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Feminist Rereading of Shabih'khani in Iran

This article examines Shabih'khani, a traditional ritual performance in Iran also known as Ta'ziyeh, in the context of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement. It includes the historical challenges faced by Iranian women in a patriarchal society dominated by politics and religion, augmenting existing research on women's Shabih'khani through recently discovered documents that show the erasure of feminine symbols within the tradition. The article also explores the theatrical conventions, dramaturgical elements, and historical reasons for the emergence and decline of women's Shabih'khani, together with factors that contribute to the endurance of men's Shabih'khani. By drawing connections and comparisons between Shabih'khani and the contemporary 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement, it illuminates the factors shaping the movement and offers insights into its potential for success and progress.

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An Introduction to Shabih'khani

Shabih'khani, commonly known as Ta'ziyeh in English, is a ritual performance tradition in Iran, originating in mourning religious processions and gradually developing into a distinct ritualistic practice. It reached its peak during the Qajar era (1789–1925). While scholars like Farrokh Ghaffari and Bahram Beyzai propose that Ta'ziyeh may have roots in ancient Iranian rituals such as the 'Revenge of Siyavosh', there is a lack of tangible evidence to substantiate this claim.¹ Ta'ziyeh – its literal meaning rooted in 'mourning' and the expression of condolence – most clearly traces its origins to the historic battle that unfolded on the plains of Karbala in Iraq during the month of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, in the year 680. This performance condenses the narrative of the battle where Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the leader of the opposition movement known as

Shiat Ali, fought to assert dominance over the early Muslim community. Hussein met his untimely demise in the battle, leading to the triumph of the forces led by Yazid, son of Muawiyah. 'Among the Shi'ites,' writes Elizabeth Fernea, in a landmark issue of *TDR* on Ta'ziyeh, 'mourning for Hussein becomes mourning for lost leadership and power, and a symbolic statement of perceived injustice.'² Within the Shiite community, the act of mourning for Hussein transcends personal sorrow, assuming a collective voice that resonates with a yearning for justice and a commemoration of the sacrifices that Hussein had made.

The Safavid dynasty, reigning over Iran from 1501 to 1736, notably embraced Imami/Twelve Shi'ism as the official state religion. With its governance of a diverse array of ethnic and linguistic groups, the Safavid empire played a pivotal role in shaping a unique Iranian cultural and political identity. Given the geopolitical context of Iran, surrounded

by Sunni neighbours such as the Ottoman Turks, Arabs, and Uzbeks, the Safavid dynasty recognized the importance of cultivating a distinct Shia identity as a means of forging a unified community within the region and of safeguarding the region's survival. In this pursuit, they sought ritualistic-performative forms unique to their faith. These sought-after dramatic expressions found their embodiment in the form of 'Muharram mourning rituals, which evolved over time to adopt a more theatrical and ritualistic nature, ultimately giving rise to the tradition known as *Shabih'khani*'.³

The development of *Shabih'khani* gained momentum in the aftermath of the Safavid dynasty, and reached its peak during the Qajar period (1789–1925), largely due to the significant interest and generous patronage of the Qajar kings. This era also witnessed the emergence of diverse forms of *Shabih'khani*, beyond the tragic production of *Ta'ziyeh*. In fact, *Shabih'khani* serves as an inclusive umbrella term encompassing various forms, including *Ta'ziyeh*, women's performances, and comedic interpretations.⁴

Ta'ziyeh, performed at specific times and in designated locations, recounts the tragic events of Hussein's death. This solemn drama holds immense symbolic significance, particularly during the month of Muharram when Shiites worldwide commemorate Hussein's sacrifice through intense and immersive rituals. *Ta'ziyeh*, which evolved into a distinct type of music drama, occurs in public spaces or specially built structures known as *Takyeh*, 'a place where Shiite Muslims gather to mourn Muharram'.⁵ Typically, a ceremonial procession occurs before the beginning of a *Ta'ziyeh* performance. Participants typically commence their procession from locations like the city's main square or mosques and make their way towards *Takyeh* or other public spaces where *Ta'ziyeh* is performed. While marching, participants often carry symbolic objects, banners, or religious relics. Some recite mournful poems related to Hussein's life; others may engage in self-flagellation or chest-beating as a form of mourning in remembrance of Hussein.

Ta'ziyeh performances involve stark stage decor, symbolic props, representational costumes, and unique musical accompaniments.

The play's characters, symbolic colours, and singing style contribute to the portrayal of contrasting dramatic personalities and situations.⁶ These performances attract a wide range of spectators, from devout Shiite Muslims to people interested in cultural and historical experiences. Audience members encompass men, women, and children. Many spectators become emotionally involved in the story, shedding tears, expressing grief, and experiencing a strong sense of empathy with the characters' suffering. Among the scenes in *Ta'ziyeh* performances are moments that occasionally evoke laughter from audiences. Traditionally, at the conclusion of the performance, particularly at the poignant moment of the protagonist's death, 'the whole audience rises to its feet and weeps'.⁷ Spectators may join in recitations of lamentation, engage in ritualistic acts of mourning, and even interact with the performers. During a *Ta'ziyeh* performance, one of the actors may lament for Hussein, and members of the audience may express their grief and solidarity with Hussein's suffering through acts of flagellation, which can involve chest-beating or head-beating. These expressions of mourning contribute to the overall atmosphere of solemnity and shared grief. As a result, many viewers describe feeling a strong spiritual connection during *Ta'ziyeh* performances.

Traditionally, *Shabih'khani* was exclusively performed by men, leaving women confined to the role of spectators. However, there was a period when women's *Shabih'khani* emerged in Iran, spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although a more specific timeframe remains uncertain. During this period, women-oriented productions took place primarily within the homes of nobles and royalty, creating a unique platform where women could actively participate both as actors and spectators, with men strictly excluded from these performances.

This stark division between male and female productions raises intriguing questions about how women's productions were shaped and performed, and the dynamics that existed within each form. While a significant body of research exists on *Shabih'khani*, few studies have been dedicated to the phenomenon of women's *Shabih'khani* due to their

being 'rare and infrequently or poorly documented'.⁸ Most of our knowledge regarding women's Shabih'khani comes from biographical sources, especially the memoirs of Mūnis al-Dawlah (1871–?), the maidservant of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (1831–1896), the fourth king of the Qajar dynasty. *The Memoirs of Mūnis al-Dawlah* (2001) offers a comprehensive account of the private lives of royal and court women during the Qajar era. Mūnis al-Dawlah wrote one chapter describing the performance of women's Shabih'khani. Her memories were featured in multiple articles in women's magazines during the 1970s. Eventually, in 2001, Sīrūs Sa'dvandiyan compiled these articles into a published book.

The majority of the research, both in Farsi and English, has primarily focused on collecting data to construct a historical narrative, mentioning women's Shabih'khani briefly as a kind of sidenote to that narrative. For instance, in Farsi, Iranian theatre scholar Bahram Beyzai briefly addressed women's Shabih'khani in his *A Study of Iranian Theatre* (1965), including an appendix dedicated to the subject.⁹ In English, Dutch historian and Iranologist Willem Floor provided a short chapter in his *The History of Theatre in Iran* (2005).¹⁰ Iranian-born Performance Studies professor Rana Salimi dedicates only two pages to women's Ta'ziyeh in a chapter focused on women's entertainment in Qajar courts.¹¹

Even in such scholarly journals as the landmark 2005 issue of *TDR* dedicated to Ta'ziyeh, all articles primarily focus on public men's performances. The goal was to acquaint international readers with Ta'ziyeh in general. While the issue explores theatrical elements, Islamic aspects, and Sunni-Shia conflicts, little attention is given to women's Shabih'khani, except for one article titled 'Karbala Drag Kings and Queens', in which Negar Mottahedeh, a cultural critic and film theorist, examines the role of drag in public Ta'ziyeh. She briefly discusses women's Shabih'khani, arguing that the use of drag in public Ta'ziyeh is a way of subverting traditional gender roles.¹²

So, previous scholarly endeavours have incomplete documentation and fail to assess and access the full scope of historical materials. Furthermore, there is a noticeable gap in

research analyzing the foundational factors that influence the emergence and eventual decline of women's Shabih'khani, including its dramaturgical aspect. As an Iranian, before travelling to the USA, I purchased a recently published memoir by Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, *The Diary of Naser al-Din Shah* (2020), which contains several of his memories about both public and women's Shabih'khani.¹³ This article, which relies on the recently published book here cited, introduces information that was previously unknown, offering additional insights into women's Shabih'khani. The following discussion thus scrutinizes the theatrical and dramaturgical elements of women's Shabih'khani, examining the reasons behind its formation and disappearance. By drawing connections between women's Shabih'khani and contemporary women's liberation movements in Iran, I explore potential avenues for the success of these movements.

Women's Shabih'khani

Negar Mottahedeh argues that 'women did not participate as actors – or, rather, role-carriers – on the public stage'.¹⁴ However, in the Qajar era, their role transformed from being that of simple spectators to one in which they become organizers of women's performances, as well as their actors. In 1843, Russian historian Ilya Nikolavitch Berezine (1818–1896) witnessed a public men-oriented Shabih'khani performance and curiously noted that 'wealthy [female] hermits of the harem sometimes arrange a stage in their homes, and only acquaintances are invited to the performances: in this case, the cast consists only of women'.¹⁵

According to Bahram Beyzai, the introduction of women's Shabih'khani on stage took place in the residence of Qamar al-Saltaneh (1833–1891), the daughter of Fath Ali Shah (1772–1834), the second king of Qajar Iran, who ruled from 1797 until his death in 1834.¹⁶ Floor also cites Jean Calmard, a French scholar of Iranian and Islamic history, who affirms that these performances by women were initially performed in Qamar al-Saltaneh's house.¹⁷ These narratives lack detailed

references and fail to provide substantial evidence. Information on Qamar al-Saltaneh is limited, most books offering only brief mentions of her life but without proper sources. Historical records mention that 'Qamar al-Saltaneh, the daughter of Fath Ali Shah, was highly regarded for her commendable poetry skills, as well as her proficiency in French, Turkish, and Ottoman'.¹⁸ Verifying these claims and dispelling the legends surrounding her life is a challenging task. Nonetheless, given the status of court women during that era, it is plausible that Qamar al-Saltaneh was a devout and religious woman. Her religious perspective might have been her primary motivation for hosting women's Shabih'khani performances.

The first recorded encounter of women's Shabih'khani was documented by Abdullah Mostofi (1876–1950). Mostofi recounts his childhood experiences, stating: 'In our county, I would often go to Ezzatodoleh's home to watch Ta'ziyeh.'¹⁹ Ezzatodoleh (1836–1905), the daughter of Mohammad Shah Qajar (1808–1848) and sister of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, presumably hosted Ta'ziyeh performances in her home as a religious commitment. Another account comes from Moāyer ol-Mamalek (1854–1912), one of Naser al-Din's sons-in-law, who describes how 'Anis al-Dawlah, Shokouh al-Saltaneh, and women of similar rank would perform magnificent Ta'ziyeh in the yard and Tanbi Hall'.²⁰ Shokouh al-Saltaneh (1836–1892) and Anis al-Dawlah (1842–1896) were both consorts of Naser al-Din Shah. Naser al-Din Shah himself witnessed a women's Shabih'khani in Anis al-Dawlah's house on 8 March 1876, and he vividly describes this performance in his recently published memoirs:

Women's Shabih'khanis were performed in andaroun.²¹ They were performed for six nights. A roof covering was established in front of Anis al-Dawlah's hall, with shades around it. Aghali constructed a stage, [and] many lanterns were borrowed [to illuminate the stage]. [Valedeh] Khanoom was the director of Ta'ziyeh.²² A girl named Masoomeh Beigom from Baraghan [a village in Iran] has a good voice with a nice tone. She is fourteen or fifteen years old, and she is also not ugly. She is not inclined towards her husband.

Most of the time, she stays at Mohammad Taghi Khan's home. She is the life of the Ta'ziyeh. It was funny, the cast included very many women. . . . musicians . . . slave children, eunuchs, were there too. They also had horses [on the stage].²³

Two significant points can be drawn from this account. We have sure evidence, to be shared here for the first time in English, that women's Shabih'khani was practised in Iran during the nineteenth century. Additionally, it is noteworthy that Shabih'khani was not limited to the month of Muharram, traditionally associated with mourning. The Shabih'khani performance witnessed by Naser al-Din Shah took place on 8 March 1876, indicating that these dramatic representations extended beyond Muharram, even into other months such as Safar, the second month of the Islamic lunar calendar.²⁴

Since male strangers were not permitted to enter the king's andaroun, our knowledge of women's Shabih'khani is limited. However, Mūnis al-Dawlah provides intriguing descriptions of women's behaviours and rituals within the andaroun, where only mahrams were allowed to enter.²⁵ Mūnis al-Dawlah explains that women held their own Shabih'khani performances 'in which all actors were women without the hijab',²⁶ and the audience consisted solely of women as well';²⁷ further, that these performances were sponsored and shown in the mansions of 'Qamar al-Saltaneh' and 'Munir al-Saltaneh', the other consorts of Naser al-Din Shah.²⁸ Her accounts suggest that they were exclusively held in the residences of nobles and royalty, highlighting the financial capacity required to support such lavish productions.

According to Mūnis al-Dawlah, these Shabih'khani performances took place in the open air, either in a garden or a salon, and were exclusively attended by an audience of women. The actors were all women, with leading roles played by women renowned for their vocal abilities. Unlike male actors in public Shabih'khani, the women had to memorize their lines because most of them were illiterate, although a few educated and high-ranking women, some of whom were poets, also participated. Mo'in-ol-Boka

(died 1914), who was a male *Shabih'nevis*,²⁹ *Shabih'gardan*,³⁰ and head of the Royal Theatre in Tehran, trained literate eunuchs to learn the various roles, including the musical scores. These trained eunuchs would then search the noble homes in Tehran to find suitable actresses and to teach them their designated lines. The eunuchs would accompany the performances by playing musical instruments.

There were also blind male actors who performed on the stage. Qamar al-Saltanch, in addition to directing the plays in her own quarters, would appear on the stage, as did male directors, providing directions with a walking stick. On some occasions, she even slapped an actress to evoke the required emotion for their role. The actresses performed all parts without veils, unlike male actors playing female roles (with veils and in drag). When playing male roles, the actresses dressed up as men, applying make-up, beards, and moustaches. They also carried swords and, when necessary, rode horses on the stage.³¹

Due to the religious nature of *Shabih'khani* performances, which often feature prominent religious figures like the Prophet Muhammad and Hussein, it is likely that women may have portrayed these characters, using beards and men's costumes. For example, one of the plays performed in women's *Shabih'khani* was *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding* (see below), in which one of the featured characters was the Prophet Muhammad.³² While one can ponder what it may have felt like for segregated women to embody powerful male roles, there is unfortunately no archival evidence to give insight into such feelings. Likewise, we cannot know exactly how the spectators of women's *Shabih'khani* reacted. We do know that during the public men's performances, women spectators expressed their grief through convulsive sobs and breast-beating, with copious tears coursing down the weathered visages of the majority of the audience.³³

Dramaturgical and Theatrical Elements

Information about the individual or individuals who selected plays to be performed by

women is not available. However, it is known that *Mo'in-ol-Boka*, who was responsible for selecting, editing, and sometimes writing the texts of public *Shabih'khani* for men, assisted the eunuchs in memorizing the play. Therefore, it is possible that the same plays performed by *Mo'in-ol-Boka* in Tehran's Royal Theatre were used in women's *Shabih'khani* as well. According to *Mūnis al-Dawlah*, 'most of the women's *Shabih'khanis* revolved around events with feminine and recreational aspects, such as *The Wedding of Bilqis and Solomon*, *Joseph and Zuleikha*, or *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding*'.³⁴ If these plays are the same ones performed in men's *Shabih'khani*, their main stories are known in Iran, rooted in religious narratives. *Mūnis al-Dawlah* explains that the story of *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding* was performed in women's *Shabih'khani* in more detail, but such data regarding other texts and performances remain elusive. To gain insight into technical and dramaturgical aspects, I shall now examine the women's performances alongside the more extensively documented public men's performances. Through the lens of *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding*, I analyze the general structure of *Shabih'khani*.

Mūnis al-Dawlah's diary recounts the popularity of the play *The Wedding of a Quraysh Daughter*, known as *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding* (see above), in the women's *Shabih'khani* tradition: 'This performance gained significant popularity, drawing women from distant cities who would travel to Tehran to witness this performance.'³⁵ Although the precise text performed by women remains unknown, the story itself is well known among believers, and has probably been transmitted across generations through oral tradition. While some authors of *Shabih'khani* plays are known by name – such as *Mirza Mohammad Taqi Ta'ziyehgardan* (died 1872) and *Mirza Mohammad Bagher Mo'in-ol-Boka* (died 1914) – it is unlikely that any single person wrote the scripts as they evolved over time.³⁶ As *Rebecca Ansary Pettys* aptly notes: 'The *Ta'ziyeh* plays are somewhat similar to the mystery cycle plays of medieval Europe in

that authorship is corporate and anonymous.³⁷ The authorship of the play *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding* is also unknown, and it is likely that it was a collaborative effort, given the existence of several versions of this play.

Quraysh women are here depicted organizing a wedding for an 'unattractive' bride. The Quraysh were a prominent Arab tribe based in Mecca during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and it had significant social, political, and religious influence in pre-Islamic Arabia. The Quraysh women decide to invite Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, to the wedding. However, Fatima initially declines due to lack of time and suitable attire. Then, an angelic figure, portrayed by a tall and beautiful woman with wings, appears and sings to the houris urging them to dress and prepare Fatima for the wedding.³⁸ The houris arrive at Fatima's house bearing gifts and treasures. Overwhelmed by this divine intervention, Fatima decides to attend the wedding. Upon her arrival, the sight of the beautiful Fatima causes the ugly bride to faint, and the bride eventually passes away. The Quraysh women implore Fatima to intercede with prayers for the bride, and miraculously the bride is brought back to life. As a result, the pagan Quraysh women embrace Islam.³⁹

Shabih'khani plays are characterized by their episodic structure, with each episode capable of independent inclusion or omission in the overall performance. This structure can be attributed to several factors. First, the financial capacity of the organizers often determines the number of episodes included in a performance. Those with more resources may present more extensive and elaborate productions, while others opt for a condensed version with fewer episodes. Second, given that the audience is well versed in most religious stories, the addition or subtraction of episodes allows for variations in the performance, ensuring diversity. Third, less familiar episodes, when introduced, can pique the audience's interest and curiosity. The addition of lesser-known episodes can create suspense, and so delay the culmination of the story.

Typically, one episode is added to the performance work over time, and these episodes

may expand to become full plays with distinct narratives. One of the earliest accounts of Ta'ziyeh dates from 1787, when William Francklin visited Iran and observed a public performance in Shiraz. In his book, *Observations Made on a Tour from Bengal to Persia*, he vividly described a renowned Ta'ziyeh play, *The Marriage of Qasim*. Francklin depicted a scene within the play set in the court of Yazid the caliph. According to Francklin:

In one of the representations, the court of Yazid the caliph is shown and the caliph, who is sitting on a beautiful throne, surrounded by many guards. The Ambassador of Europe is also sitting by him . . . Among the most affecting representations is the marriage of young Qasim, the son of Hassan, and nephew of Hussein, with his daughter; but this [marriage] was never consummated, as Qasim was killed in a skirmish on the banks of the Euphrates [in the Battle of Karbala in 680].⁴⁰

The Ambassador of Europe, a character highlighted by Francklin, eventually evolved into a full-fledged play titled *The Ambassador of Europe*. As noted by Iranian scholar Jamshid Malekpour:

This particular Ta'ziyeh was performed regularly during the Qajar era (1787–1925) . . . The Ta'ziyeh of the Ambassador of Europe is about a Christian European ambassador who comes to the court of Yazid. The ambassador sees Yazid drinking wine and beating a bodiless head. When the ambassador asks about the head, Yazid tells him that the head is that of Imam Hussein, who was killed in the plain of Karbala by his order. The ambassador, moved by the Imam's faith and suffering, expresses his sympathy and criticizes Yazid for what he has done to Hussein and his family. Yazid is so angered by the ambassador's criticism that he kills him. The message of the Ta'ziyeh is clear: the tragedy of Karbala is so impressive that even a non-believer like this European ambassador shows sympathy for its martyrs.⁴¹

As for *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding*, this play, like all Shabih'khani texts, would have adhered to an episodic structure. While the precise origins of its initial episode remain shrouded in mystery, it incorporated three key episodes in its later iterations performed by women: Fatima's invitation to the wedding, the descent of angels and their intervention, and the wedding party. The play's

structure emphasizes the protagonist's journey, culminating in a joyful conclusion, imbued with a spiritual lesson. It is worth noting that *Shabih'khani* is structured around conflicts between opposing forces. Two distinct types of *Shabih'khani* sit within this framework. The first type revolves around physical conflicts, often characterized by war, where a protagonist meets a martyr's fate at the end, as exemplified by *The Marriage of Qasim*: Qasim becomes a martyr. The second type involves conflicts of a more ideological nature, pitting opposing worldviews or ideas against each other, as is the case in *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding*. In this play, Fatima symbolizes a simple and modest way of life, while the Quraysh women represent opulence and conspicuous consumption. Initially, Fatima adorns herself, adhering to the mentality prevalent in traditional Iranian society, which sought to capture attention with physical beauty. Here, women were portrayed as mere objects of adornment. However, when Fatima miraculously revives the deceased bride, the story's conclusion conveys the message that spiritual beauty holds greater significance than physical allure.

The question arises: Why is *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding* called *Shabih'khani* when, on the one hand, it has no direct connection to the events of Karbala, and on the other, it does not conclude with the martyrdom of the hero? The answer lies in the fact that a play does not necessarily have to end with the hero's martyrdom to be classified as *Shabih'khani*. And there are other examples of *Shabih'khani* plays that do not focus on characters from the Karbala, such as *The Assassination of Nasser al-Din Shah*, which narrates the contemporary events surrounding Naser al-Din Shah's assassination by Mirza Reza Kermani (1854–1896).⁴² A play might even lack a direct link to Shia Islam's religious figures, such as *Telling the Truth by Mansur Al-Hallaj*, which narrates the story of Mansur Al-Hallaj, a late-ninth-century Persian poet and mystic.⁴³

In essence, a text is categorized as *Shabih'khani* when its textual and performance structure adheres to specific formulas, some of which involve a clear demarcation between

its villains and its virtuous characters. These distinctions are reflected in costume choices and language. Villains openly acknowledge their malevolence and make no effort to conceal it, often employing a declamatory style, whereas virtuous characters sing in traditional Iranian singing modes. Colours also denote moral status: green and white denote protagonists, while red and yellow signify antagonists.⁴⁴ In the case of *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding*, the Quraysh women clearly represent the antagonistic characters, while Fatima embodies the virtuous character. These techniques collectively aid the audience to recognize the distinctions and conflicts within the narrative. This, in turn, serves to convey a spiritual, religious, and moral lesson, and emphasize the tragic nature of the story.

According to Mūnis al-Dawlah, 'performances like *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding* and *The Wedding of Bilqis and Solomon* were typically staged after Muharram and Safar, meaning during Rabi' al-Awwal,⁴⁵ a month associated with celebration'.⁴⁶ This account indicates that, during the Qajar era, *Shabih'khani* performances were not limited to Muharram and Safar. They were arranged for various religious occasions throughout the year. Willem Floor observes that 'the play [*Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding*] belonged to the lighter, non-tragic plays performed in the month following the months of mourning'.⁴⁷ However, the recently released memoirs of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, noted in this article for the first time in English, indicate that the play was also performed in the public *Shabih'khani* in Tehran during Muharram on 10 Muharram (27 February) 1874 and 12 Muharram (8 February) 1876. This suggests that the play had a wider range of performances beyond the lighter post-mourning period. Naser al-Din Shah Qajar expressed his disappointment with the 1874 Ta'zīyeh, describing it as 'tasteless' and noting that the audience was more inclined to laughter than tears.⁴⁸ His criticism was stronger for the second Ta'zīyeh in 1876:

In the evening, a Ta'zīyeh took place, drawing a large crowd of both men and women that made it impossible to move through the crowd. There were more women in attendance . . . The Ta'zīyeh

performed was titled *Hazrat-e Fatima's Attendance at the Wedding*. . . . The actors portrayed their roles in a playful manner, resulting in laughter from the audience. [Furthermore,] there were scenes where Quraysh women engaged in physical altercations and other humorous incidents unfolded. The entire audience laughed. This play should never again be performed in the Royal Hall.⁴⁹

It appears that this *Shabih'khani* was initially performed throughout the year, including the month of Muharram. However, after 1876, it seems to have been performed in the month following the months of mourning. It may have garnered significant popularity among women, both in public *Shabih'khani* and private women's *Shabih'khani*, given its focus on a woman-centred narrative. It can be presumed that the selection of scenes for all-women-cast *Shabih'khani* often emphasized women's roles, perhaps catering to the audience's preferences. Yet how and why did women's *Shabih'khani* come into being in a patriarchal society, and why did it eventually disappear? How did this form of performance reflect the prevailing status quo of women in Iranian society?

Women and Power: The Formation of Women's *Shabih'khani*

A memoir by Lady Mary Leonora Woulfe Sheil (1825–1869), the wife of Justin Sheil, an English diplomat during the early years of Naser al-Din Shah's reign, offers valuable insights into the condition of women in Iran. Accompanying her husband from 1849 to 1853, Lady Sheil had the opportunity to interact with women from the court. She sharply comments on the cities: 'in short, there was everything and everybody, but there was not a single woman, for in Persia a woman is nobody.'⁵⁰ During the Qajar era, women, to achieve the fundamental rights denied them, had to obtain power, find a platform, voice their concerns, and actively pursue these rights.

Marrying a powerful man was often seen as the primary pathway to gaining influence and status. Naser al-Din Shah's inclination towards polygamy not only reflected his personal tendencies but also attracted women who sought power and wealth through

marriage with him. The fact that he had a large number of wives can be attributed, in part, to women's desire to secure positions of power by being aligned with him. Jane Dieulafoy (1851–1916), a French archaeologist, explorer, novelist, feminist, and journalist, visited Iran during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah. She writes of Anis al-Dawlah as possessing 'great energy, enthusiasm, and a lively spirit, albeit considered vulgar by some; Anis al-Dawlah quickly gained influence over the legitimate women in Naser al-Din's court, and it did not take long for her to secure the top position within the royal *andaroun*'.⁵¹ Mūnis al-Dawlah vividly describes the circumstances that compelled women to marry influential men:

For a girl, marriage was her sole aspiration. There were no educational opportunities or employment prospects available to her. She held no societal value and had no designated role. Instead, she burdened her father [and family]. As she reached adulthood, her utmost desire was to find a husband who would provide her with sustenance and clothing, enabling her to leave her father's household.⁵²

In a society with limited options for women's empowerment, marrying a powerful man became their primary aspiration, but this situation was not the same for all women. In different ethnic communities, such as the Lur and Kurd populations, women, including those in smaller towns, often worked alongside their husbands, experiencing greater gender equality.⁵³ It is crucial to consider the diversity within Iran during the Qajar era, as different ethnic and social groups had their own ways of empowering women. It must be remembered that I am here focusing on court women in Tehran during the Qajar era.

Another factor influencing Iranian women's bid for power was their exposure to European women. Although direct evidence is lacking, it is evident from the writings of that era that Iranian women were curious about the status of European women. Lady Sheil recalls numerous instances of being invited by court women. In one such memory, Naser al-Din's mother invited her to the royal *andaroun*, where court women from various apartments hurried out, eager to catch a

glimpse of Lady Sheil, as she herself reports, describing the intelligence and beauty of the king's mother and her enthusiasm for Europe:

She is very clever, and is supposed to take a large share in the affairs of the government. She also has the whole management of the Shah's andaroon . . . She asked me many questions about the Queen [i.e. Victoria]; how she dressed, how many sons she had, and said she could not imagine a happier person than her Majesty, with her fine family, her devoted husband, and the power she possessed. She made me describe the ceremonial of a drawing-room. I much regretted I had no picture of the Queen to show her. She was also curious to have an account of a theatre.⁵⁴

It would seem that although these court women did not have the opportunity to visit European countries, their interaction with European women who visited the Iranian court had an impact on their views. This connection with Europeans likely motivated the Qajar women, especially the generation of Naser al-Din Shah's children, to learn different languages and become acquainted with western culture and literature. Unlike common people, many royal women received an education within the court, becoming literate. Tadj es-Saltaneh (1884–1936), the daughter of Naser al-Din Shah and a princess of the Qajar dynasty, exemplified the educated and progressive women of that era. Tadj es-Saltaneh was known as a feminist, a women's rights activist, and a memoirist. She provides insights into the rise of Anis al-Dawlah, a woman of humble origins who swiftly gained a position of power at court. According to Tadj es-Saltaneh, 'Anis al-Dawlah would host gatherings at her residence, inviting the wives of foreign ambassadors during holidays and official events.'⁵⁵ These highlights of the interactions of court women with their European counterparts should not be misconstrued as suggesting that Europeans played a role in shaping Ta'ziyeh or women's Shabih'khani. Rather, such interactions underscore the Qajar women's curiosity about other cultures and theatre.

Another important point regarding Qajar women is that this period, approximately coinciding with the formation of the first feminist movements in Iran, played a significant role in shaping their experiences. In her

brilliant study *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran*, Eliz Sanasarian, an Iranian-American professor of political science, provides a detailed examination of the formation and development of the women's movements during this time. According to Sanasarian, 'in the late 1800s and the first years of the 1900s, women's activities were mostly inspired by religious leaders . . . Later on, especially after 1906, women's action became more visible and independent.'⁵⁶

Qajar women, then, gradually acquired power, albeit within certain limitations. They began to receive religious and educational instruction, including literacy skills, which empowered them to take action. When Naser al-Din's mother enquired about the European theatre, her request suggested that Qajar women wished to establish their own form of performance, influenced by their religious upbringing. Given that women were not permitted to participate publicly in Shabih'khani performances, the emergence of women's Shabih'khani can be seen as a manifestation of their endeavour to assert their rights. Bahram Beyzai claims that 'the performance of Ta'ziyeh, with its all-female cast and audience, was a direct response to prevailing traditions and obstacles. These performances sought to reclaim a right that had been unjustly taken away from them.'⁵⁷ 'Playing male roles,' Rana Salimi contends, 'was quite a bold move on the women's part since to this day appearing in roles of the Imam and his male family members is an honorary act bestowed upon the most religious and respected male members of the Shiite community.'⁵⁸ Consequently, the accumulation of power and wealth among royal women, their increasing literacy, interactions with Europeans, and exposure to public men's Shabih'khani performances culminated in the emergence of courtly women's Shabih'khani.

The Elimination of Women's Agency

Shabih'khani also serves as a reflection of Iran's patriarchal society. Prior to the emergence of women's Shabih'khani, women played mostly passive roles as spectators in public Shabih'khani, mirroring their overall

passivity in society. Their participation was limited to such tasks as flag ornamentation and food preparation before public *Shabih'khani* events, as well as joining the procession and engaging in mourning, including chest-beating and head-beating. It was customary for the king's wives to decorate flags within the *andaroun* prior to a public *Ta'ziyeh* performance. As Moāyer ol-Mamalek recounts: 'Anis al-Dawlah had the responsibility of adorning the flag. The women within the *andaroun*, numbering over three thousand, would gather around the flag while Anis al-Dawlah served them fruit juice. Following this, one of the girls would step forward and sing a lamentation.'⁵⁹ Presumably, prior to Anis al-Dawlah, the duty of adorning the flag fell to the king's mother. Subsequently, the flag, along with the procession and mourning, was transferred to the Royal Hall for a public *Shabih'khani*. This practice exemplifies the portrayal of women in a patriarchal society, where societal norms dictated that women engage in grooming and culinary preparations in private settings rather than public ones. In essence, women of that time were expected to be subservient to men, confined to the domestic sphere, and objectified as a sexualized and secondary gender. This perpetuated the erasure of women's agency and reinforced traditional gender roles.

The suppression of women is further accentuated by their absence on the stage, replaced by men. In a public *Shabih'khani*, male actors take on the roles traditionally designated for women. If a female character is to be portrayed, men don hijabs and assume the role. As noted by Peter J. Chelkowski, a professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, the voluminous robes and veils worn by male actors also serve as a means of concealment.⁶⁰ Men in women's attire, adorned with hijabs, create a profound paradox. Although women's voices are heard, they resound through the mouths of male performers. Furthermore, women spectators themselves wear hijabs while attending the performance. Thus, the elimination of women's agency manifests through multiple layers within *Shabih'khani*: women's roles by male actors, the symbolic hijab worn by

female characters on the stage, and the presence of veiled spectators.

In many societies, the veil is commonly associated with social customs and norms, often overshadowing its deeper spiritual significance. Abdulla Galadari, a multidisciplinary scholar exploring the intersections of spirituality, science, and cultural understanding, argues that 'the wearing of the veil has deeper spiritual meanings than what social norms and cultures try to ensure in the physical realm'.⁶¹ It may be thought that the fact of women portrayed by men transforms and elevates them into an ethereal and spiritual presence, almost disembodied. However, one might wonder why only female characters were required to be veiled in such a manner. Why was not a similar expectation placed on male characters? We can conclude that this practice likely reflects the influence of religious teachings and the prevailing patriarchal norms of the time. Even so, it is important to acknowledge the undeniable spiritual dimension of these performances.

Another crucial aspect to contemplate is the nature of the hijab itself, whether taken in the context of *Shabih'khani* performances, or in everyday life. While it has been argued that the hijab protects women from the objectifying gaze of men and also acts 'as a shield to protect them from the impure gaze of commoners', what about those who prefer to exercise their freedom of choice in selecting their attire?⁶² There are women who willingly wear the hijab due to their beliefs, but should those who do not share these beliefs be deemed as outliers in society? In Iranian society, whether during the Qajar era, when the hijab was religiously and traditionally obligatory, or in the present day, when political Islam mandates it, the hijab holds symbolic significance for both men and women who do not embrace it. I see the hijab as a symbolic barrier that influences understanding. Like a curtain, the hijab serves to obstruct the view of men and women, preventing them from perceiving reality. The imposition of a barrier between them and reality hinders their ability to analyze events objectively. The intertwining of rigid religious and political beliefs limits the capacity for critical analysis, and the hijab symbolically

contributes to this hindrance of vision for both men and women. Consequently, women are unable to see, and men are unable to see women, resulting in a partial blindness to half of society. The consequence is that women lose agency.

Women and the Sexualized Stereotype

In Islam, there is a general emphasis on modesty for both men and women, and dress-code guidelines are often more stringent for women. Islamic dress codes vary across different cultures and traditions, and interpretations of modesty can differ. The primary objective of modest dress in Islam is to promote humility, dignity, and piety. While the hijab for women is more about covering their body to maintain a sense of privacy and to emphasize character and inner qualities over physical appearance, unveiled women may be viewed as inciting lust in men. It is considered inappropriate for women to be present in public spaces where they may become objects of desire for men. This sensitivity extends to public *Shabih'khani* performances. While some *Shabih'khani* plays depict images of strong, religiously devoted women who fight for their beliefs and families, certain aspects of these representations are often downplayed in patriarchal societies. Female characters portrayed in public *Shabih'khani* tend to be individuals who are highly revered in a religious context, such as Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, or Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad. For instance, in the play *The Martyrdom of Imam Hussein*, Zaynab is depicted as courageously accompanying her brother, Hussein, in the Battle of Karbala.⁶³ In numerous *Shabih'khani* performances, the climax is marked by a powerful speech delivered by Zaynab, highlighting a woman's resilience in the face of familial loss and her unwavering pursuit of justice.

According to William Beeman, 'the special nature of the women in Imam Hussein's family depicted in *Ta'ziyeh* makes it unthinkable that they could be depicted in any way that could identify them as sexual beings or objects of any desire'.⁶⁴ Setting aside religious interpretations of the hijab as a protective measure

against sexual assault, the portrayal of veiled women in public *Shabih'khani* inherently reflects society's perception of women as sexual objects. While there may not be explicit references to sexuality within *Shabih'khani*, the manner in which women are represented on stage underscores the existence of sexism within society. The body and face are fully covered, and even such revered figures as Fatima lack any semblance of femininity. All aspects of femininity are within the hijab, suggesting that the mere presence of a woman's body, including her face, can be seen as potentially seductive to men. As historical evidence confirms, 'during the Qajar era, all women had to appear with a hijab and veil in the public space. Not only did the veil cover their face, but also their body'.⁶⁵ The presence of fully covered female characters on the stage serves as a reflection of the reality faced by women in a society that imposed their concealment.

Women's circumstances in private settings were even more oppressive. The sociologist John Foran refers to women's status in Qajar society, stating that, 'in terms of the institutions of polygamy, temporary marriage, and the divorce laws, they were second-class people'.⁶⁶ Women were often reduced to the role of sexual labourers, primarily focused on reproduction and procreation. This perspective contributed to the prevalence of polygamy, exemplified by Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, who 'was lampooned in the West for having eighty-four wives'.⁶⁷ Consequently, the public *Shabih'khani* presents an idealized and unrealistic image of women, devoid of both body and face but meant to be shielded from the gaze of lustful men.

The Disappearance of Women's *Shabih'khani*

It is unknown when women ceased to perform *Shabih'khani* privately. Beyzai suggests, albeit without specific references, that 'women's *Shabih'khani* likely ceased to exist during the middle of Ahmad Shah Qajar's reign'.⁶⁸ Ahmad Shah Qajar (1898–1930), the last ruling member of the Qajar dynasty, reigned from 1909 to 1925. Therefore, while

public *Shabih'khani* continues to be performed in Iran, it is probable that women's *Shabih'khani*, prevalent during the nineteenth century, gradually disappeared in the early twentieth.

Five reasons can be attributed to the decline and ultimate disappearance of women's *Shabih'khani*. First, women's *Shabih'khani* was its exclusive nature, primarily confined to court women. According to Mūnis al-Dawlah, 'women's *Shabih'khani* was exclusively performed in the wealthy, royal, and noble households'.⁶⁹ The lack of awareness among women in smaller towns about such performances hindered its broader adoption in Iran. In general, education for girls was marked by strict expectations, as highlighted by the statement that 'girls were taught from infancy onward to sit quietly, not to stir, not to ask questions, [and] not to be curious. . . . They were trained to be humble, feeble, servile, and dull.'⁷⁰ The oppressive treatment of women extended to even the most basic actions: noticeable breathing at home required permission from men, as did the possibility of travelling to Tehran to witness a women's *Shabih'khani*. Even if a woman outside Tehran somehow learned about these performances, she probably could not attend one.

The second contributing factor to the disappearance of women's *Shabih'khani* was the transformation of the form itself during the Qajar era. Evolving from a side job to a respected profession, '*Shabih'khani*, which was previously viewed as . . . a part-time occupation, gained significant respect as a profession.'⁷¹ This change brought about a significant transformation in the very nature of *Shabih'khani*, turning it into an elaborate and glamorous show that demanded substantial financial and human resources. Increased costs, such as hiring skilled actors and creating intricate designs, created obstacles to maintaining women's *Shabih'khani*. Although today's and Qajar public *Shabih'khani* have often relied on financial contributions from the audience, women's *Shabih'khani* struggled to secure financial sponsors. As a result, financial constraints proved a significant barrier to its performance and wider accessibility among ordinary women.

Third, following the decline of the Qajar dynasty and the establishment of Pahlavi rule (1925–1979), a significant political transformation took place, resulting in the gradual disappearance of various aspects of the previous regime, including its traditions and rituals. Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944), an Iranian military officer and the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, initiated swift infrastructural changes. Initially, he enjoyed a positive relationship with Islamic authorities and participated in Muharram mourning. Apart from a political conflict with Iranian cleric Hassan Modarres (1870–1937), unrelated to Modarres's Islamic beliefs, Reza Shah deeply respected the clergy. However, this changed swiftly. His emphasis on nationalism clashed with religious identity. As his power solidified, he directly challenged certain religious traditions, labelling them as superstitions responsible for the nation's backwardness. Mehran Tamadonfar, a professor of political science, describes how, 'Inspired by the secularization programs in Turkey launched by Kamal Atatürk, and in a concerted effort to consolidate his power, Reza Shah, founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, undertook a series of legislative reforms designed to undermine the role of the clergy.'⁷² Reza Shah, who deemed traditional practices and rituals inadequate for achieving modernization, established numerous modern institutions that continue to shape present-day Iran. In the 1930s, a ban was imposed on various religious mourning demonstrations and, in 1931, 'Reza Shah banned the traditional Iranian performing art, *Ta'ziyeh*'.⁷³ The religious dramatic form of *Ta'ziyeh*, which had been undergoing gradual transformation, was abruptly affected by these prohibitions, leading to a period of stagnation. While public performances continued to exist clandestinely in villages, the form lost favour among the people of that period, even after restrictions were later lifted. While public *Ta'ziyeh* had supporters among religious individuals during the Pahlavi era, and still has them today, women's *Shabih'khani*, lacking support outside of Qajar court women, completely vanished.

Fourth, the confluence of various events created the perception that Islam and

phenomena associated with Islamic content were symbolic of backwardness. The collapse of the Qajar dynasty, the establishment of the Pahlavi regime, and the process of modernization coincided with the notable emergence of women's rights movements in Iran between 1910 and 1932. As outlined by Sanasarian, the pursuit of women's rights in Iran took shape through a series of actions, including: '(1) the publication of women's periodicals, (2) the formation of women's organizations, and (3) the opening of girls' schools.'⁷⁴ Women's publications predominantly focused on discussing feminist movements in the West and the status of women in such countries as Britain, the United States, and Turkey. The members of women's associations were often graduates of western universities or held anti-Islamic sentiments. Initially, girls' schools were primarily Christian and Jewish institutions and, even when Muslim schools were subsequently established, they propagated a negative perception of Islam among educated elites.⁷⁵ It would seem that there was a prevailing negative sentiment among women intellectuals regarding Islamic ceremonies and women's Shabih'khani in the Qajar era. Only minor intellectuals expressed a desire to revive Islamic traditions, while the overall trend leaned towards a critical stance and a lack of enthusiasm for their resurgence.

Fifth, as previously mentioned, women's Shabih'khani was exclusively performed in private settings by women for women. While the purpose behind women's efforts to perform women's Shabih'khani was to assert their fundamental rights, adhere to religious beliefs, and uphold religious orders and afterlife rewards, these performances took place within a private environment, separated from the presence of men. As Sanasarian points out, there was a clear social segregation between men and women during that time: 'In households, male visitors were entertained by men, and female visitors were entertained by women.'⁷⁶ This segregation extended beyond Shabih'khani performances and permeated society. The external world was primarily occupied by men, while the domestic sphere was predominantly the domain of women.

In contrast to public men's Shabih'khani, which included women in the audience, women's Shabih'khani lacked any male participation. This gender divide played a role in the survival of public Ta'ziyeh, as women were able to take part in it, albeit in limited roles as spectators or facilitators. However, women's Shabih'khani gradually disappeared due to its exclusion of male participation, influenced by religious and social restrictions that forbade men from taking part in such performances. Women's Shabih'khani serves as a reflection of a society divided along gender lines, where communication between men and women was hindered by spatial segregation. This division resulted in the emergence of two distinct ritualistic forms – one confined to the social sphere, and the other within the confines of the home. However, the inherent limitation of women's Shabih'khani, lacking the participation but also the support of half of society, ultimately led to its demise.

Unravelling the Influence of History on the Present: Shaping Today's World

While it may not be appropriate to compare a period like the Qajar era to the present time directly, the phenomenon of Shabih'khani can provide insight into the factors shaping the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement and its potential for success. In 2022, the tragic death of Mahsa Amini, a young Sunni Kurdish woman, in police custody, over her hijab, sparked a significant movement in Iran. Operating under the banner 'Woman, Life, Freedom', this ongoing movement aims to address vital issues, including women's rights, religious oppression, patriarchy, and corruption, as well as the systematic constraints imposed by Iran's current regime. To comprehend this movement, examining the historical origins of women's subjugation in Iran becomes imperative. However, unearthing these origins and establishing connections with historical events like women's Shabih'khani presents a challenge. The scarcity of historical sources pertaining to this subject remains one of the foremost obstacles encountered in this research endeavour.

Theoretically, one significant factor contributing to the emergence of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement, akin to men's Shabih'khani, is the dissolution of the traditional division between male and female spaces in present-day Iranian society. Despite the current government's strong emphasis on maintaining the separation of public spaces in society, various factors, such as the proliferation of social media, the presence of women and men in mixed university environments, the rising levels of literacy among the general public, and the establishment of co-educational universities and workspaces, have contributed to the potential dismantling of this spatial divide. These developments offer new possibilities for dialogue, interaction, and exchange between men and women today. Hence, the current efforts by the Islamic government to enforce spatial segregation elicit an opposing response. Men and women within society are determined to dismantle the division of spaces. Therefore, an essential factor in ensuring the vitality of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement is to persist in dismantling segregation.

Additionally, Shabih'khani serves as a poignant reminder that the active involvement of both women and men has been, and continues to be, instrumental in the survival of male-oriented Shabih'khani. This historical practice highlights the significance of collective participation from all segments of society. Similarly, the emergence of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement owes its existence to the active engagement of women, men, and sexual minorities, including the LGBTQ+ community. Their collective efforts have propelled the movement forward. A crucial aspect to consider is that the ongoing success of this revolutionary movement in achieving its objectives hinges upon everybody's participation. Their joint involvement remains a vital condition for the movement's continuity and effectiveness. Gender and absence pose challenges, as evidenced by the disappearance of women's Shabih'khani.

Finally, the significance of Shabih'khani is evident in its contrasting outcomes: men's Shabih'khani survived due to its ability to conquer the public space, while women's

Shabih'khani disappeared as a result of its private nature. For the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement to thrive and achieve its goals, it must assert its presence in the public sphere. The occupation of streets and other public spaces opens up opportunities for transformation. If the movement fails to conquer these spaces, it will face repression. This was evident when the Iranian government intensified its pressure on the people, enforcing stricter measures on media, hijab, and even executing protesters when public spaces were deserted.⁷⁷ The initial tolerance shown by the government, when the movement controlled public spaces, quickly gave way to increased strictness when the occupation ceased. While the occupation of public spaces may not be universally applicable, it holds great significance in contemporary Iran, where the gap between the government and the people is vast, and bilateral dialogue with the dictator is virtually impossible. By occupying public spaces, breaking the division between male and female spaces, and fostering participation from all, the movement can challenge the government, expand dialogue, amplify diverse voices in society, and pave the way for democracy, equality, and human rights.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the transformative journey of Qajar court women as they pioneered a distinctive form of women's Shabih'khani within the confines of their own homes. Through strategic marriages to influential officials, these royal women gained power and education. Inspired by the public male Shabih'khani performances, they established a space for women's Shabih'khani, exclusively inhabited by women and guarded against male intrusion except for mahrams. Unlike the male public Shabih'khani, which was subject to strict societal constraints such as the hijab, the women in women's Shabih'khani enjoyed freedom from such restrictions. They crafted their own rules and norms within their performances, signalling their attempt to assert their fundamental rights.

By contrast, the public Shabih'khani reflected the prevailing patriarchal society of the Qajar era. Here, men assumed women's roles and adorned themselves with veiling and the hijab. These actions enacted the erasure of women's agency within society. Moreover, the presence of audiences of women in hijab watching male actors portray female characters reinforced the society's objectification and control of women's bodies. The imposition of full covering on women stemmed from the notion that their bodies could incite lustful desires in men. This image perpetuated a demeaning view of women as the second sex, forced into concealment due to the perception of their inherent sexual objectification.

Understanding the historical context of Iran is crucial in gaining insight into the contemporary events and feminist movements in the country. The phenomenon of Shabih'khani sheds light on the factors shaping the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement and its potential for success. If we seek to draw a lesson from Shabih'khani, the potential for success in the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement lies within the removal of segregation between men's and women's spaces; the participation of all sections of society, encompassing both men and women, and anyone who sees themselves differently; and the occupation of public spaces to fulfil their aspirations. By occupying public spaces, breaking down gender divisions, and fostering inclusive participation, the movement can effectively challenge the government, amplify diverse voices, and pave the way for democracy, equality, and human rights.

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- In Iranian architecture, 'andaroun' refers to the inner quarter where women resided, similar to a harem in Arabic culture.
- Molla Nesā, also known as 'Valedeh Khanoom', was one of Naser al-Din Shah's 'mothers-in-law', from Kashan, a city in Iran. Mūnis al-Dawlah also mentions her as a director of women's Shabih'khani: see Mūnis al-Dawlah, *Memoirs of Mūnis Al-Dawlah*, ed. Sīrūs Sa'dvandiān (Tehran: Zarrīn, 2001), p. 227.
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- For Shia Muslims, the month of Safar is a time of reflection and remembrance, even though the mourning

for the tragedy of Karbala primarily occurs during Muharram. Safar is when some Shia communities continue to reflect on the teachings and principles exemplified by the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, albeit in a less intense manner than during Muharram.

25. A 'mahram' is a close male relative whom a woman is prohibited from marrying due to their close blood relationship or marital ties. Mahram relationships create a level of familiarity and protection within the family, and these individuals are considered 'permanently unmarriageable' to each other according to Islamic law. Common examples of mahram relatives include a woman's father, brother, son, uncle, and other close male relatives. The concept of mahram establishes boundaries and guidelines for interactions and privacy between men and women within the family context.

26. 'Hijab' is a term used to describe the modest dress code and behaviour prescribed for Muslim women. It typically involves wearing a headscarf or veil to cover hair, neck, and sometimes the chest, while leaving the face visible. Hijab is not limited to clothing alone, but also encompasses modesty in behaviour, speech, and interactions. It is practised as a religious obligation for Muslim women after reaching puberty, symbolizing faith and promoting modesty, humility, and privacy.

26. Mūnis al-Dawlah, *Memoirs*, p. 96.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

29. 'Shabih'nevises' are the authors of Shabih'khani scripts, often written collectively and anonymously. Different communities in Iran have a variety of these scripts for performances. While some Shabih'nevises from the Qajar era are known, they are not quite like western playwrights. They could be individuals or a group, adapting and compiling various writings. Sometimes, scripts lack a specific Shabih'nevis, and multiple Shabih'nevises might have worked on the same text over time, making changes and additions.

30. 'Shabih'gardan' refers to the director of Shabih'khani performances. For a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences between a theatre director and a Shabih'gardan, see Kouček-zadeh and Azarm, 'Investigating Early Dramaturgy'.

31. Mūnis al-Dawlah, *Khāṭirāt-i Mūnis al-Dawlah*, p. 96–108.

32. Reza Kouček-zadeh, *Descriptive Catalogue of Malek Shabihnames (Texts of Passion Plays)* (Tehran: Malek Library, 2013), p. 84–5.

33. Floor, *The History of Theatre in Iran*, p. 189.

34. Mūnis al-Dawlah, *Khāṭirāt-i Mūnis al-Dawlah*, p. 99.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Kouček-zadeh and Azarm, 'Investigating Early Dramaturgy'.

37. Rebecca Ansary Pettys, 'The Ta'ziyeh of the Martyrdom of Hussein', *TDR*, XLIX, No. 4 (Winter 2005), p. 28–41 (p. 28).

38. 'Houri' refers to a celestial being, often described in Islamic tradition as a beautiful and pure creature, promised to believers in the afterlife. These beings are envisioned as companions granted to righteous individuals in paradise, symbolizing purity and beauty.

39. Mūnis al-Dawlah, *Khāṭirāt-i Mūnis al-Dawlah*, p. 96–108.

40. William Francklin, *Observations Made on a Tour from Bengal to Persia, in the Years 1786–7*, second edition (London: T. Cadell, 1790), p. 240–50.

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43. *Elenco di Drammi Religiosi Persiani: Fondo Mss. Vaticani Cerulli*, ed. Enrico Cerulli, Ettore Rossi, and Alessio Bombaci (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1961), p. 208–9.

44. Chelkowski, 'Ta'ziyeh', p. 39.

45. Rabi' al-Awwal is the third month of the Islamic lunar calendar and is significant because it is believed to be the month in which the Prophet Muhammad was born. It is a time when some Muslims commemorate his birth with various celebrations and events.

46. Mūnis al-Dawlah, *Khāṭirāt-i Mūnis al-Dawlah*, p. 104.

47. Floor, *The History of Theatre in Iran*, p. 189.

48. Naser al-Din Shah, *Diary*, p. 7.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

50. Lady Sheil [Mary Leonora Woulfe Sheil], *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* (London: John Murray, 1856), p. 86.

51. Jane Dieulafoy, *La Perse: la Chaldée et la Susiane: Relation de Voyage* (Paris: Hachette, 1887), p. 200 (my translation).

52. Mūnis al-Dawlah, *Khāṭirāt-i Mūnis al-Dawlah*, p. 109.

53. The Kurds and the Lurs are distinct ethnic groups in Iran. The Kurds, present in several countries, including Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, have their unique language (Kurdish) and cultural identity. The Lurs, primarily located in Iran's Lorestan province, also have their own language and cultural traditions, contributing to the diverse ethnic landscape of Iran.

54. Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners*, p. 131–3.

55. Tadj es-Saltaneh, *Memories of Tadj Es-Saltaneh*, ed. Mansoureh Etehadieh (Tehran: Tarikh-e Iran, 1924), p. 25.

56. Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (New York: Praeger, 1982), p. 20.

57. Beyzai, *A Study of Iranian Theatre*, p. 151.

58. Salimi, 'Harem Entertainers', p. 47.

59. Moāyer ol-Mamalek, *Notes From the Private Life of Naser Al-Din Shah Qajar*, p. 66.

60. Chelkowski, 'Time Out of Memory', p. 17.

61. Abdulla Galadari, 'Behind the Veil: Inner Meanings of Women's Islamic Dress Code', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, VI, No. 11 (2012), p. 115–25 (p. 122).

62. Ashraf Zahedi, 'Contested Meaning of the Veil and Political Ideologies of Iranian Regimes', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, III, No. 3 (Fall 2007), p. 75–98 (p. 77).

63. Reza Kouček-zadeh, *Descriptive Catalogue of Qajar Period's Texts of Passion Plays* (Tehran: Majles, 2011), p. 170.

64. William O. Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions*, Bibliotheca Iranica: Performing Arts Series 9 (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda, 2011), p. 229.

65. Mohammad Hosein Sharifi Saei and Taghi Azadarmaki, 'Women and Patriarchal Gender Order: A Historical Narrative of "Family Life" of Iranian Women in the Qajar Era (1789–1925)', *Social Sciences*, XXVII, No. 91 (April 2020), p. 157–94 (p. 164).

66. John Francis Foran, *Fragile Resistance: Social Structure and Social Change in Iran from 1500 to 1979*, vol. 2 (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1988), p. 385.

67. Hamad Subani, *The Secret History of Iran* (Morrisville, North Carolina: Lulu.com, 2013), p. 266.

68. Beyzai, *A Study of Iranian Theatre*, p. 152.
69. Mūnis al-Dawlah, *Khāṭirāt-i Mūnis al-Dawlah*, p. 106.
70. Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran*, p. 15.
71. Kouček-zadeh and Azarm, 'Investigating Early Dramaturgy', p. 13.
72. Mehran Tamadonfar, 'Islam, Law, and Political Control in Contemporary Iran', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, XL, No. 2 (June 2001), p. 205–19 (p. 210).
73. Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (London; New York: Verso, 2001), p. 19.
74. Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran*, p. 32.
75. Before the establishment of girls' schools, common belief deemed studying unnecessary or undesirable for girls, associating modesty with staying uneducated within the confines of the home. The populace generally held a negative view of new educational institutions. During the turbulent times of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1905–1911), amidst societal suspicion towards innovation, discussions emerged among authorities regarding the creation of girls' schools. Despite societal apprehension, driven by an increasing awareness of the need for girls' education, a group of intellectuals initiated the establishment of the first girls' schools in Iran. Despite numerous obstacles, the number of these schools expanded significantly. By 1943–44, the count reached 870 schools, with approximately 50,000 students graduating. See Nasrin Sotoudeh, 'The Women Awakening in the Constitutional Revolution', *Kitab-e Tose'e*, No. 7 (1994), p. 16–24.
76. Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran*, p. 14.
77. The majority of men who had been arrested were charged with 'waging a war on God' – also known as 'moharebeh' in Farsi – a punishable offence that results in execution by hanging. Sabreena Kaur, 'Iranian Executions: Women. Life. Freedom.', *The Organization for World Peace* (blog), 25 January 2023, <<https://theowp.org/iranian-executions-women-life-freedom/>>.