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IRAN AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES: ITS DEVELOPMENT AND CURRENT STATUS

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axis of evil

colonial legacies

ethnicity

Iran–West encounters

multicultural Iran

postcolonial studies

Even though Iran has never been formally colonized, a brief glance at its history reveals western powers' imperialistic tendencies toward and colonialist impositions on it. By providing a brief overview of Iran–West encounters since the nineteenth century, this essay sets the stage for understanding how postcolonialism is relevant to the Iranian context. It then attempts to trace the main elements which have conditioned the reception and development of postcolonial perspectives in Iran. Drawing briefly on the work of Iranian religious and political thinkers, it seeks to highlight the role of political Islam in promoting anti-imperialist discourses and practices which led to Iran's Islamic Revolution one year after the publication of Said's Orientalism (1978). Yet there has been no systematic development of postcolonial studies in Iran and indeed the arrival of postcolonial theory has been rather late – as late as the mid-2000s. Notwithstanding this situation, the first decade of the twenty-first century saw a flourishing of cultural studies which seems to have aroused an interest in postcolonial debates both within Iranian academia and research centers affiliated with the government. This research argues postcolonialism has been empowering for the multicultural society of Iran in the sense that it has provided Iranians with a critical framework to question lingering

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imperialistic legacies and to deal more effectively with current national and international issues, both in academia and in society.

An overview of Iran–West encounters

One cannot write about Iran and postcolonial studies without probing into the history of western powers' interest and agendas in the country. Iran has never been formally colonized. However, its history reveals how it was reduced to the status of a semi-colony as an effect of western powers' political and economic exploitation. By providing a brief history of such encounters, I aim to indicate the way postcolonialism is relevant to the Iranian context. In "Persia as Seen by the West," L. Lockhart documents Iran–West encounters from the Achaemenian era (546 BCE) and lists politics, trade, and religion as key factors in attracting western powers to Iran.[1] This interest was intensified by the exotic picture of the country painted in travel narratives (Lockhart 1953, 328–358); Marco Polo's thirteenth-century image of Iran's unbounded treasures (Heseltine 1953, 362), and Sir John Mandeville's mid-fourteenth century narrative's depiction of Iran as "an earthly paradise" (Heseltine 1953, 361), although stemming more from fable than fact, shaped the image of Iran as a desirable land in the western imagination. Even though the Safavids' (1501–1722) active foreign policy prompted and facilitated more western travels and exploration of Iran (Matthee 2009, 139), it was not until the late eighteenth century that the country appeared as an important commercial and political entity for western imperial powers (Banuazizi 1977, 213). Due to the Great Game of rivalry between Russia and Britain to win mastery in the Middle East, Iran was especially important to Britain for its strategic position neighbouring Russia on its northern borders and British India on its eastern borders (Blow 2008, 401). Britain needed Iran as a buffer state to protect British India against Russians' colonial advances, since "the British economy was so closely tied to its Indian colony" (Laisram 2006, 19). Iran's loss of some of its northern provinces to Russia in the early decades of the nineteenth century brought about a new type of informal Russian and British colonial interference in Iran (Abrahamian 2008, 36–37; Helfont 2015):

> Iranians began to refer to the two powers as their "northern" and "southern" neighbors. The treaties [Turkmanchai (1828) and Gulestan (1813)] had far-reaching consequences. They established borders that have endured more or less intact into the contemporary age. They turned the country into a buffer and sometimes a contested zone in the "Great Game" played by the two powers. Their representatives became key players in Iranian politics – so much so that they had a hand not only in making and unmaking ministers but also in stabilizing the monarchy and influencing the line

1 The country was known as Persia until 1935, when it was changed to Iran by Reza Shah Pahlavi (Katouzian 2009, 3). The terms "Iran" and "Iranians" have been utilized for the purposes of this essay since they are known as such nowadays.

> of succession throughout the century. This gave birth to the notion – which became even more prevalent in the next century – that foreign hands pulled all the strings in Iran, that foreign conspiracies determined foreign powers. (Abrahamian 2008, 36–37)

Anglo-Russian rivalry increased in the last decades of the nineteenth century. However, the two imperial powers had to come to an agreement about their colonial interests in the region, as Germany was emerging as a rival; accordingly, through the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, they dismembered Iran into three zones of interest: a northern Russian zone, a southern British zone, and the rest of the country as a neutral zone (Behravesh 2012, 389; Khatib-Shahidi 2012, 12–13). The convention coincided with the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Iranians' attempt at "taming internal despotism and initiating political reforms" through the Constitutional Revolution was undermined by the Russians and the British, who saw its anti-imperialist nature and were worried about their interests being endangered by the revolutionaries (Behravesh 2012, 389). The Russian government was actively behind the bombardment of the Majles in June 1908 (Yaghobian 2014, 70–76). Furthermore, Russian consuls turned the western and northern parts of Iran "into a virtual colony of the Russian Empire" by running local administration in the years following the Constitutional movement (Volkov 2015, 914). Indeed, the Convention haunted Iranians in the first half of the twentieth century; Anglo-Russian occupation of Iran intensified during World War I in spite of the fact that Iran declared its neutrality. The same story was repeated during World War II; the British need for oil and a supply line (corridor) through the country to the Soviet Union led to the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 and the abdication of pro-German Reza Shah Pahlavi (Abrahamian 2008, 97; Tazmini 2012, 86). The end of World War II saw the development of US interests and imperialist interventions in Iranian affairs. Mohammad Mosaddeq, prime minister of Iran, who "saw in the Anglo-Oil Company the personification of the evils of economic imperialism" (Louis 2004, 148), and was intent on preserving Iran's sovereignty, denounced extant oil agreements and negotiations with the British, Americans, and the Soviets, and nationalized the oil industry in 1951, thus endangering these imperial powers' commercial interests in Iran. This led to Mosaddeq's government being overthrown by a joint British–American *coup d'état* in 1953 under the guise of saving Iran from Soviet communists; in reality it aimed more at preserving their interests in Iran (Byrne 2004, 213–218; Louis 2004, 151–177).[2] The coup led to mutual cooperation between Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the United States, the first retaining the political and economic interests of the United States and the latter supporting the Shah's rule for two and a half decades (Fayazmanesh 2008, 12). The Pahlavi Shah, who regained his authority through this coup, formed

2 After the 1917 Revolution, the communist government of Russia changed its foreign policy towards Iran

and focused on covertly promoting "Communism and the Soviet Union" through its secret police in the country (Yaghobian 2014, 131; see also Abrahamian 2008). In the guise of supporting communist and socialist movements in Iran, as well as sponsoring Kurdestan and Azarbaijan's demands for provincial autonomy (1945), Russians were pursuing their various interests in Iran (Abrahamian 2008, 107–118).

3 At the time of this speech Sayyad Mohammad Khatami was Iran's president. He had won a second term by a landslide of 77 per cent in 2001 (www.irentekhabat.com).

military bonds with the West and granted capitulations in Iran to imperial powers, which seemed to reduce Iran's status to that of a colony (Abrahamian 2008, 157). These generated anti-imperialism movements and activities leading to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which is characterized as "deeply anti-American" (Gasiorowski 2004, 261).

The 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War was fuelled and lengthened by the United States, which was unhappy about losing its privileges in Iran following the Islamic anti-imperialist revolution (Fayazmanesh 2008, 15–17). Backing Iraq's imposed war against Iran was not the United States' only anti-Iranian agenda. The US government has pursued harsh anti-Iran measures; in his State of the Union message to Congress on 29 January 2002, President George Bush, deploying provocative rhetoric, called Iran a terrorist country and placed it with North Korea and Iraq on an "axis of evil," stating: "Iran aggressively pursues these weapons [of mass destruction] and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom" (Bush 2002).[3] In 2005, multiple sanctions were imposed on Iran by the United States, the United Nations, and the European Union because of its nuclear programme. This lasted for a decade until a deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [JCPOA]) was concluded in 2015 about Iran's nuclear programme between Iran and the P5+1. Yet the United States' antipathy towards Iran is still pronounced and has become more fierce with a Republican president in office. Even though the Trump administration has renewed its sanctions waiver for Iran to uphold its part in the JCPOA, it has levied fresh sanctions on Iran's missile programme and on a few Iranian officials (Wilkinson 2017). This antipathy has also been strongly expressed in Trump's recent travel ban, which includes Iranian citizens among six other mainly Muslim nations (*Guardian*, 6 March 2017).

Anti-imperialist rhetoric of the 1979 Islamic Revolution

"Islamic thought," according to Kohn and McBride, has not received much attention from postcolonial critics, even though they see "important commonalities between strands of Islamic political theory and other critiques of imperialism and colonialism" (2011, 37). The Islamic Revolution is a telling example of the significant role of Islam in generating anti-imperialist debates and movements. This role is best highlighted in the works of Iranian thinkers and intellectuals of pre-revolution Iran such as Sayyid Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, and Ali Shariati. Even though these three thinkers belonged to different schools, they all agreed that a return to the self and its traditional Islamic values was the only alternative to the West and its imposed imperialistic practices.

Sayyid Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini (1902–1989) – the first Supreme Leader of Iran (1979–1989) – develops a political understanding of Islam and highlights its anticolonial potential. His definition of Islam best captures his stance: "Islam is the religion of militant individuals who are committed to truth and justice. It is the religion of those who desire freedom and independence. It is the school of those who struggle against imperialism" (Imam Khomeini 2002, 2). Imam Khomeini's anti-imperialist perspective is best embodied in the Islamic Revolution he led successfully to victory in 1979.

Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) – a leftist novelist and political activist – is also considered as one of the first Iranian "'postcolonial' thinkers" who drew attention to the West's imperialistic approach to Iran and its culture (Vahdat 2002, 114). He was concerned about the Pahlavi regime's fascination with what was regarded as modern, secular, and western. His works, which scathingly criticized westernization, were famous in intellectual and clerical circles and were "read seriously and discussed both on the university campuses and in the theological seminaries" (Boroujerdi 1996, 76). His monograph *Garbzadegi* [Westoxification] (1962) criticized the assimilationist tendencies of the West towards Iran and Iranian intellectuals' loss of identity as an effect of their "exposure to Western culture and values" (Moallem 2005, 191).[4] The book was "hailed as an intellectual bombshell" (Boroujerdi 1996, 67). It called for a return to an authentic Islamic and Iranian self to withstand the assimilationist tendencies of an alien western culture and the West's imperialist grip on the country's economy and politics (Matin-Asgari 2009, 145; Vahdat 2002, 114). Indeed, *Garbzadegi* pronounces Al-e Ahmad's harsh criticism of orientalism sixteen years before the publication of Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 (Boroujerdi 1996, 132). Al-e Ahmad looked at Shi'ism "as a mobilizing political ideology" (Boroujerdi 1996, 75) and played a significant role in establishing "Islamic revolutionary discourse" in the two decades leading to the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Vahdat 2000, 55).

4 Al-e Ahmad coined the term *Gharbzadegi* (westoxification), which became a popular metaphor for the debilitating effects of western lifestyles, institutions, and values (Kohn and McBride 2011, 37).

Similarly, Ali Shariati (1933–1977) – Iranian intellectual and sociologist – stresses the role of Islam as a vital traditional source in fighting against the West's imperialistic and colonial impositions on Iran. His emphasis on a return to one's culture, identity, and Shiite Islamic values echoes Al-e Ahmad's views. In his lectures Shariati articulates his concerns about western domination in Iran and presents his political approach to Islam by redefining it as "a revolutionary religion" (Farahzad 2017, 136). For him, Islam is a common culture and language which could unite Iranian intellectuals with the masses and mobilize them against western imperialism and the pro-western shah of Iran. While doing his doctorate in sociology at the Sorbonne in France (1959–1964), Shariati was exposed to the anti-imperialist ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon (Kohn and McBride 2011, 44). Shariati played a key role in introducing Fanon's ideas to an Iranian readership; he is said to have translated Fanon's *Will* [وصیت نامه فانون] as well as

The Wretched of the Earth [دوزخیان روی زمین], both published in 1971(Farahzad 2017, 133).[5] The anti-imperialist rhetoric of Fanon's works had such a strong appeal to Iranian readers in the decade leading up to the revolution that *Toward the African Revolution* [انقلاب آفریقا] and *Black Skin, White Masks* [پوست سیاه، صورتک های سفید] underwent seven and five reprints, respectively (Farahzad 2017, 131).

5 There is controversy as to whether Shariati partially or wholly translated *The Wretched of the Earth*. For more information, see Farahzad (2017). Apart from these two translations by Shariati, Fanon's four books were also rendered into Persian by Iranian translators with different ideological leanings, "ranging from Marxism to Islam" (Farahzad 2017, 130).

Development and reception of postcolonial studies in Iran

Considering the long history of the western powers' imperialistic tendencies and colonial impositions on Iran, and the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, one would expect an early take-up of postcolonial studies in the academic context as it provides a framework for writing back. Yet postcolonial theory received only a belated introduction and reception in Iran due to post-revolution intellectual leanings. Following the Cultural Revolution of Iran (1980–1987) and its emphasis on the Islamization of universities, western theories in the fields of social sciences and humanities were regarded with suspicion (Ellings 2013, 132). As Robert Young rightly observes, Islam was "unreadable for most postcolonial theorists" in its first two decades or so of existence (2012, 13). Young contends "the question of Islam and the role of religion in anticolonial struggle" were sidelined by postcolonial thinking in spite of the fact that Said's *Orientalism* appeared one year before the 1979 Iranian Revolution (28). These seem to have been instrumental in the late development of postcolonial studies in Iran, given the post-revolution focus on Islam in academic and public contexts.

However, the reformist years of the late 1990s and early 2000s of Khatami's presidency saw a flourishing of cultural studies, which seems to have aroused an interest in postcolonial debates within Iranian academia and research centers affiliated with the government. The Persian translation of *Orientalism* by Abdul Rahim Gavahi was published in 1992 by a state-sponsored publication aiming at promoting cultural studies. A second edition appeared in 1998. Persian translations of Said's other books gradually followed. This paved the way for a slow but steady development of an interest in postcolonial debates. The works of leading postcolonial theorists such as Robert Young, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Leela Gandhi were introduced to Iranian readers in Persian translation mainly by the Social and Cultural Research Center and the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology.

Apart from the books translated into Farsi, there is also a book and some book chapters on postcolonial theories by Iranian scholars. Azade Shahmiri's نظریه و نقد پسا استعماری (Postcolonial Theory and Criticism) (2010)

is the first and only attempt in Farsi thoroughly to address postcolonial theory. This four-hundred-page volume seeks to achieve two goals. The first part of the book (chapters one and two) defines postcolonial theory and its surrounding concepts by drawing on the main theorists of the field. The second part offers practical examples of deploying this critical framework to reread imperialist literature; chapter three provides examples of how pioneering theorists such as Said, Spivak, and Achebe reread canonical literary works; chapter four provides a comparative analysis of Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1611) and Aimé Césaire's *Tempest* (1969) through a postcolonial lens. This chapter also provides a postcolonial reading of Bernard-Marie Koltès' *Return to the Desert* (1988). Even though the book makes a significant contribution to the development of postcolonial studies in Iran, it does not reflect on the pertinence of postcolonial theory for the political and cultural contexts of Iranian society. However, Shahmiri's book enjoyed a favourable reception and it has been drawn upon by almost all Iranian scholars in their Farsi articles on postcolonialism.

In addition to sponsoring the translation of key texts of postcolonial theory, the state's research centres have financed a number of talks on postcolonialism. For example, Gandhi's talk "Postcolonial Process" was delivered as part of the cultural–international dialogue series of the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization in 2005. Moreover, almost every conference addressing the English language and literature has postcolonial studies as one of its themes. Another factor which seems to have played a crucial role in the development of postcolonial studies in Iran is the personal interest of some university staff members, especially in foreign languages departments. From the late 1990s, many Iranian university lecturers in the humanities were provided with scholarships by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology to do their PhDs in the UK, the United States, Australia, Malaysia, and India, among other countries. There they were exposed to the critical potential of postcolonial theory via their supervisors and academic events at centres for postcolonial studies, and deployed this critical framework for writing their research. After returning to Iran these scholars continued their research and passed on their interest in postcolonial studies to their graduate students.

Postcolonialism was also brought to the forefront of critical debate in two Iranian periodicals. The bilingual (Kurdish–Persian) *Cultural and Literary Quarterly* زریبار (*Zeribar*) was among the first to devote almost an entire issue (11 [63] in 2007) to postcolonial studies. Its introduction to postcolonial studies is followed by a Farsi translation of some important works of postcolonialism, such as Ania Loomba's "Post-Modernism and Postcolonial Studies," Neil Lazarus' "Nationalism and Postcolonial Studies," and Bart Moore-Gilbert's "Homi Bhabha," as well as some articles on ethnic issues. Half a decade later, in 2012, نقد نامه هنر (*Letters in Art Criticism*) chose

postcolonialism as the main theme of its summer issue. Its editorial draws attention to the fact that while the ex-colonized world has produced prominent theorists such as Bhabha and Spivak, Iranian scholars have been extremely passive in the field of literary and critical theories and have not translated the experience of their anti-imperialist 1979 Revolution into the realm of art and literary studies. The issue offers an introduction on Orientalism and postcolonial theory, followed by articles deploying this critical tool to read various literary genres such as poetry, travelogue, and drama, as well as cinematic and theatrical works. The issue provides a worthy contribution to postcolonial studies in Iran, not only by calling for studies to build a link between the experience of revolution and literature in Iran, but also by offering some scholarly articles deploying postcolonial theory as a critical lens. However, it fails to explicate how postcolonial theory can be used to address current and past issues in an Iranian context; for example, only one article in the collection offers a postcolonial reading of travel books on Iran by Jane Dieulafoy, the wife of French archeologist Marcel-Auguste Dieulafoy.

Postcolonial theory has mostly generated ambivalent responses from Iranian scholars, who embrace it for its critical potential and warn against its deployment due to its theoretical roots in postmodernism. One line of debate about the reception of postcolonial theory expresses concerns about its theoretical foundations (Ismaeili 2014; Nassaj 2014). In his short article "ما و مطالعات پسااستعماری؛ مطالعات پسااستعماری از چه وجوهی میتواند مورد توجه ما باشد؟" (We and Postcolonial Studies: How Can They Interest Us?), Hamid Nassaj, a scholar of political science, voices his reservations about postcolonial studies' links with postmodernism and their contradictions with fundamental Islamic beliefs, contending that Iranian scholars should be very cautious in the deployment of postcolonial theory for their research (2014, 136). However, he encourages Iranian critics' engagement with postcolonial studies for what he considers its merits:

> deconstructing western narratives of imperialism and providing a non-binaristic alternative version; exposing the European-centered nature of western social sciences and paving the way for a framework free from hierarchies; and questioning the West's representation of its self-centered version of human rights as universal. (136)[6]

6 Translations from Persian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Similarly, Mohammad Javad Ismaeili both warns and encourages Iranian scholars in their deployment of postcolonial theory. He maintains that Iranian proponents of a postcolonial studies perspective have overlooked the fact that this theory negates the existence of any religious "super-historical values" based on which a country could be governed (Ismaeili 2014, 145). Ismaeili regards postcolonial theory as an imported critical tool based on a "western non-essentialist doctrine" which questions fundamental Islamic beliefs (145). Yet he contends that "treated as a theory not an ideology,"

postcolonial perspectives may help better understand and deal with social, cultural, and political issues in Iran (145).

A second line of argument about the reception of postcolonial theory focuses on the contribution it can make to a study of social sciences in Iran. In "جامعه دوران گذار و گفتمان پسااستعماری: تاملي در بحران علوم اجتماعي در ايران" (Transitional Society and Postcolonial Discourse: A Reflection on the Crisis of Social Sciences in Iran), Ebrahim Tofigh offers a critical examination of the social sciences in Iran and elaborates on dominant constitutional and religious discourses. He sees Iranian society as transitional and finds the dominant positivistic approach to social sciences limiting and reductive, as it does not allow a full understanding of the facts of a heterogeneous society (2011, 24, 33). After introducing postcolonial discourse and explaining its concepts, Tofigh very briefly reflects on how this discourse can enrich a study of social sciences in Iran; he maintains that "discourse of a transitional society [Iran] is nothing but a reflection of 'other's' desire to become 'self'" (36). He appreciates the critical potential of postcolonial theory and considers its contribution as "'scandalization' of this desire, especially in Spivak's reading of it" (36). Tofigh, however, does not explain how postcolonialism can function to solve this crisis. In a similar vein, Jalil Karimi, in his article "مقدمه ای بر مطالعات پسااستعماری " (An Introduction to Postcolonial Studies) echoes Tofigh's view. He states that postcolonial theory can contribute to the study of Iranian sociology by providing an alternative critical framework different from the current western positivistic approach (2007, 19). Even though later in a talk on "روایت تاریخ در گفتمان پسااستعماری " (Narrative of History in Postcolonial Discourse) Tofigh reiterates his appreciation of the critical potential of postcolonial theory, he is not happy with Iranian scholars' response to this theory (Research Center for Islamic History 2016). He argues there is a "nativistic and essentialist approach" to postcolonial theory in Iran which murders its critical potential (n.p.).

The last debate about the reception of postcolonial theory in Iran addresses the contention that the theory cannot be deployed to deal with issues pertinent to an Iranian context which has no history of being formally colonized by any imperial powers. Postcolonial theory is partly looked upon by some scholars as a theory borrowed from the West which is mostly fruitful in dealing with issues related to ex-colonial contexts where hybridity, ambivalence, mimicry, and the like are dominant in people's daily lived experiences. However, this is not the dominant outlook. Karimi, the Persian translator of Robert Young's *White Mythologies* (1990) and a university scholar in sociology, stresses the necessity of engaging with postcolonialism to study Iranian society and sociology. He maintains the fact that Iran has never been formally colonized does not imply the irrelevance of postcolonial studies because "the present world, in general, experiences a postcolonial situation and Iran is no exception" (Karimi 2007, 18). Karimi finds engagement with postcolonial

theory fruitful for the Iranian context both for the critical framework it provides and for the immediate social reality of Iran as a multicultural country (18). Underscoring postcolonial theory and its surrounding concepts' potential for providing a critical tool for decentering society and empowering those in the peripheries by offering them a voice, Karimi is hopeful it can help better understand and study Iran's multicultural society (20). He adds that postcolonial theory offers us a framework to deal with the world on better terms and encourages us to cherish our society's values (20–21). Karimi's embrace of postcolonial theory is also reflected in the article "در ضرورت طرح و سنجش مطالعات پسا استعماری" (On the Necessity of Engaging with Postcolonial Studies) by Arman Zakeri. While acknowledging that Iran has never been formally colonized, Zakeri finds postcolonial theory fruitful for dealing with issues facing Iran and highlights the way postcolonial theory provides a voice for ethnic groups and the subaltern (2013, 63). Similarly, in his paper "پسااستعماری یا ضداستعماری؟ رویکرد پسا استعماری؛ تردیدها و تمایل ها" (Postcolonialism or Anticolonialism? Postcolonial Theory, Doubts and Interests), Ismael Farahani reflects on the issues addressed by Karimi and Zakeri. Farahani's view that postcolonial theory is pertinent in understanding and explaining Iran's current position in the world, in spite of the fact it has not been formally colonized, is in line with the contentions of the other two scholars (2014, 138).

Current trends in postcolonial studies in Iran

Despite initial distrust and the slow development of postcolonial studies in Iran, recent years (especially the last five) have seen a growing interest in such studies. Postcolonial studies in Iran could be classified into two main categories: studies at an international level dealing with Iran–West encounters, and studies at a national level addressing ethnicity issues.

Postcolonial studies at an international level have looked at past and current issues in Iran–West encounters. Studies on Iran–West encounters in the past are usually carried out in foreign languages departments and mostly in English departments. A good number of articles and Masters and PhD dissertations emerging from these departments have deployed postcolonial theory as a useful theoretical framework to reread the long corpus of western and especially British writing on Iran, ranging from travelogues to poetry and novels.[7] Also, very recently, research has been carried out in departments of Persian language and literature and translation studies employing a postcolonial lens. Postcolonial studies dealing with current Iran–West encounters mainly have their origin in political and media sciences and focus on questioning western demonization of Iranian people and Iran's

7 Much research also focuses on revisiting world literatures in English in light of postcolonial theory in English departments.

nuclear programme in the media and Hollywood. Scholarship from political science has also addressed western representations of Iran's nuclear programme from a postcolonial studies perspective.

A recent conference at the University of Tehran is an example of how postcolonialism has provided Iranian scholars with a critical framework to write back to the West.[8] Almost one year after delivering a keynote address at the first Shakespeare conference at the University of Tehran, Stephen Greenblatt, John Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University, published a travelogue of his visit to Iran entitled "Shakespeare in Tehran" in the *New York Review of Books* in its 2 April 2015 issue.

8 Iranian postcolonial writing back has been mainly targeted at the West, as its harsh anti-Iran measures and policies are still active. The scarcity of Iranian postcolonial studies focusing on Russia seems to stem from the fact that currently there is a cordial relationship between Russia and Iran. Given their close political and economic interests, such writing back seems unlikely, at least in the near future.

This travelogue portrays an Orientalist picture of Iran informed with an othering rhetoric which valorizes and demonizes Iran and its people. Greenblatt politicizes his reading of Shakespeare's work by constructing a parallel between present-day Iran and England under Queen Elizabeth I, when "England was a closed and decidedly unfree society, one in which it was extremely dangerous to be honest in the expression of one's innermost thoughts" (2015, n.p.). By referring to Iranian exiles' "entirely credible horror stories of their treatment … at the hands of the Islamic Republic" in his seemingly *entirely credible* travelogue, Greenblatt relegates Iran to four hundred years in the past when the queen's secret police were torturing and murdering British scholars. Greenblatt's construction of this parallel is a familiar echo of what Johannes Fabian calls a "denial of co-temporaneity" or a "denial of coevalness" (1991, 201, 198), which exoticizes the other and promotes the stereotypes of the *unchangeable other*. Greenblatt's view of Iran as an oppressive country and his deployment of Orientalist tropes feed from and into the western media's demonization of Iran as an axis of evil. Travelling to the country with his cultural baggage and Orientalist phantasies on "the magic carpet" (Greenblatt 2015, n.p.) provided by Shakespeare, Greenblatt appears unprepared for an unbiased reading of his experience of the contact zone.

Greenblatt's travelogue has generated responses from Iranian scholars both within the country and abroad. Ismail Salami, the first organizer of the conference, writes back to Greenblatt in "Greenblatt in Tehran: A Neo-Orientalist in Town" (2015). He makes a reference to Edward Said's argument about Orientalism as constructing and promoting binaries of the familiar West and the strange Orient to set the stage for his response to Greenblatt's travelogue (Salami 2015, n.p.). Salami reflects on the West's fabrication of demarcating lines between the East and the West, Orientalist stereotypes and the lurking goals behind Islamophobia and Iranophobia, and is sad that Orientalism "has assumed different forms and has gained momentum in recent years." He censures Greenblatt for demonizing and otherizing Iran and its people and sees him as one of "new harbingers of neo-Orientalism" who availed himself of "a double pleasure"; "deliver[ing] a 'believably' twisted account" of his observation in Iran and "quench[ing] … [his] voyeuristic quest for

adventurism for the Orient." Salami also reprimands Greenblatt for misreading his articles and quoting him out of context "in the attitude of traditional orientalists" about his views on Israel and condemning its atrocities. Salami states the aim of the conference was to "bring people of different nationalities together," which unfortunately seems impossible as Orientalism still remains:

> There was a time when I transiently presumed that the age of stereotyping and otherizing is over; but, unfortunately, Greenblatt's essay proves that the Orientalist viewpoint still prevails, that there is a cosmic gap between the West and the East and that this trend of stereotyping is painfully promoted by some western scholars. (Salami 2015, n.p.)

Similarly, Hamid Dabashi, the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Comparative Literature and Iranian Studies at Columbia University, responded to Greenblatt's travelogue with his article "Shakespeare in Wonderland – not Tehran." Dabashi finds Greenblatt as a "belated Orientalist" whose travelogue reads like "James Morier's 'Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan'" presenting "a deeply flawed and distorted vision" of Iran and its people (2015, n.p.). Dabashi is "bewildered" that Greenblatt, as a preacher of "the humane complexity of Shakespeare's tragedies," conflates his immediate host's anti-Zionist remarks with anti-Semitism. Dabashi also lashes out at Greenblatt for his condescending remarks about the intellectually curious Iranian students attending his keynote address:

> Most of the questions were from students, the majority of them women, whose boldness, critical intelligence, and articulateness startled me. Very few of the faculty and students had traveled outside of Iran, but the questions were, for the most part, in flawless English and extremely well informed. (Greenblatt 2015, n.p.)

What follows the conference seems ironic, as Greenblatt's essentialist and Orientalist approach to Iran questions the very themes of the event – to bring cultures together and provide a nuanced reading of Shakespeare's tragedies and its humane complexity. Rather than bridging the gap between East and West, the message of universality promoted by Shakespeare's *oeuvre* was dismissed by Greenblatt in his account. The travelogue, coming from as prominent a literary scholar as Greenblatt, convinces Dabashi "that the fears of cultures alienated on the spectrum of self-raising, other-lowering topography of 'the West and the Rest' can never overcome its absolutist metaphors" (2015, n. p.). This is a good example of what Young (2012) persuasively argues as "postcolonial remains."

Postcolonial studies at a national level emanates from departments of social sciences and literature and focuses on ethnicity issues. Iran is a multicultural country: Azeri, Kurd, Arab, Lur, Baluch, and Turkomen are the main ethnic

groups. Members of these groups inhabit the border areas and have co-ethnics across borders. Accordingly, ethnicity has been politicized and regarded as a security matter throughout centuries. The Pahlavi regime's (1925–1979) plan for Persianizing Iran and its assimilationist policy (based on its so-called Aryan heritage) led to the exclusion of ethnic groups in Iran and turned them into *internal others* (Asgharzadeh 2007). This policy was reflected in the literature of the time, especially in novels. Ethnic languages and cultures were ridiculed and inferiorized in line with Pahlavi policy. Postcolonial theory has provided Iranian scholars with an agency, a critical framework to write back and question the formulation of the centre and periphery and representations of the self and other embedded in the literature of the time. Ethnicity studies either address current issues of co-ethnics in neighbouring countries such as the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey or Iranian ethnicities under previous regimes. Karimi's نظریه پسااستعماری و کردشناسی (Postcolonial Theory and Kurdology) (2017) is among the first serious attempts deploying a postcolonial lens to explore western discursive representations of Kurds in the early decades of the twentieth century.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, ethnicity policy shifted towards acknowledging Iranian ethnic groups and recognizing their various rights in the Constitution (Tohidi 2009, 301–304). Postcolonial theory has offered a framework for a better reading of some current events in Iran. Due to increasing awareness about ethnicity (partly because of satellite channels and social media), Iran's ethnic groups are voicing their demands more forcefully, deploying concepts from postcolonial theory such as self–other and centre–periphery. Recently, ethnicity has become an important part of Iran's parliamentary and presidential election campaigns. Following President Rouhani's election in 2013, there have been promising signs of more ethnic activity and involment in society and academia. One such example is the BA in Kurdish language and literature at Kurdistan University in Sanandaj (Kurdistan Province), offered since 2015. Kurdistan University has also recently held conferences celebrating the Kurdish language and cinema. In 2016 Urmia University launched its Center for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in the city of Urmia (West Azerbaijan Province), known for its multi-ethnic make-up. Indeed, there has been a gradual move away from treating ethnic diversity as a threat towards embracing it as an asset. There is a need for more research to address current ethnicity concerns in Iran, and even though an opening has emerged for such studies, huge challenges remain due to western meddling and the securitization of the issue. As Tohidi (2009) observes, "at present, playing the ethnic card has become part of the US strategy of 'regime change'" (299). As such, the question of ethnicity has tended to remain connected to the question of national security, due to foreign conspiracies against the territorial integrity of Iran (305, 314–315).

As discussed, postcolonial theory has arrived late in the day into Iran's critical arena given this theory's fruitful framework for addressing the long history of western colonialist meddling and imperialistic impositions on Iran. Iran's post-revolution intellectual leanings and postcolonial theorists' sidelining of Islam in their early debates were the main reasons for this belated arrival. Yet, despite some Iranian scholars' initial distrust and concerns about its theoretical grounding, the field of postcolonial studies has been flourishing in recent years. It has provided Iranian scholars with an effective critical tool to flesh out past and present western Orientalist constructions of Iran, and to look at issues Iran faces because of its multi-ethnic composition.

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