

THE REPRESENTATION OF POLITICAL DISSIDENTS AS “THE OTHER” IN MOHAMMAD RASOULOF’S FILMS

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Abstract

This study examines the symbolic representation of political dissidents as “the Other” in Mohammad Rasoulof’s *There Is No Evil* (2020) and *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* (2024), using Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence and Roland Barthes’ visual semiotics. Through a qualitative symbolic analysis of visual elements, including cinematography, mise-en-scène, spatial positioning, and body language, the research explores how Rasoulof constructs dissidents as marginal figures within authoritarian regimes. The analysis reveals that both films deploy images of confinement, silence, and aesthetic fragmentation to depict dissidents’ internalized repression and systemic exclusion. Mechanisms of state power are embedded in domestic and institutional settings, while resistance is articulated through symbolic acts of defiance, affective gestures, and narrative ruptures. The study also unfolds how dissidence intersects with gender, class, and religious othering, with specific emphasis on the regulation of female bodies and economic pressure. Findings suggest that Rasoulof’s films do not merely critique power through narrative, but encode dissent within visual form itself. This research contributes to media scholars on cinema and resistance and holds particular relevance for Pakistani film students navigating visual storytelling in politically sensitive contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Cinema has always been considered as an influential tool for political criticism, offering filmmakers a platform to critique authority, questioning societal models, and strengthening the voices of marginalized groups. Films serve not only as narrative vessels but also as rich symbolic texts through which political dissidents are constructed as “the Other”, marginalized figures who challenge dominant ideologies and face systemic repression. The concept of “the Other” has been widely theorized in postcolonial and critical theory as a process through

which dominant social orders define and marginalize those who resist conformity (Said, 2012). In his book, Mbembe reinterprets Othering as a colonial legacy continued through modern governance. He states that regimes construct “the enemy within” (e.g., dissidents) as a “racialized Other” to legitimize suppression in authoritarian states’ treatment of political dissent (Mbembe, 2021). In essence, othering is “a process which serves to mark and name those thought to be different from oneself”

In authoritarian frameworks, where dissent has often encountered tyranny, film becomes a particularly vital tool for resistance (Wu, 2022). In the rampant socio-political landscape of today's Iran, a study explores how Iranian filmmakers use cinema as a tool of dissent, with the regime labeling their portrayals of societal struggles as "sordid realism" to justify censorship and suppress counter-hegemonic narratives (Khosravi, 2023). Rooted in a tradition of Iranian art-house cinema utilizes allegory and visual metaphor to elude censorship (Wittmann, 2020). It would be interesting to analyze how prominent Iranian directors use the art of cinematography to raise voice against state power. For this, the research selected the work of Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof who is prominent for his bold cinematic explorations of power, oppression, and political resistance. He is one of those banned Artists who kept on raising voices against systematic corruption and injustice. His work mostly depicts political dissidents as "The Other," portraying them as entities alienated from mainstream society, exposed to state violence, and forced into moral dilemmas that test their ideological beliefs. Rasoulof's films offer a thoughtful critique of the mechanisms of state power, including surveillance, legal persecution, and institutional censorship (Fazli, 2024).

1.1. Problem Statement

Film is a powerful tool to build narratives which is being neglected in Pakistan. In a media sensitive environment like ours, Pakistani film makers should learn to adapt symbolic strategies for storytelling without overt confrontation. To learn these cinematic strategies, we need to study their use in more or less similar repressive contexts like Iran. Moreover, there are less studies on analyzing semiotic strategies in films, specifically in the global South which can guide our students and emerging filmmakers to enhance artistic values for their films. This study addresses that gap by offering a framework for Pakistani filmmakers and scholars to analyze and develop symbolic cinematic language, enabling them to represent marginal voices and navigate institutional constraints through layered visual narratives.

1.2. Objective

O₁: - Analyzing the use of symbolic imagery in Mohammad Rasoulof films to represent political dissidents as "the Other", focusing on their marginalization and resistance within authoritarian systems.

O₂: Exploring the visual techniques (e.g., cinematography, mise-en-scène, symbolism) Rasoulof implement to construct the "otherness" of political dissidents.

1.3. Research questions

RQ₁ How political dissidents are symbolically constructed through visuals as "the Other" in Rasoulof's films?

RQ₂ Which symbolic representations depict the mechanisms of state power (surveillance, censorship, legal systems) that contribute to the "othering" of dissidents?

RQ₃ How do Rasoulof's films, symbolizes resistance to the pressures of state control and societal expectations?

RQ₄ How does the symbolic representation of political dissidents in Rasoulof's films intersect with other forms of "otherness," such as gender, class, or ethnicity?

2. Literature Review

The concept of "otherness" has been extensively explored in critical theory and cultural studies, often referring to the marginalization of individuals or groups based on differences in ideology, ethnicity, or political stance. Othering functions as a socio-political mechanism that reinforces dominant power structures by labeling dissenters as outsiders (Tanveen et al., 2020). In *Complaint!*, Ahmed studies institutional mechanisms that frame dissenters as outsiders. She argues that those who challenge power are labeled as "troublemakers" or "deviants," interpreting them susceptible to exclusion and punishment, a process she terms "institutional Othering" (Ahmed, 2021). In reference to the Iranian cinema, the process of othering is habitually aligned with state narratives aiming to control representation

and public discourse (Friedman & Ghorbankarimi, 2022).

Cinema serves as a medium for constructing narratives of inclusion and exclusion. As far as Iranian cinema is concerned, filmmakers have used multiple storytelling techniques to represent marginalized identities, portraying the socio-political certainties of respective time (Sultan & Sharji, 2016). Symbolic depiction plays a major role in constructing these identities through visual metaphors, allegory, and *mise-en-scène* to represent resistance and suppression (Sabbar et al., 2023). A study on Portuguese films reveals that the portrayal of the marginalized group, such as migrants and women, offer counter-narratives portraying gendered and racialized inequalities (Macedo et al., 2023).

Symbolism in films has been studied across various studies. Symbolic visuals, like confined spaces, fragmented reflections, and silences, are commonly used to highlight themes of isolation and control (Khan, 2022). Similarly, a study discusses the use of restrained settings, repeated motifs, and visual contrasts highlighting the planned marginalization of certain groups within society (Namazi et al., 2025). It further highlights that indirect storytelling techniques are used to represent otherness dodging censorship, creating a layered and refined discourse on exclusion and resistance. A study on Asghar Farhadi's film, on the representation of female agency in patriarchal system of post-revolutionary Iran, reveals that female characters are often portrayed as economically dependent and emotionally stressed (Çakici & Meriç, 2023). Farhadi finely utilizes visual elements like costume color, where lighter tones signify virtue and darker tones propose deviance, to criticize these norms. A study explores the contribution of surveillance, legal frameworks, and systemic repression in depicting "the Other" (Valikhani V., 2024).

2.1. Significance of the Study

The research is specifically significant for Pakistani film students and scholars, as it provides a framework for critically analyzing politically charged cinema in authoritarian and post-authoritarian settings. It provides our students with tools to analyze how film can function as a platform of ideological resistance, especially in a media environment where censorship,

state surveillance, and moral policing are major issues. It also provides a guideline for our emerging filmmakers to play beyond surface-level storytelling and recognizing visual form, framing, and *mise-en-scène* as tools for signifying marginalized voices, and critique power structures without dependence on existing political rhetoric. In a socio-political climate with narrowing space for free expression, this research not only deepens critical understanding of visual narrative but also serves as an academic model for crafting meaningful, symbolically rich cinematic discourse in Pakistan.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research examines the portrayal of political dissidents as "the Other" in Mohammad Rasoulof's films by implementing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence and Roland Barthes' visual semiotics.

3.1. Symbolic Violence and the Representation of Marginalized Dissidents

The occurrence of violence is not necessarily to be visible directly but through ideological structures that construct social action (Barsihannor et al., 2023). Pierre Bourdieu's idea of **symbolic violence**, discussed in his broader sociological framework, refers to the indirect, mostly unnoticed forms of domination that are rooted in everyday cultural and social practices (Bourdieu, 1989). Unlike physical violence or overt pressure, symbolic violence functions through language, norms, and symbols, systems that appear neutral or natural but, in reality, reinforce existing power hierarchies. Central to Bourdieu's theory is the idea of **habitus**, a set of internalized unconscious beliefs shaped by one's social background and fields, the structured social spaces (like politics, education, or art) where power is disputed (Pierre Bourdieu, 1991). In analyzing Rasoulof's films, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and symbolic violence provide valuable tools to unpack the mechanisms through which political dissidents are visually constructed as "the Other" and marginalized within authoritarian narratives.

3.2. Visual Semiotics and Resistance Through Symbolism

Ronald Barthes offers a framework for understanding the political meanings through visual narratives in films (Shakil, H., et al. (2024). Barthes used two terms to describe the signification process denotation level and connotation level. The Denotation level of signification is the meaning of the image as its literal or descriptive meaning while the connotative level is identified with the aesthetic and ideological variables that are opened to interpretations keeping in mind the end goal. There is no correct way of interpreting their meaning; on the contrary, they are open to all kinds of interpretations (Barthes, R., 1968). Barthes concepts of reading the connotative and denotative meanings of signs will help in identifying the relevance of the identified signs with state surveillance, resistance and symbolic violence in Rasoulof’s films through objects, settings, and framing choices.

3.3. Bringing the Frameworks Together

Together, Barthes’ semiotics offers the tools to interpret the visual language of Rasoulof’s films, while Bourdieu’s theory explains how such images function within a broader structure of ideological domination

and internalized marginalization. The incorporation of these frameworks allows for a rich symbolic analysis that goes beyond shallow narrative, revealing how Rasoulof’s cinematic techniques critique and resist authoritarian power by representing dissidents as both socially and visually “othered.”

4. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative symbolic analysis** approach rooted in film studies and visual cultural analysis. It focuses on the symbolic representation of political dissidents in the selected films of Mohammad Rasoulof. Symbolic analysis is appropriate for exploring how ideological meanings are constructed through imagery, cinematic techniques, and narrative structures (Chandran & Jagadisan, 2024). The research deconstructs visual elements, cinematic codes, and symbolic motifs in order to examine the marginalization and resistance of dissidents within authoritarian systems.

4.1. Sample selection

Based on the PRISMA method of screening and sample selection, the following exclusion extrusion criterion has been implemented:

Inclusion Criterion	Exclusion Criterion
Films Directed by Mohammad Rasoulof	Films that are not directed by Mohammad Rasoulof
International Award-winning films of Mohammad Rasoulof	Mohammad Rasoulof’s Films that have not won any international awards
Films produced from 2020-2025	Films produced before 2020

Based on the above criterion from 2020 to 2024 three of his projects were screened two films, There is no Evil (2020) and The seed of the sacred fig (2024), and a documentary film “Jenayat-e amdi (2022). Out of these two of his award-winning films have been selected:

1. **There Is No Evil**, 2020, 18 wins & 10 nominations (There Is No Evil (2020) - Awards - IMDb, 2020).

2. **The Seed of The Sacred Fig**, 2024, 33 wins & 67 nominations (The Seed of the Sacred Fig (2024) - Awards - IMDb, 2024)

4.2. Data Collection

The data consists of the films themselves, analyzed through repeated viewings. Specific scenes, mise-en-scène, camera work, sound design, dialogue, and visual metaphors are extracted and annotated. A scene-coding guide was developed to categorize key sequences that reflect the following categorization scheme

4.3. Categorization Scheme

Variables	Categories	Explanation
Visual Representation	Cinematography Techniques	Use of lighting, camera angles, setting and framing to depict dissidents.
	Body Language & Facial Expressions	Fear, defiance, alienation in dissidents' expressions and posture.
	Spatial Positioning	Isolation, confinement, marginalization within visual composition.
State Power	Surveillance	Depiction of cameras, informants, digital tracking.
	Censorship	Suppression of dissent through media control and self-censorship due to fear.
	Legal Repression	Trials, unjust laws, imprisonment of political dissidents.
Resistance	Acts of Defiance	Public protests, underground movements, artistic resistance.
	Internal Conflict & Moral Dilemmas	Choosing between compliance and resistance under authoritarian rule.
	Alternative Visions of Freedom	Utopian dreams, personal sacrifices made for justice.
Cross-Cutting Variables	Gendered Othering	Marginalization of women dissidents, gender-based political repression.
	Class-based Othering	Economic disparities shaping who becomes a dissident.
	Ethnic & Religious Othering	Targeting of specific ethnic or religious groups as "the Other."

4.4. Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by two complementary theoretical lenses. Pierre Bourdieu’s Theory of Symbolic Violence used to decode how internalized ideologies, institutional power, and structural inequality are subtly embedded in visual and narrative elements. Roland Barthes’ Visual Semiotics to interpret signs at both the denotative and connotative levels.

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

- **Stage 1:** Descriptive breakdown of selected scenes (denotative level).
- **Stage 2:** Interpretation of ideological and symbolic meanings (connotative level).

- **Stage 3:** Thematic synthesis with reference to Bourdieu’s sociological concepts.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

As this research involves public cultural texts and not human participants, formal ethical clearance is not required. However, due care is taken to interpret the films respectfully and within cultural and political context, particularly given the sensitive nature of political dissent in Iran.

5. Symbolic Analysis and Discussion

This section examines how political dissidents are symbolically constructed as “the Other” in Mohammad Rasoulof’s *There Is No Evil* (2020) and *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* (2024). The main symbolic patterns and aesthetic strategies are identified by using the visual coding scheme outlined in the methodology.

5.1. Visual Representation of Dissidents as ‘The Other’

Category	Film	Visual Cue Description/ Denotative level	Symbolic Interpretation / Connotative level	Reference to Theory
Cinematography Techniques	There is no evil	Repetitive frames/windows in composition, Low-angle shots, symmetry, stillness	institutional containment and the symbolic entrapment of the dissident within power structures	Symbolic Violence

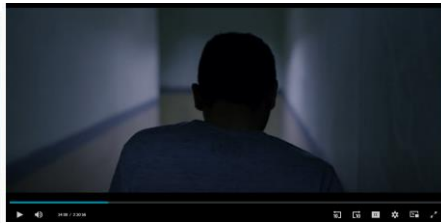
		Wide angle shots of dissidents alone or with a partner either in barren lands or on roads	Marks dissidents as spatially and socially excluded, reinforcing their othered identity	Field & exclusion
		Low-key lighting with abrupt shadows	Conveys emotional ambiguity, fear, and symbolic suppression through aesthetic restraint	Habitus of repression
		subtle yellow light	Evokes a restrained warmth; the tension between suppressed hope and ideological control	Emotional conditioning via habitus
	The seed of the sacred fig	Natural lighting with abrupt shadows	Suggests duality and ambiguity; symbolic contrast between clarity and repression within the visual field	Field through environmental aesthetics
		handheld camera shots	Conveys instability, emotional unrest, and experiential realism	Habitus in motion
		Iman centered in the frame	Reinforces presence, moral anchoring, and symbolic authority of dissident figure	Field centrality of moral actors
		Choker shot of Najmeh	Emphasizes emotional and psychological intensity; highlights gendered perspective under pressure	Gendered habitus
Body Language & Facial Expressions	There is no evil	Slouched body, withdrawn facial expression	Signals internal conflict and silent regret; emotional breakdown due to complicity	Habitus
		Hands covering ears, hunched posture, tightly closed eyes	Embodied refusal of state power; emotional resistance to normalized violence	Habitus
		Javad visibly distressed, downward gaze, avoiding eye contact	Suggests moral disillusionment, emotional fallout due to guilt	Internalized Symbolic Violence
		Flat facial expression with normal routine	Normalization of violence	Symbolic Violence normalizing oppression
		Calm, static and thoughtful expressions. Behram	Reflective moral agency and principled resistance; calmness underlines intentional withdrawal from complicity	Resistance within field
	The seed of the sacred fig	Tearful restraint in daughters	Emotionally constrained grief shaped by internalized repression and generational subjugation	Habitus (gendered emotional discipline)
		facial conflict in father	Encodes internal turmoil, moral ambivalence, and submission to institutional expectations	Symbolic Violence
		Blind folded Sana's close up	blindfold signifies silencing and stripping of agency under authoritarian	Symbolic Violence
		Rezvan sits upright, while Iman leans forward with a clenched jaw	Contrasts moral conviction and repressed aggression; posture signifies ideological divergence within the domestic field	Field conflict and relational habitus
Spatial Positioning	There is no evil	Character in confined spaces, tight architects, long tunnel like corridors	Symbolizes institutional entrapment and surveillance; reinforces the controlled limits of state power	Field of control
		Characters placed in shadowed space with low key lighting, minimal movement	Low-key reflects marginalization; the physical movement reinforces dissident identity	Field

		Javad immersing himself in a waterbody, followed by a mute scream.	symbolically trying to wash away guilt or internalized violence	habitus
		Protagonist shown behind bars, alone in frame	Marginalization, isolation of the dissident	Visual semiotics
		Barren lands, away from the normal life	Visual metaphor for exile, alienation, and withdrawal from dominant social fields	Marginality in social fields
		Into the woods	Represents a liminal space of emotional confrontation, self-realization, and symbolic freedom	Ethical repositioning in the symbolic field
	The seed of the sacred fig	Framed through doors and windows	Signifies restricted agency and visual entrapment	Field bound in spatial framing
		Disrupted domestic spaces; women in peripheral frames	Illustrates displacement of women from central domestic authority; visual marginalization reflects symbolic othering	Gendered symbolic violence in domestic field
		Iman’s makeshift “courtroom” at his mountain home	Symbolizes patriarchal interpretation of law and control; private space transformed into site of symbolic judgment	Power enactment within private field
		Mother daughter confined in dark rooms	darkness as repression, surveillance, and gendered confinement; domestic space rendered as carceral	Symbolic violence via spatial restriction

In both the films, the visual construction of political dissidents as "the Other" is powerfully encoded through cinematography, body language, and spatial design. Both films play with repetitive frames, low-angle shots, shadow, low-key lighting, and barren landscapes to visually entrap characters, highlighting their marginality within authoritarian fields.

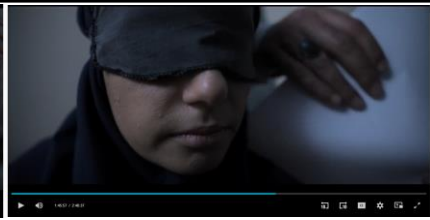
In *There Is No Evil*, Rasoulof portrays dissidents through visual and spatial containment. Dissidents are often framed alone, in dimly lit interiors or in

constrained spaces, reflecting internalized repression. These stylistic choices mirror Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of habitus, wherein oppressed individuals unconsciously embody structures of domination. The restrained performances and silences of the protagonists illustrate how marginalization operates not just externally, but within the self, aligning with the psychology of symbolic violence (Rezaie, M., Soheili, J., & Armaghan, 2024).



In *The Seed of the Sacred Fig*, female dissidence is portrayed through claustrophobic mise-en-scène. The dissident daughter is repeatedly positioned behind symbolic barriers; windows, doors, and household partitions; evoking her “othered” status within both familial and state power structures. The use of partial

lighting and tight framing renders her only partially visible “controlling gaze” that objectifies and disciplines female agency in visual culture (Jia Xinyue., 2023). These spatial metaphors suggest both enforced silence and latent resistance.



5.2. Mechanisms of State Power and Visual Control

Category	Film	Visual Cue / Description	Symbolic Interpretation	Reference to Theory
Surveillance	There is no Evil	The corridor lit up as Hashmat moves forward	Suggests omnipresent institutional control	Field of surveillance
		Red and green lights, reminding the lights in the executioner room	Symbolic reinforcement of state control over life and death	Symbolic Violence
		Indirect monitoring	Subtle yet pervasive oversight; reinforces normalization of being watched without direct confrontation	Symbolic structure of power
	The seed of the sacred fig	Iman interrogates his own family	Illustrates collapse of public surveillance into private sphere; authoritarian field extends into domestic relationships	Symbolic Violence and Field saturation
Security footage, police checkpoints, phone tapping		Symbolizes omnipresent state control; visual and auditory monitoring reinforce systemic paranoia and symbolic violence	Surveillance as field mechanism	
Censorship	There is no evil	Omitted dialogues, sudden cuts	Reflects suppression of dissenting voices and psychological fragmentation under authoritarianism	Symbolic Violence
	The seed of the sacred fig	hide's Sadaf's shooting from Iman	Symbolizes resistance and self-censorship through silence; bandaging becomes an act of emotional protection and subtle rebellion against domestic authoritarian control.	Habitus within familial field; Symbolic Violence through the suppression of truth.
Legal Repression	There is no evil	Scenes of executions	Direct symbol of state violence; reinforces fear and normalization of death as a political tool	Symbolic Violence
		People not allowed to attend funeral of Keyvan	Denial of mourning as a form of social erasure; symbolic exclusion even after death	Field exclusion in death rituals
		Repetition of dialogues like "I won't get my passport"	Highlights bureaucratic oppression and internalization of restricted mobility under authoritarian rule	Habitus (blocked mobility)
	The seed of the sacred fig	Stacked up files and stamping without reading	Represents bureaucratic dehumanization and mechanical justice; symbolic of a field where human stories are reduced to paper trails	Field of power naturalizing symbolic violence
		Prisoners handcuffed and taken in and out of court rooms	Embodies state's performative justice system and physical domination; handcuffs reinforce the literal and symbolic subjugation of dissent	Habitus of submission; Symbolic Violence as enacted spectacle
		Scenes from real riots, dragging and imprisoning protestors	Merges fiction with reality to expose systemic brutality	State field as a site of physical and symbolic domination
		Najmeh's blood-stained hand holding small bullets removed from Sadaf's face	The hand becomes a site of both wound and resistance—a literal extraction of violence from the body.	Symbolic Violence

Rasoulof symbolically depicts state power through recurring images of surveillance, institutional architecture, and implicit censorship. In There Is No

Evil, execution is shown not as spectacle but as routine, embedded within domestic and institutional spaces. As Konde (2023) argues, Iranian cinema often

uses indirect storytelling and allegorical techniques to bypass censorship, which Rasoulof adapts to critique normalized authoritarian violence.



In *The Seed of the Sacred Fig*, surveillance is both thematic and aesthetic. The use of over-the-shoulder framing, obscured reflections, and disjointed editing evokes a climate of paranoia, mirroring the psychological effects of state surveillance. The father's

dual role as investigator and patriarch reflects control as internalized and omnipresent even within private life. His control over his daughter's behavior functions as a metaphor for broader institutional repression.



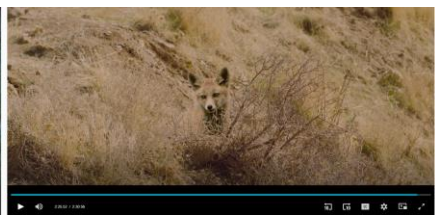
5.3. Resistance and Symbolic Defiance

Category	Film	Visual Cue / Description	Symbolic Interpretation	Reference to Theory
Acts of Defiance	There is no evil	Pouya's Dynamic Steadicam escape shot; rifle discarded	Represents kinetic resistance and moral awakening; discarding the weapon signifies renunciation of institutional violence	Field rupture; Habitus realignment
		Refusal to follow execution orders	Active defiance against systemic oppression	Resistance within symbolic field
		Military uniform hanging on tree like scarecrow	Deconstruction of militarized identity; uniform becomes a visual metaphor for abandoned compliance and reclaimed humanity	Symbolic transformation of authority
	The seed of the sacred fig	Rezvan challenge news coverage as lies	Marks the intellectual rejection of state propaganda	Field disruption; Symbolic Violence challenged
		Sana stole father's gun	Sana's act is a symbolic inversion of authority and a latent threat to the regime's control	Subversion of symbolic capital military authority
Internal Conflict & Moral Dilemmas	There is no evil	Claustrophobic bunk scene, soldiers in tight formation	Peer pressure enforces symbolic violence; internal moral resistance shown	Habitus
		Photograph of Keyvan; Javad's reaction in mirror	Mirror reflection suggests internal conflict and fractured identity	Habitus shaped by loss and guilt
	The seed of the sacred fig	Sana's hands trembled as she point gun at father	Represents emotional conflict in enacting resistance; the trembling reflects internalized habitus and fear of challenging patriarchal authority	Habitus and symbolic violence

		Wife’s hands washing husband’s face as he confesses sentencing a twenty-year-old boy	Gesture of intimate complicity and emotional burden; cleansing becomes a symbolic ritual of shared guilt and repressed dissent	Symbolic Violence within domestic field
		Najmeh treats Sadaf and bandaged her	Act of maternal care transformed into resistance; tending to wounds becomes symbolic healing of political trauma	Habitus of care intersecting with resistance
Alternative Visions of Freedom	There is no evil	Walk through forest, natural light	Nature as symbolic freedom; visual contrast to controlled urban/military spaces	Field outside domination
		Military uniform hanging on tree like scarecrow	Visual guilt and rejection of soldier identity; uniform as empty self	Field
		Escape from the prison, to his girlfriend, enjoying soundtrack	Signifies liberation from state control and reclamation of personal identity; music marks emotional release	Field exit and individual agency
		Fox calmly watching from distance	Fox as metaphor for silent witness or conscience; reinforces quiet observation of moral awakening	Symbolic observer within field
	The seed of the sacred fig	Real-life protest montage of women unveiling and waving hijabs	Acts as a visual rupture between fiction and reality; women's unveiling becomes an ultimate metaphor of resistance against patriarchal authoritarianism	Field disruption via public dissent
		Hopeful gazes, poetic visuals, personal memory sequences	Embodies subjective memory and imagined freedom; hope visualized through affective, non-verbal emotional cues	Habitus of hope
		Last scene sand covered hand of buried Iman	Symbolizes silenced authority and the burial of oppressive ideology; the buried hand gestures toward both death and unfinished accountability	Symbolic violence reversed

Both the films portray resistance not as overt rebellion, but as layered, symbolic defiance woven into visual language, physical gestures, spatial positioning, and relational dynamics. In *There Is No Evil*, defiance is structured through individual moral awakening. Pouya’s escape and rifle discard signify a disagreement within the military field; his habitus restores morally as he rejects state-sanctioned violence. Javad’s reaction to a martyr’s photo and his silent

inner conflict portrays how symbolic violence implants guilt and repression, even in silence. Visual elements such as lush green forests, the rejected uniform, and encounters with nature offer metaphorical freedom, as spaces outside authoritarian logic where conscience can awaken as lush green forests represent emotional healing and cyclical self-discovery (Steiff, 2020).

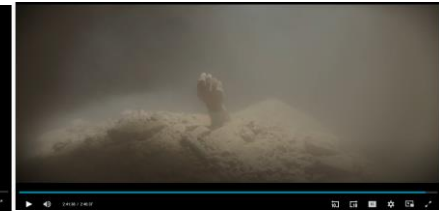


In *The Seed of the Sacred Fig*, resistance takes on a gendered and familial dimension as in most of the Iranian films (Aqababae et al., 2024). Rezvan’s

challenge to state media and Sana’s theft of her father's gun upset patriarchal authority, symbolizing youth-driven logical and physical resistance.

Caregiving gestures transform domestic acts into political ones, representing emotional defiance

engrained in the feminized habitus, where symbolic healing and silent denial co-exist with love and fear.



Both films culminate alternative visions of freedom. Whether through hopeful gazes, real-life protest montages, or symbolic deaths (e.g., Iman’s buried hand), these flashes visualize liberation not as

conquest but as internal transformation and ethical clarity. The domestic space, forest and the individuals all become symbolic fields for resistance.

5.4. Cross-Cutting Variables: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity

Category	Film	Visual Cue / Description	Symbolic Interpretation	Reference to Theory
Gendered Othering	There is no evil	Wife interrogated before handing over husband’s salary	Exposes gendered surveillance and symbolic violence against women through bureaucratic mistrust; positions female autonomy as a threat to state order	Symbolic Violence; Field as site of gendered power imbalance
		Tahmineh’s Ultimatum (“You can do it”)	Represents female agency and moral courage; her voice acts as a catalyst for resistance and ethical awakening in male protagonist	Field resistance via relational habitus
	The seed of the sacred fig	Labeled disloyal when talk for women’s right	Demands for women’s rights are criminalized as political betrayal	Symbolic Violence delegitimizing dissent
		Daughters silenced, mother passive	Intergenerational gendered silence; symbolic transmission of fear and internalized oppression across female habitus	Habitus shaped by gendered fear
Class-Based Othering	There is no evil	financial needs for sister’s medical treatment, readiness to execute	Illustrates class-based coercion and moral compromise under economic pressure	Field (economic capital shaping position); Habitus under pressure
	The seed of the sacred fig	Iman’s modern space Vs riots on street	Contrasts insulated privilege with public unrest; spatial division reflects symbolic separation between elite detachment and collective struggle	Field class-based spatial division
Ethnic & Religious Othering	There is no evil	Lack of representation	the absence of other groups reinforces internalized control	Symbolic Violence (unmarked domination)
	The seed of the sacred fig	Females targeted for hijab	Hijab becomes a visual marker of state control in the name of religion	Field of state surveillance on female bodies

Both films shape dissident identity and deepens their “othering” across intersectional social fields through symbolic violence operational under gender, class, and ethnicity. In reference to gendered othering, both films portray female autonomy as a threat to state order. Either through the interrogation of a wife before handing over her husband’s salary in There is no Evil or through silencing and labeling daughters as disloyal in “The seed of the sacred fig” reflects the

intergenerational of “otherness” in the female habitus.

However class-based othering is not directly addressed but appeared through contrasting visual and narrative cues. In There Is No Evil, a character’s willingness to execute due to financial needs for his sister’s medical treatment and while in The Seed of the Sacred Fig contrasts Iman’s modern space with street riots, reinforces class-based division between elite authority and public resistance.

In domain of ethnic and religious othering, lack of representation of ethnic and religious identities in *There Is No Evil* itself refer to marginalization of the other group. On the other hand, *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* directly categorize females without hijab on the basis of religious othering.

5.5. Analysis Answering the Research Questions

Answering the first research question: How are political dissidents symbolically constructed through visuals as "the Other" in Rasoulof's films? The symbolic analysis of Mohammad Rasoulof's both films demonstrate the portrayal of political dissidents as "the Other" utilizing cinematic techniques, aesthetic fragmentation, and spatial positioning. Dissidents are framed in shadowed, confined spaces, behind bars, or through architectural frames like doors and windows. These compositions emphasize the dissident's displacement from both public and private fields of authority. A habitus shaped by internalized repression is represented by controlled body language; slouched postures, reserved gazes, and cautious movements. These aesthetic choices in collaboration with narrative silences and emotional restraint represents symbolic violence as an invisible but deep-rooted mechanism of state domination.

The second question inquires, which symbolic representations depict the mechanisms of state power (surveillance, censorship, legal systems) that contribute to the "othering" of dissidents? The mechanisms of state power are not only thematized but symbolically embedded through dark corridors, tight positioning and red-green color schemes expressing execution rooms signal state surveillance. Omitted dialogues and abrupt cuts act as signs for censorship, symbolizing silence as a tool of repression. In *The Seed of the Sacred Fig*, interrogation scenes between father and daughters illustrate the extension of authoritarian power into domestic settings. Bureaucratic services and real-life protest shots combine fiction and reality, showing the ubiquitousness of symbolic violence across visual and affective elements.

The third question interrogates, how do Rasoulof's films symbolizes resistance to the pressures of state control and societal expectations? Resistance is depicted not through violent revolution but through symbolic representations. In *There Is No Evil*,

resistance is visualized through Pouya's discarded rifle, hung military uniforms turned into scarecrows, and characters moving to countryside, suggesting a refusal to be part of state violence and uprising of inner conscience. In *The Seed of the Sacred Fig*, female resistance is depicted in domestic space either through the elder sister, challenging media narratives, Sana stealing her father's gun, and Najmeh's caregiving into an act of healing and political protest. These gestures represent resistance symbolically rather than declarative rebellion.

As far as the fourth question: How does the symbolic representation of political dissidents in Rasoulof's films intersect with other forms of "otherness," such as gender, class, or ethnicity? Is concerned. The symbolic representation of dissidents is also depicted through gender, class, and ethno-religious othering. Women are frequently framed as threats to ideological purity, with forced hijab used as a visual tool of state control. Scenes of daughters being silenced by elders highlight the generational transmission of fear and submission. Class-based othering is depicted through economic pressure and spatial privilege.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that Mohammad Rasoulof's films use visual symbolism as a powerful method for criticizing authoritarian power and portraying political dissidents as "the Other." By applying Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, field and habitus, and Barthes' visual semiotics, the analysis reveals that marginalization is not only portrayed through narrative but is symbolically represented by cinematic expression, through framing, lighting, spatial positioning, and gesture.

In broader implication Rasoulof's films portrays dissent not only through political position but also highlights their aesthetic presence. The films highlight authoritarian control through both the state and within domestic relationships, while resistance, mostly feminine, relational, and silent, appears in domestic spaces and through affective gestures. These findings contribute to critical discourse on cinema of resistance by illustrating repressive contexts, constructing layers of meaning that challenge the viewer's perception of power, conformity, and morality.

The study highlights the value of symbolic analysis in reading cinematic texts especially for film scholars, media researchers, and students in politically sensitive regions such as Pakistan. It boosts a deeper understanding of interpreting structural violence and instigates ethical reflection through visual storytelling, offering not only critique but also a silent but powerful design for resistance.

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