

Ta'ziyeh as a Heterotopic Site

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On the first month of the Muslim lunar calendar, that is, during the month of Muharram, thousands of Iranian Shi'ites commemorate the Martyrdom of Imam Hussein in a tradition known as Ta'ziyeh. Literally meaning expressions of sympathy, mourning and consolation,¹ Ta'ziyeh can be understood as an indigenous expression of Islamic drama. Through performance, poetic recitation and song, the subject matter is always connected to the one particular event in the history of the Shi'ites: the suffering and death of Hussein on the plains of Karbala in 680 AD.² Perhaps more concisely, it can be defined as a ritualistic form of theatre; for without the elements of participation and belief, on the part of both the actors and audience, its theatrical realization could not be possible. This link has often led scholars to compare Ta'ziyeh to the Christian passion plays of medieval Europe,³ particularly in regards to the Oberammergau Passion Play. Peter Chelkowski, a professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at New York University, writes: "The dramatic form known as the passion play [Tazi'yeh] is often associated exclusively with Western, and specifically, Christian theatrical tradition."⁴ Although several parallels can indeed be made, the most obvious being the devotion to the suffering and death of an oppressed religious figure, viewing Ta'ziyeh simply as a variety of theater in Western terms robs it of its indigenous value. Ta'ziyeh is not a contemporary phenomenon, but rather, the culmination of a 300-year (with plausible earlier roots) tradition that has been strong enough to stand against repeated opposition.

This essay argues that the reasons for the development and perseverance of Ta'ziyeh in Iranian history are due to its heterotopic qualities; that is, its ability to repeatedly create subversive sites in which norms may be contested and undermined. The theory of a heterotopic site, as defined by Michel Foucault in his article *Des espaces autres* (Of Other Spaces), will be used as an analytical tool that is best able to elucidate Ta'ziyeh as uniquely indigenous to the Iranian Shi'ite spirit.

Before entering into this analysis, some elaboration on the emergence and development of Ta'ziyeh is necessary. We have evidence that Mu'zzu'd Dawla, of the Buyid Dynasty, had ordered his people to go into mourning.⁵ The original report of these mourning rituals has been provided by Ibnul-Athir, the author of *The Complete History of Islam and Iran*. The source explains that on the tenth day of Muharram of the year 963, Mu'zzu'd Dawla issued orders for people to close the shops and bazaar, not to sell or buy, and to wear coarse black clothes.⁶ For women, they were to disarray their hair, to blacken their faces, to rend their clothes, to lament, to walk in the city and to slap their faces.⁷ Thus in its initial form, Ta'ziyeh was simply a mourning ritual that took form in processions.

The next elements were only introduced in the sixteenth century with the Safavids' reestablishment of Persia as a nation and the adoption of Shi'ism as the official state religion. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, a Frenchman who traveled to the East several times, describes a clear example of *shabih-sazi* (impersonation) as part of the mourning rites performed at that time.⁸ He writes: "In some of those coffins, a child was sleeping and the coffin was surrounded by people

who were weeping and mourning. These children were representative of Ali Akbar and Ali Asghar, children of Imam Hussein who were killed by Yazid.”⁹ Mock Battles, accompanied by funeral music were performed along a path of spectators in what could perhaps be contemporarily visualized as a form of parade¹⁰. We also witness the appearance of colorful costumes and *tableaux vivants* (living pictures) of butchered martyrs stained with blood that were moved along wheeled platforms.¹¹ With the encouragement of the Safavid officials, court poets were likewise encouraged to create elegies centering on Hussein and began using elegiac literature to elevate their narration of the tragedy of Karbala; *rowzeh-khani* (recitation sessions) became an additional feature of the Muharram ceremonies.¹² Virtually always connected with the Karbala ambush, these stories were taken from a book called *Rowzato 'i Shohadah* or *The Garden of Martyrs*, written in Persian and widely circulated among Shi'ites from the early sixteenth century onwards.¹³

It took an additional two centuries, until the Qajar dynasty was in power in the eighteenth century, for processions and recitations to merge into a tradition of symbols and conventions rich and complex enough to result in the birth of Ta'ziyeh as an actual dramatic representation of the tragedy of Karbala.¹⁴ The tradition reached its fullest development—its zenith—under Nasseredin Shah (1848-96) who was responsible for constructing the *takiyah-i-dawlat* (takiyah of the state), modeled after London's Albert Hall and able to accommodate over 3000 spectators.¹⁵ Samuel Benjamin, the first ambassador of the United States to Iran writes of its grandeur:

The interior of the building is nearly two hundred feet in diameter and some eighty feet high...in the center of the arena was a circular stage of masonry, raised three feet and approached by two stairways...The entire area...was absolutely packed with women, thousands on thousands...Refreshments were served in our box repeatedly, and cigars for myself...But after the performance began, all smoking and refreshments were banned as indications of frivolity in consistent with the tragical events of the damas.¹⁶

The Ta'ziyeh suffered significantly in the 20th century, when it was attacked by a number of pro-Western and nationalistic movements that objected to such religious dramas deemed to encourage social stagnation.¹⁷ It was in fact banned in the 1930's by the Pahlavi monarchy but latter played an important role in mobilizing the feelings of the Iranians in support of the Islamic revolution. Although on one hand the new government did not approve of Ta'ziyeh, it eventually came to be part of the Republic's Islamic values. Today, throughout Iran, it is possible to see many Ta'ziyeh performances during the month of Muharram, as well as other festivals held throughout the year.¹⁸ Since Ta'ziyeh now lies mostly in the hands of the government, the tradition may suffer from religious and artistic restrictions, leading to a possible misrepresentation of the faith and tastes of the Iranian population.¹⁹ However, as the history of the tradition has shown, it is not the first, nor likely the last time, that Ta'ziyeh has faced an oppositional force that directly challenges its indigenous endurance.

As mentioned above, this essay argues that the reasons for the development and perseverance of Ta'ziyeh in Iranian history are due to the heterotopic qualities of the tradition. Heterotopias in Foucault's formulation, in contrast to Utopias, are material places in space, which are both integrated into the fabric of society but also at once removed from it.²⁰ They are alternative sites, both physical and metaphysical, which can simultaneously mirror society, even replicate some of its structures, but also contested and invert them.²¹ As Naomi Hetherington writes: "Heterotopias organize a bit of the social world in a different way to that which surrounds them. That alternative ordering makes them out as Other and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things."²² In this sense, heterotopias are always in the process of becoming rather than being. By creating themselves as new kinds of places, local acts of resistance are facilitated through the alternative ordering of the social world.²³

Along the same lines, Hamid Dabashi views Ta'ziyeh as a theatre of protest in its relation to Shia Islam as a religion of protest, which was put to use to consolidate the Safavid Empire, the Qajar Empire, to overthrow the Pahlavi government and to consolidate a theocracy.²⁴ Dabashi argues that the central thematic of Ta'ziyeh and Shi'ism is the notion of *mazlumiyyat* (the absence of justice that signals the necessity of its presence) which is reflected in the configuration of the protagonist and the antagonist.²⁵ Hussein's epithet is "*Mazlum*"; he is called "*Hussein-e Mazlum*," or "the Hussein who was wronged."²⁶ The protagonist, Hussein, is understood as a martyr or a victim of unjustified oppression by the antagonist, Yazid. Although Dabashi states that Ta'ziyeh can only be understood in its Shia context, many strong family resemblances can be drawn to pre-Islamic rituals, particularly in regards to the central thematic of *mazlumiyyat*.

For instance, the Mesopotamian mourning ritual of *The Death and Resurrection of Dimuzi*, is probably one of the earliest mourning rituals created, and became the prototype for many similar versions; *Dimuzi* was a Sumerian god called *Tammuz* in Babylonian and *Adonis* in Greek.²⁷ The ritual consisted mainly of mourning procession and recitation, the main features of Ta'ziyeh, in the name of the dead god. Similarly, the *Abydos Passion Play*, was a ritual which dramatized the death and resurrection of the Egyptian god Osiris, probably performed each year on the first day of spring in the period around 2500 BCE.²⁸ The *Stella Ikhernefret* provides valuable inscriptions about this yearly ritual drama, which has been interpreted by some scholars as holding theatrical elements in which the death and resurrection of Osiris were re-enacted by a crowd of people and priests, including battle scenes and processions.²⁹ *The Mourning for Siavush* is strikingly similar to the death and resurrection of Osiris, in terms of both form and context. Ehsan Yarshater provides a convincing argument for the connection between the *Passion of Siavush* and that of Hussein. Although he does state that the origin and development of the Ta'ziyeh could be drawn from Mesopotamian, Anatolian and Egyptian myths, he emphasizes that one cannot deny that Ta'ziyeh has clear precedents in pre-Islamic Persia.³⁰

In all three rituals, those of Osiris, Siavush and Hussein, a beloved hero is killed by an evil opponent who cannot tolerate the righteousness and popularity of his opponent. Just as Seth is envious of Osiris, so too is Garsivaz of Siavush and Yazid of Hussein.³¹ In all three cases, the antagonist is killed by the hero's son (or a close representative): Seth by Horus, Garsivaz by Kai

Khusrau, and Shimr, one of the Imams killers, by Mokhtar. In all three cases the theme of resurrection is evident: Osiris as the judge of the dead, Siavush as a plant or as his son and Imam Mahdi as the returning savior.³² Yet above all, in all three cases, the element of *shuhada* (martyrdom) is a key element in the central thematic of *mazlumiyyat*. Shahrokh Meskoob describes how *shuhadat* is a sacred phenomenon and is consequently mixed with religious beliefs. Meskoob argues that the myth of *Siavush*, as an old belief and tradition, has remained in the unconsciousness after the advent of Islam.³³ The point is that the martyrdom of Hussein, such as the martyrdom of *Siavush* and *Osiris* is an effort to provide revolutionaries, or an alternative ordering through time and space in the name of *mazlumiyyat*.

The narratives of Ta'ziyeh, center on Hussein, who consciously goes to Karbala to be martyred in order to protect the basis of Islam. He is a living symbol or role model for those who are in search of truth and justice in this world. William S. Haas writes:

No doubt in the recesses of their souls the Persians, at least those of the first centuries after the Islamic conquest, identified themselves with the persecution and martyrdom of Ali and his house. They, too, were a defeated and humiliated people whose rights and deepest convictions had been violated and trodden upon... the great psychological function of the Shia schism was the defense and self-protection against the new religion.³⁴

In this sense, Ta'ziyeh as the religious and cultural expression of the oppressed, can be viewed as a heterotopic site that presents an alternative ordering that challenges the norms, whether that norm is the Umayyad Caliphate, the Ottoman empire or the Pahlavi regime.

Now that we have established the heterotopic quality of Ta'ziyeh—its ability to create sites of resistance—the rest of the essay will be devoted to explaining the mechanics wherein this is facilitated. Foucault, in “Les espaces autres”, mentions a number of heterotopias, such as cemeteries, Persian gardens, asylums, ships, and briefly, as a contemporary example: theatre. Well aware and in fact inspired by Ta'ziyeh, in its 20th century form, Foucault wrote: “*L'hétérotopie a le pouvoir de juxtaposer en un seul lieu réel plusieurs espaces, plusieurs emplacements qui sont en eux-mêmes incompatibles. C'est ainsi que le théâtre fait succéder sur le rectangle de la scène toute une série de lieux qui sont étrangers les uns aux autres*”³⁵. A common statement made by several leading scholars, such as Peter Chelkowski, Rebecca Pettys and Janet Afary is that Ta'ziyeh continuously breaks the boundaries of time and space and of the real and imagined worlds. For instance, *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain*, a complete collection of Ta'ziyeh plays published in English by Colonel Sir Lewis Pelly in 1879, describes the cycle beginning with the story of Jacob and his loss of Joseph and ending with the day of final judgment, all while revolving around the central tragedy of Karbala.³⁶ In one of the segments we witness Jacob, who existed centuries before Christ, speak of the trials of Karbala, which took place seven centuries after Christ.³⁷ This is one of countless instances in which historical events are unbounded by time and space, or in other words, whereby there is a suspended sense of history. Dabashi eloquently writes: “The suspended sense of history is contingent—always – on an expectant delivery, where a promise is made, and almost (but never completely) cosmetic promise, and whereupon history can never end, or begin, for *history*, is but a mimetic trope in a story that is eternally retold.”³⁸ This eternal story is that of the oppressed and the oppressor, of

the future life and the material world and of the good and the evil.³⁹ Its genius is that it combines immediacy and immense flexibility with a sort of universality⁴⁰. For instance, Khomeini was able to merge the oppression of Hussein with the oppression of Iran in the Iran-Iraq War; the emphasis was on Hussein's willingness to sacrifice his own life in the name of *mazzlumiyyat*.⁴¹ Its meaning derives from the fact that what happened in the year 61 of the Muslim era on the battlefield of Karbala can continuously express itself as present reality. Chelkowski writes: "All Ta'ziyeh drama expands beyond spatial and time constraints to merge the past and present into one unifying moment of intensity that allows the spectators to be simultaneously in the performance space and at Karbala."⁴²

Even the physical space in which Ta'ziyeh are performed, reflect this central paradox: all takiyeh, regardless of their size, are constructed as theatres-in-the-round (a circular stage in the middle of the audience) to intensify the dynamic between actors and audience.⁴³ The spectators are literally surrounded by the action and often become physical participants in the play; in unwallled takiyeh, it is not unusual for combat or other spontaneous scenes to occur behind the audience.⁴⁴ Returning to Foucault's explanation of the heterotopic quality of theater in particular—that is its ability to juxtapose in a single place several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible, we see that Ta'ziyeh is a heightened example of a heterotopic space whereby neither time or place is real and definite. It offers a concrete materialization of the concept of the heterotopia as a material place, which enacts imagined version of the real and of an individual's relationship with these imagined realities.⁴⁵

This last point—that is, the individual's relationship with these imagined realities—is particularly important because much of Ta'ziyeh's appeal is in the physical, spiritual and emotional links forged between the actors and the audience.⁴⁶ Ta'ziyeh, particularly during its peak in the 18th century, was a communal event; each individual contributed according to his/her means and ability. Men brought their most precious or humble objects with religious devotion, athletes donated their strength and women provided refreshments such as water, the symbol of the Martyr's thirst.⁴⁷ Participation was seen to be an aid to salvation, for the suffering and death of the martyrs of Karbala were instruments of redemption for all believers.⁴⁸ Similarly, Afary argues that Ta'kiyeh is a collective, dramatic public festival of death.⁴⁹ Penitence, as a form of self-purification and a renunciation of guilt, engages the individual in the physical, emotional and spiritual sense, leading to an enormously gratifying experience.⁵⁰ The annual penance of Muharram, in which Ta'kiyeh is part of, is a time for the individual sinner to place under everyone's eyes the body and the flesh that has committed the sin; by mourning for Husain, one also gains absolution for one's own guilt.⁵¹ By remembering, but not articulating their individual personal grief and sin, they are told to compare their own tragedies and losses to the suffering experienced by Husain and his family—the ultimate example of sacrifice, the pinnacle of human suffering. Along the same lines, William O. Bemman argues that those in the audience are placed in the position of being both the symbolic murderers of Hussein at Karbala, and being the mourners of Hussein after his death.⁵² At the conclusion of the performance they must end up being converted, or renewed, through their profound expression of grief at Hussein's death and through their demonstrations of loyalty to the ideology that Hussein represents.⁵³

In conclusion, this essay has argued in favor of viewing Ta'ziyeh as an indigenous development rather than simply as a variety of theater in Western terms. We have seen that Ta'ziyeh is not a contemporary phenomenon, but rather, the culmination of a 300-year (with plausible earlier roots) tradition that has been strong enough to stand against repeated opposition. As Malekpoor writes: "The performers of the Ta'ziyeh have learned how to fight and win and celebrate, and how to lose and hide and survive for the next round. Is this not also the story of Iran and the Iranians?"⁵⁴ Here Malekpoor is associating the endurance of the tradition with the Iranian spirit in its metaphorical usage—as the collective essence of a particular group: in our case, the Iranian people. To elucidate such a connection, this essay has used the concept of the heterotopias site as an analytical tool that can best explain the development, but more importantly, the survival of the tradition. Heterotopias, as sites of resistance or sites of becoming, facilitate the expression of struggles against normalization. Those who see themselves as marginal may see heterotopic sites, such as the Ta'ziyeh, as religiously, socially and politically important to their alternative values. The fact that Ta'ziyeh, as a heterotopia, is unbounded by time and space, allows it to merge past and present because it is a story that is eternally retold. It is the story of the oppressed and the oppressor, of the material life and the future life, and of the good and evil. It can be forever re-appropriated because Ta'ziyeh, as a meaning-laden heterotopia, speaks to the hearts and minds of its believers.

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Endnotes

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- ² Jamshid Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama* (London, UK: Frank Cass Publishers, 2004), vi.
- ³ Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama*, vi.
- ⁴ Peter J. Chelkowski, "Time out of Memory: Taziyyeh, the Total Drama," *TDR* 49.4 (2005): 16.
- ⁵ Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama*, 33.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, vi.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ¹⁰ Chelkowski, "Ta'zieh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran," 33.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ¹² Rebecca A. Pettys, "The Ta'zieh: ritual enactment of Persian Renewal," *Theatre Journal* 33.3 (1981): 345.
- ¹³ Chelkowski, "Ta'zieh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran," 33.
- ¹⁴ Pettys, "The Ta'zieh: ritual enactment of Persian Renewal," 342.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 346.
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- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
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- ²⁷ Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama*, 38.
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- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 48.
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- ⁴⁵ West-Pavlov, *Theatre As Heterotopia: Contemporary Comparative Perspectives on Shakespeare*, 12.
- ⁴⁶ Afary, "Shiite narratives of karbala and Christian rites of penance," 203.
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