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Economic Coercion and Ideological Control: Totalitarianism in Wajdi Al-Ahdal's Play *A Crime at Restaurant Street*^(*)

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الإكراه الاقتصادي والسيطرة الأيديولوجية: الشمولية في مسرحية وجدي الأهدل جريمة في شارع المطاعم

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الملخص العربي:

تحلل هذه الورقة مسرحية "جريمة في شارع المطاعم" لوجدي الأهدل من خلال منظور النظرية التاريخية الجديدة، مستكشفة كيف تشكل السياقات التاريخية وديناميكيات السلطة شخصيات وأفكار المسرحية. بالاستناد إلى الأطر النظرية لمبادئ الشمولية التي قدمها فريدريش وبريزينسكي، تدرس الورقة آليات السيطرة الأيديولوجية، والشرطة الإرهابية، واحتكار الاقتصاد، وتركيز السلطة في نظام حكم كليبوتوقراطي. من خلال وضع المسرحية ضمن هذه الأطر، تستقصي كيف يقوم النظام الشمولي بالتلاعب بالأفراد نفسياً وأخلاقياً، مما يدفعهم إلى التضحية بقيمتهم من أجل البقاء. تتناول الورقة أيضاً الانهيار العاطفي والنفسي الذي يمر به شخصيات مثل عبد اللطيف محلاً تحولاً تحت تأثير النظام القسري. تبرز هذه الدراسة كيف تعكس "جريمة في شارع المطاعم" تقاطع السلطة، والفساد، والولاء، والمقاومة داخل نظام قمعي، بينما توضح الآثار الاجتماعية الأوسع للشمولية على الاستقلال الشخصي، والأخلاق، والعلاقات الإنسانية. من خلال هذا التحليل، تضيء الورقة الطرق التي تشكل بها الأنظمة الشمولية ليس فقط الهياكل السياسية، ولكن أيضاً نفسية وهويات الأفراد الذين يعيشون تحت سيطرتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السلطوية، الشمولية، الكليبوتوقراطية، المحسوبية السياسية، النيوباتريموالية.



Economic Coercion and Ideological Control: Totalitarianism in Wajdi Al-Ahdal's Play *A Crime at Restaurant Street*

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Abstract

This paper analyses Wajdi Al-Ahdal's *A Crime at Restaurant Street* through the lens of New Historicism. It explores how historical context and power dynamics shape the play's characters and themes. It draws on the theoretical frameworks of Friedrich and Brzezinski's principles of totalitarianism, to examine the mechanisms of ideological control, terroristic policing, economic monopolisation, and the centralisation of power in a kleptocratic regime. By contextualising the play within these frameworks, it investigates how the totalitarian system manipulates individuals psychologically and morally and how compels them to compromise their values for survival. The paper also delves into the emotional and psychological collapse experienced by characters like Abd al-Latif. It analyses his transformation under the regime's coercive influence. It also highlights how *A Crime at Restaurant Street* reflects the connection between power, corruption, loyalty, and resistance within an oppressive system and illustrates the broader social impacts of totalitarianism on personal autonomy, morality, and human connections. Through this analysis, the paper illuminates the ways in which totalitarian regimes shape not only political structures but also the very psyche and identity of individuals living under their control.

Key word: Authoritarian, totalitarianism State Capture, kleptocracy, political patronage, patronage networks, neopatrimonialism.

Introduction

Wajdi Al-Ahdal is a Yemeni novelist, short story writer, and playwright. He was born in 1973 near Bajil, Yemen. He has expressed his duty to expose corruption in Yemeni society. His debut novel, *Mountain Boats* (2002), sparked controversy in Yemen due to its political themes. Its release led to an intense media campaign against him. As a result, he was forced into exile in Syria, however; his trial continuing in absentia alongside his publisher, Nabil Abadi. Al-Ahdal returned to Yemen in December 2002 after mediation by the German Nobel laureate, Günter Grass.

Al-Ahdal's play *A Crime at Restaurant Street* became the first Yemeni play to be translated into English in 2016 by Katherine Hennessey. It was originally written as a short story, then it was adapted for the stage and performed in April 2009. The play reflects the political climate under Saleh's presidency, during a time of widespread lawlessness, terrorism, repression of freedoms, and a decline in democratic values. In an interview with Saleh Albaidani in 2007, Al-Ahdal emphasised that his writing wasn't motivated by personal grievances, but by broader social concerns. Katherine Hennessey (2015) notes that Al-Ahdal's reference to the dollar symbol in the play is to criticise Saleh's regime. She further highlights that the corrupt bank manager character symbolizing Saleh's control over state institutions for personal gain (16).

Critics have frequently accused Saleh's government of manipulating terrorism to secure foreign support. They also claimed that the government was exploiting state resources to maintain power. These accusations were stressed by Dr. Abdullah Abdulsamad in his 2006 article, *Yemen is a Democracy Without Democrats*, and by Yemeni human rights activist Tawakul Karman. Both condemned Saleh's regime for restricting freedoms and oppressing the Yemenis (Abdulsamad 2006; Finn 2011). These claims of corruption and human rights violations contributed significantly to the political unrest that led to the 2011 crisis. Karman and other opponents of Saleh viewed this crisis as a necessary revolution to overthrow decades of totalitarian rule.

In contrast, Saleh's administration and supporters denied allegations of corruption and human rights violations. They argue the government was combating terrorism and engaging in dialogue with factions and use force

only when necessary. In a 2008 interview with *The New York Times*, Saleh defended his actions. He rejected claims of exploiting terrorist groups for foreign support. He emphasised his dual approach of using force against some factions while negotiating with others. Meanwhile, Abdullah Al-Fuhaidi, a member of the ruling Congress party, praised the constitutional amendments during Saleh's presidency. He claimed that they aimed to democratise the system and ensure military and police neutrality (Al-Fuhaidi 2003).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing international interest in Middle Eastern literature, Yemeni literary voices remain underrepresented in scholarly discourse, particularly those addressing political repression and human rights. Wajdi Al-Ahdal's *A Crime at Restaurant Street* serves as a critical lens which explores the interplay between literature and authoritarian power structures in Yemen. However, there is limited academic analysis of how Al-Ahdal's work reflects and reviews the mechanisms of totalitarianism and kleptocracy. This study addresses this gap; It examines the political and psychological dimensions of control depicted in the play, and how these reflect broader historical and social realities in Yemen.

Significance of the Study

This paper is important on several levels: literary, political, social, and cultural. It draws attention to Yemeni literature, which is still underrepresented in global literary discussions. It highlights the value of Yemeni authors like Wajdi Al-Ahdal in conversations about literature, politics, and human rights. Moreover, the paper uses New Historicism and theories of totalitarianism to show how literature not only reflects historical realities but also criticises the power structures behind them. It shows that literature can be a form of resistance.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of this paper are to analyze the power dynamics and control mechanisms in *A Crime at Restaurant Street* through the lens of New Historicism. It examines how Carl J. Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) delineations of historical context and totalitarian principles, shape individual behaviours and societal structures within the play. It explores how the play reflects key features of totalitarian and kleptocratic systems and how these

mechanisms contribute to the maintenance of power and suppression of opposition. Moreover, it investigates how living under a totalitarian regimes lead to the manipulation of characters as Abd al-Latif, Antar, Wiswas, and Jamila and their subsequent moral and emotional collapse.

Research Questions

This paper highlights several key questions: What are the power dynamics and control mechanisms in *A Crime at Restaurant Street*? How do historical context and totalitarian principles, as defined by Carl J. Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965), shape individual behaviours and societal structures within the play? Additionally, in what ways does the play mirror the key features of totalitarian and kleptocratic systems, and how do these mechanisms contribute to the maintenance of power and suppression of opposition? How do characters like Abd al-Latif and Antar are manipulated by totalitarian regimes and what is the moral, emotional and psychological impact of such manipulation on these characters?

Conceptual Framework

Totalitarianism and authoritarianism are mistakenly used interchangeably, but there a lot of differences between them. Totalitarianism is a subdivision of authoritarianism. It seeks essential transformation of a state's political, social, and economic systems. It has a comprehensive ideological framework for that change. Patrick O'Neil (2004) explains that authoritarianism refers to a political system where a small group holds significant power over the state without accountability to the public through constitutional means. In such systems, leaders act with relative autonomy. They put policies with little consideration to no consideration to the needs of the public, (120). In contrast, O'Neil argues that totalitarian systems utilises state institutions, violence, and ideology to reshape society to control and transform the entire fabric of a country according to an ideological goal. (122).

The distinction between totalitarianism and authoritarianism goes beyond violence. Totalitarian regimes attempt not only to subdue dissent but to reshape individuals and society to fit the regime's ideological vision. O'Neil emphasises that totalitarianism "requires the unbridled use of terror and violence to break down the human spirit in order to remake it in the image of the ideology" (122).



Loneliness also is used by totalitarian regimes to subjugate people. When people are isolated or feel disconnected from society, community, or purpose, they may become emotionally and mentally vulnerable. Hannah Arendt (1951) provide an analysis of loneliness as a mean of subjugation used by totalitarian regimes to tie social alienation with the psychological conditions that foster regimes of terror. He suggests that loneliness is a fundamental element that contributes to the rise of terror and totalitarian regimes. They think that isolating people make them more likely to follow extreme ideas or leaders and gain control. Loneliness helps in turning lonely people into either victims or those who help carry out violence. (310).

Totalitarian regimes concentrate power in the hands of a single leader or ruling party. They dominate political, social, and economic aspects of life. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, argue that in such regimes the leader's complete authority is established by replacing democratic institutions with apparatuses to facilitate the process of manipulation of state institutions and resources for personal or political gain. This process is called state capture (43). This system is reinforced through clientelist networks. They build relationships where people give loyalty or support in exchange for favors, jobs, or resources. In return, those in power protect or hide illegal actions from being investigated or punished. (Richter 183).

State capture and kleptocracy coexist within totalitarian regimes. Shleifer and Vishny (1998) describe kleptocracy as a system where state resources are exploited for the enrichment of leaders and their associates (18). Daron Acemoglu (2004) elaborates that kleptocratic rulers get resources through taxes and rents and redirect them for personal consumption instead of public development (164). This corruption is institutionalised through a practice where politicians distribute favours and jobs in exchange for loyalty and support. This practice is called political patronage. Guillermo Toral. (2021) highlights that patronage networks are based on personal relationships rather than merit, which foster corruption and inefficiency in public administration. These networks ensure political stability in kleptocratic regimes that reward loyalty to consolidate the ruler's power (56).

Neopatrimonialism operates alongside state capture and kleptocracy. It reinforces single man rule in totalitarian regimes. Bratton and van de Walle

(1997) explain that neopatrimonialism blends formal and informal institutions, where patronage, clientelism, and loyalty-based exchanges coexist with bureaucratic structures (60). In totalitarian systems, leaders treat state institutions as extensions of their personal interests. In this system patronage networks creating webs of loyalty that maintain the regime's power. D. Beekers and B. van Gool (2012) notes that patron-client dynamics foster reciprocal relationships. Patrons reward loyalty with resources, consolidating their control (6).

In conclusion, the interrelationship between totalitarianism, state capture, kleptocracy, patronage networks, and neopatrimonialism forms a complex system of mutual reinforcement. Totalitarian regimes use state capture to centralise domination, while kleptocracy facilitates personal enrichment. Patronage systems ensure loyalty, while neopatrimonialism ties personal rule to state governance, creating a hybrid system that perpetuates authoritarian control (Shleifer and Vishny 21).

Methodology and Literary Theory

This qualitative paper analyses Wajdi Al-Ahdal's *A Crime at Restaurant Street* through the lens of New Historicism literary theory. It seeks to explore how historical context and power dynamics shape the play. Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000) points out that New Historicism, is not a rigid analytical framework. It does not provide a fixed, step-by-step method for interpreting texts. Instead, it reflects a careful openness; it rejects predictability in favour of an analysis that resists oversimplification. According to Greenblatt and Gallagher, "New Historicism is not a fixed, repeatable approach or a strict set of rules for analyzing texts" (19). Traditional literary criticism may follow formulaic methods, whereas New Historicism focuses on the complexity of both literary works and their historical contexts, offering a multi-layered understanding rather than a single interpretation.

New Historicism emphasises the dynamic relationship between literature and history. It argues that literature is not merely a passive reflection of historical events but actively shapes and is shaped by the political, social, and cultural environments in which it is produced. New Historicism challenges the view that literature simply mirrors history; instead, it sees literature as both influenced by and influential in its time. As Dobie (2011) and Kumar,



Pramod K.V., and N. Ramachandran Nair (2015) argue, New Historicism treats literary works as products of their specific historical contexts and social structures They stress on the interconnectedness between text and history. Unlike traditional Historicism, which views history as a backdrop, New Historicism analyses how literature engages with and reflects the ideological currents and power structures of its time (Dobie 179; Kumar and Nair 120-121).

This theory calls for reading both literary and non-literary texts together to achieve a full understanding of the historical context. Kumar and Nair (2015) argue that these texts, whether literary works or historical documents, should be read as interconnected, reflecting the debates and ideologies of the era (120-121). Dobie further contends that literature plays an essential role in social reform. It shapes power dynamics and gives voice to marginalised groups. By examining texts in light of contemporary and later discourses, New Historicism provides a deeper understanding of how these works engage with their political and historical contexts (182).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on *A Crime at Restaurant Street* and Al-Ahdal's works is limited; however, several scholarly articles address the political, social, and economic conditions in Al-Ahdal's writing in particular and in Yemeni Literature more broadly. These discussions shed light on broader themes such as gender, corruption, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and societal stagnation in Yemen They offer valuable insights into Al-Ahdal's literary output.

Among the scholars Abdulrahman No'aman (2016) and Hatem Al-Shamea (2018). Both provide critical analyses of Yemeni novels, with particular attention to the ways in which gender, corruption, and authoritarianism are portrayed. No'aman's comparative study investigates the representations of women in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* by the Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande and *It Is Just Love* by the Yemeni novelist Nadia Al-Kokabany. No'aman contends that both authors, despite their different backgrounds, explore the shared theme of women's struggles to gain respect and recognition in male-dominated societies. Both novels highlight the rooted social issues faced by women. They mirror the broader gender inequalities in both Indian and Yemeni contexts. They expose the marital violence, gender

bias, and the special treatment of male children over female children (No'aman 211).

Al-Shamea, in his 2018 analysis, examines four novels by Al-Ahdal: *Mountainous Boats*, *A Donkey among Songs*, *Quarantine Philosopher*, and *A Land without Jasmine*. He argues that these works expose both divine and social taboos within the patriarchal Arab society. Al-Shamea suggests that the novels criticise the marginalisation of women and the stifling of democratic freedoms. He notes that the dominance of patriarchal structures not only limits women's contributions in political and social spheres but also exacerbates a broader cultural stagnation. He further posits that the absence of democratic reforms in Yemen has contributed to a climate of manipulation. In Yemen, he argues, the norms of religion and tradition are distorted to restrict freedom and perpetuate a culture of servility and deception (Al-Shamea 181-182).

In his 2024 study, *change as Impossible Necessity: Change for the Worse as Depicted in Wajdi Alahdal's A Crime at Restaurant Street*, Abdulmajeed Abdulqadir Saeed Alhanash analyses Wajdi Alahdal's *A Crime at Restaurant Street* using psychoanalytic and trauma theory. He investigates the psychological effects of social and political stress on individuals. The research explores how the playwright anticipates a deteriorating social environment. He asserts that socio-political corruption induces significant pressure and trauma, leading to psychological disorders as reflected in Abd al-Latif's negative transformation. Alhanash's findings highlight the destructive nature of corruption, which exacerbates psychological distress. It results in post-traumatic stress disorder that pushes Abd al-Latif toward terrorism. The study concludes that while the play underscores the urgent need for social change, it conveys a deep pessimism regarding the feasibility of such a transformation.

In addition to these critical examinations, other scholars have also explored the broader political and social criticism within Al-Ahdal's works. Katherine Hennessey (2019) observes that Al-Ahdal's *The Colonel's Wedding* reviews the pervasive corruption and impunity among Yemen's elite, while William Hutchins highlights *A Land Without Jasmine* as a satirical exploration of social hypocrisy and sexual depravity.



International reports from organisations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies provide additional context for understanding the political and social issues that Al-Ahdal's works address. These reports document Yemen's persistent corruption and state capture, particularly during the presidency of Ali Abdullah Saleh. According to the NDI, Yemen's efforts to combat corruption have been ineffective despite the establishment of the Supreme National Anti-Corruption Commission and the passage of anti-corruption legislation. Legislative mandates have often been left unimplemented, and anti-corruption measures have been obstructed. This leads to the hindrance of democratic development and reform efforts (National Democratic Institute 1).

The Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies (2018) further contextualises this issue. It notes that Yemen's corruption problem became deeply entrenched during Saleh's presidency, especially with the rise of neopatrimonialism, a system in which state resources are used to maintain loyalty through patronage networks. This system allowed Saleh and his inner circle to maintain control over Yemen's military and security forces. They create a network of power that insulated them from accountability and perpetuated a culture of impunity (Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies 5).

Moreover, reports from organisations such as ARD, Inc., in collaboration with USAID's Bureau of Democracy, highlight how Saleh maintained his hold on power through strict domination over the security apparatus. He relies on his family and loyal supporters to consolidate his regime. According to ARD, Inc. (2004), these groups were put in key positions within Yemen's military and security structures, making it exceedingly difficult for them to relinquish power. As a result, the political environment remained characterised by totalitarianism, with limited prospects for democratic transition (20).

In sum, while scholarly engagement with Al-Ahdal's work remains limited, existing analyses and reports underscore the significant ways in which his novels engage with the political, social, and economic realities of Yemen. Through the exploration of gender dynamics, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and corruption, Al-Ahdal's fiction offers a potent criticism of



Yemeni society, reflecting broader regional and global concerns about power, inequality, and social injustice.

Analysis

The play *A Crime at Restaurant Street* opens in a coffeehouse. In the Coffeehouse, there is a golden ball named "The Bank," inscribed with a U.S. dollar sign, hangs from the ceiling. The characters are Abd al-Latif Muḥammad Aḥmad, an interior designer; Murshid Antar, an intellectual; Yasir Uthman, a journalist; Jamila, a young orphan living by begging; Wiswas, the bank teller; Ḥurayb, the waiter; and the Bank Director, whose presence is known only through a voice coming from the golden ball.

The play talks about Abd al-Latif's past, his achievements abroad, and his eventual return to Yemen, where he faces rigid obstacles imposed by the government leaders. The bank manager gathers information about him with the help of Wiswas, Murshid Antar and Yasir. Murshid is paid 40 thousand for his services to the bank manager. He describes Abd al-Latif as someone who has assimilated foreign culture and now is disgusted with his Yemeni roots. He attributes to him a hidden violence. In contrast, Jamila, who receives no compensation, offers a more positive portrayal of Abd al-Latif. She describes Abd al-Latif as modest, wise, and cultured.

Abd al-Latif narrates his life story during an interview with Yasir as requested by the bank manager. He reveals that he was orphaned at a young age and lived with his uncles in Kenya until their death. He was later adopted by a Lebanese Maronite family that provided him with an excellent education, opportunities to travel, and eventually made him a successful designer with a fortune of 800,000 USD. However, after being deported from Kenya, Abd al-Latif returned to Yemen, only to find his bank account frozen, and his talents is not appreciated by the government.

In a twist, the bank manager offers Abd al-Latif the chance to unfreeze his assets if he agrees to commit a crime. When Abd al-Latif refuses, Wiswas disguised himself as a madman and assaults him. Abd al-Latif retaliates, and the police arrest him. In prison, Wiswas offers him a final deal: either commit murder and regain his freedom, or remain in prison. Eventually, Abd al-Latif succumbs to the pressure and was given a gun. He goes to the coffeehouse and kills everyone, including Jamila and Ḥurayb and becomes an instrument



of the regime's oppressive tools. The play *A Crime at Restaurant Street* criticises totalitarianism and corruption within dictatorial regimes. It highlighting how power structures manipulate society to maintain control. In an interview with Ammran Al-Hammadi, on the fifth of November 2020, Wajdi Al-Ahdal expressed his critical views on the political and social dominance of dictators. He emphasises the psychological factors behind their oppressive behaviour. Al-Ahdal argues that the psychological flaws of dictators often make them unsuitable for leadership. He suggests that many should be admitted to psychiatric hospitals due to their mental disturbances. He also raised concerns about the influence of tyrants' supporters, who often outnumber those backing peaceful rulers.

Both the play and Al-Ahdal's interview highlight the damaging effects of dictatorship and power abuse. He accentuates the moral and psychological decay of those in power. The character Abd al-Latif is a metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of kleptocracy. Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965), outline six key features of totalitarian regimes: ideology, a single party led by one man, terroristic police, communications monopoly, weapons monopoly, and a centrally directed economy (21). Totalitarian regimes utilise a combination of ideological control, centralised political power, terroristic policing, media monopolisation, a monopoly on weapons, and economic centralisation to maintain power and suppress opposition. These features work together to create an environment where the state dictates every aspect of life, leaving little room for individual autonomy. In a totalitarian state, power is typically concentrated in the hands of one individual who leads a single-party system. The role of the leader is not only political but also symbolic. He represents the embodiment of the regime's ideology where the single-party system is crucial because it ensures that no political competition exists (Friedrich and Brzezinski 22).

These traits are useful in analysing the dynamics in *A Crime at Restaurant Street*, where the bank manager symbolises totalitarian leadership, and the regime's systemic corruption mirrors the characteristics of totalitarianism. The play examines how regimes manipulate individuals and social structures for domination. The play also illustrates how the political patronage system, terroristic police, and communication monopolies contribute to the state's power, silencing dissent and perpetuating corruption.

Ideology

The ideological framework in *A Crime at Restaurant Street* reflects the regime's attempt to control not only behavior but also thought and belief of the people. The regime's ideology is not simply a set of doctrines. It is a totalising force meant to shape reality and suppress individuality. It is within this context that Friedrich and Brzezinski define totalitarianism as a regime exercising "total control of the everyday life of its citizens," including "their thoughts and attitudes as well as their activities," and guided by a vision of a utopian final state that demands absolute loyalty (16–22).

Friedrich and Brzezinski's definition underscores the regime's use of ideology as a psychological weapon that compels conformity through fear, social manipulation, and narrative control. In the play, ideology functions as more than a political doctrine. It becomes an all-encompassing system that restructures reality. It erodes individuality, and enforces conformity through psychological and social mechanisms. This aligns directly with Friedrich and Brzezinski's notion of ideology as a "psychological weapon" used to suppress dissent and regulate inner life, thereby achieving dominance over both external behavior and internal moral frameworks.

Against this backdrop, Abd al-Latif emerges as a figure of resistance whose humanistic principles sharply contrast with the regime's ideological machinery. His assertion to Jamila "All people are equal. You should never think of yourself as lower or less valuable than anyone else" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 7). He rejects the regime's hierarchical and discriminatory value system, which defines worth through loyalty and submission. This resistance aligns with Friedrich and Brzezinski's concept of dissent as a threat to totalitarian rule. Abd al-Latif undermines the regime's psychological grip by affirming individual dignity and moral autonomy. In this sense, Abd al-Latif's presence serves as a counterforce to the regime's ideological weaponry. He shows that personal conscience can still survive within a system explicitly designed to eliminate it. He exemplifies what Friedrich and Brzezinski describe as the rare persistence of ethical judgment in a system engineered to destroy it.

The conflict between internalised ideology and individual moral judgment is further illustrated through Antar, whose denunciation of Abd al-Latif



reflects the regime's fear of intellectual plurality. Antar describes Abd al-Latif as "a sad soul who tries to ape foreign ways... they can't re-acclimatise to their own society and its customs" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 8). Here, Antar represents the regime's fear of intellectual or cultural contamination. His criticism reveals how totalitarianism constructs foreignness as a threat. This reinforces conformity through the demonisation of outside influence. This tactic, as Friedrich and Brzezinski argue, helps enforce ideological purity by fostering a climate of paranoia and suspicion. Antar's condemnation reflects how the regime molds citizens into enforcers of ideological convention. It uses cultural rhetoric to delegitimise dissent and maintain its psychological stranglehold on the people.

The Bank Manager's ideological manipulation is perhaps the clearest reflection of Friedrich and Brzezinski's theory. As Friedrich and Brzezinski argue, "the essence of totalitarianism is to be seen in such a regime's total domination of the everyday life of its citizens" (16-22). His "new theory of ethics," as described by Wiswas, reframes criminality as a socially acceptable. it is for him even noble and a path to achieve material and spiritual needs, "people will engage in criminal behaviour if this is the only way to attain what they deserve, materially and spiritually, within society, like predators in the jungle. And the unquestioned reward for committing such crimes is being considered an upstanding citizen" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 17).

This reframing serves the regime's interests by morally justifying violence and suppressing dissent under the guise of utilitarian ethics. This redefinition of crime as socially acceptable serves to align individual behavior with state objectives, transforming exploitation into a moral imperative. Such a distortion of ethical norms directly supports Friedrich and Brzezinski's claim that ideology in totalitarian regimes is not only prescriptive but reconstitutive, redefining moral categories to serve political ends (22).

Wiswas exemplifies how totalitarian regimes transform individuals into passive agents of the state. This transformation takes place not through overt coercion but through the gradual erosion of moral reasoning through propaganda and ideological saturation. As Friedrich and Brzezinski argue, totalitarianism extends beyond the restriction of action to the reshaping of thought, eliminating the perception of moral contradiction (22). Wiswas's

portrayal of the Bank Manager as “a philosopher, and quite a unique one” who has “invented a new theory of ethics” (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 17) reflects the regime’s manipulation of intellectual discourse to legitimise its objectives. His uncritical admiration-despite its clear immorality-demonstrates the psychological damage inflicted by such regimes. Education and propaganda displace independent ethical judgment. It replaces it with ideological conformity. Wiswas no longer questions the regime’s logic; he merely reproduces it, and this illustrates Friedrich and Brzezinski’s assertion that the true power of totalitarianism lies in making coercion appear rational and morally acceptable.

Friedrich and Brzezinski argue that the most sneaky feature of totalitarianism is its capacity to destroy personal conscience(23). This destruction is evident in the play’s depiction of characters like Wiswas and Antar. They reflect the internalisation of state ideology. The disintegration of empathy, the loss of independent thought, and the normalisation of moral compromise all serve to sustain the regime’s control. Wiswas’s indifference and Antar’s self-righteous hypocrisy reflect the successful psychological colonisation that Friedrich and Brzezinski identify as a hallmark of totalitarian systems.

In contrast, Abd al-Latif’s unwavering humanism at the beginning of the play and Jamila’s recognition of his integrity-“very modest... and cultured as a philosopher” (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 11)- offer a vision of ethical resistance. Their perspectives serve as a counterpoint to the regime’s ideological deformation. This juxtaposition reveals the corrosive effect of totalitarianism on individual moral agency, a core concern for Friedrich and Brzezinski. They emphasise that totalitarian control is as much about shaping internal belief systems as it is about enforcing external obedience.

Totalitarianism and Single Party, Led by One Man

Totalitarian regimes maintain power through a comprehensive assault on both public actions and private thought. As Arendt (1965) explains, they seek to control not just what people do, but also their thoughts and feelings, using an “iron band of total terror” that systematically destroys people’s sense of right and wrong and leaves them “empty of emotions.” (309).



This theoretical framework aligns closely with Friedrich and Brzezinski's conception of totalitarianism, which involves the regime's total penetration into all aspects of life. Together, these theorists show how such regimes manufacture loyalty not through genuine belief, but through fear and manipulation. This manipulation turning individuals into obedient instruments of state ideology. In *A Crime at Restaurant Street*, this is brilliantly portrayed through the psychological and emotional erosion experienced by multiple characters, particularly those who are coerced into complicity.

A key mechanism for enforcing this coerced loyalty, as Friedrich and Brzezinski argue, is the creation of tightly controlled patronage networks. These systems create a privileged class that benefits from the regime, leading to widespread moral decay as individuals are forced to sacrifice personal integrity for survival. According to Friedrich and Brzezinski, these beneficiaries are "dedicated committed to certain assumptions, prepared to assist in every way in promoting its general acceptance." (22). In *A Crime at Restaurant Street*, Antar exemplifies this dynamic; his receipt of a large sum of money is not a reward for merit but for loyalty. His privileged position reinforces the regime's strategy of consolidating power by promoting ideological conformity over integrity or competence. The stark divide between beneficiaries like Antar and oppressed individuals like Jamila highlights how totalitarian regimes maintain control not only through violence but by structuring society around unequal access to resources, producing moral collapse and complicity among those who benefit.

The moral corruption engendered by this system is further illuminated by Arendt's analysis, particularly in Antar's interaction with Jamila. When he says, "A man of culture does not give alms, because he wishes to discourage a system of dependence on others" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 5), his hypocrisy becomes evident. Although he criticizes those who rely on others, he himself is entirely dependent on the regime's support. His words show how deeply he has absorbed the regime's ideology. This reflects what Friedrich and Brzezinski describe as the psychological control used by totalitarian systems, where individuals are trained to accept state values, even when those values go against basic human ethics. As Arendt notes, the regime destroys individuals' "sense of right and wrong," replacing it with mechanical

adherence to ideology (310). Antar's lack of empathy for Jamila shows how thoroughly totalitarianism dehumanises its subjects, making them incapable of moral judgment outside state-prescribed norms.

Ultimately, Jamila's death at the hands of Abd al-Latif serves as a brutal culmination of the regime's systemic violence. It reflects Friedrich and Brzezinski's argument that totalitarian regimes "use any means: force, state institutions or economy to control the movement, behavior and thoughts of people" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 23–24). Abd al-Latif, once a peaceful man, is psychologically broken and repurposed by the state as an agent of violence. Jamila's refusal to conform marks her as expendable within a system that crushes non-compliance, turning even victims into perpetrators. Her death is not merely personal tragedy-it symbolises the regime's capacity to destroy relationships, moral convictions, and humanity itself. This final act underscores the terrifying effectiveness of totalitarian control, which achieves domination not just over public life but over private conscience and moral agency, as described by both Arendt and Friedrich and Brzezinski.

Terroristic Police

Friedrich and Brzezinski assert that totalitarian regimes rely on "technically advanced possibilities of supervision and control of the movement of persons" to regulate both physical and psychological behavior (24). This form of control infiltrates public and private spheres alike, extending state authority into the most intimate aspects of life. Within this system, the secret police are not instruments of justice but tools of political repression, designed to maintain dominance and suppress personal autonomy. Significantly, the regime's terror is not confined to identifiable enemies of the state; rather, it extends "more or less arbitrarily" to ordinary individuals, rendering the entire population vulnerable to suspicion and punishment. This dynamic is dramatised in the play *A Crime*. The arrest of Abd al-Latif exemplifies how totalitarian systems weaponise law enforcement to enforce submission.

Wiswas deliberately provokes a confrontation with Abd al-Latif as a pretext to involve the police. Wiswas attacked Abd al-Latif. Abd al-Latif defended himself, however, he is arrested and is treated not as a victim of assault but as a threat to the regime. This occurs after Wiswas fails to

manipulate him with the promise of releasing his frozen assets. In a just society, Abd al-Latif's response would be recognised as self-defense. However, under a totalitarian regime, even self-preservation becomes suspect. His arrest illustrates the subordination of justice to political control, confirming Friedrich and Brzezinski's argument that law enforcement is repurposed to serve ideological enforcement rather than uphold genuine justice.

Abd al-Latif's mental deterioration further reflects this psychological terror explained by Friedrich and Brzezinski. He is diagnosed with a "rare, malignant disease" that causes his brain cells to emit vibrations into space. He comes to believe that his thoughts are being both extracted and manipulated: "When I came down with it, my brain cells began to send vibrations into space, carrying all of my thoughts along with them" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 13). This metaphor of invasive thought surveillance mirrors Friedrich and Brzezinski's assertion that totalitarian regimes "systematically exploit modern and more specifically scientific psychology" (23) to instill fear and enforce conformity. Abd al-Latif imagines that a machine "collects his thoughts" and that the regime implants "evil thoughts" into his mind (13). These beliefs are symptomatic of a state that has destroyed the boundary between inner consciousness and public control.

Friedrich and Brzezinski's concept of "secret-police science," in which surveillance and psychological coercion operate jointly to erode individual autonomy (24), is vividly embodied in the play. Within this context, Abd al-Latif's paranoia emerges not as irrational, but as a rational psychological response to the regime's pervasive mechanisms of control. His contention "They're trying to destroy me, to turn me into a criminal who'll do their dirty work" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 14) reveals the extent of the psychological manipulation he endures. It also highlights how authoritarian power infiltrates and destabilises the self.

In addition, Friedrich and Brzezinski emphasise that totalitarian power is maintained through a combination of "social pressure" and technological surveillance (23). In the play, beyond individual suffering, Abd al-Latif's observations reveal the regime's broader methods of subjugation. He notes, "Every one of these poor people who you see wandering here, they've all



been robbed of their financial rights” (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 13). This remark draws attention to the role of economic deprivation as a form of control. The regime’s oppression thus operates on multiple levels-psychological, legal, and material. It creates a population that is not only watched and manipulated but also economically disempowered as Friedrich and Brzezinski’s framework assert.

In this light, Abd al-Latif becomes emblematic of the totalitarian subject: criminalised for self-defense, surveilled in thought, and stripped of agency through economic and psychological means. His narrative illustrates what Friedrich and Brzezinski describe as the “true terror” of totalitarianism that uses technology, science to fundamentally reshape the inner and outer lives of individuals (24).

Communications Monopoly

Control over mass communication is a central strategy in the totalitarian apparatus. Friedrich and Brzezinski characterise this as “a technologically conditioned, near-complete monopoly” over all effective means of communication (22), to ensure that the regime’s ideology saturates public discourse and eliminates dissent. In *A Crime at Restaurant Street*, this control is symbolised through the disembodied voice of the Bank Manager, who issues commands via a golden ball. This figure is unseen but omnipresent, like totalitarian control itself.

Friedrich and Brzezinski argue that totalitarian regimes control public conversation through false accusations and misinformation (23), a tactic clearly illustrated in the play. For example, the Bank Manager asks Murshid, “Is it true that you’ve accepted bribes from people in high places?” (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 7). This question appears to demand accountability, but it actually distracts from the regime’s own corruption. In response, Murshid blames “Zionists, CIA agents...” for spreading lies (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 7). His reaction reflects the regime’s common tactic of using scapegoats to avoid criticism and silence dissent.

Educational authority is also manipulated to bolster regime legitimacy, reinforcing the regime’s near-complete control over knowledge and truth. Murshid’s claim to be “the best-educated man in the entire country” (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 7) is a tool for propagating the regime’s official narrative rather

than fostering independent thought. Later, Wiswas states that “Truth, my friend, is only worth what you can pay for it” (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 16). This proclamation encapsulates how totalitarian regimes distort truth to maintain power. This manipulation of education and truth aligns with Friedrich and Brzezinski’s argument that the monopoly over communication extends beyond censorship. It actively reshapes reality to serve the regime’s interests.

Moreover, Murshid’s description of Abd al-Latif as someone who “wraps himself in mystery” and shows “inflated importance” reflects his earlier scapegoating of external enemies like Zionists. This tactic portrays Abd al-Latif as a possible foreign agent or conspirator, deflecting attention from the regime’s internal problems by framing criticism as foreign subversion. Murshid’s use of scapegoating is consistent with Friedrich and Brzezinski’s analysis of totalitarian propaganda, which manipulates public perception to maintain ideological control and suppress dissent, thereby reinforcing the regime’s monopoly on communication and control over society.

Weapons Monopoly and Intimidation

Totalitarian regimes maintain control through monopolising violence, limiting access to weapons to the state and its agents. Friedrich and Brzezinski argue that this “technologically conditioned, near-complete monopoly” ensures that opposition is impossible (22). This monopoly is not only about physical weapons but also about controlling who can use violence and how. The play dramatises this monopoly by showing how Abd al-Latif, a victim of systemic pressure, is ultimately turned into a tool of the regime’s violence.

This transformation is not voluntary. Abd al-Latif is compelled into murder after years of psychological torment and material deprivation. It reflects Friedrich and Brzezinski’s idea that the regime’s monopoly over violence is deeply intertwined with psychological control. The regime’s dominance is so complete that it forces an educated, peaceful man to commit acts that contradict his values. This shows that the control over violence extends beyond physical weapons to include the psychological coercion necessary to break down individual resistance.

Centrally Directed Economy

Friedrich and Brzezinski explain that totalitarian regimes often centralise domination over the economy to dictate decisions about production,

distribution, and pricing. The state brings independent corporations and businesses under bureaucratic domination to ensure loyalty and prevent opposition (22). This economic control explained by Friedrich and Brzezinski is highlighted in the play when Abd al-Latif struggles to regain his financial. He states, "I had around eight hundred thousand dollars in the bank, and suddenly I wasn't able to withdraw any of the money" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 13). This symbolises the regime's ability to enforce financial deprivation and undermine any sense of autonomy.

Additional illustration of the regime's social domination-as mentioned by Friedrich and Brzezinski-is when Abd al-Latif recounts, "I've suffered from this condition, this disease, for seventeen years. They've cut me off from every decent livelihood, and they fight against me everywhere I go to find work" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 13). This demonstrates how the regime sabotages individuals' livelihoods in order to isolate them socially and professionally.

Abd al-Latif's statement, "I defy you to find one of them who has lived honorably" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 13), supports Friedrich and Brzezinski's claim that totalitarian regimes take control of the economy to force businesses into obedience and ensure loyalty to the state. They explain that this control creates a system where the ruling elite becomes morally corrupt and uses its power for personal gain (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 22). Abd al-Latif's words reflect this idea by pointing out how those in power act dishonorably and take advantage of others. His disillusionment with the regime shows how it operates like a kleptocracy, where a small group gets rich while the rest of the population suffers. He adds, "Certainly I'm not the only one in this country who has had his financial rights taken away" (Al-Ahdal, *A Crime* 13), which shows how widespread the economic exploitation is. This supports Friedrich and Brzezinski's view that the regime's control leads to systemic injustice and leaves ordinary people powerless.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Wajdi Al-Ahdal's *A Crime at Restaurant Street* functions as a potent literary anatomy of a totalitarian-kleptocratic state. It applies the theoretical framework of Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski to systematically decoded the play's allegorical landscape. It moves beyond a general review of corruption to reveal the intricate,



intertwining mechanisms of power that define the former regime in Yemen. In doing so, it directly addresses the core research questions posed at the outset.

The investigation confirms that the power dynamics within the play are not merely repressive but are deeply transformative. It aimed at reshaping individual morality and societal structures to serve the regime's ideological goal of self-perpetuation. The Bank Manager's unseen authority, the terroristic manipulation of the police, the cynical monopoly on communication, and the strategic use of economic deprivation collectively illustrate Friedrich and Brzezinski's six features of totalitarianism in action. Crucially, this paper has detailed how these mechanisms operate: through the psychological manipulation of characters like Abd al-Latif, whose moral and emotional collapse is engineered by a system that weaponises his own virtues and vulnerabilities against him. Similarly, the complicity of figures like Antar and Wiswas is exposed not as mere weakness, but as a calculated outcome of a patronage system that rewards loyalty and punishes integrity to ensure the suppression of opposition.

This paper fills a significant gap in the existing scholarship on both Al-Ahdal and modern Yemeni literature. While previous studies, such as those by Hennessey and Alhanash, have rightly highlighted themes of corruption and psychological trauma, this paper provides the first sustained analysis of *A Crime at Restaurant Street* through the specific lens of Friedrich and Brzezinski's totalitarian model. It thereby moves the critical conversation from a focus on the symptoms of a broken system-corruption, trauma- to a systematic diagnosis of the political pathology itself. The paper situates the play within its precise historical context using New Historicist principles to establish Al-Ahdal's work not just as a reflection of Yemen's political realities under Saleh, but as an active participant in the discourse of resistance.

The scholarly contribution of this work lies in its demonstration of how a literary text can serve as a primary document for understanding the lived experience of political theory. It shows how concepts like state capture, neopatrimonialism, and ideological terror are not abstract political science categories but are instinctual forces that warp human relationships and dismantle the individual psyche.



Building on these findings, future research could productively expand in several directions. A comparative study between Al-Ahdal's dramatic criticism and the works of other Arab playwrights who have confronted authoritarianism, such as the Lebanon's Issam Mahfouz, particularly his absurdist play *The Dictator*. This further study would illuminate common strategies and distinct national trajectories of literary resistance across the region. Additionally, Alaa Al Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* offers a fascinating fictional parallel to *A Crime at Restaurant Street*. Both texts confront the systemic corruption, patronage networks, and ideological decay underpinning authoritarian regimes-Saleh's Yemen and Mubarak's Egypt, respectively. While Al-Ahdal uses theatrical allegory and absurdism to anatomise totalitarian power, Al Aswany exposes its social consequences through the interwoven lives of Cairo's inhabitants. Together, they reveal how authoritarianism not only governs through repression but reshapes morality, identity, and communal life.

Furthermore, as Yemen continues to pass through a complex political landscape, analysis of contemporary Yemeni novels, poems or theatre productions that address themes of state fragility, militia rule, and social fragmentation would be invaluable. Investigating if and how these new works engage with the legacy of totalitarian structures, as anatomised by Al-Ahdal, could reveal the evolving role of art in a nation grappling with the enduring scars of a kleptocratic past. Ultimately, this paper confirms that *A Crime at Restaurant Street* is more than a historical product; it is a timeless cautionary tale about the machinery of absolute power and the high cost of resisting, or succumbing to its design.



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