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## THE ROLE OF RUSSIA IN GUILANIANS' ACQUAINTANCE WITH MODERN THEATER ART IN THE QAJAR PERIOD

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*В настоящей статье предпринята попытка на основе анализа иранской историографии изучить влияние русского театрального искусства и вклад российских граждан как посредников в развитие этого искусства в Иране и, в частности, в его северной провинции – Гиляне. Вопросы влияния российской драматургии на становление и развитие театра в Иране и значения Гиляна как посредника в передаче данных культурных ценностей практически не исследованы в отечественной иранистике. Между тем, со второй половины XIX в. русские сыграли значительную роль в передаче культурных ценностей и основ западной модернизации Ирану, особенно Гилян. Культурное влияние, обусловленное присутствием русских в Гиляне, вызвало изменения в таких областях, как образование, мода и даже в разговорном диалекте. Можно сказать, что Гилян в период Каджаров гораздо быстрее, чем другие регионы Ирана, обратился к европейской культуре, находясь под влиянием России и ее европейской культуры. Хотя русские оказали большое воздействие на гилянцев в различных областях культуры и искусства, их влияние на театральное искусство Гиляна было гораздо большим по сравнению с другими сферами общественной мысли и культуры. Оно отразилось как на самом появлении, так и на содержании пьес, которые ставились в театрах Гиляна. Большинство ранних спектаклей, поставленных в Гиляне, вели свое происхождение из русских драматических произведений, и позже, несмотря на то, что деятели искусства Гиляна создавали уже собственные пьесы, они все еще находились под влиянием драматургического искусства России. Для объяснения ее роли в становлении и развитии театра в Гиляне в настоящей статье использован описательный и аналитический методы. В результате исследования проанализированы процессы трансляции европейских культурных ценностей в социокультурную среду каджарского Ирана через театральное искусство России.*

**Ключевые слова:** Гилян, Россия, театр, искусство, модернизация, Каджары.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the of the Qajar rule in Iran, European powers, including Russia, paid special attention to Iran. At this time, due to long wars and Golestan and Turkmenchay treaties, the Russians succeeded in separating large parts of the South Caucasus from the territory and adding them to their territory.

Despite this, Iranians relationship with the Russians was not influenced, and in the nineteenth century an increase in economic, cultural and artistic relations between the Iranians and Russians, especially in the Caucasus is obvious. This is why, historical analysis often do not pay attention to the positive impact that Russia has had on Iran's acquaintance with Western culture and civ-

ilization. Guilan had a strategic position in the Qajar era due to its proximity to Russia and its connection to Europe via the Caspian Sea. Also, due to the relative stability and importance of Iran as a strategic point, foreign ambassadors and guests, including political officials, ambassadors and businessmen, always had two options to reach Iran; the first one was the route that had to cross the Ottoman Empire and eventually enter through the western borders of Iran, and the second way was to cross the Caspian Sea and Bandar Anzali, most people chose the latter to enter Iran. That is why, Guilan has been called the gateway to Europe. This region came under full Russian influence after the Turkmenchay and Golestan treaties, so that all economic

and commercial privileges of Bandar Anzali and Guilan were ceded to Russia. The constant presence of the Russians, the movement of merchants and traders to Russia and the Caucasus, migration for living or education, the presence of the Armenians and their trade relations made the people of Guilan get acquainted with the Western culture and accept it much earlier than other parts of Iran. One of the elements of the Western culture that the Iranians became acquainted with through Russia is theater. Before the Iranians became acquainted with the art of theater, the play was performed in Iran in two forms: *taziye* (is a Shia Islam ritual that reenacts the death of Hussein – the Islamic prophet Muhammad's grandson – and his children and companions in a brutal massacre on the plains of Karbala,) and imitation. In this chapter, at first *taziye* and imitation are discussed as two traditional forms of theater in Iran and then how the Iranian writers get acquainted with theater will be considered, and finally Guilanian's acquaintance with theater and the first theatrical performances will be discussed.

Theater as a modern art, like other concepts and manifestations of modern Western civilization, was introduced in the field of Iranian culture, art and civilization in the early nineteenth century. The meaning of «play in its new interpretation» is a theater that was established in Iran in the late Qajar period under the influence of the West. After the Constitutional Revolution, the nobles and dignitaries, who had more opportunities, brought tutors to their houses to educate their children or sent them on trips to foreign countries [1, 6]. The return of these Iranian students, businesspersons, and immigrants to Iran after a period of tyranny brought a wave of new ideas. The story of the arrival of theater in Iran is similar to the story of the arrival of many other manifestations of new civilization through Russia and the Caucasus. The first important point is the initial reactions of those in power in this regard, which according to Will Durant's

writings are astonishing and even shocking. In his *History of Civilization*, Will Durant refers to the reaction of the founder of the Qajar dynasty and states: «after invading Georgia and capturing Tbilisi, Agha Mohammad Khan ordered to behead the actors and set a bloody theater scene» [2, 467]. This action of Agha Mohammad Khan showed that the Iranians were not familiar with the modern Western art and hostile to its manifestations. In fact, the Georgians had already been influenced by the Western art, while the Iranians were still far from the basics of the Western art.

The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a period of Iranian society confrontation with European theater. At first, Iranians ignore its values. But at the end they go through that and accept it. This movement goes from the stage of cultural disregard to the stage of awareness and interest and relationship with theater along with other historical currents. In this historical development, there are reciprocal reactions that result from differences in cultural values. Thus, according to special historical circumstances, European theater existed in a limited area of Iran, but then spread to the whole country.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several preliminary events took place in the historical context, but in connection with the theater and later in the field of theater itself, which showed the attitude of the authorities towards the theater and also Iran's attitude to this phenomenon [3, 14].

The arrival of theater in Iran and the acquaintance of the first Iranian writers with it took place via Russia. Establishment of Russian consulates in various cities of Qajar Iran, which led to increased Russian intervention, eventually, caused the anger of the Iranian people and the embassy was attacked and the Russian ambassador Alexander Griboedov was assassinated (1829).

His presence in Iran took place at a time, when the Iranian people had no acquaintance with theater, so no one knew that Griboedov was a playwright. This ignorance can

be seen, where Griboedov speaks of masquerades and theaters in his books and notes about his time with the Shah of Iran. His disregard for this art by the court is a sign of ignorance of the art of theater. Also, the first observations of Nasser al-Din Shah during his trip to Europe (1874 AD) confirms this ignorance of European theatrical art in Iran. «Although Griboedov's life did not help the art, his death contributed greatly to Iranian theater» [4, 57]. After his assassination, an Iranian delegation led by Prince Khosrow Mirza, son of Prince Abbas Mirza, travels to Tsarist Russia to apologize. According to the description of this group of seventeen people written in the travelogue of Mirza Massoud, these people were apologizing during their stay in Russia during the day and were sightseeing at night, and some of these people would go to theaters every night [4, 57]. Wildorant has named the accompanying members of the board as the founders of European theater in Iran. Mirza Agha Tabrizi, who is one of the members of the expedition, is the first playwright in Persian whose name shines in the history of Iranian theater [2, 468]. Other members of the 17-member delegation include Mirza Mostafa Afshar, who wrote a comprehensive account of Russian theaters in his travelogue. Also, Mirza Saleh Shirazi, the Minister of the Court, due to his direct involvement in the establishment of the Dar al-Fonun Theater, is one of those who is worth being mentioned [5, 75].

The first person to use the word «theater» in Iran in his research is Mirza Massoud, who says that theater is the translation of «Tamasha Khane». The issue of support for theaters was one of the main ones in the works of these authors. The theater as a public institution and not a private one, attracts their attention. Mirza Mostafa Afshar has become aware of the impact of the play and its application in the field of sociology, and suggests that it be introduced in Iran by government officials and courtiers, so that instead of blaming the government unemployed people go to the theater:

«The purpose of the government in creating theaters and spreading all these joys is that the unemployed people do not seek to blame the government. In this way, corruption will arise in the affairs of the government, because experience has shown that as soon as the people have no job to do, they certainly start blaming the government. Mirza Saleh Shirazi is one of the first Iranian students to be sent to Europe by the order of Prince Abbas Mirza. During his stay in Moscow, he went to the theater at the invitation of Alijah Colonel Khan and some of his comrades: «Tonight, we got in a cart and went to the theater. It is a large house with lower rooms around it. Everyone comes at the scene and talks in the different characters and then the curtain opens and another conversation begins» [6, 107].

Mirza Mustafa Afshar, in his reports on the theaters of St. Petersburg, explains: It was the theater that provided the opportunity to entertain the people of the country in all the regions ruled by Russia. Each theater has a staff of at least five hundred people, all of whom are actors, literate, and fully skilled, and have set up special schools and appointed teachers to train them. The poor girls and boys are educated there at the expense of the government. After graduation, each is assigned to any jobs in which he or she is skilled [3, 39].

Afshar also described theaters in Russia: «There are four theaters in St. Petersburg, each with its own staff. The Russian theater is called the Great Theater, because it is superior and larger than other theaters in the building, and it is a circular and domed structure. After preparing the ticket, everyone can enter the theater and sit in any position they want. But there is a fee for every position» [3, 40]. Akhundzadeh was one of the first people to get acquainted with theater through Russia. This acquaintance led him to write plays based on his perception of the art of theater: theatrical art, which leads to growth and development, has not yet become popular in Iran [3, 43].

Due to its proximity to Russia, Guilan was on the path of Western modernization, as a result, Guilan was more inclined to modernity and freedom [7, 23]. Of course, the Caucasians played an undeniable role in spreading these ideas, especially after the Russian Constitutional Revolution in 1905, when the ideas of freedom spread rapidly in Guilan.

From this time, the Guilanis participated in literary activities by publishing modern-style newspapers, and, according to Farahvashi, «awakened Muslims from their slumber» [8, 121]. Before the formation of the first theatrical assembly in Rasht, artistic groups from these areas came to Rasht via the Anzali waterway and staged interesting artistic programs for the people. Haj Ali Asgari has considered the performance of this type of play to be more effective than anything else in opening the thoughts of Rasht art lovers to the civilized world of that period [1, 7].

About the history of the play in Iran Nowzad mentions: «by the spread of the art of taziye and clowning; Two Azerbaijani brothers, Kamal and Jamal, came to Guilan from the Caucasus and performed four or five patriotic plays. The effect that these performances had on the spirit of the people was so great that they thought of forming theatrical gatherings in Guilan [9, 24].

Simultaneously with Tehran, new schools were established in Guilan; like Majidiyeh, Mozaffariyeh, Etefaq in Rasht, Haghghat in Lahijan, Mohammadiyeh, Rushdieh, Islami in Anzali [1, 6]. This led to the growth and development of intellectuals and educated people in Rasht, and at the same time daily and weekly press, that wrote scientific, political, and critical articles to raise public awareness, were published.

Ali Asgari mentions in his book that «in that time, humorous press also followed the other press and, at the same time that the newspapers emerged, nightly newspapers were distributed, and what was impossible to say publicly, was included in the nightly

newspapers» [1, 6]. In this way, a group of tasteful people of Rasht, aware of the importance of this art and its impact on correcting social flaws and influencing the minds, pioneered enlightenment in society and established a theater in Rasht by staging several plays. According to Haj Ali Asgari, this happened at a time when «any progressive movement was strongly opposed by some people»; and this is how the theater in Rasht after the Constitutional Revolution was able to find a suitable place among people.

Dr. Mehdi Forough mentions the beginning of theater in Rasht when foreign nations, including Russia, started commuting with Iran; for this reason, the early founders of this art, in order to fight against foreigners and awaken the minds of people and their awareness, tried to develop the theater tremendously. Of course, the one who is near the beehive is more careful than the one who is far away from it, and the people of Rasht were like that [10, 36]. The beginning of theatrical art in Guilan is due to the group of Armenians living in Guilan who took the first steps to spread this art in Guilan. In the field of theater, the Armenians were influenced by the art of Russian theater and transmitted this art to the society of Iran and Guilan. As mentioned before, during the constitutional period, Armenian and Caucasian theater groups came to Guilan with special political ideas as well as fundraising. These groups often chose their main actors from interested natives. The plays that were brought to Guilan were in Turkish and Armenian, and theatrical performances in these two languages were in great demand due to the presence of Turks and Armenians in Guilan [10, 149-150]. All the benefits of Guilan Theater were spent on talent and art, acting and gaining fame, promoting culture and education, helping hospitals and schools and charities, which later found political aspects. And this was at a time when not only ordinary people but also celebrities did not know about the theater in other provinces of Iran and looked at these artists with contempt.



During this period, Tehran also had theater groups. But the people of Tehran never welcomed the theater like Guilan people, and this was one of the reasons for the success of the founders and early groups of Guilan theater [11, 38]. The first theatrical performance in Guilan was in the tobacco warehouse of a person named Dr. Stepan Haratonian in Zarjoub-Rasht.

The play was called «The Dealer» by Chekhov<sup>1</sup> and was performed by a Caucasian group. After the Armenian community of Rasht had succeeded in obtaining permission to build a church, the theater was established in 1887 with the construction of the Church of the Holy Mesrop [10, 150-151]. Theater in Guilan since 1904 was seriously pursued in Armenian religious halls, especially the Mesrop Church, when Tehran was not yet familiar with the theater [12, 34]. This holy place was used as a cultural complex. There is already a report of a theater performance by Armenian artists in 1888 in Akhtar newspaper.

In this newspaper, we come across a theatrical announcement that was one of the first examples in this field. This play has been performed by Monsieur Safrastian Mani (who is very skilled in the field of theater). With his wife and other Armenian companions, he arrived to Tabriz and also translated into Turkish well-known drama and a comedy of Shakespeare [13, 23]. Among the important documents from the theater performance in Rasht is the memoirs of Basil Nikitin, who was the Russian ambassador in Rasht. «There were no permanent plays in Rasht, but sometimes when there was a play, I would attend it», he said. My presence was not just to listen to their conversation and complete my Persian information; but their skillful play was remarkable and spectacular I remember that these plays were translated from French and showed that the Iranians liked French plays [8, 127].

Due to the geographical location of Guilan and the emergence of new social and cultural conditions, at least from 1904 to 1929,

Rasht became the main base and center of non-Guilani artists and freedom fighters. Hassan Nasser, Yahya Kermani, Abbas Banki (Asalat) and Agha Daei are clear examples of this fact [12, 36]. For example, Mirza Hossein Khan Daei Tabrizi (known as Daei Namashi) was one of the Mujahideen of the Tabriz constitutional period who came to Rasht and married the daughter of an Azerbaijani businessman living in this city [10, 38]. The late (Daei Namashi) once came on stage with Caucasian actors who came to Rasht and performed Nader Shah's play, and played the important role of Mirza Mehdi Khan, the Prime Minister, very well [1, 47].

Many people from other parts of Iran came to Guilan and some of them also performed different plays. «Rasht at that time had attractions for all those who were educated in Europe», Sartip Poor explains. It had a mild climate and its streets were clean and paved, its people were well-behaved and receptive to innovation. Imports and exports took place via Anzali, as it was the only safe sea route from Iran to Europe. The city generally had a position that could attract people from other states. The traveler entering Guilan needed a place to live for some while. So, they had to think about the inn, so the inn was established in Rasht. This inn trained waiters. There were doctors, pharmacists, hairdressers, etc., and people used their services. So, someone who came from Europe would find everything in Rasht. If he did not have a house, there was an inn. People, who had become soft and kind as a result of socializing, also received guests. The intellectuals, who came from Europe, also brought their behavior and thoughts.

Hassan Nasser is one of them. Hassan Nasser had previously translated plays and wanted to create an opportunity to stage them. He was a fan of Moliere's works and translated most of his plays. «Nasser's efforts finally paid off, and he was able to form a theater group in Rasht» [11, 223-224]. The establishment of new schools instead of the old ones, in addition to helping to raise the

level of literacy, also helped to expand and improve the performance of the theater. About these new schools and having new performances, Sartip Poor referred to Etefaq, Saadat and Roshdieh schools. Etefaq School was managed by Mirza Ali Agha Habibi and Saadat School was managed by Mr. Ismail Pourresol. Rushdieh school was also in good condition with the presence and management of Hassan Nasser. The principals of these three schools were intellectuals. Hassan Nasser tried to use them in educational activities and for this reason he encouraged them to set up a theater in Guilan. Nasser knew Western theater well and knew that it could have a good effect on the development of ideas. Eventually, with their efforts, a theater was set up, and of course, the Daei Namayeshi was one of the founders, and later Banki (Asal) joined them. Theater was active until the end of 1911, but after that, it ceased its activities because the Russians entered Guilan and Azerbaijan. Then, in 1914, the war broke out, and then the jungle movement and clashes between British and domestic forces disrupted the artwork. In addition to Hassan Nasser, Daei Namayeshi, and Mirza Yahya Kermani, one of the most important people who served the culture of Rasht a lot was the late Haji Reza Matbae, because Haji Reza Matbae mostly used to go to Baku and the Caucasus for trade because of his job. Of course, he was not literate enough, but he had learned some Russian during his trade and association with the Russians, and as a result of his frequent observations and travels, he had a good understanding of Russia's progress.

Therefore, by learning the way and tradition of printing, he brought a printing machine of lead letters to Rasht and printed the required newspapers, books and press. This man was a benefactor and persevered in everything; By receiving donations from the people, he helped to reduce the school budget and was very serious in promoting shows and selling tickets among merchants [1, 33].

According to the notes of Khachatur Minasian, quoted by Talebi in his book (probably after 1889), «For the first time, Olinga Veno Mr. Armenak Hovhannisyan's daughter in law, who had just arrived in Rasht from Tbilisi, went on stage and performed the play «Pepo» wrote by Gabriel Sundukian. Gregory Yeghikian was an enthusiastic member of Rasht Theater from 1921 to 1925. He was fluent in several languages and, more importantly, had seen various theatrical performances outside Iran, especially in the Caucasus region. When he went to Badkoobeh and saw Narimanov's play «Nadanliq», he became acquainted with the author of the play, and talked to him about his work, and then wrote a detailed critic of it» [11, 153-154]. Referring to the presence of women in the plays, Parsi referred to the initial presence of women and noted that «at the request of the Mohammadiyya community, a Caucasian woman named Sona, who had a soft voice, played a role for the first time in Arshin Malalan's play. But one of the issues that prevented any violent action against the Caucasian Sona, and then Maryam Gorji, was their citizenship of the Russian government and their non-Muslim status [12, 47-49].

Guilan Theater was evolving at an unprecedented level until 1925, but unfortunately after that due to censorship of plays, actors were often disappointed and discouraged until in 1928, some of them were exiled by the authorities and the real stagnation happened in the theater [14, 45]. The time from the beginning of Iranian consciousness and the constitutional movement till 1921 can be called the period of protest in playwriting. The outstanding plays of this period are in fact translations of the night's periodicals. The play «The Rule of Zaman Khan» written by Mirza Agha Tabrizi, «The play of old and new rulers» by Morteza Gholifekri are in this category [15, 203].

So, the life of Europeans and Russians along with the people of Guilan in the Qajar era, made the people of this region more familiar with the European clothing of men

and women than in Tehran and other parts of Iran, and after the constitutional era, most aristocrats and intellectuals dressed in European style. The migration of Guilans to Russia to study and work, not only caused a further change in the type of clothing they received, but also led to a change in the style of education. From the Qajar period, the Armenians of Guilan became acquainted with modern theater performances due to their travels to the Caucasus and Baku. Also, theatrical groups that came to Iran from Russia first passed through Guilan and performed in this area. In addition, due to the presence of Russian agents and intellectuals who

came to this area after the constitutional era, the theater in Guilan was welcomed. With the expansion of modern-style schools, because these schools were new and could not be run on a personal budget, and because of the widespread acceptance of theatrical performances, they were used to earn money for cultural activities, including school funding. In general, Guilan Theater and its formation were influenced by the art of Russian theater. On the other hand, many of the themes of Guilani's work, especially in the first years of its formation, have been influenced by Russian theater both artistically and dramatically.

#### Note:

1. "The Dealer" ("Delets") – a story by Russian writer, dramatist Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (1860-1904). Written and first published in 1885 in the journal "Oskolki" under the signature "A Man Without a Spleen" ("Chelovek bez selezenki"). The story "The Dealer" is a portrait sketch of an "entrepreneurial person".

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**Keywords:** *Guilan, Russia, theater, art, modernity, Qajar period.*

*This article attempts, on the basis of Iranian historiography, to study the influence of Russian theatrical art and the contribution of Russian citizens as intermediaries to the development of this art in Iran and, in particular, in its northern province of Gilan. The issues of the influence of Russian dramaturgy on the formation and development of theater in Iran and the importance of Gilan as an intermediary in the transfer of these cultural values are practically not studied in domestic Iranian studies. Meanwhile, from the second half of the XIX century Russians played a significant role in the transfer of cultural values and the foundations of Western modernization to Iran, especially Gilan. The cultural influence due to the presence of Russians in Gilan caused changes in such areas as education, fashion and even in the spoken dialect. It can be said that Guilan in the Qajar period, much faster than other parts of Iran, turned to European culture and as a gateway to Europe, were influenced by the Qajar period, Russia and its European culture. Although the Russians have influenced the Guilanis in various cultural and artistic fields, their influence on the art of Guilani theater has been much greater than other branches of thought and art. The Russians were influential in the formation as well as the content of the plays that were performed in the theaters of Guilan. Most of the early plays performed in Guilan were influenced by Russian theatrical literature, and later, although Guilani artists created works of art, they were still influenced by Russian theatrical literature. In the present article, an attempt is made to explain the role of the Russians in the formation and growth of theater in Guilan by means of a descriptive and analytical method. In the course of the present study, the processes of translation of European cultural values into the socio-cultural environment of Qajar Iran through the theatrical art of Russia were analyzed.*

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