

Development of Diegetic Practices in Iranian Indigenous Performances: A Historical View

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Performance Traditions and Narrative Practices in Ancient Persia

Persian performance dates back to the centuries before the rise of Islam. It is assumed that ritual ceremonies are the right starting point to discuss on the roots of performance in Iran. Popular rituals such as *Soug-e Siavash* (Mourning for *Siavash*, a mythic Prince) and *Kin-e Iradj* (Revenge of *Iradj*, a mythic King), the oral epics collected and remained from antique literary texts like *Shah-Name* (Book of The Kings), are generally recognized as the historical bases from which developed the earliest arrangements of regular social gatherings later called *Majles* (A Meeting of the Folks). These took place each year at a given time and place. Due to Islamic restrictions for portraying atheistic icons and demonic figures, these meetings disappeared and were at last totally transformed into a type of religious assembly, particularly after the dominance of Shiite sectarianism in the settled territories, approximately between 600 and 800 A.D.

There are different views about the beginnings of the Ta'ziyeh. Some scholars and orientalist believe that the preliminary experiences which today may be called religious performances happened after the first centuries of establishing the Shiite faith in Iran, during the Safavid dynasty (1502-1736 AD) as an official instrument of the State to promote the spirit of commemorating and mourning for the heroes who sacrificed by the evils at the Holy Day of Ashura.

In spite of all changes in the styles and the performative strategies of showing Ta'ziyeh, through its long journey from ancient Persia to the current time, new trends of Iranian theatre remain deeply connected to the tradition of telling stories and doing actions simultaneously before popular audiences. These are mostly inspired by the Muslims' interests in getting together to celebrate their myths and epics. In this respect, Iranian believers are known as the most interested people of the region attracted to gathering around and reciting the oral narratives again and again. Ta'ziyeh was hence a kind of materializing of the communal unconsciousness to make ideal imaginary associations with the relatives of the Prophet Muhammad. Repeating the seasonal ceremonies and imitating the heroic actions were, in fact, a shared intention to be totally engaged in—an initiation, the ritual of becoming mature. In this respect, Ta'ziyeh might be connected to the anthropological approach of performance theory.

Among those non-religious performances in Iran of which we may follow the vague traces, Naghali is the

most influential in its use of narrative practices. We don't know much about the origin of Naghali in the pre-Islamic world. A few indications in Iranian literature and historical books suggest that there were many popular storytellers in ancient Persia who recounted lyric and epic stories for the people and this is the oral tradition which came into Islamic communities. The poems of Ferdowsi (*Shahname*, 1010 AD), Nizami's *Haft Peykar* (which literally means seven stages of transcendence, 1200 AD) and the book *History of Sistan* (1460 AD) or Ibn Nadim's *Al-Fehrest* (987 A.D.) were the most reliable texts in which the narrative practices of doing a performance in ancient Persia could be found.

After the advent of Islam, however, there were numerous folklore and literary texts that might inform us how these—not yet perhaps called theatrical—ceremonies evolved through the different periods of the Islamic empire. Several picaresque-style narratives of local rulers, their battles and romances still popular with the Iranian people were prevalent all around the territory. The story of *Samak-e Ayyar* (1275 AD), *Firouz Shah Epic* (1250 AD), *Darab Nameh* (1300 AD) and *Amir Arsalan* (1400 AD) are the major texts from that time. The common aspect of these stories was the domination of narrative instead of doing action or showing and representing a certain act. These types of provoking audiences by means of reporting techniques and language-based strategies later developed a unique pattern of exchanging the facts and images between actor-narrator and spectator-receiver that may be also found in Ta'ziyeh.

In general, Naghali is a method of reciting, reading or recounting epic events and romances. In ancient Persia, it was often accompanied by musical instruments that were rarely seen after the rise of Islam, due to their illegal possible abuses. All musical and choral effects were gradually removed from the performative structure of Naghali, but the oriental techniques of narrating stories, in the meantime, continued to develop in the Islamic periods. In the first three centuries of Islam, the mission of *Naghalan* (Naghali Performers) was promoting the nationalist spirit of Iranians, but since around 1000 AD they were engaged in making their own myths and idols for ordinary people. Mythopoeia therefore flourished with the assistance of unorganized performative traditions, which had not yet any theatrical identity or established terminology. That is in fact a turning point in Iranian performance history, when the myths and epics were manipulated to benefit business or for political purposes, to control public opinion. A fabricated history of superstitions was developed later by traditional performers, who were commissioned to encourage folks to be more involved in religious and official ceremonies.

During the Mongolian period (1284-1335 AD), Naghali favored the narrating of pseudo-epic and religious myths. Due to state sponsorship, it especially flourished in Safavid dynasty, and it hence divided into some minor but innovative branches of folklore performance in Iran. The *Hamle khani* (Attack Play), *Shah Name Khani* (Epic Play), *Rawze Khani* (Threnody Play) and *Sokhan vari* (Declamatory Play) are amongst the popular minor performances propagated during the Islamic dynasties. Naghali as an established style of performance moved during the Qadjar periods (1794-1925 AD) to the *Ghahve Khane*, a traditional location for serving tea and hookah. Remembering the myths and the saints through the exotic experience of watching a rhythmic show, particularly along with flavored tobacco smoked from an Arabic or Turkish hookah, made this narrative practice an inseparable part of Iranian traditional performance.

Naghali (Minstrelsy): The Narrative Foundation of Iranian Performance

Not only as a form of oral storytelling but also as a style of individual (solo) performance, Naghali can be considered today as a performance mediated by the presence of a narrator-performer that appeals to

actions and body gestures for recounting a story. What is the subject of focus is that in the given tradition of performance, (which is a significant source for the emergence of successive traditions of performance in Iran), diegetic and narrative elements outweigh mimetic and performative elements. In fact, events are told rather than being performed; in other words, "telling" dominates "showing."

A *Naghal* sometimes implies the presence of another character by a specific way of looking ahead, and specifies the dimensions of this presence by an extension of the look, or the actions and motions of the imagined person can be suggested by retreats or sudden attacks. This narrator-performer turns from one character to another through actions like whispering, sudden calling or screaming, changing the tone of speech, incorporation of prose and poetry, or sitting and standing. In another variation, assembling all the characters, he acts as a general narrator who recounts an episode, tells short jokes or admonishes. It can be said that in Naghali, the presence of characters is more verbal than physical; therefore, movement from one character to another takes place by each statement of a Naghal who narrates the characters rather than performing (imitating) them. Even when a Naghal performs the actions and manner of a character and imitates his/her intonation (first-person presentation), he refers to the character as a third-person (combination of narration and imitation). In fact, the Naghal always remains fundamentally a narrator.

For the presentation and definition of the space, a Naghal might visualize a variety of times and places, utilizing only a cane and without the help of any other property. The fact is that space is merely a mental image that is imagined via the speech or movements of a Naghal and the movement of the cane. The cane might function as a symbol for sword, spear, bow or a horse, and its movement may visualize walking in the plains, climbing a mountain or riding a horse. In some cases, also, a merely verbal description makes the image. For instance, a Naghal might say: "*What a verdant valley and a high mountain! It is better to sit down under this tree!*" then sitting under the imagined tree and leaning back on it. Beside the cane, in a *Sokhan-vari* (oratory / Declamatory) show, the wares of *Sárdam* (a symbolic façade conventionally used to hang the guru's belongings) were often also added to the scene. With no performative or narrative functions, these objects are simply exchanged during a conversational debate of two orators. Since the theatrical atmosphere is purely represented by speech and action here, there is no need of moving the props for changing the scene. Time and space are constantly changing in this performance, but the narrator can easily pass from a given time to another by using a short hint or articulation, a tiny gestural mime, a tonal variation of words.

It needs to be noted that a Naghal never imitates the role of a character in the manner that an actor might put himself into a character's skin. Although a Naghal performs the role of a character with actions and speech tone, he keeps distant in speech and presents the character in the third person. Furthermore, in contrast to the use of present tense in drama, a Naghal narrates the verbs in past tense indicating distance from a performed role (as is suggested in Brecht's epic theatre). The distance between narrating (telling) a story and performing (imitating) it is especially clear when a Naghal might refer to a scroll script while performing. A great number of Naghals held a scroll that included the text and sometimes read from that. The presence of the scroll served as a barrier for Naghals moving from a narrator role to the actor role.

Persian Diegesis vs. Western Mimesis: An Aesthetic Approach

Diegesis has been commonly described by exploiting its contrast with the concept of mimesis. The distinction between performative presentation that imitates words and actions (Mimesis) and fictional presentation that narrates actions and events (Diegesis) dates back to Plato's *Republic*. In the third book of

this work, Plato discusses the methods of storytelling and makes a distinction between two kinds of narration: *Diegesis*, through which a narrator (author) directly speaks to us without pretending that the speaker is a different person and *mimesis*, in which an author indirectly, i.e. via different characters, speaks to us. From another perspective, mimesis refers to the direct representation of the events without mediation of a narrator while diegesis is an indirect medium of representation, i.e. it requires a narrator.

Aristotle extends the concept of mimesis in his *Poetics* in a way that has made it a key term in the realm of performative arts. He does not assume mimesis to be exclusively bound to theatre and considers different types of poetry (from tragedy to epic) as the various forms of imitation differentiated by three elements, namely means of imitation, the subjects of imitation and the methods of imitation. From his point of view, what differentiates the various arts is the method of imitation; thus, imitation in tragedy operates by action and in epic by narration.

During the primary stages of modern Western discussions of narratology, diegesis was gradually associated with a fictional narrative through which actions and events are narrated verbally and mediated by a narrator; on the other hand, mimesis was associated with a dramatic world where the words and actions were directly imitated or performed without the presence of a narrator. In more recent years, some Western scholars tried to make a connection between drama and narrative, regardless of their historical struggle for being diegetic or mimetic media. Some investigated diegetic aspects of performance and attempted to recognize the voice of a "narrator" and the methods of "telling" instead of "showing" in drama, through which they referred to the components like prologue, epilogue, asides, soliloquies, parabasis, messengers' reports and choric speeches in drama and likewise to some particular types like memory play and monodrama.

In his epic theatre, Brecht attempted to modify theatre into a sort of storytelling. He not only made efforts to revive narrator types in classical theatre and, consequently, turned back to chorus, messenger reports and direct audience addresses for mediating the transmission of a story and third-person recounting, but also characters in his theatre appear as "narrators" of the roles and "messengers" of the story rather than sheer representational roles and parts of the story. He even used to ask actors to rehearse using expressions like "that man said" or "that woman said." As a result, apart from using the past tense (exclusive to storytelling) instead of present tense in drama, the dialogic and first-person speech of characters were replaced with a narratorial and third-person report. In fact, characters read the explanation of a text in each scene instead of performing it, by the help of which the distance and difference between "written" story and "performed" one decreased to their least amount.

Ta'ziyeh: a Diegetic Performance

The combination of mourning rituals and narrating traditions of Naghali prepared the way for an Iranian performance called *Ta'ziyeh* or *Shabih-khani*, a kind of epic performance rather than a performative art with its conventional Western connotations. In other words, *Ta'ziyeh* comes between narrative and performance. Emphasizing the concept of *verfremdung* or alienation, numerous researchers have investigated the similarity between *Ta'ziyeh* and the epic theatre advocated by Brecht. It is important to stress however that *Ta'ziyeh* was created long before the bringing of strategies of narrativizing a performance into theory and practice by Western artists like Piscator and Brecht. *Verfremdung* in the Brechtian theatre was a transition from performance to narrative in addition to its socio-political aims. In point of fact, the characters, by creating distance, constantly intended to signify that they were not

characters but narrators. In *Ta'ziyeh*, similarly, presenters mostly narrate the story rather than depict or perform the roles and events. The application of the term "*Shabih-khan*" instead of the equivalent terms in Farsi or Arabic for actor or performer can be an indicator of the aforementioned situation. This is the reason that presenters of *Ta'ziyeh*, for example Imam-Khan, conventionally held a scroll script in their hands to indicate that they were not Imams or caliphs but ordinary people who were reading these words. Since in this kind of performance, it is emphasized that the presenters do not embody and play the roles of characters but are merely like those characters of "*Shabih*" and are there to narrate roles but not be a character, it is possible for the presenters easily to leave their roles and join the chest-beating audience members, or to drink a cup of tea in the intervals, or even after martyrdom stand up and present another role. The concepts of time and space in *Ta'ziyeh* also bear more diegetic features than mimetic. In contrast to the exact and estimated time in drama, *Ta'ziyeh* can simultaneously encompass present, past and future. Possible times can be altered with only a single sentence or turn of a presenter. Contrary to the Aristotelian principle of three unities, we encounter a multiple presentation of variable times and places.

Similarly, the visual aspects of space are not restricted but unstable and uncertain. As an example, if a water bowl is held by a character, it may represent a drinking container, but leaving it on the ground might signify the Euphrates River. Sometimes a cane connotes the prominence of a character and at another time it betokens a war instrument. Because of the limited visual effects, space in *Ta'ziyeh* is mainly represented by characters' elucidations. As a mimetic factor by which the fictional nature of narrative might be transformed to a performative mode, dialogue has not any dramatic effect in *Ta'ziyeh*. On the contrary, it resembles to a type of recounting a given text, or of delivering a long monologue, a kind of open expression of thoughts or feelings with no clear addressee. The characters in *Ta'ziyeh* have no conversations together, but each starts and finishes the reading of their scripts signaled by the beckoning of director's cane.

In *Ta'ziyeh*, the narrative layers are constantly interwoven by presenters-narrators (*Shabih-khan*) and directors (*Shabih-gardan*). The director can step into a running performance and change the flow of a performance or remind presenters of the roles. Moreover, *Shabih-khans* sometimes leave the roles they are presenting to become a narrator or a commentator. For instance, *Movafegh-khan* (protagonists) sometimes praise the roles they are presenting; while *Mokhalef-khan* (antagonists) may curse Imam Hussein's enemies, including themselves, and recant the roles they are presenting. Moreover, the actors are suspended in a threshold between performance time and real time. Sometimes an actor leaves his role and directly speaks to the audience or reads a long text outside the story line or dialogues. Amid the performance, actors and audiences frequently act like a chorus and start singing or join in chest-beating, comment on the events being shown or predict the coming incidents. *Ta'ziyeh* also provides an interesting exemplar of the play within a play. The main events are constantly combined with *Pish-Vaghe'e-Khani-Ha* (prologues), *Hashiye-Khani-Ha* (digressions) and *Mozhek-Ha* (ridiculous interludes). A wedding may be held amidst the Kerbala events, folk tales are incorporated into the event of Muharram and even Iranian literary figures like Layla and Majnun may appear in religious stories. In Brecht's epic theater, at the beginning of each scene a brief review of the scene in narrative form is sometimes presented, an already performed scene may be "told" once more, or a scene thoroughly reported, instead of being performed. In *Ta'ziyeh*, sometimes the opponents introduce themselves to the audience at the beginning of play, and verbally present their story. To sum up, it can be asserted while *Ta'ziyeh* involves a strong tendency towards telling and narrating instead of imitation and representation. Its difference from the operations of standard Western theatre is summed up in the following table:

Table 1- A Comparative Presentation of Diegetic World of *Ta'ziyeh* with Mimetic World of Theatre**Diegetic World of *Ta'ziyeh***

Narration of events

Narration of roles

Use of the term “Shabih-Khan” for performers

Verbal description of space

Verbal visualization of entities and limited use of stage equipment

Script reading

Shifts in infinite time and space

Individuals as narrators

Monologue of “Shabih-Khan”

Reporting events in past tense

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a highly notable example of incorporating storytelling into performance is *Ta'ziyeh-e Doreh* or *Ta'ziyeh-e Sayyar* (mobile *Ta'ziyeh*). In this kind of *Ta'ziyeh*, ten groups of 'Shabih-Ha' successively perform ten events of Kerbala in an open space. First, a single group performs the first event and proceeds to perform for the next audience while the second group occupies their place to perform the second event, and in this procedure, ten groups sequentially pass the audience and perform a specific part of a story. This method of performance can be investigated as a particular way of presenting a story in performance. It can be a significant solution for incorporating chain narratives of Iranian storytelling traditions into the frame of Iranian native performance. Western theatre scholars may be struck by the similarity of organization between this method of presentation and that of the medieval cycle plays in England and elsewhere, Europe's own most outstanding example of religious-based drama.

Mimetic World of Theatre

Theatrical actions

Imitation of roles

Use of the terms “actor” or “performer”

Visual presentation of space

Unlimited and visual use of stage equipment

Dialogic interaction

Confined in a specific time and space

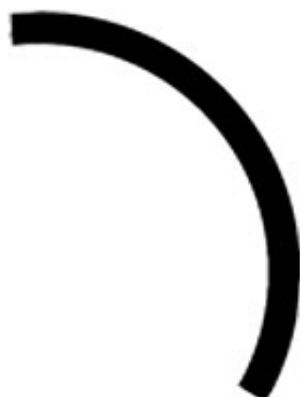
Individuals as roles

Dialogue between actors

Performing events in present tense

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