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Janet Afary & Kevin B. Anderson,
Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and
the Seductions of Islamism
(University of Chicago Press,
2005)**

Ta'zieh plays are interpretations of a mythologised battle: the battle of Kerbala, which took place in 680 AD. Following the death of Mohammed in 632, there was a dispute over who should be the new leader. This conflict would lead to the establishment of two groups that still exist to this day and which are now known as the Sunnis and Shiites. The followers of the caliphs would become the Sunnis, while the followers of the Imam would become the Shiites. On the 10th of October 680, when Imam Husain ibn Ali was on his way to Kufa with 72 of his men, Caliph Yazied I's army cut him off at the pass. During the ensuing battle, Husain ibn Ali and every single one of his men were killed. The battle had political objectives: land and leadership. However, the processing of the defeat had a spiritual aspect that strongly informs the Shiite identity: opposition to what was perceived as unjust oppression. As with any mythical story, multiple readings are possible: a particular reading can be deliberately selected, exaggerated and staged in an opportunistic fashion. (3)

This makes the myth an exceptional political tool that incites identification with the players. The entire public sphere in Iran is dominated and controlled by an extensive and sophisticated network of images that reference this story. Unsurprisingly, a fair number of social movements have arisen that do not espouse this static, official reference frame. For many, this results in a schizophrenic situation: social acceptance on an official level and social acceptance in the subgroup. Public and private are two different scenarios. If identification with the official is impossible, then as soon as the physical threshold is crossed to the outside world, self-preservation leads to self-correction and self-censorship. People put on a disguise. Each space proclaims the codes of conduct loud and clear. It could be argued that such a rigid structure also provides a sense of security. One can follow the rules without personally engaging with them. The public space as a whole can be perceived as a theatre in which the polar opposites of identification and detachment are both present.