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Mysticism as Transgression in Chista Yasrebi's *Rahil*

As a prominent figure in the contemporary Iranian theatre scene, Chista Yasrebi uses her plays to call for female liberation in the country while navigating the existing political constraints, including censorship. Her 1996 play *Rahil*, for example, acts as a political allegory through its narrative of the titular woman's desire for transcendence within the patriarchal realm of Persian mysticism. In its close analysis of the play, this article identifies the historical significance of mystic women in Iran and examines Yasrebi's use of mysticism to comment on the complexities of gender politics, the oppression faced by Iranian women, and the need for social resistance. Further, it draws on key concepts from Alain Badiou's political philosophy to demonstrate how *Rahil*'s journey into mysticism can be seen as an act of transgression. It argues that Yasrebi's work enriches the ongoing discourse on the role of women in Iranian society and the broader struggle for political transformation.

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IN RECENT YEARS, the theatre of Iran has become a platform for a growing number of female playwrights determined to mobilize women. These playwrights have used the increased artistic freedom that was a product of the Reform Era of the late 1990s to defy the rigid socio-political and religious tenets ingrained in the country's prevailing patriarchal ideology and its suffocating, monolithic cultural and moral norms.¹ The artists and playwrights who emerged out of the Reform Era – widely known as the 'scorched generation' – focus on narrating, sharing, and celebrating female experiences as a way of freeing the theatre from the tight strictures imposed by such male playwrights as Akbar Raadi, Bahram Beyzai, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf.² Thus, plays like Chista Yasrebi's *Yek Shab-e Digar Beman Sylvia* [*Stay for Another Night, Sylvia*] (2004), Tala Motazedizadeh's *Khan-e Faramoushan* [*The House of Oblivion*] (2006), and Rosa Jamali's *Sayeh* [*The Shadow*] (2007) foreground the voices of Iranian women.

To do this, the playwrights embrace a spectrum of feminist concerns from domestic and social violence to confronting the oppressive patriarchy and advocating for liberation.

This article focuses on the 1996 play *Rahil* by Yasrebi, an undisputed pioneer of the feminist reform of contemporary Iranian theatre. *Rahil* centres on the titular woman's aspiration to excel in mysticism, a domain traditionally dominated by men in Iran. Yasrebi uses the play to examine the role and position of mystic women in pre-modern Iran (Persia), and to probe mysticism's political implications and its connection to femininity in modern Iran. This article argues that Yasrebi's play acts as a political allegory to critique subtly the intricate web of gender politics and religious dogma that has restricted the lives of Iranian women. The use of such allegorization is a strategic manoeuvre to navigate censorship in Iran. *Rahil*'s journey towards self-knowledge, political consciousness, and transcendence through her quest to become a

mystic is thus shown here to be a metaphor for Iranian women transcending the constraints imposed by religious and political oppression.

Finally, the article draws on Alain Badiou's concepts of 'the event', 'the state', and 'the situation' to demonstrate the link between transcendence, self-realization, and social transformation. Badiou's philosophy borrows from structuralism and mathematics to argue that truth is an ongoing and dynamic process that occurs when an event disrupts the existing order of a particular situation. In the case of Yasrebi's play, the journey that Rahil undertakes acts as the event and leads her to a profound introspection and reconstruction of the self to embrace multiplicity and plurality, which, in turn, pave the way for wider political change in contemporary Iran.

Introducing Yasrebi and *Rahil*

From her emergence onto the Iranian theatre landscape in the mid-1990s, Chista Yasrebi has earned recognition for her unwavering commitment to empowering women and dismantling hegemonic control. She has made a significant impact as a writer and director through such plays as *Rahil*, *Stay Another Night*, *Sylvia*, and *Dokhtar-e Khouchak-e Shab-e Toulani* [*The Little Girl of the Long Night*] (1997), all of which were highly successful. Her work is characterized by a fierce critique of post-Revolutionary conservatism and gender inequality, and her productions serve as a platform on which to address societal issues such as social injustice, political repression, and class struggles in Iran. Thus, her work is a testament to the power of the arts to challenge prevailing norms and promote self-expression.

Yasrebi examines the female experience through the theatricalization of ancient Persian myths, which she combines with inscrutable Islamic texts. Her approach has resulted in narratives that combine influences from literary and cultural legacies, including legends, epics, allegories, and etiological tales, and engage with myriad conflicting discourses, encompassing theology, Sufism, politics, and social reform. Her unique contribution to Iranian theatre lies in her

reinterpretation of monumental manuscripts by ancient male commentators on Islam and mysticism from a distinctly female perspective. In doing this, she is also challenging the tradition of such re-narrativization being the exclusive realm of male theatre luminaries in Iran, most notably Beyzai, as evident in his 1982 play *Marg-e Yazdgerd* [*Death of Yazdgerd*, also known as *Death of the King*].

Yasrebi uses the apparent anachronism of the allegorical-mystical themes in contemporary Iranian theatre to challenge the established narratives and encourage the audience to reflect critically on the interplay between religion and authority. In *Rahil*, for example, she explores the traditionally male-dominated sphere of Sufism and Persian mysticism by dramatizing one of the most pivotal texts in Islamic theology – Abu'l-Fa'zl Rašid-al-Din Meybodi's *Kašf Al-asrār Wa'oddad Al-abrār* [*Unveiling of Mysteries and Provision of the Righteous*]. Meybodi was a twelfth-century male mystic and a staunch traditionalist who criticized speculative theology and advocated complete submission to all Islamic decrees. This mystic tradition has marginalized women historically by labelling them as incapable of both inner and outer spiritual quests and has even gone so far as to deny the existence of mystic women, often suggesting that they were men in disguise. Yasrebi's play counters such views and, in doing so, highlights this deeply problematic representation of femininity, which is given extra significance when considered in the context of 1990s Iran.

Rahil tells the story of Rahil, a slave woman (*Kanīz/kanīzak*) who aspires to become a prophetess, that is, to achieve the highest level of transcendence in mysticism. One night, she awakens to an ethereal whisper – a revelation – that informs her of the people of Samouk (a fictional desert) who worship a tree as their deity, and that she has been chosen to embark on a prophetic mission to stop this idolatrous practice. In the lead-up to her mission, Rahil encounters a woman who compels her to assist 'an albino hag', 'a sick Master', and 'a blind girl'. Frustrated by these seemingly unrelated tasks, she reluctantly agrees. The journey that Rahil undertakes over the course

of the play, which she thought was about transcendent, otherworldly truths, leads her to self-discovery and an understanding of her true calling in life, including the profound realization that the tree of Samouk symbolizes her own barren soul. This nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of a slave girl in a society where power, desire, and servitude were intertwined sheds light on the complexities of women's lives in pre-modern Iran. It also underscores the diversity of experiences and roles these women played and challenges the simplistic stereotypes that were common in medieval Islamic literature to offer a more comprehensive understanding of their place in the history of the country.³

In her 2010 essay 'Some Reflections on Islamic Art', Yasrebi identifies the common ground that Islamic art forms and mysticism share in their quest for truth. Most notably, both follow a path that includes stages of 'expansion', where individuals open up to the world, and 'transcendence', where they unite with the One.⁴ In the case of *Rahil*, however, the stage of expansion is caught in a conflict due to external factors that determine the protagonist's ability to reach the One, or block it altogether. Yasrebi is here challenging the prevailing understanding of mysticism that associates it with negating the world (society) in pursuit of transcendence. She, by contrast, brings the complexity of personal transformation to the forefront to show that the path to self-discovery may lead through the intricate landscape of human relationships and societal interactions and not just transcendental aspirations. She thus navigates the chauvinistic and, at times, misogynistic aspects of mysticism, creating a matrix of demythologization and demystification.

Women and the History of Mysticism in Iran

Mysticism, widely known as Sufism in Iran, was destined to revive and reform Islam, 'infusing into it a spirit of love and liberty'.⁵ In medieval Iran, 'Moslem ascetics appeared who, from their habit of wearing coarse garments of wool (*Suf*) became known as Sufis', although what is now known as Sufism 'dawned unheralded, mysteriously, in the

ninth century of our era and already in the tenth and eleventh had reached maturity. Among all its exponents, there is no single one who could be claimed as the initiator or founder.'⁶ Cyprian Rice argues that, in its attempt to 'spiritualize Islam', Sufism could be seen as 'Persia's revenge for the imposition of Islam . . . by the dissemination of the Sufi creed and the creation of a body of mystical poetry which is almost as widely known as the Quran itself'.⁷ Focusing on the reconciliation of all dualities, Persian mysticism drew its sustenance from the 'transcendental moment' in which 'the self and the divine other, the created and the creator', became united, and 'the eternal and the temporal . . . the physical and the spiritual los[t] their meaning'.⁸

Despite its widespread impact on Iran, mysticism was a predominantly male enterprise; women were not readily admitted into the mystic circles due to the perception of them as incapable of spiritual sublimation. The male mystics saw women as embodiments of earthly sensual delights and thus believed they were obstacles to the renunciation of worldly pleasures and the endurance of suffering that was necessary for spiritual elevation.⁹ Indeed, within some Sufi strands, the woman was inherently synonymous with the soul or 'self (*Nafs*)', a 'Mistress World' or incitement to evil, 'divert[ing] the man from his intellectual or religious striving, which is just another expression of the typical ascetic male fear of the power of the female'.¹⁰ This negative perception of women was taken to an extreme by the Qalandars, a faction of male mystics, who would put a lock on their genitalia in an attempt to ward off any sexual temptations.¹¹

A recurring theme in the mystical writings of the era was the presence of beautiful, captivating, yet non-believing and sinful women, as exemplified in the work of Abu Said Abu al-Khair. Under the guidance of the elderly mystic master, or Sheikh, these women underwent a transformative journey resulting in their repentance.¹² In this climate, prominent mystics such as Farid-od'Din Attar (commonly known as Attar of Nishapur) claimed that women who were eager to become mystics had to first denounce their femininity.¹³

Yet history shows that women were deeply engaged with mysticism in medieval Iran. Annemarie Schimmel argues that Sufism 'is permeated throughout with feminine traits. There is no question that the imagery employed primarily by the Arabian Sufists is patterned after the classical model of love for an unattainable woman.'¹⁴ Further, while there are no more than a 'few names of famous women mystics' listed in the biographies of Sufis,

all classical works and all Sufis, however, eagerly admit that the central figure in the early history of Sufism was a slave woman named Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Tradition has it that it was she who first introduced the element of absolute love of God into the strictly ascetic Sufism of the eighth century.¹⁵

Rabi'a referred to 'God as the Beloved' for the first time since the emergence of Islam and, in contrast to the esoteric writings of male mystics, she passionately reiterated that her 'starting point was neither fear of hell nor desire for paradise, but only love'.¹⁶ Likewise, Sufi women spread the language of harmony, 'creative ability and the coincident capacity for relationship and love', as a path to the Sublime.¹⁷

In spite of the difficulties imposed by the patriarchal society of the time, mystic women did not stay in the shadows and constantly sought new ways for self-recognition. As Camille Adams Helminski explains:

Within some Sufi circles that developed over the centuries, women were integrated with men in ceremonies; in other orders women gathered in their own circles of remembrance and worshipped apart from men. Some women devoted themselves to the Spirit ascetically, apart from society, as Rabi'a did; others chose the role of benefactress and fostered circles of worship and study. Many of the great masters with whom we are familiar had teachers, students, and spiritual friends who were women and who greatly influenced their thoughts and being.¹⁸

While the male mystics travelled and tolerated austerity as proof of endurance, these women practised 'introversion and journey in the soul' and 'discovery and intuition'.¹⁹ Another distinctive feature of mystic women's

practice was their active involvement in society as mothers and wives. Whereas many mystic men withdrew from social engagements and immersed themselves in abstinence, women engaged in mystical conduct alongside their daily activities.²⁰ In doing so, they again proved that 'committed partnership, children, and wider family are great blessings, containing the inspiration, the breathing in, of the Divine. As we deepen our capacity for relationship and fidelity in the human sphere, we also increase our capacity for relationship with the Divine.'²¹

When considered through this historical context, the significance of Yasrebi's *Rahil* is made clear, especially in how it criticizes the rigidity and constraints of Persian mysticism while alluding to the struggles of Iranian women living in cultural inertia. It is also useful to examine *Rahil*'s quest in relation to its counterparts in Western mythology. Maria Tatar and Maureen Murdoch have both extensively discussed the notion of the female quest, and show that, within Western mythology, the heroine typically returns to a state of safety and reconciliation after her journey, regardless of the challenges she faces.²² *Rahil*, by contrast, returns to a nightmarish self which is marked by dryness and a profound absence. This departure from the typical Western heroine's journey is a striking example of how Yasrebi injects an Eastern perspective into *Rahil*'s quest by revisiting mysticism and its cultural impositions.

The State of Mysticism in *Rahil*

When the play starts, *Rahil* has already been yearning to reach the Sublime, the One, for a number of years. She has piously been following all the rules and laws set by the male mystics in order to achieve this ultimate transcendence from the worldly to the celestial, including endless worshipping of God, supplication, and solitude. Through highly metaphoric and poetic language, the play shows *Rahil* receiving a mysterious revelation in the form of an ethereal command (in a 'whispering voice') while asleep one night that assigns her to a prophetic mission: 'These are hidden truths revealed to you! A message that not

everyone deserves to hear: a lone tree in the Samouk desert is worshipped as God! Worshipped and worshipped.²³ As the voice fades, Rahil wakes up aghast:

(To herself) What an ominous night and eerie dawn. As if the world is emptied of its soul! Samouk people and a lone tree in a desert! I have never heard of these people! Which faraway voice is calling upon me? Secret messages and nightmares of Rahil, the slave? No. This is impossible! Undoubtedly, I have been fooled by my naivety. Naivety or old youthful dreams?²⁴

Yet Rahil has been praying for this day in all her solitude and recognizes that she is being called: 'No doubt, it is Him. It is Him who is calling upon me, and "truthful calling is only for Him", so why are you scared, Rahil? Haven't you been waiting for this miracle all your life? . . . Yes, Rahil, you are one of the Addressed.'²⁵

After receiving the revelation and before setting off on her dangerous journey into the unknown to become a prophet, Rahil encounters a mysterious Woman, claiming to be an angel, who persistently discourages her from taking on the task. Significantly, the stage direction does not distinguish between the Woman's voice and the ethereal voice, suggesting that they are one. This raises an important question for the audience: why is the same voice that announced Rahil's prophethood now trying to dissuade her? The Woman tells Rahil that she is not a prophetess: 'You are neither a prophet nor a Select One. Go back to your prayer as the tree of paganism cannot be uprooted by a slave.'²⁶ Trying to convince her that the voice was a demonic temptation, the Woman forces her to accomplish three tasks to 'purify her heart' before embarking on the journey to Samouk.

First, Rahil needs to care for a 'blind albino hag' living in the neighbourhood, who appears on the stage in rags 'humming a song'.²⁷ The hag orders her to dig a grave that is 'not too narrow that I cannot breathe in, and not too wide that would make me feel lonely'.²⁸ Rahil becomes increasingly agitated by the ongoing dispute concerning the size of the grave, as the hag continually fails to be content with the dimensions and insists that

Rahil lies in it to assess its comfort. At this point, Rahil's endurance falters, along with the sincerity of her intentions, leading the hag to curse her: 'Go away, the prophet of unfinished tasks! The prophet of curses and failure.'²⁹

The second task is to help an old man, who is a 'Master of earthly and heavenly knowledge with an oozing and infected wound'.³⁰ Again, Rahil fails the task, this time because she does not know what to do with such a severe wound and starts cursing his children for their negligence towards their father. Disappointed, the Master sends her off. Rahil's final task is to befriend an orphan flower girl who has blinded herself so as 'not to see the unkind world'.³¹ 'Touching the girl's eyes', she miraculously restores the girl's eyesight by stressing the importance of love: 'Believe that love is in your heart. I will love you like a little girl, and you will love me too. Now open your eyes under the name of God, the seer.'³² Buoyed by this miracle, Rahil invites the girl to join her on the journey, explaining: 'I should become immortal in history. I will take you with me so you can see and hear everything and witness a prophet's agony.'³³ However, the girl realizes Rahil's self-interest in healing her eyes and refuses to be her chronicler: 'Prophets do miracles only by God's permission and not to fulfil their desires. You should not have laid out a condition!'³⁴ Once again, Rahil has failed in her attempt at altruism and pure devotion.

These three failed tasks can be read as establishing the play's 'situation', in Alain Badiou's sense of the term. He argues that the reality of a particular situation is bound by the existence of its 'non-localizable' or unpredictable elements, which are irreducible to the totalizing forces of the state, or what Badiou often refers to as 'counting-as-one'. In *Rahil*, then, the three failed tasks act as the non-localizable elements that disturb the stability of the state: that is, the conventions of mysticism and transcendence. While the 'situation' is divided between the anarchic and the organized, the 'state of the situation' thwarts any deviations from this unifying process of 'counting-as-one'.³⁵ Thus, the state of the situation is a 'metastructure of the situation which

seeks to secure the consistency of all the multiples and sub-multiples counted in it . . . assuring the stable count of its elements, parts, sub-multiples, and subsets'.³⁶ The appearance of the state as an immanent, counted-as-one world is, therefore, already demarcated with a transcendental order in which the multiples are homogenized and unified.

In the case of *Rahil*, the three tasks need to be performed meticulously in order for the state of the situation – that is, reaching the Sublime – to be secured. Yet Yasrebi shows that such a state mirrors the male-dominated sublimation tradition, with prophethood being its unwavering pinnacle. Rahil desperately acts in accordance with the masculine codes of sublimation, which even coerce her to perform a miracle in a fashion similar to such male prophets as Moses or Muhammad. She does whatever it takes to be a prophet, mindlessly following the male-prescribed religious conventions. Her failure to accomplish the tasks and so be initiated into the covenant of mysticism highlights the exclusionary nature of this tradition and the extent to which female expression is conceived as a form of disequilibrium and dissonance within the patriarchal and religious norms.

The three failed tasks also highlight the need for Rahil to embrace multiplicity, heterogeneity, and contingency. Yasrebi draws attention to the fact that the stability promoted by transcendence is essentially *virtual*, which Badiou defines as something that is potential or apparent but not fully actualized or realized. The perceived stability of any system, including, in this case, mystic transcendence, is contingent on certain conditions and so does not have the grounded, substantial quality that it seems to promise. Likewise, Yasrebi shows that seeking stability through transcendence alone is illusory or precarious, and that true stability and genuine transformation also require active engagement with events and the consequences they bring.

Yasrebi's play, then, is a political allegory that rejects these virtual religious norms and challenges the notion of transcendence. This state of transcendence is presented as the prevailing ideology of Iran, while the ethereal voice that commands Rahil embodies the

hegemonic control in the country. It is for this reason that she experiences profound depersonalization when trying to follow the indoctrinations that it imposes on her, which results in her loss of self as she becomes an ideological automaton. In the context of contemporary Iran, where direct protest results in severe suppression and silencing, Yasrebi uses Rahil's spiritual journey to comment on the female experience and denounce complacency and conformity, and also to allow female audiences to live vicariously through her path to self-knowledge.

The Event of Transgressing Transcendence

Upon her return from the failed tasks, the Woman appears to Rahil again and discloses the key to her mystical transcendence: 'You are the lone tree, Rahil. Samouk is nowhere, but your heart and I live in that desert too – the Desert of Samouk. You are the tree; uproot yourself. I am from Samouk, and now I return to it.'³⁷ Astounded, Rahil cries out: '(To herself, as if waking up from a long dream) A lone tree in a desert, in that dry land. Get up, Rahil, satiate your thirst, kill this cruel thirst, I need water . . . (her voice fading)'.³⁸ Rahil can no longer be petrified into the state of orthodox transcendence and has now returned to her barren self. This reversion sabotages her transcendental subjectification as she learns to accept the void at the centre of her being. The play finishes with the following stage direction: 'With the fading of the light, Rahil collapses, and her shadow resembles a withering tree. The sound of music is heard, accompanied by the sound of water drops.'³⁹ This moment of revelation enables a form of self-sublimation that replaces the practice of following blindly the paths set by religion or culture. It marks the start of Rahil's real quest, namely the journey to herself that has been long delayed by her previous obedience to rigid rules.

Rahil's experience here transgresses the institution of mysticism and sublimates her to the *event* of self-awareness. Badiou, again, defines the event as an occurrence that is capable of challenging established norms and inspiring meaningful political change. Such events are rare, unpredictable, and exceptional,

but have the potential to introduce new possibilities, challenge existing structures of knowledge, and transform the foundations of being. In *Rahil*, the event disrupts the established order of Islamic mysticism and introduces a new possibility for truth that is centred on self-knowledge.

In its closing stages, the play depicts female individuation and self-interrogation as a way to challenge religious transcendence and cultural submission. By acknowledging that she is the Samouk tree, Rahil begins an act of subversion:

Why don't you stand up . . . not for reaching the Samouk, just for a sip of water . . . you might satiate this dry thirst of the desert. Stand up, Rahil; what is wrong with you? Stand up, drink a little water, just a sip to kill this cruel thirst. Stand up, Rahil . . . stand up . . . I need water, water . . . How thirsty I am. Like a lone tree in the middle of a desert . . . a lone tree in the desert . . . (*Her voice fades*.)⁴⁰

This process of demystification occurs following the encounter with others; that is, the three people seeking help in the play. Following these encounters, Rahil's identity undergoes a rupture and her sense of self begins to (dis)appear, expand, shapeshift and come into being. In this sense, her metamorphosis into the Samouk tree is marked by what Badiou calls 'events of structural breakdown, moments of dysfunction or indecision'.⁴¹ Following this rupture, Rahil embodies a new, emancipated world, and remains faithful to the transformative potential of the revelation and its unknown possibilities, which could only be achieved through active engagement with others.

Although he neglects the socio-historical structures that perpetuate gender inequality, Badiou's thoughts on the feminine as the 'generic' and 'indiscernible' can also help to shed light on Yasrebi's allegorization of politics and the contemporary social struggles of women in Iran. Badiou argues that 'the feminine as the generic set cannot be counted (or represented) within the given situation, because it is always that which exceeds the count of that situation, whatever the transcendental order . . . the feminine functions by making a hole in knowledge, by disrupting knowledge'.⁴² Of course, Rahil's sublimation cannot be understood

solely through the binary opposition of the masculine and the feminine, or the finite and the infinite, since her transformation into the Samouk tree could be read as her accomplishing '*Fanā*', which means 'to die in God': 'It is to forsake the created world in contemplation of the unimaginable oneness of God.'⁴³ Yet Yasrebi does not yield readily to such mystical orthodoxies. If the Samouk tree embodies the object of mystical desire – the divine or God – then Rahil's metamorphosis into it is not just dissolution into infinitude, or *Fanā*. Instead, it is an effervescence of the self in the face of the absent divinity. In this world, the feminine disrupts the knowledge and functions of mysticism, yet dissolves in the infinite possibilities of womanhood as a form of cultural resistance and political reformation.

Rahil is presented here as a heroine on a quest for (self-)knowledge. Despite all the obstacles, doubt, and self-abnegation, she becomes the leader of her cult and, by the end of her mystical voyage, a believer in her own way. As the Woman explains, she chooses 'to become eternal in history' over 'becoming an anonymous prophet who only knows total submission to Him'.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the fact that the play is favourable to the Sublime and sublimation shapes the core paradox at its heart. On the one hand, Rahil celebrates the rich ancient tradition of mysticism, but, on the other, she repudiates it through her translation of mysticism into a quest for womanhood. Through this duality, the play seeks an escape from the myth of mysticism and its historical impositions.

Notes and References

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