الزرع (az-zar'): Refers to planting or crop yield; it emphasizes the agrarian and productive aspects[5].

3.2.6. الشجر (asy-syajar): Refers to trees; it emphasizes the woody plant structure that serves as a habitat for fauna[9].

3.2.7. الخضر (al-khaḍr): Refers to green; it emphasizes vitality and coolness [6].

In Quranic stylistics, النبات is often used in its plural form (نباتا), accompanied by the elements of water (الماء) and earth (الأرض), forming a poetic and symbolic network of meaning. For instance, in An-Nahl: 10–11, Allah sends down rainwater and grows النبات from the earth, displaying the harmony between celestial and terrestrial elements as a metaphor for ecological balance [9].

Semiotic analysis reveals that النبات functions as a divine sign (آية كونية), a cosmic sign indicating the order of creation. In the Quranic narrative, plant growth is a metaphor for spiritual life: just as the dead earth is brought to life by water, so too the human heart is brought to life by revelation [4].

Furthermore, contemporary Islamic environmental scholars argue that vegetation symbolizes divine trust (amānah) entrusted to humankind, forming the ethical foundation of ecological

responsibility [1],[3]. Thus, al-nabāt operates not merely as a botanical term but as a universal metaphor for life, moral growth, and accountability before God.

4. CONCLUSION

From an ecological perspective, al-nabāt symbolizes the principle of balance (mīzān) embedded in the natural order and highlights humanity's responsibility as khalīfah (vicegerent) to preserve environmental sustainability. This ethical dimension corresponds with contemporary Islamic ecological thought, which emphasizes stewardship, restraint, and accountability toward nature as part of religious obligation [1], [3]. Derived from the root n-b-t (نبت), the Qur'anic usage of al-nabāt demonstrates that vegetation is never depicted as an isolated phenomenon but is intrinsically connected to water, soil, climate, and human existence [5], [8]. Semantically, the meaning of al-nabāt evolves from a physical process of biological growth into a broader symbolic framework representing continuity of life, divine providence, and moral cultivation. Through contextual usage and relational semantics, the Qur'an transforms the notion of "growing" into an ethical metaphor for nurturing faith, responsibility, and consciousness before God [4], [5]. This confirms Izutsu's assertion that Qur'anic concepts function within interconnected semantic fields that integrate ontology, theology, and ethics into a coherent worldview [4]. In the context of the modern global environmental crisis, the Qur'anic symbol of alnabāt offers a revelation-based foundation for ecological awareness. The repeated depiction of harmony between water, earth, and vegetation forms a theological narrative that encourages environmental care as an act of worship rather than merely a technical necessity [1], [2]. This worldview contributes to the development of Islamic environmental ethics (eco-theology), which emphasizes sustainability, moderation, gratitude, and respect for all forms of life as divine signs (āyāt kawniyyah) [3], [6]. Accordingly, environmental preservation is not only a scientific or economic concern but also a spiritual responsibility rooted in Qur'anic semantics and Islamic theology.

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