

Figures of Power and Regimes of Marginalization: A Symbolic Reading of The Kingdom of the Crow by Azzedine Djellaoudji

مَثَلات السلطة وأنساق التهميش: قراءة رمزية في رواية مملكة الغرب لعز الدين جلاوجي

Figures du pouvoir et régimes de la marginalisation : lecture
symbolique du Royaume du corbeau d'Azzedine Djellaoudji

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Abstract

This research paper examines the paradox of justice and marginalization in *The Kingdom of the Crow* by Azeddine Jlaouji, highlighting how symbolic structures within the narrative serve to legitimize inequality and consolidate authoritarian power. Rather than portraying justice as a moral or legal principle, the work reveals it as a tool of exclusion, where legitimacy is granted through ritual, birthright, or arbitrary signs rather than merit. The study focuses on how satire is used to deconstruct dominant narratives and expose the mechanisms by which the center maintains its privilege at the expense of the periphery. By adopting a symbolic-analytical approach, the paper analyzes key symbols—especially the figure of the crow—as devices that institutionalize oppression under the guise of order and tradition. Drawing on thinkers such as Edward Said and Mikhail Bakunin, it explores how power systems manipulate discourse to normalize subjugation and transform obedience into virtue. Ultimately, the narrative critiques a performative model of justice that masks injustice with moral symbolism, calling for a reimagining of legitimacy rooted in ethical competence and true equality.

Keywords

symbolic justice, marginalization, center-periphery dynamics, satire, Azeddine Jlaouji, *The Kingdom of the Crow*

الملخص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية آليات اشتغال التهميش وتكريس المركز في مسردية مملكة الغراب لعز الدين جلاوي، من خلال تفكيك مفهوم العدالة كما تُقدّمه المسردية، بوصفه آلية رمزية تُعيد إنتاج اللامساواة. وتكمن أهمية الدراسة في كشف المفارقة التي تجعل من "العدالة" أداة للظلم، ومن "الرمز" سلطة تتجاوز القانون والعقل. وتطرح الورقة إشكالية التواطؤ بين الخطاب السلطوي والطقس الاجتماعي في بناء وعي زائف يجعل الامتياز حكراً على المركز، ويحوّل التهميش إلى قدر مشروع. وتهدف إلى تحليل البنية الرمزية للمسردية بوصفها بنية تفكك القيم السلطوية من خلال السخرية، وتعيد مساءلة مفاهيم الكفاءة، الشرعية، والجدارة. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج التحليلي الرمزي، مستثمرة مرجعيات فكرية مثل إدوارد سعيد ومبخائيل

باكونين، لتحليل رموز السلطة في النص، وعلى رأسها شخصية "الغراب" بوصفه أداة إنتاج للشرعية الزائفة. وتشمل خطة البحث تتبع تجليات السلطة الرمزية في المسردية، ورصد أوجه التقاطع بين السرد والطقس، وبين الطاعة والتهميش. وخلصت الورقة إلى أن مملكة الغراب تقدم نقدًا لاذعًا للعدالة الشكلية، وتكشف كيف تُوظف القيم لتقنين الظلم، داعيةً إلى إعادة الاعتبار للكفاءة كمبدأ بديل عن الإرث والرمز والطقس.

الكلمات المفتاحية

العدالة الرمزية، التهميش، المركز، السخرية، عز الدين جلاوحي، مملكة لغراب

Résumé

Cette étude analyse les mécanismes de marginalisation et de consolidation du pouvoir central dans la mesraddiya Le Royaume du Corbeau d'Azzeddine Jalawji, en déconstruisant la notion de justice telle qu'elle est représentée dans l'œuvre. La justice y apparaît comme un outil symbolique de reproduction des inégalités, plutôt qu'un principe d'équité. L'importance de cette recherche réside dans la mise en évidence du paradoxe où la « justice » devient un vecteur d'oppression, et où le « symbole » – tel que le corbeau – acquiert un pouvoir supérieur à la loi et à la raison. L'article soulève ainsi la problématique du compromis entre discours autoritaire et rituel collectif dans la construction d'une conscience sociale faussée, qui transforme le privilège en droit exclusif du centre, et le rejet en destin accepté. S'appuyant sur une approche analytique symbolique, la recherche mobilise des références théoriques, telles que celles d'Edward Said et de Mikhaïl Bakounine, pour explorer les symboles du pouvoir dans le texte. Le personnage du corbeau y est étudié comme un instrument de légitimation fictive, révélateur des logiques de domination. L'analyse met en lumière les croisements entre narration et rituel, obéissance et exclusion, tout en dévoilant l'usage de l'ironie comme moyen de subversion des valeurs dominantes. La mesraddiya offre ainsi une critique profonde de la justice de façade et démontre comment les systèmes de pouvoir manipulent les valeurs pour perpétuer l'injustice. L'étude plaide pour la reconnaissance du mérite comme fondement légitime du pouvoir, en rupture avec l'héritage, le symbole et les rituels figés.

Mots-clés

Justice symbolique, marginalisation, centre, ironie, Azzeddine Jalawji, *Le Royaume du Corbeau*

Introduction

Human relationships are often structured around a tense binary: the center and the margin. The center holds power, authority, and decision-making, while the margin is pushed to the periphery — silenced, stripped of influence, and often forced into secondary roles marked by exploitation or exclusion. This binary is not incidental; it is a deeply entrenched symbolic structure reproduced through language, religion, mythology, and education, to the point where it resembles a kind of “social fate” that resists disruption.

In literature, this binary becomes a critical tool to deconstruct systems of dominance and reveal the symbolic mechanisms used to marginalize certain groups — often through subtle forms of manipulation and cultural complicity. In this light, *The Kingdom of the Crow* by Azeddine Jlaouji presents a theatrical narrative that exposes this structure. The work employs a hybrid literary form known as “al-Masrudiya”, which blends dramatic and narrative modes to create a symbolic, satirical text that engages with a disordered reality and poses difficult questions about justice, power, and legitimacy.

This hybrid form draws its aesthetic power from the text’s philosophical depth. By incorporating multiple voices, perspectives, and narrative styles, it lays bare a central paradox: how does justice become a tool for producing injustice? How is the rhetoric of justice manipulated to uphold centralized authority while marginalizing those who rightfully deserve power?

The narrative unfolds in an absurd world where governance is handed over to a “crow” — chosen not through any rational or ethical criteria, but through an empty ritual that grants false legitimacy to hollow authority. The “Diligent” — symbol of hard work and integrity — is ruthlessly cast aside, while the “Drowsy” — representing laziness and opportunism — is elevated to leadership simply because the crow “landed on him.” This is the tragedy of false justice: the individual and collective fate reduced to the arbitrary gesture of a bird, and myth used to cover the collapse of meaning.

In this inverted world, the margin becomes a symbol of oppressed labor, while the center is a fragile space upheld by superstition rather than competence. Authority becomes a farcical stage where everyone performs roles written in advance, stripping them of agency or authenticity.

This paper adopts a symbolic-analytical approach, deconstructing the characters, symbols, and events within the Masrudiya to uncover how the margin-center binary is constructed, how false justice is represented, and how satire serves to destabilize fixed meanings. It also draws on semiotic analysis to explore central signs in the text — such as the crow and the dream — that form the narrative’s deep structure and shape its philosophical and political message.

From this theoretical and methodological perspective, the paper raises the following key questions:

- How is justice portrayed as a deceptive discourse that serves the interests of power ?
- Why does the center in this text derive its legitimacy not from competence, but from ritual and superstition ?
- How is the margin represented, and what symbolic and ideological tools are used to suppress it ?
- Finally, how does satire function in the *Masrudiya* as a means of deconstructing a false world that is continuously reproduced in the name of justice ?

1. Theoretical Framework

To make this theoretical framework analytically operational, the present subsection treats center, margin, and power as an interdependent conceptual triad rather than as separate notions. Because these categories function together as a symbolic system that organizes hierarchy, legitimacy, and exclusion in discourse, the framework is presented as a series of list-paragraph definitions. Each item stabilizes one key concept through lexical and critical clarifications, while keeping it connected to the dialectical logic that binds the center to norm-production, the margin to relegation and counter-consciousness, and power to the mechanisms that authorize dominance and render inequality intelligible—and, at times, contestable—within symbolic texts.

- **The Dialectic of Center and Margin and the Structure of Power in Symbolic Texts:** The concepts of center, margin, and power are fundamental analytical tools for understanding the social, cultural, and political structures embedded in texts and discourses. These interrelated notions form a symbolic system that produces and reproduces hierarchy and dominance within societies. Therefore, clarifying their meanings is essential for deconstructing the unequal relationships between those who hold power and those relegated to the peripheries.
- **Defining the Center:** The concept of the “center” is essential in analyzing the social and cultural structure of texts, as it represents a locus of power and dominance—whether in discourse, authority, or representation. Lexically, traditional Arabic dictionaries such as *Lisan al-Arab* and *Al-Muheet Dictionary* define the center as “something stable, firm in the ground, the focal point of a circle’s radius; it also connotes anything valuable like gold or silver in material terms, and symbolizes intellect, knowledge, and generosity in abstract terms” (Thimar, 2025, p. 378). In the cultural and critical context, the same author explains that the discourse of the center refers to the ideas and perspectives that emerge from positions of societal power, often dominating political and cultural debates. This discourse can shape and reinforce prevailing norms and values (Thimar, 2025, p. 378).

- **Defining the Margin:** The margin, on the other hand, is a symbolic and social space to which everything that deviates from the center's norms—whether individuals, groups, or discourses—is relegated. Thus, the margin carries a cultural dimension that surpasses geographical or class distinctions, becoming an expression of dissent and a site of counter-consciousness. In literary contexts, the margin is defined as “any literature produced outside the institution—whether political, social, cultural, or academic” (Ben Youssef, 2025, p. 327). This form of literature resists institutional censorship by challenging dominant frameworks and exposing their flaws. Houeida Saleh deepens this idea by asserting that “official history [...] presents itself as the legitimate culture; it establishes itself within the historical flow by eliminating others' hopes of advancement, granting them neither the opportunity nor the ability to express themselves. They are, in its view, the residue of the survival struggle and the final deformities in a social body founded on dominance and hierarchy” (Saleh, 2015, p. 13). This portrayal highlights the oppressive foundation of the center and renders the margin an open field of resistance—not only to assert the existence of the marginalized but also to displace or at least interrogate the center.
- **Defining Power:** Power is a central concept in political and social thought, historically associated with the exercise of control over individuals and communities. Linguistically, the root letters (S-L-T) in Arabic revolve around meanings of strength and coercion, and from them derives the word *sultan*, signifying either sovereign force or authoritative proof. Power has been defined as “the ability to enforce one's will upon others, whether they agree or not” (Al-Qurashi, n.d., p. 10). The scholar notes that power comprises two main elements: control—the capacity to influence or direct others—and legitimacy—the right to exercise this influence in a lawful or socially accepted manner (Al-Qurashi, n.d., p. 10). Thus, the core of power lies in its perceived legitimacy by those subjected to it. Power, then, is a mixture of force and legitimacy, practiced within a political and social framework and considered foundational for organizing relationships, allocating roles, and determining decision-making authority.
- **Analytical implications:** The following paragraphs synthesize how the center–margin distribution operates as a symbolic mechanism of domination in social and narrative structures, and how literary discourse can expose, destabilize, or contest that distribution.

In any social or narrative structure, power is based on an implicit or explicit distribution of positions—some are assigned to the “center” as representatives of legitimacy, privilege, or authority, while others are pushed toward the “margin” as less worthy or capable. This duality, though seemingly natural or organizational,

conceals a symbolic system for reproducing oppression and entrenching control. Since literature reinterprets reality, it often serves as a symbolic laboratory for exposing and challenging such power distributions. This is especially evident in Al-Qurashi's definition of power as "the enforcement of speech upon others, whether they accept it or not" (Al-Qurashi, n.d., p. 10). This stark description reveals power as a coercive force that leaves no room for negotiation or retreat, deepening the symbolic divide between center and margin and cementing obedience as the standard for legitimacy. Thus, literature emerges as a space of resistance to such imposed authority, where dominant narratives may be deconstructed and questioned.

Within this framework, the "center" transforms into an inherited position guarded by symbols, "power" becomes a ritual stripped of reason, and the "margin" is reshaped as a voiceless space—neither thinking nor demanding. Since these concepts are embedded in discourse, every statement about justice, legitimacy, or order becomes a linguistic tool for reinforcing this hierarchical distribution. This aligns with Baqqaqa's view that the relationship between center and margin is a binary opposition that affirms the former and erases the latter—a dynamic resembling the eternal conflict between self and other (Baqqaqa, 2021, p. 181). This critical framing situates the authoritative structure of the center-margin binary within a logic of ongoing exclusion and reveals how injustice is normalized through language and cultural representation.

In this sense, the theoretical framework functions as an analytical lens for understanding how literary texts construct systems of symbolic oppression, how power hides behind ritualistic rhetoric and collective discourse, and how the margin is suppressed under the guise of "false justice" while the center is preserved in the name of the crow, sleep, and absolute silence.

2. Methodology and Corpus

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in symbolic and semiotic criticism. The corpus is limited to Azeddine Jlaouji's *Masrudiya Mamlakat al-Ghurab* (2020, مملكة الغراب) and its paratext (dedication, stage directions, key dialogues).

The analytical procedure combines close reading with semiotic mapping: (1) identification of recurring signifiers (crow, sleep, ritual, school, silence), (2) thematic coding of the center/margin opposition, (3) contextualization through critical literature on symbolic power and social exclusion, and (4) argumentative synthesis linking textual evidence to interpretive claims.

Because the corpus is a single work, the results should be read as an in-depth case study rather than a generalizable model. Further research could test the proposed interpretive matrix on a broader set of Algerian hybrid dramaturgical texts and on comparative corpora.

3. Synopsis of the Masrudiya

The Masrudiya opens with a depiction of a dilapidated environment, inhabited by its two protagonists—al-Ta'is (the Wretched) and al-Na'is (the Drowsy)—who live within a crumbling garden that reflects a broader state of decay and disillusionment. Al-Na'is is characterized by laziness and constant sleep, while al-Ta'is represents his opposite: he works, thinks, and aspires to change his reality. A tension emerges between them, rooted in opposing worldviews: the former finds comfort in sloth and views sleep as a refuge, while the latter sees meaning in effort and purpose. This simple contrast gradually escalates into a deeper symbolic conflict when a fundamental question arises: Who deserves to rule? Is power granted based on competence and awareness, or does it follow the logic of chance and submission?

The tension intensifies when al-Ta'is and al-Na'is leave the garden and arrive at a public square where crowds are gathering in anticipation of a royal coronation ritual. It is here that the absurd logic of power is laid bare: the ruler is chosen based on the landing of a crow on someone's head. No one questions the process; no one objects. The sacred ritual overrides reason, and its authority is unquestioned. The crow lands on al-Na'is, and the crowd erupts in cheers, proclaiming him king—even though he neither speaks nor exerts any effort. Meanwhile, al-Ta'is—with all his awareness and labor—is left on the margins, pitied or mocked. This moment reveals the narrative's central irony: merit and intelligence do not establish legitimacy—ritual and coincidence do.

In the final chapters, the Masrudiya continues to expose the foundations of a system of rule built on conditioning the public mind and emptying concepts such as justice and merit of their substance. The coronation not only places a crown on al-Na'is's head but legitimizes an entirely new order—one in which education and culture are restructured around obedience. New schools are announced to teach the “art of praise,” and every critical or conscious voice is silenced. Al-Ta'is, who once symbolized the hope for transformation, experiences a spiritual collapse upon realizing that the system is beyond reform—that effort is condemned, and slumber is rewarded. The Masrudiya concludes with his withdrawal from meaning itself, renouncing awareness, and thus closing the circle on the tragedy of the intellectual in a world that rewards only oblivion.

4. Al-Ta'is and Al-Na'is : The Architecture of Injustice Between Competence and Complacency.

Across history, authoritarian systems have always required a legitimizing discourse—one that not only justifies their existence but protects the central seat of power from any challenge. The most insidious form of such discourse is that which borrows the language of values and symbols, reproducing social and class hierarchies under the illusion of justice, order, fate, or religious authority. This

is the core of symbolic oppression that shapes the narrative structure of *The Kingdom of the Crow*, particularly in what the Masrudiya presents as the first age: a time where power is built on the distortion of meaning.

Power does not impose itself through sheer force alone. It survives—and thrives—when it presents itself as a necessary protector of communal interests and shared values. In doing so, authoritarian discourse becomes a subtle tool of justification: blending coercion with cultural narratives, turning domination into a collective mindset that feels not only acceptable but natural. This makes resistance much harder and more complex. In such systems, privilege is framed as a natural right—granted through rituals, inherited identities, or sacred myths. As Bakunin put it, power ultimately aims to “assassinate the hearts and minds of people” (Bakunin, 2021, p. 26).

In this symbolic age, violence is no longer overt. It is replaced by spectacle—rituals that masquerade as legitimacy. Justice is reduced to the meaningless landing of a crow, and the future of an entire nation is sealed by one man’s sleep. This is not merely satire—it is a founding metaphor for a system of authority that relies on performance, not truth. Rituals, in this sense, fulfill the psychological need for consensus—even if false—while suppressing reason and critical thought.

In policy-oriented literature, marginalization (often approached through the concept of social exclusion) is commonly defined as the systematic exclusion of individuals or groups from meaningful participation in economic, social, political, and cultural life (United Nations, 2016, p. 18).

The reign of al-Na’is thus embodies the workings of symbolic violence, where exclusion operates through the denial of recognition. The center reproduces itself by reshaping definitions—of justice, competence, leadership, even silence. Those who do not conform to these redefinitions are pushed to the margins. Justice becomes a rhetorical tool not for resisting injustice but for justifying and protecting it. In this way, the Masrudiya revisits the center-margin dichotomy through a hybrid form that blends ritual, narrative, and symbolism—recasting political and social concepts as performative, deconstructable, and steeped in dark irony.

Within this constructed reality, al-Ta’is stands as a figure of awareness and labor—but in a world that worships sleep and complacency, his presence is disruptive. As a result, he is methodically sidelined. The first symbolic age in the Masrudiya is not only the death of hope, but the triumph of myth over reason, and ritual over intention. It lays the foundation of a power structure built on the systematic suppression of critical consciousness and the silencing of dissent.

Understanding this age requires viewing it as a crystallization of soft repression—where physical control gives way to cultural domination: collective acceptance, widespread silence, and a pre-emptive surrender to absurdity. All of this works to dismantle the very possibility of dreaming or imagining alternatives. Power is no longer enforced through threat, but through belief—convincing

the people that leadership is earned not by merit, but by the fall of a bird or the slumber of a passive man.

This logic is consistent with the concept of symbolic repression, which relies on persuasion, containment, and the soft erasure of dissent. Through cultural standards and dominant values, submission appears not only natural but desirable (Latim, 2023, p. 344). In such a system, power deprives individuals of the desire to think, to hope, or to resist. This is the most severe form of control: the kind that quietly infiltrates consciousness, turning superstition into fate and performance into unquestioned law.

4.1. The Figures of Al-Na'is and Al-Ta'is : The Dialectic of Inertia and Marginalized Awareness

The *Masrudiya* presents Al-Na'is and Al-Ta'is as two opposing symbolic archetypes embedded within the structure of power. Each character embodies a sharply defined metaphor: Al-Na'is represents the parasitic center—passive, privileged, and legitimized without merit—while Al-Ta'is symbolizes the competent yet excluded margin. Through this dichotomy, the narrative deconstructs the underlying value system governing the text's symbolic society. It exposes how authority is not granted based on merit or consciousness, but through ritual, randomness, and institutionalized laziness.

This perspective resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's account of symbolic power, in which linguistic authority functions as a form of domination that operates through recognition and misrecognition, thereby naturalizing unequal social relations (Bourdieu, 1991).

In this sense, the *Masrudiya* unmask the transformation of authority from a political function into a cultural and symbolic system—one that infiltrates collective consciousness and sustains itself through repetition. Power, here, is not imposed through explicit force, but normalized as a discourse that justifies its own existence. Within this system, Al-Ta'is is excluded not because he lacks competence, but because his awareness threatens the foundations of a regime built on sleep, obedience, and a false sense of order.

4.1.1. Al-Na'is : The Parasitic Center Built on Absence

In *The Kingdom of the Crow*, the character of Al-Na'is offers a darkly ironic portrayal of power rooted in superstition and emptiness—authority founded not on merit or action, but on randomness and ritual. Al-Na'is possesses no qualifications; his only “achievement” is prolonged sleep. Yet, somehow, he is granted dominion and crowned as ruler. In this world, dreams become policy, and illusions transform into mechanisms of control.

This inverted logic makes Al-Na'is a precise symbol of absurd authority—one that transcends reason and action, drawing its legitimacy from blind reverence and inherited myth. In a central scene, Al-Na'is recounts the origin of his name:

“First, I was born asleep. I didn't cry like other babies ; the midwife even thought I was dead... Second, I was born with my mouth open, and only closed it when suckling from my mother. I used to nurse greedily” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 9).

This tragically comical moment turns nearly animalistic physical traits into existential justification for someone who will eventually sit atop the social hierarchy. It is a sharp critique of collective consciousness—its readiness to confer legitimacy on sheer absurdity simply because a ritual, such as the crow's landing, occurred as expected.

The Masrudiya's dark satire culminates in the coronation scene, where the crow lands on Al-Na'is's head amidst a crowd gathered in blind belief, attributing divine meaning to a bird's arbitrary movement. The surreal fantasy becomes reality:

“The crow flies around for a moment, then lands on someone's head, then again takes off and finally settles on Al-Na'is's head... The crowd gathers around him, lifting him up and chanting : Long live the king !” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 67).

This empty coronation encapsulates the essence of the play: Power is not earned—it falls from the sky onto the heads of the idle, in a moment of historical absurdity where laziness is sanctified, misery becomes inevitable, and hope is reduced to a commodity traded in the marketplace of illusion.

4.1.2. Al-Ta'is : Marginalized Awareness as a Threat

The tragedy of Al-Ta'is lies not only in his exclusion from power, but in the gradual disintegration of his own awareness and the collapse of the values he once upheld. He is a victim of a symbolic structure where both authority and society conspire to suppress anyone who dares to think, question, or resist. In the world of *The Kingdom of the Crow*, ignorance is crowned, while labor and intellect are cast aside.

From the very beginning, Al-Ta'is is portrayed as the mind and conscience of the text. Yet he is expelled from the stage precisely because he disrupts the stagnant order and exposes the absurdity of a power built on ritual and coincidence. As highlighted in the dedication of the play:

“In my country, rulers are born gods ; their judgments are infallible, their thoughts are sacred... and we, alas, are cursed peoples—oppressed by clubs, bullets, and brooms” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 5).

This dedication encapsulates the system of symbolic oppression that crushes Al-Ta'is. The ruler is sanctified no matter what he does, while the people are condemned no matter what they strive for.

His psychological collapse reaches its peak when he witnesses Al-Na'is's coronation—an event devoid of any justification or merit. In that moment, Al-Ta'is realizes the futility of resistance in a system where legitimacy is granted by a bird's random landing, protected by hollow ritual. His most painful outburst follows—not directed at an individual or a king, but at the entire structure that defined him and even at the name forced upon him:

“Damn you, life... Damn you all, you cowardly, miserable fools...
Worshippers of the crow, damn you who named me Ta'is” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 68).

This cry marks the final moment of unveiling—a rejection not only of his name, but of the entire symbolic order. Al-Ta'is renounces the imposed identity and declares the collapse of meaning, the defeat of awareness in the face of collective absurdity. The scene is made even more painful by the collective silence that precedes it—a silence so suffocating that it drives Al-Ta'is to doubt the very worth of his consciousness.

In this transformation, Al-Ta'is becomes a striking image of the repressed intellectual: silenced not by brute force, but by neglect; excluded not because he is weak, but because he is too aware. He becomes a voice that disturbs the false peace of collective conformity, and for that, he is stripped of worth—until he himself begins to believe that his only mistake was not being foolish enough to sleep his way to the throne.

4.2. In the Symbolic Opposition Between Them

Within this symbolic polarity, Al-Ta'is and Al-Na'is become instruments for exposing the deep flaws in concepts of power and justice. Through these characters, the

Masrudiya critiques a system in which heedlessness becomes a qualification for leadership and consciousness a transgression worthy of exclusion. The Kingdom of the Crow lays bare a reversed world—where emptiness is rewarded, intellect is punished, and ambition is criminalized. In doing so, the text deconstructs the symbolic logic that sustains authoritarian power by questioning the values that produce privilege and domination.

Mikhail Bakunin articulates this form of authority when he writes: “Privileges and the positions associated with them assassinate the hearts and minds of people. Whoever holds political or economic privilege is morally and intellectually corrupt—this is a universal social law without exception” (Bakunin, 2021, p. 26). The Masrudiya reveals how power is institutionalized by engineering conscious-

ness and distorting the meanings of justice and merit—until marginalization becomes a fate, and privilege appears as a “natural” result of obedience or passivity.

The relationship between Al-Ta’is and Al-Na’is is not simply a clash of social classes or individuals versus society—it is a metaphysical and existential representation of power at its most insidious: a system where injustice is reproduced through symbolic structures internalized by the victims themselves and perpetuated by a complicit society. These two characters personify the collapse of the value system itself: an inversion of the proverb “you reap what you sow,” where those who sow are excluded, and those who sow nothing are crowned.

Al-Ta’is symbolizes a human being who believes in labor as a path to self-realization. He does not complain about poverty but about the futility of effort in a system rigged against it. In a moment of exhaustion and despair, he laments: “I’m tired... I’ve had enough... Am I not human?” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 13). This phrase encapsulates internal collapse and a bitter sense of futility—where work becomes a burden and effort, a curse rather than a source of dignity. He suffers not because he lacks capacity, but because he knows the outcome is predetermined: success is stolen before he even begins. This is what he endures—the highest form of injustice: being forced to strive within a system that refuses to recognize him.

This tragic awareness mirrors what Ali Oumlil observed about the Arab intellectual: one who sees himself “as a producer of consciousness and a catalyst for change, yet lives the bitterness of being denied that role—having no real influence on decisions or public discourse” (Oumlil, 1998, p. 9). Like Al-Ta’is, the intellectual operates within a closed system that does not hear him, no matter how advanced his insight or how great his effort. In a distorted world, such awareness becomes a burden, not an asset.

Thus, Al-Ta’is becomes a theatrical, symbolic version of the silenced intellectual—someone who sees the truth but is denied the means to act on it. In contrast, Al-Na’is does not work, think, or seek change. His philosophy is built on complacency and disengagement. He says: “You work to rest—just rest now” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 15). This cynical logic devastates Al-Ta’is, as he must contend not only with an unjust system but with a passive opponent who shares his space and mocks his values. Even more painfully, it is Al-Na’is who becomes king, simply because a crow landed on his head.

In one absurd moment, the entire moral order is overturned: Laziness becomes the path to glory, and effort leads to marginalization. The play thus poses a scathing question: What is the point of work in a system that rewards incompetence and punishes dedication? In this way, the Masrudiya becomes a profound existential allegory—a satirical but searing portrayal of a broken reality. It is not merely the story of two characters, but a symbolic conflict: between the dreamer of change and the submitter to decay. In this upside-down world, it is always the opportunists who rise, while the diligent are crushed.

Even more disturbing is that Al-Na'is is rewarded precisely because he does not think. He was born asleep, as he recounts: "When I was born, my mother noticed two things: First, I was asleep—I didn't cry like other babies, and the midwife thought I was dead" (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 9). Sleep here is not a biological state—it is a symbol of ritualistic compliance. It marks him as the ideal citizen—rewarded for not disturbing the system with questions. In *The Kingdom of the Crow*, sleep becomes policy, drowsiness becomes loyalty, and silence a path to upward mobility.

Al-Na'is doesn't merely embody physical idleness—he turns it into a belief system, proudly declaring: "I get my food and clothes while I'm sleeping" (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 20). His body colludes with power to reproduce authoritarianism: the sleeping man becomes a metaphor for satisfied submission, a condition eagerly rewarded by the system. Thus, the regime produces its "natural" ruler: a man who does not act, does not question, and poses no threat to the status quo. He is the perfect extension of a lazy power structure that seeks nothing from its people but collective sedation.

Meanwhile, Al-Ta'is is punished because he thinks. His suppressed awareness threatens the culture of sleep, plunging him into a moral crisis where merit becomes a sin, and labor is condemned. In this light, Al-Ta'is represents the exploited margin—those whose labor powers the system but who are denied access to its benefits. He is the symbolic and material force of production that serves the center without ever belonging to it.

Conversely, Al-Na'is embodies the parasitic center, feeding on the exhaustion of others and monopolizing privilege in the name of fate, lineage, or ritual. He personifies a ruling class that reproduces its dominance by distorting the very notion of merit. Thus, the *Masrudiya* becomes a symbolic dissection of how power functions: the center does not earn legitimacy through competence, but through its ability to convert idleness into prestige and meaninglessness into order.

The more the margin strives, the more isolated it becomes—because this system does not want actors, but subjects. In this context, Houeida Saleh observes that official history and authoritarian systems "present themselves as legitimate culture, establishing their authority in the flow of history while crushing others' hopes for progress. They grant neither opportunity nor capacity for self-expression, viewing those who resist as the remnants of a survival struggle, the final deformities in a body built on domination and hierarchy" (Saleh, 2015, p. 13).

Moreover, *The Kingdom of the Crow* shows that the absurd system is not protected by power alone—it is safeguarded by the silent masses, who chant, justify, and reproduce oppression under the guise of tradition. Injustice becomes a collective act, one that relies on minds conditioned to worship illusion. The cor-

onation scene captures this diseased collective consciousness—where randomness becomes legitimacy, and a bird becomes a god. The narrator describes:

“The crow flies for a few moments, then lands on someone’s head, then again takes off and finally settles on Al-Na’is... Everyone surrounds him, lifts him up, and chants : Long live the king !” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 67).

This moment—both majestic and grotesque—summarizes the tragedy of a society that venerates chance and fears awareness. The crow becomes a mirror reflecting collective madness, turning absurdity into ritual and sleep into governance.

Al-Ta’is, standing outside the cheers, realizes that the crow’s landing was not divine selection—it was a collective conspiracy against truth. His final outburst captures the collapse of meaning:

“How vile is this world ! How vile is coincidence ! I spend most of my life working hard and remain miserable, while this despicable man sleeps his life away and ends up a great king ?” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 68).

Here, the tragedy reaches its peak. Al-Ta’is does not just protest the system—he indicts the people who uphold it. The crow did not choose alone; it was chosen by a society that needs a symbol to worship in order to abandon responsibility. Thus, ritual becomes a tool of repression, and cheering for the king becomes an act of voluntary enslavement.

In *The Kingdom of the Crow*, Al-Ta’is represents every consciousness that is cast out because it threatens the false stability of power. In contrast, Al-Na’is symbolizes every authority figure who is rewarded precisely for not thinking. Between the two, the ugliest face of distorted justice is revealed: truth becomes a burden, silence a virtue, and stupidity a currency of success. This condition is not imposed by force alone—it is sustained by a silent society that programs itself for obedience and reproduces its own submission, whether knowingly or not.

This perspective resonates with Pierre Bourdieu’s account of symbolic power, in which linguistic authority functions as a form of domination that operates through recognition and misrecognition, thereby naturalizing unequal social relations (Bourdieu, 1991).

5. The Crow as a Mechanism of False Justice

Since the dawn of civilization, societies have relied on rituals, symbols, and signs to regulate collective existence and reproduce political and power structures. The danger arises, however, when these symbols move from the realm of metaphor into the realm of legislation—when ritual replaces law, signs override actions, and symbols displace human agency. At that point, the symbol itself becomes the authority. This is precisely the danger Mikhail Bakunin warns of when he writes: “All authority or institutional right imposed on people as such

becomes immediately oppressive and false... inevitably leading us to slavery and absurdities" (Bakunin, 2021, p. 29).

This transformation of the symbol into sovereign power is embodied by the crow in *The Kingdom of the Crow*. The crow is not merely a bird—it becomes a political apparatus that reinforces the center and legitimizes marginalization. It doesn't simply signal decisions; it enforces them, appoints rulers, excludes others, and reshapes collective consciousness according to a structured absurdity.

In this symbolic framework, the crow establishes what can be called ritualistic justice—a justice system built upon symbolic moments, detached from any rational or ethical standard. It is a justice without logic: a system that codifies disorder in the name of tradition, transforming coincidence into law. When the crow's landing becomes the mechanism for choosing a ruler, all metrics of merit and competence collapse into dark satire. Law is replaced by myth; political agency is replaced by ritual spectacle.

Ahmed Karim Bilal identifies this type of legitimation as a breakdown of political reason. He notes that some regimes and discourses "dismantle authority, paralyze the system, and replace the idea of reform with the glorification of chaos... legitimacy is reshaped through alternative symbols that lack any rational or legal foundation" (Bilal, 2020, p. 35). Within this context, the crow is not just a bird but a ritualistic institution, reproducing power through empty spectacle and fake meaning—where myth replaces reason and submission replaces choice.

Traditionally, the crow in literature and myth carries ambivalent connotations—death, misfortune, prophecy, and omens. It has often been viewed as a harbinger of doom (Youm7, 2023). In *The Kingdom of the Crow*, this symbolism is magnified and institutionalized into a mythical legislative body, drawing its power from collective fear and the desperate need to explain the unknown, even at the cost of reason. The society surrenders to the shadow of a wing, and the act of falling becomes sacred. The crow becomes the symbolic "eye of the regime," which sees only what reinforces its stability—much like the icons of authoritarian systems: flags, statues, emblems, rituals. These symbols are transformed into tools of suppression, and meaning is assassinated in the name of the symbol.

To analyze the crow is to deconstruct an entire system of symbolic governance—one that creates central authority through irrational tools and protects it with ritual sanctity. Once the crow lands on someone's head, the conversation ends. A new era begins—not led by the most capable, but by the one chosen by the ritual.

The crow thus evolves from an ordinary creature into a source of absolute legitimacy, where kings are not elected by reason or merit, but by the bird's descent. In the height of the ceremony, one character declares: "When the king dies, the people gather in one place to choose a new one. Then the sacred crow is brought

forth... it lands on one of the attendees, and that person becomes our king and master” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 64).

In that instant, political reason is replaced by ritual destiny, and justice becomes a matter of random descent—where people accept their fate as a sacred decree. This ritual is enforced by a collective discourse steeped in submission. An elder proclaims: “I call upon you all... it is time to release the sacred crow... let your hearts be pure, and your feelings toward the crow be clean” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 65).

And when the crow lands on Al-Na’is, no one demands explanation or accountability. Instead, he is celebrated as a savior, and the crowd chants: “Long live the king... Long live the king... Long live the king!” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 68).

Yet this choice was manipulated. Later, Al-Na’is’s lover reveals: “I spent a long time taking care of the sacred crow and trained it well to land where a certain scent was released” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 72).

This confession exposes a political system rooted in deceit and theatrical manipulation, where justice becomes a staged performance, vulnerable to conspiracy. Justice in *The Kingdom of the Crow* is not justice at all—it is a symbolic facade used to protect a systematic tyranny. The king is not just granted earthly authority—he is elevated to the realm of the divine. Meanwhile, anyone not chosen by the crow is automatically excluded from power, regardless of merit.

In a moment of heartbreak, Al-Ta’is laments: “I spent most of my life working hard and still remain miserable, while that parasite spends his life sleeping and is crowned a great king?” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 68).

The Kingdom of the Crow thus becomes a symbolic space where human merit is invalidated, power is sanctified in its most absurd forms, and ritual becomes eternal authority—immune to criticism, unaccountable to logic, and protected by blind faith.

6. Justice as a Justification for Marginalization

Throughout history, injustice has often been armed with discursive strategies that make it appear fair. Oppression does not always operate through direct coercion; in authoritarian contexts, justice itself becomes part of the machinery of domination—redefined in ways that numb the victim and absolve the oppressor. This is where the most dangerous form of violence emerges: symbolic violence, where suppression is enacted through persuasion, and competence is excluded because it clashes with the false standards established by the center to preserve its authority.

In such a framework, marginalization is reinterpreted as necessary, even as a legitimate component of what is framed as “justice.” This dynamic is clearly embodied in *The Kingdom of the Crow*, where Al-Ta’is is sidelined not due to a lack of merit, but because he does not belong to the “natural” center. Meanwhile, Al-Na’is is enshrined in power—not for any achievement, but by virtue of birth,

ritual, or coincidence. In this symbolic order, justice functions as a tool to discipline the margin and stabilize the center, internalizing a logic that convinces the marginalized that their condition is fate, not injustice.

Justice thus becomes a moral facade for a closed class system, in which inequality is presented as a form of order. In the world of the play, justice serves as a mask for a deeply hierarchical regime, where exclusion is not only systemic but justified through a symbolic structure that convinces everyone that injustice is simply another form of balance. Justice, in this context, is circulated through linguistic and psychological rituals that render marginalization not just acceptable—but sacred.

In *The Kingdom of the Crow*, justice is not presented as a living virtue that liberates, but as a mechanism that legitimizes systemic marginalization, enforced by authority in the name of rights and legitimacy. While the self-proclaimed king declares that he is restoring justice and balance, entire segments of society are classified as “the miserable” or “the sleepers” and are effectively excluded from decision-making spaces. As the text states: “We have followed your instructions to the letter... nothing more, nothing less” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 77).

While this line may appear as a declaration of judicial integrity, the phrase “to the letter” reveals that justice here is not reflexive or critical but a mechanical obedience to potentially unjust directives. Justice is reduced to a symbolic display of conformity, while the marginalized remain silenced, denied any opportunity for defense or recognition.

Within this logic, the ruler promotes “curriculum reform” under the guise of justice, but in practice, education becomes a tool to domesticate the lower classes. The text proclaims: “From now on, our children will only learn the art of praise... we want an army of journalists, poets, and speakers who master the art of flattery” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 78).

Here, justice is distorted. While it is presented as a redistribution of opportunity, it is in fact a means of manufacturing obedience. Education, justice, and the people are portrayed as interconnected—but in practice, education serves to reinforce authority, not to empower the marginalized. Thus, justice becomes the rationale for excluding those who cannot or will not master the “art of praise.”

Moreover, justice is deployed to justify a new social structure: the “smooth” and passive are rewarded with power, while the “miserable” are left outside the realm of decision-making—rationalized by appeals to destiny or law. In one telling moment, Al-Tà’is bitterly asks: “How vile this world is! How vile is coincidence! I spend most of my life working hard and remain miserable, while that parasite spends his life sleeping and is crowned a great king?” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 68).

This question does not exist outside the logic of the proclaimed justice—it sits within it. The official discourse claims that effort and work lead to reward,

but the lived reality affirms the opposite. Marginalization is thus institutionalized under the guise of law or fate, and justice becomes a slogan, while injustice defines reality.

Justice in the play is further ritualized, enacted not as a human right, but as a ceremonial event involving birds and symbols. During the coronation, the narrator announces: “The crow flies around, then lands on Al-Na’is... everyone gathers around him, lifts him, and chants: Long live the king... long live the king” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 67).

Here, the so-called justice of selection is not guided by any transparent or objective criteria—it is reduced to a meaningless ritual, where a bird’s arbitrary landing determines leadership, and the crowd responds with ceremonial praise. What this moment hides is that Al-Ta’is and the other marginalized characters were never granted representation. The declared justice is merely a cover for a social order that rewards the idle and excludes the capable.

Finally, justice in the text is wielded to justify oppression in the name of “national interest” or “social order.” After the crow lands and the king is crowned, a religious elder announces: “I call on you to step forward... it is time to release the sacred crow. May God bless our mission. May your hearts be pure...” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 65).

This call suggests that justice is performed as a communal ritual, not as a platform for critique or accountability. Anyone who questions this order—like Al-Ta’is—is considered divisive or disruptive, not a participant in justice. Thus, what is proclaimed as justice is used to solidify power and rationalize marginalization.

Taken together, this analysis reveals that “justice as a justification for marginalization” in *The Kingdom of the Crow* takes multiple forms: justice without transparency, justice through education that turns the lower classes into tools, ritualized justice that glorifies deception, and justice that affirms exclusion in the name of national stability. The text reminds us that justice is not always what it appears to be—it can, and often does, become a mechanism for reproducing systemic injustice.

7. Satire as a Tool for Exposing Collective Complicity

Among all critical tools, satire stands as one of the most intelligent—and most dangerous. It is not mere mockery or a psychological escape from pain; rather, satire is a symbolic mechanism for dismantling dominant narratives. It reorders awareness from within and strips authoritarian discourse of its mystique by exposing its paradoxes and contradictions. In both political and social literature, satire arises from the depths of consciousness—it makes us laugh to wound, simplifies in order to expose, and undermines systems that legitimize oppression under the guise of sacredness, legality, or ritual.

In *The Kingdom of the Crow*, satire becomes the sharpest weapon against the false structure of authority. It works from within the system, turning its symbols—like the crow, the throne, ritual, and even formal language—into farce. Through this lens, sanctity is desecrated, false justice is unmasked, and the symbolic mechanisms of marginalization are dismantled. Satire here functions as a symbolic resistance, turning the narrative from story to exposure, from tale to tribunal. It reorders inner consciousness, replacing reverence with critique, sacredness with irony, and obedience with questioning.

Suhā ‘Abd al-Sattār al-Sattūhī (2003) supports this view in her study, noting that:

“Satire is the highest form of humor, for it requires subtlety, cleverness, and strategy. It is a weapon used by politicians to mock and trap their opponents, and it is also the tool through which writers and philosophers critique prevailing superstitions and flawed ideologies” (p. 48).

In *The Kingdom of the Crow*, satire becomes a tool for dismantling a fabricated reality where absurdity is institutionalized and complicity is ritualized. The playwright does not use humor for amusement, but rather as a way to peel back official narratives, exposing symbolic laziness cloaked in authority. One of the clearest examples is when Al-Na’is climbs and descends a staircase while ridiculing the logic of labor. He says:

“Don’t overthink it—just get me. Life is like a staircase : you climb to come back down. So why bother climbing in the first place ?” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 17).

This line encapsulates a full satirical philosophy: it enshrines the system’s absurd logic that justifies and reproduces inertia. It is not merely a joke, but a manifesto of futility, a rejection of effort and merit. Al-Na’is doesn’t just embody laziness—he turns it into a worldview, even a wisdom, suggesting that the collective’s complicity in ignorance is not accidental but chosen.

This paradox deepens when dreams, typically instruments of rebellion and change, become tools of distraction. Al-Na’is proudly declares: “I dream... I dream more than you can imagine.” And later: “That I may become a prince” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 22).

When Al-Ta’is mocks this delusional ambition, it becomes clear that dreaming itself has been hollowed out, co-opted into the absurd. The very desire for change is reduced to a mockery, not a catalyst for liberation, but a mechanism for pacifying consciousness—especially when heedlessness is rewarded with a crown.

Even more unsettling is how satire itself is eventually co-opted into collective complicity. The crowd that once laughed at Al-Na’is rallies behind him, chanting: “Long live the king... long live the king!” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 68).

All he has done is be chosen by the crow—he has said and done nothing of substance. It is a scene of perfect absurdity: satire is transformed into ritual glorification. At this point, satire not only serves to deconstruct, but it becomes a weapon that corrodes consciousness itself. The victim laughs at their own suffering and praises those complicit in their subjugation.

The female character in the play reinforces this pattern. She laughs, manipulates, and deceives—not to change the system, but to prove that complicity is not a male monopoly. She says bluntly: “I did everything for you, my love... We will fulfill our dream together... Al-Ta’is and the others will be nothing but tools in our hands” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 46).

Her words are not merely sarcastic—they weaponize irony to delegitimize action, turning those who strive for change into pawns for the cunning. She builds a repressive order in the name of love, mocking Al-Ta’is both as a lover and as a means to power.

Satire reaches its climax when Al-Ta’is’s entire struggle is reduced to a sarcastic job offer. Al-Na’is proclaims: “If I become king, I promise to find you a job—one that keeps you working day and night!” (Jlaouji, 2020, p. 65).

This is no reward—it is a cruel jest, a rejection of worth. Despite all his awareness and effort, Al-Ta’is is dragged toward his fate with a smile, unaware that the dream he helped build was a lie. Satire, then, becomes the lens through which the mechanisms of collective subjugation are exposed. The play shows us not only the presence of oppressive power, but a complicit society that laughs when humiliated, cries when excluded, then cheers for the very hand that crushes it.

This is the profound danger of satire in the play: it does not liberate, but reveals that everyone is both victim and accomplice at once.

Conclusion

In *The Kingdom of the Crow*, we are confronted with a complex symbolic architecture that weaves together narrative, theater, ritual, and language to produce a counter-discourse—one that challenges the established, inherited, and collectively sustained structures of power. Azeddine Jlaouji constructs his *Masrudiya* as an intellectual space where critique emerges not from direct confrontation, but from the subversive force of sharp satire and revealing symbolism. Marginalization, instead of remaining a silent experience, becomes a loud symbolic cry, and the center is exposed not through protest, but by dismantling the language of power from within.

The play reveals how authority is exercised through false meaning: justice functions as a mask, a symbolic apparatus that persuades the marginalized that their status is natural and that the injustice they endure is a form of cosmic balance. The playwright masterfully transforms notions such as choice, wisdom, and kingship into suspicious linguistic tools that produce class division through

language itself. In this narrative, those who rule do nothing, while those who think and labor are excluded. Al-Na'is symbolizes the parasitic center—rewarded precisely for not thinking—while Al-Ta'is embodies the aware, excluded margin whose very consciousness threatens the established order.

Between these two figures operates a system of unjust justice, where stupidity becomes a qualification, awareness a curse, and silence the currency for power access.

Moreover, this system is upheld not merely by dictatorship, but through collective complicity. The people cheer for the ritual, sanctify the crow, demonize critical thought, and reproduce inequality in the name of fate, religion, and tradition. This exposure required a language capable of unsettling the unsaid—and satire proved the sharpest weapon. It reveals, destabilizes, and burns down the aura of power, exposing a hollow system that survives not by real legitimacy, but by symbolic manipulation.

Satire in this play becomes a philosophy of deconstruction: it turns phrases into axes, rituals into puppet theater, and authority into a laughable void. The key findings of the study are as follows:

The Kingdom of the Crow offers a narrative model for anatomizing systems of power based on inheritance and pseudo-rituals, where positions are granted through symbolic coincidence rather than merit.

Justice is presented as a mechanism for reproducing inequality, framing oppression as a metaphysical destiny that cannot be questioned.

Al-Ta'is and Al-Na'is are not merely characters, but symbolic equations: the former represents the conscious, excluded margin; the latter, the parasitic center upheld by false symbolic legitimacy.

Satire is employed as a rhetorical and deconstructive system, stripping authoritarian discourse of its grandeur and transforming formal language into a site of absurdity that collapses the regime from within.

Authority in the play is produced outside the realm of reason, through mythical rituals and folkloric representations that establish succession, ignorance, and fixed hierarchies.

Recommendations

It is essential to re-examine systems of governance through the lens of symbols and rituals, not merely through law or violence, as much of today's authoritarianism is symbolically legitimized.

Satire should be invested in as a serious critical tool, capable of dismantling ideological narratives that beautify oppression.

The scope of critical Arabic literary studies must be expanded to include hybrid forms like the *Masruḍiyya*, which offers high symbolic potential for representing issues of marginalization and structural violence, outside the confines of traditional genres.

Literary analysis should be linked to political and symbolic analysis, as texts like *The Kingdom of the Crow* do not merely reflect reality—they rewrite it and reconstruct its meaning.

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