

Introduction

The development of technology has overwhelmed the traditions of many Eastern countries. For them, following the Western pattern of life has become more attractive than preserving their own traditions and transmitting them to the following generations. Iran too has been affected by the wave of modernity. Iranians have discarded some of their traditions in favour of the attractions of modernity. *Ta'ziya*, an Iranian form of 'passion play' commemorating suffering and martyrdom, has been one of the victims of this process. It has been banished from the large cities to more remote villages; but, despite the limitations imposed on it, a trace of the past glory of *ta'ziya* has survived. Through *ta'ziya* performances, an audience learns about the life of the Shiite Imāms¹ the afflictions that they suffered, the laws of religion, the social virtues, and historical events.

This study focuses on the character of Zeynab, Imām Ḥuseyn's sister, the third Shiite Imām. The way she demonstrated exceptional behaviour in standing up to the Umayyad caliph Yazid (d.63/683)² during and after the battle of Karbalā is a crucial issue for Shiites. She protested against the tyrannies and oppressions that were inflicted upon Imām Ḥuseyn's family. After analysing Zeynab's behaviour during the battle and during her subsequent imprisonment, I will focus on how modern Iranian women have received Zeynab, especially during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

A Short History of *Ta'ziya*

Ta'ziya is an Arabic word, literally meaning 'condolence,' and referring to mourning for the dead, or enjoining patience. The Iranian *ta'ziya* play is a form of religious drama, analogous to the Middle-English passion plays. It has its historical roots in pre-Islamic Persia, where Persians performed the tragedy of Mitrā (*maṣā'b-e mitrā*). During these rites, the worshippers wore masks and mimicked the afflictions that Mitrā had suffered, acting

them out on a platform.³ Mitrā is an Indo-Persian name meaning contract, agreement, treaty, alliance and promise. The name is associated with the sun (*mehr*). The god Mitrā punishes people who break their contract: he takes the strength from their feet and the light out of their eyes. He is a warrior who drives a chariot and carries a weapon. On the other hand, he rewards the faithful by bringing rain and making the plants grow, and he brings rugs, cattle herds and other rewards to the one who faithfully worships him.⁴

It is reported that two other mourning rituals were performed in Iran. The first commemorated the tragedy of Zarir, the brother of King Vištāsp, who converted to the religion of Zoroaster. The story comes from the Sasanian period (224-651), when Middle Persian was spoken, and originated in Parthian history. Briefly, the story is that a neighbouring king, Arjāsb, objected to King Vištāsp's conversion and attacked Vištāsp with a huge army. In spite of the odds, Zarir goes to the battlefield where he is murdered by Bidarāfš, the brother of king Arjāsb.⁵ Zarir, like Imām Ḥuseyn, is the archetype of one who is murdered for his faith.

The other pre-Islamic tragedy commemorated the death of Siyāvuš, the son of Keykāvūs, Iran's mythical king. Siyāvuš was brought up by Rustam, the Iranian hero of Sistān. When Siyāvuš returns to the palace of his father, he is falsely accused by Sūdāba, his father's wife, who has made several attempts to seduce him. Siyāvuš proves his innocence in a trial by fire, but is forced to leave the country. He goes with his companions to Tūrān where initially the king, Afrāsiyāb, honours him. Siyāvuš even marries Afrāsiyāb's daughter, but jealous courtiers induce Afrāsiyāb to murder Siyāvuš, and his head is cut off. The main source for this account is the history of Bukhāra by Naršakhi, who says that in his own era, each year, 'The people of Bukhāra sing songs about the killing of Siyāvuš. The singers (*qawwālān*) call the songs the weeping of the Zoroastrians (*geristan-e mughān*).'⁶

*The Movements after 'Āšūrā and the Development of Ta'ziya*⁷

Contemporary Iranian *ta'ziya* is performed mainly to commemorate the death of Imām Ḥuseyn, the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad (d.11/632), and the other events of 'Āšūrā.⁸ Imām Ḥuseyn was killed on the plain of Karbalā in 61/680.⁹ The people of Kūfa had invited him to come to lead their community, but he never reached Kūfa. On the plain of Karbalā, on the first day of the month of Muḥarram in 60/680, he and his household were surrounded by the army of Yazid, the successor of the Umayyad caliph

Mu'āwiya. Imām Ḥuseyn preferred death to swearing allegiance to Yazid as the caliph of the Muslim community. After nine days of negotiations, during which the Imām and his followers were deprived of food and water, the battle started on the tenth of Muḥarram (Āšūrā). It lasted one day. Imām Ḥuseyn and his companions were killed and the surviving members of his household were arrested and taken to Yazid's palace in Damascus, along with the heads of the dead mounted on lances.

After the martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn, the Shiites of Kūfa repented their failure to prevent his martyrdom and decided to kill his murderers or sacrifice their own lives. They felt ashamed before the Prophet and worried about the Day of Judgement when they would have to confess their shortcomings to God. They called themselves the Penitents (*Tawwābūn*). The penitents believed that 'Alī Ibn al-Ḥuseyn (later named Imām Zeyn al-Ābedin) was Imām Ḥuseyn's legitimate successor because he was related to Fāṭima, the Prophet's daughter. They put more emphasis on his relationship to the Prophet through Fāṭima than through 'Alī (the cousin of the Prophet). The *Tawwābūn* gathered Shiites from Kūfa and the neighbouring cities, encouraging them to fight against the Umayyad army. But before going into battle they went to Karbalā, to the grave of Imām Ḥuseyn, and lamented for him. In 65/684 they fought with Syrian forces in the siege of 'Ayn al-Wardā, where they were defeated. Most were killed; the remainder fled to Qarqisiya, where their movement was eclipsed.

In 66/865 another movement was begun, by Al-Mukhtār Ibn Abi 'Ubayda al-Thaqafi.¹⁰ The movement also sought to revenge Imām Ḥuseyn's blood, and supported the succession of Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥananfiyya, 'Alī's third son from a Hanafi woman. Since he was not from the bloodline of the Prophet, the two movements did not unite. The movement of 'Ubayda ath-Thaqafi was also defeated by the Umayyad army.¹¹

Almost three centuries after the *Tawwābūn* movement, the impulse of penitent commemoration developed into processions commemorating the martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn. On the tenth of Muḥarram 963, by order of the Buyid rulers (945-1055), the martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn was officially commemorated for the first time by mourning processions that passed through the streets and markets. In the following year, the commemoration was supplemented with the recitation of elegies, beating on the head and face and begging for water in imitation of Imām Ḥuseyn, who had asked for water for his infant, 'Alī Aṣḡar, on the plain of Karbalā.¹² The combination of processions and dramatic recitations gives us the elements of the late Medieval *ta'ziya*. Such rites continued during the Buyid era.¹³

Late Medieval and Modern Ta'ziya

The mourning performance developed until it reached a high point during the Šafavid period (1501-1722). The emergence of the Šafavids had a lasting effect on the history of Iran. It was during their rule that the mass of the population converted to Shiite Islam. Many theatrical features were added to *ta'ziya*, which helped the director to make a vivid portrayal of the events of Karbalā.

Shah Tahmāsb (1525-1576), the second king of the Šafavid dynasty, ordered poets 'to devote their time to writing eulogies of Imāms.'¹⁴ He favoured devotional subjects so much that other literary forms such as lyrics and storytelling (*dāstān-sarā'i*) declined. However, the poets of this period responded by using and adapting poetic forms for religious subjects. Muḥtašam from Kāšān (d.996/1587-8) wrote the famous *dawāzdah-band* ('the twelve-stanza poem'),¹⁵ an elegy on the martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn and a milestone in the development of Persian poetry. Hātef from Isfahān (d.1198/1783)¹⁶ followed Muḥtašam in composing elegies, and later Qā'āni (1808-54) imitated Muḥtašam.¹⁷ Waqār from Shiraz (d.1298/1881) wrote his *haft-band* (seven stanza poem) in imitation of the *dawāzdah-band* of Muḥtašam from Kāšān.¹⁸

Another important book of elegies for the Imāms in the Šafavid period is the *Rawzat al-šuhadā* (*the Garden of Martyrs*) by Ḥuseyn Wa'ez Kāsefi (d.1504-5). This book relates the deaths of the Shiite Imāms, particularly the martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn. *Rawzat al-šuhadā* had a major effect on the *ta'ziya* texts. It provided a broader perspective for *ta'ziya* composers. The recitation of *Rawzat al-šuhadā* and other books with similar religious subjects led to the practice of *rawza-khāni*, the animated reading of the passion of Imām Ḥuseyn, the singing of elegies and a sermon. *Ta'ziya* as a dramatic form and devotional practice has developed from the *rawza-khwāni*. There are brief mentions of 'Āšūrā mourning processions with dramatic re-enactments in accounts by Pietro Della Valle in 1618, and Cornelis de Bruyn in 1704.¹⁹

During the Afshāriya period there was a sharp decline in *ta'ziya* performances. Nāder Shah Afshār (r.1147-60/1736-47), the founder of the Afshāriya dynasty, was a Sunnite Muslim and did not wish to commemorate the martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn.

With the advent of the Zand dynasty (1751-1796), the popularity of *ta'ziya* was restored, and it reached a peak during the Qājār dynasty (1796-1925). Something about the development of *ta'ziya* performances at the

time can be deduced from an account written by William Francklin around 1786-87:

[...] Among the most affecting representations is the marriage of young Casim, the son of Hussun and nephew of Hossein, with his daughter; but this was never consummated as Casim was killed in a skirmish on the Banks of the Euphrate, on the 7th of Muḥarram. On this occasion, a boy represents the bride, decorated in her wedding garment, and attended by the females of the family chanting a mournful elegy, in which is related the circumstance of her betrothed husband being cut off by infidels – (for such is the term by which sheias speak of Sunnies). The parting between her and her husband is also represented when on his going to the field she takes an affectionate leave of him, and on his quitting her presents her with a burial vest, which she puts around his neck.²⁰

Nāṣer al-Din Shah (r.1848-96) was very fond of *ta'ziya*. During his long reign, *ta'ziya* was greatly developed and became popular among different classes of society. From this period, *ta'ziya* was performed in an enclosed area. The places used for *ta'ziya* performances were named *tekiyas*. The most famous in the Qājār period was the *tekiya-dawlat* (the Royal Tekiya), a circular building modelled on the Royal Albert Hall in London, which Nāṣer al-Din Shah had built on his return from London in 1873.²¹ It was used for *ta'ziya* performances for the royal family.²² It was destroyed in 1948.

From 1925, as Reżā Shah Pahlavi (r.1925-1941) initiated a process of modernization in Iran, the entertainment offered by radio, cinema, and later television supplanted *ta'ziya* performances, which went into a gradual decline. After World War Two, *ta'ziya* performances were largely limited to small towns and remote villages.²³

The Shiite Muslims later divided into several branches. Among these are the Zaydiyya, the Imāmiyya or 'twelver' Shiites, and the Ismā'iliyya. The Imāmiyya, the majority Shiite sect in Iran today, believe that the twelfth Imām, a child, was supernaturally concealed after the death of the eleventh Imām: he is still alive today and is expected to return before the end of the world.²⁴ One of the fundamental doctrines of the Imāmiyya is that the Imām is protected (*ma'ṣūm*) from sin and error. If the Imām fears for his own safety or for that of his community, he has to practice dissimulation (*taqqiya*).²⁵

The Devotional Contents of *Ta'ziya*

Ta'ziya is the most important popular devotional ritual in Iran. Every year, from the first day to the tenth day of the month of Muharram, Iranian Shiites commemorate the martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn. They perform *ta'ziya* to keep alive the memory of the events of Karbalā and the tyranny that the family of the Prophet suffered. There are separate *ta'ziya* for each of the main events of Karbalā, and its aftermath. For instance, the *ta'ziya* called 'the bazaar in Damascus' (*ta'ziya-ye bāzār-e Šām*) describes the conditions of the prisoners after 'Āšūrā. There is a *ta'ziya* on the martyrdom of two of Zeynab's sons, a *ta'ziya* on the survivors' 'entrance to Medina' (*ta'ziya-ye vurūd-e be Medina*), on the death of Zeynab (*ta'ziya-ye vafāt-e ḥaẓrat-e Zeynab*), and on the death of the two sons of Muslim Ibn al-'Aqil, an uncle of Ḥuseyn. Muslim Ibn 'al-Aqil was martyred as well. There is also a conversion tale known as the *ta'ziya* on the Monastery of Širin.

There are also *ta'ziyas* for other events not directly related to Karbalā, such as the death of the Prophet (*ta'ziya-ye vafāt-e paygambar*) and the martyrdom of Imām 'Ali (*ta'ziya-ye šahādat-e ḥaẓrat-e 'Ali*). Another *ta'ziya* centres on the martyrdom of Qāsem, the son of Imām Ḥasan, the second Shiite Imām. But these are less frequently performed than the *ta'ziyas* on the martyrdom of Ḥuseyn. There are also *ta'ziya* on biblical figures.

Ta'ziya is a medium that teaches and reinforces Shiite beliefs and piety. In commemorating Imām Ḥuseyn's martyrdom and other devotional events, the audience is dramatically confronted with Shiite doctrines such as fate, predestination and free will. Several of the written sources that have transmitted *ta'ziya* texts to us show Imām Ḥuseyn sacrificing himself for the salvation of the Shiites. Here, the concept of free will (*ekhtiyār*) is highlighted.

The language of the *ta'ziya* texts is simple and understandable for all kinds of Persian audiences: even illiterate people can appreciate the text. Its leaders and performers require no formal religious training, and no knowledge of Arabic. *Ta'ziya* was (and is) composed in verse form, to be read aloud and preferably performed.

Oral Tradition in *Ta'ziya* Texts

Although the performers and director of a *ta'ziya* have texts, *ta'ziya* has many of the characteristics of oral literature. An oral text is composed for audiences and is based on their needs. It is composed for memorization

and recitation.²⁶ Ruth Finnegan states that an oral text is composed in performance;²⁷ at least, it is not separate from recitation or performance. The composer thinks about the time of performance and the expectations of his audience. The message of the *ta'ziya* text is what the audience understands when they see it and hear it being performed.

As oral literature, the *ta'ziya* text is not memorized word for word. If a player forgets a part, he improvises. The text is written, as an aid to memory, but it cannot be checked against one written version that is correct.²⁸ In oral literature, every version is correct.²⁹ In *ta'ziya*, each copy (*nuskha*) is treated as correct: the composers, performers and spectators do not seek an authoritative version.

Another characteristic of an oral text is that it is made up of formulaic thoughts and expressions that are memorized.³⁰ The next is repetition, an important device in oral literature, and drama, because the listeners cannot go back to refresh their memories. Repetition fills the gaps when the speaker does not remember the next subject, but it also reinforces the thought in the mind of the audience, particularly through the repetition of motifs.³¹ Another characteristic of oral literature is the use of antithetical terms and balanced patterns, which again serve to make the message more understandable for the spectators.³² Finally, in oral literature, physical violence is vividly described.³³ Examples of these four characteristics of orality in *ta'ziya* will be given below.

Firstly, some formulaic thoughts and expressions, drawn from everyday speech that one would not normally find in Persian written literature. To 'give one's heart to credit, and be quit of cash' (*be nesiya del bedahad naqd rā rahā bekunad*) (9)³⁴ means to live in a fool's paradise, believing promises. 'My house will be destroyed' (*khāna kharāb būdan*) (9) is the state of a person losing all hope. 'To see the brand-mark (portent of death) of one's child is intolerable' (*dāg-e farzand didan āsān nist*) (14) is self-explanatory. 'Light of the eye' (*nūr-e chešm*) (23) is a clichéd expression said to a person whom one loves, for instance by parents to their child. 'The black dust is on my head' (*šud khāk-e siyāh bar sar-e man*) (47) refers to an irretrievable calamity such as the death of a loved one or having an incurable disease. 'He was raised with the salt of my father' (*namak parvarda-ye bābam*) (63) refers to a person who has grown up in a family or is indebted to them. The proverb shows that the recipient is inferior to the speaker. To 'cry with one's face to a wall' (*rūy be divār geristan*) (157) represents a condition in which there is no hope of assistance or improvement. Another cliché, used to encourage the audience to give alms, is 'give alms because it repels calamity' (*šadaqa*

deh šadaqa daf‘-e balāst) (180). The above examples are repeated in the *ta‘ziya* text.

Another characteristic of oral literature is repetition. Participants may insert this to fill gaps, and there is also simple repetition of words in a single passage for rhythmic effect. The examples below show the repetition of motifs, whether as images or concepts, in words that may seem different but convey the same sense to the audience. For instance, the thirst of Imām Ḥuseyn, and his men and family, is a very common theme in *ta‘ziya*. For those who have seen *ta‘ziya*, the first association of the Imām Ḥuseyn’s name is that he was killed while suffering from thirst. This motif is repeatedly associated with the name of Imām Ḥuseyn, as an epithet. For instance, he is called the thirst king (*Shah-e tešna kām*) (41), the king whose lips are athirst (*Shah-e tešna lab*) (49), and the king whose liver thirsts (*Shah-e tešna jegar*) (51). The motif is more fully developed in particular episodes. In one, the sons of Imām Ḥuseyn’s sister Zeynab go to the battlefield, and are defeated. When Šemr is about to kill them he gives them some water but they do not drink it, so both are killed while suffering from thirst (18). Also, on the day of ‘Āšūrā, Imām Ḥuseyn writes a letter to one of his Shiite followers and asks him to bring some water for the thirst ([...] *gar mitavāni barā-ye tešnegān ābi resāni*) (73). In another episode a European messenger has come to the court of Yazid. He intercedes on behalf of Imām Ḥuseyn’s son, Imām Zeyn al-Ābedin, who is about to be killed. Yazid orders the executioner to kill the European. He asks for a sip of water but then does not drink it: he says,

ābat nanūšam ḥāšā-vo kallā
lab tešna bāšand owlād-e Zahrā (132).

I will never drink water,
 While the lips of Zahrā’s children are dry³⁵ (132).

In another passage, Zeynab tells the audience that when Imām Ḥuseyn fell from his horse he tried to say something, but his lips were stuck together because of thirst (*būd labhāš be ham časbida*) (147). Then, she says, ‘he wanted water: dust be on my head!’ (*āb mikhāst ke khākam bar sar*) (147).

Another motif in the *ta‘ziya* texts is *gurbat*, meaning exile and alienation, but also wretchedness. The term is used in poetry to describe the condition of looking back, in nostalgic memory, at the place that was home. In classical poetry, Nāṣer Khosrow (1004-1088) did in fact travel widely. He was

for many years away from home, but the persona of the wandering poet in exile is used widely, even by poets who were geographically less adventurous. Poets speaking in this voice call on their past memories to sustain them: exile and memory are two parts of one motif.³⁶ In the *ta'ziya* texts, the *ġurbat* motif shows that Imām Ḥuseyn and his family are far from their homeland and that they bewail the loss of their glorious past. Part of the pain of exile is not being in control of one's fate. In the struggle between Imām Ḥuseyn and Yazid, Imām Ḥuseyn is represented as one who is bound in exile: he has no choice but to fight Yazid's army.

Two terms, *ġurbat* and *ġarib*, are repeated in many episodes. The former is the abstract noun for the condition of living away from one's homeland, and the latter refers to a person living in another land. Both terms are used in relation to the martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn and his followers on the plain of Karbalā. The *ġurbat* motif highlights their alienation, hopelessness and helplessness in the face of the enemy's army. The term appears in all of the *ta'ziya* stories, underlining that Imām Ḥuseyn was killed in another land, far from his Shiite followers. For example:

Imām Ḥuseyn says to Zeynab:

In exile, I only have you
(*dar ġaribi hamin tu rā dāram*) (14).

Zeynab says to Šemr:

We are strangers, and have no protector
(*ġaribim-o kasi bar sar nadārim*) (25).

Šahr-bānū says to Zeynab:³⁷

What can I do, I am an exile, and in my exile you are my Friend
(*če kunam ke man ġaribam be ġaribiyam tu yāri*) (43).

Imām Ḥuseyn says to the Heavens (*rūzgār*):

See our condition: we are strangers, alone and far from our family
(*mā rā ġarib-o bi kas-o bi aqrabā bebin*) (61).

Ruqiya says to Zeynab:

O! God I am a stranger, despised and afflicted
 (*khudāvandā ġarib-o khār-o zāram*) (138).

Dorra Šadaf is a warrior who attacks Yazid's army when she hears that the household of Imām Ḥuseyn has been taken captive. When Muštari, one of her companions, hears that Imām Ḥuseyn has been killed, she says,

ġarib-e vādiy-e karb-o balā Ḥuseynam vāy
šahid-e khanjar-e Šemr-e daġā Ḥuseynam vāy (100).

Alas, for my Ḥuseyn, the stranger of the plain of Karb-o balā,³⁸
 Martyred by the dagger of deceitful Šemr, alas! (100).

In the *ta'ziya* on the martyrdom of 'Abdullāh Ibn al-'Afif, Ibn al-Ziyād threatens Zeynab with death. There is no one to rescue her, but Sakina intercedes on behalf of her aunt and says,

bejuz in 'amma mā yāvar nadārim
dar in ġurbat kasi bar sar nadārim (84).

We have no helper but this aunt,
 In this our exile (*ġurbat*), we have no protector (84).

In a passage relating to the imprisonment period, Zeynab looks back on the time, in Medina when she was respected and protected. She tells Yazid's wife Hendeh, who was previously Zeynab's maid, 'in Medina, the parasol of royalty was over my head' (*man dar madina čatr-e Shahi bar saram būd*) (146). Other members of Imām Ḥuseyn's family also talk about their glorious past when they lived in Medina, when the martyrs of Karbalā were alive. Imām Ḥuseyn's daughter, Sakina, says, 'How fine the day, when my father was alive' (*khuš ān rūzi ke bar sar būd bābā*) (76).

The term orphan (*yatim*) often appears in the *ta'ziya* texts. A *yatim* is a child whose father and mother are dead; the concept complements the concept of *ġaribi* and makes a full image of the tragic situation of Imām Ḥuseyn's children after the battle. It points to both the cruel behaviour of Yazid's commanders and the unfair behaviour of the people of Kūfa. Both protagonists and antagonists use the term, reminding the audience that Imām Ḥuseyn's children are orphaned. For example:

Come beside me, sister, for we are both orphans (*biyā khāhar ke mā har du yatimim*) (23).

He (Šemr) is the cause of the deaths of orphans (*ke gardad bā'et-e mārg-e yatimān*) (25).

I am orphaned, I am orphaned, I am orphaned (*man yatimam, yatimam, yatimam*) (51).

Another example is:

*az yatimi du češmam pur āb ast
bar yatimān taraḥum tavāb ast* (53).

My eyes are full of tears, because I am an orphan,
Compassion for orphans is requited (53).³⁹

Much more could be said about the terms that are repeated in the *ta'ziya* texts, but we will suffice here with a brief review of some other terms that are repeated often. 'Infidel' (*kāfar*) (18, 40) is frequently used in reference to the antagonists. Its connotation is of infidelity rather than heresy. The enemies of Imām Ḥuseyn are infidels because they fight against him. 'Damned' or 'cursed' (*la'in*) (24, 30, 33, 53, 76, 77) refers to those to whom God will show no mercy. 'Imprisonment' (*asir, zendāni*) (26, 40, 43, 51, 54, 72) refers to the period when Imām Ḥuseyn's family are at the court of Yazid in Damascus. They are taken there, passing from town to town (*šahr-o bāzār burdan*)⁴⁰ (74, 76), with their heads kept bare (77, 81), and are then held in chains (*zanjir, rismān*).

Another feature of the *ta'ziya* text as oral literature is the heavy reliance on antithetical terms. The antagonists are unbelievers (*kāfar*), lacking faith (*bi-imān*), shameless (*biḥayā*), faithless and oppressive (*bivafā, jafākār*), rebellious (*ašrār*), tyrants and oppressors (*zālem va setamkār*). The protagonists are full of faith (*bi-imān, musalmān*), fidelity (*bā vafā*), pious (*abrār*), innocent and oppressed (*bigonāh va maẓlūm*).

Physical violence is presented vividly in *ta'ziya*: the audience is encouraged to imagine themselves present in the battlefield. The antagonists' cruel behaviour is described in detail, and the antagonists themselves explain their tyranny. The purpose is to increase the spectators' hatred. In the *ta'ziya* on 'entering the place of execution' (*ta'ziya vurūd-e be qatlgāh*) (21-

22), there is an episode in which Yazid's commander, Ibn-e Sa'd, orders the army to plunder and burn the tents. Then they take the prisoners to the plain of Karbalā where the headless bodies of their loved ones are lying. The prisoners recognize them from their clothes. In another episode in the same *ta'ziya*, Ibn al-Sa'd and his companion Būkhaliq go to the battlefield to count the wounds of the dead (28-31). They talk about each of them and describe how cruelly they killed the companions of Imām Ḥuseyn. They regret that they killed Imām Ḥuseyn, because he was a good servant of God. Another example is the description of the death scene of Imām Ḥuseyn and his infant 'Alī Aṣḡar (115-117). Šemr describes how violently he treated the corpse of Imām Ḥuseyn, and says that Yazid's army did not allow a sip of water for 'Alī Aṣḡar or the other family of Imām Ḥuseyn. Instead, they kill the child with an arrow, and Šemr kicks the wounded body of Imām Ḥuseyn.

The physical violence of the antagonists is described in formulae such as 'the shameless people tear you in pieces' (*ze bas in qowm bi šarm-o ḥayāyand šumā rā pāra pāra minamāyand*) (12), 'I whip the prisoners' (*mizanam bā tāziyāna*) (24), while their victims suffer a 'wounded side' (*pahlū-ye čāk-khurda*) (26) and 'broken chest' (*sina-ye šekasta*) (26). Imām Zeyn al-Ābedin wails, 'my father's body is cut into pieces in the dust' (*qat'a qat'a naš-e bābam bar zamin*) (31). The exiles suffer from 'wandering door to door' or 'homeless' (*dar be dar būdan*) (137), living in a ruined place (*dar kharāba tu rā gašta maskan*) (139). Ruqaya says, 'My face is bruised blue by Šemr's slaps' (*rūyam kabūd gašta az zarb-e sili-ye Šemr*) (139).

Both the depiction of violence and the antitheses are very much reinforced by patterns of repetition. Repetition could be described as the most influential stylistic feature of the *ta'ziya* texts.

Ta'ziya Players and Devices

The *ta'ziya* players are all men. They are divided into two main groups, protagonists and antagonists. The former perform the roles of the Imāms, their families and their followers. The latter play the role of the enemies of Imām Ḥuseyn's family. The director and the audience also participate in the performance.

In the *ta'ziya* performance, the director uses specific devices to distinguish the protagonists from antagonists. Antagonists are ugly, with harsh voices and rude behaviour. They wear red and yellow. Antagonists are cruel

to the protagonists, or they act the buffoon and appear ridiculous.⁴¹ They motivate the audience to hate them. Protagonists are handsome with soft voices. They chant when they speak, behave reasonably and are kind to their enemies. They wear white and green, colours that reflect their virtues. In the Qurʾān, the face of the blessed on the Doomsday is said to be white,⁴² while green is the colour of the Prophet. In Islamic tradition, the archangel Gabriel has two green wings and the well-Preserved Tablet (*lawḥ-e mahfūz*, see below, *Zeynab and Imām Ḥuseyn*) is made of green emerald.⁴³ The good and bad behaviour of the two groups is used to instruct the spectators in the laws of religion. For instance, the antagonists are shown drinking wine, which is forbidden in Islam.

There is a repertoire of stylized gestures and props that allude to the historical setting. For instance, a player will raise his hand as a shade over his eyes, to indicate a hot, sunny day. Circling the stage several times is used to represent the distance between two places, and thus a change of scene, for instance from the plain of Karbalā to Damascus.

A bowl of water symbolizes the Euphrates, which the Umayyad troops prevent Imām Ḥuseyn and his family from reaching to drink water. A shroud (*kafan*) is the symbol of death: when a player wears it, the audience knows that he will soon die as a martyr. When the shroud is spotted with red, the player is wounded. The audience is familiar with the symbolic meanings of the objects. They help the audience to transcend the borders of time and space and feel like real observers of the events of Karbalā.

Audience Participation in the *Taʿziya*

The role of the spectators is also important. The spectators freely show their anger and hatred towards the antagonists by shouting at them and cursing them, and they show sympathy for the protagonists. They follow the director's actions, indicating when the audience members should beat their chests or heads. The audience's role begins with literally setting the scene before the performance. For instance, if the *taʿziya* is to be performed in a closed place such as the courtyard of a house or in a *tekiya*, the audience will decorate the walls or carpet the ground. If the *taʿziya* is to be performed in an open area, the audience will help the director to erect a temporary *tekiya*. Some people may donate props for the performance, others will undertake to distribute sweets or sherbet among the spectators.

The *ta'ziya* spectator has a complex symbolic role. He is both mourner for Imām Ḥuseyn, and his enemy. On the one hand, he is mourning and wailing for his Imām, but at the same time the spectators surround the players in a circular form, like Yazid's army around Imām Ḥuseyn and his followers on the plain of Karbalā. The background knowledge of the spectators helps them to form a perfect mental image of the events of Karbalā.

By actively participating in the *ta'ziya*, the audience bridge the emotional gap that separates them from the real events of Karbalā.⁴⁴ They react like real observers near the battlefield, who cannot help Imām Ḥuseyn and his family. They curse Šemr and Ibn al-Sa'd. They mourn, lament, and beat their heads and chests, showing their frustration at not being able to intervene. Chest beating (*sina-zani*) is a form of physical audience participation that heightens the identification of the audience with the *ta'ziya*. First, the director beats his chest, then the procession of mourners (or players) follows him, and then the audience imitates them. There is a harmonic interplay between the director, the players in the procession and the audience. Beating one's hands over one's head operates similarly: the director sits and initiates this, the procession of mourners and the audiences follow his actions. It could be said that the audience takes part in the *ta'ziya* performance as amateur players.

The active participation of the audience in the *ta'ziya* is not limited to the performance itself. As previously mentioned, before the performance, people help the director to arrange the space, decorating the walls or spreading carpets on the ground, or helping the director to erect a temporary *tekiya*. They also bring objects to be used during the performance; through these contributions they become participants. Every object related to *ta'ziya* is acceptable.⁴⁵ During the first ten days of the month of Muḥarram, some people make vows to God to distribute sweets and sherbet among the spectators. The audience's eating can be seen as a symbolic re-enactment of the family of Imām Ḥuseyn, eating their last remaining food during the siege and imprisonment. Those who participate in the *ta'ziya* in these ways can hope for Imām Ḥuseyn's intercession on Judgement Day, and to receive God's reward in the Hereafter.

Whether the *ta'ziya* is performed in an enclosed place such as the yard of a private house or in an open area such as a bazaar or street, the audience stands in a circle around the *ta'ziya* players. Standing in this way, they represent the enemies of Imām Ḥuseyn who surrounded him,⁴⁶ while also representing the supporters of Imām Ḥuseyn who wished to be present and help him, but are unable to intervene. They show their emotions while remaining completely aware that the situation is non-realistic. They draw on their

background knowledge to enrich the image of the battle of Karbalā. They are reminded of, or learn about, religious prohibitions, beliefs and moral virtues, and see vices embodied in the antagonists.

Zeynab in *Ta'ziya*

The main focus of this study is the presentation of Zeynab, Imām Ḥuseyn's sister. She was present at the battle of Karbalā, as part of the household of Imām Ḥuseyn. After the battle, the survivors were taken to Damascus, to the court of the Umayyad ruler Yazid. Along the way, when the captives arrived in Kūfa, Zeynab preached a sermon and called the people of Kūfa 'infidels' because they had invited Imām Ḥuseyn to come, but then did not assist him in Karbalā. Zeynab preached another sermon at the court of Yazid, when the ruler boasted of his ancestors and claimed that this war was revenge for the death of his ancestors, killed by the Prophet Muḥammad and his companions. Here, Zeynab criticized Yazid as being of the same rank as his pagan ancestors.

Zeynab's character traits deserve a profound study, but a general outline of her character, beliefs and behaviour can be derived from several examples of *ta'ziya* texts compiled by Ḥasan Ṣālehi Rād Darbandsari, in his *Majālis-e ta'ziya*. This is the collection used in this study. It is recent (2001), and attracted my attention because it is a complete collection of the main copies (*sar-nuskha*) used by the directors. In the various episodes in the *Majālis-e ta'ziya*, Zeynab is seen playing an effective part before and after the battle of Karbalā, so it is an appropriate example to take for this study.

In this collection, Zeynab appears as the archetype of Shiite women and as a mirror reflecting a constellation of Shiite beliefs. For instance, she submits herself to fate and God's decree. She talks to God in different tones in various situations. Sometimes she complains about Yazid and his commanders and asks desperately for justice, at other times she describes the situation and patiently waits for God's decision. A Shiite learns from Zeynab that belief in predestination and submission to God's decision is fundamental, but she also shows the concept of free will. Like other members of Imām Ḥuseyn's family, Zeynab receives inspiration (*elhām*) from the divine source. She is aware of her fate and accepts her destiny without trying to change it. Zeynab is the archetype of sacrificial behaviour. She sacrifices her children to serve justice. She is also the archetype of a leader. She teaches her community how to protest against the tyrannies of the Umayyad caliph.

Zeynab's role as a woman is emphasized by a crowd of women in the audience, who identify themselves with her.

The effect of Zeynab's curses is emphasized in several episodes. For instance, after the tenth day (*Āšūrā*), Šemr takes the earring of Fāṭima, Imām Ḥuseyn's daughter, against her will. She cries and Zeynab curses Šemr, asking the earth to take him. In a moment, Šemr is paralyzed, until Zeynab asks God to forgive him. Zeynab's spiritual power is emphasized repeatedly. For instance, when Ibn al-Ziyād orders his soldiers to trample the bodies of the martyrs, Zeynab sends her servant, Fezza, to bring a lion to protect the bodies.

As an archetype of Shiite virtue, Zeynab is portrayed as a generous person. When she and her family, who are treated as prisoners of war, return to Medina, Zeynab gives her anklet to Bašir, a man who helped them during the journey. Imām Zeyn al-Ābedin follows Zeynab's example and gives his turban, while Sakina, the daughter of Imām Ḥuseyn, gives her necklace to Bašir (184).

A prominent feature of Zeynab is her role as the preserver of precious objects that are believed to exempt the Shiites from punishment on the Day of Judgement. These objects are two teeth of the Prophet, the bloody turban of Imām 'Ali, the torn liver of Imām Ḥasan, and the bloody robe of Imām Ḥuseyn. These objects are described as trusts (*amānāt*), given to Zeynab who, on her deathbed, gives them to her sister 'Umm al-Kulṭūm. These objects symbolize the Shiite devotional tradition, reminding Shiites of injustices done by Sunnite Muslims. For instance, the bloody turban of Imām 'Ali reminds a Shiite Muslim of the murder of 'Ali.

In the *ta'ziya* texts, Zeynab is the saviour of the line of Shiite Imāms. After the battle of Karbalā, Imām Ḥuseyn's son, Imām Zeyn al-Ābedin, was the last surviving member of the Prophet's bloodline. When the prisoners were taken to the court, and Yazid saw Zeyn al-Ābedin, he ordered him to be killed. Zeynab rescued her nephew, by telling Yazid that if he wished to kill him, he would have to kill her as well. Yazid released Zeyn al-Ābedin and he returned to Medina with the other survivors from Imām Ḥuseyn's household.

In what follows, I have focused on Zeynab's relationship with several members of the family of the Prophet, beginning with her brother Imām Ḥuseyn. In the *ta'ziya* texts, their relationship is portrayed in connection with the events at Karbalā. Imām Ḥuseyn is so extremely dear to Zeynab that she offers her two sons to him. There is always a parallel between Imām Ḥuseyn and his sister Zeynab. For instance, both of them were aware of their fates at Karbalā: one fragment of text describes how they share the events

of Karbalā between themselves. Imām Ḥuseyn says that he has accepted his fate, and that he knows what is going to happen to his family, informing Zeynab about the bodies of the martyrs, the dagger wounds, and the shameless Yazid's attack on the holy household. Zeynab tells Ḥuseyn about the events that were to follow the battle, elaborating on the enemy's assault on the tents and her responsibility to take care of the household. In addition to a theological dimension concerning fate, these conversations rouse the audience to sympathize with Imām Ḥuseyn and Zeynab.

There is a splendid portrayal of the relation between Zeynab and Sakina, the daughter of Imām Ḥuseyn. Zeynab behaves like a mother, a supporter and a protector of Sakina. Zeynab sacrifices herself to protect Sakina from Yazid's tyrannies. Another person who is portrayed in the *ta'ziya* texts in relation to Zeynab is the mother of Qāsem, the wife of Imām Ḥasan. Her son was killed in the battlefield. The close relation between her and Zeynab is described briefly, but sufficiently, to show that Zeynab is a leader whose words are accepted by Qāsem's mother.

Zeynab's protest against the antagonists is also described. The Umayyad caliph Yazid and his commanders Šemr, Ibn al-Ziyād and Ibn al-Sa'd are the most notorious enemies of the Prophet's family. Šemr killed Imām Ḥuseyn while he was suffering from thirst, and beat on his severed head in the presence of Zeynab and other prisoners. After the battle, Yazid ordered his army to arrest the women and children and take them through a bazaar and to his court, without allowing them to cover their heads with veils. The issue of unveiling is a crucial one in Iranian history. Reżā Shah (1925-1941), the founder of Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), outlawed the veil (*hejāb*) in public in 1936, as part of a modernization plan for Iran.⁴⁷ Zeynab does not fear Yazid's commanders, talking to them in loud voice, cursing them, and reminding them of God's justice.

The *ta'ziya* composers have transformed several historical facts. For instance, Sakina, the four-year-old daughter of Imām Ḥuseyn, died during the imprisonment, but in the *ta'ziya* she appears as a mature girl who is Zeynab's companion. In the last part, we see how the events of Karbalā are influenced by Persian concepts. For instance, Imām Ḥuseyn has eponyms such as 'the headless king' (*Shah-e bi-sar*) and 'the king of Karbalā' (*Shah-e karbalā*). The term for kingship, and the ethic of kingship alluded to, draws on the Persian monarchical tradition. In the *ta'ziya* of 'the Damascus bazaar,' Ḥuseyn is referred to as *ān Shah-e bā farr* – that glorious king (130), but the 'glory' (*farr*) is a specific divinely-given quality associated only with ancient Persian kings.

Zeynab plays an important role in modern Iranian culture. After their conversion to Shiite Islam, Iranians elaborated on the role of Zeynab in the context of Imām Ḥuseyn's martyrdom, taking her as a religious and social example. Beliefs and virtues are represented in her behaviour. Thus, many women follow her character as the archetype of an ideal woman. Zeynab is particularly present in Shiite Iran during the first ten days of the month of Muḥarram. Sometimes, she is remembered during the devotional rituals; at other times, preachers recite an elegy for the oppressions that she suffered. For instance, she is honoured in connection with the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imām 'Ali. She is present in everyday life and in the hearts of Iranians. Every year, many Iranians travel to Syria to visit Zeynab's shrine.

Notes

- 1 The term Imām refers to the leadership of the Shiite community after the death of the Prophet. See 'The Concept of Imāma in Shiite Tradition' in the present study.
- 2 The first date is in the Islamic lunar calendar, followed by the Western calendar, i.e. A.H. /A.D.
- 3 A. Bulūkbāši, *Ta'ziya-khāni, hadiṭ-e qudsi-ye maṣā'eb dar namāyeš-e ā'inī*, Tehran: Amir kabir, 1383/2006. p. 42.
- 4 H.P. Schmidt, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Mithra, I. Mitra in Old Indian and Mithra in Old Iranian; W. Sundermann, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Mithra, III. in Manicheism.
- 5 E. Yarshater, 'Ta'ziyeh and Pre-Islamic Mourning Rites in Iran', in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. P.J. Chelkowski, New York: New York University Press & Soroush Press, 1979, p. 89.
- 6 Ibid., p. 90; J.G.J. ter Haar, 'Ta'ziye: Ritual Theater from Shiite Iran,' pp. 160-161. For further information on mourning rites for Siyāvuš and their connection to death see E. Yarshater, 'Iranian National History', in *The Cambridge History of Iran, the Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, vol. 3 (1), ed. E. Yarshater, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 450-1.
- 7 For further information on Āšūrā see M. Ayoub, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Āšūrā. For information about the 40th day (*arba'in*) after the death of Imām Ḥuseyn see M. Ayoub, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Arba'in. Šāleḥi Najafābādi in his *Šahid-e jāvid* (The Eternal Martyr) discusses how Imām Ḥuseyn protested and how his martyrdom at the plain of Karbalā was a political act. Najafābādi observes the roots of the battle in the historical conflicts between the Umayyad dynasty (661-750) and the Prophet's family. See N.Š. Najafābādi,

Šahid-e jāvid (The Eternal Martyr), Tehran: *mu'assesa-ye khadamāt-e farhangī-ye Rasā*, 1361/1982.

- 8 The term 'Āšūrā is derived from the Arabic number 'ašar, meaning ten.
- 9 According to Shiites, Imām Ḥuseyn was martyred (*šahid*) in the battle of Karbalā. The term *šahid* means 'being witness' and 'testifying witness.' The term *šahāda* refers to the formula used to profess faith in Islam: 'there is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God.' See D. Gimaret, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition), under *Shahāda*. E. Kohlberg, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition), under *Shahīd*. See also A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Martelaren: Van mystieke weg tot oorlogspad*, Amsterdam: KNAW Press, 2009.
- 10 For information on the Al-Mukhtār's movement see 'Abd al-Husain Zarrinkūb, 'The Arab Conquest of Iran and its Aftermath', in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 4, ed. R.N. Frye, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 33-38.
- 11 S. Husain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, Tehran: Ansariyan Publications, 1989, pp. 222-233.
- 12 For further information on 'Ali Asğar see J. Calmard, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under 'Ali Asğar.
- 13 J.G.J. ter Haar, 'Ta'ziye: Ritual Theater from Shiite Iran,' p. 159.
- 14 R.M. Savory & C.E. Bosworth, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition), under *Tahmāsp* (*Tahmāsb*).
- 15 See J.T.P. de Bruijn, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition), under *Muhtašam-i Kāshānī*.
- 16 See Zabih Allāh Šafā and EIR, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under *Ḥātef, Sayyed Aḥmad Ešfahānī*.
- 17 See M. Shaki, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition), under *Kā' ānī*.
- 18 Š. Humāyūnī, *Ta'ziya va ta'ziya-khānī* [Tehran]: čāpkhāna bist-o panjom šahrivar, [1354/1975], pp. 34-35; P.E. Losensky, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, under *Wakār*.
- 19 J.G.J. ter Haar, 'Ta'ziye: Ritual Theater from Shiite Iran,' pp. 161-162; M. Bektash, 'Ta'ziyeh and its Philosophy,' in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. P.J. Chelkowski, New York: New York University Press and Soroush Press, 1979, pp. 101-102.
- 20 As cited by J.G.J. ter Haar, 'Ta'ziye: Ritual Theater from Shiite Iran,' pp. 164-165.
- 21 Ibid., pp. 165-167.
- 22 Ibid., pp. 173-174.
- 23 Humāyūnī, *Ta'ziya va ta'ziya-khānī*, p. 22.
- 24 Ibid., for more information on the Mahdi see Colin Turner, *Islam without Allah? The Rise of Religious Externalism in Safarid Islam*, Richmond: Curzon, 2002, pp. 187-230.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 R. Narasimahan, 'Literacy: Its Characterization and Implications,' in *Literacy and Orality*, ed. D.R. Olson and N. Torrance, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 178.

- 27 R. Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality Studies in the Technology of Communication*, Oxford: Opus, 1988, pp. 88-89.
- 28 Ibid., p. 69.
- 29 Ibid., p. 89.
- 30 W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy the Technologizing of the World*, London & New York: Methuen, 1982, pp. 23-26.
- 31 Ibid., pp. 39-41.
- 32 Ibid., p. 38.
- 33 Ibid., p. 44.
- 34 References in parentheses are pages numbers in H. Şāleḫī Rād Darbandsari, *Majālis-e ta'ziya*, vol. 2, Tehran: Soroush, 1380/2001.
- 35 Zahrā is a title of Fāḫima, the Prophet's daughter.
- 36 S. Sharma, *Persian Poetry at Indian Frontier: Mas'ud Sa'd Salman of Lahore*, Oxford: Permanent Black, 2000, pp. 47-48.
- 37 Šahrbānū is the daughter of Yazdgerd III, the last Sasanian king of Iran. She is the wife of Imām Ḥuseyn. See M. Boyce, *Zoroastrians their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1979, p. 151.
- 38 Karbalā here is called Karb-o balā, meaning 'affliction and calamity.'
- 39 For more examples see H. Şāleḫī Rād Darbandsari, *Majālis-e ta'ziya*, pp. 54, 55, 62, 74, 75, 76.
- 40 'šahr-o bāzār burdan', refers to showing slaves in the bazaar to be sold.
- 41 A. Shahidi, 'Literary and Musical Developments in the Ta'ziyeh', in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. P.J. Chelkowski, New York: New York University Press and Soroush Press, 1979, p. 42.
- 42 A. Schimmel, in *The Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under *Colour*.
- 43 A. Morabia, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition), under *Lawn*.
- 44 W.O. Beeman, 'Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Ta'ziyeh' in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. P.J. Chelkowski, New York: New York University Press and Soroush Press, 1979, p. 28.
- 45 P.J. Chelkowski, 'Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran', in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. P. J. Chelkowski, New York: New York University Press and Soroush Press, 1979, p. 8.
- 46 W.O. Beeman, 'Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Ta'ziyeh', in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama*, pp. 26-30.
- 47 H. Afra, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, under *Reza Shah Pahlavi*.