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1

Modernity, Heterotopia, and Homeless Texts

Modernity and heterotopia

A shift toward “historical epistemology” has altered the nature of scholarship on modernity and nationality.¹ Departing from objectivist and Eurocentric historiographies, postmodern and postcolonial scholars have begun to *reactivate* the *sedimented* practices that naturalized “the nation” and instituted Europe as the original home of modernity.² As the foundation of modern historical narratives, “the nation” is being revisited by scholars who view it not as a concrete and observable reality but as a modernist style of collective imagination, societal organization, and self-disciplining of citizens.³ By the contingent deployment of territory, history, language, ethnicity, and culture, the architects of modern *cosmopolitical* order naturalized the nation as a serially continuous and homogeneous entity endowed with a distinct identity and characteristic. By structuring thought-ways, patterns of identity, nations and nation-states regulated the modern time’s expanding gap between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation.”⁴ In the *new age* of “fateful simultaneity of spring and autumn”⁵ when everything seemed “pregnant with its contrary,”⁶ the apocalyptic expectation of the radical rupture of the time to come was transformed into an anticipated and planned “progress” toward the future. Displacing divine decree with human agency, the modernist notion of *progress* combined experience and expectation and thus “served the purpose of theoretically anticipating future historical movement and practically influencing it.”⁷ Revolution, development, progress, and liberation – these and other *temporalized* concepts – were employed to awaken a nation to “self-consciousness” and to normalize the experience of everyday life in rapidly changing modern times. The binary opposites of these concepts – reaction, tradition,

stagnation, and despotism – were often deployed against a nation’s internal “foes” who were marginalized and excluded from the national-political scene.

The reexamination of the Eurocentric definition of modernity has been at the center of recent historical *reactivations* of “modern times.”⁸ The conventional Enlightenment story treats modernity as a peculiarly European development and as a byproduct of “Occidental rationalism.”⁹ Viewed from within this hegemonic paradigm, non-European societies were “modernized” as a result of Western impact and influence.¹⁰ Thus Westernization, modernization, and acculturation were conceived as interchangeable concepts accounting for the transition of “traditional” and “non-Western” societies.¹¹ These assertions have been reevaluated by scholars examining the cultural genealogies and etiologies of modernity.¹² Locating “the West” in a larger global context beginning with the “Age of Exploration,” Stuart Hall suggests that “The so-called uniqueness of the West was, in part, produced by Europe’s contact and self-comparison with other, non-western, societies (the Rest), very different in their histories, ecologies, patterns of development, and cultures from the European model.”¹³ Demonstrating the critical importance of “the Rest” in the formation of “Western” modernity, Hall submits that “[w]ithout the Rest, (or its own internal ‘others’), the West would not have been able to recognize and represent itself as the summit of human history.”¹⁴ Hall’s revised conception of modernity allows for an expanded framework of analysis encompassing what I call the formative role of *heterotopic* experiences in the formation of the *ethos* of modernity.

In contrast to *utopias*, the imaginary places in which human societies are depicted in perfect forms, Michel Foucault explored *heterotopias* as alternative real spaces. As existing loci beyond the everyday space of experience, heterotopias “are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” These loci of alterity served the function of creating “a space of illusion that exposes every real space . . . a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill-constructed, and jumbled.” Calling the latter type a “compensatory” heterotopia, Foucault speculated that “on the level of the general organization of terrestrial space” colonies might have “functioned somewhat in this manner.”¹⁵ He offered as historical examples the regulated colonies established by Jesuits and Puritans. Similarly, sixteenth-century reports of European exploration of exotic heterotopias deepened the Renaissance “humanists’ understanding of human

motives and action” and enlarged their framework of understanding.¹⁶ “As late as the 18th century,” according to Stephen Toulmin, “Montesquieu and Samuel Johnson still found it helpful to present unusual ideas by attributing them to people in a far-off land like Abyssinia or Persia.”¹⁷ The attribution of “unusual ideas to people in a far-off land” was not merely a “literary device.”¹⁸ For instance, the physical presence of the Persian Ambassador Muhammad Riza Bayk (d. 1717) in France in 1715–16 provided the pertinent context for the imaginary scenarios informing the “unusual ideas” and the central question of *Persian Letters*: “How can one be Persian?”¹⁹ As spectacles and as native informants of exotic heterotopias, travelers like Muhammad Riza Bayk inspired native European spectators who in turn provided them with a space of self-recognition and self-refashioning. Considering the material significance of the “Rest” in the formation of “Western modernity,” such attributions can be considered as residues of a genesis amnesia in European historiography. Such a historiographical amnesia has made possible the fabrication of a coherent and continuous medieval and modern “Western Civilization.” As Maria R. Menocal has demonstrated, the “European Awakening” was “an Oriental period of Western history, a period in which Western culture grew in the shadow of Arabic and Arabic-manipulated learning.”²⁰

By recovering the significance of heterotopic experiences in the formation of the ethos of modernity, the lands beyond Europe, instead of being the reverse image of enlightenment and modernity, served as “laboratories of modernity,” as sites of the earliest sightings of “the hallmarks of European cultural production.”²¹ This has been explored in the historiographical works of Paul Rabinow, Sidney Mintz, Timothy Mitchell, Uday Mehta, Benedict Anderson, Gwendolyn Wright, and Nicholas Dirks, among others.²² Summarizing the contribution of these scholars, Ann Stoler observed that, “These reconfigured histories have pushed us to rethink European cultural genealogies across the board and to question whether the key symbols of modern western societies – liberalism, nationalism, state welfare, citizenship, culture, and ‘European-ness’ itself – were not clarified among Europe’s colonial exiles and by those colonized classes caught in their pedagogic net in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and only then brought ‘home’.”²³ For instance, in his study of French colonialism in Morocco Paul Rabinow observed that “[t]he colonies constituted a laboratory of experimentation for new arts of government capable of bringing a modern and healthy society into being.”²⁴ In *Imagined Communities* Anderson demonstrated that Creole communities developed “early conceptions of their nation-ness – well before most of Europe.”²⁵ Locating Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* in a larger trans-European

context, Stoler contends, “One could argue that the history of Western sexuality must be located in the production of historical Others, in the broader force field of empire where technologies of sex, self, and power were defined as ‘European’ and ‘western,’ as they refracted and remade.”²⁶ In the following chapter, I explain how the “founding” of Orientalism was informed by the works of *Persianate* scholars and scholarship in India.

In light of these recent studies it can be argued that modernity was not a homemade product of “Occidental rationality,” as asserted by Max Weber and universalized by “modernization” theorists. Alternatively, modernity can be viewed a product of a globalizing network of power and knowledge that informed the heterotopic experiences of crisscrossing peoples and cultures and thus provided multiple scenarios of self-refashioning. Whereas Europeans reconstituted the modern self in relation to their non-Western Others, Asians and Africans began to redefine the self in relation to Europe, their new significant Other. But what Toulmin calls the “counter-Renaissance” search for certainty,²⁷ constituted European modes of self-refashioning as archetypically universal, rational, and modern. This dehistoricizing universalist claim enabled European rationalists to obliterate the heterotopic context of their self-making and thus constitute themselves as the originators of modernity and rationality. This *amnesiac* or *forgetful* assertion gained hegemonic currency and thus constituted “non-Western” modernity as “Westernization.”

The universalist claims of European enlightenment has blackmailed non-European modernity and debilitated its historiography by engendering a tradition of historical writing that used a dehistoricized and decontextualized “European rationality” as its scale and referent. Iranian historians and ideologues, like their Indian and Ottoman counterparts,²⁸ developed a fractured conception of historical time that viewed their contemporary European societies ahead of their own time. This conception of historical time parallels the time-distancing devices of European anthropologists who denied *coevalness* to their contemporary non-Western societies.²⁹ Such a *schizochronic* conception of history informs the nationalist historiography of Iranian modernity, a historiography that assumes the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous Iranian and European societies.

Discursive affinities of nationalism and Orientalism

Recognized as the heterotopia of modernity and scientific rationality, Europe has been constituted as the horizon of expectation for the Iranian passage to modernity. Thus European history, as the *future past* of the

desired present, has functioned as a normative scenario for the prognosis or forecasting of the future Iran. This anticipatory modernity introduced a form of historical thinking that narrated Iranian history in terms of the European past. By universalizing that past, historical deviations from the European norm have been misrecognized as abnormalities. Thus, the development of feudalism, capitalism, the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, democracy, freedom, scientific rationality, and industry in the “well-ordered” Europe have informed the diagnoses of their lack, absence, retardation, and underdevelopment in Iran.³⁰ In other words, alternative non-European historical processes have been characterized as the absence of change and as unhistorical history. For instance, John Malcolm, the author of an influential Orientalist *History of Persia* (1815), which was translated into Persian in 1876, observed:

Though no country has undergone, during the last twenty centuries, more revolutions than the kingdom of Persia, there is, perhaps, none that is less altered in its condition. The power of the sovereigns, and of the satraps of ancient times; the gorgeous magnificence of the court; the habits of the people; their division into citizens, martial tribes, and savage mountaineers; the internal administration; and the mode of warfare; have continued essentially the same: and the Persians, as far as we have the means of judging, are at the present period, not a very different people from what they were in the time of Darius, and the Nousheerwan.³¹

In a more concise statement, Hegel (1770–1831) similarly asserted that, “The Persians . . . retained on the whole the fundamental characteristics of their ancient mode of life.”³² This dehistoricizing assumption – that is, the contemporaneity of an early nineteenth-century “mode of life” with that of ancient times – informs both Orientalist and nationalist historiographies that constitute the heightened period of European colonialism and imperialism as the true beginning of rationality and historical progress in Iran. Whereas a progressive conception of time informs the modern European historiography from the late eighteenth century to the present, the accounts of modern Iran, like that of other non-Western societies, are unanimously based in a regressive conception of history. Thus the passage to modernity has been constituted a radical break with the “stagnant” and eternally recurring Iranian mode of life.

Malcolm viewed Islam and “the example of the prophet of Arabia and the character of some of the fundamental tenets of his faith” as the most prominent factors “in retarding the progress of civilization among

those who have adopted his faith." These "retarding" factors explained why "every country inhabited by Mahomedans" never "attained a state of improvement which can be compared with that enjoyed by almost all those nations who form the present commonwealth of Europe." He concluded his recounting of the Iranian past with a reflection on its future. "The History of Persia, from the Arabian conquest to the present day," he claimed, "may be adduced as a proof of the truth of these observations: and while the causes, by which the effects have been produced, continue to operate, no material change in the condition of that empire can be expected." Malcolm wondered whether "the future destiny of this kingdom" could be altered with "the recent approximation of a great European power." The experience of the Ottomans who "wrapt up in the habits of their ancestors and . . . have for ages resisted the progress of that civilization with which they were surrounded" did not seem promising to him. Thus the proximity with European powers and the "consequent collision of opposite habits and faith, was more likely to increase than to diminish those obstacles which hitherto prevented any very intimate or social intercourse between Mahomedan and Christian nations."³³ This prognosis, a forerunner of the "Clash of Civilizations," was grounded in the epistemological differentiation of the progressive Christian "commonwealth of Europe" and the stagnant "Mahomedan nations" of Asia.

With the global hegemony of "the West," this binary opposition became an ever more significant component of an Iranian national historiography venerating progress, development, and growth. With these concerns, a celebratory history of Europe provided the normative manual for deciphering the abnormalities of Iran's past and for promoting its modernization, that is, Westernization. For instance, Ervand Abrahamian, the author of one of the most sophisticated accounts of modern Iran, offers a paradigmatic view of the nineteenth century, a view that is embedded in Persian historical writings. "Traditional Iran," in his estimation, "in sharp contrast to feudal Europe, thus had no baronial rebellions, no magna carta, no legal estates, and consequently no representative institutions." These and other *lacks* constitute the foundation for explaining a series of reformist failures of the nineteenth-century Qajars: "The attempt to construct a statewide bureaucracy failed. . . . The Qajars were equally unsuccessful . . . in building a viable standing army . . . [and] even failed to recapture the full grandeur of the ancient shah-in-shahs." By narrating a failed version of European history, this progressive historian of Iran assumes a typically Orientalist vantage: "For the nineteenth-century Europeans, the Qajar dynasty was an epitome

of ancient oriental despotism; in fact, it was a failed imitation of such absolutism."³⁴ Such a characterization is a common feature of Orientalist, nationalist, and also Marxist historiography of nineteenth-century Iran.³⁵ The opening paragraph of Guity Nashat's *The Origin of Modern Reforms in Iran* is, likewise, a testimony to the centrality of Europe in the horizon of expectation for "traditional" Iran:

In 1870 a young Iranian of modest background, Mirza Huseyn Khan, was presented with an opportunity to regenerate Iran. During the next ten years he introduced regulations that were designed to transform the country's traditional political, military, and judicial institutions to resemble Western models. He also attempted to introduce Western cultural innovations and Westernized modes of thought.³⁶

Viewed as a "Western model" used to transform "traditional" societies, "the modern," as in the above case, is commonly understood "as a *known history*, something which has *already happened elsewhere*, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content." As a mimetic plan, Iranian modernity, like its non-Western counterparts, can at best be hailed as a "project of positive unoriginality."³⁷ An eternally recurring Iranian premodernity was thus superseded by an already enacted "Western" modernity.

Viewing modernity as belated reduplication of "Western models," historians of Iran often invent periodizations that are analogous to standard European historical accounts. Recognizing Descartes's *Discours sur la Méthode* and Newton's *Principia* as two founding texts of modern thought in Europe, Iranian historians have the same expectations for the Persian rendering of these texts. In a modularized periodization of the Iranian "discovery of the West" and the "dissemination of European 'new learning'", Mangol Bayat, a historian of Qajar Iran, writes that a Persian translation of René Descartes's *Discourse* was commissioned by Arthur Gobineau and published in 1862.³⁸ Referring to I'tizad al-Saltanah's *Falak al-Sa'adah* (1861),³⁹ she adds that only one year earlier Isaac Newton and the idea of heliocentricity had been "introduced to the Iranian public."⁴⁰ This periodization concerning the introduction of modern European philosophical texts is similarly advanced by Faraydun Adamiyat, Elie Kedouri, Nikki Keddie, Jamshid Bihnam, and Alireza Manafzadeh.⁴¹ Adamiyat, a pioneering historian of Iranian modernity, contended that *Falak al-Sa'adah* and the Persian translation of *Discourse* provided the "context for rational transformation" (*zaminah-i tahavvul-i 'aqlani*) of nineteenth-century Iran. To dramatize the historical significance of

Descartes's translation, he speculated that all copies of an earlier 1853 edition of the text might have been burned.⁴²

In these accounts, the Comte de Gobineau, a French diplomat in Tehran as well as an infamous anti-Semite,⁴³ is credited as the initiator of the rationalizing tasks of translating Descartes's generative text of European modernity into Persian. Although Gobineau commissioned this translation, he doubted whether Iranians and other Asians were capable of absorbing modern civilization.⁴⁴ Like Gobineau, Iranian historians of scientific modernity often assume that "the defense of geocentrism was of greatest importance for Muslim traditional scholars, just as it was for the medieval church."⁴⁵ In such accounts the endeavor for modernity is often depicted as a contention between the rational European astronomy and the irrational Muslim astrology.⁴⁶ For example, Bayat writes that I'tizad al-Saltanah "rose in defence of Newton and other European scientists' theories, and he declared obsolete the 'knowledge of the ancients.'"⁴⁷ Likewise, Arjomand argues that I'tizad al-Saltanah's work "is the first book of its kind, aimed at combating the belief in traditional astronomy and astrology and bringing what might be termed scientific enlightenment to 19th-century Iran."⁴⁸

Recounting the contentions for scientific rationality, historians of modern Iran often select scholars who endorsed astrology and opposed heliocentrism as Muslim representatives, ignoring those who did not fit into this schema. By claiming that the Persian publication of Descartes in the 1860s is the beginning of a new age of rationality and modernity, these historians provide a narrative account that accommodates and reinforces the foundational myth of modern Orientalism, a myth that constitutes "the West" as ontologically and epistemologically different from "the Orient."⁴⁹ This Orientalist problematic has been validated by a nationalist historiography that constitutes the period prior to its own arrival as a time of decay, backwardness, and despotism.⁵⁰ By deploying the basic dogmas of Orientalism for the enhancement of its own political project, in this sense Iranian nationalist historiography has participated "in its own Orientalizing."⁵¹ As self-designated vanguards of modernity and national homogenization, both official and counter-official Iranian nationalists have naturalized and authenticated the working assumptions of Orientalism.

Homeless texts

In the mid-seventeenth century a purely self-congratulatory view of European civilization as the paragon of universal reason and the

concurring “blackmail of the Enlightenment” had not yet been formed. Similarly, Europe’s Oriental-Other had not yet been dehistoricized as only “traditional,” “static,” and “unchanging,” and Muslims were not viewed as “anti-scientific.” More significantly, historical thinking had not yet been confined to the boundaries of modern nation-states. It is during this period that an alternative account of a Persianate modernity can be retrieved. Predating the consolidation of modern nation-states and the co-optation of modernity as a state-legitimizing ideology, following Foucault, modernity may be envisaged as an ethos rather than a well-demarcated historical period.⁵² By envisaging modernity as an ethos rather than as a decisive epoch of the nation, historians of Iran and India may imagine a joint fact-finding mission that would allow for reactivating what the poet Mahdi Akhavan Salis has aptly recognized as “stories vanished from memory” (*qissah-ha-yi raftah az yad*).⁵³ These vanished stories may be retrieved from a large corpus of texts made homeless with the emergence of *history with borders*, a convention that confined historical writing to the borders of modern nation-states.

The convention of history with borders has created many *homeless texts* that have fallen victim to the fissure of Indian and Iranian nationalism. Although abolished as the official language of India in the 1830s, the intellectual use of Persian continued and Persian publications in nineteenth-century India outnumbered those produced in other languages. Publishers in Calcutta, Bombay, Lucknow, Kanpur, Delhi, Lahore, Hyderabad, and other cities in the Indian subcontinent also published more Persian books than their counterparts in Iran. Many of the literary and historical texts edited and published in India achieved canonical status in the neighboring Iran. Rammahan Roy, the acclaimed “father of modern India,” was in fact the editor of one of the first Persian newspapers, *Mir’at al-Akhbar* (1822). This Indo-Iranian intellectual symmetry continued until the end of the nineteenth century, when a Persian newspaper, *Miftah al-Zafar* (1897), campaigned for the formation of Anjuman-i Ma’arif, an academy devoted to the strengthening of Persian as a scientific language.⁵⁴ Whereas the notion of “Western civilization” provided a safety net supplementing European national histories, no common historiographical practice captures the residues of the colonial and national conventions of historical writing that separates the joint Persianate literary culture of Iran and India – a literary culture that is irreducible to Islam and the Islamic civilization. A postcolonial historiography of Indian and Iranian modernity must begin to reactivate the concurring history that has been erased from memory by colonial conventions and territorial divisions.

The conventional account of Persianate acquaintance with the Cartesian notion of “I think, therefore I am”, differs radically from an account retrievable from the *Travels* of François Bernier (b. 1620), a French scholar who resided in India for a few years. Approximately 200 years prior to Arthur de Gobineau, Danishmand Khan Shafi’a Yazdi (d. 1670?), a Mughal courtier and Iranian émigré who was aware of current intellectual developments in Europe, dared to be wise (in Kant’s sense of *sapere aude*) and commissioned Bernier to translate into Persian the works of René Descartes (1560–1650), William Harvey (1578–1657), and Jean Pecquet (1622–1674).⁵⁵ Bernier (a student of the philosopher Gassendi and a recipient of a “Doctor of Medicine” in 1652), who is considered as a founding figure of modern Orientalism,⁵⁶ was an employee of Mirza Shafi’a, who was granted the title “Danishmand” (scholar/scientist) for his intellectual endeavors. Bernier reported of “explaining to my Agah [master] the recent discoveries of Harveus and Pecquet in anatomy . . . [and] discoursing on the philosophy of Gassendi and Descartes, which I translated to him in Persian (for this was my principal employment for five or six years).” Illustrating the intellectual courage and curiosity of Danishmand Khan, Bernier wrote:

[M]y Navaab, or Agah, Danech-mend-khan, expects my arrival with much impatience. He can no more dispense with his philosophical studies in the afternoon than avoid devoting the morning to his weighty duties as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Grand Master of the Horse. Astronomy, geography, and anatomy are his favourite pursuits, and he reads with avidity the works of Gassendi and Descartes.⁵⁷

Danishmand Khan, who is known to have espoused and “disseminated many of the innovating principles of that [European] community” (*aksari az ahkam-i tahrifat-i an jama’at tikkar minimud*) desired to know “European sciences” (*ilm-i ahl-i farang*) at a time when Europe was still plagued with religious wars.⁵⁸ His sustained interest in European intellectual developments is evident from his securing of a promise from Bernier “to send him the books from *ferngistan* [Europe].”⁵⁹ It was within the dynamic intellectual community around Danishmand Khan that Bernier became familiar with Persian translations of classical Sanskrit texts, including the *Upanishads*, which he brought back to Paris.⁶⁰ But the writings of Danishmand Khan and his cohorts who trained Bernier – this pedagogue of the “educated society in the seventeenth century” Europe – have remained virtually unknown. This is in part because of the

stereotypical perception of the period of the Indian Mughal Emperor Aurangzayb's rule (1658–1707) as the age of Muslim bigotry and medieval decline. Confined within the grand narratives of “historical stages” and counter-colonial Hindu nationalism, historians of “medieval” India have mostly found facts of decline, all too often the only facts that they have searched for. During the same period François Martin, a friend of Bernier who visited Iran in 1669, observed that Persians “love the sciences, particularly mathematics.” Contrary to received ideas, Martin reported: “It is believed that they [the Persians] are not very religious.”⁶¹ Likewise Pietro della Valle (1586–1652) could still confide that the Persianate scholar Mulla Zayn al-Din Lari, who has remained unknown to historians of Iran, “was comparable to the best in Europe.”⁶²

The scholarly efforts of Raja Jai Singh (1688–1743) provide another precolonial example of Persianate scholars' engagement with the modern sciences. Jai Singh built the observatories of Delhi, Banaris, and Jaipur, and based on new observations prepared the famous Persian astronomical table *Zij-i Muhammad Shahi* of 1728.⁶³ After the initial draft of his astronomical calculations, he sent a mission to Portugal in 1730 to acquire new observational equipment and to inquire about recent astronomical findings. The mission, which included Father Emmanuel de Figueredo (1690?–1753?) and Muhammad Sharif, returned with an edition of Phillipe de La Hire's *Tabulae Astronomicae* from 1702.⁶⁴ Mubashshir Khan provides a brief account of Jai Singh's scientific mission in his *Manahij al-Istikhraj*, an eighteenth-century guide for astronomical observation and calculations. Mubashshir Khan reported that Mirza Muhammad 'Abid and Mirza Khayr Allah were two “Muslim engineers” who assisted Raja Jai Singh in the building of observatories. He had met Mirza Khayr Allah, who explained to him how Jai Singh, with the assistance of “Padre Manuel”, acquired European observational equipment and a copy of de La Hire's *Tabulae*. La Hire's calculations were used by Jai Singh in a revised edition of his *Zij-i Muhammad Shahi*.⁶⁵ This astronomical table, which was well known to eighteenth-century Iranian scholars, has remained virtually unknown to historians of Iran.⁶⁶ It is significant to note that almost a century earlier Shah 'Abbas II (1642–66) also had sent a mission to Rome to learn European painting techniques. The delegation included Muhammad Zaman “Paulo”, who joined the ranks of the artists of the royal court and left a long-lasting imprint on representational art in both India and Iran.⁶⁷

Works of Tafazzul Husayn Khan (d. 1800), well known to his Iranian friends and associates, are among other homeless texts that are elided from both Indian and Iranian annals of modernity. Hailed as an *Allamah*

(arch-scholar), he was an exemplary figure of the late eighteenth century who interacted closely with the first generation of British Orientalists in India and actively promoted local inquiry into modern science. In the 1780s he translated Isaac Newton's *Principia*, Emerson's *Mechanics*, and Thomas Simpson's *Algebra*.⁶⁸ In his obituary in 1803 *The Asiatic Annual Register* remembered Tafazzul Husayn Khan as "both in qualities and disposition of his mind, a very remarkable exception to the general character of Asiatic genius." Taking an exception to William Jones's assessment that "judgment and taste [were] the prerogative of Europeans," the obituary stated, "But with one, at least, of these proud prerogatives, the character of Tofuzzel Hussein [Tafazzul Husayn] unquestionably interferes; for, a judgment at once sound, clear, quick, and correct, was its indistinguishable feature."⁶⁹ To document the accomplishments of this "Asiatic" who had "cultivated ancient as well as modern European literatures with ardour and success... very uncommon in any foreigner," *The Asiatic Annual Register* published letters received from Ruben Burrows (1747–92),⁷⁰ David Anderson,⁷¹ and Lord Teignmouth (or John Shore, 1751–1834). Lord Teignmouth remarked that for Tafazzul Husayn Khan, "mathematics was his favorite pursuit, and perceiving that the science had been cultivated to an extent in Europe far beyond what had been done in Asia, he determined to acquire a knowledge of European discoveries and improvements; and with this view, began the study of the English language." He further noted that in two years, Tafazzul Husayn Khan

was not only able to understand any English mathematical work, but to peruse with pleasure the volumes of our best historians and moralists. From the same motives he afterwards studied and acquired the Latin language, though in a less perfect degree; and before his death had made some progress in the acquisition of the Greek dialect.

Tafazzul Husayn Khan's knowledge of classical Indo-Islamic sciences were utilized by the British Orientalists William Jones, Richard Johnson, and Ruben Burrows, with whom he was acquainted.⁷²

Mir 'Abd al-Latif Shushtari (1172–1220/1758–1806), a close associate of Tafazzul Husayn Khan who traveled to India in 1788, provided a synopsis of European modernity, modern astronomy, and new scientific innovations in his *Tuhfat al-'Alam* (1216/1801).⁷³ Shushtari constituted the year 900 of Hijrah (1494/95 CE) as the beginning of a new era associated with the decline of the caliphate (*khilafat*) of the Pope (*Papa*), the weakening of the Christian clergy, the ascent of philosophy, and the strengthening of philosophers and scientists. Referring to the

English Civil War, he explained the historical conditions for the decline of religion. While both philosophers and rulers affirmed the unity of God, they viewed “as entirely myths” (*hamah ra afshanah*) prophecy, resurrection, and prayers. He also explained the views of Copernicus and Newton on heliocentricity and universal gravitation. Shushtari rejected the astrological explanations of “earlier philosophers” (*hukamayi ma taqaddam*) and found affinities between the contemporary British scientific views and the “unbounded rejection of astrologers in the splendid Shari’ah” (*kah hamah ja dar Shari’at-i gharra’ takzib-i munajimin varid shudah ast*). Critical of the classical explanation of tides, as recounted by ‘Abd Allah Jazayiri (d. 1173/1760) in *Tilism-i Sultani*, he offered a Newtonian account, relating the tides to gravitational actions of the sun and moon on oceanic waters.⁷⁴ Accordingly, he explained why the magnitude of the high tides in Calcutta differed from that of the coastal cities of the Persian Gulf. Shushtari viewed Newton as a “great sage and a distinguished philosopher” (*hakim-i a’zam va filsuf-i mu’azzam*) and ventured that in view of Newton’s accomplishments all the “the golden books of the ancients” (*gawharin namah’ha-yi bastaniyan*) are now “similar to images on water” (*nimunah-i naqsh bar ab ast*).⁷⁵ Shushtari’s critical reflections on European history and modern sciences was appreciated by Fath ‘Ali Shah who assigned the historian Vaqayi’ Nigar (d. 1250/1834) the task of editing an abridged edition of *Tuhfat al-‘Alam*, which is known as *Qava’id al-Muluk* (Axioms of Rulers).⁷⁶ Given Shushtari’s competence in both classical and modern astronomy, a periodization of Iranian “scientific modernity” that lionizes I’tizad al-Saltanah’s *Falak al-Sa’adah* (1861) as the harbinger of scientific modernity needs serious reconsideration. This is particularly important since I’tizad al-Saltanah was familiar with *Qava’id al-Muluk*.⁷⁷

Aqa Ahmad Bihbahani Kirmanshahi (1777–1819), an Iranian Shi’i scholar and a friend of Shushtari who visited India between 1805 and 1810, devoted a chapter of his travelogue, *Mir’at al-Ahval-i Jahan Nama* (1810), to “the classification of the universe according to the school of the philosopher Copernicus.” In the introduction he explained that “eminent philosophers are so numerous in Europe that their common masses [*avvam al-nas*] are inclined philosophically and seek mathematical and natural sciences.” Like many other Muslim scholars, Bihbahani linked the “new views” (*ara’-i jadidah*) of Copernicus to those of ancient Greek philosophers, but emphasized that “most of his beliefs are original” (*mu’taqidat-i u aksari tazigi darand*).⁷⁸ He explained favorably the heliostatic system, the sidereal periods for the rotation of planets around the sun, the daily axial and annual orbital revolutions of the

earth, and the trinary rotations of the moon. This Muslim theologian found no necessary conflict between Islam and modern astronomy.⁷⁹

The corpus of homeless texts of modernity includes Mawlavi Abu al-Khayr's concise account of the Copernican solar system, *Majmu'ah-i Shamsi* (1807), which appears to have been known in Iran.⁸⁰ Like the works of Tafazzul Husayn Khan, *Majmu'ah* is a product of dialogic interaction between Persianate scholars and the British colonial officers. Among topics discussed in the *Majmu'ah* are the movements of the earth, the law of inertia, the planetary motions, and universal gravitation. In the introduction Mawlavi Abu al-Khayr noted that his book was based on English language sources and was translated "with the assistance" (*bi-i'anat*) of Dr William Hunter.⁸¹ It is significant to note that Hunter had introduced Raja Jai Singh's *Zij-i Muhammad Shahi* to the English reading public in an article appearing in *Asiatic Researches* (1799).⁸² It is likely that Mawlavi Abu al-Khayr had assisted Hunter in understanding and translating this highly technical Persian text.

During the first three decades of the nineteenth century numerous other texts on modern sciences were written in Persian that do not appear in accounts of Iranian and Indian modernity.⁸³ Muhammad Rafi' al-Din Khan's treatise on modern geometry and optics, *Rafi' al-Basar* (1250/1834),⁸⁴ was one such text. The author was informed by English sources brought to his attention by Rev. Henry Martyn (1781–1812),⁸⁵ a renowned Christian missionary and a translator of the Bible into Persian.⁸⁶ With an increased mastery of modern science, Persianate scholars can be seen as becoming active themselves in the production of scientific knowledge. In *A'zam al-Hisab*, a treatise on mathematics completed in 1814, Hafiz Ahmad Khan A'zam al-Mulk Bahadur (d. 1827) took issue with the Scottish astronomer James Ferguson on reckoning the difference between the Christian and the Muslim calendar.⁸⁷ Aware of the self-congratulatory views of Europeans, "particularly among the people of England," A'zam al-Mulk Bahadur wrote a treatise on astronomy, *Mir'at al-'Alam* (1819) in order to "disprove" the assertion that Muslims were "uninformed of mathematics and astronomy."⁸⁸ Based on Copernican astronomy and informed by the most recent observations and discoveries at the Madras Observatory, this treatise likewise remains homeless and among those not yet included in the Indian and Iranian nationalist accounts of modernity.

This familiarity of the Persianate world with the modern sciences was commonly reported by European travelers. Referring to Abu al-Khayr's *Majmu'ah-i Shamsi*, John Malcolm reported, "An abstract of the Copernican system, and the proofs which the labors of Newton have afforded of

its truth, have been translated into Persian; and several individuals of that nation have laboured to acquire this noble but abstruse subject . . . ”⁸⁹ The British Orientalist James Fraser reported meeting in December 1821 Fath Ali Khan Saba (d. 1822), the Qajar poet laureate, whom he viewed as “singularly well informed in, and has a great taste for, mechanics; having constructed several complicated pieces of machinery of his own invention, in a very ingenious manner, and even succeeded in making a printing press, from the plates of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.” In February 1822 in Mashhad, Fraser met Amirzadah Nasir al-Din Mirza, whose “observations upon astronomy were pertinent and good; and the solutions he had devised for various difficulties that met him in his way, were ingenious and often perfectly just.” Mirza Abd al-Javad, son of Mirza Mahdi the Mujtahid of Mashhad, was also acquainted with modern sciences. Reporting on his conversation with Mirza Abd al-Javad, Fraser wrote:

He asked me many very pertinent questions relating to geography and astronomy; and he pushed me so hard on subjects connected with the theory of optics, and the nature of the telescope, that I found I had neither language nor science sufficient to satisfy him. He was particularly well skilled in mechanics, and produced several very ingenious articles of his own construction, with others of European fabric, as dials, dividers, and other mathematical instruments, such as I never expected to find in Khorasan; and the uses of which he so well understood, that he had contrived to repair some of them which had accidentally been broken.⁹⁰

Mirza Abd al-Javad’s interest in modern astronomy is evident from a Persian manuscript, *Tufah-i Muhammadiyah* (1610)⁹¹ which was copied for him. The manuscript included an appendix (written at a later time) on Europe, modern scientific instruments, the solar system, and notes on Newton. Mulla Aqa Abu-Muhammad, another acquaintance of Fraser in Mashhad, was so keenly interested in astronomy and Fraser’s telescope that he invited the non-Muslim Fraser to dine with him. Fraser believed that “I owed this invitation entirely to his wish to see my large telescope, and to view the stars through it, rather than to any desire for its master’s company.”⁹²

Decolonizing historical imagination

The preceding synopsis of Persianate familiarity with the modern sciences and its dialogic relations with Europe calls for the decolonization of

historical imagination and the rethinking of what is commonly meant by South Asian and Middle Eastern modernity. By anticipating a period of decline that paved the way for the British colonization, historians of Mughal India have searched predominantly for facts that illustrate the backwardness and the disintegration of this empire. Mughal historiography in this respect has a plot structure similar to the late Ottoman history. In both cases, the dominant themes of “decline” and “disintegration” are based on a projection about the rise and progress of Europe. In a similar manner, historians of modern Iran inherited historiographical traditions that militate against the construction of historical narratives about the pre-Constitutional and/or pre-Pahlavi times as anything but an age of ignorance (*bikhabari*), stagnation, and despotism. Anticipating the coming of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–9, historians have crafted narratives of intolerable conditions that instigated the coming of the revolution.⁹³ Written by a participant of the revolution between 1910 and 1912, the title of Nazim al-Islam Kirmani’s paradigmatic account of the revolution, *Tarikh-i Bidari-i Iraniyan* (The History of the Awakening of Iranians), reveals this prevalent assumption of pre-revolutionary dormancy. To legitimate the Pahlavi dynasty (1926–79) as the architect of Iranian modernity and progress, Pahlavi historians likewise depicted the Qajar period (1794–1925) as the dark age of Iranian history. These two Iranian historiographical traditions have been informed by, and in turn have informed, Orientalist accounts of Qajar Shahs as absolute Oriental despots and Islam as only a fetter to rationalization and secularization. Inscribing the history of Europe on that of India and Iran, both Indian and Iranian historians have deployed a regressive conception of time that constitutes their respective histories in terms of lacks and failures.

These bordered histories have rendered homeless texts that yield a different account and periodization of Persianate modernity. Historians of modern India often view Persian as a language only of the “medieval” Muslim Mughal court and thus find it unnecessary to explore the Persian texts of modernity.⁹⁴ Viewed as solely Iranian language, historians of Iran also consider unworthy Persian texts produced outside of the country. The conventional Persian literary histories, moreover, regard poetry as a characteristically Iranian mode of self-expression. With the privileged position of poetry in the invented national *mentalité*, the prose texts of the humanities are devalued and scholarly efforts are infrequently spent on editing and publishing non-poetic texts. Thus a large body of historically significant prose texts of modernity have remained unpublished. This willful marginalization of prose is often masked as a sign of the

prominence of poetry as an intrinsically Iranian mode of expression. These factors account for the elision of texts produced in India, which are stereotypically considered as either linguistically faulty or as belonging to the corpus of the degenerate “Indian style” (*sabk-i Hindi*) texts. Consequently, Persian language texts documenting precolonial engagement with the modern sciences and responding to European colonial domination have remained nationally “homeless” and virtually unknown to historians working within the confines of modern Indian and Iranian nationalist paradigms. This has led to several historiographical problems. Exclusion of these “homeless texts” from national historical canons, on the one hand, has contributed to the hegemony of Eurocentric and Orientalist conceptions of modernity as something uniquely European. On the other hand, by ignoring the homeless texts, both Indian and Iranian historians tend to consider modernity only under the rubric of a belated “Westernization.” Such a conception of modernity reinforces the exceptionality of “Occidental rationality” and corroborates the programmatic view of Islamic and “Oriental” societies and cultures as static, traditional, and unhistorical. This historical imagination is simultaneously grounded on two problematic conceptions of historical time. On the one hand it is grounded in the presupposition of the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous Western and “Oriental” societies, and on the other hand it is based on the dehistoricizing supposition of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous early nineteenth-century and ancient modes of life. With the onset of Westernization, consequently, the premodern repetition of ancient modes of life is replaced with the repetition of Western modernity.

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