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Siyavash-Khani: To Tell the Untold

Abstract:

This is an analysis of the techniques and methods employed by the Iranian artist, Bahram Beyzaei, born 1938, specifically in his screenplay, *Siyavash-Khani* (1996). This work is an adaptation of the mythic story *Siyavash* which is a part of the Iranian National Epic *Shahnameh* written by Ferdowsi, 940-1020. Beyzaei is recognised for his depictions of myths and rituals as well as for his research. In this article I will study *Siyavash-Khani* from Beyzaei's perspective as a writer. The majority of the analyses of his adaptations focus on the final product. However, I will emphasise the process of adaptation used by him to establish meaning. Apart from critiques of the final work, this essay's major sources are interviews with Beyzaei about myths and rituals in general and *Siyavash-Khani* in particular. Collecting these pieces helps to clarify the puzzle of his adaptation. Based on this approach, we need to have a background in the ritual used in *Mourning for Siyavash*, together with Tazieh, the ritualistic Iranian traditional performance that has influenced Beyzaei. Then, I will turn my attention to the screenplay *Siyavash-Khani*.

Biographical Note:

Houman Zandizadeh is a dramatist and researcher. He was awarded the Akbar Radi Prize for the Best Young Dramatist of Iran in 2008 and 2009 and was shortlisted in 2010, 2011 and 2012. Before moving to Australia, he was the Head of Dramatic Literature Association of Iran's House of University Theatre. In 2014 he finished runner-up in the Arts Award Category amongst international students in South Australia. In 2015 he won this award and also was shortlisted for the Postgraduate International Student of the Year Award in Australia. Houman is currently completing a practice-led PhD in the area of drama and adaptation at Flinders University.

Tazieh and the Ritual of *Mourning for Siyavash*

Mourning for Siyavash is a ritual focussing on Siyavash, the Iranian prince, who was unjustifiably murdered. Vengeance is the focus of this ritual and so, it is also known as *Avenging Siyavash* as well as *Siyavash-Khani* and *Siyavushan*. Ferdowsi's version (2008: 287-424), the *Siyavash* story, is the most famous version of the story of Siyavash.

The story is about a handsome and desirable prince, Siyavash, who is destined to come to a bad end. Rostam, the greatest Iranian warrior, trains Siyavash for seven years and then he goes back to his home. There, Sudabeh, his stepmother and the Queen of Iran, falls in love with Siyavash. Because Siyavash refuses to betray his father, the Queen accuses him of rape. To find out the truth, the King forces them both to prove their innocence by passing through the fire, an ancient test by which liars are revealed. Truth tellers will not be burnt. Sudabeh refuses to undergo the test but Siyavash passes through the fire successfully. The King decides to punish his wife, but the prince asks him not to. Later, the Turanians, the enemies of the Iranians, attack the kingdom and Siyavash leads an army to defeat them. He takes 100 hostages. The King wants him to kill the hostages, but Siyavash does not break the oath he made with the Turanians to preserve the lives of the hostages. Because he refuses the King's command, Siyavash goes into self-imposed exile in Turan. Afrasiyab, the King of Turan, initially values him very highly. Siyavash founds two cities in his new land and marries two girls; the daughters of the King and his minister. Garsivaz, Afrasiyab's brother, makes Afrasiyab doubt Siyavash by telling him that Siyavash is planning to betray him. Afrasiyab chooses to behead the Iranian prince. A plant grows from Siyavash's blood called Siyavushan. When Rostam hears the story, he kills Sudabeh and goes to fight the Turanians.

The story of Siyavash has its roots in an ancient time. The article 'Siyavash in Iranian Literature' lists the significant versions of the story in existence (Allami & Shakibmomtaz, 2007). The Iranian historian Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, 838-923, who lived before Ferdowsi, tells a different version of the story (2007: 549-569). Likewise, in *Shahnameh of Sa'alebi*, 1017-1021, the story is told in prose with some changes in the plot (Sa'alebi, 2006: 75-99). The '3500-year-old' book of *Avesta* (trans. 2012), the bible of Zoroastrians, presents the oldest written version of Siyavash. In his book *The History of Bukhara*, the historian Abu Bakr Narshakhi, 899-959, mentions 3000-year-old verses about the 'death of Siyavash' being sung (1972: 185-186). Sadegh Ashoorpoor (2010a: 54), an Iranian theatre researcher, states that the ritual of *Mourning for Siyavash* has its roots in another ancient Iranian ritual called *Zaravokerta*. Ali Hasoori (2006: 15), a mythologist, mentions that a mosque named *Siyavushan* exists in Shiraz, a city located in the middle of Iran. He (2006: 26) also talks about a village with the same name in Herat, Afghanistan; a city that used to be a part of Iran. In more recent times, Simin Daneshvar, 1921-2012, has written a novel based on the ritual of *Mourning for Siyavash* called *Savushun*, meaning 'the mourners for Siyavash' (2001). The ritual is still performed today in Shiraz. This history reveals the ongoing life of *Mourning for Siyavash*.

Mourning for Siyavash developed from an older ritual, the base of the most important Iranian traditional performance, Tazieh. Tazieh is a 'commemorative ceremony for Imam Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad, who was martyred by Yazid, his political adversary' (Hussein, 1995: 110). The story canonises the martyrdom of Hussein and becomes the structure and meaning of the *Siyavash* story. He becomes the martyred God. Mourning plays a major role

in both stories. 'In our culture, mourning for a sacred martyr will make us closer to God and will improve things', says Mehrdad Bahar, the Iranian mythologist (2008: 447-448). The stories tell us how two innocent reformists were beheaded because they wanted to found a utopia. Both Hussein and Siyavash are aware of their fate (Yarshater, 2005: 119). The audience of the ritual also knows what is going to happen, but they stay watching the performance in order to experience the catharsis.

The Arabic word *tazieh* means mourning, but this performance is also known as <u>*Shabih-Khani*</u>. *Shabih*, meaning 'similar', is used to describe the actor in Tazieh. Ashoorpoor (2010b: 21) states that the term *Shabih-Khani* has its roots in a religious saying: 'the one who makes himself similar to another person, will be that person'. Hence, the performers of *Shabih-Khani* will be rewarded by God.

Shabih-Khani could be said to have a similar meaning to another theatrical term: Bertolt Brecht's 'alienation effect'. In Tazieh, actors always keep their distance from the roles they play to alienate the audience from the effect of their acting. Hence, they become *shabih* to the character, not the character itself. This serves to remind the audience that the actors are not as sacred as the protagonists, nor as negative as the antagonists. This technique also protects the actors playing the antagonists from the audience. There have been cases in which the audience has tried to avenge the death of the martyred hero by attacking the actor portraying Shemr, the character who beheads Hussein. I personally have seen the actor playing Shemr trying to emphasise the difference between being Shemr and being the *shabih* of Shemr for the audience.

Apart from the content, Tazieh is a significant performance form in Iran. This traditional performance can be performed either in a hall or in an open-space. It is said to resemble the performance of *The Rug Washers of Ardehal*. Beyzaei (2008: 144-145) explains the similarities between the two performances:

> The rituals of fertility and worshiping natures' powers used to happen at the beginning of the agricultural season. The Rug Washers was and is thus performed in autumn and is one of the tens of examples of agricultural rituals. These kinds of domestic performances take at least a week and occur in India as well. […][*The Rug Washers*] is a domestic ritual based on the story of Siyavash; a story that mixes the themes of death and resurrection, with a sacred wedding. The ritual changed after the Muslim conquest of Iran. Now it tells the story of the ambiguous character of Sultanali, the allegoric martyr of Ardehal. Muslims sought to link Imam Hussein's story with the older version of the story of Siyavash; the story of an innocent man who comes from another place, but the people of the new land betray him. He is surrounded by enemies and the ones who try to rescue him arrive too late. What is important in the myth is not whether the innocent man accepts help or that the helpers arrive late; it is that he dies. It is not whether he is able to defeat the enemy or refuses to do so; it is that he dies. In other words, if these two characters defeat their enemies, there would be no myth, no death and no martyrdom. They need to die so that followers of Hussein/Siyavash can learn things from their deaths.[1]

Despite the fact that Tazieh is not as popular as it once was, it is still performed in Iran. The further we travel from the cities into the rural areas, the more the ritualistic power of Tazieh exists.

Beyzaei and Tazieh

Tazieh has clear links to Iranian contemporary theatre. Beyzaei, directly and indirectly, has been inspired by Tazieh. In his book, *A Study on Iranian Theatre,* Beyzaei talks about Tazieh more than any other performance (2004a: 113-156). After 50 years, this book is still one of the primary resources on Iranian traditional performance.

When Beyzaei first encountered Tazieh, he was a university student studying literature.

> I saw Tazieh for several consecutive days and it shocked me, but it was a gracious shock. It was the thing I was looking for. […] I told the university that I've found my thesis topic: 'Iranian Performance'. They replied that there is no indigenous performance in Iran and if there is, it would not be accepted as a topic of study at this university. So I left the university (Beyzaei, 1999: 12).

After leaving university, Beyzaei started researching Iranian performances. He wrote his first articles about Tazieh in the years 1959-1961 (Beyzaei, 2000: 124). 'I was working on a text for Tazieh and my father said ''isn't that a text for Tazieh'''? Then Beyzaei discovered that in his family Shabih-Khani had been common for generations (Beyzaei, 1999: 7).

Tazieh is much more than an ordinary performance for Beyzaei. He considers Tazieh highly important in terms of Iranian anthropology and comparative mythology. He (1999: 17) says:

> In some of them you can find hidden beliefs of Iranians as well as their ceremonies; the beliefs other than the commonly held ones. They are also important source texts in terms of understanding Iranian popular culture and collective psychology. Moreover, we need to record the musicology of every single line. Then if we ever publish the corrected texts instead of the incorrectly edited works that have been widely published,[2] we would gain an effective theatrical language; a language that we do need.

The 'ancient magic' of Tazieh amazes Beyzaei; a magic that 'is linked to the primal fears and anxieties of human beings; the magic that you can find in any great performance, whether it is old or contemporary' (1999: 152). Beyzaei (1999: 96) considers Tazieh a ritual, and rituals play an important role in his works. He believes that 'despite the contemporary moment that we belong to, we are absolutely living the ancient rituals'. He (1999: 96-97) continues: 'I might have filtered the rituals through my own perspective, but I have not made any myself. There are facts that I made up, but years later I accidentally discovered the originals [and these facts were in them]'.

The Stranger and the Fog, *Ballad of Tara*, *The Fateful Day*, and *Siyavash-Khani* are some of the works by Beyzaei that are clearly inspired by the tradition of Tazieh. He (1999: 151) considers *Ballad of Tara* as 'the first Tazieh in which the protagonist is a contemporary woman, and in which a woman plays that role'.[3] He (1999: 94) states that *The Stranger and the Fog* is a Tazieh 'about the universal destiny of human beings'. Beyzaei adapted this performance for his screenplay *The Fateful Day* (2003). In all these works he tries to modernise Tazieh.

Siyavash-Khani

Siyavash-Khani was written in 1993 and is based on the *Siyavash* story by Ferdowsi for 'film and live performances' (Beyzaei, 1996: 1). Beyzaei published the work in 1996 and since then, the play/screenplay has been republished five times. *Siyavash-Khani* together with works such as *A New Foreword on Shahnameh*, *Sohrab-Koshi* and *Azhdehak*, are all adapted from *Shahnameh*; an epic that Beyzaei (2008: 137) considers his 'guide and primary influence'.

Beyzaei did not intend to adapt *Shahnameh* anymore, but decided to go back to it in the 1990s. He had wanted to make a new movie for years, but state censorship had stopped him. After another three years of unsuccessful effort, he finally realised that he was not going to be allowed to make work. He chose then to sit at home. After a while government representatives brought him a list of 'permitted topics' to work on. He told them: 'I have written about one of these topics, Ferdowsi, and you did me a favour by rejecting it' (2008: 138)! That work is *A New Foreword on Shahnameh.* Producers considered it to be a problematic screenplay. They recommended him to work on *Siyavash*. 'If I did not accept, they would have said that Beyzaei does not want to work; a rumour started by my friends and disseminated by my enemies' (2008: 138). He wrote *Siyavash-Khani* in less than a month.

Shahnameh has been adapted more than any other book in Iran, but none of these have pleased Beyzaei (2008: 137-138): 'I have always thought that the adaptations of *Shahnameh* that I have read or seen, have been done the wrong way'. For example, 'Westernizing and/or Greek [Tragedy] versions of *Shahnameh* are absolute mistakes; both as written texts and performances'. He considers Ferdowsi's work better suited to 'open-space performances than to Western covered-space and black-box theatres'. Beyzaei (2000: 21-22) believes that 'Iranian dramatists should not obey Western styles of playwriting. They must find their way based on their own performance legacy'.

Beyzaei (2008: 138) states that in *Siyavash-Khani* '[he] tried to write the unwritten parts of *Shahnameh*, rather than the epic itself'. He (cited by Tahaminejad, 2004: 138) repeats this method in his other works:

> … my creative works are about the history of Iran; the history of Iran and about our encounter with the West in recent times […] I read the history and inherited a great horror. Then gradually I could hear the voices of the untold people.

He believes that 'there are lots of unknown and untold things in our culture that could revolutionise our idea of Iranian traditional culture' (2004b: 100).

But how can one tell the untold via adapting myths? Beyzaei (2004b: 104-105) says:

> I have never said that I am writing a myth. What I do is to rethink the myths that we do not know very much about. For instance, we do not know more than a couple of lines about Arash [an Iranian myth], but to create a performance we have to write about Arash and the characters around him. We have to make [dramatic] situations and humanise the characters. In other words, we need to alter the myths to present a human possibility that is imaginable, comprehensive, and accessible, to be experienced and criticised. That's not myth anymore; that is a contemporary interpretation of myth, and I have not claimed to be doing otherwise. But yes; we create the myths of our era, but time will tell whether this is true.

For Beyzaei, ritual is the important untold part of the *Siyavash* story. He discovered the roots of the ritual *Mourning for Siyavash*. About 50 years ago Beyzaei mentioned Narshakhi in his report on *Mourning for Siyavash*. Likewise, Beyzaei is the first to clarify the connection between Iranian Islamic mourning and this ritual (2004a: 30, 55).

Beyzaei does not change the plot of the original source text, but includes characters from five villages; he writes a drama about drama. Characters from five villages take the roles in *Siyavash-Khani* and revive the ritualistic aspects of the story. Beyzaei (2008: 140) states

> I did not want to perform *Shahnameh* word by word; my work is a poor performance by impoverished people who carry the spirit of the epic in their souls. What helped me were the images painted by the words of Ferdowsi, together with the living passion of the people from five villages in my head.

Beyzaei (2008: 142-143) states that professional actors do not suit this text:

> … for me, actors with their ordinariness restrict our unlimited imagining of mythic characters. To use actors, you need to write an ordinary text that destroys the myth. It has happened a lot, but does not help the performance.

Hence, Beyzaei (2008: 143) writes *Siyavash-Khani* for the unprofessional actor '[who] believes in myths and has passion for them'; the ones who can engage in [ritualistic] tests after a few rehearsals. He says that '*Siyavash-Khani* is a work about the lives and the work of ordinary people'. With the sympathy and friendship of the audience, '… they will not remain ordinary because they will go beyond their limits via the performance, ritual and language'.

This approach references Tazieh, in which ordinary people take the roles. Researcher Rasool Nazarzadeh (2005: 219) states that in *Siyavash-Khani* '… all Beyzaei's research on Tazieh culminates'. For example, the characters read from scrolls as they do in Tazieh. They also keep their distance from the roles they are playing in order to remind the audience that they are not the mythic characters.

Beyzaei (2004c: 34-35) summarises the differences between good and bad adaptations: '… thought, creativity, and possibility'. He continues, stating that '… no old text should be used in the original form. The original form of *Shahnameh* is not appropriate for new adaptations. […] There are thousands of cultural and mythological meanings in *Shahnameh* that we need to rethink'.

To rethink *Shahnameh*, Beyzaei tries to revolutionise the female characters of the story. 'In *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi hardly characterises the females. They are presented with the same values and characteristics of the men' (Beyzaei, 2008: 143). He also states that we need to reconsider this because '… whilst this can happen in myth and in epics, it cannot in performance. Performance is performance and it requires characters' (2008: 143). Therefore, unlike in Ferdowsi, Sudabeh, the main female character in the story, does not seem bad in *Siyavash-Khani*. The significance of the rewriting of women in the mythic stories in Beyzaei's works is such that Shahla Lahiji (2004: 162), his publisher, claims that '… he shows the untold permanent influence of women on Iranian history, culture, traditions, and language whilst avoiding writing unbelievable women'.

Beyzaei has also revolutionised the language of Ferdowsi in his adaptation. He replaces the epic verses of *Shahnameh* with poetic prose: 'Ferdowsi's verses are written for narrating, not

performing' (Beyzaei, 2008: 142). Nonetheless, in terms of not borrowing any word from other languages, Ferdowsi and Beyzaei share the same interest.

Polluting the Persian language had happened before Ferdowsi's era. In the 7th Century Arabs attacked Iran and dominated the country. After the conquest of Iran, they gradually changed the official language from Persian to Arabic. Later, Iranians tried to go back to Persian. In the 10th Century, when Ferdowsi started writing *Shahnameh*, there was a great desire for this cultural revolution. Ferdowsi regenerated and preserved the language by avoiding foreign words as much as possible. Therefore, he became an icon in Persian culture and his work has been known as a key to the preservation of Persian language.

Similarly, Beyzaei does not use non-Persian words in his adaptation. Nevertheless, he does not intend to use an archaic language because 'no-one would understand it' (2004b: 118). 'I write in a language that shows the difference between the eras' (2004b: 118). So he tries to use a literary language that is understandable for the contemporary audience, but still preserves the nature of the ancient time. By doing this, he avoids using complicated language: '… that would be useless because audience could not read the text, nor listen to, or understand it' (Beyzaei, 2008: 141). He also says that when he was writing *Siyavash-Khani* he '… was fortunate to have the living and vivid characters start talking themselves in his head. I do not remember if I was looking for any particular word, but there were words that tried to remind me to write them. Thank them anyway'(2008: 141)!
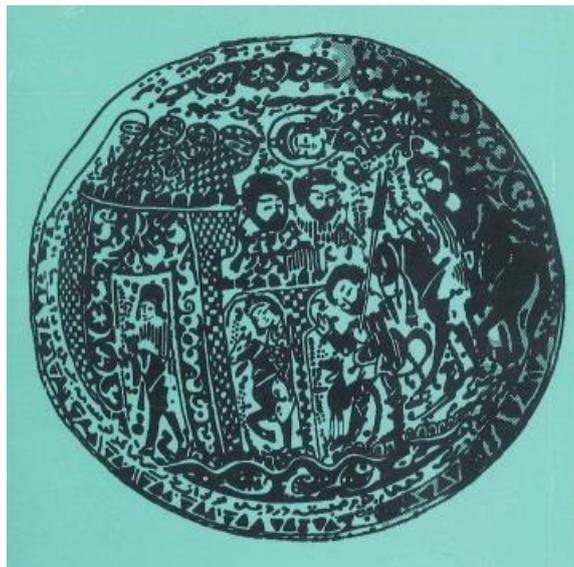
(Figure 1)

Apart from Tazieh and *Shahnameh*, Beyzaei (2004b: 139-141) is inspired by several images in adapting *Siyavash-Khani*: 'my visual resources are those Manichaean paintings[4] of *Shahnameh*'. One of them is on the cover of the first publication of *Siyavash-Khani* (figure 1): 'a dense image full of simple, bright, colourful and passionate lines that might be one of the first images of Tazieh in Iran, and probably the image of *Siyavash-Khani*', says Beyzaei. 'The other visual resource is the famous wall-painting of Panjkand [that is printed on the cover of the more recent publications of the book] (figure 2)'. The last one is the image of *The Rug Washers of Ardehal*. He uses all this material to recreate the ritual.

(figure 2)

Siyavash-Khani has never been performed/made as theatre or cinema. The governmental producers who recommended this story to him, declined to cooperate with Beyzaei without giving any reasons. As the full version of *Siyavash-Khani* takes around six hours, none of the independent producers have been able and/or interested in working on it. Beyzaei tried to prepare it for One Thousand Years of Writing Shahnameh, but did not succeed. '[A]fter more than a year of passing me from a ministry to two organizations and a foundation, I finally realised that it is not on their priority list' (2008: 139). Nevertheless, *Siyavash-Khani* is still considered to be one of the most important works of Beyzaei.

Principles Used by Beyzaei

Beyzaei employed several key principles in his adaptation. He told the untold parts of the original source text and tried to rethink the myth and culture. He preserved the ritual from the epic and got back to the open-space style of traditional Iranian performances. Using a modern form of literary language, Beyzaei not only showed the difference between the current time and the past, but also achieved a new language for the contemporary audience. He also reconsidered the female characters. Unlike *Shahnameh*, in *Siyavash-Khani* female characters are no longer black or white. Beyzaei adapted the form of the original text as well as its content. Finally, he used the visual texts as well as the written ones. All these resources helped him to clarify the puzzle of the old ritual to make a contemporary adaptation.

List of Illustrations

The following images have been scanned from different cover versions of the book *Siyavash-Khani* (Beyzaei 1996 & 2001)

Endnotes

[1] This is from an interview about Siyavash-Khani that was first published in July 1997, a few months after publishing the play for the first time.

[2] Here Beyzaei mentions the Tazieh texts that have been widely published in recent years. He does not see the originality in these works and hence, uses the word 'incorrectly edited' to describe them.

[3] In Tazieh men traditionally play the roles of women.

[4] Manichaeism is a religion founded by the Iranian prophet Mani about 2300 years ago.

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