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Staging Iranian Modernity: Authors in Search of New Forms

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Staging Iranian Modernity: Authors in Search of New Forms

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Dedication

For my soulmate, Ehsan.

For everything.

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Staging Iranian Modernity: Authors in Search of New Forms

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This dissertation calls attention to three important twentieth-century Iranian playwrights who have made extraordinary contributions to the development of modern Iranian drama and whose oeuvres reveal instances of creative encounter with modern Western dramaturgy. In place of an attempt to provide a thorough diachronic analysis of dramatic productions in the regions concerned, I focus on specific moments and key figures that exemplify major stages in the evolution of modern drama both in Iran and the West, i.e., the triumvirate aesthetic movements of Idealism, Realism, and Modernism. With the aim of re-situating modern Iranian drama within the context of international dramatic developments, the plays of Gholamhossein Sa‘edi, Akbar Radi, and Bahram Beyzaie are respectively compared with the works of Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and Luigi Pirandello in order to detail the affinities and divergences between the two through close-readings of plays and analysis of the scholarship and historical documents that shaped the playwrights’ views about modernity. In doing so, I thus propose a reading of Iranian drama that is sensitive both to Western influences and to the transformation exerted on Western literary forms in response to local realities and needs.

In order to demonstrate the rise of modern drama as a literary form that is deeply aware of modernity, I provide a historically grounded perspective on its development. Therefore, in addition to examining the specific plays, I engage with a methodology that includes reviewing historical and social circumstances that informed the playwrights' creations. Such an approach allows for the expansion of the dominant Western cannon, Ibsen, Chekhov, and Pirandello, for instance, and for gaining new perspectives on other national literary traditions which unfortunately have mostly been omitted from the world dramatic discourse. At the same time, by linking Western dramatists to their Iranian counterparts, this dissertation aims to join the discussions on the interactions between Iranian and Western literatures and to give an account of an exchange between Iran and the West that is embedded in the development of both.

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Note on Transliteration

Except for the quotes, the transliteration system of Persian words in this dissertation follows the example of the journal *Iranian Studies*, which dispenses with markers of difference for consonants that are not phonetically distinguished in Persian as well as all diacritical marks. The initial *'eyn* has also been dropped, thus Ali and not 'Ali. Words commonly used in English such as Hossein, Isfahan, Shi'ism, and so on, however, appear in their anglicized form. The vowels are transliterated as they are pronounced in Persian.

Introduction: The Beginnings of Modern Iranian Drama

I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have seen in theater: A group of four hundred villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under a tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing—although they all knew perfectly well the end of the story—as they saw [Hossein] in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred, the theater became a truth—there was no difference between past and present. An event that was told as remembered happening in history 1,300 years ago, actually became a reality in that moment.¹

— Peter Brook

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “modern” as “of or relating to the present and recent time, as opposed to the remote past.”² However, for all its omnipresence and ubiquity in critical thinking and intellectual discourses, academic or otherwise, this concept as well as its related derivatives—modernization, modernity, and modernism—remain remarkably elusive and even puzzling. Analyzing the contradictory applications of these terms, Susan Stanford Friedman, for instance, argues:

¹ Quoted in Peter J. Chelkowski, Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University, 1999): 80.

² Oxford English Dictionary, March 10, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry>.

The stories began with the problematic of *modernism* but drew us inexorably into a web of words—*modernism* and its siblings *modern*, *modernity*, and *modernization*. Not only does the meaning of the concept deny fixity; so do its grammatical and semantic aspects. The root word *modern* is both noun and adjective, whether signifying descriptively or normatively. The different suffixes herd the word into different grammatical functions that carry semantic weight. The *-ity* of *modernity* limits the word modern to a noun—a status as a thing or condition that is distinguishable from other things or conditions. The *-ism* of *modernism* turns the noun *modern* into an advocacy, a promotion, a movement presumably centered around a systematic philosophy, politics, ideology, or aesthetics. The *-ization* of *modernization* signifies a process, an evolution or revolution from one condition to another, with modernity as the condition achieved by modernization.³

Informed by the complicated task of defining words with the root “modern,” and in order to avoid post hoc confusion, it is important that each term is defined explicitly upfront. As used here, modern, as it pertains to dramatic productions, refers to those plays, from the nineteenth century onward, which, unlike classical drama, focus on the primacy of characterization over plot and develop out of “interpersonal relations.”⁴ Modernization is understood as the social, political, economic, industrial, and technological processes within a society. It can also include “state-funded developments on the infrastructural and external levels in non-Western societies,” of which “Reza Shah’s efforts to reform the economy and bureaucracy” is an example.⁵ Modernity, on the other hand, refers to the modes of experiences and the social and historical conditions that are influenced by modernization changes. Lastly, modernism is adopted to signify aesthetic, artistic, and literary practices through which the experience of modernity is expressed. In other words, modernity is the social, political, and cultural requisite that makes modernism both essential and possible.

³ Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015): 26.

⁴ Szondi, Peter. *Theory of the Modern Drama*, ed. Michael Hays. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987): 7.

⁵ Khatereh Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity and Film After the Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011): 94.

In Iran, intellectual and aesthetic responses to the issue of modernity have been largely influenced by social and historical conditions, and the country's literary productions are best understood within their historical contexts. As a result, despite being impacted by modernism and modernization practices, Iran's literary discourse is "quintessentially local and non-Western."⁶ In fact, it can be argued that this simultaneous participation and distance from the Western cultural mainstream has emboldened the writers' creativity and enabled them to create new hybrid forms.

Of course, the implementation of modern ideas neither began at the same time nor developed at the same pace in all genres. In comparison with other literary forms such as poetry, novel, and short story, modern Iranian drama is a relatively new genre that first emerged in the late nineteenth century. The reasons for its slow development can be attributed to multiple social and historical factors. First, contrary to the polytheistic traditions which allowed for a more human representation of gods, the two monotheistic religions— Zoroastrianism and Islam—that arose in Iran did not cherish aesthetic practices, such as dance, music, and performance. According to these doctrines, God is absolutely ineffable, transcendent, and beyond and therefore cannot be represented through images. Second, Iran has almost always been run by those absolute, despotic kings and rulers, who either appropriated drama to achieve their desired form of entertainment (mostly exemplified by buffoonish moments and farcical humor) or else banned it altogether in fear of possible criticism. Third, the incomplete transition from a tribal community and a rural economy to an industrial society, which could have otherwise brought about urbanization, welfare, and economic growth, only resulted in the malintegration of the Iranian society. The slow growth of the middle class merchants and

⁶ Ibid., 100.

industrialists caused the decreasing state of support for entertainment products and led to the performers' loss of potential patrons. To these must also be added the stigmatization of drama as a "low" form, widespread illiteracy, economic vulnerability, continuous wars and subsequent instabilities—all of which negatively affected the overall development of drama in Iran.⁷

Of course, this does not suggest that the genre did not exist in some form of another prior to the inception of Western-inspired drama in the nineteenth century. Despite all the restrictions, various kinds of indigenous dramatic performances, including *ta'ziyeh* (passion plays), *naqqali* (dramatic storytelling), *taqlid* and *ruhowzi* (satirical comedies), and *kheyime-shab-bazi* (puppet theater), were part of the nation's literary tradition. However, "the fact remains that they rarely found their way in written form into the arena of formal literature."⁸ *Shabih-khani* or *ta'ziyeh*, for instance, which began around the tenth century and reached its zenith in the mid-eighteenth century, was a reenactment of the battle between Imam Hossein, the third Shi'ite Imam and the grandson of Prophet Mohammad, and Caliph Yazid that took place on the plains of Karbala, in present-day Iraq. Although this conflict, which ultimately resulted in the martyrdom of Hossein, constitutes the central episode of *ta'ziyeh* performances, soon the ritual extended beyond the religious context and began to engage with various aspects of popular culture.⁹

In any case, straightforward plots, unelaborated costume and scenery, and simple poetic language that is accessible to the masses, are the most prominent features that characterize the oral tradition *ta'ziyeh*. The nonrealistic nature of these performances is further enriched through the experience of theatricality. As Hamid Dabashi points out:

⁷ For a complete description, see Bahram Beyzaie, *Namayesh dar Iran* (Theater in Iran) (Tehran: Roshangaran and Women Studies Publishing, 2000): 13-24.

⁸ M. R. Ghanoonparvar, "Persian Plays and the Iranian Theater," 87.

⁹ Bahram Beyzaie, *Namayesh dar Iran* (Theater in Iran): 113-114.

In *ta'ziyeh*, acting is not mimetic; it is entirely suggestive—with a full contractual agreement, dramatically articulated, between the actors and the audience that they are *just* acting. Actors hold their script in their hands, not because they don't know the lines but because they want to demonstrate distance and suggest dissimilitude. If the Aristotelian mimesis is based on similitude, *ta'ziyeh* is predicated on dissimilitude. The director of *ta'ziyeh* is always present on the stage, not because the actors don't know what to do, but because the audience needs assurance that this is just acting.... The stage never loses sight of its not-being-the-stage. Noneactors have easy access to the stage area; actors move in and out of character at will. There is fluidity between reality and acting because the actors are performing no act of fiction.¹⁰

This emphasis on the self-conscious theatricality of action is very similar to the distancing effect in the Brechtian Epic Theater, even though the two are distinct in purpose. In fact, the possible link between the two has been suggested by more recent scholarship, such as Peter Chelkowski's study of *ta'ziyeh* and Beyzaie's extensive research on its development.¹¹

At any cost, despite numerous limitations, during the early decades of the Qajar era (1779-1925), under the patronage and support of both the rulers and the elites, *ta'ziyeh* reached its height of popularity and was turned into a Shi'i Iranian dramatic tradition. Indeed, Iran's indigenous drama had the potential of begetting a secular one. However, this theatrical form experienced a significant decline at the turn of the century, partly because of the diminishing power of the Qajar dynasty and its subsequent conflicts, and partly due to the introduction of Western-style drama that was coupled with the urge for rapid modernization.

During the mid-nineteenth century, Iranians were exposed to new forms of culture as a result of their contact with the West. Naser al-Din Shah Qajar's journey to Europe and

¹⁰ Hamid Dabashi, "Ta'ziyeh as Theatre of Protest," *The Drama Review* vol. 49, no. 4 (2005): 94-95.

¹¹ See, for instance, Peter Chelkowski, "Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran," and Parviz Mammoun, "Ta'ziyeh from the Viewpoint of Western Theater," in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979): 1-11 and 154-166; Bahram Beyzaie, *Namayesh dar Iran* (Theater in Iran): 113-156.

his fascination with Western theater and operas, the practice of dispatching Iranian students to Europe mainly with the goal of learning new sciences and technology, in addition to the establishment of *Dar Al-fonun* as the first modern college in 1851 by the Qajar vizier, Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir, were crucial factors in diffusing Western culture, including Western theater, in Iran. Such encounters further propelled a transnational cultural activity, *Nehzat-e Tarjome* (Translation Movement), which rendered works of writers such as Shakespeare and Gogol available in Persian and remained in full swing throughout the twentieth century.

Indeed, Naser al-Din Shah was so passionate about modern drama that he ordered the construction of Iran's first theater hall in 1886. During this early stage, Iranian dramas consisted of translations and/or adaptations of European plays, which were predominantly French at first, mainly Molière's. In fact, the French playwright was so popular in Iran that a free adaptation of his *Le Misanthrope* (*Gozaresh-e Mardomgoriz*) became the first play to be staged in the newly constructed theater. Yet, given the strong religious opposition, these performances were restricted to the royal family and the elite members of the society and even that was brought to a halt in 1891, perhaps partly because the King gradually came to perceive theater as a threat to the existing social order and to the status quo.¹²

The private theater was short-lived; nevertheless, the same period witnessed an increasing interest in experimenting with the new dramatic form. First attempts to write secular modern plays were made by Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878) who published a collection of his plays, *Tamsilat* (Comedies) in Azari Turkish in 1859. As a progenitor of Iranian nationalism, he rejected the Islamic culture, idealized the notion of pure "Iranianness" that is presumably based in the country's pre-Islamic history, and

¹² Farrokh Ghaffary, Arby Ovanessian, Laleh Taghian, "Iran," in *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Asia/Pacific*, ed. Don Rubin, Chua Soo Pong, Ravi Chaturvedi (New York: Routledge, 1998): 216.

expressed a deep admiration for Western progressive ideas. His viewpoints are perhaps best captured in his writings, especially his plays. However, despite the fact that they are fashioned on “the models of Molière and Shakespeare,”¹³ Akhundzadeh successfully gave his plays a local color and original characters that not only made them palatable to the tastes of the audience, but also fulfilled his desire to provide Iranized works that could both engage in moral education of the public and function as a medium for political criticism against the Qajars.

Following the translations of Akhundzadeh’s works into Persian, Mirza Aqa Tabrizi (1834–1911) began to try his hand at writing modern plays and thereby became the first Iranian playwright who wrote in Persian. Written in colloquial language and in a realistic vein, Tabrizi’s plays address the need for social reforms and deal with political issues concerning the Qajar’s despotism and its detrimental effects on people’s lives. Interestingly, although Tabrizi was less familiar with the basic norms of the Western theater, his plays demonstrate innovative variations on conventional aesthetics that ultimately succeed in introducing new experimental forms. His lack of adherence to the three unities, fluid merging of scenes in a *ta’ziyeh*-like manner, his use of various registers of Persian in dialogue, portrayal of women in leading roles, as well as the tragicomic quality of his drama, make his plays “the first instances of the type of drama which may have naturally evolved from a more constructive encounter between the two [Iranian and European dramatic forms.]”¹⁴ Yet, his creative endeavors were judged as failures by his predecessor as well as by the ruling government, who deemed them as too incendiary to publish or perform during his lifetime. Despite such disapprovals, Tabrizi’s drama remains

¹³ Shiva Balaghi, “The Iranian as Spectator and Spectacle: Theater and Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Constructions of Nationalism in the Middle East*, ed. Fatma Muge Gocek (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002): 199.

¹⁴ Saeed Talajooy, “A History of Iranian Drama (1850-1941),” in *Literature of the Early Twentieth Century: From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah*, vol. 11 (New York: IB Tauris, 2015): 363.

to be significant for at least two reasons: First, his literary experiments impacted the development of Western-inspired drama in Iran; Second, “Tabrizi seems to have established a precedent, which was followed in Persian drama in the following century, that is, a utilitarian purpose for art with emphasis on its message.”¹⁵

Enqelab-e Mashruteh (The Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911) marked a key episode in the passage from a traditional to a modern world that is concerned with democracy and equality. The relatively democratic atmosphere of the period encouraged political activism and social movements. As a result, a number of new theatrical troupes began to publish and perform at a variety of indoor or outdoor spaces, though not without challenges. The state, for instance, “feeling the potential danger of theater for propagating political dissent and fearing the reactions of religious radicals”¹⁶ did not foster theater practitioners. Nevertheless, during and following the revolution, the establishment of a number of theater groups, such as that of *Anojoman-e Okhovat* (Fraternity Society) and *Ta‘tr-e Melli* (The National Theater) in 1911 significantly contributed to the popularization of drama as a vehicle for political awareness and enlightenment. The repertory consisted of translation of Western plays as well as original plays written by leading figures such as Ahmad Mahmudi (1875-1930), whose *Ostad Nowruz-e Pinehduz* (Master Nowruz, the Cobbler, 1919) was the first to use a fully colloquial South Tehrani Persian.

Given the rise of nationalist tendencies during the 1920s, another significant element that characterizes some of the plays written during this period is the tendency to express skepticism about the Western culture. Hasan Moqaddam’s (1895-1925) popular play, *Ja‘far Khan az Farang Amadeh* (Ja‘far Khan Has Returned from Europe, 1922), for instance, satirizes the over-Westernized petit aristocrat, Ja‘far Khan, who praises all that is

¹⁵ M. R. Ghanoonparvar, “Persian Plays and the Iranian Theater,” 91.

¹⁶ Saeed Talajooy, “A History of Iranian Drama (1850-1941),” 374.

European and scorns all that is Iranian. At the same time, it is important to note that the playwright does not fail to ridicule strict adherence to traditional beliefs and customs and in doing so, he successfully “integrates the tale of Ja‘far Khan’s return to Iran in the grand narrative of Iran’s modernization and the conflicted encounter between inherited values and infiltrated culture in the Persian society of the early decades of the 20th century.”¹⁷

Reza Shah’s ascendance to the throne in 1925 commenced a new trajectory of modernity in Iran. He pursued a top-down modernization project that included numerous plans, from cultural and educational Westernization, centralization policies, development programs, nation-building efforts, to dress code regulations, which were not compatible with the traditional Islamic values and norms. Furthermore, his European-style modernization, which took place in the absence of political development, was primarily an urban phenomenon, confined to Tehran and a few other urban centers and therefore resulted in the double alienation within the country, i.e., the state from the civil society as well as the elite from the masses. As Nikki Keddie accurately points out:

Reza Shah’s work for rapid modernization from above, along with his militantly secularist cultural and education program, helped create the situation of “two cultures” in Iran, which became more and more acute in later decades. The upper and new middle classes became increasingly Westernized and scarcely understood the traditional or religious culture of most of their compatriots.¹⁸

One aspect of the undemocratic policy that is particularly relevant to this discussion is the rigorous censorship of the first Pahlavi’s regime. All texts, literary or otherwise, had to meet the state’s censor’s approval before they could be licensed for publication or screening. However, in the absence of clear guidelines with regards to what was to be published, the censors simply refused to grant permission to any works that criticized the

¹⁷ Maryam Shariati, “Ja‘far Khan az Farang Amadeh,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/>.

¹⁸ Nikki R. Keddie, and Richard Yann, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 102.

regime or addressed social and cultural problems. As a result of this lack of criteria as well as the censors' limited knowledge, the nature of censorship, especially in the early years of the Pahlavis, was extremely repressive and highly subjective.

Interestingly, despite the government's progressive intolerance towards criticism, this period witnessed a corresponding increase in the overall development of drama. Hasan Javadi identifies three main types of drama during this period: historical plays, romantic musical plays, and didactic social comedies.¹⁹ Among the most prominent instances are Sadeq Hedayat's *Parvin, Dokhtar-e Sasan* (Parvin, the Daughter of Sasan, 1928), Reza Kamal's (known as Shahrezad) *Abbaseh Khahar-e-Amir* (Abbaseh, the Amir's Sister, 1930), and Sayyed Ali Nasr's *Arusi-ye Hossein Aqa* (The Wedding of Hossein Aqa, 1939). Of the three types, historical plays remained one of the most dominant forms of dramatic literature mainly for two reasons: set in the pre-Islamic past, the genre not only enabled the playwrights to achieve a high nationalist pitch but more importantly, provided them with an indirect venue for criticizing the present by disguising their works.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that theater enjoyed some government support and encouragement as a result of Reza Shah's attempts to secularize public life, "which though limited political freedom to a minimum, provided more space for such cultural activities as theater, music, and dance which had remained restricted due to religious pressures."²⁰ Furthermore, Reza Shah licensed the appearance of women on public stages for the first time—a historic moment for the Iranian theater. Prior to this innovation, women were officially excluded from theater because of religious and social restrictions and no doubt pioneering performances of minority female actresses, especially Armenians and Jews, paved the way for a greater recognition of their Muslim counterparts. Lastly,

¹⁹ Noted in Willem M. Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 261.

²⁰ Saeed Talajooy, "A History of Iranian Drama (1850-1941)," 388.

during the same period, Iran's first drama school, *Honarestan-e Honarpishegi-ye Tehran* (Tehran Acting School) was established in 1939 with the aim of training the burgeoning actors, directors, and designers in the art of modern theater. Some nationally prominent playwrights and artists of the time, such as Abdolhossein Nushin, Rafi Halati, Moezzodian Fekri, and Rezazadeh Shafaq, served as its instructors, who along with "a few others laid the foundations of Iranian theater by enhancing the standards of acting."²¹

Following the Allied forces occupation of Iran, despite the country's declaration of neutrality in World War II, and the subsequent abdication of Reza Shah in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah in 1941, a twelve-year period of untrammelled political freedom ensued. The installation of a young, inexperienced king against a background of political and economic chaotic period resulted in a temporarily abandonment of censorship and thereby provided a timely opportunity for opening up new theatrical companies and musical concerts all over the country. Additionally, the fact that foreign powers were not sensitive to criticism if it was not directed at them and supported local cultural activities in order to win the support of the people, further contributed to the thriving of dramatic productions.²² Some Persian plays in line with the social and political needs of the time were written and a number of Western plays were performed using professional stagecraft and technique. Furthermore, amid the high hopes for change and democracy, the Tudeh (Socialist) Party was established in the same year and with it continuing growth of nationalist, social, and political themes. Among the prominent writers who promoted leftist causes and aligned themselves with the party are: Bozorg Alavi, Nima Yushij, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ahmad Shamlu, and Sadeq Chubak. Even though the party's pro-Soviet allegiance

²¹ Noted in Saeed Talajooy, "The Impact of Soviet Contact on Iranian Theatre: Abdolhossein Nushin and the Tudeh Party," in *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions Since 1800*, ed. Stephanie Cronin, (New York: Routledge, 2013): 340.

²² Willem M. Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 263.

later led to the disillusionment of intellectuals, leftist ideologies continued to dominate intellectual fashions throughout the next three decades.

The 1953 coup d'état and the subsequent consolidation of Mohammad Reza Shah's power once again restored repression and censorship. What is more, the prevalence of radio in the 1950s, both as a mainstream entertainment and a vehicle for political advertising, posed a threat to this nascent theater with its already limited audience. As Hamid Dabashi explains, "Radio was paramount among all social strata, from the urban intellectuals to peasants in the field."²³ Another important factor was the emergence of the widely viewed *filmfarsi* (a commercial genre of Iranian cinema which was influenced by Hollywood, Egyptian, and Indian films) that made theater lose some of its glamor.

The 1960s and 1970s experienced a resurgence of theater as a result of government incentives. The Foundation of *Daneshkade-ye Honarha-ye Dramatic* (School of Dramatic Arts) in 1964, the establishment of the *Jashnvar-e Honar-e Shiraz* (Shiraz Arts Festival) in 1967, and support from the National Iranian Radio-Television, for instance, encouraged experimentation in theater as a move towards theater development along with the Western lines. However, government support came with strings attached, and works that contained criticism of the regime were censored and their authors could face jail. As a result, "Persian drama as well as other arts and forms of artistic expression generally adapted enigmatic forms, perhaps in hopes of avoiding the wrath of government censors and police."²⁴ Symbolism therefore became one of the most prevalent modes of artistic expression. Moreover, a wide range of foreign drama, from Sophocles to Shakespeare, and to modern American and European plays, were translated and staged so as to circumvent censorship. As such and despite all the restrictions, the last two decades prior to the 1979 revolution

²³ Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (London: Verso, 2001): 38.

²⁴ M. R. Ghanoonparvar, "Persian Plays and the Iranian Theater," 94.

are among the most productive periods of modern drama, one in which prominent Iranian playwrights such as Gholamhossein Sa'edi, Akbar Radi, and Bahram Beyzaie continued to write extensively.

Yet, despite its rich history of drama, Iranian modern plays have drawn little critical attention and have yet to be included in the discourse of drama and theater studies. On those rare occasions when they are included in the discourse, Iranian literary productions are mostly depicted as wholesale imitations, re-enactments, of Western literary techniques.²⁵ The purpose of this dissertation is to fill this gap by examining plays, from the 1960s and 1970s, written by Sa'edi, Radi, and Beyzaie who are widely believed to be the pioneers of modern Iranian drama and who have made extraordinary contributions to its development. By re-situating their works within the context of international dramatic developments, this project aims to explain how these playwrights have in fact countered stereotypical assumptions while celebrating aesthetics that emphasize authenticity. To achieve this, plays by Sa'edi, Radi, and Beyzaie are respectively compared with the works of Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and Luigi Pirandello in order to detail the similarities and differences between both groups through close-readings of plays and analysis of the scholarship and historical documents that shaped their views about modernity. Moreover, this study seeks to explore the ways in which dramatists of the modern era in Iran and in Europe have represented ontological and existential issues in order to show that theater can be a perfect medium for crossing the barriers between philosophical statements and socio-political realities as well as a vehicle to enhance cross-cultural understanding.

²⁵ See for instance, Gholam Ali Ra'di Azarakhshi, "She'r-e Farsi-ye Mo'aser," in *Sokhanraniha-ye Nakhostin Kongereh-ye She'r Dar Iran* (Speeches at the First Poetry Congress in Iran) (Tehran: Farhand va Honar, 1960): 178; Manuchehr Mohandessi, "Hedayat and Rilke," in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature*, ed. Thomas M. Ricks (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1984): 259.

The study's focus on the six major playwrights—each of whom responded to the sense of cultural, social, and political changes that promoted the modern vision—is by no means exhaustive. A comprehensive research would also deal with August Strindberg, George Bernard Shaw, Bertolt Brecht, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett, and others on the European side, and Sa'id Soltanpur, Abbas Na'ibandian, Bahman Forsi, Esmail Khalaj, and others who contributed to the modern Iranian drama. However, instead of an overview represented by such approach, a more focused analysis of key figures gives a fuller sense of their work and place within the movement. Moreover, these seminal playwrights are not chosen only because they continue to remain among the most widely studied in their respective contexts, but also because in meeting the challenge of modernity each introduced a clearly distinctive style of theater that has been highly significant. Yet, it is important to note that while these playwrights initiated different styles of theatrical forms, which serve to map out the peculiarities of modern drama, there are discernible connections between their works that help to show the evolutionary trajectories of the development in this genre.

Furthermore, in doing so, this project foregrounds the ways in which these two seemingly idiosyncratic, disparate cultures, nonetheless, experienced similar symptomatic patterns due to historic changes in societal values and political conditions. Of course, as already mentioned, this comparative approach does not seek to foster a Eurocentric definition of modernity that formulates progress and modernization as exclusively Western phenomena and consequently holds that, “non-European societies were ‘modernized’ as a result of Western impact and influence.”²⁶ This hegemonic assumption that regards the Western modernity as the “original” phenomenon has been destabilised by a large body of

²⁶ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001): 2.

postcolonial scholarship; instead, as explained by Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, modernity is “a product of globalizing network of power and knowledge that informed the heterotopic experiences of crisscrossing peoples and cultures and thus provided multiple scenarios of self-refashioning.”²⁷

This is precisely how Iranian literary productions, in general, and the selected Iranian plays, in particular, must be examined. Utilizing the general framework of modern Western drama and the corresponding techniques, Sa‘edi, Radi, and Beyzaie have sought to address matters that are both of local and universal significance. Their works are, therefore, lasting contributions to world literature based on both Persian and European cultural and literary traditions.

Each of the three chapters that follow takes up one aspect of the major aesthetic evolutionary stages in the development of modern drama, i.e., Idealism, Realism, and Modernism. Through close-readings of nineteenth and twentieth-century dramatic texts selected from a variety of national and linguistic contexts, the project explores and illuminates the ways in which texts across boundaries of nation, language, and time have used dramatic representation to give voice and form to their conflicts and attendant anxieties.

Drawing on the Kierkegaardian’s concept of “that single individual,” Chapter One, “Ibsen and Sa‘edi: The Politics of Idealism,” examines the idealist characteristics of Doctor Stockmann in Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* (1882) and Mr. Mim in Gholamhossein Sa‘edi’s *Parvarbandan* (The Cattle Fatteners, 1969) and elaborates on the playwrights’ reflections on the nature, limits, and vulnerability of nonconformity and individualism against oppressive conventions, hypocritical authorities, and established

²⁷ Ibid., 4.

institutions. The chapter concludes by suggesting that despite the apparent differences of situation and setting, in portraying the conflicts between the revolutionary individual versus social structures and political agendas, both plays transcend specific times and culture and thereby constitute utterly universal messages.

Chapter Two, “Chekhov and Radi: The Bond of Realism,” focuses on the relation between modernity in conjunction with the disintegration of the old world and demise of societies in modern drama during the rapidly changing socio-political circumstances in the early twentieth century Russia and mid-twentieth century Iran. Through examining Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard* (1903) and Radi’s *Labkhand-e Ba Shokouh-e Aqaye Gil* (The Glorious Smile of Mr. Gil, 1971), this comparative analysis presents how similar themes are developed in different settings and time periods, how social and political elements inform the understandings of the plays, and how this genre can be utilized as a perfect medium to voice ontological and existential crisis. Drawing on the respective historical contexts of the post-coup Iran and the pre-revolutionary Russian society, the chapter concludes by suggesting how these contexts have affected the two plays’ denouement, although in different ways.

The final Chapter, “Pirandello and Beyzaie: Standing on the Threshold of Modernism,” investigates the impact of modernity as it relates to the problematic nature of human identity and the plasticity of truth in Luigi Pirandello’s *Right You Are (If You Think So)* (1917) and Bahram Beyzaie’s *Marg-e Yazdgerd* (Death of Yazdgerd, 1979). Focusing on the playwrights’ use of alienating devices, including meta-theatrical reflexivity, play-within-the-play, and doubling, the chapter demonstrates not only their rejection of essentialist visions of individuality, reality, and even history but also examines how such discontinuities can contribute to audience involvement. Despite the lack of historical relationship between the Italian writer and his Iranian counterpart, their analogous modes

of a theatrical probing of reality and identity suggests the possibility of unsuspected connections between the otherwise idiosyncratic, disparate cultures.

This connects the project to its start, and to how the new generations of eminent Iranian playwrights utilized drama as a perfect medium for a deeper, more nuanced exploration of social and political changes as modernity was plowing through the country. Analyzing the modern Iranian dramatic productions would allow for the expansion of the dominant Western cannon, Ibsen, Chekhov, and Pirandello, for instance, and for gaining new perspectives on other national literary traditions which unfortunately have mostly been omitted from the world dramatic discourse. At the same time, by linking Western dramatists to their Iranian counterparts, this dissertation aims to join the discussions on the interactions between Iranian and Western literatures and to give an account of an exchange between Iran and the West that is embedded in the development of both.

Chapter 1. Sa'edi and Ibsen: The Politics of Idealism

In his book, *The Theater of Revolt* (1962), Robert Brustein distinguishes modern playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Anton Chekhov, and Bertolt Brecht from their predecessors by emphasizing their romantic perspective of the notion of revolt. Brustein suggests that the modern playwright is a rebel, one who is more concerned with the unattainable than the possible. Therefore, the modern protagonist in whom this revolt is reflected can often be regarded as a mouthpiece for the dramatist himself.²⁸ On the other hand, Brustein also does not fall short of acknowledging the playwright's critical views on the protagonist and his revolt, pointing out:

It is this conflict between idea and action—between conception and execution—which forms the central dialectic of the modern drama. For the rebel dramatist is one who dreams and puts his dreams to the test. This may suggest why the conflict of illusion and reality is such an important theme in the modern drama: illusion and reality are the twin poles of the dramatist's imagination. All rebels hate reality and labor ceaselessly to change it; but no true artist can withdraw entirely from the world of matter. The more rebellious the artist, the more he takes refuge in a sphere of fancies and illusions; but even the most subjective artists in the theatre of revolt are pulled irresistibly back to the tangible, materials world they would escape.²⁹

²⁸ Robert Brustein, *The Theater of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962): 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

In addition to the instances of the playwrights' identification with their protagonists (partially or otherwise), the parallel opposition between dream and reality is also evident in the plays of Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and Gholamhossein Sa'edi (1936-1985), one of the leading modern Iranian dramatists. Sa'edi's rebel protagonists like many of Ibsen's main characters—Brand, Halvard Solness, and Dr. Thomas Stockmann—are idealists who attempt to achieve the impossible. For both Ibsen and Sa'edi's characters, the importance of their freedom comes to the forefront as they try to rise above their circumstances while maintaining their individuality. "The key to Ibsen's concept of tragedy centers on the question of whether or not man is free to order his life as he chooses, whether man is the master of his own destiny."³⁰ Similarly, according to Sa'edi, the human tragedy consists of the confrontation of man and his deficiencies with the limitations imposed on him by society.

Given the different time and place in which these two authors emerged, the Norwegian playwright and his Iranian counterpart might not immediately stand out as remarkably similar in their literary productions. However, drawing on some intriguing resemblances or "typological affinities"—i.e., "similarities between literary phenomenon based on similar reactions to similar problems in comparable and social contexts"³¹—this chapter explores the concept of "social revolt" in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882) and Sa'edi's *Parvarbandan* (The Cattle Fatteners, 1969) and investigates the social and political contexts which both dramatists responded to in their respective societies.

³⁰ Sverre Arestad, "Ibsen's Concept of Tragedy" (PMLA, 1959): 285-286.

³¹ Douwe Fokkema, and Elrud Ibsch, *Modernist Conjectures: A Mainstream in European Literature, 1910-1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987): 16.

1.1 IDEALISM AT THE LIMITS: RETHINKING THE MESSIANIC FIGURE

Henrik Ibsen had a tendency to deny the tremendous influence of other thinkers and writers on his writing. In response to the possible impact of the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), on his work, for instance, the Norwegian dramatist claims that he has “read little of Kierkegaard and understood less.”³² According to his biographer and translator, Michael Meyer, “[this] statement was probably true, for Ibsen was never much interested in philosophical writing. On the other hand, he shares with Kierkegaard such striking similarities not merely of thought but of phrasing that the matter cannot be allowed to rest here.”³³ Likewise, thinkers, such as Otto Weininger, have suggested a deep resemblance between Ibsen’s outlook and Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) moral philosophy,³⁴ while others have traced the influences on him back to Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), among others.³⁵

Yet, given the lack of sufficient evidence to support any of the claims conclusively, establishing precise influence linkages and measuring the extent of literary impact proves to be difficult, if not impossible. Instead of attributing literary influence, however, the present study adopts the Kierkegaardian framework of Idealism to explore themes of nonconformity and individualism in Ibsen’s play, *An Enemy of the People*. The choice of Kierkegaard is not made at random of course. As an example of Ibsen’s polemical work, this millenarian play manifests the tension between individual and Idealism versus

³² Michael Meyer, *Ibsen* (Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2004): 119.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Otto Weininger, *Die letzten Dinge, 1904-1907 (On Last Things)*, trans. Steven Burns (Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001): 1-31.

³⁵ See for example, Otto Heller, *Henrik Ibsen: Plays and Problems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912): 97; Brian Johnston, *Ibsen Cycle: The Design of the Plays from “Pillars of Society” to “When We Dead Awaken”* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992): 27-97; Ross Shideler, *Questioning the Father: From Darwin to Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Hardy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 57.

community and social convention—something that resonates with the polemics against Idealism as viewed by Kierkegaard. To get a better understanding of Ibsen’s artistic career, first, his oeuvre is situated at a historical juncture when Norwegian art and literature is obsessed with “churning out ideal Norwegian heroes and heroines.”³⁶ Next, Ibsen’s ambivalence toward the messianic character is brought out in his treatment of Dr. Stockmann with an eye to the Kierkegaardian philosophy and his engagement with the Idealist tradition.

Henrik Johan Ibsen was born in 1828 into a merchant family in the little town of Skien on the southern part of Norway—an uninteresting and dull country town which was “a typical home of all the mournful virtues of Philistia, and correspondingly replete with the meanness and pretensions that are anatomized later on by unsparing blade of Ibsen’s satire.”³⁷ The father’s bankruptcy in the mid-1830s and the subsequent impoverishment of the family forced Ibsen to fend for himself. Working as a pharmacist’s apprentice, he intended to pursue a career in medicine, but instead turned to writing after failing the university entrance examination in 1850. The publication of *Catiline* (1849) and *The Burial Mound* (1850) paved the way for his job as the writer and director at the Norwegian Theater of Bergen. In the 1860s and while residing in Italy, he wrote two major dramas in verse, *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867). Brand’s pursuit of the ideal and ethics and Peer Gynt’s opportunism and self-indulgence effectively capture the dramatist’s concern about the limits of Idealism as well as the individual’s attempts of self-realization against the limitations of society—themes that find overt expressions in Ibsen’s later plays. Soon he moved to Germany in 1869 where he turned his attention to social problem plays of which

³⁶ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 147.

³⁷ Otto Heller, *Henrik Ibsen: Plays and Problems*: 16.

The Pillars of Society (1877) is an example. His subsequent four plays—*A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), *An Enemy of the People* (1882), and *The Wild Duck* (1884)—garnered Ibsen fame (and notoriety) across Europe and the rest of the world. From the mid-1880s onwards, Ibsen increasingly became more preoccupied with Symbolism. *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), *Hedda Gabler* (1890), *The Master Builder* (1892), *Rosmersholm* (1887) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) are among his best-known works.

Ibsen's career is generally divided into three major phases reflecting different aesthetic tendencies: a period of ardent Idealism/Romanticism, a middle period of social Realism, and a later phase of poetic Symbolism.³⁸ This categorization, however, is neither unequivocal nor exclusive. Others, in fact, have distinguished alternative categories in Ibsen's oeuvre: historical dramas exemplified by *Catiline*, satirical dramas such as *Brand*, and a period of modern prose of which *A Doll's House* is typical.³⁹ Still other critics propose different classifications. Brian Johnston in his seminal work, *The Ibsen Cycle*, for instance, argues that Ibsen's last twelve plays—from *Pillars of Society* to *When We Dead Awaken*—are in fact a single cyclical work fashioned in parallel to the Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. He then goes on to present Ibsen as “a post-Romantic artist who still remained royal to Romantic aspirations: who, though he saw everywhere the betrayal of revolutionary and Romantic *ideals* (italics mine), still held onto the impossible goal of ‘a revolution in the spirit of man.’”⁴⁰

Yet the playwright's own works and words seem to undermine such convenient categorizations. For instance, in mid-nineteenth-century Norway, Idealism and

³⁸ See for example, Orley I. Holtan, *Mythic Patterns in Ibsen's Last Plays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970): 97; Nellie Burget Miller, *The Living Drama: Historical Development and Modern Movements Visualized, a Drama of the Drama* (New York: The Century Co., 1924): 179.

³⁹ See for example, John Oscar Hall, *When I was a Boy in Norway* (Boston: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Co., 1921): 226.

⁴⁰ Brian Johnston, *Ibsen Cycle*, xvi.

Romanticism were prominent features of the literary climate of the time. Characterized by the celebration of native values and authenticity, a yearning for the idealized peasant past untainted by foreign domination, and exaltation of truth, freedom, heroism, and beauty, Norwegian Idealism and Romanticism emphasized nationalistic aspects. Yet, Ibsen's early works "are records of his struggle to fit into the straitjacket of idealist aesthetics."⁴¹ In his third play, *St. John's Night* (1853), for example, Ibsen satirizes the idealist poet, Julian Paulsen, who is pretentious, ridiculous, and full of nationalist sentiments. Julian falls in love with the *Hulder*, a Norwegian national pixie, but his passion for the beautiful folkloric nymph disappears when Julian discovers that she has a cow's tail! Ibsen's use of an aesthetically flawed creature "as an embodiment of Norwegian nationalist aspirations offers a particularly scathing critique of the nationalist agenda and its potential implications for the Norwegian nation."⁴²

Critique of Idealism continues to be the subject of Ibsen's later works as well. In the case of *An Enemy of the People*, for instance, the dramatist's critique is combined with the idiosyncrasies of his protagonists to produce a play that is anything but conventional. Ibsen in a letter to Hegel writes, "Yesterday I completed my new play. It is entitled *An Enemy of the People*, and is in five acts. I am still a little uncertain whether to call it a comedy or simply a play; it has much of the character of a comedy, but there is also a serious basic theme."⁴³ In other words, the 1882 play does not comfortably fit into neat rigid boundaries; rather, as an example of modern drama, it exemplifies a revolt not only

⁴¹ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, 148.

⁴² Ann Schmiesing, *Norway's Christiania Theatre, 1827-1867: From Danish Showhouse to National Stage* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006): 115.

⁴³ Quoted in Henrik Ibsen, *Ibsen Plays: A Doll's House; An Enemy of the People; Hedda Gabler*, vol. 2, trans. and intro. Michael Meyer (London: Methuen Drama, 2006): 109.

against the romantic Idealism—a movement that was essential to European aesthetic discourse around the 1870s⁴⁴—but also against the limits of realist representation.⁴⁵

Anticipating the main ideas of later existentialists and rebelling against the hegemony of “Idealism,” Kierkegaard promotes an individualistic paradigm that focuses on authentic existence and the quest for knowing self. According to David F. Swenson:

... the individual should be challenged to transcend the existing social order and find himself, thus making it possible for that order to be transformed. His individualism consists in conceiving the task as one which must be attacked from within outward, instead of from the outside inward.⁴⁶

Kierkegaard’s advocacy for individualism, however, does not support an antisocial or apolitical stance as some critics have noted.⁴⁷ On the other hand, more recent scholarship has challenged such a prevalent view of the philosopher as indifferent and instead has suggested the ways in which Kierkegaard’s oeuvre can be read in light of his social, political, religious concerns. Merold Westphal, for example, observes that, “Kierkegaard’s individualism, I have become increasingly persuaded, expresses a radical politics and is anything but a form of apolitical or antisocial indifference or withdrawal.”⁴⁸

Kierkegaard’s social and political concerns, for example, become more apparent when his ideas regarding the political transformation that was taking place in Denmark around 1849 are considered. The most important of such changes, of course, was the replacement of the absolute monarch with a democratic constitution. The new socio-political climate contributed to his sense of anxiety regarding the development of the

⁴⁴ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, 82.

⁴⁵ Aaron Matz, *Satire in an Age of Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 110.

⁴⁶ David F. Swenson, *Something about Kierkegaard*, ed. Lillian Marvins Swenson (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983) 232-233.

⁴⁷ See for example, Martin Buber, “The Question to the Single One,” in *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965); Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

⁴⁸ Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987): viii.

individual in the wake of the “crowd’s” access to power. Fearful about the assimilations of the former into the masses as well as modernity’s contribution to the idealization of the public opinion, he reacts against the nefarious ramifications of the disappearance of single individuality in an age of collectivism. According to Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard believes that:

this kind of phenomenon [leveling] is a pernicious aspect of modern life. Anyone who dares to be different or who possesses great gifts that make the mediocre masses envious will be subject to criticism and mockery. Such a person who towers above others will be brought down to the common level of the masses.⁴⁹

In addition to the “crowd,” Kierkegaard also criticizes the rise of mass media, especially the press, as another agent of modernity that threatens to vilify individuality. In *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, he discusses the significance of decision-making and personal accountability as essential components of individuality and highlights the role the media with its hegemonic forces in robbing the single individual of his true, passionate self. In doing so, Kierkegaard argues, the media succeeds in controlling the public’s minds and enforces a sense of conformity. Given the prioritization of the crowd’s opinion in the “present age,” those who seek to step outside of this web of anonymity are not granted a public approval. Given its quantitative superiority, the “crowd” assumes to have the truth on his side. Concerned about the manipulative power of the media, a position that was further enhanced by the “*Corsair* affair,”⁵⁰ Kierkegaard writes, “When truth conquers with

⁴⁹ Jon Stewart, *Soren Kierkegaard: Subjectivity, Irony, and the Crisis of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 168.

⁵⁰ The so-called “*Corsair* affair” (1847) refers to the story of the literary duel between Kierkegaard and the popular satiric Danish newspaper, *The Corsair*, after the publication of his book, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. The journal attacked the philosopher. Its caricatures and lampoon sketches turned Kierkegaard to an object of derision in the eyes of the public. The incident which ended in the resignation of the editors, Meier Aaron Goldschmidt (1819-1887) and Pedar Luvig Møller (1814-1865), also forced Kierkegaard to live a more isolated life and contributed to his public image as a solitary individual. Furthermore, the affair made him keenly aware of the destructive power of the media in modern societies and its close relationship with the masses.

the help of ten thousand yelling men—even supposing that the victory is a truth—then with the form and manner of the victory a far greater untruth is victorious.”⁵¹

Unlike many philosophical notions, Kierkegaard’s writings were immediately accessible to the Norwegian readership given the existence of a shared language and culture. His great impact on the intellectual life in Norway is perhaps best captured by the critic, Gerhard Gran (1856-1925) who writes, “Kierkegaard has stamped his impression, either temporarily or permanently, on our theologians, our poets and writers, our pedagogues—yes, one even finds traces of him amongst our journalists.”⁵² In the case of Ibsen, however, although the extent of the Danish philosopher’s influence remains to be debated, it is safe to say that the playwright’s familiarity with Kierkegaardian ideas is undisputable. First, there is evidence supporting the assumption that Ibsen had access to and read Danish writers’ works.⁵³ Second, both Ibsen’s mother-in-law, Magdalene Thoresen, herself a literary enthusiast, and his Danish friend, Georg Brandes, had a passionate occupation with Kierkegaard. Irrespective of the degree of influence, then, what follows is an attempt to draw parallels between the two figures using the aesthetic struggle of the age as the framework, i.e., examining Ibsen’s response to the legacy of Idealism and studying his approach toward the rampant individualism.

1.2 INDIVIDUALISM AND THE VORTEX OF ALIENATION

An Enemy of the People revolves around the story of Dr. Thomas Stockmann, the primary founder and inspector of the newly developed baths in a small coastal town in Norway, where the local tourist trade and economy profit of the town depend heavily on

⁵¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: The Modern Library, 1964): 431.

⁵² Quoted in Thor Arvid Dyrerud, “You Have No Truth Onboard! Kierkegaard’s Influences on Norway,” in *Kierkegaard's International Reception: Tome I: Northern and Western Europe*, vol. 8 (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Co.): 122.

⁵³ See for example, Michael Meyer, *Ibsen*, 49; 67; 69; 90.

the securing the reputation of the baths. Soon after their creation, however, Dr. Stockmann receives the scientific proof of the contamination of the spa waters caused by sewage. Concerned about the threat to the health of his fellow citizens, he calls for temporarily shutting down the baths and suggests relaying of the conduit pipes higher up the mountains to avoid pollution. Dr. Stockmann considers it his duty to publish his report in the local newspaper and to communicate this dangerous issue to his brother, Peter Stockmann, who is both the chairman of the baths committee and the mayor of the town.

Yet, considering the great cost of the reinstallation of new pipes and the possible permanent abandonment of the baths by the visitors, Peter Stockmann protests his brother's decision and refers to the destruction that his discovery would bring upon the town, saying: "The whole town would be ruined, thanks to you!"⁵⁴ It is important to note that Peter Stockmann is inclined to follow an evasive and dishonest path. Instead of explicitly putting the options on the table—the decision between the town's prosperity and the tourists' health—he attempts to distract attentions by questioning that the accuracy and validity of the medical report on the pollution of the water. This is his method of covering up the truth in order to continue benefitting from the baths' popularity. Ibsen is complicating the situation not only by depicting the mayor's insensitivity to the possible threat for the citizens and visitors, but also by highlighting Peter Stockmann's hypocrisy and his intentions to distort and misrepresent the reality; a characteristic that stands in sharp contrast with Dr. Stockmann's quest for Truth.

In elaborating on the townsmen's reaction to Dr. Stockmann's notion of absolute value of Truth, Ibsen is, in fact, criticizing the centers of power within a given society. To begin with, in response to his elder brother, the idealist Dr. Stockmann states: "We lived

⁵⁴ Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm*. trans. and intro. James McFarlane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 34.

by peddling filth and corruption! The whole of the town's prosperity is rooted in a lie!"⁵⁵ Here the physician is actually drawing a parallel between the physical contamination and the moral corruption. Indeed, one is tempted to see the biological poison as a symbol for moral corruption.⁵⁶ Dr. Stockmann considers dishonesty and hypocrisy as detrimental elements which can plague and corrupt the whole society. He even goes further saying that the sources of the town's spiritual life are polluted by the old, traditional ideas held not only by the reactionaries but also by the "majority," which he blames for being truth and freedom's worst enemy. Yet the mayor does not hesitate in asserting that anyone who makes such "offensive insinuations about his native town must be an enemy to our community." The benevolent doctor is soon to be labeled as "an enemy of his people", as an individual deliberately alienating himself from his own people.

Disappointed by his brother, Dr. Stockmann, still naively expects the press—represented by Hovstad, the editor of the *People's Herald* and Billing, a journalist—and the majority of the people—represented by the petty bourgeoisie, Aslaksan—to support him in publishing his report in their "progressive and independent" newspaper. Although the press staff initially promises Dr. Stockmann their full support, one should not mistake their incentives to be as disinterested as those of the physician. Even though they pretend to be interested in the truth and the well-being of the society in which they live, in reality, the staff are pursuing their personal goals by supporting Dr. Stockmann's discovery. Their main motivation is to incite controversy with the reactionary Mayor and thus gain a political advantage over the party ruling the town.⁵⁷ In the words of Hovstad:

⁵⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁶ Mordecai Roshwald, "The Alienated Moralist in *An Enemy of the People*," *Modern Age* 46.3 (Summer 2004): 229.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Then, you see, once the ring is broken, we can keep pegging away day after day in the paper, pointing out to the public how completely incompetent the Mayor is, and how all the positions of responsibility, in fact the whole council, ought to be handed over to the Liberals.⁵⁸

The reactions of the liberal editors illustrate the discrepancy between them and Dr. Stockmann. While the latter is concerned about the health of his people in general, and Truth, in particular, the press staffs are interested in making a political capital out of the situation. The gap between the two stances seems to be unbridgeable. Hovstad and Billing, the heroes of the “free, independent” press, in fact, represent the most stark forms of opportunism and hypocrisy, while Aslaksan, with his philosophy of moderation is a caricature for the petty bourgeois, the majority, and their timidity.

Furthermore, similar to Kierkegaard’s critique of the press as a societal force that imposes passivity and conformity and reinforces normalization and massification at the price of individuality, here, too, Ibsen is concerned about the monopoly of power in the hands of the mass media, especially in the hands of “the so-called liberals” whose sole motivation is maximizing their self-interest. It is important to note that it is the same party that did not hesitate to distance itself from Ibsen after the latter was accused of anarchism and nihilism following the publication of *Ghosts*. Similarly, Dr. Stockmann is quickly disowned by the Liberals as soon as their profits take a nosedive. Concerning the illiberality of this party, for instance, Dr. Stockmann asserts:

I just want to take these mongrels and knock it into their heads that the Liberals are the worst enemies of freedom... that the party programmes grab hold of every young and promising idea and wring its neck... and that policies of expediency are turning all our standards of morality and justice upside down, so that life’s just not going to be worth living.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm*, 45.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

The press's allegiance changes, therefore, when Peter Stockmann approaches the editors of the newspaper before the report of his brother is printed, trying to question its validity while pointing out how costly it will be to install new pipes. The mayor is eventually able to successfully bring them onto his side. Peter Stockmann explains to them that the negative consequences of the publication of the report would affect the people of modest means no less than the wealthy and that how the costs of this reconstruction will make people pay higher taxes. Therefore, both the town and the individual citizens will be worse off if Dr. Stockmann's solution is adopted.⁶⁰ The conservative mayor asserts that "the public does not need new ideas. The public is best served by the good old, accepted ideas it already has."⁶¹ His argument is successful in bringing all parties together, uniting them against Dr. Stockmann. The significance of the masses and their influential role is best depicted when Aslaksen explains to the doctor that it is not the editor who is in control of the paper, but the subscribers, the public opinion; and that "it would mean total ruin for the town if your article were printed."⁶² All other efforts of Dr. Stockmann to publish his discovery are thwarted.

In spite of finding himself alienated from his fellow citizens and the collective interest of the community, Dr. Stockmann, as an idealist and a dedicated truth seeker, is ready to sacrifice the short-term interests in the name of truth. The principle is more important to him than the will of the majority, or even the well-being of his people. For him, conformity and compromise is not an option.

The dramatic structure reaches its climax when the rebel protagonist determinedly opposes the old, traditional ideas and the hypocritical opportunism of society. In a

⁶⁰ Terrance McConnell, "Moral Combat In *An Enemy of The People*: Public Health Versus Private Interests," *Public Health Ethics* 3.1 (2009): 82.

⁶¹ Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm*, 37.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 64.

confrontation with his townsmen at Captain Homer's house, Dr. Stockmann who has been warned against speaking publicly about the baths' issues, declares his "revolution against this lie that the majority has a monopoly of the truth."⁶³ The truths the majority worships, he says, are "elderly" and "senile." The truth is on the side of the few, "the genuine individuals in our midst, with their new and vigorous ideas. These men stand in the very forefront of our advance, so far ahead that the compact majority hasn't even begun to approach them—and it's *there* they fight for truths too newly-born to have won any support from the majority."⁶⁴ Dr. Stockmann becomes an object of ridicule when the angry mob eventually declared him as an "enemy of the people," a "traitor to his country." He is even further alienated from his community when on the following day, his family is turned out of the house, Dr. Stockmann himself is expelled from the baths' committee, Petra, his daughter, is dismissed from her school and her job, while his boys are fired from school.

In depicting the confrontation between Dr. Stockmann and his fellow citizens, Ibsen is fighting a war on two levels. On the one hand, the dramatist turns his armament against the critics who vehemently attacked and rejected his earlier play, *Ghosts*, for telling "dirty" truths and references to "indecent" including syphilis and incest—topics unfit for public presentation. In a letter to Hegel he writes, "All these fading and decrepit figures who have pounced on my play [*Ghosts*] will one day receive their crushing judgment in the literary histories of the future ... My book belongs to the future."⁶⁵ Ibsen's response to the hypocrisy, provincialism, and corruption of the Norwegian society is penning his "most

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Quoted in Einar Ingvald Haugen, *Ibsen's Drama: Author to Audience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979): 3.

clearly political play,”⁶⁶ *An Enemy of the People*. On the other hand, focusing on the primacy of the individual over the conventions of the society, his Idealist character aligns well with Kierkegaardian notions when at the end of the play, in support of individualism, he famously proclaims, “the strongest man in the world is the man who stands alone.”⁶⁷ Here, Ibsen points out the eventual suffering of an individual who has the right on his side but finds himself in opposition to the majority and how that confrontation can influence one’s individuality, resulting in either the possible self-effacement of the individual under the pressures of conformity or his complete estrangement from the community; an entire isolation. Dr. Stockmann, obviously, does not yield to the prevalent opinion of the majority. At the end of the play, the estranged doctor stands almost alone while continuing to defy the community that he has loved.

Yet, it is important to note that Ibsen is careful not to cast his protagonist as a traditional tragic hero. To avoid such an outcome, the playwright does not limit himself only to bring the positive qualities of Dr. Stockmann into the center; rather, Ibsen highlights some of the protagonist’s shortcomings through a critical eye. Such common features, in turn, would help the audience to think of the protagonist not as someone superior to them, but as someone who is as ordinary as themselves. Moreover, Ibsen portrays the changes that Dr. Stockmann goes through over the course of the play in order to deflate his heroism while distancing himself from the Idealist roots and radical elitism of his protagonist.

From the very beginning of the play, Dr. Stockmann’s interest in expensive, high quality objects is emphasized. He enjoys luxury drinks and cigars, for instance, and is pleased to have guests over to his house. “Let’s have the cigars out, too. Ejlif, you know

⁶⁶ Quoted in Juan Ignacio Guijarro González, “Hysteria and Communism in Arthur Miller’s Rewriting of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*,” in *Nor Shall Diamond Die: American Studies in Honor of Javier Coy*, ed. Carme Manuel, Paul Scott Derrick (Valencia: Universidad de Valencia, 2003): 217.

⁶⁷ Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm*, 106.

where the box is kept. And you, Morten, can bring my pipe”⁶⁸ says Dr. Stockmann. His ability to enjoy a “luxury” lifestyle and “to appreciate [having a decent income] after living on a starvation wage,”⁶⁹ are the results of the financial success of the baths. Same level of “extravagance” can also be found in Dr. Stockmann’s ideas and zealous tirades, especially early in the play. Initially he is concerned about the contamination of the baths, but is naïvely Idealistic about the implications of his discovery and the public’s reaction to the revelation of the truth. However, as the play moves onto its climax, his materialistic attachments reduce while his disillusionment with the public and democratic systems intensifies. The doctor realizes that the physical problem is merely symptomatic of a deeper social malaise that plagues the entire modern world, namely, the philistine majority who, according to an old doctrine, “have the same right to criticize and to approve, to govern and to counsel as the few intellectually distinguished people.”⁷⁰ Disappointment with the authorities, public, and the press for not getting the support he craves, Dr. Stockmann’s pursuit of the Truth becomes a source of egotism so much so that in spite of being a scientist, he stubbornly rejects other potential possibilities for resolving the problem of the baths, but his own proposal to rebuild the baths even if that means the extermination of “mongrels” like “vermin.”

Dr. Stockmann’s self-indulgence becomes more obvious later when he ignores his wife’s warnings about his responsibility towards the future of his children if he continues his resistance against the authorities and the majority. Dr. Stockmann’s reasoning is almost entirely self-centered.⁷¹ He replies: “The boys...! [Suddenly stops with a determined look.]

⁶⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁷¹ Harold C. Knutson, “*An Enemy of the People: Ibsen's Reluctant Comedy*,” *Comparative Drama* 27.2 (Summer 1993): 165.

No! Even if it meant the end of the world, I'm not knuckling under. [...] I want to be able to look at my boys in the face when they grow up into free men."⁷² His persistence of individual's integrity comes with a price as his wife had warned. Near the end of the play, their house is stoned and destroyed, the family receives notice from the landlord, Dr. Stockmann is fired from position at the baths, Petra loses her job at the local school, the boys have trouble at school, townspeople sign a letter agreeing to boycott the family while Captain Horster's dismissal from his job as the captain of his ship blows their plan of going to America. In spite of all this, the redeemer is determined to continue to strive for his high ideals through educating his children and street urchins and thereby breeding a new generation of Idealists. Yet, Ibsen, once again, masterfully undercuts the protagonist's heroic pose with the use of comic elements. For instance, early in Act Five, following the mob's attack, Dr. Stockmann discovers that his trousers are torn by the stones and concludes:

You should never have your best trousers on when you turn out to fight for freedom and truth. Well, it's not that I care all that much about the trousers—you can always put a stitch in them for me. But what gets me is the idea of that mob going for me as though they were my equals—*that's* what I can't stomach, damn it!⁷³

While the doctor seems courageous and heroic at points, Ibsen does not hesitate to undermine his pose repeatedly. Here, for instance, the author meticulously employs ironic humor for two main purposes: a) As Keith Tester argues, Dr. Stockmann's "reaction was an uneasy combination of bourgeois virtue and intellectual disdain for possessions;"⁷⁴ and b) to undercut Dr. Stockmann's feeling of superiority; both of which contribute to the readers' disenchantment with the protagonist.

⁷² Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm*, 43.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷⁴ Keith Tester, *The Two Sovereigns: Social Contradictions of European Modernity* (New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002): 174.

Dr. Stockmann's arrogance is further depicted when he asserts his superiority against the majority. He explicitly mentions that moving to another town would make him find there "the same insolence from the masses in the other towns."⁷⁵ The same would be the case when in Act V, the doctor selfishly refuses to listen to his father-in-law, Morten Kiil, who has bought the spa shares at a low price with the money intended to be inherited to his wife, Katherine. Of course, Dr. Stockmann loses no time in refusing Morten Kiil's suggestion for breaking his resistance and succumbing to the authorities, but his egotistical nature comes out more explicitly when he does not even bother himself with explaining the situation to his wife since it is her money that has been spent and put into the baths.⁷⁶ When the doctor writes three "Noes" in response to Morten Kiil, and is questioned subsequently by his wife about the implications, he merely tells Katherine, "I will tell you that too, later on."⁷⁷

Aside from different instances of Dr. Stockmann's self-centeredness, Ibsen also juxtaposes his inconsistency throughout the play to further connect his protagonist to the concept of an ordinary man and to question the romantic idea of the rebel. For example, early on in the play, Dr. Stockmann is portrayed as a sociable, energetic scientist who values public opinion, Truth, and new ideas. He also wholeheartedly welcomes the press support in publishing his scientific report and eagerly appreciates Aslaksen's backup. Yet, as it turns out later, Dr. Stockmann is not acting from purely disinterested motives. Even though he is right about the dangerous situation of the baths, he also is sanctimonious, naïve, self-righteous, and vain in his pursuit of Idealism.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Harold C. Knutson, "An Enemy of the People: Ibsen's Reluctant Comedy," 166.

⁷⁷ Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm*, 102.

Dr. Stockmann, for instance, holds high hopes for winning public acclaim due to his discovery, even though he attempts to fake indifference. Flattered about the idea of being treated as a hero and receiving tributes, in response to Hovstad he says, “Well, anything at all—a parade or a banquet or a presentation—whatever it is, you must promise me faithfully to put a stop to it. And you too, Mr. Aslaksen! I insist!”⁷⁸ Dr. Stockmann is not only naïvely out of touch with the economic and political realities of his community but also he is indifferent to the dire consequences that his individualistic position has on the lives of his family and townspeople. Therefore, when faced with the interference of the majority, the political parties, and the press, he goes against his former stance and openly denounces the press, while relegating the majority to the status of worthless pack of mongrels who deserve no political role.⁷⁹

Likewise, Dr. Stockmann’s inflexibility and intolerance combined with his aristocratic views turns his love for his hometown into the extreme opposite when he announces that a society based on lies should be entirely destroyed. He shouts with growing fervor:

When a place has become riddled with lies, who cares if it’s destroyed? I say it should simply be razed to the ground! And all the people living by these lies should be wiped out, like vermin! You’ll have the whole country infested in the end, so that eventually the whole country deserves to be destroyed. And if it ever comes to that, then I’d say with all my heart: let it all be destroyed, let all its people be wiped out!⁸⁰

What began as a project of cleaning the baths, therefore, is converted to a rebellion against the society as a whole. Yet, “this leap from critical objection to total and ruthless

⁷⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁹ Harold C. Knutson, “*An Enemy of the People: Ibsen's Reluctant Comedy*,” 168.

⁸⁰ Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm*, 82.

contempt,” according to Ronald Gray, “makes Dr. Stockmann one of Ibsen’s more childish egoists—no ordinary distinction—and reduces the political interest considerably.”⁸¹

The case of Dr. Stockmann makes it quite clear that although Ibsen is still engaged with the romantic notion of the rebel, yet, he is carefully dissociating his protagonist from the traditional tragic heroes. Although the doctor stands almost alone at the end of the play, yet his defeat is not entirely hopeless or completely tragic. He does not leave the town; rather, he stays intending to face his “enemy”, the modern bourgeoisie,⁸² and the first place to start his mission with is educating the future generations and offering his service to those in need. As a result, his outward defeat, in fact, implies the survival of his inner hopes, hopes that are represented by the street urchins for whom Dr. Stockmann establishes a school and the poor patients for whom he is offering his medical practice.

By not playing by the rules, Dr. Stockmann, with his mission in telling the truth, is supposedly turned into a messianic character who voluntarily embraces martyrdom to save his community (mankind) from its sins. The protagonist’s Idealism along with his distrust of the majority rule, therefore, have induced critics to take Dr. Stockmann as the mouthpiece of the author. As Robert Brustein claims:

Ibsen has invested this play with the quality of a revolutionary pamphlet; and Stockmann, despite some perfunctory gestures towards giving him a life of his own, is very much like an author’s sounding board, echoing Ibsen’s private **convictions** about the filth and disease of modern municipal life, the tyranny of the compact majority, the mediocrity of parliamentary democracy, the cupidity of the Conservatives, and the hypocrisy of the Liberal press.⁸³

Yet, it is important to note that Ibsen does not fail to represent the negative qualities of his larger-than-life, Idealist character and thereby to guard himself against being identified

⁸¹ Ronald Gray, *Ibsen: A Dissenting View: A Study of the Last Twelve Plays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977): 92.

⁸² Mordecai Roshwald, “The Alienated Moralist in *An Enemy of the People*,” 232.

⁸³ Robert Brustein, *The Theater of Revolt*, 71.

with his protagonist. Dr. Stockmann's rashness, his lack of self-awareness, his egotism, and his aristocratic sense of superiority, among other characteristics, successfully highlights his naiveté about people, society, and politics and puts him in a questionable light.

There is a felt need in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* to challenge the stronghold of Idealism that heralded the artistic convention over much of the nineteenth century and to make an effort to balance the transcendental Idealism with a more Realist approach. Yet at the same time, the play's engagement with the timeless themes of tyranny of the majority and nonconformity of the individual are applicable to the oppressive political climate of the twentieth century Iran. In spite of their differences, this tendency to portray "familiar events in a style that corresponds to the experience of the spectators,"⁸⁴ also finds a significant expression in Gholamhossein Sa'edi's dramaturgy, particularly in *Parvarbandan*, which is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

1.3 GHOLAMHOSSEIN SA'EDI AND THE COMMITTED LITERATURE

Contrary to the relative freedom after the abdication of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1941, during the decades that followed Mohammad Reza Shah's 1953 coup d'état against Mohammad Mossadeq (1882-1967) and the creation of SAVAK (National Intelligence and Security Organization) in 1956, the rigorous censorship was once again restored. While the young Shah had grand ambitions for the social and economic modernization of Iran, he brutally denied writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals political freedom. In such a stifling atmosphere, Iranian writers turned to the genre of *committed literature* in order to "glorify

⁸⁴ Quoted in Martin Gottfried, *Arthur Miller: His Life and Work* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003): 92

resistance against the shah's regime on the one hand, and to demonize Western imperialism as a unified bloc of otherness on the other hand."⁸⁵

Committed literature, *la littérature engagée*, refers to a concept widely advocated by the mid-twentieth century Jean-Paul Sartre and his circle. Writing in the post-Second World War period, Sartre reacts against the ahistorical movement of "l'art pour l'art" in his 1948 influential essay, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, and instead promotes moralizing literature and demands "responsibility" for writers to engage with social and political issues of their time. Emphasizing the importance of historicity, he writes:

Since the writer has no means to escape, we want him to embrace his time tightly; it is his unique chance: it made itself for him and he is made for it. One regrets Balzac's indifference to the 1848 Revolution, Flaubert's frightened incomprehension of the Commune. One regrets it for *them*. There is something there that they missed forever. We do not want to miss anything in our time. There may be some more beautiful, but this one is our own. We have only *this* life to live, in the middle of *this* war, of *this* revolution perhaps.⁸⁶

As a call to steer away from the cult of "art for art's sake" and the confinements of existence in the ivory tower, Sartre designates imaginative literature and poetry as unsuitable for committed literature and instead advocates for prose as a communicative genre that has roots in Realism. To this Theodor Adorno adds, "To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric"⁸⁷—a statement which he later revised. In any case, the immediate historical situation following the two world wars was a significant factor in the development of the commitment literature in the works of many European writers, such as

⁸⁵ Majid Sharifi, *Imagining Iran: The Tragedy of Subaltern Nationalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013):133-134.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004): 56.

⁸⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," *Prisms* trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981): 28.

Albert Camus and Ronald Barthes, who accepted their responsibility to society and passionately embarked on their roles as agents of change, in spite of their differences.

Similarly, the dark atmosphere of growing dictatorship following the 1953 coup and the reestablishment of Mohammad Reza Shah gave rise to the committed literature in the 1950s and 1960s Iran. As Michael C. Hillmann in his account of the modernist Persian literature argues, “from its very beginnings modernist Persian literature has been *engagé* as well, social commitment becoming a serious *ta’hhod-e adabi* [literary commitment] for Iranian writers by the 1960s.”⁸⁸ Many of the writers who adopted this literary movement as a vehicle to fight against the regime and raise the social and political consciousness among their readers were under the influence of Marxist ideology and were associated with the Left Party. Prominent among those are: Bozorg Alavi, Khosro Golsorkhi, Sa’id Soltanpour, and Gholamhossein Sa’edi, who is the focus of this chapter.

Gholamhossein Sa’edi (1935-85), who often wrote under the pen name Gohar Morad, was born into a middle-class family and was raised in Tabriz, the capital of East Azerbaijan province. In the midst of the Second World War, when he was six years old, Soviet planes bombed the city of Tabriz forcing his family to move in with relatives whose houses had not been affected in the countryside. Living among the poor villagers stimulated Sa’edi’s awareness of social and political issues of the time so much so that “some of his most powerful stories and plays, and some of his more memorable characters, are derived from these early experiences of the life of peasants.”⁸⁹ Prior to joining the University of Tabriz to pursue his medical degree, Sa’edi became a member of the underground *Sazman-e Javanan-e Ferqe-ye Demokrat* (Youth Organization of the Democratic Faction)

⁸⁸ Michael C. Hillmann, “The Modernist Trend in Persian Literature and Its Social Impact,” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1-4 (1982): 8.

⁸⁹ Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979*, vol. 1 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008): 879.

and began writing for several newspapers—activities which resulted in his initial arrest in 1953 and subsequent incarcerations.

Sa‘edi started his artistic career in 1956 by writing his first short story, *Morgh-e Anjir* (The Fig Hen), and by 1963, began his specialization in the field of psychiatry and started his residency at Ruzbeh Hospital in Tehran. In 1964, along with his brother, Akbar Sa‘edi, also a physician, Gholamhossein Sa‘edi founded a health clinic in southern Tehran in order to respond to the needs of the residents in this poor neighborhood, occasionally free of charge. However, his office was soon transformed into a favorite hangout of intellectuals, dissidents, and writers.⁹⁰ It was during this time that some of his outstanding works appeared: *Karbakfakha dar Sangar* (Workaholics in Trenches, 1960), *Azadaran-e Bayal* (The Mourners of Bayal, 1964), and *Chub be Dastha-ye Varzil* (The Stick-Wielders of Varzil, 1965), all of which embody his conscious attempts to offer glimpses into the larger contours of political dissent against the Shah’s despotism as well as Western imperialism.

Throughout his lucrative writing career, Sa‘edi practiced different genres—drama, short story, novel, screenwriting, essay, and travelogues—while creating tales uniquely of his own. His “*psychedelic Realism*” is combined with a strong sense of literary commitment to produce works that revise, combine, and/or undermine genre convention in order to address the social problems, economic inequalities, political issues, and existential anxieties of his generation. As Hamid Dabashi mentions:

Sa‘edi’s particular manner of realism was anchored in an almost clinical psychopathology of the uncanny, and his perceptive articulation of psychosis (neurotic anxiety, to be exact) in his fiction was utterly unprecedented in Persian literature. Sa‘edi’s psychedelic realism, through its evocation of the supra-normal and the creative use of superstition, hallucination, and delusions, effected an acute

⁹⁰ Ibid.

intensification of a literary awareness of reality, combined with a sensory perception of the uncanny.⁹¹

In 1969, Sa'edi collaborated with Dariush Mehrjui to make the world-acclaimed movie *Gav* (The Cow), which is an adaptation of the Sa'edi's short story from his collection, *Azadaran-e Bayal*. The two would once again collaborate in 1978 on a production of *Dayere-ye Mina* (Azure Sky), based on Sa'edi's short story, *Ashghal-duni* (Garbage Dump, 1977). From 1973, Sa'edi assumed the editorship of the newly-founded journal, *Alefba* (Alphabet), which immediately became a well-respected and influential publication. However, only after the first five volumes *Alefba* was shut down by the regime and its editor was once again incarcerated and tortured on charges of "having ties to radical groups."⁹² Following the 1979 revolution, the subsequent alienation of the secular intellectuals who witnessed the Islamization of the country forced Sa'edi to leave Iran for exile in Paris, a devastating experience that ultimately led to his untimely death in 1985. According to Michael C. Hillmann:

Hedayat had fled Iran to commit suicide in Paris in despair of what was happening in his homeland. Sa'edi died of exile. His country forced him to leave, and he could not survive without it.⁹³

1.4 **PARVARBANDAN: A QUEST FOR INDIVIDUALITY**

In spite of the fact that Gholamhossein Sa'edi's writings are characterized by socio-political commitment, it is important to note that they are not disconnected from the idealist impulses. In the case of *Parvarbandan*,⁹⁴ for instance, Sa'edi directs his attack against ideologies and institutions that refuse to recognize the individuality of man and his

⁹¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2007): 109.

⁹² Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians*, 881.

⁹³ Faridoun Farrokh and Houra Yavari, "Sa'edi, Gholam-Hosayn," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, November 30, 2015, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/saedi-gholam-hosayn>.

⁹⁴ Gholamhossein Sa'edi, *Parvarbandan* (The Cattle Fatteners) (Tehran: N.I.L., 1969).

freedom. Responding to the ethics of conformity, mediocrity, and passivity, Sa'edi in his 1969 play, explores the unbounded power of society and state to subordinate the individual rights in favor of the common good and collective interests.

Similar to Dr. Stockmann, Mr. Mim, the protagonist of *Parvarbandan*, is determined to expose truth despite the opposition of the entire community. He is a politically committed writer who cherishes the ideal and desires absolute freedom as a means through which he can develop his autonomous self. Mr. Mim tries to rescue all that is particular about his individuality from the dehumanizing collectivism, whose aim is to cast individuals from the mold of the useful citizen and mitigate individual responsibility. Unlike Ibsen, however, Sa'edi does not undercut or question his protagonist's pursuit of truth and authenticity.

Parvarbandan recounts the story of a dissident writer, Mr. Mim, one whose high ideals cannot be sullied through compromise. As the play opens, Mim (literally, Mr. M) has well-documented the corruption of authorities and is about to expose them in the name of justice and truth. But before any of this could happen, Mim is lured into an isolated house outside of the city located on a fattening animal farm by a friend, Mard-e Avval (literally, the First Man) who initially pretends to provide a secure place for the former. The First Man gives Mim the news that the influential person whose charlatanism he had revealed before has now been murdered and that Mim is the primary suspect. The supposedly worried friend insists to hide the committed writer, as the threat to Mim's life is serious this time and that the host has already arranged everything for his stay.

The simple plot becomes rather complicated when the protagonist and the audience gradually realize that the concerned friend in fact is a major part of the plan to entrap Mim. The conspiracy became more obvious when at the end of Act One Mim's "hosts" provide

him with striped, “comfortable clothing,”⁹⁵ that is identical to those worn by prisoners, and force him to wear the clothes despite Mim’s resistance. The hosts are prison guards, the house is a jail, and Mim an inmate. Throughout the rest of the play, the fatteners resort to physical torture to break down the writer’s resistance and to force him to cooperate. They want Mim to eat food, to fatten up, and to exchange his freedom for the “happy” life outside the prison’s walls. To achieve their goal, for instance, in Act Two, the guards ask Mim’s father, uncle, and his former professor to come for a visit hoping they could pull him out of resistance. The plan proves to be unsuccessful as Mim does not agree to conform despite the disapproval and rejection of family members and friends. In Act Three, the fatteners have thrown a “party” in Mim’s honor attended by family members, friends, the Judge, and the conformist members of the community. Unable to break neither Mim’s self-imposed hunger strike nor his oath of silence, the Judge is determined to show how Mim will be treated if he is arrested by “non-friends.” The Judge begins to interrogate Mim and employs physical torture as well as psychological threats and intimidation to coerce the nonconformist into uniformity, all in vain. Once the interrogation is over, they toast Mim once again and go to the food table to satisfy their insatiable appetite. Seizing the opportunity while everyone is busy eating, Mim leaps through a window, is chased by one of the guards, and is shot to death. The play ends with the hosts and the guests sitting down to resume eating.

Mr. Mim’s aversion to compromise and earnestness for truth and enlightenment parallel the efforts of Dr. Stockmann who identifies himself as a nonconformist. As an idealist and a committed writer, Mim puts freedom and individuality at the center of his thinking and attacks the assimilation of the individual into a uniform public. In his efforts

⁹⁵ Ibid., 42.

to attack tyranny and corruption, he takes up his pen and turns it into a political weapon. Yet, Mim is confronted not only with the authoritarian rule but also with the superfluous and complacent public, who deem the nonconformist individual as a disturber of the status quo, one whose beliefs should be suppressed and guided by society. In other words, the process of de-individualisation is reinforced via state intrusion in public and private spheres as well as public imposition of conformity that pushes the individual to surrender freedom and his autonomy.

The conflict between the individual on the one hand, and the state and society on the other, is obvious from the start. The first clue is given in the list of characters before the opening scene begins. The characters, with the exception of Mim, have no names and are simply referred to as the First Man, the Second Man, the Third Man, the Woman, the Father, the Uncle, the Professor, and the Judge. These nameless characters, who have lost their individuality in the face of pervasive conformity, embody violent state institutions and mob supremacy. Mim, on the other hand, revolts against all types of conventionality in order to express his individuality. Perhaps, his name, Mim, the initial letter of the word *man* (“I” in Persian), alludes to this sense of authenticity that is central to Mim’s original being.

Another significant factor that highlights the conflict between the individual and the community, whether be it family, society, or the state, is the setting of the play. The opening stage directions read:

A large tattered house with many rooms, hallways, and closets stands in an empty desert [...] Throughout the day till late at night, the clamor of cattle and sheep who groan because of overeating and obesity as well as the monotone and constant noise from some unseen bulldozers is heard [...] The bulldozers build countless barns for future fattened cows and sheep. The play’s setting is a cattle-fattening farm.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Ibid., 9.

Sa'edi's focus on the animal fattening is not just a metaphor for the horrors of dictatorship but also for the evils of a society that emphasizes conformity and normalcy. Here, the dehumanized individual is created and his material needs are satisfied in exchange for his anonymity and obedience. The obsession with food and fattening up combined with the desire to turn oneself into an acceptable subject amid the homogenous crowd, leaves no room for intellectual development and personal growth. In addition to the moaning of the obese animals, the loud noise of the bulldozers working feverishly in the background is also included in the opening stage directions. The bulldozers reinforces the state presence that ultimately seeks to ensure the creation of "good" citizens, a theme finds its boldest expression in Sa'edi's 1978 play, *Mah-e Asal* (Honeymoon); simultaneously, they symbolize the sound of development and modernization in Iran, an uneven project that was initiated by the Pahlavi government from above and therefore resulted in superficial transformations. According to Homa Katouzian, Iran in the twentieth-century was trapped in a state of "pseudo-modernity," an incomplete project that was made possible mainly because of the state's huge oil revenues. In other words, the growing income allowed for the continuation of the old autocratic-rentier state under a new guise, which Katouzian labelled "Petrolic Despotism."⁹⁷

As the play opens, the First Man and the house owner's wife are inside the building waiting the arrival of Mim. The writer, contrary to his more "fortunate friends," does not have a car of his own and therefore cannot reliably arrive on time. The combination of the room's old and incongruous furniture covered with a thick layer of dust and the fierce sun shining through closed windows contribute to the creation of a stale atmosphere, one in which the fresh breeze of free expression is hardly imaginable. Mim's uneasiness with this

⁹⁷ Homa Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran: Despotism and Pseudo-Modernism, 1926-79* (New York: New York University Press, 1981): 213-255.

environment and his isolation from the rest of the characters is obvious from his first words. Upon his arrival, Mim immediately opens the window and hears the bleating of a sheep. Startled at the sight of the bulldozers, he says:

MIM: Lots of bulldozers here! Are they digging trenches?

THE FIRST MAN: They're building modern barns.

MIM: This is an animal husbandry then, isn't it?

THE FIRST MAN: Yeah, it's a fattening farm.

MIM: A fattening farm?

THE FIRST MAN: Yeah, they fatten lambs here.

MIM: Fattening lambs here?!

THE FIRST MAN: Yeah, lambs, cows, sheep, anything.

MIM: How?

THE FIRST MAN: Very easily. First, they castrate them and then they leave them on their own. They don't think of anything but eating, sleeping, and fattening.

MIM: And what do you do here?

THE FIRST MAN: I want to become a fatter, too. To fatten lambs, eat lamb stew and lamb kebobs, and ultimately fatten-up myself. [*He laughs.*]⁹⁸

Borrowing from psychoanalysis, castration can be interpreted as a symbol of loss and impotence, both physically and intellectually. This lack of potency in the neutered animals and individuals, by extension, ensures the creation of a depersonalized society that encourages conformity. Furthermore, the First Man's desire to fatten up like animals combined with his obsession with food raises the question of the border between animal and human beings in the absence of will and freedom of existence.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 15-16.

The imagery of food and consumption is developed further later in the act. When Mim inquires about the reason behind the meeting, the First Man evades answering his question and instead tries to divert Mim's attention to food. When the latter declines the offer to eat, the First Man steers slyly toward the real issue. First, he attempts to dissuade Mim from going forward with his revelations about the extent of the corrupt influential figures, reminding Mim that the public are too busy to follow the news. However, as dedicated as Mim is to truth, justice, and freedom, he knows no compromise. His mission is:

[...] to catch them out; those who have fabricated and uttered falsehoods all too long and those who have hidden the liveliest moments of history from people's view through deception, propaganda, and panegyrics.⁹⁹

However, when Mim hears the news of the murder of an influential figure about whom he had written before and realizes that he has wrongfully been accused of the crime, he loses his temper momentarily and shouts angrily, "I'll disgrace them all. I'll catch them all out. I know their conspiracy theories."¹⁰⁰ Observing Mim's frustration, the First Man seizes the opportunity and tries one more time to stop the dissident from proceeding and warns him of the risks involved, all in vain. He says:

This time things are very serious. They have set a trap for you from which there is no escape. You can't do anything by being brave and outspoken. It is a matter of life and death [...] They want to eliminate you, ruin you. At least they want to silence you, to break your pen. Do you understand?¹⁰¹

Yet, quickly Mim recovers from anger and reaches for his moral principles. Asserting his inexorable will, Mim once again exercises self-determination against the oppressive state

⁹⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 26-27.

and emphasizes the importance of maintaining his individuality, saying he would rather die courageously than to live cowardly.

Aside from the prevalent language and imagery of eating which conveys the state and crowd's will to exercise power over the individual, this act also refers to the significance of the press in destroying individuality and creating a modern public that is "very good at being rabble."¹⁰² As an instrument for denouncing opposition groups, the press purveys ideas that align with the authoritarian regime. In the middle of the act, for instance, Mim talks about his experience in exposing one of the corrupt officials. Emboldened by his impunity, the official is able to openly publish his provocative letter, full of threats and accusations against Mim, in newspapers. According to the latter:

He [the official] hinted that he can easily bump me off with a slight signal and that I'd better watch myself and avoid more radical positions. [...] At the end, he asked me for reconciliation.¹⁰³

Later, Mim is informed that the press, immune from liability, has published a possibly phony death rumor of the very same corrupt official along with Mim's name and picture as the murderer. Despite the lack of solid evidence of criminal involvement, the thin story has been signed by a number of witnesses, including neighbors and governments officials. But the smear tactic to silence the individual proves to be ineffective. Confronted with Mim's resistance, the "hosts" gradually put all the forced formalities aside and resort to torture and violence in their attempt to beat the nonconformist into submission.

The opening of Act Two leaves no doubt as to the nature of the setting. The sparse furniture, the absence of decorative objects, and the bars on windows transform the setting into a prison-like atmosphere that presents a panoramic shot of the isolated protagonist who

¹⁰² Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and The Present Age of A Literary Review*, ed. and trans., Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006): 137.

¹⁰³ Gholamhossein Sa'edi, *Parvarbandan*, 20.

has been disturbed by the noise of cows and sheep bleating. Such pervasive bestiality is combined with alimentary metaphors to further suggest the potent effect of societal pressure. While eating and food consumption signifies a strong sense of conformity to social norms and political forces, hunger strike and food avoidance are expressions of individuality. The metaphor of food and fattening up take primacy when the Woman enters the stage with a food tray at the beginning of the second act. Here, references to food is accompanied by sexual approaches of the hostess, both of which aim to subdue Mim's independence of mind and his restless pursuit of the truth through the appeal to bodily urges. Yet, Mim does not succumb to the temptation and as soon as the Woman touches Mim's hand, he refuses her advances promptly, saying, "Get your hands off me! Don't touch me again!"¹⁰⁴ When this plan fails, the three men join the Woman to stop Mim's hunger strike and force him to eat before the arrival of his immediate family members and former professor. Given Mim's unwavering resistance, the fatteners try to use family pressure as a last resort to persuade the dissident to join the majority of conformists.

From their first appearances in the play, Mim's father, uncle, and former professor are portrayed as markedly different from the truth-seeking protagonist by the virtue of their dispositional submissiveness and conformity. Using his supposed ill-health as an excuse, the Father reminds Mim of the stigmatization of the whole family due to his son's political convictions and urges him to live like everyone else. Neglecting the profundities of subjective existence, the Father is constantly concerned with corporeal trivialities, such as his own loss of appetite, frequent urination, and constipation—an unhealthy retention that signifies both physiological and intellectual restraint. Unable to diverge from certified values and norms or move beyond blind parental affection, the Father can only persuade

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 48.

his son to join the unthinking majority. He expresses his disbelief in Mim's protest and says:

You can't change the world alone. Open your eyes and ears and see how other people live. They simply mind their own business; they come, go, eat, and sleep; they try to improve and sustain their living conditions, to feel comfortable and prosperous. [...] Why would anyone be crazy enough to thoughtlessly trample everything beneath his feet? [...] Mind your own business and live your life.¹⁰⁵

Likewise, failing to realize the destructive consequences of "leveling" Mim's individuality at the hands of the "hosts," the Uncle does not spare a second to express his gratitude to the fatteners for their generosity in treating Mim with food and their care and concern for his future. He reprimands Mim for endangering the family's life and their "happiness," finds the Father guilty for not nurturing his son "properly," criticizes "the old educational system" for aggravating Mim's boldness, and condemns the Professor for providing weak instruction and implanting "poisonous" and "erroneous" thoughts into Mim's mind.

"The old educational system," in the context of the play can be read as the scholastic system that primarily took shape under the reign of Reza Shah and was developed by his successor in the years leading up to the 1953 coup d'état. It is during this twelve-year period of relative freedom prior to the coup that political activism flourishes and Iranians begin to enjoy the taste freedom of expression—changes that are frowned on by the conformists such as the Uncle. To the Professor, he says:

THE UNCLE: You are to blame as much as him [Father].

THE PROFESSOR [*With a full mouth*]: But what have I done?

THE UNCLE [*Furiously*]: All these poisonous and erroneous thoughts, all these absurd and delusive thoughts have been put into the youth's minds at school, right?

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 65-66.

THE PROFESSOR: Right, it used to be like that before, but not anymore.

THE UNCLE: Yes, and I am talking about those days. [...] And isn't he [Mim] the product of those days?

The significant changes in the educational system that the Uncle is referring to took place in the post-coup years under Mohammad Reza Shah's White Revolution. The new system mostly relied on fear and punishment tactics to instill obedience and conformity in students instead of stimulating their critical and independent thinking—a subject that Sa'edi further explores in his 1969 play, *Dikteh and Zaviyeh* (Dictation and Angle). Advocating for the application of harsh corporeal punishment to the educational process, Uncle says:

THE UNCLE: This old educational system has led to the production of the self-indulgent, naïve individual, one who has never been punished.

THE PROFESSOR: Not punished? Of course not! He didn't do anything wrong to be punished for.

THE UNCLE: Do you think that punishment is only justified in cases of wrongdoing, dear Professor?

THE PROFESSOR: Of course! What else?

THE UNCLE: It's unfortunate to see that you are still unaware of such basic steps. [*Decisively.*] Punishment is to crack the whip, to make one get used to fear, and to force him to understand what's really happening around him. He'd better realize that one day he might get whipped or beaten.¹⁰⁶

Under such educational systems, individuals are expected to conform to and comply with all that the state and the majority dictates, or else punishment, elimination, and torture will follow. According to the Uncle, had Mim experienced fear and intimidation before, he would not have diverged from what the Uncle calls, “the right way of living.”¹⁰⁷

The last of the three characters to visit Mim is the Professor, who ironically is the most ignorant of all. From his first appearance, he is depicted as a submissive, shallow

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 64.

person who has an insatiable appetite for food. Identifying the fatteners as Mim's "best friends," the Professor mooches food from the prisoner's bowl and foolishly compliments the "hosts" on the "excellent food,"¹⁰⁸ several times throughout the play. Furthermore, as opposed to the Father and the Uncle, the Professor does not even try to persuade Mim to conform; instead, he is too busy eating and occasionally stops to say something stupid to agree with one or the other side of the argument. When Mim asks his visitors for the reason of their visit, the Professor replies, "Oh my dear! There's no purpose to our visit, we just came to here to see you."¹⁰⁹

The Professor is determined to maintain the status quo and would prefer to remain a bystander rather than an agent of change. When the Uncle, for instance, pushes the former to take responsibility for his role in Mim's "improper" education, the Professor suggests to be excluded from the debate altogether, saying, "I possess a healthy composure and you cannot make me angry, do you understand? You'd better cut me out from this argument, okay?"¹¹⁰ The Professor's shallow intellect combined with his crude instincts allows him no redeeming qualities. He is so obsessed with eating and drinking that even his solutions involve dietary treatment through the consumption of food. Near the end of this act, for example, when the Father clenches his heart after a heated argument with Mim and is unable to breathe normally, the Professor brings a spoon of pottage up to the Father's mouth, saying, "Eat this! Take a spoon of this pottage! It's perfect! Very nutritious with chunks of meat!"¹¹¹

Ultimately the Father's parental affection and yearning, the Uncle's reproachful approach and threats, and the Professor's insensibility and shallow remarks prove futile in

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 70.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 76.

persuading and/or coercing Mim to abandon his individuality in exchange for their promised “happiness.” Similarly, when the fatteners ask Mim to forget the recent events and instead try to internalize the feeling of “happiness” through repeating the words “I am happy,” he sarcastically responds:

Oh yes, I am happy, very happy indeed. [...] These walls, locked doors, and bars all declare that I am happy! I am happy to be held captive among the bulldozers. I am happy to live on an animal fattening farm, to breathe among my friends, who love me so much and care for me, who give me pottage and water, who talk to me and are worried about me. Those who want to castrate me and fatten me up. Yes, I am happy indeed.¹¹²

When their attempts to make Mim to conform to the collective values of the community fails, the fatteners decide in the third act to consummate their mission by putting Mim on trial for the crime he has committed against the majority of conformists.

The setting of this last act switches to the lower story of the same building, where a party is being held. The guests, including the Father, the Uncle and the Professor, are busy drinking, eating, and laughing and occasionally the noise of their talking is subordinated to the noise of the animals bleating. As the act opens, a newly introduced character, the Judge, has attracted the most attention of the guests by sleazily narrating stories about his acts of improprieties during the course of his career, somewhere away from Tehran. Aside from holding his judicial position, during his spare time, the Judge used to make numerous types of wine at home, many of which were stolen by the alcoholic neighbor in exchange for his wife’s services. As a representative of law and order, the Judge’s unethical accounts are not only evidence of his personal decay, but also they symbolize the overall demoralization and corruption of the state and its institutions. Additionally, the fact that the Judge’s vulgar stories are accompanied by the crowd’s loud guffaw of laughter characterizes the latter’s silliness, debased morality, and ethical void.

¹¹² Ibid., 82-83.

Undoubtedly, in a society ruled by a totalitarian leader, the construction of such a trivial crowd whose existence ensures conformity is the goal in itself.

Next, Mim is dragged into the room as soon as the Judge finishes telling his stories. Contrary to the loud noise of the guests and their unrestrained appetite for food and drink, Mim remains completely silent throughout this act and refuses to eat or drink at the “reception” given “in his honor.” At the suggestion of the Woman, all the guests, except Mim, raise their glasses and join in for a toast. However, similar to the gradual revelations about the nature of the “hosts,” their agenda, and the significance of the setting in previous acts, the primary reason behind holding this party is revealed when the Judge puts Mim on trial for refusing to eat and talk and more importantly, for plotting to escape from the farm. According to the fatteners, their warm hospitality and continuous generosity deprive Mim of his right to abandon his “friends” and “supporters.” What they want from the Judge now is to decide the case and to dispense “justice.”

As a typical example of a tyrant system, the Judge firmly believes in the power of fear-based conception of justice. He blatantly employs various intimidation techniques, ranging from physical assaults and torture to psychological intimidation and humiliation, in order to frighten the individual and to break down his resistance to conform—harmful techniques which can also allude to Gholamhossein Sa‘edi’s personal experiences with torture and terror. Additionally, the fact that the Judge continuously consumes alcohol throughout the interrogation process and is drunk on duty not only undermines the perspicacity of his judgment, but also it speaks to the limits to which idealized notions of justice and fairness were internalized, both by the state and members of the society.

Despite the relentless pressure from the Judge and the crowd, Mim is determined to continue with his hunger strike and silence. Where power and domination function through the destruction of individuals, Mim’s refusal to talk, eat, and drink becomes a

weapon to maintain his autonomous self. The significance of Mim's nonverbal opposition, for instance, is alluded to by Judge, when he says:

Perhaps, you are trying to voice your protest through silence? Right? But protesting against what? Protesting against whom?¹¹³

It is important to note that Mim's refusal to eat and his lapse into complete silence in Act III is the outcome of an evolutionary process throughout the play, a process through which the dissident attempts to reclaim his agency. Demanding freedom of expression and subjectivity, for instance, Mim uses the prolonged hunger-strike in Acts II and III, as a tool of resisting the authority of the agents of power over his body and, by extension, his soul. Likewise, Mim is initially outspoken in his protest and adamant in his critique of conformity in Act I. Yet, as a prisoner in the second act, he is confined within the walls of his cell and is surrounded by the fatteners and the conformist members of the society, both of whom are in complete harmony with the system of values established by power. When his attempt to be understood by his society fails, Mim becomes completely isolated and silence becomes his last weapon to recuperate his integrity.

To prove the impossibility of resisting power, however, the Judge enacts an interrogation scenario that inevitably leads up to violence. Confronted with Mim's silence, the Judge becomes angrier and more violent. He wants to know the names of other "suspects" who plotted with Mim, information about his plans, his motives, and his reasons for trying to escape. Unable to break Mim's silence, he whips Mim across his face and chest, pulls the chair away and brutally beats his head once Mim falls on the floor. Standing in front of Mim, the Judge says:

Even those more determined and stubborn than you have been subdued sooner or later. I have all kind of ways of making those as resistant as you talk.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Ibid., 114.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 118.

The clash of the role of interrogator in the character of the Judge further ensures the subordinated position of the individual within such a society while giving supremacy to the agents of power in a system that practices suppression and is intolerant of differences. The interrogation ends only when one of the fatteners speaks in the voice of Mim, answers the interrogator's questions, and confesses his guilt. The fattener's intervention not only indicates the conformists' internalized desire for subsuming the individual within the crowd, but also suggests their failure in breaking down the individual self and suppressing his revolt against the dominance of the general.

In spite of all the means available to them, at the end of the play the Judge and the crowd can only succeed in killing the individual and removing the nonconformist from the society. Unwilling to compromise his will or self-determination until the very end, Mim remains to be an individual among the faceless majority who can resume their only function and objective in life following Mim's death, once "all is over."¹¹⁵

The Cattle Fatteners contains reference to actual social and political events from the 1960s and narrative allusions to the decade. Sa'edi's use of literary devices, however, has been successful in helping him to evade censors: surprisingly, the play was not banned from publication or performance.¹¹⁶ Sa'edi uses the symbolism of time, for instance, to imply the changes in dramatic structure. The play opens in the late morning, around ten, when the sun is out in the sky and everything is clear. The protagonist is still free, outspoken, and verbally critical of both the state and the society. The second act, however, takes place in late afternoon, before sunset, when Mim becomes fully aware of his surroundings and of his entrapment in a world of violence that hardly leaves any room for

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹¹⁶ The play was first performed at the *Sanglaj* Theater Hall, Tehran, directed by Mohammadali Ja'fari in November 1969.

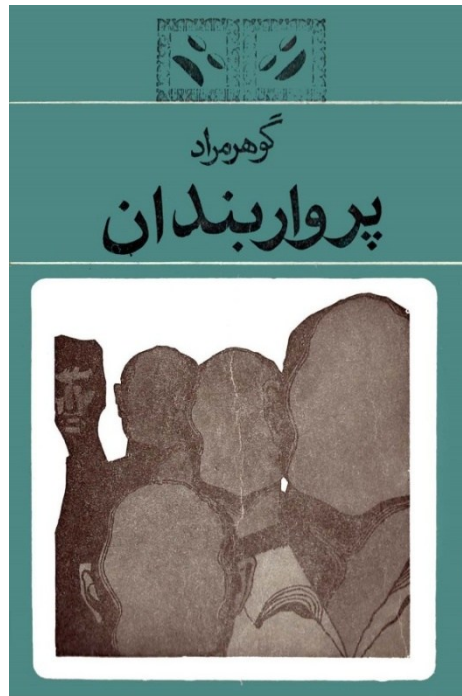


Figure 1-1: The play's original front-cover illustrates the individual (Mim) standing behind the faceless majority.



Figure 1-2: Theater poster for *Parvarbandan*, directed by Mohammadali Ja'fari (Taken from, Hasan Javadi, *Namayeshnameh dar Iran*: 242).

political activism and individualism. He is isolated from the civil society and the majority still has hopes of persuading him towards conformity. The third act occurs at nightfall. Mim is interrogated and tortured for the crime of raising his voice and expressing his dissatisfaction with a society where free expression is a crime. It is in this act that Mim's complete silence turns into his only weapon for protest. It is also in this final act, the climax of the play, that Sa'edi provides the audience with a very effective picture of the reality behind the surface of daily affairs in the Iranian society of the time. Mim, the dissident writer who in the daylight of the first act had thought he could freely express himself, realizes by the time night falls that he has to pay a high price for confronting the authority, a crime that unfortunately has tragic consequences.

The metaphor of night is widely used by the writers of the 1960s and 1970s as a crucial code for political oppression and violence. In fact, this metaphor became so popular that it was employed again and again by the dissident writers of the time in their production of Committed Literature to refer to the faulty social and political conditions—so much so that Reza Baraheni refers to the Pahlavi period in Iran as the “age of night.”¹¹⁷ Despite widespread censorship to silence state's opposition, writers like Sa'edi committed themselves to continue their artistic expression against the repressive ideology. Successfully using irony to convey his message, Sa'edi portrays a society which is so familiar for his audience, a society where friends ironically turn into jailers, family members into state collaborators, parties into interrogation sessions, and judges into police interrogators and torturers. Finally, it is important to note that despite the construction of such a particular setting, Gholamhossein Sa'edi successfully achieves universality by attacking societies that wish to castrate the individual or shamelessly sacrifice the truth-

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Mohammad R. Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of Doom: Literature as a Socio-Political Phenomenon in Modern Iran* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984): 161.

seeker in order to support the values and preserve the integrity of the established order. In the words of Massud Farzan:

A moving satire of bogus democracy and justice, *Parvarbandan* directs its attack at any institution, small or big, communist or capitalist, that would want to see its individuals castrated, bedded down, and fattened. Eschewing Realism or any historicity, the play like the author's previous work "The Club Wilders of Varazan," avoids politics or propaganda, achieving universality.¹¹⁸

Indeed, *Parvarbandan* is a story of individual's entrapment in and estrangement from his society, not simply a story of the political nonconformist in Iran.

1.5 CONCLUSION

Even though both Dr. Stockmann and Mr. Mim seem to be defeated by the shortsighted masses at the end of the plays, it can be said that they ultimately experience inner triumphs. The doctor refusing to withdraw from his stance categorically rejects offers which would secure his former position as a medical director of the spa and bring him back his power: eventual reinstatement promised by the mayor, future financial welfare offered by his father-in-law, and the support of the liberal press. Dr. Stockmann's three big "Noes" are proof of his "great discovery;" i.e., the truth that "the strongest man in the world is the man who stands alone." Similarly, in *The Cattle Fatteners*, Mim expresses his stance against the conventions and corruptions present in the society through his writing and when pressured to do otherwise, he continues to reject the opportunity to join the united public. Although his life is in danger and he ends up getting incarcerated, nevertheless, as an individual, Mim is not willing to sacrifice his ideas nor to surrender his values. When the First Man tries to compel Mim to give up the protest and hide himself for a while on the fattening farm, the nonconformist declares, "I shouldn't let that crush my morale, I

¹¹⁸ Massud Farzan, "Parvarbandan," *Books Abroad*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1972): 168.

shouldn't duck out on this challenge. Rather, I should confront this conspiracy courageously."¹¹⁹

Although both plays highlight the irony of man's limitations within his society, they do not fail to accent the protagonists' self-determination, unshakable will to resist, and their refusal to compromise. In fact, the idealists' external defeat heralds the survival of their inner ideals and hopes. In the case of *An Enemy of the People*, this hope is represented by the poor boys for whom Dr. Stockmann and his daughter, Petra, plan to set up a school after the doctor gives up his idea of abandoning his town and instead chooses to stay and face the challenge. For the doctor, the "street urchins," who have not yet been destroyed by collectivism, represent the "raw material" out of which a better society can be created.

Sa'edi's play, like Ibsen's, ends with Mim's self-determination and the collaborators' failure in breaking his will. No matter how much Mim is restricted in his struggle against his surrounding, he still remains to be an autonomous self. Due to his unwavering resistance, however, Mim ultimately becomes alienated not only from the society at large, but also from his immediate family members, something that makes his situation more serious than that of Dr. Stockmann. Furthermore, unlike Ibsen's play, *The Cattle Fatteners*, like so many of Sa'edi's dramas, ends with the political dissident's annihilation, a price that the protagonist has to pay for his unwillingness to succumb to the "friends'" wishes and his refusal to embrace anonymity.

Both plays are criticisms of faulty conditions at particular times in history and are efforts to focus on the notion of ideal and truth. Indeed, the basic similarity between the theaters of Ibsen and Sa'edi comes from their concept of drama as a search for truth.¹²⁰ Focusing on the notion of truth as it relates to the protagonist and his choices, Ibsen

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹²⁰ Introduction to *Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Rolf Fjelde (N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965.): 3.

foregrounds the individual's freedom and responsibility for his actions while carefully dissociating himself from his protagonist, at least partially. Sa'edi, too, treats a similar situation in the twentieth-century Iran, where his protagonist seeks to bring truth to a society shrouded in "night" through the publication of his documents. Unlike Ibsen, however, the Iranian dramatist does not direct his ridicule at the nonconformist; as a consequence, Sa'edi seems to promote identification with the individual who has the courage to violate the socially accepted norms and values in his pursuit of ideals. No wonder, then, that Sa'edi's main character lacks the comic touches found in Ibsen's text. Instead, farcical elements are incorporated in reference to the members of the majority in order to further emphasize their one-dimensionality and triviality.

Despite their differences, ultimately, both Ibsen and Sa'edi are representatives of what Eric Bentley has described as the "liberal conception" of the writer "as questioner, dissenter, challenger, troublemaker, at war with his age."¹²¹ Both are rebel dramatists who revolt against oppressive conventions, hypocritical authorities, and established institutions. Perhaps, where they differ most, is their degree of optimism in the possibility of overcoming societal pressures that have halted or decelerated change. Indeed, in the absence of a thinking individual, achieving this goal seems to be more elusive in a community that has less tolerance for difference.

¹²¹ Eric Bentley, *Thinking about the Playwright: Comments from Four Decades* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987): 10.

Chapter 2. Radi and Chekhov: The Bond of Realism

The abdication of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1941 under the pressure from the Allies during the Second World War resulted in a lull in censorship which lasted up to the CIA and British-backed coup against the Prime Minister Mosaddeq in 1953. Given the relative political freedom during this period, the country was exposed to Marxist ideas and political and literary activities flourished. In the background of rapid transition, Iranian writers, especially the *engage literati*, reacted to the actual historical changes and commented on the social and political context in their works. The most recurring themes of their literary production revolved around justice, freedom, and equality. As a result, the 1960s and the 1970s witnessed the eruption of the social Realist trend in Iranian modern drama of which Akbar Radi (1939-2007), one of Iran's most prominent dramatists, is a major proponent. Radi believes that literature should be written for the people and should derive its legitimacy from addressing the problems of the people, and not that of the ivory tower of art for art's sake. Thus, social and political engagement remained a driving force behind his literary oeuvre. Living in a transitional society, he reacts to the land-reforms and the consequent destruction of the idle aristocracy in such plays as *The Labkhand-e Ba Shokuh-e Aqay-e Gil* (The Glorious Smile of Mr. Gil, 1971). Radi, in a Realist mode, depicts the psychologically tormented lives of the fading gentry and the aristocratic intelligentsia who

substitute talk for action, and whose seemingly pointless lives are filled with ennui and paralyzing depression.

Aside from reflecting the ideological ferment of his own time in his dramaturgy, Radi is too wise not to acknowledge the collective Western dramatic inheritance provided by the masters of modern drama. For nearly fifty years one of Radi's abiding passions was his interest in Anton Chekhov (1860-1904). His wife, Hamideh Anqa recalls a time when upon moving into a new apartment Radi gave her some pictures saying: "I'd like you to put these pictures on the wall in my room. Chekhov, Ibsen, and Hedayat, although even without these pictures, I'm floating in their worlds."¹ In a conversation with an Iranian literary critic, Malek Ebrahim Amiri, in 1991, Radi claimed: "... An artistic shadow can be seen upon some of my plays, perhaps a Russian tinge. And undoubtedly this is Chekhov's shadow... Perhaps because of common mindsets; or historical and geographical similarities, rain, fog, forests, and sea; or perhaps because of transitional overlap period and the typical Gilani cultural similarity to the Crimea's and beyond... or perhaps because of all three reasons... but if you look more carefully at my works, other shadows will appear. From Shakespeare to Gogol, Dostoevsky, Ibsen, O'Neill, Williams, Ionesco, and Beckett, as well as traces from our own *ta'ziyeh* [passion plays] and *ruhowzi* [satirical comedies], Hedayat, and Bahram Sadeqi..."² Here, Akbar Radi directly acknowledges his debt to his literary ancestors: his interest in representing characters' interior conflicts, their inability to liberate themselves from a past, their relation to society as well as their frustration with incommunicability are among the strong links between Radi's dramaturgy and that of his predecessors. He then goes to stress the importance of tradition and literary

¹ Faramarz Talebi, *Akbar Radi: A Literary Biography* (Tehran: Qatreh Publication, 2004): 29.

² Quoted in Faramarz Talebi, *Akbar Radi: A Literary Biography*: 436.

heritage when he adds, "...after all, others experienced and we, for accelerating our work- I emphasize- are forced to use some of their experiences."³

But what is tradition? In his influential modernist essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot departs from the dominant discourse of an absolute break from the past and instead advocates for a tradition that perpetually changes and allows ample room for strong individual talents. Calling attention to the co-adaption of the old and the new, he writes:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead... What happens when a work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all works of art which preceded it... The past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.⁴

Often critics tend to measure the value of the work of art in its ability to step away from literary tradition and the degree of its originality; Eliot, on the other hand, contended that the real originality is found in the reanimation and redirection of the past. In an attempt to reconcile heritage and originality, Eliot celebrates the beneficiary model of artistic creation through interaction between author's creative powers and his literary tradition. However, in evoking the echoes of the past, he encourages a vantage point that supports a Eurocentric perspective and modernity. Eliot writes, "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the Literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his country has simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."⁵ These lines reveal the author's definition of "tradition." In privileging European literature, Eliot too reproduces

³ Ibid.

⁴ T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 37, 36-42.

⁵ Ibid.

eurocentrism, despite the considerable efforts he makes to promote historicist sensibility in artistic and cultural reflection; instead his formulation overtly presents his “commitment to European values and the European sensibility.”⁶

But if, initiation into the great “tradition” is a process by which one’s own culture is set aside in favor of absorption (and thereby into) an idealized Anglo-European cultural order, is Akbar Radi’s position and his stress on the importance of the Western literary culture similar to that of Eliot’s? Is the former’s oeuvre, therefore, a way of inscribing himself in the “tradition” in order to pay homage to his ancestors? Or is he actually embracing innovation and freedom to engage with all topics regardless of their cultural provenance? To provide a possible answer, this chapter aims to throw new light on an era in which a new generation of Iranian playwrights turned away from the tradition of melodrama and toward modern dramatic ideas and style by introducing to it Realistic plots and setting. The focus on Radi and the themes that emerge in his dramaturgy is intentional in that, while the basic impulse of his works is towards Chekhov’s Realism, they epitomize and are responses to the internal political issues, cultural traumas, and the complexities of modern Iranian society.

Akbar Radi was born in 1939 into a middle-class family in Rasht, Gilan, south of Caspian Sea—a city known for its moderate and Mediterranean-like climate and its forestry regions. Radi was acutely aware of his bond with nature during his childhood when his character was taking shape. Years later, in his conversations with Malek Ebrahim Amiri, Radi notes that “my favorite place was *Sabzeh Maydan* (the Farmers Market) which was in the downtown area and on its eastern side Hungarian women dresses were on sale, all second-handed, and back then I did not know the story behind them. Years later, I realized

⁶ Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 208.

these dresses were the ones whose owners were sent off to ‘Auschwitz,’ ‘Treblinka,’ and other death camps... the Shah Street stretched from *Sabzeh Maydan* to *Sa‘at-e Baladiyeh* (Town Hall Clock) and back then this street seemed very long to me and the garden was exceptionally vast and glorious.”⁷ In the aftermath of the Second World War when his father went bankrupt, he and the family moved to Tehran where he experienced both poverty, homesickness, and alienation, as well as abstract concepts, such as piety, dignity, and self-sufficiency.⁸ As a result, in his artistic career, when Radi focuses on profiling his observations and perceptions about the lower classes of Iranian society, the reader knows that the author has understood this not merely as a detached observer but knew it from personal experience.

Radi started his artistic career in 1956 by writing his first short story, *Mush Mordeh* (Dead Mouse) and, by 1963, he had earned a degree from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Tehran. By then, he had written his first two outstanding plays—*Rowzaneh-ye Abi* (The Blue Outlet, 1959), which alludes to the new generation’s revolt against centuries-old tradition and their demand for more breathing space, and *Oful* (Descent, 1963)—both of which embody his conscious attempts at communicating his vision of reality. In fact, *Oful* proved to be such immediate success that Jalal Al-e Ahmad, one of the most influential Iranian post-Second World War intellectuals, in response to the play said, “In *Oful* [descent], Radi has ascended.”⁹ The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a blossoming of Radi’s talent. Many of his plays appeared and were staged by both professional and amateur companies and adapted for television, radio, and cinema. Throughout his literary career, Radi denied being a follower of any political, religious, or

⁷ Malek Ebrahim Amiri, *Mokalemat ba Akbar Radi* (Conversations with Akbar Radi) (Rasht: Hedayat, 1991): 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

other school persuasion; instead, his texts seem to reflect the author's mindfulness of the human condition and suffering, identity crisis, and a concern for social issues, such as injustice, corruption, and violence of Iranian society with an attempt to cultivate objectivity and detachment. As he mentions in an introduction to his play, *Pellekan* (The Stairway, 1982): "If the pen's responsibility is implementing justice in the world it presents, as a reverence to pen... I testify I had no temptation aside from implementing justice in my quest."¹⁰

Radi has sixteen plays to his credit. Some of his post-revolutionary works, like *Hamlet ba Salad-e Fasl* (Hamlet with Seasonal Salad, 1988) and *Khanomche va Mahtabi* (Khanomche and Mahtabi, 2002), employ postmodern narrative elements and are partially influenced by the Theater of the Absurd, while his earlier works, such as *Labkhand-e Ba Shokuh-e Aqa-ye Gil*, and *Monji dar Sobh-e Namnak* (Savior on a Wet Morning, 1978) are situated within the context of the post-coup years and deal with complexities of the modernization program as well as the role of the intellectuals in the revolutionary movements, social transformations, and possible directions for political and cultural debate in Iran. Radi's pre-revolutionary pieces, for the most part, include dramas fashioned in the modern Western dramatic tradition, an influence that some critics have referred to as a late flowering of Chekhovian tradition, if not a mere reiterations of Chekhov's insights or imitations of his style.

Informed by the above observations, this chapter studies the functions of modern vision and the parameters of Realism in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1903) and Radi's *Labkhand-e Ba Shokuh-e Aqa-ye Gil* and explains how the transitional quality of modernization imparts in these works.

¹⁰ Akbar Radi, *Pellekan* (*The Stairway*) (Tehran: Namayesh, 1982): 8.

The idea of modern drama involves a range of different but related issues. In addition to the elimination of stylistic constraints, exploring “forbidden ideas,” a comprehensive study of modern drama would also call for an understanding of the content of plays which straddles different subjects: loss of such values and beliefs as the rationality, purposefulness, and dignity of the human condition, among others. But of equal importance is a grasp of technical aspects—an ongoing search for new forms and techniques capable of exteriorizing the inner sense of dissonance and dislocation inherent in this new world-view.¹¹ However, in place of the overview represented by such an approach, a more concentrated analysis of the most salient qualities gives a more focused sense of the two dramatists’ works and of their place within the movement.

To accomplish this aim of selectivity and focus, the current chapter is mainly involved with two demonstrations of modernization. First, it identifies the presence and the nature of the social evolution experienced during a transitional period when the ruling class is forfeiting its position of superiority and the other classes are rising to take its place. What makes the representation of these changes significant is the authors’ attempts to deal with recognizable worlds and people through the prism of Realism. Second, it explores the isolation of intellectuals and the development of a sense of their impracticality through the emergence of the “superfluous” man in these works, one who is full of good intentions but is ineffectual.

Given the different times and countries to which these authors belong, the sequence here matters because the social revolution and the predicament of the intellectuals that are demonstrated first in turn-of-the-century Russian society not only anticipate many of the peculiarities of Iranian modernity but also they foreshadow some of the evolutionary

¹¹ Introduction to *Modernism in European Drama: Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello, Beckett: Essay from Modern Drama*, ed. Christopher Innes and Frederick J. Marker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), x.

trajectories of the movement in this genre in Iran. In other words, although both Chekhov and Radi are responding to the major social and political changes that are actually happening in their societies, the latter is not simply offering a version of the former's vision. The assessment of Radi as merely following Chekhov, like some critical assessments of non-European appropriations of the European canon, would fail to represent the whole richness of intercultural communication and the fact that such exchanges are astonishingly diverse and complex. Indeed, the case of Radi and Chekhov epitomizes the dynamic and productive interaction that takes place when one author refashions another, changing the original as well as inventing the new.

2.1 MODERN DRAMA AND REALISM

With melodrama's loss of ascendancy and the rise of modern drama, a new intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic dramatic mode came to the fore at the end of the nineteenth century. Emphasizing depth of characterization and accurate portrayal of ordinary life, the Realist drama proved to be modern drama's dominant mode.¹² "Realism," however, is a very slippery and elusive term and needs to be defined before being applied. On a very basic level, Realism was an oppositional stance towards the principal tenets of Idealism. Under the influence of the industrial revolution, visible poverty, new urbanism, and the emergence of the proletariat, "the heroic was diminished; the capacity for unqualified good was questioned; conflict could no longer be resolved by sentiment; the banal competed with the extraordinary; contradictions prevailed,"¹³ as Richard D. Lehan claims in his book *Realism and Naturalism*. Although varied in style and literary techniques, the Realist writers advocated objectivity in favor of representing the world as

¹² Sanford V. Sternlicht, *A Reader's Guide to Modern British Drama* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004): 6.

¹³ Richard Daniel Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism: The Novel in an Age of Transition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005): 4.

is and portraying “social reality as a ‘whole.’”¹⁴ Focusing on the conflict of individual versus society and society’s institutions in his struggle for identity, the Realists emphasized the historical, social, and economic context in order to offer a representation of everyday life; a technique that is often termed as “a slice of life” Realism. Whereas the German Idealists advocated for the existence of transcendental reality and emphasized historical continuity, the Realists, with their quest to investigate and report lived reality, were committed to strengthening their ties to everyday reality and society while discarding the grand Romantic narrative of revolution.

Nevertheless, disagreements exist among the critics as to whether Realist works are anti-aesthetic and whether authors associated with this genre aim only at a mimetic reflection of reality. In addition to such aesthetic critiques, another easy objection to level at Realist writers is that they do not actually render a faithful slice of life, instead, they always fail to capture the reality because of the very means by which they communicate, i.e., representation, form, and style. In other words, literary Realism is a tale of dishonesty since all works of art will always fail in reflecting real life as the sufficiency of any artistic reflection itself is always compromised from the start. As some critics claim, literary Realism embodies the complacency of assumed notions and prejudices about the world rather than producing challenging new forms of knowledge.¹⁵

Yet, one cannot do justice to the artistic achievements of literary Realism or recognize its capacity to facilitate new ways of understanding the reality if one remains within a suspicious critical perspective that only perceives all attempts to reflect reality as merely illusions. Even a critic of Realism such as Erich Auerbach in his definition of Realism makes clear that, “The serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more

¹⁴ Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990): 194.

¹⁵ Pam Morris, *Realism* (London: Routledge, 2003): 97.

extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation, on the one hand; on the other hand, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid background—these, we believe, are the foundations of modern Realism.”¹⁶ In fact, Realist writers do not intend to mislead their readers by “illusions;” rather, they use Realism as a means to provide active pleasure and knowledge through displaying the maximum verisimilitude. They neither require nor claim certainty; nor do they aim to provide scientific or objective truth. On the contrary, Realism’s predominant mode is comic, irreverent, secular, and skeptical. Enthusiastic about coupling observation with experimentation, Émile Zola, for instance, writes, “A stupid criticism made against us naturalist writers is that we want to be merely photographers... Well! With the application of the experimental method to the novel, debate ceases. The idea of experimentation entails with it the idea of modification.”¹⁷ In other words, “the project of Realism is founded upon an implicit consensual belief that realities do exist ‘out there’ beyond linguistic networks and that we can use language to explore and communicate our always incomplete knowledge of that ever-changing historical materiality. Thus, the form of Realism is necessarily protean but the commitment of the genre to historical particularity is non-negotiable.”¹⁸

Indeed, what distinguishes Chekhov’s and Radi’s work from the core works of nineteenth-century Realism and the expectation of a fictional reproduction of reality through a faithful copy of the external world, is their attempt to go beyond the boundaries

¹⁶ Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013): 491.

¹⁷ Quoted in William J. Berg, “A Poetics of Vision: Zola’s Theory and Criticism,” *Émile Zola* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004): 60.

¹⁸ Morris, *Realism*, 93-94.

of illusionistic Realism through modifying and expanding the expressive possibilities of this convention. In an attempt to present their visions of reality, both authors benefit from integrating elements of Symbolism into the Realist texture of their plays. In other words, examining their works will show how their plays in turn-of-the-century Russia and twentieth-century Iran utilized elements of Symbolism in order to complicate the sufficiency of the Realist mode and to suggest how to go beyond it.

2.2 CULTURAL TRANSITIONS, SOCIAL UPHEAVAL: RUSSIA AT THE JUNCTURE OF THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

As an example of modern Realist drama, Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) explores the conflict of the past and the present without being melodramatic. As a literary genre, modern drama is known for its struggle for self-realization and freedom, an exploration of anxiety and alienation,¹⁹ and a conscious attempt at overthrowing tradition in the context of massive social, economic, philosophical, and artistic changes brought about by "a rejection of Classical formalism (seventeenth century) and Enlightenment rationalism (eighteenth century), and ... by two revolutions: the nineteenth-century industrial revolution... and the French Revolution (1789)..."²⁰ Revolutionary thoughts in Darwin's evolutionary ideas, Marx's materialistic approach, and Freud's psychology, all contributed to a major intellectual shift that gave rise to the modern drama in which characters' inner complexities and their relation to the world were portrayed. According to T. K. Shakh-Azizova, "[new drama is characterized by] an atmosphere of general unease...not just social forms and institutions, but the basis of society, the family and the formerly peaceful worlds of work and everyday life, where everything is upside down, in ferment, undefined..."²¹ Modern dramatists examined traditional and conventional values,

¹⁹ David Krasner, *A History of Modern Drama*, Volume I (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-4

²¹ Quoted in Rose Whyman, *Anton Chekhov* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 36.

aimed to expose cruelty in human relationships and to raise questions of social responsibility.

It is during this historical phase that Chekhov embarks on the idea of “Realist” theater. In a letter to Maria Kiselyova, Chekhov writes:

Literature is accepted as an art because it depicts life as it actually is. Its aim is the truth, unconditional and honest... But the writer is not a pastry chef, he is not a cosmetician and not an entertainer. He is a man bound by contract to his sense of duty and to his conscience. Once he undertakes this task, it is too late for excuses, and no matter how horrified, he must do battle with his squeamishness and sully his imagination with the grime of life. He is just like an ordinary reporter...²²

Chekhov’s artistic career conforms pretty well to this discussion on the subject of writing. Faithful to the tradition of humanist literature, Chekhov’s oeuvre as a whole is preoccupied with ordinary human beings regardless of their social class, their value systems, their failure of communication, and their loneliness and silence. As Ildiko Regeczi argues, “Loneliness appears in [Chekhov’s] works as a fundamental state of existence; silence is presented from an iconic point of view... Pauses have different roles in Chekhov’s drama. Mostly they express the impossibility of finding a solution to the situation, helplessness or the refusal of verbal help. The heaviest and the most tragic statements are regularly followed by pauses.”²³

Focusing on such aspects of isolation and alienation, some critics suggest that a certain pessimism underlies Chekhov’s work, while others tend to accentuate optimistic values in Chekhov through highlighting his work’s comic aspects and the author’s use of humor.²⁴ Yet, as I will argue, both critical schools fall short. The inclusion of the above

²² Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov’s Life and Thought; Selected Letters and Commentary*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973): 62.

²³ Quoted in Gail A. Bulman, *Intertextuality and Nation in Contemporary Latin American Theater* (Cranbury: Bucknell Univ Press, 2007): 177.

²⁴ See for example, Lev Shestov, “Anton Chekhov: Creation from the Void” (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966); Robert Corrigan, “The Plays of Chekhov” in *The Context and Craft of Drama* (Scranton: Chandler Publishing House, 1964); Martin Esslin, “Chekhov and the Modern Drama”

mentioned themes neither makes his writings essential candidates for thoroughgoing pessimism nor does it merely prefigure the works of the Absurdist movement. Nor does Chekhov's acknowledgement of the human capacity for change and improvement confine his dramaturgy to the realm of positivism. Rather, in place of such reductionist readings, the examination of *The Cherry Orchard* in this chapter aims to offer a balanced interpretation of the play through participating in a synthetic tragicomedic form, thereby epitomizing a fundamental mode of modern drama. However, to do so, first the politics of Russian theater and different ideological maps that emerged at the turn-of-the-century Russia should be evaluated.

In the years prior to the political and cultural changes of the late 1860s, a group of Russian intelligentsia who had strong faith in social reform emerged in Russian society. Yet even the most famous authors could not escape brutal suppression, strict censorship, and the establishment of the secret police under the tsarist autocracy—policies which significantly affected their works and made them develop various techniques to evade the censor. According to Donald Rayfield, “Tsarist censorship was stricter in Moscow (a provincial city) than in Petersburg, and stricter on publications aimed at the mass market than on those meant for the intelligentsia. Every item in the Moscow weeklies was subject to pre-censorship and careless editing could result in a missed issue or a banned magazine...”²⁵ Therefore, in order to see their works in print, authors had to conform to the state's rules. However, stringent censorship did not mean that Russian intellectuals were completely unable to express their views in print; rather, using different literary genres, they attempted to push the boundaries of what the system deemed acceptable,

(Westport, 1985); John Tulloch, “Chekhov Abroad: Western Criticism” in *A Chekhov Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985).

²⁵ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov: A Critical Study Of Chekhov's Prose And Drama* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999): 7.

especially during the reign of Alexander II (1855-1881) who inaugurated far-reaching reforms including the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 as well as relaxing the rigid censorship. The former contributed to the decline of Russia's feudalism and hastened the formation of a new class of citizen, the "free farmers," while the latter unleashed the growth of a more powerful and energetic class of artists and intellectuals.

With the prominence of ideology and revolutionary fervor at its peak, different ideological groups came into being near the end of the nineteenth century. Although there were some overlaps between these groups, close examination of the movements reveals that there were three main strains of thoughts in the Russian intelligentsia: the populists, who with an eye to Russia's future, embraced the idea of serving the masses in the hopes of a socialist revolution; the conservative Slavophiles, who called for eradication of western influence while emphasizing Russia's indigenous culture and glorious past. For them, the social change involved a process of moral and spiritual regeneration of the nation presided over by the intellectuals; and the liberal Westernizers, who advocated European intellectual and cultural models as means of achieving social, political, and economic transformation.

During this turbulent period, one issue that was shared by all these ideological groups was criticism of the status quo in favor of social improvement. However, for all their struggle for far-reaching changes, Russian intellectuals mostly subscribed to the ideas and ideals of life—ideals that they presumed should be welcomed and supported by people from different classes of society—and not to concrete social rights and obligations. Adopting a heroic worldview as bearers of truth and enlightenment, the members of the intelligentsia believed that their mission was to fulfill the aspirations of people in order to protect the interests of the society as a whole. Focused on discussing ideas, philosophies, and ideologies, they were unable to establish firm contacts with others classes of society,

especially the peasants whom they deemed to represent. On the topic of the populist's failure, for instance, Russell Bova argues that:

[the populist movement] envisioned an exodus of intelligentsia from the cities to the villages, where they would provide the peasantry with the education and insights that would lift the scales from their eyes and allow them to see the shortcomings of the regime. The movement was an utter failure. Peasants, not yet devoid of their faith in the tsar, distrusted the citified intellectuals—in some cases, going so far as to turn them over to the police.²⁶

Furthermore, the members of Slavophiles and liberal Westernizers were predominately nobles²⁷ whose education and exposure to the Western ideas and societies had deeply separated them from the state and society. As Michael Kort argues, “Their education and political commitment had made the members of the intelligentsia strangers from their own land, cut off by their expanded horizon from the ignorant and superstitious masses and stifled and hounded by an autocracy that would not let them implement their ideas for improving their country.”²⁸

As a result, in spite of advocating a new social order, these currents failed to recognize the very fact that for the first time in Russian history there was diversity of opinion not only among the elite, but also in society in general. The three different ideological groups of Russia's educated, professional, and affluent people, instead of cultivating and encouraging a diversity of opinions and compromise, dedicated their lives to imposing their views upon one another. This imposition ultimately resulted in turmoil that subsequently undermined the intelligentsia as a powerful and affluent social class. In other words, instead of uniting their talents and assuming their responsibilities to develop their country, the Russian intellectual leaders were engrossed in their ideological or

²⁶ Robert H. Donaldson, Joseph L. Noguee, and Vidya, Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2014): 37.

²⁷ Susanna Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006): 9.

²⁸ Michael Kort, *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1996): 32.

personal struggle with each other. As a result, their imposition of ideology led not only to the destruction of a cultivated society, but also produced intolerance and impatience for inclusionary politics and reduced diverse social groups into an ideologically homogeneous one.

These issues have an echo in the plays of Chekhov, who portrays the impracticality and stagnation of cultured elite in the face of social change as well as the inability of intellectual characters to fulfill their role because of their impotency and inertia. Denouncing the passivity and blindness of the latter and their inaction in contributing to the improvement of social conditions, Chekhov in a letter to I. I. Orlove writes, “I have no faith in our intelligentsia, hypocritical, false, ill-bred, lazy; I have no faith in them even when they suffer and complain, for their oppressor come from the same womb as they.”²⁹

This attitude toward the Russian elite and their tragicomic fate as well as the shallowness of the intellectuals is best treated in Chekhov’s last full-length play, *The Cherry Orchard*. In the midst of social, political, and economic issues taking place at the end of the nineteenth century in Russia, the declining landed nobility is paralyzed with nostalgia and inaction in spite of gradually being dispossessed of their wealth and status. Likewise, Trofimov, a member of the intelligentsia, while aspiring radical changes, is plagued by his own inadequacy and inertia as well as his tendency to philosophize and speechify. Of course, like other modern dramas, *The Cherry Orchard* enjoys a wide range of elements (such as human loneliness, identity crisis, marital dissolution, difficulty of communication between human beings); however, of the existing factors in modern drama, this chapter focuses on the social, economic, and political changes that were sweeping Russia during Chekhov’s time and deals with the representation of the Russian aristocracy

²⁹ Anton Chekhov, *Letters on the Short Story, the Drama, and Other Literary Topics by Anton Chekhov*, ed. Louis Friedland and Ernest Simmons (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1964): 286

and intelligentsia as well as their inability to function within the society. To elucidate the connections between Anton Chekhov and Akbar Radi, the following section addresses the above mentioned elements in the Russian play and then the results will be extended to *Labkhand-e Ba Shokuh-e Aqa-ye Gil*.

2.3 THE CHERRY ORCHARD: A TALE OF FLUX

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, Russia was faced with the irreversible decline of aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie. The landowning nobility were left on the brink of bankruptcy and the feudal system was moving towards inevitable collapse while a new social order, an entrepreneurial class, was on the ascendency. With the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, citizenship, in limited ways, was brought to millions of peasants, who in the past were deprived of owning lands and could be bought or sold as properties. Liberated from servile dependence on the landowners, the peasants were allowed to purchase the property allotted to them from their former owners and enjoy the limited freedom granted to them. Furthermore, since the landowners mostly lived in cities and away from their estates for long periods of time, they could do little to understand agricultural problems, much less to solve them. As a result, under the burden of debt and unable to retain their properties, many of the landowners sold their estates at auction. By 1903, when Chekhov wrote this play, almost one-half of all private land in Russia (excluding peasant land) was mortgaged, a situation that forced the land owners to sell their estates and join the professional or commercial classes.³⁰ In parallel with the above historical changes during this period, Russia also heralded rapid urbanization and industrialization which fueled fundamental changes in the social fabric of Russia's feudal

³⁰ Anton Chekhov, *The Complete Plays*, ed. and trans. Laurence Senelick (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006): 335.

economy and stimulated mobility, both geographical and social, throughout the empire and across a significant segment of the population.

The literature of this era provided abundant critical commentaries on the social and political changes and related issues mainly through the prism of Realism, of which Chekhov's dramaturgy is an example. Written at the beginning of the twentieth century, Chekhov's final play, *The Cherry Orchard*, is characterized by the author's historical sensibility which portrays the psychological and emotional conflicts that confronted his characters who live during a period of rapid social changes accompanied by political turmoil. Focusing on the everyday lives of ordinary people, Chekhov's work successfully engages the reader with the moral and psychological dilemmas of his characters and focuses on issues such as ideality or pragmatism, action or inaction, stability and change—dilemmas and agonies that are shared by his characters as well as his readers. As Donald Rayfield points out, "The starry-eyed radicalism of Trofimov, the self-serving capitalism of Lopakhin, and the intuitive deafness to reason on the part of the orchard's owners (who nevertheless are wise in their foolishness) are just as relevant to today's Russia as to yesterday's; such stances and conflicts set out permanently irresolvable dilemmas for the human condition."³¹

As with *The Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard* takes place on a Russian country estate and recounts the story of an aristocratic but feckless family who are on the brink of losing their estate, a story which resonates widely with the changes happening in Russia at the time. In the opening act, Lyubov Andreyevna along with her brother, Leonid Gayev and her adopted daughter, Varya, returns from Paris to her family mansion and its cherry orchard, only to see it will be sold soon at auction to pay off their debts. From the very

³¹ Donald Rayfield, *The Cherry Orchard: Catastrophe and Comedy* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994): 13.

beginning, Yermolay Lopakhin, a rich self-made merchant with peasant origins, loyally warns the landowners about the imminent loss of the property and the impending auction. He urges them to follow his practical proposal, i.e., to chop down the historic cherry orchard, divide the land, and lease it out to summer vacationers. However, ignorant of what is happening around them and unable/unwilling to engage with his suggestions, the owner fails to take any action and as a result lose her family estate to Lopakhin, the new owner of the land. While the idle members of the upper class cling to their past and hope for a miracle, Lopakhin, attempts to build a better future for himself through hard work—a proposition that is undermined due to the contradictions within the character. Yet, it was indeed the massive social changes that provided former peasants and serfs, such as the fictional Lopakhin as well as Chekhov’s father, with an opportunity to reconstruct their social identities within a short period of time. Exulted to see the breakdown of the old boundaries and remapping of a new social structure, Lopakhin at the end of Act Three says: “If my father and grandfather could only rise from their graves and see [...] how their Yermolay—Yermolay who was always being beaten, who could hardly write his name and ran round barefoot in winter [...] bought this estate, the most beautiful place in the whole world. I’ve bought the estate where my father and grandfather were slaves, where they weren’t even allowed inside the kitchen.”³² With the loss of the orchard, everyone is forced to depart except for Firs, the old servant, who inadvertently is locked in the house. The play ends with the sounds of an axe falling on trees in the cherry orchard.

The Cherry Orchard’s simple story—the arrival of the family members, their ineffectual attempts to salvage the cherry orchard, loss of the estate, and their subsequent departure—has invited many critics to classify Chekhov’s works as “static drama”

³² Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays: Ivanov, The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, and The Cherry Orchard*, trans. Ronald Hingley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 310.

precisely due to characters' lack of action on the stage. Thus, in spite of being revered by countless readers and scholars for his focus on characterization, Chekhov's dramaturgy has struck others as undramatic and seriously flawed. Among his earliest and most pointed critics as a dramatist was Leo Tolstoy who consistently complained about the shortcomings of the younger writer's plays. Interested in subject matter and concerned with the absence of action in his colleague's plays, Tolstoy after seeing *Uncle Vanya* famously told Chekhov: "You know I can't stand Shakespeare, but your plays are even worse than his."³³

Although Tolstoy's background as a count and a member of aristocratic landowning family might have influenced his outlook, yet his condemnation of Chekhov's plays reveals much about the centrality of the conventional early nineteenth-century theatrical practices such as melodrama and well-made play, an essential ingredient of which was the primacy of plot. With the rise of Realism and Naturalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century, modern playwrights moved away from the Aristotelian enshrined model of drama in an attempt to push the boundaries beyond the conventional plots. In a return to Horace's emphasis, what distinguishes them from their predecessors is the weight these new dramatists placed on the significance of character over plot and action. Similar to other innovators of modern drama, such as Henrik Ibsen, Chekhov subordinates plot in favor of characterization. As Maurice Valency points out: "Chekhov's characters do not serve the plot at all. At best, they accommodate themselves to it like unwilling passengers on a train which is taking them where they have no desire to go."³⁴

The characters in *The Cherry Orchard* are formed by their coherent and stable world and are unable to come to terms with the reality outside. But that seemingly static

³³ Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought; Selected Letters and Commentary*, 375.

³⁴ Quoted in Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994): 123.

world is fading away and with that threatened is the characters' sense of personal security. The twentieth century has begun to creep in and social and economic changes are its inevitable consequences. Characters suddenly find themselves in a world in which they do not know "what it is [they are] really after"³⁵ and their nostalgic grasping for the order of the past manifests itself in their physical inactivity, which, in turn, provokes intense mental and emotional reactions. In a world where feudalism is crumbling and capitalism is on the rise, enormous changes are inevitable, and characters, instead of finding solutions for their problems, are trapped in their lack of action and impotency. It is the refusal to recognize the reality of their situation and to act upon it that leads to the sale of the estate and not the "overpowering forces" imposed upon the characters. It is, indeed, the author's mastery of dramatizing characters' inner voices and internal debate, their social dislocation and alienation, combined with Chekhov's objective narrative style that defines his dramaturgy and his overall theatrical aesthetic.

Using the social and economic contrast between the rising peasant class and the feudal aristocracy as a starting point, Chekhov explores the effects of such changes on the inner lives and identities of his characters. Drawing characters from a wide social background, the author presents their difficulty in adapting to the new social conditions as well as their attitudes towards the world around them, their society, and even their own individual selves. Through the first group, represented by Ranevskaya and Gayev, Chekhov shows the procrastination and the inability of the owners to engage with the realities of their present situation; the avoidance of which leads them to live in a world that almost does not exist anymore. The solution for salvaging their property seems very simple. Lopakhin does not wait long to provide them with a proper plan, but they, time and

³⁵ Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 287.

again, lose the opportunity to avert the imminent loss and continuously fail to address the problem by changing the subject altogether.

An illuminating example of this is the scene in Act I when Ranevskaya is confronted with Lopakhin's proposal; instead of facing the issue, she chooses not to listen to his idea and talks about her life in Paris. Similarly, in Act II in response to Lopakhin, who demands a decisive action regarding the future of the estate, she replies, "Your cigar's given me an awful headache."³⁶ In order to avoid the present issues, Ranevskaya is focused on the past even if that means revisiting some of her bitterest memories. Following Lopakhin's advice would mean breaking up with the past, something that she is not prepared for. Unable to reconcile with her new situation, she takes refuge in her memories and acts as if she is wealthy: she senselessly spend her money and even gives her whole purse to the peasants, she plans balls with orchestras, enjoys fine dining, and agrees to lend money to her neighbor, Pishchik—all of which indicates her inability to face the precariousness of her situation.

Similarly, Ranevskaya's brother, Gayev, does not have plans for saving the estate except fantasy ones. All his three proposals—borrowing money from their affluent aunt, suggesting his sister to borrow some money from Lopakhin, and getting a loan on promissory notes—prove to be ineffectual. His habitual response to a difficult question is to say something unrelated to the current topic as her sister does—something that gives both characters a sense of ludicrousness. Obvious examples are Gayev's refuge from reality in billiards at times of discomfort accompanied by delivering monologues. In Act I, for instance, Gayev delivers a speech before the antique bookcase as he tries to sidestep Lopakhin's plan.

³⁶ Ibid., 288.

Dear and most honored book-case. In you I salute an existence devoted for over a hundred years to glorious ideals of virtue and justice. In the course of the century your silent summons to creative work has never faltered, upholding [*through tears*] in several generations of our line confidence and faith in a better future and fostering in us the ideals of virtue and social consciousness.³⁷

In his pompous apostrophe to the bookcase, Gayev reveals his anxiety over the imminent crumbling of the estate as well as degeneration of high ideals. To him, the antique bookcase, a surviving witness of the past, exemplifies the beautiful old way of life with its culture and eternal values;³⁸ something that does not work out well in Lopakhin's practicality and the inevitable new order. Yet, however touching, Gayev's grand statement combined with his failure to take responsibility and action contributes to the complex essence of his character: he is both pitiable and ludicrous at the same time. Indignant over the idea of leasing out the orchard to summer vacationers, Gayev is carried away with his own speech so much so that he forgets it is "an inanimate object" that he is addressing. As Herbert Müller comments: "In his humanity [Chekhov] was ... more keenly aware at once of the ludicrous and the tragic aspects of man's folly and futility. Humor runs all through his serious drama. It is only slightly more pronounced in *The Cherry Orchard*, which he labelled a comedy, and which might be called the quintessence of tragicomedy."³⁹

Furthermore, refusing to exercise some mental agility in regards to their condition, both Ranevskaya and Gayev have attuned to their childhood so much so that they resist the passage of time and deny the idea of change. Returning from Paris to her childhood home, Ranevskaya quickly sinks back into her recollections of the past. Facing the prospect of the orchard being cut down, Ranevskaya tells Lopakhin, "If there's one interesting, in fact

³⁷ Ibid., 279.

³⁸ Irina Levin, *Working on the Play and the Role: The Stanislavsky Method for Analyzing the Characters in a Drama* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992): 71.

³⁹ Geoffrey Borney, *Interpreting Chekhov* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2006): 230, quoting H. Müller, *The Spirit of Tragedy* (New York, 1956): 288.

quite remarkable, thing in the whole country it's our cherry orchard,"⁴⁰ and soon looking at the blossoming trees, she exclaims, "Oh, my childhood, My innocent childhood! This is the nursery where I slept and I used to look out at the orchard from here. When I woke up every morning happiness awoke with me, and the orchard was just the same in those days. Nothing's changed. [*Laughs happily.*] White! All white! Oh, my orchard!"⁴¹ The emphasis on such a reversion to childhood is further stressed by the nursery setting of Act I and Act IV. As children, Ranevskaya and Gayev used to sleep in the same nursery and upon finding themselves in the familiar space once again, they can hardly dissociate themselves from the nostalgia for a childhood filled with innocence and happiness. Gayev's preoccupation with the past and his resistance to time passing is further emphasized when he says to his sister:

GAYEV: ...At one time, dear sister, we both used to sleep in this room. And now I'm fifty-one, unlikely as it may sound.

LOPAKHIN: Yes, time marches on.

GAYEV: What's that?

LOPAKHIN: Time, It marches on, I was saying.

GAYEV: This place smells of cheap scent.⁴²

The dominance of spatial indicators, "this room," "this place," and the double pointing to "we/brother and sister," indicates an attempt to reaffirm a sense of location and identity which are under threat in a period of profound changes.⁴³ Even though their familiar past

⁴⁰ Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 277.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 275.

⁴³ Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 64.

is gradually fading into oblivion, both characters are inclined to dwell in their past hoping to resist the impending fate and its inevitable ramifications.

Taking a mental journey into their respective pasts, Ranevskaya perceives her dead mother walking in the orchard while Gayev recalls, “when I was six years old sitting in this window on Trinity Sunday and watching Father go off to church.”⁴⁴ The latter’s childlike illusions and irresponsibility is further emphasized by his habit of eating sweets. For example, at the end of Act I, Gayev confidently asserts:

I’m going back there on Tuesday and I’ll talk to them again. [*To Varya.*] Stop that crying. [*To Anya.*] Your mother’s going to speak to Lopakhin and I’m sure he won’t let her down. And when you’ve had a rest you can go and see your great-aunt the Countess at Yaroslavl. This way we’ll be tackling the thing from three different directions at once and we simply can’t fail. We shall pay that interest, I’m sure of it. [*Puts a sweet in his mouth.*] I give you my word of honor.⁴⁵

Here, Gayev’s delivers a speech and makes promises, but his determination is undermined by sucking a candy like a small boy. Aware of his own improvidence, but unable to take up responsibility and action, he later, while taking sweets, says, “People say I’ve wasted my substance on boiled sweets... (*Laughs.*)”⁴⁶

Gayev’s childish and ineffectual character is also reinforced by his dependence on Firs. In Act II, for instance, Gayev announces that he has been offered a position at the bank, but his mood of pride and optimism is quickly undercut by the entrance of Firs who scolds the fifty-one-year-old Gayev for not wearing the right clothes. Incapable of living by himself, the latter obeys the servant even in his impatience.

GAYEV: I’ve been offered a job in a bank. At six thousand roubles a year. Had you heard?

MRS. RANEVSKY: What, you in a bank! You stay where you are.

⁴⁴ Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 320.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 290.

(Firs comes in with an overcoat)

FIRS [*To Gayev*]: Please put this on now, Mr. Leonid sir. It's damp out there.

GAYEV [*Putting on the coat*]: You're a bore, my dear fellow.⁴⁷

Another character that constitutes Ranevskaya's and Gayev's extensional counterpart is Firs who has not adjusted to the new order. Even after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, he chose to stay with his masters and now at the age of eighty seven he nostalgically talks about old days. The past was simple, according to him, since everyone was aware of his/her place within the rigidly structured and regulated social hierarchy; calling the abolition a "disaster," he expresses his confusion over the sweeping changes: "The serfs had their masters and the masters had their serfs, but now everything's at six and sevens and you can't make head or tail of it."⁴⁸

At the end of the play, the sick Firs is supposed to be delivered into the care of an old-people's home, but instead he is inadvertently left behind in the empty estate. He approaches the empty stage, sits on the sofa and mumbles:

They forgot me. Never mind, I'll sit here a bit. [...] these young folk have no sense. [*Mutters something which cannot be understood.*] Life's slipped by just as if I'd never lived at all. [*Lies down.*] I'll lie down a bit. You've got no strength left, got nothing left, nothing at all. You're just a—nincompoop. [*Lies motionless.*]⁴⁹

As the final curtain comes down, the snapping of a distant cable along with the crack of a falling axe in the orchard is heard. This "horrible" sound is first introduced in Act II for which characters provide different explanations: Lopakhin thinks it is the sound of a cable from the mines; to Gayev it suggests a heron; Trofimov wonders if it an old owl; Ranevskaya anxiously calls it "disagreeable"; and Firs declares that it is the same sound

⁴⁷ Ibid., 292.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 292.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 322.

that was heard before the calamitous Emancipation—all of which, of course, are consistent with their personalities. In addition to the actual sound of an ax on the tress, according to Geoffrey Borny, “this sound crystallizes the moment of recognition that the estate is lost,” the repetition of which “ensures the moment of sad recognition.”⁵⁰ The once blossom-laden cherry orchard and its inevitable destruction symbolizes the loss of a stable past propelled by unprecedented social changes. Likewise *Firs* represents the old system. Aside from his naïve views towards the change, his perspective can also reflect the former serf’s skepticism towards social change and social progress while implying that emancipation by and itself is not enough to effect change. Sara Haslam correctly argues, “... the present is complicated. This confusion spreads to the other workers from the estate. The question of the landowners’ responsibility for the serfs they used to own still remains. Now, with the estate in ruins, the Ranevskys are effectively abandoning those for whom they should care. The emancipation seems to make this abandonment easier.”⁵¹

Yet, this transitional epoch does not solely evoke loss. Rather, the possibility of social improvement and historical progress as it relates to the modern businessman’s possession of the orchard occupies the center of the play. Of particular interest is the upward mobility of the enslaved classes of the past, to whom Lopakhin’s family belonged, through the class system and their flexibility to cross boundaries that would be impossible in the pre-twentieth-century Russian context. In an attempt to save the estate, Lopakhin, person of the present, first persuades the owners by proposing the realistic plan of leasing out the orchard for summer dachas. Upon pressuring Ranevskaya, she responds: “Forgive

⁵⁰ Geoffrey Borny, *Interpreting Chekhov*, 256.

⁵¹ Sara Haslam, “Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*,” in *Aestheticism & Modernism: Debating Twentieth-century Literature 1900-1960*, ed. Richard Danson Brown and Suman Gupta (London: Routledge, 2005), 40.

me, but all that's so frightfully vulgar."⁵² Exasperated by the owners' sloth and inaction, Lopakhin buys the estate and triumphantly announces his victory.

Often times, Lopakhin has been criticized as the brute who represents the self-made capitalist—a mercenary who is unsympathetic to beauty (the cherry orchard) and insensitive to the nobility's plight.⁵³ However, this reading of the character falls short of capturing Chekhov's complex characterization. On the surface, it may seem that Lopakhin's traits come across as coarse or rapacious. He is considered uneducated, materialistic, philistine, and clumsy, but a closer look at his characterization does reveal a more complex reflection of his ambivalence. Refusing to mold a stereotypical merchant character, Chekhov insisted that his main character should not be portrayed as a villain or a hero. Writing to Stanislavky, the author warned that, "he [Lopakhin] may be a merchant but he is a decent person in every sense; his behavior must be entirely proper, cultivated and free of pettiness or clowning."⁵⁴

From the very beginning of the play, Chekhov ensures to establish Lopakhin as a sincere, hard-working, and good-natured man. As the play opens, while awaiting the arrival of Ranevskaya, Lopakhin is having recollections of his bloody nose incident years ago when he was a child, but he is still grateful to her master for her kindness.

LOPAKHIN: Your [Dunyasha's] mistress has been living abroad for five years and I've no idea what she's like now. She was always such a nice woman, unaffected and easy to get on with. I remember when I was a lad of fifteen and my father—he's not alive now, but he kept the village shop in those days—punched me in the face and made my nose bleed. We'd come round here for something or other and he had a bit of drink inside him. Lyuba Ranevsky—I can see her now—

⁵² Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 290.

⁵³ See for example Richard Gilman, *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening Into Eternity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995): 235; Harvey Pitcher, *The Chekhov Play: A New Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973): 173; Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought; Selected Letters and Commentary*, 443; Walter Russell Mead and Sherle Schwenninger, *The Bridge to a Global Middle Class: Development, Trade and International Finance* (Boston: Springer, 2003): p. 536

⁵⁴ Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought; Selected Letters and Commentary*, 461.

was still quite a slip of a girl. She brought me over to the wash-stand here in this very room, the nursery as it was. ‘Don’t cry, little peasant,’ she said. ‘You’ll soon be right as rain.’ [*Pause.*]⁵⁵

The opening scene is significant because not only it reveals the character’s fine traits, but also it successfully brings about his dualistic nature. Despite his progressive attitudes, Lopakhin’s affection and reverence for Ranevskaya signifies his nostalgia for the old world as well as his lack of self-confidence produced by his class origins. His ambivalence is even clear in his own clothing; he is dressed up in a white waistcoat which suggests his new social status and brown boots which emphasize his peasant origins. While Lopakhin’s appearance seems more refined now, his ill-matched clothing is a token of status difference. He is aware of his peasant origins, and therefore in spite of success, he thinks of himself as a “bull in a china shop.” His attempts to overcome his inadequacies through educating himself fail, at least partially, as he falls asleep trying to read.

Another illuminating example is Lopakhin’s awareness of time passing. Contrary to the old nobility’s reluctance to accept the passage of time and the inevitable change, Lopakhin is constantly referring to the remaining time accompanied by a sense of urgency. His concern with the passage of time is clear in his frequent announcement of “time marches on,” and is summed up in his phrase to the weeping Ranevskaya after the orchard sale, “My poor dear friend, you can’t put the clock back now.”⁵⁶ As Rayfield points out, “Lopakhin is naturally a source of numerical information—dates, sums, temperature, but references to time reveal all the cast as prisoners of the past.”⁵⁷ Sitting in the nursery, right before wrapping himself in the memories of the past, Lopakhin tells Dunyasha that he had overslept and therefore could not welcome Ranevskaya at the train station. Awaiting her

⁵⁵ Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 269.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁵⁷ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 246.

arrival, he nevertheless falls asleep as if he is unable to fully escape the “estate’s temporality of missed opportunity as soon as he sets foot on it.”⁵⁸

Similarly, his inability to propose to Ranevskaya’s step-daughter, Varya, is yet another instance of the character’s contradictory sides. As the family prepares for departure from the orchard, Ranevskaya makes one final attempt to urge Lopakhin to marry Varya. However, what follows is an abortive dialogue. Expecting Lopakhin’s proposal, Varya enters the room pretending to look for something in the luggage; however, the two, unable to find a way to communicate their feelings, converse about their future plans, life in the estate, and finally about the weather instead.

VARYA: Oh, where can it be? Or should I have put it in the trunk? Yes, life has gone out of this house. And it will never come back.

LOPAKHIN: Well, I’m just off to Kharkov. By the next train. I have plenty to do there. And I’m leaving Yepikhodov in charge here, I’ve taken him on.

VARYA: Oh, have you?

LOPAKHIN: This time last year we already had snow, remember? But now it’s so calm and sunny. It’s a bit cold though. Three degrees of frost, I should say.

VARYA: I’ve not looked. [*Pause.*] Besides, our thermometer’s broken.⁵⁹

Every time Lopakhin tries to steer the conversation towards the topic of marriage, but each time he fails to bring himself to take action. The scene concludes with Lopakhin leaving the room with relief when he is called away and Varya is left weeping quietly. In spite of his pragmatic vision, Lopakhin, too, experiences moments of indecisiveness and even though he enjoys living in the present, he struggles to come to terms with the changing world. His inability or reluctance to act in the above scene, whether out of love for his

⁵⁸ Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1994): 192.

⁵⁹ Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 319.

childhood patroness or out of failure to overcome his peasant origins, signals the character's ties to the past and his struggle to adapt to his new social status.

While the pragmatic and realist businessman represents the new bourgeoisie and the possibility of social mobility in the early twentieth-century Russia through hard work, Petya Trofimov, "the eternal student," represents the revolutionary ideologist—an idealist who in his series of long speeches criticizes the intelligentsia for their empty philosophizing, idleness, lack of action, and for their ill-treatments of their servants. Echoing Chekhov's comments regarding the intelligentsia from earlier years, Trofimov points out:

The kind of Russian intellectuals I know, far and away the greater part of them anyway, aren't looking for anything. They don't do anything. They still don't know the meaning of hard work. They call themselves an intelligentsia, but they speak to their servants as inferiors and treat the peasants like animals. They don't study properly, they never read anything serious, in fact they don't do anything at all.⁶⁰

Similar to Lopakhin, the revolutionary student is also future-oriented. Talking to Anya, Trofimov teases the latter about her family's feudal exploitations of the serfs and calls for a break with the past claiming that building a brighter future is attainable to every one through sacrifices and hard work. He says:

Forward then! We are marching triumphantly on towards that bright star shining there far away. On, on! No falling back, my friends.⁶¹

In the above examples and also throughout the play, Trofimov sets forth his progressive views in the form of lengthy speeches and voices burning issues that have plagued Russia while trying to offer solutions. Faithful to the cause of revolution, he even "idealizes romantic love and the abstention from it"⁶² when he is left alone with Anya and declares,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 294.

⁶¹ Ibid., 297.

⁶² Rose Whyman, *Anton Chekhov*, 156.

With her narrow outlook, she [Varya] can't understand that we're *above love* (italics mine). To rid ourselves of the pettiness and the illusions which stop us being free and happy, that's the whole meaning and purpose of our lives.⁶³

However, although Trofimov calls attention to the social and political problems in the Russian society at the time and makes remarks regarding the advancement of humanity towards a higher truth, the dramatist did not fail to label him with the Chekhovian trademark, i.e., the dual perspective of the character. Michael Frayn writes: "Chekhov plainly takes Trofimov seriously as a man who holds sane and genuine convictions for which he is prepared to suffer. But then to go to the opposite extreme, as was done in Trevor Griffiths's adaptation of the play, and to turn him into a 'positive hero' in the Socialist Realist sense, is also an absurdity."⁶⁴

For instance, in the above mentioned scenes, Chekhov is quick to effectively undercut Trofimov's high rhetoric, which is overblown in an idealistic fashion, and to deflate his arguments. Although he sympathizes with his fellow man and passionately invokes the need to work, the fact that Trofimov does little work and spends his time in idleness or in talk comically reduces the seriousness of his pronouncement. His candidacy for being promoted as a role model and/or a hero, similar to Ranevskaya's and Gayev's portrayal as tragic heroes, is undercut by his ironic and comical representation and his suffering from logomania. Of equal importance is Lopakhin's immediate response to Trofimov's monologue, in which he identifies himself as someone who actually does work. He says: "I'm always up by five o'clock, you know. I work from morning till night, and then—well I'm always handling my money, my own and other people's..."⁶⁵ Similarly, the idealist's claim about being beyond love is undermined by Ranevskaya who accuses

⁶³ Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 297.

⁶⁴ Michael Frayn, *Stage Directions: Writing on Theatre 1970-2008* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008): 200.

⁶⁵ Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 294.

him of not understanding love. Later, angry and still absorbed in his speechifying, Trofimov trips down the stairs.

Aside from Lopakhin and Trofimov who in their different ways point out to the impending changes and express possibilities for the future, the newer generations of the servants provide another perspective on the transitional climate in Russia at the time. As the social and economic dimensions of the old world change, traditional boundaries of class and division between masters and servants become quite blurred. For instance, the servants in this play parody the gentry and duplicate their doings: Dunyasha frequently powders her nose and fakes ladylike behavior; the unsympathetic Yasha, the former peasant determined to move up in social class, in an attempt to imitate the nobility's style, uses French words in his speech, embraces western attitudes, drinks champagne and smokes cigars; Yepikhodov, the clumsy estate clerk, plays on the guitar, sings, plays billiard, and dons the mask of intellectualism. Yet, Chekhov, here again, consistent in tone with his own bitter-sweet attitude, is not only questioning the aristocratic manners, but also make the servants targets of satire due to their sham aristocratic refinement and delicacy.

In addition to producing comic account of both master and servant, the parody of the latter by the former attests to the shifts in the social structures of the twentieth century Russia. In spite of their weaknesses, Chekhov's servants (with the exception of Firs) aspire to upward social mobility and elevated social status, and in doing so, go beyond the traditional dichotomy of master/servant. Examples abound: Dunyasha, Yasha, and Yepikhodov are cast in their roles of unrequited and requiting lovers which, as Rayfield aptly mentions, was exclusive to Chekhov's gentry;⁶⁶ Yasha takes advantage of the social changes and is openly contemptuous of Gayev while treating Ranevskaya almost as an

⁶⁶ Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov*, 243.

equal; Dunyasha is allowed to go and dance at the ball arranged by her mistress to compensate for the scarcity of guests; etc. Similarly, the debunked nobility's inability to take action and to cope with the social and economic realities signals not only the absurdity and the fast obsolescence of their worldview in the early twentieth century Russia, but emphasizes their inability to adjust their lives to a new order given the rapid changes taking place at the time.

The social changes that affect the master-servant relationship are intertwined with the modernizing forces present in the play the examining of which is of primary importance as they provide further social context for Chekhov's narrative. Throughout the play, images of urbanization and industrialization that are relentlessly encroaching on the idyllic countryside become a vehicle for depicting rapid changes in Russia. In Act I, Ranevskaya and her entourage return to the estate by carriage from the train station; In Act II, there are rows of telegraph poles in distance that bring messages for Ranevskaya from Paris juxtaposed with the view of a large town in the background as well as an abandoned shrine and old tombstones; In Act III, Ranevskaya arranges to hold a ball in the estate in an attempt to recreate her aristocratic lifestyle; having bought the orchard, Lopakhin plans to cut down the orchard and build cottages for the growing number of city-dwellers; In Act IV, Simeonov-Pishchik, another gentry character, is saved when Englishmen discover a valuable white clay on his land; the train takes Ranevskaya and her daughter back to Paris; and Gayev plans to work at a local bank.

What all these examples share is their bitter-sweet portrayal of a world in flux achieved through the juxtaposition of the continuity and stability of the past and uncertainties of the present and future in addition to the confrontation between the technological progress with the rural ways of living. Inevitably, the transition from the feudal landed aristocracy to capitalism and bourgeois society was accompanied by both

anxiety and hope. For instance, although trains break down the isolation and quietude of the country and are therefore associated with the discourses of nostalgia, they are also emblematic of positive change that would benefit the new emerging classes through providing a new mode of conveyance. Similarly, telegraph poles, another marker of industrialization and modernization, have penetrated the rural spaces and are raised where the trees once stood. Yet, at the same time, they establish another link between the rural land and the urban realm and facilitate the communication over vast distances within a short period of time.

At the center of this conflict between progressive aspirations and the preservation of a supposedly more authentic lifestyle stands the cherry orchard itself. Here again, Chekhov masterfully exhibits his impartiality regarding the changes and demonstrates the different ways his characters relate to the orchard. The orchard is a symbol for the masters' glorious past; It was once world-famous and was even mentioned in the Encyclopedia. For the owners, the orchard represents their pleasant childhood, their happy past, and elegant lifestyle before the immense changes threatened the nobility's very existence. The sale and subsequent destruction of the orchard, therefore, suggests both a farewell to the past and their inability to adapt to the emerging economic system in Russia.

Likewise, for Firs, the orchard is the embodiment of past. He mentions "In the old days, forty or fifty years back, those cherries would be dried, pickled, marinated, made into jam."⁶⁷ At the peak of its productivity, dried cherries were sent to cities like Moscow to secure revenue for the already rich owners. But though lovely, the orchard is no more productive, even the recipe is lost—similar to Ranevskaya and Gayev who "have lost the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 204.

recipe for the gracious ways of life of earlier generations”⁶⁸—and no one remembers the formula any more.

For Lopakhin, cutting down the orchard and building summer cottages seems to be a sensible solution to the family’s financial plight. Yet, his efforts to save and later to buy the estate should not be perceived solely in terms of personal advancement and monetary pursuit or viewed as the victory of the bourgeoisie at the expense of the an accelerated robbery of nature. On the contrary, Lopakhin is no evil; he appreciates beauty and is capable of love, but he is also concerned with the present that is pregnant with immense business opportunities. Furthermore, due to his class origins, the orchard also embodies “the oppression suffered by his father and earlier generations before the emancipation.”⁶⁹

For the revolutionary Trofimov, the orchard represents the institution of serfdom and conjures up the painful memories of slavery. At the end of Act II, Trofimov provides a counterargument regarding the charming past of the orchard when he says to Anya, “Can’t you see them [serfs]? Human beings staring at you from every tree in the orchard... Can’t you hear their voices?”⁷⁰ As young idealists, they hold on to their optimistic outlook eagerly looking forward to a brighter future. In her exit line, Anya says “Goodbye, old life!” and Trofimov replies, “Welcome, new life!”—their visions are contrasted with Ranevskaya’s yearning for the idyllic past.

Chekhov’s treatment of the triad of past idealization, present development, and future optimism remains intentionally ambiguous. Trofimov’s and Anya’s future may be as idealized as Ranevskaya’s past, and Lopakhin’s project for the orchard may be the

⁶⁸ Harvey Pitcher, *The Chekhov Play: A New Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973): 161.

⁶⁹ Edward Braun, “The Cherry Orchard,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 115.

⁷⁰ Anton Chekhov, *Five Plays*, 297.

economically dominant vision of the future,⁷¹ but, influenced by his medical training, the dramatist retains his neutrality and is unwilling to impose his authorial presence. And yet, even though he advocates a non-judgmental approach and famously states that “a writer must be as objective as a chemist,”⁷² his oeuvre should not be evaluated through the prism of artless Realism; rather, similar to his characters, Chekhov cannot be reduced to a one conventional thinking that divides objective and subjective approaches. Indeed, his real accomplishment is presenting:

the conflict between the subjective intentions of his characters and their objective tendencies and significance. This constantly creates a divided impression in the minds of the audience. On the one hand, they understand the characters’ feelings and can even sympathize with them. At the same time, they are forced into an intense experience of the tragic, tragi-comic or comic conflict between these subjective feelings and the objective social reality.⁷³

2.4 THE CLIMATE OF CHANGE AND THE POLITICS OF IRANIAN MODERNITY

In his influential book, *A History of Modern Iran*, Ervand Abrahamian elaborates on the three main pillars that supported the Pahlavi state, namely, the military, the bureaucracy, and the court patronage system.⁷⁴ These components along with the increasing oil wealth not only helped to consolidate Mohammad Reza Shah’s (reign 1941-1979) power but also enabled him to finance his “modernization” project with the help of foreign support, especially the injection of U.S. funds. Partly concerned with the re-emergence of communism and the Soviet influence in Iran and partly with the damage done to the United States’ public image due to the continued American support of the Shah and its oppressive regime, the Kennedy administration advocated social and economic reform

⁷¹ Downing Cless, *Ecology and Environment in European Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 148.

⁷² Anton Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov’s Life and Thought; Selected Letters and Commentary*, 62.

⁷³ Georg Lukács quoted by Edward Braun, “The Cherry Orchard”: 111.

⁷⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 123.

over military assistance in Iran. The executive secretary of State in his secret memorandum from January 21, 1963, captures the United States' role in the following words:

A new and positive U.S course of action has emerged since early 1961. Steps were taken to head off the threatening financial crisis, to encourage the Shah to move back into a more constitutional role, to reduce the size of Iran's military forces and improve its efficiency and public image, to work toward a moderate political synthesis, and to rely on a program of carefully planned social reform and economic development to avert what appeared to be an eventual certain overthrow of the regime followed by chaos and ascendency to power of demagogic, anti-Western forces.⁷⁵

For the Shah, on the other hand, the series of reforms was a way of improving his own popularity and legitimacy in the aftermath of the 1953 coup against Mohammad Mosaddeq as well as gaining the support for his regime among the masses, particularly the landless peasantry. Additionally, this project provided the Shah with an opportunity to mold his image as a patriotic modernizer.

As a result, on January 9, 1963, the Shah launched the *enqelab-e sefid* (the White Revolution, later known as the Revolution of the Shah and the People): a six-point reform plan—approved through a national plebiscite—which aimed at transforming Iran into a modern industrial society. The plan consisted of 1) land reform, 2) nationalization of forests, 3) sale of state-owned factories to the private sectors as a way of financing land reform, 4) profit-sharing with industrial workers to prevent exploitation of labor, 5) formation of the Literacy Corps, and 6) the advancement of women's suffrage.⁷⁶ The cornerstone of the modernization plan was the land reform which was intended to shake

⁷⁵ Quoted in James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988): 149.

⁷⁶ For a detailed examination of the *ulama's* (religious leaders') reaction to the content and implementation of the Six-Points Program, see Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999): 82-91.



Profit-sharing



Privatization of the government-owned enterprises



Literacy Corps



Land reform



Nationalization of forests



Women's suffrage

Figure 2-1: Stamps publicizing the White Revolution (Six-point reform law, January 1964⁷⁷).

⁷⁷ *Six-point Reform Act: Economic and Social Reform*, digital image, viewed August 13, 2015, http://colnect.com/en/stamps/list/country/2733-Iran/series/138115-Six-point_reform_act_economic_and_social_reform/year/1964.

the feudal power structures in rural areas and empower the peasantry through the redistribution of agricultural lands and the breakup of the feudal relationships between the absentee landlords and peasants. Simultaneously, it would permit the central government to penetrate the villages and control them politically to an extent not achieved by any previous regime since Iran's re-emergence as an independent state early in the sixteenth century.⁷⁸

However, in practice, the reform failed in a number of ways. First, it only granted land to men as heads of households and relegated women as homemakers. Second, the breakup of the rural society left many landless peasants with no option other than migrating to big cities and joining the urban poor population. Third, lack of sufficient financial support and resources for sharecroppers left them vulnerable.⁷⁹ Fourth, the land reform was financed through the sale of state-owned factories' shares, in some cases, to former landlords in payment for their land.⁸⁰ Former feudal lords, therefore, reincarnated as factory owners. Additionally, the mechanization of agriculture and the introduction of modern farming methods not only depleted the allocated funds for development in the rural areas but also made it difficult for small landholders to compete with the foreign state-sponsored agribusiness. The results, of course, forced even more unemployed peasants off their lands and into the bigger cities.

But the landholders and the peasants were not the only ones affected by the land reform. The program stimulated the most opposition among the *ulama* (religious leaders) and the *bazaaris* (traditional merchant classes) as well as the secular oppositional parties,

⁷⁸ Eric J. Hooglund, *Land and Revolution in Iran, 1960–1980* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982): II.

⁷⁹ Roksana Bahramitash and Hadi Salehi Esfahani, "Modernization, Revolution, and Islamism: Political Economy of Women's Employment," in *Veiled Employment Islamism and the Political Economy of Women's Employment in Iran*, ed. Roksana Bahramitash, Hadi Salehi Esfahani (Syracuse: University Press, 2011): 62.

⁸⁰ *Iran Almanac and Book of Facts* (Tehran, 1976): 216.

particularly The National Front. The *ulama*, who owned extensive landholdings in the form of *vaqf* lands (endowments), denounced the program under the fear of losing their properties. The *bazaaris*, on the other hand, considered the reforms as a sign of state intervention in their commercial activities.⁸¹ Additionally, the National Front denounced the program since it was carried out under undemocratic conditions.⁸² Such opposition culminated in riots after Ayatollah Khomeini's (1902-1989) sermon on 5 June 1963 in which he attacked the Shah's land reform and his pro-American policies. Rebutting the Shah's policies which he believed were endangering the country's sovereignty, he said prophetically:

You don't know whether the situation will change one day nor whether those who surround you will remain your friends. They are friends of the dollar. They have no religion, no loyalty.⁸³

The security forces severely suppressed the uprisings led by Khomeini, arrested and incarcerated him. Later, Khomeini was exiled in 1964 for the next thirteen years.

From a literary perspective, during the 1960s and 1970s, despite strict censorship, Iranian drama flourished, partly due to the government support for theater in conjunction with the reforms to endorse the "modernization" paradigm. One of the most important contributions of the government was the establishment of *Jashn-e Honar-e Shiraz* (the Shiraz Art Festival) in August-September 1967. Sponsored by Farah Diba Pahlavi, the Empress, the Shiraz Art Festival became a major international event both for avant-garde Western drama and the Iranian theater under the direction of Farrokh Ghaffary, himself a writer and filmmaker. Founding avant-garde directors such as Peter Brook, Jerzy

⁸¹ Nikki Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim World: Resistance and Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1995): 116-117.

⁸² Afshin Matin-Asgari, "The Pahlavi Era: Iranian Modernity in Global Context," *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*, ed. Touraj Daryaee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 358.

⁸³ Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, 120.

Grotowski, Robert Wilson, Peter Schumann and André Greogory, among others, put on performances in Shiraz.⁸⁴ In return, they had the opportunity to experience the traditional Iranian performing arts, such as *ta'ziyeh* and *ruhowzi* theater, experiences which subsequently influenced their writings. On the relation between the actor and audience, Peter Brook writes:

I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have seen in theater: A group of four hundred villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under a tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing—although they all knew perfectly well the end of the story—as they saw [Hossein] in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred, the theater became a truth—there was no difference between past and present. An event that was told as remembered happening in history thirteen hundred years ago, actually became a reality in that moment.⁸⁵

It was indeed Brook's exposure to *ta'ziyeh* that urged him to adapt Farid al-Din Attar's mystic fable, *Manteq al-teyr* (Conference of the Birds, 1177) for experimental productions.⁸⁶ The Shiraz Art Festival was particularly instrumental in bringing *ta'ziyeh* back to popularity, especially after a period of dormancy caused by Reza Shah's ban on such performances for twofold reasons. First, as a theater of protest, according to Hamid Dabashi, *ta'ziyeh* constitutes the possibility of Shi'ite revolt. Second, such folkloristic and traditional performances did not go well with the Shah's modernization campaign.⁸⁷

Another contributing factor in the development of Iranian drama in this period was “the continued translation of and production of European, American and occasionally Arab

⁸⁴ Jamshid Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama* (London: Frank Cass, 2004): 13.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University, 1999): 80.

⁸⁶ David Williams, *Peter Brook: A Theatrical Casebook* (London: Methuen, 1988): xiii.

⁸⁷ Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (London: Verso, 2001): 19.

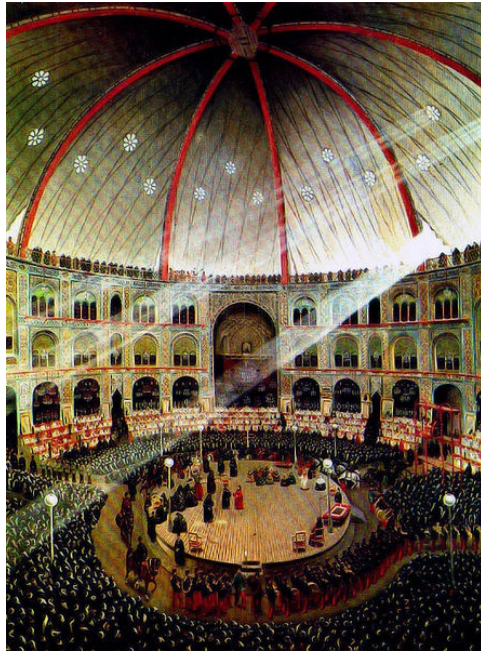


Figure 2-2: Painting of the *Tekiye Dowlat* (Royal Arena Theater) by Kamalol Molk.⁸⁸



Figure 2-3: The Martyrdom of Imam Hossein, Shiraz, August 1976.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Peter Chelkowski. Painting of the *Tekiye Dowlat* (Royal Arena Theater) by Kamalol Molk, Photograph, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, August 18, 2015, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/tazia>.

⁸⁹ Peter Chelkowski. The Martyrdom of Imam Hossein. Photograph, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, August 18, 2015, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/tazia>.

and Asian plays.”⁹⁰ Major classic and modern plays were staged by amateur or professional groups, including works by Sophocles, Shakespeare, Goethe, Ibsen, Wilde, Chekhov, Gogol, Brecht, Beckett, Pinter, Osborne, and Williams, among others. With the arrival of young Iranian dramatists trained mostly in Europe and North America, there was a growth in the number of theater halls in Tehran and other major cities. Furthermore, with the establishment of the Office of Dramatic Arts in 1958 and the blossoming of theatrical activities, numerous theater departments were formed at major universities, including Tehran University’s *Daneshkade-ye Honarha-ye Ziba* (Faculty of Fine Arts) in 1961.

In spite of all these developments under Mohammad Reza Shah, the government repression continued through censorship and punishment for “political” writers and artists who opposed the Shah’s program of modernization from above at the expense of indigenous culture, societal traditions, religion, and political freedom. Many productions were halted and publications were banned. Hamid Naficy rightly argues:

In the 1970s, the Shah’s government, sensing a threat from both leftist and Islamist forces and from dislocation caused by Westernization, intensified its attempt at constructing and administrating a type of official culture, which depended on revitalizing a partly fabricated monarchic, chauvinistic ideology and history that pre-dated Islam. This revivalism took the form of a series of state-sponsored grandiose national spectacles and rituals, such as the Shah’s own coronation, staged lavishly in 1967 [... and] the Shiraz Festival of Art and Culture, a ten-day annual extravaganza, [...] became a key showcase for the Shah’s revitalization project.⁹¹

Partly as a result of the stifling censorship restrictions, Persian drama as well as other literary and artistic productions generally resorted to enigmatic style of writing to avoid censorship by the authorities. According to M. R. Ghanoonparvar, “Iranian drama,

⁹⁰ M. R. Ghanoonparvar, “Drama,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, VII/5, pp. 529-535; August 18, 2015, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/drama>.

⁹¹ Hamid Naficy, “Iranian Cinema,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2001), 153.

as a whole, relies extensively on symbolism, as do other Persian literary forms, in both classical and modern literature.”⁹² In addition to the domestic changes, the international factors triggered the Iranian authors of the period’s interest for writing. As Mehrzad Boroujerdi argues, this generation of writers was also heavily influenced by the World War II, atomic holocaust at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War, bitter disillusionment with Stalinism, the Vietnam War, student movements and rise of dictatorships, consequences of economic dependency, as well as the nationalist uprisings. The combination of these factors helps to explain the proliferation of socialist agenda in literary productions.⁹³

It is in this phase of social and economic transitions that Akbar Radi embarks on producing his plays. Radi’s artistic career conforms pretty well to the economic and sociopolitical commentary that dominated modern Iranian drama from its very inception in the late nineteenth century. However, to understand the significance of Radi’s literary approach, the politics of Iranian literature and the prevalent ideological maps of the time should be examined first.

2.5 INTELLECTUAL TRANSITIONS IN MODERN IRAN

Prior to and around the time when Radi was writing, so much of Iranian intellectual activity was oriented: 1) away from tradition and religion and toward Western liberal values and glorification of Pre-Islamic past, 2) at a nativist discourse which advocated a cultural resistance to the penetration of the West and reliance on indigenous and historical culture, 3) or at adopting middle way that would bridge the gap between nationalist tendencies and religious beliefs. One of the early figures of the first trend is Mirza Fath Ali

⁹² M. R. Ghanoonparvar, “Persian Plays and the Iranian Theater,” in *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts of the Middle East*, ed. Sherifa Zuhur (Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2001): 95.

⁹³ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996): 74.

Akhundzadeh (1812-78), a dramatist and a translator who promoted Enlightenment ideas of secularism, rationality, and freedom as prerequisites for progress and development. Other intellectuals, such as Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1853-96) and Hassan Taqizadeh (1878-1970), would follow his footsteps in expressing nationalist sentiments to construct an Iranian identity. The ideas of these intellectuals regarding the separation of religion from politics, the introduction of the rule of law, and limiting of the monarch's power laid some of the groundwork for the Constitutional Revolution of 1906⁹⁴. Ironically, similar sentiments not only were echoed in the 1950s by Mohammad Mosaddeq, the charismatic leader of the National Front, but also they found earlier resonance in Reza Shah's rhetoric of modernization and nationalism—another step consistent with his efforts at reducing the power of the clergy. No wonder then that “appeals to a sense of Aryan ethnicity and pre-Islamic Zoroastrian culture were echoed in the sentiments and actions of Reza Khan.”⁹⁵ Even though these thinkers' approach was to some extent successful, it also suffered from a major weakness. Similar to many intellectuals of the age, Iranian intelligentsia for the most part espoused the ideas and ideals of democracy and freedom while remained alienated from the realities of economic needs and the class struggle. As Parsinejad notes, “Like their European predecessors, they believed in overcoming social problems simply by shedding light on them.”⁹⁶

Yet these views represent only one aspect of Iranian intellectual movement. Nativism is another nationalist discourse. According to Mehrzad Boroujerdi, “in its

⁹⁴ Pejman Abdolmohammadi, “History, National Identity and Myths in the Iranian Contemporary Political Thought: Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-78), Mirza Aqa Khan Kerman (1853-96) and Hassan Taqizadeh (1878-1970),” *Perceptions of Iran: History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Ali M. Ansari (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014): 26.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Shabnam J. Holliday, *Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011): 30.

⁹⁶ Iraj Parsinejad, *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran (1866-1951)* (Bethesda: IBEX Publishers, 2001): 90.

broadest sense nativism can be defined as the doctrine that calls for the resurgence, reinstatement or continuance of native or indigenous cultural customs, beliefs, and values.”⁹⁷ The origins of the Iranian intellectual nativism go back to the debates maintained by Seyyed Fakhroddin Shadman (1907-67), Ahmad Fardid (1912-94), Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-69) and Ali Shariati (1933–77) who advocated the concepts of Iranian authenticity and *bazgasht be khishtan* (return to the self) and warned against the cultural and financial dominance of the West. The malaise was called *gharbzadegi* (Westoxification), a term Al-e Ahmad adopted from Fardid, who was himself a disciple of the proto-Nazi German philosopher, Martin Heidegger. In spite of their differing secular and religious points of departure, a common basis was shared by them all, i.e., these intellectuals rejected the Shah’s modernization arguing that the project “had made society vulnerable to the temptations of an alien and morally decadent West.”⁹⁸ Ironically in their attempt to confront Eurocentrism, they fell into the trap of categorical, dualistic thinking and began to write about themselves and the Western world from the vantage point of dissimilarity. As Edward Said argues, this sort of nativism “reinforces the distinction [between the colonizer and the colonized] by revealing the weaker or subservient partner. And it has often led to compelling but demagogic assertions about a native past, narrative or actuality that stands free from worldly time itself.”⁹⁹

Yet another group under the progressive leadership of Mohammad Mosaddeq and his colleagues in the National Front, aspired to find a middle ground between the nationalist tendencies and religious beliefs while promoting independence and democracy. In spite of

⁹⁷ Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*, 14.

⁹⁸ Zhand Shakibi, *Khatami and Gorbachev: Politics of Change in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010): 58.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Hamid Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in a Time of Terror* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009): 258-259.

their profound differences, the leftist Tudeh party, which was also formed shortly after Reza Shah's abdication in 1941, joined the National Front in promoting the Constitutional values of democracy, particularly the attempts to limit the power for the monarchy. However, following the 1953 CIA-engineered coup d'état against the government of the prime minister Mosaddeq, both opposition parties were dismantled and Mohammad Reza Shah was installed as the new dictator.

Akbar Radi's tempered Realism and social commitment coupled with his mastery of Iranian culture and the Gilaki dialect of Persian are responses not only to the political, economic, and social transitions at the time but also to the need of reworking Western literary models to new ends. In his literary approach to Iranian history and the intellectual life of society, Radi took a realistic turn that fits the above mentioned intellectual maps. He was always a fervent admirer of Anton Chekhov, Nikolai Gogol, Henrik Ibsen, Tennessee Williams as well as other Western playwrights; yet, he did not spare a moment to acknowledge his debt to indigenous forms of drama, such as *ta'ziyeh* and *ruhowzi* and to pay homage to the great Iranian writers, especially Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951) and Bahram Sadeqi (1937-1985)¹⁰⁰—the former a romantic nationalist with anti-Islamic attitudes and the latter an experimental writer famous for his blistering satire and parodies. Radi advocates a theater of “identity”—a “national, non-protocol driven, but federative”¹⁰¹ theater—which is concerned with the people's awareness of themselves and their history, traditions, and culture. At the same time, in response to the sociopolitical processes of nationalism and the essentialist call for refashioning of the self and nation, Radi's theater stages overlapping and intertwined identities and explores mixes of culture in order to provide alternatives for comprehending pluralities. His dramaturgy entails mixing between

¹⁰⁰ Malek Ebrahim Amiri, *Mokalemat ba Akbar Radi* (Conversations with Akbar Radi): 76.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

traditional and folk Iranian cultural elements, while incorporating modern Western and contemporary influences.

Far from being a cultural chauvinist or a mere imitator of Western art and literature, Radi promoted a more innovative way on the part of the writers who imparted Western models asking them to rebuild such models according to their existing social framework. “Those Easterners who, clinging to the idea of ‘global village’, copy other [writers] and whose words parade between the West’s crotch seams, in fact have no contemporary understanding about the extent of human [agency] and the geography of their scene.”¹⁰² In other words, Radi was not the sole proponent of nativism nor did he fully embrace the acculturated position. Rather, he fostered a theater of identity that could bring out its own indigenous heritage as well as interacting with the Western literary tradition without any qualm. By adopting a middle ground perspective, the new dramatic production could adapt foreign models while remaining distinctively Iranian both in form and in spirit.

Labkhand-e Ba Shokuh-e Aqa-ye Gil is one of the instances of this period that subscribes to Radi’s sense of a historicity as well as his idea of a theater of identity. Since the English translation of the play is not available in English, before discussing the above mentioned themes, a brief summary is provided here.

2.6 LABKHAND-E BA SHOKUH-E AQA-YE GIL (1971)

The story of *Labkhand-e Ba Shokuh-e Aqa-ye Gil* (hereinafter referred to as *Labkhand-e Aqa-ye Gil*) portrays Iran’s intellectual and social climate in the post-land reform era that broke the tie between landlords and the rural population and was an attempt to take lands out of the hands of aristocratic landlords and to pass them into those of the

¹⁰² Quoted in Faramarz Talebi, *Akbar Radi: A Literary Biography*: 42-43.

better-off peasantry.¹⁰³ The play has three acts and they all happen in Aliqoli Khan Gil's estate. Radi's Gil is a seventy-year-old former landowner who is suffering from cancer. The story begins when Fakhri A'zam, who is a cosmetology doctor and the second oldest daughter of the family, along with her husband, Tajaddod, pays a visit to her ill father, after her older sister, Forughozzaman, has informed them about their father's cancer. To confirm the diagnosis, after examining Gil, the couple recommends him for a further testing. At the same time, they persuade Gil to draw them an oversized check to fund their project of starting a private hospital.

Forughozzaman, a psychology professor, has an unquenchable thirst for power marked by her willingness to manipulate the members of her family. Jamshid, the youngest of all siblings, holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from the Sorbonne University and spends the majority of his time drinking coffee, reading philosophy books, and playing piano. He has aspirations of building a school one day in his future inheritance of land in Gilan to serve the lower classes. On many occasions throughout the play, he is upbraided by his older sister for his lack of attention to the father's declining health. Davud, the second oldest brother, is a ferocious womanizer. He is a fan of gambling, hunting, and drinking and spends much of his time away from home and in nature. As a means of treatment, Davud encourages his father to take the young servant of the house, Tuti, as a concubine instead of undergoing the surgery. Gil feels tempted to accept the suggestion on condition his favorite daughter, Forughozzaman, approves. Mehrangiz, the youngest daughter, was born with a limp and is unmarried. She, too, pays but very little attention to her father's illness. Mehrangiz is a painter with a detached character who occasionally recites poems solely

¹⁰³ See for example, Ann K. S. Lambton, *The Persian Land Reform 1962-1966* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

from Forugh Farrokhzad,¹⁰⁴ a talented Iranian poet who epitomized the need for breaking conventional barriers both in life and art. Nuroddin, Gil's oldest son, shows some concern regarding his father's health; however, in reality he is mostly worried about his business and the family's financial situation. Their mother, Gilantaj, is a mad old woman, whom Forughozzaman keeps usually locked up alone in a room.

Throughout the second and third act, the discussion of inherence spills over into serious conflicts among the siblings. Triggered by Forughozzaman, the father disinherits Jamshid and before being hospitalized for treatment, he donates the Gildeh village, which was originally supposed to be Jamshid's inherited land, to the farmers asking them to build a mosque, a school, and a clinic on it. When Gil's health begins a steep decline, Forughozzaman takes full control of everything. In accordance with Gil's will, Jamshid is thrown out of his father's house after verbal altercations with his oldest siblings and Davud, who gets the father's personal belongings, under a fit of (partial) insanity, rapes Tuti and commits suicide afterwards. As the play moves to its end, the breaking of the seventy-year-old-pine is heard in their yard.

2.7 FAMILY DECLINE NARRATIVE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN IRAN

"I think Latin American writers over the past half-century have taught genius writers a lesson: they took recourse to ethnic myths and announced their independence to the world using a national poetic metaphysics," observes Akbar Radi in his conversation with Malek Ebrahim Amiri. He continues:

If not in cotton fields and banana companies, [Latin American writers] return to self and discover their roots at least in their ironic literature. And this is the battle fought between the authenticity and the monster of power. Well, what then do we do in this part of the East? What is our Asian Realism? And what is the

¹⁰⁴ For a biography of Forugh Farrokhzad and an introduction to her poetry, see Michael Craig Hillmann, *A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and Her Poetry* (New York: Three Continents Press, 1987).

contemporary national 'I' that aligns with the common human experiences? And what is the dominant national sense that can conform itself to the common human soul and be absorbed into a human culture? In the Third World [countries], I believe ... there exists only one theater and that is the theater of identity.¹⁰⁵

Radi welcomes what other, especially Western, cultures may contribute to the modern Iranian theater. At the same time, his theater emphasizes the components of the national language and culture. Throughout his dramatic oeuvre, Radi is concerned about the collective memory of his country, especially in works like *Labkhand-e Aqa-ye Gil* that is symptomatic of a heightened sense of anxiety related to the sense of decline and demise among the Iranian landholders and the emergence of new classes during the land reform era. Therefore, in spite of resemblances of the plots in *The Cherry Orchard* and *Labkhand-e Aqa-ye Gil*—the collapse of the aristocracy in a changing society—different contexts within which these dramas are produced should be examined carefully.

The play opens in the family's estate with an elegant staircase made of marble flanked by two delicate deer heads, a view of a garden featuring willow trees, and adorned with exquisite carpets, an elaborate chandelier, a grand piano, a nineteenth-century-style large wall clock stopped at ten minutes to three as well as other lavish furniture that characterize the owners' aspiration to maintain a conspicuous luxurious lifestyle. Yet while the play's setting and the opening stage directions do seem affirmative, the final lines of this section sharply contrast with the idea of the idyll life. It is near the end of the paragraph in lines like "the hallway with its precise, majestic, and *bleak* furnishings reflect a *morose* and bourgeoisie atmosphere [*italics mine*]"¹⁰⁶ and "the harmony of useless ornamental objects resonates a painful melody of pride, *savagery*, and *isolation* masked behind marks

¹⁰⁵ Malek Ebrahim Amiri, *Mokalamat ba Akbar Radi* (Conversations with Akbar Radi): 105-6.

¹⁰⁶ Akbar Radi, *Labkhand-e Ba Shokouh-e Aqa-ye Gil* (The Glorious Smile of Mr. Gil) (Tehran: Zaman, 1973): 8.

of distinction and the Rashti aristocracy [*italics mine*]"¹⁰⁷ that the audience is provided with the gap between the two levels of reality that will be crucial later in the play.

The narrative then takes a Chekhovian turn as it focuses on wasted lives, unfulfilled dreams, and dashed hopes. The title character, Aliqoli Khan-e Gil, is a feudal lord whose landholdings have been taken away from him in exchange for factory shares under the land reform program. As a result, he is declining both economically and politically. Gone are his golden days and with that his glorious, feudalistic patriarchal smile. What remains now of Gil (a name referred to the inhabitants of the northern province of Gilan) is a dying body, a mad wife, and children who are more concerned with their share of wealth than the plight of the father. Even the play's title is an indication of the narrative's penchant for the end of an era as the title character, Aqaye Gil, does not appear in person until the end of Act I and even then his presence is far from being an occasion for glory and/or authority. Dressed in a fine robe, a *termeh*¹⁰⁸ nightcap while hefting his golden-headed cane, Aliqoli Khan enters the stage, but he cannot even walk on his own without the support of Nuroddin, Tajaddod, and Fakhri A'zam. He has grown visibly ill and is robbed of his glamour and former majesty. Time has changed and his once unquestionable feudal rule is now being exposed as oppressive and exploitative and being responded to with disgust and indignation. Trying to be in-tune with the new situation, Aliqoli Khan wishes to live ten years longer to correct his past mistakes and to set a new course. Speaking in a low voice as if talking to himself, he murmurs:

On a sunny day, in a buoyant mood, I'll sit in that beige metallic car and go to the factory. I'll go there humble and downright folksy; they'll cheer and clap for me. I know it's fake; they still look at me as a master who has come to take their lives, but I don't care. I depend on my golden-headed cane and yes, I should remember

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ A traditional paisley cloth woven in Yazd, embroidered with gold thread and all sorts of lavish embellishments.

to wear my glasses. I'll transform the factory [workers] with one phrase: twenty-percent increase in wages... How's that? [*He listens.*] I can hear their cheer. This time it isn't fake. I've changed their destinies and deserve such gratitude. Look! [...] I then raise my cane and wave it at them with a smile...¹⁰⁹

As the passage shows, in spite of Aliqoli Khan's seeming willingness to concede to the demands of the toiling workers and his inclination to improve their conditions, he is still unable to detach himself from feudal ways of thinking and his role as a benevolent lord. Partly relying on his abundant wealth, Gil considers himself distinct and in many respects superior to the born commoners and those who work for wages. Congruent with the feudalistic dynamics, he feels entitled to assert his ethnic and social superiority as well as indispensability. After years of oppression, therefore, Gil still believes that his workers should be grateful to him for rewarding them with unexpected bonuses.

In addition to the factory workers, Gil negligently fails to provide his in attendance servants with better living conditions as well. When he asks the young servant, Tuti, about the room where they all live, she says:

TUTI: [*Hesitantly.*] Maar Jaan and Dokhtar Agha have asked me to tell you that...

ALIQOLI KHAN: To tell what?

TUTI: That you think about a place for us to spend nights.

ALIQOLI KHAN: And why don't they speak up for themselves?

TUTI: They're embarrassed to do so, Sir. They are not allowed to set foot in the manor.

ALIQOLI KHAN: Well, what can I do for them? What's happening at the other side of the garden?

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 52-53.

TUTI: Nothing, Sir, but... we're six or seven people living in a box. When sleeping, you do not know what'd happen. We are not *mahrms*.¹¹⁰ [...] If only I could take my bedclothes to the basement, to that storage...¹¹¹

The combination of land reform's shortcomings and a growing number of urban labor proved economically devastating for workers. No longer did the employer/master felt some responsibility to look after his workers' needs as well as their poor working and living conditions, insecure tenure, and low wages. When informed about the workers' cramped living arrangements, however, Gil alleges that he was unaware of their poor housing situation and at least tries to detach himself from the stereotypical cruel master who treats his servants merely as means. He then reveals a desire to improve Tuti's and her brother's living conditions. "I've got a great idea for you and your brother, Pray it happens..."¹¹² Aliqoli Khan says. Although such instances may offer a more humane image of Gil and the feudal and patriarchal systems, it is worth looking closely at the character's real motivations.

Gil's wife, Gilantaj (whose name literally means 'the crown of Gilan'), is first introduced through the spatial perspective—she is locked up in a room and is pounding on the door. When loneliness and fear wells up within her, Gilantaj screams to get free. Her mobility in space is narrowed down to the small space she occupies in her diminished status as a mad woman—one who can be silenced and sent away when family members give her a piece of chocolate fish. Unable to understand the life around her or adapt herself to the changing conditions, she lives upon past glory and earnestly prays for Gil's health. Indeed, as a mother and as an archetype for land, she is essential to the continuation of his patriarchy. She has been used as a proxy for Gil's territorial, economic, and sexual

¹¹⁰ In Islamic shari'a terminology, a *mahram* is an unmarriageable kin with whom sexual intercourse is never permissible, such as mother, father, daughter, son, sister, brother, etc.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 67.

dominance as well as the procreator and bearer of the future generation. But now that life is slipping away from their fingers, one is succumbing to cancer and the other to madness, she is the first person who mentions remarriage as the solution to the crisis in patriarchal authority. Feeling that an imminent celebration is bound to happen in the depressing atmosphere of their house, Gilantaj forms her fingers to the shape of a camera lens and addresses Forughozzaman, Mehrangiz, and Tuti respectively.

GILANTAJ: Not you, I fear you'd end up a spinster. Nor you. If you weren't crippled, a nice young man might have married and taken you with him... Aha! Click! It blinked. It's your omen Tuti. Watch out! Your fortune will rise, but you need to act on it. You should pray for my Sir's good health. [*Tuti is entranced.*] Pray for him to arise as strong as an ox and to look down with his stunning eyes on heaven and earth once again. [...] [*To Davud*] Only if her breath touches that of Sir's, it'd heal him like Jesus' breath. [...] It'd wash away all his diseases like a white virgin rabbit.¹¹³

This idea is quickly picked up by Davud who then urges his already in love father to inhale youthful breath as a way of strengthening Gil's patriarchy. In response to Aliqoli Khan's concern about his daughters' reactions, especially Forughozzaman's, regarding him marrying a peasant girl, Davud continues: "You've to learn a lesson from your ancestors. You should mix your old, tired, and thin blood with a young and thick one. This is not self-indulgence Sir, it's self-sacrifice."¹¹⁴

Aliqoli Khan's feelings for the young girl first become evident when the two of them are present on the stage for the first time. As Tuti enters, Aliqoli Khan stares at her momentarily with his eyes full of affection. This and following instances set up the stage for possible bond between master and servant. Furthermore, the formation of such a passion between the two justifies Aliqoli Khan's concern regarding the brother and sister's poor housing conditions. On the other hand, contrary to Forughozzaman, Aliqoli Khan is fully

¹¹³ Ibid., 27-8.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

aware of the family's dependence on the servants and their service. He says to the latter: "If only one night we tie them up and keep them confined at the far end of the garden, we'll perish soon. [*Pause.*] In fact, I'd put forward an alternative suggestion: why is the basement, for instance, left vacant for no apparent reason?"¹¹⁵ Confronted with such reasoning, Forughozzaman rejects the idea of warranting the servants (whom she considers as "animals" and "insects") a more gentle treatment while reminding her father that the basement is not vacant since her dog, Sorena, sleeps there at night.

Gil repeatedly mentions his wish to live ten years longer and his desire to correct his wrongdoing. He plans to consolidate his power and to redefine his relationships with people and his workers and to break away from aristocratic lifestyle in order to win their hearts and support. In fact, his desire for replacing his traditional old wife by a young peasant girl aligns well with his impulse to move away from the feudal land ownership and the authoritarian system to a more democratic structure. To do so, however, Aliqoli Khan first seeks to secure the permission of Forughozzaman, who initially resists the possibility of such a union. Later when she seemingly agrees to her father's remarriage, Aliqoli Khan momentarily enjoys the possibility of the continuation of his glorious life. His optimism, however, is shattered when he realizes that his favorite daughter has ordered a black lace cloth in preparation for the father's upcoming funeral. Bent over on his cane, Aliqoli Khan stares at the audience with a glorious smile at the end of Act Two before physically disappearing from the play. Near the end of Act III, the breakdown of the seventy-year-old pine, a symbol of eternity and longevity, alludes to Gil's death and the subsequent disintegration of the world as he knew it. In spite of his attempt to suspend the passage of

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

time, historical changes prove to be inevitable. Ironically, the exact time at which the wall clock has stopped happen to be same as the time of his death.

Yet the play is not concentrating on a single protagonist, Radi utilizes a realistic mode to provide examples of a rich ensemble of characters from different classes, professions, and individual personalities in order to portray a panoramic view of the Iran of his time. These characters all have their own peculiarities and every one of them is important to the development of the plot. To capture the reality from below, each of the characters narrate their own stories within their cultural and historical moment. At the same time, similar to Aliqoli Khan who represents the collapse of the feudal power, other characters also represent their time through the behavior and beliefs that are derived from historical circumstances. In this respect, representation in Radi's play reflects not only the realistic principle of verisimilitude but also is suggestive of the problematic relationship between nostalgia/tradition and modernity.

The presence of such tension is evident in the author's portrayal of fragmented characters and their isolation. They are isolated not only emotionally, but also spatially and Radi's use of restricted domestic setting in the play reinforces the atmosphere of loneliness. His characters are for the most part physically present but emotionally disconnected. In the words of Forughzaman, "Only in our letters, we are kind to each other and want to be together. When apart, we'd miss each other only when we feel the full force of homesickness."¹¹⁶ Their fear of the discontinuity with the past, their inability to deal with the emerging social values and norms, the collapse of their family structure, and their displacement contributes to their sense of inadequacies in the present and the experience of in-betweenness shared by them all.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 46-47.

Forughozzaman, a symbol of matriarchy in the play, for instance, is willing to sacrifice anything to inherit the father's aristocratic status. Insolent and authoritative, she spares no chance to exercise her authority at home and at work in the most despotic way. In a like manner, she considers both family members and her students simply as objects that might be studied at will to advance her profession as a psychology professor. She observes Jamshid to collect information about his "abnormal" behavior, gives drugs to Gilantaj to study their effects on her, refrains from hospitalizing her ill mother to avoid divulging family "secrets," suggests Mehrangiz to go to her office to undergo some psychological tests, and even finds Tuti's "evil nature" convenient to conform to her theory on "education's diffraction factor in heterogeneous social classes." She thinks of herself as an intellectual and a modern woman, but she cannot resign herself to the traditional beliefs that values women's chastity and sexual passivity, for instance, in the scene when she warns Tuti against wearing makeup and advises her to dress decently. The emptiness of her claims is underscored later in scenes like the one where Mehrangiz is using the half-naked Taher as a model for painting. Forughozzaman pauses in the doorway and "stares at Taher. As if beginning to feel the stirrings of a dormant desire, she walks close to him. Pauses. Her eyes devouring his bare shoulders;"¹¹⁷ but she gradually comes back to herself and dismisses the boy. Or when she boasts about Gil's decedents' gentle upbringing, but does not hesitate to use bad language to insult the servants and whoever opposes her or disobeys her directions. Unable to forge a close bond with her family members or to keep good relationships with people of lower rank whom she considers as sub-human, Forughozzaman feels detached and lonely. Talking to Aliqoli Khan, she acknowledges that, "everyone hates me,"¹¹⁸ yet her inability to resist the power and control stops her from

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 99.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

allying herself with others. For example, when her father reveals his intension to begin socializing with the gentry and the lower classes alike, as a subtle protest, she says, “I think too much socialization can wear one out.”¹¹⁹ Given her manipulative attitude, no wonder Forughozzaman becomes the heiress of Gil’s possessions and authority at the end of the play. While her installment as the new noble matriarch within the context of her family, in particular, and in an already disappearing aristocracy, in general, may seem absurd to the point of self-caricature, it can also undermine the possibility of a better future in the absence of democratic institutions.

The inability/unwillingness to disengage oneself from the superior class perspective and to face the erosion of privileged status is also a remarkable trait in Forughozzaman’s siblings. Mehrangiz, for instance, enjoys reciting Farrokhzad, whose poetry foregrounds the themes of oppression, emancipation, and social constraints. She often holds an orchid flower, spends her time drawing paintings, and expresses her lack of interest in meeting the snobs and traditional people. Despite her presumably sensitive personality, however, she is unable to cut herself off from her aristocratic roots. In the above-mentioned scene, for example, she forces the young dumb servant, Taher, to kneel down, keep the heavy armchair over his head, and hold that “natural” pose so that she can create her version of Sisyphus. The fact that the youngest family member is born with a limp further emphasizes her personal struggle in such a transitional society and foregrounds the contradictions concerning Iran’s entry to modernity.

Nuroddin, on the other hand, is a marketeer who willingly offers his loyalty to the highest power in exchange for money. He appears only in a few scenes and has minimal dialogue that focuses almost exclusively on financial matters. When Aliqoli Khan talks

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 54.

about his future plans of improving his ties with the common people, he is the first person to express his dissatisfaction with the father's generosity towards the workers and common people and later suggests that as the heir-to-be he would dominate those people only through "power and cruelty."¹²⁰ Similarly, he tries to comfort himself by restoring the past glory of a feudal power through cementing his superiority over and disdain for the lower classes. For instance, when Aliqoli Khan remains hospitalized, Nuroddin supports Forughozzaman's decision to suddenly dismiss Tuti and Taher after years of service without the means of subsistence and warns Jamshid that whenever opportunity is high, these seemingly docile servants would spare no time in wreaking vengeance against the masters. At the end, although Nuroddin does not become Gil's heir, he manages to secure his position in the family through affirming his loyalty to the new power.

Another character who is unable to let go of the past and to face the present is Davud. He takes relaxation at saunas, enjoys fine food and drink, and cherishes the tradition of hunting as an aristocratic pastime. His desire to be in control and his pursuit of pleasure, however, is not limited to animals. In a scene that foreshadows the calamity of the ending, for instance, Davud returns home from hunting after having killed a white bellied rabbit—a symbol of purity as well as sexual fertility. He then puts the dead animal next to Aliqoli Khan's feet while trying to urge him to consider marrying Tuti.

DAVUD: I told you my humble opinion before; instead of these ceremonies, you should sacrifice a rabbit as an offering. [*Aliqoli Khan stands up anxiously and walks with the help of his cane.*] Your noble blood is tired, Sir and a virgin white rabbit is a remedy for this pain.¹²¹

Aliqoli Khan's declining health, however, robs him of the chance of continuing his domination. While Gil is hospitalized, Forughozzaman executes his will and Davud

¹²⁰ Ibid., 119.

¹²¹ Ibid., 70.

receives his share of inheritance, which includes a diamond-gemmed opium-pipe, a ruby prayer beads (*tasbih*), an emerald ring, a lock of Gil's hair, and a handwritten note. The significance of these symbols of power and the content of the note become clear near the end of the play when Davud receives the death notification telephone call from the hospital. At the same time, the loud sound of the breaking old pine is heard. Imitating his father by wearing the inherited antiques, Davud is a step away from sanctifying the other part of his inheritance, Tuti. Surrounded and seduced by the symbols of power, he considers deflowering the virgin servant as his prerogative right. After consummating his beastly desires and his lust for power, Davud grabs his gun and commits suicide next to swimming pool. As a member of the feudal aristocracy he is unable to adapt to the new realities and cannot cope with the diminishing power, status, and loss of traditional privileges. Suicide, therefore, is the last resort for him.

Jamshid, the youngest son of Aliqoli Khan, on the other hand, seems at first to be an exception to this feudalistic attitude towards authority. He is a foreign-educated philosopher and a representative of the Iranian intellectuals. From his very first entrance, Jamshid's political and philosophical commitment to articulate the proletariat interests sets him apart from the rest of his family members. He ridicules Forughozzaman's pomposity towards lower classes, her snobbishness towards the students, and rails against the exploitation of servants and their poor living and working conditions. Denouncing the aristocratic pretensions and power, he says:

You've built this suburban twenty one-bedroom villa of four-acre to enjoy the landscape garden of your own; you've displaced seven or eight poor people from land on which they lived and brought them here as servants, maids, gardeners, cooks, bakers, yogurt makers, and blah blah blah to serve a few cultivated nobles. They work like dogs from dawn to dusk and perform their ceremonious duties, but they do not own any space in this villa even a space as small as a grave.¹²²

¹²² Ibid., 94-95.

His tirade, however, is quickly undercut by the contrast between his words and his character. He can only step away from the argument when confronted by Forughozzaman, who challenges his lack of action and accuses him of not practicing what he preaches.

Similarly, Jamshid's obedience to Aliqoli Khan, his concern about the father's plan to cut his pocket money, and his distanced and idle lifestyle are at odds with his heroic speeches about a better and more egalitarian future. He often carries books in his hand and quotes from Nietzsche, but as an idealist he is stung by inaction. In the words of Forughozzaman, "you develop many plans and your mind is being constantly bombarded with ideas, but you are always stopped on verge of action."¹²³ Even though he is the one person in his family who makes futuristic speeches and expresses concerns for the laborers, his inability to venture out into the "real" world and to take action is symptomatic of the intellectual stagnation and shallowness that might have permeated the minds of the Iranian intelligentsia at the time. At the end of the play, Forughozzaman who has locked Jamshid out of his room, asks him to decide between two options: First, after providing her brother with a pistol clip, she encourages him to commit suicide to atone for his lost honor; Second, before leaving the hall, she throws the room's keys at Jamshid allowing him to spend one more night at her manor. Once alone, he grabs the clip and looks at the pistol in fascination, but ultimately picks up the keys and goes back to his room. In spite of his moral and ideological standpoints, Jamshid is not a promising leader of change. His inability to abandon the old mode of existence, adapt to the present, or act toward a progressive future reflects the play's emphasis on the contradictions of modernity.

¹²³ Ibid., 146.

The clash between tradition and modernity is perhaps best evident from in the dialogue between Aliqoli Khan and his son-in-law, Tajaddod, whose name literally means modernity.

TAJADDOD: To your health, Sir! We'll start the project this week.

ALIQOLI KHAN: If you don't get offended... and even if you do it doesn't matter, so you'd better not... I should say you stink like a cadaver.

TAJADDOD: Thanks Sir, appreciate it!

ALIQOLI KHAN: Down the toilet! You're demanding your shares in advance, but none of your plans will ever fly!¹²⁴

Tajaddod is not only a second-degree family member but also lacks a noble background—things that put him in an inferior position within the power dynamics of the Gil family. In spite of his name, elements of modernity discernable in his character are only superficial. He talks about spending the New Year's vacation in Europe and wears western-style clothing, but in spirit, Mr. "Tajaddod," does not live up to his role. Instead of advocating a progressive outlook to align himself with the historical forces that are sweeping his country, he is completely submissive to the patriarchal power, although mostly to gain financial profit.

Aside from his utter obedience to the father figure, Tajaddod proves to be completely incompetent in the few short scenes when he appears in Act I and before he disappears entirely for the rest of the play. When he first enters the stage, his character is described as a short man with a small hunch who holds a medical bag and walk behind his wife. He rarely has anything to say but stupid things and dull memories or parroting his wife's exact words. Near the end of the Act I, for example, Fakhri A'zam asks her husband to call home and to check on their daughter, Pantea, who is left at home with her nanny,

¹²⁴ Ibid., 45.

Ozra. Tajaddod seems unable to remember their own telephone number and finally dials the number only after his wife provides him with the correct digits.

TAJADDOD: Ozra, is that you? What's Panti doing? Watching TV?

FAKHRI A'ZAM: Didn't I tell you! Ask if she ate her banana smoothie?

TAJADDOD: Did she eat her banana smoothie? [*To Fakhri A'zam*] She ate it.

FAKHRI A'ZAM: She shouldn't be exposed to cold air.

TAJADDOD: She shouldn't be exposed to cold air.

FAKHRI A'ZAM: Has she listened to the dialogue on the record?

TAJADDOD: Has she listened to the dialogue on the record?

FAKHRI A'ZAM: Room temperature should be set at twenty one [centigrade].

TAJADDOD: Room temperature should be set at twenty one [centigrade].

FAKHRI A'ZAM: Has she gone to the bathroom?

TAJADDOD: Has she gone to the bathroom?

FAKHRI A'ZAM: Alrighty!

TAJADDOD: Alrighty!

FAKHRI A'ZAM: What a relief...

[*Tajaddod hangs up the phone. Faint music is heard from upstairs. Mehrangiz enters.*]¹²⁵

Even though Radi's depiction of the fall of feudalism and traditional patriarchy cherishes the promise of social and individual emancipation and progress toward a hopeful future, he also complicates the notion of progress, primarily through his meditations on nostalgia for a stable past juxtaposed with what may be described as incomplete or pseudo-modernity, i.e., a superficial imitation of the Western project of modernity. Radi's

¹²⁵ Ibid., 49-50.

Tajaddod is the most superficial of the characters, a trait that is even evident in his profession. As a cosmetology doctor, he overemphasizes the importance of beauty and physical appearance advising others on the use of skin aids and a proper diet for a better complexion. The irony, of course, is that he possesses none of these characteristics. He is neither handsome nor strong and well-made. His manners are devoid of distinction or charm and his slavery to the demands of his body has removed him from the realm of mind and the intellect. In fact, his attention to financial matters and monetary gain, his subservice, and his superficiality are suggestive of the author's hint at the fragility of pseudo-modernity's project and its progressive promises in the face of capitalism. In fact, even though feudalism and aristocracy have begun to sink rapidly into decay, the new era hardly seems to be the messenger of a new phase of history.

2.8 CONCLUSION

Similar to the characters of *The Cherry Orchard*, characters in *Labkhand-e Aqa-ye Gil* belong to a transitional period. Confronted with a state of crisis regarding their own legitimation and challenged by the potentially destabilizing forces of modernity, they are faced with the difficulty of coming to terms with the position to which they have been reduced. Gilantaj's nostalgia for the family's secure position mingled with occasional urge to sink into the past memories, Davud's lavish lifestyle in spite of the family's financial decline, Gil's false hope of a return to power and restoration of the old order, Forughozzaman's belief of her birthright to wield authority in a changing society, Nuroddin's aristocratic perspective towards the lower classes, Mehrangiz's indulgence in leisure pursuits, and Jamshid's inability to leave the comforts of an aristocratic lifestyle in spite of his progressive viewpoints, are all indicative of the characters' attachment to the

past, their psychological constraints to make the transition to the new world, as well as their struggle to adapt to the present.

The same tensions constitute Chekhov's narrative focus represented by the nobility's nostalgia for and idealization of a remote past, Lopakhin's affection for Ranevskaya, as well as his failure to overcome his peasants origins in spite of success, Firs' adherence to the old order, and even Trofimov's disregard for the passage of time. Yet, as it becomes clear at the end of the play, none of them can escape the impact of social change on their lives. With the destruction of social mobility barriers, a new era has dawned—one in which members of the rising classes are replacing the traditional aristocracy. Whether a brighter future described by Trofimov will in fact occur is not enunciated by the author himself. Nor does he deny the possibility of it altogether. It is only the passage of time that would reveal the validity of his prophetic qualities.

In addition to addressing implications of social, economic, and political change within their respective societies, the works' general atmospheres and the playwrights' use of symbols share some resemblances. But is this as far as the similarity goes? Given the links between the two plays, could it be that, instead of an inept, lumbering imitation of Chekhov, the works appear similar because both writers were exploring the same phenomenon? The differences between characters' initiatives for action in one versus inability to act in the other as well as the endings seem to nurture that possibility. With the Russian play, characters are anchored to the past and are paralyzed by inaction as a result. Gone is the orchard and with that the heyday of aristocracy. Yet, underneath the despair that was produced as a result of economic and social changes in the Russian society, there could be some hope for the new generation who express the will to break with the past and a new beginning. With the Iranian play, however, not all characters are trapped in their own inaction. While emphasizing their aristocratic status and values, Aliqoli Khan,

Forughozzaman, and Nuroddin, for instance, try to engage with the “real” world in an attempt to regain some bygone greatness. By the end of the play, even though the old pine disappears, the aristocratic manor and the successor to the estate do not. Perhaps, given the atmosphere of despair following the 1953 coup d’état and the consequent reinstatement of dictatorship that influenced Radi’s dramatic production, maintaining Chekhov’s bitter-sweet quality seems to be even more challenging.

Chapter 3. Beyzaie and Pirandello: Standing on the Threshold of Modernism

*There is somebody who is living my life and I know nothing about him.*¹

— Luigi Pirandello

In his influential essay, “On Humor,” Luigi Pirandello maintains that,

All phenomena either are illusory or their reason escapes us inexplicably. Our knowledge of the world and of ourselves refuses to be given the objective value which we usually attempt to attribute to it. Reality is a continuously illusory construction.²

He further elaborates on the notion of relative individuality and the illusionary and fragmented nature of the self. For Pirandello, the human self is not static and fixed, but fluid and relative and one can only through humor, and not comedy or tragedy, exposes humanity’s masks of self-deception. He, therefore, considers Copernicus as the first humorist of the modern age since he “took apart not the machine of the universe, but the proud image which we had made of it.”³ Writing after the Copernican and Darwinian

¹ Quoted in Richard Gilman, *The Making of Modern Drama: A Study of Büchner, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, Beckett, Handke* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1974): 157.

² Luigi Pirandello, “On Humor,” *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1966): 48.

³ *Ibid.*, 56.

revolutions in a world where established traditional conventions have been defied, the Sicilian writer is among the first who responds to the modernist identity crisis originating in the state of uncertainty and confusion following the First World War. Throughout his oeuvre, Pirandello undermines the possibility of having access to objective realities; instead, he stresses the supremacy of subjective reality, which may, contradictorily, be more real than the one it displaces.

Pirandello's preoccupation with the problem of identity and the unverifiability of the truth is shared with the theater of Bahram Beyzaie, a distinguished Iranian playwright whose career is marked with constant attempts to "create alternative narratives on the formation of human identity at psychological, personal, social, national, and cultural levels."⁴ Growing up during a tumultuous period when modernization and westernization had begun to gain momentum, Beyzaie along with other Iranian modernist writers, such as Sadeq Hedayat, Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, Sadeq Chubak, and Hushang Golshiri, responds to the crisis of identity brought about by radical changes in his society, both before and after the 1979 revolution. In their attempts to explore the question of identity, both playwrights go beyond the limits of Realism and other prevailing literary modes and instead experiment with the metatheatrical structures to further elaborate on the discrepancy between reality and illusion.

The considerable affinity between Pirandello's ideas and Beyzaie's approach to drama can perhaps best be outlined in their plays, *Right You Are (If You Think So)*⁵ (1917) and *Marg-e Yazdgerd (Majles-e Shahkoshi)* [Death of Yazdgerd (Gathering for Regicide)] (1979), both of which are implicit answers to the unfolding changes in their respective contexts. To accomplish this, first the demonstrations of the relative nature of truth and the

⁴ Saeed Talajooy, "Beyzaie's Formation, Forms and Themes," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 5 (2013): 691.

⁵ Hereafter referred to in abbreviated form as *Right You Are*.

fictional qualities of identity are examined in Pirandello's play and then the results are extended to Beyzaie's drama. Although the existence of such resemblances does not prove the Italian playwright's direct literary influence on the Iranian dramatist, it nevertheless suggests the possibility of unsuspected connections between different expressions of modern theater.

3.1 PIRANDELLO'S THEATER: APPARITIONS OF REALITY, DISRUPTION OF IDENTITY

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women are merely players; They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts," says Jacques famously in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.⁶ Holding up the mirror of theater to itself, Pirandello adds a twist to this comparison by suggesting the illusionary nature of human life. Assuming multiple masks to conform to the social and moral conventions, man sweeps into numerous layers of constantly shifting identities, projected images that can only attest to the relativity of man's existence and expose his "naked" vulnerable self. Indeed, according to Pirandello, the role-playing and adoption of masks are inevitable consequences of being human.⁷

Likewise, similar uncertainties challenge the fundamental notion of absolute reality. According to Pirandello, the quest for truth is a despairing one since not only truth has many faces and is always in flux because of the impact of time but also it is subjected to the relativity of individual's perception. In other words, truth is neither timeless nor an objective value, rather subjective and personal. By foregrounding the twin issues of subjective reality and theatricality of existence, Pirandello successfully dissolves the formerly established barriers between life versus art and reality versus illusion, thereby

⁶ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1997): 83.

⁷ Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*, 288.

rendering theater as a medium “for liberating the dreams that are more real than reality itself.”⁸ In fact, Pirandello’s depiction of fragmented individuals and his theory of “relativism” have been so crucial in revolutionizing man’s attitude to the world that some critics have considered his works as embodiments of Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity. According to Daniel S. Burt, for instance:

If Einstein assaulted our construct of time and space, Pirandello has done something quite similar to our understanding of identity and reality, to our awareness of the gap between being and seeming.⁹

Luigi Pirandello was born in 1867 into a prosperous family in the village of Càvusu, near Girgenti—a Sicilian city famous for its wealth, splendor, and luxury of its inhabitants, mainly as a result of rapid expansion in sulfur production in the nineteenth century. Referring to the etymology of his birthplace, he once said, “I am the son of Chaos, and not allegorically but literally, because I was born in a country spot, called, by the people around, Càvusu, a dialectical corruption of the authentic, ancient Greek word, *chaos*.”¹⁰ His father was a sulfur-mine owner who could give his family the best lifestyle his wealth could provide—an advantage that was not shared by the bulk of those around him. When the family moved to Porto Empedocle after a financial setback, Pirandello joined them in 1886 to help his father at the mines, where he witnessed the ruthless exploitation of mine workers and their disastrous conditions first hand. In revulsion he writes, “No one cares; no one complains. They [the mine workers] all seem to have gone mad down there, turned into animals by the men, ferocious fight for gain!”¹¹ As proud as he was of his native

⁸ Susan Harris Smith, *Masks in Modern Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 116.

⁹ Daniel S. Burt, *Literary 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Novelists, Playwrights, and Poets of All Time* (New York, 2009): 379.

¹⁰ Quoted in Eric Bentley, *The Pirandello Commentaries* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1986): 79.

¹¹ Olga Ragusa, *Luigi Pirandello*, *Columbia Essays on Modern Writers*, no. 37 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980): 6.

origins, the horrific experiences of his short time at the sulfur mines—poverty, illness, loneliness—along with the stark contrast between ostentatious wealth and grinding poverty of the Sicilian society would influence his attitudes as well as his subsequent works such as, *Il fumo* (The Smoke, 1901) and *Ciàula scopre la luna* (Ciàula Discovers the Moon, 1912). As Susan Bassnett and Jennifer Lorch mention:

Sicily in 1867 was in especially miserable straits. The natural barrenness of the land intensified agricultural destitution, the lack of industries drove millions of islanders to emigrate, in much the same way as the Irish peasantry of the same period were also forced to emigrate. Cholera epidemics frequently devastated the population, and in the few months from October 1866 to the summer of 1867 some 53,000 Sicilians died of cholera.¹²

Following these bitter experiences, the young Pirandello left for the University of Palermo, determined to pursue a literary career and later earned his doctorate in Romance philology from the University of Bonn in 1891. Given the traditional community and family in which he grew up, in 1894 Pirandello accepted an arranged marriage with the daughter of a rich sulfur mine owner, Antonietta Portulano, a union which initially improved his financial security, but later turned into a daily torment. When his father's mines were flooded in 1903, the family went bankrupt and Pirandello's wife developed a nervous and physical breakdown and eventually was committed to a mental institution in 1919. Ironically, the playwright's worsening private life coincided with his considerable public recognition and success in the early 1920s—another disparity that strongly influenced Pirandello's literary productions.

In his essay on Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Bryant Creel writes, "just as wealth has the power to turn an ordinary reality into an ideal image, poverty can turn an ideal image

¹² Susan Bassnett and Jennifer Lorch (eds.), *Luigi Pirandello in the Theatre: A Documentary Record* (Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993): 2.

into an ordinary reality.”¹³ Pirandello, too, was well aware of the disparity between fictional ideal and semblance of reality not only within the Sicilian society but more importantly, at the core of human existence. According to him, reflection on these dialectical qualities enables the humorist to make the readers perceive “the feeling of incongruity”¹⁴ which results in an alternative view of reality. He continues to argue that, “reflection insinuates itself sharply and subtly everywhere, and it disarranges everything: each image of feeling, each ideal fiction, each flash of reality, each illusion.”¹⁵

Although Pirandello’s ongoing preoccupation with the theme of reality and illusion seems reminiscent of Platonic ideas, yet, his views on self-reflexivity and relativity of identity have roots in the psychoanalytic approach. The ever-changing self is caught up in the cycle of projecting chimerical identities onto the external world. Similar to truth, each and every one of these performative identities, or “masks,” are relative and ultimately fail to reveal the “real” self. Indeed, a crucial factor that contributed to Pirandello’s views in this regard was his wife’s mental turmoil when,

...he [Pirandello] experienced Antonietta’s power to define him according to her own disturbed perceptions. Seeing an alternative self forming in his wife’s delusions, the author found it necessary to accept this imagined but seemingly real second identity.¹⁶

Aside from the above mentioned personal episodes, the larger context within which Pirandello was writing also contributed to the formation of his worldview and his pessimistic vision. The period following the First World War was initially pregnant with great hope for a brighter future. People called the Great War, “the war to end all wars” and

¹³ Bryant Creel, “Palace of the Apes: The Ducal Chateau and Cervantes’ Repudiation of Satiric Malice,” in *Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quixote*, ed. and intro. Harold Bloom (New York, 2010): 114.

¹⁴ Luigi Pirandello, “On Humor”: 47.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ Fiora A. Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1997): 88.

rejoiced over the signing of the Versailles Treaty in 1919 as an attempt to resolve disputes among the European states as well as the establishment of the League of Nations that promised the preservation of international peace. But these idealistic hopes for future were soon to be shattered as a result of mounting social unrest, economic recession, and persistence of political conflict between the European countries. Soon, the prevalent atmosphere of interwar crisis marked by the loss of confidence in the traditional certainties and a clear sign of insecurity occluded the prophecies for the better future. Furthermore, as Michael Bennett argues, “the interwar crisis was different from previous crises, in that this was the first *self-aware* crisis where populations were confronted with ‘an age of unstable transformation.’”¹⁷ In the years prior to the Great War, a deep-rooted confidence in progress, reason, and science were traits that defined the Western Civilization. Shortly after the 1918, however, faith in the idea of a progressive future was blown into pieces while the ideals of the past turned into mere illusions. Appalled by the outbreak of the war, Henry James wrote to a friend on August 5, 1914,

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and meaning is too tragic for any words.¹⁸

In Italy, the First World War heavily contributed to the rise of Benito Mussolini’s (1883-1945) political movement and the installation of his Fascist regime in 1922. Exploiting the disruptive effects of the war, the widespread discontentment of the public with the prewar political parties, fear of the growing power of socialism and communism especially following the overthrow of the Tsarism in Russia in 1917, as well as the

¹⁷ Michael Y. Bennett, *Words, Space, and the Audience: The Theatrical Tension between Empiricism. and Rationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 58

¹⁸ Quoted in Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (Madison, 1986): 28.

bankruptcy of liberal democracy, the ex-Socialist Mussolini turned to nationalist sentiments and propaganda to garner support from various sectors of the society, including disgruntled veterans, nationalists, industrialists, and the disaffected middle-class. Campaigning for the use of political violence, militarism, and war as a necessity to facilitate national revival, in a speech to the Fascists of Bologna in April 1921, for instance, Mussolini says:

However much violence may be deplored, it is evident that we, in order to make our ideas understood, must beat refractory skulls with resounding blows... We are violent because it is necessary to be so...¹⁹

Despite his violent methods, Mussolini's self-confidence coupled with his vision to restore Italy to its ancient Roman glory and his promise to create a new state proved successful in mobilizing the public opinion. Accepting King Victor Emmanuel's offer to form a new government, the Duce and his supporters marched on Rome to celebrate the acquisition of power in late October 1922. Interestingly, this march, with its dubious historicity, finds an echo in the broader postwar debate about the relationship between reality and illusion.²⁰

Benito Mussolini's ascent to power coincided with Luigi Pirandello's rise to prominence as a dramatist in the 1920s. Similar to some well-known modernist intellectuals, such as Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats, Pirandello, too, proffered his support for Italian fascism and publicly defended Mussolini's policies, partly to obtain the government's support to establish a national theater company. Nevertheless, for Pirandello,

¹⁹ Quoted in Allan Todd, *The European Dictatorships: Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 113.

²⁰ For the critical disagreement concerning the so-called "March on Rome," see Antonio Morena, *Mussolini's Decennale: Aura and Mythmaking in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015): 119; Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005): 87-110; Adrian Lyttelton, "The March on Rome," in *Fascism, Anti-fascism, and the Resistance in Italy: 1919 to the Present*, ed. Stanislao G. Pugliese (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004): 43-46; Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997): 77.

the Duce was a hero, a “great man” whose “role is to construct reality for the weak who cannot construct these realities themselves.”²¹ The playwright celebrated Mussolini’s courage, as the leader of the masses, both to understand the constructed nature of human reality and to create his own ideologies in an artistic manner in the hope of uniting the supposedly formless Italian nation—a political activity which Mary Ann Witt aptly labelled, “aesthetic fascism.”²² On the significance of the creation of reality as it relates to the Duce, Pirandello further explains:

I have always had the greatest admiration for Mussolini and I think I am one of the few people capable of understanding the beauty of his continuous creation of reality: an Italian and fascist reality which does not submit itself to anyone else’s reality. Mussolini is one of the few people who know that *reality only exists in man’s power to create it* (emphasis mine), and that one creates it only through the activity of the mind.²³

Theater, therefore, with its inherent capacity to produce multilayered perspectives regarding a presumably static text, was a perfect medium for Pirandello to convey the notions of fleeting reality and multiplicity of identity. To achieve this, for instance, Pirandello uses the play-within-a-play technique as one means of hinting at the “human impulse to construct replicas of ourselves and, most centrally, the choices we make or avoid between imagination and reality.”²⁴ This structure, along with Pirandello’s use of roleplaying, helps to create a world where life and art come together as the line dividing them is blurred. (Con)fusing reality and illusion, furthermore, challenges spectators’ assumptions of truth and forces them to consciously think about their own social masks and theatricality of their behavior. No wonder, then, that Pirandello published the collected

²¹ Kimberly Jannarone, *Artaud and His Doubles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010): 183.

²² Quoted in Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 103.

²³ Quoted in Silvio Gaggi, *Modern/Postmodern: A Study in Twentieth-Century Arts and Ideas* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989): 177.

²⁴ Richard Gilman, *The Making of Modern Drama*, 174.

edition of his theatrical works under the title, *Naked Masks (Maschere nude)* — a title that succinctly “underscores his awareness of the centrality of role-playing in the construction of human identity.”²⁵

In order to be able to represent modern man’s relative existence and complex being in its entirety, Pirandello turns away from the limits of photographic Realism. Instead, he stresses the significance of subjectivity and advocates for the power of imagination in creating the illusion of reality. In his transition from Realism to Modernism, he undermines the notion of reality as something that exists out there simply waiting to be copied; instead, “with his emphasis on illusion, which destabilized the nature of theatrical representation,”²⁶ he liberates the stage from the pervasive realist conventions of drama in a move toward theatricalism. Even in his very first novels, such as *The Turn (Il turno)*, published in 1902, but written in 1895) and *The Late Mattia Pascal (Il fu Mattia Pascal)*, 1904), Pirandello’s quest for a new artistic expression that could probe the crisis of the individual in society as well as his preoccupation with psychological analysis of his characters’ consciousness are evident. Yet, he does not call for a complete abandonment of Realism; rather, he ventures to combine Realism with aspects of the grotesque and Idealism in order to depict the shifting nature of reality.

The result was what it had to be: a mixture of tragic and comic, fantastic and realistic, in a humorous situation that was quite new and infinitely complex, a drama which is conveyed by means of the characters, who carry it within them and suffer it, a drama, breathing, speaking, self-propelled, which seeks at all costs to find the means of its own presentation; and the comedy of the vain attempt at an improvised realization of the drama on stage.²⁷

²⁵ Fiora A. Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*, 16.

²⁶ Frederick J. Marker, C. D. Innes, *Modernism in European Drama*, xiii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

Perhaps, no play reflects the above mentioned themes and techniques more fully than Pirandello's *Right You Are*. The major work just preceding this play, *Liola* (1916), explores the opposition between reality and illusion as well as subjectivity of perception, and *Right You Are* develops these themes in still greater force and richness.

3.2 *RIGHT YOU ARE: A CASE OF ILLUSIVE REALITY*

Similar to many of his plays, *Right You Are* is taken from one of Pirandello's own short stories, namely, *Mrs. Frola and Mr. Ponza, Her Son-in-Law*, but with several changes made to its structure. The play represents an important shift in Pirandello's oeuvre, one after which his drama moves in a new direction.²⁸ Challenging conventional Realism and Naturalism, the play promises the dramatist's subsequent experiments with the medium of theater in works such as *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)—dramas that would revolutionize the twentieth-century stage. In fact, *Right You Are* is the first stepping stone toward reworking familiar conventions in a subversive fashion. A superficial reading, at least initially, might suggest the play's strong conformity to the realistic mood and naturalistic forms that had characterized the bourgeois theater of the turn of the century Italy: a three-act play set in the typical bourgeois parlor with a familiar conventional plot and a recognizable situation that deals with "[the inquisitors'] bourgeois mentality and prying gossip, with their acritical assumption that an objective truth both exists and can be established."²⁹

Closer analysis, however, reveals the profound ways in which Pirandello destabilizes these conventions. In fact, his revolutionary theater assumes forms from the

²⁸ Olga Ragusa, *Luigi Pirandello: An Approach to His Theatre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980): 57.

²⁹ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks: New Translations of Six Major Plays*, trans. Umberto Mariani and Alice Gladstone Mariani, intro. Umberto Mariani (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011): 10.

traditional domestic drama only to demonstrate its limitations. The play's subtitle, "A Parable in Three Acts," foreshadows the central search for truth/knowledge from the very beginning. The word "parable," according to Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, suggests the idea of comparison between the unknown and something that is known in order "to explain a central truth about the less familiar concept."³⁰ They continue, "Although parables are fictitious stories, they present content and situations that are true-to-life."³¹ Nevertheless, Pirandello's play, with an enigmatic major title which successfully cast doubt on reality (*Right You Are*) and perception (*If You Think So*), can only promise relativity of truth and elusiveness of identity. As Bassanese correctly argues, "the play's title suggests the shift from positivist belief in a knowable and recognizable universe based on fact and material evidence to the acknowledgment of a world of doubt and uncertainty emerging from the relativity and individuality of perceptions—Pirandello's world."³² For those seeking comfortable dramatic resolution and logical solutions, the play offers nothing more than confusion and ambiguity.

Right You Are revolves around mysteries concerning the identities of three newcomers— Signor Ponza, his wife, Signora Ponza, and his mother-in-law, Signora Frola—who arrive in a small country town in Italy, where Signor Ponza has newly began his work as a secretary at the local office. The trio are among the few survivors of an earthquake that completely destroyed their former town as well as the official documents relating to their past. Signor Ponza and his wife, whom no one ever sees until the very end of the play, have rented a poor tenement house at the edge of town while Signora Frola lives alone in a comfortable town apartment. Further complicating the situation is the fact

³⁰ Robert B. Hughes and J. Carl Laney, *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990): 408.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Fiora A. Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*, 46.

that Signora Frola and her daughter never directly see one another. Instead, the two communicate by means of letters that are passed back and forth in a basket from the balcony of the Ponza's apartment.

The arrivals' aloof and distant lifestyle as well as their restraint in interacting with the community quickly becomes a source of peculiar interest to the townspeople. Unable to stamp down their surge of curiosity, the inquisitive townsfolk want to know the real truth about the newcomers and their strange living arrangements. To find answers, or "facts" for that matter, they decide to receive both Signor Ponza and Signora Frola under the guise of respect and to ask them pointed questions that would assist them in their investigation. According to Signor Ponza, his first wife's death four years earlier has driven his mother-in-law to madness. Even though he had remarried another woman, Signora Frola suffers from the delusional belief that her daughter is still alive and married to Signor Ponza. As a result, for the sake of her comfort as well as to protect his second wife, Signor Ponza keeps the two apart. According to Signora Frola, however, her daughter's illness traumatized Signor Ponza so much so that he is deluded into thinking that his wife had died and that he had remarried someone else. As the famed Pirandello biographer, Gaspare Giudice, points out, the playwright uses "theatrical technique of continuous coups de scene each of which destroys a hitherto accepted truth."³³

Unable to endorse either of the two claims conclusively, the townspeople, therefore, become even more bewildered in their search for the real truth. Their subsequent attempts at fact-gathering are also doomed to failure: the plan to bring Signor Ponza and Signora Frola together, the documents the commissioner finds at Signor Ponza's former town, and even questioning Signora Ponza herself all prove to be fruitless. Although she is the only

³³ Gaspare Giudice, *Pirandello: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975): 110.

person who can verify the correct version of truth, Signora Ponza's declaration at the end of the play does not help resolving the expectations. She is both Signora Frola's daughter as well as Signor Ponza's second wife. To the objections of the townsfolk who demand that she must be one or the other, she replies: "And for myself, nobody! Nobody! [...] I am whoever I'm thought to be."³⁴ The play concludes with Lamberto Laudisi's ironic laughter, mocking the characters' search for objective truth. His concluding lines, "Behold, ladies and gentleman, how truth speaks [...] Are you happy now?"³⁵ further reinforces "the playwright's final statement of the impossibility of knowing."³⁶

In his seemingly crude story line, Pirandello demonstrates his mastery of modern drama and addresses issues that are crucial to the modernist discourse, i.e., the principles of the twentieth-century uncertainty and provisionality following the collapse of absolute beliefs. Indeed, the underlying concept of relativity as it relates to individual identity and subjective truth, is given center stage in Pirandello's play—a concept that does not sit well with the conventional bourgeois society. The townspeople demand a single truth, while the Pirandellian characters consistently undermine the existence of it. The opposition between the two groups is suggested early on within the somehow detailed opening stage directions, when Pirandello describes the setting as well as the members of the community. Act One is situated in the drawing room of Counsellor Agazzi household which is a familiar domestic setting for the realistic theater: "the living room in the home of Counsel Agazzi. Main door to the rear, side doors to the right and left."³⁷ Similarly, initial descriptions of the characters are indicative of the conventions of Realism: Amalia's appearance and her vanity as a result of her husband's position in the community, Dina's conceited personality

³⁴ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks*, 118.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Fiora A. Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*, 47.

³⁷ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks*, 69.

as well as her “youthful grace,” details regarding Laudisi’s dark clothes, looks, and elegant manners, as well as the characters’ relationships with one another. Likewise, throughout the rest of the play, Pirandello provides descriptions of other bourgeoisie characters: Signora Sirelli, a “plump,” “still attractive” woman with “overdone elegance,” her husband, Signor Sirelli, “fat” with “pretensions to elegance,” Signora Cini, “silly” and “full of malice,” Signora Nenni, a “silly” and “avidly curious” old lady, and Signor Agazzi, with “unkempt, red hair” and an “authoritarian” attitude—characteristics that are readily familiar to the audience.

On the other hand, the newcomers are first represented through the eyes of the conventional characters before they appear on the stage themselves. The neighbors in their gossip contemplation discuss Signora Frola’s and Signor Ponza’s characteristics, looks, and clothing. The former is described as “a poor little lady” and “poor mother,” while the latter is cast in a negative light as “a boorish county lout,” “a rude hick,” “savage,” “a monster,” with a “nasty face” and “eyes of a wild animal” who wears black suit all the time. Anticipating the Foucauldian nexus of seeing, knowledge, and power, Pirandello, too, from the very beginning of the play emphasizes the significant role of seeing as it relates to townspeople’s judgements as well as their coercive desire to control and ultimately to construct a narrative that aligns well with their coherent version of the truth. Indeed, when “strangers” finally appear on stage, the stage directions further reinforce the townspeople’s descriptions as if to suggest whose voices are privileged and whose voices are erased by the hegemonic forces of the society. Signora Frola is “a neat old lady, modest, very pleasant” who has a gentle smile and always dresses in black. His son-in-law, on the other hand, is presented as a brutish man who has “stocky, dark-skinned, almost savage-looking, dressed entirely in black; thick black hair, low forehead, thick black moustache; clenches his fists constantly, speaks with an effort, in fact with barely contained violence; at intervals

dries his brow with a black-bordered handkerchief. When he talks, his eyes remain hard, fixed, and grim.”³⁸ Finally, Signora Ponza is described as “stiff, in mourning dress, her face hidden by a thick black veil.”³⁹ The neighbors do not have access to any accurate information regarding the newcomers’ true identities and can only rely on appearances to establish an objective truth. Their stance exemplifies, what Eric Bentley calls, “the dehumanizing influence of society.”⁴⁰

Yet, as it becomes clear throughout the course of the play, the townsfolks’ judgments are anything but trustworthy in a world dominated by masks and masquerades. Questioning the possibility of faithful representation, Pirandello not only points to the disjuncture between reality and appearance but more importantly he emphasizes his view of reality as an illusion. In fact, in his reaction against representational Realism, the playwright intentionally draws on real-life situations only to undermine their validity. As Bert Cardullo puts it, “Beneath this apparent realism—the illusion of reality, as it were—whirl the depths of chaos, contradiction, and paradox, ready to rear up at any moment and prove reality a lie—or to reveal the reality of illusion.”⁴¹ Ultimately, despite all their efforts to “see,” the conventional characters fail to uncover the mystery. Their gaze is anything but revealing.

Still, unconnected to either group of antagonists stands Lamberto Laudisi, who is “the detached chorus, the *raisonneur* of the grottesco theater, representative and expositor of the ideas of the author.”⁴² As the curtain rises, he is impatiently listening to the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴⁰ Eric Bentley, *The Pirandello Commentaries* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1986): 27.

⁴¹ Bert Cardullo, *Comparative Stages: Essays in the History of Euro-American Drama* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008): 141.

⁴² Umberto Mariani, *Living Masks: The Achievement of Pirandello* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008): 27.

exchanges between Amalia, his sister, and Dina, the daughter of Amalia and Agazzi, who discuss the seemingly strange living situation of the Ponzas. He is described as a man in his forties who is “slender, elegant in an unobtrusive way” and “is wearing a purple morning jacket with black lapels and cuffs.”⁴³ Laudisi’s undermining attitude towards the obsessive pursuit of absolute truth, his refusal to actively meddle in the lives of the newcomers, as well as his dark outfit tends to associate him with the newcomers who epitomize the playwright’s conception of the plurality of personality and epistemological relativism. Furthermore, Laudisi’s description can be an important clue to distinguish him from the rest of the characters on the stage who are mostly concerned about their superficial elegance, satisfying their own vanity, and are far more devoted to gossiping than to realization of truth. Amalia’s “ostentatiously self-important manner,” Dina’s “air of one who thinks she understands everything better than Mom, and even Dad,” Signora Sirelli’s “overdone provincial elegance,” her husband’s “pretensions to elegance,” as well as Signora Cini’s “avid malice poorly concealed by an affection of naivety,” are all extensions of their snobbery—attitudes that further propel their obsessive curiosity under the guise of search for truth. Reacting against their driving desire to pry into the newcomers’ lives, Laudisi says:

LAUDISI: ... I’m just saying that your curiosity (I beg the ladies’ pardon) is unbearable, if only because it’s pointless.

MRS SIRELLI: Pointless?

LAUDISI: Pointless, pointless, my dear ladies!

MRS SIRELLI: That we want to know?

⁴³ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello’s Theatre of Living Masks*, 70.

LAUDISI: Know what? What can we really know about other people? Who they are, what they are, what they do, why they do it? ⁴⁴

Laudisi's distinction becomes even clearer when early in Act One, he challenges the conventional bourgeoisie's complacent belief in the existence of an objective reality as a unified whole. Emphasizing the significance of perception and circumstance, he asks Signor and Signora Sirelli to attest to his existence through the medium of natural senses, i.e., seeing and touching. Upon their approval, Laudisi asserts that each of them is, in fact, looking at him from a different perspective, a different angle of vision which is different from how he sees himself and that ultimately these visions create multiple selves within each individual. Conducting such an experiment is his first attempt to communicate his point regarding the impossibility of solidifying these alterities to the inquisitors. He further continues:

LAUDISI: ... I see you all getting worked up in this attempt to know who other people really are, and how things really are, as if other people and things were this or that in themselves.

MRS SIRELLI: Then, according to you one can't ever know the truth?

MRS CINI: If we can't believe even in what we see and touch anymore!

LAUDISI: Oh, please, do believe in it, dear lady! I only say: respect what others see and touch also, even when it's the opposite of what you see and touch.⁴⁵

Unsurprisingly, then, Laudisi, too, is portrayed as a complex character. On the one hand, he takes pleasure in listening to gossip, keeps stirring up the neighbors' curiosity, and even suggests interviewing Signora Ponza in order to clarify the mystery. On the other hand, he is the only character among the townspeople who acknowledges the existence of multiple realities and relative truth in the realm of human matters and continues to taunt his family and friends' obsessive prying into the newcomers' affairs. Voicing the

⁴⁴ Ibid.73-74.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 75-76.

Pirandellian theme of the multiplicity of personality, for instance, he says, “I really am the way you see me. But that does not eliminate the fact, my dear lady, that I’m also the way your husband, my sister, my niece, and the Mrs. here ... Cini ... see me.”⁴⁶ Yet, the townspeople are not willing to step outside the reductionist patterns of absolutism. Counsellor Agazzi, for example, dismisses Laudisi’s doctrine on the grounds that it is philosophical. He impatiently remarks, “Philosophy, old man, philosophy! We’ll see, now we’ll see if it [distinguishing reality from illusion] is impossible!”⁴⁷ Clearly, for those who maintain that logical reasoning is the superior mode of processing information to solve problems, philosophy, with its mission to pose more questions, is inferior to the faculty of reason as it is less likely to result in certitude.

Despite Laudisi’s insistence on the apparent inadequacy of perceptual knowledge in capturing absolute truth, the urgency to know the unknown is far too powerful to stop the townspeople from assiduously seeking a single reality about the strangers. Unable to accept the multiplicity of realities, they continue their malign search through the process of fact-gathering. To this end, they call attention to the newcomers’ nonconformity to the conventions of bourgeois propriety and norms which manifest itself in their refusal to exchange customary courtesies, welcome visitors in their house or accept the neighbors’ invitations. Early on, for instance, Amalia furiously complains about not being properly received by Signora Frola.

AMALIA: ... It was we, instead, Dina and I, who went to call on this lady, and we weren’t received.

LAUDISI: And what’s your husband gone to the Perfect to do? To impose an act of courtesy through the authorities?

⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 92.

AMALIA: A justified act of reparation, if anything! You don't leave two ladies standing like two pegs in front of your door.⁴⁸

As a result of straying from the “proper” conventions, the “strangers” are perceived as a threat to the bourgeois social stability and domestic harmony in the community. Now, the townspeople “regard it as their civic duty to see that the truth is revealed in an unambiguous clarity.”⁴⁹ To achieve this, they successfully persuade Counselor Agazzi, Ponza’s boss, to make a legal case to the governor against Signor Ponza and his seemingly strange domestic living, even though as Laudisi mentions, “it’s an abuse of power.”⁵⁰ Unsurprisingly, it does not take much to convince the officials that a legal action should be taken against the social rebels. Agazzi quotes the governor as saying that,

He'd heard some talk, too, and... and he too sees this as a good chance to clear up this mystery, to get to know the truth.⁵¹

No wonder, then, that the setting of the play is the Agazzi family house. As government employees, Counsel Agazzi and the Perfect are the two state representatives in the play who are actively involved in probing the truth about the newcomers. However, the officials’ ability to use their power in order to advance private interests as well as to satisfy their compelling curiosity is indicative of a more widespread problem in state institutions. According to Bassanese, “they [Agazzi and the Perfect] represent the arm of the state, the procedures of the bureaucracy, and the realm of legality—all of constituted order, which is being challenged by the irregularities, undocumented state, and unorthodox of the trio.”⁵²

Signora Frola’s imposed visit to the Agazzi’s household brings hope to the townspeople. Accompanied by the audience, they feel the urgency to solve the mystery this

⁴⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁹ Silvio Gaggi, *Modern/Postmodern*, 27.

⁵⁰ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks*, 70.

⁵¹ Ibid., 78.

⁵² Fiora A. Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*, 49.

time through the application of the “coherence theory of truth.” This theory, very roughly, maintains that “a given statement is true if it *coheres* with or does not contradict any other statements within a set of statements that also cohere with each other.”⁵³ Yet again, this approach fails to account for a plurality of explanations. As Amalia Amaya argues:

Coherence theories [...] do not take coherence to be one value among many. [...] In other words, what is the “best” mix is pretty clear for coherence theories, namely, the “most coherent” one. The problem that the objection correctly understood raises is whether there may be different “mixes” that are equally coherent, so that the coherence theory fails to provide guidance for choosing among two decisions which equally cohere with a set of beliefs...⁵⁴

Similarly, in their quest for coherence, reason, and order, the townspeople can only consent to the “best mix,” one that would lead them to the ultimate truth, even if the process of arriving at it necessitates a trial-like confrontation. Nevertheless, the alternating paradoxical accounts offered by the Ponza’s family are far from their idealistic fixation.

Signora Frola is initially reluctant to share her family story, but when pressured by the collective public, she explains that her son-in-law loves his wife so much so that even as a mother, she is not allowed to come between the couple. Yet, despite accusations of cruelty and selfishness, she describes Signor Ponza as a “good” man, one who “couldn’t be any better!”⁵⁵ After she leaves and just as the townspeople’s (as well as the audience’s) curiosity is melting into pity, Signor Ponza arrives only to offer his version of the truth—one that essentially cancels out Signora Frola’s earlier account. He defends his decision to keep his wife and mother-in-law apart due to the latter’s madness. Considering Signora Frola’s delusion that the second wife is her own daughter, he explains, the separation would

⁵³ Thomas A. Provenzola, “Theories of Truth,” in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics: Surveying the Evidence for the Truth of Christianity*, ed. Ed Hindson, Ergun Caner (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2008): 480.

⁵⁴ Amalia Amaya, *The Tapestry of Reason: An Inquiry into the Nature of Coherence and its Role in Legal Argument* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2015): 65.

⁵⁵ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello’s Theatre of Living Masks*, 82.

ultimately benefit his family. Just a Signora Frola's version, Signor Ponza's account regarding his domestic arrangement appears to be fully convincing and is collectively validated by the group.

Soon, however, their facile judgments are overthrown once again by another compelling narrative given by Signora Frola. According to her, it is her son-in-law who suffered a breakdown following his wife's severe illness and hospitalization. Since Signor Ponza refused to believe her survival, Signora Frola arranged for the couple to marry again. Unable to afford another emotional loss, he keeps his "new" wife locked up indoors. Confronted with this new version of the truth, the crowd along with the audience becomes even more frustrated and confused about the true identity of Signora Ponza. Laudisi's sarcastic closing comment at the end of Act One—"All staring at each other, eh? The truth?!"⁵⁶—not only highlights the inadequacies of empirical paradigm and coherence theory in extracting the truth but more importantly, it alludes to the impossibility to arriving at one.

Acts Two and Three take place in Agazzi's study. The change from the drawing room to the even more claustrophobic atmosphere of the study emphasizes "both enclosure and entrapment."⁵⁷ The stage directions read:

The study in the home of Counsel Agazzi: antique furniture; old paintings on the walls; a curtained doorway on the back wall; [...] a large fireplace, on its mantel a large mirror; a telephone on the desk; also a small sofa, easy chairs, other chairs, etc.⁵⁸

The antique furniture and old paintings lend an air of traditional bourgeois elegance to the setting and can be indicative of the owners' high culture and taste. Yet, that elegant image

⁵⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁷ Ruth Garde, "The Imprisoning Gaze: A Study of Three Works by Luigi Pirandello," *Journal of the Society of Pirandello Studies*, vol. 28 (Birmingham, UK, 2008): 75.

⁵⁸ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks*, 90.

is quickly undermined by the bourgeois characters' excessive prying into the lives of the Ponza family. Given their previous unsuccessful attempts at closure, they now resort to "the verification model" to resolve the conflict.⁵⁹

As the second act opens, Agazzi is speaking on the telephone trying to gather some information regarding the newcomers' past in their hometown, but disappointingly, both for the inquisitors as well as the curious audience, the whole town is destroyed and so is all the records and "factual data." Witnessing their disappointment, Laudisi offers a possible solution: either they should believe both narratives or discard them both. To their surprise, he responds:

... You're asking for factual data, for documents, so you can either accept or deny—not me! I have no use for them, because, as far as I am concerned, *reality lies not in them but in the minds of those two* [italics mine], and I've got no access to their minds, except for whatever they choose to tell me.⁶⁰

Reflecting on the significance of individual interpretations of truth, here, Laudisi succinctly captures the main theme of the play, i.e., truth and self are incommensurable and can therefore be relativized to perspectives and situations.

The Pirandellian concept of plural aspects of identity is further reinforced by the ontological nature of the Laudisi's mirror scene in which the character questions his own solid identity. Half through the play as the other characters leave the stage, Laudisi is left alone pacing in the study before confronting his reflection in the mirror. Gazing at his own images he sarcastically notes:

The unfortunate thing is, the others don't see you the way I do! And in that case, old man, what becomes of you? I'm talking about me, the one who's seeing and touching myself in front of you... so you, as far as others see, what becomes of you? You're a phantom, old man, a phantom! And yet, see these crazy people?

⁵⁹ Diana A. Kuprel, "On Truth's Elusive Nature," in *Luigi Pirandello: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide*, ed. and intro. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2010): 37.

⁶⁰ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks*, 91.

Instead of paying attention to the phantom they carry around with them, inside themselves, they're running, bursting with curiosity, after somebody else's phantom! And they think it's a different thing.⁶¹

Laudisi's experience of doubling and distortion is a central moment in the play that directly engages with the impossibility of having a unified identity. Furthermore, by drawing the audience's complete attention, the scene contributes to the creation of a sense of discomfiture and uncertainty in viewers who subsequently are forced to question their own ability to distinguish reality from illusion. "The mirror reflects the individual but also distorts: our reflected image is inevitably a perversion, whether be it the one in the glass or the image found in others or in ourselves."⁶² Caught in this Pirandellian confrontation between reality and illusion, Laudisi's mirror scene is emblematic of the failure to find the true self. Nevertheless, it is important to note that his realization of self as an alterity, as a being at once different from what it perceives itself to be and conscious of this difference is an underlying step in the process of self-awareness.

Laudisi's soliloquy is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a servant who is startled to see the former talking to himself. Here, Pirandello masterfully showcases the multiplicity of perspectives that are constitutive to the construction of human identity: Laudisi is looking at himself in the mirror and is being watched by the servant and the audience, who are also watching the servant and Laudisi staring at himself.⁶³ The simultaneous existence of multiple viewpoints, images, and masks corresponds to the multiple and fluid identities that each individual inhabits and undermines the possibility of defining him according to one stable identity. Within the Pirandellian philosophical thinking, role-playing is recognized as a condition of all life and each individual, as a result,

⁶¹ Ibid., 94.

⁶² Fiora A. Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*, 53.

⁶³ Enrico Garzilli, *Circles Without Center: Paths to the Discovery and Creation of Self in Modern Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972): 79.

has to assume different masks both to conceal the ever-changing identity behind his constructed existence and to conform to social conventions, although this adaptation often happens unconsciously. As the title of the collected plays, *Naked Masks*, suggests, there is no face, or reality for that matter, underneath these layers of masks; rather, stripping away each mask only leads to the revelation of other lurking masks. According to Pirandello,

They [masks] disappear in a breath, giving way to others... Each one fixes his mask up as he can, the exterior masks. Because inside them is another one, often contradicting the one outside. Nothing is true.⁶⁴

Pirandello continues to undermine the process of arriving at absolute truth based on monitoring factual data throughout the rest of the play. In their search for reliable documents, the townspeople are initially excited to find two pieces of evidence that could be used to rebut the false claims: the certificate of Ponza's second marriage as well as a witness. Yet, soon, both prove to be weak and potentially unreliable. As Laudisi mentions, the certificate could be an inauthentic one fabricated to protect Ponza's delusion that he is marrying another woman. More importantly, questioning the inherent value of documents he says, "Documents, my dear lady! Documents, even these little notes! But according to the value you want to attribute to them!"⁶⁵ Contrary to scientific observations, such as calculations about the length of a year, Laudisi concludes, "in the realm of human emotions, of personal opinions and beliefs, of the value of moral principles and behavior, truth can never be absolute."⁶⁶ The witness, on the other hand, turns out to be a frequent visitor from a different town who is unable to conclusively resolve the situation. Quoting the witness, Agazzi says, "he says he used to go there often... that he doesn't remember well... that he thinks he heard people say so..."⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Quoted in Nelvin Vos, *Inter-Actions: Relationships of Religion and Drama* (Lanham, 2009): 129.

⁶⁵ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks*, 97.

⁶⁶ Umberto Mariani, *Living Masks: The Achievement of Pirandello*, 28.

⁶⁷ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks*, 106.

The desperation to find “truth” leads the townspeople to set up an engineered encounter between Signora Frola and Signor Ponza and before the newcomers could arrive, they carefully arrange everything as if trying to construct their own play. For instance, it is decided that ladies go to Signora Frola’s home and make some excuse to bring her back while Agazzi under the pretext of some business matter will bring Signor Ponza to his house; they decide to leave the door between the two rooms open so that ladies’ discussions can be heard; Signor Sirelli should come to pick up his wife a few minutes after eleven, etc. As Laudisi puts it, “All arranged, you know. It’s going to be such a scene, such a scene! Any moment now, at eleven o’clock, right here!”⁶⁸ Similar to the first act, then, the crowd of characters (now functioning as the audience) would once again gaze at the newcomers’ performances. These alternations, within the metatheatrical structures, as Ruth Grade mentions:

replicate the configurations of audience and stage/actors in the theater itself [...] The apparent equation thus established between audience and voyeuristic curiosity carries implications for the theatrical audience outside the proscenium. Such parallels support Giovanni Sinicropi’s analysis, which argues that the spatial distribution of all the townspeople in relation to the Frola/Ponza triangle represents an attempt to destroy the aesthetic distance between the two divisions of theater space. He comments that the spectator is, in this close identification with the townspeople’s position, in effect brought *onto* the stage and obliged to take a position along the axis of opinion running between Laudisi’s relativistic and Agazzi’s heuristic approaches.⁶⁹

Upon his arrival, Signor Ponza hears a piano in the adjoining room, a piece that his wife used to play before. He becomes extremely upset and reminds his mother-in-law about her daughter’s death, a statement to which she agrees. After Signora Frola leaves and just as the neighbors are convinced that it must be Signor Ponza who is mad, the latter reveals that he feigned madness in an attempt to maintain his mother-in-law’s illusions. Despite

⁶⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁹ Ruth Garde, “The Imprisoning Gaze: A Study of Three Works by Luigi Pirandello,” 73.

their various efforts to verify the truth, by the end of the second act, the townspeople are even more stupefied, except for Laudisi whose laughter fills the stage again as the curtain falls. He says, “So there we are, ladies and gentlemen, the truth’s been revealed! [*He bursts into laughter*] Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!”⁷⁰

Since all their attempts to determine truth through empirical, coherence, and verification models have failed, the neighbors are left with no other option than questioning Signora Ponza herself. Indeed, the “ontological inquest” is their last shot at validating the reality. This method concerns “the testimonial paradigm of truth-finding as truth-saying (*parlare*) or assertion, which is based on the questioning of the object by a tribunal authority and which requires that the object respond apophantically.”⁷¹

As a result, following Laudisi’s earlier suggestion, the Perfect is tempted once again to use his official power for the furtherance of his own interests and those of the crowd. However, before the governor and Agazzi can make their request, Signor Ponza asks the Perfect to be transferred to another town as a result of the people’s “outrageous harassment” and “relentless inquisition” into his personal life. Yet, despite the negative impact of their investigation on the trio’s lives, both the perfect and Agazzi treat the situation rather lightly and when Signor Ponza refuses to consent to the official’s request to interview his wife they claim to their official power as a way of legitimizing their actions.

PERFECT: Just a moment! First of all, Mr. Ponza, I won’t tolerate your taking that tone with one of your superiors and with me [...] You’re refusing to provide proof that *I*, not others, am requesting of you; it’s in your own interest, and I see absolutely nothing wrong with it. Both I and my colleague here are perfectly capable of receiving a lady... or, if you prefer, coming to your place...

PONZA: Are you forcing me then?

⁷⁰ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello’s Theatre of Living Masks*, 103.

⁷¹ Diana A. Kuprel, “On Truth’s Elusive Nature,” 37.

PERFECT: I repeat that I'm requesting it for your own good. As your superior, I could also give you an order!⁷²

Unable to confront the authorities and their abuse of power, Signor Ponza is bound to obey their demands at the price of endangering his family's privacy one more time.

As soon as Signor Ponza leaves to bring his wife, the curiosity reaches a climax as the gossips of the town accompanied by the audience resume their speculations about the enigma under the pretext of establishing the truth. While Signor Ponza is away, his mother-in-law enters to announce that she has decided to permanently leave the town so that her family could live in peace. Yet, even the visibly sad and shaken old woman cannot stop the insensitive crowd from carrying on their cruel plan. They are desperate to put a little adventure into the dull stream of their monotonous lives and apparently nothing can prevent them.

Yet before Signora Frola can leave the Agazzi's house, Signor Ponza returns with his wife, who "comes forward stiffly, in mourning dress, her face hidden by a thick, black, impenetrable veil."⁷³ The reunion of the three family members is both emotional and equivocal: embracing the veiled figure, her husband names her "Giulia" while Signora Frola addresses her as "Lina"—names that reinforce her relational existence. Furthermore, the veil, which Signora Ponza refuses to lift, fulfills a twofold purpose. On the one hand, the "impenetrable" veil draws attention to the *inaccessibility* of truth by demonstrating that "the inquisitive social eye cannot see beyond such a barrier, proving that an objective truth is ultimately unknowable."⁷⁴ On the other hand, truth's inaccessibility does not rule out its existence altogether; rather, it alludes to its relativity. Indeed, the veil, as Susan Smith notes, turns into "a blank page on which her [Signora Ponza's] family and the townspeople

⁷² Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello's Theatre of Living Masks*, 114.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁷⁴ Ruth Garde, "The Imprisoning Gaze: A Study of Three Works by Luigi Pirandello," 77.

print as image.”⁷⁵ Such “conflicting” version of self, of course, is not accepted by the truth-seekers. Reacting against the crowd’s attempt to reduce her to a single identity, Signora Ponza says,

MRS PONZA: ... what? the truth? the truth is only this: that I am the daughter of Mrs. Frola, yes...

ALL: [*with a sigh of relief*]: ... ah!

MRS PONZA [*immediately, as above*]: ... and the second wife of Mr. Ponza...

ALL [*stunned and disappointed, softly*]: Oh! How can it be?

MRS PONZA [*immediately, as above*]: ... yes. And for myself, nobody! [...] For myself, I am whoever I’m thought to be.⁷⁶

Signora Ponza’s acknowledgement of her multifaceted personality dashes the crowd’s expectations for reaching a definitive resolution through “ontological inquest.” Her ambiguous presence as well as her confirmation of the contradictory versions of the truth serves only to heighten the tension and add to the confusion of the characters and the audience alike. As a symbol for truth, she “does not personify certainty, but unknowability.”⁷⁷ Her identity/truth is fluid not fixed, relative not immutable, indeterminate and not definite. Much like beauty, the truth about Signora Ponza lies in the eye of the beholder. No wonder, then, that there is not one truth, but many truths depending how others perceive her. As J.L. Styan aptly points out, she embodies “the abortive truth”⁷⁸ that the neighbors have fabricated for themselves. Following Signora Ponza’s departure, the play concludes with Laudisi’s laughter, “Behold, ladies and gentlemen, how truth

⁷⁵ Susan Harris Smith, *Masks in Modern Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 129.

⁷⁶ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello’s Theatre of Living Masks*, 118.

⁷⁷ Fiora A. Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*, 50.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

speaks! [*He glances about with derisive defiance.*] Are you happy now? [*He bursts into laughter.*] Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!”⁷⁹

Laudisi functions as the Pirandellian humorist philosopher who “pauses to contemplate the spectacle of life and to perceive the futility of much human behavior, and indirectly to invite the audience to share his perception.”⁸⁰ Echoing the playwright’s ideas, each act ends with a kind of refrain that encapsulates Laudisi’s insistence on the elusive nature of truth and parodies man’s continuous failure “of documenting anything human.”⁸¹ Indeed, the play successfully combines comedy with tragedy (townspeople’s vain attempts to distinguish reality from illusion juxtaposed with the tragic dimension of the Ponza/Frola family) to arouse a sense of humor that ultimately translates into “awareness” within the spectators. By the end of the play, therefore, Pirandello’s audience are left to ponder over the reality of the three characters as well as themselves’.

3.3 SHIFTING TIDES: LITERATURE AND THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 did not occur overnight. Rather, it was provoked by an entire series of events beginning in the 1960s: The fast-paced industrialization and uneven modernization efforts between 1961 and 1977 embodied in the “White Revolution,” which led the wealthy landowners and tribal leaders into the arms of the political opponents; rampant economic inflation and subsequent dissatisfaction among all segments of the society, particularly bazaar merchants and industrialists; stifling political climate and the Shah’s increasing authoritarianism which alienated the growing restless members of the new urban class and intellectuals who demanded their share of power; the Shah’s dissolution of all official political parties and his establishment of *Hezb-*

⁷⁹ Luigi Pirandello, *Pirandello’s Theatre of Living Masks*, 118.

⁸⁰ Umberto Mariani, *Living Masks*, 31.

⁸¹ Fiora A. Bassanese, *Understanding Luigi Pirandello*, 46.

e Rastakhiz-e Mellat-e Iran (The Iran National Resurgence Party) in 1975 as the country's single political organization which further weakened the ties between the monarchy and the traditional clerics while antagonizing the bazaar merchants; and finally the Carter administration's significant pressure on the Shah to improve Iran's human rights situation which forced him to implement a new "liberalization" policy in 1977—although as James Bill points out, "the liberation was partial; the reforms were superficial; and the political system was to remain fundamentally the same."⁸² As a result, instead of garnering the Shah the support of the middle-class and moderate intellectuals for his cause, as might have been expected, his liberalization program only served to strengthen the opposition while providing its members with the opportunity to increase their political activities.

By the late 1970s, therefore, the Shah increasingly lost touch with the dramatically changing Iran, the pulse of his people, and the political reality of the time as he was blinded by a belief in his own invincibility as well as by a delusional confidence of the people's support. Yet a series of events, especially during the last two years of his reign, finally forced him to face his increasing unpopularity—a realization that came too late of course. Of significant importance was *Dah Shab* (Ten Nights) of poetry readings organized by the Writers Association of Iran that was held at the Goethe Institute in Tehran in October 10-19, 1977. The writers, who were among the most renowned dissidents, recited poems with political overtones to an estimated of 10,000 people.⁸³ Despite their diverse political affiliations and origins, the attendees shared the fundamental belief that the oppressive regime should be replaced by a democratic one. As Ali Gheissari mentions, the event

⁸² James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven, 1988): 225.

⁸³ Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 390.

successfully “helped galvanize public opinion in favor of the revolution.”⁸⁴ On the tenth night, the enthusiastic people took to the streets in protest against the status quo. Following the clash between the protesters and the police, some were arrested, but only to be released soon afterwards. The regime’s flexibility, which was interpreted as a clear indication of weakness by the opposition groups further emboldened them in their attacks so much so that they “refused to settle for anything short of the Shah’s removal from power.”⁸⁵

The post-poetry readings protest was far from an isolated incident. The publication of an anti-Khomeini article in the state-run newspaper, *Ettela‘at* (Information), on January 7, 1978, incited huge demonstrations in the religious city of Qom followed by a cycle of anti-regime protests in Tabriz, Yazd and Isfahan. After a period of relative quiescence, the controversial arson attack on August 19, 1978—the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1953 coup—in Rex Cinema in the southern city of Abadan and the deliberate murdering of nearly four hundred civilians immediately recommenced mass demonstrations against the Shah, even though the government put the blame on the religious extremists who considered cinema as a symbol of imperialist penetration and moral corruption “filled with Western mores of sex and violence.”⁸⁶ Following a series of demonstrations, the Shah imposed martial law on the early hours of September 8, 1978, later known as the Black Friday, in major cities, but soon demonstrators, many of whom were unaware of the curfew, gathered at *Meydan-e Zhaleh* (Zhaleh Square) in Tehran. The massacre occurred when the regime’s troops opened fire on demonstrators and killed four thousand people,

⁸⁴ Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 66.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸⁶ Hamid Naficy, “Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post-Khatami Update,” in *New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (New York: I.B.Tauris Publishers, 2002): 27.

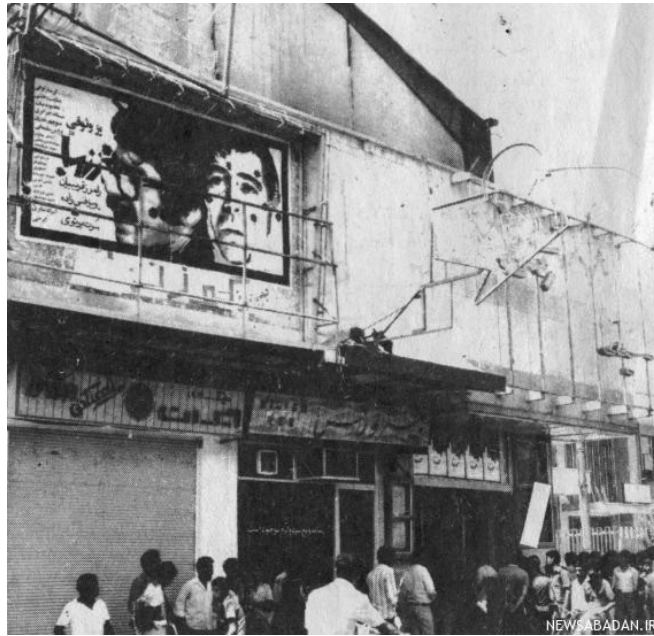


Figure 3-1: Exterior view of the burned Rex Cinema, Abadan, 1978.⁸⁷



Figure 3-2: Funeral for the victims of the horrific fire.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Photograph, *Iranian National News Agency*, February 5, 2016, <http://www.melli.org/>.

⁸⁸ Photograph, *Tarikh-e Irani*, February 5, 2016, <http://tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/>.

according to Michel Foucault—the numbers were of course inflated and later the estimate put the toll at eighty four.⁸⁹

Over the course of the months leading up to the revolution, the Shah made some attempt to satisfy the growing demands of the opposition. To this end, he dismissed the military government, lifted martial law, and appointed Shapur Bakhtiar, a leader of the National Front, as the Prime Minister. However, Bakhtiar only consented to the appointment on condition that the Shah leave the country. Bakhtiar was installed on December 30 and the Shah left Iran on January 16, 1979 for the last time. Once in office, Bakhtiar tried to appease both the people and the opposition through immediate implementation of a series of radical reforms including, releasing all the political detainees, dissolving SAVAK, granting freedom of the press, legalizing political parties, and punishing corrupt officials.

Yet, despite all his efforts, Bakhtiar failed to reach out to the political and religious opponents mainly because: 1) Many of his former colleagues in the National Front, especially Karim Sanjabi, disowned Bakhtiar as soon as he accepted the premiership and instead lent their support to Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamists. Bakhtiar, on the other hand, sought in vain to win the support of the more fundamental clerics as well as the military leadership in order to form a constitutional government. Indeed, the party's withdrawal of support "seriously undermined Bakhtiar's ability to solidify his government and move towards stability;"⁹⁰ 2) Khomeini's swift denouncement of Bakhtiar's "illegitimate" government and his declaration that cooperation with this administration is equal to "obedience to his master—Satan."⁹¹ Furthermore, Khomeini demanded huge

⁸⁹ Noted in Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 159-161.

⁹⁰ Tomas B. Phillips, *Queer Sinister Things: The Hidden History of Iran* (Raleigh: Lulu Enterprises, Inc., 2009): 413.

⁹¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 525.

demonstrations against the newly-assigned prime minister—a call that was enthusiastically responded to by millions of people in Tehran and other major cities on January 19, 1979.

As a last effort to restore order and to forestall the inevitable, Bakhtiar refused to resign under all that pressure and instead tried to prevent Khomeini's return by closing Tehran's airport for three days in late January. Unsurprisingly, however, the wave of demonstrators filled the streets immediately and many were killed in violent clashes with the military. Bakhtiar ultimately was forced to yield when the army declared its neutrality in the conflict so that further bloodshed might be averted. On February 1, 1979, Khomeini finally returned triumphantly from exile to Iran and was warmly welcomed by about three million people in Tehran.

From the very beginning, Khomeini envisioned the establishment of an Islamic state run by radical clerics, but initially he did not openly reveal his will to rule for tactical considerations. Nevertheless, his rejection of Western destructive dominance of the Muslim world coupled with his conception of the revolutionary Islam as a means of resisting Western imperialism hugely influenced the contours of Iranian identity. As Alam Saleh argues:

The impact of this new regime was patently apparent in Iran's post-revolutionary national identity discourse. The search for an authentic Iranian identity was illustrated succinctly by Tehran's radio announcement given shortly after the victory of the revolution: "This is the voice of Tehran, the voice of the true Iran, the voice of revolution."⁹²

For Khomeini, as well as many of his strict disciples, Islam constitutes the central component of national identity construction; as such, national identity is subjugated to "pure" Islamic identity as a way of bolstering unity which, in turn, is essential in confronting Western hegemony. Later referring to divisive force of nationalism, Khomeini

⁹² Alam Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 26.

inveighs, “Those who say we want nationalism are against Islam. Islam came to destroy such a nonsense term. We have no use of nationalists. Nationalism means we want the nation and not Islam.”⁹³ In short, by juxtaposing the authentic Islamic identity against the intrusive West, Khomeini seems to promote an authentic Islamic identity which is static, essentialist, and timeless, one that presumably can resist foreign dominance and helps to enrich unity within the Islamic community, *ummah*.

To achieve his goal of Islamicizing the country, on March 30 and 31, 1979, Khomeini called for a national referendum to determine the fate of Iran as either a monarchy or an Islamic republic. The restricted nature of the plebiscite proceeded with objections from some political parties, especially those who suggested the addition of the word “democratic” to the new state’s title. Khomeini, on the other hand, associated the concept of democracy with the West and contended that Islamic democracy is superior to all other democracies. Despite such opposition, however, it was perhaps not surprising that the majority voted in favor of the creation of the Islamic republic. In the words of Hamid Dabashi:

Virtually all the factions approved of replacing the monarchy, but few Iranians other than Khomeini and his populist constituency wanted an Islamic republic—but to say no to an Islamic republic at this point meant saying yes to the monarchy.⁹⁴

Equipped with the popular support, Khomeini’s next move was to include his doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (government by the religious jurists) in the final version of the constitution which was put to a referendum in December 1979 for public’s approval. This theory maintains that “during the absence of the prophet’s heirs—vacant since the ‘great occultation’ or disappearance of the twelfth Imam Mahdi in the tenth century—the world

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: New Press, 2007): 164.

can be governed legitimately only by a *vali-ye faqih*—the only one who can execute God’s will on behalf of the Hidden Imam—the agency with the mandate to rule both politically and spiritually.”⁹⁵ In his emphasis on the significance of the Islamic government, Khomeini highlights the need for qualified ruling clerics who have extensive knowledge in *shari‘a* and who can implement divine laws in accordance with God’s instructions and the Prophet’s teachings. What is more, he attributes a sense of divinity to the ruling *faqih* when he asserts that “Islamic government may therefore be defined as the rule of divine law over men.”⁹⁶ As such, other forms of governance that fail to concern with the divine laws are considered as illegitimate and Muslims are thereby obligated to overthrow them.

As might have been expected, the initial hope for democracy and freedom soon faded, as high ideals expressed in the excitement of the revolution began to collide with economic and political realities. Despite a mounting disillusionment with the revolutionary promises, however, the U.S. hostage crisis (1979-1981) and the prolonged war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988) helped to sustain many defenders of the revolutionary vision via mobilizing Islamic identity and Iranian-Islamic identity, respectively.

It is against the background of these social, political, and historical transformations that Bahram Beyzaie produces many of his influential literary and cinematic works. Given his fascination with such concepts as identity—whether individual or collective—the focus of this chapter on Beyzaie is intentional in that, his oeuvre reflects and contributes to the complexities and dilemmas of the fast-changing Iranian society around the time of the revolution.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Ramin Jahanbegloo, “Iranian Intellectuals and Cosmopolitan Citizenship,” in *Iranian Identity and Cosmopolitanism: Spheres of Belonging* (Lucian Stone. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014): 26.

⁹⁶ Ruhollah Khomeini, *Governance of the Jurists* (Velayat-e Faqih), trans. Hamid Asgar (Tehran: International Affairs Division, 1980): 29. February 7, 2016, http://www.iranchamber.com/history/rkhomeini/books/velayat_faqeeh.pdf.

Bahram Beyzaie was born on December 26, 1938 into a distinguished literary family in Tehran. His grandfather, his father and uncles were highly-gifted poets and prominent *ta'ziyeh* performers whose books and hand-written manuscripts Beyzaie inherited, and to whom was assigned the task of preserving the family's literary heritage. His relatives on the mother's side likewise were noted for their literary abilities. According to Beyzaie, his mother was an "absolute genius" who was deprived of intellectual development by the traditional society which reinforced notions of domesticity and motherhood for women.⁹⁷

Beyzaie hated school, where he experienced many problems and his grades reflected it. Instead, he read widely from the large family library, took refuge in literary magazines, and was exposed to Persian literary tradition in his father's literary gatherings, all of which helped to expand the young Beyzaie's sophistication and knowledge of art, poetry, and cinema. During this period, he wrote his first full-length works, *Azhdahak* and *Arash*. He then entered the University of Tehran to pursue a degree in literature, but abandoned his studies only a year later when his professors declined to supervise Beyzaie's suggested topic for his thesis on Iranian Drama. According to them, "There is no drama in Iran, and even if it is, it does not belong to the university's scholarly agenda."⁹⁸

Beyzaie's first highly acclaimed play, *Pahlavan Akbar Mimirad* (Champion Akbar Dies) was written in 1966 and embodies his conscious attempts at revitalizing mythic elements and tapping into forms of Iranian traditional theater in creating his poetic dramas. Soon, he started directing and worked as a literary and film critic at the Office of Dramatic Arts in Tehran. Yet, from the very beginning his works were branded as "subversive" and "too modern" for the public to understand and therefore were frequently censored or

⁹⁷ Zaven Ghoukassian, *Conversation with Bahram Beyzaie* (Tehran: Agah Publishing, 1992): 8.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

delayed in their publication and staging. Among them were his production of Zeami Motokiyo's *Atsumori* (fourteenth century) as well as his own plays, *Arusakha* (The Marionettes, 1963), and *Soltan-e Mar* (The King Snake, 1969). The last of the three created so much controversy that Beyzaie had to wait more than a decade before he could stage his famous play, *Marg-e Yazdgerd*. Despite its success, however, Beyzaie faced so much government resistance that he decided not to stage any other plays for the next twenty years.

Of course, the Shah's tightened censorship could not completely silence Beyzaie's creative works. Frustrated by the conventions and limitations imposed on his dramatic productions by managers and official censorship, for instance, Beyzaie turned to cinema and completed his first short film *Amu Sibilou* (Uncle Mustache) in 1969, which depicted the complexities of human relations and was an attempt to "reveal the absurdity of cultural conventions and obsessions by testing them against the piercing gazes of children's untainted visions."⁹⁹ In 1972, he had his first major cinematic experience as a director of the movie, *Ragbar* (Downpour), which gradually led him to a prolonged career as an accomplished filmmaker with a recognizable style and a long line of successes.

After the revolution, Beyzaie was arbitrarily dismissed from his faculty position at the University of Tehran since his views were perceived as too disruptive. Furthermore, many of his movies were banned by the government on the grounds of their focus on Iranian culture—and not Islamic—portrayal of strong female characters as well as references to Iran's ethnic and linguistic varieties. Faced with conditions that increasingly circumscribed the possibility for artistic production, in 2010, Beyzaie finally left Iran for the United States, where he currently teaches courses on Iranian theater and cinema at Stanford University.

⁹⁹ Saeed Talajooy, "Uncle Moustache," in *Directory of World Cinema: Iran*, vol. 10, ed. Parviz Jahed (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012): 234.

3.4 NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND TRUTH IN BEYZAIE'S *MARG-E YAZDGERD*

Marg-e Yazdgerd is a metaphor for the relative and partial nature of truth, identity, and memory against the background of the transitional period of the Iranian revolution. Similar to Pirandello's *Right You Are*, Beyzaie's play is also concerned with the problems of verification where multiple conflicting versions of a situation are given and the antagonists along with the audience have to decide which may be true. The original idea for the events Beyzaie exploits in *Marg-e Yazdgerd*, however, can be traced back to his early school years. Back then, with respect to the historical reality of King Yazdgerd's death, Beyzaie asked his teacher, "Who tells us then that Yazdgerd was murdered while asleep at the hands of the miller, who wanted to rob him of his jewelry and elaborate clothes?"¹⁰⁰—a thought-provoking question to which the teacher was not able to give any answers and thereby encouraged his curious pupil not to pursue the matter any further. Beyzaie, of course, was no quitter and indeed *Marg-e Yazdgerd* is the playwright's attempt to reflect on this one-simple-sounding question in order to give voice to multiple, but equally valid, alternative perspectives.

Marg-e Yazdgerd concerns a 651 A.D. murder of the last Sassanian king, Yazdgerd III, who, upon the fall of his capital, Ctesiphon, escaped eastward in an attempt to raise an army against the Muslim Arabs who had invaded Iran and as the play opens are close to conquer the Sassanian empire outright. The details of the assassination are constructed and reconstructed from different, contradictory perspectives that challenge the possibility of accessing objective truth. Significantly, *Marg-e Yazdgerd*, as well as the film version which was made three years later directed by Beyzaie himself, opens with this historical "fact" that "... Thereupon Yazdgerd fled towards Marv and sought refuge in a watermill. The

¹⁰⁰ Zaven Ghoukassian, *Conversation with Bahram Beyzaie*, 193.

millar, longing for His treasures, killed Him in sleep... [651 A.D.]. History!"¹⁰¹ The single setting of the play is a mill in the vicinity of the city of Marv, where the Commander, the Captain, and the Soldier, accompanied by the *Mobad* (Zoroastrian high priest), have just arrived to avenge the death of the King. The Miller, the Woman, and the Girl are all convicted of murder and should seize the fleeting opportunity to exculpate themselves from the charge by revealing the truth about what really happened to the King while Yazdgerd's army men are setting up a gallows to hang the murderer on.

Each of the three defendants provides a long narrative and offers his/her version of truth, yet all the competing accounts are coherent and equally plausible. According to the Miller, the King, who was well aware of the impending defeat, wanted to commit suicide but since he was too afraid to take his own life, he had offered to pay the Miller to carry out the plan. Faced with the latter's resistance, the King then violates his wife and daughter in order to entice the Miller to kill him. The Miller provides further reasons throughout the play: the tragedy of his young son's death who served as a soldier in the war as well as the King's systematic repression and exploitations which cost the Miller his youth. According to the Woman, on the other hand, the corpse does not belong to the King; rather, he has faked his own death, using someone else's corpse as a body. Finally, the Girl initially claims that the King is not dead but asleep. Later, however, she reveals that her mother and the King had collaborated in her father's killing; the corpse therefore, she believes, belongs to the Miller. Given the conflicting set of narratives, the leaders as well as the audience are left to puzzle over the events. Indeed, a faithful reconstruction of reality remains elusive. To complicate the situation even further, none of Yazdgerd's men nor the priest have seen the King's face before and thus are unable to verify the identity of the corpse. By the end

¹⁰¹ Bahram Beyzaie, *Death of Yazdgerd*, trans. Manuchehr Anvar (Tehran: Roshangaran & Women Studies Publishing, 1997): 5.

of the play, the leaders accept the Girl's version of truth and hang the corpse as the murderer of the King from the gallows. The characters' relief is short-lived, however, as the completion of the Arab conquest seems both imminent and inevitable.

The opposition between fact and perception are evident from the very beginning. Paralleling the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah, the last Pahlavi king, in 1979, the play takes place during "a timeless time, at zero moment, when one historical period has ended and another has not commenced yet. A period of absolute chaos in the midst of which few people try to maintain some order while others attempt to stay alive under the absolute reign of death."¹⁰² What served as a catalyst for this chaos, according to history, was the murder of Yazdgerd by a miller, who succumbed to the temptations of jewelry and money. *Marg-e Yazdgerd*, on the other hand, draws on this historical "truth" only to dramatize the notion that there is no fixed reality, that reality itself is a subjective construction which may vary with individuals. The accumulation of multiple testimonies in relation to a single crime mystery perfectly epitomizes the characters' interpretive differences and embodies their individual interests. Furthermore, Beyzaie's poetic imagining of events existing outside the dominant history ultimately reflects the constructed nature of history itself. History is thus fiction and *Marg-e Yazdgerd* is an attempt to unmask the historical myths that constitute the "reality."

One of the elements that accentuate this sense of uncertainty associated with reality and the fragmented nature of history is the setting of the play. The seventh-century cosmopolitan city of Marv once boasted of much splendor and used to be one of the major cultural centers of the Sassanian Empire, but now, it has become an emblem for desolation, decay, and decline: the entire city is deserted, reduced to ruins, and turned into a disposal

¹⁰² Zaven Ghoukassian, *Conversation with Bahram Beyzaie*, 200.

site for unclaimed corpses. In this dimly lit mill lays a body whose face is covered with a golden mask. In choosing this site as the background for the recollection of contradictory trial testimonies, Beyzaie successfully tries to bridge the gap between the realms of history and narrative and in doing so, relegates the issue of historical veracity to the realm of opinion and human subjectivity. The “dilapidated millstone” which is a “ritual symbol for time standing still in a dangling moment of history and for the wheel of fortune,”¹⁰³ further challenges strict binary between history, deemed as grand objective fact versus narrative, viewed as trivial and fictional. Additionally, similar to the veil worn by Signora Ponza in Pirandello’s play, here, too, the masked corpse is meant to serve a two-fold purpose. On a more conventional level, it hides the face of the wearer and prevents the characters from knowing his identity. The corpse, therefore, becomes whoever others see him to be—existing only in relation. On the other hand, the mask, as a site for imposed multiple identities, is an embodiment of the indiscernibility of objective truth. There is not one truth about who the murdered person is, but as many truths as different perspectives.

Additionally, aside from Beyzaie’s perennial preoccupation with epistemological skepticism, ontological dilemmas, and artistic concerns, in *Marg-e Yazdgerd*, the playwright also seeks to comment on the shifting social and political issues of his country through evoking events from the past. Written during the pivotal period of the 1979 Revolution, the play allegorizes “the time of the transitional year after the overthrow of an ailing monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”¹⁰⁴ The seventh-century backdrop of *Marg-e Yazdgerd* combined with the play’s Old Persian language

¹⁰³ Saeed Talajooy, “History and Iranian Drama: The Case of Bahram Beyzaie,” in *Perceptions of Iran: History, Myths and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2014): 197.

¹⁰⁴ Shouleh Vatanabadi, “Paradoxical Interplays: Censorial and Counter-Censorial Discourses,” in *Critical Encounters: Essays on Persian Literature and Culture in Honor of Peter J. Chelkowski*, ed. M. R. Ghanoonparvar, Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007): 88.

successfully situates the story, both geographically and linguistically, in the past and thereby allows Beyzaie to sidestep censorship regulations despite staging his contemporary issues. Furthermore, by sustaining continuity between memories of the past and present uncertainties in his society, the dramatist enables the audience to move across time periods as if little has changed.

Another trope that immediately captures the ruptures that characterizes Beyzaie's work is the play's decidedly ironic title, *Marg-e Yazdgerd (Majles-e Shahkoshi)*. Divided into two parts, the first half translated as *Death of Yazdgerd* emphasizes historical actuality, completeness, and certainty while the parenthetical subtitle, *(Gathering for Regicide)*, suggests fictionality, performativity, and theatricality. *Shahkoshi* is a ritual that originates from ancient Iran and involves the act of killing of an old and ailing king or his surrogate and using his blood to fertilize the land.¹⁰⁵ Beyzaie's emphasis on the theatricality of the play—further supported by numerous maskings and role-playing—is crucial since he uses the medium of theater to produce disillusionment about the objective value of history. History, therefore, is a theatrical production that manufactures the past and thereby much like memory is elusive. Interestingly, the ritual of killing of a presumably divine king is also practiced in other parts of the world. Perhaps, alluding to the Achaemenian ceremonies, James Frazer points out:

Now primitive peoples, as we have seen, sometimes believe that their safety and even that of the world is bound up with the life of one of these god-men or human incarnations of the divinity. [...] The danger is a formidable one; for if the course of nature is dependent on the man-god's life, what catastrophes may not be expected from the gradual enfeeblement of his powers and their final extinction in death? There is only one way of averting these dangers. The man-god must be killed as soon as he shows symptoms that his powers are beginning to fail, and his

¹⁰⁵ Sirus Shamisa, *Naqd-e Adabi (Literary Criticism)* (Tehran: Ferdows, 1999): 245.

soul must be transferred to a vigorous successor before it has been seriously impaired by the threatened decay.¹⁰⁶

The difference, however, is that in *Marg-e Yazdgerd* the images of the King and the Miller are blended so seamlessly together that by the end of the play they become indistinguishable from one another. Furthermore, regardless of the identity of the corpse, the unintended “offering” hardly promises the possibility of purification and protection at a critical moment when the Iranian empire has nearly collapsed and the Arab invaders are close at hand.

The ritual of *Shahkoshi* gradually altered over the course of the time and in the post-Islamic period evolved into a carnivalesque ceremony called, *Mir-e Nowruzi* (the king of the New Year). In this ritual, a commoner is chosen as a substitute for the king to rule over the country for five days during the New Year’s holidays. In his short reign, the farcical king assumes royal authority and can issue orders of many kinds. The juxtaposition of this ritual and the tradition of *naqqali* (epic storytelling), Talajooy asserts:

aesthetically undermines epic grandeur just as the thematic structure rearranges the events and the dialogue to reveal the underbelly of the idea of heroism and empire. It gradually injects the carnivalesque into the sublime to demonstrate the absurdity of glorifying unbridled imperial power and the heroic gestures associated with it.¹⁰⁷

Significantly, this dual narrative strategy is accompanied by a dual narrative structure which successfully opens up the conventional historical discourse to marginal voices. According to the historical narrative, produced and promoted by first set of characters, including the King, his men, and the priest, Yazdgerd III was an ideal ruler of his country; he was just, noble, and valorous in wars. In the words of the Commander:

¹⁰⁶ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922): 265. February 15, 2016, <http://www.bartleby.com/196/pages/page265.html>.

¹⁰⁷ Saeed Talajooy, “History and Iranian Drama: The Case of Bahram Beyzaie,” 192.

The Commander of commanders, possessor of all possessors, King of all Kings, Shah Yazdgerd, the son of Shah Yazdgerd who himself was one of the sons of Yazdgerd the First. This red rivulet you see here running flows from him who had royal blood in all his four hundred sixty six veins and was placed above all men by the hand of *Ahura Mazda* [the supreme deity of Zoroastrianism].¹⁰⁸

Bound by the recognizable account of truth, the Commander, himself a member of aristocracy, does not want to give up his belief in the King's cosmic power nor can he substitute his ideal image for a more realistic one even after being exposed to alternative narratives. When confronted with the Miller's claim that the King cowardly had fled from the battlefield, the Commander, tries to explain and justify the monarch's escape by arguing that "He [the King] was about to gather a great army and deliver the kingdom plain after plain from the countless hordes of the enemy."¹⁰⁹ The conventional "story" is simply too compelling to ignore and grant legitimacy to alternative ones.

This hegemonic narrative is further confirmed by the rest of Yazdgerd's men—the Magus (the clergy), the Captain (the military), and the Soldier (the younger generation driven by blind obedience and violence)— who do not hesitate to promote the monistic theory of truth. Holding firm to their beliefs in the existence of one historical truth, they never question the process of its establishment. It is a fact that a corpse is lying in the mill, but the reason behind his death as well as the truth of his identity are totally different according to each group's mentality. The dilemma appears to be simple to Yazdgerd's men: as preconceived by history, the King is killed by the Miller, who comes from a disadvantaged economic background and thereby conveniently fits the stereotype of poor as thieves. According to the Magus:

You [the Miller] are punished for your greed. The demon that raised its head in you was called avarice. Tell us if you gazed at the King's shining breast plate or his knee-band or belly-band or leg-band? We know well that the subordinates

¹⁰⁸ Bahram Beyzaie, *Death of Yazdgerd*: 9.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

long to rise above their superiors. The runner behind wants nothing better than to overtake the one running ahead of him. Or the loser, what does he want but winning? The walker hates the rider and the beggar thirsts for the king's blood.¹¹⁰

An “accusation” against which the Miller and his family must defend themselves. The whole play, as a result, can be considered as a trial-like situation, where Yazdgerd's men, accompanied by the audience, assume the roles of judges and jury members and listen to the Miller's family presenting their narratives.

Yet, as it turns out, the search for truth proves to be rather complicated. In order to portray reality in all its complexity, Beyzaie breaks away from the realistic conventions in favor of a freer expression of human experience. His use of theatrical devices, such as masks, as well as his adoption of a bare stage with minimum props is crucial in drawing attention to the theatricality of the characters' performance and of the whole piece. A bare



Figure 3-3: Susan Taslimi as the Miller's wife.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹¹¹ Photograph, *Deutsche Welle Persian*, March 1, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/fa-ir/>.

stage affords a total concentration on the characters and encourages audience's engagement convey the idea of unstable identities and provisional realities.

As soon as the play opens, Beyzaie introduces into this world conflicting forces that unsettle the otherwise eternal dichotomy of reality and fiction. As opposed to the first set of characters, the King's idealized portrayal is constantly challenged by the Miller's family, whose views do not conform to the established "facts" that ultimately shape "reality." Undermining the legitimacy of the justice system, the Miller, in his opening lines, claims:

No! revered master, lofty Commanders, clad in armor from top to toe! That which you administer now is not justice, but rank tyranny. This indeed is the place where his blood was shed—this uninvited guest—but I'm not to blame for it. He had already opted for death. No, my armor-clad master, what you do to us is not what we deserve.¹¹²

The repeated emphasis on judging and justice is significant in that it provides a counternarrative to the established reality. History, and those who represent it, attests to the King's exercise of impartial justice, benevolence, and diligence. Yet, their version of reality is challenged by the Miller's version which, in turn, instills doubt in the audience's mind and weakens the former's credence.

Aside from the Miller himself, the King's righteous image is also deconstructed through the voices of those who had previously been excluded from historical narratives, namely women. Faced with the King's men impetuous haste in executing "judgment," for example, the Woman sarcastically retorts:

Yes, make haste lest we get away and our tongue shall reveal the disgraceful story of his flight and make people laugh at the valiant Shah! Yes, be quick!¹¹³

And later, she adds:

¹¹² Ibid., 7.

¹¹³ Ibid., 8.

Look for the King's slayer not here but out there. The King was slain already by the King. He who came here was a feeble little man.¹¹⁴

According to the Iranian mythology which reached its zenith under the Sassanian Empire, the king is bestowed with divine glory; he is not “one of the gods (*yazadan*), but, like the sun and moon, he [is] a divine creation of Ohrmazd [Ahura Mazda], essential for the proper functioning of the cosmos, and serve[s] an antidemonic role in creation.”¹¹⁵ But here, little by little, the King's divinity is forfeited by his subjects who expose the former's human nature as well as his frailties. According to the Miller's family, Yazdgerd's conduct was anything but “kingly”: he contemplated suicide but was too much of a coward to end his life; shamefully fled from the battlefield to hide in the mill; and committed rape on the Miller's daughter and seduced his wife. Therefore, as the story unfolds, the King's glorious image is challenged by ambiguity and contradictions while his heroic myth is gradually debunked by the Miller's family. His reality is reduced to the golden mask while his real self remains constantly veiled.

While the play's polyphonic dramatic structure succeeds in inserting hitherto excluded voices into and shaping the official historical discourse, its parallel narrative structure conditions the search for truth to the realm of subjectivity. As a result, multiple versions of truth are produced not only to highlight the indeterminacy of reality but also to foreground the impossibility of obtaining one. Over the course of the play, a total of four major accounts present Yazdgerd's death from different perspectives: that of Yazdgerd's men, the Miller, the Woman, and the Girl.

1. The King is murdered by the Miller. As discussed earlier, this account, offered by history and supported by Yazdgerd's men, is deemed as an objective, non-perspectival,

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹⁵ Matthew P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth. Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 101.

and logical explanation of a past reality. Overlooking the representational value of realist historical narratives, the Commander, the Captain, and the Soldier align themselves, at least initially, with the historical “truth” provided in the beginning of the play—“The miller, longing for His treasures, killed Him in sleep... [651 A.D.]. History!”—and thereby corroborate its privileged status as a timeless reality. Early on, for instance, the Commander asserts:

This is our verdict: this man, miller with hands dipped in blood up to the elbow!
You shall be put to death presently [...] The record of this horrible crime will
hang from city gates and the name of the miller shall be defiled forever.¹¹⁶

In his search for a coherent truth, the Commander mainly draws on the collective knowledge and resorts to the great power of sight and vision as instruments of knowledge production. The former stance results in a particular reasoning that is inherently exclusionary while the latter fails to convey the nuances of vision as a means of judgment. Referring to the widely shared belief that king is the head of his people, the Commander says, “And now that the enemy is pressing our throat, what better assistance could it be given than the severing of the head from the body.”¹¹⁷ His comparison endorses the conventional account that allocates power to one mighty, divine individual regardless of his deeds or ability while relegating people to a subservient position, so much so that they become disposable on the battlefield. Reacting against the Woman’s claim that her son’s life is worth more than the King’s, he says, “Did you hear that? It is thus that this kingdom is now falling to pieces.”¹¹⁸

Similarly, having no access to proper information regarding the accurate identity of the corpse, the Commander’s belief in the truth behind Yazdgerd’s death is based on the

¹¹⁶ Bahram Beyzaie, *Death of Yazdgerd*: 7-8.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

interpretation of events as seen through the eyes of the Captain as well as other characters, whose perceptions are determined by their own interests or personalities. The Captain, who arrived first at the mill, witnessed the Miller's family sitting around the bleeding corpse and bemoaning in grief. The fact that the Captain has not seen the murder firsthand undermines the reliability of his testimony as well as subsequent observations drawn on his perception. What makes the Commander's insistence on obtaining an objective truth by means of empirical knowledge even more fatuous is the fact he has never seen Yazdgerd's face, which was almost always hidden behind some sort of lattice-work. Confronted with the Girl's claim that the corpse is her own father, the Commander admits that:

I myself had never encountered him except when he wore his gilded helmet or sat behind a screen. It is, therefore, difficult for me to say how far that glory is from this blood-covered corpse.¹¹⁹

The Commander's confession forces his fellows as well as the onlookers to reassess the dominant historical reality that he promotes alongside all other narratives instead of conveniently branding it as the "true" version.

The Magus, likewise, blindly insists on the validity of the historical reality and immediately identifies the Miller as the murderer. Unable to envision alternative perspectives, his verdict depends on the prevalent assumption that the disadvantaged people always aspire to greater material goods—a firm belief that can hardly be dislodged.

THE MAGUS: No! It's unbelievable that the miller was not seduced by gold; unbelievable that he did not strike the dagger; unbelievable that he did not slay the King. You must indeed have killed him and other than this everything is unbelievable.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 76.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 61.

Yet, his conviction, like that of the Commander, is founded on his ignorance as well as his want of perception of truth. The Magus recognizes Yazdgerd's splendid clothes and the golden armor, but failing to remove his unfounded prejudice, does not hesitate to regard his superficial familiarity as true knowledge. Looking at the King's armor, he nods, "Ay, I know the King."¹²¹ Moreover, although he claims to have seen the King's countenance before, the Magus is unable to identify the bloody face—a face ravaged by pain and death's agony. His failure to resolve the ambiguity, therefore, not only challenges the validity of objective, logical observations but also contributes to the complication of the notions of reality and identity, of which the mask is the most telling symbol.

The dominant historical "reality," is also initially endorsed by the Captain. He was absent at the time of the murder and arrived only afterwards; nevertheless, despite the lack of clear evidence, he orders the Soldier to erect the gallows for executing the Miller. He is firm and peremptory to the Miller's family, but respectful and submissive to his superiors. Yet, despite the depth of his faith in the King's sanctity, valor, and wisdom, the Captain, (perhaps representing the military forces who withdrew their support from the government following the Shah's departure in 1979) inspired by hearing alternative narratives as well as the monarch's removal, is the first to acknowledge the latent contradictions of the historical version and consciously testifies against the privileged status of Yazdgerd.

THE CAPTAIN: ... Now that this world is disjointed I can without fear say something even though I belong to lower ranks. [...] We did not lose him in the storm, he fled from us. [...] May *Ahura Mazda* forgive me a thousand times! Kingship to him was no longer anything but a precipice to fall from. He ran away from his stars not his subjects. I saw him saddling his horse.¹²²

He is pragmatic and flexible enough to explore alternative realities and eventually accept/reject them on their own merits. No wonder then, mid-through the play, the Captain

¹²¹ Ibid., 25.

¹²² Ibid., 55.

abandons his former stance in favor of the Miller's family and says, "I change my verdict."¹²³

The Soldier, on the other hand, passively accepts the historical recounting and does his best to fulfill its promise. He is a cold young man, devoid of compassion or mercy, whose object is to kill the culprits as quickly as possible. More importantly, he is the sole connection between the inside and outside world and regularly interrupts the "trial" to inform his superiors of his progress in setting up the gallows as well as updating them about the Arab captive's revelations. In this capacity, he is the only character who can elicit some information about the ongoing war and especially the enemy's advance into Iran's territory, but given the language barrier, he is not able to obtain any information despite the use of torture.

THE COMMANDER [To Soldier]: ... Give him bread and whey and then whip him until he talks! And ask him how many Arabs there are and where they are. What's on their mind? [...] Ask him why they destroy, burn, and wear black? And this God they talk about, why is He so enraged?¹²⁴

Viewed within the context of its epoch, the Arab invaders can be taken as the Islamists rise to power in 1979. Indeed, Beyzaie has no intention of creating an illusion about the revolution. As Talajooy correctly points out, "though the frightening enumeration of tortures demonstrates the cruelty of the Commander and his cohort, Beyzaie suggests that the arriving forces may be worse."

Finally, although the captive gives in right before his death, as it becomes clear, he has supplied false information regarding the withdrawal of the Arab forces. Or, could it be that the Commander has misunderstood/misinterpreted the former? At any rate, the outcome could hardly have been different.

¹²³ Ibid., 59.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 31-32.

2. The King has not been murdered. This account is initiated by the half-sane Girl, who in response to the accusations voiced by the Yazdgerd's men, says, "The King is not slain, the King is not slain! [...] He is asleep dreaming about us."¹²⁵ Representing those who have largely been excluded from history, the Girl's version of truth is significant at least for three reasons: on the one hand, the King is so dominant a force that he manages to insinuate himself into the lives of his subjects even after his death—imposing his reincarnation in their bodies.¹²⁶ Importantly, although the Miller's family members each reenact the events from the Yazdgerd's final hours, their performance is anything but a faithful representation of history. Indeed, in their theatricality, the family appears paradoxically more "real" than the distorted historical reality.

On the other hand, the Girl's version is an attempt to construct a higher reality pitted against the established reality of history. She successfully forces the antagonists, as well as the audience, to reevaluate their long-held beliefs and their conceptions of reality. As a result of her seemingly nonsensical account, a subsequent cycle of alternative realities are constructed, which ultimately emerge in a higher reality, i.e., that the King is not murdered. If Yazdgerd's men are unable to positively identify the corpse, how can they be certain about his death, then? Upon the realization of possible misidentification, the Magus grotesquely beats the corpse while grumbling:

THE MAGUS: [*Beats the corpse*] Woe on us if this dead man should only be a nameless miller! For I graced him with the Prayer of the Kings.¹²⁷

Lastly, by calling attention to the theatricality of the play, Beyzaie not only revolts against the hegemony of realist narratives and their claims to objectivity in favor of a

¹²⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹²⁶ Azar Nafisi, "Marg-e Yazdgerd," in *A Collection of Essays on Criticism and Introduction of Bahram Beyzaie's Works*, ed. Zaven Ghokassian (Tehran: Agah Publishing House, 1992): 387.

¹²⁷ Bahram Beyzaie, *Death of Yazdgerd*: 8.

marginalized aesthetic form, but also aims to give voice to those marginalized individuals, including the insane, through revising the historical discourse that has long been presented as the absolute truth.

3. The King wanted to be killed by the Miller and therefore arranged for his own murder. This account, offered by the Miller, the Woman, and the Girl, presents a series of schemes Yazdgerd had presumably contrived as a way of triggering the Miller to carry out the killing. Although, contrary to the established ideal image of a sinless, divine King, these scenarios venture to render a more complex picture of him as a coward, cruel, immoral, and exploitative tyrant, the fact that these narratives ultimately collide and are rescinded by the family members further adds to the confusion of this puzzle.

According to this account, the King has fled the battlefield as a result of his army's betrayal. Lonely, defeated, and stripped of his power, Yazdgerd contemplates committing suicide, but is deterred by his fears. Now, hoping to entice the Miller to carry out the plan, he (impersonated by the Woman) encourages the father to avenge the death of his son. This violent performance, of course, is too painful for the Woman and forces her to momentarily step out of her role to mourn the son's death. Her emotional experience, which prevents her total immersion in the imposed role, "is a reminder of the pain the king inflicted on the family."¹²⁸

Failing to tempt the Miller by provoking his vengeance, next, the King tries to persuade the Miller by offering his gold coins prior to asking his assistance in killing himself. Distrustful of the proposal, the Woman says, "You're indeed teasing us. It's a mean joke to give hope and then take it back and laugh heartily at your dupes."¹²⁹ Aside from negotiating the ideal image of the Empire, the lines are also significant as they

¹²⁸ Saeed Talajooy, "History and Iranian Drama: The Case of Bahram Beyzaie," 203.

¹²⁹ Bahram Beyzaie, *Death of Yazdgerd*: 47.

showcase Beyzaie's deliberate mixing-up of the old, elevated language of the past with contemporary demotic words and phrases (teasing us and heartily). In doing so, the playwright creates audience distance by exposing the theatricality of the play, which, in turn, emphasizes the ruptures between representations and reality.

Next, to the shock of the his men and the audience, the King attempts to prompt the former's anger and hatred by reminding him of his life of luxury built on the exploitation of poor people like his family, by humiliating him, forcing him to stand on all fours, ordering him to bark like a dog, and finally by raping his daughter. Beyzaie's juxtaposition of the stark contrast between the obscene luxury of the King and the appalling poverty of the people along with his immorality and extreme cruelty successfully introduces nuances, hidden histories, and silenced voices into the dominant historical truth.

Despite the King's abusive treatment, the Miller is too fearful to protest his actions. Assuming that the King is actually testing his loyalty, he puts his hands over his eyes and ears so as not to see or hear his daughter's violation or helpless pleas.

THE MILLER [*Covering his eyes*]: I shall not be angry. No, I shall not be angry!¹³⁰

It is, indeed, the cultivation of fear in the minds and hearts of the people that sustains the absolutist kingdom and allows "the king to do whatever he wants with the family." In order to liberate himself from this subjugated position, "the miller has to kill the king in himself before killing the king."¹³¹ The scene ends with Miller's confession of the murder, which he quickly disowns claiming that he invented the false story as a way of saving his honor.

In dramatizing alternative narratives, Beyzaie seems to undermine historical truth by suggesting the centrality of emplotment. According to historian Hayden White,

¹³⁰ Ibid., 68.

¹³¹ Saeed Talajooy, "History and Iranian Drama: The Case of Bahram Beyzaie," 205.

emplotment is a process of selecting and synthesizing historical data into a meaningful narrative, according to the primary forms of emplotment, i.e., romance, tragedy, satire, comedy, or epic. Depending on the selected mode, then, the emplotted history is fashioned accordingly, thereby generating a particular kind of historical truth, rather than the Truth. He says, historical narrative “does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charge our thought about the events with different emotional valences; it *calls to mind* images of the things it indicates, in the same way that a metaphor does.”¹³² Indeed, what Beyzaie shares with the postmodernist camp is his problematization of such notions as objective historical truth, fixed identities, and absolute knowledge evident in the play’s irresolution, indeterminacy, and the impossibility of a comfortable closure.

4. The Miller is murdered by the King. The account is initiated by the Girl and later supported by her family. She identifies the corpse as her father and says, “I pity the slain man, I pity the slain man. [*Sits down*] Ah, father, why did they kill you? [...] He who sleeps here is my father. A poor miller who received no reward from life not even after his death.”¹³³ As she pities her father’s forlorn and destitute situation, tears fall fast and bitterly from her eyes. Given the antagonists’ inability to identify the corpse, the claim creates great turmoil among Yazdgerd’s men. Immediately, two scenarios are presented by the Miller’s family. First, the Woman claims that following the murder of her husband, the King fled the crime scene. Second, hoping to clarify the suspicion regarding the real identity of the Miller, the family proclaims him as the King himself. The Girl’s (mis)identification can be interpreted in two different ways: First, the Miller’s inaction, be it out of submission or

¹³² Hayden White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 39; see also, Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

¹³³ Bahram Beyzaie, *Death of Yazdgerd*: 74-75.

reverence, in the face of the King's abusive conduct greatly has wounded his daughter so much so that he is dead to her.

THE MILLER: ... So, be silent!

THE GIRL: Why should I not weep since my poor father perished before my eyes?

THE WOMAN: O mother's darling, do not make my heart bleed!

THE MILLER: Why does she think me dead? Have I ever lived in your eyes?¹³⁴

He is no less of a stranger than the King in his own home. Second, although the Girl is considered infirm and only half sane, it is her version of truth that ultimately becomes the reality of the play. The Girl, like her story, falls outside the defined confines of what the majority accepts as valid, be it sanity or reality; yet, she successfully brings about the ultimate transformation of the antagonists' verdict and in doing so, undercuts the possibility of obtaining a shared notion of truth.

The last shock of the trial occurs near the end of the play, when the Girl, reveals the story of betrayal between her mother and the King as well as their plan to kill the Miller. This crucial scene acted out by the Miller's family, with the Girl impersonating the King, creates a tone of dark comedy through "the interplay of conflicting identities, the girl's Electra complex, the woman's dead dreams, the king's soft words and insatiable lust, and the voyeuristic eagerness of the magus to see the enactment of the seduction."¹³⁵

Upon hearing the fuller story, Yazdgerd's men, aligned with the historical "truth," decide to hang the corpse as the King's murderer. Their discovery of "truth" paradoxically does not promise the dawn of a new era. Instead, devoid of their alignment and impetus in

¹³⁴ Ibid., 82-83.

¹³⁵ Saeed Talajooy, "History and Iranian Drama: The Case of Bahram Beyzaie," 206.

a hopeless war, Yazdgerd's men await death as the enemy with their black banners closes in. After all, the Captain asserts, "History is written by the victors."¹³⁶

3.5 CONCLUSION

For Beyzaie, as for Pirandello, the concepts of truth and identity are anything but absolute and apodictic. Following the last scene of *Marg-e Yazdgerd* which reflects the historical event of the Arab invasion as well as the Islamic Revolution, the players sing the following song:

May he who read this legend,
be delivered from the world's thousand treacheries.
May he walk tall on the proving ground of this world.
On stretching a loving hand, may he not encounter a dragger.
May he not see the day when he cannot know friend from foe.
Let us ask forgiveness for the speaker and the listener,
for the compiler and the author who spent much life on this.
Say, "Be it so and be it more so!"¹³⁷

The overt theatricality of the scene not only undermines the possibility of separating truth from fiction, but more importantly, confronts the adequacy of representational Realism. In this context, dominant realist narratives, which have so far established themselves as a transcendental and universal truth, are pushed to the side while alternative narratives of normally marginalized voices, such as women, the poor, the insane, emerge and characterize the major events of the play. No wonder then, that this net of conflicting

¹³⁶ Bahram Beyzaie, *Death of Yazdgerd*: 111.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

accounts does not satisfy the impatient desire for the predominantly recognized truth in the antagonists as well as the audience, who might subconsciously fight against such rupture.

Add to this the namelessness of all characters that further challenges the recognizable genre features of Realism. Identified by their social roles—woman, girl, miller, commander, soldier, etc.— they are foregrounded as *characters* and thereby serve as reminders to the audience that the play is a performance of reality and not the reality itself. Likewise, the constant role-playing—taking multiple roles, wearing masks, or impersonating one another—of the three protagonists conveys the same message and therefore contributes to the creation of the distancing effect in the onlookers. What is more, multiple role-playing which corresponds to a fluid self underscores Beyzaie’s concern with the ongoing construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of identity, particularly at transitional moments.

The same concerns in Pirandello’s play, *Right You Are*, are represented by the conflict between the conventional townspeople and the Pirandellian newcomers, whose version of truth does not coincide with that of the inquisitive neighbors and their confidence in the existence of absolute truth. The Ponza’s summon to appear before the townspeople as well as the latter’s search for objective documents are their strategies to resolve the mystery. Yet, as it becomes clear, they are no closer to understanding the truth at the end of the play than they were at the beginning of the drama. If anything, the appearance of the veiled figure of Signora Ponza only confirms the playwright’s insistence on the relativity of identity and truth. As dedicated as the inhabitants are to finding truth, they are unable to overcome their stereotypical, limiting beliefs and prejudice that ultimately leaves them completely empty-handed.

However, despite the abound similarities, the two plays employ relativism to dissimilar ends. In *Right You Are*, although the townspeople fail to obtain “facts” regarding

the lives of the newcomers, they succeed in using their powers of regulation to banish the nonconformists from the town and to presumably restore harmony within the civic community. In *Marg-e Yazdgerd*, too, the search for identity and truth ultimately proves to be futile; however, unlike Pirandello's drama, reestablishment of order hardly seems conceivable when enemy and death are afoot. As the woman remarks in her closing lines, "Ay, the principal judges are coming now. With your white banner, you have passed your judgment. Let us now await the verdict of the Black Banners."¹³⁸ Once again suggesting the parallel between past and present, Beyzaie, similar to many of his Iranian modernist counterparts, is cynical, even pessimist, about the beginning of a new era. In the words of Talajooy, "with the white banners of the king's white revolution gone, Beyzaie [is] now awaiting the ruling of the black banners of the revolutionaries."¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Bahram Beyzaie, *Death of Yazdgerd*: 111.

¹³⁹ Saeed Talajooy, "History and Iranian Drama: The Case of Bahram Beyzaie," 207.

Epilogue: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Drama

The blossoming theatrical activities of the 1960s and 1970s were interrupted by the 1979 Revolution, which, unexpectedly, proved a watershed moment in the development of modern Iranian drama. Initially and prior to the Islamist consolidation of power in 1980, a short-lived, but vibrant cultural and political climate of “*Bahar-e Azadi*” (Spring of Freedom) ensued during which drama, as well as other artistic expressions, flourished. A number of theatrical groups were formed and plays, especially those with critical overtones against the Pahlavi regime, were staged, among them Mahmud Rahbar’s *Padegan dar Shamgah* (Barracks in the Evening) and Sa‘id Soltanpur’s *Abbas Aqa Kargar-e Iran Nasional* (Abbas Aqa, the Worker of Iran National Company)—the latter reportedly performed on the streets.

However, this “Spring of Freedom” was fleeting. Before long, theater, especially “the kind that was imbued with Western tradition,” was “socially, religiously, and above all, politically suspect and hence relegated to the sidelines.”¹ Moreover, the consequent imposition of strict censorship combined with the silencing, jailing, and sometimes even execution of the artists resulted in the subjugation of dramatic productions. Many leading playwrights such as Gholamhossein Sa‘edi, Parviz Sayyad, and Bijan Mofid fled the

¹ Willem M. Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 297.

country in fear of persecution, while others, such as Sa' id Soltanpur, whose creative staging of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* in 1969 had provoked a fierce reaction from SAVAK, was executed in 1981 for his association with the left-wing theater productions.

With the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, a more systematic censorship was introduced with the aim of pushing the writers to subscribe to the Islamic model or else to force them to scale back on the volume of writing and eventually quit artistic productions altogether. Contrary to expectations, however, theater as well as its sister art, cinema, were not banned altogether. Rather, recognizing the potential to use entertainment industries for propaganda purposes, the government supported artists whose products could lend themselves to the nationalist, political, and Islamic propaganda. *Ta'ziyeh*, for instance, which had long lost popularity, was appropriated by the revolutionaries as a part of campaign to promote national, religious, and moral values. In these post-revolutionary performances, initially the Shah was characterized as Caliph Yazid, who was responsible for Imam Hossein's martyrdom; during the course of the war, however, Saddam Hussein, the Sunni Iraqi president, was identified with Yazid and, by implication, Khomeini with Imam Hossein. Interestingly, despite all the efforts to Islamicize theater, "with these measures, the government succeeded, for the most part, in eliminating the taboo that had existed in the minds of many Iranians with regard to the theater. The medium was no longer considered an evil instrument."²

As the decade came to a close, it became clear that the landscape of performing arts in Iran would never be the same again. The social, political, and cultural transformations engendered literary responses which differed in crucial ways from those of previous movements both in form and content. Aside from the "general value system and social

² M. R. Ghanoonparvar, "Persian Plays and the Iranian Theater," 99.

institutions” which influenced the content of plays, the veiling code and the rule of modesty for women along with other imposed limitations on interactions between men and women, forced “actors, producers, and directors to rethink and revise their production of plays in order to conform to the standards and regulations established by the Islamic government.”³ On the other hand, drawing on the prevalent anti-Western climate of the period, many playwrights resorted to indigenous dramatic tropes as a way of constructing a national drama that is most concerned with identity and authenticity issues. Furthermore, during the same period, a number of different factors affected the development of theater. The relative stability following the end of the war in 1988; the establishment of the arts festivals, including *Jashnvare-ye Fajr* (literally, *Sunrise Festival*) in 1983 and the International Puppet Theater Festival in 1989; state incentives or inducements to encourage theatrical production and presentation of traditional and religious plays; as well as the Rafsanjani administration’s liberalization policies in the 1990s not only brought about the revitalization of drama in general, but more importantly spurred the resurgence of local theater forms.

In general, three major trends characterize the post-revolutionary dramatic productions. The first trend, represented by prominent playwrights such as Akbar Radi, utilizes the conventions of realistic and naturalistic styles and methods in conjunction with symbolism or surrealism. Of course, despite working in the realistic vein, playwrights belonging to this trend often differ in their objectives. Radi, for instance, continues the thematic focus on sociopolitical issues, while others, like Mohsen Makhmalbaf, wrote plays that were initially informed by his religious and revolutionary convictions. The second trend is identified by such directors as Atila Pesyani as one toward theatrical

³ Ibid.

innovation through experimentation with local forms. For this group, Western and Eastern avant-garde theaters remain sources of inspiration. The last paradigm involves the attempts by those dramatists who “inspired by the works of Beyzaie, Mofid, Na‘lbandian and others, aim at performances that refashion Iranian forms.”⁴ Aside from Beyzaie who reformulates indigenous traditions, such as *naqqali*, *kheymehshab-bazi*, *taqlid*, and *ta‘ziyeh*, to suit the modern period through creative experimentation, others, including Pari Saberi (1932-), Behruz Gharibpur (1950-), Davud Mir-Baqeri (1958-), and Mohammad Rahmanian (1962-), have also attempted to restructure traditional forms “to create modern plays commenting on human experience in general and on Iranians as a people in transition.”⁵

Such aesthetic restructuring has thus energized various styles of post-revolutionary drama and contributed to the development of performing arts, especially in the years leading up to the twenty-first century and beyond. During the same period, the substantial increase in government subsidies evidenced by the record-breaking ticket sales in the 2002 Fajr Theater Festival which drew more than 22,000 people over the course of twelve days,⁶ contributed to the popularity of theater. This annual festival, which is part of the larger Fajr Festival held in late January to commemorate the victory of the revolution, not only showcases the most recent Iranian productions but also features international plays from different parts of the world. Yet, despite this “theater boom,”⁷ not all plays of literary merit enjoyed a secure place in the dramatic repertoire. Reformed and renamed in 1987, *Vezerat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Islami* (The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance) became the institution in charge of overseeing all publications, including books and movies, before

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of these trends, see Saeed Talajooy, “Indigenous Performing Traditions in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Theater,” *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (June 2011): 501.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 502.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁷ Willem M. Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 299.

being released to the public. In the absence of objective quality standards, then, those theater practitioners, such as Beyzaie, whose works do not fit the ideological guidelines of the MCIG have often been the target of bureaucratic censorship after the revolution just like the previous regime.

Of course, the strictness of enforcing ideological conformity as well as the tolerance for nonconformism has varied under different governments and at different times. The 1997 overwhelming victory of President Mohammad Khatami, for instance, inaugurated a period of unprecedented cultural, social, and political reforms and liberalism—also known as the Iranian version of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Similar to his former role as the head of the Ministry of Culture, during his presidency Khatami moved quickly to lessen censorship and endorsed his culture minister, Aytaollah Mohajerani, whose liberal policies brought about a literary and artistic renaissance in Iran. The loosening of rigid cultural boundaries and of censorship rules broadened the scope of subject matter of theater and fostered a culture change that laid out the foundations for staging such plays as Shakespeare's *Richard III* for the first time. The approval of the play's production, as Arezoo Osalnoo explains, "allegorically marked a new era in the Islamic republic, one in which the new state formation is a marker of modernity, while that which was deposed, like Richard himself, was a poorly devised and polluted one."⁸ Indeed, with fresh memories of recent and past despotisms, the late sixteenth-century western play may well serve as a vehicle for indirect commentary about contemporary politics.

The serious attempts to put an end to the transitional character of the Islamic Republic through "pragmatic economic liberalization, and reformist political opening

⁸ Arezoo Osalnoo, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009): 50-51.

respectively championed by Presidents Rafsanjani (1989-97) and Khatami (1997-2005)”⁹, however, was overturned by the rise of hard-line conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power (2005-2013), especially following his contested re-election in June 2009 which sparked several weeks of public protests and later was congealed into *Jonbesh-e Sabz* (the Green Movement). Inspired by anti-Western policies, Ahmadinejad’s government called for more stringent censorship on foreign films, books, arts, and literature, even those that had been printed many times before. Reflecting on the complex, but nontransparent and arbitrary censorship procedures, Asghar Farhadi, the director of the Academy-Award winning film, *Jodai-ye Nader az Simin* (A Separation, 2011) once mentioned, “The restrictions and censorship in Iran are a bit like the British weather: one day it’s sunny, the next day it’s raining. You just have to hope you walk out into the sunshine.”¹⁰ The system of censorship reached absurd proportions when following harsh crackdowns on writers, in 2012 many prominent publishing houses were penalized by having licenses revoked and books banned from the Tehran book fair—among them was *Cheshmeh*, “a prominent Tehran publishing house that specializes in translations of global literature and poetry, including Katherine Mansfield, Mario Vargas Llosa, Toni Morrison, Paul Auster and Kazuo Ishiguro.”¹¹ No wonder then that despite the efforts to conclude the prolonged transitional period, Ahmadinejad’s government, with his agenda to Islamicize culture, his populist economic leanings, and hardline political policies, could hardly afford such profligate ambition. Indeed, rapid political changes and the subsequent economic transformations are still very much present today even under the presidency of Hassan

⁹ Mohammad Nafissi, “Shiism and Politics,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (New York: Routledge, 2009): 124.

¹⁰ Quoted in Annabelle Sreberny “Cultural Revolution in Iran,” in *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, ed. Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013): 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Rouhani. By the same token, Iran continues to remain a country in transition and so does its drama.

Whether drawing their inspiration from pre-Islamic heritage and literature, more recent historical events such as the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, current sociopolitical situations, or foreign plays that can be tailored to the needs of the moment, Iranian post-revolutionary playwrights have used the medium of drama to reflect on the changing dynamics of their society as well as presenting counter-discourses to the apparatus. Of course, in the revitalization of drama, one cannot afford to underplay the importance of directors, who develop creative ways of working around the regulations. According to Liliane Anjo:

Beyond their craftiness, they [Iranian directors] have created imaginative and expressive codes. Through an exploration of the possibilities of non-verbal expression and non-descriptive modes of representation, Iranian directors have managed to create an original scenic language. They use a language of colors and gestures that is particular to their theater and understood in the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹²

In fact, despite strict regulations, such creative processes have enabled staging of a number of plays without succumbing to the regime's ideological requirements. After forty years of delay, for instance, in 2015, Atila Pesyani finally staged an adaptation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, which became the highest-grossing performance of the year.¹³ Perhaps, the play's melancholic atmosphere of a transitory Russian world as well as its preoccupation with themes of loss and changing political times are aspects which make it peculiarly relevant to contemporary Iranian theater and thereby earned it great success.

¹² Liliane Anjo "Contemporary Iranian Theater: The Emergence of an Autonomous Space," in *Cultural Revolution in Iran: Contemporary Popular Culture in the Islamic Republic*, ed. Annabelle Sreberny and Massoumeh Torfeh (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013): 89.

¹³ Foruzan Jamshidnejad, "Iranian Theater in 1394," *BBC Persian*, March 18, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/persian/>.



Figure 4-1: Atila Pesyani's 2015 adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard*.¹⁴

¹⁴ Photograph, *Iran Online*, March 18, 2016, <http://www.ion.ir/>.

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