An Altered Mind Wandering in *Taʿziyeh*'s Eternal Time

The WOMARD project, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), is a comparative exploration of religious plays within the Abrahamic traditions. Based at the University of Fribourg and headed by Professor Elizabeth Dutton, WOMARD stands for Women, Martyrdom, and Religious Drama. Its thematic focus encompasses female figures, martyrdom, conversion, and perceptions of the other. The primary materials of our study are European Christian biblical drama, Jewish *Purimshpil*, and Islamic *Taʿziyeh*.

These performances hold significant religious importance across all three Abrahamic faiths. While modern editions of Christian biblical dramas are readily available, access to Jewish and Islamic dramas remains limited in the English-speaking world. Thus, one part of our project involves editing and translating pieces from these traditions, with the assistance of Yiddish and Persian scholars on our team.

Under Professor Dutton's supervision, our research team comprises Dr. Eleanor Lucy Deacon, a post-doctoral scholar specializing in *taʿziyeh* and Shi'ite studies; Dr. Sonya Yampolskaya, a senior researcher focusing on Hebrew Literature and Jewish studies; and Sara Khalili Jahromi, a PhD student.

With a background in comparative literature focusing on American 19th-century literature and Persian classical poetry, I recently joined the WOMARD team. My role, in collaboration with Dr. Deacon, involves transcribing and translating eleven *taʿziyeh* plays from the Cerulli Persian Collection—the largest collection of *taʿziyeh* scripts in the world, housed at the Vatican library. Our forthcoming volume, concentrating on female figures in Islamic tradition, will be published by the Vatican publishing house, marking a major contribution to the existing literature in this field. Additionally, I am conducting research for my thesis within the WOMARD project framework, under Professor Dutton's supervision. Professor Babak Rahimi from the University of California's Department of Literature is my co-supervisor, and I plan to spend six months there for my research.

I haven't yet finalized the subject of my thesis, but I am developing an interest in the representation of the Devil in *taʿziyeh* and Christian plays. My prospective research explores the evolution of the concept of evil and its portrayal in various forms, ranging from Prosecutor and Adversary to Lucifer, Satan, Sheytan, Eblis, and other demonic entities. Focusing on religious drama, I aim to study the diverse treatments of the Devil, spanning from denunciation and ridicule to appropriation and defense.

Today, my talk is about some aspects of *taʿziyeh,* which I believe are fit to be discussed under the title of this conference. This devotional Shiite performance tradition dates to the second half of the 17th century in Iran, which is later than the historical medieval period in Europe. Speaking about it may seem anachronistic in a conference with focus on medievalism and American 19th and 20th centuries. However, as these plays constitute our comparant in studying medieval cycle plays, I thought it appropriate to bring the subject forward here.

The exact inception procedure of *taʿziyeh* is still a subject of controversy among scholars due to its folkloric, semi-oral nature, usually ignored by the intelligentia of the time. In our research on the history of this dramatic tradition, we rely mostly on foreigners' travelogues and locals' memoires, especially during the Qajar period (1789-1925), considered the heyday of *taʿziyeh*. The central plays in the *taʿziyeh* repertoire depict the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the maternal grandson of Prophet Muhammad and the third Imam Shiite, during the battle of Karbala on the 10th of Muharram in the year 61 AH, which corresponds to 680 AD. However, numerous plays, including comedic ones, have been developed around this pivotal event, spanning from the story of Cain and Able to the resurrection day, featuring saints, humans, animals, and supernatural beings.

To highlight the connection between *taʿziyeh* and the "altered mind," I'd like to cite a passage from James Justinian Morier's—a British diplomat and author—observation of this performance during his journey to Persia in 1809.

> 25th. This day was the last of the Moharrem, when all those, who had performed the ceremonies peculiar to this season, appeared before the King. He was seated in a more elevated chamber, which looked towards the Maidan [square]. A tent had been pitched for the Envoy, who was invited to attend, but he was too unwell to venture out. The representation of the day happened, indeed, to be incomplete. A strange circumstance had occurred at a village near Teheran, which so much frightened the man appointed to personify Hussein before his Majesty, that in fear of the same fate he absconded. His alarm was natural, for at this village the man who performed the part of the executioner chose to act to the letter, what was only intended as a very bloodless representation; and when Hussein was brought before him to be beheaded, he cut off the poor actor's head. For this the King fined him one hundred tomauns.[1]

Morier does not provide further information on this tragic event. Did the actor who played Shemr, the arch-antagonist in the battle of Karbala, have a personal conflict with the actor who played Hussein? Was he under the influence of psychedelics? In the absence of evidence on the circumstances, these speculations cannot be excluded. However, there is still one plausible explanation for the bizarre behavior of the actor: the mind-altering power of *taʿziyeh* on the participants, both the audience and the actors. While the behavior of Shemr's actor in Morier's account is an extreme instance of reaction, weeping, wailing, chest-thumping, and face-scratching are other less violent responses to the passion of Hussein. These are part of mourning rituals, but mourners sometimes show signs of an altered state of consciousness induced by extreme emotional experiences and mourning ritualistic activities. The question that I'd like to pose and potentially answer in my ongoing paper is why or how this devotional play exerts a trance-like effect on its participants. Apart from the intense emotional experience of the devotees, what aspect or aspects of *taʿziyeh* contribute to moments of deviation from normal consciousness?

By examining the religious underpinnings of this ritualistic art, delving into the narratives dramatized in these performances, and studying the rules and conventions governing *taʿziyeh*, I have come to believe that part of the answer to this question lies in the special ontological status of time in *taʿziyeh*. Time in *taʿziyeh* is fluid, ambiguous, transcending the linear progression of time through which we comprehend our everyday lives. This dramatic presentation creates a sense of "no-time" or "eternal time", offering spectators an immersive experience that goes beyond conventional temporal boundaries.

I believe the disturbance in conventional time in *taʿziyeh* occurs as the boundaries between the dichotomies of past and present, profane and transcendental, written and oral begin to slide on stage. I should emphasize that what happens on stage is the continuation of an ideological and theological perspective that facilitates this distortion. To express it more clearly, the Islamic concept of *Alam-e Zar*, also known as *Alam-e Alast* is helpful. This idea is based on a verse in Surah al-A'raf, which reads:

> وَ إِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَ أَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلى أَنْفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ قالُوا بَلى شَهِدْنا أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هذا غافِلِينَ.
>
> And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify touching themselves, 'Am I not Your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we testify'-lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'As for us, we were heedless of this.'[2] (7:172)

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[1] James Justinian Morier, *A Journey through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, in the Years 1808 and 1809*, (Project Gutenberg, 2016), 197, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/51819/pg51819-images.html.

[2] Arthur J. Arberry, trans., *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1955), 7:172.

This verse, cherished by mystic Persian poets, is known as the *Misaq*, or Primordial Covenant verse. It is open to various interpretations, of which one is that in *Azal*, or "eternity a parte ante," God gathered all the descendants of Adam before their physical creation and entered into a covenant with them, asking them to testify to His Lordship. According to this interpretation, the children of Adam are in the form of *zarreh* or particles at this stage. This concept of time, or more accurately no-time or being out of time, is present in or created by *taʿziyeh*. One of the *taʿziyeh* plays is *Majles-e Alam-e Zar*. There are different versions of this play. In the one attributed to Mir-e Aza Kashani (from Hashem Fayaz's collection), this primordial event is depicted to highlight the message of Karbala. The particles or souls depicted in the play include Muhammad, Ali, Hassan, Hussein, Noah, David, other prophets, and some enemies, i.e. Abu-Jahl, Ibn-Muljam, Asma and Shemr. Hatef, or God's messenger, makes a pledge with these particles. After the pledge, Noah and David swear allegiance to the family of Muhammad (*Ahl-e Beit*). Then the enemies acknowledge their future enmities: Abu-Jahl will throw stones at Muhammad, Ibn-Muljam will assassinate Ali, Asma will poison Hassan, and Shemr will behead Hussein.

Then, Jabraeil brings forward *Jam-e Bala,* or the Cup of Affliction, symbolizing the tribulations one endures in the context of spiritual growth or divine testing. He presents the cup to all the prophets—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Esmaeil, Moses, Jesus, Job, Joseph, Jacob, Idris, Shuaib— but they refuse it. The only volunteer is Hussein, who drinks it despite Jebraeil's warning of future sufferings for him and his family. After Hussein drinks, Jebraeil shows him all the future scenes of the battle of Karbala, including the assassinated companions and family members, and those captured. The play ends with Hussein being awarded the key to Paradise, and acknowledgement of those who will mourn for his sufferings.

While *Majles-e Alam-e Zar* embodies the concept of primordial or eternal time, other plays demonstrate other instances of blending past and present. In various scenes, deceased figures such as the Prophet Mohammad or Fatemeh, his daughter, return from the afterlife to visit or assist their living relatives and supporters. In a play depicting the aftermath of the battle of Karbala, revered women from other religions, such as Mary and Asiya, arrive at the battlefield to offer their respects.

The blurring of boundaries between the past and present extends beyond the content level of the plays. In my view, modern Western Aristotelian theatre, with its emphasis on mimesis, possesses the potential to transport spectators to the past when depicting historical events. Actors strive to embody closely the characters they portray, creating a realistic impression. However, the approach differs in *taʿziyeh*. To elucidate this, it's essential to underscore the significance of certain terms in this tradition. Using the term "actor" for *taʿziyeh* performers is not entirely accurate. The Persian equivalent of actor is *bazigar* which is commonly used for theatre or cinema actors. However, for *taʿziyeh* we use *shabih* or *shabihkhan*, hence the term *shabihkhani* as another name for *taʿziyehkhani*. The suffix "*khani*" originates from the verb "*khandan,*" meaning "reading," "narrating," or "singing." This is despite the fact that for other dramatic genres in Iran, the term "*bazi,*" equivalent to acting, was employed, as seen in *Siahbazi*, a traditional comic theatre in Iran.

Using the word *khani* instead of *bazi* is suggestive of the priority of reading or narrating over acting in this tradition. Therefore, *taʿziyeh* was not originally categorized under performance or representational art in the Islamic tradition.[3] *Shabihkhans* were akin to *Rowzekhans*, who recited the lives and sufferings of saints. The addition of performance attributes came with the condition that *Shabihkhans* do not assimilate themselves with the characters they portray, especially the saints, the enemies of the saints, and the female figures. Thus, as Dabashi asserts, the acting in *taʿziyeh* is not

[3] Mohammad Reza Khaki, Farhad Mohandespour, and Ali Qolipour. "*Masaʿle-ye tashaboh va elale etlaq-e vajey-e shabihkhani be taʿziyeh* [The Issue of *Tashaboh* and the Reasons Behind Naming *Taʿziyeh* as *Shabihkhani*]." *Fine Arts Magazine* 39 (winter 2010): 45-54.

mimetic but suggestive.[4] Although the actors and spectators may not be well-versed in religious rules and regulations, the underlying theological ideas permeate the performance's conventions. For example, holding booklets in hand and reading from them while performing, or men playing female characters (albeit masked) with male voices, serve as distancing elements. However, despite this distance, the actors are engaged in a religious ritual, narrating and suggesting historic characters. This circumstance blurs the boundary between past and present. The actor maintains his own identity in the present while simultaneously recalling someone from the past, leading us to experience the past in the present. I acknowledge that in Western theatre, in its Aristotelian sense, the actor's presence is undoubtedly sensed. However, Western theatre, at least theoretically, strives to efface the actor to give more prominence to the role they represent. In *taʿziyeh*, this is not the case. This blending can cause a new perception of time and consequently form a new hybrid world.

The distance discussed above also blends the sacred and profane. I am not sure if this disturbance can be categorized under the disturbance of time, but since the transcendental is typically associated with an eternal or cyclical time, beyond the conventional boundaries of beginning and end, I think it could be included here. To give you an example of conflating the mundane with the sublime, I cite here from Abdollah Mostofi's—the Iranian bureaucrat and historian—*the Story of My Life*:

> In the past, Hamedan was renowned for producing high-quality leather known for its durability. Leather was also crafted from donkey skin. People from other cities, especially Tehran, would jestingly refer to the Hamedanis as "donkey skinners." It is said that during a *taʿziyeh* performance depicting the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, a talented actor from Hamedan played the role of Shemr [the arch antagonist in Karbala] with great skill. In the scene where Shemr attempted to behead Hussein, he recited a poem questioning why his dagger could not pierce the Imam's. In response, the actor playing Imam Hussein had a humorous retort, exclaiming "You mischievous one; your dagger is dull from skinning donkeys in Hamedan." This response was so loud that it was heard by the other actors around the Imam, causing them to burst into laughter. They repeated, "He's right; your dagger is dull from all the donkey skinning in Hamedan," loud enough to entertain the entire audience. This repetition caused everyone to start laughing, disrupting the *taʿziyeh* performance. (My translation) [5]

It is quite remarkable that Mostofi's anecdote revolves around the most emotionally charged and poignant moments in the *taʿziyeh* repertoire — the climax of the story of Hussein when he is tragically beheaded by the enemy. This scene is often the most heart-wrenching and tear-inducing for spectators, but in this instance, the result was laughter. This laughter is the logical consequence of juxtaposing two contrasting elements: the dagger, a symbol of the mundane act of donkey skinning, is used for the solemn task of beheading revered Hussein, an Imam believed to be the intercessor of all Muslims on the Day of Judgment. Hussein bears the epithet *Sar-Allah*, meaning "the blood of God," with God having promised to be his blood-money. While this anecdote represents an extreme example, even in regular performances when everything proceeds smoothly and spectators get emotional and express tearful sorrow on the calamities of Imam, there exists this integration of the transcendental and the profane.

Apart from the theological distinction between *shabihkhan* and actor, not being identified as "actor" holds significance in another way. Outside of the performance context, *taʿziyeh* performers have regular occupations recognized by their town or village community. They are individuals with jobs such as grocers or butchers, and their involvement in *taʿziyeh* is typically limited to the ten days of Muharram.[6] In a society where many are known by their occupations, being labeled as an "actor" becomes part of one's identity, and in this profession, one is expected to have a fluid identity. However, when one is not known as an actor but, for example, as an herbalist in a village, his identity as an herbalist is less likely

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[4] Hamid Dabashi, "Ta'ziyeh as Theatre of Protest," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (T 188) (Winter 2005): 91-99, p. 94.

[5] Abdollah Mostofi, *Sharh-e zendegani-e man* (Tehran: Zovar, 1964), vol. 1, 290.

[6] There are exceptions to this. During the Qajar period, when *taʿziyeh* was very popular and supported by royalty, *shabihkhani* became a profession for popular performers.

to be forgotten when he performs on stage. Unlike a professional actor, whose job involves a fluid identity, adapting like water to the form of each role he plays, an herbalist retains a more fixed identity. When this herbalist portrays Hussein, he connects the everyday life of the market and terrestrial existence to a transcendental level typically accessible under conditions corresponding to such experiences. Religious rituals are usually confined to sacred spaces and times, such as mosques, solitary prayers in secluded and tranquil settings, or pilgrimages to holy sites, serving to detach individuals from the mundane aspects of life. However, in *taʿziyeh*, a sublime event is portrayed by ordinary men on a platform in the town or village square, a place spectators pass by every day. This humble platform, far from being a glorious holy place managed by men of God, becomes the stage for Hussein's martyrdom, creating a new world where secular and celestial coexist.

The third dichotomy whose disruption contributes to the emergence of a new time and world is the division between the written and the oral. The plays in the *taʿziyeh* repertoire result from collective creation, evolving over decades through rewriting and recitation by numerous anonymous contributors. These narratives have undergone transformation with each retelling, reflecting shifting cultural, religious, social, and political contexts. While we can enumerate the stories dramatized in *taʿziyeh*, determining the exact number of versions for each narrative is challenging. Although we may value older manuscripts or those by renowned *taʿziyehnevis*, originality and authenticity hold a different significance in this genre. Each rendition of a story can be regarded as authentic, with its value lying not in adherence to a single original version but in its capacity to adapt and resonate across generations. These characteristics firmly position *taʿziyeh* within the realm of folklore, yet we cannot disregard its written aspects.

As William L. Hanaway asserts, *taʿziyeh* generically "has ties with both written and oral literary forms."[7] Not only are these plays scripted, but also draw upon a variety of written sources, including scriptural texts, hagiographies, historical accounts, *maqtals* and *rowzehs* (narratives on the Imams' vicissitudes), as well as poetry, especially Persian epics, and mystic literature. The *Alam-e Zar* play, mentioned earlier, illustrates this fusion, tracing its origin back to a Quranic verse with mystic interpretations before being adapted to the events of Karbala. Moreover, the story of Hussein finds mention in historical texts such as *The History of Tabari* or *Maqtal al-Hussein* by Kharazmi. Thus, unlike folklore, where stories primarily originate orally, *taʿziyeh* draws its narrative foundation from written sources. Nonetheless, around the written nucleus, diverse embellishments and imaginative dialogues emerge, enriching the performance. Over time, certain peripheral events and side stories gained autonomy and appeared as independent plays. An ongoing interplay between the oral and written realms has emerged, where the domains of speech and writing, presence and absence, converge. Writing within this tradition does not resist change; rather, it remains adaptable and protean. New interpretations and adaptations at the oral level integrate with it, bridging the gap between writing and speech. Consequently, the past evoked through writing intertwines with the immediacy of speech and the present moment.

Standing at the crossroads of religion, literature, performance, and music, *taʿziyeh* has forged its unique form and conventions, adapting fluidly to the ever-changing conditions of society. In the absence of detailed records, the exact essence of such phenomena remains elusive. However, the realm of literary creativity and critique invites speculation. While the true intentions of the actor portraying Shemr in the slaying of the man portraying Hussein remain obscured, this occurrence has led me to hypothesize and argue for the hypnotic effect of *taʿziyeh*. By disrupting conventional notions of time and creating a kind of no-time, transcendent, or eternal time, *taʿziyeh* has the power to captivate and mesmerize.

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[7] William L. Hanaway, Jr., "Stereotyped Imagery in the *Ta'ziyeh*", in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 188.