



## Ta'ziyeh and Declamation in Shia Tradition: Discourse in Focus

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### Abstract

The central theme of Ta'ziyeh, as one of the Islamic tragic drama and folk theater, in one of the major denominations of Islam (the Shia) is a representation of the siege and massacres of Karbala. This study investigated Ta'ziyeh (alternatively Ta'ziye, Tazīa, Ta'zīya) and its discourse, a form of declamation. The data were collected from library resources (e.g. books, electronic resources) and observation. The data were analyzed based on Gee's discourse and society model. The study confirmed that Ta'zieh was the most important tragedy in Shiism. The discourse used in Ta'ziyeh, contrary to the Western variations, appeared to be a more spiritual practice than a dramatic genre. Furthermore, the role of Ta'ziyeh writers and performers was explored as agents who have distributed the accounts of the Karbala battle for generations in Iran. The findings, from a global perspective, might emphasize how diverse a culture's perceptions of religion and its related rituals could be and how a language variety (e.g. declamation) could help frame such perceptions in dramatic genre. The findings could also guide the categories that multi-cultural studies of tragedies may take into account.

**Keywords:** Ta'ziyeh, Declamation, Shia, Drama, Karbala, Tragedy

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## **Introduction**

Ta'ziyeh, as one of the most prominent Islamic dramas, narrates tragic stories of holy men, especially Imams who suffered their enemies' oppressions. One of the sad stories among these bitter events is the tragic and wronged martyrdom of Imam Hussain (PBUH) in Karbala around the year 680 A.D. Literally, Ta'ziyeh means "a holy mourning" or grief, especially referring to the sad events in Karbala battle (Talebinejad, 2013). For Shia Moslems, in Iran and worldwide, the events in Karbala are of religious and historical significance.

The event has been remembered and respected in many ways though history. It is believed that Ta'ziyeh was first initiated as an official practice by Moezodole Deilami (963 AD). Various studies have tried to investigate the ways Ta'ziyeh is structured, distributed and responded to. A highly important aspect of Ta'ziyeh is its socio-linguistic specification. The tragic event, the plot, the characters, Ta'ziyeh actors, and many other specifications have been separately studied, although the dramatic representation of the Karbala battle, in its entirety, can be systematically investigated through socio-functional models.

The present study looks at the drama of Karbala from a discursive perspective which can incorporate several elements into a unified whole. Ta'ziyeh in this study is regarded as a form of declamation, which involves cultural significance, political messages, and social value in the Iranian society. To conduct the analysis, Gee's (2011) model of discourse and society is used. The data analyzed are three samples of Ta'ziyeh with different specifications. The study also compares and contrasts Ta'ziyeh to Western tragedy, emphasizing the profound history and social function of Ta'ziyeh in Shia societies.

## **Literature Review**

### **Drama, tragedy and dialogue**

Drama has a profound history in the Western literary tradition (Kalantari & Karimnia, 2011). Short (1989, p. 149) believes that, "dramatic dialogue is similar to everyday dialogue; and applicable methods and techniques in everyday conversation are suitable for analyzing dramatic discourse." However, drama normally involves a more complicated structure in which one level of a discourse is organized in another. The reason for this especial structure is that drama is shaped by social relationships between and among individuals. The writer-reader interaction is also decided by such social conventions. In the same vein, Burton (1980, p. 7) argues that:

There is a relationship between everyday dialogue and dramatic dialogue based on a set of linguistic forms and functions which could reveal such a relationship; and it is impossible to use those forms and functions by "discussing sentences, phrases, alliterations, polysyllable-words, and so on.

This linguistic specification of dramatic dialogue suggests that the only linguistic level for dramatic analysis is discourse, or more specifically, conversation (Short,

1989). According to Carbaugh (1993, as cited in Xu, 2005, p. 63), “in western cultures, language is often used as an expression of valued individual reason and self-identity.” Eastern cultures, in contrast, tend to use speech communication as an instrument for preserving social relationships and harmony.

According to Arp and Johnson (2006), tragedy, as an ancient literary variation, is usually created to simulate emotions of sympathy and fear the spectators. This understanding of tragedy is, of course, inspired by an Aristotelian reading; “Aristotle’s *Poetics* unfolds significant issues such as psychological factors of dramatic tragedy, in which the audience collectively observes a narrative event (social influence) and individually experiences catharsis of fear and pity (psychological influence)” (Kharmandar, 2016, Karimnia & Khodashenas, 2016). This function of catharsis has also been acknowledged in modern science as well. Modern medicine has borrowed this word [catharsis] to mean “discharge of emotions as a pressure valve” (Talebinejad, 2013, p. 120)

The nature of tragedy was very important for Aristotle and whether right or wrong his insights constituted the basis of an archetypal notion of tragedy that has dominated critical minds for centuries. Apart from philosophical questions concerning the nature of tragedy, the Western literary canon has also specified the constituents that may incorporate the body of a tragic drama or play. For instance, the components of Shakespearean tragedy can be summarized as follows:

The first act is the introduction, where you would meet all the characters. The second is where complications arise. The third is the rising action where things leading up to the climax happen. The fourth is the climax point. Then comes the falling action where everything is coming to an end. Finally, the catastrophe which usually results in the death of Shakespeare’s hero. (Talebinejad, 2013, p. 120)

Besides these Western conceptions of tragedy, there are Eastern variations with their specific cultural values, structures and themes. In the Islamic tradition, Ta’ziyeh is the dominant tragic genre, which normally recounts the suffering of Islamic saints and Imams.

### **A brief history of Ta’ziyeh**

Etymologically, the term Ta’ziyeh has been defined differently in different contexts depending on its usage. “Ta’ziyeh is a type of religious and national dramatic musical performance with several elements such as music (vocal and instrumental), recitation, poetry, narration and drama [...]” (Massoudieh, 1978 as cited in Talebinejad, 2013, p. 120). The primary theme of Ta’ziyeh is the tragedy of Karbala. According to the *Encyclopedia of Iranica* (2008), the literature tells us that Ta’zieh, the sad theater that comes from *Aza* [mourning], is a kind of traditional Persian drama, which narrates a heroic dramatic story through music and declamation.

One of the most important performative features of Ta’ziyeh is *declamation*, a kind of epic poetry that warriors recited in the battlefield (Shojai, 2007). However,

declamation lost its epical function very soon and was adapted to the frames of mourning. In Ta'zieh performances, the audience, cultural themes, and historical events are unified as a single entity. Each character interacts with other characters; the audience empathizes with the tragic songs which are recited by Ta'zīyeh performers (Shojai, 2007).

The narrative recounted and performed in this tragic adaptation is inspired by historical facts, events and characters. In Ta'zieh, the audience's imagination has an essential function, because no décor is implemented in Ta'zīyeh and the audience should visualize Karbala desert, where the tragic events took place. Therefore, Imam Hussain's battle is remembered symbolically. Narrators of the Karbala tragedy (Rafifar & Shirmohammadi, 2015) engage the public audience in the mourning rituals.

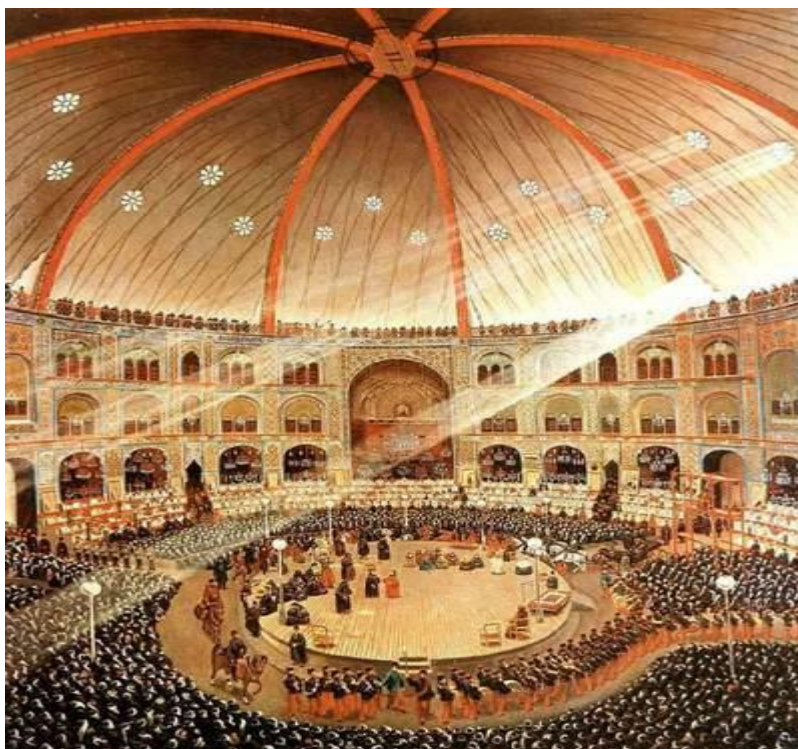
The rituals have, of course, undergone stylistic changes over time. Yet, compared to all other holy rituals and festivals, Ta'zīyeh is highly admired that few events reach its popularity. Masses of people who gather around the performers reveal how influential this religious rite is in the Iranian society. The event also functions as a source of spiritual enlightenment that is thought to purify the souls of those who witness the event.

Browne (1902), the author of *The Literary History of Persia*, has referred to two Iranian and German pieces of evidence in his attempts to identify the founder of Ta'zīyeh rituals. According to Browne (1902), Moezodole Deilami (963 AD) was the first founder of the tragic drama. After he appointed to the Caliph's court in Baghdad, Moezodole declared ten days of mourning from the beginning of the holy month *Moharram* and ordered all stores to be closed in Baghdad during this time. People were asked to dress in black to show their sadness. This command rendered mourning an official and general rite and later established the foundation for the present form of Ta'zīyeh during the Safavid era (1501 AD-1722 AD) (*Encyclopedia of Iranica*, 2008).



**Fig. 1.** Ta'zīyeh in the Iranian society

Like Western famous plays, Ta'ziyeh dramas were originally performed outdoors on the streets, in the neighborhoods and other public places. After a long time, some special places called *Takiyeh* were constructed specifically for performing religious rites such as Ta'zieh (*Encyclopedia of Iranica*, 2008). This architectural specification further situated the ritual in the depth of the Shia society.



**Fig. 2.** Takiyeh Dawlat

### **Dramatic aspects of Ta'ziyeh**

Some specifications of Ta'ziyeh make the event very similar to classical theater in other parts of the world. Wearing costumes and make-up, taking up roles, using an elementary form of script, setting up an ordinary stage, and engaging performers and sometimes a director are among the characteristics that Ta'ziyeh shares with Western stage performances. Classic tragedy and Ta'ziyeh also share a common feature: most often they are both concerned with the lives of heroes (e.g. Othello, Macbeth, and in the Shia tradition Hazrat (Saint) Aliakbar, son of Imam Hussain).

However, one of the most important differences is that in Ta'ziyeh the audience is already aware of what happens in the story before it is performed (e.g., Amoozadeh & Shafiei, 2007; Talebinezhad, 2013). The most evident characteristics of the art of Ta'ziyeh are as follows: (a) it is played in public and open places among

people; (b) the actors do not usually hold higher education degrees and they engage in the play for their passion for the Imam rather than for economic incentives; (c) the performances are linguistically simple and easy to understand; (d) performances, although specifically structured, are not based on written version; (e) actors usually come from the lower strata of social classes; and (f) actors feel a sense of unity and interaction with the audience.

### **A model of discourse and society**

The social functions of Ta'ziyeh from a discursal perspective demands investigating socio-functional aspects of the ritual. To do so, first a model of discourse and social practice is introduced in this section. Gee (2011) has proposed a model based on a strong theoretical framework. The analytic components of the model are seven different parameters for conversation: significance, practices (activities), identities, relationship, politics, connections, sign systems, and knowledge. These parameters, which are described as “tasks”, are briefly explained below.

#### **Task one: significance**

How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?

#### **Task two: practices (activities)**

What activity or activities is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as going on)?

#### **Task three: identities**

People use language to get recognized. What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e. get others to recognize as operative)?

#### **Task four: relationships**

What kind of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?

#### **Task five: politics**

(The distribution of social goods) What aspects of social goods does this piece of language use to communicate? What is taken to be “natural”, “right”, “good”, “correct”, “proper”, “appropriate”, “valuable”, the way things are, the way things ought to be, high status, low status, like me or not like me?

#### **Task six: connections**

How does this piece of language connect or disconnect things? How does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?

#### **Task seven: sign systems and knowledge**

How does this piece of language privilege or disprivilege specific sign systems (e.g. Persian vs. English, etc.) or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief? (Gee, 2011)

## **Methodology**

### **Data collection**

The data included various pieces of information about Ta'zieh, its discourse, translation, and analysis of warriors' declamations of Karbala. The data were gathered from books, online resources, and observation of some Ta'zیه performances. Out of 28 samples, three ones were selected to be analyzed.

### **Data analysis**

The selected samples were analyzed based on Gee's (2011) model. Although Gee's model is in line with a Western style of text analysis, it looks at discourse from a functional viewpoint and can serve as a tool for social analysis of rituals. The model involves a theoretical framework including seven different tasks for discourse analysis.

Analysis of samples

#### **Sample 1**

In the Ta'zیه of Hazrat Abbas, Hazrat Zeinab says (Abedini, 2011, para 1):

عباس علمدارم نور بصر زینب  
ترسم که شود نیلی معجر به سر زینب  
تا آیه تو باشد ما پرده نشین باشیم  
بعد از تو به غارت رفت معجر به سر زینب  
ای ماه بنی هاشم، خورشید لقا عباس  
ای نور دل حیدر، شمع شهدا عباس

Hazrat Abbas or Abolfazl was Imam Hussain's brother who had a revered status among the martyrs of Karbala. One of his important tasks during the war was to provide water, although he never drank water himself as a sign of respect and selflessness for those who were thirsty.

In this piece, Hazrat Zeinab, Imam Hussain's sister, who is now in charge of managing women in the family, is part of the family:

Oh my Abbas, the Bearer of the Flag, the light of my eyes, I am afraid I have to wear black mourning for you, While you are with us, we are safe in our privacy, After you, my head-scarf will be taken off, Oh you Moon of the Bani Hashem [tribe], good-looking Abbas, Oh you the light of Heidar's heart, the candle of the martyrs, Abbas!

Significance

Gee's (2011) model assumes that people state their attitude and feeling by using language. Language use is accompanied by some features such as tone and

intonation. Tone is the way people's voice sounds, which shows how they are feeling or what they mean. Intonation is the way in which the level of people's voice changes in order to add meaning to what they are saying. Therefore, tone, intonation and meaningful words or descriptions are features that Hazrat Zeinab uses to address Hazrat Abbas to show the significance of discourse. In this part of the Ta'ziyeh, there is a rising tone and intonation as some descriptive words and expressions are emphasized such as "the Bearer", "the sight of my eyes", "Moon of the Bani Hashem", "the light of Heidar's heart", and "the candle of martyrs".

### **Practices**

According to Gee's (2011) model, what people say and do while using language enacts practices or activities. These activities depend on people's position and situation. For example, in this part of the Ta'ziyeh, Hazrat Zeinab expresses her words based on the situation, her position, and Hazrat Abbas's position in the family and as Imam Hussain's brother and in Karbala. These specifications help her (character) to speak and behave bravely. As Hazrat Zeinab uses descriptions such as "the Bearer", "Moon of the Bani Hashem", and "While you are with us, we are safe in our privacy."

### **Identities**

Gee's (2011) model assumes that people use language to shape a certain identity or role. That is, to build an identity under the present circumstances. Studying discourse through this example shows that Zeinab uses positive descriptive language to illustrate her identity and Abbas's identity / role in this situation. She calls Hazrat Abbas "the Bearer", "the sight of my vision", "Moon of the Bani Hashem", "the light of Heidar's heart", and "the candle of martyrs".

### **Relationships**

Gee (2011) mentions that people use language to signal what kind of relationship they have, want to have, or are trying to have with their listener(s) or addressee(s). In this part of discourse, Hazrat Zeinab uses the positive descriptive language to express what kind of relationship she has with Hazrat Abbas as an addressee. For example, in her dialogue with Hazrat Abbas, she calls him "the sight of my vision" and "Moon of the Bani Hashem, good-looking Abbas", and is worried about his fate: "I am afraid I have to wear black in mourning for you". These words or expressions tell us that Hazrat Zeinab has a strong emotional and friendly relationship with her brother, Abbas.

### **Politics (The distribution of social goods)**

Gee's (2011) model explains that people use language to shape a perspective on the distribution of social goods. In this part of the discourse, Hazrat Zeinab uses language to state her viewpoint on the present situation and events in Karbala. Furthermore, the events in Karbala are regarded as a significant social tragedy



among Muslims. As Hazrat Zeinab says “I am afraid I have to wear black in mourning for you”, she wants to illustrate her viewpoint on Karbala events.

### **Connections**

From Gee’s (2011) viewing, people use language to express whether certain things are connected or relevant to other things or not. In this regard, Hazrat Zeinab uses language to make a connection between her words and Hazrat Abbas’s personality, position, and appearance. Meanwhile, she relates the events in Karbala to audience’s background knowledge. In doing so, Hazrat Zeinab calls Hazrat Abbas “the sight of my vision”, “Moon of the Bani Hashem”, “the light of Heidar’s heart”, and “the candle of martyrs”.

### **Sign systems and knowledge**

Gee (2011) states that people use language to create, change, maintain, and revise language itself and other sign systems and their ways of making knowledge claims about the world. In this piece of discourse in Ta’zieh, Hazrat Zeinab uses a positive descriptive language as a sign system to create a positive image of Hazrat Abbas in the audience’s mind, while describing Abbas’s personality and his position among his family members, friends, warriors and martyrs. For example, Hazrat Zeinab expresses her intimacy when she says, “while you are with us, we are safe in our privacy.” This comment shows her knowledge about Hazrat Abbas’s position and his personality and Karbala.

### **Sample 2**

In the Ta’zīyeh of Hazrat Abbas, Ibne Sa’d says (Abedini, 2011, para 2):

ای شهنشاهی که چون بر صدر زین ماوا کنی  
با اشاره رستخیز محشری برپا کنی  
سید قران نسب طاها لقب یاسین حسب  
باید اینک سرخط ما فوق ما امضا کنی  
یا که بنما بیعت ما را ز جان و دل قبول  
یا که عباست روان بر جانب میدان کنی  
که هل من مبارز منی حسین تشنه جگر  
مبارزی بفرست یا حسین سوی لشکر

Ibne Sa’d (the commander of the villain army fighting against Imam Hussain) addressing Imam Hussain:

You, the King of Kings, when you are riding your horse, With single flash of hand you can start a resurrection, You Noble descendant of the Holy Qur’an, of sacred origin, worthy of holy verses, You must now sign a peace treaty with our superior, You either accept our superiority, Or send your

Abbas to fight us, Is there a worthy fighter from your army, Oh you who are tired and thirsty? Send us a fighter, Oh Hussain!

### **Significance**

The tone of the discourse clearly shows the antagonist, the bad character in Ta'zieh, who uses a threatening voice. Although this character's voice is relatively rhymed, it lacks the beauty and passion in the protagonist's voice. The holy character in this piece is Hazrat Abbas. Interestingly, however, despite the threat in the antagonist's discourse, the words are still respectful towards the holy character. For example, Ibne Sa'd calls Imam Hussain "the King of Kings" to show the significance of the discourse.

### **Practices**

What Ibne Sa'd says and does is related to the situation and his position. Ibne Sa'd is the commander of the villain army, but he addresses Imam Hussain based on his position and personality. For example, Ibne Sa'd refers to Imam Hussain as "the King of the Kings", he puts himself in the lower position than Imam Hussain.

### **Identities**

Ibne Sa'd's words are used to reveal the identity or role of Imam Hussain in Karbala. For example, Ibne Sa'd addresses Imam Hussain "the King of Kings", "Noble descendant of the Holy Qur'an", and "send your Abbas to fight us".

### **Relationships**

In this part of discourse, Ibne Sa'd uses language to show what sort of relationship he wishes to have with his addressee, Imam Hussain. For example, Ibne Sa'd asks Hussain to sign the Allegiance letter or send his warrior, Hazrat Abbas to engage in the war. This part of discourse shows no intimate relationship or friendship between Ibne Sa'd and Imam Hussain, and particularly emphasizes hostility.

### **Politics**

Ibne Sa'd uses language to illustrate his perspective on Karbala. For example, in this part of the discourse, he describes Imam Hussain as a person who "can start a resurrection with a flash of hand." This description expressed the power of Imam Hussain among the warriors in Karbala.

### **Connections**

Ibne Sa'd uses language to build a connection between his words and Imam Hussain's personality and position, and refreshes the audience's background knowledge about the quality of the events in Karbala. For example, as Ibne Sa'd calls Imam Hussain "the King of Kings", "You Noble descendant of the Holy Qur'an", and "You either accept our superiority or send your Abbas to fight us".

### **Sign systems and knowledge**

In this part of the discourse, Ibne Sa'd uses language in the form of declamation to express his knowledge about Imam Hussain, Imam Hussain's position, and events in Karbala. For example, Ibne Sa'd addresses Imam Hussain "You are tired and thirsty"; it can be inferred from this part of discourse that the weather was burning hot. Ibne Sa'd and his allies had obstructed the path to the water soured so that Imam Hussain, his family, and his warriors could not reach the water. Thus, they were tired and thirsty.

### **Sample 3**

In the Ta'ziyeh of Hazrat Abbas, Hazrat Abbas says (Abedini, 2011, para 6):

ای ولی حضرت خلاق رب العالمین  
ای پناه بی کسان بی شرمی اعدا بین  
یا علی چندان مسافت از نجف تا کوفه نیست  
سر برآر از قبر و ما را بی رو سامان بین  
ما در این صحرا غریب و بت رستان می کشند  
انتقام نهروان از شاه مظلومان بین

Abbas, the protagonist, the Holy character addressing Imam Hussain:

Oh you sign of God, the Creator of the two worlds: Oh you supporter of the lonely, behold the ruthlessness of the enemy, Oh Ali, Kufe is not far from Najaf, Rise from your tomb and observe our helplessness, We are strange in this desert and the pagans are killing us, To take revenge of Nahravan on the King of the Oppressed.

### **Significance**

Abbas's words are most appealing and passionate in voice. Simultaneously, he is speaking of loneliness with a melodic tone filled with sympathy and emotion. These features show the significance of discourse in Ta'ziyeh. For example, Hazrat Abbas refers to Imam Hussain as "You sign of God", "You supporter of the lonely", and "We are strange in this desert." These qualities emphasize the significance through discourse.

### **Practices**

In this part of discourse, Hazrat Abbas expresses his words according to the situation, Imam Hussain's position in his family and among the warriors. Hazrat Abbas uses "You sign of God" and "You supporter of the lonely" when he addresses Imam Hussain. These positive descriptive words show the position of Imam Hussain in his family and among people particularly in Karbala.

## **Identities**

Taking a look at this part of discourse in the Ta'ziyeh reveals that Hazrat Abbas uses a descriptive language to illustrate his identity and Imam Hussain's identity or role in Karbala. He refers to Imam Hussain by "You sign of God", "You supporter of the lonely", "behold the ruthlessness of the enemy", and "We are strange in this desert", to put himself in the lower position than Imam Hussain.

## **Relationships**

Hazrat Abbas uses a positive descriptive language to state what kind of relationship he has with Imam Hussain as an addressee. For example, as he calls Imam Hussain "sign of God" and "supporter of the lonely" to express a strong emotional and friendly relationship between himself and Imam Hussain.

## **Politics**

Hazrat Abbas uses language to state his point of view on the situation and events, which are happening in Karbala. For example, Hazrat Abbas symbolically addresses Imam Ali, Imam Hussain's father: "rise from your tomb and observe our helplessness" and "We are strange in this desert." These deceptions illustrate his viewpoint on the hardships in Karbala.

## **Connections**

Hazrat Abbas uses language to express a connection between his words and Imam Hussain's position in Karbala, reminding the audience of the events happening in Karbala. For example, in his dialogue with Imam Hussain, he uses "You the sign of God" and "We are strange in Karbala" to express their helplessness in the tragic event.

## **Sign systems and knowledge**

Hazrat Abbas uses language in the form of declamation to illustrate his knowledge about Imam Hussain's position and Karbala. To depict the adverse events Karbala, he expresses to Imam Hussain this sentence: "behold the ruthlessness of the enemy."

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper aimed to provide a systematic analysis of the social functions of the discourse of Ta'ziyeh as played in Iran. Some have investigated the similarities and the differences of discourse employed in tragedy and Ta'zieh (e.g., Ahmadzadeh, 2007; Talebinezhad, 2013). According to Arp and Johnson (2006), the type of language used in tragedy and Ta'ziyeh is configured to reflect the prominence and insignificance of the events they recount.

We proposed a new approach to Ta'ziyeh by applying Gee's (2011) model, which presents a theoretical framework including seven different tasks to analyze

discourse in Ta'ziyeh. Ta'ziyeh is formed by an external conflict between two forces of power: good and evil. The struggle in Ta'ziyeh finds a socio-political aspect. Through using the seven different tasks of discourse investigated in this study, the following conclusions were drawn:

It was found that the discourse used in Ta'ziyeh was more a practice with spiritual values rather than aesthetic aspects of genre. Ta'ziyeh is a unique type of drama practiced among Moslems. It involves ideological dimensions in all respects such as theme, language, setting, plot, characterization, structure, even imagery and metaphors. What makes Ta'ziyeh unique and brilliant is the Shiite ideology emerging from the Islamic tradition and Persian beliefs on holy and innocent Household of the Holy Prophet Mohammad.

Choosing Gee's building tasks as an analytic tool reflects the researchers' desire to critically engage with the existing literature around Ta'ziyeh discourse. Thus, the main activities in which we engaged were those of describing, analyzing and critiquing some samples on Ta'ziyeh through the use of Gee's (2011) seven rules. Since Gee's tasks are informed by his background in linguistics, the use of the building tasks themselves and the corresponding focus on how discourse is used to construct reality may be more closely aligned with certain intellectual heritages with roots in linguistics and less closely aligned with others (e.g., sociocultural theories). We should also be aware of the fact that the use of the tasks provides a particular perspective on the kinds of work done within Ta'ziyeh discourse that might change with the use of another analytic tool. In other words, by foregrounding some elements, we necessarily background others.

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