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The identity of the puppet and multiculturalism

An analysis of the Iranian puppet show *Simin and Farzan*

When I think about my identity as an Iranian, I ponder to what extent nationalism, religion and even ethnicism and ethnonationalism have been mixed with my own identity as a person and as an artist who wants to create; to what extent my society's thoughts (and also my own) about my identity have influenced my art; and even to what extent society pushes me as an artist to create, based on societally accepted components of identity. As an artist active in theatre and puppet theatre, I am expected to reflect elements of my Iranian culture in my work; if there were no trace of it, I would somehow not be an artist committed to the identity values and cultural legacy of my society. The question is: What is artistic identity in contemporary art? In these days of hybrid identities and multiculturalism, I believe that it is meaningless to resist cross-cultural views, especially in the field of art and, here more specifically, in puppetry.

What I find thought-provoking about puppetry is where the identity of the puppet comes from. Just what is the definition of ›puppet identity‹ in contemporary puppetry, and is it limited to a specific place, time and person? It seems today, in this global village of ours, that the national, indigenous and even ideological point of view on puppetry is no longer controversial, and is at the very least not the only definition of identity for a puppet. Traditionally, the appearance, form and techniques of puppets reveal their identity directly. For instance, there is ›Mobarak‹, the black puppet with just two strings and a voice produced by ›swazzle‹ (›Safir‹), who is the main character of the traditional Iranian puppet play *Kheimeh Shab Bazi*; then there is ›Karagöz‹, the colourful, hunchbacked puppet of traditional shadow plays in Turkey. But in contemporary puppetry, with

its hybridity and crossing of cultures, boundaries and forms, how can we talk about the identity of a puppet? It seems that the identity of puppets has changed fundamentally since the Second World War. Some boundaries have disappeared, being made redundant by issues such as immigration, refugees, an attraction to Eastern rituals and traditions, and rediscovering indigenous forms of performance. Post-colonial discourses have flourished in this period; as Mark Fortier has argued: »One facet of post-colonial work is to challenge the canon of western art, a challenge which takes myriad forms, from outright rejection to re-appropriation and reformulation« (Fortier 2005: 194). New theories on puppet theatre and performing objects have also become relevant.

Here, a dogmatic point of view might suggest that conserving the identity of an artwork necessitates taking its national, ethnonational and ideological identity into consideration, inasmuch as its form and content have been determined by its creator. The origins of this notion are debatable. In Iranian culture, we can say that the expectation that Iranian artworks should express a specifically Iranian cultural identity has its roots in Westernophobia dating back to the 1960s, mostly in leftist and Marxist discourse. When orientalists began engaging with Iran of the Safavid and Qajar eras (from the 16th to the 19th centuries), features of Western culture entered Eastern culture. As Edward Said has written, the result of this was that

> Europe (the West, the ›self‹) is seen as being essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, authentic, active, creative, and masculine, while the Orient (the East, the ›other‹) (a sort of surrogate, underground version of the West or the ›self‹) is seen as being irrational, aberrant, backward, crude, despotic, inferior, inauthentic, passive, feminine and sexually corrupt. (Macfie 2002: 8)

Some thinkers with a postcolonial perspective opposed Westernisation and Western cultural hegemony, which in an inaccurate, inverted form resulted in a kind of excessive Iranisation in all types of arts. Sometimes it seems as if the elements that make up the cultural identity of an artwork, or that are represented in an artwork, are internalised

and only indirectly revealed in the artwork. And sometimes the artwork makes its own way, separating itself from its creator and his or her cultural contexts.

In this article, I intend to study the interwoven, hybrid identity of an artwork – which in the present case is puppet theatre – and shall argue for the multicultural and hybrid functions of this art form. I shall also discuss the issues that effect this active hybridity (as Homi Bhabha states in his book *The Location of Culture*). As Mark Fortier has written,

> The East is not essentially anti-rational any more than the West is inherently rational, and any particular subject position in a world as variable as our own will call for the bringing together of disparate elements in new and unexpected ways. (Fortier 2005: 196)

I also prefer to consider all aspects of postcolonial discourses in seeking answers as to how an Eastern puppet artist might consider, rediscover and reinvent traditional puppetry forms, and apply and internalise imported, new forms to create a new, active, hybrid identity while also protecting their original identity and self-validation in terms of postcolonial and neo-colonial discourses.

In this regard, I here refer to a critical discussion held after the puppet show *Simin and Farzan* (directed by Fahimeh Abedini and Sadeq Sadeqipour of the Maahee Theatre Group) in the City Theatre Complex of Tehran in spring 2019. Most of the attendees belonged to the audience who had just come to see a show, and did not have any idea about the performing techniques employed in it. After a while, some of those in audience tried to participate in the discussions, and declared that they did not know about these so-called Iranian traditional puppetry techniques – whereas the performing technique in question was not Iranian at all! I found this question very significant: What had caused this notion in the audience's mind? And what factors had afforded a new identity to that puppet performance?

Now I shall attempt to analyse the different elements of this performance in terms of form and content, to study its new identity and the multicultural meaning of this product of our era of hybridity and

globalisation. I shall analyse three aspects of the performance: its story, its performing technique, and its appearance.

The story

The plot of *Simin and Farzan* is a very close adaptation of *Ruslan and Ludmila*, a narrative poem by Alexander Pushkin, the Russian Romantic writer (1799–1837). Apart from the Iranian names of characters and places, all the events and conflicts in the plot are generally faithful to Pushkin. But the original story itself seems to be very Oriental. We know that Pushkin began writing his poem in 1817 and based it on Russian folktales he had heard as a child. But many writers and poets were influenced by Oriental culture and by studies of the Orient in the post-Enlightenment era at the close of the 18th century. According to A. L. Macfie in his book *Orientalism*:

> In Russia, a country deeply involved from earliest times with the Orient, where oriental languages had been taught to interpreters in the period of Catherine the Great, a chair of oriental languages was established at Moscow University in 1804, and a department of oriental languages at the Russian Academy of Sciences. (Macfie 2002: 40)

And »Russian scholars, responsible for the creation of effective departments of oriental studies, in particular Arabic, Persian and Turkish, at Russian universities« wrote »Arabic and Persian manuals, used in Russian universities until the end of the nineteenth century« (ibid.: 41).

We can thus imagine that Eastern literature might well have exerted an impact on Russian writers.

One-thousand-and-one nights was one of the books that impressed Pushkin the most. This famous book bears ample witness to Eastern/Islamic culture over six consecutive centuries, and had a great impact on European writers and poets, especially the Romantics of the 18th and 19th centuries. According to a paper by Fatemeh Aali entitled »Comparing one thousand and one nights with Pushkin's Ruslan and

Ludmila«, we can trace this inspiration in some of Pushkin's works such as *Ruslan and Ludmila*, *The Egyptian Nights*, *Angelo*, and the two poems *The moon shines* and *The evil eye*. It seems that the Eastern influence in the narrative poem *Ruslan and Ludmila* is deeper than in other works by Pushkin, and that it has a narrative structure comparable to that of the *One-thousand-and-one nights*.

The story is that of Ludmila, the daughter of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, who was abducted at her wedding ceremony by an evil sorcerer, after which the brave knight Ruslan (the groom) tries to find her and rescue her. According to Aali, Ruslan and Ludmila is similar in structure to the story of Abu Mohammad Kaslan in *One-thousand-and-one nights*. In the story of Abu Kaslan, his bride, the daughter of one of the city nobles, is abducted by a Jinn on her wedding night. There are adventurous, magical factors that play a great role in both stories. In each case, the groom sets out on a long, adventurous journey to find his bride.

There is no doubt that the stories of *One-thousand-and-one nights* were Pushkin's initial source when writing *Ruslan and Ludmila*, nor that the main story line has been borrowed from the adventures of Abu Kaslan – though Pushkin adds several other adventures that seem to refer to another story from the collection, entitled *Hassan of Basra* (cf. Aali 2013: 3).

This influence is not confined to the topic of *Ruslan and Ludmila*, but also encompasses its form and structure. Just like the stories of *One-thousand-and-one nights*, *Ruslan and Ludmila* also has a main story and numerous subsidiary stories that branch out from the main one. It also begins in a state of tranquillity before progressing through conflict and adventures to return at the end to the calm and tranquillity of the opening, just like the *One-thousand-and-one nights*. This narrative poem is also filled with love, adventure, fights, magic, spells, Jinns and sorcerers. These elements combine ›reality‹ and ›imagery‹, and the writer's imagination takes the reader into the world of Russian literature and fantastic Eastern legends.

The plot of the show, its narrative techniques, dilemmas and conflicts are thus a combination of Russian, Persian and Arabic literature that cannot be separated; it accordingly seems as if we are watching a show based on a contemporary telling of an old Iranian tale.

The performing technique

The performing technique used in the show is paper theatre, the two-dimensional technique employed in 19th-century, Victorian era in England and also in several European countries. »Toy theatre, also known as paper theatre, model theatre and juvenile drama, is a technique that involves the manipulation of paper characters« (Lecucq 2011/ Cohen 2014), and did not exist in Iran until 2005, and no one knows about this technique as a classical form of performing. In that year, the French puppet artist Alain Lecucq (a master of paper theatre and the owner of the Papierthéâtre Company) was invited to hold a paper theatre workshop at the 8th International Student Puppet Festival in Tehran. At first, there was opposition to any acceptance of this technique as an expressive, professional form of puppetry. Iranian puppeteers were used to performing with three-dimensional techniques, and the only two-dimensional form that was accepted was shadow puppetry. But with support from UNIMA (the Union Internationale de la Marionnette) in Iran (UNIMA-Iran or Mobarak UNIMA) and from educational centres such as Kanoon (the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults), Lecucq gave workshops in many different venues ranging from the University of Tehran to small, faraway towns in the country). His subsequent support also enabled paper theatre companies in Iran to perform at his paper theatre festival in France. As a result of these activities, paper theatre flourished in Iran and became a favourite technique for many Iranian puppeteers, who performed for both children and adult audiences. Lecucq travelled to Iran many times. His wife was also Iranian, and with her help he became better acquainted with Iranian culture and encouraged local students to utilise his techniques to perform their own dramatic literature.

The reason for this gradual acceptance of paper theatre can perhaps be found in the narrative traditions of illustrative storytelling in Iran such as ›pardeh-khani‹, which is a form of ›naqqali‹, a centuries-old storytelling tradition. ›Pardeh-khani‹ means reading from a screen; the ›pardeh‹ (screen) is a movable painting, showing a representation of a religious or epic story (mostly from the mediaeval epic poem

›Shahnameh‹), which is told by the ›pardeh khan‹ or narrator, who points to the vivid, colourful images on the ›pardeh‹ during his performance. These large images were traditionally on easily portable screens that allowed the ›pardeh khan‹ to move from one location to the next, be it a street corner or a coffeehouse (a ›ghahve khane‹), which in Iranian history were social hubs and centres for the performing arts.

Appearance

Iranian puppet and set design were directly adapted from lithographic images of the Qajar era (the Persian dynasty of 1789–1925). The first lithographic printing press was brought to Iran in 1821 from Tbilisi (Georgia) on the orders of the Crown Prince, Abbās Mirzā (cf. Shcheglova 2009). We know that a lithographic printing press began operating in Tbriz in 1832–1833. The earliest extant books printed with this technique are a ›Qur'an‹ dated 1832–1833 and the ›Zād al-ma'ād‹ of Majlesi of 1836 (cf. ibid.).

Ulrich Marzolph, a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Göttingen, wrote in an article entitled »Lithographic Illustrations of the Qajar Period as a Source of Inspiration for Contemporary Iranian Art« that it was during the Qajar era that Iranian artists began to create art not just for royalty but for ordinary people too. Lithography accordingly played a major role in raising the awareness of the masses. Due to the interaction of Iran and the West and the process of Westernisation during the Qajar period, innovative ways of thinking emerged among Iranians, who adapted the Western knowledge they acquired in order to create art forms in line with Iranian painting traditions.

Early in the 19th century, Iran became one of the most important regions in the Muslim world where printing was established as a continuous cultural practice, and lithography remained a widely used printing technique there for more than a century. In fact, for almost two decades between 1856 and 1874 it was the only printing technique in use, and it continued to be employed until the mid-20th century.

> Lithographic printing held several advantages in contrast to printing in movable type. First, the equipment was simple, readily available, considerably cheap and easy to manage. Second, lithographic printing constituted a smooth continuation of the previous technique of producing books as manuscripts, particularly in terms of the aesthetic impact of the calligraphy. And third, printers soon realized that in lithographic printing, it was possible to produce both text and graphic adornment, whether illumination or illustration, in one and the same technique. (Marzolph 2011b: 125)

The first illustrated, lithographed book published in Iran was the 1843 edition of *Maktabi's Leili and Majnun*, the classic poem by the Iranian poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209) (cf. Marzolph 2011a: 41). Several years later, many different types of lithographic books began to be illustrated, which Marzolph has categorised in three types depending on their subject: Persian classical literature, religious literature, and Romantic epics and folk stories.

Lithography was also employed to provide realistic illustrations for scientific, educational and historical books, along with travelogues and translations of Western books. It was considered a sign of modernisation and industrialisation. Nevertheless, before the research carried out by mostly Western scholars like Marzolph, lithography had been long neglected on account of being deemed a popular, non-artistic technique when compared with Iranian miniature painting and ›ghahve khane‹ paintings. Lithographic illustrations were not considered as artworks, but as mere realistic illustrations by anonymous artists. Marzolph rediscovered them in books, categorised and analysed them, and his re-evaluation of them in turn attracted the attention of Iranian visual arts scholars.

For the performance in question, the book *Narrative illustration in Persian lithographed books* was used as a main source for designing and making the puppets and the stage scenery. The positions adopted by the musicians and actors were similarly influenced by the framing styles of these illustrations. The lithographic images also influenced the typography, the style of drawing and painting, the black and white illustrations, the style of architecture, perspective, figures, postures and even the articulation and moving style of the puppets.

Conclusion

A puppet performance is a multicultural, hybrid product that can attain a new identity using cross-cultural components. In contemporary puppetry, a puppet is just a puppet, belonging to its own world beyond borders and geographical features. Pushkin, Marzolph and Lecucq, three artists from three different times, places, fields of art, and cultural contexts, all influenced an Iranian contemporary puppetry group in its endeavour to create a new identity for its artwork in a different geographical context.

Using paper theatre offers a good example of authentic appropriation; it is in itself an entirely European technique that has here been combined with an adapted Russian/Arabian/Iranian story and traditional Iranian images. This hybridity even made the audience believe that the performance in question was of an Iranian post-traditional artwork!

In my opinion, *Simin and Farzan* also offers an instance of what I seek in the identity of the puppet; it is a cross-cultural work of art whose aesthetic is situated in post-traditional Iranian theatre, but in which we can observe hybridity in its every aspect, even in its genre (is it epic, romantic, tragedy or comedy?). It has a kind of multi-genre structure in terms of its plot and narrative. It is a sad, romantic story with villains and malevolent acts, spells and magic, but at the same time it is comic in performance. It endeavours to defamiliarise the classical form of toy theatre by thinking outside its classical ›box‹, using shadows, and through the acting and communication of two actors/manipulators and two musicians with the puppets, themselves and the audience. This is an act of deconstruction both in narrativity and in performing technique.

We cannot suggest exact paradigms for puppet identity in today's Iranian puppetry. But apart from traditional, well-known forms (like ›Kheimeh shab bazi‹), we can here describe three different paradigms. Some directors avoid applying any components of Iranian culture (in terms of form and content) in their puppet theatre; some occasionally emphasise both timelessness and placelessness and simultaneously try to inject layers of Eastern or Iranian cultural elements (in

terms of aesthetic, technique, and narrative) that can serve as points of identification for Iranian audiences and also when performing at international festivals. Then there is a third paradigm: using Iranian cultural criteria (in narrative, the appearance of the puppets and the scenography) in the context of imported Western techniques. The most prominent example of this is Behrouz Gharibpor's marionette operas based on Iranian classical literature, which feature a national identity with Western artistic techniques, and have been well-received by both Iranian and international audiences.

Finally, I believe that in these studies of puppet identity we must focus on the audience, which is an essential part of any artistic performance. Why are we performing, and for whom? Who is our target audience? Is it a ›self‹-audience, or and audience of ›others‹? Is it for domestic consumption, for international attention, or even both (either intentionally or unintentionally)? The puppet identity is a relative concept that can sometimes refer to the spectators and the context in which the performance is viewed. For me, it is still a matter of open discussion in terms of post-colonial discourses.

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Show

Fahimeh Abedini/Sadeq Sadeqipour/Maahee Theatre Group (2019): *Simin and Farzan*, City Theatre Complex, Tehran.

Redaktion und Druck wurden unterstützt durch die
Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften,
die Philosophisch-historische Fakultät der Universität Bern und
das Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der Universität Bern

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