

A Study on the Relation of Platonic Dramas with Diegetic Dramas, Focusing on the Plays by Bahman Forsi

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Abstract

Plato's works have always been studied as philosophical dialogues. Few scholars have considered them as dramatic texts. Plato's approach to mimesis has made him an anti-theatre figure. His emphasis on diegesis instead of mimesis may be one of the reasons his theories disappeared from dramatic studies. But modern drama, based more on diegesis, have connections with Platonic concepts. Modern diegetic dramas have been recognized as a new genre in modern era. This research is going to study these diegetic dramas which go back to Platonic dialogues. First, mimesis and diegesis were explained through classical views. Also Plato's dialogues were compared with tragedy and comedy as the main forms of drama. Having achieved Platonic dramaturgy, modern drama is analyzed. Through comparing modern diegetic dramas with Platonic dramas we got to the components that construct diegetic dramas. By using these components we studied structure of Iranian dramas. Roots and conditions of Iranian dramatic tradition proceeded us to the

modern period where some modernists such as Bahman Forsi represent diegetic drama. Results showed that there is a correlative relation between diegetic Platonic dramas and diegetic Iranian dramas. These results led us to a new structure for Iranian dramas.

Keywords: Plato, Aristotle, diegesis, mimesis, diegetic drama, Iranian drama, Bahman Forsi

Introduction

Talking about diegetic or narrative dramas and its counterpart, mimetic or imitative dramas, goes back to classical era. Plato's writings were among the first ones which began this discussion. When we relate drama to Plato it means that we considered him as a dramatist and his works as a drama. But can this assumption be true? Based on Plato's theory of forms, it is always claimed that Plato was against mimesis and mimetic arts. So how can such a thinker be interested in a mimetic art such as theatre and drama?

Mimesis, which means imitation, and diegesis, which means narrativity, are two important concepts rooted in Plato's and Aristotle's works. In Republic and Ion Plato expresses his views about mimesis and diegesis. He believed that diegesis is more widespread than mimesis. He explains that when Homer talks in the third-person point

of view, there is ‘pure diegesis’, and when Homer talks in first-person, we see ‘diegesis through mimesis’ [1]. On the opposite side, Aristotle believed that all modes of poetry, such as lyrics, epic and drama, are different kinds of mimesis, so mimesis is more general and valued than diegesis [2]. According to this defense of mimesis and mimetic art by Aristotle, theatre and dramatic studies shaped on Aristotelian views since then, and so Platonic ones disappeared from these fields. But history of theatre and drama was not always in accordance with Aristotelian approach. For example modern drama, which is based mostly on diegetic forms, does not have anything to do with Aristotelian decorum and instead it has many common structures with the Platonic one. Among the diegetic modern theater movements, one of the most diegetic dramatic literature belongs to Iran’s modern drama which rooted in its own diegetic theatrical tradition. And among these modernist Iranian dramatists, Bahman Forsi (1933-) is one the most significant one whose works shaped an important movement in Iran’s dramatic literature. Since most literary criticisms on dramatic texts are often based on Aristotelian views, Iranian dramas and especially Forsi’s dramas have not been considered as standard dramatic texts as they do not follow classical decorum. This research aims to change this view by presenting another classical decorum as Platonic principles which is mainly based on diegesis instead of mimesis.

Methodology

This research is based on data analysis in quantitative method which gained its material by searching archives. Besides primary and secondary sources that provided analytical material for this research,

sampling method is used for studying Bahman Forsi’s plays. These samples are chosen from the plays written in the period between 1953 Coup d’état to 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, when it was the flourishing era of modernist dramatists in general, and of Forsi in particular.

Findings

Platonic Dramas

The term Platonic drama raises the question of relation between Plato and being dramatist. Despite the common views about Plato that consider him as an anti-theatrical figure, he was involved in drama writings. The very first facts for this claim can be found in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where he gives a division of dramatic genres. He presents a basic taxonomy of ancient drama which includes three established genres of ‘tragedy’, ‘comedy’ and ‘satyr’; he also adds two minor genres: ‘mime’ and ‘Socratic dialogue’, which was a new literary form introduced by Socrates’s student, Plato. This Socratic dialogues, being referred as a minor genre of drama by Aristotle, gained dramatic prestige, and that is why we now call them Platonic dramas. Besides Aristotle’s *Poetics*, there are some other facts that proves Plato as a dramatist. For example Diogenes Laertius (180-240 AD), Plato’s biographer, depicts him as a person who was involved with theatre during all his lifetime. He says that Plato had connections with Euripides and Epicharmus, the two significant dramatist of classical era, and sometimes he himself wrote trilogy tragedies which he burnt some time later [3].

Despite all the anti-theatrical interpretations of Plato’s works, in later eras some scholars began to focus on this dramatic aspect of

Platonic works. For example Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) applied interdisciplinary discussions to Platonic studies and focused on dramatic aspects of those texts. Or James A. Arieti (1948-) who, in his important book *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (1991), believed that Plato's dialogues were more similar to tragedy and comedy, especially to Aristophanes' comedy, than to scientific and literary texts before Socrates. So he thinks that we should not ignore dramatic aspects of these dialogues in favor of philosophical ones, and we should study them as studying Sophocles' or Shakespeare's works [4]. He emphasizes that Plato did not want us to read his works as only philosophical treatises but he used prosaic comedy form to lead the reader to comprehend this difference [5]. For example he sees *Symposium* as an intellectual comedy than a serious discussion about love [6].

Another important contemporary literary scholar who has studied Platonic dramas concentrating on diegesis and mimesis concepts, is Martin Puchner (1969-). He has two important books in this field, *Stage Fright* (2002) and *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy* (2010), which are somehow structural framework of this research too. In these two books Puchner analyses the diegetic structure of Platonic dialogues as dramatic texts. He says: "it is true that Plato was extremely critical of the entire theatre system... his critique must be understood not as that of an outsider but as that of a rival; he was not an enemy of theatre but a radical reformer. Attacking many features of Athenian theatre, he sought to create an alternative form of drama, the Socratic dialogue, which avoided all of these features:

it was mostly read aloud by one person in front of small audiences; it was based on a new subject matter, philosophy; and it lacked the spectacular effects of choral dancing" [7]. He then compares Plato's dialogues with western modern diegetic dramas, or more specifically, with closet dramas. Through these studies he has obtained some specific diegetic components applied to diegetic dramas which can be used for further studies of other dramas in other dramatic literature such as Iran's and Forsi's dramas.

But before going to analytic study of Forsi's dramas, we should have an exact outline of what the Platonic drama and diegetic components are.

Platonic Dramaturgy

In expressing structural elements of Platonic dramaturgy, first we take a look at similarities and differences of these dramas with tragedy and comedy.

Classical tragedy has significant differences with Plato's dialogues. First, Plato's dialogues are about contemporary characters, not mythological figures. Second, they are written in prose, not in verse. And Plato's dialogues did not attend Dionysus festival. Despite all these differences, there are some similarities between them too. For example character of Socrates in Plato's works has tragic fate. Many of Plato's works such as *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo* depicts a tragic story of Socrates' death. Although in *Phaedo* Plato attacks tragedy more than any other book, it is the very text where he follows some tragic principles in describing Socrates' death, such as tragic fate, tragic suspense, unity of time, and most of all the catharsis. Socrates describes himself as a

tragic character: “as tragedians say, this was my fate” [8].

Plato’s dialogues were not only in connection with tragedy, but also with comedy. For example Plato was interested in portraying issues of the society, not historical stories, and that is what is found more in comedy. Also, his characters were from his contemporary surroundings with usual features. Socrates, although characteristically was tragic, he was from a lower class of society which accords with classical comedy genre principles. In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates is not only a philosopher, but also a rude, impolite and comic person [9].

So Plato’s dialogues were always in challenge with both tragedy and comedy genres. Socrates was not a simple tragic or comic protagonist, but he was a kind of antagonist mixture of both, whose intelligence put social issues into philosophical questions [10]. Plato’s dialogue is a new genre combining features of both tragedy and comedy and standing side by side of them. In other words, Plato’s dialogues were a new dramatic genre which competed not in the field of tragedy or comedy, but in a new field alongside them.

So this Platonic dramaturgy has some specific features: a dialogue in prose, with socio-political and philosophical subjects that are rooted in characters’ speeches instead of their actions: dialogues that are written to be read in a somehow personal situation, not to be staged on public theatres. Plato wanted his audience to get involved in his texts intellectually. He did not want passive audience. This approach reminds us of Epic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) in modern era that was based on critical audience instead of silent spectator

and applied this by adding narrator to the mimetic world of the drama. In other words Plato was inventor of a new genre of drama that flourished in modern era.

Modern Drama

The relation of modernism with theatre is complicated. Renaissance art was in praise of mimesis. All arts and literature tried to represent the actual world in its best. But by getting to modern era, arts began to get distanced from mimetic representation of the world and instead tried to express their personal, inside conceptions. So abstract styles began to flourish in different arts such as painting, sculpture and also in literature. Among all of these arts theatre had a unique condition. In contrast to other arts that allowed abstraction easily, such as abstract paintings or sculptures or texts, theatre, due to its material that was alive human beings, could not get totally abstracted and always should have been linked to mimetic world. So it tried to decrease its mimetic aspects in drama part. Dramatists started to write texts that were far from mimetic representations and in this way they added non-mimetic components as much as they could. These non-mimetic components for a genre that consists of dialogues, could be nothing but narrativity. So diegetic dramas that were not necessarily meant to be staged began to be written. Non-mimetic literary styles such as symbolism, expressionism, etc... also led to write dramas that were suitable for being read individually because they were overqualified to be staged. Moreover, modern era provided all writers with socio-political issues that became the main subjects of dramas and significant philosopher-dramatists emerged, such as Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Albert Camus (1913-1960), and Jean Paul Sartre

(1905-1980). So modern drama found its own identity by some definite characteristics: more narrativity than dialogue, lots of symbolic or metaphoric elements, with social, political, and philosophical subjects, without being needed to be staged and instead being read individually. As it is obvious these are the same Platonic dramaturgy that mentioned above. So modern drama, which has been called sometimes as closet drama, is the legacy of Platonic drama.

Diegetic Drama Components

Based on Puchner's studies on many western modern diegetic dramas, we can provide a list of diegetic components that can be applied to other dramatic structures. Some of these important diegetic components are: descriptive stage directions, narrators, soliloquies, asides, narrative passages about the past, descriptive speeches, chorus, messengers, prologues, epilogues, commentators, and shifting point of view from first person to the third person.

Iranian Dramas

These components are a kind of touchstone for recognizing the diegetic or mimetic weight of a drama. They are very helpful for studying dramas of some dramatic literature that are usually known as diegetic. Iranian dramatic literature is one of those which has always convicted to be less mimetic and so not enough dramatic. One of the most significant Iranian dramatists who wrote in a period when 'National Theatre' movement originated to shape the future dramatic literature, was Bahman Forsi. Forsi's dramas have always been criticized as texts between drama and narrative fictions. And as they did not follow Aristotelian dramatic principles,

many critics haven't considered them as drama. But now that we know there exists another approach as Platonic one with its own dramaturgy, it is necessary to analyze Forsi's dramas according to Platonic dramas.

Before going to Forsi's dramas, it is helpful to take a general look at Iranian dramas' structure since ancient theatre tradition till beginning of drama writing in Iran.

Narrativity has always been an important part of Iranian culture. Oral storytelling in ancient history of Iran made its way to narrative forms of theatre such as 'Naqali' and 'Pardehkhani', where a narrator performs an epic or religious story [11]. 'Siah Bazi' is also another old form of Iranian theatre based on comic narration of one performer. But most important of all is 'Ta'zieh' which is considered as the most complete theatrical form of Iranian culture. We know that in Ta'zieh also the main part of the performance is based on the narrative recounts of the performers from Karbala events. "The actor in Ta'zieh is an actor and narrator at the same time. He just reads the text with act. He is a medium between the spectator and a sublime world whose spectator is himself. In fact he is an actor, a narrator and a spectator at the same time' [12]. So narrativity is an essential component of Iranian theatre since the ancient time, and it definitely affected the tradition of drama writing in Iran.

In addition to narrative nature of Iranian theatre, structure of general Iranian literature is based on three parts which is different from that Aristotelian dramatic structure. Iranian fictional and dramatic literary texts, in almost all genres, generally follow three phases: 'first selection, then journey, finally returning to recount' [13]. These three phases or stages are found in almost all Iranian

literary works; from *Shahnameh* to even Imam Hussein's *Ta'zieh*. These three stages and their various forms of depiction is completely different from western Aristotelian literary structures that consist of 'problems, pitch, and solution'. The eastern-Iranian structure is linear while the western-Aristotelian one is ascending-descending. So Iranian drama, naturally, is distinct from Aristotelian drama, and it is more akin to modern dramatic texts of Platonic dramatists such as Brecht and Beckett who definitely tried to disobey Aristotelian decorum. Now the best example of an Iranian dramatist for this Platonic diegetic drama is Bahman Forsi.

Bahman Forsi

Bahman Forsi (1933-) is one of the pioneer modernist dramatists of Iran. He had many innovations in form and style of playwriting. In 1960 he wrote a play, *Flowerpot*, and introduced a new kind of dramatic language and style by it. "Forsi's works had somehow been influenced by western modern theatre, namely absurd theatre that recently were introduced to Iranian intellectuals and philosophers by translations of Beckett and Ionesco" [14]. Innovations in Forsi's dramatic style was so much that many critics believed that "he entered narrative fictional spirit to drama form" [15]. Forsi's most important dramas, which were written in the period of 'National Theater' movement, i.e. 1953 Coup d'état to 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, are *Flowerpot* (1960), *Crutch* (1962), *Steps of a Ladder* (1962), *Mouse* (1963), *Spring and the Doll* (1964), *Green in Green* (1964), *Two Multiplied by Two Equals Infinity* (1968), *Breaking Sound* (1971), *Hoscalmpice* (1977).

Forsi's dramas have some components that can be found in almost all of his works. For

example all of his dramas start with prologue. Although these prologues are not those traditional Iranian theatrical prologues where a narrator gives a general overview of the story to the audience. Here, Forsi's prologues come after stage directions, and they have a separate title from prologue: 'Perspective'. In these 'Perspectives' the writer expresses his personal view in detail about the general world of the drama and its characters. For example at the beginning of *Flowerpot* there are some separate prologues for the characters:

1. The girl is sitting on icebox, hugging herself, noises and narrow place is frightening her, she is trapped in her childish fears.
2. The vagabond child holding a stone sits on his knees. He holds his breath, points his stone and throws it. Short silence waiting for result. Suddenly he stands up frantically and follow the track of flown bird with his look.
3. A lame person holding a mirror box around his neck and looks like a peddler, moving awkward, come to the tree and sits there on the street. [16]

As it is obvious, these epilogues have descriptive narrative which looks more like fictional language style than dramatic one. If they have not been put into drama texts, one could not find any mimetic feature in these passages that implies dramatic genre. Besides these diegetic 'Perspectives' that are found in almost all of Forsi's works, there are some short poems by Forsi himself or quotations by other famous writers that come even before 'Perspectives'. This feature is like Brechtian titling of each scene with a word or verse which asks the audience to get distanced from the mimetic world of the theatre by reading them. In addition to these diegetic components of Forsi's dramas, almost all of his dramas have narrators who

recount the story directly to the audience. For example in Crutch the narrator is called 'Man of History', who implies to narrativity:

Man of History (in declamatory tone): narrators have narrated... [17]

And after 'Man of History' there is 'Witness' who removes the mimetic fourth wall by addressing the audience directly and introducing himself:

Witness: ok, I'm ready. (To the audience). Let me introduce myself. I'm the witness [18]

This way of direct addressing the audience continues to the end of the drama and constantly breaks the mimetic world. Besides, there are many long monologues in the form of soliloquies and asides thorough the texts that emphasizes the diegetic aspects strongly. In Forsi's dramas time and place are indefinite. There is no trace of Aristotelian unity of time and place. The most evident example is Green in Green, a play without dialogue and totally descriptive. At the beginning of this play it is mentioned that: "place of story: anywhere on the earth; time of the play: till today" [19]. Abstract world of his dramas sometimes get mysterious too. For example in Hoscalmpice, in addition to long diegetic monologues, the dramatist has put some codes for the reader that can be solved only by reading, not in watching the play on the stage:

If you add 1300 to the two-digit numbers that actors announce, you can find the important date of historical events in our country... I did not mention this secret in our practices and performances [20].

So Forsi's dramas are full of diegetic components, such as prologues, narrative stage directions, various narrators, long and different kinds of monologues, direct

addressing of audience, third-person point of view, diegetic verses and quotations, abstract world, and written codes between dramatist and reader that can only be solved by being read. All of these components have made Forsi's dramas the most diegetic dramas that their meaning can be realized without necessarily being staged. They also accord with Platonic dramaturgies: they are dialogues with social, political, philosophical issues that are shaped more on characters' speeches than on their actions and they are meant to be read instead of being staged. These dramas which are rooted in diegetic tradition of Iranian literature, have become as a kind of model for the next generation of dramatists in Iran.

As we have seen, drama genres are not only limited to only Aristotelian 'tragedy and comedy' anymore. There exist other genres, such as Platonic diegetic one, which originated in classical time but flourished in modern era. Iranian drama also, due to its diegetic nature and based on modern necessities, shaped a kind of diegetic drama which can stand separately next to tragedy and comedy.

Conclusion

Plato's dialogues, although usually have been considered anti-theatrical, are dramatic texts. Plato's defense of diegesis instead of mimesis, has made him disappeared from dramatic studies. But by development of diegetic dramas in modern era, paying attention to Platonic dramas as the pioneer of this genre found its place. Now diegetic drama is considered as a separate genre next to Aristotelian genres of tragedy and comedy. Confirming this diegetic dramas lead us to study and analyze some diegetic literature more exactly. One of those literary traditions

that have always been dominated by diegesis, is Iranian literature which gets more diegetic in modern era by some dramatists like Bahman Forsi. Forsi's dramas, with various diegetic components such as descriptive stage directions, prologues, monologues, narrators, abstract worlds, etc. ... are completely diegetic dramas that accord with Platonic dramaturgy. This comparative study between Iranian diegetic drama and Platonic drama proves that although some kinds of drama do not follow Aristotelian principles, they can be identified as a third genre next to those classic tragedy and comedy. This paper, through studies on Forsi's drama, is a starting point for proving that diegetic Iranian drama is drama. We hope that other researchers study other Iranian dramas to gain broader view about this literary structure.

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