

A View from the Inside: The Anatomy of the Persian Ta'ziyeh Plays

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A View from the Inside

The Anatomy of the Persian Ta'ziyeh Plays

Sadegh Homayouni

The basic foundations of the Persian *ta'ziyeh* plays are poetry, music, and performance style.

Poetry

Iranians have an extraordinary poetic inclination, which is reflected in their history, art, and culture. There is a saying that every Persian is a poet; this is probably due to the fact that there are few nations that are so well acquainted with their poetic literary tradition. It is hard to find an Iranian who doesn't like poetry or who does not know by heart many verses of our great poets. Poetic verse is often used in conversation, cited according to the occasion. The verses used in *ta'ziyeh* are very simple and understandable. An example is the monologue of Shemr—the cruel commander of Yazid's army—in *The Ta'ziyeh of Ali Akbar*. Shemr addresses his army and praises the young hero Ali Akbar with eloquence. In the same *ta'ziyeh*, Ali Akbar's mother, Umm Laila, has a monologue in which she addresses the horse of Ali Akbar with extremely touching simplicity. Folk poetry as well as the famous verses of great classical Persian poets are found in *ta'ziyeh*, with the different styles complementing one other.

Music

In *ta'ziyeh*, both vocal and instrumental music are used. In the instrumental music, mostly reeds/flutes known as *ney*, kettle drums/timbrels known as *naqareh*, or wind instruments known as *sheyppur* (bugles/trumpets) and *karna* (horns) are employed. It is easy to find these instruments in every part of Iran and it is not so difficult for those who have musical talent to master them. Another reason for the use of these specific instruments is that they do not fall into the category of musical instruments forbidden for religious reasons.¹ In certain regions, for example, Boushehr, local instruments such as the bagpipes are utilized.

Vocal music, with a wide range of Persian modes and melodies, occupies a very important place in the *ta'ziyeh* and is used in a specific manner for each dramatic situation. All the verses of the protagonists must be sung and vary enormously, employing all the Persian modes, including both sad and joyful melodies. *Ta'ziyeh*

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performers begin their training as children and adolescents, with experienced adults and ta'ziyeh directors. They learn to how to choose a melody for the lyrics of each separate dramatic event. Sometimes they utilize different *maqams*, or modes. Only the antagonists recite their lyrics without music. In the scenes of battle and epic moments, the melodies are uplifting, usually in the modes of *Mahour* or *Chahargah*. The protracted lyrics accompanying farewells, preparations of the heroes for the battlefield, or the transportation of the corpses are very sad and are sung in the *Abuata*, *Bayat-e Turk*, *Afshari*, or *Dashti* modes. When the subject of the scene is love and affection, the performer sings in the *Bayat-e Esfehan* mode. At the moment of the climax of the tragedy and martyrdom, the performer sings the lyrics in the mode of *Husseini*.

Carla Serena wrote in her book, *Hommes et choses en Perse* (1883) that:

the song that is sung at the time of separation was so full of sorrow and sounded like the prayer for death. Words sounded like a trumpet and a clear voice was heard in the remotest corners of the *Takiyeh* and in response the sound of weeping of thousands of people could be heard. The voice was like thunder that had not reached the earth. The singing began softly and gradually became louder, resembling the sound of the south wind. It was as if a ship had been caught in a terrible storm in the Atlantic Ocean, in the middle of a dark night [...].²

She added in the same section that:

[...A]t first the voice was low and gradually increased. The song became so powerful that one's soul would tremble. The most beautiful scene for the musical performance is when Imam Hossein, in a ta'ziyeh, is informed of the martyrdom of his son or brother and goes to the scene. Near the body [of the martyr] and full of sorrow he puts his head on his knee and hand on his forehead and becomes absorbed in himself. He then takes the head of the martyr in his lap. At this moment the music is solely the sound of a mouth instrument, or a nay, and single strikes of a stick on a drum. A terrifying silence overwhelms the space.

The Show and Its Performance Style

Ta'ziyeh performances are easily realized everywhere, in towns or villages. They are performed either in a special place or in a square, depending upon the season, with any number of performers. The props and the performance styles are specific to ta'ziyeh. Time and space do not exist and distance loses its significance. Certain props and objects—such as horses, swords, and shields—are real. Others are symbolic: a basin of water is the sign for the river Euphrates. The color red on a piece of cloth or costume is a sign for martyrdom and wounds. The costumes of the antagonists are sumptuous and red, and the costumes of the saints simple and green. The “People of the House” (the Prophet’s family) wear black with veils, and the herald and the dervish have yellow costumes.

Each ta'ziyeh has a specific *nueh*, or dirge, sung before the performance of the play for the purpose of “capturing the attention” of the audience. These *nuehs* are performed differently in various parts of Iran. In *The Zarqan of Fars* two of the performers who have good singing voices perform up on a roof or balcony and the rest of the performers stand together below them. The two begin to sing simultaneously from above and those on the ground put their heads close together and answer. *The Ta'ziyeh of Zainab* starts thus:

THE ONES ON TOP:

The sufferings of the world kill me.
The sufferings of the world kill me.
The house of grief of Sham [Damascus] kills me.
The house of grief of Sham kills me.

THE ONES ON THE GROUND:

I am the grief stricken Zainab, that's my name.
I am the grief stricken Zainab, that's my name.
At the end this very name will kill me.
At the end this very name will kill me.

THE ONES ON TOP:

I have received so many stones of injustice on my head.
I have received so many stones of injustice on my head.
The stones laid around the roof kill me.
The stones laid around the roof kill me.

THE ONES ON THE GROUND:

I have run after camels for so long.
I have run after camels for so long.
The blisters of my feet kill me.
The blisters of my feet kill me.

After the nuheh and before the beginning of the performance, the actor in the role of the demonic Shemr recites a poem addressing the audience with a loud voice. He does this to indicate that he is not a real Shemr but only a role carrier (to protect himself from the possible wrath of the audience) and to testify to his faith in Islam and his hatred for the enemies of Imam Hussein:

O moaners for Karbala now is the time.
Appreciate this opportunity in this place.
Neither am I Shemr nor is this Karbala.
Neither is this army from *Kufa* nor the cursed *Sham* (Damascus or Syria).
Neither Hussein nor Zainab are present here.
Neither Abbas of Ali nor the beautiful Ali Akbar are here. [...]

Shemr continues to put on his costume, piece by piece, to get ready for the battle. As he picks up the helmet he says:

O my beloved helmet, you are so pleasant.
You are so good and nice that I put you on my head.
Come O golden mail, sit on the head of faithless Shemr.
Be obedient; you are my crown, you are my head cover.
O spiritual drummer, beat the Solomonic drum.
If fate is with me I will break Zainab's heart.

In the ta'ziyeh texts there are no references to the mood or the actions of the performers and this allows the performer to use his creativity in dramatically expressing his character.

Content and Variety

The ta'ziyeh draws inspiration from an array of sources. Some are based on religious or national myths such as *Belqays and Sulayman* or the *Primordial Day*.

Some are based on the life of the Prophet and the imams, such as *The Ta'ziyeh of Imam Hussein and Imam Hassan* and *The Martyrdom of Imam Ali*. Others are rooted in Persian literature, such as *The Dervish of the Desert*, which is a reference to Moses' life in Mount Sinai.

In some cases ta'ziyehs have acquired comic overtones. We also come across plays that have been influenced by miracles, such as *The Ta'ziyeh of the Wedding of Quraysh* and *The Bonding of the Thumbs of the Demons*. Love appears in the most delicate ways, especially in the depths of disaster, death, and martyrdom. On the plain of Karbala, Ali Akbar reminisces about his betrothed and shares his sentiments with his mother before going to the battlefield:

ALI AKBAR: [Mother], come kindly to a secluded corner.

UMM LAILA: What do you want in a secluded corner?

ALI AKBAR: I have something to tell you.

UMM LAILA: Tell me what you wish my soul.

ALI AKBAR: Promise not to tell my father.

UMM LAILA: I shall not tell whatever you tell me.

ALI AKBAR: Do not shame me in front of my father.

UMM LAILA: Tell me my beautiful youth.

ALI AKBAR: Give my regards to my cousin.

UMM LAILA: You burn my heart my lovely one.

ALI AKBAR: What a wonderful time it was when she was my betrothed.

UMM LAILA: Your words make me faint.

ALI AKBAR: When we left Medina [...]

UMM LAILA: Didn't you see that unique one?

ALI AKBAR: She sent a slave girl to me.

UMM LAILA: What did that slave girl say?

ALI AKBAR: She said come back soon from Karbala.

But what can I do? Death won't let me see her again.

There are poetic tropes like the conversation about Karbala between a rose and a nightingale; or that of a blood-stained bird who flies from the plain of Karbala to Medina, its reddened feathers conveying the bitter news of the massacre of Hussein.

Some of the most joyous ta'ziyeh plays may have been the women's ta'ziyeh performed in the court of the Qajar kings. The performers, director, and the audience were all female and no man was allowed to watch the performances. It's a pity that these women's ta'ziyehs are now consigned to the past, especially at a time when there is an ever-growing participation of women in the Muharram rituals.

—translated by Iraj Anvar

Notes

1. The "forbidden" instruments would be mainly *tar* (an hourglass-shaped picked string instrument made of mulberry wood, akin to the lute), *setar* (a lutelike instrument also made of mulberry wood, with a small body, long neck, and 25 or 26 movable gut frets and four metal strings), *kamancheh* (Persian spike fiddle with a small, hollowed body over which a skin

membrane is stretched, a cylindrical neck, and four strings, and is played vertically like the viol), *tambour* (similar to the setar with a larger body and shorter neck, and with only 14 frets), *daff* (frame drum), and *zarb/tunbak* (squared-off goblet drum with a goatskin head). Of course, not all Islamic scholars agree about the prohibition of music in Islam. There is no direct mention of this prohibition in the Qur'an. In fact, the great Islamic/Persian scholar of the early years of Islam, al-Ghazzâlî, has a very famous article about the subject. He makes it clear that music is not only *not* illicit but it even elevates the soul. In fact, the Prophet states very clearly that chanting the Qur'an with a pleasant voice is a good deed (al-Ghazzâlî [1873] 1991).

2. Translations from French to Persian by the author; translations from the Persian by Iraj Anvar.

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Sadegh Homayouni is one of the leading researchers on *ta'ziyeh* in Iran. The second edition of his groundbreaking work, *Ta'ziyeh in Iran*, more than 1,000 pages long, was published in 2002 (Navid Publishers). Many of his publications deal with popular culture in his native province of Fars.