

History, Aporia and Politics in Bahram Beyzaie's Death of Yazdgerd

Ramin Farhadi, Mohammad Amin Mozaheb

¹M.A. in English Literature, Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran

²Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Language Center, Department of Foreign Languages, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran

***Corresponding Author:** Mohammad Amin Mozaheb, Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Language Center, Department of Foreign Languages, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran

ABSTRACT

As a prominent Iranian playwright and screenwriter, Bahram Beyzaie (b. 1948) stages Iranian history and mythology in his plays. His play *Death of Yazdgerd* (1980) represents the murder of the last Sasanian monarch Yazdgerd III during the Arab invasion of Persia in 651 AD. Having been published a year after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the play draws a parallel between the conquering Arabs in Persia, and Islamic revolutionaries in contemporary Iranian context. In *Death of Yazdgerd*, Beyzaie views history as a text that needs to be interrogated, and by reconstruction of past narratives, he also raises the important question that from whose voice and point of view such narratives must be written. Therefore, this study, by using poststructuralism and close analysis, explores the way in which Beyzaie questions the documentary impulse in modern Iranian historical playwriting. It also articulates that how Beyzaie in *Death of Yazdgerd* willfully manipulates the historical past to invite historical speculation about the actual historical murder of Yazdgerd III. Seen as such, his history play aims to reveal the contradiction and polyvocality of history.

Keywords: Bahram Beyzaie; *Death of Yazdgerd*; History Play; Aporia; Poststructuralism

INTRODUCTION

According to Harben (1988), the term the 'history play' is a very popular genre in the contemporary theatre. It treats with history and understanding and consciousness of past. De Groot (2009) maintains that history contains the national identity of a society, and the way in which "a society consumes its history is crucial to the understanding of contemporary" thought and context (p. 2) which is one the main objectives of historical theatre. Cavanagh (2003), too, expresses that historical drama is a form of considering and evaluating the function of history in societies in which there is an increasing historical awareness.

The most significant use of history on stage is that the playwright can treat history imaginatively; interpreted differently, imaginative reconstruction of past events or figures may function as a trial over history. Seen as such, the playwright can question history and reveal the repressive historical institutions along with their adverse effects on the present society. Therefore, the history play becomes the effective means of historicism to anticipate the

potentiality of social-political resistance (Dollimore, 1991); it would be the exploration of "dissident" identity (De Groot, 2009, p. 183).

Explorations of the past grant a license to the playwright to interpret and reflect on the way in which historical discourses might have influenced individuals. In addition, they help to identify the excluded and silenced groups from the narratives of history. In this way, the history play can itself function as a piece of history writing since it regards the past as a text which is subject to re-interrogate, re-evaluate and rewrite. The historical playwright, as Nicholson (2007) observes, creates his own account of history in order to challenge the understanding and value of history in the present, and by revealing its repressed voices and contradictions, he may offer an alternative to rewrite it from the perspective of those silenced individuals. Therefore, the notions of polyvocality, subjectivity and indeterminacy of history are put forward by historical drama.

In contemporary Iran, Bahram Beyzaie (b. 1938), the celebrated playwright, screenwriter, film and theatre director, stands apart from his contemporaries in a sense that his historical

playwriting offers the view that history is an idea or discourse which can be interpreted and evaluated repeatedly. For him, there is no fixed, true meaning that can be derived from history. His theatre, in general, is poststructuralist/postmodern in which, as Eagleton (1996a) puts it, meaning is "suspended" (p. 111), and reconstruction of the past is done through the interpretations of it in the present. In this connection, history is subject to subjective and imaginative interpretation. Williams (2005) maintains that poststructuralism is "a revolutionary way of thinking about history" (p. 7); its view of history is in contrast with "settled truths" (p. 3).

In this regard, Beyzaie's major history play *Death of Yazdgerd: A Feast of Regicide* (1980) represents the aftermath of the murder of Yazdgerd III, the last Emperor of Sasanian Empire, by a miller and his family in a remote rural setting. The play stages that discovering historical truth is impossible due to the variety of voices and interpretations that relate to historical events and figures. As Baraheni (1999) writes, everything in the play is a plurality, and this is true of Yazdgerd; there are "different Yazdgerds" (p. 374) that the audiences are faced with. Beyzaie wrote his play a year after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and there can be seen a historical parallel between Yazdgerd's flee and Mohammad Reza Shah, the last monarch of the Pahlavi dynasty a few weeks before the fall of his royalty in the last days of 1978.

Significantly, *Death of Yazdgerd* employs both postmodern historicist and historiographical approaches. The play unmask the exercise of royal power from the Sasanian Empire to the Pahlavi dynasty (historicist approach), and it also raises serious questions about from whose voice history is written and the possibility of contradiction in past narratives. The paper, therefore, explores the question of historiography and politics in Beyzaie's *Death of Yazdgerd* by using poststructuralist theory and close analysis.

DISCUSSION

In *Death of Yazdgerd*, Beyzaie stages different versions of the historical murder of the Sasanian Monarch at the time of Arab invasion of Persia from 632 to 651 AD. The significance of murder is that the Persian Empire was officially ended, and Persia began to occupy brutally by the early Islamic Arabs. Among Beyzaie's historical sources *Two Centuries of Silence* (1957) by the

prominent Iranian literary scholar and historian Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob looms large. Zarrinkoob writes that the Arab conquest of Persia ultimately resulted in two centuries of "oppression and corruption" in the county (p. 75). In this regard, the binary oppositions of lightness/darkness, white/black, and angels/demons through the play may relate to Zarrinkoob's monograph. The references of the Priest, the Miller's Wife, and the General to these binary oppositions in the play make prediction about the deteriorating situation after the Arab conquest of Persia.

The play begins by the corpse of Yazdgerd in the centre of the stage and the trial of the Miller's household, his Wife and Daughter, by the General, the Army Chief, the Priest and the Soldier for the murder of the Persian Monarch. The trial for murder is a means of finding out the truth, the main reason why the Miller and his family members decided to kill the Monarch at the time of war with the invading Arabs. The defendants, however, narrate different accounts of Yazdgerd's death. Notably, each of them – the Miller, the Wife and the Daughter – plays the role of the dead Monarch. As a result, Beyzaie can also demythologise Yazdgerd, or in Hegel's words, the master, and gives voice to the peasants, or the slaves.

Historically speaking, the death of Yazdgerd III is a historical fact, yet Beyzaie, as a historical playwright, presents different motives, accounts and interpretations of this historical fact in a way that a meta-narrative of history is de-centred by different micro-narratives. Put differently, History (with uppercase *H*) is deconstructed and, hence, transformed into smaller *histories*. Hellekson (2001) notes that historical writers understand that there was an actual historical event or figure, yet the way in which it is narrated and understood in the present, depends highly upon the historical writer who takes the past "traces" (p. 20) to shape them into new material for narrating a new version of history. Moreover, Eagleton (2003) too observes that poststructuralist/postmodernist writers, such as Beyzaie, are contemptuous of the notions such as "truth, unity and progress" (p. 13), which are described by Enlightenment as characteristic feature of history.

The Miller and his family create four different narratives of Yazdgerd's last minutes in the text. In Beyzaie's play, there is a strong sense of plurality and discontinuity. What can be

understood from these conflicting accounts is the idea of inconsistency in history. Overall, there are two dominant narratives regarding the dead body of Yazdgerd III on stage.

First Narrative: the Miller as the Murderer

As can be read from different historical sources about the history of Iran, Yazdgerd III was killed by a miller in Merv (a city in Turkmenistan) while he was fleeing from various coups against him and the Arab's breakthrough (Pourshariati, 2008, p. 257). On the other hand, there is another account which he was mobilising army against the Arabs and he was in a miller's house, for food and rest, the miller killed him because of the monarch's gold coins (Zarrinkoob, 1957, p. 161). In the play, these conflicting accounts are expressed by the Wife replying the General that orders to set up gallows to hang the Miller: "Yes, do haste, do haste! that we survive to speak of the Monarch's shameful fleeing; that we spread the truth and all the peoples of the universe tease the gallant Monarch. Yes, do haste!" (Beyzaie, 2014, p. 8). The General's response is quite contrary to the claim of the Wife: "He intended to mobilise an army to free this great Land, from plain to plain, from countless foes" (ibid, p. 9).

Interestingly, the reasons explained by the Miller and the Wife are also contradictory. While the Miller speaks of poverty and suffering, especially from the loss of his son, as the real motive of killing the Monarch, his Wife denies the act of killing and, instead, expresses that Yazdgerd was willing to die due to his defeat from the Muslim Arabs. From the outset, Beyzaie's text echoes what the French thinker Derrida (1993, p. 11) describes as *aporia* or impassability of meaning, which is one of the main concepts of poststructuralist resistance to conventional understanding of meaning, and of history particularly. Even though, in this narrative Yazdgerd is killed by the Miller, there are some textual clues that refer to his innocence, especially when the Daughter joyfully speaks of her sympathy towards the dead Monarch: "the Monarch is not dead. He is not dead... (*joyfully*) He's asleep dreaming us right now" (Beyzaie, 2014, p. 9).

Beyzaie's history play stages poststructuralist principles behind its historical theory such as contradiction and plurality. On the one hand, the Miller tells the General that he held a long-standing grudge against the Monarch for his son's death, which may be a strong motive for taking revenge; on the other hand, the Wife

asserts that her husband is innocent of murder, and the Miller, too, himself denies committing regicide (ibid, p. 12). However, this is not the first expressed motive throughout the text. The second motive of killing the Monarch is that due to the destitute of the Miller's family, the Miller planned to kill Yazdgerd in his sleep to possess his gold coins and expensive outfits. The Wife confesses that it was she who urged the Miller to kill the guest in the middle of the night. Yet interestingly, they thought he was a thief. According to Miller: "Do the monarchs flee? Do they beg in the same vein as the beggars? Do they rob themselves as the robbers? Do they put on different clothing rather than of what to be?" (ibid, p. 15).

The Miller's, by trying to justify the death of Yazdgerd, his master, echo Hegel's theory of master-slave dialectic in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel (1977) notes that one's self-consciousness is reliant upon another's self-consciousness; in this way, self-conscious, in general, is genuine when that other self-consciousness recognises the former and regards it as a self-consciousness (p. 111). Explaining Hegel's philosophical ideas, Beiser (2005) points out that:

Through this dialectic, the self will eventually break outside its solipsistic shell. In the end, it will realize that its independence requires giving equal and independent status to the other, and that its independence consists in the self-awareness of equal and independent beings through one another. (p. 186)

Seen as such, there is an essential need for mutual recognition, and the family of the Miller as the slaves plays the role of Yazdgerd, the dead master, and each role-playing exposes different identities of the murdered monarch. The self-consciousness of the Miller and his family is dependent upon the self-consciousness of Yazdgerd – although dead, he is one of the main characters of the play.

The Miller and the Wife, later, reveal the third motive of murder – the nationalist pride. They express that Yazdgerd was incapable of ruling the Empire; he was a fraud monarch and very "frightened" by the Arab invasion (Beyzaie, 2014, p. 18). In this narrative story, the Miller plays the role of Yazdgerd and accused of him (himself) being salacious and indifferent to the matters of the State: "while at Tisphone Palace, I was indifferent to the world. There were many pains and moans, and I didn't listen to. I had

forsaken the world. That's right! Now the world has forsaken me" (ibid, p. 30). Since Yazdgerd was unaware of understanding and knowing the people living under his rule, his people too could not know the Sasanian monarch. This negates the mutual understanding promoted by Hegel's dialectic of master-slave. As a monarch, Yazdgerd had abandoned ruling his people; as a result, he could not have demanded obedience of the subjects, and the subjects too could not have monarch's recognition and understanding (Beiser, 2005, p. 187). Yazdgerd had failed to forge a monarch identity for himself, and this justifies the Miller's action to murder Yazdgerd in his sleep for his nationalist pride to make the situation better.

As has been noted, Beyzaie's history play is a drama of contradiction and possibility. There is no authentic narrative in the text. Each narrative story with its motives is compelling, and above all, plausible. It is the family, not the authorities, who set the conditions of plausibility to persuade the authorities. In this respect, Sinfield (1992, pp. 30-1) asserts that the act of story-telling, especially in the plays of Shakespeare and his peers, fosters a direct relation with the question of identity. The real speakers here are the family of the Miller. This postmodern/poststructuralist approach of Beyzaie to history is to question its metanarratives in order that excluded, minor voices of history to be expressed explicitly; in this fashion, these micro-narratives can put forward the idea of "genuine plurality" of history (Eagleton, 1996b, p. 66).

What Beyzaie aims to achieve is to promote the idea of polyvocality of history in favour of the silenced characters that are excluded by historical narratives. In almost all the historical sources of the fall of Sasanian Empire and conquest of Persia by the early Muslim Arabs, whether in Persian or in other languages, it can be read that the Miller murdered the last Sasanian monarch as an act of revenge for the death of his son, or the killing was driven by Miller's greed for Yazdgerd's coins. Nevertheless, Beyzaie's text suggests possibilities for the interpretations of a historical fact – the death of Yazdgerd III.

The fourth motive of murder, and the last in the first narrative of the Miller as the killer, is revealed by the Miller that Yazdgerd himself ordered the Miller to be killed. Due to the heavy defeats of Persian troops and the various uprisings and coups against Yazdgerd at the

time of Arab invasion, the desperate monarch demanded his death by the hands of the Miller. According to this story, Yazdgerd, playing now by the Miller himself, offers a bag of gold to the Miller to kill him:

The Wife: The stolen gold coins!

The Daughter: He is not a robber. The robbers do know well how to spend their stolen coins.

The Wife: What do you want to do with this ruined place? The collapse of the ceiling is just a matter of time. All our neighbours have escaped. You don't desire this ruined place for the mill, what do you really want to do with it?

The Miller: Suicide!

The Priest: Suicide?

The Wife: He said the exact word!

The Miller: Suicide! (Beyzaie, 2014, p. 31)

Here, Yazdgerd is staged as desperate and suicidal; instead of defending the country against the Arab invaders, he is willing to die. By deconstructing the figure of Yazdgerd, Beyzaie refuses to depict the monarch as a martyr who has faced a tragic destiny. The Miller later mentions that he rejected the monarch's death wish for four times. Once again, contraction and possibility run through the play, particularly when Yazdgerd threatens to rape the Miller's wife and daughter, the Miller confesses to the murder of the monarch, and this immediately followed by his denial that he is not the killer.

In order to persuade the Miller to kill him, after threatening to rape the Wife and the Daughter, Yazdgerd speaks of class differences, his wealth and power, and the poor state of the Miller and his way of living. What can be understood here is that there were sharp class divisions in Sasanian Empire before the invasion of the Arabs. As Pourshariati puts it, the massive corruption at the time of Yazdgerd III's reign was a strong motive for his commanders and subordinates to defy royal decrees and measures (p. 273). Despite the constant effort of the historical Yazdgerd III to tackle corruption and to unify various parts of Empire, the clerical classes and many local rulers were agents of corruption and oppression. For instance, Yazdgerd III was tolerant of other religions, especially Christianity, but the Zoroastrian priests amounted to religious and racial discriminations that nullified the measures of the Emperor (Zarrinkoob, 1957, pp. 75-7). As

akin to previous claims and denials, the Miller at first accepts the murder of the monarch because of corruption and oppression, and the binary opposition of rich/poor, then denies that he is the killer. Notably, the situation becomes more baffling when the Daughter claims that the body belongs to her father, not to Yazdgerd. Beyzaie, then, challenges various historical texts about the death of Yazdgerd III by raising this possibility: what if Yazdgerd faked his death and lived with a different identity?

The Second Narrative: Yazdgerd as Murderer

The Wife, playing role of the King, asks the Daughter to play the role of Miller's wife, and her daughter willingly accepts then attempts to seduce the Miller (Beyzaie, 2014, p. 44). From the outset of the play she insists that the dead body is of the Miller: "(*moaning deeply*) The Monarch hasn't been killed; he hasn't been killed!" (ibid, p. 9). Beyzaie willfully manipulates historical facts, and prompts speculation over the historicity of the existing texts, and the authenticity of the historians. In the second half of the play, the focus of attention shifts from the murder of Yazdgerd by the Miller to this possibility that the Miller is killed by the monarch, and in this narrative, it is the Daughter that plays Yazdgerd, and her theatricality shows the cruelty and sensuality of the allegedly murdered monarch.

The motive of murder changes into the game of Yazdgerd, and its central player is the monarch himself. Before starting to perform the role of Yazdgerd, the Daughter casts a glance on the dead and exclaims: "The man lying here is my father. Oh, poor miller!" (ibid, p. 48). The Yazdgerd that the Wife plays is very witty and intelligent who tries, one way or another way, to persuade the Miller to kill him; however, the Daughter shows a Yazdgerd who seduces the Wife of the Miller, and plans to murder him to take on his identity. In this way, both Persians and Arabs would realize that the Sasanian Emperor is passed away or killed. Interestingly, even to the end of the play, the Persian authorities, demanding justice for the deceased monarch, are reliant upon the stories of a peasant family to understand what did really happen a night ago. The family acts as historians, trying to construct a narrative of past by their performance of different aspects, factors and motives, quite contradictory, involved in the death of Yazdgerd or the Miller. As a consequence, borrowing from Southgate (2003),

postmodernism represents history as a fictional narrative of "inconsistencies and contradictions" (p. 7).

The Daughter, playing Yazdgerd's part, uses a language of seduction. She starts to seduce the Wife, her mother, by claiming that Yazdgerd was sexually interested in the Miller's wife. The Daughter announces Yazdgerd's tricky and sexual behavior as the main motive for the murder of the Miller. She even mentions the problematic relationship between her parents, and how her mother was forced to sleep with other men to provide money and food for the family survival (Beyzaie, 2014, pp. 65-6). However, what is interesting is that among all the mentioned motives for the murder of Yazdgerd, even in the second dominant narrative that the Miller is the victim, poverty and class differences are present from the beginning of the play. Daryae (2009) notes that poverty was one of the main causes of the uprising of the poor, which immediately followed by the Sasanian authorities' ruthless suppression since keeping the order "was the most important thing, because in their minds it brought prosperity for all" (p. xxii).

The Daughter speaks of Yazdgerd's swordsmanship and that the Miller was no match for him, and the Miller confirms: "Yes, he attacked me. Your Monarch, with his naked sword like a wild beast – (he walks) he was a valiant warrior whose sword had no equal. He attacked me like death, and I had to slay him!" (Beyzaie, 2014, p. 67). As is apparent, the contradiction in the Miller's words is that he never referred to his weapon for defending himself and the question that how he could kill a monarch who was a mighty warrior and swordsman.

If the focus of attention is now on the death of Miller, the Miller's statement that he had to defend his family against the mischievous Yazdgerd is contradictory to the Daughter's theatricality. Undecidability and skepticism are evident in all the Miller's family's stories, especially in the last story that the Miller is the dead. In this regard, the skeptic Soldier and Priest demand the examination of the body to find that whether it is of their monarch or not. Beyzaie's text follows the politics of poststructuralism, that is, nothing is certain and its rejection of unsettled truths (Williams, 2005, p. 3); in this connection, after the examination of the body and the Miller, they cannot reach conclusion whether the Miller is Yazdgerd or

himself. As a result, the bewildered General ordered the soldier to hang the corpse and leave the peasant family at the same time that from a far distance the army of the Arabs approaching:

General: The legend remains the same. Hang this lifeless body!

Soldier: of the Monarch?

General: Hasten!...

[...]

Army Chief: Let's leave! History is always written by the conquerors!

(Beyzaie, 2014, p. 68)

At the close of the play, the situation changes, and nobody cares for discovering the truth about the death of Yazdgerd or the Miller, because the Arabs will construct a narrative. The real hero of the play, the Wife, says the last words in the text: "Yes, here come the real judges! Your flag was white, and that was your trial! Let's see what will be the sentence of those with the black flag!" (ibid, p. 69). The Wife saves her family for several times in the play; she is the main speaker, and when the Sasanian authorities are skeptical about the Daughter's claim that the dead body belongs to the Miller, she reveals the specific details of Tisphone Palace, including Yazdgerd's seraglio and the number of his concubines, which amazes the Sasanians.

Notably, the three peasant characters of the play – the Miller, the Wife, and the Daughter – all deconstruct the sovereign figure: Yazdgerd. Zeifman (1993) contends that history inclines to create myth for contemporary generation, and one of the tasks of the postmodern writers is to deconstruct the invented historical myths (p. 133). The family rebuked Yazdgerd for being dressed as a beggar, deserting his people at the time of invasion, being a sexual predator, and being suicidal. In Beyzaie's drama, the slaves define the identity of the master. They are also the real performers and their theatricality persuades the Sasanian authorities to never draw a conclusion. What the play offers at the end is possibilities. There is no fixed meaning in history; and the representations are responsible for re-creation of past narratives and events.

Beyzaie's history play aims to deconstruct the fraud of history by demythologization of its myth, Yazdgerd and the truth about his death or survival. In the text, Yazdgerd as the last Sasanian monarch is equated with the Miller and other members of his family. At the end of the

play, it is almost impossible to recognize the Miller from Yazdgerd, vice versa. The Miller can be the monarch or himself. Whether Yazdgerd is murdered or survived is not clear at the end. The plurality of voices in the play, along with the plausibility of stories, has designated the truth-seeking process in the play ambiguous and indeterminate. Beyzaie deconstructs a historical meta-narrative, and breaks it into various contradictory micro-narratives: a single voice of Persian history is transformed into multiple voices by which meaning and truth are unsettled (Ghaderi & Kazazi, 2009; Baraheni, 1999). Briefly speaking, *Death of Yazdgerd* is also a political play which was written and performed concurrent with Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979. Perhaps, one can notice a similarity between the flight of Sasanian Yazdgerd III and Mohammad Reza Shah, the last monarch of Pahlavi dynasty a few weeks prior to the Revolution.

CONCLUSION

Historical drama deals with history of a nation. This widely practiced dramatic genre can be used in a variety of ways particularly after the rise of poststructuralism in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Poststructuralist theory gives new meaning to the representation and understanding of the historical; it introduces a new definition of history and past narratives. According to this critical approach, meta-narratives of history must be questioned in favor of marginalized voices and those excluded from the historical discourses. Seen as such, the celebrated Iranian playwright, screenwriter and film director, Bahram Beyzaie uses the genre of history play to achieve multiple purposes; he adopts a poststructuralist historicist approach in his historical plays.

In this regard, in his magnum opus *Death of Yazdgerd* (1980), Beyzaie questions the historical fact of the murder of the last Sasanian Emperor Yazdgerd by a miller in the city of Merv at the time of Arab invasion of Persia in the early seventh-century AD. The play opens up various possibilities about the reasons of Yazdgerd's murder. However, at the end of play, what contradicts and somehow challenges the authenticity of the existing historical sources about Yazdgerd III's last days is raising the questions that what if Yazdgerd survived and hid himself from the scene of history; what if he was the killer of the miller. *Death of Yazdgerd* is drama of uncertainty, plurality and skepticism.

Whether Yazdgerd is killed or not remains obscure in the play. The play also makes a parallel between the Arab conquest of Persia and the fall of Sasanian Empire, and the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime in 1979. Beyzaie's history play not only questions the historical facts about the death of Yazdgerd III, but also deconstructs the figure of Sasanian monarch by giving voice to a peasant family and licensing them to improvise stories, very contradictory in their nature, about Yazdgerd's last moments in their mill to de-center the center, the royal power.

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