



## Islam in Modern Drama and Theatre

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## ISLAM IN MODERN DRAMA AND THEATRE

BY

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Goethe in his *Noten und Abhandlungen to West-östlicher Divan* said: "*Höchst merkwürdig ist, daß die persische Poesie kein Drama hat*".<sup>1</sup> Goethe looked at Persian literature through the prism of Western dramaturgy. He was looking for the dramatic literature which is organically connected with the existence of theatre. Though the ultimate goal of this literature is its stage presentation, it can be appreciated just as well by reading.

This form of literature, however, did not yet exist in Iran at the time of Goethe, nor did it exist among the Arabs or the Turks, which led many scholars to the simplistic conclusion that Islam was completely antagonistic to drama and the theatre. Despite the strong and consistent objections of Islamic theologians to the representational arts, indigenous theatrical forms such as puppetry, shadow plays, improvised comedies, traditional storytelling and even passion plays have not only existed but thrived in Islam for centuries. These theatrical modalities have been related to holidays, seasonal and religious festivals, and occasions such as weddings, births and circumcisions. These largely extemporaneous spectacles are loosely based on standard storylines whose authors are either unknown or deemphasized. Even the *ta'ziyeh*, the Shi'ite passion play which is often noted for its powerful and poetic literary merits, is in a sense anti-literary, inasmuch as it is written not in the form of script or libretto, in which scenes follow one another in established order, but as

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<sup>1</sup> J. W. Goethe, *West-östlicher Divan, Noten und Abhandlungen: Nachtrag*; p. 189. The full quote: "Höchst merkwürdig ist, daß die persische Poesie kein Drama hat. Hätte ein dramatischer Dichter aufstehen können, ihre ganze Literatur müßte ein anderes Ansehen gewonnen haben".

separate parts for each character written on loose sheets of paper. Another characteristic of *ta'ziyeh* is its anonymity.<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars believe that in the Islamic framework of thought—that is, total submission to the will of God—there is no place for dramatic literature representing characters whose wills are set on courses necessary to their own moral natures, and who become overpowered by opposing forces and where the truth about the human condition arises out of human nature under the stress of extreme situations.

No doubt, the development of drama and theatre in the Middle East must be researched in conjunction with a study of beliefs and of the ways in which people circumvented religious barriers. But this is not enough. The traditional lack of dramatic literature in the Middle East before Islam must also be taken into account.

The dramatic literature that Goethe sought was finally introduced through the medium of the West in the second half of the 19th century throughout various Islamic areas. This drama had to fight the religious, social and political mores of its time and had to overcome the structural and technical literary obstacles. It succeeded, however, and today drama in the Middle East enjoys its proper place next to poetry and prose; and the theatrical modalities have become largely the secular pastimes for people in all walks of life.

As for the relationship between Islam and the theatrical arts, it is evident that the traditional theatrical modalities—in Iran, for example—have always been connected with, or related to, Islam in one manner or another. *Naqqāli* [storytelling] is a one-man show encompassing pantomimic gestures and vocal modulations which can move an audience either to tears or to laughter. Though the story is usually based on a Persian literary masterpiece such as the *Shāhnāmeḥ* of Ferdowsi known to people through the oral tradition, a *naqqāl* begins his performance with the *bismillāh* formula and a praise of Imām 'a:l or another exalted figure, and a selection of religious poetry. This is followed by a call for a *ṣalavāt* (prayer, blessing). If a *naqqāl* is performed on a religious holiday, the story ends with a *rowza*, an emotional narration and some singing about the suffering, the deeds and the deaths of many Shiite martyrs.

During a *naqqāl* performance, the storyteller frequently makes

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<sup>2</sup> See: Peter Chelkowski (ed.), *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, New York University Press, 1979, introduction.

analogies between the heroes of the *Shāhnāme* and the heroes of Islam, and this gives the story credibility for its audience and makes the total presentation more meaningful.<sup>3</sup> A usual place for a *naqqāli* performance is a *Qahvakhāneh*, a coffee house. Such a place serves during the nights of the Islamic month of religious fasting, *Ramazān*, as a locus for various theatrical entertainments.<sup>4</sup>

*Pardadāri* is another type of one-man show, a story chanted with the aid of a huge illustrative painting. More often than not, the story and its backdrop are that of the tragedy of Kerbela. *Ta'ziyeh*, the Shiite passion play and the only serious drama ever developed in the world of Islam, except for the contemporary theatre, has been praised by many Western men of letters in the 19th century—Matthew Arnold, the Comte de Gobineau, and our noted present-day men of the theatre such as Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski.<sup>5</sup> Though many Shiites outside of Iran, and a portion of the Iranian clergy, are opposed to *ta'ziyeh* on theological grounds, the form must be considered as a religious play par excellence. *'Umar Kushan*, a farce played out in town streets, or as a skit for small seated audiences, can take on a satirico-erotic form. Basically, however, it is a religio-political performance that mocks the Sunni enemies of the Shiite faith. *Rūhowzī* is a satirical improvised play in comic form. Very similar to *Commedia dell'Arte*, it ridicules the stock characters in Persian life and Islamic sanctimoniousness.<sup>6</sup> Alexander Chodzko wrote in the first part of the 19th century that these plays mock the mullahs and their act of "absolution and leeching".<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See: Mary Ellen Page, *Professional Storytelling in Iran: Transmission and Practice*. In: *Iranian Studies*, Journal of the Society for Iranian Studies, Summer-Autumn, Vol. 12, Number 3-4. Boston, 1979, pp. 195-215; see also: Mary Ellen Page, *Naggāli and Ferdowsi: Creativity in the Iranian National Tradition*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> The nights of the month of *Ramazān* in the Ottoman cities were devoted to entertainment. The major form of entertainment was the shadow theatre, known as *Karagöz*. Even recently, in the late 1970s Turkish television featured nightly performances of *Karagöz* during the month of *Ramazān*.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Chelkowski, *Dramatic and Literary Aspect of Ta'ziyeh-Khani — Iranian Passion Play*; in: *Review of National Literatures*, Vol. 2, Number 1, pp. 121-138, St. Johns University, Spring, 1971.

<sup>6</sup> William O. Beeman, *Why Do They Laugh? An International Approach to Humor in Traditional Iranian Improvisatory Theater*, in: *Journal of American Folklore*, 94 (374), 1981, pp. 506-526. Also see by the same author: *A full Arena: The Development and Meaning of Popular Performance Traditions in Iran*, in: Michael E. Bonine and Nikki Keddie, *Continuity and Change in Modern Iran*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1981, pp. 285-305.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Chodzko, *Le théâtre en Perse*, Paris, 1844.

*Kheymeh Shab Bāzi* is the puppet theatre, performed with glove dolls as well as marionettes. The puppets usually number five and represent archetypal figures from both Persian life and legend. One of the puppets is a member of the Shiite clergy *akhund*.<sup>8</sup> At this point it is worth mentioning that if we analyze the canonical restriction of pictorial representation carefully, we may come to the conclusion that the shaping of puppets and making them come to life is a far greater transgression on God's restricted area of creation than the imitation of men by men on the live stage where no creation of a formed object takes place. This Islamic taboo about personal representation was perhaps circumvented by the fact that the puppeteer was not doing the acting and was responsible only for the vocalization. A similar situation pertained in *ta'ziyeh* where the actor held a piece of paper with the written lines of his part in his palm, although a village actor might not be able to read them. This is a demonstration that he is only the carrier of the role, not the man himself. In this fashion he would not draw the anger of the audience upon himself while realistically portraying Shīrīn, or conversely, be considered sacrilegious while representing Hussein.

It now becomes possible to show why there was no written drama in the Middle East as questioned by Goethe. Illiteracy was all-pervasive. People recognized stories which were repeatedly told. Whereas puppets only supply the action called for in the tale. *Ta'ziyeh* makes the story come alive since the characters not only move but also do their own talking. It seems therefore that in this sense a play is really a story come to life in which the actors take the place of the storyteller.

Outside of Iran, in Turkey, for example, similar relations between the same traditional performing arts and Islam may be observed. Modern Middle Eastern drama and theatre have usually been defined as drama and theatre in the European mode. There are three distinctive periods in the development of this genre during the last 140 years.

1. Adaptation of Western plays, which are mostly of French origin, especially those of Molière, to the existing local conditions and ways of life. Western drama's characters and their ambiance were Middle Easternized by injecting local proverbs and stories into the plays. Using

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<sup>8</sup> For further information about traditional performing arts in Iran see: F. Gaffary, *The Secular Theatre of Iran*, in: *McGraw Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama*, 2nd edition New York (forthcoming) and Bahrām Beyzā'ī, *Nemāyesh dar Irān*, Teheran, 1344.

the basic framework of Western dramatic masterpieces, local situations and characters were superimposed, thus reflecting various current social situations in the Middle East.

During the same period there was much experimentation in the writing of plays in the Western manner.

2. Straight translations from Western drama; that is, creation of modern drama fashioned along the lines of Western plays.

3. Original art forms, both in their literary and theatrical appearance. This was achieved by Middle Eastern playwrights and theatre directors by resetting the familiar literary and folklore themes of these countries into modern dramatic forms which have a strong stylistic identity of its own. Also borrowing both from the techniques of traditional and indigenous theatrical modalities and from Western models.

Most interesting is the fact that despite the ethnic and cultural differences among the Arabs, Iranians and Turks, these nations have gone through identical processes and similar states in developing modern drama and theatre. During the last 25 years, they have been able to fashion a contemporary and highly original art form. However, this does not preclude the peculiarities and the unique individuality of dramatic and theatrical expressions in their respective areas. Today the common denominators are observable in the literary and dramatic form in the performing arts of the Middle Eastern countries even, in fact, in the sphere in which this paper emphasizes: Islam in modern drama and theatre.

A useful cut-off date for starting to research modern Middle Eastern drama is 1850. At this time the first play by Mīrzā Faṭḥ-'Alī Akhundzādeh [also known as Akhundov] was written. Less than two years later his dramatic writing caught the attention of German scholars.

In August of 1852 in the *Magazin für die Literatur des Auslandes*, the following observation appeared:

One would think that the Moslem population of Transcaucasia, according to the spirit of Islam, will for a long time remain strange to such innovations [i.e., the theatre], but there has suddenly appeared among them a dramatic genius, a Tatar Molière, whose name deserves attention even beyond the confines of his country. He is Mirza-Fet-Ali Akhundov.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Translated and quoted by Svatopluk Soucek, in: *Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1812-1878) and the Birth of Modern Azeri Drama*, M.A. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1964, p. 32.

The first of six plays written by Akhundzādeh is entitled *Molla Ibrāhīm Khalil*. It is a biting satire on greed, hypocrisy and the calculated bigotry of the Muslim clergy. In the play, Molla Ibrāhīm personifies a falsely pious scholar. Through his affected religious devotion, his innate cynicism and shrewdness, he succeeds in blinding the eyes of simple people with religious fervor and extorting their money. Molla Ibrāhīm is actually a Muslim analogy of Tartuffe. In his later plays, Akhundzādeh exercised some restraint in his frontal attack on Islamic bigotry among the clergy. When he died in 1878 he was refused religious burial at first, which shows what a powerful influence his dramas had upon the public. Only when his family donated a certain sum of money to the clergy was this controversial dramatist of Middle Eastern origin finally interred at a Muslim cemetery at Tiflis.<sup>10</sup>

Outside of the Shiite Islam-dominated world, Islamic religious authorities have been less the target of mockery and general criticism in dramatic representations.<sup>11</sup> They have, however, taken keen interest in the development of drama and theatre. This interest was often dictated by the concern for Muslim morality. It is not surprising, therefore, that religious minorities have played a crucial role in the introduction of modern theatre to the countries of the Middle East. The Armenians were among the first ethnic group to produce plays in Istanbul. Christian and Jewish women were the first females to step on a Middle Eastern stage, breaking the age-old tradition of men playing female roles. A pertinent eyewitness account of an early theatrical production in Lebanon [written by David Urquhart] serves as a revealing note to amplify the subject:

“Jan. 13th [1850]... We went to the play! The piece ... was written by the son of one of the members of the Megilis: was to be acted by the family, which was a large one, in their house in the suburbs... The subject announced was ‘Aroun el Rashid and Jaffar’... We went on horseback ... and presently arrived ... at a house all in disorder, and a crowd of people all in commotion. When we were introduced into the reception apartments, who should we find there but three grave Ulemas, the two Muftis, and the Cadi! ... The theatre was the front of the house

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> The Shiite clergy are very sensitive to any type of criticism. The Muslim popular beliefs and rituals are often the target of criticism of the writers and poets in the Middle East. The playwrights in general are defending the rituals, since they like to incorporate the dramatic functions of the rituals into their plays.

itself; which was exactly what we seek to imitate by our scenes. There was in the center a door, on each side of it two windows, and two above; the wings were the advanced part of the court with side doors. The stage was a raised platform in front. The audience was in the court, protected by sails spread ... As to costume, there was the design at least of observing the proprieties; and as regards the women, that is the boys dressed up as such, with perfect success. As there were no women on the stage, so were there none in the court, and not even at the windows which opened on the stage ... Between the acts we retired to the *divan hané*, where refreshments were served; and though it was long, very long, no one went away, and everyone seemed content and merry ... A short farce occupied the interval between the second and third acts. It was a husband befooled by his wife, a very grave case, and the ex-Mufti judged it to be so; taking the most vivid interest in its progress, and repeatedly informing the one party of the proceedings of the other. In fact he identified himself with the action, somewhat in the fashion of the ancient chorus, bewailing or approving. The husband at last is undeceived, by observing from the window at the side the lady and her lover; while the Mufti from the *Stalle d'Orchestre* commented vigorously on the guilty nature of the proceedings of the one, and the extreme imbecility of the other. The roars of laughter which these cross-purposes produced conferred on the farce unbounded success, which all were agreed to attribute to the actor whose part the author had not inserted".<sup>12</sup>

This acting in front of the curtain, a byproduct of the traditional performing arts, is still being employed all through the Middle East as a "time-killer" or "curtain-raiser" to amuse the audience between long intervals. Spoken or sung, these satirical skits usually spare neither governmental nor religious officials, without mentioning any names, of course. The skit form allows statements to be made which could not be published in a newspaper.

Khedive Ismā'īl had a great Opera House built in Cairo in 1869 for the celebration of the opening of the Suez Canal, as well as "other smaller theatre halls created for troupes".<sup>13</sup> Despite the support for

<sup>12</sup> David Urquhart, *The Lebanon (Mount Souria) A History and a Diary*, London, 1860, Vol. 2, pp. 178-182.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob M. Landau, *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958, p. 63.



drama and theatre by some of the graduates of *Al-Azhar*, like al-Taḥṭāwī<sup>14</sup>, another graduate of *al-Azhar* who wrote a play, which was produced by the company of Ya'qūb Ṣanū', several strong articles criticizing the Egyptian theatre appeared in the press. The strongest of these were written in 1902 by al-Shaikh Muṣṭafā al-Dars of Dimyat.<sup>15</sup> But even so, these articles were not written against the theatre per se, but against certain "sexual immoralities" seen on the stage, either in verbal allusion or in gesture. In 1918 *Shaikh al-Islām* issued a decree preventing women from performing on the stage.

The next issue that the burgeoning modern theatre had to contend with was the admission of women into mixed-audience theatres. The growth and popularity of the cinema in the Middle East was extremely helpful in this instance of taboo-breaking. The cinema was helpful also in removing some of the obstacles concerning social mores with which drama and theatre were confronted.

Islam is not the major thematic thrust in contemporary literature of the Middle East; and this includes dramatic literature, of course. The Islamic themes, however, are effectively utilized by the Muslim men of letters when they can serve the struggle against political tyranny, economic and social backwardness, cultural alienation, foreign intervention and repressive domination. Often they can strengthen national pride and invoke a revolutionary spirit. One of the most powerful of Islamic themes used most skillfully by current writers concerns sacrifice and martyrdom.

The Koran is studded with references to martyrdom: "And say not of those who are slain in the way of God: 'they are dead'. Nay, they are living, though ye perceive it not".<sup>16</sup> "But those who are slain in the way of God, He will never let their deeds be lost. Soon will He guide them and improve their condition and lead them into Paradise which He has announced for them".<sup>17</sup>

In the contemporary Arab literature the theme of martyrdom increases in direct proportion to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the worsening plight of the Palestinians. Regardless of how far the territory of the poet is from

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<sup>14</sup> Rifā'ah al-Taḥṭāwī, an alumnus of Al-Azhar in his autobiography: *The Purification of Gold on the Trip to Paris* (Cairo, 1958) praises theater as educational institution that strengthens morality.

<sup>15</sup> *Al-Muqattam*, 2.9.1902 and 9.24.1902.

<sup>16</sup> Sura 2, 154.

<sup>17</sup> Sura 47, 4-6.

the fighting area itself, emotions run high. Although the majority of Arab writers are not Shiites, the example of the martyrdom of Hussein, son of 'Alī and the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad transcends the Sunni-Shia differences. Hussein is regarded as the supreme martyr, and this is echoed not only in Arabic poetry but also in its drama. A play in two parts by 'Abd Al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī was published in 1969 and called *Ta'r Allāh (God's Revenge)* or *Hussein the Rebel* and *Hussein the Martyr* [a play in two parts]<sup>18</sup> is the finest example of Hussein being utilized as a revolutionary symbol in the modern Islamic world. Hussein is simultaneously the symbol of gallantry along the lines of ancient Arabic standards: manliness, *muruwah*, and the classic ideals of Islamic perfection.

In the eyes of the Muslims, Hussein did not fight for wealth, power, or political ambition, but for the Islamic ideal of social and political justice. Most particularly he fought and sacrificed his life for the underdog, the underprivileged, the oppressed and the humiliated.

In the first part of the play *Al-Ḥusain tā'iran (Hussein the Rebel)*, Hussein appears as a righteous man besieged by political agents of the usurper to the caliphate, Yazid, who attempts to force Hussein to pledge formal allegiance in return for a good life. Hussein is threatened with death for himself and his family if he refuses. Hussein therefore has a difficult and perilous decision to make; either to compromise and accept Yazid's offer, which would mean rejection of what Islam and the prophet of Islam, his grandfather, had lived for, or to refuse Yazid and thus bring bloodshed upon not only his own family but also the loyal band of his supporters. The holy city of Medina would become stained with the blood of the Prophet's family. Hussein therefore decides to leave the city. This is the first part of the play which could be described as a modern passion play. Although the title and the action indicate the political as well as spiritual struggle, the emphasis still centers on love, mercy and forgiveness.

It is the second part of the play entitled *Al-Ḥusain šahidan (Hussein the Martyr)*, that underlines the universal and timeless qualities of Hussein's martyrdom. Though his death took place 1300 years ago, it remains

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<sup>18</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sharqāwī, born 1920, poet, novelist and playwright. *Ta'r Allāh (God's Revenge)* Second Part *al-Ḥussein Shahidan*, was published in Cairo in 1388/1969; the first part *al-Ḥussein Tā'iran* in 1971.

more than relevant to the problems in the world today, particularly in Egypt, after the crushing defeat of the Six-Day War. Hussein's death is not considered as a useless sacrifice, it should be cited, but as a turning point in human history which has been and always will be avenged by God.

Toward the end of the two-part drama, Hussein's ghostly presence addresses the audience in a revolutionary manifesto:

"Remember me not through the shedding of the blood of others, but remember me when you seek to save the truth from the claws of falsehood. Remember me as you struggle in order that justice may reign over you, remember me in your struggle ... Remember me when virtue finds itself a stranger and lonely, and when vice is preferred to virtue ... Remember me when courage and foolishness are mingled and confused, and when greed and self-interest become the sole standard by which friendship is judged ... Remember me in your tears; when the meek and lowly are oppressed. Remember me when religion is belied by the cries of hungry stomachs and when the corrupt among you are set up in government over the destiny of the men of faith. Remember me when the singing of nightingales in your lives would be overcome by howls of pain and when the sound of clinking glasses drowns out the cries of weepers ... When the song of brotherhood disappears and when the poor complain and the pockets of the rich bulge, remember me ... Remember me when all these things take place and rise up in the name of life to lift up high the emblem of justice and truth. Remember my revenge so that you may exact it from tyrants. In this, life will find its victory. But if you hold your peace against deception and accept humiliation, then I would be slain anew. I would be killed every day a thousand times. I would be killed every time a zealous man is silent or a man of endurance slackens. I would be killed whenever men are subjugated and humiliated. I would be killed as long as some Yazid rules over you and does what he pleases ... Then would the wound of the martyr forever curse you because you did not avenge the blood of the martyr. Avenge the blood of the martyr!"<sup>19</sup>

In the traditional Shiite passion play, *ta'ziyeh*, the passage of Hussein from Medina to his death at Kerbela, is represented in ten or more plays

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<sup>19</sup> Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shiism*, The Hague, 1978, pp. 233-234.

usually starting on the first day of the month of Muḥarram, with a play devoted to Hussein's emissary to Kufa, a man named Muslim. This is followed by the martyrdom of two of Muslim's children, and then by the death of various members of Hussein's family, such as 'Alī Akbar, Qāsim and 'Abbās.

One *ta'ziyeh* play is devoted to one of the commanders of the opposing army, Horr, who deserts Yazīd's forces and is martyred together with Hussein and his supporters. The final play is set for the day of 'Āshūrā, Muḥarram 10, when the death of Hussein takes place. Hussein's death is considered by the Shiites as the greatest sacrifice and redemptive act in human history. Through his death, and in participation in the annual observance of his death, the Shiites assure for themselves a safe passage to Paradise.

All these tragic events were telescoped by Al-Sharqāwī into one play in two parts. In the *ta'ziyeh* plays the paramount message is the intercession of Hussein, and the spiritual mobilization of the Shiites. In Al-Sharqāwī's drama it is the revolutionary preparedness in the face of internal and external forces of evil. It is not surprising, therefore, according to R. Allen, that *God's Revenge* was "banned after consultation by the censors with the authorities at Al-Azhar".<sup>20</sup>

Na'ibandiyān's play, called *Nāgahān (Suddenly)*,<sup>21</sup> is a modern avant garde approach to the sacrifice of an individual at the hands of a society, stemming from oppression, ignorance, poverty and superstition. The play's hero, Feridoun, is a school teacher fired from his position by a headmaster because he refuses to give in to the headmaster's wish to marry his daughter. Feridoun becomes the victim of a trumped-up charge of pederasty. Stripped of his job, he finds a place to live in an impoverished quarter of the town where a courtyard is shared by the inhabitants of several surrounding rooms. They are a diverse assembly of poor people of the lowest social strata.

In this group, Feridoun is the odd man out, with whom the poor people cannot establish a rapport because they do not understand him. There is one exception, a young girl named Fatimeh whom Feridoun

<sup>20</sup> Roger Allen, *Egyptian Drama after the Revolution*, in: *Edebiyat*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1979, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> 'Abbās Na'ibandiyān, born in Teheran in 1947. His theatrical career started at the Iranian Television theatrical workshop of Kārgāh-e Nemāyesh, *Nāgahān*, was published by National Iranian Television in Teheran in 1351.

voluntarily tutors in Persian. A relationship develops between the pair. Fatimeh is the only one who does not believe that Feridoun's locked chest is filled with money, but rather contains books and his meager savings. The others in the crowd of poor people believe that Feridoun is rich, and they plot to get the chest full of money for themselves.

On the day of 'Āshūrā, the assault takes place at noon. Struggling for the key to his chest, the crowd accidentally kill Feridoun. Then they are filled with remorse for having killed him. He was a good man, they say, and they plan to bury him in situ, and pretend that he left them dressed in his best.

Upon this skeletal plot is then superimposed a tale which identifies Feridoun with the Imām Hussein whose martyrdom also occurs at noon on the day of 'Āshūrā, Muḥarram 10. Playwright Na'ibandiyān utilizes the technique of juxtaposition, flashback and superimposition to make a double track of the play's tragic themes. The drama of Kerbela and the fate of Feridoun at times converge and at other times run concurrently. Like Hussein, Feridoun is a victim of an oppressive system and a backward society. He is a modern martyr, a *shahid*. And like Hussein, he is unwilling to compromise his principles in favor of his advancement. It is not accidental that the play's hero is a teacher, since being a teacher has always played such an important role in Middle Eastern society. Throughout the play there is background chanting of the Koran and the sound of chains with which the Muharram mourners flagellate themselves.

In the opening scene, the voice of the house owner states the situation, and like an oracle, predicts the ongoing tragedy. He replaces the Greek chorus or *pishkhāni* in *ta'ziyeh*. One by one, the occupants of the courtyard introduce themselves through the mode of soliloquy. They reveal their distinct personalities, their degradation, deprivation and misery, all of which serve to motivate them toward the planned assault on Feridoun's chest. Whenever their greed for the money becomes paramount, the sound of Muharram mourners beating themselves with chains can be heard in the background. This has a chilling effect on them, stirring their consciences, and each of them recites a verse from the Koran which is supposed to ward off Satan.

In the second scene Feridoun is shown conversing with Hussein Āghā, a pederast, who lives in the courtyard with a boy whom he supports. Hussein Āghā is completely unable to understand Feridoun's relatively simple speech and thoughts. This idea permits the dramatist to break the

time sequence at will. Toward the end of the scene, Feridoun is describing the tragedy at Kerbela as though he were actually Hussein reincarnated. Whenever Feridoun becomes Feridoun-Hussein, an off-stage voice echoes the endphrases of his speech. With the progression of the play, the spectrum of the echo widens, and it reproduces more and more of Feridoun-Hussein's sentences until at the play's finale the two voices become one in unison.

Whenever Feridoun is in anguish, he invokes his dead father, as in *ta'ziyeh* Hussein invokes Imām 'Alī. The premonition is a common occurrence in *ta'ziyeh*, where the heroes frequently reveal their own destiny, especially the circumstances of their own deaths. It is remarkable that they then apparently forget these revelations and behave as circumstances demand, without reference to them. In *Nāgahān*, Feridoun-Hussein behaves in the same way.

To amplify the parallel between the tragedy of Kerbela and that of Feridoun, the day of 'Āshūrā when Feridoun is killed is also an extremely hot day, and the occupants of the courtyard feel great discomfort from the heat.

There is no doubt that the stage realization of *Nāgahān* makes more sense to the viewer than the text of the play does to the reader. However, the reader can enjoy the literary power of Na'ibandiyān's language. This is particularly evident when it is juxtaposed in the text of the play with the quotations from the great masters of Persian literature such as Rūmī, 'Attār and Ḥāfez.

This love for the old literary masters is quite common among the people of the Middle East. The creative writers of today borrow freely from the past and bridge it with the present so that the two are vitally alive. Although very much a Persian in his expressions and symbolism, Na'ibandiyān does not limit his horizon only to the Iranian world. He is at his best when he borrows from the great Persian mystics and such modern playwrights from the West as Ionesco and Beckett. In this fashion he creates theatre which is a heady mixture of the Sūfī *khāneqah*, *naqqālī* [storytelling], *ta'ziyeh*, and the Theatre of the Absurd. The title page of the play, *Nāgahān*, carries a subtitle, a quotation in Arabic. According to tradition, it was written in green script on the forehead of the early Sufī, Dū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī upon his death.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Hādihā ḥabīb allāh māta fī ḥubb allāh, hādihā qatīl allāh māta fī saif allāh* — this passage is taken from 'Attār's *Tazkirat Auliya'*, 5th edition, Enteshārāt-i Markazi, Teheran, p. 129.

The play's extended title alone brings the initiated audience into the world of Islamic mysticism. The first sentence of the play is also a Sūfī quote, this time in Persian which is taken from the *Bāyazīd-e Bisfāmi*.<sup>23</sup> Na'ibandyān is greatly attracted to Sufism. His first play, *A Modern, Profound and Important Research in the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era*, is structured on the model of 'Aṭṭār's *Manṭeq al-ṭeyr* [The Discourse of the Birds].<sup>24</sup> Another man of theatre in Iran who was very successful in blending popular Islamic beliefs and rituals with modern playwrighting and stage, was Iraj Ṣaghīrī. His production of *Abū Dhar al-Ghifārī* and *Qalandar Khāneh*, must be mentioned here. The latter was very well received at the Shiraz Art Festival in 1975.

There are very few men in the history of Islam about whom so much has been written, by both Muslims and non-Muslims as Ḥallāj.<sup>25</sup> The life, death and teachings of Ḥallāj are part of the academia, belles lettres and Islamic folklore. He has become a part of the universal culture. For the mystics he occupies a place next to Jesus and St. Francis. It is therefore not surprising that he should enter into the Middle Eastern drama.

In the dramatic literature both the mystical quality and the political/social implications of his life and deeds are brought into focus. After all, his experiences, particularly his imprisonment, trial and death took place against the backdrop of political and religious intrigues. In the religious sphere he was accused of blasphemy, claiming *Ḥulūl*, i.e., a substantial union with God. His persecutors feared his influence on the people, not only in Baghdad where he was powerful, but also in other regions. He was considered a dangerous agitator, even a rebel. There is no doubt that Ḥallāj was not only interested in his personal mystical experiences, he was also trying to help improve the sorry lot of commoners and bring some sense of justice to the community. His martyrdom paved the way for his inclusion in the Shiite *ta'ziyeh* repertory.

This *ta'ziyeh* play, which can be performed only outside of the first ten mourning days of Muḥarram, is pregnant with both Sufi and socio-

<sup>23</sup> *Taḥkīrat Auliya'*, p. 146.

<sup>24</sup> See an excellent analysis of the play in Gisèle Kapuscinski, *Persian Theatre in the 1960s*, Ph. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1982.

<sup>25</sup> al-Ḥallāj (the wool-carder), 857-922 AD.

political overtones. It was successfully staged at the City Theatre in Teheran in 1977.<sup>26</sup>

Among the playwrights of Iran who chose Ḥallāj for modern play themes is Khojasteh Kiyā.<sup>27</sup> This female dramatist also acted as director for the play. It was triumphantly received in the year 1970 at Kārgāh-e Nemāyesh, an experimental workshop theatre, at Takiyeh-Niyavaran [Qajar Ta'ziyeh arena theatre], and at Teheran University. Khojasteh Kiyā broke many barriers.

For the intellectuals of today, Ḥallāj looks like a modern intellectual revolutionary. The director/playwright K. Kiyā made it a point to bring out this aspect of Ḥallāj in the play, but the Šūfī and the religious groups, and ordinary people from all walks of life, could also have derived a great personal message from the play's substance. In a way, the drama is a collage of verses taken from various famous Persian poets, mainly from 'Aṭṭār, Rūmī and Ḥāfez, and very cleverly connected by K. Kiyā's text. The symbolism of the play came across both in the text and in the performance.

The performance was styled along the lines of the contemporary theatre of Peter Brook and T. Kantor. The body movements of the actors and the rhythmic singing were performed in the classical Persian mode in order to create perfect harmony. The play begins with the gallows set in the middle of the stage, a tall tree from which Ḥallāj is hanging. The scene is reminiscent of the bringing down of Christ from the cross in the Flemish paintings. The white shroud in which the body is to be swathed is suddenly stained with blood. The crowd carries this sheet outstretched and shouts *Yā Husain*. Ḥallāj's first name was Hussein, but here there is a purposeful confusion with the original martyr Hussein, son of 'Alī. A flashback into Ḥallāj's life follows, describing his teaching, his imprisonment and his trial. The play ends with the traditional *nazr* when the spectators throw money or personal belongings into the same white sheet. It is most remarkable that K. Kiyā wrote and staged her play

<sup>26</sup> Louis Massignon published a partial translation of this play — *Le Majlis de Mansur-e Hallaj, de Shams-e Tabrezi et du Mollā de Roum*, in: *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 1955. The full translation and commentary by Mehdy Sorayya and Peter Chelkowski is currently in the manuscript form. The theatrical production in Teheran in 1977 of the *majlis* was based on this manuscript.

<sup>27</sup> The title of the play is: *Zekr-e Misibat-e bar Dār kerdan-e Mansūr-e Hallāj Rahmatullah Aleyh* (A Testimony of the Martyrdom of Hallaj) Teheran, 1969 (as far as I know the text was never published).



*Ḥallāj*, while at the same time in Egypt Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Ṣabūr created his own play called *Ma'sāt al-Ḥallāj*, [The Tragedy of Hallaj].<sup>28</sup>

Although the play of 'Abd al-Ṣabūr starts in the same manner as K. Kiyā's drama—with Ḥallāj hanging from the gallows and with flashbacks into his life—it must be considered diametrically different. It is a straightforward play in two acts along the lines of traditional Western drama playwrighting schools. There is no purposeful ambiguity of expression, nor symbolism and allusions—though the text is open to personal interpretation by readers or spectators. There are two simultaneous currents in the play—the Ṣūfī and the socio-political. As for the Ṣūfī current, the author shows his deep knowledge of Islamic mysticism, and in a poetic cadence reveals all stages on the Ṣūfī path from the moment a man receives a call until the time he is united with God. The death of Ḥallāj [in the play] is nothing but God's answer to Ḥallāj's request to be sacrificed to Him on the altar of love and devotion. From the socio-political perspective, Ḥallāj's death is a result of his desire to reform society and particularly its rulers. Ḥallāj's passion for the union with his Beloved is as great as his passion to help the poor and oppressed. This love for humanity leads him away from the hermetic Ṣūfī life and into the real world. In a conversation with his mentor Shiblī, Ḥallāj says "Supposing we manage to avoid the world, how then shall we deal with evil?" Shiblī replies: "Evil? I am confused. What do you mean by *evil*?" Ḥallāj says: "The poverty of the poor; the hunger of the hungry ..."<sup>29</sup> Evil has conquered God's world. Tell me. How can I close my eyes to the world, and not wrong my own heart?"<sup>30</sup>

On another occasion at the public sermon in the bazaar of Baghdad, Ḥallāj shouts out: "Murder, demagoguery, theft, betrayal, flattery, anger, aggression and tyranny: These are the citizens of poverty's realm, the battallions of Satan, its Vizier ..."<sup>31</sup>

Immediately after the sermon, Ḥallāj is imprisoned and accused of "sowing seeds of sedition in the minds and hearts of the people, ... and of spreading heresy". These two charges, one of a secular nature and the

<sup>28</sup> Actually 'Abd al-Ṣabūr's play predates that of Kiyā by almost three years, it was first published in 1966 and won the state prize for literature. The English translation by Khalil F. Samaan under the title *Murder in Baghdad* was published in Leiden in 1972.

<sup>29</sup> Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Ṣabūr, *Murder in Baghdad*, Leiden, 1972, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

other religious, are being pressed alternately during Ḥallāj's trial. In this fashion there is no escape for the accused; he must be summarily condemned and executed. The perfidy of the system is portrayed at the play's end when the death sentence is meted out on the basis of religious condemnation.

Ḥallāj's conduct prior to his imprisonment, during his time in jail, and the trial itself, reminds us of Gandhi and his principles of non-violence in the struggle against opposing external and internal forces. Ḥallāj's tragic end, however, reminds us of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. It is the crowd whom Ḥallāj used to address, the same crowd of poor commoners who used to love him and feel secure in his presence, they are the ones who now demand his death after being bribed by the authorities.

The crowd speaks:

"They lined us up, row upon row.  
They gave us each a pure gold dinar.  
They said 'Shout Heretic! Heretic!'  
We shouted 'Heretic! Heretic!'  
They said 'Shout let him be killed,  
His blood be on our heads!'  
We shouted 'Let him be killed,  
His blood be on our heads!'"<sup>32</sup>

The English translator of the play, Khalil I. Semaan, has rightly changed the play's title to *Murder in Baghdad*. In the play's introduction the translator compares the play to T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. This comparison isn't that of Thomas Becket and Ḥallāj, but of the style and execution of the plays by the two different authors.<sup>33</sup> The major play in Turkish devoted to Ḥallāj is: *Hallâc-ı Mansur* by Salih Zeki Aktay, prose-and-verse play in five acts, published in 1944.

Now let us tackle the argument which many scholars of the West, and some in the East, consider to be the main reason for the lack of drama in Islamic classical literature: i.e., total submission to the will of God. The submission excludes the type of conflict which is the main ingredient of dramatic literature and theatre around the world. In the Koran we read: "Verily We created Man from a drop of mingled sperm, in order to try

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, introduction.

him: so We gave him [the gifts] of hearing and sight. We showed him the way: whether he be grateful or ungrateful [rests upon his will]."<sup>34</sup>

In 'Abd al-Ṣabūr's play, the character of Shiblī says to Ḥallāj: "Evil is old in this world, Evil is meant for those who are in this world, so that the Lord can know who shall be saved and who shall perish."<sup>35</sup>

The power to determine and decide is indirectly related to the power of evil; that is, to Satan. In the Koran there are many passages which refer to Satan and his evil deeds. When God created Adam He gave him special knowledge which the angels did not possess. They were commanded to bow to man and his superiority. Except for Iblīs, they complied. Iblīs was made of fiery material, unlike the composition of the other angels and he refused to bow to the superiority of mankind. For this, God expelled him, but He allowed Iblīs' plea that he be permitted to subvert human beings until the Day of Resurrection. Then, on the Day of the Last Judgment, Iblīs and his converts would be relegated to the Inferno.<sup>36</sup>

Iblīs' first victim was Adam. When he and Eve were cast out of Paradise, God said: "Go hence ... and may your offspring be enemies of each other".<sup>37</sup> Adam and Eve populated the earth together with the Satanic progeny. These resulted not only in conflicts between man and Satan, but also between one man and another.

As if to undermine the Western hypothesis, many of the Muslim dramatists made the conflict between men and Satan the dominant theme for their dramatic writings. In this context, Satan uses wealth, women and power-seeking to tempt men.

One of the early plays on the subject was written by an Egyptian man of letters, Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm.<sup>38</sup> The title of the play is *Sulaimān al-Ḥakīm*

<sup>34</sup> Sura LXXVI, 2-4.

<sup>35</sup> 'Abd al-Ṣabūr, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Sura XV, 26-44.

<sup>37</sup> Sura II, 36.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Ḥakīm, born in Alexandria in 1898, is a leading man of letters in Egypt in the 20th century. There are two other plays by al-Ḥakīm, which have been inspired by Islam: *Ahl al-Kahf*, 1933, (The People of the Cave) is based on Sura XVIII. Al-Ḥakīm once commented on the reason for writing this play: "my purpose was not merely to take a story from the Glorious Book and to cast it in dramatic form (but) rather to look at our Islamic mythology with the eyes of Greek tragedy, (hence) bringing about a fusion of the two mentalities and literatures." ... "introducing the element of tragedy to an Arab-Islamic theme."—quoted by Farouk Abdel Wahab in *Modern Egyptian Drama*, Bibliotheca Islamica, Minneapolis-Chicago, 1974, p. 30.

[Solomon the Wise]. King Solomon was tempted by the devil and went astray. But realizing his sins, he tortured himself to death in the service of repentance. The devil then tried to tempt others in the vicinity, the first of whom was a fisherman, who did not succumb. The fruits of Solomon's wisdom were already known to this man, so that he won the fight with Satan.

In a play by Fathī Riḍwān called *The Tears of Iblis* [*Dumū' Iblis*, 1962], the central character is a female who is very active in community work. Satan wishes this woman to stop her good deeds, so he impersonates a very handsome man and tries to seduce her. But instead he falls in love with her. The result of the woman's seduction is a boy child in whom the women's genes predominate, so that the child grows up destined to continue the woman's good works. Consequently, Satan becomes responsible for his offspring's death, which brings tears to Iblis', or Satan's, eyes.

In this setting it is not surprising that Goethe's *Faust* held a strong appeal for many dramatists in the 20th century Islamic world. Most of the dramatists used Goethe's plot but infused it with Islamic concepts of Satan. Such were Egyptian writers Aḥmad 'Alī Bākathīr with his *New Faust*, and Maḥmūd Taymūr with his *More Intelligent than Iblis*. 'Abbās Na'lbandyān also wrote a play on the subject called *Agar Faust Yek Kam Ma'refat Beh Kharj Dadeh Bud*, or *If Only Faust Had Shown A Little Wisdom* (Teheran, 1969).

It follows that these three playwrights and others in their creative imagination have profited from the fundamental conflict between Satan/Iblis and man. They were able to reshape and invigorate Islamic drama by using Western Faustian structure. The conflict between good and evil became the central theme in many works, and was particularly effective since this paralleled modern political conflict.

Up to this point, the dramatists we have discussed held an interest in Islam as a vehicle for the social or political messages in their writing,

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Another play which must be mentioned here is *Muhammad*, (1936), al-Ḥakīm's longest play. Jacob M. Landau, comments about this play: "Even though other Arabic plays have dealt with the epoch of Muhammad or his friends, this appears to be the first play treating exclusively of the life and mission of the Prophet of Islam. It is a sign of the weakening of the religious hold on the people that a play on Muhammad could appear at all and its author go unmolested, one wonders if the same would have been the case, were the play to be produced." — Jacob M. Landau, *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958, p. 143.

rather than in Islam per se. The previously mentioned dramatist, Bākathīr, is an exception. As a devout Muslim and a religious activist, his message was that people should return to the Islamic way of life and ritual, to the credo of Islam in daily life without any Western embellishments. Bākathīr's writing, however, could not be totally dissociated from social and political messages. It was for this reason that the society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt chose him as their "writer-in-residence". In that society's journal called *Majallat al-Da'wah*, and in the weekly paper, *Majallat al-Ikhwān al-Muslimin*, Bākathīr's creative writing and literary criticism occupied a prominent place. The latter paper added columns on Islamic art and cinema.

Richard P. Mitchell in his excellent volume, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, writes: "The cinema column dealt with the problem of the art of making films, and 'currents of reform' in the substance of films. In itself, the columns reflected a development from opposition to films as evil to the hope that they could be reformed and 'used' for the renaissance.

"The Society also condoned 'Islamic drama' [which was also 'edifying'] of two types: political satire and religious. Written usually by 'Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr, the plays, normally of one act, were published in the daily to be read, but on occasion they were also produced and acted by the members. Typical titles included the following: 'King of the Sudan'—an attack on British policy in the Sudan; 'Greater Syria'—an attack on British policy in the Fertile Crescent; 'The Message of the White Man'—an attack on Western racial policies. The religious drama most frequently featured was one entitled 'The Raid of Badr' which dealt with that event in Islamic history with a fervour matched only by the Society's attachment to its militant importance".<sup>39</sup>

This is a very interesting development, since both drama and theatre began to play an important role among the various groups of Islamic revivalists. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Bannā', had a very rigid view concerning media and entertainment. He demanded strict censorship of films, magazines, theatres, radio and the press. Surveillance was directed toward such places of entertainment as coffee houses and

<sup>39</sup> Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, Oxford Univ. Press, London, 1969, pp. 292-293. In the note 89 on the page 293 the author writes: "Sometimes these productions appeared in Cairo theatres ... but the headquarters also had a theatre group which travelled to the provincial capitals and towns for branch performances".

summer resorts, in order to make them conform to Islamic morality. It seems almost inconceivable that al-Bannā' would consider drama and theatre as media to promote the principles of the Brotherhood, but this did occur.

From the dramatic point of view, it is notable that Bākathīr could borrow from the ancient Greek repertory and give it an Islamic slant. His Oedipus becomes a Muslim Oedipus. When Nasser came into power and dissolved the Muslim Brotherhood, the pressures upon Bākathīr to deny his affiliation with the Brotherhood were strong. And in the case of Oedipus he tried to emphasize that his message in the play was in opposition to those who tried to make a business out of religion.

Drama and theatre also made inroads into the Islamic fraternities in other countries. In Iran, in the famous *Husseinieh Ershad* of Teheran, where Dr. 'Ali Shariati played the dominant role, there were attempts to utilize drama and theatre for the dissemination of beneficial data on Islamic morality and education to the membership. Unfortunately, this attempt was short-lived because the *Husseinieh Ershad* was closed down by the government. But even so, it is remarkable, all things considered, that such an attempt took place in Iran. Only a few years earlier, in June of 1963, during the religious uprising in Teheran, crowds looted and set fire to several of the Performing Arts Agencies [*Bongah-e Nemāyesh*]. These agencies engaged comedians, musicians, dancers, puppeteers and other performers to provide live performances at many private clubs and parties in the Iranian capital. These acts of violence against live theatre must have been dictated by prejudice. Other objects of attack were businesses owned by the Bahais.

Since 1967 and particularly during the early 1970s, Iran became a Mecca for the international theatre groups who converged annually in Shiraz to participate in the yearly arts festival held there. This festival was like a theatrical laboratory in which the ancient Asiatic drama traditions were blended with the Western avant-garde theatre. As a significant international meeting, it no doubt made a great impact on the development of dramatic art throughout the world, but it was frowned on by the clergy. The disapproving look at the Shiraz Arts Festival by religious authorities was probably dictated by the theatrical expressions of some Japanese and Western troupes which may have been regarded as immoral by strict Muslim standards.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran brought about an unprecedented

flowering of theatrical productions, festivals and other dramatic experimentation. However, as soon as the Khomeini regime was firmly entrenched and it realized that these theatrical outbursts were primarily intellectual and consisted of leftist educational orientation courses, the government executed one of the prominent theatre directors, a poet and a dramatist, Sultan-Pur. This was a graphic signal to colleagues to cease their activities promptly. Many theatres were closed and censorship became all-powerful in the entire realm of theatre and film entertainment.

One of the most dramatically active countries in Asia in recent years has been Bangladesh. This trend has existed since the war of independence from Pakistan in 1971. New theatres are now proliferating all over the country. Many new plays have been written, and many playwrights are experimenting with colloquial languages. Actor-training facilities have been established; a theatrical journal is being published. While Pakistan is an Islamic country par excellence, Bangladesh Islam persists with an emphasis on nationalism. A play written by Samsul Hug under the title *The Sound of Footsteps*<sup>40</sup> is a very good example of the mood in that country. The play's voice is rural dialect and takes place in a village toward the end of the "war of independence" of 1971. In it, "freedom fighters" are only a short distance from the village.

Two main characters dominate the play and are Matbar, the village chief, and Moulobi, the religious village elder. The village chief has actually collaborated with the "army of occupation", whereas Moulobi is ambivalent toward the ruling government. Matbar tries for self-seeking reasons to influence the villagers. The climax comes when the rebel forces are seen to be inevitably victorious and Moulobi throws the weight of his authority toward the side of revolution. The message reads: nationalism with the support of Islam.

While all this is going on, Matbar offers his daughter to a Pakistani soldier who rapes her. Subsequently she takes poison and dies.

The play was sent to the Third World Theatre Festival in Korea in 1981 and was met with great success. The staging of the appearance of the victorious "freedom fighters" might have been adapted from the

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<sup>40</sup> Syed Samsul Hug; for further reference about the production of this play see: *The 5th Third World Theatre Festival and Colloquy*, 1981, Seoul, Korea.

USSR or any other Communist country today, where social realism and flag-waving create a spectacular crowd scene with an obvious message.

In the USSR where some 40 million Muslims live, throughout Central Asia and the Caucasus, and where theatrical facilities have been in operation now for many years, there is very little of Islam detectable in the dramatic literature of the many local languages. Nor is there any explicit mention of Islam in the Russian language.

In dramatic works only old and eccentric men and women may utter a few Islamic phrases. But this occurs chiefly when the characters appear to be either ridiculous or senile. As for the costumes, which might be called traditional Islamic, these are very marginal and present only in the historical plays.

In the fiction writing of the same area, some positive remarks about Muslim believers and scenes which could be characterized as of Muslim cultural dimension do appear. This, however, would be unacceptable to the censor if it appeared in dramatic form. The underlying reason for this is most probably that the literary work is intended for limited consumption of the *cognoscenti* whereas a theatrical production of a play would be aimed at the masses, with a clear, strong message as its central core. In addition, a theatrical expression would make a much more powerful impact than the written word.

Let us turn now to Turkey: The establishment of the republic in 1923 ushered in a new era, not only in politics but in its culture as well. Metin And, leading authority on Turkish drama, says: "Because the state considered drama an essential element in the modernization of Turkey, it assumed full responsibility for the actor's professional career. The state conservatory, established in 1926 to train professional actors, opera singers and ballet dancers, has greatly advanced the development of Turkish dramatic arts".<sup>41</sup>

From the point of view of the development of Turkish drama, the republican period is without precedent, not only in Turkey but in the whole Middle East. There is no doubt that the Turks are far ahead of the Arabs and Iranians in the quantity and quality of theatre and play-wrighting. The dramatic output of the republican period can be broken down into many categories:

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<sup>41</sup> Metin And, *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama*, new edition (forthcoming).



1. Plays concerning contemporary man's sense of isolation and alienation.
2. Plays about individuals caught in the cultural conflict between traditional values and ways of life, and the modern Western modalities.
3. Plays about the plight of the peasantry emigrating from the country to large cities.
4. Plays concerning the plight of the lower middle classes and working families in the grip of financial difficulties.
5. Plays about the role and the social position of women in the society.
6. Plays about the life in rural areas and the problems of corruption, injustice and binding local customs.
7. Plays about the themes of legends and history and the glorification of the national past. [Several playwrights have attempted to demystify the past.]
8. Plays covering the "War of Independence" and quite recent Turkish history.
9. Plays concerning political and social revolutions and ideals.
10. Symbolic dramas and criticism of contemporary mores.<sup>42</sup>

In some of these categories, Islam plays a somewhat relevant role, but a minor one. In most plays it is completely disregarded, but it *is* praised for its beneficial influence on society, as well as being criticized, sometimes, for its detrimental impact. A well-known drama in the latter category is *Hülleci*, by Reşat Nuri Güntekin. When it was revived in the early 1970s, a group of religious fanatics stormed the theatre and there was wide controversy over it in the press. The emphasis on secularization and modernization during the republican period is responsible for some of the indigenous and traditional Turkish performing modalities being either lost or forgotten. Turkish theatre appears to be far more Western in substance than that of the Arabs or the Iranians, and considering its recent history, this is understandable.

Taking Bangladesh and Turkish theatrical development as an example, there would seem to be a danger on the part of researchers to come to quick, general conclusions—that when Islam is deemphasized, drama and theatre flourish richly. The situation is, however, far more complex than that. In fact, it resembles the Middle Eastern marionettes, pulled in different directions by the strings attached to many interests

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

and power-pressure groups; government and political parties; stagnant and/or mobile social classes; censorship customs and imprimatur.

To sum up the foregoing, it becomes evident that Islam is not generally opposed to drama and theatre, but in the contemporary world, Islam becomes a very important political and social framework for various societies which may be radically different in other areas. The politico/religious background rather than the theological one is what determines the growth and/or decline of performing arts. This is then reflected in the dramatic literature and the living theatre.

Let me conclude on a positive note. The dramatic literature and the theatrical productions in the Middle East during the last two decades are not poor copies of the Western world, but rather a unique and complex blend of ancient and indigenous traditions and Western influences.