



The Funeral Carnival of Ta'ziyeh Play in Iraqi Digital Theatre Post-2003

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This article looks at Ta'ziyeh through the Bakhtinian lens. Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia and carnival can be traced in Ta'ziyeh in the Iraqi theatre post-2003. Although these terms have been associated with novels and specifically European novels, they apply to Ta'ziyeh performances since there is multivocality, a temporal structure and the participation of the audience. Such terms as chronotope and polyphony which are closely connected to modern digital technology are deeply analysed to see their influence on this kind of play. This study provides a clear framework of how the Shi'a ritual of Ta'ziyeh can be seen through Bakhtinian reading. By studying these ceremonies as performances—whereby participants show others what they are doing in order to influence their judgment—the article aims to shed light on the function of these ceremonies and the role played by modern technologies in the Iraqi public space. It also aims to tackle AbdulRazzaq Abdul-Wahid's *Al-Hur Arriyahi* as a Ta'ziyeh play.

The core of my argument is to show how these carnivalesque performances help reinforce group solidarity between different segments of the Iraqi community, sustaining the imagined entity and unity of society. This is done through the use of modern technologies such as big screens, lighting and sound systems.



Introduction

It is increasingly noted that the use of classical theatre concepts, particularly those developed by Aristotle, to analyze the popular religious performances known as Ta'ziyeh among Shi'ites, is inaccurate. Concepts such as "introduction," "denouement," "climax," and "dialogue" do not truly capture the nature of Ta'ziyeh. In Greek theatre, dialogue serves as a means of moving the plot and developing the story. In Ta'ziyeh, however, speech does not fulfill this role. Instead, technology can be used to enhance the dramatic impact and expand the scope of creativity through the use of advanced lighting and sound systems, 3D printing of props, digital visual displays, videos, and even virtual and augmented reality technologies to create immersive and interactive experiences, enriching the viewer's experience and making the theatre more attractive and able to keep pace with other artistic performances.

In an article entitled *Bakhtin's Carnival: Utopia as Critique* (29), Michael Gardiner wrote 'indeed, Bakhtin argues that almost every religious ritual and event had its carnivalesque counterpart.' A particular example which is worth mentioning here is the famous rituals occurring during Ashura in Iraq. Before proceeding with Bakhtin's concept of carnival and how digital technologies are employed, a brief historical overview of Ta'ziyeh is provided to contextualize the Shi'a variant of Muharram.

The religious practice of Ta'ziyeh (Condolences), which started a few years after the murder of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed in 680 AD in Karbala, is an important indication of the religious and cathartic theatrical practices in ancient Iraq. This occasion is closely related to the sense of guilt that Iraqis, particularly Shi'ites, felt after abandoning Imam Hussein, his family and followers to be brutally killed on that day. These performances were created and enacted during the first month of the Arabic year, Muharram. The first ten days of this month are called *Ashura*¹ throughout which the performances are carried out to embody the actions of the battle that led to the savage murder of these holy figures at the hands of the Umayyad Caliph and his followers. Khalid Amine points out that among the significant features of these practices is that whereas some theatrical events in different parts of the Arab world were limited to temples in ancient times, the Ta'ziyeh Islamic performances of Muharram and Ashura used streets as stages:

Every year the Karbala events are reconstituted and represented in elaborately staged performances throughout the Shi'ite world. Within the performance, the audience assumes the role of the passive Kufans who abandoned Hussein to death. They weep and ask forgiveness for their personal sins. The performance becomes a yearly occasion whereby the Shi'ites' historical guilt is re-enacted, leading to a

collective emotional discharge and purging of their souls. The performance contains many grotesque elements of real torture and violence, which the performers willingly inflict upon themselves. (Amine 2006, 149)

Perhaps no other single event in Islamic history has played so central a role in shaping Shi'a identity and communal sense as the martyrdom of Hussein and his companions at Karbala. Hussein's martyrdom is a symbol of sacrifice in the struggle for right against wrong, and for justice and truth against wrongdoing and falsehood. Accordingly, millions of Shiites come annually to visit 'the tomb of Hussein in Karbala and even carry their dead to be buried there' (Chelkowski, 2005: 156). After all, the city becomes plazas and there are, naturally, privileged spaces for the occurrence of Carnival which has benefitted from the digital technologies of multimedia to enhance people's interaction. Therefore, the streets are covered by big screens on both sides to aggravate the feelings of deep sadness.

Over a period of twelve centuries, five major rituals around the battle of Karbala have developed. These rituals include the memorial services (*majālis al- Ta'ziyeh*), the visitation of Hussein's tomb in Karbala particularly on the occasion of the tenth day of 'Ashura' and the fortieth day after the battle (*ziyārat ashura* and *ziyārat al- arbāin*), the public mourning processions (*al-mawākib al-husayniyya* or *al-'azāiyya*), the representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a play (the *Shabīh*), and the flagellation (*tatbīr*) (see **Figure 1**).

Historically, the development of this distinct ritual, in the form of a carnival play representing the battle of Karbala, can be detected after the establishment of Shiism as the state religion in Iran. The appearance of the *Shabīh*, Iranian epic dramas that commemorate the martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of Mohammad - the signal event separating Shiism as an Islamic sect in Iran - might have been inspired by the Christian Corpus Christ Processions which reenacted various events in the passion of Christ culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection. It may also be that in its initial carnival-type format, the *Shabīh* incorporated some features of practices like the use of banners and horses in funeral processions.

By the same token, *Ta'ziyeh* plays share with their Christian counterparts similar symbolic forms, social arrangements, and ritual, processional, and dramatic structures: both are funereal cycles of plays that originated in religious processions, using collective grief as an annual occasion to celebrate a local town or village, as well as to help a community bond through their collective feelings. According to Émile Durkheim (2012: 397-400), 'the grief expressed during a particular ritual is eminently social and independent of the individual's affective state. The grief is a collective assertion that



Figure 1: Ta'zieh: Shi'a Iranian ritual commemorating the death of Mohammad's grandson Hussein and his male children on the plains of Karbala, 680 CE. (Iran Front Page: IFP Editorial Staff, September 20, 2018, ifpnews.com)

the individual consents to be part of rather than a spontaneous or personal expression of sadness.' He also argues that human feelings are intensified when they are affirmed collectively (1995: 403). In Iraqi theatre, this feeling is intensified by mass use of digital multimedia such as big screens, amplified sound and visual images of historical figures of Ta'zieh. In Iraq, 'The interactive body and sound become a visible feature of Iraqi theatre after 2003, due to the importance of body language in today's theatrical performances' (Midhin and Rasheed, 220).

However, Hamid Dabashi (2005: 92) argues that

By ta'zieh I do not only mean a Shi'ite version of the Christian passion play similar to the miracle plays of Oberammergau, though the forms have striking similarities. Ta'zieh is more a performance of mourning—as its name clearly indicates—that has historically spread over a whole constellation of dramatic and ritual performances.

From the account of the Portuguese traveler Antonio de Gouvea, who watched the celebration of Ashura in Shiraz in 1602, it is clear that by that time Iranians already

observed the Shabīh in the form of a carnival. Gouvea recounted that ‘on the tenth day of Ashura a group of camels covered with painted cloth, and carrying mourning women and a small child, paraded through one of the city’s streets, representing Hussein’s women folk and his son on their return journey from Damascus to Medina with Hussein’s head’ (Yitzhak Nakash, 1993: 170–171).

Accordingly, the explicit form of the Shabīh gave way to a more theatrical form, the Ta’ziyeh play, which was enacted on stage. As Hildegard Müller suggested, ‘the appearance of a theatrical form coincided with literary developments, most notably the use of a new dramatic literary genre instead of the old narrating literature’ (Quoted in Yitzhak Nakash, 1993: 171). The Ta’ziyeh play reached its zenith during the Qajar period (1794–1925), stopping short of becoming an Iranian national theatre early in the twentieth century. Under royal patronage the play evolved into a complex melodrama, particularly in Tehran and in other large cities in Iran. The literary and artistic additions reached their peak during and shortly after the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah (1848–1896). While the main theme was still the battle of Karbala, much stress was laid on individual heroes about whom separate plays were written. To create a greater effect, authors of the Ta’ziyeh plays added new characters and transformed existing ones.

The Ta’ziyeh play developed mainly in Iran and its rich theatrical dimensions reflected strong Persian influences. This is supported by what is known about the Shabīh and the Ta’ziyeh play in other Shi’a regions. Introduced into Iraq only in the late eighteenth century, the Shabīh never developed into a full-scale theatre and its nature was fundamentally different from that of the Iranian, reflecting the strong Arab tribal character of Iraqi Shi’a society.

I. Ta’ziyeh Through Bakhtinian Reading

As mentioned earlier, Ta’ziyeh is mostly associated with the Shi’a communities, replicating the story of Imam Hussein in Karbala. Throughout the centuries, this has been performed in many countries and in different languages, but the concept remains the same. To quote Dabashi again, he affirms that

Ta’ziyeh is a Shi’ite ritual drama. Although its dramatic and ritual roots are traced to such pre-Islamic Iranian practices as *Seyavashan* (the mourning of Seyavash, a legendary hero in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*), today it is a thoroughly recodified dramatic act that is a specifically Shi’ite practice. It can be found in South Asia, Iran, the Arab world, and even the Caribbean, where it was taken by South Asian émigré communities and then mixed with Latin American carnival (2005: 92).

This genre is an amalgamation of poetry, prose, music and acting which invites the audience's emotional catharsis. This aspect of musicality makes it easier for digital multimedia to be used extensively in Ta'ziyeh plays. While Ta'ziyeh is commonly seen in religious and cultural contexts, it has the potential to be analysed in many other ways as it is rich with dialogue, audience interaction, and has a great narrative as well. The interaction with the audience in particular makes it unique in comparison to similar religious performances. This engagement with the audience provides the basis for embodying, among other things, Bakhtin's polyphonic concept.

Ta'ziyeh portrays multiple voices such as Imam Hussein and his family, enemy forces and the angels. These monologic voices are mediated and portrayed in dialogic tensions, which allow the coexistence of ideological perspectives. Though the story belongs to the past, it is re-enacted in the present. In an article entitled 'Media, performance, and past presents: authenticity in the digital age,' Katrinka Somdahl-Sands and John C. Finn (2015: 812) argue that 'What makes this interesting is the relationship between space and time in mediated performances. The physical act of performing is in the past, but the audience experiencing the mediated performance is in *their* now.'

The enemy's voice, i.e. Yazid's, adds the emotional and moral complexity to this narrative. This tension is elevated by the participation of the audience as they respond to the events in the performance. They weep, cheer, and even on different occasions, they intervene in the performance. The combination of interaction and voices via digital screens creates meaning through their interaction. Ta'ziyeh's polyphonic performance embodies the religious, historical and communal concepts which make it considerably distinctive yet dialogically intertwined. These new media formats encourage a new engagement with public art and a new kind of public participation that is changing the 'dialogue between professional artists and curators on the one hand, and mass publics on the other' (Townsend 2008, p. 2)

The meaning is constructed by Hussein and his followers' voices opposing Yazid's. All the voices that support Imam Hussein and his propaganda or his ideology oppose what Yazid and his followers saying. As such, Hussein is the protagonist, and Yazid is the antagonist in this setting. This tension is not simplified in Ta'ziyeh as the antagonist is given the space and opportunity to express himself in persuasive and tragic tones which results in a polyphonic structure. Similarly to Dostoevsky's novels, in Ta'ziyeh the tension among the characters is prominent. Moreover, this is amplified by the audience's part in the performance which adds even more tension.

This leads to Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia as multiple speech and various languages are used in Ta'ziyeh. Each voice corresponds to a social category that

brings together people from a range of countries and regions. This becomes even more complex when regional grievances are portrayed where Ta'ziyeh is performed. For example, if Ta'ziyeh is performed in Iran, cultural and political events are embedded in the script. Therefore, Ta'ziyeh's scripts are not fixed and they change based on the place they are performed. At times, it can become politically heavy, therefore Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia in Ta'ziyeh becomes more prominent. In addition to the above, there is nonverbal speech, such as colours, props, cultural and ritual emblems, which contribute to the semiotic heteroglossia. All these colours and props can be embodied through digital multimedia such as video and audio in contemporary performances.

According to Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque, social hierarchies are reversed, as they are in Ta'ziyeh. For Bakhtin, medieval and Renaissance carnival traditions could celebrate 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.' It marks 'the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions' as the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal, a Utopian world of unlimited potential (in Payne 1998: 40–41).

Thus, participants in a ritual deliberately play a role and act in a similar fashion as they would in a theatre play: contrary to everyday life, they show spectators what they are doing in order to influence their judgment. By projecting moving images onto large screens, the performance creates visual distance that encourages viewers to adopt a more neutral and reflective mode of judgment. Pursuing the analogy with acting, Victor Turner (1988: 72–98) defines the ritual as a performance, during which messages are communicated. But the distinction between actors and spectators is less clear in a funeral: participants act and watch at the same time during a funerary ceremony, while it is not the case in a theatre play. In this sense, the funeral is closer to Bakhtin's reading of the medieval carnivalesque. Throughout the carnival, he argues, the participant who is both actor and spectator parodies and imitates real life with costumes, chants and dances which are intensified by using digital media. In *An Interpretation of 'Carnaval'* by Roberto Da Matta and Ray Green (1982/1983), they state that 'Carnival takes the form that Bakhtin attributed to it, that is, it creates the possibility of changing places, of being spectator and actor simultaneously' (167). This process is similar with funerals: Mourners play a role as both actors and spectators in the ceremonies. Their motion, text and clothing are not pure fiction, they imitate real life in communal and virtual fashion. By playing real life in such way, the carnival—like the funeral—temporarily suspends social order, and thus symbolically forces out boundaries of the everyday life. Rules are consequently overthrown, hierarchies reversed, and the structure turned over. This liminal phase is a moment during which a breach is momentarily made

possible between all social, ethnic or religious boundaries. Participants reach a state of communion that transcends all these ordinary barriers and together they unite.

Within Ta'ziyeh, power- particularly that assigned to and exercised by governments- is contested, and divine justice replaces secular authority. This is where Ta'ziyeh is used to convey social and political messages in different regions, reflecting conflicts between the oppressor and the oppressed. Under the Pahlavi regime in Iran, for instance, Ta'ziyeh was banned due to its provocative impact on mass society. However, under the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ta'ziyeh is used to pass on the message of the government and power. Ta'ziyeh can be seen as a theatre of political theology; a performance in which Imam Hussein represents the oppressed and Yazid, the oppressor. Martyrdom, which is advocated through Ta'ziyeh as divine justice, is needed to overthrow power. Therefore, sometimes the political message of Ta'ziyeh is to encourage mass society to oppose the oppressive power, whether it be the government, an external force or an enemy. It is also important to note that these mediated performances unfold across online and offline domains. Yet, as Moinar (2014, p.53) argues, their capacity to mobilise collective action is largely dependent on relative physical proximity, enabling participants to translate online engagement into urban presence.

Sometimes Ta'ziyeh is manipulated by a government showing themselves as the oppressed and the message to society is to stand up against the external force and to encourage them to fight another country. However, this can be understood in a different way to awaken the mass society to stand up against any oppressive power. The message of the Ta'ziyeh is not to tolerate any injustice. Instead, it is to speak up and fight any oppression, to die on one's knees but not to kneel down to the oppression, and to die with heads up. Therefore, the oppressed seek divine justice, hoping that they will be allowed into paradise as promised in their religion.

By utilizing the imagery of carnival, Bakhtin sought to defamiliarize the current state of affairs, to historicize that which was taken to be immutable and eternal, and to relativise abstract claims to truth through a 'gay parody of official reason.' As Barbara Goodwin has argued (though without explicitly referring to Bakhtin), carnivalesque or folkloric examples of inversion 'infer serious criticism of existing society, and the need for change or revolution. [The] subversive effect of inversion can at least provide the impetus for reconstructing the present' (in Gardiner 1992: 32).

Bakhtin's concept of chronotope is also applicable to Ta'ziyeh. chronotope refers to the spatial and temporal dimensions in narrative and Tekyeh, the structure built to stage the Ta'ziyeh plays, provides such environments for the people to inhabit the eternal moment of sacrifice. Tekyeh is a place like a mosque, but smaller and less

equipped than mosques usually are. It provides a space mainly dedicated to the concept of Ashura and martyrdom. The culture of Tekyeh is to help poor people in society. People donate to Tekyeh and all the donations are spent to help the group of society who suffer from class segregation and to give them power and prosperity. It is the voice of the oppressed. Its message is to portray that martyrdom is never finished. By repeatedly re-enacting the events, Ashura operates as a performative reminder that foregrounds social injustice and the struggles of the oppressed. Tekyeh is the main place to conduct Ta'ziyeh. The performers use this space to practise, and in the month of Muharram they perform Ta'ziyeh in their local Tekyehs. It is run by the public and aims to serve the public.

This chronotopic power shows that the political enemies, such as a tyrant like Yazid, also have a role in this context. Mourning in Ta'ziyeh is a political act against oppressive power. Collective mourning is also depicted among the people mourning for Imam Hussein and his followers during the month of Muharram. People in an organised fashion resonate with the fight of Imam Hussein and they become collectively the voice of the oppressed. By using digital media such as sound amplifiers and visual means, the sadness is highlighted. Mourning in the time of Muharram is cathartic and empowering. Bakhtin writes that during such carnivalesque celebrations the participants are 'reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The Utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind' (1968: 10). In doing so, the oppressed are given the voice and the power they need to fight the oppressive powers. The mourning groups are countless and this gives confidence to the oppressed. Unlike the limited number of fighters of Imam Hussein, now the number of the oppressed is many. Therefore, mourning in Ta'ziyeh is not merely an act of lamenting out of weakness but a strong voice to reject the oppression in any form or shape.

In *Ta'ziyeh as Theatre of Protest* (2005), Dabashi argues that

We have to remember that ta'ziyeh is much more than a mere passion play commemorating the battle of Karbala. There is a profound element of redemptive suffering involved in its multifaceted self-flagellation that can assume mild forms of Sineh-zani (rhythmic beating of the chest) to very violent forms of Qameh-zani (cutting your shaved head with a saber). There is a real sense of angry regret in ta'ziyeh in which Muslims mourn their historical inability to aid their Imam. Ta'ziyeh of Hur, for example, is replete with a potential participation in the actual dramatic event though in absentia, with which contemporary Shi'ites vicariously identify. Every time forces of good and evil face each other, the extension of ta'ziyeh thematics into

real time history provides the Shi'ites with an opportunity to participate in the battle of Karbala and help Imam Hussein win the battle against Yazid. (96)

For instance, for many audiences, Zainab, Imam Hussein's sister, represents not resignation but power. As a woman speaking within a patriarchal context, she articulates resistance through mourning that functions as a rhetorical and political act. In Ta'zīyeh, this performative expression of grief is not confined to the stage; it is transmitted to the audience through shared emotional engagement. The cathartic structure of Ta'zīyeh draws spectators into this process, transforming Zainab's voiced resistance into a collective experience that empowers the community.

A Bakhtinian reading of Ta'zīyeh unveils multiple layers of political, social, ritual and dialogical concepts. The voices of Imam Hussein, Yazid, Zainab and the audience exemplify a ritual polyphony where collective grieving and historical events are communicated by multimedia. The polyphonic ritual of resistance of Ta'zīyeh represents the concept of martyrdom. Imam Hussein was a scapegoat to give freedom to the oppressed so they are empowered against any injustice and oppression. The story of Imam Hussein through Ta'zīyeh has always been told through the heart of the society to confront their oppressive governments. Through Tekyehs, they live the moment of martyrdom, and this chronotope adds another layer to Ta'zīyeh. Bakhtin's ideas are clear through the performance of Ta'zīyeh, and unlike most of the previous applications of his theories to novels - most notably to Dostoevsky - they fit well with Ta'zīyeh. The application of Bakhtinian reading to novels confines it to the textual and representational level of literary analysis. In such readings polyphony is typically understood as the coexistence of multiple ideological voices within finite narrative structure, and chronotope as an organising principle internal to the text. By contrast, the chronotope aspect of Ta'zīyeh makes it even more everlasting in the lives of people nowadays. The polyphony and dialogism continue beyond the realm of Ta'zīyeh, and it encompasses people's everyday lives. The chronotope of Ta'zīyeh collapses historical Karbala into the present moment of performance, repeatedly reactivating the past within contemporary public space. Similarly, its polyphony extends beyond scripted voices to include performers, mourners, ritual participants and mediated sound and images, allowing dialogism to persist beyond the temporal limits of the performance itself. For this reason, a Bakhtinian reading of Ta'zīyeh proves particularly apposite: unlike the novel, whose dialogic energies ultimately conclude with the text, Ta'zīyeh sustains an open-ended dialogism that continues into everyday lives, political imaginaries and communal practices of its participants. Ta'zīyeh, through a Bakhtinian reading, does not end when the performance ends, unlike novels. When a Bakhtinian reading is applied to novels, mostly when the novel ends, all of the voices, speeches,

and dialogue end with it; in Ta'ziyeh, all of the voices continue in people's everyday life in the sense that its significance stimulates varied opinions and future discourse. These opinions are deeply rooted in people's minds since they are highlighted by digital technologies which combine both visual and audio means. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin (1984) aptly summarizes his recurrent stress on futurity and the value of the Utopian imagination:

... the carnival sense of the world also knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of conclusive conclusion: all endings are merely beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again. ... nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future. (165–6)

By the same token, this allows a more varied reading of Ta'ziyeh and its role among people in various religions and societies. The story of Ta'ziyeh is relatable to anyone who is under tyranny and wants to stand up to it.

II. Ta'ziyeh in Iraqi Theatre

The sociologist Yvonne Niekrenz (2014: 643) rightly said, "Carnival is chaos and order, sacred and profane, and represents happiness as well as melancholy." In Iraqi Carnavalesque rituals of Ashura, both happiness and melancholy are reflected. These rituals represent happiness for those who look at themselves as the grandsons of Imam Hussein who sacrificed himself for their benefits. At the same time, they feel regretful because of the loss of Imam Hussein. They feel responsible for what happens to him. They failed him. In his comment on Ta'ziyeh play, Dabashi states that

As a cosmic carnival of a constitutional injustice, ta'ziyeh is the mourning of a loss that must always fail in its stated objective if it is to be successful.... The success of mourning means the eradication of the central trauma that has caused it, and no such eradication of a trauma definitive to a culture is possible-without nullifying that very culture. Shi'is are condemned/blessed forever to remember the central trauma of their history, but never so fully that they can then forget it. The act of remembrance will have to remain always incomplete-like a dream that keeps haunting a people, forcing them to try to remember it, but never successfully. In commemorating the death of a martyr, Shi'is are seeking to identify with absolute Otherness; with saintliness in the midst of sin and death at the moment of living; with dual, absolutely incongruent, Otherness; with the face and the body, miasmatic memory and

creative incantation, of the saintly and the diseased. In that impossibility, mourning choreographed and staged, ta'ziyeh is made possible. (Dabashi 2005: 98)

In Iraq, the ritual practices related to the martyrdom of Al-Hussein were carried out by Iraqis privately and secretly within very limited spaces until their revival after 2003. Milla Cozart Riggio points out that

The Ashura rituals in Iraq or the funereal Muharram processions of India have their origin in the same set of beliefs, but they differ from the Iranian plays mourning the death of Hussein. These are commemorative plays; they do not involve self-inflicted wounds. However, just as the blood rituals and flagellanti parades of Ashura have parallels among those who historically have scourged themselves in the name of other religions, such as Christianity, so too this drama may establish a bridge between cultures (101).

In the post-2003 period, festivals are held every year to celebrate the martyrdom of Al-Hussein and his companions at Karbala. The celebration includes reciting poetry and eulogy in art galleries, and listening to sad music. The people, who come from different parts of Iraq, walk with different colorful banners to visit the shrine of Imam Hussein - this can be considered as a funeral carnival. Their parade, suit and serving food are signs of that funeral carnival. During the month of Muharram, different festivals are held such as The Fountains of martyrdom in Babylon, The festival of Al-Taf in Najaf and Al-Husseini Theatre in Karbala. Moreover, on the margin of these festivals, different theatrical practices and other art activities are presented. All these activities are highlighted by setting up big screens to be watched by people on or off stage.

In Iraqi digital theatre, modern condolence plays integrate digital technologies to enhance emotional impact, expand reach, and provide interactive experiences. Digital technologies such as visual displays, integrated sound, and interactive messages allow spectators to immerse themselves in the experience in new ways. While "technical rehearsal" focuses on the technical aspects of live performances, digital technologies can be fully integrated into the performance of a play, creating a unique experience for the audience and the performance.

Among these modern theatrical practices is *Al-Hur Arriyahi* by AbdulRazzaq Abdul-Wahid.

Abdul-Wahid's *Al-Hur Arriyahi* was published in 1982 by Arab Encyclopedia House, Lebanon, Beirut. The play, directed by Karim Rasheed was presented on the Iraqi National Theatre during the 4th Arabic Theatre festival in 1994. It was also performed

in 1997 in Basra. Surprisingly, this play was written and performed during the era of the Ba'ath ruling political party. At that time, the ruling political party was sensitive about these issues related to religion, thinking that these rituals deepen sectarianism (tā'ifiyya), so the tradition was banned. Carlson and Midhin (2025) state that "During the latter part of the century however, the Iraqi people and their theatre struggled through a challenging series of wars, occupations, dictatorships, terrorism, and revolutions, resulting in decades of instability due to aggressive sectarian conflicts and ethnic tension." They add that "the central event in recent Iraqi history and a major contributor to the ongoing trauma of this troubled nation was the US-led invasion of 2003"(1). Because of this fact, sadness forms an integral part of Iraqi society.

The play was also presented on Al Hamraa Theatre in Damascus in 2013. It was directed by Hameed Saber, a famous Iraqi director and playwright who died in 2025. As already referenced, the play was performed in Iraq within the activities of the 4th Arabic Theatre festival in 1994 and in Basra in 1997. These two performances took place inside Iraq. The reason for my concentration in this article on Saber's direction is the fact that it was the first time for the play to be performed outside Iraq after the US war in 2003. Moreover, in the 1990s, Iraqi theatre was not familiar with modern digital technologies and multimedia such as big screens, internet and satellite, as all these digital means were prohibited by the ruling political party.

The play opens with Bakhtin's polyphonic voices. Like a carnival, the play is shrouded by different human and non-human voices which are amplified by the use of big screens on and off stage. The presence of these voices in the dramatic scene and their crystallization before the audience leads to the unraveling of the complex network of events that transcend direct emotion. The visual-audio means that accompany the performance offer an engaging experience for the participants. The big screens and amplified sound bring the historical incident into the present. In doing so, people are given an opportunity to experience their past with all its painful memories. Setting up the screens on and off the stage helps the audiences share the emotional feelings of the dilemma. The predominant red, black, white and yellow colours on screens make people remember and shed tears over the catastrophe of Al-Hussein.

The play represents Al-Hur Arriyahi's internal conflict which is heightened by its voicing on screen by the actor. This conflict is an ideological and psychological conflict before it is a conflict of facts and events. Therefore, we find it revolving around the forces of good and evil, the strong and the weak, duty and conscience, values and principles, in addition to the conflict of belonging and freedom. This conflict comes into existence with the help of big digital screens which increase peoples' sad feelings by amplifying sound.

In the performance, Al-Hur appears perplexed, hesitant and passive. He is torn between his duty as a leader of the army and his desired fate in an unusual circumstance. The poetic quality of the dramatic situation, or the poetic quality of the moment of emotion, is embodied in his anxiety and fear. Like Hamlet, he cannot make up his mind. He is haunted by his inner voice, “the obsession.” Al-Hur finds himself between two camps: the first was the Husseini camp, which represented truth in all its manifestations, despite its small numbers and equipment. The second was the Umayyad camp, which represented falsehood in all its forms and was superior to the first in numbers and equipment. He had to choose between martyrdom for the sake of truth or victory for falsehood. Al-Hur’s internal conflict is represented by Al-Hajis (the obsession) who puts him before two choices:

This is the moment of silence.
 Let words be brief.
 Will you retreat?
 or kill now?
 Which path is clearer?
 (*Al-Hur Arriyahi: 23*)

Here, the big screen is employed to show his hesitation through different colours. Sometimes it is shown by red when he is agitated to work. At other times, by white when he is silent. From here, the events in the play began to develop continuously to consolidate their basic meanings. This “obsession” dialogue reveals two types of conflict. Externally, Al-Hur asserts his authority before others by portraying himself as an unrivalled leader, entrusted by those in power to manage critical tasks and crises. This public performance of competence reinforces his status within the existing power structure. Another internal conflict occurs when he realizes, in the depths of his being, that his humanity demands justice regarding crucial issues. In a monologue-like soliloquy, Al-Hur realizes that the price for his decision would be inevitable death. Al-Hur is obsessed by fantasies, and suspicions about his decision and destiny. This is clearly evident through some of the words used in the above quote such as ‘retreat’, ‘or kill now’ and ‘which path is clearer?’. These words translate the inner feelings of the character and what he goes through within. By using big screens, the two types of conflicts are represented by black and white colours respectively.

The dialogue between Al-Hur as a human being and the obsession is the true dramatic moment in Al-Hur himself because the obsession is the deep, profound inner voice and the basic catalyst for crystallizing the position and pushing it toward a victory for the human self, which begins to rise gradually.

The theatrical construction of *Al-Hur Arriyah* is shaped through the interaction of multiple elements that together give coherence to the performance. These include both the formal and theatrical structure and the event-centred conflict around which the action unfolds. Although the play is grounded in a historical episode- the Karbala incident- it deliberately exceeds historical representation to address contemporary realities. Acts of massacre, systematic killing, and the confiscation of rights are not confined the past but recur across different historical periods and geographical contexts.

The Playwright emphasizes the inseparability of the past and present by visually juxtaposing the images of historical and modern massacres on large screens during the performance. Through this strategy, temporal boundaries are collapsed, allowing the audience to perceive Karbala not as a distant historical event but as a continuing ethical and political condition. This temporal convergence can be understood through Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, in which time and space are fused to produce meaning. In this performance, the stage becomes chronotopic space where historical memory and contemporary experience coexist, enabling the audience to recognize recurring structures of violence and oppression across time. Theatrical construction is based on several elements that combine to complete the play. There is the theatrical structure and there is the event linked to the conflict.

Despite its reliance on a historical incident - the Karbala incident - *Al-Hur Arriyah* reflects a contemporary issue, i.e., massacre, killings and confiscation of rights which can be found everywhere in every period. The playwright wants to say that the past and present are inseparable. To prove this, different pictures of massacres from the past are shown on the big screens.

Accordingly, Abdul-Wahid did not stop at the borders of the city of Kufa, but extended to include Sinai, Tel al-Za'atar, and the occupied territories, to emphasize the idea of addressing places, depicting them, and reproducing them semantically and psychologically to recall that oppression also occurred there. It will continue in the future.

In contrast to *Al-Hur Arriyah*, we have *Al-Shammar bin Dhi al-Jawashan* who represents the dark side of human beings. The use of black colour and lighting effects accompanies his presence. Like *Al-Hur*, he is also haunted by his inner voice which encourages him to commit sins. In Abdul-Wahid's poetic play, he is elevated to the "tragic villain in Elizabethan drama" as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra rightly says in his introduction to the play. Because of his killing of *Al-Hussein*, *Al-Shammar* is punished by hallucinations and self-tortured.

In the performance when he is asked by a young man if he is 'really trying to meet *Al-Hussein* to kill him again', *Al-Shammar* answers, 'I will kill him a thousand times'".

His answer reveals his instinctive nature of evil. Al-Shammar is not only an ordinary killer but also a tyrant whose head is stained by the blood of his victims. Every day he is pursued by the ghosts of his victims. Like Macbeth, he can't sleep because of his terrible crime. The young man at the end of the performance challenges him, saying

Listen then... If you cut off the neck of the Euphrates and the tops of all the palm trees, O son of Dhi al-Jawshan, then you will have killed Al-Hussein for us. (*Al-Hur Arriyahi*: 158–159)

The tragedy of Hussein was not an ordinary tragedy. It was a religious and social tragedy – a tragedy of deception and evasion of responsibility, treachery and betrayal, thirst and hunger, a living conscience and a dead conscience. Accordingly, it is difficult to reduce it to a single interpretation. In this case, it reflects Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, in which multiple, coexisting voices resist a unified or authoritative meaning. The incorporation of image and sound intensifies this polyphonic structure by layering visual and auditory registers that introduce parallel perspectives and emotional registers. Through multimedia, the performance transforms Bakhtinian polyphony into a sensory experience, allowing conflicting meanings and ethical positions to coexist simultaneously on stage. It was a tragedy of deception and evasion of responsibility, treachery and betrayal, thirst and hunger, a living conscience and a dead conscience. Accordingly, it is hard to reduce it to a single interpretation. In doing so, it reflects Bakhtin's polyphonic view.

Notes

- 1 In the year 680 CE, Hussein, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, was brutally murdered along with his sons and followers on the plains of Karbala in what is now present-day Iraq. For the Shi'a Muslims, Hussein's death is considered the greatest symbolic act of redemption in history, and is to a large degree what distinguishes them from their Sunni brethren. Hussein's passion and suffering have been remembered for the last 1,300 years in the form of an annual observance during the month of Muharram. The manifestation of this paradigmatic ritual varies according to its location and to the degree of influence exerted on it by local religions, cultures, and rituals. From Karbala, the observances spread in many directions-west to what is today south Lebanon, east to Iran, northeast to the Caucasus, and southeast to India. In the 19th century, it was transported to the Caribbean basin, and during the last two decades it has moved north from Trinidad to New York and beyond. For further explanation, see Frank J. Korom and Peter J. Chelkowski, "Community Process and the Performance of Muharram Observances in Trinidad," *TDR* (1988-), Summer, 1994, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer, 1994), p. 151.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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