

## When American Dramatists come from Hollywood to Iranian Cinema: Socio-Semiotic Exchange in Literary Adaptation

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Media is building one of the most important influences of our lives, shaping, revising and testing our values. The adaptation of literary works on silver screen is no exception. It is important to mention that being faithful to the original work, has been seriously challenged by the scholars in the realm of adaptation studies to the extent that accuracy has never been the criteria for evaluation, especially in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Benefitting from the model introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) regarding the social dimension of semiotics, this paper shows how the apparently dissimilar traditions of American and Iranian art is conjoined in the Iranian adaptation of American dramatists. This research aims to analyze two cinematic adaptations of Tennessee Williams: *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) in America and in Iran. Hollywood, almost instantly, adapted the play under the same title with the help of eminent movie stars and a renowned director, Irving Rapper (1950). However, it took more than 60 years for *Glass Menagerie* to be adapted as *Here without Me* by Bahram Tavakoli (2011) in Iran. Focusing on two adaptations of Tennessee Williams, this research reveals how semiotic signs in the movies, expose the social concerns of the time rather than the issues addressed by the playwright. From semiotic point of view, the patriarchal ideology in America of the 1950s and Hollywood obsession with happy ending is replaced by a powerful mother-figure and class struggle in Iran of the 2010s. By deciphering the codes in the two adaptations, it is concluded that Tavakoli's *Here without Me* goes beyond indigenization while Rapper's *Glass Menagerie* is mostly bound to the Hollywood status quo and hence remained unknown to both the Iranian audience and the fans of Hollywood classics.

**Keywords:** Adaptation studies, Social Semiotics, Visual communication, Tennessee Williams, Hollywood, Iranian Cinema

## Why is Williams Popular in Iran?

Williams's reception and popularity in Iran is indebted to several translations of most of his plays as well as their numerous reprints and editions. Furthermore, the superstar quality, the box-office and critical success of his Hollywood adaptations concurred with the golden age of dubbing in Iran, which in turn echoed the golden age of cinema in Iran and in America. TV programs could not compete with the popularity, dominance, and pervasiveness of films; thus, cinema had many lovers, fiery fans and devotees who bought the tickets at any cost.

The cinema of Iran was a museum of Hollywood Classics, Indian Films and occasionally Iranian melodramas and romantic comedies. The prevalence of foreign films brought the birth of the finest dubbings in the history of film translation. Going beyond the claim of the critics who accept theater or opera translation as creative adaptation (Snell-Hornby 116-118), one lands on the realm of dubbing. Dubbing is more "covert" rather than overt "translation"; and "there is no scope for the primary target audience to evaluate the actual standard of content synchrony achieved"; thus, the "analyses of dubbed texts often reveal a *high degree* of adaptation" (emphasis is mine, O'Connell 130). The judges of this type of adaptation are in the theater not in the bookstores and universities. Therefore, they demand the fidelity of the translation/adaptation to the socio-cultural context and the reception of its superstars in their own society rather than its text.

Iranian dubbing talents gave new vigor and credibility to every film they dubbed, mostly Hollywood Classics— Williams's adaptations included. Many Classic fans have raved about the quality of the localized and Persianate dubbing claiming that they even excel their original soundtrack! The voice of every superstar have been assigned to one dubbing talent; so, Vivian Leigh (1913-1967), Marlon Brando (1924-2004), Paul Newman (1925-2008), Elizabeth Taylor (1932-2011), Anna Magnani (1928-1972), Burt Lancaster (1913-1994), Al Pacino,... have a consistent, familiar voice in every film. The professional resume and the fame of dubbing talents depended on the actors/ actresses they dubbed. The spectacle of cinema and the good quality of Farsi dubbing magnified Williams's fame in Iran persisting for decades even after the popularity of cinema faded. Tavakoli's intellectual

pose of literary awareness, the known plot which stood the test of time and Williams's label are all good reasons for both academic and unsophisticated financial attractions.

Although Williamsian theatrical hallmark is the tragic portrayal of misfits, the characters of *Glass Menagerie* (1945) can be trimmed as *less* unfit compared with his other plays. *Glass Menagerie* (1945) is more reserved and less sensuous lacking characters like hyper-masculine Stanly Kowalski, the almost-prostitute Blanche DuBois of *Streetcar* (1957), seductive and emotionally intense Maggie the Cat and Brick Pollitt of *Cat on Hot Tin Roof* (1955), the gigolo Chance Wayne of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), Alma Winemiller, the will-be-prostitute priest daughter of *Summer and Smoke* (1948) or the defrocked Reverend T. Shannon tempted by a teen in *The Night of Iguana* (1962). *Glass Menagerie* (1945) is not offending the unwritten rules of the socio-political and socio-cultural context and discourse in Iran. As for the visual codes embedded in the movies, Kress and van Leeuwen theories can be the decoding key.

### **Socio-Semiotic Exchange in Iranian Cinema**

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) the meanings and significations of any visual sign is shaped by the social system and cultural group that create it. Thus, visual signs must be analyzed in close relation with their context and background. They believe that like “linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 2). Visual communications carry some culture-specific forms and meanings that are various in every model. As a result, grammatical models differ from one culture/setting to another. Therefore, when Williams is adapted the mise en scene of Tavakoli's film finds a different meaning in Iranian culture.

Cultural, social, and linguistic differences lead to inevitable modification and adjustments in cinematic adaptation which Tavakoli represents in his different and fluid reading of *Glass Menagerie* (1945). In all his interviews, he warns artists against “secrete adaptation”, the term he uses as a euphemism for plagiarism (Tavakoli interview, *Khabar Online*, par. 23; Tavakoli interview, *Isna News*, par. 5). Yet, being faithful to copyright does not negate intertextuality. It refers to the

intertextual and adaptational nature of the work as well as its revision, re-creation and localization. Thus, the title, the name of the characters and the ending must change.

*Glass Menagerie/ Here without Me*, narrates the life of a lower-middle class, Wingfield/ Taghavi family struggling with financial and psychological dilemmas. A man (Jim / Reza) enters the life of the girl who seems to belong to another world: a world with less complication and more hope. Laura's love for Jim has a long history going back to ten years ago when Jim was the high school hero. However, Yalda falls in love with Reza's voice when she first hears him singing. They pleasantly meet each other and their response is based on mutual, favorable estimation. When the plot reaches the pinnacle of a romantic comedy leading to marriage, Jim/ Reza claims that he has been engaged to another girl. In a fiery fight, the mother (Amada/ Farideh) accuses Tom/ Ehsan of neglecting the family's honor and pride and trifling with the purest feeling of her crippled sister.

The son, always wants to desert the family like his father, however he constantly finds himself more faithful than he intends to be (Williams *Glass Menagerie*, 338). His mother's words are always echoing in his mind that he does not have the ethical permission to leave the helpless women behind to peruse his unattainable dreams (*Glass Menagerie*, 295-298, 337; *Here Without Me*, min. 33-34, 69). Here, the cultural discourse of American 50s, meets Iranian 2010s: the happiness, emotional and financial safety of women lies in the hands of their men. From the hands of a father, a woman must be safely delivered to the hands of a husband. Amanda/ Farideh's obsession to marry Laura/ Yalda is well reflected in this cultural discourse. Before the girl is mature enough to marry, father takes care of this responsibility. Thus, the absence of father in the family, by death or separation, forces the son/ brother to carry the burden of this patriarchal responsibility. Ehsan cannot leave his family until, Yalda finds safety in a marital life; consequently, Farideh can rely on her son-in-law as a replacement for her son.

Using the techniques of his invented 'plastic theater' and 'memory play', Williams keeps the reader suspending (Williams "Foreword", "Person-To-Person", "The Timeless World of a Play"): did Tom leave or did he stay? The same suspension and the lack of certainty is kept by Tavakoli, albeit as the major element of his film: Ehsan's deserting the family, the family's happy/ miserable future

and past, and even Reza's marriage to Yalda are all possible interpretations. This is how Tavakoli's version of visual communications differs with that of Williams.

The collision of reality and illusion is the central concern of *Here without Me* (2011). The realistic setting and the mise en scene represent the psychological and philosophical dilemmas of characters. The stage dividing, transparent faded portieres of the play (Williams *Glass Menagerie*, 276), is changed to ground glass in the film separating the drawing room from the lavatory. This is the same shield which keeps Yalda away from audience in the theatrical posters. Taking Kress and Van Leeuwen's view into account, this ground glass wall, the replacement for Williams's transparent gauze curtains, is the thin borderline between reality and illusion. Behind this glass wall, Farideh and Ehsan are trying to save Yalda from the illusion of Reza's love, her imaginary dialogue with him or with her glass animals.

This dream shield is the only escape that Yalda can afford in her world: during the fierce fight of mother and son, she takes refuge behind the wall washing her glass animals (min. 28-30); when Farideh understood that she deceived her about attending the porcelain flower class<sup>1</sup>, she hides behind the wall (min. 15); when she realizes that Reza has a fiancé, she imprisons herself at the back this wall (min. 68). This Williamsian prison of dream and illusion ("Wells of Violence", "Memoir") breaks into reality when Yalda is mentally disturbed by Reza's illusionary phone call which causes her obsession to answer it by any means (min. 70-77).

The importance and the iconic nature of this glass wall determine the promotional movie posters and photoshoots since most of theatrical posters portray the wall in different depictions. This fragile collision is represented in two theatrical posters as well as the banners of the critical symposium of *Here without Me* (2011) in July 2011. Semiotically speaking, either Yalda is imprisoned behind this wall or her identity, beside every other character, is shattered or cracked as the glass wall snaps. In his *Discipline and Punish* (1995), especially "The Gentle Way in Punishment", Michel Foucault (1926-1984) rediscovers the importance of the distribution of posters, placards and signs. For him,

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<sup>1</sup> Yalda's porcelain flower class is a replacement for Laura's typing class.



“[t]he publicity of . . . [posters] must not have the physical effect . . . ; it must be an open book to be read” (111). As a result, the significance of the dream-reality collision ‘must be an open book’ to be read by the people who have or have not seen the film. Those who have seen the film will re-narrate the story for those who have not which may allure them to the box-office. The story of the film is spread far beyond the silver screen or the theater.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen’s visual semiotics, Tavakoli’s reading and understanding of the borderline between reality and illusion is very different from Williams’s play. The ground glass in the doorframe replaced most of the key elements in the play and their symbolic significance: the transparent faded portieres (*Glass Menagerie* 276), the recurrent reference to Laura’s glass menagerie and the unicorn. Williams sees the clash of reality and illusion in terms of transparent curtain, fabrics, and flexibility. However, for Tavakoli, this collision is hard but fragile and glass but half-transparent. This conflict is the manifestation of Derridean *différance*. The dialogic quality of the ground glass, its transparency and opaqueness, its solidity and fragility ‘defers’ and ‘differs’ any concluding certainty and finality.

The food company, Farideh’s working place, is another central part of the visual semiotics of mise en scene. Enclosed by mountains of onion (min. 13, 36), Farideh looks small and even belittled when she struggles with finical difficulties at any cost, albeit in an honorable and decent way. Her unsteady job and drudgery in Onion-peeling Room of Delpazir Food Company is an intertextually bitter irony of the company’s slogan: “With Luscious, life turns luxurious!” or “Life graces us with Gracious” [*Ba Delpazir, zendegi delpazir mishavd*]<sup>2</sup>; To add more to the irony, one must take the meaning of *Delpazir* into consideration, which literary means luscious or gracious. Tavakoli’s interpretation and intertextual coding are the representation of to Kress and Van Leeuwen’s culture-specific model and Bryant’s (2002) “process of cultural revision” (93). They both signify the localization of an imported text.

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<sup>2</sup> با دلپذیر، زندگی دل پذیر می شود!

To make it believable for Iranian audience, Tavakoli must filter *Glass Menagerie* (1945) through Iranian cultural context, social setting, and familiar socio-cultural codes. He must maneuver *Glass Menagerie* (1945) ‘ideologically’ in the process of ‘ideological manipulation’. These additions and revisions also fit Boney’s (1994) definition of “revisionist history” (196). ‘Revisionist history’ claims that history reflects the time in which it was written more than the era it covers. History represents the contemporary dynamics, ideologies and culture (of *now*) more than the experience and records of past (of *then*).

Apparently, it seems that *Here without Me* (2011) is organized within a familiar, realistic framework. However, many critics claim that illusion and reality is so deeply entangled in the film structure that achieving certainty to judge the film’s ending is impossible (Malek, par. 2-4; Riyazi, par. 1-6; Moharami, par. 3; Hashemi, par. 3). Riyazi (2011/ 1390) states that the “dream”, “illusion”, “uncertainty” and “ambiguity” are the “keys to enter Tavakoli’s world” (par. 1-2). Despite the realistic setting, the last minutes of the film (min. 88-91) are in sharp contrast with the rest, in the course of light direction, cinematography, mise en scene and music. In the last ten minutes (min. 80-91), after the nocturnal rain and Reza’s phone call for Yalda, morning sunlight shines through every scene. Nevertheless, the colors and mise en scene give a cold and wintery impression. The dazzling light prepares the audience to accept the last three vibrant and colorful minutes of the film.

Being conscious or unaware of the intertextual quality of the film, the audience reaches uncertainty. Différance is shaped: the clash between happy ending and the film’s finale. In Tavakoli’s visual communication, the line between happy or tragic end of *Here without Me* (2011) is blurred. This uncertainty is rooted in the meta-narrative nature of the movie: a realistic film about the imaginary nature of cinema. Ayne-Dar (2011) goes much further in claiming that “*Here without Me* has a third director: the alert and well-informed audience” (par. 6).

Ayne-Dar like Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010) echoes Brecht’s definition of ‘cofabulation’ which discusses “audience’s active involvement in creation of their own story out of the material available to them in the play or in . . . film” (Zeydabadi-Nejad 89). Did Ehsan answer his cell phone and return to care for the family and find a psychiatrist for Yalda? Is he really absorbed in watching the Hollywood

Classics of the 50s in an empty theater of Iran's 2011? Does Ehsan live with this “delusion of being a great writer” (Malek, par. 3) or he is artistically gifted? Did Reza leave his fiancé for Yalda or the marriage is the fabrication of Ehsan and Yalda's mind? Characters narrate their past and future with deep unconscious *différance*. Would mother have a luxurious life if she married one of her rich suitors or numerous lovers are just a figment of her imagination (min. 10, 30)? Is it possible that any moment a gentleman caller appears at their house and proposes to Yalda (min. 11, 16, 21, 41, 44)? Different readers with heterogeneous backgrounds can, and must have, diverse answers. With miscellaneous ideologies for life and art, they ‘cofabulate’ their own version of *Here without Me* (2011) every time they watch the film or discuss it ad infinitum. ‘Cofabulation’ is the product of the dialogic quality of the film and Kress and Van Leeuwen's culturally specific grammar of visual communications.

The last episode (min. 88-91) is boldly mimicking escape movies and happily-ever-after formula. It purposefully concludes with a happily-ending, albeit ironical, since Tavakoli's conclusion negates the causal-effect relationships and the consequence of characters' actions and reactions. The apparent reality goes far beyond mother's dream! The film's end is portraying crutch-less Yalda setting the colorful launch table and polishing the tumblers, as a sane and healing alternative for her glass menagerie. The joyous colors of stained glass of windows stand in sharp contrast with pale transparent glass animals that Yalda *used to* care for. There is no hint of the menagerie's delicacy or Yalda's fragility. The indoor vibrant colors, multicolored reflection, and beauty are mirrored in outdoor setting, too. Then Yalda comes to the yard, bathed in sun, flowers, and warm colors, smiling to her well-dressed Reza near a barbecue, her grinning mother, and laughing daughter. Sitting on a chair, Ehsan is the spectator of this picturesque splendor with an appreciative smile which later is melted away. Gradually, his smile is faded into bitterness, doubt and the darkness of the closing credits which reveals the dialogic qualities of Tavakoli's visual communication.

From the climactic minute 80 onward (last 10 minutes), although there is no drastic change in the wintery setting of film, the misery is miraculously healed. Yalda claims that Reza called her to inform his break with the fiancé and the desire to marry her; he then comes to Taghavi's house for a formal marriage proposal. Farideh's coworkers bring several gold coins as Yalda's bridal gift besides



enlightening her with the happy news of her retirement and the consequential salary. Events are accumulated like a sweet dream. However, the music, which was mostly absent, paces at a tragic speed. Music is heard in few occasions: the opening credits, title sequence, closing credits and whenever the film departs from the play's text. Unlike the play, there is no specific light direction for Laura/ Yalda (*Glass Menagerie*, 274). Moharami (2011/ 1390) believes that there is no key figure or lead role in *Here without Me* and all characters are treated equality in terms of development and psychological depth (par. 10).

The illusion/reality clash is intertwined with every scene until it reaches its climax in the last ten minutes. In the beginning of the film, Yalda speaks so kindly to her glass animals as if they are a member of Taghavi family. She changes her mental monologues and dilemmas into dialogues with inanimate glass animals. On the other hand, Ehsan is bewitched by the Hollywood Classics of the 50s in empty theaters of 21<sup>st</sup> century in Iran. For Ehsan, no line parts reality, dream, illusion, imagination, desire, cinema and life: they are all inseparably interconnected.

Riyazi (2011) and Malek (2011) state that even the paradoxical movie title is the manifestation of illusion/ reality collision. The word “here” denotes and connotes the speaker's presence because if the narrator were absent, s/he would prefer to use “there” (Riyazi, par. 1). Thus, a straightforward title would be: *Here “with” Me* or “*There*” *without Me* rather than *Here without Me*. Tavakoli's visual communication portrays how reality is deferred in favor of illusion or dream and at the same time, audience is conditioned to be aware of reality/dream difference. That is why the film is saturated in illusion/reality difference.

If the audience accepts the film's happy end with doubt and prefers to read the movie as a prologue to a new motion picture on the illusory quality of show business, the tragedy is augmented. The film's ending is only a beginning to Ehsan's unceasing, endless dreams and illusions. In that sense, adaptation carries a heavier tragic burden compared with Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie*. The ending is an ironic echo of Ehsan's objection to his mother's dreams and desires: “Mom, you have to *know* something: it's better to *die* than to live as a dreamer, delusional nut and thinking you're

sane and normal” (min. 27':55'', emphasis in the original). Unfortunately, Ehsan and his family fall into the tarp, the bitter future, which he was always afraid of and has tried to evade: the dream trap.

For Ehsan, there is no boundary between the virtual world of dream and fancy, and the actual world of real life. In this reading, the audience/ reader watches a film whose scriptwriter, director, cast and producer is Taghavi family. Their life is a tragic performance after the camera stops rolling; yet, it is too insignificant to be in front of the same camera. Their life film is devoid of audience. The misery, love, magnanimity and dignity of its heroes and heroines do not win them any film award or nomination. The persisting background sounds and voices which infatuate Ehsan, are echoing other adaptations of Tennessee Williams (min. 24, 38-39). Again, the reality-dream distortion is mirrored in Ehsan's watching the films surrounded by empty chairs. Tavakoli's visual communication discovers *Glass Menagerie* (1945) in the glassy and fragile dreams of Ehsan, Farideh and Yalda. It's a decent claim to re-title *Here Without Me* as “Here without *Reality*”.

### No End, No Conclusion

One can accept the validity and possibility of alternative endings of *Here without Me* varying from family's mass suicide with gas (min. 71-79) to Reza's marriage proposal (min. 81-86) and even the idealistic life of Yalda (min. 88-91), independent of crutch, living with her family in a beautiful house happily ever after. Behind every reading, lies a philosophy of life and art. Every interpretation and every choice of influence are the reflection of a personal and public ideology and the demonstration of the cultural and social discourse. However, choosing one interpretation is not favored in the liberal and eclectic atmosphere of adaptation studies. It is advisable to respect the dialogic qualities of the film and accept a museum of ending(s).

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