
A ROBIN REDBREAST IN AN IRON CAGE:
REVISITING THE INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENT OF DISSENT IN IRAN
BETWEEN THE 1953 COUP AND THE 1979 REVOLUTION

by

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the 1953 CIA-backed coup d'état in Iran and the toppling of the democratically elected government of Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh, a cultural-political movement that opposed the Shah's policy of rapid, authoritarian modernization emerged in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. This study proposes the concept of *Bazgasht be Khish* [A Return to Self] as an umbrella term that describes the various anti-colonial and critical counter-Enlightenment strains that eventually converged and formed a revolutionary force in 1979. The concept of *A Return to Self* was not monolithic and was defined differently by competing ideological movements. This project focuses on Ali Shariati's consequential question, "A return to which self?" and defines it not as a regressive form of self (ethnic, racial, Islamist, etc.) but as a progressive one that is critical of hegemonic universalism, traditionalism, nativism, and fundamentalism and offers a "third way" based on a dialectical interlocution between modernity and tradition, or between East and West.

The conventional literature concerning the post-coup period has often dismissed the movement of *A Return to Self* as nativist and, therefore, of little intellectual merit. This study takes a different perspective and proposes that it is possible to recast and theorize the post-coup intellectual movement in Iran as an attempt at a "third way," which sought to transcend the tradition / modernity binary and offer a way out of the impasse the Iranian society was facing. Theorizing the post-coup movement of *A Return to Self* provides a conceptual framework within which the artistic and literary works produced during this period can be re-interpreted. Textual analysis of those works will provide a deeper insight into the social and cultural factors that led to the 1979 revolution; this methodology also demonstrates the persistence of a positivist approach that has contributed to the emergence of a brand of neoliberalism that exists in symbiosis with the oppressive clerical oligarchy in post-revolutionary Iran.

This dissertation claims that the label “nativist” not only fails to capture the multifariousness of the post-coup movement, but also leads some scholars to shun serious scrutiny of the literature and art of that period. Such a methodology also allows an investigation into the traumatic impact of fast-paced, imported, and authoritarian modernity on the Iranian psyche and the function of fiction, poetry, and film of the time as resistance against the alienating effects of modernization. The most notable figures discussed in this study include Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad, Ali Shariati, Dariush Shayegan, Gholāmhossein Saedi, Shahnush Parsipur, Bahram Sādeghi, Ebrahim Golestan, Naser Taghvaei, Forough Farrokhzad, and Sohrab Sepehri.

Contrary to widespread claims in the conventional literature, the movement of *A Return to Self* was diverse and not necessarily regressive, Islamist, traditionalist, or nativist; it was, in fact, a progressive movement that foresaw the consequences of blind adherence to unbridled modernization in sociocultural, political, and economic terms. The post-coup movement contains several points of convergence with the critical counter-Enlightenment philosophical movement that emerged in Europe in the 20th century, particularly Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s magnum opus, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Those points of convergence can lead to new insights into and remedies for the neoliberal takeover of Iranian politics and economy in the 21st century and reorienting Iran’s path, and that of the Global South in general, towards social justice.

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Introduction

Iran's encounter with modernity dates back to 1800, in the wake of a humiliating defeat by the Russian empire in the North and the British Empire in the South. The sword-wielding Iranian army was decimated by Russian guns and mobile artillery, and this defeat led to the traumatic ceding of modern-day Georgia and Armenia to the Russians under the Golestan and Torkamanchāi treaties. In the South, the monarch Fathali Shah (1772-1834) was coerced into the Treaty of Paris (1857) with the British. Both powers were then allowed "to open consular and commercial offices anywhere they wished" and their merchants were exempted from import duties, internal tariffs, travel restrictions, and even "the jurisdiction of shari'a law courts" (Abrahamian 51).

Abbas Mirzā (1789-1833) was the first leader of the modernization movement in Iran. He had been frustrated by the disorder and fragmentation of the tribal armed forces, so when the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925) mustered the will for reforms, he assumed control of the process by establishing a military corps, building cannon and musket factories, and dispatching students to Europe to acquire knowledge of "practical subjects" such as "military science, engineering, gun making, medicine, typography, and modern languages" (Abrahamian 52). Although the emphasis on what was deemed practical might have been warranted due to the urgency of the matter, as the Persian empire was being carved up by larger empires, this seems to have established two conflicting attitudes toward European modernity among Iranian political leaders. Both of these attitudes, I suggest, continue to impede the progress of an indigenous Iranian modernity. The first view was the belief that modernity is importable; that is, that the process could be re-created by establishing modern European technological products in Iran. The second, and more devastating, view was that European modernity was the only possible model. With more and

more students and officials visiting the West, these two attitudes began to spread in Iranian society, gaining momentum and leading to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11.

The equating of instrumental rationality with modernity has remained a persistent misconception, with such disproportionate reliance on the “civilizational” aspects of modernity at the expense of the “cultural” (Malekian). This imbalance has been referred to by various names, including “lopsided augmentation,” “uneven development,” and “clerico-engineering” (Vahdat xii; Abrahamian 419; Tavakoli-Targhi 23). In short, the economic boost in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s came “at the expense of political reforms (Mahdavi, “Rise of Khomeinism” 50).

WHAT IS THE THIRD WAY?

From a panoramic viewpoint, the Constitutional Revolution can be mapped as the scene of competition among three competing camps in their response towards modernity. The more conspicuous two are the top-down “secularist modernists” and the “traditionalists,” both of which adhered to a binary that placed Iran against Europe and Islam against the West. The former perceived modernity as *the* solution whereas the latter rejected it as *the* problem (Mahdavi, “Muslims and Modernities” 57). The third group, which previous studies have tended to lump with the traditionalist, nativist camp, is the focus of this project. The main goal of the third way has been to deconstruct binaries and synthesize a fresh outlook from the dialectical relationship between, and a critical approach towards, both tradition and modernity.

The Third Way was a reaction to the first and second ways, so to speak, which had reduced the sociopolitical debate in Iran to a question of whether or not to accept European influences. The top-down secular nationalist position called for a complete overhaul of Iranian

society in order to “embrace” Western values (Hunter 36). Figures such as Mirzā Malkam Khān (1833-1908), Seyyed Hasan Taghizādeh (1878-1969), Āqā Khān Kermāni (1854-1896/97), and Fathali Akhundzādeh (1812-1878) are among the most frequently noted supporters of secular nationalism. They equated modernization with Europeanization, a grasp based on two misconceptions of modernity. First, their approach was merely “imitative” (Hunter 36); that is, they conceived of modernity as a marvel of science and technology that could be imported into Iran. Second, their understanding of “the historical, social, and cultural developments that had given rise to modernity” was superficial, ignoring its “variations” in different European countries (36). Modernist secularists who upheld the legacy of figures such as Abbas Mirza and Amir Kabir aspired toward a “top-down” model of modernization (Jahanbaglou, *The Fourth Wave* 21). They set out to embark on reforms through a “practical modernity,” a European package that they believed could set in motion what they referred to as *Tajaddod* [being new] (21). Mirza Malkam Khan, for instance, saw no point in trying to strive for an indigenous Iranian modernity when a ready-made package already existed in Europe:

If you intend to discover the path of progress with your own intellect, then we must wait another three thousand years. The Europeans discovered this path of progress and the principles of order in the last two to three thousand years [—] the same way they discovered the principles of telegraph and organized them based on an ordered principle. We can borrow their principles of order and discipline and implement them immediately, the same way we can import the telegraph from Europe and connect it to Tehran. (13)

The polar opposite to the nationalist/militant secularists was nativism, which was manifested under various brands in various periods. Although they were not identical in their

nativism, Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri (1843-1909) and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) each championed the nativist movement of their respective times, rejecting the West as debauched, dissolute, and dangerous. In general terms, nativism is defined as a “cultural reflex” (Boroujerdi 14) against the sprawl of modernity into the Global South, a reflex that essentializes native cultures and assumes their inherent incongruity with Western values and institutions. As such, nativism calls for a return to an old self and is imbued with nostalgic longing for a time in which native identity was authentic and tradition was unsullied by foreign values, worldviews, or lifestyles. On a philosophical level, nativism adheres to an East/West binary that defines Western and non-Western societies as fundamentally different from each other and regards modernity, in all its forms and definitions, as an irreconcilable other that must be avoided or thwarted.

Nuri was the most prominent opponent of *Mashruteh*, the limiting of the monarch’s powers, instead supporting a front that proposed *Mashru’eh*, the supremacy of Shari’a law. On one occasion, in an impassioned speech to acrimonious protesters in Tehran’s Cannon Square, he decried the Constitutional movement, “denounced the concept of equality,” attacked Mirza Malkam Khan as an “atheist Armenian,” and warned that “the liberals” were paving the way for “socialism, anarchism, and nihilism” (Abrahamian 97).

A fact that sometimes remains unacknowledged in public debates between the first two camps is that both of these discourses have analogous Western equivalents: the fin-de-siècle infatuation with European modernity among comprador intellectuals of the Global South corresponds to “the hegemonic discourses of the post-Cold War era” (Mahdavi & Knight 1) that announces the end of history. On the opposite pole, the cultural essentialism among nativists such as Ayatollah Khomeini, is reinforced by the Orientalist notions of Samuel Huntington, Bernard Lewis, and others, who adhere to “Muslim Exceptionalism” (Mahdavi, “Muslims and

Modernities” 58) and perceive Western and Eastern civilizations as perpetually clashing. In this interpretation, the New World Order has failed to see that Islamism, as the most ubiquitous and modern form of nativism in the Islamic world, is a “product of the modern capitalist system” and is fuelled more by the imposition of neoliberal policies on those societies than by “the historical events in the Muslim past (Abu-Rabi’ ix ; Mahdavi, “Muslims and Modernities” 60-61). In short, nativism is, more than anything else, a modern phenomenon.

The Third Way is an attempt to shed the dogmas of secularism and nativism and transcend the binary conceptualization that captivates them. It “synthesizes universal values of democracy and social justice with the particular institutions of a country/civilization” (Mahdavi and Knight 13). In Iran, the early proponents of this position, such as Ayatollah Hossein Naiini (1860-1936), Akhund Khorasani (1839-1911), and Seyyed Jamal-eddin Asadabadi, also known as Jamale-ddin Afghani (1838-1897), emerged during the Constitutional Revolution.

Asadabadi’s position towards Islam and modernity was contrary to Nuri’s. For the former, Islamic reform was the only way to “reverse European domination” (Hunter 15); he chastised those who rejected “science and knowledge in the belief that they ... [were] ... safeguarding Islam” as “Islam’s true enemies” (qtd. in Hunter 37). As more sophisticated iterations of the Third Way began to emerge in the mid-twentieth century following the Constitutional Revolution, Ali Shariati, Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad, and Dariush Shayegan, Shayegan among others, became the vanguards of The Third Way.

Based on the above reflections, the contributions of this project stem from the observation that the intellectual movement that led to the 1979 revolution cannot be explained in terms of hackneyed binaries, but in terms of a philosophical approach to the works that constituted the zeitgeist of pre-revolutionary Iran with no prejudice or preconception but instead

reads them within their own historical moment. In short, this study is a contribution to The Third Way, the unfinished project of Iranian modernity.

The conventional literature on post-coup Iran has often perceived the build-up phase of the 1979 revolution in terms of restrictive binaries of modernity/tradition, West/East, or Islam/Secularism. As a result, proponents of The Third Way have been labeled as Islamists, nativists, and even charlatans, who failed to understand the supremacy of the European way of life and rejected it out of spite and bigotry. This study, however, suggests that among the loud and competing voices that gradually intensified as the 1979 revolutionary moment drew nearer was a discourse that was marginalized but continued to exist.

Ali Shariati described his departure from binary taxonomies and analyses as “Ideh-ye Bazgasht be Khish [The Idea of a Return to Self],” though he warned that such a return did not constitute either a regressive return to an Islamic past or an ethnic return to the romanticized Achaemenid glory of pre-Islamic Iran. He called for a return to an identity that, through a critical revisiting of tradition and a critical encounter with European modernity, could form the basis of an indigenous modernity.

Another basis for this project is the notion that an isolated study of intellectual movements and philosophical arguments falls flat in capturing the lived experiences therein and the true spirit of the age. A more three-dimensional understanding should engage with the visceral and the emotional as much as the intellectual; therefore, in addition to revisiting the post-coup intellectual movement of *A Return*, this study tries to capture the dialectical relation between philosophical arguments and artistic productions. Hence, following Chapter One, which is devoted to unpacking the discourse of *A Return to Self*, the subsequent chapters trace the

effects of that discourse on fiction, poetry, and film. This project also explores the parallels between the discourse of *A Return* and Critical Theory as a major critical counter-Enlightenment movement in 20th century Europe. Identifying these points of convergence is important in demonstrating that dismissing the critique of modernity before the revolution as reactionary or as culturally essentialist is irresponsible. One of the central propositions of this study is to view the post-coup discourse in Iran not as a failed project but as an unfinished one, with massive untapped potential and many unexamined aspects.

The methodology of this study includes analysis of both theoretical and literary/artistic texts. Close readings of the works of Shariati, Āl-e Ahmad, and Shayegan seek to identify the underlying themes in those works and to discuss them in an unbiased manner within their specific historical contexts. Such conceptualization and identification of the Third Way's main tenets are this project's most significant contributions to the growing literature on this subject.

The first chapter of this dissertation provides a textual analysis of the works of the three most influential thinkers of post-coup Iran: Ali Shariati, Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad, and Dariush Shayegan, in order to identify the main propensities, arguments, attitudes, and discourses in their works. The chapter also unpacks the discourse of *A Return* and distinguishes it from nativist and Islamist concepts of return as professed by Ayatollah Khomeini. Shariati would jokingly refer to regressive calls for return as “return to the plough!” He insisted that before embarking on any project of return, we must be clear as to which self we are meant to be returning. A return to a pre-modern, Islamic self would not only be undesirable, but also impossible. By the same token, a return to a pre-Islamic Achaemenid self is also unlikely. The only way is to forge a path forward: a path that is anti-capitalist, postcolonial, and post-Islamist, but not necessarily anti-Islamic, as Islam is an integral part of Iranian identity that cannot, and should not, be erased.

In comparison, Āl-e Ahmad's approach towards the question of modernity was more focused on a critique of the hegemonic and alienating aspects of modernization. This study suggests that, despite contingent and topical statements, his idea of *Gharbzadegi* [Westoxication] was by no means nativist at its core. In fact, at the onset of his magnum opus *Gharbzadegi*, he laments the Iranian society's failure "to assume a prudent and calculated position towards" technology (13) and warns against the false equivalency of modernity with technology. He also warns against mindless emulation of the latter without having "grasped the essence, the foundation, and the philosophy" of the former (13). This chapter also points out that previous studies have tended to gloss over the nuances of Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad's thought and categorize them as Islamists and nativists along with Ayatollah Khomeini. Previous work on post-coup Iran is still defined by the modernist/nativist binary; this project calls for a transcendence of that binary, suggesting that the "modernist" and "nativist" categories fail to account for the complex realities of post-coup Iran and seeking a third categorization, in part to avoid the awkward situation of classifying Khomeini and Shariati together in the same group. This issue might seem solely taxonomical at first glance, but it goes beyond taxonomy and constitutes a crisis of imagination. The discourse of *A Return to Self* is not a dead end, but an unfinished project.

The subsequent chapters feature textual analyses of works that can be (re-)categorized as part of the critical counter-Enlightenment, anticolonial discourse and (re-)interpreted within the new theoretical framework provided in the first chapter. The second chapter includes a brief literary history of post-coup fiction to establish a context from which to introduce and re-read the works of Gholāmhossein Saedi, Bahram Sadeghi, and Shahrnush Parsipur, as well as several brief glances at other writers of the period. The chapter illustrates how the ten main themes in the

discourse of *A Return* are manifested in post-coup fiction. Saedi's magical realism is interpreted as an externalization of the violence of modernization. His depiction of the lives of civil servants under a crushing bureaucratic regime dovetails with the critique of bureaucracy, machinism, and income inequality in Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad's works. Barhām Sadeghi's playful narratological experimentations are key in appreciating his disdain of the petit-bourgeoisie and their adherence to a fake, hollow, imported modernity on the one hand and their nostalgic romanticizing of pre-Islamic Persian Empire and the Aryan race on the other. Similarly, Sharnush Parsipur's fiction adopts magical realism, but unlike Saedi, her departures from verisimilitude are based on a psychic revolt against the spiritual deficiencies of modernity and its traumatic effects on the psyche of her characters.

The third chapter follows the trajectory of Persian New Poetry within the sociopolitical context of the time, with particular attention to Forough Farrokhzad and Sohrab Sepehri as two poets whose critiques of instrumental rationality have remained largely unexamined. The chapter begins with a brief history of She'r-e No [New Poetry] and the sociopolitical motivations for the departure from restrictive (neo-)classical versification in Persian poetry. This is followed by a taxonomy of post-coup poetry that delineates the stylistic divisions based on ideological allegiances and the burgeoning debate of the time about committed and non-committed poetry. The chapter also distinguishes between Romanticism and Romantism, based on the work of various scholars including Michel Löwy, and claiming that Romantism in literature carries anti-capitalist and counter-Enlightenment elements that seem to be absent from other disciplines. The main focus of the chapter is a re-reading of the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad and Sohrab Sepehri that highlights their Romantist and counter-Enlightenment propensities and their

spiritual critiques of what Max Weber called “a disenchantment of the world” at the hands of the Enlightenment (Protestant Ethic).

The fourth chapter is devoted to the New Wave of Iranian Cinema, focusing on Naser Taghvaee and Ebrahim Golestan as two filmmakers who understood the undesirable consequences of the Shah’s project of rapid modernization and reflected on those consequences in their films. The chapter begins with a brief history of Iranian cinema and a contextualization of the (first) New Wave, which was heralded by Golestan and later by Taghvaee, among others, and a distinction between commercial and intellectual cinema, with the New Wave belonging to the latter. The films discussed in this chapter are emblematic of the identity crisis brought about by unbridled modernization, Golestan’s documentaries particularly critical of the Shah’s top-down, uneven approach to modernization that was of little consequence to the Iranian working class.

Although drama began to flourish in the 1960s, it is not touched upon in this dissertation because without access to video recordings of those performances, critical commentary would be limited to the scripts, which were in most cases written conservatively by playwrights to avoid censorship, perhaps in the hope that some visual clues on the stage can help the audience decipher the cryptic texts. At the time, the Shah’s national security apparatus, Sāzmān-e Etelā’āt va Amniat’e Keshvar (SAVAK) systematically and efficiently prevented any dissent or criticism of the state on the stage; as a result, playwrights included most of their sensitive commentaries in the performances rather than in the script. That is why the SAVAK raided theatres on the nights of the performances, even if the text of the play had already acquired all the permits (Emami 175).

Gholamhosein Saedi is a case in point. As Dariush Ashouri recalls, he and Saedi were among young writers who, “under intensifying censorship” (qtd. in Asgarpour), attempted to write in a manner that “took a jab at the dictatorship apparatus at the same time as escaping censorship. This was how the cryptic literature of the 60s came to be, and Saedi was a vanguard of that literature” (qtd. in Asgarpour). Saedi was one of the most prominent playwrights of the period, and his fiction and drama share the same thematic patterns and philosophical undercurrents. Thus, his fiction represents his views perhaps better than his dramatic works, which were written under a paralyzing censorship regime.

Dutch scholar Willem Floor’s *The History of Theater in Iran* is an authoritative history of Iranian theatre. Unfortunately, it does not adequately cover the oppressive circumstances of theatre production in post-coup Iran, mentioning only in passing that the government encouraged “experimentation” but “playwrights who went too far were censored and even jailed” (290). Saedi, for example, was detained on nineteen separate occasions (Sabri-Tabrizi 11), most of which included beatings and even hospitalization (Asgarpour). The last detention lasted a year under severe torture; the Saedi that was released from prison in 1976 “was not the old Saedi anymore.” The Pahlavi regime “simply annihilated Saedi” (Asgarpour).

The conclusion of this chapter touches upon a few important consequences of regarding the discourse of *A Return* as an unfinished project. It is, first and foremost, a proposal to interpret the post-coup discourse in its particular historical context, and also a call for a revitalization of that discourse in 21st-century Iran. In other words, instead of asking whether Shariati’s thought is relevant today, this thesis asks what Shariati or Āl-e Ahmad might have to say about the current neoliberal takeover of the Islamic revolution. The conclusion proposes that the project of

A Return should, rather than criticizing Islamic anticolonial discourse, address Iranian neoliberalism and militant nationalism as more pressing issues.

Chapter One: The Zeitgeist of Post-coup Iran

What am I?	من چیستم؟
A silent myth wrapped in a thousand wiles	افسانه‌ای خموش در آغوش صد فریب
A particle of dust seduced by the coy breeze	گرد فریب خورده‌ای از عشوه نسیم
A Rage lurking behind every bitter smile	خشمی که خفته در پس هر زهر خنده‌ای
A secret buried in the heart of a dark forrest	رازى نهفته در دل شیبهای جنگلی

From "What Am I?" by Ali Shariati

PRELUDE

09 Nov. 1954. Qasr Army Headquarters, before dawn.

Dr. Hossein Fatemi, the former Foreign Minister of Iran under Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, is being carried to the firing squad on a stretcher. He cannot walk because he has been tortured and his body is being consumed by a 40°C fever. At the time of his execution, Hossein Fatemi is 37. He is the youngest foreign minister of Iran to date. Fatemi was arrested on 25 February 1954, seven months after the CIA-led, British-backed coup overthrew the government of Iran and reinstalled the Shah. After his return to Iran, the Shah told Kermit Roosevelt, a CIA operative, "I owe my throne to God, my people, my army and to you!" (Roosevelt 200). Roosevelt was the CIA's front man in operation TPAJAX, the codename for the coup.

The American and British secret services even proceeded to decide the fate of Mosaddeq's cabinet after the coup. Sam Falle, the last British ambassador to Tehran, noted that "[a] cold-blooded execution, apart from being inhuman, might be unwise in Mossy's [Moşaddeq's] case, although it might be the best answer for Fatemi if he is ever caught. As long as these boys are alive and in Persia there is always the danger of a counter-coup. Toughness is necessary" (qtd. in "FĀṬEMĪ, HOSAYN").

HISTORICO-PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT

Dr. Fatemi's trauma is Iran's trauma. The dangerous life he led, the three assassination attempts he survived, and his violent death help to position him as a Christ-like figure in the history of the 1953 coup. The circumstances of his death, in particular, can provide great insight into the zeitgeist of post-coup Iran and shift our attention towards the collective psychological process that played an important role in the 1979 revolution.

However, Dr. Fatemi is one among numerous other members of Mosadegh's administration and his supporters. The underground movement of artists, filmmakers, and literati that ensued after their ousting serve to depict the silent rage of the nation in the wake of the coup, which reached its culmination in the 1979 revolution, toppled the Pahlavi Dynasty, and brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power. The American intelligence community has interpreted the 1979 revolution in general, and the following hostage crisis at the American Embassy in particular, as an instance of "blowback" (Johnson). The term was first used in 1954, one year after the coup, as a metaphor for "the unintended consequences of the U.S. government's international activities that have been kept secret from the American people" (Johnson).

Many studies, articles, monographs, and historical accounts have been published on this period, and all of them have tried to offer explanations as to why the 1979 revolution took place.² The Iranian opposition to the state can be divided into three fairly distinct discursive camps: the leftists, most notably *Hezb-e Tudeh-ye Iran* (Party of the Iranian Masses) and *Sāzmān-e Cherk-hāye Fadāii-eh Khalgh-e Irān* (Organization of the Iranian People's Devotee Guerillas); the nationalists, most notably *Jebheh-ye Melli* (The National Front); and the Islamists, consisting of

2. See, for example, Abrahamian; Afkhami; Milani.

three main groups: the apolitical clergy, the moderates, and the militant (Abrahamian 450-75). Despite these seemingly clean-cut demarcations, there were groups, organizations, movements, and coalitions that did not fit into a single ideological framework. For instance, the left comprised several groups such as the Fadaïyan, *Mujahedin* [the militants], *Niru-ye Sevvom* [The Third Force] and many others, which had either branched off from the Tudeh party or were formed by former members of various groups that convened over a set of principles. *Nehzat-e Āzādi* [The Liberation Movement], of which Ali Shariati was a member, was perhaps the most diverse coalition of this sort and, according to Abrahamian, played the most significant role in the revolution (462).

The state enforced a top-down authoritarian modernization with the help of the media and attempted to monopolize the political scene with the help of the army and *Sazman-e Etela'at va Amniat-e Keshvar* [The Country's Organization of National Intelligence and Security] (SAVAK). In the aftermath of the 1953 coup, Tudeh Party members faced a brutal crackdown by SAVAK; forty were shot, fourteen died under torture, and two hundred received life sentences (Abrahamian 451).

The Pahlavi monarchy favoured technocratic importation, an authoritarian, autocratic, top-down project of modernization. As Abrahamian notes, the revolution did not take place because the Shah modernized too much or too little, but because he modernized unevenly. He “expanded the ranks of the modern middle class and the industrial working class but failed to modernize on ... the political level” (427). Although the Shah would be seen visiting religious shrines and performing Islamic rituals, he was unabashed in eschewing his modernizing social policies by establishing movie theatres and bars, issuing permits to magazines that showcased Western lifestyles, and allowing state-run television to produce programs that were meant for a

more urban middle-class, while largely ignoring the religious convictions and economic hardships of the lower and rural populations. As Abrahamian observes, Khomeini was able to prevail as the leader of the 1979 revolution because he succeeded in forming a wide-ranging alliance among various groups by blaming the Pahlavi regime for “neglecting the economic needs of merchants, workers, and peasants, undermining the country’s Islamic beliefs, encouraging *gharbzadegi* [Westoxication] and constantly expanding the size of central bureaucracies” (Abrahamian 425).

The diverse and multifaceted forces that formed the political map of Iran between the coup and the revolution were consumed with the desire for a proper stance towards modernity and Western culture, which was manifested in the Shah’s authoritarian approach to modernization. This was more or less central to their philosophical ruminations and strategic plans and is one of the main factors that allows us to demarcate their ideological borders today. I would also add that adherence to an East/West binary was a prominent characteristic of the majority of political actors and organizations. How modernity and the West were (mis)perceived in post-coup Iran is a question that has inspired a vast body of scholarly literature marked by a multitude of nuanced and competing views and interpretations.

Existing studies of the years prior to the Iranian revolution describe the period in terms of the four categories mentioned above: the state, the left, the Islamists, and the nationalists. This study is primarily an attempt to tell the story of a fifth group of intellectuals, poets, filmmakers, and belletrists, who, for various reasons, have been misrepresented or even ignored in both academic and popular accounts of post-coup Iran, placed in one of the four categories or on one side of the East/West binary. Thus, this study seeks to achieve the following goals:

- 1) To contribute to the small yet growing body of scholarly works on post-coup Iran that seeks to recognize the fifth group of intellectuals and offers an analysis of the period that transcends the age-old binaries of Secularism/Islam, Modernity/Tradition, and Eurocentrism/Nativism.
- 2) To offer a comprehensive definition of this fifth category (the third way) and explicate their discourse, which advocated *A Return to Self*.
- 3) To identify and interpret the manifestations of the discourse of *A Return to Self* in the literature and cinema of post-coup Iran.
- 4) To establish links and identify the commonalities between the Iranian critical discourse of *A Return to Self* on the one hand and the Frankfurt School as a critical counter-Enlightenment movement on the other. This comparison is meant to create a synthesis between the discourse of *A Return to Self* and the Frankfurt School's critique of various aspects of modernity, in order to devise a theoretical standpoint from which to envision an indigenous model of modernity for Iran and beyond.

This project discusses poets, novelists, philosophers, and filmmakers who best represent the proponents of the discourse of *A Return to Self*. This statement does not mean that they all subscribed to exactly the same ideology or philosophy, but rather that they have enough discursive overlap to warrant a new look at their placement on the ideological map of post-coup Iran. Despite the variety in genres and their minor political disagreements, these authors and their works do have the following characteristics in common: they are modern, but they resent the Shah's rapid, top-down modernization; they are leftists, but they reject a relapse into traditionalism as a remedy for imperialism; they critique instrumental rationality, but they do not

consider utopian Islamism as an alternative; and finally, they lament the lack of spirituality in modern life, but they do not lead or advocate a hermetic lifestyle.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Before laying forth a tentative sketch of the discourse of *A Return to Self*, it is necessary to define several terms that are frequently used in this project.

Nativism

Nativism, according to Mehrzad Boroujerdi, is “the doctrine that calls for the resurgence, reinstatement, or continuance of native or indigenous cultural customs, beliefs, and values” (14).

As a term in post-colonial studies, nativism represents

a cultural reflex on the part of many Third World intellectuals from Southeast Asia to the Caribbean, eager to assert their newly found identity. The proponents of nativism were adamant about ending their condition of mental servitude and their perceived inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West. (Boroujerdi 14-15)

Likewise, Ali Mirsepassi defines nativism as an attempt to return to a utopian past, where agency is absolute (45). He observes that “the crisis of nativist imagination” is that “in the postcolonial world, there is no option of returning home” (45), and the top-down paradigm of modernization “slips into the past amid the unruly energies of globalization” (45) that create an unconscious sense of rootlessness and anxiety, ultimately caused by “the decentering experiences of modernity” (46). Thus, for Mirsepassi, nativism is a self-defeating project that ignores the realities of the modern world. In such a theoretical paradigm, “Islamist movements [such as ISIS] are the latest manifestations of a nativist desire” (46).

Ernesto Laclau draws a dichotomy between nativism, to which he refers as “particularism,” and universalism. He argues that the nativist project is essentially self-defeating for two reasons: first, a harmony among various nativist ideologies will not be possible without recourse to universal principles (26); and second, adherence to particularism or nativism would require ignoring relations of power between various nativist groups, minorities, or ideologies, which will lead to “sanctioning the *status quo* in the relations of power between the groups” (27).

It is important to note that although such a reading of Laclau might seem reductionist, as Laclau's theory of universality/particularity is intended to address the question of identity, one of the main pillars of nativism *is* identity. An essentialist view of identity paves the way for the emergence of a nativist discourse that defines itself in irreconcilable opposition to modernity. In this sense, equating Laclau's particularity with nativism can be warranted.

For over a century, Iran has been the battleground of two interpretations of modernity: on the one hand, hegemonic universalism, which “equates modernity, progress, and civilization with the superior West and [...] associates tradition, backwardness, and barbarism with the exotic and inferior Rest/East” (Mahdavi and Knight) and, on the other hand, a nativist discourse that has capitalized on ordinary people’s hopes and dreams of an indigenous modernity (Mahdavi, “Forbidden Fruit”) that had been hijacked and then forgotten by the state. Many leaders of the global South, which includes Iran, have “justified totalitarianism, patriarchy, and racism under the guise of nativist national and cultural paradigms” and rejected “freedom, democracy, and social justice” as essentially Western (“Forbidden Fruit”). This thesis argues that the Third Way would foster a critical discourse with both nativist and universal paradigms so that “universal values, such as democracy and social justice, can emerge from indigenous cultures” (“Forbidden Fruit”).

Modernity, Modernism, and Modernization

The literature on modernity, its origins, modes, definitions, philosophical roots, dark sides, and models is vast enough to warrant a dissertation of its own, so my attempt here is to provide a working definition and delineate the major discourses that reflect on or respond to modernity.

In general, modernity is understood as either an ethos or a historical period (Tavakoli-Targhi, “Homeless Texts” 263). As a historical period, however, modernity is a form of sociocultural structure that coincides with the emergence of modern societies (Ahmadi 23-24). In this sense, modernity is characterized by the “insitutionalization of purposive-rational economic and administrative action” and a “reflective treatment of tradition” by means of a “universalization of norms of action,” a “generalization of values,” and “patterns of socialization that are oriented to the formation of abstract ego-identities and force the individuation” of the subject (Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 2-3).

As an ethos or attitude, Foucault defines modernity in opposition to the classic Kantian characterization as a historical period. He suggests that modernity can be viewed as an attitude:

a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos. (“What is Enlightenment?”)

In this thesis, the term *modernity* mainly refers to the series of industrial, economic, and political changes that began to transform Western Europe since the 16th century and continued well into the 20th century. Modernity was a positive, transformational force that sought to free Europe from religious dogma, facilitate commerce, promote science, and eventually provide more

welfare to the average citizen. However, modernity has “a darker side” (Mignolo 2), as demonstrated by the colonization of the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas, as well as a general imperialist and hegemonic attitude towards the global South. Colonialism brought about a massive influx of wealth from its periphery (the third world) into the core (Western Europe), which enabled rapid industrialization, cultural development, and even more aggressive military colonization of the periphery.

Postmodernists, the Frankfurt School, and postcolonials have each provided specific critiques of modernity. Among postmodernists, Foucault is perhaps the most prominent commentator on the institutions that make the modern social structure possible; in several of his works, he observes that the modern subject is constantly under the surveillance of a “panoptical” structure that categorizes, surveys, and labels the subject into preordained binaries (*Discipline and Punish* 200). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno expose the mythologizing tendency of the Enlightenment and cast doubt on its claim to scientific objectivity. There is also a rich postcolonial literature that foregrounds the violence of modernity in its expansion into the global South by force, othering non-European nations, dehumanizing natives, and imposing European culture and beliefs on them. The most notable examples of postcolonial criticism include Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Walter Mignolo’s *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*.

Thus, modernity should not be equated with the West. As Mahdavi notes, there are as many paths to modernity as there are societies (“Universalism from Below” 282). Today, scholars of political and social sciences have moved away from the Eurocentric model and instead adhere to the model of multiple modernities (282). In this model, modernity is defined as a universal condition, characterized by human subjectivity. This study will, hence, refer to the

emergence of modernity in Europe as European modernity or Enlightenment modernity, while the act of exporting the European way of life to the colonies (whether or not by military force) is referred to as colonial modernity.

Modernization, on the other hand, is the process of transforming a traditional, pre-modern society into a modern one: “[T]he formation of capital and the mobilization of resources, ... the development of the forces of production and increase in the productivity of labor, ... the establishment of centralized political power and the formation of national identities, ... [and] the secularization of values and norms” (Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* 3).

Modernization, in Habermas’s view, is theorized by two “abstractions” on Max Weber’s concept of modernity. First, it “dissociates modernity from its European origins,” rendering it a “spatio-temporally neutral model” that can be applied anywhere around the globe. Second, it sunders the connection between rationalization and its “historical objectification” (Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* 3). In this way, modernization can become a façade of modernity, via urbanity, technology, or the nation-state, without the cultural and philosophical aspects of modernity such as freedom, individualism, secularism, or the rule of law. What has taken place in 20th-century Iran is more modernization than modernity; Eravand Abrahamian calls it “Uneven Development” (419), Farzin Vahdat calls it “Lopsided Augmentation” (xii), and Mostafa Malekian calls it the distinction between “cultural” and “civilizational” aspects of modernity.

Modernism, in this dissertation, exclusively refers to a literary and artistic movement that emerged after WWI. According to John Barth, “modernists, carrying the torch of romanticism, taught us that linearity, rationality, consciousness, cause and effect, naive illusionism, transparent language, innocent anecdote, and middle-class moral conventions are not the whole story” (173).

Drawing on Charles Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life," David Harvey describes modernist art as a movement concerned with the duality of "the ephemeral and the fleeting" (10) on the one hand, and the "eternal and the immutable" (10) on the other. In other words, a modernist artist tries to find an "immutable" truth in the "ephemeral," fast-paced condition that modern life has created.

THE GAP IN LITERATURE

This project is a response to recurrent calls for the establishment of a middle ground in between the modern / nativist binary. In addition to Mahdavi and Knight,³ two figures (among several others), who have called for such a conciliatory approach are Abbas Milani and Mehrzad Boroujerdi. Milani argues that Iranian modernity should be an attempt to find "a theoretical vista that is free from the self-congratulating swagger of Eurocentrism and the self-deluding slumber of nativist thought" (*Lost Wisdom* 21). Boroujerdi too contends that "[t]he essential question presently confronting Iranian intellectuals ... is how to transcend the dichotomous thinking that traps them either in a state of fraudulent "modernism" or a "nativist impasse" (181).

Nonetheless, some scholars of Iranian studies have either miscategorized the advocates of such a middle ground under the nativist rubric, or, while recognizing the middle ground they stand on, have failed to offer a third rubric that would transcend the modernism/nativism binary. The former overlooks the philosophical and ideological nuances that might exist among certain figures, and the latter fails to escape the false binary of modernism/nativism.

3. See Mahdavi and Knight's introduction to *Towards 'The Dignity of Difference? Neither 'The End of History' nor 'The Clash of Civilizations.'*

Mirsepassi's critique is noteworthy, as it divides the responses towards modernity into narratives of hope and despair. He lumps Fardid, Āl-e Ahmad, Reza Dāvāri (1933-),⁴ and Morteza Motahari (1919-1979)⁵ together, labels them as Islamists, and argues that their grievances of modernity were informed by counter-Enlightenment philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. Mirsepassi refers to those responses to modernity as "philosophies of despair" (25-26). He also adds that Shariati's vision of an alternative modernity is "troubling" (127) and continues that "Fardid, Āl-e Ahmad, Shari'ati, and many others ... rejected the entire Iranian experience of modernity, its socio-economic development, and all Western influence as evil and cancerous" (33).

Mirsepassi's characterization may be true for Fardid, but, as this dissertation suggests, it is inaccurate for Āl-e Ahmad and Shariati. In addition, such a categorization of reactions to modernity into hope and despair implies an overly optimistic view of European modernity and reduces its dark side, which includes colonialism, capitalist exploitation, environmental crises, and income inequality, to simply a misunderstanding of modernity based on the emotional state of despair.

Farzin Vahdat has also miscategorized the discourse of *A Return to Self*. In his reading of Āl-e Ahmad, he notes that Āl-e Ahmad's "significant reliance on religious symbolism and his effort against Western imperialism did not, in the final analysis, lead him into an anti-modern camp, even though he often appeared to have fallen into that trap" (114). Nevertheless, Vahdat does not hesitate to place Shariati alongside Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Motahari, under the rubric of nativist Islamism. He deems them "the three main architects" of the revolution (131),

4. Dāvāri is an Iranian philosopher whose work is influenced by Heidegger's thought and is characterized by criticism of the West.

5. Motahari, an Iranian cleric, philosopher, and politician who was a disciple of Khomeini and perhaps the most influential ideologue of the Islamic Republic after the revolution until his assassination.

the “main thrust” of which, Vahdat contends, “was to refute the discourse of modernity in Iran” (131).

The reason for the difference in the treatment of Āl-e Ahmad and Shariati is not clear. What is clear is that Vahdat's approach overlooks several aspects of Shariati's thought, such as his rejection of institutionalized religion (“Which Self?” 45) and his proposition of “Islam minus the clergy” (“Familiar Audience” 6-8), which goes against the very grain of Khomeinism.⁶ Vahdat does assert that Āl-e Ahmad is not an anti-modern intellectual and that he should not be blamed for post-revolutionary oppression, but it seems that Āl-e Ahmad is an exception to the binary rule. He acknowledges Āl-e Ahmad's membership in Khalil Maleki's organization, *Niru-ye Sevvom* [The Third Force], but this acknowledgement does not amount to a critical revisiting of the modern/anti-modern binary, and Āl-e Ahmad remains an aberration. This unwillingness to abolish the binary conceptualization of post-coup Iran further affects Vahdat's treatment of Shariati. Although Vahdat does categorize him as a nativist thinker, he recognizes that most of Shariati's audiences were from among “the middle- and lower-middle-class intelligentsia, who believed he could restore them their lost selves, without altogether alienating them from their newly acquired identities as moderns” (135). This last observation shows that, like Āl-e Ahmad, Shariati sought to reinvent the Iranian self through a mediation between modernity and tradition, rather than by rejecting one for the other.

Unlike Vahdat, Mehrzad Boroujerdi offers a mostly fair account of Shariati's ideas and his placement at the centre of a political triangle among the Islamic clergy, the left, and the secularists. He describes Shariati as “[a] man ignored by the secularists, admonished by the clerics, and punished by the shah's regime” (105). He also observes that “the modern Iranian

6. For a comprehensive comparison of Shariati and Ayatollah Khomeini/Khomini, see Mahdavi.

intellectual's concept of the self has been historically constrained by their perception of a dominating Western other" (176), and that some intellectuals "advocated imitation of Westernization and modernism" and others pursued a "nostalgic" and "archaic...renaissance of the past" (176). He further adds that the majority of Iranian intellectuals in the last five decades belong to a "middle-ground," which rejects "apish imitation of the West" and "renaissance of the past" (176) yet claims that their search for "indigenization and authenticity" has ground to a halt in "nativism and Islamicism" (176).

While Vahdat considers Shariati a nativist and Āl-e Ahmad a post-colonial intellectual, Boroujerdi points out Āl-e Ahmad's leftist activism yet still dismisses his intellectual project as a "nativist alternative to the universalism of the Iranian Left" (67). As the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, Boroujerdi's assessment of Āl-e Ahmad is based on an unfortunate misreading: he claims that Fardid's influence on Āl-e Ahmad led him to contend in *Westoxication* that "science and technology" are the "instruments of human mastery" and "the essence of Western civilization" (68). However, this is untrue: Āl-e Ahmad's concern was Iran's inability to assume a position towards the West and Iranians' failure to grasp the philosophy that animates technology.

In addition to this misreading of Āl-e Ahmad, what I take issue with, in a more general sense, is that Boroujerdi's overview is still restricted to the modernist/nativist binary. These two categories fail to capture the realities of post-coup Iran, and a third categorization is necessary in order to avoid classifying Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad with Khomeini, Fardid, and Motahari. This taxonomical issue, I claim, constitutes a gap in the scholarly literature on post-coup Iran. Contrary to Boroujerdi's claim, the discourse of authenticity in Iran has not led to a nativist impasse (176), but rather to a rekindled interest in the discourse of *A Return to Self*, which

necessitates a fresh look at post-coup Iran not as the background to a failed venture, but as an unfinished project, upended by the rise of the Islamic Republic and its gradual turn towards authoritarianism, oppression, and oligarchy.

Thus, I claim that Āl-e Ahmad's critique of Westoxication or Shariati's call for *A Return to Self* were neither fundamentally nativist nor, as Boroujerdi holds, laden with "demagogy and obscurantism" or an "essentialist and dichotomized worldview, and cultural schizophrenia" (177). The idea of *A Return to Self* was a response to the burning issues of the time in a language comprehensible to the average Iranian with a gentle slope towards decolonization and grassroots social change. Based on the means at hand, this approach was the best method for laying the groundwork for an authentic Iranian modernity. In addition, I suggest that Boroujerdi's claim that middle ground intellectuals have wound up in nativism (176), is not supported by what transpired in the course, and as a result, of the reformist movement in Iran, during which many neo-Shariati intellectuals offered a more democratic re-reading of Shariati's ideas.⁷ For instance, Reza Alijani contends that Shariati's Shiism is different from that of religious jurists confined to seminaries. Shariati refuted the latter as Black, Safavid Shiism and called for a return to a more socially engaged and progressive Red, Alavid Shiism (*Shariati: The Right or the Wrong Path?* 14). Alijani adds that Shariati's religiosity is "based on reason (though not necessarily the ubiquitous Western and Greek dissociative reason but based on a sort of non-dissociative Eastern reason)" (15). By dissociative reason, Alijani means the augmentation of instrumental rationality at the expense of "passion, emotion ... and humane rationality" (15). Alijani's critical approach allows him to focus on the core of Shariati's thought, which he describes as his view on life:

7. Boroujerdi's book was published in 1996, one year before the election of President Mohammad Khatami. Thus, his observations were current only up to that time, and the events of the reform years (1997-2005) do not necessarily support his argumentsto office..

“bread, freedom, culture, faith, and love” (16). Such a characterization of Shariati allows for a progressive “re-reading” of him (16).

In *The Making of Iran’s Islamic Revolution*, Mohsen Milani offers three distinct categories of Islamism that can help us grasp the nuances of revolutionary Islamism in post-coup Iran and can be used as a stepping stone into the theoretical outlook of the discourse of *A Return to Self*. Milani proposes three currents in Shi’ism: an orthodox-quietist current, which is “socially and politically conservative,” supports the monarchy, and rejects the involvement of the clergy in politics (138); Modernist Shi’ism, comprising mostly lay religious intellectuals, who all share the conviction that “in Shi’ism one may find all the ingredients of a liberating, progressive, and modern ideology, capable of neutralizing the cultural hegemony of the West in Iran, ending the endemic alienation of educated Iranians, and protecting the country’s national identity and heritage” (139); and a fundamentalist Shi’ism with an agenda for “aggressive political activism” and an advocacy for “the direct rule” of Islamic clergy (149).

Milani’s rubric of “modernist Shi’ism” is an interesting, though small, departure from the modernism/Islamism binary opposition that Boroujerdi and Vahdat propose. According to Afkhami, the same “bipolar space” (90) existed after the coup and before the revolution in Iran, wherein “the human psyche had to choose between the ignominy of religious superstition as traditional culture, and the opprobrium of a culturally meaningless and abusive technology as modernism” (90). As a result, Shariati’s “new interpretation of Shi’ism was received ... as a breath of fresh air” (90).

In fact, Shariati’s new interpretation of Shi’ism was part of the post-coup ethos in Iran, which, as noted above, emerged after the 1953 coup and culminated in the 1979 revolution, and intellectuals such as Āl-e Ahmad and Dariush Shayegan further contributed to the philosophical

foundations of that discourse. Novelists such as Gholamhosein Saedi, Bahram Sadeghi, and Shahrnush Parsipur depicted the social conditions of life after the coup and manifested resistance to those conditions in their fiction. Poets such as Ahmad Shamlou mythologized the suffering of everyday people and lyricized the dissent of the Iranian left against the Shah, while others such as Sohrab Sepehri and Forough Farrokhzad imagined a spiritual alternative to the Shah's harsh, authoritarian modernity. Together, these literati created a coalition among various forces with various ideological nuances and brought them under an umbrella, which I refer to as the discourse of *A Return to Self*.

THE IDEA OF *A RETURN TO SELF*

The previous section has sought to identify the gap in the scholarly literature on the discursive scene in post-coup Iran. I argued that in addition to the two opposing camps of proponents of modernization and nativist opponents, we need to define a third camp that can be referred to as the vindicators of the idea of *A Return to Self*. In this section, I seek to theorize the discourse of *A Return to Self* by offering a comprehensive analysis of its philosophical foundations. This discussion would, in turn, help to provide a theoretical prism, through which the literature and cinema of post-coup Iran can be re-read with a fresh look.

The *Idea of a Return to Self* gained momentum during the second half of the 20th century as a result of a global movement that called for more political agency for newly established nation-states that had unshackled themselves from colonialism (Boroujerdi 14-15). The 1950s and 1960s were the most seminal decades in the formation of anti-colonial movements in third world countries. In the 1950s, the wind of independence swept the global South: Libya, Tunisia, Ghana, and Sudan in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam in Southeast Asia, all witnessed anti-colonial movements and subsequently gained independence. Aime Cesaire's

Discourse on Colonialism was published in 1951. These independence movements gained further momentum in the 1960s as 32 countries achieved independence, particularly Algeria, the inspiration for, among other works, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in 1961. The repercussions of this wave of liberation were felt in Europe and North America, as the emergence of the New Left and the American Civil Rights Movement are believed to owe much to third-world anticolonialism (Jameson 180). Despite their differences, these mass movements shared an ideological common denominator, which is referred to as "the discourse of authenticity."

"The Idea of a Return to Self" [in Persian, *Ideh-ye Bazgasht beh Khishtan*] was the Iranian discourse of authenticity. In Iran, Jalāl-Āl-e Ahmad, Ali Shariati, Ehsan Naraqi, and Dariush Shayegan were its championing ideologues, though their positions towards Islam, tradition, modernity, the West, and even opposition to the Pahlavi regime were not always similar. In the first tier, Ali Shariati was the most prominent (Mahdavi, "Two Dreams?" 14), while many artists, writers, and activists formed the second tier of the movement. The idea of *A Return to Self* was first proposed in Iran by Khalil Maleki, a socialist intellectual who had branched out of the Marxist-Leninist *Tudeh* Party [Party of the Masses] and joined the Toilers' Party [*Hezb-e Zahmatkeshan*] in 1947. The program of the Toilers' Party called for freeing Iran from "all forms of imperialism including Russian imperialism" (Abrahamian, qtd. in Vahdat 109). Maleki also established a newspaper named *The Third Force* [in Persian, *Niru-ye Sevvom*]. After the *Tudeh* Party withdrew its support of Mosaddeq amidst the oil nationalization crisis, Maleki left and founded his own party, which he named after his newspaper (Vahdat 109-10). Maleki's work contributed to "the emergence of the all-important theme of 'return to the self' (110).

In order to prove that the discourse of *A Return to Self* is not nativist, it is necessary to identify the philosophical foundations of that discourse. Two dichotomies that Shariati created, *Este'mār* and *Estehmār* [colonialism and religious deception], and *khish* and *khish* [self and plough],⁸ may be useful in helping us identify those foundations.

Shariati used the two homophones of *khish* [self] and *khish* [plough] to distinguish the idea of *Return* from nativism. According to his daughter Sousan, Shariati was critical of the regressive and nostalgic conception of the past in his time. Instead of solely discussing *A Return to Self*, Ali Shariati asked:

“Return to which self?” ... [He] ... would jeer, “return to the plough’! ... In fact, Shariati’s critique is aimed at this dual nostalgic-exotic aspect in revisiting the past. He says that without a firm grasp or a critical approach, this return to yesterday is meaningless. He even continues that there is no return there, as we have not broken away from that regressive and dogmatic yesterday yet. So, a return to it would be neither necessary nor nostalgic. This self from yesterday needs sifting with a critical approach in order to filter the undesirable. (S. Shariati)

In spite of their divergent approaches, it can be argued that some progressive Iranian intellectuals who were inspired by the global discourse of authenticity and were not trapped in the nativist impasse shared, were inspired, or were influenced by Shariati’s approach towards tradition. In

8. The comic effect herepun is based on the homophone /khish/, which, with a slight variation in spelling, can mean both “self” [خویش] and “plough” [خیش].

addition, they shared the following general tendencies that can prove helpful in laying out the contours of the discourse of *Return* in Iran.⁹

1) Westoxication

Gharb-zadeh-gi [Westoxication] was a concept introduced into Iranian intellectual discourse by Ahmad Fardid¹⁰ and popularized in a monograph by Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad. In the introduction to the second edition of his book, Āl-e Ahmad acknowledges that the term had been taken from his “savant” Fardid’s “oral remarks” and hoped that “the courage of [his] pen shall compell him [Fardid] to speak out” (Āl-e Ahmad, *Westoxication* 6). They were both members of the Ministry of Educations’s *Shora-ye Hadaf* [Steering Committee]; in the meetings of 29 November 1961 and 17 January 1962, Āl-e Ahmad presented the monograph as a report (5). The commission decided that due to its “overly critical view of the regime” (Derakhshesh, qtd. in Boroujerdi 67), Āl-e Ahmad’s report could not be included in the committee’s final collection of reports, which led him to publish it independently a few months later, in the fall of 1962 (Āl-e Ahmad, *Westoxication* 6). The monograph’s publication was impeded by censorship and banning; however, by the time it was published, the term “Westoxication” had already become a catchphrase among thinkers, activists, and writers.

9. Most studies of the ideological trends in post-coup Iran are categorized into different sections, each bearing the name of one proponent of that particular section. I have deliberately avoided that approach in this dissertation for two reasons. First, sections that are each devoted to the study of one person function as isolated territories, the conglomeration of which will not offer a comprehensive picture. Second, such isolation is counterproductive for the purposes of this study, which is meant to delineate the boundaries of a new discourse with a life of its own.

10. Fardid (1909-94) was an Iranian philosopher and a fierce critique of modernity, who based his nativist premise on Heidegger’s critique of the Enlightenment. Responses to his work have been extremely polarized. His sympathizers lionize him as the first Iranian intellectual, who introduced Heidegger to Iranians, while his critics regard his misreadings of Heidegger as detrimental to Iranians’ views of the latter. Most of the confusion and the controversy regarding his legacy is due to his dearth of written work, as he was an oral philosopher. In 1999, Mohammad Madadpoor, a student of Fardid, transcribed and published a selection of his lectures as *Didār-e Farrahi va Fotuhāt-e Ākhar-o-zamān* [*The Divine Encounter and the Prophetic Revelations*].

Āl-e Ahmad defines “Westoxication” not as a rejection of modernity or technology (13), but as the failure of Iranian society, along with the rest of the Global South, in maintaining its “historical-cultural personality against the machine and its inevitable onslaught” (13). He asserts:

[t]he point, here, is we have failed to assume a prudent and calculated position towards this monster of recent centuries. The point is that as long as we have not grasped the essence, the foundation, and the philosophy of the Western civilization, and only keep mimicking it (by consuming its machines) we look like an ass wearing a lion’s skin. (13)

This passage captures the essence of Āl-e Ahmad’s thought, around which he built a large corpus of text that at times might seem contradictory and inconsistent. However, contrary to the various misconceptions and misrepresentations of his work, he should not be read as an anti-Western, anti-modern, technophobic, or nativist thinker.

Boroujerdi contextualizes *Westoxication* as involving Āl-e Ahmad’s four main responses to the socioeconomic transformations of his times: first, as a “critical chronicle of Iranian enlightenment”; second, as “a nativist alternative to the universalism of the Iranian Left”; third, as a “eulogy” for times past and a skeptical glance at what the West had to offer; and fourth, as an exhorting of Iranian intellectuals who had embraced Western ideas in a “passive and servile” fashion and a call for “awakening and resistance” to the “alien” and hegemonic Western culture (67-68).

In my view, only the first of Boroujerdi’s characterizations is tenable. There is no textual evidence to suggest reading Āl-e Ahmad’s book as a distrust of modernity or a call for resistance to it. His concern is not modernity but authoritarian modernization. He admonishes that “as long as we are consumers—as long as we have not built the machine—we are Westoxicated. And the

irony is that, after we have built the machine, we will become machine-toxicated!” (13-14). This is a call for an understanding of the West, not a rejection of it; his more specific issue is not technological advancement per se, but machinism as a side-effect of that advancement. Perhaps the young Shayegan is among the very few who would have sympathized with Āl-e Ahmad’s message, as in *Asia Vis-à-vis the West*, he notes, “contrary to popular belief, Westoxication does not stem from knowledge of the West but from ignorance of the true essence of Western thought, an ignorance that leads to alienation” (8).

For the most part, Āl-e Ahmad calls for a rereading of Islam and modernity, seeing the dark sides of both and warning against blind submission to both Islamic traditions and Western culture. He considers nationalist and Islamist movements, “which exaggerate religion and nationalism” (*Westoxication* 60), absolutely detrimental to Iranian society. He invokes the Safavid dynasty as a relevant example of the negative complicity of Islam and nationalism; during this time “the throne and the clergy went into the same robe and each put one arm into a sleeve” (60). However, since the culmination of the project of authoritarian modernization in the 1950s, the situation deteriorated:

Today that robe has been torn in half. The state, relying on its Westoxication, more and more treads down a path that invariably leads to decadence and destitute. ... On the other hand, religion ... resorts to superstition as much as it can and seeks refuge in the ancient times and its putrefied rituals. The clerical class is content with being the gatekeepers of the graveyard and contemplate Dark-Ages costumes in the middle of the Twentieth century. Today, the more the nationalist state resorts to the West to consolidate itself, the more the internal

religious rule, on the opposite front, regresses to the past to safeguard itself. (Āl-e Ahmad, *Westoxication* 60)

Āl-e Ahmad foresaw that this tension between the Islamic clergy and the nationalist state would lead to a political meltdown, which did occur in 1979. The tension remains to this day, however. The way he offers out of this “spell” is not by going back to the past, as “going back on the road or even stopping is not an option” (65), since even the Saudi family “who are still captivated by their ignorance [Jahiliyyah]...have conceded to the changes brought about by the machine” (65). Thus, Āl-e Ahmad proposed a “third way, from which [he believed] there ... [was] ... no escape” (65). Shariati also repeatedly called for the necessity of a third way that would transcend the westoxication/nativism binary. To him, the third way meant building a civilization rather than importing modernization. He thus distinguished between *Tamaddon* (civilization) and *Tajaddod* (modernization). He made it clear that “Consumerist imported civilization is not civilization at all[;]...it is a market!” (“Which Self?” 172).

2) Critique of Machinism

Several Iranian thinkers both before and after the 1979 revolution have lamented the excessive emphasis on modernization at the expense of modernity in Iran. Mostafa Malekian, for instance, makes a distinction “between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘civilizational’ aspects of modernity In fact, once the products of a subjective view turn into objective ones ... then the civilizational aspect emerges. In Iran, we are part of the civilizational aspect of modernity ... but, culturally, [we] have not yet experienced modernity” (10). Malekian’s distinction between cultural and civilizational modernities is the equivalent of Shariati’s distinction between civilization and modernization, which, in my view, is conceptually akin to Habermas’s distinction between modernity and modernization. Āl-e Ahmad similarly explains this distinction in his own words,

arguing that one side of Westoxication is enslavement to the machine and failure to capture the critical thinking and the philosophical insight that enables the West to manufacture that machine.

The flipside of technological dependence is a “façade of democracy” (95) devoid of its implications, namely “freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom to use the means of communication, all of which are controlled by the state; and freedom of dissent” (95).

Reminding the reader of the etymology of the word “democracy,” Āl-e Ahmad argues that the rule of the people is only possible when:

- a) Large local powers and land owners and residual tribal leaders have been disfranchised, as they impede the people’s free vote.
- b) Means of publication and advertisement are not the prerogative of the state but have also been provided to dissidents.
- c) Political parties have gained extensive influence and power, not as petty political cabals, but in a meaningful way.
- d) Military forces and secret organizations (such as SAVAK) have been emphatically debarred from interfering with the country’s affairs. (*Westoxication* 97)

This passage reveals the immutable core of Āl-e Ahmad’s thought, despite occasional oscillations, inconsistencies, indeterminacies, uncertainties, and even factual errors. Rereading these lines in light of Malekian’s distinction between civilizational and cultural modernity shows that Āl-e Ahmad might, or might not, have been consciously aware of this unevenness, but had failed to theorize it.

In *God and Juggernaut*, Farzin Vahdat points to the same distinction with more philosophical depth. He argues that Iranian society suffers from a “lopsided augmentation of

selective aspects of modernity” (xii), an allusion to the exclusive development of the civilizational aspect of modernity without nurturing the cultural. In the post-revolutionary context, Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi has theorized on this issue in a similar way. He identifies the contemporary Iranian discourse that enables this lopsided augmentation as “clerico-engineering” discourse. From numerous examples taken from the discourse of Iranian political and cultural elites, he concludes that combinations such as “leadership engineering, the geometry of power, compromise engineering, and political engineering of public opinion” are “symptom[s] of the prevalence of practical reason in the network of power and knowledge inside the Islamic Republic” of Iran (“Clerico-engineering” 7) with their roots in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-07). In Tavakoli-Targhi’s view, such combinations and phrases are not merely for the sake of eloquence or figurative embellishing of speech:

the dominance of an engineering attitude and practical reason [in Iran] was the aftermath of a strife among academic disciplines.... The polyrational reason of the Humanities and Social Sciences was under attack by those who understood “the Unitarian state” and the “Islamic establishment” compatible with engineering systems as both possessing a singular rationality and intellect. In the course of this strife, residents of Islamic seminaries, who were seeking political power, deemed the multiperspectival attribute of the Humanities and Social Sciences in discord with Unitarianism and religious certitude, and by unifying of seminaries with science and engineering faculties laid the foundation of the “Unitarian state” ... the practical reason that was utilized to construct “the geometry of the state” in the Islamic Republic of Iran, erected the Iranian and Islamic culture on a bureaucratic, technological and kratocratic logic. (“Clerico-engineering” 8)

This “lopsided augmentation” has its roots in the Constitutional Revolution (1905-07), during which the proponents of aggressive modernization joined forces and brought about significant political change. The Pahlavi Dynasty put great emphasis on the civilizational (to use Malekian’s term) aspects of modernity and, as a result, the gap between civilizational and cultural aspects has continuously grown ever since. In 1961, when Āl-e Ahmad completed the first edition of *Westoxication*, authoritarian, civilizational modernity had become the official policy of Mohammad Reza Shah, while its cultural aspects had remained largely ignored.

The royal policy of creating a façade of modernity without paying attention to individual subjectivity, political agency, and freedom of speech was rapidly enforced after the 1953 coup. In “Return to Which Self?” Shariati warns against such hasty, unbridled modernization; he considers civilization-building as a gradual process, “not a set of exported commodities” (172). A civilization established by imports from abroad “will undoubtedly achieve eye-catching success, but only eye-catching!” Shariati points out; furthermore, those who seek to civilize a country in such a manner “do exactly what a scheming but fatuous gardener does when they buy large, green fruit trees from ‘abroad’ and simply stick them in their own arid and infertile land!” (172).

Āl-e Ahmad also believed that remaining adamantly traditional was no less harmful than succumbing to the tide of imports from Europe and the US. Therefore, he proposed a “third way” to avoid such an impasse, which sought to recapture “the genie of the machine in the bottle” (65), as it is merely “a stepping stone.” Āl-e Ahmad further noted that “we should not become enslaved by it...because the machine is a means and not an end. The end goal is to eradicate poverty and provide everyone with material and spiritual welfare” (65).

The Frankfurt School philosophers reacted to similar conditions at the beginning of the 20th century, and the Critical Theory movement shares several discursive and philosophical parallels with the discourse of *A Return to Self*. Horkheimer, for instance, contends that modernization based on technological advancement will create tensions inherent to commodity economy “over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism” (227).

Like Horkheimer, Shariati regarded machinism as a malaise, a sentiment that is perhaps best expressed in his lecture “*Māshin dar Esārat-e Māshinism* [Machine Enchained by Machinism], in which, after identifying “tradition” and “Eurocentrism” as the two intellectual “poles” of Iranian society (342), he laments the predicament of a minority of “outcast intellectuals” (343), who “cannot accept hereditary and petrified structures ... nor do they consume the century-old, canned ideological imports of Europe. They [rather] want to ‘think’, ‘make’, and ‘choose’” (343). This admonition is his response to frequent accusations that he rejects science and technology. The tone in his lecture is one of deep frustration over how his thought has been misconceived and skewed; thus, he finds it necessary to clarify his position on science and technology: “Machine is not machinism,” he asserts, “and machinism is not the machine” (352).

Shariati’s definition of machinism is sociological, based on his critical leftist approach to labor. His critique begins with the premise that with the advent of technology and automation of the means of production, workers should have more time to pursue spiritual and intellectual growth outside of the workplace, but what happens in reality is that automation brings about

false consumerist demands, which in turn lead to debt and more working hours (“Machinism” 402-03).

On the geopolitical level, machinism multiplies production output, which creates the need for new markets beyond the immediate locale of the production unit, necessitating military colonization of third-world countries. However, mere military occupation will not guarantee a market. Bringing about deep-seated cultural change among the colonized nations is key. The same false consumerist demands need to be created, a goal that is unachievable without first emptying the indigenous cultures of their essence and fostering a sense among the populace of inferiority to the European subject. From this point, the processes both within and outside of Europe are very similar. Shariati outlines the consequences of machinism as follows:

1) Bureaucratization of Society

The precondition for the emergence of a “bureaucratic system,” Shariati notes, is the emergence of a “technocrat class, which controls the structure and the fate of society” (396-97). He invokes Weber, Jaspers, and Heidegger to demonstrate that the effect of bureaucracy on clerks is very similar to what Marx described as the alienation of workers from their work (397). As the second chapter of this thesis points out, the fiction of Gholamhosein Saedi is perhaps the most tangible example of such alienation among the clerical population working in modern institutions.

2) Fascism

Shariati argues that fascism does not solely refer to the political apparatuses under Hitler or Mussolini, but also involves, and stems from, “the increasing prevalence of technocracy” (399). Shariati sees a connection between machinism, technocracy, bureaucracy, and fascism. Drawing on the work of George Gurvitch, his professor and mentor at the Sorbonne, Shariati describes the technocrat class as a “rootless class with no ideology,” in compensation for which it recurses to

“racism, vainglory, contrived ideals, [and] fake glories and excitements ... to justify and impose itself” (399).

3) Intensification of Exploitation

Contrary to popular belief, according to Shariati, machinism aggravates exploitation and deepens its catastrophic effects. He draws on the concept of *Arzesh-e Ezafi* [surplus value (in German, *mehrwert*)], which is central to Marxist economics. The introduction of technology (the machine, as Shariati calls it) increases yield explosively, but this explosion in profit rarely compels capitalists to increase wages, and when wages *are* increased, the increase is minimal and not commensurate to the increase in yield. The process thus leads to severe income inequality and class struggle (400-401).

4) Rationalization of Capitalism

The massive wealth gap between capitalists and workers can potentially lead to an explosive reaction, but the solution capitalists favour is to create a false feeling of “embourgeoisement” in workers (402), instigating them to make purchases that are above their social and economic status. The emergence of the petit-bourgeoisie is a result of such a so-called “rationalization” of capitalism. However, as Shariati observes, this rationalization further alienates workers through “cultural colonialism, de-culturization, emulation, immitation, and competition in false and symbolic consumerism” (403).

5) Historical Fragmentation

The emergence of a new petit-bourgeoisie, which gives precedence to consumerism as an individual’s *raison d’être*, also gives birth to a new generation that is “hollow, rootless” and “disjointed from its historical continuity,” for only an individual who is “still in contact with his/her historical experience” (404) is capable of resisting capitalism.

6) Psychological Crisis

In defining psychological crisis, Shariati emphasizes “the soul’s revolt” against the materialistic lifestyle that machinism promotes. He sees a vicious circle that constricts the modern individual, who sacrifices his/her peace and welfare “not to seek the truth, or ascension, or Buddhist Nirvana” (406), but to reach welfare. His refutation of Camus’s idea of the absurd stems from the recognition that “the world is not absurd, ... not meaningless, ... not blind” (407), but “it is the machinistic system that begets absurdity. Absurd humans see absurd worlds” (407).

In short, machinism for Shariati is not equal to technology, but is rather “a system that has been imposed on the machine” (412). Technology is meant to reduce human labour and allow for longer hours of leisure, but in effect, the same amount of labour, and perhaps even longer hours, is demanded to enrich the capitalist class that owns the means of production. The machine “frees up work hours,” which workers can use to “contemplate and cultivate their artistic and spiritual” qualities, but machinism “devours those hours back for more work” (414).

3) Critique of Scientism

The philosophical affinities between Shariati’s idea of scientism and Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of Enlightenment are striking. In his overview of the bourgeoisie, Shariati notes that the bourgeois class adopted science “which had always been seeking the truth, the mystery of creation, the ideal fate of humanity, unravelling the supernatural, [and] understanding the nature of God ... and gave it only one task, which Francis Bacon calls ‘science’” (“Machinism”, 374-75). Thus, a will to power replaces a pilgrimage in search of the truth. Such an abandonment of metaphysics is a central tenet of Horkheimer and Adorno’s philosophical project: “On their way toward modern science human beings have discarded meaning. The concept is replaced by the formula, the cause by rules and Probability” (3).

While Horkheimer and Adorno identify the desire for domination that has replaced metaphysics in modern science (2), Shariati points to the positivist tendencies in modern science, which concerns itself exclusively with “rationalism, ... sensory experience, observation, comparison, and deduction” (“Intellectuals and Their Responsibility” 103). Thus, any knowledge that is not attained through those methods is deemed unscientific and hence unreliable (104), which invalidates knowledge gained via “emotion—such as artistic and literary knowledge—and ... revelations and epiphany—such as religion, mystical and spiritual knowledge—is not part of science” (104-5) and should be viewed with “suspicion” (Horkheimer and Adorno 3; Shariati, “Intellectuals and Their Responsibility” 105).

The creation of such a hierarchy seems warranted at first glance, since a rigorous methodology is necessary to separate mythology, superstition, and dogma from verifiable facts, but as Horkheimer and Adorno note, Enlightenment, as the philosophical foundation for modern science, recreates mythology by placing the subject at the centre of the universe, and the imagined “distinction between man’s own existence and reality swallows up all others” (5). This contradiction lies at the heart of modern science, what Critical Theory calls the dialectic of Enlightenment, and Shariati calls scientism.

With regard to ideology in science, Sharati distinguishes between “committed” and “noncommitted” science (“Which Self?” 401). Committed science operates based on ideological “convictions, presuppositions, and agendas” (400); therefore, it cannot offer an objective view of its object of study. Ideologically committed science is based on imagined social, national, racial, and political convictions and aspirations, which alienate science. At the other end of the spectrum, noncommitted science has freed itself from the church’s yoke of Christian cosmology in the last five centuries and therefore refuses to commit to any cause (402). It seeks to discover

the laws that govern nature based on realistic observation and objective data. Modern science, Shariati contends, is committed: it chooses its subject matter by examining the economic value of a scientific discovery, determined by the market, rather than according to the people's needs. In short, modern science only claims to be noncommitted, as it has freed itself from religion only to become enslaved by capitalism.

Shariati offers an eclectic approach to avoid both extremes. He argues that a scientist or intellectual should remain completely objective and resist any ideological commitment to class, political party, race, or religion. A scientist should also return to his/her social milieu, to the social class or the community, to which he or she "is humanely committed" ("Which Self?" 402) and consider the needs of the people in order to steer technology by humane necessity rather than by market propensity (403).

A parallel must be drawn here between the post-coup critique of machinism and scientism on the one hand and critical counter-Enlightenment thought on the other. Herbert Marcuse, for example, explores the implications of the Weberian "'rationalization' of society" (Habermas, "Technology and Science" 237). For Marcuse, rationalization is not the introduction of rationality as such to the modern society, "but rather, in the name of rationality, a specific form of unacknowledged political domination" (237). Marcuse observes that "the very concept of technical reason is perhaps ideological. Not only the application of technology but technology itself is domination (of nature and men)" (qtd. in Habermas, "Technology and Science" 238).

The ultimate purpose of modernization is empowerment of the human subject and the realization of his/her desire to subjugate nature. Critical Theory's critique of late modernity and capitalism starts from this very premise. Modernity has objectified the subject by restraining it to social, cultural, and economic norms. In revolt against Enlightenment, "blind nature, now

working under the fancy name of social order, is once more playing with humans...[who]...have degenerated into extensions of the established order” (Klapwijk 4).

4) A Spiritual Critique of Nihilism

The contrast between spiritual and Faustian worldviews is one of the main themes of Dariush Shayegan’s *Āsya dar Barābar-e Gharb* [*Asia vis-a-vis the West*]. In this work, Shayegan. Here, Shayegan argues that the influence of nihilism on Western thought has positioned it in “gradual rejection of all beliefs that constitute the spiritual heritage of Asia” (3). He further adds that Western thought is characterized by “four descending trajectories”: descent from intuition to technological thought, from essential modes to mechanical concepts, from spiritual essence to carnal drives, and from teleology and belief in resurrection to historicism.

For Shayegan, “the eradication of the experience of origin” (239) is the distinguishing factor between Asia and the West. He offers an epistemological approach towards the Asia/West divide:

In fact, philosophy began with the demise of the experience of origin, which is based on a mytho-poetic outlook; thus, that which did not raise any doubts and did not remain concealed was hidden and intellect began asking questions.... The paradigms of abstract thought, which are forms of the mytho-poetic outlook, were separated and started building a new world by means of synthesis, deduction, and comparison. Thought had become captivated by concepts and followed the *Adaequatio rei et intellectus* [my italics] principle. In contrast to Asian thought, which shunned scattered things and categorization of subjects and sought absolute unity, Western thought avoided the impossible unity of things and tried to organize scattered issues. (239-40)

Shayegan's main argument is very similar to Foucault's critique of the mode of categorization in the Enlightenment; however, due to his spiritual inclination and his acquaintance with Henry Corbin, Shayegan's analysis begins with the premise that "the initial motivation for Western thought is desire, leading to acquisitiveness and distinguishment" (241). Asiatic thought, on the other hand, "avoids contradiction, fears categorization, and bases its thought on the path of denying all that is mundane: One desires more; the other nothing. One turns desire into motivation to act; the other asks for desire's extinguishment" (241).

For Shayegan, "the Shayegan, "human is the great yogi of life" (245) because he/she is able to suppress his/her instincts. He considers this the central theme of Max Scheller's book, *The Human Place in the Cosmos* (1966), in which humans are perceived as the only beings capable of placing the cosmos under scrutiny. Thus, contrary to an animal, which constantly says "Yes" to nature, humans can say "No" and abstain.

In addition, Shayegan presents Faust as the archetypal harbinger of instrumental rationality, which has emerged from the Enlightenment. In his interpretation of Goethe's *Faust*, he reaches the same conclusion that Adorno and Horkheimer reached in their interpretation of the *Odyssey*.¹¹ A Faustian view of the world entails the desire to gain mastery over nature. The human is "eternally Faustian, who is never completely satisfied by his/her conditions and always seeks perfection" (Shayegan 244). It is this power that drags Faust into "eternal damnation" and forces him to say, "O had I ne'er been born!" (Goethe). This exclamation voices "the loudest objection to Fate" (245) and the greatest "doubtfulness of the meaning of life and universe" (245). This worldview has manifested itself in literature "as alienation, despair[,] ... absurdity, and purposelessness" (245), in art, "as rejection of all classical cultural paradigms" (245), and in

¹¹ For an overview of Adorno and Horkheimer's interpretation of the *Odyssey*, see Whitebook.

philosophy, “as the inherent limitations of life and the unsolvable mystery of human existence” (245).

On the other hand, Asiatic thought, according to Shayegan, discovered the “underground” (246) structure of human psyche and tried to steer the simultaneous creative and destructive power of the unconscious towards spiritual values as opposed to carnal desires (246). He proposes Faust and Buddha as the embodiments of the two opposing aspects of the “yogi of life,” for the latter is “a yogi who says ‘no!’, but instead of wailing ‘O had I ne'er been born!’, shows the way out. Buddha’s answer begins where Faust’s cry ends: One turns to the strait of despair and the other reaches the sea of freedom” (246-47).

I believe that even though Shayegan’s distinction between Faustian and Buddhist worldviews can be problematic due to its heavy reliance on the West/East binary, it does point to an important want in critical counter-Enlightenment philosophy: the question of spirituality. Rationalization, disenchantment of the world, tutelage, and reliance on human intellect rather than on religious conviction are among the main philosophical themes of the project of Enlightenment. This attempt to reach a secularized salvation is achieved through mastery over nature and unravelling of the laws that govern it. However, the resulting disenchantment has led to a spiritual crisis. This is why almost all four of Shayegan’s descending trajectories lament this de-spiritualization in some way, and this lack of spirituality and prevalence of cold scientism have also become themes in numerous works of literature and film. The poetry of Sohrab Sepehri, discussed in the next chapter, is a notable example of lamentation for the lack of spirituality in modern life.

One question that needs elaboration is the reversal in Dariush Shayegan’s philosophical project, particularly in light of his passing on 22 March 2018, which has been felt in both Iranian

and French academic circles. In an obituary for Shayegan, his nephew Ramin Jahanbaglou divides his philosophical work into four distinct periods. The first period, the main focus of this study, covers the beginning of his career until 1981, and includes Shayegan's writings in Persian on Indian religions and philosophies and on Asia's encounter with the West. *Asia Dar Barābar-e Gharb* [*Asia vis-à-vis the West*] (1978) is the most important book he produced during this time. The second period spans Shayegan's work between 1981 and 1992 regarding "the case of mistaken modernity in Iran" and his criticism of the 1979 revolution, during which time he wrote *Henry Corbin: The Spiritual Topography of the Iranian Islam*. In the third period of his life, Shayegan distanced himself from the first period, arguing that "Western civilization has become an integral part of the planetary civilization," rendering any opposition to it "meaningless". Unlike his lamentation of the spiritual vacuity of Enlightenment thought in *Asia vis-à-vis the West*, Shayegan considered modernity and Enlightenment "the main turning point in human history," which inspired his work *La Lumière Vient L'Occident* [*The Light Shines from the West*] (2005). Finally, the last period of Shayegan's life was devoted to literary criticism of classical Persian poets as well as French writers such as Baudelaire and Proust (Jahanbaglou, "Daryush Shayegan" 5-6). My thesis is naturally concerned only with the works of Shayegan between the 1953 coup and the 1979 revolution, among which *Asia vis-à-vis the West* has gained the most traction among scholars.

5) Critique of Islamism

Although the literature on Iranian thinkers who voiced discontent with the Pahlavi monarchy is ample, it does not display not much variety in interpretive creativity or discursive categorization. Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad have been considered Islamists and regressive, while Shayegan's work Shayegan is often read in terms of the young Shayegan, who was too radical to be taken

seriously and the old Shayegan who was more liberal and therefore worthier of respect.

Remembering his *Asia-vis-à-vis the West* 20 years later, he ascribes the writing of the book to “the counter-culture years” in the 1960s and adds, “I was too obsessed with the East back then... I think those statements [in the book] can be dangerous” (qtd. in Rajabi).

Although Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad may have occasionally made questionable statements regarding topics such as decolonization, women’s rights, and violence, there is no justification for categorizing them as Islamists. Their numerous critiques of Islamism, on the other hand, have been largely ignored or overlooked. For instance, in a Q&A session with Tabriz University students, commenting on “superstition in Islam,” Āl-e Ahmad asserts that “any religion starts with a few inconvenient people getting together ... [who] ... give it ‘dynamism’.... But when they are established, then turn into an institution...which impedes the initial principles” (*Three-year Report*, 163). Similarly, in many instances, Shariati criticizes rigid Shari’a law, institutionalized Islam, and the corruption and demagoguery of Islamic clergy (*Ulama*). He laments the preoccupation of Muslims with absurd Islamic rituals (“Which Self?” 46-47) and petty quarrels among various sects (“Which Self?” 45):

In the mid-nineteenth century,...while European governments were cementing their political, economic, and cultural rule, after their military conquest, over Asia and Africa, and European intellectuals were talking about exploitation, and in England, Western, and central Europe, class struggle and emancipation of workers and battling capitalism was in motion, ...in every Islamic country, messiahs were emerging,...and there was quarrel... between Azalis and Bahais, and search through *Behār Al-anwār* anecdotes to find signs of the apocalypse and

the characteristics of the messiah, and war among the Fuqaha and the Sheikhs and the Sufis. (“Which Self?” 44-45)

Unlike the majority of nativist thinkers who blame colonialism for every hardship in the Islamicate world, Shariati observes that Iran, like any other Muslim nation, is captivated by two equally dangerous trends: *Este`mār* (colonization) and *Estehmār* (religious deception)¹² (“Which Self?” 51). The former refers to colonialism and colonial modernity; the latter refers to the religious deception of the masses by clerics who have kept their subjects preoccupied with absurd religious rituals and inconsequential quarrels among Islamic sects and denominations.

It is worth mentioning that Shariati’s view of Islam and its social function is very different from that of the conservative clerics who took power in 1979, especially Khomeini. Shariati and Khomeini are “worlds apart” (Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent* 145), and it is a fallacy to lump them together under the same rubric. While the discourses of Khomeini and Shariati did both contribute to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, they “developed separately, appealed to different social forces, and will have different fates in post-revolutionary Iran” (Mahdavi, “Two Dreams” 23). They both called for “A Return to Self,” but Shariati’s call was much more progressive than Khomeini’s. Shariati’s collection *Return* [in Persian, *Bazgasht*] is a compilation of his views on the idea of *A Return to Self*, and his particular approach to this question is significant. The collection consists of three chapters: “A Return to Self,” “A Return to Which Self?” and “Franz Fannon’s Will,” translated by Shariati. In “A Return to Self,” Shariati admits that he is not advocating a return to national, ethnic, racial (36) identity, or to “traditional,” “regressive” Islamic identity (33). He calls instead for a return to “the de facto self that resides

12 . Religious deception (*Estehmaar* has been translated as “Stupification” in the literature, which is not a telling equivalent and not a very common word in English. I propose “Religious Deception” as a better translation.) sometimes been translated as “stupification,” which is an uncommon term in English and is not entirely accurate. Therefore, I propose “religious deception” as a better translation.

within the social conscience.... It is that self that is alive and dynamic and not the dead archeological classicism” (38). Shariati asks, “To which self should we return?” (“Return to Self” 38), and adds that before professing a return, we should determine not only to which self, but to which Islam, we seek to return:

Is it the one that we have now? The one that permeates the society as an unconscious repetition? Return to that is a futile effort and folks live and act based on that and have faith in that and it is absolutely useless[;] in fact, it is one of the causes for their recession and it is the cause of their traditionalism, ignorance, backwardness, and cults of personality. What there is now under the name of religion, hinders individuals not only from fulfilling their responsibility but also from being alive in the world.... It is this religion which every intellectual, with social insight, despises and shuns. (“Which Self?” 38-39)

It is in this light that the project of rereading Islam begins in post-coup Iran. The purpose of such a rereading is to revisit the religion and turn it into a means for decolonization and social awareness. According to Shariati, Islam must be transformed from a set of “doctrines[,] ... rituals, [and] actions” into “an ideology,” in order to create a “promethean miracle” (40) that would “turn social stasis into dynamism...and enable the religion and secular intellectuals alike to awaken the society” in order to start a revolution (41).

At this point there appears to be a divergence among the proponents of *A Return to Self*. Although they were not instrumentalizing Islam, Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad believed that Islam, as the most entrenched and widespread religion in Iran, could become a vessel for revolutionary anticolonialism. Such a notion did not appear in the work of Shayegan; even so, it is possible, even likely, that these three authors did agree on certain basic principles: the only way to save

Iranian culture from the rapid encroachment of modernization is to understand the philosophical roots of Enlightenment, reform Islam, re-interrogate tradition, and revive spirituality.

CONCLUSION

More than four decades after the coup, this study marks a look back at the intellectual project that led to the Islamic revolution and its aftermath. In a wider context, it examines the discourse of authenticity that took the Global South by storm. It is fair to say that the intellectual project was both misunderstood and abused; dictatorships in Africa, religious totalitarianism in the Middle East, sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria, and political oppression in Iran were ushered in under the banner of authenticity and decolonization. The discourse of *A Return to Self* encountered many pitfalls, including romanticization of tradition and violence, and misconceptions of and lashing out at modernity; however, as the third chapter of this study will demonstrate, romanticization is not always a nostalgic longing for an imaginary past. Romanticism and Romanticism should be distinguished, and the links between Romanticism and the opposition to the machinism of the Enlightenment and to capitalism should not be neglected.

There is still enormous potential that remains untapped. The postcolonial literature produced by such figures as Edward Said, Franz Fanon, and Shariati, to name only a few, has afforded the periphery of European modernity, both in the cultural and colonial senses, the opportunity to (re)assume a position towards the core. The problem in the case of Iran, as part of that periphery, is that fostering a home-made modernity, embedded in Iran's cultural tradition, will not be possible without a thorough interrogation of European modernity as the imposed Other of Iran. Such an interrogation should certainly also be accompanied by a reminder of the generally overlooked fact that the so-called "East" and "West" have always been

enmeshed in a cultural flux, through which both sides have shaped each other.¹³ In addition, attempts to define what the West and the East mean only reveals the tenuous and imaginary nature of these classifications. The West is “an amalgam of liberalism and fascism, democracy and dictatorship, development and underdevelopment, equality and inequality, emancipation and racism” (Mahdavi & Knight 5), and the East has a similar history of “difference and contradiction” (6). It is, therefore, untenable to regard the path of the West as the only possible path towards modernity.

For most of the 20th century, Iranians have dealt with modernity as a fashion trend (Jahanbagloo, *Fourth Wave* 60). Although state-of-the-art technology had permeated almost every aspect of Iranian life, the philosophical premises from which that technology ultimately stems were left unexamined, creating a society marked by positivist superficiality, social and cultural lethargy, and political despotism. Iranian society was, in Kamran Talattof’s words, a “modernoid”; Iranians found it “easier to imitate or adopt Western commercial, medical, industrial, and administrative models” (31) than to assimilate “the essential components of the ‘blueprint’ for modernity, such as a rational state system, an individual’s right to control his or her own body, and a dialogue about sexuality” (25).

These circumstances are slowly changing, however, especially in the wake of the progressive Green Movement in Iran that grew out of the protests against the results of the 2009 presidential elections. Iran is moving away from this superficial treatment of modernity and becoming part of a nexus in the Global South that does not imitate the West but bases its endeavors on a model of multiple or alternate modernities. What Iranian society may gain from this philosophical dialogue is yet to be determined, but it is apparent that the Iranian

¹³ For a review of the literature concerning Eastern influence on Western modernity, see Mannani 1-15.

intelligentsia are positioned at an extremely critical moment in history. The previously modern world is now enthralled in an age of postmodern doubt in which history, politics, ethics, and culture are at the interrogation table to confess to their secret ideological convictions. This creates a window of opportunity, a third way, for a complete reshaping of the political-cultural *ancien régime* of the world.

In *Westoxication*, Āl-e Ahmad raises a warning that has reverberated in the corridors of modern history. He proposes that technological and scientific advancement without the ability to discuss freedom and democracy has led to a “feverish crisis” in Iran (111). He adds that even if “the next morning we turn into Switzerland or Sweden or France or the United States, will we not arrive at the same problems that they have in the West?” (111). For Āl-e Ahmad, the “security and safeguarding of cities and museums and theatres has come at the price of taking away freedom in colonized and backward countries” (113). He understands that the intellectual and artistic history of Europe is fueled by a subteranean psychic revolt against machinism:

I think ... rebellion against the people and the law as well as all sorts of intellectual and actual cruelty are byproducts of the regimentation of people in front of machines. The main product is Western wares and the byproduct is them [;] and this regimentation is a prerequisite of the machine. The cause and the effect [are] together. Uniformity for the machine and being lined up in the factory and coming and going on time and a lifetime of humdrum jobs will become a secondary habit of all who deal with the machine. And a tertiary habit will be joining a party or a union, which would lead to uniformity in barracks. That is, at the war machine! What difference does it make? A machine is a machine. Only one makes a milk

bottle for a baby and the other pours out mortars for the young and the old. (113-14)

Āl-e Ahmad's concern is now a reality in the everyday life of Iranians. Iranian modernity is by no means an identical duplicate of its European counterpart; however, the ubiquitous presence of Western culture and modes of thought, both American and European, in Iran, through the culture industry, has created similar trends. This incongruity calls for an eclectic methodology that would borrow some concepts from critiques both within and outside of Europe.

This chapter has been an attempt to contribute to the literature that recognizes the need to pursue the unfinished project of *A Return to Self* as a critical and progressive movement that can illuminate the Third Way towards an indigenous modernity for Iran. My attempt in this chapter has been to show that *A Return to Self* should be clearly distinguished from nativism and eurocentrism, as it is neither regressive nor culturally essentialist. Further, this discourse is not hegemonically universalist or Eurocentric: it is not blind to the darker side of modernity and aware of the woes of capitalist exploitation and the alienation of the culture industry. This discourse is a call for a critical revisiting of tradition to retain what is still relevant, and also a call for an interrogation of modernity to adopt its progressive elements. As such, the discourse of *A Return to Self* is a reinvention of the Iranian self.

Chapter Two: “Through Romantic Cocoons”: Psychosis, Sarcasm, and Spirituality in Post-coup Iranian Fiction

In the murderer-infested street	در خیابان پر از قاتل
Not a single officer	یک نفر مامور پیدا نیست.
And a red light	با چراغ قرمزی
At the “Shah Intersection”	در سه راه شاه
(This absurd three-way/four-way)	(این سه راه چهار راه پوچ)
The roads are closed...!	راه ها بسته است...!

From “The Street” by Mohammad Ali Sepanlou

INTRODUCTION

After an attempt at theorizing the discourse of *A Return to Self* in the previous chapter, this chapter seeks to trace the elements of the discourse in post-coup Iranian fiction. The works to be examined in this dissertation are, and have been selected, based on varied manifestations of the discourse of *A Return to Self*, and this chapter offers a rereading of writers and works most amenable to interpretation from the anticolonial, critical counter-Enlightenment lens of the discourse of *A Return to Self*.

A brief glance at the history of Iranian fiction after the coup shows that the seven years after the coup were considered an initial period of disillusionment. As MirĀbedini notes, the coup destroyed the “hopes and dreams” of writers who lived in the 1940s, and, thus, these few years are characterized by a fading away of the “pre-coup excitement and optimism” and the emergence of a feeling of “absurdity and despair” (276). This mood of despair made the 1950s into a period of escapism and a commercialization phase of fiction in Iran. Pulp fiction, whose “invincible übermensch” protagonists would be propelled from one action scene to another in “twisted, incoherent” plots conveyed in “weak prose” (MirĀbedini 279), became the most widely read genre.

The movement of dissent against the Pahlavi dynasty’s top-down modernization emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, following the initial phase of disillusionment and despair of the 1950s

(Langroudi 2; MirĀbedini 406). These two decades witnessed an unprecedented flourishing; according to MirĀbedini, “moving farther from the coup is the beginning of exploration” (408), as the creative energy of intellectuals gradually breaks away from the journalism of the 1940s and 1950s and is allocated to “literary and artistic creativity” (408).

Iranian men and women of letters sought to negate the contrived identities that were imposed on them by the communist ideology of the Tudeh Party and the hollow shell of imported modernity. They turned their attention to the anxieties of the emerging middle class in the cities on the one hand, and the struggles of the impoverished, deeply religious rural population in small towns and villages on the other. The harmful effects of authoritarian modernization and urbanization, and the effects of the reconfiguration of the social structure to emulate that of the West, were prevalent themes in this period.

Despite, or perhaps also as a result of, the Shah’s reforms, the initial enchantment with Western culture faded and gave way to an “awakening and awareness” (MirĀbedini 403). This era is characterized by a complete detachment from Eurocentric views and a nostalgia for more traditional social configurations. Several novelists wrote about the simple, rural life of ordinary people as a way of rejecting the Shah’s authoritarian modernization. As MirĀbedini observes, the fiction produced between 1961 and 1979 aimed “to establish a conscious relation with reality and history” (406). After the initial infatuation of the constitutional revolution years and citizen-of-the-world trends in the 1940s, “dissent” became the overarching mood and “opposition against the pseudo-modernization of the Pahlavis led to the formation of a ‘return-to-self’ romantic trend....[and]...return to tradition and anti-modernism become the predominant notion among the intelligentsia” (406).

Despite MirĀbedini's characterization, I suggest that the discourse of *A Return to Self* was not a romantic trend as such. It is true that, in the case of fiction, the influence of the discourse of *A Return to Self*, represented by the search for a new identity, was extremely varied and, at times, replete with misconceptions, faulty generalizations, and unwarranted romanticizations. It is also true that many writers of the period failed in their quest to offer a breath of fresh air and transcend the modern/traditional binary. Some authors tried to emulate Soviet social realism, under the influence of the communist Tudeh Party. For example, Mahmoud Etemādzādeh (M.E. Behāzin) (1915-2006), produced the first instances of social realism, first with little success in the short-story collections *Parakandeh [Scattered]* (1944) and *Be Su-yeh Mardom [Toward the People]* (1948), and later with less bombast and superficiality in characterization in *Dokhtar-e Ra'yat [The Peasant Girl]* (1952) (MirĀbedini 237). His social realism draws its vitality from elevating folklore art and commenting on contemporary issues in allegorical form (MirĀbedini 436). Thus, every natural phenomenon in his stories takes on a renewed social significance: "A lonely and proud tree in a vast desert signifies steadfastness" or an arid desert symbolizes the country's "social wasteland" (332), against which Behāzin took up arms by attempting to inject social awareness into his readers. After the coup, he published the short-story collections *Naghsh-e Parand [Silk Design]* (1956), *Mohreh-ye Mār [Snake Stone]* (1965), and *Shahr-e Khoda [City of God]* (1970), echoing his struggle against political subservience and social despair. He is better known as a prominent translator, however, and has been lionized for his translations of Honoré de Balzac, Roman Roland, Shakespeare, Mikhail Sholokhov, and Goethe's *Faust* into Persian.

For others, including Bozorg Alavi and Mahmoud Dolatabadi, opposing modernization and Westoxication meant nostalgic romanticization of simple rural life (MirĀbedini 407).

Though these writers criticized city life and its harmful effects, their opposition was more an emotional response to the coup than a critically informed anticolonial commentary. Most of these works are characterized by a sentimental tendency toward “avoiding city life and a return to the village” (MirĀbedini 600).

The works of Ebrahim Rahbar frequently feature superficial diatribes against the city. His short-story collection, *Man Dar Tehranam* [*I Am in Tehran*], portrays characters who are exposed to various aspects of city life, its chaos, absurdity, emotional anguish, and loneliness among cement and iron walls (MirĀbedini 601). The stories in *I Am in Tehran* mostly revolve around lower-middle class characters who are exposed to the harsh, stressful, and gloomy urban setting of Tehran: a deafeningly loud, crowded, fast-paced city whose people seem stern and unsympathetic. The first-person narrator of “I Am in Tehran” and “The Bus,” for instance, delivers his/her observations from a seat on a bus moving through the busy streets and describes the interactions of the passengers who get on and off at every stop. Both stories begin and end with romantic descriptive passages that are more telling of the narrator’s mental anguish:

It’s quiet again. The sun is raging over my head. ... There is no wind. I wish there were wind. A wind and a massive, destructive storm that would scatter the earth into the sky, scramble everything, uproot the trees, and topple the buildings. What else would be the heart’s desire of a person like me, under these conditions, with this life, in this world that I am in? (Rahbar 32)

Rahbar’s narration begins with an objective description of ordinary events but abruptly ends in contrived diatribes that undermine the dramatic effect, which are added as responses to the prevalent air of dissent.

Reza Shah's policy of mandatory unveiling of women, and his son's social policies that encouraged women's social engagement, opened up a space in which female writers could imagine new horizons and create an identity that was, now, somewhat less overshadowed by patriarchy and religious dogma. Women writers such as Simin Daneshvar, Goli Taraghi, Mahshid Amirshahi, Shahrnoosh Parsipur, Mahin Bahrami, and Ghazaleh Alizadeh were among the most prominent writers of the period. Their "memoir-like" works were "portrayals of rich, inner" lives and a "reflection of their personal feelings and experiences," in which they lamented their constriction by "familial and societal expectations" and the dependence of their identities on their relationships to men (408-09). Hence, critique of modernization is only peripheral in their works and not an overarching theme. One notable work of fiction by a woman author who critiques modernization more directly than her peers is Shahrnosh Parsipur's *Women without Men*.

From a literary history viewpoint, the 1960s are characterized by an explosion in literary innovation accompanied by a departure from propagandist fiction and flat character types who exist only to give political sermons. Many writers understood and partook in this new departure, but very few managed to develop their own "unique and independent" voices (MirĀbedini 410). As Forough Farrokhzad noted, her generation had "set out without a light" trying to find its way "through romantic cocoons" and to choose their places based on their "personal" experience (qtd. In MirĀbedini 418).

Two literary nuclei that were mostly free from partisan ideological biases, romanticization, and escapism, and provided fresh outlooks on fiction, were Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad's immediate circle and the Isfahan School, both of which were characterized by the

implementation of various elements of literary modernism against the accepted and sanctioned traditionalist styles of fiction and poetry.

The immediate circle of writers, poets, and thinkers surrounding Āl-e Ahmad was the centre of a new philosophical, social, and political approach to fiction. The publication of Āl-e Ahmad's *Westoxication* in 1959 was a watershed moment in the history of Iranian literature, specifically fiction, to the extent that it has sometimes been described, not as a pamphlet or a book, but as a "manifesto" (*Zibakalam*). The authors who belonged to this circle included Simin Daneshvar (Āl-e Ahmad's wife), Gholamhosein Saedi, and Ebrahim Golestan. In *Nefrin-e Zamin* [*Curse of the Earth*] (1346), Āl-e Ahmad tried his hand at writing fiction that explicated his theory of Westoxication, while in *Suvashun* (1969), Daneshvar also depicted the anticolonial struggles of villagers in the 1940s in simple and straightforward prose. Daneshvar's novel is a masterpiece in Iranian literature, in which the protagonist Zari's feminine perspective is intertwined with her husband Yusof's anticolonial fervor and with the oppressive feudal social structure that existed in Iran in the 1940s. Although *Suvashun* is an important portrait of anticolonial sentiments among post-coup Iranian writers, it does not directly engage with post-coup city life, since the setting of the novel is rural Iran in the 1940s, or with the cultural and psychological struggles of the Iranian middle class with the consequences of modernization. Daneshvar's short-story collection *Shahri Chon Behesht* [*A City Like Heaven*] (1961), features in-depth psychological profiles of various characters from a feminine point of view and refers to the struggles of women, but in these stories as in her novel, the effects of the modernization of society, such as regimentation of workers, bureaucratization of institutions, or political oppression are not the central issues. Another friend and colleague of Āl-e Ahmad, Gholamhosein Saedi, produced fiction marked by deep psychosocial insights, critical

engagements with middle-class life, literary innovations, and commentaries on political oppression.

The Isfahan School was perhaps the most innovative movement to introduce literary modernism¹⁴ into Iranian fiction. Literary modernism, which originated in Europe and North America, encompasses a wide array of authors, subject matters, and ideological trends, making an all-encompassing definition difficult; it can, however, be depicted in two broad strokes: as a stylistic reaction to the era before it, which harbored realism and narrative authority (Childs 73-75); or as a philosophical reaction to modernity, industrialization, and capitalism (28). The literary modernism produced in Iran is, nevertheless, different in many ways from that of Europe and North America. The post-coup generation had unique social and literary interpretations of modernism that sought to engage with the “uncanny so as to transcend the norms of everyday life and the needs of ordinary people and reach an inner emancipation of sorts” (MirĀbedini 664). The mood of defeat after the coup was thus “remedied with a feeling of emancipation on the artistic, imaginary level.... [In fiction], a mystification of places and people prevents a historicization of the character of the age, and the struggles of realist writers is replaced by introversion and psychological analysis” (664). Sadegh Hedayat’s *Buf-e Kur* [*The Blind Owl*] is a precursor to such modernist fiction. The recoiling, paranoia, anxiety, and introversion that permeate Hedayat’s novella instilled a great anxiety of influence among later generations of writers. After the coup, the Isfahan School writers, such as Taghi Modarresi and Bahram Sadeghi, continued to publish in *Sadaf* [*Mother of Pearl*] and later in *Āyandegan* [*The Posterity*] and *Farhang-o Zendegi* [*Life and Culture*] magazines (MirĀbedini 668).

¹⁴ .As noted in Chapter 1, for the purposes of this study, *modernism* strictly refers to the literary school, not to an adherence to modernization.

The Shah's censorship regime was also very influential in establishing and enforcing the line between literary traditionalists and modernists. The SAVAK¹⁵ welcomed the establishment and operation of "moderate" literary magazines with "conservative outlooks" and "traditionalist literary societies" ("Jong-e Esfahān"). The first members of the Isfahan School began attending literary circles at Saeb Tabrizi's sepulchre. Extremely suspicious of any intellectual gathering not sanctioned by the state, the SAVAK claimed the meetings were "a 'cover' for non-literary activities" ("Jong-e Esfahān") and closely monitored, even hampered, their activities under various pretexts.

Despite the crackdown, the members of Isfahan School managed to publish eleven issues of their literary journal, *Jong-e Esfahan* [*The Isfahan Anthology*] between 1965 and 1973. The journal included works that had been mostly read during the meetings and which were rigorously critiqued and vetted by the members. They also included translations of other modernist works such as *The Erasers* by Alain Robbe Grillet, which is considered an important work of the *Nouveau Roman* movement (MirĀbedini 667). In fact, the weight of the movement of dissent against the Shah's cultural and social policies was on the shoulders of modernist writers, who were among the most vocal in their dissent against and opposition to the state's persecution of writers, curtailing of freedom of speech, and relentless censorship (Hillman 9).

Gholamhosein Saedi and Bahram Sadeghi were the most successful of each respective literary movement in experimenting with new fictional forms and conveying insightful social, political, and philosophical commentaries. Both MirĀbedini (325) and Mohammad Ali Sepanlou (115-18) discussed Saedi and Sadeghi as two novelists who, more conspicuously than others,

¹⁵ The Iranian secret police under the Shah.

criticized the vacuity in the lives of middle-class Iranians and the incongruity of the relentless modernization effort with cultural and political development.

According to Sepanlou, the misanthropy, abjection, and harsh realism that entered the literary scene with writers such as Sadegh Hedayat and Sadegh Choubak had become so fashionable that a separate movement seeking to “strike an equilibrium between ugliness and beauty” (*Iran’s Eminent Writers* 108) appeared in response. He mentions Āl-e Ahmad, Ebrahim Golestan, and Bahram Sadeghi as the most prominent writers who broke away from the nihilism and despair of the previous generation and produced a new literary style that was influenced by American, Russian, and European authors but was not a mere imitation of them (108-09).

Based on MirĀbedini and Sepanlou’s historical accounts, this chapter focuses on selected works of Gholamhosein Saedi, Bahram Sadeghi, and Shahrnush Parsipur. Although Ebrahim Golestan belongs to the same group, I prefer to engage with his films in my fourth chapter, as he is predominantly considered a filmmaker, and his most important work of fiction, *Asrar-e Ganj-e Darreh-ye Jenni* [*The Ghost Valley’s Treasure Mysteries*]¹⁶ is based on the film of the same title that was made in 1974. As for Parsipur, I propose that her literary avant-gardism is much more philosophically informed, though I do discuss *Women without Men* (1991)¹⁷ to show how the simple and seemingly facile plot of her novel conceals one of the most cogent critiques of instrumental rationality in Iranian literature.

GHOLAMHOSEIN SAEDI

Saedi’s fiction is characterized by “watching and expounding on poverty[:] inner and outer poverty” (Sepanlou 117). His stories take place in three distinct settings: first, the

¹⁶ I propose *The Mysteries of the Haunted Valley Treasure* as a more accurate translation.

¹⁷ Although the novella was published in 1991, Parsipur had written it one year before the revolution in 1978, which warrants its inclusion in the corpus of this study.

harbors of southern Iran, [in] arid and impoverished climates with local diseases and superstition. Secondly, in the villages of Azerbaijan, [amid] the clash of interests of small village groups, small and languid businesses, [and] minds captivated by illusions and defects...[and]...Thirdly, [in] the big city with its intellectuals, with its hospitals, its workers, and its jobless. The air that they all breathe is an air of poverty, insanity, and ignorance. (Sepanlou, *Iran's Eminent Writers* 117)

The modernization spree that was launched by Mohammad Reza Shah's father, Reza Shah, in the course of his reign (1926-1932) created a "bureaucratic centralization" (96) that led to the emergence of the civil servant class who, in a few years, "totally comprised the urban population" (Modaressi, qtd. in Sepanlou 96). Saedi's stories of city life focus on this newly emerged class "grappling with their deviations, miseries, and frustrations" (96-97).

Saedi was born in Tabriz on 5 January 1936 and died in Paris on 23 November 1985. His first short story appeared in *Sokhan* magazine in 1956, while he was a medical student in Tabriz. After moving to Tehran to complete a five-year internship in psychiatry, he opened a small clinic with his brother, also a physician, during which time he wrote prolifically and "came to critical notice" ("SA'EDI, Gholam-Hosayn"). He was also involved in political activism from an early age and, once in Tehran, was a "vocal opponent" of the state and "the ersatz Western culture that it promulgated and imposed upon the populace ("SA'EDI, Gholam-Hosayn").

After the 1979 revolution and the regime of oppression and censorship, this time in the name of Islam, Iranian writers soon realized how misplaced their hopes had been in what the Islamists referred to as the Islamic Republic. Saedi was among those who first experienced that bitter truth as, like many other Iranian intellectuals, he was forced into exile, in his case to

France. In an autobiographical piece written for *Alefba* [*The Alphabet*], a literary magazine he published in Paris, Saedi recounts the story of his escape. He recalls that the Islamic Republic first reacted to his writing with “threatening phone calls” (3), which escalated to the point of forcing him into hiding. He lived in a “semi-secret life in an attic” (3) while regularly meeting other dissidents and publishing in underground journals. In the meantime, the state’s security forces were looking everywhere for him. They even summoned his old father and advised that his son “had better turn himself in!” (4).

His hiding place was eventually exposed. The SAVAK raided the attic, but his neighbor tipped him off and he escaped through the roof. In an attempt to change his appearance, his friends shaved his head and his mustache. He spent the next six to seven months moving from one hiding place to another. During this time, he lived “in total darkness” with the blinds “always closed” (4). He did not stop writing, however; he wrote “more than a thousand pages of short stories” (4). Government agents “constantly threatened” his father and eventually arrested his brother (4). His friends finally convinced him to leave and arranged for his escape. He crossed the border into Pakistan “through the mountains and the valleys with tearstained eyes and tremendous anger” (4). He sought asylum in France and moved to Paris, where he spent the last three years of his life.

At the time of writing his autobiography, he had been residing in Paris for two years. He described his time in Paris as follows:

I feel as if I have been torn from my roots. Nothing is real. I see all Parisian buildings as theatre décor. I feel as if I am living in a postcard. I am scared of two things: sleeping and waking up...During those few hours of sleep I have colorful nightmares. I incessantly think about my homeland. In solitude, I repeat the

names of Iranian streets and alleys to make sure I have not forgotten them. I have completely lost my sense of belonging...During this time, I have not once had a dream about Paris. I constantly have dreams about my homeland. I decided several times to return through any way possible, but my friends stopped me. I reject everything. Out of stubbornness, I refused to learn French. I think it is a defense mechanism. Being abroad is the worst kind of torture...The only thing that is stopping me from committing suicide is writing. (4-5)

This mood of despair and abjection is a very common feature of Saedi's fiction before the revolution. His characters live on the edge of nightmarish dreams and unbearable reality, with their only defense mechanism to escape from the harsh realities of life under dictatorship and fast-paced modernization into a world of dream that eventually leads to paranoia and psychosis.

Saedi was very close with Āl-e Ahmad; they spent "almost all days and nights together" (Saedi, "Saedi on Saedi" 25). He was greatly influenced by Āl-Ahmad and his "travelogues and anthropological writings" (Dastgheib). "The emotional bond between the two was deep" (Ashouri, "With Saedi" 157), so deep that Āl-e Ahmad had become his "spiritual anchor..., [and] as a result, Āl-e Ahmad's death was a huge blow to him. He never forgot Jalāl's memory and ... even during his hallucinations before death in the hospital, he [Saedi] was uttering his [Āl-e Ahmad's] name" (157). Āl-e Ahmad was fond of Saedi too. In an article of praise for Saedi, he had declared that "if in the world of writing bequeathing mantles had been customary, and I had been worthy of one, I would have placed my mantle on Saedi's shoulders" (qtd. in Ashouri, "With Saedi" 157). In short, Saedi's fiction reflects the "preoccupation with Westoxication, which he had learned from Āl-e Ahmad, and the identity anxiety that had

emerged among Iranians throughout the years of rapid economic and industrial advancement” (Karimi-Hakkak, “Saedi’s Works”).

Sadeghi’s and Saedi’s training as physicians seems to underlie the verisimilitude in the psychological profiles of their characters. However, in terms of the discourse of *A Return to Self*, Saedi’s fiction aims to represent the violent effects of rapid modernization on the psyches of middle-class Iranians. His realism is enhanced by unreal elements and the externalization of psychic maladies.

Sadeghi, on the other hand, assumes a playful and satirical position, challenging common narrative traditions of realism by experimenting with point of view. His short story “Tasirat-e Motaghabel [Mutual Effects]”¹⁸ is an example of his antipathy toward the “preoccupations and aspirations of the petit-bourgeoisie ... [as well as] their addiction to imported goods and the pathological games they play with trending baubles” (Sepanlou 116). MirĀbedini notes that in Saedi’s prose, “Sadeghi’s satire is replaced by wistfulness and rage. To depict the psycho-social effects of the violence exerted on ordinary people, Saedi trespasses the borders of realism and arrives at a sort of surrealism (or fantasia-realism)” (325-26), which many consider an instance of magical realism before Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Masjedi; Nazemian et al.; Pournamdarian and Seyedi).

Saedi’s externalization of the violence wrought by modernity, and his honest portrayal of the ignorance and superstition of village people, lead readers to claim that he does not have any romantic delusions about rural life. Like Sadeghi, he encountered various aspects of modern life in Iran with a subtle satire akin to that of Jonathan Swift in English literature; however, his most significant achievement is representing the violence of modernization through psychological

¹⁸ This story appears in the collection *The Trench and the Empty Canteens*, first published in 1970.

portraits and magical realism. These artistic portrayals of psychological disorders are very important to a philosophical approach to his fiction.

In “My Father’s Dreams,” for instance, we witness an average bookkeeper’s downward spiral into paranoia and projecting of the state’s violence unto his family. Upon finding a discrepancy in his books, the father begins to suspect that the numbers are switching places when he is not looking:

--Everything changes in these books.¹⁹

--What changes?

--The numbers! What else?

--How do they change?

--They all walk like ants. They blend. They’re pulling my leg.

--That’s not possible, Dad.

--Of course it is! I saw it with my own eyes. A few fours and nines and fives quickly switched places. (Saedi, *Majestic Soiree* 45)

There are numerous instances of psychological revolt and nightmarish incidents in the otherwise realistic style of the story. For example, the son, tired of the tensions at home, walks into the guest room, where he sees a picture of his father’s days of youth and glory on the wall. The picture comes to life in the frame and begins to transfigure:

Deep wrinkles appear on both sides of his mouth. His hair becomes disheveled and his face starts to frown. His face crumples. His cheeks become punctured. His shoulders! His shoulders go up, his mouth opens and suddenly he starts to puke. I

¹⁹. Translations of Saedi’s works are mine unless otherwise stated.

feel a sudden surge of panic in my stomach. I try to get up. I smell a dampness and immediately after that my father's screams come out of the living room. (45)

At the end of the story, the father, who has gone completely insane, walks into the kitchen and starts imploring to his son:

My lord! I beseech you to hear my last defense. I am but a wretched clerk, who has selflessly devoted his entire life to bookkeeping at this organization. God knows that I have not broken a single law to this very day. I had never set foot in these sorts of places before. I have lived with absolute honor and do not have the faintest idea how I ground up in this quagmire.

I imploringly request that you let me go. Don't let my reputation be tarnished among the public. Please do not hand over my name to the media. I am miserable and always have been, but I have never been dishonored. Please do not dishonor me. I beg of you. Please tend to my case.

He is trying to cling to my legs, but I pick him up and my authoritative voice echoes in the room:

--Thy only crime is that thou do not follow my orders.

--How dare I? I will follow whatever you order, word for word.

--If that is so, then thou shalt retire to thy chamber without delay, take an aspirin, and peacefully slumber. (50-51)

The imagery of the cuckoo clock as opposed to the rooster at the end of the short story is key in Saedi's critique of modernization:

The alarm clock chimes twelve times. Its cuckoo opens and closes its beak twelve times. The voice of the neighbors' rooster blends with the sound of clock's cuckoo. (51)

The last line of the story is:

My father exits the room repeatedly saying "Absolutely! Absolutely!" I sneak into the room a few moments later. His snoring can be heard from the living room and also the voice of a rooster that I cannot quite locate. (51)

The sound of the rooster as opposed to the man-made cuckoo clock is telling. Even though this story was written a few years after the 1953 coup, its critique of bureaucratized life in Iran still holds true.

Saedi's fiction contains many, if not all, elements of magical realism. Pournamdarian and Seyedan identify two reasons for Saedi's interest and utilization of magical realism: first, "his attention to the psychology of his characters, especially in creating psychotic characters, who, as a result of social upheaval, suffer from mental states such as illusion and hallucination" (50); and second, his travels across Iran, with Āl-e Ahmad, to provinces such as "Azerbaijan and the Southern shores and his acquaintance with the people and the mysteries" (51).

With regard to Saedi's depiction of psychological resistance to modernization, I suggest that the label of "social upheaval" (Pournamdarian and Seyedan 50) is too vague and facile; instead, I seek to examine the psychological and philosophical roots of the discontent in Saedi's characters. As noted earlier, Saedi's training as a physician, and later as a psychiatry resident, is quite discernable in his stories. Almost all of his short stories feature an air of psychosis, paranoia, or neurosis engulfing the characters, for which the entire political establishment and

sometimes the social order—for example, the state’s oppression apparatus, the bureaucratic hierarchy, or the cultural belief system—is indirectly culpable.

In “Shab-neshini-ye Bā-shokuh [The Majestic Soiree],” for instance, a story from the collection of the same title, a group of government civil servants and their managers are gathered by the mayor to celebrate the recently retired employees of “the municipality ... the culture, ... tobacco, ... sugar, ... post, ... the deceased, ... civil registration, ... the treasury, and other bureaus” (9), on a rainy night in a dilapidated auditorium. The story combines a chronological report of the various stages of the program with the various stages of the heavy rain slowly turning into a thunderstorm.

Like almost all of Saedi’s short stories, “The Majestic Soiree” contains elements of both satire and fantasy. The satirical effect is produced by the dry, bureaucratic language of the speakers. Readers of Persian immediately notice that the unimaginative formal language and the bombastic choice of words are akin to that of the language of government officials of the same era; the bureaucratese is even discernable in the title of the short story. The satirical effect is produced as the reader gradually comes to the realization that, in fact, the meeting is neither majestic nor even a soiree. On the other hand, the thunderstorm functions as a metaphor for the psychological state of the characters and the general mood of anxiety and despair.

Like “My Father’s Dreams,” the fantastical element serves as a metaphor for the effects of bureaucratization and regimentation (to use Āl-e Ahmad’s term) on the Iranian middle class. In “My Father’s Dreams,” that effect is achieved by depicting the paranoia of the main character, who believes that numbers are conspiring to sabotage his bookkeeping. Mr. Lakpour’s story has the same effect: Lakpour, a recently retired employee of the Bureau of the Deceased, tells the audience that his job involved receiving birth certificates of the dead from graveyard employees

and entering their names and dates of death into the books. He recalls that one day, the graveyard employee handed him twelve birth certificates; when he opened the first one, he saw his own name:

You know what I saw gentlemen? The name on the certificate was Mohammad Ali Lakpour. I was absolutely transfixed. I was alive and yet was supposed to nullify my own birth certificate with my own very hands. I paused for a moment and opened the next one, and you know what I saw dear attendees? Mohammad Ali Lakpour. The third one, Mohammad Ali Lakpour. The fourth one, Mohammad Ali Lakpour. The fifth one, Mohammad Ali Lakpour. All twelve were Lakpour. I raised my head and, from the corner of my eye, looked at the graveyard employee.

--“What are these?”

--“Yesterday’s dead people.”

--“Twelve?”

--“Yes.”

--“What are their names?”

--“It’s in there.”

--“All men?”

He paused for a moment and said,

“I think three were women.”

I said, “But these are all men.”

He said, “Whatever’s in there. I can’t read. Maybe they were men.” (23-24)

The audience finds the story extremely funny and loudly applauds Lakpour. By the end, when he tries to talk about how “miserable and wretched” (26) the life of a civil servant is, the manager stops him with a kick on the shin from under the table.

In this story, Saedi depicts the frame of mind that such bureaucratic modernization results in. The soiree begins with the mayor’s long and upbeat speech on scientific progress and nationalism, insisting that “today’s world is a world of science” (10). He adds, via contrived bureaucratese metaphors, that “science and art are shining bright over the whole world like the Sun and have slaked everywhere like spring rain” (10). Despite his pairing of science and art, the reader immediately notices that art has no place in the mayor’s discourse. He refers to flight and sea travel and lauds “men of science and action” as the real forces that “turn the country’s wheels” (10). He refers to the newly retired among the audience as “great scientists” who “from dawn to dusk, are in file rooms doing paperwork that pertains to construction and regional development and spiritual progress” (11). As he continues, the reader notices that his speech is taking a turn towards an appalling, yet amusing, idiocy:

The spiritual value of a street sweeper is not any less than that of a scientist, who is mass-murdering dangerous and harmful germs in a lab, for if the street sweeper stops cleaning the streets, the germs will grow in number and will attack the scientist too.... I know clerks so devoted to serving their country that they lost their minds and eventually gave their lives for our beloved homeland. (“Soiree” 11)

This passage reflects both the entrenched instrumental rationality and the hollowness of the political establishment. Saedi aims for a comic effect by displaying the mayor’s shockingly

simplistic view of science. Such a lack of rudimentary knowledge of scientific and technological concepts can enslave a society, which is a core argument in Āl-e Ahmad's *Westoxication*.

Characters like the mayor in this story appear frequently in Saedi's work as advocates of modernization, progress, science, and technology. The technotopian future that the mayor envisions for the country is stretched to the extent of reducing the employees to mere statistics and boastfully envisioning how much the newly retired employees can contribute to society by bearing new offspring to fuel future progress (14).

On the other hand, the psychic revolt with which Saedi's characters grapple, tears the veil between dream and reality and gives his work a distinctive narrative style. In addition to the father of the family in "My Father's Dreams" and Mohammad Ali Lakpour in "The Majestic Soiree," we witness instances of these disorders in "Umbrella," "The Bureau of the Deceased," and "Resignation Letter."

In "Umbrella," Mr. Hasani, a clerk in the Civil Registration Organization, has a strange feeling that something is not right within him. He has morbid thoughts and feels that an "invisible animal" (28) circles him as he leaves the office. He also remembers that, in the dark, dingy, dusty, and narrow staircase, something or someone "had grabbed his umbrella and had not let it go" (28). As he is walking around the city to run some errands, he suddenly notices that his umbrella is gone. He is beaten down by the heavy rain and has to walk through the torrents on the asphalt, carrying several packages and plastic bags. When he finally arrives home, his wife opens the door and notices his disheveled and tired look:

--"Oh my god! What happened? Why are you looking like this?"

-- "Aren't the lights on?"

--"It's an outage. What happened? Did you fall?"

...

--“I couldn’t find a cab. Nobody stopped for me. I’m dying. I walked the whole way. The rain punished me. My umbrella is gone! Stolen! I was beaten down by the rain. I’m covered in mud. I got soaked! I am exhausted! Oh, I am so wretched!” And tears filled his eyes.

But his wife, without saying anything, walked up to him and held up the lantern and moved the packages around. The umbrella appeared on Mr. Hasani’s arm. (Saedi 33-34)

The umbrella is a highly personal symbol for Saedi that appears in several of his short stories, serving as an emotional haven for his characters as they shield themselves from the harshness of the outside world. Perhaps the most prominent example of the symbolism of the umbrella occurs in “The Bureau of the Deceased,” when the narrator advises the uncle of an incoming employee to give his nephew his umbrella:

In the first few days, he might decide to leave the office, and for a clerk, an umbrella is a necessity. It will always prove useful. Although I never leave this place, I still have mine and hide under it whenever I am overwhelmed with fear.

An umbrella shelters one, separates him from the outside, from others. An

umbrella is a small black sky that holds one in its dark womb. (Saedi 86)

Various characters, all of whom are middle-aged clerks, experience fear, anxiety, paranoia, and psychosis in different forms, but why do they suffer such abjectness and misery? As Dariush Ashouri notes, Saedi was among the generation of authors who were working “under the ever-increasing pressure of censorship” (155), which gave rise to a “cryptic diction in the 1960s and Saedi became the pioneer of that diction” (156). Ashouri’s historical insight explains why, in

Saedi's fiction, characters rarely voice their grievances about their lives and the general political or economic conditions. His attempt to avoid being singled out by censors has its benefits as well: Saedi's stories become more dramatically effective because he must resort to irony and satire to convey his message. "The Majestic Soiree" and "The Bureau of the Deceased" provide two such examples of these evasive manoeuvres, as demonstrated by Mr. Lakpour's addendum in "The Majestic Soiree" to his surreal story that made his audience laugh:

Soon, there will be another service in our memory, where there will be no laughter and storytelling. I believe that I should live as long as I am alive, in spite of what the haters and the naysayers might say: That this wretched and miserable life, indeed wretched and miserable....

The manager slowly kicked Lakpour in the shin. Lakpour turned around and looked at him and went mute. A few people gave out a bitter scoff from the back rows. Lakpour returned to his seat. (Saedi 26)

Lakpour's unfinished sentence hints at the idea that the Shah's censorship regime would have deleted it if it had continued. Circumvention of censorship is present in a less comic manner in "The Bureau of the Deceased," as the narrator, a clerk of the bureau, writes a letter to his cousin, whose son will be working at the bureau. As with many of the stories in this collection, the style is marked by typical Persian bureaucratise, full of bombastic vocabulary and inflated phrases that foreground the hollow pretensions of the Iranian petit-bourgeoisie:

My Dear cousin,

Your letter bestowed the glory of its arrival. My pilgrimage of your sacred handwriting, after so many years, was a defining moment for me. Learning that someone is still thinking of me, the forgotten one, stirred a strange feeling. For a

moment, I thought it is not the others who have forgotten me; it is I who have forgotten myself. But how did this happen? There is no clear explanation. (Saedi 83)

The question of how this happened is, of course, rhetorical, as the narrator's alienation was very well lamented, if not theorized, by the anticolonial and leftist intellectuals of the time. As the story progresses, we realize that although the narrator is encouraging his cousin to send his son to work there, he cautions that some things should be kept from him for the time being:

Our bureau was a derelict building and we were four clerks, three of which have shuffled off their mortal coils, and I am left here alone.... Life here does not require any superfluous ornamentations. I rarely leave the office...I abhor the outside, the prairies, the squares, and all the places where one cannot find a hiding place.... Every morning, I find myself somewhere new. One day, I wake up on the files, one day, on the desk, and another day, on my chair.... Another benefit of living here is not being bothered by calm and carefree people.... There is, therefore, no reason for me to leave here. I mean, what is out there that could be of interest? ...When I was younger, I used to make paper flowers during my leisure time and would then set up a table outside the door around sunset. But who buys paper flowers from the Bureau of the Deceased? I have wound down now. Instead, a strange dreamy state has enthralled and infatuated me. I have the trance of an opiate, without having taken any. Yes, my dear cousin, I have no place in the world of the living. I am at the Bureau of the Deceased. I am deceased.

My request is for you not to tell your dear offspring. He is still young and might not have the courage to embark on this undertaking. But I am certain that

he will get accustomed to it soon enough.... Later, when he would have surrendered to it, he will gain a strange sense of tranquility. Studying and knowledge is of no use either. Explain to him that there is no bright future. It is only continuity and repetition that makes a man. (Saedi 84-86)

Towards the end of the story, the narrator vaguely voices his dissatisfaction with the pointlessness of education. But, as with almost all of Saedi's stories, the characters do not express any grand political or ideological views or any criticism of the sociopolitical conditions they endure. However, when read alongside each other, Saedi's stories offer sharp critiques of social policies and political ideologies that have led to the Iranian middle class adopting such vacuous lifestyles.

In addition to indirect hints in the monologues and interactions, almost all of Saedi's short stories are characterized by a general mood of melancholy, conveyed through vague descriptions of scenes, gloomy weather, and an overall lack of light. For instance, in "The Majestic Soiree," the thunderstorm becomes more severe as the story progresses and, by the end, the water creates a "small torrent running in through the window panes" (26) and turns the auditorium into "a swamp" (26). In "Umbrella," the story starts with "heavy and lowering skies" and "thick and dirty cloud" covering it (27). The weather descriptions are interspersed with a psychological profile of Mr. Hasani:

A cold gust was blowing. It was clear that it had started raining at a far distance. The traffic policeman was wearing a worn-out raincoat, the cars were in a hurry, and some people had taken shelter under an awning as if it lead was falling down from the sky. (27)

A similar pattern exists in “Incident Because of Children”: four clerks who have learned that their “branch is on the brink of disintegration and closing down” (53) take out their stress on each other by arguing over whose children are more successful in school. Outside, there is a heavy snowstorm, which gets worse amid the escalating arguments among the four officemates:

Everything was chaotic. The snowstorm was shaking the windows, the wind was going through every nook and cranny, and the fire from the heater would stick out its tongue every few seconds and lick the air in the room. (Saedi 58-59)

The culmination of Saedi’s use of setting to convey the zeitgeist of his times is in “Sealed Fate” from *The Majestic Soiree*. Here, despite a sunny day, Saedi manages to convey subtly the general mood of the story, which is consistent with the mood of the other stories in the collection:

Like a furnace on the verge of going out, the Sun is selflessly giving its cold and pale light to our planet. But, alas, by the time this little gift passes through the dull and frozen layers of the atmosphere and reaches its destination, it is paler, colder, and palsier. Nonetheless, when it enters the Treasury’s Fourth Branch of the Bureau of Accounting, through its round windows, it warms Mr. Telischi’s hands, which are imploringly spread over the desk.... Mr. Ashkriz is sitting in the shade and is watching from behind his dark glasses. Mr. Ashkriz does not understand what warmth is. He rubs his numb hands against each other and thinks that the world is freezing over and imploding. (Saedi 87)

For Saedi, the violence of nature is a metaphor for the hardship his characters experience in life and the violence of modernity. He uses bad weather as a metaphor for the general mood of melancholy and despair that is brought about by political, social, and economic conditions. His characters know that something is not right, but they cannot precisely identify it. They admit,

time and again, that their lives are meaningless and their futures bleak, but no one is able to identify the cause. This ambiguity, I suggest, should not be entirely ascribed to Saedi's attempt to evade censorship. It is true that in order to escape censorship and prosecution, Saedi had to avoid directly criticizing the state's social policies, but the ambiguity is a literary device that, when combined with his magical realism, makes his fiction unique in Iranian literature.

One thread that connects all of Saedi's works is his resentment of the Iranian court's social and political policies on the one hand, and his disdain for the superstition that resides at the root of all religious and cultural beliefs on the other. His novels *Fear and Trembling* (1967), and *The Mourners of Bayal* (1964) demonstrate his disdain for religious superstition.

Based on these examples, I suggest that Saedi's depiction of city life is meant to externalize the violence of modernization. For instance, the ten consequences of machinism that Shariati identifies, including bureaucratization, psychological crisis, elimination of diversity, and income inequality, are present, in various degrees, in Saedi's work. His characters live in an extremely bureaucratized system whose humdrum jobs and low wages have chased away their hope and led to various psychological disorders.

On the other hand, as Ashouri notes, like Āl-e Ahmad, Saedi was concerned about how machinism and modern life were "disintegrating traditional life and uprooting people" but at the same time "could not bear the sight of people living in poverty and wretchedness and ignorance and unsanitary conditions and backwardness" ("With Saedi" 158). In that regard, Saedi was perhaps the closest literary affiliate of the discourse of *A Return to Self*, for he did not embrace the imported modernization or fall back on religious superstition and cultural essentialism. He belonged to a generation under what Ashouri refers to as "*assimeh-gi*," which is the equivalent of "angoisse [anxiety] in French[,] ... an incessant innominate phobia" (155).

This anxiety was a defining trait of writers and intellectuals who were blinded neither by the nativist ideology of Islamism nor by the dogmatism of orthodox Marxism in Iran. Saedi was certainly an important member of this group; his defiance towards rubrics has led to him being misrepresented, dismissed, and marginalized by ideological discourses that continue to shape literary historicism. There are, therefore, very few serious studies that have interpreted his work and even fewer that have tried to place him on a discursive map in Iranian literature. This study has attempted to address both of these issues as much as possible. His work is much more progressive than current literary critics and historians are willing to admit and deserves to be studied with less ideological fervor and more academic objectivity.

BAHRAM SADEGHI

Despite his small number of works and his early death at the age of 50, Sadeghi is considered one of the most prominent fiction writers of contemporary Iran. Like Saedi, he was a physician by profession and published his short stories in literary magazines, mostly in *Sokhan*, *Sadaf*, and *Keyhan Weekly* (*Special Issue on Sadeghi*). He has written numerous short stories, the most recognized of which were collected in the anthology *Sangar va Ghomghome-haye Khali* [*The Trench and the Empty Canteens*] (1970).

Like that of Saedi, Sadeghi's fiction is a critical portrait of rapid modernization and its effects on the Iranian middle-class. He too uses irony, satire, and fantasy to paint a picture of life in post-coup Iran. However, unlike Saedi's works, Sadeghi's fiction uses complex narratological techniques. At times, the omniscient narrator stops the flow of the plot and negotiates the elements of the story with the reader. He combines the "playfulness" of, for example, Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* with the "irrealism" of Joyce and Nabokov to achieve a satirical effect (Nafisi) that is unique to Iranian fiction, even among modernist writers.

In Sadeghi's fiction, we witness elements of *Nouveau Roman*, which typically rejects traditional elements of the novel in favor of "stream of consciousness." Sadeghi's characters, however, are predominantly from the petit-bourgeoisie, who draw their identity from romanticizing pre-Islamic Iran and the so-called Aryan Race on the one hand and emulating Western lifestyle as a fashion statement on the other. Sadeghi satirizes this hollowness by creating a character such as Mr. Kamboujeh, a clerk living in Tehran, who pretends to be an intellectual, but is unable to focus on a singular subject for too long:

Mr. Kamboujeh turned from one side to the other on his squealing traveller's bed and opened his dreamy eyes...He stared at the ceiling for some time and it took him a while to realize that it was no use.... He stuck his head under the blanket and thought: "We'll think, then." A few minutes passed, and nothing came to his mind. He thought, "how about I think about moving and fixed stars?" and replied, "It's great." And then these brief negotiations crossed his mind:

--fixed and moving stars?

--yes...

--Yes, indeed, some stars are fixed, meaning they do not move and some stars are moving, meaning they move.

One or two more minutes passed, and Mr. Kamboujeh was still trying to find something to think about: "Oh, I got it! I'll think about God." And thought, "God ... alright, God, God is great... indeed, and some believe that instead of God, one should say nature. Very well, we'll say nature."

...

--Mr. Kamboujeh, your opinion about ... about ...

--Supertankers?

--Well done! Well done! What is your opinion about supertankers?

...

--I really have no opinion in this regard. (Sadeghi 66)

This passage is taken from “The Trench and the Empty Canteens,” from the collection of the same name and first published in *Sokhan* magazine in May of 1958. It is exemplary of Sadeghi’s unique style; his rejection of the traditional elements of a story produces a satirical effect that in turn serves to foreground the vacuity of culturally alienated Iranians.

“The Trench and the Empty Canteens” is organized into two parts, titled “Birth Certificates”: The first birth certificate describes a morning in the life of Mr. Kamboujeh,²⁰ a clerk, whose last name and father’s name is covered by “the stamp of the Bureau of Sugar” (Sadeghi 65) and, therefore, illegible. Sadeghi portrays the alienation of the average clerk in a big city like Tehran by drawing the reader’s attention to his loss of identity. Both Mr. Kamboujeh and Miss Sakineh have lost their identities. Their last names are rendered illegible by a stamp from a bureaucratic organization:

First Birth Certificate

Mr. Kamboujeh with the surname... Son of... was born on the 18th of 1290 A.H. in the city of... (Unfortunately, over those spaces, where his surname and place of birth are written, intentionally or unintentionally, the seal of the Bureau of Sugar is stamped. In other words, it could be said that they are all illegible.)

...

Second Birth Certificate

²⁰ Kambujiya, or Cambyses in English, is the name of two ancient Persian emperors of the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BC).

Miss Sakineh, surname (stamp of the Sugar Bureau) daughter of (stamp of the Sugar Bureau) was born on the 19th day of Bahman of 1300 A. H. in the city of (stamp of the Sugar Bureau). (Sadeghi 65-73).

Alienation is a dominant theme in both Shariati's and Āl-e Ahmad's works. Shariati uses both a transliteration of the French equivalent of the concept, *aliénation*, and its Persian equivalent, *maskh*. However, for Shariati, alienation or *maskh* goes beyond the orthodox Marxist concept of the alienation of the worker from the work, to take on a cultural meaning that refers both to Eurocentrism, or what Āl-e Ahmad refers to as Westoxication, and rigid, religious dogma and superstition.

Shariati also examines cultural alienation (*Which Self?* 91), which he considers the most detrimental type of alienation. For him, alienation occurs when modernization is imported from Europe without a grasp of its philosophical aspects. He refers to modernization without its cultural and philosophical implications as *Tajaddod*, which means "imported from abroad like a commodity" ("Which Self?" 49), and which leads to cultural alienation. Like Sadeghi, Shariati is concerned with the manifestation of cultural alienation among common Iranian character types. For instance, he provides an archetypal depiction of a very traditional Iranian shopkeeper, who sits all day in a small "damp, shabby shop with peeled off walls and a wobbly little desk" ("which Self?" 122). His clothing and appearance include "signs of religious devotion: a shaved head and a dirty cashmere handkerchief and a four-season chasuble ... with his white pajama strings always hanging and a pair of summer shoes and no socks and rosary beads between henna-colored fingers" (122). However, this old-fashioned man and his traditional family go on a trip to America and become modern overnight:

[He now has] furnished his living room with the most expensive stainless steel, Louis XVI armchairs and Italian curtains and French stainless-steel décor and has completely changed his appearance too and has attended Iran-America classes for a few months Now both he and his house look like exhibitions of *Today's World's*²¹ wiles. (123)

Unlike Shariati, who takes a derogatory tone toward petit-bourgeois pretensions, Sadeghi uses satire to address this problem. For example, he describes Miss Sakineh, a young woman from a nouveau riche family, as overly obsessed with her appearance:

A Night in the Life of Miss Sakineh:

7:00 o'clock—Miss Sakineh passed by the mirror in a cranky mood and approached her mother while holding the ribbon in her hand. ...

--Mom, since early this evening I've been trying to style my hair like a ponytail. But since I am doing it by myself and tie it too loosely, every time the ponytail is sprawled like that of a battle-weary horse instead of sticking up like that of an unruly horse. I want you to help me....

8:00 o'clock – With a stuck up ponytail, Miss Sakineh, while trying not to move her head, sat on a Polish chair and picked up a *Ladies of the Future* magazine and held it right in front of her head to read it, but since she was not in the mood (a few days earlier, she had written in her diary: “I am not made for reading”), began turning the pages, sporadically reading snippets from each page. (Sadeghi, “Empty Canteens” 73-74).

²¹. *Donya-ye Emrooz* [*Today's World*] was a lifestyle magazine of the time, similar to the North American magazines *People* or *Hello Canada!*

The title *Ladies of the Future* is an allusion to *Zan-e Ruz (Woman of the Times)*, a weekly lifestyle magazine founded in the early 1960s by Majid Davami, who had just returned from the United States with a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University and an idea for a magazine (Behnoud). He started publishing the magazine in 1965 as Editor in Chief. Under his supervision, *Woman of the Times* became Iran's most circulated magazine of the era (Behnoud).

Among dissident intellectuals and Islamists, *Woman of the Times* was a symbol of everything wrong with the Shah's social policies regarding women. Clerics rejected it as spreading "decadent Western culture" and corrupting Iranian women (Behnoud). However, for Shariati and others, the unbridled consumerism and the cultural alienation that the magazine propagated were reprehensible symbols of Westoxication and cultural imperialism.

Shariati, for instance, saw *Woman of the Times* in an anticolonial light. He criticized the Iranian middle class for being followers, "yesterday, followers of ayatollahs and today, followers of celebrities" ("Which Self?" 124). For him, neither religious dogma nor superficial modernization were desirable. However, like Saedi and Sadeghi, Shariati allocated the bulk of his energy to critiquing the pretensions of the middle-class in Iran, as opposed to religious dogma, for at the time, the Westoxication of the middle class seemed a more urgent matter. He described the Iranian middle class as follows:

Their worldview and the battleground of their intellectual and social life is strife over chador and miniskirt, car models, home décor, style of buildings, fashion, cosmetics and nauseating mimicked sashays and being modern and novel in the quality of eating and recreation and entertainment and superficial and idiotic customs.... The method of changing the old to the new is a lightening fast and ostensible, at the level of consumption, ornamentation, and everyday life. Under

the guidance of *Woman of the Times*, a woman is taken to Christian Dior and as she emerges a few hours later, she is completely European from head to toe....

This rapid modernization and wondrous progress have only two prerequisites:

Being stupid and uncultured and being well-off. (124-25)

Judged by today's standards, Shariati's writing lacks proper punctuation and is full of redundancies, and at times, his fiery oration borders on offensive and sexist language. However, his writing was a product of his time. As Hamid Dabashi points out, Shariati "entered the Iranian ideological scene more like an unexpected thunder than a forecasted rain, thus giving his writings a certain emotional immediacy, a certain urgency of purpose" (104). Shariati's hurried and slipshod writing style reflects the atmosphere of post-coup Iran and his feeling of urgency to commit his thoughts to paper as soon as possible before everything was lost.

Sadeghi's writing style, on the other hand, is patient and calculated, marked by derision and absurdity in contrast to Shariati's sound and fury. He specifically targets the superficiality and ludicrousness of the petit bourgeois's attempts to emulate the European way of life, and his characters are caricatures of major ideologies that he considers intellectually bankrupt. In "Unexpected," for instance, the father, Mr. Mirza Mahmoud Khan Mosāvāt, is a parodic figure of millions of Iranians who believed in and cherished the Aryan race, considered "Cyrus the Great" a prophet, and romanticized pre-Islamic Iran. Mr. Mosāvāt sits fully dressed at his desk all day and works on his book, believing that "if he wrote his book without a hat and socks and a tie on, he would offend his ideas" (95). Like many other men of his generation, Mr. Mosāvāt is searching for a utopian past in the pre-Islamic Persian Empire; therefore, when his wife, Tāvoos, complains about her liver disease and her friend, Ashraf, with whom she has not spoken for more than two years, Mr. Mosavat is very annoyed:

--Look ma'am, you are disturbing again.... This is a critical moment in my very serious work. This is not a game, ma'am. I am doing research on the condition of women under the Achaemenid Empire; I want to prove that the battery was first invented by Iranians, but you are hampering me.... (95)

...

--Mr. Mosāvāt, everything between us is over! You go your way and I'll go mine. Go write your book. Hogwash! ... nonsense! ... a bunch of lies.... You're writing about women's feelings during the Achaemenid Empire? With what training? With what knowledge? Pity on me! I knew French. I could read Anatole France's books. Then I married your highness and have become a classic fool.... Oh, I wish I had stayed with Anatole France and remained single. (97)

After a lengthy argument, Mr. Mosāvāt finally agrees to write a letter of apology to Ashraf on behalf of his wife. What he does not tell Tāvooos, however, is that the letter is more of a letter of praise for his upcoming book:

My one and only,

“O, letter that is going to her

Kiss her face on my behalf!”

Anatole France says, “O heavenly angels who bathe in Germany's blue lakes, open your wings and fly toward me, for it is time to be friends.”

...

Oh, my dear Ashraf! What a great book, which will embarrass Jurji Zaydan, Gustave Le Bon, and al-Manfaluti and will shake the pillars of this drowsy society and will make women and men aware of their rights and emotions. (99)

“Unexpected” is an insightful portrait of petit bourgeois character types, in which everyone is trying to be what he or she is not. The mother tries to present herself as a happy housewife, and the family as in complete harmony; the son never speaks to his parents and refers to them as a bunch of “morons”; the husband is a delusional individual obsessed with writing a book that he believes will be an intellectual marvel; and the daughter, Flore, is a passive, reticent character with large “surprised eyes” and “a stupid face” (105), constantly working, similarly to her father, on a book of kitsch poetry.

“The Unwanted Guest in the Big City” shatters the hollow pretensions of the petit bourgeoisie in a devastating manner. Abdolali Dastgheib, an Iranian literary critic and one of the very few writers to have engaged with Sadeghi’s work, considers this story the pinnacle of Sadeghi’s satire; as he notes, Sadeghi is “the first writer who noticed and witnessed the migration of people from rural areas to big cities in Iran” (30).

The main character of this story is Rahman Karim, who has migrated to a big city from a village and has done his utmost to fit in. During the weekend, he sits at his old wooden desk “so that he can perhaps start *Caligula*, which he has been trying to read for a month” (Sadeghi 301). In an attempt to make himself as comfortable as possible, he has “placed his arms on the desk based on Dr. Howers’s latest method, ‘All Rest’, and has stretched his legs under the desk as far as possible. His gaze is fixed on one line, and he is absolutely unable to continue reading” (302).

As usual, he is about to give up on reading and is waiting for his friend Parviz to show up and take him to a movie theatre, where he can see “Silvia Koscina and Marisa de la Amadego Alassio” (303). Instead, out of nowhere, his relative, Lotfollah Hadipour, arrives from their village “with a dusty head, a pale face, and wild sleepy eyes” (302-03).

For the next few days, Lotfollah experiences life in the unnamed big city, from drinking café au lait in European-style cafés to taking cabs and eating at high-end restaurants with French names. In the meantime, Rahman, who is embarrassed by his guest's appearance and lack of manners, subjects him to "Operation Golden Bow and Arrow," a series of "spoken and manual maneuvers, which would result in Mr. Hadipour's voluntary flight" from the big city (316). He discusses the hazards of life in the big city, the pollution that causes cancer, the dusty and dirty streets that lead to tuberculosis, the yokeless eggs, the red ink in beats and the green ink in *Ghormeh Sabzi*²² stews, the pickpockets, the panhandlers, and the homeless. His constant talking frightens his guest so much that he stops eating altogether and leaves within the next twenty-four hours. He even begs Rahman many times to leave the big city behind and move back to the village. As the car is driving away, Rahman watches Lotfollah "crying and shaking his head with pity" (321).

After he sees his guest off, Rahman is wistful. Instead of feeling liberated, he feels empty. He walks all the way home from the bus terminal and is overwhelmed with grief as soon as he gets home. When Parviz shows up to pay him a visit, Rahman throws himself into his arms and starts weeping, but finds out that he is even unable to cry:

Rahman...took the radio from above the heater and smashed it into the wall, turned his bed upside down, and tore apart and threw around the magazines and newspapers, at which he only used to glance. Then in the middle of the room, he sat on the dusty carpet, held his head between his hands, and started squealing.
(321-22)

²² A popular dark green Iranian dish prepared with sautéed herbs, lamb, and dried Persian limes.

This is one of the rare instances in which Sadeghi's satirical treatment of his characters briefly gives way to a somber and tragic tone. In the garage as he watches Lotfollah's tearful farewell, the reader expects Rahman to feel triumphant and return to his usual pleasures of movies, chasing women, and attending sessions at "The Society of Lovers of Serenity" (322), but instead, he ends up as the target of his own "Operation Golden Bow and Arrow." His seemingly exaggerated description of the big city's ugliness ironically awakens him to the vacuity of his own life.

Lotfollah's naiveté in crying and shaking his head in pity for Rahman may bring a smile of pity to the reader's face, but a few pages later, the reader realizes that the pity and the tears are both well-deserved. Rahman is an example of a typical middle-class Iranian, who lives in a big city like Tehran and tries to act like an intellectual when everything around him, including the desk on which he reads his *Caligula*, is falling apart. The change in lifestyle that is a direct result of rapid modernization has created an emotional void in the character that had once been filled with more pre-modern familial and tribal relations.

As noted above, this scene is one of the few instances in which Sadeghi sheds his satirical aloofness and bares the suffocating anxieties of an urban subject. It is in this brief, somber, gloomy moment that Sadeghi's fiction begins to resemble European existentialist and modernist literary works that engage with the modern subject's anguish and loneliness.

In "Mutual Influences," Sadeghi tackles the issue of bombastic and inflated names and titles. From the onset, the satirical effect in this story is conveyed through the use of names, such as Mr. Karim Moaser [Karim Effective] and Mr. Karam-ali Vafadar [Karam-ali Faithful], who is a janitor. The story also features a pawn shop called "Mandolin-e Derakhshan [The Lustrous Mandolin]", or a school called "Sa'adat-e Melli [National Prosperity]". The school principal is

Mr. Baha-o-ddin Oloumi [Baha-o-ddin Scientific], and the European pastry café across the street is called “The Barbara Ritz Café,” with Monsieur Andre as the head server. The streets are called “Timburlane, Dostoevsky, the first 20-metre-wide, Ferdowsi, Roman Roland, and Hatam-e Ta’ee²³” (Sadeghi 258).

Self-important characters appear in situations in which they feel obligated to speak in semi-formal Persian and namedrop to impress their interlocutors. For instance, as the narrator is sitting in Barbara Ritz Café, he is trying to eavesdrop on a conversation between a man and a woman, who are coworkers:

Monsieur Andre skillfully bowed to me and placed two Napoleons and three Chateaubriands and a French coffee on the table. I was shocked at how busy the pastry café was and what an unsuitable spot I was sitting in—right in a dark and dingy corner, stuck behind a fake Venus statue and under the authentic canvas of “The Sunflower” by Mr. Mirza-ye Negarin [Mr. Mirza Painter]. (259)

The characters have very common Arabic first names, but also have contrived last names that fit their profession, as if they all have changed their names recently. The world of the story is a pretentious social environment in which culturally alienated characters are caught in an incongruity between authentic, traditional first names and contrived, modern last names. This atmosphere intensifies to the extent that the narrator comes across as a *flâneur* enjoying the memories of his watch brands and entertained by the sensory experience of city life:

A young man passed in front of me and I was suddenly reminded of watches. I had lost my Nawers watch and the cheap Teal Watch, which I had just purchased, had been taken by muggers. We had sold my wife’s Uranus watch at a moment of

²³ A Pre-Islamic Arab ruler who was well-known for being generous and chivalrous. In Persian, his name is a metaphor for utmost affluence, generosity, and charity.

hardship and, at another moment of hardship, the Hill Andrew Chester watch that belonged to my son, Sa'adatmand-e Eftehāri [Prosperous Honorable], who is a sophomore at Ayandeh-ye Derakhshan [Bright Future] high school.... You know that these watches do not show time.

But what can you do? One has to get to the office on time and sign the attendance book.... That's why, these days, the bulky, heavy three-line Bombay watch, which I have inherited from my grandfather, is moving around in my pocket.

Monsieur Andre whispered something into Arshak's ear, the other server at the café. As the door was opening and closing, I could smell the strong and penetrating rain and the mild and mesmerizing fragrance of damp roofs. It was as if I could taste the cool and astringent taste of asphalt in between by teeth. The café was alive. I murmured to myself, "You can smell the rain better in the street, and, as long as you don't have a cold and do have a good nose, even the smell of trees." (261)

As noted earlier, Sepanlou refers to this story as he contextualizes Sadeghi's legacy within the literary history of post-coup Iran. He interprets the above passage as a satirical treatment of "the preoccupations of the petit-bourgeoisie of the time" (116), where Sadeghi ridicules their "compliance with the mesmerizing glitter and the grandiose appearances of rotting foundations (for example through pretentious names for schools)" (117), and the narrator "cures the absurdity of his explorations by recourse to controlled urban nature" (117).

Sadeghi's fiction is a satirical portrait of the attempts of the Iranian petit bourgeoisie to emulate European ways. Where Gholamhosein Saedi depicts the violence of a highly

bureaucratized and machinistic system against its subjects, Sadeghi presents the violence that these subjects exert on themselves by embracing European lifestyles and idiosyncrasies that they do not fully understand, and by becoming caught up in the inner workings of colonial modernity.

Shahrnush Parsipur

As noted earlier in this chapter, the advent of women writers on the literary scene is an important aspect of post-coup literature in Iran. However, as MirĀbedini notes, female fiction writers' engagement with modernization was merely peripherally demonstrated in their works. Shahrnush Parsipur's *Women without Men*, however, is one of the few novels that deals with modernization and its patriarchal implications more directly than others.

Parsipur is an Iranian novelist and translator, currently living in the United States. Her books have been translated into several languages, and her novella *Zanān Bedun-e Mardān* [*Women without Men*] (1990) was popularized by Shirin Neshat's cinematic adaptation in 2009. Parsipur first wrote the story in the summer of 1978 but did not publish it until 1990. *Women without Men* tells the story of five women from different walks of life, living in the Tehran of the 1950s, who decide to leave city life behind and relocate to an orchard in the neighboring town of Karaj, located about 25 kilometers outside of Tehran.

From the chapters devoted to Munis, one of the five women, we can determine that the story is set in the summer of 1953, the year of the coup. On the way to visit her friend Munis, Faiza is trapped in a taxi that is passing through the turmoil on the streets, such as skirmishes between supporters of Prime Minister Mossadeq and CIA-organized thugs. The army has deployed tanks into the streets of Tehran in support of the Shah. There is a widespread crackdown on the *Tudeh* Party, the largest and most organized opposition to the Shah, with blood, sweat, and roaring of men everywhere. The story, however, only peripherally alludes to

the chaos of the coup on the streets of Tehran, as Parsipur intends to tell a much more compelling story.

Munis is interested in politics, but under her brother's strict orders, she cannot leave the house, leaving her with the living room radio as the only connection to the unfolding situation outside. She does leave the house in defiance and roams the streets of Tehran for a month. Upon her return, she is killed by her brother and buried in the yard. While Faiza is in the yard, she hears her faint cries from under the ground. Faiza hurriedly digs her out of the ground, and they leave for Karaj.

Another character, Mahdokht, a teacher at an elementary school, is devastated at witnessing the poverty of the children and constantly daydreams of becoming something else, such as having five hundred hands, so she can knit winter gloves for poor children, or becoming a tropical tree in Africa:

Mahdokht beat her head against the wall repeatedly. She broke down and started crying. As she was sobbing violently, she was thinking that she would take a tour of Africa. She wanted to be a tropical tree. This was what she wanted with all her heart. It is always the heart's desire that drives one insane. (Parsipur 9; trans. Faridoun Farrokh)

The most important character in the story is Zarrin, a prostitute who lives in a brothel. She experiences visions of a headless customer that upset her to the point that she runs away to a deserted orchard owned by Farrokhlagha, another escapee, whose husband has recently passed away.

Each chapter of the book is named after one of the characters. The final chapters, the "reprises," are one to two pages long and concern the fate of each woman. Munis returns to

Tehran and becomes a school teacher; Farrokhlagha and Faiza get married and continue with their lives that are not ideal but are still comfortable. However, Mahdokht and Zarrinkollah are different. The reprise for Mahdokht, who wanted to become a tree, describes her state after she has arrived at the orchard in Karaj and planted her feet in the ground:

Mahdokht had planted herself on the riverbank in the fall. She suffered as the clay around her ankles hardened. The freezing rainstorm of the season tore her clothes to shreds.... She shivered incessantly until the winter frost froze her all over. But her eyes were left open, looking at the river as it flowed by. (103)

For Mahdokht, everything comes to “a sudden end” (105) as the tree turns into “a mountain of seeds,” which is scattered into the river with a strong wind; the seeds travel “with the water to all corners of the world” (105). Zarrinkollah, meanwhile, marries “Kind Gardener,” who looks after the orchard, and becomes pregnant. In time, she gives birth to a morning glory that “flourishes in the bank of the river” (113). Kind Gardener tells her that they “must go on a journey” and that they “don’t need clothes where ... they ... are going” (113). The reprise chapter is arguably the height of Parsipur’s artistic imagination: “They embraced the morning glory. The morning glory wrapped its foliage around them and they all rose to the sky in a puff of smoke” (113).

A common feminist interpretation of these two characters would regard Tehran as a cesspool of militarism and misogyny, and the orchard as a heterotopia in which a woman can reach her full creative and imaginative potential. Although this is an important and legitimate reading of the novel, I propose a more radical interpretation: it is Parsipur’s deviation from strictly realistic depictions that makes *Women without Men* outstanding. Parsipur’s magical

realism, like Saedi's, is indicative and critical of the social and political reality of the time, though her departure from realism is richer than Saedi's.

Parsipur's characters can be categorized into two groups based on what fate they meet: first, those who return to Tehran, the symbol of modern social structures, and start a "normal" life; second, those who simply depart from reality. Parsipur takes a detached tone toward, and uses brief descriptions of, the lives of the former group, and seems more interested in the second group. Her tone suggests that the characters have lost vitality because, after having been given the opportunity to escape the civilization, militarism, and patriarchy symbolized by Tehran, they choose to remain and acquiesce. For example, Farrokhlaqa returns to Tehran and marries a politician named Merrikhi: "They have a fairly good relationship, not torrid by any means but not frigid either" (112). Similarly, Faiza also returns to Tehran and gets married: "Life goes on for the two of them—not ideally, but not too badly either" (108). The fate that Munis meets is also, more or less, similar:

In an instant, Munis turned into a tiny whirlwind and rose to the sky in a cloud of dust. She was then in the desert, an endless desert.

Seven years passed, and she passed through seven deserts, fatigued and aged, devoid of hope and vision, but replete with experience. That was all.

She arrived in the city after seven years. She bathed, put on fresh clothes and became a simple schoolteacher. (110)

These lines convey a sense of hurriedness, as though the character has been left behind by the story. On the other hand, the plotline devoted to Zarrinkollah moves much more slowly and carries more significance:

Zarinkollah married Kind Gardener and became pregnant. In time, she gave birth to a morning glory. She loved it as her own child. The morning glory flourished on the bank of the river.

“Zarrinkollah,” her husband called to her, “we must go on a journey.”

Zarrinkollah cleaned the house and packed a bundle of clothing for the journey.

“But we don’t need clothing where we are going,” her husband said. “Leave your bundle behind.”

They embraced the morning glory. The morning glory wrapped its foliage around them and they all rose to the sky in a puff of smoke. (113)

Zarrinkollah’s phastanstical return to nature should be read in a spiritual light, rather than as romantic escapism. In *Women without Men*, Tehran distorts life into a horrid, Frankensteinian monstrosity. Löwy’s concept of “Critical Irrealism” serves to explain why *Women without Men* should not be read as a work of romanticism. Löwy argues that, in addition to the rudimentary association of Romanticist *angst* in literature and art with abhorrence of modernization, romanticism also features a kind of revolt manifested in the injection of “irreal” phenomena into otherwise realist literature, especially the novel (“Critical Irrealism”). He proposes that in a literature that is generally observant of verisimilitude, fantastical elements appear that serve as “deep-seated Romantic rebellion against the industrial/capitalist mechanization of life” (“Critical Irrealism”).

CONCLUSION

This chapter’s discussion of Gholamhosein Saedi, Bahram Sadeghi, and Shahrnush Parsipur identifies and examines the different angles from which they reflect on the lived experience of

post-coup modernization in Iran. Saedi's and Parsipur's writings both use magical realist and surrealist elements that signify the characters' resistance to the woes of modernization, such as regimentation, bureaucratization, machinism, militarism, and political oppression, while Bahram Sadeghi's work depicts cultural alienation, absurd petit-bourgeois preoccupations, and the implications of mass migration from the country to the city. These works perhaps best represent the reaction of post-coup Iranian fiction to modernism; although the authors did not present the problem in a systematic or theoretically sound manner, they did notice something awry in the psyche of the average urban middle-class subject, which led them to reflect on the undesirable consequences of such a problem and voice their concerns in their work.

Furthermore, Michel Löwy's concept of Critical Irrealism in literature dovetails with the discourse of *A Return to Self*, which is primarily a sociopolitical, anticolonial discourse. Modernity in this context is the last stage in a four-century-long tradition of disenchanting the world, resulting in a modernized and mechanized life at the expense of losing a spiritual attachment to the world. *Women without Man* draws readers' attention to this loss by means of a spiritual critique of Enlightenment thought, which translates into authoritarian modernization and colonial modernity in the case of Iran. If we agree that we are on the verge of an epistemic shift that would dismantle the binary opposition of the West and the Rest, and if we also agree that such an epistemic shift stems from a critique of late modernity on all levels, then Iranian literature can contribute to that discussion by depicting spiritual experiences much like those present in Parsipur's novella.

Chapter Three: A Re-enchantment of the World: Critique of Instrumental Rationality in Iran's Post-coup Poetry

I am a Moslem.	من مسلمانم
My mecca is a rose.	قبله‌ام یک گل سرخ
My mosque is a spring, my prayer stone the light.	جانمازم چشمه مهرم نور
Fields make my prayer rug.	دشت سجاده‌ی من

From "Sedā-ye Pā-ye Āb [Water's footsteps]" by Sohrab Sepehri

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter reexamined post-coup Iranian fiction in terms of the discourse of *A Return to Self*. This chapter seeks to provide a survey of post-coup poetry and offer close readings of several poems that best represent the contemplation of post-coup rapid modernization in Iran. Before delving into the subject, it is important to address the question of style in Persian poetry, as informed by literary history. Any discussion of Persian poetry in the 20th century invariably begins with the well-known distinction between classical poetry and *She'r-e No* [New poetry]. The emergence of New Poetry, as the manifestation of literary modernism, is predominantly ascribed to Ali Esfandiari (1895-1960), better known by his pen name, Nima Yushij. By the beginning of the 20th century, Yushij had introduced changes to rhythm and rhyme, allowing subsequent generations of poets to unshackle themselves from the rigid restrictions of versification in classical poetry and produce a new kind of poetry that is very similar to blank or free verse in English literature.

Classical Persian poetry in all its forms – qasida, ghazal, mathnavi, Rubaie [Quadrian], and any combination or variation of these – requires each distich to be divided into two lines with a caesura in the middle. In qasida and ghazal, each line must follow a very rigid rhythm and the distichs must end in rhyming words. In a mathnavi, however, the first line of every hemistich

ends in a word that rhymes with the second line of that distich, but the distiches do not rhyme with each other.

Persian *She'r-e No* [new poetry] is characterized by a break from these constrictive rules. From the viewpoint of literary history, new poetry is considered a stylistic response to the sociopolitical necessities of the time. *Fin-de-siècle* Iranian poets concluded that classical diction and versification were not capable of adequately reflecting on or encompassing the increasing modernity of Iranian life, and thus chose to revisit the old poetics.

It is also worth noting that many popular and academic accounts regard the transition from classical to new poetry as abrupt, and many of these accounts attribute the transition to Yushij in a one-man revolution (Katouzian 265). Nevertheless, as Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak notes, the process is well-rooted in a lengthy process that began at the end of the 19th century and came to fruition after the constitutional revolution, in the beginning of the 20th century (*Recasting Persian Poetry* 4). This binary opposition is not the only issue present in the critical literature on Persian poetry. Classical poetry has often been criticized for not addressing “important social and political issues,” while New Poetry, its opposite, has been automatically linked to “ideals of progress, democracy. And freedom” (3). Karimi-Hakkak’s argument relates to the scope of this project in that he points out that although, contrary to common belief, modernism in poetry did not begin with Yushij, Yushij was an important vanguard of the movement.

Early post-coup Iranian poetry is characterized by an air of “uncanny despair” and “morbidity” (Shafi’i Kadkani 61), the most celebrated example of which is Mahdi Akhavan Sāles’ “Winter” (1956). More than just “a season between December and March,” the poem represents a “change in the social mood of Iranians” (“The Impact of the Coup”):

Your greetings will not be returned
 Heads are buried in collars
 No one will raise theirs to reply or to see the comrades
 Eyes cannot see beyond the feet,
 For the road is dark and slippery.
 ...
 It is disdainfully cold, ow!
 ...
 weather is gloomy, doors locked, heads down, hands concealed,
 breaths steamy, hearts heavy,
 Trees are crystalline skeletons,
 The earth morose, skies low,
 The sun and the moon dusty--
 It's winter. (Akhavān Sāles; my trans.)

Meanwhile, with the popularity of the Tudeh party, their vehement advocacy for literature and art, and the establishment of SAVAK in 1958, Iranian intellectuals debated the decision of whether or not to create class-conscious, politically and socially committed poetry ("The Impact of the Coup"). Saeed Soltanpour is perhaps the best-known example among the poets of his generation who supported poetry as social commentary (Alavi 7).

In *Periods of Persian Poetry*, Mohammad Reza Shafi'e Kadkani offers a "systematic approach" (17) toward 20th-century Iranian poetry, complete with new classifications, including figures, voices, themes, technical characteristics, and cultural and economic agents of change (18).

Among these terms, “voices” and “agents of change” are probably the most relevant to the approach I take here. Kadkani defines “voices” as “what we hear when we put our ear against the wall of the times” (19), “agents of change” as sociological, economic, and political forces, “the tracks of which we should follow in poetry” (19), and cultural agents as “the impact of the publications of books and magazines and statements and translations from world literature” (19).

From 1953, the year of the coup, to approximately 1960, the Iranian poetic scene experienced an unprecedented surge in Romantic tendencies, with Fareidoon Tavaloli at the vanguard of Romanticism (Aminpour, qtd. in Khājāt 88; Kadkani 59). Poetry of the early 1960s was characterized by insightful social commentary accompanied by a unique spirituality that, according to Kadkani, was imbued with East Asian thought (73).

Langroudi similarly points to Romanticism as a major trend, but also mentions “Guerrilla Poetry” as the predominant poetic mode, especially in the years of the armed struggle that led to the 1979 revolution. Guerrilla Poetry mixed Nimaian poetic modernism with the innovations of New Wave poetry and with sociopolitical dissent against the Shah. Hamid Mosadegh’s “Blue, Grey, Black” (1965) was the first instance of this “young, brisk, and bellicose symbolic poetry” (Vahabzadeh). Poets such as Said Soltanpour, Ja’far Kushabadi, Khosrow Golsorkhi, Nemat Mirzazadeh, and Islail Khoee became prominent in the 1960s (Vahabzadeh), a status they enjoyed until the 1979 revolution. According to Kadkani, the years between 1970 and 1979 were “the autobiography of poppies” (81), as SAVAK’s brutal campaign of torture and murder left a bloody trail behind the movement of dissent.

Kadkani notes that during the 1960s, Romanticism fell out of favor and was replaced with other movements, such as the infatuation with nature present in the works of Manouchehr Atashi (69), or the spiritual poetry of Sohrab Sepehri:

Let us not muddy the water

In the low, it seems,

A dove is drinking.

...

The hand of a dervish, perhaps, has dipped a piece of stale bread in the water. (“Aab [Water]”; my trans.)

Many post-coup poets did not share Sepehri’s spirituality or apolitical aloofness.

Langroudi maps the rich and varied poetic scene of the 1960s in terms of “protest” (2) on social, political, and philosophical levels, and describes this protest in terms of two opposing aspects: “one was a protest against tradition and was in line with socio-economic modernization,” as represented by “*She’r-e Mowj-e No* [New Wave Poetry]”; the other was a protest against modernization and modernity devoid of political freedom, or what Vahabzadeh has dubbed “repressive development” (109), as represented by Guerrilla Poetry (2).

Langroudi’s mapping is problematic at times, however. Aside from being based on the false modernity/tradition binary, it ignores the literary modernism at the core of Guerrilla Poetry, which, contrary to his claim, was not “in line with traditionalism” (2) but its exact opposite in style, versification, and subject matter. Furthermore, in both the New Wave and Guerrilla Poetry, one can point to outstanding works that transcend the stylistic confines of the movements and capture the sentiments of the post-coup generation as a whole. Ahmad Shamlou’s two celebrated guerrilla poems, “*Marg-e Vartan* [Vartan’s Death]” and “*Biaban* [The Desert]” are cases in point. On the other hand, the works of Sohrab Sepehri and Forough Farrokhzad, Farrokhzad both of whom were largely unengaged in the political movement against the Shah, are worlds apart from the oeuvres of Ahmad Reza Ahmadi or Fareydoun Rahnama, as founders of the New Wave

movement. In fact, as Vahabzadeh observes, Guerrilla Poetry emerged from a “context” created by the New Wave (109), which testifies to the fluidity and proteanism of such categorizations, to say the least.

From a sociological viewpoint, the New Wave movement in poetry was the perfect vessel for Iranians who, in the aftermath of the Shah’s “Land Reforms,” had migrated to large cities from villages or small towns. After the coup, the Shah realized that the project of modernization could not continue under the feudal economic configuration. To create a bourgeoisie, the feudal, land-based economy had to be replaced by a monetary system. Therefore, through three bills presented to the parliament, the monarchy partially redistributed land among farmers and peasants. These reforms were initially named “*Barnameh-ye Eslahat-e Arzi* [Land Reforms Plan]” and later “*Enghelab-e Sefid* [The White Revolution]” and “*Enghelab-e Shah-o Mellat* [The Shah-and-Nation Revolution]” (Langroudi 15-16).

As a result of the White Revolution, a considerable number of people who had acquired new riches and, hence, independence from their feudal masters, were enticed by the flickering attractions of city life and left their villages behind in search of better lives in cities. The “imported modernization” (Langroudi 17) that was rapidly transforming the fabric of Iranian society was partly responsible for the emergence of a modernist art that rejected everything traditional and defied any sort of social, political, or ideological commitment.

On the other hand, other Iranians found this new trend morally decadent and socially irresponsible and dismissed modernist artists as pretentious, dissolute, and, to use Āl-e Ahmad’s words, Westoxicated (Langroudi 17). This latter group found themselves “humiliated in the face of Western and modern sights of city life” and “rejected” its “destructive dissolution” (17). For the former group, poetry was political commitment and protest in verse, and for the latter, a

“modern, anti-traditionalist” art form that was “free from any sort of social commitment” (Langroudi 17).

New Wave Poetry falls under the latter rubric. Following the example of Dadaists and Surrealists, and based on translations of European poets such as Luis Aragon, Andre Breton, and especially T. S Eliot (Kiaras; Langroudi 18), the Iranian New Wave poets equated the philosophical and psychological aftermath of the two world wars with those of the 1953 coup and concluded that “the morbidity and despair of the Romantic and symbolic poetry of the 50s had been a result of false hope and...ideology” (17). They embarked on a quest for a poetry “free from commitment to anything and anyone, a poetry that has no end but poetry itself, or at least, does not adhere to themes that call for political change” (17).

If we accept Langroudi’s chronological account of poetry in Iran, which identifies the 1960s as the pinnacle of poetry and the 1970s as its decay, we will notice that, as we approach the moment of revolution in the winter of 1979 and the intensifying fervor of armed struggle and guerilla movements, revolutionary themes increasingly prevail in poetry to the point that they become indistinguishable from the discourse of *A Return to Self*. By the early 1970s, that is, nine years before the revolution, this fusion makes it difficult to differentiate between committed poetry, guerrilla poetry, and philosophical poetic reflections on modernization and its impact.

One important observation that is largely absent from Langroudi’s account is that we can identify numerous poets from both sides of Langroudi’s binary who would not fit in a single category. Iranian poets frequently cross these fluid borders. For instance, Ahmad Shamlou is generally considered a humanist, even though he composed some of the best guerrilla poetry and also several celebrated love poems that would have been considered politically disengaged. Some of his poems feature a perfect synthesis of literary Romanticism and political dissent:

Daughters of the plains!

Daughters of expectation!

Daughters of slim hopes

In the infinite plains

And infinite wishes

with short tempers.

...

If you blossom from the armor of your dresses,

The crazy wind

Will unsettle the long mane on the horse of desire...

...

In the heart of which of you has blood trickled

From the wound in Abai's heart?

Which one's breast

Has flowered in the spring of his puberty?

Among you, whose lips

Whose lips

--do tell--

Has sprouted in his mouth, discreetly, the fragrance of a kiss?

...

Who among you

--do tell--

Who among you

Is sharpening
 Abai's weapon
 for
 the day of
 revenge? ("Of the Wound in Abai's Heart"; my trans.)

The erotic admiration of Turkmen girls in the first few lines imperceptibly transitions into the representation of a repressed rage caused by Abai's (Aman Jan) death. In a letter to a Turkmen writer, Shamlou explains that Abai was a schoolteacher, who was shot and killed by the Shah's security forces in the 1940s in Gorgan, Iran. After the 1953 coup, Shamlou spent several months among Turkmen tribes in northeast Iran. One early evening, he recalls, there had been talk of Abai, and he had asked one of the girls if she knew him, but she did not reply. He recounts his experience later that night as follows:

Late at night, in a Turkmen gazebo, ... I opened my eyes. In the red and yellow reflection of the half-lit oven or light that was placed there, ... on the other side of the firepit, I saw the round face of the host's daughter, who was still awake, with a remote thought, and was staring at the short blades of the flame. I will never forget the grief I saw in those oblique-shaped eyes.... I thought to myself, "She is thinking of Abai!" Outside, there was the monotonous tune of the rain and the howling of a lone dog in the far. I wrote the poem a week later. ("Reply to Mr. Aghcheli."; my trans.)

"Of the Wound in Abai's Heart" is but one of many examples of post-coup Iranian poetry that does not fall onto one side of Langroudi's engaged/disengaged, new wave/guerrilla, or socially conscious/Romantic binaries. In Iran, Romantic poetry is a direct result of translations of

European Romantic poetry, which began to appear in various journals and magazines during the Constitutional Revolution; however, Iranian and European Romanticisms are very different. Where European, specifically British, Romantic poetry is highly individualistic and subjective, Iranian Romanticism draws its vitality from the sense of frustration as an outcome of two political failures: those of the constitutional revolution and the 1953 coup. Thus, Iranian Romanticism is imbued with a peculiar philosophical critique of modernity that is absent from other movements in poetry.

Here, due to the interdisciplinary nature of this project, it is necessary to offer two clarifications: the distinction between Romanticism in cultural studies, especially in literary studies, and in social sciences, specifically in political science; and how I understand Romanticism, defined alongside—and in opposition to—modernity and capitalism.

According to Löwy and Sayre, in literary studies Romanticism is viewed as “composed only of literary and aesthetic phenomena, defined by some common traits such as liberty, love, hope, joy, imagination, nature, symbol, myth, or, by some accounts, as a revolution of “the European mind against static / mechanistic thought and in favor of dynamic organicism,” characterized by “change, growth, diversity, and creative imagination” (“Romanticism and Capitalism”). But these attempts at defining Romanticism appear “arbitrary,” which points to a “methodological weakness” stemming from a descriptive approach as opposed to a deeper, philosophical view:

Composite lists of elements leave the principal questions unanswered. What holds everything together? Why are these particular elements associated? What is the unifying force behind them that can explain Romanticism's various empirical features? How can we account for the contradictions of Romanticism, a

movement that can take both realist and nonrealist, mystical and sensual, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary, democratic and aristocratic, retrograde and utopian forms? (“Romanticism and Capitalism”)

Löwy and Sayre also note that literary studies and political science each often ignore the other’s opposite definitions of Romanticism. Political sciences focus only on the “conservative, reactionary, and counterrevolutionary aspects,” while literary studies define it as a revolutionary movement. Why is this so? How can we reconcile these opposing sets of definitions? Löwy and Sayre’s response is to approach Romanticism as a worldview and, in that, “a specific form of criticism of modernity”:

The Romantic sensibility is bound up with an experience of loss, the painful conviction that in modern capitalist reality something precious has been lost.... Certain essential human values have been alienated – qualitative values as opposed to the purely quantitative exchange value that predominates in modernity. (“Romanticism and Capitalism”)

In this context, Sayer and Löwy enumerate five “thematic constellations” that are considered “particularly pernicious” (“Romanticism and Capitalism”) by Romanticism:

- The disenchantment of the world
- The quantification of the world
- The mechanization of the world
- Rationalist abstraction
- The dissolution of social bonds

This new paradigm features a very close philosophical affinity between the main tenets of the discourse of *A Return to Self* and Löwy and Sayre’s Marxist recasting of Romanticism. As noted

in Chapter One, the discourse of *A Return to Self* also critiques scientism, machinism, and nihilism, corresponding to the Romantics' disdain for disenchantment, mechanization and quantification, and rationalist abstraction.

The general understanding of Romanticism in Iran among critics is largely negative (Hoseini 10; Pour Ali Fard 84). In order to counter that stigma, following Jacques Barzun, Hoseini uses the alternative nomenclature of "Romanticist" as opposed to "Romantic":

My goal ... is to argue that Sepehri is essentially a Romanticist poet and to quickly add that, a Romanticist poet, in my view, is not a sentimental, foolish, deranged, and hallucinatory person. Nor is Romanticism a dead term to bury and say farewell to. To me, Romanticism is a dynamic, vivid, and evolving term, which manifests in mystical, naturalist, and primitivist aspects, and in it, art is seen as epiphanic and fantastic intuitions and expresses a truth that transcends reality and rationality and here and now. (Hosseini 10)

In Europe, Romanticism can be considered the first modern literary movement, as it was a direct result of poets' reaction to capitalism and modernity (Khajat 48). European Romanticist poets were trying to find a world outside of the harsh and soulless modernity that was slowly beginning to transform their lives. In Iran, however, such frustration did not prevail until after the 1953 coup (109), a political event; therefore, this brand of Romanticism, which was much more socially and politically conscious than its European counterpart, was used to convey Iranian poets' resentment of the authoritarian modernization of the Shah.

Although Iranian poetry both before and after the 1953 coup contains Romantic elements to various degrees and in various intensities, critics generally agree that Fareydoon Tavalloli was Iran's first Romanticist poet. In his introduction to *Raha* [*Free*], a collection of poems, Tavalloli

decries the language of classical Persian poetry as “dead” and “incapable of carrying emotion” (qtd. in Shafi’i Kadkani 65). He proceeded to suggest that poets should try to coin new compound nouns such as *Sabkgoriz* [style-defying], *gorizahang* [rhythm-defying], and *Shafaghpeyvand* [dawn-attached] and use them in their poetry. His introduction is considered the manifesto of Persian Romantic poetry (Shafi’i Kadkani 65) and his “Maryam” is considered a salient example of his poetic calling. Its publication in *Sokhan Magazine* “had a profound impact on conservative modernists and propelled Tavalloli to the leadership of the movement” (Langroudi 1: 299):

In the middle of the night, when the moon,
Broken and sallow, rises in the East,
Standing in the dead of the night, is fair Maryam.
Calm and pensive:
She is waiting for the moonlight
To shine from behind the jagged ridges
and remove the mask on the night’s countenance.
For the luster to rain on her, to wash her tender body in the moon’s bright.
...
In the lush and loud silence of the forest
The mist is floating like a bird at a brook.
As Maryam bathes, singing
is a bird on a bough. (Tavalloli, qtd. in Langroudi: 1, 299-300; my trans.)

After Tavalloli, and while literary discussion was overshadowed by the dispute between politically committed and non-committed circles, Romanticist poetry maintained a marginal

existence, which, to various degrees, was reflected in the work of all poets of the time. Despite such marginality, Romanticism is present in much of the nuanced commentary on modernization in Iran. This seems to contradict the commonplace cognitive mapping of post-coup Iranian poetry, since most critics and poets use the term “Romantic” to describe a poem negatively as shallow, regressive, or sentimental. Following Sayer and Löwy’s redefining and Khajāt’s categorization, my attempt in this chapter is to show that Romanticism does contain a subtle critique of modernization that can only be theorized with the philosophical instruments of the discourse of *A Return to Self*.

According to Khajāt, Iranian Romantic poetry can be classified into six types: lyrical, social-revolutionary, philosophical, intuitive, and linguistic. He defines lyrical Romanticism as characterized by “despair and bereavement” (127), a fascination with nature, and a resentment of city life. In short, “wistfulness and a tragic worldview is the beating heart of lyrical Romanticism” (127). Poets such as Tavalloli, Nader Naderpour, Fareydoun Moshiri, Hamid Mosadegh, Golchin Gilani, and Mansour Owji are considered lyrical Romantics (129).

Social-Revolutionary Romanticism was a direct product of the 1953 coup (Khajāt 147). It differed from lyrical Romanticism primarily in subject matter. Poets such as Houshang Ebtahaj, Siavash Kasraee, Mohammad Kalantari, and others considered poetry “a weapon of class struggle, not the flower of such and such greenhouse” (Langroudi 21). Therefore, they also considered the “pornographic, predominant poetry of the time as an opiate and a disease that must be sidestepped by social Romantic poetry” (21). Khajāt classifies Ahmad Shamlou, Manouchehr Atashi, and Esmail Shahroudi as, more or less, belonging to this category.

Philosophical Romanticism, as Khajāt observes, is also a result of the disillusionment caused by the coup. The consequent despair, paired with translations of French existentialists,

most notably Sartre and Camus, and Khayyamesque nihilism, lie at the core of philosophical Romanticism (174).

Khajāt defines intuitive Romanticism as poetry “that engages the intricate world and the universe with words and in words and, in a lingual-semantic spiritual contemplation, attempts to reach an understanding of some aspects of the truth” (196). The most outstanding exemplar of such poetry is Sohrab Sepehri, whose poetry is strongly influenced by Eastern thought. Alongside Sepehri, Yadollah Royaei, the founder of *She’r-e Hajm* or “Espacementalisme” (Mashaei) is noteworthy, and Khajāt also considers Ahmadreza Ahmadi and Bijan Jalali intuitive Romanticists.

My objection to Khajāt’s study is his dismissive treatment of what I would call the critique of instrumental rationality in post-coup poetry. While enumerating the general characteristics of Iranian Romanticist poetry, he contends that “it is against everything modern. That is, instead of critiquing the project and process of modernity, it often attacks its essence and rejects all its aspects, yearning for a simple, old world” (115). Löwy and Sayre’s project addresses this misunderstanding by acknowledging that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to offer a philosophical critique of the project of modernity in a poem. Instead, Romanticist poetry should be read as the emotional/visceral residue of such a critique. A more comprehensive look at the poetry of Sohrab Sepehri or Forough Farrokhzad within their social context would clearly show that they were at the vanguard of embracing modernity, but in a manner that was more intuitive than systematically philosophical, as they witnessed the dark side of the process of modernization.

In fact, within the European context, a look at, for example, William Blake and his criticism of Isaac Newton can demonstrate that even British Romanticism, the bastion of the

movement, is by no means against modernity; it is, rather, an expression of a concern about the instrumental rationality that modernity ushered in as it disenchanting the world. Instrumental rationality or instrumental reason can be defined teleologically, as one that would seek the most efficient path to a goal without moral regard for the means. In explaining the reasons behind the Protestant takeover of business ventures in Germany, Weber names “economic rationalism” and “secularization” as the two main contributing factors (*The Protestant Ethic*). In this context, Weber adds, virtues are only virtues so long as they “are coloured with utilitarianism”:

Honesty is useful, because it assures credit; so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtues. A logical deduction from this would be that where, for instance, the appearance of honesty serves the same purpose, that would suffice, and an unnecessary surplus of this virtue would evidently appear an unproductive waste. (*The Protestant Ethic*)

Blake’s *First Book of Urizen*, for instance, should be read as a mythological account of the Enlightenment in general and Cartesian-Newtonian reality in particular. Here, Blake subtly critiques Newton’s “reality” and invites his reader to suspend it in favor of an irreality that can be in many ways more truthful. In *Visionary Physics: Blake’s Response to Newton*, Donald Ault argues that Newton’s interpretation of the world was, in many ways, based on his imaginary interpretation of the mathematical equations he had reached, and thus imposed a myth on the reader in the name of science.

A careful look at Blake’s paintings and poems will also indicate that he rejected the logic that suppressed “the emotional, personal, and spiritual dimension of understanding” in pursuit of the “rational, universal, [and] materialist” (Ault). He resented the attempt in Newton’s cosmology to “lure knowledge, consciousness, and perception away from total imaginative

fulfilment” (Ault 2). In short, Blake’s disdain was not for science as such, but for scientism and instrumental rationality:

Sleep on Sleep on while in your pleasant dreams
 Of reason you may drink of Lifes clear streams
 Reason and Newton, they are quite two things
 For so the Swallow & the Sparrow sings
 Reason says miracle. Newton says doubt
 Aye that’s the way to make all nature out
 (Blake, “You Don’t Believe”)

Sepehri and Farrokhzad’s poetry, I suggest, should be read in the same way. Rather than treating the former as a reclusive mystic and the latter as merely as an emotional, sentimental, and depressive woman,²⁴ the uniqueness of their poetry should be celebrated as they transcended the political strife of the time and tried to offer an intuitive critique of instrumental rationality. Thus, their spirituality is not an escape from modernity, but a response to it, a way of remaining as modern as spiritual. Their poetry lends itself to a reading through the theoretical lens of the discourse of *A Return to Self*.

SOHRAB SEPEHRI

Sohrab Sepehri (7 October 1928 - 21 April 1980) was born in Kashan, a central city in Iran. He entered the Fine Arts Department at the University of Tehran in October 1948 and published his first collection of poetry, *Marg-e Rang [Death of Colour]*, in 1940. Sepehri graduated from the

²⁴ In a recent BBC Persian interview with Farrokhzad’s partner, Ebrahim Golestan, the interviewer was adamantly trying to establish that Farrokhzad was “constantly thinking about suicide,” and was, therefore, depressed, and that this depression shaped her poetry. Golestan’s reasoning against that interpretation did not seem to convince the interviewer. This is not an isolated example, as gender stereotypes dominate most accounts account of Farrokhzad’s life and work.

University of Tehran in May 1953 with a bachelor's degree with distinction. From that point until February 1962, he participated in art exhibitions and worked for various governmental organizations. In February 1962, however, he quit his job and devoted his full attention to painting and poetry. He travelled extensively through India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Europe, and the Americas. His travels through South Asia were mostly spiritual, while his visits to other places were to participate in galleries and exhibitions. Sepehri's most celebrated long poem, *Water's Footsteps* (1965), was published during this period. He died in April 1980 and is buried in Mashhad-Erdhal village in Kashan. Sepehri's most well-known collections are *Shargh-e Anduh* [*East of Sorrow*] (1961), *Mosafer* [*The Passenger*] (1966), and *Hajm-e Sabz* [*The Green Space*] (1968).

In the post-coup years, despite its uniqueness in diction, style, imagery, and worldview, Sepehri's poetry was generally met with silence. As Faraj Sarkohi notes, at a time when "cultural opposition" to the state was the "axis of literary creation and the main criterion of its assessment," artists who "either joined the struggle or stood against it had a more essential social role" (103). In this historical context, Sepehri's poetry was easily misunderstood or dismissed as reclusive and hermetic. Thus, in order to understand Sepehri, it is important to understand his metaphysics. As Jaffar Hamidi notes, if we removed "mystical tenderness and restlessness" from Sepehri's poetry, what remains would be "a bunch of words and dry, soulless, and trite terms" (60-61).

In a series of articles titled *Tarhvareh-i az Erfan*²⁵-e Modern [*A Sketch of Modern Spirituality*], Soroush Dabagh portrays Sepehri as a modern mystic as opposed to Rumi, a classical one. The latter, Dabagh explains, shuns the world and considers it a prison:

This world is a prison and we are prisoners

Make a hole in the prison and free yourself. (Rumi, qtd. in Dabagh 84)

The former, however, “takes worldly life seriously and seeks salvation at the same time as pursuing existential preoccupations. S/he pays full attention to what goes on in the world and does not deem everyday life and its occurrences as an obstacle to their spiritual journey” (85). After the 1953 coup, Ali Shariati fervently preached this progressive interpretation of mysticism. He identified three “pillars of oppression: *zar* [capital], *zoor* [coercion], and *tazvir* [chicanery] and “a three-dimensional ideal type” to counter those: *azadi* [freedom], *barabari* [equality], *erfan* [mysticism] (Mahdavi, “Post-Islamist Trends” 103). In defining *erfan*, Shariati does not refer to the tradition of esotericism and the occult, but simply considers *erfan* “in general, the innate preoccupations of a human in the natural world” (*Erfan, Equality, Freedom* 3) and ascribes it to an inherent desire in the human psyche that the natural world cannot satisfy. For neo-shariatis, *erfan* is interpreted as an “attempt to articulate a discourse of indigenous modernity on the basis of a spiritual ontology and a progressive public religiosity [which] represents a poignant challenge and an alternative vision to Enlightenment modernity’s positivist and secularist legacy” (Saffari). Spirituality, in this context, serves as a “strong impetus for the recognition of difference, respect for the other, and solidarity with the marginalized and the oppressed” (Saffari).

²⁵ The Persian word *Erfan* comes from the Arabic root عَرَفَ (Arafa), which translates to knowing; t^h. hus, Erfan translates to knowledge. Here, I suggest the word mysticism as the English translation, as opposed to spirituality, which is a more recent term that does not accurately convey the cultural and literary connotations of *Erfan*.

In line with Shariati's conceptualization, Sepehri's poetry can be regarded as an expression of spirituality that challenges instrumental rationality. Numerous studies have focused on mysticism in Sepehri's poetry, but unfortunately, very few have tried to define the term or trace the mystical elements in his poetry to their philosophical roots in East and Southwest Asia. What we know is that Sepehri travelled extensively through Asia, especially, "India, Japan and China" (Khadivar and Hadidi 62) and studied the customs of these regions, "particularly Buddhism and other religions," which deeply influenced his "thought, poetic expression, and even painting" (62). The use of simple words such as *water, rain, lake, light, religion, sect, bird, perception, garden, flower, grass*, and others testify to the Buddhist influence in Sepehri's poetry (63-4). His poems also include several direct allusions to Buddhism, for instance, in these lines:

I was crossing the boundary of dreams,
 the dark shadow of a lotus
 Had fallen on all these ruins
 What reckless wind
 Brought this lotus seed to the land of my dream? ("Nilufar [Lotus]"; my trans.)

The lotus is a highly significant symbol in Buddhism. Among other things, it is the symbol of "growth of the soul from the dirty physical world" to reach spiritual enlightenment and Buddhahood ("Lotus"). In addition to Buddhism, Sepehri also alludes to Islam, Christianity, and other religions in his poetry, placing his mysticism in "the space between the Quran, The Bible, and Eastern mystical scripture" (Khadivar and Hadidi 55):

There is a Quran above my head and The Bible is my pillow, the Torah my bed
 Avesta my undergarment. I dream:
 A Buddha in a lotus. ("*Shuram Ra* [My Passion]"; my trans.)

Although the critical literature on Sepehri is replete with references to mysticism as the core of his thought and poetry, the philosophical roots of his thought have remained largely unexamined. This is, perhaps, partly due to a lack of primary texts and biographical accounts: we do not know what Sepehri did or whether he met any renowned mystics and/or spiritual gurus during his travels across Asia. The only place in which he mentions his influences is *The Blue Room*, which he wrote in October 1976. At first glance, the text might seem highly cryptic due to its abundance of references to various esoteric, occult, and mystical texts, concepts, and traditions from all over the world, but it is, in essence, a memoir about a blue room on the farm where he lived:

At the end of our garden was a barn house. Above it, was a room that was blue....

In the Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan treatise, which is an account of Java

Mahayanism, instead of mordas, look at geographical directions. Lack of fear is in the north. Mom was right to migrate to the north of the house. And again, you see that pity is in the South. Nobody killed the blue room.

In Buddhism, I saw the place of Lokapalas in geographical directions. The color blue was in the South. The blue room was also at the South end of our house.

Once in Hinduism and once in Buddhism I saw the color white in the North. The Northern-looking window of the house was white too. What a pleasant

resemblance! Our house was a microcosm of the universe; it had a cosmogonic map. In the cosmic system of the Dogons of Africa, the place of domestic animals is on the southern stairs. Our Barn was in the south too. (Sepehri, *Blue Room 1*; my trans.)

He also describes his encounters with various snakes and the significance of the snake in various esoteric traditions:

In Meygun, I remember we were on the mountain, climbing up the hill. Suddenly, my soul was alerted. I went and told the others that we will see a snake at the turn. The one who was going ahead yelled, “Snake!” And on another occasion, in the morning sun, I was sitting on a stone. My gaze was fixed on the golden peak of the mountains, unaware of the ground. A pause was placed on my gaze. I looked at the ground at my foot: a snake was sliding and moving. I didn’t do anything. I was not a Tamoul man to put my hands together, or to recite a mantra from Atar and Evda, or to say Nalla Pambou. (Sepehri, *Blue Room 1*; my trans.)

It is not clear, from these allusions, how familiar Sepehri was with these terms, but the wide range of references testifies to his deep involvement in the study of esoteric texts. Some texts and traditions that are mentioned in *The Blue Room* are as follows:

- Sanghyang Kamahayanikan, a Tantric Buddhist text from East Java, a province in Indonesia.
- The Dogon people, in West Africa
- The Tamoul language, spoken by the Tamil people in India and Sri Lanka
- Hermes, the ancient Greek god
- Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), a German polymath and occult writer
- Numerology
- *Ahimsa* [compassion], a Sanskrit word and a key virtue in Jainism
- Mahabharata, an ancient Sanskrit epic

- The Ligurian people who lived on the northwestern Mediterranean coast in the first millennium BC.
- *Kundalini*, a Tantric concept signifying cosmic energy that is believed to be within everyone.
- Occultism
- Huarochiri mythology, from ancient Peru
- *Pradakshina*, a Hindu concept referring to circumambulation of sacred places
- Individuation, a philosophical/psychoanalytic concept
- *Mysterium Magnum*, a book by Jakob Böhme, German mystic and theologian

From what we know of Sepehri's personality and disposition,²⁶ he is predominantly described as divorced from the cultural and sociopolitical movements of dissent in his time. Such a characterization, however, is somewhat facile. Instead, building on Löwy and Sayre's recasting of Romanticism, I suggest that a much more radical and progressive reading of Sepehri is possible. The right question that needs to be asked from Sepehri's text is how his mysticism can be understood in the context of post-coup literature in Iran.

The following discussion focuses on "Water's Footsteps" as a paradigm for an interpretation of Sepehri not as an aloof hermit, but as an intellectual who engages with philosophical concepts entrenched at the heart of Enlightenment.

"*Seda-ye Pa-ye Ab* [Water's Footsteps]" was written near Kashan in the summer of 1964 and first published the following fall in *Arash* magazine, a modern literary journal that was edited by Sirus Tahbaz. The poem is considered the culmination of Sepehri's unique voice in

²⁶ Houman Sarshar describes him as a "soft-spoken, calm, and unusually sensitive introvert with a high-pitched voice and an exceptionally captivating gaze" ("Sepehri, Sohrab").

Iranian poetry (Shamisa, qtd. in (“Sepehri, Sohrab”). In addition to being a “loosely autobiographical work,” the poem has as its central theme “a dichotomy between the restrictive formalities of received knowledge and the dehumanizing materialism of modern times, on the one hand, and the need to re-evaluate preconceived ideas and ultimately to attain a closer connection with nature, on the other” (“Sepehri, Sohrab”).

The poem starts with a reference to the poet’s birthplace, Kashan:

I come from Kashan.
 I lead a modest life.
 I earn a morsel of bread,
 I have a bit of intelligence, an iota of taste.
 I have a mother, better than the green leaf.
 I have friends, better than the running water.
 ...
 I come from Kashan,
 My lineage goes back perhaps
 To some plant in India,
 to some pot excavated from Sialk.
 My lineage goes back perhaps
 to some prostitute in Bokhara. (98-99)

The humility of the first few lines sets the tone for the whole poem as less of an autobiography and more of a manifesto of the poet’s outlook on life; the remainder of the poem is, therefore, “a poetic elaboration on his attainment of this outlook, or in his words, listening to the footsteps of the water of aging in the torrent of life” (Langroudi 3: 194). The pot from Sialk refers to an

actual discovery of an engraved clay pot that depicts Zoroastrian deities and a lotus flower
(Hosseini 25):

And I have a god nearby:

Somewhere amidst these gillyflowers,

at the foot of that tall pine.

On top of water's consciousness,

over the law of the plants.

I am a Moslem.

My mecca is a rose.

My mosque is a spring, my prayer stone the light.

Fields make my prayer rug.

I make ablution with the heartbeat of the windows.

Moonlight flows through my prayers, the spectrum too.

Rocks show through my prayers:

Every particle of my prayers is crystalline.

I say my prayers

When I hear the wind call out the faithful

from the top of the minaret which is the cypress tree.

I say my prayers

When I hear the grass pronounce the *takbirat al-ehram*.

I say my prayers

When the wave utters the *qad-qamat*.

My kaaba lies by the water,

My kaaba lies under the acacias.

My kaaba travels like the breeze,

from one garden to the next,

from one town to another.

*My hajar al-asvad*²⁷ is the daylight on the flower beds. (Sepehri, “Water’s Footsteps” 98)

T. E. Hume’s characterization of Romanticism as “spilt religion” is a suitable point of departure towards an interpretation of the above lines. Here, Sepehri offers a highly spiritual reading of Islam that moves beyond a rigid reading at the hands of scholars of Shari’a law (the *faqih*). The Islam of Sepehri is pantheist, and in that sense is “spilt religion”. Hume took a dismissive view of Romanticism: during the antebellum era, he predicted that Romanticism was at an end as humanity was set to enter a classical revival, and indeed, he regarded Romanticism as an antithesis to classicism (“Romanticism and Classicism”).

Sepehri’s poetry, however, becomes more than simply spilt religion as we read further. The following passage demonstrates how, as I claim in this project, his poetry can be read as a commentary on instrumental rationality:

Our garden was on the shady side of Wisdom.

Our garden was a place for Feeling and plants

to become entwined.

Our garden was the meeting point of the Gaze,

the Cage and the Mirror.

²⁷ An Arabic term meaning “the black boulder,” which refers to the cornerstone of the Kaaba in Mecca.

Our garden was perhaps an arc
 from the green circle of bliss.
 In those days, I would chew on god's green fruit
 in my sleep.
 I would drink philosophy-free water.
 I would pick science-free mulberries.
 The moment a pomegranate cracked,
 my hand would flow toward it full of desire.
 The moment a lark broke into song,
 my heart would burn with eagerness to listen.
 Sometimes solitude would press its cheeks to the window.
 Sometimes Passion would come by,
 putting its arm around Sense. (Sepehri, "Water's Footsteps" 99-100)

The garden is described as a place in which "wisdom" and "feeling" can "become entwined".

The duality of wisdom and feeling, or affect and reason, is at the heart of Enlightenment.

Saleh Hoseini notes that the garden is an allusion to the garden of Eden before the Fall (27). Sepehri's metaphor of "passion...putting his arm around sense" is based on a frame of reference that transcends the dualisms that have plagued the Enlightenment. His description of "philosophy-free water" and "science-free mulberries" can be read as a critique of a rationalist dissection of nature in favor of a more harmonious coexistence with it.

Thus, Sepehri's critique of humanity's insatiable curiosity for the purpose of gaining mastery over nature closely resembles a Frankfurtian critique of the Enlightenment. Adorno and Horkheimer interpreted Freud's theory of ego formation, and hence the project of enlightenment,

as “self-defeating” due to its repression of “unconscious-instinctual life” (Whitebook 78); in Sepehri’s poetry, unconscious-instinctual life is replaced with mystical intuition. The most celebrated two lines of the poem can be understood based on this approach:

It's not our job to unravel the mystery of the rose.

Perhaps our job is

To swim in the magic of the rose.

To set up camp behind Wisdom.

...

To spray a fine mist over our perception

of space, color, sound, and windows. (Sepehri, “Water’s Footsteps” 111)

The phrase “magic of the rose” is not an adequate translation here. The original Persian is “*Afsoon-e gol-e sorkh*” and I suggest, “enchantment” as a much better equivalent for *afsoon*, so that the line can be translated as “Our job is, perhaps, to revel in the enchantment of the rose.” This new translation thus allows us to establish a meaningful connection with Max Weber’s portrayal of the world as “an enchanted garden” for “popular religions of Asia” (*Sociology of Religion* 271), in which there “evolved no ‘capitalist spirit’” (270). In Weber’s view, “the disenchantment of the world lay right at the heart of modernity” (Jenkins 12). The process of disenchanting has been more or less “uneven” and the “imperialism of formal-rational logics and processes” has been undermined by “a diverse array of oppositional (re)enchantments” (12), of which Sepehri’s poetry can be viewed as an example.

It should be noted that this call for re-enchantment is not necessarily from a regressive and nativist stance; it should, rather, be understood within the contingencies and possibilities of its historical moment. At a time that Iranian society was arguably much more religious than it is

now and defined Islam as its major emancipating force, Sepehri's imagining of *Kaaba* travelling "like a breeze" was deeply radical, especially since all Muslims face in the direction of the *Kaaba* (in present-day Saudi Arabia) for their daily prayer and call it the *Qibla*. A displacement of the *Qibla*, even in poetry, could be considered blasphemous.

"Water's Footsteps" continues with the description of an imaginary trip that the poet takes to the modern world, "the world's party" (100):

I went to a party, the world's party:
 I went to the plain of sorrow,
 I went to the garden of mysticism,
 To the illuminated arch of science,
 Up the stairs of religion,
 Down the alleyway of doubt,
 As far as the cool air of detachment,
 As far as the wet night of affection.
 I went to meet someone on the far side of love.
 Then I went on and on to woman,
 to the red light of pleasure,
 To silenced desire,
 To the sound of solitude fluttering its wings.
 I saw many things on earth:
 I saw a child smelling the moon.
 ...

I saw a woman pounding light in a mortar.

For lunch they were having

Bread, with fresh herbs, a plateful of dewdrops,

a hot bowl of kindness.

I saw a beggar going from door to door,

asking for the song of a lark.

And a street sweeper worshipping

a slice of melon rind.

I saw a lamb, eating kites.

I saw a donkey, appreciating alfalfa.

And in the pastures of Advice,

I saw a really sated cow.

...

At the bedside of a despairing theologian,

I saw a jug brimful with questions.

I saw a mule laden with Composition.

I saw a camel laden with empty baskets

of Famous Sayings.

I saw a mystic laden with *tanana ha ya hu*. (Sepehri, "Water's Footsteps" 101)

From an archetypal viewpoint, if the garden signifies the Garden of Eden, then a trip to "the plain to sorrow" can signify the Fall (Hoseini 27). From a sociological viewpoint, these lines testify to Sepehri's engagement with social life, contrary to what many of his critics claim. He uses defamiliarization to foreground the spiritual crisis that he sees in Iranian society. Phrases

such as “a child smelling the moon,” “a woman pounding light in a mortar,” “a hot bowl of kindness,” and “a street sweeper worshipping a slice of melon rind” all appear to be bizarre acts at first glance, but such bizarreness does invite contemplation. These acts seem unusual, perhaps, because they do not follow the linear logic of instrumental rationality that is always directed towards a practical end.

Sepehri further satirizes the conventional knowledge that underlies such rationality by comparing its proponents to mules and camels, which simply carry loads of composition and quotations without benefitting from them. His disregard for institutionalized religion is clear in the image of a “despairing theologian,” a *faqih*, who has merely added more questions to a jug, which was supposed to satiate him with answers to problems of Shari’a law. Even a mysticism that has been reduced to mindless, stylized mantras and incantations such as “*tanana ha ya hu*” (101) does not get a free pass. In the following lines, defamiliarization is accompanied by oxymorons of old and new and contrived and natural, which enrich the poem’s thematic expanse:

I saw a train carrying daylight.

I saw a train carrying theology;

how heavy the boxcars sounded!

I saw a train carrying politics;

how empty the boxcars sounded!

I saw a train carrying morning-glory seeds

and the song of canaries.

And an airplane from which, at that altitude of several

thousand feet,

The soil could be seen through the window:

The hoopoe's crest,
 The spots on the butterfly's wings,
 ...
 A flight of stairs going up to the hothouse of lust.
 A flight of stairs going down to the cellar of alcohol.
 Stairs leading to the law of the rose's decay,
 To the mathematical perception of life,
 To the rooftop of Illumination,
 To the platform of Manifestation. (Sepehri, "Water's Footsteps" 101-102)

These lines are particularly important to a radical interpretation of Sepehri's poetry. The juxtaposition of modern symbols such as trains and planes with natural life, and the association of "lust," "alcohol," and "decay" with "a mathematical perception of life" and its juxtaposition with the Sufist concepts of *eshragh* (Illumination) and *Tajali* (manifestation) lead to an understanding of Sepehri's metaphysics, which, as noted above, is based on a critique of instrumental rationality.

The sound of the train boxcars conveys Sepehri's obvious derision for *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and politics, in contrast to the third train that carries lotus²⁸ seeds and song. This juxtaposition also alludes to disciplines and practices that, in Sepehri's view, impede the spiritual enlightenment that he considers the true path for humanity. It is again important to note that "theology" is not an accurate translation for *fiqh*, as the latter is not an ontological attempt, but a legal one, with the purpose of interpreting Islamic principles and devising new rules, based on

²⁸ Here, *nilufar* has been translated as morning-glory, which weakens the translation by eliminating the allusion to Eastern thought. *Lotus* is a better translation for *nilufar*, and it should be noted that morning-glory and lotus are two very different flowers.

which a Muslim can lead his/her life. Thus, while theology is an age-old undertaking, *fiqh* is a modern one, and a response to the demand for new rules and regulations for a Muslim living in modern times.

The underlying notion in witnessing the soil, the hoopoe's crest, and the spots on the butterfly's wings from an airplane is a breakdown of physical distance, which alludes to mystical metaphysics and a view of physical reality as contingent and illusory. It can also function as an ironic trope that points to technology and the blinding effect it can have on the human perception of, and harmony with, nature. In the second juxtaposition, the direction of the stairs is significant: downward stairs lead to "hothouses" and "cellars" while upward ones lead to "rooftops" and "platforms" of spiritual enlightenment:

The city could be seen:

Geometric growth of cement, steel, stone.

Pigeonless roofs of a hundred buses.

A florist putting his flowers up for sale.

A poet tying up a hammock between two lilac trees.

A boy throwing rocks at the school wall.

A child spitting an apricot stone onto his father's

faded prayer rug.

And a goat drinking from the Caspian Sea on a map.

...

The wheels of a cart longing for the horse to stop,

The horse longing for the cart driver to fall asleep,

The driver longing for death.

Pigeons in Iranian Shi'ism are symbols of the spiritual and emotional aura that surrounds shrines of religious figures, especially the prophet's descendants referred to Imams and ma'sums [saints]. In Iran, pigeons are generally associated with the shrines of Imam Reza in Mashhad or her sister, Fatemeh Ma'sumeh, in Qom. With this association in mind, a pigeonless roof signifies spiritual want, while the geometric shapes of the city are meant to replace natural vegetation. The subsequent lines bring us back to Sepehri's unique poetic language that is replete with defamiliarization and images that emanate from a mystical worldview, the synthesis of which produces a unique, refreshing poetic language:

A seed's journey to flowering.

An ivy's journey from one house to the next.

The moon's journey to the pond.

The outburst of meadow saffron from the soil

The downswing of a young grapevine from the wall.

The downpour of dewdrops over the bridge of sleep.

The high leap of joy over the moat of death.

The passage of adventure through words.

...

The infamous fight of Nazis with a *naz*²⁹ stalk.

The fight of a parrot with eloquence.

The fight of the forehead

with the coldness of a prayer stone.

²⁹ A. Persian word meaning coyness.

A mosque's mosaic tiles attacking the prostrate.

The wind attacking the ascension of soap bubbles.

A swarm of butterflies

attacking the Pest Control program.

A squadron of dragonflies

attacking a squad of Water Board pipe layers.

A black regiment of reed pens

attacking the printer's font.

Words attacking a poet's jaws.

A century conquered by a poem.

A garden conquered by a starling.

An alleyway conquered by two salams.³⁰

A town conquered by three or four wooden horsemen.

A feast conquered by two dolls and one ball.

* * *

...

Moonlight murdered by neon.

A willow tree murdered by the State.

A depressed poet murdered by winter flower.

³⁰ Persian for "hello".

The whole earth could be seen:

...

I saw many peoples.

I saw many cities.

I saw plains and mountains.

I saw the water and the dry land.

I saw light and darkness.

And I saw the plants in light,

and I saw them in darkness.

I saw the animals in light,

and I saw them in darkness.

And I saw mankind in light,

And I saw him in darkness. (Sepehri, "Water's Footsteps" 103-104)

Here again, the poetic language that points to the poet's fundamentally mystical perception of the world still hints at the social changes brought about by modernization: butterflies attacking the pest control program, dragonflies attacking pipe layers, or moonlight murdered by neon.

Sepehri's mystical outlook, his personification of nature, and his placement of nature as the subject of his sentences all work to displace humans as the centre of the universe and highlight the inherent revolt of nature against humanity's attempt to master it, represented by dragonflies, butterflies, and soap bubbles attacking modern phenomena.

The tone of the poem to this point is that of compassionate derision of modern life, as the ways of the city people are depicted in an air of absurdity and nihilism. From here, the poem takes on a more serious tone, as if trying to offer an alternative to the alienation of modern life:

I come from Kashan

But Kashan is no longer my town.

My hometown has been lost.

With feverish effort, I have built myself a house

On the far side of the night.

In this home, I am close to the damp anonymity

of the grass.

I can hear the flower beds breathing.

And the sound of darkness, as it trickles down

from the leaves.

And I can hear daylight coughing behind the trees.

And water sneezing out of every pore of the rock.

And the drip-drip-dripping of swallows

from the ceiling of the spring.

And I can hear the clear sound of solitude

opening and closing its window.

...

My soul flows in the fresh direction of objects.

My soul is underage.

My soul sometimes falls into a coughing fit

out of passion.

My soul has nothing to do:

It counts falling raindrops
 and the rows of bricks on a wall.
 My soul is sometimes as real as a stumbling stone.
 I have never known two poplars to be enemies.
 I have never seen a willow selling its shade
 to the ground.

The elm lets its branch to the crow for free.

...

Life is a pleasant custom.

Life's wings spread out as much as death's.

Life leaps as high as love.

Life is not something to be left behind by you or me

 on the edge of the habit's shelf. (Sepehri, "Water's Footsteps" 104-106)

A house on the other side of the night can signify many things depending on how "night" is interpreted. Here, I suggest, night signifies a lack of mystical wisdom and the darkness of not knowing what awaits us in the afterlife. The dichotomy can also refer to spiritual Enlightenment and lack thereof. In these lines, all references to city life and modernization are replaced with positive imagery of life in harmony with nature. The poet sees himself in harmony with nature and is content with the anonymous solitude in which he finds himself with nature as his only companion, as he hears "the flower beds breathing", "the sound of darkness", and "the coughing of daylight". His soul "has nothing to do" except being a child. It is thus clear that, for Sepehri, life involves a deep and emotional connection to nature and one's own soul, as opposed to forgetting one's purpose "on the habit's shelf".

The subsequent lines are a critique of aesthetic values that emanate from an obsession with practicality, which is characteristic of instrumental rationality. The poet questions value judgements based on mere practicality and tries to encourage the reader to reconsider a solely pragmatic view of the world:

I do not know

Why it is said that the horse is a noble creature,
that the pigeon is a beautiful bird.

I do not know why nobody keeps a vulture in a cage.

I do not know why clover flowers are considered
inferior to red tulips.

Eyes should be washed, to see things in a different way.

Words should be washed

To become the wind itself, the rain itself.

We should fold our umbrellas,

And walk out into the rain.

We should take with us

All our ideas and memories into the rain.

...

Life is a series of successive drenchings.

Life is taking a dip in the basin of This Moment.

Let's undress:

Water is only one step away.

...

Let's not say what a terrible thing the night is.

And let's not say that the glowworm
is unaware of the garden's insight.

...

Let's not read a book in which no wind blows,
And a book in which dewdrops are not moist.
And a book in which cells have no dimension.
Let's not want the housefly chased off Nature's fingertip.
And let's not want the leopard expelled from Creation.
And let's remember that if there were no worms,
something would be missing in life.
And if there were no caterpillars,
the law of the trees would suffer.
And if there was no death, our hand would keep looking
for something.

And let's remember that if there was no light,
the living logic of flight would be reversed.

And let's remember that before corals,
there was a vacuum in the thought of the seas.

Let's not ask where we are,

Let's just smell the fresh petunias of the hospital.

Let's not ask where the fountains of good fortune are located.

And let's not ask why the heart of truth is blue.

...

Sometimes a wound in the sole of my foot
Has taught me to appreciate the undulations of the earth.

Sometimes in my sickbed I have seen that flowers grow
manifold in size,

And so does the radius of the sour
orange and the rays of the lantern.)

...

Let's not close our door to the living words of destiny
that we hear from behind the wattles of sound.

Let's tear away the curtains:

Let's allow Feeling to catch a breath of fresh air.

Let's allow Puberty to spend the night under whichever
bush it pleases.

Let's allow Instinct to go play games,

Take off its shoes and jump over the flowers
in pursuit of the seasons.

Let's allow Solitude to sing,

To write,

To go out.

* * *

Let's be simple.

Let's be simple everywhere,

in front of a teller's window or under a tree.

It's not our job to unravel the mystery of the rose.

Perhaps our job is

To swim in the magic of the rose.

To set up camp behind Wisdom.

To wash our hands in the ecstasy of a leaf

before we eat.

To be reborn each morning with the rising sun.

To send our thrills up like a kite.

To spray a fine mist over our perception

of space, color, sound and windows.

To seat the sky between the two syllables of Be-ing.

To fill and refill our lungs with eternity.

To unburden the swallow from its load of knowledge.

To take back the names we have given to the cloud,

To the plane tree, to the mosquito, to the summer.

To climb to the heights of affection

on the wet legs of the rain.

To open the door to mankind,

to light, to plants and to insects.

Perhaps our job is

To run between the Morning Glory and the Century

In pursuit of the sound of Truth. (Sepehri, “Water’s Footsteps” 106-110)

As noted earlier in this chapter, Sepehri identifies the fundamental incongruity between two views of the natural world in the Enlightenment and Mystical traditions: the former is characterized by a mastery over nature that is aimed at making life more comfortable for humanity, while the latter adheres to harmony with nature.

A consequence of an anthropocentric view of nature is a system of cognition that is based on gratification, practicality, and subjugation, and subsequently dismisses anything unpleasant, such as worms, caterpillars, or houseflies. Sepehri, on the contrary, invites us to view the world outside of the confines of instrumental rationality and recognize the indispensability of so-called off-putting phenomena; he invites us to wash our eyes and words, to see the world with fresh eyes. This symbolic washing represents stepping out of the anthropocentric worldview and acknowledging that we are not here to unravel the mystery of creation. Our job is, rather, to run endlessly after the truth “between the morning glory and the century” (111).

Sepehri’s poetic philosophy, if we can call it that, challenges the formation of the modern subject at its core: a subject that is capable of categorizing, dissecting, and mastering the universe is the goal of the project of Enlightenment. However, Sepehri regards the ego as a mere illusion. In almost all Eastern mystical traditions, “the ego dilemma” (Kara 151) is the main impediment to spiritual enlightenment; the illusion of the ego, in its psychoanalytic sense, is what the teacher needs to eradicate in the student. This eradication is accomplished through various meditation techniques and extensive dialogues between a teacher and his/her student, in which the former poses a question that the latter must contemplate for some time. Spiritual enlightenment is the fruit of that discussion and the tension that builds up in the student’s mind

when all his/her answers are rejected and scoffed at by the teacher. What Buddhism teaches is that we are not lonely and confined to the boundaries of our physical bodies, like strangers in the world. Everything in the universe is seamlessly connected; therefore, there is no such thing as an ego or a subject.

If we read Sepehri from this viewpoint, his poetry will cease to be a collection of kitsch gems of wisdom, and an inner logic will emerge that governs his use of literary devices, his compassionate tone, his mysticism, and his critique of the Enlightenment. As Langroudi notes, “Water’s Footsteps” was among the “few philosophical new poems that reached the essence of meaning without falling into rhetorical pretensions of philosophy; thus, it ... became sincere, lively, discernable, and poignant” (3: 196).

FOROUGH FARROKHZAD

Parveen Etesami, Simin Behbahani, and Forough Farrokhzad respectively represent the three stages of Persian poetry’s “transition ...into literary modernism,” from Etesami’s loyal adherence to classical forms, to Behbahani’s innovations in Ghazal, to Farrokhzad’s complete break from classical versification (Zarghani 230). From a sociological point of view, Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1966) is perhaps the best representative of Iranian women’s resistance against patriarchal social norms. She dropped out of technical high school, where she had been sent to learn painting and sewing and took up poetry. In 1952, she fell in love with the already-married satirist and caricaturist Parviz Shapur. She married him when she was sixteen years old, and they moved to Ahvaz, a city in the southwest of the country (Milani). After experiencing the boredom and suffocation of married life, she divorced Shapur in 1955. The price for that rebellion was the inability to see her son for the rest of her life, which took a great emotional toll on her; after a period in psychiatric care, she left Iran to travel to Europe and to escape the Persian literary

scene that was laden with “lingering rumors” (Milani) and speculations about her personal life. In 1958, Farrokhzad met Ebrahim Golestan, a filmmaker and owner of Golestan Film Workshop, and began working there as an assistant (Milani). She developed a romantic interest in Golestan, who was married at the time, which lasted until Farrokhzad’s death on 14 February 1967 in a car accident (Milani).

The critical literature on Farrokhzad is plagued by a patriarchal mindset. To this day, the media has been more interested in her personal life than in her literary talent. Her poetry is generally described as “confessional” (Katouzian 272), “erotic,” and representative of her marriage, affair, and sex life (See Darznik 104). Farrokhzad In contrast to Sadegh Hedayat, whose artistic sensitivity and critical attitude toward Iranian norms, beliefs, and customs have been seen as traits of an intellectual who committed suicide due to frustration and estrangement from society, Farrokhzad has been regarded for the same reasons as pathological, depressive, prone to “nervous breakdown” (Milani) and sexual fantasies. In short, Farrokhzad’s artistic career has been treated as a series of scandals that fueled her poetry. Even after her death, Sokhan Literary magazine’s obituary placed more emphasis on her gender than on her literary achievements:

Forugh is perhaps the first female writer in Persian literature to express the emotions and romantic feelings of the feminine gender in her verse.... Prior to her, female writers ... expressed general feelings which had no special feminine characteristics, and which were the same as ‘masculine poetry. (qtd. in Hillmann 132)

Like any other poet, Farrokhzad did tap into her subjective experiences for artistic inspiration; her poetry is, to a great extent, “a most illuminating expression of her own much

troubled life” and parallel to her “non-conformist” lifestyle (Mannani 49). Nevertheless, a chronological survey of her writing demonstrates that her later poems are less personal than her earlier ones. She cannot be considered exclusively a “feminine-oriented” poet, but rather a “humanist” (Naba’ee) In looking back at her own coming of age as a poet, Farrokhzad ascribed a more crucial role to her “personal experiences” in her early collections (qtd. in Langroudi 3: 106). For instance, she viewed *Divar* [*The Wall*] and *Osyan* [*Rebellion*] as “bad poetry” and “the final struggles before an emancipation of sorts” (3: 106), which corresponds to the time at which she had only recently freed herself from the confines of the “small and narrow space” of “married life” (3: 106). Her early collections, *Asir* [*The Captive*], *Divar* [*The Wall*], and *Osyan* [*Rebellion*] were dismissed by critics as “sentimentalist and shallow” (Langroudi 3: 105). In reading her famous poem “Gonāh [Sin]”, for instance, Katouzian notes that its form and content both suffer from “weaknesses” that make the poem sound like “a prose composition with rhymes” (267).

Tavalodi Digar [*A New Birth*] (1961) was, on the other hand, a new birth for her poetic style. With *A New Birth* and *Iman Biavarim... [Let Us Believe...]* (1963), she established herself as an unparalleled Iranian poet who had found her voice in a “realist” space between the two polarities of “introverted subjectivism” and “extroverted didacticism” (Langroudi 107). Mehdi Akhavan Sales considered *A New Birth* “a new birth of Persian poetry” and Farrokhzad a victor who “in the span of a few years, conquered our poetry of today with absolute might and bravery and no equipment or army” (qtd. in Langroudi 3: 110).

Akhavan Sales’s military metaphor is a reference to Farrokhzad’s style: her poetry is written in a plain, but not simple, language, a quality that she admired in Nima Yushij. In an interview, she referred to Yushij’s influence on her poetry as “a new beginning” for her:

Nima was a poet in whose poetry I saw for the first time a kind of intellectual space and human perfection, like Hafez. As the reader, I was facing a human, not a handful of shallow emotions and daily mediocre words.... His simplicity amazed me, especially when behind that simplicity, I suddenly faced the darkest questions and complexities of life.” (qtd. in Langroudi 3: 107-8)

Farrokhzad’s unique individual style reaches its full bloom in *A New Birth*, in which her plainness attains a level of sincerity and purity of emotion, conveyed by repetition of words, that makes her poetry immediately recognizable:

I will plant my hands in the garden
 I will sprout, I am sure, I am sure, I am sure
 And sparrows will lay eggs
 In the nooks between my inky fingers. (*A New Birth*; my trans.)

This plainness, along with the heavy presence of nature, adds a Romanticist quality to Farrokhzad’s poetry. Khajati categorizes her Romanticism as philosophical, not based on a specific school of philosophy, but, like Sapehri, on “intuitive logic,” in Farrokhzad’s own words (qtd. in Khajati 194). In this project I take a philosophical approach to Farrokhzad’s poetry in order to demonstrate Farrokhzad that her Romanticism is not solely a spontaneous overflow of feminine emotions, but owes its existence to her “intuitive logic,” a spiritual commentary on modern life that becomes more pronounced in her later works.

A comparison of the poems in both collections can be very helpful in this regard. In *A New Birth*, poems such as “Āftāb Mishavad” [“The Sun Comes Out”], or “Ān Roozhā” [“Those Days”] might seem at first to be stereotypical Romantic and confessional poems, but they share a general theme that permeates the entire collection and even, arguably, all of Farrokhzad’s poetry.

Even in the most personal poems, Farrokhzad's soul finds itself vulnerable and helpless in the face of ubiquitous death and decay. From where does this feeling of despair stem: the result of a woman's depression and loneliness, or spiritual dissatisfaction with modern life? The following lines from "Didar dar Shab" ["Rendezvous at Night"] establish that the latter is the case:

Perhaps
 An addiction to being
 And a constant consumption of painkillers
 Have dragged pure and sincere human desires
 To the abyss of decay
 Perhaps the soul
 has been exiled
 to the isolation of a deserted island
 Perhaps I only dreamed the sound of the cell
 ...
 So is it true, is it true that humanity
 Is not awaiting the messiah anymore?
 And women in love
 Have ripped open their gullible eyes
 With long needles?

In "Āye-hāye Zamini" ["Terrestrial Verses"], we encounter a morbid apocalyptic vision that alludes to a loss of spirituality in a style that resembles that of the Quran or the Old Testament:

Then the sun cooled

and fertility left the earth.

And vegetation withered in the fields

And the fish shriveled up in the oceans

And the earth

Did not open its arm

To the dead.

...

No one cared for love

No one cared for triumphs

And no one

Ever cared for caring any more.

In caverns of loneliness

Absurdity was born

Blood reeked of bhang and opium

Pregnant women

Gave birth to headless infants

...

Bread had won over

The wonder of prophecy

Hungry, helpless prophets

Deserted divine havens

The lost lambs of Jesus

No longer heard their shepherd's call.

...

Swamps of alcohol

Exuding dry, deadly gases

Attracted to their lower depths

Inert masses of intellectuals

While in antique cabinets.

Pernicious rats gnawed

At the golden leaves of books.

...

People

The fallen masses of people

Heartsick, broken, stunned

Dragged their ill-omened carcasses

From one alienation to another

And the will to kill

Swelled in their hands.

Once in a while a spark, an infinitesimal spark

Suddenly imploded

The silent stupor of their society,

They rushed at each other

Daggers in hand, men

Slit one another's throats

And rolling in pools of blood

Raped underage girls.

They were immersed in their fear

And a terrifying sense of sin

Had stupefied

Their blind, dull souls.

And in public hangings, often

As the hangmen's rope

Pushed out of its sockets

...

These little murderers

At the edge of the public square

Standing

And staring

At the continual downpour of water spray

From the fountain.

Perhaps still

Some confused, half-alive something

Lurked behind their emaciated eyes, deep in their frigid souls

Which struggled feebly

To believe in the purity of the water's words.

Perhaps—but what an endless void!

The sun was dead

And nobody knew

That the sad little dove
 Flown off from the hearts is called—faith.
 Imprisoned voice!
 Will the glory of your despair
 Ever be a tunnel toward light
 Through the walls of this loathsome night?
 Oh, imprisoned voice!
 Oh, last of all voices.... (trans. Karimi-Hakkak)

These lines should not be interpreted as a religious prophecy in the manner of St. John the Divine, nor as the words of “seers” (Shamisa) such as Nostradamus or the Iranian mystic Shah Nematollah Vali. As Sirous Shamisa notes, in both “Terrestrial Verses” and “*Delam Baraye Baghcheh Misuzad* [I Feel Sorry for the Garden]”, the reader encounters an apocalyptic vision that stems from social crisis. As Farrokhzad explains in an interview, “Terrestrial Verses” is not about “actual humans,” but rather about an “atmosphere that draws humans towards ugliness, absurdity, and criminality” (qtd. in Shamisa 113). For Shamisa, this atmosphere was how Farrokhzad understood the current state of affairs in Iran. Farrokhzad observed that “traditional Iranian society, in the absence of any sort of cultural preplanning, was moving towards a form of hollow modernity.... The civilized veneer was, in her eyes, extremely superficial” (113).

Shamisa’s approach to “Terrestrial Verses” illuminates Farrokhzad’s imagery of death, decay, murder, and savagery as a two-pronged comment on both intellectuals and the masses, with the former represented by bhang, opium, and alcohol and the latter by lost lambs, murder, and hanging. She does not garner any hope for the next generation, whom she calls “little murderers / at the edge of the public square” (“Terrestrial Verses”). The same social commentary

appears in “I Feel Sorry for the Garden,” except that in this poem, the imagery is less morbid and more philosophically charged:

No one is thinking of the flowers
 No one is thinking of the fish
 No one wants to believe
 That the garden is dying
 ...
 That the mind of the garden is slowly
 Draining of green memories
 ...
 Our yard is lonely
 ...
 Our pond is empty
 Small, inexperienced stars
 Are falling from the heights of the trees to the ground
 And through the discolored windows in the fish’s house
 coughing can be heard at night
 Our yard is lonely. (Farrokhzad; my trans.)

These lines are not sheer Romanticist lamentations for a loss of touch with nature but should be read in the context of the poem in its entirety and the sociopolitical upheavals experienced by Iranian society. Farrokhzad describes a society overtaken by revolutionary excitement leading the country towards violence, chaos, and uncertainty; as Zarghani notes, “If we could point to a few figures who understood the concept of modernity, and were able to convert in into linguistic

signs, the second Farrokhzad was certainly one of them” (248). Farrokhzad also remarks upon the apathy of the older generation in her depiction of her father as a representative of that generation:

Father says:

“It’s past my time

Its past my time.

I’ve carried my load

and my work is done.”

And reads either the *Shahnameh*

Or *Nasekh al-Tawarikh*

From dawn to dusk.

Father says to mother:

“Damn all the fish and birds!

When I’m dead

What difference would it make

If there is a garden

Or not?

My pension is enough for me.”

**

Mother’s entire life

Is a prayer rug

Spread on the altar of fear of Hell;

She is always searching

For the footprints of some deadly sin
 In everything
 And thinks the garden has been defiled
 By the heresy of a plant.
 Mother is an original sinner
 She prays all day
 And blesses the flowers
 And blesses the fish
 And blesses herself;
 Mother is awaiting the Messiah
 And a forgiveness that will be bestowed. (Farrokhzad)

The poem can be read as an allegory, in which the garden is a symbol of the country and each character represents a group of Iranians. The father is the apolitical traditionalist, who is mired in Persian nationalism, symbolized by *Shahnameh* (1010 A.D.), the most celebrated Persian epic and a symbol of national pride for Iranians, and *Nasekh Al-Tawarikh*, a nine-volume book of world history written by Mohammad-Taghi Shabestari Kashani during the Qajar Dynasty (1789-1925). The brother has a cold, apathetic attitude that defines itself against all tradition in Iran and demands such a complete break with the past as to comprehensively modernize the country:

My brother called the garden a graveyard
 My brother laughs at the rioting of the grass
 And counts the corpses of the fish
 That are turning into rotten particles
 Under the diseased skin of the water

My brother is addicted to philosophy
 My brother sees the garden's cure
 In its destruction
 He gets drunk
 And punches the walls
 And tries to say
 That he is very wretched and tired and despondent
 He takes his despair with him
 Everywhere outside
 Like his identification and calendar and handkerchief and lighter and pen.
 And his despair is so tiny that, every night,
 It is lost in the commotion of a bar.

The discourse of *A Return to Self* gives such a character many names. Shariati refers to this character type as a *fokoli* intellectual, an alienated dandy, who tries to emulate the ways of Europeans and constantly complains about the backwardness of Iranian culture and its people. Āl-e Ahmad calls this character a westoxicated intellectual, who demands the country open its arms to Western imperialism, and Shayegan sees this character as having developed a Faustian view of the world that leads him/her to sever all ties with his/her spiritual existence. The brother's addiction to philosophy is key here, as Farrokhzad creates a binary between philosophy and spirituality, in which psychological maladies such as anger, frustration, and vacuity result from choosing philosophy over spirituality. The sister, meanwhile, represents a social class that has been "civilized" by the introduction of consumerist values:

And my sister that was a friend to the flowers

And when mom beat her
 Used to take her heart's simple words
 To their quiet and kind circle
 And occasionally invited the fish family
 To sunlight and pastry...
 Her house is on the other side of town
 In the fake house
 With fake goldfish
 Under the protection of her fake husband's love
 Under the branches of the fake apple tree,
 She sings fake songs
 And bears real children
 Whenever she come to visit
 And the edge of her skirt is soiled
 By the poverty of the garden
 She takes a perfume bath.
 She is always pregnant when she visits.

In his analysis of this poem, Sirous Shamisa interprets the following passage as Farrokhzad's anticipation of rebellion against the Pahlavi regime (116), which did occur after her death.

During Farrokhzad's later years, due to SAVAK's brutal crackdown and the state's relentless censorship, almost all dissident groups and ideologies came to believe that armed struggle would be the only option against the Shah:

Our yard is lonely

Our yard is lonely
All day
The sound of shredding can be heard from outside the door
And explosion
Instead of flowers, our neighbors are all planting mortars and machine guns
Our neighbors all cover their ponds
And the ponds are unaware
that they are secret gunpowder depots
And our pupils have filled their backpacks
With small bombs.
Our yard is disoriented
I am scared since it lost its heart
I am scared of imagining the absurdity of all these hands
And of picturing the alienation of all these faces
I am lonely like a student
Insanely fond of her geometry class
And I think that the garden can be taken to the hospital
...
And the garden's heart is swollen under the sun
And green memories
Are slowly draining out of the garden's mind. ("I Feel Sorry for the Garden")

Adding to Shamisa's sociopolitical interpretation, Farrokhzad's imagery hints at the spiritual crisis she sensed: the personification of the yard, symbolizing the country, as a "disoriented"

person who has “lost its heart,” the portrayal of absurd hands and alienated faces, and the idea of taking the garden “to the hospital” all allude to a spiritual crisis that, as explained in previous chapters, originated with authoritarian modernization and soon gave way to blind, revolutionary fervor. Furthermore, the metaphor and motif of “green memories,” repeated at the beginning and the end of the poem, signify, not the passing of blissful and serene times under the Shah’s regime, but the loss of spiritual vitality that Farrokhzad laments. Farrokhzad was among the very few who predicted that the revolution would go awry before its triumph in 1979.

Farrokhzad and Sepehri met in the early 1950s and developed a life-long friendship, which lasted until Farrokhzad’s death in February 1967 (Sarshar). Her unexpected death in a car accident “had a profound impact on Iranian literati in general, and Sepehri in particular.... With her death Sepehri lost not only a close friend, but a fellow poet who shared much of his world vision and sensibilities, both emotional and poetic” (Sarshar). His “Doust [Friend],” from *Hajm-e sabz* [*The Green Expanse*] (1968), is an elegy for Farrokhzad:

And she left to the edge of nothingness
 And lied down behind the patience of the lights
 And never thought
 How--amid the listlessness of pronouncing the doors--
 We are left alone
 To eat an apple (my trans.).

CONCLUSION

This chapter is a brief overview of the stylistic departures of New Poetry from classical and neo-classical versification that contextualizes those departures within the sociopolitical context of 20th-century Iran. It outlines various types of Romanticism, drawing from Khajāt’s

study, and distinguishes between romanticism and romantism. It further adopts Michel Löwy's Marxist reading of Romanticism to provide a reading of Sepehri's and Farrokhzad's works as criticisms of instrumental rationality and as laments for the disenchantment of the world. Many of the main tenets of the discourse of *A Return to Self*, as listed and defined in Chapter One, are latent in Sepehri's and Farrokhzad's spirituality, which should not be read as reclusive, but as socially engaged and politically informed.

Chapter Four: “But A Foamy Wake”: The Dark Side of Modernity in Light of Iranian Cinema’s First New Wave

The age of the monstrous grandeur of mansions عصر عظمت‌های غول‌آسای عمارت‌ها
 And lies و دروغ
 The age of massive flocks of hunger عصر رمه‌های عظیم گرسنگی
 And the most horrifying of silences و وحشت‌بارترین سکوت‌ها
 From “Shabaneh [Nightly]” by Ahmad Shamlou

INTRODUCTION

Where the previous chapter discussed works of poetry that criticized instrumental reason and authoritarian modernization in Iran, this chapter investigates the realm of cinema in Iran for traces of the discourse of *A Return to Self*.

The most comprehensive history of Iranian cinema is Hamid Naficy’s four-volume *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, on which he spent more than thirty years of his life (“In Other Words: Hamid Naficy”). The historical scope of this thesis falls under what Naficy has dubbed “The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978,” preceded by “The Artisanal Era, 1897-1941” and followed by “The Islamicate Period, 1978-1984” and “The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010” (n. pag.). Iranian commercial cinema in the second half of the twentieth century was generally composed of *Filmfarsi* and *Abgushti* [Stewpot] films. These were the B-movies³¹ of Iran, often characterized as mediocre melodramas with canned plots. The *Filmfarsi* genre is a “mixture of melodrama and popular tales in which the clash of good and evil are [sic.] based chiefly on class contrast (between rich and poor), a contrast of values (between chivalry and lack thereof), and social contrast (between city and village)” (qtd. in Naficy 2: 149).

A popular subgenre of *Filmfarsi* was *Film-e Abgushti* [Meat and Potato or Stewpot Film], a derogatory term that alludes to these films’ inane storylines, themes, acting, and

31. Lowlow-budget, “formulaic” films that appeared as the second feature of a double bill and were popular during the 1930s and 1940s/40’s, often referred to as “the Golden Age of Hollywood” (“B-Film”).

cinematography. The protagonist was typically a *Jahel* or *Lat* [vagabond], a “lumpen character feigning a degenerate code of chivalry” (Dabashi, *Close Up* 40), referred to as *Jaheli*. He often wore a white shirt, black suit, and chapeau hat, and would brandish a crimson handkerchief. A *Jahel* was a grotesquely exaggerated example of masculinity, set in a plot of successive bar dance and bar fight scenes in which he would overcome numerous attackers and impress a mistress. Films that featured a *Jahel* as the protagonist would include several bar scenes with women dancing in short skirts and men singing, during which the rogue, mysterious, antisocial, and beleaguered alpha male would “fall in love” with a highly sexualized woman and express his love by projecting his sexual energy into beating up everyone else at the establishment. This textbook example of a dysfunctional relationship would invariably lead to a happy ending, symbolized by a wedding. As Forough Farrokhzad observes:

The goal of this cinema is the accumulation of capital and that is achieved only through the exploitation of society’s spiritual weaknesses. This cinema is, in essence, a hollow but gaudy one, with hypocritical morals and perverse tendencies. In a financial assessment, this cinema is the most successful and hence the most ubiquitous. In a healthy, moral, and social assessment, however, this cinema has no place. (qtd. in Jahed, *Writing with the Camera* 29)

Enough of these films were produced in the 1950s to warrant the derogatory term *Abgushti*, derived from *abgusht*, a traditional Iranian dish that is cheap and easy to make. All one needs is to throw meat, chickpeas, and spices into a pot and add water; and if unannounced guests arrive, one need only add more water. The title of the genre is taken from a stewpot-eating scene in *Ganj-e Gharoun* [*Croesus’s Treasure*] (1964), in which Ali Bi-gham (Mohammad Ali

Fardin) lip-synchs to a song by singer Iraj to cheer up a cranky friend while preparing the dish with the help of Hassan Jekhjegheh (Taghi Zohuri).

THE IRANIAN NEW WAVE

The real life of Iranian cinema as an art form was not happening at the box office, however. As Naficy notes, “if culture and cinema in the United States are primarily commercial, in Iran they are principally political” (2: 325). Thus, this chapter focuses on films that are more “authorial” (328), which were later lauded as New Wave. The emergence of New Wave cinema coincided with the Shah’s policy to instill “an official culture of spectacle” fueled by a “monarchic, chauvinistic ideology that predated Islam” (328). In opposition to state-sponsored cinema, the New Wave was concerned with the darker side of modernity and how it affected various individuals and their way of life. This cinematic movement recorded that epistemic shift, perhaps better than any historical account of the time, as it was beginning to take shape. This chapter examines how the grievances expressed by Iranian New Wave filmmakers dovetail with the central concepts of the discourse of *A Return to Self*.

The intellectual affinity of New Wave filmmakers with the discourse of *A Return* is more vividly apparent in the collaboration of filmmakers and writers, which was unprecedented until this time. This collaboration was mostly due to

the almost simultaneous emergence of a new generation of socially conscious leftist and secular writers, whose works these filmmakers adapted or with whom they collaborated on original screenplays, [and this] meant abandoning the traditional commercial movie genres in favor of new-wave films that were imbued with enhanced realism and criticism, character interiority, narrative

continuity, a coherence of space, time, and causality, and improved technical qualities. (Naficy 2: 335)

The best-known examples of filmmaker-writer collaborations include *Gav* [*The Cow*] (1969) by Dariush Mehrjui and *Aramesh dar Hozur-e Digaran* [*Tranquility in the Presence of Others*] (1972) by Naser Taghvaei, both of which feature screenplays by Gholamhosein Saedi. The former is based on the novel *Azadaran-e Bayal* [*The Mourners of Bayal*] (1964) and the latter on a short story from the collection *Vāhemeh-haye Bi-Nām-o-Neshān* [*Innominate Apprehensions*] (1967).

Tranquility in the Presence of Others is the most noteworthy of the screenplays that engaged with modernization, city life, and the alienation these produced. Compared to Mehrjui's *The Cow*, Taghvaei's film has remained largely unexamined by critics, despite its biting criticism of the Iranian middle class. It is also much more accessible than Mehrjui's *The Cow*, which was perhaps the least politically charged New Wave film, but which continues to receive ample attention from critics and scholars. Therefore, this chapter begins with a close reading of *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* and then moves on to Ebrahim Golestan, as his contribution to documentary filmmaking and his *Mudbrick and Mirror* set the tone for later New Wave masterpieces of the next 20 years, such as Masoud Kimiai's *Gheisar* (1969) and Sohrab Shahid Saless's *Tabi'at-e Bijan* [*Still Life*] (1975).

TRANQUILITY IN THE PRESENCE OF OTHERS

"[G]ritty realism," along with a poetically surrealist superimposition and a general mood of fear "of modernity, of patriarchal traditions, of the totalitarian state, of foreign powers, of internal enemies, and of forces of the unconscious" comprise the three characteristics of the Iranian New Wave (Naficy 2: 342-43). Taghvaei's inspiration for *Tranquility* can be seen in a reading of all

the stories collected in Saedi's *Innominate Apprehensions*. Like Saedi's short story, Taghvae's film is a requiem for the disturbed psyche of Iranians after the coup. This observation is necessary to grasp the bitter irony in the film's title: nobody is tranquil in the presence of others. The constant moral disorientation and intellectual despair and gloom in the stories and the film allow for a metaphorical reading of the spiritual state of Iranian society under the regime of relentless modernization.

Jahed characterizes *Tranquility* as an intellectual film and compares it to *Gheisar* (1969), *Mudbrick and Mirror* (1965), *The Cow* (1969), *Downpour* (1972), *Still Life* (1974), and *A Simple Event* (1974):

These films are the result of the cynical outlook of Iranian intellectual cinema towards the deep-seated contradictions within Iranian society and the prevalence of a mood of failure, despair, and abjection, among intellectuals. During this time, the outcome of the Shah's project of modernization is nothing but income inequality, excessive Westoxication, mass migration from villages to cities, the expansion of poverty, the estrangement of intellectuals from the state, and the radicalization of social and political movements. (Jahed, "Melancholy")

From the onset, the tense mood is made palpable by Mahlagha's (Leila Baharan's) groundless disquiet, which she shares



Fig. 1. Manijeh (Soraya Ghasemi) in three separate sequences of *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*. Screenshot collage.

with her jaded lover, Mr. Naraghi (Ali Naraghi). The lovemaking session between the two is interrupted by a jarring doorbell announcing the arrival of their father, who is a retired colonel, and his young wife, Manijeh (Soraya Ghasemi).

Soraya Ghasemi conveys the tension inherent in the script, as her facial expressions summarize the general mood in each sequence: suspicion in the first when she and the colonel enter the house; discomfort and embarrassment in the second when the family is having dinner; and guilt and anxiety during the party sequence, to name but a few examples.

Mahlagha and Maliheh (Parto Nouri) are very different from Manijeh: they read popular magazines, listen to Western records and put up fake social-butterfly façades, while Manijeh, who is from a small town and a more traditional background, is innocent, stoic, and unhappy. Maliheh's and Mahlagha's cheerfulness can initially be seen as a sign of emancipation and of having been able to shed old puritan values and constrictive social norms. Therefore, it seems only natural for Mahlagha to give advice to Manijeh, who lags behind in that regard:

Manijeh: Your records are all foreign?

Maliheh: Yeah. Do you like it?

Manijeh: Nah.

...

Maliheh: You're so languid. You don't take care of yourself. With this nice face that you have, if you take care of yourself, you'll be gorgeous. I was like you at



Fig. 2. Maliheh (Parto Nouri) in *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* (1972). Screenshot.

first too, all languid and grumpy. But now I have changed: charming and bubbly.... Everybody has to find a way to save themselves, or else there is something that will make you listless. There is something in the air that will suffocate you. If you don't hurry up, you'll get old. You won't recognize yourself in the mirror anymore. ... Here, things are different from the country. Here, being quiet is a sign of dowdiness. (Taghvaei)

The film dramatizes the anguish that, like an invisible thread, connects the father's severe depression, the wife's self-consciousness about being almost the same age as her stepdaughters, and the daughters' navigation of the double life of a "good" daughter and an independent "modern" woman. The colonel's wistfulness and nostalgia, Manijeh's being ill at ease, and the daughters' suppression of their anxieties are all results of a social transformation that has taken place too quickly for them to catch up. *Tranquility* is a cross-section of the Iranian psyche under the strain of fast-paced modernization.



Fig. 3. The Colonel (Akbar Meshkine) in *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*. Screenshot.

The social commentary of Taghvaei and Saedi depends on contextualizing the daughters' lifestyle within the normative structure of the social mores of the time. Rapid modernization created an unbridgeable gap between generations in terms of morality, sexuality, and value systems. The father and his wife are appalled and saddened at the sight of their daughters' moral laxity, while the daughters are completely divorced from the old moral system upheld by their parents.

It is in this context that we can make sense of the father's insinuations in the second sequence. His talk of family values, the importance of children, and his self-doubt over whether he has been a "good father" all point to his outrage at his daughters' modernized lifestyle, which he perceives as morally and sexually licentious:

When I think of it, I can say that I have been a good father for you two. Or maybe not! Maybe I *have* been a bad father. And it's now been a few hours that I have been clinging to your lives like a leech.... I was hoping, upon showing up here, to see you two having settled down. How nice would it have been to have two or three little ones crawling up our backs? Wouldn't that have been nice? Wouldn't it have been much better than debauchery? ... I don't like childless houses anymore.

(Taghvaei)

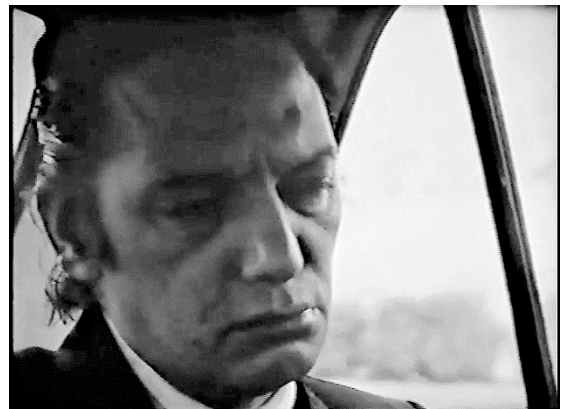


Fig. 4. The Colonel (Akbar Meshkini) in *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*. Screenshot.

This passage is the first sign of the colonel's psychic breakdown, as he sees himself amidst the structures of the old world that are crumbling down all around him. He represents a generation of Iranians who were unable to come to terms with the rapid Westernization of their country. The relentless intrusion of pop culture, such as films, magazines, celebrities, music, and talk shows, into the public sphere targeted a small middle-class stratum that lived in the cities but left behind the older generation and ignored the poorer classes. The latter did not benefit from economic growth, and the former generally believed that embracing the new culture would entail leaving behind their customs, traditions, and religious beliefs and becoming European caricatures.

Ali Shariati was one of the few who noticed this fear among the lower classes as well as the nouveau-riche. His distinction between *Tamaddon* [civilization] and *Tajaddod* [modernization] is highly relevant, as he viewed the latter as a massive influx of imported goods into a third-world country to create a façade of welfare and progress (“To Which Self?” 168), and defined the former as “the culmination of a society’s cultural and spiritual growth and the refining and training of the soul and of the individual insight” (169). Where modernization requires commodities and takes only a few hours, civilization needs ideologies and takes centuries. The tragedy, Shariati believes, is that capitalism can lead people to confound the two as one and the same (169).

As noted earlier in this chapter, another major theme in both Taghvaei’s film and Saedi’s short story is alienation, which, even though central to both, is not well developed by either. Saedi is slightly more successful than Taghvaei in dramatizing the characters’ alienation through conversations that enrich the psychological profiles of the characters, as the drunken exchange between the blue-eyed man and the doctor demonstrates:

The doctor said, “What’s wrong with you? Who are you mad at? Me? Him? The world?”

The blue-eyed man said, “neither with you, nor with him, nor at this world. I’m mad at myself.”

“Why? What happened?” asked the doctor.

The blue-eyed man said, “Everything has changed. I have changed too.”

“How come?” asked the doctor.

The blue-eyed man said, “one has to get these things on their own. You know, up until a few years ago, there were many things for us to look forward to. All that

pursuit and desire and panting and ado and nervousness and excitement and messiness and upheaval and encouragement that kept one alive. But what is there to do with this cold, frozen, dead life? Constant restfulness has so rotten everything that there is no hope left. And then you ask me why everything has changed? It's all gone wrong, all gone wrong." (Saedi, *Innominate Apprehensions* 211)

The short exchange between Maliheh and Manijeh at Mahlagha's wedding is another such example:

"Are you feeling unwell?" Manijeh asked.

Maliheh said, "I don't know the difference between well and unwell. It's a stupid, pointless life. I feel totally useless and without purpose. We ended up neither like the elders, nor like the new people... A strange thing is destroying me. I don't know what to do. It's driving me crazy." (217)

Towards the end of Saedi's short story, we realize that the two daughters' upbeat attitudes are a hollow shell, a defense mechanism to distract themselves from the unknown and unnamed gnawing at their souls. In fact, they are as unhappy as Manijeh and as depressed as their father but are more successful at concealing that unhappiness. What the "innominate apprehensions" of the story's title are is hard to identify: they might be signs of the horror after having discovered the bars of the Iron Cage, or symptoms of the trauma of a rapid modernization that was dissolving the cultural traditions, the pole that had been holding up the tent of Iranian identity. Taghvaei's film vividly depicts the frivolity in the fake modern gestures of the colonel's daughters, their infatuation with Western vinyl records, their thumbing through

lifestyle magazines, and their constant boredom and apprehension. This film foresaw the coming of the new age and the “gradual crumbling” to which Hegel alluded.



Fig. 5. The Colonel's pass in review of the barack fence in in *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*. Screenshot collage.

Taghvaei's lack of success in conveying that aspect of Saedi's short story may be accounted for by speculating that his attempts to portray the scene on film may have been part of the forty minutes' worth of material that were censored before the film could receive approval for public screening.

The deviations from Saedi's short story have enriched the artistic effect of the film. For example, the colonel's walk around the city is highly significant, as his lethargic steps accompanied by the military march coming from a nearby barracks create a deeply ironic scene. Once the centerpiece of these sorts of parades, he now stares into the barracks through the fence and pretends to perform a pass in review. His disheveled look, bent knees, and slight limp combined with the image of the fences resembling soldiers create a caricature of a real pass, vaingloriously performed by the Shah as the commander of what was then the fourth largest army of the world.

The abrupt change of scene at the end of the music track to a liquor store also adds to the ironic effect of the scene, as he downs two large glasses of liquor in front of the astonished eyes

of the bartender and continues his pass in review, this time of sidewalk trees and stone walls, before catching a taxi home. The synthesis of decoupage, camera movement, music, and cutting make this sequence a testament to the cinematic brilliance of Naser Taghvaei, earning him a place among the eminent New Wave filmmakers of post-coup Iran.

The psychiatric ward doctor, who in Saedi's story was enthusiastic about seeing Manijeh and her daughters again, has suddenly lost interest in them and, subsequently, in taking care of their patient. Manijeh finds her husband left to himself in a far less lavish hospital room, completely paralyzed and covered in his own vomit. She does not even find a glass to fill with water for him, so she uses her hands. In Iranian culture, water is associated with life, rebirth, and spiritual revitalization. The colonel's drinking out of his wife's palms as the last shot of the film signifies that, for both Taghvaei and Saedi, there is still a droplet of hope.

Various characters throughout the film attempt to identify what perturbs them and prevents them from being calm, and each time, they fail. As Maliheh points out, there is something in the air that suffocates, something that none of the characters can convey with words. The discourse of *A Return to Self*, especially Shayegan's views on the four decadent trends, as explained in Chapter One, was an attempt to voice such unspoken afflictions. However, Taghvaei succeeds in dramatizing all these tensions with abrupt



Fig. 6. Manijeh (Soraya Ghassemi) bringing water for her husband (Akbar Meshkine) in *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*. Screenshot collage.

camera movements that follow the characters' actions as well as lingering close-ups of their faces, which allows them to convey their misery and their lack of tranquility.

An important event that takes place in the film but not in the short story is Maliheh's suicide, an intentionally



Fig.7. The cat licking Mahlagha's blood in *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*. Screenshot.

incredulous incident. The events of the night of the house party, when she goes for a ride in the car with her lover and another woman, seem like final sparks rather than a singular reason for committing suicide. The audience is thus compelled to search for the unseen, or what Saedi calls the "Innominate," that color every aspect of modern life with gloom, vacuity, and anxiety.

The slightest spark of happiness is extinguished as soon as it begins. Mahlagha's euphoria after hearing her boyfriend's over-the-phone marriage proposal is short-lived. She finds Maliheh's lifeless body when she enters her room to break the good news. There is a still shot of her slit, bloody wrist, which then zooms out and pans to include her face and her entire body. By now, the joyful tune of Mahlagha's happy dance has been submerged into a deafening silence. She shrieks in horror and disbelief.

The extremely morbid shot of the cat licking Maliheh's blood is disturbing enough to provoke a more radical reading of the film. It is true that the loss of Maliheh's love serves as the emotional trigger for her suicide; however, it should not be considered the sole reason. Given Saedi's philosophical outlook, the addition of the scene was probably meant to foreground the theme of absurdity and hint at the indeterminacy of Maliheh's apprehensions.

As Danesh notes, this film is an “anti-system” cry at the “garishness” of the state’s claims to being “the gateway of civilization,” a film that “contrary to mediocre morality plays of the times, which were a paradoxical amalgam of vulgarity and virtue, neither stooped to mediocrity nor publicized simplistic slogans” (Danesh). The making of *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* amidst the popularity among Iranian moviegoers of the more escapist Filmfarsi, was the signal through the noise; to this day, this film remains one of the most celebrated works of the Iranian first new wave. Almost half a century later, Iranian society is hankering, like the colonel, for palms to quench its thirst.

GOLESTAN FILM WORKSHOP

Among other new wave films, the ones that are the most relevant to this project, and yet the least studied, are Ebrahim Golestan’s *Yek Atash* [*A Fire*] (1961), *Mowj-o Marjan-o Khara* [*Wave, Coral, and Rock*] (1962), and *Khesht-o Āyneh* [*Mudbrick and Mirror*] (1965), which I consider his best film.

Golestan was the most influential filmmaker of his generation (Jahed, *Writing with the Camera 7*), which included Farrokh Ghaffari and Fareydoon Rahnama, two other prominent New Wave filmmakers. Golestan was also an employee of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Consortium before Mossadeq’s nationalization of the oil industry, and an employee of the National Iranian Oil Consortium afterwards. He was an avid moviegoer since childhood and became passionately devoted to Marxism later in life. After joining the *Tudeh Party* (Party of the Iranian Masses), he translated Stalin’s *Dialectic* and Lenin’s *Principles of Marxism*. He was also a man of letters and with his very good command of English, translated short stories by Hemingway and Faulkner as well as Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. The years following the coup coincided with his employment at the Oil Consortium; there, he made his first documentary, *Ghatreh va Darya* [*The*

Droplet and the Sea] (1957), with his 16-millimeter Bolex camera. The film greatly impressed the French director of the consortium and compelled the consortium to fund the Golestan Film Workshop (GFW).

The workshop's ample revenue from Golestan's freelance work as a photographer and correspondent allowed him to remain financially and ideologically independent and paved the way for making his later feature films and hiring many leftist writers, intellectuals, and poets, including Shahrokh and Ruhollah Emami, Karim Emami, Najaf Daryabandari, Feraidun Rahnama, and Forough Farrokhzad. In time, the workshop became "a lively intellectual salon" at which many of the era's most prominent figures, such as Āl-e Ahmad, Sadeq Chubak, and Farrokh Ghaffary, met to discuss current issues and read poetry (Naficy 2: 78-79). Taghvaei became familiar with cinema and trained as a director through his introduction to GFW and acquaintance with Ebrahim Golestan and Forough Farrokhzad, from both of whom he learned how to "synthesize realism and poetic-ness" (Jafarinezhad).

The uniqueness of Golestan's documentary films stems from several factors, particularly his bombastic narrations and deliberate camera angles, shot sizes, and editing. The language of these narrations resembles that of a modernist novel with an omniscient narrator. He fine-tuned innovative approach to documentary filmmaking in his later films, which earned him a place among the most prominent creators of Iran's first New Wave cinema.

A Fire (1958-61), GFW's first output, is a short documentary about one of the largest oil fires in the industry's history, which took 70 days to put out. Golestan made the film for the Oil Consortium in the span of four years (1957-1961). The filming was done in 1958, but the editing was not completed until 1961. The film also marked Farrokhzad's first experience in editing; the

workshop sent her to England for a short stock shot library archiving course (Naficy 2: 81), and upon returning, Golestan briefly trained her to do the job.

The initial plan, as Beyzāii recalls in his *Arash Magazine* review, had been for Golestan to make “a black and white report,” something that had already been done on this subject. After witnessing the circumstances, however, Golestan decided that “something more valuable” could be created (52), which he accomplished with his innovative use of sound effects and decoupage, not to mention Farrokhzad’s artful editing. As he noted in an interview,

“[m]any oil wells had caught on fire before and many had made films of those fires, [but] we wanted to create a different atmosphere” (qtd. in Jahed, “Treasures”).

During the opening credits, the sound of machinery can be heard in the background but is abruptly replaced by the deep roar of the fire. The rest of the shots are incessant battlefields between these two sounds, except when the setting switches to a nearby village (Mottahedeh, “Pastoralism and Modernity”), and an ancient folk cry pierces through the silence of the plains. This is the most significant juxtaposition occurring in the film. As Michael C. Hillmann observes, Golestan and Farrokhzad juxtapose “the blaze with the sun and the moon, flocks of



Fig. 8. *A Fire*. Screenshot collage.

sheep, villagers eating, harvest time, and the like” (43). Naficy interprets these juxtapositions as the “hallmark” of the workshop’s documentaries and ascribes them to an overarching poetic realism of New Wave films, which functioned in GFW’s documentaries as means of commenting on the effects of “encroaching industrialization” on the lives of people in rural Iran (2: 81). From a more philosophical viewpoint, these juxtapositions point to the incongruity of two worlds: on the one hand, the world of modern industrial machinery that subjugates, destroys, and transforms nature, and, on the other hand, the plain and simple world of rural Iran, whose people live in abject poverty on resource-rich lands that do not benefit them.

Commenting on this juxtaposition, Negar Mottahedeh highlights the imaginary nature of what the Oil Consortium was trying to foist on its audience as the new Iran: “Both the modernity inhabited by industrialization and the archaic rural landscapes that the film technology casts as its own past are the imaginary landscapes,” and the latter is spoken for by the former with a British male voice-over (“Crude Extractions”).

The film deviates from the detached, matter-of-fact style of a typical documentary, beginning abruptly following initial written descriptions and a shot of a sign saying “Chah Mikanand” in Persian and “Well Drilling” in English. Although this is an authentic sign, the translation is not entirely accurate: “*Chah Mikannand*,” which literally means “They are digging



Fig. 9. *A Fire*. Screenshot collage.

a hole,” can be read ironically, alluding to a Persian idiom that means “a conspiracy is in the works.” The still shot adds anticolonial undertones and points to Golestan’s ambivalence about modernization, a sentiment that permeates almost all GFW films.

The still shot is immediately followed by the narrator’s voice saying, “Suddenly a spark flew!” followed by two shots of a goat and some children running away from the fire, which ferociously leaps toward the camera in the next shot. This sequence clearly illustrates the incongruity between the pastoral life of the villagers, who have received the raw end of this modernizing deal, and the human-made fire that threatens their way of life.

Another distinctive aspect of Golestan’s directing style is his use of camera angles. The main focus is on the workers toiling behind the machinery. The shots are tight when they could have been wider to include both the men and the machinery, but Golestan’s Marxist propensities and the influence of Hemingway’s man-against-nature naturalism appear to have left their mark on these scenes. There are no cold, detached, all-seeing bird’s-eye shots of the entire field; the focus is on the labour. The stern, resolute looks on the sweaty and charred faces of the workers take precedence over panoramic shots that would have provided the audience with a sense of control and a feeling of triumph over unruly natural forces, but this path is avoided, because it would have ignored the obscure struggles of the workers who are the story’s unsung heroes.



Fig. 10. *A Fire*. Screenshot collage.

Golestan's dramatization of the heroism involved in an otherwise technical process, in a made-to-order industry film, is intensified by the night scenes in which the world of the film is transformed into a red-and-black slice of Hell. Even the abject retreat of the makeshift long mechanical arm conveys emotion when viewed among shots of crouched workers and the fire's red reflection on the ripples of the artificial pond. The men are defeated every night by the wrathful vengeance of the fire; they retreat, eat, regain strength and plunge into the red battlefield again. Everything is set up to elevate the story to epic proportions. In this context, sentences such as "the long arm carried the gift of death" (Golestan) add poetic, epic, and dramatic effects to the otherwise arduous act of devising a long mechanical arm to carry a bomb to the source of the fire and extinguish it with an explosion.

In addition to the epic scale, the intellectual climate of dissent against the state has also left its mark on Golestan's filmmaking. Apart from the very intentional juxtaposition of the villagers' pastoral life with the roaring of the fire and the

clanking and throttling of the machinery, the script refers to the inability of unbridled modernization to improve the lives of average Iranians: "Soon after, the fire became part of the



Fig. 11. *A Fire*. Screenshot collage.

landscape. Sheep grew accustomed to it; men sought ways to kill it” (Golestan). At the time of the film’s release, Beyzāii was, perhaps, the only critic who regarded Golestan’s depiction of the fire as something more than a mere interruption in the process of oil extraction: “this film was the epic of labor and a depiction of the frightening beauty of that rebellious fire, one that is both magnificent and frightening...and the unsung heroes were busy taming the fiery monster and muzzling the well’s volcano and that was work and epic” (53). Golestan’s cynical tone, which is readily discernible from the decoupage and the editing, presents the fire as an archetypal monster, the Humbaba of modern times, symbolizing nature’s revenge for having been subjugated to the Anthropocene.

A Fire, to a considerable extent, owes this added layer of significance to Farrokhzad’s “keen sense of rhythm and her affinity for sound” (Naficy 2: 81). When the rushes and the sound were ready, Golestan briefly trained her in editing on an “ordinary device” (Jahed “Treasures”). Her talent at editing added poetic resonance to the film, helping to elevate it to its present status in Iranian cinema.

A Fire not only received praise within Iran, but also gained international recognition with the Gold Mercury Award and the Lion of San Marco at the 1961 Venice Film Festival. For Golestan, however, this was a stepping stone, a “mere sketch” to prepare him to create the more ambitious *Wave, Coral, and Rock* (1962) (qtd. in Jahed, *Writing with the Camera* 22). In this film, his unique voice in documentary filmmaking became fully distinct with its synthesis of literariness, cinematography, and philosophical insight.

Wave, Coral, and Rock tells the story of building a jetty on Khark island, off the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf, and the operation of connecting it to an oil pipeline. This film features a more artistic use of the rural/industrial juxtaposition, an artistic coming of age. Unlike *A Fire*,

the narration of *Wave* is in Persian, and the telegraphic descriptions are replaced by a highly poetic voice-over that, at times, conveys the filmmaker's commentary on the project in relation to the grand scale of the modernizing project in Iran.

Golestan's talent and experience as a writer allow him to begin his narrative from an innovative perspective. The initial sequence, showing an oil tanker, on its way to Khark, is accompanied by upbeat music, albeit typical of such industry documentaries, that represents the high-spirited bustle that is about to revitalize a half-dead island. "A high-capacity tanker has arrived in Persian Gulf from a new port to transport a load," announces the narrator (Assadollah Peyman), but then the camera turns downward and enters the water and Golestan's voice addresses the fish: "What do you seek? The flower of the sea? A speck on a rock? A soft light? An ancient gem? Distant times? The roots of a mystery from a bygone era? Or the seeds of a life for a creation of tomorrow?" (Golestan). The voice-over (Golestan), or what Mottahedeh calls "acousmètre" ("Crude Extractions" 235), then confides in the audience:

In the country of the sea, they [the fish] are away from the sorrow of intellect. They seek no mystery, nor do they build. They are at the mercy of the environment's fate and live their lives in the captivity of instinct. A mud from another world constantly splashes on their bodies, to cover them. (Golestan)

The voice follows the camera into the island of Khark. Golestan asks the audience to "raise" their heads "from the rotating ceiling" of the sea and observe the island: "And here is Khark, a coral sitting before the sun. The ancient witness of time's constant wave. A memory from an ancient era is congealed in the chest of its rocks" (Golestan). The social commentary of the film begins immediately after these scenes, as the slow and smooth movement of the camera through Khark's ruins is accompanied by a lamentation of the island's abandonment:

And the wave and the wave that pulled and washed and took. A people left, and a people came, and the sun rose, and the sun sank and a land that was once full of creatures, sat in solitude. Its palm tree fallen, its qanats caved in, its mosque abandoned, its altar empty, and the arch broke and the smell of bread evaporated and there was nothing left of its bread ovens, but a soot stain on the wall.

(Golestan)

These lines are highly significant in terms of comparing Golestan's outlook to the general anticolonial discourse of *A Return to Self* in Iran. The lamentation of Khark's abandonment and the later scenes involving the workers and the machinery all make it clear that the ruins are not being depicted as nostalgic reminiscences of ancient times. *Wave* is not a blind rejection of modernity, but does, like *A Fire*, comment on the rural people of Iran falling through the cracks of a system that was slowly being put in place to modernize the country, or what Abrahamian describes as "uneven development" (419).

While it reflects on the untapped potential of the island, the film also portrays the introduction of technology to the region much more artistically in comparison to *A Fire*. The new shot of goats grazing and a local man sitting in the shade is interrupted by the loud chuffing of a helicopter as it approaches the camera. Up to this point, the camera moves

smoothly, complemented by the soothing music and Golestan's whispering narration. The serenity is interrupted by the helicopter's jarring approach. The change in the social structure



Fig. 12. *Wave, Coral, and Rock*. The ruins in Khark Island. Screenshot collage.

requires a change in narrative pace, so the smooth camera movements are replaced by quick shots, and the journalistic language by the matter-of-fact tone of Assadollah Peyman, the initial narrator. The contemplative music, the slow tracking shots through the island, the peaceful nap



Fig. 13. *Wave, Coral, and Rock*. Local inhabitant noticing the arrival of a plane. Screenshot collage.

of the local man, and Golestan's narration are all chased away by the loud helicopter that jolts the audience back into the hustle of modern life, ushered in by "a vanguard of an age in the future" (Golestan), who has come to visit Khark.

As Mottahedeh notes, Adorno's observation that modernity defines itself by othering everything before it as "archaic" is relevant here ("Pastoralism and Modernity"). In comparison to the "archaic" life of Khark's inhabitants, the helicopter and the airplane almost seem to have come from another universe. These "vanguards" of the new age are here to destroy in order to construct. Golestan conveys this notion with a still shot of an ancient wall suddenly torn through by an invisible force and a loud bang, until what remains is rubble. The next two shots are taken from aboard a helicopter and show the massive scale of the explosions. The project has begun.

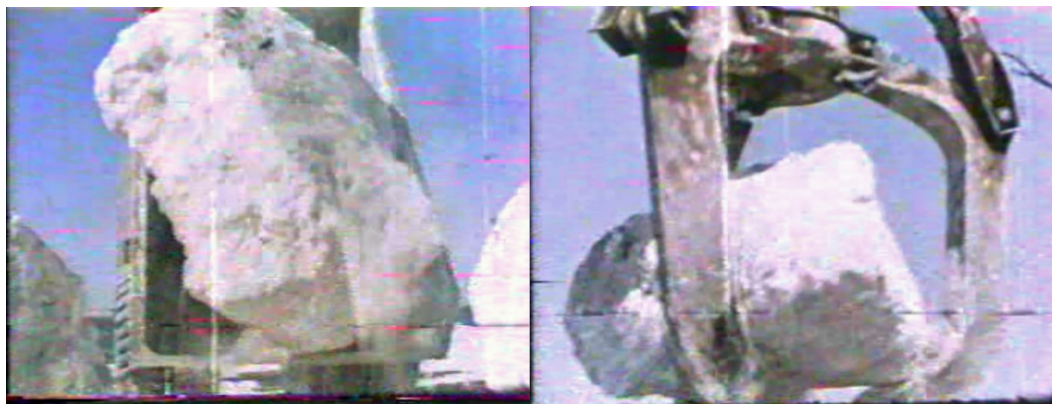


Fig. 14. *Wave, Coral, and Rock*. Heavy Machinery Moving Boulders. Screenshot collage.

In order to connect the jetty to the island, a road must be built through the water. The shots of heavy machinery, such as bulldozers and grabbers, throwing boulders into the water to forge that path acquire a new meaning: the camera's close-up shots accompanied by the loud screech of the steel against the boulders juxtapose the perturbingly heavy presence of the machines with the undefiled innocence of the secluded lands.

The replacement of Golestan's poetic narration and contemplative voice with Peyman's journalistic language also brings the film back to the domain of conventional industry documentaries. As with *A Fire*, this is one juxtaposition in a long series, all of which point to oil as a crucial resource to the transformation of Iran, a double-edged sword that can inject new life into the stagnant economy and the drab lives of destitute Iranians but can also destroy their world and throw them into a new age in which instrumental rationality takes precedence over human relations.

Nonetheless, throughout the remainder of the film, Golestan's criticism is subtly imparted. For example, in a scene in which the workers are wrestling, the hopeful, positive music stops, and, instead, we faintly hear the pounding of a giant hammer that grows stronger. The hammer is used to fasten the pillars of a bridge into the waterbed, but its rapid shots interspersed

with still shots of the workers' faces is an artful portrayal of the impact of technology on the human psyche, a theme that Golestan has developed, in more depth, in *Mudbrick and Mirror*.

Again, as in *A Fire*, pastoral life is contrasted with stern, cold, and stiff images of modernization. The script of *Wave*, however, expresses this incongruity more effectively. After the emitting gases are set on fire, indicating the beginning of the extraction, the setting changes to the quiet life of a shepherd, playing the flute and grazing his goats and the narrator adds, "The same prairie and the same mountain. The same shepherd and the same flute and the same cattle, but near the old boughs, branches of steel had blossomed" (Golestan).

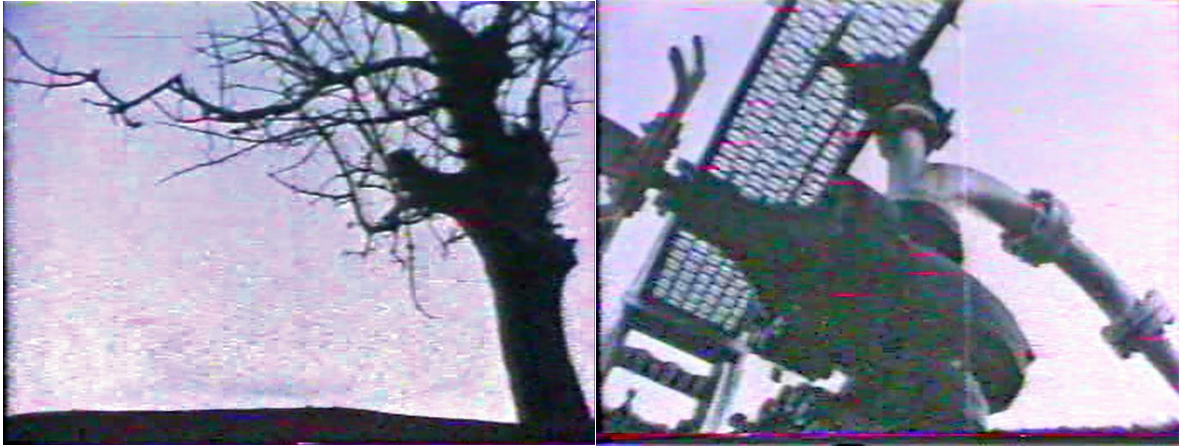


Fig. 2. *Wave, Coral, and Rock*, "...near the old boughs, branches of steel had blossomed." Screenshot collage.

In the final scene, Golestan remarks upon the current state of affairs: "And the land of the slumbering pearl and the fate-bound fish have no share in all that but for this foamy wake" (Golestan), while the camera points at the wake of the ship. Golestan recalled the Shah's comment on the final scene, noting that he "was extremely courteous and then he got up and started walking, and, well, obviously I was supposed to go with him I think maybe he was testing the waters to say it or not, and remembering it still weighs heavy on my chest. It makes one sad, an intelligent person, who could get things like that, but couldn't take control of things—well, it's his own personal tragedy, at least. He told me 'and, by the way, about what

you said at the end of the film, as long as I am in this country, and there are people like you, we won't let our share to be just a foamy wake'" (Behnoud).

GFW produced several other documentaries and feature films, most notably *Ganjineh-haye Gowhar* [*Iran's Crown Jewels*] (1965), *Tapeh-haye Marlik* [*The Hills of Marlik*] (1963), and *Asrar-e Ganj-e Dareh-ye Jenni* [*The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jenni Valley*] (1974). *A Fire, Wave, and Mudbrick and Mirror* are the most outstanding among Golestan's films, both philosophically and cinematically.

The thematic affinities between Taghvaei's *Tranquility* and Golestan's *Mudbrick and Mirror* are striking. The first sequence of Golestan's film creates a mood of anguish much like that in Taghvaei's film. Even the unyielding *zarb*³² rhythm, in lieu of an opening theme, sounds like the cold, metal throbbing of a city's heart, keeping pace with the neon lights flickering on both sides. Hashem (Zakaria Hashemi), a cab driver, is driving through the streets of Tehran, a dark, frightening, unforgiving urban setting, while changing stations on his car radio. He stops in front of a woman (Forough Farrokhzad), who gets into the car alone, but when she reaches her destination, she leaves a baby and disappears into the dark. Hashem's anxious and frantic running around the dark neighbourhood leads him to a surreal scene: a half-built house in which a few people, including a strange woman (Mehri Mehrnia), are squatting. The baby's mother is nowhere to be found, so Hashem gets back into his car, baby in hand, and drives to a bar, where he joins his friends for dinner.

The Tehran of *Mudbrick and Mirror*, in the 1960s, is at the early stages of becoming the vast monstrosity that it is today. The woman in the half-built house represents the disturbed psyche that has been unable to cope with this rapid urbanization. "This was a farmland before,"

³² An. Iranian percussion instrument that is like a goblet drum.

she recalls; “[o]ne day they came and sold it all. There was lots of wheat and the barley. They pulled it out, plucked it all out. They built walls, oh how many walls they built” (Golestan). The woman is also the voice of shanty town settlers: workers of the previous two decades and people who have left villages and resettled in the outskirts of large cities (Habibi & Rezaei). Tehran is an epitome of that urban sprawl.

The bar scene in *Mudbricks and Mirror* is especially notable for the superb acting of Jalāl Moghadam and Parviz Fanizadeh. The former serves as Golestan’s mouthpiece in referencing Tehran’s ghoulish vastness: “Poor woman!” he exclaims in pity. “How can she find her baby? ... Big city! From the north of Darband to Shabdolazim, from Juy-e Mehrabad and Kan all the way to Javadieh and Ghal’e-Morghhi. From the other side of Dushun-Tappeh all the way to ... Tehranpars. How can she find her baby amidst all this?” (Golestan). The sequence also contains a dismissal of Filmfarsi. The musical band and the female dancer, usually centerpieces of bar scenes in post-coup commercial cinema, have been relegated to the farthest background of the film and receive no attention from the patrons.



Fig. 16. *Mudbrick and Mirror*. "The musical band and the dancer in the background of the shot, distinguishing it from common mise-en-scènes in Filmfarsi." Screenshot.

Golestan's portrayal of the era's spiritual crisis is evident in a side-by-side examination of some of the elements of the film. During the bar scene, for instance, the ramblings of Jalāl Moghadam's character, who contradicts himself and changes his position at least three times, and the superficial intellectualism of Parviz (Parviz Fanizadeh), who draws "artistic pleasure" from solving crossword puzzles, are all allusions to the malaise, decadence, and shallow intellectualism of the Iranian bourgeoisie. In response to suggestions that Hashem should go to the police and tell the truth, Parviz asks:

What is the truth? It's trivial. Let him set his imagination free. Imagination is much more precious. Besides, talking is just like a well. You Talk? You have opened a well and have fallen in. You tell the truth? You fall all the way to the bottom. It's really hard to get out of a vertical well, sometimes impossible. But a small well—a lie—if you fall in it, you have fallen less. You can get out quicker. You can get out always. Look at this crossword puzzle!

Jalāl Moghadam's character replies in annoyance: "Get away with that stupid puzzle!" signalling Parviz's love of puzzles and rambling about them. Parviz replies:

What do you know about puzzles? Langling fool! O, how the lines take shape! You fill in a line and suddenly another reveals itself.... Crossword puzzles are just like creation. You have an idea, you imagine, and you put a letter in a square, a neutral letter, a detached letter, but each the free foundation of a truth. An integral part of truth. Another letter, one more, one more, and now you have a reality. A beautiful flower, a book of poetry, an important poet.... No, in the beginning there was not the word; in the beginning there was the letter!

Taji (Tajolmoluk Akbari), Hashem's partner, finally interrupts this train of thought with, "Oh, shut up, will you?" (Golestan).

As Golestan noted in an interview with Parviz Jahed, and contrary to Amir Pouria's interpretation of the film, Parviz's nonsensical philosophizing about crossword puzzles and the well metaphor both demonstrate intellectuals' detachment from real issues and immersion in their own inconsequential discussions with no benefit for average Iranians. Jahed wonders whether that discussion is "what one would hear in *Laleh-zar* Street cafes." Golestan's answer is negative: "What they are talking about is total nonsense. Complete gibberish!" He adds, "If you listen well, you'll notice.... What poor Parviz Fanizadeh is saying there is ridiculous, meaningless, mangled, and more or less surrealistic" (*Writing with the Camera* 80).

The central issue of the film is Hashem's indecision as to whether he should keep the baby. The first scene conveys his fear and indecisiveness as he tries to find a radio station to listen to. First, we hear the voice of a man and a woman, who are frantically trying to hide a dead body and about to set the house on fire with the body in it. We then hear a host talking about the Constitutional Revolution, and then a story, in Golestan's voice, describing a frightened hunter walking through a dark forest:

The night had settled over the forest. The hunter throd through the thicket steadily. Danger throbbed in the dark. Fear filled the forest. And terror sparked in the night. The night was hard. The night seemed long. Nothing was reflected in the eye of the owl but anguish. And fear was life's only sign. The hunter throd steadily through the night. Beasts were staring. And the eyes of the thousand-eyed perils were wide. It was dark. And in the dark, there was no one to tell [the] hunter ... [from the] ...hunted. (Golestan)

Golestan explains that his voice on the radio in the first sequence should not be referred to as a voice-over, for this is part of the “realistic setup” of the scene, “around which the entire film revolves.” There are two such scenes: “One of them is in the taxi when the radio can be heard, and you wrote voice-over by mistake. This is not voice-over” (*Writing with the Camera* 87).

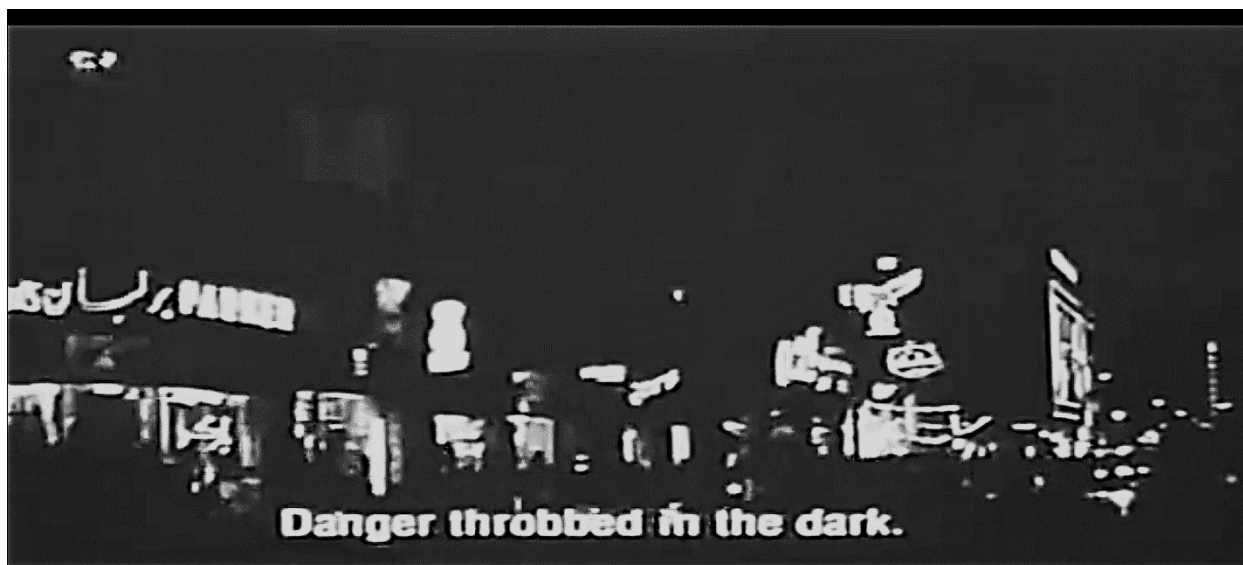


Fig. 17. *Mudbrick and Mirror*. "View of the street from inside Hashem's taxi cab, as he listens to the story with Golestan's voice." Screenshot.

The hunting analogy can be understood in terms of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of human supremacy over nature in Enlightenment thought (20-21). Humanity is the hunter in the forest of nature. Humans dissect, study, control, and manipulate nature to their will, but that system of subjugation gives rise to a social order that will eventually turn the individual into its prey. Thus, in the hunting analogy, Hashem might initially seem like the master of his surroundings, searching the streets of Tehran for a passenger like a hunter searching for game. The references to “terror sparking at night,” “the eyes of a thousand perils,” and “danger

throbbing in the dark” all correspond to the pulsating neon lights on the street, which suggest cynicism towards this proliferating social order.

The neon lights are the pulse of the monster city. The gaudiness of the lights should not blind the spectator to the underlying and alienating effect of the urban structure on the individual. Urbanization, as a conspicuous manifestation of modernization, is, in essence, an attempt to alter and complicate nature so as to accommodate the complex web of relations that are implied in modernity. It is meant to establish new connections and make life easier, but if that altering of nature goes too far, it has an alienating effect. Therefore, it becomes difficult to distinguish



Fig. 18. *Mudbrick and Mirror*. “Taji and Hashem in Hashem's apartment.” Screenshot.

between nature as an object of human manipulation and humans as victims of their own making. The hunter might have very well become the hunted after all.

Another ubiquitous theme of the film is its contrast between darkness and light. Golestan himself comments on the dichotomy with reference to the apartment scene, noting that Taji wants the light on because she is too elated to go to bed. Hashem wants to have sex and thus

prefers darkness. They finally reach a compromise and agree to turn on a small oil lamp, which then “gains another dimension” (Jahed, *Writing with the Camera* 88).

Taji refers to the baby as a “gift from above” who will join them as a family (Golestan). The main tension in the remainder of the film is, therefore, between Hashem and Taji, as he is not sure what to do with the baby, but she is.

The police station scene provides another commentary on the dark side of modernity. As Hashem walks in, we hear the shouting of a doctor who has been robbed by some men, alleging that a pregnant woman needs medical attention and the doctor should accompany them. The doctor’s cryptic commentary on the spirit of the age makes him into the filmmaker’s mouthpiece. He believes that the assault was payback for another incident that had occurred two weeks prior: the stillbirth of a headless baby.

The police chief (Jamshid Mashayekhi) has nothing but consolation to offer; his broken right arm in a cast signifies the failure of the justice system, and the chief is well aware of that failure. “You expect too much,” he says to the doctor, who has been robbed and beaten by fake patients, and reminds him that, despite what his position of authority might suggest, he is “also from the same neighborhood” and a mere “employee of an organization” (Golestan). His final response to the doctor’s outrage and anger is a conceited utopian vision of a society in which people “behave well” of their own volition:

They need you and they need me, these people. Let’s hope for one day to come when there’ll be no more theft or things like that. Then, there would be no need for a Police Station. Then they’d have made so much progress that there would be no more sickness. And if anybody gets sick, they would treat themselves. Like

how people shave their own faces. But until that day, I volunteer to be an officer, and you a doctor. (Golestan)

What the police chief suggests is that modern institutions such as the police or the justice system are essentially fraudulent, as they are unable to fight crime.

Hashem's inner conflict is his personal struggle with his own gender identity. His rejection of the baby and his poor treatment of Taji are a result of his hyperbolic masculinity that conceals the absurdity of his undertakings. The pictures of beefy naked Pahlavans and iconography of Shi'ite imams in military gear with which he decorates his apartment are references to the imagery of masculinity promoted in Iranian commercial cinema and in traditional culture, which was and is deeply patriarchal.

Golestan thus perceives modernity as ideological. As an alienated subject under the false consciousness of this ideology, Hashem is disinclined to accept his traditional role as the father of a family but is not able to leave behind the old value system either. He prefers quiet and the protection of the dark against the neighbours' prying eyes. Hashem's paralysis and constant demands for quiet greatly dismay Taji; she considers him a coward and asks the baby to shout even louder before she can grow up and become a coward too. Hashem is the epitome of the average Iranian living in the city, who is trapped between these two worlds.

The result of this mental and spiritual paralysis is decay, symbolized in the constant references to death and deformed bodies, the doctor's account of the stillbirth, and the coffin in the bazaar, among others. There is no birth in *Mudbrick and Mirror*. Even the water features in one of the initial scenes are turned off after Hashem tells Taji that he does not want the baby. The doctor at the police station is horrified when he remembers the stillborn headless baby, the pregnant woman at the clinic turns out to be lying about her pregnancy, and even the hard-nosed

nurse at the pregnancy clinic gives her small speech in front of the gut-wrenching background of a shelf filled with deformed fetuses in jars.



Fig. 19. *Mudbrick and Mirror*. “Orphanage scene.” Screenshot.

No other film produced in this period has offered a more in-depth view of the alienation associated with modernity or a more poignant commentary on the spiritual crisis in modernity. If the first half of the film is dedicated to introducing the various characters and their psychologies and to establishing the setting and the plot, the second half turns the story into a true masterpiece, with its critique of civilizational structures, of the alienation of modern subjects, and of the hypocrisy of pseudointellectuals.

In the courthouse scene, for instance, where Hashem has taken the baby with the intent to adopt her, he asks a scribe, played by Akbar Meshkine, the retired colonel from *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*, to write a statement for him. This exchange between the two characters is important for understanding Golestan’s distrust of modern institutions. After criticizing Hashem for not being literate enough to write his own letters, the scribe comments on his intention to keep the baby. At first glance, the exploitive character of the scribe might be noticeable from his asking Hashem for cigarettes twice, only to take more than one each time

and stash them in his shirt pocket. However, his character can be read more symbolically: his comments on Hashem's decision to keep the baby make him into a spokesperson of modernity, an ideology that promotes excessive individualism, instrumental rationality, and spiritual disenchantment:

So, you have a job that is all right. You have a good life. Nobody's under your care. Bless your heart! You have no wife, and then you are asking for a headache? You're a fool! ... They have abandoned it. Why should you get involved? Are you trying to be a good Samaritan? You're just a passer-by.... Go have your fun. Drink your alcohol. Sleep around before it's too late. Four bottles of milk are worth half a bottle of Arak.³³ You want to cut down on your drinking because this kid wants milk?

--What do I do? ... She is alone.

--Why does she need someone? Do you have someone yourself? This is the *age* of loneliness. These institutions are there to fill that gap! (Golestan)

After the scribe leaves Hashem at the top of the stairs, a highly significant shot of his dark silhouette holding the baby in front of a bright, very large window signifies how a modern

³³ A traditional alcoholic spirit in Iran, with a similar taste to Vodka.

institution, the courthouse, draws its power from disenfranchising an average man such as Hashem. Here again, the light/dark dichotomy creates a stirring portrait of the modern subject.



Fig. 20. *Mudbrick and Mirror*. “Hashem and the baby at the courthouse.” Screenshot.

Mudbrick and Mirror is a psychological study of alienation, a tragic portrait of the erasure of the pre-modern way of life in a matter of decades, to be replaced by cold, calculating modern institutions. It is also a portrait of the modern Iranian subject freed from feudalist exploitation only to be subjected to capitalist obsession with profit, utilitarianism, and hedonism.

The duplicity of modern institutions, such as the police, the justice system, or the orphanage, and their spokespersons, such as the chief, the scribe, or the nurse, is revealed when Hashem sees, in a store window, the courthouse scribe (Akbar Meshkine) on TV wearing a fake smile, preaching about the importance of being a good Samaritan, and reciting hackneyed lines from Sa’adi’s poetry that encourages selflessness and altruism. The story comes full circle at this point, as Hashem realizes that he has fallen prey to the scribe’s duplicity. The same scribe who arrogantly lectured Hashem about the role of modern institutions to fill our loneliness is now amiably lecturing viewers about the importance of human virtues. It is too late for remorse, however; as he glances out of his windshield, the same mysterious passenger (Forough

Farrokhzad), who left her baby in his car, flags down another cab and gets in. The once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is now missed.

Canadian film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum considers *Mudbrick and Mirror* a “masterpiece” that combines a neorealistic look (in black and white and ‘Scope) with visual and dramatic modes that suggest expressionism and metaphysics. Peripheral characters periodically take over the story, and some of their monologues suggest Dostoyevsky in recounting the world’s misery. (The title derives from a somewhat cryptic line by the 13th-century Persian poet Sa’adi that says what the old can see in a mud brick, youth can see in a mirror. (Rosenbaum)

In an attempt to correct Rosenbaum’s mistake, Parviz Jahed notes that the title of the film is not taken from Sa’adi, but from Farid-addin Attar of Neishabur (“*Mudbrick and Mirror* is a Masterpiece”). Jahed refers to his conversations with Golestan, in *Writing with the Camera*, where the latter refers to Attar as the inspiration behind the title. The distich is neither by Sa’adi nor Attar, but *Mathnavi-e Ma’navi*, by Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet and sufi: “*Ānch Binad ān Javān dar Āyneh / Pir andar khesht mibinad hameh*” [What the young see in a mirror / the old see in a mudbrick].

The couplet is not really “cryptic,” but is, in fact, a well-known proverb in Persian, referring to the experience, insight, and knowledge of an old spiritual teacher who, unlike a young and rash student, recognizes meanings and relations without having to see them with the corporeal eye. Thus, seeing something in a mudbrick suggests profound insight, even foresight, of events before their unfolding in the mirror of reality.

Understanding that allusion to Rumi is key in interpreting the orphanage scene. The children's using their potties as ponies, the baby holding a doll with a deformed face, the constant neurotic fidgeting, the insertion of a big needle into the fragile neck of a child, and the blocking of another child's smile with an ID card are among a series of successive shots that bring Taji, who is there to find the lost baby, to the painful conclusion that, as future citizens, these babies are born into pre-existing structures that rob them of their identities and turn them into mere cogs in the machine. At the time, these implications of entering the age of modernity seemed crushing and impossible to resist.

The sound effects in the orphanage scene are not any less significant. The fidgeting and the screaming take over, shot by shot, as first one child starts to fidget slowly,

then another in the adjacent bed, until the whole orphanage is filled with the sound of babies and young children screaming: a minuscule uprising. The next shot is of a doctor injecting one child with a colorless serum in the neck. The shot of the serum is then interspersed with shots of calm



Fig. 21. *Mudbrick and Mirror*. "Orphanage scene." Screenshot collage.

and serene children, and the screaming subsides. The children begin moaning as if under the influence of an opiate, and then there is a dead quiet. The liquid has the same effect as Arak, or Soma in Huxley's *Brave New World*. This is the hedonism in capitalism, the distraction from the discontent, the anxiety, and the loneliness of modern life.

The constrictive social norms rooted in institutionalized religion are not left unscathed either. Hashem's constant worrying about the neighbors, the woman's implorations about how her neighbors ridicule him for not being able to have babies, and the brilliant shot of the two milk bottles in the orphanage, reminiscent of mosque minarets, all demonstrate that

Golestan does not garner any illusions about nativist cultural essentialism. This film is, by no means, an apology for tradition, but is the expression of a longing for a third way, a return to a self that is neither regressively nativist nor oppressively modern.

The tracking shots of barred beds and the still shot of a child's arm hanging from between the bars are reminiscent of shots usually seen in prison documentaries, in which they represent



Fig. 22. *Mudbrick and Mirror*. "Orphanage scene." Screenshot collage.

the indolence, stillness, and absurdity of a life squandered behind bars. Why would a director choose to evoke a prison setting? The association is meant to convey Taji's thoughts as she leans against the corridor walls. Her epiphany comes as she realizes that these children cannot fill anyone's void, as they are themselves prisoners born into the Iron Cage.

Modernity is thus viewed as unnatural. The dark, "theatrically lit" locations (Rosenbaum) are connected by the meaningless hustle and bustle of the modern city (Mottahedeh "Crude Extractions"), with its threateningly tall cement buildings and noisy cars. *Mudbrick and Mirror* is mainly a realistic film, but what we see in the mirror of reality is a mere façade of humanity. The real spiritual void is in the mudbrick, not readily visible to the *flâneur's* eye, dazed by the mirror.

In the last sequence of the film, Taji leans against the orphanage wall in complete desperation, as the camera slowly moves away from her. She is, like the rest of the children, another cog in the machine, a mere name on an ID card, helpless, with no control over her life. The camera slowly pulls back, leaving Taji and everyone else in the confines of this world. It will take the audience a few seconds to appreciate the gravity of the message and the sombreness of the scene.

Mudbrick and Mirror offers a careful and nuanced response to Iranian modernity. Golestan's approach to and position regarding modernity are never superficial. About half a century later, his response to a direct question about the subject is still as nuanced, albeit less radical: "One of the heated debates among intellectuals in the 1960s is that of tradition and modernity. And the reaction that society has in the face of the Shah's project of modernization (authoritarian modernization). How do you assess this incongruence between tradition and



Fig. 23. *Mudbrick and Mirror*. “Taji leaning against the wall in the orphanage corridor.” Screenshot.

modernity?” asks Jahed, to which Golestan replies, “There was no incongruence between tradition and modernity. The country was moving and changing very rapidly.... You focus on dictatorship and what not. Inside that dictatorship, interesting things were happening too, that is the state was not able to control all things”:

...

J – Were you critical of the state or not?

G – One has to be critical all the time. I’m nothing if I’m not critical.... I am talking to you now and you are avoiding being critical. You say that period was a dictatorship..., but what does that mean? That it would have been better if that period had never happened? If it had never happened, many things wouldn’t have happened.... Iraq would have attacked Iran.... You can’t be against modernity.... That would be naïve. Obviously, there was dictatorship. All those who didn’t benefit, were saying ... this is terrible and all those who did, were saying this is great. This is wrong. Both have to benefit. (*Writing with the Camera* 69-71)

Golestan's responses to Jahed are similarly ambiguous. He adopted this strategy to allow for innovative interpretations of his work. What is clear, however, is that he was never a radical revolutionary or a nativist, regarding every aspect of modernity as harmful and intrusive. He was more concerned about the downtrodden who were not raised from poverty even by the Shah's modernization project. What one grasps from reading the entire interview with Jahed is that Golestan was irate about the corruption of the statesmen, the duplicity of the intellectuals, and the philistinism of the middle class. His outlook was inspired by Marxist theory and he thus saw the history of Iran in the 20th century as a transition from "feudalism to comprador bourgeoisie" (Jahed, *Writing with the Camera* 69), and foresaw the inescapable consequences of steering the country down that path.

Golestan's cinema is as defiant against Filmfarsi as his personality. He rejects any pigeonholing of his films; even Jahed's attempt to associate him with Antonioni and his hackneyed interpretations, based on superficial understanding of theory, greatly upset him. Jahed's attempt to classify him according to rigid taxonomies leads to an explosive response:

J – What does the man's [Hashem's] cowardice and physical incapacity point to?

G – In the end, the woman [Taji] tells him that you brought this baby and I thought it was my saviour and put my hopes up. But then you took the baby away and did away with her. I am not with you anymore. I know what I'll do. I have to do something on my own. The main thing is that everyone has to do their own thing.

J – To what extent was this a feminist outlook?

G – Nothing! Nothing! Cliché after cliché! Don't try to force things on me, young man! (Jahed, *Writing with the Camera* 189).

Aside from his critique of Iranian masculinity, his ridicule of commercial cinema, and his disdain for duplicitous intellectuals, Golestan's philosophical critique of modernization is the most interesting aspect of his oeuvre, but also the least examined. The orphanage scene in *Mudbrick and Mirror* and the hammer scene in *Wave, Coral, and Rock* are two examples of his mastery of cinematic creation and his insightful understanding of the philosophical discourse of modernity and its adverse impact on the human psyche.

Golestan still does not miss an opportunity to express his disdain for Āl-e Ahmad's ideas and to point out minor inaccuracies in his *Westoxication* in an attempt to discredit his entire intellectual project, but at the time of their close friendship, they spent much time together, were in the Tudeh Party together, and developed an intellectual camaraderie that was reflected in his films. It is important to approach and interpret the New Wave in general and Golestan's films in particular within their historical context.

CONCLUSION

This chapter is a historical overview of the commercialization of cinema in Iran and the gradual emergence of the first Iranian New Wave after the coup. It examines the collaborations between Saedi and Taghvaei, Farrokhzad and Golestan, and Taghvaei and Golestan as examples of the emergence of literariness in Iranian cinema, which served as models for several decades. The chapter regards Taghvaei's *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* as an often-overlooked film that, like *The Cow*, *Still Life*, and several others, depicts the alienation of the Iranian middle class under the transformative modernizing regime of the time.

This chapter examines Golestan's treatment of modernity as, in essence, informed by the conscious or unconscious discernment of a structural tension that existed in Iranian society: the clash of instrumental rationality with the pre-modern rationality of the Global South, which is an

amalgam of collectivism, religiosity, and tradition. Instrumental rationality underlies modern capitalism, commodifying, alienating, and destroying phenomena, subjects, and relations in order to establish new relations that follow the practical logic of reaching profit as quickly as possible. As Golestan's documentaries and *Mudbrick and Mirror* demonstrate, the traumatizing onslaught of instrumental rationality into Iranian society led to alienation, income inequality, mass unemployment, and ultimately revolution against the Shah's dictatorship.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In a debate with Alex Callinicus at the “Marxism 2009” conference, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek invoked Adorno’s *Three Studies on Hegel*, a response to the “patronizing” question of what is still alive and what is dead in Hegel (qtd. in Žižek): “According to Adorno, such a question presupposes an arrogant position of a judge”, who can graciously “concede” to something being still relevant. However, Žižek continues: “But Adorno points out, when we are dealing with a truly great philosopher, the question to be raised is not ‘what can this philosopher tell us?’ but the opposite one: ‘what are we (our contemporary situation) in his eyes? How would our epoch appear to his (or her, of course) thought?’” (“What Does It Mean to Be a Revolutionary”).

Many critics of Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad have similarly placed Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad outside of their historical context and blamed them, often with much “aggression” (Alijani, “Hatred for Shariati”), for how their work was read and their teachings put into practice after their deaths. As Hunter notes, Shariati is often accused of instrumentalizing Islam, being a “totalitarian ideologue,” and a “mastermind” of the current system of governance in Iran (50). Many of these accusations, prominent in non-academic literature about post-coup Iran, are based on misreadings of Shariati’s and Āl-e Ahmad’s works.

Mirsepasi’s depiction of Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad as nativist (25-26) has led to the possibility of their being unfairly blamed for the political totalitarianism and oppression that followed in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution. This has opened a space for further mischaracterizations of Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad that have been presented in European and

North American news outlets on a regular basis,³⁴ so that non-academic literature on post-coup Iran assumes a patronizing position, as explained by Žižek, towards Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad.

There are however, more thoughtful and balanced criticisms that deserve to be noted. For instance, in his review of Āl-e Ahmad's *Westoxication*, Dariush Ashouri notes that several points in this text have not been properly conceptualized. In Ashouri's view, it is not clear what Āl-e Ahmad meant by the West: does it mean all "industrial nations," or does it include "Japan and Czechoslovakia...[or]...Romania" (18)? Ashouri further admits: "I do not understand what Āl-e Ahmad means by 'the machine'; perhaps he means automobiles of some sort, otherwise if he means production machinery, the West has been against their export to its subordinate countries" (20).

My response to such critiques is that Shariati, Āl-e Ahmad, and Shayegan should be read within their own historical contexts, which were, in this case, influenced by anticolonial movements across the Global South, and critical counter-Enlightenment, which had become very popular in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. If Shariati or Āl-e Ahmad were alive today, however, their philosophical discourse would most likely be focused more on neoliberalism and the culture industry than on bolstering Islamic mythology as an anticolonial force. As Reza Alijani, a proponent of neo-Shariati thought, contends, "religiosity, socialism, and radicalism" were the "dominant discourses" in post-coup Iran, and Shariati was the child of his times. He had no choice but to engage with those trends, which, in Alijani's view, constituted the dominant discourse in post-coup Iran. Alijani admits that nowadays, democracy has become the

³⁴ For instance, Majid Mohammadi calls Shariati "the ideologue of the oppressive state" and blames him for not speaking out for LGBTQ+ rights in his speeches; Milani sees a direct link between Shariati's thought and the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* [Guardianship of the Jurist] ("Ali Shariati: Political Islam"), upon which the position of the Supreme Leader in the current Iranian constitution is based; and Bahram Moshiri, a popular TV personality, regards Shariati as a precursor to Ayatollah Khomeini and a "seeker of despotism" ("Doctor Ali Shariati").

“criterion to assess notions and actions” (13), and if Shariati were alive, he would recast his intellectual project accordingly.

In my view, Shariati’s thought can be distilled into three core themes: critique of *zar, zur*, and *tazvir* [Capital, Coersion, and Hypocrisy] (“Of You Two Witnessing Martyrs”), for which, as noted in previous chapters, he offers three antidotes: *erfan*, *barabari*, and *azadi* [Mysticism, Equality, and Freedom]. The former tripartite conceptualization corresponds somewhat to present-day capitalism, colonialism, and religious fundamentalism; nonetheless, distilling his thought into a critique of these three trends should also take into account their transformation over the last five decades. All three have undergone fundamental changes since Shariati’s death. Capitalism now resembles a neoliberal empire; nation-states have become substrates to the global reach of multinational corporations, whose agendas are often at odds with the governments that host them. In much of the Global North, quasi-legal surveillance of various forms of communication technology has led to a panoptical police state, from which citizens can hardly imagine any escape. Colonialism has acquired new layers of meaning after 9/11. The war on terror is now the cover story for attempts at regime change and the expansion of the empire. *Fin-de-siècle* attempts at colonization that were made in the name of expanding Christianity or civilizing the natives are now made through neocolonial dependency and in the name of foreign investment. Cultural imperialism benefits from the global reach of American hegemony over pop culture, which works insidiously to promote cultural whiteness and mindless consumerism of short-lived cultural commodities. Finally, religious extremism has become the face of Islam in mainstream media as, in the absence of viable leftist political and intellectual alternatives, religious extremist and nativist discourses have managed to position themselves as vanguards of

a fake anticolonial movement, one that Tariq Ali refers to as “the anti-colonialism of fools” (126).

What the literature regards as contradictory in Āl-e Ahmad and Shariati’s thought is a result of a rigid, binary framework. In light of Žižek’s proposition, this study has attempted to engage with Shariati and Āl-e Ahmad at a more theoretical level and to offer a progressive reading of their oeuvres. Their projects view the anticolonial, anti-capitalist, and critical counter-Enlightenment movement before the revolution as an open-ended, unfinished attempt to formulate an indigenous response towards European modernity. If we adopt this approach, a revisiting of Islamic mythology to make it more flexible and responsive to contemporary issues or promote social justice should be welcomed, not rejected as a strategic blunder. Shariati’s and Āl-e Ahmad’s approaches to Islam were more sociological than theological. Just as Shariati was trying to reclaim Islam and end the clergy’s prerogative over it, which led to the “Islam minus the clergy” thesis, we should read Shariati in a post-Islamist light. As Mahdavi notes, a distinction should be made between Shariati’s “intrinsic” and “contingent” ideas; what is intrinsic in Shariati’s thought “is about freedom and democracy without capitalism, social justice and socialism without authoritarianism, and modern spirituality without organized religion and clericalism” (“Post-Islamist Trends” 103).

There is much more to Shariati’s and Āl-e Ahmad’s thought than their conversation with Islam. Their critique of alienation, disenchantment, and rationalization points to Āl-e Ahmad, Shariati, and also Shayegan’s critique of metaphysics, or lack thereof, in Eurocentric modernity. Horkheimer and Adorno also lamented this deficit, viewing the cold logic of modernity as a “machinery of thought” under the Enlightenment, which “subjugates existence” and hence

blindly remains “satisfied with reproducing it”. Questions in metaphysics, such as the nature of being, time, space, or truth, remain unanswered in that tradition. In comparison, Āl-e Ahmad’s criticism of regimentation, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, can be read in the light of the observation that “the expulsion of thought from logic ratifies in the lecture hall the reification of human beings in factory and office” (Horkheimer and Adorno 20, 23).

In the case of Shariati, one largely unexplored aspect of his thought is his response to the disenchantment of the world. He describes his worldview as a “spiritual interpretation” (*Bazgash* 479) that involves an understanding of the cosmos “not as a material, non-conscious, purposeless, and absurd system, but as a living, sentient, self-conscious, rational, body with will, cognizance, ideals, and creativity” (479). Such a spiritual worldview is missing from Enlightenment. Modern science has “discarded meaning” and replaced it with “the formula,” a shift in philosophical inquiry that only seeks to dominate “nature...and human beings. Nothing else counts” (Horkheimer and Adorno 3, 2).

A regressive return to tradition and religion was not at the core of Shariati’s and Āl-e Ahmad’s thought; they, and especially Shariati, seem to have reached the conclusion that without a revitalizing, fresh reading of tradition, mobilizing the mostly-religious underclasses would be impossible. Shariati, in fact, poked fun at members of the Tudeh Party who would go to remote villages and talk to illiterate farmers about Marx and Lenin:

After a few sentences in philosophical ostentatiousness and very scientific ideological subjects [the peasants] would have become so aware of their conditions...that they would have picked up their hammer and sickle, ready for battle, acrimoniously leaving the farm, running behind you, But a moment later, you realize that...no! They are running *after* you, and you ... are running ...

for shelter “from the peasants” towards “police protection” (*A Return* 56-57; my italics).

In a similar way, Āl-e Ahmad was critical of Iran’s indecision in the face of the machine, or technology, but did not advocate a rejection of modernity and a complete return to tradition. Such a rejection would contradict his call to Iranians to overcome their fear of technology and attempt to master it. Bijan Abdolkarimi, a serious critic of Āl-e Ahmad, admits that he had two “cures” for the disease of westoxication: first, “overcoming ... our technophobia and attempting to build [the machine],” and second, “relying on historical authenticities in culture and a return to tradition” as the last line of defense against Westoxication (“A Survey of Āl-e Ahmad’s Thought”). In post-coup Iran, repositioning Islam was the main antidote against colonial modernity.

Nevertheless, Shariati’s and Āl-e Ahmad’s anticolonial reading of Islam does not amount to an instrumentalist approach to religion. Shariati is commonly criticized for having ideologized Islamic mythology (Hudashtian; Shayegan), in order to make it into a revolutionary force against the Shah, and Āl-e Ahmad is criticized, usually based on his autobiographical novel, *Sangi Bar Guri* [*Thumbnail on a Grave*], for not being devout enough, and therefore being an instrumentalist. As Shireen Hunter notes, contrary to these claims, their treatment of Islam was not “with a superficial knowledge of Islam” or a cynical attitude to make their “message appealing to the religious masses” (50). These criticisms of instrumentalism assume the position of an arbiter of the truth of the religion and the qualities of a follower of that religion, which, in my opinion, stems from an ontologically problematic understanding of Islam, as a concrete entity existing in the realm of physicality. My response is that Islam is neither abstract nor monolithic. There are as many nuances of Islam as its 1.7 billion followers. Islam is a collection of texts and

contexts, whose meaning depends on the act of reading by those who regard themselves as Muslims. Islam is the sum of its followers, making the religion a protean entity whose essence varies based on various readings, propensities, and necessities of a given historical moment. In brief, Islam is different things to different people, and no claim can be laid to its essence by anyone. The process of interpretation never ends, and the meaning of Islam is constantly deferred. As such, no one can claim a monopoly over what the religion involves or who can be considered inside or outside of it.

In an attempt to address the wide range and depth of these transformations, this study has revisited the scholarly literature concerning the discourse of *A Return to Self* and identified a gap that stems from lumping the discourse of *A Return to Self* with Khomeinism. My focus has been to prove that, despite what its title might suggest, the discourse of *A Return to Self* was not a nativist recoiling in the face of modernity, but rather an attempt to propose indigenous alternatives to the Eurocentric version of modernity. I have also attempted to theorize the discourse of *A Return to Self* and to prove that, despite certain claims, this discourse has been much more nuanced and complex than it has been portrayed. The first chapter identified the core notions of the discourse of *A Return to Self* and situate that discourse as the theoretical framework of this study within the sociopolitical climate of post-coup Iran. The second chapter traced that discourse's effects on Āl-e Ahmad's literary circle and the Isfahan literary school. The works of Gholamhosein Saedi, Bahram Sadeghi, and Shahnush Parsipur, three post-coup novelists, and their themes, motifs, characters, and descriptions, which can be read as interlocutions with the prevalent dissident discourse of the times, are examined in a dialectical conversation with the discourse of *A Return to Self*. Farrokhzad The third chapter provides an overview of various movements in post-coup poetry and distinguishes between romanticism and

Romanticism in order to create a rationale and a theoretical framework through which the works of Sepehri and Farrokhzad can be read in terms of that in the first chapter. The fourth chapter, on the other hand, focuses on the distinction between commercial and intellectual cinema in the Iranian First Wave. It discusses Ebrahim Golestan as the precursor of the Iranian First Wave and his protégé, Naser Taghvaei, who was also in close intellectual affinity with the discourse of *A Return to Self* thanks to his collaboration with Gholamhosein Saedi. The critical engagement with these works of fiction, film, and poetry confirms my initial argument that the approach toward modernity and tradition taken in the works discussed here is not rigidly dualistic but is nuanced and complex and demands more attention than it has previously been given in studies of Iranian modernity.

THE DISCOURSE OF *A RETURN TO SELF* IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

An examination of the values and principles shared by the authors who, to various degrees, were affiliated with the discourse of *A Return to Self* demonstrates that neocolonialism, rapid and uneven modernization, alienation, spiritual crises, and religious fundamentalism were the main problems facing Iranian society. According to Shariati, the triangle of *zar-o zur-o tazvir* [Capital, Coercion, and Hypocrisy] were the root of all other evils. The irony is that in less than a century, all of these problems have not only become entrenched in Iranian society, but have even become official policy, especially after the adoption of neoliberal policies in the late 1990s. Since Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani took office as president in 1989 and Mohammad Khatami was elected in 1997, neoliberal policies have been introduced into Iran's economy and pursued by all levels of government. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 took place under the banner of social justice, political freedom, economic independence, and a spiritual awakening in the face of Western cultural decline, spiritual decadence, and economic inequality. However, all those ideals have

been replaced by an oligarchy of Islamist neoliberals who have thrown the country into a deep economic, cultural, and political quagmire. In brief, the Islamic revolution of 1979 has not met its goals. The three evils of *zar-o zur-o tazvir* still persist, and the idea of *A Return to Self* still remains an unfinished project.

University of Tehran professor Yusof Abazari provides a clear overview of the current condition under Islamist neoliberalism. He can be regarded as a 21st-century counterpart of Shariati in this respect. Abazari observes that neoliberalism is the logical expansion of one theoretical percept: “The market determines the truth”. This is not a play on words; for proponents of neo-liberalism, it is “an epistemological conviction, the debate between philosophers and theologians [regarding the nature of truth, etc.] is like childish frolic for them....As long as that frolicking does not interfere with their truth, they ignore it,” but as soon as scholars and thinkers in the Humanities “cast a critical look in their way, they will be regarded as enemies” (“Rationalism, Centrism”). With regard to Iranian neoliberalism, Abazari adds, “neoliberal epistemology has been the guiding light for all post-revolution [1979 onwards] governments, including centrist, reformist, or conservative,” and their aim is “the assimilation of Iranian economy in the global markets” (“Rationalism, Centrism”). Proponents of neoliberalism in Iran are “nowhere to be found before elections and avoid conspicuous endorsement of any candidate because they need to sell their product to all governments. After the elections, however, they turn up again to offer ‘scientific economics’ and provide consultation to all administrations—all administrations!” (Abazari, “Rationalism, Centrism”).

The rise of neoliberalism in Iran has been accompanied by the worrisome emergence of a hyperbolic nationalism. The discourse of Aryanism, a false discourse of return that was vehemently sanctioned by the Pahlavi regime, has become widespread. Some Iranians now reject

Islam as the religion of Arab occupiers and call for a return to an idealized pre-Islamic identity. Such use of Aryan discourse in Iran was, in fact, spearheaded by the Shah, who chose the epithet *Aryamehr* [light of Aryans] for himself. The Shah did not hesitate to express his lack of amusement at his land's geographical location: "Yes, we are Easterners, but before that Aryans," he had contended. "What Middle East? Nobody can find us there anymore.... We are an Asian power, a power whose beliefs and philosophy resembles European powers, above all the French" (qtd. in Zia-Ebrahimi 105). In a private meeting with Sir Anthony Parsons, then the British Ambassador to Iran, he claimed that Iran's placement in the Middle East was "a geographical accident" and that it should have been among its "family of European nations" (105). The culmination of the Iranian brand of Aryanism was *Jashn-ha-ye 2500 Saleh* [The 2500-Year Festivities], a garish celebration of the Shah's birthday in 1971. World leaders were invited to a "kitsch" show in the ruins of Persepolis, for which 2500 wine bottles were flown in from Paris and Iranian caviar was served to the dignitaries. The Shah addressed King Cyrus's tomb in his oft-quoted speech: "Sleep at ease, Cyrus, for we are awake" (Ali 128). The event cost 300 million dollars, "which must have included the expenses of the non-state celebrities present – enough money to feed the entire population of a third world country for several months" (Ali 128). Zia-Ebrahimi's exhaustive etymological and historical analysis shows that the entire false equivalency of the Aryan race in Europe and the Aryan discourse in Iran was based on several historical misunderstandings, unsubstantiated claims, and linguistic misreadings. The term, nevertheless, is still widely used in Iran and can be heard almost daily basis several Los Angeles-based, low-budget satellite channels that remain loyal to the Pahlavi family and imagine the dynasty's ascent to power.

Although the 1971 celebration of Royalism attracted massive criticism and even ridicule from dissident intellectuals, such sentiment is nowadays met with nostalgic wistfulness. The zeitgeist of Iran in the first half of the 21st century is very different from what it was after the 1953 coup. Apart from the critical movement that has always been a minority, the main struggle in post-coup Iran was between Islam as an anticolonial force and the West as the bastion of colonialism and decadence. Now, however, the battle is between three forces: Islamism as the oppressive ideology of the clerical oligarchy; (neo-)liberals who call for integration into the global economy, while clinging on to a modern reading of religion; and a militant secularism that intends to chase every last unicorn of religiosity out of Iranian public sphere. The critical movement is still a minority. Every year, a large number of Iranians travel across the country to visit the sepulchre of Cyrus the Great (c. 600-530 BC), the idolized Achaemenid King, to celebrate the Persian New Year, and some of them chant chauvinist, anti-Arab slogans. During the mass protests in early 2018, which involved 90 cities and towns across the country, royalist chants could be heard, lionizing Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878-1944), Mohammad Reza's father and the founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty. The neoliberal policies of the last four presidents are now taking their toll on the lower-income strata. Combined with mass unemployment and an increasing wealth gap, the situation has become somewhat similar to the Weimar period in Germany, and pre-Trump America for that matter, where both conservative and liberal parties are abhorred and are disappearing (Chomsky, qtd. in Hedges). In Iran as well, new mass protests have included chants rejecting both *Osul-gara* [Principalist] and *Eslah-talab* [Reformist] fronts. Before the rise of Trump, Chomsky had predicted, "with uncanny insight," the rise of a Trump-like figure six years before the 2016 elections:

There [in Weimar Germany] it was the Jews. Here it will be the illegal immigrants and the blacks. We will be told that white males are a persecuted minority. We will be told we have to defend ourselves and the honor of the nation. Military force will be exalted.... This could become an overwhelming force. And if it happens, it will be more dangerous than Germany. The United States is the world power.... I don't think all this is very far away. If the polls are accurate, it is not the Republicans but the right-wing Republicans, the crazed Republicans, who will sweep the next election. (qtd. in Hedges)

In Iran, as we witness the gradual emergence of the cracks in the stern-looking façade of the Islamic Republic, a nationalist, Aryanist, neoliberal political force could easily captivate the disillusioned masses, fill the political vacuum, and rise to power. The Iranian version of Trump is ready to be born. All these considerations and recent developments show that Iranian society is still in dire need of a legitimate discourse, a critical return to self that would strive towards social justice.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

One of the shortcomings of this study is its lack of engagement with the consequential influence of Heidegger on the post-coup Iranian intellectual milieu, specifically Ahmad Fardid. The literature on Fardid is slowly developing,³⁵ but more work needs to be done on how he read Heidegger. Fardid was an oral philosopher, most of whose teachings took place in his home with a highly devout and infatuated circle of disciples, among which Āl-e Ahmad and Dariush Ashouri are perhaps the most outstanding. In fact, Āl-e Ahmad borrowed the concept of Westoxication from Fardid, albeit using it for his own purposes, to Fardid's dismay. Indeed, he is

³⁵ See Mirsepassi, for example.

said to have accused Āl-e Ahmad of not having understood what he had meant by Westoxication. As far as is known, in addition to Mirsepassi's recent monograph, Bijan Abdolkarimi has conducted a comprehensive study of Fardid's thought, published in *Heidegger in Iran: An Overview of the Life, Work, and Thought of Seyyed Ahmad Fardid*. Another recent publication in this regard is a transcription of some of Fardid's talks by his devoted follower Mohammad Maddadpour, published as *Didar-e Farrahi va Fotuhat-e Akhar-o-Zaman [The Divine Encounter and the Prophetic Revelations]*. It would be interesting to see how a scholar with a robust understanding of Heidegger would evaluate Fardid's reading of him and what transformations Heidegger's thought underwent in Iran both before and after the 1979 revolution.

Another topic that is somewhat intertwined with the study of Fardid's thought is the study of the philosophical roots of Sufism and the possibility of extracting a critique of Enlightenment from Sufi scriptures and teachings. Such a study would certainly have to trace the influences of South Asian mysticism on Islamic mysticism and would have to include a survey of various modes of rationality, especially instrumental rationality, in the Enlightenment, and attempt to extract an epistemic alternative to the Enlightenment approach to metaphysics. Instrumental rationality is taken for granted as the basis of technological innovation in the present day. For instance, when defining artificial general intelligence, developers of artificial intelligence (AI) take instrumental rationality as the building block of human behavior while completely ignoring more intuitive modes of encountering and understanding the world. Such a study might also involve an attempt to define spirituality in the age of atheism on a philosophical level. Is it possible to be spiritual and atheist at the same time? If the answer is yes, what would the pillars of such a mode of thinking be, and how could that change the course of technological innovation? Two recent monographs that have overlapped with this subject are Saffari's *Beyond*

Shariati: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and Islam in Iranian Political Thought (2017), which presents the neo-Shariati reading of Shariati's spirituality as an alternative to Enlightenment, and Hamid Dabashi's *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene*, which highlights the role of care in Iranian culture as an alternative to Enlightenment. Saffari's and Dabashi's works, combined with my suggestion for a textual analysis of Sufi and East/South Asian mystical texts, can further contribute to the unfinished critical project of *A Return to Self*.

Finally, based on the introductory remarks of Abazari about the infiltration of neoliberal policies into the mindset of the policymakers after the revolution, a multidisciplinary study at the intersection of economics, sociology, and cultural studies could shed light on the widening wealth and income gap in Iran or the romanticization of pre-Islamic figures such as King Cyrus. This study would be particularly beneficial if it examined the philosophical roots of such an astonishing reorientation among Iranian politicians in outlook and policy from the anticolonialism of the 1970s to the urge for assimilation into the global market.

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