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## **A STUDY OF POSITION OF ARISTOTLE'S CATHARSIS IN THE PERSIANS TA'ZIYEH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In addition to its momentous religious dimension, Ta'ziyeh is considered as the most important performance art in Iran—the art which is specific to Iran and Iranians, the art which is intermingled with souls of this land's people. Since drama is regarded to the most significant art in each country, this is well-suited to pay meticulous attention to enriched dramatic art of Iran, comparing its dramatic aspects to those of the globe's. One of such elements is catharsis coined by Aristotle that is still discussed in academic venues after several centuries. This article intends to investigate popular involvement—as one of the most important elements in Ta'ziyeh—and the notion of catharsis, the concepts which result in spiritual refinement and purification of the audience. In fact, this alignment of meaning provoked conduction of this research. A qualitative study, this text relies upon philosophical ideas. Identification of catharsis in Ta'ziyeh was set as the purpose of this study, as a result of which Aristotle's catharsis and Ta'ziyeh's outcome, i.e., self-purification, are equally defined herein.

**Keywords:** *Ta'ziyeh, Catharsis, Spiritual Refinement and Purification*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Persian Ta'ziyeh has unique characteristics which have goaded its special attractiveness for its audience. This enables every scholar and researcher in dramatic arts, traditional arts, etc., to look into its different grounds. In this article, attempts are made to cover issues ranging from color semiotics in Islamic mysticism, costume designation, stage semiotics, actors' contracts, and feelings expressed by passionate audience that are main propellants of this Iranian-Islamic drama to spontaneous feedings produced by audience of Ta'ziyeh using the concept of catharsis. Influence of drama on the audience that involves and, in fact, revolutionize, their emotions leads to their self-purification: the concept of catharsis (katharsis). In Aristotelian terms, catharsis is purification and refinement which is generated as a result of provocation and excitation of a mixture of compassion and fear senses, leading to purification of audience's souls (Harland, 2006). This definition of catharsis has for long engaged drama theorists who have made diversified interpretations thereon.

On exact interpretation of *catharsis*, as mentioned in the sixth chapter of Aristotle's *Poetics*, there have been decades-long discussions: many researchers believe that Aristotle meant to convey a sense of man's mental transformations under the influence of art. Catharsis, in BābakAhmadi's opinion, is translatable in three meanings: purgation, purification, and clarification. First two interpretations are evidently related to an audience's reception from the artifact as well as mental and ethical influences thereof; while, the last one can be regarded as associated with the artifact's structure (Ahmadi, 2007). This is important to note that first two meanings are intended in this article.

Ta'ziyeh and Ta'ziyeh citation are a Persian religio-ritual play, which is mixed with Iranians' souls. People have done their best to hold these plays all during the history in order to exhibit their affection to the Holy Prophet's descendants and demonstrate Imam Hossein's afflictions in the Battle of Karbala. And, what can be replaced by affection for endearing Imam Hossein as a driving force for such plays? Since around thirteen centuries the martyrdom of Imam Hossein and his descendants, Shiite Iranians have shown their fondness toward their Imam by means of arranging Ta'ziyehs in which they weep and shed tears.

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Dramatically speaking, Ta'ziyeh is an accepted form for all theatre researchers. Although, what have introduced Ta'ziyeh as a universal phenomenon are, alongside its dramatic dimensions, its themes and philosophical facets (Mokhtabad, 2008). Ta'ziyeh knots the souls of us Shiites with religio-ritual arrangements and plays. As mentioned earlier, what is gained for viewers is purification of their souls, i.e., *catharsis* which is elaborated by Aristotle in a different manner. This served as a motivation for us to address the concept of *catharsis* as a well-noted universal topic in Ta'ziyeh plays which come with a long timeline and are of immense impacts on both Iranians and some theatre and drama giants around the world.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research method used in this context, qualitative methods that are associated with philosophical motif and the compilation of this research is the library.

### *Catharsis*

Catharsis is a Greek term meaning purification and purgation. This is derived from *kathaire* which has medical applications. The first, and most serious, definition of catharsis in the area of dramatic arts is the one developed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: "Pathos which influences one's soul equally affects others' souls; if there is any difference in such impacts, it is only in one of the degrees, for instance, in fear and pity." In *Poetics*, Chapter XIV, Aristotle talks of catharsis with regard to Classic works as such: "Fear and pity may arise from a play or be ensuing from sequence of events, with the latter being superior to the former and a job of great poets. Legends should be compiled in such a way to shiver their audience, who then should feel pity for the protagonist, just as happens for Oedipus audience. If this effect is intended to be achieved from the setting, it is beyond the poetical principles and needs nothing but material equipment" (Zarrinkoob, 2001).

Aristotle deliberated on internal and personal functions of art, which, as elaborated by BābakAhmadi in his *Reality and Beauty*, it was this way of thinking that invented the term catharsis. This way of thinking can, although, be regarded as a rejection of Plato's opinions that art of drama damages peoples' souls, particularly the youth. Therefore, Aristotle gave a positive and constructive aspect to theatre by inserting catharsis in drama as a result of fear and pity (Ahmadi, 2007).

Nature and reality of the term catharsis, as interpreted to mean purification and purgation, are under heated questions by various scholars, and no word is as renowned as catharsis in the Greek literature. Hippocratic interpretation of catharsis is likely to be used by Aristotle who intended to use the term as to mean what purifies the soul from damages and corruptions. Apparently, purification is not opposed to this interpretation of catharsis (Zarrinkoob, 2001).

Berthold Friedrich Brecht defines catharsis as: "What is socially important for us is the purpose which Aristotle determined for tragedy: purgation. It is purification of viewers by means of imitation of actions which provoke fear and pity. Purgation sinks audience in persons whose behaviors are imitated by actors. In their activities and research on the term catharsis, scholars and translators have pinpointed to the issue that *fears* and *pity*, or solely one of them, are/is associated with catharsis. Another design is that Aristotle meant to accompany fear and pity with other similar emotions. This is, however, most probable that Aristotle wished to indicate that catharsis is a repercussion of a complex reaction ensuing from fear and pity.

Lessing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century defined catharsis as a change of effects into righteous habits in which fear and pity are so adjusted that can be heightened to reach at the position of virtues (Nasiri, 2008).

In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustinus presented a description of the paradox of tragedy. He believed that we enjoy the feelings of affliction and pain in a tragedy as a reference to the feelings of sympathy and pity. Reflected also by many other 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers as Adam Smith, Lord Kim, Harry Hum, etc., this definition was attractive due to the close relationship between an artistic accomplishment and Christian ethics. However, David Hume rejected this interpretation that we enjoy from fear and pity, indicating that: "If this was the case, we could have been enjoying being in a hospital more than being in a party. This is not only a deficient solution to aesthetics, but also a poor interoperation of catharsis as meant by Aristotle.

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This misinterpretation is caused by change in main words.” Examining the issue of catharsis in Aristotle’s *Politics* in relation to music, we come to the conclusion that catharsis is laid on the mind of music listener, not the music itself. The conception that catharsis is received and experienced by tragedy audience can be addressed, thus, in a similar way (Ahmadi, 2007).

#### **Ta'ziyeh**

Ta'ziyeh is the only native performance in the world of Islam, a Persian religion-ritual play which is deeply rooted in Islamic tradition and principles. Thanks to its Shiite philosophy, Ta'ziyeh has found a global presentation. It is recognized as a global drama due to the rich theatrical presentation and aesthetic richness of its contents (Chelkowski, 1979).

A dramatic, ritual art of Iranian people, Ta'ziyeh means lamentation, jeremiad, elegy, and commanding to patience. In expression, however, Ta'ziyeh means a religious lyrical presentation in which a body of professionals acquainted with religious compositions performs the ceremonies often in Muharram month, observing special measures and using particular instruments and vocalizations in order to electrify the arrangements and people attending there aimed at enjoyment of interventions by virtuous persons specially the Holy Prophet’s descendants (Safa, 2000). Although exact starting point of Ta'ziyeh is non clear, some date it back to pre-Islam Iran and 3000-year lamentations for national Persian heroes including Siavash. Others, relying on available accounts, consider the Battle of Karbala where Imam Hossein and his companions were martyred as the origination of Ta'ziyeh (Ashoorpour, 2010).

Obviously, theme of Ta'ziyeh contains the encounter of good and evil where, apparently, evil overcomes the good, but ultimate triumph goes for the good. Ta'ziyeh is, in fact, a performance based on stories and narrations related to life and afflictions of the Holy Prophet’s descendants, particularly incidents occurred in Karbala at 639 A.D. Formation of Ta'ziyeh was grounded upon people’s oral narrations about historical events, Karbala epic, accounts from myths, and popular beliefs. Therefore, Ta'ziyeh is an achievement of worldviews and ways of thinking by majority of people whom have been overwhelmed by the symbolic and epic-building culture and thought. Secret of Ta'ziyeh citation and its popularity are the culture in which people have grown. Revolving around a series of religious, allegorical, and ritual elements as well as human ceremonials, this culture induces ritual and ancient behaviors into the community, on the one hand, and provokes people to imitate previous social interrelations and traditions, on the other. Moreover, this can exhibit as unfair, discriminatory, and anti-value the behaviors which do not conform to ancient paradigms. Ta'ziyeh citation is of its greatest influence upon previous religious communities and present traditionalist groups.

By visualization of Karbala events, Ta'ziyeh citers try to excite religious emotions and collective psyches of people for touching incidents of the Battle of Karbala aimed at keeping alive the history of Schism’s a supreme exemplar by means of right-seeking philosophy and self-dedication spirits of epic-builder martyrs. The art of Ta'ziyeh, which is performed by a group of people, is of paramount influence on its audience as it can be regarded as an equivalent of mourning for the Holy Prophet’s descendants. Ta'ziyeh comes with educational aspects for its addressees, who get acquainted with prominent religious personalities.

In Ta'ziyeh, protagonist of each account finally reaches at the supreme position of martyrdom, the occasion which gives rise to martyrdom-seeking mentality in the audience. Ta'ziyeh viewers, by watching the performance and identifying themselves with Ta'ziyeh heroes, bewail for the Holy Prophet’s descendants, in which process they achieve a spiritual purgation and animate their sense of perfectionism. Performance of Ta'ziyeh requires little stage decoration, since it can be organized without any pre-determined sceneries. This has caused many European dramatizers including Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), a Polish director, to call Ta'ziyeh a pristine “*insolvent theatre*.” Performance of Ta'ziyeh is not confined to a special location, but it is mostly arranged in the vicinity of mosques and *Hosseiniyehs* due to its continuity with Muslims’ lamentations (Chelkowski, 2001).

#### **A Study of Catharsis in Ta'ziyeh Performances**

Now, after different ideas about catharsis were mentioned, its representation in a Ta'ziyeh performance will be addressed.

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As mentioned hereinabove, Ta'ziyeh is a Persian religious performance art that is entangled with peoples' souls and hearts. The relationship that Ta'ziyeh makes with its audience is exceptional. Every year, Iranian people unanimously attend Ta'ziyeh performances with their hearts filled with love and eyes with tears—this is the unique characteristic of Ta'ziyeh which differentiates it with other plays performed at other places in the world. Ta'ziyeh receives its chief power from the laymen; directorship and execution of Ta'ziyeh by such men makes this distinction. Although knowing that he/she is witnessing a historical event, a Ta'ziyeh audience finds himself/herself immersed in the story: he/she weeps, fears, and shouts to reach at catharsis. A love of Imam Hossein and his immaculate descendants is the principal motivation for performing Ta'ziyeh by Shiites. Ta'ziyeh audience consciously and since rely weeps for afflictions of the Holy Prophet's descendants, though he/she knows whole the story. Ta'ziyeh is the only performance in the world whose reiteration not only does not lead to satiety, but also adds to the effects on its viewers. Who is Imam Hossein, then? What is the secret behind the fact that a Ta'ziyeh audience grows so revolutionized upon watching the performance and weeps as if the 639 A.D. Karbala incidents have occurred right now?

Peter Stephen Paul Brook, a contemporary prominent English theatre and film director, who was astonished upon watching a Ta'ziyeh by its aesthetical and philosophical facets, says:

In a remote village in Iran, I managed to witness my most strange and unbelievable event in my whole life. The entire people of the village, around 400 ones, gathered around a tree and watched Ta'ziyeh, during which I observed strange behaviors and dispositions: they traveled from horselaughs to sobs, and, more strangely, they all knew everything about the story like when their Imam is put into danger or martyred. But, when the moment of Imam's martyrdom arrives, the performance all of a sudden becomes real; there is no more any difference between present and past: an incident of 13 centuries ago is experienced in a Ta'ziyeh performance as a reality. The borderline between time segments grows blurred. This is, unquestionably, a time warp: Imam Hossein is once again martyred before the eyes of the villagers (Mokhtabad, 2008).

Is there not a close association between such spiritual currents of the audience and Aristotle's concept of catharsis? In his *Reality and Beauty*, Bābak Ahmadi writes: "Catharsis, as defined by Aristotle, means that art purifies human souls and equips thinkers and mystics with purification instruments" (Ahmadi, 2007). Does not it happen for Ta'ziyeh audience? Chelkowski, a noted orientalist and Ta'ziyehologist, writes: "A western drama is successful when it manages to influence on its viewers and establish a type of catharsis in them. Laughing, crying, creating remorse, and infuriating are the tools adopted by the Western theater to influence upon its audience." Elsewhere, he says:

In the Western theater, commonplace materials, which are extracted from usual life, are used to drag the watchers out of their normal dispositions. Aimed at strengthening religious bases in the audience, however, Ta'ziyeh purifies its viewers by means of representation of reactions (Chelkowski, 2003).

Although knowing that they are witnessing a historical event from which a long time elapses, Ta'ziyeh viewers find themselves submerged in the story, while cursing Imam Hossein's murderers and bawling for torments felt by Imam and his untainted descendants. This leads to a soul purgation, which constitutes a building block in catharsis. By watching such performances, Ta'ziyeh viewers practice a sort of worshiping as they reach at self-purification through identifying themselves with their Imam. Drama audience, as regarded by Aristotle, attains a type of emotional discharge whereby purification equilibrium is made possible. By embossing evil characteristics as against good ones, this process engages viewers in internal emotions, assisting them to disinfect their souls. This is a divine-granted feature in human beings that they side with the righteous party upon watching dramas.

All stratum of the society attend Ta'ziyeh performances and weep for victimization of their Imam. They backstop the honorable party and save their souls from evils, reaching at self-purgation. Therefore, Aristotle's catharsis, which is purification and refinement generated as a result of a mixture of pity and fear, leads to purification of audience's souls (Harland, 2006). As two key terms and two centerpieces for Aristotle, purification and refinement affect on the watchers, create fear and pity in them, pave the way for their identification with protagonists, and guide them into self-purgation, i.e., catharsis. Such

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processes are witnessed in Ta'ziyeh viewers, who feel sympathy and compassion for their Imam exhibited by their weeps and tears for the good and cursing the evil.

In theatrical analyses, viewers play the leading role, since a stage presentation is not completed without their presence. Therefore, *eventuality* of a theatre should be taken into vigilant account when discussing about theatricality. A distinction of the good and the evil creates theatricality, which is apparent in melodrama, to which Ta'ziyeh is an offshoot. In addition to promoting religio-ethical thoughts, Ta'ziyeh provokes such senses as laughter, anger, excitement, and fanfare—the elements which result in purgation or catharsis (Farah, 2008).

### **CONCLUSION**

According to the concept of *catharsis* as referred to in the Aristotle's *Poetics* as an integral part of dramatic representations, diverse definitions made by different theorists all during the history, and semantic similarity of this term with effects of Ta'ziyeh on the viewers, it can be perceived that Aristotle's purpose from purporting such a multifaceted and sophisticated word has been nothing but the ideas of purgation and purification, the elements which are achievements of Ta'ziyeh, too. In fact, Ta'ziyeh helps us interpret catharsis: establishment of immorality-free, polished souls that are built in Ta'ziyeh viewers. Finally, Ta'ziyeh appears to be an indisputable exemplar for introduction of catharsis in the world.

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