

# Lost wisdom

## Rethinking Modernity in Iran

Dr. Abbas Milani in his book, in a collection of several essays written since 1991, embarks to dislodge Islamists main argument against modernity in Iran; Islamists proclaim modernity is the pretext of western foreigners for colonial and cultural domination. Dr. Milani, himself a product of modernity in Iran, tries to prove modernity has its seeds in Iran for centuries and nurtured by most learned Iranians. The foundation he builds for his argument stretch from ancient Persia to modern time. He bases his thesis on individuals who left ample proof of his reasoning. There are shining moments recorded in the history of many nations. And Dr. Milani, by his research and foresight, presents these shining moments of Iranian history discernable for its modernity proclamation and its failed attempts to permeate to Iranian national mentality.

Dr. Milani research in ancient world strives to establish the contribution of the Persian culture to the foundation of western Jude-Christian culture by the Persian's Zoroastrian religion; the first mankind's monotheistic religion. The religion was practiced widely in ancient Persian Empire for a thousand year until its annihilation in the hands of Muslim conquerors. The Zoroastrian religion geographical periphery far exceeded Persian Empire political boundaries. The same influence was explored in the work of titans of western philosophy such as Hegel, Nietzsche. He reiterates, the disputed, discredited and reduced to famous family of doctors, the existence of Jondishapur medical school. Dr. Milani refers to religious fundamentalist, Islamist, in one of his essays as the enemies of modernity for their narrative of western secular society and political democracy. By introducing two concepts of democracy and secularism, Dr. Milani distance himself from his original thesis because the Persian Empire by no means was a beacon of democracy and secularism similar the Greek's city states, which in that even gods were subjected to restrictions of their authorities. He argues Khomeini's criticism of colonialism attracted many Iranian democrats support for Islamic revolution. Contrary to his argument, Iranian middle class and intellectuals fell into Khomeini's political trap because they were deeply influenced by communism narrative of west; at the time, Iranian society was way too secularized to be influenced by Khomeini's Shiite ideology.

Dr. Milani's supportive argument for Iranian's roots of modernity drawn from classical poets and historians such as Sa'di and Beyhaghi and modern writers and poets during the Imperial Shah's and Islamist Faghih's dictatorial regimes. Two essays of Kafi and Nasir Al-Din Shah represent respectively Islamist struggle against modernity, now triumphant, and monarchy resistance confronting progressive ideas before the constitutional revolution. Dr. Milani explains the foundation of Shia theology in a collection named Kafi (enough), written in tenth century by Kulaini. In sixteenth century, in the newly established first Shiite dynasty of Safavid in Iran, this book became the nucleus of Shiite theology education for its expanding guardians. Dr. Milani confronts reader with Khomeini adherents to Kafi and its contradiction with European modernity messages which were secularism, rationalism, and progress in a free society. He presents Nasir Al-Din Shah as a confused despot confronting modernity in European countries. He was so fascinated by European modern societies that he traveled to Europe three times

with borrowed money. At the end, he was assassinated by a frustrated modernist who was in pain from the backwardness of Muslim countries, and his close to fifty years of backward reign in second half of nineteenth century.

Dr. Milani in his research for history of modernity roots in Iran concentrates on the work of Sa`di one of the great intellectuals of Iran in the period of tenth to thirteenth century. He compares Sa`di's work in *Golestan* and *Bustan* to work of modern writers of Europe like Shakespeare and others. He reminds us how Sa`di's work was declared worthless by Iranian intellectuals struggling to modernize Iran at the last decades of nineteenth and beginning of twenty century. Also, he mentions how Islamists of Islamic Republic claim Sa`di as their historical and ideological adherent. Dr. Milani argues because Sa`di admires bodily pleasures and the accumulation of wealth, the concept more familiar in the pursuit of happiness, in contrast with the religious promotion of virtues and Sufism glorification of poverty; he was promoting ingredient of modernity two hundred years before his European colleagues in the west. If we accept our writer's reasoning for Sa`di's fundamental argument, one can be sure Sa`di's message never permeated among his vast number of admirers for the last seven centuries.

In contemporary Iran, Dr. Milani's champions of modernity are his generation novelists and critics of Pahlavi dynasty. With this chosen approach he disregards politicians, policy makers, and Iranians' confused politics. He cherry picks his favorite novelist and analyzes their critical works of Pahlavi and Islamist regimes which are in the form of metaphor to camouflage them against censorship in order to reach their readers.

Dr. Milani presents his first modernist Seyyad al Fakhr-Din Shadman. According to Dr. Milani, he earned two doctorate degrees from Sorbonne and Landon school of Economics. He was in the cabinet of General Zahedy who in a military Coup over throw Dr. Mossaddegh's regime, the oil nationalization prime minister at any cost. He is a secretive man. Because, when he resigned from his last government job as the custodian of the religious Shrine he refused to say his reasons. Dr. Milani reports the gossip which is his refusal to pay the Shah's share of shrine's income, and he submitted his resignation to Grand Ayatallah Boroujerdi, the supreme Ayatallah at the time, instead of the Shah. And the reader must not forget as a Sayyed he was a descendent of Prophet Mohammad. Dr. Milani reveals an important information about the controversial coup d'état against Mossaddegh's regime. The conventional wisdom is that coup was planned and executed buy Americans and British but the reality is it was a native transfer of political power played out with collaboration of Islamist and military before its ceremonial era began. Mr. Shadman's following books *Conquering Farangi (west) Civilization* and *The Tragedy of Farang* were considered by Dr. Milani his most important works. Farangi is a disparaging name for western countries used by contemporary Islamist like the other word Fokoli which used to allude to westernized well dressed Iranians to make fun of them. For Islamist, it is not very hard to realize, these are the favorite names for books. The reprint of *Conquering Farangi Civilization* fits to vast and impressive Hezb Allah propaganda machine and Dr. Milani's introduction to this book alludes to his cordial relationship with Islamic Republic regime. Although, this pen never read any of Dr. Shadman books, probably for their names, it is hard, with the information provided in this paper, to consider Dr. Shadman the torch bearer of modernity in Iran.

Dr. Milani in his search for modernity explores its foot print the capital of Iran in Tehran. By those who lived in Tehran, it was considered the cradle of modernity in contemporary Iran. Tehran gave sanctuary and escaping opportunity to individuals from other cities far behind Tehran in modernity, and it provided numerical strength and government protection for their survival. He relays the disparaging comments of some of those educated Iranians living in Tehran about Tehran. The reader receives a short history of Tehran. But most of Tehran's essay is about Ja'far Shahri whose writing chronicles introduction, advancement, and survival of modernity in Tehran. Dr. Milani considers his work the native modernity.

Dr. Milani selects following literary contemporary left leaning writers Sadeq Hedayat, Ebrahim Golestan, Houshang Golshiri, and Shahrnush Parsipur to examine flowering of modernity in Iran. These writers are among the greater number of intellectuals who are product of national push for modernization after the constitutional revolution and rise of Reza Shah, its engine, to power. Without political, social, educational, and industrial national modernization for two generations the existence of these intellectuals couldn't have been imagined to materialize. Dr. Milani considers Sadeq Hedayat, the most famous Iranian contemporary writer, modern "for his formal and aesthetic innovations". Hedayat weary and cynical approach to Iranian nascent modern society framed by Dr. Milani in "*tragic vision*" which was explained in detail.

Abraham Golestan a novelist and film maker was introduced and his work interpreted in capacity of modernity. Golestan grandfather is an ayatollah and his father is a newspaper publisher. He comes from a rich feudal family. He joins Stalinist Tudeh party and becomes its newspaper editor. His works, in *The Cripple* and *Ghost Valley*, resonates his back grand as a feudal and opposition to the Shah's regime. In Dr. Milani views which closely identifies with Golestan in Pahlavi era "modernity was mangled", "changed society at the point of bayonet".

Houshang Golshiri is a novelist well known for writing *Prince Ehtejab* novel. He is a writer who has no connection to the disappearing ruling class, but still he shows, in his book, his fascination about bygone era. Dr. Milani presents him as a modern writer. According to Dr. Milani he was captured by allure of changing society. He sees literary value in Islamic religious materials as well as Persian literary work and learns from both of them. Dr. Milani argues the prevailing understanding among contemporary Iranian writers is "... Iranian writers who want to be "modern" must emulate their Western masters." He continues "Golshiri tried to debunk this theory, and on the way, perhaps unwittingly, helped to undermine the common Eurocentric notion of modernity as well." In response, one can argue if we consider the novelist the product of the same society which he or she writes about. It will be hard to be a modern novelist while laminating for backward traditional society. Furthermore, it is hard to consider any writer original when he or she emulate instead of learning. Dr. Milani considers the other general Golshiri's view, which one is the struggle of Persians identity of nation with Islamism and the other one is Islamic messiah. Golshiri disengagement with dominating leftist ideology and his approach to pressing issues of modern Iran fits him to cast of lost modernity in Iran.

Dr. Milani favorable critical review of *Blue Logos* written by Shahrnush Parsipur fits into his interpretation of modernity in contemporary Iran. The author is from a poor family with roots in the fading ruling class,

similar to Dr. Milani, before rise of Pahlavi dynasty to power. She was jailed in Islamic and Pahlavi regimes which point out to her dedication to political activity and probably she was a committed leftist. In her book, she concentrates on women predicaments in an Islamic country without directly saying that. Dr. Milani tries very hard to explain different aspect of her work to the point of confusing the reader. As Dr. Milani mentions there is no linear flow of time and place in *Blue logos*, and the reader is left to work out with his or her imagination as our critic does.

Dr. Milani considers the state and impact of Iranian intellectuals in exile in America. He explores the similarity of Iranians with German exiles in America and compares the Islamic Republic to Nazi Germany. Dr. Milani distinguishes three mass intellectuals immigration from Iran, the first one was during Afghan invasion of Iran in eighteenth century, second one during constitutional revolution in 1905- 1907, and third time after Islamic revolution in 1979. The author point out to the love and hate relationship of Pahlavi regime with intellectuals and their historical attachment to each other for survival from demise. Dr. Milani summarize the credibility of Iranian intellectuals as follows “furthermore a disillusioned public had become disappointed with the role intellectuals had played in the revolution.” Dr Milani puts it very mildly the Iranian intellectuals’ responsibility and a total betrayal of Iran’s people for Islamist Revolution in Iran. Also, he mentions the impressive achievements of Iranians in America.

It is hard to imagine the author had a same thesis in mind in these papers which had been written in span of fourteen years. It is absolutely clear that Pahlavi regime betrayed one of the pillars of constitutional revolution which was democracy; although it faithfully struggled to modernize Iran’s society, industry and government apparatus. Also, intellectuals blanketed criticism of Pahlavi regime including Di. Milani’s modernist intellectuals poisoned Iranians national mentality to the point of political suicide. The tone of Dr. Milani papers addressing the Islamic Republic in the span of time they had been written changed considerably. This is a hard book to read compare to Dr. Milani previous books.