

# Escaping from Orientalized Orientals: Studying *Occidentosis* as a Methodological Polemic for Regaining Eastern Identity *versus* West

Jalal Farzaneh Dehkordi, Mohammad Amin Mozaheb\*

Department of Foreign Languages, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran

## Email address:

mozaheb.ma@gmail.com (M. A. Mozaheb)

\*Corresponding author

## To cite this article:

Jalal Farzaneh Dehkordi, Mohammad Amin Mozaheb Escaping from Orientalized Orientals: Studying *Occidentosis* as a Methodological Polemic for Regaining Eastern Identity *versus* West. *English Language, Literature & Culture*. Vol. 2, No. 4, 2017, pp. 31-36.

doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20170204.11

**Received:** May 3, 2017; **Accepted:** May 9, 2017; **Published:** July 12, 2017

---

**Abstract:** Although Iranian society has not been directly colonized by Western countries over the past centuries, the colonizing strategies of some of these countries have been successful during various historical periods. Furthermore, Iranian intellectuals have taken diverse orientations towards the Western ideology. Nonetheless, debates on Western influences on Iranian culture and the orientations that could be taken towards them reached their climax during the Constitutional Revolution of Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued to the Pahlavi Dynasty. It is said that Jalal Ale-Ahmad was among those intellectuals who were deeply influenced by the issue of Western influence on Iranian society. As a translator of some Western literary works, Ale-Ahmad could not have a nativist orientation towards Western influences. Nonetheless, he did not accept that Iranian culture could be influenced entirely by the Western culture. In his *Occidentosis*, Ale-Ahmad, besides explaining the term Westoxification attempts to introduce the problem of Orientalism in Iran. The current study aims to shed light on Ale-Ahmad's personal views and orientation towards Westoxification. This paper will cover the problems of being oriented, in Ale-Ahmad's view and also address his proposed solutions for Westoxification. Likewise, the issue of the Orientized Orientals, as understood, by Ale-Ahmad will be put under consideration.

**Keywords:** Westoxification, Orientalism, Orientalized Orientals, Ale-ahmad, Occidentosis

---

## 1. Introduction

According to one of Edward Said's general definitions about Orientalism, this term can refer to "every or any occasion when a Westerner has either imagined or written about the East". Based on this presumption "Orientalism becomes an imaginative ... style of thought which covers two millennia of consciousness about East" [1]. In his *Orientalism* Said maintains that the textual and representational encounter between the East and West was launched as early as Aeschylus wrote the play *Persians* [2]. In a similar study, Ziauddin Sardar, also, traces the historical roots of Orientalism back to the "inception of Islam" when it became a rival for Christianity and also its problems [3].

Although the West/East encounter and the process of the *Otherization* of the Easterners by the West can be traced back to the textual products resulted from Crusades or the fights

between the Ancient Persians and Greeks, it can be said that "colonization in its form of naked aggression started from the Renaissance, when many of the European, colonial powers invaded, occupied or annexed, a huge area of the globe" [1].

In the case of Iran, the first serious colonial encounter of Europeans with the Asian country, happened during the *Safavid* period when Europeans engaged Iran militarily for the first time in the year 1515 [4]. Despite some limited military assaults, the Europeans' dealings with the Iranian government during the next 200 years of the *Safavid* and *Afshar* dynasties were in missionary, commercial, and cross-cultural forms [5]. The major encounters of European countries with Iranians took place during the *Qajar* dynasty which rose to power at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, it was "during the 125 years of *Qajar* rule that the Iranian empire transformed into a nation-state" [4]. During the *Qajar* period the Iranian government became

absolutely dependent on European governments [4]. As Clawson and Rubin explain: "Throughout Nasir al- Din Shah's rule, large numbers of European [sic] entered Iran. Towns that never before had a sustained look at the foreigner, found Europeans in their midst on a daily basis".

The process of modernization in Iran, which started with Nasir Al-Din Shah's reformist enterprises of Amir Kabir, Nasir al- Din Shah's prime minister, and later on followed by the Iranian Constitutional Revolution raised the subject of Westernization in the mind of many intellectuals. Consequently, from approximately the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century driven with the growing popularity of Iranian intellectuals who were influenced by the discourse of modernity, the debates of being affected by Western thoughts and culture was raised [6]. However, the economical and social miseries brought to people by dependent *Qajar* authorities and despots alongside the Western technical, political and social development led to three major strands among Iranian intellectuals:

- a) The first group, among them Mirza Malkom Khan, believed in the full acceptance of the Western civilization and "a break with the awkward past";
- b) The second group tried to articulate the oriental mysticism and Enlightenment's humanism; they also had an inclination towards the pre-Islamic Iranian traditions and tried to "reconcile the modern rationalism with the antiquated traditions"
- c) The third group were the Islamicists. These group believed in the Islamic Modernism and "advocated selective adoption of those Western scientific and cultural traits which were compatible with *Shari'ah* [Islamic rules] [7].

During the Pahlavi dynasty, although it is claimed that Iranian society moved more through modernism and technology the above categorization did not change very much. The sympathizers of the Western culture assumed that the society can make progress, but only under the pressure of perfect Western modernization and there were, however, some intellectuals who believed in the Iranian and Islamic background of the society as a medium for retrieving the glorious past. As, Mehrzad Boroujerdi expresses these three intellectual undertakings were viewing the West as the "other" which taking a distance from it or being absorbed by it could make changes for Iranians [7].

Among the intellectuals of the third group was Jalal Ale-Ahmad who in last phase of his intellectual quest, wrote "*Occidentosis*" in the year 1961. "*Occidentosis*" (*Gharbzadeghi* in Persian) was a political polemic written in the Pahlavi government. It was also one of the first books that criticized the Iranians' deep and opaque affection for the technological and imperialistic Western culture. At the same time it was trying to retrieve the Iranian oriental identity by Islamic Modernism and anti-consumerism.

This article, besides shedding light on the diagnostic attitudes of Ale-Ahmad about the Iranian society's problem of becoming West-stricken, proposes that Ale-Ahmad's *Occidentosis* as well as being a pathological polemic about

Iranian West-stricken society is a prescriptive work. In other words, *Occidentosis* besides explaining the problems of a West-stricken society attempts to prescribe some solutions for the problems which have affected the Eastern society of Iran. It also aims to explain that the prescriptions cut both ways. To put it other way, although mechanization and automation are criticized, they are not completely rejected. To put it simply, mechanization and automation according to Ale-Ahmad, can lead the society to a better situation, if they are localized and adopted to the needs of the society. Also it will be mentioned that Ale-Ahmad is introducing new strategies to the religious scholars (*Ulama*) of his day to deal with the Western technological and cultural productions in a way that they can use these technologies for confronting the West-stickness asserted from the West.

## 2. *Occidentosis*: The Word's Root and Its Significance

Ale-e Ahmad's critical opinions in the *Occidentosis* is towards two dominant areas within the Iranian culture: industrial domination of the West and the intellectuals who are propagating the Western culture without having any knowledge about their own culture or even the West. At the very beginning of *Occidentosis* Jalal Ale-e Ahmad says "I speak of "occidentosis" as of tuberculosis. But perhaps it more closely resembles an infestation of weevils. Have you seen how they attack wheat? From the inside." [8] So, it is clear that Ale- Ahmad is talking about a disease, which is somewhat invisible and not easily diagnosed. The Persian term *Gharb-Zadegi* or as it is translated: "Westoxification" "Occidentosis" "West-struckness" "Euromania" "Westoxication" and "Westamination" was not a term dubbed by Ale Ahmad himself. Indeed, as Ale- Ahmad himself mentions: "I owe the expression "occidentosis" to the oral communications of my other mentor, the esteemed Ahmad Fardid". Ale-Ahmad's borrowing of the word from Fardid renders a particular signification.

For Fardid, who was an oral scholar rather than a writer, East and West are not geographical concepts [9]. Considering East and West two existential poles, Fardid believes that East is based on celestial groundings. He considers East as the center of a circle around which the other philosophical circles including materialism, Hellenism, existentialism and other philosophical schools exist. According to Fardid for being redeemed and to reach God, the Western culture should build their foundations on the Eastern culture. Fardid considers the conceptual West as Imperialism and believes that in order to reach salvation from the materialism of western culture we should take refuge in spirituality [9]. So, according to Fardid, West could be destructive in the sense that it could damage the entire world by its materialistic ideas of its philosophers and politicians. Fardid's other message was that the damage caused by Western materialistic opinions could be compensated by regaining the Eastern spirituality. In other words the salvation of human culture was only possible by

returning to its Eastern sources.

Ale-Ahmad in *Gharbzadeghi* was trying to explain the problems of Iranian society from the viewpoints of his teacher. He wanted to say that the Iranians have had a “diseased” society and the source of this disease is their ill confrontation with the Western culture. As Mehran Kamrava says in his *Revolution in Iran* “Ale-Ahmad argued that Iran was dominated by the west in two areas: in its industrial and technological development and also in its culture” [10].

### 3. Technology, Mechanization and the Destruction of Eastern Culture

The danger of unrestricted and illogical technology can be explained by the fact that the automation and mechanization of the Western society which were inflicting not only the Iranian society but also the spiritual Eastern society in general. Ahmad Fardid, Ale-Ahmad's oral teacher and a Heideggerian thinker believed that the notion of technology was in opposition to the Eastern notions of spirituality [10]. However, Ale-Ahmad's idea against mechanization cannot be studied under an essentialist and radical negation of the machination. Ale-Ahmad sees the problem of mechanization and technology in two domains:

1. The problem of the technology which is not produced from within
2. The problem of changing of the society into a Westoxified society that threatens its cultural identity [11].

In a chapter of his *Gharbzadeghi*, named Mechanosis, Ale-Ahmad speaks about the process of the development of technology in a society which is not technological from within. In other words, he explains a situation in which technology and machinery which is produced by the West is not manufactured in the area. So, the culture that is begotten by it is not original [12].

The important factors that distinguish a transitional period of society with its characteristic crises are, from one standpoint, the advance of science, from another, the transformations of technique, technology, and the machine, and from a third, the possibility to speak of Western democracy. We have only a semblance standing for each of these three factors, a sample to display for purposes of ostentation. Given that the machine transformation, the technological transformation, engenders social crises in proportion to its speed, we who are now at the first bend of the road faced with the necessity of undertaking a two-hundred-year journey are in much worse shape than we suppose. Our fever delirium of crises is going to be far more persistent and disheartening than those that have arisen in similar countries [8].

The problem of mechanization is not just the problem of Iranians, or as it is seen in Eurocentrism, the third world society which is not competent of keeping technology as a positive notion. Ale-Ahmad believes that the immoral technological development of the Western culture has

reached a form of regimentation even in the Western culture. So, even in the Western society which is itself the producer of the technology, technology causes people to be adopted into uniform institutions. Furthermore, as Ale-Ahmad says, the regimentation of people is the result of mechanization. Wearisome work makes people uniform and tired of their life. So, even the Nihilism, and the absurdity of the human being in the Western society is the result of the Western mechanization and Eastern culture should not be inflicted with it.

However, the problems of the Western society do not finish here. According to Ale-Ahmad, ‘machine’ which is itself the product of pragmatism, scientism, and positivism can end in warmongering and colonization. According to Ale-Ahmad when the machine reaches the surplus, the owners enter in fierce competitions for exporting their extra productions. These exporting enterprises can be led to warmongering. In other words, the heavy industry can be led to the production of war machines and the weapons which destroy the other countries' productions [8]. Here, again, Ale-Ahmad returns to his teacher, Fardid, who believed that the whole problem of the West is its materialistic orientation towards man.

The negative effects of mechanosis are not just industrial. The pivotal role of mechanosis is cultural. According to Ale-Ahmad the machine comes into the Eastern society not as one part of it but the industrialization of the society has caused the machine to be used in the country. The problem is that the Eastern culture does not utilize the machine based on its inherent needs. On the contrary, the Western culture propagates and produces the need and then the Eastern societies should buy and use the machinery without any original need. To put it other way, the Easterners' need to machine has not been the reason of bringing it to the East. As Ale-Ahmad says:

West progressed through machine and technology to regimentation, party, barracks, and war. We have done just the reverse: from barracks and training for street wars to lining up, then to becoming party members, and then to becoming machine tenders. That is where we are headed [8].

The problem of mechanization and machine for the East is double. According to Ale-Ahmad while the Western culture is *nihilized* because of the mere mechanization and technology and many of Westerners are trying to be absorbed in the Eastern tradition [8] the Easterners start to be absorbed in the Western culture. The Westoxified culture generally forgets about the originality of its traditional symbols. The traditional Iranian wrestling which is practiced in *Zurkhaneh* is forgotten. The Iranian architecture and its function which are adapted to the Iranian climate are considered archaic and useless. Iranian traditional music is considered as something twanging which should be replaced with the Western rhapsodies [8]. The matter at issue is that Ale-Ahmad is not against the Western culture. Ale-Ahmad tries to awaken those Westoxified people who have forgotten their glorious past. He wants Iranian people be aware of their precious heritage. He asks:

Why shouldn't the nations of the East wake up to see what treasures they hold? Why, just because the machine is Western and we are compelled to adopt it, should we assume all the rest of the West's standards for life, letters, and art? [8].

In other words, the machine is not malicious but it should be controlled by the treasures of Eastern culture without changing or ruining the Eastern identity.

Although Ale-Ahmad finds the roots of the Iranian society in the Westoxification which is itself the result of Western mechanization, his prescription for the correction of the Westoxified society goes through the logical democratization and modernization. He writes:

As the problems are clarified, the solutions will be found. The role of education is to help break down every wall that has grown up around the center of command and leadership in this country and blocked access to it, made it a monopoly. I speak of a democratization of the nation leadership, that is, of removing it from the monopolistic grasp of this or that person or family. One may be no more explicit than this. The task of education is to tear down every wall raised in the path of progress and development [8].

In Ale-Ahmad's opinion, however, the democratization of Iranian nation does not go through the secularization of Iran. During the Constitutional Movement of Iran Sheikh Faz Al Allah Nuri, one of the *ulama* of Tehran "did turn against the movement once it became clear that the constitution was not to reinstate the *shari'a*" [10]. His complaints reached a critical point and Sheikh was condemned to be hanged as a fundamentalist. This brutal act of the other politicians is not acceptable in Ale-Ahmad's eyes. In his *Occidentosis* Ale-Ahmad writes:

I look on that great man's body on the gallows as a flag raised over our nation proclaiming the triumph of occidentosis after two hundred years of struggle. Under this flag we are like strangers to ourselves, in our food and dress, our homes, our manners, our publications, and, most dangerous, our culture [8].

Although Ale-Ahmad is introducing the Skeikh as a martyr who is killed for the dominance of Westoxification, he does not sympathize with the archaic and passive Islam. His Islam is modern, active and political. In other words if he believes that the perfect Utopia of early Islam can be an alternative for recovering the destroyed Eastern Identity [7], he does not act against the controlled technology and mechanization.

Because of all these reasons Ale-Ahmad contrary to Mehrzad Boroujerdi's idea, cannot be named a nativist [7]. If we consider nativism as the "desire to return to indigenous practices and cultural forms that existed in the pre-colonial society" [11], Ale-Ahmad is trying to return to cultural, national and religious originality by using the latest technology of Western society. So, the recovery and improvement of the indigenous culture of the Iranian people becomes possible by utilizing the Western machinery in a very knowledgeable and controlled way. Such a strategy lets the Iranian society resist against the globalization of cultures and the national and cultural resistance finds its significance.

Ale-Ahmad's idea about machine and the way that we control it proves that he believes in its utilization. Further, machine should not be the goal but a piece of production that can be controlled within our culture. Moreover, as he says, we should "put this jinni back in the bottle" [8]. In his short polemic Ale-Ahmad, prescribes the nationalistic and regional ways of production that start from the internal development of the local culture. He believes that the machine should be made according to our national and regional needs and it is clear that these national and regional needs can only be produced within the framework of an independent economy. It is clear that the educational system should also be adapted to such framework.

#### 4. Westoxified Intellectuals as Orientalized Orientals

In his *Orientalism*, Ziauddin Sardar introduces "Captive Minds" or "Orientalized Orientals". These characters are identified with their absolute ideological dependence on the Western thought. The point about these captive minds is that their interest in the Western tradition does not let them think independently and if they have a critical mind their theoretical reasoning is through the media of Western philosophy and polity [3]. Clearly, the educational methodology of the Western countries during the colonial period has been a reason for the emergence of such characters. Many of the Orientalized Orientals have become only familiar with the educational programs of the Western society and have not learned anything about their own cultural heritage. Such relationship between the colonizer and the colonized according to Albert Memmi (as cited in [1]) is an interdependent one. According to him "the colonial condition chained the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence, molded their respective character and dictated their conduct" [1]. Memmi's idea shows that even after the colonization is finished in a country and even in those countries which have been under the indirect hegemony of Western countries such a master and slave paradigm continues to exist. Memmi asks: "How could the colonized deny himself so cruelly ... How could he hate the colonizers and yet admire them so passionately?" [1].

The Orientalised Orientals symptom is mentioned in Ale-Ahmad's *Occidentosis* under the title of Westoxified intellectuals in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of his *Occidentosis* "*Asses in Lions' Skins*". Ale-Ahmad believes that the Westoxified has no character of himself and is always attracted to the western culture.

The occidentotic hangs on the words and handouts of the West. He has nothing to do with what goes on in our little world, in this corner of the East. If perchance he is interested in politics, he is cognizant of the faintest right or left tendencies in the British Labour Party and is more familiar with the current U.S. senators than with the ministers in his own government [8].

The Westoxified intellectual's main problem is his lack of

knowledge on his culture. The body of knowledge that he acquires comes from the Orientalists' unauthentic knowledge. Instead of the thick description of his local culture, a Westoxified intellectual refers to the orientalist's knowledge about the local cultures. As Ale-Ahmad believes that such dependence is so deep that the Westoxified "comes to know even himself in terms of the language of the orientalist". So clearly, Ale-Ahmad had identified the symptoms of the Orientalist Orientals about 60 years ago. He describes the Westoxified people as:

An occidentotic who is a member of the nation's leadership is standing on thin air; he is like a particle of dust suspended in the void, or a shaving floating on the water. He has severed his ties with the depths of society, culture, and tradition. He is no link between antiquity and modernity, nor even a dividing line between old and new. He is a thing with no ties to the past and no perception of the future [8].

Clearly, Ale-Ahmad does not mention his critical viewpoints without any prescription. He believes that those intellectuals who are not committed to Westoxification can change the Iranian Westoxified society. These intellectuals are not moving in the direction of the Westoxified norms. He mentions that these intellectuals according to pop psychology are maybe considered abnormal or unbalanced. However, as he mentions, the characteristic of these intellectuals is self-sacrifice. Ale-Ahmad believes that his society is at the verge of critical transformation. Clearly, the Orientalized Orientals cannot lead the society out of this transitory period. According to Ale-Ahmad, the educational system should not try to "homogenize" or "uniformize" those kind of students who do not have any tie with their past. The intellectuals who are the productions of such educational system will be Westoxified intellectuals who are only familiar with the Western tradition without having any interest in or knowledge about their local cultures.

If one can maintain a role for our educational system, it is to disclose outstanding personalities who, in the midst of this social disorder (arising from the crisis of occidentosis), can lead this caravan somewhere. The aim of our educational system, such as it is, must not and cannot be to conventionalize, to uniformize, to homogenize people so they will all put up with the existing situation and come to terms with it [8].

Thus, according to Ale-Ahmad, the Western style of education should be reformed and localized just as the machinery which is imported to the Eastern countries [14], [15]. Those intellectuals who understand and digest the cultural and local needs of their fellow citizens should take part in the localization of the education system. It is only after the propagation of this method of education that those students will be trained who are not considered as "Captive minds" or "Orientalized Orientals".

## 5. Conclusion

As it was mentioned in the beginning of the article Eastern and Western encounters and the Westerners' image-makings

of Islamic and Eastern culture have been existed since a long time ago. However, Iranians' major encounters with the Westerners have reached their climax during the *Qajar* period when the issues such as Constitutional Movement and Modernization of Iran were put forth. From this period into the contemporary age the intellectuals have provided different orientations towards the Western culture. Some of them have believed in complete acceptance of Western culture, some of them have negated it completely and the others have tried to adapt those necessary parts which are not against Islamic *Shari'a* and Iranian culture. Among the third group of intellectuals was Jalal Ale-Ahmad.

In his *Occidentosis* Ale-Ahmad tried to diagnose the problems of the Iranian Westoxified society and then tried to prescribe some methods which can change Iranian Westoxified society. These points can be extracted from the discussion:

1. Ale-Ahmad condemned the uncontrollable development of machine. According to him only the localized development of machine can help the Iranian society. It is clear that this controlled method of development can prevent the Iranian society from Westoxification.
2. Ale-Ahmad condemns those intellectuals who are standing "on the thin air". These Orientalized Orientals do not have any relation with their past culture and cannot lead the Iranian society out of its transitory period.
3. Ale-Ahmad believes that the self-sacrificing intellectuals without being trapped in the nativism, should be "ardent", not "Occidentotic".
4. Also his idea about the *Shari'a* and the clergymen is that they should adapt themselves to the modern trend of technology in order to use it as a means of struggling with Occidentosis.

## References

- [1] Gahndi, Leela (1998). *Postcolonial Theory, A Critical Introduction*. Australia: Allen and Unwin.
- [2] Said, Edward (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- [3] Sardar, Ziauddin (1999), *Orientalism*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- [4] Clawson, Patrick and Michele Rubin (2005). *Eternal Iran*. New York: Palgrave.
- [5] Wright, Dennis (2001). *The English amongst the Persians*. New York, I. B. Tauris Publishers.
- [6] Nabavi, Negin (1999) "The Changing Concept of the "Intellectual" in Iran of the 1960s" *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Summer).
- [7] Boroujerdi, Mehrzad (1996). *Iranian intellectuals and the West: The tormented triumph of nativism*. Syracuse University Press.
- [8] Ale-Ahmad, Jalal (1984). *Occidentosis, A Plague from the West*, Berkley: Mizan Press.

- [9] Dastgheib, Abdol-Ali, (1992), *Naghde Asare Jalal Ale-Ahmad*, Tehran: Zharf Publications.
- [10] Keddie, Nikki R. (1981) *Roots of Revolution*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [11] Tiffin, Hellen (2008). *Post-colonial Studies: The Key concepts*. New York: Routledge.
- [12] Farsoun, Samih k (Ed) (1992). *Iran, Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, New York: Routledge.
- [13] Kamrava, Mehran (1990). *Revolution in Iran*, London: Rutledge.
- [14] Nanquette, Laetitia (2017). Translations of modern Persian literature in the United States: 1979–2011. *The Translator*, 23 (1), 49-66.
- [15] Mirsepassi, Ali. (2017). *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid*. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press.