



Revised and extended article: *The Last Muslim Intellectual, The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad: Political economy Approach*

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ABSTRACT

Jalal Al-e Ahmad was a leading Iranian writer and critic, best known for his long essay, *Gharbzadegi* or Weststruckness, which many critics controversially regard as a harbinger of the Islamic revolution. There is no doubt that, willy-nilly, what was believed to be his rejection of Western civilization was posthumously very influential in shaping public opinion. Dabashi's largely uncritical biography is useful in its description of Al-e Ahmad's life but is flawed in its interpretation and analysis of his works. In particular, it ignores Al-e Ahmad's extensive resort to conspiratorial theories and his cavalier treatment of not just Iranian but world history to prove his case. This article could be accounted as a new analysis of the political economy of Ale-e Ahmad as well.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction

Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1968), an Iranian writer and social, literary, and art critic, was arguably unrivaled as an Iranian public intellectual at the time of his premature death. He was born into a clerical family, joined Ahmad Kasravi's Bāhamād-e Āzādegān (Free Peoples' Party) – a movement that actively campaigned against Shiism and Shia clerics – in his early twenties, and later joined the Tudeh (communist) party. However, in 1948, he played a leading role in the split of around eighty cadres and intellectuals from that party¹. In 1952, he joined the central committee of the pro-Mosaddeq Nirū-ye Sevvom (socialist) party and contributed widely to its journals and publications. It was in the same period that he translated Dostoevsky's novel, *The Gambler*, André Gide's *Return from the Soviet Union* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Dirty Hands*, and assisted in the translation of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. Meanwhile, he had been writing a series of short stories as well as articles in literary criticism. From the mid-fifties onwards Al-e Ahmad gave up party politics but retained his personal commitment and admiration for his mentor Khalil Maleki, the veteran socialist leader, until his death two months after Maleki's². Yet, he remained a prolific social and political as well as literary and art critic, while continuing his career as a fiction writer, most notably his highly successful novel, *Modir-e Madreseh* (which exists in English as *The School Principal*)³. A couple of years later, he published his well-known essay, *Gharbzadegi*, translated many times posthumously in English under various titles, including *Weststruckness* and *Westoxication*⁴.

1. See, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Roshanfekrūn*, Entesharat-e Ferdows: Tehran, 1993, chapter 6

2. See Al-e Ahmad, *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat*; Homa Katouzian, *Khalil Maleki, The Human Face of Iranian Socialism*, London: Oneworld, 2018.

3. <https://www.complete-review.com/reviews/iran/aleahmj2.htm> (accessed in July 2022)

4. For example, *Gharbzadegi = Weststruckness*, trans. Johan Green and Ahmad Alizadeh, Lexington, Ky: Mazda Publishers, 1982

Gharbzadegi was the peak of Al-e Ahmad's radical social criticism. The book was at first censored, but its second edition was later published with some additions and subtractions. Yet, it did not attract widespread attention before his death, and it was from the 1970s that it increasingly began to capture the imagination of the Iranian public (and later) Western intellectuals, and within a short period, it became all things to all men and women. I remember when, early in 1970, an old physicist friend from London who was then studying computer science in Paris told me that a French journalist writing about the then British economic problems had said that Britain had become 'sous-développé'. But as soon as I said how the first industrialized country was underdeveloped, she cut me short, shouting 'gharbzadeh nasho' (stop being Weststruck)!

This summarizes the career of Gharbzadegi and its unfortunate writer. It became the catchword of almost every man and woman, young and old, rich and poor, Islamist and Marxist-Leninist, etc., for anything and anyone they disliked. The author became 'Jalal' to everyone, the prophet who put down every ill of the Iranian society to the machinations of the West, and – even worse – the reason why Iran should drop or abolish anything in politics, culture, etc., that was somehow related to western society; and later still, it was utilized to mock the West itself for its industrial and cultural achievements. But as soon as the celebrations of February 1979 were over, 'Jalal' was rendered an ogre of the longest hue - wholly responsible for what they thought gharbzadegi was – by its critics, who themselves had taken part in that revolution! Few of the multitudes, though, are likely to have read the book, and even fewer, if they had understood its meaning and message.

2. Brief History and more illustration

Al-e Ahmad was an old friend and when, in 1962, he came to London, he gave me eight copies of the illicit first edition of the book to distribute among friends. Having read it virtually overnight, I discussed it with him the next weekend when I took him out of town, an activity that was his

weekends' favourite. I told him that he had put his finger on something important and with considerable potential for further socio-cultural analysis, but he had not quite succeeded in giving it a convincing treatment. The day was long and we debated what I thought were the book's weaknesses, which were characteristic of Al-Ahmad's impatient and hasty remarks on things he wanted to get quickly off his chest.

For example, I pointed out to him that his frequent and emphatic repetition of the evils of 'the machine', reminded me of the opening line of Voltaire's letter to Rousseau where he said that on reading the latter's prize-winning essay written in response to the Dijon Academy's competition, he had decided to walk on all fours! He went on the defensive in response, saying that not only was he not anti-mechanical but he even enjoyed hearing the growling noise of his car when he put it in gear two in driving upslope.

In fairness, he corrected this in his second edition of the book. This has now found its way into a reprint of the first edition. For example:

Our time is the time of two worlds, one, building, developing, and exporting the machine, and the other, consuming, wasting, and importing it. The one is its builder, the other is its consumer. And its instruments? Besides, tanks, field guns, and missiles...which are themselves products of the Western world, UNESCO, FAO, UN, ECAFE, and other supposedly international institutions that are worldwide and universal; but Western devices which in a new guise are used to colonize that other world, Latin America, Asia, Africa. And here is the foundation of the weststruckness of all non-western nations. The point is not the negation of the machine or its rejection...Not at all. The universalization of the machine is a historical necessity. The point is about the ways in which the machine and technology are encountered¹.

But my strongest criticism was his blatant resort to, and even invention of new, conspiracy theories, as part of his distortions of history. He had even gone as far as claiming that the adoption of Shiism by the Safavids and their conflict with the Ottoman Empire, and so on, was all due to Western machinations!

1. See Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Gharbzadegi, first edition, Tehran: publisher anonymous, 1962: 27.

[And] it was for this reason that encountering us, the West not only attacked this Islamic unity (in its encouragement of the bloody Safavid Shiism, in its provocation of discord between us and the Ottomans, in encouraging Baha'ism in the middle of the Qajar period, in smashing the Ottomans in the First [World] War, and, in the end, by confronting the Shia clerics in the constitutionalist riot, and after it...), but it tried to destroy, as soon as possible, that unity which had [already] split from within, and its collectivity existed only in appearance. And like African natives, first turned us into raw material, and then took us to the laboratory. It is thus that in the list of all the Western encyclopedias, the most important is the Islamic encyclopaedia. We are still asleep, but, in this encyclopedia, the westerner has taken us to the laboratory¹.

And further:

If you are still in doubt, take note of the fact that not even a spark hit the Christian world from the devastating fire of the Mongols and the massacres of Tamerlane. And Russia was punished a little [by the tartars, encouraged by Europe!], it was due to the sin that it was Orthodox, and did not kiss the threshold of the Pope of Rome. And again, if you are in doubt, note that exactly fifty years after the conquest of Constantinople, the Safavid state was founded in Ardebil, right behind the Ottomans, the best place for a stabbing in the back².

And beyond that, I pointed out his many historical errors and inaccuracies, on neither of which matters could we agree (see further below). A couple of years later, he was to publish an essay entitled “*Serkeh-ye Naqd ya Halvā-ye Tarikh*”, alluding to an old Persian adage, meaning better bitter cash than sweet credit³. History was the sweet credit the truth of which took ages to discover, and bitter cash was his approach to social and historical problems as he saw them here and now. It was clearly in response to my criticism, though no names were named.

1. See Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*: 32

2. See Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*: 68

3. See *Serkeh-ye Naqd ya Halvā-ye Tarikh*, in Mostafa Zamāni Niyā, ed., *Adab va Honar-e Emrūz, Majmū'eh-ye Maqālāt-e Jalal Al-e Ahmad*, Tehran: Mitra, vol. 3, 1994: 1121–1129.

To the best of my knowledge, there has been only one other full-length biography of Al-e Ahmad, the hagiographic *From the Brother's Eye*, written by his brother Shams, even the title of which implies an apology for the heroic treatment of its subject¹. Apart from that are four large volumes of his collected articles, containing all his critical essays in literature, language, society and so on, admirably edited and published by Mostafa Zamāni Niyā².

3. More diligent review of Dabashi's work

Hamid Dabashi's volume is the first biography to appear in English and contains many problems which shall be discussed below. The book consists of nine well-written chapters covering Al-e Ahmad's life, his marriage with the prominent writer Simin Dāneshvar, his impressive essayism, his travels, and travelogues, etc, ending with chapter 9, "From a Short Life to a Lasting Legacy: Towards a Post-Islamist Liberation Theology", in which we are expected to find Al-Ahmad's contribution to liberation theology, more than fifty years after his death when the term Islamist itself was yet to be coined. And, in any case, making the reader wonder what has Al-e Ahmad to do with any *theology*, Islamist or otherwise:

Throughout this book, I have affirmed that my purpose in writing on a seminal Muslim intellectual is to argue our path towards the articulation of post-Islamist liberation theology, a path that ipso facto will have to be pre-Islamist liberation theology³.

However, the book ably covers other noteworthy aspects of Al-e Ahmad's life, occasionally in some detail: his love of anthropological explorations; his travelogues on visits to various parts of Iran and international gatherings and conferences; his close friendship, admiration, and support for Nima Yushij (the founder of modernist Persian poetry); his friendship, cooperation or mentorship of writers, intellectuals, and artists, such as Alinaqi Monzavi (social critic), Gholamhossein Sā'edi (writer and

1. See Shams Al-e Ahmad, *Az Cheshm-e Baradar*, Tehran: Sa'di, 1990.

2. See Zamani Niyā, *Adab va Honar-e Emrūz*, vols. 1–4.

3. See Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual*: 282.

playwright), Samad Behrangi (children story writer), Hannibal Alkhās (artist), and so on.

Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Dabashi says, was “the paramount example of a Muslim intellectual” – Indeed an “organic Muslim intellectual”, “*the last Muslim intellectual*, whose healthy and robust Islam never degenerated into fanatical Islamist”¹. It is certainly true that he was neither in a name - the term did not exist at the time – nor indeed an Islamist, though the terms “organic Muslim intellectual”, and “healthy and robust Islam” are badly in need of a meaningful definition. However, trying to prove his case, he begins by attempting to put down two other Iranian Muslim intellectuals by claiming that they were either not Muslims or not intellectuals, or perhaps both.

Ali Shariati certainly was a Muslim no less “rooted” and nurtured than Al-e Ahmad by both descent and upbringing, a fact which the author is keen to emphasize. Yet Shariati was not an Islamist as the author claims. Indeed, he was far from it, as he was openly an out-and-out anticleric writer and campaigner who would not have lasted for long, after the Islamic revolution. He was also an intellectual with a doctorate from the Sorbonne and a cluster of French and French-speaking intellectual interlocutors.

He even translated Franz Fanon, with whom the author likes to compare Al-e Ahmad, although he points out that in a letter Fanon had told Shariati that “although my way is different and opposed to yours, I am convinced that our paths will eventually cross towards this destination where humanity lives a better life”² That is precisely evidence that Shariati was a Muslim, as Fanon surely was not! Besides, why should any intellectual receive his credential from Fanon to be regarded as such? Another point is the author’s claim, at least implicitly, that since, unlike Al-e Ahmad, Shariati was not a literary and art critic as well, he cannot have been an intellectual. Let it be said at once, that none of that implies that any or all of Shariati’s ideas are acceptable: simply that he was a Muslim intellectual and a utopian one at that³.

1. See Dabashi: 18, emphasis added

2. See Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual*: 31.

3. See Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian, A Political Biography of Ali Shari’ati*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998.

The other Muslim Shia thinker Dabashi attacks, this time vehemently, is Abdolkarim Soroush. He writes here as well as elsewhere in the book:

There was a strong Islamic streak in [Al-e Ahmad's] character and culture, but there was no Islamist. After his death, Ali Shari'ati took this Islamic streak and drove it fast to the edge of Islamism, before he too died and passed the baton to the even more fanatically Islamist functionary Abdolkarim Soroush who began his career as an ideologue of the triumphant Islamic Republic, completely siding with the ruling power until he exhausted his usefulness to the ruling Islamists and was spat out of its system¹.

Let us pass over in silence that he describes both Al-e Ahmad and Shariati as Marxist a couple of pages later. But his vehement attack on Soroush is both unfair and almost libelous. Soroush is a Popperian Muslim who became critical of Islamism from the early 1980s, becoming the intellectual mentor of the young Islamic critics who later formed the reformist movement, leading to President Khatami's Muslim democratic government. He was systematically persecuted until the Green Movement of 2009 (justly described as democratic by Dabashi himself), which he wholeheartedly endorsed, resulting in his living in exile ever since. The official newspaper Keyhan mentioned him as 'Abdascia' or 'Abdolcia - (slave of the CIA), instead of Abdolkarim - shortly afterwards. Once again, that is not a comment on Soroush's thoughts.

Dabashi almost contemptuously calls him and his like-minded colleagues as "religious intellectuals" (*roshanfekrān-e dini*), as if to be a Muslim, there is no need for being religious, besides the fact that they are described as such in contrast to secular intellectuals. There are quite a few others, including Mohsen Kadivar, and Mohammad Mojtahed-e Shabestari, both of whom voluntarily gave up their clerical status in protest to the theory and practice of prevailing Islamism².

1. See Dabashi, *The Last Muslim*: 280–281.

2. For an excellent and extensive description and analysis, see Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and its Discontents, Political Thought and Reformism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. See also, *Transitional Networks and Intellectual Authority in Islam in Europe, The Case of Mohammad Arkoun*, Nasr Hamid Au Zayd and Abdolkarim Soroush, DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2020

Let us note that all these innuendos and near-libels are to prove Dabashi's bizarre claim that only Al-e Ahmad was a Muslim intellectual; indeed, the last of the species! Putting aside the three above-mentioned Iranians, in what sense could Mohammad Arkoun and Nasr Abu Zayd (both of them North African Arabs) not be described as Muslim intellectuals? Besides, the implication that there were and are no Muslim intellectuals, even including public intellectuals, from Indonesia through the Subcontinent and the Middle East to Morocco beggars belief.

However, the assumption that Al-e Ahmad was a Muslim is itself very much subject to debate and disagreement. According to the author, he followed 'robust Islam' and was an 'organic Muslim intellectuals', but he does not explain what this means. Do they mean that an Islam that is not 'robust' is not Islam, and a Muslim intellectual who is not 'organic' is not one, without however clearly defining these jargons? Al-e Ahmad did not say his daily prayers, did not fast in Ramadan, was a heavy drinker, and was a confessed adulterer!¹ He went to Hajj and at the end of his travelogue wrote that he did not know why he had gone there; and that perhaps he was in search of his late brother who had died and been buried in Medina:

And if it is confession or protest or blasphemy or whatever you prefer to call it, in this journey, I was mainly looking for my brother – and all of those brothers - rather than looking for God who, *for whoever believes in him*, is everywhere².

Chapter 5 of Dabashi's book is entitled "Gharbzadegi, the Condition of Coloniality". As noted, it could have been called the conspiratorial condition of coloniality. Yet, Al-e Ahmad does not claim that Iranian society itself had no share in catching 'the disease'. As early as 1932, his early mentor Ahmad Kasravi, the first intellectual to raise the matter clearly and extensively, had written:

'Have modern European inventions added to human happiness? 'Sadly not! Alas, not!'. Such [European] inventions and the inevitable changes which

1. See his posthumously-published confessional *Sangi bar Gūri* (A Stone on a Grave), Tehran: n.p., 1981.
2. *Khasi dar Miqāt*, Tehran: Ferdows, 1994: 183, emphasis added.

they have brought with them have caused increasing trouble to human beings [not just Iranians] ... We remember well what a peaceful life we used to enjoy until twenty years ago when we still had our own Eastern mode of living and know what difficulties we face now that we have been polluted by the Western style of living¹.

In other words, the West – itself suffering from the consequences of modern tools and methods - exported the new industry and culture, and the East imported them. Iranians were not just helpless pawns in the hands of the West in aping what was a superficial pseudo-modernist version of what Europe was. India was a Western colony for almost two centuries, yet it is doubtful if anything corresponding to Al-e Ahmad's notion of *gharbzadegi* may be applied to it, not to mention Japan. Although reading Dabashi's views, one gets the impression that whatever calamity has befallen the East has been due to European colonialism, and not a result of voluntary changes in the indigenous attitudes and behavior.

However, Al-e Ahmad's flight with religion is due not to being a Muslim of any kind but to his typically slapdash reading of modern Iranian history. His pure and simple argument, which he discusses at length in the book *The Service and Betrayal of the Intellectuals* much more than in *Gharbzadegi*, is that, since the late nineteenth century, whenever clerics and intellectuals have acted together, their movement has been successful, and whenever they have not, it has failed. And his motive is quite apparent: that the struggle against Mohammad Reza Shah and the West can only be won if the two acted in unison.

But the history that he covers just in two or three pages of the book is generally incorrect. Referring to the Tobacco Revolt of 1890-1892 he says: "In the tobacco incident the clerics acted alone"². Without the mass participation and leadership of the merchants themselves, the movement would not have succeeded. That apart, it is now virtually certain that the fatwa banning the use of tobacco, published and widely circulated in the

1. Ahamad Kasravi, *Ā'in* (1932), reprint, Nashr o Pakhsh-e Ketab: Tehran 1975, Part 1:6.

2. See Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Roshanfekrān*: 277.

name of Mirza Hasan Shirazi, the senior marja'at-taqlid (source of emulation) who lived in Samara, was in fact issued in his name and without his prior permission by Hajj Mohammad Kazem Malek at-Tojjar, a leading merchant as well as intellectual¹. And the movement did succeed, even though, according to Al-e Ahmad, the intellectuals did not support it!

He then says that in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911, clerics and intellectuals acted together and succeeded, but it eventually failed because “the right wing of the clerics” turned against it. This was a group led by Sheikh Fazlollah Nūri, who were fighting for mashru‘eh (Sharia-based government), but they failed and Nūri, a darling of modern Iranian Islamists (whom Al-e Ahmad calls “Martyr Sheikh Nūri”, here as well as in *Gharbzadegi*) was executed with the support, or at least acquiescence, of the great ulama of Najaf, and the leading ulama of Tehran. Putting aside the fact that the movement would not have succeeded if it had not had the military support of the Bakhtiari nomadic confederation, the great landlords of the Caspian littoral, and the fighters from Tabriz and the Caucasus². And it failed not because mashru‘eh was defeated and Nuri executed, but as a result of endemic social and political chaos³.

“And then there is the case of the coup d’etat [of 1921] and the change of dynasty, with which the clerics did not agree, from [Seyyed Hasan] Modarres to Hajj Mojtahed-e Shirazi [?!] who did not go to the 1925 constitutional assembly. But the intellectuals consented”⁴. Modarres was a Mojtahed politician and he opposed the change of dynasty, not on religious but on political grounds, as the leader of the parliamentary opposition.

Four intellectuals, Seyyed Hasan Taqizādeh, Hajj Mirza Yahya Dowlat-Ābādi, Mohammad Mosaddeq, and Hossein Alā, delivered speeches against

1. See especially Fatemeh Soudavar-Farmanfarmaian, ‘Revisiting and Revising the Tobacco Rebellion’, *Iranian Studies*, 47, 4, June 2014. See also, Nikki R. Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: the tobacco protest of 1891–1892*, Cass: London, 1966.

2. See, for example, Homa Katouzian, *The Persians, ancient, mediaeval and modern Iran*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009, chapter 8.

3. See, for example, ‘Constitutionalism and Chaos’, chapter 3 in Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran, the eclipse of the Qajars and the emergence of the Pahlavis*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

4. See Al-e Ahmad, *Jalal, Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat*: 277.

the move when it was first debated in the Majlis, before it went to the constituent assembly, in which they did not take part¹. Nor did Poet-Laureate Bahar and some other intellectuals. Soleyman Mirza (the socialist leader) who did attend the assembly did not in the end vote for the foundation of the Pahlavi dynasty. However, many clerics sat in the assembly, some of whom Seyyed Mohammad (later Ayatollah) Behbahani abstained from voting, and others such as Seyyed Abolqasem (later Ayatollah) Kashani voted for the foundation of the Pahlavi dynasty.

But further than all that, in 1924, the three marāje‘attaqlid, Hajj Sheikh Abdolkarim Hā’eri Yazdi, Seyyed Abolhasan Isfahani, and Hajj Mirza Hossein Nā’ini met with Reza Khan in Qom, and told him that they did not oppose his bid for kingship!², And thenceforth, they kept sending Reza Khan gifts from the Museum of Imam Ali’s shrine in Najaf.

The nationalization of Iranian oil is the next turning point: “In the nationalization of oil the clerics and liberal intellectuals [other than Tudeh party members] cooperated”, and the movement succeeded³. The fact is that Ayatollah Kashani, a Mojtahed-politician, was the only prominent religious leader who actively supported nationalization, Ayatollah Boroujerdi, the sole Marja in Iran, was and remained silent, and Ayatollahs Behbahani and Chehelsoṭūni, the senior religious leaders in Tehran opposed it, among others who followed them⁴.

And last, the revolt of 15th of Khordad (6 June 1963), did not succeed because the intellectuals did not support the clerics⁵. However, that movement was led by Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters while most of the prominent clerics stayed aloof from it. Second, The Socialist League of Iran, the Freedom Movement party of Iran, and many Tehran University, and

1. See, for example, Hossein Makki, *Doktor Mosaddeq va Notqāhā-ye Tārikhi-ye Ū*, Entesharat-e Jāvidān: Tehran, 1977.

2. See for a highly convincing account, Habib Ladjevardi, ed., *Memoirs of Mehdi Haeri-Yazdi*, Bethesda, MD: Distributed by Index (IranBbooks), 2001.

3. See Al-e Ahmad, Jalal, *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat*: 278.

4. See, for example, Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran*: second edition, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999

5. See Al-e Ahmad, Jalal, *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat*: 279.

even high-school, students took part, and some of them paid dearly for it. The main reason for its failure was that it was severely repressed in a bloody clampdown. The repression was condemned by four members of the former government, Ali Amini (prime minister), Nūreddin Alamūti (justice minister), Mohammad Derakhshesh (minister of education and culture), and Gholam‘ali Farivar (minister of industry), who paid for their disloyalty.

Al-e Ahmad did not survive to see the revolution of February 1979, which succeeded, not because of clerics-intellectuals cooperation, but, among other reasons, due to the mass revolt in support of Ayatollah Khomeini’s uncompromising stand against the Shah¹.

However, Al-e Ahmad concludes his thesis by saying: “I have mentioned in *Gharbzadegi*, that the execution of Martyr Sheikh Nūri [in 1909, by the constitutionalists] was the sign of the domination of Weststruckness of this country”².

None of the above is discussed in Dabashi’s uncritical adulation of Al-e Ahmad. He does justly admire Al-e Ahmad as a prominent literary and art critic, and rightly emphasizes the great merit of his unique prose style, which alone, if it had been done in a European language, is quite likely to have got its author the Nobel prize in literature. But none of that would make him the “last Muslim intellectual”.

Dabashi, at times loses sense of time, and at times makes historical errors. Referring to the Islamic Republic, he writes:

The forty years of the ruling Islamic Republic systematically destroyed a vitally cosmopolitan culture that had been in the making for about two centuries before Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran to establish his juridically dominated Islamic Republic³.

This must sound very strange to anyone with some knowledge of Iranian history in those two centuries of Qajar and Pahlavi’s arbitrary despotism,

1. See, for example, Katouzian, ‘The Iranian Revolution at Thirty. The dialectic of state and society’ in *Iran, Politics, History and Literature*, London and North America: Routledge, 2013.

2. See Al-e Ahmad, Jalal, *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat*: 474.

3. See Dabashi: 28

persecution, and censorship. And if the emphasis is on culture in the narrow sense of the term, the fact is that despite social and political repression, Iranian cinema and theatre have been flourishing as never before, and the other public arts such as fiction-writing, screen-play writing, painting, translation, etc., have largely survived the socio-political onslaught. Just for one example, before the revolution there were only a couple of Iranian women fiction writers; now there are many.

Dabashi's claim that "Reza Shah received the full support of the British, expanding their commercial and economic interests in Iran" flies in the face of the facts: the British played no role in the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, and Reza Shah was personally anti-British and, like his son after him, believed that all calamities anywhere in the world were due to British machinations¹. And as for Dabashi's other claim that Nima Yushij liberated Persian poetry from "the *stifling tyranny* of classical prosody", the reference is to a 'stifling tyranny' that has produced Ferdowsi, Rumi, Hafiz, Sa'di and so many others over a millennium!² Nor was Khalil Maleki "one of the founders of the [Tudeh party]"³. Indeed, he joined it two years after it had been founded by others.

However, by the time he died, Al-e Ahmad was believed to be the most outstanding Iranian novelist and short-story writer of his time both in and outside Iran. But there is no discussion of it in these 300-plus pages, not even his highly important posthumously-published *A Stone on a Grave* in which he both opens up on the agony of his infertility and owns up to his adulterous engagements in Europe.

4. Conclusion

This article could be accounted as a new analysis of the political economy of Ale-e Ahmad as well. Dabashi's contribution regarding Al-e Ahmad is to

1. See Dabashi: 21. See for Reza Shah's accession, etc., for example, Katouzian, *State and Society*, chapters 9–11.

2. See Dabashi: 39, emphasis added.

3. See Dabashi: 41.

some extent useful, but it needs to be treated with caution and reflection when it comes to analysis and interpretation, and in part also for the many unexplained jargons such as “Christian imperialism”, “Jewish imperialism and “Muslim imperialism”, which he is fond of throwing about!. Dabashi’s largely uncritical biography is useful in its description of Al-e Ahmad’s life but is flawed in its interpretation and analysis of his works. In particular, it ignores Al-e Ahmad’s extensive resort to conspiratorial theories and his cavalier treatment of not just Iranian but world history to prove his case.

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