FEMININE *TA'ZIEH*: BREAKING THE STRICT MASCULINE WALL BY IRANIAN WOMEN IN THE QAJAR DYNASTY

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RIASSUNTO: Durante la dinastia Qajar (1779–1955), il *Ta'zieh* – la rappresentazione epica di narrazioni religiose – ha rappresentato una opportunità storica per le donne iraniane di trascendere le strutture patriarcali e estendere i propri ruoli sociali attraverso l'impegno con i miti religiosi. Questo articolo esplora il modo in cui il *Ta'zieh* abbia permesso la formazione di un identità femminile unica, dimostrando come le donne abbiano utilizzato la cornice religiosa per sfidare e oltrepassare le restrizioni, prendendo parte a queste *performances* epiche. L'attenzione si concentra sugli indicatori chiave che hanno facilitato l'ingresso delle donne nel teatro e sul più ampio impatto che questi sforzi hanno avuto sulle loro vite.

PAROLE CHIAVE: donne, *Ta'zieh*, dinastia Qajar, epica, *Ta'zieh* femminile, movimenti delle donne

ABSTRACT: During the Qajar dynasty (1779–1955), *Ta'zieh* – the epic performance of religious narratives – presented a historical opportunity for Iranian women to transcend patriarchal structures and expand their societal roles through engagement with religious myths. This article explores how *Ta'zieh* enabled the formation of a unique female identity, demonstrating how women utilized religious frameworks to challenge and overcome restrictions by participating in these epic performances. The focus is on key indicators that facilitated women's entry into theater and the broader impact these efforts had on their lives.

KEY-WORDS: Women, *Ta'zieh*, Qajar dynasty, Epic, Feminine *Ta'zieh*, Women's movements

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1. Introduction

Before the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1909), Iranian women were largely confined by traditional norms, where they were viewed as the property of men and served as a means to enhance family prestige through childbirth and parenting. This restrictive condition was more pronounced among urban populations. Iranian-Islamic culture framed women's roles through concepts such as harem, harim, mahram, and hormat.[1] Women were often required to live within a harem, while men were responsible for defining their privacy based on Islamic principles to protect women.

In its physical manifestation, the harem was part of the household, reflecting Iranian architectural traditions that distinctly separated women's spaces from the outside world. Iranian homes were typically divided into two sections: Andarūnī ('interior') and Bīrūnī ('exterior'). Bīrūnī was where men engaged with the public and their male peers, while Andarūnī was reserved for women, covering them from the view of male visitors. Islamic jurisprudence dictated that men were prohibited from looking at women to whom they

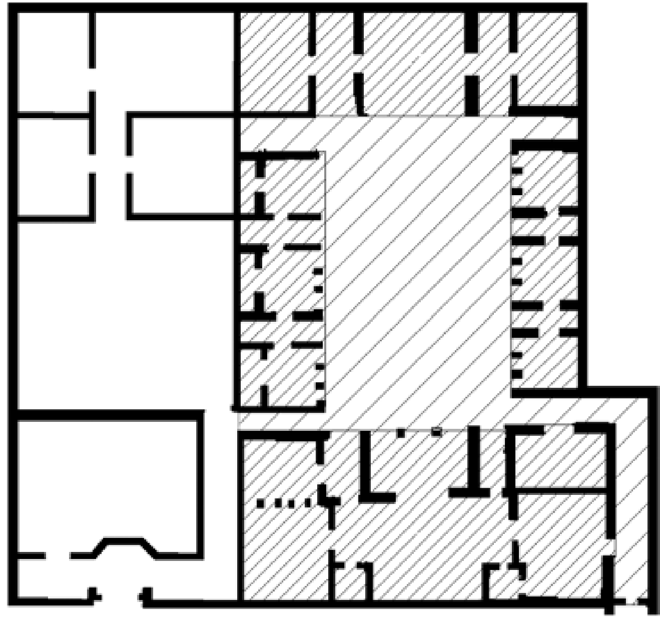

Fig. 1. Plan of a large courtyard house in the city of Yazd, illustrating the andarūnī (unshaded area) and bīrūnī (hatched area) sections. Courtesy of Pamela Karimi.

[1] All of these terms – *harem*, *harim*, *mahram*, and *hormat* – entered the Persian language from Arabic, and they share a common linguistic root. The origin of these words can be traced back to the Hebrew term חֵרֶם (*ḥērem*), meaning 'taboo', which has evolved into various, but closely related, derivatives within the Arabic linguistic structure. For instance, today, the word *ḥarīm* is commonly understood to mean an "exclusive space", but its original meaning is more accurately linked to a "restricted place". For a more detailed exploration of these terms, refer to Ibn Manzur's *Lisan al-Arab*.

were not related, a rule known as mohramāt. This religious ruling governed a complex network of relations, allowing men to control women's social presence, with the aim of preventing interactions between women and unrelated men.[2]

This ruling compelled women within a patriarchal structure to accept the *hijāb* as part of their belief system. However, *hijāb* extends beyond women's clothing; it is also reflected in architectural spaces such as the *andarūnī*, which serves as a physical veil, covering women from the gaze of unrelated men. As a garment, *hijāb* is intended to protect women – considered part of the *haram* – from strangers. As these man-made boundaries became increasingly rigid, Iranian women faced limited prospects for social opportunities. In his article *Feminist Rereading of Shabih'khani in Iran*, Milad Azarm argues that *hijāb*, in its more extreme forms, strips femininity from the body and face, reducing a woman's identity to the *hijāb* itself. He adds «All aspects of femininity are within the *hijāb*, suggesting that the mere presence of a woman's body, including her face, can be seen as potentially seductive to men».[3]

Before the Constitutional Revolution, Iranian women, regarded as the weaker gender and as men's property, were largely confined to the roles of mother, wife, or a means of social advancement through marriage into powerful political and economic families. The patriarchal interpretation of Islam in this period restricted women's social roles to domestic duties. However, throughout history, women have sought opportunities to break free from these male-dominated structures. Since social restrictions were often justified by religious principles and traditional society showed little willingness to oppose religion, one of the least risky ways for women to gain social privilege in a patriarchal religious society was through religion itself.

During the Qajar dynasty (1779-1925), *Ta'zieh*, the most important form of Iranian drama, which combined epic storytelling with religious narratives, offered women such an opportunity. A subsidiary form of *Ta'zieh*, known as "feminine *Ta'zieh*", allowed women to transcend patriarchal boundaries by engaging with religious and epic narratives. Initially, women were only considered part of the audience for *Ta'zieh*, but over

[2] Karimi 2016: 22-30, discusses how this separation led to social change and how both women and men adopted Western concepts to reinforce their authority within the household in her book.
[3] Azarm 2024:135.

time, they were permitted to play more active roles in its production and performance. This shift marked one of the first attempts by women to perform in theater and coincided with the social changes following the Constitutional Revolution, which granted women some civil liberties with the help of epic narratives.

Negar Mottahedeh, in her article *Karbala Drag Kings and Queens* (2005), argues that Iranian Shi'ism, in its effort to assert superiority over Ottoman Sunnis, fostered an identity based on *Ta'zieh*. However, this identity also allowed for the emergence of alternative cultures, including a feminine identity within *Ta'zieh*.[4] Although *Ta'zieh* was originally intended to reinforce patriarchal identity through Shi'ite beliefs, it inadvertently created a space for women to form their own distinct identity, which this article seeks to explore through the artistic epic narration of *Ta'zieh*.

Contemporary feminist scholars, such as Afsaneh Najmabadi and Janet Afary, have highlighted the Qajar era as a significant period for understanding women's efforts to play a social role. The Qajar era is particularly well-documented due to the advent of photography and the intellectual trend toward documentation among Iranian elites. Despite this, feminine *Ta'zieh* has remained largely neglected in historical studies, even among those focusing on women's history. The widespread illiteracy of women and the exclusion of men from attending feminine *Ta'zieh* performances have limited the available sources on this socio-cultural phenomenon.

While *Ta'zieh* studies have been popular in Iran, prominent scholars such as Bahram Beyzai, Enayatollah Shahidi, and Jamshid Malekpour have overlooked feminine *Ta'zieh* due to the lack of available resources. The primary sources on this subject are scattered references, including the memoirs of Nasser al-Din Shah (1831-1896) and a book about his handmaiden, Mouns al-Dowlah, who reported the peak of feminine *Ta'zieh*. By examining Mouns al-Dowlah's accounts, it is possible to trace the evolution of feminine *Ta'zieh* and its impact on women's social status, even after its disappearance. To fully understand this development, it is essential to explore the historical relationship between Iranian society and concepts such as epic and religion, which have deeply influenced the cultural fabric of Iranian life.

[4] Mottahedeh 2008: 75.

2. National Epic/Religious Epic

The origins of Persian epic literature lie in the Zoroastrian holy book, *Avesta*, which chronicles the lives of mythical Iranian kings from the «Pishdadian» and «Kayanian» dynasties. As Zoroastrianism became more established, epics were written to legitimize the religion of two Zoroastrian dynasties: the «Parthians» (247 BC-224 AD) and the «Sassanids» (224-651 AD). Works like *Yadegar Zariran* and *Khodanameh* later served as sources for post-Islamic epics, including *Shahnameh*.[5] The interplay between "epic" and "religion" has consistently presented Iranian society with a tension between nationalism and religiosity, especially following the transition from Zoroastrianism to Islam. During this time, Iranians sought to preserve their national identity through epic narratives, while adapting to the new religious framework. By reinterpreting these epics, Iranians have managed to synthesize their national and religious identities, a process that continues to this day.

While one segment of society created religious epics based on Shiite history – just as in the past they had crafted Zoroastrian epics – another group treated Iranian history and mythology as national epics. As a result, epics flourished in artistic forms such as poetry and drama. In poetry, Abolghasem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (940-1020) stands as the most significant national epic, serving as a comprehensive model for epic creation. Although Ferdowsi reinterpreted Iran's mythological past, he also sought to reconcile Zoroastrian narratives with Islamic teachings. This method became a popular approach among Iranian poets who composed religious epics, in which Shiite figures became the protagonists of fictionalized stories akin to *Shahnameh*. Works such as *The Attack of Heydari* by Bazel Mashhadi (18th) and *Khavaran-nameh* by Ibn-Hessam Khusfi (1380-1470) are notable examples. In these works, Ali ibn Abi Talib (600-661), the first Shiite Imam, is portrayed battling demons and giants, despite the lack of Islamic connection to these figures.[6]

This transition from nationalistic to religious epics is also evident in Iranian drama. *Ta'zieh* is a dramatic and epic retelling of the events of 680 CE in Karbala (in pres-

[5] For more information see Khaleghi Motlagh 2007.

[6] For more information about roots of religion epics see Razmjoo 2002.

ent-day Iraq), where Hussein ibn Ali (626-680), the third Shiite Imam, fought against the forces of Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah (647-683), the sixth caliph. Hussein's small band of supporters was killed, and his family captured. In *Ta'zieh*, the courage and sacrifice of Hussein's supporters are transformed into poignant epics, performed through a musical drama known as *Shabih-Khāni*.

Many scholars of Iranian theater history argue that the roots of *Ta'zieh* trace back to the mourning rituals of Siavash, a legendary Iranian prince whose death mirrors that of Hussein. Both figures were minorities, surrounded by religious prejudice, and ultimately murdered. Evidence, such as *History of Bukhara* (943) and the frescoes of Panjakent (in present-day Tajikistan), suggests that the performance elements of Siavash's mourning may have been transferred to *Ta'zieh*.[7] During Siavash's mourning, Iranians would march in processions, striking their faces and chests while chanting. However, proving a direct connection between these rituals and *Ta'zieh* remains difficult, as the earliest recorded evidence of *Ta'zieh* dates to the 11th CE. A key document from Shah Tahmasb II Safavid's reign (1704-1740), signed by Mullah Mohammad-Ali Vaez Khansari in 1723, provides the earliest known reference to *Ta'zieh*.[8]

The acceptance of certain Zoroastrian concepts by Iranian Shiites, such as the celebration of *Nowruz* ('first day of year') and the *Sedeh* ('the middle day of winter') festival in rural traditions, further strengthens the theory that Siavash's mourning rituals influenced *Ta'zieh*.

3. The Absence of Women in Epic Writing

Epic writing in Iran has a long-standing yet predominantly masculine history, with women playing a limited role in its production. Most epics in Iran are poetic, predominantly authored by male poets, despite some being centered around feminine subjects. Notable examples include *Banu Goshsabnameh* (date unknown) and *Susannameh* (12th), both of

[7] For more information about roots of Ta'zieh see Baizaei 1965, and Malekpour 2004.
[8] See Fathali Begi 2015: 1-4.

which were written by men. This absence of women in epic literature contrasts sharply with their presence in the history of lyrical poetry.[9]

Similar to the Shiite tradition prevalent in Iran prior to the «Pahlavi» era, women are depicted as men's property within epic narratives. This is evident in the mourning traditions surrounding the story of Siavash, where female characters in the *Shahnameh* are often portrayed as possessions.[10] For instance, in the tale of Zahhak's downfall, Ferydun, the legendary Persian king, must marry Jamshid's daughters to legitimize his rule. Similarly, in the narrative of Esfandiar, the Iranian prince, he is compelled to rescue his sisters, Homa and Behafrid, from «Turanian» captivity. In Iranian epics, men bear the responsibility of protecting their *harems* from enemies, while women are portrayed as vulnerable to abduction. This notion of female vulnerability is encapsulated in the concept of *Gheyrat*[11] ('jealousy'), where women symbolize the *Nāmous* – a metaphor for the homeland, suggesting that the loss of a woman equates to the fall of the nation.[12]

The absence of women becomes even more pronounced in *Ta'zieh*, where their participation as actresses is prohibited by religious beliefs.[13] The Iranian patriarchal society, underpinned by Islamic laws, disallows women from performing on stage. Even roles of female characters are typically portrayed by cross-dressing men who imitate female voices. This prohibition also stems from religious restrictions on women's singing. Consequently, women are unable to engage in the reproduction of epic narratives through writing or performance in *Ta'zieh*, relegating them to the role of mere spectators.

This dynamic has intrigued Western travelers, particularly due to the separation of men and women in *Ta'zieh* performances. Notably, Lady Schell (1825-1869), the wife of the British ambassador between 1849-1853, provides a captivating account in her

[9] See Razmjoo 2002.

[10] Siavash is a mythological prince in Persian literature who marries Farangis, the daughter of Afrasiab, the king of Turan, and Piran-e-Viseh, Afrasiab's minister. After Siavash is murdered by Afrasiab, Giv, an Iranian general, embarks on a secret mission to Turan. During this journey, he not only seeks out Keykhosrow, Siavash's son and the future king of Iran, but also brings Farangis back with him to Iran, thereby reuniting her with her husband's legacy.

[11] The term is derived from the Quranic verses that state, «Men are the protectors and maintainers of women» (Quran, Surah An-Nisa: 34).

[12] Najamabadi 1996.

[13] Birjandi 2009.

memoir, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* (1856). She describes the seating arrangements and behaviors of women at these events

> The house was filled and there must have been several thousand persons present. Part of the pit was appropriated to women of humble condition who were in great numbers, all however carefully veiled, and all seated on the bare ground. Before the curtain drew up it was ludicrous to witness the contention among these dames for places which were not always limited to cries and execrations. They often proceeded to blows striking each other heartily on the head with the iron heel of their slippers dexterously snatched off the foot for the purpose and, worse still, tearing off each other's veils several guardians were present to keep the peace armed with long sticks, with which they unmercifully belabored these pugnacious devotees.[14]

Fig. 2. A domestic *Ta'zieh* performance in the Kamraniyeh mansion, the residence of Kamran Mirza, viceroy under Naser al-Din Shah. Photograph by Yusuf Khan, courtesy of the Golestan Palace Museum collection.

[14] Sheil 1856: 128.

The report highlights the unique challenges faced by women, including the violent behavior exhibited by their guardians. As a result, women participated primarily as observers of *Ta'zieh* and mourners. Sheil, who observed the *Ta'zieh* performance from among the women, noted their distinct expressions of grief. Women would harmonize their cries with the *Ta'zieh-Khan*s to publicly display their mourning for Hussein; when one woman wept loudly, it often prompted others to join in. Sheil remarked on the profound emotional impact of this collective mourning, which moved her to tears as well.[15]

Sheil's observations also reveal a significant social gap between men and women. While men could engage in various social roles and contexts, women's presence was largely restricted to religious ceremonies. This shared space for women was often marked by insults and limitations imposed by the male society. Mirza Agha Tabrizi, the first Iranian playwright, discussed these dynamics in his 1874 essay, *Essay on Ethics*. He reported that male spectators frequently disrupted the experience for women during *Ta'zieh*, engaging in flirtatious behavior that threatened the safety and comfort of female attendees. Tabrizi described how these interactions could lead to altercations among men, underscoring the precarious situation of women in the Qajar era.[16]

Bushra Delrish, in her book *Women in the Qajar Period* (1997), classifies the circumstances of women during this time as follows:

1. Forced marriages in childhood, early pregnancies, and minimal rights within marital relationships,
2. The prevalence of polygamy among men, which confined women to domestic roles, though some worked in agriculture or as shepherds in rural areas,
3. Limited access to healthcare, as medical professionals were prohibited from entering the *Andarūnī*,
4. Prohibition of education for girls, resulting in widespread illiteracy,
5. The exploitation of women as prostitutes, singers, dancers, and servants, particularly among the elite,
6. Restrictions on women's societal participation,

[15] *Ibidem.*
[16] Tabrizi 2003: 275.

7. Mandatory adherence to *hijāb*,
8. Increased vulnerability to violence and theft.[17]

Delrish substantiates these issues with numerous documents but emphasizes that, despite these challenges, women's most active social engagement occurred during religious ceremonies such as *Ta'zieh*, which took place during *Muharram* and *Safar*, two significant months in Shiite Islam. During these periods, *Ta'zieh* performances were held in dedicated spaces known as *Takiyeh*, which, while primarily male-dominated, served as important gathering places for women. Despite this, women were still required to cover their bodies completely and wear veils to protect their faces from male onlookers.

Jane Dieulafoy (1851-1916), in her narrative *At Susa, the Ancient Capital of the Kings of Persia: Narrative of Travel Through Western Persia and Excavations Made at the Site of the Lost City of the Lilies, 1884-1886* (1890), describes a scene in Qazvin:

> On one side there are veiled women, and on the other side, the men are wearing the round peasant caps... The women let out gasps of pain or words of commiseration addressed to the victims hitting their chest and shoulders.[18]

Other European Orientalists encountered similar portrayals of Iranian women, indicating that their attire often obscured their individual identities and experiences.

4. Breaking the Masculine Boundaries

For women to enter the world of epics and participate in their reproduction, Iranian society needed major changes in its social structures. These changes occurred a century after the earliest version of *Ta'zieh*, driven by class transformation during the Qajar era and Iranians' increasing familiarity with the West, which influenced family structures and social behaviors. One of the most significant changes was the diversification of the methods of

[17] It's a summary of the book Delrish 1997.
[18] Dieulafoy 1887: 109.

performing *Ta'zieh*. Previously, *Ta'zieh* was primarily performed in *Takiyeh*, a religious venue akin to Western theaters. *Takiyeh* featured a central courtyard and a circular platform, with rooms surrounding the courtyard serving as audience seating, resting areas, locker rooms for actors, and storage for accessories. Its architecture was directly adapted from traditional Persian homes, which also have a central courtyard and several surrounding rooms.

During the Qajar class transformation, the nobility began to hold *Ta'zieh* performances in their homes. This shift was indicative of the growing popularity of *Ta'zieh* among various guilds and classes of society.[19] Enayatollah Shahidi, a researcher of *Ta'zieh*, describes in his book on *Ta'zieh* how the prevalence of home performances led to a decline in the quality of these performances. Unlike *Ta'zieh* in *Takiyeh*, which featured numerous instruments, horses, and camels to authentically represent the events of Karbala, domestic performances were limited and shorter due to constraints on the means of display. This situation created opportunities for women to engage more in the production of *Ta'zieh*, as these performances did not require extensive skills or the gathering of elaborate equipment, enabling women to perform in their homes with minimal resources.

Shahidi explains that «performing *Ta'zieh* in homes allowed some aristocratic women to host performances in which the actors were women».[20] This adaptation came to be known as feminine *Ta'zieh*, marking the first time that women transitioned from spectators to performers. He notes that this shift not only allowed women to express their sincerity and religious beliefs but also included elements of «show-off, ostentation, and feminine entertainment».[21] Women's entertainment included dramatic games performed in the absence of men, characterized by rhythmic and textless performances at events such as birthdays, weddings, circumcisions, and childbirth celebrations. In the absence of men, these games sometimes contained erotic elements, with women assuming roles related to the theme of the event. For instance, at a wedding, women would portray the bride, groom, and their families.[22]

[19] Shahidi 2001: 109.

[20] *Ibidem*.

[21] Ivi: 110.

[22] Seyyed Abolqasem Enjovi Shirazi, an Iranian anthropologist, compiled a collection of 20 different games

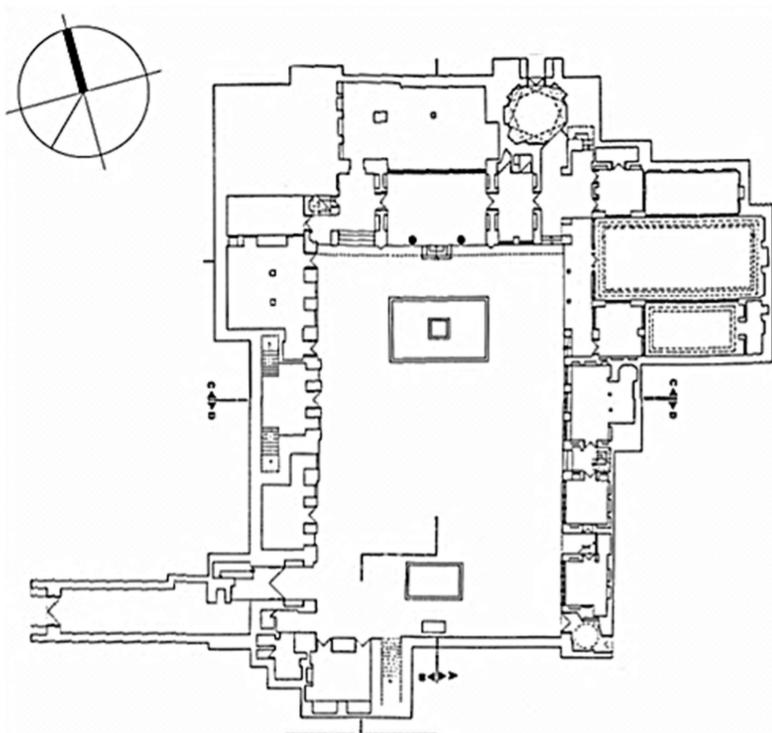

Fig. 3. The layout of Moshir Takiyeh in Shiraz, which closely resembles the architectural design of an Iranian house from the Qajar era. Courtesy of Maryam Kian.

The feminine *Ta'zieh*, much like dramatic games, was exclusively for women. Men were prohibited from entering this space due to the religious laws forbidding them from seeing women or hearing their voices, which ultimately provided women with an opportunity for cultural independence. Consequently, the courtyards of noble households became single-sex spaces. Given the similar architectural designs of the house and *Takiyeh*, domestic *Ta'zieh* performances could occur without issue, allowing women to transform the *Andarūnī* into a male-free community that contrasted with its traditional nature.

The house also offered several advantages over *Takiyeh*; it had no windows facing public passages, effectively serving as a form of *Hijāb,* and promoting a feminine archi-

shows in 1973 at the request of Iran's National Television Organization. This compilation, titled *Dramatic Games*, aimed to present various versions of each game to highlight the differences in gameplay across different cities.

tectural design with rooms arranged around the courtyard. This configuration created a nurturing environment for participants, akin to a mother's womb. The metaphorical connection between the house and the female body is further emphasized by the power dynamics at play: women held authority within the *Andarūnī* but lost it upon stepping outside. According to Azarm's views on *hijāb*, a woman's departure from the home significantly diminished her femininity. Thus, women's efforts to assert their position outside the patriarchal framework become evident, as they navigated a society dominated by men while seeking ways to strengthen their standing.[23]

Reports indicate that the first feminine *Ta'zieh* was established during the reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar (1769-1834), primarily supported by nobles and courtiers. For instance, Mahlaqa Khanum, one of Fath-Ali Shah's daughters, is noted for organizing feminine *Ta'zieh* events at Golestan Palace, the Shah's residence. Mah Taban Khanum, known as Qamar al-Saltaneh, another daughter of the Shah and wife of Mirza Mohammad Khan Sepahsalar, the prime minister during Nasser al-Din Shah's reign, hosted the most magnificent feminine *Ta'zieh*. Similarly, Munir al-Saltaneh, Nasser al-Din Shah's wife, also held feminine *Ta'zieh* events at her residence, known as *Muniriyeh*.[24]

Unlike most women of their time, these pioneering figures in the establishment of feminine *Ta'zieh* were not confined to traditional roles. They had access to some Western influences due to their aristocratic backgrounds, proximity to Europeans, and even European educators for foreign language studies.[25] This socio-political freedom enabled them to exert influence over men's decisions; for example, Qamar al-Saltaneh played a crucial role in her husband's political choices. Pouran Farrokhzad, in her book *Iranian Elite Women's Achievement: Past and Present*, describes Qamar al-Saltaneh as a key figure in the establishment of "feminine *Ta'zieh*", noting her literacy in French and Turkish and her involvement in constructing a library for Sepahsalar School. She adds, «She was so astute

[23] Hijazi has utilized numerous documents to illustrate the ways in which Iranian women were subjected to humiliation by men during the Qajar era.

[24] Mottahedeh 2008: 79

[25] In her book, Lady Sheil recounts multiple encounters with Iranian aristocratic women, noting the presence of a French teacher in the court of Mahd Olia, the mother of Naser al-Din Shah. Sheil also highlights the curiosity of these aristocratic women to learn more about the intricacies of Western life. Sheil 1856.

in political matters that her husband consulted her before making governmental decisions and held great respect for her opinions».[26]

Political power allowed aristocratic women to participate in activities typically inaccessible to other women. Doust Ali Khan Mu'ir al-Mamluk, Naser al-Din Shah's son-in-law, in *Notes from the Private Life of Nasser al-Din Shah* (1982), describes a Muharram mourning ceremony in the Golestan Palace, where 3,000 women gathered in the Shah's *Andarūnī* to perform a ritual. A specially decorated flag was raised in the courtyard, and one of Fath-Ali Shah's daughters sang beneath it, while the other women rhythmically beat their chests in unison with her voice. These women were performing actions traditionally reserved for men, though in an all-female space.[27] Singing in front of men was strictly forbidden for women, making this display particularly significant for courtly women, as it was considered taboo for others.

The political empowerment of these aristocratic women, owing to their literacy and political acumen, resulted in significant changes in women's social roles. *Ta'zieh* emerged as a vital tool for women seeking to challenge and navigate the rigid male-dominated system.

5. The Report of Mouns al-Dowlah

Due to women's illiteracy, the lack of female writers, and the absence of men in feminine *Ta'zieh* performances, there exist limited reports on this subject. Mouns al-Dowlah (1871-?), a notable figure in the Qajar court, is among the few individuals to have documented these *Ta'ziehs* in her book, *Memoirs of Mouns al-Dowlah: The Maidservant of Naser al-Din Shah's Harem* (2001). In her concise report, she adeptly outlines the characteristics of feminine *Ta'zieh*, the factors contributing to its production, its thematic content, the relational dynamics among women involved, the significant differences between women's and men's practices, and the opportunities that feminine *Ta'zieh* afforded women.

[26] Farroxzad 2001: 643.
[27] Moāyer ol-Mamalek 1982: 66.

The report reveals that feminine *Ta'zieh* markedly differed from its male counterpart in both structure and content. For instance, rather than performing popular *Ta'ziehs* featuring male protagonists, women centered their performances around female heroines and their narratives. This shift indicates that, within a female-dominated context, the traditional tales of male heroism on the battlefield held diminished appeal. Azram, in discussing feminine *Ta'ziehs*, suggests that the staging and representation of female characters are likely influenced by female desires and preferences.[28]

This inclination toward female protagonists and narratives is closely associated with dramatic games, which serve as a significant aspect of women's gatherings at social events. According to Mouns al-Dowlah, both feminine *Ta'zieh* and dramatic games shared similar patterns, including the staging of *Ta'zieh* during wedding ceremonies, which is a popular element in these performances. She references notable *Ta'ziehs*, such as the weddings of Bilqis and Suleiman, Yusuf and Zulaikha, and Fatemeh, all of which are derived from Persian *Bazmi* literature, known for its convivial narratives. This genre typically recounts tales of love involving heroes and kings who strive to win their beloveds, characterized by a level of elegance that resonates more with female audiences.
In discussing their popularity, Mouns al-Dowlah highlights the immense interest in the *Ta'zieh* « Going Fatemeh to a Wedding, » noting that «sometimes women from distant cities would travel to Tehran with great difficulty to watch this performance, in which all the performers were women». [29]

Mouns al-Dowlah provides a detailed analysis of a *Ta'zieh* titled *The Quraysh Bride,* which illustrates the progression of *Ta'zieh* content toward a feminine discourse and a redefined understanding of the relationships between characters. In this *Ta'zieh*, the feminine dynamics give rise to conflicts that diverge from the frequent violence and bloodshed characteristic of male-centered *Ta'ziehs*, where the antagonist is typically portrayed as a purely evil figure. Instead, the feminine conflict reveals a more nuanced perspective, wherein the antagonist comes to recognize her faults.

[28] Azarm 2024: 129

[29] Mouns al-Dowlah 2001: 99.

For instance, in *The Quraysh Bride,* the non-Muslim Quraysh[30] women host an extravagant wedding to flaunt their financial and social status in a bid to undermine the Prophet's daughter, Fatemeh, by inviting her to the event as a means of mockery. Mouns al-Dowlah notes:

> The costumes and makeup of the Quraysh women were depicted as quite absurd. They donned red *Charqad*[31] garments and short, thigh-high blue skirts, accessorizing with the tails of dogs and cats draped around their necks. On one leg, they wore a shoe, while on the other, they wore a *Giveh.*[32] Some Quraysh women were portrayed wearing saddlebags instead of traditional clothing, riding on bare donkeys. Eunuchs were responsible for holding the reins of the donkeys, guiding these women into the scene.[33]

In male *Ta'zieh*, the appearance of enemies was not subject to ridicule as a means of humiliation. Distinctive signs in dress and music were employed to differentiate between antagonists and protagonists; for example, antagonists typically wore red garments and remained silent, while protagonists donned green and engaged in song. In contrast, costume in feminine *Ta'zieh* emerged as a more complex element, serving as a significant marker within the feminine world. While it had the potential to limit women's roles and deprive them of their human rights, it also exhibited a contradictory function, becoming a tool for humiliation despite its intended parodic aspect.

Although the wealthy Quraysh women were expected to wear opulent clothing, the actresses portrayed them in ugly and unconventional attire that failed to reflect their class status, instead resembling beggars. Rather than riding horses, they were depicted riding donkeys – a symbol of humiliation, as donkeys were typically associated with villagers and lacked saddles and horseshoes. Fatemeh's dress and posture as the protagonist did not conform to the stereotypical image of a prince. According to Mouns al-Dowlah's report, this representation conveyed a feminine message shaped by the era in which feminine *Ta'zieh* was developed.

[30] It refers to a tribe of Hijaz Arabs from the region of present-day Arabia, to which the Prophet of Islam belonged.

[31] An old-fashioned scarf in Iran.

[32] Iranian traditional shoe.

[33] *Ibidem.*

By describing the performance atmosphere and reviewing its chronological order, Mouns al-Dowlah indicates that Fatemeh's entrance occurs while she is engaged in making flour at home, dressed without luxury. This portrayal is significant, as it reflects the importance of traditional women's roles in Iran, particularly the management of household affairs, for the organizers of the performance. Unlike the heroic representation of figures such as Joan of Arc, Fatemeh is depicted in a manner that seeks to reinforce the social status of the organizers, who hailed from noble families and could influence their husbands in socio-political decisions, despite their confinement to the *Andarūnī*.

As the daughter of the Prophet, Fatemeh also lends legitimacy to this group of women, many of whom identified as descendants of the Prophet based on their genealogy. Notably, Fatemeh is the only child of the Prophet who had offspring, thereby granting her a unique position of power among Shiite women. In Shia Islam, family relations are often traced through the father-daughter relationship, and there exists a concept known as *seleh rahem*, which refers to the connection established through the womb, contrasting with blood relations.

Mouns al-Dowlah subsequently explains how Fatemeh transforms into a heroine. Initially, she declines the invitation to the wedding; however, the angel Gabriel, the messenger of revelation, appears. Mouns al-Dowlah describes this scene as featuring a beautiful woman with two wings, accompanied by twelve enchanting nymphs clad in luxurious garments. These nymphs carried bags and chests filled with expensive clothing for Fatemeh, purportedly delivered from heaven.[34]

Gabriel's arrival and the bestowal of gifts served as strategic maneuvers to legitimize the changes desired by the organizers. The nymphs presented Fatemeh with luxurious clothing and fragrant perfumes, transforming her simple attire. Clad in her new garments, she attended the wedding to thwart the Quraysh women's conspiracy. Upon her entrance, the bride – typically depicted as an unattractive girl afflicted with smallpox and poorly dressed – fainted at the sight of Fatemeh. The women present urged Fatemeh to pray and beseech God to restore the bride's vitality. Fatemeh prayed, and miraculously, the bride was revived. Witnessing this miracle, the women converted to Islam.

[34] Mouns al-Dowlah 2001: 99-104.

Fatemeh departed her home in attire that was deemed impossible for the audience. As a heroine, she broke societal taboos and showcased a feminine aspect that is less prominent in male *Ta'zieh*. Through her actions, Fatemeh successfully invited many women to Islam without resorting to physical force or violence. In contrast, her father had engaged in nearly a decade of warfare against the Quraysh to propagate Islam, culminating in their conversion following the conquest of Mecca.

The distinction between female and male perspectives on historical events is poignantly illustrated in feminine *Ta'zieh*, particularly through the symbolism of clothing. Fatemeh's appearance was integral to her triumph, whereas, in male *Ta'zieh*, appearance plays a minimal role in shaping events. In feminine *Ta'zieh*, the protagonist ultimately reconciled with her antagonists through a religious act, such as prayer, while the prayers of male protagonists typically failed to influence their adversaries. Women wielded religious power as a transformative means for dramatic turning points, distancing themselves from violence and conflict.

This dynamic reflects the fertility aspect of women, underscored by the Persian word *zan,* ('creator'), which transforms the epic narrative into an opportunity for joy and life, rather than the tragedy of others' deaths.

Women also introduced changes in the performance of *Ta'zieh*. In male *Ta'zieh*, the director, known as Mo'in al-Boka, is responsible for overseeing the stage, managing the actors' entrances and exits, and coordinating the music. His role includes supervising the *Ta'zieh-Khan* to ensure that they recite the poems precisely according to the texts. In contrast, the situation in feminine *Ta'zieh* differs significantly, as roles such as *Mo'in al-Boka* and *Ta'zieh-Khan* were adapted due to the lack of literate women who could read the scripts.

Mouns al-Dowlah addresses this challenge by noting that some literate eunuchs took on the responsibility of reading and memorizing Mo'in al-Boka's texts. They learned to sing the roles of antagonists and angels, subsequently returning to the *Andarūnī* to teach the women and girls what they had learned. Mouns al-Dowlah adds «This group of women was referred to as *Mullah.* The title of *Akhund* designated the chorus leader, who sometimes possessed only a basic level of reading literacy».[35]

[35] Ivi: 98.

Mullah and *Akhund* typically refer to clerical men. The term *Mullah* is derived from Arabic, ('a person who holds authority over others'); in Persian, it specifically denotes traditional teachers educated in religious schools. As such, *Mullahs* were often attired in the clothing of Shiite clerics. The term *Akhund* refers to a man who is literate, but within Shiite culture, it signifies a cleric who has completed his religious education.

Women were traditionally barred from attaining the ranks of *Mullah* or *Akhund*. However, in feminine *Ta'zieh*, they appropriated these male titles, which symbolize the masculine abilities – such as singing, writing, acting, and, notably, donning combat attire – from which they had been excluded. Through feminine *Ta'zieh*, women were able to adopt male titles and break free from these constraints. Mouns al-Dowlah reports that women donned helmets and swords and rode horses. In Persian epics, only two women are depicted wearing such garments: Gordafarid, the daughter of Gazhdam, a legendary Persian general who battles against the "Turan army", and Banu Goshasb, Rostam's daughter, a prominent figure in Iranian epics who also participates in the fight against the Turan. Thus, in the context of feminine *Ta'zieh*, women were afforded the opportunity to challenge the conventional stereotype that only men could take to the battlefield.

When it became impossible for men to direct *Ta'zieh*, this role was assigned to some literate aristocratic women. Mouns al-Dowlah mentions a princess who directed the performance in a manner akin to Mo'in al-Boka. To distinguish herself, she donned a short, creased skirt, a robe made of cashmere or satin, a long veil, and special shoes known as *Saqari.* Additionally, she wielded a short cane to command the musicians and actors. Mouns al-Dowlah illustrates how the director endeavored to create impactful moments, narrating:

> When a girl or woman sang a sad song, the princess would step forward and gently strike the woman or girl's ears, sharing in their pain and tears. This interaction infused the melody of that part with a sense of natural sadness.[36]

One of the most significant feminine *Ta'zieh* was held in the royal palace, and according to Mouns al-Dowlah's report, this event took place on Ashura night, the 10th of Mu-

[36] Ivi: 105.

harram, commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein. During this *Ta'zieh*, a princess bared her head and feet, leading the others while holding a bag full of straw. She sang *Noheh* ('lament') and threw the straw with a loud voice. The harem women, including both nobles and handmaidens, followed suit, also with bare heads and feet, beating their chests and shedding tears. They moved to a room known as the *Museum*, where they retrieved a ceremonial flag adorned with jewels, referred to as the Shah's flag, and carried it to another area of the palace known as the Marble Throne Courtyard. After spinning it among themselves, they returned it to the *Museum*.

The events of this *Ta'zieh* hold historical significance and understanding them requires knowledge of the *Museum's* context. The *Museum* was the most important section of the Golestan Palace, serving as the seat of the Qajar kings' government and housing the royal treasury. High-ranking figures, including ministers and ambassadors, were permitted to visit the king there during important ceremonies. Traditionally, the *Museum* was a domain reserved for powerful men. However, during this feminine *Ta'zieh*, women occupied this masculine space, at least on Ashura, allowing even ordinary women to participate amidst the royal treasures.

Feminine *Ta'zieh* succeeded in transcending significant class and gender boundaries rooted in religious rituals; the women of the Shah's court, invoking religious justification, discarded the taboos imposed by these traditions. This breaking of taboos was also reflected in the clothing of women spectators.

Mouns al-Dowlah notes a notable change in the way women dressed when attending feminine *Ta'zieh*. In contrast to their customary attire, she observed that «they came very freely, with their unveiled faces, and watched very comfortably».[37] This freedom in dress is particularly evident in a special *Ta'zieh* that featured joyful aspects. This event, held on the twentieth of Jumada al-Thani ('a lunar month'), celebrated Fatemeh's birthday, during which a *Sayyida* ('a woman of the Prophet's lineage') was chosen to embody Fatemeh as a bride. She adorned herself with jewelry and luxurious clothing, and the *Ta'zieh* was performed in her presence.

[37] *Ibidem*.

Mouns al-Dowlah reports that nearly 2.000 women participated as spectators in this ceremony, and unlike in their everyday lives, they attended without *hijāb*. This absence of *hijāb* was complemented by makeup and expensive garments. Some women made a concerted effort to enhance their appearance in hopes of entering the royal *harem*, aiming to attract the Shah or his son, the only men permitted within. The Shah and his son would select one, two, or more girls for immediate marriage.[38]

Feminine *Ta'zieh* enabled women to assume new roles in society, granting them enhanced social value. Titles such as *Mullah* and *Akhund* were viewed as religious and social privileges, allowing women to benefit from certain distinctions even within a patriarchal framework. Prior to the emergence of feminine *Ta'zieh*, female singers and dancers, often stigmatized as prostitutes in Iran, were utilized in aristocratic ceremonies. These women possessed little social standing, as in Islam, female singing, and dancing are generally regarded as reprehensible. This contrasted sharply with the status of female *Mullahs*, who were honored figures among the Shiite Imams.

The *mullahs* did not confine their activities to *Ta'zieh*; their melodious voices also allowed them to perform at joyful events. They recited poems celebrating Fatemeh's birth and wedding, opting for household items such as trays and basins in place of instruments, which were forbidden. Thus, unlike female singers and dancers, the *mullahs* employed these tools to avoid offending religious sensibilities.

However, women's participation in *Ta'zieh* appears to have been accompanied by innovations. Shahidi remarks that this participation introduced a modern aspect to the tradition. While Shahidi does not view this modernity positively, considering it to be in contradiction with the essence of *Ta'zieh*, the disruption of masculine structures by women during the continuation of feminine *Ta'zieh* facilitated the introduction of other epic elements.[39] Traditionally, mourning for Shiite Imams had been a masculine endeavor, reflecting participation in epic recitation.

Banafsheh Hejazi, in *Women's History* (2009), recounts an event from the Constitutional Movement (1905-1908), a revolutionary movement aimed at curtailing the Shah's power, in which Iranian women challenged the male-dominated mourning rituals.

[38] Ivi: 107.
[39] Shahidi 2001.

In 1907, several women in Qom donned shrouds to protest military tyranny, mourning and lamenting in the streets and bazaars while attempting to close shops in solidarity with their cause. This movement garnered the support of the Shiite clergy.[40]

Evidently, women's events such as feminine *Ta'zieh* reinforced their acquisition of roles previously held by men, fostering a heightened awareness of their collective power. Azram argues that the association of court women with European women also significantly contributed to Iranian women's inclination to assert their positions. This trend became even more pronounced after the victory of the Constitutional Movement, which helped dismantle longstanding patriarchal and religious boundaries.[41]

6. Going Beyond *Ta'zieh*

With the constitutionalists' victory, the decline of the Shah and princes' power, and the growing social and political inclination towards modernity, *Ta'zieh* began to wane in Iranian society. This decline coincided with the rising popularity of European theater among intellectuals and urban dwellers. Consequently, feminine *Ta'zieh* ultimately disappeared during the reign of Ahmad Shah (1898-1930), the last Qajar king. During this period, female *Ta'zieh-Khans* lost their social roles, in stark contrast to their male counterparts, who held various social positions, including shopkeepers, and were able to engage politically through the constitutional movement.

With the rise of theater, modernists viewed this emerging medium as an excellent opportunity to articulate their socio-political demands. Despite the constitutionalists' efforts to secure rights for women, including literacy and social freedom, patriarchal norms continued to restrict women's civil liberties. At the onset of the first parliament, women were denied voting rights and barred from representation within the legislative body. Furthermore, Muslim women were not only prohibited from performing in theaters but were also excluded from entering them. Despite the socio-political changes of the time, women remained largely marginalized in public spaces.

[40] Hijazi 2009.
[41] Azarm 2024: 132.

With the conclusion of the Qajar era, women intellectuals began to leverage existing media to advocate for women's rights. In 1913, Maryam Amid Semnani published *Shokoufeh*, the first women's magazine in Iran, which featured articles addressing women's rights, challenging superstition, combating child marriage, and promoting cultural awareness among women. Women's associations consistently sought to utilize the medium of theater to enhance awareness of women's rights. Given the prohibition on women's presence in theater – both as actors and directors – the only way to challenge this taboo was to model the structure of feminine *Ta'zieh*, which allowed women to assert their agency and limit men's presence in their feminine spaces.

Two significant attempts to perform theater occurred at relatively long intervals, both reflecting conditions akin to feminine *Ta'zieh*. The first instance took place in 1910, when a group known as the Women's Association organized a feminine play held in the Atabak Garden, a well-known venue in Tehran. All the actors were women, and no men were permitted to attend the performance. The proceeds from the play were donated to charity. On June 28, 1910, the only surviving documentation of this event is a newspaper report published in *Iran-e-Noe*. The program aimed to address issues such as child marriage, male polygamy, women's illiteracy, societal insecurity for women, and the diminishing role of women in society. It began with a speech by the organizer; however, the report does not provide the name of the play, its actors, or its storyline, although it notes that 500 women attended.[42]

The second attempt occurred in 1924 when a group known as the Patriotic Women's Association, which was active in promoting literacy among women, decided during one of its board meetings to stage a drama to raise funds for establishing classrooms for illiterate women. Noor-ul-Hoda Manganeh (1902-?), the first secretary of this association, recounts this decision in her book *The Story of an Iranian Woman* (1965). She proposed her home as the venue for the performance due to the ban on women's presence in theaters. Manganeh owned a spacious house on a prominent street, encompassing 2,000 square meters, which included a hall with a capacity of 300 to 400 seats. Following the regulations, the group approached the police office to obtain a performance permit.

[42] Anonymous 1910.

They were granted permission on the condition that they declare the event as a wedding on the invitation cards. This license was facilitated by the support of the officers' wives.[43]

Fig. 4. Board of Directors of the Patriotic Women's Society, Tehran, 1910. Courtesy of Ms. Manganeh.

The play titled *Adam and Eve* was an adaptation of the creation story rooted in Islamic tradition, incorporating epic elements. What distinguished this performance from the feminine *Ta'zieh* was its transgression of religious boundaries. Manganeh notes, «In those days, Muslim women knew nothing about the play, and I had to reach out to the Armenian Ms. Terian».[44] The initial steps taken by Iranian women in theater were supported by religious minorities, as Muslim women faced restrictions on their presence in theatrical spaces. Armenian women, enjoying greater freedom, aided their Muslim counterparts in fostering national unity – a goal central to Iranian epic narratives throughout history. These narratives emphasized the need for various Iranian tribes, despite their racial and linguistic diversity, to identify as Iranian to maintain a cohesive central rule.

The play was staged on May 2, 1924, coinciding with Ramadan, the holy month of fasting for Muslims. Manganeh explains that the choice of Ramadan was strategic;

43 Mangeneh 1965: 31-33.
44 Ivi: 32.

unlike other months, the nights during this time were more permissive, allowing easier access to the venue. This illustrates how religious opportunities enabled women to circumvent societal restrictions, similar to those imposed during Muharram. However, the performance elicited a fierce backlash from the ruling male society. The following day, clerics delivered impassioned speeches in mosques condemning the event as an attempt to undermine the *hijāb*. Their assertion was based on the fact that women appeared without *hijāb* during the performance, despite Islamic law dictating that *hijāb* is necessary only in the presence of strange men, which was not the case during this show.

The vehement rhetoric from the clergy incited an angry mob to storm Nur al-Huda's residence on May 3, 1924, resulting in the destruction of her property and violence against her staff. Nevertheless, she persevered, successfully establishing a literacy class for adult women in Tehran.

Following this event, the *Patriotic Women's Association* successfully challenged the taboo against women attending cinema by organizing a home cinema in a rented house. This time, however, there was no violent backlash. Four years later, Satnik Aghababian, widely known as Pari Aghababian (1900-1979), a prominent Armenian theater star in the 1920s and 1930s, established a cinema in Tehran called *Pari* for Women.

Mangeneh's report, along with the Iran-e-Noe newspaper's coverage of the Women's Association's efforts, highlights several commonalities between feminine *Ta'zieh* and women's theater. First, both took place in the home of a wealthy individual, with performances exclusively by women for an all-female audience, excluding men from attendance. Second, both used religious epics as a framework to express their goals and thoughts, even though religion had historically contributed to the limitations they faced. However, this dynamic ultimately evolved, allowing women to engage in cultural environments such as theater without the same restrictions.

7. Conclusions

Although religion has historically imposed many restrictions on women, they have succeeded in improving their social conditions even amidst the most challenging social and

religious traditions by leveraging religious possibilities. Through re-enacting their ancient epics in various art forms, women sought to achieve a different social status. The Iranian women's movement toward modernization has paralleled their ongoing participation in the reproduction of these epics. To this day, women find themselves in situations that call for the revival of these narratives, as evidenced by contemporary movements advocating for freedom of attire.

Considering the deep religious roots in Iran and their strong presence in people's customary beliefs, efforts like feminine *Ta'zieh* serve as significant examples of women protesting patriarchy. This form of protest, intertwined with religion, effectively prevents men from confronting it, thus allowing women to occupy religious spaces traditionally held by men. While the potential for promoting *Ta'zieh* has grown in recent years, the lack of awareness among female artists about the rich history of feminine *Ta'zieh* has hindered any attempts to revive this unique art form.

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