

The Existence of a Scarecrow is Essential¹: ISA and RSA in The Four Boxes

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Abstract

The Four Boxes is the most political play written by Bahram Beizaie in 1968 before the Islamic revolution in Iran. In the acclaimed work which has been written in the western form of the Theatre of Absurd, Beizaie depicts the social and political situation of his time. Whereof Bahram Beizaie created works that incorporated the literature of the world and adapted modern western literary styles of writing, this essay employs the western approach of the Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses by Louis Althusser. The writer explores The Four Boxes to depict the ways in which Beizaie has pictured Iranian society of the late 1960s in his play. Concepts such as Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses are employed to analyze the relationship between the scarecrow, as the ruler of the society, and the four colors, as a representation of different social classes. The paper aims to investigate different apparatuses which are practiced in society and their effects on the subjects. Therefore, it grants the readers of the play with a better understanding of the association

between levels of society and the reasoning behind the characters' actions.

Keywords: Bahram Beizaie, Iranian society, Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses, The Four Boxes.

Introduction

a) Bahram Beizaie and The Four Boxes

Bahram Beizaie, (1938-today), is one of the most acclaimed writers and movie directors in Iran. He is a figure praised both by critics and the audience because of his skill in using the world's new artistic forms giving them Iranian authenticity. Bahram Beizaie started writing plays in 1963, and he is still writing and directing plays in America [1]. He explores a vast variety of themes and subjects in his plays such as Death of Yazdgerd, Afra, Or the Day Passes and The King Snake. This essay is going to discuss one of Beizaie's plays called The Four Boxes (Chahar Sandogh), published in 1968. "The main subjects of Beizaie's works can be divided into five subjects: national, social, historical, protestation, and religious plays. His Social Plays are divided into three categories as well: social plays which address women issues, social plays with symbolic form and political content and plays in which he uses the features of popular Persian literature" [2]. To categorize The Four Boxes in this division

¹ (Beizaie 10)

of Beizaie's works, we must consider this play as a political play with allegorical forms and symbols [3]. This play can be called the most political work of Bahram Beizaie, and he even went through lots of trouble showing it on the stage.

The Four Boxes is a play in two acts including five characters (four colors and one scarecrow). The play starts with four figures, Green, Red, Yellow, and Black, thinking that danger is imminent and they have to do something about it. Therefore, they decide to build a scarecrow. After finishing the creation process, they celebrate scarecrow's existence. However, the scarecrow refuses to obey the figures and starts to order them around instead. Colors try to unite and overcome the scarecrow's power, but they cannot succeed. In the second act, the reader observes four boxes on the stage, each for one of the colors. They are trapped in the boxes by the scarecrow without any recollection of what has happened to them. The Four Boxes is a play in two acts including five characters (four colors and one scarecrow). The play starts with four figures, Green, Red, Yellow, and Black, thinking that danger is imminent and they have to do something about it. Therefore, they decide to build a scarecrow. After finishing the creation process, they celebrate scarecrow's existence. However, the scarecrow refuses to obey the figures and starts to order them around instead. Colors try to unite and overcome the scarecrow's power, but they cannot succeed. In the second act, the reader observes four boxes on the stage, each for one of the colors. They are trapped in the boxes by the scarecrow without any recollection of what has happened to them.

They seem happy in their little boxes until Black starts remembering something and feeling uncomfortable in its box. Therefore, once again the colors try to unite and defeat

the Scarecrow. To ensure none of them will betray their trust, they decide to destroy their boxes so there would be no way back. Black smashes its box, but others feel doubtful and refuse to do the same. Hence, Black is left alone empty-handed to face the scarecrow by itself, as the play ends.

As mentioned above, this play is allegorical and symbolic at the same time in which every character could be a symbol of one group of the society in Iran. Between the late 1960s and 1970s, Iran's growing contact with the West aroused many contradictions, inner conflicts, and extravagancies [4]. "As Iran began to have increasing contact with the West, many sectors of the population—especially intellectuals, minorities, clerics, and women—became increasingly aware of their nation's problems." [5]. Additionally, new western literary genres were introduced to Iran via skilled Iranian writers' works. The Four Boxes reflects the social situation of the time it has been published [6]. The scarecrow is the totalitarian ruler of the society, and every color symbolizes a social class and different types of people. "Yellow represents the intellectual class, Green represents the traditional religious class, Red represents the capitalist, and Black is the Public" [7]. Beizaie manages to build a complete reflection of the society of his time in this play through five characters using the absurd form of Samuel Becket. The Four Boxes incorporates the western absurdist works demonstrating modern Iranian conflicts. Henceforth it would be possible to explore and analyze the characteristics of The Four Boxes' society through Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses.

a) Louis Althusser, ISA and RSA

Nowadays Louis Althusser is considered as one of the most critical Marxist theoreticians whose ideas are constantly referred to in

scholarly writing. Many of his books, such as Machiavelli and Us and Lenin and Philosophy, seem to be influenced by his preceding ideologists such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and Friedrich Engels [8]. “Not Marx nor Engels, have not developed a structured theory of Ideology, although they have mentioned this concept in many instances” and in fact, it was Althusser who used their ideas to form a solid theory or even expand them [9].

This paper will analyze The Four Boxes through Althusser’s famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in which Althusser added new concepts to some of the previous thinker’s theories. He uses Marx’s idea of a reproduction of the conditions of production to explore the function of a society and the way levels of a system are working for the aim of gaining the power [10]. As Althusser refers to Marx’s concept of a society, he suggests that every society is constructed of different levels which he called infrastructure and superstructure [11]

These levels of society are in a relationship and therefore “that the upper floors could not ‘stay up’ alone if they did not rest precisely on their base” [12]. Thus it is safe to say that every level of society needs other levels, especially the upper levels, such as the ruling part of the society in order to have a base to rest on, to even rule on. This feature of the society is the part which is called State Apparatus or in the short term suggested by Althusser, State is “a force of repressive execution and intervention ‘in the interests of the ruling classes’ in the class struggle conducted by the bourgeoisie and its allies against the proletariat” [13].

According to Althusser, the whole class struggle is aimed for the possession of state power. The lower classes, the proletariat, are seeking to gain or even regain the power from the ruling class. Therefore, it is

inevitable to expect the ruling class to try to maintain its position or as it has been mention before, to reproduce the conditions of production. The struggle of the lower classes against the higher authority is called a revolution, “the overthrow of the existing state pursuant to a conquest of state power, that is, the confiscation of its apparatuses and their replacement [14]. Of course, the ruling class is not idle toward these actions and it has its solutions in order to prevent or eliminate any uprising in the society. In order to have dominance, a State uses its Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses (RSA and ISA). They are the means for the state to rule on its subjects and prepare the conditions of the society for the production which is the most important ground, based on Marxist’s view. Althusser distinguishes between RSA and ISA by their function: “the Repressive State Apparatus functions by violence, whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function by ideology” [15]. However, he admits that it is impossible to see these apparatuses function by themselves and actually “There is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus” or “purely ideological apparatus” [16]. Therefore, Ideology and Repressive forces work simultaneously, but it is the ratio that differentiates types of apparatuses.

Accordingly, ISA and RSA are two weapons for the ruling class to stabilize its position. “no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses” [17]. The primary purpose of all the effort from the ruling class is to make the individuals a subject of their ideology. No revolution or uprising is possible and the state reaches the full possession of the power. Therefore, this essay aims to explore Althusser’s theory about Ideological State Apparatuses and

Repressive State Apparatuses, in order to give a better understanding of The Four Boxes to the audience.

Getting through The Four Boxes

The first act of the play, starts with the colors, sitting around and then suddenly Yellow yells “Danger!” [18]. They all discuss the fact that something dangerous is coming for them; however, they do not know what it is or even if there is any danger at all. Nevertheless, they all decide to build something in order to keep themselves safe. So they all participate and a scarecrow is built. One must keep in mind that the scarecrow can be a symbol of the dictator or the ruling class, and the colors portray the different classes of the society. Therefore, at the start of the play, the reader notices the fact that it is the society (and no other element) that decides who rules over them. Reading the play, one will observe how the colors give the scarecrow weapons such as whip and gun. Thus, the ruling class needs the common people to be powerful or even to be in power. It seems that all of the characters had one intention for building the scarecrow. “**Yellow:** It knows its duties. Because it was built for those duties; serving us, rage for our enemies!” [19]

However, as a creature which was given the power of thought, after coming to life the scarecrow doubts its creators and wonders about its position. “What if you are not satisfied with me? What will happen to me?” [20]. So the colors admit that they will eliminate him. Hence, as it is expected for anyone or in this illustrative example, any government to try and fortify its status. “**Scarecrow:** I want to live – [raises the gun] There is no other way; you wanted a servant? Now it is you who should serve me. **Red:** Be careful; that gun is loaded! **Scarecrow:** Better! You should obey me” [21]. Here is the first example of RSA in the story. In order

to enforce himself, the scarecrow starts to threaten the colors and because they realize there is no other option for them, colors start running away. After a period of running and chasing, the scarecrow seems to give up on chasing them. “**Black:** It must have understood that it was doing something bad, it must be regretful. **Yellow:** Nonsense! It has changed the method” [22]. Meanwhile, the scarecrow has seized attacking while the colors start to consult with each other to find a solution. Therefore, they ally to be united and kill the scarecrow. They know the scarecrow will not kill them because it needs them “**Yellow:** Because if it kills us, he is alone in facing any other danger. **Black:** By the way, if there is no us, who would he rule?” [23] The Scarecrow returns. He has recognized that threatening is not the permanent solution; thus he starts enforcing through an ideology: “There was a spy in your meeting” [24]. In this way, the Scarecrow tries to infiltrate to Red and he succeeds. With faking torturing the Red, the scarecrow plans to affect other members of the society too and once again it is successful in its plan. Green hears the fake shouting of Red and faces the scarecrow about its behaviors. However, it is the scarecrow who achieves to fool Green just like it did with Red. “**Green:** [laughing] You are right. What do I have to do with all this? I am neutral. Completely impartial. And with my neutrality, I am on your side” [25]

Then it is time for the scarecrow to meet with Yellow as he is the intellectual character among the four. Of course Yellow is smarter to be fooled by the scarecrow’s speeches, but it appears to be the only way to fool other colors and show them its power. “**Scarecrow:** Have you ever thought about it? You make me scarier than what I am with your opposition. This is great; I become bigger and bigger, and you smaller. In this way, no one dares to face me” [26].

Since he needs society to keep his authority, the scarecrow shows its support for Yellow in order to make all colors doubt Yellow's loyalty. "**Scarecrow**: It should not have been revealed; we should have been more careful." [27]. Therefore, the scarecrow acts as if something was going on between itself and Yellow so that the others doubt the loyalty of Yellow. To finish the plan, the scarecrow meets with Black and starts to manipulate it as well. "**Black**: Who said that? **Scarecrow**: One of your friends. Do not insist I will not say its name. **Black**: which one? **Scarecrow**: You might become enemy with it. **Black**: you do not say it, so I doubt everyone" [28]. Now that the scarecrow planted the ideas in the colors' minds, he leaves with themselves. Through the last pages of the first act, the reader witnesses the way each color doubts other colors while accusing one another of being a spy. The unity they made in the middle of the act is broken and the scarecrow has managed to stabilize its position.

Similar to the first act, the second act starts with serenity. The scarecrow seems happy and everything looks in order. Instead of the four colors, there are now four boxes on the stage and each for one color. The scarecrow goes around to examine the situation in its society. Every color starts talking about to what extend happy they are and how everything is perfect because of the things the scarecrow has done [29]. Although the scarecrow offers Green to live outside the box, it says that there is nothing outside of the box and it is blissful where he is [30]. After, the scarecrow provides a speech about the way this peace was achieved via force and ideological lessons. "So everything is in order. There is no flaw. Reaching this peace was not easy. At first, it needed force. Yes, force! . . . But the order was finally achieved . . . They are used to their boxes and now ever they love them. Because they have not come out of them for years. Or maybe they have

forgotten it is possible to leave them" [31]. The reader notices how the scarecrow plays with the characters' minds and uses his force at the same time so that he would stay the omnipotence.

On the contrary, after the scarecrow goes to sleep, the colors come out of their boxes. They seem not to be able to take the burden anymore. Howsoever, visiting each other, they cannot remember who they are. For their ideological oppression made them forget everything. Yet, they all can agree on their dissatisfaction of the situation and also remember the cause of their misery. "**Yellow**: who made us go in the boxes? Who would not let us come out? Who would not let us know each other? **Red, Black, Green**: Scarecrow!" [32]. As a result, they can find no other solution than arranging a revolution. All four colors unite once more to revolt against the oppressing force in order to destroy it.

Near the end, for each color to trust its comrades, they decide not to leave anything of their present miserable life behind which would be their boxes. Hence, they must destroy them so they would not have any way back [33]. At first, they all rush to smack their boxes. They are enthusiastic and it is Black who manages to capture the ax and break its box into pieces. Nevertheless, when it is other color's turns, they start to doubt the act: "**Green**: I think about the future; I want to have my previous life if there is no happy world waiting for me. You see; this box is chained to my foot" [34]. Even Red and Yellow have the same attitude. "**Yellow**: the scarecrow is the winner. Do you know what a hell is awaiting us?" [35]. Consequently, Green, Yellow, and Red leave Black alone. Their hesitation that is the outcome of the dominant ideology paralyzes them to act and they even encourage black to go back and rebuilt the box he just destroyed. "**Green**: rebuild your box before it makes you to" [36].

The play ends at this very moment, as Black is waiting for its faith.

Conclusion

Although Bahram Beizaie is considered as one of the most important play writers in contemporary Persian literature, not many scholarly works had been done on his plays. Therefore, it seemed necessary to study Beizaie's works in detail in order to offer a better understanding to the reader. This paper has chosen one of the most controversial plays of the writer, *The Four Boxes* in which Beizaie uses the western form of the theatre of absurd, to portray the political picture of his time in Iran before the Islamic revolution. Accordingly, a western theoretical framework was preferred to depict whether Beizaie's society in *The Four Boxes* is close to reality employing Althusser's expectations of a capitalist (or a totalitarian) society.

This paper aims to represent how the living situation of Iranian people (that has been reflected through *The Four Boxes*) seems close to Althusser's capitalist society. As it was analyzed thoroughly, the scarecrow simulates a dictator in this story that uses Repressive State Apparatuses at first to repress its subjects. Then he has its Ideological State Apparatuses to plant ideas in people's minds in order to make them distrust each other. When its plan is successful, the Scarecrow uses prison as another example of the Repressive State Apparatus to keep his dominance for the time. Even though the society thinks of a revolution in order to overthrow the power, as Althusser claimed to be inevitable in such situations, the Ideological State Apparatus is affecting the subjects' minds in a way that turns them into some powerless creatures. Although this essay would help the reader getting through the play with a better understanding, it only focuses on one aspect of the play. That is, there are still various

fields in which *The Four Boxes* needs to be examined.

To conclude, analyzing *The Four Boxes* in this paper using the Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses approach is something more than just an effort to show how Beizaie's society (both in fiction and in reality) is close to Althusser's theory about the State: not only it will provide a better understanding of Beizaie's work but also it offers new insights for further studies. As it was mentioned in the essay, Beizaie uses absurdist features of the western theatre to shape the structure of his story. Whether this statement is true or not is a suggestion for advanced studies. For this aspect of *Four Boxes*, like many other plays of Beizaie, is yet to be discussed and studied. To emphasize on the style of Beizaie's plays, one can study Beizaie's motive choosing this western form for a Persian context and the reason he blended it with Iranian authenticity.

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