



Dramatic Elements of “Qanbar’s Elegy” Ritual in Fasa, Iran

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Abstract

Theory of the origin of ritual theater is still the most credible theory on the development of drama in the world. Rituals in terms of function, construction and even implementation are very close to drama, so that at times they cannot be clearly separated. Now the question is that what are the dramatic elements of the “Qanbar’s Elegy” ritual in Fasa, Iran? The present study answered the question by referring to the history of the world and Iran. The rituals are a form of knowledge and a means of recording events and sanctities. Since the Ta’zieh of Qanbar’s Elegy unites the audience, who are also the actors, through a social and creative activity, and equalizes the individual truth of the participants with the cosmic truth, it could have the required elements of play; elements such as location, performers, dramatic movement and the audience. The present research paper has tried to review the dramatic aspects of Qanbar’s Elegy ritual in the city of Fasa in a descriptive analytical way.

Keywords: Ritual, Dramatic Elements, Qanbar’s Elegy, Fasa

Introduction

The first forms of drama in Iran were only rituals, celebrations and dramatic traditions. One of these rituals that is held in honor and sanctity of a religious character and is tied to the sincere faith of the Iranians is Qanbar’s Elegy which is held every year at the time of martyrdom of Imam Ali (PBUH) in the city of Fasa. The ritual is considered a kind of drama according to the way it is performed, the place of performance, the performers (actors), the audience, structure, and other dramatic elements. Therefore the present study tries to show the dramatic elements of Qanbar’s Elegy Ritual. In this regard Qanbar’s Elegy Ritual in the city of Fasa will be examined in a descriptive analytical method to understand its elements of drama through analysis of this ritual.

What is a ritual?

In order to study the origin, nature, and function of a ritual, we need to go back to ancient times. The history of rituals which are a great factor in shaping human culture and the way it is shaped, is very long and assessable. With an overview of the meanings given in *Dehkhoda Dictionary* (vol. 1, p. 231); and the *Persian Dictionary* by Dr. Mohammad Moin

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(vol. 1, p. 112); and *Ghaffari Dictionary*, by Amir Jalal aldin Ghafari (vol. 1, p. 145); and *Amid Persian Dictionary*, by Hossein Amid (vol. 1, p. 49) we can infer the two practical and theoretical aspects of ritual, and finally reach this general meaning that a ritual is a set of regulated traditions which represents an attitude or belief. In simple words we can reverse the above case. In other words, mindset leads to the formation of the behavior, whenever we can understand mind through behavior, that behavior is a ritual.

The Relationship Between Ritual And Drama

Since the most common theory of drama states that it originated from myth and ritual, then we can say rituals were a form of knowledge and a medium to record events, sanctities, customs and history of the people among primitive societies. “A ritual united the audience, who were also the actors, through a social and creative activity, and equalized the individual truth of the participants with the cosmic truth, and released the divine power of the tribe or community. That was in a way that during the oral era, rituals had a comprehensive function and were the most important communication medium. It more or less had the same functions presumed for plays today. Therefore rituals could bring about elements that the future developments of drama



depended on them. These elements include performance place (setting), the performers (actors), dramatic movement, and the audience. It should be noted that the ritual's content had no text, but were refined and adopted in the oral culture of tribes through repetition and continuity of precise traditions" (Barackat, 1363, p. 38). Therefore, the phonetic similarities between *drama* and *dromenon* (meaning ritual) could not be not a coincidence.

A ritual itself is not considered by its nominal aspect but it is considered because of creating a bridge to the eternal aspect and because everything in the performing the ritual involves proper communication with the divine world, therefore any violation not only is rejected but also it is deemed to be blasphemous. This tendency not to violate traditions can still be found in Iranian culture. Therefore many of our modern traditions root in hundred centuries ago, a root that might have lost its necessity at the present time but in ancient times, has guaranteed human survival.

Mullah Mohammad Ismail Matbuei

The late Mullah Mohammad Ismail Matbuei, one of the poets and elegy writers of Fasa, was born in Farvardin 1250 AH (March 1871) in Fedeshkooyeh or the lower neighborhood of Fasa.

His father was a teacher in a Maktabkhaneh. He started his studies under the supervision of his parents in a Maktabkhaneh to learn Quran and Islamic sciences. Due to his skill and acuteness soon he found his own Maktabkhaneh and was therefore called a "Mullah" by the elders. At the age of 30, about 1280 AH, he started to compose poetry, most of which were Ta'zieh and elegy (See Jafari and Soleimanpoor, 1388, 108). Qanbar's Elegy is a version of a Ta'zieh in memory of the martyrdom of Amir al-Mu'minin (The Commander of the Faithful) Imam Ali (PBUH) written by Mullah Mohammad Ismail Matbuei. This Ta'zieh was first performed by himself and has been performed for nearly a century in the city of Fasa. It's still performed.

Location And Stage Decoration

In the city of Fasa (in Fars province, 145km southeast of Shiraz) in addition to the mourning and memorial ceremonies in mosques and hei'ats from about a century ago, Qanbar's Elegy ritual was held in most of the famous religious site and mosques

such as the mosque of *Goldasteh* (minaret), the mosque of *Howze Mahi* (fish pond), the *Shirazis* mosque, the mosque of *Haji Sadeghi* in bazaar and other places, and in the years after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, in the Friday Prayer's Mosque (Musalla) every year during the times of Imam Ali (PBUH) martyrdom, from 19th to 23rd of Ramadan, and especially on 21st of Ramadan. The concept of location in Qanbar's Elegy ritual is a concept that can offer a definition of location in all traditional forms of drama in Iran. The nature of this tradition, which has been associated with blending imagination and reality and was away from naturalistic practices, will well meet the needs of performance and participants in the ritual with its own style of dialogue and performance. This is a neutral atmosphere (mosques, hei'ats, Tekyes of Fasa), an atmosphere-less atmosphere, that does not indicate a specific location. The line between actors and participants in the ritual and dramatic atmosphere can also continually change and break. The participants in the rituals freely sit and watch the ritual and they can easily come and go. Maybe the setting of Qanbar's Elegy ritual can be a good example for the *Central Setting* that Edward Gordon Craig emphasized in his designs. This is a naked scene with no decor that does not induce any specific historical time or geographical location. It is a scene where there is no screen between it and the participants in this ritual. It is a scene that has no special light and sound effects, and in short it is a general scene in which location is everywhere and time that is eternal. The very lack of decor and nakedness of the scenes, enables the actors to arrange for the participation of the audience in the ritual, and using codes, symbols, imagination and already accepted contracts, take a full advantage of this type of setting so that the participants of the ceremony get involved in a kind of ritual thinking. Another point is the impact of decoration and objects around the performance that find an existential necessity in the Qanbar's Elegy ritual. These objects include pulpit, altar, mohr, prayer rug and etc. Although these are not part of the stage and decoration, but they somehow play an important role in the atmosphere of Mullah Mohammad Ismail Matbuei's Qanbar's Elegy. As Adolphe Appia mentions they have influenced the nature, soul, and even form of the story. In the interviews with the actor of Qanbar role it was pointed out that



before the Islamic Revolution that the ritual was held on 23rd of Ramadan a symbolic coffin was used for Imam Ali’s funeral which was taken by the participants to the streets of the city, even a tray full of barley bread and milk was part of the scene, too.

Time

Dramatic arts flow in a context of time and place. The creation of time for the play is directly related to the thoughts of the performers for compliance or noncompliance to its limits and boundaries. In ritual ceremonies, time is subject to certain contractual principles. These contracts govern the relationship between real-time and time of performance. In fact, creating time illusion in Qanbar’s Elegy ritual, is influenced by the Iranian-Islamic ideas about time and imaginative forms in Iranian art. In Iranian art imagination easily passes physical matters and picture a world that is full of liberation from material limitations and creates a time that has all the times in itself, a moving from one time to another and from a moment to eternity is easily possible in it. This has made the participants in the Qanbar’s Elegy ritual make contact with the martyrdom of Imam Ali (PBUH) every year during days of martyrdom of Imam Ali (PBUH) in 19th-23rd of Ramadan, especially on 21st of Ramadan, the day of martyrdom of Imam Ali (PBUH).

Text (dialogue)

Before Imam Ali (PBUH) was wounded by the accursed Ibn Moljam Moradi, Qanbar leaves the city to visit his relatives with the permission of Imam Ali (PBUH). But it does not take a long time that he becomes impatient and worried because of being far from his master, so he immediately returns to the city of Kufa which coincides with the time that Imam Ali (PBUH) is wounded. Upon entering the city of Kufa and going to the house of Imam Ali (PBUH) Qanbar notices that the people in all parts of the city have gathered together and shed tears of sorrow. He asks for the reason of their grief. They tell him “Where were you Qanbar? Did you know that our Lord and Master Imam Ali (PBUH) was wounded in the head by Ibn Moljam Moradi and now is in bed and doctors have been unable to treat him?” Hearing this bad heart-rending news, mourning Qanbar moves toward the

house of Imam Ali (PBUH) with a plaintive and tearful face. He reaches there while he is full of grief. Actually, “Qanbar’s Elegy” starts from this point and Mullah Mohammad Ismail Matbuei talks about it in his version of Qanbar’s Elegy ritual and writes the dialogues between Imam Ali (PBUH) and Qanbar.

Characters

The actors in this ritual have two aspects of form and character. Thus, according to a specified contract, any physical characteristics of the actors can actually represent their inner character and nature. Signs in clothing, colors, objects that people carry, manner of expression, voice and gestures, movements, facial expression and even dialogues of the actors, all easily introduce the inner traits and character of the actors. It must be said that the simplicity of the characters in this ceremony complies with the general form of rituals. Although the inner structure of characters in this ritual is simple and far from the complexity of inner personalities in Western plays, the presence of exaggeration and emphasis in the outer layer of these characters is apparent in all aspects, so that it influences the visual effects of the show. The movements and behavior of actors, their clothing and makeup, and everything that makes the appearance of the character, have a kind of exaggeration. This very feature is effective in accentuating the character in the matter of thoughts, feelings, affections, emotions and motivations, and largely makes the character tangible and familiar. The characters of Qanbar’s Elegy ritual are as follows.

The character of Imam Ali (PBUH)

The person who plays the role of Imam must have a kind, white, bright face, with white beard, and be a virtues man who is well-reputed in the community and people praise him. “Of course, if the role is placed by a clerical sayed or one of great sayeds of the city, it will contribute to the faith and beauty of this Elegy” (Matbuei, 1391, 37).

The character of Qanbar

The person who plays the role of Qanbar should if possible be tall, swarthy and husky.

The character of the panegyrist

This character who is originally a assistant for the characters of Qanbar and Imam should have useful



experience and enough skill in handling a Ta'zieh and especially in eulogy. At the end of the elegy, he should encourage the audience for mourning and finish the ceremony in a proper way by singing eulogies for mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Ali (PBUH).

Acting

Since the actor is the most important option in transferring personal traits of Qanbar's Elegy ritual, this ritual, with its own characteristics, has evolved in such a way that the actor will matter more seriously. In a place that has no array or artificial light or sound to fill the atmosphere, in a naked scene full of simplicity, and at a time of no time, the actor becomes everything, therefore the actor must have considerable capabilities from technical and physical abilities to good and acceptable traits and manners. Over a century, veteran actors in each step taught something to the students of Qanbar's Elegy ritual, so that there be somebody to fill their place over time. In many cases, this art was inherited in families, and sons followed their fathers' steps so that the roots of Qanbar's Elegy ritual never die in the city of Fasa (For further information, see *Qanbar's Elegy* by Masood Matbuei). The point in this ritual that makes the participants accompany it is the kind of action that the actor is performing. The participants in this ritual are familiar with the entire story told the ritual, therefore what associates the participants with Qanbar's Elegy ritual is the type and manner of behavior or action that the actor has.

Acting in Qanbar's Elegy ritual has the following features:

- Acting is associated with a kind of hyperbole, exaggeration and emphasis in speech, gestures and emotions.
- In many cases the objects, light, decor, etc. are induced through performance and speech by creating a mental pictures; their external and objective reality are not very important.
- Shifts in time and place can be made as a contract in performance and movement because of the form of stage.
- Actors can leap in time and place.

- In this ritual the gestures and actions are often performed with emphasis and exaggeration.
- Speech and discourse are exaggerated and form with singing, declamation and exaggerated voice.
- In some cases, the style of performance is framed or explanatory.
- Using performance during performance or action during acting is possible.
- Imitative acting has a historical background among the actors in this ritual.

Separation from roles happens at the end of Elegy when the panegyrist asks the participants to stand up and mourn for the martyrdom of Imam Ali (PBUH) is.

Clothing And Objects

In Qanbar's Elegy ritual, the clothing of the characters are fixed based on the roles and special contracts, so that the participants in the ceremony quickly receive certain information upon seeing the actors. The information leads to the identification of the role, and even inner behavioral and traits if the character. It is better that the Imam actor wear a robe, black turban, and a white shirt with a green scarf around the neck or waist. Qanbar should also wear a long white dress like Arabic long clothes and a white skullcap with a Kashkool on one hand and a Tabarzin (see 10.2) on the other. The panegyrist should wear black as a sign of mourning. It should be noted that, at the time of development of a show, actors found their objects in some ways, and that particular object becomes a part of the show over time, so that it would be difficult to imagine the character without it. During the evolution of Qanbar's Elegy ritual the only object that could always stay with Qanbar's character in over a century, was the Tabarzin and Kashkool that is brown. It is a small symbolic object and a sign of beauty of devotion and courage of lovers and servants of Imam Ali (PBUH).

Kashkool

The word refers to a kind of container that is made of the fruit skin of a tree like coconut that is found in the forests of India and Africa. Sometimes it is also made of metals and poultry and itinerant Sufis hang it over their shoulder or their arm (Matbuei,



1391, 38). During this ritual, according to what is said about the participants, they sometimes put their vows in the Kashkool of Qanbar and some poor but respectable people only put their empty hands in the Kashkooli as a sign of putting money inside it.

Tabarzin

This word refers to a type of small two head axe with an iron handle that was put in front of the saddles while riding and was used as a weapon to fight face to face with the enemy (Matbuei, 1391, 38)

Words And Music

About the relationship between words and music, Mohammad Taghi Masoudieh says “The relationship between words and music is based on both content and structure. In the first case it is tried to study the relationship between content and melody; and in the second, structural relationship include: (1) the integration of music with poetic forms (rhyme, sequences, combinations and refrain) (2) Blending music with poetic rhythms (longness and shortness of syllables, number of syllable and pauses). (3) The relationship between music and the pitch of the syllables and intonation” (Masoudieh, 1356, p. 62). Words in Qanbar’s Elegy ritual are expressed in poetry and rhythmic speech. Therefore each character has a specific expression pattern in accordance with their role. This gives the characters an individuality i.e. it describes the specific desires, feelings and thoughts of each character and distinct them in terms of physical, social, psychological and other traits, using vocabulary and expressive characteristics, from other characters. These patterns and practices make the participants accompany the sense of grief and the course of happening events – martyrdom of Imam Ali (PBUH) – with wailing, lamentation, and mourning.

Makeup

Much of our information about the makeup in Iran, is about the rituals and traditions of ancient drama that were run until recently in many parts of the country. Makeup in Qanbar’s Elegy ritual is for highlighting the face of the actor and emphasizing the character. Also makeup in this ritual can have a metaphorical and symbolic function and be the

cause to identify the character and give some information about the characters to the participants. Especially with blackening the face of Qanbar and transferring the character of Qanbar.

Structure

With a closer look, perhaps we can say that there is a special structural model for performing Qanbar’s Elegy ritual. The model presented here, in fact, represents the structure of an Iranian play, which has three *preliminary*, *main* and *final* parts, each of which has its own special features. At the *preliminary* part the character of Qanbar reads a quatrain that binds the heart and soul of the participants in this ritual to the ceremony. He continues with reading poems in praise of Imam Ali (PBUH) by his nice-sounding voice. It should be noted that the panegyrist should avoid reading long poems at the beginning of the ceremony since it will bore the participants. The *main* part of the show that is actually the start of this ritual ceremony begins with reading panegyrics and requiems, which address Imam Ali (PBUH) (actually Imam and his family). He says: *My Lord, dear Ali*

I said the name of God with your sweet name

You are Ali, there is no one like you, I swear by God,

They ask me about your power, and I say

There is no power but from God

(Matbuei, 1391, 63)

It continues with other poems with a music (in Dastgāh-e Šur) by Qanbar and accompaniment of the audience who repeat at the end of each paragraph and address the Imam “*Nade Alian Aian Ya Ali*” (Call Ali, Call Ali, Oh Ali) with the rhythm of “*Mofta’alon Mofta’alon Mofta’al*” with Qanbar.

Until finally they reach the end of the dialogue between Qanbar and Imam Ali (PBUH) which is actually the end of Qanbar’s Elegy. Here the *final* part of this dramatic ritual forms and at this moment the panegyrist invites the participants to stand up in honor of Imam Ali (AS) and start mourning and lamentations

Audience

The word spectators may not be a full and expressive word for the audience that watch the Iranian rituals, because they are not only passive



and silent observers. In the process of communication during performance, the audience give a good feedback and have an exemplary conformity with the ritual. Certainly the competence of the audience and the performing team and their readiness to accept a deep and pervasive communications is essential, so that some experts like Peter Chelkowski refer to the audience of the Qanbar's Elegy ritual as *spectator-actors* which indicates the importance of public participation in the structure and representation of the plays. In this ritual people considered tearing during lamentation and mourning as *Thawab* (divine reward), the actors also made them cry and as people sympathized with the heroes in Ta'zieh, they did the same in this ritual, too. During the ritual they would pray, mourn, tear, wail, and give financial donations for their forgiveness and penitence. It should be noted that these offerings and donations were used to help those in need.

Result

Every ritual is basically for taking the attention of those who it is performed for. So all the conceptual and emotional impacts of such play depend on the realization of this idea. Consciousness of the artists and their potential to use all the facilities provided are essential. Vigilance, appropriate handling of the

ceremony, and coordination between the dramatic elements are the appropriate steps to achieve the objectives of the actors. The trick in all rituals is the familiar pain, sensitivity and vigilance of the unknown artists in these shows. Qanbar's Elegy ritual that is held to commemorate and consecrate the first martyr of the sanctuary, Imam Ali (PBUH), is performed in a symbolic time (martyrdom of Imam Ali (PBUH)) and symbolic place (mosques, he'ats, tekyes, Musalla). Due to the importance of its dramatic aspect, this ritual required elements of play, such as location, performers, dramatic movement, audience, etc. in order to reach its goal which is purification of the actors and participants in this sacred ritual.

Note

In a division among different arts, some arts only flow in time, such as poetry, music, and story. Some art only flow in place such as painting, sculpture and architecture. And finally, a number of others flow in time and place such as plays, movies, and dances. The first category are called Phonetic Arts, the second category are plastic arts and the third category are called dramatic arts.

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