

## Argumentative Practices in Contemporary Theatrical Discourse The Play “The Perplexed Sultan” by Tawfiq Al-Hakim as a Case Study

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### Abstract:

The daily communicative discourse inherently relies on argumentation in its broad sense, regardless of the level at which it operates. The form and function of argumentative practices vary depending on the nature of the discourse, as do the strategies and mechanisms employed, shifting from one communicative context to another. Argumentation has long preoccupied scholars—both classical and contemporary—who have explored it extensively in various writings and theoretical frameworks. While most forms of discourse display a degree of argumentatively, it emerges most clearly in theatrical discourse, which is essentially dialogic and built upon the dynamics of persuasion and mutual conviction among interlocutors. In his theatrical works, particularly *The Perplexed Sultan*, Tawfiq Al-Hakim masterfully deploys a range of argumentative strategies. This article examines the play through the lens of Toulmin's model of argumentation, highlighting how theatrical argumentation is structured around a central claim reinforced by a network of interconnected proofs that collectively serve to persuade the audience of its validity.

**Keywords:** Argumentation, Theatrical Discourse, Stephen Toulmin, Complete argument.

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### 1- Introduction

In recent years, the argumentative study of discourse has become a focal point for many researchers, as communication is essentially aimed at persuasion through a variety of argumentative practices. Despite the diversity in the nature of discourses, a primary objective of the speaker or sender remains the same: to convince or influence the audience. This goal underscores the importance and

centrality of argumentation, a concept that has gained significant weight in contemporary pragmatic and discourse analysis.

When focusing specifically on contemporary theatrical discourse, we find it to be among the most argumentatively charged forms, both in structure and content. This is primarily due to its dialogic nature, which is based on exchanges between two or more interlocutors, each striving—through a series of utterances—to persuade the other party of their point of view. Hence, the arguer in such discourse relies, to the greatest extent possible, on arguments and evidence that reinforce their stance, counter opposing views, and ultimately enhance the credibility and persuasive power of their speech.

What stands out in *The Perplexed Sultan* by Tawfiq Al-Hakim—despite its relative antiquity—is that the play is built entirely upon argumentation, often between two conflicting viewpoints: one advocating that legal frameworks are the sole solution to social and political dilemmas, and the other asserting that such issues can also be resolved through power and force, especially when the path of law becomes fraught with complexity and obstacles.

In this context, the character of the Judge emerges as the central figure of persuasion and argumentation. His discourse is replete with proofs, references, and logical reasoning, which eventually succeeded in persuading the Sultan and compelling him to fully adopt his perspective. This paper, therefore, seeks to explore the nature and structure of the Judge's arguments, posing the following questions: **How are argumentative structures constructed in *The Perplexed Sultan Play*? And how does the character of the Judge employ argumentation in his interaction with the Sultan?**

This study proceeds from the hypothesis that argumentation in the play is organized around major argumentative structures for each discursive unit, with each macro-structure supported by a chain of interlinked arguments, where each premise reinforces the next. We contend that the Judge bases his argumentation on premises, warrants, and justifications that are generally accepted by his audience, drawing primarily on logical reasoning rather than relying heavily on linguistic or rhetorical devices.

Although the Arabic academic tradition contains a wide range of works on argumentation—such as *Pragmatics and Argumentation* by Saber Al-Habasha, *On the Rhetoric of Persuasive Discourse* by Mohammed El-Omari, *On Argumentation Theories* by Abdallah Soula, and *Theories of Argumentation* by Jamil Hamdaoui—studies specifically focusing on theatrical argumentation remain limited. Examples include Fatima Musabeh Al-Dhaheri's article on *Argumentation in the Plays of Sultan Al-Qasimi and Dhaif Abdelmonem Al-*

Farjani's article on Argumentation in Egyptian Theatrical Discourse. However, most of these studies have focused mainly on rhetorical and linguistic tools based on the theories of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, with a noticeable absence of alternative models such as that of Toulmin, which we adopt in our analysis of *The Perplexed Sultan*.

The significance of this topic lies in its contribution to the growing body of research on argumentation, a field increasingly embraced by scholars of discourse and communication. Most studies, however, have approached argumentation from a rather technical angle, concentrating on tools and techniques in isolation, often disregarding the interconnectedness and progressive layering that led to the construction of the overarching argument meant to gain audience adherence. We argue, therefore, that an effective approach to analyzing theatrical discourse from an argumentative perspective involves identifying the arguments within the text and mapping their internal relations until they culminate in the central argumentative claim.

Our aim in this study is twofold: first, to encourage researchers interested in argumentation to engage more deeply with theatrical discourse, which, by virtue of its dialogic nature and conflicting themes, provides an ideal ground for such analysis; and second, to demonstrate a method of argumentation analysis that highlights the overarching argument of a discourse by tracing the logical progression and internal reinforcement of smaller argumentative units without detaching them from their context or function.

Methodologically, we rely primarily on descriptive and inductive approaches to present various perspectives and techniques of argumentation analysis. In its applied aspect, the study adopts Toulmin's model of argumentation as the most suitable for our analytical goals—reasons for which will be clarified further in the paper.

As for the analytical framework applied to the selected discourses, it focuses on argumentative content and explores the relationships between individual arguments and the central claim. As we see it, meaningful work on argumentation must move beyond the mere cataloging of techniques and instead approach the argument as a discursive act that transcends isolated utterances to form a cohesive textual<sup>1</sup> structure. This necessitates uncovering the general argumentative blueprint of the discourse and treating each argument as a logical step in

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan al-Bahi, *Al-Hiwar wa-Manhajiyat al-Tafkir al-Naqdi* (Dialogue and Critical Thinking Methodology), Dar Ifrikiya al-Sharq, Morocco, p151

constructing the internal logic of the overall message—ordered and evaluated based on its strength and role in substantiating the central claim<sup>2</sup>.

We find no model more suited to this approach than that of Stephen Toulmin, whose framework reveals the internal architecture of argumentative discourse and clarifies the function of each individual component in building the central claim the speaker seeks to convey and make persuasive to the audience.

## 2. Argumentation and Its Persuasive Dimensions

Argumentation emerged within modern studies as part of what came to be known as the New Rhetoric, marking a kind of re-foundation in the 1950s<sup>3</sup>. It was introduced to explore the means of persuasion in everyday communicative interactions, relying on a clear strategy aimed at convincing the interlocutor. When a speaker adopts a persuasive strategy, their goal is to make the receiver accept the propositions of the persuasive discourse. This acceptance, however, does not occur in a vacuum; the speaker must incorporate into their discourse all that would bolster their position regarding the issue at hand—through the use of arguments and evidence that reinforce and justify it—ensuring that these elements are coherently structured and interrelated in a specific manner. Therefore, argumentation is considered the most prominent technique of persuasion, and the visible trait by which a discourse's persuasive power is evaluated.

In the Philosophical Dictionary, argumentation is defined as: “The process of assembling arguments to support or refute a viewpoint; argumentation is the manner of presenting and utilizing these arguments.”<sup>4</sup> This definition implies that argumentation involves two core components: First, the collection of arguments and proofs—these are the contents likely to convince the receiver of the correctness of the view being defended. The speaker selects the arguments they believe to be most effective in persuading the listener. These arguments differ from one audience to another and from one context to another. They are gathered with the aim of either supporting and validating a particular viewpoint or refuting and undermining it by exposing its flaws and inconsistencies.

Second, the process of arguing itself—this refers to how the arguments are presented, considering the audience being addressed. Although all arguments aim to support the central issue, they should be arranged in a deliberate manner. This

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<sup>2</sup> Jili Muhammad al-Zayn, *Al-Bina' al-Hijaji li-Khitab Susiri: Dirasa Muqarana bayna al-Muhadarat wa-l-Makhtutat* (The Rhetorical Structure of Swiss Discourse: A Comparative Study of Lectures and Manuscripts), PhD Thesis, University of Batna, 2017, p191

<sup>3</sup> See: Lionel Bellenger, *l'argumentation, des techniques pour convaincre*, op cit, pp11, 15

<sup>4</sup> Ibrahim Madkur, *Al-Mu'jam al-Falsafi* (The Philosophical Dictionary), *Majma' al-Lugha al-Arabiyya, al-Hay'a al-Aama li-Shu'un al-Matabi' al-Amiriyya*, Cairo, 1983, p67

might involve an inductive approach moving from specific instances to general principles, or a deductive or demonstrative style, depending on the nature of the rhetorical situation. Thus, argumentation is based on a network of interlinked arguments aiming to reach a unified result<sup>5</sup>.

Another definition of argumentation sees it as: “A communicative process grounded in logical argument with the goal of persuading and influencing others, driven by the existence of disagreement between interlocutors; for there is no argumentation regarding what is self-evident or obligatory.”<sup>6</sup> From this angle, argumentation is inherently interactive, targeting either a real or imagined audience. It belongs to the broader category of human acts oriented toward persuasion, as many communicative situations call for a speaker or group to promote a certain behavior or perspective<sup>7</sup>. Here, the argument is founded on logical reasoning which, though not scientific logic, is deemed acceptable within the context and persuasive enough to bring about assent. The ultimate aim is to influence the audience to adopt the position being advocated.

Since argumentation is the mechanism through which persuasive discourse is enacted, it has five core features: 1- It addresses a listener. 2- It is articulated in natural language. 3- Its premises are generally probable, not certain. 4- Its progression does not require strict logical necessity. 5- Its conclusions are not binding.<sup>8</sup> Hence, argumentation is neither an absolute truth nor a strict logical relationship between premises and conclusion—it is rather a belief-based dynamic. The premises are acceptable to the listener, the argument is seen as valid, and the argumentative triangle (introduction, result, and argumentative reasoning) is perceived as cohesive<sup>9</sup>. This idea is reinforced by Taha Abderrahmane, who defines argumentation as: “Any utterance directed at another person with the purpose of conveying a specific claim that the addressee has the right of objection on it.”<sup>10</sup>

On a procedural level, argumentation is also defined as: “The study of discourse techniques capable of leading minds to accept certain propositions, or increasing

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<sup>5</sup> See: Le Petit Robert: Dictionnaire de la langue Française, 1re rédaction, Paris, 1990, p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> Bilqasim Daffa, *Istratijiyat al-Khitab al-Hijaji* (The Rhetorical Strategy of Discourse), *Majallat al-Mukhtabar*, no. 10, p. 497.

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Breton, *L'argumentation dans la communication* (Argumentation in Communication), 3rd Edition, La Découverte, Paris, 2003, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Olivier Reboul, *Hal yumkin an yujad hijaj ghayr balaghi?* (Can There Be Non-Rhetorical Argumentation?), trans. Muhammad al-Omri, *Majallat Alamāt Jidda*, vol. 22, no. 6, December 1996, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> Voir: Lionel Bellenger, *Les techniques d'argumentation les plus sûres, convaincre avec clairvoyance* (The Most Reliable Argumentation Techniques, Convincing with Insight), op. cit., p. 32, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Taha Abd al-Rahman, *Al-Lisan wa-l-Mizan* (The Tongue and the Balance), al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-Arabi, Casablanca, 1st ed., 1998, p. 226.

their degree of acceptance.” This definition links argumentation—as a fundamentally cognitive process—to the way the discourse is constructed and formulated. Arguments are initially mental constructs, but they must be translated into persuasive discourse. That can only happen through effective use of language and its rhetorical tools<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, a strong argument can fail due to poor expression, while a weak argument can be reinforced through a well-crafted discourse. Thus, the arguer must be well-versed in the rhetorical techniques that enhance the efficiency of their arguments and the acceptability of their content. This aligns with the views of Anscombe and Ducrot, who assert that: “Argumentation occurs when a speaker presents one statement (or a set of statements) that leads the audience to accept another statement (or set of statements).”<sup>12</sup>

According to Habib Arab, the scope of argumentation is broader than many might assume: “Argumentation is not limited to specific rhetorical contexts<sup>13</sup>; it is an inherent dimension of every form of discourse.” That is to say, the concept of argumentation extends across all discourse types. Even in casual everyday communication, speakers often embed their speech with persuasive features—consciously or not. The same applies on collective or institutional levels, such as in media or advertising discourse. Argumentation is also the defining trait of political discourse, where it is used to promote ideologies.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Argumentation and Its Main Patterns According to Contemporary Thinkers

#### A. Argumentative Patterns at Some Western

Argumentation has garnered considerable attention from rhetoricians and discourse analysts, especially in the contemporary era. This is due to its vitality in handling both spoken and written argumentative discourses, which require a speaker to employ argumentative strategies to persuade a present or absent audience. Within this context came the efforts of **Perelman and Tyteca**, who associated the study of argumentation with rhetorical techniques that aim to lead minds to accept the propositions presented to them, or to increase the degree of such acceptance. They focused on persuasive rhetorical mechanisms, whether linguistic, stylistic, or rhetorical in nature. Their interest even extended to the

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<sup>11</sup> Chaim Perelman et Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, traité de l’argumentation, 5<sup>ème</sup> édition de l’université de Bruxelles, 1992, p5.

<sup>12</sup> J. Anxombre et O. Ducrot, L’argumentation dans la langue, édition Mardaga, Liege – Bruxelles, 2<sup>ème</sup> édition, 1988, p8.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Habib Arab, Al-Hijaj wa-l-Istidlal al-Hijaji (Argumentation and Argumentative Reasoning), Majallat 'Alam al-Fikr, Kuwait, no. 11, July-September 2001, p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> See: Ruth Amossy, l’argumentation dans le discours, ARMAND Colin, p15.

audience, who is considered the foundation and main pillar of discourse. The study of argumentation, therefore, requires an awareness of the mechanisms, techniques, and tools that can achieve the act of persuasion<sup>15</sup> and adapt it in accordance with the argumentative context. It goes without saying that their main concern was to compel the receiver to accept the proposition, or to strengthen such acceptance. It is evident that their argumentative pattern leans toward the structure of discourse, and their focus on techniques and mechanisms of argumentation confirms this. This approach turns the study of argumentation into a somewhat mechanical, technical activity that may not fully delve into the truths, essence, and diverse interrelations of arguments, which are not only embedded in the linguistic structure of discourse but also in its semantic, logical, and intellectual frameworks.

One of the most prominent contributions to the study of argumentation also comes from the **Ducrot** and his friend **Anscombe** in their book *Argumentation and Language*. In it, they explain the foundations of argumentative construction in discourse: “The argumentative process is linguistically summarized in the speaker presenting a statement or a set of statements (P1) that leads to (P2), which serves as the result<sup>16</sup>.” Thus, the first statement is considered the premise that should lead to the emergence of the second, which may be explicit or implicit. “Because the argumentative value of any utterance is not solely derived from the information it contains, but rather, the sentence may include morphemes, expressions, or forms—beyond its informative content—that provide the utterance with an argumentative orientation and guide the receiver toward one viewpoint or another.”<sup>17</sup>

For Ducrot and his colleague, argumentation consists of two main procedures: stating the argument, and activating argumentative inference—whether the conclusion is explicitly stated or understood from the first proposition. These scholars limited the study of argumentation to the realm of linguistic analysis, rather than searching for what lies beyond it. They believed that the possibilities of argumentative sequencing are determined by a specific linguistic function, namely, the argumentative function<sup>18</sup>. Accordingly, argumentation for them—like

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<sup>15</sup> Ali Mahmoud Al-Tawalba, *Al-Hijaj fi Khutbat al-Nabi al-Ula ba'd al-Jahr bi-l-Da'wa* (Argumentation in the Prophet's First Sermon After the Public Proclamation of the Call), *Majallat Dirasat: Al-'Ulum al-Insaniya wa-l-Ijtima'iya*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2023, p. 530.

<sup>16</sup> Ducrot (O.) and Anscombe (J.C.), *L'argumentation dans la langue* (Argumentation in Language), ed. Mardaga, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> O. Ducrot, *Les échelles argumentatives* (Argumentative Scales), Editions de Minuit, 1980, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Habib Mansouri-Muhammad Bin Said, *Aaliyat al-Hijaj al-Lughawiya fi al-Mathal al-Sha'bi - Maqaraba Dalaliya* - (Linguistic Mechanisms of Argumentation in Popular Proverbs - A Semantic Approach), *Majallat al-Ta'limiya*, vol. 10, no. 2, July 2020, pp. 137-138.

for their predecessors—remains confined to the discursive structure, and the argumentative features of discourse can only be extracted through structural tools.

### **B. Argumentation According to Contemporary Arabs**

Taha Abderrahmane defines argumentation in his book *Language and Balance* as: “Any spoken utterance directed toward another in order to make them understand a specific claim that is open to objection.<sup>19</sup>” He thus confines argumentation to the concept of the claim, i.e., a proposition that the recipient has the right to reject—thereby excluding other types of discourse that do not have this characteristic from the realm of argumentation. In his book *Foundations of Dialogue and the Renewal of Kalam Science*, he outlines two prominent characteristics of argumentation: **first**, its pragmatic nature, as argumentation is of a cognitive and social context, taking into account situational factors such as shared knowledge or present conditions<sup>20</sup>; and **second**, its dialectical nature, as its persuasive goal is achieved through broader and richer inferential forms than narrow demonstrative structures—i.e., transitions are not only based on logical propositions, as in demonstration, but also on their meanings and interrelations<sup>21</sup>. He also adds a third feature—dialogicity—which he ranks into three levels: dialogue, conversing, and mutual exchange.

Abdelhadi Ben Dhafer Al-Shahri also addressed the topic of argumentation in his book *Discourse Strategies*. He defined it and linked it to persuasion, stating: “Argumentation is the most prominent mechanism through which the speaker uses language to embody the strategy of persuasion<sup>22</sup>.” Thus, he viewed argumentation as a means used by the arguer to achieve the goal of persuasion—a strategy with its own rhetorical structure—executed through language and its communicative potential.

As for Aboubakr Al-Azzawi, he separated modern argumentation studies from their historical roots in Aristotelian rhetoric. He considered the foundations of argumentation to have begun with Austin and Searle, who introduced the concept of speech acts—further developed by Ducrot. Al-Azzawi believed that the

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<sup>19</sup> Taha Abd al-Rahman, *Al-Lisan wa-l-Mizan aw al-Takawthur al-'Aqli* (The Tongue and the Balance or Intellectual Proliferation), al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-Arabi, Casablanca, Morocco, 1987, p. 226.

<sup>20</sup> Taha Eid al-Rahman, *Fi Usul al-Hiwar wa-Tajdid 'Ilm al-Kalam* (On the Foundations of Dialogue and the Renewal of Kalam Theology), al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-Arabi, Casablanca-Morocco, 1st ed., 2000, p. 65.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, same page

<sup>22</sup> Abd al-Hadi Bin Dhafir al-Shahri, *Istratijiyat al-Khitab: Maqaraba Lughawiya Tadawuliyya* (Discourse Strategies: A Pragmatic Linguistic Approach), Dar al-Kitab, Beirut, 2nd ed., 2004, p. 456. Makhbar: *Abhath fi al-Lugha wa al-Adab al-Jaza'iri* – Jami'at Biskra, Algeria, no. 10, 2014, p. 496.

essence of argumentation lies in the structure and sequence of linguistic expressions and their role within discourse.<sup>23</sup>

Belkacem Deffa<sup>24</sup> considered argumentation a pragmatic, dialectical activity closely linked to the elements of context. The term “argumentation” implies interaction, being at the core of every interaction between two sides of discourse. In its common meaning, it refers to the way arguments are presented and delivered, with the aim of influencing and persuading the recipient. The effectiveness of argumentative discourse is judged by the degree of this influence, which may include directing the recipient toward a particular viewpoint or persuading them of a new belief or behavior.

### C. Argumentation and Its Determinants According to “Stephen Toulmin”

We chose to focus on the argumentative model of the British philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1922–2009), a pioneer of rational philosophy, as we found that the argumentative analysis of the selected theatrical discourse aligns strongly with his model. Toulmin emphasizes preliminary considerations in argumentative analysis and proposes a suitable model to highlight the pathways of argumentation when they converge to form the discourse’s overall argument.

According to Toulmin, persuasion cannot be achieved by merely asserting one’s opinion without support. Instead, the arguer must provide reasons that lead others to accept their stance, evaluate the strength and relevance of these reasons to the argumentative topic, and be able to address potential objections that may refute their viewpoint.<sup>25</sup>

Toulmin’s argumentation is based on several core principles<sup>26</sup>. **First, argumentation is primarily a social activity** practiced within a specific society that has its own cultural, religious, and traditional particularities. Argumentation, in this sense, conforms to societal norms and derives its persuasive power from central shared assumptions. For example, in Muslim societies, the Qur’an is considered a central source of evidence and persuasion. The use of a Qur’anic

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<sup>23</sup> Abu Bakr al-'Azzaoui, *Al-Hijaj wa al-Lugha (Argumentation and Language)*, al-'Umda fi al-Tiba'a, 1st ed., 2006, pp. 14–15.

<sup>24</sup> Belkacem Deffa, *Istratijiyat al-Khitab al-Hijaji: Dirasah Tadawuliyya fi al-Irsaliyya al-Ishhāriyya al-'Arabiyya (The Strategy of Argumentative Discourse: A Pragmatic Study in Arab Advertising Messaging)*, Majallat al- Makhbar: Abhath fi al-Lugha wa al-Adab al-Jaza'iri – Jami'at Biskra, Algeria, no. 10, 2014, p. 496.

<sup>25</sup> See: Toulmin, S and others, *An Introduction to Reasoning*, Macmillan, New York, 1984, p9.

<sup>26</sup> See: Toulmin, S and others, *An Introduction to Reasoning*, p73-38.

verse compels the audience to submit to its authority, as it is seen as a fundamental truth. As we move from one society to another, argumentative standards and sources change. What counts as a valid argument in one context may not be persuasive in another.

**Second, the necessity of having a main idea to persuade.** The argumentative discourse must center on a primary, overarching argument, around which the process of persuasion revolves. This is achieved through a structured argumentative sequence that presents arguments one after another in a specific order governed by clear rules. The success of this process enhances the acceptability and persuasiveness of the main argument.

Third, the **effectiveness of arguments** derived from the specific communicative field in which argumentation occurs. Success depends on leveraging values that are commonly agreed upon within that context. Fourth, **the goal of argumentation**, which is persuasion, which requires inferences that meet certain criteria—chiefly their acceptability to the audience and their suitability to the context. **Fifth, the relative nature of argumentation** due to its connection to the cultural and social specifics of a group. Argumentative conclusions are not absolutely binding (except in some scientific cases), but only hold weight when aligned with the contextual variables, which ultimately determine the effectiveness of the argument.

Toulmin proposed a **model of argumentation study** comprising several components<sup>27</sup>: **first: introductions:** The assertion made by the arguer concerning people, events, or issues, which is logically tied to the conclusion. A flawed claim weakens the entire argument. **Secondly: Guarantees or justifications:** These express the general principle that justifies the claim based on its relation to the data. The strength of the argument lies in the logic and force of this relationship. **Thirdly: Supports, evidence, and proofs:** These are the supporting pieces of evidence that enhance the credibility and plausibility of both the claim and warrant, forming the detailed argumentative chain that supports the overall argument. **Fourthly: Qualifiers:** These indicate the degree of certainty or applicability of the conclusion and may involve analogies, examples, or comparisons. **Fifth: Result:** The final argumentative outcome that the speaker aims to persuade the audience of, either explicitly or implicitly. It is the central focus of the argumentative discourse. **Sixth: Exception and refutation:** This refers to counter-arguments or refutations. Just as an arguer seeks to affirm certain claims, they also aim to negate others. The acts of affirmation and negation form

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<sup>27</sup> See : Toulmin, S, *The Uses of Argument*, Cambridge university Press, Cambridge, 2003, p93.

a key argumentative opposition: proving one claim is simultaneously a refutation of its opposite, and vice versa.<sup>28</sup>

#### **4- Communicative and Argumentative Aspects of Theatrical Discourse:**

Theatrical discourse<sup>29</sup> is considered the closest to ordinary speech or daily communication because it portrays reality and its inherent contradictions. It serves as an expressive tool for conveying ideas and ideologies, thus representing ordinary speech in all its dimensions, including the aesthetic dimension that dynamically governs human relationships.

What distinguishes theatrical discourse from other types of discourse is its dual nature<sup>30</sup>—it is a literary production that can be read, but it can also be heard and seen when staged by a director through actors. For this reason, drama has been described as “the art of paradox.”

Theater has a communicative character<sup>31</sup> due to its dialogical dimension, which inherently carries an argumentative nature. Dialogue is the primary means by which the playwright presents the events of the play and introduces its characters to readers and viewers. It is also the medium through which characters communicate, taking the place of the narrator in recounting events, analyzing situations, and revealing inner motives.<sup>32</sup>

As is well known, theatrical discourse serves multiple functions: it introduces the audience to the characters, especially the central ones; it develops the plot, eventually revealing the fate of each character. In some cases, it goes further by shedding light on the compelling motivations behind characters’ actions. This adds a realistic quality to the play, aligning the characters’ behavior with their psychological states and situational contexts.<sup>33</sup>

To achieve its purpose, theatrical discourse relies on dialogical exchanges with a pragmatic nature. Characters engage in conversations filled with questions, answers, and arguments. Sometimes, the dialogue leans more toward narrative

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<sup>28</sup> Muhammad al-‘Abd, *al-Nass wa al-Khitab wa al-Ittisal (Text, Discourse, and Communication)*, al-Akademiyya al-Haditha lil-Kitab al-Jami‘i, Cairo, 2013, pp. 190–191.

<sup>29</sup> Din al-Hannani Ahmad, *Khasiyyat al-Tawasul fi al-Khitab al-Masrahi (The Communicative Property in Theatrical Discourse)*, Majallat Dirasat Fanniyya, vol.: 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Ali Awwad, *Ta‘adud al-Aswat fi al-Khitab al-Masrahi (The Multiplicity of Voices in Theatrical Discourse)*, Majallat al-Drama, Amman, Jordan, no. 1, 1996, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Qitt, *Min Funun al-Adab: al-Masrahiyya (From the Literary Arts: The Play)*, al-Dar al-‘Arabiyya lil-Tiba‘a wa al-Nashr, Beirut, 1972, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Muhammad Masaif, *al-Naqd al-Adabi al-Hadith fi al-Maghrib al-‘Arabi (Modern Literary Criticism in the Arab Maghreb)*, al-Sharika al-Wataniyya lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzi‘, 2nd ed., 1981, p. 375.

and storytelling, serving as a means for characters to communicate ideas and convey events to the audience.

Thus, the function of drama is fundamentally informational—it transmits knowledge to the audience through the characters. In this regard, Eric Bentley states: “A play is written by someone who only wants to speak to the audience, and the audience only wants to listen.”<sup>34</sup>

Anyone examining theatrical texts in general will notice their argumentative structure: the characters, as they clash, differ in opinions and stances on various life issues. Each character actively engages in argumentation during dialogue, presenting evidence and reasoning to persuade the other party or the audience—who, in fact, constitute the main target of theatrical argumentation. The playwright uses the characters’ dialogues to advocate for a central idea, building up arguments to influence the spectators or readers. Tawfiq al-Hakim’s play *The Perplexed Sultan* is a prime example of this approach.

## 5- The Perplexed Sultan Play and Its Context

### A. Summary of the Play:

In a kingdom ruled by a powerful and respected sultan, rumors spread among the public suggesting that their ruler is nothing more than a slave, and thus unfit to govern free people. It had been customary for a reigning sultan to choose his successor from among the Mamluk army leaders, grant him his freedom, and only then would he become eligible to rule according to law and religious principles. The vizier orders the execution of one of the gossipers, but due to unfavorable circumstances, the execution is canceled. The accused is brought before the sultan to plead his case and is eventually pardoned. The sultan then orders the judge to publicly announce the document proving his manumission, hoping to put an end to the rumors. However, the judge informs the sultan that he was never formally freed, owing to the complicated circumstances of the previous sultan’s death.

This plunges the sultan into a dilemma: should he silence the rumors with the sword, as the vizier suggests—by executing anyone who dares speak on the matter—or should he abide by the law, as the judge proposes, which requires that the sultan be sold at public auction as property of the former ruler, and then legally freed before ruling again. This, of course, would bring great humiliation.

After a long argumentative dialogue between the judge and the sultan, the sultan chooses to reclaim his freedom through legal means. He is put up for sale and bought by a courtesan from the city who initially refuses to free him. After much

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<sup>34</sup> Eric Bentley, *al-Hayat fi al-Drama* (Life in Drama), trans. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, al-Maktaba al-‘Asriyya, Saida–Beirut, 1986, p. 83.

debate and exchange, she finally sets him free, allowing him to return to his palace and throne. The play ends at this point.

## **B. The Argumentative Context of the Play**

### **Historical Context of the Play:**

The play *The Perplexed Sultan* draws inspiration from a real historical event. Sultan Al-Salih Najm al-Din<sup>35</sup> was a strong and ambitious ruler who sought to strengthen his army for protection by purchasing Turkish Mamluks with state funds. He trained them in chivalry, warfare, and combat, and they earned his trust, eventually rising to powerful positions—some even becoming direct deputies to the sultan.

When the eminent scientist ‘Al Azz Ibn Abdessalam (577–660 AH) was appointed Chief Judge during Najm Eddine reign, he discovered a legal flaw: the Mamluk leaders were still technically slaves under Islamic law, as their emancipation had not been officially recorded. This meant their rule and all their legal actions<sup>36</sup>—like trade, marriage, and governance—were invalid. This caused a major disruption, especially as it affected the sultan’s own deputy<sup>37</sup>. The Mamluks approached the judge seeking a solution, but he firmly insisted on following the law: they had to be sold at public auction to benefit the Muslim treasury, then freed legally so they could hold office. The judge famously declared, “We will hold a court, announce your sale for the public treasury, and your emancipation will follow according to Sharia.”<sup>38</sup> After much negotiation, the public auction was held under Al Azz Ibn Abdessalam’s supervision, the Mamluks were sold and freed, and then reinstated in their positions.

### **Contemporary Context of the Play:**

The play also addresses contemporary political and social issues. It critiques current and potential political practices that may be governed either by law and justice or by force and arrogance. These dynamics appear at all societal levels—from simple interpersonal relations, to interactions between social classes and their leaders, to relations between nations and regions. All of these oscillate

<sup>35</sup> al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub ibn al-Malik al-Kamil Muhammad ibn al-‘Adil Abi Bakr ibn Ayyub, known as Abu al-Futuh, was born in Cairo in 1205 CE and died in al-Mansura in 1249 CE. He was the seventh Ayyubid sultan of Egypt, ruling from 1240 to 1249.

([https://arz.wikipedia.org/wiki/الصالح\\_أَيُّوب](https://arz.wikipedia.org/wiki/الصالح_أَيُّوب))

<sup>36</sup> Muhammad al-Zuhaili, al-‘Izz ibn ‘Abd al-Salam Sultan al-‘Ulama’ wa Ba’i’ al-Muluk (Al-‘Izz ibn ‘Abd al-Salam: Sultan of the Scholars and Seller of Kings), Dar al-Qalam, Damascus, 1st ed., 1992, pp. 179–180.

<sup>37</sup> Taj al-Din al-Subki, *Tabaqat al-Shafi’iyya al-Kubra* (The Great Classes of the Shafi’i Scholars), ed. by Mahmoud Muhammad al-Tanahi and ‘Abd al-Fattah Muhammad al-Hilu, Dar Ihya’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, Cairo, vol. 8, p. 216.

<sup>38</sup> Same reference, same page

between the authority of law and the power of force. People's convictions regarding this issue vary. Some prefer to rely on legal systems, customs, and international norms in certain situations. But when these standards don't serve a pragmatic purpose, some resort to the logic of power—regardless of its form—thus ignoring accepted social structures in favor of quick gain. Tawfiq al-Hakim, through this historically rooted play, seeks to explore this complex issue and the intellectual underpinnings that shape such convictions in modern societies. The goal is not merely to portray a historical moment, but to reveal the thought patterns that influence decisions in any given civilization.

In general, Tawfiq al-Hakim's plays offer concentrated reflections on vital life issues, both on an individual and societal level. Individually, people often face critical moments where they must choose between short-term and long-term gains, personal or public benefit, under favorable or difficult circumstances. These choices shape the future of individuals and nations alike, leaders, too, face tough choices: pleasing themselves or serving the public, avoiding needed reforms or implementing them and bearing the consequences, and between making constitutional or legal amendments, for example, or rejecting them.<sup>39</sup>

In *The Perplexed Sultan*, al-Hakim addresses a persistent psychological dilemma of his era—still relevant today—using a historical backdrop to make the events feel realistic and relatable. He presents what he sees as a universal human struggle: the confusion and hesitation between upholding the law and yielding to brute force. Humanity, as he sees it, is fully aware of the need to adhere to law and religion, and yet continues to struggle with truly giving them the final word in shaping human destiny.<sup>40</sup>

## **6- The argumentative practices in the judge's speech to the sultan:**

Under this title, we address the judge's speech to the sultan in the play "The Perplexed Sultan" from a rhetorical perspective, as he tries to convince the sultan to implement the law on himself, rather than resorting to the power of the sword, which silences anyone who denies the sultan's freedom by force. Our aim is to provide a comprehensive rhetorical analysis, taking into account the main argument of the speech as a whole, and then demonstrating how the individual arguments gradually combine to form the final picture of the overarching argument. The rhetorical analysis will not be sufficient unless it reaches this goal and focuses only on the verbal forms of rhetoric, as these do not ultimately reveal

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<sup>39</sup> Ahmad Galal, Sultan al-Hakim lam yakun ha'iran (The Sultan the Wise Was Not Confused), article on the Al-Masry Al-Youm website, dated 22-04-2019.

<https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1390807>

<sup>40</sup> Muhammad Mandur, Masrah Tawfiq al-Hakim (The Theater of Tawfiq al-Hakim), Manshurat Mu'assasat Hindawi, al-Mamlakah al-Muttahida (UK), 2020, p. 161.

how the arguments work together to clarify the overarching argument that forces the audience's compliance and persuasive response. Perhaps the closest rhetorical model to achieve this goal is Stephen Toulmin's model, which aligns closely with the structure of the speech in the play.

### **A. The General Argument**

Toulmin argues that argumentation is a social activity closely tied to a specific community, which differentiates it from other communities based on social, religious, cultural, and behavioral characteristics. Consequently, the rhetorical practices evolve according to these distinctions.

The general argument that the judge tries to convince the sultan to adopt is the commitment to the law and its strict application to everyone, whether rulers or subjects, kings or slaves, without evasion or manipulation in solving various problems. The law, even if it contradicts personal desires, ultimately provides protection to those who adhere to it, whether they are strong or weak, as it does not recognize the criterion of power or authority in its rulings but rather the criterion of rightfulness. He also convinces him to abandon the use of the sword and force because they do not acknowledge rightfulness but only the stronger, and these provide temporary gains that vanish when the balance of power shifts.

Thus, the judge's speech revolves around this general argument, and his detailed arguments cooperate and harmonize to create a unified rhetorical position capable of convincing the sultan, who ultimately chooses the rule of law despite its appearance of humiliation, unworthy of a strong sultan like him.

### **B. The Rhetorical Support and Inference in the Judge's Argument:**

**In the First Passage:** After the sultan asks the judge to display documents of his emancipation to the public to end rumors about the sultan's slavery, the judge informs him that no such documents exist because the late sultan did not actually emancipate him. Then, he explains his status according to this situation by presenting his argument: "In the eyes of the law and Sharia, you are nothing but a slave... a slave is considered legally and religiously as property, as an object or item... Since the late sultan, the owner of your body, did not emancipate you before his death, you are still an object owned by another, and therefore, you lack the capacity to engage in ordinary transactions like free people."<sup>41</sup>

At the beginning of his argumentation, the judge relied on a premise that is presumed to be universally accepted—a fundamental assumption that serves as the argument's foundation. In Toulmin's model, such a premise is a claim the

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<sup>41</sup> Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Al-Sultan al-Ha'ir (The Perplexed Sultan)*, Mu'assasat Hindawi, al-Mamlakah al-Muttahida (UK), 2023, p. 30.

arguer makes about people or situations, and it is logically tied to the conclusion. In this case, the premise is the necessity of respecting the authority of religious and legal perspectives, which the judge represents: 'In the eyes of the Sharia and the law...!' This serves to compel the interlocutor (the Sultan) toward compliance with the forthcoming conclusion: 'You are nothing but a slave.' The warrant of the argument in this passage—the justification that reveals the general principle validating the claim based on its connection to the premises, according to Toulmin—is the Sultan's prior acknowledgment that no document exists to prove his emancipation."

He then uses the phrase “you are nothing but a slave” as the **introduction** to a subsequent rhetorical argument based on the legal and customary understanding of slavery: "a slave is considered legally and religiously as property." This sets the stage for the conclusion that the sultan, in his current status, is not entitled to the rights of free people.

The judge further **supports** this by using evidence and justifications for the premises. Toulmin's model highlights the importance of these supports to establish the credibility of the arguments. In this case, the judge's reasoning that the late sultan did not emancipate him before his death solidifies the claim that the sultan is still considered property.

The **rhetorical markers** here are the signs of strength that show the likelihood of the outcomes being applied. The ultimate result is the legal and moral conclusion that the sultan is a slave and incapable of holding contracts or engaging in governance, which is the core rhetorical argument of this passage.

**In the Second Passage:** After convincing the sultan that he is not fit for rule and is merely property, the judge builds on this result to **construct** the following argument: “Since you are considered property of the late sultan according to the law, you are now part of his inheritance, and since he died without an heir, his property has been transferred to the state treasury... Therefore, you are now an item of the state treasury, a useless item that does not yield any profit...”<sup>42</sup>

The judge begins his argument by referring to the law, which everyone is presumed to follow. This adds initial strength to his claims. Since the late sultan did not emancipate him, the sultan becomes part of his inheritance, which ultimately belongs to the state treasury. The rhetorical support here is the reference to the law and the fact that there is no heir to the sultan's property. The judge continues to explain that the property, being without an heir, will be managed by the state treasury and cannot be disposed of arbitrarily. The

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<sup>42</sup> Previous reference, p32

argumentative qualifier (**modal warrant**) here lies in demonstrating the feasibility of this conclusion, which also includes a characterization of this asset (the Sultan) as being barren and unproductive—an asset that yields no benefit because it is not being invested. Furthermore, no one has the right to dispose of it. This constitutes the argumentative conclusion of this passage.

**In the Third Passage:** Building on the previous arguments, the judge continues by explaining how to deal with “useless property” belonging to the state treasury. He specifies the sultan’s case and says: “As the treasurer of the state treasury, it is customary in such cases to dispose of useless property by auctioning it off to avoid harming the interests of the state treasury, and the proceeds from the sale should benefit the public, especially the poor... The state treasury cannot emancipate property without compensation; no one has the right to dispose of property owned by the state without proper payment...”<sup>43</sup>

The judge bestows upon himself a legal status that authorizes him to manage the public treasury—not in his capacity as a judge, but rather as a treasurer. Acceptance of this new status constitutes an argumentative foundation upon which subsequent inferences are built, turning the previous argument into a premise for what follows. The premise of this new segment thus lies in the audience’s recognition of the judge’s new role, and the conclusion derived from it concerns the necessary procedures for handling unproductive public assets, namely, their sale through a public auction. What reinforces the judge’s argument is the idea of putting barren assets to productive use and averting the harm caused by their stagnation. In order to close the door to interpretation or manipulation of legal texts, he asserts that no disposal of public funds is permissible without compensation. Therefore, the Sultan cannot, for instance, be emancipated unless through a legitimate financial transaction.

The judge arrives at a second argumentative conclusion—which marks the end of this segment of reasoning—namely, that the disposal of state property is only legally valid if it is auctioned publicly. Accordingly, if all the preceding argumentative conclusions presented by the judge are accepted, then the logical implication is that the Sultan himself must be put up for sale at a public auction.

The judge reaches a second argumentative conclusion - which is the conclusion of this argumentative section - that the disposal of state property is only valid if it is put up for sale in a public auction, and this implies that the Sultan should be put up for sale in a public auction if all the argumentative conclusions that the judge argued for are accepted.

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<sup>43</sup> Same, p32

### C- Argumentative synthesis

The synthesis of this argumentative sequence is presented by the judge in a clear and unambiguous manner. It is the final, **overarching argument**—the culmination of all the reasoning and its ultimate conclusion—as well as the optimal solution to the Sultan’s problem. It affirms the necessity of submitting to the rule of law and Sharia. This appears in the judge’s statement: “The legitimate solution, then, is to put our lord the Sultan up for sale in a public auction, and whoever wins the auction shall then emancipate him... In this way, the public treasury is neither harmed nor defrauded of its property, and the Sultan, through the law, gains his emancipation and freedom.”<sup>44</sup>

The judge proceeds to explain the procedure for this public auction, by offering the Sultan for sale, after which the buyer will manumit him. Among the justifications and supports for this argument is the principle that the public treasury must not suffer harm. More importantly, it ensures the Sultan’s liberation and the restoration of his right to rule the people—and, by extension, his right to autonomy and interaction. This is all achieved by appealing to the authority of Sharia and the law, which serve as the central argument underpinning all the preceding segments. These parts are interconnected through a series of argumentative practices that reinforce the supremacy of legal and religious judgment, along with all the resulting implications. The culmination of these efforts is the Sultan’s recovery of his freedom and sovereignty through the power of the law—no matter how humiliating this process might appear to the Sultan, who had previously preferred to solve the issue by force, by beheading anyone who dared to diminish the dignity of the great Sultan or to describe him as a slave, and so on.

At the end of this argumentative discourse, the judge returns to the initial premise of the debate, which is expressed in the following question: Which is more rightful and more just to adopt in resolving problems and overcoming obstacles—law and justice, or force and the sword? In the final part of his argument, the judge presents the consequences of each option, both in the present and in the future, laying them before the Sultan in these terms: “I acknowledge the undeniable power of the sword, its swift action, and its decisive impact. But the sword grants rights to the stronger—and who can say who will be stronger tomorrow? Might not someone even stronger than you arise? The law, on the other hand, protects your rights from any aggression, because it does not recognize strength—it recognizes justice. And now, my lord, the choice is yours: between the sword,

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<sup>44</sup> Previous reference, p34

which imposes your authority but exposes you, and the law, which challenges you but protects you.”<sup>45</sup>

The judge thus formulates his ultimate argument and gives it its final form by acknowledging the sword’s capacity to resolve conflicts and its alignment with the stronger party, unjustly granting them what they do not deserve, while excluding the sustainability of its rule, since the balance of power is never stable. He then highlights the virtue of turning to the law, which sides with what is just, not with who is strong. Therefore, the fluctuations of power do not affect it, and it consistently supports the rightful party—whom all laws, societies, and customs aim to empower, respect, and uphold. This, in turn, ensures lasting stability for nations and societies and bestows upon humanity its meaning and distinction, as opposed to the law of the jungle. Law exerts its authority when respected, even if it opposes certain interests. In the end, however, it guarantees protection for all. Force, though it may impose its will, offers no true guarantee for the permanence of its authority or the preservation of human dignity.

## 7- Conclusion

At the end of this study, we conclude that argumentative practices in theatrical discourse in general, and in *The Perplexed Sultan* in particular, take a distinctive path due to the dialogic nature of the genre on one hand, and due to the requirements and motivations of argumentation on the other. The most important findings can be summarized as follows:

- Argumentative practices in dialogue in general, and in theatre specifically, revolve around a central argumentative content — the overall idea of the entire discourse — which may not appear explicitly, but the outcomes of the argumentative practices suggest its presence and centrality.
- Arguments follow a coherent and interconnected sequence of evidence and proofs, where each step paves the way for the next, starting from commonly accepted premises and deriving conclusions that serve as new premises for subsequent arguments, and so on until the end of the argumentative chain.
- A successful argumentative sequence inevitably leads to the overarching argument, which provides it with persuasive strength and rhetorical authority.
- Theatrical discourses align well with the Toulmin model of argumentation due to their dialogic structure, inherent conflict, overarching themes, socially grounded premises, and the diversity of their supports, warrants, and directions.

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<sup>45</sup> Same reference, p37

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