

roles and should attempt to be active in society. This article and another on compulsory military training, written in English by Y. Simon, help us trace discourses regarding gender roles in the early Pahlavi learning environment.

One of the most compelling pieces is written by Hossein Hashemiyan in defense of the need for a “literary revolution” (*enqelāb-e adabi*) in Iran. The author argues that literary revolutions should precede political revolutions, and that it has been the inadequacy of a literary revolution in Iran that has resulted in the incompleteness of its political development. He states that because a literary revolution had not yet adequately developed, and consequently lost its path during a political revolution, literature had failed to achieve its goals, and furthermore was unable to change its course to influence the new political system (p. 57A). Given its publication date, such a critical approach to the dynamic relationship between political and literary revolutions, published in a student compilation, further historicizes the emergence of a sociological understanding of literature in the modern history of Iran.

There are questions that remain unanswered and require further investigation. For example, did the college advise or assist in any way with the compilation of this collection? Were such contributions considered in the overall assessment of a student’s development and academic performance? Such questions might be answered if other studies of student life and culture at the American College of Tehran appear. Morteza Gheissari’s final sentences in the introduction to his album imply that this was a pioneering attempt at the American College to create a new way for future students to compile and possibly publish works of a similar vein. Still, it is not clear to what extent this call was answered by later students, given the institutional changes that soon altered the course of the college’s history. In 1940, this Presbyterian missionary institution (originally established in 1872) was taken over by the government and integrated into the Iranian educational system.

After the college was nationalized, its lively student life, consisting of student clubs, play rehearsals, and publishing the school’s bilingual paper, *Javānān Irān*, underwent a gradual transformation in a school that, while preserving some of its historical legacy in humanities and journalism, prioritized assisting students to learn and excel in the exact and natural sciences.

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The One Thousand and First Night: A Play by Bahram Beyzaie

Translated and Critical Analysis by Saeed Talajooy

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For almost half a century, Bahram Beyzaie (also Beyzai or Beyzā'ei) has been widely hailed as Iran's greatest and most influential playwright, whose pioneering work for stage and screen transformed the Persian literary and theatrical landscape. His prolific output comprises seventy-seven plays, fourteen feature films, and a significant body of research and texts on the history and mythology of Japanese, Chinese, and Indo-Iranian drama. However, despite his considerable creative output and contributions, Beyzaie's original output has rarely been the subject of new, high-standard translations. Saeed Talajooy, who has indeed contributed in no small way to the current renaissance of interest in studying and translating Beyzaie, has played a critical role in raising awareness in Western academia about a writer whose sensitive revisiting of myths and rituals has made him one of the major reformulators of Persian mythology, generating novel discourses on modernization and collective nationality. Talajooy's recently published English translation of one of the greatest and most important plays by Beyzaie, *The One Thousand and First Night* (Shab-e Hezār-o Yekom), deserves recognition as it provides an opportunity for timely discussion of the history of *One Thousand and One Nights* as a classic text with mysterious roots. It invites literary scholars studying or teaching *One Thousand and One Nights* mainly as a classic text rooted in the Arabic tradition to revisit its Persian roots from a freshly unique Iranian perspective and through the lens of mythology, drama, and performance.

The original play was published and staged in Tehran in 2003. Written in three parts and in an elegantly poetic fashion, *The One Thousand and First Night* blends two classic texts—the *Book of Kings* (Shāhnāmeḥ, 1010), the eleventh-century Persian heroic epic by Abolqasem Ferdowsi, and *One Thousand and One Nights* (Hezār va Yek Shab), often known in English as *Arabian Nights*—into a text that comprises ancient folktales from Arabic, Sanskrit, Persian, and Mesopotamian literature. Bayzaie draws on both texts to weave his own unique narrative about the formation of Iranian national identity following the Arab conquest in ways that deeply resonate with the socio-political situation of his own time. His composite characters are either directly borrowed from the above-noted texts or are deeply inspired by their tropes and stories. Each part of the play offers a different reading of the myth of Zahhak, the villain ruler in the *Book of Kings* who fed the serpents that grew on his shoulders with the brains of his kingdom's youth.

To understand the complex dynamics of the play, it is worth noting that the *Book of Kings*, and its reformulation, has been a central recurring source of inspiration for Beyzaie's work, with at least six of his plays adapting and reframing its characters and stories for a modern reader. As Talajooy has noted, Beyzaie's harnessing of these tales constitutes an attempt to highlight “the origins of Iranian monarchy to write a hi/story of the present and challenge the glorification of monarchy in a modern society.”¹ Beyzaie himself has argued that “the *Shāhnāmeḥ* shows us how power and the powerful gradually get corrupted over time and give rise to despotism. It shows us how despotism can ruin our lives forever.”²

Another important feature of this play is Beyzaie's radical repositioning of women at the center of his storytelling, also a key characteristic of his other works, subverting and transcending political circumstances that render Iranian women one of the most marginalized groups in the history of Iran. Prior to the publication of *The One Thousand and First Night* (2003), Beyzaie featured a critique of royalism and monarchical structures in two of his plays, *Ashdahak* (1960) and *The Account of Bondar the Premier* (1961). He reimagined the battle of two opposing kings, Zahhak as the villain king and Jamshid as the extolled one, with the underlying message: “the monarchy worked by a cruel subjugation of people and a paranoid control of knowledge.”³ In *The One Thousand and First Night*, Beyzaie takes a step further and weaves together elements from stories of the *Book of Kings* and the character of Scheherazade, the storyteller princess of *One Thousand and One Nights* who rescues herself

¹ Saeed Talajooy, “Indigenous Performing Traditions,” *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011): 498.

² Beyzaie interview with *Ayyār-e Tanha* documentary, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXSUxdiptM8>.

³ Saeed Talajooy, “Reformulation of *Shahnameh* Legends in Bahram Beyzaie's Plays,” *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2013): 698.

from death at the hands of the oppressive ruler Shahriar by recounting stories for one thousand and one nights. Weaving different characters and stories from these two sources, Beyzaie succeeds in creating a distinctly modern play about the personal liberation and political emancipation of women in a deeply misogynistic society. Through forming a counterhegemonic discourse, Beyzaie confronts misogyny by reimagining the details that may have been removed from history in favor of the ruling power. As Beyzaie himself once said,

throughout Iranian history, women are the ones who take the lead in everything. Men either brag or live in their own dreams. Although women have never claimed the throne, they have been instrumental in shaping and reforming the power through indirect ways.⁴

The One Thousand and First Night is indeed the most persuasive example of his claim.

In all three parts of the play, we see women characters as agents of change and liberation rather than repressed, marginalized voices. The first part of the play is a return to the warring kings, Jamshid and Zahhak, this time from the point of view of King Jamshid's daughter, who has been captured and married by his nemesis, King Zahhak. By subverting the proverbial Persian saying "a woman's dream is the reverse" (*khâb-e zan chapeh*), the two women, as Talajooy also notes, become the authors rather than just the recounters of the story.

The second part recounts the story of Zahhak from a new perspective. Beyzaie considers the myth of Zahhak and the story of Scheherazade and her struggle with her oppressor king in *One Thousand and One Nights* to be of the same root. The focus of the second part of the play is on the historical tensions between Persians and Arabs following the Arab conquest of Persia (632–654). Having written extensively about Persian identity formation under the rule of Islam, Beyzaie brings his profound knowledge and insight on the impact of the Arab conquest on Persian culture and identity to this play by focusing on the translation of *Hezâr Afsân* (A Thousand Tales), which he takes to be the original source of *One Thousand and One Nights*. The play highlights the destruction of the text as a turning point in the alteration of mainstream narratives on the text's original roots. The scene echoes actual historical events such as the prohibition on recording poetry in Persian in the first two centuries after the Arab conquest and the change of script, which made recording of the Persian tradition in the original Pahlavi script essentially impossible during this time. Three characters embody this loss and devastation. First is Pour-e Farrokhân, who is responsible for the translation of *Hezâr Afsân* from Pahlavi to Arabic. He is tortured and killed under the orders of the Sheriff of Baghdad for what Arabs define as heresy. As Talajooy notes in his critical analysis of the play, the torture and death of Pour-e Farrokhân "builds the tension to suggest the crushing surveillance and suffocation that one may suffer under a tyrannical regime that justifies its atrocities with religion" (p. 148). Khurzâd, Pour-e Farrokhân's wife, and her sister Mâhak are two key female characters in this part who take an active role in representing Persian culture in Baghdad's court. Their roles are almost identical to that of Scheherazade and her sister Dinâzâd in the court of Shahriâr in *One Thousand and One Nights* and Shahrnâz and Arvanâz in the court of Zahhak in the *Book of Kings*. However, to avoid succumbing to their oppressive ruler or being held as war captives in Baghdad, Khurzâd and Mâhak end their own lives.

The third part of the play offers a third reading of Zahhak's story, depicting women as the source of knowledge and men as their ignorant oppressors. The female protagonist, Roshanak, is a literate and educated woman living in a highly superstitious society that believes a woman is doomed to death if she reads *One Thousand and One Night* in full. Roshanak reads the book and then patiently challenges her ignorant, oppressive husband Mirkhân, who refuses to listen. Mirkhân had previously married Roshanak's mother and later represents the evil king Zahhak. Roshanak's mother, who is an educated and literate

⁴ Beyzaie interview with *Ayyâr-e Tanhâ* documentary.


woman and owner of a school, also ends her own life when Mirkhân forces her to shut down her school. Talajooy notes that Beyzaie wrote this part for a festival entitled “1001 Nights–today” in Denmark, where it was staged by Alan Lyddiard at the Betty Nansen Theatre in 2002. He then wrote the other parts and staged the full play in Tehran in Autumn 2003.

Overall, the play invites the audience to confront a question with important repercussions: What impact has silencing women had on indigenous Persian culture? Talajooy’s critical essay—published as an appendix to the play—is an extremely helpful guide for any reader interested in a deeper understanding of the play in the context of Beyzaie’s life and work. The translation itself is particularly timely, as Iranian women and girls continue to spearhead an unprecedented emancipatory movement in Iran and the Middle East following the death-in-police custody of the twenty-two-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022. As Talajooy writes in his critical essay, “Beyzaie’s heroines act as role models for women not just for the sake of women but also for the roles such women can play in subverting the vicious cycle of female desire and male aspiration that produces toxic masculinity” (p. 138). Revisiting, appreciating, and enacting such multilayered and rich characters has never felt more urgent and resonant than now, as Iranian women’s struggle continues to inspire citizens of the world in the battle against misogyny and toxic masculinity.

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Afghan Crucible, The Soviet Invasion and the Making of Modern Afghanistan. Elisabeth Leake (Oxford University Press, 2022). i-xxii, 343 pages, maps. ISBN: 978-0-19-884601-7 hardback

Afghanistan’s Lost Futures

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Afghan Crucible offers a comprehensive narrative based on an exceptional synthesis of the sources now available to help understand the long and bloody civil war that led to the country’s destruction in the years of the Soviet military occupation (1979–1989) and after. The book analyzes the war as a complex entanglement of local, regional, and international dynamics, arguing that fighting continued for years because competing Afghan voices with differing visions of modernity (constitutionalist, monarchist, socialist, Islamist) were never allowed to settle their differences internally. Instead, domestic conflict was continually inflamed and structured by regional neighbors (Pakistan, Iran, China), Cold War competitors (USSR, USA), and global ideological influences.

Drawing on a wide range of original archival sources and documents, especially Soviet materials, the chapters situate Afghan events within global historical processes of Asian nationalism, decolonization, modernization, non-alignment, the rise of Islamist discourses, and alternatives to western models. Full discussion using citations from globally comparative secondary literature integrates the most recent scholarship from each thematic field so that events in Afghanistan are fully contextualized. Elisabeth Leake tells stories familiar from earlier, now standard, references, but gives substantial background to issues and dynamics