
AS BLACK AS COAL: THE ROOTS OF THE BLACK CHARACTER IN TRADITIONAL PUPPETRY OF IRAN

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Abstract: The black character has an important and influential presence in traditional Iranian theatre. Siah (the black), with various names, plays a major role in both traditional Iranian plays such as Siah Bazi (Takht-e-Howzi) and traditional puppetry such as Kheimeh shab bazi (traditional string puppetry). There is much debate about when siah first appeared in Iranian theatre. Some trace its origins to prehistoric myths and pre-theatrical rituals. Some attribute the presence of the black character to the slave trade and colonization of southern Iran by the Portuguese (1507) and the arrival of African slaves in Iran, which also historically occurs during the Safavid period. There is no doubt that black people played a role in the creation of this character, but it seems that this character is not a symbol of racism. The black is not being ridiculed, but he is mocking power and domination. And, of course, there is no hiding the fact that the historical origins of the black character are rooted in colonialism and, consequently, slavery. The aim of this article is to examine the origin of the black character in traditional Iranian puppetry in terms of form and content, with a historical/analytical approach and based on postcolonial and intercultural theories, as well as current issues and challenges.

Keywords: black character, Mobarak, siah, kheimeh shab bazi, siah bazi, Haji Firouz, otherness, racism, colonialism.

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Introduction

The black character called Black (in Farsi: Siah) has an important and influential presence in traditional Iranian theatre. They can be found in numerous traditional shows such as siah bazi or takht-e howzi (mimicry plays) and puppet shows such as kheimeh shab bazi (traditional string puppetry) and pehlavan kachal (traditional glove puppetry) as well as in pre-Nowruz shows¹ in the role of Haji Firouz. In all these shows, the black character (Siah) is a clown who has a talent for mimicry and makes the audience laugh with his humor and improvisation. The black character is usually the servant or slave of the master, the caliph, sultan, or sometimes a ruler takes the place of the master. In such traditional shows, the characters are usually fixed types. In the play "siah bazi" (imitation), the character of the servant has a black painted face and wears a red dress. Although this slave is a clever person, what is more visible in the play is his stupidity, which causes laughter. Siah

¹ Spring is a symbol of life, fertility and rebirth in different civilizations and cultures. Inner and spiritual rebirth and rebirth in the material world and in nature. Pre-spring rituals demonstrate the relationship between man and nature and its components. Iran's pre-spring rituals were performed in the second half of winter until the arrival of spring and the beginning of the New Year and Nowruz. Some of these ritual performances (by actors, puppets or quasi-puppets) include Mir Nowruzi, Kuse galin, Teke or Takam, Arus guley, etc.

has three other characteristics: the power of repartee, dancing, and a special voice (Ashourpour, 2011, p. 183).

Siah's physical characteristics can be studied in terms of appearance, behavior, and verbal characteristics. Siah's costume is a combination of red and black, tattered and old, like the clothes of jesters in the satirical plays of the past. About 200 years ago, in Qajar era, the face was blackened with black soot. To blacken the face, they first burned cork until it turned into powder, then mixed it with water and rubbed it on the face (Raisi, 2017, p. 173). Dance and music are inseparable parts of *takht-e howzi* and *kheimeh shab bazi*. Siah is dynamic on stage and has his own special dances and songs; *shateri* (baker) and *mesgari* (coppersmith) dances, exaggerated eye, eyebrow and tongue movements are among them. Siah is a fool who makes people laugh. Siah has a special accent and expression, as if he doesn't hear some words and pronounces them wrong. In various performance situations, he substitutes letters and words (transliteration), makes grammatical mistakes, and is unable to pronounce difficult or foreign words. With these characteristics, he sometimes makes fun of other characters' appearance and articulation.

The origin of the black character in Iran

There are many debates about when and why the black character entered the world of Iranian performance and its transpositions. Researchers see the phenomenon differently depending on their point of view. According to Bahram Beyzaie, Siah was for a long time a member of the *Nowruzzi Khan* (singers of the new year) and *Mir Nowruzzi* (Messenger or king of the Spring) traveling groups, known by names such as Haji Firouz or Atash Afrouz (Fire Maker), who sometimes sang, danced and made fun of himself with black face make-up and sometimes with a mask (Beyzaie, 2000, p. 164). Then Siah joins the group of traveling musicians and makes improvised jokes and participates in imitative performances. Beyzaie also believes that the black character, despite its popularity among the people, gradually acquired its personal and traditional characteristics only during the Qajar period (1789-1925) (*ibid.*, p. 164). Siah appears as an actor or puppet with the names Yaghoot (ruby), Almas (diamond), Zumrod (emerald), [Haji] Firouz and Mobarak, both in traditional Iranian joyful plays (comic shows) and puppet shows.

Haji Firouz

Sadeq Ashourpour (Ashourpour, 2011) believes that the black figure is a survivor of ancient Mithraic rituals in Iran and the performance of Shah-e-Pirouz (the victorious king), which was performed during Nowruz. After Islamization of Iran (633–654), the name was changed to Haji Firouz. Later, this show was no longer sacred and was only performed on special occasions (especially Nowruz) by a clown or buffoon for the caliphs at court (Ashourpour, 2011, p. 175). In fact, he considers several rituals such as Mir Nowruzi, Kose Barneshin, Kose Galin and Haji Firouz to be the surviving and transformed representations of the victorious king in ancient Iranian Mithraism (Ashourpour, 2011, p. 173). And the color black or the holding of a black crow in these pre-spring rituals was a sign of the cycle of life and death, winter/death and spring/rebirth.

“False king” as a scapegoat

Nowruz is the beginning of the New Year, the end of winter and the beginning of spring, and the ritual performance of Shah-e-Pirouz was not separate from the Nowruz ceremony. This ritual performance can be attributed to the beliefs of early societies and agricultural civilizations. In most of these civilizations, fertility was the central value. Changing nature and transforming frozen winter into warm spring and summer was a great and complex mystery: decay and then rebirth. Therefore, the gods of vegetation had a special importance, and in most of these societies, the dying and rising god became the incarnation of the god of vegetation as a scapegoat or sacrifice. As a result, the killing of the dying god to ward off evil from plants and humans gradually became a ritual enacted at the beginning of the year. At the centre of these celebrations was the performance of “false king” rituals: a person would become king for a short time and then be overthrown. Someone from the inferior or lower classes was chosen as the king/god, and for a short period of time he created a kind of disorder and chaos, and indeed, a carnivalized atmosphere. After a certain period of time, this false king, who is a funny clown, would be killed in a ritual ceremony to become the scapegoat of nature and the people. A ritual celebration in which laughter and death were mixed at the same time.

With the spread of the Nowruz ceremony in Iran, the performance of Mir Nowruzi has been held in Iran for a long time and “it is still common among some Iranian tribes such as the Iranian Kurds and Bakhtiari Lurs and cities such as Esfrain in special local forms” (Bloukbashi, 2005, p. 44). Mir nowruzi is a false king, but in a new context. During Nowruz, an ordinary person is chosen from among the people to be a temporary king or Amir, called Mir Nowrozi, for public entertainment and fun. When Nowruz ended (after 13 days), so did his kingdom.

This zany character later becomes Haji Firouz, and according to Shiva Masoudi, he can be the ancestor of every clown in Iranian shows.

Mir Nowruzi/ the scapegoat, which is a ritual-mythological descent of the clown model, has five characteristics: otherness, rebelliousness, buffoonery, mortality, and duality, which is a way to understand the general characteristics of the clown model. (Massoodi, 2016, p. 42)

We'll analyze these characteristics in relation to the black character.

In Iranian mythology, according to Mehrdad Bahar (1997), Siavash (meaning the owner of the black horse) is a dying-rising god.

The god who returns from the world of the dead every year during Nowruz... so it is possible that the name Siavash in Avesta means black man... Haji Firouz is also a survivor of the Siavash ritual. And his black face is a symbol of his return from the world of the dead, and his red dress is a symbol of passing through the fire, Siavash's blood and renewed life, and the dying-rising god, and his joy is the joy of rebirth, which brings with it growth and blessings. (Bahar, 1997, pp. 226-231)

Soudabeh Fazaeli in her article "Holy Firouz" also studies the symbology of Haji Firouz and considers the color of his face and his clothes as signs left over from the symbolic makeup of the highest ranks of Mithraism. She believes that

in the philosophy of mysticism, black is the absolute color, the end of all colors and the result of the steps that must be taken to reach the stage of attraction. The stage where God manifests and enlightens the mystic... Red is also the color of life, representing fire, blood and the sun. (Fazaeli, 2009).

Siah Bazi

After Islam, Iranians made many changes in their rituals to preserve them, so Haji Firouz used to perform every year on Nowruz Eid to make the caliph and courtiers happy and receive gifts. For better understanding, his dialect was half Persian and half Arabic (Ashurpour, 2011, p. 174). Gradually, other characters were added to him and Siah Bazi slowly took shape, but Haji Firouz did not disappear and continued his life alone as the messenger of Nowruz.

Thus, the black character was formed not as a mythological symbol but in the form of a servant or a slave who looks stupid but is stubborn and clever inside. Siah Bazi was formed by buffoons and clowns, people from the lower class of society, and therefore it was mostly based on improvisation. Before the performance, they coordinated the story and went to the stage and “sometimes they performed the show from the beginning of the night until sunrise based on improvisations” (Ashourpour, 2011, p. 176). This show is based on two characters: Siah (servant/clown) and the master, although sometimes the caliph, sultan, or ruler takes the place of the master. And there are funny and interesting relationships and dialogues between them. Siah is a clown who, in addition to the general characteristics of clowns such as frankness, truthfulness, intelligence, and a sense of humor, has other characteristics according to the social and local conditions. In contrast, his master is deceitful and hypocritical, and although Siah is loyal to him, he criticizes, mocks and sometimes insults his master.

Beyzaie mentions in his book *A Study on Iranian Theatre* that Aleksander Chodźko, who was in Iran at the beginning of the 18th century, has a description of these imitative shows. Chodźko says in the introduction: “In such shows, all kinds of gestures and vulgar words are free, and since the aim is to make the audience laugh, there are no serious feelings in the show” (Beyzaie, 2000, p. 164). Chodźko also refers to the black character: “Actors rub flour or/and a layer of soot with egg yolk instead of wine lees” (ibid.). These shows (if they are performed, of course) are still performed in the same manner, depending on the time, place and the type of audience.

Mobarak puppet in traditional puppetry of Iran

Kheimeh shab bazi

Most of the historical documents related to puppetry in Iran date back to around the eleventh century and we see descriptions of string, glove and shadow puppets in poems and historical texts. Kheimeh shab bazi (also known as Shah Salim bazi) is a string puppet theatre of Iran that used to be performed at night. Mobarak is a main character in this show. Some like Bahram Beyzaie believe that the Mobarak puppet in Kheimeh shab bazi is older than Siah in Siah bazi; as he writes: “Imitation performances, in search of new stories, even adapted the puppet stories; the characteristics of the black puppet (Mobarak) such as great mobility, being unrestrained and villainous, and even his wicked frankness was directly imported into imitation plays” (Beyzaie, 2000, p. 171). Mobarak has a humorous, open and active personality. He is rebellious and adventurous, and his behavior can change the course of the story and take it in a different

direction. Mobarak has always been popular with the audience, and sometimes people went to the show just to see his jokes. He has the characteristics of different Iranian ethnic groups and his behavior and speech are familiar to the audience (Masoudi, 2018, p. 60). He belongs to the people and has always been their voice. Mobarak is a servant and/or a slave; a slave who criticizes the master. He always reveals the secrets of his master, criticizes the rich, exposes hypocrites, and challenges the power of the ruler. In *Shah Salim Bazi* (a kind of *Kheimeshab Bazi*), he is the servant of the Ottoman Sultan Salim. Mobarak doesn't hesitate to mock the characters who are proud of their social position, and this may be the manifestation of the ambitions of the people who have been dominated for years and who wanted to react to the ruling system. In *Shah Salim Bazi*, the arrival or wedding of the king becomes a context for making fun of different types of people.

According to Masoudi (2018, p. 59), in the documents of the Safavid period and in the early types of *Kheimeh shab bazi*, there is no mention of a character with the functions of Mobarak, and such a character with comic features was added to this kind of puppet shows later. Whereas, the name of *Shah Sultan Salim* (1470-1520), who was one of the Ottoman kings during the Safavid period, and the performance of *Shah Salim Bazi* have existed since the era of *Shah Ismail Safavi* (1487-1524). Masoudi writes that

Shah Sultan Salim was a great enemy of *Shah Ismail Safavi* [from the battle of *Chaldiran*], and he killed and persecuted the Shiites. The impact of this enmity on the public and the government led to the emergence of the model of *Kheimeh shab bazi* with the intention of mocking *Shah Salim* and indirectly supporting the government in this type of show. (Masoudi, 2007, p. 249)

Thus, a post analysis shows that a protagonist against *Sultan Salim* was necessary for a dramatic action to take place, and over time, Mobarak, a kind of court servant who was also considered a court clown, would create this confrontation. Gradually, as the role of *Salim Khan* faded, this confrontation was created between *Morshed* (narrator/backchat, interlocutor) and Mobarak.

Haj Mobarak

Haj Mobarak is a type of Iranian glove puppet in which Mobarak is the main character. The show is considered a branch of the *Pahlavan Kachal* (or *Jiji Viji*) puppet show.

In terms of plot and characters, Pahlavan Kachel seems older and more Iranian than Kheimeh shab bazi. It is a humorous and witty story in the imaginary world of puppets, based on a theme that has been repeated many times in Iranian folk tales: a girl is held captive by a demon, and Pahlavan (the warrior, the hero) goes to fight the demon, rescues her, and marries her. (Sohrabi, 2012, p. 23)

Mobarak is not present in the main plays of Pehlavan Kachal, but in Haj Mobarak plays, which were mostly performed in the city of Isfahan. The main connection was between Haj Mobarak (Mobarak) as a servant of an imaginary master and Morshed (Baba); whereas the rest of the characters such as the young woman named Sarvenaz, the demon, etc. are introduced according to the needs of the story. This glove puppet show is “an imitation of Takht-e-howzari and the relationship between Haji (master) and Mobarak (servant)” (Gharibpour, 1981, p. 10). It seems Hasan Louian, an Iranian juggler and puppeteer from Isfahan, made Haj Mobarak show with the changes he made on Pahlavan Kachal.

Mobarak's physical features

Mobarak in Kheimeh shab bazi is a string puppet no taller than 45 cm, with a cloth body and a head usually made of wood or papier-mache. It is connected to the control, which is only a small wooden stick, by two strings from the head and the back. Mobarak's clothes are red, like Haji Firouz or the black character of Takht-e-Howzi (Siah), usually made of red floral fabric. He has a black face and most of the time, the parts of the face (like eyes, nose and lips) are marked with white paint. Mobarak as a glove puppet is about 20 cm tall with a red cloth body and a black papier-mache head. In both types of puppets, the puppeteer speaks over Mobarak (and other Kheimeh Shab Bazi characters) by Safir (Swazzle).

Mobarak with a red dress and black face is a servant who has the function of a clown. The contrast between Morshed and Mobarak is also interesting. Because Morshed is neither a king nor a master, the black figure of Mobarak is placed against him. Morshed is a narrator, a storyteller, and a spiritual guide, a figure between the two worlds of audience and performer; and Mobarak is sometimes like a naughty and misguided boy, sometimes like a servant, and sometimes like a clown. Mobarak is rebellious by nature and “is a violent and passionate character who is always causing trouble or getting into a predicament” (Sediq, 2004, p. 46). Morshed sometimes advises Mobarak and sometimes is mocked by him and sometimes they are like two friends and accomplices.



Mobarak Puppet, with a black non-realistic face.
Puppet Maker: Bijan Nematisharif
© Abdolreza Nikoo

The presence of black people in Iranian culture

When we talk about the black people in Iran, what do we mean by it? The origin tracking indicates that sometimes it goes back directly to the people of African descent, who were generally Abyssinian (now sometimes called Ethiopian) in Iran. These Iranian people of African Zanj origin, known as Afro-Iranians, are concentrated in the coastal provinces of the Persian Gulf such as Hormozagan, Sistan and Baluchestan, Bushehr and Khuzestan. Persian texts from the Islamic period, such as *Qaboosnameh*, mention Abyssinian slaves being sold in Iranian markets.

Many of these people are survivors of slaves brought to the Persian Gulf by slave traders. In later periods, the Portuguese also began to trade along the coasts of Iran. These blacks were mainly Bantu-speaking and came from East Africa and the countries of Tanzania, especially Zanzibar, Malawi and Mozambique. Finally, in 1848, under British pressure, Mohammad Shah Qajar issued an order to abolish slavery (Cacchioli, 2014).

In the 16th century, the Portuguese captured the south of Iran (1507) and built their fortifications there, and brought a group of slaves from the shores of Abyssinia and Zanzibar to the shores of the Persian Gulf.

However if we consider the presence of slaves in ancient Iranian culture it should be said that, in general, throughout the history of Iran, from ancient times to the first half of the 20th century, there have been the employment and use of slaves under the title of servants, maidservants, or eunuchs in various jobs such as in royal courts, military, household and construction services (Mortazavi 2021, pp. 67-70). In the early centuries of Islam during the expansion of conquests and increase in the territory of Muslims, especially the Turks of Central Asia and the steppes of Eastern Europe, were captured by Muslims and were mostly used in military and royal court jobs (Damerchely, Saber, 2017). Until the middle of the 19th century, captivity in wars and sudden invasions were the main sources of acquiring slaves and maids from different Caucasian, Turkmen, Kurdish, Baluch, or even Persian ethnicities (in northeastern Iran) (Alipour, 2011, p. 12). Wars and conquests were the main sources of slaves in Iran. Mortazavi notes in her book (2022) that the racial diversity of slaves in different periods is impressive. In most historical periods, Georgian, Armenian, Roman, Indian, Abyssinian, Malabar and Bengali slaves, and sometimes Slavs and Turks, have been mentioned. Of these, Armenian and Georgian slaves were mostly recruited into the army and sometimes reached high military and government positions. Blacks were mostly employed in households and harems. Domestic servants, court servants and maids were also employed for music, singing, dancing and minstrelsy (Mortazavi, 2022).

The presence of minstrels and dancers can at times be traced to itinerant performers who came from India and the surrounding regions. The term black does not refer to a specific race, but is more related to the otherness of a range of people broadly understood to be outsiders. Iranian researchers consider some historical events as the reason for the presence of black people in Iranian performing arts; which I try to explain in more detail below.

It is said (mentioned in Nezami's *Haft Peykar*, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, and also in *Majamal al-Tavarikh*) that during the Sassanid period (224 - 651 AD) and the reign of Bahram Gur (421 to 438), several thousand gypsies from different parts of Asia, especially India, entered and scattered in Iran and most of them were dark-skinned. According to Nizami Ganjavi, their professions were acting, singing, playing musical instruments, and performing with puppets (Beizaie, 2000: 46). Beizaie believes that even those we see in traveling groups, named *Haji Firouz* or *Atash Afrooz*, who dance and perform buffoonery with black faces or masks on their faces are imitators of these gypsies. Probably,

their different skin color can be seen as the origin of black actors and clowns. “Six thousand masters of singing, drumming, dancing and puppet playing...” (Nezami, 200, p. 106)

There are some Iranian paintings from the 16th century, especially from the works of Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād (c. 1455/60 - 1535), in which black people are seen as servants and sometimes as singers and dancers. According to some paintings of this period, we can see the presence of the red-dressed black person next to the music group dancing and performing with a cane, and from this “it can be clearly understood that the cheerful black character existed in Iran at least several centuries before the formation of Takht-e-howzi. We therefore can’t consider it as the influence of the black slaves of the Qajar court” (Nemat Tavoosa, Dadvar, 2004). “In general, from the time of the Mongols on, we see black people in paintings as servants, workers, sailors, and also as entertainers. And the degrees of this blackness are from light brown to dark brown and finally to black” (Beizaie, 2000, p. 164). Based on the depiction of this color spectrum, it can be said that the emphasis was not on a particular race, but on the isolation and differentiation of the slaves brought to Iran from distant lands.

In his article “History of traditional performances and Siah Bazi”, M.H. Naserbakht says that, based on the words of Dr. Polak, a special physician of Naser al-Din Shah (1831-1896), these slaves, who were first transported from the coast of Africa to the south of Iran by Portuguese ships, were kept as servants in the houses of nobles and aristocrats. They were divided into two groups, Zanzibari and Abyssinian, and were mainly used for domestic work. Slaves in Iran – then and now – are never assigned to hard work or agriculture, but they are kept in noble houses as a luxury item. It is considered one of the great things to have servants of different colors, for this reason no slave are seen in any farm or factory (Naserbakht, 2013). The historian Jafar Shahri (1914-1999), who himself played the role of Siah, believes that Takht-e-howzi is an imitation of the slaves who served in the houses of the Qajar nobility (Nemat Tavoosa, Dadvar, 2004). According to him, they mostly spoke Persian words with the tip of the tongue and had a sweetness in their expression, mixed with their natural simplicity and honesty, that made every listener happy. The best way for these slaves to earn a living (probably after emancipation, because, as slaves, they were not allowed to study and perform the arts to earn money without their master’s permission) was to join the artistic community by making funny facial expressions and playing musical instruments (Shahri, 2020, p. 58).

Is black face a racist icon in Iranian performing arts?

Maryam Nemat Tavoosi and Abulqasem Dadvar (2004) believe that according to Dumzil's approach to the function of colors in the trifunctional ideology of Indo-European mythology and the reexamination of the story of Siavash, it seems that from prehistory in the cultural field of Iran and probably in the eyes of many Indo-European people, the color black was a sign of return from the world of the dead, the dark world below. Thus, from an Indo-European perspective and also within Mesopotamian culture, which had a tremendous influence on its neighbors, the black face of the playful clowns was not a racial sign (Nemat Tavoosi, Dadvar, 2004). This black man comes back from the world of the dead every year to bring back the lost happiness to the people. Undoubtedly, this happiness was caused by different events in different periods of human life. At a time when people's lives were completely dependent on natural cycles, the growth of green life could be considered the greatest happy event for people, so they held the greatest and happiest celebration when spring came.

I suggest that the mythical element always continues to exist in cultures, taking on an appropriate meaning according to the times. Often these meanings are not so far from the original myth and, therefore, are not difficult to recognize. The main function of the myth of the black man is to bless; a blessing that brings good fortune. That's why the auspicious black men have added all of the joyful elements to their character throughout history.

In the book *Speedster Heroes*, Khojasteh Kia (1996) refers to the ancient and historical roots of the color black and believes that the black color on the faces of the actors and heroes of Iranian stories is not a sign of racial color, but is rather like a mask that the hero puts on his face. She points out that the auspicious black character, who is the source of happiness, belongs to the prehistory. So they make their faces black and often hang bells around their waists (like the messengers of spring) (Kia, 1996, pp. 177-198).

Blackness as a mask

Siah is happy on the outside and sad on the inside, as if the black color is a mask to hide behind. He has no family. He is alone. He pretends to be ignorant, but he is intelligent and, as mentioned, he uses a special tone and language, singing, reciting, and dancing to advance the story.

From a historical point of view since the Middle Ages in the European context, farce performers, clowns and buffoons, have never appeared on stage with normal faces and clothes; rather they have been distinguished from other people by special clothes or masks. Harlequin, the buffoon character of the Italian commedia

dell'arte, wears a one-piece dress made of colorful rhombuses sewn together. He also wears a special hat with tassels on the top. Pierrot, the stock character of pantomime, wears white baggy clothes and a French peasant's beret hat. The circus clowns also use baggy clothes, red clown noses and painted faces. The caustic criticism of the clown can be tolerated if he wears his red nose and portrays a stumbling drunk, to such an extent that a drunk man can say anything and do anything because he is out of his normal state. It should also be noted that while some comedians perform with a white face under the mask and unusual clothes they could criticize freely, make fun of him and open his heart with his behavior and words. In Iran, this mask was a black color applied to the face, and it was a black character who could do anything. Being a clown and hiding behind a mask, which here is the color black, contributes to the frankness, defiance, sarcastic behavior and buffoonery of the black character. Here, black is the protagonist, and I think it can be different from the concept of sambo and the black face in American culture, which is an escape to avoid responsibility (Wynter, 1979). He is not an obedient slave, he is rebellious, and for the actor or puppeteer, the character is an escape to achieve freedom of expression and behavior. According to a poem by Iranian poet Anvari (1126-1189), which has also become a proverb in Iranian culture: "Go and make a joke and learn to be a clown,/To get your right from everyone".

Blackness as absence

In Persian dictionaries, Siah (black) means whatever is the color of charcoal. The opposite of white: raven, dark, dim, death, negro, sinister, unblessed, and ominous. Destruction and decay. In Persian language, Shab (night) also has the meaning of blackness and, in some cases, like Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, it is used instead of blackness, like *Shabgoon* (like night).

In some cultures, black is the color of mourning and is directly related to the negative concept of spells, black magic, and black arts. But black also means uncertainty, void, the initial darkness.

The black night refers to a period before creation, darkness before birth, before rebirth, or before the birth of light. But at the same time, it is the manifestation of chaos, death, madness, disintegration, and return to the embryonic stage of the world. In Iranian culture, blackness is absence and lack of light. "Absence" means nothing.

So it can be said that the black character of Iranian performances exists, and does not exist at the same time. In this nightlike puppet, the black feature actually means being colorless and absent, or is equivalent with hidden and covered. For this reason, he can say and do what others cannot and dare not say.

Blackness as performing otherness

Otherness means any difference in appearance, language, culture, geography etc. Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group (Us, the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups (Them, Other) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. And who is the “other”: member of a dominated out-group, whose identity is considered lacking, and who may be the subject of discrimination by the in-group. Geography is a remarkably effective producer of otherness (Staszak, 2009), as Edward Said argued regarding the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”) (Said, 1978, p. 43). What can be seen in history, the difference in skin color always leads to alterity and being different in the society, and this also leads to the entry of others into the performing arts.



Saadi Afshar, who died on the 19th of April 2013 at the age of 79, is considered one of the greatest actors in the history of the Siah-Bazi in Iran.

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To be a clown in a performance and to be an “other” in a community is as if they are the same. Who is the clown? The clown’s range of activities extends from storyteller, musician, and minstrel to entertainer and magician. Sometimes

he is stupid, sometimes he is clever and funny, and finally the combination of all these things makes him a buffoon and a clown. The link between all these functions is the character's alterity in the community.

He becomes "other" to his society or community. At the same time that he is the centre of attention, he is the "other" that can act against society, and this is the beginning of rebellion. So it seems that alterity is the first concept that brings us to the ancestor of the clown. (Massoudi, 2016, p. 23)

As a clown, Mobarak has the quality of otherness. He is supposed to be different. That is why he has a different appearance and expression, and it is as if he is hiding behind the black color of his face. The black color can cover his real face like a mask. Like the half-mask of Pulcinella.

There are many black puppets in Germany, Portugal, and other European countries. In his article, which is a comparison between the characteristics of the black character in Portuguese theatre and Siah bazi of Iran, Sabri Zikri (2019) mentions the black or negro character in Portuguese plays, especially in the 16th century. According to him, there were many blacks in the form of slaves and free people, and although they had less social facilities, we cannot ignore their participation in social activities. Although there is not much news about how they entered Portuguese performing arts, there is no doubt that the black character was the result of actors imitating the behavior and speech of black people. According to him, the main similarity between these two black characters is the inability to speak fluently and the mistakes in pronunciation and listening.

In the article "Black face puppet from the German imagination" the author W. Condee classifies German black face puppets in various categories, but he mentions that although the puppets are different, they have one important characteristic in common: the black painting is consistently a manifestation of the Other. However, the appearance of the "Other" and who is represented as the "Other" changes over time.

These puppets are part of multiple discourses of difference and otherness. What these puppets have in common is the perception of a foreign threat – strange and exotic – that is emblematic of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. Fear of the imagined "Turk" is based on fear of and fascination with the Ottoman Empire, as Said observes. (Condee, 2023)

Condee says that the role of humor, which is so important to the impact of puppetry, is here part of a process of dehumanization and degradation. The people these figures evoke in the imagination may be seen as dangerous, but the humor makes them exotic and funny. He also mentions that these puppets spoke bad German, wore raffia skirts, and had stereotypical racist features on their faces. They were meant to be laughed at – the target of humor (ibid.).

With the explanations given before about the characteristics of Mobarak and the comparison with the characteristics of the German black-faced puppets, the case of Mobarak seems to be different. Mobarak is also black; his aim is to make the audience laugh, and he will stop at nothing to achieve this. He speaks Farsi with an accent and mistakes, which is one of the reasons for his comic character. But the audience does not see him as a symbol of some threatening exotic stranger. They do not attribute him to a strange race. In fact, despite his different appearance, Mobarak seems to have come from the hearts of the ordinary people and he is their voice. Mostly it is he who mocks the master, the king, and all hypocrites; and therefore Mobarak does not embody the same racist stereotypes as those found in European and North American contexts.

The existence of this difference may be due to the fact that the postcolonial discourse did not exist in Iran as it existed in the West. In the sense that in this land, if you have captured and enslaved people, you have been captured and have been enslaved by another people in another place, and in a way, you have geographically included the discourse of Orientalism. As Edward Said defines Orientalism as a discourse through which the West construct the otherness of the Turks, Moroccans, Persians, Indians, Japanese, etc. (Staszak, 2009).

Conclusion

The question of why Mobarak or Haji Firouz is black, and whether his blackness was a symbol of slavery and racism, has been debated more than ever these days. In Nowruz 2021, the Tehran Municipality announced that it would limit the presence of Haji Firouz in the city's Nowruz celebrations² due to the presence of racist traces in his image. There is no doubt that black people played a role in the creation of this figure, but it can't be said that it is a symbol of racism. For in Siah bazi or Kheimh shab bazi it is not black people who are being mocked, but it is Black who is mocking power and domination. Can it be assumed that today's manifestations of the confrontation with racism have taken a different form with the expansion

2 Nowruz is celebrated by various ethnic groups worldwide as a veneration of spring's beginning, a tradition which originated in Zoroastrianism. It is a festival based on the Iranian Solar Hijri calendar, on the spring equinox – on or around 21 March on the Gregorian calendar.

of the media and the activities of civil groups, and that its borders have expanded from the political and social sphere to other areas as well? And can this expansion create a different approach in this direction? While we cannot ignore the fact that some historical origins of the black character may be rooted in colonialism, in the course of history, its practical and substantive aspects have undergone tremendous transformation, and only its appearance remains, which is blackness.

Until the issue of racial discrimination was raised by the government in Iran, that was the furthest thing from the minds of the Iranian puppeteers and the audience, and for them Mobarak was a cute naughty boy who made people laugh, and because he was sweet and funny, no one was offended. But after this issue was brought up, everyone started to think about justification, to think about historical research, and even to think about change. Some of the groups changed their puppets, and in some Takht-e-howzi groups the black actor no longer blackened his face. However this period was also temporary.

Whether the black character (actor and puppet) is rooted in mythology and ancient pre-spring rituals, whether it is a relic of gypsies and itinerant performers (from India and beyond), or whether it is a legacy of imitating the behavior and dialect of black slaves; and whether the sum of all these things has made the black character throughout history, it can't be a manifestation of colonialism, and indeed in Siah of Takht-e-howzi and Mobarak of kheimeh shab bazi one can see the combination of all these traits. The characteristics and skills that have made this character and its performers popular among Iranians. Mobarak and the black character as a whole is a cultural and artistic symbol, and to consider it as a symbol of colonialism and racial discrimination is a way to destroy this ancient heritage.

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