

## Ta'ziyeh, The Art of the Iranian "Passion Play"

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### Abstract

The term "Ta'ziyeh" refers to an Iranian dramatic genre which might be compared to the Western Passion Play and is the only indigenous drama of the entire Islamic world. This ritual drama has both an Islamic and a Persian heritage, the central theme of which is the tragic and heroic martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed and the third Imam of Shi'ite in the desert of Karbala in 680 A.D. Shiites believe that Imam Husayn sacrificed his life to be their Intercessor on the Day of Judgment.

The history of Ta'ziyeh did not begin with the events at Karbala rather it dates back to pre-Islamic culture as well as the dramatic expressions of both the *Memorial of Zarer*, a religious epic from the Sassanid era, (226-652 A.D.), and the *Tragedy of Siyavush*, a work from ancient Iran, which precedes the Ta'ziyeh play by 1,200 years.

The tradition continued from an early processional form to the *Magtal-Khani* (a recital of martyrdom stories), until it took a dramatic shape. Further, both the playwrights and the structure of the Takiyeh performance building, its performance site, contributed to the evolution of Ta'ziyeh. In this paper, the emphasis is to demonstrate the character of Ta'ziyeh, its foundation and, the development of its various elements. It also attempts to reveal, from an objective stance, its value to a people who embrace it as a kind of ritual, both a holy and national art form. Ta'ziyeh is a kind of ritual drama which has fascinated some of the world's most famous theatre historians, critics, and performers, who view in it some elements of the postmodern theatre.

**Keywords:** Taziye, Karbala, Imam Husayn, Muharram, Safavid, Qajar, Martyrdom

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## Introduction

The word Ta'ziyeh originated from Arabic root *aza* signifying mourning, condolences, or sympathy. Literally, it means "expressing sympathy mourning and consolation" (Chelkowski 1986: 216)<sup>1</sup>. In Iran the word Ta'ziyeh is identified particularly with the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. In this paper the task of defining Ta'ziyeh as an Iranian passion play highlights: its roots, its historical development from an early processional form to the *Maghtal- Khani* (storytelling form), and its literary sources, the *Rowzeh-Khani* (the reading of *Rowzata'l Shuhada*) until it took dramatic shape. Additionally, it also examines the playwrights, the Takiyeh structure (the site for Ta'ziyeh performances), and the evolution of Ta'ziyeh.

## The History and Religious Foundation of the Ta'ziyeh

The logical starting point for any study on Ta'ziyeh is to examine its foundation<sup>2</sup>, development and growth.

1. Mohammed Jafar Mahjub was the first Iranian scholar to give a definition of Ta'ziyeh. He wrote, "Ta'ziyeh literally means sympathy and mourning for a dead person; however, technically it means a Shi'ite passion play. Likewise, Ta'ziyeh doesn't always contain a tragic theme. Certain Ta'ziyeh can also be comedy, provoking laughter. It seems in the beginning Ta'ziyeh was performing for the commemoration of the tragic events at Karbala, although this exhilarating theme was added at a later time during its compilation and refinement (Mahjub 1966: 1).

2. Some researchers, like Sadiq Humayuni, Jaber Anasory, Ehsan Yar-e-Shater, and others, believe Ta'zieyh has some similarities with ancient Iranian tragedy like *The Memorial of Zarer* and *The Tragedy of Siyavush*. Besides, other Islamic historians like Tabari or Narshakhi and great poets such as

The actual theme of the Ta'ziyeh is the great martyrdom of the Imam Husayn, and his ultimate sacrifice in the desert of Karbala. His tragic death displays the basic doctrines of the religion connotation of Ta'ziyeh by Shiite:

The suffering of Husayn and its commemoration become the very core of the Shia faith. ... It [the commemoration] is the highest religious duty, and many times more meritorious than any other good work (Chelkowski 1985: 153).

However, the guarantee that the Ta'ziyeh would survive and grow was only due to the fact that Iran developed as a Shia nation (Chelkowski 1979: 4). Also, according to the McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama, "The Ta'ziyeh drama is a theatrical modality peculiar to the religious orientation of the Iranian people" (Hochman, ed. 1984: 54)." The religious significance of the Ta'ziyeh maintains its high popularity with the Shiite:

The tragedy of Karbala is viewed by the Shia as the greatest suffering and redemptive act in history. ... The commemoration of the Imam Husayn's passion and martyrdom is charged with unusual emotions throughout the Shiite communities in the world (Chelkowski 1986: 209).

Ferdowsi wrote about these same events. For instance, Narshakhi relates that "the people of Bukhara have wonderful Suruds [songs] concerning the playing of siyavush, and the minstrels call these songs Kin-e siyavush (Humayuni 1988: 110). Today, the plots from these plays still exist but their dramatic form no longer remain. Both have aspects that parallel Ta'ziyeh. They were ritualistic and popular because they came from ancient Iranian religious belief.

## **A Short Historical Overview of the Events at Karbala**

After the Prophet Mohammed's death in 632 A.D., Islam split into two groups: Sunnite and Shiite. The Sunnite believe in the traditional way of choosing the prophetic successor, the Caliph (Leader). However, the Shiite faction believe in choosing the Imam (spiritual and temporal leader) through the blood line. Initially, the Sunnite view prevailed and they chose the first three Caliphs. The Shiite chose Ali, the nephew and son-in-law of the Prophet, who was to become the fourth Caliph. However, after the death of Ali, the Sunnite leader Muawiyeh did not allow Ali's oldest son Hassan lead the community rather proclaimed himself to be Caliph and shifted the seat of Caliphate (leadership) from Medina to Damascus under the Umayyad dynasty, also choosing his son Yazid to be his successor and next Caliph.

After the death of Hassan (Shiite's Second Imam), his younger brother Husayn became the Shiite leader (third Imam). Also, during this time Yazid came to power and called himself King Yazid and asked Husayn to pledge allegiance to him. Husayn refused and Yazid forced him to leave his territory. Husayn was invited by some of his faithful in the city of Kufa (in today's Iraq) to become their leader, whereupon he sent his envoy to that city. Also, he, his entire family, and small band of followers left Medina and traveled toward Kufa.

On his way to Kufa, Husayn received news that his envoy had been killed by Yazid's soldiers. Nevertheless, he continued his journey and on the first day of Muharram 680A.D. in the desert of

Karbala, he was intercepted by the Yazid army. There, on the parched desert of Karbala, Husayn and his followers were trapped and surrounded. The enemy prevented them from reaching the waters of the Euphrates River, and all became very thirsty and dehydrated. The general of the Yazid army, Ibn Sa'd, asked Husayn to pledge allegiance to the Yazid, but Husayn again refused. After ten days of resistance on the day of Ashura, Husayn and all of his male followers except one were killed and their bodies were mutilated. Yazid's army took Husayn's head along with captive females and relatives to Yazid in Damascus (Humayuni 1971: 10-20).

In most Ta'ziyeh, this bloody massacre is portrayed in several episodes, illustrating the successive murder of each member of Husayn's camp and finally His own martyrdom.

## **Ta'ziyeh Compilation and Development (Muharram Mourning)**

In the course of compiling and refining of the Ta'ziyeh, the first step was to begin with the Muharram mourning procession. This was undertaken during the Buyid Dynasty in the tenth century.

### **A) The Buyid Dynasty (954-1055A.D.)**

One tenet of Sunnite belief of the time was to place obstacles in the way of every aspect of Shiite culture and faith. They did not allow the Shiites to practice any religious ceremonies and to commemorate the Karbala tragedy until the Buyid dynasty (954 A.D.) from Iran who ascended to power and became the

first Shiite and Iranian ruler throughout the Islamic empire (Mahmud 1975: 1-5).

The first responsibility of this regime was to enliven Shiite culture and belief, especially commemorating the death of Imam Husayn, and for this reason they allowed people to have these ceremonies:

It is mentioned in the history of **Ibn Khthir**, the Syrian that Mu'izzu'd-Dawla Ahmad ibn Buyid issued orders in Baghdad that during the first ten days of Muharram all **Bazzars** of Baghdad should be closed, and that the people should wear black for mourning and betake themselves to mourning for chief of martyrs (the Imam Husayn) (Browne 1953: 31).

In the first Shiite mourning for the Imam Husayn in Baghdad in 963 A.D., men, women, and children came to the streets, wearing black and formed a procession. They used a horse with no rider--representing Husayn's abandoned, riderless horse--to lead them. The men beat their heads and chests and women disheveled their hair (Chelkowski 1979: 101).

#### B) The Safavid Dynasty (1501-1722 A.D.)

For nearly five centuries, none of the regimes could support Muharram procession. Following the Buyid regime, the Safavid was the first to allow the Muharram mourning procession. There were several less powerful regimes, but none of them had the courage to officially support the Shiite in Iran (Humayuni 1988: 101), until Safavids who formally supported the Shiite faction by announcing Shia belief as the state religion. It legitimately recognized the mourning and

procession for Imam Husayn. Along with the procession, the Safavid supported *Magtal-Khani* (Recital of Martyrdom stories)<sup>1</sup> and the *Rowzeh-Khani* (*The Reading of the Rowzatual Shuhada* (*The Garden of Martyrs*))<sup>2</sup>. This support from the regime opened the path for the Ta'ziyeh to become a national and religious art form.

Some information about starting of drama in the Safavid regime comes from travelers like Antonio de Covea:

In front of the mourning procession camels are seen draped in green cloth upon which women and children are riding, the heads and faces of the woman and children are bruised and wounded as though by arrows and they appears to be weeping and wailing. Then a company of armed men passed, shooting their guns into the air. After them came coffins followed by the

1. *Magtal-Khani* (*Recital of Martyrdom Stories*) is a narration in story form of the tragedy of Karbala. It contributed more toward a theatrical development of the Ta'ziyeh because it provided the story and, later, Ta'ziyeh playwrights developed its dramatic aspect from the *Magtal*. Mulla Husayn Vaiz Kassefi (d. 1505 A.D.) was the first Persian author to write *Magtal* and named his work *Rowzata'l Shuhada* (*The Garden Of Martyrs*). This book was the Persian source that renewed the dramatic action and theatricality of the Karbala massacre for the Iranian culture (Anasory 1985: 4-5).

2. *Rowzeh-Khani* was the first prototype of tragic drama after *Magtal-Khani*: "They were essentially the record of the tragedy on the Karbala and were recited each Muharram in mourning assemblies and gatherings for the purpose of playing upon the emotions of those present and making them weep" (Chelkowski, 1979: 102). In the *Rowzeh-Khani* we can observe the specific story with specific characters along with singing, chanting, and rhythm.

government. All entered the great mosque of Shiraz. There a mullah [vaiz] mounted the pulpit and recited eulogies, and all wept... (Chelkowski 1979: 105).

Several other travelers also left their accounts about the mourning procession in Iran during the Safavid regime. Each description shows the development of Ta'ziyeh from the procession and **Rowzeh-Khani** toward drama. This development process occurred at the end of the regime, and Ta'ziyeh as the Iranian and Muslim world's only passion play finally came into existence in an early form. Nonetheless, since fall of the Safavid regime in 1722 to Mahmud Ashraf of Afghanistan (part of Iran during that period) and his defeat by Nadir Afshar, a Sunni, in 1725, after which Nader became King in Iran until his death in 1736, Ta'ziyeh and mourning for Husayn was abandoned (Brown 1929: 135).

The political neglect and opposition, for short time affected Ta'ziyeh development (from 1736-1747), during which the Muharram ceremony was stifled, but since the people still mourned for Husayn, they continued the ceremonies underground (Humayuni 1971: 19).

### C) The Zand Regime (1750-1794 A.D.)

After the assassination of Nadir by his own soldiers, Karim Khan-i-Zand became the King of Iran in 1750 A.D. Since, he was a Shia himself, people found political opportunity to perform works that consecrated their beliefs. Karim Khan freely allowed people to participate ceremonies surrounding Imam Husayn's death, and once more the Ta'ziyeh process started with pace.

It is interesting to note how the political situation affected the growth or diminution of the Ta'ziyeh. The Zand's support for Ta'ziyeh and its growth can be found in travelers' account of the time. One of them is by William Franklin, an American, in his book *Observations made on A Tour from Bengal to Persia in the Year 1787-1787* wrote:

About the analysis of Ta'ziyeh, I must say, the dramatic form of the Ta'ziyeh in this period [Zand regime] changed from pure religious mourning and procession to become in its creative and individual form a mixture of several dramatic forms. It shows a very natural phenomenon of art (131).

Sa'idi Humayuni<sup>1</sup> one of the reliable Ta'ziyeh historians in his book *Shiraz: Origin of Ta'ziyeh*, which is based on information from travelogue and other historical facts, concluded, "At the end of the Zand regime in 1794 A.D. Ta'ziyeh reached its ideal dramatic perfection and artistic form in Shiraz" (Humayuni 2000: 82).

### D) The Qajar Dynasty (1796-1925 A.D.)

The Qajar Dynasty put emphasis on two aspects of political strategy toward its goal. First, the dynasty announced Shia to be the state religion, and proclaimed freedom for any kind of ceremony related to Muharram mourning. Second, it supported the nationality of Iran under the symbol of the king

1. Humayuni is the first Iranian Ta'ziyeh scholar whom raise the idea of Ta'ziyeh's origin in Shiraz during the Zand regime (1750-1794 A.D.). However, most of Ta'ziyeh researchers believe became an art form during the Qajar Dynasty (1796-1925 A.D.).

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(Bosworth and Carole 1983: 216). This policy was the same as the Safavid and the only difference was the era. At that time, the society began to change, and Iran had widened relationship with the west through its respective diplomats. The French ambassador to the Persian court in 1881 recorded that "On the eighth night of the Muharram, the great Vizier [Prime Minister] invited the whole of the embassy to attend his Takiyeh<sup>1</sup> for a Ta'ziyeh performance" (Bosworth and Carole 1983: 218).

Because of the popularity of Ta'ziyeh, King Nasar al-dan shah in 1869 A.D. built Takiyeh Dowlat (Royal Arena Theatre) in Tehran. This building was different from the customary Takiyeh as it combined European and traditional Iranian architecture (Shahidi 135: 2001). Another Western influence was the extent to which Western travelers tried to collect Ta'ziyeh scripts<sup>2</sup>, as Polish Orientalist Alexander Chodzko did. He provided the West with the first collection of Ta'ziyeh-Khani drama<sup>3</sup>. He also attended the Ta'ziyeh play in 1833 and even played the character of Nasrany<sup>4</sup>.

1. The term Takiyeh, as used in Iran to refer to site for Shia communal mourning ceremonies, is applied to any site used for such purpose, whether it be a simple arena at the crossroads of a town or an elaborate building to accommodate an audience of thousands (Chelkowski 1979: 64-65).

2. The Ta'ziyeh script is written in verse form in seven-line strophes. Herman Eteh, German scholar and orientlist said about Ta'ziyeh texts, "Iran, like Greece and Europe in the Middle Ages, found its drama. Ta'ziyeh is a religious and natural Iranian creation. Its playwrights and producers are unknown. It is one of the most perfect ritual dramas that you can see in one nation (Hermann Eteh 1970: 204)."

3. Chodzko knew the Iranian language very well and he was the first foreign researcher of Iranian folklore. In 1796 A.D. he collected more than three hundred Ta'ziyeh manuscripts. He

During the Qajar era, the Ta'ziyeh spread throughout Iran. In every village and city Ta'ziyeh companies began performing the text. It even attracted women, and several female companies became active, the performances being only for women.

Also, Ta'ziyeh comedies began to develop comic characters, such as the clownish slave. These comedies were usually performed at times other than Muharram, such as in celebration of Imam Husayn's birthday. In these comedies, performers attempted to bring more improvisation into their performances much like the *commedia dell arte* troupes of Italy. These companies would also try to adapt their performance to the local towns and village in which they performed, alluding to people or local problems in their improvisations (Baizi 1965: 140)<sup>5</sup>.

It is noteworthy that at the end of Qajar era in 1925 A.D. the Takiyeh Dowlat was shuttered up and Ta'ziyeh was never again performed in it. In 1948 A.D. the new King, Raza Shah Pahlavi ordered it to be razed, but this did not prevent Taziyeh from dying away. It continued to be played in the towns and villages where the people's support kept it alive (Humayuni 1971: 30).

translated some of these texts into French and published them in 1832 (Chodzko 1878: 35).

4. Nasrany was a Christian and appears as the Third Commander of the Yazid Army in the Ta'ziyeh play *The Martyrdom of Imam Husayn*. In the play he converts to Islam and is killed as a martyr.

5. These comedies and especially the comic characters involved eventually lead to the foundation of an Iranian national drama called Rouhozi, which utilized these characters.

### Ta'zīyeh in the Contemporary Western World

From an early contact between Iran and the West during Safavids, Western scholars and travelers became more interested in this unique work. These people expressed their views on Ta'zīyeh's popularity and its apparent value to the Iranian people. However, Ta'zīyeh's epic form and other specific qualities attracted Western theatre scholars and theatre practitioners in the Postmodern era of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most important of these are its artistic and dramatic value with significant historical content that exhibits the Islamic faith and culture as well. There is also the universal idea of martyrdom, common in much of the Western religious drama, especially the Passion play. Also, knowledge of the Ta'zīyeh texts gives a new perspective to those who are interested in serious drama and a writing style that is not of traditionally Western in structure. Working on Ta'zīyeh and its performance can be a satisfying experience for all who participate in it, especially for theatre practitioners interested in ritualistic and experimental theatre.

Ta'zīyeh performance these days can be divided into several styles: first, a more traditional, "old-fashioned" such as that produced by the Ta'zīyeh Troup in Iran. Second, a more thought-provoking contemporary mode that depends on the a director to realize and create more theatrical effects.

The Ta'zīyeh's has distant counterparts in Western theatre; some may compare it to Grotowski's "Poor Theatre," as both forms do not use complex production designs. For example, in Ta'zīyeh, a bowl of water symbolizes the Euphrates River. One branch of the tree indicates

the greenery found in nature<sup>1</sup>. Ta'zīyeh has impressed its artistic significance on other researchers, like Richard Schechner, who in his book *Between Theatre and Anthropology* articulates, "It is hard to classify Ta'zīyeh since it belongs neither to ritual nor theatre nor politics" (Schechner 1985: 4). Peter Brook, the British theatrical innovator, sees Ta'zīyeh in the same way as Schechner. He believes that the experience of a Ta'zīyeh performance has adequate magic and potential to capture the attention of audiences<sup>2</sup>.

1. By "poor" Grotowski means stripping the theatre of extraneous outward appearance and achieving a purity of interaction between audience and actor that is based on their common humanity. This is only possible by reinvesting dramatic action with ritual and establishing a common denominator or archetype, such as in Ta'zīyeh's redemptive martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala. Grotowski seems to be striving for what have always been the fundamental principles of Ta'zīyeh. The important difference is that Grotowski regarded the theatre as his laboratory and controls intimacy by limitation of space, number and distribution of spectators, and so forth; his is chamber theatre. Ta'zīyeh, on the other hand, achieves the same goal in enormous spaces and with masses of spectators (Chelkowski 1979: 10-11).

2. I saw in a remote Iranian village, one of the strangest things I have ever seen in theatre: a group of four hundred villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under a tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing--although they knew perfectly well the end of the story--as they saw Husayn in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred the theatre form became a truth--there was no difference between past and present. An event that was told as remembered happening in history, thirteen hundred years ago, actually became a reality in that moment. Nobody could draw the line between the different orders of reality. It was an incarnation: at that particular moment he was being martyred again in front of those villagers (Hochman, ed., 1991: 56).

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Because of Ta'ziyeh sway on researchers, and practitioners, there is a soaring demand to see it in performance. To some aficionados of the postmodern theatre movement and Eastern ritual drama, it has become a passion to travel to the birthplace of a form like Ta'ziyeh and experience it on site. However, it is very difficult to overcome the distance between Iran and American and European cultural centers in order to find the resources to bring Ta'ziyeh to the West. Even then, it is not understood by the general populace. The most recent Ta'ziyeh to be performed in the United States was on July 21, 2002, at the Lincoln Center Festival. David Patrick Stearns, a music critic for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, titled his article "Oklahoma' it isn't: Muslim musical theatre comes to N. Y." (Stearns July 2002). For both Western and Eastern theatre people, a closer relationship and understanding could be a breath of diplomatic "fresh air." Furthermore, combining ritualistic performance ideals with more creativity would certainly provide a better atmosphere for today's theatre.

### Conclusion

Ta'ziyeh is a ritual drama treasure from the past which exists today in the East. It integrates Iranian faith, civilization, history, culture, arts, music<sup>1</sup>,

1. Music in the history of Iran has always been popular, and for this reason has been incorporated into the Ta'ziyeh. Music is mainly used in the Muharram procession. Nuha Khani is choral singing in which several kinds of songs and musical instruments are used, even joined by the audience in some parts. It shows the power of music and its important role in Ta'ziyeh. To perform in Ta'ziyeh each group of actors representing the protagonist and antagonist must learn Iranian

literature and creativity. To understand Ta'ziyeh means to appreciate a nation with a rich cultural and artistic heritage. Ta'ziyeh combines several different elements from a processional mourning form to fully operatic action, from pure bodily symbols to the most significant scenic and iconic themes, from simple choral singing to the most difficult Iranian traditional musical performance. It encompasses diverse customs, symbolic color, spectacular scenery, and even poor environment in its *mise-en-scene*. All these aspects partake of qualities that could bring Ta'ziyeh out of the country of its origin to the entire whole world seeking greater enjoyment and human knowledge.

Finally, from the day of Imam Husayn's martyrdom upto present time, Ta'ziyeh has become history in itself. Its journey has not been an easy one. It has had many struggles and challenges, but it has become a well-known traditional and ritual art form and the only passion play of the Islamic world. It gives its viewers bliss and the opportunity for emotional catharsis, motivation, enough for its practice.

ritual music. Because Ta'ziyeh is musical drama. The actors learn how to match the song with its appropriate musical instrument. The protagonists sing with rhythm but the antagonist's song is very loud without emphasis on the rhythm, which sets the him apart and serves to incite the audience against him. Six or seven instruments, such as the trumpet, flute, drums, cymbal, and horn are used. Each Ta'ziyeh group has an orchestra of about five to seven people under the guidance of a director. Finally, about the music in Ta'ziyeh we can say that it is quite operatic and at the same time alluring and beautiful (Ayassami 1973: 124).



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