Goethe in his *Noten und Abhandlungen* to *West-östlicher Divan* said: “Höchst merkwürdig ist, daß die persische Poesie kein Drama hat”.\(^1\) 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 Shiite 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

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

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 *Shāhnāmeh* of Ferdowsi known to people through the oral tradition, a *naqqāl* begins his performance with the *bismillāh* formula and a praise of Imām 'īsā or another exalted figure, and a selection of religious poetry. This is followed by a call for a *ṣalāvat* (prayer, blessing). If a *naqqāli* 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 *naqqāli* performance, the storyteller frequently makes

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