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Reflections on Cultural Imperialism: Iran's Discourse of Misery (*badbaxti*)*

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Abstract

This article examines the theme of cultural imperialism through a case-study of change in nineteenth-century intellectual discourse. It analyzes an Iranian intellectual discourse, which is known, according to the Persian nomenclature, as the discourse of “misery” (*badbaxti*). The article shows that throughout the nineteenth-century, the perception of Iranian intellectuals changed, rather drastically, from self-confidence to self-immiseration. This argument is grounded in a close textual contrast between two representative texts. Mirza Saleh Shirazi's *Safar-nāme* (1815), representing confidence, is contrasted with *Siyāhat-nāme-ye Ebrāhim Beyk* or “The Travel Diary of Ibrahim Beg” (1895), which articulated the idea of an incomparable Iranian misery. The author of *Siyāhat-nāme-ye Ebrāhim Beyk* captured this discursive transformation when he wrote: “there is no country on the face of the planet today more miserable than Iran”. The discourse of misery had profound consequences well into the present. Self-immiseration entered popular culture in the Pahlavi period (1925-1979) and intensified in the Islamic Republican period (1979-present). The discourse of misery has captivated modern Iranian consciousness, without necessarily corresponding to social reality.

Keywords: Colonialism, Intellectual History, Iranian Studies, Persian Travelogues, West Asia

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1. Introduction

When we think of imperialism, an immediate association is the tangible and the material realm, for instance, the extraction of natural resources or the movement of human resources from the colony towards the metropole. The material processes of imperialism are probed by Patnaik and Patnaik (2016) in *A Theory of Imperialism*. The mental complement to the material is also significant (Ngũgĩ, 2008, pp. 16-17); indeed, for some scholars, the mental dimension has primacy over the material. Wael Hallaq (2018, p. 19) appears to give primacy (or at least equal consideration) to the mental and epistemological dimensions of imperialism over the material and economic dimensions. In the broadest sense, the mental dimension of imperialism denotes a cognition of the world, which has, as its constituent parts narratives, discourses, and cultures that persuade nations and peoples into imperialist relationships, also justifying these relationships and solidifying their longevity¹.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1994, p. xii) defined culture as the “arts of description, communication, and representation, that [had] relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realm”. Through these “arts of description,” Said explained, the colonialist imagined the colony and its inferiority. This imagination was extensive, traveling through geography. The colonized themselves, tapped into colonialist

1. In this article, I follow Edward Said’s distinction between imperialism and colonialism. He defined imperialism as the practice, the theory, and the attitude of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory. Colonialism, in contrast, was a consequence of imperialism and the implanting of settlements on a distant territory (Said, 1994, p. 9). In explaining the relationship between Europe and Iran, imperialism is thus a more fitting concept because of the absence of European settlements on Iranian territory.

representation to interpret their identity and history. They also appropriated colonial representations and instilled them with new meanings in acts of resistance. We can note the example of “civilization” here as both a category of domination and resistance. In his brief, but persuasive discursive genealogy of the concept, Hamid Dabashi (2001) argued that a number of historical forces, including capitalistic revolution, European Enlightenment, and colonialism, joined together to initiate civilizational thinking. He added that while national cultures in Western Europe were concocted to distinguish one economic unit of capital from another, Orientalism invented civilizational thinking to unify these national cultures against their colonial consequences, which included the “Islamic civilization” and the “African civilization”. These civilizational others were not represented as equals, Dabashi (2001, p. 364) emphasized, but as inferiors. In West Asia, modernist intellectuals accepted the colonialist narrative of their “civilizational” inferiority (Hourani, 1970). These intellectuals believed that their inner groups (Arabs, Turks, Muslims, and Iranians among others) suffered from an inferior condition either in their present, or in their past, which had shaped their present predicament. Examples of the former were Muslim reformers, such as Seyyed Jamalol Din-e Afghani and Mohammad Abduh, who accepted the orientalist representation of the Islamic civilization in the present as inferior (Jung, 2001).

However, they departed from orientalists, such as Ernst Renan (Turner, 1999, p. 200), in their conviction that a return to the supposed true and rational Islam of the earliest Muslim communities would propel their fellow Muslims into a prosperous future. In other cases, the inferiority complex of West Asian intellectuals went further back in time, displaying an inferior

attitude about their past and present. Joseph Massad (2007) demonstrates this in the context of Arab intellectual history. Arab intellectuals attempted to explain male-on-male desire in their bygone societies as “foreign” additions, which they believed had led to the current state of their sexual “abnormalities”. These intellectuals then went after sexual norms modeled on European (hetero)sexuality to cure their alleged abnormalities.

The mental dimension of imperialism extended into Iran in the form of an intellectual discourse, which is known, according to the Persian nomenclature, as the discourse of “misery” or *badbaxti*.¹ The formation of this discourse is traced back to the second half of the nineteenth-century. The discourse of misery may be defined as one that represented the national self as inadequate and inferior, when compared to the outside world, in particular the colonialist West. Immiseration is viewed as a discourse (Foucault, 1972) because it did not remain confined to an intellectual circle. In the Iranian sociality, “being miserable” has become an institutionalized way of thinking that is mutually intelligible and determinant of what can and cannot be said about “Iran.” The weight of this discourse allowed it to drive other contradictory discourses. As Reza Zia-Ebrahimi (2016) has argued, the nationalist idea of Iran’s pre-Islamic glory emerged as a reaction to European imperialism, and I would add, in the context of immiseration. Iranian nationalists contrasted past glory with an immiserated present; Tavakoli-Targhi (2001, p. 103) provides us with examples of these contrasts in his *Refashioning Iran*. Similar to Afghani and Abduh who believed that “Islam” had lost its early rationality, Iranian nationalists held

1. *Badbaxti* was a term of self-castigation for the examined discourse. In one of the examined texts below, the author stated in frustration: “There is no country on the face of the planet today more miserable than Iran” (Maraghey’i, 1983, p. 234).

that “Iran” had lost her pre-Islamic glory, which had plunged Iranians into misery.

The intellectual interest in immiseration was not simply imaginative; it had a material basis. Tsarist Russia, armed with modern artillery, defeated the Qajars in two wars and imposed on them the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmanchai (1828), which forced Iran to surrender its claims over the Caucasus. Moreover, the British extended their reach from South Asia and the Persian Gulf into Central Asia and forced the Qajars to relinquish Herat, imposing on Iran the Treaty of Paris (1857) (Abrahamian, 2008, p. 36). Economically, local and traditional Iranian industries declined as commercial and industrial foreign goods entered Iranian markets (Ashraf, 1359 [1980 A.D.], p. 91). Despite providing a number of unpopular concessions to European states, the government was not able to raise enough revenue to implement effective political and economic modernization (Abrahamian, 2008, p. 38). This resulted in the absence of an infrastructure that would reduce the pressure of colonialism. Material insecurity thus propelled intellectual imagination into action. Intellectuals castigated the self—against or in disregard of alternative discourses against colonialism—to raise their fellow Iranians from their supposed slumber and stagnation relative to the outside world.

This article adds to the growing line of inquiry on Iran's discourse of misery. In the context of his study on Persian fiction, Honarmand (2017) has shown that late nineteenth-century reformist intellectuals aimed at “revealing the [supposed] ignorance” of their fellow Iranians. They produced the discourse of Iranian backwardness, Honarmand rightly argues, in a conversation with disparaging European texts about Iranians. In the context of Persian satire, Abedenifard (2021) has studied three early Iranian

modernists who, in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century, expressed and disseminated frustrated feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, and shame as collective self-criticism of Iran and Iranians. Calling this “Iran’s self-deprecating modernity”, Abedenifard (2021, p. 411) correctly notes that this was a “thriving discourse rather than a sporadic set of self-critical practices”. Samiei’s book (1400 [2021 A.D.]), “*Development and Well-Being Among Iranians*”, is the most extensive account of the subject, which also examines the present manifestations of immiseration. Samiei (1400 [2021 A.D.], p. 46) identifies, in part through polling data, a widespread lack of subjective well-being. According to one poll conducted between 2014-2018, residents of two Iranian cities, Mashhad and Tehran, ranked 177 and 178 out of 186 cities surveyed when it came to “hope in the future” (Samiei, 1400 [2021 A.D.], p. 46). Samiei (1400 [2021 A.D.], p. 62) adds that strong feelings of hopelessness occur among Iranians, despite the country having a relatively higher position on the more “objective” and quantitative measures of economic welfare. In about a fifty-year period, according to polls conducted between 1974 and 2020, the level of subjective well-being has remained low (Samiei, 1400 [2021 A.D.]).

Following extant line of inquiry, this article utilizes a textually-informed historical approach to the question of misery. It probes the discursive origins of misery by contrasting change in intellectual texts through time. Two texts are chosen that represent their broader intellectual contexts of confidence and immiseration. The first text is the well-known *Safar-nāme* or the “*Travelogue*” by Mirza Saleh Shirazi, which is representative of the age of confidence. Menashri (1992, p. 68), without explicating Shirazi’s self-confidence, recognized that “Shirazi [did] not advocate the adoption of western ways, as other Iranians would do later” adding

that the text is “descriptive rather than admonitory”. In modern Iranian Studies scholarship, the commentary on the *Safar-nāme* has been extensive. Green (2015) has viewed the text as an important example of early Iranian encounter and “friendship” with the modern world. Following Dabashi (2019), this work emphasizes Shirazi’s encounter with the (modern) world, as opposed to modern Europe, because Shirazi spent considerable time in Caucasia, Russia, and the Ottoman capital in addition to his stay in England.

In 1815, the Qajar crown prince, ‘Abbas Mirza Na’ebol Saltane, having experienced Iranian defeats to the Tsars two years earlier, commissioned Mirza Saleh Shirazi and four other students on a journey to England (Musavi Tabari, 1353 [1974 A.D.]). According to Shirazi (1387 [2008 A.D.], pp. 93, 95), the trip’s goal was to learn *natural philosophy*¹ and languages, in particular Latin, English, and French, and inquire into foreign religion and law, but excluding crafts (*san‘at*), which two other students were tasked with acquiring. The two students were Aqa Mohammad Kazem Hakkak and Ostad Mohammad ‘Ali who was a craftsman in Tabriz’s arms production facility. The style of the text was a mix between a chronicle, proto-ethnography, and history. Shirazi chronicled mundane daily events in chronological succession. He also provided a series of empirical observations on the social and urban organization of the places he visited. The text can also be read as a historical account: it informed the reader, without specifying its sources, the histories of foreign territories he visited, in particular the dynastic histories of the Tsars, the Ottomans, and the English (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 297).

Safar-nāme is contrasted with a text of the late Qajar years—*Siyāhat-nāme-ye Ebrāhim Bayk* or *The Travel Diary of Ibrahim*

1. hikmat-e tabi’i

Beg (1895)—which represented the broader constitutionalist discourse on an incomparable Iranian misery. The context in which Maraghey'i penned his *Siyāhat-nāme* has been correctly identified, by Gheissari (1998) and Dabashi (2016) among others, as an intellectualism that occurred outside the court and articulated reformist sociopolitical concerns with wide-reaching impact and long-term consequences for state and society. Although the *Siyāhat-nāme* was fictional in nature, the story of the main character, Ibrahim Beg, was very much autobiographical, resembling the life and travels of its author, Zaynol 'Abedin Maraghey'i (1840-1910). Maraghey'i received schooling until the age of sixteen and then joined his father's trade. After agitating officials in Iran (of the *kadxodā* rank), he left Iran for Tiflis, where he worked as a small merchant. The Iranian consulate employed him there, but his perception of disorderly affairs caused him to leave. He eventually took up residence in Istanbul and became involved with constitutionalist papers like *Shams* in Istanbul and *Ḥablol matin* in Calcutta (Aryanpur, 1354 [1976 A.D.], pp. 305-306). The story's protagonist, Ibrahim Beg, was also a merchant who lived outside of Iran, in Egypt, but maintained a deep emotional bond with Iran, in a way that he refused to speak Arabic and was grieved whenever someone told him something unpleasant about Iran (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], pp. 29-30). Ibrahim Beg travelled to Iran, for the first time, in his adult life. There, his idealized picture of Iran quickly shattered and he began to diagnose Iranian immiseration. Shirazi and Maraghey'i both encountered Iran in relation to the outside world, thus informing the readers about Iranian self-perception. Although both wrote their travelogues in the context of European colonialism, they differed in one major respect: Shirazi viewed Iran with confidence; Maraghey'i viewed it with embarrassment.

2. From Confidence to Immiseration

In the early twentieth century, it was commonplace for intellectuals to populate pages of newspapers and journals with criticisms on how things were done in Iran, often in comparison with a better approach in Europe. One intellectual castigated Iranians' consumption of tea in the following way:

Granted they drink tea in England, but it is served with milk and not in the same heavy color consumed by Iranians, or in the same amount, one after another, cup after cup. The English drink it in the morning and on an empty stomach, with bread and butter, and in the evening too it is served with some bread and butter, so that its bad effects are eliminated. This is in contrast to Iran: as soon as a guest arrives the host goes, "tea, everyone!" Then the tea flows without interruption. [In addition to ill effects on the body such as poor digestion, tea has caused most Iranians to look dark and frail] (Kowkab, 1304 [1925 A.D.], p. 554).

Dated to approximately 1925, Iranian intellectual, Mirza Mehdi Khan Kowkab, wrote these words from Hyderabad, India for the *Iranshahr* Journal. Around this time, reformist intellectuals saw immiseration everywhere and found causal links to it in the most unexpected of things, in this case the consumption of tea. The discourse of misery began in the second half of the nineteenth-century and intensified with the Constitutional Movement of 1906 (Afary, 1996). Attempting to make sense of colonial modernity, reformist intellectuals articulated a comparative idea of misery, measured in relation to Europe as well as other (semi)-colonies of the world, such as the Ottoman Empire, Caucasia, and Japan. Diagnosing misery was not a deep-rooted intellectual exercise, however. In fact, in the first half of the Qajar period (1786-1925),

until the second half of the nineteenth century, Iranian intellectual discourse viewed the order of life in Iran with confidence.

Shirazi's travelogue provided many details that showcased this confidence. Shirazi travelled from Isfahan to Caucasia and Russia, after which he went to England, where he spent three years and nine months, returning to Iran via Istanbul. Beginning his travels in Iran, Shirazi traveled from Isfahan to the peripheral towns of Kashan, and then from Qom to Tehran. He described the geography and the infrastructure in detail. A frequent term describing Iranian infrastructure was "*estehkām*"—a term used to describe such things as caravans and castles (*arg*) (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], pp. 64, 70, 71, 79). This term, meaning "strength" or "stability," informs us about Iranian self-perception before the immiseration discourse emerged. According to Shirazi, the productive Qajars had brought about *estehkām*, reversing abandonment and decay before them and replacing it with construction and prosperity (*ābādi*), although not entirely, as in a city like Qom, he recorded several ruined mosques and *madrasas* (colleges). Shirazi acknowledged construction and prosperity undertaken by previous dynasties, but gave most emphasis to his contemporaries. He gave credit to the Qajar-appointed ruler (*hākem*) of Isfahan, Amin-o-ddole, in particular. He wrote, "old infrastructure that were buildings of Safavid Sultans had become wasted and defective. Now, architects, bricklayers, painters and stonemasons are brought [by Amin-o-ddole for repair]" (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 47). He credited Amin-o-ddole with several new constructions as well, including the bazaar and the *chahārbāgh*, built in formerly ruined areas. Shirazi took some delight in describing this "prosperity" (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 47). He was awed by the aesthetic beauty of the Iranian infrastructure (*emārat*), in a way that in certain passages, he

refrained from their detailed description “not to prolong speech,” also commenting that words fail to express their quality (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], pp. 48, 55). Among the infrastructure, he praised the chancery (*divān-khāne*), caravans, mosques, *madrasas* (colleges), gardens, and castles for their grandeur (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], pp. 80, 63, 64, 56, 68, 67, 79).

The infrastructural picture in Maraghey'i transformed radically from the description we read in Shirazi. For Maraghey'i (narrated through his traveler's voice, Ibrahim Beg), Iranian infrastructure was almost without exception deficient. Only one form of infrastructure impressed Maraghey'i (as it had impressed Shirazi's ivoyaging gaze): caravans. But it was the Safavid Shah Abbas (ruled, 1588-1629) who received credit for them. All the good infrastructure in Iran, including caravans and the *Narin* castle in Ardabil, were viewed by Maraghey'i as remnants of Safavid glory, unrelated to the idle, misery-generative Qajars (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], pp. 68, 164, 168). The contrast between Safavid and Qajar times was not simply Maraghey'i's polemical judgment. Ahmad Ashraf, quoting what was a more disinterested foreign observer, explained that the expansion of English imports had transformed Kashan from a major industrial city in Safavid times to an economically-stagnant place in the late Qajar period (Ashraf, 1359 [1980 A.D.], p. 92). Qajar cities, Maraghey'i wrote, were desolate, dirty, and underdeveloped, in particular in comparison to European cities, where unlike “lazy” (*tanbal*) Iranians, all citizens were uninterruptedly occupied with increasing national wealth and prosperity (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 154).

Iran was also contrasted with parts of Caucasia. In comparison, Iran was a failure, Maraghey'i thought, because of “governmental negligence and people's laziness”, to extract oil and natural

resources and facilitate foreign investments and industries around them (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 51). In contrast to Egypt, he added, Iranian bathhouses were unsanitary and the water was idle and filthy, causing contagious illnesses (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 61). Hospitals lacked cleanliness, equipment, medicine, and qualified doctors (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 62). Travelling in Iran was difficult because of underdeveloped roads and lack of railways, Maraghey'i added (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 74). The state made no effort, Maraghey'i charged, to create companies for production of goods and participation in global markets (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], pp. 66, 206). Maraghey'i contrasted Iranians' alleged lack of interest in modern industry to the Japanese. He wrote that a group from Japan had gone to Germany as tourists. While visiting a cannon factory¹, they took careful (mental) notes and duplicated their production in Japan (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 138). Iran lacked industries, he wrote, for production of arterially and modern weaponry (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 76). Maraghey'i's polemical prose did not give sufficient credit to the Qajar state. Willem Floor (2003, p. 33) has shown that in response to colonialism eroding traditional production, the Qajar state of Iran tried, at great financial and social cost, to provide Iran with an independent industrial base. It even invested in a number of factories, with the earliest one, a rifle factory in Tehran, dating back to 1850. However, Floor added that this industrial policy failed because the Qajar state did not have the sufficient centralization and know-how on running modern industries. It was this failure that made Maraghey'i's prose convincing to his readers.

Compare Maraghey'i's prose with pre-immiseration

1. Kārxāne-ye tuprizi

observations on foreign industry. In Russia, Shirazi (1387 [2008 A.D.]) described industries in the production of stone (*hejāri*), gun, chariot, sword, knife, and other weapons. These industries, he wrote, had either acquired material from Europe or had brought European experts to the country. This Russian strategy had resulted in production and duplication of European products (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 195). In England, Shirazi documented industrial capacities and commanded their orderly production. Two sites in particular occupied his attention, a wool-making factory in the city of Ashburton, which he lauded for its incomparable grandeur. He was equally impressed with a naval ship in Plymouth, which “resembled a small town” (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 289). Shirazi simply recorded his observations on foreign industries; but, these observations, though at times laudatory, were not coupled with anxiety about what Iran lacked, nor did they express an interest in Iran’s need for the same industrial and inventive capacities, with the exception of Shirazi’s importation into Iran of a print machine to produce a newspaper for circulation in the court. Shirazi did not link print to Iran’s enlightenment. He simply wrote: “If I can take something from this country [England] to Iran, which would be of use to the lofty government, it might be good” (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 496).

Shirazi’s self-confidence was further evident in an exchange between Shirazi and his friends, who advised him against traveling abroad. Before departing for his travels, Shirazi met with them and “each one reproached and reprimanded [him] separately” (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 92). Shirazi attempted to justify his trip to a certain friend and merchant, named Aqa Ismail Borujerdi, reasoning that it was of an educational nature. His friend validated his desire for learning, but objected that such an objective would not be fulfilled by travelling to Europe as “everyone [there] will be

ignorant, so what benefit lies in their companionship?” (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 93). This opinion made Shirazi insecure to the point that at a later point in his trip, he reprimanded himself thinking that: “I [was] a fool to have left my own home, becoming entangled with this journey” (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 172). In his friends’ estimation, therefore, Europe was not a place of comparative advantage nor enlightenment, but a place of ignorance.

Despite his friends’ reprimand, Shirazi went to England to learn about their educational order. He linked progress in the sciences, in England and British India, to the kingship of George III, and commanded in particular the “incomparable” progress of chemistry (alchemy’s successor for Shirazi) (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 360). He also described higher educational curriculum in a Moscow school, as well as the subjects taught there, unavailable to Iranian students, such as painting (*suratkeshi*) and dance (*raqqāsi*) (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 142). On primary education, Shirazi wrote that at age of four to five, the English started to teach their children, and by age seven, each child was able to read. Shirazi simply documented the curricula and pedagogical difference in primary and higher education, but made no indication that this difference evidenced an Iranian lack. He did not interpret lower, functional literacy rates in Iran as a sign of misery. This was a sharp contrast to the reformist discourse of his late nineteenth-century forerunners, who viewed lower functional literacy in Iranian children as a cause of collective misery. One of the earliest works to argue for mass, functional literacy was Akhundzadeh’s (1812-78) *Maktubāt* (1385 [2006 A.D.], p. 325). Akhundzadeh linked state power to “national education” (*tarbiyat-e mellat*), which could be achieved through mass literacy¹.

1. *kasb-e savād barā-ye omum-e nās*

In Maraghey'i, in contrast to Shirazi, European knowledge served as a measuring board against which Iran fell miserably short. Maraghey'i criticized Iranian schools for lacking proper pedagogy. He wrote that the curricula were free of new sciences, thus disabling Iranians from preventing and curing deadly diseases such as smallpox (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], pp. 117, 224). In particular, for Maraghey'i, medical knowledge was deficient and "every high dervish, every herbalist ... and every village woman-elder" claimed to be a doctor without proper training or a certificate (*shahādat-nāme*) (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 226). This polemic anticipated intellectual discourse in the twentieth century, which as Cyrus Schayegh (2009) has shown, put in motion a transformation of medical theory and practice, lasting into the present. On new knowledge forms, Maraghey'i further castigated the Qajars for not using numbers in their governance. He wrote that no state-commissioned annual statistics existed, and that no one in the country kept a record of important dates such as birthdates. According to Foucault (1991), the "science of the state" or statistics was a new form of knowledge that eighteenth-century European administrative and territorial monarchies, and thereafter republican states, employed to govern and manage their populations. Maraghey'i thought that the qualitative approach of the Qajar state and the absence of numbers, meant a failure in effective governance.

Shirazi also showed interest in law and government outside of Iran, but without inferring immiseration. He commanded English liberty (*āzādi*) and legal organization in the context of his narrative on a shopkeeper on Oxford Street in London. English authorities, whose positions he did not specify, attempted to close a shop for a period of six months, and the shopkeeper refused closure. With

some exaggeration, Shirazi wrote that the entire army (*sepāh*), if it tried, could not take it by force, nor could the prince inflict financial or bodily harm on the shopkeeper. England had achieved a legal order, in which, all from the king to the beggar are bound by the country's order and are punished for their violations, Shirazi told his readers (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 429). Shirazi praised English liberalism, but did not prescribe its emulation nor did he contrast it with an Iranian deficiency. Instead, Shirazi compared English legal organization to a supposed Arab deficiency, writing that before England's new legal order (read: liberalism) emerged, the English were like the people of Arabia (*'Arabestān*), filled with "evil, corruption, and bloodthirst" (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 296).

Maraghey'i represented Qajar political authority as incompetent, oppressive, and corrupt. Their corruption was widespread inside Iran, he wrote, but also extended beyond its frontiers. He charged Iranian consulate officials with embezzling passport fees from Iranian subjects abroad (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], pp. 49, 230). Inside the country, he alleged that everyone from high officials, like the king, ministers, and governors, to their inferiors like the *dārughe* and *kadkhodā* were incompetent and corrupt. He added that officials were undeservedly given (or even bought) numerous available courtly titles (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 90). According to Maraghey'i, officials thrived on material grandeur and took bribes (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], pp. 137, 239). He charged the *motevalli* and his agents with the appropriation of *awqāf* (1983, p. 166), and other officials with the appropriation of the inheritance of Iranian subjects abroad, which by the *Shari'a* did not belong to them (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 50). Maraghey'i alleged that taxation practices were

arbitrary, according to the whims of local rulers, with no uniform, central taxation law that would generate revenue for the state (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], pp. 125, 137). More generally, no uniform guidelines¹ existed for governors (*hokkām*), based on which they would know their duties and govern, he wrote (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], pp. 209, 272). Maraghey'i went on to say that officials' (*kār-pardāzān*) oppression was so severe that poor classes escaped to the Caucasus and performed the most difficult manual labor or sold merchandise on streets, while the wealthier renounced their Iranian citizenship (*tābe'iyat*) seeking the protection and commercial support of foreign states (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 52). To make matters worse, political authority was allegedly not responsive to complaints. Maraghey'i's traveler-narrator, Ibrahim Beg, secured meetings with the interior and foreign ministers (ironically, rather easily for their supposed lack of reception). In meeting with them, he diagnosed Iran's miseries and suggested a path to reform. Their only response, however, was reprimand, and in the case of the Iranian foreign minister, corporeal beating of Ibrahim Beg (Maraghey'i, 1362 [1983 A.D.], p. 109).

Shirazi took no quarrels with the political authority of his Qajar patrons. One particular episode in his travelogue was quite telling. When in England, Shirazi attempted to learn new knowledge from his hosts. But he was left without the necessary funding and coordination to obtain instructions. In his narrative, Iranian officials did not receive any significant reprimand. The real culprit, Shirazi wrote, was a man named Joseph D'Arcy (d. 1848). D'Arcy was a British officer who, in 1811, after Iranian setbacks against Russia, had come to Iran with the British ambassador, Sir Gore Ouseley, to

1. *dasturol'amal*

provide arterially training to the men of ‘Abbas Mirza. Upon D’Arcy’s return in 1815, ‘Abbas Mirza commissioned five students, including Shirazi, to accompany him and study in England. Shirazi blamed delays in obtaining lessons almost entirely on D’Arcy’s administrative incompetence, personal selfishness, and financial greed (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 269). According to Shirazi, D’Arcy fell far short of the well-known and effective English official he pretended to be. D’Arcy, Shirazi alleged, did not want students to communicate with other English officials or seek lessons on their own. This was because he alone wanted to be in charge of their coordination, and for this labor he hoped to be paid by the British government. In other words, if the students themselves or English persons other than D’Arcy were to coordinate lessons, D’Arcy would be left without his payment (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 257). The payment he had hoped for never came, Shirazi wrote, so he did not coordinate lessons and the students were left idle. A distraught Shirazi sold scarfs (*shāl*) in his possession to secure finances for private lessons that he arranged himself (Shirazi, 1387 [2008 A.D.], p. 253). Shirazi had no significant frustration with the Iranian side. He believed that the British, D’Arcy in particular, failed to secure his comfort in England, because of the same vices, such as financial greed, that immiseration intellectuals associated with Qajar’s entire political organization.

3. Text and History

Maraghey’i’s prose therefore contradicted Shirazi’s account of firm Iranian infrastructure, functioning order of education and knowledge, and qualified political authority. Maraghey’i, who represented the broader reformist discourse of the later Qajar years,

viewed Iranian infrastructure and knowledge as deficient, and political authority as incompetent and corrupt. These problems generated collective misery of an incomparable degree. Maraghey'i declared Iranians miserable, not only compared to Europe, but also compared to some of their neighbors. If Shirazi admired a certain aspect of organization in Europe, say, protections of liberal law for individuals, he did not follow this admiration with a castigation of Iran. Maraghey'i, on the other hand, used difference to generate a discourse of Iranian lacks, deficiencies, and miseries.

Why did the mood and confidence of Iranian intellectuals change dramatically when we compare early and late nineteenth-century writings? Was there a collective devastation that compelled intellectuals towards the idea of self-immiseration? In a major way, the answer to this question is negative. Compared to the aftermath that followed the fall of the Safavid Empire (Matthee, 2011) in the eighteenth century, Iranians enjoyed a relative state of stability throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, major territorial losses had occurred closer to the time of Shirazi than Maraghey'i, which was a major reason for Shirazi's "discovery" journey Westwards. In terms of modernization, the Qajar state had accomplished much more when Maraghey'i penned his travelogue. Modernization had expanded from mere military modernization in the early nineteenth century to new approaches to state bureaucracy, higher education, and the economy in the late nineteenth century (Amanat, 2017). Although limited and slow-paced compared to the Reza Shah period (1925-1941) (Cronin, 2003), under Naserol Din Shah (1848-1896), modernization reforms were still more extensive compared to his predecessor Fath'Ali Shah (1797-1834) whose court patronized Shirazi. Social efforts towards modernization were also more serious. An example

were the “civil” organizations, such as *anjoman-e ma‘āref*, that had gathered resources for the promotion of mass, functional literacy. By Maraghey’i’s own measures, Iran was less “miserable” in 1895 than it was 1815. However, the outside world appeared far more different in 1895 compared to 1815. By the 1880s, European colonial states had secured territorial, economic, financial, and cultural control over the entire globe. Moreover, colonialists, and in some cases their direct colonies, possessed more modern characteristics when compared to the semi-colony of Iran, such as centralized states, impersonal bureaucracies, industrial productive capacities, conscription regimes, disciplined societies, new sciences, and high functional literacy rates. If these were the definitive measures of well-being, then Iran was in comparison indeed miserable.

The anxiety of misery helped facilitate material change during the constitutionalist period, such as the institution of a parliament tasked with generating political accountability and economic growth. However, those who championed constitutional reform as a way out of misery were withdrawing from politics by the late 1910s (Abrahamian, 2008, p. 35). They seemed disillusioned that their reform program had failed to put an end to misery. It is thus important to consider, whether an alternative intellectual discourse, free of self-castigation, would have generated a more constructive environment for the reform of material conditions in the late Qajar period.

After the constitutionalist period, intellectual texts carried on with the idea of immiseration. Examples included the 1920 *Essay on the Causes of Our Misery and its Remedy*¹, written by Iranian

1. *Risāle-ye ‘elal-e badbaxtī-ye mā va ‘alāj-e ān*.

politician, Mohtashemol Saltane (also known as, Hasan Esfandiyari). Another major example was the 1995 book written by University of Tehran Sociology Professor, Sadeq Zibakalam: *How Did We Become Who We Are? A Genealogy of Iran's Backwardness* (1377 [1998 A.D.]). The temporal gap between these influential works shows the longevity of the discourse of misery, which began to appear under the new terminology of the day, such as "underdevelopment" or "backwardness". Writing in different political and historical contexts, the search for underlying causes to a supposed Iranian misery unified these authors. Zibakalam held that the lack of suitable agricultural lands and low precipitation was one of the major causes for Iran's supposed backwardness relative to the West (Zibakalam, 1377 [1998 A. D.], pp. 74, 75). This was in sharp contrast to Shirazi's contemporary, Shushtari, who viewed Iran and its climate, Shushtar in particular, with near awe, linking it to health and happiness. It is worth quoting him at some length:

[The climate of Iran], this heavenly piece...the expression of its excellence cannot be contained in words. [In particular], the climate of Shushtar is better than all the world in the preservation of health and the destruction of disease. [Because of Shushtar's pleasant and moderate climate], its residents, in whatever state they find themselves, are glad, happy, and merry, for their entire lifespan. The climate is equally agreeable to the temperament of aliens, visiting from any country, as it is to Shushtar's resident-natives (Shushtari, 1363 [1984 A.D.], pp. 52-53).

4. Conclusion

The drastic change from confidence towards immiseration did not remain confined to text and intellectual discourse. As Iranians went through the twentieth century, intellectual discourse on misery seeped into popular consciousness and everyday sociality. Nationalism, new education, print, reading publics (Vejdani, 2015), and visual media built a bridge between intellectual writings and everyday imagination. In contemporary Iran, movies, songs, social media, and foreign-funded broadcast media imagine “Iran” deprecatingly. For example, the 2009 movie “My Tehran for Sale”¹ represented post-revolution Iran as an unlivable place, from which the protagonist sought to emigrate in desperation. In an unintended way, the film echoed anxieties in the notorious 1991 U.S. propaganda movie “Not Without My Daughter.” Protagonists in both movies desired to escape Iran: the former because of collective misery and the latter because of an abusive husband. Musically, Mohsen Namjoo captured the social feeling of misery in his song, “Geographic Determinism”². The lyrics appear to say that one is inevitably doomed to misery because he or she is born in Iran. Perhaps no other medium promotes immiseration more effectively than foreign-funded medias, which include Manoto TV, Voice of America Farsi, and Iran International. These broadcasts, operating out of the metropole and via foreign financial support, represent postrevolutionary Iran (1979-) as exceptionally immiserated³. Their sizable viewership in Iran consumes this

1. *Tehrān-e man harāj*

2. *jabr-e joqrāstiyā-yi*

3. According to the U.S. Library of Congress (2017, in Iranian Canadian Journal, 2018), VOA Farsi is funded by the U.S. government. Neither Manoto TV nor Iran International have been transparent on their funding sources (Iranian Canadian Journal, 2018). The Guardian has alleged Iran International is funded by the government of Saudi Arabia (Dehghan, 2018).

representation as their main source of information (Fazeli, 2021) through satellite dishes and on social media channels.

The popular perception of misery travels in the realm of imagination more than reality. It fails to distinguish between 1895 and today's realities. Maraghey'i wrote at a time when Iranians were experiencing the "shock and awe" of colonial modernity. In contrast, Iranians today face fewer serious threats to their territorial integrity. Moreover, they are better integrated into the modern world and benefit from more stable socioeconomic conditions, relative to the Qajar period. Despite these differences with the past, contemporary sociality indulges in deprecation to the same extent as Maraghey'i once had. While socializing, Iranians enunciate expressions mixed with humor, such as "this is Iran!" (*injā irān-e*) or "this is Iran after all" (*irāne dige*), when faced with the embarrassment of a problem in their country, even if this problem is shared by the community of nations. These expressions are mutually intelligible ways for fellow nationals to remind each other about a shared state of supposed misery, and of an imagined world "outside" (*xārej*) that is devoid of them. The world of the "outside" (generally equated with the West) has become an almost synonym for a place of "well-being" in the collective imagination, where one could escape from internal misery. Factors such as greater purchasing power and better infrastructure in the West are reasonable justifications for this imagination. However, the imagination becomes an almost absolute one, refusing to allow for a recognition of the realities of racism, capitalist discipline, unhappy individualism, and neoliberal austerity in the West.

On self-colonized sociality, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1388 [2009 A.D.]) wrote the classic *Westoxification* (*Qarbzadegi*) in 1962. In

this essay of social criticism, Al-e Ahamd traced Westoxification to Iranians' failure to manufacture "the machine," relying instead on Western production. Although originating from the economic sphere, Westoxification came to infect all spheres of life. The lack of an independent economy, Al-e Ahmad thought, resulted in the social imitation of all things Western on the one hand, and the repression of an Iranian-Islamic personality on the other. After the Islamic revolution of 1979, the state pursued policies against cultural imperialism in an attempt to restore Iranian-Islamic confidence. However, the cultural discourse of misery persists and erodes collective confidence.

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