



Pardeh Khani as Performance: An Approach Based on Erika Fischer-Lichte's Theories

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ABSTRACT

Pardeh Khani is a distinctive form of traditional storytelling in Iran that is recognized for its unique performative qualities. This performance method combines storytelling, painting, and acting, which has resulted in the formation of a unique style of Iranian painting known as coffeehouse painting. This article examines the characteristics of *Pardeh Khani* based on performance theory, particularly using Erika Fischer-Lichte's theories, which emphasizes four key aspects: mediality, materiality, semioticity, and aestheticity, to uncover the performative possibilities of this tradition. Although *Pardeh Khani* has faced a decline in recent decades, the initial findings of this research indicate that it has the potential for renewal as an interdisciplinary art form by integrating advancements in both painting and narration. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of its performative possibilities is required to preserve and modernize this performance art.

Keywords: *Pardeh Khani*, Coffeehouse Painting, Iranian Performances, Fischer-Lichte, Interdisciplinary Art

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Introduction

Pardeh Khani is an important part of the Iranian performance tradition. This art form has a long history and is considered a branch of *Naqqāli* (storytelling). It is one of Iran's authentic performance arts that intertwined with painting during its evolution to become a new method of storytelling.¹

The theatrical form of Pardeh Khani, also referred to as *Pardeh Dāri* or *Shamāyel Gardāni*, was typically performed in places specifically dedicated to hosting such performances, such as coffeehouses.² Over time, painted curtains were added to enhance the narrative and improve the performance. Consequently, coffeehouse painting, named after these venues, developed in close relation to this performative method. The contents of such paintings were entirely dependent on the narrative, often featuring religious, epic, or mythological themes.³ The combination of painting with Pardeh Khani made it one of the most theatrical forms of traditional storytelling.

In a Pardeh Khani performance, the storyteller hangs the painted curtain, which resembled a scroll with a series of images that sequentially follow one another, in a coffeehouse corner or a public square. The storyteller then gradually unrolls the scroll in front of the gathered audience, narrating the depicted events with a captivating and rhythmic voice, adding contextual details. When the narrative is a religious one, it can perhaps be considered just before *Ta'zieh*, which is the most popular form of religious theater.⁴

Many performing arts are meant to bring art into people's daily lives by fostering greater interaction with the audience. Pardeh Khani, as a performance with its historical significance and cultural importance for the Iranian people, had the potential to deeply penetrate their lives. However, due to a lack of updates in various aspects, such as form and content, this has not been achieved.

This study will therefore examine the possibilities of Pardeh Khani from a performance perspective, using the theories of Erika Fischer-Lichte, a renowned theorist in the field. It will outline the steps for preserving and preventing the decline of this traditional Iranian art. The following sections will sequentially address the research background, the theoretical framework, the history, and an analysis of the data and its results.

Pardeh Khani has been discussed in several books and articles, but these have generally limited themselves to explaining the method of performance and, in some cases, the details of curtains and storytellers' performances. Some of the most significant studies in this area include the following: In *Ta'zieh va Ta'zieh-Khani* (1974), Sadegh Homayouni dedicated several lines to Pardeh Khani and its close relationship with painting. However, he only mentioned it in the context of its impact on *Ta'zieh* and its expansion, without providing further details about the methods of performance. In *Selections from the History of Theater in the World* (1971), Jamshid Malekpour devoted an entire chapter to theater in the East, which included an introduction and providing general overview of Pardeh Khani in Iran. However, he also did not delve into its performative elements. Jaber Anasori's *Darāmad-i bar Namāyesh va Niāyesh dar Irān* (1987) also made references to this form of performance, but like most sources in this period, he limited himself to a general introduction of the form.

As studies in the field developed, scholars began to add more detail. In *Qahvehkhānehā-ye Irān* (1996), Ali Bolukbashi discussed the most renowned painters in the genre of coffeehouse painting, though he still made only general references to its performative uses. However, Mohammad Hossein Naserbakht (1998) described and categorized the characteristics of Pardeh Khani, the performer, and the painted curtain, and proceeded to analyze several painted curtains.

Behrouz Gharibpour, in "The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani" (1999), also defined and categorized the features of Pardeh Khani and the painted curtains, which are of great significance here. He also related some of the religious stories typically performed through Pardeh Khani. Notably, this was followed by one of the first foreign scholars to elaborate on Pardeh Khani, Peter Chelkowski, who made brief references to *these* performances and their paintings in his book *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (2005).

Meanwhile, Iranian scholars have begun adapting Western performance theory in their studies. In *Dānishnāmih-yi Namāyish-i-Irānī* (2008), Yadullah Agha-Abbasi examined the features of performance from the perspectives of Richard Schechner and Marvin Carlson, mentioning the general performative features of various Iranian performances, including a brief reference to narrative storytelling. However, he did not closely focus on any particular genre of Iranian performance or its alignment with performance art. In Bahram Beyzaie's *A Study on Iranian Theater* (2013), one of the most important written sources on Iranian theater, an entire chapter is dedicated to narrative storytelling. However, he provided only a brief introduction to this form of performance and its prominent use of painting.

¹ Behrouz Gharibpour, "The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani," *Fasnāme-ye Honar*, no. 40 (1999): 55.

² Bahram Beyzaie, *Namāyesh dar Irān* (A Study on Iranian Theatre), (Tehran: Roshangarān and Women Studies Publishing House, 2013), 76.

³ Ruyin Pakbaz, *Encyclopedia of Art*, edition 10. (Tehran: Farhang Mo'aser, 2011), 587.

⁴ Beyzaie, *Namāyesh dar Irān* (A Study on Iranian Theatre), 77.

More recently, Zahra Rahbarnia and Roshanak Davari (2017) examined Ta'zieh as a performance art, which included the role of the audience in this form of theater. This article is significant as it provides an updated analysis and categorization of the features of a traditional Iranian performance in comparison with performance art. Similarly, Leili Galehdaran and Reza Pourzarrin (2019) explored the relationship between the storyteller and the audience through the medium of the painted curtain and the interaction of visual and performative elements. Majid Fadaei (2020) and Ramtin Shahbazi and Mohammad Hashemi (2022) have focused more on narrative, with Fadaei examining the epic aspects of the Pardeh Khani narratives and Shahbazi and Hashemi discussing the use of time markers in these narratives and the storyteller's skill in creating narrative connections between the frames of the painted panels.

Theoretical Framework

To clarify the criteria of performances and compare them with Pardeh Khani, this article will refer to the theories of Erika Fischer-Lichte, a prominent scholar in the performance field. Fischer-Lichte defines the concept of performance by referring to specific medial conditions (bodily co-presence), a particular material characteristic of materiality [its (transience), a special mode of creating meaning [semioticity or the emergence of meaning], and the specific type of aesthetic experience [the experience of liminality].⁵ From this perspective, all phenomena that align with these criteria can be considered as performances. Richard Schechner's (2018) views on performance are also used to complete gaps in certain theoretical issues. We will first explain these four characteristics and then proceed to analyze them in the context of Pardeh Khani.

• Mediality and the experience of liminality

Mediality and liminality share certain similarities. Mediality is defined as follows: "A performance exists in the moment of bodily copresence of 'actors' and 'spectators.'"⁶ A performance thus possesses different situations of mediality rooted in its dependence on bodily co-presence. Fischer-Lichte further explains that during such interactions, actors influence the spectators and vice versa. Additionally, spectators can influence each other during the performance and in their reception of the work.

This concept is directly related to the aesthetic experience of liminality, which can occur rapidly through sudden physical changes in a person; such rapid occurrences can happen when intense emotions accompany the process of perception.⁷ This subsequently prompts the spectator to become engaged in an event and challenge it. Based on these definitions, these two characteristics share a common ground in the interaction between the performer and the audience, which we will later analyze in more detail in comparison to Pardeh Khani.

• Materiality and objects

Fischer-Lichte presents the transient condition of materiality by stating that performances cannot be contained within or transformed into material artifacts; they are ephemeral and transitory. Once a performance ends, it is irretrievable and lies beyond repetition. The transient materiality of performance emerges through the features of spatiality, corporeality, and tonality.⁸

Regarding spatiality, Fischer-Lichte explains that we must distinguish between the architectural space in which a performance takes place and the performative space created by the performance, the latter of which reciprocally affects the performance itself. Every movement of people, objects, light, and sound can alter this space. Therefore, the performative space is constantly fluctuating.⁹

In terms of corporeality, or physical presence, when actors step outside themselves to portray a figure using the "material of their own existence," they highlight this doubling and the simultaneous distancing of the figure from themselves. There is a tension between the actors' phenomenal bodies, their bodily existence, and the use of those bodies as signs to depict characters.¹⁰

The transient materiality of performance is also derived from the materiality of sound, or tonality. Sound creates presence and fills the space between the spectator and the performer, uniting them and establishing a relationship between them. The transience of the moment in which sound is produced contributes to the strength of a performance.

⁵ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 100.

⁶ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 19.

⁷ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 43.

⁸ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 22.

⁹ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 23.

¹⁰ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 26.

Tonality has a profound emotional impact: it can cause listeners to tremble and breathe more rapidly, increase their heart rates, and induce feelings of melancholy or euphoria. It can arouse desires or bring forth vivid memories.¹¹

Fischer-Lichte's understanding of transient materiality is comparable to Schechner's theory of the object in performance: In activities related to performance, the economic value of all objects is much less than the value attributed to them in the context of the activity, except for certain ritual implements and relics.¹² In other words, performance can attribute a transient value to objects or, conversely, diminish that value.

• Semiotic and rules

Fischer-Lichte defines semiotic by stating that "Traditionally, performances were seen as a means to transmit preexisting meanings." However, considering the conditions mentioned above, understanding and interpreting meaning heavily rely on individual spectators' mentalities, which are related to factors such as age, gender, class, and cultural background.¹³ From another angle, spectators enter into the rules of performance, but they may also interfere in and continuously generate new meanings in this process. Each audience member can add something to the performance based on their own characteristics, contributing to the creation of new meanings.

Pardeh Khani and Its Relationship with Coffeehouse Painting and Storytelling

An overview of the history and performance characteristics of Pardeh Khani will allow for a comparison with the aspects outlined by Fischer-Lichte. Through this comparison, it will be possible to further consider the potential for modernizing this traditional performance method.

• Pardeh Khani

Pardeh Khani, or dramatic storytelling, has its roots in religious narratives like the events of the Battle of Karbala (680 AD), and epics like the tragedy of Rostam and Sohrab. It is a subset of narrative storytelling, a meta-genre that gained prominence in the mid-fifth century with the rise of Shia Islam, particularly as a means of promoting and propagating Shia beliefs. This began with the Buwayhids, who paid special attention to the lives of the Imams. Various forms of religious storytelling emerged, including Manaqib Khani, Fazail Khani, Sokhanvari, Hamleh Khani, and Pardeh Khani.¹⁴

Shemayel Gardani or Pardeh Dari is the act of presenting religious images on a curtain and narrating their stories.¹⁵ A prominent feature of Iranian performances is the inclination toward storytelling, as noted by Naserbakht, and forms of storytelling in Iran often involve subplots that typically carry moral themes and relate to everyday life.¹⁶ This method creates a complex, intertwined structure, linking the main event and characters with contemporary figures and the ordinary people who are spectators in the assembly. This presents an example of Fischer-Lichte's semiotic, which posits that performances can establish a connection between the past and the present during the process of meaning transfer, thereby creating new meanings in the presence of contemporary audiences.¹⁷ This same quality was a reason for its promotion and spread by rulers such as the Safavid monarchs, who turned it into an effective means of religious promotion. This has also been seen in medieval Europe. Chelkowski has noted that in Iran and throughout the Islamic world, depicting and sculpting animals and humans has often been prohibited and considered illegitimate. Nevertheless, there are still artists who paint curtains depicting scenes from religious stories such as the sacrifice of the martyrs of Karbala or the revenge of Imam Hussein's killers. Performers display parts of such paintings every day and engage their audience with loud speeches, oratory, and rituals that have evolved over hundreds of years.¹⁸

In this manner, it can be said that Pardeh Khani is a subset of performance art in which storytelling is conveyed through painted images. As mentioned earlier, Pardeh Khani is also referred to as Shamayil Gardani and may depict religious figures. It could thus be argued that painting, like poetry or music, has sought a social place for itself and gained acceptance. The painting techniques used in these curtains are such that villains are usually depicted as ugly, abnormal, and repulsive. Their heads are shaved, their foreheads are short, their laughter is bitter and joyless, their mustaches

¹¹ Fischer-Lichte, , 34.

¹² Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 11.

¹³ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 38-39.

¹⁴ Leyla Taghavi, "Coffeehouse Painting and Miniature - Formation and Interaction" *Art and Architecture*, no. 25 (2011): 11.

¹⁵ Beyzaie, *Namāyesh dar Irān* (A Study on Iranian Theatre), 219.

¹⁶ Mohammad Hossein Naserbakht, "Darvishi Curtains: The Art of Pardeh Khani and Darvishi Curtains Painting" *Honar*, no.35 (1998): 103.

¹⁷ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 51-53.

¹⁸ Peter Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, Trans. Davood Hatami, (Tehran: Samt, 2005), 179.

are dangling, and their gaze is shameless.¹⁹ These images, through the dynamic interactions between performers and audiences, are narrated in a new way each time and generate new meanings.

Other scholars have drawn connections between painting and performance art, including Kamyabi Mask, who discusses Pardeh Khani as follows:

In 1984, when I went to see Schechner for the works he had performed with the backing of UNESCO, we had a discussion that lasted two to three hours. If we consider the integration of arts... in my opinion, we had a form of performance art in the past called Pardeh Khani. There was a painted curtain with another curtain on it; a storyteller or curtain-holder stood by the painted curtain, gradually moving aside, then explaining the image on the curtain. We can consider this a performance in which painting, storytelling, and someone as an actor were used.²⁰

Gharibpour also states that religious Pardeh Khani has three equally valuable basic elements: story (content), dramatic painting (dramatic representation), and storytelling (acting).²¹ The defining element of painting in this performative style presents the first signs of the interdisciplinarity of this artform. However, from the early to mid-20th century, due to Western influences and the emergence of new forms of entertainment, coupled with the overall decline of coffeehouses, Pardeh Khani gradually lost its prominence.

• Coffeehouse Painting

Coffeehouse painting is closely associated with Naqqāli (storytelling). The term is used to describe a narrative oil painting with themes like battle scenes, festivities, or religious subjects. It emerged as a genre during the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and is based on the traditions of folk and religious art and influenced by the naturalistic painting style popular during that era. The coffeehouse can perhaps be considered the birthplace of this genre, not only because of its close link with storytelling but also because coffeehouse owners were among its initial patrons. However, these curtains have also been hung in places such as mourning ceremonies, shops, bathhouses, and wrestling arenas.²² As previously mentioned, Fischer-Lichte emphasizes the need to distinguish between “architectural space,” the structure in which a performance takes place, and “performative space,” which is created by the performance itself and reciprocally affects it.²³ In terms of performance studies, the architectural space is the physical location where the painting is displayed, whereas the performative space is shaped by dynamic factors such as the constant movement of the audience, light, sound, and the presence of the storyteller. Thus, each time the paintings are in a new context, and with the changing presence of spectators and performers, they generate new meanings and create a fresh space for artistic experience.

According to Boloukbashi, coffeehouse paintings can be classified into two general categories based on contents: religious and nonreligious paintings. The notable pioneers of these two categories were the painters Hossein Qollar-Aghasi (1902–1966) and Mohammed Modabber (1890–1966).²⁴ Gharibpour refers to the painted curtain used in Pardeh Khani as a “dramatic” painting: this type of painting involves a performative act, with its images depicting pivotal points in narratives on which the storyteller (*Naqqāl*, “face” or “curtain reader”) elaborates. Therefore, the scenes lack static and still qualities.²⁵

Bezyaie also notes that curtains are often painted with dark colors. Some curtains may depict one or several episodes from the life and tribulations of the Prophet’s family. Curtains may relate historical events like the tragedy of Karbala or its surrounding events (such as the deeds of Mukhtar al-Thaqafi or scenes of the torture and massacre in Yazid’s court), and others may pertain to the miracles and virtues of the Imams (such as the story of Imam Ali and Javanmard-e Ghassab).²⁶ The events of Karbala are among the most important themes of religious Pardeh Khani curtains.

• Performer as Naqqāl in Pardeh Khani

The integration of the two arts of painting and storytelling in Pardeh Khani can be considered a component of its performance and interdisciplinary visibility. Naqqāl is one of the most important and authentic roles in Iranian theater. Just as Vaghe’e Khani (storytelling) is a demanding, specialized art based on established principles and traditions, Pardeh Khani narrators must possess a precise understanding and self-taught knowledge of the psychology of the audience. Their remarkable mastery over both their audiences and themselves stems directly from this foundation. In

¹⁹ Sadeq Homayouni, *Ta’zieh va Ta’zieh-Khani (Ta’zieh and Ta’zieh Recitation)*, (Shiraz: Jashn-e-Honar Publication, 1974), 28.

²⁰ Ahmad Kamyabi Mask and Mohammad Bagher Ghahramani, “Impact on the Audience”, *Art and Architecture*, no 95-96 (2007): 87.

²¹ Gharibpour, “The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani,” 56.

²² Ruyin Pakbaz, *Encyclopedia of Art*, edition 10. (Tehran: Farhang Mo’aser, 2011), 587.

²³ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge introduction to theatre and performance studies*, 23.

²⁴ Ali Boloukbashi, *Qahvehkhānehā-ye Irān (Iranian Coffeehouses)*, (Tehran: Dāftar-e Pāzhūhesh-hā-ye Farhangī, 1996), 98.

²⁵ Gharibpour, “The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani,” 60.

²⁶ Bezyaie, *Namāyesh dar Irān (A Study on Iranian Theatre)*, 75-76.

recent centuries, the foundation of the Iranian storytelling tradition has also supported the acting methods of a newly emerging performance, known as Ta'zieh, helping it achieve a high degree of perfection in form.²⁷

The live presence of the storyteller-as-performer can be associated with Fischer-Lichte's concept of mediality, which refers to the direct influence that both the audience and performers exert on one another by being simultaneously present in a performance space.²⁸ The storyteller's interactions with the audience often lead to sudden emotional changes in the performance, which, according to Fischer-Lichte's framework, results in the creation of an aesthetic experience that is unique and different in each performance.

Aqabbasi discusses a related characteristic of Naqqāli, namely improvisation. Many Iranian performances lack a written text, emphasizing improvisation instead. This type of creativity is not always meticulously planned. Iranian performers can effectively guide a show in the desired direction using the expertise gained through prior experience. However, there is always the possibility of unforeseen elements influencing a performance.²⁹ As a result, these highly skilled performers must begin their performances with an awareness of current and local public opinions and events. Each time they perform, they tailor their speeches to current issues and the perspectives of their audience. It is therefore rare for them to start and end a performance in the same way twice.³⁰ Having established the basic elements of Pardeh Khani, coffeehouse painting, and Naqqāl, we can now analyze the details of Pardeh Khani through the lens of performance theory.

Data Analysis

This section will provide a more detailed comparison and examination of the characteristics of Pardeh Khani and its performative structure, expanding upon the explanations provided within Fischer-Lichte's theoretical framework.

• Mediality and the experience of liminality

Fischer-Lichte discusses the concept of mediality as part of a reciprocal relationship; performance emerges in the moment of bodily co-presence of both actors and spectators.³¹ For instance, in Naqqāli, a storyteller adjusts their performance based on the audience's reactions. This connection is better understood through Hassan Beigi's explanation. Shemayil Gardani, which had a notable presence across Iran during its peak, is among the performing arts where there is no distance between the narrator and the audience. Naqqāli uses poetry, storytelling techniques, oratory, and specific musical modes to establish a precise connection with the audience.³² In other words, it is an art form in which a storyteller conveys a tale with their entire being, utilizing all their talents and physical expressions to captivate their audience, not only entertaining but astonishing or surprising them.³³

As Fischer-Lichte suggests, in a performance, the audience members' reactions exert influence on each other and on the actors. Using these reactions, skilled Naqqāl-ha (storytellers) can precisely predict which parts of their story will be the most thrilling for the audience and how to deliver them for maximum impact. They achieve this effect by inserting pauses, modulating their voice, raising and lowering their tone at the appropriate times (such as whispering or shouting), adding a tremor to their voice, altering their pitch, clapping their hands together and stomping their feet on the ground, and even suspending the narrative at a critical point to keep the audience emotionally engaged.³⁴

The excitement Beyzaie speaks of is not always internal and can lead to physical reactions from the audience, such as during the moment of a hero's death. This experience, derived from the bodily co-presence of the performer and the audience, inherently involves another aspect known as "aestheticity," stemming from combined physical and bodily experiences, as Fischer-Lichte notes. Pardeh Khani has the capacity to create such liminal experiences by evoking emotional moments and engaging the audience in scenes such as a hero's death or a story's climax. According to Fischer-Lichte, these experiences, which occur suddenly and intensely, are considered one of the key aesthetic dimensions of a performance.³⁵

²⁷ Beyzaie, *Namāyesh dar Irān* (A Study on Iranian Theatre), 81.

²⁸ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 19.

²⁹ Yadullah Agha-Abbasi, "Theater: Iranian Theater and Its Relation to World Theater," *Art and Architecture*, no. 42-43 (2008): 243.

³⁰ Mohammad Reza Hasan Beigi, *Tehrān-i Ghadim* (Old Tehran), (Tehran: Ghoghnoos Publishing, 2006), 343.

³¹ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 19.

³² Hasan Beigi, *Tehrān-i Ghadim* (Old Tehran), 343.

³³ Homayouni, *Ta'zieh va Ta'zieh-Khani* (*Ta'zieh and Ta'zieh Recitation*), 28.

³⁴ Beyzaie, *Namāyesh dar Irān* (A Study on Iranian Theatre), 81.

³⁵ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 43.



Figure 1. *Pardeh Khani performance by Moshed Mirza Ali. Note the presence of the bodily co-presence of the storyteller and the spectators. Source: <http://tabnakfarhangi.ir>*

Therefore, a Pardeh Khani performance is contingent upon the full engagement of all participants and the mutual influence these participants on the performance (see Figure 1). The experience of liminality in performance is thus directly related to the condition of mediality, or bodily copresence. Agha-Abbasi argues that audience intervention is a key aspect of intimacy and transparency in postmodern performances, and that this transitions an audience from a passive to an active role. In Western theater, this trend began with Brecht, who advocated for audience involvement and eliminating their distance from the actors. Brecht, in turn, owed this inspiration to Eastern theater.³⁶ From this perspective, Pardeh Khani simultaneously embodies both mediality and liminality in its performance. These direct, complex connections between audience and storyteller dynamically transform the course of a performance, making Pardeh Khani one of the unique examples of traditional Iranian performance arts.

- **Transient materiality**

Pardeh Khani performances may take place in open spaces, completely confronting an audience with an event. Here, payments to the performer are entirely based on each viewer's discretion and do not significantly affect the performance mechanism. However, it should be noted that the money received for Pardeh Khani does not commodify it, as the concept of reward is involved. Regarding this, Gharibpour has stated that the remuneration received by the performer, or more precisely, "begging," is considered charity, which has reciprocal rewards for both the payer and the receiver.³⁷

The painted curtains or canvases used in Pardeh Khani have also existed as long as this performance artform has existed. These are also not considered commodities, as they held their own ritualistic value and are treated with respect. However, some of these curtains have since been placed in museums, such as the works of painters like Qollar-Aghasi and Modabber. Due to their nature as artworks, they have been transformed into valuable items that possess material value (Figure 2). However, this was not the case during the performance process until recently.

³⁶ Agha-Abbasi, "Theater: Iranian Theater and Its Relation to World Theater," 242.

³⁷ Gharibpour, "The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani," 56.



Figure 2. The Pardeh of the Day of Ashura by Hossein Qollar-Aghasi, Malek Museum. Source: www.honaronline.ir

The main point here is that in performance, performers and audiences do not gather for the primary purpose of maximizing returns or producing more goods. This issue directly relates to materiality: performances cannot occupy a place in material goods or be transformed into them. They are ephemeral and unstable as acts of autopoiesis, a form of self-creation.³⁸ In terms of bodily co-presence, for example, a single narrator can be several actors at once and convincingly perform multiple roles, without the aid of supplementary theatrical elements such as stage decorations or music.³⁹ Fischer-Lichte calls this “corporeality.”⁴⁰

Another important point is the absence of the traditional “character” in performance art. This stands in contrast to the traditional character of Western theater, which is constructed and treated as real, with the actor completely embodying their role. In Iranian performances, the actor is merely an intermediary. The narrator is not Rostam or Sohrab, but through them, we see both Rostam and Sohrab. This approach offers greater diversity and complexity and is more challenging. “The actor resembles but is not the character themselves.... Actors maintain a state of detachment and are always aware of their own work, avoiding the pitfalls of sensationalism.”⁴¹ Similarly, Fischer-Lichte cites Brecht’s theory of acting, where the actor simultaneously portrays a character and takes a stance vis-à-vis that character.⁴²

In the realm of tonality, Gharibpour emphasizes the importance of the voice in Pardeh Khani and other storytelling performances, stating that a storyteller possesses all the capabilities of both narrators and epic storytellers, and whenever necessary, takes on the emotional states of the characters. They sing, cry out, and sometimes, with skill akin to that of a professional eulogist, perform elegies for the dead.⁴³ The narrator creates most of the narrative through the use of their voice, as the performance space is not exclusively a space for watching (theatron), but for listening (auditorium).⁴⁴

Here, it is crucial to supply a brief discussion on the nature of objects object in performance. As noted previously, Schechner argues that performances can either bestow value upon objects or diminish it. The market value of objects is usually significantly lower than their value within the context of the activity itself.⁴⁵ Similarly, in Pardeh Khani performances, there is the question regarding the sanctity of objects. In religious contexts, the elements and components of a performance are considered sacred from the beginning to the end.⁴⁶ For example, the painted curtain is recognized as a sacred object in religious Pardeh Khani. Gharibpour enumerates some key characteristics that transform the curtain into a sacred object. First, the persons and events depicted must denote religious occurrences. Their importance and sanctity are usually directly proportional to their size. For example, Imams are always much larger than ordinary people and often occupy the center of a curtain. Events or places like Judgment Day and Hell are depicted with symbols such as dragons, trees, and terrifying creatures to make the fate of sinners clear and tangible. The colors are usually bold and the images are two-dimensional. Realism may vary; for example, the faces of Imams painted may only be

³⁸ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 22.

³⁹ Beyzaie, *Namāyesh dar Irān* (A Study on Iranian Theatre), 82.

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⁴¹ Agha-Abbasi, “Theater: Iranian Theater and Its Relation to World Theater,” 243.

⁴² Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 29.

⁴³ Gharibpour, “The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani,” 61.

⁴⁴ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 34.

⁴⁵ Schechner, *Performance theory*, 11.

⁴⁶ Gharibpour, “The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani,” 56.

painted in some cases, and the women of Karbala may be depicted as faceless. The narration provided by the performer will clarify the identities of individuals and the significant events.⁴⁷

Based on the sacred nature of their use, the objects used in Pardeh Khani typically resist commodification. This only changes when their utility or function changes, such as paintings or scrolls that have been transferred to the museums. As a result, Pardeh Khani, as a performance, with its ephemeral and transitory characteristics, fits perfectly within Fischer-Lichte's theoretical framework on materiality; through its interaction with objects, space, and its audience, it generates its own unique values.

• Semioticity and rules

In the context of representation, performances were traditionally seen as a means of conveying preexisting meanings. If we assume that the bodily copresence of actors and audience is integral to the performance and that performances are inherently unstable, the idea of an absolute meaning in performance cannot exist. Understanding and interpreting meaning heavily relies on the interior life of each spectator. Within a performance, a special world is created where humans can establish rules and consequently create meanings based upon them. In Pardeh Khani, the narrator, based on the mentioned characteristics, engages in selecting narratives and improvisation. According to Anasori, the Pardeh Khan (or Naqqāl) is a skilled, discerning actor who carefully observes the audience and selects the appropriate characters to focus on based on its composition. For instance, if he sees a strong and handsome youth, he speaks of Qamar Bani Hashem, and if he sees an adolescent boy, he instead describes Hazrat-e Qasem, both of whom were significant figures in the Battle of Karbala.

As mentioned earlier in this section, the storyteller must know what type of discourse is suitable for a given moment and location. Naturally, the audience will also respond based on their own characteristics. In fact, it can be inferred that the rules of performing and the way each Naqqāl or storyteller narrates in each Pardeh Khani performance—as well as the interaction of the audience during that performance—can create new meanings. Each performance adheres to its own set of rules. Similarly, Pardeh Khani incorporates a mixture of traditions and regulations that can vary to an extent, from costume design to the use of objects. For instance, the Pardeh Khan will often refer to images with the *Metrāgh* (narrator's stick). This stick has been adopted for use by Mo'in-al-boka for pointing during Ta'zieh performances.⁴⁸ In terms of the number of curtains and their narratives, more specific laws and traditions prevail. For example, the sacred number 72 will often be incorporated, with Pardeh Khani about the Battle of Karbala including references to the 72 companions of Imam Hussein and it can also include 72 plot lines.⁴⁹

In addition, special rules have been established for creating the paintings that assist the narrators during the performance. According to Royin Pakbaz, artists will often write the names of individuals alongside their images in the curtains. Furthermore, as noted above, the paintings often incorporate *Māqami* perspective, which depicts the size of characters based on the centrality of their roles. The main character is generally larger than the secondary characters and painters will use specific visual conventions to emphasize the positive or negative aspects of the characters. The efforts of the coffeehouse painter in representing scenes and displaying the physical and internal characteristics of the characters are generally influenced by a bias in favor of the heroes. Based on artists' ethical and ideological motivations and the logic of narrative in a curtain, the painter observed specific arrangements in depicting the figures and garments, color selection, and composition as storytelling elements.⁵⁰ As noted previously, faces may be obscured (Figure 2):

In the images of curtains, due to religious barriers, the face of the Imams is not shown, and only a halo of light distinguishes them.

These rules, particularly in the use of symbols and visual techniques, have thus established a foundation for conveying multilayered meanings in Pardeh Khani. While deeply rooted in tradition, however, these rules also have the capacity for endless reinterpretation and adaptation to new contexts, which can serve as strengths for further adapting Pardeh Khani for contemporary times.

• Time and space

Pardeh Khani performers must plan the duration of a narrative according to the patience and eagerness of their audience. This flexibility in storytelling allows Pardeh Khani to captivate diverse audiences across different eras. Following Schenker's view, a significant portion of traditional theater utilizes symbolic time.⁵¹ For example, in Pardeh

⁴⁷ Gharibpour, "The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani," 60.

⁴⁸ Gharibpour, "The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani," 65.

⁴⁹ Gharibpour, "The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani," 58.

⁵⁰ Pakbaz, *Encyclopedia of Art*, 587.

⁵¹ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 9.

Khani about the Battle of Karbala, the events are generally not presented in chronological order, and instead draw from the episodic structure used in Eastern storytelling.⁵² Rather, all curtain stories feature elaborate introductions and conclusions, which works to create anticipation in the audience. Even seemingly peripheral events can be skillfully interwoven with mastery to connect to the central events of Karbala.⁵³ Thus, time in such narratives is intertwined and generally holds a symbolic significance rather than adhering to real-time sequences of events. This approach to time offers more opportunities to create deeper emotional and symbolic meanings for the audience, as the break from real time allows for a stronger connection between the audience and symbolic or mythical narratives.



Figure 3. Pardeh Khani in a public place street. Source: www.karnaval.ir

Another important feature of the Pardeh Khani performance is space, which we will elaborate on in the continuation of this section, along with explaining the concept of spatiality previously mentioned in the materiality section. Pardeh Khani, due to its temporal and spatial constraints, does not allow for elaborate stage design or the use of special accessories. This type of performance can be done anywhere, with any number of spectators, and for any duration. The flexible use of time and space is a hallmark of Iranian performances, which have skillfully utilized these features throughout the millennia. In general, Iranian performances do not rely on stage design. They can take place in town squares, on platforms, in coffeehouses, in the corner of a living room, or any other location using minimal accessories. These performances are flexible and cost-effective, expanding their scope to wherever audiences may gather (Figure 3).⁵⁴ This simplicity and flexibility makes Pardeh Khani a suitable contemporary performance style for diverse audiences in various locations.

As mentioned earlier, there are two types of Pardeh Khani: one is religious and sacred in nature, and the other is heroic or mythological. Therefore, the subject of the curtain determines the location of its installation.⁵⁵ In each case, the performance venue will vary. It can be inferred that each type of Pardeh Khani requires an identity that the location will provide it. During Qajar Iran (1789–1925), for instance, narrators were mostly concentrated in cities with widespread meeting places (including coffeehouses), especially in Tehran and Isfahan. In cities lacking large coffeehouses or other gathering centers, narrators rarely thrived. Performance given in coffeehouses typically involves recounting mythological narratives, unless it was at a specific time, such as the days of Muharram or Ramadan. Meanwhile, the venues for religious Pardeh Khani include pilgrimage sites, holy shrines, and Imamzadehs.⁵⁶ Therefore, each type of Pardeh Khani takes on a unique identity based on the location in which it occurs. In other words, the venue can enhance the meaning of the performance and enrich the audience's experience.

As noted previously, Fisher-Lichte argues that the spatiality of performance is created in, through, and as the performance space and is perceived under the conditions created by that space.⁵⁷ Location also possesses a unique identity in the characteristics of Pardeh Khani, because it can vary depending on the content. As stated above, artists around the globe developed the concept of spatiality after being inspired by Eastern performances, including the attributes often observed in traditional Iranian performances.⁵⁸

⁵² Naserbakht, "Darvishi Curtains: The Art of Pardeh Khani and Darvishi Curtains Painting," 107.

⁵³ Gharibpour, "The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani," 58.

⁵⁴ Agha-Abbasi, "Theater: Iranian Theater and Its Relation to World Theater," 244.

⁵⁵ Pakbaz, *Encyclopedia of Art*, 587.

⁵⁶ Gharibpour, "The Sacred Art of Pardeh Khani," 56.

⁵⁷ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 23.

⁵⁸ Agha-Abbasi, "Theater: Iranian Theater and Its Relation to World Theater," 242.

Pardeh Khani: An Interdisciplinary Art Form

According to Ruyin Pakbaz, Pardeh Khani has largely declined today due to the loss of its original functional nature.⁵⁹ In an era where many art forms are advancing and modernizing, Pardeh Khani may benefit from new painting techniques and other visual arts to diversify its storytelling. As paintings, sculptures, poetry, and other artworks enter a performance, they lose their independent identities, and they transform into elements that shape that performance. In this way, theater is an “interart,” and Theater and Performance Studies is an interdisciplinary field.⁶⁰ The use of new and digital technologies can also provide opportunities for the revival of traditional art forms. This transformation could give Pardeh Khani a modern appeal and make it more attractive to new generations.

Interdisciplinary performance art has seen consistent advances in recent decades. This raises the question of how traditional Iranian performance forms like Pardeh Khani, with its ties to coffeehouse paintings, can be integrated with other arts, including digital arts, to enhance its narrative expression more comprehensively and dynamically. In this case, Pardeh Khani has a significant potential for modernization and attracting new audiences. However, this endeavor requires further research and exploration.

Performance art is inherently collaborative, and like Kolazh art, it brings together and synchronizes diverse materials.⁶¹ Ultimately, it seems that Pardeh Khani, by combining the arts of storytelling, painting, and acting, has the potential to modernize itself using advances in painting and multimedia arts, both in narrative and visual aspects. Its recent decline is largely due to a lack of alignment with social changes and the emergence of modern entertainment. Nevertheless, this does not signify the end of Pardeh Khani. With further research and exploration, it is possible to find ways to revitalize this art form while preserving its traditional values.

Tables

To better understand the comparison between Fischer-Lichte’s theories and the performance of Pardeh Khani, we have designed a table based on the characteristics of Pardeh Khani and performance theories to distill the compatibility of these theories with this type of performance.

Table 1. Alignment of Pardeh Khani Characteristics with Fischer-Lichte’s Framework

Fischer-Lichte’s Framework		Performance	Pardeh Khani
1	Mediality	A performance exists in a moment of bodily co-presence of actors and spectators.	The narrator and audience are present in the same space. The narrator adjusts the narrative based on the audience’s reactions, creating pauses or engaging in dialog as necessary.
2	Materiality	Spatiality	The narrator chooses and presents a narrative based on the audience’s characteristics and the atmosphere in the performance space at that moment.
		Corporeality	The narrator, by distancing themselves from the characters, simultaneously embodies all the roles they narrate.
		Tonality	The narrator shapes the narration and the characters vocally, including singing, shouting, and eulogies. They will always return to the role of the narrator.
3	Semioticity	Factors such as age, gender, social class, and cultural background influence how people perceive performances.	The narrator selects the narrative of their painted curtain based on the audience and improvises during the performance based on the space created by them, thereby creating new meanings.
4	Aestheticity	Audiences may experience a broad spectrum of intense emotions during a performance. Each performance has the potential to create an aesthetic experience.	In religious performances, audiences often weep, while in mythological performances, they engage in various forms of sympathy.

⁵⁹ Pakbaz, *Encyclopedia of Art*, 588.

⁶⁰ Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge introduction to theatre and performance studies*, 147.

⁶¹ Agha-Abbasi, “Theater: Iranian Theater and Its Relation to World Theater,” 243.

Conclusion

This study has introduced Pardeh Khani and its characteristics and analyzed them based on the theories of Erika Fischer-Lichte. She, by defining concepts such as mediality, materiality, semioticity, and aestheticity, demonstrated that a performance transcends a static experience. Rather, a performance is a dynamic, ephemeral experience that depends on the simultaneous physical presence of both the audience and the performer. Pardeh Khani, as a traditional Iranian form of performance, combines the unique artistic elements of painting, storytelling, and performance, giving it a highly interdisciplinary characteristic and enabling it to create a distinct, meaningful experience for audiences.

The alignment between contemporary performance theories and the tradition of Pardeh Khani demonstrates that this traditional art form still possesses the potential for renewal and the creation of new meanings in today's world. The dynamic performance space and the improvisation of the storytellers in interaction with the audience, which is in line with Fischer-Lichte's theory of mediality, prove that Pardeh Khani can continue as a living, contemporary performance. This examination allows the redefinition of traditional values within new contexts and, by combining them with contemporary theories, the discovery of innovative ways to expand this art form. Pardeh Khani allows for complex interactions between the performer and the audience, which is clearly manifested through the bodily co-presence, emotional moments, and active participation of the audience in the storyteller's narration. However, the rules and conventions governing this art form, including the semiotics of the paintings and the use of tools such as the narrator's stick, provide Pardeh Khani with a traditional but flexible structure. These rules, along with the improvisations of the storytellers, not only lead to the creation of new meanings each time but have also transformed Pardeh Khani into a dynamic yet ritualistic art form that can still hold a special place in the culture and art of Iran. However, to accomplish the preservation and updating of Pardeh Khani, it is essential to establish a strong movement in the field of performance studies in Iran, in which ritual-traditional performances can be revisited and analyzed from new perspectives. This will allow the fundamental steps required for the growth and transformation of traditional Iranian performance methods.

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