

Invisible Occidentalism: Eighteenth-Century Indo-Persian Constructions of the West*

Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his. In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy and relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them.

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Marco Polo's encounter with Kublai Khan, which Italo Calvino made the framework for his exploration of the fantastic in urban life, stands as a useful parable for the nature of the interaction of West and East in the period between 1200 and 1700, when myriads of Europeans produced journals and accounts of their journeys into the rest of the world. Representations of Europeans in Asian works during the same period are few and episodic. The literature produced by Europeans who ventured into the rest of the world in that period was once viewed by many Western academics as documenting objective "discovery." In the past decade or so, the European production of knowledge about the Other has been portrayed in quite a different manner as, at base, shot through with self-interest, in thrall to powerful organizing institutions such as the colonial state, the trading companies, and the imperial universities. According to this version, popularized by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the Europeans created in their minds a static, stagnant, chaotic, effeminate Orient, a realm crying out to be ordered and rendered dynamic by the virile touch of European proconsuls and investors.¹ This revisionist view often suffers from being too monolithic in approach to allow an analytical understanding of cultural interaction, and too inattentive to the nuances of difference in the views of diplomats, travelers, merchants and academics. Nevertheless, Said's vision, powerfully informed by Gramsci's idea of culture as a form of subtle domination (hegemony) by the ruling classes and by Foucault's insistence on finding a genealogy for knowledge in institutional con-

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1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

texts, contains important insights. It also, of course, presents only one side of the equation.

Here we might play turnabout by inquiring into three eighteenth-century depictions of the West written in Persian by Shi'ite notables. Although our main concerns are thematic, an attempt will be made to set them in the context of social interests. On the face of it, we might expect to find in these texts, written at a time of unprecedented European encroachment on the Muslim lands, a mirror-image of Orientalism, a systematic critique of Western colonialism and Western culture. But do we?

Muslims were, of course, in contact with Europeans throughout their history, especially in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, the public culture in most Muslim lands little acknowledged Europeans or European culture in the early modern period. The Renaissance, the Copernican revolution, the printing revolution, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment all might as well not have occurred for all the cognizance most Muslim intellectuals took of them.² Although the European expansion and the trading companies made an impact upon Muslims right from the beginning of the Iberian transoceanic voyages, relatively few indigenous accounts of Westerners survive before the eighteenth century.

In the course of the eighteenth century the British emerged as the predominant European power in the Persian Gulf (succeeding the Portuguese and the Dutch), and they gradually crafted a new political order.³ In India, of course, they defeated in turn the army of the Shi'ite-ruled Bengal province in 1757 and the Mughal forces led by the Shi'ite governor of Awadh (Oudh), Shuja' al-Dawlah, at Baksar in 1764. Despite the numerical predominance of Hindus in the population and of Sunnis among the Muslims, the post-Mughal era had witnessed the emergence of important Iran-linked Shi'ite elites in northern India, particularly in Bengal and Awadh, though these were gradually displaced from power by the British.⁴ Although only occasionally do the Shi'ite leanings of these authors

2. Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982); Fatma Müge Göcek, *East Encounters West: France and the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). For a strong statement of the thesis of early modern cultural isolation between the northern and southern Mediterranean lands, see Andrew C. Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

3. For the European impact in the Persian Gulf see Juan R. I. Cole, "Rival Empires of Trade and Imami Shi'ism in Eastern Arabia, 1300–1800," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987):177–204. For eighteenth-century Iran and its relations with the British East India Company in the Persian Gulf see John R. Perry, *Karim Khan Zand* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). For the British view see J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf 1795–1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

4. See Philip B. Calkins, "The Formation of a Regionally Oriented Ruling Group in Bengal 1700–1740," *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (1970):799–806; Richard B. Barnett, *North India Between Empires: Awadh, the Mughals, and the British, 1720–1801* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980); and J. R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State*

emerge in the accounts under discussion, it does so happen that all the authors covered adhered to that branch of Islam.

The Westerners loomed too large after 1750 for Persophone writers in Iran and India to ignore them any longer. Natives of Lucknow, or of Shushtar and Kermanshah, began making extensive Persian notes on Europe and the Europeans in the late eighteenth century, several of which were published in manuscript form or lithographed early in the nineteenth century. What were the institutional and technological contexts for this writing? We know that the advent of moveable-type printing and the age of European expansionism, along with the literature of travel and description the latter spawned, coincided with one another in the late fifteenth century. Did the rise of printing in the Persophone world in the late eighteenth century have a similar relationship with the literature describing Europe to Iranians, Central Asians and Indians in Persian?

Other social practices are also important here. The literate class of Muslim courtiers, landlords, garrison commanders, and clergymen were called locally in Arabic, Persian and Turkish the *a'yān*, or notables. In a classic essay Albert Hourani discovered in their interests and activities the essence of pre-modern Middle Eastern politics.⁵ They often held land or engaged in court service or both. The three authors discussed below all derived from this class.

In this period the notables became divided between those who opposed the expansion of European power in the Muslim world and those willing to ally themselves or collaborate with the foreigners.⁶ Sometimes the career of a leader, such as Shuja' al-Dawlah of Awadh (r. 1754–1775), demonstrated both leanings, with early opposition to the foreigners followed by a collaborationist phase in the wake of a decisive defeat at British hands. The advent of new transportation and communication technologies brought these elites into closer contact with one another and also established a context for new sorts of cultural production in the Indo-Iranian culture area.

Since the forces of the British East India Company either subdued recalcitrant Muslim elites—as in Bengal or in the south in the war against Tippoo Sultan—or surrounded and neutralized remaining princely states, such as Awadh and Hyderabad, most Indian notables who wrote about Europe had either taken employment with the British or dwelt in circumscribed polities that had become “subsidiary allies” of John Company. Thus, Shi'ite writers in Awadh, not excluding the clergy, tended to look favorably upon the British as patrons (from the

in Awadh, 1722–1859 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

5. Albert Hourani, “Ottoman Reform and the Politics of the Notables,” in W. Polk and R. Chambers, eds., *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

6. The classic statement of this theory is Ronald Robinson, “Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration,” in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe, eds., *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London: Longman, 1972), 117–42.

late 1760s) of their nawab. In a bizarre victory for Orientalism, notables often received patronage from European consuls or agents to write Persian chronicles about the local political events of the day, from a point of view that flattered the British.

Iranians, who retained at least a nominal independence, were often more ambivalent about the foreigners, but those most likely to know anything serious about Great Britain were immigrants to India or students studying in London, and so they gravitated toward the circle of collaborating elites or subsidiary allies. Under much of the Persian writing about Europe lay the question of what benefit the notable class might derive from the new encounter with the West. In the absence of notions like nation-state or citizenship in Asia, exclusive national or even communal loyalty had no resonance. Many Iranians, after all, had emigrated to join the Mughal army and bureaucracy. In India Muslim notables frequently served in the courts of Hindu potentates, and Shi'ite courtiers routinely served Sunni rulers. In keeping with this tradition of cosmopolitanism, Shi'ites felt that there was nothing wrong with taking service in the British East India Company, so long as they did nothing contradictory to their religious principles.

Although the Persian texts under consideration purport to discuss "Europeans" (*farang*), the authors mostly concentrate on high culture and high politics—in short, on the European equivalent of the notable class. Here we will focus on their views of the British, discussing three major positive themes in these portrayals: egalitarianism and parliamentary government, science and technology, and gender. Next we will turn to a consideration of their criticisms of European society.

The value of these texts lies in their being some of the first widely-available accounts of Europe to reach literate Persian speakers early in the nineteenth century, much before "Westernization" began in these societies in any meaningful sense. The texts have their flaws and idiosyncrasies, but none of these detracts from their value for our immediate purpose. The authors appear to have depended on interviews with Persian-speaking Europeans, rather than upon printed texts, for their information. This caused them sometimes to garble facts and details (one writer confidently asserts that British monarchs are permitted legal polygamy, and that the hair of all Native Americans is white).⁷ The question arises, moreover, of to what extent the picture they derived of Europeans reflected the self-image of their informants; but this problem exists in all "ethnography."

'Abdul-Latif Khan of Shushtar in southwestern Iran, born in 1760, emigrated to Hyderabad around 1790 and during that decade took the notes on which he based his *Tuhfat al-'alam* (Gift to the World), written in 1800–1801. The book was printed in Hyderabad in 1805. Another writer, Mirza Abu Talib Khan, was born in 1752 in Lucknow, in the post-Mughal, Shi'ite-ruled state of Awadh. He hailed from an Iranian family that had fled to India from the tribal turbulence of

7. Mir 'Abdul-Latif Khan Shushtari, *Tuhfat al-'alam va zayl al-tuhfah*, ed. S. Muvahhid (Tehran: Tahuri, 1984), 277, 329.

eighteenth-century Iran. After a mixed career as a local revenue officer, he set out for England from Calcutta in 1799. On his return to Bengal he wrote up his observations in 1803–1805 as *The Travels of Talib in the Lands of the Franks*. The Persian text was published in Calcutta in 1812, after a two-volume English translation had already appeared in London in 1810.⁸ Aqa Ahmad Bihbahani, an Iranian clergyman brought up in Kermanshah, escaped his debts by emigrating to India, where he ultimately settled as a leader of Friday prayers in British-ruled Patna, writing his travelogue, *The World-Revealing Mirror*, around 1810; he had access, apparently, to a manuscript of Abu Talib Khan's work.⁹ Of these three authors only one, Abu Talib, had a direct experience of late-eighteenth-century Britain, but all three had ample opportunity to associate with Britishers and derive information from them. We are concerned with these three accounts among others because of the relatively similar backgrounds of the authors—all Indo-Persian Shi'ites of the notable class.

These authors saw Great Britain as a more egalitarian, less hierarchical society than Muslim Iran or South Asia, though Shushtari stresses this aspect of Britain rather more than does Abu Talib, who moved in aristocratic circles and who had an opportunity to observe the practice as well as the theory of British parliamentarianism. Shushtari observes: "Another of the laws of these people is that no one may dominate another. If the king or nobles make unreasonable demands on their subordinates, these latter may lodge a complaint in the courts."¹⁰ Abu Talib concurs that masters could not directly punish their servants, but rather had to take them before a magistrate, and is awed that even the heir apparent could be sued by an ordinary person.¹¹ He thinks that this equality before the law made the ordinary folk impudent, and recounts the story of how a lord, when he sullied his gloves on a newly-painted, unmarked door, upbraided the painter—who saucily asked whether the nobleman had eyes in his head or not. He continues, "Their lawmakers, however, are of the opinion that this freedom tends to make them brave."¹² On the other hand, he also points out the severe limits to this equality under the law and suggests that wealth stratification was even greater in England than in India.

The writers here considered derived from countries where royal absolutism predominated, and where elective office was virtually unknown, except perhaps

8. I have used Mirza Abu Talib Isfahani, *Masir-i ṭālibi fī bilād-i ifrangī*, ed. Husayn Khadivjam (Tehran: Shirkat-i sihami, 1972); Charles Stewart (trans.), *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* (New Delhi: Sona, repr. 1972). The accounts of Shushtari and Abu Talib are briefly noticed in Denis Wright, *The Persians amongst the English: Episodes in Anglo-Persian History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1985), 44–52.

9. Aqa Ahmad Bihbahani, "Mir'āt al-aḥwāl-i jahān-numā," (London, British Library, Persian MS, Add. 24,052); the MS circulated very widely in manuscript in India and Iran, and I understand it has recently been published in Iran, but I know of no nineteenth-century lithograph edition.

10. Shushtari, *Tuhfat*, 275.

11. Abu Talib, *Masir-i ṭālibi*, 232–3; Eng. trans., 129–30.

12. *Ibid.*, 232; Eng. trans., 130.

among the guilds or merchant and artisan craft organizations. Shushtari's detailed description of parliamentary government is one of the first to appear in Persian, and it raises questions to be considered below. He concentrates on the political system and its principles, giving an idealized and somewhat collapsed account of the decline of absolutism in England:

The philosophers, after having implemented most of the above-mentioned laws, began thinking about how to organize power (*salṭanat*). For until that time government was absolutist and autocratic. Every day, one ruler was deposed and another achieved dominion through conquest. The turmoil and bloodshed attendant upon changing regimes became apparent. The king at that time was himself a learned man and shared the prevailing opinion among the philosophers. They thought for many years on this issue. In the end, all arrived at the opinion that the king should be deprived of his power, and that they should appoint for him an agreed-upon amount, equivalent to one crore rupees or 500,000 silver tumans, which he would devote to the expenses of the monarchy, excluding the expenditures of the princes and their dependents, for each of whom a separate stipend was appointed. The king, in addition, was willing to become powerless, though in the degree of respect and courtesy everyone offers him, each is free to choose. As noted, he may not kill or harm anyone, or even beat one of his own servants.¹³

According to him the English system based itself on three pillars—the king, the aristocracy, and the subjects—and no great affair could be undertaken without the consent of all three estates. He then describes how the British built a great edifice in the capital, which they called Parliament (*shūrā*, literally consultation) or the House of Consultation (*khānah-yi mashwirat*). “They informed the inhabitants of every village and town that it should choose a suitable representative, so that he should come to the capital and affairs might be accomplished by means of consultation with all.”¹⁴ Describing formal balloting, he makes mention of the MPs’ terms being limited to seven years. “In matters of war, peace, aiding others, the military, etc., the ministers present a brief to the king. The king reserves particular days for going to parliament to meet with ministers and members of parliament. The great ones are called by the king and they write out their views. In the end, majority rules. If there is a tie, the king breaks it” (p. 276). He thus depicts the British in terms of Muslim neo-Platonism, as being ruled by a philosopher-king taking advice from the great philosophers of the realm. A Platonic emphasis on innate knowledge and reasoning as a potential basis for society had fascinated many Muslim philosophers working in the Greek tradition, as an alternative to a literalist dependence on the detailed, almost Talmudic code of revealed Islamic law. The influence of Plato’s *Republic* on eighteenth-century Muslim thinkers was third-hand, since the text of the Arabic translation was lost in the medieval period, survived only by a summary, but some of its premises had been incorporated strongly into Greco-Islamic thought. One might argue that this intellectual tradition provided Shushtari with the framework whereby he could understand the rise of constitutional monarchy.

13. Shushtari, *Tuhfat*, 275–6.

14. *Ibid.*, 276.

Although Abu Talib also saw the British system as a union of the monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic forms of government, and approved of the mixture, he neglected to give any such detailed picture of how MPs were elected, instead stressing the king's power to approve laws, to command the army, to pardon criminals and to dismiss cabinets. He does observe that, in appointing judges for life, the king gives up control over the judiciary. Furthermore, he depicts Parliament's powers as extending primarily over taxes and public contractors and agents, and acting as a check on the power of cabinet ministers.¹⁵

The third writer, Aqa Ahmad Bihbahani, who came from a clerical background, puts a unique twist on his description of the British form of government. In response to the wars of succession, he says, the philosophers and the learned made the affairs of state dependent on the consent of three entities: the king, the ministers, and the members of Parliament, which he describes as an assemblage of nobles (*umarā'*) who are well-wishers of the king and his subjects. So he appears to have known only of the House of Lords and not of Commons. The king, he maintained, was chosen by the nobles; and he must be learned, a sort of *mujtahid* or accomplished jurist.¹⁶ Interestingly enough, George III was not the philosopher-king of Muslim neo-Platonism as described in its medieval literature, but something of a precursor to Ayatollah Khomeini—an expert in Christian legal reasoning elevated to rulership because of his learning. In the development of Shi'ite thought in the eighteenth century, the victorious Usuli school asserted that all laymen must emulate and obey the most learned of the Muslim jurists, or *mujtahids*. The laity was to choose the most learned on its own, so that in Iran and Iraq two or three top *mujtahids* became "exemplars" (*marja'-i taqlid*) for very large numbers of believers. Theoretically, Usulism admitted the possibility of a single most learned jurist at the top of the hierarchy, but the informal and fluid nature of clerical charisma in fact militated against the emergence of a single Shi'ite "pope."¹⁷ In this period monarchy was accepted as natural to Islam, and no one advocated that the Shi'ite *mujtahid* actually rule. Bihbahani appears to have seen in the British system a sort of rationalization and fulfillment of Usuli ideals. Although he played down the democratic elements in British government, he did see the kings and ministers as constrained by Parliament, which he defines as the "place of consultation" (*maḥall-i mashwirat*). Nevertheless, he depicted the MPs as pawns in the hand of the prime minister, who could use them to thwart royal policies with which he disagreed.¹⁸ Of the three authors, the one who stresses British juridical egalitarianism least is Bihbahani, who tends to see the aristocracy and the cabinet as the predominant forces in society.

15. Abu Talib, *Masīr-i ṭālibī*, 239–42; Eng. trans., 134–9.

16. Bihbahani, "Mir'āt," foll. 270a–b.

17. See J. R. I. Cole, "Shi'i Clerics in Iraq and Iran, 1722–1780: The Akhbari-Usuli Conflict Reconsidered," *Iranian Studies* 18 (1985): 3–34; and, more generally, Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

18. Bihbahani, "Mir'āt," fol. 273a.

Muslim rulers, from the Ottomans in Istanbul to Muhammad 'Ali in Cairo, took a dim view of the French revolution and its principles; nor could the Indian nawabs be any less sensitive to the questioning, implicit in parliamentary democracy, of the basis of their authority. Yet our authors felt free to depict the British system quite openly, even though Shushtari continued to reside off and on in Hyderabad and Abu Talib could well have returned to Lucknow. Perhaps the fact that this parliamentary system operated in a foreign, exotic land made writing about it seem less seditious than if the writers had been proposing it for India and Iran. Bihbahani, living under British protection in Patna, was at greater liberty to say what he pleased, but his clericalist Shi'ite ideology apparently made it difficult for him to grasp some of the egalitarian implications of parliamentary governance. As noted, Abu Talib's stress on the remaining power of the king may have derived, in part, not only from circumspection but also from the elitist social circles in which he moved while in London. Shushtari's account clearly exaggerates British democracy as practiced in the late eighteenth century, depicting the king as no more than a figurehead who was ultimately pensioned off. His informants could very well have been Whig East India Company officials who strongly believed in the achievements of the Glorious Revolution.

Shushtari sees the Westerners' egalitarian, rationalized governmental system as a product of the same sort of ratiocination that led to their mechanical sophistication. "After organizing the state and laws," he writes, "the philosophers then turned their attention to investigating the reality of things on sea and land."¹⁹ After giving an account of the magnetic compass and of the voyages of Christopher Columbus, he (bizarrely enough) depicts the explorer as an Arabic-speaking native of the Arabian peninsula. Shushtari is fascinated by clocks, orreries, telescopes, and other technical achievements of the Europeans. Perceiving that the mechanization of life had far-reaching effects, the author depicted all Europeans as subject to a peculiar work-time discipline, such that they carried clocks on their persons and "organize all their activities—writing, riding, eating, sleeping—and all time by means of clocks."²⁰ Likewise, they showed inventiveness in weaponry and ordered their military rationally, unlike Asian commanders whose armies often resembled disorganized crowds. So long as the British, he writes, "maintain their formations, which they call 'lines,' they are like an immovable volcano spewing artillery and rifle fire like unrelenting hail on the enemy, and they are seldom defeated."²¹ Thus he displays an awareness of not just the mechanical inventiveness of the Europeans but of the synergy between technology and rationalized social organization.

Shushtari lists three reasons for this Western excellence in all fields: first, their kings and rulers "strive to see that each person receives an education appropriate to his station"; second, every individual works full-time in his own specialization, and performs no other work—"They say that life is short, and if one learns

19. Shushtari, *Tuhfat*, 284.

20. *Ibid.*, 299.

21. *Ibid.*, 316.

to excel in one thing during one's seventy years, that is enough"; third, new ideas are protected by patent. If artisans and craftsmen invented something, the patent was purchased by the crown and its inventors taught it to others. No invention, he says, could be manufactured until its inventor was protected by a patent. He believed that the gulf which existed in Iran between theoretical or philosophical knowledge and practical mechanics had been bridged in the West, so that even humble blacksmiths knew how to use levers and pulleys.²² Bihbahani agrees: "The great philosophers of the West are exceedingly abundant, to the extent that even the character of the common people is philosophical and inclined to investigate mathematics and nature."²³

Abu Talib sees the people of England as highly individualistic, speculating that the climate and soil are responsible not only for a vast variety of crops grown, but also for "such a difference in the tempers and manners of its inhabitants that no two of them appear to think or act alike."²⁴ He lauds the mechanical inventiveness of the West, including the printing press, whereby any book "may be circulated among the people in a very short time, and by it the works of celebrated authors are handed down to posterity, free from the errors and imperfections of a manuscript."²⁵ Commenting on British shipbuilding technology, the casting of cannon, and the use of the steam engine in manufacturing, he attributes to this mechanization of industry a sharp drop in commodity prices and an improvement in the lot of the common people. He thinks the British more persevering in their determination to set up machinery for any extensive works than, say, the French.²⁶

The achievements of Western science and technology had not only made the Europeans formidable, they had also refigured cosmology. Shushtari discovered from his encounters with the British in Hyderabad and Bombay the Copernican model of the solar system. Muslims had remained oblivious to the Copernican revolution and continued to adhere to Ptolemaic astronomy into the nineteenth century. Moreover, as in sixteenth-century Europe, the Ptolemaic system had been adopted into theology, and the pious saw heliocentrism as an affront to Islamic cosmology, so that discussing the issue was as fraught with dangers as was the delineation of constitutional monarchy in politics. Not only is Shushtari convinced by the Copernican view of the solar system, but he also argues in favor of the roundness of the earth. The traditional Muslim view of the cosmos as a series of stacked heavens, he points out, is incompatible with the circular conception of the solar system current among Western scientists; he goes on then to discuss Newton and the laws of planetary motion.²⁷

Shushtari attempts in two ways to defuse the potentially explosive religious implications of this discussion. First, he points out that earlier Muslim notions

22. Ibid., 298–9, 312.

23. Bihbahani, "Mir'at," fol. 227b.

24. Abu Talib, *Masir-i talibi*, 182; Eng. trans., 103.

25. Ibid., 195–6; Eng. trans., 110.

26. Ibid., 205–14, 263–4; Eng. trans., 114–22, 181–2.

27. Shushtari, *Tuhfat*, 300–303.

about cosmology and astronomy were largely derived from the Greeks. Thus he sets up a choice between ancient European ideas and modern ones, rather than between Islamic orthodoxy and Western science. Second, he employs a mystical, Sufi language used to discuss the inadequacy of the intellect to understand God's mysteries. Here, an orthodox rejection of eighteenth-century science in favor of medieval theology becomes equated with the sort of hubris inappropriate to a pious believer.²⁸ (Such reminders of the fallibility of human reason had also been a feature of Galileo's writings.) Abu Talib was convinced of the truth of the Copernican theory, especially once he had seen an orrery, or mechanical model of the heliocentric solar system.²⁹ Bihbahani's reports on eighteenth-century European cosmology contain little comment, but are interspersed with numerous pieties such as "and God grants success."³⁰ No doubt, his status as a leading Shi'ite clergyman made it less necessary for him to defend his orthodoxy than for a layman such as Shushtari.

Shushtari concludes his discussion of European science with the reminder that the wonders of the modern Europeans were "innumerable," pointing out that European civilization was, after all, three thousand years old. He remains convinced, however, that neither the Western Europeans nor the Chinese had succeeded in producing a thousandth of the wonders of the ancient Greeks; had their books not been destroyed by the Caliph 'Umar in Andalusia and Alexandria, the world would have been far better off.³¹ The tradition that the Caliph 'Umar, the second vicar of the Prophet according to Sunni Islam, was responsible for burning the library at Alexandria, is, of course, apocryphal. The Shi'ite rationalist pins blame on Sunni know-nothingism for the destruction of the Hellenistic heritage, which by its richness might have made the Muslims—its most vigorous heirs in the early medieval period—great. Modern wonders are offset with a wistful appeal to the myth of a squandered golden age.

One of the major differences between Asian and European societies, according to our authors, lay in gender relations. Shushtari noted that Europeans in India did not impose veiling or seclusion on their wives, even when these were local Hindu or Muslim women, and he remarked on the prohibition against Englishmen taking their Indian wives back to Britain for fear of tainting the homeland with miscegenation.³² Abu Talib hugely enjoyed the greater openness of Europe, and was apparently an incorrigible flirt. He explains the lack of seclusion and veiling among British women in four ways. First, the gender-divided household in Muslim lands, with separate sets of servants for husband and wife, would have been too expensive in a country like England, with its high labor costs. Second, the cold weather inclined the husband to live and sleep with his wife. Third, the British were more homogeneous as a population; in India, Muslims and Hindus secluded their women from each other. Fourth, Europeans expected

28. *Ibid.*, 306–7.

29. Abu Talib, *Masir-i talibi*, 188; Eng. trans., 106.

30. Bihbahani, "Mir'at," foll. 227b ff.

31. Shushtari, *Tuhfat*, 315.

32. *Ibid.*, 295.

their wives to take part in the husband's business, which militated against gender segregation.³³

Nonetheless, Abu Talib defends the treatment of women in Muslim lands, insisting that Muslim women enjoyed certain advantages over their Western counterparts. Indian Muslim men let their women control the family finances, choose the sect of Islam to which the children would belong, and exercise great authority over the servants. Muslim women could separate easily from their husbands without divorce, and in case of divorce were awarded custody of the daughters—in contrast to Europe where fathers got custody of all children.³⁴ The idea of relative sexual equality plays no part in Abu Talib's construction of gender roles. (Incidentally, female segregation ensured that we heard from no Muslim women travelers to England in this period who might have disagreed with Abu Talib.)

It should not be thought that these authors had no criticisms of the Europeans, though their discussion of the positive aspects of European life appears to differ radically in nature from their criticisms of it. Shushtari thought that British dependence on strategic and technological advances in warfare accounted for their victories, whereas they "have none of the delight in bravery and courage possessed by other peoples."³⁵ In short, what they lacked in manliness they made up for in machinery. More particularly, Abu Talib forthrightly devotes a chapter to their faults. Although he speaks of the "English" as a whole, he in fact directs his twelve major criticisms at the aristocrats with whom he associated—another indication of the degree to which Shi'ite views of the Europeans pertained actually to the European upper classes. Abu Talib decries the ethics and morals of the British, their lack of religious belief, and their inclination to secular philosophy, which he thought bred dishonesty among the lower classes. He also finds them wanting in chastity, exclaiming that hardly a street in London lacked a brothel. Besides, he believed, the British were often selfish, irritable and inconsiderate, consumed with acquiring material things. The upper classes are faulted for living extravagantly, keeping more carriages than they needed, overfurnishing their homes, and wasting a great deal of time on eating and dressing. These habits he contrasts unfavorably with the ascetic warrior code of Muslim Arabs and Turks.

According to Abu Talib the English aristocracy erred badly in allowing irreligion to spread among commoners, because it led to their coveting the property of the rich and made them rebellious. He found the high officials astonishingly complacent toward working-class riots and strikes, ascribing this insouciance to a half-century of British progress and triumphs, which feeling of invulnerability, in view of the French Revolution, he deemed highly unwise.³⁶

33. Abu Talib, *Travels*, 343–5.

34. *Ibid.*, 348–51.

35. Shushtari, *Tuhfat*, 316.

36. Abu Talib, *Masir-i ʿālibī*, 265–74; Eng. trans., 167–77.

Finally, some of his criticisms bear upon the issue of colonialism. Although as a guest of the aristocracy and a member of the collaborating notable class in India Abu Talib does not cavil at the colonial enterprise in and of itself, even he is hurt by some British attitudes. These include their vanity and arrogance about their attainments in science and their knowledge of foreign languages. In particular, he thinks that the British official class knew Asian languages like Persian much less well than they believed themselves to. One may attribute this particular criticism to professional disappointment: Abu Talib had planned to set up an institute in London for teaching Persian to colonial officials but, for most of his stay there, had found no encouragement. In conclusion he cites the British "contempt for the customs of other nations."³⁷ Once the question of colonial hegemony arises, then, a discordant note creeps into Abu Talib's generally flattering estimate of the British. It is followed by the issue of the law courts, on which he displays his pique at colonial abuse. While praising the functioning of the judicial system in Britain, he excoriates the British courts in India, which he thought laid local Indians open to abuse at the hands of expatriate carpet-baggers.³⁸ Even this early in its career, the collaborating Asian elite expressed discomfort at the manner in which European arrogance manifested itself, and the thoughtlessness with which European institutions were grafted onto local ones. Needless to say, for the members of this class such discomfort was not nearly sufficient cause for abandoning the collaboration.

It strikes one that whereas these authors focus on systemic features when they discuss European society positively, their criticisms tend to concentrate on flaws in what might be called national (or even class) character. The European notables, despite their philosophical and technological prowess, were puffed up with pride, or overly concerned with material acquisitions, or insufficiently courageous, or too convinced of their mastery of foreign languages. The closest thing to a systemic critique offered appears to be Abu Talib's comments on how British justice went awry when the procedures of London were transplanted in Bengal. The objection is aimed rather at the way the system worked than simply character flaws in colonial judges. Different conceptions of class also color Abu Talib's cavils. His criticism of opulence in British aristocratic life is a protest against the embourgeoisement of the aristocracy in England. The contrasting image he had in mind was the steppe or desert warriors among the Arabs and Turks, who, in lore at least, were depicted as possessing ascetic values. His friends, the lords and ladies of London, were closer in their actions to Muslim long-distance merchants than to the feudal warlords in Iran or India. Shushtari's depiction of the British officers as lacking in martial spirit echoes this perception—that the ruling classes in the Indo-Iranian world held vastly different values from those in Britain. While our authors were much impressed by the governmental and technological advances of the Europeans, it is clear that they had difficulty admiring an aristocracy they felt lacked Spartan valor.

37. *Ibid.*, 270, 272; Eng. trans., 173, 177 (quote).

38. *Ibid.*, 279–81; Eng. trans., 156–60.

As hinted earlier, an important context for the new writing about the Europeans lies in the greater impact of printing in the Persian-speaking world from around 1800. The British example in Calcutta and Bombay appears to have proven especially important. Two of the works here discussed were lithographed in the early nineteenth century. The non-adoption of printing by Persian-speaking peoples for three and a half centuries after the technology became widespread in Western Europe reflected, as in Russia, not ignorance of technique, but low rates of literacy and the small size of the indigenous middle classes. The old ways had definite drawbacks: manuscripts were expensive, and hand copying was an inefficient and frequently inaccurate means of transmitting maps and diagrams. This helps to explain the generally low levels of knowledge of world geography and technology among the Persian-speaking notable class.³⁹ The new, late-eighteenth-century accounts treating of the Europeans could hope for a much wider audience, because of lithography, and could include, for instance, diagrams of the solar system as envisaged by Copernicus and Newton, at a time when most Muslim thinkers remained wedded to Ptolemaic ideas. Printing formed an incentive, a technique, and a medium for the new depictions of Europe just as it had grown up earlier in Europe in tandem with the travelogues of the age of exploration.

These Shi'ite authors depict the British as philosophers of the highest order who found a way of bridging the gap between ratiocination and practical wisdom. Through cogitation they had banished the turmoil of wars of succession, had combined the three forms of government delineated in Aristotle's *Politics* into a happy amalgam, and had created stability and order while enlarging the scope of public consultation. Not only did they possess Newtons, but their common artisans understood basic physics and mechanical principles, made inventions, and had them patented. This largely positive view of the Europeans comes as a surprise to anyone who came of age during twentieth-century decolonization, when anti-imperial discourse was common in Afro-Asia. But it must be remembered that two of these authors had little means to check independently what their sources told them, and therefore they were frequently reporting, in their own terms, what they understood as the British self-image. Moreover, the collaborating notables who for the most part wrote about the West had an interest in flattering their potential patrons or allies. The social context within which these texts were produced—of a notable class without strong national loyalties—helped to color the accounts in a manner favoring the British. Occidentalism was not the mirror-image of Orientalism, but rather an extension of the Western power to shape images. Westerners often fashioned a representation of the Orient, which they then substituted for the actual thing, so that they created a representation of themselves as the Orient. What is interesting here is that by reporting it to Orientals whom they were wooing as clients, they managed to have their portrayal written up in Persian and widely disseminated. In a colonial version of Gramscian hegemony, by the late eighteenth century the might of coercive Western institutions such as the trading companies and the colonial army

39. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) (2 vols. in one).

extended right into Asia, allowing Westerners to begin asserting a subtle cultural dominance there, even in works in Asian languages.

Although one would not wish to deny independent agency and perception to the writers here discussed, it does seem clear that their depictions of the West in very large part reflect the Western self-understanding, and that the Indo-Persian writers at that point possessed little in the way of an institutional base for the elaboration of an independent, critical examination of the Occident. What, then, of the occasional criticisms found in these books? For one, the genre of “mirrors for princes,” with which these works sometimes have affinities, required such blame and praise.⁴⁰ Still, one can perceive a substantive rather than merely formal pattern in the criticisms. The reproaches are most vehement where they touch on the British denial of the need for the collaborating notables. As a clear example one might point to Abu Talib’s chagrin at not receiving immediate acclaim in London as a greatly needed Persian teacher, whereupon he cavilled at the British judgeships in Calcutta as inappropriate. His reaction is understandable given that posts as Persian teachers and in the judiciary had been the monopoly of the Muslim notable class in the pre-colonial era. At the dawn of modern colonialism, many of the notables did not mind being adopted by a new suzerain, especially one that struck them as powerful and clever, provided they were assured that their services would be vaunted and not swept away along with their existing perquisites.

We have little idea of how these texts were read by their Persian-speaking audience. We must not assume they were received in a straightforward manner, since the accounts lack a great deal of essential context and must have presented many puzzles, not to mention indecipherable names, to their audience. Toward the end of Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Kublai Khan inquires from Marco Polo, “When you return to the West, will you repeat to your people the same tales you tell me?” The intrepid traveler replies, “I speak and speak . . . but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. The description of the world to which you lend a benevolent ear is one thing; the description that will go the rounds of the groups of stevedores and gondoliers on the street outside my house the day of my return is another.”

From the eighteenth century to the present, people in the various world cultures have continued to rediscover one another in each generation, often forgetting what their forebears had earlier known. Each culture, and each generation, perhaps, retained only the words they were expecting.

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40. I am grateful to Barbara Metcalf for this suggestion.