



# Discursive Memory of Authoritarianism and Religious Delegitimation of Resistance in Modern Arabic Drama: A Sociocognitive Reading of Musthafa Mahmud's Az-Za'īm

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** - This study introduces two interpretive concepts—discursive memory of authoritarianism and religious delegitimation of resistance—to examine the construction of power in Musthafa Mahmud's modern Arabic drama *Az-Za'īm*. Rather than applying Van Dijk's sociocognitive CDA as a checklist, the study deploys it to show how a single dramatic text encodes the structural logic of authoritarian discourse across historical periods.

**Design/methodology/approach** - The study applies a qualitative descriptive design grounded in library research. The primary data consist of 27 purposively selected textual units—dialogues, monologues, and stage directions—drawn from the 1990 *Dar al-Ma'arif* edition of *Az-Za'īm* (pp. 3–97). Inclusion criteria required each unit to: (1) contain an explicit representation of a power relation; (2) carry at least one ideologically marked lexical item (e.g., *kufr*, *sādah*, *'abīd*, *ṭā'ah*); (3) exhibit a syntactic form enacting power (imperative, passive, or fronting); and (4) relate to a historically traceable socio-political condition. Units lacking all four criteria were excluded. Analysis moved through three linked stages: data reduction via a structured coding table, cross-analyst interpretive discussion (triangulation), and contextual interpretation connecting linguistic findings to Ottoman Tripolitan and modern Arab political history.

**Findings/results** - Power in *Az-Za'īm* is constructed through four interrelated discursive strategies: (1) religious delegitimation, whereby the term *kufr* forecloses political dissent before its content is addressed; (2) hierarchical lexical opposition (*sādah/'abīd*), which naturalizes social inequality while simultaneously enabling its critique; (3) imperative forms that condense vertical authority into bare commands; and (4) passive constructions that delete the agent of discriminatory policy. Collectively, these strategies constitute what this study terms the discursive memory of authoritarianism—a repertoire of recurring linguistic moves that reproduce domination across Ottoman and postcolonial Arab political contexts.

**Originality/value** - The study proposes two novel conceptual tools for the field: discursive memory of authoritarianism and religious delegitimation of resistance in modern Arabic drama. These extend Van Dijk's model beyond its standard application and position *Az-Za'īm* within comparative debates on political theater, critical stylistics, and the discourse-historical approach. The findings have direct implications for Arabic literary pedagogy and scholarship on power discourse in postcolonial Arabic contexts.



**Paper type** – Research article

**Keywords:** *Critical discourse analysis; Discursive memory of authoritarianism; Religious delegitimation; Van Dijk; Modern Arabic drama.*

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## 1. Introduction

Power does not announce itself cleanly. It works through the language that orders bodies, allocates resources, names enemies, and consecrates obedience. When a tax decree is read aloud in a marketplace, when a religious epithet silences a complaint, when the seating order in an assembly signals who belongs and who does not—all of this is discourse doing the work of domination. Studying how power is represented in literary texts is therefore not a peripheral scholarly exercise; it is one of the more direct routes into understanding how authority reproduces itself and how resistance finds or loses its vocabulary.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) rests on the premise that texts are social practices bound to positions, knowledge systems, and structures of control (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2009). Van Dijk's sociocognitive model holds that discourse operates simultaneously at the level of linguistic structure, shared mental representations, and socio-political context. What makes this model productive for literary analysis is precisely that connection: a text's lexical and syntactic choices carry ideological weight not because of some hidden meaning embedded in words but because those choices activate collectively held beliefs about who deserves authority, who constitutes a threat, and what counts as legitimate protest.

Modern Arabic drama is particularly fertile ground for this inquiry. Drama is inherently dialogic: the voices of ruler, intellectual, rebel, and crowd confront one another on stage, and their exchanges make opposing ideologies audible in real time—through commands, justifications, refusals, and threats. Arabic political theatre has a sustained history of interrogating colonialism, authoritarianism, and the weaponisation of religion in the name of national order (Badawi, 1988; Hafez, 2022; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995). Yet CDA scholarship has applied itself far more systematically to political speeches and media texts than to Arabic dramatic writing, leaving a gap in our understanding of how the stage has functioned as a site of discursive struggle.

Musthafa Mahmud's *Az-Za'im* (1990) occupies an instructive position within this gap. Set in Ottoman Tripoli during the resistance led by Ghuma al-Mahmudi in the mid-nineteenth century, the play dramatises the mechanisms through which a colonial administration monopolises positions, imposes discriminatory taxation, and invokes religious authority to foreclose Arab dissent. Prior scholarship has read the play through genetic structuralism (Rahmah, 2023), Freudian character analysis (Raihanah & Sumardi, 2021), sociological literary criticism (Ziyat & Sofyan, 2021), and Gricean pragmatics (Fitri, 2024). These studies have produced valuable partial readings. None, however, has examined how the play's specific linguistic choices—its imperatives, passives, religious epithets, and lexical oppositions—function as a coherent discursive system, and none has connected that system to a broader

historical account of how authoritarian discourse persists across changing political contexts in the Arab world.

That persistence is what this study conceptualises as the discursive memory of authoritarianism: the set of recurring linguistic moves—commands that erase dialogue, religious epithets that foreclose dissent, passive constructions that delete responsible agents, hierarchical lexical pairs that naturalise inequality—through which domination reproduces itself even as its institutional forms change. A related concept, religious delegitimation of resistance in modern Arabic drama, designates the specific discursive operation by which religious vocabulary is deployed not to describe a theological condition but to pre-empt political criticism by classifying dissent as moral transgression. These two concepts extend Van Dijk’s framework beyond its standard sociocognitive application and offer tools for comparative analysis of political discourse in Arabic literary texts.

Existing CDA scholarship on Arabic-language texts has focused primarily on news media and political speeches (Hafez, 2022; Mousavi & Al-Masri, 2024; Patrah, 2025). Studies applying Van Dijk’s model to Arabic drama remain rare, and none has integrated all three of his analytical dimensions—text, social cognition, and socio-political context—into a unified reading of a single dramatic work. This study addresses that gap directly.

Three research questions guide the analysis:

**RQ1:** How is power represented through the macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure of *Az-Za’im*?

**RQ2:** How does the play’s discourse reflect Mahmud’s social cognition regarding domination, injustice, and resistance?

**RQ3:** How do the Ottoman Tripolitan context and patterns of modern Arab authoritarianism shape the discursive construction of power in the text?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis: Language, Power, and the Construction of Domination

CDA treats language as social practice bound to relations of power, domination, and inequality. It asks whose interests a discourse serves, who appears as agent and who is erased, and how legitimacy or resistance is produced linguistically (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Fairclough’s three-dimensional model—text, discursive practice, social practice—shows that discourse reproduces social order through practices that appear natural precisely because their constructedness is concealed. Wodak’s discourse-historical approach (DHA) adds a comparative dimension: it traces how particular argumentative topoi and strategies recur across different historical moments and institutional contexts (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). The DHA is directly relevant to this study because it provides a methodological warrant for reading *Az-Za’im*’s Ottoman setting alongside modern Arab political history, without collapsing historical specificity into an undifferentiated claim about ‘authoritarian discourse.

Power in CDA encompasses not only coercion but control over meaning and knowledge. Dominant groups seek to make their worldview appear natural, self-evident, or divinely



sanctioned (Van Dijk, 1998). Labels such as rebel, infidel, slave, or traitor do more than describe; they position speakers and addressees within unequal social relations (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Critical stylistics, as developed by Jeffries (2010), extends this insight into literary language: it identifies the textual processes through which readers are positioned to accept particular distributions of identity and value as normal. Simpson's (2014) work on discourse and point of view adds a further dimension relevant to drama: the choice of who speaks, in what syntactic form, about whom, is never neutral.

## 2.2 Van Dijk's Sociocognitive Model: Text, Mental Representation, and Social Context

Van Dijk's model distinguishes three analytical levels: text, social cognition, and social context. Text is examined through macrostructure (overall thematic coherence), superstructure (the schematic sequence of discourse), and microstructure (lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical choices). Social cognition refers to the mental models and ideological representations that link individual text production to socially shared belief systems. Social context encompasses the political, institutional, and cultural structures within which a discourse becomes possible and consequential (Van Dijk, 2008, 2009, 2014).

The ideological square is the model's central analytical concept: dominant ideology typically foregrounds in-group positives and out-group negatives while backgrounding the reverse (Van Dijk, 1998). In political and literary texts this logic appears in the binarism of ruler/ruled, believer/infidel, master/slave, Arab/Turk. Importantly, the square is not a fixed property of vocabulary; it is a discursive operation that the same word can perform differently depending on who deploys it. This is precisely what makes *Az-Za'im* analytically interesting: Ghuma's appropriation of the masters/slaves binary reverses the square's ideological function, turning the discourse of domination into an instrument of critique.

## 2.3 Historical Context: Ottoman Tripolitania, the Sanusi Movement, and the Structural Grammar of Arab Authoritarianism

Situating *Az-Za'im* historically requires attention to three distinct but related contexts. The first is Ottoman Tripolitania in the mid-nineteenth century. Under the reorganisation of 1835, the Ottoman state reasserted direct administrative control over Tripoli after a period of Qaramanli autonomy, installing Turkish officials in senior military, judicial, and administrative positions while Arab and Berber populations were largely confined to subordinate roles and subjected to taxation systems that generated substantial resentment (Anderson, 1986; Wright, 1969). Ghuma al-Mahmudi's resistance in the 1830s–1840s was one of the earliest organised Arab challenges to this administrative structure. The play draws directly on this history while dramatising its discursive logic rather than simply narrating its events.

The second context is the Sanusi movement, which from the 1840s onward built a religio-political network across Cyrenaica and later Tripolitania, providing an alternative framework of Islamic solidarity that coexisted uneasily with Ottoman authority (Evans-Pritchard, 1949; Peters, 1990). The Sanusiyya's use of religious identity as a resource for collective organisation makes it directly relevant to the play's treatment of *kufr* as a political instrument: it shows that religious vocabulary was simultaneously a resource for colonial

administration and for indigenous resistance, a double valence that the play exploits dramatically.

The third context is Libya after 1969 and its place within broader patterns of Arab nationalist authoritarianism. *Az-Zaʿīm* was published in 1973, four years after Muʿammar al-Qadhafi's coup, during a period when the new Libyan state was deploying the slogans of Arab liberation, Islamic legitimacy, and revolutionary nationalism while systematically eliminating political opposition (St John, 2012; Vandewalle, 2012). The play does not represent this regime directly. Its analytical value lies in what it reveals about the structural similarity of authoritarian discursive repertoires: grand slogans, religious sanction, elimination of the individual voice, and the transformation of tribute into loyalty. Reading *Az-Zaʿīm* against this triple context—Ottoman administrative colonialism, religio-political contestation, and post-independence Arab authoritarianism—is what gives the concept of discursive memory of authoritarianism its explanatory force.

## 2.4 Modern Arabic Drama as a Site of Political Discursive Struggle

Modern Arabic drama emerged in the nineteenth century under conditions of colonial encounter, cultural renewal (*nahda*), and accelerating urbanisation (Badawi, 1988; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995). By the mid-twentieth century, playwrights from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the Maghreb were using the stage to interrogate colonial legacies, state violence, and religious authority in ways that formal political speech could not accommodate. Saʿd Allah Wannus in Syria, Alfred Farag in Egypt, and ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Madani in Tunisia all exploited the dramatic frame's capacity to stage contradiction: to allow a tyrant's voice to expose its own logic through the very extravagance of its claims (Allen, 2000; Carlson, 2012).

Mahmud's *Az-Zaʿīm* belongs to this tradition while departing from it in one significant respect: it locates its critique in a historical rather than contemporary setting, which creates a double temporal frame. The Ottoman Tripoli of the play functions simultaneously as a specific historical episode and as a mirror held up to modern Arab political realities. This double temporality is itself a discursive strategy, allowing the text to operate as political critique while maintaining the protective distance of the historical.

Patrah (2025) has shown that Arabic language use is deeply entangled with authority, cultural heritage, and contested identity—a finding that informs the present study's reading of *Az-Zaʿīm*'s deployment of Classical Arabic religious vocabulary within a colonial political drama. The study also draws on Hafez (2022) and Mousavi and Al-Masri (2024) for the broader relationship between Arabic-language discourse and political identity formation.

## 2.5 Prior Studies and Research Gap

Table 1 maps the position of this study relative to prior scholarship on *Az-Zaʿīm* and on Arabic CDA more broadly. The critical gap is not simply that Van Dijk's model has not been applied to this play—it is that no prior study has used the play's discourse to generate new conceptual tools for understanding authoritarian language in Arabic literary texts. That gap is what this study addresses.



**Table 1:** *Prior Studies and Position of the Current Study*

<b>Prior Study</b>	<b>Framework</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Limitation</b>	<b>How This Study Differs</b>
<b>Rahmah (2023)</b>	Genetic structuralism	Ottoman social reality	Sociological, not discursive	Analyses linguistic mechanisms constructing power, not social background alone
<b>Ziyat &amp; Sofyan (2021)</b>	Sociological literary analysis	Social injustice	Content-based; discourse mechanisms unelaborated	Connects injustice to lexical, syntactic, and ideological analysis with textual evidence
<b>Fitri (2024)</b>	Gricean pragmatics	Conversational implicature	Pragmatic; power and ideology not focal	Reads conversational exchange within structures of domination and resistance
<b>Raihanah &amp; Sumardi (2021)</b>	Freudian psychology	Character inner conflict	Individual psychological, not sociocognitive	Analyses collective social cognition and shared ideological representations
<b>Alliana &amp; Mudore (2025)</b>	Van Dijk CDA	Different Arabic text	Not on Az-Za'im or political Arabic drama	Applies all three Van Dijk dimensions to a modern Arabic political play
<b>Hafez (2022)</b>	Media discourse analysis	Egyptian media identity	Media, not literary drama	Provides comparative framework for Arabic political discourse beyond media

### 3. Method

The study employs a qualitative descriptive design within a library research framework, appropriate for interpretive analysis of textual data (Miles et al., 2014). The analytical framework is Van Dijk's sociocognitive CDA model, extended by the two conceptual tools proposed in this study: discursive memory of authoritarianism and religious delegitimation of resistance.

The primary source is *Az-Za'im* by Musthafa Mahmud Dar al-Ma'arif (1990). The corpus consists of 27 textual units selected purposively from across the play's 97 pages. Secondary sources comprise scholarship in CDA theory, modern Arabic drama, Ottoman Tripolitan history, and the discourse-historical approach.

Inclusion criteria for data selection required each unit to satisfy all four of the following conditions: (1) contains an explicit representation of a power relation between characters or

between a character and an institutional structure; (2) carries at least one ideologically marked lexical item from a predefined coding list (kufṛ, sādah, ‘abīd, ṭā‘ah, jizā, ikhsā’); (3) exhibits a syntactic form associated with power enactment (imperative mood, agentless passive, or marked fronting of a participant); (4) relates to an identifiable socio-political condition within the play’s Ottoman setting. Units satisfying only two or three criteria were noted but excluded from primary analysis to maintain analytical rigour. Repeated reading was conducted in three rounds, with interpretive consensus achieved through discussion among the research team (theoretical triangulation).

Table 2 sets out the coding framework. Analysis proceeded through three stages: data reduction (selecting the 27 units from an initial pool of 54 candidate passages), data display (organising units in the coding table below), and contextual interpretation (connecting linguistic findings to social cognition and historical context).

**Table 2:** Analytical Coding Framework

Van Dijk Dimension	Analytical Focus	Indicators in Az-Za‘īm	Page Reference (Mahmud, 1990)
<b>Macrostructure</b>	Overall thematic coherence	Injustice, domination, demand for equality	pp. 3–15
<b>Superstructure</b>	Schematic event sequence	Discrimination → taxes → refusal → revolt → Ghuma’s death	pp. 15–97
<b>Microstructure — Lexicon</b>	Ideologically marked vocabulary	Kufṛ, sādah/‘abīd, ṭā‘ah, jizā	pp. 12, 27, 34, 41
<b>Microstructure — Syntax</b>	Imperative and passive constructions	‘Sit’; ‘Read the decree’; ‘Turks are exempted’	pp. 21, 33, 47
<b>Microstructure — Style</b>	Participant ordering and fronting	Arab/Turk vs Turk/Arab positioning	pp. 38, 52, 67
<b>Social cognition</b>	Authorial and character mental models	Transition from obedience to resistance; gift as soft coercion	pp. 29, 44, 71
<b>Social context</b>	Historical and political structures	Ottoman Tripoli, Sanusi movement, post-1969 Libya	External sources

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Textual Structure: Power’s Linguistic Architecture

#### 4.1.1 Macrostructure: Injustice as Structural Theme

Az-Za‘īm’s macrostructure is not built around ethnic conflict but around the exposure of an administrative system of domination. The play’s central proposition, advanced through



Ghuma's dialogues and the play's cumulative rhetorical structure, is that inequality is manufactured and that its manufacturing follows a recognisable logic: monopolised positions, differential taxation, and the deployment of religion to seal the boundary between legitimate authority and illegitimate complaint.

Ghuma states in the market scene (p. 12): "The whip is behind us because we accepted slavery... offices for the Turks, army commands for the Turks, the navy for the Turks, and the Arab contents himself making sandals, tent pegs, and tents." The rhetorical structure is cumulative enumeration: each phrase in the series adds another domain from which Arabs are excluded, building the picture of a comprehensive system rather than an isolated grievance. The whip and the sandals bracket the list—physical coercion at one end, economic marginalisation at the other. This is not simple complaint; it is a discursive mapping of the architecture of domination.

The macrostructure's critical turn comes when Ghuma redirects the play's central religious question: "Where is Islamic equality when half the state are masters and half are slaves?" (p. 27). This move is significant within Van Dijk's framework because it appropriates the authority's own ideological resource—Islamic equality—and turns it against the authority's practice. The text's macrostructural theme is not revolution as such but the exposure of the gap between ideological claim and material practice.

#### **4.1.2 Superstructure: Consciousness as Narrative Trajectory**

The play's superstructure moves through a sequence that is also a political argument: an unequal situation is first depicted in detail, then shown to generate its own critique, then shown to produce organised resistance, which is met with symbolic co-optation (gifts, decrees, titles), which fails, which leads to violent suppression and Ghuma's death. Each stage in the sequence represents a stage in collective political consciousness.

From a CDA standpoint, the superstructure's most important function is to show that authoritarian domination is not stable but self-undermining: every act of linguistic and material violence—every tax, every decree read aloud in public, every epithet of *kufr* applied to a complainant—adds to a discursive accumulation that eventually exceeds the authority's capacity to manage it. Flowerdew and Richardson (2018) describe this dynamic in political discourse as the production of counter-publics through the very act of their exclusion. *Az-Za'im's* superstructure dramatises exactly this: the authority's discourse of domination generates the language of resistance it seeks to prevent.

#### **4.1.3 Microstructure: Religious Delegitimation of Resistance**

The word *kufr* (unbelief) appears at three distinct junctures in the play: when Ahmad Qurji interrupts Ghuma's tax protest (p. 34), when the Pasha justifies military levies by invoking the defence of Islam against 'infidels' (p. 41), and when a minor official applies the term to an Arab elder who questions the appointment of a Turkish judge (p. 55). In each case, *kufr*

functions not as a theological description but as a discursive pre-emption: it closes debate before the content of the objection can be evaluated.

This is what this study designates religious delegitimation of resistance: the discursive operation whereby religious vocabulary is deployed to classify political dissent as moral transgression, thereby removing it from the domain of negotiable politics and placing it in the domain of non-negotiable religious obligation. Van Dijk (2008, p. 86) argues that dominant groups control not only what can be said but what can be heard: the *kufr* label ensures that the Arab complainant's words reach the Ottoman official already contaminated by moral disqualification. Fairclough's (1995, p. 54) observation that language "participates in producing and reproducing social order" is nowhere more visible in the play than here: a single word does more coercive work than a decree.

Comparing this finding with CDA scholarship on political Islam and religious discourse: Mousavi and Al-Masri (2024) show that in Palestinian curriculum reform debates, Islamic vocabulary is similarly contested—wielded by state actors to foreclose critical engagement and by civil society actors to demand it. The structural parallel suggests that religious delegitimation is not a historically specific Ottoman practice but a recurring discursive mechanism available to any administration that claims religious authority. This is part of what the concept of discursive memory of authoritarianism is designed to capture.

#### **4.1.4 Hierarchical Opposition: Masters, Slaves, and the Reversibility of the Ideological Square**

The binary *sādah*/*'abīd* (masters/slaves) operates as a structural pivot in the play's discursive system. Ghuma's statement "The state is half masters and half slaves" (p. 27) condenses the play's social diagnosis into a single opposition. Within Van Dijk's ideological square, *sādah* marks the in-group of the dominant (Turks, officials, their children), and *'abīd* marks the out-group of the dominated (Arabs, local populations). The terms do not describe a natural condition; they describe a constructed one, and the play's discursive achievement is to make that construction visible.

What distinguishes this move from straightforward complaint is that Ghuma does not replace the binary with its opposite—he does not assert that Arabs should become masters. He dismantles the binary's naturalised status by exposing the gap between its deployment and the Islamic equality that the administration claims to uphold. This accords with Hart's (2014, p. 112) analysis of discursive struggle: the most effective counter-discourse does not simply reverse the dominant framing but reveals the contradiction within it. In critical stylistics terms, Jeffries (2010, p. 67) would identify this as the 'opposed values' textual process: the text constructs its critique by foregrounding the internal inconsistency of the authority's own value system.

#### **4.1.5 Imperative Forms and Passive Constructions**

Power manifests through imperative forms concentrated in the speech of Ottoman officials and the Pasha: "All seated... sit down, efendi" (p. 21) and "Read the sultan's decree,



Ahmad Qurji" (p. 33). In CDA terms, the imperative is a condensed representation of asymmetric social relation: it presupposes the speaker's right to direct the addressee's behaviour and the addressee's obligation to comply without negotiation. When these forms appear exclusively in the speech of Ottoman officials—never in the Arabs' speech except in Ghuma's moments of open resistance—the syntactic distribution itself maps the play's social hierarchy.

Passive constructions operate differently: they conceal rather than display. The phrase "And from these taxes the Turks and Karaghla and their children are exempted" (p. 47) removes the agent entirely. The privilege exists, but no one granted it; the discrimination is real, but no one decided it. Reisigl and Wodak (2016, p. 33) identify agent deletion as one of the most consistent features of political discourse justifying unequal treatment: passivisation transforms a political decision into an administrative fact. The comparison with Wodak's (2009) analysis of Austrian political discourse is instructive: 'passivisation' there similarly naturalises exclusionary policies by detaching them from their institutional authors.

#### 4.1.6 Participant Ordering and the Politics of Fronting

The ordering of participant names within clauses is not incidental in the play. Ahmad Qurji frames the conflict as "An Arab Muslim fights a Turkish Muslim" (p. 38), placing the Arab first in a context of accusation. Ghuma's formulations reverse the order: "Equality before the law between the Turks and the Arab" (p. 52) and "No distinction between Arab and Turk" (p. 67). In Halliday and Matthiessen's (2013, p. 89) systemic functional grammar, the thematic position carries the greatest communicative prominence; what comes first is what the clause is 'about.' Ahmad Qurji's ordering makes the Arab the initiator of conflict; Ghuma's ordering makes the Turk the holder of privilege. The argument is conducted partly at the level of syntax.

**Table 3:** *Discursive Strategies, Textual Evidence, and Comparative CDA Connections*

Discursive Strategy	Textual Indicator	Page Reference	Discourse Function	Comparable CDA Findings
<b>Religious delegitimation</b>	Kufr; 'fighting infidels'	pp. 34, 41, 55	Forecloses political dissent as moral transgression	Mousavi & Al-Masri (2024): religious vocabulary contested in state vs civil society
<b>Hierarchical opposition</b>	Sādah / 'abīd	pp. 27, 44	Naturalises inequality; reversed to expose it	Jeffries (2010): 'opposed values' textual process

<b>Authoritative imperative</b>	'Sit'; 'Read the decree'	pp. 21, 33	Displays vertical authority; eliminates dialogue	Machin & Mayr (2012): imperatives mark social hierarchy
<b>Agent concealment</b>	'Turks are exempted' (passive)	p. 47	Deletes responsible agent; naturalises privilege	Reisigl & Wodak (2016): passivisation as political legitimisation
<b>Participant fronting</b>	Arab/Turk vs Turk/Arab ordering	pp. 38, 52, 67	Controls accusation or claim by thematic position	Halliday & Matthiessen (2013): Theme as discursive prominence

#### 4.2 Social Cognition: Mahmud's Analytical Propositions on Domination and Conscientisation

Van Dijk's social cognition level asks what mental models and ideological representations are encoded in a text's discourse. In *Az-Za'im*, the author's social cognition is not a unified political thesis but a set of analytical propositions about how authoritarian domination works. Three propositions are central.

First, domination reproduces itself through the production of consent as much as through coercion. The scene of ceremonial gifts (pp. 44–48) is the play's most sophisticated treatment of this: cloaks and royal bounties are presented to tribal sheikhs, who are then asked to sign declarations of loyalty. The gift is not generosity; it is symbolic subjugation—what Bourdieu (1991, p. 170) would recognise as the conversion of economic capital into symbolic capital, which the dominated are then required to reciprocate through deference. Ghuma's refusal of the gift is not a personal affront; it is a refusal to enter the economy of domination at all.

Second, the play encodes an awareness that resistance requires epistemological work before it becomes political action. Ghuma's statement—"We agree to pay taxes for the sake of reform, efendi, but we find no reforms; the taxes go into the tax collector's pocket and nothing reaches the people" (p. 29)—is not a rejection of the state in principle. It is a demand for accountability within the terms the state has already set. This is a significant social-cognitive position: domination is most effectively challenged not by rejecting its declared values but by holding it to them. This is what Ghuma's Islamic equality argument does.

Third, the play encodes what might be called the cognition of gradual conscientisation: the recognition that collective resistance does not appear spontaneously but forms through accumulated experience of injustice. The transition from the early market scenes—where Arabs accept discrimination with resignation—to the confrontational dialogues of the middle



sections—where Ghuma names the system—mirrors the account of consciousness formation in critical social theory (Freire, 1970; Van Dijk, 2014, p. 199).

### **4.3 Socio-Political Context: How Authoritarian Discourse Persists across Ottoman, Post-Colonial, and Revolutionary Arab Formations**

The play's socio-political context operates at three levels that this study has been at pains to keep analytically distinct even while tracing their structural connections.

The first is Ottoman Tripolitania. After 1835, the reimposition of direct Ottoman rule created a sharp administrative divide between Turkish officials and local Arab and Berber populations (Anderson, 1986; Wright, 1969). Taxation was differential; military exemptions were racially coded; appointments to senior positions were systematically closed to non-Turks. This is the historical substrate from which the play draws its dramaturgy of injustice. Ghuma al-Mahmudi's historical resistance, lasting from 1835 to his capture and death in 1858, provided Mahmud with a documented case in which the discursive mechanisms of colonial administration—religious legitimation, military decree, symbolic co-optation—could be shown in operation.

The second level is the Sanusi movement's religio-political contestation in nineteenth-century Libya (Evans-Pritchard, 1949; Peters, 1990). The Sanusiyya's use of Islamic networks as an alternative administrative and educational infrastructure that competed with Ottoman authority illuminates the double valence of religious vocabulary in the play: *kufr* is a weapon in the Ottoman official's arsenal, but Islamic equality is a weapon in Ghuma's. The same religious tradition generates both.

The third level is post-independence Arab authoritarianism, particularly the Libyan political context of 1973 (St John, 2012; Subkhana Adzim Baqi & Zikriyah, 2025; Vandewalle, 2012). The Qadhdhafi regime's simultaneous use of Arab nationalist slogans, Islamic legitimation, and systematic political repression follows the same discursive repertoire that the play analyses in its Ottoman setting: grand ideological claims, religious sanction, gift-based co-optation of local leaders, and violent suppression of organised dissent. The parallel is structural, not direct. The play is not an allegory of 1970s Libya; it is an analysis of authoritarian discourse that happens to be as applicable to 1970s Libya as to 1840s Tripoli.

This is what the concept of discursive memory of authoritarianism designates: the transferability of a specific repertoire of linguistic strategies across different historical instantiations of domination. The repertoire—religious delegitimation, hierarchical lexical opposition, imperative command, agent concealment, symbolic co-optation—does not belong to Ottoman colonialism specifically; it belongs to a grammar of domination that Ottoman colonial administration happens to have used, as have other authoritarian formations before and after it.

#### 4.4 Discussion: Contributions to CDA Theory, Critical Stylistics, and Arabic Drama Studies

The findings contribute to four areas of existing scholarship. Within CDA theory, the study demonstrates that Van Dijk's model is productive for dramatic texts precisely because drama's dialogic form makes the distribution of linguistic resources across social positions directly legible. The finding that imperative forms are concentrated in Ottoman officials' speech while agentless passives appear in administrative proclamations replicates, in a literary corpus, the patterns that Machin and Mayr (2012) and Reisigl and Wodak (2016) identify in political media. Drama is not an exceptional genre for discourse analysis; it is a particularly transparent one.

Within critical stylistics, the study extends Jeffries' (2010) work on the 'opposed values' textual process by showing that in political drama this process is not just a feature of the text's surface structure but a mechanism through which the text's social cognition is constructed and transmitted. When Ghuma appropriates the masters/slaves binary and turns it against the authority's own Islamic equality claims, he is performing—on stage and in the text—what Jeffries calls 'critical work.' The reader or audience member is positioned, through the textual process, to share that critical work.

Within the discourse-historical approach, the study's concept of discursive memory of authoritarianism is offered as a contribution to DHA's comparative methodology (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). DHA's topoi—recurring argumentative structures that appear across different historical contexts—provide the closest existing theoretical resource for what this study describes. The discursive memory concept specifies this more sharply for the case of literary political discourse: it is not only that certain argument types recur, but that specific lexical-syntactic repertoires are available to administrations seeking to maintain domination across changing institutional contexts.

Within Arabic drama studies, the study confirms and extends the account of political theatre as a site of discursive struggle (Badawi, 1988; Hafez, 2022; Jayyusi & Allen, 1995). Az-Za'īm's particular contribution to that tradition is its meta-discursive character: the play does not only stage resistance; it stages the linguistic conditions of resistance and domination, showing how words—*kufr*, *sādah*, *'abīd*, *ṭā'ah*—do the work of power. This makes it an unusually productive object for discourse analysis and a valuable teaching resource for critical Arabic language education (cf. *Alsuna: Journal of Arabic and English Language*; Patrah, 2025).

#### 5. Conclusion

Az-Za'īm constructs the discourse of power through four interrelated linguistic strategies—religious delegitimation, hierarchical lexical opposition, imperative command, and agent concealment—deployed across a dramatic structure that moves from documented injustice to conscientised resistance. The play's macrostructure exposes the manufactured character of social hierarchy; its superstructure dramatises the formation of political



consciousness; its microstructure makes the specific linguistic tools of domination—and of critique—audible.

These findings support two conceptual contributions. Discursive memory of authoritarianism names the transferable repertoire of linguistic strategies through which domination reproduces itself across different historical instantiations—Ottoman colonial administration, post-independence Arab nationalism, and potentially beyond. Religious delegitimation of resistance in modern Arabic drama designates the specific discursive operation by which religious vocabulary forecloses political dissent by reclassifying complaint as moral transgression. Both concepts extend Van Dijk's sociocognitive model toward a comparative and historically grounded theory of authoritarian discourse in Arabic literary texts.

The study's limitations are real. It analyses a single dramatic text through qualitative interpretive methods; its findings establish an analytical model rather than a general law. Linking the play's Ottoman setting to post-independence Arab contexts requires the kind of sustained comparative historical work that a single study cannot fully accomplish. Future research should pursue comparative analysis across Arabic political drama from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the Maghreb, and should integrate CDA with semiotics, reception theory, and performance studies to understand how the discourse of power in modern Arabic literature is received by contemporary audiences across different political settings.

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