

## Reconceptualising Justice and Authority: Interpretive Conflicts in The Sultan's Dilemma by Tawfiq Al-Hakim

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**Abstract:** This research paper seeks to explore the disruption of conventional schemas of authority and justice in Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma*. The study applies Peter Stockwell's Cognitive Poetics, particularly Schema Theory in order to revisit and reconstruct the already existing schemas related to law, authority, and religion. This research argues that the conscious disruption of already set notions enhances the irony and philosophical depth of the narrative. The core tension emerges when the Sultan, once an enslaved person, finds himself coerced to seek legal authorization for his actions. This scenario creates disruption in the minds of readers, compelling them to reshape their notions of justice, not something rigid, but flexible, constructed by society, and rich in diverse interpretations. The research uses qualitative research methodology grounded in close reading and textual analysis and divulges how the language and structure of the play challenge the readers' anticipations, forcing them to consider the multiple layered meanings. The pre-existing schemas are disrupted by adding the new information, which become the source of their reconfiguration. This study concludes that schema disruptions in *The Sultan's Dilemma* interrogate fixed conceptions of authority and justice, making readers to critically reassess societal norms through irony and cognitive reflection.

**Keywords:** Schema, Authority, Justice, Disruption, Irony, Refreshment

### Introduction

This study aims at reinterpreting the prevailing ideas of authority and justice in *The Sultan's Dilemma*, showing how these transformations enhance the play's ironic tone and expand its philosophical depth. The play subverts traditional outlooks of power and justice by reinforcing the anticipated understandings of the readers. The research implements Stockwell's Cognitive Poetics, specifically Schema Theory, to delineate the reconfiguration of the disrupted schemas of justice and authority.

As set against the milieu of political and legal transformations of Arab world, the play pertains to the rudimentary viewpoints of justice, authority and religion. Through the characters like the Sultan and the Chief Cadi, demonstrated as flawed and equivocal, the play provides both uneasiness and humour, leading to the emotive and thematic depth. With regard to this, the application of Cognitive Poetics becomes particularly significant, as it elucidates how the disruption of expectations and the reconfiguration of already existing schemas build up the philosophical depth of the play.

*The Sultan's Dilemma* begins with a scene in which a man is tied to a stake and is subject to assassination at the dawn prayer. When the time comes, he starts conversing with executioner, who is more focused on personal ease than on matters of justice. This nonconforming introduction disrupts the audience's expectations outright. As the story proceeds, the Sultan finds himself caught between upholding the formal legal procedures and exercising his authority as a ruler. His skirmish engenders a story infused with irony and elusiveness, encouraging the readers to explicate the concepts of justice, law, and power. The readers forestall unyielding decision-making, instead, they observe reluctance and self-questioning, which interrupt their conventional reasoning patterns and induce a reassessment of meaning.

Justice is derived from the Latin root "jus", meaning law or right, which has long been associated with fairness, moral integrity, and the idea of receiving what one deserves. However, justice is not a fixed or

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universal concept; it transforms with time and context. In everyday understanding, it often represents a balanced system where laws ensure equality and protect individuals from the misuse of power (Paranami, 2019).

Renwick and Swinburn (1992) describe authority as the capacity to influence others, built upon the belief that a person or group has the rightful role to lead. This influence is sustained through respect, which fosters legitimacy and power. Authority, therefore, is not just about command—it is about the social trust that grants someone the right to be followed. However, literature frequently complicates these concepts. Through the lens of Cognitive Poetics, notions such as justice and authority are understood in relation to world schemas—mental structures that shape how we perceive roles, norms, and power dynamics in society (Stockwell, 2002).

This research delineates how these deeply rooted schemas are disrupted. It investigates how the play unsettles conventional expectations surrounding justice and authority, divulging the ironic and philosophical tensions that emerge when established roles are questioned. By doing so, the study sheds light on the interpretive conflicts between inherited traditions and emergent ideas of justice and authority. The play under research presents a world where power is uncertain, justice is delayed, and authority is questioned. These complications force the audience to reconsider what justice and authority truly mean in society.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the challenge posed by conventional ideas of justice and authority, highlighting cognitive disruptions that enhance the play's irony and philosophical depth. By employing Cognitive Poetics, the study investigates how Al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma* questions the system of justice and power. It involves the reader in this questioning through their mental and emotional responses.

### Research Objectives

1. To examine the schema disruption of justice and authority in *The Sultan's Dilemma*.
2. To examine the impact of schema disruption on readers' interpretation of irony and philosophical depth in *The Sultan's Dilemma*.

### Research Questions

1. How does the narrative of *The Sultan's Dilemma* disrupt the conventional schemas of justice and authority?
2. How do the schema disruptions shape readers' interpretation of irony and philosophy in *The Sultan's Dilemma*?

### Theoretical Framework

This research employs cognitive poetics, particularly the schema theory by Peter Stockwell, to look into the reconfiguration of schemas and their impact on the play's irony. Cognitive Poetics, introduced by Stockwell, centres on how readers engage with literature. Cognition relates to mental activity, and poetics deals with the art of literature. These concepts open the door to deeper questions about the readers' identities as thoughtful, self-aware individuals who connect through shared language and perception (Stockwell, 2002).

Stockwell (2002) views schemas as mental frameworks that help one organise and make sense of the world around them, including language and literature. They allow readers to group related information, from the meanings of individual words to the broader structure of a full story or genre. Whether the readers imagine a character, understand a plot twist, or recognise a literary form, their minds rely on these pre-existing knowledge patterns to process and interpret what they read.

Schema theory particularly engages in understanding that these mental patterns are not fixed. Instead, they grow and change as readers experience more. In general, schemas develop in three main ways: **Accretion** involves adding new information to an existing schema without changing its overall structure, such as adding more details to what readers already know. **Tuning** refers to adjusting or refining the

schema by modifying certain parts, such as changing the relationships between ideas based on new experiences. **Restructuring** is a more significant shift, where a completely new schema is formed—often because the existing one no longer fits what the readers have learned. These processes reflect how the understanding evolves as readers interact with stories, language, and the world (Stockwell, 2002).

Stockwell (2002) further elucidates that Schema theory is valuable to understand better what makes literary language distinct or impactful. Texts with surprising or unexpected elements may cause a schema disruption, a process where the reader's existing schema is challenged and they are forced to reconsider or adapt their understanding. These disruptions can be handled by either expanding the existing schema (similar to accretion) or refreshing it, a process where the reader adjusts or rewrites their understanding to incorporate the new information (akin to tuning or what literature often achieves through “refamiliarisation”—making the familiar appear new).

Readers process new information through different schema-related strategies; schema preservation, reinforcement, accretion, disruption, refreshment and knowledge restructuring. However, this research specifically focuses on schema disruption and schema refreshment through the integration of new knowledge frameworks. The theory emphasizes that literature is not only about conveying ideas but also about how those ideas are experienced mentally, which makes it a suitable lens for analyzing a play that evokes powerful emotional and cognitive responses through its unconventional portrayal of justice and authority. By defying expected patterns, the play invites reflection and uncertainty, deepening its philosophical impact.

## Literature Review

This research implements Stockwell's Schema theory from Cognitive Poetics in order to examine the role of irony in disruption of schemas in Al-Hakim's *The Sultan's Dilemma*. According to Stockwell (2002), readers develop their emotional responses on cognitive and affective levels with respect to the particular piece of literature, which engage them with the set concepts of justice and authority. With regard to this, the play provides a striking moment when the Sultan, despite being the authoritative personality, chooses to abide by the law. This astonishing moment shatters the reader's notion of authority, which aggravates the play's philosophical depth.

In order to sustain the veracity of law, the Chief Cadi proposes the public auction for the Sultan as a solution to reclaim his position and authority. On the other hand, the Vizier recommends to use the power of sword, undermining the stability and enflaming the disorder (Rahman et al., 2020). The contradictory tactics of these two authorities belonging to the same system jolts schemas of readers which enforces the reconfiguration.

Muhi (2021) analyses *The Sultan's Dilemma* within the socio-political backdrop of post-revolutionary Egypt and puts forward that despite being set in medieval Islamic court, the play underscores the moral challenges faced by contemporary leaders. The Sultan's dilemma embodies the skirmish between personal gains and moral duty, accentuating the inevitability of fairness, the outlook which reverberates with the present research.

For Ihidero (2023), the Chief Cadi and Muezzin face the moral conflict as they deal with religious obligations and state laws. The execution and call to prayer at the same time underscores the way in which religious norms are expropriated for political gains. His viewpoint showcases the ways in which the conventional norms of authority and justice are unsettled while agglomerating the sacred duties with power.

Solomon (2023) approaches *The Sultan's Dilemma* from psychoanalytical theory and upholds that the Sultan's dilemma is a clash between superego and id as he is skirmishing between his moral obligation and desire to exercise power. Her research findings align with the present research, which reveals how the Sultan's chaos heightens the philosophical depth of the play.

Gready (2005), while conducting his research on *The Sultan's Dilemma*, differentiates between embedded and distant justice, where former is based on universal ethics and participation of the society

and latter is grounded in abstract codified laws excluded by culture. As per this explanation, the play practises embedded justice as the Chief Cadi advocates for the method which integrates communal values with legal reasoning.

Hassan (2005) maintains that *The Sultan's Dilemma* is an amalgamation of malformed and twisted elements which aggravates its irony. Through this play, an author critiques the unbending and inflexible standards of power and lays bare the uncertainty of justice. These grotesque elements, request of generosity by hangman from executioner and Sultan being treated as slave, serve as a means to reconfigure the already set schemas of readers and force them to revisit their concepts of justice and authority.

Justice is a moral virtue that involves treating equals equally and unequals proportionally. This idea of distributive justice emphasises fairness based on context and character (Aristotle, 1985, as cited in Hurlbert & Mulvale, 2011). The present research challenges this concept as the Sultan navigates between legal obligation and ethical responsibility, highlighting that true justice depends on moral character as much as law.

As defined by K. Frost and J. Fross (2002), authority is the legitimate right to make decisions and issue directives, typically held by someone in a superior position who is expected to gather necessary information and guide others toward efficient outcomes. In the context of *The Sultan's Dilemma*, authority becomes problematic, while the Sultan holds formal power, his legitimacy is questioned, and true authority shifts toward Chief Cadi, who upholds justice through reason and law rather than force, challenging conventional power structures. This research deals with this destabilised notion of authority.

Thus, after shedding light on the previous research conducted on the play, theory, and topic, it is evident that *The Sultan's Dilemma* has been approached from political, psychological, and religious perspectives. However, a significant gap exists in integrating this text through a unified cognitive framework. The existing literature underexplored how schema disruptions—key in Cognitive Poetics—shape readers' interpretation of authority and justice in the play. This research fills that gap by applying Peter Stockwell's schema theory to examine how the play challenges and reconstructs readers' expectations intellectually and emotionally. Doing so contributes a nuanced understanding of how literary form engages deeply with philosophical and ethical issues, particularly within culturally embedded power structures, thereby underscoring the importance of our work in this field.

## Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology to analyse *The Sultan's Dilemma* by Tawfiq Al-Hakim. This study explores how conventional schemas related to justice, authority, and religion are disrupted and refreshed by newly formed schemas through the lens of cognitive poetics, particularly schema theory by Peter Stockwell. The primary source for this research is *The Sultan's Dilemma* and supporting articles, reviews, books, and journals consulted for the evidence serve as secondary sources. The methods of this research are textual analysis and close reading. By utilising the textual references and supporting material as evidence, this research explores the refreshment of disrupted schemas, which also enhances the irony and philosophical depth of the play.

## Analysis

Drawing on Stockwell's Schema Theory, a framework from Cognitive Poetics, this research examines the ways in which the meanings are reconfigured and reinterpreted in the minds of readers. As per Stockwell (2002), readers perceive the meanings of the text according to their already set schemas. When these schemas are met with the newly added information which is totally averse of apparent interpretation, they undergo a process known as schema disruption. Due to schema disruption, readers are enforced to re-evaluate their understanding, leading to the enhancement of interpretive contemplation.

In accordance to this this concept, the play offers an ironic and logically challenging situation in which a ruler is compelled to abide by the law instead of being authorised by it. Hence, the narrative reconstructs the traditional notions of justice, authority, and moral obligation, illustrating applicability of Stockwell's Schema Theory to examine multifaceted interpretations of the play.



As the notions are based on traditional understanding, therefore, these engrained cognitive ideas have their impact on the perceptions of justice and authority. According to the conventional idea, the sovereign holds the power over justice instead of being coerced to abide by the law. The scenario, the Sultan is a former slave who has to comply with law, is alien to pre-established schemas and *The Sultan's Dilemma* deliberately disrupt such schemas so that they could be the subject of refreshment.

The status of the Sultan is critically questioned in the play when the Cadi remarks, "The Sultan is ruling without having been manumitted, and that a slave is at the head of a free people" (Al-Hakim, 1960, p. 28). Traditionally, the Sultan is perceived as the ultimate authority—free in his actions and unquestionable in his power. However, this statement from the Cadi introduces a powerful schema disruption. It challenges the foundational belief that authority naturally belongs to the sovereign, revealing instead a contradiction: the ruler is, in legal terms, still a slave.

The Cadi, a figure of legal integrity, ironically undermines the Sultan's legitimacy by pointing out his lack of formal freedom. This not only destabilizes the existing schema of authority but also initiates schema refreshment by encouraging readers to reconsider the basis of legitimate rule—not as a divine or inherited right, but as something that must be recognized within legal and social frameworks.

When the Sultan becomes aware of his lack of manumission, he instinctively turns to violence, wishing to assert power through the sword. However, the Cadi resists this attempt, refusing to compromise the law for political convenience. Instead, he offers a legalistic solution, further reinforcing the notion that true authority must be lawfully earned, not merely assumed.

It is the custom in such cases to get rid of unprofitable chattels by putting them up for sale at auction, so that the good interest of the Exchequer be not harmed and so that it may utilize the proceeds of the sale in bringing benefit to the people generally and in particular to the poor. (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.31)

The Sultan holds a sight of honour and reverence in public imagination, which prohibits the use of any derogatory terms to be uttered against him. However, schema disruption is realized through the chief Cadi's abased comments regarding the Sultan by labelling him "an unprofitable chattel," questioning his usually conceived persona.

The suggestion given by chief Cadi challenges the reader's schema of authority by portraying the sovereign (the Sultan) as legally subordinate and vulnerable. It emphasises that authority in this context is conditional, dependent on legal recognition rather than inherited power. The Sultan himself expresses frustration, stating, "Up until now, I have obtained no solutions from you. All I have had are insults" (Al-Hakim, 1960, p. 32). His humiliation further disrupts the conventional image of the Sultan as a revered figure, reframing authority as fragile and performative—something that must be earned and validated through lawful means rather than assumed by status or tradition.

Moreover, the Sultan, typically seen as a figure of unyielding power, is depicted as vulnerable when faced with the choice between law and the will. This reconfiguration of power dynamics challenges the traditional notion that the Sultan wields power effortlessly. His dilemma, as he laments, "He makes us choose between two alternatives, both of them painful: the law which shows me up as weak and makes a laughing-stock of me, or the sword which brands me with brutality and makes me loathed" (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.34), evokes a sense of empathy in the audience.

The Sultan's situation shows that despite his authority, his actual freedom is limited by legal recognition, which contradicts the common schema that the ruler's word is law and his power is absolute. Instead, legal structures independently define and limit authority, challenging traditional notions of sovereign power. When the Sultan is put up for sale, the slave trader assumes the role of an auctioneer and the one who carries out the sale (Al-Hakim, 1960). This moment radically reconfigures the traditional hierarchy in which merchants or commoners are seen as socially and politically inferior to rulers. The inversion of this order—where a trader exercises legal authority over a sovereign—disrupts the audience's ingrained schema of power and status. It powerfully illustrates that, within the logic of the play, it is legal identity—not inherited rank or social standing—that ultimately defines and legitimizes authority.

When the Sultan is bought by the lady, she imposes a condition that she will sign the manumission deed only if he spends a night at her house until the Muezzin's call to dawn prayer. Stripped of alternatives, the Sultan is forced to comply in order to regain his freedom. His declaration, "I am not free" (Al-Hakim, 1960, p. 60), starkly reveals his helplessness and the collapse of his perceived authority. His admission deconstructs the conventional belief that the Sultan holds absolute, untouchable power, exposing instead his vulnerability to external control and legal processes.

The disruption of authority is not limited to the Sultan alone. Figures traditionally associated with law and justice—such as the Cadi and the Muezzin—also contribute to the distortion of established schemas. The Cadi, who initially refuses to assist the Sultan on legal grounds, later participates in the auction, thereby undermining the perception of him as a steadfast upholder of justice. His shift from principled legalism to practical compliance fractures the reader's expectation of legal integrity and further destabilizes the boundaries between authority, morality, and law within the narrative.

Cadi: Go and climb up into your minaret and give the call to the dawn prayer.

Muezzin: When?

Cadi: Now!

...

Muezzin: Dawn at midnight?

Cadi: Yes! Hurry!

Muezzin: Isn't this just a little . . . premature?

Cadi: No. (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.79–80)

The exchange between the Cadi and the Muezzin challenges the belief that the Cadi represents unwavering justice. By ordering the dawn prayer at the dead of night, the Cadi disrupts the sacred schema of fixed prayer times, revealing his willingness to manipulate religious norms for political ends. This command shocks both the Muezzin and the audience, exposing how authority in the play distorts tradition to maintain power. The Muezzin, ultimately complying, compromises his moral duty in what is framed as a patriotic act, blurring the boundaries between faith, law, and politics.

Muezzin: I shall do it immediately. I shall be proud of it the whole of my life. Permit me, milord Cadi ...

Cadi: ... Shut your mouth well if you want your action to bear fruit and be appreciated (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.79–80).

In this exchange, the Muezzin expresses pride in fulfilling the Cadi's unusual order, expecting recognition for serving justice. However, the Cadi silences him, disrupting the schema that righteous acts deserve public acknowledgment. Instead, obedience is demanded in silence, implying that justice is no longer transparent but subject to manipulation. This disruption challenges the reader's expectation of moral integrity in the justice system, revealing how authority distorts even sacred duties to preserve control.

Furthermore, the act of signing manumission document before dawn by Lady questions the pre-existing legal conceptions.

Lady: ... You are now free, Your Majesty.

Sultan: Free?

Lady: Yes, bring the deed of manumission, Chief Cadi, so that I may sign it.

Cadi: You'll sign it now?

Lady: Yes, now. (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.85)

The Lady's wants to sign the manumission deed at that time, which underscores the significance of moral judgements over technical formalities, distorting the schema that justice must comply with set rules. Here, justice is presented as grounded in ethical intervention and intercession instead of judicial rules. Apart from refreshment of schemas, the play also amplifies its philosophical depth by shaking and remaking the schemas of readers.

Muezzin's claim, "I gave the call to the dawn prayer some time ago... at its due time" (Al-Hakim, 1960, p. 22), provokes irony as he has deliberately delayed the call to prayer. His act demonstrates the

manipulation of religion by the one who is obliged to embody it. The research, through Muezzin, exposes the flexibility and brittleness of socially constructed standards of law and authority.

One of the central ironies in *The Sultan's Dilemma* emerges when the Sultan confronts the choice between the sword and the law. As he reflects on "the sword which imposes and exposes, and the law which threatens and protects" (Al-Hakim, 1960, p. 37), the tension between coercion and justice becomes clear. This juxtaposition unsettles the conventional notion of righteous authority, revealing that both force and law are paradoxically capable of serving and subverting justice. Rather than offering clarity, the Sultan's dilemma underscores the instability of power itself. The interplay of these opposites invites readers into a space of philosophical irony, where authority is no longer absolute but fragmented, and the legitimacy of rule is subject to moral scrutiny.

When the Sultan is sold for thirty thousand dinars, he bitterly remarks, "So this is the height of noble, patriotic appreciation!" (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.48). This overturns the expected schema of a revered ruler, exposing the irony of a sovereign reduced to merchandise. The moment critiques how legal formalities and spectacle can eclipse genuine loyalty. Later, when bought by a whore, the Sultan exclaims, "Bravo! Bravo! The crowning touch!" (p.53), sarcastically applauding the final blow to his dignity. These moments underscore the fragility of status and the performative nature of honour and power. When the Lady refuses to grant his freedom and claims him as her property, the Sultan's fate is no longer his own—power shifts completely, highlighting the instability of authority and the illusion of control as the lady asserts:

Lady: And who has

given me all this authority—money?

Sultan: The law.

Lady: A word from my mouth can change your destiny and channel your life either to slavery and bondage, or to freedom and sovereignty. (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.62)

The exchange between the Lady and the Sultan heightens the play's irony by inverting traditional power structures. Once dismissed, the Lady now wields absolute authority—not through force, but via the very law meant to protect rulers. Her remark exposes the paradox of legal systems empowering the weak and restraining the powerful. This shift questions the legitimacy and permanence of authority, revealing its constructed and fragile nature.

The Vizier and Executioner's plan to falsely brand the Lady as a spy, "We could, for instance, say she is a spy" (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.67), further intensifies the irony. They portray wicked nature and use unethical means to serve their purpose. Their way of dealing with the concerned matter show how the truth can be manipulative to serve the political purpose.

The Sultan's remark, "Your luck was better than mine. With you, no one forgot to free you at the proper time" (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.68), ironically contradicts with his position as a slave. He is envious of Lady because she is holding authority, from which, he being the king is deprived of. Through this comment of the Sultan's, this research highlights the instability of power and also lays bare the fact that liberation is determined by legal acknowledgment, rather than social rank. The irony of the play is amplified by the Sultan's reference to Shahrazad and Shahriyar, which invokes mythical inversions.

Sultan: I who am in the position of Shahrazad! She too had to tell stories throughout the whole night, awaiting the dawn that would decide her fate.

Lady [laughing]: And I, then, am the dreadful, awe-inspiring Shahriyar? Sultan: Yes—isn't it extraordinary? Today everything is upside down. (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.69)

This conversation heightens the irony by reversing the traditional power dynamic of *One Thousand and One Nights*. The Sultan, identifying with Shahrazad, assumes a feminised, vulnerable position, while the Lady mirrors Shahriyar's authority. This role reversal disrupts the schema of male dominance, revealing identity and power as performative and reversible. Philosophically, it dissolves binaries, ruler and subject, male and female, exposing the constructed nature of authority and the fragility of societal hierarchies.

Beyond legal schema disruptions, the Cadi's order to the Muezzin to call the dawn prayer (Al-Hakim, 1960, p.79) ironically exposes how law manipulates religion for political survival. This act of Cadi unveils how sacred rituals are co-opted to fabricate justice, challenging schemas of religious and legal integrity. In lieu of protecting truth, the law abets trickery, which amplifies the play's criticism power and ethical decay. Hence, schema disruptions become the source of aggravating the irony and philosophical depth. This research reevaluates the power structures by placing the Sultan in the place of haplessness who is governed by a prostitute. Moreover, the research poses challenges to pre perceived standpoints of justice, authority and emancipation. The reversal of set meanings advocates for the updated schemas which perceives power being relied on the given circumstances, rather than ethical values.

## Conclusion

After analysing *The Sultan's Dilemma* by Al-Hakim through the framework of Stockwell's Schema Theory, this research underscores the importance of schema distortion and refreshment in reconfiguring the set notions and aggravating the irony of the play. The research, through expected role reversals such as the Sultan being slave and lady exercising the power, distorts schemas, leading to the reconsideration of set patterns in the minds of readers.

This research, furthermore, presents the exploitation of religious and judicial systems and explicates the flexibility of structure unclasped from the moral considerations. The discrepancy between perceived and actual roles exacerbates the irony and philosophical depth of the play. Hence, it is argued that *The Sultan's Dilemma* portrays the system which justify, maintain and cultivate the political and legal institutions. Thus, it is revealed that the philosophical depth is intensified by disrupting the established notions, which develops the novel and authenticated notions of justice, authority and personal autonomy within the abyss of discrepancies created by pre-existing schemas.



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