

Political Symbolism in Tareq Hammadi's Play *Al-Mirya'*: A Semiotic Reading of Characters and Events

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the political symbolism in Tareq Hammadi's play *Al-Mirya'* through a semiotic approach focusing on the characters (the *Mirya'*, the Generals, and the flock) and the key events (isolation, castration, and the wearing of the bell). The study deconstructs these elements as cultural signs that reveal the mechanisms of authoritarian hegemony in manufacturing an artificial leader used to domesticate the masses. The analysis adopts a semiotic methodology (Umberto Eco / Roland Barthes) supported by the study of dialogues and dramatic conflict to link the text to the Algerian collective memory. It reveals a scathing critique of contemporary authoritarian regimes and the contradictions of pseudo-leadership and culturally normalized oppression.

Keywords: Political symbolism, *Al-Mirya'*, Tareq Hammadi, Semiotics, Hegemony, Algerian theater, Artificial leadership.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Algerian theater represents one of the most significant cultural spaces tasked with a critical function: the deconstruction of hegemonic discourse and the unveiling of political and social domination mechanisms. This is achieved through the strategic deployment of symbolism, metaphor, and dramatic representation to interrogate reality and reshape collective consciousness. In this context, Tareq Hammadi's play *Al-Mirya'*—published by Dar Al-Awadh in Constantine (2024)—emerges as a semiotically dense dramatic text. It utilizes the imagery of the "shepherd and the flock" to embody the mechanisms of manufacturing pseudo-leadership and the normalization of subjugation within a closed authoritarian structure. This occurs within an Algerian cultural landscape where colonial legacies intersect with contemporary manifestations of political and social alienation.

This study originates from a central problematic: How do the symbolic characters—primarily the *Mirya'*, the Generals, and the flock—and pivotal events—such as isolation, taming, and the "wearing of the bell"—transform into a system of semiotic signs that produce a discourse of hegemony? Furthermore, how does this system reshape the public consciousness according to the logic of artificial leadership and culturally normalized submission? Finally, how does this symbolic order contribute to consolidating an authority that is internal in appearance but governed and controlled by external forces?

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to provide an analytical reading that links the dramatic text to Algerian collective memory. It presents *Al-Mirya'* as a symbolic laboratory for deconstructing symbolic violence and indirect control mechanisms. Moreover, it contributes to the enrichment of semiotic studies in contemporary Arab theater by synthesizing textual analysis, cultural interpretation, and political criticism.

The primary scholarly objectives of this study are as follows:

- **Analyzing the symbolic structure** of characters and events within the dramatic text as signifying signs of political hegemony.
- **Uncovering the mechanisms** of manufacturing artificial leadership and producing false legitimacy through discourse, rituals, and dramatic representation.
- **Deconstructing the manifestations of symbolic violence** practiced upon the masses within a cultural context normalized toward submission.
- **Linking these semiotic structures** to the Algerian historical and social context, allowing for a deeper understanding of theater's role in critiquing tyranny and reconstructing collective awareness.

The study adopts a semiotic methodology grounded in the theories of Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes regarding sign analysis and mythical discourse. This is supported by the critical frameworks of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu on hegemony, while employing textual analysis of dialogue, dramatic conflict, and stage movement as tools for producing authoritative meaning.

2. Cultural and Historical Framework

The cultural and historical framework constitutes an essential entry point for reading *Al-Mirya'* as a symbolic discourse with socio-political dimensions. It is deeply embedded in the Algerian collective memory; its semantic structure cannot be understood without linking it to the formation of contemporary political consciousness and the complex relationship between authority and the masses in modern Algerian culture.

This framework paves the way for the semiotic analysis in subsequent sections by reconstructing the network of theatrical symbols rooted in the collective imagination. It deconstructs the image of the "shepherd and the flock" as active cultural signs in the formation of social awareness, thereby elucidating the mechanisms of producing submission and normalizing hegemony within the theatrical discourse.

2.1. Tareq Hammadi and Contemporary Algerian Theater

Tareq Hammadi is an Algerian writer born on October 29, 1969, in Constantine. A graduate of the National Higher Institute for Youth Cadre Training, he serves as a consultant in the youth sector. Hammadi is a prolific short story writer and playwright whose work has appeared in numerous Algerian newspapers and Arab periodicals. He was awarded the Gold Prize at the 2010 Experimental Theater Festival for his play *The Last Night*.

Hammadi is recognized as a serious voice in Algerian fiction, characterized by a spirit of innovation. His name was included in the anthology of Algerian short stories *The Hoopoe Said*, published by the Egyptian General Book Authority. His literary output since 2012 includes several collections such as *The Thief of Joy* (2012), *A Souless Bird* (2013), and *God's Garden*

(2017). His play *Al-Mirya'* (2024) is a critical dramatic work that addresses a military leadership seeking to manage "flocks" that threaten its control through the "Mirya' Project." In the context of the play, the *Mirya'* refers to a lamb isolated from its mother at birth and raised by humans or a surrogate, becoming a compliant tool used by the shepherd (authority) to lead the flock (the masses). It serves as a symbol of the artificial leader manufactured by the regime to lead from within while remaining entirely subordinate to power.

2.2. The Context of *Al-Mirya'*: Power and the Masses in Cultural Memory

The play appears amidst an Algerian cultural climate characterized by escalating inquiries into the nature of leadership and collective identity. It evokes pastoral symbols rooted in Algerian folklore to expose the mechanisms of alienation that have become culturally normalized.

- **2.2.1. The *Mirya'* as a Renewed Literary Symbol:** This character serves as a deep semiotic sign within the heritage of animal motifs in Arab and international literature, where animals represent human society or power. Similar to the works of George Orwell or *Kalila wa Dimna*, it critiques the manufacturing of false leaders.
- **2.2.2. Between Tradition and Modernity:** The symbol bridges traditional roots—where animals were vessels for political expression—with a modernist vision that transforms ancient tropes into a critique of modern oppression, ideological grooming, and surveillance.
- **2.2.3. Contemporary Arab Literature:** The symbolism extends beyond drama into a broader critical movement concerning freedom and identity. It aligns with historical efforts to expose despotism, such as those by Al-Kawakibi and Al-Azouri, utilizing animal imagery to interrogate the manufacturing of illegitimate authority.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework constitutes the cognitive foundation necessary for deconstructing the political symbolism in the play *Al-Mirya'*. It synthesizes two complementary methodologies: the **cultural semiotics** of Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes, used to analyze the structure of signs and their cultural significations; and the **critique of hegemony and power** by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, employed to understand the production of artificial leadership and culturally normalized submission. This theoretical integration enables a unified and coherent reading of how theatrical discourse is utilized to produce—and subsequently expose—symbolic dominance within the text.

3.1. Cultural Semiotics (Eco and Barthes): Decoding the Sign and Political Symbol

Umberto Eco is among the preeminent theorists who developed a sophisticated understanding of the cultural sign. Eco defined the sign not as a simple unit, but as a complex unit of meaning that requires a shared cultural code for correct interpretation. According to Eco, a sign consists of three integrated dimensions:

- **The Signifier:** The visible or auditory material form received by the subject.
- **The Signified:** The underlying concept or meaning behind the form.
- **The Cultural Code:** The set of conventions and shared rules that render the relationship between the signifier and signified possible and intelligible (Eco, 1984, p. 89).

In the context of *Al-Mirya'*, the *Mirya'* itself becomes an ideal semiotic sign embodying this complex mechanism:

- **The Signifier** is the lamb isolated from its mother and raised by the Generals.
- **The Signified** is the artificial leader, entirely subordinate to the regime's control, intended to lead the flock (the masses) according to the regime's desires.
- **The Cultural Code** is the collective memory of Algerian folklore, which historically recognizes the shepherd as a "natural" symbol of dominance. This code operates deeply and subconsciously within the audience's mind, making the acceptance of the *Mirya'* as a leader appear "natural" and "logical."

Complementing Eco's theory, Roland Barthes—who developed his framework in *Mythologies*—analyzes the political symbol as a complex linguistic discourse that conceals hegemony and oppression under a veneer of "naturalness" and inevitability. Barthes asserts that authoritarian ideological ideas are transformed into "natural facts" or "self-evident truths" that are familiar to the masses and thus remain unquestioned. This transition from the "ideological" to the "natural" is a fundamental mechanism for reproducing symbolic dominance in culture (Barthes, 1972, p. 142).

In *Al-Mirya'*, the Generals' discourse operates precisely in this manner. When they employ phrases such as "Our Great Nation" or "Freedom is a Responsibility," they are not conveying neutral information; rather, they are exercising a mythological discourse that normalizes their oppression as something "necessary" and "inevitable." Through this discourse, the *Mirya'* becomes a living mythology of "natural leadership," transforming submission into a normalized social ritual within the Algerian cultural code.

3.2. Critique of Hegemony and Power: Foucault and Bourdieu

To understand how authority produces submission and obedience, a deeper theory of power is required. Michel Foucault, in his seminal study *Discipline and Punish*, provides a revolutionary understanding of power. Foucault views power not as a commodity possessed by an individual or institution, but as a complex network of social relations that produces submission through repetitive discourse, constant surveillance, and systematic instruction (Foucault, 1977, p. 205). Foucault utilized the example of the **Panopticon**—a prison design where guards can observe inmates at all times without the inmates knowing if they are actually being watched—as a metaphor for modern power. Due to the possibility of constant surveillance, inmates begin to **internalize** the constraints of the gaze, monitoring themselves and becoming voluntary agents of order.

In *Al-Mirya'*, this model is directly embodied. The Generals monitor the rearing of the *Mirya'* with regularity ("Not yet," "We wait"). This constant surveillance and repetitive discourse gradually transform the *Mirya'* into exactly what the Generals desire: a loyal leader. The *Mirya'* is not imprisoned by physical walls, but by a web of discourse, expectations, and daily practices that lead him to "voluntarily" choose to be a tool of authority.

Pierre Bourdieu completes this picture with his core concept of **Symbolic Violence**. Bourdieu argues that true power is not that which uses overt physical force, but that which produces an artificial "charisma" and hides its violence behind a mask of inevitability (Foucault, 1980, p.

104). Symbolic violence occurs when authority imposes a specific category of ideas and values on society in a way that appears natural, such that people accept them without feeling coerced. In the play, authority exercises symbolic violence through specific processes:

1. **Isolation from the mother** (severing natural identity).
2. **Castration** (stripping of biological and psychological potency).
3. **The wearing of the bell** (an authoritative distinction that transforms the *Miry'a*' into a "different leader").

These practices are not merely physical violence but sophisticated symbolic violence that reshapes the *Miry'a*'s identity. The bell is a complex symbol: it distinguishes him from the flock (elevating him) while simultaneously making him controllable (every step is heard). Thus, as Bourdieu suggests, submission is transformed into a choice that appears natural.

4. Character Analysis

The character analysis axis transforms the theoretical framework into a practical application, wherein the characters manifest as semiotic signs embodying the hegemony of authority and the submission of the masses within the dramatic structure. This axis consists of two primary elements:

- **First:** Analyzing the character of the "**Miry'a**" as a sign of normalized subordination and pseudo-leadership, based on the methodology of **Umberto Eco**.
- **Second:** Deconstructing the characters of the **Generals** as a symbol of the hegemonic institution, and the **Flock** as domesticated masses, based on the methodologies of **Roland Barthes** and **Pierre Bourdieu**.

The function of this axis is to demonstrate that the characters constitute a network of symbolic signs that produce and deconstruct hegemony, thereby paving the way for the analysis of events in the sixth axis. The adopted methodology relies on the use of direct quotations from the theatrical text as analytical evidence, supported by the theoretical framework, to highlight political significations in both dialogue and physical movement.

4.1. The "**Miry'a**": A Sign of Subordination and Pseudo-Leadership

The *Miry'a*' is the central character of the play, and the name is far from arbitrary. He is a lamb isolated from his mother immediately upon birth and raised by the hands of the Generals until he becomes a "leader" of the flock. This concept is not a coincidence; rather, it is a clear symbol of how pseudo-leaders are manufactured—groomed by authority from a young age to serve its interests.

How do we understand this symbol? (Eco's Theory Applied simply): Umberto Eco posits that every symbol has three components:

- **The Visible Form:** The *Miry'a*' as a small animal.
- **The Hidden Meaning:** The artificial leader.
- **The Cultural Background:** The Algerian collective consciousness understands the meaning of a "lad raised by the shepherd" (Eco, U., 1984, p. 48).

In the play, the *Miry'a*' tells the Generals: "*I am ready to serve your great nation*" (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 35). This is not ordinary dialogue; it reveals how he has become loyal to the authority after being isolated from his mother and nature.

Pseudo-Leadership (Roland Barthes): Barthes asserts that power transforms its oppression into something "natural" (Barthes, R., 1972, p. 142). The *Mirya'* has become "natural" in his service to the Generals following his upbringing, and the masses accept him as a leader because he is "from among them."

Hidden Hegemony (Foucault and Bourdieu): Foucault likens authority to a surveillance network: the Generals monitor the *Mirya'* 's upbringing ("Not yet") until he becomes voluntarily compliant (Foucault, M., 1977, p. 195). Bourdieu adds that they create an artificial "charisma" for him through the bell and castration to make him appear as a genuine leader (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 195).

Why is this significant? The *Mirya'* is not a simple character; he is a mirror reflecting how leadership is manufactured in reality: taking an ordinary individual, isolating them from their origins, grooming them, and then sending them to lead the masses in the name of authority. This thought paves the way for the analysis of the Generals in the following section.

4.2. The Generals and the Flock: Symbols of Hegemony and the Domesticated Masses

4.2.1. The Generals: Symbol of the Hegemonic Institution

The Generals (First, Second, Third...) are not mere individuals but symbols of the transcendent military institution. Their appearance (military masks, repetitive dialogues) conceals their meaning: the authority that normalizes its oppression as "the natural state of affairs." Through Barthes' semiotics, their dialogues ("Our great nation," "Freedom is a responsibility") are a mythological discourse that transforms oppression into a natural reality familiar to the masses (Barthes, R., 1972, p. 109), completing the alienation of the *Mirya'* mentioned previously. General One expresses the project of authority clearly: *"Survival is for the strongest, for he who possesses; if you possess power, you shall prevail"* (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 21).

4.2.2. The Flock: The Domesticated Masses

The flock (soldiers, chamberlains, servants) represents the tamed masses. Their form is characterized by collective movement, silence, and obedience; their meaning is the collective submission awaiting its *"Mirya'."* Under Bourdieu's concept of hegemony, authority makes submission a "natural choice" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 72). The flock accepts the *Mirya'* because he is "one of them," continuing the alienation of the *Mirya'* from the previous section. The text illustrates this dynamic: the Generals tell the soldiers, *"Be brave and defend the glory of our empire"* (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 13).

4.2.3. The Relationship between the Generals and the Flock

The Generals are the creators of the *Mirya'* to serve as their intermediary with the flock ("The flocks are difficult to manage") (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 11). The flock accepts him because the hegemonic discourse has rendered him "natural." This relationship completes the *Mirya'* in 4.1 as a network of hegemony.

4.2.4. Theatrical Function

The characters are not individuals but signs showing how authority functions: it manufactures a pseudo-leader (4.1), tames the masses, and makes oppression ordinary.

4.2.5. Conclusion and Linkage

The Generals and the flock complement the *Mirya'* in a network of symbolic hegemony, paving the way for the analysis of events in the sixth axis, where these signs transform into a dramatic ritual.

5. Analysis of Events

The events axis completes the character analysis (4.1-4.2) by transforming semiotic signs into a dramatic ritual that produces and deconstructs the hegemony of authority. After establishing that the *Mirya'* is the Generals' intermediary for taming the flock, this axis is recorded through key events:

- **First: Isolation and Castration** as symbols of the loss of maternal identity and sexual/vital power, paving the way for the alienation of the *Mirya'*.
- **Second: The Celebration and the Wearing of the Bell** as two rituals of authoritative normalization that transform submission into culturally acceptable ceremonies.

The function of this axis is to show how characters (4.1-4.2) transform into a dramatic ritual of hegemony that reveals pseudo-leadership, leading to the extraction of results in the conclusion. The methodology utilizes quotations from the text as analytical evidence supported by the theoretical framework (Eco, Barthes, Foucault, Bourdieu) to deconstruct events as hegemonic signs in physical movement and theatrical discourse.

5.1. Isolation and Castration: Symbols of the Loss of Identity and Power

5.1.1. Isolation: Symbol of the Loss of Maternal Identity

Isolation is the first event of the play: the lamb is separated immediately upon birth from its mother to be raised by humans (the Generals) (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 08). Using Eco's methodology, this event is a sign:

- **Signifier:** Separation of the infant from the mother.
- **Signified:** Loss of original identity and cultural alienation.
- **Code:** The Algerian memory of the lad separated from his origins.

Barthes sees in this a discourse that normalizes oppression: isolation makes the *Mirya'* "naturally" loyal to the authority (Barthes, R., 1972, p. 152). The *Mirya'* expresses this alienation: "*I am ready to serve your great nation*" (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 37), showing how he was severed from his natural origin and replaced it with absolute loyalty to authority.

5.1.2. Castration: Symbol of the Loss of Vital Power

Castration is a symbolic event: cutting the parts of the *Mirya'* to make him "compliant" without the instinct of rebellion. Through Foucault ("The Productive Body"), castration is symbolic violence that strips the body of its power to serve authority. Bourdieu adds that it produces an "artificial charisma" devoid of the instinct of power. After castration, the *Mirya'* accepts the bell and leadership with tranquility, showing the loss of his vital power. The Generals emphasize his compliance: "*The Mirya' has no power to exit our authority*" (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 21), indicating that castration is not just a physical process but a psychological one that strips him of the will to resist.

5.1.3. Relationship between Isolation and Castration

Isolation results in the loss of identity (maternal), and castration results in the loss of power (sexual/instinctive), preparing the *Mirya'* for pseudo-leadership in 5.2. According to Foucault,

this is a network of symbolic violence that produces submission (Foucault, M., 1980, p. 109). Each event completes the other in an organized chain of alienation.

5.1.4. Theatrical Function

The events are not ordinary occurrences but a ritual showing how authority prepares its leader, deconstructing the pseudo-leadership before the recipient. Physical movements (separation, cutting) embody a hegemonic discourse conveyed not only through words but through dramatic action.

5.1.5. Conclusion and Linkage

Isolation and castration are symbols of total alienation, paving the way for the ritual of normalization in 5.2 and the conclusion. They prove that hegemony is not a single event but an organized series of symbolic events that produce submission gradually.

5.2. The Celebration and the Wearing of the Bell: Two Rituals of Authoritative Normalization

5.2.1. The Celebration: The Ritual of Announcing Pseudo-Leadership

The celebration is a central event: the Generals celebrate the "investiture" of the *Mirya'* as leader of the flock (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 45). Per Eco, this is a semiotic ritual:

- **Signifier:** The party and the dialogues ("The *Mirya'* has no power to exit our authority").
- **Signified:** Normalizing submission as a victory.
- **Code:** The collective convention of official parties as symbols of power.

Barthes sees it as mythology: the party transforms oppression into "national pride." The Generals say: *"Today, the nation is honored by its new leader"* (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 46), normalizing alienation as a public event worthy of celebration.

5.2.2. The Wearing of the Bell: The Ritual of Distinction and Domestication

The wearing of the bell is a powerful symbol: the bell on the *Mirya'* s neck makes him distinct and audible to the flock (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 47). According to Foucault, this is physical symbolic violence that strips the individual of their freedom to become a tool of authority. Bourdieu adds that the bell produces an "artificial charisma" that makes submission natural. The *Mirya'* accepts the bell with satisfaction: *"I am on pins and needles"* (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 48), indicating his internalization of submission. The bell becomes a sign of his leadership, but also a shackle he retains voluntarily. The Generals emphasize: *"We provide him with the causes for growth"* (Tareq Hammadi, 2024, p. 49), showing that the bell is not a punishment but a "privilege" normalized by authority as a gift.

5.2.3. Relationship between the Celebration and the Bell

The celebration announces leadership, and the bell consolidates it. Per Eco, these are two rituals that transform the *Mirya'* into a complete sign of hegemony. Each ritual completes the other: the celebration addresses the masses (the flock), and the bell addresses the physical sense of the *Mirya'* himself. Together, they form an integrated hegemonic network.

5.2.4. Linking to the Plan

These two events complete the isolation and castration in 5.1, showing how authority fully prepares its leader to tame the flock (4.2). The four events (Isolation, Castration, Celebration, Bell) form an organized series of symbols that produce hegemony.

5.2.5. Conclusion and Linkage

The celebration and the bell are normalization rituals that reveal pseudo-leadership, paving the way for the conclusion. They prove that the play is not just a text but a cultural document documenting actual power mechanisms through sophisticated dramatic symbols. The dramatic ritual turns into a live exposure of hegemony mechanisms in contemporary societies.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that Tareq Hammadi's play, *Al-Mirya'* (2024), represents a critical theatrical text that exposes the mechanisms of authoritarian hegemony through a clear symbolic system. This system is manifested in the *Mirya'* as an artificial leader, the Generals as a symbol of the hegemonic institution, and the flock as the embodiment of the tamed masses. Furthermore, the study highlighted that the central events of the play—such as isolation, castration, the celebration, and the wearing of the bell—perform a ritualistic function that contributes to the manufacturing of pseudo-leadership and the normalization of submission within the collective consciousness.

The adopted theoretical framework, grounded in cultural semiotics and the critique of hegemony, proved effective in deconstructing the relationship between the dramatic text and Algerian collective memory, transforming traditional pastoral symbols into tools for political and cultural critique. Additionally, the research contributed to developing an analytical model that links theater to contemporary cultural and political reality, underscoring its role in producing critical awareness.

The findings of this study open several horizons for future research, including expanding the semiotic approach to other Algerian theatrical texts, studying the stage performances of this play, and conducting Arab-wide comparative studies regarding the symbols of authority and artificial leadership. The study also demonstrated that the Algerian audience's reception of the text occurs in light of their shared cultural memory, rendering the play a mirror of the crisis of leadership and representation.

In conclusion, it can be said that *Al-Mirya'* constitutes a semiotic laboratory that reveals how hegemony is manufactured from within. It contributes to the development of contemporary Algerian theatrical criticism as a tool for analyzing the representations of authority and the masses within the collective cultural memory.

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