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The Incompetency of orientalism approach for the understanding Iranian people in Qajar Era (1786-1925)

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Abstract

The reportage and travelogue of Westerns describing Iranians and their physical appearance, events, culture, customs (etc.) during Qajar period (1789-1925) often refer as one of the most interesting presentations of national character. At the heart of this paper lies a critical engagement with the orientalism theory and representation of East –including noble savage/ uncivilized –by Westerners. It sheds light into relations based on religion and religiosity as a significant element of Western’s travel writings of Iran. The main question however is how contemporary sociological research about Iran can benefit from re-thinking about orientalism in travel writing from Iran

The most frequent Iranian behaviors reported in 500 travelogues, I've had quantitative content analyses on them, are hospitality and hostility at the same time. I'd like to explain how these controversial behaviors could be managed by Iranian people at the same time.

Common analysis in Iran to explain this phenomena, has been orientalism, but I'll show the incompetency of this theory for analyzing, and I'll try to elaborate these controversial behaviors are co-exist at the same time by "smart secretive people" theory that lived in tyranny and insecurity situation, in 19th century Iran.

1) Civility, tolerance and hospitality in the Iranian literature

The Iranian literature is full of prose and poetry samples which emphasize on chivalry and tolerance toward strangers and foreigners, whose best examples can be observed in the poems of Hafiz and Saadi (the Iranian ethical master) and in particular in Fotowat Nameh (The book on the lives and deeds and also rules of behavior of heroic figures and the knights).

2) Is hostile to the strangers in contradiction with the Iranian politeness?

The most important Iranian positive behavioral characteristics with reference to the data obtained from the travelers' books include "hospitality", "politeness" and "respect to strangers".

Reviewing more than 500 travelogues published in Persian from the foreigners who have taken a trip to Iran including the earliest reports, i.e. Herodotus up to the end of the kingdom era in Iran in 1979.

But on the other side, whatever has been presented by the foreign travelers and strangers concerning the Iranians' treatment with them is to some extent denying civil and polite behavior:

Preventing people from eating and drinking with foreigners (Niebuhr, 1975: 44), displaying enmity towards the Russian Christians (Trézel, 1982: 71) , being suspicious towards the foreigners (Polak 1982: 407; Mel'gunov, 1985: 4) , prevention from the arrival of non-Muslims into the house and having a hostile treatment with the Jews (Wales , 1999: 114; Dieu lafoa, 1997: 463) , murder and persecution of the Christians on different pretexts (Schafer, 1991: 252) , considering the non-Muslimism as impure people (Niedermayer, 2001: 260) and religious baseless accusation directed at non-Muslims (Norden , 1977: 61).

Based on the same research, the most frequent Iranian negative characteristics in various historical periods in the perspective of the writers of foreign traveler's book (after "superstations") is the "religious prejudice against the Christian, Jewish residents and explorers in Iran".

3) Explanation in the first view based on orientalism approach

The prejudiced and hostile behaviors based on religion have been almost mentioned in all foreign traveler's books and they have complained about it. If we intend to elaborate this type of behavior based on prevailing analyses, it can be criticized clearly as a traditional phenomenon. When religious prejudice has been prevailing, it has caused a situation, in which the Iranians like other eastern people and other people of the world including the West, to show a tough treatment with those who have had a different religion. The analysis of prejudicial behavior is a

part of the analysis of the behavior of the eastern cultures. This feature has been explained under the general title of “orientalism” by Edward Said. Inspired by Foucault, Said defines the orientalism in this way: Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.

Orientalism and the genre of travel literature

Orient (East) through a series of scientific agents, has been converted from a personal attestation and sometimes an insignificant set of travels and adventures in the orient into impersonal definitions and explanations. That is to say, it has been converted from the regular experience of individual researches into a type of imaginative museum without any walls in which whatever had been collected from distance and various types of the eastern culture were considered seriously as something belonging to the orient. (Said, 1998:301)

4) The incompetency of the Said’s orientalism attitude in the contradictory dual analysis of “Politeness-Religious”

In this paper, efforts will be made to show that the Edward Said’s view on orientalism is incapable in explanation one of the Iranian behavioral domains and the study of this behavior is in need of new approaches. So, in this part, it will be discussed how Iranians have been famous both in maintaining politeness and hospitality towards the foreigners and how they have practiced while adhering to their religious teachings in the domain of impurity of non-Muslims (because they identified as pagan). So, here we will discuss the most important explanations of incompetency of Said’s attitude in elaborating this contradictory dual feature:

The first explanation: Comparing the Iranian with other oriental people

Though the foreigners’ views towards Iranian culture are elaborated within the framework of the orientalism theory but the west has not always had a same view toward eastern people. The best evidence for this claim is the comparison made by the westerners between the behaviors of Iranians and Ottomans.

This point has been emphasized on Benjamin and Edward Brown and Curzon’s statements and they have found the Persians and Iranians’ behavior more favorable in comparison with Othman Turks.

The Second explanation: Adherence to religion as an alternative for underdevelopment in the perspective of the orientalism

Based on the attitude of orientalism, the Iranian prejudice towards the westerners has roots in their underdevelopment, whereas this avoidance, is related to the Muslims’ religious teaching in distancing from the non-Muslims and is connected to the decrees on impurity. So, they were avoiding them in social relations or they were sitting on the same food table to eat, or were not shaking hands. So at the rainy time, this issue was problematic and finally, they were washing carefully the foods being eaten with them. So, the adherence to Muslim rules and observing religious rituals was the only reason for this social distance.

The incorrect understanding of this issue has made the westerners to consider the religious treatment resulting from the religious teachings as a prejudicial and a negative behavior.

The Third explanation: The Iranians' solutions to respect the foreigners while being faithful to the religion

Another important part of this issue, which has not been noticed in the orientalist attitudes and is the main discussion of this paper is that opposite to the Ottoman people, the Iranians' behaviors have been an approach based on religious behaviors but not a prejudice. This is an issue which has been mentioned by the foreigners' observers.

In the cases, where an Iranian individual has observed a conflict between his politeness and hospitality and distance from the non-Muslim, he has displayed diverse reactions which by itself deny the influence of underdevelopment on prejudice. For instance, pay attention to the following samples:

- **Making effort to be far from distress and keeping politeness and hospitality:** In many cases, while encountering with the non-Muslim, Iranians have prevented from distress and despite belief in their impurity, they have made their utmost effort for hospitality. For example, they serve food on the table for them and under the pretext of lack of habit in this style of eating, they keep away from them. Or when they are forced to shake hands and do not desire to do this, they do not shake hands with the people of their own religion too to prevent from any impoliteness.
- **The shift of respect through appreciating the religious concepts of the minorities:** Though Iranians consider the non-Muslims as impure but due to respect to the divine religions and their prophets, they have had behaviors which are still in conflict with underdevelopment of a nation and this has been pointed out in the travelers' reports, behaviors such as presenting beautiful paintings of Jesus Christ.

The Fourth explanation: Lack of modification of prejudiced view in the course of time and its contradiction with the orientalism approach

The westerners expected a prejudiced behavior which should be modified through education and interaction with the eastern people and be developed, but this training did not move ahead in Iran but increased gradually. They also expected a passive receiving society which could accept the west as a "big male" and the travelers as their representatives. But in Iran, this type of submission to the travelers is almost rare.

The important point here is that in Iran, from the fall of the Safavid to the end of Qajar era, the rate of dominance of the Russia and England on the Iranian economy and politics was gradually increased but this dependency on the west did not cause any reduction in the conflicting behaviors towards the western people. This is an issue which cannot be explained by the orientalism approaches.

5) Conclusion: Uniqueness of Iranians' Behaviors

That a western individual, under the support of an embassy and with a dominance over an eastern state in an underdevelopment and insignificant eastern country (the Iran of the 19th century) attends and sees all the country under his control with the exception of the people and people avoid him (for religious reasons), is a unique phenomenon which has not been noticed in

the literature of orientalism. It is necessary to consider it carefully based on historical psychological cognition of Iranian people.