

Reversing the Colonial Gaze: Persian Travelers Abroad

Hamid Dabashi

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In his preface to *Reversing the Colonial Gaze: Persian Travelers Abroad*, Hamid Dabashi locates the origins of the book in the 2016 US presidential election, after which the newly-elected Donald Trump signed an Executive Order banning citizens of six Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. The title itself explicitly demonstrates Dabashi's determination to overturn the general attitude towards the travelogues under his scrutiny: Whereas "Europe was only part of their travels," some categorize the Persian travelers for having focalized Europe as their sole destination (ix). While there is no denying that the travelers in question did indeed

visit, and documented their observations of the continent, Europe was merely—and against the grain of Eurocentric scholarship—one leg of their journeys.

Focusing on such travelers as Mirza Saleh Shirazi, Hajj Muhammad Ali Sayyah, and Zeyn al-Abedin Maragheh'i, Dabashi commends their audacity to leave their homelands for a life of adventure, and remap the colonial world in the process. He too is an itinerant scholar who left Iran for the United States some four decades ago. Wary of Trumpian xenophobia, and Islamophobia in the long aftermath of 9/11, Dabashi still struggles, not unlike the Persian travelers abroad, with a “metaphysical conception of a homeland” away from Iran, while not quite feeling welcome in America (xv). Yet he finds solace in their courage to transcend local constraints, leave the frontiers behind, and inaugurate a new chapter in world history.

Dabashi maintains, despite his rather repetitive assertion that Europe was only part of their destination, that those travelers “had an awareness of Europe as the site of a monumental thing called ‘modernity’ to which they were exposed through European colonialism” (2). Rooted in the site of former empires, the travelogues sought to ascertain what was happening in a world under the spell of “modernity.” The itinerants’ encounter with colonial modernity, along with their growing awareness of imperialism in the course of their journeys, formed the building blocks for the constitution of a postcolonial nation. Typical of his oeuvre, Dabashi closes his introduction by extending his commentary on the flawed binary opposition between “Islam and the West,” or “the West and the Rest,” reiterating his intention to “retrieve the cosmopolitan worldliness” that the following Persian travelogues provide us with (4). Chronologically reading eleven travelogues written within a period of a hundred and fifty years, Dabashi thus deconstructs the common, and Europe-centered, assumptions surrounding Persian travel writing.

Following the heartfelt introduction, the first chapter (“Mr. Shushtari Travels to India”) is allocated to Mir Seyyed Abd al-Latif Shushtari’s travelogue *Tohfah al-‘Alam* (*The Gift from the World*, 1788–1801). As an itinerant who commenced his journey in Shushtar towards Basra in Iraq, and then to India, Shushtari provides a commentary on political, scientific, and technological advancements of Britain, particularly since his residency was concurrent with the expropriation of parts of the Indian Subcontinent by the East India Company. Having had a deep connection with the British governors in India, Shushtari does not offer a one-sided reflection on his

contemporary issues; rather, he looks at the phenomena “from the curious vantage point of a foreigner” (29). As an observer who “does not think his homeland or India ‘backward,’ in need of ‘Westernization,’” Shushtari is an itinerant whose travelogue is quintessential of “cosmopolitanism” (44).

While in India, Shushtari forged a friendship with Mirza Abu Taleb Isfahani, a voyager to whom the second chapter (“Mirza Abu Taleb Travels from India”) is dedicated. He embarked on his journey to Africa through Asia, then visited Europe, and on his way back to India went on the Muslim pilgrimage through Ottoman territories. Interestingly enough, the original Persian of Abu Taleb Isfahani’s *Masir Talebi* (*Talebi’s Itinerary*, 1803) was published posthumously after its English translation had already appeared. Its translation “distorted a factual document by way of consolidating British imperialism and dishonoring the original author” to provide the East India Company’s employers with some valuable, but falsified, information whereby they could expedite their imperialistic affairs (65). Furthermore, *Talebi’s Itinerary* was also labelled “reverse travelogue” just to deprecate it as a recorded document authored by a non-European, hence “secondary” scholar, compared to the European travelogues inaccurately credited as “original” or “primary.” Dabashi’s preliminary contribution lies in his transnational outlook which evacuates the primacy given to “historical narrative[s]” penned by European colonial agents (50). Writing in Persian, not in line with the hegemony of any European language, Abu Taleb goes “beyond the dehumanizing gaze of European colonialism” by documenting an open-minded and unprejudiced account of his peregrination (52).

The third and fourth chapters shed light on the undisclosed truth behind a travelogue and a work of fiction penned by two companions, an Iranian and a British diplomat respectively. In the third chapter (“An Ilchi Wonders about the World”), Dabashi contextualizes *Heyrat-Nameh* (*Book of Wonders*, 1809), an account of Abu al-Hassan Khan Ilchi’s diplomatic missions during the early Qajar era. On his journey, he visited Istanbul, London, Rio de Janeiro, and finally Mumbai on his way back to Iran. Among these four major cities, Dabashi contends, the Iranian editor of the text has only privileged Europe by titling the work, “Safarnameh Abu al-Hassan Khan Ilchi beh Landan/Abu al-Hassan Khan Ilchi’s Travelogue to London” (77). The fact that James Morier, a derisive companion and author of an Oriental novel, was accompanying Ilchi as a local informer to mold the Persian traveler’s understanding of where “exactly” Europe was, is quite telling. Nonetheless, one should not overlook Ilchi’s opportunism

since he was too easily flattered by the British governors who sought out imperialistic ventures in Asia. Dabashi's proposition, then, is that it is the scholar's responsibility to dismantle the ahistorical, and Europe-centered geopolitics of such travelogues as they have merely "left us eyewitness account[s]" which have "carved an indelible mark for the future of the region as postcolonial nation-states" (81).

Consequently, the fourth chapter ("A Colonial Officer Is Turned Upside-Down") reflects on James Morier's Oriental tale, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, and its surprisingly de-colonized translation by Mirza Habib Isfahani. The original text is the fictional story of an oriental who visits Europe to bring back home the fruits of European modernity. Edward Said's "Traveling Theory" and Hans Robert Jauss's conception of "reception" are critical assets for Dabashi to effectively dismiss the legitimacy of the term "liminality" in this chapter: "for the traveler does not link a point of origin to a point of destination to become bicultural" (127). Thus, Dabashi extols Mirza Habib's Persian translation as it "turned the sour lemons of colonial arrogance into the sweet lemonade of anticolonial uprising" (130) through the act of *deterritorialization*, "crossing from one fictive frontier to another," and materializing "successive manners of *reterritorialization*" (127).

Between Ilchi's *Heyrat-Nameh* and Morier's *Hajji Baba*, the fifth chapter ("A Shirazi Shares His Travelogues") addresses another travelogue, which is in line with Mirza Habib's critical disposition. Wending his way from Tabriz to Russia, and then to England, Mirza Saleh Shirazi provides us with a thorough observation of these territories and the Ottoman lands he visited upon his return to Tabriz. Against the grain of Nile Green's reading of the travelogue which, in Dabashi's hasty judgement (and to which I return below), unfolds "like *Alice in Wonderland*" (134), Mirza Saleh's imagination of the civilized "West" refreshingly includes Africa. Therefore, the pretension that there was no formal "interaction" between Iran and Europe before the 19th century should not lead the reader to ignore the "Eurocentric historiography" that was appropriated—then and now—to serve imperial ambitions (147-149).

The remainder of *Reversing the Colonial Gaze* is a close reading of travel narratives from the second half of the 19th century onwards. The sixth chapter ("A Wandering Monarch") casts an in-depth look at Naser al-Din *Travelogue* (1873) and foregrounds the geopolitical location of Iran, which intrigued the Ottoman, Russian, and European insatiable will to power.

Significantly enough, the intention to also foreground Naser al-Din Shah's contemporaneous travel account of Seyyed Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, a recalcitrant anti-colonial wanderer, is to sketch out the feasibility of "de-Europeanizing our reading of these texts," notwithstanding their shortcomings (184). Dabashi's primary proposition is that the transnational transformation of such narratives necessitates a "comparative global understanding of the context of the already globalized capital and its circulations of labor, raw material, and market," rather than the Eurocentric *idée fixe* of "Islam and modernity" (181).

The seventh chapter ("Hajj Sayyah Leads a Peripatetic Life") scrutinizes the life of Hajj Muhammad Ali Sayyah (1836–1925), author of *Khaterat* (*Memoirs*, 1878) and *Safarnameh* (*Travelogue*, n/d), as an inflated figure in the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911). It is unjustifiable, Dabashi proclaims, to tag a worldly excursionist, who even "does not use the phrase 'Farang' or 'Farangestan,' or 'Europe'" in his narrative account, as a man who has brought back "modernity" from "the West," specifically the US, being the first Iranian to be granted American citizenship (195). Dabashi's critique of the postcolonial nation-state demonstrates how our understanding of "Iran" and "Europe" has been recast by capitalist, white, and masculinist European modernity, culminating in today's binary opposition between a civilized "West" and uncultured "East": "'Europe' was not a reality *sui generis* to which these travelers decided, as Alice did into that rabbit hole, to plunge and come back" (220).

Naser al-Din Shah's fascination for reading and writing travelogues was to the extent that he, during his itineraries within and outside Iran, decreed that his entourage compose their own travel accounts. Chapter eight ("In the Company of a Refined Prince") examines two travelogues written by Abd al-Samad Mirza 'Izz al-Dowleh Salur, Naser al-Din Shah's half-brother. Salur's worldliness can be perceived in his metaphorical reference to heaven, since he introduces Paris, Moscow, the Rhone, and Gilan as a "paradise". Dabashi views the common misreading of these texts as the ramification "of the Pahlavi modernization project, later leading to the Islamist nativism" (236). Indeed, the postcolonial intellectual can also essentialize "the West" as the cynosure to be rejected or embraced.

Reversing the Colonial Gaze subverts the reductive view fixed on Persian travelogues by sometimes downplaying the authorial role of the travelers. Chapter nine ("A Wandering Mystic") goes through the second travelogue of Haji Mohammad Ali Pirzadeh (*ca.* 1835–1904), in and out of his

hometown following almost the same route of his predecessors. What distinguishes this report from its precursors is the title, “Safar-e Farangestan” (“European journey”), designated by Pirzadeh himself. Through employing Umberto Eco’s hermeneutics, Dabashi not only downplays authorial intention but also promotes the triangular theory of intentions (of the author, the reader, and the text) as the critical key to appraising the text (258). Dabashi textures the successive moments of colonial production and anti-colonial interpretation, calling to reread and revivify the Persian travelogue “at the concluding end of postcoloniality, when minds are decolonized” (258)—a bold, and perhaps premature, resolution to the riddled condition of postcoloniality in the twenty-first century, particularly in Iran.

Chapter ten (“In and Out of a Homeland”) is significant since Yahya Dowlatabadi, in *Hayat-e Yahiya* (*The Life of Yahiya*, 1893–1939), a four-volume travelogue, echoes the break from the Qajar to Pahlavi dynasty. This chapter, the lengthiest in this book, is testament to the anticolonial, anti-racist, and de-Europeanized standpoint of Dowlatabadi—and perhaps of Dabashi himself. It is almost impossible, notes Dabashi, to find a description of Europe without at least one parallel reflection on Dowlatabadi’s homeland of Iran. His attendance at the Race Congress held in London in July 1911, as one of the West Asian delegates, was, in contrast to common Orientalist perception, to decenter “Europe” and declare “his perspectives on democracy and socialism”—especially since he showed up in national costume, unlike many fellow representatives who appeared in European attire (297). Furthermore, Dowlatabadi’s “Shabnameh” (nightly pamphlet), in which he rebukes the coalition between Iran, Austria, and Germany during WWI, accounts for his “awareness of the global circumstances of multiple empires and the fate of smaller nations like his homeland in this context” (299).

In the penultimate chapter (“The Fact and Fiction of a Homeland”), Dabashi steers his decolonial critique towards Zeyn al-Abedin Maragheh’s *Siyahat-nameh-ye Ibrahim Beg* (*Ibrahim Beg’s Travelogue*, 1942) a conflation of fact and fancy in three volumes. The uniqueness of this fictional narrative lies in its approach of reprising Qajar reign, inasmuch as its Iranian protagonist leaves Cairo and travels to his homeland, in contrast to the modus operandi of most precursors who left Iran and travelled abroad. Knowing the fact that Maragheh’s point of reference to “Mamalek-e Kharejeh” (foreign countries) is limited to Calcutta, Ottoman territories, Egypt, Russia, and Mumbai, along with the repeatedly-mentioned fact of visiting

Europe—while it eventually turned out to be Japan—are necessary to fully evaluate this work. Dabashi's ultimate critique in this chapter is of the bifurcation of the travelogue genre between those penned by Orientalist European travelers like James Morier's *Hajji Baba*, and those authored by "Muslim and other geographers," like Maragheh'i himself, who reclaimed and remapped the world, based on their own desires and interests (333).

Scrutinizing eleven travelogues, in chapter twelve ("Professor Sayyah Comes Home to Teach") Dabashi moves away from narrative accounts to essays written by Fatemeh Sayyah (1902–1948), Hajj Sayyah's niece, as a "towering paradoxical conclusion of all the travels" (337). Compared to Hajj Sayyah from chapter seven, Fatemeh Sayyah, born and educated in Russia, was a trailblazer in women's rights during the reign of the first Pahlavi monarch, and the pioneer in Comparative Literature at the University of Tehran. Fatemeh Sayyah falls outside the stated scope of Dabashi's study, but examination of her work fulfills a rhetorical purpose: the final chapter stands out in its exposition of Sayyah's Eurocentric perspective whose "elitist, state-sponsored, bourgeois feminism" exposes the limits of the "modernization" project implemented by the first Pahlavi monarch (343). Dabashi contends that in coming home to teach, and leaving such a profound mark on literary study in Iran, she should have grasped the "cosmopolitan worldliness" of her uncle and prior wayfarers.

Whereas Dabashi's reading of the eleven travelogues offers a timely paradigm of decoloniality, one which Dabashi's scholarship has helped to advance in Iranian Studies, *Reversing the Colonial Gaze* leaves the reader with a few reservations. For one thing, I find the predominant assertion that "the world was the ultimate destination of these travelers, not 'Europe'" (219) problematic not only since Europe was principally the farthest point to which our Persian itinerants travelled, but also because the continent was an integral part of their imaginative geography. Indeed, not all Iranians who travelled to Europe harbored a potentially liberating agenda: for example, Dabashi invokes Mirza Saleh multiple times in the fifth chapter, without any reference to his companions dispatched to study artillery, chemistry, and engineering as manifestations of modernity and/or coloniality. To more comprehensively implement a decolonization of the modern Iranian imagination, the reader should have been furnished with a more direct critique of the way the Industrial Revolution, and not merely Enlightenment discourse, contributed to the moral and intellectual, albeit informal,

colonization of a nation—resulting in the flawed bipolarity of “the West and the Rest” in Iran today.

Another point of contention is Dabashi’s treatment of Nile Green’s *The Love of Strangers: What Six Muslim Students Learned in Jane Austen’s London* (Princeton, 2016) as an Orientalist account of the tradition that goes back to Bernard Lewis’s and William Wright’s fascination with “Muslim travelers” (7). In fact, Green’s peculiar reading of Mirza Saleh Shirazi, the Muslim student, may be viewed as a romantic attempt at revisiting the past and rewriting the present of UK-Iranian relations, and hence a problematic act of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak’s term). The identification of Green’s work as benevolent Orientalism, in line with Lewis’s imperialist scholarship, is grossly reductive. As a scholar of English Literature based in Iran, I have, for instance, benefited from Green’s critique of a Persian travelogue which arguably provides an alternative history of England. As an interesting example not only of Iranian Studies but also of transnational British studies, *The Love of Strangers* foregrounds contested issues that, according to Green, Jane Austen, Mirza Saleh’s contemporary in Regency London, “chose to carefully downplay in her novels” (and see Amirhossein Vafa’s recent “Lost in Paradise” in *IJMES* 52:2, for a reading of Green as a catalyst to decolonize English literary studies in Iran).

Notwithstanding the above issues, *Reversing the Colonial Gaze* is a timely contribution to studies of Persian travel writing that seek to revive a cosmopolitan and multifaceted public sphere which was previously denied, or circumscribed, through the prism of colonial modernity in both Iranian and Euro-American intellectual discourse.

Mojtaba Rostampour-Jahromi
MA student, English Literature
Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran