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## THEATRE TRANSLATION IN IRAN: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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### Abstract

In this paper, we provide a critical overview of the crucial role played by translation in the emergence and formation of Western-style theatre in Iran and its relevance to the sociopolitical conditions within Iranian society, from its early years in the Qajar era (1869) to the revolution period (1979). The influence of Western culture grew rapidly in the country, and theatrical productions during the reign of the Qajar kings constituted the first efforts to transfer a considerable body of Western plays into Persian. Free translation or adaptation marked the beginning of the arrival of Western theatre in Iran to meet the needs of the audience. The establishment of the constitutional revolution (1945) and the National Theatre (1950) were most strikingly characterised by their strict adherence to original content. Since the 1950s, translated plays have become popular and Persian plays have adopted Western styles. Influential practitioners (mostly translators and directors) studied in Europe, focusing on the sociopolitical enlightenment, and devising modern performance modes.

**Keywords:** Theatre Translation. Iran. Historical overview. 1979 Revolution

### Resumen

En este artículo, ofrecemos una visión crítica del papel crucial que desempeñó la traducción en la aparición y formación del teatro de estilo occidental en Irán, así como su relevancia en las condiciones sociopolíticas de la sociedad iraní, desde sus inicios en la era Qajar (1869) hasta el período de la revolución (1979). La influencia de la cultura occidental creció rápidamente en el país, y las producciones teatrales



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durante el reinado de los monarcas Qajar representaron los primeros intentos de trasladar un considerable número de obras occidentales al persa. La traducción libre o la adaptación marcaron el comienzo de la llegada del teatro occidental a Irán para satisfacer las necesidades del público. El establecimiento de la Revolución Constitucional (1945) y el Teatro Nacional (1950) se caracterizó notablemente por una estricta fidelidad al contenido original. Desde la década de 1950, las obras traducidas se han vuelto populares y las piezas persas han adoptado estilos occidentales. Los profesionales influyentes (principalmente traductores y directores) estudiaron en Europa, enfocándose en la concienciación sociopolítica y en la creación de modos de representación modernos.

**Palabras clave:** Traducción teatral, Irán, Panorama histórico, Revolución de 1979.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, dramatic literature in Iran has undergone a significant transformation, a sit went through several stages of development, from ritual performances (*Naqqali*, *Ta'ziyeh*, *Ruhawzi*, and *Taqlid*)<sup>1</sup> to Western-style theatre. The transition from traditional to modern theatre was challenging due to religious and ideological reasons (Malekpour 1984a). The growth of political and social awareness contributed to the emergence of modern drama, while modern theatre in Iran has also been shaped by the country's unique cultural and historical experiences. The development of modern theatre to Iran happened gradually and was preceded by much

1. *Naqqali* (narration) is a form of dramatic storytelling, which dates back to the Parthian Gusar(s). An 'epic declamation' consists of the narration of an event or story through prose or verse, using dramatic movements and gestures in the presence of the audience

*Ta'ziyeh* (mourning) refers to the dramatic performances associated with Ashura ceremonies, the annual mourning rituals commemorating the martyrdom of the Shiite saint, Hussein, and the male members of his family.

*Ruhawzi* is a comic type of traditional folk musical drama in Iran, often characterized by improvised funny remarks with social and/or cultural overtones and usually performed by professionals at ceremonies and festivities such as weddings and circumcision celebrations.

*Taqlid* (imitating) originates in the musical plays of pre-Islamic traveling and court entertainers, known after Islam as *motreb(s)* (entertainers), who performed musical dance and song routines, spiced up by mimicking regional dialects and character traits of various professions.

preparation, but ultimately drew its form and content from translations of European and American plays (Zahedi 2010). The encounter with the West, the formation and arrival of modern ideas through translation, and the rise of newspapers in Iran helped intellectuals become more familiar with the theatre and use it as a means of communication and criticism (Malekpoor 1984a).

The existing literature on theatre in Iran is mostly confined to investigating the history of rituals and performance traditions (Gaffary 1984; Kiani 1984; Emami 1987; Floor 2005; Filippini 2015; Kazemimojaveri 2016; Dayani 2018). The importance of theatre translation in Iran is acknowledged (Bozorgmehr 2000) but only superficially, as evidence seems sparse and fragmentary. Regarding research on the emergence of new genres in the country, Farrokhnia & Buryazadeh (2013) address the main factor in the rise of the novel in Iran, namely the translation movement. Ahmadi (2015) studied the history of the emergence of video games from the Western world in Iran during the Iran-Iraq War in the early 1980s. Turdiyeva (2016) explored the history of the short story in Persian literature and its characteristics in the pre- and post-Islamic revolution. After some initial attention (Cook 1949; Allworth 1983), in recent years, important additions to international scholarship on the topic of theatre and theatre translation began to emerge (Fischer-Lichte 2002; Gitre 2011; Brodie 2012; Peghinelli 2012; Chan 2015; Li 2022).

Against this backdrop, this paper provides an overview of the history of theatre translation as an independent genre aiming to depict the emergence and growth of this field from its early years to the present time. This study seeks to provide insights into significant advancements in the field of theatre translation in Iran, hoping that the study of its history may bring a better understanding of its present state and may help in the future life of an inherited repertoire of plays, as each one is transformed for new audiences.

## 2. Methodology

This essay adopts a historical approach that aligns with the framework articulated by Špiláčková (2012) which involves tracing the origins, evolution, and current status of the subject matter under investigation. Drawing

upon F. N. Kerlinger's definition (1973), this methodology revolves around critically scrutinizing past events, developments, and experiences. This involves the examination of historical testimonies while evaluating their validity as information sources. According to Danto (2008), there are four categories of sources for historical information, namely primary sources found in archives, secondary sources authored by historians, official records from diverse institutions, and private materials such as memoirs, diaries, and oral history records. By employing this comprehensive approach, this essay aims to construct a narrative that not only recounts historical events but also evaluates the reliability and significance of the sources shaping our understanding of the past.

### 3. Qajar Dynasty: A New Beginning (1848-1925)

After Mohammad Shah Qajar's death in 1848, Naser-alDin Mirza (1848-1896) inherited the throne and was enthusiastic about European culture. Amir Kabir, the First Minister, took advantage of the king's interest in Western improvements and initiated fundamental changes in the educational system. On his trips to Europe, Nasir-alDin Shah attended theatrical productions and reported on his observations in a travel account called 'Naseri's Travelog'. After watching plays in Europe, he arranged for plays, pantomimes, and musical performances to be staged in the Interior Private Precincts (Andarun) of his palace in Tehran. Later, he ordered a playhouse to be constructed at Dar al-Fonun.<sup>2</sup>

The first acquaintance of Iranians with Western plays was through attending plays on Western stages (both in Western languages and in translations). After Naser-alDin Shah, other Iranians published their observations on theatre in the West in the form of reports, travel accounts, biographies, and newspaper articles. These observations resulted in the creation of an official theatre, Dar al-Fonun, Dar al-Talif,<sup>3</sup> and Dar al-Tarjemeh<sup>4</sup> in charge of the translation of literary and dramatic texts. (Malekpoor 1984a). The reports which started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were represented in documents

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2. (lit., "Polytechnic college"), The oldest Western-style college.

3. Writing Agency.

4. Translation school.

including *Rouznameh-i-vaqa-yilttifaqiyeh* [Newspaper of Current Affairs], *Rah-i-Talebi* or the travel book of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, travel accounts by Mirza Saleh Shirzai, Mirza Massoud, Hossein Khan Ajodanbashi, Ibrahim Sahafbash, the *Akhtar* newspaper and a *The law* newspaper (Emami 1987).

As Emami (1987) notes, the death of Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov (1829), the Russian Minister in Iran, led some people to go to Saint Petersburg to apologize on behalf of the Shah. One of those people was Mirza Mustafa Afshar, who went to the theatre and wrote about what he saw. He was probably the first person to use the word “theatre” and introduced it into the Persian language.

Dar-al-Fonun, the Institute of Higher Education was constructed next to Tehran’s major bazaar and the Golestan Palace, and it was officially inaugurated in 1851. The building had a theatre for musical productions and plays, as well as a translation school, and a new government printing office for publishing schoolbooks. They published more than 160 titles in the course of the century including military textbooks, linguistic and medical handbooks, biographies of notable Muslim leaders, and translations of famous European works (Ganjeh 2017).

### 3.1 *Takiyya-yi Dawlat*

Following Nasir al-Din Shah’s travels to Europe, the first European-style auditorium to be built in Dar-al-Fonun, was based on the architectural design of Albert Hall in London. The enterprise was headed by Mirza Ali Akbar Khan Mozayen-al-Dowla, a painter, and Alfred Jean Baptiste Lemaire, a music professor (Malekpoor 1984a). The theatre called “*Takiyya-yi Dawlat*” was opened in 1873 in the southwest of Golestan Palace (Emami 1987). This was the first European theatre supported by the government (Gooran 1981) and its capacity was approximately 3000 people (Aryanpour 1996).

The Shah ordered Mozayyan al-Dawla to plan a modern theatre performance for the court in Tehran. Mozayyan al-Dawla translated numerous French plays into Persian, including *The Miser* (*L’Avaro*) by Molière, and staged them with the assistance of foreign residents in Tehran. Many of these translations were ordered to elevate the monarchy; however, Iranian

readers were unintentionally made aware of the contrast between the shahs of Iran and the most illustrious European kings, as well as between Iran's poverty and Europe's prosperity, which served to undermine the Qajar monarchy (Ganjeh 2017).

The Shah initially intended to introduce European theatre to Iran using this playhouse. However, in the face of objections from religious authorities and the counsel of the mullahs, this remarkable venue was converted into a "Takkyie" for religious performances.<sup>5</sup> Despite this shift, the space became the site of numerous magnificent "Taziye" rituals and various other theatrical events (Ganjeh 2017). Rafi Halati (1896-1981), a director, actor, writer, and translator, provides a vivid description of Takkiya Dawlat as quoted by Emami:

Takkiya Dawlat was a playhouse with a spacious hall accommodating 3000 people. It featured wooden entrances, spiral stairs, and gas lighting. The semi-circular ceiling was decorated with lanterns and plaster molding. The Shah visited the gas-lit theatre with its five tiers and an exclusive box, enjoying a beautiful show with singing and a dramatic tale, and ordered performances costing 400 pounds per night (1987: 116).

### 3.2 Translation and Adaptation of Plays in the Qajar Era

During Naseri's time, the plays were performed for the entertainment of courtiers, for self-examination, and for providing new experiences as well. The translations of works by Molière, Gogol, Labiche, and Akhundzadeh were of great interest and included such topics as oppression, ignorance, illiteracy, hypocrisy, and miserliness. Theatre enthusiasts were also aware

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5. *Takkyie* or *Hosseynie* refers to a type of performance space where the audience surrounds a square or round platform stage, known as the 'sakku'. The surrounding loggias (alcoves) are richly decorated with carpets, shawls adorned with inscriptions, and crystal chandeliers—items lent by the shah, dignitaries, and sometimes the people themselves. The performers, more accurately termed the "executants," portray holy men and their followers, dressing in green or white, while their adversaries (the villains) wear red. The plays are always performed in Persian verse, with the good characters singing their lines and the villains reciting theirs. The "executants" are not generally professional actors; they come from all walks of life and perform on occasion. Some performances also feature masks, particularly those of demons, to enhance the portrayal of the villains.

that theatre is not only for entertainment but also for education and moral refinement. Moreover, any actor who was more skilled in using improvisation could say whatever he wanted on the stage, and any actor who could make the people laugh was considered more skilful. That was why Molière's plays were changed from an original comedy to a completely localized version (Bozorgmehr 2000).

Iranian theatre prior to the modernization era did not follow the practice of staging plays in accordance with their published scripts (Ganjeh 2017). Iranians were familiar with ritual performances, but Western theatre was very different. To make Western plays comprehensible for audiences, free translation or adaptation based on Taqlid and Ta'zyieh was common practice in Iran. Titles, characters, words, expressions, and scene descriptions were adapted to meet the audiences' needs and expectations. A few examples of changes are as follows:

- The original title of Molière's *George Dandin ou le Mari confondu* was changed to the *Allegory of the Bride and Groom* by Mirza Jafar Qarache Daghi who translated this play from Turkish into Persian.
- Some descriptions were added by the translator to make the text more performable, for example names of characters in the play *Le Misanthrope* were changed to familiar Persian names; *Alceste* became (Mounes), *Eliante* became (Leila) (Khabari & Khaki 2002).

The following is how Edward Browne describes these adaptations:

The characters are Persianized, and the text is in verse, following the story, although Persian idioms or proverbs are occasionally substituted for French expressions (Browne 1924: 459-460).

Consequently, the names of characters and places were changed to Persian ones to make them more familiar to Iranian audiences. This adaptation also included integrating moral messages into the play and adjusting the endings to ensure the triumph of good over evil. Although the play still bore the author's name, the translators politicized the language to reflect the current Iran situation (Ganjeh 2017). In addition, many translations were indirect translations, often from Turkish (Aryanpour 1996). It could be mentioned that the prevalence of adaptation in Iranian theatre was due

to several reasons, one being the performance of plays on stage (Malekpoor 1984a). Additionally, the use of an intermediate language, often Turkish for translation is another factor as highlighted by Aryanpour (1996).

The translators were from different social classes. They had either acquired foreign languages abroad or had received training in foreign languages at Dar al-Fonun. Members of minority groups (Armenians, Assyrians, Jews) also contributed to the development of the theatre. The most learned of them was Uvanis Khan Musa'id al-Saltana. Some of the foreigners who were residents in Iran in this period, such as Jules Richard and Baron Norman, also worked on translations. The majority of those whose official job was translation served in the following four government departments: The Royal Office of Translations, a section of the Ministry of Publications; the Dar al-Fonun; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the office of Zill al-Sultan, the governor of Isfahan (Ganjeh 2017).

### 3.3 *Le Misanthrope: The First Play Translated into the Persian Language*

As many of the Persian experts in the Qajar era had received their education in France, it was mostly the Comédie Française that influenced Iranian theatre. In 1869, *Le Misanthrope* (Guzarish-e-Mardum-guriz [lit., the report of the one who flees the people]), was translated into Persian and published by Mirza Habib Isfahani and published at the Tasvir-i Afkar printing house in Istanbul in 1869 (Sanjabi 1998).

Mirza Habib, poet, editor of literary works, and translator from French into Persian spent most of his life in exile in the Ottoman capital, where he worked as a Persian language and literature instructor in the state schools (Sanjabi 1998). Mirza Habib was one of the first authors to provide information about plays and playhouses in the Akhtar newspaper in 1875. He also wrote the world history of theatre in the Persian language (Gooran 1981). He is renowned for his 1885-86 free translation of James Morier's Oriental romance, *Hajji Baba of Isfahan*, and Le Sage's picaresque romance *Gil Blas* showcased his mastery of French language and translation skills (Sanjabi 1998).

There are some considerations about *Le Misanthrope*: first, Mirza Habib may have collaborated with Mirza Malkum Khan, a Persian friend,



to translate French literature in the sense that he benefited from Malkum Khan's help but used his own knowledge to turn the prose into Persian verse. He may also have benefited from a Turkish version by Ahmad Vafiq Pasha, an influential statesman and literary figure. Mirza might have looked up to him as a model not only for translation but also for producing works about Persian grammar and language, as well as for themes in his own poetry (Sanjabi 1998).

Second, translating *Le Misanthrope* had another appeal for a translator like Mirza Habib. Molière's comedy addressed topics that were new to Persian readers (and potential audiences) as much as it constituted a new theatrical genre. However, because it was written in verse (although French verse) rather than prose, it could also be translated into Persian verse, a literary style familiar to the Persian ear and treasured in Persian culture (Sanjabi 1998).

Nonetheless, Mirza Habib's translation of *Le Misanthrope*, although Persianized was largely faithful to the original text. This method was less favoured by Middle Eastern translators who preferred "paraphrase" (or free translation) to make their renderings more accessible to their audiences. The translation also featured references to Hafiz's<sup>6</sup> work and those of other classical masters and also included idiomatic Persian from the Qajar era, which might be unfamiliar to non-native speakers. Although the choice of names for the characters in the play was Persianized, this adaptation did not alter the theme or the message of the play. His translation also considered functional considerations for the stage (Sanjabi 1998).

Edward Browne gave the first report on this play:

At least three of Molière's farcical plays have been translated into Persian. It was published in the printing house in Istanbul in 1869. The dialogues in *Misanthrope* are all rhymed and very close to the original. The title is translated as "The adventure of him who fled from mankind." The translator replaces French expressions and proverbs with Persian ones (Browne 1924: 459).

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6. *The Divān of Hafiz* (Persian: *Divān-e Hafiz*) is a collection of poems written by the Iranian poet Hafiz. People learn his poems by heart and use them as proverbs and sayings (Hafez 2017).

The Turkish translation of *Le Misanthrope*, *Adamjil*, by Ahmad Vafiq Pasha, was published about the same time as the Persian translation, so Mirza Habib might have used this translation (Sanjabi 1998). Aryanpour (1996) also confirms that *Le Misanthrope*, which was translated from Turkish, was probably based on the translation by Ahmed Vefiq Pasha in 1869. This can be inferred from the Turkish names used in the translation.

Muzayyanal-Dawla staged the only performance of *Mardum-guriz* by with a cast of European actors in Dar al-Funun's auditorium around the early 1870s in front of the Shah and his entourage (Sanjabi 1998). The performance of this play continued for several consecutive nights until the translation and performance of Molière's comedies became one of the main attractions of Dar al-Fonun. *Tartuffe*, *Don Juan*, *Les femmes savantes*, *Les fourberies de Scapin*, *George Dandin ou le mariconfondu* were among the plays that were translated and adapted for production by Mozin al-Dawlah, Etimad al-Sultaneh, Mirza Jaafar Qarache Daghi, and Tahir Mirza (Gooran 1981).

Despite Nasir al-Din Shah's appreciation of European plays he was hesitant to confront the Shi'i ulama's general objection to staging European plays or any other dramatic adaptations, which hampered the development of modern drama in Iran before the Constitutional Revolution (Sanjabi 1998).

#### 2.4 Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadeh

Because modern Iranian playwriting was Western influenced through translations this resulted in Iranian playwrights adopting the Western style that had become increasingly popular (Bozorgmehr 2000).

Mirza-Fath Ali Darbandi, Akhundzadeh, was the first Iranian playwright to write plays in the Western style (Kia 1995). Yahya Aryanpoor (1996) in his book *Az Saba ta Nima* named Akhundzadeh as the first Iranian dramatist in the European tradition. Under the name of Akhundov, he acquired Russian citizenship and was a progressive author whose pamphlets had a significant impact on liberal circles in Asia (Gaffary 1984). Akhundzadeh's encounter with dramatic literature and the staging of plays on Western stages from the West led to his composition of six satirical

comedies that were published in a collection entitled *Tamsilat* in 1855, which was then translated into Persian by Mirza Jafar Qarachedaqi in 1874 (Malekpoor 1984a). He wrote his six comedies in Turkish Azari and later translated parts of them into Russian to be performed in Tbilisi and Baku. His comedies include *Mulla Ebrahim Khalil, the Alchemist* (M. E. Kh. Kimiyagar); *Monsieur Jordan, the Botanist* (M. J. Hakim-e nabatat); *The Vizir of the Khan of Sarab* (or Lankaran); *The Thief-catching Bear* (Kher-e Qoldorbasan); *The Miser* (Sargozasht-e Mard-e Khasis); *The Barristers* (Vokalay-e morafe'e) (Khalvati 2016).

Translations of Akhundzadeh's plays into Russian, French, German, English, and Norwegian led to his fame throughout the world, to the extent that people called him the "Eastern Molière." His plays served as a means of social criticism and reform, satirizing government corruption (Malekpoor 1984a). Akhundzadeh also translated works by Gogol, Molière, and other playwrights into Turkish and staged them (Aryanpour 1996).

### 2.5 Mirza Agha Tabrizi: The First Persian Playwright (1871)

Mirza Agha Tabrizi was the first author to compose Western-style plays directly in Persian. He was proficient in Turkish Azari and French as he had worked as local chief secretary at the French legation in Tehran for more than seven years. He was asked to translate Akhundzadeh's plays into Persian, but he answered that he would prefer to write his own plays directly in Persian, so that the Iranian people could see instances of this new style. Nonetheless, Mirza Agha Tabrizi was very much influenced by Akhundzadeh's plays and authored four comedies (Emami 1987).<sup>7</sup>

Akhundzadeh assisted Mirza Agha in learning more advanced European-style playwriting techniques by writing criticisms of his plays. The government, wealthy individuals, and religious leaders all exerted significant pressure on the progressive writers of the day. As a result, writers had to find a less direct way to communicate with their audiences and convey any criticism in an indirect, more symbolic manner. This made it

7. Ashraf Khan; *The Method of Government of Zaman Khan* [[Tarīqa-ye Hokūmat-e Zamān Kān-e Borūjerdī] *The Pilgrimage of Shah Qoli Mirza* [Karbalā raftan-e Šāhqolī Mīrzā]; and *Aqa Hashem's Love Affair* [Āšeq šodan-e Āqā Hāšem] (1945-47).

difficult for plays to be printed, published, and especially performed. To avoid any threat from the government, Akhundzadeh urged Mirza Agha to avoid using the Governor's true name in his plays, to change the characters' names, and be more cautious with his language (Emami 1987).

### 3. Constitutional Revolution (1867-1911) and Theatre

The Constitutional Revolution had a considerable impact on the evolution of Iran's theatre. Constitutionalism provided the grounds for the formation of various parties and associations, including the formation of dramatic groups, the organization of theatre workshops, and the publication of magazines and newspapers (Gaffary 1984). Theatre was regarded as a means of disseminating reformist and constitutional ideals among the general population and was no longer confined to courtly circles. Middle-class people also developed their performing skills. Streets, mosques, and bazaars, which were state-owned public spaces, were used as stages (Ganjeh 2017).

During this period, theatre groups often aligned themselves with political parties or adhered to specific policies in staging plays (Malekpoor 1984b). The inception of theatre in Iran witnessed pioneering efforts from groups such as the "Ilmia Farhang Company" in 1869, the first to translate Western plays for performance during the constitutional period. Around the same time, the "Iranian Play Company" emerged, consisting of Zoroastrians from Tehran (Talimi & Mahmoudi Bakhtiari 2019), with Homayun playing a prominent role as a member and becoming the first person to be referred to as a "Translator." Subsequently, the formation of the National Theatre in 1870, overseen by Mohagheg al-Dawlah and in collaboration with figures like Seyyed Ali Khan Nasr and Mahmoud Bahrami (Monshi Bashi), marked a significant development (Talimi & Mahmoudi Bakhtiari 2019).

The National Theatre group changed the perception of theatre by establishing Faros Print Hall as a permanent theatre. Unlike previous groups, they diversified their repertoire, presenting critical plays including comedy, social and notably, historical plays. They were the second group, after the Ilmia Farhang Company to translate European plays in the style of Molière's works (Talimi & Mahmoudi Bakhtiari 2019). The first play

performed by the National Theatre was *The Inspector*, a comedy by Gogol that had been translated into Persian by Nader Mirza, a member of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1908). It highlighted the bribery, trickery, and disorderly situation of Russia under Tsar Nicholas I, resonating with Iran's socio-political situation at the time.

The growth of Iranian theatre led to the recognition of the need for professional, educated actors. The Madrasaye Tiatr Shahrđari (Shahrđari Theatre School), the first theatre school was established in 1939 to train directors, playwrights, actors, and technicians (Emami 1987). Following an invitation from Ehsan Yarshater, a group of government officials such as Lotf Ali Akkas, Ali Nasr, and Issa Sepahbodi held theatre classes and performed some translated plays such as *Nick* by William Inch, *Day and Night* by Eugene O'Neill, *Seven Mornings* by Paul Osburn. These plays were only translated for performance rather than published (Bozorgmehr 2000).

The playwriting process in this era was significantly influenced by the abundance of translated Western plays (Bozorgmehr 2000). The majority of translators hailed from the privileged ruling class, particularly those who had graduated from Dar al-Fonun. As a result, a key characteristic of this period was the translation and performance of plays by intellectuals and the educated elite (Gooran 1981). Whereas Molière was the focus of theatre groups during the Naseri period, the constitutional period saw a shift in attention towards other great playwrights, notably Shakespeare (Gaffary 1984). Shakespeare's significance at this time is such that the constitutional period was called "The Age of Shakespeare" (Ganjeh 2017).

Armenians also played a great role in this era, as some had studied in Europe and founded theatrical groups. Their objectives were to instruct young people, advance theatre art, and provide financial support for the theatre school. Additionally, they paved the way for people to act on stage. The introduction of female actors to the theatre in 1897 was another advantage of the liberal policy. Hovhannes Khan Masehian (Mosa'ed al-Saltaneh), a most prolific translator, translated Molière and Shakespeare's plays into Armenian and Persian. There were also separate performances for Armenian women (Ganjeh 2017).

Azeri theatre groups (1910) frequently travelled across the border to provide performances in Tabriz, Rasht, and Tehran during the

constitutional era. Azeri theatre held significant value in advancing Iranian constitutionalism, aiming to introduce Iranian audiences to a more sophisticated culture through the presentations by Azeri troupes, as noted by Rice (2021). Only a few performances were in Persian, while most were in Turkish. *It is Good to Be Patient in the Evening* (Axşam Sbri Xyir Olar) and *Dursunali and the Tulumba* (Dursunali v. Ballibadi), two short comedies by Azeri writer Sultan Majid Qanizadeh, were performed by actors. It has been noted that following the performance, one of the actors delivered a speech focusing on constitutionalism and freedom (Malekpoor 1984b).

World War I, internal chaos and anarchy influenced the socio-cultural situation in Iran and provided the ground for spreading cultural activities through translation. At this time, the number of published books increased, newspapers were also a means of fostering a sense of social identity, and with the formation of increasing numbers of dramatic groups, the need for translating plays was felt more than ever. These translations were either adaptations of Molière's plays or of Russian and Caucasian plays (Gooran 1981).

#### 4. Reza Shah Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-41)

Reza Shah's endeavours to modernize the country provided a supportive environment for the flourishing of modern theatre in Iran. The theatre benefited from the state's unique circumstances (Ganjeh 2017). Malekpoor (2007c) argues that Reza Khan's rule was rooted in nationalism, and describes it as an ideology that uses national awareness, ethnic identity, and language to shape political expression and strengthen governmental power. It aimed to create a unifying space and promote obedience to a dominant culture.

This nationalist concept became the central theme in local theatre during these decades, extending its significance beyond the state's original objectives and influencing state theatre and dramatic policies. The significance of developing Iranian theatre was such that Reza Khan set up a special arts budget for free screenings of plays and movies to mobilize public support for his new state businesses, such as the national army or foreign advisors training the Iranian military (Naficy 2011).

However, freedom of expression for artists and writers changed during Reza Shah's monarchy in 1925. Reza Shah, despite initially sponsoring modern theatre, found himself in a situation where he had little control. Rigorous censorship led to the prohibition of many plays, especially those critical of the government, and the reviewing of play scripts before staging. Satire was only permitted if it was directed prior to the Qajar regime (Floor 2005). Reza Shah even banned the traditional play "Taziye" in the early 1930s, considering it awkward and old. Additionally, due to cultural and financial progress, more people were becoming literate, transforming theatre attendance from a primarily intellectual pursuit to a more widespread activity (Ganjeh 2017).

The political landscape significantly influenced the process of playwriting and translation during this period. Active translators, such as Karim Keshavarz, Mirza Mohammad Khan Bahadur, Abulfath Ojan Bakhtiari, Ali Asghar Shamim, Abdul Hossein Noushin, Reza Shahrazad, and Hassan Nasr engaged in translating plays for performance on stage. Their motivations included reflecting on governmental policies, translating great historical works, the impact of modernism and wanting to instil political, social, and moral messages and introducing the world's classic literature to broadening the audience's knowledge. (Bozorgmehr 2000). The plays that were adapted for production were not published at all (Gooran 1981).

When tyranny increased in the second decade of Reza Shah's rule, censorship became more apparent. The Thought Promotion Organization, established in 1938, emphasized components like "kingdom" and "patriotism," (Nawabi 2010) reflecting the Pahlavi propaganda agenda (Haghighi & Moradikhalaj 2022). Authors and translators tried to argue that historical subjects should be protected from censorship, while theatres in cities like Rasht and Isfahan regularly translated Western plays (Gaffary 1984). Ganjeh (2017) quotes Hasan Javadi that there were three types of plays in this era: historical plays, romantic musical plays, and didactic social comedies. Plays with a historical or moral theme fulfilled the state's expectations for theatre.

Ali Nasr (1891-1961), one of the forefathers of modern theatre in Iran, claims that Reza Shah made significant contributions toward his ideal theatre despite censorship under his rule. Reza Shah supported women's

involvement in theatre and initiated the construction of an opera house in Tehran, although it remained unfinished by 1941. During this period, Iranian playwrights, though lacking professional experience, responded to the public's interest by creating original works and translating European plays. They endeavoured to adapt these plays into a Persian style since they were more familiar with Western theatre. However, their plays were criticized as immature in terms of literary, aesthetic, and theatrical standards (Ganjeh 2017).

With the influence of the British government in Iran, the French language, formerly the official language of education, swiftly lost its significance, being supplanted by English (Nawabi 2010). In 1939, the modern theatre gained official recognition as a pivotal component of contemporary Iranian culture for the first time. The establishment of the inaugural theatre school, the "Honarestan-e Honarpishe" Tehran was facilitated by Reza Shah's support. This institution was crucial for training 129 directors and actors, adhering to the curriculum of the Paris Conservatory. It operated until 1958 and was succeeded by the Anahita Drama School (Ganjeh 2017).

## 5. Mohammad Reza Shah Period (1941-1979)

Mohammad Reza Shah's era is regarded as the pinnacle of Western-style theatrical activities in Iran (Bozorgmehr 2000). He favoured Western productions (Cram Cook 1949) and contributed to their popularity by constructing additional theatre venues, leading to over 500 foreign plays being translated and performed during his reign. Although Shakespeare's works were translated, they were not staged due to the Pahlavi regime's opposition to plays depicting regicide (Malekpoor 1984a).

The years between 1941 and 1953 are called the "stage period" due to the wide range of performances on stage. Dozens of theatres, including Saadi Theatre, Ferdowsi Theatre, and Farhang Theatre were established. These theatrical groups staged many translated or adapted plays for performance. Translated dramatic works were published by literary scholars and theatre practitioners, while others were published in magazines such as *Sokhan*, *Sokhan-e-No*, *Payam-e-No*; and some were adapted for performance



on stage (Bozorgmehr 2000). Playwriting in this period was considered a revolutionary task (Malekpoor 2007c).

### 5.1 *Leftists Ideology and Iran's Theatre (1941-1953)*

The emergence of cultural activities during the dominance of the Marxist-Socialist school in Iran in the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah began with the Iranian Tudeh Communist Party, established in 1937 by 27 out of some 53 imprisoned Marxists (Emami 1987). Within a brief period, the Tudeh Party effectively used art, culture, and theatre to propagate its ideologies within society. Numerous esteemed academics, artists, and intellectuals—especially authors and translators—aligned themselves with the party to express their endorsement (Bozorgmehr 2000). According to Prime Minister Hovayda (1965-1977), the only non-communist Iranian outside the Tudeh Party was the Shah, as mentioned by Masoud Behnoud, an Iranian journalist. Consequently, given that most playwrights, actors, filmmakers, producers, and poets were members of the Tudeh Communist Party, the content and themes in the flourishing cinemas and theatres of Lalehzar Street were predominantly radical and leftist (Rezaei, Rezvani & Soltanzadeh 2022).

A well-known figure in the early twentieth-century history of Persian theatre and one who assumed control of the Tudeh Party's theatrical activities is Abdu'lhusayn Nushin. Along with Sayyed Ali Nasr, Nushin is recognized as the father of contemporary theatre in Iran. Following the arrest of the 53,<sup>8</sup> Nushin accepted an invitation to the Festival of Soviet Theatre and travelled to Moscow with his wife, Loretta, and Husayn Khayrkhwah. There he learned Stanislavski's method. After returning to Iran, Nushin translated some of Shakespeare's plays and became involved in a variety of literary and theatrical activities. Together with friends freed from prison or returned from exile, Nushin participated in the founding of the Tudeh party. In 1942, he was elected a member of the Central Committee of Tudeh and remained in this position until his death (Talajooy 2013).

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8. 6 people, 40 people, 3 people, and 4 people, known as 53 people in total, were a group of Iranian political prisoners with Marxist ideas who were arrested and imprisoned in Qasr prison during the reign of Reza Shah in 1937.

The theatrical company known as Farhang, was founded by Nushin, his wife and others in 1944. *Volpone* and *Topaze* were performed by this company, along with *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Three Thieves*, *Mirza Kamal al-Din* (an adaptation of *Tartuffe*), and *Adventures of the Lankaran Khanate Vizier* by Akhundzadeh translated by Mohammad Ali Foroughi in the years between 1944 and 1953. Nushin had a significant influence on the growth of Iranian dramatic art being the first Persian director to stage Western plays in their original versions. He urged Iranian playwrights to attempt composing and translating high-quality plays. Plays by Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Gorky and Sartre were all translated by Nushin himself. He also played an important role in developing dramatic language. Before him, dramatic language was something like Naqali or Rawhuzi (Emami 1987).

Nushin was detained along with other Tudeh Party members in 1949 when an attempt was made to kill Mohammad Reza Shah. He was given a ten-year prison term. He and several Tudeh co-workers broke out of jail in 1950, spending nearly 20 months in hiding. Finally, he was forced to leave Iran for Russia, ending his theatrical career (Talajooy 2013).

The translation of Marxist playwrights like Chekov, Gogol, and Brecht allowed communist theatre activities to continue after the coup. Most of Brecht's works were translated between 1962 and 1967. The most well-known of these were *Life of Galileo*, *A Man's a Man*, *The Good Person of Szechuan*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Herr Puntila and his Man Matti*, *Round Head*, and *Pointed Head*, and *Mother Courage*. Other plays include Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, *A View from the Bridge*, and *Accident at Vichy* by Arthur Miller, and *The House of Bernarda Alba* by García Lorca. Most of these plays were performed by amateur, independent or university companies. Given the historical circumstances of the time, it was very difficult to stage plays produced by communists (Emami 1987).

## 6. Western School and Western Style Theatrical Activities in Iran

During the Shah's reinstatement in 1953, when American influence first emerged in Persian theatre, American ideas began to be significant. The first influential American was Dr. F. Davidson, who established a theatre class at the University of Tehran in 1956. Along with working with several

new theatre ensembles, he also lectured at the Iran-America Society. He graduated from the Stanislavski method acting school and produced several plays in Iran, including *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams and *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder in the Tehran Theatre (Emami 1987).

Together with the above-mentioned direct involvement of American producers, Iran's government also established the Department of Dramatic Arts at the Fine Arts Office in 1957 under the direction of Dr. Mahdi Forugh. The first steps in this department included the formation of theatrical classes and groups, including marionette groups, the broadcasting of theatrical works on television, the publication of numerous theatrical creations, and the awarding of an annual prize for the best Iranian plays and the best-translated plays (Emami 1987).

Several directors and actresses received their degrees in performative arts from European universities. They put a lot of effort into translating Western plays into Farsi so that Iranian audiences might enjoy them. Most of these plays were included on the same weekly television programs and were carefully chosen by liberal groups. Some of these translations were later published (Emami 1987).

After the bitter experience of the 1953 coup, some other theatrical groups were formed (Rezaei, Rezvani & Soltanzadeh 2022). From 1961 to 1970, the number of translated plays reached 276. These plays were published either in the form of books or periodicals, except those that had been translated for performance on stage. According to Bozorgmehr (2000), the motivation for translating foreign plays was educational.

The arrival of Absurdist theatre is also an important issue that should be taken into account. This was facilitated through theatrical institutions and festivals that were directly funded by the government. Translations of plays by Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Max Frisch, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Fernando Arrabal were produced. From 1971 to 1976, the City Theatre was one of the most active theatres of this kind. During the American-backed Shah's rule, translators were urged to select more enigmatic playwrights like Ionesco and Beckett rather than blatantly anti-capitalist authors like Brecht (Emami 1987).

## 7. The 1979 Islamic Revolution

Due to the major political and social changes that came with the 1979 revolution, cultural activities like theatre underwent abrupt changes. The administration of theatre in Iran now fell under the control of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The Centre of Dramatic Arts was responsible for the choice of theatre productions. Everything in the system had to agree with Islam. Some Iranian theatre performers left the country after the Islamic Revolution, believing that there would be no theatrical activity in the Islamic Republic. But some stayed and worked with several young artists, despite difficulties. Although there was no concern theoretically for theatrical activities in Iran, the problems were practical, such as women on stage having to wear the Islamic veil and not being able to have any physical contact with men (Talajooy 2011). After 1979, Western art and culture were banned and consumption was prohibited. Western music, theatre, film, and fashion were seen as a means of corrupting young people. Western theatre and cinema have long been susceptible to censorship (Madani Sarbarani 2019).

A comprehensive overview in tables form has been compiled to show canonical periods, the number of translated plays, and authors, drawing on various sources including dramatic literature and bibliography books. The categorization process involved synthesizing data from multiple outlets specifically the book *List of Translated Persian Printed Books: From the Beginning to the Year 1991* (Bashtani, Fazayelijavan & Keihanfar 2001) serves as the primary reference for this analysis.

No.	Plays	Year	Period	Most published authors	Number of translated and printed plays	No printing date
1	French	1868-1904	Qajar era	Molière Akhundzadeh	-	
2	English	1905-1937	Constitutional era	Molière Shakespeare Caucasian plays	9	33
3	English Russian	1925-1941	Reza Shah Pahlavi dynasty	Shakespeare		
	Russian French English	1941-1979	Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi dynasty	Molière Shakespeare Brecht Chekov Sartre	513	
4	-	1979-89	Islamic revolution	-	99	

Table 1. Canonical periods, Plays and Authors.

Figure 1. Most translated authors from 1926 to 1989.

## 9. Discussion and Conclusion

This essay offers a concise overview of the emergence of modern theatre in Iran, through translations of plays to elucidate historical transformations within the country's theatrical landscape. The analysis spans five crucial periods: the Qajar era, Pahlavi I, Pahlavi II, the Constitutional era, and the 1979 Revolution period and has sought to explore the question of how modern theatre has been formed in Iran.

The key takeaway from the evidence obtained is that theatre translation in Iran has been inextricably linked to the country's social and cultural fabric. Political and ideological factors strongly influenced the cross-cultural exchange of theatrical works. There is a strong theatre legacy in Iran that dates back to the nineteenth century, with modern Iranian theatre rooted in old cultural pursuits like Taziyah and Taqlid. It emerged through the contact with Western nations and its development began with new changes in society following the Constitutional Revolution (Kazemimojaveri 2016).

The introduction of Western theatre to Iran was characterized by free translation or adaptation (Afshar 1950). Similar findings were echoed in Bandín Fuertes' study (2023) on postwar Spanish theatre translation, highlighting the prevalence of adapted plays during the Franco era. The essay also underscores the role of theatre during Iran's Constitutional era, wherein nationalist and democratic ideals propelled its integration into the public sphere, mirroring similar phenomena observed in India's Street Theatre as documented by De & Basu Thakur (2017).

The subsequent exploration into the Tudeh party's influence on Iranian theatre from 1941 to 1953 reveals a convergence of leftist ideology and theatrical expression. This aligns with research by Bozorgmehr (2000) and corroborates findings by Khalighi, Khazaee Farid & Nazemianfard (2015) and Javadi Yeganeh & Tofangsazi (2012) on translated novels and national literature. Their findings revealed that the selection of literary works for translation or national literature was influenced by the dominant leftist thinking. Even after the Islamic revolution, the resilience of theatrical activities persisted, marked by the emergence of revolutionary theatre after

1979, with themes centering on the Iran-Iraq war, imperialism, and the corrupt regime of the Shah.

To sum up, the infusion of translated plays into Iran's theatrical realm marks a pivotal juncture in the evolution of modern theatre within the country. Iranian theatre practitioners have been exposed to a wide range of dramatic techniques, styles, and subjects as a result of play translations from other cultures and languages. This exposure has expanded the Iranian theatrical landscape, inspiring creativity and experimentation in the local theatre scene. Collaborations with international theatre artists, as well as participation in global theatre festivals, have all helped to integrate modern theatre into Iran, stimulating cross-cultural exchange and impacting the evolution of Iranian theatre. Through translation, cultures increase their value and return to themselves, redefining themselves in the process of encountering another culture. This dynamic continues until culture no longer exists (Posner 2004).

As the literature on the history of theatre translation across the world is limited, the present review is constrained by disparate and insufficient evidence, a condition that is slowly being improved. The subfield of theatre translation is underdeveloped but full of potential for unearthing histories of individuals, ideas, and artistic production (performance) largely unheralded by extant studies. Acknowledging the limits imposed by the scarcity of data and various sources, this essay urges additional research into the field of theatre translation, emphasizing its potential to reveal hitherto unknown histories of individuals, ideas, and artistic output within the global context of performance studies.

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