Peripheral Taʿziyeh

The Transformation of Taʿziyeh from Muharram Mourning Ritual to Secular and Comical Theatre

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This essay is neither a chronological nor historical treatment of *taʿziyeh* and the Persian theatre. My intention is to discuss the evolution of Persian indigenous theatre production, its ramifications, its abrupt truncation, and the theatrical possibilities that it could have brought about in the Iranian theatre. It is interesting to note that although neglected in Iran, taʿziyeh nevertheless had a considerable impact on modern theatrical thought and production in the West. It is enough to mention the monumental production of the *Mahabharata* by Peter Brook (1985) in which the influence of the taʿziyeh style was quite evident.[1]

Much has been written about taʿziyeh in the past 25 years. However, the existing material has mainly studied taʿziyeh within the framework of the mourning rituals of the first 10 days of the month of Muharram. Therefore, it deals solely with the events surrounding the tragedy of Karbala—the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (the third Shiite Imam), his family, and his companions. For example, following the 1976 international symposium on taʿziyeh, which was part of the Shiraz Art Festival, Peter J. Chelkowski edited a book entitled, *Taʿziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (1979). This book is one of the best if not *the* best source for scholars and anyone interested in this indigenous Iranian form of theatrical expression. Even so, it discusses and introduces the taʿziyeh in its original form, concerning only the events of Karbala.

I wish to examine the development of taʿziyeh and its transformation into a secular and even a comical form of theatre, created purely for entertainment, which retained the techniques and style of the traditional religious taʿziyeh. The "comical taʿziyeh" is actually a contradiction in terms since "taʿziyeh" is the verbal noun from the Arabic verb *ʿaza,* meaning "condolence," "mourning for the dead." Thus, the very idea of "comical taʿziyeh" as an expression does not make much sense from the linguistic point of view. Today most scholars prefer to call this kind of representation *shabih-e mozhek*. *Shabih* means "alike, equal, representation," and *mozhek* means "funny."

The development of taʿziyeh reached its peak during the Qajar period thanks, in particular, to the great interest shown by the Qajar Kings, especially Nasser al-Din Shah (1848–1896). A most important development during this period is that "due

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to popular demand," performances of ta'ziyeh were no longer restricted to the month of Muharram and the following month of Safar, but extended to other times throughout the year. In the beginning, there were only certain dates in the Shiite calendar when ta'ziyeh could be performed. For example, the ta'ziyeh of the martyrdom of Ali, the first Shiite Imam and the fourth caliph, was performed on the 21st of Ramadan, the day Ali died from a sword wound.

Popular appreciation of this dramatic form encouraged the growth of the ta'ziyeh repertory. Other stories from the Islamic tradition as well as biblical stories and Iranian national legends were incorporated. Since staging a performance involved a great deal of effort, a ta'ziyeh group would usually perform in the same place for several days, mixing the Muharram repertory with what we can call the fringe ta'ziyeh plays. Among these plays, we finally come across comedies, or more accurately, satires, concerning various perceived enemies of the Shiites. In particular, these satires concentrated on Umar, Uthman, and Abu Bakr, the three caliphs who, according to popular Shiite belief, were instrumental in preventing Ali from becoming the first caliph/Imam after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

It is theoretically possible to incorporate any event, from the day of creation to the day of judgment, into the repertory of ta'ziyeh. This is possible through a very important theatrical device that played a crucial role in facilitating the importation of subjects foreign to the main topic into the ta'ziyeh plays without creating any technical or moral problems: *guriz*. The word *guriz* is the verbal noun of *gurikhtan,* which means, "to flee." In ta'ziyeh this word, combined with the auxiliary verb *zadan,* acquired a very specific meaning: "to refer to the events of Karbala." In English *guriz zadan* could be replaced by "flashback" or "flash forward," as the case may be. The authors of ta'ziyeh plays, by utilizing guriz, created an opening for the introduction of non-Shiite plays into the ta'ziyeh repertory. They simply employed this theatrical technique as a digression: in the secular ta'ziyeh there is usually a glance at one of the events of Karbala, often toward the end of the play, but this varies depending on the action of the play. For example in *Dervish of the Desert and Moses,* when Moses has no more resources to prove to the Dervish the legitimacy of the existence of Hell, he holds his index and the middle finger horizontally in front of the Dervish's face for him to peek through them and see the beginning of the parade of the martyrs of Karbala in their most tragic appearances. This stratagem finally convinces the Dervish that God has a right to have created Hell besides Heaven. The author uses the device of guriz, as a bridge to connect to the events of Karbala, no matter how irrelevant the subject of the play may be. Guriz is therefore one of the main ingredients of the "fringe" or secular *shabih,* and it is used to legitimize the performance of a secular story.

The device of guriz provided a valid pretext for producers to use stories other than the Shiite martyrdom tragedies to entertain people. Through the guriz, all human conditions are directly or indirectly related to the suffering and tragic death of the "Martyrs of Karbala," regardless of whether the story takes place before or after the Karbala massacre. The Cerulli collection, housed in the Vatican library, contains some 1,055 ta'ziyeh manuscripts collected by the Italian Ambassador, Enrico Cerulli, between the years 1950 and 1955. A small percentage of these manuscripts have no direct connection with the Karbala tragedy and fall into the category of peripheral ta'ziyeh.

By examining the history of ta'ziyeh and the chronology of ta'ziyeh manuscripts we can easily follow the development of ta'ziyeh from a simple ritual into full-fledged drama. Such a survey of the texts also reveals that there are not many comedic texts that are totally of a secular nature. This is because ta'ziyeh suffered a tremendous blow when it was driven out of the big cities as the Pahlavi Dynasty came to power (1926–1979) and was forced to revert to its original form. Nonetheless, *The Majles of Tax Collection by Muinolbuka,* probably the last shabih-e muzhek,

reveals a totally secular theatre that could have emerged from the traditional taʿziyeh, pursuing a specific trajectory that can be clearly traced by examining certain texts. We can delineate the course of a clear transformation by exploring the following examples: (1) *The Majles-e Amir Teymour,* (2) *The Dervish of the Desert,* (3) *Mansûr Hallâj, Shams-e Tabriz and Mulla of Rûm,* (4) *The Majles-e Shâhanshâh-e Iran, Nasser al-Din Shah,* and (5) the above mentioned *Majles of Tax Collection by Muinolbuka*.[2] I believe that these five manuscripts shed a clear light on the process by which taʿziyeh gradually branched off into a would-be secular theatre.

The Majles-e Amir Teymour concerns the revenge of the death of Hussein by Teymour, the Conqueror.[3] The play begins with Teymour and his men on the move. They stop at a husseiniyeh, which, like a takiyeh, houses religious events, but originally was built specifically for the Muharram rituals honoring Hussein. Teymour reveals to his men that he intends to go to Damascus and destroy the city. The governor of Damascus sits on the throne that once belonged to Yazid, the caliph responsible for the death of Hussein in the 7th century.[4] On the way, he goes to the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf to seek the Imam's blessing. Then he sets out with his army toward Damascus. The Governor of Damascus gets word of the attack and decides to surrender unconditionally. Teymour arrives at the palace and when the Governor offers him gifts and presents, he refuses them. Instead he asks to marry the Governor's daughter, only to humiliate her by lifting the bride's veil as she is brought out to him. In the final scene, the Governor and his vizier are clubbed and put in prison. None of this is historically true. The siege of the city actually went on for a long time and even Teymour's own son joined the enemy before the fall of Damascus. The taʿziyeh author views Damascus as the city of the cruel, the city of the infidel, and anyone who conquers it is a hero. It was also where Hussein's women were brought as captives from Karbala. This alone, for many Iranians, suffices to make Teymour a hero, despite the fact that he attacked Persia and brought about innumerable deaths and great destruction. Iranian historians emphasize the intense cruelty of his massacres, his indiscriminate slaughter of innocent citizens. One of them wrote that during his attack on Isfahan, Teymour killed 70,000 people and built towers with their decapitated heads. In 1400 he attacked Syria. After taking Aleppo and other strongholds, he marched south. Following a fairly long siege, Damascus surrendered in March of 1401.[5] This taʿziyeh text depicts Teymour as a much kinder person than he was in reality. However, in the mind of the Iranian people he is the avenger of the blood of Imam Hussein, a reincarnation of Mukhtar, another hero who took revenge on the Karbala massacre. In *The Majles-e Amir Teymour,* although the author attempts to create a distance from the events of Karbala, he is not able to ignore the central drama. He timidly writes a different story, wishing to alleviate the pain of the tragedy by depicting revenge for the cruelties committed long ago and by showing the humiliation of the "heir" of the ruler responsible for the death of Hussein. The play does not happen in Karbala but it concerns the same events. Only this time the good guys have the upper hand. In this play the plot is slightly removed in time and space from Karbala and attempts to take a new direction. Another daring innovation in this text indicates the Persian Sufi belief in the Divinity of Ali: a Dervish character at the shrine of Imam Ali sings Ali's praises and extends his exaltation to the status of God Himself. Here, at Ali's tomb in Najaf, the play acquires a definite Sufi dimension. The Dervish, almost coming out of nowhere, is placed face to face with Teymour, and seems to dominate him.

The *Dervish of the Desert* begins with a soliloquy by the Dervish in praise of God, accompanied by ecstatic dancing and singing. Finally, he falls asleep and dreams of the torments of those in hell and the beatitude of those in heaven. He goes into a rage and starts to question why punishment exists when the most emphasized attribute of the Almighty is mercy. A messenger of God tells Moses about

the rebellion of the Dervish and God's desire to guide him back to the right way. Moses goes to the Dervish and tries in vain to convince him that God is just and upright. Upon the Dervish's denial of God's goodness, Moses goes into a rage, saying harsh words to the Dervish, and finally beating him.

God is not happy with Moses' action and orders him to go back to the Dervish and show him some of the events of Karbala to demonstrate the necessity for punishment and the existence of hell. The play ends with the staging of the afflictions of Imam Hussein and his companions, whereupon the Dervish declares that there must be not only one hell, but a thousand hells. In this play, which seems to be inspired by the story of Moses and the Shepherd in the *Mathnawi* of Rumi, Sufi thought prevails and only at the end of the story is there a brief reference to the events of Karbala as a guriz. The text removes itself from the original ta'ziyeh form by a few more steps, but does not totally liberate itself from it.

However, we see that the next play is completely independent of what precedes it. It is an original story, far removed from Karbala and what occurred there. There is no mention of the characters of the original ta'ziyeh plays and for the first time we see that even the guriz device has not been employed. It is a Sufi story taken from popular legends.

There are three historical characters in the play of *Mansur Hallaj, Shams of Tabriz and Mulla of Rum:* Hussein Ibn Mansur Hallaj (known as the "Martyr of Mystical Love"), Shams Tabrizi, and Jalaluddin Rumi. Historically, Rumi and Shams were actual contemporaries. In fact, Shams was Rumi's spiritual master, and Hallaj, who was one of the most ecstatic of all Islamic mystics, lived some 300 years before both of them. However, in this play, Rumi and Mansur Hallaj are also contemporaries. In the play, some time after Hallaj is killed, he reappears as Shams Tabrizi, born of Rumi's daughter.

The play begins with an ecstatic poem sung by Mansur Hallaj. He sings of his rapture and overwhelming love for God, uttering the famous phrase, "*Ana al-Haqq*" (I am the Truth). He is then brought to the judge who is the Mulla of Rum (Rumi). After a short trial, Hallaj is found guilty of claiming divinity and the Mulla sentences him to death. As Hallaj's blood spills to the ground, it graphically forms Hallaj's own words, "*Ana al-Haqq*." This deeply disturbs the Mulla. He collects the blood from the ground, puts it in a bottle, and tells his family that it is a strong poison.

Next, we see the Mulla's family departing for an outing in the countryside, leaving the unhappy crippled daughter in the house. Filled with sorrow and tired of living, she decides to commit suicide. Believing it to be poison, she drinks the contents of the bottle. Not only does she not die, she is actually healed. When her parents return, they do not recognize her until she reveals the secret. The Mulla now realizes that the execution of Hallaj was definitely wrong. After a while the daughter recognizes that she is pregnant, despite never having had any contact with a male. The Mulla and his wife decide to keep this a secret and the daughter gives birth to Shams of Tabriz. In the next scene, Shams appears at the *madrassa* where the Mulla teaches. A dialogue between Shams and Mulla culminates in a demonstration of Shams's mystical powers. The Mulla pleads with Shams to accept him as his student and Shams puts him to a severe test. The play ends with the two of them walking on water. Mulla of Rum learns the first rule of walking the Sufi path: to have complete trust in the master and to obey his orders without question.

The ta'ziyeh of *Majles-e Shahanshah-e Iran Nasser al-Din Shah* tells of the final days of Nasser al-Din Shah's life, his assassination at the hands of Mirza Reza Kermani, and the ascension of Muzaffar al-Din Shah to the throne. After embarking on a hunting trip to alleviate his depression, Nasser al-Din Shah returns to his palace. At night, when he goes to sleep, the apparition of a masked holy man enters into his dream and informs him of his imminent death. The apparition advises the

Shah to go on a pilgrimage to the nearby holy shrine of Shah Abdul Azim. In the morning Nasser al-Din Shah calls his court officials and informs them of the dream. As he completes the pilgrimage, he is shot by Mirza Reza Kermani. The vizier has to stall for time and make sure that no one finds out about the Shah's assassination until everything is under control and Muzaffar al-Din Shah, the Crown Prince in Tabriz, is informed. He succeeds masterfully in keeping the assassination secret.

The vizier asks Imam Jumeh of Tehran to announce in the mosque both the Shah's martyrdom and his son's ascension to the throne. When Imam Jumeh announces the news in the mosque, he recites the story of the tragedy of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, comparing it to the death of the Shah. The subsequent scene shows Muzaffar al-Din Shah in Tabriz, receiving the news of his father's assassination. He sets out to Tehran to assume the throne and avenge the death of his father by hanging the assassin, Mirza Reza Kermani.

The story of this play is definitely not religious but since it deals with the death of a king who was known as, "The Martyr King" after his assassination, it acquires some religious overtones. Nasser al-Din Shah's assassination is compared to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. The guriz to the events of Karbala in this play is verbal: the Imam Jumeh mourns the loss of the King in the mosque. If we consider that this story is about the death of a King and his mourning ritual and not about the martyrdom of Hussein, we can surely categorize this play as a secular drama removed from the original taʿziyeh plays.

The last play under consideration in this essay is completely secular and comical. The only connection it has with the original taʿziyeh plays is in its depiction of the taʿziyeh performers, their rivalries, and the corruption with which they were plagued. In my opinion, this play is the farthest removed from the original taʿziyeh and demonstrates that it could have paved the way for a form of original secular theatre rooted in tradition and without any foreign dramatic influence. But before this fledgling dramatic form reached maturity, it encountered a premature death.[6] The synopsis of *The Majles of Tax Collection by Muinolbuka* follows.

"Muinolbuka" was the designation for the man who organized and directed a taʿziyeh play. The play begins with Muinolbuka's soliloquy thanking the Almighty for his elevated position as the chief of the Tehrani taʿziyeh group. At the same time, he introduces himself to the audience in taʿziyeh style. It was a common trend for the performers to communicate directly with the audience, and the performer who played the part of a villain would curse and discredit the character he played, announcing that he was just playing a part. Even so, there have been cases where the actor playing the killer of Hussein was beaten after the play and on rare occasions even killed by the mob. This is followed by the introduction of his assistant, Mirza Agha Jan, and other characters who curse him vehemently and are generally not very fond of him. It is clear at this point that the author of this taʿziyeh is not fond of Muinolbuka either and has written the play to discredit him. The main concern of the Tehrani group, however, is to prevent the success of the rival Kashani group and to find a way to defeat them. We soon find out that Seyed Ali Akbar, the chief of the Kashani group, is the main target. It is also established very quickly that Seyed Ali Akbar and his group are the good guys and Muinolbuka and his men are the villains. The Tehrani group members and their leaders conspire to destroy the other group. In a subsequent confrontation, it is clear that they are no match for their rivals. Muinolbuka, through his government and court connections, tries to establish a tax for taʿziyeh performers and to restrict each group to a certain area. Although the play is not very clear about the outcome, he does not seem to succeed.

We know that taʿziyeh reached its peak during the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah Qajar (1848–1896), receiving a tremendous amount of royal patronage. This atmosphere proved conducive to the natural growth of taʿziyeh as a theatrical form.

Its popularity, along with the sponsorship of the rich, opened the way for the ta'ziyeh directors and producers to hire the finest performers and singers and to construct the best takiyehs for staging the performances. Thus, it was obviously no longer possible to restrict productions of ta'ziyeh to the months of Muharram; people wished to enjoy this form of entertainment more often. Various excuses, such as the recovery of the ill and the return from pilgrimage, were found to extend performances to other months. Later on, however, the decline of ta'ziyeh began in response to the interference and opposition of several elements and forces. To begin with, during the last years of the Qajar rule, although ta'ziyeh never lost its popularity, the support of the court and the well-to-do started to wane, causing the ta'ziyeh performers to seek sponsorship from a lower strata of the society. "After Nasser al-Din Shah, the glory and the importance of ta'ziyeh was gradually diminished but its popularity was conserved. The professional troupes which were newly formed toured the cities all year round and performed" (Beiza'i 1965:150).

The rural population did not enjoy the sophistication (or perhaps the decadence) of the more advanced urban society. They were definitely more interested in the traditional ta'ziyeh and had no interest in comical developments in their yearly mourning ritual. And we should not underestimate the almost absolute authority of the clerics in provincial cities, small towns, and villages. I have no doubt that alongside the ta'ziyeh and *ru-howzi* (improvisational) theatre, an indigenous, secular Persian national theatre would have evolved if its development had not been thwarted by various elements of Iranian society in the 20th century.

Notes

1. The English-language version of this production—coproduced by the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Los Angeles Festival, the Australian Bicentennial Authority, and the city of Zurich—toured throughout 1987/88 to Los Angeles, New York, Perth, Adelaide, Copenhagen, Glasgow, and Tokyo.
2. The dates for these texts cannot be certain as there are no dates on the manuscripts. These five texts were used to make my point in "A Study of Peripheral Ta'ziyeh in Iran" (1990), my doctoral dissertation.
3. The historical Teymour is known in Western culture as Tamerlane (d. 1404).
4. Yazid was the main enemy of Imam Hussein, who ruled the world of Islam in those days. According to the Shiites Yazid and before him, his father Muawiyah, were the usurpers of the caliph's throne, which rightfully belonged to the family of the Prophet. Hussein, who lived in Medina, was invited by the people of Kufa (a town near Karbala) to go there and with the help of the people of Kufa defeat the army of Yazid. However, once there, Hussein did not receive any help. This is the prelude that led to the events of Karbala.
5. The historical facts have nothing to do with the ta'ziyeh play. The only real fact in the play is Teymour's attack on Damascus. The rest of the story is just writer's imagination. This is true, to various degrees, about all the ta'ziyeh plays.
6. The difficulties began with the fall of the Qajar dynasty. The first Pahlavi king, Reza Shah, was a fierce enemy of the clergy and all the religious rituals and pageantries. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah, tried to continue his father's policies, but he was less strict. The Islamic Republic opposed the practices of ta'ziyeh but accepted the strong wish of the people who wanted to continue these traditions. Now there are more ta'ziyeh performances than during Shah's rule, yet the quality continues to decline. Many factors, including the negative influence of the media, are gradually killing ta'ziyeh in its traditional forms.

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