

The Evolution of Playwriting and its Diversity in Persian Literature

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ABSTRACT

Drama or play is a dramatic art and the plays were performed since five century before Christ in Athens and Roma. Play progressed in different forms in middle age, renaissance and modern period for criticism of cruel governments and kings. Since the kings did not bear critical language of the plays, most of the plays were accompanied by satire and ridicules and laughing. In ancient Iran the plays were performed in different kings' courts centuries before Christ. After Islam plays like *Ta'ziyeh*, comedies, *Baqqaal-Bazi*, puppet show and contemporary plays were performed. The main objective of this study is to better introducing the main and well-known types of plays (*Ta'ziyeh*, Comedy, *Baqqaal-Bazi*, *Ruhowzi*, Puppet Show and Contemporary Drama) and their playwriting evolution in Iran and even in some cases for Middle Easterns. As a consequence, the mentioned different plays in Iran can be considered in New Playwriting Strategies around the world.

KEYWORDS: Play, *Ta'ziyeh*, Comedy, *Baqqaal-Bazi*, Puppet Show, Contemporary Drama, Persian Literature

1. INTRODUCTION

In a simple definition, a play involves all movements and actions for showing or applying a subject. According to this definition, it can be concluded that show is a play in its primary form. We know that play is one of the instincts of human being. Usually an event is showed which was happened before. So, play is showing or repeating of looking, imitation and playing each of which is a different form of a drama. In definition of theatre, it can be said that theatre is a dramatic art performed 500 years before Christ in Greece and Rome and it was continued in stages of the middle age, renaissance and then in modern period in Europe. Theatre means an organized structure that needs written text and director and etc. A playwright, also called a dramatist, is a person who writes plays [1]. By etymological study it is revealed that, the term is not a variant spelling of "playwrite", but something quite distinct: the word *wright* is an archaic English term for a craftsman or builder (as in a *wheelwright* or *cartwright*). Hence the prefix and the suffix combine to indicate someone who has *wrought* words, themes, and other elements into a dramatic form, someone who crafts plays. The homophone with *write* is in this case entirely coincidental.

Early playwrights and playwriting theory

The earliest playwrights in Western literature with surviving works are the Ancient Greeks. These early plays were written for annual Athenian competitions among playwrights [2] and held around the 5th century BC. Such notables as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes established forms still relied on by their modern counterparts. For the Greeks, the playwright was "poesis" the act of making plays. So the "poet" had a different connotation than it does today.

Aristotle's Poetics

In the 4th Century BC, Aristotle wrote his *Poetics*, the first play-writing manual. In this benchmark text, Aristotle establishes the principle of "action" or "praxis" as the basis for all drama. Aristotle establishes a hierarchy of elements for the drama beginning with Plot (mythos), Character (ethos), Thought (dianoia), Diction (lexis), Music (melopeia), and Spectacle (lusis). The ends of drama were plot, character, and thought, the means of drama were language and music, and the manner of presentation was spectacle. Since the myths, upon which Greek tragedy was based, were widely known, plot had to do with the arrangement and selection of materials. Character was equated with choice, as opposed to psychology, thus, character is determined by action. In tragedy, the notion of ethical choice determined character of the man. Thought had more to do with arguments, and rhetorical strategies, rather than "theme" has it today. Language and Music were the material means of drama, much like paint and brushes are the means of the painter. Aristotle's methodology was inductive and based on reading the great tragedians of his day. In other words, he redacted his theories from the plays themselves, rather than begin with a theoretical approach. As such, it is not intended as dogma (as it would later become) but was written as a guide describing best practices. His definition of tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious.....etc." brought in the concept of mimesis from real life, rather than from the ideal that Plato had touted. Thus, he developed his notion of hamartia, or tragic flaw, which was really an error in judgment by the main character or protagonist. The *Poetics*, while very brief, is highly condensed and worthy of study by any playwright

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today. It provides the basis of the "conflict-driven" play, a term we still tout as the sine qua non of dramaturgy. Perhaps, the most Aristotelian of contemporary playwrights is David Mamet. Mamet embraces the idea of character as "agent of the action" and exemplifies causality in the structure of his plays. His recently revived, *Speed the Plow*, and is quintessential.

Aristotle observes the unities, with exception of Act II's change in place, and builds its plot through a causal stream of discoveries and reversals. The term *playwright* appears to have been coined by Ben Jonson in his Epigram 49, *To Playwright*, [2] as an insult, to suggest a mere tradesman fashioning works for the theatre. He always described himself as a poet, since plays during that time were always written in meter and so regarded as the provenance of poets. This view was held even as late as the early 19th century. The term later lost this negative connotation.

The Italian Renaissance brought about a stricter interpretation of Aristotle, as this long-lost work came to light in the late 15th century. The neoclassical ideal, which was to reach its apogee in France during the 17th century, dwelled upon the "unities," of action, place, and time. This meant that the playwright had to construct the play so that its "virtual" time would not exceed 24 hours, that it would be restricted to a single setting, and that there would be no subplots. Other terms, such as verisimilitude and decorum circumscribed the subject matter significantly. For example, verisimilitude defined that characters were to base upon the ideal of a type, versus what might be considered realistic. It also prohibited actions that might not be considered possible within the limits of the unities. Decorum fitted proper protocols for behavior and language on stage. In France, Jean Racine in tragedy, and Molière, in comedy, was purveyors of the unities and other strictures. Corneille, on the other hand was condemned by the French Academy, when his play *Le Cid* contained too many events and actions, thus, violating the 24 hour restriction of the unity of time. Neoclassicism never had as much traction in England—Shakespeare's plays are directly opposed to these models—and in Italy, improvised and bawdy *commedia dell'arte* and opera were more popular forms. In England, after the interregnum and restoration of the monarchy in 1660, there was a move toward neoclassical tragedy, but this was never popular. For example, Dryden's *All for Love*, a redaction of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, attempted to compress the sprawl of action and multiple settings from Egypt to Rome to a single place, and within a 24 hour time frame. One structural unit that is still useful to playwrights today is the "French scene" which describes any character entrance or exit. Thus, motivations and actions for characters will change based on who is present on stage. This is an excellent structural tool, and can let the playwright know exactly how much a particular character is involved in the action.

THE EVOLUTION OF PLAYWRITING IN MIDDLE EAST AND ESPECIALLY IN IRAN

The evolution of playwriting and related literature cannot be considered outside the cultural contrast resulted from social status before and after Islam. So, it is necessary to study shifts and cultural paradox resulted from advent of Islam that caused to shift in artistic and literary structures and in some cases in social values.

European drama was transferred from Greece to Iran in Achaemenian and Parthian periods and during attack of Alexander to Iran. It cannot be denied that drama was performed in cultural way in Iran but unfortunately it did not lead to a movement. Plutarch writes about the history of Iranian drama: "approximately drama was performed in Iran fifty three years before Christ so that at the end of the ceremonies some parts of Arvidip were read for the king and guests" [3]. "According to the historians, Medes had established Aryan civilization accompanied by Indians. They were skilled in construction and setting of the scenes by carving on the stones and sculpturing and it seems that they had not special dramatic art" [4].

It is necessary to study playwriting kinds and reminded texts and even paintings and sculptures concerned to drama after Parthian period and establishment of Sassanid dynasty and advent of Islam. The important text considered by the historians and officers of Sassanid government is history of Aster Angues, the Medes princess and Queen Zaari Neaa that "Ketzayas" a physician of the second Ardeshir refers to it. Drama also developed in Sassanid period. The plays were accompanied by comedy performed in wedding parties or funeral ceremonies. "Ammein Marcelin points to dancing ceremony held by the First Shapur for death of one of the aristocrats" [5].

By attack of Arabs on Iran and shifting of the artistic values and even social and political structures, the form and content of the plays changed. According to this fact that the Arabs were not familiar with art and considered imitation as competition with God, some Iranian scholars like Farabi and Avicenna introduced the Greeks drama by translation of Depolica but due to oppression and indifference of the rulers these plays were not performed in the stage [6].

It is obvious that drama was among people but it never exalted. Performed plays were not registered so the people were not aware from these plays. Our information about status of drama in Iran during attack of Greeks and Arabs is limited. Only there is information about evolution of playwriting since attack of Mongols to fifty years ago that passed nonreligious path. This trend was stopped by entering western culture in Iran and a new trend began toward drama with social and real concepts and traditional drama was forgotten and modern stage theatre developed.

The main objective of this study is to better introducing the main types of plays (*Ta'ziyeh*, Comedy, Baqqal-Bazi, Ruhowzi, Puppet Show and Contemporary Drama) and their playwriting evolution in Iran because these five kinds of plays are very common and well-known to all Iranian people and even in some cases for Middle East people.

Part one: *Ta'ziyeh*

Based on DehKhoda Dictionary, from lexical view point *Ta'ziyeh* means sympathy, lamenting and condolence (Figure 1, 2) [7].



Figure 1. A Ta'ziyeh scene of Qajar era in 1870 [8]

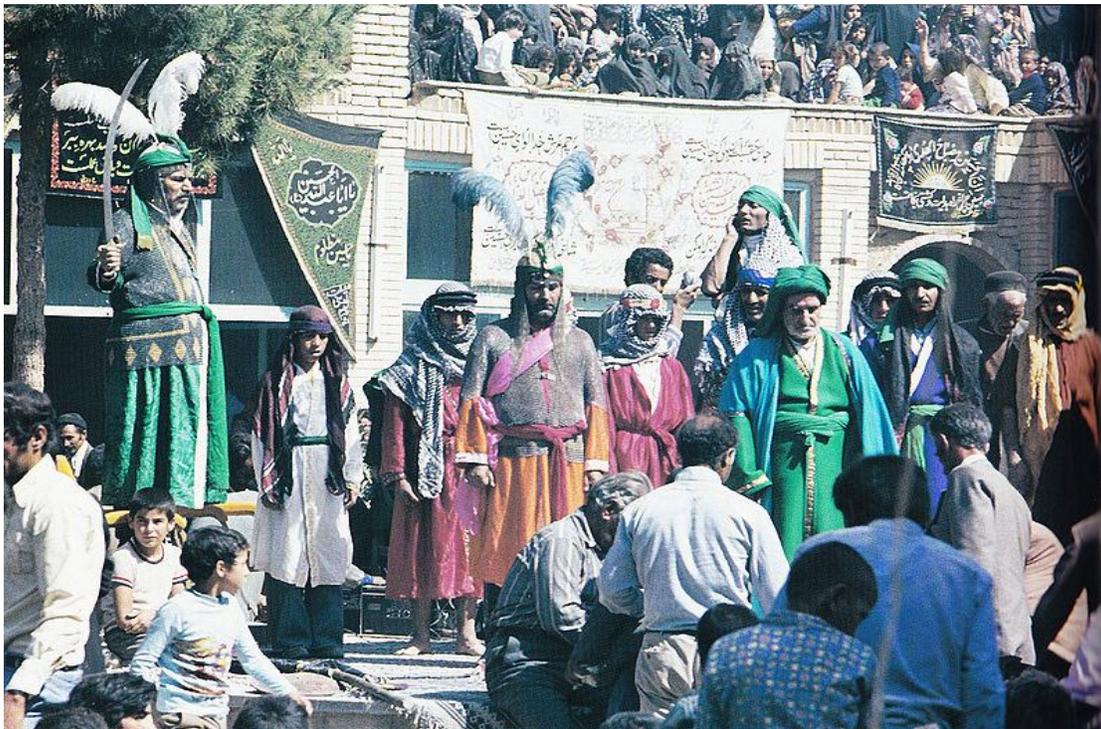


Figure 2. Ta'ziyeh in Shiraz Arts Festival (1977)

All "*Shabih Gardani*" or "*Shabih Khani*" or "*Taziyyeh*" are as a drama centered on the difficulties of Prophet Mohammed family and especially events of Muhrram and martyrdom of Shia Imam Hussein and his family in Karbala in year 61 of the Hegira. This kind of drama involves all stories and recreational aspects of common people" [5]. Since establishment of Arab governments, Iranians sought to release themselves from Arabs

so they began movements against Umayyad and Abbasid governments since these governments were not from the prophet family. The Iranians supported Abbasid governors because they belonged to the prophet family and they established new sect of Shiite. The Iranians considered themselves near to the prophet because of friendship between Salman Farsi and the Prophet. Shahrbanu the daughter of third Yazdgerd, the Sassanid king, was the third wife of Imam Hussein and mother of the fourth Imam and the next Imams were grandsons of this Imam and Imam Reza that was buried in Iran.

Therefore, “it is concluded that *Ta'ziyeh* progressed as a result of political and religious independence” [6]. Since *Ta'ziyeh* and *Shabi khani* are considered as main factors in empowerment of people believes and accepting Shiite, the rulers have employed the artistic innovation for expansion of their political purposes. It should be pointed that Iran is the only country that could perform drama of *Tazyeh* in spite of banishment of the governments and attachment of people.

Part two: Comedy

In the middle of Safavid period there were singers groups performed plays in houses of aristocrats usually from night to morning. These groups wore the native costume and danced. There were two kinds of dancing: one part involved “wrath and reconciliation” and the other was performed in two scenes as love question and reply in ridiculous way by signing a song. From these shows comedy progressed as short and comic stories performed by singing. By continuity of comedy, another form was appeared as long dialogues accompanied called imitation play.



Figure 3. Asgar Tavakkoly (Comedian in Asgar Comedy Movie)

“The actors imitated ascent and personalities of natives and they imitated individuals from different classes that greeted with each other and then quarreled and ridiculed their ascent and personalities and the play was ended by fighting and running away. That was one of the simple imitation stories. In all shows, there was a person that imitated the accent of the others and he was the main pivot of the story. He could have been a merchant and even a servant” [9]. “In late Safavid and early Zandieh period, there were singers and imitating groups in some cities especially in Isfahan. They gathered in the traditional coffee houses and they sometimes performed plays and they were invited to the middle class or poor houses for wedding parties and other ceremonies [6]. In this period, the singers groups performed plays besides their joyful programs in meetings and parties so the plays progressed and narration was empowered in its different forms. Joyful plays involve different plays like magic show and performance of clowns and then *Kachlak Bazi* and *Baqqual Bazi*.

After Safavid and in Zandieh period, *Kachlak Bazi* was performed by bold clowns. It might be the main character was bold that caused laughing. *Hassan Kachal* is one of these plays [10].

Part three: Baqqal-Bazi

Baqqual –Bazi is close to the modern theatre among plays like *Ta'ziyeh*, *SiahBazi*, *Ruhowzi* or *Takhtehowzi* and other plays. The dialogues of this play are close to modern dialogues and it was performed by Karim Shirei the clown of Naseridin Shah [10].

For studying this play, it is necessary to refer to social and political status in this period. In Ghajar period, especially in fifty years governance of Naserdin Shah, due to political dictatorship and lack of press and media like TV and radio, criticizing the government was impossible except by satire and facetious. So, Baqqal Bazi gained importance. The actors pointed to the social problems in these plays by limited characters: “Learn ridiculing and singing in order to take your right from great and subordinate” [11].

It is said that in journey to Isfahan these actors could transfer difficulties of people to Naserdin Shah. Baqqal Bzai had simple theme. It was a story of a grocer that some thieves wanted to steal yogurt or milk from him. But it was the appearance. The actors pointed to social and economic problems and the corruption of the governors.

Krim Shirei, the Isfahanian clown of Naserdin Shah, was founder of this play. He was famous for ridiculous talking.

“He was the main character and the story was about deceiving and stealing yogurt and milk and it was introduction on implicit criticism of the court corruption and government” [5].

Karim along with his friends [12] performed his shows in *Takyeh Dawlat* (the first theatre of Iran) that *Ta'ziyeh* was held there [12].



Figure 4. Baqqal Bzai in Iran



Figure 5. Krim Shirei in Iran

Some plays were performed in traditional coffee houses or houses. Earl Dogobinio writes:“ Takiyeh Dawlat was built by order of Naserdin Shah by Dost AliKhan Maerol Mamalek in 1869. It was the biggest governmental theatre near Gulestan palace by the capacity of twenty thousand people. The building was in four floors with area of approximately two thousands eight hundred and twenty meter as the magnificent place for *Ta'ziyeh*” [6]

There were thousands candles and lights in the Takiyeh Dawlat added to glory of this place. There was a circle platform in height of half meter to seventy five centimeter in the middle by two lines of stairs and a place for sitting of men and women in separated part. The nearest room to stage was dressing room. It should be pointed that Baqqal Bazi was performed extemporaneously and there was no text since they did not want to have a document and the actors were not familiar with plays and playwriting techniques. The plays were performed by imitators in cities. As mentioned before, since plays were rooted in people behavior, the actors could enter to people houses and they performed plays on the boards on the basin so these plays were popularized as Ruhowzi or Takht-howzi. The founder of these plays was Karim Shirei. Baqqal Bazi was performed in houses of aristocrats and that the actors of Baqqal Bazi pointed to corruption of the governmental officers.

Tahvildare Isfahan, as the author of *Geography of Isfahan* in 1963 [13] writes: “the past scholars invented Baqqal Bazi for some purposes and performed it in happiness and ridiculous meetings. Finally complaints, injustice of the officers and subordinates were announced by the actors when the play was performed for pleasing and happiness of the King” [13].

The complaints and recommendations of the greats and aristocrats were expressed easily by these actors. Baqqal Bazi performed in the traditional coffee houses was an introduction to the modern and official theatre.

Karim Shirei continued his plays in Takiyeh Dawlat. It is said that Karim criticized aristocrats and officers in one play which led to irritation of the aristocrats and laughing of Naserdin Shah. Karim demanded king a robe of honor and the servants brought him a large wooden tray with a packsaddle and the king laughed and

Karim wore it and walked on the stage and thanked the king and said: the honorable king gave his cloth to me today [6]. Discussion about Baqqal Bazi is out of this article.

Part four: Ruhowzi

Ruhowzi is one of the Iranian funny plays rooted in old happy customs and traditions. "Ruhowzi is a play based on dialogue, dancing and singing and it is a traditional and joyful play performed in the Ghajar period in wedding parties and other ceremonies on the rectangular or hexahedral boards covered by carpet located on the basins" [8]. This joyful play as a complete Iranian play progressed and culminated in late governance of Ahmed Shah Ghajar and theatres were built and it was declined after August nineteenth coup d'état by omission of its critical theme due to control of the government and advent of powerful media like TV and radio and commercial approach of theatres that led the drama toward banality. Construction of recreational centers like cabaret for covering social problems and amusing middle and low classes led to forgetting of Ruhowzi plays.

Siyah (Black) character in Ruhowzi: There are many assumptions about character of Siyah (black) in this play. The hypothesis of Bahram Baizaei is acceptable. He writes: "certainly Siyah is not remainder of black tribes before Aryans. It is probable that in the period of unity of Islamic countries that the merchants who traveled to African countries brought some African servants and merchants" [5]. But it can be referred to the hypothesis that "Asian and especially Indian homeless gypsies traveled to Iran in pre Islam and post Islam period and they were settled all over Iran. They traveled, danced and sang and they imitated others. They are called "Garachi" or "Garachi" means black faced in some parts. It is less probable that they are originated from Africans and "Siyah" refers mostly to gypsies.

"In Iranian comic plays originated from gypsies "Siyah" is undoubtedly is a gypsy and his face is covered with soot that seems darker than usual and his accent and behavior is exaggerated in order to seem ridiculous" [6].



Figure 6. Siyah (Black) character in Ruhowzi

According to above mentioned, Siyah indicates the characteristics of a person that mispronounces most of the words because of attending in a new environment. These characteristics besides black and different face of the personage led the Iranian imitators to seem more ridiculous by using these traits and on the other hand gradual attendance of a black servant in most houses of the aristocrats caused that the behavior and reactions of these servants employed in the plays. It should be pointed that Siyah Bazi is a traditional drama of Iran that professor Kamyabi Masak suggests employing of Siyah in a new drama: "it is better to show siyah personage in different ways and replace the naïve characters with smart and vigilant personages like Mula Naserdin and Bahloul and other Iranian personages by other characteristics" [10].

Part five: Arusak Bazi (puppet show)

It can be said that when human being sat beside fire and saw his image and comprehended surrounding objects in the caves and when the religious heads considered masks and moving shapes as symbol of goddesses the puppet show was performed as sign of supernatural forces. These shows were considered as the oldest plays in the east. Puppet show has old record in Iran.

The history of the puppet shows in Iran has been discussed several times but it is unnecessary to consider the origin of these plays here.

It might be curiosity of the people in old times that led to discovery of the show with puppets.

There is no information about puppet show after advent of Islam in Iran. Since fifth AH century, some hints can be found in poems. It is possible that these poems could confirm explicitly puppet shows in sixth and seventh centuries without interpretation. It can be referred to poems of Khayam Neyshabori in sixth AH century that calls human being as puppet and the world as puppeteer.

از روي حقيقتي نه از روي مجاز
It is truth not false that

ما لعبتکانيم و فلک لعبت باز
We are puppets and the world is a puppeteer

افتيم به صندوق عدم يکيک باز
We play our role and then leave the world step by step [13]

بازيچه همي کنيم بر نطع وجود
[13]

In *Garshasbnameh* Asadi Tusi describes unstable nature and points to temporary life and day and night as two scenes of the nature magic show [15]:

که در پرده داند نمودن خيال
That shows the secrets in the scene

چه چابوک دست است بازي سگال
It is skilled playing

ببندد همي گه سیه گاه زرد
Sometimes black and sometimes white

دوپرده بدین گنبد لاجورد
Two scenes are shown in this blue sky

Nizami poems are explicit: "among poems pointed to puppet shows following poems are acceptable since they refer to performing this show in the poet period" [16].

بازي شب ساخته شب بازي
The night shows off itself

هر نفسي از سر طنازي
Every breath is from coquettishness

گرنه بر او اين همه لعبت که
بست

لعبت بازي پس اين پرده هست
[16]

These shows are repeated in history

There is a show behind this scene

لعبتي از پرده به درنامه
Toys are not out of the shadows

وعده تاريخ به سرنامه
Delay promises has not ended yet

The puppets progressed by the progress of the technology and cotton and cloth puppets were replaced by puppets made of chemical materials. These puppets lack delicateness of the cotton puppets and kindness of the woody puppets and smile of the puppeteers and even they could not be friend for children and they could not gain position in life of the people.



A



B

Figure 7. A) Khayyam= Illustration for *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*: "Earth could not answer; nor the Seas that mourn" (Khayyam, 1959); [14]. B) Nizami= Rug depiction of Nizami Ganjavi (1939) (Nizami Museum of Azerbaijani Literature)

Part six: Contemporary Drama

Since two centuries ago, by combination of east and west cultures, drama was affected like other oriental arts and also east civilization influenced on west. In this period *Ta'ziyeh* was prohibited in Iran and coffee houses as place for show were closed. The imitative shows were replaced by folklore shows. These transformed shows were neither Iranian nor western.

"Concurrent to constitutional movement some show groups were established and they performed critical shows accompanied by advocates of constitutional government. Advocating constitutional government was only a context for shaping these plays. Establishment of association is one reason for founding show groups in this period" [17].

Several theatres were constructed by holders of show in this period. A theatre was constructed by Hussein Chobi in "Sultan square" and since it was a temporary theatre for holding shows in the summer, it was

closed and another theatre was built in a wood warehouse popular for “*Bongahe Tir froshi*” in 1910. *Chahr Sandoug* and *Nouroze Panbe* were shows of this theatre” [6].

“In 1923 *Komedi Akhavan* firm was established by Mahmud Zahiredini as a famous comedian and member of this group. In 1926 Mehrdash established a club called Baber association. This association became popular by showing “*Layla and Majnun*”, “*Adalat*”, “*Khayam*”, “*Khosro and Shirin*” “*Namayesh Edari*” [4]. Then permanent theatre of *Nekisa* was constructed by Aflaton and showed plays for three years, then it was banished by government and this group was abolished. Ten years later, Seyed Ali Nasr and Ahmed Dehgan established Tehran permanent theatre and new plays were performed and political issues were addressed and since then musical scenes called “interlude”.



Figure 8. Effigy of Khosrow (Mr.) and Shirin (Mrs.) in the epic poem of "Khosrow (Mr.) and Shirin (Mrs.)" by Nezami Ganjavi

By beginning of Second World War, Iran art and literature were shifted and the writers and artists employed new themes and concepts and people got familiar with modern theatre since 1940. Unfortunately, Iran Theatre was not shaped accompanied by traditional plays and it was removed [10].

CONCLUSION

Regarding to objective of this review related to the playwriting evolution in Iran, it is concluded that play is an art expressed by different forms by comedy and tragedy in people language dating before Christ. Iran has old record in play. It can be found that plays were performed in pre Islam period. After Islam the plays were religious and they were culminated in Safavid period of Iran and they performed in satirical way for criticism of government's corruption. Different plays were performed in Iran like *Ta'ziyeh*, comedy, Baqqal Bazi, puppet show, Ruhowzi and etc. The plays had not especial places and they were performed in courts of kings and squares and houses and even in markets and alleys.

Recent efforts to break with traditional structure and characterization have met with a measure of success as contemporary playwrights seek new forms and modes of expression. "New Playwriting Strategies: A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting" [18], challenged the orthodoxy that had governed playwriting pedagogy for a century, and is now largely eclipsed. In this regard, different plays in Iran that are mentioned in the current review, can be applicable in New Playwriting Strategies around the world.

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