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IMAGINING THE IRANIAN 'SELF' IN THE WORKS OF FAKHRUDDIN SHADMAN AND JALAL AL-E AHMAD

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ABSTRACT :

How is identity constructed? How role does 'difference' plays in constructing the 'Self'? The question of identification has always been central to human society. Imagining the margin or difference between self and other has been important in unfolding any political process. Assertion of one's identity has been the focus of imperialism and anti-imperialist movements. Scholars argue that identities are invoked against the 'other' and are constructed through 'difference' which has become socially recognised. The paper is an attempt to answer the questions posed above



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by looking into the construction of Iranian identity as propounded by Fakhruddin Shadman and Jalal al-e Ahmad, two of the most prominent intellectuals of the twentieth century Iran.

KEYWORDS : Identity, Iran, Intellectuals, West, Westoxification, Anti-imperialism, Fokolis, Gharbzadegi.

INTRODUCTION

History of modern Iran has been a history of external intervention and revolts against it, writes Keddie (2003). Iran's strategic position, its boundaries with India, Russia and the Gulf, its large oil reserves and other natural resources made Iran the base for many struggles for domination. Its 'history of victimisation by outside powers' is usually traced back to the invasion of Arabs in 650 A.D., followed by pillage of the Mongols six centuries later (Clawson and Rubin 2005: 2). This was then followed by British and Russian intervention and in the second half of the twentieth century the United States of America had become the imperialist power for Iran. Though never formally colonised, foreign interventions in political affairs of Iran undermined its sovereignty, destroyed its economy and became an attack on Iranian culture and identity and Iran responded to these incursions in form of ideas, protests and revolutions.

The Tobacco protest of 1890-92, Constitutional Revolution of 1906, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 were not only revolts against western imperialism in Iran but also an enquiry into an "authentic" Iranian self. The Tobacco protest preceded the tobacco concession granted by the Shah to Major G.F. Talbot that gave him full monopoly over tobacco production and sale for fifty years. Concessions and loans not only had economic values but were tools for political control as well as cultural subjugation. Tobacco had gained cultural values in Iran and concession was resented as an attack on Iran's culture as it had large and direct effects on the social life and livelihood of the people. The Constitutional Revolution was a result of Mozaffar ad-Din Shah's increasing reliance on concession, discrimination of local merchants over the Russians and among many other factors, the defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese war (1904-05) gave encouragement and inspiration that a major power can also be defeated.

The revolution was Iran's first major revolution that succeeded in establishing a Majles as well as in asserting an independent Iranian identity against external others. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a major anti-West especially anti-American revolution in the history of Iran that thwarted the Pahlavi regime. It was a revolution based on discourses that consisted seeking and reimagining one's true self and true identity.

The question of identification has always been central to human society. Imagining the margin or difference between self and other has been important in unfolding of any political process. Assertion of one's identity has been the focus of imperialism as well as of anti-imperialist movements. In Iran also, anti-imperialist movements were assertions of what Iran is and should be. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was not only physical political processes with thousands marching down the streets to overthrow the Shah, but was also an intellectual struggle rooted in the works of intellectuals even before the revolution. Iran has long fought the battle against economic destruction, political subversion and cultural subjugation by external forces. These battles were also battles for assertion of its identity both politically as well as intellectually. Subversion of an authentic Iranian self, its destruction not only by the West and the Shah (seen as its stooge) but also by Western educated Iranian intellectuals remained major theme in the works of Iranian intellectuals especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

With an attack by the hegemonic external other in complicit with the state, intellectuals saw themselves as the defender of the "authentic" self and thereby critiqued the West, the state as well as those within themselves who drifted the authenticity. Even though the state played and continues to play a major role in shaping and defining one's identity, intellectuals also constitute a great deal in guiding or many a times questioning such definitions. The role of intellectual has been succinctly put forward by Antonio Gramsci. For him it is the 'organic intellectual' which performs the 'function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong' (Gramsci 1999: 131). Outlining the role of intellectuals, Edward Said (1994) writes that no major revolution or counterrevolution has taken place in modern history without intellectuals. And Iran has seen two revolutions in its modern history. The revolution of 1979 particularly could be studied as an assertion of Iranian identity against a hegemonic external other. Role of intellectuals like Jamal-ud-din Afghani (1838-1897), Mirza Malkhom Khan (1833-1908), Fath Ali Akhunzadeh (1812-1878), Ali Akbar Dikhunda (1879-1956), Farrokhi Yazdi (1889-1939), Fakhruddin Sahdman (1907-1967), Jalal al-e Ahmad (1923-1969) among others are significant in understanding constructions of Iranian identity.

Under attack from within and without, regaining the threatened Iranian identity lied in returning to the authentic Iranian self. This "true" Iranian self was to be found in Iran's culture, civilisation and its religion. But it was not just enough to regain the suppressed and threatened identity. It was also imperative to take pride in that identity and to reject the inferior status imposed upon it by the West. In order to challenge the Other it was important to gain confidence in the Self revolutionary assurance of the oppressed stems once (s)he is convinced that the ruled is at par with the ruler (Fanon 1963).

The paper is an attempt to look into the construction of Iranian identity as propounded by Fakhruddin Shadman and Jalal al-e Ahmad. It is important to understand that identities are constituted within discourses, or what is called within Representation (Hall 1996). Hall therefore makes it clear that in order to understand identities it is important to understand them as "being produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formation and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (Hall 1996: 4).

Hence, Iranian identities, produced in the nineteenth and twentieth century were also produced within specific discourses of anti-imperialism and intellectuals played a major role in shaping those discourses. Fakhruddin Shadman was one of the most important intellectual of early twentieth century Iran. Shadman wrote at a time when the world had just seen World War II and Iran had undergone Tobacco Protests and the Constitutional Revolution.

DEFINING THE 'OTHER'

What does it mean to identify oneself or to define what the self is constituted of? How do we identify ourselves? Confession of an identity is to confess difference (Connolly 1991, Derrida 1981). Derrida (1981) talks about two sites of relation between identity and difference. First, any difference that poses 'greatest threat' to the purity of an identity is defined as independent of that identity. Second, "doubts about self identity are posed and resolved by the construction of an Other against which that identity may define itself". Thus suggesting that in construction of one's identity, constructing the Other becomes imperative. Similarly Connolly (1991) argues that the self is constructed against the Other in relation to differences that have become "socially recognised". It is the difference that constitutes the 'self', as identity converts difference into 'otherness' in order to secure its being. He further argues that differences are described to prioritise the self with a proclivity to marginalize, demonise difference and to sanctify the self.

While the West constitute the major other against which Iranian identity is now defined especially after 1979 Revolution, Iranian identity was defined and asserted even before, as responses to Greece, Alexander's conquest and subsequently the Arab conquest, though with the Arab conquest a compromise was reached (Yarshater 1993) when difference (Islam) was adopted as a significant part of the self. Scholars agree that the major clear assertion of the Iranian self was made in the inscriptions on the tomb of Darius I (522-486 BCE) at *Naqsh-e Rostam*. It states "I am Darius the great king, king of kings, king in Persia...of the line of Achaemenes, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Iranian of Iranian lineage". Similarly the *Ka'ba-ye Zardosht* inscriptions of Shabuhr I (239/40-270/2 CE) states "I am the Mazda-worshipping lord Shabuhr, kind of Kings of Iran and Non-Iran...the sovereign of the Kingdom of Iran" (Canepa 2015: 1).

For Shadman, the self was defined against two kinds of "Other": the external Other and the internal Other. The external Other(s) were the West and Russia, which he believed were two powerful enemies. He believed that defeat at the hands of these two will destroy Iran forever and therefore any defeat at their hands will be Iran's final defeat for Iran will not survive thereafter. The enemies, particularly the West, were more powerful because despite their means of attack being soft (i.e. threats, bribes, presents, treaties etc.) the end was severely destructive. This was because, Shadman believed that the attack by the West was on Iran's culture and identity and it sought to replace Iranian way of life with theirs. Such an attack would transform the native Iranian by making them "obliged to learn new methods in dealing with Europeans, to speak the same political language which was entirely new to them and master to the best of their ability the intricacies of a novel life that their relations with foreigners has forced upon them." (Shadman 1939: 9-10). Transforming the native was a significant tool for British colonialism. This was also true in case of India. To penetrate into a distinctive culture, they created a class of "Indians in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions and morals and intellect". Shadman was critical of this kind of transformation in Iran as he viewed this as a destruction of native identity. He insisted on social and political recognition of the cultural difference between the external other and the self in order to safeguard the later.

Though the self drawn against the external other is based on what it is not, the self in respect to the internal Other produces the "true" Iranian self more clearly for Shadman. This approach of producing the Self as different from and against something that is internal is one of Shadman's greatest contribution and is taken up later by Jalal al-e Ahmad when he talks about *gharbzadeh*. The internal other, Shadman argues, augments the threat posed by political and ideological intrusion by the West. He called them the *fokoli* (derived from French *faux-col*) who are pseudomodernists. In order to bring out his idea of the 'true; Iranian self, he constructs two fictitious characters namely Hushang Hanavid and Sheykh Vahab Ruf'ay. Hanavid if read in reverse becomes divanah or insane and Rufay becomes yafur (Yafur referred by theology students to blockhead). The names he used are important in terms of constituting ones identity because as Edwards (2009: 3) writes that "the misuse or appropriation of names and stories can both be an insult and an attack on identity". Shadman through such a projection was not only critiquing and insulting them but was also using them to construct the 'self' different from them. His criticism of Yafur was that they rejected everything Western, were ignorant of the modern

world and nostalgic of the bygone era. But Shadman's major criticism was of Hanavid. He called them Iran's most 'treacherous enemies' (Boroujerdi 1996), 'dirty enemy from within' (Gheissari 1998). These set of fokolis, he argued imitated *farangi* ways of life and assumed the role of interpreter and introducer of modern Western civilisation. Shadman writes, '[A] fokoli is a shameless Iranian who knows a little of some European language and even less Persian, yet claims that he can describe to us the European civilization of which he has no knowledge and through a language he does not know'. (Shadman 1948)

Boroujerdi (1996) writes that for Shadman there were three groups of the fokoli nemesis. First, those working with *Farhangestan*¹. "They are ignorant or ill-intentioned Iranians who think that if Persian alphabet is replaced by a Latin one, all Iranians will suddenly be able to read and write" (Shadman 1948:14). The second category is of those intellectuals who had recently returned from abroad. This group, he believed had given up their national culture and religious roots in order to become superficially westernised. He criticised them for being unaware of western missionaries who relegate Islam as the root cause of Iran's problems. He argued that those who consider Islam as the source of Muslim ills are ignorant, egocentric and prejudiced. The third category is criticised for deserting classic poetry for non-conventional Western styles (Boroujerdi 1996: 57-58).

Fokolis praise for the West, Shadman believed, rests on their ignorance about the West's history of the Dark Ages, crusades and in their beliefs that Islam is responsible for Iran's backwardness. Such ignorance stems from their lack of knowledge of Iran's glorious past, its history and its contribution to scientific knowledge (Milani 1988: 141).Shadman argued that *fokolis* wrongly assumed that merely imitating Europeans guarantee progress and modern civilisation. He was concerned with the "cultural drift associated with modernization in the 1940s" (Bayandor 2018: 15)

Like every act of identity construction is an act of power, Shadman's construction was no different. The act of construction of identity suppresses that which threatens it in order to reaffirm itself (Laclau 1990). Shadman's introduction of *fokoli* is not only a critique of 'superficial' identity but is also an effort to form a common sense of what is not 'true' Iranian identity. It is also important to understand that constructions of identity are hegemonic as well as counter hegemonic in nature. The identity that Shadman propounded was a counter-hegemonic act at a time when Western intrusion in Iran had begun and Iranian culture and life was being threatened. Even though counter hegemonic identity constructions challenge the prevailing hegemony, they are also intrinsically hegemonic, as every identity construction is a homogenising effort that suppresses other minor identities. Thus Shadman projected a homogenous true Iranian self against the fokolis and the West and will be discussed subsequently.

Like Shadman, for Jalal Al-e Ahmad, the Other was both external and internal. Al-e Ahmad discussed questions about Iran's identity in his *Gharbzadegi*, translated in English as Weststruckness, plagued by the West, Westoxification, Occidentosis, Westernisation and Euromania. Writing the introduction for Ghabzadegi's English translation, Algar (1984) cautions that it should not be understood not as an ideology but as al-e Ahmad's discovery of Iran's disastrous submission to the West and his urgency to communicate people about the same. Gharbzadegi was published in 1962, originally a report for the Council of the Aims of the Iranian Education. But rejected due to its overtly critical tone and was subsequently published in journals and newspapers. The term Gharbzadegi, Algar (1984) argues was initially coined by Ahmad Fardid (1912-1994), but brought to popular usage by Jalal al-e Ahmad. At a time when Iran was undergoing rapid socioeconomic transformation, Gharbzadegi was hailed as intellectual bombshell (Boroujerdi 1996).

Gharbzadegi is an attack (or a disease) by the West in form of an infestation by weevils that eats up indigenous culture, its identity by leaving behind the "rootless" empty shell (Al-e Ahmad 1984). Boroujerdi (1996) explains that this explains the characteristics of both the external (disease) as well as

¹ Farhangestan was founded in 1935 on orders of Reza Shah. Composed of forty literary persons they were tasked with standardization and enrichment of Persian language. It gradually developed a mandate to combat the contamination of Persian language by 'purifying' it from foreign language mainly Arabic. Second Farhangestan was established in 1970.

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the internal (the empty shell) other. Hence, the West constituted the external other and *gharbzadeh* or the superficial Iranians, the internal other. The West for Ahmad is a broad category consisting of West-Europe, Soviet Russia, North America and other industrialized nations. This group, consisting of the developed nations forms one of the poles on which Gharbzadegi rests. The other pole is the developing world consisting of Asia, Africa and non-industrialised nations². He argues that West and non-West are not geographical but political concepts. In drawing these two poles, he contextualizes Iran in the international sphere, thereby defining the broader self as a developing nation among the exploited nations. Al-e Ahmad viewed the attack from the West in form of machines. The machines, he argues are the monsters of the contemporary industrialized world that have destroyed Iran's historical-cultural identity. The world is on economic war, he believed where the machine and the machine civilization on the one hand was producing and exporting and the hungry developing nations were importing and consuming. The economic attack by the West not only destroying local economy but was also imposing a new Western superficial culture. He compared Iran to a "weak, exhausted body of a sick man with an unnatural big and strong head that was the oil industry, artificially dragging the country just to feed the West" (Dabashi 2006: 59). The only aim of the Westernisation was not to develop the underdeveloped but to facilitate Western penetration. And the way to face and protect oneself from the attack from the West is by comprehending the essence of Western civilization. The attack, he argued, is on Iranian culture, identity that destroys Iranian authentic self and transform them into superficial and inauthentic. He explained the growing rootlessness as 'under the flag proclaiming the triumph of occidentosis...we are like strangers to ourselves, in our food and dress, our homes, our manners, our publications and most dangerous, our culture. We try to educate ourselves in the European style and strive to solve every problem as the Europeans would' (Al-e Ahmad 1984: 57). Such critique of colonialism transforming the native into a superficial Western is found in works of intellectuals of the colonised world. Frantz Fanon, for example in The Wretched of the Earth writes, "we can do everything so long as we do not imitate Europe, so long as we are not obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe..." (Fanon 1963: 252-254).

For the attack to penetrate and succeed, the local environment is made susceptible by the existence of *Gharbzadeh*. *Gharbzadeh* variously translated as occidentotic, West-struck, Westoxicated, Al-e Ahmad argued are "standing on thin air...a particle of dust suspended in the void...has severed ties with...society, culture and tradition...is a thing with no ties to the past and no perception of the future...is a hypothetical point on a plane...like that suspended particle...has no character...is a thing without authenticity". The *gharbzadeh* were carriers of the disease who were themselves affected by it and rejected the superficial imitation of the West like "an ass going about in a lion's skin" as done by them. Al-e Ahmad provided a staunch critique of the Pahlavi state and argued that it's only role was to play the role of interpreters for Western masters as they guaranteed their hold on power. Al-e Ahmad's analyses of Westoxification revolve around two points:

first the Western corporations and Western governments infiltrated the economic and cultural markets of Iran in order to extract resources, mainly oil and produce a system of consumption in which Iranians would look to the West for all forms of technology and goods. Al-e Ahmad's second and closely related point is that Iranian-Islamic subjects themselves perpetuate the penetration of Western machine because reception of Western economic and cultural goods makes westoxification possible (Deylami 2011: 251-252).

Thus the penetration of westoxification according to him was made possible by the Pahlavi Shahs, who through westernisation in the name of modernity made Iran dependent on the West and the 'occidentotic' intellectuals who have willingly accepted the West, thus both neglected 'authentic' Iranian culture. Thus, like Shadman Iran, Al e Ahmad also believed that Iran was under dual attack or double strike by both kinds of other. And the solution Ahmad offered was an introspection of Iran subservient

² Borourjerdi (1996) argues that even though there was no explicit mention of the debates like the dependency theory, Al-e Ahmad was no doubt influenced by these debates. Al-e Ahmad embraced Marxism in 1940s before founding pro-Mosaddeq socialist party Niroy'e Sevvom (TheThird Force) in 1952 (Bayandor 2018).

acceptance of Western ideas and culture and machines. His solution was to awaken people from the growing "rootlessness" in Iran and return to the self i.e. *az nanu shinakhatan-i khish* or renewed understanding of the self according to ones own conditions or what Algar (1984) calls 'cultural self analysis by victims of imperialism'.

RETURN TO THE 'SELF'

While describing the Other, the self is constituted. For Shadman, a true Iranian would despise superficial imitation of the West. He defines an authentic Iranian as the one who is an Iranshenas (with complete knowledge of Iran) as well as a *farangshenas* (with complete knowledge of the West) (Shadman 1965). Shadman believed that the attack from the West could be faced in two ways: either capture it voluntarily with reason and guidance or surrender unconditionally. The only solution for Iran therefore was to "capture it before it captures us" (Shadman 1948). Shadman was clear that everything that defines the West was not negative. Infact he argued that there should be indigenous application of Western knowledge and this could be done with the help of Persian language. He called for a cultural revolution (Milani 2008) and saw language as the saviour of Iranian identity and authentic Iranian self. Shadman's emphasis on use of language as a saviour in wake of Western onslaught is criticised by Boroujerdi (1996) on the ground that he had failed to explain the case of nations like Japan and Arabs, who vehemently protected their language but failed to escape Western attack. But this criticism becomes less relevant if Shadman's idea of imperialism is understood as cultural imperialism. Because language plays an important role in order to resist cultural imperialism. Language in any society under cultural attack, help people identify themselves as one and can become, what Dei (2005) calls, a powerful instrument of identity and belonging. Japan and Arabs have resisted cultural imperialism to a large extent and are still able to relate themselves to their culture through language. Shadman's emphasis on language, therefore, was not merely on the communicative aspect of language but also on its symbolic aspect, 'language as an emblem of groupness, a symbol, a psychosocial rallying point...the historical and cultural associations that it had accumulated' (Edwards 2009: 55). Shadman's insistence on language as a tool to preserve Iranian self can be understood from the importance of language as a major aspect of Iranian cultural identity even during Persian Empire. Scholars like Frye (1993), Yarshater (1993) argues that Persian culture and language continues to remain most central aspects of Iranian identity. Yarshater (1993) states that with Arab invasion, Islam was adopted in addition to maintaining and preserving Persian language and culture as an inherent marker of Iran's identity. It is through Persian language that the West can be captured. Shadman claimed,

we can compare Western civilisation to an army made up of one hundred million soldiers. Every valuable book that we bring to Iran, every accurate translation that we give to our countrymen, and every blueprint of a factory, a building, a machine...that we gather in Iran is as if we have captured one soldier of this huge army and made him into our own servant (Shadman 1948: 75).

Al-e Ahmad provided cultural critique of attack on Iranian identity. Like Shadman he also considered Persian language as an important aspect of Iranian identity (Dabashi 2006) but for him Shii Islam that is the strongest tool for self assertion. Though he did not embrace Islam in his early years, his solace in Islam, as his wife Simin Daneshvar writes, was a result of "his wisdom and insight because he had previously experimented with Marxism, socialism and to some extent, existentialism, and his relative return to religion and the Hidden Imam was toward deliverance from the evil of imperialism...preservation of national identity, a way toward human dignity, compassion, justice, reason, and virtue" (Daneshvar 1982: xi). He prioritised religious over secular leadership as he believed "none of our ephemeral governments have lived up to the least of its promises" (al-e Ahmad 1984: 71).

CONCLUSION

Differentiating a true Iranian based on Persian language, culture and Islam provided the base for assertion of Iranian identity. Intellectuals like Fakhruddin Sahdman and Jalal al-e Ahmad identified the difference that threatened 'authentic Iranian self' not only by introducing the external other but also by bringing in the internal superficial other. Their was an attempt to define and assert an Iranian identity against threat from Western influence as well as by 'superficial, inauthentic' Iranians. The intellectuals provided an escape from the attack though did not reject everything from the West. These ideas subsequently lead to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Even today the animosity between Iran and West particularly America could be understood in historical circumstances and the intellectual tradition of Iran and their definition of an 'authentic' Iranian self.

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