

DEATH, DOXA, AND THE DELEGITIMATION OF POWER IN NAIB IZRAIL

M. Arifurrahman¹, Mochammad Bagja Agung Nugraha Zainaldy²

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati

arifurrahman@uinsgd.ac.id¹ mochammadbagjaagungnugraha@uinsgd.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Yusuf al-Siba'i's Naib Izrail turns death into a narrative mechanism that destabilizes the legitimacy of office, honor, and public recognition. Previous studies have identified its religious messages, social criticism, representation of the Angel of Death, and authorial subjectivity, but have not explained how the novel withdraws symbolic recognition from dominant actors. Using Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of doxa, symbolic capital, symbolic power, and legitimate language, the study applies qualitative close reading to narration, dialogue, characterization, and episodes involving Yusuf, Izrail, elites, and ordinary people. The findings show that worldly authority is constructed as a doxic order that misrecognizes status as moral worth; Izrail's authorized speech reverses human hierarchies; death prevents elite capital from converting into immunity; and fantastic satire exposes manipulation, materialism, and governmental abuse. Death is therefore not symbolic power itself, but a counter-classificatory device that interrupts doxa and reveals human legitimacy as contingent within society.

Keywords: Bourdieu; death; doxa; modern Egyptian literature; symbolic power

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana *Naib Izrail* karya Yusuf al-Siba'i mengubah kematian menjadi mekanisme naratif yang mengguncang legitimasi jabatan, kehormatan, dan pengakuan publik. Kajian terdahulu telah membahas pesan keagamaan, kritik sosial, representasi Malaikat Maut, dan subjektivitas pengarang, tetapi belum menjelaskan cara novel menarik pengakuan simbolik dari aktor dominan. Dengan menggunakan konsep doxa, modal simbolik, kekuasaan simbolik, dan bahasa legitim Pierre Bourdieu, penelitian ini menerapkan pembacaan dekat kualitatif terhadap narasi, dialog, penokohan, serta episode yang melibatkan Yusuf, Izrail, elite, dan masyarakat biasa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa otoritas duniawi dibentuk sebagai tatanan doxis yang menyamakan status dengan nilai moral; tuturan berwenang Izrail membalik hierarki manusia; kematian mencegah modal elite dikonversi menjadi kekebalan; dan satire fantastik menyingkap manipulasi, materialisme, serta penyalahgunaan pemerintahan. Dengan demikian, kematian bukanlah kekuasaan simbolik itu sendiri, melainkan perangkat klasifikasi tandingan yang memutus doxa dan memperlihatkan bahwa legitimasi manusia bersifat kontingen dalam karya sastra Mesir modern yang relatif kurang diteliti akademis.

Kata Kunci: Bourdieu; doxa; kematian; kekuasaan simbolik; sastra Mesir modern

INTRODUCTION

Modern Egyptian literature developed amid profound political, social, and cultural transformations, and prose became a medium through which writers negotiated individual experience and collective crisis. The modern Arabic novel does not merely reproduce social reality; it reorganizes that reality through narration, irony, fantasy, characterization, and symbolic conflict. Scholarship on Egyptian fiction shows that literary form can register authoritarian power, social exhaustion, and the moral contradictions of public life in ways that exceed documentary description (Ryan, 2023). Within this history, Yusuf al-Siba'i occupies an important but comparatively underexamined position. His fiction combines popular

accessibility with social criticism and repeatedly connects concrete social problems with abstract questions of death, responsibility, love, and moral choice.

Naib Izrail narrates an extraordinary encounter between Yusuf and Izrail, the Angel of Death. Because of an error involving the protagonist's identity, Yusuf is drawn into Izrail's domain and entrusted with assisting in the taking of human lives. The premise turns him into an observer of different social positions and moral situations, allowing the novel to examine life, status, honor, and mortality. Hani (2011) identifies religious and social messages concerning death, repentance, worldly attachment, abuse of office, suppression of truth, and materialism. Ta'abudi (2019) argues that the novel replaces an exclusively terrifying image of the Angel of Death with a more humanistic and dialogic figure. Masrur (2023) studies al-Siba'i's subjectivity in criticizing Egyptian social construction, while Kosasih et al. (2024) emphasize criticism of lying, manipulation, worldly desire, and governments that divide society for political interests.

These studies clarify what the novel criticizes, but they do not fully explain the narrative mechanism through which worldly authority appears legitimate at one moment and radically fragile at another. Identifying social criticism is different from explaining how a text produces a crisis of recognition. This gap matters because the novel's popular, fantastic, and religious dimensions may encourage readers to treat it only as a moral tale. A sociological reading must also move beyond the universal proposition that all people are equal before death. Human beings approach mortality from unequal positions: elites possess resources that allow them to define truth, command obedience, and conceal moral failure, while ordinary people may bear the consequences of decisions they did not authorize. *Naib Izrail* places these unequal subjects under a common limit while exposing the unequal order that precedes it.

This study therefore asks how *Naib Izrail* naturalizes and destabilizes the legitimacy of worldly power and how Izrail transforms death into a critique of domination and social recognition. It argues that the novel creates a counter-classificatory structure in which office, reputation, wealth, and public honor lose their convertibility into moral worth. Through fantastic satire and unequal linguistic exchange, legitimacy is represented as social credit that can be withdrawn.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHOD

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology provides a precise vocabulary for this process. A field is not merely a setting for conflict but a structured system of relations among positions, agents, institutions, stakes, and forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1983, 1985). The present study therefore does not call death itself a field. It examines the represented social order in which human beings accumulate and display cultural, social, economic, and symbolic resources. Symbolic capital is the recognized form of other capital: honor, prestige, reputation, office, and authority

become effective when a community treats them as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1989, pp. 17–23). This distinction separates a title or position as a social fact from the collective belief that converts it into moral or political superiority.

Doxa refers to presuppositions that appear self-evident because the social order has naturalized them. Under a doxic regime, officials appear deserving of deference, wealth signifies success, reputation proves virtue, and political command seems inherently legitimate. Domination becomes difficult to perceive when everyday practice normalizes unequal symbolic resources (Murti & Susanti, 2021). Symbolic power, however, must be distinguished from physical or metaphysical force. It is the capacity to impose a vision of the social world and have it recognized as legitimate; it depends on belief, authorized speech, and the misrecognition of historical arrangements as natural ones (Bourdieu, 1989, 1991). Death is therefore not automatically symbolic power. In *Naib Izrail*, its critical force emerges through representation: Izrail's voice, the mandate given to Yusuf, and the language of judgment reorganize the hierarchy of speakers and values.

Bourdieu's account of language is central because utterances do not possess equal force. Commands and classifications become effective through the recognized authority of their speakers (Bourdieu, 1991). Indonesian literary studies have used Bourdieu to examine the cultural production arena and strategies of domination (Darwis & Kristianto, 2021), while Harendika (2023) stresses the need to relate textual structures to social structures without collapsing one into the other. The present analysis accordingly uses Bourdieu as an operational framework rather than as a set of abstract labels. This controlled application follows the broader argument that Bourdieusian concepts are most productive when attached to concrete mechanisms of recognition, delegation, and classification (Schirone, 2023).

The study employs a qualitative interpretive design and close textual reading. Its material object is Yusuf al-Siba'i's *Naib Izrail*, and its formal object is the narrative operation of doxa, symbolic capital, legitimate language, and symbolic delegitimation. Units of analysis include narration, dialogue, characterization, episodes, and descriptions of office, reputation, government, worldly desire, and responses to death. The analysis proceeds by selecting passages relevant to authority, recognition, domination, and mortality; identifying the narrative position of each speaker or character; mapping the capital or recognition involved; and explaining whether an episode reproduces doxa, interrupts it, or replaces it with another classification of human worth. The primary source is the Arabic scan supplied for the study. Because it lacks a complete edition statement, the reference uses the original publication year and cites the printed Arabic pagination visible in the scan. Secondary studies establish the history of interpretation but do not replace primary textual evidence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Worldly Authority as Doxa and Misrecognized Moral Worth

Naib Izrail begins in a world organized through distinctions of position, reputation, wealth, political proximity, and moral appearance. These distinctions do more than describe social difference; they classify worth. Office is treated as evidence of competence and virtue, while a respected name appears to confirm moral quality. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital shows that such authority is relational credit: titles and reputations work because others recognize them and adjust their conduct accordingly (Bourdieu, 1989). The novel's criticism is therefore directed not only at immoral individuals but at the conversion of social recognition into claims of moral superiority. Kosasih et al. (2024) identify lying, manipulation, worldly desire, and governmental abuse as major targets of the novel. These practices remain effective because dominant actors possess enough credibility to control how their conduct is interpreted.

The conversion of economic success and publicity into honor is condensed in one satirical sentence:

«وبين عشية وضحاها وجد نفسه كيرياشو بك».

["Between one evening and the next, he found himself 'Kiriacho Bey.'"] (al-Siba'i, 1947, p. 85).

The compressed time phrase emphasizes how rapidly economic capital and public visibility become symbolic credit. The honorific Bey is not an ethical quality inherent in Kiriacho; it is a socially conferred distinction produced by wealth, publicity, and recognition. The scene stages misrecognition because the process that manufactures prestige disappears while the title seems to certify personal worth. Ahearne and Speller (2012, pp. 1–2) describe Bourdieusian criticism as attention to the presuppositions and institutional logics that carry while masking social logics. Here, the title masks the social manufacture of superiority.

Yusuf's altered position enables him to reverse the public classification of political authority. He refers to rulers as:

«أولئك المجانين الأشرار الذين يسمونهم: القادة والزعماء».

["Those wicked madmen whom people call leaders and chiefs."] (al-Siba'i, 1947, p. 50).

The wording exposes the gap between public designation and ethical conduct. When Yusuf moves toward Izrail's perspective, offices and reputations become temporary arrangements rather than natural measures of worth. Doxa is interrupted when the categories through which society values people cease to organize the scene. The powerful and the ordinary remain historically unequal, but elite symbolic capital cannot perform its usual function before Izrail. Office may command obedience, yet it cannot guarantee justice; reputation may

produce admiration, yet it cannot guarantee integrity. The novel thus separates social effectiveness from moral validity and reveals that recognition has a limited field of circulation.

Izrail's Legitimate Language and the Reversal of Hierarchy

The encounter between Yusuf and Izrail is structured through explanation, command, refusal, and delegation. This linguistic structure matters because a statement becomes effective not only through its wording but through the authority of the speaker. Izrail explains the initial error in administrative language:

«لقد أخطأوا في المجيء بك إلى هنا... فلست أنت المقصود، بل المقصود هو صاحب الاسم الذي في الكشف».

["They made a mistake in bringing you here; you are not the intended person. The intended person is the name recorded on the list."] (al-Siba'i, 1947, p. 11).

The exchange establishes an asymmetry between speakers. Yusuf may question, fear, or negotiate, but Izrail's words define the situation within which those responses become possible. In Bourdieusian terms, the statement operates as an authorized classification. The Angel of Death does not possess symbolic capital in exactly the same way as a human official; rather, the novel constructs an authority against which human capital appears contingent. Parvez (2022, pp. 272–274) treats legitimate judgments as classification struggles and distinguishes a field's discourse from the doxa that makes its categories seem self-evident. Izrail's declaration displaces the authority through which Yusuf had understood his own position.

The mandate given to Yusuf intensifies this distinction between assigned office and legitimate judgment. Izrail states:

«هذا بيان بالأرواح المطلوب قبضها... وليس عليك إلا أن تشير إلى الروح بهذه العصا».

["This is a record of the souls to be taken; all you have to do is point to the soul with this staff."] (al-Siba'i, 1947, p. 33).

Yusuf immediately resists: «أعفني من هذا العمل» ["Release me from this work"] (al-Siba'i, 1947, p. 34). The assignment gives him an instrument and a function but does not erase fear, partiality, or social memory. Schirone (2023, pp. 201–202) describes delegation as the transfer of institutional capital to an individual while emphasizing that authority continues to depend on recognition. Yusuf's resistance exposes this dependence. The role does not automatically transform him into an unquestionably legitimate judge.

The hierarchy is reversed when human titles, commands, and excuses lose force because the conditions of recognition have changed. A powerful character may still speak imperatively, but the utterance no longer reorganizes the scene. This is why death itself should not be called symbolic power. Mortality alone does not explain the redistribution of legitimacy; voice, position, mandate, and interpretation make the limit socially critical. Izrail's authorized language turns death into a mechanism through which human claims are reclassified.

Death as the Symbolic Delegation of Elite Power

Office, honor, reputation, and wealth do not simply vanish before death. They are delegitimized because the narrative places them where their usual recognition cannot secure the outcomes expected from them. A respected name cannot postpone mortality, political authority cannot redefine the final limit, and wealth cannot convert itself into immunity. The novel thus stages a failure of capital conversion: resources effective in the human social order become inoperative under a different classification.

This failure is politically significant because authority seeks more than administrative capacity. Officials also seek to appear protective, wise, honorable, and necessary. Domination is sustained through credible names and narratives: division can be called unity, manipulation can be called guidance, and exploitation can be called service. Sapiro (2003, pp. 441–442) shows that literary activity remains subject to social constraints and that authoritarian power seeks control over material and symbolic means of production and consecration. *Naib Izrail* similarly presents political control as a struggle over who may define collective interests. The novel describes manipulation as follows:

«فيمسكون بزمامهم ويتحكمون في أمورهم... ثم يقودونهم إلى الدمار ويلقون بهم إلى التهلكة».

[“They seize the reins and control their affairs, then lead them to ruin and cast them into destruction.”] (al-Siba‘i, 1947, p. 46).

The sequence begins with seizing direction, continues with monopolizing public affairs, and ends in destruction. Citizens are reduced to beings whose movement can be controlled. The leaders’ authority depends on making control appear as leadership, so the decisive struggle concerns the legitimate description of what they are doing. Izrail creates an external point from which official categories can be exposed because he does not participate in the elite economy of reputation.

The recurrence of Kiriacho’s honorific on the death register makes the crisis of recognition explicit:

«الاسم الرابع: جابر بك كيرياشو... الزمان الساعة الثانية والنصف عقب وليمة غداء».

[“The fourth name: Jaber Bey Kiriacho; the time: half past two, after a luncheon.”] (al-Siba‘i, 1947, p. 48).

Bey remains visible but cannot purchase delay, immunity, or moral distinction. The novel does not deny the title’s social effects; it relocates the title into an order where its credit is not accepted. This formulation is more precise than saying that death makes everyone equal. Social power produces unequal suffering before mortality arrives. The novel holds both truths together: death limits every human claim, while domination determines whose life is constrained and whose actions are protected by prestige. Like the Egyptian fiction discussed

by Ryan (2023), *Naib Izrail* converts existential vulnerability into a social diagnostic, although it does so through a comic-fantastic rather than an exhausting aesthetic mode.

Marginalized Subjects and the Ethics of Recognition

Attention to elite delegitimation must be accompanied by attention to people positioned below the elite. Ordinary subjects are not merely examples of humanity before death; they have unequal access to voice, recognition, and institutional protection. When government turns society into an instrument of political interest, one group possesses the power to define and use while another is reduced to an object of policy or conflict (Kosasih et al., 2024). This marginalization is symbolic because ordinary people have less power to name their experience and define public meaning.

The narrator exposes the distance between official rhetoric and social conditions:

«ما أعجب أولئك الذين بيدهم الأمر في هذا البلد... هم يحرصون على المناداة بمحاربة الفقر والجهل والمرض».

["How strange are those who hold power in this country: they insist on proclaiming war against poverty, ignorance, and disease."] (al-Siba'i, 1947, p. 73).

The poor, the ill, and the uneducated become objects of official speech rather than agents able to define their needs. Their suffering supplies a vocabulary through which officeholders display virtue. Parvez (2022, pp. 273–274) defines misrecognition as a failure to perceive the arbitrariness of the social world, so established arrangements appear legitimate and necessary. The rhetoric of reform asks the public to recognize proclamation as achievement before testing whether resources or conditions have changed.

Death interrupts the elite monopoly over classification, but the intervention remains limited. It can expose official fragility without giving marginalized subjects an enduring institutional voice. *Naib Izrail* therefore performs symbolic critique rather than presenting a complete political program. Its ethical possibility lies in weakening the belief that hierarchy is natural. Once honor is recognized as dependent on collective belief, the reader can ask whose conduct deserves recognition and whose suffering has been excluded from public value. Høigilt (2017, pp. 111–113) similarly shows that Egyptian symbolic works can challenge authoritarian relations and give public expression to marginalized concerns, even when cultural expression does not itself redistribute institutions.

The novel also separates public prestige from ethical intention in its account of respectable philanthropy:

«ففكروا في مشروع الجوارب... وجمع التبرعات والاكتتابات ممن يبتغون وجه الألقاب، لا وجه الله».

["They devised a sock project and collected donations from those seeking the favor of titles, not the face of God."] (al-Siba'i, 1947, p. 85).

The charitable project signifies service, but the narrator reclassifies it as an investment in titles. The nominal beneficiaries remain secondary to the donors' desire to be seen and

named. Religious language sharpens the contrast between ethical responsibility and symbolic display, producing an alternative economy of recognition grounded in conduct rather than prestige.

Fantastic Satire as Symbolic Reclassification

The novel's critical effect depends on form. A realistic narrative could depict corruption, materialism, and inequality, but *Naib Izrail* uses an impossible encounter with the Angel of Death. Fantasy creates distance from ordinary expectations and combines metaphysical anxiety with satire. Ahearne and Speller (2012, pp. 5–6) note that literary form may conceal social reality but can also disclose it through aesthetic shock and defamiliarization. Here, the supernatural encounter makes familiar hierarchies available for renewed perception.

Satire reclassifies what appears admirable and what appears ridiculous. A prestigious figure can be reduced to fearful self-interest, an ordinary narrator can occupy a role that unsettles official authority, and the Angel of Death can become dialogic and unexpectedly humane. Ta'abudi (2019) emphasizes this revision of conventional imagery. The reversal becomes explicit when Izrail describes his beloved as:

«حورية ما رأيت أفطن منها ولا أجمل».

[“A houri more captivating and beautiful than any I have seen.”] (al-Siba'i, 1947, p. 28).

The figure expected to embody terror displays affection and conversation, while figures expected to embody dignity reveal vanity and moral weakness. Høigilt (2017, pp. 111–112) likewise identifies humor and playful form as vehicles of explicit social and political criticism in Egyptian cultural production. Accessibility and comic invention therefore do not weaken the novel's capacity to challenge authoritarian classifications.

The fantastic mode also prevents a simplistic identification between fictional characters and particular historical persons. Officials and social actors operate as positions within a narrative model of power. The analysis examines relations among those positions and the language that legitimizes them, consistent with Harendika's (2023) warning not to collapse text into social history. Boschetti (2012, pp. 10–12) argues that field theory can support literary analysis across contexts when methodological rigor and empirical limits are maintained. Accordingly, this study restricts historical claims to what the available textual and secondary evidence supports.

The counter-classification culminates in a diagnosis of worldly attachment:

«فهو لا يعترف بأن الموت حق... بل هو يعمل لدنياه كأنه يعيش أبداً».

[“A human being does not acknowledge death as a truth; instead, he works for his worldly life as though he will live forever.”] (al-Siba'i, 1947, p. 18).

The novel's achievement is interpretive rather than absolute. Readers return to a world still organized by titles, institutions, wealth, and reputation, but the narrative has shown that these forms of capital depend on recognition and that recognition can be suspended. Death becomes a counter-classificatory device through which the text asks why power is believed, whose interests that belief serves, and what remains when belief no longer secures legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

Naib Izrail transforms death into a critical test of social classification. It does not present mortality as symbolic power in a strict Bourdieusian sense. Instead, Izrail's presence, the delegation of authority to Yusuf, and the interruption of ordinary situations withdraw recognition from the signs through which human beings claim superiority. Office, honor, reputation, wealth, and public status remain socially real, but their moral meaning is contingent because they function as symbolic capital only while a community recognizes them as legitimate credit.

The analysis identifies four connected operations. First, worldly authority appears as a doxic order in which position is misrecognized as moral worth. Second, Izrail's authorized speech and Yusuf's unstable mandate reverse the hierarchy of speakers and show that occupying a role is not identical to possessing legitimate judgment. Third, the death motif produces symbolic delegitimation by preventing elite resources from converting into immunity or moral superiority. Fourth, fantastic satire creates a counter-classification in which prestige becomes ridiculous and socially overlooked subjects become ethically visible.

This reading also locates marginalization before the shared limit of mortality. Ordinary subjects occupy positions shaped by unequal access to voice and protection, while elite actors can convert official language into political credit. Death exposes the fragility of this legitimacy but does not automatically repair the injuries of domination. The novel therefore offers symbolic critique rather than a complete political solution. Its contribution lies in revealing hierarchy as dependent on recognition and in separating prestige from ethical responsibility.

The study is limited to close textual analysis. It does not reconstruct the complete Egyptian literary field, reception history, publication networks, adaptations, or readership of al-Siba'i's novel. Future research may combine this reading with archival or reception studies, compare *Naib Izrail* with al-Siba'i's other treatments of death and hypocrisy, or examine how different readers respond to its religious and satirical reclassification of power.

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