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## A Psychoanalytic Reading of Selected Persian Children's Plays

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Once theatre aims at children, who are the citizens and decision makers of the future, it can influence the course of society through the values and worldviews that it promotes. The exceptional capacity of this medium in engaging the audience, along with children's receptiveness, necessitates a meticulous study of the ideologies embedded in plays. This study unravels how these ideological factors can hamper the theatre's main purpose which is to encourage the audience to form individual fantasies. Accordingly, Žižek's theories are drawn upon for their hints on ideology, fantasy, reality, and subjectivity. Taking his psychoanalytic views into account, four Persian plays are examined to determine what ideologies underlie these plays' motifs and instructions, as well as what may justify their presence in plays. On close inspection, it becomes evident that these plays are loaded with conscious manipulative ideologies which are intended to train homogeneous social members rather than present objective glimpses of real life.

**Keywords:** children's drama, fantasy, ideology, other, subject, Slavoj Žižek

Iran's theatre, in the form we are familiar with today, has targeted children for about a century, and in this brief history, it has changed focus several times. In its early stages, promoting religious doctrines was its main objective, and this was especially accomplished through Tā'ziyeh which revolves around the legend of Karbala and Imam Hossein. Moral aims, which are mainly based on Islamic views, have never ceased to motivate dramatic productions for children. They have even been manipulated by the

authorities to further political ends. Therefore, whenever there has been a clash of aims among different political parties, there has been no production. As a result, children's theatre – which had reached a point where specialised dramatists were profoundly active in the field, and where schools were beginning to host productions for and by students – was practically dormant during the years of the Islamic revolution because “theater was socially, religiously, and, above all, politically suspect” (Floor 2005: 297). After the 1979 revolution, since the government had definite plans for the “Islamization of culture”, only those plays that “encouraged religious devotion” were permitted (Talajooy 2011: 500). The manipulative use of theatre became particularly evident during the Iran-Iraq war when the main motifs of children's plays were the importance of jihad and the glory of martyrdom and patriotism. In fact, “the Islamic government ... realized the importance of theater as a political propaganda tool”, and with strict censorship managed it in a way to further political ends (Floor 2005: 297). The present study claims that this manipulative trend in defining and representing reality still exists, and children's theatre in Iran is used to reinforce specific ideologies. Since ideology functions at the level of the psyche, and is inextricably interwoven with culture and politics, Žižek's psychoanalytic views seem to be most illuminating in our approach to children's plays.

In general, it seems that the main objective of children's theatre in Iran is to train homogeneous subjects who would adhere to specific ideologies and who would therefore be easy to control and subjugate. While this is especially true of subsidised plays that have access to spaces to perform in public community centres and therefore target the majority of people, private productions are not without this fault. In other words, children's theatre in Iran fails to provide children with an opportunity to form individual responses to the experiences made available in the safe atmosphere of plays. Therefore, it can be argued that these productions do not provide their audiences with a sense of relief that could have resulted from healthy identification with characters. Psychoanalytically speaking, the subject is always struggling with the sense of lack and loss, and, at the same time, the ego continually creates the fantasy of integration and universal connection which characterises the imaginary phase (Homer 2004: 31). Theatre has enormous potential to create relief from this tension. Therefore, it can be said that ideologies in Iranian children's theatre have overshadowed profound objectives like cathartic experiences and relief from the sense of lack. These ideology-stricken plays tend to blur audiences' fantasies.

While the term *ideology* is commonly used as a notion restricted to the level of thought and belief, Slavoj Žižek considers it to be more concerned with the unconscious and automatic practices in our daily lives (Hawkes 2003: 167). In fact, what matters most in understanding ideological practices is the “act that continues in spite of the knowledge of its falsity”, not the acknowledgement of an erroneous belief system (Myers 2003: 67). However, a dichotomy of reality / ideology does not exist in Žižekian psychoanalysis because a subject's understanding of reality depends on language and is hence under the influence of discourses and ideologies (74). On the other hand, while the term *fantasy* is commonly used in association with dreams and illusions, Žižek's notion of fantasy

regards how subjects conceptualise reality in singularly individual ways. Thus, again, fantasy and reality are not contradictory. The possibility of fantasy resides in the fact that the symbolic world is not an exact model of the Real. It is this gap and the necessity of hiding it that give rise to fantasy. In addition, fantasy is not entirely subjective, but rather intersubjective because it also regards a subject's endeavour to make sense of what the other expects from him (Žižek 1996: 117). It also functions as a "screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real" (Žižek 2006: 57). As such, Žižek ascribes two distinctive sides to fantasy: 1. the subject's dreams of utopian equilibrium; 2. the subject's uneasiness with the status of the other (Žižek 1996: 116). The first view of fantasy is referred to as "the symbolic fiction", which basically negates society's "inherent antagonism", and the second is the "spectral apparition" haunting everyone except perhaps "saints" (116). It is in accordance with these senses of the terms that we approach the selected plays.

The plays addressed in this study are written for children of five to twelve years of age, passing a stage of their lives which is highly influential in personality formation. In this phase, a child is most predominantly preoccupied with the desire of the other, as the child strives to become the others' object of desire. It is an ethical imperative that the community does not take advantage of this tendency to curtail children's right to "freedom of thought" – Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989: 4). Children who assume that they have chosen a specific lifestyle of their free will, but have actually internalised the other's desire, are developing an antagonism toward this governing force and will ultimately react to it. Consequently, the long-term results of such manipulations would be as catastrophic for a society as they are for children. Therefore, the insights proffered in this study intend not only to be helpful for understanding oneself in relation to the intimate other and the big Other – the symbolic order itself – but also informative for the governing entities that represent the big Other. Therefrom arises the importance of studying the interactions between a culture and its subjects.

Deeming it possible that children can be provided with the experience of a theatre either perfectly devoid of ideological manipulations or merely at the mercy of ideologies leads us to categorise children's playwrights based on their intentions to encourage unique fantasies or to educate their audience with ideologies. Needless to say, the latter is possible if the playwright believes in the stability and decidability of Truth and conceives of himself as "the pure instrument of the big Other's Will" (Žižek 2006: 105). Therefore, such a dramatist would not consider his manipulation of children's free flow of thought unfair. In other words, such an author is actually a "pervert" who imagines that he is perfectly aware of the Other's desire (Myers 2003: 96). On the other hand, the author inviting individual intuition and fantasy is conscious of the inaccessibility of Truth, discourses of the Other, the other's lacking nature and its obliviousness of its own desire (Žižek 1996: 116). Therefore, such a receptive author lets fantasy accomplish its function of signifying the void in the big Other, and offers the subject a personal window through which he can observe reality (Myers 2003: 99). However, these views

are two extremes of a continuum and it is idealistic to imagine that a text can be written without the influence of the other or in pure servitude of this other. After all, without personal emotion and motivation which are the essence of all literary texts – however ideological – the production of plays is impossible. Moreover, the “alienation” of subjects is inevitable for they all ultimately surrender to the language of the symbolic universe and hence see the world and themselves through the eyes of the other (Homer 2004: 71). The juxtaposition of different plays will be illuminating as to what position each occupies in this continuum.

Consequently, the following plays have been selected: *When Fish Drowns*, and *Moon's Guests* both by Dolatabadi (2006); Bayat's *The Moon-marked Forehead* (2016), an adaptation of an old Persian folktale with the same title; and Abbas Janfada's adaptation of *Hasan the Bald* in 2015, a folktale bearing the same title. While the play scripts constitute the main focus of this study, due to the cultural significance of when they were staged, it must be noted that the plays were staged in 2019, 2016, 2017 and 2015 respectively. Therefore, their juxtaposition can be helpful in drawing conclusions on temporal factors contributing to their production and reception. In addition, as stage productions, these plays represent the two categories of children's plays in Iran – public productions (the former two plays) and private ones (the latter two). Accordingly, analysing them can yield a general understanding of children's theatre in Iran. As the plays' synopses will later show, these plays are thematically close, too. *When Fish Drowns* and *Hasan the Bald* both concern a young boy's journey in the symbolic world and his endeavour to achieve self-actualisation. *Moon's Guests* and *The Moon-marked Forehead* – staged as *Sara and the Moon* – both focus on characters who lack harmony with their communities and are finally taken to the heavens. Generous space is devoted to Dolatabadi since he is the most prolific Iranian children's playwright and an influential figure in establishing standards in the field. Overall, this selection seems to be appropriate for discussing cultural and ideological features in plays.

The research at hand has benefited from the following researchers' and authors' contributions to the field: Shajiee (2016) who confirms our claim that Dolatabadi's plays are filled with ideologies; Dolatabadi (2012) who gives voice to Iranian culture's tendency to highlight the necessity of respecting one's own culture and imitating heroes present in literary texts as representatives of socially accepted characters; Van de Water (2012) who shares our view that theatre barely respects children's rights and regards children as less than whole human beings; Bedard (2011) who pinpoints how societies compel playwrights to pen plays for angelic audiences whose innocence would be wasted without pedagogical texts and constructed reality; Fadayi Hossein (2009) who reprimands playwrights' tendency to instruct children and calls for consideration of children's dreamlike worldviews and limited concentration; and Van de Water (2011) who believes that, even in countries where theatre for young audiences first appeared and set examples for other nations, the ideologies of official and political institutions have affected children's plays. This scholar contends that most plays written for children depend on school performances for their success, and what ensues is the playwrights'

consideration of the conformity of their texts with the ideologies dominant in schools (279). Hence, what theatre for young audiences represents is art transformed into a “pedagogical tool” (280). Other studies that have been enlightening include the research conducted by Benjamin (1999) who, in line with the present study, claims that “proletarian children’s theatre is the dialectical site of education”; Sarland (1999) who addresses political and economic factors influencing the creation and reception of children’s literature, and ultimately children’s value formation; and finally Rose (1984) who believes that “nature is a quality in the child which must be cultivated like a plant”, but “education” is essential because “a child left to its own devices would perish”, and “without education the child would be even more totally disfigured by social institutions” (44). The present study attempts to enrich the literature by keeping a close eye on Žižek’s view of ideology and fantasy in revisiting children’s drama. Žižekian concepts have rarely been applied to children’s literature, but they can enhance our understanding of the culture that has given rise to the production and reception of these plays.

As mentioned earlier, ideology and fantasy are key points in this analysis. An approach to these two concepts is flawed without reference to the subject and his psyche. In Žižekian psychoanalysis, the subject is believed to appear in the void between the Real and the symbolic. The subject is castrated through the process of subjectification, yet maintains his freedom to form individual insights (Myers 2003: 97). Finding it hard to shoulder the responsibilities this freedom entails, subjects have devised the Other of the Other as a conspiring agent. The illusory existence of this entity is supposed to justify subjects’ actions done in accordance with dominant ideologies without being sober advocates of these belief systems. It is the possibility of the Žižekian Act which shines light into the dark horizon of ideology. The Act is a subject’s renunciation of the world as he already knows it, or a “symbolic suicide” meant to “realize the potential of [one’s] true self” (Myers 2003: 59, 60).

As the Act is supposed to liberate subjects from ideologies, other Žižekian propositions like “traversing the fantasy” and “respecting the fantasy” are expected to save subjects from traps of fantasy. One needs to “traverse the fantasy” and realise that there is nothing behind the veneers of fantasy (Myers 2003: 108). This understanding lets us acknowledge that “the Other does not threaten our enjoyment, the Other does not possess what we lack”, and antagonism precedes our familiarity with the Other (Wood 2012: 125). Respecting each other’s fantasies is based on the shaky position of each fantasy in face of another. Respecting the fantasy leads to the creation of “empty gesture[s]” or “offers to be rejected” which are in fact superficial freedom that is curtailed by some cultural “unwritten rules” (134). Characters in the selected plays will be further studied with regard to how successful they are in meeting these Žižekian imperatives.

*When Fish Drowns.* The play features a family of two bears and their father. Punda is helping his father when he falls and gets hurt. Panda is reproached for not helping his brother as his father had asked, and thus is sent out to find someone in need and give him a hand, or he is not going to get anything to eat. However, Panda causes a great deal of trouble as he does not make sense of others’ needs and conditions. His father, who

has been following him, lets him return home and eat because he has done his best to make himself useful. Ultimately, he is asked to help his family members to learn proper ways of assisting others.

Dolatabadi affirms that instructing audiences is the main objective of his plays (2012: 41). But he does not seem to be aware of the effective ways he may accomplish this. The language his characters use in addressing the young Panda damages the addressee's sense of self and is, therefore, disturbing for the audience who identify with him. As a result of the repeated reprimands Panda receives from his family and forest animals, the audience would also grow defensive, the worst state for acquiring any new perspectives. As Schonmann (1999) recommends, children's feelings should not be excessively aroused because they may not be capable of maintaining the necessary aesthetic distance throughout their experience of theatre (84). In other words, as unexperienced viewers, children are not fully able to balance their beliefs in the theatrical world – which make them lose themselves in the dramatic world – and their suspended beliefs – which remind them that it is just pretence (84). Therefore, even if we consider Dolatabadi's desire for instructing his audience to be a noble intention, the means he employs is flawed. The language he uses is filled with performatives which assume a position for the child addressee. The child, accordingly, feels trapped and can hardly act beyond the frames of that supposition and what is expected of him.

Other problematic, yet recurrent, issues in this play include the unnegotiable superiority and rightfulness of the parent, which is well established in Iranian culture, as well as the degradation of children's fantasies. But what leaves the play highly open to criticism is its focus on the character it reproves, rather than on the one with the positive trait of being helpful. This tendency testifies to the fact that the playwright has failed to traverse the fantasy and is still under the "phantasmatic spell" of the "bad guy" who is reproached "officially" but constitutes "the focus of [his] libidinal investment" (Žižek 1996: 117). The play's main purpose is also overshadowed by the father's strong desire to be obeyed. Although he advises his son that the best way to practise helpfulness is to be useful to one's family members, he sends him out to help strangers and welcomes him back when he witnesses how zealously the son has abided by his commands. Moreover, in the beginning, the father is quite dissatisfied with his sons because he is in a hurry to collect some of the good honey he has found, but his sons do not cooperate with him. However, as it turns out, he actually forgets about the honey and keeps following Panda to see if he is obedient. From this point arises "the irrationality of an ideology [that] involves the split between what people say that they know and what they unconsciously believe, as expressed through their actions" (Sharpe and Boucher 2010: 42).

Overall, what seems to have kept this family together is *the symbolic fiction* that hides the inherent antagonism in the relationship between the father and his sons. This antagonism is evident from the very beginning when the obedient Punda's voiceless state shows that he only *seems* to be willing to help. And as the father's personality is disclosed and his strategy in dealing with Panda is shown, it becomes clear that even Punda has never been free to choose to help or not. At best, he might have faced an

*empty gesture* of freedom to be helpful and nice. Therefore, the play seems to advocate the necessity of children's obedience rather than helpfulness. Besides, the author, along with the father, can be considered to be tools in the hands of the big Other, the "hollow" mediator, through whom the "voice" reverberates with a "spectral autonomy" (Žižek 1996: 92). Finally, since the communication between Panda and the forest animals fails, it becomes clear that all of them fail to respect the fantasy and comprehend how the other views reality.

*Moon's guests.* The play begins with a focus on an unusual friendship among a fox, monkey, and rabbit. The first pages of the play are devoted to criticism of the established view of foxes' wickedness, especially toward rabbits, but it is kindness that constitutes the main point addressed throughout the text. A lonely old man living on the moon observes the close relationship among the aforementioned animals, and descends to ask the kindest of them to move in with him. To choose his companion, he disguises himself as a pauper and seeks food at the friends' door. Lacking what is edible for a human, the animals set off in search of food, leaving their dwelling at their guest's disposal. After a while each of them shows up to reveal the fruit of their labour, but the rabbit admits to being empty-handed. Rejecting his friends' offers to bestow upon their guest the acquired food as a shared donation, he has the monkey and fox fetch fuel and sticks, which later turn out to be intended for a fire supposed to roast him for the man. Upon the revelation of the man's real intention, the friends are displeased to part with the rabbit whom they confirm to be the kindest. Subsequently, the man takes them all to live with him, and the play concludes with an image of the animals' lives on the moon associated with our astronomical knowledge of their dwelling, as well as with a song on the importance of friendship and kindness.

The predominant issue that sets the play in motion is obsession with the desire of the other. Yet, closer inspection makes it clear that the other's desire is eclipsed by the big Other's injunction reflected in ideology. Although what we see on the surface is that the animals are touched by the man's penury and voluntarily agree to help him, what is really at work is the internalisation of the big Other and the *empty gesture* of free choice. In fact, the reason why the animals behave in this manner is that they have internalised the dominant doctrine that necessitates opening the door to anybody who stands there and has a request. Since a person in need is to be respected as a guest, it is crucial that his demands are fulfilled. After all, serving a guest is ideologically associated with some holy opportunity to serve God. Being aware of the ideological system prevailing in the community, the old man takes advantage of the *empty gesture* of asking for food while he knows that his request must be accepted. This is especially evident as he inquires more emphatically "did you just hear what I asked?" after he faces the animals' brief pause after he first utters his demand (60). What is most disturbing in this case is that the rabbit has identified with the desire of the Other so profoundly that his sheer existence seems meaningless to him without the successful accomplishment of what is expected of him. His subjectivity has been formed by a set of ideologies, and thus when he finds that he is inept at putting them into practice to serve the guest, he faces the emptiness

of his existence. The fact that he is the selected one to ascend with the old man is an implied verification of the mentioned ideology.

In addition, the rabbit's insistence on having a present of his own to proffer the man – while there is already enough food to satisfy his hunger – can be seen as a sort of commodity fetishism which is not rejected but rather approved of in the play. More exactly, the food in itself has no value, but its importance lies in its use, and excess is worthless when no one needs it. Hence, besides being a sign of respecting the guest and the established doctrine, food gains new significance here: it is an implication of one's capabilities which might be questioned in comparison with those of others.

Overall, the mentioned ideological views and instrumental lives are areas where the author finds himself at ease and in power. When dealing with ideologies, Dolatabadi does not feel the need to emphasise and persuade, for he approaches them as matters of fact. However, in introducing novel, subjective, phantasmatic views, his edginess is disclosed through repetitions and persuasive language that have no parallel in his other purely ideological text addressed in this study. Some of such uncomfortable treatment of phantasmatic elements occur on these occasions: in the beginning, when the unusual fellowship is introduced, and an extended argument follows to justify the idea; then, the repetition of the idea that life does exist on the moon in several parts of the play; and the final emphasis that everything can be possible in a story – as the narrator explains how the moon's marks, rotation, and light depend on the three animals living on it. These attempts in justifying the imaginary descriptions hinder the audience's detachment from rigid reality and established worldviews. Therefore, even in this play – which is the most dreamlike of Dolatabadi's collection of plays for pre-schoolers and elementary students – the playwright is absolutely careful not to disrupt the audiences' supposed rationality and distract them from instruction of ideologies. It is Dolatabadi's absolute adherence to ideologies and persistence in error that are most contemptible about his instructions. As Žižek asserts, “the pervert's falsity resides in his very unconditional attachment to truth, in his refusal to hear the truth resonating in a lie” and see the merit of opportune transgressions from norms (2006: 111).

*The Moon-marked Forehead.* Sara lives with her stepsister – Soraya – and stepmother who send her to work where fiends are deemed to reside. While Sara is spinning cotton there, the fiends appear from a well and steal her belongings. Sara goes down the well to retrieve her property. There, she pleases the fiends, and hence is instructed to wash her face with the clear – not dark – water at a nearby spring. Obediently doing so, Sara becomes gorgeous, and a shiny crescent appears on her forehead. A horse rider taking water from the well finds Sara and falls in love with her. But Sara rushes home, only to find Soraya jealous and her stepmother angry enough to confine her in the furnace. Soraya leaves to do the same as Sara but washes her face with dark water. Having turned into a hideous creature, she returns home where her mother applies cosmetics to her face and passes her off as Moon-marked Forehead whom the prince marries. On the other hand, Sara is rescued and taken away by the horse rider.



To start with the positive qualities of the play, it should be noted that there are areas where it saves itself from being ideological. It undermines the general idea of marriage as a happy ending and presents it as a punishment for the couple. Soraya loses the chance of having a loving husband, since as her true identity and appearance are disclosed, the prince is sure to despise her. After all, he has been looking for the most beautiful girl in town to marry throughout the play. Another subversion of doctrines is evident in the characterisation of the prince whose princely grandeur is challenged. The play also reflects commodity fetishism by depicting how the single girls in the community try to marry a prince to enjoy a royal life, as if money itself has gratifying powers. While great space and focus are devoted to commodity fetishism, it can be argued that the play undermines the idea in the end as Soraya and her mother who most ardently adhere to it are punished. Still, these are rare cases compared to the ideologies the play conveys.

The most outstanding ideology in this play is its portrayal of female figures and the treatment of gender roles. Female figures in the play are limited to the role of housewifery. Sara is constantly busy with chores and is highly regarded by the playwright throughout the play and gets to win the moon mark. Her sister, Soraya, on the other hand, is exempt from such responsibilities around the house and is represented as a lazy reprehensible character. It is as if women's identity and worth depend on their submission to their gender roles without which they are nothing. As Fig. 1 shows, Sara manages to win the fiend's approval due to her submission and her consent to do menial tasks for the fiend – taking lice out of the fiend's hair, washing her socks, and doing the chores.



**Fig. 1.** A fiend and Sara. *The Moon-marked Forehead* by Mitra Bayat. Directed by Seyed Mohamad Taheri-rad as *Sara and the Moon*. 25 April 2017. Tehran Theatre Complex, Tehran, Iran. Photo by Seyed Ziaeddin Safavian.

**Sl. 1.** Demon i Sara. *Mjesecom obilježeno čelo* Mitre Bayata. Postavio redatelj Seyed Mohamad Taheri-rad pod naslovom *Sara i mjesec* 25. travnja 2017. Teheranski kazališni kompleks, Teheran, Iran. Fotografija: Seyed Ziaeddin Safavian.

The women's denial of feminine roles leads to their punishment. The stepmother is punished for not masquerading her dominion, and Soraya is punished for not conforming with the ideological description of good girls. In a patriarchal society, a woman is not supposed to exhibit masculine characteristics like power, authority, independence and agency which are found in the stepmother. Assuming a "feminist position", she avoids "masquerade[ing]" her dominion and "power", as well as shrinking into the modest role society has assumed for her "at the expense of" being dismissed by the community (Parsons, Sawers and McNally 2008: 387). Therefore, she is a threat, not only to the patriarchy but also to her female counterparts, namely Sara and the neighbours, who have internalised the patriarchal ideology. Consequently, she is demonised and brought down, as she is mocked by all the neighbours for having a daughter who looks like a devil. On a more personal level, however, the stepmother seems to deserve the castigation because she has failed to distance herself from two false fantasies. Her first illusion is that her stepdaughter (Sara) has deprived her of the full enjoyment of life, and the second is that Sara is perfectly capable of leading Soraya to a point where such enjoyment is possible.<sup>1</sup> But the truth is that Sara lacks such joy that is expected to accompany exquisite beauty, and she is not capable of showing her sister how to achieve true happiness. Not being able to traverse the fantasy, the stepmother treats her stepdaughter cruelly, and finally burns in the hell she herself has kindled. In any case, as Simone de Beauvoir insists in *The Second Sex*, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Crowley and Pennington 2010: 298), and this story is ardently manipulative in this process of becoming. Becoming a woman, according to the play, involves self-denial.

The view of ugliness being a sign of wickedness, and the "unity of true, good, and beautiful" (Krečič and Žižek 2016: 60) are the other ideologies underscored. Soraya is everything that Sara is not: lazy, complacent, selfish, assertive, and silly. Still, she lives a life Sara yearns for, a comfortable life filled with love. Therefore, she is the embodiment of Sara's innermost desires, and, accordingly, her repulsiveness resides "not [in her] ugliness but [in] the blurring of the line between inside and outside" (70). After all, "the ultimate object of disgust is bare life itself, life deprived of the protective barrier" (66), in other words a life Sara would have led if she had not been bound by social norms. A comparison between Figs. 1 and 2 unmasks how the submissive character (Sara) and the recalcitrant one (Soraya) are treated with discrimination by the white fiend (the beneficent fiend). What can be understood from the two figures is that a female has either to surrender to the dominating system or her assertiveness is to be nullified by superior powers.

<sup>1</sup> The stepmother expects Sara to help her stepsister to become pretty. She thinks that Sara owns something (beauty) and must share it with Soraya. It is as if Sara has robbed her stepmother and Soraya of their happiness (because once they see that Sara is undeniably superior to them, they are no longer satisfied with their lives).



**Fig. 2.** The fiend and Soraya. *The Moon-marked Forehead* by Mitra Bayat. Directed by Seyed Mohamad Taheri-rad as *Sara and the Moon*. 25 April 2017. Tehran Theatre Complex, Tehran, Iran. Photo by Seyed Ziaeddin Safavian.

**Sl. 2.** Demon i Soraya. *Mjesecom obilježeno čelo* Mitre Bayata. Postavio redatelj Seyed Mohamad Taheri-rad pod naslovom *Sara i mjesec* 25. travnja 2017. Teheranski kazališni kompleks, Teheran, Iran. Fotografija: Seyed Ziaeddin Safavian.

As is evident, by admiring the submissive and speechless female figure and belittling the assertive girl, the play advocates submission. Yet, another problematic issue in the play is the way it defines the child-adult relationship. The adult's superiority to children is one of the most fundamental ideologies in Iranian culture and is evident in Fig. 3.



**Fig. 3.** Sara, her stepmother, and Soraya. *The Moon-marked Forehead* by Mitra Bayat. Directed by Seyed Mohamad Taheri-rad as *Sara and the Moon*. 25 April 2017. Tehran Theatre Complex, Tehran, Iran. Photo by Seyed Ziaeddin Safavian.

**Sl. 3.** Sara, njezina maćeha i Soraya. *Mjesecom obilježeno čelo* Mitre Bayata. Postavio redatelj Seyed Mohamad Taheri-rad pod naslovom *Sara i mjesec* 25. travnja 2017. Teheranski kazališni kompleks, Teheran, Iran. Fotografija: Seyed Ziaeddin Safavian.

*Hasan the Bald.* The protagonist, Hasan, is a youngster rejected by his peers because of his baldness. A jinni meets him and gratifies his desires in return for six different portions of his life (for each wish the jinni fulfils, Hasan has to give up one portion of his life). Hasan's main desire is to win Chelgis, a girl imprisoned by a fiend. But since the fiend cannot help him directly in this regard, Hasan wishes for physical strength, assertiveness, mastery of poetic language, a companion who can advise him, and the fiend's life. Upon saving Chelgis, he takes his mother to Chelgis's house to ask for her father's blessing. Eventually, they marry and the jinni does not take Hasan's life because he believes it belongs to his wife.

In this play, non-ideological issues abound. The *act* is partially fulfilled as Hasan questions the social requirements and gender roles. Facing his unconscious, embodied in a jinni (Badirkhani 2012), he is initially overwhelmed by the desire of the Other. Hence, he seeks masculine qualities approved at the symbolic level: sexual assertiveness and physical strength, both of which are deemed essential aspects of masculinity; poesy, which turns out to be in close association with financial matters; and friendship which requires conformity and self-abnegation. Hasan's final success in overcoming the grip of the big Other coincides with his confrontation with the fiend that has captured Chelgis. The fiend turns out to have been a lamb compelled to fake savagery to conform with the strong creatures who can survive in the symbolic world. He asks Hasan to break the glass holding his spell and life to liberate the real lamb. Doing so, Hasan symbolically sets himself free of the absolute manipulation of the ideology, the desire of the Other, and the symbolic world in general, and is prepared to die – because only with the help of the jinni is he able to break the glass, and the jinni only helps him in return for his life. The fall of the potent fiend also undermines the righteousness and superiority of the other. The Žižekian symbolic suicide is represented by the disappearance of Hasan's double who is an entity filled with the other's desires and rules. Besides, fantasy is traversed as Hasan notices that there is nothing behind his desires, and as the big Other is relegated to be seen as an entity that struggles with lack and loss. Hasan's triumph is promising with regard to the possibility of a new world where obsession with the Other is less prevalent. Accordingly, a balance seems to be achieved in the end, where being subjugated and manipulated by the symbolic phase is denied. A sacrifice is undertaken in giving up a part of one's nature for the sake of recognition by the culture.

The path Chelgis takes toward the realisation of her subjectivity is less straightforward. As a girl, she experiences puberty earlier than Hasan and has to adapt to the conditions of the culture ruled by the Other. She needs to yield to the rules of the big Other which are mandated through the Name-of-the-Father, the fiend. She has to stay within the limits and modestly avoid the male gaze. In this reading, the death of Chelgis's compassionate mother and the mother's replacement by a cruel stepmother should be viewed as Chelgis's fantasy. Losing the former unity with the mother and being sent into a less lenient world of the symbolic and patriarchy, Chelgis has to cling to her fantasy to cope with her castration. Therefore, she keeps her relation with the imaginary

phase through the fantasy of an ideal mother who has passed away – rather than a mother who has to prepare her daughter for the reality of social life – and begins to see her father as a ruthless embodiment of customs and rules. As Goldwater mentions, “it’s much easier” to attribute periodical misbehaviour to a “bad stepmother” rather than the real mother (2013: 234). Chelgis’s uneasiness about her stepmother’s status can be read as a *spectral apparition*. Chelgis believes that it is the stepmother who has robbed her of her pleasure and peace. Unlike Hasan, she neither traverses the fantasy nor questions the righteousness of the symbolic injunctions. Even when asked by Hasan whether or not the fiend is cruel to her, Chelgis approves it with contentment and says that after all it is a fiend. Therefore, again the submission of women is reinforced in this play.



**Fig. 4.** Hasan, his mother and Chelgis. *Hasan the Bald* by Abbas Janfada. Directed by Mansoor Jahanbakhsh. 11 September 2015. Red Crescent Theatre Hall, Mashhad, Iran. Photo by Meysam Dehghaani.

**Sl. 4.** Hasan, njegov majka i Chelgis. *Ćelavi Hasan* Abbasa Janfada. Postavio redatelj Mansoor Jahanbakhsh 11. rujna 2015. Kazališna dvorana Crvenoga polumjeseca, Mashhad, Iran. Fotografija: Meysam Dehghaani.

In its treatment of feminine gender roles, the play is highly ideological. The assertive woman – whom the jinni introduces to Hasan to help him overcome his shyness – is presented as a contemptible character. But Chelgis who waits passively to be saved is shown to be a virtuous respectable woman. Chelgis’s passivity is further evident in the part where her father refuses to let her marry Hasan, and she plays the role of an obedient daughter who has no voice before her father. And only after this does her father let her do what she wants. Another ideological issue that the play shares with the previous plays concerns the adult-child relationship. Hasan and Chelgis are both treated as inferiors by their caregivers and are obliged to obey them. Hasan is forced by his mother to leave the house and find a way to become independent. In the end also,

he depends on his mother to propose to Chelgis and brings Chelgis to the same inferior position (Fig. 4). Chelgis is also obedient and submissive in her relationship with her father. Thus, the ideological view of adults' superiority is reinforced in this play, too.

Another common problematic issue in all the plays studied here regards the children's right to participate in the art world and in cultural events. The audiences of Iranian children's theatre encounter only a few child actors on a stage that has come to life for them. Adults play major roles and their greater number on stage drives child actors to the margins. How child actors are driven away from the centre is evident in the poster of *When Fish Drowns* staged in 2019.<sup>2</sup> As can be seen, the leading character (Panda) is played by an adult. A scene from the 2016 production of *Moon's Guests* also shows the injustice done to children as the majority of roles are filled by adults. The only child on stage is the girl who assumes the role of the rabbit.<sup>3</sup> This is quite telling regarding the culture responsible for such a decision. In this culture, children are not yet complete human beings to be trusted and given responsibilities.



**Fig. 5.** Hasan, Chelgis, and the wedding guests. *Hasan the Bald* by Abbas Janfada. Directed by Mansoor Jahanbakhsh. 11 September 2015. Red Crescent Theatre Hall, Mashhad, Iran. Photo by Meysam Dehghaani.

**Sl. 5.** Hasan, Chelgis i svatovi. *Ĉelavi Hasan* Abbasa Janfada. Postavio redatelj Mansoor Jahanbakhsh 11. rujna 2015. Kazališna dvorana Crvenoga polumjeseca, Mashhad, Iran. Fotografija: Meysam Dehghaani.

<sup>2</sup> A photograph of the poster can be seen at <<https://booshehr.theater.ir/fa/119974>>. It presents forest animals and the panda brothers. *When Fish Drowns* by Hasan Dolatabadi was directed by Dorna Hemati and Mina Khajezade and performed at The City Theatre, Bushehr, Iran, on 25 April 2019.

<sup>3</sup> A photo of this scene can be found at <<https://yazd.theater.ir/fa/62711>>. It presents the rabbit, the fox, the monkey, and villagers. *Moon's Guests* by Hasan Dolatabadi was directed by Seyed Abas Hosseini Zarch and performed at The Art Hall, Yazd, Iran on 13 August 2016.



**Fig. 6.** Hasan and the wedding guests. *Hasan the Bald* by Abbas Janfada. Directed by Mansoor Jahanbakhsh. 11 September 2015. Red Crescent Theatre Hall, Mashhad, Iran. Photo by Meysam Dehghaani.

**Sl. 6.** Hasan i svatovi. *Čelavi Hasan* Abbasa Janfada. Postavio redatelj Mansoor Jahanbakhsh 11. rujna 2015. Kazališna dvorana Crvenoga polumjeseca, Mashhad, Iran. Fotografija: Meysam Dehghaani.

Performances intended for children are also generally expected to include dances to lively songs. A performance like the one based on *The Moon-marked Forehead*<sup>4</sup> has to censor out dances due to the leading actors' gender. Accordingly, it merely has limited dance-like movements. Similarly, in *Hasan the Bald*, the dances seem to owe their legitimacy to the fact that they are traditional (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). It is as if in Iran only what is ideological is permissible. Dance is acceptable only if it is traditional and not modern, if there is a reason for dancing: to familiarise the new generation with traditions. Hence, as Fig. 5 and Fig. 6 show, movements are strictly uniform, controlled by established customs, just as clothes are. Therefore, at the level of dramaturgy also, the plays fail to respect individuality and reinforce conformity.

Overall, theatre with its unique potentials in engaging audiences aurally, visually and kinetically is more than a mere instrument for moulding the child who is thereupon viewed as “a human becoming” rather than “a human being” (Uprichard 2008: 304). Prioritising children's future socio-cultural role, a pedantic writer like Dolatabadi focuses on who the “child will be rather than [who] the child is”, and, aside from “neglect[ing] the present everyday realities of being a child”, may harm children with his uncertain “anticipations” (304). Such anticipations can be found in Dolatabadi's three addendums to each of his plays: Pre-performance Discussions, Suggested Acting and Directing Procedures, and Character Analysis. The first section includes an explanation of the

<sup>4</sup> *The Moon-marked Forehead* by Mitra Bayat was directed by Seyed Mohamad Taheri-rad as *Sara and the Moon* and was performed at Tehran Theatre Complex, Tehran, Iran on 25 April 2017.

concepts and lessons addressed in the related play, and also several quotations mainly from religious figures. This part, which is intended to be read to audiences prior to performances, hinders one of the most important functions of children's theatre which is "helping young audiences to become more active, reflective, critically self-aware and articulate audiences" to attain the "ability to reason" instead of being dependent on others' reasoning (Reason 2013: 101). Children also need to learn how to focus on the experience and the way they see the performance rather than on the educational points; they need to appreciate the art and how it stimulates and focuses individuals' energies and enhances one's understanding of human life (105–106). The two other sections, on the other hand, disrupt the actors' genuine identification with the characters, restrict the opportunities theatre experiences provide for actors to creatively offer new insights and critically object to some issues, and finally paralyse actors in understanding and constructing a mental image of the characters. In other words, "improvisation", which Benjamin (1999) considers "central" to actors' experience of the theatre, is strictly controlled and reduced to a bare minimum in the works of this dramatist. Dolatabadi's preoccupation with socio-cultural conditions, and his emphasis on being fully aware of the requirements arising from these conditions (Dolatabadi 2014: 18), justifies the view that he considers himself as the big Other's mediator, being unquestionably "certain" about "what the Other wants" (Myers 2003: 95).

More specifically, in theatre halls, "the touch, even the odor of the actor's sweat, the blink of his eye, the rhythm and warmth of his breathing create an intimacy between actor and spectator for which nothing can be substituted" (Chelkowski 1977: 39). However, such a significant potential of live performances is rendered abortive through the obsessive desire of some adults, just like that of Dolatabadi, to have the audiences' experience under control as well as to impose ideologies on them. The ideologies that were dominant and recurrent in all the studied plays include the superiority of adults and the necessity of children's obedience and submissiveness. In order to understand what may justify the presence of such doctrines in these plays, it is important to note that the economic situation in Iran has long rendered it impossible for people to escape the fixed social classes they belong to. Many people are even doomed to fall into the lower classes. Therefore, in order for the ruling system to protect its position, it is highly important to train submissive citizens who are less likely to revolt against it. This seems to justify why Dolatabadi's plays – which have less aesthetic and psychoanalytic value than the other two plays – enjoy governmental support. In addition, reinforcing the idea that adults, and especially parents, have some holy status, and obeying their orders is a moral and religious duty, along with applauding the act of prioritising others over oneself, all create the sense that opposing superiors and others is an act against God and has to be avoided. Such ideas are even present in private plays because, to be staged, they also have to obtain permission from governmental and religious departments. Besides, as these private productions face numerous financial difficulties in renting spaces to perform and in providing the necessities, they cannot risk their income which is only obtained through selling tickets. Accordingly, they have to please the majority of the public who



are still under the spell of cultural and ideological notions. The strict measures of these official entities have also led to playwrights' self-censorship and avoidance of addressing taboo subjects. Therefore, it seems unlikely that children's theatre in Iran will improve unless critics stop being silent and start examining plays aimed at children to establish high standards for a play's reception.

Since life owes its richness to diversity in worldviews, it is crucial to set the stage for children to be reassured of the validity of their fantasies. Still, it is simplistic to think that one can reach one's ultimate subjective fantasy and pure individuality. As Žižekian psychoanalysis illustrates, the position of the subject, devoid of the other's marks, entails the occupation of a void that is supposed to remain empty (Myers 2003: 36). Besides, one needs to live in a community to satisfy one's needs, and thereupon arises the necessity of being recognised by the other, and, subsequently, the gaze and voice of the other begin to matter. Accordingly, assuming rights for children and defending them against adults' propensity to shape their minds are not to be equated with deluding oneself into believing that it is possible to eliminate society's influences and indoctrination. Rather, what the present study intended to indicate was the necessity of presenting the world as objectively as possible, leaving room for new worldviews to evolve. For, as the preceding pages have illuminated, the reality of life is limited to our own fantasies instead of being there in its own undeniable position awaiting each passing generation to acknowledge it. While established views ensure a relatively harmonious community where the clash of ideas finds immediate resolutions, they block the way toward a new world which might turn out to be worth the struggle.

While the modern world distrusts language and counts it inept in reflecting reality immediately and effectively, Dolatabadi insists that everything be explained. He does not seem to believe that "showing is better than telling: the ideal work lets the characters and events speak for themselves" (Rose 1984: 60). However, the present study has proven the strong likelihood that Dolatabadi has dismissed this fact because he wants to limit children's perspective. His plays perfectly show how "language does not simply reflect the world but is active in its constitution of the world" through doctrines (60). Dolatabadi's tendency to shape children's perception might have arisen from the total innocence that is generally attributed to children in Iranian culture. It can be argued that regarding children as "innocent" beings has made him obsessed with moralities that are ideologically considered to nurture children as rational angels (Bedard 2011: 286). Therefore, in an attempt to adapt his texts to the majority's expectations, he has composed innocent and didactic plays which are by no means compatible with the idea of art for art's sake.

Even though nullifying ideologies is idealistic and none of the studied plays are bereft of ideological footprints, we are reassured by Žižek that what we need is not to defeat all ideological systems and prove their falsity. However, even a momentary, elusive image of how we are manipulated and are manipulating others will guide us toward more liberated, enriched lives. In fact, it is naïve to think that reality is false, and our lives are based on "lie[s]" (Hawkes 2003: 171), since, as Žižek contends, a community

can only exist if its subjects overcome the madness brought about by fascination with the Real and abide by regulations of the symbolic (2006: 46). Finally, since the public plays studied here are considerably more ideological than the private ones, and because they are reaching a wider audience, it is necessary to examine them on a large scale and in more depth. The necessity to ameliorate Iranian children's theatre could be further emphasised through a quantitative study that would investigate children's responses, both as audiences and actors, to plays during performances or rehearsals, as well as after several days. Such a study might rely on questionnaires filled out by parents, teachers, or children themselves. A well-prepared questionnaire would help shed light on all the nuances of the present situation that would be thought-provoking for those interested in expanding the horizons of children's drama.

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### **Psihoanalitičko čitanje odabranih perzijskih dječjih igrokaza**

Jednom kad se kazalište okrene djeci, budućim građanima koji će donositi odluke, ono vrijednostima i stavovima koje promiče može utjecati na smjer razvoja društva. Izniman kapacitet toga medija u poticanju i aktivaciji publike u kombinaciji s dječjom receptivnošću, nužno upućuje na važnost detaljnoga istraživanja ideologija kojima su igrokazi prožeti. Ovaj rad otkriva kako ti ideološki čimbenici mogu ugroziti glavnu svrhu kazališta, tj. poticanje gledatelja na stvaranje svojih vlastitih zamisli. Istraživanje se oslanja na Žižekovo razumijevanje ideologije, fantastike, zbilje i subjektivnosti. Polazeći od njegovih psihoanalitičkih uvida, analiziraju se četiri perzijska igrokaza kako bi se utvrdilo koje su ideologije u temelju motiva i pouka tih djela, kao i to kako se opravdava prisutnost takvih sadržaja u dječjoj drami. Detaljno razmatranje pokazuje da su analizirani igrokazi obilježeni svjesnim manipulativnim ideologijama s namjerom odgajanja homogeniziranih članova društva umjesto posvećenosti prikazivanju objektivnih uvida u stvarni život.

**Ključne riječi:** dječja drama, fantastika, ideologija, drugo, subjekt, Slavoj Žižek