

Metatheatre and the Semiotics of Subjugation: A Reading in *Merya'e* a Play by Boukathir Douma

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Abstract

This study aims to provide a scholarly analysis of *Merya'e* by the Tunisian playwright Boukathir Douma through an examination of the text's aesthetic and semantic functioning. More specifically, it investigates the dual dramatic structure of the play and explores how the playwright mobilizes the "play within the play" technique (*metatheatre*) to uncover and critique conditions of oppression and alienation. Methodologically, the study is grounded in a structural-semiotic approach, which serves as an operative analytical framework for examining the paratextual thresholds of the text and the actantial organization of characters and their interrelations within the dramatic system. The analysis shows that the title *Merya'e* constitutes a condensed semantic center, signifying psychological castration and the deprivation of human will. It also reveals that the interpenetration of the actors' real identities and their dramatic roles exceeds the level of formal experimentation, functioning instead as a coherent semiotic structure that reflects hierarchies of power and submission and lays bare the erosion of justice and equality in oppressed societies.

Keywords

Maghrebi theatre; metatheatre; structural semiotics; actantial structure; Boukathir Douma.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Maghrebi theatre has witnessed profound transformations in its artistic structures and in its ways of engaging reality. It has moved beyond classical dramatic forms toward experimental techniques that seek to break the fourth wall and dismantle theatrical illusion. Among the most prominent of these techniques is the use of theatre within the theatre, or metatheatre, a device that turns the stage into an ambivalent space in which the artistic game intersects with lived reality, making the spectator a participant in deciphering the performance.

Within this experimental horizon, *Merya'e* by the Tunisian playwright Boukathir Douma, emerges as a densely meaningful case. The play is triggered by a tragic real incident: the killing of the actor Salih Zarrouq, who had been performing the role of the Sultan. Rather than stopping the performance, the stage space is thrown into disarray and becomes entangled with a criminal investigation, as the director, Saber Barkat, and the policeman, al-Badrawi, find themselves compelled to enter the game and successively perform the roles of the Minister and the Sultan. This overlap between the actor and his real identity on the one hand, and the dramatic role on the other, establishes an implicit discourse on oppression and alienation in defeated societies.

This tragic vision is further deepened by the first textual threshold, namely the title *Merya'e*, a term drawn from the pastoral popular lexicon referring to a castrated ram deprived of will and made to follow another beast. The playwright exploits this semantic displacement in order to transfer the

attribute of castration from the animal realm to the human realm, making his characters embodiments of humiliation and the loss of efficacy.

On the basis of these premises, the central problem of this study may be formulated as follows: how does the playwright employ metatheatricality and the textual thresholds to create a semiotics of subjugation, and how does the overlap between real space and stage space contribute to the construction of the overall meaning of *Merya'e*?

Several subsidiary questions arise from this central problem: what semiotic dimensions underlie the title *Merya'e* and the names of the characters? How is theatre within the theatre manifested in the dramatic structure, and what effect does it have on destabilizing the actor-role binary? To what extent does the actantial structure of the characters reveal a hierarchy of power and submission within the text?

To address these questions, the study relies on the structural-semiotic method as the most effective tool for deconstructing the textual thresholds, analyzing the actantial structure, and interrogating stage signs, thereby clarifying the mechanisms through which meaning is produced within the closed theatrical system.

2. Textual Thresholds and the Semiotics of the Title

2.1. The Lexical and Contextual Significance of the Title *Merya'e*

In structural-semiotic criticism, the title constitutes the great sign that precedes the text and directs the paths of reading. In *Merya'e*, the title is not a flat linguistic signifier; rather, it is a dense semantic nucleus that requires lexical and contextual unpacking in order to grasp its symbolic charge.

To uncover the semiotic dimension of the title *Merya'e*, one must trace its semantic trajectory back to its classical Arabic roots. Returning to older Arabic lexicons, one finds that the triliteral root (r-y-'e) carries meanings related to elevation and speed. In *Lisan al-'Arab* by Ibn Manzur, one reads: "It is said: How much is the elevation of your land? It is also said: they build on every elevated place. A *Merya'e* camel is one that gives milk quickly, and it is also said: one that fattens quickly" (Ibn Manzur, 1994, vol. 8, entry (r-y-'e), p. 142).

This dictionary meaning, which links *Merya'e* to elevation, status, and productivity, constitutes the direct lexical sense. Yet Boukathir Douma, fully aware that this dictionary meaning is inadequate to encompass the burden of his dramatic text, turns instead to the contextual and popular, that is, socio-cultural, meaning of the word as used in pastoral culture. In the prefatory note attached to the play, he offers a precise definition: "A *Merya'e* is a ram that is separated from its mother on the day of its birth. It is fed her milk without seeing her, and is usually placed with a female donkey so that it suckles from an artificial feeder hung in her saddlebag until it believes that she is its mother. After it grows up, it is castrated, its wool is not shorn, and its horns grow until it appears large and imposing. Clanging bells are hung around its neck, so that when the *Merya'e* moves, the flock follows it, believing that it is walking behind its heroic leader. But this *Merya'e*, with its counterfeit prestige, never walks unless the donkey walks, and it never overtakes it" (Douma, 2023, p. 5).

By juxtaposing these two citations, one may conclude that the playwright exploits a striking semiotic contradiction in the service of his dramatic construction. On the one hand, he preserves the formal image of elevation and largeness present in the lexical meaning; on the other, he subverts that image through the pastoral contextual meaning, which empties such largeness of any efficacy or independence. Within the semiotic system of the play, the *Merya'e* is thus a hybrid being: it possesses the outward appearance of leadership - horns, bells, largeness - yet is robbed of will and governed by

absolute dependence on a creature deemed inferior to it, namely the donkey. This semantic deconstruction prepares the reader, from the very first threshold, to receive a dramatic text that likewise dismantles the structure of the counterfeit prestige of power and exposes the mechanisms of domination and the falsification of collective consciousness, represented by the flock that follows a castrated and constrained leadership.

2.2. Semantic Displacement and the Semiotics of Castration

Boukathir Douma does not merely borrow the term **Merya'e** from the pastoral lexicon and leave it within its animal boundaries. Rather, he performs a profound semantic displacement. In literary discourse, displacement is understood as a stylistic procedure through which the creator breaks the conventional patterns of familiar language; the resulting transformation arises from a rupture in the relation between signifier and signified, whereby words acquire new meanings (Mouayleh, 2023, p. 45). By means of this deliberate rupture, the signifier **Merya'e** moves from its original animal field and becomes attached to the human and social sphere.

The play itself clarifies this imposed transfer that deprives the being of its will: "How did the word in this dramatic text shift from a designation for the animal to an attribute and designation for the human being, even though the **Merya'e**, whether human or animal, did not choose this path? It was imposed upon it, because castration is a terrifying means of physical and psychological torture" (Douma, 2023, p. 6).

This conjunction between critical reference and textual reference confirms that castration is not presented as a merely biological event; it becomes a semiotic sign of systematic domination. Here castration is a master metaphor for alienation and the confiscation of being. The human **Merya'e** does not choose its destiny; it is imposed upon it by a higher authority that subjects it to the harshest forms of humiliation in order to domesticate it.

This semantic displacement reaches its climax when the playwright links the deformation of the material body - the loss of virility - to the loss of social efficacy. In theatrical discourse, the body is not merely a biological mass; it is a necessary determinant of artistic expression, since it bears primary responsibility for expression, the production of signification, and the eruption of meaning on stage (Khayyat, 2022, p. 142). From this bodily semiotics, one may read in the play: "The castrated man, l'homme castre, is the one who has lost, together with his disabled sexual organ, all the pleasures of life. This **Merya'e** comes carrying many of the concerns that trouble the intellectual in a backward society that knows nothing of human rights, knows nothing of equality, and knows nothing of justice. In such a society, the man can only be a **Merya'e**" (Douma, 2023, p. 7).

From this perspective, the castrated body in the text is transformed into a semiotic space through which the defeats of a backward society are read. The semiotics of subjugation is structurally founded on emptying the individual of the power to generate and to act, thereby producing distorted human models. They possess an external image suggestive of prestige, but inwardly they have lost the condition of their humanity. The choice of the word **merya'** thus functions as a semiotic declaration that lays bare the political order that deforms the citizen, turning an active subject into a subordinate instrument.

2.3. The Semiotics of Character Names and Dramatic Functions

Semiotic work in **Merya'e** is not confined to the threshold of the main title; it extends to the names of the characters, which constitute an essential entryway into deciphering the text. In semiotic theatre studies, the character does not express a flat biological entity; rather, it is a conceptual practice

and a framework of systematic reference that furnishes a body of knowledge contributing to the formation of the iconic space through which we engage the issues of the text (Dali, 2013, p. 45). From this perspective, Boukathir Douma carefully shapes the names of his characters so that they function as signs bearing operational meanings that deepen the idea of alienation and subjugation.

This semiotic intentionality appears clearly in the character of al-Zayyat, who represents absolute power and the hidden motor of events. In the list of character thresholds, the text introduces him as follows: "Al-Zayyat: formerly the master of the Sultan and his owner. A man of wealth and trade. He is played by Mustafa al-Dhawi and is the principal suspect in the killing of the original actor, Salih Zarrouq, who was playing the role of the Sultan" (Douma, 2023, p. 17). In the popular lexicon, the signifier al-Zayyat is associated with the pressing of olives and the production of oil, an operation that requires pressing and crushing in order to extract material benefit. This name corresponds exactly to the character's function as a wealthy trader and the principal suspect in the crime: he represents capitalist power that presses individuals - including the Sultan himself, who had once belonged to him - in order to secure its own interests.

By contrast, the character of the Sultan stands as a semiotic sign built on tragic irony. In collective memory, the signifier Sultan evokes power and absolute sovereignty, yet the playwright overturns this signification in the character list: "The Sultan: a dark-skinned man in his fifties. This role is performed by the policeman al-Badrawi in place of the deceased original actor, Salih Zarrouq" (Douma, 2023, p. 17). Here the Sultan is merely an illusory facade. He possesses no power beyond the name itself, for he was originally a slave owned by al-Zayyat and is now nothing more than a theatrical role performed in haste by a policeman in order to fill the void left by the murder of the original actor. This composition makes the Sultan the practical embodiment of the title of the play: he is the supreme **Merya'e**, a ram carrying the bells of prestige and the name of sovereignty, yet stripped of will and subject both to the power of his former owner and to the directives of the director and the investigation.

This dependent semiotic structure is completed by characters such as Nasir, the castrated singer in the palace, and Ghanwa, the slave girl who does not know that she is the Sultan's daughter. The name Ghanwa evokes voice and melody as a means of entertaining authority, while the name Nasir carries the meaning of victory and support, yet it is a victory aborted in advance because it proceeds from a castrated being.

Accordingly, the naming of the characters in this text is far from arbitrary. It is fully consistent with semiotic sign theory, according to which the relation between signifier and signified is governed by the laws of the text itself (Bouakhlal, 2016, p. 89). These names constitute an integrated signifying system that exposes the falsity of visible authority, represented by the Sultan, confirms the dominance of hidden material power, represented by al-Zayyat, and consecrates the condition of complete incapacity in the remaining figures, such as Nasir and Ghanwa.

3. The Structure of Metatheatre and the Overlap of Spaces

Metatheatre, or theatre within the theatre, is one of the most significant experimental mechanisms through which contemporary Maghrebi theatre has sought to break with classical dramatic structure. Critically speaking, metatheatre may be defined as theatre that takes theatre itself as its subject, assuming the task of critiquing theatre through theatre and establishing a double consciousness in the spectator (Pavis, 2009, p. 546). In **Merya'e**, Boukathir Douma does not use this

technique as a merely decorative device; rather, he turns it into a semantic structure that exposes mechanisms of alienation and implicates the spectator in the game.

3.1. Deconstructing the Dual Narrative Structure and Intertextuality

The narrative architecture of **Merya'e** is built upon two parallel and interwoven narratives. The first is an urgent realistic narrative centered on the killing of the original actor, Salih Zarrouq, and the investigating judge's attempt to uncover the circumstances of the crime. The second is an imagined dramatic narrative involving a Sultan, his Minister, and a slave girl, a play that the director Saber Barkat and the policeman al-Badrawi attempt to complete by exchanging roles. This doubled theatrical cavity breaks the linearity of classical narration and creates a critical distance that prevents full immersion in illusion, prompting the spectator to reflect on the organic relation between imagined theatrical oppression and lived social oppression.

To deepen this metatheatrical structure, Douma employs intertextuality as an operative mechanism through which previous texts intersect with the later text in order to generate new meanings. He explicitly points to his intertextual references in the play, stating: "It became clear to me that before writing this text, Boukathir Douma had read Shakespeare and came to know theatre within theatre through Hamlet; he had also read Corneille and admired Le Cid, and he had turned to Murad III by al-Habib Boularas" (Douma, 2023, p. 7).

The evocation of Shakespeare's Hamlet carries a central significance. Just as Hamlet employed a play within the play, the Mousetrap, to expose his murderous uncle and reveal the falsity of usurped authority, the investigating judge - or indeed the director - in **Merya'e** uses the game of role exchange to interrogate the accused al-Zayyat and uncover the background of the crime. Intertextuality here is not a mere display of erudition; it is a functional dramatic strategy that rearticulates the question of authority within a crisis-ridden Maghrebi context.

The references to Corneille's Le Cid and al-Habib Boularas's Murad III deepen the theme of revenge and the conflict of wills. The play includes a direct intertextual echo of this tragic struggle: "The fire burning in my chest will be extinguished only by my own hands. No one in this palace feels what I feel. Bring him in" (Douma, 2023, p. 56). This intertextual borrowing projects the psychological condition of Corneille's and Boularas's characters onto the figures of **Merya'e**, thereby affirming that the human tragedy of despotism remains one and the same even when times and spaces change.

It follows that the playwright succeeds, through metatheatre and intertextuality, in constructing a text open to multiple readings. The staging of the crime within the Sultan's palace is not merely a detective inquiry; it is a semiotic trial of the order of oppression, in which the dramatic text itself becomes a critical instrument for dismantling reality.

3.2. The Actor-Role Binary: A Semiology of Doubleness

In semiotic approaches, the actor is understood as an icon; as both a sign and a bearer of signs, the actor is considered an icon as an ordinary person before stepping onto the stage, but on stage he becomes a sign, and that sign gives birth to further signs through the body and through its interaction with carried signs such as costume, decor, music, lighting, and props (Sharji, 2013, pp. 102-103). In **Merya'e**, however, because the play depends on metatheatre, the semiotic function of the actor becomes more complex and reaches the level of an ambiguous doubleness between the actor's real identity and the role assigned to him.

This doubleness becomes especially clear after the narrative shock created by the disappearance of the original actor playing the Sultan, Salih Zarrouq, due to his murder. This forced absence compels real characters from outside the theatrical game to enter it. Thus, one reads in the character list: "The Sultan ... this role is performed by the policeman al-Badrawi instead of the deceased original actor, Salih Zarrouq" (Douma, 2023, p. 17), and "The Minister ... is performed by the actor Saber Barkat, who is also the director and producer at the same time" (Douma, 2023, p. 17).

Semiotically, this situation produces what may be called the blurring of the sign. In the real world, the policeman al-Badrawi represents the authority of law and executive force; yet on stage he is compelled to embody the role of the Sultan-**Merya'e**, that is, authority that has been castrated and rendered subordinate. This contradiction between the actor's reference - the policeman - and the role's reference - the Sultan subordinate to al-Zayyat - yields an implicit meaning: even the authority of law in oppressed societies may become only a formal role or a **Merya'e** manipulated by hidden powers that possess wealth, represented by al-Zayyat.

Likewise, the intervention of the director-producer, Saber Barkat, to play the Minister carries no less dangerous a semiotic charge. The director is normally the figure of absolute authority on stage, the one who distributes the roles; but by embodying the Minister - a figure who obeys the Sultan and al-Zayyat - he symbolically relinquishes artistic authority in favor of hidden material power. As Pavis notes, metatheatre exposes the mechanisms of theatrical production in order thereby to expose the mechanisms of social production (Pavis, 2009, p. 314). The director here does not control the game; rather, he is himself part of a coercive game controlled by al-Zayyat. Subjugation thus exceeds the limits of theatrical role-playing and comes to affect the makers of the performance themselves.

The language of the investigating judge further consolidates this overlap. Although one might expect the investigation to proceed in formal language, the play specifies in a stage direction that the scenes taking place between the investigator and the actors are to be performed in the local dialect (Douma, 2023, p. 18). The use of the local dialect breaks the solemnity of the criminal moment and lowers it to the level of familiar daily absurdity, thereby dissolving the boundaries between the real crime - the murder - and the theatrical farce - the substitute performance.

From this overlap, one may conclude that Boukathir Douma uses the duality of actor and role to shatter the fixity of the theatrical sign. The actor is no longer merely a faithful transmitter of a ready-made text; rather, his hurried involvement in the roles reflects the Arab individual's involvement in an absurd reality in which he is forced to assume identities and behaviors that do not represent him, simply in order to keep the game - or life itself - going.

3.3. The Semiotics of Theatrical Space and the Multiplicity of Meanings

In semiotic criticism, theatrical space is one of the constitutive units without which drama cannot exist. It is not merely a dry geometric container for the actors; rather, it is a primary visual and aesthetic system that first confronts the spectator, and an integrated signifying order from which meanings are generated in the service of the issue being treated (al-Yusuf, 2010, pp. 22-25). In **Merya'e**, which is grounded in metatheatre, space undergoes a complex splitting and overlap between two parallel domains: urgent realistic space, namely the site of the police investigation, and imagined dramatic space, namely the Sultan's palace.

This semiotic overlap appears through the playwright's disruption of the unified-space pattern. The stage no longer represents one stable place; instead, it shifts continuously and abruptly from the scene of an actual murder - the killing of the actor Salih Zarrouq - to an imagined historical stage

space, the palace of the Sultan and the Minister. This alternation of spaces performs semiotic violence upon the spectator, taking him beyond the classical horizon of expectation and thereby shattering the fourth wall that separates stage from auditorium.

The meaning of this overlap is further deepened by the use of linguistic signs, namely stage directions. In a prefatory note, the playwright explicitly states: "The scenes that take place between the investigator and the actors are to be performed in the local dialect" (Douma, 2023, p. 18). The insertion of the local dialect into the space of the real investigation constitutes a decisive semiotic sign. The dialect strips the space of its official or elevated character and connects it to the everyday and the lived, making the stage an extension of the street and of society. By contrast, the space of the Sultan's palace is expected to speak in standard or elevated language befitting the false grandeur of authority. This linguistic contrast deepens the spatial contrast between two worlds: the world of everyday oppression, marked by dialect and reality, and the world of historical or institutional oppression, marked by palace and high language.

Modern semiotic studies have shown that the overlap of spaces acquires remarkable artistic and aesthetic value when it embodies the occurrence of events in the dramatic text, turning place into a partner in the production of tragedy (al-Nu'aymi, 2004, pp. 77-78). Accordingly, the Sultan's palace in **Merya'e** is not a space of sovereignty; it is an extension of the space of the real crime. In both spaces there is a **Merya'e** deprived of agency: the murdered actor, the policeman who assumes his role, and the Sultan subject to al-Zayyat. Space here is enclosed and besieged, allowing no freedom, and thus becomes an objective correlative, or icon, reflecting the siege of the Arab individual within his social and political reality.

4. The Actantial Structure and the Binary of Power and Submission

Structural-semiotic analysis goes beyond viewing characters as flat psychological and social entities, seeking instead to understand how they function as actants within the structure of the text. Narrative semiotics has shown that Greimas's actantial model is built around six central roles organized into three major binaries: subject and object, sender and receiver, helper and opponent. These roles form a network of relations within which narrative forces move according to trajectories of desire, communication, and conflict (Boujlal, 2019, pp. 206-207). This perspective allows the characters in **Merya'e** to be reread not as isolated individuals but as active forces embodied through actantial roles, thereby revealing how the binary of power and submission is formed within the dramatic system.

4.1. Applying Greimas's Actantial Model

Since Greimas's model is organized around six actants distributed across three binaries that govern desire, communication, and conflict within narrative, it can fruitfully be applied to **Merya'e**. The central event - the killing of the original actor and the attempt to uncover the truth within an ambiguous metatheatrical space - makes it possible to distribute the actants across the characters of the text in a way that highlights the binary of power and submission.

Actantial Axis	Actant / Figure in the Play	Semiotic and Dramatic Justification
Subject (Sujet)	The investigating judge / the director	The active subject that seeks, on the realistic level, to uncover the truth of the crime and, on the theatrical level, to end the state of performative vacancy and restore order to the 6

		+ performance. It is therefore the immediate mover of the narrative program.
Object (Objet)	Access to the truth / continuation of the performance	The value-object the subject seeks to attain: solving the mystery of the actor's murder in the criminal world and ensuring the continuation of the Sultan play in the stage world, thereby preserving the coherence of both worlds together.
Sender (Destinateur)	The crime (the killing of the actor) / the vacancy of legitimate authority	The initiating event that launches the narrative program and reveals a void in legitimate power and legal justice, thereby impelling the subject to move in search of truth and the restoration of lost order.
Receiver (Destinataire)	Justice (society) / the audience	The beneficiary of the realization of the object: on the one hand, society as the value of restored justice within the story world; on the other, the audience as the recipient of spectacle and meaning as forms of truth disclosure.
Helper (Adjuvant)	The policeman al- Badrawi / the role- exchange game	He assists the subject by assuming the role of the Sultan in order to fill the directorial void and interrogate the suspects. Through the game of role exchange, he reveals the overlap of real and theatrical authority and helps move the investigation forward, even though he himself remains a subordinate Merya'e .
Opponent (Opposant)	Al-Zayyat / the dominant authoritarian order	The hidden mover of events and the principal suspect, who embodies the hegemonic order and possesses the material power that obstructs access to the truth, turning the other characters into Merya'es deprived of will and leaving the narrative trajectory circular, endlessly reproducing the same coercive structure.

This actantial distribution shows that the conflict in **Merya'e** is not based on a simple confrontation between opposing characters. Rather, it is built on a complex network of relations in which forces of domination monopolize the trajectory of action and redirect desire, justice, and representation alike. This leads directly to the need to dismantle the dialectic of master and subject as the deeper framework within which the binary of power and submission is organized in the text.

This actantial architecture also reveals that the axis of desire, between subject and object, suffers from a deliberate structural defect. The investigator-director seeks to arrive at the truth, yet encounters a fierce opponent that is not limited to the person of al-Zayyat, but extends to the entire authoritarian order that he represents.

At the level of the axis of communication, the receiver - society or the audience - remains in the position of a passive spectator unable to receive the object, namely justice and truth, because of the dominance of the opposing force. What intensifies this incapacity is that the helper, the policeman al-Badrawi, does not intervene as a coercive force imposing the law; rather, he intervenes in order to play the role of the Sultan-**Merya'e**. This means that the helper himself has been swallowed up by the system of subjugation and transformed into a subordinate instrument within the metatheatrical game.

From the analysis of this actantial network, one may conclude that Boukathir Douma constructs relations of coercion in which the subject has no space to triumph over the opponent, because the opponent possesses the mechanisms of castration and dispossession, rendering the narrative circular and endlessly reproducing the same defeated structure.

4.2. The Master-Subordinate Dialectic and Sociological Projection

To deepen our understanding of the actantial structure in **Merya'e**, one must move beyond the formal analysis of actants and interrogate the philosophical and cultural references implicit in the text. The binary of the Sultan and al-Zayyat constitutes the most explicit dramatic manifestation of the concept of the master-slave dialectic as formulated by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. As Hamza al-Wadan explains, this dialectic is based on a struggle between two self-consciousnesses, each seeking recognition; the struggle ends in a relation of domination and servitude in which the master depends on the recognition of the slave, while the slave chooses life rather than freedom and thus submits to the master's will (al-Wadan, 2022, p. 4).

In light of this conception, the logic of the dialectic is embodied in the play through the character of the Sultan, who is supposed to be the absolute master. Yet the playwright demolishes this image when he reveals, in the list of characters, that al-Zayyat is the Sultan's former master and owner. The Sultan here is the slave who chose submission and fear in order to survive and thus lost his true freedom, whereas al-Zayyat retains the role of the directing master who holds the threads of power from behind the curtain and reproduces relations of domination and enslavement at the levels of both plot and actantial structure.

Yet Boukathir Douma offers a pessimistic Maghrebi vision of this dialectic. Whereas Hegel sees the slave as beginning a journey toward deeper consciousness through labor and through transforming reality, eventually surpassing the master who depends on idleness, the slave in the play - the Sultan - has been stripped of the capacity for action and labor as a result of psychological castration and has therefore become a **Merya'e**. Castration here prevents the realization of the dialectical negation Hegel describes. Alienation thus becomes an eternal condition: al-Zayyat remains in control of the course of power by virtue of his wealth and trade, while the Sultan remains merely a dependent facade, exactly like the ram that carries the bells but moves only behind the donkey.

This projection extends from the individual, represented by the Sultan, to society as a whole, represented by the audience and the addressee of the text, so that the play becomes a sociological document that dismantles the structure of oppression. The absence of a positive hero in the play - whether the murdered actor, the substitute policeman, the Sultan, or the castrated singer Nasir - confirms that the dominant authoritarian order has not merely exercised material repression; it has also exercised semiotic oppression through which individuals are emptied of their active being.

In this backward society, as the playwright describes it, one that knows nothing of human rights, knows nothing of equality, and knows nothing of justice, a society ignorant of enduring human

values such as truth, justice, goodness, and beauty, man can only be a **Merya'e** (Douma, 2023, p. 7). The semiotic meaning of the text is thus completed: the interplay of metatheatre, textual thresholds centered on **Merya'e** and castration, and the actantial structure dominated by an overwhelming opponent constitutes a rigorously crafted writing strategy for exposing a society that has lost its compass. The flock imagines that it is following a majestic leader, while in truth the leader himself has been stripped of will and reduced to a mere shadow of a hidden despotic power.

5. Conclusion

Based on the foregoing structural-semiotic reading of **Merya'e**, by Boukathir Douma, one may conclude that this text represents a mature dramatic experience that wagers on the destruction of classical theatrical construction and its replacement by a complex experimental system. The playwright's use of metatheatre is not a matter of aesthetic luxury or technical display; rather, it functions as a dense semantic structure in which the threads of reality and imagination become intertwined in order to expose the mechanisms of alienation and oppression exercised upon the Arab individual.

The study leads to several principal results. First, the threshold of the title **Merya'e** constitutes an encoded semiotic nucleus that exploits a sharp contradiction between outward largeness and blind dependency. Through semantic displacement, the playwright transfers the attribute of the castrated ram to the human being, turning castration into a master metaphor for the confiscation of will and psychological death in a society where the values of justice and equality are absent.

Second, through its intertextual relation to global works such as *Hamlet*, the technique of theatre within the theatre destabilizes the binary of actor and role. The intervention of real identities - the policeman and the director - in order to embody dramatic roles - the Sultan and the Minister - creates an ambiguous space revealing that subjugation is not confined to imagined stage reality, but extends to the makers of the performance and to the power of lived reality.

Third, the actantial structure reveals a deliberate distortion in the trajectories of desire and communication, insofar as the hidden opposing force represented by al-Zayyat dominates at the expense of the Sultan-**Merya'e**. This treatment embodies the master-slave dialectic in tragic form, since the slave - the Sultan and, by extension, society as a whole - is deprived of any possibility of liberation because it is subjected to both symbolic and actual castration.

In sum, **Merya'e** is a semiotic trial of an oppressed political and social order. This rich text remains open to multiple critical readings, among them socio-cultural and deconstructive approaches capable of eliciting further latent structures within Maghrebi theatre.

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Articles

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