

# THE CONCEPT OF TASHBIH (IMITATION) IN "TA'ZIYEH" AMONG SHIITE THEOLOGIANs

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## Abstract

The concept of *Tashbih* (Imitation) is believed to be the cornerstone of philosophical theme in *Ta'ziyeh* (Persian passion play). Furthermore, without the decree of Shiite theologians on philosophical theme of *Tashbih*, *Ta'ziyeh* would not have fully developed in form and context, as it exists today. A historical review of *Ta'ziyeh* would reveal that the changes could not occur without the positive compatibility of *Tashbih*. During early stages of the formation of *Ta'ziyeh* the idea of *Tashbih* became a subject of much debate among Shiite theologians and scholars. With the development of *Ta'ziyeh* and its influences on people in expressing Shiite philosophy combined with Tragedy of Karbala, Shiite theologians came to realization and transition to create an environment consistent with *Tashbih* and issued a decree for it. This led to further propagation to ensure the survival of its form and content in order to gain a deeper foothold in public arena.

The concept of *Tashbih* involves the individual demonstration of one's spirituality arising from participation in the *Ta'ziyeh* and evolved historically with traditions of its performance. The Islamic viewpoint of impersonation embodied in the Shiite concept of *Tashbih* requires that the imitation of a character be made imperfect in some deliberate way, such as by a lack of complete revelation, interruption, inaccuracy of detail, and so forth; perfection of imitation, as is the case of perfection in all aspects of Islamic life derived from Koranic

law, is a condition reserved for the godhead alone. To be perfect is to be in a sinful relationship with a deity. A point of view with a counterpart in the western world is held to some degree by the Native American culture. For example, the elaborate geometric design in a rug or pot not intended for use in religious rite will be deliberately flawed in some detail so that the object will not be "Coveted" by a devil or demon and thus compromise the safety of its owner (Hoebel 1972, pp. 360-370). This view limits the artist in his portrayal of the historical



character and has been a perennial point of disagreement among the Sunni, who believe that this qualification of *Tashbih* still violates Islamic belief and Shiite factions. Some practices in circumventing the prohibitions are traditional in nature; other new ones have been added over time. For example, the face of Imam Husayn must not be shown; the actor is customarily veiled. The face of a bodyguard need not be covered, but only because of Islamic culture and not to satisfy the principle of *Tashbih*. Somewhat ironically, the concept has influenced basic attitudes of Islam toward all drama. However, western drama is performed today in Iran (but not equally in all Islamic cultures) without the requirement to conform to these practices (Hochman, 1989, p. 59).

There are a number of ways in which the *Tashbih* principle can be appropriately maintained in a *Ta'ziyeh* performance. For example, the individual playing Imam's character may, prior to the character's dialogue, introduce himself with the disclaimer, "I am not Imam Husayn; I am only playing [the phrase employed, *Blatahabih*, is itself derived from *Tashbih* and is the same used to describe the practice of veiling the face] his character" (Chelkowski, 1985, p. 25). He may even repeat this same phrase several times during the performance and weep openly with the audience out of grief for Imam Husayn's fate. Similarly, the individual playing the antagonistic Shimr will preface the performance with insults against the character. *Tashbih*, therefore, arises from *Ta'ziyeh* practice and, in turn, historical *Ta'ziyeh* practice has influenced changes in the nuances of the concept of *Tashbih* itself.

Without meaning to make the issue unduly complex, it should be repeated that Islamic theology is split into two groups. The Asharite (mainly Sunni) believe that man is not in control of his own destiny. On the other hand, the Mutazilite (mainly Shiite), believe in the exercise of personal judgement or free will that Imam Husayn embraced. Because of this free will, the Shiite could recognize a *FETWA*, or religious decree, that defined free will.

The *FETWA* issued by the Shiite theologians meant that, with free will, people can understand and recognize truth. Thus, according to the Shiite religion, people with free will could imitate an evil or a spiritual person without becoming that person because of the *FETWA*. This allowed people to be more free in different aspects of life, especially in dramatic impersonations that the Sunni religion did not allow. With the concept of free will, Shiite people were more free to display the events at Karbala. However, some theologians, although holding the Shiite concept of free will, did not accept *Tashbih* because they had the same impression that the Sunni people had that to impersonate (imitate someone perfectly) is not right (Chelkowski, 1989, p. 19).

With this understanding, it is no surprise that the first reaction in 900 A.D. about *Tashbih* from theologians was: "Whoever makes himself resemble a group is in the category of that group." They believed if someone played Shimr, he was Shimr--"evil and infidel"-- who did the same guilty acts that Shimr did. This interpretation of *Tashbih* did not change for a long time. However, a new understanding and interpretation of *Tashbih* in 1120 A.D. gave a major opportunity to the society and people to develop their ceremonies toward a more theatrical mourning production (Chelkowski, 1979, 101).

Abul-Qasem Mahmud Ibn Umar-Zamakhshari (1074-1143 A.D.), the famous Shiite theologian, in his book *Atwagudh Dhahah fil-Muwa'iz wal-khatb*, wrote, "according to religious traditions, anyone who weeps for Husayn is certainly destined to join him in eternity" (Chelkowski, 1979, p. 102). His view extended further to say that if someone caused another person to weep for Husayn, it was good, and it rejected the idea that prohibited *Tashbih*. This received support from religious theologians and changed the traditional view (Chelkowski, 1979, p. 102). The new interpretation of *Tashbih* was, for example, that if someone played Shimr and caused people to weep for Husayn, it was a good religious duty and they would join Husayn in eternity. This



new idea about *Tashbih* caused some people to think and write about the event of Karbala, and the tragedy then began to develop.

During the regime of Qajar (1796-1925 A.D.), however, the concept of *Tashbih* was still under discussion by some of the religious leaders. They tried to find out the relationship between *Ta'ziyeh* and Islamic law. Was it in the path of religious law or was it against it? Most of them believed that the *Ta'ziyeh* grew from a religious source and that faith and religion were its cradle, but many still had doubts which came from the fast movement and development of society from the old pattern to a new pattern (Humayuni, 1971, p. 22). This brought several questions to people's minds as to whether the *Ta'ziyeh* really had any kind of relationship with the religion. This kind of misunderstanding was not too popular, but religious leaders wanted to find out more reasons for it. They did not doubt that the foundations of the *Ta'ziyeh* began in the faith, but they wanted it interpreted through Islamic law. Also, they needed to give a definition of this kind of drama from an Islamic viewpoint. This type of thought caused religious leaders to explain in detail the viewpoint of Islamic law about *Tashbih*, because if they did not propose this kind of definition, the society could interpret it the wrong way and this would affect their religious responsibilities. This is why the people needed a *FETWA* (official religious statement) as to whether or not religious drama should be free and lawful.

During the reign of the first king of the Qajar dynasty, Agha Mōhammed Khan (1805 A.D.), when the dramatization of the *Ta'ziyeh* was spreading, the initial famous judgement about the Shiite plays was given by Mirza Abul Qasem Ibn Husayn Gilani, whom Persians know as Fazel Qummi (died 1815-16 A.D.). In his book entitled *Jami a'l Shatat*, he states,

The religious plays aren't only lawful; but they were among the greatest of religious works.... there is no reason to prohibit the representation of the innocent and pure ones and generality of the excellence of

weeping, and pretending to weep for the lord of martyrs and his followers. (Rabbani, 1980, p. 80).

He also proclaimed that men could imitate female characters.

After his support, the second famous statement came from Sayyed 'Ali Yazdi in 1903-4 A.D. . He approved of the new interpretation of *Tashbih* and also the decision about portraying women characters by men:

A man impersonating [portraying] a woman is not harmful... he repeats the words she spoke in order to induce weeping and this cannot be called female impersonation. For this purpose, portrayal is only of that which is peculiar to women without any other motive (Rabbani, 1980, p. 111).

He continued his support of *Ta'ziyeh* in several aspects. For example, in his book *Vasail Muzaffari* he discussed the merits and virtues of watching the *Ta'ziyeh*.

In this statement, he encourages the *Ta'ziyeh* audience and puts more emphasis on weeping, as well as the importance of *Tashbih*:

It is appropriate that Shia not think of reward and compensation in weeping and observing the mourning for that great person [Husayn]. His devotion to Shia'ism, his love for Husayn, make him weep, nothing else. Heartfelt sincerity to that great one makes him lose control of himself and causes his tears to flow... Is not the *Tashbih* of the perfect ones of God among the prophets and messengers and saints enough to cause weeping? (Rabbani 1980, 90).

Another very famous scholar of the Naser-al Din Shah and Muzaffar-al Din Shah periods (1984-1906) was Mohammed Rafi Tabatabai (Nezam al-Ulama). In his book, *Majales-e Husayniyeh*, he discusses the philosophy of the suffering and mourning for Imam Husayn. This opinion was one of the highest supports in favor of the *Ta'ziyeh*:

Among good deeds: resorting to the Imam,



the Lord of Martyrs [Husayn], and the discussion of the circumstances and time of that Imam of salvation are better than other works and make for the strengthening of the pillar of devotion and freedom.... The principle, foundation, and essence of which is necessarily strengthened with pity and sympathy for the Imam and attention to the oppression and injustice suffered by the family of Misfortune. (Nezamol-olama, 1943-1961).

He then finished his book with the verse from the Koran which approves the mourning ceremonies of Muharram:

الا الذين آمنوا وعملوا الصالحات وذكروا الله كثيرا و انتصروا  
من بعد ما ظلموا و سيعلم الذين ظلموا اى منقلب يتقلبون (سوره  
شعرا؛ آيه ۲۲۷).

"Those who do wrong shall surely know by what overturning they will be overturned." (Koran, 26:227).

In conclusion, Tabataba'i's view which accepts the *Ta'ziyeh* as a drama and as a play, changed the

traditional misunderstanding about *Ta'ziyeh* and helped people to see it in a new aesthetic way and outlook which continues to exist today.

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### درونمایه تشبیه و آراء علماء شیعی در

#### "تعزیه"

دکتر سید مصطفی مختاباد

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#### چکیده

درونمایه تشبیه اساس فکری - فلسفی درام عبادی شیعیان تعزیه را تشکیل میدهد. بدون تأیید فلسفی تشبیه از طرف فقهای شیعی، تعزیه قادر به بقاء و ادامه حیات در جامعه شیعی ایران نبود. در بررسی سیر تاریخی تعزیه می توان دریافت، رمز تحول این هنر در فرم و مضمون مدیون همسویی آن با اندیشه فلسفی شیعی بوده است. در آغاز شکل گیری تعزیه، درونمایه تشبیه محل مباحثه فقهای شیعی بود اما با تحول و تکامل تعزیه فقهای بزرگ اثرات مثبت آنرا در بیان مفاهیم فکری و فلسفی شیعه و بخصوص در زمینه فاجعه کربلا سعه نهادند. یعنی آنها درونمایه تشبیه را مورد تأیید قرار دادند. همین تأیید سرآغازی بر تحول و تکامل همه جانبه تعزیه در فرم و محتوا گردید.