

Quest for an International Shipwreck: Taqi Raf'at and the Titanic

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The shipwreck of the Titanic happened far from the Iranian lands, as did modernity and modernization. Nevertheless, it had an impact on the Iranian atmosphere even more than the disasters happening in Iran. The impact of modernization is evident and commonplace, requiring no extensive argumentation to prove. The capitalist states imposed upon the so-called backward countries “legal systems appropriate to capitalism, regardless of whether the existing rulers” were “retained or destroyed.”¹ Consequently, all these economies began to dissolve into the capitalist economy. However, the case of the Titanic is more subtle, for the topic of disaster in modern times is subtle and crucial. Moreover, the story of the Titanic emerged with a delay in the Iranian cultural atmosphere. When it emerged, however, it immediately related itself to something deep in the heart of modernity: the disaster or, so to say, disastrous modernity.

¹Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 322.

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Although the Titanic shipwreck was widely received globally and thus probably in Iran as well, there are no documents of its reception in the country, in 1912, or even some years later. The first momentous reception of the Titanic shipwreck emerged later, in 1918, in an essay by Taqī Rafʿat, where one is totally in doubt if he is longing for the Titanic or demonstrating it as a disaster. Rafʿat's essay, which is titled "A Literary Rebellion," offers an opportunity to investigate one of the early receptions of the Titanic and also, more importantly, the emergence and conception of disaster and disastrous modernity.

Taqī Rafʿat, in his famous essay "A Literary Rebellion,"² dedicated a passage to the Titanic. In his debate with the members of *Danishkadah* over Sa'di, he gets to the point where he tries to argue that there is no classic poetry or poet that can soothe or even express what he calls the pain. The pain, according to him, is the result of an encounter with civilizations beyond the Iranian one. The pain resulting from this encounter is not expressible within the existing poetry traditions of the time, which the members of *Danishkadah* conservatively defended. Then, in order to elaborate, he writes a passage on the Titanic and later invites his readers to compare those sensations and thoughts with any verse in the canon. The passage is as follows:

Have you heard about the marine circumstance that led to the shipwreck of the huge transatlantic ship called the Titanic? Imagine for a moment: the breadth of the surrounding ocean – an infinite dark sapphire space – formidable waves – silence... – being sure that the safe coast is a thousand kilometres away – the ship had hit something in the sea – the water goes up in the ship, and the ship goes down in the sea – the people of the twentieth century with the help of tools, trying to prepare what is needed to survive.

Who? – Only ladies and children! – There is no place for men – a young wealthy officer who was settled in a lifeboat, leaves that safe spot and gets back to the ship about to perish (the captain's commands are obeyed!...) – only ladies and children!! The music

² یک عصیان ادبی

plays... - the daunting water has gotten to the knees of musicians...
– passengers are busy praying: “nearer, my God, to thee!”

Above this frightening resurrection, some invisible metal cords (antennas) – some electric sparkles in a hidden room of the doomed ship – wireless telegraph! – and in the cloudy horizon, the fugitive shattered smoke of the ships coming to rescue the Titanic from all four directions of the surrounding sea!³

What follows this passage is only a suggestion to compare it and the impressions and thoughts caused by it with a poem of classic literature. There is nothing more so one can understand what is going on. Is the Titanic what one may aspire to or is it something one must evade? Consequently, is the Titanic the inevitable moment that one is stuck in and must find a way to express the pain caused by that?

We may get to Raf‘at’s argumentation in his essay again, later. However, for now, we can look at the Titanic’s presence in the Iranian atmosphere and some direct influences it had on Iranians and their social condition. One of the early references to the Titanic, which was directly related to the Iranians, could be found in the writing of Sir Percy Sykes in his book *A History of Persia*.

The occasion where the Titanic shows up is the bombardment of the Holy Shrine in Mashhad by Russian troops. There Sykes writes:

The feeling excited throughout Persia and in a lesser degree throughout the Moslem world was intense, as Meshed is the centre of pilgrimage in Persia. Curiously enough, the bombardment attracted little notice in England, as it coincided with the dreadful catastrophe of the *Titanic*, and the British public was naturally absorbed in the details of that terrible disaster, which occupied the columns of the press to the exclusion of practically everything else. For me, the bombardment of the Shrine, of which I warned the Legation beforehand, of which I knew all the details, and which I

³Taqi Raf‘at, “A Literary Rebellion,” *Tajaddud* (Nowruz 1297), 30-31.

witnessed, represented an outrage on an innocent people, and clearly demonstrated the sinister motives underlying Russian policy.⁴

Interestingly, the Titanic disaster, which happened far from Iranian lands, still disastrously affected the Iranians. The press columns were exclusively dedicated to the Titanic and news pertaining to it, leaving no space for the bombardment of the Holy Shrine. The bombardment of the Holy Shrine (69 to 800 estimated deaths) was not the concern of the British public compared to the Titanic since the Titanic was directly related to themselves. Moreover, and although Sykes seemed to prove himself and the British government innocent in the bombardment, the reality was not like that. As a result of the 1907 convention, Russian troops were enjoying their influence over the north of Iran, which meant that the British were implicitly approving what was happening by Russians, not to mention what the British were doing in the south. Moreover, some documents prove that the British Government and their Consul General in Mashhad conspired in the disaster.⁵

Apart from that, there is something in the essence of the Titanic's reception that is closely linked with journalism. This topic was disputed in the British cultural atmosphere in the early days after the Titanic disaster. George Bernard Shaw and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle engaged in a dispute over the Titanic. Shaw argued that the whole "effect of sensational catastrophe" is cast by "an explosion of outrageous

⁴Sir Percy Sykes, *A History of Persia*, second edition, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1921), 427.

⁵Mohammad Hasan Adib Heravi, in his book about the history of Holy Shrine in Mashhad titled *Hadiqat al-Radawiyya*, gives an account of the bombardment of Mashhad which he himself was an eye witness and as a clergyman had close contacts with those involved. He writes about the talk between the Official Custodian of the Holy Shrine and Consul General of the United Kingdom (Sykes):

"I told him that you induced the Russians so that these unfavourable events occurred. 'Us?!' he asked. I told him: 'yes, it was you who told the Russians that our citizens are not safe, and since your troops are in the front line and present in Khorasan, we are taking no action, and if you take no action in protecting our citizens, we will be obliged to bring forces from India. Recently Russians have acquired documents from you that you have consent, and you beguiled them, and I am aware of that document.'" Mohammad Hasan Adib Heravi, *Hadiqat al-radawiyya* (Mashhad: Chapkhane Khorasan, 1948), 225.

Obviously, the British government and their Consul General were aware of the event and intrigued the chaotic, disastrous event.

romantic lying.”⁶ There Shaw argues in detail how this outrageous romantic lying is made by the devices of journalistic narrative and that it took over reality and its perception. Later, Joseph Conrad and Gilbert Keith Chesterton argued against the reception of the Titanic in the journals of the time.⁷ Apparently, there is something about the Titanic and its reception that obscured reality.⁸ Furthermore, as we have seen, it was not just the reality of the Titanic that was obscured, but also the reality of the disastrous events in Iran, which the Titanic and its shipwreck obscured. Modern journalism seems to be as disastrous as the Titanic.

Interestingly, Sykes, in his account, blames Iranians for an asynchronous mentality and writes: “My visit, rightly or wrongly, was considered to have been the cause of the restoration of the Treasury, Persians not being able to distinguish between *post hoc* and *propter hoc*, and I received many letters of thanks.”⁹ First, it is evident that Sykes not only influenced the restoration of the Treasury, but also was engaged in the intrigue surrounding the chaos. Thus Sykes’ writing itself is part of the “outrageous romantic lying.” However, what is essential is the fact that Sykes, as the core of romantic lying, finds it odd that the people far from the Titanic get involved with the actual cause of the disaster. Sykes and the producers of the outrageous romantic lying not only had believed their own lie, but they also found others in a mode of asynchrony since those people were not living the outrageous lie, but rather were experiencing the disaster.

The Titanic had another direct influence on Iranians, or at least one of them. This direct influence, surprisingly, was caused through absence rather than presence. Abdu’l-Baha, son of Baha’u’llah and the last of

⁶George Bernard Shaw, “Some Unmentioned Morals,” *The Daily News*, 14 May 1912.

⁷Gilbert Keith Chesterton, “Our Notebook,” *The Illustrated London News*, 27 April 1912, 619. Joseph Conrad, “Some Reflections, Seamanlike and Otherwise, on the Loss of the Titanic,” *The English Review* 11 (1912): 304-315.

⁸For a comprehensive study on this see: Arash Poorakbar, “The Disaster in the Heart of the Modern Moment: The Titanic and Disastrous Modernity in the Writings of British Authors,” *Romanian Journal of English Studies* 19, 1 (November 2022): 96-104.

⁹Sir Percy Sykes, *A History of Persia*, 427.

three central figures of the Baha'i faith, was expelled from Iran long before the Titanic disaster. After his father's release from prison, he had to accompany his father to Baghdad as an eight-year-old child. After some time in Istanbul, he ended up in Akka, where he was officially a prisoner of the Ottomans but with some freedom. The uprising of the young Turks eventually released him from his imprisonment in 1908. After some time in Palestine, Abdu'l-Baha finally decided to visit the United States. On 29 August 1910, one of the American Baha'is visiting Abdu'l-Baha in Palestine wrote to his friend: "I have a very big piece of news to tell you. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has left this Holy Spot for the first time in forty-two years and has gone to Egypt.'"¹⁰ In 1911 he made his first journey to Europe which lasted until the spring of 1912, when he travelled back to Egypt. On 25 March, he was boarded on the S. S. Cedric in Alexandria, headed towards the United States.

The point which relates this journey to the Titanic could be understood within two extremes. It is either a mere chance or a miracle. Abdu'l-Baha was asked to travel on the Titanic after getting to England, but he refused. He donated all the money provided for that cause by his friends to charity and travelled by the S. S. Cedric. This could have possibly been seen as a mere chance or the miracle of Abdu'l-Baha¹¹. Within the Baha'i community, it seemed that it was not utterly decided how to treat that event. Some impressions may suggest the miracle, but all are left in vain without significant insistence. Apparently, in modern conditions, it is impossible to decide whether a miracle has happened

¹⁰Eliane Lacroix-Hopson, *'Abdu'l-Baha in New York: The City of the Covenant* (New York: NewVistaDesign, 1987), 6.

¹¹"Some believers suggested that if 'Abdu'l-Bahá traveled to England, His arrival would coincide with the maiden voyage of the Titanic, which was believed to be the finest and largest English vessel in the world, and that if He would make His journey on that ship, He would arrive in New York in only five days in comfort and ease. Most of the friends approved of this suggestion. But after brief reflection, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, 'No, we will go direct, trusting in the assistance and protection of the Blessed Beauty. He is the true Protector and the divine Keeper.' Later, when the tragic news of the sinking of the Titanic reached the friends and believers, they were exceedingly grateful that He had not accepted their suggestion". Mirza Mahmud Zarqani, *Badayi' al-asar* (Paris: 1921), 7-8, the translation into English from Mirza Mahmud Zarqani, *Mahmud's Diary* (Oxford: George Roland, 1998), 10.

or not. Everyone goes around the event longing for the miracle, but ambiguous allusions are the only existing things. This can remind us of Raf'at's writing on the Titanic as well. It seems impossible to decide whether he is craving for the Titanic disaster or just depicting a modern moment not existing in the Iranian atmosphere. The disaster and the miracle are at the centre of this modern moment while nobody can assuredly admit their existence. Why must one depict the disastrous moment of modernity when he seems to be advocating modernization (tajaddud)? This makes Raf'at's writing stand aside from all pro-modernization arguments in those days. Having these two in mind, it seems that there is an aspiration for two extremes in modern Iran: miracle and disaster.

There are many occasions when the story of the Titanic appears among Abdu'l-Baha and his believers. All of these stories are ambiguous and could not be decided as either miracle or chance. The strategy of Baha'is and Abdu'l-Baha toward modernity seems peculiar and ambiguous itself. When one of the survivors of the Titanic asks the master if he knew this would happen, the master replies shortly: "God inspires man's heart."¹² It seems that the master either has not made up his mind or is simply giving a humble response. However, and in contrast to this, there is another event that happened on American soil where it is easier to observe a miracle in the midst of material progress.¹³ While he was still in America on 15 September, the master had to travel to Kenosha for a visit to Dr MacNutt. They were supposed to travel via railway.

¹²Zarqani, *Badayi' al-asar*, 202; English translation in Zarqani, *Mahmud's Diary*, 218.

¹³On many occasions that surprisingly were related to the Titanic, Abdu'l-Baha praised the American material progress, which he thought must be completed with spiritual progress: "Truly I say it is a wonderful city. As New York has made wonderful progress in material civilization, I hope that spiritually it may also advance in the realm of God, so that the friends in this city may become the cause of the illumination of America; that this city may become the city of love, and that the fragrances of God may spread from this place to all parts of the world. I have come for this." Abdu'l-Baha, "Addresses Delivered by Abdul-Baha in New York City and Vicinity," *Star of the West*, Vol. 3, 8 Sep 1912, No. 10, 4-5

"The powers of man in material civilizations are wonderful, but all his accomplishments are as nothing, – he, himself, is as non-existent unless he upbuilds in himself the civilization spiritual." Abdu'l-Baha, "I am summoning you to the world of the kingdom (Words of Abdul-Baha to Howard MacNutt, after the Titanic disaster)", *Star of the West*, Vol. 4, No. 12, 16 Oct 1913, 210.

Apparently, the master and his friends had to change trains after two stations, but due to some complications, they missed the train, so they had to wait for the next one. Those around the master seemed sad, but he replied: “it matters not. There is a wisdom¹⁴ in this.” Finally, they catch the next train, and in the middle of their way, they face the first train wrecked and some passengers injured. “This, too, was the protection of the Blessed Beauty,” said Abdu’l-Baha. Then he narrated the story of his travel from Alexandria to America. “Some proposed that we leave via London by the S. S. Titanic, which sank on the same voyage. The Blessed Beauty guided us to come direct.”¹⁵ This time, the miracle has happened. Before this, in the case of the Titanic incident, it was at most the inspiration of God. However, this time it is obviously a direct order from God. God directed the master this time, or maybe on American soil, it is possible to observe such direction and miracle. Modernity proves itself less disastrous on American soil. The material progress in America, which Abdu’l-Baha praised, seemed to pave the way for God’s order to reach him.

On another occasion that turned out to be very cinematic, Abdu’l-Baha commented on his rejection to board the Titanic. At the end of his speech, he makes a comment on that journey which Howard MacNutt describes: “[After a long pause, – looking reflectively out the window] I was asked to sail upon the *Titanic*, but my heart did not prompt me to do so.”¹⁶ MacNutt’s account of Abdu’l-Baha’s speech suddenly turns out to be cinematic. What is in the Titanic that requires Cinema and cinematic representation? The analogous logic exists in Raf’at’s passage, where one feels it is intended to provide a cinematic representation of the shipwreck. The passage in “A Literary Rebellion” is a cinematic description of the disaster. One possible answer may be found in one of the writings of Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” There he comes up with

¹⁴The word in Farsi is “hikmat” (حکمت) to which there are specific semantic nuances. It has an obvious relation to the determinism prevailing in Islamic culture.

¹⁵Zarqani, *Badayi’ al-asar*, 247, and the English translation in Zarqānī, *Mahmud’s Diary*, 265.

¹⁶Abdu’l-Baha, “I am summoning you to the world of the kingdom,” 210.

a dialectical analysis of distraction and concentration. As he observes in Dadaist manifestations, the paramount requirement of distraction is to outrage the public.¹⁷ We previously observed this outrageous romantic lying as described by Shaw. Interestingly, the disaster in modern times is linked with outrage and distraction, making it fit for a cinematic representation based on “successive changes of scene and focus,” which is “predisposed to this form of reception” in distraction. Although we are facing a cinematic production neither in the case of Raf‘at nor in the case of Abdu’l-Baha, both texts are based on a distracted logic where the scene and focus change rapidly, and there is no room for concentration. It is impossible to concentrate in this moment of disaster and decide whether Raf‘at is longing for the Titanic or Abdu’l-Baha has been miraculously directed by God. The disastrous modern moment results in a condition where the mind evades concentration and is distracted by the disaster when nobody is sure if they must reject or aspire to the disaster.

Abdu’l-Baha’s absence on the Titanic related him to Raf‘at’s writing. However, there is more than that to this relationship. He is present hideously somewhere else in Raf‘at’s writing. When defending the idea of a free discussion, Raf‘at quotes a phrase: “the sparkle of truth flares from the collision of ideas.”¹⁸ The idea behind this phrase is not unique, but when we trace its meaning and phrasing, we get to certain points and figures. Tracing back the idea, one can get to John Stuart Mill in his famous treatise *On Liberty*, where he writes in a passage: “it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied”¹⁹. This phrase was distortedly quoted in one of the writings of Akhundzade, titled “The English Philosopher John Stuart,” which one may guess that Raf‘at had read. In fact, the whole essay by Akhundzade seems a fair bit distorted. Although it indirectly suggests it is a translation or a review of Mill’s writing, it is almost a

¹⁷Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Book, 2007), 238.

¹⁸بارقه حقیقت از تصادم افکار بر جسد.

¹⁹John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1959), 95.

new piece of writing with new ideas irrelevant to Mill's. The distorted phrase by Akhundzade: "gradually by the collision of different ideas and beliefs the truth will find its place."²⁰ The idea and phrasing seem to be close to the quotation by Raf'at, but far from being a legitimate reason to be placed in quotation marks. The quotation marks in Raf'at's text suggest that he is quoting the exact phrasing. On the quest to find the reference of the quotation, one can finally get to an important figure whom we already have met. The exact phrasing is found in the letters of Abdu'l-Baha on different occasions and even later referred to by Shoghi Effendi. This could make us sure that most probably Raf'at's reference is to the master. This is the point that we can leave behind the master's absence and get to his presence on the modern scene of Iran.

There are two occasions that this idea and phrasing could be found among the speeches and writings of Abdu'l-Baha. The first occasion wherein the idea is present, but the phrasing still seems different, is in one of the letters by Abdu'l-Baha where he is advising the believers about the proper behaviour in a divine council. "Collision of ideas and opposition of thoughts in the council results in the revelation of the ray of truth,"²¹ says Abdu'l-Baha. The second occasion is on the same subject in another letter:

... The negotiation and consultation must be done in a way that will not cause any discord. The way is that during the meeting, everyone must freely express his ideas and arguments and if someone else disputes, they must not be sad because unless there is not a dispute on the topic, the agreeable vote will not occur. And the sparkle of truth is the emitted ray of the collision of ideas.²² Finally, after the negotiation, if there is a ubiquitous vote that is the best, if, God forbid, there is discord, they must act upon the vote of

²⁰ «و فایده کربتیکه، در صورت آزادی خیال، آن خواهد شد که عاقبت رفته رفته از تصادم اقوال و آرای مختلفه حق در مرکز خود قرار خواهد گرفت و در علم مدنیت ترقیات ظهور خواهد کرد.» in Mirza Fath'ali Akhundzade, *Maqalat* [The Essays], ed. Baqer Momeni, (Tehran: Ava, 1351 [1973]), 93-4.

²¹ Abdu'l-Baha, *Khasā'ese Ahle Bahā va Fara'eze Ashabe Shawr* [Characteristics of the Baha'is and Duties of the Members of Council], ed. Riyaz Ghadimi (1972), 63.

²² بارقه حقیقت شعاع از تصادم افکار است.

majority... and the negotiations in the council must not be revealed to others.²³

The phrasing here is almost the same except for two words. In this phrase by Abdu'l-Baha, he refers to the spark as the emitted ray (شعاع ساطعه), but Raf'at uses the verb to flare up (برجهیدن). This minor difference in the phrasing could not weaken the argument that the quotation's reference is Abdu'l-Baha because the same quotation with different phrasing appeared in another context as well.²⁴ This could mean that this was a famous saying by Abdu'l-Baha to the extent that no one cared for its exact phrasing.

To this point, Abdu'l-Baha proved himself present both in Raf'at's writing and the disastrous moment of modernity which is the Titanic shipwreck. The master was absent in Iran and present in the international atmosphere with his peculiar strategy toward modernity. He definitely was not the direct cause for Raf'at's writing since we are not able to scrutinize Raf'at's religious beliefs.²⁵ However, he could prove himself useful to situate and contextualize the perception of modernity in Raf'at's writing which is a disastrous understanding of modernity. Nevertheless, what is certain is that Abdu'l-Baha has a ghostly presence in Raf'at's writing. Moreover, this specific text is concerned with the Titanic disaster in its essence. Therefore what is shaping the future condition of Iran, apart from the conservative stance of protecting existing traditions, is the disastrous presence of Iran in the international scene and the perception of this disastrous moment in a rebellious strategy.

²³Abdu'l-Baha, *Khasa'is-i Ahl-i Baha*, 63-4.

²⁴Shoghi Effendi, in one of his letters dated 1939, refers to Abdu'l-Baha: "Through the clash of personal opinions, as Abdu'l-Baha has stated, the spark of truth is often ignited, and Divine guidance revealed."

The Farsi translation is as follows:

همانگونه که حضرت عبدالهء بیان فرموده‌اند؛ از طریق تصادم افکار شخصی، اغلب بارقهٔ "حقیقت ساطع میشود و هدایت حضرت احدیت لامع میگردد" in *Lights of Guidance: A Baha'i Reference File*, ed. Helen Hornby (New Delhi: Baha'i Publication Trust, 1988), 64.

²⁵There is not enough evidence to prove or negate Raf'at's relationship to those of the Baha'i faith. Moreover, it is not the concern of this writing to do so.

Now that we can see some ties among Raf'at's writing, the Titanic, Abdu'l-Baha's international journey, and disastrous modernity, we may look at the track that the Titanic story could have gone through to reach Iran. Apparently, the presence of Iran in the international scene is mediated by other geographies and cultures. We have a useful tool to shed some light on this subject. This tool is the pronunciation of loan words in the Farsi language. The recent pronunciation of the word "titanic" is /tāytānīk/ and is written like "تایتانیک". However, one may not expect the same to be true in the case of Raf'at and his text. Intuitionally, one may expect a pronunciation like /tītānīk/, which is more similar to the French pronunciation. Till this point, the earliest writing form of the word "titanic", of which we are aware, is the one in the writings of Mirza Mahmud Zarghani, who travelled with Abdu'l-Baha to the United States. Although his book was published in 1913, one can assume that the orthography must not have changed, and the word existing in the book must be as Mirza Mahmud wrote in 1912. The word that Mirza Mahmud has written on different occasions in his book is "تیتانیک".²⁶ This must have been pronounced like /tītānīk/, which totally accords with our hunch about orthography and pronunciation.

However, and curiously, the orthographic form of the word "titanic" in Raf'at's writing does not comply with this hunch. Raf'at writes the word as "تیتانیق" which must have been pronounced as /tītānīq/. The difference is the last consonant of the word "c", which is usually pronounced as /k/. The interchange of /k/ to /q/ happens in some dialects of Arabic and also in Turkish. This tendency of changing /k/ to /q/ was obvious in Ottoman Turkish and then in the Modern Turkish spoken in Turkey. This may lead us to the point to suppose that the form "تیتانیق" used by Raf'at is the Turkish pronunciation. There are two reasons to support this idea. First is the fact that Raf'at had lived for some time in Trabzon in Turkey, which may be the reason for using a Turkish pronunciation. Moreover, plenty of documents close to the date of the Titanic disaster include the same pronunciation and orthographic

²⁶Zarqani, *Badayi' al-'asar*, pp. 8, 33, 202, 247.

form used for the word “Titanic” in the Turkish papers.²⁷ Having these in mind, one may probably be convinced that the emergence of the Titanic, at least in Raf‘at’s writing, has happened via the Ottoman atmosphere. The same was the case with Abdu’l-Baha, who stepped into the United States, starting his journey from imprisonment in Ottoman Turkey. This disastrous modernity is mediated via the Turkish atmosphere. It seems that even the disaster is mediated. The geopolitical conditions still have their role in the modern condition and its formation, especially when travelling and communication via land is the primary means of transport. Still, there is a century until the frenzied world of planes and the internet.

Going back to Raf‘at and his argumentation in “A Literary Rebellion,” it is crucial to note that his passage is full of details that prove he was closely familiar with the Titanic shipwreck and its reception. All the famous details of the popular narrative of the Titanic shipwreck can be found in the passage. This includes references to people struggling to survive, the famous “women and children first” code of conduct which was popularised by its usage on the Titanic, and the music band playing either to ragtime or “Nearer, My God, to Thee,” the famous hymn by Sally Adams. There is also a reference to the wireless telegraph and its role in the Titanic story. This indicates that he was closely familiar with Titanic’s reception and that the Titanic had a pivotal place in his thoughts.

Then, one may ask what the Titanic could mean to such an argument. There seems to be one answer concerning a vortex where hope, a new strategy, or a rebellion may flare in the midst of disaster. When concluding his writing on Marx, Marshall Berman sums up the themes he had developed by which modernism comes to define itself. One of these themes is the “sense of being caught in a vortex where all facts and values are whirled, exploded, decomposed, recombined; a basic uncertainty about what is basic, what is valuable, even what is real;

²⁷In the Turkish paper *Donanma* published in April 1912, one can find different occasions where the word titanic is written as “تیتانیک”.

a flaring up of the most radical hopes in the midst of their radical negations.”²⁸ The Shipwreck of the Titanic seems to characteristically represent this vortex and the sense of being caught in it. The same sense of a maelstrom was also introduced by Hilferding when describing the force that finance capital imposes on the backward countries to merge them into capitalism: “The old social relations are completely revolutionized, the age-old bondage to the soil of the ‘nations without a history’ is disrupted and they are swept into the capitalist maelstrom.”²⁹ Modernity and modernization seem to be the same. The process of the modernization of Iran and its entrance into the new economic paradigm is symptomatically understood by Rafʿat via the Titanic. The moment where someone is caught in it, and there is no way out. This moment is when all values are exploded, all previous content and form get decomposed, and one is left alone to decide a strategy to develop new forms and ideas. This is the moment that some may conservatively resist, like the *Danishkadah* members trying to resurrect the dead and the exploded. At the same time, for Rafʿat, it is the time to make up his mind to take a rebellious stance when concentration is no longer possible.³⁰ In such a disastrous moment, something flares up. In the case of Marx, it is a radical hope, and in the case of Rafʿat, it is a new rebellious understanding of his position as an Iranian in the new scene of the modern international condition. Furthermore, this rebellion is formed in literature, as the centre of this cultural atmosphere, in order to explode ossified tradition and create something new and rebellious, which has the potential to act in a disastrous time of distraction.

In his essay, Rafʿat asks those defending the old literary paradigm and the status quo to free him and those like him of “the nightmare of decadence and destruction.”³¹ While the members of *Danishkadah* are

²⁸Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 121.

²⁹Hilferding, 322.

³⁰I have prepared a comprehensive analysis of Rafʿat’s rebellious stance, his perception of modernity, and the idea of being urged to decide in modern condition, which is related to reading other works in his oeuvre, which may soon be published.

³¹Rafʿat, “A Literary Rebellion,” 27.

busy defending Saadi and the old literary paradigm, he is caught in his nightmare of the disaster. Everything is about to vanish and destruct forever. He finds himself “anxious, distressed,” and distracted. Concentration on the “interpretations of the ancestors” and “the joy which they had experienced better than us” is not the solution. He is looking for redemption in the heart of disaster. The redemption for him is embodied in the rebellion, which he thinks is the meaning for him to exist, and is the only way to rescue the old tradition.

What Raf‘at finds in a state of decadence and destruction could be two different things. One could be premodern Iran and the old literary paradigm. Which then must be destroyed by a new paradigm, a modern paradigm within the modernization scheme. However, then it may seem strange to propose the Titanic disaster as the new paradigm or its symbol. Then one must consider another scenario that the thing about to destruct and in a state of decadence is the coming days of Iran, the modernized Iran. In this sense, he is foreseeing the disastrous future of Iran or the disaster inherent in modern life. Keeping in mind that the Titanic resulted from a modernized society, this second hypothesis does not seem farfetched. The Titanic in Raf‘at’s writing is aspiration and rebellion against modern life. He is sure the old is gone and vanished, but he is distressed and anxious about the new disaster to come: the disaster inherent in the heart of modernity. He is the lonely one fighting the conservatives to admit that things have melted into air and at the same time finds another front for which he must prepare himself. This is the front to encounter disastrous modernity. Unlike Abdu’l-Baha, who appeared as the Don Quixote of modern Iran, invading earthly non-spiritual manners while praising material progress, Raf‘at seemed to have the Don Quixote (the master), his journey, and his Titanic miracle in mind while he himself was totally absent from the scene. His absence was as problematic as the presence of the conservatives—both disastrous and disconnected from the reality of the disaster.