

# Iranian Intellectuals *in the 20<sup>th</sup>* Century



*Ali Gheissari*

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*To Anna,  
and to Rana, Soraya, and Mariam*

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classical Persian literature; on the other hand, Shâdmân would likely have approved of Kasravi's insistence on the necessity of embracing modern civilization and of a national awakening, his systematic approach to learning, and his recognition of the Islamic foundations of Iranian culture. In addition to his criticism of the pseudomodernists and those who, without having a full command of the language themselves, insist on "language purification," Shâdmân also pleads for a methodical and systematic approach to education and research, a theme echoed by other writers.<sup>94</sup>

### Âl-Ahmad and the Notion of *Gharbzadegi*

Perhaps the most famous critic of Westernism among the Iranian intellectuals was the writer and critic Jalâl Âl-Ahmad (1923–1970), a veteran of socialist and nationalist activities of the 1940s and early 1950s. He was born to a respected clerical (*rowhâni*) family that had originally come to Tehran from Tâleqân. After completing his primary education, he enrolled in the Dâr al-Fonoun, from which he graduated in 1943; by then, he had already made it clear that he would not follow the family vocation of becoming a cleric. He left school just as Reza Shah abdicated and the period of relative political freedom began.<sup>95</sup>

Âl-Ahmad found the source of many contemporary social and cultural maladies to be the abandonment of the traditional heritage and submission to, and superficial imitation of, Western ways, combined with a lack of any real knowledge of the roots of Western progress. He termed the condition as a whole *gharbzadegi* (the state of being struck by the West) and first described it in a short booklet with the same title. The book had originally been prepared as a report given at meetings on the problems of contemporary Iranian culture (*Showrây-e Hadaf-e Farhang-e Iran*) sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, in November 1961 and January 1962, but owing to its controversial content and critical tone, it was not included in the seminar proceedings. Instead typescripts of the text were subsequently circulated among fellow intellectuals. Early chapters of *Gharbzadegi* appeared in spring of 1962 in the ill-fated *Ketâb-e Mâh* (Book of the Month), a literary journal published by the daily *Keyhân*.<sup>96</sup> Âl-Ahmad made further minor revisions but was never able to openly publish the work in his lifetime.<sup>97</sup>

In *Gharbzadegi*, Âl-Ahmad summarizes his critical observations in terms of the evil function of modern Western technology, for which he preferred to use the French term *machinisme*.<sup>98</sup> At times, his argument re-

sembles a Marcusian criticism of positive science,<sup>99</sup> but then he introduces the mysterious and nebulous external agent devised as part of a grand colonial plan and attributes to it all historical manipulations since the medieval period, if not earlier. The term *gharbzadegi*, originally coined by a contemporary Iranian philosopher, Ahmad Fardid (1912–1994), though literally the state of being afflicted or struck by the West, has been variously translated into English as "plagued by the West," "Weststruckness," "Westoxication," "Occidentitis" (playing on the Persian suffix *-zadegi*, which in medicine refers to the state of being struck by an ailment or an infection), "Westamination," and "Euromania."<sup>100</sup> In any case, most connotations of *gharbzadegi* include the image of the nation or state as an organism, which is in itself an old metaphor, as are the medical and anatomical images of disease and plague. Fardid himself explained *gharbzadegi* by using the word "dysiplexia," a Greek neologism that he invented by joining *dysis*, which means the West, with *plexia*, meaning to be afflicted (as in, for example, "apoplexy").

Fardid's main complaint was not with modern Western technology, but with the very structure of the worldview (*Weltanschauung*) of Occidental epistemology, as it originated in ancient Greece, which posits an existential separation between the human mind as the knowing subject and the external world as the object of study. The emergence of that kind of perspective, as opposed to the totalizing, harmonious, and illuminative qualities of Oriental thought, began a period of universal darkness that has since concealed the original unity and totality of Being.<sup>101</sup>

If, in Fardid's thinking, any possibility for redemption was suspended until the eventual configuration (*Gestalt*) of the historical *Zeitgeist*, for Âl-Ahmad the question was less philosophical and more political: Iranians as a Muslim community must begin from the point where they lost their cultural integrity and self-confidence. He believed that the nineteenth-century liberal intellectual break with society's popular, mainly Islamic, traditions was a grave mistake. Âl-Ahmad regards the Constitutionalist as having the fatal flaw of dependence on Western sources, not only for the actual text of their Constitution, but also for their approach. He proposes a new and more genuinely indigenous movement of self-assertion to deal with all contemporary problems, from economic and political dependency to urban anomie.<sup>102</sup>

Although at this stage Âl-Ahmad did not articulate a definite plan, he gradually reduced his distance from Islam, which he thought still had great cultural and political potential. His rapprochement with Islam became particularly strong after he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in the

spring of 1964; a skillful and stylish writer, he gave a detailed and effective account of this journey in one of his last works.<sup>103</sup>

In *Dar Khedmat va Khiânat-e Rowshanfekrân* (The Intellectuals: How They Serve or Betray Their Country),<sup>104</sup> Âl-Ahmad begins by defining intellectualism as dealing with questions of thought and ideas and as involving a particular approach to reality<sup>105</sup> that uses the power of both written and spoken words (*kâlâm*)<sup>106</sup> to guide and motivate people.<sup>107</sup> He traces the origins of Iranian intellectualism to the Constitutional movement. He does not like the word *rowshanfekr* for intellectual.<sup>108</sup> Of the earlier term *monavver al-fekr*, he says:

*In the period when the children of the aristocracy who had just returned from Europe (farang) were busy translating the Belgian Constitution to serve as the Iranian Constitution,<sup>109</sup> the ordinary people in the street who followed the clergy referred to them as fokoli, mostafrang (Europeanized), [and] motajadded (modernist). . . . At that same time, these gentlemen [i.e., the intellectuals] referred to themselves as monavver al-fekr, a translation of the French les Éclairés, meaning, the Enlightened.<sup>110</sup>*

However, what word Âl-Ahmad does approve for use remains unclear. He echoes the standard definition of the intellectual as one who is "free from prejudice and [blind] imitation, is usually engaged in mental, and not manual, labor, and who puts the result of his work at the service of the populace. The result of his work is often oriented towards solving a social problem rather than promoting personal and material gain."<sup>111</sup>

In Iran ordinary people often regard the *rowshanfekr* as "fokoli, modernist, Europeanized, *dezanfekteh*" (French *désinfecté*, i.e., sanitized), and, to some extent, "show-offy and vain,"<sup>112</sup> with "European mannerisms, atheist or at least feigning it, and educated."<sup>113</sup> For Âl-Ahmad, these attributes in fact epitomize some broader ideological attitudes of the intellectuals that include alienation from their native, traditional environment<sup>114</sup> and having a "scientific worldview."<sup>115</sup> In *Dar Khedmat va Khiânat-e Rowshanfekrân*, Âl-Ahmad discusses the separation of modern education from traditional centers of learning:

*If intellectualism is seriously related to modern science (that is, if it only flourishes in a society where modern science has already been firmly established and modern educational and research establishments constitute the living organs of that society), then why, since the early days [of Iranian modernism] in the time of the early Qajars, instead of introducing modern*

*science into our old schools, did we build new, separate schools for the sciences? By doing this we undermined all the institutions of traditional culture.<sup>116</sup>*

He contends that in Iran, new schools and universities have not so far made any significant contribution to knowledge because a genuine scientific spirit is generally absent in them. To show the detrimental effect of the split between old and new schools, he mentions that while an old seminary (madrassa) in Isfahan has been turned into a museum, the newly opened Isfahan University confers meaningless degrees on a generation alienated from both tradition and modernity.<sup>117</sup> Although he makes the obscurantist position of the ulama toward modern education during the Qajar period partly responsible for this situation, he adds that it was not the only cause.<sup>118</sup>

Âl-Ahmad then asks why institutions of modern education in Iran did not develop in traditional schools, in a way comparable to the transformations that allowed schools in Europe to lose their religious base and become modern centers of learning and research. In Iran, however, "we built the Dâr al-Fonoun in opposition to tradition."<sup>119</sup> He recalls times in Iranian history when sciences and arts were pursued in traditional establishments, such as "the Nezâmiyeh schools in Baghdad and Nishapur, and the Rab<sup>c</sup>-e Rashidi in Tabriz, which was a kind of university as well as living quarters for artists, and the Jondi-Shâpour, which was a centre of both Zoroastrian teaching and Greek medicine and philosophy."<sup>120</sup>

Here, he agrees with Shâdmân, who several years earlier had claimed that allowing the traditional schools to decay had been a mistake.<sup>121</sup> However, they both failed to note the underlying dangers of rigidity inherent in such settings. For example, the fate of the allegedly heretical movements both before and after Islam who were persecuted because of their unconventional ideas should have reminded them that traditional establishments seldom tolerate opposition to the ruling order. Âl-Ahmad was of course referring mainly to scientific knowledge, but even scientific communities that deal exclusively in applied sciences with industrial and commercial objectives always have close ties to the political establishment, as, for instance, the numerous contemporary American science parks demonstrate. In the modern world of the arts and humanities, however, such a unified design, no matter how desirable, would be obsolete; some have even argued that modern and traditional schools are methodologically incompatible.<sup>122</sup> On the other hand, had institutions of modern learning in Iran emerged from within traditional madrasas, it

is debatable whether the fate of scientific practice and the arts would have been very different.

Like Shâdmân before him and many of his contemporaries such as Shari'ati and Narâqi, Âl-Ahmad limited his discussion of the intelligentsia and the social role and functions of modern education to a national perspective. The dichotomy between "them" (the West) and "us" (Iran) was at the center of all his explanations and analytical criteria. In almost every modern social problem, he finds the hidden hand of Western colonialism, acting independently or through its predictable local agents, such as the pseudomodernists and secular intelligentsia, or through an unholy alliance with native despots.

The assertion of genuine elements of selfhood or the rhetoric of authenticity in Âl-Ahmad overlays a series of allegorical assumptions. He did not engage in any systematic evaluation of traditional institutions, knowledge, or value judgments, and his analysis barely went beyond the level of introducing historical arguments into a political controversy. Yet, in spite of this, Âl-Ahmad enjoyed significant influence and personal charisma among Iranian intellectuals in the 1960s, and his views reflected much of the ideological rhetoric of the revolution of 1979.<sup>123</sup>

#### Narâqi on Spiritual Rehabilitation

Another writer who criticized Westernism in Iran and urged his readers to resist Western influence was Ehsân Narâqi (b. 1926). Like Âl-Ahmad, Narâqi came from a religious family background.<sup>124</sup> He first studied in his native town of Kâshân and then at the Dâr al-Fonoun in Tehran. He was a Tudeh Party member before leaving Iran to study sociology in Europe. In 1951, Narâqi graduated from Geneva University, and in 1956 he received his doctorate from the Sorbonne. From early in his career, Narâqi held various administrative appointments—with international organizations, mainly the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and with state institutions, for example, as director of Tehran University's Institute of Social Research.<sup>125</sup> This interest in administration separates him from intellectuals like Âl-Ahmad or Shari'ati, who avoided holding official posts. As a result they were both far more popular and trusted by the intelligentsia than Narâqi was; he was considered an "establishment intellectual." On the question of Iran's encounter with the West, however, his views and terminology had many similarities to those of Âl-Ahmad and Shari'ati.

Most of Narâqi's published works are collections of essays, lectures, and interviews on youth culture and university education, the economic and demographic problems of Third World countries, the cultural impact of science and technology, and aspects of cultural identity.<sup>126</sup> The collection *Âncheh Khud Dâsht* (One's Own Treasures), a title borrowed from Hâfêz that implies "the spiritual power within," is clearly influenced by the terminology current in the 1960s in Western, and particularly French, intellectual circles. According to Narâqi, in *Âncheh Khud Dâsht* he set out to answer a question already raised in a previous book called *Ghorbat-e Gharb* (Estrangement of the West), where he had critically examined contemporary Western societies and had pointed to some fundamental social and cultural crises that these societies had encountered in the course of their technological and administrative progress. This question was:

*[I]n the face of contemporary conditions in the West, what direction should the Oriental countries in general and Iran in particular pursue so that they will be able to regain their appropriate status vis-à-vis the West and at the same time protect themselves from the crises and mistakes with which Westerners, on their own road to progress in their own civilization, have become entangled? In other words, what should be done to allow the Oriental countries, and Iran especially, to become conscious of their national and cultural existence and be "for-themselves", without falling either into blind imitation of Western patterns or into extremist reactions to such patterns?*<sup>127</sup>

Based on his "several years of residence in Western Europe" and "six years of service in a global organization [UNESCO]," Narâqi proposes this answer: "In this chaotic and disorderly world, the only thing which could lead us to the shores of salvation is serious and sincere attention to our own cultural life, national spirit, and historical heritage."<sup>128</sup> He admits that the West has made spectacular progress in the sciences, and he cautions that this is a reality that Easterners should neither want nor try to ignore. At the same time, recognizing the progress that the West had made should not be allowed to undermine the spiritual merits of the East. In the course of its history, the Orient has acquired an insight (*bineshi*) that even the West admires.<sup>129</sup> He holds that the power of Western civilization is derived from its obsession with objective reality (*vâqeq'iyat*), whereas "the glory of Oriental history stems from the eternal