

Untragic Modernities in Muhammad Iqbāl and Walter Benjamin

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Sir Muhammad Iqbāl (1877 – 1938) is simultaneously a leading figure in modern Indo-Persian poetry, the outstanding representative of modernist Islamic philosophy, and a founding father and pivotal political theorist of Pakistan. His exceptional poetic achievements in India and Iran, for which he was knighted in 1922, combined with his philosophical doctoral training in Cambridge and Munich, makes him unlike a cleric, a mystic, or even an Islamist – the traditional types of Muslim intellectuals scholars generally study – allows him to offer a truly global perspective on pressing theoretical issues of contemporary relevance.

Recent studies (Billings & Leonard, 2015; Leonard, 2015) argue that Greek tragedy exercised a formative influence on theoretical reflections on modernity, especially as understood by 18th – 20th century German aesthetics. Leonard 2015 notes that scholarship on tragedy has not been inclusive of the West's 'others'; yet the same is true of scholarship á la Leonard concerning the relationship of tragedy and modernity. Since theories of modernity premised on tragic presuppositions remain tied to Eurocentric ideas, a study of non-Western reactions to tragedy can successfully critique the dominant Eurocentric theories of modernity (Habermas, 1988; Taylor, 1989).

Iqbāl offers a completely novel approach to the question of tragedy and modernity can *nevertheless* be traced to the thought of a major figure in German aesthetics, of whom Iqbāl was a contemporary with but unaware of, namely Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). Actualizing a potential conversation between Benjamin and Iqbāl will elucidate what the latter can offer to contemporary theories of modernity, which rely heavily on tragic presuppositions. By investigating how Iqbāl utilizes the Qur'ān as the foundation of an anti-classical modernity, I will trace a global history of an anti-classicism centered on the idea of the tragic.

While many works have critically explored Iqbāl's intellectual

engagement with the other major facts of modern European thought (Bürgel, 1980, Qaiser, 2009), none deal with one of its key constituents: Greek tragedy. In issues published across the first 17 years (1960-1977) of *Iqbal Review*, the major English journal in Iqbāl Studies, only one discussion compares Iqbāl to Greek tragedy (Bausani, 1968). Iqbāl's poetry, which I argue is best characterized as a Qur'ānic counterpart to Greek tragedy, stages a tension between tragedy and the narrative aspects of medieval Persian poetry – premised on the anti-tragic metaphysics of the Qur'ān – that has the potential to globalise the debate on tragedy and modernity.

Given Iqbāl's belief in the Qur'ān's anti-classicism (Iqbāl, 2013), how does his modernist poetry utilize the Qur'ān as the foundation of an anti-classical modernity? Exploring how Iqbāl uses the reception of the Qur'ān's narrative elements in medieval Persian poetry to critique the role of classicism in the formation of an exclusively European modernity will lead to insights of relevance to scholars of Qur'ānic and Persian Studies alike.

How was Iqbāl's relation to tragedy shaped by his sustained study of modern German aesthetics which theorized the idea of the tragic (Billings & Leonard, 2015)? Iqbāl's *Iblīs* is typically analyzed as a tragic hero (Sākit, 2019). I will analyze Iqbāl's *Iblīs* through Benjamin's allegorical conception of evil (Benjamin, 1978). Since Benjamin opposes the allegorical to the tragic, the proposed analysis will expose the untragic core of a character typically viewed as tragic. An untragic reading of Iqbāl's *Iblīs*, which will provide the key to an Iqbālian critique of a tragic Western modernity, places this project at the intersection of literary theory and comparative poetics.

Can a comparative study of Iqbāl and Western theories of the tragic transform the provincial (European) debate on tragedy and modernity to uncover its global dimensions? In pursuing the untragic hero via the German-Jewish Benjamin and the South-Asian Muslim Iqbāl, this project will offer a global perspective on the contemporary debate among classicists and continental philosophers on the role of tragedy in shaping modernity.

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Epistemic uncertainty, fluidity and versatility in the Kristang creole/indigenous way of being in contemporary Singapore

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Kristang (iso 639-3:mcm) is a critically endangered creole language spoken mainly in Singapore and Melaka by around 1,000 people including the author; both the language and its associated community, the mainly Roman Catholic Portuguese-Eurasians or Jenti Kristang, have their roots in coercive intermarriages between arriving Portuguese colonisers and local Malay residents starting from the former's colonisation of Melaka in August 1511. Nonetheless, despite this and other deep and long-lasting intergenerational trauma and shame resulting from marginalisation and stigmatisation under the Dutch and British colonial empires and the independent